

## No Light Down Here in the 9/11 Museum

Early on in the National 9/11 Memorial & Museum, there is a door off to the side of its huge exhibit devoted to the events of that day. A sign advises that visitors who wish to leave the exhibit early can exit through that door.

I suspect many will. Or will wish they had.



Spencer Finch, *Trying To Remember the Color of the Sky on That September Morning* (2014). The artist designed the installation and painted 2,983 watercolors to represent each of the victims of the attacks.

Photo: Jin Lee.

The 9/11 Museum is completed, and it is a great mournful sadness. It is graphic and difficult—which is to be expected and to a large degree, necessary and forgivable. But it is also catastrophically subterranean, unrelentingly gray, and brutally secular. These are unnecessary and not forgivable.

The Museum, which opens to the public May 21, is the long-awaited finale to eight years' work and 13 years of debate over how to document the day when hijacked planes exploded into Manhattan's World Trade Center, into the Pentagon, and on a Pennsylvania field, killing about 2,700 people and forever creating a before and after in America.

I don't visit it or review it as an architect, since there are better-trained people for that, but as a born-and-bred New Yorker. New Yorkers have a particularly intimate ownership of the tragedy. Most people don't realize that we, a supposedly sophisticated clan, are people who never moved away from home. High school friends are down the block as much as they would be in Mayberry. Like several other special interest groups with their own significant claims—firefighters, airline crews, The Families—we feel we own this horror. So something that makes

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you feel even worse about it, less hopeful, almost assaulted—and I use that word very, very carefully and only after three days of turning it over in mind—is not what New York needs.

David Simpson, author of *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration*, said in a 2010 interview while the project was in development that there would be a potential that “the museum will not educate, it will simply shock,” and generate so much emotion it will be a shrine, not museum.

That is, perhaps, what has happened here.

First, a description of the total Ground Zero site as tourists experience it. Built by difficult architects (Snøhetta, Davis Brody Bond, Daniel Libeskind, among them)—the project was divvied up “like pieces of a pie,” says one—the site marries several elements. There’s 1 World Trade Center, a squat, cowardly apology for a skyscraper. There are spindly trees, though we are promised an eventual oak forest, and, worst of all, there is a massive amount of Port Authority construction still ongoing, more than a dozen years later. On the footprint of the Twin Towers themselves, waterfalls drain funereally into giant square black holes. On the banks of these waterfalls, the name of every victim is etched, Vietnam Veterans Memorial–style. In a bit of welcome sentimentalism, victims get roses placed on their names on their birthdays. It brings the only color to the space other than the many tour guide flags held aloft that dot the park.

Then, down to the new 9/11 Memorial & Museum: After moving through a sunny and soothing but somewhat anonymous entry pavilion at street level, you’re heading down dark ramps and gulping from the get-go. In the entryway to the first exhibit are life-sized photographs of people in Lower Manhattan looking skyward, gasping, and screaming. It is the iconography of Godzilla movies, and it is just the beginning.

But it is the building by far, not the understandably disturbing exhibits in it, where the real problem lies. You descend 70 feet to the bottom. There are halls and halls (110,000 square feet, in total) with walls exactly the color of tombstone. And the design fetishizes the towers, marking the footprint, the space between them, details of their construction, the rebar remaining. It is, ironically, an underground monument to the once tallest towers on Earth.

A beautiful installation by artist Spencer Finch, a wall of some 3,000 squares of paper in various shades of sky blue, offers a short respite. But the architects giving a tour of the Museum repeat that his installation is temporary so often you worry at their haste to remove it, disrupting, as it does, their never-ending flood of gray.

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Consider for a moment the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC: a masterpiece. One of its most moving and memorable exhibits, simply a pile of shoes, is breathtakingly sad, but it's your mind that fills in the blanks.

Here, in downtown New York, there are acres and waves of burnt cameras, of dusty wallets, of tragically empty hats, of newspaper headlines, of heartbreaking "Have you Seen?" posters. There are photographs of jumpers. Most of this hoarder's horror is arranged in a very long series of bedroom-sized interconnected rooms devoted, literally, to every second of that day. It's sometimes noisy and, in keeping in a trend in current museum design, unrelentingly high-tech. On one wall, footage from the *Today Show* features a chipper but frowning Katie Couric announcing that a plane seems to have just hit the World Trade Center. There are recordings of the phone calls saying goodbye. A even sadder soundtrack to all of this is in another section of the Memorial, as the families drone the names: "My daughter . . . My friend." This is horrific.

There are totems of different religions on display which might be soothing—the disputed 9/11 cross, after much debate, got in—but they are crammed in identically to other artifacts without weight given to their meaning. Ours is nation that puts "In God We Trust" on its money but leaves no place for him here?

There are some great human-scale moments, of course. A photo of every person who died in the towers, or in the related tragedies earlier or at the Pentagon or in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, is featured. The viewer can type in a name and find out more about each person in heartfelt and respectful and surprisingly lively tributes. Over time, visitors will be able to add their memories of that person. How marvelous. Near the end of the tour, you walk down stairs adjacent to the staircase people took to escape Tower One, a shocking touch that brings it brilliantly all home.

Then a park guard asks me, as I eventually emerged into the sunlight, "Did you expect it be pretty?"

It is traditional for writers to whine about the major buildings of their time, and to be proved wrong. Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum was reviled, for example. So, it is possible that as years pass, the indisputable monochromatic elegance and power of the subterranean space will triumph, that it will seem soothing and a proper tribute. But three days later, I still feel ravaged. This is a mausoleum. And if so, perhaps it could never have been otherwise, and so be it.

But when you visit Ground Zero, perhaps stay above the ground, hang out by the trees. Bring a rose and choose a name to leave it by. We all remember in our own way.