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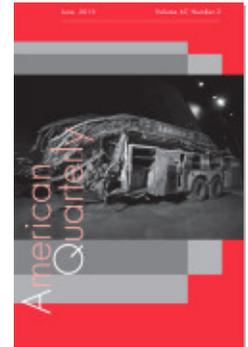
The 9/11 Memorial Museum and the Remaking of Ground Zero

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American Quarterly, Volume 67, Number 2, June 2015, pp. 471-490 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2015.0022>



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The 9/11 Memorial Museum and the Remaking of Ground Zero

Marita Sturken

In the vast Foundation Hall of the National September 11 Memorial Museum, which opened in May 2014 at Ground Zero in New York, reside two objects that embody in many ways its complex, contradictory, moving yet problematic project. The first is the very large steel column that stands in the middle of the room, commanding over the space.

Known as the Last Column, this thirty-six-foot-high steel colossus is covered with messages to the dead, photographs, and memorial inscriptions put there by firefighters, police, rescue workers, and other laborers who worked at the recovery mission at Ground Zero for nine months. The Last Column has been much written about and as an object has been the source of a significant amount of emotion and ceremony. When the column was finally removed from the site of Ground Zero on May 30, 2002, it was draped with a flag and awarded an honor guard escort. As the museum itself narrates, “Standing tall once again, the Last Column will encourage reflection on the foundations of resilience, hope, and community with which we might build our collective future.”¹

One could say that this steel column became an extraordinary object in the aftermath of September 11, one deeply invested with the grief, anger, and mourning of the site. As a symbol of resilience, *because it survived*, it is an object of affirmation that mediates the loss and vulnerability experienced in the events of 9/11. It speaks to the deep ethos of the public servants, engineers, and union workers who devoted themselves to the recovery and clearing of the site of Ground Zero (many of whom have suffered in the aftermath). Scrawled with names and messages, plastered with photographs, the column has been transformed into a kind of pastiche of the loss that resides at Ground Zero; on display in the museum it has been set up with a digital database, so that visitors can go to screens and tap into the stories behind the messages. Yet, importantly, the meaning of the Last Column is also about scale. It is huge, towering over the space of the hall, which itself stands seven stories underground. It is a reminder, in its size, of just how tall the twin towers were, as oversized skyscrapers that dominated the New York skyline for decades. It is also



Figure 1. The Last Column on display in Foundation Hall, with the Slurry Wall behind it. Photograph: Jin Lee, courtesy of the National September 11 Memorial Museum.

a reminder of the scale of the event—that huge pieces of steel were twisted, bent, melted, and broken. This steel column in many ways embodies this

massive scale and the shocking transformation of materiality that took place on 9/11 even as, at the same time, its inscriptions speak a kind of intimacy, of compassion, of sorrow.

The second object, which is on display not far from the Last Column, is a seemingly ordinary brick in a display case.

This brick was taken from the compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, where Osama bin Laden was assassinated by US Navy Seals in 2011, and it is now on display with the jacket of one of the Navy Seals (donated by the man who wore it) and a small CIA “challenge coin” apparently awarded in the agency for a mission accomplished and donated by the CIA operative (“Maya”) who led the intelligence mission to find bin Laden. There are many troubling aspects to the inclusion of this brick in the museum, not the least of which is that the historical exhibition of the museum has only the smallest mention of the killing of bin Laden (under the title of “Accountable”). Unlike the Last Column, which is striking in its uniqueness, a steel column that could not be mistaken for another column, the bin Laden brick does not exude its histori-

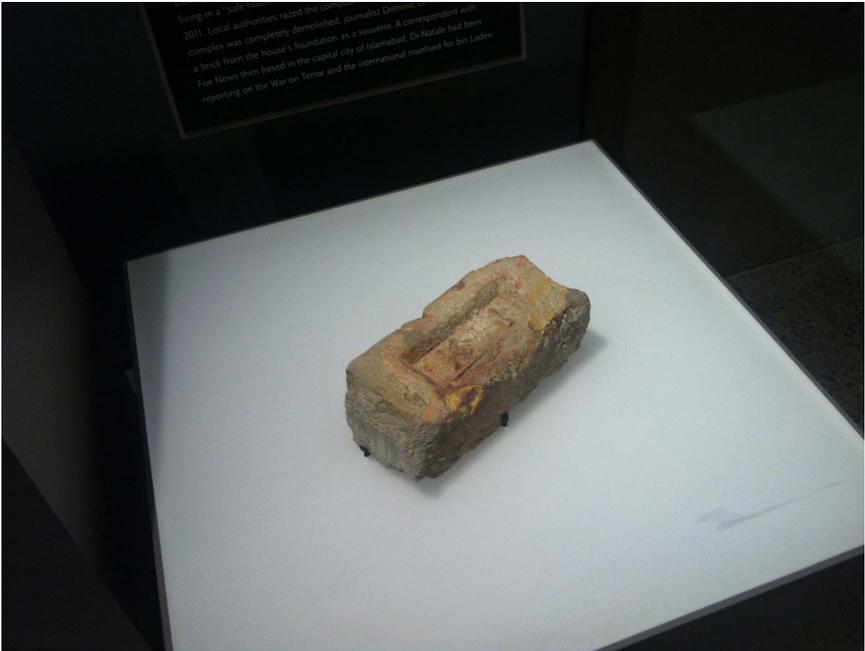


Figure 2. The brick from the Abbottabad compound in Pakistan where Osama bin Laden was killed in 2011, on display in Foundation Hall. Photograph: Marita Sturken.

Fox News reporter Dominic Di-Natale, who chiseled several bricks out of the foundation of the compound (before it was torn down) while reporting in Pakistan. According to Fox News, he stated at the time, “America is the greatest country in the world. It’s the least I could do.”² Tragically, Di-Natale, who was originally British, committed suicide in December 2014, after being diagnosed with brain damage related to injuries he received while covering the war in Iraq.³ The layers of tragedy in this story speak to the bitter emptiness of revenge and the impossibility of closure of the events of 9/11. It is a reminder of another sad consequence of the wars that emanated from 9/11, the thousands of American veterans and journalists who have been disabled, killed, or have committed suicide in the last decade.

In a certain sense, the brick sits in the museum as a form of evidence, with a quasi-legal status, as an indicator that indeed bin Laden’s killing did take place. Its presence in the museum is meant to signal a narrative end to the story of 9/11, if not closure then the restoration of national power. We have

cal importance in its objectness. It looks like an ordinary brick, of a particular kind of sandy construction. The brick was donated by

no actual material confirmation of bin Laden's death, since the Pentagon chose to anonymously bury him at sea, so it is only the popular culture imagining of the 2013 film *Zero Dark Thirty* (through which most museum visitors would likely have learned the story of the woman CIA officer "Maya" who pursued bin Laden over the years). It is the journey of the brick from Pakistan to New York that provides this narrative of closure, creating the sense that the brick's final destination should be in the museum, on display with the artifacts of 9/11.

The presence of these two objects near each other in the Foundation Hall demonstrates so many of the varied and sometimes contradictory aims of the 9/11 memorial museum. The museum states its mission as "bearing solemn witness" to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. But there are other goals in evidence at the museum: to tell the story of the events of September 11, 2001, and its aftermath; to construct a political narrative of the meanings of 9/11; to commemorate those who died that day, not only in New York but at the Pentagon and in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, as well as the victims of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing; and to meaningfully provide access to key aspects of the site of Ground Zero itself.

The existence of a memorial museum at Ground Zero in New York now seems like an inevitable outcome of the events of September 11, 2001. Yet this is a retrospective inevitability, a quality we read into the museum today, since its very presence seems to convey the sense that it is the natural outcome of that day. In other words, many aspects of the museum (its site specificity, its narrative, its material objects) cohere to make it seem as if it were always supposed to be there, at this site, now defined as sacred. Such a sense has been retrospectively constructed, since a memorial museum was not part of the first visions for the site and is the result of many years of debate and controversy; its fate was often precarious and unpredictable. The museum was only initially conceived in 2004, with its current form put into development in 2006, a full five years after September 11 and after many other cultural imaginings for the site, including the International Freedom Center, a museum with a much broader aim, and various cultural centers had been proposed, debated, fought over, and rejected. Many scholars of 9/11 and memory studies, myself included, have watched the 9/11 memorial and the National September 11 Memorial Museum's long, slow, and tortured development with trepidation—it seemed so doomed from the start, so mired in politics. Surely it would please no one, it has long been said; surely it will fail in this context of overdetermined expectations.

Yet here it is now, a major destination in the city and the nation. The museum reported in September 2014 that it had reached the milestone of one

million visitors a mere few months after its opening. It has been the focus of an enormous number of reviews, civic attention, and not a small amount of criticism. The fact that the museum already seems to be fulfilling the role of the most symbolic destination in relation to 9/11 thus rewrites its creation as one of inevitability. Yet, ironically, evidence of the fitful stops and starts of the museum's conception are writ everywhere in its design, its narrative of the meaning of 9/11, and its exhibitions. Without even knowing the details, it is possible for one to decipher in the mishmash of its exhibition design the fact that it was worked on by an array of exhibition design and architectural teams. (The original exhibition design firm Thinc Design, with Local Projects, did the lead exhibition design; Thinc Design did the introductory exhibits, memorial exhibition, and exhibition level design; Layman Design, which was hired in 2010, did the historical exhibition; the various media designs were by Local Projects; and, as I discuss below, the architects played a role that spilled over into exhibition design.) One can read in the tentativeness of its narrative that it was in its design beholden to a large number of political interests and interest groups, including family members of those who died, public servants, and donors, and that it is the result of design by committee in ways that were inevitable. Most visitors may not draw these conclusions, but the hodgepodge quality of the exhibitions has been noted frequently in assessments of it.

That the museum's success as a destination is ensured should direct us to consider the consequences of its newly emerged role as the central narrative of 9/11. Like all the post-9/11 responses to that day, it has been a messy and expensive project (with a price tag of \$700 million for the memorial and museum combined, an amount inflated by the cost of rebuilding damaged infrastructure at the site)—in this light, one cannot help but compare it with One World Trade Center that stands next to it, which at a \$38 billion price tag is the most expensive building ever built. The 9/11 museum matters, and it tells us a lot about how 9/11 has shaped American culture and society in what we can still define as the post-9/11 era in American history, both in what it does well and in what it is unable, for political reasons, to do.

It is with the site itself that the museum first makes an impression on visitors. As part of its status on the National Register of Historic Places, the museum must provide meaningful access to certain aspects of the site, including the slurry wall that famously held back the Hudson River that day and afterward and the column footprints of the original twin towers. This mandate helped shape the design of the architectural team that had the most impact on the final design, Davis Brody Bond (DBB), which was hired in 2004 to work on design-



Figure 3. Night view of the north pool of the 9/11 memorial with the Snøhetta museum pavilion behind it. Photograph: Amy Dreher, courtesy of the National September 11 Memorial Museum.

ing a structure at Ground Zero before the museum director and staff were even hired. While Snøhetta, an international design firm based in Norway, designed the museum's pavilion, which sits on the plaza between the two voids of the 9/11 memorial pools and houses the security-heavy entrance, an auditorium, and a café, its input ended at ground level, and the majority of the architectural design (from the first escalator downward) was done by DBB. (The pavilion was originally supposed to house a restaurant serving gourmet “comfort” food by the well-known restaurateur Danny Meyer, but after criticism this was downscaled to a café with pastries and coffee.)⁴ Indeed, the Snøhetta pavilion, which looks modern and bright on the plaza, especially when lit up at night, is in character and feel quite different from the rest of the underground museum. (Both firms were working on previous projects at the site when the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation changed tack and put them together on the newly conceived museum project. The combination of these two designs was thus based on the fraught management of the project rather than on aesthetic choices.) One could say that these two parts of the museum are not in dialogue with each other, each creating very different aesthetic experiences.

The DBB design of the museum effectively curates the specific aspects of the site as particularly symbolic. Its primary feature is a broad “ribbon” walkway that brings visitors down toward the huge central space, stopping at a kind of vista point that looks into the Foundation Hall with the slurry wall on the left. Thus the architectural design of the museum articulates the site itself as impressive, something to be gazed at—the first time I stood at that vista point, I was reminded of standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon. Farther down, the walkway reaches another vista point, and then brings viewers down to the floor below next to the “Survivors’ Stairs,” part of a preserved staircase that provided a way out to Vesey Street for thousands of survivors.

The architectural design of the space is shaped by the fact that the underground museum incorporates the two enormous square structures that contain the “voids” of the original twin towers that now constitute the main feature of the 9/11 memorial at ground level. This means that within the museum’s vast expansive space, which reaches seven stories down to the bedrock and constitutes 110,000 square feet underground, there are two large enclosed chambers—these hold the pools at the upper levels, with two key galleries (the memorial gallery and the historical exhibition) housed below them. The architects clad these chambers in a kind of aluminum mesh that provides an intriguing textured surface in the larger spaces. At the far end of each edge of the site, the architects made the decision to excavate the bases of the columns of the original towers, so that one sees not only the footprints of the original columns but the metal bases, worn concrete, and even the original wooden frames from when those columns were first erected in the late 1960s. These features of the museum design are surprisingly effective—while one might want to question how the footprints of the original towers have taken on such symbolic power, the site’s materiality carries a particular kind of evocative power.⁵ Standing in the Foundation Hall, with the slurry wall and the very tall Last Column, one feels a kind of vulnerability and even awe at how deep and vast the space is.

Scale is thus a key feature of the experience of the museum. (Scale is also a central aspect of the 9/11 memorial because the two huge pools are so overpowering in their presence that they overshadow all the other elements of the memorial, including its most important feature, the names etched on the pools’ edge. I would argue that scale is a problematic aspect of the memorial design; the pools are so outsized that they make it practically impossible to have an experience of intimacy there.) Thus, one is reminded constantly when at both the memorial and the museum that the scale of the event was massive. Scale

was one of the four guiding principles in the architectural design (DBB's key guiding themes were memory, authenticity, scale, and emotion). Indeed, scale is such a pervasive factor in the memorialization at the site that it is worth putting it under scrutiny, so normalized has the scale of the site become—for instance, the site could today contain a much smaller memorial and museum and still be a powerful place of memory.

Scale is also a constant theme in the memory of 9/11 and its political meanings. The bigness of the site, the vastness of the memorial pools, the huge space of the underground museum, and the immense size of many of the objects on display: all converge to convey the sense of 9/11 as an event of massive importance. This means that scale functions in the site as a form of 9/11 exceptionalism, which itself forms a part of American exceptionalism. This exceptionalism enables, among other things, the valuing of the almost three thousand deaths that took place on September 11 more than the hundreds of thousands who have died in the wars that followed in its wake. Scale is of course also evocative of massive power—the scale of empires, of super powers, of imperial aims and intents.

Yet, in the museum, the sense of immense scale is also a part of the site specificity of the design. The underground space constitutes not only the original underground of the World Trade Center complex, with its shopping mall and transportation systems, but also the site of its aftermath—the immense hole in the ground that remained after the debris had been hauled away. While the influence of the architect Daniel Libeskind as the original “master planner” of the site has withered away to practically nil over the years, the public embrace of his plan in 2003 was in part because of his insights about how the site of Ground Zero itself was meaningful. Libeskind was one of the first to say that the design for the site should highlight rather than cover over the slurry wall and the bedrock. Visitors are confronted with the question of scale from the moment they enter the plaza-level pavilion and pass through security, as the first objects they see are the tridents, which are huge remnants of the outer skin of the towers. These stand in the entrance to the pavilion (they had to be installed before the building was fully built because of their size). They loom over the escalators and look, precisely because they are out of context, like two oversized forks standing in the entrance and pulling viewers downward.

The architectural curation of a trajectory into the site is a primary feature of the experience of visitors to the museum. Yet the museum has many stories simultaneously being told. Initially, visitors are immersed as they walk down the walkway into a collage of voices and images that evoke the global response

as the events unfolded on the morning of September 11. Here, the shock of what happened is narrated by voices from around the world, with images and place-names from around the globe flashing on screens. In this, the museum's most cosmopolitan moment, we see the event as a global rather than local experience, and as one that unified, however briefly, a worldview.

As visitors continue down the ramp, they come to the vista point looking toward the vast Foundation Hall, and the sense of a journey continues. Yet, as visitors move down the ramp, the story becomes jumbled. Half of the immense bent steel from the first moment of impact in the North Tower is hung awkwardly off to the side so that it is difficult to view (that the museum separated these two pieces of steel, which could have been hung together to great effect, is incomprehensible). There are also two images of the original twin towers before and after they were hit, projected images of the twin towers and of the missing posters, and a mishmash of artifacts. It is as if someone said, hey, we have this long walkway into the space, let's put some of the stuff we have there. When visitors descend from the walkway onto the main floor of the space (adjacent to the Survivors' Stairs, they have a choice to go right, where there is a "tribute walk" of memorial quilts, a memorial motorcycle, and other items in tribute to those who died. Visitors can follow these artifacts until the end of the corridor, where the second piece of impact steel stands—alone, it appears aestheticized into a work of modern art. Then, the excavated footprints of the towers lead visitors along the perimeter, which includes explanations of the original building of the twin towers, and at the far corner, a video about the World Trade Center with documentary clips and excerpts of its representation in films. The footprint in this corner contains the memorial gallery, which displays photographs of those who were killed that day, along with various digital databases that allow visitors to call up individual profiles and reminiscences and to have those profiles played in the main gallery space.

If visitors turn to the left at the bottom of the stairs, they come through a wide corridor that contains a large artwork of blue panels by Spencer Finch paired with a quote from Virgil about memory, and a number of large artifacts (a crushed fire engine, a portion of the towers' antenna), before arriving at the entrance to the historical exhibit (contained within the North Tower footprint) and the Foundation Hall.

Within the historical exhibition, an extraordinary amount of material—images, videos, objects (from large to small)—is crammed into the space of one tower footprint. The narrative starts with the day of September 11, then backtracks to a section titled "Before 9/11," and then jumps forward to "After 9/11,"



Figure 4. The historical exhibition includes projected images on trident steel fragments. Photograph: Jin Lee, courtesy of the National September 11 Memorial Museum.

this is chronologically confusing would be an understatement. Not only are there moments of replication (both the South Tower corner and the historical exhibition have sections on the twin towers and their representation in popular culture, for instance), but the narrative of the story of 9/11 jumps forward and backward, from before to after, from tribute to prior. This means that the modes and responses that these varying elements demand—somber reflection,

before depositing visitors into the large Foundation Hall where they can see the Last Column and the bin Laden brick along with an interactive timeline about the journalism of the events. To say that

grief, intellectual engagement—flip back and forth in disconcerting ways. Thus, this museum does not achieve a very basic aim of standard exhibition design, which is to take visitors through a meaningful trajectory. This is surprising given the enormous funds, expertise, and time that went into its creation, but it is an indication of the complex ownership and management of the project, with its several different exhibition design teams as well as the architects whose shaping of the space was curatorial in effect. At the same time, the museum is experimenting with digital technology as a way to extend the experience of the space—from the digital collage of voices in the entrance to the exhibit space to the digital sampling of the memorial galleries, to devices that expand on the stories that are told such as those of the Last Column, or a station in the Foundation Hall where visitors' notes about the museum are projected on a wall. The museum is thus ambitiously attempting to open up the terrain of the stories that can be told, and to engage visitors in various forms of interactivity (designed by Local Projects). While these are not all effective, they indicate participation as an important ethos in the museum's overall design.

It should not be surprising that it is in telling the story of the actual day of September 11, 2001, that the museum is at its most compelling—this is, after all, an extraordinary story, dramatic, epic in its scale, and deeply moving in its stories of compassion, resilience, and sacrifice. In the stories told here, visitors see and hear details that are chilling, and they are reminded of the initial confusion as the events unfolded. In the audio narration, desperation and hope are dramatically evoked through both the voices of those who died, in the form of recorded voice messages, and those who survived who tell their stories. Above all, the museum powerfully narrates the story of survival.

This survival narrative is also an active effect of the many objects on display in the main corridors and spaces, and crammed into the historical exhibition (the museum's collection of objects currently stands at over ten thousand). As objects that survived, these material remains stand in for the violence of that day, in particular the violence of the planes' impacts on the twin towers and their crushing collapse. While the exhibition narrates the stories of the crash at the Pentagon and the crash of United Flight 93 in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, it is the story of the World Trade Center that dominates here. Crushed ambulances, an enormous water main valve, bent pieces of steel, and other smashed vehicles are spread throughout the museum spaces, each testimony to the devastating material transformation that took place that day—the brute destruction of buildings, steel, furniture, vehicles, objects, and bodies.



Figure 5. Ladder Company 3 fire engine. Photo: Jin Lee, courtesy of the National September 11 Memorial Museum.

For instance, the crushed fire engine of Ladder Company 3 stands in one of the main corridors. Ladder 3, based in the East Village, was one of the first companies to respond to the first tower and suffered some of the highest numbers of deaths (the call came in during a shift change and so two shifts of firefighters went to the towers). The truck, parked on West Street next to Tower One, was damaged in the fall of the tower. In this photograph (fig. 5), taken by the museum's photographer, the light emphasizes the objectness of the fire engine. It is lit for dramatic emphasis, and it looms over museum visitors in person. Fire engines inspire awe in part through scale; they are big lumbering machines that clear streets and fascinate children. Here the engine is stripped down, mangled, and battered. It is dramatic both in its partially destroyed state and in its state of survival. To look at the Ladder 3 fire engine is to think of the men who once rode in it. The empty open doors, the crushed frame, the torn metal evoke the absence of those who once inhabited it. It is a sorrowful object, but it is also an object of affirmation—precisely because it survived.⁶

The museum narrates a significant amount of its affect through these objects that survived, both immense and intimately small. The most resonant of these smaller objects are the possessions of those who died, their car keys, wallets,

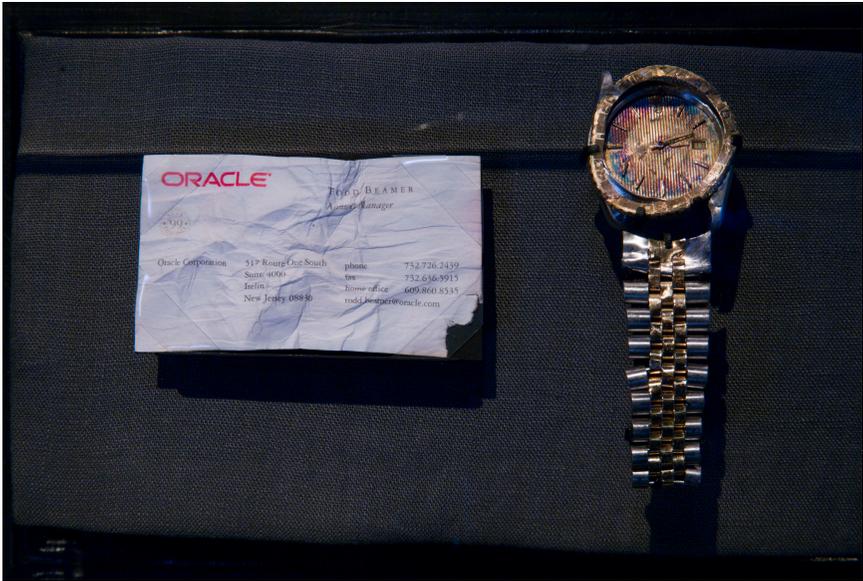


Figure 6.
Todd Beamer watch and business card.
Photograph: Jin Lee, courtesy of the National September 11 Memorial Museum.

credit cards, IDs, and shoes. These personalized objects stand in for the dead, reminding us again of their absence. One of the most resonant of these objects is a watch that once

belonged to Todd Beamer, a passenger on United Flight 93.

Beamer has become famous as one of a small group of passengers who fought back against the hijackers; he is the one who apparently uttered the phrase “let’s roll” in range of a cell phone when they moved forward. His watch is one of several on display in the museum, its battered frame (it was a \$7,000 Rolex when first purchased) indicating the violence it was subject to and the stopped moment in time, 10:10, when the plane crashed.⁷ The watch itself is a kind of miracle, that it survived at least somewhat intact, that it belonged to this person who became famous in death as an American icon (a narrative of redemption in a story that was otherwise devastating), that it held that fateful moment in time within its mechanism. On exhibit in the museum, the watch is also a deeply American object. In this context, we can see Beamer’s watch as taking on an extraordinary register of national meaning, not only evoking the tale of heroism and sacrifice that Beamer achieved in death but symbolizing a narrative of American identity that dominates in the museum—the can-do, don’t give up spirit of resiliency that we need as a narrative here, one that helps us screen out the brutal American actions that were taken in revenge for 9/11.

As Jan Ramirez, the museum's chief curator, notes, watches carry a particular power because they are intimate objects that have touched the body.⁸ A watch is worn and thus stands in for the body that did not survive. The 9/11 museum is haunted by the stories of bodies, in particular the stories of the bodies of those who either jumped or fell from the top of Tower One, and whose trajectory downward shocked and traumatized those who saw them. The museum presents these images in a side alcove with a warning sign, but they remain indelible whether we see them or not. The museum is also haunted by the bodies that disappeared that day, the bodies that were recovered in the tiniest of parts, and the bodies that are gone forever, vanished. This was an event in which the effect of material transformation was extreme. Not only were bodies vaporized, but two enormous 110-story buildings filled with offices, equipment, and furniture were reduced to dust. How to fathom this kind of material transformation, the shock that these buildings, those desks and chairs, those bodies, those airplanes, were just gone? This incomprehensibility is a part of the effect of the objects on display in the 9/11 museum—these objects embody the destructive force of the airplanes' impact and the collapse of the towers; they prick at us, they pull us to them, they haunt us precisely because *they survived when people did not*.

The most controversial object in the museum, its presence the most debated before it was put on display, is known as the "composite." This is a chunk of debris in which approximately four to five floors of one of the twin towers are compressed into an object several feet high. While the composite contains evidence of the debris of the towers, even bits of paper, the Office of the Medical Examiner concluded, to the consternation of some family members, that it did not contain human remains. Nevertheless, the museum treats it as a controversial object, placed in a discreet alcove with signage that carefully describes its status and a nearby box of tissues. The composite (its very name indicative of the fact that it is uncategorizable in social terms) is disturbing because of its indecipherability, its indeterminacy. For some family members, who advocated against its inclusion, it is not an object at all, but entombed remains. Here again, it is precisely the *absence* of human remains that haunts the *presence* of objects in the site-specific place occupied by the museum.

It is not incidental to the meanings of objects in the museum that the building now houses an enclosed and restricted room that contains the remains of the dead who have not been identified. This is an enormously complex issue, and the source of significant debate, controversy, and lawsuits.⁹ I suspect that most visitors to the museum will be unaware that the room housing the remains

exists, since it is tucked away between the two footprints in an inconspicuous way. The power of the unidentified remains is what they signal about the future and science—the primary reason to retain them in a scientifically controlled chamber, according to the medical examiner, is that technologies of identification may someday be developed that will allow them to be identified. Both the composite and the remains as objects within the museum form disturbing counterparts to its aim to operate as a form of memorial as well as a museum. The presence of remains at the museum amps up the register of disapproval at museum activities that seem to push at the boundaries of memorialization, such as the black-tie VIP cocktail party that took place at its opening, which the *New York Daily News* called an “alcohol-fueled party” on “unidentified remains.”¹⁰

While objects, along with photographs and video, are a key element through which the museum narrates the story of the events of September 11, it is the audio that stands out in the museum experience. The historical exhibition is crowded, practically claustrophobic, and usually quite packed with visitors. Yet there are several alcoves where visitors can sit and listen to audio testimonies (as well as some voice messages of those trapped in the towers). These audio retellings, which were curated by the museum staff from several sources, including the StoryCorps archive and the museum’s ongoing accumulation of oral testimonies, are digitally sampled into groups of about six integrated retellings, as visitors see a map of the twin towers that locates each speaker. Sitting in a low-lit alcove listening to these narrations of ordinary people’s escapes from the towers, of the stories of police and firefighters telling those who arrived to the horror of the plaza level (with the dangerous crash of bodies at every turn) to run and not look up or back, of the memories of the expressions of the firefighters who were climbing the stairs to their deaths, one cannot help but be deeply moved. Here, the medium of audio is particularly powerful; it functions as a respite from the visual clutter of the exhibition. The simplicity of listening to voices and hearing stories told in sound collages works to a profound effect. The voices convey a sense of authenticity; one feels the emotion of the speakers through the timber, intonation, and vibrations of their voices.

The museum can be deeply affecting in telling the stories of survival, resilience, sacrifice, and compassion that took place in response to the attacks of 9/11; it is significantly less effective in addressing the *meaning* of 9/11. This was entirely predictable, precisely because of the museum’s multiple functions as a memorial museum (one containing a memorial gallery in tribute to those who died, built on the site where thousands died and were never recovered)

and as a historical museum that aims to tell a narrative of a political history. That the museum was constrained in how it could address the political meaning of 9/11 was a given from the start, and the broad range of its consultancies during the design phase aimed to provide it more leeway in its narrative. This aim of the museum to interpret the meanings of 9/11 remains unfulfilled in so many ways, in particular in the museum's representation of Islamic faith, which has been under regular attack from Muslim leaders and constituencies. Complaints have focused most on the film, shown in the "Before 9/11" section of the historical exhibition, titled *The Rise of al-Qaeda*, which is narrated by the newsman Brian Williams (while initially this lent it an air of journalistic objectivity, the recent scandal over Williams has perhaps tainted his narration), and which has been accused of equating all Muslims with jihadists and terrorists. Before the museum opened, its administrators refused to respond to the call by an interfaith group of religious leaders to change the film and make these distinctions clearer.¹¹ In the gallery after the film, there are photographs of the 9/11 hijackers (this very representation was felt by some of the families to be an affront to the memories of those who died). These are placed low on a wall, at high level, as if such placement would mediate the fraught feelings produced by the images.

Part of the problem here relates to the broader question of chronology—when does 9/11 the event begin and end? Historians might argue that 9/11 begins with the rise of al-Qaeda in the 1990s, or with the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, or with the United States' political engagement with Saudi Arabia, and so on. Each step backward into the deep narrative of political decisions and events that produced the attack of September 11, 2001 (itself the most spectacular in a series of terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda), can be perceived as spreading the blame and responsibility for what happened that day. And, then, when does the event of 9/11 end? Since the United States is still politically in the post-9/11 era of history, how to tell the story of what happened in the wake of that day? Here is perhaps the museum's greatest shortcoming—a small room contains one image of Guantánamo, one poster about a protest against the war in Iraq, one small picture of Afghanistan, and one mention of the Patriot Act; visitors then exit the gallery to see the bin Laden brick. That the events of 9/11 tragically drove this nation, with enormous public support, to enter two disastrous and costly wars (both ongoing more than a decade later) that resulted in hundreds of thousands dead is not a story that can be addressed within the museum. We could say that this may be asking too much of the museum, to fully engage with the fact that the story

of 9/11 is as much about its aftermath as what happened that day. But it is also the necessary work of historical interpretation.

The 9/11 memorial museum is thus so many conflicting things: a memorial to those who died, a historical museum, a shrine, a sacred site, a tourist destination. It is also a commercial venture. This is indicated not simply in its \$24 admission fee (it is free for families of the dead) but in its selling of merchandise related to 9/11. Just as the 9/11 memorial museum now seems inevitable (though for many years it was not), the presence of a gift shop within the museum now feels irrevocably determined (many though certainly not all contemporary memorial museums throughout the world have gift shops). The gift shop has drawn the most negative attention in all of the assessments of the museum, despite its discreet location (it is of course on the trajectory of viewers out of the museum, the obvious “exit through the gift shop” design feature but unobtrusive nevertheless). The *New York Post* called it the “Little Shop of Horror,” quipping “Visit mass grave, buy a T-shirt.” The highest level of derision was aimed at the September 11 cheese plate, a plate shaped like a cheese-yellow map of the United States with hearts marking Shanksville, New York, and the Pentagon; it was withdrawn by the museum when the criticism reached a crescendo. Crass is the most common adjective used to describe the merchandise for sale at the shop. Yet we need to try to understand what this kind of merchandise generates in terms of the meaning of 9/11 and to take seriously what it means for visitors to buy it and take it home.

The selling of 9/11 merchandise, much of it kitsch, has taken place since the first weeks after September 11, much of it in unofficial street merchandise of informal economies, some of it in more official stores (there have been a number of temporary official stores selling official merchandise since 2001, including coffee mugs, stuffed animals, T-shirts, and the like).¹² There are several different categories of merchandise for sale in the gift shop: Much of the merchandise is pedagogical—books, films, photographic books. Another key category is that of comfort objects, intended for children and adults—stuffed FDNY teddy bears, rescue dogs, and animal-related merchandise. There are many items that could be called souvenirs, many of which celebrate the FDNY and NYPD, merchandise of New York boosterism that existed long prior to the loss of many public servants that day. A significant amount of the merchandise, however, is what we might call domestic merchandise. This is typical for museum gift shops in general, like the shops of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which generate income by selling household objects, clothing, and jewelry. However, this is a much more tricky enterprise in relation to memorial museums. While



Figure 7. Merchandise with architectural theme in the museum gift shop. Photograph: Marita Sturken.

souvenirs in general are intended to be put on display, domestic merchandise is intended for use in quotidian life. A hoodie or a T-shirt with the twin towers logo is intended to be worn. A coffee cup, through its very materiality, implies an integration into daily life, so that not only is its presence at the breakfast table appropriate but it is expected. What does it mean to drink one's morning coffee with a 9/11 memorial museum coffee mug or to sip from a 9/11 museum water bottle? Is it a way to integrate the memory of 9/11 into one's life or does it function to domesticate and reduce the story of 9/11 to one of simple sentimentality? It is certainly the case that souvenirs that align the story of 9/11 with patriotism, jingoism, and narratives of resilience are screening over the complexity of the story of 9/11, reducing it to one of unproblematic notions of strength and resilience.

Interestingly, architectural style is a key factor in commodifying the story of 9/11 in the gift shop. A key theme in the museum's commissioned merchandise takes the design of the "gothic" skin of the original twin towers, transforming it into a modernist design for serving dishes, scarves, and ties.

Here we have a domestication of the modern architectural form of the twin towers into merchandise at a gift shop at a museum that aims to confront the complexity of their destruction for political reasons. Who could have predicted such an outcome? It is an odd decision, but one that seems to deploy the nostalgia about the towers as a way to mediate the very selling of merchandise itself.

If we are attentive to their effect and their appeal, we can see how, despite their varying levels of crassness, these objects, by nature of their existence in the gift shop at this site, convey a sense of authenticity; they signal the charged aspects of the site of Ground Zero, and this gives them a certain power. Yet, in the end, such memory souvenirs can only perpetrate a myth of innocence, conveying a sense of comfort that disavows the complex world of global politics that produced the events of 9/11 and its aftermath and in which the United States is implicated.

It may behoove us to remember that most sites of violence around the world do not result in memorial museums. Yet it is precisely the exceptionalism of 9/11 that demands that we continue to try to tell its story as one of consequences—to frame it and make sense of it within the larger history of the United States. We live in a post-9/11 era in which the tragic consequences of that day continue to emanate. At its best, the 9/11 museum is a work-in-progress, designed to accrue more stories, to hold conferences and events, and to function as an educational institution. Its repository of stories will continue to grow, and this alone is hopeful.

Notes

1. Thanks to Dana Polan and Katherine Hite for reading previous drafts and offering helpful advice.
2. www.911memorial.org/foundation-hall.
3. “FNC Reporter Donates Brick from Bin Laden Compound to 9/11 Museum,” July 6, 2014, <http://insider.foxnews.com/2013/07/06/fnc-reporter-donates-brick-bin-laden-compound-911-museum>.
4. Ernesto Londoño, “Returning Home, a Veteran War Reporter Wrestled with Old Wounds,” *New York Times*, December 15, 2004.
5. Steve Cuozzo, “9/11 Museum Café Drops Booze, Gourmet Food,” *New York Post*, July 10, 2014.
6. I wrote at length about the fetishizing of the footprints in my book *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
7. I borrow the idea of a “survivor object” from the Survivor Objects conference, organized by the Center for Material Culture Studies at the University of Delaware in November 2014. My thanks to those at the conference for their valuable feedback on a related paper I gave at the conference.
8. Guy Trebay, “A Moment in Time Captured in Pieces,” *New York Times*, August 13, 2014.
9. Ibid.
10. See Patricia Cohen, “At Museum on 9/11, Talking through an Identity Crisis,” *New York Times*, June 2, 2012.

10. Alfred Ng and Dan Friedman, "9/11 Museum, Which Sits on Unidentified Remains of Attack Victims, Hosts Alcohol-Fueled Party Night before Opening," *New York Daily News*, May 21, 2014, www.nydailynews.com/new-york/9-11-museum-hosts-alcohol-fueled-party-night-opening-article-1.1800072.
11. Sharon Otterman, "Film at 9/11 Museum Sets Off Clash over Reference to Islam," *New York Times*, April 24, 2014.
12. I discuss the proliferation of 9/11 kitsch in *Tourists of History*.