Rapid Memorializing Trend

REBECCA O'NEAL DAGG
Auburn University
RUSTY SMITH
Auburn University

In the last decade a trend of rapid memorializing has emerged in the United States. Rapid memorializing activity is a force with the potential to shape the urban environment and to affect the public realm's mediation of catastrophic events. Exemplified by a compression of time between event and built public monument or memorial, the pattern of commemorative activity is notably different than in previous generations because now the memorializing occurs in relation to occurrences that are smaller in scale than wars, but are closer to home. Contemporary media saturation allows current events to pipe into the homes of people not directly affected by the event, amplifying the potential for psychological impact of not only the event, but also of the subsequent memorial. This paper analyzes the trend by discussing the characteristics of the trend, the memorial process, and the shift in meaning of memorials as the time frame is condensed.

Trend Substantiation

Rapid memorialization is exemplified in the events of the Oklahoma City Bombing, then Columbine, and now Hurricane Katrina. Particularly dramatic, the unprecedented case of 9/11 alone clearly substantiates the trend. Before September 2001, was over, architectural drawing art dealer Max Protetch began soliciting drawings of rebuilding and memorial proposals from famous architects for a gallery show in Manhattan.[1] Despite expressing some reservation about the timing of the show he continued with the endeavor stating, "I couldn't deny an irrepressible interest in what would replace the World Trade Center. I knew most architects and many others were thinking along similar lines, though they probably felt, as I did, that such thoughts were unseemly given the horrible circumstances of that day."[2] Less than two years after the attack that killed over three thousand people, an extensive public and international memorial competition was sponsored by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, a post-9/11 formed group in charge of re-developing Ground Zero. The competition entry deadline was June 30, 2003.[3] Architect Michael Arad and landscape architect Peter Walker's design, "Reflecting Absence," was chosen over five thousand two hundred other Ground Zero memorial entries[4] and is slated for completion by 2009.[5] Despite ongoing controversy surrounding the five hundred million dollar[6] memorial, in 2006, the Manhattan architecture office of George Handel is finishing construction documents for the prize winning competition entry that includes a tree filled urban plaza at street level. The memorial's organizing sponsor, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, is scheduled for dissolution by the end of the year.[7] According to the September issue of Architecture Record, seven other significant public 9/11 related memorials are designed, under construction or finished. The Staten Island Memorial designed by architects Sono and Fong opened exactly one year later on September 11, 2004.[8] In less than five years the public memorial processes have come almost full circle while the attack is still so fresh that in April 2006, seventy-four

unidentified bone fragments where found on the damaged Deustche Bank building next to Ground Zero Manhattan.[9] Other suspected bone shard findings are reported as recently as September 2006.[10]

This rush to capture the significance of the event before resolution is present — and perhaps before the media moves on — is continuing in the recent 2005, tragedy in the Gulf Coast and New Orleans. Will we so easily forget? In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina when thousands of people were stranded in the swiftly flooding and deteriorating infrastructure of New Orleans, while vast tracts of the Gulf Coast were completely obliterated, discussion of memorials began. With steep body count estimates flying, as bodies floated in the flooded streets, the question of commemorating the losses in a memorial was already part of the national media coverage. Meanwhile, a photo of the body of one little girl was circulated worldwide. She was left floating, dressed in a striped shirt and gym shorts, braided hair with colored beads, face down in the grimy water with no one bothering to cover her or collect her. Later that year in October, the body of famous civil rights activist Rosa Parks laid in honor in the Rotunda of the Capital of the United States. It is difficult to imagine the two conditions existing simultaneously in 2005 — eulogizing one minority African American woman with the highest honors that can be given to an American citizen, while another little African American girl is lying alone and dead in the water for hours as the news media discusses who might be sponsoring a memorial. How does one speedily create a memorial to such a complicated situation that involves culture and race and economics while aiming for the timeless and the beautiful to honor the dead?

Trend Characteristics

Why has speed become so important? The rush to memorialize may simply be a collective coping mechanism, or it may represent the subsurface desire to sweep the whole affair under the rug and "get on with things." In New Orleans the Hurricane Katrina aftermath was and is unforgivable. Perhaps compartmentalization of the tragedy in an urban memorial or monument may ease the collective shame. New Historicist theorist Stephen Greenblatt discusses the role of monuments as containers:

> "First, monuments, like graves, are not only expressions of the dream of renewal; they are paradoxically expressions of a dream of containment: through the monument the dead will be given a proper place and kept in this place. We do not want the dead to roam unchallenged in the places of the living."[11]

How does one capture the staggering losses and their affect on the collective consciousness? One year later, when the majority of lower income New Orleans residents remain displaced, discussion on the New Orleans Katrina Memorial continues while smaller parishes or neighborhoods are already constructing their own. In a particularly unpoignant rapid memorializing example the ABC television series "Extreme Home Edition" created a memorial in Biloxi in a matter of days. Although probably well-intended, it is an untimeless collage of bits and pieces including some Parc Guell-ish tile work depicting a wave on a wall that is twelve feet high ("approximately the height of the water"),[12] a granite slab reminiscent of the National Vietnam Veteran's Memorial, and a glass case of artifacts that is a combination of an 80's glass exhibit case at a Hard Rock Cafe and one of the glass displays at the National Holocaust Museum. As an art piece, it is an unusual terrarium with regular items like porcelain angels and firefighter badges…lit up. Requiring both electricity and Windex, the solidity and monumentality that are historically present in conventional memorials is notably absent. The collection will be an easy target for obliteration by another substantial hurricane like Katrina or Rita. In the speedy construction of the Lower Ninth Ward memorial that is already underway, the hurricane is so recent that the neighborhood is completely barren with no urban infrastructure like law enforcement to support even the basics. Within three days of the start of memorial construction, one hundred thousand dollars worth of heavy construction machinery was stolen in the middle of the night.[13]

Memorial process

Throughout the memorializing process controversy abounds as the main issues of memorial timeframe, of domain, and of design are debated. Prior to the formal memorials people leave personal items from both domestic and sacred settings such as personal photographs, signs, letters, stuffed animals, votive candles, and flowers out in the public domain. In the transformation of normal space to a sacred place, individuals empty the contents of their homes onto the street in order to communicate with the dead. Spontaneous makeshift memorials at the place of impact evolve into buzz talk on television of the need for a physical permanent "memorial" usually followed in a few months by the organization of a memorial design competition. Resultant formal memorials range from the poignant to the one-dimensionally superficial. Some generate positive space in the city, while others have negative urban impact, or worse, heighten commodification of the tragic occurrence.

New York Times Magazine's Marshall Sella researched this first stage of the communal memorial activity on the streets of Manhattan before writing a notable October 2001, article in which he suggested that the comfort of public and communal ritual in contemporary times is rendered more difficult by American cultural diversity, further stating: "The punishment for American diversity is that we are denied the warmth of shared ritual. We have no common text for bereavement, no outstretched hand from the ancient world upon which to rely as a truly single culture. We've been winging it: secret sharers who cobble our rituals from a very recent history."[14] Sella studied the action in Washington Square Park, where signs, murals, canvases were filled with writings that plastered the urban space. He wrote, "Hardly a square inch of space was not crowded by an expression of gratitude, bewilderment, pacifism, or unbridled rage… The only commonality to be found was the fact that all this rhetoric existed in a single place.".[15] Recognizing the phenomenon of the WTC "Missing" posters, he then traced it to one family.[16] LMDC's memorial competition jury publicly acknowledged the phenomenon of the ritual as a major part in the pattern of memorializing that emerged in New York City.[17] On national television, footage of "Missing" posters gained more weight and desperation as the missing individual's WTC floor number increased above the levels of the aircraft impacts. City streets and ordinary urban components like fences, walls, posts, benches and even the ground plane become repositories for a wallpaper of grief.

According to cultural anthropologist Stephen P Huyler, these spontaneous memorials mean that a small part of ordinary public space has become separated and consecrated by the artifacts themselves. Such "Sacred Spaces" he says "bring healing, allowing us to bridge our grief or find a form of solace, to be quiet at a time of turmoil."[18] Dr. Huyler, a specialist in Indian culture, contends:

> "… a shrine is a place whose sole purpose is to honor the sacred, whatever the sacred is to that individual. Often shrines are simply collections of things personal to those who create them… In India, the variety of these shrines shows that there is no single, "right" way to approach the divine, that it is an individual matter… In India shrines can be, and are, created anywhere. They appear in many places, especially in the wake of disasters, natural or otherwise. Making shrines - it's something that's natural - it comes from deep within. It's an archetypal need of mankind to create sacred space at times of great need."[19]

After John F. Kennedy, Jr.'s untimely death in 1999, a substantial collection of gift offerings were brought to the Kennedy museum in Boston.[20] In contrast, after his father President John F. Kennedy's death thirty-six years earlier, makeshift memorials were not as significant a part of the national mourning according to the Facing History Foundation.[21] Humans have always made shrines and memorials. The current trend distinguishes itself from the past by the quantity of participation, by the scope and scale of the memorials, and by their preservation and extension through extensive and pervasive documentation. Photos of the collections flow over into the nonspace of the web as the physical artifacts disintegrate. The quickness of the web allows for the local urban memorials to expand into the global arena as they are frozen in time. Some of the earliest

remembrance artifacts are plucked for further preservation in the formal memorials. A desire for continuity in the overall memorializing process has led to an emergence of the rapid memorializing trend's characteristic of preserving elements of the first phase memorials into the later formal memorials. Permanent conservation and display of these artifacts binds the temporal acts to the long term memorials in a continuum. Blurred boundaries between phases is increasingly a characteristic found in present-day memorials. From the stored collection in Colorado of at least two hundred thousand artifacts left in memory of Columbine victims, to the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building "grieving fence" that once surrounded the site and is now included in the final memorial at Oklahoma City, the pairing of the ephemeral with the permanent becomes important for this contemporary process of remembering. [22]

Future

Not only characterized by a compressed timeframe, the trend also relates to the design aspects of the memorials. Concerning this shift in character and corresponding meaning, New Historicist theorist Stephen Greenblatt recounts a trend from 1990-95, arguing that, "… the sense of inert matter, of monuments as dead substitutes for living memory, has if anything steadily increased, so that we have as a culture grown exceedingly uncomfortable with cenotaphs and obelisks and statues of heroic warriors. For our attempts at memorialization, we prefer narratives and movies and interactive museums."[23] When arguing for the timeless value of Eisenman's Holocaust Memorial, writer Hanno Rauterberg warns that for contemporary times "Remembrance all too easily devolves into empty ritual…"[24] The future of the qualitative design aspects of the trend can be predicted in the majority of recent formal public memorial designs, which create variations of urban rooms as places where people can go as a part of a personal and collective grief ritual. Maya Lin's Vietnam Veteran's memorial is a key American project in the paradigm shift to the collective urban room that is now pervasive in the fast-tracked memorial design. A different spatial urban room character is demonstrated as the interior "turns itself out" in the Oklahoma City Memorial composed of a collection of oversized stone chairs. Lin's space is more contained and more interiorized as it cuts into the earth. She described the quality of her monuments, "I consider the work I do memorials, not monuments: in fact I've often thought of them as anti-monuments. I think I don't make objects; I make places… the places set a stage for experience and for understanding experience…places where something happens within the viewer. "[25] The urban interior characteristic is evidenced in all seven of the previously mentioned 9/11 designs including the main urban memorial park/room at Ground Zero. Not surprisingly, Lin was a member of the jury for the WTC Memorial Competition that resulted in the above ground and below ground urban rooms for remembrance.

In the future, it will be difficult for the memorial process to get any faster, however the design aspect may continue to follow the trend away from monumentalized objectification towards interior and interactive space-making and cultural preservation of memorial process. When the interactive component of the extended grief and remembrance rituals become too much like entertainment, as many of them already are, then the pendulum will need to swing back to a paradigm of timelessness, or admit that the memorials are temporal, more like extended makeshift memorials. Ideally the future permanent memorials will have a lasting contribution to the urban fabric, which may require that the pattern of fast-tracking will need to slow down.[26]

Endnotes

[1] Max Protetch, *A New World Trade Center: Design Proposals from Leading Architects Worldwide*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2002), vii.

[2] Max Protetch, vii.

[3] Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, "World Trade Center Site Memorial Competition Guidelines," New York State, http://www.wtcsitememorial.org/pdf/LMDC_Guidelines_english.pdf (accessed September 2006)

[4]Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, "World Trade Center Site Memorial Competition Guidelines," New York State, http://www.wtcsitememorial.org/about_jury_txt.html (entries) (accessed September 2006)

[5] Associated Press, "September 11 Families: World Trade Center Memorial should be Above Ground," http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,186239,00.html, February 27, 2006.

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[9] Associated Press, "Human Remains Found on Roof Near World Trade Center Site," http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,190797,00.html, April 6, 2006.

[10] Claudia Parsons, "Pilgrims or tourists, millions come to Ground Zero," Reuters/My Way, September 9, 2006, via http://www.reuters.myway.com

[11] Stephen Greenblatt, "Stephen Greenblatt," in *Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities Occasional Papers 3: Grounds for Remembering,* ed. Christina M. Gillis (Berkeley: Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities Occasional Papers, 1995), 23.

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[13] The Associated Press, "Equipment Stolen From Katrina Memorial Site," August 21, 2006, via http://www. wcbs880.com

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[15] Sella.

[16] Sella.

[17] Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, "World Trade Center Memorial Jury Statement for Winning Design," New York State, http://www.wtcsitememorial.org/about_jury_txt.html (accessed September 2006)

[18]Gustav Niehbuhr, "Shrines serve the Need for Healing," New York Times, October 6, 2001. via Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation at http://www.facinghistory.org/campus/memorials.nsf/0/1AF1B74C0AA9CFD785256E750079AAE6

[19] Gustav Niehbuhr.

[20] Kennedy Museum visit by co-author xxxx, 1999.

[21] "Spontaneous Memorials," via Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation.

[22] Spontaneous Memorials," via Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation at http://www.facinghistory.org/campus/memorials.nsf/Home?OpenFrameSet

[23] Stephen Greenblatt, 26-27.

[24] Peter Eisenman and Lars Muller, *Holocaust Memorial Berlin*. (Baden, Switzerland: Lars Muller Publishers, 2005), 15.

[25] Maya Lin, "Maya Lin," in *Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities Occasional Papers 3: Grounds for Remembering,* ed. Christina M. Gillis (Berkeley: Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities Occasional Papers, 1995), 13.