

Connection Point: Defining Purpose through the Architectural Process

Tribute WTC 9/11 Visitor Center is a testament to how collaborations can succeed in even the most difficult and sensitive projects

By Joan Krevlin, AIA

Our goal was to design an interim visitor center at the World Trade Center site. In a small 20th-floor conference room overlooking the hole where the Twin Towers once stood, a small group of us from BKS Architects met with the September 11th Families Association, which provides support and resources to the 9/11 community. On the street below we observed thousands of Ground Zero visitors surrounding an uninviting, fenced-off area, welcomed by hawkers of cheap merchandise and self-professed tour guides. This hollow scene informed our task at hand: to create a contemplative space that would provide a meaningful connection to the emotional events of September 11 – the Tribute WTC 9/11 Visitor Center.

The mission of the center, “person-to-person history,” grew out of a chorus of voices wanting to share their stories. Spearheading the efforts were Lee Ielpi, a retired Rescue 2 firefighter who lost his fellow firefighter and son, Jonathan, on 9/11, and Jennifer Adams, who spent nine months as a volunteer at Ground Zero. Lynn Tierney, former Deputy Commissioner for the FDNY, barely survived the attack and then attended more than 300 funerals of her colleagues. We also met Gerry Bogascz, who had worked in the south tower and escaped

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JEFF TOTARO/ESTO



Top: The Tribute WTC 9/11 Visitor Center faces the south end of Ground Zero Above: The first gallery features a model of the Twin Towers set on a floor map of the area, and floor-to-ceiling panoramic views taken from the towers' observation deck

down 80 flights of stairs – for the second time. Lois Eida worked out of her house in Battery Park City, and both her home and business were destroyed. Marian Fontana lost her husband and wanted to celebrate his life for their son.

After listening to their stories, we realized that no one “museum voice” could tell the story better than the many firsthand accounts we’d heard. But how could we design an environment that would help them share their experiences with the thousands of visitors seeking their own emotional connection to these events?

As project architects seeking to create a sense of place for visitors, we found the planning process to be more instinctual than spatial. Over two years, from initial design meetings to the opening in September 2006, the challenge was to select appropriate words and images that would represent a full range of voices. For the September 11th Families Association, the challenge was to share personal photos, words, and mementos with the world. Every color, font, and detail of the exhibit was considered until it felt right. Despite our limited time and budget, we all felt this careful consideration was critical in conveying the powerful memories associated with the contributed artifacts. A variety of media was used to create this experience for the

visitor. For example, at the center of the rescue and recovery gallery, are Jonathan Ielpi's torn coat and helmet, testaments to the heroism of all the rescue workers. On a documentary video, his father Lee describes how a band of firefighters searched for their sons, bringing visitors a personal and universal sense of loss and, surprisingly, hope.



JEFF TOTORO/ESTO

A series of open galleries present the sequence of events through images, objects, and words; freestanding panels along the exhibit route recall the Twin Towers' vertical windows

More than just containers for objects, today's museums are about creating a collective identity – a connection point. Even when addressing a recent emotional event, a mission and message that resonates with visitors inspires self-awareness, social awareness, action, and advocacy. "It's about the vibrancy of a community, not death and tragedy," Tierney explains. The collective mission that emerged from our visioning sessions was not to provide a memorial to lost lives, which was already planned for the site, but to provide an environment for interpretation of oral histories, objects, and personal recollections.

The process of building is also the process of imagining, or re-imagining, the role of a public institution and interaction with the visitor. Architectural and exhibit design play a crucial role in mediating the visitor experience. The revamped former deli space tells the story of the building, the site, the individuals affected, and, in conclusion, the visitors themselves. At the Tribute Center, the small footprint of the space (6,000 square feet) necessitated the collaborative working method. We worked closely with content developers, graphic designers, and the September 11th Families Association to construct a path to understanding. The spare design focuses attention on the words and sounds of the oral histories and ordinary objects that, because of the tragedy, exemplify what was

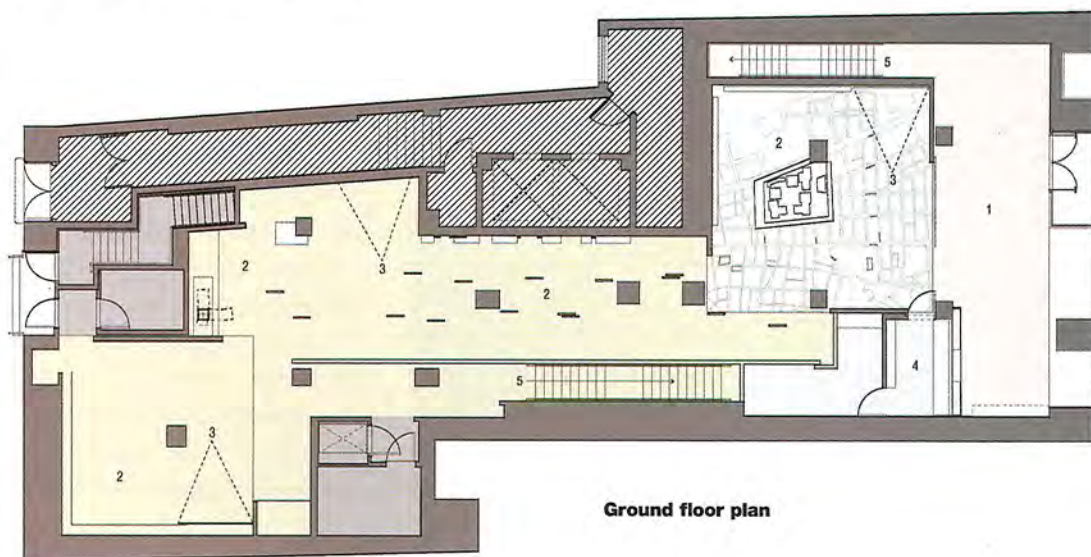
lost. The architecture structures the emotional impact of the exhibition material in a way that contributes to healing.

A glass storefront overlooks the Ground Zero site directly across Liberty Street. Inside the long rectangular space, a series of open galleries reflects the sequence of events. The first gallery, featuring floor-to-ceiling photographs from the observation deck of the towers, celebrates the vitality of the former World Trade Center community. The subsequent galleries offer a timeline of unfolding events. The space narrows and the exhibit route is punctuated with a series of 22-inch-wide freestanding panels that recall the towers' vertical windows. The content of the panels, along with video and recovered objects, convey the private grief of those who lived and died. A long blue wall extends the length of the space and is covered by the missing persons flyers that blanketed the city after 9/11. At the end of the hall, personal mementos and photos commemorate the vibrant and varied lives of the victims. In the final gallery on the lower level, the voices of the visitors become part of the exhibit. Their thoughts, written on note cards, are pinned to wall surfaces, their stories shared with the community in return.

The collaboration that resulted in Tribute WTC 9/11 Visitor Center succeeded in finding a distinctive voice within the debate over how to shape the WTC site and make sense of the tragedy. It serves as a place for visitors to gather, reflect, and find a connection between themselves and the events of 9/11.

Joan Krevlin, AIA, is a partner and principal at BSK Architects. Her recent projects include the New York Hall of Science Playground, the FDNY Fire Safety Learning Center, and the new Queens Botanical Garden Visitor Center, slated to receive a LEED Platinum rating.

Client: The September 11th Families Association
 Architect: BSK Architects
 Construction Manager: Cauldwell Wingate Company
 Graphic Design: Poulin & Morris
 Structural Engineer: Weidinger Associates
 Mechanical Engineer: Ambrosino, DePinto & Schmieder
 Lighting Design: Kugler Associates
 Special Exhibit Consultant: Daniel Schnur
 AV Consultant: Monadnock Media
 Exhibit Fabricator: MSL Productions



Ground floor plan

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Oculus

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