

Rethink The Type Of Memorial We Want

by Max Page

Monday, November 24, 2003 12:00 AM

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The largest competition in the history of the world - to design a memorial to the victims of the terrorist attacks on 9/11 - has resulted in eight finalists that have provoked words such as "generic" and "impersonal," and, worst of all, "like an airport design." There were 5,201 entries from 63 nations and 49 states and yet we are left with proposals that fail to approach our hopes. What went wrong?

The criticisms of the memorial designs that are percolating up in conversation and in the press are, at first glance, not completely fair. Each of the designs offers some element that individuals may find deeply moving. Norman Lee and Michael Lewis's votive candles hanging above the foundations of the towers, each representing one of the 2,982 victims who perished that day (and in the 1993 bombing), could move visitors and mourners the way the children's memorial by Moshe Safdie at the Yad Vashem memorial in Jerusalem does. Dual Memory, by Brian Strawn and Karla Sierralta, makes permanent the powerful "Portraits in Grief," the brief biographies of the victims published in the New York Times in the year after 9/11, with projections of images and information about each victim. All of the designs are earnest, by talented young designers, and sure to provoke tears of mourning from many. But that is not the measure of success for a memorial.

The fault is not with the designers, but with the process. Everything about the rebuilding of Ground Zero, and the memorial in particular, has been rushed. With a Republican Governor and Mayor, there is only one date that mattered to the rebuilding process: the opening of the Republican convention in New York next August. The laying of the cornerstone for Liberty Tower and for the memorial has been preordained to occur when George Bush rolls into town.

But although some might like to blame it all on the Republican Party, there were even more fundamental flaws in the process. The focus of the program guidelines was on recognizing the individuals who perished, and not about how future Americans would understand 9/11 and might move forward. As a result the jury has chosen eight beautiful designs for a cemetery, but no designs for a living memorial to 9/11. Our obsession with building increasingly more clever, and complicated, memorials to remembering individuals who lost their lives in disasters has steered us far away from an older way of thinking about memorials, one that looked more toward a common future than to individual loss.

New York has distinguished itself from other cities by its lack of grand memorials. As architect James Sanders has noted, the greatest of our memorials - the Statue of Liberty - stands in the middle of the harbor and not at the end of a wide boulevard, or amidst a large square. New

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York's monuments have long had to compete for space on the grid, and against the city's restless physical renewals.

But New York is in fact filled with memorials of a different kind. All across New York City are places and institutions that ennoble us that are in fact memorials. John F. Kennedy High School, Lincoln Center, Father Fagan Square in Queens, McCarren Park Pool in Brooklyn. There are the branches of the public library built by Andrew Carnegie, hospital wings built by Sloan and Kettering, and public housing complexes named after Walt Whitman and Louis Armstrong.

True, these places do not try to memorialize New York's most horrific disasters (a small plaque marks the site of the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire; a small tablet in Tompkins Square park is all that reminds us of the worst single loss of life in New York before 9/11, the General Slocum disaster of 1904). But shouldn't a human disaster of such great proportions ripple far beyond the four acres allotted in Ground Zero? Shouldn't there be signs of the way we are making the city better in these victims' honor all over the city? These are the kinds of memorials that dot New York City, as well as cities and towns across the country - public libraries, memorial concert halls, parks, scholarships, pools. But they are utterly absent from the group of finalists offered to us.

Missing from the group of finalists was the first public memorial to 9/11, which was also the most fleeting: the Tribute in Light, the towers of light shining up from Ground Zero, that were allowed to shine for only one month, and then went dark. The decision to turn off the lights was the best decision anyone has yet made, because it said to us all that the memorial to the dead is not our final destination, the city is. New York, our national jewel, what E.B. White called "the greatest human concentrate on earth, the poem whose magic is comprehensible to millions," is the lasting memorial.

Let's send the jury back to find among those 5,000 entries proposals that see the memorial as a chance to invest in what has always made New York great: not its private capital but its human capital, its people. That would be the unforgettable memorial.

*Max Page, the author of *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan, 1900-1940*, teaches architecture and history at the University of Massachusetts, and is curator of a forthcoming exhibition at the New-York Historical Society on the centennial of Times Square.*

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