Letting History Speak for Itself

by Michael Arad
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Photo by Ken McCown In a change from the original design, hundreds of trees will create a canopy of leaves on the plaza of the National September 11th Memorial.

Michael Arad, who grew up in Israel, Mexico and the United States, burst on to the public scene in 2004 when his design was selected for the National September 11 Memorial, winning approval over more than 5,000 other entries in an international design competition. After almost seven years â€“- and many controversies and design changes â€“- that memorial is set to open this Sept. 11. Nicole G. Anderson recently spoke with Arad.

(*To read Anderson's article on the memorials and the museum â€“ and the difficult path to their completion -- go here*).

What was the inspiration behind the design of the memorial? How did you conceive of the idea?

It started out with an image of two voids carved into the surface of the Hudson River with water flowing into these voids, but the voids remaining empty and never filling up. I ended up drawing and sketching it, and eventually building a small model. This was in 2001 and 2002. Then I set it aside and came back to it a year later when the competition for the design was announced. I thought, why I don't I modify that idea and move it from the river to the site itself.

Could you tell me a bit about the process of designing the memorial and working with other architects involved in the project?

I was one person designing a memorial without a client, and then it became something much, much bigger than that through this competition. That changes how you work. We have multiple clients whether it's the agencies like the Lower Manhattan Development Corp. and the memorial foundation, the mayor's office, the governor's office, and then you have other considerations of course, meeting with families who lost loved ones, New Yorkers in the neighborhood, people who survived the attack.

Memorial designer Michael Arad

It is not as if there is a single client, a single guiding voice on a project like this. It is about listening to many people and building consensus and advocating for a design. It's been challenging, but very positive. I wouldn't trade it for anything else. I think the process itself is part of what makes it a public monument. It reflects upon our values as a society. Is it a messy and long process? Yes. But it is an absolutely necessary part of the process.

How were the families of 9/11 involved in the design process? What kind of feedback have you received from them?

I think one of the parts of the design that was most emotionally important to the families was the display of the names -- how the names would be arranged, what information would or would not be included alongside someone's name.

What we were able to do, which is remarkable and unlike any other memorial that I know of, was to reach out to all of the family members and ask them if there are names of other victims of the attack that they would like to see next to the name of their loved one. We had over 1,200 requests. When you walk up to the two memorial pools -- each pool is ringed by close to 1500 names -- the names are arranged in five rows. What we were able to do is to arrange names in such a way that there are these hidden connections. They're not spelled out, they don't jump out at you. But the people who know these victims first hand when they walk up to the memorial will see the name surrounded by a friend or co-worker, and be able to discern these hidden connections, and we'll find ways to share that with the broader public who comes to the memorial.

For me, that was a very important part of the design because it allowed us to view these very personal, deep, and tragic stories and then find a way to connect these histories to visitors. Whether it's through a printed brochure or whether it's through an audio guide, that will allow you to come and hear first hand, perhaps in the voice of surviving relatives, about that day, about the lives were cut short and know, just not about the death of these people, but about their lives.

Talking to family members and giving them the opportunity to tell us who should be listed next to their loved one was a way to do that, to create that opportunity for families to contribute to the design and the placement of the name on the memorial.

Some families expressed a wish to have more specific information listed on the memorial such as rank of fire fighters, company information, etc. In the end, why was it decided to list only the names?

We looked at many different arrangements and we just thought that we had to find an arrangement that was equitable and fair and didn’t privilege some over others. Some of the arrangement ideas which were looked at unintentionally did that.

The challenge was to find a way to avoid that -- to create something that treated all equally. I think what came out of it after a lot of deliberation, after a lot of effort, is beautiful and evocative and really focuses on the most essential quality of each person, which is the person's name. It worked to amplify that very basic message of the memorial: the individual lives that were lost. We're also talking about the communal loss we suffered, and you see that in this array of names. name is individually displayed with space around it, but together it forms a broad band,

this river of names that surrounds each pool.

What about the changes made to the design over the course of time?

I think a lot of the design process is very much about evolution. You start with a very core idea and adapt it to the realities outside. We had a strong and clear idea in the beginning of this project, which is what helped guide it to a successful conclusion. The design is really about letting the history of the site speak for itself with as little embellishment and flourish as possible and let the truth of the site emerge. I think you see that today. The design was always meant to use the quietness and emptiness as the guiding principle and it stayed through the design. It is about marking absence, and as I understood it, it is a built equivalent of a moment of silence.

What was the greatest challenge of this project?

It is a very emotional project. I think design always has an emotional component to it, and in this case, more so than usual. That can be challenging and difficult because emotions are not easy to parse out and to analyze and to hold onto, and it was important to do that over a very long period of time, to not lose that focus.