FABRICATIONS

THE JOURNAL OF THE SOCIETY
OF ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIANS,
AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

Vol 15, No 2
Building Sites of Memory: the *Ground Zero* Sonic Memorial Sound Walk

Haidy Geismar

No one loved the towers as much as everyone missed them.¹

On 11 September 2001 (or 9/11), as we all know, two airplanes flew directly into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in downtown Manhattan, precipitating the total collapse of both buildings. Almost 3,000 people disappeared into the dust and debris that quickly became known as 'Ground Zero'. The epithet implies a nuclear-like incineration yet, since 9/11, Ground Zero has been a site of perpetual movement and shifting materiality: rescue and forensic operations; salvage and clean-up missions; commemorative ceremonies; the opening of newly cleared spaces in the vicinity; the re-development and re-opening of the PATH train and subway; and the selection of Daniel Libeskind’s *Freedom Tower* and Michael Arad’s *Reflecting Absence* memorial as designs for the lengthy, and much contested, rebuilding project.

Many commentators have observed a parallel, and popular, “rush to memorialisation”² accommodating the speedy redevelopment of the site by city, state and corporate officials. Within hours of the attack people had gathered at Union Square, the closest city space still available for public gatherings. New Yorkers started to build impromptu shrines with flowers, candles and written tributes throughout the city.³ Personal memorials were built around the desperate missing persons notices that plastered the city, on spare pieces of city land, as well as at firehouses and other sites connected to those who lost their lives. Soon after the event there was a creative proliferation of commemorative exhibitions. For instance, ‘Here is New York: A democracy of photographs’ displayed photographs taken by both amateurs and professionals in a SoHo Gallery.⁴ The diversity and speed of dissemination of these public outpourings was facilitated by the use of digital technologies: cameras, printers, fax machines, copiers and computers.

Running parallel to these popular engagements was, and is, the more formal state and federally sanctioned curation of 9/11. The New York Historical Society and the National Museum of American History began ‘collecting’ the event almost immediately. In contrast to the fluidity of digital engagements, curators struggled to objectify 9/11 out of the detritus of the site—collecting objects as varied as paper shrines, posters, amateur photographs, crushed file cabinets, a fireman’s hat, paper debris from an office, building keys, and sections from the building façade.⁵
The quandaries of museum curators in collecting, conserving and thinking about the future role of these artifacts and recent controversies arising around the development (and subsequent shelving) of the International Freedom Center at the site, highlight some of the political issues around more conventional processes of memorialisation. They also draw attention to the tensions that can arise in making events, opinions, conflicts and ideologies material. The often disturbing effect of permanence that comes from using stone and other weighty artifacts to solidify versions of history and forms of memory raises provocative questions about representation, inclusiveness and what kinds of ‘things’ can be used to remember in what kinds of spaces, asking ‘what’ exactly is being memorialised.

Memorials that acknowledge immateriality, absence and change may be better suited to the dynamic political environment of Ground Zero than those that try to translate the experience and memory of before and after 9/11 into a solid three dimensions. It is striking how the evocation of the absent forms of the Twin Towers, formerly criticised by many for their stark modernity, have become salient to many 9/11 memorials. Perhaps the most popular memorial to date was the 2001 installation *Towers of Light*, or *Tribute in light*, by artists Paul Myoda and Julian LaVerdiere, which projected two beams of light, replicating the form of the absent towers, into the night-time skyline. It also seems clear that Michael Arad’s *Reflecting Absence*, which centred on a contemplative space created by two submerged pools mimetically referring to the footprint of the Twin Towers, was the popular (and official) selection primarily because of its acknowledgement of absent form. The evocation of absence in the process of remaking the Twin Towers in diverse, seemingly ephemeral, media have proved to be a vital part of the ways in which people are maintaining their memories and memorialising 9/11.

The presence of absence is, by necessity, heavily mediated by reproductive technologies. In addition to the memorials mentioned above, the absent form of the World Trade Center is replicated by being printed on the myriad souvenir t-shirts, postcards, posters and calendars that vendors sell around the site of Ground Zero and beyond. The towers, and personal memories of them, also loom large within a proliferation of digital creativity—in photography, websites, and other digital and print media.

The reproduction of images of the buildings mirrors the reproduction of memory, which is most commonly conceptualised in relation to the visual domain. However, the visual is not the only sense through which we construct and experience memory (and even so-called ‘visual media’ requires the use of other senses in its production and apprehension). In this review of one particular digital tribute to the Twin Towers—the *Ground Zero Sonic Memorial Sound Walk*—I examine how digital technologies may unite sound, vision, and a broader sense of being, into a multi-sensory and embodied experience, which in turn may also permit a more open-ended form of memorial, incorporating diverse meanings and experiences.

Little has been written about the scope for digital technologies to permit individual involvement, even intervention in creating not only the form of memorials, but the very idea of what a memorial might be. In taking the reader
Building Sites of Memory

through a condensed version of the Sonic Memorial, I emphasise how sound can be seen as a new way of curating the experience of memory, forging new kinds of memorial, re-making absent places in resistant spaces. The text here is accompanied by images I took during my own participation in the sound walk. Paralleling the paradoxical experience of listening to sounds of the past in the present, or rendering present the disappeared, the images capture and freeze the changing nature of the site of Ground Zero, and situate the process of memorial making within this dynamic.

The Sonic Memorial was developed by a team of independent radio producers in collaboration with a National Public Radio (NPR) initiative Lost and Found Sound. The initial radio venture aimed to commemorate the life and history of the World Trade Center in the wake of 9/11. Listeners were encouraged to contribute by calling a dedicated telephone number and recording their memories of the Twin Towers or to contribute voicemail tapes or other kinds of sound recordings. These memories were originally launched as a segment on NPR and have also been archived on the web. They were edited into a 60-minute audio walking tour narrated by the New York writer Paul Auster, and are now part of a series of sound walks that include New York’s Chinatown, and Paris’ St Germain des Pres.

The Sonic Memorial merges the narratives of many different people, historical recordings, interviews, radio broadcasts and other sound recordings into a ‘soundscape’ that in turn is situated within the ever-changing, dynamic environment of the contemporary site of Ground Zero. Whilst the narration and selection of sounds are circumscribed by Auster and the editors, they were selected from over 1,000 contributions by members of the public, and as a listening experience, the sound walk allows each of us to bring our own thoughts, memories, as well as the sounds and sights we experience on the particular day of our visit, into the space of the memorial.

The sound walk traverses what is currently the outer perimeter of the building site of Ground Zero, although it is not necessarily fixed to any static path. As Auster instructs from the start of the walk, “if a gate is locked or something is changed, check your map and meet me at the next point.” There is an inherent flexibility built into the Sonic Memorial from the start. Beginning in the adjacent churchyard of St Paul’s chapel on Broadway, Auster tells us, “We came together after September 11, 2001, radio producers, artists, construction workers, bond traders, secretaries, archivists, widows, firefighters, a nationwide collaboration to chronicle and commemorate the life and history of the world trade center and its neighbourhood, in public radio, on the web, and now in lower Manhattan.” Auster thus invites the listener to become part of this popular community, part of history, and by extension, part of the site of Ground Zero. In this way, the narration begins to engender a memorial constituted by multiple, and diverse, voices, all equal in their entitlement to claim a stake in documenting and remembering, breaking down conventional representational hierarchies in many other memorials where city officials and design specialists often presume to ‘speak for’ a more general public.

St Paul’s Church, built in 1766, is Manhattan’s oldest building in continuous public use. From the churchyard, Auster walks and talks the listener through the
early history of the area. Formerly ‘radio row’, the electronics (and sound) center of the city, the neighbourhood was razed to make way for the Twin Towers. A New York historian comments on the Soundwalk, that peeling back these material layers of history emphasises the “entanglement of the past and the present...the air is so thick now with memory and loss and pain it has acquired a whole other dimension.” Such layering is also achieved through sound—voices mingling together, old music, new memories. From the outset of the tour the listener is made painfully aware of the transience of even the most solid of buildings, and again is invited to seek refuge within the paradoxical permanence of sound recorded in the area many years ago, before the World Trade Center was even an idea.

The re-creation, in sound, of Radio Row brings the neighbourhood back for listeners who had never seen it. Will the Sonic Memorial do the same for those who had never seen the former World Trade Center or who cannot visualise Ground Zero as a zone of havoc and destruction once the new building work has been completed, and it no longer exists? The potency of sound to invoke visualisation is very different from the kind of work that visible memorials do. Looking at tangible memorials fixes the gaze in a particular direction. Hearing sound forces the listener to use their imagination and memory in a more creative way. As we ‘hear’ the past incarnation of the area, we come to realise how much memory is as much like recorded sound as it is like a photograph, immaterial yet powerfully present and embodied.

In addition to the mental images and physical sensations evoked by sound, there are many other kinds of memorials in St Paul’s churchyard, which get incorporated silently into the sound walk through the experience of walking: old gravestones, a memorial bell to 9/11 given by the people of London to the city of New York, memorial plaques, and museum-like panels of text. Passing these on the churchyard path, the sound walk directs the listener to exit the wrought iron gates and face Ground Zero.

The site is currently surrounded by a grid-iron fence. An audio-recording made on 11 September 2001 as the recorder stared aghast at the collapse of the first tower plays on the Soundwalk. The frantic noises of police radioing one another, and fire engines racing, compete with the ‘real-time’ noise of the city today. The co-existence of these city sounds both brings the listener into the moment of 9/11 and brings that moment into the present. Once more, unlike static memorials, sound is able to compress time and space and to effect the experience of visiting the site. The effect of these recordings will remain even after the fence is removed, and the site blends again into the surrounding city.
Auster asks that the listener stand at the site and take a moment to listen. Bob Dylan sings. Squinting to look through the squares of the heavy fence, telephone messages from Sean Rooney from his office in World Trade Two, and from Brian Sweeney taken hostage on the flight from Boston are played. Synchronous with their voices is the presence of a large panel of text listing the names of the ‘heroes of 9/11’. The area is crowded with tourists and other visitors. Many have cameras and are making their own images of Ground Zero, to be taken home as personal memorials.
A visitor to the site will thus find themselves surrounded by many different memorials in the making, from the formal panels of image and text fixed to the fence by the Port Authorities of New York and New Jersey, to the spontaneous notes and artifacts the many visitors have left behind, even though the site is heavily policed by signs warning visitors not to leave such offerings behind. Despite the air of regulation, all of these approaches towards memorialising the site, official or unofficial, become part of the Sonic Memorial, as sound engages the listener and walker with their environment.

Figure 2: Message to the 'Ground Zero mothers' tied to the perimeter fence.
Photographer: Haidy Geismar.

Figure 3: One of many signs surrounding Ground Zero asking visitors to leave no trace behind.
Photographer: Haidy Geismar.
Auster directs the walker-listener to spend a moment at the cross of two steel beams found standing two days after the attack. This fragment, discovered by a fireman, quickly became a sacred memorial for rescue workers and visitors. To date, it has not been incorporated into any of the formal memorial proposals and it remains to be seen if it will form a visible part of the museum currently being planned. Once more we become aware that the narration of the sound walk may very well outlast the remnants of Ground Zero, as the other recordings we hear have outlasted the Twin Towers and many of their inhabitants.

Auster directs the walker to pass the local firehouse. Answerphone messages play, left by a rookie firefighter lost in the towers. The fencing is supplemented by large black plywood walls, on which the rubric ‘Post No Bills’ has been stencilled over and over again. Irrepressibly, someone has chalked poems next to these warnings, seizing the black boards for what they most viscerally are. The tension between official regulations and public engagements with the site are again made palpable.

Figure 4: Graffiti poem on siding on the south side of the site.

Photographer: Haidy Geismar.

Despite Auster’s ‘narration’, and the ostensible circuit around the site that the walk moves the listener through, the Soundwalk does not provide a linear narrative of history. Starting with the neighbourhood prior to the building of the World Trade Center, moving to their destruction on 9/11, next, as the listener is looking north at the deeply excavated foundations, the Soundwalk moves back in time again, to describe the building of the Twin Towers. The story is told by
Mohawk iron-workers, who worked on many of New York’s skyscrapers. Rather than narrating a rigid chronological passage through time, these stories give a sense of the sedimentation of the past in the present, and compress time and space into the experience of remembering the past at Ground Zero. The fracturing of narrative mirrors the changing nature of the space.

The southern side of the site is the least regulated and despite the warning signs there are many personal mementos attached to the fences, and propped into alcoves left by scaffolding and temporary fencing. These memorials are made out of cheap toys, paper, trinkets, key-rings, plastic flowers and other prosaic objects. It is the leaving of them behind that makes them valuable.

Figure 5: Cuddly toys tied into the police fence on the south side of the site.

Photographer: Haidy Geismar.

The Soundwalk directs the walker past these private memorials, along a temporary walkway filled with signs advertising the commercial regeneration of the site, which ends with smooth, brass doors leading into One World Financial Center. There is an immediate sense of entering a corporate domain. The pavement turns to marble, the visitor is lured away from the view of the building site towards stores and cafes. Passing through the revolving doors, the Soundwalk plays memories of the office workers who inhabited the Twin Towers. One woman remembers the sound of the doors as being like a heartbeat and asks the organisers of the memorial to find a sound of it. There is no sound recorded, but the listener can hear a similar noise in the revolving doors they too are passing through.
Building Sites of Memory

Figure 6: The building site, seen through the glass of World Financial Center.

Photographer Haidy Geismar.

The next stop is Two World Financial Center, where the listener is invited to sit for a moment, looking back through the windows at Ground Zero from an elevated position. Steven Vitiello, a sound artist who did a residency at the World Trade Center in 1999 talks about his work recording the building. Unable to open the windows, he instead attached microphones to a window, and sat at night “feeling as though he was listening with a stethoscope to the heart and soul of the building.” In agreement, the structural engineer who designed the building, said “often buildings speak to you.” It is striking how the (absent) buildings themselves have become a repository for the trauma of loss. Narrating the life of the building encapsulates the lives of those who worked and played there. Animating the building, remembering the concrete forms, creates a virtual home for the more painful memory of the lost people who worked within the building.

The sound walk continues to animate the virtual twin towers, playing the noises and voices of the many different people who spent time in the World Trade Center, from the Mexicans who cleaned the building to the tourists who came from all around the world to visit the observation deck. In the Winter Garden of Three World Financial Center, the sound walker hears the story of Philippe Petit, a high-wire walker who in 1974, after nine years of planning, strung a wire between the two buildings, and walked, ran and danced backwards and forwards on it, listening to the roar of traffic and feeling the buildings waving gently in the wind, whilst police desperately tried to capture him.
In the Winter Garden, there is currently a temporary exhibition about the World Trade Center memorial. The *Soundwalk* accompanies the exhibition with a discussion by the director of the New York Historical Society. He talks of the instantaneous need for building a memorial at the site: "Now we no longer go to cemeteries...we are drawn towards these public memorials...it reminds us we need to treasure the people we know...because nothing is forever." The *Soundwalk* is a memorial that evokes change and transience, rather than solidity and closure.

Auster ends the *Soundwalk* outside the Winter Garden, looking out across the water at the Statue of Liberty. He reads a short, highly personal, piece that he wrote on the day of 11 September 2001, ending: "My eyes fill up with tears, tears for the dead, tears for the living, tears for the abominations we inflict upon one another, for the cruelty and savagery of the whole stinking human race. We must love one another or die." Making memory in a space like Ground Zero, which is resistant to stillness, and which controversially negotiates between public and private interests, displaces and re-contextualises the weighty contemplation expected of more static memorials. Digital technologies are able to recreate events, images, and objects, whilst simultaneously acknowledging their absence. The *Sonic Memorial* curates the experience of remembering the World Trade Center in a way that transcends most of the capabilities of more conventional memorials—by encompassing diverse public monuments and popular memorials, layering through voice and music the past into the present, and making the memorial into a highly personal bodily experience.

Unlike more concrete edifices, memorials in sound are not in conflict with the inevitable re-development of Ground Zero—whilst there may not be space for everyone's expectation of a memorial, or new World Trade Center, to be built, there is always room for another sound. Music and talk can never be built over. The *Soundwalk* creates a simultaneity of shared experience, different times and spaces, it weaves itself into a 'soundscape' that achieves the ambition of any memorial—it may allow any one of us to exist in more than one time in the same place, and in more than one place at the same time. Sound is able to satisfy our need for formal tribute and commemoration, whilst drawing us in as active participants in the process of memorialisation. There is space and time for each listener, whatever their background or opinion, to bring their own understandings, experiences and recollections into the space of the *Soundwalk*. The fragmentary nature of the walk, coupled with the fragmentary, ever-changing nature of the site, means that the visitor is not programmed with any precise agenda, but instead feels part of a dynamic and diverse community of shared experience. However, this creates more of a community across time, than with the people that may surround the walker as they participate in the *Sonic Memorial*. In this way, the only thing lacking in the *Sonic Memorial* is the way in which tangible objects, in stone or metal, provide places for people to come, pulling people together in a collective process of memorialising, creating genuine communities of remembrance. The *Sonic Memorial* is an individual experience. Whilst this may be almost the opposite in effect from the intention of most memorials, it is appropriate as an alternative memorial for 9/11 whose memorialisation has been so overtly co-opted in highly regulated ways by diverse interest groups and agenda.
Building Sites of Memory

Listening to the tour whilst walking around the site creates a visceral memorial out of one's own body—channeling memory through hearing, sight, and movement. The sound walk creates continuity between past and present, layering different moments of history into a single hour, invoking different people's experience into a single walker and listener. As the new Freedom Tower emerges from the rubble of Ground Zero, the Sonic Memorial will still continue to evoke both the transience and permanence of the past and the conflicting memories that emerge from a site with a long history, of which 9/11 was only one part.