

# A Tale of Two Memorials

## Dallas and New York

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I EXPERIENCED THE TWO GREATEST AMERICAN TRAGEDIES of my life at school. On November 22, 1963, I was sitting in an 8th grade classroom—I can't remember the subject or the teacher—at Hill Junior High School in Denver, when the principal came on the P.A. system with the announcement that our president had been shot in Dallas. There was no television or similar device—as we now say—in the classroom, and, when the announcement was made, it was as yet not clear that the president was dead.

School was let off; everyone went home however they could (I was bussed and have no memory of how that worked) in time for us to turn on a television and watch the first non-election continuous news coverage many of us had ever seen. The events unfolded over the next days, and it is safe to say that the entire nation was in shock for more than week.

The second was the 9/11 disaster in 2001, and I was then a professor at UT Dallas teaching a seminar—and again I cannot remember the subject of the seminar, either that day or for the whole term. The sheer fact of national trauma and the further addition of an unknown fear of what might happen next took all else from our minds. We *did* have a television in the classroom and turned immediately to it to watch with horror and fascination as the two planes flew into each of the two towers of the World Trade Center (one replayed again and again, the other live, followed by the collapse of the towers in sequence).

Always the pedant, I was telling the students, many of whom had never been to New York, about the buildings, about their architect, the Japanese-American master Minoru Yamasaki, whose work I had deeply admired as a younger man, and about the symbolic value of the towers in the United States and the world. When completed in 1973, they had been the tallest buildings in the world, but were displaced less than a generation later by others in the U.S. and Asia by the time of their destruction. Yet, they remained the most prominent architectural symbols of American capitalism in our financial and cultural capital, New York. Even for those who disliked them—and these were many—the skyline of lower Manhattan was unthinkable without them.

The “simultaneity” of events and their reception in 1963 was much less than in 2001, but the ripples from them lasted for days, months, and finally years. How, then, do we remember such events in the places in which they occurred? Building statues (the old way) was clearly not what was needed, but how does one remember a horror for years afterward, even after those who actually remember it are gone?

In the case of the Kennedy assassination, there was a greater inclination on the part of the city of Dallas and of the Kennedy family to forget than to be reminded of the location of this event—to take away the inevitable stain on the city’s reputation from the assassination and its filmic and photographic representation. There was, in short, no national, and little local, interest in memorializing this tragic event; the Kennedy family went full speed ahead in creating a scholarly center in his memory at Harvard, as far away as possible from Dallas.

The champion of “remembering” the events of 1963 in physical form in Dallas was the revered culture-leader, Stanley Marcus, whose clout, easy access to the Kennedy family, and sense of style made it possible to hire the esteemed architect Philip Johnson in 1969, fully six years after the assassination, to conceive of a monument for this difficult act of remembrance. This would allow Dallas to be a part of the national mourning, albeit as a late entrant. The result opened in 1970—a white concrete roofless cubic room lifted on small pilotis.

Before Johnson’s death, he spoke with me about the memorial while it was being restored, and told me that he had wanted to stress two elements: First, the vertical elements of the structure, apparently unsupported and magnetically connected to one another, suggested Kennedy’s “magnetism.” Second, the light fixtures at the bottom of the cantilevered concrete elements, detailed as if rocket engines, suggested Kennedy’s belief in the conquest of space. At night, the Kennedy memorial was to rise from light, but was otherwise unlit. Kennedy himself is represented by his absence—an empty base where there might have been a bronze or marble sculpture—and by his words. This man of eloquence and power was thus remembered through architecture without any sculpture. Like a cenotaph, which is what Johnson called it, rather than a “memorial.”



Philip Johnson, John F. Kennedy Memorial Plaza, Dallas, 1970.  
Creative Commons/Wikimedia.

The memorial was a failure from the start. No one really wanted it—neither the family nor the city—and criticism of its chilly emptiness, of its siting away from the actual assassination site and of its abstractness, was pervasive. Few go there on November 22 to remember, and fewer take visitors to Dallas by it on city tours with more than a passing reference. Mark Lamster, in his recent biography of Johnson, is dismissive of the memorial for more valid reasons—its use of architectural sources that are unacknowledged. But how, in a work of architecture, does one acknowledge sources?

I also remember talking with Johnson about the fact that the cubic space was roofless—that it could never protect a visitor from the wind or rain. As I recall, he was quite strong in his response to this query by saying that it was the intention of the cenotaph *not* to protect, but to expose the visitor to the elements, and he reminded me that he had once visited Georgia O’Keeffe (whom he loathed), but whose house in Abiquiu had a “roofless room” in which he was profoundly moved. “You gotta look UP!” he said emphatically—referring, I guess, to heaven.

A memorial without overt or figural symbolism was a powerful idea to very few in 1970s Texas when the Kennedy memorial was opened, but it was certainly not to be the last. In 1981, Maya Lin won a national competition (with 1,421 entries!) to design the Veterans Memorial for the Vietnam War on a prominent site in Washington, and her response was even more abstract, largely because it was a cut into



Michael Arad and Peter Walker, National September 11 Memorial, New York. Photo: William Warby, Creative Commons/Flickr.

the earth, rather than an actual structure like the Kennedy memorial. Our national ambivalence to that war, which we lost and which cost the country thousands of lives, becoming a wound to our international prestige, would not allow such a structure. Instead the monument's walls are wedged into the earth with the names at its opening of the 57,939 fallen American soldiers (with room for more) cut into its mirror-finished black granite. Even the color of the stone is associated in the West with mourning, something that Johnson did not permit himself twelve years earlier in a monument that is both about white and, at night, lifted by light—a celebration of Kennedy even in death.

The Vietnam War Memorial, as it is most often called by its visitors, had a powerful effect on Americans of all types when it opened in 1982, largely because the war took its victims from every state in the union and because the memorial is in Washington, D.C., our political capital. It too had its critics, many of whom were not happy until a bronze figural sculpture of three soldiers (one white, one African-American, and one Hispanic, but all bronze!) was placed nearby, undercutting its abstract clarity. Even Dallas's own Ross Perot had withdrawn his financial support when he saw Lin's design. Yet, for the worlds of advanced art and architecture, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial has been a touchstone against which all other subsequent monuments are compared and, in addition, was ranked tenth on the American Institute of Architects' 2007 poll of America's Favorite Buildings. The Kennedy Memorial is not on that list.

So, after the shock of the 9/11 catastrophe abated, and it was time to think about making a memorial to its victims, the two memorials already discussed provided precedent for thinking about such matters. One of them, the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial, was omnipresent in the minds of all involved in the 9/11 decisions, and its architect, Maya Lin, was a member of the jury. The other, Johnson's Kennedy Dallas Memorial, had already been all but completely forgotten.

The 9/11 Memorial, as it is most often called, opened to great fanfare precisely a decade after the disaster it commemorates. And, like all such matters in our largest city with overlapping owners and governmental entities, the road to its completion was long and arduous. Indeed, a rehearsal of the details, even in summary, would be a needless diversion in this context. Rather, let me return to the place itself and to my first actual experience of it five years ago, well after I had seen hundreds of reproductions and read thousands of words about it in the press.

Like the Dallas monument, it is a landscaped area within the densest part of a large city and has no discernable outside barriers. One does not enter it through a gate or have any sense of a sacred precinct with definitive borders. I walked in from the east, without a clear intention of studying the monument or spending time; simple curiosity drew me. In fact, my intention was to study the engineering histrionics of Santiago Calatrava at the nearby Transportation Center, rather than to get involved with memories. I found the insistent east-west lines of the trees (it was winter, so I was not then clear that they are white oaks) to be a psychological barrier, forcing me by that very directionality to follow them somewhere.

Although I had been to the World Trade Center before its destruction to marvel at the construction of the scale-less monoliths, I had no memory of their exact locations, but I knew from reading the extensive publicity after the opening of the memorial in 2011 that the two square towers were represented *exactly* by their absence: two square pools with descending walls of water going into the earth and into a smaller, darker square "drain" in the center.

I found the first of these—the north tower—and was totally stunned by the huge scale of the great un-enterable dark square. The sheer scale of it and the sound of the water rushing down four sides of the squares to the darkness below erased all thoughts of the grove I had just walked through. The trees—even in their winter undress—were forgotten, and I began to deal with the slanted bronze balustrades surrounding the pools and with the names seemingly engraved into them and gilded. Because I had not prepared for the visit in any way, I was not able the first time to make any sense of the names, but I quickly realized that there *was* no sense to the names, except that the people to whom they belonged had, in one way or another, perished.

At a certain point in following the perimeters of the walls and studying the names, I found the bronze indications of their groupings. Those in each of the two flights were grouped together, and those of the men and women in the towers themselves, and those who came to their aid, but the enormity of the loss washed over me as the names, none known to me, assumed greater and greater significance simply because they *were*, and are, unknown to me. I found small offerings—flowers or notes—next to particular names, making it clear that others who visited that day had come specifically to remember someone and not, like me, to visit the site and to think about its character as a memorial.

After circumambulating the north tower, reflecting on the names, and looking across the great void at other viewers who, like me, lined the squared edges, I turned back into the groves of trees. They were planted with regularity in lines, but not always regularly spaced along each line—this allowed spaces to walk through, or to sit down and to “gather” in groves or areas of what might be called an urban forest. I also realized the importance of the fact that the trees, unlike the people whose names I had seen, were alive and that they would represent the four seasons by bright green foliage in the spring, darker in the summer, red-orange in the fall, and its absence in the winter. This sense of the orderly progression of annual time seemed to be incredibly healing as I walked and contemplated, giving me strength to experience the identical excavation of the south, of the “twin” towers.

In truth, I had intended simply to “scan” the memorial and to plan a real visit on a later day, but I found it completely engaging to all my senses and my mind—it forced me to contend with my own memories, visual, aural, and verbal, of the catastrophe. I simply could not leave quickly and was late to a dinner party nearby after having lost two hours at the memorial site. There was no need of a wall to keep me in or out; the memorial itself functioned almost like a magnet, pulling me in and forcing me to contend with my memories and with those of the many others, speaking many languages, who lined the two great square pools. We were together like Lilliputians in a land of former giants, sharing without words something larger than all of us combined.

I wept as I had never done in at the Dallas memorial, and as I had only done in places like Chartres or, in a memorial way, at the Auschwitz Birkenau site in Poland—a place the effect of which cannot be predicted. Why did I weep? Simply because the place with its trees, its paving stones, its two great voids, and its names made weeping inevitable, and because it allowed me to relive my memories and forced me to imagine the memories of others. For the first time, I confronted the fact that the planes were filled with people who died in an instant, and that the buildings were filled with people who perished gradually, depending on their locations, or who miraculously survived. It was, in the end, the survivors who now mattered, and I somehow wanted their names as well.

I was very late for dinner just blocks away, arriving with an armful of flowers that was intended for the hostess, but which was really for those who died. Oddly, I felt no need to talk about the experience, and we turned to the familiar topics of art, travel, food, family, and friends, as we most often do in such intimate parties. Had I unloaded the whole weight of my emotional response, dinner would have been pulled down into personal histrionics, which stayed safely bottled up, until I left.

Then, it was then late at night, and I walked back to the memorial which was fortunately a block beyond my hotel, beckoned by the light emanating from those formerly dark pools. The light among the trees was dim, but I had no sense of danger—"Who would dare harm or rob someone here?" I thought. I essentially reversed my steps, heading first to the south tower and wanting to see whether the re-experience at a different time would be deeper or somehow transformative in a different way.

It was the light on the cascades of water that were to completely transform my experience as well as the spaceless black of the great void at the center of each huge square. Absent visually were the glass windows behind the cascades that I had wondered about earlier in the evening light. The fringe of water and its gathering sounds were themselves illuminated as they moved, and the absolute emptiness and inaccessibility of the central void was felt with even greater urgency than it had been in the light of day. These voids—and I went to both of them—the "twin voids"—possessed the most concentrated form of emptiness I had ever experienced. They made the night sky with its planes, planets, stars, planets, and city light, seem abuzz with life by comparison. Even Rothko's furry blacks or Reinhardt's all-over pictorial blackness seem friendlier and less empty than these did. They were truly black holes—vortexes of visual anti-matter, sucking all the light into absolute nothingness.

Like all complex sites with overlapping memories and memorial functions, the 9/11 memorial was not fully experienced by me. I had, for example, no interest in standing in line and entering the wedge-shaped museum that, to me, intruded on the site. Nor had I any real curiosity about finding the way to get below street level and to see the great voids from the safety of the glass-walled perimeters visible through the waterfalls. All of this was, for me at the time, unnecessary.

Nor did I find the now-famous tree—a Callery Pear, nursed back to life having barely survived the catastrophe. Its very existence was perhaps behind Peter Walker's decision to change his original recommended tree from an eastern white pine to swamp white oaks—from evergreen to deciduous. Whatever the reason, the latter decision was to me of crucial importance to the experience of the memorial. I also felt no urge to do "research" about the 9/11 memorial, as I had done both personally and in reading for the Kennedy Memorial. And, in preparing for this essay, the more I read about the web of alliances, the fund-raising stories, the crises, the misunderstandings, the clearer it became to me that none of these had *any* effect on my perception of what is surely one of the very greatest sacred sites in our country.

There were two designers who collaborated on the 9/11 Memorial: a young British-born, American-educated Israeli, Michael Arad, and the much older Berkeley-based landscape architect, Peter Walker and his firm. Just as Maya Lin had been an unknown architecture student when she won the Vietnam Memorial competition, Michael Arad was a 35-year-old, virtually unknown figure in world architecture when he won the competition, but his idea was so compelling that, as he teamed up with a world-renowned firm of landscape architects, the combination of Arad's idea and Walker's experience made the project possible.

Since the project was completed in 2011, I have read little about further work by Arad and the firm for which he now works, Handler Architects, but I have become a close friend of Peter Walker, who designed the landscape and advised on the fountains and materials of the great square tower sites as well as the landscapes at UT Dallas that have so transformed the university. I even attended a lecture by Peter at UT Dallas in which he discussed the process of design of the 9/11 memorial, and, although I pretended to listen, my mind returned to my own earlier experience of the site itself.

Anyone who reads the immense critical bibliography and the tortured narrative about the years between conception and completion will enter a welter of words, words, words—words which, in the end, are completely irrelevant to the experience of the memorial. This is proof that the clarity and strength of the idea were such that they survived what we today call “the process”—a public-private, city-state-federal, commission driven, too many cooks, series of events and expectations.

Sadly, there was no such “process” for the Kennedy Memorial in Dallas. The reasons for that would take another long essay to untangle, but questions long persisted about whether it needed changing. When Philip Johnson visited the memorial (“*Cenotaph!*” he would insist), the then-director of the Sixth Floor Museum wanted to see whether he might reconsider any aspects of the project—its landscaping, its lack of a boundary wall in the middle of city, and its openness. He spent weeks considering any changes, working with his partner Alan Ritchie in New York, and finally, perhaps due to age or to wisdom, decided that no changes were necessary. What he had designed in 1969 was what he wanted decades later.

I cannot predict whether my short discussion of this Dallas memorial to a nationally—indeed globally—important event will help renew interest in the Kennedy Memorial, which is so close to home and which surely memorializes an event of equal power in our history. In truth, it does not measure up to the 9/11 Memorial in experiential terms, but, when considered together with the constellation of nearby monuments—the later Sixth Floor Museum, the historic site of the Grassy Knoll, and the funny reconstruction of John Neely Bryan's mythic log cabin—it will create a collective sense of the power of this space. I urge all readers to open your minds to it, to visit alone or in small groups and to give it the time that it needs. ■