

# UC Berkeley

## Places

### Title

Living Memorials National Research: 9/11 and the Public Landscape by USDA Forest Service, Northern Research Station [EDRA/Places Award 2007 -- Research]

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1ks8x4nh>

### Journal

Places, 19(3)

### ISSN

0731-0455

### Author

Sullivan, Lisa

### Publication Date

2007-10-15

Peer reviewed

# Living Memorials National Research: 9/11 and the Public Landscape

USDA Forest Service, Northern Research Station



Before the media circus began around the design and construction of an official 9/11 memorial in Lower Manhattan, more personal and perhaps more meaningful memorial activities were taking place across the United States. In countless communities, private citizens sought to express their grief for the victims and sympathy for their families. Some gestures were small, spontaneous acts by largely anonymous groups of people; others were deliberate and public, involving the support of local governments. But all involved a heartfelt desire to respond to the events of that tragic day by honoring its dead and beginning to heal the wounds in personal lives and in the national psyche.

At the urging of Congress, the U.S. Forest Service initiated its Living Memorials Project in response to this outpouring of public emotion. The project sought both to provide

funding to memorial projects nationwide and to study the effects of tree planting and other alterations of the natural environment on collective resilience and emotional recovery.

“Living memorials are spaces re-created, used, or appropriated by people as they seek to embed memory in the landscape,” explains Erika Svendsen, one of the principal researchers at USFS. “They may involve simple acts like tree planting, more elaborate memorial gardens, or the restoration of entire forests or other natural areas.”

Initially, the USFS effort began with a singular focus on trees, an enduring and universal symbol of life and renewal. The goal was “to invoke the resonating power of trees to bring people together and create lasting, living memorials to the victims of terrorism, their families, communities, and the nation.”



However, the project soon expanded to chronicle more than seven hundred sites throughout the country where communities and individuals have used the natural environment to respond to the 9/11 attacks. And its findings have been made public in an online project inventory and a virtual map ([livingmemorialproject.net](http://livingmemorialproject.net)), presentations to professional audiences, a general technical report, a multimedia exhibition of twelve “journeys” to visit these sites, plus a DVD and catalogue.

The audience for this research is potentially huge, including urban planners, designers, natural resource managers, stewardship groups, and the general public. And the awards jury was particularly impressed that it had been sponsored and largely carried out by a federal agency. Given the cumbersome and trouble-prone efforts to estab-

lish official memorials at the 9/11 crash sites, they were unanimously moved by the qualities of the many smaller and, in some cases, unofficial memorials documented and facilitated by the work. They praised the simple recording of these sometimes-temporary sites, which will provide a treasure for future understanding of how human care and investment in small alterations to the landscape can transform the ordinary into the sacred.

**Left to right, top to bottom:** Cedarhurst, NY; New York, NY; Scarsdale, NY; New York, NY; Leonia, NJ; Rockaway, NY; Staten Island, NY; Lyndhurst, NJ; Breezy Point, NY; Boston, MA; Woods Hole, MA; Stirling, NJ; Brooklyn, NY; Long Island City, NY; North Hempstead, NY; Quantico, MD; Wyckoff, NJ; Brooklyn, NY. For credits and information on individual memorial sites, see [www.livingmemorialproject.net](http://www.livingmemorialproject.net).

## Precedents

Throughout history, working through collective grief has involved the creation of places to embody meaning and memory. So many damaged places come to mind: Auschwitz, Chernobyl, Dresden, Hiroshima, My Lai, Verdun, Wounded Knee, the Soviet gulags.... In light of the confusion and fear that followed 9/11, there could perhaps have been no better role for a government agency than to help the nation come to grips with the scope of its grief.

Yet, the events of 9/11 were also not without precedent, and new tragedies are sure to follow. After the battle at Gettysburg, President Lincoln looked out over its fields and forests and claimed them to be “hallowed ground.” Such sites of tragedy and violence abound throughout the world. As a nation, we look at them to discover who we are, how we respond to violence, and how we seek solace in its aftermath.

Among the examples of 9/11 memorials documented by the Living Memorials research are plantings of sunflowers in street medians and vacant lots in New York City; a line of street trees in the Bronx; and various impromptu memorials installed near the World Trade Center. The project sought to capture the full range of these community memorials and simple shrines to friends, neighbors, and family members.

Initially the work concerned itself with the three crash sites, as the researchers tried to better understand the role of trees, open space, and nature in memorial activities. Then they began to realize that these activities were taking place not just in New York City, or even the Northeast, but also across the country.

The research method involved an initial identification of sites by a newspaper database search. The researchers then conducted interviews, field observation, and photo documentation in the course of personal journeys to visit

more than one hundred and fifty memorial sites throughout the U.S.

One particularly valuable activity was the creation of an online national registry, allowing communities to report to the USFS about new memorials. As this information grew, the researchers created an interactive map to chart the emergence of sites nationwide.

## Outcomes

To foster understanding of this outpouring of design activity, the Living Memorials project built on the work of writers from a variety of disciplines, including Durkheim, Foote, Fraser, Halbwachs, Jackson, Pogue-Harrison, Sunstein, and Young. It also received generous assistance from landscape designers, sociologists, ecologists, local city government officials, and private citizens.

As the project grew, the Forest Service also developed a grant program to support smaller towns and communities in their memorial activities. The grants were allocated mainly for plantings, site restoration, and signage; they stipulated that the memorials honor the original intent of “the resonating power of trees.”

To observe uses of the natural landscape and resources, the grant selection committee posed four questions. What is the purpose or mission of the memorial? What are the plans to use the space? Why was a location selected. And finally, was the site considered “sacred”?

Answers to these questions gave researchers great insights into the sites and their creators’ intentions.

“For me personally, it was the location piece that enabled me to look at these sites in a different way,” Svendsen says. “There were very complex detailed stories about ‘why here?’ These sites were under the flight path if they were near the Hudson River, in the viewshed of the Twin Towers, always a significant place. It may be a portion of a

## Sample Juror Comments—Living Memorials

**Roberta Feldman:** There is no doubt that 9/11 had an impact that went well beyond the physical devastation of those buildings. Trying to understand how the public dealt with this process in this really troubled time for our country I think was a very important research project. And the way that they wrote the research up was truly moving. It could have been written in a very dry document style. Instead, the

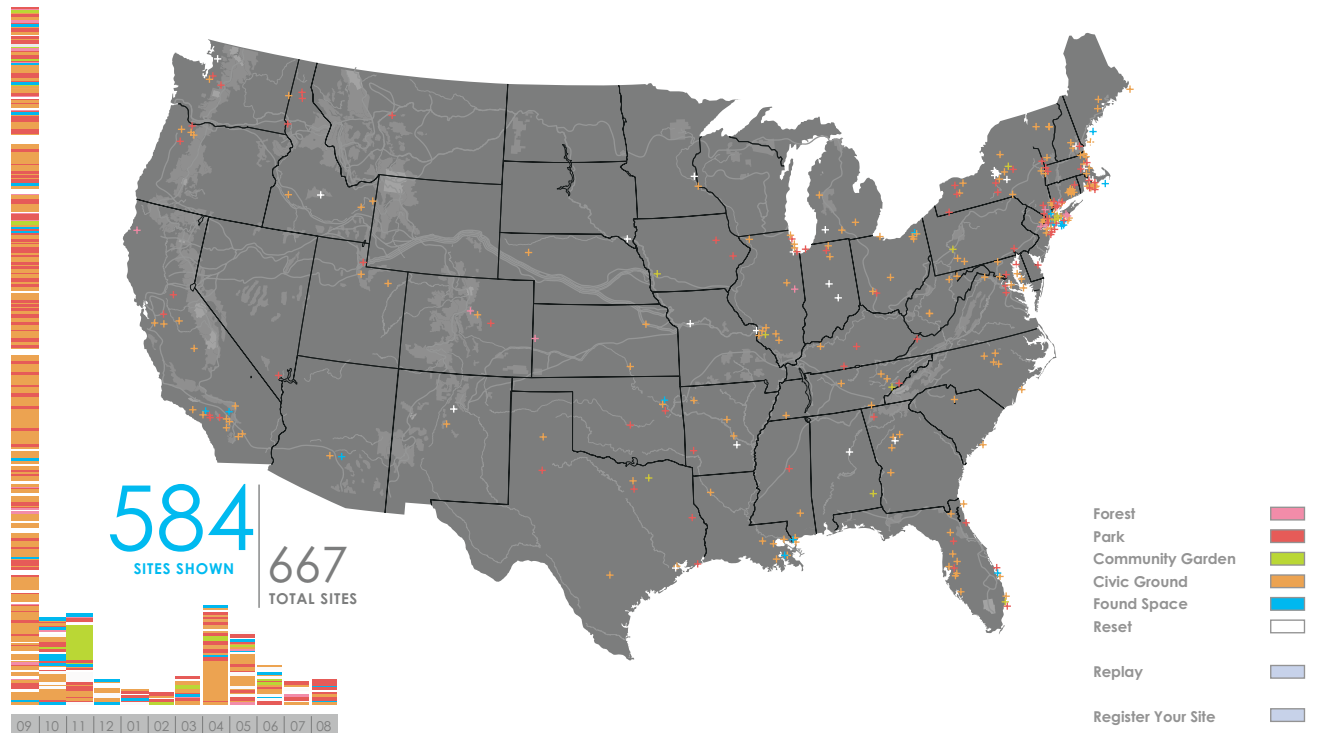
way they organized the material, the narrative they developed about the findings, has a definite feel. It is very clear and demanding. It is not sentimental.

**Ann Forsyth:** What’s interesting to me is that it is one research project with multiple products, and it includes an inventory of memorials. But I was particularly impressed with the journeys. There are twelve journeys that helped the reader to move through a

series of memorials. It is actually a wonderful model for other research projects to help people journey through the landscape in an instructive way.

**Anne Whiston Spirn:** I actually wanted to join those paths.

**Roberta Feldman:** The journeys were the personal journeys of the researchers, and their voices and their emotions come through. So the research is



park or a community that has great meaning, sometimes to an individual, sometimes to the whole community.”

On the interactive map, the project shows the sites as they developed. At first, clusters appeared near the crash sites. Later, they emerged in other areas, such as California, where the planes were headed.

Recognition of the broad-scale patterns emerging on the map led to the next project phase. Called “Land-markings: 12 Journeys through the 9/11 Living Memorials,” this took the form of a multimedia exhibition of twelve digitally authored

personal journeys culled from four years of research.

According to the other principal researcher, Lindsay Campbell: “The location function informed the journey portion of the land-marking part of the exhibit. It drew on our own experience of collecting the field data and the patterns that were beginning to emerge about geographic clusters and thematic threads that ran through the idea of living memorials.”

Above: The Living Memorials Project National Map, created by urban-interface.

objective and very personal at the same time, and those wonderful drawings they have of their journeys are very evocative of the scope of all of these memorial activities. The exhibit catalogued those. The first document was much more of a research document. In the exhibit catalogue, they had the freedom to be more expressive, and the graphic design is beautiful.

**Anne Whiston Spirn:** It could have had some more

analysis. And it definitely could have had linked to literature more. But it is a lovely project.

**Roberta Feldman:** I think there are different kinds of research that have different purposes. These documents are intended for a nonresearch audience, but you can find everything—the question, the method, the findings, the literature, and so on. For a general audience it is even a little more sophisticated

than I would have expected. It is competent research; the interpretation resonates; it's very emotionally moving because of the subject. It has every ingredient I could imagine in a research project.

**Buzz Yudell:** Another thing that gives one some hope in difficult moments is that the federal government was actually involved in this.

**Roberta Feldman:** And what's also really important

For example, one journey crossed Long Island from south to north. Many of the firefighters and rescue workers who perished at the Trade Center had families on the southern part of Long Island. Traveling across the island, to its northern shore, the exhibition catalogue notes, demonstrates the “social and eco-cultural diversity on the island and renders the search for order or pattern in memorial form and function a challenging one.”<sup>1</sup>

Journeys such as this highlighted the diversity of responses to the 9/11 attacks. Yet the research and interactive map attempted to convey a politically neutral reading of the personal and political narratives embedded in the memorial sites.

### Meaning and Memory

One enduring theme at each of the sites was a quality of “sacredness.” Without intending to proscribe anything at the onset of the project—just starting with a simple hypothesis that trees, open space, and living things matter to people—the researchers found the word “sacred” was used all the time. According to Svendsen: “It seemed to be a word that helped expand that space between life and death.” It had no specific religious meaning, rather a spiritual one by which people could indicate the creation of hallowed ground, marked with significance.

Such a notion expands the idea of a memorial for 9/11 beyond Ground Zero. The act of setting aside a space and caring for it, whether it is a box of sunflowers or a garden in the center of town, imbues a site with meaning and memory.

As disagreements born in the wake of the 9/11 attacks continue to boil, from the contest of egos and financial ambitions surrounding the rebuilding of the Trade Center site to the national debate over the wisdom and conduct of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the Living Memorials project carries a far more human message. It also continues



to support our collective response to the tragedy, away from the tourists and the television cameras.

Historians looking back on the events of September 11, 2001, may argue about how they changed politics, culture, and national identity. But few will contest 9/11’s impact on our sense of the American landscape. The Living Memorials project illustrates myriad responses, unified in their lyrical temporality, their affirmation of life, and their desire to steady our nerves against a tide of fear and uncertainty.

—Lisa Sullivan

#### Note

1. Erika S. Svendsen and Lindsay K. Campbell, “Land-markings: 12 Journeys through the 9/11 Living Memorials,” exhibition catalogue, United States Department of Agriculture.

Above: New York firefighters at the Living Memorial Trail, Bronx, NY.

### Sample Juror Comments—Living Memorials

is that they note a lot of these interventions, these memorials, are temporary, or are going to change over time. So that there is importance to documenting them immediately, early on, because so much of it is going to be lost or changed.

**Buzz Yudell:** It brings up an interesting irony or paradox, which is the kind of richness of these temporary memorials and expressions versus the kind

of turgid work that is happening right now on the actual Ground Zero site.

**Roberta Feldman:** It is interesting too that they have some permanent memorials documented. And the impromptu ones have a design richness about them that the permanent ones don’t have. The permanent ones pick a singularity of purpose, whereas the impromptu ones involve multiple people’s perceptions

or actions. And it creates a much more diverse display. It’s fascinating. Each place is really different. And the title “Living Memorials,” rather than speaking about memorials to the dead, gets back to this notion of affirmation of life that we looked at in *Defiant Gardens*. A lot of these are gardens, and involve trees, flowers, and so on. This is also life affirming.