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Memories, Ghosts, and Scars: Architecture and Trauma in New York and Hiroshima

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Within days of the September 11 attack and the subsequent collapse of the World Trade Center Towers, New York’s architectural society was opining as to what the architectural response to this calamity should be. With one notable exception (the firm Diller and Scofidio stated, “Let’s not build something that would mend the skyline. It is more powerful to leave it void. We believe it would be tragic to erase the erasure”), there was a consensus to “re-build” the towers, despite likely differences regarding their aesthetic updating. From the old-guard patriarch of New York architecture, Philip Johnson, to the dean of Columbia’s progressive architecture school, Bernard Tschumi, there was agreement in terms for an expedient architectural replacement.

Whatever they take down, we’ll rebuild. I think we should provide the same amount of office space, that it’s the least we can do (Philip Johnson).¹

Of course one has to rebuild, bigger and better. There should be offices and a mix of activities, both cultural and business. Yes, there should be a place to mourn, but that shouldn’t be the main thing. It must be a place looking into the future, not the past (Bernard Tschumi).²

Although thousands of individuals lost their lives in the attack, it was obvious that for New York architects, these two towers, which had previously been aesthetically and architecturally reviled, were also victims of the day. The towers

were designed by the Japanese-American architect Minoru Yamasaki, and soon after their completion architects such as Robert Stern criticized how they ignored the context of the city. The high-modernist strategies of the raised plaza, which separated itself from the city street, and the blank facade that anonymously concealed corporate power, helped to deem the project an urbanistic failure, and was one of several projects that led to the post-modern reaction in American architecture.

It is interesting that another of Yamasaki's projects had been demolished in another highly publicized event in 1972, the year of the World Trade Center's completion. The Pruitt-Igoe Housing Project (1955) in St. Louis was designed as a radical and optimistic approach to public housing. There was still a great deal of hope in the redemptive qualities of modern architecture to cure inner-city strife, and blocks of old neighborhood fabric were demolished to make room for clean, unadorned twelve-story slabs with internal glass galleries, surrounded by green space, and integrated with low-rise townhouses. However, much to Yamasaki's dismay, while the project was being realized the city doubled the density of slabs, and eliminated the townhouses, the natural ventilation and screening of the galleries. Consequent lack of maintenance of the buildings accelerated their degradation, the galleries were alternately too hot and too cold and generally uninhabitable, and the green space was cramped and unusable. The tenants, who were ninety-eight percent African American, saw the project as a segregated urban prison by way of public housing. When deemed a failure and demolished, it symbolically signaled for many the failure of modern architecture as a social strategy and helped prompt a move away from modernism in American architecture during the 1970s and 1980s.

It is interesting that Robert Stern, one of the post-modern architects whose career prospered after the architectural reaction to the opening of the World Trade Center and the demolition of Pruitt-Igoe, following September 11 would state, "We must rebuild the towers. They are a symbol of our achievement as New Yorkers and as Americans and to put them back says that we cannot be defeated."³ Why this change of heart? Among other things, the World Trade Towers, like Pruitt-Igoe, were criticized for the cold, institutional/corporate syntax of their blank "meaningless" facades. However, when the towers fell, those who criticized these buildings realized they had attained "meaning." Obviously, the buildings were chosen as targets for their symbolic value, not only because of the cost of lives their destruction would cause. As icons to finance and capitalism, and furthermore, as markers that distinguished the skyline of the city most associated with the economics of plenty, they were valued as both target and icon. This led the architect Peter Eisenman, for years the architect most associated with an American theoretical avant-garde, to the reactionary declaration, "Whatever we do in the future has got to reflect the sense that the West, its culture and values have been attacked. I would hope that we would not be deterred from going as high as the old towers were. We should not move back from that point. We cannot retreat."⁴

For Eisenman and many New York architects, architecture had become both victim and participant in this “war.” For them, the appropriate response should be rapid, even if urbanistically rash, so as to not to reveal “weakness.” Eisenman’s rhetoric for an architectural response has allied itself with the Bush administration’s propaganda surrounding its military campaign. Both have become framed as a question of values without regard to the political or urban causes and consequences of a response. The original buildings, now missed by their critics, have been painted as “innocent victims,” like the people inhabiting them, of an enemy threatened by an American “way of life.” Unfortunately, those inhabiting the skyscrapers cannot be resurrected, but there is the sentiment that the buildings can and should be in order to show that the “culture and values” on which they were built are solid and unwavering.

As symbols of “values” and a “way of life,” Eisenman describes the towers in terms that are non-aggressive in nature. They are not imposing, and explicitly relate to nothing beyond themselves. However, it is naive to equate the building with those inside as “victims of circumstance” and not address the larger political contexts that lead to acts of aggression. As a center of international finance in the country with the greatest global cultural and political influence, particularly in Middle East politics, the World Trade Center meant more to those who attacked it, than it had to the architects who lived in the city where it was sited. To deny the international economic and political context in which it sat, was to deny any responsibility in reconsidering the global conditions that may have prompted the attack and the consequences of destruction after the attack.

Currently, Larry Silverstein, the owner of the land beneath the World Trade Center, is planning another plaza, but with four fifty-story towers and some sort of memorial to the human victims of the tragedy occupying the plaza’s center. The only notable difference is the size of the towers, and their proposed reduction in height is predicated, not on symbolic softening, but on safety issues pertaining to the time needed for exiting a shorter structure. Whether or not this new version of the Trade Center is realized, most debates have focused on what will occupy the site, rather than what the site will become. In the years before the attack, many corporations were leaving lower Manhattan because of high rents, the inability of old buildings to be wired for new technologies, and the ability to use these technologies to do business in more suburban areas. Thus, the area was becoming more varied, with residences appearing even in iconic downtown office buildings such as the Woolworth Building. Impending projects such as the new Guggenheim Museum will likely continue Lower Manhattan’s transformation into a collection of attractions; a change from a site of finance and production to one of consumption. Although the conditions of their respective demises were entirely different, Pruitt-Igoe’s demolition marked a point from which strategies of urban housing were questioned and reformulated. There is now, as there was in Chicago after the Great Fire of 1871, a similar opportunity to rethink what Lower Manhattan, and consequently, New York

City will become after this event amid the changing circumstances in which business is done and cities are used. There is now the possibility of a transformation in the urban fabric that will envision a new Lower Manhattan, rather than just a new set of skyscrapers to compensate for this architectural loss.

Unfortunately, Silverstein's general proposal of four fifty-story buildings and a "victims memorial" on a plaza is essentially a more modest replacement of the original pair of 110-story buildings and plaza without a re-envisioning. While there is a national discomfort in change being prompted by what has been painted as "an act of evil," "re-building," also foregrounds the use of architecture to replace what has been removed. In doing so, it erases the scar that has been created by this apocalyptic event, but in mending, "rebuilding" enacts a form of amnesia onto the city. What are the consequences of, as Diller and Scofidio say, "erasing the erasure," through rebuilding?

In rebuilding the towers, the city removes the scar that registers the history of the event. Scars on bodies of any scale are a material marking that prompt future discourse and re-examinations of the events that caused them. Furthermore, these events are caused by and occur in larger contexts. When the replacing architectural object plays the role of obfuscating this material record, it conceals trauma, and urban history is represented as a lineage of building rather than an examination of calamity. The "memorial" has increasingly become a space for the examination of calamity. The Silverstein project provides this space through the "victims memorial" while replacing both symbol and office space with the new towers. There are no specifics as to what this memorial will be, but recent American memorials give an indication of how it might address large-scale tragedy. By referring to the memorial as a "victims memorial" it assumes that the lives lost in the tragedy will take precedence over an examination of the causes and effects of the event. Perhaps this is how it should be. Indeed, recent memorials, such as the Vietnam War Memorial and the Oklahoma City Memorial have focused on the individual lives lost. The use of names at the Vietnam War Memorial and a collection of empty chairs at Oklahoma City, describes each calamity as a series of individual tragedies rather than as a larger geo-political event. It is difficult not to feel unqualified sympathy for these "victims" of events beyond their control. However, these events remain fleeting and unscrutinized in these places of mourning as the focus is on those killed and not on the reasons the catastrophe occurred in the first place. If one assumes a similar strategy at the "victims memorial" at the World Trade Center, the calamity will likely be framed through the remembrance of individual victims, rather than in the context of the international dynamics that preceded and followed September 11th. While, the "replacement towers" deny the force of the calamity, the memorial highlights the mourning of the individual, removing it from national political discourse.

Strangely enough, memories of the history between the United States and Japan have surfaced since September 11 on a number of levels. Most blatantly has been the recalling of Pearl Harbor, when the U.S. also positioned itself as an

“innocent victim” within a narrative of confrontation. However, in relation to how calamity is recorded within an urban space and national psyche, it is more interesting to look at Hiroshima and its architectural recollection and urban reinvention following the 1945 American bombing. While the two-sided strategy of rebuilding the World Trade Center and creating a victims memorial foregrounds an understanding of September 11 as a collection of individual tragedies that obfuscates or forgets the nation’s role in a national tragedy, Hiroshima has positioned itself quite differently in relation to its catastrophe. Rather than highlighting individual suffering within a city that hopes to remain fundamentally unchanged, Hiroshima “forgets” its national tragedy by universalizing the event as a tragedy for humanity, a narrative that the city has been reconfigured to support.

Because the scale of destruction in human lives and area covered was far greater than in Lower Manhattan, Hiroshima immediately became a site that had to be re-envisioned rather than merely rebuilt. Kenzo Tange, the architect of the Peace Memorial, was also responsible for Hiroshima City through the Government Agent for Reconstruction. Coincidentally, both Tange’s parents died the same week that Hiroshima was bombed (his mother was killed the same day). For Tange, the individual tragedy and the national tragedy were indistinguishable. “Perhaps mother was better off in having followed father in death. With one grief coming hard upon another, for a time, we did not know what to do. Even at the very beginning of the war, given our nation’s strength, I never thought Japan could beat the United States; and now that it was all over, I felt as if I were waking from a bad dream. The time had come to make a fresh start.”⁵ Consequently, Tange’s team proposed a “fresh start” for the city, re-organizing it around the epicenter of the blast, and the city’s narrative orientation was likewise adapted to the transcendent ideal of peace. “We were attempting to work out a proposal within an overall structure that would make Hiroshima a city dedicated to Peace; and our ideas involved revising the road net, expanding the greenery system, converting part of the port into a seaside park, and creating Nakanoshima Park [the Peace Park].”⁶

Indeed, in 1949, Hiroshima was designated by the National Diet as “the city which will act as a symbol of the human ideal for eternal peace . . . the city no longer belongs to the people of Hiroshima or Japan alone, but to the whole human society.”⁷ At Hiroshima, a very specific and materially horrific event fostered the larger more abstract ideal of peace in what had become a post-nuclear world. While the event became a clear historical marker, the focus from this point was squarely toward the future and the utopian ideals that should be impressed upon humanity for that future to be preserved. Thus, while the cenotaph to the victims and the remaining mangled dome building do recall both the force and individual suffering of the bomb, the center of the project is occupied by the Peace Center, which is more a space for group congregation than for memory. It recalls, at a smaller scale, the UN General Assembly and was lauded by architectural critics who compared it to Le

Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer, saying that it proved “how strongly *international* architecture has appealed to young Japanese architects and how well they use it.”⁸

With the choice of Tange’s scheme, one without overtly nationalist stylistic preoccupations, the committee hoped to signify Japan’s entry into a modern, post-war international economic community. However, as it was looking forward, the memorial contributed to a certain national forgetting. The site of the Peace Memorial had previously been an important institutional and celebratory space of Hiroshima during pre-war imperial Japan. The absence of this legacy, with the exception of the dome building, which has become a record of the effect of atomic force on architecture, has been noted by Lisa Yoneyama. “Hiroshima memories have been predicated on the grave obfuscation of the prewar Japanese Empire, its colonial practices, and their consequences.”⁹ The Peace Memorial, therefore, is as much about forgetting historical contexts that are entangled with calamity, as much as it stands to instigate mourning. Unlike the plans for Lower Manhattan, Hiroshima not only acknowledges the scar, but employs it, although not to remember a nationalist past, but to enter an international community. Even the deaths were framed in relation to the future. The visitor’s pamphlet at the parks states, “there was no doubt that the over two hundred thousand victims were not merely those belonging to any one nation, but instead, they were memorialized as laying the foundation for peace for all humanity.”¹⁰ In comparison to the American memorials, which are predicated on a collection of individual tragedies, at Hiroshima, the dead and the city are understood and owned by all humanity. Again, the downplaying of Japan, or for that matter, the United States, in focusing on the abstract mass of humankind, obfuscates the political and historical context that was entangled with the event.

Whether at the World Trade Center or Hiroshima, can architecture contribute to more meaningful and critical ways of remembering urban calamity, or, by its very nature of rebuilding or re-formulating urban space, can it only erase? The rubble that presently exists on the site of the attack in Lower Manhattan has become the city’s largest tourist attraction, and likely provides a more over-powering image than any subsequent memorial. However, even Ground Zero, with a new temporary tourist ramp designed by Diller and Scofidio with David Rockwell and Kevin Kenon, has become laden with tourist booths selling patriotic paraphernalia. Here, even a very neutral and functional architectural structure can act as a stratum for jingoist commoditization that supports nationalist interpretations of the event. Such architectural interventions on sites of calamity naturally produce a new objective presence, which then cloud memories of events that have been inscribed on the site. Therefore, to address the memory of the site, architecture somehow has to overcome, or perhaps employ, its own material presence.

Soon after Pearl Harbor the Japanese-American sculptor Isamu Noguchi interned himself at a relocation center for Japanese-Americans in Poston, Arizona. Noguchi occupied, like many other Nisei, a dislocated space between two patriotic moorings, and, during this period, he developed work that explored the events and

effects of war on the earth and those inhabiting it. However, unlike Tange's buildings at Hiroshima, Noguchi employed the materiality of the architecture as an agent to remember pain through sensation rather than monumentalism. In 1943 he proposed his Monument to Heroes, which questioned both "monument" and "heroes" and the nationalist narratives that created both. The memorial was a tubular structure with apertures through which bones and remnants of airplanes would be tautly strung together with wire. As the wind blew through it, the tower would act as a flute emitting wails. "I could see it as a large cylinder on a mountain top with the wind blowing through it and things dangling there like skeletons. It was a dirge for futile heroes who killed themselves – for what?"¹¹

Seven years later, Noguchi developed this proposal further with the Bell Tower for Hiroshima. The tower was meant to be seventy feet high, and like the monument to heroes, was to act as a wind-chime rather than a traditional bell tower. While the expressive potential of the found objects (the bones and propellers) became abstracted forms, the building was still essentially a device that created "haunting flute sounds caused by the wind through the tubular forms of the bell tower to suggest voices of the dead mourning war's wanton destruction."¹²

In late September of this year, a group of young architects and artists including John Bennett, Gustavo Bonevardi, Julian LaVerdiere, and Paul Myoda proposed a different sort of phenomenal tower for Lower Manhattan. Their Towers of Light proposal is a recreation of the towers that rethinks their materiality and acknowledges catastrophe. Two vertical beams of light that extend upward over 1,000 feet act as ghosts of the original towers, creating an uncanny doubling of a pre-existent symbol on the skyline. While the city's media image relied on the towers for its identification, for the majority of New Yorkers, the most important function of the World Trade Center was as an orienting urban landmark. The tower of light project plays with what Henri Bergson has called a "habit-memory, a latent intervention of the image-memory"¹³ where recognition becomes an automatic motor activity. The towers of light superimpose the space of the "habit-memory" with its ghost, playing with the power of destabilizing it and making conscious "image-memory" that is "effervescent, a phantasm that disappears just at the moment when motor activities try to fix its outline."¹⁴ This simultaneously recalls the object, its absence, and consequently the event surrounding its loss, without fixing a narrow reading.

Both the Hiroshima Bell Tower and the Towers of Light proposal resist the erasing and and/or re-orientation of memory that the "rebuilding" of the World Trade Center would instigate. They do this through the acknowledgement of trauma as a residue of memory and the strategy of *haunting* as a mechanism to recall. Whereas the scar is a material record of calamity "haunting" introduces both past presence and recalls the events by which this presence inhabits not only the past. As haunted or haunting structures, the projects elicit memory through a sort of phenomenal doubling without fixing that memory into a static narrative that erases ambiguity and proposes a singular understanding. The unsettling doubling of sound

and light that reproduces subject and object, creates an uncanny condition where things are recalled without being clarified. As Anthony Vidler has stated, “the uncanny revels in its non-specificity, one reinforced by the multiplicity of the untranslatable.”¹⁵

It is in this realm that ambiguity becomes a productive phenomenal strategy as it leads to inquiry rather than dogma. It has been assumed that memory is expressed principally in narrative, which can be fixed, oriented, or even erased. The plans for the World Trade Center are presently striving to both obfuscate the scar and posit a clear condition of victimization that uses the individual memories of many to constitute a singular memory of the events of September 11. However, to construct architecture that employs memory to construct history, negates architecture’s haunting resonating power. Trauma at any scale clouds clarity and defies a singular interpretation of any event. Furthermore, it is ongoing, and in its subliminal presence, can deepen and add meaning to re-evaluations and responses that may be equally ongoing. New York City’s rush to find closure to catastrophe may deny real opportunities to critically question not just the conditions of the past, but the possibilities for the future.

Notes

¹ The architects’ responses quoted in this article circulated via e-mail within days of September 11th. They were published soon after in Richard Meier, “Filling the Void: To Rebuild or Not,” *New York Times Magazine* (23 September 2001): 18.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Kenzo Tange, “Recollections: Architect Kenzo Tange,” *Japan Architect* (June 1985): 6.

⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁷ Kôichi Hasegawa, “Hiroshima Resurrected as Mecca of Peace,” *The American Builder* (April 1952): 96.

⁸ Ryûichi Hamaguchi, “Japanese Architecture and the West,” *Architectural Forum* (January 1953): 143.

⁹ Lisa Yoneyama, *Hiroshima Traces: time, space, and the dialectics of memory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 3.

¹⁰ Ibid. 17.

¹¹ Words of Isamu Noguchi quoted in Martin Friedman, *Noguchi’s Imaginary Landscapes* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1978), 43.

¹² Ibid. 45.

¹³ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* ([1908] New York: Zone, 1996), 86.

¹⁴ Ibid. 87.

¹⁵ Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 23.