

The Mosque That Wasn't:  
A Study in Social  
Memory Making



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## THE MOSQUE THAT WASN'T: A STUDY IN SOCIAL MEMORY MAKING

*The ninth anniversary remembrance of the '9/11' destruction of the World Trade Center in lower Manhattan was sharply different from the preceding eight. Whereas earlier years had been marked by a solemn procession and service of remembrance within the site, the 2010 anniversary occasioned bitter conflict and political division that carried over into the ceremony itself. Why had it so changed? National media attention focused on the political opportunities generated by the midterm national elections, and on religious tolerance (or lack thereof) in American society. While acknowledging the importance of such factors, this essay seeks to cut a layer below the political tensions to examine the nature of the site as a place of social memory. Between 2009 and 2010, the original site had been greatly disturbed and changed by new construction. The anxieties this was producing, it seemed to me, were displaced, quite literally, onto the plans to build a new Islamic Community Center in a building a few blocks away from 'Ground Zero.' Though many people, from the mayor to the center's planners, denied there were ever any plans to build a 'mosque at Ground Zero,' their plain statements were ignored. I argue that complex anxieties over remembering and forgetting gave rise to the often venomous protests surrounding the ninth anniversary, and that these stemmed from the new construction itself. 'Ground Zero' no longer has a recognisable shape. The fact that the new memorial being built was not yet discernible within the site added to these anxieties. Using a strikingly parallel incident from fourth century CE Antioch, I analyse the controversy at the local and regional level in particular, in terms of displacement and replacement, destruction and (re)construction of an important social and cultural memory.*



The central fact in the tale of the mosque at Ground Zero is that there *is* no mosque at Ground Zero, and there was never planned to be one. This was pointed out over and again in many ways, by the organisers, the press, the more concerned politicians, the neighbours of the World Trade Center site, all to no avail in persuading determined people who for many complex reasons needed for there to be a (nefarious) plan to build a mosque at Ground Zero. The more the organisers protested their innocence of any such designs, the more firmly many people believed they were lying. And the farther away from Lower Manhattan they lived, the more firmly they seemed to believe both in the mosque plot and in the solemn sacredness of Ground Zero itself.

The opportunistic politics of the matter are so readily identified that they are not a matter of particular interest to me. These shenanigans had little to do with religious beliefs and much with colliding ambitions, powers and interests. The interest of Nassau County (Long Island) Republicans and their supporters, eager to retain and if possible augment their power both in the state and nationally, has been an essential part of the story since just after 11 September 2001. It centrally involves characters familiar in New York Republican politics: would-be national candidate and former mayor Rudolph Giuliani ('a hero of 9/11' according to his admirers); US Representative Peter T. King (Nassau County's congressman); former New York Governor George Pataki; Pamela Geller, a blogger from the wealthy suburban 'Five Towns'

(whose blog-organised groups ‘Freedom Defense Initiative’ and ‘Stop Islamization of America’ promoted the protests); and the campaign for US Senate of a hapless but perennial candidate, Rick Lazio (whose supporters had designs on the seat held by Kirsten Gillibrand, a Democrat). All have close ties to Nassau County Republican organisations. Long-standing rivalries between Giuliani’s old supporters and the present Mayor Bloomberg (so very much more successful as mayor); between the NY City and NY State; between the mayor and the City Council; between the City and the Lower Manhattan Development Council; divisions between ‘Manhattan elites’ and the ‘outer boroughs’ – all these played their role. So did a steady increase in the number of immigrant residents, many of them Muslims needing new prayer spaces, to Nassau County, the outer boroughs (Staten Island and Queens in particular) and urban New Jersey. Farther afield, there is no doubt that the midterm US Congressional elections, due in early November, played a large part in the bizarre September appearances on West Street and in Battery Park City of Florida evangelical pastors and southern Tea Party candidates. Mosques were threatened or burned in states far from New York. Various elements of the ‘news-entertainment’ media played their parts as well. And there was the remarkable sight of the US president awkwardly intervening in what was (we who lived there thought) an entirely local event, to assure the world that the US was not anti-Muslim – not that that had its desired effect on violent anti-American protests in Afghanistan and elsewhere, occasioned (the protestors claimed) by a Florida pastor’s ‘burning’ of the Koran (‘Mistrust and the Mosque’; ‘Outraged, and Outrageous’; ‘Fight on Islamic Center Flares Anew’).

Obscured by the political carnivals was genuine local distress on the part of those many, myself included, who had been affected first-hand by the attacks of 2001, and who had over eight years managed to come to a sort of peace with our memories of that day. Achieving this had come for many to center on a wholly secular civic liturgy of remembrance taking place at ‘Ground Zero’ on the morning of each September 11. It featured a solemn procession of the ‘First Responders’ and ‘The Families’ of the dead, from street level on West Street down a ramp (which had been used to carry away the debris from the site), into what was left of ‘the bathtub,’ the walls sunk far into the bottom of the Hudson River, which had supported the many now razed buildings and all the infrastructure associated with them. Bells were struck and silent moments observed at the exact time the planes had hit and the buildings fell. The names of all the dead were read out by the survivors, punctuated by slow string quartets and bits of inspirational verse read out by various politicians of all persuasions. God was often mentioned, but clergy of whatever sort were absent by design. Those reading names would often identify a particular one as a family member or friend, but no political comment was condoned. The whole ceremony, when it had fully developed, took just over three hours, incorporating the time from the first plane strike to the second tower’s fall. The liturgy was televised live by the local NY stations without commercial interruptions.

It was a secular, civic liturgy of remembrance and promised renewal amidst total destruction. And for nearly eight years it was repeated without acrimony or obvious political opportunism, and although it became clear as the years went on that tension had developed within the surviving families, between the ‘heroes’ and the ‘civilians,’ and those who had come to some peace with the past and those still raw, these were not openly expressed in the ceremony. Particularly raw was the grief and survivor guilt of NYC Fire Department personnel and families, most of whom were still struggling to get compensation for their injuries and deaths, though similar guilt and grief were common among all the families. As the insurance and legal claims dragged on unresolved, and the site itself remained a hole in the ground, the city’s communities seemed to have entered a realm of stasis, stuck in memories of the destruction. But in 2009 the financial and political problems that had checked the rebuilding of the World Trade Center site were enough resolved to allow new construction to begin. The public was excluded from Ground Zero,

the ramp dismantled, a high construction fence put up concealing the whole site from views at street level and the annual liturgy was displaced to a plaza to the east, across Church Street from the site itself. Things were decidedly not the same anymore and some grumbling went on, though not enough to capture much attention. The emphasis in 2009 was still on healing the wounds from the initial event, its destructiveness still plainly visible in the shattered remains of the Deutsche Bank building on Liberty Street (the south boundary of the WTC site), which was only very slowly being dismantled. Indeed human remains had been found in it only a year before, and two firemen had died when fire broke out during its razing. (These firemen have now been added to the commemoration list of the 9/11 dead.) But in 2010 the ceremony became itself an occasion of bitter conflict ('Rifts Amid Mourning'; 'Loss and Tension'; 'Deutsche Bank Tower Vanishes').

I was in New York in August–September 2010, at my home in Battery Park City (BPC), only a couple of hundred yards from the construction site. I had not lived there in 2001, though many friends and colleagues did; I was at NYU in Washington Square, a little over a mile from the attack on 9/11 and I saw the first tower fall and, vainly waiting for my meeting to start, listened in shock to the fall of the second. That noon I walked the six miles to my then home near Columbia University. My own memories of the time are all vivid: the endless procession of refrigerated vans down Broadway to the temporary morgue near the site, my neighbour who worked through the night at St Vincent's Hospital waiting for the expected hundreds of wounded who never came, the ghastly smell that pervaded lower Manhattan, the dark cloud in the southern sky on a cloudless blue September day. These are the memories that I own, recognising that many others have far more dreadful ones. These, though, are the memories that have a place in my life, and that are properly located with the others in the liturgical structure of the 9/11 ceremony at Ground Zero.

Although the bulk of news analyses of these events interpreted them solely in terms of religious and political conflicts occasioned by the upcoming Congressional elections, or of religious bigotry against Muslims, or accusations of failures in patriotism and respect for American values flung from all sides, these explanations all seemed to me to beg the basic question. Which was this: why was the evidently false tale of a plan to construct 'a mosque at Ground Zero' so tenacious? Time and again the sponsors had pointed out that no mosque was planned; that the plan was for a community center with prayer rooms in it of the sort common in areas like lower Manhattan with many Muslim workers and residents (indeed both destroyed towers had prayer rooms, uncontroversially); that the site was well away (by Manhattan standards) from the boundaries of the area internationally known as 'Ground Zero' and invisible at street level from the site, its proposed design unremarkable (no domes or minarets); that other Muslim prayer spaces were located nearly as close to 'Ground Zero' as the proposed center; that the imam sponsoring the planned center's religious programs was well-known in the interfaith community of New York (I had heard him speak and pray several times at the Episcopal cathedral in upper Manhattan), a friend of rabbis, the Catholic archbishop, assorted mainstream Protestant leaders, the mayor, and had been a consultant for both the US State Department and the FBI. None of these facts – published and broadcast time and again – had the least effect in checking the rising tensions ('Planned Sign of Tolerance'; 'Early Missteps Fueled a Storm').

Yet plainly much genuine, unassuaged anxiety existed for many people, which had locked unmovingly onto the site. The mosque and its developers' plans were all a bit of a red herring in my analysis. Most striking to me in all the expressed concerns was the tenacity of its putative location – *at Ground Zero*. Opponents of the plan had attempted to have the decrepit and wholly undistinguished building in which it was to be housed declared a city landmark, on the basis that it was part of Ground Zero because a piece of landing gear (long since removed) had

fallen on it during the attack. Their fury grew when, in early August 2010, the NYC Landmarks Commission unanimously denied their petition. Later, a local news program devised a logo for stories connected with the quarrel, which superimposed a structure resembling the Blue Mosque in Istanbul on the iconic image of the listing steel rubble of the twin towers. It was wholly false (and irresponsible on the part of the station, I thought) but it captured and reinforced how so many people imagined what was planned. So it seemed to me that some basic problem lay within the site itself, producing the fears displaced onto the non-existent mosque. But what was so changed at Ground Zero on this ninth anniversary, and why did it matter so deeply?

I have mentioned in some detail my own memories of the original event because the tensions generated in September 2010 were all about memory, focusing as they did on a day of commemoration. As I thought about it – being a medieval historian who has analysed a number of incidents involving the creation and maintenance of both personal and cultural memories – the matter showed some striking parallels to an incident from late antiquity that I had examined (Carruthers, 1998, pp. 35–59). This took place centuries ago, in Antioch in 362/3 CE. It involved competing religions, gods and heroic martyrs, stational civic processions, a sacred building destroyed by fire, and a particular site that had played a foundational role in one civic narrative, had been disturbed once by one distant emperor but recovered, and then had been majorly disturbed again by another intrusive power in the person of yet another emperor, Julian (the Apostate). The final incident at Antioch was seen at the time as not so much a competition of religious practices (though it included those) but of remembering. It was touched off by the effort of the crusading emperor Julian's ill-advised attempt to restore his version of pagan religion to a suburban site (Daphne, just outside the city of Antioch) that had for centuries housed temples and a famous oracle of Apollo. Antioch was urban and Christian, Daphne suburban and (relaxedly) pagan. The site had been disturbed a decade earlier by Julian's zealous Christian half-brother, the Emperor Gallus, who had imported into the Daphne precincts from Antioch the body and tomb of a Christian martyr called Babylas. Though Christians (the majority in Antioch) had lived fairly peacefully by their more or less pagan suburban neighbours for many decades, this action provoked tensions. After the first disturbance in 354 a tense peace had been obtained, but the second disturbance in 362/3 fractured this. It culminated in a liturgical procession by Antioch's Christians, returning their martyr Babylas to the city. Simultaneously (by one account) a great conflagration occurred at the Daphne site, which burned down the temple of Apollo. This was interpreted as marking the triumph of the Christian Antiochenes over their suburban neighbours. As I wrote of that event: 'As an incident of social memory-making and (crucially) of social forgetting, th[is] narrative has much to teach us. For the contest between Babylas and Apollo, as between Christ and Julian [...] is cast as a contest over remembering. As such it is also a contest of stories' (Carruthers, 1998, p. 48), told separately by two master orators, the pagan official and scholar Libanius and the Christian bishop John Chrysostom. As I also observed, in creating social memory, the content recalled is less crucial than how the memories are addressed, placed and cued. When the sites and cues of memory-work are disturbed, great anxiety, social and individual, usually results. If a location is destroyed, people will even retain an imagined map of the original in order to re-place their memory cues properly. The best surviving example of this is the old city of Jerusalem, whose several physical destructions have traditionally been countered by acts of remembering its buildings and dimensions with apparent precision – for example, by the prophet Ezekiel (Ezekiel 40–42 esp) during the Babylonian captivity, and then again by early Christian pilgrims who visited the holy sites even though the Romans had destroyed them as thoroughly as they could in 70 and again in 132 CE (Carruthers, 1998, pp. 40–44).

What had changed at the World Trade Center site in September 2010? Crucially, by then Ground Zero itself no longer existed in any form recognisable from the iconic photographs of

nine years earlier. Visitors peering in from the Winter Garden viewing platform across the street puzzled to make out what they saw and were often disappointed. I overheard one say, 'there's nothing to see,' and turn away; tourists in the streets were directed only to the high construction fences. All the destruction had been cleared away, and construction was proceeding visibly and rapidly throughout the entire site. The forlorn bank building had been torn down nearly to street level (by the new year it was gone). Construction cranes covered the site and tall buildings were rising, blotting out all signs of what had once been within. 'Ground Zero' had become, once again, 'the World Trade Center,' the name it had always had on the city's street and transit maps. No 'Freedom Tower' was rising, but instead '1 World Trade Center' (and 3 and 4 WTC were also rising quickly: 7 WTC had been completed). Construction was proceeding rapidly as well on the national memorial park, which occupies the foundation footprints of the two original towers ('Reviving Ground Zero'; 'Deutsche Bank Tower Vanishes').

The plans for this memorial had been released several months earlier to great civic satisfaction and without any reported complaint. It is to be underground, two levels below the street, though open to the sky through the two footprints. A grove of trees is planted around the openings, which are walled in dark polished granite with the names of the dead incised. Walls of water flow over the granite down to the first below-street level. One is to walk from the entrance at ground level down to this floor of remembrance, and then down another level to the museum, where various remnants of 9/11 will be kept, including pieces of the original arch-like structures of their facades, a mangled fire engine, visible bits of the concrete walls of the original building foundations and a concrete staircase. All the design elements are ostensibly secular, while incorporating many of the conventional tropes of a martyrdom: the grove, the springs (waterfalls), the dark granite, the martyrs' names, their relics, the tomb-like undercroft. Its designers hope that it evokes, when finished in September 2011, an appropriate civic processional liturgy again, to a renewed 'sacred space' at Ground Zero, now two levels below the street ('Reviving Ground Zero').

But in 2010 that site was not ready, not even discernible. Instead, behind the high construction fencing was all that construction, all that change. The memorial liturgy was again held in the park across Church Street from the original site, a much smaller location and without any associations with 9/11. It is a place without proper 'places,' and in there it is hard to remember. The new anxiety of 'the families' was very apparent and they turned on one another, something never before seen in public, certainly not on that special day. As *The New York Times* noted, the commemoration of 2010 was 'starkly different in tone and emotion from those past. [...] The posters and photographs that victims' relatives held aloft bluntly injected politics into New York City's annual ceremony' ('Rifts Amid Mourning').

The divisions focused on how to remember the dead. The *Times* related an encounter between two grieving relatives. A woman held up a photo of her dead sister with the caption 'Today is ONLY about my sister and other innocents killed nine years ago': she burst into tears and was comforted by a man whose wife was killed in the north tower when the plane carrying the woman's sister crashed into it. The man then said to a reporter, 'A mosque is built on the site of a winning battle. They are symbols of conquest. Hence we have a symbol of conquest here? I don't think so.' The woman, still upset, said she was tired of all the politics – 'today is only about loss.' Another woman, reading out some of the names of the dead, wept and said 'Let today never be a national holiday. Let it be forever somber.' Some victims' families stayed away, as they had in years before. For example, survivors and friends who worked in the restaurant on top of the north tower, 'Windows on the World,' where 73 workers had died, gathered for brunch at a restaurant some of them had started up since the destruction. The *Times* reported that 'People of many faiths, born in places from Egypt and Yugoslavia to Brooklyn, passed around

babies and pictures. Zlatko Mundjer, 38, who had tended bar at Windows on the World, said no one was talking politics. “We are all family here – we are neutral” (‘Rifts Amid Mourning’; ‘Loss and Tension’).

One evident division was between those whose grief was essentially personal and reflective, and those for whom the attack had been a declaration of war and an event of national humiliation requiring revenge. The first group wanted a ceremony like those in the past, a day of dignified commemoration of the murdered innocents. Both women in these accounts would seem to be of the first group. The man however was outraged by the *idea* of a mosque at the site, a symbol, he thought, of triumph in war. Imam Abdul-Rauf, Egyptian-American, Columbia-educated, practicing the Sufi tradition of his faith, a member in good standing of the Manhattan educated elite, was completely unprepared for the storm his plan had engendered, nor had any of his well-connected, well-educated friends prepared him for it. His prayer center had been located for years in TriBeCa, a half-mile from the World Trade Center. The building designated as the home for the new community center had been in use for a year or so (with City permission) as an overflow site for his congregation. He had planned the new center’s programs with the upper West Side Jewish Community Center as its model, and more distantly such organisations as the YMHA and YMCA. It was to have exercise spaces, lecture halls, concert and theatre spaces, language classes and a prayer space. (When the ‘mosque’ controversy erupted, some of my neighbours in BPC took to calling it ‘the swimming-pool at ground zero’ plan.) The imam was not even, at that point, connected to the more middle-class Muslim immigrant communities beyond Manhattan, with far more experience of rough streets and rougher opinions (‘Muslim Prayers and Renewal’; ‘Early Missteps Fueled a Storm’). Within the city’s Jewish communities, too, there were uncomfortable divisions that surfaced about how, in High Holy Day sermons, to deal with the mosque controversy. And while a ‘special Jewish interest’ was claimed by a few rabbis, more reacted in the tolerant traditions of their faith or chose to preach on other topics (‘Rabbis Weigh Their Words’). Polls of New Yorkers taken near the commemoration day showed that the political anxieties sown were having an effect: 67% in a poll of New York City residents taken in late August said the ‘mosque’ should be moved to ‘a less controversial location’ than Ground Zero (‘Mistrust and the Mosque’). ‘New York City’ includes all the boroughs; the breakdown by borough showed that Manhattan had a slightly positive response (graph accompanying ‘Mistrust and the Mosque’), unlike the other boroughs. No finer breakdown of the poll was made, so far as I know, of those living in closest proximity to Ground Zero – a missed opportunity, for reasons I will give later.

None of the press reports addressed what seemed to me the issue at the heart of the disruption. Of course the anniversary was about remembering, and of course ways of mourning varied among the surviving relatives, co-workers and friends. But this had been going on all along. At issue was not only the fact of the ceremony’s displacement from the initial site to the park across the street – the 2009 commemoration had been as dignified as before, though crowded into that same unfamiliar space. Nor did the midterm elections, nor New York Republican hopes, the blogs and Fox News appearances of Pam Geller, the coincidence of High Holy Days, the class differences among Muslim immigrants, nor even the tolerance or intolerance of protestors, account for the collapse of the immediate survivors into such rancour during the ceremony *nine years on*. Many protesting the building of the mosque at Ground Zero objected strenuously to being called bigots and goons; my Battery Park neighbour who has been most vociferous in opposition – and indeed cast the only negative vote when the proposal for the Islamic center came to our local community planning board – wrote a passionate letter describing how two ‘devout Muslim’ associates in his law firm ‘agree with me’ that ‘the proposed *construction*’ (my emphasis) was ‘an unnecessary provocation.’ I think these protestations of innocence were genuinely felt, though one may find them unconvincing in fact.



What was crucial through all the wrangling was construction at Ground Zero itself (though opponents took to admitting ‘the mosque’ was ‘near’ rather than ‘at’ the site, this made no real difference – and indeed the argument put forward to have the center’s building declared a city landmark hinged on a claim that it was part of Ground Zero’s ‘sacred space’). And what had noticeably changed at the site between 2009 and 2010 was the pace of construction going on within the walls. The permanent memorial could not yet be seen (though a row of saplings had been trucked in and planted, the first of the memorial grove, they were too small to be visible over the fences). All one could see were the cranes and the inexorable rising of steel and concrete and glass – looking from outside just like every other construction site in Manhattan. Drawings and plans had of course been published widely, but those were not sufficient (‘Reviving Ground Zero’). Nobody knew what was coming – we knew only that it would be permanently, irretrievably, different. In a small change from the usual proceedings, in 2010 the teams reading out the names of the dead consisted of a surviving family member (as always) and a construction worker. And it was clear, as the televised service went on, that those construction workers – architects, developer’s representatives, carpenters, steel-workers, and all – were not always welcome to their temporary partners in the liturgy.

Unreported by the national media and in general polling was the response of the local neighbourhood of Battery Park City itself. This area, a middle-class and professional development (true, there are a few celebrities there now) that is home to several thousand people, also has a newspaper, the *Battery Park Broadsheet*, whose ‘letters’ pages reflected the sentiments of those who had lived closest to the attack. Debris rained on the residents that day; those at home witnessing the immediate terror were carried off to safety in unknown destinations, many without money or papers, by people they did not know. They made their way back to BPC to find their apartments closed by police, the area shut off from the rest of the city by checkpoints manned by soldiers. None was able to return home until their apartments had been cleaned by people in haz-mat suits, who destroyed anything that might have held poisonous debris. Most were unable to return for more than three months; the area was devastated as a thriving residential neighbourhood and many families could not bear to return at all. Within BPC those who lived through this experience have a claim to memory that those (including me) who moved in later must respect. Among the residents, the arguments about mosques and religious tolerance were beside the point. Only two topics dominated: memory and the long-delayed reconstruction.

Yet support for building the Muslim Center was overwhelming in the pages of the *Broadsheet*, as also from Community Board 1, the local governance and planning group which had consented to the Muslim Center’s application by a vote of 19 yes, 1 no, and 10 abstentions (this vote was taken in the face of a noisy oppositional group brought in from outside BPC – the negative pressure on the Community Board from outside the community was both gratuitous and well organised). The desire among the neighbours to rebuild is very strong. Indeed if polling results had been analysed according to the distance lived from the WTC site, I would expect that the negative feelings about the Muslim Center and the desire that the whole site be made a permanent war memorial unchanged forever, would increase directly with distance resided in from lower Manhattan. The neighbours’ feeling was well expressed in a letter: ‘I think the world at large (well beyond Manhattan, even) would be surprised that our priorities are quite different [from those who were against the Muslim Center]. We just want our own backyard cleaned up, built up, and improved. Anyone who wants to make progress towards that goal is going to be welcome here’ (Letter, *Broadsheet*, October 1, 2010; see also ‘Muslim Prayers and Renewal’).

There was one vote on the Community Board against building the center. A letter to the *Broadsheet* from this voter directly raised the essential issue of remembering. ‘What disturbs me more than the possible construction of the mosque is the very short memories we, as Americans,

have; especially those who live in Battery Park City and were here on 9/11' (Letter, *Broadsheet*, October 12, 2010). The response from another resident was swift: 'The unmitigated gall of using the term "short memories" leaves me shaking with rage. I understand such stupidity from people who don't live here, but from a fellow downtown resident, it's reprehensible. How dare you suggest that you know what I remember, or that you have the right to dictate what attitudes and beliefs should emerge from my memories (which are perfectly hideous, and none of your damn business)' (Letter, *Broadsheet*, October 13, 2010). 'How dare you suggest that you know what I remember' – I think that sums up the matter very well.

Perhaps the new memorial will succeed, though controversies have erupted again from the old tensions and fears. Still it has a chance of succeeding just because it so evidently remembers all the dead, without differentiating special 'heroes' among them (some families of the Fire Department dead wanted their names marked out with a star, but this request was denied) and because it is wholly secular but also wholly conventional as a memorial/martyrium. It can be a place that is 'forever somber,' 'unstuck in time' like Billy Pilgrim in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughter-House Five* forever reliving the bombing of Dresden. Above it, Lower Manhattan is again rebuilding. Another of my neighbours spoke in a letter for most of us in BPC by asking for 'a return to normalcy' (Letter, *Broadsheet*, March 17, 2011). Above ground there is already a return to Manhattan normalcy, construction of new offices, restaurants and malls. The 'Anchor Tenant' of 1 WTC is Condé Nast publications, a company whose products are definitely not unstuck in time. After visiting the memorial, people can walk back up into the time-bound reality of the World Trade Center and go shopping.

The person who called for 'normalcy' had a particular idea of what that was – an exact replication of the original twin towers at the site, the 'clearest and most evident way to return to normalcy' (Letter, *Broadsheet*, March 17, 2011). Shortly after the mosque controversy faded, another contentious issue arose in BPC itself (it was mostly unreported outside the local area) that casts an interesting light on how (better?) to reconstruct a site of social memory. The World Financial Center, across West Street from the trade center, had suffered severe damage in the attack, especially to a great marble-and-glass atrium space known as the Winter Garden. On the east side of this atrium is a monumental red and cream marble staircase leading up to a glass wall facing the trade center site. This staircase, after the attack, was soon rebuilt just as it had been, and became a favoured viewing platform into Ground Zero. As construction of the new WTC began in earnest, the owner of the Winter Garden announced plans to reconfigure the atrium and tear out the staircase, because in terms of the new construction it no longer served any purpose (it had connected a second-storey walkway into the old twin towers; the new WTC site plans are for an underground passage, less vulnerable to attacks). Removing the staircase would allow much more room for elegant new mall shops, said the owner. This plan met with vigorous protest from BPC residents, precisely over the issue of the staircase as a site of memories. Letters were again written. One angry resident wrote: 'I will never forget standing on those stairs [and looking over the rubble][...] I, for one WILL NEVER FORGET!' (Letter, *Broadsheet*, March 30, 2011). Another resident, an architect, drew up some plans that would both preserve the staircase and provide access to the planned underground passageway; he posted these with the *Broadsheet* and also on his firm's website. In mid-June 2011 the building's owner, Brookfield Properties, announced that the staircase would be saved after all, and as the *Broadsheet* reported, 'a collective sigh of relief went up around Battery Park City' (*Broadsheet*, June 17, 2011). A wise compromise, which allows the future to accommodate the present by incorporating the past without too obvious disruption. 'Normalcy' is restored, at the cost of fewer new shops. The new World Trade Center site itself, however, would seem to have taken a different approach, for there the future is all up top, the past buried below. What sort of stories the present will tell about this is uncertain still. A plan to bury martyrs'

relics ('unidentified human remains') in a wall within the undercroft of the new memorial is controversial again, as some families of the dead are uneasy about putting them below street level, others not ('Poll of 9/11 Families is Sought'). Those objecting this time do so on the grounds of what they deem to be appropriate memorial conventions: tombs of unknown soldiers are above ground, they point out, not below. Hidden in this quarrel, as indeed in so many of the 9/11 anxieties – including the mosque fantasy – is a basic clash of interpretations, between those who see the attacks as the mass murder of innocents and those who see them as the opening battle of a (continuing) war. This fundamental interpretative difference, probably irresolvable, has been present all along, in the designation of 'heroes' and 'civilians,' the very naming of 'Ground Zero,' the complaint that mosques are 'always' built to mark 'victories,' the growing unease by a vocal minority with the new construction. As long as the memorial was unbuilt, it was possible to hold both interpretations in mind, however uneasily. But the built memorial may seem to honour one more than the other.

And 'the mosque at Ground Zero'? Gone, disappeared from the national news, like the chimera it always was. The imam no longer plays an active role in planning the Muslim Center and the developer who bought the building has gone as quiet as he can. (The matter made the news again in March when a suit against the city's Landmarks Commission, brought by an ex-firefighter financed by an evangelical Christian political group, was argued in court; the suit charged undue influence by Mayor Bloomberg.) Perhaps in time the Muslim Center will come into being, though it will likely do so in a different building. Indeed, the best way to 'forget' the mosque-that-wasn't-there is to 're-member' it as a construction in a new location, materially to 're-place' it. And if people are reassured that their own memories of 9/11 have not been 'messed with' by the new Ground Zero memorial, I would guess that the anxiety that allowed this urban legend to take hold so destructively will dissipate. The memorial formally opens on this year's anniversary. Stay tuned ('Fight on Islamic Center Flares Anew'; 'Planners of Mosque Considering New Project'.)

Added 12 September 2011: Though the lower level museum is still under construction, the street-level memorial plaza and falling-water pools were completed for the tenth anniversary. The names of the dead etched in bronze plaques on the low walls of the pools provided the tangible location needed, as memorials traditionally make what is absent present. Touch was the critical experience. Family members and friends felt the letters, took rubbings of the names and left various small mementos of and for the dead in the deeply etched surfaces. As the director of the new museum commented, 'This is now a place, not a construction site, not a design.' One father said, 'to me it's very peaceful.' No fears were expressed this time about a Ground Zero mosque, no protestors marched ('Connecting With Lost Loved Ones').



*Reference List*

The *Battery Park Broadsheet* archive may be accessed at [www.ebroadsheet.com](http://www.ebroadsheet.com).

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*The New York Times* reports as follows, in chronological order:

‘Muslim Prayers and Renewal Near Ground Zero,’ December 9, 2009.

‘Planned Sign of Tolerance Bringing Division Instead,’ July 13, 2010.

‘For Muslim Center Sponsors, Early Missteps Fueled a Storm,’ August 11, 2010.

‘Mistrust and the Mosque,’ September 2, 2010.

‘For High Holy Days, Rabbis Weigh Their Words on Proposed Islamic Center,’ September 8, 2010.

‘Reviving Ground Zero,’ September 10, 2010.

‘At Memorial Service, Loss and Tension,’ September 11, 2010.

‘On Sept. 11 Anniversary, Rifts Amid Mourning,’ September 11, 2010.

‘Outraged, and Outrageous,’ October 10, 2010.

‘10 Years After 9/11, Deutsche Bank Tower Vanishes,’ January 12, 2011.

‘Poll of 9/11 Families Is Sought Over Unidentified Remains,’ June 2, 2011.

‘Fight on Islamic Center Flares Anew as Ex-Firefighter Takes His Case To Court,’ March 15, 2011.

‘Planners of Mosque Considering New Project,’ March 29, 2011.

‘Connecting With Lost Loved Ones,’ September 12, 2011.

Convenient links to all these reports and more have been collected in the Times Topics rubrics ‘Park51’ and ‘9/11 Reconstruction’ at the website of *The New York Times*, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

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*Insights*

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