Where Emotion Was Ground To Zero

by Sasha Sanders

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Ground Zero is not called Ground Zero. It is called the World Trade Centre site. And that is exactly what it is – a vast, clinical construction site. Or, more accurately, a construction site in waiting. It waits for a fate that seems to have become strangely removed from this part of Manhattan, emotionally if not geographically; a fate that is as my visit was: unromantic.

Romance may seem a strange association to make with this part of the world and its history. But it is not the euphoric, poetic, life-affirming sort of romance. It is the sort that comes with being so loaded, so imbued with surrealism and disbelief, so full of shockingly vivid memories. If the magnitude of historic events can be measured by how quickly people can answer the question "where were you when…?", this must rate above Yitzchak Rabin or Princess Diana's death, or even Neil Armstrong's walk on the moon. I won't forget 9/11, not as long as I have a healthy mind: I remember being at work, watching it on TV, watching the second aeroplane hit, watching people jump out of the windows, watching the towers crumble. Those are the images that form this kind of romance. It is a romance that makes you wonder what it was like to be there on that day, in the days and weeks afterward, and what it's like to be there now. It is a romance heavy with pain and expectation.

Some four years after the attacks, I still expected a sombre mood. I wondered if I might find people dressed in black. I envisioned bunches of fresh flowers, placed faithfully by survivors or widows. I half expected a respectful silence. But that is not realistic, in downtown New York of all places, and that is not how it was.

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Instead, the site has become an attraction for tourists like me, people who watched 9/11 on TV from a distance and now hope to find some remnant, however intangible, of what it was like on that morning. Close to the fences separating us from the building site, visitors take photos of each other in front of a booth that explains what will be erected.

I manage to shut off from the noise and activity for a few moments and remember seeing the second plane hit. I look up and try to imagine how high the towers must have been to dwarf the skyscrapers around it. I recall with horror the bodies falling to the ground, and try to imagine, ridiculously, what it must have been like inside the towers for people to believe, even in a desperate moment of chaos and insane panic, that they might survive if they jumped. I remember wondering, mesmerised with a kind of perverse curiosity, if the towers would fall over or crumble. I try to imagine the stench of burning metal support structures, melted and soft enough to give way to the weight above, weight that would eventually collapse and take everything with it.

I had expected, maybe hoped for, some rubble, some smoke, some something I could touch or see or smell to give these images in my head substance, to help them be more than just the work of my memory and imagination. But by now the site is tired of catering for these kinds of needs. It is tired of feeling sorry for itself. It is tired of looking back, and has started – more than started – to look to the future. Perhaps this is why it is not called Ground Zero, but simply the World Trade Centre site. The choice of words descriptive rather than emotive helps make this future real.

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If in my fantasy I hoped for some ruins, in reality I didn't expect it to be cleared and cleaned and then simply left like the remains of an Auschwitz. It may have been the most honest, most painfully truthful testament to what happened on 9/11, but does the American psyche really want to hold on to that baggage? Do the victims deserve such a brutal resting place? And would this nation want to appear apologetic, weak or submissive in the eyes of its enemies? Of course the World Trade Centre was always going to be rebuilt. If not for sentimental reasons, then for business ones.

I had wondered glibly about what would replace the towers. Would it be something introspective and soul-searching, or something defiant? The answer, I now discovered, is that it will indeed be another macho expression of power and grandeur: the "Freedom Tower" will not only be taller than the previous twin towers, it will be the tallest building in the world. Bigger, better, louder, prouder. Perhaps the knowledge that a dazzlingly, dizzyingly high tower will dominate this site in another four years adds to why it is leaving me cold. But these hopes for its future are as romantic as my expectations were for it this morning. Those closer to its fate didn't have the luxury of sentiment. They may have felt as mournful as anyone else, but they had to get down to business. Big, long, complicated business.

The land in question is owned by the Port Authority of New York, landlord to real estate giant Larry Silverstein, who six weeks before the attacks signed a 99 year lease on the World Trade Centre. His lease obliges him to pay $10 million in rent each month, which, without a building and without tenants, he is not

making back. It also obliges him to rebuild the World Trade Centre, and it allows him to choose the architect.

However, New York Governor George Pataki, whose political future will be determined in large part by his handling of the World Trade Centre site, overrode Silverstein's right to name the architect, throwing the design of the new World Trade Centre open. The job went to Daniel Libeskind, who came to America as a teenager and whose first memories of the country include seeing the Statue of Liberty as his ship sailed into New York. He is also, as his detractors gladly point out, a man whose previous tallest building was only four stories high. Libeskind's initial design, as it happened, had serious flaws and failed to take into account essential workings underneath the building. And so eventually David Childs – Silverstein's original choice since and a man with, literally, towers of experience – was announced as collaborator on the project.

The collaborative design did have some symbolic value: a spire that ran up the side of the tower and then above the top of it, giving it its height, was meant to be reminiscent of the Statue of Liberty's arm. Also, with a glass façade and a cabled top that you could literally see through, there was some suggestion of fragility and even fallibility. Of course, favourable opinion of the design was far from unanimous. One critic called it "symbolist crapola". Donald Trump, he of questionable taste and unique hairstyle, described it as a junkyard and suggested the twin towers be rebuilt. And the spire, it has to be said, could also be seen as a giant middle finger, raised defiantly to those who supported the destruction of its predecessors. But these objections were not the reason why this design would ultimately not get off the ground. The final say came from the

NYPD, who felt the building's exposed base and proximity to the street made it vulnerable to car bombs. It had to go back – in the truest sense – to the drawing board.

And so, finally, George Pataki let Silverstein effectively have his man, but gave him just eight weeks to design the new building – a job that normally would take at least four months. And Childs didn't have the same freedom for his Freedom Tower that Libeskind did. He had to use what he could of preparation work that had already been completed on the site's foundations, while moving the building far enough from the street and making its base impenetrable enough to satisfy security concerns. Considering the constraints, it's admirable he got the job done. But while the new building does have a certain geometric beauty, it is more monolithic than the first design. Sticking up like a big American phallus, from across Brooklyn Bridge it will look twice as high as the rest of the Manhattan skyline.

Aesthetics aside, the story paints a picture of Silverstein and his architect, wearing pragmatic business trunks, in one corner, slugging it out against Pataki and his architect, wearing sentimental political trunks, in the other. Refereeing the match was the Port Authority, while the NYPD kept score. As to who won, well, it looks like a split decision.

During four years of power struggles, scrutiny and setbacks, the process often took one step forward and two steps back. And the frustrating unfolding of events seems to have contributed to a strange detachment from the emotion of Ground Zero by the people most intimately involved with its future. It is a slow, almost imperceptible but probably inevitable process. One that happens the

same way people visit a grave, each time becoming slightly less bereaved, and slightly more concerned with upkeep of the tombstone. The metaphor may be crude but when you multiply the scale by several thousand, add enormous amounts of money and throw in a few strong personalities, it is unsurprising that progressively little room is available for emotion. The businessmen, politicians and authorities returned to Ground Zero hundreds of times either physically or, from their offices and meeting rooms, in their minds. With each visit, a place of unbearable tragedy and pain became a place where a job had to get done, where logistics and budgets had to be considered, solutions and compromises found, business decisions made.

And so somehow, in the process of getting back to normal, the poignancy and romance have dissipated from this place. 9/11 is still incomprehensible, still carries enormous power and emotion. The words “Ground Zero” do too. But Ground Zero, the *place*, does not. And the World Trade Centre site even less so. It is a site of planning, power struggles, politics. A few thousand square metres of dust, concrete and cranes.

When the site is finally developed and the new Freedom Tower built, there will be, in its shadow, a memorial called “Reflecting Absence”: two voids of recessed pools that encompass the footprints of the old twin towers. Visitors will be able to descend into the recesses, escaping the noise and concrete of the city and entering a quieter, contemplative space. And so perhaps I am just here at the wrong time, a time caught in limbo between before and after. Perhaps in a few years, these voids will, as the memorial’s name suggests, reflect the

absence of the towers and the nearly 3000 lives that perished inside them. And not, as I experienced, the absence of emotion.