

Finding peace at the World Trade Center memorial pools: Legends & Landmarks

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By **John Gomez/For The Jersey Journal**



John Gomez/For The Jersey Journal Roses inserted into some of the stenciled letters of victims' names. Monday, Sept. 12, 2011. -- JOHN GOMEZ / FOR THE JERSEY JOURNAL

Last week, clutching an Internet-printed pass, I arrived at and entered — after undergoing stringent security procedures put in place by the Port Authority of New York & New Jersey — an unparalleled millennial monument, an architectural apotheosis open to the vast Manhattan sky speaking to a future without measure.

The **National September 11 Memorial & Museum** at the World Trade Center site in Lower Manhattan, now accessible to the public via a months-long reservation process, drew, as anticipated, unbated breaths of experiential ecstasy — a feeling not unlike entering a thousand-year-old cathedral and coming out euphoric and irrevocably altered.

TICKET TO HISTORY

I was one of the fortunate few to have a public opening-day ticket in hand, having signed up online last spring as soon as appointments were officially announced and made available. Sept. 12: the day after the poignant 10-year-anniversary unveiling, when families and first responders first pierced the memorial's perimeters. A singular Monday: the sky blue, bright, empyrean, its westerly winds tinged with closing summer humidity.

On this day, I initially pondered, I would become part of the site's unfinished history. But elation, and the sense of good fortune, were soon consumed by long-erased sorrow — and then a trepidation that overtook me.

Printing out my ticket proved to be painful. Images of where I was on 9/11 (in a sixth-grade classroom on Bergen Avenue in Jersey City with my fear-stricken students) came cannoning back. Trauma assumed vanquished appeared again just by touching an authoritative piece of paper.

How, I wondered, would the 9/11 Memorial affect me? Would I become integral to its fabric and core? Would it feel like a private burial ground, its sanctified space and regions reserved only for families? Would I break down, look away from the awesomely rendered architecture, snap my eyes shut, try to escape?



The Tribute in Light memorializes the victims of 9-11 The Tribute in Light shines over Manhattan every year on September 11th to honor the victims of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. After first appearing on the sixth month anniversary of 9-11, the Municipal Arts Society of New York has produced the installation of 88 lights annually since 2003. These photos were taken over the past 10 years from vantage points around New York City and New Jersey. Photographs by John Munson/The Star-Ledger

SEMBLANCES

Surrounded by other memorial visitors — their motions and gestures as unhurried and uncertain as mine — I walked down a long barricaded passage that traverses West Street, arriving, finally, at a combined entrance and exit fence.

Immediately — perhaps even before crossing into the solemn setting — I heard the already-famous cascades, the strident peal of two falls, and beheld a forest of more than 200 White Swamp Oak trees, their trunks met by undulating planks of grass and granite paving stones.

People were meandering in reverential silence, some embracing or holding hands, sitting on square stone seats as dusk-hinting light flooded the memorial's 13-acre plaza — half the size of the World Trade Center cavity — and lit up the rowed trees' leaf crowns.

After lingering in the dense forest, I approached the plaza's two cavernous waterfalls, their square footprints measured semblances of the former south and north Twin Towers.

CEASELESS CURRENTS

To my surprise, I received their cool spray even before fully taking in their gigantic shapes. Drawing closer, I touched their bronze sides, the names of those who perished in the attacks inscribed in tablet formations electrified by interior lights. I observed visitors leaning on the fountains' smooth surfaces and filling their deeply incised names with red rose stems, small pennants, rolled personal notes, faded and creased photographs.

Some were carefully rubbing precious engravings, others just pressing their palms down in prayer.

Looking over the fountains, I was floored by the mystical movement of the waters, their ceaseless currents stilled in high reflecting pools before subtly dropping down walls composed of 30-foot-high battered black granite slabs.

My eyes followed the foaming flows as they slipped into a second square portal. At that moment, those great pools resonated with the spirits of acquiescence, transcendence, peace, penance — of a monumental architecture manifested beyond the physical.

THE PRINTED PARAGON

Leaving, catching a glimpse of the Jersey City waterfront beyond the promenade tree groves of Battery Park City, I promised to always keep and cherish my 9/11 Memorial pass, to treat it like a fragment of yesterday, a paragon of tomorrow.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *John Gomez is founder of the Jersey City Landmarks Conservancy and holds a Master of Science in Historic Preservation from Columbia University.*