

When Barack Obama returns to World Trade Center site, he'll see marked construction progress

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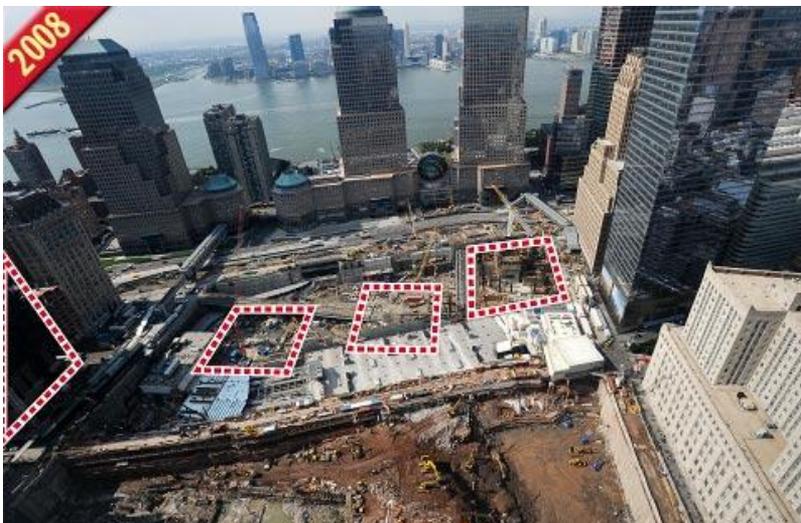
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

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Bryan Smith for News; Alfred Giancarli for News (below)

Above, the World Trade Center site as it looks today. Marked progress has been made since President Obama visited in 2008 (below), then as a candidate.



When candidate Barack Obama last visited Ground Zero on Sept. 11, 2008, the Freedom Tower had yet to rise above street level.

When he returns in triumph Thursday, he will see the signature tower, now called 1 World Trade Center, soaring 64 floors - 771 feet - into the sky.

As Obama mourned with the victims' families 2 1/2 years ago, the toxic Deutsche Bank tower loomed 27 stories above the site, a ghostly and unavoidable presence.

Now, the most hated building in New York City has finally been dismantled and the site is being transformed into a graceful Welcome Plaza for millions of visitors entering the 9/11 Memorial.

"It is no longer The Pit," said Port Authority Executive Director Chris Ward. "President Obama will see . . . enormous progress."

It almost didn't happen. The economy tanked not long after Obama's first visit; skeptics branded the Freedom Tower a white elephant and predicted a forest of empty office towers downtown.

There have been casualties. Developer Larry Silverstein has mothballed plans for a 1,270-foot Tower 2, which would have risen higher than the Empire State Building. He's also delaying his 1,137-foot Tower 3.

After a lengthy feud, Silverstein and the Port Authority hammered out a financing deal. Now, his 64-story, 975-foot Tower 4 - which was below street level in 2008 - has soared to 23 floors, or 355 feet.

The centerpiece of the hallowed 16-acre site - the 9/11 Memorial - was unrecognizable in 2008: The reflecting pools hadn't been finished, and the twin voids where the north and south towers once stood had yet to take shape.

Today, a visitor can see the footprints of the twin towers and the outline of the two biggest man-made waterfalls in North America, twin torrents that will drop 46 feet.

More than 150 stately white oak trees have been planted in the Memorial Plaza, installation of

the bronze name parapets on the edge of the two pools is under way, waterfall testing is expected in June and the memorial will open in time for the 10th anniversary on Sept. 11.

The Sept. 11 Memorial & Museum is expected to announce Thursday the final arrangement of the names of the 2,982 victims that will be scattered throughout the 9/11 Memorial.

"The arrangement of the names, forever etched in bronze, expresses bonds that could not be broken by the murderous attacks," said 9/11 Memorial President Joe Daniels.

"It reflects the relationships and the strong bonds that 2,982 innocent people shared in life and in death."