

The Observatory: One World Trade Center Looking Squarely To The Future

Trip to the top is no 9/11 history lesson – it's all about the views of Manhattan and beyond, the human feat that is New York ... and sheer height



The Observatory sits atop the One World Trade Center. Photograph: Spencer Platt/Getty Images

By Ed Pilkington

If you blink a couple times, or let yourself be distracted by your ears popping as the high-speed elevator rises 102 floors in 47 seconds, you might very easily miss it. The only mention of the Twin Towers, and their destruction on 9/11, flashes past you in a heartbeat.

It comes towards the end of a multimedia depiction of 500 years of New York history that is displayed as a panorama as you shoot up to the Observatory, the new viewing station at the top of One World Trade Center that opens to the public on Friday. As you rise up the building the view of downtown Manhattan transitions digitally in front of your eyes from grassy swamp, through early village settlements, to sprouting skyscrapers.

And then suddenly the Twin Towers emerge, somewhere in the late 1960s, only to vanish about three seconds later.



View of Manhattan from the observation deck. Photograph: Spencer Platt/Getty Images

And that's it. There's no other reference to that dreadful day, to the more than 2,700 people who died, or to the epic and at times ugly struggle to rebuild at Ground Zero that followed, culminating with the construction of the tallest building in the western hemisphere at the top of which we are now standing.

What there is, is a paean to height. New York is back up in the clouds, the message clearly states, so let's celebrate.

The views are certainly worth celebrating. On a clear afternoon, as Tuesday was, with just a slight haze in the air, you truly can see for miles.

To the south your eye drifts over Lady Liberty waving as the Staten Island ferry chugs along in diminutive form like a toy tug in a bath. To the east the super-fashionable neighborhoods of Brooklyn look as though you can reach out and grab an artisanal coffee, while farther out, fly-sized jets buzz over JFK.

To the west, well, that's New Jersey, enough said. And to the north, there's the Empire State building, naturally. Its familiar outline, reduced to matchstick proportions from here, looks comfortingly familiar but also – whisper it – a little bit tired.

It's taken more than 13 years to get to this point since American Airlines Flight 11 and United Airlines Flight 175 brought down the twin towers. More than 13 years of costly delays, at times bitter politicking and almost \$4bn was expended to reach the historically symbolic 1,776ft (541m) at the tip of One World Trade Center's beacon.

None of the up to 4 million visitors who are expected to make the elevator ride up to the Observatory every year will be any the wiser about that nuanced history, judging from what they will learn on the tour. From the perspective of the viewing station, the memorial aspect of Ground Zero is diminished, pushed to the background even.



Looking down into the commemorative pool built where the North Tower stood. Photograph: Spencer Platt/Getty Images

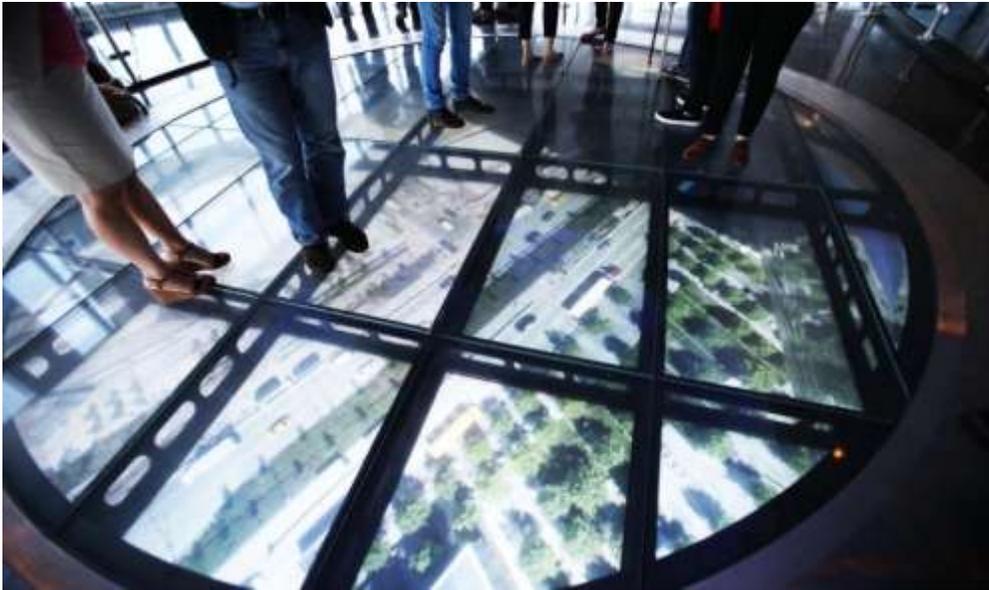
Take the commemorative pool that sits in the footprint of the stricken North Tower. To see it you have to lean your body against the viewing window and stare straight down in a manoeuvre that induces alarmingly the sensation of falling.

It's all quite consciously done, according to David Checketts, the CEO of Legends, operator of the new observatory. "The whole experience was about looking forwards, a sort of fist bump for having put this building up. It's all about courage and resilience, and our goal is to present New York in the best possible light," he told reporters at the outset of the tour.

To be fair, the building sits alongside the 9/11 memorial museum where the tragic events of September 2001 are marked with exhibition space beneath ground. There is too a new sense of New York City beginning to reach up to the skies again, after decades of architectural stagnation.

New skyscrapers, gravity-defying in their slimness and elevation, have started to spring up all over Manhattan, from Frank Gehry's glistening and twisting tower just under the nose of the Observatory, to Rafael Vinoly's 432 Park Avenue and the Nordstrom Tower which is under construction in West 57th Street and will stop, in deference to One World Trade Center, just one foot shorter at 1,775ft

But most of these new super-skyscrapers are residential buildings catering for the global (often absentee) super-rich. Vinoly's 432 Park Avenue boasts a \$95m penthouse.



The Sky Portal which shows real-time footage of the streets below. Photograph: Qin Lang/Xinhua Press/Corbis

There's more than a slight whiff of that commercial sensibility in the new observatory – inevitably perhaps given the enormous sums that have to be recouped. The designers of the Observatory have thrown in every bit of whizz-bang digital innovation they can think of – from iPads telling you what view you are looking at, with a narration by novelist Jay McInerney (at \$15 extra cost), to the “City Pulse” that creates a “concierge experience” using gesture recognition technology. Adult tickets are \$32 if booked online.

To round off the tour there is the souvenir shop. Among its delights: a glass model of One World Trade Center for \$200, or if that is beyond budget, an observatory polo shirt for \$174.95.

Perhaps the message of the observatory is right for New York in 2015. Perhaps it is time for the city to look up and move on. But where to – that's the question.