

The image shows the interior of the 9/11 Memorial Museum. A prominent feature is a dark, cantilevered mezzanine level where several people are standing, some taking photos. Below this, a large, light-colored wall is covered in a grid of small, rectangular windows, each containing a photograph of a person. In the foreground, there are wooden tables and benches, and a few more people are visible, some looking at informational displays. The lighting is soft and focused on the exhibits.

Talking Through Our Pain

Visitor Responses at
the 9/11 Memorial Museum

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Visitors to the 9/11 Memorial Museum encounter a space whose archaeological components reinforce the authority of the space and establish the artifacts as witnesses to the events of 9/11 and their aftermath. Seen here, the museum's Foundation Hall.



The National September 11 Memorial Museum came into existence in a tempest of emotion. More than a decade of passionate public debate accompanied the planning of the museum, as staff and consultants carefully shaped a visitor experience rooted in countless personal experiences, always mindful of our own witness of the terrorist attacks. When the 9/11 Memorial Museum opened in May 2014, we found, with satisfaction, that our design solutions encourage visitors to see themselves as actors in historical events. By allowing a safe place for intellectual and emotional exploration, the museum offers opportunities for visitors to embrace their continued ownership and understanding of the events with both mind and heart.

We...launched the visitor journey with an exhibit that establishes 9/11 as both deeply personal and widely shared.

This paper focuses on two design strategies we employed. First, we purposefully choreographed a visitor experience that would avoid exhibition dramatics and allow visitors to choose whether or not to engage with the most difficult content. Second, we devised an approach that helps visitors see themselves as part of the story, and to contribute to that story through their own cathartic experience of the museum's emotional subject.

Hot Topic, Cool Treatment

History museums often have to figure out how to engage their visitors emotionally in a fact-based presentation, to offer a compelling view of history that could otherwise feel removed or foreign. Anticipating that the vast majority of our visitors would have witnessed the events of 9/11, we realized we faced the opposite problem: our factual presentation of the events and repercussions of 9/11 would

be inherently personal and thus emotional. The project team set out to find a balance between sheltering visitors from the intrinsic emotionality of 9/11 without downplaying the disruption, confusion, anger, and sadness.

We adopted a design approach first suggested by a scholar who participated in our advisory meetings: “hot topic, cool treatment.” The museum is located on the actual footprints of the Twin Towers, where more than 2,700 people lost their lives in the 9/11 attacks. Given this, and the fact that the attacks are a lived memory for the majority of our visiting public,¹ we were sure that a visit to the 9/11 Memorial Museum would be *de facto* an emotional one. We chose to let the archaeological space and the materials on exhibition, rather than their presentation, provide the drama (*intro image*). A large portion of the exhibitions at the museum are placed in open spaces where the archaeology of the former World Trade Center is visible. Here, the narrative emphasis is on specificity of place, with large artifacts recovered from the site simply presented and modestly interpreted to allow visitors to cognitively and viscerally understand the scale and scope of the disasters.

Seeing Others/Recognizing Yourself

We understood that visitors would enter the museum with their own 9/11 experiences, and that anxiety about stepping into memory, as well as concern about whether their 9/11 story would be affirmed, could cast a shadow on their visit. We thus launched the visitor journey with an exhibit that establishes 9/11 as both deeply personal and widely shared. “We Remember” is an audiovisual soundscape that provides a diverse array of first-person accounts, describing where the storytellers were and how they heard the news on that September morning (*fig. 1*). By presenting a range of languages, locations, and points of view, this installation allows

1 Claudia Deane, Maeve Duggan, and Rich Morin, “Americans Name the 10 Most Significant Historic Events of Their Lifetimes,” Pew Charitable Trust, December 15, 2016, accessed December 30, 2016, <http://www.people-press.org/2016/12/15/americans-name-the-10-most-significant-historic-events-of-their-lifetimes/>.

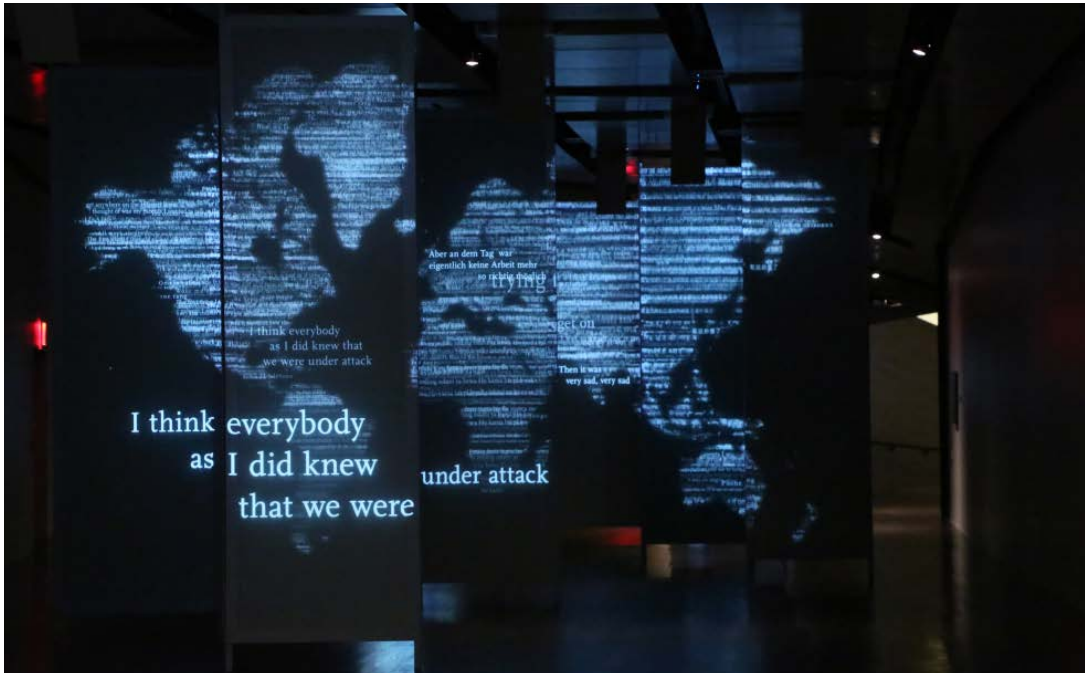


fig. 1.
The soundscape installation “We Remember” is comprised of first-person memories of September 11, 2001.

visitors an exhale of recognition that their history is honored and that they are here, now, recalling it as survivors. It also posits the notion that there are a wide range of experiences of 9/11, each rooted in individual storytellers’ subjectivity.

Throughout the exhibitions, we use this technique of joining distinct voices to recount a coherent narrative. Through this method, media pieces and artifact presentations offer visitors both the facts of the events of 9/11 and the human compassion at the center of the museum’s narrative. Serving as witnesses of experience, the materials on display transform the historical account from abstraction to personalization. These encounters often move visitors from sympathy to empathy as they expose a fundamental truth of 9/11: any one of us could have been there. Different as we may be, this happened to all of us.

Designing for Different Levels of Emotional Engagement

In our main exhibition, we use alcoves to tell the most intimate parts of the story: the experience of those inside the attack sites. The voices of survivors, the last phone calls of those who perished, and the images of people who fell or jumped to their deaths relay these experiences. Much work went into finding a responsible balance between recounting the full historical narrative, even its most difficult components, and not forcing our visitors to confront material that might be too challenging for them given their own life experiences. The alcoves protect this sensitive content, which might represent a person’s last moments of life. They also shelter our visitors, who can choose to engage with these stories or to bypass them, while acknowledging that these experiences are at the center of why re-encountering the 9/11 story holds such trepidation.

Designing Interactive Exhibits as Emotional Outlets

In addition to thinking about how our visitors would experience the narrative of 9/11 while they were within the walls of our institution, another question presented itself: how do we help them transition after their visit into the normalcy of their day? We realized that not only did we need to design for emotion as part of the journey through the museum, we needed to provide an outlet for the emotions people would process after experiencing the exhibitions.

The 9/11 Memorial Museum does this, primarily, in two interactive installations. The first, “Signing Steel,” captures written messages in a virtual guestbook. The second, “Reflecting on 9/11,” elicits video responses to curated prompts. While we planned for these opportunities, we did not anticipate how heartfelt and powerful our visitors’ responses would be.

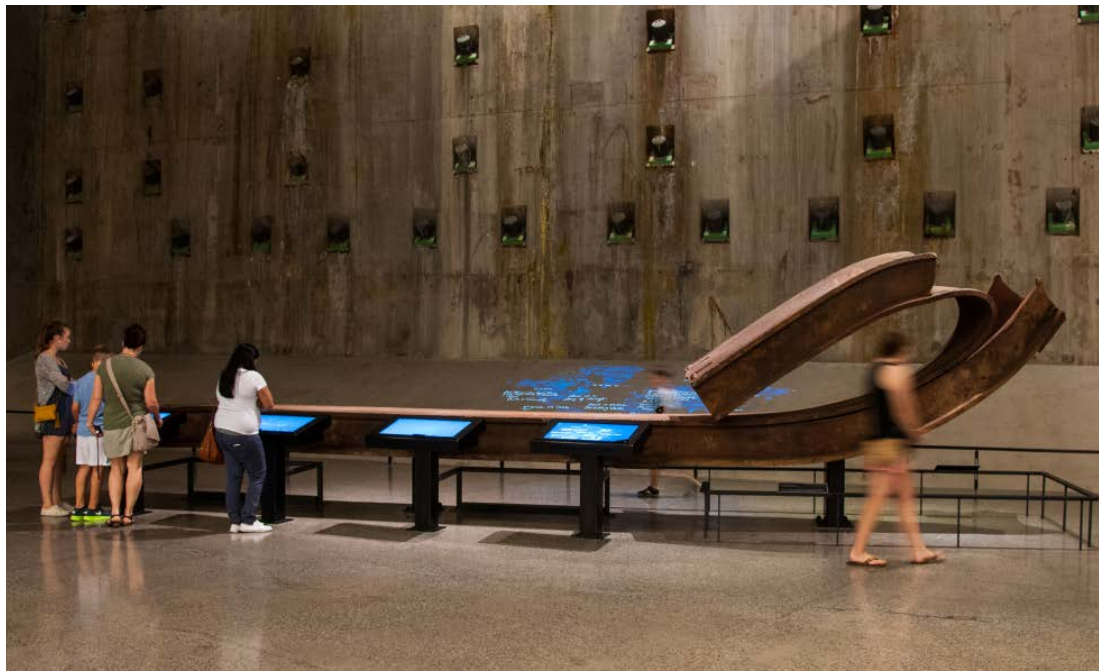
“Signing Steel”: A Simple Interface Yields Deep Reflections

“Signing Steel” is located within Foundation Hall, a vaulted, contemplative space that visitors encounter toward the conclusion of their journey through the museum (fig. 2). At the gallery’s center stands the Last Column, a piece of recovered steel that was found erect at the World Trade Center site and then signed by many who worked there in recovery operations. Echoing that historic act, at “Signing Steel,” museum visitors can scribe a drawing, signature, or message on touchscreen monitors set alongside another piece of recovered structural steel. They then type in their hometown, which allows their message to be generated as an animation on an adjacent world map.

To date, the interactive has recorded messages from visitors representing more than 200 countries and territories and in more languages than our staff can identify. About one in every 10 visitors leaves a digital signature, and many signatures represent several people visiting together. “Signing Steel” messages typically and evocatively

fig. 2.

The “Signing Steel” interactive, located in Foundation Hall, features touchscreen kiosks and a projection of a world map.



JIN S. LEE, COURTESY 9/11 MEMORIAL MUSEUM

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urge world peace, remind us to never forget, declare solidarity, offer prayers, and thank first responders (fig. 3).

The installation also gives visitors an opportunity to share specific and personal sentiments. Some express their journey toward closure, often in the context of their museum visit.

“I was 20,000 miles away that day, now I’m here. Rest in Peace.”
—Taipei, Taiwan

“I was on 43rd St. on 9/11. Today was difficult but amazing. Thank you.”
—Waddington, England

“How beautiful it is to have a museum not just for remembering but for thinking.”
—Sammamish, Washington, United States

Other messages link life decisions visitors have made to the events of September 11. A visitor from Minneapolis, Minnesota wrote, “This is why I decided to become a police officer,” while another from New York City explained, “This is why I became a nurse.”

And occasionally, we hear from visitors who use this installation to send a figurative letter to heaven:

“Joseph, It took me 14 years, but I made it to say goodbye. xx”
—London, England

“I miss you Dad even though I never met you.”
—Lakewood, New Jersey, United States

These messages take our breath away. In content and volume, they demonstrate



fig. 3. Examples of messages and drawings left by visitors at “Signing Steel.”

fig. 4.

"Reflecting on 9/11" is a film presentation that shares a gallery with the museum's recording booths. Visitors can listen to others consider the ongoing meaning of 9/11 and add their own recording to the presentation and museum archive.



the cathartic value of writing oneself into history. While we have not yet tested this observation through formal evaluation, we see it reiterated when visitors post their drawings on social media. They tag their images to establish their solidarity with core messages of the museum: #neverforget, #honor911, #iloveny, #respect.

"Reflecting on 9/11": Joining Past and Present

If with "Signing Steel" we aspired to allow visitors to declare their presence in the museum and the 9/11 narrative, with "Reflecting on 9/11" we sought to expand the narrative by presenting a record of how 9/11 continues to shape the lives of people around the world (fig. 4).

"Reflecting on 9/11," a film presentation, shares a gallery with the museum's recording booths. Constructed as a curated selection of commentaries by government officials, 9/11 survivors, victims' family members, historians, journalists, members of the armed forces, and (most relevant to this article) ordinary citizens, the film provides over three hours of rotating content. It explores responses to questions raised in the wake of the attacks, suggests to visitors that they ponder their own perspectives on these

ongoing issues, and encourages them to add their voice by making a video recording in a self-guided recording booth.

Since the museum opened, we have recorded almost 5,000 responses from visitors. We frequently incorporate these new recordings into the film presentation, continuing the ever-evolving conversation about 9/11 and the impact of the attacks. We also introduce new questions regularly. We have found success, in terms of what questions visitors answer, with those that allow visitors to speak from a personal place, from a sense of expertise born from their own experience, rather than from historical or political expertise. Our prompts have included:

How has your life been affected by the events of 9/11?

Did a piece of art or an artifact you saw today connect to your own memories of 9/11? How?

How have you been affected by global terrorism since 9/11?

What is your experience with individuals suffering from 9/11-related illnesses?

"Signing Steel" is a smaller, simpler ask of



fig. 5.

Dewayne Q., a visitor from Brooklyn, New York, leaving his responses in one of the museum's recording booths.

visitors than “Reflecting on 9/11”: picking up a pen to jot down your thoughts has a much lower barrier to entry than seating yourself in front of a camera and bright lights. Visitors who make the decision to record in “Reflecting on 9/11,” however, leave incredibly articulate responses (fig. 5). While the film presentation helps museum visitors consider, intellectually, the far-reaching and ongoing impacts of 9/11, for those who record, the experience can be emotionally profound. A visitor from Oregon taught us this when he helped test the interface before the museum opened. He later wrote in a note:

The defining moment came, at least for this visit, and for me when I sat in front of that camera. It may be by the catharsis of talking through our pain, our grief, our fears and hopes that this kind of event helps us to heal, not just as individuals but as a nation, a culture and a world. I suspect the power of your project may not be its impact on the listeners/watchers but on the ‘selves’ of the speakers.

The recordings we receive in the booths suggest that visitors’ responses are influenced by what they’ve seen and

experienced in the museum. We see people impacted by emotion and hear them reflect on the exhibitions’ content. Some, like Kwa Heri H. of Arlington, Texas, talk through their own memories of September 11 and the impact it had on their lives:

Prior to September 11th, I used to be a public health education coordinator.... Since I was in public health, after the anthrax scare, we needed to create an emergency preparedness program for anthrax and different kinds of biologicals. I began to work in emergency management.... Since then, I...have served individuals during Hurricane Katrina, Hurricane Rita, and in my own community during tornadoes and floods. So, I guess you could say September 11th changed my life completely as far as my career.

And we hear from some for whom the museum visit affirms their life choices, like this recording from Mike Z. of New York City:

As a transitioning veteran, oftentimes it’s quite difficult to find direction in life and understand what we’ve contributed, what we’ve done in the

military, and what all that means. And a lot of times you don't see clear signs of that in day-to-day life. And to me, personally, this [museum] signifies a concrete, direct representation of that kind of direction. It shows me that it wasn't all for nothing. My mentors, my friends didn't make the ultimate sacrifice for no reason."

Such recordings, the results of dialogue between visitors' experiences on 9/11 and the presentation at the 9/11 Memorial Museum, affirm that designing for emotion is a potent goal for museum exhibitions.

We continue to evaluate visitation to "Reflecting on 9/11" through formal observation and interviews with visitors. While the quality of responses we receive from the recording booths exceeds our expectations, the quantity of responses is less than we had anticipated. As we seek to increase the volume of visitors taking this opportunity to "talk through" 9/11 for themselves, we are reflecting on the success of "Signing Steel" and are considering similar tactics for engagement here. Among our considerations are: the visibility of the exhibit ("Signing Steel" is hard to miss, "Reflecting on 9/11" is tucked away); the ease of completing the experience from start to finish ("Signing Steel" has few steps, "Reflecting on 9/11" is less intuitive, requiring an introductory instruction video); and the clarity of the activity and its result (visitors can immediately see their signature animated in "Signing Steel," while, due to the curatorial selection process for "Reflecting on 9/11," those who record do not experience that same instant gratification). We will learn about our initial premises and visitor needs from testing and evaluation throughout 2017.

Conclusion

Revisiting September 11, 2001 is inherently emotional. Acknowledging this in the design and content of the museum's exhibitions allows our visitors—who are witnesses and survivors of these events—to understand that their own stories are acknowledged, that the museum will treat the material evidence of these memories honestly and tenderly, and that their re-encounter with this difficult history will be an experience they can direct themselves.

Visitors experience the story of 9/11 through individual voices. In addition to hearing their own memories reflected back at them, visitors come to recognize the diversity and validity of others' experiences. The opportunity to actively mark their personal place in the story allows visitors to articulate changes in themselves as they take steps toward healing. By providing vehicles for these visitors' personal expressions, the museum encourages that process while preserving their authentic voices for the learning and reconciliation of future visitors. ■

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