

September 11, 2021: Reflections on Memorials

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Creating memorials in the aftermath of mass violence incidents serve to honor those killed, victims and survivors, and loved ones so that communities never forget the senseless act of violence that shattered lives near and far.

Developing such memorials can come with many challenges, as they are both deeply personal to those directly impacted and also public arenas to be shared with the greater community. Some tell stories of the events to offer a permanent collection of history telling, while others solely offer places of contemplation and tribute to those impacted.

Trauma impacts individuals and collective communities in a multitude of ways, often resulting in more complexities as to how such spaces are planned, created, and opened.

I was privileged to have the opportunity to recently visit the 9/11 Memorial Museum on a private tour when the Museum was closed, and hear the lessons leaders learned during its inception, development, and implementation. During my tour, I was in awe of the perseverance of such a large-scale undertaking.

How does one create space for an archive, for a museum, for a memorial that does it justice, in comparison to the magnitude and impact of an event that rocked the core of direct victims and their families but also the nation as a whole?

How do you hear from and integrate the voices of those impacted?

How do you create a lasting and sustainable legacy?

What narratives are essential?

The challenges are many. However, while standing near the survivor stairwell in the quiet of the 9/11 Museum, looking on at the memorial exhibition nearby and hearing stories of those that perished, the survivors, and the heroes, I was overcome with emotion. I felt sadness, grief, and anger but, at the same time, I was filled with hope, determination, and spirit. It is in all of these emotions and the actions they foster that memorials are an essential fabric of community recovery and resilience.