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Analysis: Five finalists' memorials try to capture impact of Flight 93

Designs capture significance to varying degrees

Tuesday, February 08, 2005

By Patricia Lowry, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The journey from Pittsburgh to the United Flight 93 crash site in Somerset County is a process of elimination. First the city falls away, then the hair-raising Pennsylvania Turnpike gives way to stop-and-go Route 30, then Lambertsville Road to snow-swept Skyline Road. We pass from urban to suburban to rural farm to remote field and then, as we near the crest of the ridge on Skyline Road, something in the field to the right catches the corner of an eye. What is that tangled pile of red, white, blue and black metal?



"Disturbed Harmony," one of five finalists' designs for a memorial for the Flight 93 crash site in Somerset County, features a stone wall that would guide visitors to the impact area and become a memorial wall and a timeline of events from the 9/11 crash.

[Click photo for larger image.](#)

Slow down, stop. It's a great burial mound of Pepsi machines, piled one on another like a tumbled tower of children's blocks, an unfortunate and unsettling introduction to the crash site.

Travel on, up over the ridge and into a wide, open, bowl-like field partially fringed by a small forest of trees. There, on the right, is a parking lot and just beyond it, the temporary memorial, 40 feet of chain-link fence to which visitors

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have attached flags, FDNY and local rescue workers' baseball caps, license plates, bouquets of plastic flowers and photographs of victims.

On the Internet



The memorial Web site is <http://www.flight93memorialproject.org/>.

"People come," said Donna Zwick, who lives on a nearby farm and is one of 40 "ambassadors" who staff the temporary memorial near Shanksville. Even in the biting winds of winter, "They just keep coming."

In three years more than 500,000 people have visited the Flight 93 crash site and left 20,000 objects, most of them now in archival storage. They will become part of the permanent memorial, scheduled to break ground later this year. Five finalists in the design competition were selected last week.

The plane's impact area was small and compact, but the memorial will be large, 2,200 acres owned and operated by the National Park Service, complete with park rangers and parking for 200 vehicles. There will be a visitor information center, archival storage and maintenance buildings, roads, trails, utilities. The Pepsi machine mound will disappear.

The plane came down on private land, in a field being reclaimed after deep and surface mining. The creation of a national park promises permanent access as well as the funds to produce and maintain a quality memorial and continue the land reclamation, perhaps as a distinctive earthwork.

Absent the temporary memorial, there is no evidence that anything significant happened there. Because the crash site is also a grave site, the crater made from the impact has been filled in, so the record of what happened has to be put back. But who should interpret it, and how? How should future generations consider the events of 9/11 and the people caught up in them? "In 100 years, all new people," as the writer Anne Lamott likes to say. The memorial should be as much for them as for us.



"The Crescent of Embrace" design makes use of the mountain laurel, the state plant of Pennsylvania.

Click photo for larger image.

education and respect for the rural landscape.

Good guidance came from "the partners," a coalition of groups representing Flight 93 family members, local residents, design professionals and the National Park Service. In their search for "that one brilliant answer," the partners have proceeded in a commendable way, beginning with a detailed mission statement that emphasizes commemoration,

The memorial must honor the dead, who are believed to have thwarted a planned attack on Washington, D.C. It should invite the public to express their feelings about the event, and it should preserve "the solemn and tranquil setting" of the crash site.

The memorial also must revere the site as hallowed burial ground, commemorate the events of 9/11, celebrate the lives of the passengers and crew, express the nation's appreciation, educate visitors about the context of the events of 9/11 and offer a place of comfort, hope and inspiration.

Anyone could enter this open competition, and 1,011 individuals or teams did -- about a fifth of the 5,201 entries in the World Trade Center memorial competition. While many were not professional designers, the pros had the edge, not only with their polished presentation boards but in their ability to speak and interpret the language of design. Most of the finalists are experienced design professionals; one is an architecture student.

Still, a sophisticated presentation was no guarantee of a sensitive idea. Whether conceived by pros or amateurs, monumental sculptures of falling bodies, crashed airplanes and Todd Beamer in a martial arts stance do not make for a comforting memorial, and it's mildly astonishing that some people would think so. Nevertheless, communicating and transcending the violence of the event is a part of the challenge of the Flight 93 memorial.

The entrance will be on Route 30, with some land north of that road also included as part of the entrance experience. The guidelines organized the irregularly shaped park area into five regions: the gateway, the approach, the ridge, the bowl and the sacred ground, which includes the crash site and adjacent hemlock grove. Trees shorn off by the impact have been removed and grass and wildflowers planted in the fields.



"Memory Trail," one of the finalists' designs for the Flight 93 memorial, follows the plane's flight path as it approached the field in Somerset County.

[Click photo for larger image.](#)

Competitors could submit a self-contained "memorial expression" -- a sculpture, say -- or interpret the entire site and all of its history as the memorial, providing an opportunity for distinctive earthworks that gently reshape the land and its vegetation.

According to the jury members' report, a visit to the crash site after their initial viewing of the entries had "a profound impact" on their evaluation. Back at competition central in Somerset, amid a sea of presentation boards laden with classical columns, flags, eagles, airplanes

and other symbolic elements, the simplest ideas stood out. The finalists' designs were chosen to represent a range of expression, but to a degree each integrates the memorial with the land.

While each entry contains additional site treatments such as vehicular access and support building locations, only the signature "memorial expressions" are discussed here. The park service has a \$20 million budget for the memorial expression alone, with a budget for the entire project dependent on the design. The entries are given in alphabetical order by designer name.

"Disturbed Harmony" Leor and Gilat Lovinger, landscape architects, Berkeley, Calif.

"Bravery Wall" is the Lovingers' name for the stone wall that is the primary feature of "Disturbed Harmony." It is five feet wide and runs for 2.5 miles through the site, fluctuating in height as its purpose changes. It begins at the entrance and serves as a guide to the sacred ground, becoming a memorial wall and a timeline of events along the way. The jury suggests it also could interpret the pre-9/11 history of the land it traverses. And as the jury indicates, it could be articulated and made more interesting by varying other aspects in addition to height.

The wall is at once modest and monumental, calling attention to the contour of the land without overpowering it. But as a symbol, "Bravery Wall" doesn't adequately transform a landscape element into metaphor. A more poetic and pointed name would help, such as the one chosen by another entry for its "Wall of Resistance," which, better than most entries, communicates the singular lesson of this memorial, that the passengers took a stand, one that may have changed history.

"(F)Light" Ken Lum, graduate student in architecture Toronto, Canada

"(F)Light" is a partially enclosed, horizontal landscape element that traces the plane's path from Newark, N.J., to Somerset County, gently rising to its literal and metaphorical turning point before descending to a memorial courtyard that points to the sacred ground. "Moments of significance" during the flight would be etched into its "luminous roofscape," made of marble, frosted glass or alabaster. I like that the visitor would have to look up, toward the sky where the events unfolded, to read about them. From an airplane, the roofscape would be visible at night.

"(F)Light" exploits and translates on the landscape the powerful narrative of the event better than any of the other finalists. Eloquent and transcendent, with a single, bold stroke it turns barbarity into poetry and educates us along the way. But while the concept is strong, the design and materials are too urban and polished for this rural, rugged site.

"Fields, Forests, Fences" Laurel McSherry, landscape architect Columbus, Ohio**Terry Surjan, architect and urban designer Phoenix and Los Angeles**

This entry treats the entire site as the memorial, one that changes over time as its introduced forests, grasses and wildflowers grow. The ridge and bowl become meadows. The sacred ground is fenced, allowing access only to family members, and planted with a grove of birch trees within and beyond its limits -- the sacred ground as sacred grove.

Within the grove, 40 stone steles commemorate the passengers and crew, individual markers for a common grave. Cast urns holding hemlock mulch act as symbolic reliquaries throughout the site and are meant to suggest the density of the land's original forest. A memorial fence along the ridge, sparsely assembled from posts and wire, references both the traditional barbed wire fence of the farm field and the temporary memorial, allowing the accumulation of aluminum forestry tags, recording the names and sentiments of visitors and, it would seem, adding a silvery, sparkling contrast to the earth tones. It is inevitable that it would accumulate other objects as well.

Above all other entries, this one respects the land but does not go far enough in interpreting the events of 9/11 and honoring the crew and passengers.

"The Crescent of Embrace" Paul Murdoch Architects, Los Angeles, Calif.

This has two key elements -- at the gateway the Tower of Voices, a small, open-air chapel holding 40 silver metal wind chimes, and at the ridge the Crescent of Embrace, an arc of 40 red maple trees shading a curved walkway. It forms a partial rim to the bowl and serves as a viewing platform for the sacred ground, which would be planted with mountain laurel, our state flower. Mountain laurel is a spectacular and rewarding native plant, but one that has too spreading and complex a form for the sacred ground, which demands more elegance and simplicity in its plant material. It's also demanding in its soil and drainage requirements, and its drama would be limited to a few weeks of bloom a year. The clarity of this entry is enticing, but it, too, lacks narrative and passion.

"Memory Trail" Frederick Steiner, architect Austin, Texas with Karen Lewis, Jason Kentner and E. Lynn Miller

Like "(F)Light, "Memory Trail" also traces the plane's path on the landscape, but in a far more subtle way. The entry road rises gently through a field of red maples to views of the sacred ground, then makes an abrupt turn toward the parking lot. People will walk to the visitors'

center, which provides an overview of the sacred ground. A long, extruded tube that widens to a funnel framing the view, the building's sleek, digital form renders it an alien object on the landscape, and one that is, as the jury points out, too tied to a specific design moment.

The "Memory Trail" road continues around the ridge and aligns with the plane's flight path as it approached the field on 9/11. It diverts visitors around the crash site, to which only family members will have access, and carries them over a new lake before curving around part of the bowl planted as a Remembrance Grove, with 3,021 white oaks representing the casualties of 9/11.

This is an elegant, refined, understated idea -- perhaps too much so.

After viewing the entries, the jury realized that it would be difficult for any one memorial expression to fulfill the mission statement. It has asked the finalists to include an interpretive center with their revised designs, which are due June 15 and will be exhibited in Somerset in July. While an interpretive center is welcome, necessary even, its addition as an afterthought serves to underline the failure of many of the designs to communicate persuasively what the memorial is about.

I'm favoring "(F)Light" and "Disturbed Harmony" but will reserve judgment until the revised designs are in. One of the five may well be "that one brilliant answer," but it will take some work to get there.

(Post-Gazette architecture critic Patricia Lowry can be reached at plowry@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1590.)

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