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Waterloo grad to design new 9/11 tribute?

If he wins, Canadian architect Ken Lum has grand plans for a memorial honouring the victims of United Airlines Flight 93, which crashed in a bleak field in Southwestern Pennsylvania, Sept. 11, 2001, writes JAMES ADAMS

BY JAMES ADAMS

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"The site really humbles you, the immensity of it."

Ken Lum turns to a collection of photographs taped to a wall of his family's recreation room. One, in colour, shows a rather forbidding field, empty, wind-swept and snow-covered, surrounded by trees. It's a reclaimed strip mine, says Lum, "2,200 acres, twice the size of Central Park in New York." It was here, on what's now a grass-covered meadow near the town of Shanksville in southwestern Pennsylvania, that a United Airlines' Boeing 757 en route to San Francisco from Newark, N. J., crashed, killing all 37 passengers and seven crew. The date? Sept. 11, 2001, 10:06 a.m. EDT.

Four of those passengers, we now know, were members of al-Qaeda. About 40 minutes after take-off, they hijacked the jet and turned it back toward the Eastern Seaboard, toward Washington, 190 kilometres away where, it's believed, they intended to ram the plane into either the White House or the Capitol. The plan, however, was reportedly foiled by the other passengers who, having by this time heard about the twin attacks on New York's World Trade Center an hour earlier, attempted to fight their way into the cockpit. Sensing they weren't going to reach their target, the hijackers instead plowed the jet into the field near Shanksville, shouting "Allah is the greatest" as their suicide approached.

A year ago Ken Lum didn't know much about United Airlines Flight 93 or the whereabouts of Shanksville, population 250. But he does now: One morning in late January this 28-year-old master's graduate in architecture at the University of Waterloo received a cellphone call during a meeting with his thesis advisers. The news was good -- so much so that the usually thoughtful, temperate Lum found himself "going nuts in the hallway." The caller told him he had just been named one of the five finalists -- and the only Canadian -- in the international competition to design the Flight 93 National Memorial at that remote Pennsylvania meadow.

Lum, who lives with his father (a banker), his mother (a teacher) and a younger sister (an accountant) in a roomy Toronto townhouse, admits he's still rather dazed at being on the shortlist for such an important commission, which has a budget of \$20-million (U.S.). But there's no time to surrender to the dizziness and confusion. Working out of the family room that he converted to a design studio late last year, Lum and three Waterloo colleagues are busily spending a \$12,000 (U.S.) honorarium to prepare the crucial final submission.

The submission, due June 15, will include two 3-D models. Lum will get another \$13,000 upon delivery. A jury will eventually forward a recommendation to the Secretary of the Interior and Congress, with the winner named in September.

"To be honest," Lum said recently with a chuckle and a shrug, "I had no idea what I was getting into last fall" when, as he was trying to finish his master's thesis, he "stumbled upon the details for the competition cruising around the Net."

While Lum, a native of Malaysia who had come to Canada just 10 years ago and entered architecture school only two years after that, is no stranger to design competitions ("I've done a lot of them"), he wasn't expecting much from the memorial design he submitted Jan. 11 after working on it solo for two months. After all, he hadn't visited southwestern Pennsylvania -- his design "solely relied on images and site plans" of the topography. Moreover, he later discovered the competition, funded by a start-up grant of \$500,000 from the Heinz Endowments and administered by the U.S. National Park Service, attracted 2,000 registrants and 1,011 actual entries.

"Basically, I thought I'm doing it for the sake of doing it. I was never expecting anything out of it. I mean, what are the odds, right? I'm just a student; I'm not an American. I just went back to my thesis."

Clearly, though, the nine-person jury -- which included family members of Flight 93 passengers -- saw something in Lum's "memorial expression" that pushed it to the fore. In fact, there is a certain appropriateness to its selection since Lum has spent the last several years pondering "how architecture can reconcile with nature, how mankind can give back to nature, and how architects can give back to mankind in general." Indeed, the master's thesis he completed and defended less than three months ago is called *The River Sanctuaries: A Choreography Between the Sacred and Profane*. It deals in part with building "an interfaith sacred space" at the mouth of the polluted Don River that snakes through eastern Toronto to Lake Ontario.

"Sacred site" and "sacred ground" are, in fact, two of the terms the 15-member Flight 93 National Advisory Commission uses in its literature to describe the Pennsylvania meadow. Lum's design, which he calls (*F*)light: *The Luminous Roofscape*, explores notions of "healing and recovery," while at the same time "articulating," as the jurors favourably noted, "an environment of violence and disruption."

Lum's memorial is essentially a huge arc that mimics the flight path of the doomed Boeing 757. If built as conceived, visitors will enter by foot a long, opaque roofscape incised into the ground, then come to a wall (representing the moment of the hijacking). At this point, the trajectory curves back, toward a memorial garden and the actual site of the crash and debris field.

"It's about pilgrimage, effort," Lum explains. "The roofscape breaks the winds, which are pretty much incessant and almost horizontal in the way they come at you. The idea is for visitors to move slowly but deliberately on foot, in a kind of processional -- I don't want to have cars going through that space -- so that there's a kind of threshold they have to go through to get to the site."

"The interesting thing about most monuments," he adds, "is that they stick out like a sore thumb. They don't engage the site. Here, the challenge was to create a monument in such a way that it disappears but doesn't at the same time."

Since being shortlisted, Lum has visited Shanksville twice, the first time on a bitterly cold day in late February when he was asked to attend a finalist workshop, the second about four weeks ago. "What I've come up with isn't a loud monument," he observes. "But it has a sort of monolithic quality to it, in part because the site would swallow it up if it wasn't. It's just so huge."

Lum and his team -- Dennis Fanti, Yvonne Lam, Ivan Illic, Waterloo graduates all -- are hoping to get their final design, including elevation perspectives and site organization, completed by the end of this month. "Then we'll have an open critique of it" by colleagues and non-professionals alike before sending it in for adjudication. "It's good to keep your hopes up," Lum observes, "while at the same time being realistic about it. I mean, it is an American monument, and who's going to be surprised if an American wins?"

If Lum doesn't triumph, well, "I'll go straight back to looking for a job, working for a firm, then some day setting up my own practice. I have an interest in a lot of things. That's the problem," he says with a laugh. "I was very humbled for being short-listed. It made me think about what I could accomplish if I was really devoted to something. . . . Right now I'm just happy for the exposure and the opportunity to bring my ideas forward."

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