

Dossier | Ground Zero : The Domestication of Remains or the Power of Disposal

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Ground Zero: The Domestication of Remains or the Power of Disposal (1)

By Louise Lachapelle

To articulate the past historically... means to seize hold of a memory [the image of redemption] as it flashes up at a moment of danger.

– Walter Benjamin

The study of reconstruction at Ground Zero has already shown that the reality of remains, debris, and other ruins had to be excluded in order to produce the site of catastrophe as a place where construction is possible in conformity with the American myth of the new beginnings.⁽²⁾ What remains at issue now is the treatment of those scraps and remnants: whether material vestiges that still bear witness to 9/11 at the World Trade Centre site (such as the sunken imprint revealed by the collapse of the towers, and the bathtub or the slurry wall, the foundations that contain the Hudson River), or those remains that we choose to discard or to rediscover, to preserve (in a museological sense) or to bury, and their vertiginous proliferation in the forms, languages, and technologies of a contemporary culture exposed to danger.

The speed with which debris was evacuated and the site was cleaned cannot be justified solely on the base of a search for survivors and human remains. This swift action was intended to rebuild a certain kind of enclosure through the process of domesticating remains. The rhetoric of the resilient city therefore seeks to contain the event, to enclose it within the limits of an interpretation. ⁽³⁾ To consider Ground Zero and its relation to waste is only another way of ascertaining that the “Law of the house” (according to the etymology of the word economy) is also the power of disposal, be it of people, narratives, or things.

Hence the photographic counterpoint of this article: images from another site, the Mbeubeuss garbage dump in the Dakar suburbs, one of the largest landfills of the African continent. A comparison between refuse found on site at Mbeubeuss or Ground Zero would be enough to convince of “our” fabulous power of exclusion and domination if their wasn’t also the ways in which we identify and process (or don’t process) “our” wastes.

“[T]rash is a dynamic category... created by sorting,” writes Susan Strasser: “Non trash belongs in the house; trash goes outside.” ⁽⁴⁾ As the paradigm of all architecture, the house reflects the city as well as the diverse and collective forms of enclosure, inside of which our cultural practices exercise the functions of integration and differentiation that ensure the cohesion of familial and social groups. The house is also a system of domination and

control. One of its central functions pertains to the transmission of a culture and its conciliatory mechanisms still based on sacrifice, be it in terms of art or gift, in various exchange forms, through the market or war, or the processing of our wastes. "We" still believe, therefore, in our power to choose and, most often, "we" choose to continue to move our trash towards the margins of "our" property, "outside of our house," as far as the borders of "our" culture. This economy of wastes is also an ethics that spatially inscribes cultural forms of sacrifice.

The debris of the World Trade Centre were gathered and driven "out of the city" to Staten Island's Fresh Kills garbage dump, two New Jersey scrap metal yards, and a couple of metal recycling sites. (5) Created in 1947 to solve, albeit temporarily, the problem of the ever-increasing garbage produced by New York City, the 3,000 acres of Fresh Kills Landfill became the municipality's exclusive dumping grounds and the largest dumpsite in the world. It was finally closed after fifty-three years of operation and after twenty-five years of effort, on the part of the riverside community, to stop the transfer of refuse to the island. Closed on March 22, 2001, the site was reopened on September 13, 2001.

The evacuation of remains "out of" Ground Zero negatively reinstates a certain kind of enclosure around the site whose centre is being emptied out. Throughout this cleanup, the pile becomes the pit. Ground Zero becomes the object of a distancing as well as of a symbolic and sacrificial re-appropriation. The site takes on sacred and mythical dimensions as a result of restrictions and prohibitions, which favour a conquering domestication of both the space and the event's meaning: restrictions to access and circulation, in addition to prohibitions against seeing, photographing, and displaying ruins, remains, and bodies. These interdictions promptly impact the spontaneous memorials and other gestures that inscribe themselves and are disseminated within the space of the city, in the media, and on the web in response to the event, leading to a process producing "new" remains that will be checked neither by prohibitions, the cleaning of the site, nor the removal of artefacts and informal memorials. On the contrary, under the aegis of memory and resilience, Ground Zero elicits an incessant proliferation of images, objects, sounds, and stories.

"Your house is burning down, you run back in, what do you save?" (New York Times). This question, raised by Bartholomew Voorsanger, one of the architects participating in the conservation team commissioned on-site by municipal and state authorities, does not merely raise the issue of the processing of remains in the immediacy of the collapse of the Twin Towers. What do you save? This is the same as asking: What sacrifice will save "us"? Faced with 1.8 million tons of debris, how does one make a choice? At the Fresh Kills dump, the pile of debris will be meticulously sorted by hand. There is a "mission" at stake, and it pertains to rescue efforts, legal medicine, and police investigation; it demands the finding of human remains, personal objects, and clues for future inquests; and it comprises its own "experts," authorities, and truths. This sorting involves specific selection criteria, since the recovery of relics points to their restitution as well as to a quest for meaning. Through the

creation of lists (objects, victims, survivors, those compensated, etc.), of inventories that tend to be self-contained, the narrative establishes itself. Most of the sorted remains will not have been “recovered” at Fresh Kills or at Ground Zero; they will have been “saved.”

The first choices are improvised and spontaneous, and the selection criteria pertain to the World Trade Center and the collapse of the Twin Towers. (6) Museum institutions are soon called upon and the quest for meaning is hastened, under the shelter of a certain historical and cultural perspective. At this stage, curatorial choices begin to be differentiated and criteria become specialized. (7) The narrative has a strong tendency to align itself with the dominant discourse of faith and progress. Of even greater influence, however, is the power of attraction of the cultural forms of faith and progress.

In other words, the narratives of resilience will be effectively relayed through the museum’s authority and expertise, through photography and institutional or informal archival practices (archived are artefacts, images, websites, sounds, and oral histories), through different 9/11 “exhibitions of relics,” (8) as well as through the aesthetization of remains—another form of their domestication—in numerous artistic forms (photography, literature, cinema, cartoons, websites, and web art).

At Ground Zero, reconstruction rests on this socially and economically productive form of denial, which also forms the basis of the rhetoric of the resilient city (Vale and Campanella) (9) and contributes widely to the domestication of 9/11’s remains. It is fundamentally a matter of denying the failure of the culture of sacrifice. Ultimately, it is a denial that aims to safeguard this same culture. The war on terror seeks to counter aggression in the same manner as the rhetoric of the resilient city seeks to retaliate against its symbolic defeat, i.e., by means of the same values and culture.

To the power of buying and consumption corresponds an analogous power of discarding and disposal. September 11, 2001, and our cultural response to this event offer a formidable demonstration of this double power. The destruction of the World Trade Center seems challenged through a paradoxical potlatch that proceeds by valorizing its remains—an escalation of conspicuous consumption linked to the imperatives of treatment, preservation, and the dissemination of remains, and, simultaneously, a refusal to acknowledge loss. However, to whom is this symbolic retort addressed, if not to the same culture that “suffers from the blow”? It is a culture that tries desperately to protect itself from danger in a manner similar to its shielding itself from what it has excluded. Thus, rather than preserving the memory of an event, the domesticated remains of September 11, 2001, serve to produce the salvational memory of a culture.

NOTES

1. This article is part of an ongoing research cycle sponsored by the FQRSC titled *This Should Be Housing / Le temps de la maison est passé* and dealing with the expressions of ethical imperatives in contemporary cultural and artistic practices. A first and extended

version of this text was presented at the colloquium Fictions et images du 11 septembre 2001, Montréal, UQÀM, December 14-15, 2007 (proceedings forthcoming; documentation collaborator: Émilie Pinard, M.A. candidate in Architectural Sciences, École d'architecture de l'Université Laval; special thanks to André Casault and Devora Neumark as well as to Papa Djaye and Fal Mbaye, Mbeubeuss scavengers).

2. See "Ground Zero, Where Do We Go From Here?," eds. Bertrand Gervais and Christina Horvarth, *Écrire la ville*, Université du Québec à Montréal, Centre Figura de recherche sur le texte et l'imaginaire (Figura collection), no. 14, 2005, 183-196; "Ground Zero—Quand l'architecture, comme la guerre, devient préventive," *Le Devoir*, September 11, 2003, A7.

3. This is the case not only at Ground Zero, but also in that imprecise trauma zone where the shock wave echoes in the form of personal and social distress as well as in other kinds of borders (or remains) such as the Homeland Security Department, the Security Fence, and the Secure Border Initiative.

4. "American cities and towns no longer operate swill yards or piggeries at the city limits, but they do maintain landfills and incinerators [in addition to toxic waste dumps] in places that are out of the way of all but the poorest citizens," Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (New York: Owl Books, 2000), 355 p.

5. There is a definite irony in the fact that the site upon which the WTC was built was itself an old dumping ground dating back to colonial days. Unfortunately, lack of space does not allow a comment here on the trajectory of these metal scraps.

6. There was an immediate "consensus" regarding the need to preserve certain material remains. This was the case with many "structural remnants" of the towers as well as with fragments of artworks. They soon left Ground Zero to be transported to Warehouse 17 at the JFK international airport, a site of storage, reserve (in a museological sense), and sanctuary. The countless commentaries diffused in the media insist on the usefulness of this "collection" in its ability to communicate the catastrophic proportions of the attack, the chaos and raw emotion associated with it, and the magnitude or power of the event itself.

7. One of the further developments of this study will focus on the analysis of these collections, the creation and specialization of 9/11-related collections by museum institutions, including the countless exhibitions that have marked the process.

8. For instance, as both a quest for social legitimacy and cohesion as well as a fundraising initiative for the construction of the "altar," the memorial Reflecting Absence, the exhibition 9/11 Tribute Tour was shown in several cities prior to its eventual integration on the Ground Zero site.

9. "Urban resilience is an interpretative framework proposed by local and national leaders and shaped and accepted by citizens in the wake of disaster. However equitable or unjust, efficient or untenable, that framework serves as the foundation upon which the society builds anew." Laurence J. Vale and Thomas J. Campanella, *The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 340, 353.

We have only to think of G. W. Bush's speech associating homeland security with the

national economy and inciting the citizens of the United States to consume as a humanitarian gesture, or of mayor Giuliani's invitations to go out, spend money, and consume—in short, "to act as if all were well."