

"Tribute in Light" Explained

A designer of the WTC memorial says it's too early for a permanent one.

By *Gustavo Bonevardi*



One of my shots from right after the disaster

The day of Sept. 11 thrust me back into childhood. I don't mean that it brought back a flood of memories. (Though it did: I grew up in the meat-packing district, just north of Lower Manhattan, and still live and work in what had been my father's studio. The construction of the towers was the backdrop to my childhood.) Rather, I mean that I was seeing the world again as a child. The events were so big as to be beyond my comprehension. My grown-up frame of reference was useless to me, and the work and life that I have created for myself were eclipsed. I relate this because my first reaction was juvenile: I wanted everything to be OK, I wanted the Twin Towers back, and I wanted it all, now. That day, after watching the buildings crumble, I aimlessly biked around the city. The skyline I saw was all wrong, but it was also strangely familiar. I took some pictures.

It's hard to backtrack and remember exactly how we had the idea to build something out of light. My partner, John Bennett, and I were not the only ones who had it; as the project moved forward, we worked with collaborators, Richard Nash Gould, Julian LaVerdiere, and Paul Myoda, who had nearly the same idea at almost the same time. I think it's because we had all been staring at the towers for so many hours that day. The after-image was practically burned in our retinas. So the idea of trying to evoke what was lost was almost self-evident. In our minds' eye, the image was as clear as the towers themselves had been the day before.



Our first rendering

The day after the towers fell, I discussed the initial idea with John, and together we developed it into a realizable concept and made a digital rendering. Though thousands had died, we rejected the idea of creating a memorial. At that time, we still believed the rescue workers would miraculously free survivors. We could not yet acknowledge the deaths.

We set out to "repair" and "rebuild" the skyline—but not in a way that would attempt to undo or disguise the damage. Those buildings are gone now, and they will never be rebuilt. Instead we would create a link between ourselves and what was lost. In so doing, we believed, we could also repair, in part, our city's identity and ourselves.

All the same we saw the work as part of the physical and spiritual reconstruction Advertisement efforts. Not wanting to interfere with the city's recovery, we proposed that the lights be installed in any of a number of sights in the immediate vicinity of Ground Zero, but not where the towers had actually stood (one idea was to situate them on barges in the harbor). The reconstruction of the skyline did not have to be literal. Besides, we wanted our proposal to be a realistic, viable project, not a fantastical one. We felt an incredible urgency. We wanted the light to inspire the rescue workers and the city at large and to show the world that New York was still New York. The international aspect was key: It was the World Trade Center, after all, and people of many nationalities had perished there. We even proposed that, in solidarity, similar light towers be erected in cities around the world: London, Paris, Buenos Aires. The original towers were destroyed. Now virtual ones would sprout up all over the world.

Architecturally speaking, more than buildings were lost that day. Part of the identity of our city was lost, too. The development of New York, of all cities, is a dialogue between architects, developers, ideas, and self-interests. Each new addition is created for, or in reaction to, a specific context. This is not to say that the work is contextual; the best work often refutes, challenges, or intentionally ignores its context. Still, the play between one building and the next is what gives the skyline its coherence, its interest. This is very much the case with the buildings constructed around the World Trade Center, particularly those in front along the harbor. They were designed in relation to and were visually dependent on the towers. Together they created

a larger composition and a defining image of our city. This composition has now been fractured. Our temporary monument had to address the void in the New York skyline and symbolize the spirits of the thousands caught in the towers' tragic collapse.

It didn't seem to matter what deranged persons were responsible. Seeing those huge monoliths, as seemingly timeless as the pyramids, vanish taught us something about our buildings, our institutions, and ourselves. We learned how ephemeral life really is. Light is ephemeral, but it is also universal—that's what we wanted this project to be. We simultaneously wanted the towers of light to express humanity's brighter side and to offer renewal through a celebration of creativity, ingenuity, and technology.

Even though six months have passed since Sept. 11, we think it's still too soon to build a permanent monument. Some time has passed, and now our project does memorialize those who lost their lives—it's a tribute to rescue workers, among other things, and we hope it helps bode a spring full of hope and renewal for New York City. But nobody has yet achieved the perspective necessary for a more lasting commemoration. Permanent memorials need time—passion has to be framed by a cool, sharp, historically mature understanding of what is being memorialized. The Vietnam Memorial in Washington is a good example. It could not have been built right at the end of that war. Philip Johnson recently remarked that even the Washington Monument wasn't started until nearly 50 years after the president's death.

The project being erected tonight is remarkably true to our original inspiration. We're not reconstructing the towers in their original size, but the distance between the two squares of light is the same as the distance between the actual towers. So in effect, we're not rebuilding the towers themselves, but the void between them.