

THE WORLD TRADE CENTER,  
NEW YORK CITY

# THE VOIDS

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
PETER WALKER

BY CHRISTOPHER HAWTHORNE / IMAGE CREDIT JOE WOOLHEAD

9/11 MEMORIAL  
CELEBRATION

PETER WALKER, FASLA, FOUNDER OF PETER WALKER AND PARTNERS LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE (PWP) IN BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA, WAS PROMINENT AMONG HIS PEERS

but little known by the general public when, near the end of 2003, he agreed to collaborate with the young architect Michael Arad on Arad's proposal for the Ground Zero memorial competition in New York City. Arad, then 34, had submitted a powerful but very spare entry, called *Reflecting Absence*, that was dominated by a pair of voids covering the footprints of Minoru Yamasaki's Twin Towers. Water cascaded down through the voids, and visitors would descend a series of ramps to a lower level to read the names of the 9/11 victims while looking out through the falling sheets of water. It was named one of eight finalists in the competition in November 2003, more than a year after Daniel Libeskind had been selected as the master planner of the larger World Trade Center site. Soon after, at the suggestion of some of the jurors in the memorial competition, Arad asked Walker, then 71, to join his team. The pair wound up winning the memorial competition in January 2004. What followed was an often contentious collaboration between two designers who were nearly 40 years apart in age but legally joined at the hip. (As Walker puts it, "We signed contracts to that effect—that we couldn't fire each other.") The design was dramatically simplified in 2006 to save money—the entire underground portion, which had been central to Arad's original conception, was eliminated, and the names of the victims were brought up to the plaza, where they will now be listed on parapets on the outer edges of the voids. But the memorial is also the only portion of the rebuilding process that has managed to come through anywhere close to intact. As the memorial neared completion—it will be officially dedicated on the 10th anniversary of the 2001 attacks—Walker spoke about the memorial, his relationship with Arad, and the influence on his work of minimalist artists such as Michael Heizer. The conversation took place in PWP's conference room, which is lined, like much of the office, in bright green Astroturf. Walker was wearing a blue button-down shirt, black dress pants, and a pair of black Vans sneakers.



**CHRISTOPHER HAWTHORNE:** So let's go back to the period in 2003 when this competition began. You submitted your own entry for the Ground Zero memorial. Tell me about that entry and how you approached the competition at that stage.

**PETER WALKER:** Well, we did it in a weekend. We were very busy, and I would say that it had some interesting formal ideas, but philosophically it was probably pretty empty.

**HAWTHORNE:** Because of how quickly you put it together?

**WALKER:** Yeah. The partners got together and said, "Are we going to do this?" And we said, "Sure, as long as it doesn't cost too much." So we didn't work on it for months and months and months, as the young architects do. And clearly the finalists, the eight, had. We followed Danny's scheme [Daniel Libeskind's master plan] and we put it down 37 feet, or whatever it was, and we preserved the footprints. They were represented in a plane, nothing fancy. And we brought the [victims'] names up in a series of glass panels that could be read from the street.

THE ARCHITECT, MICHAEL ARAD, "HAD THIS NOTION OF THE VOIDS VERY EARLY." — PETER WALKER, FASLA

**HAWTHORNE:** Michael Arad's winning entry—for the design that you would later join—was more aggressive in moving around pieces of the Libeskind master plan for rebuilding the site than yours had been. You've said before that maybe it was his youth that allowed him to disregard it a little bit more, but certainly it allowed his entry to stand out.

**WALKER:** He says, and I've heard him say it many times, that he had this notion of the voids very early. And that his original notion, which was before the competition, was that they would be out in the river. I don't know why, but it would have been remarkable if you'd had two squares out in the river, and the water not being there—that is a very strong image. What the water had to do with it at that stage I'm not sure. And then he made a little model that

**ABOVE**

Water will cascade into the voids that occupy the Twin Towers' footprints on the plaza.

**IMAGE CREDIT**

Visualization by Squared Design Lab/Courtesy of the National September 11 Memorial & Museum

## OPPOSITE

Trees surround Arad's "voids" at the Ground Zero memorial.

## IMAGE CREDIT

Peter Walker & Partners

didn't have any surrounds. And Michael always says that he'd never seen the Heizers, up at Beacon. [Walker is referring to the Michael Heizer piece *North, East, South, West*, which features basic geometric shapes, including a pair of squares, cut into the gallery floor as voids.] And I know that's not true. Couldn't be true, not true. But he's steadfast in that.

**HAWTHORNE:** Take us back through that chronology. He first reached out to you before a design was chosen, right?

**WALKER:** Yes, when he was one of the eight finalists. And I don't know who it was, and Michael has a story, but somebody suggested that he add a landscape architect.

**HAWTHORNE:** One of the jurors?

**WALKER:** Almost certainly. Michael says he went through web sites and so forth, but...

**HAWTHORNE:** At the very least, somebody asked him to think about reaching out to a landscape architect.

**WALKER:** No, they told him. Because [the landscape element] was the one part of his entry nobody could buy. So he called me up.

**HAWTHORNE:** This is near the end of 2003?

**WALKER:** Yes. Seems like forever ago. So we worked back and forth, and we were faxing stuff. And Michael's urge was always to explain himself. It's still his urge—to explain the mysteries. And I kept saying, "You're on a really good track here. You're not supposed to explain a mystery. If Maya Lin told you why she did what she did with the Vietnam memorial—if she told you, it wouldn't be a mystery."

**HAWTHORNE:** Let other people speculate.

**WALKER:** Yes. It would be banal. Which doesn't mean that it wasn't useful to her, but what she came up with wasn't banal. What he was working on was not in my judgment banal. And I said what we need to do essentially with the design is two things. One, we need to deal with the issue of the plaza, this endless stone plaza. And, two, we need to convince people beyond the jury—because the jury was maybe the easiest—we need to be able to prove to them that nothing is something.

**HAWTHORNE:** That's an interesting way to put it. To make the case for the minimalism of the design, in other words.

**WALKER:** Because that's what Heizer does.

**HAWTHORNE:** Also, in maybe a more simplistic way, a more reductive way, to change the design so that it wasn't just about death, right? Arad's entry was so spare and minimal that it almost seemed hopeless, nihilistic. In contrast to Libeskind's master

plan, which had appealed to so many people, early on, because it did balance tragedy with rebirth—slightly corny rebirth, but still. But there was also something in the minimalism of Michael's entry that clearly appealed to you, right?

**WALKER:** Yes, yes. If one of the other finalists had wanted to bring me in, we probably wouldn't have done it. I didn't know that we would offer anything—I mean, to plant it up, who wants to do that? But when I found out that Michael was dealing with this void, I could see why Maya [Lin, a member of the memorial jury] would pick up on it immediately. But I also could see that he was trying to make a seven-acre Heizer—that's a hell of a big Heizer, and pretty tough. And that was his imagery. He had some trees but they were practically dead.

**HAWTHORNE:** So you saw the potential to be more than just the plants person here?

**WALKER:** Well, I'd been dealing with this issue of flatness for a while. I'd been teaching a course on memorials at Harvard for about eight years, and one of the things the students would deal with each year was this issue of emptiness, or flatness. And a lot of our projects are flat, intentionally flat. And we work hard to get them flatter. In the same way that a vertical marker—this phallic thing—is sort of the metaphor for architecture, the plane is the metaphor for landscape.

**HAWTHORNE:** And that means more, right, at Ground Zero, this place where, obviously, a large part of what you are marking—remembering—are the Twin Towers, this incredibly vertical and visible architectural presence.

**WALKER:** Before the jury made the final decision, I remember one of them asked us, "Well, can you make this into a park and can you keep this plane working at the same time?"

**HAWTHORNE:** That was the challenge, to humanize it, bring some landscape elements in, without losing the sense of this immense and empty plane, the sense of physical absence?

**WALKER:** And I said yeah, you can. You can be in a park and still feel the strength of the plane. You can be amongst trees and things. And there are ways of making that surface more taut, more insistent. And of course there are ways of making it really flat if you want to go that route. And we did. It's not the flattest thing we've ever done, but it's close.

**HAWTHORNE:** And what was the relationship like with Michael at the beginning? After it was announced that you'd won?

**WALKER:** Our relationship was fine at the beginning. We worked well through the point where we won. Again in the same way that Michael wants to explain himself he also wants to elaborate everything. It's a little like someone who's designing their first house, they want to do everything they've ever thought of. And



**RIGHT**

The shade of swamp oaks will cover the plaza up to the edges of the voids.

**IMAGE CREDIT**

Visualization by Squared Design Lab/Courtesy of the National September 11 Memorial & Museum



THE TREES  
“PLAY AGAINST  
THE CITY. THEY ARE  
A CONTRAST TO  
THE CITY.”

Michael kept coming up with things. He kept putting things in. And surprisingly in the corner there was to be a building—first, a cultural building, a big one—and Michael wasn't opposed to it. I kept trying to convince him that the bigger that was, the harder it was going to be for us. That northeast corner is where most people are coming in. That's where the train is, and so forth. And the fact that you had to go through a big building to get to the memorial meant that our hands were tied, that we had less that we could do.

**HAWTHORNE:** So he was thinking like an architect, understandably?

**WALKER:** Well, he was sympathetic to architects and people who were adding things to the site.

**HAWTHORNE:** The stories that began to emerge about Michael at that point were stories of someone very aggressively defending his design in the midst of this very complex political process. Many said too aggressively. Then this *New York* magazine story appears, a real hit piece on Michael. [The article, “The Breaking of Michael Arad,” by Joe Hagan, detailed Arad's many “tantrums and threats.”]

**WALKER:** Well, you have to know that story was planted.

**HAWTHORNE:** By whom?

**WALKER:** It could have been a number of people working together. The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation is a creature of the governors [of New York and New Jersey, who officially control the World Trade Center site]. The memorial foundation is a creature of the mayor.

**HAWTHORNE:** So somebody on the elected side?

**WALKER:** Probably, I think. Could have been the Port Authority. But it was a political thing, had nothing to do with the design. It was a political remedy. It was a way of disciplining us. And it worked a little, because Michael came off badly in that. And he was angry, as anybody would be. And I think that meant that we were going to work together, somehow. You have to remember that originally the names of the victims were down below the plaza. You went down these ramps. And sometime after that story, the names were brought up to the surface. There were a tremendous number of reasons for doing that, and I think ultimately it was a good decision. But Michael doesn't believe that. He felt he was going to express himself through these passageways, and going down, and with the really beautiful image of standing behind these waterfalls and the water coming down and you'd see out.

**HAWTHORNE:** That was a powerful image.

**WALKER:** But extraordinarily hard to do. Maybe impossible to do in a satisfactory way. If you've ever been behind the fountain in San Francisco at Yerba Buena Gardens—I took him through there to show him what we're dealing with. But when the tomb went away, he felt that his ability to express things was compromised. And that's a reasonable point of view. It's hard for me to understand how devastated he must have been, between that article and bringing the names up. It took a lot of courage for him to keep in there and keep going. Because those were devastating to him.

**HAWTHORNE:** And what did that decision to bring the names up to the plaza, and get rid of the underground portion—what did that decision mean for the design and how you worked on it?

**WALKER:** Michael from that point on had the names to deal with, and the parapet. And though we participated in it, he basically was the guy who made the decisions there. And we had the park.

**HAWTHORNE:** So there was a clearer division of labor from that point.

**WALKER:** Yeah.

**HAWTHORNE:** Let's talk a little about the specifics of the design, for those people who aren't familiar with it beyond the voids. Can you explain specifically the experience that people will have as they approach and enter the memorial?

**WALKER:** The first thing is that the city streets stop at the other side of each ordering street. The memorial comes out to the curb—begins at the curb, and ends at the curb. So when you cross any one of the cross streets at any one of the corners, or a cab drops you off, you walk immediately into the surrounds, and the surrounds are made of stone and trees. Some planting, but mostly stone and trees.

**HAWTHORNE:** What kind of trees?

**WALKER:** They're oaks. White swamp oaks. So you immediately enter beneath this canopy. And once you get a little ways in, the mood is so different from the cacophony outside. And that's partly a change in sound, partly in mood.

**HAWTHORNE:** Different light.

**WALKER:** Yeah, the shadows are different. So you walk through that, and except for the northeast corner, or right along Fulton Street, you walk through a fair amount of trees before you come upon the voids. The voids when you first walk in will not be visible. When you get in a little bit, the noise of the fountains will be noisier than the street. They're making a sound. So before you see it, you hear it. You walk all the way over to the parapet beneath this canopy, and suddenly the canopy goes away, the sun is on you, there are no shadows, and you hear this torrent of water. Michael doesn't like me to say this, but it has sort of a Niagara Falls quality.

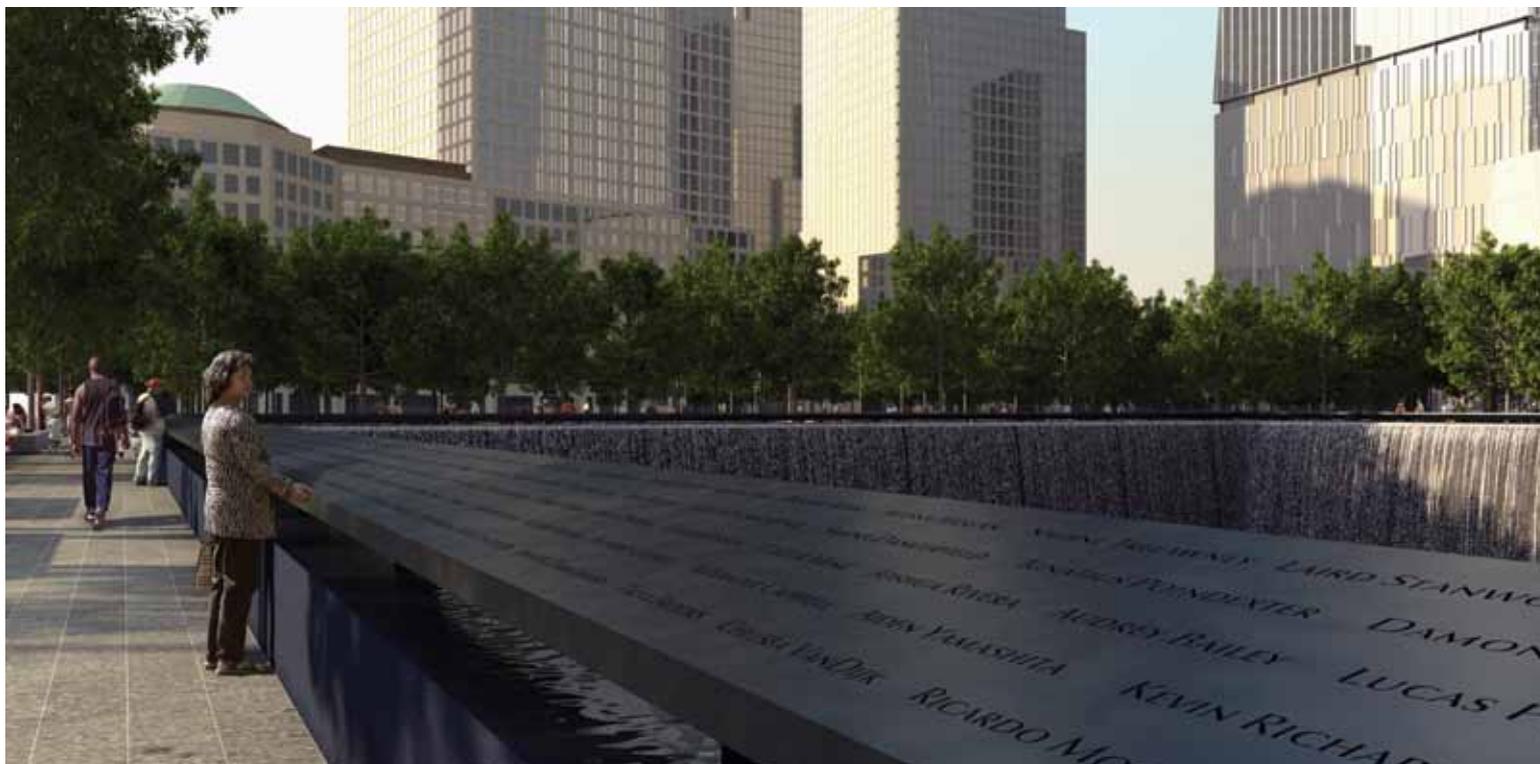
**HAWTHORNE:** Why doesn't Michael like you to say that?

**WALKER:** Michael would like everything to be unique. And yet there's nothing new under the sun. There are always analogies. That's how we talk, through these references: "It's as big as a football field," "It's more like a little lane," or all of these things. That doesn't mean I'm right. We'll see. The proof's in the eating. And I don't think we've lost that much. The thing that holds it all together, and the thing that has been difficult for a lot of people to understand—including people on the design team—is that this place is big. Seven acres in New York is a huge space. Big thing. And it's longer than a block. And you have time to make this processional work. And the other thing I spent a lot of time doing is explaining to everyone how trees work. That they play against the city. They are a contrast to the city. It has to do with shade, it has to do with them being alive and changing through the seasons. That's the nice thing about trees: They change in a way that humans tend not to pay attention to but like. I mean, when the leaves come out in the spring it's a big deal.

**HAWTHORNE:** Especially in New York.

**WALKER:** And during the summer when you're in full shade it's a big deal—it's hot there. And when the leaves fall, that'll be the first time you see the buildings around the site, because the canopy pretty much hides them. You'll look up through that tracery and you'll see those buildings, and that's a big deal. You don't have to do a whole lot more than that to create the interest that it needs.

**HAWTHORNE:** Obviously you had to think about that annual cycle, as you have to do on every project. But this is an unusual site in the sense that you have to think about one day more than others: September 11. On that day—late, late summer—what will those trees, what will the whole memorial look like on that day every year?



#### ABOVE

The names of victims of the attacks will appear on parapets that surround the voids' edges.

#### OPPOSITE

In winter, the bare branches of the swamp oaks will form Gothic traceries over the plaza.

#### IMAGE CREDITS

Visualization by Squared Design Lab/Courtesy of the National September 11 Memorial & Museum

**WALKER:** Originally they were going to be *Liquidambar*, and they would have turned a brilliant red just before September. And Michael, at the 11th hour, convinced the mayor [New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Honorary ASLA] that they would take away from the voids. And we'll have to wait and see. I think it's absurd, but...

**HAWTHORNE:** There's a metaphor in there somewhere about the relationship between architects and landscape architects.

**WALKER:** Well, he just wanted to distribute a few of those trees in there so they wouldn't be a total distraction.

**HAWTHORNE:** And your response was to use a different tree altogether?

**WALKER:** My response was to take them out of the project. Because if they're not doing what they're there to do they don't need to be there at all.

**HAWTHORNE:** And what will these swamp oaks look like on September 11?

**WALKER:** They will turn gold. The whole plaza will turn gold and then to brown. They have a little variation in them, but it's a golden brown.

**HAWTHORNE:** And the trees are arranged in a grid?

**WALKER:** The trees are in a grid in one dimension. If you walk in from the north or from the south, you won't see the grid. It'll just look like

a forest of trees. And then you turn, and look east and west, and they suddenly become colonnades. And the reason we chose the oaks is that they go up in almost a Gothic way. And if you remember there was a Gothic element to the architecture of the World Trade Center.

**HAWTHORNE:** The tracery Yamasaki used had echoes of the Gothic.

**WALKER:** So when you're under the trees you're getting this change from disorder to order.

**HAWTHORNE:** I remember you talking about that in the very early stages.

**WALKER:** It was one of the first ideas. And Michael participated in that. What has happened, which I find really interesting, is that the disorder occurs even when you're looking down a column. When you look diagonally you see disorder; when you turn right you seem to be in the only arcade. And then you move to the next arcade, and once again it seems you're in the only arcade. So it's not working like an orchard, where you get diagonal arcades.

**HAWTHORNE:** And are aware of the order all the time.

**WALKER:** Overall it has a forested quality. And you know, these oaks are interesting—they go back historically, and they were worshipped. It was because they were bigger than other trees and because lightning hit them. So they're a pretty powerful tree.

**HAWTHORNE:** How tall will these get?

**WALKER:** Maybe 60 feet. They will get as tall as any trees in New York. They are getting planted more carefully than most trees in New York, and they're being attended, and being fed—we have an elaborate system of feeding. I think the danger to the trees is to get more than 400 trees planted while construction is going on all around. And we've already had some problems. They bring them in on the weekends and at night so they don't have to stop construction. The Freedom Tower people wanted to move some trees. We're spending a lot of time defending them.

**HAWTHORNE:** That raises the larger question of the incredible complexity of this process, both as a design challenge and also of course politically, with all the entities involved: the Port Authority, the governors of New York and New Jersey, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, the developer Larry Silverstein, Libeskind, the Memorial Foundation, the mayor of New York...

**WALKER:** I'm always tempted to vent about that.

**HAWTHORNE:** I wanted to ask about the design side of that, to say nothing of the political morass. In terms of the design, you are commemorating an event where—in terms of who your client is—you start with the families of the victims, who have an incredible personal connection to this site...

**WALKER:** And they are diverse.

**HAWTHORNE:** And then you have a city that thinks of this tragedy as its tragedy, for very good reason.

**WALKER:** And the city is complex.

**HAWTHORNE:** And of course you have the nation at large, since this is a national tragedy as well. How do you deal with that from a design point of view?

**WALKER:** You know, in the larger picture, the concept that Michael and I presented to the jury to win hasn't changed much. The most drastic change was moving the names up. We have not really had any problem conceptually with any of those groups. They were all sympathetic. Ada Louise [Huxtable] did say that the memorial is too big. But those aren't our decisions—we haven't had a lot of antagonism about that. The problems have all come about details—this detail or that detail. The benches have been redesigned five times. Every new group of people wants to go after the benches. We went around and around with the lights. We went around and around with the security. With every detail. With the drainage. So it's been a lot of defense of detail. And Michael too. Michael spent a tremendous amount of time on



“THE FOUNTAINS  
ARE NOT GOING  
TO BE PLEASANT.  
THIS IS NOT  
A VICTORIAN  
OR BAROQUE  
EXUBERANCE.  
THIS IS AN  
AWESOME  
KIND OF THING.”

the parapet and the names and trying to answer this question or that question. I'd say it was more a question of how many people were pawing over it.

**HAWTHORNE:** I'd like to ask you about minimalism and abstraction. In Michael's entry and in your own work, there is a great interest in minimalism. And minimalism has become a kind of lingua franca in most monuments and memorials these days. It started with Maya Lin's Vietnam memorial and has continued—while there are neoclassical exceptions like the Roosevelt memorial, nearly every major memorial now that wins a design competition is generally abstract and minimalist. At the same time, however, there is this counter impulse toward narrative, storytelling, and figurative objects, like the realistic statues of the soldiers that were placed near the Vietnam memorial. They are also adding a museum there, buried below Maya Lin's memorial. And at Ground Zero something similar is happening, using the museum to show literal objects from that day—twisted I beams, crushed fire trucks, that sort of thing.

**WALKER:** They have a whole warehouse at JFK that you can go through. And it's quite powerful.

**HAWTHORNE:** I just wonder if it takes away from the power of a largely abstract memorial to put right next to it a place where you go and see the real thing and have the whole event and its meaning explained for you.

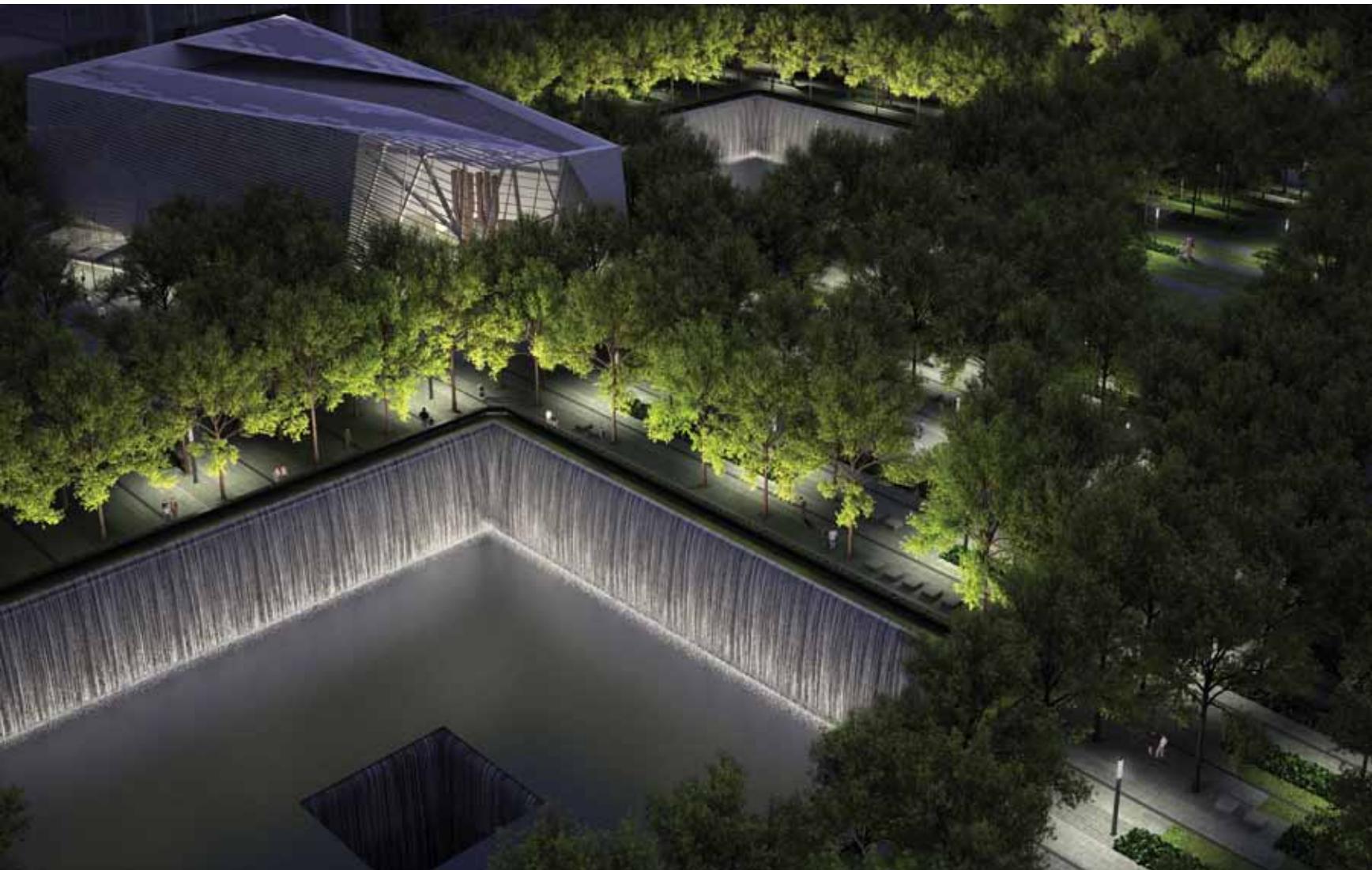
**WALKER:** Michael wanted a place down below so that those literal objects didn't wind up on the plaza. And I agreed. Rather than having those things all over, which would have been what you saw, and what you remembered—that smashed taxi, or that smashed bus. I'm sure the kids would remember the smashed bus. It would compete in its visceral power with the voids. I think it would diminish the voids.

**HAWTHORNE:** Absolutely.

**WALKER:** But they saved all that stuff, and they were determined to use it. And I think of all the various choices, putting them in a museum that was made for them, away from the memorial, was a good one. Again, you don't always get the purest answer to things, but you often find the balance point.

**HAWTHORNE:** It seems to me that you feel that despite how complex and difficult this process has been, you still feel that the experience visitors have—coming into the memorial and toward the voids through these trees—has been in relative terms protected, that you actually were able to preserve that in large part. Is that right?

**WALKER:** I think it will come through. Whether it will come through in an elevated way, in an artistically elevated way, I don't know. I'm hoping. But you never know. We've made huge



models—eighth-scale models of the whole thing—and we still don't know.

**HAWTHORNE:** We've talked about the seasonal changes. What about over the long term? What will this thing look like 25 years from now, 50 years from now?

**WALKER:** Like any garden, it will depend on the maintenance. What would Versailles look like if they didn't take care of it? And for many years they didn't. We think the bulk of the trees will live 80 years; I don't expect every tree will live 80 years. If one dies we've designed it so you can dig it up and put in another one.

**HAWTHORNE:** Anything else you want to talk about? What haven't I touched on?

**WALKER:** I had one other thing I was going to say. The procession is one thing. But coming out is another. When you get to the edge and you see the names and you see how many there are, it's pretty heavy. The fountains are not going to be pleasant. This is not a Victorian or baroque exuberance. This is an awesome kind of thing. And then you turn around. And you walk out, and there the trees are again, and they're alive. And I think the symbolism of that is powerful too. It's like going to church, hell and brimstone, and then you walk out, it's Sunday morning again, and you can see the light. So there is a recession as well as a progression here. And I remember—I'm an Episcopalian—I remember going into church, it's very somber. Serious. You're going there for your own good, you know. But when you come out, the cross is held high. And it's joyful. And that's part of this, too. ●

CHRISTOPHER HAWTHORNE IS THE ARCHITECTURE CRITIC FOR *THE LOS ANGELES TIMES*.

**ABOVE**

The cascades of water in the voids will be illuminated at night. The 9/11 museum pavilion, designed by Snøhetta, is at the upper left.

**IMAGE CREDIT**

Visualization by Squared Design Lab/Courtesy of the National September 11 Memorial & Museum