

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Sensitive design captures the eye, the enormity

By Sebastian Smee, Globe Staff | September 7, 2008

How do you make something permanent and poignant in a place dedicated to people who are distracted and on the move? That's the challenge the Boston-based firm Moskow Architects faced down and overcame with the winning plan for Logan International Airport's 9/11 memorial.

It's a smart and sensitive design. It strikes all the right notes, and it will grow with the site.

That site could not have been more difficult. It is between two noisy highways, a multinational hotel, and a garage. Sweeping overhead is a pedestrian bridge with conveyor belts. The whole place resembles a scene out of a novel by J.G. Ballard: impersonal engineering, artificial environments, modernity at its bleakest.

But somehow, they've made it work.

The fact is that the choice of the site made a lot of sense. It is in the heart of the airport from which the two planes that smashed into the twin towers took off. And it is right alongside the Logan Airport Hilton, which became the headquarters for the Massachusetts Port Authority's family assistance CARE Team in the wrenching aftermath of 9/11.

Memorials used to be heroic and triumphalist as a matter of course. They were usually figurative, too: a striving, stiff-jawed soldier, an imploring victim - whatever seemed most representative.

This one is different. It is understated and abstract. It is less a "thing" - a fixed marker of some historical event - than an attempt to create an environment of contemplation. It does not aim to make those who experience it think one particular thought. It invites them to think their own thoughts.

The approach follows the new norm in memorial design worldwide. (The turning point was Maya Lin's minimal but much-lauded design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.) This may smack a little of decision-making by committee, but it befits a site designed for people who went through so many different experiences on that day, and in the days and months after.

You approach the main part of the memorial along a winding path. It's pleasant. You are not made to feel like you are being herded from point A to point B. You can amble, take your time. You notice how much care has gone into the landscaping - in particular the trees (young ginkgos), the granite benches, and the curving stone walls, made in a New England vernacular from blue stone and fieldstone.

Then, after wandering up an easy incline, you arrive at the memorial itself. It's nothing more than a glass box, really. Just inside one entrance to the box is a vertical panel with a time inscribed on it: 7.59. That's when the first plane, United Airlines Flight 175 took off from Logan. On the back of that panel are the names of all those - terrorists apart - who were on board.

The entrance diagonally opposite has the same setup: a panel with the names of the victims of American Airlines Flight 11 and the time it took off on the flip side. After passing by either panel, you find yourself standing inside the box. Looking up, you see the sky through a network of cables supporting small reflective panels, all at different angles. The effect is to fragment the sky. The idea is to evoke some of the shattering impact of that September morning.

I found this memorial both subtle and strong. It looks a little slick just now, but I sense that it will stand the test of time.

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