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FACTS & STORIES

(Re)Making Meaning of 9/11: A Decade Later

JERRY KRASE (September 28, 2011)

To try to make meaning out of 9/11, every year since 2001 I have retraced my steps to re-photograph how my neighbors displayed their feelings about the tragedy. As time has passed it has become clearer to me what can and can't be seen in the gentrified landscapes of Park Slope, Brooklyn. I am gratefully that the pain we all felt then has, visibly at least, slowly faded away.



Jerry Krase

When the Twin Towers fell, many New Yorkers felt the need to visually express their grief. Here on 7th Avenue in Park Slope one car owner used his rear window as a canvas.

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Recently, I spoke at a conference -- MAKING MEANING OF 9/11: LOCAL IMPACTS, GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS -- at St. John's University's Manhattan Campus. The title of my talk was "Park Slope, Brooklyn in the Aftermath of 9/11." I explained that every year since 2001 I have retraced my steps shortly after the official commemoration to re-photograph how my neighbors displayed their feelings about the tragedy. As time has passed it is clearer to me what can and can't be seen in the gentrified landscapes. Gratefully the pain has, visibly at least, faded away. The *camera obscura* was a marvelous invention but my annual reverential practice of rescanning the same locations in search of what is less and less in evidence has convinced me that the pin-hole lens that etches our visual memory remains a far more miraculous invention.



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The "Making of Meaning" is an interesting phrase for any subject, and for the past, present, and future sights that surround 9/11 it is especially challenging. When we ask "Who makes meaning?", we are also asking from where does that "meaning" come. To me, the meaning of what we see comes from our own store of knowledge that has been informed by our experiences. As a visual semiotician I am fascinated by the signs and symbols that are thought to convey meaning to viewers. In my work I argue that ordinary people change the meaning of places merely by changing what they look like. In this way, sidewalks and walls become canvasses for children and graffiti artists alike.

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Casa Italiana NYU, "The Towers, the Portico and the Farm"



For more than half a century I have paid close attention to the most mundane neighborhood landscapes. In that process I have recorded how the most powerless of people transform inhabitable areas of global cities such as the informal townships in Capetown and abandoned neighborhoods of Beijing into homes and communities. These sights have convinced me that 9/11 offers another example of how ordinary people changed the meanings of places and in the process healed a wound with small but immensely effective visual statements that divert our eyes from more painful memories.



Not very long after 9/11 immigrant street vendors surrounded the horror created by Osama bin Laden with a colorfully irreverent outdoor market. In this morbid suk, hordes of tourists further diminished al Qaeda's stature by buying "We love NYC more than ever" and left-over "NYC Blackout" t-shirts. Many had their photos taken, smiling and standing near the edge of the guarded precipice as they do at the Grand Canyon -- wrought not by terrorists but by the hand of Whomever. It's as if 9/11 happened so that they would have another place to visit. Few of those tourists know the words of Minoru Yamasaki, the designer of the World Trade Center.

"I feel this way about it. World trade means world peace and consequently the World Trade Center buildings in New York ... had a bigger purpose than just to provide room for tenants. The World Trade Center is a living symbol of man's dedication to world peace ... beyond the compelling need to make this a monument to world peace, the World Trade Center should, because of its importance, become a representation of man's belief in humanity, his need for individual dignity, his beliefs in the cooperation of men, and through cooperation, his ability to find greatness."

A few more might make sense of Yakov Smirnoff's mural painting "hanging" high above the site -- "America's Heart" -- including a special message that reflected his belief in the human condition. "The human spirit is not measured by the size of the act, but by the size of the heart." The fewest would see the semiotic analogy between the splintered wooden cross of Pietro Di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* and the twisted steel girder crucifix that stands for the equal sacrifices made by blue, pink, and white-collar workers alike who died for simply being on the "Job."



Meaning is always personal, as are our own *little* connections to the times and spaces that we sometimes call history. In the fall of 2001 my daughter Kathryn went by subway to the Children's Aid Society on Williams Street everyday at 9:00 A.M. That morning she delayed her trip in order to help my daughter Kristin who had some post-delivery problems with her second child. My nieces and nephews, John, Peter, and Suzanne worked in finance in Manhattan and experienced history via frantic phone calls from people in the building and horrible views from office windows. My friend Michael's law office was

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close by and he saw "debris" falling from the towers before realizing that what was falling were people. Another niece, Carolyn, was living at the time in Battery Park City across the street from the WTC.

I had scheduled an ethnographic field trip to Battery Park City during that fall semester to observe an example of a "modern urban community." Our meeting point was at the subway entrance to the U.S. Customs Building near the north bridge entrance to the World Financial Center. My only above ground experience at Ground Zero, before it was called that, was standing in the solar oven created by the New York State Office Buildings on one of those class excursions. The only time I was inside the Towers above the first floor was when I was treated to dinner at Windows on the World at which my host mistakenly thought I would prefer sitting closer to the window. Later, in 2002, the high school students in my ACE Mentor team (Architecture, Construction, and Engineering) planned to rebuild the site and create a memorial. They actualized Frank Lloyd Wright's mile-high skyscraper with a few accoutrements such as anti-aircraft missiles. Their memorial was a polished absolute black granite cube that would reflect the images of its unknowing victims. They also visited the Queens Museum to view the model of New York City in which the Towers were gently wrapped in a red, white and blue bow.



Today we can see that something new will eventually replace what was there before. A few commentators on the NYC scene see Culture Wars (Jihads and Crusades) to define (and perhaps redefine) the landscape of the powerful. Others offer their severe opinions on the pressing need for a new aesthetic of security. A new tower is seen as a powerful expression of our commitment to never surrender to terror, and I agree it is. But, to me the most powerful expressions will always be those of ordinary people, my friends, family, and neighbors who did small things on the days following 9/11. I would argue that, as texts to be read, the efforts of my neighbors were far more transformative.





On 9/11 I received the following message from my niece:

Subj: Is Everyone Safe????

Date: 9/11/01 5:37:29 PM Eastern Daylight Time

From: (Liz)

To: (Uncle Johnny), (Uncle Jerry), (Kristen Krase), (Katherine Krase), (Aunt Maryann), (Aunt Suzanne)

I don't know where everyone works. Can someone please check in with me and let me know our family is all safe and accounted for. Thank you. Love Liz

I immediately sent Liz a note and the next day I sent out my own message to everyone in my address book and to all the professional association list services to which I subscribed. Here it is:

We live in Brooklyn but the smoke from the fires and dust from the debris coated the neighborhood and we had to close all the windows and people were wearing dust masks on the street. My family is fine but there is so much horror. I spent the day with my three daughters and two grandsons. My wife worked at one of the hospitals receiving some of the bodies and triaged patients. I and my daughters went to the local hospital to give blood but there were so many people who came to contribute their blood that we were told to come back the next day. I have asked everyone to give blood and say prayers. I will go into the college today and see if I can do something meaningful. I am worried about intergroup problems in the city and especially at the university where students had been at each other's throats over Middle Eastern issues.

I decided to play squash today as I usually do on Wednesday mornings and forgot that when I take the subway there is a point en route which has(d) such a wonderful view of the NYC skyline and the twin towers. As we approached the Smith and Ninth Street Station which reputedly is the world's highest subway station I moved to the window and almost simultaneously, and in total silence, people got out of their seats and moved to one side of the car. It was the most quiet time I have ever heard on a NYC subway car. I will not take a picture of any of this as I've already seen too much.



F-Train Window 2002

Note: I had publicly vowed not to photograph scenes of the tragedy (admittedly a rather odd response of a visually oriented sociologist). I was true to my promise and some time later in 2002 I photographed (above) out the same dirty windows of the Manhattan bound F- train and captured what was then the new view of lower Manhattan. Eerily, the smears on the glass emulated what once was an ugly plume of smoke that had wafted across the water over Brooklyn Heights and then made its way up the slope of Brooklyn to menacingly hover for days over my neighborhood and occasionally depositing into the streets, sidewalks, and especially the backyards of my neighbors, an assortment of paper and other light weight debris, including one check from Cantor-Fitzgerald.

In response to my message I received hundreds of responses expressing various degrees of sympathy and support. I was shocked however at the number of people who added a "but" to their notes. As the time from 9/11 and distance from the World Trade Center increased I noticed that how much the view of America, especially by Europeans, had radically changed since we were an Ugly but well-intentioned superpower. I naturally assumed that there would be immediate and unequivocal sympathy, if not support, for the U.S. from among my colleagues. There was for my family, and me but there was too often a qualifier to expressions of compassion. Academics have an annoying tendency to give some kind of informed, objective, emotionless opinion of an historical event and this one was no exception.

In a few e-mail responses, I had also been saddened by the implication that the actions of my country abroad such as the support for oppressive regimes when it suited what someone had decided was in the national interest somehow lessened the horror. The messages reminded me that people around the world are keenly aware of, and sensitive to, American foreign policy (and military) exploits. When I went to Ireland to deliver the Keynote Address at the Annual Meeting of the Sociology Association of Ireland, in Tralee, not long after 9/11. Many were surprised that I would make the trip so soon after the tragedy, not understanding that for an academic having one's expenses paid for a trip is a powerful inducement. There besides many warm welcomes I also received the observation by one host that in a way the USA had it coming and thought my wife was about to flatten her. Increasingly in discussions among colleagues, even here in the USA, there were expressions that American foreign policy at least indirectly caused those planes to crash into the Twin Towers as almost a divine intervention.

Six months later I was on a "9/11" Panel at a meeting of the Multicultural Education Society of Europe and the Americas in Padua, Italy. As an introduction to a photo essay "Park Slope in the Aftermath of the World Trade Center Tragedy" I read aloud, for the first time, the words of my 9/12 e-mail message. Tears came to my eyes as I relived that day. I remembered, now from a distance, going upstairs to help my elderly in-laws to close all the windows and thinking that perhaps I would not return as I walked over to my daughter Kristin's house where her two sisters, Karen and Kathryn had instinctively gathered. We stayed there with her and my three-year-old (Spencer) and one-month-old (Leander) grandsons and waited, without admitting that the End might be coming. In the panic of the time there were rumors circulating of further attacks and that the smoke we were breathing was laced with poisonous gases.

Of course, in Padua, my personal pain moved many, but too many others took what I described as a terrible tragedy as an opportunity to "explain" why it happened. Why 3,000 people died in a few minutes of my life. Perhaps this is a stretch but 9/11 was discussed in much the same way that some Americans talk about the "Collateral Damage" in Belgrade, Baghdad, Gaza, Lebanon, Tel Aviv, Dresden, or even Nagasaki and Hiroshima. "Terrible, but after all didn't they have it coming?" Perception of victimization is also an interesting. For example, when I went upstairs to tell my mother in-law to close the windows on the morning of 9/11 her response was "why do these things always happen to me." Over the course of her 80 some odd years, she had drawn a very small circle of empathy around herself. It seems that for too many, Americans are outside of that circle. Because of what was done in our name, they erroneously believe that we are not entitled to sympathy. I continue to grieve for the 3,000 who died in the USA on 9/11 but I also must grieve for the tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of victims of America's misguided military adventures abroad that used our first 3,000 victims as an excuse for the pursuit of meaningless vengeance.



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