

Observation Report 2: Field Site Visit—Participant Observation

9/11 Memorial



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9/11 Memorial

One walks through downtown Manhattan on streets lined with scouring skyscrapers. Amid this urban density, an open space emerges—a poignant contrast to the steel and glass around it. Here, yellowing leaves float gently into the flat vastness of the 9/11 Memorial. There's an invisible weight that hollows the earth but what it symbolizes is almost tangible. The memorial's presence carries a unique gravity, both in its immense scale and in the stark materiality of its design.

The structure of the 9/11 Memorial is composed of two large reflecting pools, each occupying the footprints of the original Twin Towers. Water cascades continuously over the edges of the pools into a central void—symbolizing loss and absence. The plaza is landscaped with trees, including a "Survivor Tree" that withstood the attacks—representing resilience and renewal.



Marks on the granite slabs

Dark, flat granite slabs bear the engraved names of the lives lost. They hold marks—memories—evidence of the human touch, a testament to the fact that grief has been divided, carried, and honored by those who live on. The lightly textured stone's reflective surface mirrors the city that stands resiliently around it, tying the somber truth of the past to the ongoing reality of the present. As the sun moves, the angled slabs catch and reflect its light, creating sharp glints that dance across the structure.

The memorial is a meeting of contrasts—manmade and natural. The open layout allows wind to flow freely, and when water flows within the structure, it adds another sensory layer to the experience. But it's the unseen element, a deep energy tied to the space, that leaves the strongest impression.

The 9/11 Memorial serves as a profound tool of information. It communicates, educates, informs, and preserves collective memory and cultural knowledge.

The information experience at the memorial is deeply immersive, blending spatial design with a visceral connection to the victim's names. The names are etched in uppercase Optima, a humanist sans-serif typeface that lends both clarity and dignity to the presentation. Well-laid-out clear space around each name ensures that every individual is honored and remembered.

Transforming the abstract notion of a large-scale tragedy into something deeply personal, the memorial becomes a tactile and visual record of lives lost. The etched names, accessible to touch, allow visitors to engage physically with the information, turning the experience into one of active remembrance. The simple structure, with its reflective surfaces and the sound of flowing water, amplifies the gravity of the loss, making the space both an emotional and informational narrative.

I visited the 9/11 memorial website while at the site to understand the thought behind the design of the structure. I was fascinated by the concept of “meaningful adjacencies”.

The 9/11 Memorial arranged the names of victims in part by “meaningful adjacencies” – where they were at the time of their death and what personal relationships they shared with other victims. You can easily find the locations of victims’ names on the memorial using the Memorial Guide.

The guide, which is a website and an app that can be downloaded for free on iPhone, Android and Windows phones, ensures that the legacy of those who died will continue to live on and enables you to search for and view all of the names inscribed on the memorial. It provides photographs of victims as well as biographical information such as date of birth, hometown, employer and requested adjacencies made by family or next of kin. An individual map for each victim shows the specific location of the name on the memorial.

Using the guide, you can also find detailed information on the arrangement of the names and locate cobblestones that people or organizations sponsor as a permanent piece of the memorial plaza.



With this new understanding, I observed how differently people engaged with the memorial. Some moved with quiet purpose, searching for specific names—likely those of loved ones or individuals they knew. A young group gathered around a cluster of names, pointing and discussing, perhaps reflecting on the connections between the victims or the historical significance of the site. There were also tourists who seemed to be there more for sightseeing, observing the space without searching for a specific meaning. My perspective, shaped by the knowledge I'd gained online, allowed me to appreciate the layers of interaction happening all around me.

My visit to the 9/11 Memorial provided an opportunity to observe how individuals interact with a site of collective memory and reflection. The design of the memorial, with its careful layout and thoughtful integration of names and spaces, evokes a range of emotional responses and invites personal engagement. Whether visitors were there to honor loved ones, reflect on history, or simply experience the space as part of the city, their interactions were shaped by context and purpose. The memorial's ability to serve both as a place of quiet remembrance and a public site of information underscores its powerful role in commemorating a tragedy while fostering understanding for all who visit.