

Points of View

Epitaph for a Landmark ... From Afar

by Graham Pohl, AIA

Graham Pohl, AIA, a member of AIA Kentucky, wrote the following for publication in his Lexington, Ky., local newspaper.

I write this from Lexington, Ky., in the week following the horrendous events at the Pentagon and the World Trade Center. The grotesque waste, the mind-numbing loss of life has left us breathless and in tears. From a distance we identify with the victims and the loved ones of those who perished in the attacks. We feel profound sadness, we are confused and angry, and we are frustrated at how little we can help.

Americans across the country feel this empathy deeply, regardless of how personally connected they may be to New York City.

From conversations with many fellow Kentuckians it has become clear that a surprising part of our sadness surrounds the loss of the twin towers, the buildings themselves. This sadness is shared by people who have never been to New York, let alone visited the soaring skyscrapers.

The emotional attachment one has to a building is mysterious and wonderful. The image of a building—St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, the Parthenon in Athens, Big Ben in London, the Space Needle in Seattle, the Capitol in Washington, the twin towers in New York—takes on real meaning to us and becomes associated with an idea even if we've never visited. You can see these buildings in your mind's eye. They symbolize some aspect of the cities they inhabit; some essence of the people who built and use them. They play critical roles in defining their cities, and their images come to crystallize some essence of these places.

Because iconic buildings like these are so resolute in their presentation, they resonate with our understanding of who and where we are. Their physical function as landmarks is eclipsed by their importance as architectural bellwethers, psychosocial reference points, and cultural direction finders.

The twin towers were selected for destruction in part because they symbolized our way of life. They represented optimism—they were manifestations of the potential of democracy, capitalism, and technology. Their destruction, so massive, so visible, so inescapable, was an attempt to damage our faith in the way we live, and to stun us with our vulnerability.

Fear is the ultimate weapon of the terrorist, and to show us that we should be afraid they chose the biggest, most visible target. They knew the power of the image, they knew we would become saturated with film footage of the carnage in New York. One wonders if they also predicted the profound sense of personal loss that Americans would feel with the destruction of the towers.

To some, the twin towers represented arrogance, wealth, and power. But architecture of heroic scale plays an important role in expanding our understanding of the art and technology of building. The success of the twin towers (regardless of whether we approved of their design) showed us that if ever there were a place for heroic buildings, that place was the southern tip of Manhattan Island.

The twin towers had become inextricably associated with the skyline of New York. The towers were the shimmering dot on the fabulous exclamation point that is Manhattan. However we perceived their symbolism, the strength of their aesthetics and their association with a people and an era were undeniable. Even among Americans for whom the towers represented megalomania run amok, there is deep sadness at the loss of the buildings, entirely separate from the horror of the human loss. Even for the cynical, the cultural symbolism of the landmark buildings was transcendent.

The image and meaning of the World Trade Center Towers will stay with us, and we will miss them. May their memory inspire us to move forward fearlessly, to make more works of architecture that speak to us in a profound language about the places they inhabit and the people who inhabit them. ■■