

9/11: Ten years later - 'Empty Sky' reflects both similarity to Vietnam memorial and its own version of remembrance

Published: Saturday, September 10, 2011, 7:02 AM

By Dan Bischoff/For The Star-Ledger



GETTY IMAGES A view of the newly constructed "Empty Sky Memorial" at Liberty State Park on September 7, 2011 in Jersey City, New Jersey. The concrete and steel "Empty Sky Memorial" designed by architect Jessica Jamroz pays tribute to the 746 citizens of New Jersey who lost their lives on September 11.

There's an animating memory that hovers just behind "Empty Sky," New Jersey's \$12 million memorial to the 746 people connected to the state who died on 9/11. And it's not Bruce Springsteen, whose song title inspired the name.

It's Maya Lin's Vietnam War Memorial on the Mall in Washington, D.C.

Like the Vietnam memorial, "Empty Sky" unscrolls the names of the dead along a wall that is subtly reflective — it's clad in brushed stainless steel — allowing visitors to see themselves as they read the names. The names are in no particular order (though family members are clustered together), and you can consult a book (just like at the Vietnam Memorial) at a nearby kiosk to help you find the one you want. In fact, "Empty Sky" is really the Vietnam memorial squared, since it carves its far fewer names on two walls, set about as far apart as a city street is wide, and cuts them into a bright silvery surface that leaps more than 30 feet high to loom over visitors.

Of course, everything that made the Vietnam Memorial so moving — its understated polished black marble wall, set into a shallow "V" along the edge of a sidewalk that dips, then rises as you exit the memorial space — is reversed in "Empty Sky." The surface isn't mournful black but shiny silver; the pathway doesn't dip, but stretches flat for 210 feet (the length of one side of the towers' original base) to frame a view across the Hudson River of the site where the towers once stood.

The walls cut through a grove of weeping cherries planted across Liberty State Park, which has been scalloped to form a shallow amphitheater from which to view what remains of the skyline. This gently sloping park is the best thing about the memorial, and a reminder of the stock-in-trade of Frederic Schwartz Architects, the New York firm that designed "Empty Sky" and has won awards for its waterfront esplanades from China to India.

"Empty Sky" was in fact conceived by Jessica Jamroz with Frederic Schwartz. At the time their idea won the contest in 2004, Jamroz was not a member of Schwartz's firm, but she is now. Together, they have also designed another 9/11 memorial, this one for Westchester County, N.Y., called "The Rising" (2006), a round tower that comes to a point (something like a silver Eiffel Tower, but more cone-shaped). A lot of noise was made about how all the memorial designs, including Michael Arad's for Ground Zero, were selected by committees based on blind submissions, but Schwartz's good fortune is remarkable. His firm was a runner-up for Ground Zero, too, and after studying "Empty Sky," you get the sense that it was put together by someone very close to the process.

The invocation of Maya Lin is obvious. But so are several other aspects of “Empty Sky,” so much so that the design reads almost like a pastiche of many of the popular ideas about what a memorial should look like that were floated in the news and online in the first year after the attacks.

First of all, there’s the obsession with iconic numbers, such as the 203-foot length of the walls (a detail that has to be explained to be grasped), and the attempt to proportion them to correspond to the dimensions of the actual World Trade Center, so that the walls mimic in small scale the towers laid on their sides. There’s the copse of living trees, as well as the need to walk a designated course to unfold the memorial’s meaning. At one time there were even plans to top the walls with searchlights pointed straight up, to make the Albert Speer-inspired “towers of light” effect that proved so popular in 2003 (the searchlight idea was dropped for the final version, which is still trying to raise funds for its maintenance).

It’s not just New Jersey’s memorial to 9/11 — it’s every proposal ever made to memorialize 9/11, in one spot.

Perhaps that’s why “Empty Sky” doesn’t really seem half as mournful as the song it takes its name from. It’s a busy site. The scale is, compared with the Vietnam memorial, gargantuan, and like a Richard Serra sculpture, the vast sheets of steel beetle over a visitor in a way that is vaguely threatening. How the finished concrete walls on the outside will wear in the weather over the years is an obvious concern (some are trying to raise the funds to coat them in stainless steel, too, but that could be a long wait, given the price of metals today). But even more worrying is the interior, somehow triumphant in its glowing silver cladding — the color, you realize, of the fuselage of a modern aircraft.

Is it supposed to remind us of a jetliner, or an F-16?

Related Stories:

[COMPLETE 9/11 - Ten Years later coverage](#)

[9/11: Ten years later - How TV marks Sept. 11 anniversary](#)

[9/11: Ten years later - Where art fears to tread](#)

[9/11: Ten years later - Star-Ledger, NJPAC present 9/11 documentary](#)

9/11: Ten years later - Dances of remembrance and hope

9/11: Ten years later - The Remembrance Project shows families searching for solace

For 9/11 first responders, inadequate medical assistance an insult to heroism

© 2011 NJ.com. All rights reserved.