THE PERFUME OF GARBAGE

Beginning work with Bill Rathje and David Platt on a paper for a special issue on archaeology and modernism for the journal Modernism/Modernity

This is how we begin with the World Trade Center

There is something profoundly archaeological about the experience of 9/11 and its aftermath. Less than a month after the attack a meeting of representatives of thirty-three museums, headed by the Smithsonian and New York's City Museum, considered how they might document the event, asking what things should be collected and preserved for display and for posterity.

A year later an exhibition opened at the Smithsonian; it continues its tour into 2004. "Bearing Witness to History" displays artifacts and associated stories, photographs and documents from the events of 9/11: a battered wallet, a melted computer screen from the Pentagon, torn clothing, a structural joint from the World Trade Center, a window washer?s squeegee handle, a stairwell sign, as well as artifacts associated with the aftermath (commemorative coins, artwork, patriotic ribbons, rescue equipment). Other exhibitions have run at the Museum of the City of New York and the New York State Museum in Albany.

The project was explicitly one of documenting history in the making. Some of this was done with the notion of finding evidence. Actually, and more accurately, the museum curators and archaeologists sought material icons. Each of the artifacts displayed in the Smithsonian exhibition has a story attached, one that ties it to an individual or event that bears significance and pathos. And they certainly evoke. Their aura is very apparent. Each acts as a touchstone; not so much illuminating the topics of political and forensic interest, the exhibits are material correlates for the intimate personal experiences, the individual stories. This is what we mean when we call the things iconic.

Briefcase recovered from the World Trade Center.

Description: A briefcase recovered from the World Trade

Center wreckage that belonged to Lisa Lefler, an Aon Risk Services employee.

Context: World Trade Center workers had varied experiences on September 11. While about 2,200 office workers were killed, over 20,000 managed to escape the Twin Towers.

When the first plane struck the north tower, Lisa Lefler, an Aon Risk Services executive, immediately evacuated her 103rd-floor office in the south tower. In her haste she left her briefcase behind. Seventeen minutes after the north tower was hit the south tower was struck, cutting off the escape path above the 78th floor. Fifty-six minutes later, the entire building collapsed, killing 175 of Lefler’s fellow Aon employees.

Several days later, Boyd Harden, a rescue worker at Ground Zero, found the briefcase in the debris and returned it to Lefler.

Here are some associated materials on the exhibition web site:

Partial view of resume found inside briefcase.

As the writing on the clear plastic cover indicates, Boyd Harden found this resume inside Lisa Leffler’s [sic] briefcase, and it allowed Mr. Harden to identify and locate Ms. Leffler [sic]. The resume was tattered but entire. This view has been altered to protect . . .

Notes from the curator?s files about the route of Lisa Lefler?s briefcase and its discovery. Transcript: found 12-13 Sep by EMT Boyd Harden @ Greenwich St. near O’Hara’s Pub on the street (Albany St.) Bag identified as Lefler’s by resume in bag, found . . .

Photograph: Aon Risk Services employee Lisa Lefler.

Statement from Lisa Lefler:

September 11, 2001. My Recollection. The morning of September 11 started out like any other morning. The train was on time, the path train was crowded. It was a beautiful, sunny fall day. I went to the deli across the street for a bagel before going . . .

Statement from Boyd Harden:

Briefcase Found At WTC On September 13, 2001 The Events

Surrounding Lisa Lefler’s Briefcase That I Found At The WTC by Boyd E. Harden At approximately 9:00 AM on September 11, 2001, my wife, who works in New York City (NYC), called me at our apartment . . .

Statement from David Shayt (September 11 Collecting Curator, Museum Specialist, Division of Cultural History):

. . . not the sort of thing we would collect unless it had some extraordinary, iridescent story.

There is an intimacy here in the material artifact and its testimony to an everyday event (going to work at the World Trade Center) that became historical. The quotidian becomes the materialization of a historical moment. This is a process of archaeological metamorphosis: mundane things come to carry the baggage of history; they become allegorical. There is also an elision in this process: conventional historiography (of chains of causation, socio-political analysis, telling of the unfolding of events on a political stage) slips away, is irrelevant in the confrontation between the banality of everyday life, sentimental association and the apocalyptic (confrontations with horror, death, the clash of civilizations).

The question of what stuff to keep is one of conservation, of value and choice: it is profoundly archaeological, relating to the systems of classification at the core of museology. But the archaeological component of 9/11 is more than just artifacts. The photographs in the New York Times and elsewhere of neighboring apartments abandoned and covered in thick layers of dust as the towers came down are archaeological moments frozen in time just like Pompeii, abandoned to its own disaster.

The twin towers site itself became an icon of ruin: photographs of the remains of the building’s steel framework silhouetted against the lights illuminating the

search, the clearing operation, the excavation are classic compositions borrowing the aesthetic of a backlit Greek temple colonnade.

All the proposals for rebuilding the site included museums of some kind. The final choice of architect is very telling. Daniel Libeskind is the designer of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, a remarkable memorial to twentieth-century Jewish experience, a building marked by a historiographical component – the past, the old street plan around the museum, and many other features of the architecture of community and holocaust are built into the design of the museum.

Many of the objects in Bearing Witness to History are responses to 9/11: commemorative pins and medals, picks and hard hats from the rescue operation, photographs. The exhibition looks back at the debris of history, but its collection of the memorable is future-oriented: the purpose is to preserve for future generations. There has been great concern that the replacement for the World Trade Center should be a monument of hope and confidence in the future, as well as a commemoration of its origins and the site's past. This again is a characteristic of archaeology. Since at least the late nineteenth century the field has been intimately associated with conservation policy aimed at preserving heritage and material history for the future. This is, for most cultural resource managers, as the professionals are now termed, the primary archaeological project – less the interpretation of the past (that can wait), and more a project to ensure that the remains of the past will endure, in themselves or as some kind of formal and sanctioned record, particularly under the pressure of urban and rural development. This conservation ethic (loss and destruction of the material past is unacceptable) goes unquestioned in the academy and the profession. The Soviet occupation chose to obliterate traces of Hitler's bunker in Berlin in 1945; this kind of destruction of history would be unthinkable now and is even a difficult comparison to make with 9/11, yet both the bunker and the remains of the World Trade Center are evidence of outrageous and violent aspiration. The difference is, of course, related to different notions of historicity – the perceived place in history of Americans today and Soviets in the 1940s.

Many of the objects preserved by the Smithsonian and other museums came from the evidence recovery operation at the Staten Island Landfill site, commonly known as Fresh Kills. Here we approach the irony at the heart of the archaeological project. The twin towers site was designated a scene of crime and the debris was removed to

the newly reopened landfill site on Staten Island to be carefully sifted for evidence, personal remains and effects, and memorabilia. So, choices having been made and the valuable retrieved, the debris has been consigned to the biggest garbage tip in the world. It is certainly the most prominent human artifact visible from space (the Great Wall of China is quite invisible). Where else could over a million tons of building rubble be put, it might be argued. Our point is rather that the destination of the debris is neither incidental nor an embarrassment. Put aside choice of what to keep: this is the real stuff of archaeology and history – what gets thrown away – garbage.

While a common perception may be that archaeology is a set of techniques aimed at the recovery of remains of the past, we want to claim these components of the experience of 9/11 for archaeology – that is, we describe them as archaeological. To recap: the archaeological refers to ruin and responses to it, to the mundane and quotidian articulated with grand historical scenarios, to materializations of the experience of history, material aura, senses of place and history, choices of what to keep and what to let go (remember/forget), the material artifact as allegorical, collections and their systems, the city and its material cultural capitalizations (investments in pasts and futures), the intimate connection between all this and a utopian frame of mind (archaeology is not just about the past, but about desired futures too). And the stuff of it all is garbage.

So – archaeologists deal in garbage, though this is often denied. We make two broad points

1. modernity is unthinkable without its museal and archaeological component
2. the cultural imaginary that links archaeology and garbage (and just outlined for the twin towers) is at the heart of the composition and decomposition of modernity and modernism.