

Natural Hazards Research and Applications Information Center
University of Colorado
482 UCB
Boulder, CO 80309-0482

Quick Response Report #139

Field Observations of Lower Manhattan in the Aftermath of the World Trade Center Disaster: September 30, 2001

James K. Mitchell*

Peter Kabachnik**

Robert Donovan**

Junko Noguchi**

Tom Mitchell**

E-mail: jmitchel@rci.rutgers.edu

*** Professor**

**** Graduate Student in Geography**

Department of Geography

Rutgers University

54 Joyce Kilmer Ave.

Piscataway, NJ 08854-8045

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INTRODUCTION

This brief report focuses on "perishable" information about the World Trade Center Disaster. Perishable information is information that is temporarily available and would likely be lost if not collected quickly after the event. It might include physical evidence such as high water marks on damaged buildings or interviews conducted about the performance of emergency management systems during the disaster impact period. In this case, it is information contained in posters created by the impacted population and observations by the investigators about changes in the physical environment. The collection of perishable information has a lengthy pedigree in hazards research. In the past, research teams from the National Research Council's Committee on Natural Disasters entered disaster-affected places to record such information. The Natural Hazards Research and Applications Information Center (NHRAIC) at the University of Colorado also manages a small grants program for the National Science Foundation that supports this kind of research. The present study is patterned after these initiatives though independent of them.

MAIN OBJECTIVE

Posters created in the wake of the World Trade Center (WTC) disaster (September 11, 2001) were the focus of investigation. For the purposes of this study a poster is any displayed material that contains information about the event, its cause(s) or consequences or human responses to such, which is affixed to an object in a publicly visible location. Posters that refer to persons who were missing in the aftermath of the disaster were of primary interest. No information about the identity of individual victims was sought or collected during this study.

METHODS

Information was gathered during a half-day field trip to lower Manhattan. The research performed was not quantitative or systematic, but was based upon informed qualitative observation and analysis of the newly transformed urban and social environment. These observations are by no means exhaustive, but they provide a series of cogent threads and responses, both informative and explanatory, objective, and subjective.

Team members adopted a three-tiered approach that involved collecting information about: 1) specific objects/posters, 2) the contexts in which these objects were found, and 3) apparent gaps or silences. Notes were kept by the investigators and transcribed after returning from the field. Photographs were also taken to provide more detailed documentation than could be collected on a walking transect.

Time

The data was collected from 9.45 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Sunday, September 23, 2001, from Canal Street to Union Square.

Weather

The weather was dry, sunny, warm, and humid. Temperatures rose to 80° F with a light west wind.

Route

Observers walked a west-to-east transect through Lower Manhattan, mostly along the line of Canal Street, followed by a south-to-north transect from the Financial District to Union Square with detours to several other locations. The approximate distance was 5 miles. Parts of the route were inside a security cordon that had been erected to prevent vehicles entering damaged areas. The team did not attempt to cross the final cordon into the zone near "Ground Zero". Portions of the following neighborhoods were visited: Tribeca, Civic Center, Financial District, Chinatown, the Bowery, Little Italy, SOHO, Greenwich Village, Chelsea, Gramercy.

Route details include: Start at Canal Street Station, go on foot west to West Street (Hudson River), return to Greenwich Street, south on Greenwich to police cordon at Duane Street (4 blocks north of WTC), back to Canal, east on Canal to Broadway, south on Broadway to Dey Street (1 block east of WTC), east on Dey to Nassau Street, north on Nassau to Park, north on Park to Lafayette Street, north on Lafayette to Canal; east on Canal to Bowery, south on Bowery to Doyers Street (right turn), through Chinatown on Doyers, Pell, and Mott to Canal, north on Mott to Hester, west on Hester to Mulberry, north on Mulberry through Little Italy to Bleecker, west on Bleecker to La Guardia, north on La Guardia to Washington Square South, through Washington Square Park to Arch, north (Greenwich Village) on Fifth Avenue to 16th Street, east on 16th to Union Square, and through Union Square to Subway Station at southeast corner.

SECURITY CORDONS

Security cordons were established around the site of the WTC and at various distances beyond. These were intended to limit access by vehicles and pedestrians. During the 10 days after the Twin Towers collapsed, up to three or four layers of cordons surrounded the site. The strictness of the checking procedures varied widely from place to place. In some cases persons who wished to proceed were required to have verifiable reasons, including employment ID cards for premises located inside the cordon. Elsewhere, checks were more cursory and it was possible for persistent and self-confident persons to proceed. Checkpoints could also be bypassed simply by entering lightly patrolled streets. This suggests that the cordons mainly functioned to prevent vehicular traffic and to reduce pedestrian traffic but not to eliminate it. The vast majority of curious people who might have sought access to the WTC seemed sufficiently deterred by a combination of warnings against entering the area, their own fears, and police officers and military personnel stationed at streets on the perimeter of Ground Zero (i.e., the devastated site).

POSTERS

Posters proved to be a rich source of information about many human dimensions of disaster. They provided insights about the disaster-impacted population, the role of vernacular information and "grass roots" contributions to formal systems of disaster management, informal information display and communication strategies, the multiplicity of messages about hazards that are contained in everyday urban landscapes as well as crisis ones, and differential neighborhood responses to disaster.

At least 17 different types of posters were observed (see list below). Basic sampling techniques suggested that tens to hundreds of thousands of posters were created and affixed throughout Manhattan in the wake of the disaster. The numbers of "missing person" posters that were observed by the study team are in the range of hundreds to low thousands but this is only a very rough estimate. The relative frequency of different kinds of posters is shown below. Posters ranged from those created by large groups (hundreds of people) on lengthy sheets of brown wrapping paper to small "post-it" style stickers affixed by individuals. Members of the team who visited lower Manhattan between September 13 and September 20 believe that many of the posters they observed earlier had disappeared by September 23. At the time of observation there was no evidence that posters were being removed in any systematic fashion although it was also clear that some may have blown away and/or destroyed by exposure to sun, wind, and rain. The City of New York announced plans to collect items of commemoration and put them on display in Washington Square or archive them in co-operation with the Smithsonian Institution. Whether this will include "missing persons" posters is not known.

At the time of writing (September 30, 2001), many posters have disappeared from Union Square Park and other locations where they were formerly thickly distributed.

Most Common

1. Mourning the event and its victims (Childrens' messages; poems; paintings; quotations; and expressions of empathy, commiseration, reflection, thanks, and inspiration by individuals and groups. These often complemented or accompanied other objects at informal vigils or shrines (e.g., candles, flowers, icons, or tokens).

Very Common

1. Missing persons (see details below).

Common

1. Religious (Tracts or pamphlets, extracts from Holy Scriptures, and commentary on the religious significance of events).
2. Political commentary on the event (Some of these were a personal rethinking of the event in a search for explanations that connected with large causal factors and structures. Others were statements by political parties, organizations or interest groups that favored particular analyses, justifications, and/or policy stances on the event).
3. Community announcements (meetings to discuss problems arising from the disaster, scheduled parties for neighborhood children, and establishing memorial and assistance funds for local fire department units).
4. Government safety information (advice for persons seeking to re-enter housing or business premises affected by the disaster, environmental quality information, and notices of permits applied for).
5. Thanks to helpers.

Least Common

1. Solidarity with vulnerable minorities.
2. Election campaign posters.
3. Appeals for customers.
4. Requests for supplies.
5. Solicitations of personal experiences.
6. Defiant assertions.
7. Invitations for rescue workers to use facilities.
8. Advertisements from helpers seeking employment.
9. Directions to aid locations.
10. Pets without owners.

Posters That Mourned the Event and Victims

The single most prevalent type of poster conveyed a message of sympathy or empathy with the victims. These are identified here as "mourning" posters. Most of them carry brief text and are small in size or crowded together with many others in a composite display.

This is a large and complex category with many different components. It overlaps with some of the other categories because posters sometimes carried mixed messages. Many of the mourning texts are not posters in the commonly accepted sense but informal tokens that recall the event and the affected populations. For example, some contained personal messages of great intimacy which expressed deep sympathy and sadness as well as strong personal connections to affected people and places. Others were fashioned by children in apparent attempts to "make sense of" the situation, often by means of hand-drawn visual representations. A third group conveyed thanks to the victims and those who helped in the aftermath of the event. Messages of love and peace to the world constituted a fourth group.

Missing Person Poster Contents and Locations

This is the second most common category of posters, only exceeded by the more heterogeneous population of "mourning" posters. They are also perhaps the more visually arresting of all the posters.

Missing persons posters were typically standard 8 x 11" white sheets that included text (70-75% of area) and photographs (20-25% of area). Some were larger (e.g., enlarged photos with minimum text) and some were smaller (e.g. photocopies of workplace ID cards).

Photographs generally included semi-formal posed portraits, often taken in a workplace; many wedding and party photographs; some casual photographs; and a few ID photos from employment records. Black and white prints were dominant but there were also many in color. A few photographs showed more than one person. In these cases the image of the missing person was highlighted.

Poster text 1) supplied standard "missing persons" details such as names, employment, gender, height, weight, hair and eye color, distinguishing marks, location and circumstances when last seen, and WTC workplace location by floor; and 2) common "contact" information such as telephone numbers and e-mail addresses. Many telephone numbers were toll free 800 area code numbers and e-mail addresses often included large popular servers (e.g., Hotmail) as well as others that were more location specific.

Less usual, but still common, were additional data such as ethnicity, skin color, country of origin (e.g., Honduras, Bermuda, and Poland), and lists of possessions. In some cases, the latter were highly specific including brands and models of clothing, purses, jewelry, watches, cell phones, etc. It was noticeable that a significant number of posters appeared to have been created and placed by persons from churches with which immigrant minority victims had been affiliated.

Missing person posters were mainly affixed to flat vertical surfaces such as walls, fences, doors, bus shelters, mail boxes, telephone booths, and upright poles. A small minority were placed inside the windows of buildings. All were in ground floor sites. Most were intact, although many showed signs of wear and weather damage (rain, wind). A few had ragged edges that marked places where strips had been torn off by note writers. A small minority of missing person posters were covered with transparent film as a protection against weathering. There was no evidence

that early missing persons posters had been covered over by later additions or crowded out by other types.

Multiple examples of missing person posters were common, almost always in separate locations. Certain posters showed up in widely separated areas or in almost all places where posters were common. In at least two cases more than a score of copies of the same poster were observed along the observation route.

Posters were located in some neighborhoods and routes but not others. For example, there were relatively few missing persons posters inside the security cordon but many elsewhere in Tribeca, Civic Center, and around Union Square. Scattered posters occurred in Little Italy and Greenwich Village (apart from Washington Square where they were thickly clustered). Individual posters and small clusters (3-6) of posters were located in subway and train station corridors. There were virtually no posters in Chinatown but many U.S. flags (see below).

Members of the team who visit Manhattan frequently reported the presence of different missing persons posters in locations that were not visited during this field investigation. For example, several posters that pertained to missing Japanese citizens were observed at Grand Central Station in mid-Manhattan. None of these were observed in Lower Manhattan.

The largest observed concentration of all kinds of posters was outside the Subway station at the west end of Canal Street (Varick Street). At this site, about 2,000-3,000 posters appeared on windows and portable wooden boards stretching along the front of a building (identified by a larger temporary "Windows on the World" banner) that provided food and allowed the rescue personnel to recuperate. Here the Southern Baptist Convention invited those passing by to contribute messages that could be written on small "post-it" stickers and affixed to display surfaces. The great majority of posters here were "mourning" messages and most surfaces were covered with transparent plastic when they reached capacity. An estimated 100+ missing persons posters were affixed at this location.

Characteristics of the Poster-Viewing Population

Audiences for posters varied, to some degree, by location. Disaster relief workers, members of public safety services, and children were prevalent in Duarte Park (West Canal Street). More than a few of the mainly adult population in Union Square Park sported insignia that echoed nearby political messages. Disaster tourists of all ages were common behind the vehicular security cordon, in Tribeca, and near City Hall. Viewers in Washington Square Park included a broad cross-section of people from the adjacent residential neighborhood as well as tourists who appeared to have come specifically for purposes of visiting the disaster commemorations.

ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGES

Modifications of the physical environment were noticeable in many parts of Lower Manhattan. Disappearance of the World Trade Center's Twin Towers was the most obvious of several dozen such changes. These included:

1. Disappearance of the World Trade Center's "Twin Towers";
2. Giant piles of rubble;
3. Damaged buildings;
4. Smoke above disaster impact site;
5. Soot on cars, windows, streets;
6. Unfamiliar smells (cement, fire, and soot);
7. Air difficult to breathe;
8. People wearing breathing apparatus/air filters;
9. Heavy machinery (cranes, flatbeds, dump trucks, etc.);
10. Trucks hauling debris and unclaimed vehicles from disaster site;
11. Spotlights on WTC site (at night);
12. Increased police presence;
13. A new presence of military personnel and vehicles;
14. Security cordons and other security measures around government buildings;
15. Rescue workers (firemen, construction workers, volunteers, EMT's);
16. Stands and vans of disaster relief and charitable organizations;
17. Stands and vans of religious/church groups;
18. Stands and vans of community organizations;
19. Stands and vans of insurance companies;
20. Portable toilets for disaster workers;
21. Press presence (vans, satellites, reporters etc.);
22. Staging areas & camps (military, public utilities, and Red Cross (in streets and parks));
23. Security checkpoints for vehicles and pedestrians;
24. Altered traffic flows and controls;
25. Helicopters over WTC site;
26. Fighter jets overhead;
27. Diminished or absent commercial aircraft traffic;
28. Subway lines and stations closed/altered;
29. Suspended ferry services;
30. Closed tunnels & bridges;
31. Altered utility services (no lights, phone service, etc.);
32. U.S. flags on buildings and vehicles;
33. Posted information and materials and posting boards;
34. Informal disaster shrines and commemorative displays;
35. High concentration of NY/WTC/America consumer items for sale;
36. Piles of water, supplies, food etc. (under-utilized);
37. Candles;
38. Flowers;
39. Ribbons;
40. Empty streets in cordoned off areas;
41. Entertainment shows cancelled;
42. Closed stores;

43. Empty residential buildings and displaced residents;
 44. Moments of silence;
 45. Official flags at half-mast;
 46. Tourists (both local and non-local) interested specifically in "Ground Zero" and sites of displayed materials.
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COMPLEX INFORMATION: MISSING VOICES, AMBIGUITIES and CONTRADICTIONS

Posters and U.S. Flags

The landscape of Chinatown was most striking. It featured few posters but was festooned with flags and related symbols. They hung from walls, sat in holders, decorated service vehicles, were attached to the insides of windows, and lined porticoes and ledges above doors. This was the only area visited where U.S. flags were available in large numbers for purchase. Canal Street also had many stalls that contained WTC post-disaster T-shirts and postcards illustrating the WTC before the disaster. In contrast, Little Italy contained fewer flags and posters, though some of both. Relative to posters, flags were much less evident elsewhere. Along lower Broadway (between SOHO and Little Italy), it was common to find U.S. flags used as backdrops to sidewalk sales displays.

The Missing Buildings

Members of the team who are frequent visitors to NYC, reported feeling disoriented by the absence of the Twin Towers. The towers appeared to constitute a "silent voice" of a special non-human kind. On the other hand, the pervasive smell of powdered concrete and scenes of freshly washed streets rimmed with dust deposits acted as sensory reminders of the event near the Civic Center and Financial District.

Arresting Images and Jarring Juxtapositions

The following items were representative of the often contradictory visual information about the WTC disaster and its societal context that was present in the Manhattan landscape. They are presented here without formal analysis or comment.

- i. In a single line of sight were: a large advertising poster for "Band of Brothers" (a World War II mini-series); flanked by a lushly vegetated City Hall; and backed (in order of distance) by a line of portable toilets, a church spire, the blackened remains of WTC buildings, smoke from the debris, and apparently undamaged skyscrapers.
- ii. The serene, gleaming, modern, glass and steel high-rise U.S. Court of International Trade stands in marked contrast to the WTC site only a few blocks away. The Court, surrounded by a carefully landscaped plaza, contained no people, was cordoned off, and was flanked by a U.S. flag at half-mast.

- iii. On Canal Street, retail outlets often sold WTC-related postcards, T-shirts, and U.S. flags alongside non-WTC-related novelty items such as auto licence plates. In some cases, images of the WTC competed for space with usual tourist goods carrying messages about various pathologies of New York City (e.g., crime and insulting epithets).
 - iv. Reminders about the ambiguous complexity of urban social pathology, both in Manhattan and elsewhere, were readily visible. These included: diners lunching at a branch of the same pizza firm that was devastated during a recent suicide terror bomb attack in Jerusalem and in a restaurant that was the scene of a highly publicized organized crime murder, copies of a poster for a person who was missing before the WTC disaster, and emergency vehicles with blaring sirens speeding into parts of lower Manhattan that already had a heavy public safety presence.
 - v. Residents of Battery Park City who sought to retrieve belongings from their apartments passed within sight of "Ground Zero" and a giant billboard that portrayed President Franklin D. Roosevelt.
 - vi. Military rescue personnel, acting like-tourists, snapped photographs of "wanted" posters for a suspected terrorist leader that had been affixed to the rear of an oversized sculpted bull in the Financial District.
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POSTSCRIPT

This report is intended mainly to identify, describe, and classify posters and other changes to the urban landscape that were observed in the aftermath of the World Trade Center disaster. The qualitative method used to gather this data has implications for both future urban hazard research and complimentary analyses on social coping strategies. It allows for a rapid evaluation of immediate post-disaster landscapes, without having to invest major time, and human resources. Future analyses of this data could focus on the spatial differentiation of mourning sites, how spaces of mourning are constructed and change over time and how urban grieving becomes manifested on the landscape as tourist attraction or site of opposition.

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hazctr@colorado.edu

