Saving the Tribute in Light

The Tribute in Light is a contemporary art installation at the World Trade Center site in New York City that was installed as a temporary memorial to the victims of 9/11 and the devastation to the fabric of the city. It is composed of eighty-eight, 7,000 watt xenon lamps housed in searchlights and arranged in two groups approximately forty-eight feet square each with a space in between. In all, the array requires approximately three-quarters of an acre of space.

The lights were conceived by different design teams almost simultaneously with the collapse of the towers and production was begun with support from the city and private donors. They were set-up in a vacant Battery Park parking lot near the World Trade Center site and debuted on March 11, 2002, the sixth month anniversary of the attacks. They were initially illuminated through April 13, 2002; a one-month tribute. Subsequent to the initial tribute though not sanctioned during the preparatory planning and financing, the lights have been illuminated yearly on the anniversary of 9/11 due to the popular and international support they received. They now are lit at dusk on the 11th and slowly fade by dawn on the 12th of each September.

“The 88 searchlights that produce the two beams are currently arrayed once a year on the roof deck of the Battery Garage, six blocks south of the World Trade Center site. But there is no guarantee how long that space will be available.”(1)
The Tribute in Light shines as the ultimate memory site to the events of 9/11 for the New York City region, the United States and the world but is threatened with extinction after 2011, the tenth anniversary of the attacks. The Tribute is widely recognized as highly symbolic, artistic, beautiful, evocative, appropriate, fitting and timeless.

“Tribute In Light is one of the most poignant reminders of the tremendous losses we suffered on that day, as well as the resilience we as a city displayed in the aftermath of September 11...”(3)

“As realized, the concept gives the impression of an image revealed, rather than designed, as if two lustrous columns have been excavated by an archaeological team from the darkness of time. Like classical columns, the towers are fluted, an effect of the 44 individual high power lamps used to create each one. Extra lamps at the corners reinforce the architectonic illusion. ... Observed from beneath, at street level, they register obliquely. The angle to the ground becomes less perpendicular as you approach the light source. The effect is similar to that made by missiles thrusting off into space. Though stationary, the light towers appear aimed for the arrival of signs from above. The eye wants to follow, not just behold them.”(4)

It is mentioned in the current AIA Guide to New York City.

Since its inception, the Tribute in Light established a city tradition and is eagerly anticipated every year. It is the de facto monument to the events of 9/11. But, its official designation as a temporary memorial requires that its placement, set-up, maintenance, testing, illumination and expense be negotiated and funded yearly. It is expected to be made redundant at the completion of the official 9/11 Memorial, Reflecting Absence.

“Nearly three fourths [of victims’ families] said the twin-beam Tribute in Light, whose proportions and placement echo the twin towers, should be made permanent.”(5)

This paper argues that the Tribute has grown into something of far more importance than a temporary memorial. It looks at the Tribute in Light through the eyes of the National Park Service’s National Register Criteria for Evaluation for National Historic Landmarks in light of protecting, preserving and continuing the Tribute in Light. The seemingly self-evident, exceptional qualities and historical significance of the ephemeral Tribute in Light as a national symbol do not easily fit into the National Register Criteria for Evaluation, the traditional notions of an historic monument or the concept of preservation when reviewing its design, materiality, integrity and age.

“Where to start”? (From How to Complete the National Register Registration Form)

The cornerstones of National Historic Landmark qualifications are: retaining and exhibiting historical integrity and having exceptional association within an historic national context or theme. The seven pillars of integrity are: location, setting, materials, workmanship, design, feeling and association. There are six criteria for developing historic context and eight exceptions, any one of which may be used to establish eligibility: (from CFR 36, Part 65)

(a) Specific Criteria of National Significance: The quality of national significance is ascribed to districts, sites, buildings, structures and objects that possess exceptional value or quality in illustrating or interpreting the heritage of the United States in history, architecture, archeology,
engineering and culture and that possess a high degree of integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association, and:

(1) That are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to, and are identified with, or that outstandingly represent, the broad national patterns of United States history and from which an understanding and appreciation of those patterns may be gained; or

(2) That are associated importantly with the lives of persons nationally significant in the history of the United States; or

(3) That represent some great idea or ideal of the American people; or

(4) That embody the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type specimen exceptionally valuable for a study of a period, style or method of construction, or that represent a significant, distinctive and exceptional entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or

(5) That are composed of integral parts of the environment not sufficiently significant by reason of historical association or artistic merit to warrant individual recognition but collectively compose an entity of exceptional historical or artistic significance, or outstandingly commemorate or illustrate a way of life or culture; or

(6) That have yielded or may be likely to yield information of major scientific importance by revealing new cultures, or by shedding light upon periods of occupation over large areas of the United States. Such sites are those which have yielded, or which may reasonably be expected to yield, data affecting theories, concepts and ideas to a major degree.

(b) Ordinarily, cemeteries, birthplaces, graves of historical figures, properties owned by religious institutions or used for religious purposes, structures that have been moved from their original locations, reconstructed historic buildings and properties that have achieved significance within the past 50 years are not eligible for designation. Such properties, however, will qualify if they fall within the following categories:

(1) A religious property deriving its primary national significance from architectural or artistic distinction or historical importance; or

(2) A building or structure removed from its original location but which is nationally significant primarily for its architectural merit, or for association with persons or events of transcendent importance in the nation's history and the association consequential; or

(3) A site of a building or structure no longer standing but the person or event associated with it is of transcendent importance in the nation's history and the association consequential; or

(4) A birthplace, grave or burial if it is of a historical figure of transcendent national significance and no other appropriate site, building or structure directly associated with the productive life of that person exists; or
(5) A cemetery that derives its primary national significance from graves of persons of transcendent importance, or from an exceptionally distinctive design or from an exceptionally significant event; or

(6) A reconstructed building or ensemble of buildings of extraordinary national significance when accurately executed in a suitable environment and presented in a dignified manner as part of a restoration master plan, and when no other buildings or structures with the same association have survived; or

(7) A property primarily commemorative in intent if design, age, tradition, or symbolic value has invested it with its own national historical significance; or

(8) A property achieving national significance within the past 50 years if it is of extraordinary national importance

**Integrity- Design, Location and Setting:**

We must place the Tribute in Light in a National Register category of property. The two most promising categories are “object”, which it clearly is; or “site”, which it clearly is not- however, the object is designed for its site. The object or material being of the Tribute belongs to the City of New York. It is a highly location-specific piece that cannot be taken out of context; but it has no address or metes and bounds, no permanent location. A quote from the designers:

“Not wanting to interfere with the city’s recovery, we proposed that the lights be installed in any of a number of sights[sic] in the immediate vicinity of Ground Zero, but not where the towers had actually stood (one idea was to situate them on barges in the harbor).”

This isn’t to suggest that the Tribute should remain homeless; only that precise location is irrelevant. The fact that the lights neither stand where the towers once did nor that they are not in their original placement, as is generally accepted as part of having historical integrity, is part of their history. Vicinity or a placement zone is important for this object; historically accurate “location” or address is not. The Tribute’s very power emanates from that area of Lower Manhattan where the significant events occurred and the scale of the devastation, emotions and memories rendered larger than life by the Tribute is appropriately (and sensitively) placed in a World Trade Center zone which is in fact its real setting. Its placement, out of the way of rescue teams, construction crews and rebuilding efforts adds layers of meaning to its contextual setting. It matters not what happens immediately around the Tribute, its imagery in unmistakable. One of its exceptional attributes is that it can be experienced by millions of people simultaneously from thirty miles away.

(7) View from Queens, NY
Integrity- Design, Materials and Workmanship

In similar vein to necessarily de-emphasizing the Tribute’s location; the style, materials and workmanship of the Tribute are not what’s important. It is what those materials produce: light. One can argue that the engineering of the Tribute is unique and has superlative qualities such as the most powerful artificial light ever projected into the sky from earth; but its real significance is the symbolism and ideas that the lights project. The light is the monument, not the luminaire. Preserving the luminaires (the means to creating the light) speaks to materials and workmanship. They are only important in that the specifications for quantity, size, spacing, angle, color, intensity, spread and aiming (the light travels 4 miles) be matched in order to produce the same light. By its very design, that is the only way to preserve the light’s integrity; it does not mean that it doesn’t have integrity- light is real; you just can’t touch it. This is an established methodology of contemporary art conservators:

“With the advent of the modern movement in art and the attendant use of mass-produced materials and objects in its creation, many of the former assumptions concerning the treatment of artworks are either impossible to achieve or are irrelevant. As the “hand” of the artist becomes less relevant or apparent, there is a consequent refocusing on idea. The specific object becomes subordinate to the ultimate intent of the artist. Similitude can become an authentic creation rather than an imitation. The idea regains its supremacy over the object.

This implies a drastically new approach to the conservation of art. It allows for actual substitutions of visually similar elements in a work, something that is currently accepted practice ...” (10)
“The material itself conveys messages, metaphorical and otherwise, about objects and their place in culture ...”(12)

Light as monument (and its attendant technology) is a product of our time.

**Integrity- Association and Feeling:**

“Historical preservation is not merely about preserving buildings or structure, but it is also concerned with preserving an essence or importance.”(13)

The Tribute is representative of many things. The concept of “historical appearance”, used to convey the association of the property to the event, focuses on the object rather than the idea behind the object or the idea the object conveys. In this case, the object is light. It conveys, by suggestion, the whole of the World Trade Center, from the towers’ presence, the attacks and their collapse, and to their absence and rebuilding. The Tribute has the outstanding ability to metaphorically be what was steel and glass, eternally linking the light to them and rendering them ethereally. (It is interesting to contemplate that the presence of the World Trade Center Towers had little historical interest; but their absence has.) The association of the Tribute in Light to the absence of the World Trade Center towers is exceptionally clear and the lights render feelings about the whole story.

A picture is worth a thousand words:
**Historical Significance- Criteria 1**

The significant historical theme, today, can be framed in many ways: Wall Street as the financial center of the world, late 20th century globalization, attacks on US soil, war on Iraq, war on Afghanistan, or the war on terrorism. But these are continuing narratives or, as yet, un-developed histories. New York’s and America’s response was and is uniquely American as is America’s responsibility to share its grief and project its spirit, leadership and endurance to the world. Americans continue to be deeply affected by the events of 9/11, for instance through two wars, the enactment of laws, foreign policy and social awareness programs. We are aware of trends that have developed such as worldwide security, anti-Islam sentiments, revisions to building codes and renewed interest in immigration policy. We know that the events of 9/11 were historic we simply don’t know how to put them into a complete historical context.

The Tribute in Light does an exceptional job in marking the spot of the historic event for many, evoking memories of the people, place and time of the event and symbolizing what America has endured, its heroic spirit and its role in global affairs. It also symbolizes and provokes thought about current world politics, society and culture, as well as defining the beginning of trends that are affecting the US and peoples’ lives worldwide.

The significant place: **World Trade Center**.

The significant time: **September 11, 2001**.

The deliberate destruction of the World Trade Center towers and loss of life was a significant event in and of itself: those losses are memorialized officially in Reflecting Absence.

**Historical Context- Exception 8 and Criteria 3**

With the perspective of an un-written yet historically significant event and its response, an age of fifty years, necessary “… to apply the adjective ‘historic’ and to ensure adequate perspective” is erroneous. There was, unquestionably, a deeply affecting, transformative, catastrophic and historic event that occurred on 9/11 and the trend of history is still unfolding.

How the events of 9/11 are interpreted presently and into the future, both nationally and internationally, should be encouraged as an on-going dialog. The design of the Tribute in Light encourages this dialog in an exceptional manner as it generates private and collective memories, free of any agenda-driven influences. It encourages pure memory and provides easy accessibility. It is a uniquely important marker of an event that must not and cannot be forgotten. From an international perspective, it acknowledges all the countries that lost lives and symbolizes the American ideals that attracted them here. It changes the meaning and image of those iconic towers of steel and glass that symbolized New York and America to towers of light. (How poetic is that?) Our perspectives of 9/11 may change in fifty years but the fact is it happened.

"Every relic is a testament not only to its initiator but its inheritors, not only to the spirit of the past but to the perspectives of the present."(15)
History will be written and re-written and re-written again. Acknowledging the events of 9/11 through the Tribute in Light now and assigning a history would be a mistake both to the significance of the events and the educational value of their being. Acknowledging its importance in understanding the United States and defining the character of the American people while letting time decide what they mean is consistent with the Tribute in Light’s ethereal and ephemeral nature.

“To be a living force the past must be ever remade. ... Heritage must feel durable yet pliable.”
(16)

Conclusions

The Tribute in Light deserves to be preserved.

The National Historic Monuments Program’s broad view of eligibility, in principle, makes preserving the Tribute in Light possible, if:

Ideas of materiality and permanence are broadened to include products of contemporary culture, science and technology.

Contemporary art conservation principles and methodologies are accepted practices.

History is accepted as changeable.

Traditional preservation practice must adapt to and accept contemporary culture, science and technology to stay relevant.

“...conservation [preservation] is a means, and not an end in itself. It is a way of maintaining and reinforcing the meanings in an object; it is even a means through which the appreciation for what an object symbolizes is expressed.”(17)

Notes:

(1) ‘Tribute in Light’ Will Keep Shining, This Year and the Next by DAVID W. DUNLAP, www.nytimes.com
September 10, 2010, 1:25 pm


John Sugarman


www.hdwallpapers.im/tribute_in_light_new_york_city-wallpapers.html

www.onlytheblogknowsbrooklyn.typepad.com/only_the_blog-knows_brook/2006/09/n0_words_daily_10.html


S. Lubar and W. D. Kingery, eds, History from Things: Essays on Material Culture, Smithsonian Institute Press, 1993, pp 42; Some Matters of Substance, Robert Friedel

MARK D. BROOKSTEIN, WHEN HISTORY IS HISTORY: MAXWELL STREET, “INTEGRITY,” AND THE FAILURE OF HISTORIC PRESERVATION LAW
