Capturing Images of Progress and Hope

Joel Meyerowitz/ "Aftermath: World Trade Center Archive," Phaidon Press; Joel/Librado Romero/The New York Times

Weeks after 9/11, Joel Meyerowitz photographed messages from ground zero workers on Cedar Street. Almost five years later, right, he saw a clean tile wall.

By DAVID W. DUNLAP
Published: August 31, 2006

JOEL MEYEROWITZ is a photographer. But what he heard yesterday was almost as important as what he saw: the sounds of children squealing with delight as they played on the cascading marble steps of the Winter Garden.

Enlarge this Image

Joel Meyerowitz/ "Aftermath: World Trade Center Archive," Phaidon Press

He remembered five years ago when this vast public space in Battery Park City, opposite the World Trade Center, was so desolate, so silent, that he felt as if he ought to shout "Hello" to no one in particular (since no one else was there), simply out of the need to make and hear a human sound.

It grows easier with every passing day to forget the extent of devastation downtown from the terrorist attack of Sept. 11, 2001. So Mr. Meyerowitz's photographs of the immediate aftermath — many of them being shown for the first time — carry almost more of a visceral impact today than they would have five years ago.

After the attacks, headstones were covered in St. Paul's Cemetery.

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Librado Romero/The New York Times

Almost five years later, St. Paul's Cemetery has green grass where there was once debris and dust.

They are also a barometer of progress and stagnation around ground zero.

His book, "Aftermath: World Trade Center Archive," is being published this month by Phaidon Press and introduced formally in a lecture and exhibition on Sept. 11 at the New York Public Library. Yesterday, Mr. Meyerowitz, 68, walked around the perimeter of the trade center site to discuss what had and hadn't changed since the months in late 2001 and early 2002 when he had almost unimpeded access to the pile and the frozen zone around it.

South of the site, the damaged and abandoned former Deutsche Bank building still stands at 130 Liberty Street. He photographed it on Sept. 26, 2001, with a four-story chunk of the trade center hanging from its facade. "This building seems to me a memorial to the incapacity to make decisions," Mr. Meyerowitz said.

It looms over Cedar Street, where he recorded a dusty tile wall filled with graffiti on Oct. 20: "Plumbers Local One N.Y.C." "Chicago Police." "Buffalo Fire." "God Bless You." "I Still Have Hope." Though he peered closely yesterday, Mr. Meyerowitz could find no trace of this; not even scratches in the tiles.

North of the site, the 52-story 7 World Trade Center stands where Mr. Meyerowitz recorded a patch of blue sky on May 24, 2002. But the shrouded and deserted Fiterman Hall of the Borough of Manhattan Community College, at 30 West Broadway, looks much the way it did four years ago.

To the east, the 240-year-old St. Paul's Chapel presented a scene yesterday that seemed unchanged by the centuries. On Jan. 26, 2002, however, Mr. Meyerowitz found the headstones outside the chapel covered in protective tents.

"We were all told that the toxicity levels were workable," he recalled, "but there they were, protecting these old stones from all the corrosives in the air."

Across Church Street, he glimpsed the Vesey Street staircase behind the steel fence around ground zero; its escalators long since gone and only the upper flight of steps intact. His photograph of Nov. 15, 2001, shows that the escalators — even their glass walls — were still there.

So were the two flights of stairs that served as an important escape route on 9/11, earning them the name "survivors' stairway."

Though it is now battered and stands in the way of the future Tower 2, survivors' advocates and preservationists hope that the Vesey Street staircase will be saved, as the only aboveground remnant of the original World Trade Center.

"Having something, a relic, tells a lot," Mr. Meyerowitz said. "You understand steps. You can see yourself running down or up those steps. It's a way of measuring."

Nothing is left of the pedestrian bridge that connected the trade center to the Winter Garden, which Mr. Meyerowitz enjoyed when he lived in the West Village. He said that he liked attending dance and music concerts or just sitting with a cup of tea under the barrel-vaulted skylight and towering palm trees.

On Oct. 5, 2001, he returned.

"To come in here through a gaping hole where the bridge used to stand, walk through hanging ceiling panels and see those trees blasted, the dust over everything, the emptiness — you could *feel* the tragedy, you could feel the desecration," he said. "To suddenly find it abandoned, in ruins, is to shed light on our civilization."

REBUILT four years ago, with a sheer glass curtain wall in place of the elevated pedestrian bridge, the Winter Garden resounds again with noise.

"It's a play school," Mr. Meyerowitz marveled yesterday.

In the book, his photographic narrative ends in May 2002 with the removal from the site of the last column standing from the trade center. For a time, he imagined staying on the job.

"When my momentum was strongest," Mr. Meyerowitz recalled, "I felt it would be appropriate to chart the progress of rebuilding, thinking it would go forward without delay.

"But I moved on."