Monument to Sentiment: The Discourse of Nation and Citizenship at the Oklahoma City National Memorial

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MONUMENT TO SENTIMENT:
THE DISCOURSE OF NATION AND CITIZENSHIP
AT THE OKLAHOMA CITY NATIONAL MEMORIAL

A Thesis

Presented to
The Faculty of the Program in American Studies
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Caroline Elizabeth Carpenter

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of

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Approved, December 2001

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ABSTRACT

The 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City transformed an unremarkable government building into an historic site, overwriting a landscape of federal authority with a narrative of violent political protest. The public outcry that followed the April 19th explosion denounced both the destruction wrought by the attack and, more subtly, the vision of America it implied. Much of the battle to repudiate McVeigh’s conceptions of nation and citizenship was played out on the bombing site itself, beginning with the initial makeshift shrines in the rubble of the Murrah building and culminating in the construction of the Oklahoma City National Memorial.

This project begins with the assumption that a national monument to commemorate such an unprecedented act of violence and victimization was by no means inevitable. To occupy a permanent place in the culture’s collective memory, the Oklahoma City bombing would have to transcend momentary celebrity and ascend into the realm of the National—a mythical register of events and individuals that have, in some fundamental way, transformed our understanding of the nation. The viability of a prospective memorial would likewise hinge upon a compelling articulation of the bombing’s enduring resonance. Using close readings of the memorialization process, particularly its origins in public mourning practices, and key texts like the Memorial’s Mission Statement and architectural design, this essay traces the development of that crucial argument and, more specifically, the notions of nation and citizenship underpinning it.

Sentiment is critical to the Memorial’s national vision. Rather than focus on the often contentious relationship between the state and its citizens evident in the bombing, the Memorial’s imagined nation privileges the relationships between citizens. According to this model, which is rooted in the outpouring of sympathy and assistance that followed the attack, the nation’s character is determined by that of its citizens, particularly their ability to relate empathetically to one another. By forging a visceral connection with those most intimately affected by the attack, the Memorial seeks to revitalize those bonds even as the immediate horror of the attack dissipates. Thus sentiment is integral both to demonstrating the event’s continued significance and to supplanting the image of America asserted by the bombers; it is the link between the Memorial’s twin goals.
MONUMENT TO SENTIMENT:

THE DISCOURSE OF NATION AND CITIZENSHIP AT

THE OKLAHOMA CITY NATIONAL MEMORIAL
INTRODUCTION: SCENES FROM THE FRONT

If I had known that there was an entire day care center [in the Murrah Building], it might have given me pause to switch targets. That's a large amount of collateral damage.¹

Timothy McVeigh, executed June 11, 2001, for the Oklahoma City bombing

On the morning of April 19, 1995, downtown Oklahoma City resembled a war zone. Shrouded by a cloud of black smoke, the streets littered with debris and swarming with medical personnel and police officers, the scene was both eerily familiar and utterly foreign. As images of this once undistinguished midwestern city flooded living rooms, offices, and classrooms, newscasters likened the chaos to footage of Beirut or Bosnia. Such purposeful and catastrophic destruction, viewers were repeatedly reminded, had no domestic equivalent. The bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, in which a deadly combination of 4,800 lbs. of ammonium nitrate and fuel oil decimated nearly one-third of the nine-story structure, had no parallel in American history. Until the events of September 11, 2001, it was the worst act of terrorism committed on American soil.²

Comparing the violence wrought by the explosion with that incurred during a military conflict is more than a vivid metaphor to titillate audiences. In a very real


² It is too early to determine what effect the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, will have upon the legacy of Oklahoma City. Unfortunately, the scope of this project did not allow for a thoughtful consideration of these developments.
sense, Timothy McVeigh envisioned himself engaged in a military conflict. The Murrah Building was a strategic target in an escalating struggle between the federal government and self-proclaimed citizen-soldiers seeking to curtail its aggression. The epigraph above aptly illustrates this mindset: if the children housed in the day care center are “collateral damage,” a term used by the U.S. military to denote civilian victims, then the federal employees who perished in the explosion were enemy soldiers, the legitimate casualties of war.

While McVeigh’s “war” was short-lived as an armed conflict, his action mounted an ideological offensive whose impact extended far beyond Oklahoma City. Indeed, the public outcry that erupted in the wake of the bombing was directed as much at the vision of the nation it implied as at the attack itself. The multi-faceted response to the bombing—from the media’s packaging of the Patriot movement that allegedly fueled McVeigh’s hostility, to the punishment imposed by the criminal justice system—can be seen as an attempt to repudiate his conception of the nation and of citizenship. The America posited by McVeigh is one in which the interests of the State and those of its citizens have become fundamentally incompatible. According to this vision, citizenship is rooted in the protection and unfettered exercise of individual rights. Since the federal government has demonstrated an ever-increasing willingness to curtail these fundamental rights, all those who align themselves with its apparatus have become political, indeed mortal, enemies; as functionaries of the State and symbols of its power, their deaths measure the State’s vulnerability.
The most visible and enduring rebuttal to McVeigh’s polemic, however, was enacted on the bombing site itself. Family and friends immediately denounced McVeigh’s characterization of the victims by recoding the war-torn landscape. Placing flowers, stuffed animals, and other mementos among the rubble publicly asserted that the dead were more than symbolic casualties slain to convey a terrorist’s “message.” By making their personal grief public, these first memorializers sought to reclaim the victims as individuals and to dispute McVeigh’s claims against the government. In the years after the attack, visitors to the chain link fence that surrounded the empty site expanded this makeshift memorial to include not only the expressions of grieving families, but the sympathy of strangers as well. Each item left on the Fence emphasized the connections between citizens that McVeigh’s assault had flouted, and denied the existence of a dire conflict between Americans and their government. The final phase of this campaign to control the space, and thereby the story, of the bombing came with the building of the Oklahoma City National Memorial. Erected at a cost of nearly $30 million, the 3.3 acre complex consists of a symbolic memorial, a 24,000 square-foot museum, and an institute for the prevention of terrorism.

The first of these three components to be completed was the symbolic memorial. Its dedication on the fifth anniversary of the attack, April 19, 2000, marked the culmination of the most intense period of the memorialization process. This critical five-year span included the organization of memorializers into a Task Force and, later, a nonprofit organization; the composition of the Memorial Mission Statement; the creation of an unprecedented public-private partnership with the
Figure 1. Makeshift memorial in the Murrah Building rubble. Among the items displayed are floral arrangements, stuffed animals, children's artwork, the Oklahoma state flag, and the American flag. Credit: Oklahoma City National Memorial Foundation, “A Progress Report,” 1998, 3.
National Park Service to govern and maintain the property; and the selection of a
design for the symbolic memorial through an international competition. Most
importantly, the first phase of development encompassed the construction of the
Memorial's ideological architecture, its discourse of nation and citizenship. This
essay focuses on the importance of sentiment to the Memorial's national vision and,
in particular, how that discourse plays out in the symbolic memorial.

The memorialization process began informally within days of the attack as
unsolicited ideas and donations for a permanent remembrance of the victims appeared
in Oklahoma City Mayor Ron Norick's office. Planning began in earnest only three
months later with Norick's appointment of a 350-member volunteer task force. The
group, headed by local attorney and civic leader Bob Johnson, was charged with
gathering input from victims' families, survivors and the wider public about what
"visitors to the memorial should think, feel or experience." 3 They were to shape that
information into a mission statement whose objectives would in turn guide a design-
solicitation process; later, they would devise a plan for the design, construction,
administration and maintenance of the future memorial. Although the process was
inclusive from the outset, providing numerous opportunities for public participation,
it was by no means democratic. The wishes of those closest to the bombing—
victims' family members, survivors, and rescue workers—were given the greatest
weight at every stage of the Memorial's development.

3 Oklahoma City National Memorial Foundation, "Oklahoma City Memorial Foundation
/mission1.htm] (29 September 1999), 2.
A brief sketch of the Memorial Mission Statement’s evolution illustrates the dynamics of the project. Unanimously adopted in March 1996, the Mission Statement was the product of a “very intensive, deliberate and inclusive listening process” to determine what sort of experience families, survivors, and the general public felt the Memorial should deliver. Over the course of eight months, the Memorial Ideas Input Subcommittee solicited suggestions from the public, while the Families/Survivors Liaison Subcommittee polled that community for recommendations. To encourage participation among its constituents, the Families/Survivors Liaison Subcommittee placed a “Search for Survivors” notice in local newspapers and published a newsletter to inform those unable to attend the group’s meetings. Similarly, the Memorial Ideas Input Committee coordinated a series of community meetings held at various times and locations to ensure the greatest possible access. A survey which drew upon comments from the initial meeting of families and survivors generated additional input. Disseminated online, by mail, through local newspapers, and at public libraries and post offices, the survey garnered more than 10,000 responses from around the world. The findings of these

4 “Memorial Mission Statement,” 1.

5 This instrument drew upon ideas and comments gleaned from the Families/Survivors Liaison Subcommittee’s first meeting and was reviewed by members of that group as well.

6 The path to consensus was not without obstacles. Tensions and struggles alluded to in the Families/Survivors Liaison Subcommittee’s final report are made plain in newspaper articles published that spring as the first anniversary of the bombing approached. According to these accounts, two issues proved most divisive: determining a way to remember survivors distinct from the recognition due to victims and the public’s intense emphasis on the 19 child victims which belittled the loss of adult children.
two subcommittees were then combined into the Memorial Mission Statement, the “guiding doctrine” of the memorialization process.⁷

Given this broad-based structure, the term “memorializers” embraces a diverse array of participants; the umbrella includes long-time volunteers and committee chairs as well as the nameless thousands who responded to the survey or left their mark upon the Fence. For the purposes of this essay, “memorializers” will refer only to those directly affiliated with the task force and its subsequent incarnation, the Oklahoma City National Memorial Foundation. Since a detailed chronicle of the memorialization process is beyond the scope of this project, those involved will be treated—albeit unfairly—as a cohesive group. My narrative will, however, highlight the privileged place of family members and survivors throughout the Memorial’s development.

Much of the scholarship on collective memory emphasizes the monument’s repressive functions. To briefly summarize this substantial body of work, the monument is typically described as a medium that deploys a narrative of progress to defuse conflict and affirm the dominant ideology. Often a celebration of patriotism and civic duty, the monument rarely venerates citizens’ rights. Whether its historical interpretation is explicit, as in the case of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, or restricted to the level of design, like the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial, all commemorative vehicles seek to reorient, and restrict, collective memory. Insofar as the national monument serves to close off alternative readings of particular events and

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⁷ Permanent Exhibit, Oklahoma City National Memorial Center, Oklahoma City, OK.
individuals, its categorization as a site of repression is well deserved. Yet such spaces, like all nodes of power, are best understood as productive: productive of ideology, of history, and of citizens.

For a national memorial to be “productive,” it must be a space in which citizens experience themselves as national. It is this capacity to foster a sense of belonging to the nation that is the essence of these sites. To put a theoretical spin on it, the national memorial is a hailing mechanism à la Althusser; its discourse of nation and citizenship is the lynchpin of the process. When visitors experience a connection to the nation articulated by a memorial, they are interpellated as citizens of that imagined nation and subject to its ideology. Thus the national memorial is an exceptional weapon of ideological warfare, well suited to the struggle playing out on the footprint of the Murrah Building.

While a national memorial might be the most appropriate rebuttal to McVeigh’s unprecedented act of violence, enshrining a moment of national victimhood was far from inevitable. In many respects, commemorating the bombing defies the conventions of monument-making. However severe the perpetrators’ punishment, their suffering could never be commensurate with the damage they inflicted through the attack. The victims died for no cause. Those who survived were separated from the dead by the narrowest of margins; a trip to the copier or a chance meeting in another office often decided their divergent fates. Whereas a lost war might be remembered for the fallen soldiers’ valor or the principles they sought to

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uphold, the Oklahoma City bombing seemed to be a story of defeat with no redemptive thread. What sort of nation would a monument to the bombing and its victims depict? Would visitors wish to belong to that nation?

Paradoxically, it was precisely these reasons to avoid commemorating the bombing that galvanized the memorialization process. The Oklahoma City National Memorial’s unspoken purpose is to supplant the vision of the nation evident in the bombing with its own discourse. If the April 19th explosion was a thundering accusation, then the Memorial exists to deliver an equally powerful rebuttal. To do so, it must fulfill the promise of the “productive” national memorial. By tracing the development of the Memorial’s discourse of nation and citizenship and analyzing the factors impinging on its mission, this essay seeks to illuminate the process of becoming a national memorial.

To begin that story, the following section introduces what will be a recurring concern of the essay: the challenge of translating a media sensation into an enduring national event that will resonate with future generations. It also considers the way in which McVeigh’s use of terrorism and his complaints against the government shaped the Memorial’s imagined nation, especially its valorization of private acts and emotions. Subsequent sections will enrich this brief overview of the Memorial’s notions of nation and citizenship through readings of the memorialization process and the symbolic memorial’s design.
SETTING THE TERMS OF DEBATE:
THE MEMORIAL’S CLAIMS TO THE NATIONAL

Within hours of the explosion and long before the campaign began to erect a lasting memorial, the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building was marked a national event. The extensive media coverage was set apart from the everyday news by specially designed logos introducing each new segment or article; widely circulated images, most notably the picture of toddler Baylee Almon cradled by her would-be rescuer, became instantly recognizable icons; repeated expressions of condemnation and condolence were broadcast from the White House lawn to domestic and international audiences; numerous federal agencies descended upon Oklahoma City with promised financial and technical assistance; the protracted and highly publicized investigation and trial produced celebrity criminals; the story was quickly incorporated into the national vernacular and recycled into docu-drama television programs and true crime novels. Yet these indicators measured only the bombing’s short-term prominence; they could not predict whether the attack would have any lasting significance for the nation.

As the urgency of the rescue effort gave way to the grim task of recovering bodies, the national spotlight on Oklahoma City slowly faded. Those who wished to commemorate the bombing’s victims were left to contemplate how the attack could be made to occupy an enduring place in the culture’s collective memory. If their
rationale was to resonate with future generations, the bombing would have to
transcend its momentary celebrity and ascend into the realm of the National, a
mythical register of events and individuals that have, in some fundamental way,
transformed our conceptions about the nation. This section considers the
circumstances in which memorializers staked their claim to the National. It attends
first to an obstacle confronted by all contemporary commemorative projects—the
complex and contradictory nature of national events in an age of media-saturation—and then considers factors specific to the Oklahoma City context. How is the
Memorial's vision of the nation and its citizens influenced by McVeigh's criticism of the federal government? How does the bombing's designation as domestic terrorism, so integral to media depictions of the attack, play out in the symbolic memorial?

The paradoxical position of national events at the close of the twentieth
century was a crucial factor influencing the Memorial's claim to the National, the
speed with which it was constructed, as well as its very design. As the Oklahoma City bombing illustrates, the media apparatus plays a crucial role in producing national events. Lauren Berlant persuasively argues that "the increasingly monopolistic mass media act as a national culture industry whose mission is to micromanage how any controversial event or person changes the meaning of being 'American.'" Indeed, the power of capitalist print culture to unite disparate citizens explored by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* has been magnified a

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thousandfold by the penetration of the television into American life. That sense of connection between viewers is further fortified by the increasing homogenization of television news media, particularly global 24-hour news channels like CNN. Moreover, due to the prevalence of human interest stories, which transform unknown casualties into intimate acquaintances, viewer relationships in the current context are often mediated by a shared sympathy for the victims. This triangulation of sentiment is fundamental to the Memorial’s claims to the National, as will soon be evident.

The very qualities which allow the media to christen national events with such authority and speed also render it ill-suited to confer permanence. Walter Benjamin’s conception of information is useful to understanding this contradiction. He warns, “The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only in that moment, it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time.” His description is particularly apt for television, a medium which so incessantly insists upon the “nowness” of its own discourse that it has been conceptualized as the annihilation of memory and history. Against this backdrop of fleeting media and public attention, inscribing a collective memory of the bombing and its victims that would compel both current and future visitors presented a formidable challenge. To transform a media event into a truly national event, the

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12 Doane, 227.
Memorial must make a cogent argument for the bombing’s continued relevance in a culture of forgetting.

The Memorial’s most basic claim to the National rests on the bombing’s designation as a terrorist act. As commonly used by the media, the general public, and political figures, “terrorism” describes violence, or the threat of violence, enacted as a symbolic attack against all Americans in retaliation for the actions of their government. Under the rubric of terrorism, those killed in Oklahoma City transcend their specific identities as unknown residents of an unremarkable midwestern town to become representatives of the nation, the citizen type of Everyman. What might be construed as “random violence” if enacted by a madman becomes an overdetermined sign of all Americans’ vulnerability. More pragmatically, the terrorism label was a practical necessity authorizing not only extensive federal assistance in the immediate wake of the attack but subsequent government funding for commemorative efforts.

However well deserved the appellation, the terrorism label carries with it several unwelcome implications. Framing the bombing as an act of domestic terrorism inevitably privileges McVeigh’s perspective even as his tactics are vilified. It gives his grievances a national forum and, at the very least, stimulates further debate about those issues. The victims’ lives are reduced to their inadvertent association with McVeigh’s cause, individuality eclipsed by their collective fate. As a result, the Memorial’s emphasis on terrorism is highly selective. The Mission Statement refers to the bombing as an incident of domestic terrorism only once, and

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13 This definition is, however, significantly more narrow than that used by terrorism theorists—as well as the Patriot movement—in that it necessarily excludes state violence from the category of terrorism.
barely acknowledges that most victims were federal employees. The inscription
greeting visitors outside the symbolic memorial asks only that they come to “know
the impact of violence;” it is left to the National Park Service brochure to specify the
type of violence enacted on April 19. Like an elaborate frame which signals to
viewers that the image enclosed within is Art, the Memorial deploys the terrorism
label to justify the national significance of its subject but quickly diverts attention
elsewhere.

To a certain extent, this ambivalence may be attributed to the needs of
memorializers, many of whom were still grieving their personal losses as the
Memorial was being developed. Aware that the bombing’s national prominence was
predicated on the notion that all Americans were the symbolic target of the attack,
memorializers nevertheless struggled to maintain each victim’s unique identity. Their
conviction that visitors to the Memorial should know the bombing’s victims as
individuals rather than metaphorical casualties is illustrated by several requirements
in the Mission Statement. Not only must every victim be listed by name in the
symbolic memorial, but also the accompanying Memorial Center must include
photographs and biographies of each victim. The 168 Days campaign, which
honored one victim every day in the months preceding the Memorial’s dedication,
likewise demanded that the victims be remembered as more than representatives of
the State. That the symbolic memorial’s design strikes a delicate balance between
such opposing drives—to universalize the victims or individualize them—reflects

14 While both of these stipulations also apply to the survivors of the blast, their remembrance
in the symbolic memorial must be distinct from the tribute to the dead according to the Mission
Statement.
broader tensions in a memorialization process that strove to privilege the wishes of family members, survivors, and rescue workers yet create a memorial befitting a national audience.\(^{15}\)

Whereas memorializers were able to dispel the more odious implications about terrorism’s victims, the political connotations of the label proved more difficult to negotiate. No matter how loudly their methods are condemned, the terrorism moniker leaves open the possibility that the bombers’ claims against the government may have some basis.\(^{16}\) It opens the door to a discussion of grievances and allows the perpetrators, at least initially, to frame the debate. The magnitude of that threat is evident in the public’s fascination with the Patriot movement as the likely inspiration for the plot. Even as political figures and the media belittled this ideology as extremist and paranoid, the ink expended in the effort spoke to the need for such a dismissal. The Memorial’s discourse of nation and citizenship must deny the bombers any measure of legitimacy. Holding the terrorism label at a distance invites continued scrutiny of the perpetrators’ actions while forestalling substantive discussion of their complaints. In essence, the Memorial casts the bombing as a crime without a motive.

Fully engaging the bombing as a terrorist act would also constitute a rhetorical victory for McVeigh by conceding to him the terms of debate. The April \(^{19th}\)

\(^{15}\) This tension between individualizing the victims and universalizing them is evident throughout the memorialization process. Visitors must be able to imagine that the dead could be their mother, son, or sister, yet simultaneously appreciate a family’s loss of a particular individual.

\(^{16}\) Picard notes that the label itself is used as a “semantic weapon to place dissenters far outside the parameters of social norms, thus allowing societies to refuse to deal with the individuals and/or to act against ‘terrorists’ in ways that would not be tolerated against ‘civilized’ persons.” Robert G. Picard, *Media Portrayal of Terrorism: Functions and Meaning of News Coverage* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1993), 10.
explosion sought to revitalize discussion about the role of the federal government in the lives of private citizens. This long-standing debate, which has circled around a variety of divisive issues throughout the nation's history, crystallized for McVeigh during the federal government's 1993 assault on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas. For McVeigh and other Patriot sympathizers, Waco marked a decisive shift in the often contentious relationship between the state and its citizens, an ominous sign of things to come. Executed on the second anniversary of the fiery confrontation that killed 83 members of the sect, Oklahoma City's designation as a terrorist act rests upon the incident at Waco. Since any sustained focus on the bombing as domestic terrorism inevitably leads back to Waco, basing the Memorial's claims to the National on this foundation would give the bombers' grievances continued national prominence. Even the explicitly educational Memorial Center resists acknowledging the link between the bombing and Waco. The permanent exhibition offers no explicit motive for McVeigh's actions and segregates the investigation in small rooms adjacent to the museum's primary pathway. The sole mention of Waco notes that McVeigh traveled to the small Texas town during the ATF/Branch Davidian confrontation and "allegedly expressed deep anger following the outcome in which many people died inside the complex."\textsuperscript{17} Otherwise, visitors are left to assume that McVeigh's ideology, which "support[s] anti-government violence," is to blame.\textsuperscript{18} For all its efforts to exclude Waco and the rhetoric of

\textsuperscript{17} Oklahoma City National Memorial Foundation, "Investigation: The First Days," in Chapter 6 of the permanent exhibition, Oklahoma City National Memorial Center, 2001.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
terrorism, what the Memorial cannot discuss nonetheless functions as a defining absence that shapes its depiction of the bombing story.

Eschewing such uncomfortable questions about the government's alleged aggression against its citizens, the Memorial seeks an alternative route to the National, one that shifts the focus away from the state and toward the citizen. The Memorial's claims to the National are grounded in a particular conception of the nation, one that regards the relationships between citizens as paramount. Excluding the state almost entirely, this model frames the bombing and everything after as actions performed by individual citizens to help, or harm, one another. A victim's identity as a federal employee (or a rescue worker, for that matter) is therefore overshadowed by her multiple private roles as mother, wife, daughter, and friend. Likewise, no matter how admirable the principles McVeigh sought to uphold, they do not make his actions any less murderous. This horizontal perspective allows the Memorial to structure its narrative as a comparison of two modes of citizenship, that exemplified by the bombers and the response to the attack. Both the bombing and the caretaking that followed are integral components of the event.

Exalting citizen behavior in this manner means that private acts make for public good. According to the Memorial's brand of citizenship, then, the nation's character is determined by that of its citizens, particularly their ability to relate empathetically to one another. This premise underlies the Foundation's assertion that the bombing "reminded us that we are a great nation, . . . capable of great compassion and selflessness."\(^{19}\) The nation posited by the Memorial is thus a feeling collective

\(^{19}\) Oklahoma City National Memorial Foundation, "About the Oklahoma City Memorial Foundation," n.d., [http://connections/oklahoman.net/memorial/about.htm] (29 September 1999), 1.
where proper citizenship is defined by one's reaction to the bombing. Lauren Berlant’s description of the intimate public sphere in *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* suggests that the Oklahoma City National Memorial is part of a larger cultural shift toward a model of citizenship based on personal acts and affect. Contrasting the present situation to Jürgen Habermas’ analysis of the public sphere’s transformation under late capitalism, Berlant contends that

> the intimate public sphere of the U.S. present tense renders citizenship as a condition of social membership produced by personal acts and values, especially acts originating or directed toward the family sphere. No longer valuing personhood as something directed toward public life, contemporary nationalist ideology recognizes a public good only in a particularly constricted notion of simultaneously lived private worlds.  

Although Berlant is primarily concerned with the way in which sex and sexuality are deployed in the intimate public sphere, the reorientation of citizenship that she identifies is plainly evident in Oklahoma City as well. Although Berlant is primarily concerned with the way in which sex and sexuality are deployed in the intimate public sphere, the reorientation of citizenship that she identifies is plainly evident in Oklahoma City as well.

Under this system, an event can achieve national status without regard to the proportion of Americans who are directly affected. What matters instead is that they be “touched” by it. That citizens dispersed throughout the country experienced a connection, albeit media-induced, to the bombing’s victims and their grieving family members rendered it a national event. Indeed, the Memorial Mission Statement is insistent on this point, opening with the assertion, “Few events in the past quarter-century have... brought together the people of our nation with greater intensity than the April 19, 1995, bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in downtown...  

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20 Berlant, 5.
Oklahoma City.” The outpouring of sympathy and assistance that followed the attack bears witness to this collective grief and the need for a national memorial.

To flesh out this skeletal portrait of the Memorial’s notion of citizenship, the next section looks closely at the special place accorded the Fence in the memorialization process. The reverence with which memorializers regard the Fence and its objects suggests that this spontaneous shrine is a microcosm of the Memorial’s ideal nation. It is here that the Memorial’s brand of citizenship—what I term compassionate citizenship—is displayed, labeled, and archived. Thus, a critical reading of the Fence will illuminate the type of citizenship the Memorial seeks to instill in visitors.
THE FENCE: READING THE MEMORIAL’S STORY OF ORIGIN

Shortly after the federal building’s implosion, 23 May 1995, a galvanized chain-link fence was placed around the Murrah footprint to demarcate and protect the site, already considered by many to be sacred ground. With the erection of the Fence, the makeshift memorial which had sprung from the rubble in the weeks after the bombing took a more enduring form. As increasing numbers of visitors wove mementos into its metal fabric, the Fence evolved into an ever-changing quilt of traditional remembrances, such as photographs, silk flowers, stuffed animals, and personal messages, and seemingly inexplicable items like license plates, conference nametags, t-shirts, and even tennis shoes. For more than three years, the Fence was the literal and figurative prism through which tens of thousands of visitors viewed the site. Today the Fence comprises a portion of the permanent Memorial’s western boundary. In the words of the designers, the Fence “stands symbolically on the Healing Side of the Memorial site,” where it continues to receive all manner of tokens from visitors.

In the years since the bombing, the Fence has assumed a central place in the grieving practices of victims’ families and friends, as well as complete strangers. To

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grasp its role in the broader memorialization process, however, the Fence must be understood as a symbol of the outpouring of sympathy and material assistance that occurred in the wake of explosion. As the most visible and enduring evidence of the public’s connection to the bombing and, more pointedly, to its victims, the Fence is the crux of the Memorial’s claim to the National. A close scrutiny of the Memorial’s treatment of the Fence illuminates its perception of the nation’s relationship to the bombing and, more specifically, how the bombing mediates relationships between citizens.

From the perspective of memorializers, the multi-faceted response to the bombing included not only the efforts of professionals such as rescue workers, medical personnel, investigators, clerics, and city, state, and federal employees, but also the contributions of volunteers like the “first responders” (survivors who assisted their colleagues in the Murrah Building to safety), countless blood donors, and those who gave millions of dollars to victims’ families, disaster relief agencies, and the city and state. Finally, and most pertinent to the Fence, the response encompassed the myriad expressions of sympathy that followed the attack and persist to this day. While numerous cards, letters, artwork, and small crafts were sent to specific families, the city’s mayor and Governor Frank Keating, the Fence became the most visible repository for this public outcry.

While the preceding delineation of professionals and volunteers, material assistance and psychological comfort is useful to describe the scope of the response, it draws distinctions that are intentionally blurred by the Memorial Foundation.23 For

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memorializers, the multitude of individual acts that comprise the response are united by the spirit in which they were performed.

In the aftermath of the bombing, people of all colors, ages, religions and political philosophies reached out in love—from co-workers, bystanders and professionals who appeared almost instantly to help at the site to individuals thousands of miles away who sent letters of support or funds to provide for devastated families.  

Describing the response to the bombing as so many acts of love distinguishes it from charity, which presumes a substantial difference in the relative socioeconomic standings of the giver and the recipient and, more importantly, implies a limited or superficial emotional connection. The rhetoric of love, in contrast, suggests a mutual relationship. It infuses the diverse elements of the response with sentiment, thereby elevating them above mere civic duty. No longer the work of generous strangers and professional caregivers, the response instead resembles a gift exchange between family and friends in which the objects offered are secondary to the sentiment expressed.

This is not to suggest that memorializers do not recognize outstanding efforts as such. The rescue and recovery teams are clearly first among responders and are emphasized accordingly in the symbolic Memorial. However, the comparison between the actions of the bombers and those of responders at the heart of the Memorial’s narrative requires that differences of degree be minimized so that the collective nature of the response may be foregrounded. An emotional connection to the bombing and, more specifically, to those affected by the attack is the common thread linking all responders. The Fence, then, is crucial to the Memorial’s story.

Figure 2. The Fence: Where We Hang Our Hearts. Credit: Caroline Carpenter, January 10, 2000.
Laden with "gifts" of sympathy, grief, and outrage, it bespeaks "the depth of feelings evoked" by the attack and makes visible the bonds between citizen-strangers that gave rise to the whole spectrum of activities retrospectively labeled "the Response."25

According to the creation story recounted in the Mission Statement, the Memorial itself is an outgrowth of these bonds. "Within days of the bombing, the Mayor’s office, the Governor’s office, non-profit agencies and citizens of Oklahoma City began to receive suggestions, ideas and offers of donations related to the creation of a memorial."26 Like the rapid growth of the Fence, the public’s immediate and spontaneous call for a memorial testified to the attack’s resonance among citizens.27

Their broad-based demand predated and, to some extent, impelled the official decision to commemorate. In the Mission Statement’s account, the appointment of the task force is prefaced by a telling description of Mayor Norick as "mindful of the far-reaching impact of the bombing."28 This loosely causal sequence suggests that the recent flood of letters into Norick’s office influenced not only his frame of mind, but the ensuing creation of the task force as well.

Thus the origin of both the Fence and the larger Oklahoma City National Memorial lies with the people who were moved by the event, who expressed their desire for commemoration by visiting the Fence or offering ideas for a more

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27 Indeed, Sunni Mercer, former director of the Memorial Center, attributed both the letters and the Fence phenomenon to a national need to connect with Oklahoma City in a speech at the annual conference of the American Association of Museums. Jeff West, Chair, "Healing Communities: Collecting and Interpreting Tragedy," (panel discussion at the annual meeting of the American Association of Museums, Baltimore, Maryland, May 17, 2000).
permanent monument. Their emotional investment renders the bombing a national event and authorizes the construction of a national memorial. That the initiators included both strangers with no personal ties to the victims and those most intimately acquainted with the violence wrought by the bombing—friends and family members of the victims, survivors, and rescue workers—is integral to the Memorial’s claim to the National. In fact, the Fence’s privileged place in the memorialization process stems in part from its role as a symbolic meeting place for the two groups, where their parallel narratives of loss converge. The public attraction to the Fence underscores the national scope of the bombing’s psychological impact, while the attachment of family members, survivors, and rescuers legitimates the Fence as an authentic memorial reflecting the experience of those closest to the event.29

The essence of the Fence is its capacity to connect visitors to the bombing. Indeed, the Memorial’s reading of the Fence—a constellation of beliefs about visitors’ interaction with the site and the expectations attributed to that group—constructs it as a site for pilgrimage. This designation posits an emotionally charged relationship between those for whom the site is sacred (the potential pilgrims) and the event that transformed the landscape into sacred space. Since the event itself has no intrinsic meaning without human interpreters, it can have no symbolic impact upon the landscape. Rather, the pilgrims’ connection to that event imbues the site with meaning. In the case of Oklahoma City, the decoration of the Fence confirms for


29 That family members, survivors, and rescue workers specifically requested to preserve a large portion of the Fence in the permanent memorial is offered as further proof of its importance by the Memorial Foundation. See, for example, “The ‘Moving’ Fence Ceremony” in the Foundation’s 1999 Progress Report, 8.
memorializers that the site has been widely accepted as sacred and suggests that the “believers” share a particular interpretation of the bombing.

The Memorial’s Scope of Collections document offers the most revealing portrait of the Fence and its visitors. Written in 1996 under the direction of the task force’s Archives Subcommittee, the document gives special attention to objects left at the Fence as the seed of the larger collection. It takes the notion of “sacred ground” expressed in the Mission Statement a bit further and sacralizes the Fence itself.30 While location is crucial to this new status, the dynamic interaction between visitors and the site also factors heavily in the Scope of Collections’ logic. Beyond merely preserving this aspect of the Oklahoma City experience, “efforts will be made to document [through photographs] the arrangement and association of objects deposited at the Memorial.”31 This pledge assumes that the giver sought to invest the object with additional meaning by setting it in a particular context. Trying to recapture the elusive moment in which an object was placed at the site also makes an otherwise ordinary gesture somehow extraordinary.

The Scope of Collections’ insistence that no attempt be made to obtain information about the objects reflects a similar reverence for the Fence “phenomenon.”32 Any sort of inquiry, even printed brochures, would disrupt the Memorial’s “contemplative atmosphere” and could “alter the nature of materials left

30 “Memorial Mission Statement,” 3.

31 “Memorial Scope of Collections,” 8. Although the document broadly addresses the practice of leaving items at the site, it is clear that this practice stems from the Fence whose objects form the foundation of the Collection. The Collection’s provenance is described as “the unprecedented and unanticipated outpouring of compassionate giving [that followed the attack] much in the form of memorials, mementos and messages left at the site,” 4.

32 Ibid, 9.
at the site, thereby changing the character of the Collection." 33 These descriptions mystify the interaction between visitors and the site, casting it as a powerful, yet fragile, relationship that must be preserved in its purest form. Such awe derives in part from an unusual segment of the Memorial’s Collection. Along with prepared mementos like greeting cards, floral wreaths, stuffed animals, and American flags, the Collection includes what appear to be impromptu donations: license plates, hubcaps, tennis shoes, conference nametags, key chains, and military insignia. These haphazard gifts suggest that the Murrah site not only attracts numerous visitors, but that, once there, they are compelled to leave something of themselves behind. In much the same way that the bombing sparked an immediate response from a diverse set of helpers, this segment of the Collection demonstrates that the Fence inspires a spontaneous reaction in its visitors. The objects left behind are then traces of the connection between visitors and the bombing’s victims that was catalyzed by the Fence.

The concept of a pilgrimage also presumes that visitors to the Fence are trying to get close to something and hope be changed by their proximity. Rather than speculate about what visitors to the Fence hope to encounter, consider what this aspect of pilgrimage reveals about the desires of the memorializers themselves. They believe that the Fence produces an emotional engagement with the bombing and its aftermath that transforms visitors to some degree. While descriptions of the Fence suggest that its transformative power is an inherent property, the same cannot be said of a permanent monument. Not only would visitors be removed from the immediate shock of the attack, but the raw anguish visible on the Fence would be difficult to

33 Ibid.
capture in a formal design. Despite these obstacles, the Memorial Mission Statement insists that the symbolic memorial be invested with a parallel capacity to connect and to change. The following section examines how this expectation propels the Mission Statement’s vision of a permanent memorial that will return visitors to a time when the bombing was a fresh wound rather than a slowly disappearing scar. If visitors are to forge the sort of bonds that characterize compassionate citizenship, it is essential that the Memorial recapture that initial sense of horror and profound loss. It must, in some sense, stop time.
THE PSYCHOLOGICAL BLUEPRINT: FROM MISSION STATEMENT TO MEMORIAL

As the "cornerstone document shaping the meaning and guiding the design and development of the Memorial," the significance of the Mission Statement to the intellectual and physical construction of the Oklahoma City National Memorial cannot be overestimated.\(^3\) \(^4\) The Mission Statement served as a roadmap for entries in the design competition and it was the measure against which those submissions were judged. Yet the document contains precious little information about what the future memorial should look like. The few specific requirements carry immense symbolic importance but have limited aesthetic impact.\(^3\) \(^5\) In lieu of a comprehensive directive on how the past should be remembered, the Mission Statement offers a psychological blueprint outlining "what visitors to the bombing Memorial should think, feel or experience."\(^3\) \(^6\) The expectation that visitors be changed by their interaction with the Memorial, which clearly aligns the future memorial with a site of pilgrimage, permeates the document. Visitors should leave with their spirits uplifted, reassured

\(^3\) "Memorial Mission Statement," 1. The Memorial Mission Statement was also the basis for legislation that designated the Memorial a unit of the National Park Service and appropriated $5 million in federal funding.

\(^4\) For example, the memorial must contain the names of both victims and survivors, although the recognition of the latter group should be "in a manner separate, distinct, and apart from the tribute to... those who died." *Ibid.*, 3.

that “the world holds far more good than bad” and inspired to “live their lives more meaningfully.”

Given the nature of this transformation and the brutality of the event commemorated, the Memorial must elicit a remarkable blend of emotions in its visitors, essentially distilling hope from grief.

Although the Mission Statement is fairly inarticulate about how these feelings are to be evoked, a rudimentary sketch of the process is discernable. Two preconditions must be in place for the Memorial to deliver the desired psychological experience. A brief introduction to these precepts will suffice for now; subsequent discussion of the Mission Statement will elaborate their respective roles in the visitor’s interaction with the site and its story. First, visitors must accept and affirm the Memorial’s notions of the nation and of citizenship. This model regards the relationships among citizens as paramount so that the measure of a person’s behavior is calibrated not in relation to the state, but according to its impact on other citizens. As a fundamental operating assumption of the Mission Statement, this redefinition casts a long shadow across the document.

The second requirement derives from the first: visitors must forge an intense emotional engagement with those closest to the bombing, grieving family members, survivors, rescuers, and even victims. Compelling this sort of identification helps to bring the Memorial’s imagined nation to life: the visitors’ empathy underscores the similarities between citizens and highlights the private losses wrought by public actions. This criterion, implicit in the Mission Statement and clearly conveyed in the international design competition, also seeks to mitigate the effect of time passing on the bombing’s prominence in national memory. Keeping the initial horror of the

37 Ibid., 4.
bombing raw requires a highly experiential design capable of eliciting visitors’ sympathy for years to come.

At some level, both of these preconditions are a consequence of the leadership role afforded to victims’ family members, survivors, and rescuers. Although the democratized memorialization process incorporated numerous opportunities for public input, it consistently and unapologetically privileged the wishes of those closest to the attack. The hope that visitors will be moved by the bombing reflects the personal needs of this core group of memorializers; for their loss to elicit sympathy among strangers lends a measure of significance to an otherwise senseless death. Yet, however private its origins, the Mission Statement is fundamentally oriented toward the public whose participation at the memorial will render the bombing a truly national event. The document’s preamble provides a starting point for examining the trajectory of a visitor’s emotional experience:

_We come here to remember_  
_those who were killed, those who survived, and those changed forever._  
_May all who leave here know the impact of violence._  
_May this memorial offer comfort, strength, peace, hope, and serenity._

Elaborating upon the preamble’s call to remember “those who were killed, those who survived, and those changed forever,” the Mission Statement provides

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38 A similar split occurs in depictions of the Oklahoma City National Memorial Collection. While the development of the Collection is described in “The Scope of Collections” as “history being written from the ground up,” this document also calls special attention to the role of family members in this process. The Memorial Collection is “determined almost exclusively by emotion—by the love of a child for the parent she wasn’t old enough to remember—by the anguish of a family for a child lost in the bombing, by nostalgia, frustration, anger, pride—all the emotions that made this event and our involvement such a difficult chapter in our most recent past,” 21, 20.

39 Similarly, the nation as such played a very limited role in their lived experience. That the perpetrators’ symbolic target was the federal government is largely irrelevant to families who endured the loss of a child, parent, or spouse.
further instructions as to what form that memory should take, insisting that visitors develop an understanding of victims and survivors as individuals. Requiring the symbolic memorial to include the names of all victims and survivors is but the Mission Statement’s first step toward fulfilling that objective. The Mission Statement further individualizes those killed or injured in the explosion by emphasizing their familial roles. The mandate that the Memorial Center display photographs and biographies for each victim, written by their families, assures that family ties will remain at the forefront. This display of intimacy primes visitors not only to identify with the victims, but to experience vicariously the loss endured by their loved ones.

In a more subtle maneuver, the Mission Statement casts the bombing as an attack on families. The first mention of the victims gives little attention to their physical suffering and instead figures each death as a wound inflicted on their family. Each member of the familial body will “forever bear the scars of having had those precious to them taken away so brutally.” As previously noted, the bombing is characterized only once as a “terrorist attack” and the fact that most victims were public servants is barely acknowledged. When victims are referred to as co-workers, it is to highlight their place in a network of relationships, rather than their affiliation with the federal government. Beyond its obvious contribution to the individualization of the victims, this perspective serves to obscure the state’s role in

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40 “Memorial Mission Statement,” 1.
41 Ibid., 4.
42 Ibid., 2.
43 Ibid., 4.
the bombing story. The omission, which circumvents potential questions about the state’s involvement in the events precipitating the attack, namely the incident at Waco, is the Memorial’s redefinition of citizenship at work.

The language of remembrance in the preamble belies the Mission Statement’s insistence that the Memorial offer more than a recollection of once powerful feelings and should instead seek to solicit those feelings anew. The first two sentences of the preamble lay the groundwork for such a visceral connection to the bombing. Focusing on the attack’s violence against both bodies and minds is critical to making the psychological impact of the bombing imaginatively accessible to future generations and facilitating the transformation envisioned by the Mission Statement.

The call to “know the impact of violence” in the second sentence carries two distinct connotations. The Mission Statement discusses violence as a socio-cultural problem in its description of the Memorial Center, where visitors will come to know violence, specifically that which was enacted on April 19th, through an interactive exhibition. A second sense of knowing that is more experiential in character, implying an emotional engagement beyond the passive absorption of facts, also pervades the document. It is this sort of knowing, which meshes perfectly with the Memorial’s notion of citizenship, that dominated the design competition and was powerfully conveyed in the winning submission.

To assist entrants in translating the Mission Statement’s psychological blueprint into a material form, organizers of the international design competition

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44 Ibid.
mounted a private exhibition to "recreate the horror and heroics of the bombing."\textsuperscript{46} While designers might be familiar with the once-shocking media images and descriptions, a visit to the exhibit in the ruins of the Murrah parking garage served to "[place] them hauntingly and powerfully there."\textsuperscript{46} It proved so effective that the Memorial Foundation allowed special guests to tour the exhibit throughout the construction phase of the symbolic memorial.

The multimedia exhibit began in darkness. The silence was broken by the only recording of the bombing, caught by a tape recorder documenting a routine meeting of the Water Resources Board across the street. Nine television screens then flashed an eight-minute montage of the chaos that followed the explosion. The subsequent rooms drew viewers into the personal experiences of post-bombing Oklahoma City. The second room featured a rescue worker’s cot decorated with children’s drawings and origami cranes. This tableau emphasized the rescue worker’s personal relationship to the people of Oklahoma City rather than his or her professional service to the community. The final room displayed belongings recovered from the wreckage and items left at the Fence; a tally of 168 deaths was drawn on the wall and Bette Midler’s "The Wind Beneath My Wings" played continuously. These remnants of the dead provided a window into their families’ grief.

\textsuperscript{45}Jesse Katz, "Inspiration Sought in Horror; Oklahoma City Wants Memorial Designers to Feel Bomb Victims’ Pain," \textit{Los Angeles Times}, 7 January 1997, A5.

\textsuperscript{46}Kim Cobb, "Exhibit conveys Oklahoma City tragedy to memorial designers," \textit{Houston Chronicle}, 8 February 1997, A12.
When it was first unveiled, the Foundation’s director of communications commented that visitors to the exhibit are “a little overwhelmed,” and added, “I’ve never seen so many grown men cry.”47 One of the exhibit’s organizers noted, “I think we’re getting our point across.”48 By mounting such an experiential exhibition, the Foundation conveyed to prospective designers its expectation that the Memorial should evoke strong emotions as well. If visitors to the Memorial are similarly horrified by the suffering inflicted by the bombing, their visceral involvement confirms the memorializers’ resolve that “[the families’] losses were not in vain.”49 More broadly, the bombing’s continued capacity to “touch” a broad spectrum of people validates its status as a pilgrimage site and a national memorial.

While integral to a visitor’s engagement with the bombing story, shared grief is not the desired endpoint of the Memorial experience. Contradicting the emphasis on destruction and loss in the first two sentences of the preamble, the final line demands a decisive shift in emotional orientation. The Mission Statement envisions this turnabout as the logical outcome of a comparison between the divergent components of the Memorial’s story. When visitors regard “the brutality of the evil” and “the tenderness of the response,” they should find in this juxtaposition an “inspiring contrast.”50 More precisely, their comparison should focus on the individuals who represent each side of the bombing story and the modes of citizenship they embody.

47 Ibid.

48 Katz.

49 “About the Oklahoma City National Memorial Foundation,” 2.

The Mission Statement’s parallel depictions of the two groups construct an implicit comparison. Whereas the bombers were denounced as cowards by political figures and described obliquely by the Memorial Task Force as “the forces that sought to divide us,” those who participated in the rescue and recovery effort—an endeavor characterized by “unity, compassion, even heroism”—stand as a mirror opposite. The helpers are profoundly human and individualized. Whether they are professional caretakers or strangers offering sympathy and support, their efforts are an expression of that most uniquely human emotion, love. In stark contrast, the bombers are described as disembodied forces. Their act exemplifies evil, the antithesis of love.

As dramatic as this disparity is, it does not necessarily inspire hope. On what grounds can the Memorial deliver an “uplifting experience” to its visitors? The Mission Statement’s discussion of a special place for children at the Memorial provides a telling clue. For the Memorial to assure children “that the world holds far more good than bad” the comparison must be a quantitative measurement in which the actions of the helpers somehow outweigh those of the bombers. Yet even if the visitor judges the scales to tip in favor of the helpers, the victory is rather shallow. No matter how compassionate or heroic their efforts, the actions of a relatively small group of people over a limited period of time is a shaky foundation for such a sweeping message. An objective assessment, however, is not the point. Not only is this method incapable of producing the kind of positive, transformative experience

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51 “About the Oklahoma City National Memorial Foundation,” 1; “Memorial Mission Statement,” 2.
outlined in the Mission Statement, it runs counter to that document’s emphasis on engaging the visitor’s emotions. Most importantly, it ignores the most basic function of a national monument as a place where citizens experience themselves as national.

This is not to jettison entirely the notion of quantitative measurement, but rather to revise the dynamic between the visitor and the scale by understanding the memorial as a space that elicits a sense of national belonging. Entering into the nation imagined by the Memorial radically broadens the terms of comparison and makes possible a positive assessment of the bombing. If a visitor has been drawn into the bombing story, his or her response fuses with the actions of the helpers and tips the scale slightly. As an extension of the outpouring of emotional support that followed the attack, exemplified by the many evocative items left at the Fence, the sympathy of Memorial visitors is part of the response to the bombing. These sentiments are no less important than the life-saving efforts of rescue workers, according to the Mission Statement, since both embody the spirit of love that gave rise to the response. Furthermore, once the visitor understands their response as echoing the feelings of countless others, then the caring demonstrated by the helpers is not exceptional, but emblematic of America’s citizenry. Their combined sentiments, as weighty as actions, provide a powerful counterbalance to the destruction unleashed by the bombers. Experiencing oneself as national at the Memorial, which hinges upon an understanding of the nation as a feeling collective where certain emotions are the hallmark of citizenship, is what enables the visitor to take comfort in the bombing story.

Turning a moment of victimhood into a source of solace and strength, while vital to the Mission Statement’s ideal visitor experience, is secondary to the Memorial’s larger objective. More critical than extracting some good from McVeigh’s crime is redeeming the nation as a whole. As they leave the Memorial visitors should regard McVeigh’s action, and the deviant sense of patriotism underlying it, as a terrible aberration. Having vicariously experienced the “brutality of the evil” and recognized in themselves “the tenderness of the response,” they should be ready to embrace the Memorial’s vision of America. A visitor’s affirmation of the Memorial’s notions of nation and citizenship is the true transformation of this pilgrimage.

Prospective designers of the Oklahoma City National Memorial confronted a daunting task in attempting to render the complex emotional process described by the Mission Statement in a physical form. The winning proposal would have to strike a delicate balance to fulfill memorializers’ seemingly contradictory expectations. It would have to impress upon visitors the horror of such a sudden loss while celebrating the actions of helpers in such a way as to invest the site with a sense of hope. The subsequent section details how the winning design achieves such engagement with visitors, priming them to become part of the ongoing response to the bombing.
CITIZENSHIP MATERIALIZED: THE BUTZER DESIGN

Following its pattern of broad participation, the Oklahoma City National Memorial Foundation’s international design competition was open to professionals and amateurs alike for a minimal entrance fee of $25. The six-month selection process sought to balance input from design professionals and memorial stakeholders, yet insured that families and survivors would hold sway in the final selection. As always, the Mission Statement’s special authority was acknowledged throughout the competition. Entrants and judges were instructed that the winning submission would be that which “most appropriately interpret[ed] the guidance offered in the Mission Statement.”

The contest attracted entries from every state and 23 countries. More than 10,000 people attended an exhibition of all 624 submissions in March 1997. The public viewing was followed by the deliberations of the Design Evaluation Panel, composed of six design professionals, three members of the Families/Survivors Liaison Subcommittee, and one nonvoting recorder. These ten individuals, appointed by the Mayor upon the recommendation of the Foundation’s Board of Directors,

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narrowed the pool to five finalists and ten honorable mentions. More extensive proposals from each of the five finalists were exhibited three months later. During this phase, family members and survivors were invited to submit their recommendations to the Design Selection Committee that would ultimately choose the winning design. Unlike the Evaluation Panel, the Committee was heavily weighted with members of the Families/Survivors Liaison Subcommittee; representatives of this group held eight of the Committee’s fifteen slots. On July 1, 1997, the Foundation announced the Committee’s unanimous decision to select the Butzer Design Partnership’s submission as its winner.

In their review of the five finalists, the Selection Committee highlighted a number of areas in which the winning submission surpassed the other entries. It sparked no immediate technical concerns which might bring disaster and disgrace to a highly visible project like the Memorial; the design was cohesive, organizing the entire site into a coherent whole; and its central symbolic element, a field of empty chairs, was perceived as both more original and more easily understood than most of its competitors. While these factors undoubtedly played a role in the Committee’s selection, their most enthusiastic comments extolled the winning design’s “wonderfully balanced concept.” Again and again, panel members highlighted this aspect of the Butzer Design Partnership’s submission, underscoring the importance of


56 Ibid., 32. The Design Selection Committee also included a non-voting recorder. All sixteen members were appointed by the same mechanism as was used for the Design Evaluation Panel.

57 “Oklahoma City Memorial Design Competition: Report of Selection Committee,” June 1997, Papers of Design Solicitation Committee Co-Chairs B. Tolbert and Jackie Jones, box 1 of 2, Oklahoma City National Memorial Foundation Archive, Oklahoma City, 2.
Figure 4. Model of the Butzer design. The reflecting pool divides the Memorial site, highlighting the contrast between the actions of the bombers and those of the helpers. The prominence of the Survivor Tree suggests what the outcome of that comparison should be. Not visible in this image are the Fence segments that form the western (or left) border of the site, which are critical to the ideal visitor experience. Credit: Oklahoma City National Memorial Foundation, “A Progress Report,” 1998, 5.
equilibrium to the memorializers' vision. One example will suffice as representative: "The design is timeless, preserving the sense of deep loss shown by the chairs in [the] actual building footprint, the spirit of change reflected in the water, and the hope the survivor tree gives to those who come here."58 Although all of the finalists made reference to both components of the bombing story—"the brutality of the evil and the tenderness of the response"—no other submission drew such a sharp contrast between the two.

By dividing the site with a rectangular reflecting pool, the Butzer design definitively separates the violence enacted by the bombers from the healing actions of rescuers, volunteers, and well-wishers. The two modes of citizenship represented by these groups are the crux of the symbolic memorial, while the only references to the state, two American flags, are marginalized on the perimeter of the site. The duality of the Butzer design succeeds in tearing apart the contradictory emotions brought together in the iconic image of Baylee Almon and laying them side by side. First, the little girl's limp body captures our horror at such brutal violence, evoked most poignantly by its smallest victims. The firefighter's downward gaze at the unknown child's face and the tenderness with which he carries his fragile parcel reflects the aching reaction of those who saw the photograph. Yet his gentle touch also assuages that horror by epitomizing the bond between victim and rescuer that unites strangers in a moment of crisis. The Butzer design likewise couples these extremes of human behavior, contrasting the instinctual kindness evident in the response to the attack with McVeigh's well-orchestrated cruelty.

58 Ibid.
The commemoration of the victims dominates the south side of the Memorial. One hundred sixty-eight bronze and glass chairs, sized to represent both adults and children, are arranged on the grassy footprint of the Murrah Building according to the victims’ locations at the moment of the blast. The clusters of chairs closest to the reflecting pool give visitors a subtle but chilling indication of where the Ryder truck carrying the 4,800 lb. bomb was parked. Like the piles of shoes now displayed at Nazi concentration camp museums, the sight of so many chairs together impresses upon the visitor the scope of destruction precisely because each chair belongs to a particular individual. Perhaps most importantly, the empty chair gives shape to an otherwise intangible absence using an image of loss that is familiar to people across racial, socioeconomic, religious, or ethnic divisions.

Those injured in the explosion are recognized in a “side chapel” adjacent to the Murrah footprint. That the survivors’ names are inscribed on this side of the memorial acknowledges their kinship with the victims. However, as a living testament to the helpers’ efficacy, the survivors also mark the limits of the bombers’ power and consequently figure prominently in the remembrance of those who helped. Across from the configuration of chairs, an orchard of trees represents the professionals and volunteers who assisted in the wake of the attack and “the fruits of

59 A Progress Report, 4-5.

60 The Memorial Center offers a slightly different explanation for the preponderance of chairs in the center of the grid. Rather than recognize that spot as the locus of destruction, it is described as a symbolic gesture by the Memorial’s designers to fill the gaping emptiness left by the bombed building.

61 Contemporary social justice movements, such as the AIDS quilt, the Clothesline Project, and the Silent March against gun violence, have used similar techniques effectively.
Figure 5. Row of chairs. The victims’ chairs quickly filled with flowers and other tokens during the private ceremony of the Memorial’s Dedication. The glass bases, each etched with a victim’s name, are lit from below at night. The glow resembles a perpetual candlelight vigil. Credit: Caroline Carpenter, April 19, 2000.
their labors.” Each year’s blossoming reminds visitors that the helpers’ actions allowed survivors’ families to flourish.

As symbolically appropriate as this grouping of trees may be, it appears contrived when coupled with the Survivor Tree, the focal point of the north side. This 80-year old American elm, which still bears scars from the blast, has come to represent the resilience of the Oklahoma community and the persistence of hope in the midst of suffering. Placed atop a tiered promontory and set apart by a low circular wall, the Survivor Tree resembles a sanctuary that affords the best perspective—both visually and psychologically—from which to view the dual story of the bombing laid out below. Standing beneath its protective branches, the visitor is well poised to appreciate the words inscribed on the surrounding wall: “The spirit of this city and this nation will not be defeated: our deeply rooted faith sustains us.”

Delineating the two modes of citizenship displayed in the bombing and the response is but the first step toward fulfilling the Mission Statement’s expectations. For visitors to view this comparison as an “inspiring contrast” from which they can derive comfort and hope, they must be personally engaged in the Memorial’s story. Moving beyond mere recollection, the Butzer design pushes visitors to, in some sense, relive the chaos and caretaking of the bombing. Insofar as it draws them closer to the victims’ experience, horror is integral to the process of becoming compassionate citizens. To register horror is also to recognize one’s difference from

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62 Ibid., 5.

63 Pictures of the site dating back to 1922 show the Survivor Tree fully grown. Oklahoma City National Memorial Foundation, “Oklahoma City National Memorial Dedication Program,” April 2000, in possession of the author, 18.
McVeigh, so that this seemingly unpleasant emotion brings a sense of comfort. A similar paradox surfaces in American commemorations of the Holocaust when depictions of Nazi atrocities become a subtle confirmation of American virtue.64

To trigger that sort of experience, the Butzer design codes the memorial as a temporal space. Upon entering the symbolic memorial, the visitor passes through one of two Gates of Time at either end of the site. Once inside, the visitor can see the gates' interior facades, inscribed with 9:01 on the east and 9:03 on the west. Walking across the footprint of the Murrah building, that visitor occupies the physical space of the bombing. Sitting in a chair inscribed with a single name, the visitor's living body fills the void created by that victim's death.

By combining the empty chairs with the element of time, the Butzer design almost forces visitors to cross the line between observer and participant. Unlike other submissions, which individualized the victims by the inclusion of mementos and messages from loved ones, the uniformity of the empty chairs allows visitors to imagine themselves as part of the story.65 Instead of voyeuristic access to the family's sorrow, the Butzer design enacts a crucial shift in perspective that compels

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64 Peter Novick's *The Holocaust in American Life* discusses this pattern at length. He is particularly insightful in his warnings against allowing the Holocaust to become an excuse for failing to scrutinize American actions. Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999).

65 In one design submission, "Footfalls Echo the Memory," an object relating to each victim was pressed between layers of laminated glass panels inscribed with the victim's name and age. The focal point of another design was a sundial of sorts, in which the victim's personal memorial, including messages from loved ones and personal or devotional items, would be illuminated each year on his or her birthday. Susan Herrington and Mark Stankard, "Footfalls Echo the Memory," design submitted to the Oklahoma City Memorial International Design Competition, as photographed by G. Jill Evans, in possession of the author; J. Kyle Casper and Brian Branstetter, untitled submission to the Oklahoma City Memorial International Design Competition, as photographed by G. Jill Evans, in possession of the author.
visitors to identify with the victims themselves, thereby creating a powerfully experiential memorial.

The Gates of Time fix the moment of the bombing as a perpetual present and give permanency to the initial horror such violence provoked. Freezing this immediate reaction is a way to maintain, or cultivate if necessary, a visceral awareness of the instant in which what was once unimaginable became terrifyingly real. Other aspects of the site were also left raw, denying the passage of time and the possibility of closure. The yellow façade of the Journal Record Building, which forms the northern boundary of the symbolic memorial, remains unrestored. Although the building interior has been renovated to house the Memorial Center, much of its roof appears to be missing and its once-busy windows are gaping black holes. Those windows nearer the ground have been bricked over and painted to replicate the “bombed out” look of the others. A spray-painted message written on the day of the explosion recalls one search and rescue team’s outrage at the task before them, “We search for the truth. We seek justice. The courts promise it. The victims cry for it. And GOD demands it!” Similarly, the edge of the “side chapel” in the southeast corner of the site is a ragged remnant of the Murrah building with metal supports splayed in all directions. More subtly, the Butzer design replicates the area’s pre-bombing geography. Fifth Street is replaced by the reflecting pool, while the arrangement of chairs not only traces the perimeter of the Murrah Building but symbolically reconstitutes the bodies inside.

The final stage of the ideal visitor experience—entering into the Memorial’s story as part of the ongoing response to the violence enacted on April 19th—is
suggested by the design’s interactive components. As the outward sign of their
transformation, visitor participation marks the culmination of the pilgrimage, and
attests to the Memorial’s ability to inculcate the caretaker mode of citizenship that it
extols. Consequently, visitors are repeatedly encouraged to demonstrate their
sentimental affinity with the initial responders and subtly instructed as to what such
participation entails. A special place beyond the orchard provides chalkboards for
young visitors to express their feelings about the Memorial, as so many did in the
letters of sympathy that flooded Oklahoma City after the bombing. Nearby, a curved
wall of hand painted tiles sent by children in 1995 illustrates what these expressions
might look like. The empty chairs also invite visitors to leave a piece of themselves.
As if to ensure the initiation of that tradition, roses were distributed to each victim’s
family as they entered the completed memorial for the first time during the private
dedication ceremony.

The Memorial’s most pointed lesson is, of course, the Fence. Although the
original Butzer submission had included smaller sections of the Fence, it was given
greater prominence at the request of family members, survivors, and rescue workers.
As part of the Memorial’s groundbreaking in October 1998, a private ceremony was
held for this core group of memorializers to hand-carry a portion of the original
makeshift memorial to its new location on the western edge of the site. Its mournful
display of words, images, and eclectic objects tutors visitors on appropriate reactions
to the story told within. The Memorial’s collection of interactive elements reveals
memorializers’ fervent hope that future generations will experience a connection to
Figure 6. Mothers and children at the blackboard (series). In the Children's Area, a young girl is taught, presumably by her mother, how to contribute to the Memorial's remembrance of the bombing. The message is written as the sentiment of the child, but in the adult's hand. Credit: Caroline Carpenter, June 28, 2001.
the bombings and its victims. The institutionalization of the once-spontaneous Fence epitomizes this desire to perpetuate the response.

Moreover, the symbolic memorial’s various mechanisms for soliciting and displaying evidence of the bombing’s emotional impact suggests that it aspires to be more than merely a sacred site. A visit to the Oklahoma City National Memorial is also a pilgrimage to a sacred time, an idealized moment in which a diverse nation seemed unified by sympathy. The “uplifting experience” promised by the Mission Statement depends upon visitors believing that moment was not a fluke, but indicative of the essential American character. Making visible the bombing’s continued resonance is, in part, a way to assure citizens that the nation’s tolerance threshold has not slipped. To achieve that end, the Memorial must both celebrate and instill the compassionate citizenship evident in the response to the bombing.
Five years to the day after the destruction of the Murrah building, the dedication of the Oklahoma City National Memorial brought together victims’ friends and family members, survivors, rescue workers, political figures from all levels of government, civic and religious leaders, and numerous others to enact another scene in the national drama of citizenship. As with the bombing, the day’s events were relayed across the country and around the world by print, radio, and television media. The dedication site was surrounded by raised platforms teeming with photographers, camera crews and reporters who captured both the private and public ceremonies for global consumption. Although they were not permitted on the Memorial grounds until both ceremonies had concluded, the media’s presence was keenly felt. The most solemn moment of the private ceremony—168 seconds of silence to remember each of the victims—was marred by a flurry of clicking camera shutters. The eyes of the world were once again on Oklahoma City.

In place of the chaos and bloodshed that had captivated viewers five years earlier, the dedication offered a very different kind of spectacle. Car fires and piles of rubble had been replaced by a well-ordered, almost pastoral, space suited for contemplation. Public anxiety about the far-right fringe, along with fervent speculation about foreign infiltration, had long since dissipated with the apprehension and conviction of the attack’s perpetrators. The grief that had raged in the wake of
the bombing was still evident, but well worn with the passage of time. Perhaps most surprisingly, an event that once signaled a crisis of national security was recast by many speakers—particularly those at the public ceremony—as a moment of triumph. Governor Frank Keating’s letter in the dedication program proclaimed, “We overcame one act of evil with a million acts of goodness,” while Attorney General Janet Reno thanked the people of the Oklahoma City for “proving that the spirit that binds us together is stronger than what tries to tear us apart.”

Reno’s assertion is significant in that it points to a new understanding of terrorism, one that dovetails with the notion of compassionate citizenship. Oklahoma City Mayor Kirk Humphreys echoed the former Attorney General in his description of the bombing as a moment in which “love conquered hatred, sacrifice conquered selfishness, and what was meant to divide Americans, united Americans” [emphasis added].66 Insofar as these depictions succeed in divorcing terrorist acts from any substantive political agenda, they are typical of government responses to terrorism.67 What is more unusual is the way in which this definition of terrorism envisions the perpetrators’ target. Terrorism remains an attack on the nation, but the assault occurs on the level of individual relationships. Regardless of the violence enacted on individual bodies, a terrorist attack can achieve little success if the bonds between citizens—the national body—remain strong. By this logic, the collective mourning that followed the bombing becomes a display of defiance, rather than a measure of the perpetrators’ power. Bob Johnson’s remarks at the public ceremony clarify how

66 This quotation was transcribed by the author during the public dedication ceremony.
67 Official responses to nonstate terrorism often include refuting statements from terrorists, diverting attention from the issues raised by a particular incident to the violence itself, and minimizing the effectiveness of the perpetrators’ actions. Picard, 44.
Figure 7. Firefighters in front of Survivor Tree. Many rescue workers returned to Oklahoma City for the Memorial’s Dedication. Standing under the Survivor Tree in dress uniforms, these firefighters call attention to the success of their efforts five years earlier. Credit: Caroline Carpenter, April 19, 2000.
Figure 8. The Survivor Tree. The Survivor Tree promontory provides the best vantage point for viewing the totality of the Memorial. Looming behind the tree is the unrestored façade of the Journal-Record Building. 
Credit: Caroline Carpenter, April 19, 2000.
the battle against terrorism is to be won; the Chairman of the Oklahoma City National Trust asserted, “Oklahoma City reminded us that we are a great nation, capable of repelling terrorism and its insidious effects, capable of great compassion and selflessness.”

In many respects, the rhetoric deployed at the Memorial’s dedication is typical of such “official” commemorations. The swelling pride in national greatness, commendation of citizens’ courage, and celebration of unified opposition to a common enemy are all to be expected. Yet, in Oklahoma City, American superiority does not derive from physical bravery, military prowess, pioneer spirit, or old-fashioned ingenuity, but from the compassion of its citizens for one another. The dedication celebrated the compassionate citizenship demonstrated in the wake of the attack—from the earliest efforts of rescue workers and medical personnel, through the outpouring of sympathy that flowed into the grieving community, to the determination of memorializers to transform this moment of victimization and loss into a source of hope and inspiration. In this sense, the dedication was very much like the Memorial itself. While both vehicles fulfill the traditional functions of official commemorations, they do so in highly unconventional ways. Earlier monuments might have solicited an emotional response in visitors, but the Oklahoma City National Memorial relies on sentiment to an unprecedented degree. The defining feature of proper citizenship and vital to the Memorial visitor’s sense of national belonging, sentiment is our greatest weapon.
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