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Web-Exclusive Interview: Thinc Design Principal Tom Hennes, Designer of the Exhibits at the National September 11 Memorial Museum

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-By John Czarniecki



Our nation and the world paused this week to commemorate the 10th anniversary of 9/11, and all eyes turned to the World Trade Center site, where the public is now able to visit the National September 11 Memorial designed by architect Michael Arad and landscape architect Peter Walker.

The memorial fountains and plaza are constructed directly on top of a remarkable underground space: the National September 11 Memorial Museum, which is scheduled to open on September 11, 2012. With our readership of architects and designers focused on interiors, look for *Contract's* September issue for five

pages of coverage previewing the National September 11 Memorial Museum, designed by Aedas (formerly Davis Brody Bond Aedas), including an interview with Steven Davis, FAIA, a design partner at Aedas. Exhibitions will display small artifacts as well as large objects recovered from the site.

Thinc Design is the lead exhibition designer of the National September 11 Memorial Museum, with media partner Local Projects. Here is a *Contract* Web-exclusive interview with Tom Hennes, principal of Thinc Design.

1. Describe the role that Thinc Design has had at the World Trade Center site.

Thinc Design is the lead exhibition designer with our media partner, Local Projects. The exhibition designer is responsible for creating all of the interpretive elements of the visitor experience, including graphic design, and for placing all the major and minor artifacts. We worked together with the curatorial team and the National September 11 Museum's creative director to develop the rhythm and flow of all the exhibitions, the way visitors would encounter the materials in the museum, and the nature and configuration of all of the media and narrative elements.

2. How complicated is the design of this museum's exhibits? Describe the key challenges.

Because virtually all those who will visit this museum in its first decade or so of operation will feel some strong, personal connection between the events of 9/11 and their own lives, the exhibits must accommodate an unusually wide range of needs and expectations that will strongly shape visitors' experiences. Some visitors will have been traumatized by the events and may want to avoid parts of the museum; others will feel a need to come closer to the experience of what that day was like to live through here, on this site. We have had to plan the exhibits in such a way that people are able to easily and intuitively seek out what is most important to them, including those things most important for a particular person or family to avoid.

At the same time, part of the important work of such a museum is to enable people to broaden and more fully come to know their own experience. This means allowing some of the contradictions inherent in such an event to stand together in the space of the museum so that people have the chance not only to recognize a perspective that is familiar to them, but also to encounter contrasting perspectives that offer them a more fully-rounded sense of what happened that day, and how it changed our world.

The consequences of this event will continue to resonate throughout the world for years to come. Most people think of a museum as something that is fixed, or finished. They think of a museum as authoritative. In this case, the museum has to be able to evolve as society's interpretation of this event evolves. It can't present an authoritative history because that history hasn't happened yet, at least not fully. What it can do is present the testimony of those who witnessed the events, including those of us who witnessed it from afar, as well as the significant objects that stand as mute witnesses to what happened on 9/11 and in the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993. These are the materials out of which future histories will be written, and by presenting them in the simplest way possible, without embellishment or spin, the museum becomes an invaluable resource for society's ongoing attempts to make sense of what happened and deal with the consequences.

3. Years from now, when generations will visit this exhibit that had not experienced 9/11 first-hand, what experience do you want them to have from this museum?

These events will continue to affect public policy and remain prominent in people's consciousness for many decades. An event like this, that disrupts people's sense of the world, has after effects that can be passed through generations in families that were traumatized. I would hope that this museum provides people in the future with a chance to bear witness to what happened—to feel a personal connection to what happened here that links them more strongly to human society and makes them more capable of tolerating its contradictions and complexity.

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4. How important is this project for you personally?

9/11 was arguably the seminal event of the 21st century, with an almost infinite range of meaning by individuals, public figures and governments. Its history will be written and re-written throughout our lifetimes. For me, this is an opportunity to create a space that is emotionally safe enough for people to fully engage with its authentic materials, but not so completely sanitized that it robs them of the chance to feel challenged by the experience and to grow in some way as a result. For someone like me, whose life's work involves the way people come to know and respond to their world, it's hard to imagine a more significant project.

(Photo, above left: A rendering of exhibits, which will include steel remnants from the World Trade Center, at the National September 11 Memorial Museum. The museum is under construction underground, beneath the memorial plaza, and will open in a year.)



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