

Solutions by NETAFIM



The Gates of Memory

The New Oklahoma City National Memorial Challenges How We Look at Design Competitions, and Also at Tragedy and Remembrance

On April 19, 1995, at 9:02 A.M., a massive bomb exploded in front of the Alfred P. Murrah federal building, tearing the face off the nine-story structure and killing 168 adults and children. Hundreds of others were wounded, and more than twelve thousand volunteers and rescue workers helped in the aftermath. Like the Vietnam Veterans memorial before it and Columbine High School after it, the site became an instant memorial – a repository for teddy bears, notes, flowers and other symbols of grief.

The city mobilized. Within two months of the bombing, a 350-member task force – now the Oklahoma City National Memorial Foundation – convened to develop a permanent memorial to the victims and others affected by the explosion. Chief among the task force's charges was that the process include extensive input from families, survivors and the public. This group crafted a mission statement that would overarch a design competition: the new memorial would honor the dead, surviving and all those who helped. It would preserve the Survivor Tree, a stately American Elm on the site that miraculously withstood the blast and became a symbol of endurance. Lastly, it would include a special children's area.

In a unanimous decision, the husband and wife team of Torrey and Hans Buzer, along with Sven Berg, of Butzer Design Partnership were the chosen winner. Their design was about a 'place more than a monument,' Bunster-Ossa recalls. "It engaged the entire site as a landscape of remembrance, giving people choices about how to flow through it and ponder on the tragedy."

The memorial site is quintessentially civic – framed by two churches, several office buildings, a post office and a library. The conglomeration is so ordinary and so common to any town or city that it underscores, like a photographic negative, the absence of the federal buildings at its core. The Butzers knew this. On either end of what was once a city block are two imposing golden gates, the main entrances for the site. One is inscribed 9:01 – the last innocent moment before the blast – and the other 9:03, presumably the time when mourning began. The deadly moment between is represented by a shallow, glassy reflecting pool and a field of empty chairs beyond, one each for the dead.

Oklahoma City National Memorial Summary

Designer

Hans and Torrey Butzer with Sven Berg, Berlin, Germany of Butzer Design Partnership (competition team)

Irrigation Equipment Supplier

Grooms Irrigation Colorado, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Project Overview

- *Irrigate the survivor tree.*
- *The dripperline was laid below a deck system which elevated the plaza on a near-grid of caissons - which aided in air and water circulation, protecting its root system.*

Netafim Products Used

- *Techline Dripperline*
- *0.9 GPH Flow Rate*
- *Drippers spaced 12 inches apart*

HONORING THE DEAD

Chair backs are bronze and the base is glass, with the names of the victims inscribed on the front. Nineteen smaller chairs poignantly signify the children who were killed. At night, the glass bases are illuminated, which accentuates the names even more. With the inscriptions, the chairs – although identical – are also individual. The chairs are organized in nine rows according to the floor on which the victims were working or visiting that fateful day. They cluster in the center and spread out, like debris from the explosion.

HONORING THE SURVIVORS

Framing the eastern edge of the field of chairs is the only remaining wall of the Murrah building, a large chunk of ragged concrete and protruding rebar. The back of the field includes some similarly damaged walls of the parking garage – still open today – that bordered the federal building. Cradled between these two areas is a “side chapel” with a plaque listing the names of bombing survivors. That the wall remnant is just a small portion of the site is by design. The Butzers understood the significance of the Murrah building – two women climbed to safety over the wall that stands there today – but the lives taken and changed by the blast were considered far more important to remember.

THE REFLECTING POOL

Directly in front of the chairs, where a long block of 5th Street used to be, lies the reflecting pool. The pool is only three-fourths of an inch deep and lined with black granite. Water flows across the plane, where it disappears into a finely detailed channel around the pool’s perimeter to an intricate pumping system underground. The vastness of the pool symbolizes the absence of loved ones. The blackness symbolizes mourning. The slight depression of the central area where the fountain stands is an appropriate reference to the crater left by the blast. But it is also a brilliant play on the constant tug between good and evil: the pit recalls hell, yet the reflecting water, bringing the vast Oklahoma sky into view, recalls heaven – both coexisting in the space.

PRESERVE THE SURVIVOR TREE

Fittingly, the landscape opposite the field of chairs is devoted to the living – the survivors and the rescuers of the Oklahoma City bombing. High on a promontory overlooking the field is the Survivor Tree, an octogenarian elm that is now the centerpiece of a circular plaza. Once surrounded by an asphalt parking lot, the tree weathered the blast even as cars around it were incinerated. To protect the tree, the Butzers worked with Sasaki to specify a deck system that should elevate the plaza on a near-grid caissons, aid in air and water circulation (the tree uses Netafim Techline drip irrigation system) and shelter the extensive root system of the elm tree.

The idea was to keep the paving off the ground so that there wasn’t any compaction on the tree roots,”



A field of empty chairs bears witness to the tragedy and aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing.



The Survivor Tree, an octogenarian elm – the tree weathered the blast even as cars around it were incinerated.



Netafim Techline Dripperline is placed below the flagstone paving at the Survivor Tree.

Dean says. "The caissons are twelve inches in diameter and ten feet on center, but even then the urban forester who worked on the project did a lot of hand excavating to make sure there were no roots damaged. No tree has had so much care." The team made adjustments to the design of the retaining wall in certain places just to protect roots.

HONORING THE RESCUERS

On the fields, sloping away from the Survivor Tree is the rescuers' orchard, a field of fruit-bearing and flowering trees including Oklahoma-variety redbuds and Mexican plum trees. These trees, along with the evergreen loblolly pines that border the field of chairs, are all indigenous to Oklahoma. The site is covered in a soft Cavlier zoysia grass, for which Sasaki specified a reinforced lawn system to protect high-traffic areas such as the series of terraces below the Survivor Tree. This system employs plastic screenlike material that mixes with the soil to prevent compaction.

SPECIAL CHILDREN'S AREA

In the northeast corner of the memorial, relatively far removed from the devastating sadness of the field of chairs, is the children's area. Located across from what will be the entrance of the Museum Center, this area is partially enclosed by a wall of tiles created by schoolchildren in the wake of the bombing. As a result, this area is somewhat of a departure from the rest of the memorial – cheerful and exuberant as playgrounds are supposed to be.



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