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Ground Zero: a memorial in the making

By Troy Melhus
Star Tribune Staff Writer

A cool, thick fog fell onto the Manhattan skyline as we stepped out of the subway and into the night of Times Square.

We stopped to look up. The dancing lights of the giant TVs illuminated the night.

"Terie," I said to my cousin, "Fourboding," she replied.

We began walking up 5th Avenue toward 48th Street, to the Walter Kerr Theatre, where I was about to see my first Broadway show.



American flags have become a constant at souvenir stands and shops all over New York City, including this one in Chinatown.

There were people everywhere, of course; this is New York. But there were not the mobs of people that I remembered from my last visit. There was traffic, but not the loud, abrasive traffic that I recalled.

My cousin Andrea has lived in New York for three years, in a one-room studio in the West Village. At 34, she's one year older than I. I was the first of our family to see her since the Sept. 11 attacks, from which she was just 30 blocks away.

Friends and family had been suggesting she needed to get away from New York to clear her head and take a breath.

"I don't want to go anywhere right now," she told me. "It's not that I'm afraid to travel. It's more like Giuliani said: This is the greatest city in the world. We're a community. I want to be here."

Banner waves

I saw American flags everywhere, from the windows of sandwich delis to the stores lining 5th Avenue. At Rockefeller Center, two dozen flags lined the square. I saw them for sale on practically every corner of Midtown, along with baseball caps with the initials FDNY and NYPD. Flags hung off the back of fire trucks making to new emergencies. They flew on the antennas of police cars.

Until Sept. 11—as an American, as a former Marine—I'd begun to grow indifferent to patriotic displays. Too often

they rang hollow.

I felt something different in New York. Less, most certainly, but also a twinge of apprehension.

Grief in the streets

Shadows of Sept. 11 fell everywhere, of course.

At a small Mexican cantina in SoHo, I overheard a group recall that day: what they were doing, whom they called and what happened in the days that followed.

"It's a part of every conversation, within the first two minutes," one New York friend told me. He is an assistant editor at a magazine in Midtown, about 70 blocks from Ground Zero, as it's come to be known.

Like my cousin, he had not left his adoptive city since the attacks.

"People don't want to leave, not right now," he said. "I am proud of this city that I've ever been before."

Which is why, I think, this city will roar with life.

In my four days in New York City, I saw a sold-out comedy show, enjoyed music well after midnight at a smoky jazz club, toured two art exhibits, dined at a half-dozen times and saw a knockout Broadway production ("Proof") in a near-capacity house.

Honoring the dead

The air at Ground Zero was filled with the noise of generators. There was no traffic. There were other people here to see what could be seen, to pay their respects, but they said little.

Instead they just stared. They took pictures. They wept.

I had actually been reluctant to visit the site. Part of me did want to bear witness, to absorb the destruction's reality and humbly pay my respects. At some point this will become

an international memorial, and in many ways it already has. Being there allowed me to grieve in ways that the dimensions of television had not. It was like an open casket.

And I, for one, needed that. Sept. 11 will forever play a horrible, defining day in my country's life, and being at the scene, I felt less, more than ever, a part of this country—and part of this city, too.

But in the back of my mind, I could still hear Amy Solomon of the New York Convention and Visitor's Bureau tell me: "While we acknowledge people may want to see that area, for closure or whatever, we certainly are not marketing it as any kind of tourist destination."

There were tourists at Ground Zero, to be certain. This place has become a national touchstone.

I watched as people gathered around a street musician who played "God Bless America" on a flute. Farther down the street they craned and took pictures of what little they could see, just four blocks away. The perimeter of the site remained cordoned off, and many views were shielded by fencing and police. But I could still see and smell the smoke. When the wind shifted, the stench—an unfortunate mixture of rot and burning garbage—filled the air.

On one corner, east of the site, I could see glimpses of the wreckage: scorched buildings with shattered windows between a massive gap in the skyline. A young woman, wearing a red bandanna on her head, stood in front of me and quietly cried.

By coincidence, on Sept. 10 of this year I was at the site of the Oklahoma City bombing, and there, too, I was at a loss for words.

There, too, I wanted to pay my respects.

There, too, I walked away glad that I did.

— Troy Melhus is at melhus@startribune.com.

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