



Mark Wagner, an associate partner at Davis Brody Bond and the project architect for the National September 11 Memorial Museum (pictured here on the Memorial Plaza), identified artifacts at Ground Zero that now reside in the museum.

A Steward of History

Mark Wagner, the project architect for the National September 11 Memorial Museum, spent months on site at Ground Zero, saving more than 1,000 artifacts

By Cody Calamaio

After a month spent combing through the rubble at Ground Zero in fall 2001, it was the discovery of a large elevator motor that had plummeted onto the West Side Highway that caused architect Mark Wagner, AIA, to pause and fully absorb the weight of his task.

“I remember thinking, *How terrifying*—the thought of that falling from the sky,” he says.

The events of September 11th will forever be burned into the collective conscious of those old enough to recall the day. But it is Wagner who will help guide the understanding of the events of that day for everyone, including future generations, through his unique role at the intersection of artifact recovery and museum design.

The elevator motor is one of the artifacts now on display at the National September 11 Memorial Museum, for which Wagner, now an associate partner with Davis Brody Bond, served as project architect. But his involvement with the project stretches back to the days immediately following the attack on the World Trade Center, when he spearheaded the artifact recovery effort at Ground Zero.

In the 13 years he spent associated with the site, Wagner found that his job reached far beyond that of an architect. He also needed to become an archaeologist, curator, and historian, all while navigating a tense political and economic landscape at the epicenter of the most significant American tragedy of the 21st century.

A client and a calling

On the morning of September 11, 2001, Wagner was running late to an appointment he had at the office of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey on the 72nd floor of the World Trade Center’s North Tower. He was then working for Voorsanger Architects on a terminal at Newark Airport for the Port Authority, the bi-state agency that also owned the World Trade Center where it was headquartered. He had forgotten some of his architectural drawings that morning, and stopped off at the Voorsanger office in midtown—where he was a safe distance from the attack downtown. His detour, which some may call lucky, is not something he puts any importance on. “There were a lot of people who weren’t lucky,” Wagner says simply.

Less than a week later, Wagner’s boss, Bart Voorsanger, FAIA, was asked by the Port Authority’s chief architect, Robert Davidson, FAIA, if the firm could send someone to Ground Zero to survey the scene, because it was too painful for any of his staff. In turn, Wagner was asked to take the lead. While many in New York wanted to do something to help and could not, he was asked to take on an unthinkable challenge. “Most of us had the same gut reaction—we wanted to help,” he says. “We wanted to not just sit in front of the television and watch the news anymore. We wanted to get involved. So I accepted.”

Accompanied on the first day by Voorsanger, Wagner went down to Ground Zero and within 24 hours wrote a

In the National September 11 Memorial Museum, an exhibition includes a grappler claw with mangled rebar from the site, and a PATH station sign in front of a fragment of the “Bent Propeller” sculpture by Alexander Calder. A portion of a “That’s All Folks” sign is from the Warner Bros. store that was in the concourse level below the towers. The exhibit includes a commemoration of those people who worked on the Ground Zero cleanup.

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memo to the Port Authority documenting a few notable things visible in the rubble, including the Fritz Koenig–designed sphere statue that once stood between the towers. His work quickly expanded when other agencies and museums learned of his preservation efforts, and being one of the few people with security clearance, Wagner was asked to be their eyes, ears, and hands to gather artifacts that would capture the history of the event. “They were looking for this perfect object that tells the whole story,” Wagner says. “And there was a lot of pressure in finding something like that in a debris pile that was multiple city blocks wide and high.”

Looking at tragedy through a lens of history

Wagner began photographing and tagging pieces of the building and other notable artifacts to be saved. There was no clear goal early on, just a mission to point out still-identifiable items before they were lost.

Asked to do something beyond the scope of his normal job, Wagner tapped into his architecture training and approached the assignment like any other project. “I’m trying to figure out how to tell this emotional story, and it’s about sequential problem solving,” he says. “What’s the first step? Get the object that you need to tell that story, then back it up.”

A task-oriented mind-set propelled Wagner through the more than eight months he spent at Ground Zero, where he helped to save more than 1,000 significant objects—ranging from pieces of steel to mangled fire trucks to small personal items—many of which now reside in the 9/11 Memorial Museum and other museums and institutions all over the world. Wagner was able to compartmentalize his personal emotions to some extent, but the weight of the tragedy did permeate his work, including the moment he found the elevator motor, which he describes as his “breakdown moment.” His reaction to that discovery made him realize that each person might connect with a different part of the story through different objects, so his job became to save as many artifacts as possible.

“Who I am as an architect and a person, I tend to think big picture,” he says. “In terms of 9/11—if I were to have focused on just that moment I probably wouldn’t have survived emotionally, and I don’t think I would have been successful in making the collection. I had to look beyond what I was feeling that day.”

While Wagner continued work on other projects for Voorsanger, his duty archiving pieces from Ground Zero—as a consultant for the Port Authority—remained his primary focus in 2002 and 2003. The artifacts had a temporary home at Hangar 17 at JFK Airport, where, alongside an art preservation specialist, Wagner began the task of stabilizing, photographing, evaluating, and cataloging the collection. “It did become very personal,” he says. “It wasn’t something I was going to walk away from halfway.”

Born and raised in Queens, Wagner, like many New Yorkers, had a personal connection with the Twin Towers that stretched from their construction to their eventual destruction. One of his earliest childhood memories is being in a car with his grandfather and seeing the towers rise on the skyline. A graduate of the architecture school at the New York

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Wagner (above) had knowledge of the site that was instrumental in the design of the museum, including Foundation Hall (left). He helped to identify a wide range of artifacts at Ground Zero, large and small, to be saved. Among the large items from the site now on display in the museum are a damaged fire truck (opposite, top) and an elevator motor (opposite, bottom).

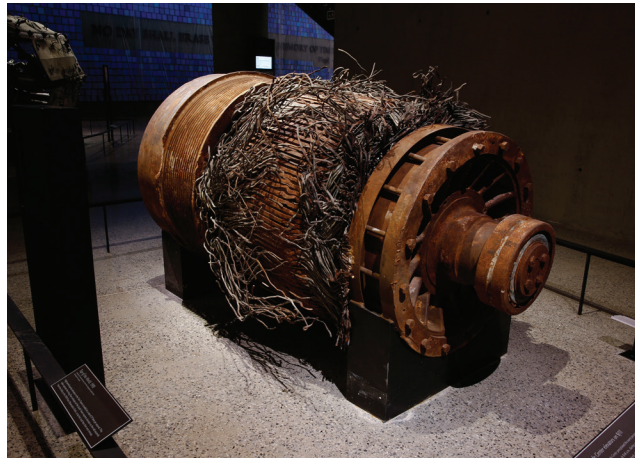


Institute of Technology, Wagner got his start working for architect William Nicholas Bodouva on another project for the Port Authority, a terminal at LaGuardia Airport. Residing in the city most of his life, he now lives in Brooklyn with his wife, Kimberly Murphy, also an architect, and their two young children.

Finding a new home

Given his experience at Ground Zero, his thorough knowledge of the site, and his relationships with the Port Authority leadership, Wagner was approached by Davis Brody Bond in 2004 when the firm was commissioned to design the 9/11 Memorial Museum. Seeing it as an opportunity to build a home for the archive he had been shepherding, Wagner made the professional move to join the firm.

“Mark has been our best asset ever since,” says Steven Davis, FAIA, the Davis Brody Bond partner who led the museum design with partner Carl Krebs, AIA, and Wagner. “His ability to communicate was frequently tested and he never lost sight of what was important, balancing the emotional and physical context of the project with skill and maturity. In my experience, many designers are often long on talent and short on humility, but Mark has an abundance of both.”



The design of the museum, built underground beneath the Memorial Plaza in the footprints of the Twin Towers, had challenges beyond the typical building program due to the need to establish the framework for a complex emotional story. The firm adopted four guiding principles: authenticity, scale, memory, and emotion. Wagner brought not only his professional and personal experience to the table, but a desire to guide the museum to reflect the magnitude of the loss as well as the sense of community unity that emerged, which was more important to him than any physical object he preserved.

A central feature of the 121,000-square-foot museum’s design is a nearly 700-foot winding, descending entry ramp that creates a slow and deliberate procession allowing visitors time to distance themselves from the world above, and to absorb the vastness of the space before reaching bedrock. The ramp—or “ribbon”—is intended to remind one of the ramp that descended to the Ground Zero foundation from 2002 to 2009. Wagner walked down that ramp many times, each time feeling the chill he associates with entering



hallowed ground. Through the museum’s decade-long design and construction process, with extremely complex budget, site, and political considerations, the ramp was one of the elements the architects fought hardest to keep.

“We could have easily given them an elevator bank, but there is nothing significant about that,” Wagner says. “We wanted to give visitors this similar feeling that we had walking down the ramp. You are slowly and deliberately making your way into this difficult site.”

Leaving a signature

Because many elements on view may be too difficult for some people to see, the museum was designed to allow visitors to absorb the space broadly, and to venture further into exhibit areas as well as readily leave exhibits. And even though Wagner identified many of the artifacts on display, and has been working on the project for years, he counts himself among those who find it too emotional to delve into each exhibit, choosing to focus mostly on stories of heroism.

“I question whether I’ve given myself the opportunity to really grieve the way everybody else did,” Wagner says.

A central feature of the museum’s Foundation Hall is the Last Column, a 36-foot-tall steel beam that was the final piece of debris to be removed from Ground Zero. By the time the column was removed, rescue workers, volunteers, and family members had covered it in signatures, photos, and other messages of unity. “It was acknowledgment not only of what we lost, but what we were starting to build,” Wagner says. “And when it came down to it, somebody asked me whether I’d signed the column and I said, ‘I’m not ready.’ And I never signed it. I was not ready to say good-bye yet.”

Wagner’s signature, though, now permeates the entire space. “Will I be ready to let it go? I think it’s going to be difficult,” he says. “In a lot of ways, like any project, you take it on personally and it becomes part of you. But the museum was never going to be my museum.”

As his 13-year journey as a steward of history comes to a close, Wagner has begun to turn his eye toward his next meaningful projects. “Once I can separate this experience, I’ll go back to the core values of who I think I am as an architect,” he says. “It really is about solving problems. Whether those problems are helping people grieve or helping people have a better life—it’s all important.” c