

A Site for Sore Eyes >>

Feature Article

Decades later, advocates are still fighting for a place to remember those struck down by AIDS. But a new proposed memorial in the heart of the Village is giving them hope.

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(Christopher Tepper and Paul Kelterborn in front of the lot where they have proposed the building of a new AIDS memorial.)

The National September 11 Memorial & Museum opened at the World Trade Center site 10 years after the attacks. This huge memorial—with two one-acre pools and man-made waterfalls—took what many called a long time to build, while various smaller September 11 memorials were erected around the country.

Yet comparatively, 30 years after the AIDS crisis began, little has been done to provide permanent memorial spaces for those lost to AIDS. The AIDS Memorial Quilt, while massive and international in scope, is now too big to display in its entirety and was never designed for an ongoing installation. In San Francisco, the National AIDS Memorial Grove serves as a place for those who were touched by AIDS to gather. But in New York, there is only a 42-foot-long curved granite bench in Hudson River Park. “[Sure, the bench is] beautiful, it’s tasteful; the piers were an important location in LGBT history especially in the late ’70s early ’80s when AIDS was first starting. I think the relative impact of the AIDS crisis on New York City history and LGBTQ history deserves something much more grand and centrally located than just that,” says Chris Tepper, Brooklyn Navy Yard’s director of development, who along with Paul Kelterborn are part of a coalition working to build what they feel is a long-overdue AIDS memorial in New York.

Tepper and Kelterborn were first drawn to the idea of an AIDS memorial as part of the solution to educate a generation of LGBTQ people who remain unaware of the history of the LGBTQ community during the AIDS crisis. “We both recognized the incredible ignorance in ourselves and in a lot of our peer group about the history of the AIDS crisis. We wanted to find a way to help work on LGBT historical preservation, specifically in the built environment,” Tepper says.

“This was the room where ACT UP got started in 1987,” says Robert Woodworth, as we sit in a large room on the first floor of the LGBT Community Center. Woodworth began his work at the Center 29 years ago and saw how AIDS impacted the community first hand. In the 1980s, he helped the LGBT Center become one of few organizations that supported people with AIDS; organizers, caretakers and those with HIV/AIDS would gather there. “The onset of the epidemic was very much focused in The Village,” he says.

Woodworth is also among the advocates pushing to bring this new AIDS memorial to the neighborhood and knew they wouldn’t have to go far from The Center’s doors to find the perfect spot: A triangular space bordered by Seventh Avenue, 12th Street and Greenwich Avenue currently houses infrastructure which once served the now shuttered St. Vincent’s hospital. Much like The Center, St. Vincent’s was considered an epicenter of the epidemic; the hospital housed the first and largest AIDS ward on the east coast.

The hospital is currently owned by Rudin Management, which is in the process of turning St. Vincent’s into luxury condos. But, since the space is no longer being used as a hospital, the city is requiring Rudin to create a public park on the property.

As luck would have it, Rudin chose the triangular space near the LGBT Center. So, during the review process, Tepper and Kelterborn proposed the idea of turning the space into an AIDS memorial. The idea gained popularity, and the AIDS memorial morphed from a small grassroots movement to a real possibility garnering support from across the community. “It just seemed fitting that when you’re creating a new public park at the site that has so much importance to that history, that we do something beautiful to commemorate that history and celebrate all the early activists and all the people who died, and the caregivers,” Tepper says.



(A rendering of the proposed NYC AIDS Memorial at Seventh and Greenwich Avenue.)

The initial plan for the memorial involved a 17,000-square-foot park occupying the entire triangular space. Based on this proposal, Kelterborn and Tepper founded NYC AIDS Memorial Park and launched a competition to find a potential design. Studio a+i, based in Brooklyn, submitted the winning plan, originally titled “Infinite Forest.” The idea of including an AIDS memorial as part of the park was subsequently approved.

Sadly Rudin was only willing to allocate 1,600 square feet of the park to the AIDS memorial, crushing the advocate’s plans. And so the project began its long journey from concept to realization.

First, Tepper and Kelterborn had Studio a+i redesign the memorial to fit into the new space. While smaller than Tepper and Kelterborn originally anticipated, “the new design is one that is more intimate and it still creates a really special and unique place,” Kelterborn shares.

The current design for the park includes three main elements: a planted canopy creating a sheltered area of the park, a reflective water feature for meditation and a “narrative surface” with meaningful and engaging words. “I think one of the most exciting parts is this canopy,” Tepper says. “The architects are working with the visual impact created in a grove of trees when trees are lost.”

Elements of the narrative paving surface also have metaphorical meaning: they resemble the rings in tree trunks when the trees are cut down, symbolizing those lost to the AIDS crisis. They also look like the symbol for an epicenter, which is appropriate since the area was one of the first epicenters of HIV and AIDS. The surface would include a patchwork of facts about the crisis, poetry and other writing that would convey the meaning and importance of the memorial. The reflective water feature will help people meditate and improve the contemplative feel of the space.

After the new memorial was designed, the community had the opportunity to get feedback on the park’s design at three community board design charrettes. “The public could come and talk about what they wanted in a memorial,” Tepper says. And on July 19, the project passed a huge hurdle—the Manhattan Community Board 2 voted to approve the design. Now, the design must pass approval by the Parks Department, the City Planning Commission and the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

Even once the design is approved by these different groups, which is expected to occur this month, NYC AIDS Memorial Park is required to raise money to build and maintain the park before construction can begin.

“It’s going to stand out in the park and neighborhood,” says Kelterborn, who along with Tepper hopes the community will use the park for anniversaries of lost friends or lovers, on World AIDS Day and events that raise awareness about the AIDS crisis. “So many people who lived through the AIDS crisis are longing for a place to remember those they lost. We’ve created a space for the community to gather. It’s more than just a single element in a park,” Tepper says.

Creating the memorial is a vital first step to addressing a larger issue of AIDS awareness. Tepper hopes that the power of the memorial will help people continue “talking about AIDS, raising funds for AIDS [treatment and research] and making sure our country is allocating the resources globally and domestically to fight HIV/AIDS.” Once it’s built, Tepper stresses the importance of taking advantage of the memorial, and creating programming to ensure that the AIDS crisis doesn’t become a forgotten part of history. “We don’t want to let anyone down. We want it to be something that serves the entire LGBT community and AIDS community.” Adds Woodworth: “We have to put something in the physical environment that will remind people of it. It’s time to do that.”

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