

Spaces to Stand In: Applying Clinical Psychoanalysis to the Relational Design of the National September 11 Memorial Museum

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Since Freud's views of the unconscious mind grew in part out of his writings about aesthetics, applying psychoanalytic theory to the conceptualizing of a Memorial Museum design was an ironic reversal of terms. After all, Freud developed ideas about things that could be thought and things that could not be known except in their absence while attending theater performances, reading myths and philosophy, and attempting to understand the psyches of artists (Ranciere, 2009). Deconstructing psychoanalytic praxis so its constituent parts could be repurposed to help this country regain its footing after collective trauma might once have seemed an overreach. But since newer formulations of psychoanalysis have privileged subjectivity, experiencing, and expanding individual potential (cf., Summers, 2013), and intersubjective recognition theory (Benjamin, 2004; 2014) has extended ideas about the *moral third* and the problem of witnessing into the political realm, this seemed like a less far-fetched goal. In this essay, I discuss how these developments catalyzed a retranscription of old understandings in ways relevant to a time that has been likened to an "age of overstimulation" (Huysens, 2003).

Managing Collapse

So much collapsed on "9/11," including the meanings denoted by the name. The popular shorthand for the massive catastrophe of that day condensed in nightmare images what were actually tangled but distinct physical, symbolic, narrative, temporal, and intersubjective collapses. The world watched in unbelieving horror as both the buildings and our American bravado literally disintegrated in real time and repeatedly. Only afterwards did it become apparent—at least to psychoanalysts - that our ability to narrate our collective and individual losses was hindered by numerous gaps in our understanding, precipitated in large measure by our fleeting dislocation in time. The relational remnant of reality that remained was polarized almost beyond recognition. Our democratic processes, so dependent on ethical mutuality and reciprocity, ground to a deadlocked standstill. Could we still stand? For what?

Psychoanalytic theory delineates how personal loss begets internalized memory and symbol formation through grieving (Freud, 1916; Segal, 2012). But surviving mass trauma calls for more than individual mourning. Memorialization is a social process that is necessary for repair of communal links as well as restoration of symbolic and social structures (Davoine & Gaudilliere, 2004; Margalit, 2002; Pivnick, 2011; 2013). In mass catastrophe social groups may lose their proximal space (as with neighborhoods) or their communally held meanings. Through gathering together collective memory, memorialization makes the absent present enough to be mourned, and makes what is present absent enough to be remembered symbolically.

Because the shock of trauma breaks up memories into their semantic and procedural components, commemorative memorialization relies on the creation of experience as well as story (Bernstein, 2000; Connerton, 1989). In addition to culturally specific eulogy, elegy, and

inscribed names, are non-inscribed practices like processions and physical arrangements of objects that convey organization and holding.[1] Memorial museums often accompany such commemorative memorials to further honor and mourn the dead, educate future generations, and chronicle the history of the event. They aim to reanimate memory without making it unbearable in a process called “enacting remembrance” (Pivnick, 2011).

Creating a memorial museum

Memorial museums occupy a unique niche in the museum world. Most museum visits can be viewed as a form of transformational travel (Pivnick, 2010b). One leaves familiar terrain to travel to a strange place that provides a contrasting or generally affirming perspective on one’s own customs and beliefs.[2] Memorial museum visits are more like pilgrimages where lost identifications stimulate mourning of the past in the present, which in turn generate expectations of a renewed future. They also present a first draft of history. Given the traumatic context of much of what’s memorable enough to be transmitted to future generations, the typical historical chronicle is so distorted that it must be understood as emerging from multiple partial views that can only gradually be brought together (Blanchot, 1980/1995; Caruth, 1996). In a memorial museum, the narrative can emerge in non-linear fashion as sounds, story strands, and images. Together these threads form an important record from which present and future members of society can weave evolving texts (Beebe, McCrorie & Pivnick, 2013; Greenwald, 2010; Halbwachs, 1941/1992).

Although such nascent historical narratives are subject to politically motivated contestation, in a museum traumatic testimonies can bear witness to the pain of victims in the presence of others who listen, observe, or re-experience and often have shared similar experiences. Public presentation of testimony can therefore serve a socially or psychologically reparative function (Davoine & Gaudilliere, 2004; Felman & Laub, 1991; Gerson, 2009). Finally, unconscious aesthetic responses can unite opposites where logical thought falters while narratives bring facts to bear on unconsciously distorted understandings (Ranciere, 2009). A memorial museum can function as a Third.

Typically a museum of this sort is a joint creation of funders, the government (if a national monument), curators, historians, stakeholders (like victims’ families or neighborhood groups), in intersubjective interplay with the visitors. It can be constructed soon after a disaster or can be delayed many years.[3] The curators generally determine what people need to know, while the designers work on creating appropriate presentation of content. The content often exists as two-dimensional objects like photos that have to be transformed into three-dimensional exhibits that convey both fact and emotion. When development occurs while the wounds are still open, the curators and designers spend many hours of time listening to testimony, viewing artifacts and videos, and visiting collections that are the remains of the event. Always hovering is the requirement not to offend various constituencies nor to shock visitors to the degree that there is a public outcry. The exhibition designer can scaffold the story to make its necessary incoherence more tolerable while time creates more room for reflection and the discovery of additional information. It is for this psychological purpose that curators and designers sometimes seek the counsel of psychologists and psychoanalysts.

The role of a psychoanalytic psychologist consultant

In the making of a memorial museum, a psychologist-psychoanalyst has either a direct or

indirect consultative role. In a direct role, the psychoanalyst provides emotional support to the design team staff whose long exposure to deeply troubling materials can become emotionally overwhelming. He or she provides referrals and functions as an emotional sounding board for the key design staff, which interface with other curatorial and administrative teams. In an indirect role, the psychoanalyst becomes part of the design process, imagining the needs and responses of people going through the museum to help the designers plan for their psychic protection.

Consulting to Thinc Design (partnered with the National September 11 Memorial Museum)

In the winter of 2007, I was contacted by Tom Hennes, the Design Principal of Thinc Design, an exhibition design firm that was at that time in the final stage of competition for the design of the 9/11 Museum project. I had previously worked with Thinc, consulting about the psychological content of science and children's museum exhibits, so Hennes trusted my input. He felt that his proposal for the 9/11 Museum did not demonstrate the skillset needed to consider how to serve visitors who might still be feeling the aftereffects of this catastrophic event. Hennes wanted my input on the emotional impact of the design solution he was proposing. I shared with him how a psychoanalyst might judge the various dimensions of what he hoped to accomplish, and hoped that he could translate my conceptual understanding into visual-spatial representation. The following is what I conveyed.

Due to survivors' vulnerability to repetition compulsion and *après coup* phenomena so soon after the actual event, visitors could be encouraged to revisit rather than re-live and be given opportunities to turn passive into active. Creating a narrative arc (with its beginning, middle, and end) could potentially be very containing. Designs that embodied calm, containment, coherence, (and provided Kleenex for weeping) would offset the chaos of the story itself. Multiple viewing angles (that would assist the visitor in anticipating what might come next) as well as many exits seemed essential for any visitors who might become unduly anxious so far underground (the planned location). Research with multiply traumatized patients pointed to ways interactive therapeutic dialogue helped reintegrate disconnections of thought or emotion, even in the face of threatened object loss (Pivnick, 2010a); providing discursive cohesion in exhibits could be achieved choreographically through recursive nesting.

Hennes casually offered me a joint role with him if Thinc were chosen. In reality a project of this sort is a team effort that includes a creative director and the museum director. I was motivated more by the challenge of applying what I'd learned in years of clinical experience with traumatized and grieving patients, in order to diminish suffering and intergenerational transmission of trauma. I had also written about how sensorimotor *qualia* (Edelman, 2004) and what we now called *vitality forms* (Stern, 2010) transform through interpersonal experience into language (Pivnick, 1998). What I didn't realize was that I had already begun to assume my indirect role: visitors, too, might feel as if this unfamiliar place echoed their former more familiar experience on that site.[4]

The work begins

Orientation Week in May 2007 was meant to acquaint the various teams and specialists

with one another, the artifacts, the narrative elements, the design principles, and the design principals. Our visits to the JFK hangar that housed most of the artifacts left us speechless. 80,000 square feet of rusted steel, like a sentence devoid of verbs, felt more like a list than remnants of life. The Family Room set up in an office downtown for families of victims was arranged so that hundreds of missing person posters lined the perimeter, perhaps not coincidentally covering the windows overlooking the pile of rubble and remains below. In the center was a small play area full of colorful toys that looked as new as the day it was created. Its lifelessness came to symbolize for us the annihilation at the core of the 9/11 experience. My mission became assisting the designers in creating a journey from “shock to think,” that is, to an acceptance of the “presence of absence.”

When introduced in the first joint meeting as the Consulting Psychologist to Think Design, one person replied, “We got rid of four of you psychoanalyst-types while designing another Memorial Museum. It is important that this museum not be known as ‘The Psychotherapy Museum’ so keep your role quiet. We don’t want the critics to pan it before it even opens.” In the unconscious parallel process, annihilation anxiety was already front and center. Of course, upholding confidentiality was nothing new for a psychologist.

Much as a cohesive self is crucial to navigating the shoals of affective swells and eddies, a well-integrated psychoanalytic identity is a necessary protection against excesses of hostility and helplessness – both within the field and in relation to those outside our perimeter. Having already survived the internecine hostilities of “the relational wars” of the 1980’s and 90’s, I had forged a professional identity I could live with. Both “too relational” and “not relational enough,” I got used to what Bromberg (1998) termed “standing in the spaces,” a stance that proved helpful to this project.

My decades of clinical work with traumatized mourners, supplemented by the writings of J. W. Bernstein (2000) and Davoine and Gaudilliere (2004) would be my initial guides for helping the designers understand the memorialization process.^[5] Psychoanalytic writing would have to be my vehicle for establishing a moral third that would help me reflect. I had already begun study of psychoanalytic writing and critical thinking at the multidisciplinary New Directions Program/Washington Center for Psychoanalysis, which supported my early efforts to conceptualize my task.^[6] There I encountered a paper by George Moraitis (1979), a psychoanalyst who consulted to historians. I decided his model was “good enough” to guide my initial forays into the storytelling part of this new role.

Moraitis saw his role as disinhibiting the historian’s creative process. He observed the historian’s thinking, read materials he was given, and refrained from personality interpretations. He understood that his role would rely both on observation and influence. He engaged in dialogue designed to clarify the historical writer’s positions and to hold in mind for the historian some of his disavowed feelings until the historian could develop a more integrated perspective. Consulting to historians, he reflected, was unlike both therapy and clinical supervision in that each participant was an expert in his own specialty. In this type of consulting, the consultant himself became the laboratory for processing the material.

Hennes and I began by considering content while I provided referrals and references to

his team to build my alliance with them. I watched, learned, read, and took copious notes, working more from the sidelines and mostly in consultation to Hennes. So that we could develop a common language, we read numerous books on museum design and psychoanalysis together, viewed many designs, and visited multiple exhibitions (Hennes, 2009; Pivnick, 2010b). He was drawn to the idea of an intersubjective design, having been the designer of the South African Freedom Park Memorial, which presented multiple perspectives in a “living archive” and where the Indigenous Knowledge System known as Ubuntu (“A person becomes a person through other people.”) informed the design. Relational psychoanalysis with its emphasis on recognition (Benjamin, 2014) and narrative co-creation (Aron, 1996) seemed a good translation for the US, particularly because it gave Hennes a theoretical framework and vocabulary to organize his intuitions.

Over time Hennes and I came to believe that if a memorial museum’s task was to represent and help repair what happened during a catastrophic communal loss, such a museum had to be about the co-creation of narrative meaning through intersubjective experience and witnessing (Pivnick & Hennes, 2014). We located the museum’s ethical center in the intersubjective negotiation of meaning through the representation of multiple experiences and perspectives of the events – in other words, in a psychoanalytic perspective (Lichtenstein, 2014). Its theoretical basis was a relational field (Civitarese & Ferro, 2013) created jointly by those who had experienced the events, represented on video and through audio recordings and text; those who created the museum through the design of space, the curation of artifacts, and the selection of narrative material; and those who would attend the museum, each with a memory of where they were when they learned of the attacks, sense impressions, and, for most, numerous gaps in awareness, knowledge, or experience. As co-creators, albeit with unequal roles, we also became an intersubjective dyad. Constituting both frame and content (Bass, 2007), we processed much of the historical and psychological material through our ongoing dialogue, as informed by my clinical sensibility.

We hoped that museumgoers would locate themselves within a field of potential meaning in a place “safe-enough” to encounter alternate ways of seeing the same story. Unlike a more conventionally-organized exhibition, in which the visitor is expected to understand and ‘correctly’ interpret curatorial messages, an exhibition created through what we came to call *relational design* would be subject to many possible interpretations emerging from users’ encounters with things and their own prior experiences (Hennes, 2009).

Designing: Applying psychoanalytic theory and practice

The work of design is to translate among physical, psychological, and metaphoric experience, so spatial representations can enter the symbolic realm as (implicit) concepts. The stereotypic “collapsed play” a therapist sees in traumatized children found its counterpart in the initial design sketches by team members. A remarkable number of archetypal religious icons or pile-ups made their appearance, rendering the drawings stereotypic, flat, and lifeless. Hennes noted there was absence where vertical structures should have arisen. Uncannily, they often looked more like rubble.

Encoding overwhelming affect

From time to time, members of the design team reacted quite emotionally to the photos

and audio testimony they reviewed for sometimes years on end. Perhaps not surprisingly, we discovered that enactments that carried emotion that had become disconnected from various museum narratives could occur and be useful. An example of this occurred one day when we were reviewing designs with Thinc's internal design team. Hennes uncharacteristically flew into a rage at what he perceived to be the emptiness of the design, telling his team they had simply arranged, not designed the exhibition. He charged across the office with a board in his hand and forcibly drove it through a large panel in Thinc's model shop to demonstrate what had occurred to him. "That," he said, "is what's missing." In our effort to protect visitors from retraumatization we had left crucial emotions out of the main narrative. I saw this dynamic as a parallel process to what museum users might encounter on their physical journey and understood we needed to reintegrate our team's own "cut-away impressions" (Davoine & Gaudilliere, 2004) into the verbal narrative.

Persuaded by several of these incidents of the intersubjective nature of the storytelling process, I began to participate in the weekly design team meetings, where I could observe and assist in managing the unconscious processes. As a result of our joint attention to the designs, I developed, with Hennes' full permission and participation, a method not unlike trauma treatment. When we found ourselves confronting in the design a disjunction between the story of the actual event and how it was represented—or gaps within the narrative itself, the larger teams' dynamics, or our own internal dynamics—we came to realize that these disjunctions might signify the presence of absent emotions, perhaps due to dissociation. If, after consideration, that proved to be true, we tried to translate these now conscious emotions back into a more formulated story in either exhibition structures or in words, with the intent of helping users to mentalize frightening images and emotions (Fonagy & Target, 1996; Stern, 2013). This helped us create more coherent stories—within an implicit, overarching narrative that that integrated design and storytelling—that visitors could internalize as thinkable thought.

The Physical Space

As designed, the entry to the 9/11 Museum is a hallway environment of voices and projected words relating where and how people all over the world learned about the attacks. It then proceeds from there down a winding ramp to a space 70 feet below ground. The memorial aboveground consists of two pools in the footprints of the collapsed buildings. The outer perimeters of those volumes are contained within the museum, perhaps implicitly reminding visitors of the towers hovering above their architectural footprints. Under each volume is an exhibit – one historical, the other memorial. At the end of a visitor's journey is a large space for communal witnessing and reflection.

The Psychic Space

At multiple points during the design process, we encountered one of the forms of collapse I described in my opening paragraph. For instance, we encountered both narrative *parapraxes* and temporal confusions. Visualize the conservator greeting us for our first inspection at JFK by saying "This won't be your first visit." We figured he meant it wouldn't be

our last visit, but here was the disjunction in time that Freud described, a space through which history might eventually emerge. Imagine the effects on survivors, who lacked bodily remains to bury, of a Volkswagen-sized composite of five floors of concrete, wire, and paper resulting from the buildings' pancaking. Its proposed use in the museum led to extended conversations, among museum curators and designers, families and stakeholders, and various community representatives, about the possibility of finding life. The wish of many to omit it from the exhibition, and others' determination to include it, contributed to the group's mourning process. Imagine, too, frequent disjunctions between the narratives and how they were situated in the space, actions that closed off the limited places for reflection, and periodic disconnection among various teams' work. For nearly every attempt to "uncollapse" the presentation, a counter-attempt arose to re-collapse the narrative structure. Managing this process through symbolization is described at some length in a recent chapter (see Pivnick & Hennes, 2014). Here, I will briefly review how we solved the problem of containing irreconcilable binaries implicitly through the design of the memorial exhibit and the construction of an overarching narrative arc that also encompassed diverse perspectives.

Representing irreconcilable opposites

While attending one of the communal meetings, I was struck by the comments of two participants. One community member requested that the museum embody the vast space the buildings had contained. Another asked that the museum provide a sense of containment for his grief by including a space that would be like "a sanctum within a sanctum within a sanctum." These contradictory special desires alerted me to the need to accommodate the likelihood of binary thinking so common after traumatic loss. Since feelings of being unsafe could complicate recovery from bereavement, designers kept both these suggestions in mind, but aspired to contain them in more paradoxical form.

The paradoxical design of the *In Memoriam* section repeats the square-within-square form of the pool above it (and the spatial organization of the family room) in a way that creates both a sense of enormity and an inner sanctum. To maximize its intersubjective potential Thinc divided it into two zones: the *Zone of The Many* – an outer perimeter with photos of those who died stretching around its expanse,[\[7\]](#) and the *Zone of The One* -- a chamber lined with inward-facing benches surrounding a glass floor through which a jagged remnant of the original 'bedrock' slab can be seen and projected video images and audio stories from families and friends about victims' lives can be viewed and heard. These offer brief impressions of not only individual people—The One—but also the web of relations that constituted their lives. Doorways create views from one space to the other. As people mourn they will notice others' suffering, as well as their own. Built-in tissue boxes offer implicit permission and support for the feelings of grief that we expect will arise.

A narrative arc: An example of our process

We arrived at our formulation of the narrative arc near the end of the design phase.

To recap, the introductory exhibition at the entry ramp visualizes spoken testimonies by projecting people's words as text onto a series of panels that form them into a map of the world that people traverse as they enter into the exhibition. The implicit message? We are all, in some way, bearing witness to 9/11, no matter where we were then. For the ending, the curator and designers developed a commemorative activity focused on a huge, folded-over piece of bent World Trade Center steel, on which individuals could write their thoughts via touchscreens.

After nearly four and a half years of work, while Hennes and I were writing about the museum, we realized that our feelings of having been either too present or not-present-enough in the events of that day had a tremendous bearing on how we thought about ourselves thereafter and on our collaboration. We were at odds. As we talked, I saw that because of our different experiences, we were embodying this emotional polarity in opposition—one having felt a need to come close to Ground Zero because of having been far away, the other needing distance because of being caught in close proximity and unable to reach young family members. By discussing how to hold these needs more paradoxically, we realized that each of us wanted to maintain a safe distance while simultaneously approaching the heart of the event. This new awareness led us to recommend a change in the final activity so that visitors could leave their mark on the site via a projected visual display of their final written messages, situated to reiterate the map of the world from the entry ramp. To summarize the new narrative arc: Each person by then would have entered the museum with a narrative of where they were when it happened—"I was there then." Having brought feelings of having been too absent or too present into the museum, this final gesture could become an important opportunity to actively assert "I am here now"—in a witnessed, leaving-behind of something of the visitor's self, experience of 9/11, and engagement with the museum journey. By giving time a spatial representation through a physical narrative sequence with a beginning, middle, and end, this arc is intended to assist visitors in maintaining a sense of time undistorted by any re-stimulation of the effects of post-traumatic collapse.

The imagined and the real

The psychoanalytic consultant's role in a memorial project resembles that of a poet, in that the designers are assisted in translating affect-laden *vitality forms* into emotionally-relevant metaphors (Stern, 2010; Beebe, McCrorie & Pivnick, 2013). The designers transform those metaphoric concepts, their own impressions, and the curatorially-structured content into design elements and spatial representations so as to bring them to life while titrating their intensity. But to accomplish this there must be interchange. As in trauma treatment, a dialogue is needed to bring often split off traumatic memories to life so they can ultimately be contextualized within the full range of survivors' life experiences (Boulanger, 2007). In a museum, "conversation" takes place among stakeholders, curators, designers, seemingly mute artifacts, and visitors, but is not merely hermeneutic. A memorial museum employs abstractions and imaginings while staying grounded in visual, spatial-temporal, and emotional reality. Not just a symbolic reconstruction, it is also an actual construction – an architectural rendering of a real disturbance and our attempts to right it (LaPlanche, 1999; Sperber, 2014).

Writing the disaster

The writing of our final joint paper was dragged down by trauma's undertow at every juncture (Pivnick & Hennes, 2014). In contrast to a many year reciprocal collaboration, during this last phase Hennes and I frequently dismantled and rewrote one another's text. We had encountered this sort of binary jousting when designing the narrative arc, so understood it as such. This time our polarization seemed to reflect the complicated emotions entailed in ending such a rich collaboration. One of us (Pivnick) wanted our story written; one (Hennes) was ready to leave it behind. Our disappointment over design suggestions that were not realized complicated this inevitable separation. Despite our best efforts, the stark binary of order versus chaos stayed in place, much as it has in the world we live in. Though the interstitial spaces remained luminous and airy, the historical exhibit, as a result of forces beyond our control had become dark and claustrophobic, with Thinc's design structure twisted *beyond recognition* to match the evolving curatorial narrative. Through "termination" of our writing process we were able to work through the "discarded or dignified" binary, thought by Benjamin (2014) to be the political equivalent of the "doer-done to" binary. No longer would "only one be recognized." Finally, Tom (literally) seized the narrative and wrote it in his voice. At the same time, he released me to talk to the media about my role.^[8] No longer silenced, I was happy to relinquish my overpowering urge to push him to take a stand. And he felt less like falling through the floor. Known and unknown, present and absent, avowed and disavowed. These themes continued to echo, much as they did for Freud.

The memorial exhibit, informed by so much psychoanalytic theory, was uncontested and has been reported by its users to be very effective.^[9] Our yearned-for uncollapse of time has in some manner been actualized through the creative reanimation of memory (Ornstein, 2010). One visitor (J. Ochsner, personal communication, 2015) commented that he was so moved by the stories that he stayed to hear those of people he had never known -- until he realized how long it would have taken to listen to the impressions of all the people on the outer perimeter wall. It was this that really brought home for him the size of the hole in our communal cloth.

Summary and Conclusion

Even if social change is effected in small increments one person at a time, as it is in psychoanalytic treatment, this communal gathering of narratives about the disaster is beginning to mend gaps in the social fabric, creating a space for *nachtraglichkeit* ("afterwardness") that may assist society in its work of translating the Other's violent intrusion (LaPlanche, 1999) on September 11 into meaningful messages that help uncollapse the rubble of history. What we were, in fact, able to realize, with the help of psychoanalysis, is a museum that contains mixed feelings while making use of many of the features of 9/11 that emerged in the process of creating it. These include physical and symbolic loss; the collapse of time; presence and absence; multiple perspectives on events; potentially overwhelming affect and narrative incoherence arising from split off aspects of experience; and a history that is evolving and contested. Like the museum, it is a history with many diverging paths and multiple portals through which both old and new meanings may emerge.

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[1] The memorial pools at the World Trade Center site, for instance, both implicitly convey the reflection of the absence in the footprints of the former towers and explicitly inscribed with the names of the dead.

[2] The ancient Greeks called this process *theorein*, which forms the root of our word, theory.

[3] Holocaust memorials, for example, often weren't built for a half century or more. The National September 11 Memorial Museum was designed only five years after the attacks and therefore will be redesigned as our understandings change.

[4] I later learned that memorial practices explored this strange familiarity (Freud's *unheimlichkeit*) through utilizing "lieux de memoire" or places of memory for just this reason (Freud, 1919; Nora, 1989).

[5] Key among them were Freud's (1920) exploration of the traumatic break in time, his (1914) ideas about remembering, repeating and working through, Caruth's (1996) notion of unclaimed experience in narrative, Gerson's (2009) work on witnessing, as well as Bromberg's (1998) and Stern's (2013) writings about narrative co-creation in relational analysis.

[6] Psychoanalytic theories of memory, mourning, melancholia, trauma and memorialization too numerous to cite here helped me distinguish the dynamic processes in need of managing.

[7] This is an example of a non-inscribed practice (Connerton, 1989).

[8] I translated "intersubjectivity" to "attention to visitor experience" for these public interviews.

[\[9\]](#) Professional reviewers have not yet been allowed in to write about it.