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Village Voices

LOCAL PROJECTS IS
TURNING MUSEUMS INTO PLACES WHERE PEOPLE INTERACT WITH INFORMATION—
AND EACH OTHER. ITS LATEST COMMISSION WILL HAVE THE WHOLE COUNTRY
JOINING THE CONVERSATION. *By Angela Starita*

Photograph by Mark Mahaney

When Jake Barton, the 34-year-old principal of the interactive design firm Local Projects, thinks about what an exhibition can do, he often considers the District Six Museum in Cape Town, South Africa. The museum documents the forced removal of more than 60,000 residents from a mixed-race neighborhood declared a whites-only zone in 1966, and tells the stories of those displaced. In the early '90s, when reclaiming that land was still not an option, the museum kept the issue in the public eye through exhibitions and debate; subsequently, the museum's sister organization helped residents apply to have their land returned. Transforming and healing a community through inclusive storytelling is, in Barton's eyes, the mandate for museums of the 21st century. These days, he has ample reason to meditate on it: In April, he and his seven-person firm received the commission to codesign the permanent exhibition for the World Trade Center Memorial Museum.

By choosing Local Projects, the memorial's directors cast their lot with a new kind of museum that prizes interactivity over top-down presentation. Local Projects insists on a plurality of voices—the exhibitions it creates function as a kind of conversation rather than as repositories of authoritative

Members
of Local
Projects
not pictured:
Katie Lee,
Ariel Efron,
Ian Curry

Ekene Ijeoma

Sterling Ely

Jake Barton

Burak Arikan

Regina Kwon



fact. "Museums are starting to evolve into agents of social change," Barton says. "That's being reflected in the numbers of people who are going to museums and the ways museums are functioning as spaces for community dialogue. We [are] trying to make diverse people visible to each other through a storytelling space." Local Projects designs high-tech, interactive installations and exhibits that connect experience to location for clients both nonprofit and commercial. With the World Trade Center commission, Local Projects, itself founded mere months before September 11, will have an unprecedented opportunity to bring its philosophy to a vast audience of potential supporters as well as critics.

Local Projects' offices are in New York's garment district, tucked between fabric stores overflowing with buttons, dress patterns, and checkered vinyl. The neighborhood is an apt metaphor for Local Projects' work, which so often turns on

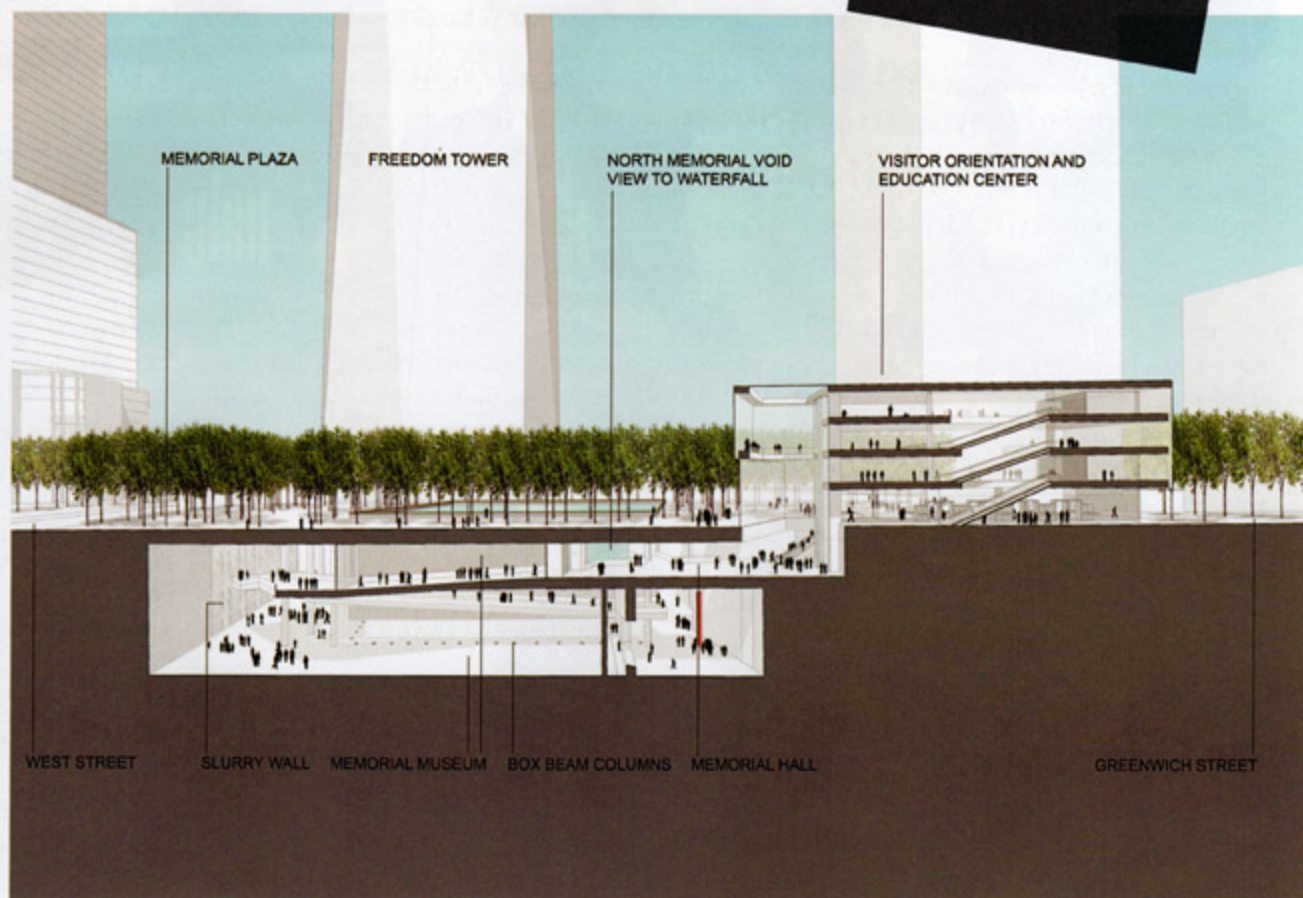
making sense of disparate scraps. Barton, who worked for Ralph Appelbaum Associates for seven years, is self-possessed, articulate, relaxed—a kind of hip Poindexter. It's easy to imagine him walking the halls of New York University, where he teaches in the Interactive Telecommunications Program (ITP). In his own college years at Northwestern University, he majored in performance studies, which he describes as "taking something that's in one format and turning it into something else." He adds, "That impulse to adapt something... that you share in a physical space is essentially what I got addicted to."

Until this June, Local Projects was a five-man team: Barton, principal; Burak Arikan, an artist and designer; Sterling Ely, a hardware designer and animator; Ekene Ijeoma, a programmer, artist, and designer; and Renda Morton, an interface designer. An influx of work has required expansion, and the group now includes an office and

"We realized that the whole DNA of the World Trade Center project was about the overlap of physical space with media space," says Barton.

ALL DESIGN BY LOCAL PROJECTS, EXCEPT WHERE OTHERWISE SPECIFIED.

The World Trade Center Memorial Museum will inhabit 100,000 square feet of space beneath the Park Memorial fountains. Visitors can walk around the footprints of the original towers. Rendering by Snohetta AS LLC.



The StoryCorps booth builds an archive of oral histories, one interview at a time. Design: Local Projects, Mesh Architectures, MASdesign, O R G, inc.



project manager, Regina Kwon; a senior graphic designer, Katie Lee; a filmmaker, Ariel Efron; and Ian Curry, an interaction designer. Curry, who met Barton when he studied under him at NYU's ITP, says, "The traditional calculus is that you have to do a lot of work that you don't necessarily love in order to keep the lights on while you do bits and pieces of great stuff. Local Projects seems to be exempt from that somehow. To me, at least, pretty much everything they do is interesting."

The firm's first job came in July 2001, when Barton collaborated with graphic designer Nancy Nowacek to create Memory Maps, part of an exhibition about New York in the Smithsonian's Folklife Festival. The two produced a fluorescent mesh structure meant to evoke a subway car, with huge maps of the city pinned inside. Participants could write stories on vellum and attach them to the map at the places where the events had occurred. More than 2,000 people added their tales, blanketing the city's neighborhoods. "What we didn't anticipate was that people would actually talk to each other through the exhibition," says Barton. "I overheard someone saying, 'Oh, you went to Midwood High School. I went there, but probably 30 years before you did.' In a way, we made a very un-New York space: a safe place for visitors to just talk to each other. And that was a total revelation."

That revelation, and Memory Maps itself, led to Barton's 2002 commission for what is probably Local Projects' best-known

work: the StoryCorps booth, a mobile studio where anyone can record a narrative of personal history; the recording is then archived by the Library of Congress. The exterior is made up of a three-LCD-panel motion graphics loop, and speakers embedded in the walls allow passersby to hear a sampling of the stories.

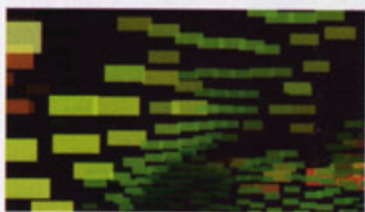
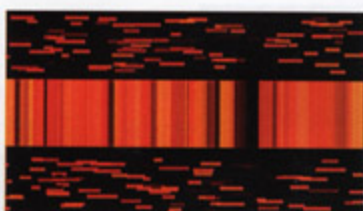
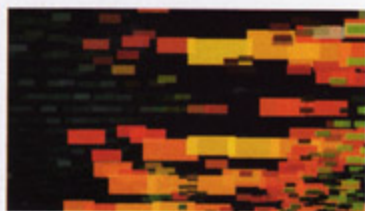
The booths proved so popular that many commercial concerns wanted their own versions. When J. Walter Thompson ran a publicity campaign for JetBlue, the agency thought a story booth would fit the image of the airline as Everyman favorite. "We had lots of companies approach us, including car companies and tissue companies," recalls Barton. But JetBlue "produced a huge stack of crazy-people letters that made us truly feel there were people who passionately wanted to share their JetBlue stories." The booth, created with MESH Architectures and MASdesign, became the focal point of the campaign, recording customer stories around the country.

Turning viewers into contributors is a feat Local Projects has refined with an endlessly inventive use of technology. Last year, when the New-York Historical Society commissioned the firm to create three media pieces for its exhibition "New York Divided: Slavery and the Civil War," Sterling Ely came up with a way to make visitors feel they were present at the black convention of 1834, during which attendees debated issues pertinent to their future. A film recreation depicting African-American New

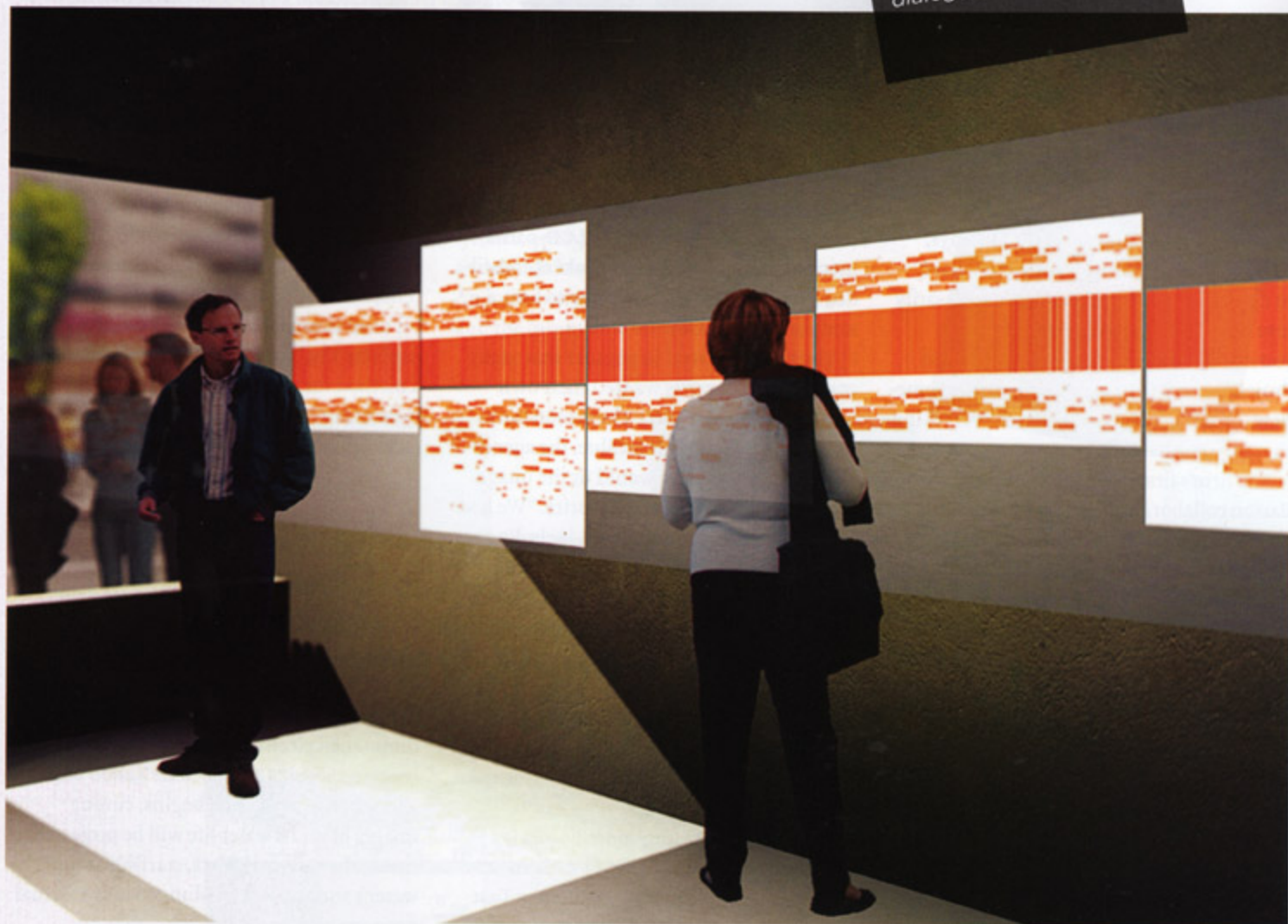
Yorkers voting at the convention is paired with an infrared camera ringed by IR LEDs around its lens. By lifting a paddle lined with infrared-sensitive material, museum visitors can register their vote; the infrared light hits the raised paddles, and the light reflects directly back to the camera. "With a bit of additional hardware/software magic," explains Ely, "we were able to turn that into a method for counting how many paddles were being held up, and display the votes onscreen in real time."

This kind of participatory drama and technological wizardry emerges again in Local Projects' work for a new carousel in downtown New York's Battery Park. A collaboration with the architecture firm Weisz + Yoes, the SeaGlass merry-go-round, tentatively slated to open in 2009, will feature sea creatures whirling under an inverted nautilus made of "smart glass," which dims when electronically charged. The center axis holds a 7,000-watt Xenon bulb and will rise as the ride begins; cutout images of underwater life will be projected inside the canopy. Riders, starting at the water's surface, will be plunged into a virtual deep-sea voyage.

Even such a purely pleasurable invention incorporates Barton's ideas of connection and the importance of place: The ocean theme refers to the fact that Battery Park once was home to the New York Aquarium. This kind of conceptual integrity exemplifies Barton's concern for the way New York's history, and its future, are expressed in the built environ-



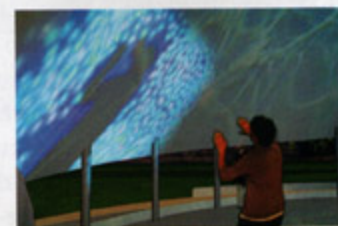
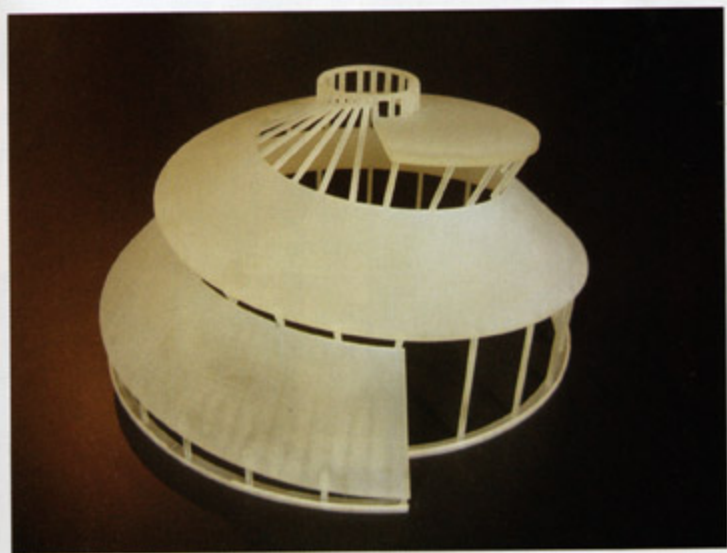
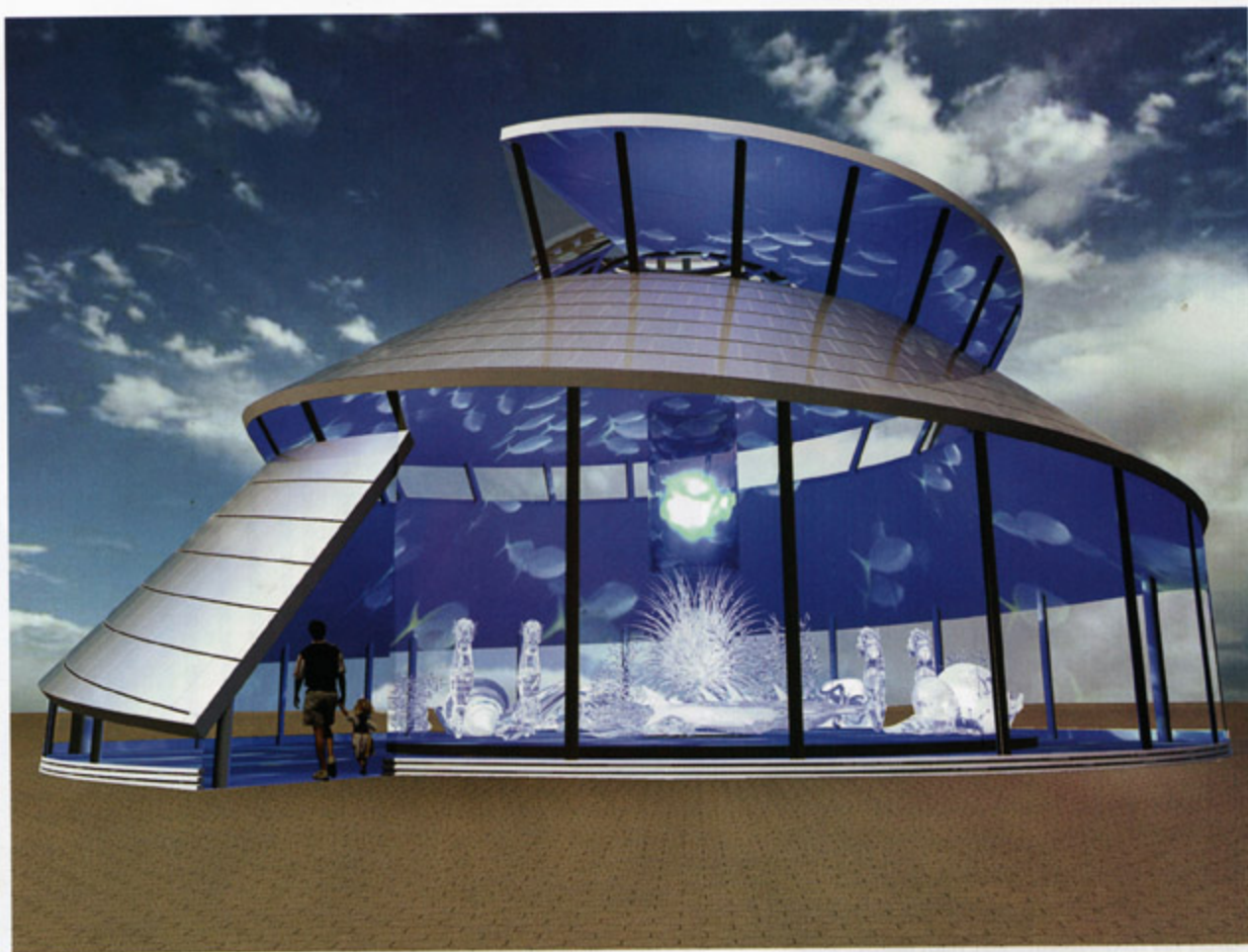
"Museums are starting to evolve into agents of social change. That's being reflected in the numbers of people who are going to museums and the ways museums are functioning as spaces for community dialogue."



At MoCA a display showing the flow of imports and exports ends in a storefront (above); MoCA's interactive StoryMap (right), also accessible online, allows visitors to collect their family histories.



The SeaGlass, an aquatic-themed carousel that features projections created by a "shadow lantern" (right). Design: Weisz + Yoes, Local Projects. Images by Weisz + Yoes (top and left) and Local Projects (bottom right).



Story booth for JetBlue. Inside, a camera embedded in a screen films visitors. Interactive design: Local Projects; architecture: MESH Architectures.



ment. Fittingly, considering his involvement in the September 11 memorial, Barton understands that public works cannot be simply viewed as panaceas or as destructive forces. The Public Information Exchange (PIE), an online forum commissioned by New York's Center for Architecture last year, tackles such issues through what Barton calls "MySpace for architecture." On one side of the PIE web page, architects working on public projects post renderings and explanations of their proposals. Opposite, visitors post comments. In essence, it's a public electronic charrette.

While PIE gives community members say over their space, Local Projects' gallery installations for the Museum of Chinese in the Americas (MoCA) help interpret a neighborhood's history. The museum's new building, slated to open in March at the northern edge of New York's Chinatown, features a Maya Lin-designed interior. The exhibition areas, arranged chronologically from an 1840 starting point, contain screens that run like a digitized ribbon throughout the galleries, charting exchange between the United States and China over 167 years. According to Burak Arian, who is designing the project's software, the screens "show a single continuous image." MoCA's curators will eventually be able to enter current data about trade between China and the U.S., making the display an up-to-the-minute





instrument for tracking the exchange of materials, goods, and ideas between the two countries. The winding screens culminate in the last exhibition room, "China/Now," situated behind a storefront window like that of many small shops in Chinatown. In a very physical way, the design will demonstrate history spilling into the present.

At few locations in the United States do past and present converge so powerfully as at the former site of the World Trade Center. Alice Greenwald, director of the Memorial Museum, says that Local Projects and exhibition design firm Thinc Design were chosen for the weighty job of developing the museum's exhibitions because they were remarkably in sync with the panel's own vision: that, through the use of digital media, visitors would become stakeholders in the story the museum will tell. "September 11 is the most documented event in history," Greenwald says. Since that documentation initially unfolded in real time via digital technology, it's only

appropriate, she believes, that the same media be used to integrate what she calls "visitors' narratives." Barton agrees. "We realized that the whole DNA of the project was about the overlap of physical space with media space," he observes. "People experienced the event live over the web and over broadcasts and radio, but then there was the replaying and the commenting. It was really a watershed of the internet itself."

Barton and Tom Hennes, the founder and creative director of Thinc, see their two firms as complementary. While Local Projects has the digital and narrative experience, Hennes is considering how to facilitate the relationship between the museum's spaces and the community (virtual and real-world).

In spring 2007, the Memorial Museum team was still in a pre-design phase, gauging the museum's collection and deciding which pieces to highlight. They made a visit in May to Hangar 17 at John F. Kennedy International Airport, where many artifacts from the September 11 attacks have been warehoused. Hennes recalls that one official

in charge of the objects had a "very apt description [of the hangar]: Everything here is ugly and everything here is beautiful." Barton and Hennes's approach to the exhibition design is apolitical—neither of them advocates a particular view of the events of September 11—yet they both talk about exhibitions having "social value" and "creating community," and plan to provide an unbiased, multifaceted record of the events through people's stories. They face an implicit challenge, though: telling the stories of the terrorists. Greenwald says the museum is "committed to not white-washing" the story; that will test the team's democratic approach and could lay them open to criticism should they be perceived as giving equal (or any) time to the attackers.

But Barton, as always, places complete confidence in the conciliatory power of linking personal narratives and location: "I think the key is the desire to tell a story. We're really trying to make our work continue to adhere to the principle that people need to share." **P**

Above: For the 2001 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, Memory Maps invited visitors to tell stories on sheets of vellum, and pin them to specific locations on giant maps of New York. Design: Local Projects, Nancy Nowacek; photographs by Nancy Nowacek.

Right: The Public Information Exchange (PIEaia.org) is an interface that fosters dialogue between architects and the general public for new projects in development. Image by Local Projects and Grimshaw Architects.

