

By *TERRENCE DOODY*

“WHAT AM I LOOKING AT, JACK? WHAT AM I LOOKING AT?”

This issue of *Cite* comes ten years after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. In that attack, more than three thousand people lost their lives, and more have died since then from the effects of exposure to toxic materials in the rubble. Many, many more have lost their lives in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars that the United States launched in retaliation.

9/11 has had lasting effects on our national life, both big and small, from our foreign and defense policy to longer lines at airport security. Perhaps the most drastic change, however, has been to our collective imagination. Before 9/11, we had seemed to ourselves to be invulnerable. Wars happened elsewhere. But since 9/11, we have had to reimagine our role in the world, acknowledging the vulnerability of our physical place, the limits to our power, and the fallacy of our belief that because of our power, we do not have to understand the cultures of other peoples in order to conquer them. The unthinkable happened, and we have had to start thinking again.

In *Up from Zero: Politics, Architecture, and the Rebuilding of New York*, Paul Goldberger, architecture critic for *The New Yorker* magazine and dean of the Parsons School of Design, explains the lofty aspirations, complex politics, and conflicting agendas that contended for control of the rebuilding project and the style of the memorial at Ground Zero. He published *Up from Zero* in 2004, arguing that more than the buildings themselves was at stake: in all its dimensions, this was to be the “rebuilding of New York,” a corrective awakening or moral revivification of the city’s spirit. His book’s last sentence reads: “Idealism met cynicism at Ground Zero, and so far they have battled to a draw.” Still, more recently, he praised the buildings and

designs that balance corporate office space with memorial, and reconnect streets where the old superblock cut them off. However, Ground Zero has a long way to go before it or the city’s soul is restored.

And the United States still has over 100,000 troops on the ground in Afghanistan.

We thought it appropriate to mark this tenth anniversary of 9/11 because “the death and life of great American cities” that Goldberger says were at stake in the aftermath of the attack remain so, including ours.

The photographer Sally Gall, a Houstonian, now lives with her husband, the writer Jack Stephens, on Vestry Street in lower Manhattan. They were once able to see the World Trade Center from their window. As Sally recalls that day, she cried out, “What am I looking at, Jack? What am I looking at?” This from a woman who had spent her adult life looking at things and imagining them as images. The unthinkable, or the unimaginable, had occurred right before her eyes, and she didn’t know how to see it. She hasn’t been alone in trying to understand all of the attack’s implications for ourselves and our cities.

Jack’s and Sally’s accounts begin this section of *Cite*.

Next is a summary review of three novels and their imaginative investigations of the catastrophe, noting the way each book makes us think about the city itself, its strangers, and the distances that connect them.

The section concludes with Rich Levy’s account of September 10, 2001, which tells the story of Salman Rushdie’s reading that night at the Alley Theatre, and of the days following as Rushdie waited for the airport to reopen. It’s a surprising essay that concludes with a guarded optimism.

