

EDITED BY TIMOTHY A. SCHULER

THE MAKING OF A MEMORIAL



A LONG SHOT COMPETITION ENTRY FOR THE SANDY HOOK ELEMENTARY MEMORIAL WINS WITH SUBTLE MOVES AND SEASONAL EMPHASIS.

BY TIMOTHY A. SCHULER

Dan Affleck, ASLA, and Ben Waldo, Associate ASLA, decided to respond to the RFP for a permanent memorial to the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting partly to stretch underused design muscles but also to wrestle with the epidemic of mass shootings in the United States. “It felt like something we could do to actually engage with that issue with the tools that we know best,” says Waldo, a designer in the San Francisco office of SWA. “We didn’t expect to win.”

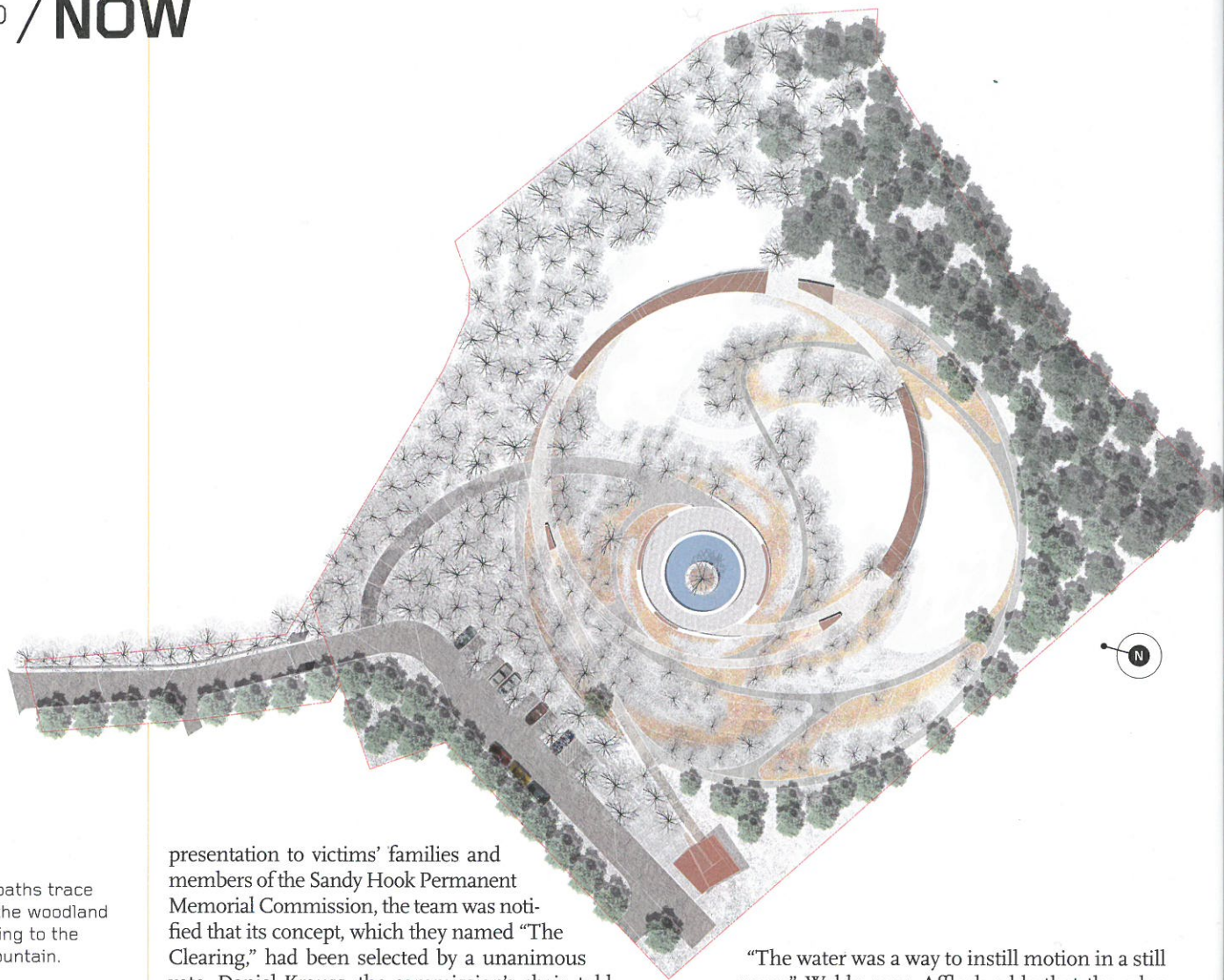
The pair spent three months developing their scheme for the five-acre woodland site, not far from the new Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. It centered on a “sacred sycamore” to be placed in a circular fountain, the edges of which would be inscribed with the names of the 20 children and six adults killed in the shooting. Waldo and Affleck, an associate principal at the firm, worked alone, trading ideas over coffee between project deadlines.

When Waldo and Affleck were named finalists in spring 2018, the designers had a decision to make: continue on their own, or involve their firm. They decided to seek the advice of Justin Winters, a principal at SWA/Balsley in New York, who had been something of a mentor to the two designers. Like Affleck, Winters was also from Connecticut. They called Winters and “laid the cards on the table,” Waldo says. “He was a very impartial adviser on how to move forward.” Ultimately, they decided SWA’s 60-year history and institutional experience would be an asset.

Waldo and Affleck remained the lead designers, however, and Winters played a supporting role, alongside engineers from Fluidity Design and Sherwood Design Engineers. In August, after a

ABOVE

The chosen design for a permanent Sandy Hook memorial calls for a “sacred sycamore” and a circular fountain that will flow year-round.



RIGHT
Braided paths trace through the woodland site, leading to the central fountain.

BOTTOM
The fountain is designed to flow gently toward the tree in a circular fashion.

presentation to victims' families and members of the Sandy Hook Permanent Memorial Commission, the team was notified that its concept, which they named "The Clearing," had been selected by a unanimous vote. Daniel Krauss, the commission's chair, told the *Hartford Courant* that the design was "universally loved" by those who lost children in the shooting.

It's not hard to see why. The design is a braided path of concentric, intersecting circles that all lead to the fountain near the center and help unify a site that, in its existing condition, feels quite fragmented, Affleck says. Because the tragedy occurred in December, the designers put special emphasis on how the memorial would appear in the winter, specifying fiery-colored cultivars such as *Ilex verticillata* 'Winter Gold' and *Cornus sanguinea* 'Cato' Arctic Sun. The warm colors also represent the flames of the candles that visitors will be allowed to place in the fountain, which will flow year-round and carry the candles toward the tree.

"The water was a way to instill motion in a still space," Waldo says. Affleck adds that the edge of the fountain becomes a threshold; the water separates a visitor from the sycamore tree in the center. "It's sort of like the void of the unknown between our life and the afterlife," he says. "We thought, wouldn't it be great if you could give something away that could bridge the divide?"

With the commission's selection, Newtown is one step closer to getting the memorial it committed to erecting more than five years ago. As the project enters its next phase (completion is expected in 2020), Waldo and Affleck say it was the right decision to bring their firm onto the project. "We came to an agreement together that the priority was that Newtown get the best memorial that they can," Waldo says, "and that working with SWA was the best way to get there." ●

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