

MAKING THE MEMORIAL



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BY MAYA LIN

I think the most important aspect of the design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was that I had originally designed it for a class I was taking at Yale and not for the competition. In that sense, I had designed it for me — or, more exactly, for what I believed it should be. I never tried to second-guess a jury. And it wasn't until after I had completed the design that I decided to enter it into the competition.

The design emerged from an architectural seminar I was taking during my senior year. The initial idea of a memorial had come from a notice posted at the school announcing a competition for a Vietnam veterans memorial. The class, which was on funeral architecture, had spent the semester studying how people, through the built form, express their attitudes toward death. As a class, we thought the memorial was an appropriate design for our program, so we adopted it as our final design project.

At that point, not much was known about the actual competition, so for the first half of the assignment we were left without concrete directions for what "they" were looking for or even who they were. Instead, we had to determine for ourselves what a Vietnam memorial should be. Since a previous project had been to design a memorial for World War 3, I had already begun to ask the simple questions: What exactly is a memorial? What should it do?

My design for a World War 3 memorial was a tomblike underground structure that I deliberately made to be a very futile and frustrating experience. I remember the professor of the class coming up to me afterward, saying quite angrily, "If I had a brother who died in that war, I would never want to visit this memorial." I was somewhat puzzled that he didn't quite understand that World War 3 would be of such devastation that none of us would be around to visit any memorial, and that my design was instead a pre-war commentary. In asking myself what a memorial to a third world war would be I came up with a political statement that was meant as a deterrent.

I had studied earlier monuments and memorials while designing that memorial and I continued this research for the design of the Vietnam memorial. As I did more research on monuments, I realized most carried larger, more general messages about a leader's victory or accomplishments rather than the lives lost. In fact, at the national level, individual lives were very seldom dealt with, until you arrive at the memorials for World War 1. Many of these memorials included the names of those killed. Partly it was a practical need to list those whose bodies could not be identified — since dogtags as identification had not yet been adopted and, owing to the nature of the warfare, many were not identifiable — but I think as well the listing of names reflected a response by these designers to the horrors of World War 1, to the immense loss of life.

The images of these monuments were extremely moving. They captured emotionally what I felt memorials should

be: honest about the reality of war, about the loss of life in war, and about remembering those who served and especially those who died.

I made a conscious decision not to do any specific research on the Vietnam War and the political turmoil surrounding it. I felt that the politics had eclipsed the veterans, their service, and their lives. I wanted to create a memorial that everyone would be able to respond to, regardless of whether one thought our country should or should not have participated in the war. The power of a name was very much with me at the time, partly because of the Memorial Rotunda at Yale. In Woolsey Hall, the walls are inscribed with the names of all the Yale alumni who have been killed in wars. I had never been able to resist touching the names cut into these marble walls, and no matter how busy or crowded the place is, a sense of quiet, a reverence, always surrounds those names. Throughout my freshman and sophomore years, the stonecutters were carving in by hand the names of those killed in the Vietnam War, and I think it left a lasting impression on me...the sense of the power of a name.

One memorial I came across also made a strong impression on me. It was a monument to the missing soldiers of the World War 1 Battle of the Somme by Sir Edwin Lutyens in Thiepval, France. The monument includes more than 100,000 names of people who were listed as missing because, without ID tags, it was impossible to identify the dead. (The cemetery contains the bodies of 70,000 dead.) To walk past those names and realize those lost lives — the effect of that is the strength of the design. This memorial acknowledged those lives without focusing on the war or on creating a political statement of victory or loss. This apolitical approach became the essential aim of my design; I did not want to civilize war by glorifying it or by forgetting the sacrifices involved. The price of human life in war should always be clearly remembered.

But on a personal level, I wanted to focus on the nature of accepting and coming to terms with a loved one's death. Simple as it may seem, I remember feeling that accepting a person's death is the first step to overcome that loss.

I felt that as a culture we were extremely youth-oriented and not willing or able to accept death or dying as a part of life. The rites of mourning, which in more primitive and older cultures were very much a part of life, have been suppressed in our modern times. In the design of the memorial, a fundamental goal was to be honest about death, since we must accept that loss in order to begin to overcome it. The pain of the loss will

always be there, it will always hurt, but we must acknowledge the death in order to move on.

What then would bring back the memory of a person? A specific object or image would be limiting. A realistic sculpture would be only interpretation of that time. I wanted something that all people could relate to on a personal level. At this time I had as yet no form, no specific artistic image.

The use of the names was a way to bring back everything someone could remember about a person. The strength in a name is something that has always made me wonder at the "abstraction" of the design; the ability of a name to bring back every single memory you have of that person is far more realistic and specific and much more comprehensive than a still photograph, which captures a specific moment in time or a single event or a generalized image that may or may not be moving for all who have connections to that time.

Then someone in the class received the design program which stated the basic philosophy of the memorial's design and also its requirements: all the names of those missing and killed (57,000) must be a part of the memorial; the design must be apolitical, harmonious with the site, and conciliatory.

I always wanted the names to be chronological, to make it so that those who served and returned from the war could find their place in the memorial. I initially had the names beginning on the left side and ending on the right. In a preliminary critique, a professor asked what importance that left for the apex, and I, too, thought it was a weak point, so I changed the design for the final critique. Now the chronological sequence began and ended at the apex so that the timeline would circle back to itself and close the sequence. A progression in time is memorialized. The design is not just a list of the dead. To find one name, chances are you will see the others close by, and you will see yourself reflected through them.

The memorial was designed before I decided to enter the competition. I didn't even consider that it might win. When I submitted the project, I had the greatest difficulty trying to describe it in just one page. It took longer, in fact, to write the statement that I felt was needed to accompany the required drawings than to design the memorial. The description was critical to understanding the design since the memorial worked more on an emotional level than a formal level.

Many of the issues that I dealt with were connected with the text of the memorial and my decision to list the names chronologically. People felt it would be an inconvenience to search out a name in a book then find its panel location and thought that an alphabetical listing would be more convenient — until a tally of how many Smiths had died made it clear that an alphabetical listing wouldn't be feasible. The MIA groups wanted their list of the missing separated out and listed alphabetically. I knew this would break the strength of the timeline, interrupting the real-time experience of the piece, so I fought hard to maintain the chronological listing. I ended up convincing the groups that the time in which an individual was noted as missing was the emotionally compelling time for family members. A system of noting these names with a symbol that could be modified if the veteran was later found alive or officially declared dead would appease the concerns of the MIA groups without breaking the timeline. I knew the timeline was key to the experience of the memorial: a returning veteran would be able to find his or her time of service when finding a friend's name.

The text of the memorial and the fact that I had left out everything except the names led to a fight about what else needed to be said about the war. The apex is the memorial's strongest point; I argued against the addition of text at that point for fear that a politically charged statement, one that would force a specific reading, would destroy the apolitical nature of the design. Throughout this time I was very careful not to discuss my political beliefs; I played it extremely naïve about politics, instead turning the issue into a purely aesthetic one. Text could be added, but whatever was said needed to fit in three lines — to match the height of the dates '1959' and '1975' that it would be adjacent to. The veterans approved this graphic parameter, and the statements became a simple prologue and epilogue.

The memorial is analogous to a book in many ways. Note that on the right-hand panels the pages are set ragged right and on the left they are set ragged left, creating a spine at the apex as in a book. Another issue was scale; the text type is the

OPENING THE BOOK OF THE DEAD

The names of the American dead occupy the black marble wall of the Vietnam War Memorial chronologically by the days of their deaths, arranged in daily sequence in alphabetical order. I was at the Wall when it was dedicated in 1982, looking for the names of a few friends I last saw wrapped in ponchos and tossed aboard outgoing helicopters. I purchased a large book the size of the phone directory of a small city. It contained the names of the 55,000 dead engraved on the Wall and where each was located.

I left Washington, D.C. with my friends from Oregon. We drove through Virginia, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Nebraska, Wyoming, Utah, Idaho and Oregon, reaching home in Cannon Beach five days later.

We stopped every night at motels or the homes of friends or relatives, and each day we made several stops for food, gas and just to get out and stretch. On the back window of our small truck was a Vietnam Veterans of America sticker, the group that built and dedicated the Wall. Everywhere we stopped people noticed the sticker and almost everyone was related to or had known men who were killed in Vietnam.

Everywhere we stopped I opened the book of the American dead and found the names the people wished to see. Many of them ran their fingers across the written names as had most of us the carved names of our friends on the Wall.

In this manner I crossed the continent. By the time I reached the Pacific Coast the American book of the dead was as well-thumbed as a phone book in a public booth. Until then I had not really understood the personal impact of Vietnam on America's heart. Each time I opened the book I felt I was performing a ritual of immense unrecognized grief.

—MICHAEL McCUSKER

FOR THE DEAD OF THE VIETNAM WAR

"For what?" wind in the Vietnamese military cemetery asks. Better to sigh your question heavenward: a Buddha, a Christ is the court of last resort in determining this matter.

After the gun barrels have cooled man conquers beast when the pain is great enough, for just a moment that old divine spark carries us: re-cycled metal, once the wreckage of a B-52, holds water, and the old gun barrels have become plumbing.

—ALEX BLACK

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