I. MEMORIAL MANIA SINCE MAYA LIN

The United States is in the throes of a memorial mania that manifests itself in two ways. First, memorials culminate every conflict, act, notable death, or historical moment. They have become the morbid cigarette we consume after tragedy, as if every loss remains somehow incomplete without its permanent place in the public sphere, in spite of the fact that the nature of the public becomes increasingly ambiguous.

Second, memorials have succumbed to the forces of multiculturalism and political correctness, and like the pluralistic—some would say balkanized—society they represent, they have become cauliflowers, each one reflecting the messy aggregation of interests of democracy trafficking in official remembrance. Recent events, moreover, have strained memorial traditions in new ways, from the AIDS/HIV epidemic to the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, the events of September 11, 2001, and the succession of anniversaries of 20th-century events, including the Holocaust and World War II. In short, American attempts to memorialize are encountering new kinds of issues in a rapidly changing political atmosphere, amid shifting conventions of art and architecture.

This was not always the case. Until World War I, the dominance of the classical tradition in architecture and the figure in sculpture provided a set of conventions for memorials and their spaces with almost limitless possibilities for composition within a limited framework of commemoration. Days of remembrance necessitated a place to gather. The memorial provided a focus for attention for official ceremonies, as well as a site for the laying of wreaths or flowers, the inscription of names, and an allegorical representation of the event, such as peace, victory, or noble death in the case of a war memorial (fig. 3). Since the American and French revolutions, these sorts of memorials have proliferated in step with the geometric population growth of the modern world, in part because modernity ruthlessly mechanized the means of destruction. To put this in Malthusian terms, memorials quickly exceeded the growth of means of subsistence: our ability to nurture memory and care for memorials lags behind our ability to produce them. And yet, in a mass society, in which almost all aspects of culture from birth to death have been farmed out to impersonal institutions, memorials are conspicuous for remaining individual and personal. As cultural behavior, they continue to resist capitulation to the machine, and this is because each one represents what has been called “memorial work,” the collective process of mourning that a community engages in after a traumatic event.

Maya Lin’s Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. (1982) is a touchstone for many of these issues (fig. 1). The story is well known. Lin won a national competition for the memorial as a student at Yale University. Her minimalist black granite wall, cut into a grassy swell on the Washington Mall, used the simplest means—reflection and the silent rhythm of names catalogued by date of death—as an abstract means to create a sacred yet incomplete narrative of the Vietnam War. Although walls of names and granite are longstanding memorial strategies, Lin’s spare memorial departed radically...
from memorial conventions and set a pattern for later efforts. While Lin single-handedly brought memorials up to date with developments in art, her memorial instantly incited controversy. In response, Frederick Hart was commissioned to design a more traditional memorial, which was completed in 1993 (fig. 2). Three soldiers, each predictably of a different ethnic group, gaze wistfully at the wall—three bronze ghosts mourning, and also instructing visitors how to mourn. As controlled and open-ended as Lin’s design is, Hart’s figurative group borders on the maudlin and sentimental. The soldiers recall returning gently to what Philippe Ariés called the “sententious” mourning of that century. By contrast, the 20th century has treated death as a taboo, and memorials as public markers of grief. The rise of abstraction—what we now understand the dilemma of representing death as a taboo. The Machine Gun Corps Memorial (Dover, Wood, 1925) also known as the Boy Wood, 1925), also known as the Boy Memorial to the March Dead of 1921 (destroyed by the Nazis and restored after World War II) shows the first impulse at work, while two more conventional memorials at Hyde Park Corner, London, show the quandary over realist in memorials (figs. 4, 5). The Machine Gun Corps Memorial (Dover, Wood, 1925), also known as the Boy David Memorial, and the Royal Artillery Memorial (Charles Sergeant Jagger, 1921-25) both memorialize soldiers who died in World War I, but they do so in remarkably different ways. The under-size David, a classical allegorical figure drawn from Michelangelo, offers an abstraction of society’s sacrifice of its youth to war, and a biblical reference to an act of heroism that likens David’s sling to the new technology of the machine gun—the new weapon must have seemed like an unlikely image for a memorial. The Royal Artillery Memorial is much more self-consciously modern. Not only does it nod to traffic with its scale and directionality, it also depicts modern war realistically. Bronzes of men in the uniforms of the day stand guard over the “tomb” and its life-size Howitzer gun. While our eyes may find the Royal Artillery Memorial powerful, it was much criticized in its day for its realism. Americans wrestled with similar issues after both World War I and World War II.

The Iwo Jima Memorial (officially called the Marine Corps War Memorial, by Felix DeWeldon, 1954) is arguably the only figurative memorial to achieve iconic status in the United States between World War I and Lin’s memorial (fig. 6). This memorial, based on a photograph taken on Mt. Suribachi on the island of Iwo Jima, where American soldiers raised a flag upon taking the mountain, represented the war directly. The Iwo Jima Memorial overcomes the problems of the Royal Artillery Memorial precisely by being “real,” by presenting itself as veristic, an act of war bronzed.

Photographic origins insinuated, public relations reinforced. Giant plaster models of the memorial went on tour during the war as part of a bond drive, making cameos in Times Square and on Wall Street in New York, and in Cleveland, Detroit, and Indianapolis. This memorial, based in photojournalism, underlined the idealizations and allegorical potential of the traditional memorial. All memorials are forms of media and modes of propaganda, but Iwo Jima may be the first to be a thoroughgoing media creation, one powerful enough to resist the trends in art and society away from figurative memorials. After World War II, with the advent of television, the iconic memorial was trapped in a mimetic relationship with the media, each reciprocal- ly reinforcing or undermining the truth claims of the other.

The decline of figurative art and the rise of abstraction—what we now can see as an out-of-body experience that lasted a few decades after World War II—was played out through memorials as well. After World War II, so-called living memorials carried the day. These “useful” memorials—community centers, gymnasia, parks, and the memorial highways on which we all drive—displaced the tradition of arches, obelisks, and columns surrounded with soldiers or topped with idealized figures like Victory or Liberty. Few memorials in the decades after World War II relied on the conventions of high art. Think of what a Jackson Pollock or Andy Warhol memorial might look like, and you see the problem. It is no coincidence that the Vietnam War spurred the first Minimalist memorial. While Minimalism already had a pedigree by the early 1980s, Lin was the first to apply it willfully to memorials, and it was a stunning act completely in tune with the tenor of the moment.

III. MULTICULTURALISM, MULTIPLECTITY, AND MEMORY

The Vietnam War, which the United States memorialized before the earlier World War II or Korean War, was perhaps the most contentious issue of its day, a war fought amid social unrest and protest: part of the same set of forces that liberalized American society and led to multiculturalism, but also part of the Cold War. Minimalism arose in the same years and gave a wide berth to these multiple viewpoints. It is an art that is assertive with space, not meaning; it sets a stage, but leaves it empty for the spectator, who becomes an
Figure 7 (left): Vietnam Women’s Memorial Project, Washington, D.C. Olenna Goodacre, 1993.


Figure 10 (right, lower middle): Civil War Memorial, Mystic Seaport, Conn.

Figure 11 (right, bottom): Korean War Veterans Memorial, New York, New York, 1991.

actor. Its impatience with Abstract Expressionism transcended a distrust of the artistic, the fussy, and the inner life of the artist, to disengage with the rigid encounter between the work of art on a wall and the adoring or bored viewer in a museum. Lin used minimalism to restore some of the possibility of the caim or burial mound, that most ancient memorial tradition that likens the unfathomable forces and eons behind the appearance of an erratic boulder in a landscape to a life and its loss. The inconclusiveness of the Vietnam War and the upheaval associated with it demanded such a memorial vocabulary. The multiculturalism born of the same social forces would demand still a different one.

By the time Lin’s memorial was finished, multiculturalism was spreading from the rarefied academy to the vitiated air of popular culture—and figuration had returned in art. Hart’s group is probably the first evidence of multiculturalism, that well-intentioned but ultimately bloated bundle of moralistic restrictions, making its way into a memorial. The ethnic variety of his soldiers was assumed, an insipid attempt to bronze multiculturalism, a matter that demands a deeper rethinking of the memorial tradition as well as cultural difference. After all, by the 1980s even advertising had taken to what we can now identify as the United Colors of Benetton strategy (begun in 1982), the marketing of racial or ethnic variety. There were precedents: The Iwo Jima Memorial also represented multiple ethnicities, but this reflected the actual soldiers who staked the flag atop Mount Suribachi. Frederick Hart’s memorial, by contrast, is a fiction driven by a political agenda, albeit an agenda we might very well agree with—while ruining the trespass on Lin’s memorial. The problem is that figuration returned in the 1980s in the form of a postmodern critique, a suitable mode for commenting on the Vietnam War, while Hart’s sculpture is anything but ironic. This nudges it towards kitsch. His soldiers also overlook Lin’s memorial from the best perch for photographs, stitching the piece into rituals of tourism and the heritage industry.

Washington thus had two Vietnam memorials, the first a major advance in solving the dilemma of figuration in memorials, achieving something iconic without using icons; and the second, a knee-jerk retrenchment and an exercise in conventionality. This face-off of conflicting artistic traditions and of cultural viewpoints is again typical of the era that nurtured both liberal political correctness and conservative family values. What becomes apparent in hindsight is the shaping of a memorial precinct within the grand necropolis of D.C., a memorial “room” for Vietnam within the American temenos. And democracy was not done serving up the memorial well of the people, for the second memorial was of three men mourning the loss of mostly male combatants. Women, too, had played an important role in the war. Some 11,500 of them served overseas. They, too, needed representation on the Mall. As H. L. Mencken remarked, in a democracy, the people get what they want, and they get it good and hard. So it is with the Vietnam Women’s Memorial (1993), a sentimental handmaiden’s tale of a memorial whose peripheral site expresses a marginal role for women in Vietnam (fig. 7). It is so clearly addenda, a perverse disservice to the very point of multicultural sensitivity. One wonders why their names couldn’t be added to the wall, regardless of gender or race. Yet the story continues, not with Vietnam, but with the effort to memorialize the Korean War (fig. 8). As if to fore- stall the conflicts of the Vietnam War Memorial, its Korean pendant (1995), which quite literally mirrors Lin’s granite wall, came prepackaged as an aggre- gate affair, a compilation of wall, figural elements, a fountain, and a vertical accent. In addition to names, garish, poorly scaled faces are bitten into the stone, the embarrassingly bad likeness- es appearing like shrunken heads next to the reflections of the visitors. The simple and direct sense of movement in Lin’s masterpiece is lost amid the bric- a-brac. One of the criticisms of tradi- tional memorials in the 1940s was that they were cluttered and random. So vehement were the opponents to “use- less” memorials, that calls went out for their destruction. The living memorial was intended, in part, to circumvent the problem. All of these problems have returned with the Korean Memorial. Even the haunting, over-scaled soldiers who walk tensely in a “field” by the wall—even they lose their gravitas, as signage tells us not to walk with them (to keep off the grass), which is the very thing we ought to be doing (fig. 9). As a whole, it is a one-man band of a memorial, playing almost every memori- al convention loudly, but playing none of them well.

The retreat of the singular, iconic memorial is not complete, but it has declined in step with the growth of memorial ghettos. Every small town gathers its herd of memorials on a public square or park, near a courthouse, or on a remaindered piece of grass at an interchange now dominated by traffic (fig. 10). Even in the nation’s densest urban environment, New York City, Battery Park has been given over to a collection of memorials, anchored by the old fort, which casts its historical aura over the entire park. Here a number of unrelated memorials have been asked to talk to one another, the only unifying theme being that they are memorials and that commemorative practices have made it a matter of utility to build new memorials in the same space. Behind this utility, however, we might see the long tradition of the American cemetery, like Brooklyn’s Green-Wood Cemetery, which urban dwellers in the 19th century used as a picturesque retreat from Manhattan. Leisure and cultural memory have often been intertwined in the American land- scape. In this respect Battery Park is typical of many towns and cities. Here sit memorials to the American Merchant Marines, Wireless Operators (1915), World War II, Korea (1991), and New York City Police (1997), as well as a tem- porary memorial and eternal flame for September 11th and the Irish Hunger Memorial, all within the historical pall of the battery itself. It is New York’s memento mori (fig. 11). These conditions implicate the single memorial in a com- plicated landscape of history, memory, leisure, and tourism, whether the space is designed to be complex, like the Korean War Memorial in D.C., or becomes complex through aggregation, like Battery Park.

IV. MEMORIAL LANDSCAPES

This multiplicity, however, can create a striking environment when applied at the right scale with a firm, consistent hand. Lawrence Halprin’s Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial in D.C. plays at this game, but within a compelling and coherent landscape (fig. 12). Monumental walls of cyclopean boulders shelter a combination of waterfalls, freestanding sculptures (including one of FDR in a wheelchair and another of him with his dog, Fala), famous quotations, and fields of more abstract sculptural elements, all within a linear frame- work of outdoor “rooms” that chronolog- ically traces his four terms as presi- dent. The effect is so grand that one
wonders if even Roosevelt can sustain this scale. Moreover, the collision of the monumental spaces with the less convincing smaller sculptures leads unsurprisingly to a feeling of bathos. The strategy might work better with a major national event, even if we take FDR as the personification of the American experience in depression and war. Yet Halprin, as landscape architect, had the sensitivity to massage all of these elements into a single, lucid experience. Unlike the Korean Memorial, which is less than the sum of its pieces, the FDR Memorial is expansive and whole.

A similar idea lies behind ROMA Design Group’s Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial (see pp. 12-15), planned for D.C. and conceived as “an engaging landscape experience tied to other landscapes of play and landscapes of remembrance.” This design has asserted a single master narrative regarding the sacred and the profane, between the insistence on retaining the footprints of King’s words and deeds. The two chambers are linked under the forceful, curving berm faced in stone and high tech art. Moreover, the multi-cultural dilemma in memorialization still has not been solved theoretically, programmatically or formally. Multiculturalism may in fact never be solved with art, and perhaps it should not be. From the beginning, the impromptu memorials set up around the World Trade Center site revealed the splintering commemorative agenda, with memorials to policemen, fire fighters, office workers, and a host of other groups and individuals (fig. 13). These factions would play an important role in directing the process and ultimately the final shape of the memorial, including the insistence on retaining the footprints of the old buildings. This alone constitutes a stunning influence of public sentiment over the design process, even if a design competition determined the ultimate form.

Michael Arad and Peter Walker’s winning design, “Reflecting Absence,” takes its cue from the voids left by the destruction of the towers (see pp. 16-21). In fact, these are not voids in the literal sense, since the entire site was smoldering pit for months; rather, the voids correspond with our “mental map” of the lost buildings. Arad and Walker imaginatively shaped a memorial space, turning the voids into recessed pools, with cascades of water defining the edges of the former buildings. A grove of deciduous trees intensifies the towers’ absence, and their transformation throughout the year as leaves fall and buds emerge plays with traditional memorial ideas of birth and death. The architects explained these pools as a sensual, unfolding experience. As visitors ascend on the ramps that lead into the memorial spaces, they are “removed from the sights and sounds of the city and immersed in a cool darkness. As they proceed, the sound of water falling grows louder, and more daylight filters in to below. At the bottom of their descent, they find themselves behind a thin curtain of water, staring out at an enormous pool.” The chamber again acts conventionally, bearing the names of the dead on its walls. Here convention is not a failure of nerve, but an attempt to communicate pathos through well-worn memorial strategies.

In Arad and Walker’s words: “Standing there at the water’s edge, looking at a pool of water that is flowing away into an abyss, a visitor to the site can sense that what is beyond this curtain of water and ribbon of names is inaccessible.”

The two chambers are linked under-ground by a passageway and a small space where visitors can light memorial candles or gather in small groups.

Additionally, the designers have exposed the smelly wall, the massive foundations of the original buildings. Some of the artifacts and wreckage from the disaster will be placed in an interpretive center, making these palpable parts of the memorial experience. In contrast to this public space, a large stone vessel in a separate room will contain the remains of unidentified victims. As a whole, the memorial delicately balances an immensely complicated set of demands, including a variety of factions with different ideas, a national tragedy with a strong local component, the need to mediate between consumerist and memorial environments, and the need for a monumental space amidst skyscrapers that can allow for intimate and personal encounters with objects. The design manages to massage all of these elements together without overdetermining the experience. This leaves open the possibility, as with Lin’s Vietnam War Memorial, of a critical response to the site and the event. It does not, however, explicitly accommodate the various groups who have demanded representation.
VI. EMERGING FORMS

In 2004, the Board of Directors of the National AIDS Memorial Grove held a competition for the design of a National AIDS Memorial. The brief challenged competitors to think in terms of the whole seven-acre site nestled in a dell in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park. The open-ended invitation to use the dell, which already sustains a variety found in memorial markers to AIDS, suggested the sort of memorial landscape of the FDR and MLK memorials. But the subject of the memorial, the AIDS epidemic, offered a range of new issues. Not only would the project memorialize those lost to the disease, but also, the board hoped, the design would stimulate thinking about AIDS and memory, promote hope for those touched by the disease, increase awareness of AIDS as a global tragedy, educate the public, raise awareness about the Grove, enhance its beauty, and “secure, through design acclaim, the care of the Grove in the future.” A tall order. Unlike the destruction of the World Trade Center, which was geographically focused and visually iconic, AIDS is a dispersed, misunderstood, constantly shifting, and ongoing tragedy. It is virtually impossible to encompass. To grasp the numbers of victims alone goes beyond the ken of most Americans, and to understand the social and cultural impact reaches still further. Not surprisingly, given the program and current trends in architecture, the vast majority of entries envisioned “fields” of architectural or sculptural intervention rather than single objects. In part, this could be a response to highly publicized memorials like Peter Eisenman’s Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, a seemingly infinite field of stone megaliths in a plaza whose scale and maze-like qualities suggest the ineffable while obstructing, occluding, and resisting the visitor’s view. In the AIDS Memorial competition, the winning design, chosen from more than 200 entries, added heavy symbolism to the idea of a field. Janette Kim and Chloé Town, who incorrectly appropriat- ed the term “Living Memorial” for their title, proposed an area blackened as if by ritual burn—“as if” because an actual fire in arid, windy, fire-wary San Francisco would be out of the question. The symbolism, at first dark and frightening, is meant to evoke hope, since out of the charred remains of a simulated fire new life would emerge. Were the design attached to real ritual burning, one could imagine an immensely evocative memorial, one tied to annual commemorations and to the natural cycle of death and rebirth. This would match the unresolved nature of the AIDS epidemic, and it would do so viscerally. But since the idea must be reduced to a static, sculptural suggestion of this process, much of the dynamism and interactive possibilities are lost.

Professor Raveevarn Choksambatchai of the College of Environmental Design, working with Department of Architecture graduates Jacob Atherton and Michael Eggers, and the author of this article as consultant, were also finalists in the competition. The team’s project included a field of dense, red, resinous rods that would glow with phosphorescence at night and an audio component in which voices eerily count nonconsecutive numbers (fig. 14; also see pp. 38-39). Humming-birds would create a canopy as they hover over the sugar-water-filled rods. Choksambatchai, who has already designed the Woman Suffrage Memorial in St. Paul (2000) and an unbuilt Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Minneapolis, renounced prescriptive symbolism for a more direct, emotive appeal through a landscape installation that operates actively through multisensorial engagement. She likened the experience of the memorial to the sensation of turbulence in an airplane, when an otherwise smooth flight hits an air pocket and suddenly jolts us back into the reality that we’re perilously hurtling through the air at 500 miles per hour, 30,000 feet above the ground. With time people have been lulled into apathy about AIDS. This project aimed to reawaken the fact of its imminent threat. Its resistance to specific meaning, however, elaborated on the trend toward open-ended narratives in memorials, and it did so with political intentions. Memorials tend to name and number, their quantitative certainty bounds them. Choksambatchai’s memorial, by contrast, rejected the act of quantification as inadequate to the memorial work demanded by the AIDS epidemic. Instead she proposed a rich environment demanding that visitors question their reality and their relationship to the disease and its ramifications, while presenting hope for the future.

Along similar lines, Leor Lovinger, MLA ’03, and Gilat Lovinger’s design for the Flight 93 National Memorial, titled “Disturbed Harmony,” a finalist from more than 1,000 entries in the competition, manipulates an immense landscape to bring out the strange collision of the terrorist hijacking and the vernacular landscape of rural Pennsylvania (see pp. 22-25). A 2.5-mile granite wall (called the Bravery Wall) meanders through the gentle undulations of the land. It is both a memorial wall and a timeline of the event, so that the last moments of this harrowing flight slowly unfold as one walks along the wall. The surreal juxtaposition is both spatial and temporal, drawing out seconds of frenetic tragedy that took place in the cabin of an airplane into a contemplative experience of verdant farmland. A generation ago, the urge would have been to monumentalize the site of the crash with a ruined airplane, a plaque, or a sculptural element that marked the spot. But here the memorial landscape makes sense; it uses the land to explain the event, and it does so in the service of a memorial experience. The form of the memorial, in other words, derives from its commemorative function. In some sense, the Lovinger’s design is traditional, a wall inscribed with names and a narrative, but its scale and site plan elaborate incisively on this tradition.

One wonders what future generations will think of this memorial mania. Will it be seen as a return to the 19th-century obsession with forging permanent memorials in the face of unprecedented change and the violent upheavals of the Industrial Revolution? Is the current memorial binge also an attempt to find temporal anchors in a world undergoing rapid changes driven by digital technology, virtualization, and biotechnology, including cloning and genetic engineering? What do we know is that memorials, like their creators, come and go.

The intense scrutiny of the present will fade with the years. Time will render meaningless even the most contentious memorials: Imagine a future moment when a child asks a parent to explain a wall of names on granite and the parent does not know it is the Vietnam Memorial. Rome memorialized with such vigor that precincits became overcrowded with memorials, forcing the city to periodically sweep them away, making room for the next round. We’ve all seen memorials to Lenin or Stalin toppled and, more recently, statues of Saddam Hussein lassoed down.

The ancients might also give us pause in other ways. After the Persians sacked Athens, Athenians observed a 50-year period of waiting before they built on the temple mount, an immensely patient, solemn, and wise response to destruction—one we might learn from in New York. Such maturity, however, is unthinkable in America’s First City, especially in its financial center, where land values demand instant gratification—although we might note that the Acropolis is hardly a low-rent property. In our eagerness to do something at Ground Zero, we forget that memorialization and the profit motive are forever at odds, which is why memorials end up orphaned on odd patches of public land. The cynical response to all of this is to conclude that no matter what design we choose in our memorials, they reflect currents in art and architecture, and, as forms of social commentary, they become outdated within a generation or two. In effect, most memorials are built not for posterity or for longevity but as part of the mounting process. They constitute an essential part of people in the present working through loss. Their obsolescence is tied to their efficacy, a sign of the end of grieving, and memorials that live on suggest a cultural snag, a lack of resolution. Still, the architectural historian in me wishes that all of these memorials outlive their usefulness.

3. Ibid., 14, 31.

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