

Jacob Ford

Hannah Gurman

Historical Memory in War and Peace

10 December 2012

In God We Trust

Maya Lin is best known for designing Washington D.C.'s Vietnam Veterans' Memorial, and she hates this notion. The rest of her career has been spent distancing herself from a reputation as "the Monument Maker" (Menand 54). Franklin Delano Roosevelt, after witnessing the political warfare surrounding the Jefferson Memorial, famously instructed his close friend and Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter:

"If any memorial is erected to me, I know exactly what I should like it to be. I should like it to consist of a block about the size of this [putting his hand on his desk] and placed in the center of that green plot in front of the Archives building. I don't care what it is made of, whether limestone, or granite or whatnot, but I want it plain without ornamentation, with the simple carving, 'In Memory Of _____'" (Struck A01).

To design a memorial is to enter a world of political contention and competitive interests, and this is where Lin and many other designers struggle. Rallying Congress in 1937 to allocate funds toward a memorial dedicated to Thomas Jefferson, the same structure whose controversy would prompt Roosevelt to ask that one never be made to himself, Representative John Boylan asserted that "[n]ever was a memorial yet erected that was not subject to criticism" (Gabor 96).

In a plot twist of historic proportions, even Roosevelt's desperate attempts to protect himself from future controversy were precisely what became the center of debate when every attempt to erect an FDR monument would be enthusiastically blocked by a chorus citing The Quote. The Roosevelt Memorial Commission stiffly argued that the only proof of Roosevelt ever having expressed opposition to a memorial was the diary of a mere Supreme Court justice, surely not a credible source. A seven-and-half acre memorial was dedicated to the former president in 1997 (Struck A01).

Any event or person worthy of a memorial is worthy of opinions, strong and often conflicting ones. An artist advocates an immersive experience for the audience while influential donors may request that the memorial highlight a specific group or idea over another. In the case of a war memorial, veterans' leagues weigh in; in the case of personal memorials, a family or an estate is likely to offer commentary. Budgets are set. Accessibility is closely monitored. It is simply inevitable that, in designing what is to become a very physical and defining memory, various groups will wish promote specific interests. However, what unnerves participants such as Lin and Roosevelt, this often-repeated memorial debate, is an integral part of the memorial's story, a small history of those are trying to represent history itself, and it must be accepted as such.

There is an instinct common to the textbook writer and the memorial artist: the notion of a need to construct a 'pure' memory. Yet, unless one wishes to author a textbook which details the movement of every atom which led up to World War II or construct a monumental slab that is politically correct in every way to every interest group, certain subjective decisions must be made as to the cause of events and the way in which they are to be remembered. However, while a textbook author may aim to write from a non-emotive perspective, a memorial artist strives to

incite emotion; much of the contention lies in choosing which are appropriate. Architectural historian (and architect himself) W. R. Lethaby describes “a feeling in the air that we ought to offer pure sacrifice for the fallen, and that there is some meanness in making memorials serve a useful purpose—that we must advertise our regret and compassion in lavish oblations of marble, brass, and glass.” He suggests holding a meeting with those killed in action to ask which materials they might find most suiting. When the fallen are unavailable, Lethaby suggests “holding a meeting of the maimed and injured and asking them what their fallen comrades would have liked” (57-58).

Before Maya Lin even had a chance to hold a meeting with Vietnam War veterans, things were not going smoothly. Lin had just been selected as the winner of a design competition for the Washington, D.C. Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and major players were already taking sides. Ross Perot, billionaire political activist, had been slated as a major donor to the Memorial. Yet, upon seeing Lin’s design, Perot withdrew his support and began rallying veterans to oppose Lin’s design. James Watt, secretary of the Interior, refused to sign off on the Memorial’s use of public land under Lin’s design (Wills).

The design which caused an outcry was a unique one indeed. Envisioned as the scar to an initial trauma upon earth’s surface, Lin’s proposal was to build a black wall of names which descended into grass on which it stood. No depictions of soldiers. No flags. Traditional war memorials were constructed in white stone, but Lin specifically called for polished black granite “in order to make the surface reflective and peaceful” (Lin). All the names of those who were killed or had gone missing in the Vietnam War would be carved into the face of the granite in chronological order of the date they had died or gone missing, rather than alphabetical. The names would start at the center of the memorial with the first death of the war, extend to the

right, and then continue on the left side to meet in the middle. Even the submission itself was unique, forgoing architectural diagrams for “very mysterious, very painterly” pastels (Lin). Two of these pastel drawings, one sketch, an engraving sample, and a single page detailing a viewer’s experience with the wall were what made up Lin’s entry, and were all that was required to nearly suspend the project (Owen).

“The memorial is composed not as an unchanging monument, but as a moving composition to be understood as we move into and out of it. The passage itself is gradual; the descent to the origin slow, but it is at the origin that the memorial is to be fully understood,” wrote Lin in her competition application (“Maya Lin's Award-Wining Design”). That origin, the apex of the memorial, became an apex of disagreement between Lin and the veterans. Lin intended that the memorial’s center remain devoid of words other than the names of deceased veterans, fearing the addition of a politically loaded statement which might instill a specific interpretation of the memorial upon the viewer. The veterans, however, insisted on the inclusion of some text, and Lin offered a guideline that any text must be limited to a number of lines that would match the height of the chronological years engraved at the bottom of the memorial (Lin). The veterans agreed to this design stipulation and today, on the chronologically first panel of names and to the left of the year 1959, one can read

IN HONOR OF THE MEN AND WOMEN OF THE ARMED FORCES OF THE
UNITED STATES WHO SERVED IN THE VIETNAM WAR. THE NAMES OF
THOSE WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES AND OF THOSE WHO REMAIN
MISSING ARE INSCRIBED IN THE ORDER THEY WERE TAKEN FROM
US.

On the final panel of names, which according to Lin's organization sits just to the left of the first, another message is engraved, explaining that the United States "honors the courage, sacrifice, and devotion [uncapitalization mine]" of its Vietnam veterans and disclosing that the memorial was funded by private donations ("Maya Lin's Award-Wining Design").

The symbolic purpose of Lin's apex was called into question yet again just two years after her memorial's dedication. While the necessary compromises had been made to construct the memorial, a small but vocal group of dissenters remained. After Lin's entry had been selected, Thomas Carhart, a Vietnam veteran, referred to the memorial as a "black gash of shame" and "a black wall in a trench with a random scattering of names," urging both the government and other veterans to reject the submission ("Viet Vet: Memorial a 'Black Gash of Shame'"). Vietnam company commander Robert Lorbeer felt the memorial did nothing to honor the living while disturbed navy serviceman Timothy Vogel felt the memorial served to "bury the memory of the Vietnam experience" (A12). Perot yet would not support Lin's memorial and Watt still refused to grant the memorial space on the Washington lawn. The controversy led to the establishment by the Memorial Fund of a second design committee, this one consisting entirely of Vietnam veterans, with the task of commissioning of a second, more traditional, veterans' monument (Goldberger C25). The new committee determined that an additional sculpture would be constructed by Frederick Hart, who had placed third in the original memorial's design competition ("Three Servicemen Statue"). The addition of Hart's memorial, a more customary and less abstract war monument consisting of three bronze Vietnam soldiers in action, was proposed in early 1982 to Watt as a compromise (Scruggs). Watt approved the modified designs, allowing the Fund to break ground for Lin's memorial with plans to later construct Hart's Three

Soldiers memorial on the site ("Watt Approves Memorial Design"). The bronze soldiers, however, needed a location. This, of course, sparked some controversy.

Hart had intended Three Soldiers be placed on the sloped grass, facing directly into the apex of Lin's monument. Lin strongly opposed this notion, not only of the Three Soldiers's existence, but especially of its placement at the center of her soon-to-be-constructed memorial, fearing her structure would become no more than a backdrop to the new figures, losing much of its symbolism (American Library Association). "It's unprecedented—artists don't go around scabbing on other artists' work. I can't see how anyone of integrity can go around drawing mustaches on other people's portraits," said Lin, who had not been informed of Hart's addition to her memorial until it had been publicly announced by the Fund (Horowitz 1B). Finally, the Commission of Fine Arts, in an October 1982 meeting, brought forth the issue of the Three Mustaches, or rather, my mistake, Soldiers, and their placement.

Present at the assembly were various witnesses speaking either for or against the proposed addition of the Three Soldiers to Lin's memorial. Hart, himself a speaker at the hearing, defended his soldiers and their position at the center of the memorial: "I see the Wall as a kind of ocean, a sea of sacrifice that is overwhelming and nearly incomprehensible in its sweep of names. I place these figures upon the shore of that sea, gazing upon it, standing vigil before it, reflecting the human face of it, the human heart" (Gallagher). Following Hart were a few more leadoff speakers, then 29 witnesses defending the addition of the soldiers to the memorial, including Assistant Secretary of the Interior Donald Hodel, appearing on behalf of James Watt. Another defender was Thomas Carhart, along with many other Vietnam veteran witnesses, asserting that the memorial must "honor those who served," not merely those who died and that Hart's statue, "a blunt appraisal of the way we [veterans] were," accomplishes this. First to speak

for the opposition to the inclusion of Three Soldiers was Lin herself, who testified that “to attempt to make a ‘unified totality’ out of two different works of art fails” (*October 13, 1982 Meeting of the Commission of Fine Arts*).

The Commission announced at the conclusion of the meeting that, while the addition of Three Soldiers was approved, its proposed location at the apex was not. A confused audience member raised the question of where, then, Hart’s sculpture may be constructed. There was some clumsy interaction, at which point the Commission’s chairman declared the final decision would be “[p]ending working out the details of the location” and abruptly concluded the hearing (*October 13, 1982 Meeting of the Commission of Fine Arts*).

This anti-decision stood for several months, until a second hearing occurred on February 8, 1983 to determine a precise location of where the *would* stand, rather than simply where it wouldn’t. Finally, it was determined that the Three Soldiers would stand off to the side of the monument, at its entrance. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, now including Three Soldiers, broke ground on March 26. Lin vacationed to Taiwan “to avoid uncomfortable questions” (Horowitz).

Since opening, the Memorial Wall has spawned a veritable library of discourse. Apart from inspiring poetry, lyrics, paintings, and countless other expressions of art, the wall has arguably redefined the modern concept of a memorial. Abstraction has become the architectural expression of memory, and Lin earned her unwanted reputation as The Memorialist, a reputation which would return to the public eye two decades later.

Not even two days after the attacks on the World Trade Towers, Lin began receiving calls. They were pleas for Lin’s comments on a new city skyline and invitations to panels and interviews and requests for memorial sketches and Lin resented all of them (Menand). It was clear Lin did not want to relive the trials of the Vietnam memorial. Though successful in dodging

all requests to build a 9/11 memorial of her own, Lin did agree to serve on the jury of a design competition for one. The design contest, not unlike the one Lin won in 1981, was initiated by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation and aimed to build a public space which would “[r]emember and honor the thousands of innocent men, women, and children murdered by terrorists in the horrific attacks of February 26, 1993 and September 11, 2001” (LMDC).

The selected winner was Michael Arad and his design, Reflecting Absence. Arad created an open, grassy space around two empty pools which matched the footprints of the two towers. Water would flow over the edges of the pool to fall into the empty space once occupied by the towers. The jury, in their statement of a winner, commented on Arad’s design “allowing absence to speak for itself” (WTC Memorial Jury). They, however, found the areas surrounding Arad’s pools to be too barren and requested that he find a landscaping partner. Arad, instead, attempted to redo the landscape on his own before the jury insisted he could not landscape the project unassisted. Reluctantly, Arad joined with Peter Walker, who had entered the memorial competition with a landscape-centric design concept, which he called Memorial Park (Walker). This was the jury’s introduction to Arad’s starkly independent behavior.

Arad’s original design also featured an underground viewing area, where visitors could look out at the memorial through the falling sheet of water and gaze at a ribbon of names which surrounded the two square spaces which would “serve to physically underscore the enormity of the destruction” (Arad). This component of Arad’s design was later scrapped due to security concerns and rising costs. Not quite a political controversy, but a hard blow which reportedly made the architect “hard to deal with” (Loos).

Indeed, from the beginning, Arad became well-known for starting yelling matches with Daniel Libeskind, chief architect of the entire WTC revitalization project. Their first point of

contention was that Arad had even won, as Arad's design ignored many of the specifications Libeskind had defined for the memorial area. Both refused to compromise, with Arad moving Libeskind's buildings around to accommodate his own memorial design and Libeskind vowing to fight against Arad and his proposal. On multiple occasions, the two had to be separated during meetings (Hagan). Arad's hardheadedness continued to spark political warfare within the offices of the Ground Zero planners, architects, and officials. The controversy spread to the outside world, however, when the names were discussed.

Like Lin, Arad advocated for a non-alphabetical listing of names. Originally split between a random arrangement "to signify the random nature of the acts of terror" and what he called "meaningful adjacency," grouping names together by their social and professional connections during life, Arad agonizingly decided to push meaningful adjacency. This raised problems with the families of civil service workers, including the firefighters and police officers. They felt the memorial should specifically honor these men and women separately (Hagan).

Eventually, a compromise was reached, and one of the designated groups of victims' names would be First Responders. Letters were sent out to all victims' families for adjacency requests; over 1,000 were received (Berry). Through a custom arrangement algorithm, all were honored (Matson). All this was done with considerably fewer yelling matches than was expected with Arad. The completed 9/11 Memorial, whose overall public response has been positive, is not without its share of critics, who have claimed that the memorial focuses too much on thousands of individual deaths, rather than a collective national experience (McCray). Debate continues yet today.

And so lies the political axiom of memorials: that even an overwhelmingly welcome public response to one is no indication of a peaceful planning phase. Indeed, many of America's

favorite memorials, the ones seemingly woven into the nation's narrative, were objects of bitter contention during their initial phases and are, in fact, not eternally cherished relics of historical memory. Memorial designers, simply by the nature of their job, enter into an area of fierce political debate, where every angle measurement is a personal expression, every decision is loaded with factional consequence, and where every detail (or lack thereof) is a political statement. These designers may try, such as Lin did, to distance themselves from the controversy or, in the case of Arad, dive in headfirst. Still, to design a memorial is to design a physical manifestation of a specific memory and, as with historical memory itself, debate is very much an integral part of the process. According to Bert Kubli, who directed the public art arm of the National Endowment for the Arts, "If no one debates it, why have it? The process and the debate are very much a part of public art itself" (Gabor 96). If any event is worthy of a memorial, that memorial is worthy of the fiercest debate, even if a war monument must start a small war of its own.

Works Cited

- American Library Association. "Healing Nature of Vietnam Veterans Memorial Thirty Years Later." @ Your Library: The Campaign for America's Libraries. American Library Association, n.d. Web. 08 Dec. 2012.
- AP. "Viet Vet: Memorial a 'Black Gash of Shame'" The Palm Beach Post 11 Oct. 1981: A11. Google News Archive. Web. 8 Dec. 2012.
- AP. "Watt Approves Memorial Design." The Victoria Advocate 5 Feb. 1982: 2C. Google News Archive. Web. 9 Dec. 2012.
- Arad, Michael. Reflecting Absence: WTC Memorial Entry 790532. Digital image. World Trade Center Site Memorial Competition. Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, 2003. Web. 9 Dec. 2012.
- Berry, Paula G. "9/11 Memorial Honors Those Who Lived and Died Together." Editorial. CNN. Cable News Network, 12 Sept. 2011. Web. 09 Dec. 2012.
- The Commission of Fine Arts. February 8, 1983 Meeting of the Commission of Fine Arts: Transcript. Washington, D.C.: Miller Reporting Co. Inc., n.d. PDF.
- The Commission of Fine Arts. October 13, 1982 Meeting of the Commission of Fine Arts: Transcript. Washington, D.C.: Miller Reporting Co. Inc., n.d. PDF.
- Forgey, Benjamin. "The Statue & the Wall; At the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Resonance and Reconciliation." The Washington Post 10 Nov. 1985, Final ed., D1 sec.: n. pag. LexisNexis Academic. Web. 8 Dec. 2012.
- Freedman, Gail, prod. "Making the 9/11 Memorial." History Specials. History Channel. New York, NY, 11 Sept. 2011. Television.

Gabor, Andrea. "Even Our Most Loved Monuments Had a Trial by Fire. (Cover Story)."

Smithsonian 28.2 (1997): 96-103. Academic Search Complete. Web. 7 Dec. 2012.

Gallagher, Edward J. "The Vietnam Wall Controversy." Lehigh University Digital Library.

Lehigh University Library Services, n.d. Web. 09 Dec. 2012.

Goldberger, Paul. "Vietnam Memorial: Questions of Architecture; An Appraisal." Editorial. The

New York Times 7 Oct. 1982, Late City Final ed.: C25. LexisNexis Academic. Web. 9

Dec. 2012.

Hagan, Joe. "The Breaking of Michael Arad." New York Magazine. New York Media LLC., 14

May 2006. Web. 9 Dec. 2012.

Horowitz, Rick. "Maya Lin's Angry Objections." The Washington Post 7 July 1982, Final ed.,

Style sec.: B1+. ProQuest Historical Newspapers. Web. 9 Dec. 2012.

"Inadequate Memorial." The Washington Post (1974-Current File) (1981): 1-A12.

Print.Copyright - Copyright The Washington Post Company May 16, 1981; Language of

summary - English; Pages - A12; ProQuest ID - 147282733; Last updated - 2012-03-03;

Place of publication - Washington, D.C; DOI - 142689262; 1740172; 48611

Lethaby, W. R. Form in Civilization. 1922. London: Lowe & Brwydone, 1936. Print.

Lin, Maya. "Making the Memorial." The New York Review of Books. NYREV, Inc., 2 Nov.

2000. Web. 16 Nov. 2012.

LMDC. World Trade Center Site Memorial Competition Guidelines. New York: Lower

Manhattan Development Corporation, 2003. PDF.

Loos, Ted. "Architect and 9/11 Memorial Both Evolved Over the Years." The New York Times.

The New York Times, 04 Sept. 2011. Web. 04 Dec. 2012.

- Lorbeer, Robert C., and Timothy J. Vogel. "Inadequate Memorial." *The Washington Post* 16 May 1981, Final ed.: A12. ProQuest Historical Newspapers. Web. 9 Dec. 2012.
- Matson, John. "Commemorative Calculus: How an Algorithm Helped Arrange the Names on the 9/11 Memorial." *Scientific American*. Nature America, Inc., 7 Sept. 2011. Web. 09 Dec. 2012.
- Mayo, James M. "War Memorials as Political Memory." *Geographical Review* 78.1 (1988): 62-75. JSTOR. Web. 7 Dec. 2012.
- McCrary, Lewis. "9/11 Postmodern Memorial Failure?" *The American Conservative*. The American Ideas Institute, 16 Nov. 2011. Web. 09 Dec. 2012.
- Menand, Louis. "The Reluctant Memorialist." *The New Yorker* 8 July 2002: 54-65. The New Yorker Archives. Web. 7 Dec. 2012.
- Owen, Edward. Photograph of Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial Competition Entry. 1980 or 1981. Photograph. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, N.p. By Maya Lin.
- Scruggs, Jan C. Letter to James Watt. 11 Feb. 1982. Digital Library. Lehigh University Library Services, n.d. Web. 9 Dec. 2012.
- Struck, Doug. "How a Dying Congressman's Words Gave Life to a Shrine." *Washington Post* 27 Apr. 1997: A01. Print.
- VVMF. "Maya Lin's Award-Wining Design." Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, n.d. Web. 7 Dec. 2012.
- VVMF. "Three Servicemen Statue." Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, n.d. Web. 08 Dec. 2012.

VVMF. "Vietnam Veterans Memorial." Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, n.d. Web. 08 Dec. 2012.

Walker, Peter. Memorial Park: WTC Memorial Entry 089924. Digital image. World Trade Center Site Memorial Competition. Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, 2003. Web. 9 Dec. 2012.

The White House. Summary of Compromises on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Design. Washington, D.C.: The White House, 28 Jan. 1982. PDF.

Wills, Denise K. "The Vietnam Memorial's History." Washingtonian. Washington Magazine, Inc., 1 Nov. 2007. Web. 08 Dec. 2012.

WTC Memorial Jury. "Jury Statement." World Trade Center Site Memorial Competition. Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, 13 Jan. 2004. Web. 09 Dec. 2012.