



Memorials Make Meaning:

Public monuments offer “a **face-to-face encounter** in a specially valued place set aside for **collective gathering**. ... [T]he public monument speaks to a deep need for attachment that can be met only in a real place, where the **imagined community actually materializes** and the **existence of the nation is confirmed** in a simple but powerful way. The experience is not exactly in the realm of imagination or reason, but grounded in the **felt connection of individual to collective body**.”¹

“[T]he monument is not, properly speaking, a sacred site. Typically it holds no relic or spiritual trace of a past presence. The site of the Lincoln Memorial, for instance, did not even exist in Lincoln’s lifetime; it sits quite literally on mud dredged from the Potomac River bottom in the late nineteenth century by the Army Corps of Engineers. The memorial itself contains no actual relics of Lincoln. It is pure **representation**. ... Why make a pilgrimage to a site with no historical significance to read a text that was already everywhere? The answer is simple: the monument manufactures its own aura. ... **[T]he monument creates an actual, if temporary, community of readers, who must [read the same quotes and] obey a particular decorum**.”²

Vietnam Veterans Memorial – A New Type of Monument:

“Before the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, no new soldier monuments had been erected anywhere in the city since 1936 [and] existing war memorials seemed rapidly to wane in significance. That happened not just because the older generations of veterans from the Civil War to World War I were disappearing, but also because the American faith in war as an instrument of democracy had been seriously shaken in the Vietnam War era.”³

“The VVM was the capital’s first true victim monument – a monument that existed not to glorify the nation but to help its suffering soldiers heal.”⁴

“The VVM was a first in many respects. It was the capital’s first comprehensive war memorial, dedicated to all U.S. troops who served in a national war rather than a subset from a particular branch, division, or locality. The memorial was more profoundly national in scope than the previous memorials erected to the heroes of the Civil War or the world wars. Even the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington, which included remains of the dead from World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam and served as a national focal point for ritual services on Memorial Day and Veterans Day, did not satisfy the felt need for comprehensive recognition of the nation’s servicemen. The VVM was the first – and is still the only – war memorial in the capital and the nation that claims to include the names of all the U.S. dead. ⁵ Maya Lin’s sunken black granite walls were designed, first and foremost, with this intention – to carry the names of the fifty-eight thousand U.S. servicemen who lost their lives in the war.”⁶

¹ Kirk Savage, *Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 4.

² *Ibid.*, 5-6.

³ *Ibid.*, 265.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁵ The Korean War Memorial now has a Wall of Remembrance listing over 43,000 casualties. The memorial was rededicated in 2022.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 266.



Vietnam Veterans Memorial – Creating Meaning:

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial (VVM) was designed through a public competition. Over 1,400 people submitted designs. 21-year-old Chinese-American architecture student Maya Lin won the competition.

The design competition specified “that the memorial must list the names of all the American war dead; must avoid political interpretations of the war, pro or con; and most harmonize with its tranquil park setting in the new Constitution Gardens. ... ‘The Memorial will make no political statement regarding the war or its conduct. It will transcend those issues. The hope is that the creation of the Memorial will begin a healing process.’ ... The monument was intended to rally Americans around the simple idea that the veterans of the war needed recognition and support.”⁷

“[Lin’s] memorial avoided delivering any message. The meaning was to be generated by the viewers themselves, in their experience of the place.”⁸

“By inviting people to confront the names of the dead and embark on a healing journey, the VVM drew its visitors into a silent web of agreement with the memorial’s premise. On their feet, or in their wheelchairs, visitors who came by the millions helped reinforce the memorial’s assumptions that these names were the Vietnam War’s real victims, the ones who mattered so much that they merited recognition on the pilgrimage route in the symbolic heart of the nation’s capital. Visitors who identified instead with the war’s other victims could easily find themselves alienated, unable to accept the healing proffered by the memorial.”⁹

“Victims are everywhere, crossing boundaries of nation, class, race, and gender. Who is to say that the death of a soldier in combat counts more than the suicide of a tortured prisoner of war? Or that the unexpected death of a civilian in the World Trade Center counts more than a routine homicide a few blocks away, more than the everyday deaths of noncombatants in war zones across the globe? One wonders how memorials of healing or of conscience will ever really succeed if they do not reach out beyond their own boundaries of victimhood and embrace what we might call ‘coalitions of the suffering,’ alliances that find strength in alleviating one another’s injury rather than ignoring or belittling it.”¹⁰

“With more than four million visitors per year, the VVM quickly became the most popular memorial in the monumental core. The rituals of engagement it inspired – taking rubbings of names, leaving personal notes and mementos – changed how we interact with public monuments.”¹¹

“The most immediate effect of the [VVM], however, was to raise the question of why other veterans of U.S. wars in the twentieth century had not yet received the same recognition. The VVM led directly to the Vietnam Women’s Memorial (1993), the Korean War Veterans Memorial (1995), and the World War II Memorial (2004).”¹²

⁷ Ibid., 267-268.

⁸ Ibid., 267.

⁹ Ibid., 284.

¹⁰ Ibid., 295.

¹¹ Ibid., 275-276.

¹² Ibid., 281-282.



Vietnam Veterans Memorials vs. World War II Memorial:

The World War II memorial, compared to the Vietnam memorial, is “white granite instead of black, plaza instead of park, loud instead of hushed, overflowing with words and images instead of stripped down and minimalist. Whereas the VVM lists the names of the dead, the World War II Memorial lists names and places of battle. Although both memorials features walls below grade that honor the war’s dead, the World War II ‘Wall of Freedom’ (with a field of more than four thousand gold stars, each one representing one hundred dead) is inaccessible, behind a semicircular pool and out of reach. Personal offerings – still an important aspect of the experience at the VVM – are impossible at the wall of stars and discouraged elsewhere at the monument. The VVM avoided rendering final judgment on the war; the World War II Memorial splashes its messages of righteous force and moral triumph from one end of the space to the other. The VVM suggested the limits of American military power; the World War II Memorial nostalgically celebrates the nation’s military supremacy.”¹³

¹³ Ibid., 298.