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Jonathan Boelkins
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

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THE VIETNAM MEMORIAL: A POSTMODERN REFLECTION

By Jonathan Boelkins
Department of Architecture
Faculty Mentor: Assistant Professor Korydon H. Smith
Department of Architecture

Abstract:

Complex in its cultural significance and entanglements, the Vietnam War is an event that continues to reverberate with social dissonance. The Vietnam Memorial (Maya Lin) sustains multiple, often oppositional, debates surrounding the Vietnam War. The Vietnam Memorial: A Postmodern Reflection examines the significance of the memorial with regard to American cultural history. The physical experience of the memorial—the decisive yet subtle geometry, the polished black marble, the chronological listing of names, and the scarring of the ground plane—is described with particular focus on the bond between material and social “reflection.” This paper utilizes the Vietnam Memorial to discuss architecture’s ability to evoke, through sensuality, a state of meditation that allows an individual to contemplate his/her relationship to social history. The author states: “Ultimately, the Vietnam Memorial becomes a reflection; a reflection not only of the [literal] image of the visitor, but of thoughts, feelings, and beliefs; visitors are allowed to see themselves and see inside themselves.” Architecture’s role in allowing, rather than denying, multiplicity and conflicting social ideologies is discussed.

Despite modernism’s attempt to create a universal architecture and a singular order, subsequent critiques recognize the limitations of such a prescribed response. By pursuing a single ideology at the expense of all others, modernism created works that rejected multiplicity and openness. The question becomes whether or not architecture can be crafted in order to accept the imperfections and discordant expectations of its users, rather than impose a single unifying thread that forces one order throughout.

The Vietnam Memorial offers a potent illustration of the power of consciously crafted multiplicity by refusing to frame a single ideology or historical perspective. Consequently, an architectural solution developed where a sociological solution seemed impossible. Marco Frascari writes in support of architecture’s unique capacity for resolution by saying, “in the details are the possibilities of innovation and invention, and it is through these that architects can give harmony to the most uncommon and difficult or disorderly environment generated by a culture.” While the Vietnam Memorial does not craft details in the literal manner that Frascari describes, the spirit of spacemaking and the pursuit of a connection between user and place resonates with Frascari and becomes a powerful illustration of architectural resolution. As Juhani Pallasmaa recognizes,

“Architecture is the art of reconciliation between ourselves and the world, and this mediation takes place through the senses.” The monument uses the potential of architecture as mediator to distance itself from the conflict. By consciously avoiding traditional political or historical stances, the wall acts a conscientious objector, choosing instead to engage the visitor’s senses, encouraging reflection and interaction.

In contrast, the Marine Corps War Memorial epitomizes the traditional war memorial. The sculpture of soldiers hoisting a flag over hard-fought enemy territory makes no mention of loss, only of victory. Furthermore, the statues are idealized in form in their representation of the Pulitzer Prize-winning image taken by Joe Rosenthal. The soldiers hoisting the flag stand
Perception becomes the fundamental difference between the two memorials. Very few questioned the reason that the war in the Pacific was being fought, and even though the invasion of Japan never happened (which was a primary reason for taking Iwo Jima,) no one ever considered the loss of life on Iwo Jima as meaningless. Americans were galvanized by the image of the American flag flying over formerly enemy territory. Such an image was never produced in Vietnam. Instead we are left with the images of street fighting and napalm raids. Similar images were produced in World War Two, but were not released to the public until after the war, as the government clearly understood the effect such images had on national unity and morale. The Vietnam War was the first war broadcast daily into American life, becoming known as “the living room war.” The immediate reporting of graphic depictions of combat helped to create stark divisions in American society.

In the words of Jan Scruggs, “A Vietnam Veterans Memorial bore a special burden. It had to satisfy audiences with conflicting needs and expectations.” The “conflicting needs” ranged from proponents of the war to anti-war protesters, the families and friends of those killed, and the veterans themselves, to name but a few. A polarized society found an opportunity for reconciliation, but not necessarily healing, through the architectural genius of the Vietnam Memorial, which accepted the reactions of visitors, encouraging them only to consider the loss through each name.

However, openness at the level of interaction cannot be interpreted as ambiguity in the design phase. Engineering experiential openness often requires greater control than a traditional closed design. While the memorial allows a variety of responses, its multiplicity is independent from indeterminacy. The wall observes a strict geometry, so that while the cultural, historical and political landscapes are recessed into that geometry, the surface of the wall is free to be manipulated in phenomenological ways.

In Umberto Eco’s essay, “The Poetics of the Open Work,” composer Henri Pousseur describes his composition Scambi by saying, “Scambi is not so much a musical composition as a field of possibilities, an explicit invitation to exercise choice. It is made up of sixteen sections. Each of these can be linked to any two others, without weakening the logical continuity of the musical process.” The critical link between Scambi and the Vietnam Memorial is Pousseur’s descriptive phrase, “an explicit invitation to exercise choice.” Pousseur thus makes the link between a deterministic approach of the composer and the less deterministic process of the musician. Understandably, the musician is more analogous to the builder than to the user, but the important issue here is recognizing the clear and deterministic intent of the creator. Maya Lin states, “I never expected it to be passionless. The piece was built as a very psychological memorial. It’s not meant to be cheerful or happy, but to bring out in people the realization of loss and a cathartic healing process.” The phenomenological and haptic properties of the Vietnam Memorial that make it open were by no means left to chance.

According to Pallasmaa, “an architectural work is great precisely because of the oppositional and contradictory intentions and allusions it succeeds in fusing together.” In what seems at first glance to be a simple gesture of remembrance are layers of meaning and tectonic expression coalescing to form a moving tribute. Robert Campbell writes, “The wall is a huge book, open at a place where it both begins and ends, and its text, its long march of names has made it, you realize, a memorial to individual human beings rather than to any larger but vague concept of country or sacrifice or victory or heroism.” By simply presenting the names of those killed rather than the imagery or a lengthy
narrative of the conflict, the memorial is elevated above traditional
discourse and the typology of the war memorial.

Although the introduction of the angled form came after the
original competition process in the design development stage, the
rationale for the change was to create an alignment with existing monuments on the Mall. Campbell describes the
orientation, “as you descend the path along the wall and reach
this angle, you realize that one wing of the black wall points
straight at the tall, white Washington Monument a mile or so off,
and the other at the Lincoln Memorial, visible through a screen
of trees about 600 feet away.” Although the overall site strategy
within the context of the Mall is effective, the localized effects
of the site and monument form provide additional layers of
meaning and possibility. While the form of the monument links
it to the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial, the
traditional ethic of the existing memorials is consciously rejected
in many ways. The simple gesture of relating the wall to the
existing monuments only in plan signifies once again that only
the subtlest historical references are allowed.

Although the monument’s form can be interpreted as a
response to the fundamental shifts in American society during
the Vietnam conflict, the interpretation of cultural change as
progenitor of form is effectively undermined by the decision not
to present the memorial as a timeline. Again, the historical and
cultural contexts, while present, recede to the background intentionally, leaving the wall open to interpretation. The inherent
openness validates Pallasmaa’s conclusion that architecture
must surpass the literal reflection of historical and cultural
context by saying, “If we desire architecture to have an
emancipating or healing role, instead of reinforcing the erosion
of existential meaning, we must reflect on the multitude of secret
ways in which architecture is tied to the cultural and mental
reality of its time.” The cultural and mental reality of the
Vietnam Memorial is that of a nation divided. That reality is not
challenged, but rather avoided in a series of shrewd decisions
regarding the treatment of the surface of the black granite panels.

It must be noted, however, that the shift towards openness is one
that is to be experienced at the most intimate level, within arm’s
reach of the wall. The traditional frontal view from the Mall of
the memorial in its entirety still supports the perception of the
wall as timeline.

The fact that the wall displays the name of every American
soldier killed in the Vietnam conflict is not unusual within the
typology of the war memorial, but the method in which the
names are presented defies convention and injects meaning into
the presentation. Rather than rely on the traditional dictum of
alphabetical presentation, the decision was made to present the
names chronologically. This simple shift immediately
transformed a static display with the dimension of time, giving
each name a space in time rather than a place in line. Pallasmaa
also recognizes the significance of the representation of time in
architecture by stating, “We have a mental need to experience the
reality that we are rooted in the continuity of time, and in the
man-made world it is the task of architecture to facilitate this
experience.” So, even though the wall alters the typical
perception of chronological presentation, the progression of
time is nevertheless present.

The presentation of the names accomplishes what the
materiality of the wall denies. While time usually marks buildings
with the effects of erosion and weathering, the material choice of
black granite, polished smooth attempts to negate those effects.
The granite offers permanence, a display that limits the effects of
time. Pallasmaa states, “Architecture emancipates us from the
embrace of the present and allows us to experience the slow
healing flow of time. Buildings and cities are instruments and
museums of time. They enable us to see and understand the
passing of history and to participate in time cycles that surpass
individual life.”

The decision not to list the names alphabetically also has a
humanizing side effect: names are listed in the order they usually
usedÖfirst, middle initial, last, and without any mention of rank.
Names are listed the way a parent speaks a given name, “Michael
J Sturgill,” rather than the militaristic method of giving the last
name first. The names on the wall are presented only as people,
not soldiers, leaving open the cause behind their deaths.

While the descending form apparently responds to the
amassing casualties and the break in the center reflects the
fundamental shift that occurred in 1968, the wall consciously
avoids such a literal interpretation and descends in association
with funerary ritual. Rather than have the form dictated directly
by the number of casualties, the monument unites the beginning
and the end of the list in the middle. The literal translation of
form becomes the backdrop for an artistic and apolitical
interpretation of the events. By uniting the names of the first and
the last casualties, the interpretation of the memorial as a simple
timeline is subdued, while also allowing simultaneous approach
from either end, furthering the idea of openness.
describes the effect by saying, “the name of the first soldier who died is carved at the angle in the wall, and the names continue to the right in columns in chronological order of date of death, out to the east end where the wall fades into the earth. The names begin again, with the next soldier who died, at the west end, where the wall emerges from the earth. It is as if the wall, after sinking beneath the earth, has continued on around the world underground before emerging once more.”

The experience culminates at the center of the wall, as each wing spreads out to the horizon and the visitor is totally submerged within the memorial. Gaston Bachelard sympathizes with the corner, “To begin with, the corner is a haven that ensures us one of the things we prize most highly – immobility. Consciousness of being at peace in one’s corner produces a sense of immobility, and this, in turn, radiates immobility. An imaginary room rises up around our bodies, which think that they are well hidden when we take refuge in a corner.” In an ironical shift from the interpretation of the corner as a cultural breakdown, the wall now offers intimacy and “immobility.” Rather than have the wall be a traditional spatial divider, the corner serves to envelop the visitor, holding them in its long arms, while uniting the beginning and the end.

The spatial organization works symbiotically with the tectonics of the wall in that while the sense of intimacy and touch are elevated, as Robert Campbell recalls, “In making this descent you feel you’re entering a cloistered space, set off from the busy surroundings. Streets and skylines disappear to leave you alone with the wall and its names.” The visitor is alone with their reflection and the names, and as Paul-Louis Landsberg writes, “For a moment, we have our feet in the land of the dead. A moment later we are once more outside the kingdom of shadows. But during that moment we experienced its bitter cold. And no one is ever quite the same after he has felt it.” Implicit is the understanding of each name carrying the weight and size of a person, and with that understanding comes a frightening concept of scale.

The extraordinary power of the names is reflected in the diversity of experience and reactions they generate. Jan Scruggs remembers some of the reactions, “They always touched the names. Fingertips traced out each letter. Lips said a name over and over, and then stretched up to kiss it. Sunlight made it warm to the touch. Perhaps by touching, people regained a sense of life; or perhaps they finally came to peace with death.” In evaluating the power of the Vietnam Memorial, there exists a constant tendency to offer statistical analysis of the number of names, the number of panels, the length of each arm, the height of the highest panel, etc. However, all of these facts can be enumerated without the slightest hint of the revealing power of this black granite wall cut into the earth. One must constantly resist the temptation to see as we are taught to see, rather than how our bodies see. Juhani Pallasmaa writes, “The eye is the organ of separation and distance, whereas touch is the sense of nearness, intimacy and affection. The eye controls and investigates, whereas touch approaches and caresses.”

The memorial is designed both the viewed in its entirety from a typical frontal position, but more importantly, the wall is designed to be experienced intimately, at close proximity, to be touched.

The simple power of touching a surface connects the visitor to both the names engraved on the surface, but also to the process of making and the symbolic power of the name. By tracing the engraved letters, visitors connect intentionally with the person represented by the name, but also incidentally to the hand of the craftsman. Pallasmaa realizes this connection, saying “The surface of an old object, polished to perfection by the tool of the
craftsmen and the assiduous hands of its users, seduces the stroking of the hand. The tactile sense connects us with time and tradition: through impressions of touch we shake the hands of countless generations." 18

Visitors are allowed, even encouraged to touch the wall, to connect with the names. The simplicity of the presentation allows a subtle and immediate understanding of the process by which the wall was made. Within this understanding and the subconscious projection undergone with the wall, each visitor bears the responsibility of engraving each name. This simultaneous burden connects the maker, the visitor, and the dead. Pallasmaa states, "As the work interacts with the body of the observer, the experience mirrors the bodily sensations of the maker. Consequently, architecture is communication from the body of the architect directly to the body of the person who encounters the work." 19 This communion is not only an implicit understanding of the process taken to create the inscriptions, but also an empathy and gratitude for the time taken on every letter. The level of craft indicates not only skill, but also reverence.

Even so, the black granite panels provide more than just a medium for the inscription of names. As Robert Campbell recognizes, "At some moment of your visit, probably not at first, you've noticed with a slight shock your own face reflected among the names of the dead, an effect that makes the granite mirror a kind of scrim set between past and present, between living and dead, integrating both on a single dark plane." 20 The reflections provided by the wall force the visitor to see themselves at the same time as the names. Jan Scruggs describes the experience, "The panels were like mirrors. The more you looked, the deeper inside you saw. The names floated all around you, along with the clouds." 21 The juxtaposition of the names with the reflections creates an intimacy by association, what is essential is the association of intimacy with the prolonged exposure to one's own visage.

Pallasmaa articulates the process by saying, "The encounter with any work of art implies a bodily interaction. A work of art functions as another person, with whom one converses." 22 Although the black granite panels offer a distinct reflection of the visitors, it is not so much the reflections that encourage touch, but the names. The incredible power of the name calls from beyond time. In the proper name lies the whole of an individual's life, and the invocation of their name momentarily brings them back to life, only to have them die again. As Jacques Derrida says, "The name alone makes possible the plurality of deaths." 23 The invocation of the name brings forth the memories of both life and death. Only the name has such simple power to momentarily revive the dead, but each resurrection is bound to the inescapable permanence of death.

Rather than have the name become isolated and fragile, in the wall, the name becomes immortal. Pascale-Anne Broulx, in commenting on the eulogies of Derrida, elucidates the summoning power of the name, "As Derrida has shown in numerous texts, the name is always related to death, to the structural possibility that the one who gives, receives, or bears the name will be absent from it. Mourning thus begins already with the name." 24 The name always carries the implication of death during life, and after death, it brings the memories of that life. The mention or touch of a name is the act of love that Paul-Louis Landsberg recognizes in writing, "A single act of personal love is enough to reveal to me, by creating the presence, or rather the present absence of the person, the essence of human death. One moment of calm in the presence of the dead, even if he be an unknown enemy – and the situation may provoke an act of personal love towards one's neighbor as such. Then the concept of human mortality recovers its full dignity." 25

Ultimately, the Vietnam Memorial becomes a reflection; a reflection not only of the image of the visitor, but of thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. Visitors are allowed to see themselves and to see inside themselves. Some find grief. Some find triumph. Architecture offers this meditative opportunity by engaging the senses. Connections are made, not only in the psyche, but also in the dermis. As the force of emotional and physical trauma pushes, the wall pushes back, balancing and comforting the visitor. Pallasmaa understands the assuring power of architecture by saying, "Architecture enables us to perceive and understand the dialectics of permanence and change, to settle ourselves in the world, and to place ourselves in the continuum of culture." 26 The Vietnam Memorial provides a home reactions suppressed by traditional memorials; the acceptance of grief, loss, and failure distinguish this wall as a postmodern answer to the discrimination and singularity of modernism.

End Notes:

1. Frascari, Marco. "The Tell-The-Tale Detail."
Throughout the semester, the following questions were posed:

1) Generically, how does cultural dogma affect the production of architecture?

2) What limits, what discriminations, are placed on architecture by status quo convictions?

3) What conditions have been segregated or denied from tectonic manifestation?

4) What is architecture’s role—historically, currently, and prospectively—in accommodating (or refuting) the “unhealthy,” of allowing/disallowing the pursuit of perverse desires?

Jonathan Boelkins, a fourth-year student in the Department of Architecture, was an active participant in this course. Most notably, Mr. Boelkins developed an independent research project that examined issues regarding the architectural and material communication of cultural identity. Mr. Boelkins recently won the School of Architecture Pella student essay competition for this paper. As well, Jon has been named to both the Dean’s List and the Chancellor’s List, is a member of Tau Sigma Delta, received the Wittenberg, Delony, & Davidson Scholarship in 2002, and currently holds a 3.75 overall GPA. As this paper and his academic accomplishments indicate, Jon is a truly accomplished student, designer, and scholar.

Faculty comment:

Mr. Boelkins’ mentor, Assistant Professor Kory Smith made the following remarks about the work:

In the fall semester of 2002, I offered a seminar to upper level architecture students at the University of Arkansas. This seminar, entitled Post-Modern Critiques and the “Unhealthy,” surveyed post-1965 architectural theory and synthesized inquiries concerning the production of architectural ideology. The course facilitated a discussion of diverse (and perverse) social, psychological, and spatial desires of (un)healthiness. This was a questioning of architectural and non-architectural conditions that have been termed “unhealthy.”

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