# The Vietnam Veterans Memorial *in Washington, DC*

*by Abbie Chessler, Tricia Edwards, and James B. Gardner*

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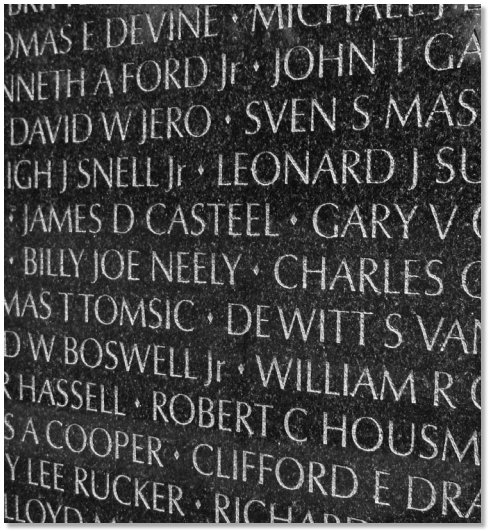
## Design Critique of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial *by Abbie Chessler*

The design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a two-fold story that is fascinating to reflect upon. It is about the pure power of a design idea and about creating a place to evoke memories, honor, and healing. There is no doubt that over time the realization of Maya Lin's vision has become revered and is an important element in our contemporary design discourse.

Living in the DC area I have visited "the Wall" a number of times. As visitors approach the black granite gash in the earth there is a noticeable hush. People slow down to read the names and to ponder the mementos others have placed on the ground. What are the qualities of this sculptural design that evoke such a strong emotional response? Is there a way to describe these qualities and apply them when we design other types of experiences?




*Names of Vietnam War dead carved into the granite Wall. Photo by Abbie Chessler.*

### Seeds of an Idea

The vision for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was to create a place dedicated to honoring those who died in the Vietnam War. In 1982, as the memorial was being completed Maya Lin wrote an essay that she shared 20 years later. Her own words describe the clear intention behind her design. She talks about having designed the memorial as a class project at Yale. She was examining questions such as What is a memorial? What should it do?

In her studies she was drawn to the World War I monument in Thiepval, France where more than 100,000 names are engraved into the walls.

> 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… Maya Lin, 1982

In the early 1980's the Vietnam conflict was still fresh in our minds. Our nation was bitterly divided over the war, and our returning soldiers bore the brunt of the politics of the time. Maya Lin's simple yet thoughtful gesture, to carve the earth, was perhaps a strong reaction to our national mood and a desire to keep politics out of her design for the memorial.

I imagined taking a knife and cutting


*Flags left as mementos at the Wall. Photo by Abbie Chessler.*

"… 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…" Maya Lin

> into the earth, opening it up, an initial violence and pain that in time would heal. The grass would grow back, but the initial cut would remain a pure flat surface in the earth with a polished, mirrored surface ….the need for the names to be on the memorial would become the memorial …the people and their names would allow everyone to respond and remember.
> Maya Lin, 1982

The success of Lin's design for the Vietnam Memorial is that its bold gesture pulls you in emotionally, and once the engraved names are visible you connect on a personal level. The Memorial is an example of restraint, of refraining from the desire to include interpretation.

**Unexpected Outcomes**

It is powerful to observe the impact of people's interactions with the Wall. I think Maya Lin sensed instinctually that something deep would occur, but I doubt she could have predicted exactly what that would be. My observation is that people are reverential and quiet when they walk along the Wall. Several design elements trigger subliminal cues.

To approach the Vietnam Memorial you take a path through tall trees and gently rolling berms. Even if you know what to expect, when you round a bend in path and see the gash in the earth it comes as a surprise. Seen from a distance it is a dramatic gesture. In contrast to all of the other monuments on the National Mall that rise up above the ground here you gently descend below ground level.

*A visitor makes a rubbing of a name. Photo by Abbie Chessler.*

Once visitors are close enough to read the names on the Wall they interact with the reflective black granite slabs. Part of the magic of the Wall is that it evokes timeless feelings and memories as compared to a figurative image that captures a single snapshot of time. The names allow my mind to wander, to imagine something

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**Reference:**
Lin, M. (1982). Retrieved July 2011 from http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2000/nov/02/making-the-memorial/

about the person. My dark reflection in the granite slabs connects me physically to the experience.

### Restraint in Design

As we take into consideration the desired emotional outcomes for projects that we design we may consider elements that evoke a strong response. For the Vietnam Memorial this is accomplished with subtlety. Visitors have a pure response; they are aware of the emotion but not what triggered it.

This is a lesson in the power of restraint in design, careful selection of what to include and what to exclude—allowing room for the space to mean different things to different people. There are no text panels or interactives, yet we see visitors touching the wall, making rubbings of names and leaving mementoes behind. As observers of these offerings we can imagine the stories that go with them.

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Perhaps when we are designing an exhibition we can think about places like the Vietnam Memorial, remember to trust the immediacy of the experience, and try to create places for emotional interaction.

## A Visit to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial *by Tricia Edwards*

As an Education Specialist at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History (NMAH), I spend a lot of time thinking about how to make a visit to NMAH logistically uncomplicated but also meaningful for our visitors. When I visited the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on a hot summer Tuesday, I was anxious to see what my visitor experience would be like and whether the strategies for information and interpretation that I employ at NMAH would have any place at a memorial.

I left the Museum of American History and walked seven blocks down Constitution Avenue to the Memorial. Having served from 1999-2004 as the Program Director at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF), the nonprofit organization authorized by Congress to build the Wall, I had visited dozens of times before. But this time I was coming simply as a visitor, not as an interpreter or tour guide. I approached the Memorial from the east, walking from Constitution Avenue to a pathway that leads to the Memorial grounds. It was a busy day at the Wall and I was wondering how my experience at what I knew to be a solemn place would be affected by a crowd.

### The Visitor Experience

I first came upon a couple using the Directory of Names, a catalog that lists the more than 58,000 names that are inscribed on the Wall, along with their panel and line numbers, to help visitors easily locate service members. Because of my time at VVMF, I understood that the names are inscribed chronologically by date of death, but it was clear as I spent more time at the Wall that most visitors were unsure of the system. (The Directories are in the areas around the Memorial but not in front of the Wall itself. It is easy to miss them as you enter the site since they are in unmarked stands and look like large phone books.) I overheard one visitor confuse the panel number on the bottom of panel 68 West

*Entering the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Photograph by Tricia Edwards.*

as the year of casualty, while another family seemed frustrated as they realized the names were not listed alphabetically and ended up leaving the Memorial without locating the name they had come to find.

Other visitors seemed unsure of how to properly visit the Memorial, asking questions like, "Do we walk on the bricks or the smooth part [of the walkway in front of the Wall]?" and "Can we take pictures?" A single National Park Service volunteer was stationed at the center of the Memorial answering questions and, despite my intentions to be "just another visitor," I found myself helping others who seemed confused or unsure. I pointed visitors to the Directory of Names, described the organization of the Wall, and explained what the years 1959 and 1975, inscribed on panels 1 East and 1 West respectivelyy, signify. (When the Memorial was built in 1982, 1959 was recognized as the year of the first casualty in the Vietnam War, and 1975 as the last.)

Reminding myself of why I was there, I refocused on the Wall itself and walked down the pathway toward the vertex where the tallest panels, 1 East and 1 West, meet. As I touched them, I was struck by just how many names are inscribed on the black granite walls. Though the Memorial by design is intended to make no political statement about the Vietnam War, I couldn't help but think it sends a strong message about the human cost of conflict. I reflected on how the 58,272 names on the Wall really represent the lives of hundreds of thousands of people—families, friends, and comrades all affected by the casualties listed there. I looked around

*The Directory of Names helps visitors locate the names of service members listed on the Memorial. Photograph by Tricia Edwards.*

at my fellow visitors and wondered how many of them had been touched directly or indirectly by the war. Who was there to visit a loved one or a neighbor or the friend of a friend?

I saw a man place a small bouquet of flowers at the Wall and then begin to make a pencil rubbing of a name. As he struggled to hold the paper in place,

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*A sign advertises free cell phone Ranger Talks about the history and meaning of the Memorial. Photograph by Tricia Edwards.*

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another visitor came to his aid. He explained to the woman helping him, clearly a stranger, that the name was that of his brother. It took me aback. I was overcome with emotion and struggled to fight back tears. While I didn't have any family who fought in the Vietnam War, I have a brother who is currently in Afghanistan on his third tour of duty. I immediately thought what it would be like if my brother didn't come home and felt empathy for this man who had come to "see" his sibling. As I continued my walk along the Wall, I saw a family stop at the center of the Memorial to say a prayer and a group leave small American flags along the Wall. As two friends looked at the names one said to the other, "Hey, that guy had the same name as my brother," and he paused to touch the inscription.

Exiting the Wall, I continued on to two of the more traditional elements of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, *The Three Servicemen* statue and the Vietnam Women's Memorial. I saw visitors taking pictures and, often, their family and friends posing in front of the statues. It seemed that visitors easily approached the sculptures and inherently understood how to interact with them in a way that they didn't with the Wall.

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**Interpretation—Present and Future**

Nearing the end of my visit, I discovered a sign advertising "FREE Ranger Talks on Your Phone" with a list of topics I could learn more about by calling a telephone number: the history and meaning of the Wall, how to find a name, and information about the Education Center that is to be built by VVMF on the site of the Memorial. Interested in the interpretative information which is lacking at the Wall itself, I started to call the number right then. But as soon as the first Ranger Talk began, I hung up. As an educator, I was hungry for context and interpretation, but as a visitor, I realized I didn't want it so soon after the emotional experience I had had at the Memorial. Perhaps if I had entered the Memorial site from a different direction or if there were signs in multiple locations I would have listened before visiting the Wall.

As I left the Memorial, I thought about how many people, despite the lack of interpretation, seemed to make meaning out of their visit—by making name rubbings, leaving offerings, or making personal connections. This made me consider how the Education Center currently being planned for the Memorial site will function. The website dedicated to the Education Center (www.buildthecenter.org) describes the project:

> The Education Center will continue the legacy of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial by giving context to the names on The Wall and enhance the Memorial experience for current and future generations by teaching about the Vietnam War, its national significance and the impact of The Wall on American culture.

As an educator interested in visitors' ability to take away meaning and understanding from their visit, part of me believes the Education Center will be an important component of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. But I also wonder if by adding to the intellectual experience of the Wall, the Center will take away from the personal or emotional one. While information about the significance of the names and how the Memorial is organized, along with some guidelines for how to visit (e.g. picture-taking is okay, but cell phone use is discouraged) would be useful, I question whether further interpretation is needed. My own experience was greatly enriched by watching, listening, and talking to my fellow visitors. If the Wall were interpreted in the traditional sense, with text panels and brochures for example, I probably would have spent my visit reading instead of interacting. I might have walked away with more knowledge, but it certainly would have been a less memorable and less satisfying experience.

## Collective Loss and Public Memory: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial
### *by James B. Gardner*

Dedicated nearly thirty years ago in November 1982, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was initially the focus of intense criticism and controversy but today is one of the most visited sites in Washington, DC. Maintained by the National Park Service, the Memorial sits on a quiet two-acre site in Constitution Gardens just northeast of the Lincoln Memorial and includes not only Maya Lin's iconic "Wall" but also later additions made in response to those early critics.

The Three Servicemen *statue by sculptor Frederick Hart, added to the site in 1984. Photograph by Abbie Chessler.*

**Historical Context**

It is impossible to comment on the Memorial without addressing how it came to be what it is today. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial was conceived in the late 1970s not as a war memorial but as a place to remember those who had died. Indeed the design competition called for submissions that would not only be contemplative in character, harmonize with the surroundings, and include the names of those who died and were missing, but also make no political statement about the war. Thus Maya Lin's winning design rejected the usual war motifs and employed instead a seemingly endless and certainly overwhelming list of the dead and missing (originally 57,939 but 58,272 as of 2011) to convey simply and powerfully the individual sacrifices that made the Vietnam War so troubling. The names are inscribed on two horizontal planes or walls, made of highly polished black granite and set at a 125 degree

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*Maya's Lin's "Wall," from the south looking past Frederick Hart's sculpture from 1984. Photo by James B. Gardner.*

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angle, each extending 246.75ft in length. While just over ten feet tall at the apex where the two planes meet, the walls recede into the earth at their east and west ends, creating, in Lin's words (1981), "a rift in the earth" that constitutes "a quiet place, meant for personal reflection and private reckoning."

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**Controversy and Compromise**

Controversy over Lin's design erupted almost immediately. In the *New York Times* in 1981, Vietnam veteran Tom Carhart decried it as "a black gash of shame,... pointedly insulting to the sacrifices made for their country by all Vietnam veterans." Carhart was quickly joined by other critics who questioned Lin's rejection of the conventions of traditional memorials—eschewing the purity of white for a more somber and sinister black, emphasizing the horizontal over the more uplifting vertical, working in an abstract vocabulary without the comforting and familiar symbols of noble sacrifice. To make a long story short, in order to quell criticism a representational sculpture of three servicemen by Frederick Hart and a flagpole were added to the site

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in 1984. Then followed complaints about who had been omitted, and the Vietnam Women's Memorial (sculpted by Gloria Goodacre) was added in 1993, followed in 2004 by a memorial plaque honoring those who died after the war from injuries in Vietnam but did not meet Department of Defense criteria for inclusion on the Wall. In other words, the conceptual simplicity of Lin's design was eroded by additions, leaving us today with a muddled mix of intentions and results.

Do the compromises made for political purposes distract from or undercut the public's engagement today with the simple but compelling story of sacrifice envisioned decades ago? Is the Memorial that we now experience less or more than envisaged? Certainly we as professionals regret the loss of what was, but that reflects our stronger commitment to the architecture and design of memory than to the experience of public memory. Too often, we're impressed more with theory than with practice, failing to acknowledge that how we approach memory and what the public wants or expects are often very different. The latter was certainly something my colleagues and I had to navigate when developing the exhibition *September 11: Bearing Witness to History* at the National Museum of American History in 2002. *(As Associate Director for Curatorial Affairs at NMAH, Gardner was project director for the exhibition.* The Editor) Instead of just developing the exhibition that we thought the public needed, we first talked to our visitors and to survivors, rescuers, and the families and friends of those who had died, learning that what people wanted was not an explanation from the museum staff of what happened and why but rather

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simply a place to reflect and remember, a role we were unaccustomed to playing. That shaped the design and tone of the exhibition, resulting in an evocative rather than didactic experience.

**Navigating the Site**

Absent a study of visitor experiences of the Memorial assemblage, I can only provide comments based on an afternoon of observation. First of all, Lin's Wall does not work intuitively—the only way to make sense of the information and perspectives that she is trying to get across is to pay very close attention. For example, while every visitor I saw moved along the wall in a linear west-to-east path, the chronological beginning of the wall is actually midway, at the apex. In her submission, Lin (1981) argued for having "the war's beginning and end meet; the war is 'complete,' coming full-circle …." That is a provocative intellectual construct but one that probably eludes most visitors, who simply start at one end and progress to the other. But it's worse: that concept makes it much more difficult for visitors to find the names of those they have lost. Listing the names in chronological order makes sense—it is, after all, about losses over the course of a long war—but the chronology is split and rearranged so that the visitor starts midway through the chronology, reaches the end of the war followed by the beginning of the war, and then finishes up midway. The reality is that the Wall is nearly un-navigable without the codes of panel number, compass direction, and line that are provided with the names listed in the bound directories at each end. And of course, you have to understand the symbols (crosses and diamonds) used to distinguish between the dead and the lost and the dots that are useful in counting the number of lines on each panel.

**Lasting Impact**

That is not to say that the Wall is not moving. What Lin absolutely got right was the tone. In her submission (1981), she described "a quiet place, meant for personal reflection and private reckoning." Indeed the shape of the site and the tapering of the walls creates a space apart,

*Flowers left at the apex of the two planes of the Wall. Photo by James B. Gardner.*

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*The polished black granite Wall. Photo by James B. Gardner.*

The Memorial is still a powerful place of individual and collective loss and memory.

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populated by individuals quietly moving along, stopping at moments, finding and reading names, leaving mementoes, all reflected in the polished granite. The lettering is small (only a half-inch-high), requiring the visitor to step a bit closer in order to read and perhaps touch, and in that moment seeing him- or her-self reflected in the surface. Even for those of us who did not lose anyone in the Vietnam War, just reading a name, any name, engages us in the experience of the Wall, of the connection of ourselves to the past. It is that dynamic of public engagement that makes the Wall powerful: all of us acknowledging our obligation to collective remembering. As the Vietnam generation ages and dies, it is that engagement in public memory that will continue to make the Vietnam Veterans Memorial compelling.

Which then leaves me to assess the sculptures and other additions to the site. While they seem a bit intrusive to me, I'm not sure that my opinion much matters. All that matters is the extent to which they distract from or contribute to the public's engagement with the Memorial. As I watched visitors encounter the various pieces of the Memorial, it struck me that, at least that afternoon, people responded to the Wall in an almost non-touristy way, as a pilgrimage, quietly walking along it and taking discrete photos of the granite walls and mementoes left behind. They seemed to perceive it as different, behaving more like tourists when they approached the sculptures. That might not be a verifiable observation, but I do think it's something to think about, suggesting how design can shape not only the interpretation but public behavior. Despite the additions, the Wall still functions as it was intended to do, with the sculptures as essentially ancillary, not the core of why the public comes. Regardless of how the purity of the design concept was compromised, the Memorial is still a powerful place of individual and collective loss and memory.

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