

# The Materiality of Controversial Memory Sites

## **INTRODUCTION**

Memory sites such as museums and memorials serve a community by helping its constituent members to remember a common or shared identity. For many, these memory sites memorialize iconic events and people and direct public action toward an idealized public goal. In many cases these sites act as a point of secular or nationalistic pilgrimages in a pseudo-religious manner.

However, other sites are met with controversy and disagreement—some even from the time of their earliest conceptions. Though the designers do not intend these sites to be controversial, the public conscience seems to rebel against the rhetorical strategies employed by these sites.

Though there are many lenses through which these sites may be evaluated to better understand the controversy surrounding them, the following analysis will focus on materiality. How does the materiality of a memory site create and contribute to controversial interpretations of those sites?

## **MATERIALITY**

Investigations into how memory sites are shaped by the identities of the people that create them and how they act rhetorically to shape and influence viewers has become a popular area of study for scholars of rhetoric in recent years. These scholars have reached nominal consensus as to several assumptions common to memory sites (Blair, Dickinson and Ott,

Rhetoric/Memory/Place 6). Though many of these assumptions are tightly intertwined with each other, of particular note is the assumption that, “memory relies on material and/or symbolic supports,” (Blair, Dickinson and Ott, Rhetoric/Memory/Place 6).

The term materiality refers to the construction and physical nature of the memory site. What materials were used in the construction and how do those materials contribute to the controversy of the site? How does the arrangement of the material features create controversy? Is there a logical pathway that is encouraged at the site and does that pathway have any controversial rhetorical effect? What physical sensations do visitors receive and do they evoke controversy? How does this site interact with other memory sites? These are the types of questions that must be asked in order to determine the effects of materiality as it relates to controversial sites.

## **CONTROVERSIAL SITES**

It is important and often difficult to distinguish between memory sites of controversial people or events and memory sites with controversial designs. At the heart of the controversy surrounding all three of the sites to be examined is the difficulty that design committees have in choosing and balancing between competing visions of what the memory sites should memorialize. Before proceeding with analysis of the sites, it is necessary to provide a brief description of the features of each site. To limit the scope of analysis, museums and portions of the memorials which do not directly contribute to the site’s controversial nature are omitted from this analysis.

## **The Vietnam Veterans Memorial**

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial was dedicated on November 23, 1982. The 2-acre national memorial is operated and maintained as part of the National Parks Service and honors service members of the U.S. Armed Forces who fought, died, or are unaccounted for during the Vietnam War. Four distinct features comprise the memorial: The Memorial Wall, The Three Servicemen Statue, The Vietnam Women's Memorial, and The Memorial Plaque. (U.S. National Park Service, Vietnam Veterans Memorial)

### **The Memorial Wall**

The Memorial Wall consists of two 246-foot-9-inch long black granite walls and is the work of Maya Lin. The walls are polished to a near-mirror finish and the names of more than 58,000 service members are etched into the face with regular typeface and spacing. The walls are somewhat below grade and angled into a wide chevron. The walls are tapered with the central apex reaching 10.1 feet high and the extremities measuring 8 inches. Directories are situated at both ends of the monument to allow visitors to locate specific names. A cordoned-off pathway directs foot traffic past this memory site. (U.S. National Park Service, Vietnam Veterans Memorial)

### **The Three Servicemen Statue**

The Three Servicemen Statue was added to the original design as part of a compromise leading up to the creation of the Memorial in 1982 and is the work of Frederick Hart. This bronze statue depicts three soldiers with the express intent of identifying them as Caucasian, African American, and Hispanic Americans. This statue rests near the entrance to the pathway leading to The Memorial Wall. (U.S. National Park Service, Vietnam Veterans Memorial)

## **The Vietnam Women's Memorial**

The Vietnam Women's Memorial is dedicated to the women service members who served in the Vietnam War. This statue was conceived by Diane Carlson Evans in 1983 dedicated on November 11, 1993 as an additional compromise on Maya Lin's original design. It depicts three uniformed women tending to a wounded soldier and lies South of the Memorial wall. There is a pathway that indirectly connects this monument to other portions of the overall Memorial. (U.S. National Park Service, Vietnam Veterans Memorial)

## **The Memorial Plaque**

This plaque was dedicated on November 10, 2004 and is immediately adjacent to The Three Servicemen Statue. It is formed from a 3ft by 2ft block of solid black granite and contains the following inscription, "In memory of the men and women who served in the Vietnam War and later died as a result of their service. We honor and remember their sacrifice." Ruth Coder Fitzgerald was the primary proponent for the creation and inclusion of this plaque within the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. (U.S. National Park Service, Vietnam Veterans Memorial)

## **Oklahoma City National Memorial**

This 3.3-acre memory site contains both a memorial and a museum commemorating those who died as a result of Timothy McVeigh's bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal building in 1995. The memorial site was formally dedicated on April 19, 2000 and the museum was dedicated and opened one year later. It is administered by the Oklahoma City National Memorial Foundation and operated by the National Park Service. The Memorial was designed by Hans and Torrey Butzer and includes a number of features described below. (U.S. National Park Service, Oklahoma City National Memorial)

## The Gates of Time

The formal entrances to the outdoor memorial are framed by twin gigantic bronze gates. The exterior of each gate bears the inscription, “We come here to remember Those who were killed, those who survived and those changed forever. May all who leave here know the impact of violence. May this memorial offer comfort, strength, peace, hope and serenity.” The interior of the eastern gate is inscribed with 9:01 and represents the last moments of peace. Opposite, the western gate is inscribed with 9:03 and represents when healing began. Between the gates lies the Reflecting Pool. (U.S. National Park Service, Oklahoma City National Memorial)

## Field of Empty Chairs

A grassy field with 168 empty chairs individually hand-crafted from glass, bronze, and stone occupies the former site of the Murrah Building. Etched into the glass of each chair is a name of someone who died in the explosion. Three unborn children died along with their mothers and are listed on their mother’s chair beneath the mother’s name. The westernmost column of five chairs represents those who died as a result of the explosion but were not located in the Murrah Building (Oklahoma City National Memorial Museum). The remaining chairs are arranged in nine rows to represent the nine floors of the building and each individual’s chair is placed in the row corresponding to their location at the time of the explosion. Finally, the chairs are grouped according to the blast pattern with the most chairs nearest the most heavily damaged portion of the building. (U.S. National Park Service, Oklahoma City National Memorial)

## The Memorial Fence

A 10-foot-tall (3.0 m) chain link fence was installed around the area that is now the Reflecting Pool and the Field of Empty Chairs to protect the site from damage and visitors from injury.

The Fence stood for more than four years, becoming notable as the place where visitors left stuffed animals, poems, keychains, and other items as tributes. During the construction of the Outdoor Memorial, 210 feet (64 m) of the Fence was moved to the west side of the Memorial, along the 9:03 side or the 'healing' side. The remainder of the Fence is in storage. Visitors may still leave small items along and in the Fence; the mementos are periodically collected, cataloged, and stored. (U.S. National Park Service, Oklahoma City National Memorial)

### **National 9/11 Memorial**

The National 9/11 Memorial was designed by Michael Arad and Peter Walker and was opened for public viewing on September 11, 2011. It was dedicated to the memory of the 2,983 people who were killed in the 2001 and 1993 terrorist attacks. (National September 11 Memorial and Museum)

### **Memorial Pools**

As focal points of the memorial, these features are nearly an acre in size and sit in the footprints of the former North and South towers. "The pools contain the largest manmade waterfalls in North America, each descending 30 feet into a square basin. From there, the water in each pool drops another 20 feet and disappears into a smaller, central void. (National September 11 Memorial and Museum)" According to Michael Arad, "the pools represent 'absence made visible'. (National September 11 Memorial and Museum)" Those remembered include the victims located in both the North and South World Trade Center towers; the victims of the attack on the Pentagon, first responders; and the passengers and crews of hijacked Flights 11, 77, 93, and 175. The names of the fallen are grouped according to the location and circumstances

in which the victims found themselves. Further, a system of “meaningful adjacencies” is used to group friends and colleagues. (National September 11 Memorial and Museum)

### **9/11 Memorial Glade**

The Memorial Glade is dedicated to honoring those who are sick or died as a direct result of being exposed to exposure to toxins in the aftermath of the attacks. The glade opened on May 30, 2019 and includes a pathway flanked by six large monoliths inlaid with steel from the North and South towers. In addition to honoring the fallen, the Glade, “also recognizes the determination and perseverance of those who participated in the recovery efforts. (National September 11 Memorial and Museum)”

## **HOW MATERIALITY CONTRIBUTES TO CONTROVERSY**

Carole Blair has identified five questions that arise from analyzing the materiality of a memorial site (Blair, *Contemporary U.S. Memorial Sites as Exemplars of Rhetoric's Materiality* 30). Of particular note for this analysis, are her fourth question, “What does the text do to (or with, or against) other texts?” and fifth question, “How does the text act on people?” (Blair, *Contemporary U.S. Memorial Sites as Exemplars of Rhetoric's Materiality* 30)

### **List of Names**

Each site contains a list of names of the memorialized deceased. The policies to include the names of those to be memorialized have sparked controversy. While many visitors find the list of names comforting, some believe that such lists do not sufficiently humanize the losses.

Conversely, others assert that lists of the deceased overly individualize these memorial sites and limits the opportunities for broad-scale grief. (Watson)

## Names without rank or title

At all three memorial sites the names are listed without rank or title to symbolize equality of station in death. Though many find this practice comforting, it has met with some objection. Some people wish to see their loved ones receive full recognition of the honor their rank or titles convey. (Cohen)

## How to group names

Though each of these sites has a means of grouping and organizing the names of the deceased, those methods differ from site to site. For loved ones, the ability to group the deceased with friends or colleagues can be important. The designers of these sites have attempted different grouping schemes in order to best offer comfort to loved ones including, in the case of the National 9/11 Memorial, allowing relatives to request which names their loved one should be grouped with. (National September 11 Memorial and Museum)

## Exclusivity

All three of these sites have struggled with who should be included. Should someone whose death occurred as result of but after the event be included? What about those whose death was indirectly related to the event? Should female non-combatants be memorialized alongside male soldiers?

For the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (VVM), this has led to three subsequent additions to the memorial. Each addition to the memorial has increased the inclusivity of the overall memorial site. The Three Soldiers Statue (TSS), though initially intended as a more concrete representation of the soldiers whose lives are memorialized by the site, was specifically designed to be inclusive of Caucasian, African American, and soldiers of other ethnicities. This statue is



positioned a short distance from the Memorial Wall and the soldiers' gazes appear to be fixed on that as a focal point. (Blakemore)

The second addition to the VVM further extended the inclusivity of the site though the names of eight women veterans who died in Vietnam were included on the Memorial Wall. The Vietnam Women's Memorial (VWM) was added to honor the women who served as non-combatants in Vietnam. Pathways connect all four portions of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, However, the arrangement of this portion of the memorial has left some questioning the sincerity of that inclusion (Gallagher). The Vietnam Women's Memorial is located across a field and not directly connected to the Memorial Wall. Further, the Women's Memorial does not appear to interact with the Memorial Wall in the way that the Three Soldiers Statue does.

The Oklahoma City National Memorial faces a different set of inclusivity problems. First, some have criticized the Gates of Time as being too exclusionary due to their massive imposing size (Watson). Second, though the chairs representing the victims in the adjacent buildings are included in the Field of Empty Chairs those chairs are separated and set apart from the chairs representing victims located in the Murrah building (Pachoda).

## **Symbolic Representation**

One area of common concern for designers is how abstract to make the memorial site. Abstract memorials lend themselves to multiple interpretations. However, if a memorial is too abstract, it loses rhetorical meaning. If designed too concretely, a memorial limits the range of interpretations that visitors can experience.

In fact, concerns that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall was too abstract were the primary reason for compromise that led to the addition of the Three Soldiers Statue. The original design was described by some as a “black gash of shame”. (Gallagher)

Similarly, the use of empty chairs to symbolize the 168 victims at the Oklahoma City National Memorial (OCNM) has been criticized for being too abstract (Holland). Jim Watson, a professor of design at Oklahoma State University, has the following critique of the chairs, “Chairs are not appropriate (not everyone was sitting or even had a chair in one of the buildings). They are cold harsh stone, metal, and glass slabs. The explanation for the chairs is (Watson).”

Curiously, though, the Memorial Pools at the National 9/11 Memorial, which are designed to represent “absence made visible” (National September 11 Memorial and Museum), have largely been accepted by the public.

## **Folk Memorial**

The mementos left behind by grieving visitors are often referred to as folk memorial. These items represent a vernacular expression of memory and can be the source of much contention for designers and curators of the memorials. Decisions regarding how much folk memorial to display and what to do with the folk memorial not on display depend greatly on the available resources. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial catalogs and stores folk memorials on a daily basis, but other memorials may not have the space or resources to store items over a protracted range of years.

## Interaction with Other Sites

When considering how different sites interact with each other, Carole Blair encourages public memory scholars to consider how memorials enable, appropriate, contextualize, supplement, correct, challenge, compete, and silence other sites (Blair, *Contemporary U.S. Memorial Sites as Exemplars of Rhetoric's Materiality* 39).

A list of names of those to memorialize is hardly the invention of Maya Lin. But the Vietnam Veterans Memorial certainly popularized this feature and it has been appropriated by numerous memorial sites, including the Oklahoma City National Memorial and the National 9/11 Memorial.

The Oklahoma City National Memorial and the National 9/11 Memorial interact in a more competitive way. Since the opening of the National 9/11 Memorial, the Oklahoma City National Memorial has experienced a drastic decline in visits. "Because of 9/11, Oklahoma City has been completely overshadowed," said Michael Treanor. "We are not the worst act of terrorism on American soil anymore. We are no longer even interesting. It's ancient history. (Witt)" Thus, understandable concerns over relevance and a desire to have their grief validated has given rise to competition and controversy.

## CONCLUSION

Blair asserts that public memory scholars have reached a level of nominal consensus that "memory is partial, partisan, and thus often contested (Blair, Dickinson and Ott, *Rhetoric/Memory/Place* 6)." Understanding the role that a site's materiality plays in creating or placating controversy is important. Designers and curators of memorial sites must often make

important decisions about how to balance between opposing narratives and viewpoints. In many cases, there is no satisfactory compromise that will appease all concerned parties.

Therefore, it is critical for decision-makers to understand how the choices they make regarding materiality will impact the overall narrative of the sites.

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