Memorial designs: Blending landscapes with memories

A good memorial evokes an important event in the collective experience of a community or a nation, but as important are the details of construction. To effectively carry their message to visitors, memorial designers must keep their message and construction simple and must work with the surrounding landscape so that distractions don’t eliminate the effect of the monument.

“The simpler the message is, the better the memorial will be,” said Thomas S. Johnson, a member of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, the organization created by the City of New York to help guide the re-development of Lower Manhattan and the World Trade Center site after the September 11 attacks.

In an article in the New York Times, Johnson stated that although memorials can carry many messages, “the memorial is better kept to a minimum of thoughts and emotions.” The Times article had numerous examples of memorials that worked to varying degrees of success.

The message is simple at the Oklahoma City Memorial to the victims of the bomb at the Murrah Federal Building. Its centerpiece is 168 empty chairs, one for each of the dead from the bombing. These chairs include 19 that are heartbreakingly small, for the children killed in the blast. This message of absence is also found at the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC. One exhibit is shoes — 4,000 empty shoes — found at the Majdanek death camp.

Strength is the message of the Iwo Jima monument in Arlington, Virginia, where the raising of the flag is commemorated in a statue. Another kind of strength entirely is commemorated in the Rosa Parks statue in Montgomery, Alabama. That statue invites others to sit alongside Ms. Parks on her bus seat and share in her quiet strength that allowed her to refuse to move to the back of that bus in more racially divisive times.

City settings can present problem in designing memorials, but the Vietnam War memorial takes advantage of its location in the midst of the National Mall. One end of the Vietnam Memorial points to the monument of George Washington — the man who built the nation out of the blood of patriots. The other end points to the statue of Abraham Lincoln, who held us together through strife and whose death was mourned by many, bringing the nation together again.

Memorials often carry somber messages from tragic events, and everyday noises of city life can distract from these messages. The Oklahoma City Memorial drops visitors below street level, giving them a quiet place to receive the messages it sends. Likewise, the Vietnam Memorial uses the landscape to separate visitors from distractions. Starting at the level of the National Mall, visitors to the Wall walk into the earth along a
chronological list of the war dead to the depths of the war. As the war ends and hope arises, so too does the visitor.

The design of the memorial to Franklin Delano Roosevelt ignored these factors. It has complex messages — probably too many of them. The memorial, on the National Mall in Washington DC, requires that visitors stroll through the many rooms in a certain order and uses waterfalls to build to a dramatic crescendo. This effect is all but lost, however, because the memorial sits in the flight path to Reagan National Airport. Both the Vietnam and the Oklahoma City memorials drop visitor below the noisy street level, carving out a place of quiet for reflection at the memorials.

Materials of construction are also important for memorials. The Vietnam memorial is made of reflective black granite. Symbolically, visitors see themselves in the wall in addition to the names there, but equally important is the durability of the granite that will make the wall a lasting, low maintenance tribute. The memorial to law enforcement officers in Washington DC was made of a soft porous material that is already beginning to wear away in places.

The best designs for permanent memorials consider all these factors, but the best measure of a memorial’s effectiveness is its ability to make a visitor pause and reflect. The most powerful images remain those of the personal beside the elegant: the rose at the base of the Vietnam wall, the teddy bear on the tiny chair in Oklahoma City — these all touch the heart and mind with remembrance of things past.

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