

I. Introduction

A. Attention Statement

In an aircraft hanger at Andrews Air Force Base, an elite jury of architectural and Art professionals stood with a small contingent of Vietnam veterans. Displayed around them were 1,421 entries, submitted from across the nation to take part in a design competition for a memorial to honor Vietnam vets. All entrants' identities were kept anonymous. On that day, May 1, 1981, the jury unanimously selected the winner for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. It was entry number 1026.

B. Subject Statement

At the age of 21, Maya Lin, an architecture student at Yale University became the designer of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

C. Significance of Subject

Through her design she helped heal a nation that was haunted by the tragic results of the Vietnam War.

D. Point Preview

First, we'll discuss why the jury selected Lin's design, second, we'll study how she conceived her design and what her intentions were, and finally, we'll touch upon the controversy the design generated.

II. Main Point One

A. Subject Statement

The officials chose the entry by Maya Lin, based on the criteria given them and because her conceptual memorial represented the 20th century aesthetic.

B. Documentation

The New York Times reported on June 29, 1981, that Lin's design was selected because it met the requirements put forth by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF), the sponsors of the competition.

C. Illustration

The VVMF requested the memorial not make a political statement regarding the war, that it contain all 58,000 names of the men and women who died or were missing in action, and to consider the memorial's site. The jury recognized Lin adhered to the rules by designing a modest V-shaped form devoid of any controversial sentiment, having all the names inscribed in chronological order, and by placing the design flush against the landscape she minimized the disturbance to the site, Constitution Gardens.

D. Signpost

Not only did her entry meet the requirements but it also embodied contemporary form and had a thoughtful complexity.

E. Documentation

In the previously cited New York Times article, the officials commented on her design as "one that could not have been achieved in another place or time." Stated in To Heal a Nation, by Jan Scruggs and Joel Swerdlow, the jury also referred to it as "one of the most profound memorials ever built."

F. Illustration (Visual aide—Maya Lin’s original entry design)

Here, Lin poses with a mock-up of her winning design and by it her entry drawing that first engaged the judges. It was minimalist with strong horizontal lines, while incorporating the use of earth, space and light. The jury was also moved by the conceptual messages of life, death, and acceptance that would emotionally challenge those who stood before it.

G. Summary Statement

Only a student of architecture, Lin created a design that mesmerized a jury who recognized it as a powerful memorial representing the 20th century.

H. Transition Statement

Now that we have discussed why the jury confirmed the design, let’s examine Lin’s reasons for creating it.

III. Main Point II

A. Subject Statement

Lin envisioned a basic structure harmonious within its environment that would be a place of truth and reflection for the veterans.

B. Documentation

In an interview with National Geographic of May 1985, Lin stated her reaction after visiting the site, “ I wanted to work with the land and not dominate it. I had an impulse to cut open the earth.... an initial violence that in time would heal.”

C. Illustration

The site, Constitution Gardens, rests between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument. She would slice into the earth, exposing its dark interior that would be replaced by black triangular walls. The walls would gradually descend to ten feet, keeping the integrity of the ground intact. She then made an angle at the walls apex and directed their opposite points at each landmark, uniting our historical past and present.

D. Signpost

In addition, Lin knew the memorial had to be for and be about the veterans.

E. Documentation

In Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision, a 1994 documentary by Frieda Lee Mock, Lin felt the vets needed a memorial that did not glorify war, but conveyed the honor and sacrifice that emerged from it.

F. Illustration (Visual Aide—Vietnam vet at the Wall)

As pictured here, Lin wanted the soldiers' names to be the "heart of the design." A tribute to their service. As an inscribed name on the reflective black granite was touched and seen in chronological time, the reality of death would be defined. The surviving veterans would be confronted with their self-image and the names of their fallen comrades. With the acceptance of death, Lin believed the healing would begin.

G. Summary Statement

While composing a site-specific structure, Lin also designed it to honor all the servicemen in the war and to provide a place of remembrance.

H. Transition Statement

As we have studied, Lin thoughtfully created a memorial for the vets; however, arguments still erupted over her design.

IV. Main Point III

A. Subject Statement

Controversy surrounded the memorial, for its lack of representation of the Vietnam experience, but after two years of negotiating it was resolved by adding a flag and a figurative sculpture.

B. Documentation

According to Art in America, April 1983, while most veterans approved of the memorial, a small faction of vets and private citizens did rally against it.

C. Illustration

Tom Carhart, a vet and member of the VVMF, strongly opposed Lin's design, calling it a "degrading ditch." He and others felt the design's understated structure stood for the anti-war movement, the black panels symbolized shame, and the chronological listing would be too difficult to find specific names. They argued for the panels to be white and moved above ground with the names alphabetized.

D. Signpost

Fortunately, a consensus was reached, but almost at the risk of Lin's vision.

E. Documentation

In the previously cited documentary, Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision, a truce was reached by adding a flag and a statue. In The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, Winter 1996, Lin tried to maintain the integrity of her design without “pretending to reach a consensus on the war.”

F. Illustration: (Visual Aide—Frederick Hart’s sculpture)

Lin consented to the addition of other elements, but artistically disagreed. A flag would be in the entry to the memorial and a statue by Frederick Hart, as seen here, would rest in the foreground. Lin did successfully defend her design. She knew any changes would disrupt the concept of the piece. Her panels stayed black, burrowed in the ground, and the names in chronological order.

G. Summary Statement

Despite opposing views between Lin and some vets, she was able to stand up for her design and reach an agreement to add other structural elements.

V. Conclusion

A. Summary Statement

Maya Lin’s design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial competition was well received by an elite jury, but even with her thoughtful intentions controversy was unavoidable.

B. Post Point Review

Today we have looked at some of the reasons why Lin's design won the competition, her process for creating the memorial, and the arguments that erupted over it.

C. Significance

Maya Lin's architectural design will forever be regarded as a world-class structure and a place of overwhelming power and reverence.

D. Wrap Around

From an obscure aircraft hanger filled with hundreds of designs, emerged a treasure of unproportional value, entry number 1026. A simple design that healed a nation.

Works Cited

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