Memory

EMERGENT

The National AIDS Memorial Competition

+ 252

REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PRESENT

Mabel O. Wilson

"Memory (the deliberate act of remembering) is a form of willed creation."

Toni Morrison

THE COMPELLING DESIGNS for the National AIDS Memorial competition offer several innovative proposals and raise many important questions as to how contemporary memorials might create new ways to enact and experience remembrance. The competition's entries to design a new focal point within the National AIDS Memorial Grove located in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park illustrate how commemorating a global pandemic such as AIDS provokes a rethinking and revision of the nature of the memorial itself.

AS PHYSICAL ARTIFACTS, memorials typically represent and preserve the knowledge of distinct events that happened to a group of people at a particular place and time. For example, the minimalist Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. designed by Maya Lin captures, through its inverted cut into the earth, the unfolding of events during the Vietnam War. The soldiers' names etched into the reflective black granite not only serve as a personal marker for those who lost loved ones to the violence of war, but also function as a somber roster of the dead that graphs the escalation and decline in the number of casualties over the course of the conflict. The abstract form of Lin's memorial, made even more stark by the absence of a soldier's valiant figure, evokes a self-reflective tone on the consequences of war, a response that echoes the contested social perceptions of the Vietnam War itself.

MOREOVER, we might also consider that the physical appearance of a memorial often serves to incite recollection by using familiar figures or abstract symbols to signify the past so that we may experience it in our present. The neo-classical Lincoln Memorial, also in the nation's capital, is a more traditional means of representing a revered person or significant event; it enshrines the towering stoic likeness of seated President Lincoln to symbolize the American principles of equality and justice. Despite the seeming timelessness of these ideals, the Lincoln Memorial's symbolic resonances have been adapted over the years by other struggles for equality. Martin Luther King Jr. and Civil Rights activists appropriated the site during the Great March on Washington in 1963 to protest unequal treatment justified by legalized segregation. Memorials, like memory, must evolve over time.

DEPARTING from these previous models of monuments, a memorial to commemorate the AIDS pandemic should transform how we represent and symbolize the places, times, and people who have lost their lives to its lethal advance. The AIDS Memorial Quilt project, which originated in San Francisco in 1987, is an important milestone in the changing modes of commemoration. The Quilt utilizes handcrafted three-foot by six-foot panels to signify personal tragedy; the panels are then assembled into an immense patchwork of collective expression. The associations of the quilt with bodily comfort and caring provide a tangible means of empathy for its viewers. Transportable, the memorial can move to different public locations. Additive, the quilt's dimensions can be transformed over time to represent the increasing toll of the disease. Thus, the AIDS Memorial Quilt successfully captures the dynamics of place and time indicative of the ongoing AIDS epidemic.

WITH THESE GENERAL ISSUES about memorials in mind, there are several questions that should be considered in regards to how the proposed National AIDS Memorial might transform and invent new rituals of commemoration. Since AIDS continues to impact many lives today and will do so well into the future, how can we begin to build a memorial that circumscribes a history whose temporal boundaries are persistently edging forward? The gay community in San Francisco has lived, battled, and mourned AIDS for two decades, but AIDS' horrendous suffering now extends across many diverse communities around the Bay Area. In recent years, the greatest devastation has been in the poorest countries around the world whose post-colonial political legacies, economic impoverishment, and lack of adequate social and health infrastructures prohibits successfully curtailing the epidemic's ravages.

GIVEN THE GLOBAL REACH of the pandemic, where is the neighborhood, town, city, or country whose community the National AIDS Memorial represents? And likewise, whose memory is preserved in the memorial since people from all parts of the world are suffering from this disease's deadly wrath? We might also consider how the future impact of AIDS, both locally and globally, challenges our ability to qualify or quantify its tragic affects. The profound incomprehensibility of scope and scale of human devastation eludes traditional methods of representation, while a new, inventive memorial could function to ground our relationship with the ceaseless advance of AIDS and still provide a place of gathering, remembrance, healing, understanding, and action.

THE VERDANT LANDSCAPE of the seven-acre dell of the current National AIDS Memorial Grove draws upon nature as a compelling symbol of remembrance. The transcendental experience of landscape has been a popular means in America for forging a connection between life and death, the past and the present. The Grove's dramatic collection of redwoods, oaks, maples, shrubbery and ferns in some respects "remembers" the pre-existing natural landscape of San Francisco before the gridiron pattern of city streets supplanted the scrub and rhythmically sloping sand dunes. Forming a vital living memorial, the current Grove allows the cycles of decline and renewal of nature to symbolize both the lives that have been lost to the AIDS pandemic and the continuation of life for their loved ones and those still living with HIV.

THE MINDFUL EFFORTS at preserving the vegetation and natural beauty of the Grove ensure the continual presence of visitors who will enact rituals of commemoration. As a site of collective memory, the Grove guarantees that the past will not wither with time, but will instead be perpetuated by those who visit it. One of the advantages of having the Grove on the larger scale of a landscape rather than on the smaller scale of an edifice, is that the former allows for incursions of everyday events into the domain of the memorial site. As the Grove merges into the larger topography of park, it in turn brings the act of memory into people's everyday lives. Because the open areas of the Grove can be used for other ceremonies and sanctioned activities, these many events incorporate the remembrance of AIDS into their experiences too.

THE NATURAL BEAUTY of the Grove fosters one way to recall those who have lost their lives to AIDS, but the possibilities of a more vital, active engagement will be initiated by the newly proposed memorial selected from the approximately 200 competition entries. Instead of designing an iconic monument to be placed in some area of the Grove, the more successful entries in the competition recognized, respected, and reinforced the expansive scale of the existing memorial landscape. Some memorial designs distribute thousands of iconic elements, such as piles of rocks or luminous poles, across the entire Grove to reflect the vast impact of the disease. The variation in the number of elements and the mutability of the pieces, such as the way a surface might age over time, remind visitors how our relationship to AIDS and efforts at its eradication have changed over the years. As directed in the competition program, the new memorial should seek an egalitarian expression of AIDS that cuts across class, geographic, and cultural distinctions. In response to this directive, many of the competition entries offered cultural symbols such as AIDS ribbons and angel wings that would be familiar to many of those visiting the memorial, while others presented

abstract symbols such as spheres, rods, and candles which would provide visitors with a more universal interpretation of remembrance.

MANY OF THE ENTRIES did recognize the important factor in memorializing AIDS: the new memorial will not mark a past event but one that is still very much a part of our present and future experience. Several designs incorporate architectural elements whose number could increase as a means of keeping track of the growing number of deaths in the United States and abroad. Other proposed memorials erect large frameworks or cages that are either filled with objects to symbolize those who have lost their lives to the disease or remain ominously empty signifying the innumerable deaths to come if a cure for AIDS is not discovered soon. Most of the proposed memorials sought forms of expression that would draw together the collective bonds of human experience in order to cultivate the hope and understanding that is crucial for recollection, healing, and acceptance.

"WE MIGHT REMIND OURSELVES," historian James Young writes in his book *The Texture of Memory*, that public memory is constructed, that understanding events depends on memory's construction, and that there are worldly consequences in the kinds of historical understanding generated by monuments." Young's observations suggest that memory must undergo continual renewal in order for the subject of remembrance, in this instance the impact of AIDS in the world, to stay vivid in our collective consciousness. The competition's new National AIDS Memorial augments the existing memorial landscape with a series of constructed elements that will allow for an evolution in the process of remembrance. Of equal significance, the new memorial will also engage the complex social and political conditions of the AIDS pandemic that nature is not fully able to represent. The memorial will keep us mindful that the AIDS epidemic is not simply a result of natural epidemiological occurrences, but that its ongoing advancement and the continuation of human suffering have also resulted from social conceptions which shape how the disease is perceived and political pressures which influence how it is acted upon.

THE NEW MEMORIAL has many missions to uphold. It should provide a meaningful place of individual reflection and collective memory. It should convey the scope of human influences upon the AIDS epidemic. And it should form a space of collective action for all those who wish to change the direction of these dire conditions.

BIOGRAPHY

Mabel O. Wilson is an associate professor of architecture and visual criticism at CCA in San Francisco. She is also a partner in KW:a—an architectural design collaborative that engages in both speculative and built work. Their proposal for the African Burial Ground Memorial in lower Manhattan was selected as a competition finalist. In 2002 she was the recipient of a Visiting Scholar Fellowship from the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles. She received a BS in architecture from University of Virginia, M. Arch from Columbia University and is currently a doctoral candidate in American Studies at New York University.