

# Contested Memories: An Analysis of the Washington Monument and Vietnam Veterans Memorial

He Du

School of Art, Qufu Normal University, Rizhao, 276800, China

## Abstract

**The Washington Monument and Vietnam Veterans Monument are two of the more iconic monuments in Washington. Both are tributes to the struggles and heroics of America's past that has led to its current state. When attributing memory and place to these two monuments, the conversation cannot simply be just about the present. The past, present and future are all linked into these sites where imagined communities gather to share their memories and viewpoints on history with these structures they are viewing. In analyzing both the Washington Monument and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, both these structures have complicated histories behind both their construction and what they stand for. It is not the monuments or the financiers of these creations, that control the message, rather the individual experience of each person within these places is what will not only link memory and place, but how history relates to these spaces for each person.**

## Keywords

**Washington Monument; Vietnam Veterans Monument; History; Landscape.**

## 1. The Preparation

One could argue the Washington Monument was among one of the more controversial American infrastructures ever created. The construction of permanent infrastructure such as the Washington Monument revolves around the debate of public versus private space. The approval by the U.S. Continental Congress in 1793 for such a statue signifies that space becomes subject to the systems of design and controlled as dictated by the select few in power, in this case it being the government itself. Although it appears as controversial that there was no public input on Washington's monument, it was not uncommon for the time period. Until 1910, there were no federal agencies or boards that reviewed these proposals, and often were not even build bay federal governments, but rather relatively small, politically connected interest groups, examples being various ethnic organizations or veterans associations [1]. Therefore, barring rejection from the federal government for some odd reason, the construction of monuments erecting American heroes and history lies in the hands of only a select few. The prior point brings to light the question of who decides what histories and stories are told or enshrined in public spaces. In the 1800s, Americans though holding a public monument was an act of suspicion, since there were mere powerful gestures by a few and not a spontaneous outpouring of feeling [2]. Yet, what is the true significance and meaning behind the construction of these lasting structures?

The Washington Monument reflects the period where any sort of statue or memorial for the commemoration of the American past was not through the federal government, but was often instead spearheaded and financed by independent, politically powerful groups with the intent to get across their specific message. On the other hand, the coming together of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial had a smoother initial process, but the debate around the product was more contested than that of the Washington Monument. While the Washington Monument was

approved during a period where they were no federal committees overlooking the proposals, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial did, but at the same time it is through the funding of private donations that made it possible. President Jimmy Carter signed the Vietnam Trans Memorial Bill in 1982, with the proposed idea being one panel honouring those who served, and the other panel noting the structure was built from the donations of private contributions [3]. The idea came from Jan Scruggs, a Vietnam veteran who was severely injured in the war, and in 1979 organized the Vietnam Veterans memorial fund [4]. The prior point illustrates that similar to that of the Washington Monument, the funding for the building of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial began with that of an independent, politically motivated group, in this case being a veterans organization.

## 2. The Site and Landscape

While the architecture of the building is important to note, the location of both these monuments also play a subtle role in the messages portrayed through each individual's experience of the landscape where the historic site is. For the Washington Monument, the idea for the castor was to look down upon the land of freedom, where one could imagine how the struggles of the past, yet reflect on the beautiful nature of a monument that hits among the gardens and bushes, creating a sense of a perpetual peace [5]. On the other hand, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial has each of its arms pointing to the corners of the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument, which suggests a connection between the memorials in forging American history [6]. Thus, the layout of each of these monuments attempt to create a specific experience for the people who are on the site, yet in the end, it is the interpretations and personal connections of each individual to the history of these buildings that will dictate the conversation around these monuments.

The site and landscape on which these monuments stand are indicative of the histories they attempt to tell, yet, the in-person experience relies more on an individual interpretation of the monument and its histories rather than a simple reading of the history for what it is. Today, monuments are spaces of experiences, journeys of emotional discovers and a balance between a site of discovery and healing versus that of patriotism and teaching [7]. Yet, this balance is difficult to achieve, as that balance lies in the hands of the personal experience. For Wagner Pacifici and Schwartz, monuments carry the idea of coincident oppositorum, an agency that brings opposed meanings together without resolving them [8]. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a perfect example of the previous point, as the United States continues to struggle with the nature of the Vietnam war, and the status of veterans associated with it (as both heroes and deviants). This is why Lin's black marble wall design is so intriguing, because it does not provide any historical information about the war, rather it simply lists those who died in it. This lack of information puts the visitor as one who must create meaning and interpretation, while at the same time seeing their reflection in the marble stone as a sign of how they are linked to the monument historically.

## 3. Details

One of the pieces of the monument that often goes unnoticed is that of the alumni pyramid cap situated at the apex of the structure. Colonel Thomas Lincoln Casey send a request to William Frishmuth's foundry in Philadelphia to create a metal pyramid to serve as a lightning rod [9]. The principal manufactures were the Cowles Brothers of Niagara Falls, New York, who were unique since they used a patented thermal process that ran off an electric resistance furnace and raw material that included aluminum oxide and copper [10]. This allowed for the inscriptions on the monument itself to remain visible up until 1934, a testament to the idea that inscriptions last forever, and that states nor move, nor change [11]. Not only is the Washington

Monument a symbolic symbol for the history of the United States, but this same alumni cap serves as a nod to the rise and success of the aluminum industry, as well as highlighting the importance of the manufacturing industry at the time. Despite the fact that the aluminum cap is a nod to one of America's booming industries in the time pyramid, the construction of the piece itself remains impressive. The choice to use aluminum was due to its conductivity, colour, and non-staining qualities, and once completed was the tallest ma mad structure it the world; even today, it remains among the world's tallest free-standing masonry structure in the world [12]. The Washington Monument thus set a precedent for the standard of remembrance of American history in the form of visual homage, but also sparked the building of monuments across the United States.

The details behind the exact construction of the Washington Monument reflect the growth of the aluminium industry at the time, but the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as an architectural art piece is perhaps of even greater fascination. The original design of the Vietnam Veteran Memorial was to have just black walls, yet there was dialogue between The Commission of Fine Arts and Maya Lin, the monuments designer, to reach an agreement. Lin's design almost flipped the neoclassical memorial landscape upside down, but her unorthodox style both confirmed and popularized the special turn in monumental design [13]. Initially, the design triggered dismay and anger, with the simplicity of the monument for some representing more of a wall of shame than that of a monument paying tribute to those serving in the war. Instead, there were two parts included to the site of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the first being the 58,132 service individuals who died in the war being inscribed in the wall, both alphabetically and in order of causality day, as well as an opening and closing inscription [14]. By listing the names of all those who did not survive the war, the meaning of the monument takes on a different role, as one similar to a memorial; by recognizing the dead individually a personal connection can be made to the story of each one individual and their role rather than fall as a simple statistic of war. On the other hand, the black construction of the wall and the listing of the name is a sign of sorrow and shame in a nation's mourning of war. The conversation surrounding the Vietnam War has always been hotly contested, thus, even with the approval of Lin's design, there was also conversation around a statue that would be put up in front of the monument. Frederick Hart, wanted two design a bronze sculpture of the soldiers, which would later be approved with the incorporation of the American flag with the statue of infantryman [15]. The addition of this statue to the black walls of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is symbolic of the divide around the conversation of the war itself, and that the site does not provide closure on the war, rather it is a site of continual debate and dialogue. Traditionally, a monument would signify victory, and a memorial refers to lives lost, but by combining the black walls of the monument along with the statue of the infantrymen beside it, there are two opposing dialogues that attempt to create a sense of healing around the war and the decision to fight in it, but also an attempt to commemorate the American spirit in the lives of the soldiers lost in service.

#### 4. Conclusion

Each time an individual encounters a monument such as that of the Washington Monument or that of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, it becomes a direct encounter with a site of historical significance. These sites are home to a collection of imagined communities that can relate to these figures in one of two ways, either through that of the architecture itself or that of what the structure itself represents. In relating to what the structure itself represents, the intentions of both these monuments is to first off reflect that of American history, but secondly, and both inadvertently and purposefully, create a dialogue about how the past American shapes that of the America of today and that of the future. In the world we occupy today, these monuments can be experienced in many ways as well. The face-to-face experience on the site itself where

the point mentioned earlier about imagined communities takes place, or digitally they can be viewed or even through any sort of literature. Either way, both the monuments analyzed have some key similarities and differences that are a reflection of American culture. First, the funding of both statues was not through the federal government, but by those of private donors, primarily veterans organizations, which brings to the forefront who decides what histories are told. Also, both sites, despite the architecture of the structures and their placement within Washington attempt to tell specific histories, it is instead the visitor, who becomes a part of the larger imagined communities that gather on the site, that decide how to interpret history. The personalization of the experience, whether that is in person by bringing letters or poems to the monument, or simply viewing the same structure online, memory and place are always a part of an ongoing dialogue with history.

## References

- [1] Savage, Kirk: *Monument Wars: Washington, DC, The National Mall, and The Transformation of the Memorial Landscape* (Univ of California Press, US 2009), p.15.
- [2] Savage, Kirk: *Monument Wars: Washington, DC, The National Mall, and The Transformation of the Memorial Landscape* (Univ of California Press, US 2009), p.15.
- [3] Foss, Sonja K: *Ambiguity as Persuasion: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, *Communication Quarterly* 34.3 (1986), p.326.
- [4] Foss, Sonja K: *Ambiguity as Persuasion: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, *Communication Quarterly* 34.3 (1986), p.327.
- [5] Savage, Kirk: *The Self-Made Monument: George Washington and The Fight to Erect a National Memorial*, *Winterthur Portfolio* 22.4 (1987), p.238.
- [6] Foss, Sonja K: *Ambiguity as Persuasion: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, *Communication Quarterly* 34.3 (1986), p.333.
- [7] Savage, Kirk: *Monument Wars: Washington, DC, The National Mall, and The Transformation of the Memorial Landscape* (Univ of California Press, US 2009), p.21.
- [8] Wagner-Pacifici, Robin, and Barry Schwartz: *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Commemorating a Difficult Past*, *American journal of Sociology* 97.2 (1991), p.393.
- [9] Binczewski, George J: *The Point of A Monument: A History of the Aluminum Cap of The Washington Monument*, *JOM Journal of the Minerals, Metals and Materials Society* 47.11 (1995), p.20.
- [10] *The Washington Monument*, *JOM Journal of the Minerals, Metals and Materials Society* 47.11 (1995), p.21.
- [11] Savage, Kirk: *Monument Wars: Washington, DC, The National Mall, and The Transformation of the Memorial Landscape* (Univ of California Press, US 2009), p.10.
- [12] *The Washington Monument*, *JOM Journal of the Minerals, Metals and Materials Society* 47.11 (1995), p.22.
- [13] Savage, Kirk: *Monument Wars: Washington, DC, The National Mall, and The Transformation of the Memorial Landscape* (Univ of California Press, US 2009), p.20.
- [14] Sturken, Marita: *The Wall, The Screen, and The Image: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Representations* 35 (1991), p.119.
- [15] Sturken, Marita: *The Wall, The Screen, and The Image: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Representations* 35 (1991), p.125.