

The vietnam veterans memorial by maya lin

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The Most Visited Memorial in Washington, D. C.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is the most visited memorial in Washington D. C. The memorial doesn't focus on the war fought but on the fighters. It is more than just a wall; it's a border that generates a variety of emotional catharsis which connects the present to the past. It creates a hushing effect in the minds leaving the visitor with a sense of peace.

Creating the Design of the Monument

As represented in *A Strong Clear Vision*, from October 1980 through March 31, 1981, over 1, 400 U. S. citizens submitted their original designs to the national contest for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial to be built on the National Mall in Washington D. C. Many professional architects, as well as hundreds of Americans, entered the contest. On May 1, 1981, a student from Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut by the name of Maya Lin was chosen for further questioning following her design. Her beautiful light pastel sketch was simple yet powerful in meaning. The design originally started as a final project for her theories of architecture course after one of her classmates found a poster explaining the national contest. She was intrigued by the marble wall in Yale University which was engraved with names of alumni who died serving their country. Her design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was inspired by this memorial located directly in her school. She then thought long about how she should proceed to design such a memorial of importance. Deciding on an emotional reaction memorial with such simple complexity, Maya Lin's design was one to stand out. Once she had completed her design of the memorial she decided to enter it into the

contest, but she had to write an essay explaining her art to go along with the sketch. Maya Lin, in her interview, *A Strong, Clear Vision* says, “ That essay took like two months to write because I knew I had to get it right because the design itself would’ve looked too simple to the naked eye.” (1994) After she sent in her entry she knew it had no chance of winning considering it didn’t focus mainly on war, but about the individual. Her design of a black reflecting granite V-shaped border caught the judges eye. They knew it was the one. Maya Lin described the border sinking into the earth as if the earth is being opened up. “ Walls, however, make the most definitive borders, whether to a courtyard, a building, or a city.” (Lyndon & Moore, 88) She wanted the border to symbolize the separation of the living and the dead, but yet have the visitor connect with veterans who had passed. The walkway beside the border would be sloped as if you are present with a loved one not separated. The names of the 58, 000 men who gave their lives would be lined in chronological order by their loss. Names bring back memories which leave the visitor to reminisce on their thoughts. She wanted the memorial to be honest, and that was simply it.

Opposition to Design

Maya Lin: *A Strong Clear Vision* states that before Maya Lin’s design there was a misconception on what a memorial should look like and represent. Many thought a memorial should be high up on a platform as if it were viewed as more honorable. That was the complete opposite of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Few monuments were built like Maya Lin’s and had never connected the past with the present. Which is why the memorial sunk

into the ground. It didn't stand out. In fact, it was difficult to find for many going to visit it.

Also stated in *Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision*, many people were offended by her design. She dealt with hate and many controversies with the border itself. Critics wanted the border to be changed to white saying that black is the color of sadness. Others said she was too young to design a monument as important as this. People even wanted to stop the construction of the memorial. The biggest controversy involving Maya Lin and critics were the additions of an American Flag and a statue of three soldiers. She had aspiration and wasn't going to give her design an opening to change. The United States Committee of Fine Arts was to decide on what to do with the memorial's design. They chose to leave the wall black, and not to place the American flag or the statue of The Three Soldiers adjacent to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial to preserve Maya Lin's design.

The Lincoln Memorial and the National Mall

A marker to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial that is located on the western end of the National Mall is the Lincoln Memorial. The Lincoln Memorial was built and dedicated in 1922. Like most monuments, it's a high platform. You can see it from miles away. This memorial was built to honor the sixteenth president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, for leading the country through the American Civil War and for abolishing slavery.

Walking down from the Lincoln Memorial leads you to the National Mall. This is the most visited park. The park honors American's forefathers and heroes

though memorials and monuments. Trees line the walkway for visitors to enjoy our country's history.

Connecting with the Past

Traveling northeast of the Lincoln Memorial leads to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is difficult to see if you are walking down the tree-lined boulevard of the National Mall. You can see trees and other scenery as you walk down the side path which leads to the monument. Finally, the visitor spots the sign introducing the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. You then head straight to the directory. The directory allows visitors to look up a family member's name and it will explain what section of the wall it is on and the date. Walking towards the American Flag is when you official see the border. Walking down the slope it gets quiet. Traffic and noise are still. The dark black border reflects your image as you look into it. The granite rises more than ten feet above you as you move down the path while looking for a name. It's at the vertex that the visitor is aware that the paths are axes. The border axes line up with the Washington Memorial and the Lincoln Monument. Lyndon and Moore say in, Chambers for a Memory Palace, " Axes reach across space to draw together the important points in a place. They are mental constructions that help us position ourselves and make an alliance with hings, buildings, or space," (5) The axes line up with the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument to connect all three memorials in its own way. The axes are where the war begins and ends. Names starting to the right of the border's vertex at 1959 listed all the way down the border and continuing on the left side of the border ending with the date 1975. The names are so small you move in closer wanting to

touch the names. The use of names brings back memories of a certain person. Your eyes get blurred by the tears in your eyes. This makes the visitor connect with the past. They complete the memorial. You and the memorial blend together to make you a part of it. You can see where people have left things such as teddy bears, pictures, and notes. People are weeping. "The pain of the loss will always be there," Lin says, "it will always hurt, but we must acknowledge the death in order to move on." (boundaries, 4: 10) Continuing on the path as it slopes back up the visitor is back above the Earth. The sadness starts the cease knowing that it is over. The war is finished and the monument is complete making a complete circle with the dates starting and ending at the vertex of the border.

If you ever have the opportunity to visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial may you be able to experience the emotional catharsis and remember the importance behind Maya Lin's design. Take a moment to notice the visitors around you and their reactions as they walk down the widening, sloped path. Many you will see when they touch a name they start to cry. Notice the teddy bears and notes that people leave laying by the border. Take a look at the thousands of veteran's names. See how the axis of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is where the war begins and ends. The war is over, it is complete. Maya Lin intended to focus on the warriors and not the war. When seeing a name, she wanted visitors to remember the person and the memories they shared. She wanted to move people through the memorial, and that's exactly what she did. She focused on accepting the deaths, so others could add closer to the loss of their loved ones.