Maya Lin and Her Impact on the Landscape Architecture Community

When thinking about relevant landscape architects, the name Maya Lin always comes to mind. Even though many refer to her as an architect or artist, Lin’s ability to design her projects to interact with viewers and assimilate into the area where they are situated undoubtedly make her a landscape architect. Whether creating projects within natural and built environments or public and private settings, Lin’s designs speak to the viewer in a fashion that few landscape architects can. Each of Lin’s projects offer a certain timeless feel that each say so much, yet simultaneously having little to no description. Like many landscape architects, Lin is incredibly influenced by natural patterns found in landscapes such as rock formations and water flow. These patterns help bring the viewer close to nature, while not making it the centerpiece of the project. Lin also states that she is deeply influenced by various parts of Asian culture such as zen gardens and minimalist art. The use of culture in her projects allowed Lin to find herself and choose what values she wanted to represent in her pieces. Maya Lin’s projects have not only changed how we as landscape architects approach monuments or public art, but have also changed how we define ourselves through pivotal moments in our history.

In an effort to start a life free from a totalitarian Chinese government, Maya Lin’s family arrived to the United States in the year 1948 and she was born on October 5th, 1959 in Athens, Ohio. Lin comes from a family filled with artists, as her father was an accomplished ceramist, her mother a renowned poet and her great aunt was Lin Hulyin, who is recognized as China’s first female architect. Lin started learning at Yale University and like many landscape architects, she began pursuing a bachelor of arts degree. But during Lin’s senior year, a unique proposition arose when a design competition for the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington D.C. had began. Lin went on to win 1st place in the contest, meaning that her design would be built. Her design was was incredibly controversial at first, but would later be considered one of the most important in the United States. After the memorial was dedicated, Lin would return to college life and went Harvard University to pursue a master’s in architecture. She would leave Harvard to work for an architecture firm in Boston, only to return to Yale University and received her masters in 1988.

1 Maya Lin and the 1960s: Monuments, Time Lines, and Minimalism Author(s): Daniel Abramson
Source: Critical Inquiry, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Summer, 1996), pp. 684
Shortly after, Lin began her own firm in New York City in 1988 and began creating projects that shine light on the social problems within American society such as war, racism, and gender equality. In light of this, I have chosen to focus on the three of Maya Lin’s projects that deal with these issues, them being the previously mentioned Vietnam War Memorial, the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama and Women’s Table on the campus of Yale University.

Not only did the Vietnam War Memorial change the design of memorials today, it changed how we remember the treacherous memories of war. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund Inc. raised 8.4 million dollars to create the memorial and it was unveiled on Veterans Day 1982. Figure 1. shows Lin’s proposal that was sent 1981. Much like war, the monument casts a scar within the land, featuring two 247 long polished black granite walls that rise from the ground and meet to form a V. What the V stands for has only added to the mystique of the memorial, with some saying that it stands for Vietnam, others believing that it stands for veterans and some suggesting that it stands for victory. Each of the walls point to two other iconic memorials in Washington D.C., one being the Lincoln Memorial and the other being the George Washington Memorial. This artistic decision also causes the viewer to question how war has shaped the United States. On each of the granite walls, the names of 57,000 men and women who were either killed or missing in action are listed in chronological order. When looking at the walls, the viewer can see his or her own reflection, making them question how the war has changed their lives. The large controversy of the memorial was due to the fact that it turned away from the heroic side of war and more to the abstract or confusion behind it. To gratify the requests of those opposed to the memorial, a statue featuring 3 soldiers was placed near the wall, but far enough to not take away Lin’s artistic message. The controversy soon died down as the general public began to realize the painstaking questions the memorial asks.

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2 Public Things in the Modern City: Belated Notes on "Tilted Arc" and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial  
Author(s): D. S. Friedman  
Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd. on behalf of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture, Inc.
Figure 1: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maya_Lin#/media/File:MayaLinsubmission.jpg

Source: Library of Congress, Manuscripts Division, Records of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, container 89.
The Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama was Lin’s first as an independent landscape architect and is considered her second most recognized piece behind the Vietnam War Memorial. The Civil Rights Memorial was sponsored by the Southern Poverty Law Center and was erected on November 5th, 1989. The project features two points of focus, a granite wall that features a quote by Dr. Martin Luther King where he says ““We will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream” and a fountain with 40 names of civil rights activists and the dates of when they were assassinated. Both the fountain and the wall have a film of water that smoothly runs over the surface and drips to the base. Water obviously plays a large role in the monument as not only does it offer a similar experience like the reflection of the granite wall on the Vietnam War Memorial, but with the soothing sound of water dripping to the floor, the viewer can see that peace and harmony have the ability to lead to a change in thinking.³

³ Reproducing Civil Rights Tactics: The Rhetorical Performances of the Civil Rights Memorial Author(s): Carole Blair and Neil Michel
Source: Rhetoric Society Quarterly, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Spring, 2000), pp. 42
Lastly, Women’s table is a monument on Yale Campus that pays tribute to the presence of women at the elite institution. Even though it is Lin’s least known piece, the memorial displays the beginning Lin’s progression as an artist and the feminist values she portrays in her other pieces. The memorial was dedicated in 1993 by the University to recognize a 20 year anniversary of admitting women to the university and cost 400,000 dollars. Much like the fountain in the civil rights memorial, the fountain has a circular top with a spiral made up of the number of women enrolled in the university during different time periods. Of the three pieces
discussed, Women’s table is Lin’s most abstract, with no explanation for what the numbers stand for. The use of water is pivotal as it draws the audience in and like the previous pieces, gives a reflection of the viewer, allowing them to think about what they stand for and how they have been affected by gender inequality.

Source: Critical Inquiry, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Summer, 1996), pg. 705

There are two components that unite these three projects and that is the use of time and reflection. Regarding reflection, the use of spotless black granite or water serve as a mirror, allowing the viewer to see themselves when they look at the monument. When doing so, the viewer can see who they truly are and what they stand for. As for time, each of the projects show the audience when certain events happening, giving them a window into how the past shapes the world we live in today. The beauty of Lin’s projects is their ability to be interactive.

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4 Maya Lin and the 1960s: Monuments, Time Lines, and Minimalism
Author(s): Daniel Abramson
Source: Critical Inquiry, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Summer, 1996), pp. 684
and intimate with the viewer. By using minimalist artistic values, the pieces become whatever the viewer wants them to be. Even though Lin’s projects are visually stunning and have changed the way we honor memories, not everyone loves her work. Critics of Lin seem to believe that there is very little development in her artistic styles. Of the three projects presented, critics argue that the Civil Rights Memorial and Women’s Table are almost identical. I on the other hand see this as something positive. Studying Lin’s work has shown me that designs can be versatile and certain details in one project can be borrowed and used in a totally different project.