

The Evolution of War Memorial Design

BY STEVEN ROSEN - JULY 28TH, 2010 - THE BIG PICTURE



A couple Saturdays ago, I went on an Architectural Foundation of Cincinnati-sponsored excursion to Columbus, Ind., a city just 90 minutes away that has developed an international reputation for its Modernist architecture. Besides the buildings, I was particularly moved by the Bartholomew County Memorial for Veterans in the city's downtown. Constructed in 1997, it smartly reflects lessons learned about veterans'/war memorials in the years since Maya Lin's landmark Vietnam Veterans Memorial was dedicated in Washington in 1982. Further, it is the work of architects.

As it turns out, a Cincinnati native, Maryann Thompson, designed Columbus' memorial with her then-husband and partner, Charles Rose, after winning a competition. Now based in Cambridge, where she has her own firm and is an adjunct professor

at Harvard's Graduate School of Design, she grew up in Wyoming and, after her parents moved to Indian Hill when she was in 10th grade, graduated from Seven Hills School.

She was a finalist for the Art Academy's redesign of an old Over-the-Rhine structure into its school and has been contacted by Playhouse in the Park about a (now-apparently stalled) expansion, but this is her closest project.

The memorial features 25 limestone pillars arranged close enough together in courthouse square to form a kind of stone grove — a sanctuary — that envelopes you once inside.

The purpose was to remember the 156 county veterans who died during 20th-century wars as a new century was about to begin.

The veterans' names are part of the memorial. But what is so emotionally powerful is that the pillars have been carved with passages from the letters and journals the soldiers sent home, sometimes just days before their death. Or, in some cases, it features military notices to a family about a son missing or killed in action. This is a silent memorial, a remembrance of the deceased, but it also approximates a living, oral history. You can hear those soldiers talking as you read their letters home.

Though a spiritual cousin, this differs from Lin's Vietnam memorial in not making the architecture so subtly part of the landscape. But Thompson and Rose are not seeking to fill up space with ostentatious monumentality and outdated heroic figuration, a trait of older war memorials. Rather, they take advantage of verticality to tell stories and infuse the limestone with humanity.

When Lin (a native of Athens, Ohio, by the way) finished her Vietnam Memorial in 1982, it was a real game-changer. Non-representational in nature, it consists of a black-granite wall containing the names of those veterans who died. Certainly after the disastrous Vietnam War a new kind of memorial was needed. By the 1980s, we sensed the modern war experience is at least as much about loss and remembrance as victory. Lin's work captured that. And nothing has happened since to change that view. After her accomplishment — and the powerfully enthusiastic public response to it, especially from Vietnam veterans — more traditional representational-realism statuary no longer rang very true. (Regrettably, not everyone learned that lesson. An unfortunate example is the circle of life-size soldiers that are part of Blue Ash's literal-minded and excessive 1991 Bicentennial Veterans Memorial.)

Coincidentally, on the bus trip home from Columbus a movie played about the making of Lin's Vietnam memorial. It told how the process wasn't easy for her — those afraid of change or who feared her wall might be disrespectful fought hard and won some changes. But history was on her side and you can see that, on a smaller scale, in the Bartholomew County Memorial for Veterans. It's worth a visit to Columbus in its own right.