

## The Construct of Remembrance

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Universities have a long-standing tradition of commemorating their students who have died during military service. The strand that connects those remembered is their tie to the university. This association supersedes all distinctions among the dead or the significance of the specific event in which they died. With their new Veterans Memorial, Northeastern University honors nearly 300 students over a 100-year period and, as of now, five different conflicts.



Up until the late 20th century, memorials often employed iconic figures and/or imagery to convey their message. Their use of symbols, such as statues and obelisks, allowed viewers to readily absorb meaning. The Northeastern University Veterans Memorial, however, participates in the on-

going exploration, launched by Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial, that challenges these iconic forms and supplants them with abstraction and space-making strategies.

Multiplicity of space and interpretations of symbols serve as the basis for the NEU Veterans Memorial.





The site is organized by three parallel elements, two spatial and one vertical: a contemplative garden, a public plaza and a black granite wall. As a spatial device, the black granite wall acts both as a peripheral element in the public plaza (as edge) and as the focal point in the contemplative garden (as center). To connote the official and vernacular memory of conflicts, iconic symbols are employed on both sides of the wall. Symbols are abstracted and appropriated for different representations and meanings.

A mural depicting iconographic images of twentieth century military conflicts, representing the official memory conveyed by the memorial, is laser etched onto the public side of the wall. Depicted are the various branches of the military, technological advances, the roles of men and women as well as racial diversity within the services. The vernacular memory is conveyed on the contemplative garden side. Here specific information about each fallen NEU soldier is etched onto individual stainless steel plates recalling the dog tags worn by military personnel. 279 of these plates are hung in ordered rows within a field. In addition, the stars and stripes of the US flag are abstracted onto the ground plane of the contemplative garden. These abstractions provide meaning to the architectural elements that aesthetically and compositionally tie the memorial together.

Until Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial, the recalling and commemorating of individual names as the representative memory on a memorial had not reached

a level of significant national stature. However, she was inspired by a war memorial at Yale University in Woolsey Hall in which individual soldiers' names were inscribed on the walls. The names honored each individual sacrifice as opposed to the collective sacrifice of all soldiers in a single event or place. Maya Lin recalls this memorial: "The power of a name was very much with me at the time... I had never been able to resist touching the cut into these marble walls, and no matter how busy or crowded the place is, a sense of quiet, a reverence, always surrounds those names...I think that it left a lasting impression on me...the sense of the power of a name."

Contemporary memorials often rely on this power of names to convey the individuality of the dead: someone's brother, wife, son. However, when familial connections to these names are not present, do memorials become less meaningful? To maintain the significance of the NEU Veterans Memorial, a construct of information about each soldier provides each new generation of students an opportunity to make connections to these fallen soldiers.

The identity of each Northeastern student, who sacrificed his or her life, is etched on a 4"x 6" stainless steel plate. The dog tag, embedded with history, was the precedent for this system of commemorating. Contemporary dog tags, worn around the neck of soldiers, identify the name, rank, ID number, blood type and religious preference of the soldier. This is crucial information when risk of in-

jury and death are present. However, in the context of Northeastern University, personal information about each soldier, such as academic major, age, and the soldier's hometown, is likely to be more important in bridging time. Even a common birthday might link current students with a soldier. This construct of data creates a sense of timelessness allowing visitors of all generations to connect with the lost. The dead become more than soldiers; they become classmates, colleagues, neighbors, and heroes. The size, weight and material of the plates were chosen relative to the scale of the human hand and tactile considerations. Each plate can be individually lifted allowing for an intimate interaction between the living and the dead.



The NEU Veterans Memorial connects all soldiers across all conflicts by placing the transformed dog tags randomly within a matrix. This arrangement promotes a search that reveals the commonality among all the names. The fact that someone was killed in 1917, 1945, 1951, 1970 or 2005 is not as important as the unity of their sacrifice and the accumulation of the loss for the community. The dog tags, seen as a field within the black granite wall, collectively reflect the mutual bond soldiers develop in times of war. Within this field a series of 100 voids recall and anticipate the unfortunate inevitability of future death.

The Northeastern University Veterans Memorial participates in the re-imagining of the traditional roles of memorials, supplanting iconic forms with space making strategies and abstraction. The design embraces the multiplicity of readings found in spatial memorials over the single reading of the statue memorial while simultaneously reinterpreting symbols to convey meaning and to commemorate the fallen. This design suggests that through the appropriation of symbols, meaning and intention can be embedded simultaneously within a war memorial: individual and collective, formal and informal, official and vernacular, heroic and tragic.





(Text slightly modified from *Memorializing: The Northeastern University Veterans Memorial*. *Journal of Architectural Education*, Volume 62, Number 1, September 2008, pg 4-10.)