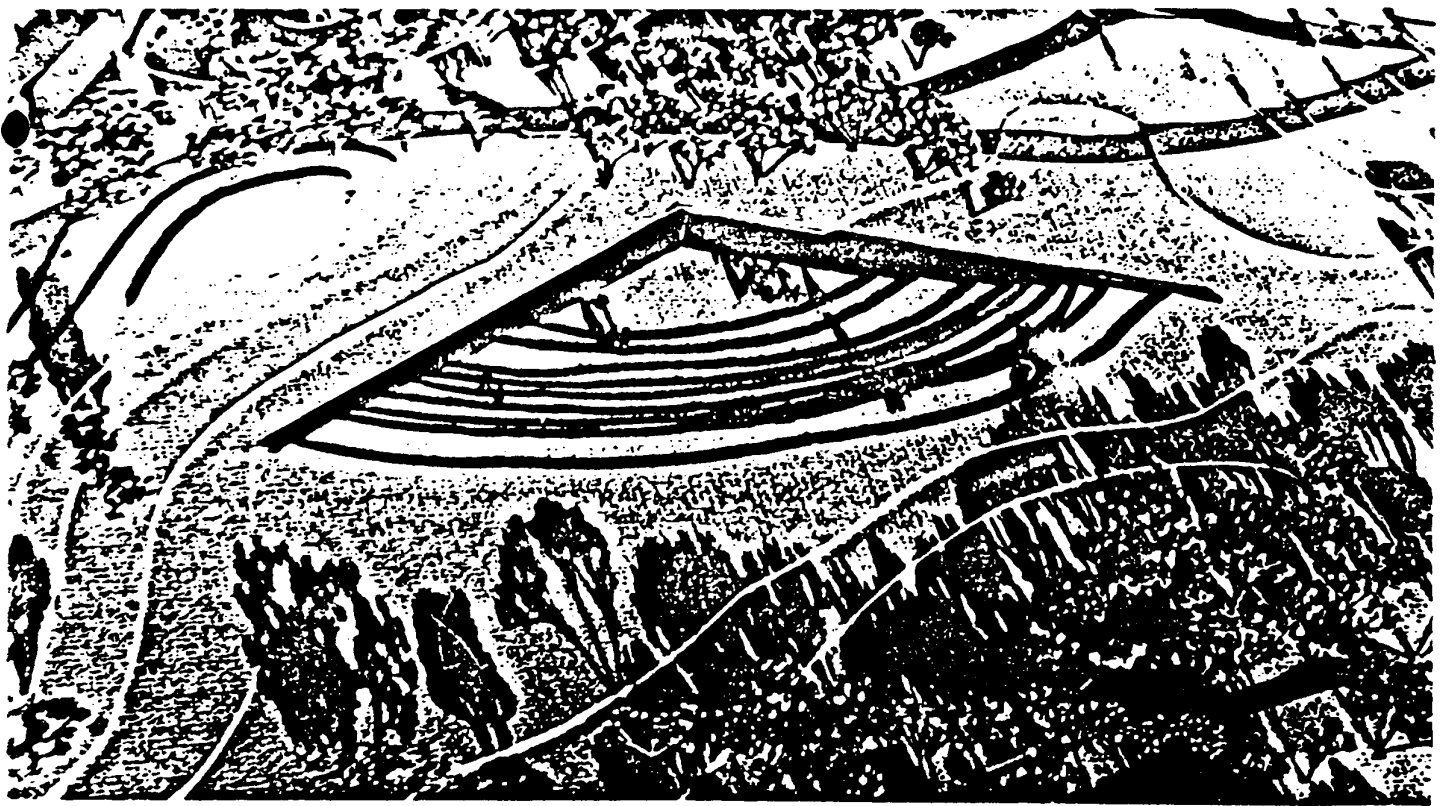


THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL

a description of the design concept



The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund Inc  
Washington D.C.  
June 5, 1981

## INTRODUCTION

This report describes the design concept of the proposed Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The site of the proposed memorial is in the western end of Constitution Gardens, near the Lincoln Memorial.

The sponsor of this memorial is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF), a private, non-profit corporation, founded and directed by Vietnam veterans. The sole purpose of the VVMF is the creation of a suitable memorial to those who served and died in the Vietnam war. The memorial is to recognize them and honor their memory. The memorial is not to be a political expression, neither supporting nor challenging the nation's actions regarding the Vietnam war. The memorial is envisioned, however, as a gesture towards reconciliation, an attempt to put the war in historic perspective by honoring those who upheld a tradition of national service.

This is a most difficult task, one without exact historical precedent. The challenge of creating an appropriate memorial, a work of art that can stand alongside our other national memorials, required the most assiduous design exercise.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund believes that it has a highly appropriate design, and it presents it in concept form to those agencies of the Federal government which are responsible for its review and approval.

## BACKGROUND of the VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL EFFORT

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund was established in April, 1979, its purpose being the creation of a suitable memorial to those Americans who served and died in the Vietnam war.

A little more than a year later, on July 1, 1980, President Carter signed into law Joint Resolution 119. This became Public Law 96-297 which authorized the use of a site of approximately two acres in Constitution Gardens, in Washington, D.C. The cost of building the memorial is to be financed by the VVMF with funds raised through private contributions. To date the VVMF has raised over \$ 1.7 million from more than 70,000 donors.

The Joint Resolution had been co-sponsored by all 100 members of the United States Senate, and nearly two hundred members of the United States House of Representatives. It was adopted unanimously by both Houses.

The design is subject to the approval of: the National Park Service (which is advised by a Memorial Advisory Committee); the National Capital Planning Commission (with the recommendation of the Joint Committee on Landmarks); and the Commission of Fine Arts.

## THE NATIONAL DESIGN COMPETITION

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund decided that the question of an appropriate design for the memorial was one which all American designers should have the opportunity to address. Accordingly, the VVMF decided to hold a national, open design competition. All American citizens, eighteen years of age or older, were eligible to compete.

Preparation for the competition began in the summer of 1980. The competition was announced formally in October, 1981. Over 5,000 inquiries regarding the competition were received. They came from all parts of the nation, including some overseas territories. They represented every state in the Union, every design field, and designers of all ages and professional positions.

To all those who inquired the VVMF sent a booklet containing a complete description of the competition, the competition rules, the purpose and philosophy of the memorial, the names of the jurors, and the list of prizes to be awarded. The booklet also contained official registration forms -- for individual or team competitors. The deadline for registration was December 29, 1980.

A total of 2,573 individuals and teams registered for the competition. In early January, 1981, all registrants were sent a booklet of detailed information regarding the design program. It included photographs of the site, maps of the Mall and the site area itself, and other technical design data. The competitors had three months in which to do their design work, the designs being due by midnight, March 31, 1981. During the three-month design process, competitors had the opportunity to ask any questions regarding the project. The questions, and the answers to them, were published and distributed to all the competitors in mid-February, 1981. Honoring the proven procedures of design competitions, all designs were submitted without visible indication of authorship, so that they could be judged anonymously, on their design merits alone.

Of the 2,573 registered competitors (individuals and teams) 1,421 submitted designs. This response was unprecedented historically. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Design Competition now stands as a record with respect to the number of competitors participating. For its type -- an open competition for a project intended to be constructed -- it is the largest ever held in the United States and, to our best knowledge, in the world.

The competition designs were so great in number that a large aircraft hangar was required to display all of them for the selection jury. The 1,421 designs constituted about 1 1/3 linear miles of display.

They were judged by an eight-person jury during a one week period, from April 27 to May 1, 1981.

## THE DESIGN COMPETITION JURY

The eight-person jury consisted of two architects, two landscape architects, three sculptors, and one design journalist. They were assisted by a professional advisor, who served during the entire competition process. These persons were:

architects:	Fietro Belluschi	Portland, Oregon
	Harry M Weese	Chicago, Illinois
landscape architects:	Hideo Sasaki	Berkeley, California
	Garrett Eckbo	San Francisco, California
sculptors:	Richard H Hunt	Chicago, Illinois
	Costantino Nivola	East Hampton, New York
	James Rosati	New York City, New York
journalist:	Grady Clay	Louisville, Kentucky
professional advisor:	Paul D Spreiregen	Washington, D.C.

The jury members and the professional advisor were selected on the basis of their demonstrated expertise and experience in design evaluation and the competition method.

The jury was asked to select a design which, in their view, best met the following criteria:

1. ... a design which would best recognize and honor the memory of those Americans who served and died in the Vietnam War.
2. ... a design of the highest artistic merit.
3. ... a design without political connotation.
4. ... a design which would be harmonious with its site, including visual harmony with the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial.
5. ... a design with a suitable "presence", neither too commanding nor too deferential; a design that could take its place in the historic continuity of our national art.
6. ... a design that would be consistent with the objectives of the agencies responsible for its review.
7. ... a design that could be built within a "target budget" of \$ 3 million.
8. ... a design which would be buildable, durable, and without unusual maintenance requirements.

These criteria were a reiteration of the program from which all the competitors worked.

The jury's selection was unanimous. It was the work of a 21-year old architectural undergraduate of Yale University, Miss Maya Ying Lin.

The jury reported its decision in the following statement:

REPORT  
of the  
VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL  
DESIGN COMPETITION

The jury for the Vietnam Memorial Design Competition finds Entry Number 1026 the finest and most appropriate of the 1420 entries submitted. We recommend to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund that it be built on this site.

Of all the proposals submitted, this most clearly meets the spirit and formal requirements of the program. It is contemplative and reflective. It is superbly harmonious with its site, and yet frees the visitors from the noise and traffic of the surrounding city. Its open nature will encourage access in all occasions, at all hours, without barriers. Its siting and materials are simple and forthright.

This memorial with its wall of names, becomes a place of quiet reflection, and a tribute to those who served their nation in difficult times. All who come here can find it a place of healing. This will be a quiet memorial, one that achieves an excellent relationship with both the Lincoln Memorial or Washington Monument, and relates the visitor to them. It is uniquely horizontal, entering the earth rather than piercing the sky.

This is very much a memorial of our own times, one that could not have been achieved in another time and place. The designer has created an eloquent place where the simple meeting of earth, sky and remembered names contain messages for all who will know this place.

Agreed, 11:25 A.M., May 1, 1981

Pietro Belluschi

*Pietro Belluschi*

Grady Clay

*Grady Clay*

Garrett Eckbo

*Garrett Eckbo*

Richard H. Hunt

*Richard H. Hunt*

Costantino Nivola

*Costantino Nivola*

James Rosati

*James Rosati*

Hideo Sasaki

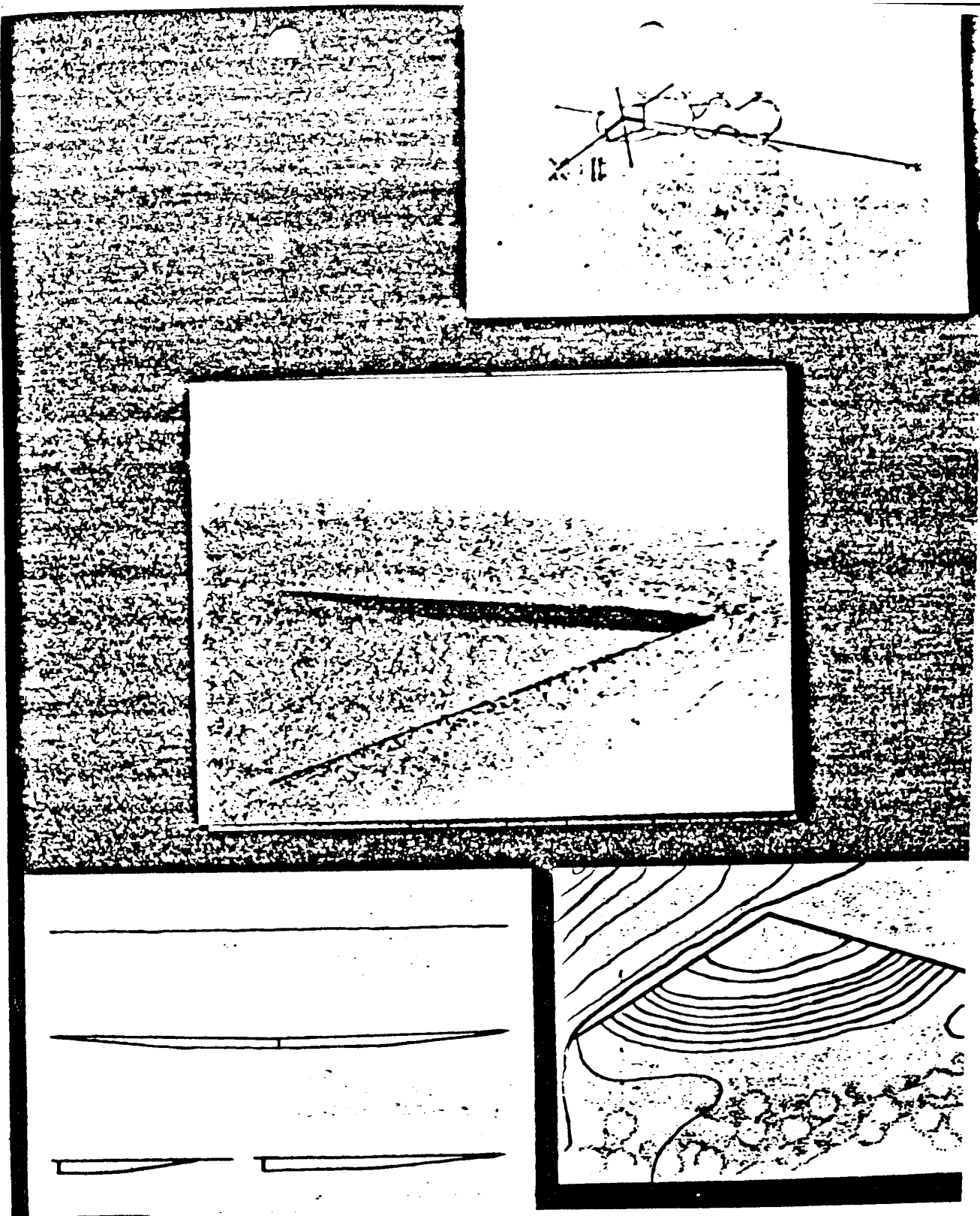
*Hideo Sasaki*

Harry M. Weese

*Harry M. Weese*

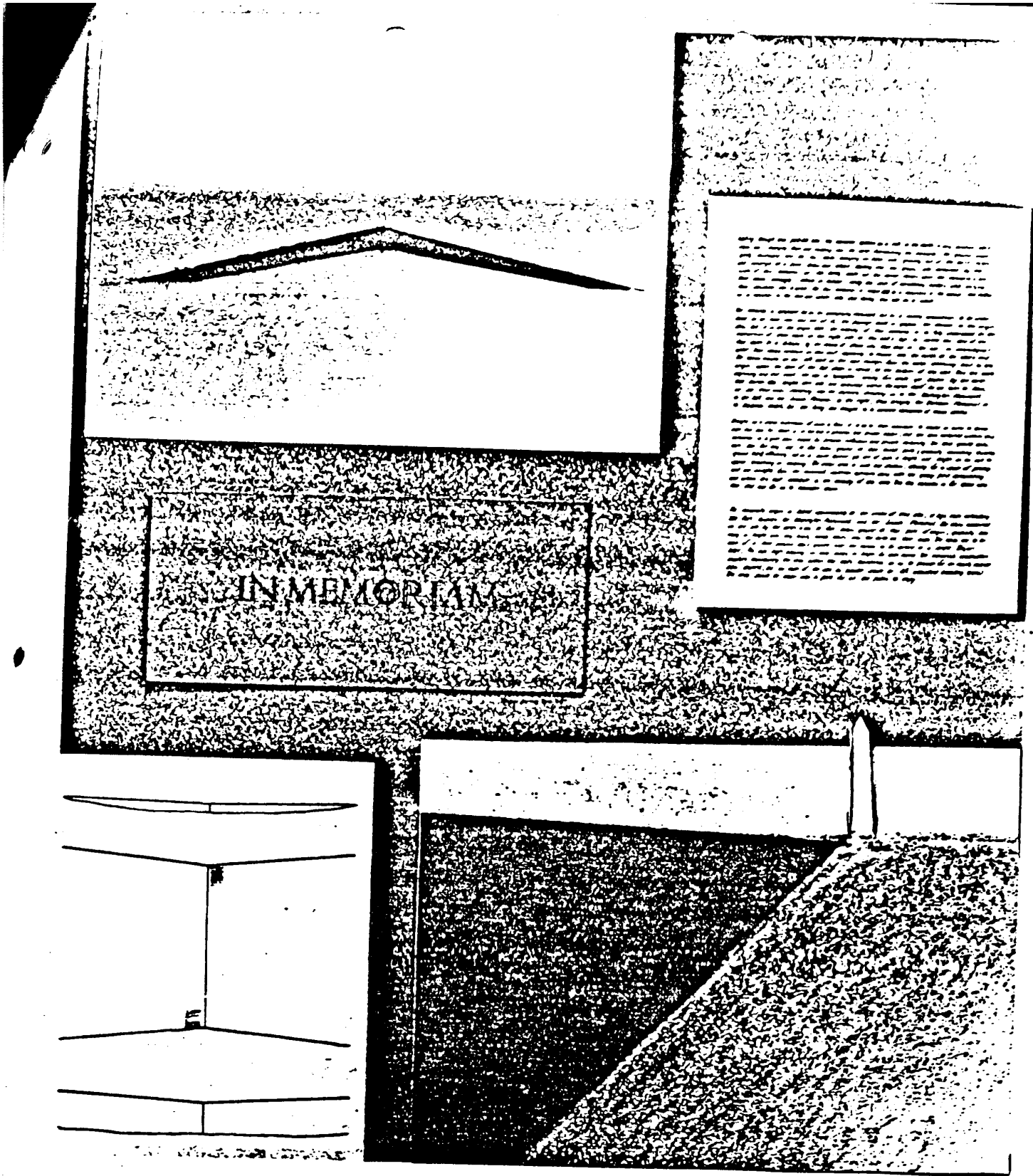
Paul Spreiregen  
Professional Advisor

*Paul Spreiregen*



**PANEL 1 of the Proposed Design, by Maya Ying Lin (Competition Drawing**

top right      Site Location Plan  
 center        Concept Sketch  
 bottom left   Elevations and Sections  
 bottom right   Plan (with 2-foot contour intervals)



PANEL 2 of the Proposed Design, by Maya Ying Lin (Competition Drawing)

- top left            Concept Sketch
- center left       Lettering Sample
- center right      Explanatory Text
- bottom left       Placement of Names
- bottom right      Comparison (Viewed with the Washington Monument)



## THE WINNING DESIGN

The design selected by the jury is the essence of simplicity. Its simplicity, however, belies an extraordinary artistic subtlety. Before discussing that, a physical description of the memorial is in order.

Maya Lin's design, physically, is a rift in the earth. This rift is formed by two walls, each 200 feet long, meeting at an angle of about 130-degrees, and forming an open wedge or echelon shape, in plan.

The tops of the walls are level with the nearly flat meadow site. Inside the wedge, the meadow slopes gently downward, reaching a maximum depth of ten feet into the earth. This depth occurs at the intersection of the two long walls.

While the tops of the walls are level with the open meadow, their bottom edges slope gently downward. The end points of the two walls begin at meadow level, and gradually increase until they achieve their full ten-foot height, at the 130-degree intersection. Thus each of the walls, in elevation, appear as elongated wedges, 200-feet long, 10-feet at their high point.

The orientation of the walls is of great importance. One of the walls is oriented towards the Washington Monument; the other towards the Lincoln Memorial. Thus the wedge space opens to the south, to the sunlight.

The walls are proposed to be made of a polished black granite. The names of the 57,692 Americans who died and who remain unaccounted for are to be inscribed in the granite walls, in chronological order.

The ground surface is to be grass, at meadow level as well as within the wedge space. The memorial assumes the most modest possible presence in the site. It will not obscure vistas of the Washington Monument or the Lincoln Memorial. It will not alter the appearance or character of Constitution Gardens.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial will be experienced in a very personal, reflective, and meditative way. Visitors will come to see it only when they have come upon it, in its meadow site. As they experience it, however, they will do so in the visual and spiritual presence of two of the major memorials on the mall -- the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. Thus, the proposed design offers the most private and reflective kind of experience, but in the atmosphere of larger and older national symbols. The proposed memorial, while a thing in itself, is not a thing apart.

## MAYA YING LIN'S DESIGN DESCRIPTION

Miss Lin's design illustrations were simple, direct, and clear. One of her two illustration panels contained the following description of her design. In her words...

"Walking through this park area, the memorial appears as a rift in the earth -- a long, polished black stone wall, emerging from and receding into the earth. Approaching the memorial, the ground slopes gently downward and the low walls emerging on either side, growing out of the earth, extend and converge at a point below and ahead. Walking into the grassy site contained by the walls of this memorial we can barely make out the carved names upon the memorial walls. These names, seemingly infinite in number, convey the sense of overwhelming numbers, while unifying those individuals into a whole. For this memorial is meant not as a monument to the individual, but rather as a memorial to the men and women who died during this war, as a whole.

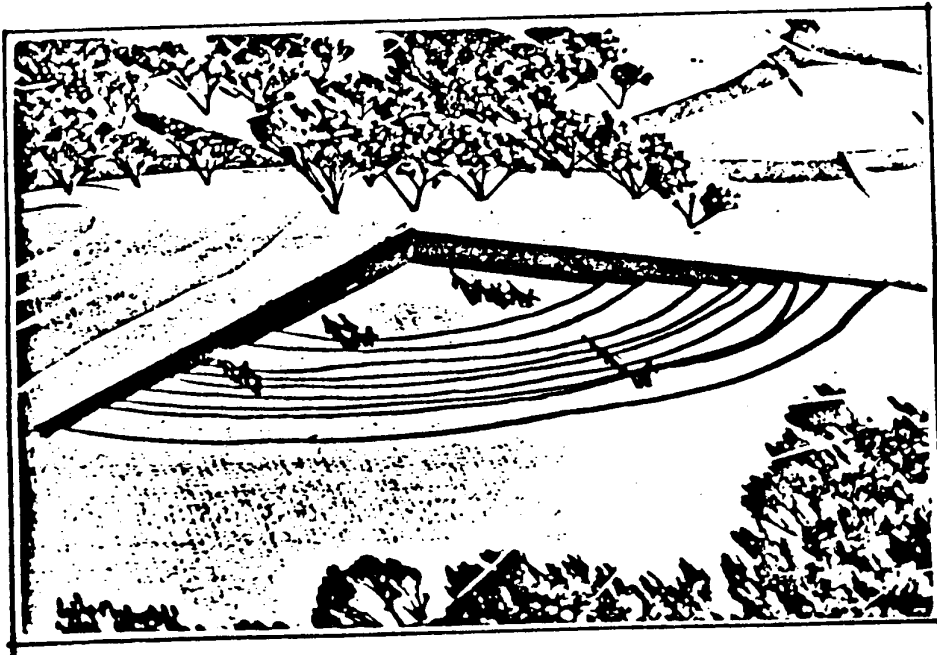
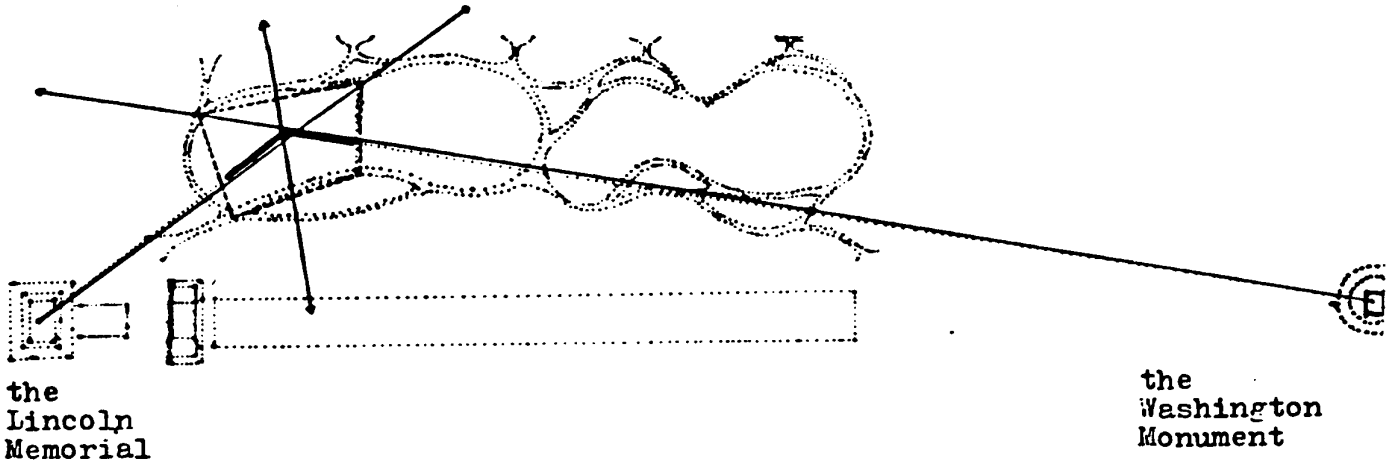
"The memorial is composed not as an unchanging monument, but as a moving composition, to be understood as we move into and out of it; the passage itself is gradual, the descent to the origin slow, but it is at the origin that the meaning of this memorial is to be fully understood. At the intersection of these walls, on the right side, at the wall's top, is carved the date of the first death. It is followed by the names of those who have died in the war, in chronological order. These names continue on this wall, appearing to recede into the earth at the wall's end. The names resume on the left wall, as the wall emerges from the earth, continuing back to the origin, where the date of the last death is carved, at the bottom of this wall. Thus the war's beginning and end meet; the war is 'complete', coming full circle, yet broken by the earth that bounds the angle's open side, and contained within the earth itself. As we turn to leave, we see these walls stretching into the distance, directing us to the Washington Monument, to the left, and the Lincoln Memorial to the right, thus bringing the Vietnam Memorial into historical context. We the living are brought to a concrete realization of these deaths.

"Brought to a sharp awareness of such a loss, it is up to each individual to resolve or come to terms with this loss. For death is in the end a personal and private matter and the area contained within this memorial is a quiet place, meant for personal reflection and private reckoning. The black granite walls, each 200 feet long and 10 feet below ground at their lowest point (gradually ascending toward ground level) effectively act as a sound barrier, yet are of such a height and length so as not to appear threatening or enclosing. The actual area is wide and shallow, allowing for a sense of privacy, and the sunlight from the memorial's southern exposure along with the grassy park surrounding and within its wall, contribute to the serenity of the area. Thus this memorial is for those who have died, and for us to remember.

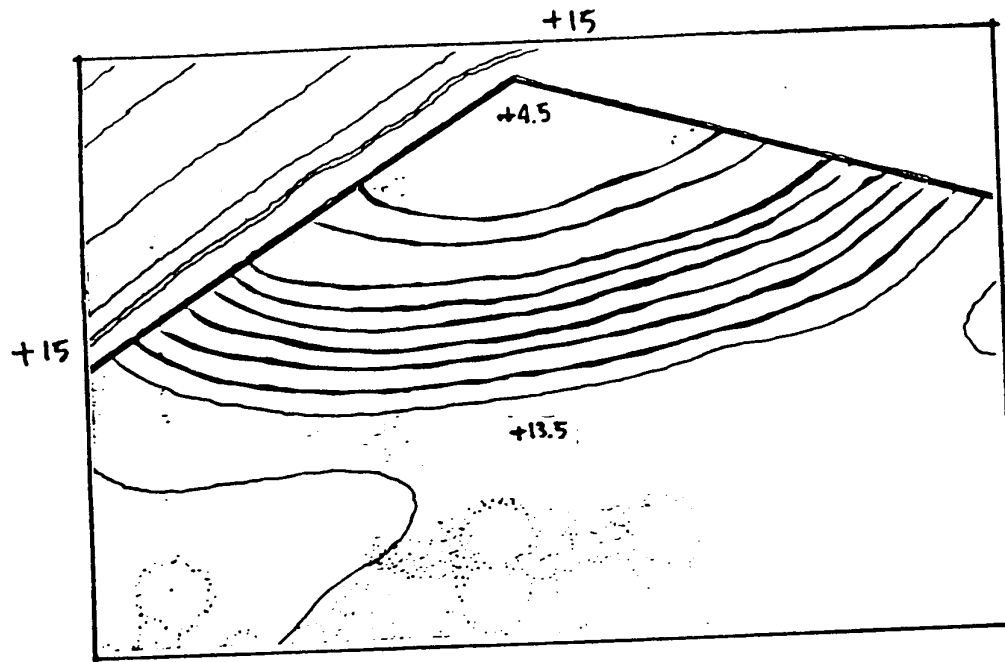
"The memorial's origin is located approximately at the center of this site; its legs each extending 200 feet towards the Washington Monument

and the Lincoln Memorial. The walls, contained on one side by earth, are 10 feet below ground at their point of origin, gradually lessening in height, until they finally recede totally into the earth at their ends. The walls are to be made of a hard, polished black granite, with the names to be carved in a simple Trajan letter,  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch high, allowing nine inches in length for each name. The memorial's construction involves recontouring the area within the wall's boundaries so as to provide for an easily accessible descent, but as much of the site as possible should be left untouched (including trees). The area will remain as a park for all to enjoy."

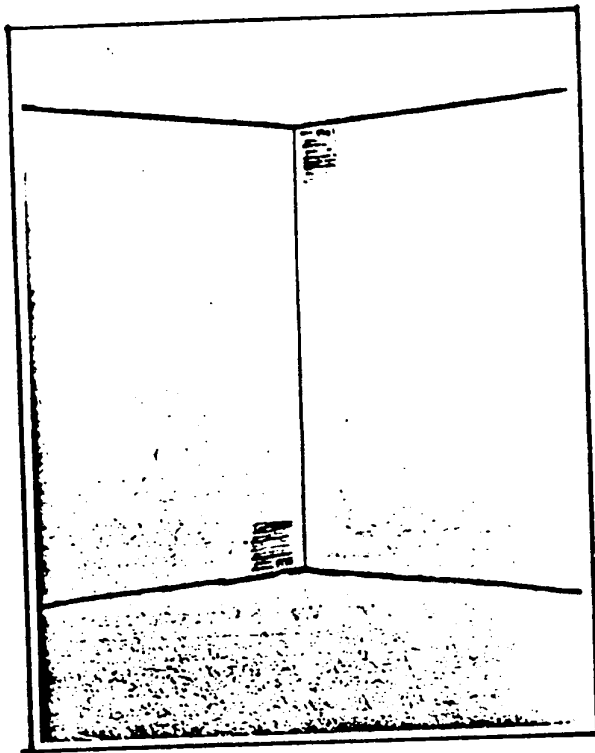
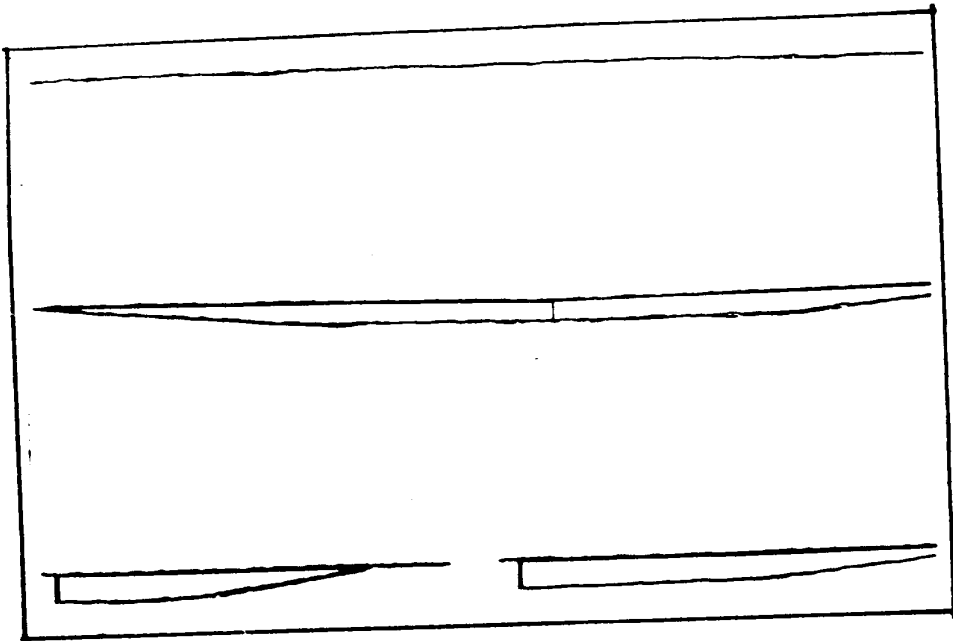
Constitution  
Gardens



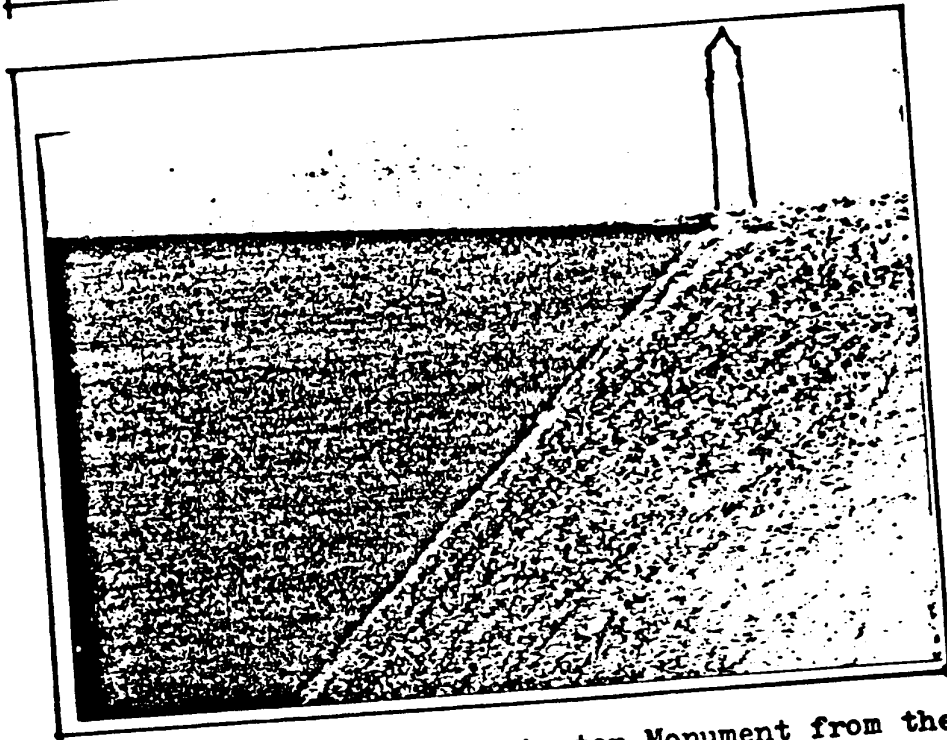
top Site Plan of Constitution Gardens and the Mall area, showing  
the orientation of the 200-foot walls of the proposed memorial  
with the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial.  
bottom Study Model of the proposed memorial.



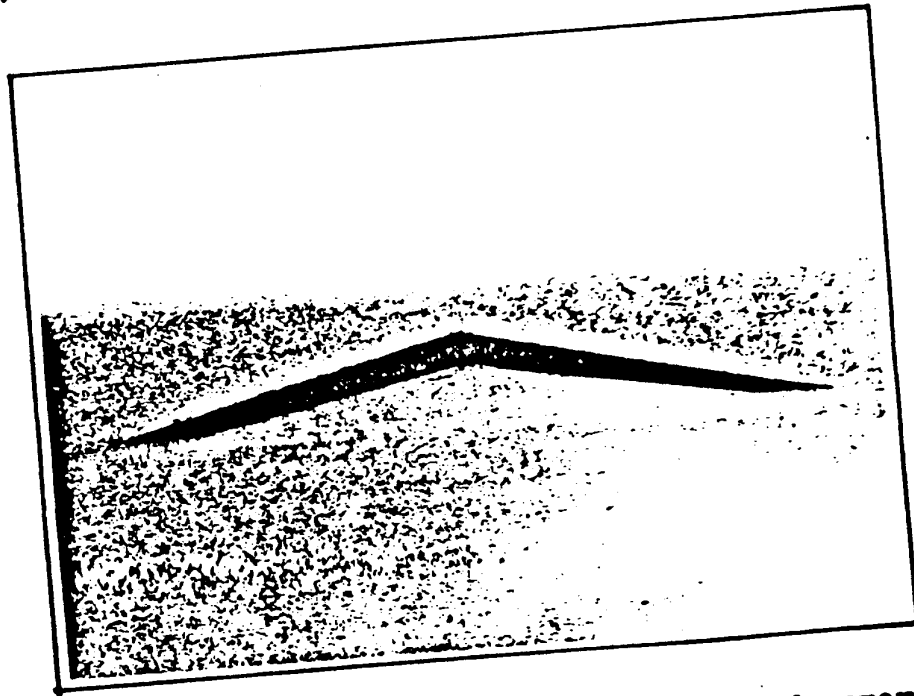
top Plan of the proposed memorial. The contour intervals  
 are 1-foot.  
 bottom Study Model. The precise location of the walls is a  
 matter of design refinement.



top Elevations and Sections. Starting at the upper right  
 bottom Placement of the Names. wall, at the center, the names begin in chronological  
 order. The names end at the lower left wall, at the  
 center.



top View of the Washington Monument from the site of the proposed memorial, looking eastward.  
bottom Concept sketch of the wall of the proposed memorial which is oriented towards the Washington Monument.



top View of the site of the proposed memorial, looking westward. The site area is the meadow on the far of the tree groups.

bottom Concept sketch of the proposed memorial. It is a slight rift in a meadow.



## JURY COMMENTS

The jury's reasons for selecting this design are particularly illuminating. The jury's deliberations were most searching. Below are a series of remarks made by the jurors during their final deliberations, as noted by Grady Clay, who served as Jury Chairman.

"The program say 'reflective and meditative'... therefore it can't be assertive or competitive... it probably has to be horizontal... with no verticals...

"I began to look for a simple solution, of serenity, without conflict...

"If it's too simple it ceases being a memorial... it must have an appropriate sense of itself, an identity...

"There has to be some degree of expression of human tragedy...

"The wall that blocks out the car noise is essential to serenity...

"Many people will not comprehend this design until they experience it...

"It will be a better memorial if it's not entirely understood at first..

"The National Park Service said that a large water element was not desired. The Reflecting Pool and the Constitution Gardens pool is more than enough water in this area...

"Vandalism and maintenance is a big factor...

"A 'minimalist' work would be evocative here... everyone sees and feels what they want to feel in 'minimalist' art... you bring and receive what you are prepared to...

"The National Capital Planning Commission doesn't want a 'building'...

"The design has to belong to this place... if it could be built anywhere else it's the wrong design...

"The memorial should look at death and at life, but forward to life...

"90% of the memorial is already 'done' -- the setting... any new presence should be modestly contrapuntal...

"The design should depend on its setting... it shouldn't be able to exist on its own...

"Washington is a city of white memorials, rising... this is a dark memorial, receding...

"Great art is like an unfilled vessel into which you can pour your own meaning... each generation continues to do that... a great work of art is never complete and forever fresh...

"Confused times need simple forms..."

"It's a statement of quiet reverence..."

"In a heterogeneous culture, symbols don't work... they arrest thought rather than expand it..."

"While it is not a thing of joy it is a thing of hope, and of life..."

The jury chose a design which will stimulate thought rather than contain it. It is a design which does not glorify death or war, but rather utilizes the tragedy of death as a point of departure for expanded personal reflection.

Associated as it is with the older symbolic memorials of the Mall, the proposed Vietnam Veterans Memorial achieves one of the most difficult of the objectives sought. It is a gesture towards reconciliation.

## FURTHER DESIGN DEVELOPMENT

The design proposed is presented, at this stage, as a concept. Assuming that it is favorably received, as a concept, a number of areas of design and engineering refinement are to be addressed. These will include:

1. Subsoil foundation conditions.
2. Drainage.
3. Type of granite; granite finish; type of granite slabs.
4. Lettering layout and incision method.
5. Details of wall, including top.
6. Finish grading.
7. Handicapped access.
8. Trees -- removal or replanting, if needed.
9. Other identifying information.
10. Lighting considerations.  
etc.