

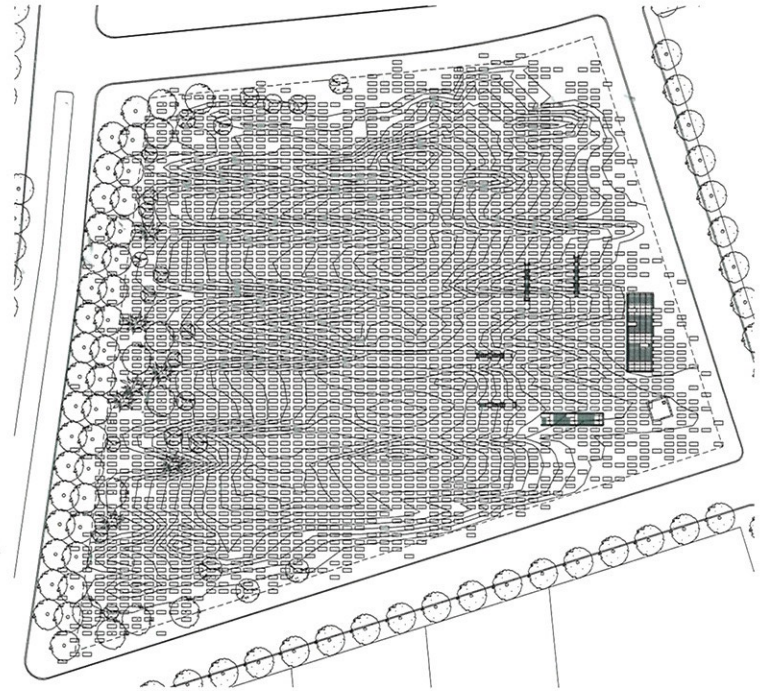
# Silent cities

From Kipling's Biblical phraseology to the 'Mountain of Remembrance' in Thailand, memorials commemorating the fallen have held a unique place in the public realm. But has the fear of offending anyone made it impossible to design anything with real emotional power, asks **Ben Stevens**



The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin and, right, a plan of the site

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Until the outbreak of the First World War, memorials were largely privately built. However, the sheer scale of slaughter in the Great War meant that a government-led approach was required. Sir Fabian Ware, who had been a British Red Cross mobile unit commander during the war, was committed to establishing a system to mark the graves of the fallen, particularly important as it had been decided early on not to repatriate any bodies to the UK. Thus the Imperial War Graves Commission (now called the Commonwealth War Graves Commission: CWGC) was created by Royal Charter on 21 May 1917.

Architects Sir Herbert Baker, Sir Reginald Blomfield and Sir Edwin Lutyens were appointed to design the cemeteries and memorials, and Rudyard Kipling, who lost his only son at the Battle of Loos in 1915, became its first literary adviser. It was he who chose the Biblical phrase 'Their name liveth for evermore' for use on Stones of

Remembrance, and the phrase 'Known unto God' for gravestones of unidentified servicemen.

The CWGC intended the cemeteries to offer a place of peace for mourners: "silent cities" as Kipling put it. To achieve this, the architects placed floriculture at the heart of their designs and consulted the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew on the requirements of various plants. Lutyens' longstanding working relationship with landscape designer Gertrude Jekyll meant her expertise was employed in transforming cemeteries into gardens of remembrance.

It wasn't until the 1960s that the Commission completed the cemeteries for both wars, by which time a strong sense of protectiveness towards the war memorials had developed. So when Crewe and Nantwich Borough Council decided last year to move a war memorial in Crewe town centre that had been there since 1924, it received a hostile reception from a vocal minority.

It was only after a public consultation and the establishment of a working group drawn from military veterans groups, that

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Gillespie's landscape architects were allowed to relocate the memorial from Market Square to the newly designed Municipal Square. This new civic space not only offers a setting of formal dignity, it also offers a more expansive space around it for the annual Remembrance Day service.

Add to this heightened public feeling, bureaucratic obstacles and conflicting political sensitivities and it is easy to see why designers of new memorials often retreat behind inoffensive, minimalist designs.

“Minimalism has come to be the language of universalism, which is deemed appropriate for monuments now that societies are afraid of being seen as exclusive,” argues Kieran Long, in his essay ‘The monument in the age of political correctness’ in *Icon* magazine. “But minimalism, while

contemplative and seemingly universal, fails to provide the meaningfulness necessary for a powerful monument.”

A case in point is the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin. During the 17 long years in its making, it had to deal with multiple location changes, resignations, political interference and – the most controversial aspect of all – the fact that a supplier of Zyklon B gas for the Nazi death camps had won the contract to graffiti-proof the memorial's slabs.

The memorial was finally unveiled to the world on 10 May 2005. Built in the shadow of the Reichstag and on the ruins of the centre of Nazi power, it comprises 2,711 sepulchral concrete pillars or stelae positioned in a subtly irregular way on a vast grid to form a wave-like progression across an

undulating site. With just 95cm between each stela, only one person can pass at a time, instilling a sense of isolation and disorientation.

The landscape architect for the project was Ölin Partnership, but the design lead came from New York architect Peter Eisenman. In the official guide to the memorial, he embraces minimalism: “In this monument, there is no goal, no end, no working one's way in or out. The duration of an individual's experience of it grants no further understanding, since understanding is impossible.”

Gunter Schlusche, planning co-ordinator of the memorial since 1996, also suggests that “the formal rigidity of the field of stelae corresponds to its wordlessness”. This potential for multiple interpretations is seen as a strength, but it also runs the risk of presenting a German response to the Holocaust that is ambiguous at best. Picking up on this point, Long suggests: “The need for an interpretation centre somehow brings into relief the profound silence of this non-representational visual language.”

Another controversial abstract memorial is Gustafson Porter's tribute to Diana, Princess of Wales in Hyde Park. Now hugely popular with the public, it initially faced technical problems, unfounded health and safety concerns and disproportionately hostile press criticism. Yet, last month, it was awarded an International Architecture Award by the Chicago Athenaeum: Museum of Architecture for its “truly elegant design”. Nevertheless, Long sees it as an exercise in empty minimalism: “This design foregrounds the visitor's psychological powers of reflection, rather than aspiring to teach them anything about the event itself. You sit there and look inside yourself, rather than interpreting a symbol provided by a sculptor.”



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1. Holocaust memorial, Berlin  
2. Crewe War Memorial



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“Memorial design is in crisis. Political correctness has shorn designers of their ability to make symbols that communicate”



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- 3. The minimalist approach for the Islington Green memorial
- 4. The Biblical quote chosen by Kipling, seen here at Runnymede
- 5. The Diana Memorial Fountain in London's Hyde Park

It is, however, the Islington Green war memorial by John Maine that incurs Long's wrath – and to his mind is the epitome of what is lacking in modern memorials. “Maine’s imagery is new-age hokum – some kind of abstract circle of life imagery. That a monument to the millions killed in two World Wars should try to evoke rebirth and continuity so directly is a gesture of such banality and disrespect that it is difficult to believe that public money has been wasted on it.

“Memorial design is in crisis. The age of political correctness and multiculturalism has shorn architects, designers and artists of their ability to make symbols that communicate, and the response has been the desolate silence of minimalism,” he concludes.

Memorial design cannot remain static, however; each year brings another tragedy to commemorate and landscape architects and designers must find a visual vocabulary to mark recent events where pain is still so keenly felt.

Consider the Royal Thai Government's Tsunami Memorial

in Khao Lak Lamru National Park, Thailand. Spanish firm Disc-O architecture won the competition to design it and its proposal, entitled Mountain of Remembrance, will include five 30m-high towers, inspired by Buddhist pagodas, and will cost in the region of 500m baht (£8.2m) to build. But will it be a sufficient or appropriate gesture? In Thailand alone, the tsunami claimed the lives of 5,395 people, with an additional 2,817 missing.

In London, the proposed memorial to those killed in the 7 July bombings has already been relocated from Tavistock Square to a more prominent site in Hyde Park at the request of the victims' families, and its eventual form is likely to be hotly contested.

When Britain's engagement in Iraq finally comes to an end and the cost in lives is known, the design of any memorial or act of commemorating such a hugely divisive war is sure to engender fierce and protracted debate. Those designers who put themselves forward will need to have a full understanding of the pressures that they will undoubtedly face. ■

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