2004

Memory Never Stands Still

Theodore S. Eisenman, *University of Massachusetts - Amherst*
Sited at the southern tip of Manhattan, Garden of Stones makes reference to the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, symbolic and literal gateways to millions of people seeking freedom. Opposite, a sapling emerging from stone symbolizes the resilience of the people the garden memorializes.
Memorials have become an important component of our response to tragedy, and few events have inspired as many memorials and discussions about the relationship between memory, place, and design as the Holocaust. With the September 2003 opening of Garden of Stones at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in Battery Park City, New York, a Holocaust memorial expands the language of conventional memorial making. Created by environmental artist Andy Goldsworthy, Garden of Stones is a granite-walled roof garden defined by 18 boulders—a single dwarf chestnut oak (Quercus prinoides) sapling planted in the hollowed-out core of each rock. The interplay between massive boulders and fragile saplings is Goldsworthy’s allegory for the strength and resilience of the Jewish people and of life itself.

Goldsworthy conceived the idea while staying in a hotel on Broadway. “My room was high up in the building,” he recalls. “I looked out the window of my room, and I saw a tree that had seeded itself, growing out of the side of the building opposite. It was for me a potent image of nature’s ability to grow even in the most difficult circumstances.”

Goldsworthy, who lives in Scotland, has created an extensive body of work over the course of three decades (see “The Geometrician,” Landscape Architecture, December 1997). Using such unheralded media as leaves, twigs, fur, feathers, stone, spit, and snow, Goldsworthy sculpts pieces that illuminate the beauty, fragility, and power of organic materials and biophysical processes. His art is allowed, and intended, to interact with the natural elements, resulting in ephemeral pieces that flow down streams, melt in the sun, and drift in the wind.

In Garden of Stones, Goldsworthy has created a place that diverges from its memorial predecessors. There are no literal references to the Holocaust itself, and unlike most memorials that tend toward the archetypal and static, this place is designed to change and evolve over the course of its life. The slow-growing dwarf oaks are expected to grow about 1/8 of an inch in diameter per year, gradually shading the austere garden of granite and gravel with 12- to 15-foot-tall trees emerging from stone. Ultimately, the trees will fuse with the rock, the living cambium beneath the bark will break, and the trees will die. This has been anticipated, and Goldsworthy has suggested that, in the future, children of Holocaust survivors replant acorns from these oaks as part of a memorial ritual. In this sense, Garden of Stones succeeds in creating not only a place that is relevant today but also a living place of remembrance for future generations.

Goldsworthy’s attention to the natural processes that unify all living things is a significant reason he was selected to design this memorial. “When [Goldsworthy] spoke to us about his design idea, it fit with our idea of what it should be,” says Ivy Barsky, deputy director of the museum. “Our museum was originally conceived as a living, breathing place that tells the story of the Jewish people, and this garden is a living expression of that idea.” Goldsworthy chose to include 18 boulders, in part, because of the number’s symbolic significance: In Hebrew, every letter possesses a number value. “Chai,” the Hebrew word for “life,” has a value of 18. This reference is one of the few literal gestures in the garden’s abstract design.

Planting 6-inch saplings in 3- to 10-ton boulders was not simple; it required collaboration with several specialists. Ed Monti, the stonecutter, used a 4,000-degree blowtorch to melt a core through several feet of solid granite—an arduous task: The largest rocks required 22 hours of relentless work. The hollowed-out cores are 6 inches wide at the top where the saplings rest, and they fan out to roughly 30 inches at the bottom of the rocks so that tree roots can access the largest possible soil volume. Goldsworthy consulted Tom Whitlow, a plant ecologist with Cornell University, on this planting design and the selection of tree species. To prepare the trees for their confined granite environments, Whitlow grew 2-year-old seedlings in 4-inch-wide, 2-foot-long PVC pipes for three months. These seedlings were transplanted in September 2003, in time for the garden’s opening. In the event that some of the saplings do not reach maturity, additional trees are being cultivated as replacements. (As of this writing in late April, only one had budded out after the saplings’ first winter.)
Abstraction is often a point of contention in Holocaust memorials. As James Young suggests in *Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (Yale Press, 1994), the groups most closely associated with the memorialized event—in this case Holocaust survivors and their families—may feel that a metaphorical narrative does not adequately express the suffering and courage of victims. A more literal approach, on the other hand, risks alienating stakeholders not represented in a particular design’s narrow story line. The push and pull between these dualistic impulses epitomizes the challenge of public memorial making and of much public art.

*Garden of Stones* is a public memorial in a public museum, but it is located in an interior courtyard and only accessible through the museum entrance. This controlled setting allowed the museum and the Public Art Fund, collaborators on the project, to pursue a bolder course than if the memorial were located in a fully public and exposed setting. “I hope it shows that you can create an inspiring place and give people some credit to form their own thoughts,” says Barsky. “Poetic abstraction can reach a lot of people. It may take some education along the way, but it’s well worth the journey.”

The value of this nondidactic approach to memorial making was perhaps best described by James Ingo Freed, acclaimed architect of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. “Memory is important,” Freed said. “Letting memory be sufficiently ambiguous and open-ended so that others can inhabit the space can imbue the forms with their own memory.”

The very nature of a memorial necessitates a gesture to the past and the historical context of the event itself. In this regard, the siting of *Garden of Stones* by the museum’s principal architect, Kevin Roche, draws important connections to the role of the United States as a liberator in World War II and as a destination for the world’s persecuted. With their history as a gateway to millions of refugees and immigrants who landed in New York’s harbor seeking freedom, the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island provide a powerful contextual backdrop. The rectangular form of the garden draws the eye out to the harbor: The boulders were selected and placed to maintain clear sight lines to the Statue of Liberty.

It is less clear how the garden will function as a space for people. An access ramp for wheelchairs, benches cantilevered along an interior wall, and stairs leading into the garden clearly imply that this is an interactive place. Yet, unlike many contemporary memorials that lead the visitor through a processional experience, at *Garden of Stones* it is not clearly evident what you are supposed to “do.” And despite thick, cantilevered granite slabs that function as benches, the garden does not inspire lingering. Still, Goldsworthy’s

To create the conditions for trees growing from stone, a 4,000-degree blowtorch was used to melt through several feet of solid granite, above left. At left: Goldsworthy at the final installation. Opposite top, the memorial is designed to evolve as slow-growing dwarf oaks (*Quercus prinoides*) gradually transform and shade the austere garden of granite and gravel. A museum café, opposite bottom, overlooks the memorial garden.
metaphor of life persisting in adverse conditions is readily accessible, and the living, growing character of the memorial will make it a place to return to.

Theodore Eisenman is principal of Environmental Design & Communications. He was a finalist for the 2000 international design competition for the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial, and he is currently managing a USDA Forest Service Living Memorials project.