



Construction

From Malls to Memorials

Vietnam Veterans Memorial

Maya Ying Lin, a native of Athens, Ohio, designed the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. Sometimes called "The Wall," the famous tribute lists the names of more than 58,235 men and women who died in the nation's least-popular war. Its goal was to honor the 2.7 million veterans who served in the war, while separating the issue of their sacrifices from the U.S. policy in the war. One of the most popular tourist attractions in the nation's capitol, it attracts more than 4.5 million visitors each year.



Ling was an undergraduate architecture student at Yale University in 1959, when a nonprofit group called the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, Inc. (VVMF) announced a nationwide competition to design a memorial. She entered the contest, along with 1,420 other individuals. A jury of eight internationally recognized artists and designers judged the entries, and picked Ling's design as the winner. She also served as a consultant during construction of the Memorial.



What was Ling's vision?

"I saw the Vietnam Veterans Memorial not as an object placed into the earth but as a cut in the earth that has then been polished, like a geode," she recalled. "Interest in the land and concern about how we are polluting the air and water of the planet are what make me want to travel back in geologic time to witness the shaping of the earth before man."

She wanted to create a quiet, protected place within Constitution Gardens, the area bordering Constitution Avenue in downtown Washington that would be the memorial's site – a park within a park. The dedication, which took place on November 13, 1982 during a four-day salute to Vietnam veterans, revealed a simple yet stunning panorama: polished black granite walls with a mirror-like surface stretch into the distance toward the Washington Monument to the east and the Lincoln Memorial to the west. As visitors draw nearer, what appear to be white lines on the wall surface come into focus as words, and then the words become names – thousands upon thousands almost without end.

Families and friends of those listed on the memorial often make rubbings of the names on the wall. They find a specific name by consulting index books available at each end of the wall. Ling's name appears on a panel on the memorial, along with those of the officers of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, architects, and others who helped make it a reality.