

# Memory Slips: Speculations in Australian Anti-Memorial Designs

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## abstract

If we begin to think of memory as not some platonic ideal that is pure or complete, but a periodic process of re-evaluation and reconstruction given present contexts, do our ideas about designing memorials evolve? Time and memory are intertwined. The design work presented and critiqued in this paper tries to negotiate with slippery qualities of memory as a way of generating memorial form. It speculates on new programs for memorials which include temporary and ephemeral processes. The paper will focus on three case studies explored in the author's own design practice. The Stolen Generation Competition's main focus is on the re-interpretation or re-writing of history. An Anti-Memorial to Heroin Overdoses questions whom we select as worthy of memorials. The Road-as-Shrine begins to interrogate memorial form and processes. The IFLA conference theme, TIME, challenges designers to critically re-evaluate time as an integral part of landscape design. And while most of us acknowledge time as quintessential to the medium of landscape, our work rarely positions it as fundamental. Memorial design is constantly imbibed with expectations of specificity, permanence, and local identity within a national context. The author's work questions the role of eternalness and memory through design which eventually disappears. The design project work presented and critiqued in this paper reflects upon challenges of design outcomes which are not permanent and offers further speculation into how landscape architecture can utilise ephemeral qualities of landscape and memory in an innovative manner.

Memorial design

Ephemeral and temporal design

Australian cultural landscapes

local and national identity



## Introduction

Andreas Huyssen writes, "Remembrance as a vital human activity shapes our links to the past, and the ways we remember define us in the present. As individuals and societies, we need the past to construct and to anchor our identities and to nurture a vision of the future."<sup>1</sup> How then do we consider the abstruse qualities of memory and remembrance? Memory is always affected by a complex spectrum of states and stimuli such as forgetting, denial, repression, trauma, recounting, reconsidering, changes in context and changes over time. If we begin to think of memory not as some platonic ideal that is pure or complete, but as a periodic process of re-evaluation and reconstruction given present contexts, do our ideas about designing memorials then evolve accordingly? There is an incongruity between the inherent changeability of landscapes and memories and conventional formal strategies of commemoration.

Memory is sustained by a sense of human temporality thriving on change, which mocks the static, everlasting conventional memorial. If memory tends to be fading, shifting, fleeting and the landscape is constantly evolving and emerging, then what happens when memorial design takes this into consideration? How can contemporary memorial design reflect ephemeral conditions of site and memory while maintaining its importance in the public landscape?

James Young asserts that contemporary Holocaust memorials, "aim not to console but to provoke, not to remain fixed but to change, not to be everlasting but to disappear, not to be ignored by passers-by but to demand interaction, not to remain pristine but to invite their own violation and not to accept graciously the burden of memory but to drop it at the public's feet."<sup>2</sup> While Young's assertions are somewhat binary, they are useful in establishing a critical understanding of what I came to define through the term "*Anti-Memorial*." The case studies presented here attempts to negotiate with the changeability of states and conditions as generative as well as testing Young's ideas in an Australian context. I am a co-author of the brief and organiser of the first project, *The Stolen Generation Memorials Competition*, and I am the principal designer for of *The Anti-Memorial to Heroin Overdose Victims*, and *The Road-as-Shrine* projects.

## The Stolen Generation Memorials Competition

The 2001 *Stolen Generation Memorial Competition* sought to illustrate how designers could offer alternative gestures in dealing with difficult, racially charged and contested histories. Indigenous children have been forcibly removed from their families and communities since the early days of European occupation of Australia. The design competition offered a new approach to examining this controversial issue within Australian history.

In order to consider memory, memorial-making and Aboriginal culture, it is important to understand the complexities of the manner in which Aboriginal groups may conceive of the concept of time. Tony Swain describes Aboriginal worlds as consisting of an interplay of two kinds of events: 'Rhythmic' and 'Abiding' Events. "Abiding Events appear more clearly separated from the normal rhythms (and chaos) of life and this is what has been interpreted as the 'pastness' of a Dreamtime."<sup>3</sup> He argues further, that the pastness of a Dreamtime is a false assumption as Abiding Events are continually occurring and that Abiding Events and every day or Rhythmic life events are co-joined quite literally through place. Thus, time is a continuum through place and many generations may pass but the place or Abiding Event is central. Simply expressed, '*when*' is not as important as '*where*' in considering Aboriginality and memorials.

Since 'place' is essentially removed in the case of the Stolen Generation, the competition proposed ephemeral and temporal events, which challenged ideas about memorials and linear, cyclical notions of time. Further, the brief stipulated that entries engage in multiple readings of issues; politically, socially and physically. It embraced the Anti-Memorial. More specifically, the *Stolen Generation Memorial Competition*, the Anti-Memorial design aimed to:

Challenge the inflexibility of permanent memorials and accepted collective notions of history. Collective memory or history in this case could refer to white historic texts and accounts which do not include the practice of stealing Aboriginal children from their families as a part of Australian history. The competition encouraged the Memorial to take on various forms such as sound-scapes and recordings, temporal architecture, performances, and landscape gestures. This was regarded as a way for memorial conventions to be twisted or disregarded. Central to aims of the competition was the ability for the memorial to allow the viewer to be included in the Memorial through some sort of interaction with it. The Memorial's ability to engage the observer, communicate new ideas and encourage creative debate was considered central to its success. Lastly, the designs had to consider the manner in which the Memorial responded to and considered the Melbourne Museum site. This referenced my interpretation of Abiding Events and place specificity in Aboriginal culture.<sup>4</sup>

The competition elicited a mix of approaches and complementary projects. Over one hundred and forty entries were submitted to the competition from both Australia and New Zealand. The jury, which included myself, initially short-listed and selected forty entries for exhibition in the museum based upon how they responded to the design brief and engaged in qualities of Anti-Memorials. We then selected four entries to be constructed at the Museum as a part of *Sorry Day 2002* events. The range of the exhibited responses fell into three general categories: Personalisation and Empathy with Members of the Stolen Generation, Apologetic Gestures, and Visitors as Memorial Catalysts.

The Stolen Generation Memorial Competition examined contested histories or ways in which to memorialise a rewritten history. The removal of indigenous children was thought to be a benevolent act; it was deemed "in the best interest of the child."<sup>5</sup> Cultural critics, social advocates and victims have criticised and challenged this view until another view of 'history' has become widely recognised. *The Stolen Generation Memorial Competition* is a part of the resultant dialogue. Participants were asked to design a memorial to those people whose lives were affected by Federally ratified, protectionist policies that led to the removal of indigenous children from their families.

The project's ultimate outcome was a public exhibition of competition entries and a supporting website gallery. The primary method in which the competition entries depart from traditional memorial modes is in their reliance on multiple participants for their effectiveness. Each person who interacts with the Memorial necessarily alters it and



Figure 1a



contributes to the whole, claiming some level of authorship. Multiple designers and authors are central to the idea of an Anti-Memorial. This first project is valuable in that it offers speculations beyond landscape-driven responses, multicultural definitions of memorials, and shows a strong engagement in political debate.

*The Stolen Generation Memorial Competition* offered a point of critical debate and a departure from a perceived complicity with a 'passive' racism in which Australia could be said to find itself today. Sadly, the proposed work from the competition remains un-built and speculative but the ways to frame and consider alternative notions of collective history learned through this case study have proved invaluable. The derailment of the project which intended to deliver actual enabling experience does have another, non-physical dimension. It contributed to an increasing awareness on my part that the debate surrounding the design and establishment of memorials is a memorial in and of itself.

The Exhibition did have a public showing and the web site has a virtual existence, so the project did operate in and contribute to the world of thought and discussion. Each of the entries was in fact, trying to make visible institutionalised racist policies and their resultant immediate and long term effects. While the project could be seen to have failed in its original intent—to produce a series of physical memorials to the Stolen Generation—the number of hours that students, designers, and artists devoted to exploring Anti-Memorial designs in fact, produced more individual memory-work than a finished, conventional memorial may inspire in its lifetime.

*The Stolen Generation Competition* acknowledged that the effects of these practices are still impacting on contemporary Australian society. However, it did place the role of the Memorials well within conventions of commemorating a series of historic events. Memorials are often relegated to history or the pantheon of historical events. Public policy and statutes like that of the National Capital Authority in Canberra often insist that a memorial can only be erected after a minimum of ten years following the event it commemorates.<sup>6</sup> This assumption denies the role that memorials can play within current and on-going issues. *The Anti-Memorial to Heroin Overdose Victims* specifically sought to challenge assumptions about memorials as a commemoration of history and explicitly focused on a continuing, contemporary circumstance. This project and *The Road-as-Shrine* sought to acknowledge that memory fades and with it so does the significance of memorials; Anti-Memorials recognise and utilise this condition as integral to their design outcomes. *The Stolen Generation Competition* proposed that we incorporate a sense of acceptance, responsibility and remorse into



thematic readings of memorial landscapes. In retrospect, the power of this Memorial may be in its continual irresolution. James Young asserts "Perhaps only an unfinished memorial process can guarantee the life of memory."<sup>7</sup> A finished memorial completes the memory and allows us to forget what must always haunt Australia, in this instance. As long as there is discussion, the memory remains active.

Figure 1b

## The Anti-Memorial to Heroin Overdose Victims

*The Anti-Memorial to Heroin Overdose Victims* was a public event that sought to humanise Melbourne's three hundred and thirty-one overdose deaths in 2000. The Memorial commemorated a group of people whose loss is not usually mourned in the public realm. It was constructed in the inner city suburb of St. Kilda's politically contested landscapes as part of the Melbourne Festival in October 2001. The Anti-Memorial consisted of three design insertions into the streetscape: a floral tribute, a landscape narrative and a memorial collection. Poppies, stencilled narratives and resin plaques formed a memorial along St. Kilda's streets. The work was sited within three socially complex streetscapes in St. Kilda: intravenous drug users, sex workers and social support services occupy the Grey Street corridor; the Fitzroy Street commercial end is frequented by a broad demographic of consumers of the strip shopping and dining precinct; while tourists, families and shoppers populate the Sunday craft market on the Lower Esplanade. The Anti-Memorial confronted each group, asking them to reconsider how they perceived intravenous drug users. See *Figures 1a–3: The Anti-memorial to Heroin Overdose Victims*

The floral tribute consisted of red poppies, which were planted on median strips, in planter boxes and in other key sites as floral commemoratives and a recognisable Australian symbol of remembrance. While they also alluded to opium poppies, the use of these flowers provided another meaning and reading: that of the already memorialised Armistice Day red poppy. Adjacent to the poppy planters, text was stencilled on the footpaths. The text included letters and stories about the overdose victims and their lives. The stories were gathered from a series of interviews with current intravenous drug users, friends and families of victims, and community workers—all of whom have been deeply affected by overdoses. The memorial collection consisted of a gathering of objects, photographs, text and images from an individual overdose victim's life. These objects were cast in thirty-five clear resin plaques and attached to the side of the poppy planters. The resin plaques were exposed or vulnerable, and tactile: to interact with them, people had to crouch down and get very close to discern the contents of the plaques. This was a deliberate attempt to encourage physical interaction with the memorial work. The physical proximity is a contrast to the traditional monument, represented as sacred and untouchable, and is often out of reach on a pedestal, only allowing floral gestures to be placed underneath them.

This Anti-Memorial was a public event: it was part of a temporary arts festival. The temporal nature of the work was bound to the Melbourne Festival, and event culture requires that one must make the time to travel, see the work and in doing so, become a part of the event.



Figure 2



Figure 3

This Anti-Memorial challenged traditional pre-conceptions of memorial objects as permanent, in that the event itself ultimately disappeared. The work offered a brief moment of commemoration, while fundamentally questioning the nature of that which is memorialised. The Memorial was deeply connected with the landscape, as are many traditional memorials, but seldom in a way that forces people to confront a social problem that affects their own locality.

This Anti-Memorial, in addition to its transient nature, differs from a traditional monument in that it is not sacrosanct but is disturbing and provocative. It offers a way of reconsidering our values and re-thinking our relationship to the world. *The Anti-Memorial to Heroin Overdose Victims* honoured people not often acknowledged by society as worthy of commemoration, people at the core of a contemporary debate about drug use, youth homelessness and prostitution. A central aim of this project was to shift ideas about commemoration away from reconsidering history toward a discussion of the subjects Australian culture selects as worthy of remembrance, as well as how we, as a society, choose to memorialise.

One of the unexpected outcomes of *The Anti-Memorial to Heroin Overdose Victims* was the way that members of the public interacted with the sites. A modicum of vandalism had been anticipated and was pre-empted by provisional back-up. Twice as many poppy plants were ordered, replacement plaques constructed, and the work was regularly patrolled, especially on Grey Street. Interestingly, only two pots of the three thousand poppy plants had to be replaced and this was on Fitzroy Street where a drunken patron unintentionally stumbled into them. Further, there was an expectation that in some instances, the work would be ignored. As Robert Musil writes, "There is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument. They are no doubt erected to be seen, indeed, to attract attention. But at the same time, they are impregnated with something that repels attention."

<sup>8</sup> During the three-week period of the installation, people left notes, cards, flowers, and wrote messages in chalk on the footpaths adjacent to the work. Quite often people would not walk on the red stencilled text, bestowing a respect similar to that shown to grave sites. People caressed the plaques and one woman knelt down, kissed her hand, and lovingly placed it on a photograph in a plaque. Due to the close personal proximity with which I was connected to the project—having interviewed many friends and family members of the victims depicted in the work, it was an amazing outcome to witness others with whom I was not familiar viscerally connect with the work. I rationalised that because the work was recognisable as a temporary installation and because it was unavoidable, sited within everyday landscapes on the footpaths it proved profoundly engaging. Rather than creating self-contained sites of memory detached from our daily lives, this memorial forces both visitors and local citizens to look within themselves for memory, to evaluate their own actions and motives for memory within these spaces.

I received numerous emails and letters from a range of sources both encouraging and scathing about the work. In particular, the traders on Fitzroy Street, the pharmacies who supply needles to IV drug users for minimal cost, protested vehemently before and during installation of the work. They felt attention was being brought to bear on St. Kilda's reputation as a drug haven, something they felt that they were working hard to change. Perhaps as a deliberately contrary stance to this reaction, I chose to site the Memorials directly adjacent to the pharmacies. Interestingly, at the conclusion of the project, one of the pharmacist owners asked if he could keep the flowers and a resin plaque. Another derisive review came from an anonymous I.V. drug user who commented as the work was being installed: "I don't need this as a reminder... look at my arms, mate... less money on art and more on rehab." This latter comment proved to be extremely confrontational and posed a myriad of questions regarding the validity of our exercise.

While there is a tremendous realm of literature and discussion on the justification of art and design for the purposes of social consciousness-raising and educative constructive purposes, I remain challenged by the apparent opportunity cost of public funding of art causes over vital medical services. I raise these points here as an open discussion of some of the critiques brought to bear on the type of work I engage in. I would conclude here, as I have observed similarly throughout the life of the project works, that the discussion that the work raises is just as pertinent to the investigations as the physical interventions themselves. Jochen Spielmann dramatically widens the functions of the public monument. He includes, "Identification, representation, anticipation, interpretation and information. And the phase of preliminary discussions, the creative process and process of receptions are integral components of the monument itself."<sup>9</sup>

The project was largely successful as a catalyst for testing other ideas about Anti-Memorials; it encouraged multiple readings of a political and social issue, prompted a different level of physical interactivity, and emphasised the informal and the local as opposed to the formal and the national. It was a temporary event and as such, it challenged traditional conceptions of memorial objects as permanent. The work offered a brief moment of commemoration, while fundamentally questioning the nature of what is being memorialised. It proposed a shift in the subject of memorials from heroic figures, to victims, to ordinary citizens, and finally to those society ostracises. This project ultimately challenges 'who' we make memorials to and the forms that those memorials take, however it did not test ideas about landscape ephemerality. It did have a temporary presence but it did not utilise time and memory in a speculative manner pertaining to landscape qualities. *The Road-as-Shrine* project sought to address these shortcomings through the design of a landscape gesture, the memorial garden.

## The Road-as-Shrine

*The 'Road-as-Shrine'* (2003 on-going) is a series of 'memorial gardens' embedded within the landscape. The project is sited on a 500-metre section of a rural road near Churchill in the La Trobe Valley, Victoria. It acts as a memorial to highway fatalities while also providing space for more personal commemorations. Hazelwood Estate Road is a section of road notorious for



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



accidents and fatalities, where two recently erected spontaneous memorial markers are, at the time of writing still in place. The Memorial reveals itself in several stages as it evolves from a native plant remembrance garden to a roadside re-vegetation program, eventually reverting to a paddock. The first native plant remembrance garden (November 2003) was planted in the Road's verge so that growth and bloom cycles would coincide with significant dates: the Christmas holidays, a peak accident period, and the birthdays of two teenage boys who died in a fatal accident on Hazelwood Estate Road. (David Hewish on 19 December 1980 and Aaron Ohara on 14 January 1982). This first garden was a literal 'garden of remembrance' and involved a collaborative effort between numerous sectors of the community. (The website at <http://roadasshrine.tce.rmit.edu.au> documents the first phases of the project more comprehensively.) See *Figures 4–6: The Road-as-Shrine*.

The second phase of the project involves a cold burn and re-vegetation through seed mat technology. The cold-burn cycle matches the peak accident period of the holidays and carries a 'drive safely' message to motorists. The notion of a scorched earth has many cultural associations; this aspect of the design speculates on a new analogy and subverts the conventional symbolism. However, the gesture is not reliant on the scorched earth metaphor, as burning is also part of the native ecology in the area, and this act can also be read as a progressive vegetation management technique. After the vegetation is burned, the ground will briefly reveal a series of seed mats. The re-seeding will help to construct a new ecology while acting as another 'memorial garden gesture' to the community. If left untended and without weed removal, the verge will eventually become indistinguishable from the surrounding paddocks again; the Memorial is thus changing and impermanent. Several communities are actively involved in the planting stages of this new category of Avenue of Honour. The gesture is open-ended, allowing other spontaneous memorials to take place within the garden setting. The garden design is meant to be a framework to encourage current spontaneous rituals and memorials, which are part of this landscape. The Memorial is designed to be ephemeral in two respects: it is usually seen in fleeting glimpses while driving at speed, and its materials mean that it will 'return to nature' of its own accord. One of the fundamental principles guiding this work involves ideas centred on landscape entropy: the eventual return of the memorial site to paddock is intended. The analogy of landscape ephemerality offers a unique proposition in an Anti-Memorial. While this project utilises a normative memorial framework—the remembrance garden—its form evolves to embrace spontaneous memorials and changes in the landscape over time. *The Road-as-Shrine* evolved into an education programme, a tourism device, and community collaboration well beyond the actual planting day. The gardens offered a framework for spontaneous memorials to occur; experimented with landscape entropy and constructed ecologies as they returned to paddock over time; and it critiqued normative memorial practices by utilising conventional remembrance garden tactics in a fundamentally new way.

## Conclusions

When the work began, its main focus was on the 're-interpretation' or 're-writing' of history. It challenged ideas about collective memory or, the more powerful reference "cultural amnesia." *The Stolen Generation Competition* work examined these ideas in depth and put forward the question: will knowing alternative versions of history help us make sense of contemporary Australia? If the first project concentrated its focus on other histories, the second project, *An Anti-Memorial to Heroin Overdoses* questioned whom we select as worthy of memorials. In the normative sense, heroin users

are seen as neither heroes nor victims. The last project, *The Road-as-Shrine* begins to interrogate memorial form and processes. This project poses the question: how can we emphasize process and dynamic forces in memorial design? It considers ephemeral forces and the dynamic systems in landscape as central to the memorial's design. This project stresses physical ephemera as it is manifested through the series of gardens and catalysts.

James Young writes, "Memory is sustained by a sense of human temporality thriving on change, which mocks the static, everlasting conventional memorial."<sup>10</sup> This work contributes to a clearer definition of Anti-Memorials. More specifically, it strives to prompt a more intimate level of physical interactivity between the public and the memorial itself, and reflect a focus on 'victims' as opposed to 'heroes' in the conventional sense. The resin plaques of the *Anti-Memorial to Heroin Overdose Victims* required close inspection and humanised the people whose deaths were represented, while the text on the footpaths was a narrative of anonymous personal reflections. *The Road-as-Shrine* project engaged the public through a series of planting days, and was easily accessible to the public as a framework for spontaneous memorial markers to commemorate individual deaths.

This work encourages and facilitates alternative readings of history and emphasises the informal and the local as opposed to the formal and the national. *The 2001 Stolen Generation Memorial Competition* project brought a shameful aspect of Australia's history to the fore, while appropriating official space in the form of a state museum. *The Anti-Memorial to Heroin Overdose Victims* and the *Road-as-Shrine* projects connected directly to local communities while expressing issues that are of current concern at a national level. They both attempted to personalise contemporary Australian issues, and did so within communities significantly affected by those issues. These projects also struggle with articulating events that some people have not directly experienced but we are subject to their implications in a greater socio-political context. Memorials are an integral part of public landscapes. Their designs serve as various civic and iconic gestures for the public realm as well as reflect upon meanings of our shared and separate histories. In short, memorials attempt to reveal meaning in specific places to people.

The value of this research is that it critiques normative, formal outcomes of memorials and asserts a new way of engaging in memorial design. Another value of the research is that it offers an alternative vision for other memorial designers or entities considering commissioning memorials in public space. It challenges current models of practice. °

## Endnotes

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