

By Dan Bellan

OPENING NEW DOORS

Giving Form to Feeling

Our main focus when creating commemorative art should be to provide an interactive experience for the end users. The most profound form of interaction with a commemorative work is that of touch, and I believe it's the most overlooked sensory pathway in today's design process. In most conventional commemorative work there's a physical distance between object and person; it resembles museum pieces where the absence of physical interaction leads to a predominantly cerebral experience. But in a cemetery I believe most people seek solace and healing through interaction, which leads to the obvious question: What is an active memorial and how can we design such?

Searching for an answer led me to conversations with Pete Macfarlane, an architect+stonemason based in Brisbane, Australia. Macfarlane, in fact, is the sole architect+stonemason in Australia who creates unique commemorative work that presents informed, creative and sensitive alternatives. Macfarlane's personally interactive work represents the culmination of 30-plus years of listening, observing, and working with landscapes. He offers an experience unlike any memorial company I am aware of.

The importance of touch

Macfarlane likes the idea of his clients "white-knuckling" the forms he creates. He says having clients visit a gravesite, grab onto an object and hold it provides them with a unique souvenir that conventional memorials cannot provide. "The thing I want to achieve," he says, "is a physical engagement with the pieces whereby the person can release energy

through direct physical contact or by touching the object."



He says that's a very old concept. The ancient world of stonemasonry revolved around a pursuit of art and mathematical theory. The knowledge was passed down and led to new ways of creating form and structure. Ancient burial grounds provided direct interaction with forms and struc-

Images 1a & 1b: Part of a trilogy series designed by Macfarlane for infants, the egg-shaped designs represent shelter or the womb. The shapes are cast concrete.



Image 2: For a young woman, Macfarlane designed a ledger of granite and stainless steel over reinforced concrete. He sandwiched the UV print between two sheets of glass and set it into a concrete frame to seal and protect it from the elements.

tures such as earth mounds, gardens, seating, and stones.

Macfarlane's sentiments should echo strongly with us: "We have an inherited responsibility as stonemasons to take the craft forward," he says, "and it's important to maintain that spirit of the pursuit of art, theory, and past knowledge within our relationship to new building materials. To me most cemeteries have become static landscapes and I am working to reverse that trend by having the memorials respond to landscape and climate in a subtle way."

In fact, Macfarlane strives for new forms that offer different ways to communicate. He says that bringing people into the memorial spaces he creates involves re-inventing the art and craft of commemoration.

Inside the space

A cemetery, more than being a burial ground, acts as a specifically designed space that provides opportunities to remember past moments while simultaneously experiencing the present. One of our greatest challenges as modern designers and stonemasons is to use that space creatively to give back a complex set of emotions. How we interpret the space will establish the narrative that occurs on and within it. Perhaps the most difficult concept to grasp is that space is more than emptiness.

Macfarlane's offset elliptical commemo-

also serve a functional purpose. "The memorial is designed for sitting and reclining inside, to rest out of the heat and commune with another, be it inner self, family, or friend," Macfarlane says.

The elliptical shape symbolizes a shelter or womb; the offset arrangement/position sends the visual signal that the alignment is off. "[It's] an oddity symbolically, as death comes to the young," says Macfarlane. One of the forms also features a multi-colored glass plate through which light passes to cast its design onto the memorial and potentially onto anyone sitting inside. A heavy-gauge circular steel base filled with pebbles lets users bury objects such as ashes and letters.

Designing with diverse materials can define the space an object occupies. In **Image 2**, Macfarlane employed granite trimmed with stainless steel in a floating-ledger composition that features a large-scale UV stable vinyl portrait of a woman. The random arrangement of smaller metal images along the ledger suggests magnets on a refrigerator. The design makes one want to approach and inspect it, as it really stands out among nearby large polished black granite monuments.

Macfarlane's commemoration for a young man, **Image 3**, reminds me of a zen-influenced garden plot. It also suggests ancient burial mounds. Rising slightly above ground level, it is an example of how a memorial can be physically experienced on a low plane. "The heavy, thick, low scale wall to the east allows for morning light through the aperture to promote vista and color on the garden, pebbles, and plaque," Macfarlane says. "The chase on the hammered concrete wall conduits light down to the mirror and illuminates the plaque and carving."

His deconstructed obelisk, **Images 4a & 4b**, occupies its space in a deeply personal way. Working with clients who were sail enthusiasts, Macfarlane split the obelisk form to create two limestone sails. The direction and angle of the sails line up with a point on the horizon at sunset to mark a moment of light on the couple's anniversary. The wood, or decking, derives from stylized yacht planking, and the number of pieces represents the number of family members.

When less is more

Large open spaces can give one a feeling of abandonment, but Macfarlane sees

Image 3: Macfarlane's memorial for a young man sits at ease with the landscape and almost appears to defy gravity in the cantilever of the deck.



rative forms, **Images 1a & 1b**, are part of a trilogy series designed for infants. When I first saw photos of them, I was intrigued. Forms with open spaces such as these aren't typically seen in cemeteries. They remind me of 1960s space-age seating designs. Aesthetically, I like them. But they



Images 4a & 4b: For sail enthusiasts, Macfarlane split an obelisk form into two off-white honed sandstone sails framed in painted steel. The decking is Tasmania oak and the curbing is picked, textured poured concrete.

a sprawling multicolored family monument quite differently. The box-like shape in **Images 5a & 5b** is approximately 18 feet square and was designed as a courtyard of light. “It’s a space in which you can commune privately or publicly,” he says.

The materials—poured concrete walls with a hammered finish, commercial grade glass, and ledgers of Bisazza tile on CFC sheeting over powder-coated alloy frames—were selected to capture and release light. Below each ledger is an in-ground vault for two people.

A memorial for husband-and-wife architects, **Image 6** illustrates Macfarlane’s exploration of negative space as a way to engage viewers physically and emotionally. While the inscribed glass contains rich detail, the monument is minimalist in form and nothing is off-the-shelf. Macfarlane says designs stripped of extraneous ornament, detail, and gimmickry can inspire us to rethink the artistic integrity of our approach to memorial design: “It is very difficult to design to this point of minimalism and let be, when adding or subtracting detail gives no further quality.”

It is certainly worth considering Pete Macfarlane’s approach in our own geogra-



Image 6: In this minimalist design, Macfarlane used glass, graphics and an astronomical light shaft to convey more meaningful statements about an architect couple than would off-the-shelf ideas and a traditional composition.



Images 5a & 5b. Macfarlane’s sprawling 18-foot-square family monument was designed as a courtyard of light and features rainbow-colored ledgers.

phies. He says it should work equally well on a small scale and with more traditional materials. The process would begin with experiencing the site, analyzing its topography, geology, wind, light, water, and the relationship to nearby memorials. Then use creative approaches—light, color, diverse materials, and new forms—to tell a story that will enrich the history and vision expressed by the clients and will engage them in the cemetery.

“If we can get our clients to step into and touch the structure, then we are on another plane,” Macfarlane says. To learn more, visit his Website, www.artattheend.com.

Vancouver, Canada memorialist Dan Bellan creates unique and meaningful works of commemorative art with the goal of expanding the industry’s and the public’s approach to memorialization. Contact him at www.danbellan.com.