

The Canadian Memorial Garden Caen, Normandy, France: Two Views

Memory, Monuments and Landscape

Nan Griffiths

In August of 1993, six students from the School of Architecture, Carleton University, and six from l'Ecole d'Architecture Paysagiste, l'Université de Montreal, accompanied by two of their professors, spent a month in Caen, Normandy in a studio/workshop to design a memorial to commemorate Canada's role in the 1944 liberation of Normandy. The group was sponsored by the Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation. The design studio was a room in le Memorial museum outside of Caen. The site was a park behind the museum, two slopes and a valley, where a German headquarters had been located during the war.

The undertaking was initiated in response to an invitation by le Memorial to mount a project in Caen to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Normandy landings and the subsequent events of 1944. What followed was arguably a case of the right idea and the right clients at the right time. Elizabeth Doherty, a project manager for Public Works Canada suggested that the Foundation consider engaging students of architecture and landscape to bring their particular sensibilities and creative energies to the study and design of the project. The tradition of student design competitions is one with an excellent record, with Canadian students having won much distinction in national as well as international competitions. The mode of working requires an intense brainstorming and design and production process; the results are dynamic and full of ideas. Ms. Doherty, herself a former student at Carleton and a graduate from the University of Montreal, suggested that the students be selected from those two institutions. A daring suggestion, it might seem, but somewhat

to the surprise of Ms. Doherty, the men of the Foundation accepted the proposal. Indeed there were many resonances: le Memorial's mandate was not simply to develop as a museum but to act as an active centre for peace and various student programs. Then there was the emotional charge of the ages. The students chosen for the project were in the middle or graduating year of their programme, and were thus the age of many of the soldiers who set out for Normandy in 1944.

To these students, the Second World War was a remote period in history, vaguely associated with grandparents but scarcely a live memory. The first charge of emotional engagement for these young people came from meeting members of the Foundation in Ottawa, many of whom are survivors of the battle, and who moved the students deeply with their own particular experiences on D-Day and afterwards. The connection in time and spirit between these senior men, the young mates who were left behind so long ago, and the 12 young students was consolidated by the first poignant visit in Normandy to the Canadian cemetery at Beny-sur-Mer, and deepened by the terrible scars that the now prosperous and apparently benign grainfields of Normandy were dealt in the battles of 1944.

The first days in Caen were spent in orientation. The images and artifacts of the museum's exhibits etched themselves in the minds and hearts of the students, each responding to different aspects of the exhibition display and narrative. We wandered, somewhat overcome by the magnitude of the task, over the very extensive park and grounds of the museum and peered at the model of the American project [for which a firm of professional architects had been hired] on display inside the museum. It was not evident at first where the Canadian project should be located, or what it should be. The question ultimately became irrelevant, as the memorial undoubtedly involved both architecture



Students examine the site for the Caen Memorial Garden project, August 1993.

experiences and discussions. The project would grow out of those, their own graphic interpretations of the power of silence and the psychology of the unknown, the battle landscape, images from the Museum's display, (the young girl hanged at Auschwitz, the silhouetted German soldier waiting at the cliff edge), the ghostly flatness of the beaches and the waving wheatfields.

and landscape all at once, a powerful abstraction of the complexities of a particular war in one deceptively simple gesture.

Ultimately, as discussions and work in the studio were interspersed with site visits and lectures, the issue of separation between form and land construction seemed to slide away. If the Vietnam Memorial in Washington DC refers generally to landscape through its psychologically dramatic relationship with the ground and vertical cut downward into it, the symbolism of its siting derives from its proximity to the symbolic man-made landscape of the Washington Mall and the obelisk. Clearly we were working with a different set of conditions, both in the character of the battle, and in the powerful way that pure landscape played its part in the battle. We, like all visitors to the battle sites, were particularly moved by those confrontations between cliff, beach and sea, where the all-too-substantial remains of German bunkers gave silent witness to the desperate vulnerability of the exposed landscape.

Words too became formed and were crucial to the design process; words such as tension and release, concealment and exposure, darkness and light, fear and courage; then notions of up and down, movement of the eye in space, movement of the body, the solitude of the individual. These developed as conditions for the site itself just west of the museum building. This area emerged partly because it is distant from the proposed American garden, and partly because of the inspirational possibilities offered by the terrain itself: i.e. a rough, uncultivated slope facing a green grassy slope of apple trees with a green valley moving between.

We asked the students to form themselves into three teams of four, choosing their "team" from the compatibility of the ideas displayed. Thus we had our working groups that began the design stage. The "entente cordial" came into play here with one group consisting of two mainly unilingual anglophones, and two slightly more bilingual francophones.

On the other hand, we were also stirred by the spectacular recovery of the land orchestrated by nature and the hard work of Norman farmers, by the farm machinery and the neat bundles of hay. That the handiwork of humankind is soon overtaken by nature is known by any one with a garden; that such work could so thoroughly be healed left a profound impression, as did the colours and textures of battle sites and fields.

It was a remarkable experience between persons, disciplines, youth and history. In the third week, the groups were ready to present preliminary concepts to the personnel of le Memorial. One student moved the guests with his guileless offering of his emotions. He was 19, the same age of many of those resting in the surrounding cemeteries. The guests responded, with some surprise perhaps, to all of the projects for there were good ideas in all four. Afterwards, the whole group, designers and personnel alike, walked out to look at the different parts of the site used by each group, and tried to imagine how the project would be seen and experienced. It was wonderful, for not always do architects have the chance to stand with clients and visualize project and setting.

In the carpeted and well-lit basement studio of le Memorial, the students became immersed in the project, its questions and emotions. To bring these into visual being, each student made and presented images, drawings and poetic quotations that represented the impressions they received from the various

To our delight, each project site was pronounced "*faisable*," and Director Jacques Belin and his colleagues were pleased that all projects were focussed and offered clear limits to their sites.

The budget was another thing. We did not know exactly how much funding was available, and as we have no real idea of construction and material costs in France, we pressed for modest but powerful manipulations of landscape and architectural form. Remarkably the students all seemed to draw intuitively on the right scale of intervention.

The remaining time was spent hard at work at the drawing boards. A splinter group decided its ideas were not that far apart from the others and they re-assembled to pool their drawing talents and coalesce their schemes into one coherent idea. Time was short, but all three projects were developed and drawings completed in time to be shipped to Canada. All of us went our separate ways at the end of August. We were all excited by this completion, the quality of the ideas and the work, and by the extraordinary richness of the experience that we have shared

Back in Canada, all three designs were received with enthusiasm by the Foundation committee at presentations at the School of Architecture at Carleton University. The students were delighted by the response, particularly the four whose work was chosen [two architects, two landscape architects]. A model was built to assist in the fund-raising process and also to arrive at some kind of budget. We had hoped to obtain the services of a landscape contractor in Caen [one of the 'families' who gave each of the students a social dimension to their sojourn] for the costing, but this did not work out. We were fortunate however in having the voluntary services of Jeff Ware, a Quantity Surveyor with Hanscomb Associates, to give us a rough cost analysis. Funds were being raised and the issue of actually getting the drawings developed and construction supervised now faced the committee. Two of the winning team students had graduated, the other two were back at School and preoccupied with the academic term. Finally it was decided that the architect who designed the museum would supervise the drawing development and design construction and that one of the young graduate landscape architects would be sent over

Students at work at le Memorial.

to work with the architect for several months. It was not an easy design process. Despite the wonders of modern technology, notably the magical transmission of drawings back and forth by fax between Caen and the good offices of Rear Admiral Dan Mainguys, the distance between three busy designers made design development a challenge.

But the narrative remained largely intact, and after the months of process and distant construction, the design team was invited to attend the ceremonial opening in May 1995 with Prime Minister Jean Chretien officiating. As the students visited the completed garden for the first time, they wondered how it would be experienced by others.

Remembrance is implied rather than literal. The project suggests multiple references, to be taken individually by each visitor. The space of the valley evokes a sense of the fearsomeness of the space of landing, of time and waiting, of exposure in a large site and a large situation. The project may be entered from the plateau at the side of the Museum, through a "forest" gate (existing but augmented evergreens) to an open platform. From the edge of the cultivated landscape, the gaze is drawn past the glass steles inscribed with the names of the Canadian regiments that participated in the invasion, over the sheer drop below down to a curving path and across the green of the valley to a reciprocal space cut into the wooded, grassy slope. The space is a green room or grove, with a black granite stone set flat into the ground and washed by a wave of water; a place of memory, of repose and of healing. The commanding position of the terrace, the vulnerability of the lower grove speaks now, not of the impending savagery of battle, but of power and trust.

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is meant to recall the Canadian forest. To reach the gate from the plateau, visitors walk past the monument to the Caen resistance members who were assassinated by the Germans on the morning of the invasion. To reach the gate from the valley, visitors must wind their way up the zig-zag path to the edge. Partly a functional solution to climbing the steep slope, the effort of climbing is also intended to evoke the struggle to attain the beachhead. The tensions of the

project are experienced through the movement of the eye and body.

This Canadian "cut" of landscape in a park [once a medieval quarry] in Caen is intended to touch the emotions of the visitors and to convey to future generations both the fragility of peace and the power of cooperation and moral engagement. A theatre of war is transformed into a theatre of memory.

If there are a few disappointments in the details, the students nonetheless were overcome with sheer delight in seeing most of the design concepts embodied and built. The last square of new turf is tucked into place minutes before the ceremonies begin, and then we watch a host of white T-shirted Caen school children, Canadian flags in hand, form a white serpentine line as they run down from the "edge" across the valley to the grove.

A Difficult Path to Tread

The new memorial garden at Caen, Normandy

Paul Gough

In a previous issue of *Canadian Military History* (Vol.5, No.1, Spring 1996) I looked at the recently unveiled Canadian War Memorial in Green Park in London, UK. I drew comparisons between the memorial and its counterparts on the Somme and at Vimy Ridge, I was fascinated by the fusion of abstract and figurative elements, and speculated that this combination of hard modernist edges with dramatic use of statuary seemed to be a particular strength of Canadian war memorials. Later that year I was invited by Professor Terry Copp to join a Canadian universities study group in France. At Caen, Normandy I had the chance to examine the new Canadian garden at *Le Memorial de la Paix*. This is a quite original, even controversial, installation, more of a peace garden than a monument. As a garden space it seems to want to tell a particular

story; its layout invites speculation and association. There are, though, many ways of 'reading' a landscaped space: this is my attempt.

The best way to appreciate the full extent of the Canadian garden is from the west where a lane cuts into the valley from the surrounding plateau. The museum is on your left, a busy 6-lane highway on the right and the broad, flat floor of the valley below. One hundred yards away, towards the headwall of the valley, lies the American forces garden, and on the plateau above lie the sites for future memorials, including a British garden.

Unlike the grandiose architecture of the US site, the Canadian garden strikes the casual walker as unusually modest. First you encounter a shallow fountain to the right of the valley floor, shielded from the highway by a bank of trees that mutes the traffic noise. I took this to be the 'start' of the garden, the beginning of a story that begins (as at Green Park) with an incessant flow of water. The fountain is in fact a sunken pool made up of sixteen rectangular black stone slabs; dug into the side of the valley wall it reminded me of gun

Right: A view of the ceremony taken from the terrace. The valley which separates terrace from the grove is clearly visible

pits that were built to house large artillery pieces or (to stretch the military analogy further) redolent of those Great War photographs of a battalion formed in open square to receive and hear its commanding officer. The black slabs are inscribed with Latin text - *Nulla dies umquam memori vos eximet aevo* (No day will erase your generation from our memory). Like the Green Park fountain, it evinces powerful notions of cleansing and perpetuation. It struck me that the water was intended to act as a metaphor for the Atlantic crossing, a point somehow reinforced by the grid-like structure of the slabs, which seems to mimic the longitude and latitude lines on Admiralty charts.

Lining the flower beds of the fountain and 'gun pit' is a low wall engraved with the names of dozens of French villages that were liberated by the Canadian Army after 1944. The list includes many hamlets and villages - Authie, St. Contest, Cussy - that are within walking distance of the garden. The slopes are planted with four rows of sycamore trees which simultaneously announce and 'protect' the exposed slab of water.

Turning your back on the fountain the next stage of the garden presents itself. Leaving the formal layout of the sunken pool (with its axial regimentation and sense of order) one has to cross 38 metres of flat terrain, aware all the time that the crossing can be monitored from the crest above and increasingly aware of the looming presence of the sheer stone wall that comprises the next stage of the garden. Unlike the falling water of the fountain, this traverse has no obvious geographical connotations except that it asserts a sense of exposure and vulnerability. The passage of time is suggested in the layout of the trees which mature as one crosses from water to the wall - from the young sycamore saplings in sentry formation besides the fountain, past two larger birches at the foot of the slope, on to the mature trees at the crest.

The next part of the garden is certainly the most challenging and, for many visitors, the most problematic. We are confronted by a steep wilderness of thick, spiky prairie grass. At first it appears impenetrable but a mud path zig-zags



steeply ahead, first to the right and then into a succession of interlocking spurs. The most striking effect is not the sense of exposed space behind or the large smooth wall directly ahead, but the strange effect where the harsh brown prairie grass give way to verdant green clumps. The transition between green and brown is abrupt and makes a straight line at the edge of the winding path giving the odd impression that a ten yard swathe of the hillside has been scorched leaving broad bands of greenery on either side. There is a further surprise in that the brown spikey clumps - neatly planted 18 inches apart in parade ground formation - are not "dead" at all, but actually soft to the touch and sprout tiny delicate yellow flowers. On the steeper banks the tufts are knitted into the soil by a cellular plastic webbing that resembles a think veneer of skin flowing over the hillside. These corporeal undertones are at the root of many objections to this phase of the garden. I was told that veterans groups and ex-servicemen's associations have objected to the apparent deadness of the plants, with their implication that they represent the fate of so many young Canadian soldiers on the campaign to liberate Europe. It may not be just the grass that

offends. The zig-zag path is frustrating to the walker; progress up the slope is constantly confused by the repetition of the clumps which are difficult to keep in focus. To add to this, one is aware constantly of the oppressive mass of white stone bearing down - a possible quotation from the impregnable walls at Vimy, but also perhaps a reminder to many veterans of the heavily-defended Atlantic Wall or a fortified pill-box that still looms gigantically in the memory.

The wall itself does seem impregnable. As one takes the third turn in the zig-zag path, the mounds of earth to either side start to assume the shape of a rampart, the brown prairie grass spreading down the slope looks more like the wiry tufts of a dismembered broom, or even miniature shrapnel bursts. Directly above, the white wall is bisected a third of the way along its length by a strip of black marble. From a distance one might have assumed that this was an opening or doorway. Instead it serves as another visual frustration, a neatly ironic touch by the design team.

The actual opening is far to the right; indeed it is at the furthest point from the last turn in the path. In the summer it is a relief to leave the dusty, baked and visually abrasive prairie path and move onto the cool white slabs of the stonework. The gap in the wall is narrow, and gives on to a stairway of four flights faced by a wall of polished black stone inscribed with the legend "Liberation Comes from the Sea. La Liberation Vient par La Mer." At the foot of this imposing and reflective surface is a narrow flower bed planted with poppies - this century's primary floral symbol of martial mourning. The narrow aperture into this stage of the memorial may be familiar to battlefield pilgrims: it repeats the stepped walkways of the Vimy memorial and the cool narrow cleft of the Green Park monument.

The shadow of the stairway is soon left behind as the visitor climbs onto the fifth and final phase in the garden's narrative. The summit of the monument takes the form of a flat viewing platform from where the journey across the floor of the valley, along the winding zig-zag path and through the tunnel of the memorial is easily read. A national flag and four glass panels make up the remainder of the memorial. The panels -

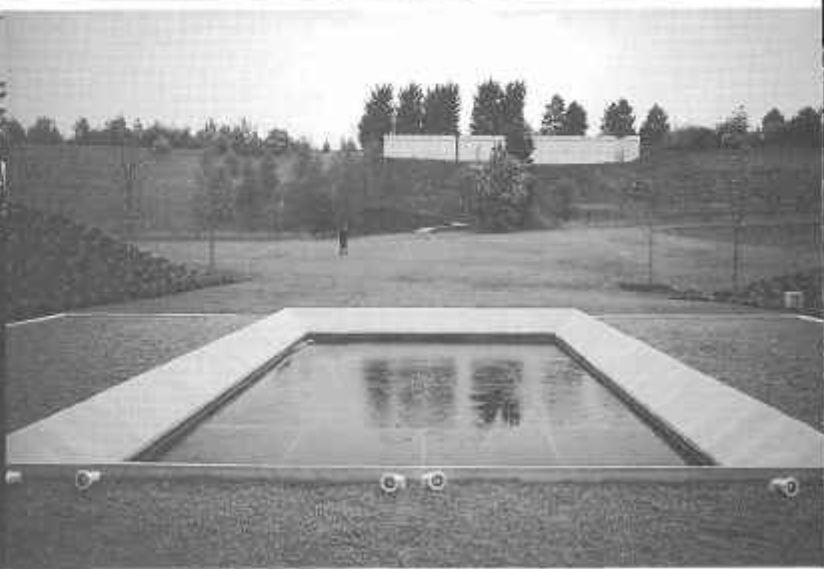
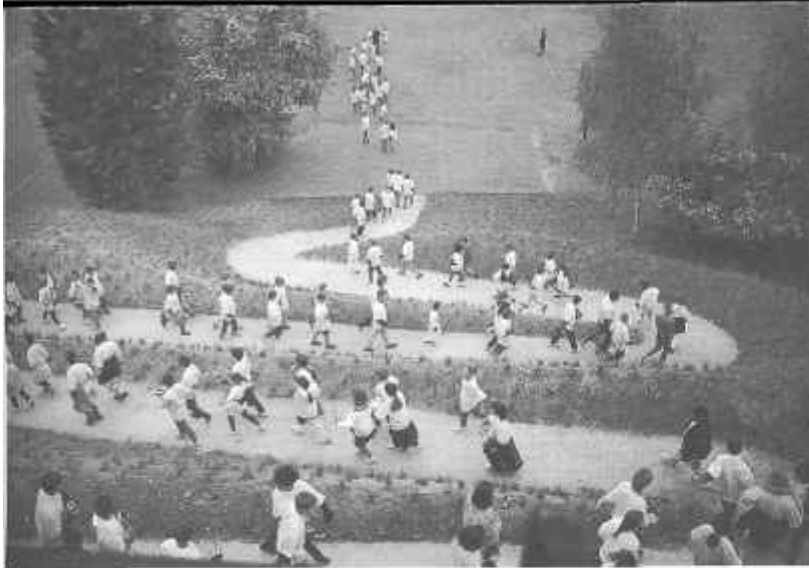
rectangles of thick laminated glass, some two metres tall - repeat the unit of commemoration that has been constant throughout the garden. Unlike many Allied memorials there are no individual names; instead there are long lists of the Canadian military units that fought in Normandy during the summer of 1944. Unlike the carved inscription near the fountain these names are less easy to read as the transparency of the glass makes the words blend with the landscape behind - a metaphor perhaps for the movement of troops through the land or for the assimilation of dead soldiers into the soil.

The small lawn is bounded by two cypress trees - the only concession to traditional funeral convention in the entire garden - and then merges with the plateau with its industrial park and grounds of *le Memorial*. One hundred yards away is the site of a proposed United Kingdom garden, distinguished only by a roughly hewn pillar of Antrim granite sent by the people of Belfast and standing rather forlornly in open space.

The Canadian Garden is a controversial piece of landscape theatre. The design team seem to have used the topography of the valley to suggest a complex series of ideas about distance from one's home country, about the painful progress of a combatant through exposed tracts, up an arduous and disorientating climb, to a hard-won breach in an impregnable stonework, and finally to an eventual triumph. I found the experience of this garden quite fascinating; it shares with the Vimy Ridge tunnels a sense of theatre, in that it was unpredictable and physically engaging. And, unlike the recently-opened Australian Memorial Park at Hamel on the Somme, it works without words, there are no proclamations or guidebooks on how to read and respond to the garden. It is a subtle mime show in which the pilgrim-visitor acts out the grim progress of the combatant. For me, it sets a benchmark for future designs of memorial landscapes.

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Top left: Caen school children walk down the zig-zag path during the ceremonial opening of the garden in May 1995; Top right: A view of le Mémorial overlooking the fountain; Above left: Glass steles etched with the names of Canadian units which fought in Normandy; Above right: The fountain, looking towards the terrace; Right: The grove as it appeared in the summer of 1998; Bottom: Two views of the terrace showing its forbidding stone structure and the wilderness of thick, spiky prairie grass which hide the zig-zag path which leads up to it. (except where noted, photos by Nan Griffiths)



Steve Osterberg

