

Washington, D.C.

# Vietnam Veterans Memorial



The moment this competition was announced in 1981, I knew the competition itself would be something memorable for a lot of people in the design community.

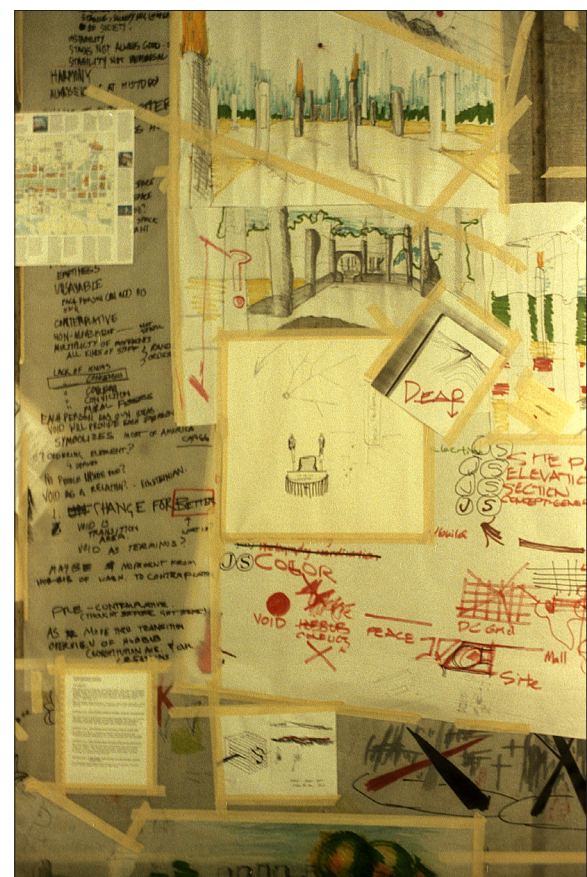
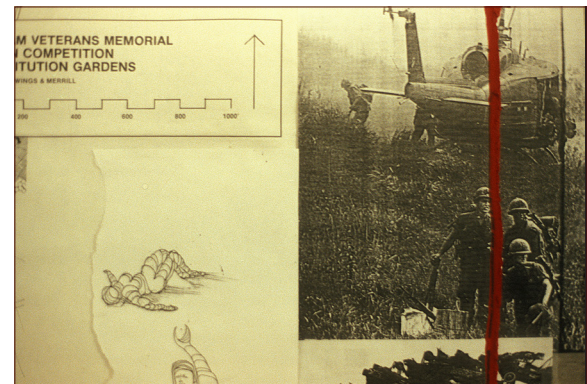
The competition had four factors that made it attractive. First, the war was still fresh in the minds of many designers. Second, the jury was an amazingly august body of diverse design professionals. (Architect Harry Weese '38, sculptor Richard Hunt, landscape architect Garret Eckbo, sculptor Costantino Nivola, sculptor James Rosati, journalist Grady Clay, landscape architect Hideo Sasaki, architect Pietro Belluschi, and architect Paul Spreiregen (professional advisor.) Third, it was an open and blind competition, meaning that they didn't care if you were a grand mother from Kentucky or had an office of 600 architects, all you had to do was pay the twenty dollar entry fee and send in two thirty by forty boards and you would be judged equal to everyone else. Lastly, they promised that they would photograph all the entries and publish a book showing each one. This would be particularly interesting as it would provide evidence of the pulse of the design community at a single point in time. A visual record of the way designers were thinking and presenting their ideas at the time. 1,442 submittals were produced. Each consisting of a 60 inch by 40 inch panel. They hung them for the jury review in hangar three at Andrews Air Force Base in Virginia. They said the jury made their initial review by walking past. I think they used a Jeep.

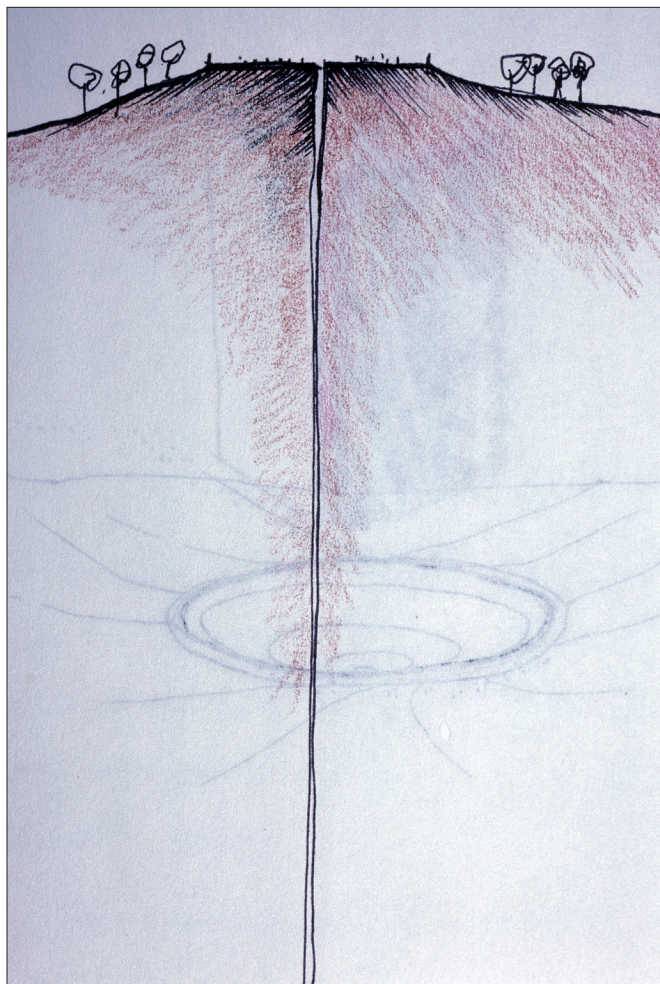
The process seems to have taken about two months. I had announced my intention to participate and asked one of the largest schools of architecture in the country if any of their students would be interested in forming a design team. Three second-year architecture students indicated they were interested. We cobbled together an extra-curricular work schedule consisting of evenings and weekends and generated a vast number of alternatives.

The Program stated that the working site consisted of four acres, but we were only supposed to actively occupy two of those acres. It was required to display all the names of the dead and to give some orientation relative to both the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument. We were also

reminded to not have any proposals, which went down into the earth because the water table was at four feet deep and severe drainage problems would result.

Preliminary calculations indicated that if we engraved the name of each dead on a common brick and had the bricks mortared together with a three-eighths inch joint, as a flat surface, the memorial would pave the entire four acre site. It was time to re-think.



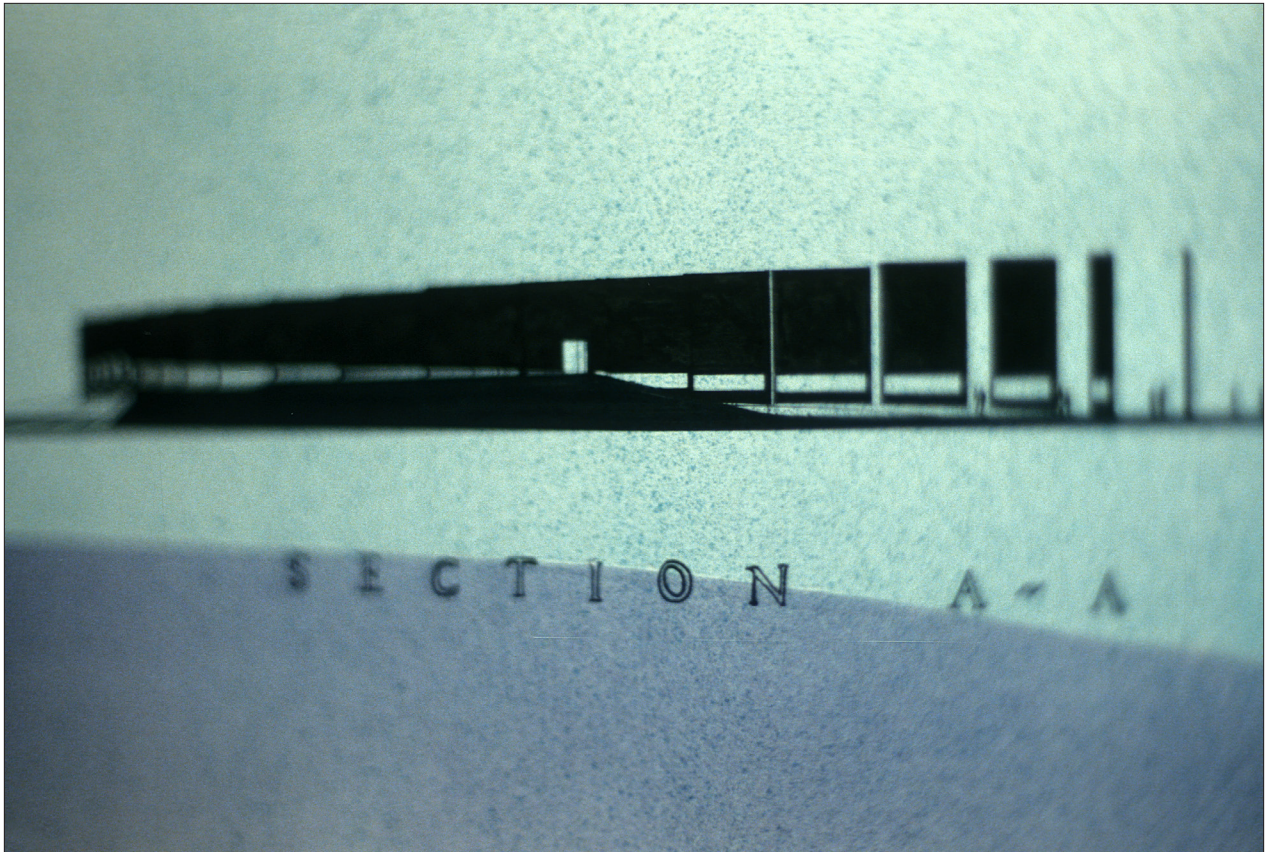


One of our earlier ideas consisted of an elevated flat platform with the names engraved on the paving stone. At the center of the platform was a nine inch diameter hole. This solution came about by knowing that the Uniform Building Code, at the time, required openings in a handrail to be no larger than nine inches in diameter. (Ostensibly to prevent a small child from falling through. It has since been revised to seven inches.) The other component was that we contacted the drilling engineers at Exxon and asked if they could drill a hole nine inches in diameter and more than fifty-nine thousand feet deep. One foot for every American who died. Because Vietnam was the hole that once you got in, you could never get out. The Engineers said, "Yes, we can drill a hole like that." And for the time being, the idea stayed on the table.

During the time of research and ideation, I would get phone calls from designers all over the country. Friends who wanted to know what I was thinking, what my team was doing. Very late one night, I received a phone call from an architect friend in New York. I will call him David. David, a Vietnam vet, was pretty well drunk and was not interested in my ideas, but wanted to tell me his. He said, "So, here's the deal. Smack-dab in the middle of the site, there is an old style 60's phone booth with a bi-fold door. OK?" I said OK. And he said, "And you go into the booth and there is this big heavy phone book where you look up somebody's name, and then you see there is no address, only a serial number, and you put your dime in the slot and (rotary) dial the serial number. A connection is made and a voice comes on and says, "That number has been disconnected and there is no new number." Click. Bzzz.

I don't remember if I was able to make a response either to David or to his Idea. I did tell my teammates the next day and there was a long silence before we could do anything.



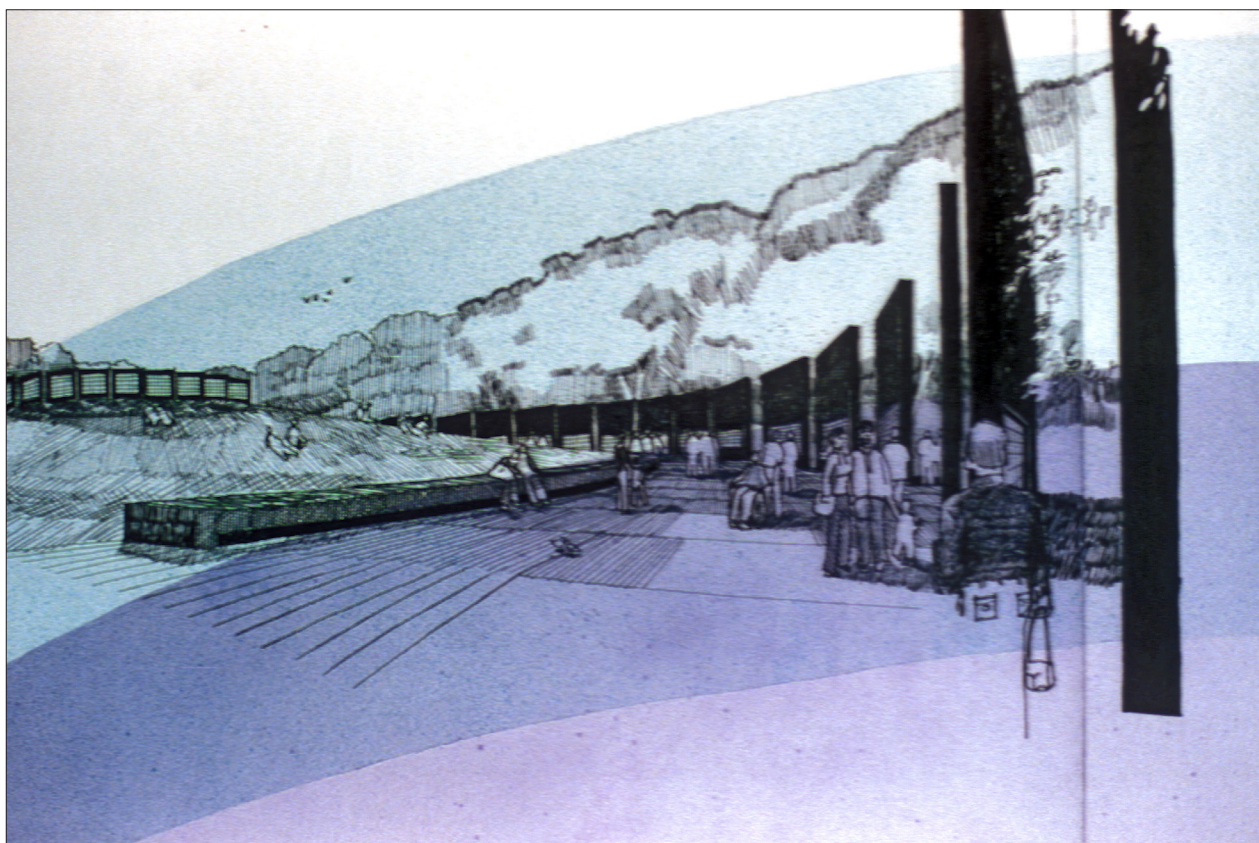


No matter how much you have been moved by the existing Vietnam Memorial, any reasonable critique would have to recognize there are some serious problems with Maya Lin's solution.

The competition rules clearly stated that it was not acceptable to have proposals which went down into the ground because of the water table. What this means is that Maya Lin's proposal broke the competition rules and still was awarded first prize. Regardless of the august jury, it was sad, unfair and unprofessional. It cost hundreds of thousands in underground drainage structures to get that water back into the Potomac River and if you want to see the proof, Henry Arnold's (Landscape Architect) office did the working drawings.

By contrast, our proposal consists of a spiral up-hill ramp with a series of black granite wall panels inset with glass blocks where the names are inscribed. The wall panels decrease in size as they progress up the hill while the glass block name panels increase in size in order to display more names. The glass block portions are internally illuminated, making the names visible at night and form a stripe of light around the hill. There were no provisions for lighting in Maya Lynn's original proposal.

We decided to utilize the spiral form because it was in keeping with the mounded hill form we had chosen to get away from the water table problem and because the image of the ever tightening spiral reverberated the Vietnam experience and forced you to exit the same way you had come in.

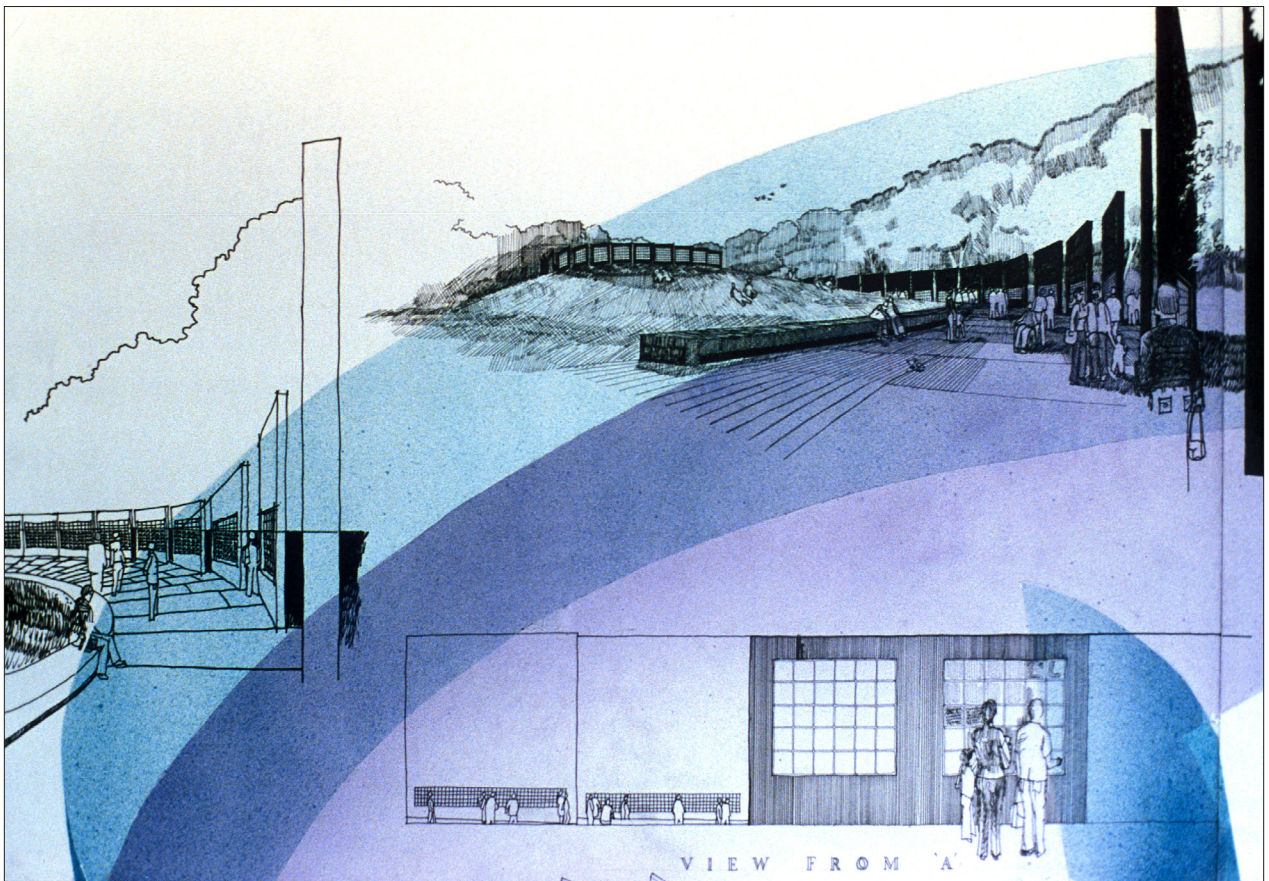
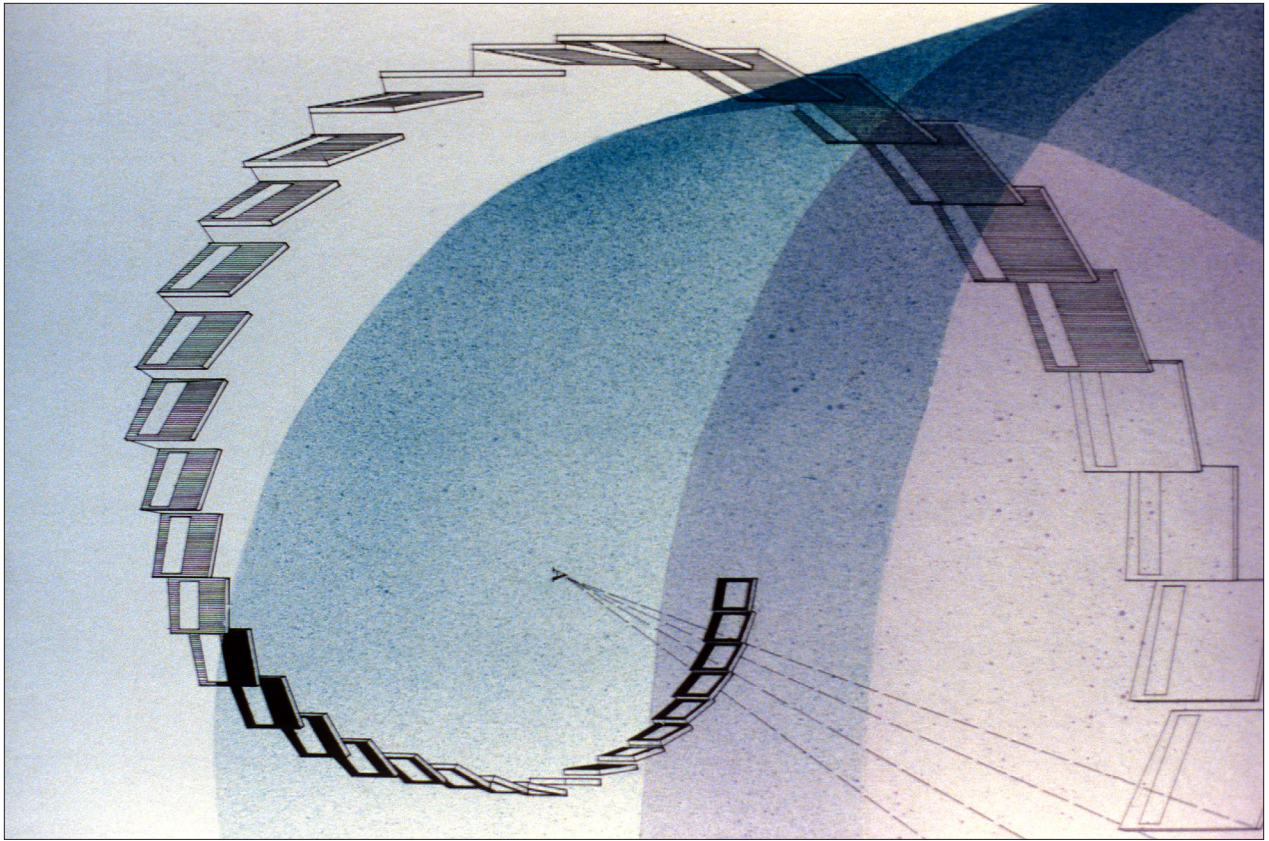


All the name panels in our proposal are touch accessible from wheel chair height. Any body who knew what a 'Bouncing Betty' was would not have placed so many names out of reach of those in a wheel chair. The pavement extends all the way up to the wall. Not so in the solution that was built.

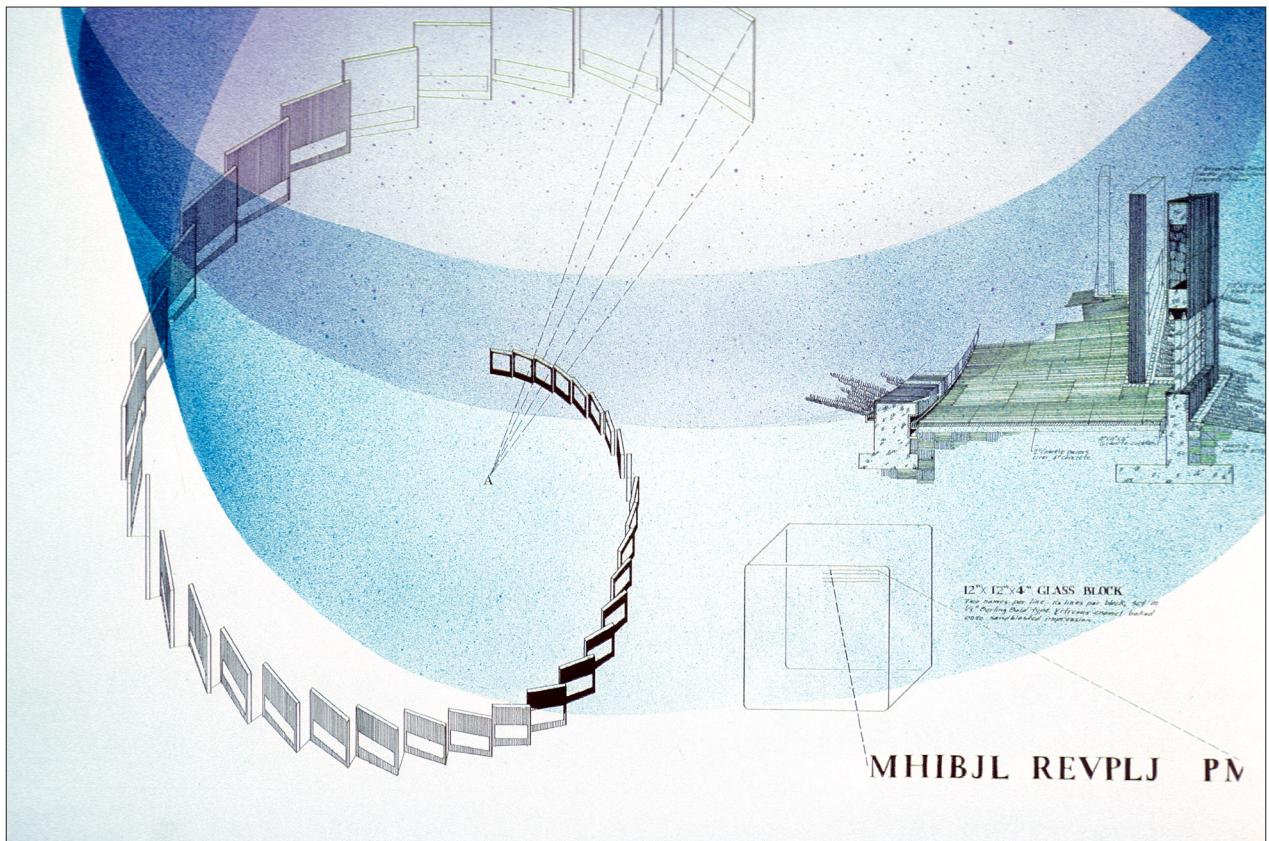
All our names were arranged in alphabetical order by year. The present system requires you to look up the deceased in a dog-eared book and then search and count panels. It is an unnecessary burden.

Our proposal provided a continuous strip of a seat wall at the side of the walk across from the wall panels. A lot of people are not able to stand when they are in the presence of the name of a friend or family member.











So what this comes around to is not sour grapes. I think The Vietnam Veterans Memorial to be one of the most moving public spaces produced in America in the twentieth century. That doesn't mean it is perfect. It is fraught with difficulties where significant problems were either overlooked or simply not addressed. The final blow is that the organizers lied to the competitors. The book of photographs of each submittal was never produced. The photographs were apparently taken, but shared the same warehouse oblivion fate as that box belonging to Indiana Jones in 'The Raider's of the Lost Arc.' Never to be seen again. Obviously, they did not want warring factions fighting in public about which was a better alternative to Maya Lin. The sad part is that the design community was not strong enough or interested enough to make a big stink about broken promises / contracts. Some art historian's dissertation may take it up in the future, but for now we can only hope a few more stories like this one become available.