

## *The shifting landscape of public remembrance*

BY JANE WHITEHEAD







**It's a park, a gift,** a place of remembrance. Just don't call it a memorial, says Donald Tellalian, architect and designer of the Armenian Heritage Park on Boston's Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway.

Tellalian's circumspection springs from a 12-year journey to create the park, in which an original idea for a memorial to the Armenian victims of mass killings by Ottoman Turks during and after World War I ultimately was realized in the form of an urban respite that celebrates all immigrants' contributions to American life. "For many years, we just couldn't get this project on track," said Peter J. Koutoujian, Sheriff of Middlesex County and honorary chair of the Armenian Heritage Foundation Executive Committee, at the rain-soaked dedication of the park on May 22 this year.

As the story of one community's emotionally driven, tenacious promotion of a contested memorial, the Armenian Heritage Park saga resonates with contemporary currents in 21st-century memorial making in terms of subject matter, motivation, and design vocabulary. It is a tale of how flexibility, persistence—and a significant dollop of private money—propelled a controversial project through a thicket of objections to get sited, designed, and built.

As with many things in Massachusetts, politics played a key role. In 2000, Koutoujian, then a state representative, sponsored a bill with a provision directing what was then the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority to study the feasibility of constructing "a monument to the Armenian Genocide of 1915–22." No location was specified, but by August 2006, a coalition of 37 community groups calling itself the Armenian Heritage Foundation had an initial agreement with the Turnpike Authority to develop an awkward half-acre parcel on the Greenway, between Quincy Market and Christopher Columbus Park.

But as *The Boston Globe* reported, even after the proposal had been given the go-ahead in principle by the Mayor's Central Artery Completion Task Force and the Boston Redevelopment Authority, the memorial issue remained "highly charged." Opponents claimed the special legislation bypassed the competitive design process for other parcels on the Greenway. Boston

Mayor Thomas Menino and Rose Kennedy Greenway Conservancy officials fretted about opening the new 1.5-mile-long urban park to a rash of competing ethnic memorials. It even risked becoming embroiled in the geopolitical debate over whether the slaughter of Armenians should officially be termed a "genocide."

Luckily, the project had in Tellalian a designer who was sensitive to the imperatives of civic space on the Greenway. Starting in 2004, Tellalian, principal architect of the National Heritage Museum in Lexington (while he was at Shepley Bulfinch), convened a committee of 12. They met in members' houses and church basements, sketching a design that would be, in Tellalian's words, neither "Mother Armenia holding the child aloft" nor a *khatchkar* (a stone marker in the form of a cross) in the middle of a grass plot. "This was going to be on public space in downtown Boston, and whatever message or memory it wished to commemorate, it had to be a well designed and welcoming urban space," he said.

It certainly didn't hurt that the foundation was on track to raise more than \$6 million in private funds to pay for the park's construction and maintenance, endow a series of lectures on human rights, and fund multicultural programming.

## Governments have long appealed to memorials as a way to unify diverse populations.

Tellalian's final design has two key elements. A 60-foot-diameter labyrinth of granite pavers, set in a lawn, has a central water jet calibrated to rise or fall according to prevailing wind speeds. In counterpoint to the ground-level labyrinth—an ancient aid to meditation—an abstract sculpture rises 15 feet from a circular reflecting pool in the form of a split dodecahedron, faced with black mirrorlike powder-coated aluminum panels.

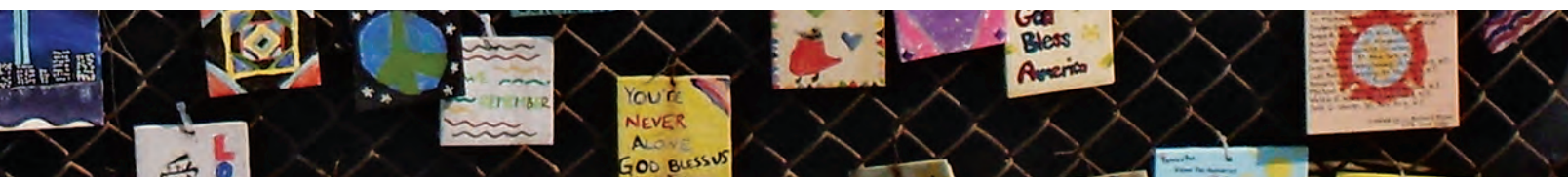
The idea for the 12-sided sculpture came from a stacking geometric toy Tellalian found in a gift shop in Rome in the mid-1960s. The shape's property of coming apart and nesting in different configurations seemed

### OPPOSITE

*Tiles For America*, a 9/11 memorial created by children and families around the world, erected on a fence in Greenwich Village, New York City. Photo: Kathryn Steed, 2007.

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See a slideshow of the Armenian Heritage Park at [architectureboston.com](http://architectureboston.com)



to him a perfect metaphor for immigrants pulled from their birth communities and forced to reshape lives in a new country. To dramatize this dynamic process, the sculpture, which has 32 possible forms, will be re-configured annually.

The inscription on the reflecting pool's plinth marks the gift of the park to the people of Massachusetts and the City of Boston from the Commonwealth's Armenian-American community, and honors the 1.5 million victims of the Armenian Genocide and those of subsequent genocides. But it also celebrates "the diversity of the communities that have re-formed in the safety of these shores."

Governments have long appealed to memorials as a way to unify diverse populations, according to James Young, an internationally known authority on Holocaust memorials. The unspoken message: "Remember these things as though they happened to you."

Young, a professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst who served on the jury that reviewed more than 5,000 submissions for the National September 11 Memorial at the World Trade Center, believes a successful memorial design should not produce "closure" in the traditional sense. "Memory's an animated, live

thing that really depends on being unforeclosed, open to evolution, to change." Contemporary memorial designers, he said, aim to create spaces "for multiple and competing memories, without overdetermining a particular story, a particular narrative."

And memorials have become more democratic over time. "The conventional memorial process often had to do with heroic figures, leaders, generals," said Alan Plattus, professor of architecture and urbanism at Yale University School of Architecture. "Now there are strong constituencies for memorializing a broader range of history—people understand that the cumulative national heritage needs to be more inclusive." Foremost among those groups have been immigrants and African-Americans, he said.

Erika Doss, professor of American Studies at Notre Dame University, has documented a plethora of recent memorials to groups as diverse as executed witches, victims of lynching, and cancer survivors. In her book *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (reviewed on page 57), she sees a society gripped by "an obsession with issues of memory and history, and an urgent desire to express and claim those issues in visibly public contexts."



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This impulse perhaps found its most vivid expression in the proliferation of local tributes following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. “Every community wanted a 9/11 memorial,” said Michele Bogart, professor of visual culture studies at Stony Brook University, who served as a member of what is now the Public Design Commission of the City of New York from 1998–2003. The brief of the commission is to review proposals for any permanent structure on city land.

“People claim ownership over memory,” said Bogart, “and the battle is over how people want to remember particular individuals.” In the year following the attacks, Bogart said she and fellow committee members wrestled with the proponents of community-sponsored memorial projects that were, in their opinion, inappropriately personal and funereal for civic spaces. It’s a charge that Tellalian, in Boston, determined to avoid from the outset. “We don’t want to be known just by our misfortune,” he said. “We don’t want to heap ashes on our heads.”

Plattus, at Yale, discerns another trend in contemporary memorial design: a move away from representation. Decades of acclaim for Maya Lin’s uncompromisingly minimalist, abstract Vietnam

Veterans’ Memorial (1980–83) have eased the sting of contemporary criticism of her design as “a black trench that scars the Mall,” in the words of Vietnam veteran Tom Carhart in 1981. Since then, said Plattus, there has been “a real groundswell—not unanimous, but pretty substantial—that this was the way forward in making memorials.”

Consciously or not, the design that evolved for the Armenian Heritage Park reflects these principles. It uses abstract, geometric forms (no figurative representation of “Mother Armenia”); it evokes the broader historic struggles of all immigrants, not only Armenians; and—if successful—it will offer multivalent possibilities for interpretation shaped by visitors’ own histories.

A week after the dedication ceremonies at the Armenian Heritage Park, Tellalian shows a visitor around the site where he intended that memory “should resonate in a hopeful and celebratory manner.” A group of teenage tourists pose in front of the sculpture. A small boy stands in the middle of the labyrinth, daring the central jet to rise and soak him. And on the rim of the reflecting pool, their long stems resting in the water, someone has placed 10 red roses. ■



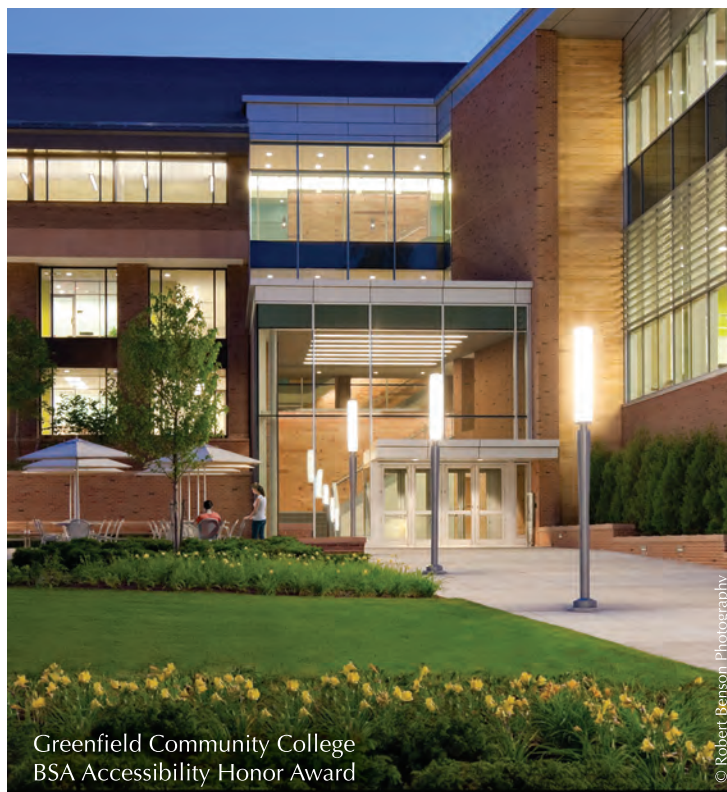
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