

Camp Barker Memorial: From Object to Urban Mediator

KATIE MACDONALD

University of Virginia / After Architecture

KYLE SCHUMANN

University of Virginia / After Architecture

Located in northeast Washington D.C., the Camp Barker Memorial responds to the landscape of American monuments that valorize performance in battle, instead taking form as a series of spatial markers which convey a complicated history. The memorial was designed and commissioned in early 2017, before the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville heightened national attention to the sustained symbolism

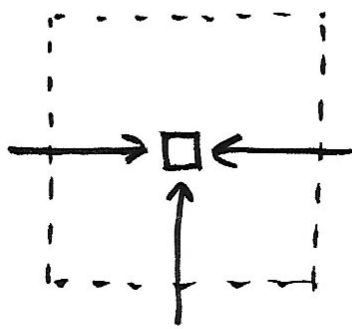
of Confederate Civil War monuments, and completed in mid 2019, before the global Black Lives Matter protests of 2020. The project's development corresponds with a period when the role of Civil War monuments is being reconsidered and advocates for the significance of counternarratives.



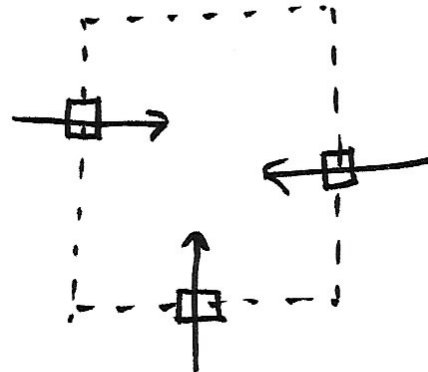
Figure 1. Vermont Avenue NW portal. Image by Sam Oberter.



Figure 2. 13th Street NW portal. Image by Sam Oberter.



MEMORIAL AS OBJECT



MEMORIAL AS THRESHOLD

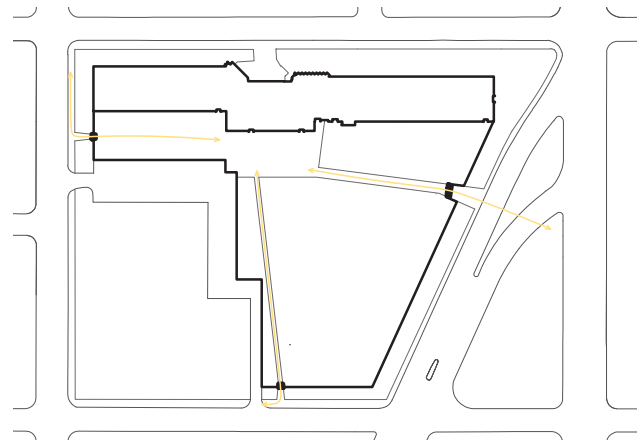
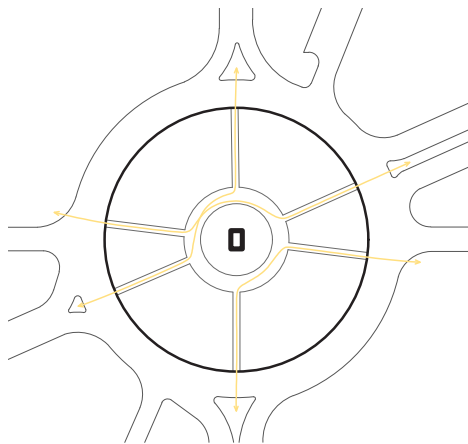


Figure 3. Nearby Logan Circle - Memorial as Object; Camp Barker Memorial - Memorial as Threshold. Image by authors.

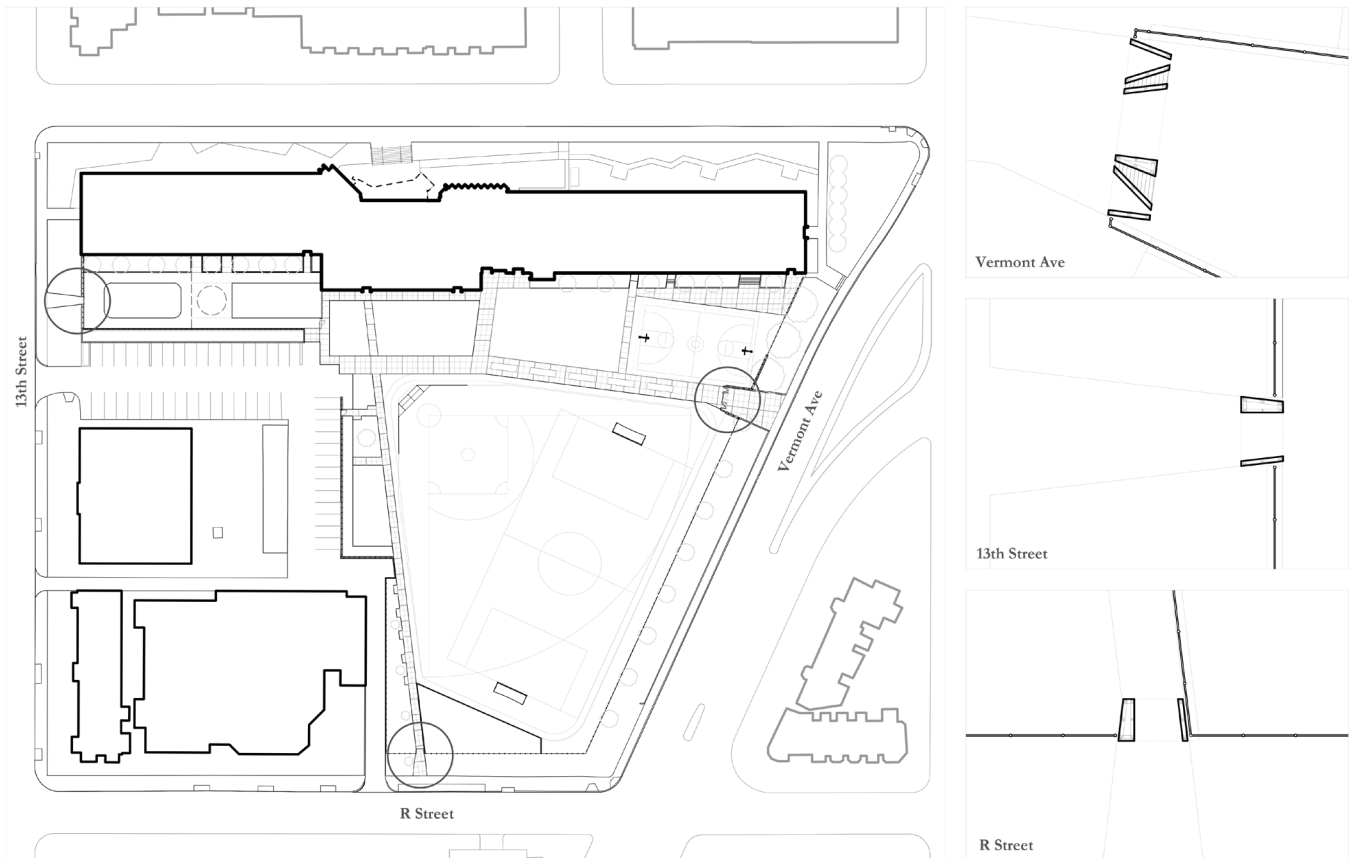


Figure 4. Site plan and portal plans describing integration with perimeter fenceline. Image by authors.

MONUMENTS AND MEMORIALS AS OBJECTS

L'Enfant's plan for Washington D.C. laid out the capital with a grid of secondary streets punctured by diagonal grand avenues, the intersections of which create circles and plazas that anticipate central, objectified monuments. The avenues point toward the National Mall, a central commons punctuated by object buildings—the White House, the Capitol, the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, among others. This landscape extends a longstanding model of heroic memory, propagated in cities and public spaces worldwide.¹ A notable exception is Maya Lin's controversial Vietnam Veteran's Memorial, offering welcome relief from the Mall's parade of objects with its cut through the landscape.²

Recently, public historical markers have begun a shift from heroic war monuments that inspire pride to markers which shed light on and address injustice and erasures. In 2020, some two centuries after its founding, the University of Virginia physically acknowledges the role of slavery in its creation with Höweler + Yoon and Mabel O. Wilson's Memorial to Enslaved Laborers; while Jefferson's contouring of the earth obscured slave labor from view, a new ring of granite embeds the terrain with a reminder that slavery shaped the very land below.³ Others have confronted the heroic

monument by reimagining the hero. Kehinde Wiley's *Rumors of War* draws gravitas from its siting at the end of Monument Avenue in Richmond, a grand boulevard marked to this day by Confederate heroes on horseback.⁴ Wiley's equestrian, a black man clad in streetwear, elevates an identity rather than a specific hero—a rebuke to the capital of the Confederacy and its depiction of southern patriarchy.

A CONTRABAND CAMP IN THE CAPITAL

The Camp Barker Memorial answers a brief for the design of three entry gateways to an elementary school by framing and revealing the site's history as a Civil War-era contraband camp.⁵

A typology specific to the Civil War, the contraband camp emerges from a legal loophole and holds a complicated legacy. Because Confederate forces considered enslaved peoples "property", Union forces were able to negate the Fugitive Slave Act, which called for those who had escaped enslavement to be returned to their enslavers. Instead, the rules of war allowed for the confiscation of enslaved people as contraband property. As a result, the contraband camp came into being as a Union establishment where those escaping slavery sought refuge from Southern enslavement. However, living



Figure 5. Vermont Avenue NW portal. Image by Sam Oberter.

conditions were harsh, and Union forces continued to limit occupant rights.

Initially constructed as Union barracks, Camp Barker later became a contraband camp. Residents experienced cramped, poorly ventilated spaces, food and clothing shortages, and poor sanitary conditions, working for meager wages. However, occupants also gained access to education and religious gatherings.⁶ In the aftermath of the war, the site gave birth to a longstanding African-American community just blocks from the heart of the Capital.

No visible trace of the former living quarters or indication of the site's importance persist on the site, though human remains and artifacts have been unearthed.

MEDIATING URBAN FABRIC

The Camp Barker Memorial takes shape as a series of thresholds integrated into the fenced perimeter of a public elementary school. The site, which encompasses an entire

urban block, is bounded by the linear school building to the north, while fencing on the east, west, and south sides encloses the school grounds which double as a public park.

The memorial portals simultaneously address the history of the site and its recreational grounds. Intervening in each of the three fenced elevations, the memorial takes the monument off its pedestal and puts it at eye level, physically and visually accessible to the public—a series of thresholds that visitors must pass through to access the grounds. Gates incorporated into each portal can be closed while children are out on recess, but otherwise remain open to the public.

MATERIAL MEMORY

The entry portals recall the informal timber buildings of Camp Barker through wood-clad structures that allow for passage and shading. A continuous folded plane forms each portal's floor, walls, and roof. On the playground side, smaller side wings create habitable spaces that engage the scale of the child. A liner of brass—a material usually too precious for



Figure 6. Model. Image by authors.



Figure 7. Bas reliefs by sculptor Vinnie Bagwell. Image by Sam Oberter.

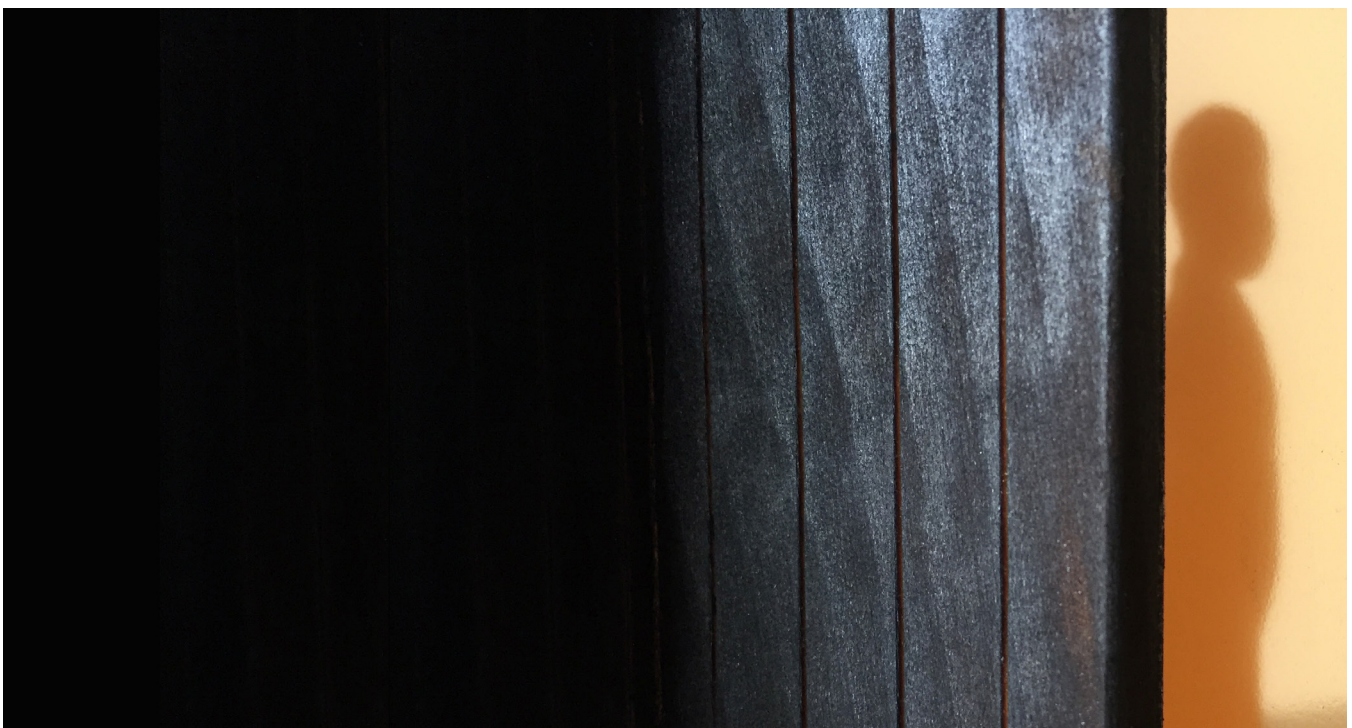


Figure 8. Model photograph highlighting material palette of charred oak and naval brass. Image by authors.



Figure 9. R Street NW portal. Image by Sam Oberter.

unsecured public space—invites reflection and casts a warm glow. Standing within the portal and looking into the brass surface, one can view the outline of one’s own reflection and the surrounding colors, a kind of visible ghost that removes personal identity in favor of a shared human condition.

In contrast to the white marble landmarks that define Washington D.C. and the nearby General John Logan equestrian figure at Logan Circle, the exterior surfaces of each portal are clad in charred wood, a finishing technique which fortifies the material against UV, fire, insects, and other environmental agents. Integrated into this palette are a series of narrative bas relief sculptures by artist Vinnie Bagwell which more overtly convey the site’s themes. The recessed sculptures, cast of blackened bronze to match the wood, are set into the thickness of the folding portals and depict key figures, moments, and texts in African American history.

The project responds to Adrian Parr’s charge that memorials might leverage the tension between past and present.⁷ It germinates the site’s contradictions for emotional impact:

the memorial beacons the elementary school, abstract space frames narrative sculpture, charred wood folds over a thin brass liner. Realities that might not readily coexist are forced to do so—the daily diversions of contemporary schoolchildren play out on a site where people once sheltered from captivity. It is contrast that makes the memorial a critical part of the elementary school campus. Present day students may day-dream of the children that learned on these grounds a century and a half prior: confronting the promise of emancipation but a long road to equity ahead. Against the backdrop of 2020, that fight is visibly ongoing, and the memorial, a reminder of what is at stake.

ENDNOTES

1. For instance, the collection of transplanted Egyptian obelisks that pinned together the urban spaces of Rome.
2. The Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial “was seen by many veterans as a way to transfer them from a subjugated to a dominant subject position. They clearly expressed the desire to have a memorial that used the standard visual vocabulary common to most monuments constructed in memory of war (bronze, marble, figurative, a strong vertical structure on a pedestal, with an indisputable representation of the veteran as a national war hero). One solution that was proposed entailed changing the wall from black to white, raising the wall to sit above ground and to add a flagpole at the vertex with an American flag,



Figure 10. Memorial viewed across the modern day schoolyard and former site of Civil War era Camp Barker. Image by Sam Oberter.

in effect turning the wall into a classical pedestal base lending support to a more nationalistically defined gesture waving the stars and stripes.”; Adrian Parr, *Deleuze and Memorial Culture: Desire, Singular Memory and the Politics of Trauma* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2008), 58.

3. Holland Cutter, “Critic’s Notebook: Turning Grief for a Hidden Past into a Healing Space,” *The New York Times*, August 16, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/16/arts/design/university-of-virginia-enslaved-laborers-memorial.html>.
4. Susan Stamberg, “‘Rumors Of War’ In Richmond Marks A Monumentally Unequal America,” *NPR*, June 25, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/25/878822835/rumors-of-war-in-richmond-marks-a-monumentally-unequal-america>.
5. Ira Berlin et. al., eds., *Freedom: Volume 2, Series 1: The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Upper South: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 329-332.
6. “Camp Barker,” *Evening Star*, October 24, 1862.
7. “[...] memorial culture is utopian memory thinking: one where culture inhabits the disruptive dimension of traumatic memories, which also entails a little bit of forgetting, while simultaneously bringing forth a sense of agency. The utopian dimension of memorial culture simultaneously presents the movement of collective agency and the materiality of concrete life. Hence, at its most successful, it avoids monumentalizing the past, choosing instead to tension the past with the present, while joyfully looking to the future.” Parr, *Deleuze and Memorial Culture*, 58.