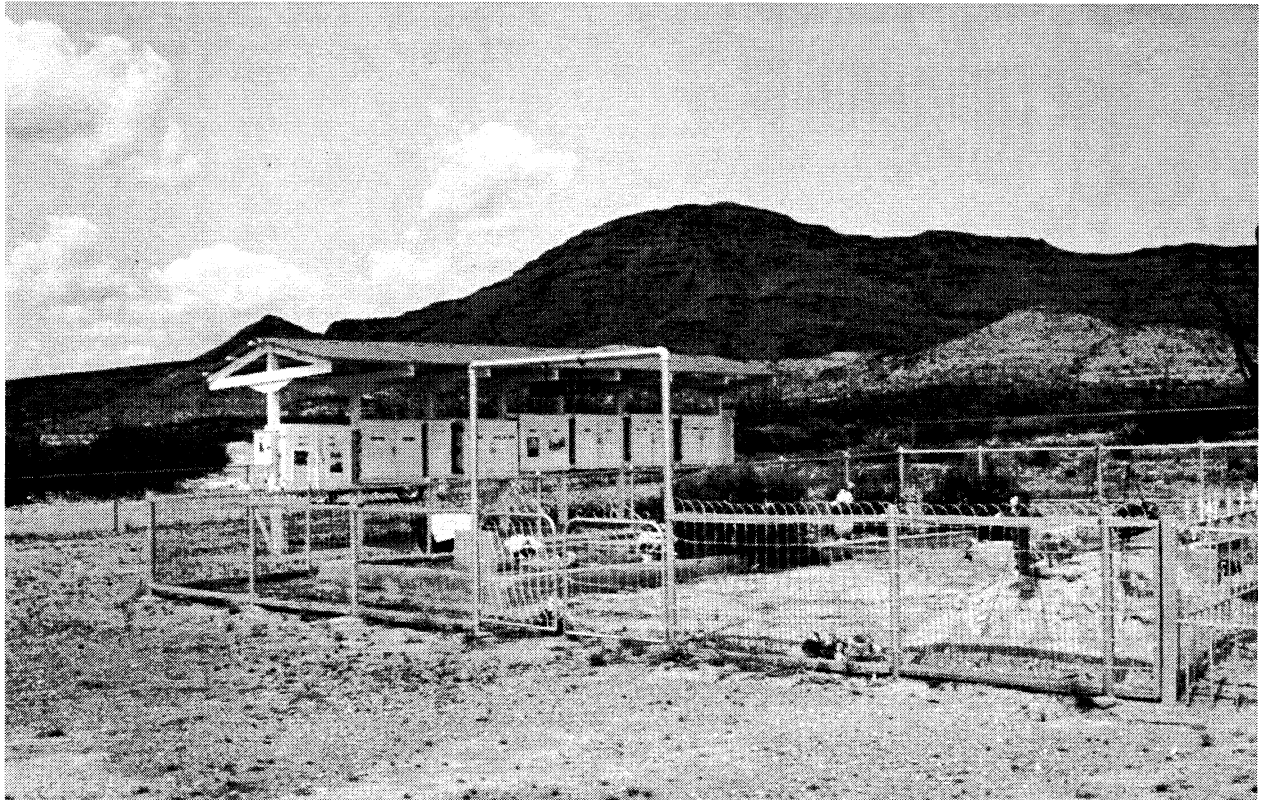


# Behind the Fence

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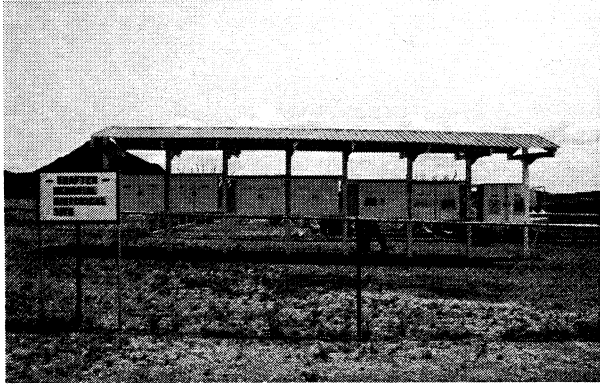


## Memorial

A monument is a marker of memory - a means by which we remember and communicate our history in a physical sense. Since memory itself tends to be unstable, we mark the landscape in an attempt to make something visible; sending our imagination back into history. The simplest story raises fundamental issues regarding subjectivity, representation, and fiction when it is translated into built form. Through research and design I have been examining how to use narratives to connect memorial constructions to a designated site, where the memorial commemorates some aspect of the site. In order to investigate what is being told and the means of telling I began examining the procession through spaces, the registration of human scale and the types of materials used to convey a forgotten history.

This presentation will discuss two memorial projects that commemorate forgotten landscapes. Both constructions address the relationship of memory and the scale of the domestic. How-

ever, the end result of what is to be remembered and how it is conveyed is quite different. The first site is a memorial in a silver mining-ghost town in Texas where the history of the former residents is on display for all that might discover it. This well kept memorial is only one of a few buildings that is still standing in a desolate desert town, it marks the difficulty the residents experienced while living in such a secluded mining town. The mines were the only form of industry and income, as they were emptied, the houses became vacant, eventually fallen to ruins. The second site is an unmarked burial field for patients of a now abandoned mental asylum in Long Island, New York. As a part of design project, I designed a construct to mark this once secluded site. It is my intention that the marker would address the deliberate attempts that have been made to erase what is below the ground, in the hopes that future residents will re-occupy the surrounding land.



### The First Site - Shafter, Texas

The town of Shafter, is located about 60 miles north of the Mexican boarder. (fig. #1) This once populated silver mining town is now a sandy desolate landscape dotted with partial footprints of former building and roads that mysteriously lead to nowhere. The town population is currently fewer than twenty residents. From the main road as you approach the boundaries of Shafter, signs advertise the Memorial Historic Site located in Brooks Cemetery. After passing the second sign you are suddenly made aware that there is no more town to speak of. The signs lead you through the remnants of what was once the center of town. Now stone building foundations and an over grown cemetery are the features in this valley looking out onto the Chihuahua mountain range.

Located inside the boundaries of the fallen cemetery gates there is a long covered pavilion that is surrounded by a chain link fence. Inside the fence, there is a gravel path that leads to a pavilion that is constructed out of wood, metal, cloth and plexiglas. A metal roof spans over seven bays of cabinets that connect to form a two-sided wall. (fig. #2) Each bay contains cabinets that are accessible from both sides, which are numbered and latched shut. Visitors are instructed to sign and date their visit, before beginning to open up and examine what is on the inside. The guest book, next to the collection box is the first indication that there have been other individuals present.

Prior to the demise of Shafter, residents organized the collection of material to construct a written and pictorial history of the once prosperous silver town. The history of the town and the residents is illustrated inside the cabinets through newspaper clippings, marriage certificates, family photographs, letters, postcards and other forms of evidence that record the stories

and legends of those that fill the cemetery beyond the fence or those who have moved away. At the same time, the present state of abandonment is visible all around leaning graves, and empty caves in the surrounding mountains and a short list of signatures on the guest book demonstrate isolation. Beyond the chain link fence of the pavilion, the cemetery itself is overgrown and it is difficult to determine the boundaries of the site. The graves are mounds of sand and stone that are marked with metal pipes, stones, or wooden crosses.

The former residents of Shafter used common or residential construction to shelter their history constructing a literal story of the events that occurred. (fig. #3) The pavilion carefully tells a story chronologically ordered by those who are featured - an autobiography of sorts. The first cabinet contained the history of the town's settlers and the last cabinet lists the current residents. Built like a tool shed, the pavilion establishes itself like a displaced house that lacks an interior or exterior. From outside the fence, the pavilion resembles a house surrounded by a yard, but once in the fenced in area the construction resembles a room. The material is common lumber and cabinet hardware that are covered with a metal roof.

Once one is behind the fence inside the memorial, your attention is drawn to the large deep carved openings on the faces of surrounding mountains. The large openings of the silver mine shafts suggest why so many people took residence on such barren land. The mountains appear to be abandoned houses, with the memorial in the backyard. Since there are no longer houses to describe where and how people lived, we are able to gather information on who lived. Even with mimicking the scale and materials of the former houses, the pavilion suggests an image of the people not of the place.

Since, there are no longer any buildings to describe the town there is no place to enter except for the post office, which is in actuality the front room of a private residence. Nowhere, are you able to get inside and escape the elements of the dessert. It is as if the pavilion is the only place inside the town. Given this observation, the cemetery and the memorial pavilion appear to be an ideal double for the former town. "If every modern town presupposes a cemetery, every old cemetery, when discovered, indicates that a lost town was to be found nearby."<sup>1</sup> The necessity to leave a trace and display the history of such a remote place, prior to leaving makes this a marker for abandonment. Before visiting this site, I was investigating how to address the notion of abandonment in a separate design project. The memorial pavilion in Shafter, contributed to the manner in which I would address memory, landscape, and material with the subject and scale of the domestic.

### The second site - Kings Park, New York

While researching the result of deinstitutionalization or the closing of mental facilities, I came across a vast burial ground in the backyard of a new neighborhood in Long Island, New York. (fig. #4) Surrounded by chain link fences on three sides this six-

acre plot of land served as the resting-place for over 5,000 patients. For one hundred years the patients of the Kings Park Psychiatric Center were buried without markers.

Kings Park began like many other mental health facilities; the original idea was to give patients fresh air and refuge from urban pressures, with the kind of work that allowed exercise, therapy and job training. The selection of the land was important, since the patients were intended to live off the land. Prior to the 1950's patients grew their own fruit and vegetables and were employed in printing shops, dairy plants and shoe repair shops on the grounds of the hospital.

Established at the turn of the century, the facility consisted of three wooden buildings that were erected to house 55 patients on fertile farmland. The three wooden structures became a self-contained village with 151 permanent structures on 600 acres of land. Eventually, the hospital built its own road systems, water sewers, and power plants, in affect it became a self-sufficient community, for those who did not choose residence. Now over one hundred years later, the asylum is empty or "depopulated" due to the federal program of deinstitutionalization of mentally ill patients.

The asylum is a man made construction to remove people from society, this removal erases time and individual identity. In the early part of this century, the asylum was an exterior program, created by a society that believed fresh air and physical work would improve mental stability. However the disconnection of the patient to the landscape grew out of a society's disbelief in being able to heal mental instability. The majority of the patients were crowded behind layers of windows and walls, to become further detached from the landscape. 2

Since most asylums are state owned, the buildings are being readapted to accommodate other kinds of institutions. As the institution of the mental facility fades, our neighborhoods will inherit the land, history and the gigantic buildings. The abandoned buildings, with their barred windows, now pose problems. Some buildings are adaptable, but most suffer damage from neglect, or merely carry the burden of their history. Since, each facility has a burial ground, which dates the facility; it is conceivable that the cemetery may be the only physical mark that recognizes the existence of the previous patients. The majority of the hospital buildings are slated for demolition, while the burial ground is protected from desecration. Since the surrounding town developed because of the hospital, many local residents feel that two generations of time will be needed to forget about the isolation and stigma that has affected the area. Subsequently, the burial ground was located at the periphery of the facility; it is the first element to be absorbed into the surrounding community. It is my intention to record the history, marking the existence of the patients, instead of erasing it in order for new forms of occupancy to come fourth. Furthermore, by recognizing the site and its contents, the surrounding community can recognize its relationship to the facility to begin to move forward.

Sited on the highest point of the hospital grounds, the plot is



accessible only by an unmarked, narrow gated driveway, or by cutting across a private backyard and climbing over a fence. Adjacent to the burial ground is a new neighborhood, with houses not yet occupied. Their backyards look unto this uneven hallow field. As all institutional burial grounds are designed for efficiency of cost and space, all patients were supposedly treated equally. There are only a few visible markers on the six acres of land, and most of the markers are moved around once or twice a season in order to cut the long grass. The patient's number is located in a wax sealed, glass vial. The vial is either inside the coffin or buried above the coffin. This cemetery is all but forgotten. Here the unmarked grave or the potter's field represents the significance of a world without writing. The unmarked grave joins the mute and the ambivalent. Without a mark, there is no boundary or point between yesterday and today. 3

Visual features provide tangible evidence of some concentration of human activities, or in a more subtle sense as reflecting human values and intentions. In order to mark the site I began to investigate the scale of an individual relative to the size of the burial ground as well as the scale of the other buildings on the grounds of the asylum. For example, the entry of the tallest building, #93 *The Infirmary*, (fig. #5) depicts how scale is distorted. Just at the base of the building, directly at the center of the facade is a small portion of the building that mimics a single family home. Besides the gable roof, the dwarfed building is deco-

rated with architectural elements that address a much smaller scale, a domestic scale.

This “feature” was intended to mediate the experience of those visiting or entering the infirmary. It was believed that if the entry appeared less institutional, the patients would be less disassociated after entering the facility. Once in the building, there is little availability or exchange of any views beyond the bars of the windows. This vestibule of a building serves as a barrier between inside and outside. The now sealed entry resembles a crypt; it is as if the rest of the building is just a backdrop to this individual structure. (fig. #6)

At the rear of the building is a loading dock, by its very nature it recognizes the horizon but again it is dwarfed by the scaleless backdrop of the rest of the building. In front of and on the loading dock, I came across confinement beds that were used to transport patients in and out of the building, as well as provide a way to allow the patients fresh air. The attributes of the bed and its placement are extremely disturbing. Particularly, since discovering that the loading dock is actually the entry of the building for the majority of the patients, making the domestic vestibule a prop to comfort those visiting. The buildings and the patient bed represent the denial of the landscape or any allowance for the patients to maintain a connection to the world outside. The vestibule that is made to appear domestic and the discarded burial ground denotes the loss of the individual. Both the buildings and the burial ground announce abandonment. In addition to the scale manipulation of the entrances, the openings have



been precisely sealed with concrete block from the inside. The mason would seal the doorways from inside and exit the building through underground tunnels. The difference between locking the doors and sealing the openings of the building after vacating, leaves one wondering what is being protected. The sealed door exemplifies the lack of desire to ever revisit the building, as well as the need to seal the contents inside.

### History Crypt

In a series of collages, I transposed the vestibule with the burial field and the burial field with the vestibule. (fig. #7) The result: an object that was the size of a shed or a crypt and a space that is a threshold instead of a designation. The small building in the collage resembles one of many security sheds that are dispersed throughout the facility, or a shed that will eventually appear in the surrounding backyards adjacent to the burial ground. The exterior and the interior are inverted in the collages. This manipulation was intended to conceptually reveal or open up the sealed buildings and to privatize the nameless burial ground. The history or the relationship of the patients to the surroundings, as well as the resulting confinement of the patients resurface in built form.

The full-scale construction, “Here Lies...” is a burial marker

and a history crypt. It challenges the boundaries or limits of the confined body. It serves as a mnemonic object that describes the dialectic relationship between the interior and exterior of the site and the subject. Built like a shed and fashioned like a crypt, the interior and the exterior of the construction reverse onto one another. (fig. #8) It is the embodiment of the site in its totality, the building, the landscape, and the community. Here, the framing device, the construction, became the object of distortion, whereas, the framed material, the documents of deinstitutionalization, appear ordered and constant. The body extends into the space of the immediate experience.

I adopted the notion of a cabinet from the pavilion in Shafter, to assist in revealing the history of the residents and to recount the relationship of the facility to the surrounding township. Once all the information was collected, one could begin to piece together the significance of the site. However, unlike the memorial pavilion in Shafter, this construction would require the visitor to physically engage the marker beyond opening the cabinet doors. Intentionally, removing the comfort of being able to remain outside of the subject. I set out to assemble a spatial narrative that would relinquish control to the viewer/reader who puts together the sequences, fills in the gaps and deciphers meaning.

The history crypt is comprised of four parts - an entry, a platform, a cabinet, and two enclosures. Through an open shutter door, the occupant discovers a cabinet with a glass panel door. Inside the cabinet the shelves are lined with documents collected in the community that mark, record and govern the site and the patients. A platform frame separates the entry structure from the cabinet structure. The walls or enclosures of this "shed" are fabricated out of reused balustrades, which are pinned vertically to the platform allowing them to unfold. When the door is closed the encasement of the door will also lay flat on the surface of the ground. The interior and the exterior of the construction are at once the landscape, reversing onto one another.

The dimensions of the marker are closely governed by the scale of the body, at times accepting and altering the body in sequence. Like a monolith, the cabinet is the only element that remains upright. The visitor must first lower the hinged pieces and then circumnavigate the fallen elements in order to reach the cabinet. However, due to the positioning of the platform/frame, relative to the cabinet door, the visitor's body prevents accessibility to the documents. Only after attempting to enter, does one realize that one must leave the platform in order to access the contents of the cabinet.

Once "inside" the cabinet the visitor would be able to piece together the process of the closure and what is left behind. Some of the documents that I acquired from developers describe in detail the function, value and condition of each of the 151 buildings, as well as proposals to reoccupy the grounds. There are maps and plans that reveal the layout of various solutions: golf course, marinas, low income housing, government buildings, light industry, all of the plans deny or do not recognize the existing patient burial ground. Many proposals locate athletic fields in the particular zone of the burial ground.

## Narrative

Through narratives we shape the landscape, narrating time, events, sequence and the stories to be told. Narrative is about closure, the boundaries of events and the significance of the interpretation. The two constructions reveal the disjunction between the context of narration and the context or the narrated event. They are both fragments witnessed as a whole, and from within, there is a whole fragment, which represents a nonexistent, non-finite, artificial ruin. In the two memorials, the house as a ruin appears as half of itself and so denotes an absence, the tomb appears as a whole, a remnant of a pure past.

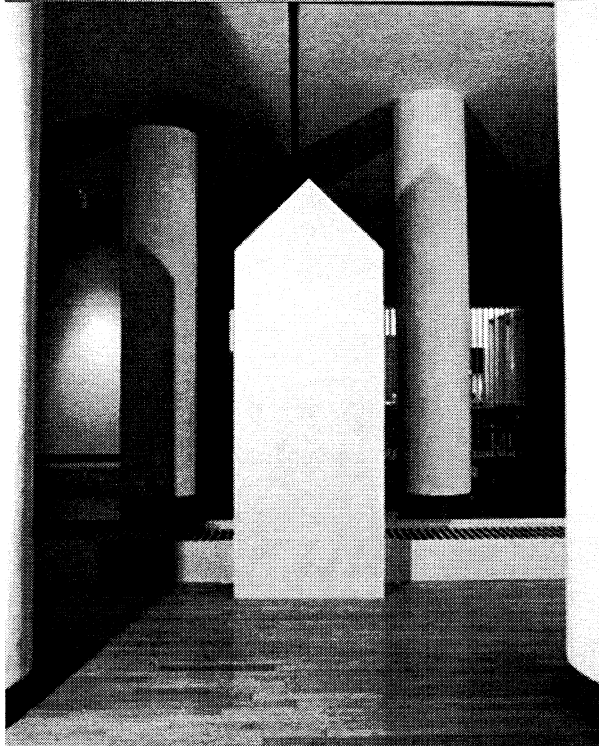
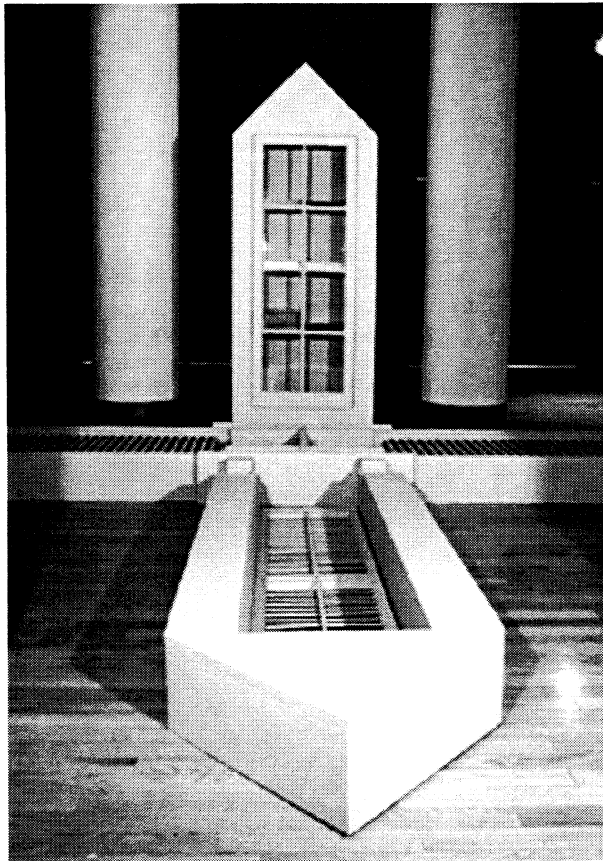
The narrative for the memorial in Shafter addresses the tourist that may stop to rest and the families that may someday return. The narrative of the burial marker addresses the adjacent residents as well as the surrounding community that grew up and around the asylum. The former, is an example of nostalgia and the latter an example of exposure. The two memorials address the concept of cemetery being a public place to house collective memory and its relationship of the community.

The two sites share the condition of isolation and abandonment - once heavily occupied by thousands of residents both have been outmoded for different reasons. In Shafter, it is the residents that narrate and construct the story. It's purpose is to share the legends of the families that worked inside the mountains and reveal the faces of those that once lived on this harsh desert terrain. It was constructed much like a room inside a home, basically it is a set of cabinets tucked under a roof. The boundaries between inside and outside are invisible much like the homes that once filled the landscape. The marker for the patient burial ground is a device that contains information for those who remain nameless. The marker conveys the history of the site containing the political/social documents that governed the patients and land. This "history crypt" records the enormous size of this asylum as well as the magnitude of confinement the residents experienced.

## Domestic Monuments

The memorial site in Shafter is fashioned like a dollhouse with relative inattention to the exterior. Like a dollhouse, one remains outside, there is no space provided for one to gain access to a protected space. As a result the visitor vicariously occupies the place that the pavilion attempts to record. While, in the case of the burial marker there is an interior space provided, but only if the occupant closes the construction around himself/herself. Instead of being protected or sheltered, one is confined. I have reversed the notion of the interior and exterior, in order to address the condition of being housed inside in the asylum. In affect, removing the privileged of the visitor to remain the objective outsider, becoming a part of its history.

By unfolding the object, the visitor creates an exterior space unfolding the narrative. Hence, occupying the frame between a closed space and an open landscape between confinement and unoccupied space. If we consider that the major function of a



closed space is always to create a tension or dialectic between inside and outside, we then create boundaries between private and public property, between the space of the subject and the space of the social.

The constructions recognize the relationship of the occupants to the landscape as well as the individual to the community. Since, both of these memorials are located in cemeteries the site is not neutral, the landscape literally contains the subject. Both memorials infer that it is in the house where we equate individual identity; the place from which we view the world. Ultimately, both projects are addressing the concept of the tomb continuing the house, with the familiarity of everyday life.

For many reasons, the death of others has become a private experience, no matter how universal. If the concept of cemetery is or was 'considered a public experience, to be shared with the world, as an aspect of our common humanity, with the epitaph and monument as devices to include society,' how do we regard the potter's field? 4 By not being marked, the patient's burial ground has lost its meaning both to the individual and to community. In contrast, the pavilion in Shafter attempts to keep a memory alive including the public in the death of a town and many of its residents. Both memorials attempt to form a relationship between the occupant and the landscape by employing the house as a metaphor to narrate a history. The tomb is in affect a double of a house, each cemetery a parallel projection of a village or town. As soon as one thinks of residing in a place, the question of death arises.<sup>5</sup>

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Ragon, Michel. Translated by Alan Sheridan. *The Space of Death*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1983 p. 39.
- <sup>2</sup> Geller, J. and Harris, M. *Woman of the Asylum*. Doubleday. New York, 1994 p. 179
- <sup>3</sup> Stewart, Susan. *On Longing*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993 p. 31.
- <sup>4</sup> J.B. Jackson– “From Monument to Place,” *Landscape* 17, no. 2 (Winter 1967-68) p.26
- <sup>5</sup> Ragon, Michel. Translated by Alan Sheridan. *The Space of Death*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1983 p. 25.

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