



Changing approaches to heritage

7th July bombings memorial

Julie Nicholson

I think what the Memorial will do in its narrative and the way it's been designed and built, is to give people a sense of 'this could have been me'.

Julie Wilkinson

On the seventh of July 2005 a series of four bombs went off in four different places in London. Fifty-two people lost their lives. There were immediate calls for a permanent memorial to mark the event. But what form should the memorial take, and where should it be sited? Decisions like this meant the memorial was four years in the making. Towards the end of this planning process we interviewed some members of the team behind the project. Julie Nicholson lost her daughter in the bombing at Edgware Road.

Julie Nicholson

At the very start of the process, before a design team had been appointed, we were given about six sites to view, and think about, and I think we were just about unanimous in Hyde Park for all sorts of reasons. It's, you know if you ask anyone, anywhere in the world to name some famous London locations, I think Hyde Park would probably be there. It's a very buzzy, thriving, living place, but also it's right in the centre of an area around it that is part of the thrust and busyness of London, and I think most of us couldn't see any point in having a memorial somewhere where it's not going to be seen.

Julie Wilkinson

In the team charged with creating the memorial, Julie was one of the four representatives of the bereaved families. Other members of the team included representatives from the Department of Culture, Media & Sport, and The Royal Parks. Colin Buttery is deputy director of The Royal Parks.

Colin Buttery

Obviously the eastern side of Hyde Park is dominated by Park Lane and interestingly one of the criteria was that the memorial should be very easily viewed by the public and having a visible link to Park Lane became quite an important part of the assessment process. The contrast to that was that we're clearly trying to make a quiet contemplative space so the traffic noise was also a factor that we were taking into account and we are fortunate in having a bund in the ground, so there's a sight level change between the memorial and the road which means that some of the noise of the road is actually deflected away from the memorial, even though the memorial is relatively close to the road.

Julie Wilkinson

The project board then set up a competition to find a designer. Julie Nicholson.

Julie Nicholson

It was a very interesting process, and the team that were selected impressed us, I think, on a number of levels – not least because of their great empathy and sensitivity and their willingness to work with families and they asked very important questions about what people's hopes and aspirations and desires were ... and you know, if you can imagine fifty-two families, an ideal memorial ranged from an ecologically-friendly worm farm to a great bronze eagle. But I think what everyone wanted was something that represented the fifty-two individuals, but also represented the four sites, but also expressed something about the collective nature. And that it would be something that stood as a thing of beauty, a work of art

but also something, which even in a hundred years time, people visiting the memorial would just stop and be able to have a sense of the narrative of the event.

Julie Wilkinson

The design team that won the commission were the architects Kevin Carmody and Andrew Groarke.

Andrew Groarke

It could be argued to be a risky way of winning the competition that was set out because we came to the interview, unlike the other candidates, and we put no scheme on the table.

Julie Wilkinson

The final decision grew out of a period of intense consultation between the architects and their clients. Andy Groarke.

Andy Groarke

The singular and the collective became a defining sort of phrase that carried us through consultation process. And the concept resulted in fifty-two cast stainless steel ingots, located in this particular special place in Hyde Park, each of these ingots representing a life lost. Now these stainless steel castings are arranged into four clusters, with the number of each life lost at each place forming the numbers of the clusters. And in turn blending those clusters together to form a collective composition of fifty-two elements.

Kevin Carmody

Yes, I think it's really important to return to the context of the park....

Julie Wilkinson

Andrew Grouke's partner, Kevin Carmody

Kevin Carmody

because that idea of the singular and collective works at a scale, you're talking about a very open park and some quite large trees, and you're approaching along paths to see the memorial, and what we wanted was something from a distance that blended like a field together to form one thing that you walk towards, yet maybe the memorial, through a changing of scale as you approach it, reveals slightly more information you realise that there's actually four clusters and then after that, as you move closer, there's actually fifty-two elements. And then after that, importantly, that each of the fifty-two elements is enscripted with information of the date, the time and the place of each of the lives lost. And that encourages people to discover these scales of realisation of the meaning of the memorial as they meander and move through the memorial.

Julie Nicholson

When some of the families started talking with the, well, even before the design team were appointed, about what we wanted the memorial to be, I think quite a lot of people felt that it needed to stand as, I don't know perhaps warning isn't the right, the right word, but as a....you know we say with wars or conflict of any kind that you know this must not happen again, usually with the full certainty that this probably will happen again, and I think if the memorial was merely about the fifty-two people that died, and didn't come with a sort, a kind of health warning that this is humanity at its worst then, you know, it kind of needed to represent something of that shadow side, and I think that what we have ended up with, with the memorial, will be at times full of light, but will also cast shadows.

Keven Carmody

And I think returning to our central message, it could have been anyone that lost their life that day. Now what's very very important in reinforcing that message is the fact that the names of the fifty-two people who lost their lives are not shown on the fifty-two standing stones. In fact there is a plaque at the end of the path, so the narrative that the final meaning of the memorial is realised actually after the experience of discovery and we have to remember that this is also in a public park which is very well used. Not only is that corner of edge of Hyde Park used for some very large events including kind of Live Aid and a number of concerts, it's

also a recreational area for London so the memorial needed to be placed almost withdrawn to the edge of those spaces but very conscious of the fact that people play softball and football around this space. It's still an open public space for recreation and there may be visitors to the memorial who are there necessarily to partake in the consideration of those lost lives and so in that sense we felt that the memorial shouldn't be heroic. It shouldn't be something that is of grand scale. It should be sensitive to the scale of the trees and the setting of the park.

Julie Wilkinson

Colin Buttery of The Royal Parks

Colin Buttery

The design process does have to reflect that some people may just stumble across the memorial, whereas for other people more closely linked to the incident, will have friends, relatives or family members who have been directly impacted upon, and they may well wish to visit the memorial on special days, special to their own family – it could be things like birthdays, it may well be other family-related dates that are important to them. But equally I think for people who are just moving through the park we anticipate that people may actually sit and have a quiet moment and actually contemplate what happened in the bombings, and I think that's very important for a public park, that they may just come across the memorial and feel moved by the memory of the people who lost their lives.

Julie Wilkinson

The architect Andrew Grouke

Andrew Groarke

We went through a very extensive consultation period with the families about what materials should form the message of the memorial and we concluded after several consultations that it would be very interesting to cast the elements with a very ancient process of sand casting. Rather like you would cast a bronze, but with a very modern contemporary material stainless steel. Now that has the advantages of indelibility as you can't scratch it or deface it – it's indestructible. It also has a very poetic message that in the solidification of the casting process these elements are formed within an instant and poetically not perhaps in a particularly comfortable way but reminding the visitor that this memorial has captured the life lost, of each of the fifty-two individuals, 'in an instant'. So the meaning and the making is very, very important. This material, as a result, is absolutely indestructible and had a unanimous vote in the end from the bereaved families for being something that will really stand the physical test of time.

Julie Nicholson

One of the really important things is that they make the unknown anonymous person real, and for a moment, alive again in the eyes of the person who might be reading the name on a plaque or engraved and I think that, these fifty-two people who were killed have no meaning in the memory or lives of people who didn't know them beyond the event and that's very difficult for those of us who are close to those people because our lives have been so overwhelmed and fragmented as a result and I think that with every memorial there's another group of families who have experienced that; other people whose lives were just cut down at the hands of others, so I think the fact that there are memorials now, I don't see them as, in themselves glorifying something but actually being a very very important and intrinsic way of saying 'these people existed and they must be remembered' even if the way in which they are being remembered is a very representative way.

Kevin Carmody

In no way through this process has this been a kind of heroic design process. We have evolved small steps of understanding with the families and tried to respond to what are often quite emotional reactions to ideas, materials on ...

Andy Groarke

Subliminal associations of the form or the size or the colour or the smell of a material. And how that may have related to their most poignant initial remembrances of where they were led

into the charred tube carriages, to take specific examples. It wasn't a comfortable design process but, necessarily not ...

Kevin Carmody

But what was very clear from the project board was that they asked us to maintain a professional approach and not to enter into any sentimentality with regard to the design.

Julie Nicholson

I haven't experienced many of the world's memorials, but my gut feeling, my instinct is that a memorial at its best must have a sense of awe and express something about the essence and the sanctity of human life just cut down. And one family representative on the board when we first saw the model of the memorial, which was a very moving and emotional and almost; it was a silent moment where we saw, and it had a massive impact on us, I mean someone had to leave the room because of the emotion of it, and then this wonderful man who was also on the project board said in quite an emotional way, which we all felt, "It reminds me of how those fifty-two people once stood tall in this life and in this world", and that's a wonderful thing isn't it that a memorial can speak that strongly.

Colin Buttery

I think the true tests of whether the design process has worked is going to be how the public react to it. I'm confident that the bereaved family group members are very happy with the design because they've been so closely involved with it, but the true test will be what your everyday Londoner makes of the design when they visit Hyde Park and just come across the design, and the memorial, and whether they like it or dislike it I think it will provoke within them the need to reflect on what happened on the seventh of July. And like artwork I'm sure there'll be some people who will really like the design, and there'll be some people who don't, but ultimately I think the true test will be what your average Londoner makes of the design.

Andy Groarke

And it's still a very very interesting process. It still feels very, as though there's a lot of vitality in the process and the families, the project boards, the design team could be so easily quite fatigued at the end of a very difficult process. In fact there's very very positive reaction to ongoing involvement of the design and consultation and just ownership of this thing that is going to be by the 7th of July by next year, going to be part of physically permanent London public space.

Julie Nicholson

I like to think that all of us on the project board have contributed to something which will be not only a gift to the families, but also a gift to London and for generations to come, so that we have contributed to the process of this 'gifting' which honours the dead, but hopefully will inspire the living.