2011 ASLA Design Awards

Vail Memorial Park
Merit Award
Sherry Dorward Landscape Architecture, LLC.

Design under $500,000 Construction Budget
Project Name and Location: VAIL MEMORIAL PARK, Vail, Colorado  (Design Category 1B)

Project Summary: Vail is a 50-year-old resort town with nearly 5,000 year-round residents but without a cemetery. In 1993, a bond issue to fund a municipal cemetery was defeated. Ten years later, a privately funded memorial park was proposed by a community foundation on Town-owned open space along Gore Creek in East Vail. The landscape architect worked with the foundation board to develop a conceptual master plan and led the public review process to gain its approval by the Town, then refined the design, produced construction documents for initial phases, and made community presentations to gain the broader public support needed to underwrite the cost of construction.

Construction Budget: Vail Memorial Park was dedicated in September 2004, and to date, two phases of the master plan have been constructed. The cost of the first phase (2004) was $203,000, which covered earthwork, extensive stone masonry, two wooden pedestrian bridges, the custom-fabricated entry feature, and the pathway network. In response to unexpectedly strong demand, a second phase was completed in 2008 for an additional $50,000. The first phase was funded entirely by donations; nominal fees for the purchase of memorials augmented donations to fund the second phase.

Purpose of the Project: The guiding mission of the project was to create a memorial park for the community that is entirely in keeping with Vail’s mountain surroundings and that uses the site’s natural qualities to enhance the park’s meditative and spiritual quality. The park is intended to be a secluded place where local residents and visitors who have an emotional attachment to Vail can hold intimate memorial services, bury or scatter cremation remains (no casket burials), and leave enduring memorials to loved ones. It was essential that the design be able to accommodate a public need while at the same time permanently preserve the site’s ecological functions and aesthetic value as natural open space.

The Site: The park site, a 13.5-acre portion of the historic Katsos Ranch in East Vail, is situated at 8,250’ elevation on the valley floor between Gore Creek and the steep flanks of Vail Mountain. In its drier mid-section, exposed to the view and noise of Interstate 70, the site supports grasses, sage, and a few scattered stands of lodgepole pine. Along the opposite edge of the site, against the base of the slopes, a thicker riparian screen of cottonwoods, conifers, and willow shrubs lines a natural drainage swale that runs lengthwise through the site parallel to the base of the slopes. There are no plans ever to extend utilities or roads to the site, which is accessed only by the Town’s 10-foot-wide recreation path. Limited parking is available in a trailhead lot near the East Vail I-70 exit, approximately ½ mile away via the recreation path.

Because the site adjoins Gore Creek, it has a high water table, and portions of it are vulnerable to flooding during spring run-off. Taking advantage of these seasonal hydrologic patterns, the Eagle River Water and Sanitation District (ERWSD) has built three shallow diversion channels from Gore Creek to inundate low portions of the site during springtime high water and thereby to enhance the growth of wetland vegetation. These small depressions and the larger swale are essential components of ERWSD’s wetland mitigation plan, offsetting a portion of the wetland area destroyed when its upstream reservoirs near Vail Pass were enlarged. Of necessity, these natural features and the wetland vegetation they will eventually support became essential defining features of the park master plan.

Role of the Landscape Architect: The landscape architect was engaged by the new foundation to develop concepts for siting and designing memorial elements and to take the lead in gaining approval of the proposed park by the Vail Planning Commission and Town Council. As a basis for conceptual design, the landscape architect conducted a basic site inventory/analysis, including an understanding of the complex hydrologic conditions on the site. Equally important was a sensory study of the natural aesthetic qualities of the site most amenable to creating a spiritual environment. With approval of the concept, the landscape architect then finalized the master plan and, after approval by the Town and ERWSD, prepared construction documents while the Board undertook fund-raising for the first phase. The landscape architect also managed the pre-construction bidding process and drafted design guidelines for memorial inscriptions and monumentation. No other design disciplines were involved, but the landscape contractor and the stonemasons were crucial to successful implementation of the plan.

Project Requirements and Special Factors: Direction from the Foundation board members provided initial parameters for the conceptual design. Among the points of consensus from the outset were that there should be no headstones, no structures, no site lighting, minimal terrain modification, and no disturbance to existing mature trees or forested slopes. It was also clear that the park would receive very little maintenance attention...
and that there was no way to irrigate new plantings except by seasonal overflows from Gore Creek. Any new plantings were to be native species consistent with those already existing on the site. Finally, the lack of auto access and a weight-restricted pedestrian bridge over Gore Creek for the rec path gave support to the conceptual rationale for a very low-key, understated plan. It was agreed that memorial services would take place only in snow-free months and that a golf cart would be made available to visitors who need it to attend scheduled ceremonies in the park.

Yet another fundamental requirement was the protection and preservation of all wetlands on the site. The Memorial Park plan took this principle a step further by designating areas on the site, principally in the lengthwise swale, where seasonal inundation could be increased and wetlands nurtured. ERWSD’s latest annual report to the US Corps of Engineers on the status of its mitigation efforts (2009) confirmed an increase in total wetland acreage at this and other designated wetland mitigation sites.

The Design: The primary design challenges were where to locate the quiet heart of the park and what form the memorials should take. The landscape architect avoided placing the core of the park in the expansive open meadows in the center of the site, opting instead to nestle it against the toe of the slope, where rugged, free-form memorial walls would seem to have a logical function (slope retention) and where mature trees would convey a comforting sense of enclosure, shade and privacy. This location also preserved uninterrupted panoramic views from the meadows and made possible the creation of a powerful experiential sequence of approach, entry into, and circulation on foot through the park.

The landscape architect’s master plan preserves the natural landscape virtually intact. Revegetation of the minimal disturbance from construction relies only on native grasses and forbs, which have fully filled in since the park’s dedication in 2004. Walking paths and a track for electric carts are made of permeable crushed stone and were laid out to take best advantage of framed view lines, as well as to avoid removal of trees. All paths and the two wooden bridges over the swale are ADA compliant.

Memorial elements are designed of natural materials (stone) used in natural ways that respect natural geomorphic and ecological processes. Memorial walls are composed of rectangular blocks of extremely durable, fine-grained sedimentary rock, selected from a quarry in Montana after an exhaustive search for dense, angular rock of a subtle but lively coloration. (Rounded granitic river rocks, plentiful locally, would not have been appropriate to the site or the park uses.) Other opportunities for memorialization are offered on pre-set boulders, stone benches, and large paving stones at the base of the memorial walls, all in the same family of source materials. Large flat boulders of the same geologic type ring two small ceremonial gathering spaces. Large erratic limestone boulders – typical here - were left in place.

Significance of the Project: A popular walking destination, Vail Memorial Park is widely acknowledged in the community as a place of special and unique character, one that illustrates the powerful effect a landscape architect can have when site qualities are beautifully married with a fitting site development program and sensitive design. Serving as a repository for communal memory and history, the park has contributed in significant measure to strengthening the sense of community in a highly transient town.

Sometimes less is more. Sometimes the design goal is a space that offers consolation, not animation, intrigue, or drama. Sometimes the result of a landscape architect’s creativity is an environment so natural that it appears, by design, hardly to have been disturbed. In a world-class resort that seeks to maximize activity and spirited human interaction, the Vail Memorial Park is a place in contrast - a place for solitude, quiet exploration, contemplation, and the solace of natural beauty.