Critics' Forum
Visual Arts

A Monumental Purpose: Armenian Heritage Park

By Jean Murachanian

After 12 years of planning and hard work, Armenian Heritage Park (also referred to as the Park), located in downtown Boston, Massachusetts, on the recently created Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway (hereafter, the Greenway), was finally dedicated on May 22, 2012. Built on public land, the ambitious project was conceived and funded by the Armenian community as a gift to the City of Boston and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The purpose of the project is to represent the contributions of Armenian immigrants, acknowledge the Armenian Genocide, and recognize the immigrant experience as a whole. The mere location of the Park signifies these intentions in explicit terms – situated in the heart of Boston's historic district near the Freedom Trail and within walking distance of the New England Holocaust Memorial, itself dedicated in 1995 to foster reflection on the Jewish Holocaust.

Armenian Heritage Park

With the completion of Armenian Heritage Park, I took the opportunity to include it in an art history undergraduate seminar I led this Spring on Holocaust/Genocide Museums and Memorials at the University of New England. Our class made a field trip to Boston to visit the memorials, as well as the Armenian Library and Museum

of America (ALMA) in Watertown, Massachusetts. It was a fruitful day, made even more memorable by our private tour of ALMA by curator Gary Lind-Sinanian. I was proud to have such prominent Armenian sites to take my students to and pleased with the prospect of direct comparison afforded by the juxtaposition of Armenian Heritage Park to the New England Holocaust Memorial.

New England Holocaust Museum

I find it noteworthy to add some important but telling facts about the class. My course was fully enrolled because the students were fascinated by the Jewish Holocaust, but … they had never heard of the Armenian Genocide. The students were primarily seniors, from a variety of majors, who were taking the class in fulfillment of an advanced class outside their majors.

Perhaps I should not have been surprised that my students had not heard about the Armenian Genocide, but it still gives me pause, particularly as an educator, that university students, even at the senior level, do not know about our greatest tragedy. Have we been so immersed in our collective pain and our quest for recognition that we have failed to make known the Armenian Genocide to the general public? Or have we simply not been vigilant enough in insisting on its acknowledgement? What is the role of each of us in this predicament? What can we, our institutions, and our memorials do to remedy this lack of knowledge outside our own community? And finally, what can we learn, if anything, from the example of the Jewish Holocaust?

In comparing Armenian Heritage Park to the New England Holocaust Memorial, my class unanimously concluded that the Jewish memorial was far more effective, both in terms of its didactic program and its emotional resonance. I was saddened by this obvious conclusion but believe we can learn from this example how individuals respond, both intellectually and physically, to memorials encountered within the cityscape. In general terms, my students found that the design of Armenian Heritage Park was too abstract to readily convey meaning, and it woefully lacked information about the Armenian Genocide and the Armenian people. This last point is particularly important, since – as suggested by the make-up of my class – the public remains largely unaware of the Armenian Genocide. Conversely, the design of the New England Holocaust Memorial was meaningful both in terms of its allusion to the death camps and its personal references. In addition, even though most people are aware of the Jewish Holocaust, the memorial, nonetheless, provides didactic information.

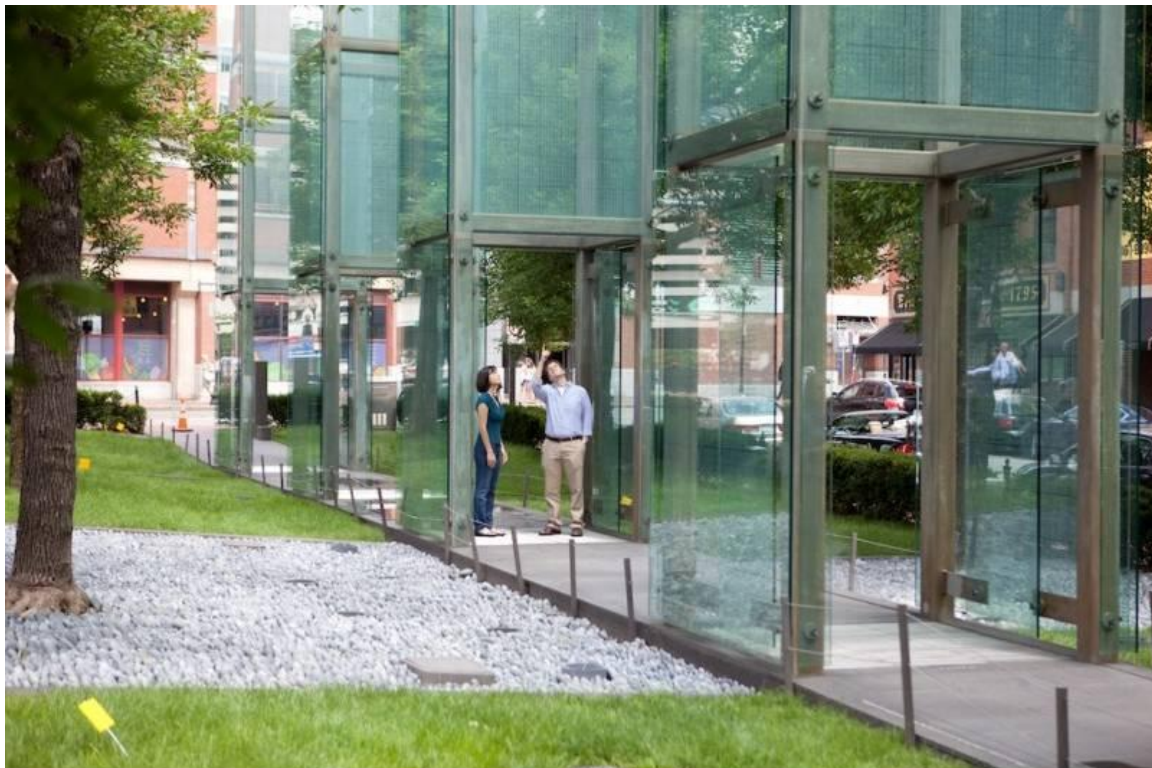
To be fair, Armenian Heritage Park is not strictly a Genocide memorial, but it incorporates a memorial in its design. The Park is comprised of two fundamental sections – an abstract sculpture and a labyrinth. The abstract sculpture, a black split dodecahedron (12-sided globe), "commemorates the immigrant experience" and is "dedicated to lives lost during the Armenian Genocide of 1915-1923 and all genocides that have followed," as noted on the monument's website. The sculpture is designed to allow for annual reconfigurations to reference "all who were pulled apart from their country of origin and came to these Massachusetts shores, establishing themselves in new and different ways." In other words, it represents the dispersion and continued reformation of the Armenian community post-Genocide *and*, in an effort toward inclusion, also alludes to the immigrant experience as a whole. The sculpture sits atop an elevated 16-foot reflecting pool wherein "its waters wash over its sides and re-emerge as a single jet of water at the Labyrinth's center." Benches curve around the base of the pool closest to the street, providing visitors with a space for contemplation, while overlooking the sculpture and the labyrinth beyond. An inscription along the base facing the labyrinth reads:

"Boston and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts have offered hope and refuge for immigrants seeking to begin new lives. The park is a gift to the Commonwealth and the City of Boston from the Armenian-American community of Massachusetts. This sculpture is offered in honor of the one and a half million victims of the Armenian Genocide of 1915-1923. May it stand in remembrance of all genocides that have followed, and celebrate the diversity of the communities that have re-formed in the safety of these shores."

As indicated on the Park's website, the labyrinth is "a circular winding path paved in grass and inlaid stone, [that] celebrates life's journey." The labyrinth, although not necessarily an Armenian symbol, has been utilized in the design because it is an ancient pattern that "has become a universal metaphor of peace, harmony, contemplation and healing." The labyrinth has four distinct sections, each of which is etched with a word marking the civic contributions made by the Armenian

immigrant community – Art, Service, Science, and Commerce. Visitors are meant to walk the path of the labyrinth and contemplate the journey and accomplishments of these people. At the center is a fountain, which symbolizes "hope and rebirth" of those that established new lives in Massachusetts, as signified by the reemergence and re-formation of the water originating from the sculpture. While Armenian Heritage Park symbolizes the experience of Armenian immigrants, it is also meant to have universal significance because it celebrates all immigrants and their unique journeys.

Needless to say, Armenian Heritage Park is an ambitious project, which involved a great deal of hard work, dedication, planning, skill, and financial commitment by those involved. Its funding by Armenian-Americans is a testament to the success and pride of the community. (It cost over $6 million, and another $1 to $1.5 million is currently being sought to fund an endowment to maintain the site.) Its location, on not only public land, but prominent public land, is significant. Symbolically, it commemorates the Armenian Genocide, honors the contributions of the Armenian-American community, and celebrates the immigrant experience as whole. These are certainly honorable and lofty goals, but is the Park effective? Does it convey meaning in a manner comprehensible to the average passerby, who, after all, is the primary visitor given its public location, and, I would argue, our intended audience given the need for public awareness of the Armenian Genocide? Yes, problems abound when dealing with the placement of monuments on public land, but let us take a look at the New England Holocaust Memorial for comparative purposes.



New England Holocaust Museum

The Jewish Holocaust memorial is comprised of six 54-foot high glowing glass towers, set in a row on a narrow strip of land along a well-traveled street near Faneuil Hall. The site is visible to motorists traveling along busy Congress Street, while pedestrians engage with the memorial by walking its length as they pass through the glowing glass towers, each one set over iron grates that emit warm, white billows of air. Each tower is named after one of the main death camps – Chelmno, Treblinka, Majdanek, Auschwitz, Sobibor, and Belzec – and they are etched with numbers which evoke those tattooed on concentration camp prisoners. Throughout the monument there are heart-wrenching quotes from Holocaust survivors. At the two entry points, there are didactic panels. From this brief description, it is obvious that the Holocaust memorial is eye-catching, symbolically intelligible, emotionally moving, and informative. It works on several levels simultaneously – the glass towers explicitly evoke the chimney stacks of the death camps, while the material they are made from alludes to Kristallnacht, and their form suggests a continued presence among the cityscape. Personal connections, provided by the six million etched victim numbers and the numerous quotes, serve to draw the visitor in with both the magnitude and the individual accounts of horror. Again, even though visitors are most likely aware of the Holocaust, the memorial includes information panels.

So what might be the obvious lesson here, if anything? It seems to me we attempted to convey too many ideas, were not explicit enough with our symbolization, neglected to include the personal element, and did not provide adequate didactic information. In our attempt at universalism, we simply failed to properly tell our own story. Significantly, the Holocaust memorial commemorates the six million Jews that died, even though almost six million other victims also perished in the Holocaust. The Jewish community emphasizes the Jewish loss because for them it is critical to recognize that Jews were explicitly targeted for extermination because of who they were, while other victims of the Holocaust (Poles, Ukrainians, Gypsies, homosexuals, the disabled, etc.) were conveniently swept up in the extermination plan. (See Edward T. Linenthal, "Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum" for further information on this topic.)

Yes, the meaning of Armenian Heritage Park is enhanced by consulting its official website and by the various programs that occur on its grounds, but ideally meaning should be conveyed by the site itself and the visitor's engagement with its various elements. My students were confused by the Park, even though we had discussed the Armenian Genocide and I had given them a print-out from the monument's website. As they moved through the Park, they were at a loss in making sense of its meaning, although they did enjoy resting on the benches and walking the labyrinth. However, a few did appreciate the progressive design of the dodecahedron and another, delighted by the labyrinth, later researched its meaning. Conversely, as they moved through the New England Holocaust Memorial, they were visibly affected. At the end of the semester, as one of my students, Michael Keenan, indicated in his design proposal for an Armenian Genocide memorial:

"I would like there to be quotes from the Armenian [G]enocide survivor victims as well as any other quotes from that time period. In Boston, the quotes that surrounded the Holocaust memorial were where the message of the Holocaust was truly conveyed. The quotes were powerful yet short and to the point, which made the reader connect more with the site. This to me was very powerful and I would like to implement that idea into this Memorial."

According to members of Armenian Heritage Park Foundation (hereafter, the Foundation), there are tentative plans to add didactic information to the labyrinth, which will highlight the contributions made by prominent Armenian immigrants, such as the Abstract Expressionist painter, Arshile Gorky. Apparently, details about the Genocide were minimized because the Foundation encountered outside political pressure. Hence, in an effort to appease outside parties and ensure that the Armenian community was represented on the Greenway, the Foundation made concessions and opted for a more inclusive message. To be fair, the Greenway, a 15-acre linear urban park created in 2008 from reclaimed land as a result of Boston's "the Big Dig," was established to allow various civic and ethnic groups to enhance the cityscape through the creation of unique public spaces meant to unify the city. The Foundation also decided to highlight other aspects about Armenians in an effort to move beyond the Genocide. Furthermore, rather than holding a design competition for the site, a committee of less than a dozen people decided on the form.

I leave you with several questions. Is a memorial/monument/park that seems to miss the mark in conveying meaning to the general public better than nothing at all? Have we been so overly sensitive to outside perceptions of our community that we have failed to be explicit about our suffering? Should we simply move beyond the Genocide, celebrate our accomplishments, and be grateful for any opportunity to participate in civic representation? Have we been so consumed with "recognition" of the Genocide that we have overlooked the fact that we need to educate and inform others first? Are we afraid to engage in heated debates about how we tell our story? As James E. Young discusses in "The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning," the New England Holocaust Memorial Committee encouraged "public debates on the merits and liabilities of the memorial." Young states further, "[W]here other communities had fretted over the unseemly appearance of squabbling and dissent, the committee in Boston encouraged it, and in so doing allowed debate to drive the process forward." I ask you, how can each of us make a difference in *our* legacy?

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