

## ***Cimitero narrativo: Disposizione rituale e riassetto*** ***Una proposta progettuale per il Michigan Memorial Park Cemetery USA***

### ***Narrative Cemetery: Ritual Arrangement and Rearrangement*** ***A Design Proposal for Michigan Memorial Park Cemetery USA***

*“Il cimitero narrativo” propone una riconsiderazione dei rituali americani contemporanei di sepoltura e dei metodi degli individui per commemorare. Un archivio di storie di famiglia è stato sviluppato per diventare un campo di monumenti confrontando diversi problemi all’interno della cultura contemporanea della sepoltura. Le narrazioni mantengono un ruolo fondamentale nell’afflizione, nel processo di “riassetto”. Il monumento narrativo impegna questo fenomeno interpretando ed esponendo storie del defunto su un campo di segni e monumenti. Segni personalizzati e tattili coinvolgono i parenti in lutto e costruiscono un ambiente coinvolgente per il rituale, in cui la presenza del singolo è sentita e immortalata.*

*“The Narrative Cemetery” proposes a reconsideration of contemporary American rituals of burial and methods of memorializing individuals. An archive of family histories is developed to become a field of monuments confronting several issues within the contemporary culture of burial. Narratives hold a pivotal role when grieving, in the process of “rearrangement”. The Narrative Monument engages this phenomena by interpreting and displaying stories of the deceased on a field of markers and monuments. Personalized and tactile markers engage the mourner and build an immersive setting for ritual, in which the presence of the individual is felt and immortalized.*



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Parole chiave: **Cimitero; Narrazione; (colore che sono) In lutto; Artefatto; Monumento**

Keywords: **Cemetery; Narrative; Mourner; Artifact; Monument**

## P roject context

“The Narrative Cemetery” designed by Amanda Culp, proposes a reconsideration of a contemporary American ritual of burial and the method of memorializing individuals. The design is the result of a year-long study in the final year of the Master of Architecture program at the University of Florida, Gainesville FL, USA. The project differs from a normal school studio or research project in that the final project, including drawings, models and written component, is not always what either the student or the faculty advisor anticipates. In a process that is as much about self-discovery and development of a position as an architect as it is about the final result, students are asked to explore and are assisted by faculty advisors who suggest context and connections to help the project grow. This project began as an archive of family histories, in particular the story of the courtship of her parents against the backdrop of urban and suburban Detroit, Michigan, and developed to become a cemetery that confronts several issues within the contemporary culture of burial. Inevitably, the forms of the cemetery and monuments will recall spatial precedents; with sensitivity for concerns about cultural appropriation, the Narrative Cemetery monuments certainly allude to the familiar

and complex forms of Native American Totems,<sup>1</sup> but they also share much in common with the characters of John Hejduk’s Masques,<sup>2</sup> and also with found and constructed landscapes in American west, specifically “The Lightning Field” by Walter de Maria. Thus the new cemetery reflects several North American spatial types, and continues the tradition of storied spatial markers.

### Setting and site

The Narrative Cemetery is sited within an established historic burial ground, the Michigan Memorial Park Cemetery in New Boston, located just outside Detroit, Michigan, USA. Michigan Memorial Park Cemetery, incorporated in 1926, is organized around a centrally located non-denominational chapel, composed of stone and glass. Manicured lawns are divided by meandering roads, focused on a monumental black granite cross set in the distance. The cemetery is organized as a traditional American municipal cemetery, suggesting a natural and organically shaped park environment containing a structured grid with flat bronze grave markers, and surrounded by the Huron River, a prominent geographic and cultural feature in the lives of those from the area. The waters of the Huron River define the southwest edge of the burial grounds.

### Problem statement

Michigan Memorial Cemetery has the potential to engage the bereaved with the healing presence of nature, through funeral rituals directing contemplation of the cycles of the natural world and celebration of the lives of individuals, but instead, the fast paced, business-like manner of contemporary funerals performed there can leave mourners adrift.<sup>3</sup> The introduction of individual stories and memories to the cemetery aims to remedy the increased sterilization of the funeral ritual; the Narrative Monument engages visitors with stories of connection, to assist in the grieving process.

### The itinerary: the ritual of arrangement and rearrangement

In the Narrative Cemetery, a long, choreographed approach allows the mourner time and space for the first step in the process of grieving. Initially, the mourner passes through a defined entrance to look upon the Narrative Monument field. (Fig. 1) Moving to the left when entering, the mourner moves into the Chapel. Though the mourner understands and comprehends the existence of the entire field of monuments, once within the Chapel their presence is obscured by a large stained glass window drawing colorful light into the space. Moving through the Chapel space and exiting to the

north, a paved path leads the mourner to the Mausoleum and Columbarium spaces. With the Narrative Monuments visible again to the right, the rustic open structure of the Mausoleum and Columbarium opens to the monument field so the mourner may reflect and gaze upon the presented stories in each monument.

Common to differing theories of grief is the concept of “rearrangement”, the process by which mourners come to understand their altered lives and their roles in existence without the person who has passed away.<sup>4</sup> This important progression of understanding is stunted with the current “normal” structure of the funeral ritual in cemeteries such as Memorial Michigan Park. The length of the Narrative Cemetery itinerary allows mourners time and space to experience “rearrangement” more fully in the grieving process, and the stories indicated on the monuments spark memories and conversations, allowing for a more gradual acceptance of loss.

### Place of pause: the monument: stories intertwine

The Narrative Cemetery proposes an intervention within the Michigan Memorial Park Cemetery. Here, the Narrative Monument acts as a grave marker and medium for storytelling. (Fig. 2) Each personalized monument contains a set of

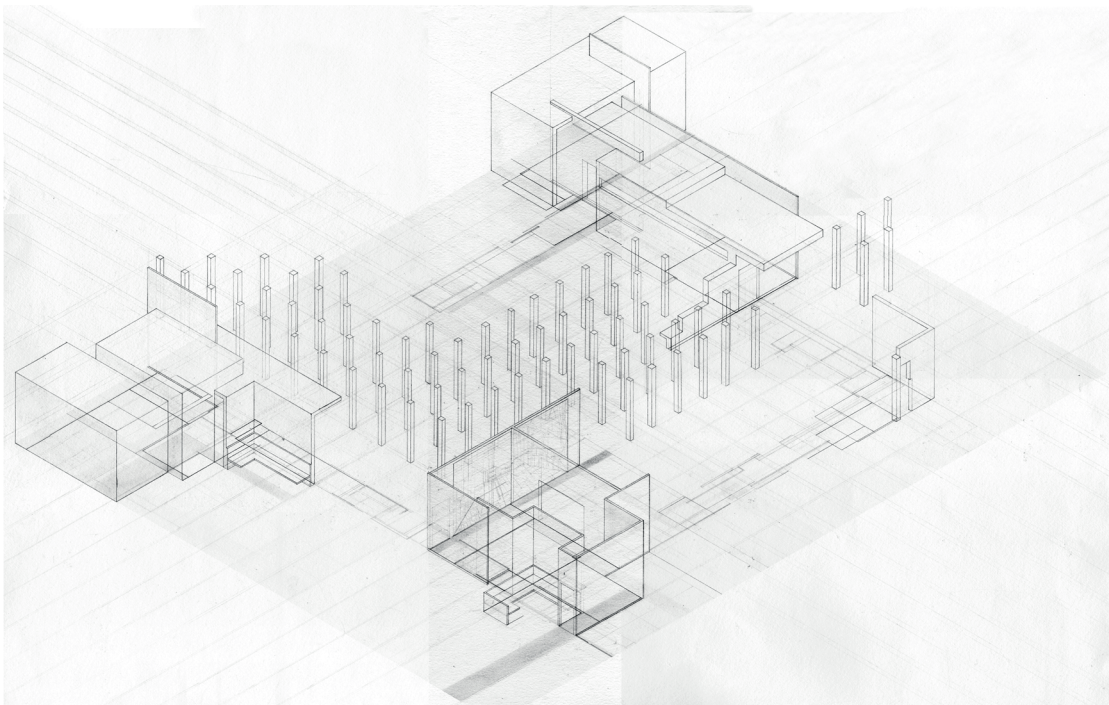


Fig. 1 Narrative Cemetery



narratives or a singular story significant to the soul that has passed and those they have left behind.

Narratives and stories play a vital role in the mourning process and the funeral ritual. Souls of the deceased live on in the retelling of memories and stories. The narratives contain truths and exaggerations of a life and spirit in significant and everyday events. The spirit is preserved through the narrative, giving further meaning to life in death. Contemporary funeral rituals, planned to accommodate constraints of time and money, can seem sterile instead of spiritual. The separation between the mourner and the passed soul is not recognized during the ritual and causes an extreme emptiness felt by the family left behind. The feeling that something is lacking is undeniable. The Narrative Monument aims to engage family members in the creation of the memorial monument, in terms of both content and craft. Each monument is hand carved and holds a narrative or a series of narratives that were significant to the one that has passed and the family and friends left behind. (Fig. 3)

### Method of making

Assembly of the monument requires the family to collect a number of stories to be displayed on their loved one's Narrative Monument. By collecting these stories, pictures, and artifacts, mourners establish a



Fig. 2 Narrative Monument\_N



Fig. 3 Narrative Monument\_F

more direct and tactile connection to the lost loved one. The collection is then combined by the family involved in the designing of the monument and the craftsman performing the carving. (Fig. 4) This collaboration occurs through an organization of the narrative collection, choosing an order, and then shaping a small scale representation that the craftsman works from. The carving established during this partnership sets the language of the narrative and how it is read in the cemetery. The language relies on the relationship between the material and the void. Each narrative part contains a void, depth and shape contingent on the narrative subject. While the connections between these voids is a dynamic representation. With more delicate carving, the connections translate how the narratives voids relate to each other, potentially through a timeline, characters, or another factor.

In the process of reading the carved language of the Narrative Monument is where the mourner can remember the stories of their loved one and simultaneously share in the stories of the other inhabitants of the Narrative Cemetery. Originally in the organization of the proposal, the shape of the carvings are chosen from a pre-determined library, certain designs would represent commonalities in life (family, love, etc.). Associations can be drawn between different Narrative Monuments to establish

relationships and a sense of understanding. However, as the monument develops in the collaborative design process and the orientation is chosen, these symbols will be lost in the personalization and thus unreadable except to the authors. As an alternative, along the major axis of each Narrative Monument, depending on the orientation, there will be an engraved tactile system that represents each part of the narrative in the carvings. These engravings will have a common language that will be readable across all the Narrative Monuments. Instead of each symbol representing a letter, like in Braille, the symbol will represent narrative components: objects, locations, actions, people, time, and emotions. With a key provided, the characters present in the carvings revolve around these common symbols creating a delicate engraving along the Narrative Monument's large scale carvings with a layer of readability to anyone in the space.

This method of making puts a personal hand back into the funerary ritual, giving the experience back to those that are mourning. A deeper connection is realized in this developed ritual. (Fig. 5)

### Experiencing the Narrative Cemetery

In the initial design of the Narrative Cemetery, the arrangement of the Narrative Monuments to be oriented vertically in

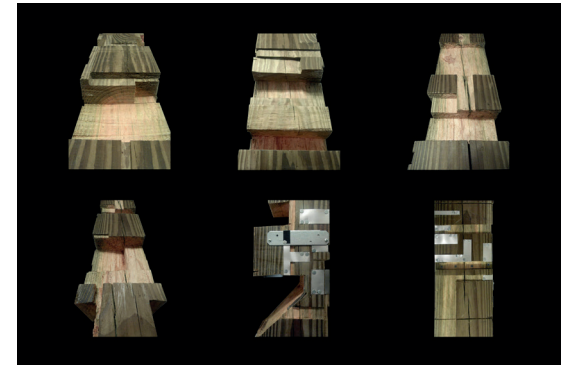


Fig. 4 Carving

the grid system was chosen to create the prevailing experience of being in a forest. (Fig. 6) The carved wood monuments would stand between ten and eleven feet tall along the grid. Within the artificial forest the mourner is embraced by the carved narratives of their loved ones and other immortalized souls. Wrapping the inhabitants with these memories potentially assists in the grieving process and combats loneliness. As the mourner stands in the space, the relationship between the earth, the monument, and the sky is pronounced, rooting the mourner in the space and encouraging contemplation. The family can choose the monument's orientation, for example, instead of a natural forest setting, the Narrative Monuments could create a sculpture garden for the mourner to move through. Each monument would command its own space vertically, horizontally, or diagonally. With this shift, the space between each Narrative Monument becomes their own unique experience where the narratives from each monument meet. Each plot would be larger than originally designed allowing further spatial elaboration. The relationship between the Narrative Monument, the earth, and the resting body can have a direct correlation. Even those that are physically sited in the Mausoleum or Columbarium space may have their story immortalized among the Narrative Monuments.



Fig. 5 Narrative Monument\_S



Fig.6 Monument Perspective



## The Narrative Monument of Rollie and Debby: family recollections

Stories Intertwined: Rollie and Debby Culp, parents of the author, (Fig. 7) grew up in the Detroit area. Their stories begin in Bellville. The memories ramble through New Boston and stretch to downtown Detroit, Michigan. The thoughts and drawings in this collection were gathered to create a detailed personal experience of Detroit and the towns that shape Wayne County. The archives are formed by the narratives provided by Rollie and Debby. Gathering narratives consisted of an oral history of significant and everyday events in the lives that rooted them in the Detroit area.

Each narrative is broken into parts and diagrammed, vestiges. The vestiges from each story are oriented on a map. Each map anchors the story in relation to the Detroit area. The following narratives molded this interpretation of Rollie and Debby's personal experiences to create an enlighten perception of a city so famously known.

### A daughter remembers: The Beginning; The Fall of Huron; Detroit Day Trips; Combustible Prom

It was Teen Night at Hoot's Boots Chickenanny. Deborah (Debby) Sinkewicz was there with a group of girls including her cousin Diane. Rollie Culp showed up with three other guys, Jim Waibel, Ed and Danny

Russo. Rollie knew the guys in the band and came with them for their gig.

Rollie and Debby didn't know each other, the tables they sat at happened to be close together. Rollie was smoking, flicking his ashes on the floor. However they were actually landing on Debby's boot.

With House of the Rising Sun playing in the background, Debby speaks up. Rollie promptly apologizes and they end up talking the rest of the evening.

They didn't exchange phone numbers, but they agreed to meet at the St. Stephen's Festival in New Boston in two weeks. Though Debby had doubts that Rollie would show up, he was there and the rest is, as they say, history. (Fig. 8)

#### The Fall of Huron

Rollie and Jim Waibel got locked out of the Waibel household one night. They decided to go to their high school, Huron High, to order a pizza. The door was open so they went in, ordered the pizza, ate and then headed home. They went back to Jim's house and fell asleep on the porch.

Huron High School burned down that night after the boys had left. Someone had seen the Rollie and Jim there and assumed they were responsible and reported them to the police.

The police showed up at the Waibels' and questioned the boys. They were taken to the police station, Rollie and Jim had to

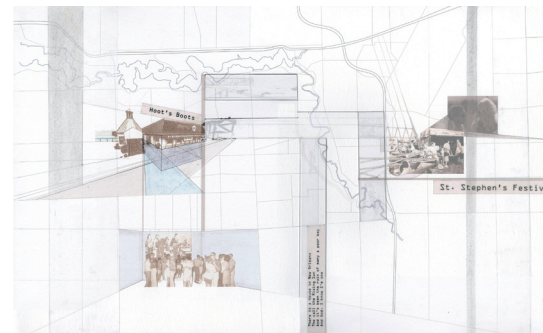


Fig. 7 The Couple  
Fig. 8 The Beginning

take a polygraph test to clear their names. Because they were innocent, they easily passed the polygraph test and the charges were dropped.

Though they had been cleared in the eyes of the law, the teachers and students still believed the boys were responsible, which made that year very difficult. (Fig. 9)

### Detroit Day Trips

Rollie Culp grew up in the suburbs outside of Detroit with his best friend, Jim Waibel. When school was out, Mr. Waibel would bring Jim and Rollie with him to Detroit when he was working in a pattern shop for tool and die. The shop was located on Beaubein Street, only a few blocks from Woodward Avenue.

The boys had run of the town for the day while Mr. Waibel was working. They made sure to avoid Brush Street and any alleys, even then Detroit was not the best. However on the streets that were bustling, there was plenty to do for two teenage boys.

Woodward Avenue was where the action was. The boys filled their day experiencing downtown Detroit, visiting museums and theaters. Catching a show, live or on screen, Rollie and Jim often visited the Cass Theater on Cass Avenue and the larger, grander Fillmore Theater.

They often visited Hudson's Department Store, the Macy's of Detroit. The store had massive window displays and there was

always something happening. During the holidays Hudson's was the host of many parades over the years.

Mr. Waibel had a routine for the trip home, they always stopped in Greektown so Jim's dad could have a beer and the boys could get a Greek sausage. There was usually one more stop on the way home between Detroit and Romulus along Jefferson Avenue for another drink. (Fig. 10)

### Combustible Prom

Rollie and Debby had been dating for a while, it was natural that they would attend the Belleville High School Senior Prom together. Rollie picked Debby up in his 1960 Ford Galaxie, they had a great time. After the dance they drove to Detroit and ate a post-prom dinner at the Top of the Flame Restaurant with another couple.

Top of the Flame was on the highest floor of a prominent building in downtown Detroit. It provided panoramic views of both the glowing city to the north and the Detroit River to the south. After valeting the car, they went upstairs to enjoy their meal.

Little did they know, the carburetor had flooded on the Galaxie during the valeting process. When this occurs the built up gasoline catches on fire. To remedy this issue, the valet just needed to restart the car and the fire and gasoline would be sucked into the engine and extinguished. However,

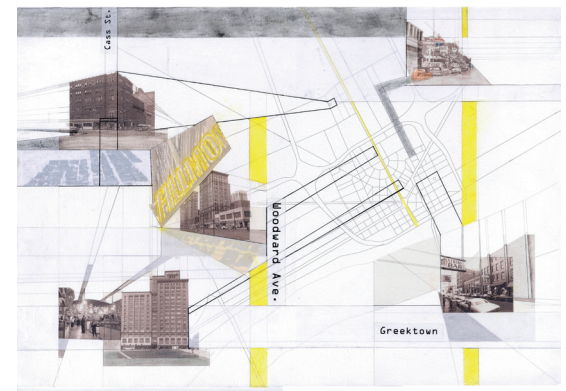
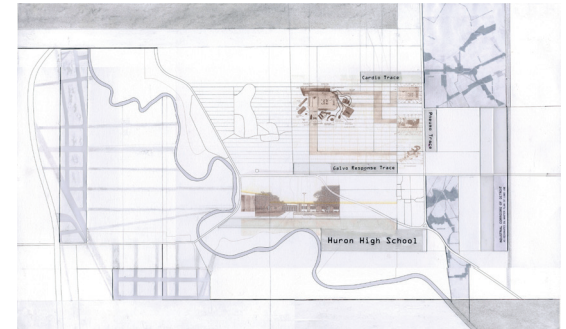


Fig. 9 The Fall of Huron  
Fig. 10 Day Trips



this was not done and the fire quickly spread and the car was soon in flames. Rollie and Debby were able to see the fire from their window seat in the restaurant, and witnessed the Galaxie burning from the Top of the Flame. (Fig. 11)

### Narrative Landscape

The Narrative Landscape is a technique used to transform the architectural and environmental elements in a narrative into characters, evolving beyond being simply part of the setting. The Narrative Landscape, developed in the proposal's design process, personified each vestige with the defining connection being the timeline, each finds its place along the line. (Fig. 12)

The measured narrative (Fig. 13) is a physical rendering of the drawn Narrative Landscape. Carving is the language of the measured narrative, from a single wooden block, each character manipulates the surface where the secondary language is about how the characters are related through the timeline to tell the narrative of Rollie and Debby.

In creating a tangible representation of the retrieved narratives, a natural transition for the carved narrative landscape became evident. The narrative landscapes will become the Narrative Monument as a landmark in the final ritual of life.

The creation of this small scale representation is similar to the progression that occurs

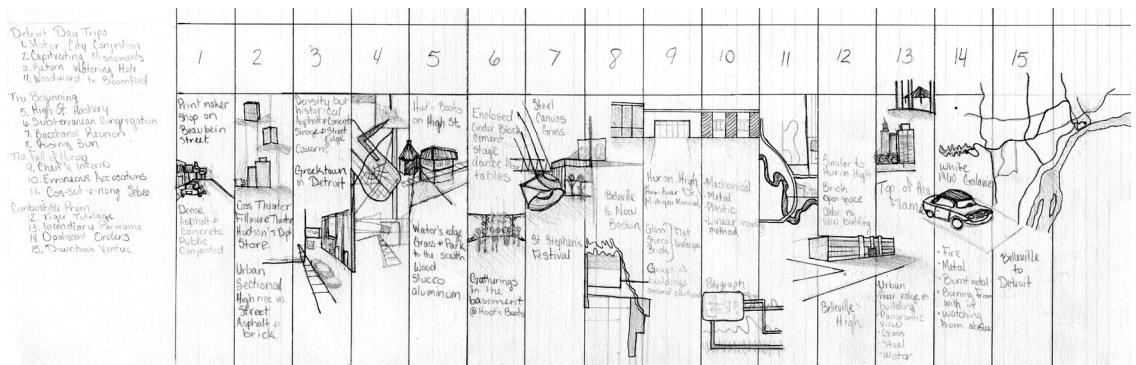
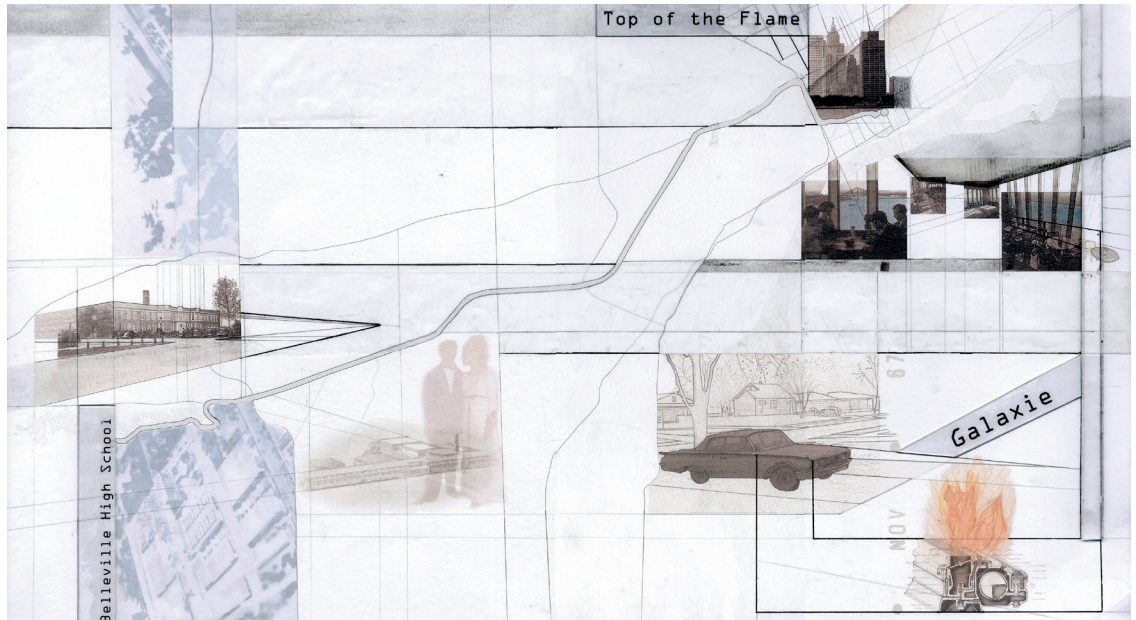
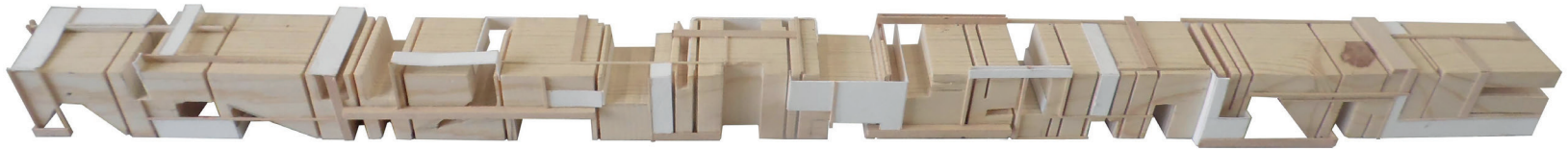


Fig. 11 Combustible Prom

Fig. 12 Characters in the Narrative Landscape



during the collaborative process with the craftsman when preparing the Narrative Monument for the Narrative Cemetery. (Fig. 14) Taking the measured narrative as reference, the Narrative Monument is the full scale adaptation from a ten and a half foot tall, ten inch by ten inch solid wood column. The carvings erode the surface as life shapes the soul that is represented in each Narrative Monument, in this instance, the stories of Rollie and Debby.

### healing memories

The new tradition of collecting memories and narratives for the creation and design of the Narrative Monument, gives those that are mourning a distinct role in the funeral ritual. This monumental ceremony is returned to those that should be closest to the experience, the mourning family and friends. In the Narrative Cemetery, the narratives of those that have passed

are revealed to create a new space. The language of the Narrative Monument, the process of carving speaks to the burial ritual. The removing of mass, excavation, and instilling the earth with personal memories and methods of remembrance is how each monument makes the Narrative Cemetery a sacred space. As an intervention in the Michigan Memorial Cemetery, a unique experience exists where mourners can heal through the power of memory and the Narrative Monuments allow the deceased souls to continue to tell their story.

1. The Totem holds a longstanding place in American Culture. It is of course an artifact of material culture of several Native American Tribes, generally located in the Pacific Northwest but also in the Great Lakes region, where the Narrative cemetery itself is sited. We can say that there are 6 or 7 types of traditional poles, which are well-described by simple names: Story poles, Family Poles, Shames Poles, Potlach or Event poles, Mortuary Poles, and Memorial Poles. In terms of traditional totem poles, this project is something of a

Fig. 13 Measured Narrative

Mortuary, Memorial, and Story pole.

The location of each traditional pole also has significance. There are house frontal poles, interior house posts, and welcome poles places near dwellings, and memorial and mortuary poles places in the landscape. Each pole is ceremonial and spiritual, with specific functions; the narrative cemetery builds on this tradition.

But the image of the Totem pole is complex, as has been pointed out by anthropologists Aaron Glass and Aldona Jonaitis, in their book *The totem pole, An Intercultural History*, which discusses the complex interaction between the totem pole and contemporary culture.

Also of interest are many contemporary Totems, for example the work of architect Toshiko Mori at the 2014 Venice Biennale.

Aaron Glass, Aldona Jonaitis, *The Totem Pole: An Intercultural History*, University of Washington Press, Seattle 2010

2. John Hejduk, *Lancaster/Hanover Masque*, Architectural Association Publication, London, 1992

3. The Culp/Sinkewicz family ancestors have been laid to rest in the Michigan Memorial Cemetery and this reason is partially why this proposal has found its place here. The Narrative Cemetery acts as an intervention in this space and has the potential to be a family cemetery within this funerary setting.

4. E. Buglass, "Grief and Bereavement Theories" in *Nursing Standard*, RCN Publishing, 2010, 41(24), pp. 44-47



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Fig. 14 Narrative Monument\_0