Crucible of Stone

A memorial to the victims of the Salem witch trials deftly employs old symbols to remind us of a present danger.

Giving architectural form to concepts such as “injustice” and “persecution” is a formidable task. Doing so in a serenely subtle way is an even greater challenge. But the Salem Witch Trials Tercentenary Memorial is appropriate in both its symbolism and simplicity for the heinous crime it marks and for its location in a 17th-century cemetery. Its design also suits our current predilection for memorials that are more eloquent in their minimalism than the graphic monuments predating the Vietnam Memorial in Washington.

Architect James Cutler and artist Maggie Smith collaborated on the design, selected from 242 entrants in an international competition sponsored by the city of Salem. The jury praised the winning design’s seamless union of art and architecture. Smith’s research into the history of the trials melds with Cutler’s form for the memorial, which bears the names of the 20 people executed as witches and their words protesting their innocence. The names are inscribed on stone benches that project from a granite wall bounding a 5,000-square-foot plot of land.

Architect and artist, both of Bainbridge Island, Washington, had wanted for a number of years to work together on a project. Smith came upon a notice for the competition and, having ancestors from Plymouth, Massachusetts, felt a personal appeal in the subject matter. Cutler was equally drawn to the theme because of a childhood experience. At the height of the McCarthy hearings in the 1950s, Cutler was accompanying his father on some downtown errands when they met an acquaintance. His dad mentioned that he had to hurry to a meeting, at which point young Cutler added, “one of those Communist meetings.” Horrified, his father demanded to know what possessed him to say such a thing. Cutler recounted an uncle’s comment about Communists in his dad’s family. In response, his father sent Cutler with his uncle to see The Crucible, Arthur Miller’s play about the Salem witch trials—a thinly-veiled condemnation of McCarthyism.

When Maggie Smith asked Cutler to collaborate on the memorial design, it was as if the project had been made for him. And when Arthur Miller unveiled Cutler’s and Smith’s design at a ceremony in Salem, the architect felt as though a circle in his life had closed.

“We wanted to personalize the injustice of the trials,” says Smith of their decision to include the names of the 14 women and 6 men who were executed in 1692. “These people never had grave markers, and we wanted them remembered by name.” In fact, for the descendants of those executed, some of whom still live in Salem, the memorial is a place where they can go in remembrance of their relatives.

The cemetery site of the memorial also personalizes the incident. Here is the grave of John Hathorne, magistrate of the trials, just outside the memorial’s walls. Cutler conceived of the surrounding gravestones as witnesses, like those who stood silent while neighbors were persecuted.

One enters the memorial from the northeast end, crossing a granite threshold inscribed with the protestations of the accused. These words, taken from the records of the preliminary hearing, disappear under the granite walls, whose weight bears down to crush them. Granite is a natural and ideal choice as it is a common material for old walls throughout New England. This sense of antiquity is reinforced by the rough, weathered stone obtained from an abandoned New Hampshire quarry. The pieces were set in place with crowbars and hammers, and Cutler and Smith urged the masons to make the wall irregular with lots of chinking, “as a farmer would build it,” says Cutler.

In the landscaping the designers expanded upon the symbolism of the stone walls. The grass is an old mix, with less turf grass such as Kentucky blue. Cutler and Smith envisioned it eventually speckled with wildflowers, “overgrown and a bit crude,” notes the architect. Along the walls beneath the benches is periwinkle, “a plant traditionally used as garlands for condemned people” since the time of the Romans, observes Smith. The black locusts are symbolic of the trees that, legend has it, were used to hang the condemned and were planted on top of their mass grave. Last to gain its leaves and first to lose them, the black locust has thorns, and grows tall and crooked with age.

Much of the ancient symbolism may be lost on many of those who view the memorial. On the day of my visit people strolled quietly around the plot, stopping at each bench to read the names, or sat in contemplation. But the memorial’s larger message—that injustice and the persecution of innocent people is ever possible when others silently stand by—is clear. This monument to events 300 years ago is as relevant as today’s headlines. Michael J. Crosbie
For my life lies now in your hands.
Oh Lord, help me.

I would confess I should save my life.

PLAN

EXISTING WOOD STRUCTURE
EXISTING TOMBS
EXISTING CEMETERY
IRON FENCE
THE PROTESTS
GATE TO CEMETERY
LINE OF NEW CONTOURS
NEW STONE WALL
BENCH TOMBS
NEW BLACK LOCUST TREES
EXISTING WOOD FENCE
EXISTING BRICK WALK

40/12m

STONETEAL WALL SECTION

STONE BENCH 4'-0" x 4'-0" x 8' CANTILEVER 1'-6"

1'-0" PLANTING BED SEE SPEC.

HALLWAY

6'-0" PLANTING BED SEE SPEC.

CRUSHED ROCK BAGGAGE, WRAP W/ FILTER BAGG.

COMPACTED SUBGRADE
The memorial's threshold (top and in foreground above) is inscribed with protestations of innocence from the accused, taken from the court records. Just beyond the walls (facing page) lie some of the hearing's officials in Salem's oldest cemetery.

Project: Salem Witch Trials Tercentenary Memorial, Salem, Massachusetts.
Designers: James Cutler, James Cutler Architects, and Maggie Smith, Visual Artist; Bruce Anderson, David Canamom (project team).
Client: City of Salem.
Site: 5,000-square-foot plot adjacent to the Charter Street Cemetery, Salem.
Program: A permanent memorial to the victims of the Salem witch trials, open at all times of day and night and in all seasons, accessible to the disabled, constructed of durable materials.
Consultants: Craig Halvorson and Cynthia Smith of the Halvorson Company, Boston, landscape architects.
General contractor: Hayden Hillsgrove Stone Masonry.
Cost: $100,000.
Photos: Steve Rosenball.