

# Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision

A FILM BY FREIDA LEE MOCK



POV

DISCUSSION GUIDE



UNTIL JUSTICE  
AND RIGHTEOU



# Table of Contents

Film Summary	5
Using this Guide	6
Share Community Agreements	7
Common Concepts & Language	8
Participants	11
Key Issues	12
Background Information	13
Sources	18
Discussion Prompts	20
Credits & Acknowledgments	24

# Film Summary



In a powerful exploration of art, politics and creativity, the Oscar winning film highlights the story behind the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in DC, one of the era's most controversial monuments. At age 21, Lin, an artist and architecture student, shot to global fame when her design was selected. Facing an onslaught of public attacks, she remained steadfast in her vision.

# Using This Guide

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and is designed for people who want to use *Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. Be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit <https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/>.

## Tips and Tools for Facilitators

Here are some supports to help you prepare for facilitating a conversation that inspires curiosity, connection, critical questions, recognition of difference, power, and possibility.

# Share Community Agreements

## Community Agreements: What Are They? Why Are They Useful?

Community agreements help provide a framework for engaging in dialogue that establishes a shared sense of intention ahead of participating in discussion. Community agreements can be co-constructed and created as an opening activity that your group completes collectively and collaboratively. [Here is a model](#) of community agreements you can review. As the facilitator, you can gauge how long your group should take to form these agreements or whether participants would be amenable to using pre-established community agreements.

## Opening Activity (Optional): Establishing Community Agreements for Discussion

Whether you are a group of people coming together once for this screening and discussion or a group whose members know each other well, creating a set of community agreements helps foster clear discussion in a manner that draws in and respects all participants, especially when tackling intimate or complex conversations around identity. These steps will help provide guidelines for the process:

- **Pass around** sample community agreements and take time to read aloud as a group to make sure all participants can both hear and read the text.
- **Allow time** for clarifying questions, make sure all participants understand the necessity for the agreements, and allow time to make sure everyone understands the agreements themselves.
- **Go around in a circle** and have every participant name an agreement they would like to include. Chart this in front of the room where all can see.
- **Go around two to three times** to give participants multiple chances to contribute and also to give a conclusive end to the process.
- **Read the list** aloud.
- **Invite** questions or revisions.
- **Ask** if all are satisfied with the list.

## COMMON CONCEPTS & LANGUAGE

### **Aesthetic**

Aesthetic refers to the philosophical study of beauty, art and taste. In relation to art, aestheticism asks questions like: What is art? What makes good art? How does art make us feel? Aesthetics help us understand what happens in our minds when we engage with beautiful objects or environments.

### **Anti-War**

To be anti-war means being opposed to war in general or to specific conflict. It describes people, sentiments or actions that reject military aggression as a way to solve political disputes.

### **Architecture as Art**

The intersection at which the design of building or structure moves beyond serving as mere shelter and “functional engineering” to become something transcendent and unexpected as an expressive medium.

### **Discrimination**

The unequal treatment of members of various groups based on race, gender, social class, sexual orientation, physical ability, religion, and other categories. In the United States, the law makes it illegal to discriminate against someone on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, or sex. The law also makes it illegal to retaliate against a person because the person complained about discrimination, filed a charge of discrimination, or participated in

an employment discrimination investigation or lawsuit. The law also requires that an employer reasonably accommodate applicants’ and employees’ sincerely held religious practices, unless doing so would impose an undue hardship on the operation of the employer’s business.

### **Equity**

In basic terms, to achieve equity is to treat everyone fairly. An equity emphasis seeks to render justice by deeply considering structural factors that benefit some social groups/communities and harm other social groups/communities. Sometimes, for the purpose of equity, justice demands an unequal response.

## **Memorial**

A memorial is an object or place that serves to commemorate or preserve the memory of a person or event, often associated with significant historical or tragic occurrences. Common forms include gravestones, plaques, statues, and dedicated sites.

## **Minimalism**

Minimalism in art comes from a 1960's movement where objects are stripped down to their barest essentials. By removing all emotion, personal expression, and representational meaning, minimalist art challenges the viewer to contend with the art exactly as it exists.

## **“Model Minority”**

A stereotype most often applied to Asian Americans that characterizes that minority as inherently successful, hard working, intelligent, and economically well off despite systemic hardships.

## **Quota**

This word can be derogatory when used to imply that a woman or a person from a racial minority has been hired or given an opportunity, not on the basis of their own merit, but to fulfill a diversity or hiring quota.

## **Serpent Mound**

The Serpent Mound is a massive effigy mound, representing a snake. One of a few effigy mounds in the state of Ohio, the Serpent Mound was likely constructed by the prehistoric Adena culture, which existed in the Ohio Valley around 1000 BCE.

## **Sexism**

While the feminist scholar and critic, bell hooks, defined sexism as “both discrimination based on gender, and the attitudes, stereotypes, and cultural elements that promote this discrimination,” a more general definition of sexism is that it is prejudice or discrimination based on one's sex or gender. Sexism can affect anyone, but primarily affects women and girls. It has been linked to gender roles and stereotypes, and may include the belief that one sex or gender is intrinsically superior to another. Extreme sexism may foster sexual harassment, rape, and other forms of sexual violence.

## **Vietnam War**

The Vietnam War was a long and bitter, multi-decade conflict between the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong (supported by the Russian and Chinese governments), and the South Vietnamese from 1955 until 1975. The United States, which supported South Vietnam, entered the war in 1964 with a bombing campaign meant to persuade the North Vietnamese that the war was no longer worth it. However, by 1966, more than 200,000 American troops were committed to the Vietnam War effort, with boots on the ground beginning in 1965. The war spanned the presidencies of Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard M. Nixon, and Gerald R. Ford, and was highly unpopular amongst the American people. Throughout the war, the United States sustained high casualties, and morale amongst troops tanked precipitously in the final years of US involvement.

## **Xenophobia**

The fear or dislike of people perceived to be either foreign or strange. It often manifests as hostility toward immigrants or people from other cultures, and often leads to discrimination or social exclusion.

# Participants

## **Maya Lin**

Asian American woman and  
architect, trained at Yale University



# Key Issues

*Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision* is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- Public art
- Using art to heal
- “People, not politics”
- Lived experience vs. professional experience
- Turning human pain into creative expression

# Background Information

## A Memorable Beginning

Maya Lin was born in Athens, OH in 1959, less than twenty years after her Chinese parents immigrated to America. Lin lived a comfortable life in Southeastern Ohio where her father and mother both taught at Ohio University. Maya recounts in *Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision* how she and her brother played in the art wing of the university where her father taught ceramics, and eventually became dean of the College of Fine Arts. “It wasn’t until after my father died that I realized the enormous impact he had on my work,” Maya remembers. “. . . After school, my brother and I would walk over to our father’s studio and spend countless hours watching as our father kneaded the clay, pounding it, pushing it, cutting it through the wire. He worked with it effortlessly, as a fluid, plastic medium, where he could pull up a form, then with one touch, open or close the shape.”

Maya was admitted to Yale University in 1977 at a time when media and societal portrayals of Asian Americans relied on stereotypes and the “model minority” myth. And as a woman, Maya remembers being at Yale during a time (1977-1986) when “...every little stained glass image, every sculpture, every statue was a man.” And yet, as a senior, Maya captured the national spotlight when she submitted the winning design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial to be built in Washington, DC. Neither her race nor her gender stood in the way of Maya winning the design competition. But her race, gender and age were all weaponized against her as some Vietnam veterans smeared Maya’s design, called her racial slurs, and questioned her ability to create a suitable design for the memorial because of her age.

## **How Memory Worked in the Vietnam Memorial**

Long fascinated by the relationship between art and nature, design and landscape, Maya Lin approached the Vietnam Veterans Memorial with a vision that departed sharply from the heroic monuments and patriotic symbolism many veterans and political leaders expected. Created at a moment when memorial design in the United States was beginning to move away from triumphal narratives and toward experiences of memory, mourning, and public participation, Lin’s proposal offered a radically different way of commemorating war.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial emerges from the earth as two long walls of polished black granite that meet at a gentle angle. Inscribed on their surface are the names of more than 58,000 American service members who were killed or remain missing in action during the Vietnam War. Simultaneously interrupting and reflecting the surrounding landscape, the memorial allows visitors to see not only the names of the dead but also their own reflections. In doing so, it collapses the distance between past and present, transforming remembrance into a deeply personal encounter.

Lin intentionally designed the memorial to blend into its natural environment, envisioning what she described as a wound in the earth that would gradually heal. Rather than directing visitors toward a particular political interpretation of the war, the memorial creates a space for reflection on its human cost. Yet the design became the center of a fierce national controversy. Critics condemned its abstract form, black granite surface, and recessed placement within the landscape. One opponent described it as “an ugly insult that portrayed the war as shameful, dishonorable and worth hiding.”

“For too long the veterans of that miserable conflict have borne the burden of the National ambivalence about the war,” wrote another critic. “To bury them now in a black stone sarcophagus, sunk into a hollow in the earth below eye level, is like spitting on their graves.”

The debate over the memorial ultimately resulted in a compromise. A flagstaff and an eight-foot bronze sculpture depicting three servicemen were added near the entrance to the site, introducing a more traditional representational element alongside Lin’s minimalist design. The intensity of the controversy—much of it directed at Lin personally—led her to avoid discussing her experience as the winner of the national design competition for many years. When she later reflected on the episode, Lin expressed regret that she had been used as a “weapon in the fight against a memorial intended to highlight veterans.”

Despite the opposition, the memorial inspired extraordinary public support. More than 275,000 Americans, along with veterans, activists, and public figures, contributed \$8.4 million toward its construction. Since its dedication in 1982, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial has become one of the most visited memorials in the United States, drawing millions of visitors each year. Widely regarded as one of the most influential works of public art of the twentieth century, it transformed expectations of what a war memorial

could be—not a celebration of victory, but a space for remembrance, grief, reflection, and healing.

## **Why We Remember: Contemporary Connections**

Since the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was dedicated in 1982, several additional war memorials have been added to the National Mall. The Vietnam Women’s Memorial, dedicated in 1993, honors the more than 250,000 women who served during the Vietnam War, many of them as nurses. The Korean War Veterans Memorial followed in 1995, commemorating those who served during the Korean War. In 2004, the National World War II Memorial was dedicated in recognition of the 16 million Americans who served in World War II and the millions who lost their lives. Most recently, plans are underway for the Global War on Terrorism Memorial, which will honor those who have fought, served, and sacrificed during the “ongoing Global War on Terrorism.”

The existence of these memorials raises an important question: Why do societies remember war through monuments?

At the most personal level, memorials offer a place for grief, reflection, and connection. For families whose loved ones died far from home, or whose remains were never recovered, memorials can serve as symbolic gravesites—places where loss can be acknowledged and shared. They provide opportunities not only to mourn the dead but also to honor the lives they lived.

Yet remembrance serves a broader purpose as well. Memorials help transform individual memories into collective memory, ensuring that experiences of sacrifice, suffering, courage, and loss are not forgotten as generations pass. They create a public space where history can be encountered not as an abstract collection of dates and events, but as the lived experience of real people.

Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial fundamentally changed how many Americans think about remembrance. Rather than celebrating military victory or offering a single interpretation of the Vietnam War, the memorial invites visitors to bring their own memories, questions, and emotions to the site. In doing so, it suggests that remembering is not simply an act of honoring the past—it is also a way of understanding ourselves in relation to that past.

We remember because memory connects us to one another across generations. We remember because the lives lost in war were more than statistics or historical facts. And we remember because a society that forgets the human consequences of its history risks losing sight of the people who lived it. Whether they inspire mourning, gratitude, reflection, or debate, memorials remind us that history endures not only in books and archives, but also in the stories we choose to carry forward.

## Sources:

Abramson, Daniel. *Maya Lin and the 1960s: Monuments, Time Lines, and Minimalism*. (University of Chicago Press; 1996). Vol 22 No 4. Pg 679-709.

Academy of Achievement, "Maya Lin Biography. Last modified 2010. Accessed February 6, 2013. <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/lin0bio-1>.

Blackburn, Sarah-SoonLing. "What is the Model Minority Myth?" Southern Poverty Law Center. March 21, 2019. <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/stories/what-is-the-model-minority-myth/>

Blakemore, Erin. "This 21-Year-Old College Student Designed the Vietnam Veterans Memorial" | HISTORY. Published: September 13, 2017, Last Updated: May 28, 2025. <https://www.history.com/articles/the-21-year-old-college-student-who-designed-the-vietnam-memorial>

Coffey, Maria. "A Guide to American War and Military Memorials." Gettysburg Flag Works, October 13, 2015. <https://www.gettysburgflag.com/blog/guide-american-war-military-memorials/>

Commonwealth War Graves Commission, "The Importance of War Memorials." January 21, 2022. <https://www.cwgc.org/our-work/blog/the-importance-of-war-memorials/>

for Humanity: The Yale Campaign, "Maya Lin '81, '86 MArch," Web, <https://forhumanity.yale.edu/maya-lin-81-86-march>

Global War on Terrorism Memorial Foundation, <https://www.gwotmemorialfoundation.org/about/>

"Juniata College - Campus Life - Spiritual Life - Excerpt from "Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision, 1994, Web, <http://www.juniata.edu/life/peacechapel.html>.

Juniata College, "Juniata College - Museum of Art." Accessed February 6, 2013. [http://www.juniata.edu/services/museum/coll\\_peacech](http://www.juniata.edu/services/museum/coll_peacech).

Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision.

Miller, Carly A.; Torreon, Barbar Salazar. "U.S. Periods of War and Dates of Recent Conflicts." [Congress.gov](https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RS21405), February 5, 2024. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RS21405>.

National Portrait Gallery, "Timeline Test 2." <https://npg.si.edu/timelinetest>

Parker, Brian. "When Architecture Becomes Art - Buildings That Inspire Me." <https://www.brianparkerartist.co.uk/when-architecture-becomes-art/>

Quinlan, Victoria. "United States War Memorials: The Transformation of Design and Significance Influenced by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial." Union College, Department of History, June 2015. <https://arches.union.edu/do/124cbede-0139-4830-b94b-45b3c447651e#mode/2up>.

Ross, Alex. Stanford Presidential Lectures and Symposia in the Humanities and Arts, “Maya Lin.” Last modified 2002. Accessed February 6, 2013. <http://prelectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/lin/index.html>.

Tate Gallery. “Minimalism.” <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/m/minimalism>

Thompson, Katy. “Art Term Tuesday: Aesthetic or Esthetic?” Fort Wayne Museum of Art. February 16, 2021. <https://fwmoa.blog/2021/02/16/art-term-tuesday-aesthetic-or-esthetic/>

Veterans of Foreign Wars, “National Memorials Honor Veterans Across the Country.” May 12, 2023. <https://www.vfw.org/media-and-events/latest-releases/archives/2023/5/national-memorials-honor-veterans-across-the-country>.

# DISCUSSION PROMPTS

## Starting The Conversation

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. You could pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion. Alternatively, you could ask participants to share their thoughts with a partner before starting a group discussion.

- How does learning about Maya Lin's life and work make you feel?
- Which of Maya Lin's designs resonated with you the most?
- What questions, if any, came to mind for you as you watched *Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision*?

## Putting Yourself in Maya's Shoes

- What struck you about Maya Lin's decision to submit to a national design competition as a college student?
  - What struck you about a college student's design being selected as the winner?
- Why do you think Maya Lin's design generated such strong reactions, and what does the controversy suggest about the role of public memorials?
- Is there a time in your life where you defied the odds to achieve something big? What and when was that?

## Maya Lin's Design Philosophy

- How does Maya Lin's use of landscape, nature, and the built environment shape the way you experience her work? Which project stood out to you most, and why?
- If you had the opportunity to spend an hour with Maya Lin, what would you most want to ask her about creativity, design, memory, or her career?
- Looking at Maya Lin's career as a whole, how did she respond to criticism and skepticism throughout her life? What do you think her journey suggests about perseverance and artistic conviction?
- What aspects of Maya Lin's approach to design resonated most with you? How might her ideas about observation, place, memory, or problem-solving apply beyond architecture and art?
- Maya Lin often creates works that encourage people to slow down and pay attention to their surroundings. How did the film change the way you think about the relationship between people, art, and the natural world?
- Many of Maya Lin's projects explore memory, history, and the environment. Which of these themes felt most meaningful to you, and why?
- Maya Lin's designs are often minimalist, yet they can evoke powerful emotions. What do you think gives her work that emotional impact?

- Throughout the film, Maya Lin remains committed to her vision even when others disagree with her. What can her example teach us about balancing collaboration, criticism, and personal conviction?

## Maya Lin & the “Model Minority” Myth

- How did Maya Lin’s identity as a young Chinese American woman shape the public response to her work, particularly the Vietnam Veterans Memorial?
- The “model minority” myth often portrays Asian Americans as hardworking, successful, and politically quiet. In what ways does Maya Lin’s story reinforce, complicate, or challenge that stereotype?
- Maya Lin has spoken about resisting labels and refusing to be defined by her ethnicity. How does the film explore the tension between being seen as an individual artist and being viewed as a representative of a racial group?
- Maya Lin’s projects span subjects as varied as war remembrance, civil rights, environmental conservation, and public history. What does the breadth of her work suggest about the limitations of racial stereotypes?
- How did the controversy surrounding the Vietnam Veterans Memorial reveal assumptions about who is allowed to shape national memory and public space?

- In what ways do race, gender, age, and artistic style intersect in the criticism Maya Lin faced throughout her career?
- Why do you think the model minority myth persists, and what are some of the ways it can obscure the diversity of experiences within Asian American communities?
- What aspects of Maya Lin's life or career challenge common assumptions about success, identity, or belonging in the United States?

# Credits & Acknowledgments

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR, NATALIE BULLOCK BROWN**

Natalie Bullock Brown is a filmmaker and the director of the Documentary Accountability Working Group (DAWG).

## **DISCUSSION GUIDE PRODUCERS**

Courtney B. Cook, Phd | *Education Manager, POV*