



OREGON STATE HOSPITAL MEMORIAL



The Oregon State Hospital Memorial

Meagan Atiyeh, Oregon Arts Commission

The Oregon State Hospital is the custodian of the cremated remains of approximately 3,500 people, at the time of writing, who died while living at the hospital and other institutions. These deceased were never claimed by family. Their ashes were held in humble copper urns that had degraded badly over the decades.

For more than six years, the Oregon Arts Commission worked with the Oregon State Hospital Replacement Project, a massive effort to build two new state facilities for mental health care authorized by the Oregon Legislature in 2007. Our task was to help shape a program of art projects for the Salem and Junction City facilities, through Oregon's Percent for Art in Public Places Program. In our first meeting, Jodie Jones, OSHRP Administrator, talked of the unclaimed remains, and the hospital's desire to properly memorialize them.

In 1976, the canisters numbered 5,000. In 2007, the hospital was given permission to release the names of the deceased, and to assist families hoping to locate relatives. The newly publicized story of the cremains was central to *The Oregonian's* Pulitzer Prize-winning series *Oregon's Forgotten Hospital*.

Coverage by *The Oregonian* and *The Statesman Journal* brought national attention, including from *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*. It also led photographer David Maisel to the hospital, whose book *Library of Dust* created a ghostly document of the number and condition of the corroding canisters. The State Hospital

was not a stranger to artistic backdrop and scrutiny. It famously served as the set for Milos Forman's adaptation of Ken Kesey's novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. That film also brought photojournalist Mary Ellen Mark, who came to Salem in 1974 to photograph the cast and set. After a year of negotiations, Mark was allowed to live on the women's Ward 81 with writer Karen Folger, resulting in a book of photography and journalism, *Ward 81*. These efforts, and many others, have served to call national attention to the hospital's struggles. When I toured the hospital in 2008, it looked very much the same as in these portrayals, which have been part of the story that allows us to conclude a long-called for chapter, that of the unclaimed remains.

Annie Han and Daniel Mihalyo were selected from an international call to artists for this project. They faced many complexities. The memorial is one of the most important projects in the state's history, an opportunity to transform a deeply meaningful history into a public memorial of great poignancy and beauty. It was also a project that would navigate many, often conflicting, desires: to create a permanent resting place that also allows for more families to claim remains; to provide for thoughtful contemplation, but maintain transparency on the high-security grounds; and to employ the highest aesthetic choices of today, while aging gracefully as it stands for the next hundreds of years. Further, the artists, the Arts Commission and the Replacement Project needed the approval of the Salem Historic Landmarks Commission to complete the alterations to a damaged brick façade of the 1896 structure.

“This is not a design problem or an issue of abstraction...or aesthetics. It seems to us that this is an issue of emotional alchemy; the opportunity to accept specific human experience and provide the emotional context for individuals to create personal transformations.”

– HAN AND MIHALYO, APPLICATION LETTER



The State Hospital's condemned Kirkbride Building, shortly before renovation. Photo: Meagan Atiyeh.

This project required the *unending* support of so many disparate communities as it reached completion: The Hospital Replacement Project; Jodie Jones and Sharon Tucker; Senate President Peter Courtney and his staff; NAMU Oregon and Mental Health America of Oregon; the generosity of the Kohler Factory where Daniel and Annie worked 16-hour days for three months to create the new urns; Western Oregon University students who worked alongside the artists in Salem; and the many individuals who wrote letters of support for the historic preservation portion of the project, including Henry Sayre, Christine D'Arcy, Roger and Bonnie Hull, Kingston Heath, Roger Roper, Doug Macy and numerous Salem neighborhood alliances with whom we met.

Lead Pencil Studio's memorial is the result of exhaustive research and unending commitment to the prime goals of the people and events it represents. Their grounds speak honestly about how these remains were found, while embarking to a more hopeful and open present. As such, it is a retelling of the historic institutional treatment of the most vulnerable in our society. Artists document our cultural ethos and aspirations, and this story is a part of our state's historic and moral fiber.



Steve Hanson

HISTORY

In 2004, Senate President Peter Courtney toured the Oregon State Hospital and discovered what would forever change the course of mental health treatment in Oregon. It all started with unlocking the door to what he later would call the “Room of Forgotten Souls.” Inside a small, non-descript hospital building, Senator Courtney discovered more than 3,500 copper urns stacked three deep on simple, pine shelves.

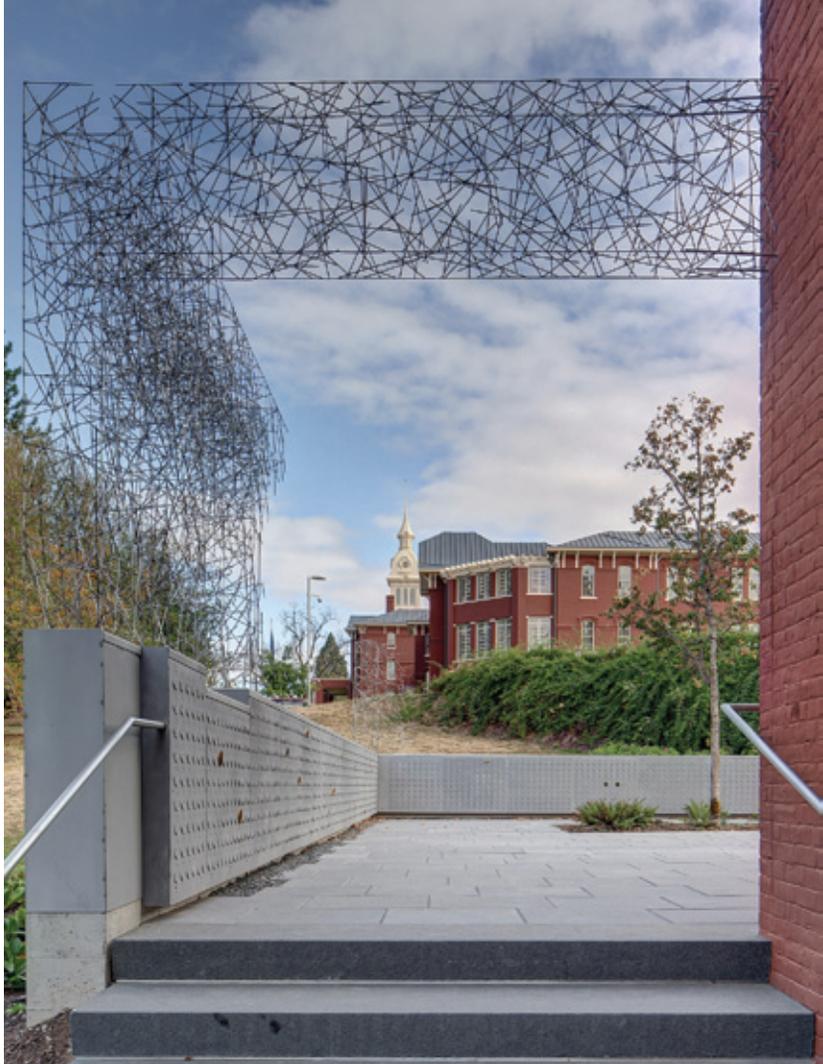
He would later compare the treatment of the urns to the treatment of those with mental illness – neglected and forgotten – and led the charge to secure funding to replace the existing 128-year-old psychiatric hospital with two new hospitals and passed legislation that would allow the state to publish the names of individuals whose urns were in the custody of the Oregon State Hospital for the purposes of reunification and the construction of a memorial for any unclaimed remains.

In 2011 Lead Pencil Studio was selected from a national call for an artist to design a memorial. Their proposal expanded the project scope to include a columbarium wall, a plaza and garden, sculpture and a memorial to house the now-empty original copper urns. The memorial is built within a relocated and restored 1896 structure known

Some of the 3,423 copper urns that once held the remains of individuals who had been placed with the Oregon State Hospital.



Building 60, above, was once the hospital's pestilence house and morgue. It is now part of the memorial. Right, metal filigrees represent another building that was attached to Building 60.



as Building 60, once the hospital pestilence house and morgue. The new courtyard recreates the footprint of a crematorium structure (Building 75) which was once attached to the brick building. A wire filigree sculpture highlights the former building's walls and windows. The bench in this courtyard is also artist-made from a tree that stood here. From this courtyard, visitors can view 3,423 copper urns, stacked in sequential rows with empty spots for those that have been claimed by family members. The ashes from the copper urns were placed in new vessels handmade by the artists inside the memorial's columbarium wall. The new garden around the memorial provides a tranquil atmosphere and a sense of private enclosure within the hospital grounds.

ABOUT THE URNS

These unclaimed remains are those of people who died between 1913 and 1971 in the Salem community or while living or working at Oregon State Hospital, Oregon State Tuberculosis Hospital, Mid-Columbia Hospital, Dammasch State Hospital, Oregon State Penitentiary, Deaconess Hospital and Fairview Training Center.

While the majority of the urns belongs to patients of Oregon State Hospital, there are also five state employees, six infants and one member of the Salem community among them. Patient birth places include 44 countries, 48 states and five who had been born at sea on their way to the United States.

The reason for admission was as varied as their symptoms and diagnosis, including fanaticism, epilepsy, alcoholism or as recorded in one female



Top photo: Oregon State Insane Asylum, circa 1905. Photo: Oregon State Archives courtesy of Oregon State Hospital Museum of Mental Health. Bottom: Oregon State Insane Asylum patient Frank Lawrence Smith who died at the hospital in 1915. His cremated remains are among those never claimed by next of kin. Photo: Oregon Archives courtesy Oregon State Hospital Museum of Mental Health

patient's file, "too much marriage." Once admitted, most patients would often live here until death.

The hospital had its own cemetery and for 30 years, patients and residents of other state institutions were buried there. But cemetery space became scarce and, in 1913, the legislature directed all bodies not claimed to be exhumed and cremated.* Between 1913 and 1971, patients whose bodies were not claimed at the time of death by relatives were also cremated and their remains were placed in these copper urns made by hospital staff.

Among the urns are those of five siblings, a mother and two sons, a father and daughter and two cousins. One of the urns holds the remains of a male patient who came to the hospital at the age of 4. He was prone to rages and had become too much for his family, which included 10 other siblings, to handle. He lived and worked at the hospital and its Cottage Farm until he died in his late 80s.

A number of war veterans are among those housed at this memorial.

Over the years, these urns were moved and stored in multiple locations, including a memorial constructed in the late '70s. Known as Memorial Circle, it featured underground vaults beneath a flower garden. The vaults, however, were subject to flooding and the urns began to show signs of corrosion. In 2000, they were moved to the now-demolished Building 75.

“On Decoration Day,’ an early-day Oregon Daily Statesman newspaper reported, ‘the little inmates of the orphans’ home, under the supervision of their matron, gathered a lot of wildflowers and decorated the graves of the insane dead.’... Like those kindhearted children, Oregonians of the 21st century owe a final “act of mercy to the unfriended dead.”

— ‘ELDA’S ASHES,’ THE OREGONIAN, PUBLISHED: MAY 31, 2005

The columbarium wall holds the ceramic canisters bearing the ashes of the dead.





Building 60 – pestilence house and morgue – before its transformation into the memorial building that houses the copper urns.

The memorial was realized and dedicated on July 7, 2014, in a ceremony led by Sen. Courtney. “What was once hidden behind locked doors and brick walls is now visible,” he said. “This memorial will remind us of where we’ve been and why we never want to return.”

INTERPRETING THE MEMORIAL

Imagine these gardens 100 years from now. The pine tree at the entrance yellows in the winter, and then greens again in the spring while the vine maples along the entry path have reached together overhead to form a bright red alley in autumn. The native Gary Oak tree at the center of the courtyard will one day have limbs that stretch from wall to wall. By then, will the wooden bench have survived? It was carved from a Sycamore tree nearing the end of its natural life on this site.

Entering the courtyard, you pass through delicate metal filigrees – a constellation of lines drawn against the sky to represent the building that was attached to Building 60. The faint sketches of the missing windows prompt you to imagine yourself a witness to the architectural ghost of a building past, but no less significant, to the human history that took place here. On a sunny day, long shadows of the former windows stretch across the ground. Once inside the courtyard, you enter a world of unseen connections that bind us together – *both living and dead*.

This simple masonry building was built in 1896, originally as a pestilence house. Later it was a morgue. The now-empty copper urns are housed here in a humble and permanent resting place. Through their kaleidoscopic textures, reflections and hues, the original urns silently communicate their incredible story. Inlaid into the floor of this building are grey

bricks that were once part of the north wall of this historic building, now set into their original configuration and appearing like portals into the earth.

The columbarium wall is made from sandblasted metal turned a soft matte from weather. The ashes from the copper urns were transferred into ceramic canisters and placed in the columbarium wall. The niche of each urn is engraved with a number, name and, if known, both birth and death dates. The urns were handmade by the artists during a three-month residency at the Kohler Company in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. A single empty ceramic urn is visible in a corner of the courtyard to recognize the patients who were ordered exhumed from Asylum Cemetery and cremated, but whose whereabouts are unknown.*

In years to come more families will come to claim their relatives. As each claim is made, the family takes home both the ceramic urn and the empty copper urn. Some have even chosen to let them rest in peace with the hope that others will continue to visit them here for generations to come. When the ceramic urns are removed they are replaced by a hollow brass tube that represents the increasing significance of reunited families. As the golden perforations increase the transparency of this once solid wall it is hoped that the evolving appearance communicates the gradual closure of this important piece of Oregon history.

* 1,556 individuals were buried in OSH Asylum Cemetery on the north side of Center Street and ordered disinterred for cremation in the new 1913 facility. Twenty-eight gravestones from the original cemetery were discovered in an overgrown pile on a hillside southeast of Salem at the hospital's Cottage Farm in 1956.



Top: The columbarium wall holds new ceramic canisters bearing ashes and identities, if known. Bottom: The hospital had its own cemetery but in 1913 bodies were exhumed and cremated.

Annie Han & Daniel Mihalyo, Lead Pencil Studio

We began work on this memorial under the influence of three primary questions: how best to bring closure and dignity to individuals who were collectively forgotten; how to resolve deterioration of the original copper urns; and how to re-introduce the hospital's significant social history back into the tattered interior of the small red brick building?

Part artwork and part work of architecture, this design was developed in continual reference to our personal belief that the final resting place should be both simple and elegant – with a minimum artistic authorship which might otherwise overshadow the sanctity of the space. The key historical circumstance this memorial seeks to address is the public recovery of individuals who went missing for decades within the hospital system. To accomplish this, we felt intuitively that our response would need to take the shape of a physical space for gathering, rather than a sculptural form. In this way visitors would be invited



Artist Annie Han works on ceramic urns for the memorial

to experience a peaceful place of contemplation whereby the living could quietly dwell amongst the deceased. We endeavored to create the possibility of sincere public reconciliation as visitors witnessed firsthand a permanently designated public space intended for the process of private closure.

To accomplish this it became clear that the creation of any memorial would be a hollow gesture if the cremains were left to continue decomposing inside plastic boxes and perpetually locked-away from public view. This set several initiatives into action, not least of which was the enormous task of creating new urns – followed by the emotional process of transferring the ashes from the corroding copper urns into the new ceramic urns.

In overcoming numerous difficulties, we are grateful for the many individuals who extended themselves to support the completion of this special project. The three-year creation of this memorial has been a tremendously meaningful experience –emotionally, physically and personally. Part reliquary for the now-empty artifacts and part long-term resting place for the cremated remains of people, this memorial is itself a vessel that will continue to fill with human experience and memory, even as it is slowly emptied of its physical contents with each reunited family.

*The artists wish to especially thank the following institutions and individuals:
Tim Askin, David Keltner, Susi Hodgkin, Chris Jones, Doug Macy, Kevin Long, Dr. Misty Weitzel, David Salove, Mike Thomas, Justin McKoon, Josh Powell, Fisher Funeral Home, Jamin Aasum, Ean Eldred, Val Jean Marcoe, Gerhard Hahn, Sharon McWilliams, The Kohler Company, Kohler ceramics associates, John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Ruth Kohler, Chris Bouneff, nami Oregon, Mental Health America of Oregon, Cascade Behavior Health, Dan Dowell, OHS Facilities Services crew, the Oregon State Hospital Replacement Project Team, Christine D'Arcy, Jodie Jones, Meagan Atiyeh.*

All memorial photography Steve Hanson.



OREGON ARTS
COMMISSION

Oregon Arts Commission
775 Summer Street NE, Ste 200
Salem, Oregon 97301-1280

(503) 986-0082 Voice
(503) 986-0260 Fax
(800) 735-2900 TDD

oregon.artscomm@state.or.us
www.oregonartscommission.org



Content copyright the authors
and The Oregon Arts Commission.

