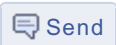


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February 2013

When we were asked to design the Strathewen bushfire memorial, I felt a huge sense of responsibility. I was conscious that the community might see us as outsiders imposing our ideas on them, and I wanted them to feel listened to and confident that the memorial would reflect their ideas. To get an understanding of what the community had been through, I read everything that had been written about the bushfires, including all the transcripts that related to Strathewen in the Bushfire Royal Commission.



People shared with us so generously their most difficult memories and reflections of the day. They also wanted to reflect on happier times, of tranquillity and life before the fires, and the joys of new friendships that carried them through the most difficult of times. But how were we to get so many beautiful heartfelt words into the design?

Someone from the community suggested haiku poetry as a style to treat the text. To me this became like painting with words. We wanted to convey the intensity of people's experiences




without making it harrowing. The community had asked for a water element as a symbol of cleansing the soul and nourishing new growth. This inspired the concept of water drops in the landscape radiating ripples of concentric circles that would represent the ripple effect of the fires.

We incorporated the words by sandblasting the text into the sandstone ripples. The words become legible by the shadows that they cast. It was a huge effort laying out all the text. It had to be correct to the millimetre to create a seamless flow. It was a very emotional journey for everyone involved in the process – including the construction workers who laid it out. When the memorial was complete, a community member wrote: “Can something be so shocking and so beautiful, can something be so sad and so full of hope?”

I feel proud to say that this memorial truly represents the collective voice of its community and our design provided the vehicle through which their story could be told.

Jan Nowell is principal designer at Arterial, which designed the Black Saturday bushfire memorial (7 Feb 2009) at Strathewen in collaboration with Tim Hart from Urban Initiatives.
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