

Ex-servicewomen's memorial garden and cairn

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Katherine Rekaris in the garden she designed in memory of women who have served at war. Image: [Susan Gordon-Brown](#)

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This memorial designed by Katherine Rekaris Landscape Architecture is dedicated to 70,000 Australian ex-servicewomen.

In 2010, Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance Trustees commissioned landscape architect Katherine Rekaris to create a memorial garden to honour the seventy thousand women who served Australia in every war and peacekeeping endeavour since the 1899–1902 Boer War. The gentle, feminine and moving landscape by Rekaris, in the Shrine of Remembrance Reserve, lies quietly on a lawn to the north-east of the Shrine, adjacent to Birdwood Avenue.

War memorials can, and I believe should, move us to places where we can imagine fear, aloneness and devastation; places where we stand in

some awe of those who endured a war and which make us question how we might have behaved had we been there.

It is surely how the stones, the statues or, in this case, the landscape can take us on this interior journey that is the measure of a memorial.



The historic cairn and a resting bench sit amid abstract swirls. Image: [Susan Gordon-Brown](#)

The original Melbourne memorial to these women, a cairn surrounded by a pretty flower garden, was situated on a site in the King's Domain parkland at St Kilda Road. But that tucked-away locale failed to acknowledge the roles women played in our war history, while their male counterparts are so dramatically honoured in the Shrine of Remembrance and its reserve.

Rekaris saw the making of the ex-servicewomen's memorial within the Shrine Reserve as a long-overdue debt to these women. "I felt the privilege of the designer, as curator of the experience, of the new memorial. I considered the meaning of womanhood to them, in light of all they had been through, and a couple of things kept at me. One was the idea of a rite of passage – of experiences of war, many of them indescribably horrific, which had taken these women on a journey from relative innocence to womanhood. The other was the idea of united experience, something which bonded them together, like a sisterhood," Rekaris says. "These women were doing things which no women before them had done. They were pioneers, they broke with all traditions and precedents; they had unbelievable guts."

As you walk towards the memorial, a casual semicircle of South African jacarandas represents the Boer War, the first war in which Australian women served. During November, at the time of the Ex-Servicewomen's Association's annual service, jacaranda trees flower profusely with blossoms on bare branches – the slightest breeze causes petals to flutter down, leaving a striking mauve carpet on the ground. Rekaris took this notion from *The Canberra Times* in April 1947 when returning troops marched through Sydney. An article in the paper described how “confetti poured down from windows in Martin Place and George and Park streets and thousands of flags fluttered from every vantage point.” She loved the idea of there being a “glorious ticker tape parade, honouring them every year at the time of their service.”



Three free-form garden beds hold a repetition of flower-shaped pavers. Image: [Susan Gordon-Brown](#)

Within the jacarandas' casual circle, in a clearing where an imperceptibly graded lawn mound creates a place for the cairn at its crest, there are three free-form garden beds that swirl around the historic cairn. These gardens of flowers hold beautiful arrangements of small, white concrete, violet-shaped pavers among the wildflowers.

The use of the violet as a flower of remembrance began in 1915 to commemorate the fallen heroes of war. The violet was a symbol of modesty, sweetness and faithfulness and was chosen by an Australian woman as a symbol to signify the sorrow of the Australian community during World War I.

This abstracted garden of perpetual concrete flowers is stronger than a garden of real flowers could ever be. It needed to be gutsy and it is. The repeated use of an identical form at a large scale allows the visitor to get a real sense of how these women suffered a united fate. Here, they are symbolically buried and their united experience continues as the

memorial stones weather and age. Every concrete violet represents two hundred women: 350 violets, seventy thousand women.



The white concrete flowers are shaped like violets, a symbol of remembrance. Image: [Susan Gordon-Brown](#)

The repetitiveness of these units on the ground gives a sobering sense of the scale of their sacrifice. These memorial flowers weather, hold water briefly after rain and are becoming more and more a part of this garden over time. Stark within their bed of *Dichondra*, native *Viola hederacea* and *Dianella caerulea* Cassa Blue, and laid out in grid formations, they are reminiscent, even from a great distance, of the tiny white crosses of military cemeteries all over the world.

When it is not jacaranda season, the memorial flowers are amplified by coloured drifts of bulbs and native wildflowers that spring up, organic in form, beneath the trees in this woodland setting.

The closely cropped, mown path contrasts with the rougher lawn beyond the trees and defines the walk beneath the jacarandas and the domain of the ex-servicewomen's garden. A nearby bench allows visitors to stop and spend some time within the memorial.

Rekaris made this memorial as a mark of unity, remembrance, sorrow and honour. "I wanted it to honour the women in a very beautiful and feminine way; a way which distinguished the memorial from the other very masculine ones on the reserve."

She has succeeded. This strongly conceived but gentle landscape is a reminder of some terrible duties selflessly done, and the debts we owe to the women who served at war.

Design practice

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Words

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Images

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Sources

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