



# Tanforan Memorial

San Bruno, CA

**Studio 431 Elements:**

Custom “Horse Stall Barrack” Memorials, Custom Signage, Custom Bench Seating

**Design Partners:**

RHAA Landscape Architects + Planners

**Team Members:**

Tanforan Assembly Center Memorial Committee, Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART)

## History

In 1942, the Tanforan racetrack in San Bruno, California was hastily converted into the Tanforan Assembly Center, a Japanese internment camp that imprisoned nearly 8,000 Japanese Americans from the San Francisco Bay Area. The camp used existing horse stalls as makeshift barracks for the thousands of internees forced into the site.

## A Decade of Development

Recognizing the need to memorialize and garner awareness about this historic injustice, the Tanforan Assembly Center Memorial Committee worked with Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) to develop both a commemorative photo exhibit and a physical memorial site.

Still in place today, a 2012 photo exhibit organized by the Bay Area's Japanese American community located in the San Bruno BART station became the inspiration for the physical Tanforan Memorial. Now, located right outside the major public transit

hub on a previously underutilized plaza, a 2,500-square-foot memorial stands as a poignant reminder of discriminatory wartime civilian incarceration.

Supporting the initiative and fulfilling the project's grant requirement for the National Park Service's Japanese American Confinement Sites program, San Francisco-based RHAA Landscape Architects + Planners have spent a decade working on the Tanforan Memorial site.

"In need of a landscape architect to design the setting for the memorial, the Tanforan Assembly Center Memorial Committee reached out to our firm knowing that some of our original

founding partners were imprisoned in U.S. Japanese internment camps during World War II," says Jimmy Chan, Vice President at RHAA. "One of whom is Harold Kobayashi, partner emeritus at RHAA, who immediately decided to take on the project pro bono beginning in 2012."

"After Harold retired, the project changed hands a few times within our firm before coming to me," Chan continues. "And for the past seven years, we've been building on Harold's initial plans, working with the Committee and BART, and refining the design for the Tanforan Memorial."

## A Custom Memorial to the Past

Finally opening in August 2022, the site at the former racetrack then internment camp features abstracted replicas of the barrack horse stalls and commemorative signage created by Landscape Forms' Studio 431 custom division. The signage offers insight into the lives of people imprisoned at Tanforan, and the names of all who were interned there are imprinted on the stall doors. Appearing prominently in the middle of the site, a bronze sculpture of interned children by Sandra Shaw and inspired by the photos of Dorothea Lange stands touchingly next to a single Japanese Cherry Tree.

Because the site was donated to the Tanforan Assembly Center Memorial Committee by BART and sits directly adjacent to a busy transit hub, the memorial faced a unique set of design challenges. "The idea was to replicate a horse stall on the memorial site, but we had to overcome many design obstacles involving BART's security and visibility concerns," describes Chan. "After many discussions and iterations, we arrived at a very abstract interpretation for the stalls."



Recognizing Landscape Forms' experience in modular structure and custom fabrication, Chan and the team at RHAA sought out Studio 431 to create the abstracted horse stall features.

**“We are very aware of Landscape Forms' experience in modular structures. And from my experience in fabrication projects where detail is so important, it would've been difficult to find someone who could put these pieces together in such a refined way as Studio 431.”**

— Jimmy Chan, Vice President  
at RHAA Landscape Architects + Planners

Describing his experience working with Studio 431, Jimmy Chan continues, “We presented them our sketches, they assured us they could build the structures, and then they explained that they could do it for easily a third of the cost proposed by the contractor. It was a no-brainer.” Following the positivity of this experience, Chan and the RHAA team returned to Studio 431 to create a selection of additional custom features for the site.

Joining the replica horse stall barracks, Studio 431 created the freestanding informational signage and custom bench seating for the Tanforan Memorial. All pieces feature steel framing finished in textured Onyx powdercoat with wooden surfaces and siding throughout the stalls and seating. “Because the location is surrounded by steel and glass, we wanted to add warmth, but also because of the site's context, we wanted to make sure nothing was flashy,” explains Chan. Studio 431's custom work closely follows this philosophy, providing warm textures and materials in a design language that's reserved, understated and respectful.

“Memorials are not projects that my firm engages in often—it's a complicated and difficult project type,” says Chan. “But at the end of the day, it can be very rewarding.”

**“I think we were able to successfully convey the significance of the Tanforan site and shed light on an important part of history that many people may not be aware of.”**

— Jimmy Chan, Vice President  
at RHAA Landscape Architects + Planners

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