

## PLACES OF VIOLENCE - LANDSCAPES OF MEMORY

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### **Abstract**

*On account of the fact that urban public space, as a palimpsest of social interactions, spatially embodies the political role of landscape, the proposed paper will attempt to investigate the way a landscape, representing the “traumatic” past or in other words, the repressed memory of violence and death, is formed. As this landscape symbolically represents the “traumatic” dichotomy provoked by the aforementioned memory, it would be worth exploring the way the monument becomes the site of contested and competing meanings, more likely the site of cultural conflict rather than of shared national values and ideals.*

*Professor Pierre Nora claims that “the memory is directly linked to spaces while history is interrelated to events”, acknowledging thus, the inseparable relation of monuments to their landscape surroundings in which they are integrated, so as for the public to be able to perceive their cultural value as a whole.*

*For these memorial spaces, their determining relationship to their surrounding landscape stems from the interaction of memory with history, in such a way that memory acts as a means of representation of the past which defines the present (and the future). And if this is true for the collective memory, then how a landscape is shaped, where the ambiguous symbiosis of memory and oblivion is inscribed? How does one record and comment the “absence” or “horror” in public space? How does one manage memory or worse, grief? Most importantly, what does a monument stand for in terms of the position a nation wishes to occupy within the course of history?*

*The memorial landscapes that have been selected for this research constitute primarily monuments of violence and include the one for the victims of State terrorism (Argentina), for the victims of violence (Mexico), for the victims of freedom of the speech (Lebanon), for the victims of Holocaust (Germany and U.S.A.) and for the Veterans of the Vietnam War (U.S.A). All these landscapes are asked to deal with issues on one hand, related to the representation of the traumatic memory which is denatured into a cultural (national) trauma and on the other hand, related to the importance of remembering the “invisible” and administrating social justice.*

**Keywords:** *monuments of violence, landscapes of memory, “traumatic” memory, cultural trauma, ambiguous symbiosis*

### **Introduction**

On account of the fact that urban public space, as a palimpsest of social interactions, spatially embodies the political role of landscape, this research will attempt to investigate the way a landscape, representing the “traumatic” past or in other words, the repressed memory of violence and death, is formed. As this landscape symbolically represents the “traumatic” dichotomy provoked by the aforementioned memory, it would be worth exploring the way the monument becomes “the site of contested and competing meanings in a confrontational context, more likely the site of cultural conflict rather than of shared national values and

ideals” (Young, 1999). The main focal point of this study is the central political role of landscape in the formation of collective memory through the ambiguous symbiosis of memory and oblivion in memorial places.

The primary function of the memory is not the preservation of the past but instead, its adjustment in such a form that allows for the understanding and management of the present as well as for the planning of the future. Therefore, memory constitutes an inherent element of nations’ identity formation and each generation processes from scratch its shared, collective memories, re-interpreting them based on its contemporary cultural and political apperceptions.

The notion of the monument is inseparably linked to the act of reminding, referring to the element that perpetuates memory. The monument selects and promotes a specific perception of the past, often following the formal national narration. As such, it validates and enhances the collective memory. This is valid since antiquity, when the monument was not only identified with the notion of monumental, but mostly with the notion of memory. This mentality of preserving and respecting the memory of all those elements with remarkable or sacred properties resulted in the creation of numerous monuments in direct relation to their surrounding landscape. The aforementioned process continues in the Roman times, when military victories were spatially represented through arches and leads to the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> World Wars, when the winners depict their own version of the events through the monuments they construct, fund or glorify. Consequently, the monument embodies the prevailing collective memory, centrally important to the social identity of any nation. More specifically, the 1<sup>st</sup> World War altered the correlations between space and historical memory, through the inconceivable human losses of the participating nations. The War placed the individual as the main focus of interest, as opposed to the arches that stood for social elitism, glorifying the military officers killed in the battlefield.

In general, the monuments illustrate the history of our civilization and constitute our cultural heritage. This is evident through the conventions on the protection of the architectural and archaeological heritage, such as the Venice Charter and the Granada Convention, which aim at the conservation of the history of the city and thus, at the protection of the historical identity and cultural tradition of any given society. In light of this, the monument is perceived as part of the urban tissue, integrated in the network of cultural elements of the city and consequently, it is organically related to its surrounding landscape.

French Professor Pierre Nora claims that “the memory is directly linked to spaces while history is interrelated to events”, acknowledging thus, the inseparable relation of monuments to their landscape surroundings in which they are integrated, so as for the public to be able to perceive their cultural value as a whole. For these memorial spaces, their determining relationship to their surrounding landscape stems from the interaction of memory with history, in such a way that memory acts as a means of representation of the past which defines the present (and the future). And if this is true for the collective memory, then how a landscape is shaped, where the ambiguous symbiosis of memory and oblivion is inscribed? How does one record and comment the “absence” or “horror” in public space? How does one manage memory or worse, grief? Most importantly, what does a monument stand for in terms of the position a nation wishes to occupy within the course of history?

### **The case studies**

Under this pre-described framework, Professor James Young introduced the term ‘counter-monuments’ to describe the “memorial spaces conceived to challenge the very premise of the monument”, indicating that “instead of embodying memory, such memorials may only displace memory” (Young, 1999). It seems that the most significant (architectural) projects in this category are those where the symbolic connotations are perceived through the spatial

experience itself and to this end, the memorial landscapes that have been selected for this research, highlight the aforementioned perception. These memorial landscapes constitute primarily monuments of violence and include the one for the victims of State terrorism (Argentina), for the victims of violence (Mexico), for the victims of lack of freedom of speech (Lebanon), for the victims of Holocaust (Germany and U.S.A.) and for the Veterans of the Vietnam War (U.S.A.). All these landscapes are asked to deal with issues on one hand, related to the representation of the traumatic memory which is denatured into a cultural (national) trauma and on the other hand, related to the importance of remembering the “invisible” and administrating social justice.

### **The Vietnam Veterans Memorial (U.S.A.)**

The first project is located in the U.S.A., and it refers to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. It is located next to the Lincoln’s monument and very close to the White House and the Washington Monument (the Obelisk). The monument hosts 5 million visitors yearly, it is considered on the ten most favorite monuments of the U.S.A. and is part of the list of the U.S.A. National Historic Landmarks.

In 1979, the Congress introduced the idea of creating a monument for the Veterans of the Vietnam War as well as for those missing since then. To this end, an international architectural competition was launched and its scientific committee evaluated over a thousand and four hundred proposals. The winning proposal, at everyone’s surprise, belonged to a then twenty-year-old Yale student named Maya Lin. Her intention was to create an opening -more likely, a wound- in the earth to symbolize the pain caused by the war and its many casualties.

Lin’s design specified a V-shaped black granite wall curved with the names of fifty-eight thousand servicemen, with one side pointing towards the Lincoln Memorial and the other towards the Washington Monument. The V-shaped wall comprises of two adjoining 75m. long walls, composed of 72 black granite panels that are inscribed with the names of the men and women being honored. The walls taper from 3m. tall at their highest point to 20cm. tall at their lowest one, with their bottom edges descending below the level of the surrounding earth.

Although Maya Lin’s memorial had received much criticism due to its minimalistic design and the artist’s lack of professional experience (and ethnicity!), the project is a significant pilgrimage site for families and friends of the deceased servicemen. Maya Lin had stated for her own design proposal: “I imagined taking a knife and cutting into the earth, opening it up, and with the passage of time, that initial violence and pain would heal, like a journey towards an awareness of loss”. Moreover, the jury of the competition had declared that the proposal constitutes “a black scar hidden in the earth, trying to hide in shame”.

### **The New England Holocaust Memorial (U.S.A.)**

The next case study is located within the U.S.A. as well and more specifically in Boston, referring to the New England Holocaust Memorial, designed by Stanley Saitowitz in 1995, after an international architectural competition.

It comprises of six glass towers 18m. high in a successive linear allocation, with millions of numbers inscribed in the glass, representing the infamous tattoos on the victims’ arms. Metal grates with twinkling lights lie on the floor of the towers, through which steam rises up, recalling memories from the gas chambers and creating a sense of suffocation and disorientation.

The number six has multiple meanings in this project: the millions of Jews killed in the Holocaust; the names of the six main death camps; and the six years, 1939-1945, during which the infamous “Final Solution,” took place. According to the architect, the towers

resemble with “six candles, as lit from bottom up and the idea was this memorial to darkness to be built with light”.

At the scale of the city, the memorial is fully integrated in the urban tissue as the path, the colonnade and the frame create urban space, defining edges and relationships with the buildings and city beyond.

### **The Holocaust Memorial (Germany)**

The next memorial in Berlin is also dedicated to the victims of the Holocaust, designed by the architect Peter Eisenman, who won the architectural competition in 1999. The spatial experience when walking through the site is characterized by the bodily correlation to the monument, which takes the form of an undulating - resembling a 3D wave- field of 2.711 concrete blocks, organized in an orthogonal grid. These blocks have the same length and width and differ from each other only in height, constituting a symbolic representation of the forced segregation of Jews during the Nazi era.

Peter Eisenman himself had stated: “The time of the monument, its duration from top surface to ground, is disjoined from the time of experience. In this context, there is no nostalgia, no memory of the past, only the living memory of the individual experience”. For him, “the space condenses, narrows and deepens to provide a place of loss and contemplation”, both elements of memory. This is evident as visitors walking through these labyrinthine corridors, experience a sense of disorientation or claustrophobia, recalling the feeling of a cemetery or even beyond that, the very own feelings of the victims, just like in the previous case study in Boston.

At the same time, the blocks, though they do look like graves, are designed in such a minimalistic way that they provide a form of informal seating. This was, indeed, the architect’s intention: the project’s integration in the urban tissue in such a way that it becomes part of the city’s public space network.

### **The Memorial for the victims of the lack of freedom of speech (Lebanon)**

The next monument refers to the Lebanese politician and the former editor and publisher of An Nahar paper, Gebran Tueni. The monument glorifies his values and ideals for which he was assassinated in 2005, such as the freedom of speech, nations’ collaboration and unity among Lebanese. On December 12, 2005, he was killed by a car bomb, being the seventh victim in a list of assassinations of high-profile politicians and journalists who were fierce critics of the Syrian government and its policies in Lebanon.

The memorial, designed and constructed by VDLA in 2011, is located in Beirut, Lebanon and basically, it constitutes an urban public space, in direct correlation to the urban tissue. It is a simple, linear, monolithic gesture of granite which ends in a vertical column 5m. high, on which Gebran Tueni’s oath towards the Lebanese people is inscribed. The selected plants -olive tree, oak tree and thyme plantings- have high sentimental value for the Lebanese and reflect Tueni’s love for his country. The pebbles under the olive tree bear his name and as people passing by picks them up daily, they are constantly replaced by Tueni’s colleagues at the newspaper which is located in the building right across the street from the monument.

In general, this monument describes not only the story of an individual but in reality, the story of a whole nation.

### **The Monument for the victims of State Terrorism – The Memorial Park (Argentina)**

The next set of memorials falls into the category of “monuments as parks”, referring to the monuments designed not as single elements but instead, as open public spaces fully integrated in the urban tissue.

The first one is the Monument for the victims of State Terrorism, the “Memorial park” in Buenos Aires, Argentina, which commemorates the victims of Argentina’s military dictatorship, the so called “Dirty War”, when from 1976 to 1983, tens of thousands of civilians were tortured, died or simply disappeared under governmental terrorism, in the form of a “National Reorganization Process”.

Fifteen years later, in 1998, an open architectural competition was launched under the auspices of the School of Architecture of the University of Buenos Aires for the creation of a monument for the victims of the “Dirty War” and the winning proposal was designed by Estudio Baudizzone-Lestard-Varas along with Becker Ferrari Arquitectos. The selection of the site for the monument’s allocation was not random, as it is located only three hundred meters away from the military airport where thousands of victims of the state terrorism were taken up in flights and dropped into the ocean, never to be seen again.

The park serves as a place of remembrance and reflection, with eighteen different sculptures scattered around, yet the most significant one bears the names of thousands of victims engraved on plaques, while there are thousands more empty plaques to signify the disappeared. This “monument as a park” was designed to cut into the landscape like an open wound, in direct reference to the wound both in the hearts of the families that lost their beloved ones and also, in the heart of democratic values.

### **The Memorial for the victims of Violence (Mexico)**

The second and last project in the category of “monuments as parks” is located in the city of Mexico and more specifically, within the Chapultepec Forest, the most significant green space in the urban tissue. In a city where the drug trafficking has cost the lives of thousands of people, this “Monument for the victims of violence” was designed in order to mitigate the political and social disorder provoked by the continuing acts of violence in Mexico.

The Memorial to the Victims of Violence, designed by Gaeta-Springall Arquitectos in 2013, is composed of a series of Corten steel plates, like a forest of walls within a forest of trees. In the central space of the Memorial, there is a fountain with an open geometrical form, as a reminiscent that the issue of violence is still unresolved. The fountain is covered with a grid, allowing for visitors to walk over water, which refers directly to the latter’s healing properties.

According to the architects, the Corten steel “is used in three ways: natural, rusty or stainless mirroring, each of them with different meanings. The rusty steel means the marks and scars that time makes in our lifetime. The stainless mirroring steel is used to reflect and multiply the living: persons, trees, and the water of the central space; and the natural steel is used as an unperturbed element that reminds us the main and essential values that societies must keep to live in peace”.

The project is characterized by two significant elements: on one hand, the recuperation of the public space with fifteen stremmas of reclaimed forest (the Chapultepec Forest) for open public space which pinpoints the importance of the monument’s correlation to its surrounding landscape. On the other hand, the remembrance of the victims of violence which is represented through the void between the steel walls and the trees. This negative space -the void- is reminiscent of the absence (of the victims), reproducing “the space between the

memorial and viewer, between the viewer and his own memory: the place of the memorial in the viewer's mind, heart, and conscience" (Young, 1999).

In this project, the architectural properties of light are used to emphasize the absence of the victims of the ongoing conflict in Mexico through the dual use of warm and colder lighting tones. The warm lights serve as a tool for spatial orientation, guiding visitors into a suggested promenade and ultimately, into deep reflection. The colder shades of lighting are used for the treetops, rendering the latter into lanterns of hope and guiding the visitors' eye towards the sky, with direct connotations to the victims' soul wandering.

Finally, one of the most significant elements of this project is the appropriation of the steel walls, acting as a canvas for people to express their feelings of pain (for the loss of their beloved ones) and anger (against the organized crime). The society itself therefore, re-designs the memorial according to their own desires and emotions.

## **Conclusions**

The status of contemporary monuments as "sites of memory" constantly fuels the ongoing unresolved debate between the intention of governments to "assign singular meanings to complicated events and people" and the determination of architects and artists to "plant in them the seeds of self-doubt and impermanence" (Young, 1999). Nowadays, the political significance of contemporary monuments is defined in terms of their ability to be openly interpreted and to act as catalysts of debate and reflection (Carrier, 2005). The monument has increasingly become the site of contested and competing meanings, more likely the site of cultural conflict than of shared national values and ideals (Young, 1999).

The pre-described case studies dealt with issues of representing traumatic memories which eventually, turns into cultural traumas and finally, into issues of attributing justice. So, what do we remember and what do we forget? What CANNOT we discuss? Who and how defines historical memory?

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