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Monuments and their Meanings

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# Introduction

Monuments are part of our everyday life and present / represent a variety of meanings. We engage with them on a number of levels, and they carry meanings for the individual as well as for a society, from the everyday prosaic to the sublime. This essay will briefly explore several types of monuments and the meanings they contain.

Personal monuments are those whose meanings are specific to only a limited number of people. By this I mean that the most immediate meanings of the monument are understood by specific individuals, and at this level, not by the society at large. An example would be a grave of an immediate family member. Those affected by the grave will have had direct relations with the deceased, and the grave is a physical reminder in the present of a person in the past. This physical reminder can trigger memories and associations for the immediate family.

Other people who did not know the deceased will not experience these memories, although they will be affected, at a level, by the universality of death, mortality, the existence/nonexistence of God, one's place in the world, and many other meanings. These meanings and associations are key elements of the monument's importance.

A personal monument is grounded in its culture, and it therefore also acts at another level, in a categorical way. While a grave of a family member is specific to the family, there is also a universal significance in that all humans come from families. Therefore, while someone may not have known the person represented by the grave, say as someone who is commemorated as a father, the person viewing the grave may have associations and feelings for his or her own father triggered by this grave. The broader relevance of these monuments is therefore grounded on those experiences that are universally experienced, even though the interpretation of these experiences may change through time. These meanings are available to the whole of the society.

Another type of personal monument is one where the monument is an expression to the outside world that the person creating the monument is of some significance in the world. Examples might be the writing of a book, the endowment of a charity, or perhaps being the patron of a work of art. Significance



Saqarra pyramid



Personal monument: family grave



Personal monument: family grave



Neuschwanstein for Ludwig II, Bavaria



Memorial to the Missing of the Somme, Thiepval, Somme, France (WWI)

in this sense means, literally, setting a marker to designate one's place in an uncertain and changing world. Particularly if one were not to believe in a life after death, there would be a greater incentive to mark one's place in the order of things.

There are monuments that are public monuments. These being monuments that have a meaning which directly addresses and refers to an entire society, in contrast to 'personal' monuments that address society more obliquely. Explicit examples include war memorials, statues of individuals famous to that society, and the like. These can be for commemorative/remembrance purposes, e.g. Nelson's column in Trafalgar Square commemorating England's defeat of the French in the Battle of Trafalgar, or it can be for the purposes of structuring the interpretation of history, e.g., a number of the Holocaust memorials that have been constructed since WWII. Monuments will contain both purposes, as remembrance and interpretation are interweaved, and are different stratas of significance. The relative importance and emphasis of each will vary with the monument.

Less explicit examples of public monuments include institutional buildings such as courthouses, libraries, and schools. While not considered monuments per se, they are important in that they physically express a value structure, and in so doing they affect society's perception of the present. For example, many courthouses and town halls in the United States built within the last century are based on Roman and Greek architecture. One can hardly argue that Roman and Greek architecture is indigenous to America, rather the purpose is to convey, by association that the institutions in question have legitimate roots going back into history.

The meanings in monuments are deep rooted. The monuments do not contain meanings in and of themselves, but rather have multiple levels of meaning through associations and remonstrances of other things. Ruskin's view (as quoted by Anderson) was that architecture is the means of society's remembrance. By this is meant that the physical monument, or architecture, is a means through which past events are remembered. While Ruskin's observation was in the context of maintaining a social hierarchy, the model that the physical structure is a medium that transmits memory can be broadly applied. Boyer



Courthouse in Washington, DC



Trafalgar Square with Nelson's column - London



British WWII cemetery at Al-Alamein

observes that collective memories are supported by a group, framed in time and space. Examples would include many of what are considered to be 'typical' monuments such as a memorial to the dead of a particular war, and statues of prominent persons. Here the monument makes a connection to another event, and the monument's significance comes from these events. The monument in itself, without other events and associations would not contain meaning or significance.

On a different level than the examples above, the associations and remembrances of monuments can be recalled through the architecture and geometry of the monument itself. Anderson gives the example of the Holy Sepulchre which was used as a model for mediaeval sanctuaries. He notes that for a sanctuary to be 'recognisable' as such it needed to be a) round, and b) to contain a reproduction of the tomb. Even though meaning is ultimately by association, the typology of the sanctuary contains meaning. More modern day examples of typologies that carry meanings include pitched roofs and fireplaces in domestic architecture.

Colin Davies, in discussing the Sir John Soane museum, observed that 200 years ago (in England) architecture was the vehicle of tradition and the medium of remembrance. The Soane museum, with its integration of living quarters, architect's office, and collection of eclectic objects was a connection of death, museum, and architecture. Particularly interesting is the Belzoni Sarcophagus, which is a prominent piece of the collection. Davis quotes Soane on the sarcophagus as "calling back so powerfully the recollection of past times, that we almost believe we are conversing with our departed friends now asleep in their silent tombs." A connection in everyday life is made to the past, and is a means of integrating memory into daily experience.

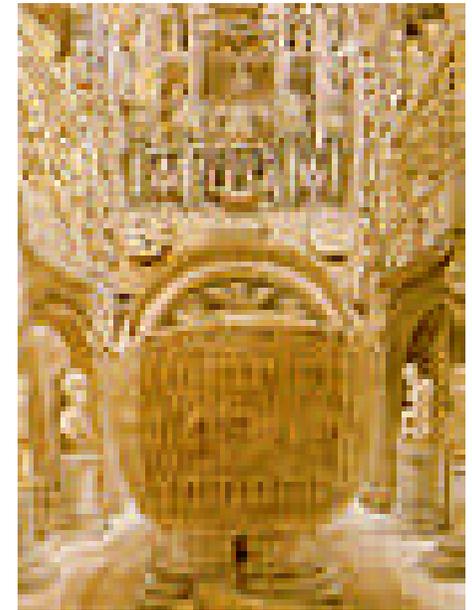
The meanings of monuments are structured through time. To take the example of death, Philippe Ariès observed three phases to Western attitudes. First, in the early middle ages, death is unexceptional and unimportant. Second, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the rising importance of the individual gives rise to a more personal conception of death. Finally, about the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, onlookers participated in death, and endeavoured to preserve the departed person's memory. In this context a tombstone would carry different connotations. The meanings



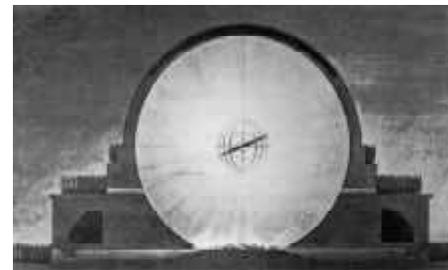
Taj Mahal - the tomb of Mumtaz Mahal in Agra



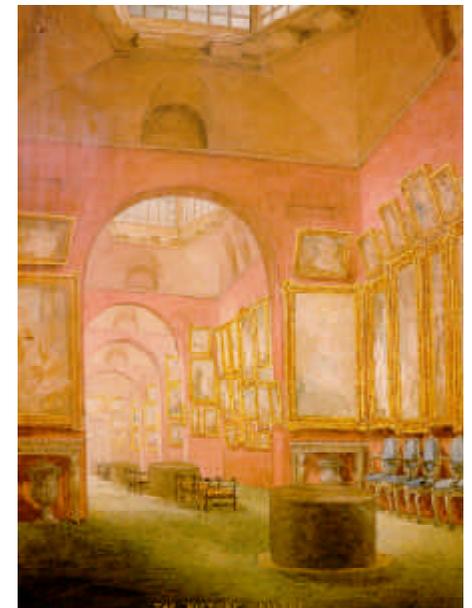
Ames Monument - Wyoming



Soane Museum, London - View of Belzoni Sarcophagus



Etienne-Louis Boullée - Newton Centotaph



Dulwich Picture Gallery (and mausoleum) - John Soane, architect

intended in one period, say an affirmation and acceptance of the eternal order of God, might be read in later times as a personal statement towards one's loved ones. In a similar fashion, man's view of his place within the world will change through time, and this is reflected in the monuments erected and the meanings that they give.

On a different level, the meanings of monuments can change because the direct associations invoked by the monuments are not experienced by succeeding generations. The hardships and suffering experienced in, say, the Crimean war, while latent, are more difficult for current generations to directly understand, and monuments depicting this will not have the same response as they had for those from that time. However, this does not mean these monuments are without meaning, rather that the meanings current generations receive are more 'universal', i.e., are based on those values that are still held in common, e.g., self-sacrifice for the good of the nation, the justness of the cause, etc.

The meanings of monuments are grounded in experiences. Some of these experiences are decidedly personal in nature, e.g., the relationship to a loved one, while others are societal / cultural experiences, e.g., what it means to be British in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Additionally, there are experiences that to a certain extent will transcend time and place. These are phenomenological type experiences that are grounded in the physical world and our perception of it, e.g., the sense of up and down, light and dark, and basic instincts such as sex, food, shelter, etc. They are universal to the extent that they are experienced by all human beings. Death is also experienced by all humans, but as we have seen, the interpretations placed on death can vary through time. These various layers of meaning are interweaved and are present in differing degrees in all monuments.

Monuments shape national and cultural identity. Harten gives the example of the French Revolution where the nature of monuments changed from signs of state power to signs of newly attained popular sovereignty. Like the writing of history, the production of monuments is selective. It is selective in the sense that a particular version of events, or a specific value structure, is reinforced through the monument. For example, most war memorials rarely commemorate the loss and suffering experienced by the enemy. On one level, the war memorial commemorates the death of the country's soldiers, but on another level the



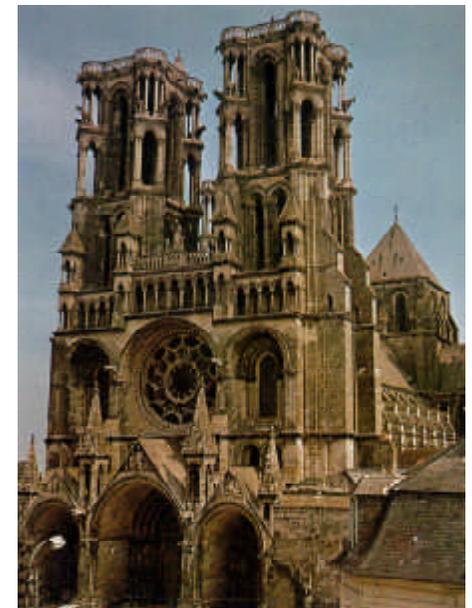
Place Vendome - Paris. Napoleonic column that replaced Louis XIV's statue



Project by Ledoux



Allegheny County Courthouse (USA)



Laon Cathedral

memorial attempts to give validation to the war itself, and to underscore the institutional validity of the country that sent these soldiers to their death.

Similar to shaping national and cultural identity, monuments give concrete expression to a dominant power structure. In the realm of architecture examples abound in both government and business, e.g., government legislative chambers, corporate headquarters, etc. While these monuments will serve practical needs, they provide a symbolic role. The concrete presence of these 'monumental' buildings is used to instil legitimacy to the power structure that built them. An institution can only exist if it is accepted by the society and granted legitimacy. A monument, even though commissioned by the institution itself, gives the appearance of an external validation of the legitimacy of the institution, which in turn can have an influence on the society.

Monuments also have a very important role in an urban setting. As mentioned earlier, institutional buildings as 'monuments' give a physical presence to the underlying institution. The physical presence in the city puts them in the network of relationships and underscores their connection to everyday life. As icons of remembrance they are a physical presence in the daily life of the city, and become part of the everyday life, becoming part of the collective unconscious. This creates a link with the past, whose interpretation will affect the present.

Monuments, in the sense of institutional buildings, are a manifestation of the value structure of the society and a physical affirmation of its goals. Buildings of this type include law courts, educational buildings, hospitals, and government buildings. Their presence is a manifestation of the underlying belief system. Again, by their placement within the city, these are integrated into daily life and the collective unconscious.

On one level, a city is a mental construct of the people who inhabit it. Monuments are important in the structure of this mental construct as the monument both presents and represents the values, history, aspirations of that society. These are important elements in the making the city a 'place'.

Another aspect of urban monuments is the role of urban landmarks around



Unbuilt project for Liverpool Cathedral, England by Edwin Lutyens



Empire State Building - New York

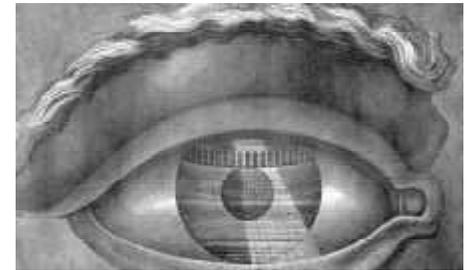


John Hancock Tower - Chicago

which people orient themselves. The Empire State Building in New York, the John Hancock Tower in Chicago and St Paul's Cathedral in London are examples of buildings that, while having a whole series of meanings and associations, also function separately as physical and mental landmarks that are used as basis of reference. The Hancock building is distinctly visible from the plains outside Chicago, and is very much a geographic marker in the area. Additionally, the Hancock building, more than other Chicago towers, also has a certain brawniness and muscularity that resonates well with the attitudes of people from Chicago. In London, St Paul's is a key landmark in the mental map that people hold of the city. This is aided by its size and its visual prominence in that it can be viewed from many vantage points across the whole of London.

The physical geography of an urban place contains features of landmarks. For example, London has the Thames, a river that meanders through the city from one end through the other. This physical feature is an important landmark in the mental geography of the city. When living in the city, one is aware of ones position relative to the Thames, and the river is an ordering device in placing oneself within London. Additionally, the Thames has acquired meanings for north and south of the river, where the attitude of people, and the feel of places within London is different. While a 'monument' such as the Thames is not man-made in the sense of the Hancock Tower, it is the harbour of meanings and associations.

Monuments are generally physical objects, but there are aspects of monuments that are accomplished without physical means in a 'conventional' sense. Earlier examples have noted the writing of a book, or the endowment of a charity, as examples of monuments. What they share with more conventional monuments is that they are tangible expressions or symbols of something beyond themselves.



Drawing by Ledoux



River Thames - London



Painting of St Pauls Cathedral - London

# Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Washington DC

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. — And the Lord shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not. — For this God is our God for ever and ever: he will be our guide even unto death. — Psalm 23:3, 4

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial (VVM) was built in the 1980s to commemorate those Americans who lost their lives fighting in the Vietnam War. The memorial is located in the nation's capital on the Mall, with its principal orientations to the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument.

The design by Maya Lin, was the result of an open architectural competition. The names of the 58,000 Americans who died in Vietnam are inscribed chronologically on two walls of black granite. A path follows these walls, and is cut into the earth.

The VVM is a powerful and moving monument because it operates on several levels. It contains references and associations to the individual and American society, as well as to universal values about death and its remembrance.

The institutional setting of the VVM is important. First, it is located in Washington, DC, the nation's capitol. Second, it is located on the Mall, which can arguably be called the most important civic space in the United States. Third, the design of the VVM anchors it to two of the most important monuments on the Mall, the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. Taken collectively, they underscore the institutional significance of the VVM. The setting means that the institutions of government and collective American society have given importance to what the VVM represents. The monument by its physical presence states that the Vietnam War is important in American history, and that it needs to be remembered along with other institutions such as Lincoln, Jefferson, Washington, the Supreme Court, etc. The same monument, were it located in another city, would still be a significant monument, but it would not have the same intensity and impact that it has given its current location.

Institutionally, the location on the Mall works on another level. There was



tremendous conflict and anger within the United States during the war. There was the draft, body counts on the evening news, the Pentagon Papers, Kent State, racial conflict, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, anti-war demonstrations (including those on the Mall), the political downfall of president Lyndon Johnson, the fall of Saigon, and many other related memories. The setting on the Mall brings these out these memories and associations for those of us Americans who lived through this time. Arguably, future generations will not have these associations with the VWM immediately available, but they will remain as latent meanings in the monument.

The VWM also structures the way in which the Vietnam War is remembered. The Vietnam War was not a 'war' on the technicality that an act of war was never formally declared (as it is unlikely that there would have been sufficient public support for this). The VWM serves to validate the war, and to further say that it was important to the values of the country (stopping the spread of communism, etc), and that the lives of 58,000 Americans were not in vain. Many in American society would argue that the war did not stop the spread of communism (and would question the validity of the underlying notion), and would further argue that in fact the lives of the 58,000 Americans (not to mention many more Vietnamese) were needlessly lost.

At this level of meaning, i.e., the validation of the war (outside of personal and public commemoration which will be discussed below), the monument is not founded on a shared value structure. The monument is used to change the publicly held value structure, and to underscore the validity of the institution of government involved in the war.

On another level, the VWM operates to commemorate the loss of 58,000 Americans, irrespective of whether one believes in the validity of the Vietnam War. At this level, the commemoration is on a personal level in the sense of the relationship between one human being and another. There is a recognition and understanding that a fellow human being, most of them very young men, had their lives taken away. They died and we live. Walking along the monument, seeing name after name after name after name, we are confronted with our own mortality. Our sense of mortality gives us a human empathy to those that have died.



On a personal level, the VWM is a memorial for families and friends of those that have died. There is a powerful emotional connection with finding the name of a loved one inscribed within the wall of 58,000 names. On any visit to the monument, one will find people making rubbings, using paper and pencil, of the name of their loved one inscribed in the wall. The tactile aspect of rubbing the name reinforces the connection with the loved one.

The VWM is unique in the sense that the name of every person (on the American side) who died is listed on the monument. Both at a public and private level, this underscores the importance of the individual life. It says that the life of each person meant something, and that it was not squandered in vain. That the monument contains all the names is partially a function of the size of the war (i.e., smaller than WWI and WWII), partially a function that indeed people feel these lives were wasted, and partially a function of the changing notions of death and service to country.

For example, compare the difference in meanings between the VWM and a monument that contains the tomb of an unknown soldier. In the later monument, the emphasis is less on the individual, and more upon the collective. The unknown soldier represents all who have died, and the meaning is that there was a collective sacrifice. In institutional terms, this collective sacrifice directly underscores duty to country, and the placing of the needs of the country over the needs of the individual. There is an important social significance that the VWM lists all the names of those (Americans) that died, and is a manifestation of social understanding of the importance of the individual.

The VWM, on the other hand, reflects a different emphasis between individual and country. In the VWM, the duty to country and the needs of the country are recognised, but the recognition of the individual takes on more greater, though not equal importance. This is partially a result of a social trend that focuses on the individual, but is also due to the nature of the Vietnam War itself. Many Americans did not believe in the cause of the Vietnam War, but supported the war because they supported their country 'right or wrong'. There was for many people a serious dichotomy between the principal of the war and the duty to country. The VWM acknowledges this dichotomy by presenting the name of each



and every American that died – thereby directly confirming their validity as individuals, while at the same time setting the monument in the context of the nation's capitol on the Mall – thereby confirming the duty to country and validating the worth of the concept.

Many of the analogies drawn from the listing of 58,000 names are specific to current generations of Americans. For example, future generations are unlikely to make rubbings of individual names. What will remain is the latent history of the monument, and its meanings at the human level. Values that are held to be important to America, e.g. waging a war for a 'higher' cause, the willingness to fight and endure sacrifice for this cause, are presented and represented in the monument.



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Vietnam Veterans Memorial

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