Making Public Pasts:
Cultural Dialogue and Negotiation in Public Space

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In *The Collective Memory*, Maurice Halbwachs (1950/1980) asserts there is a close relationship between memory and space, in that memory is not just a matter of consciously lived time but of socially lived space and the collective representation of that space. The city, for Halbwachs, is an image of collective memory. Relationships between individuals and between groups are established with regard to the artefacts of the city.

Collective memory could not be maintained and passed on from one generation to the next were it not able to reside in physical objects of remembrance such as spaces of public commemoration. This paper examines the way in which public spaces of commemoration shape a consensual view of the past through the mediation of complex political, personal, cultural and aesthetic forces.

Shaping the consensual past

As an object of scholarly thought, the notion of memory as a social rather than neuro-psychological construct is a recent phenomenon, emerging only in the early twentieth century. Since that time, scholarly accounts have argued that all memory is social memory (otherwise known as collective memory) – acquired, retained and recalled within a social context.

Collective memory is therefore grounded in social experience – a socially constructed, articulated and maintained view of the past from individuals belonging to a group, based on a sense of shared identity and experience. Collective memory is therefore not simply a collection of individual memories. It is always a mediated memory, a product of the interplay of past and present, public and private experiences conveyed through practices and media that transfer as well as transform memory.

Critics of collective memory studies argue that processes of remembering and forgetting are inherently problematic when individual memory processes are likened to collective processes. Kansteiner (2002), for example, argues that collective memory is the product of complex processes of cultural dialogue and negotiation between three different historical agents – the artefacts of public commemoration, the makers of public commemoration and the consumers of public commemoration.

Artefacts of public commemoration

Mnemonic practices in architecture recall past events, individuals or experiences through the exploitation of some form of visual linkage or cue. In its simplest form, the physical referent may take the literal form of what is being remembered, as in the traditional concept of the monument – a heroic figurative icon celebrating

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national ideals and triumphs. In the contemporary context, recent public commemorative practice has tended to reflect the polyvalent interpretations of history and late modernity and may generate built objects or take a more conceptual, ephemeral form.

Before the Second World War, public commemorative art operated within the figurative tradition, which allowed for clear, unambiguous meaning in the representation of the past and a means for communicating an agreed system of cultural and social values. In the period after the Second World War, however, which was marked by the social, political and moral impact of events such as the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Holocaust, the certainty of historic events and their meanings began to be widely debated. Giving material form to historic events such as these became problematic.

The singular, defining scope of figurative representation could no longer respond to the challenges of an era defined by discontinuities and uncertainty. Abstraction, on the other hand, offered the possibility of supporting divergent meanings and interpretations of the past. In the aftermath of the Second World War, therefore, a new language of memorial design began to develop, leading to the appearance of greater degrees of abstraction in public commemorative art. The overwhelmingly positive, critical and public response to Maya Lin's 1982 Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC (Figure 1), and its incorporation of minimalist aesthetics, set the benchmark for future memorial design.

The legacy of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial continues to the present day, with abstraction being the default aesthetic for public commemoration in the West. Clay Risen, in a *New York Observer* article, described the influence of Maya Lin, a jury member for the National September 11 Memorial Competition, as embodying a dogma (2003). While abstraction continues to be the dominant aesthetic for public commemoration, particularly the memorialisation of problematic pasts, the figurative impulse is still evident. It is interesting, for example, to compare the winning designs for the two most recent design competitions for memorials on Anzac Parade, Canberra. The 2008 design for the Australian Peacekeeping Memorial, featuring a black monolithic form, is a starkly minimalist scheme in the contemporary mode of abstract commemorative art, while the 2011 design for the Boer War Memorial, with its focus on four horse sculptures, is overtly figurative in its approach.

In the introduction to *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*, Paul Williams (2007) discusses the aesthetic controversy surrounding the recent completion of the National World War II Memorial in Washington, DC. Designed by Friedrich St Florian and completed in 2004, the memorial comprises a ring of 56 grey columns representing the states and territories of the United States that were involved in the conflict. At the northern and southern ends of the composition are two pavilions representing the Atlantic and Pacific theatres of war, separated by a large reflecting pool and fountains. The overwhelmingly negative reception of the design noted that, while consistent with the stylistic conventions of previous world war memorials, the National World War II Memorial expressed 'little of what we now expect from structures commemorating mass death and suffering, including the experiences and conflicted memories of ordinary citizens who fought, worked and grieved' (ibid, p 1). The aesthetic shortcomings of the

memorial were particularly stark in the context of the aesthetic legacy of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. In this sense, Williams notes that, in the approach to contemporary memorial design:

> … critical consensus now favours minimalist and abstract design over that which is grandiose and authoritative; decentred and incommodious space over that which is central and iconic; bodily visitor experiences that are sensory and emotional rather than visual and impassive, interpretive strategies that utilize private, subjective testimony over official historical narratives … (ibid, p 3).

The design of spaces of public commemoration is often a highly charged process, particularly when it involves the acknowledgement of individuals. In these cases, memory may need to be customised at a very personal level, reflecting the aspirations and values of those individuals who have a direct claim on the events being represented. The pivotal role these personal agendas can play in how a design evolves is often manifested in the processes of naming. Public commemoration itself is, ultimately, a process of naming, of inscribing either literally or abstractly an association with the past. In a literal sense, public commemorative processes can be evidenced in the naming of markers such as bridges, roads and public buildings. In an abstract sense, monuments and memorials serve to communicate aspects of the past through more symbolic means.

Names have the power to evoke connections. As individuals, we tend to react to names that are familiar to us – our own name, the name of a loved one or even an acquaintance, a name resembling someone well-known or famous, a place we recognise. Naming is most starkly personal when it involves the physical inscription of the names of individuals. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, for example, derives much of its power from the strategies used for naming. The names of more than 58,000 American dead and missing from the war are

inscribed in chronological order, according to the year of death or disappearance. No information is provided on the individual's rank, unit or military decorations – only names are listed. All individuals are therefore seen as equal in death.

Strategies of naming have continued to be a preoccupation in memorial design since that time. In the Oklahoma City National Memorial, for example, the 168 chairs, representing the victims of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, are three-dimensional antecedents of the 58,000 names of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Recognising that simply naming the 168 people who lost their lives would not have presence on its own, as it does in Lin's design, the Oklahoma City National Memorial designers gave three-dimensional form to each individual.

Naming, however, can often become complicated when the status of the individual in the context of the event being represented comes into play. In the National September 11 Memorial in New York City, for example, 2,983 victims are inscribed on the oversized bronze balustrade of the reflecting pools. These names include those killed not only in the 2001 World Trade Center attack but also in the 11 September attacks at the Pentagon and Shanksville, as well as the six victims who were killed in the February 1993 World Trade Center bombing. This inclusive approach situates the two other 11 September sites as part of the events of that day and privileges the World Trade Center site as the focus for 11 September commemorations. The reference to the 1993 bombing further contextualises 11 September in a rewriting of a longer history of the United States of America's so-called war on terror. The addition of these names to the memorial of the 2001 World Trade Center attack led to a prolonged debate about how they would be arranged on the memorial. The recognition of the status of victims who were rescuers was a particularly vexed issue, with sustained arguments that they be acknowledged differently from other victims. The process for arranging names was finalised in an agreement reached in 2006 and replaced an earlier plan to arrange them randomly. Requiring the development of sophisticated computer software, the arrangement of the names followed a process and algorithm to create meaningful adjacencies, based on relationship details such as proximity at the time of the attacks, company or organisation affiliations for those who worked at the World Trade Center or Pentagon and nearly 1,200 requests from family members. In fixing collective memory, the act of naming in the National September 11 Memorial shows the complex processes of cultural dialogue and negotiation required to render a consensual representation of the past.

Makers of public commemoration

The motivations for public memory-making are rarely straightforward, often representing competing and conflicting agendas. Tania Zittoun's (2004, p 487) investigation of the semiotic dynamics of memorials, for example, proposes four possible functions of a memorial: '... as a place of reunification of a state; as a form of linking and transmission of experience between people; as a place of mourning; and as a didactic object'.

Ultimately, the design of public commemorative spaces is a political act. Memory is customised through political processes that determine what is worthy of commemorating, controlling the sequence and narrativisation of actual events and their interpretation for future generations:

... [M]onuments do not simply bear the impress of the past. By providing a means for its articulation, monuments are implicated in the reproduction of a 'past' as well. Rather than forming an inert backdrop for the unfolding of historical narratives, monuments are inextricably intertwined in the production of the past, not simply reflective of it (Dwyer, 2004, p 425).

All public commemorative spaces are, to varying degrees, subject to the politics of identity claim, historical authenticity and perceived cultural significance of the events being represented. A stark example is the commemoration of the events of 4 May 1970 at Kent State University, Ohio. On that day, troops of the Ohio National Guard confronted students on the Kent State University campus who were protesting against several causes, including the recent American invasion of Cambodia. Four students were killed and nine others were injured. While participants broadly agree on the sequence of events of 4 May, they have bitterly contested the meaning and memory of these events such that agreement on these issues has never been reached (Graham, 2006, p 425). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, some groups and individuals made calls to memorialise the events of 4 May, while others strongly believed they should not be memorialised at all. The main issue that complicated attempts at official memorialisation was the intended portrayal of the students themselves:

> By what terms should the students who were killed and wounded that day be described? Were they innocent victims or perhaps even heroes or martyrs? If they were to be remembered, were they in some extended (or not so extended) sense 'war dead'? Or, as some argued, were they simply criminals? (Graham, loc cit)

In 1986, following many years of debate over the future of the site of the shootings as well as the need for official memorialisation, Kent State University conducted a national design competition for the construction of a memorial to the events of 4 May. The competition guidelines expressed a need to reflect on the tragic events as well as its greater meaning for society. The winning proposal by Bruno Ast was dedicated in 1990 with much controversy, having been reduced in size by nearly 93 percent and losing most of its power and significance. As a result of pressure from the American Legion, the memorial no longer would commemorate those who lost their lives on 4 May but would simply memorialise the 'events of May 1970'.

The constructed design takes the form of a small plaza on a wooded hilltop adjacent to a walkway in the centre of the campus. The plaza is in fact not the site of the shootings and cannot even be viewed from the site where the students were killed. Following a long struggle to mark the site of the shootings, bollard markers noting the names of the deceased were constructed in 1999 (Figure 2). The site of the main memorial provides no explanation of the events of 4 May, nor does it give the names of those killed or wounded. The university deemed the words 'Inspire, Learn, Reflect' to be a sufficient meaning for the memorial.

In the design of the Kent State Memorial, the events of 4 May are therefore remembered in a context of future student learning and recovery, but the morality and meaning of that day are left unaddressed, deliberately erased through the long process of official memory-making. The name of the official memorial, 'The May 4, 1970 Memorial', is a telling indicator of the contested politics of the event, reducing its commemoration to a signification of date only.

Figure 2: Bollards mark the site where four students were killed at Kent State University, Ohio, on 4 May 1970. The bollards are a 1999 addition to the official 4 May 1970 memorial designed by Bruno Ast and dedicated in 1990. (Photo: author's own, 2013.)

The design of public spaces of commemoration is also affected by the way that the context of the events being represented is given significance and meaning by its makers. Like history, collective memory is always open to revision and re-remembering. Jonathan Crewe (1999, p 75) notes this most aptly when describing memory as 'more akin to a collective fiction than to a neurological imprint of events or experiences'. Some events gain in significance over time while others lose their importance. Past events are reinterpreted in the light of later events and our present needs and are constantly reworked, discarded and reignited. Forgetting allows us to categorise memories. Jan Assmann (1995) refers to the notion of 'structural amnesia' to describe the process whereby parts of the past are forgotten, when they are no longer in a meaningful relationship with the present. Similarly, Owen J Dwyer (2004, p 431) refers to the concept of 'symbolic accretion' to describe a process in which memorial agents attempt to promote specific meanings within a site, while denying others.

The design for the National September 11 Memorial illustrates the complexities that arise when contextual narratives are represented in public commemorative spaces. The focal point of the memorial is the two voids containing recessed reflecting pools, representing the footprints of the twin towers, a powerful metaphor for absence and loss (Figure 3). The recessed pools, however, only approximate the size and location of the footprints of the twin towers. Due to the location of an underground train line and other services, the outlines do not accurately represent either the exact location nor the dimensions of the towers. The website for the National September 11 Memorial & Museum deftly negotiates this contextual issue by stating that the voids are 'set within the footprints of the original twin towers'.

Timing is another key concern for the makers of public commemorative spaces. In terms of the shaping of spaces of public commemoration, anniversary dates can impact significantly on the process of design and delivery. Memorials

Figure 3: Although the footprints of the National September 11 Memorial are a critical component of its contextual narrative, the recessed pools only approximate the size and location of the twin towers. National September 11 Memorial, by Michael Arad and Peter Walker (2011), New York City, New York. (Photo: author's own, 2013.)

are typically completed and dedicated on anniversary or other symbolic dates and these deadlines can often be an important influence on the way in which a work is conceived, developed and delivered.

In the past, collective memorialisation generally took place considerably after the original event. Historic memorials such as the Lincoln and Jefferson memorials, for example, came into being many decades after the death of those individuals. Since the 1960s, however, memorialisation processes have accelerated. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, for example, was completed seven years after the withdrawal of American troops, while the Oklahoma City National Memorial was completed five years after the 1995 bombing. Increasingly, the time between an event and its memorialisation has become shorter.

The recent controversy over the closure of the Australian War Memorial in London for substantial repairs is a case in point. The main feature of the memorial is its visual basis, grounded in the play of naming and inscription. At a distance, the names of 47 battles are read – Gallipoli, The Somme and Darwin, for example. At a closer scale, the battleground names lose their legibility and the randomly arranged names of 23,844 Australian towns – the birthplaces of two generations of the men and women who served in the Australian armed services – come into focus. The supertext of the battlefields is therefore constituted by the subtext of the Australian locales. This optical effect was achieved through a technique of engraving and painting.

By 2008, only five years after its dedication, however, the text had degraded to such an extent that extensive repairs were required (Figure 4). The repair and maintenance shortcomings of the memorial can be directly linked to the extraordinarily short timeframe between selection of the winning design and completion of the project, a period of just 11 months. The timeframe for completion was dictated by the date of the 85th anniversary of the signing of the Armistice and the dedication of the work by the Queen and Prime Ministers of both Australia

Figure 4: The repair and maintenance shortcomings of the Australian War Memorial, in Hyde Park, London, are directly linked to the extraordinarily short timeframe between selection of the winning design and completion of the project, a period of just 11 months. Australian War Memorial, Peter Tonkin and Janet Laurence (2003), London. (Photo: author's own, 2012.)

and the United Kingdom. This resulted in compromises, including the thorough prototyping of methods for incorporating the text. The memorial will continue to require repainting, which represents a significant ongoing maintenance cost.

Consumers of public commemoration

Spaces of public commemoration, it can be argued, are essentially places that frame the extraordinary. In doing so, they are sites that draw visitors because of their otherness. As sites of memory consumption, memorial spaces therefore operate within a larger context of pilgrimage and tourist experience. In this regard, time can be a significant factor in the day-to-day life of a public commemorative space, particularly if the events being commemorated involve the loss of life. Significant days such as birthdays, wedding anniversaries and Christmas can be times of visitation by the bereaved. At these moments, commemorative spaces may function as a de facto grave site where visitors leave floral tributes, letters and other personal items. The design of these spaces needs to anticipate these events and allow for meaningful engagement. Even in the case of highly abstract memorials, individuals will seek out ways of giving form to the dead.

The 7 July Memorial in London's Hyde Park, for example, is dedicated to the memory of the 52 victims of the 2005 London terrorist bombings. It comprises 52 individually cast stainless-steel columns, which represent the victims, arranged in four loosely interlocked groupings, representative of the four bombing locations (Figure 5). The columns are, however, not ascribed to each of the victims, a deliberate strategy used in the event of any graffiti or vandal attack – a potentially distressing event for family members. At the termination of the memorial path, a grass mound holds a blackened stainless steel plaque that lists the names of the victims. Despite the fact that the columns are not individually named, floral tributes or ribbons often appear on specific columns, either on the anniversary of the bombings or on other significant dates such as birthdays. In

Figure 5: The abstract columns of the 7 July Memorial in Hyde Park, London, have begun to be appropriated by the bereaved with floral tributes or ribbons appearing on specific columns, either on the anniversary of the bombings or on other significant dates. 7 July Memorial, Carmody Groarke (2009), London. (Photo: author's own, 2012.)

rarer cases, graffiti naming victims has also appeared on the columns. As a form of spontaneous memorialisation, the graffiti indicates a desire to give form to the dead, a counter to the overriding containment of memory in the memorial as ordered, homogeneous and abstract.

Spatial relations, both material and symbolic, shape everyday social practices, including those involved in the representation of memory. Whether public or private, spaces of memory are cultural representations that are socially produced – their meanings are negotiated through social action. Public spaces of commemoration, as well as functioning as places of memory, contribute to amenity, placemaking and public and private behaviour in public space. In the case of representational spaces, such as commemorative sites, the unregulated and often anticipated actions of people in these spaces can often challenge these sites' intended meanings. For the most part, these forms of behaviour are benign, but in some cases they are fundamentally at odds with the traditional expectations of commemorative sites as places where both memory and social behaviour are contained and restricted.

Ongoing maintenance of commemorative spaces is another public issue that customises the way in which designs may be conceived and constructed for public consumption. Materials such as water, glass and sometimes lighting are specifically excluded from the material palette of many commemorative spaces. In contradiction to this trend, however, is the National September 11 Memorial, the largest man-made waterfall in the United States of America. Annual costs for the memorial are budgeted at $4.5 million to $5 million for operating the fountains, which includes heating the water in winter. In addition, around $12 million per year will be spent on private security, including the use of armed guards (Associated Press, 2012).

The Canada Memorial in London's Green Park highlights both these issues of public use and ongoing maintenance. The memorial, dedicated in 1994, commemorates the service of over 1 million Canadians who served with British troops during the two world wars, 110,000 of whom lost their lives (Figure 6). The memorial fell into disrepair in 2004 following arguments over maintenance responsibilities. By that stage, the fountain no longer operated and children and dogs used the site as a play area. Bowing to public pressure, by late 2007, the Canadian Government announced it would fund the ongoing maintenance of the memorial.

Currently, the fountain does not operate for the majority of time. People are drawn to the polished granite surface and use the sloping form as an opportunity for climbing, running and sitting. Parents, in particular, encourage children to use the memorial as a play area and vantage point to gain a better view of Buckingham Palace Gates. While signage has been retrofitted on and around the memorial stating 'as a mark of respect, please keep off the monument', few people take any notice. While the Canada Memorial continues to function as a traditional war memorial on official commemorative occasions, for much of the time, it is simply seen as a form of public art, and people take the opportunity to engage with the work in a physical way, despite the risk of injury from slipping or falling.

Figure 6: The Canada Memorial, Green Park, London, is understood by members of the public as a sculpture rather than a memorial, and people engage with the work in a physical way, despite the risk of injury. Canada Memorial, Pierre Granche (1994), London. (Photo: author's own, 2012.)

Conclusion: Mediating the contested terrain of public commemoration

Kansteiner (2002, p 179) has argued that collective memory processes need to be understood not as an extension of individual memory but as a 'complex process of cultural production and consumption that acknowledges the persistence of cultural traditions as well as the ingenuity of memory makers and the subversive interests of memory consumers'.

Memory remains a contested terrain, therefore, where claims to truth are made from different groups representing differing world views and experiences. This contestation may appear at several levels, from the local to the national and even global. Spaces of public commemoration are, ultimately, political texts. They reflect complex processes of cultural dialogue and negotiation between many, often opposing forces – from those people directly affected by the events being commemorated, to everyday users of public space, to the imagined nation and, in some cases, the global community.

Spaces of public commemoration are shaped by multiple and competing agendas, including those of strong personalities in commissioning authorities and design juries, the politics of identity and territory, and the need for historical authenticity, prevailing design aesthetics and temporal milestones. In mediating these forces, public commemoration spaces are, in the end, a subject of and subject to the intentions of the author, readers' interpretations and political will – they are continuously shaped by their culture but also shape the culture they are within.

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