How to Use a Monument Reformulating the Role of Monuments in Today's Cities

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MA research thesis at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem - Cultural Studies Program (supervisor: Dr. Dani Schrire); practice-based research by QUIZEPO Collective

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monuments; public art; urban phenomenology

Abstract

This research is concerned with the shifting meaning and role of monuments in the social context of cities nowadays. Monuments play a significant role in shaping a collective memory of people, cultures, and places. Yet, the architectural proclaim of a situated ideology reveals the controversial nature of the monument's meaning due to its inability to achieve and retain unanimity through time. In order to think differently of a monument, one that would challenge the power order that promotes a specific idea of history, the study argues that the collective meaning of the urban monuments must be investigated in relation to the practice of everyday life. Can the notion of use be applied to a monument? What defines a useful monument? The research follows a design-driven methodology, initiating an investigation through a performative art-based architectural project called *How to Use a Monument*, which took place in February 2020 at Saint-Denis victory gate in Paris.

Extended abstract

1. Introduction

For us, it was built in the past. For them, it was built for the future. Now, we want to build a monument of the present, for the presents.

There is a wide variety of monuments, ones that accompanied our cities for hundreds of years, along with new ones that appear with ongoing events shaping our current culture. However, for initiating research that discusses the monument and its experiential aspects in the city, one should clarify what a monument is. The dictionary definition by HarperCollins [1] explains that a monument is a large-scale built form created to remind a particular event or a personality from the past. The term itself comes from the Latin *monumentum*,

which in turn derives from the verb *monere* (to remember), linked in the collective imaginary to an element characterized by precise iconography. A monument would be built with materials designed to last over time, such as marble, granite, or bronze, and similarly to a statue, it will stand on a pedestal, acting as a mediator between the earth and the sky. In 1781, Francesco Milizia defined monuments as "any work of architecture or sculpture that preserve the memory of the most illustrious men and the most venerable events" [2].

Each monument is built with the aim of passing on a memory; therefore, it is the carrier of a precise meaning and a symbolic function that makes it one of the greatest expressions of remembrance, standing as signifiers of power, order, and historical storytelling.

Monuments play a significant role in shaping a collective memory of people, culture, and places; as a visual symbol of memory, immediate or distant, it affects the temporalization of space, expressed in a specific place. They represent and eternalize a particular local history, stand as signifiers of power and order, eventually reflecting a political idea of history promoted by the state as a visible element in the urban landscape.

The monumental built form stands out for its rhetoric, solemnity, and dimensional hypertrophy. However, the architectural proclaim of a situated ideology reveals the controversial nature of the monument's meaning due to its inability to achieve and retain unanimity through time. This unveils an issue regarding its embodiment into a shared urban history, especially in the accelerated dynamics of the 20th-century urban sphere, where it is perceived as an archaic feature far from the present times. Nevertheless, we can witness this trend still taking place in cities worldwide, with instances such as the newly built Statue of Unity commemorating Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, in the state of Gujarat, India.

As an architectural object, a monument has a deep relation to the arts. Adolf Loos writes "only a very small

part of architecture belongs to art: the tomb and the monument. All the rest that is at the service of a purpose must be excluded from the realm of art" [3]. Fifty years later, Rosalind Krauss sees this connection as well. In her *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*, she notes how the logic of sculpture is intrinsically linked to that of the monument. [4] For centuries, sculpture mainly had a commemorative and symbolic role, while in modern times new definitions and practices arose toward the medium of sculpture. Krauss's notions on sculpture relate to that of the evolution of the monument and its role. The monument, in turn, shifted into a concept that contains artistic practices and interventions no longer related only to the field of sculpture but which also includes architecture, landscape, public art, as well as performance, in their broadest sense.

It was in the 20th-century, and more precisely since the end of the Second World War, that the idea of monument underwent a radical process of reformulation which redefined its fundamental elements, both in symbolic and formal terms, leading to experimentations far from the traditional conception. As James Young writes in his *Memory and Counter-Memory*, major social shifts and revolutions have marked and modified commemorative practices and their forms. "As the intersection between public art and political memory, the monument has necessarily reflected the aesthetic and political revolutions, as well as the wider crises of representation, following all of this century's major changes. In every case, the monument reflects both its socio-historical and aesthetic context. The result has been a metamorphosis of the monument from the heroic, self-aggrandizing figurative icons of the late 19th century, which celebrated national ideals and triumphs, to the anti-heroic, often ironic, and modest conceptual installations that mark the national ambivalence and uncertainty of late 20th-century postmodernism" [5]. Starting from the second post-war period, monuments such as Eisenman's *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* in

Berlin, or Maya Lin's *Vietnam Memorial* in California, acquired complex spatiality: spaces to walk through, spaces to cross, to enter, to live in, which also have a function, albeit minimal or reduced. Spaces for meditating, spaces to reflect, spaces to remember. Ultimately, spaces for the present experience. These instances are drawing on the ideas of direct, shared, and participated experience of memory aimed at the formation of new subjectivities, as this approach questions not only the role of the monument purely as an inanimate object but also its use.

2. What is a useful monument?

In order to think differently of a monument, one that would challenge the presence of any imposing, authoritative force in public spaces, bypassing the power order that promotes a specific idea of history, this study argues that the collective meaning of the urban monuments must be investigated in relation to the *practice of everyday life* [6].

The places in cities we spend most of our time in, the day-to-day practices taking place in them, are the ones leading to the complex networks of stories and narratives each culture entails. Therefore, the question at hand here is: can the notion of *use* be applied to a monument? What defines a *useful* monument?

This observation requires a process of constant reformulation: a reconceptualization of notions of shared urban memory, through engaging with people's everyday urban rituals, sets of actions, and uses -formal and informal- understood as performative events in the urban environment. If the physical presence of monuments could be discussed and worked through everyday communal discursive and performative acts, the city could reformulate and revive its cultural collective memory, while forming and cultivating connections between people, place, and community. Public places could be thought of as monuments of the city for their

daily happenings and uses, in that they represent moments of constant reformulation of the *memory of the everyday*, a participated memory. For instance, Place de la Republique in Paris generates its monumental form and symbolism as a place of both consensus and conflict, accommodating performative and collective actions. Such public places are realms where the conversation starts, where people come together forming the *social organism* [7].

Figure 1: Monument Against Fascism, Jochen and Ester Shalev Gerz, Hamburg. [Photos: Shalev Gerz]

Another kind of monument could recall the formal model of the built form while at the same time de-sacralizing it by critically bringing it to the realm of the everyday. James Young defines those as *counter-monuments*, in that they follow "the mutation, decay, and disappearance" [8], and where the relationship between object and visitor converges into that of active participant and co-creator, stimulating a first-person reflection on the happening taking place rather than on the physical element. An excellent case is the Hamburg's *Monument Against Fascism* of 1986 by Jochen and Ester Shalev Gerz, a "monumental" twelve meters high squared column, destined to slowly disappear into the ground after seven years. A *temporarily permanent* memorial where

the inhabitants are actively called to write comments on the outer surface. The artists wrote about the performative process behind the work, “as more and more names cover the 12-meter high column, this will gradually disappear, and the site will be empty. In the end, it is only ourselves who can rise up against injustice” [9]. More than anything, these instances outline what is an approach for looking at the concept of monument nowadays.

2.1. How can we think of a useful monument? A methodology

Practice-based research and design-driven research are crucial methodologies for this study, as they cyclically transfer ideas and theories into practical actions in the urban setting. They seek transformative change through the simultaneous process of taking action and doing research, which is linked together by critical reflection. In itself, every architectural project is an act of research, yet one focussed on participatory uses, and sensorial attributes, of a place.

In order to discuss a critical approach toward the useful notions of monument, a multidisciplinary and physical site-based inquiry action need to be set as methodology. The changing relations between the built forms and social processes can be examined by constructing a practice around a framework of phases, cycles, and looping feedbacks, examining changing relations between the built forms and social processes, as well as those between the spatial discipline and performance arts, their practitioners, and people’s own performative set of actions in the urban environment. In order to generate a *cyclical process of reformulation,* we turn to the dynamic idea of the *event*, developed in the second half of the 20th-century by architects and artists such as Cedric Price, Bernard Tschumi, Allan Kaprow, among others, together with system models such as the one conceptualized by scholars like Kurt Lewin.

This process involves three steps, each composed of a cycle of mapping, action, and remapping — in this case, defined as *pre-event*, *event*, and *post-event* — and verified by constant on-and-off-site feedback loops. Within this approach, it is ultimately the body itself that is understood as the real place-in-transit where to renew a relationship with the urban space at large and stimulate a different awareness while elaborating new political and citizenship forms through participation.

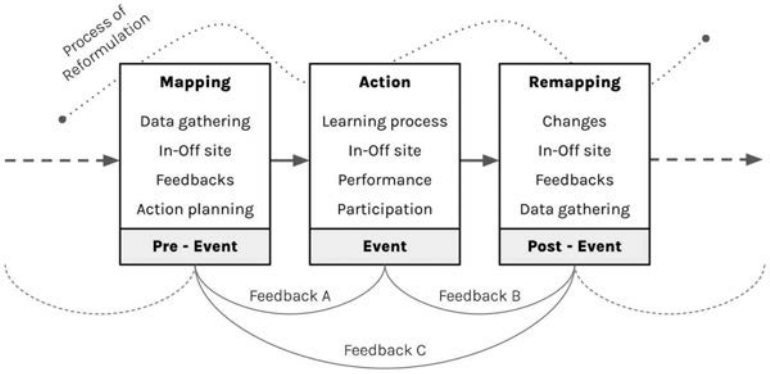

Figure 2: Process of Reformulation - methodology scheme drawing from the action-research diagram as elaborated by Kurt Lewin. [Content: Or Haklai, Enrico Chinellato]

3. A case study: Porte Saint-Denis, Paris

To understand how this methodology works, we now turn to a case study. Two years ago, as QUIZEPO we started venturing into multidisciplinary research invited by the PSA- Paris School of Architecture and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. We focussed on Paris' Porte Saint-Denis victory gate. The result was the project "*How To Use A Monument*", which was realized in February of 2020 at the case study site.

Porte Saint-Denis is a victory arch dating 1672, located in the 10th Arrondissement at the crossroads of Boulevard Saint-Martin and Rue Saint-Denis. It is the first of four triumphal arches built in Paris in the late 17th

century, on the course of Paris' old walls. Its architecture follows the proportions of the Arch of Titus in Rome, flanked by obelisks applied to the 25 meters high facade, with allegorical figures related to the passage of the Rhine, designed to symbolize and glorify the victories of the French Armies. The gate was conceived to control and tax the incoming goods from the area surrounding Paris and form a critical part of the defensive architecture of the French capital. Today the gate is a centralized background of a vibrant and chaotic urban setting, as it happens to be an unconscious marker of Paris' nearby cultural districts. As a crossroad between the nightlife of Faubourg Saint-Denis, the theatres of Saint Martin, the touristic Grands Boulevards, a mix of new unofficial activities and gentrifying real estate are simultaneously occurring in the area, creating a fascinating mix of usages and new city life. Yet, the gate remains a silent actor in the lively everyday dialogue of this scene. This condition was already well depicted in 1833 by the painting "*The Porte Saint-Denis*" by William Turner. The work's unfinishedness helps us to quickly grasp the alienated, often violent reality of monuments against the present time. Turner sketched the gate amidst the detailed, dynamic, busy street life in the foreground, standing as a blurry blank space passed by unnoticed by everyone, yet that massively towers over the life of the district. We would argue that the painting visually summarises the issue to investigate.

Figure 3: Joseph Mallord William Turner, The Porte Saint-Denis, Paris. ca. 1833; Tate Modern.

3.1 How to Use a Monument: from statement to question

Following the methodology presented earlier, the design-driven investigation has been structured on three levels. The primary stage (A) aimed at analyzing the built and spatial means of cities and their monuments through a phenomenological analysis of the percepts and sensorial affects [10] of the monument's timeline of uses, historically and in the ongoing urban scene. This happened together with an exploration of the situated condition of the physical site and its virtual presence through the action of mapping, textually and visually. Wylie explains the notions of precepts and affects as conditions of the place that resonates with our nerves.

By describing the experience of a *trail as a site* [11], they are seen as a state that influences the subjective experience of visiting the site within its spatial relations.

Figure 4: Initial mapping: diagrams and reflections during and after site visits, and mapping of the social media presence of the Porte Saint-Denis victory gate. [Content: Or Haklai, Enrico Chinellato]

The early experience visiting the site was chaotic, a full-on street rush of a variety of people and happenings. The monument is centralized but remote, untouched, rendered nearly inaccessible by the car traffic surrounding it, and therefore almost invisible. A blank spot in the junction, just like in Turner's painting. The experience of the monument continued with the analysis of its representation in the digital media, and later, by taking part in the collection of shared digital representations, taking pictures, and representing ourselves in them [12]. We saw one's representation with the monument as part of the current experience of monuments overall, certainly a performative one. Yet, this practice is still aligned with the traditional definition of a monument, in that the use and purpose are embedded in representing the absolute, the sacred, or the secular virtues, as ultimately the "true" relevance of the monument is retained by what it represents. This was followed by formulating a textual representation of the monument. In other words, reformulating its dictionary definition and generating a fictional one that reflects a different understanding, a different narrative, was a reflective tool for the desired design action.

The second stage (B) of the research activated a design action, wishing to change the form conditions through

a physical metamorphosis. The primary goal was to make the Porte Saint-Denis victory gate a usable artifact. To do so, the spatial and sensorial features of the built structure needed alteration. We metaphorically scaled-down and dissected the existing monumental arch. This process created a new object, a 150 cm high urban furniture that resembled a closet. By breaking down the scale to a human level, we envisioned a monument serving the city's everyday actions, and that supported the interactions and relations happening in the streets. Playing with scale and materiality, the gate transfigured: the limestone turned into simple plywood, and the form and the decorated facade of the victory arch were remapped, flattened, and engraved on the wooden surface as a reminiscence of the existing stone monument, while its volume was cut into 12 pieces, suiting its new scale — a human-sized object.

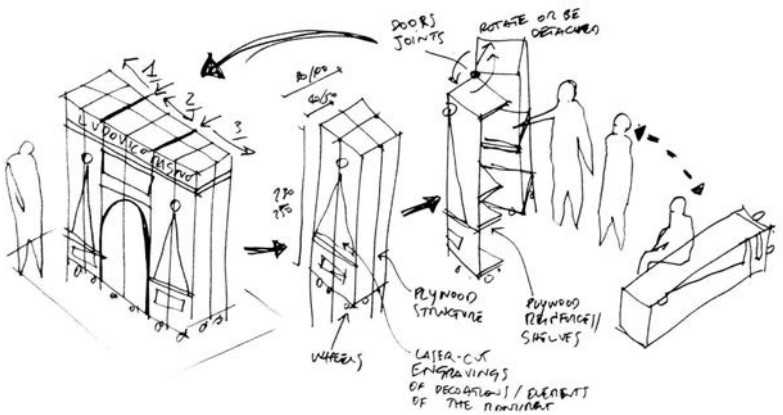

Figure 5: Preliminary sketches of the temporary structure.
[Content: Or Haklai, Enrico Chinellato]

Simultaneously, we planned an event at the site. The idea was to provokingly place this modular urban closet under the Porte Saint-Denis arch, inviting artists, performers, and the public through an open call, as well as the passersby on the day of the event, to use this urban furniture as they wish. To move it, flip it, store their belongings in it, sit on it, or play with it. We saw it as an open-ended performative and participatory action and

moved by pure curiosity we experienced a good degree of uncertainty at the on-site event. The event could have been shaped in endless forms, yet the artist's interaction with the street was crucial for achieving new relations in the street. The performance artist drew the public attention from afar, while the visual artist drawing on the furniture engaged with the people crossing the street, inviting them to participate, leave a mark on the wooden surface, or simply start a conversation. Through that, both designers and the artists moved from being the sole authors of the work, to being one of many with the community. Here we started to question what it means to participate in the urban scenery. At various times, people from different locations around the monument stopped to look at the happening, uncertain of what we were doing at this abandoned spot. They stopped, looked, got closer, as what caught their eyes was unusual to see. Towards the end of the day, the participation level increased significantly. At its core, the event enabled multiple and spontaneous actions into the city stage, bringing a deeper understanding of its spatial elements through the participatory acts, as raw and direct as it could be.

Figure 6: Photos from the day of the event. [Photos: Or Haklai, Enrico Chinellato]

The research outcome unfolds in the third stage (C). It is embedded in this paper by once again mapping and analyzing the new conditions of the place after the design-led event, operating a comparative evaluation with the first mapping and its known features. The single-day-event sensorial experiences exist within the connections made at the site, between the furniture, the artists, and the passersby. It is perceived and implemented through people's communication addressing the monument-artifact and the historical monument. This first investigation revealed the need for continuous action research that works to find, create and maintain sites of different cultural value through new city visualizations and awareness. An arts-based mechanism for urban dwellers to meet their social, cultural, and material uses at a localized scale in the city, with an accompanying interest in how places are made in the city and who is making it. With eyes toward the future, this study aims to grow and expand to different sites, including different types of monuments, while using the same tools with unexpected results.

Figure 7: A virtual representation of the monument in its three forms during the exhibition [Content: Or Haklai, Enrico Chinellato]

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