

# Introduction: Museums and Monuments

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# Introduction

## *Museums and Monuments: Memorials of Violent Pasts in Urban Spaces*

Over the last thirty years, there have been ever increasing numbers of memorial projects worldwide that address the histories of mass violence, genocides, recent wars, dictatorships and systematic human rights abuses. Along with the growing numbers of memory initiatives, the theoretical field of memory studies has developed concurrently. Writing on the influence of symbolism and ritual on remembrance in the early 1990s, historian John Bodnar noted the dearth of literature on collective memory in urban spaces.<sup>1</sup> Over the next three decades this strand has grown exponentially. In the introduction to their special issue from 2008, “Collective Memory and the Politics of Urban Space,” Reuben Rose-Redwood, Derek Alderman and Maoz Azaryahu argued that the choices individuals and groups make to remember or forget are “embedded within and constrained by particular socio-spatial conditions.”<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider had already coined the term “cosmopolitan memory” to describe how cultural memory is not limited to localities but, in fact, goes beyond borders. They reasoned that just as individual and collective memories are interconnected processes, so too, local and global memory making are symbiotic.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on developments in the field, from local framings of memory to transnational perspectives, this special issue focuses on the role of various memory practices in urban space.

When places hold multiple and often opposing memories, the question of whose histories are remembered and publicly shared, or marginalized and excluded, becomes crucial for understanding social dynamics and political change. Coming from the fields of anthropology, communication, history and political science, this interdisciplinary group of scholars presents various case studies of public representation of contested history in cities located in Europe and the Americas to discuss theoretical and

methodological approaches in memory studies. Toward that end, the articles address the following questions: To what extent is there a common thread in the motivation to portray contested history in spaces of public memory display? And related to this, in what ways are memorialization practices informed by transnational perspectives? Finally, how do political forces and civil society activists shape public debates regarding the representation of a contested past in urban space?

This collection examines how museums and memory sites construct historical narratives through processes of preservation, education and public exhibition. Aline Sierp's article on the Munich Documentation Center for the History of National Socialism considers how and why Munich, the birthplace of Nazism, was able to avoid for seventy years publicly acknowledging and documenting its role in Hitler's rise to power. Sierp refers to the influence of transnational memory processes when analyzing the museum that was ultimately constructed and shows how they shaped the museum's decision to design exhibitions to educate and engage visitors on taking responsibility. Cosmopolitan memory and glocalization—a concept also used to describe how ideas and practices are adopted globally and then adapted to suit the local situation—are employed by Jan Gryta in his article on the history of the creation of the museum in Oskar Schindler's Factory in Kraków, Poland. In this case, given Schindler's role in saving the lives of more than one-thousand Jewish internees, memorializing the factory itself was not in question. Influenced by international best practices of museum exhibition design, the museum director and curators envisioned portrayals of the daily lives of all residents of Kraków, but this met with resistance from city officials. The conflict centered on how best to represent the Poles who were both victims and perpetrators in a country unwilling to acknowledge its culpability even five decades later.

Whether or not monuments, museums and symbolic acts like street or place names are physically tied to “authentic” places of memory, they often function as powerful political tools. In Buenos Aires, the former clandestine torture and extermination center ESMA, originally the school of the Argentine navy, today houses a memorial museum in the building that was the headquarters of repression and disappearance during the Argentine dictatorship (1976–83). In her article on the Ex-ESMA, Susana Kaiser compares visitor and museum staff experiences of the site before and after it underwent a process of modernization and curatorial renovations.

In particular, the author explores how in the early years of the testimonial site, the limited exhibition content at the time provided spaces for visitors to engage in conversations and debates amongst themselves and with their tour guide about the dictatorship. At the same time as the renovation and modernization brought a professionalization to this memorial site, the increasing uniformity seems to limit dialogue and open discussion, converting the visits into a much more aseptic experience.

As in Argentina, conflicted histories of state-sponsored violence continue into the present in post-dictatorship Spain. In her article on street name changes in Madrid, Ulrike Capdepón illustrates how a cityscape can be a place for memory struggles in the present. Contextualized within specific “memory cycles,” the article analyzes the public discourses that have determined the presence or replacement of street names as memory sites and how they evolved over time. The Franco dictatorship (1939–75) used symbolic politics in the form of street names to mark the entire Spanish memory landscape. Forty years after the end of the regime, new political conflict ensues in response to current attempts to change the Francoist street nomenclature in Madrid. By addressing the discursive, academic and legal fields of action understood as the different levels that define memory politics, her contribution focuses on civil society’s attempts to remove Francoist street names from the cityscape and to introduce new ones.

Similarly, contestation around who is officially remembered and who is forgotten is the topic of Jill Strauss’s article. She examines the circumstances in which constructed narratives and histories have been publicly challenged, contested and (re)negotiated. In this case, as part of the movement to eliminate Confederate-era monuments in the United States, activists in New York City succeeded in toppling a controversial statue. Strauss describes the unrelenting efforts by neighborhood groups for the removal of the monument honoring J. Marion Sims, known as “the father of modern gynecology,” for his experimental surgeries on enslaved and immigrant women, without consent or anesthesia, in the nineteenth century. After the statue was toppled, university students created augmented reality images on the remaining empty pedestal to recover the stories of this injustice that are not yet part of the prevailing narrative.

The special issue therefore brings together scholars who consider various forms of public memorialization through discussions of how mnemonic layers are inscribed in urban space through museums, monuments

and street names. While Sierp, Gryta and Kaiser explain the challenges of exhibiting mass atrocities of the recent past in museums, Capdepón and Strauss analyze how urban space can be a setting for competing and contested historical narratives. By analyzing the circumstances in which each memory site was planned and realized, challenged, changed or recovered, all the authors explore to what extent the city serves as a vehicle for contestation and struggle over remembrance, thus providing further insight into the complex relations between memory, urban space, identity and political change.

*Ulrike Capdepón, Aline Sierp and Jill Strauss*

#### NOTES

1. John E. Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 78.

2. Reuben Rose-Redwood, Derek Alderman and Maoz Azaryahu, "Collective Memory and the Politics of Urban Space: An Introduction," *GeoJournal* 73 (2008): 161–64.

3. Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, "Memory Unbound: The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory," *European Journal of Social Theory* 5 (2002): 87–106.