Towards a Culture of Care

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Towards a Culture of Care

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In the last few years a range of global movements have heightened awareness of societal injustices arising from deep-seated inequities in income (Occupy Wall Street), in gender (MeToo) and, most recently, in race (Black Lives Matter). Each movement showed how public spaces are the loci for protests; for the exercise of political will and cultural change. Black Lives Matter in particular has intensified scrutiny of who should be memorialized in public squares, streets and spaces and how. The movement has been characterized by the toppling of statues—of Confederate generals and Civil War figures in the United States, and former slave owners in the United Kingdom and of an imperialist monarch, Leopold II, in Belgium because of their associations with the colonial conquest of people and regimes of human oppression. Black Lives Matter coalesces questions about race, gender and class in a democracy. How should we interpret the complex motives of different groups in different regions? What stories are told in the public spaces of a city and what legacies persist in its institutions? Art historians, urban sociologists and politicians across many geographies and many years have all grappled with who is memorialized and what events are documented in public spaces, as have scholars and designers in landscape who research, interpret, analyse and create public spaces or develop processes for determining the design of civic spaces.

We can examine a range of approaches to the presence of memorials that celebrate figures who were instrumental in human oppression. Removing the statues alone offers a form of redress, an acknowledgement of the problematic nature of our own histories and how they are retold. At the same time, a statue is a kind of spatial one-liner: it presents one narrative, a single point of view about who was important and why this particular narrative nevertheless persists over time, even as an understanding of that history becomes more precise and nuanced. Historian David Olusoga in a recent BBC interview argued following the removal of the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol: 'We don't learn history from public spaces. Statues aren't the mechanism by which we understand history. We learn history through museums, through books, through television programmes. Statues are about adoration, about saying that this man was a great man and he did great things. That is not true; he was a slave trader and a murderer.'[1] Another historian, Kirk Savage, further argues that the immutable, authoritative character of such statues is antithetical to democracies whose citizens govern themselves. Discussions about the existence and the content of public statues and monuments are not new. Savage quotes American President John Adams (1767–1848), who encapsulated contemporary discussions about memorials in the then new republic with a terse 'Democracy has no monuments'.[2] For Adams, the celebration of a particular individual in a public space for all citizens was antithetical to the very premise of democracy.

There is further debate about whether the removal of a statue is also an erasure of history: that it also removes a bitter, tangible testimony to injustice. An alternative approach is to retain such monuments, but to add a kind of spatial annotation that provides an alternative view of historical figures. In Belgium, some protestors in June 2020 did not remove the statue of Leopold II, but painted it red, as an evocation of his brutal reign in the Congo. This preliminary move by protestors initiated a broader examination by government officials of which statues should remain in public spaces and what kind of memorials reflect contemporary Belgian society. In Paraguay in 1994, artist Carlos Colombino was asked to reimagine a statue of former dictator General Alfredo Stroessner, who ruled the country from 1954 to 1989. Instead of simply destroying the monument, Colombino shattered it and then sandwiched its fragments between two huge blocks of concrete. In Germany, the recollection of the Holocaust was not only done by removing Nazi iconography, but also through an extensive memorial landscape. Its numerous memorials and sites of documentation recall the loss of Jewish lives and reflects a collective determination to express the values the reunited republic is committed to upholding in its urban public spaces, by actively contextualizing his-

tory. Whether initiated by protestors, or part of a process of expressing ideological changes by elected officials, what remains and what is removed in public spaces is not always an instantaneous reaction. The negotiation of what should be memorialized and how is complex and contested.

Another way to balance questions of social justice with the quality of public space gives agency to those outside of established norms by acknowledging their right to the streets and public spaces of the city, and enabling inhabitation. The creation of the first public parks for health rather than for the celebration of a particular elite are emblematic of such thinking, as are the many grass-roots, community-defined initiatives. A design process of co-production gives value to the everyday occupation of urban spaces by a diversity of people. These strategies manifest the place that the ordinary and everyday person has always occupied in urban space: a vernacular expression of what it means to inhabit a city. Other approaches to urban spaces recognize the heroic or significant qualities of those traditionally marginalized. Efforts by North American and Antipodean cities to more actively acknowledge the Indigenous cultures by reconfiguring settler iconographies to celebrate Indigenous traditions or by renaming places to reflect Indigenous languages also begin to overturn historical, colonial narratives of civilizing the wilderness and those who lived in it. The recent move to change the name of a street in Berlin from Mohrenstraße to instead acknowledge the country's first black philosopher, Anton Wilhelm Amo, equally demonstrates a wider validation of a once marginalized group, not simply by encouraging everyday inhabitation, but by giving the philosopher a permanent place on a street of the city; a significant marker.

Memorials, monuments and landmarks are often emblematic of what Savage calls a 'quest for immutable national essence'. He advocates instead for dynamic monuments that have the potential to capture a particular moment and a particular time expressed by a particular person. The Fourth Plinth in London's Trafalgar's Square is one example Savage references. It is a traditional plinth that has remained empty for over a century and has been occupied by a range of artists in the past thirty years. Antony Gormley in his 2009 installation encouraged ordinary members of the public to take a stand on the plinth, their diversity, vulnerability and particularity contrasting with the other military, laudatory statues in the square. Other artists have also used the plinth as a counter to the traditional memorial landscape of Trafalgar Square, questioning through their work the lack of women or children or of populist heroes such as footballers. Temporary memorials, ephemeral installations and reinterpretations of existing monuments become a way of instigating an open conversation, a plurality of views.

The undertow of the Black Lives Matter protests and calls is not, however, simply about reworking the monumental landscape of cities—though this itself constitutes a significant and complex aesthetic and cultural challenge. Societal inequities that can be historically traced to colonial expansion and slavery are remarkably persistent in contemporary urban institutions: in the police, in the provision of health care, in the availability of affordable housing or transportation or schools, in the safety of public spaces, in the resources available to people living in particular neighbourhoods. And this requires a more radical reshaping of urban policy and design decisions, adapted to different histories, narratives, places and persons. Perhaps what is needed is not the apparent expansiveness of a democracy without monuments, but rather the cultivation of a culture of care. We could make a stronger commitment to each other by more actively recognizing sociopolitical inequities and addressing them through institutional reform that transforms the working of our cities to better allow for equity in shaping public spaces and in sharing municipal resources.

We could promote a more radical re-humanization of urban policy, one that makes particularities of race but also of gender and of income central to place-making. The power of place, Dolores Hayden, professor emerita of architecture, urbanism, and American studies at Yale, notes, 'is the power of ordinary urban landscapes to nurture the public, to encompass shared time in a shared territory.'[3] It is worth constantly examining what beliefs, values, people and narratives are cultivated in the spaces we make and through the policies we develop, so we can co-create the world we actually want to live in: a just world that allows for the sensitive interpretation of history and acknowledges our responsibility to accurately recount multiple stories in our public spaces.

1 BBC News, 6 June 2020, interview with David Olusoga.

2 Kirk Savage, *Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

3 Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

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