

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

On Memory, Trauma, Public Space, Monuments, and Memorials

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4g8812kv>

Journal

Places, 21(1)

ISSN

0731-0455

Author

Bonder, Julian

Publication Date

2009-05-19

Peer reviewed

On Memory, Trauma, Public Space, Monuments, and Memorials

Julian Bonder



Society is the miracle of moving out of oneself.
—Emmanuel Levinas¹

As events and circumstances unveil in the present, a memorial's destiny is to recall the past and provide conditions for new responses in the future. As our psychopolitical and ethical companions, memorials should help us consider trauma and rethink and reactualize the past. They should encourage critical consciousness, committed memory-work, and the possibility of engaging with the world through transformative practices.

The word “memorial” corresponds to “commemoration”—“something that serves to preserve memory or knowledge of an individual or event”; but it also corresponds to “memento”—“something that serves to warn or remind with regard to conduct or future events.” Is it possible to conceive of memorials that focus on that warning as the key element of concern connecting the past and the future? Can we build memorials that, while addressing events and honoring victims and survivors, contribute to acts of remembrance, demand proactive engagement, and envision a better world?

Cultures of Memory

Since the 1980s, Western societies have developed a fascination with memory. In its many forms, memory has become a marker of global culture: in historiography, psychoanalysis, visual and performing arts, and media—and particularly in urban studies, public art, landscape design, and architecture. The pursuit of memory is evident in the way real and mythic pasts are re-presented, remembered, or forgotten, marking contemporary politics and global culture.

Perhaps, as the literary critic Andreas Huyssen has suggested, “the obsessive pursuit of memory may be an indication that our thinking and living temporality are undergoing a significant shift, as modernity [has] brought about a real compression of time and space yet also expanded horizons of time and space beyond the local.”²

In a not so distant past, the discourse of history guaranteed the relative stability of past events. Built space (museums, monuments, palaces, etc.) represented material traces of this historical past, and history was the background of modernity. But, according to Huyssen: “today



we think of the past as memory without borders rather than national history within borders; today memory is understood as a mode of re-presentation and as belonging to the present.”³

An important aspect of this culture of memory is the way the struggle for justice and human rights and the remembrance of traumatic events—with the Holocaust as a paradigmatic example—have been coupled, as nations seek to create democratic societies in the wake of mass exterminations, apartheid, segregation, military dictatorships, and totalitarianism.⁴

The construction of memorials and museums and the ever-increasing growth of memorial acts across the globe is significant in their sheer number, as well as the significance they hold for affected communities. Examples include the creation of official and community-based memorials and museums, the emergence of spontaneous memorials in places of recent tragedy, pilgrimages to sites of memory, and other commemorative practices.

Though the culture of memory has spread around the globe and the political uses of memory are varied, at its core the use and abuse of memory remain tied to official histories of specific communities, nations, and states. Yet, while residues of mythical meta-narratives, histories of victors, and self-aggrandizing monuments, which served in the nineteenth century to legitimize nation-states, may still be present, the cultures to which they speak have become infiltrated by repressed local or group memories; they have been subverted by forgotten micro-histories, by the appearance of vanquished others, by those who bear witness to personal and historic traumas, and by the transformation of official monuments into monuments other.

Tomb and Monument

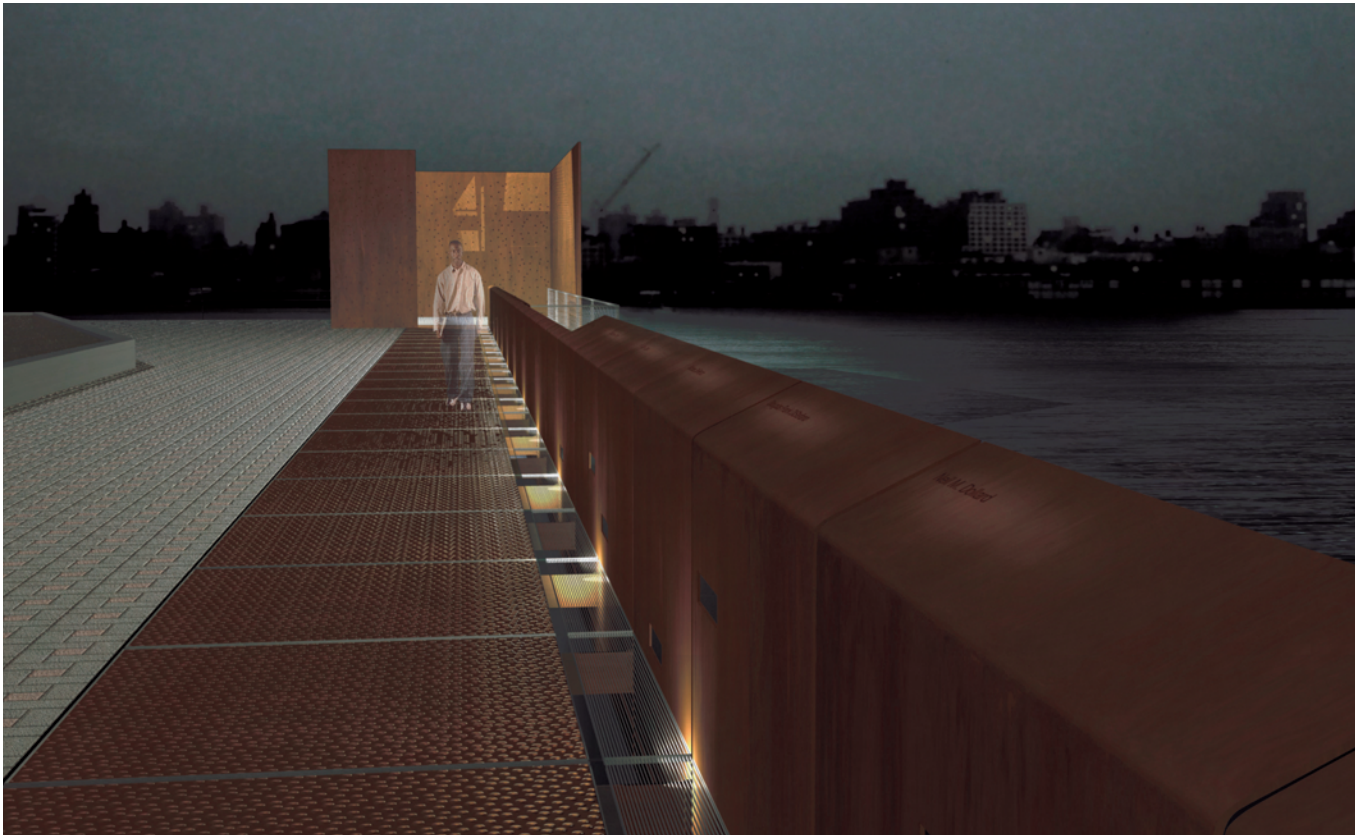
When we find a mound in the woods, six feet by three feet, raised to a pyramidal form by means of a spade, we become serious and something in us says, someone was buried here... That's architecture.

—Adolf Loos⁵

The Viennese architect Adolf Loos claimed, at the beginning of the twentieth century, that only a small part of architecture belongs to art—the sepulcher and the monument. What Loos meant, according to Massimo Cacciari, was that art takes place in the idea of the sepulcher and monument, the idea of a place of exception that life has led up to, but that transcends or reopens life's function.⁶ More important to Loos was the ethical function: that a confrontation with death prevents us from going on with the usual business of life, that it carries us to another place, a place, usually submerged, within the self. What matters is not who lies buried there, but that a human being lies buried there.

The art historian Alois Riegl has observed, “A monument in its oldest and most original sense is a human

Above and opposite: The Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Clark University, Worcester, MA: Julian Bonder, architect. On a pivotal site between the university's main campus and the historic Woodland Street Neighborhood, the project combined extensive renovation of an 1899 Colonial Revival residence and construction of a new library/reading room and memorial garden. The project did not seek to represent the Holocaust, but to make room for echoes of the past in an environment of humane reflection, study, and dialogue. Through architecture, it presents a mode of being in sharp contrast with the story at its core. Photos by Tom Lingner.



creation, erected for the specific purpose of keeping single human deeds or events...alive in the mind of future generations.”⁷ Instead of a form, a shape, or an image, monumentality may well be a quality: the quality that some places or objects have to make us recall, evoke, think, and perceive something beyond themselves. As a place of memory-work and common remembrance, a monument or memorial is produced to be historically referential.⁸ Yet, as embodiments of art in the public realm, their value is not just derived from the artwork, but from their ability to direct attention to larger issues. Their

Above: Hoboken, New Jersey, September 11 Memorial: Wodiczko + Bonder. One of four finalists in the competition for the Memorial at Pier A Park on the Hudson River, the design proposed alterations to the pier’s southern edge, which was directly exposed to the trauma of the Trade Center towers’ collapse. This edge would be remade to bear and reveal traces of this memory, establishing a relation, across the water, between the site and Lower Manhattan, and emphasizing the flow of attention, on that day and every day—and of memory and healing. A key element was a path, linking spaces for commemoration, contemplation, awareness, and silence.

significance lies in the public dimension and the “dialogic character of memorial space,” as Holocaust scholar James Young has aptly noted—the space between the stories told, or the events remembered, and the act of remembrance (memory-work) they help frame.

with Loos, it could be argued that memorial spaces that deal with public trauma may present a difficult yet interesting challenge, for they are places of exception, which life, or the destruction of life, has led up to. These places of exception/memorials can also function as mourning sites, as when the traces of catastrophe are present, or when tombstones are absent. Time is the matter. A monument’s ethical function arises from its capacity for establishing dialogues with, and presenting questions about, the past (and the future).

These places of exception often become surrogate environments upon which political, ethical, and artistic concerns are projected (and fought over). In addition, the ways artists and architects frame their positions vis-à-vis “monuments” and “monumentality,” the memories and audiences they encounter, and the actual sites of memory

encompass specific approaches to design and public space.⁹ To work on these sites of memory raises issues and questions that are not merely architectural but also moral, ethical, and philosophical. Among them are the way history, memory, and trauma will be “appropriated,” “re-presented,” and “inhabited.”

Roles/Attitudes/Positions

How do we convey the critical significance of design in conceiving and creating democratic public spaces and democratic memorial spaces? How can we elaborate on the ethical implications of Hannah Arendt’s description of the public sphere as “the space of appearance”? How do we position ourselves as architects, artists, teachers, and students when working on such projects?

The architectural historian Alberto Pérez-Gómez has suggested that the architect’s historic role has been to create a theater for memory capable of embodying truths that make it possible to affirm life and contemplate a better future.¹⁰ Our work often lies in unveiling—uncovering as well as anchoring—histories and memories. It is in the face of catastrophes, historic traumas, and human injustices that the architect’s and the artist’s roles become increasingly complex, problematic—and necessary.

Yet we need to be wary of instant metaphors and artificial meanings, because often (and especially in the wake of catastrophe) a redemptive aesthetic emerges in affected communities alongside public acts of commemoration aimed at creating regenerative spaces. The risk is that this kind of aesthetic asks us to consider art as a correction of life, that art may repair inherently damaged or valueless experience. As Leo Bersani has written, “The catastrophes of history [appear to] matter much less if they are somehow compensated for in art.”¹¹

Neither art nor architecture can compensate for public trauma or mass murder. What artistic and architectural practices can do is establish a dialogical relation with those events and help frame the process toward understanding. Hence, it seems important to conceive of these projects as roadmaps, as spatial topographies, condensing voices, opening spaces for study, re-presentation, and dialogue with a measure of spatial clarity and architectural depth. To do so, it is crucial to inhabit the uninhabitable distance between ourselves and those events. These projects need to be understood as questions—which put us in question, in the sense offered by the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas—while offering the prospect that the chronological limbo, the no-man’s land, the space between the tomb of memory and the womb of history, may be traversed and

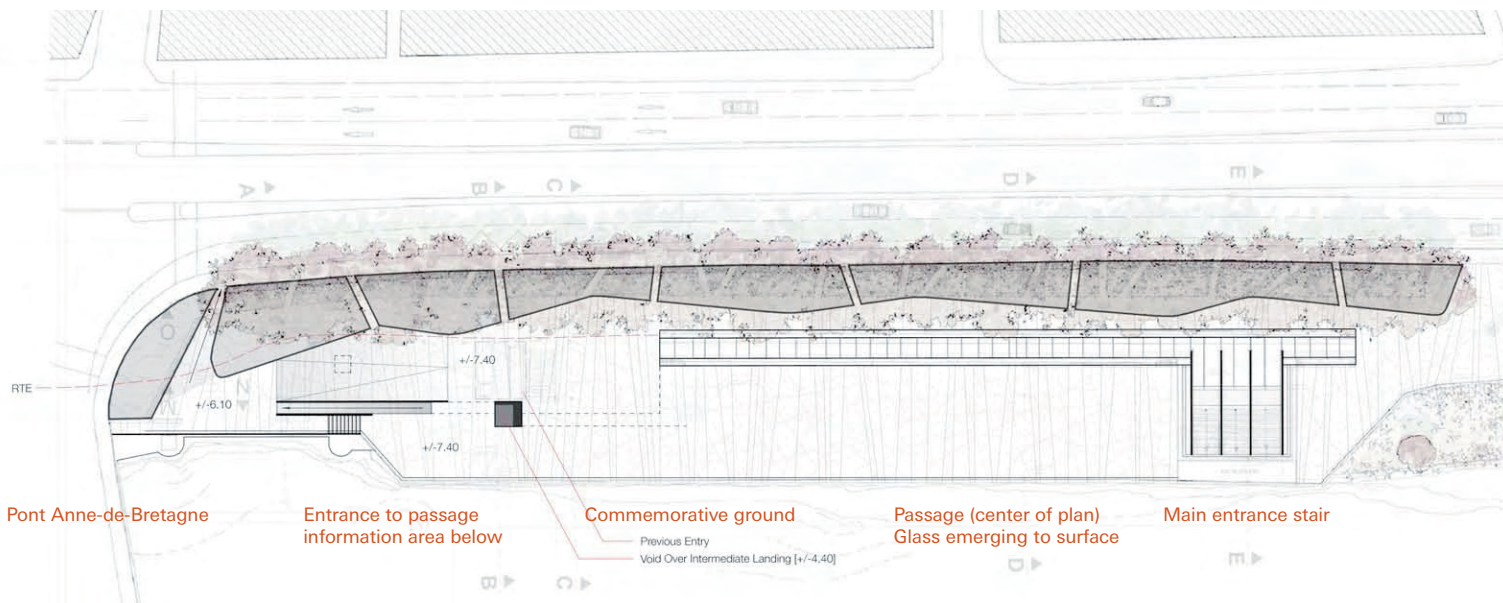
illuminated with generational piety, intellectual honesty, and ethical respect.

After an enormous eruption of art, museums, and memorials based on both figural and abstract representations of death, despair, destruction, pain, and horror, new attitudes may now be possible. Wary of the expectation that meaning can be generated instantaneously, these will acknowledge the limitations of our practices and the impossibility of representing traumatic experiences. And while recognizing our inability to propose meaningful answers, they may sustain the dilemmas of representation, the necessity for more questions, and a resistance to closure. Such projects require a persistent attempt to work within (and to transform) the public sphere; they involve establishing clear critical-ethical frameworks in which to position ourselves as engaged witnesses; and they demand precise, dialogic, and committed attitudes toward design, toward techniques and materials, toward sites of memory, history, and the voices of others. As Levinas has suggested, those others, who are not an object of comprehension but an enigma, need to be present in our democratic public spaces.¹²

Philosophers like Giorgio Agamben have theorized the position of the witness as the basis of ethico-political relations insofar as the witness answers to the suffering of others without usurping their place.¹³ Witnessing is a way of seeing and listening that requires an acceptance of vulnerability. It requires a renunciation of the will to mastery, because, as the trauma theorist Cathy Caruth has argued, to bear witness to suffering is to bear witness to incomprehensibility.¹⁴ Since by definition the event that caused psychic trauma—a wound inflicted on the mind—was so overwhelming that it could not be fully known or experienced at the time, the victim suffers from incomprehension. For the witness to claim to know the experience is to betray the victim. This poses a problem for representations that want to respond to the suffering of others. Traumatic suffering creates a need for a new kind of witnessing—what Caruth called the witnessing of impossibility, the impossibility of comprehending the trauma.¹⁵

These views raise important questions for design. How can we make room for the voices of those others to “appear” in public without attempting to speak for them? What about those who can speak—those who can bear witness, and those who cannot—or those who don’t have the possibility to appear, or who we painfully know will not re-appear? How can we welcome those others who address us from the deep wells of history and from the present memories of our democratic societies?¹⁶

Such questions call for a conscious and humble



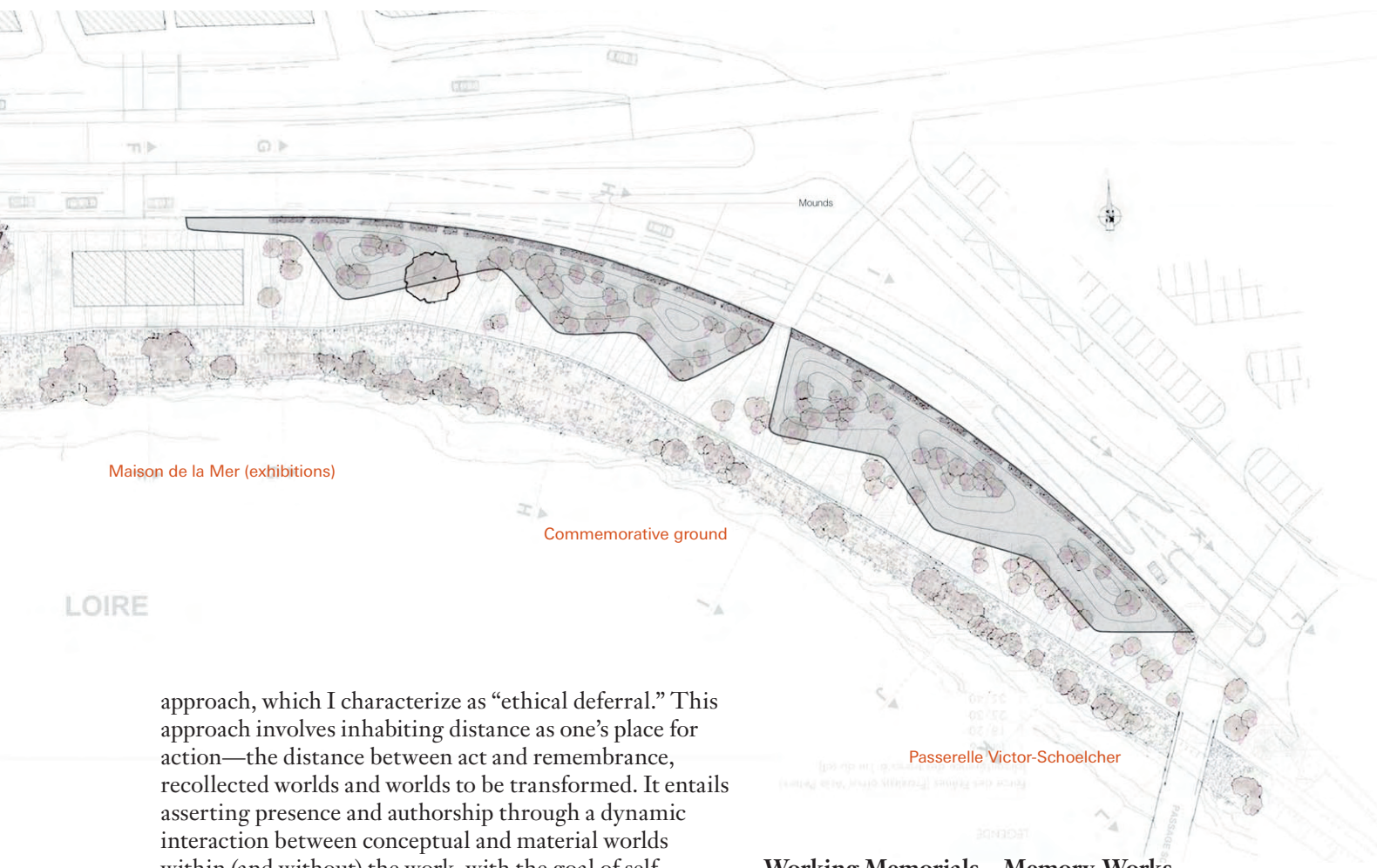
Mémorial à l'abolition de l'esclavage (Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery), Nantes, France

Located along the Loire riverfront, this project by the author and Krzysztof Wodiczko will constitute a memory of slavery and the slave trade for new generations who may have difficulty fathoming their historical reality. As a working memorial, it will provide space for remembering slavery and the slave trade as a crime against humanity, commemorating all forms of resistance to slavery, celebrating the historic act of abolition, and evoking present-day struggles against new forms of slavery. Commissioned after an invited competition by the City of Nantes and its mayor, Jean-Marc Ayrault, it will transform elements of the existing Quai de la Fosse, where French slave ships once docked. Through its spatial and symbolic link to the Palais de Justice, it will emphasize Nantes' commitment to human rights.

Visitors to the memorial will descend to a long underground passage between the nineteenth-century embankment and the twentieth-century concrete structures that replaced it. These found and transformed spaces, which suggest the confinement of maritime transport and provide an uncanny proximity to the water, will convey the emotional force of housing and transporting slaves. Like a great spade, a slanted glass plate, representing the rupture of abolition, will slice down into this space, uncovering and exposing its volumes and shapes and bringing out the hull-like foundations of the river embankment. Selected texts of the

abolitionist movement—by Victor Schoelcher, Toussaint L'Ouverture, and the Abbé Grégoire, among others—will be inscribed along its length, alternating with areas of plate that will be sandblasted, mirrored, and altered with other processes. The passage will be accessed at both ends: on the west through a narrow stair, and on the east through a monumental opening where the text of the 1848 Act of Abolition will be inscribed.

The magnitude of the slave trade and the memory of slave-ship dockings will be further commemorated above ground. Between Pont Anne de Bretagne and Passarelle Victor Schoelcher plaques will be set into excavated portions of the Quai, listing the names of the 3,829 French slave-ship expeditions (of which 1,745—nearly half—sailed from Nantes). The plaques will note the dates of their departures and the numbers of captives they took (along with the number lost in transport), as recorded in the archives of the city. The memorial will include an information area where visitors may orient themselves to its elements, including a concise presentation of slavery, the slave trade, and its abolition. Along the passage, a space acting like a “situation room” will document present-day struggles against slavery and the slave trade — a feature reinforced by a responsively programmed system of illumination over the Loire. Beyond these instructive and symbolic aspects, the memorial will also provide space for testimony and for special meetings during the biannual Nantes human rights forum.



approach, which I characterize as “ethical deferral.” This approach involves inhabiting distance as one’s place for action—the distance between act and remembrance, recollected worlds and worlds to be transformed. It entails asserting presence and authorship through a dynamic interaction between conceptual and material worlds within (and without) the work, with the goal of self-effacement. It means attempting to frame and illuminate presences through materials beyond materiality, through language beyond representation, through art beyond art, through space beyond space.

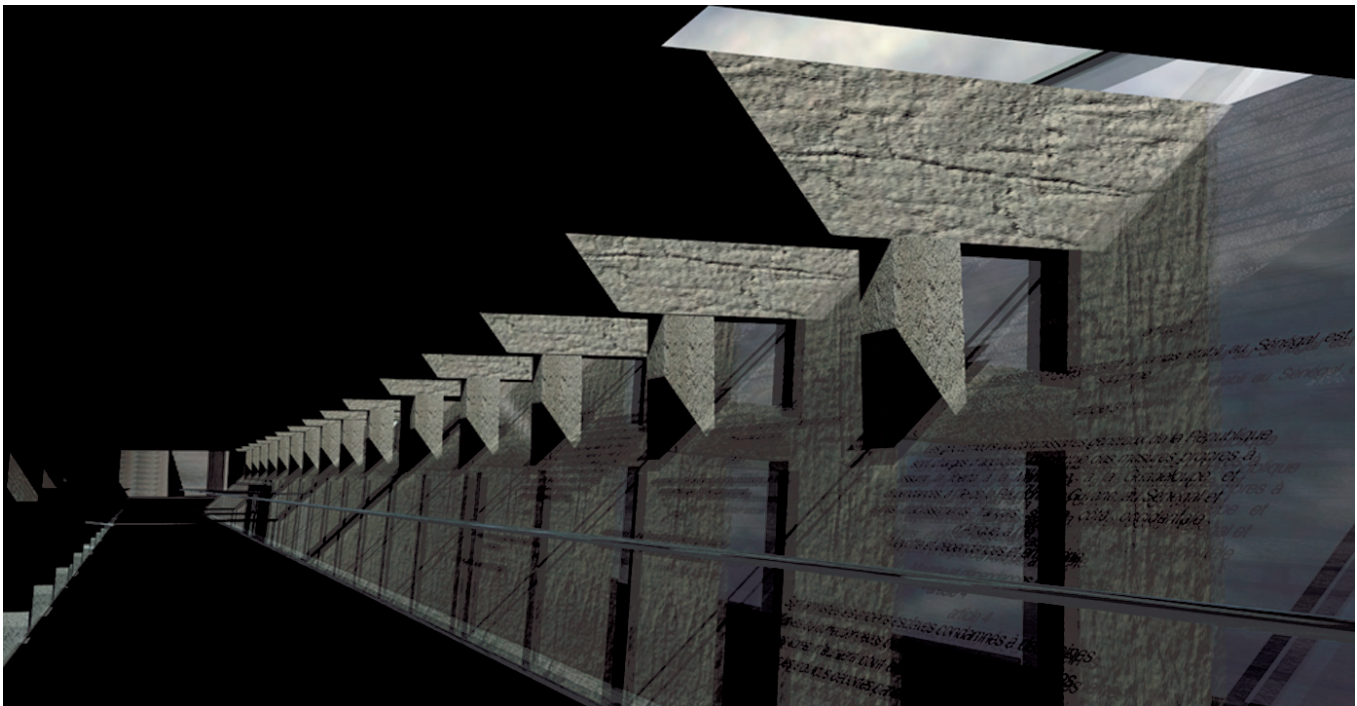
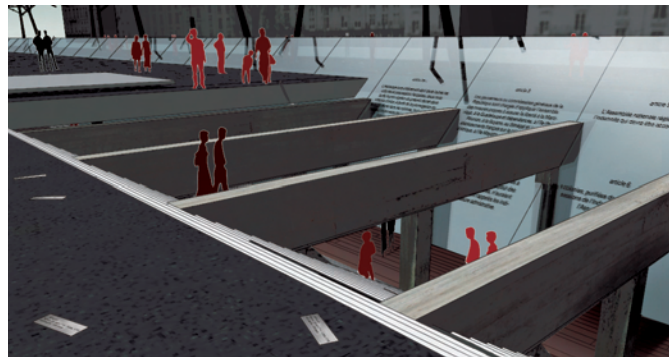
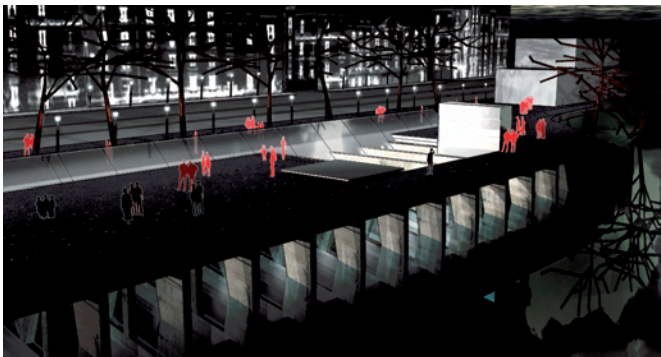
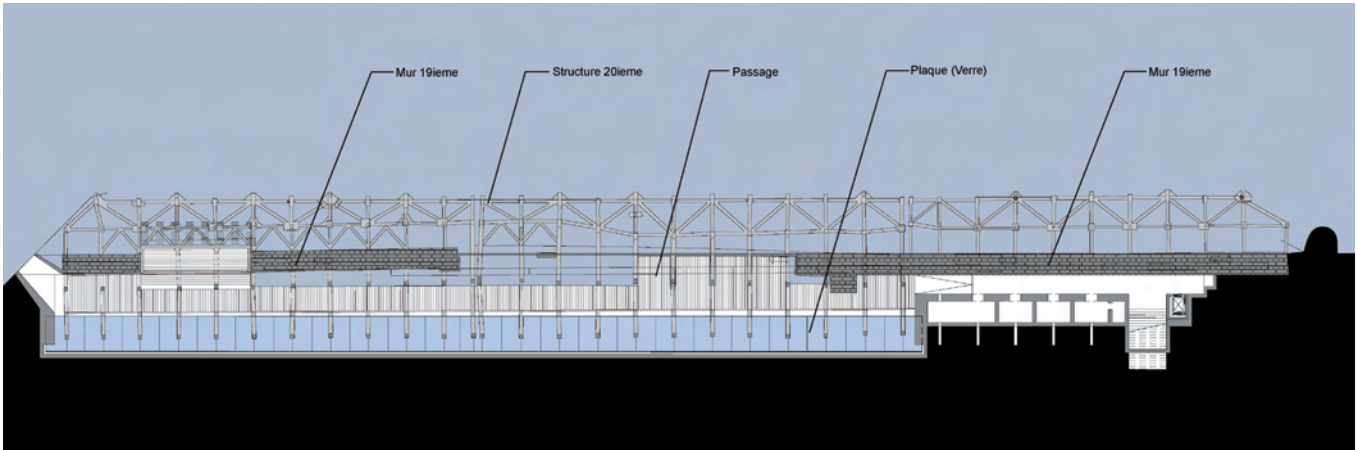
This is the attitude I have tried to bring to my memorial projects, and to collaborative work with the artist and MIT visual-arts professor Krzysztof Wodiczko. Images of several of these projects accompany this article. The approach involves understanding art, architecture, and landscape as nonrepresentational mediums—yet mediums capable of shedding light on a limited set of truths in a space between the questions, the publics, and the instruments of our practices.¹⁷ It involves contributing to the construction of a democratic and agonistic society, as authors, designers, architects, and sentient subjects, through an ethics of deference to the “other”—that is, “moving out of ourselves,” following Levinas—when proposing transformative actions in the public sphere.

Working Memorials—Memory-Works

Memorial, memento, monument, like “monitor,” or a guide, suggest not only commemoration, but also to be aware, to mind and remind, to warn, advise, and call for action. We think of these as “working memorials” that invite collective engagement. They are not projects for silent and symbolic sites of memory but agents for active dialogue. Their premise is that a memorial that truly speaks to traumatic memories—not only of the past, but of today—should come to exist through a process of engagement with the communities who share a vital interest in it.

While addressing a plurality of publics and generations, memorials should become site-specific vessels for thought,

Above: Plan of the Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery, Nantes, France: Wodiczko + Bonder. The site is across from the Palace of Justice designed by Jean Nouvel. Construction is scheduled to begin by the end of 2009, with a targeted completion in 2011.



for transformative working-through, for healing, and for pedagogic discourses. They should articulate “response-ability” vis-à-vis the past and the future. Even when built without such a conscious intention, they should be perceived as having this monitory and critical function.

Yet most memorials are inactive and incapacitated. To quote Krzysztof Wodiczko: “Monuments and memorials, in their speechlessness and stillness, look strangely human, while traumatized humans, in their motionlessness and silence, may appear strangely monumental. Speechless survivors living in their shadows face the blank facades and blind eyes of our public buildings and memorials, those speechless witnesses to present-day injustices.”¹⁸

Notes

1. Emmanuel Levinas, “Ethics and Spirit,” in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 9.
2. Andreas Huyssen, “Introduction,” in *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 4.
3. Huyssen suggests that national memory debates are always shot through with the effects of global media and their focus on themes such as genocide and ethnic cleansing, migration and minority rights, victimization and accountability. However different and site-specific these causes may be, this does suggest that globalization and the strong reassessment of the respective national, regional, or local past will have to be thought together. Huyssen, “Introduction,” in *Present Pasts*, p. 4.
4. See Theodor Adorno’s 1963 speech, “What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?” Translated and reprinted in Geoffrey Hartman, ed., *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).
5. Adolf Loos, “Architecture,” in *Speaking into the Void: Collected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993).
6. Massimo Cacciari, *Architecture and Nihilism: On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), chapter 19, pp. 195–98.
7. Alois Riegl, “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Origin,” Kurt Foster and Diane Ghirardo, trans., in *Oppositions*, 25; quoted in Tony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 177.
8. Namely, their material presence is meant to turn invisible, transparent, bridging the individual memory-work and the events or people they recall. James Young, *The Texture of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 12.
9. Maya Lin called her Vietnam Memorial an “antimonument”; James Young, when describing the practices of Horst Hohiesel and Jochen Gerz, presents their work as “countermonuments”; Krzysztof Wodiczko talks about “fearless memorials,” operations that contribute to healing through “fearless speech-acts” in the public sphere. I would like to think of these memorial projects as site-specific dialogues on memory: “ethical-monuments.”
10. See the essay by Alberto Pérez-Gómez in Richard Henriquez, *Memory Theatre*, edited by Howard Shubert (Montreal: Canadian Centre for Architecture, 1993; distributed by MIT Press).
11. See Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Jewish Modern Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) p. 144.



12. Levinas, “Ethics and Spirit.”
13. See Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 1999).
14. Cathy Caruth, “Recapturing the Past: Introduction,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).
15. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
16. As an enigma of a face that resists possession and cannot be fully known. See Colin Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), p. 83.
17. Significant examples include Maya Lin’s Vietnam Memorial and George Henri Pingusson’s Memorial to the Martyrs of the Deportation in Paris. We can also mention our attempts to contribute to this discussion via our proposal for the Hoboken September 11 Memorial, in which the ground responds to events in the world that bear the stamp of terror; for the Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery in Nantes, France, in which the site becomes radically transformed and includes spaces which serve to discuss and debate present-day slavery; and in my design work on Holocaust memorials, which attempt to investigate these questions by constructing responsive sites of memory.
18. From conversations with Krzysztof Wodiczko during our work for the Hoboken September 11 Memorial, the Memorial for the Abolition of Slavery in Nantes, France, and Babi Yar Park in Denver, Colorado.

Above: Present condition of the Quai de la Fosse showing the space between the nineteenth-century embankment and the twentieth-century concrete structure. This found space will be transformed to contain the below-ground portions of the memorial. Photo by Arcadis.

Opposite: Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery, Nantes, France: Wodiczko + Bonder. Top: below-ground plan. Middle left: rendered night view from Pont Anne de Bretagne. Middle right: rendered view at main entry. Bottom: rendered view along the below-ground gallery.