

---

# Between Remembrance and Recreation: Containing Memory in Urban Landscapes

Russell Rodrigo

---

## Between Remembrance and Recreation: Containing Memory in Urban Landscapes

Russell Rodrigo

---

### Abstract

Throughout the world, communities are increasingly concerned with remembering and documenting their histories. Monuments, memorials, and interpretive sites are being created at an accelerated pace, an international phenomenon of memorialisation which has developed since the 1980s and is unequalled since the decade after World War I. In *Loose Space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life*, Karen Franck and Quentin Stevens explore the ways in which urban landscapes, including sites of memory and reflection, are appropriated by the everyday public for uses not originally intended. Increasingly, established public spaces are being utilised as sites for the remembrance of collective trauma, producing challenges to existing understandings of the containment of individual and collective memory and public and private uses of space. In this article I argue that contemporary memorial spaces negotiate, consciously or unconsciously, the looseness of public space and the ways in which memory can be contained within urban landscapes.

Keywords: memory, memorial, public space

## Introduction

Our contemporary landscapes are filled with representations of the past—objects, places, and events that are intended to evoke memory. Memorial spaces are sites where memory is condensed, producing convergences and conflicts in their attempts to define the past in terms of the present. For any society, the construction of memorial spaces is a major cultural and political undertaking. They are potential sources of cultural healing, as well as possible sites of cultural contestation. Using participant observation techniques, this research explores the relationship between public space, trauma, and collective memory in urban landscapes through an examination of the communicative and experiential dynamics of recent memorial spaces located in London’s Hyde Park and Green Park.<sup>1</sup>

## Containing memory/displacing memory

The current worldwide phenomenon of memorialisation in architecture is unparalleled since the decade after World War I. Debate about a memorial on the World Trade Center site, for example, began within days of the tragedy. The private and public need to memorialise has never been stronger. Erika Doss, referring to the American context, calls this “... a national obsession with issues of memory and history and an urgent, excessive desire to claim—and secure—those issues in public culture”.<sup>2</sup>

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 monuments, memorials, museums, archives, and cemeteries. Communities often go to great lengths to create and maintain such sites of memory; a recognition of the understanding that our link with the past is through those physical memory sites that aspire to give permanence to memory.

Acknowledging and demarcating historical moments are phenomena that are common in many cultures. It has been generally understood that memories can be encapsulated in solid objects, which come to represent memories, and because of their durability they preserve their life beyond their pure mental existence. Various physical forms such as objects, texts, and images have the potential to trigger the recollection of events, individuals, and relationships from the past.

The notion of containment is often associated with the idea of memory and hence the ability of memory to be stored or held within a material object. Despite this, a key fate that all monuments and memorials have in common is what Robert Musil describes as their invisibility: “What strikes one most about monuments is that one doesn’t notice them. There is nothing in the world as invisible as monuments.”<sup>3</sup> While monuments are invariably constructed to be the focus of our attention, they inevitably become part of the visual blur of the contemporary cityscape.

Similarly, Pierre Nora argues that rather than holding memory, the monument displaces it. The less that memory work comes from within the individual or the community, the more it exists externally in “exterior scaffolding and outward signs”.<sup>4</sup> The natural memory work of the community is replaced by the material object of the monument. It can be argued that in presenting a resolved and closed past in monuments, as Nora has suggested, there is also the risk of destroying the understanding and connection of the past that an individual has within themselves. The monument has the appearance of permanence, with events fixed in time. However while the movement of time brings about the monument, it also changes how it is understood.

It can therefore be argued that once material form is assigned to memory, the need to remember is no longer required. As authors such as Kirk Savage have noted, in creating monuments and memorials, individuals and communities are relieved of the responsibility to remember. Memorials become self-referential and isolated from our daily lives. In facilitating the making of memorials, we are in danger of being more forgetful. The motivation to remember events through memorialisation can be seen as an equally strong impulse to forget them.

James E. Young argues that the monument has been “reformulated in its function as memorial” and forced to re-evaluate its aesthetic response to events such as the Holocaust, and more recently the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.<sup>5</sup> The traditional monument, with its singular vision of history, is at odds with the contradictions and complexities of contemporary events. The nation’s need to establish a singular memory of the past is increasingly at odds with the response of artists and designers who have become sceptical of the traditional forms and functions of monuments. Monuments are therefore more likely to be the site of contested cultural meanings than of shared national values.

### Containing memory in public space

As authors such as Erika Doss have noted, within the urban landscape, established public spaces are more and more being utilised as sites for the remembrance of collective trauma, producing challenges to existing understandings of the containment of individual and collective memory and public and private uses of space. In *Loose Space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life*, Karen Franck and Quentin Stevens explore the ways in which urban landscapes, including sites of memory and reflection, are appropriated by the everyday public for uses not originally intended. Public open space is less defined than private enclosed space and expectations in terms of accepted uses are more inclusive and fluid.

Public space becomes “loose” when it is the location for a rich variety of uses not originally intended:

*Looseness, the appropriation of public space for unplanned uses, results from freedom of choice, but no public space is absolutely free, and some spaces may be too free ... One space is looser than another to the extent to which particular*

*behavioural patterns, controls and expectations are peeled away or resisted and unanticipated activities are pursued ...*<sup>6</sup>

Activities that give space its looseness are generally outside everyday routines—they are opportunities for leisure, social expression, and interaction. They may be planned activities or impromptu, but are invariably temporary activities. By definition, some spaces such as urban park landscapes are looser than others, but it is “people’s actions that make a space loose, with or without official sanction and with or without physical features that support those actions.”<sup>7</sup>

### Loose space and the commemorative landscapes of Hyde Park and Green Park, London

Recreational landscapes such as urban parks and gardens are one form of public space where loose space predominates. London’s Royal Parks, the focus of this study, comprise eight parks covering an area of almost 2,000 hectares. They are relatively undetermined landscapes where people engage in a wide variety of unprogrammed activities. Voluntary actions may range from passive pursuits (such as relaxing, reading, sun-bathing, and eating) to more active (such as ball games, jogging, walking, cycling, or horse-riding).

The eight Royal Parks contain a large variety of historic monuments, including those set aside to the memory of individuals such as queens and kings, as well as those dedicated to the collective memory of war and conflict. Within these recreational landscape spaces are a growing number of sites for the remembrance of collective trauma. Using participant observation techniques, this research investigates the contested nature of these spaces as public recreational spaces and public memorial spaces by focusing on two key parks—Hyde Park and Green Park.

The relationship between public space, trauma, and collective memory in urban landscapes is explored through an examination of the communicative and experiential dynamics of recent memorial spaces such as: the Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand war memorials; the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fountain; and the 7 July Memorial.

### Canada Memorial

In 1992, the Canadian Memorial Foundation invited artists to design a memorial to the memory of over one million Canadians who served with British troops during the two world wars, 110,000 of whom lost their lives. Located in Green Park, close to Canada Gate and Buckingham Palace, the memorial was initiated as a privately-funded project sponsored by the then Canadian media baron, Conrad Black. It was dedicated in 1994.

Designed by Pierre Granche, the memorial is composed of a truncated pyramidal form, appearing to be partially buried while at the same time emerging

from the earth. The pyramidal form is divided into two sections representing Canadian and British joint participation in the two world wars. Bisecting the pyramid is a narrow pathway that encourages visitors to engage closely with the work.

Composed of polished red granite, the form of the tilting pyramid points toward the Canadian city of Halifax, the place of embarkation for soldiers departing to the battlefronts of both wars. The pyramid form sits in a square of paving and a small pool with a set of triangulated stairs that allows visitors to sit and reflect. A slow-moving layer of water flows from the top of the triangular forms, reflecting the sky and surrounding landscape. Embedded in the granite are scattered bronze maple leaves that resemble leaves floating downstream.

The memorial fell into disrepair in 2004 following arguments over maintenance responsibilities between the British and Canadian governments. By this 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 most of the 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, climbing it and using it as a 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. When water is flowing over the memorial, however, people do not climb over it.

The slow-moving water suggests a more traditional memorial form and a contemplative engagement with the work. While the Canada Memorial continues to function as a traditional war memorial on official occasions, for most of the time it is simply seen as a form of public sculpture, rather than a commemorative form of public art. People take the opportunity to engage with the work in a very physical way, despite the risks of injury from slipping or falling. The memorial appears to complement the looseness of its public setting through its physical placement and materiality, but its use as an object of physical play has clearly been unanticipated. In containing memory, the memorial’s physical form suggests types of engagement other than reflection and remembrance.

### Australian War Memorial

This memorial is located at Hyde Park Corner, effectively a large traffic island in the centre of London on a key ceremonial route linking the Admiralty Arch and the Mall, Buckingham Palace, and the Marble Arch. As part of the brief requirements, the memorial design required the incorporation of a wall to provide shelter from traffic to the south and water as a key element.

The memorial, designed by Tonkin Zulaikha Greer Architects, appears as a 44-metre long, curved wall commemorating those Australians who died alongside their British allies in two world wars. The wall is composed of planar, granite slabs; some blocks protruding to create places for floral tributes and others function as seating for viewers. Rather than using Portland stone as required by the initial brief, the design incorporates Australian granite, a literal translation of the Australian landscape into the heart of London. Water, as a symbolic purifying element, is designed to flow in a programmed sequence from the top of the wall in sections.

In contrast to the Canada Memorial, the setting of the Australian War Memorial is less loose. Located on a secondary pathway, the memorial operates as an incident in people's journeys across the site. Passersby rarely engage with the work beyond stopping and looking. With a distinct "front", the work reads as a more traditional form of war memorial and engagement with the work is limited to the taking of photos. In containing memory, the memorial's form, materiality, and setting work together to delimit the forms of social behaviour that are acceptable around it.

An interesting aspect of the memorial's ability to contain memory, however, is the recent controversy over its closure for substantial repairs. The key 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, for example, Gallipoli, The Somme, and Darwin. At a closer scale, the battleground names lose their legibility and the randomly arranged names of 23,844 Australian towns come into focus.

By 2008, the text had degraded to such an extent that the memorial had to be closed for extensive repairs. The repair and maintenance shortcomings of the memorial, it is argued, are directly linked to the extraordinarily short timeframe between the selection of the winning design and completion (a period of just 11 months).

Memorials are typically completed and dedicated on anniversary dates and these deadlines can often be significant factors in the way in which a work is conceived and developed. In the case of the Australian War Memorial, the containment of memory was dictated by the date of the 85th anniversary of the signing of the Armistice and dedication of the work by the Queen and Prime Ministers of both Australia and Great Britain. Inevitably this has resulted in compromises, including the inability to thoroughly prototype methods for incorporating the memorial text.

### New Zealand War Memorial

This memorial, dedicated in 2006, commemorates the lives of New Zealand servicemen and women killed in both world wars. Designed by Athfield Architects and sculptor, Paul Dibble, the memorial titled "Southern Stand" is sited on a grassy

slope on the north-eastern side of Hyde Park Corner opposite the Australian War Memorial. The memorial straddles an existing walkway and is composed of a loose arrangement of tilted, bronze columns. The patinated, cast bronze cross standards, varying in height from 1.7 to 1.4 metres, are slanted at an angle of 11 degrees.

Six of the standards represent the Southern Cross constellation and are illuminated at night. Nine of the standards are located on the grass mound while the remaining seven are on the gravel pathway. Each standard is inscribed with explanatory text on the bases. Figurative castings on the standards are intended to be descriptive of the relationship between New Zealand and Britain.

Unlike its Australian counterpart, the New Zealand War Memorial appears as a space rather than an object. The memorial negotiates the looseness of its public setting through its physical placement, form, and materiality. People walk along the path, stop, and read the memorial's inscriptions, thus directly engaging with the work. The memorial slows down passersby, and many take their time to wander through and read the inscriptions on the columns.

While the memorial has no clear focus, people create their own narrative by wandering through the space and engaging with the work. Few people however venture up the slope, most remaining around the columns on the flat pathway. The sombre patina and detailing of the columns sets up a contemplative interaction with the work—visitors read and touch the memorial with deference.

Unlike the Canada Memorial, the New Zealand War Memorial is not an attractor for social play. Its setting is primarily a thoroughfare rather than a destination, an incident through which people pass. While joggers use the path, they do not run through the space of the columns but instead use the edge of the path. In containing memory, the memorial's formal and material qualities work together to define the intended use of the space as one of reflection and contemplation.

### Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fountain

This fountain, located in the south-west corner of Hyde Park, is a memorial expressly designed as an enabling civic experience rather than a solemn symbol of loss and mourning. Designed by American landscape architect, Kathryn Gustafson, and titled "Reaching Out/Letting In", the memorial fountain is intended to symbolise Diana's personality and openness. It also reflects the two sides of her life: those happy times as well as turbulent periods.

Dedicated in 2004, the fountain is more accurately described as a large, oval streambed approximately 50 by 80 metres in size. Composed of 545 individual pieces of Cornish granite, the stream-bed ranges in width between three and eight metres and changes from a smooth bed with gentle ripples of water to a more turbulent side with steps, curves, and rills and more active water formations. Water flows from the highest point down both sides of the ring and its depth varies from ankle to knee deep.

The memorial clearly acknowledges the looseness of its public setting through its physical placement, form, and materiality, but like the Canada Memorial its dominant use as an object of physical play has clearly been unanticipated.

The memorial's complex interplay of open space, tree plantings, water, and views is intended to create an environment for public enjoyment through which memory of the Princess is projected. However, the reality of its everyday use is often much different. Unlike other memorials that may encourage reflection and introspection, the Diana Memorial encourages people-watching and overt performance. The circular form of the work encourages movement around and through the memorial. At most times this activity is relatively passive. However, more active behaviours are often present such as inline skating, running, and ball games. The form of the memorial is not dissimilar to an amphitheatre with perimeter seating facing a central stage.

The most significant activity is interaction with the water. There is a diverse array of social behaviour—visitors engage with the water in various ways from simply dipping in hands or feet to walking and playing in the stream. Signage attempts to contain the types of behaviours that are acceptable at the memorial site. There are no fewer than seven activities one cannot do in the fountain, including walking or running in the water.

However, people continue to walk or run in the water despite the signage and limited park security. The inability to contain forms of acceptable behaviour on the site stems, in large part, from the 2004 dedication when children from the royal party were photographed walking and playing in the water. In the days following the opening, large numbers visited the site in the midst of an unseasonal heat wave. As Gustafson noted, the visiting public used it more like a water park: *When it first opened, 5,000 people an hour came to see it ... How could you anticipate that? How can you solve a problem like that quickly? The turf around the oval couldn't survive these kinds of numbers. The level of management has had to be increased because of the level of people. We really underestimated that ...*<sup>8</sup>

By deviating from conventional memorial responses, the Diana Memorial attempts to define a space of memory of openness and optimism. In deliberately designing the memorial to complement its loose setting, however, unanticipated activities and overuse have restricted its ability to contain memory and to operate as a fitting setting for contemplation and reflection.

## 7 July Memorial

Located in the south-eastern corner of Hyde Park, the 7 July Memorial is dedicated to the memory of the 52 victims of the 2005 London terrorist bombings. Designed by architects, Carmody Grooke, and dedicated on the fourth anniversary of the attacks, the memorial comprises 52 individually cast, stainless steel columns symbolic of the victims. These are arranged in four loosely interlocked groupings, representative of the four bombing locations. The columns and their

arrangement are intended to reflect both the individual and the collective and the interconnectivity of the events of July 2005.

Each of the stelae is 3.5 metres high and is individually cast, resulting in unique characteristics in finish and texture. Inscriptions located at mid-height on the columns mark the locations, date, and time of each of the four bombing sites. The columns are, however, not ascribed to each of the victims, a deliberate strategy used in the event of any graffiti or vandal attack. At the termination of the memorial path, a grass mound holds a blackened stainless steel plaque that lists the names of the victims.

The space is used in a variety of ways, both expected and unexpected. The physical approach shapes people's perception of the memorial and its purpose. The memorial is located at the termination of a new public pathway and most visitors approach it frontally and deliberately. People are able to walk around and through the memorial and engage with its tactility directly by running their hands over the surfaces of the columns and reading the names inscribed on the plaque.

The memorial is designed to counteract its loose setting. No seating is provided at the memorial, a deliberate design decision to protect the privacy of the bereaved and delimit the forms of behaviour around it. The slope behind the memorial creates a small berm that reduces the visual impact of passing double-decker buses. In containing memory, the memorial's form, placement, and materiality aim to delimit the forms of social behaviour that are acceptable around it.

Despite this, forms of behaviour outside those that are deliberately contained are evident. The columns sometimes act as a labyrinth of play for children, who in some cases even climb upon them. The surrounding grass bank also provides an opportunity for children to roll or slide down its slope. People are observed interacting with the space often while in the process of doing other things such as eating, using their mobile phones, cycling, or jogging.

Most importantly, however, is the way in which the columns have begun to be appropriated by the bereaved. In some cases floral tributes or ribbons will appear on specific columns, either on the anniversary of the bombings or other significant dates such as birthdays. In rarer cases, graffiti naming victims has also appeared on the columns. As a form of spontaneous memorialisation the graffiti indicates a desire for giving form to the dead, a counter to the over-riding containment of memory in the memorial as ordered, homogeneous, and abstract.

### Conclusion: contained memory and loose space

Participant observation of recent memorial spaces in and around London's Hyde Park and Green Park indicate that public open spaces that possess particular physical features act as an invitation to people to appropriate them for their own uses. Memorial spaces that are located in loose public spaces, such as urban parks, contribute to amenity, place-making, and individual and communal behaviour in public spaces. They also function as places of remembrance.

Physical features such as walls, ledges, and slopes are often designed into public spaces in order to define spatial and behavioural boundaries. However, they can also serve other purposes, becoming places to sit, recline, climb, linger, and play. People may seek out spaces that will support a predetermined action, or the space itself may inspire social action, for example a fountain that encourages interaction.

Beyond this, participant observation also indicates that the aesthetics of contemporary memorialisation contribute to visitors often being unaware of the significance of a memorial setting. Public spaces that contain memory attempt to fix the use of a particular site. Through the appearance and aesthetic qualities of these sites, designers attempt to communicate specific symbolic meanings that will either stimulate certain actions, such as reflection and contemplation, or inhibit other actions:

*The appearance of spaces can also directly communicate a variety of religious and political beliefs and commercial and artistic agendas. Symbolism can either stimulate or inhibit actions by affecting potential users' interpretations and feelings, persuading them that a space is sacred or accommodating or private, that it provides or denies roles to certain individuals, that it is a place for escapism or grieving or work or protest.<sup>9</sup>*

The aesthetics of abstraction and minimalism of contemporary memorialisation allows for many personal and communal readings to mutually co-exist. In some cases, however, the pure abstraction of a memorial design may offer no clues to participants of appropriate codes of behaviour within the space.

People, through their own initiative, create the possibility of loose space and actively fashion public space to suit their own needs. In the case of representational spaces, such as memorial sites, unregulated and often anticipated actions of people in these spaces results in the loosening up of the intended meanings of these sites. For the most part, these forms of behaviour are benign, but in some cases they are fundamentally at odds with the conventional expectations of memorials as places where both memory and social behaviour are contained and restricted. This understanding challenges the way in which designers need to conceive, construct, and manage the way in which places of memory can be contained within urban landscapes.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>The research for this article was supported by a Design Researcher Award from the British Council in 2009.

<sup>2</sup>Erika Doss, "Memorial Mania," accessed September 28, 2010, <http://www.aamus.org/pubs/mn/memorialmania.cfm>

<sup>3</sup>Robert Musil, Joel Agee and Burton Pike, "Monuments," in *Selected Writings* (New York: Continuum, 1986), 320.

<sup>4</sup>Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire," in *Representations* 26 (1989): 13.

<sup>5</sup>James E. Young, “Memory and Monument After 9/11,” accessed September 28, 2010, <http://www.brooklynpubliclibrary.org/events/enshrined/pdf/young.pdf>

<sup>6</sup>Karen A. Franck and Quentin Stevens, *Loose Space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life* (London: Routledge, 2006), 25.

<sup>7</sup>Franck and Stevens, “Loose Space,” 2.

<sup>8</sup>Stuart Jeffries, “I Still Love My Diana Fountain,” accessed September 28, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2004/oct/12/art.monarchy>.

<sup>9</sup>Franck and Stevens, “Loose Space,” 10.

## Bibliography

Doss, Erika, “Memorial Mania,” accessed September 28, 2010, <http://www.aamus.org/pubs/mn/memorialmania.cfm>

Franck, Karen and Stevens, Quentin, *Loose Space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life* (London: Routledge, 2006).

Ivy, R., “Memorials, Monuments, and Meaning,” *Architectural Record* 190(7) (2002): 84-87, 214.

Jeffries, Stuart, “I Still Love My Diana Fountain,” accessed September 28, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2004/oct/12/art.monarchy>.

Musil, Robert, Agee, Joel and Pike, Burton, “Monuments,” in *Selected Writings* (New York: Continuum, 1986), 320.

Nora, Pierre, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire,” in *Representations* 26 (1989): 7-24. *Ontario Could Maintain War Memorial in England: McGuinty*, accessed October 10, 2010, <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/toronto/story/2007/08/22/war-memorial.html>

Savage, Kirk, “The Past in the Present,” *Harvard Design Magazine* 9 (Fall 1999): 14-1.

## Biographical note

Dr Russell Rodrigo is an architect and lecturer with the Faculty of the Built Environment, University of New South Wales, with an interest in the architecture and philosophy of memory and place. He is the designer of a number of memorial projects including the NSW Police Memorial and Gay and Lesbian Memorial in Sydney. Russell has recently completed a research-through-design PhD in memorial architecture.

Email: [russell.rodrido@unsw.edu.au](mailto:russell.rodrido@unsw.edu.au)