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Memory, Memorial and Meaning



April 19, 2013 | Melissa A. Patricio

BRISTOL, R.I. -- As visitors approach the *Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery* in Nantes, France, they are greeted by subtly glinting glass pieces that pepper the promenade. Depending on the angle and the pitch of the sunlight, leaning in a little closer will reveal names etched upon the glass: *Les Trois Maries*; *La Therese*; *L'Amour*. About the length of four football fields, the path exposes 1,710 names written in the Earth along the bank of the Loire River. They are the names of every slave ship that departed the port during what is arguably the darkest period of Nantes' long history.

What was once a parking lot is now a dialogic memorial that greets up to 500 visitors daily, inviting them to consider what slavery meant in the past, what it means for the present and the persisting struggle to eradicate the enslavement and trafficking of people.

"What we tried to do is to understand that this project is a working memorial and provides means to think about slavery and the slave trade; to think about the resistance and the struggle and bring closer the continuing struggle against slavery today," said architect Julian Bonder, a professor of architecture at Roger Williams University who created the *Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery* with his design partner, Krzysztof Wodiczko. Bonder addressed an enraptured audience during a recent community lecture – the first time a faculty member has been spotlighted in the President's Distinguished Speakers Series.

“The work we do as academics and as architects is significant not only because we’re trying our best to help think about the spaces and the places we inhabit, but also because we can establish a new kind of dialogue about what to do or what to think or how to think about these things,” Bonder said.

The crux of Bonder and Wodiczko’s work represents a redefinition of memory, or “memorywork,” as Bonder calls it. Attempting to tell the story of slavery or other human atrocities requires a commitment to remembering, he explained. As such, memory is not an object, but rather an action.

“In order to make the world a better place, we need to consider ourselves concerned members of society,” Bonder said. “This is not about us – it is about all those others who may not have a voice. Yet, we don’t speak for them.”

The purpose of creating memorials is to recall difficult pasts, Bonder said, as well as to instigate a continuing conversation about the past, present and future. And in many ways, while the events we memorialize occurred in the past, they very directly inform how we live in the present. While he approaches these projects from an architectural, artistic and academic perspective, all citizens are called on to seek the “Truth” and bring into public consciousness the questions that emerge from these challenging moments in history.

“It’s important to understand that our position in the present is connected to the past,” Bonder said. “So when we work on these projects both professionally and in academia, we need to be wary of creating instant metaphors and artificial meanings.”

Take the Zanzibar Stone Town memorial to slavery portraying chained slaves in a pit, for instance. It is an instant cliché, Bonder said. Or the Emancipation Memorial in Washington, D.C., which depicts President Abraham Lincoln standing over a kneeling slave, granting his freedom. This perpetuates a mythical narrative, he said, and does not convey any sense of agency; rather, it implies that the slave himself has not fought for his freedom, not struggled for his human rights.

“This raises questions for design that are very important,” Bonder noted. “How do we make room for the voices of 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? What about those who don’t have the possibility to appear and those we know will never reappear – how can we welcome those others who address us from the deep wells of history and from the present wells of memory in a democratic society?”

For Bonder, the work of creating memorials to the disenfranchised is very personal. The son of Holocaust survivors, Bonder was raised in Buenos Aires and attended university there during Argentina’s Dirty War. Many of his friends and colleagues are among *Los Desaparecidos* – Argentinians who disappeared without a trace between 1976 and 1983, considered political dissidents or subversives by the government.

“I come from a place where I couldn’t speak openly for a long time, and I’m passionate about this,” he said. “But I’m passionate about this not as a way to suggest that my biography legitimates or means more than anything else. On the contrary, none of what I do – none of what we do – is about ourselves. We feel obligated to contribute to the visibility of those whose history and memory have been relegated to the margins of visibility and the struggle to represent that.”

To do this well, Bonder noted, we must find room to invite the victims and survivors of violence and injustices – “the nameless and the vanquished,” he calls them – to participate in our lives via our public spaces. Only then will the continuing history of victors be disrupted and the truths of our history revealed.

For a city like Nantes, France, revealing a dark history was not without challenges, but the memorial changes the way the city perceives itself, Bonder said.

“The glass that cuts the ground transforms the space,” he said, describing the 100 meters of glass panels with words like “revolt,” “oppression” and “memory” on them along with five centuries’ worth of texts from Bob Marley and Toni Morrison to Derek Walcott and Emil Cesar. Coupled with the glass pieces built into the promenade – the **Commemorative Path**, as it’s called – the memorial tells the story of slavery with more than just words.

“People are looking, people are in search of memory,” Bonder said, describing how visitors approach the memorial. “This is not a memory being told to them. Suddenly they stop, and they take a long time. What they do here is to offer us something that is the most precious thing we have in life – that is time. They spend time, look at the ground and suddenly they connect with the ground. The physical self changes – you pause, you kneel, it stops you. You begin to internalize the process of thinking about the place in a very different way.”

At the center of the staircase leading underground is the paramount phrase from the Declaration of Human Rights (1948): “No one shall be held in slavery and servitude. Slavery and servitude shall be prohibited in all forms.” As visitors make their way into the heart of the memorial and along the **Meditative Path**, they are ushered by facts, laws, abolitionist texts and personal accounts representative of slavery around the world. At the west end, they are greeted by the story of contemporary slavery – an ongoing human plight that still affects nearly 27 million people in the world today. In a poetic nod, visitors emerge at the end of the memorial to face The Palace of Justice directly across the river.

“The only thing that happens there is you take time to reflect on the past and the present and the future,” Bonder said. “At the end, the only hope we have is that justice will still prevail for so many people who are vanquished and do not have anything in the world.”

*The Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery is the product of **Wodiczko + Bonder**, a design partnership created by Architect and Roger Williams University Professor of Architecture Julian Bonder and Krzysztof Wodiczko of the Harvard Graduate School of Design. The memorial has received international attention*

and acclaim, with many awards including a Special Mention from the Biannual European Prize for Urban Public Space, an Honor Award from the Boston Society of Architects and a nomination for the European Union Prize for Contemporary Architecture / Mies van der Rohe Award. Julian Bonder has served as professor of architecture at Roger Williams University since 2001.

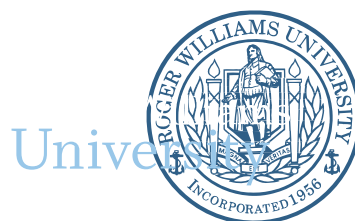
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