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The Effects of Public Memorials on Social Memory and Urban Identity

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Abstract

In recent years, instead of paramount monuments and separate or enclosed memory sites, the examples of memorials integrated into cities have been increasing. Representing memories in this way not only reminds people of their social history without visiting a place specially, but also provides a correlation and helps to develop an empathy with citizens and strengthens urban memory. This paper draws attention to the contributions of memory sites to social memory and urban identity, and then points out the effects of designing memorials that are integrated into daily life in cities on societies from a design perspective.

Keywords: Public Memorials, Memory Sites, Social and Urban Memory, Memorialisation, Design of Memorials

1. Introduction

Public memorials are landscapes which make it possible to keep past events alive in the common memory through physical representation in public areas. Public memorials, which remember the events and the pain they caused to the public through (civil) war, terrorism, genocide, etc. In our day, they are actually reflecting the psychological and sociological requirements of the societies on the landscape. These requirements can be considered as democracy, human rights, representing the victims, social commemoration rituals for the victims, preserving history and information transfer among generations and cultures, etc.

As the central structure of a developing and consisting democracy, through transparency, comprehensiveness, public participation, accuracy, sensibility and other criteria in memorialization, public memorials may become democratic dialog areas. Reminding society of a violent history physically through memorialization also contributes to the city landscape in creating a respect culture regarding solving human rights problems and conflicts by peaceful settlement. Moreover, memorialization plays a central role in shaping and managing civilian and urban life and policies, and becomes a reason to explain peoples’ opinions on political issues and ideologies (Brett et al., 2007).

Public memorials are preserved for the future by carrying the past to the present in order to “remind” people and help them to remember and prevent changing historical facts and events. Thus, public memorials serve for both transferring information to all visitors, particularly the younger generation, and for giving tourists the
opportunity to establish empathy with past events which the society they are visiting lived through. Moreover, these memorials help tourists to carry this frame of mind back to their own countries and inspire them to establish a bond with similar crimes and problems today, whether faced in different societies or in different contexts (Brett et al., 2007).

2. The design of public memorials in the context of urban identity: Memory places integrated to city and daily life

As public memorials can be classified according to their content, they can also be classified according to their state of being in interaction and their accessibility to the public. For example, these memorials can be large-scale and far from the city centre or they can also be in the city and always in contact with urban dwellers.

Monuments and memorials do not always mean the same thing. Monuments represent the official memory† and they become invisible to the constant users of that place. On the other hand, although experienced memory contains collective, political memory or a memory specific to one generation, it is always inside the individuals, their experiences and pains§ (Soher, 2009).

For most people, a “monument” is generally the design of a magnificent object created by a sculptor instead of professionals directly related to spatial design, such as architects, landscape architects or urban designers (Soher, 2009). This commonly held opinion, unfortunately, causes people to perceive the concept of commemoration as an action which is done only at specific times or which has to abide by specific routines.

In this context, if the feeling and information, which is intended to be given by the monument, is given within holistic space design and if it is designed under the title of a “memory place or site” instead of “monument”, it can escape from being invisible. By building memory places instead of monuments, ever living spaces will be created. Starting from this approach, instead of monuments, which have their own and enclosed space or which are separate from urban life, memory sites, which are connected to their environment and which can be included within peoples’ daily lives have the potential to have a more positive effect on social memory and urban identity.

“Contemporary memorial or memory place examples should be in a structure which is closer to human scale, which helps the visitor to connect, which can bring various usages and which creates a living space” (Soher, 2009).

Representing memories in this way not only reminds people of their social history, without visiting a place specially, but also provides a correlation and helps to develop empathy with citizens as tourists (Figure 1).

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* In 21st century, according to (Wall, 1999), the term “landscape” no longer refers a pastoral view but rather it is an active surface that organizes not only object and spaces but also dynamic processes and events.
† (Brets et al., 2007) defined the “memorialization” as the process of creating of public memorials.
‡ Memory has two types, the first one is the official memory and the second one is experienced memory (Soher, 2009).
§ Official memory and experienced memory differentiation is defined in Huyssen in Salcedo’s Unland: The Orphan’s Tunic, 1997.
** The monument which was built on the memory of the Jewish people who lost their lives due to Nazi regime during the Second World War is a new interpretation of traditional commemoration compositions. This work which was designed as an open public space by Architect Peter Eisenmann aims to be experienced by everybody through twenty four hours a day. It is possible to commemorate the dead and experience the scale by walking inside this artificial landscape composed by gathering 2700 concrete columns of 2 m in width and 7 m in height. These columns were placed according to the grid style and on a topography waving on a slight slope. The irregular formation inside this regular array presents a flexible scale perception to the visitors walking among columns of equal height.
Suddenly meeting a memory site or conceptual art project to remember daily life activities or our routine ways always renews memories. Putting memories in life fluency refreshes social memory and strengthens social association psychologically. In this respect, some small-scale works could be an alternative to the classical scale of traditional memorials for cenotaphs, obelisks and monuments, etc (Figure 2 and Figure 3).

Figure 2: Exhibiting blocks cut from the Berlin Wall inside the city, Berlin-Germany (Url 4), (Url 5), (Url 6).

Figure 3: Sarajevo Roses, Bosnia and Herzegovina (Url 7).

The massive proportion of the traditional memorials especially enables “remembering”, which is one of the important needs for the public. However, utilizing memory places and works could satisfy other needs of the community, such as “using” and “meeting” and also increasing the affectivity of memorials (Page & Sherida 2004). Salzburg Stumbling Blocks (Figure 4), Memorial Bridge in Croatia (Figure 5) and Princess Diana’s Memorial Fountain in Hyde Park (Figure 6) are such examples of unifying symbolic meanings, memories and utility.

Figure 4: Salzburg Stumbling Blocks, Salzburg - Austria (Url 8), (Url 9), (Url 10).
Integrating memorials as a form of the transfer of cultural knowledge to our everyday lives strengthens urban memory. It provides opportunities for citizens and visitors to compare their past and today. Remembering important incidents and people recovers and satisfies our souls spiritually. For this reason, in designing memorials, designers should not only regard giving information to the visitor, but also create new places with new ways of providing a relationship with the information.

3. The design of public memorials in the context of social memory

Instead of forming or searching for any criteria or standards in the design of public memory places, it is necessary that the designer considers feelings and situations requested to be given in these places, in order to strengthen social memory. At this point, the purpose of designing a memorial or memory place gains importance. These purposes can be listed as mourning, learning a lesson from history, teaching and reminding the younger generation about past events, improving the dialogue between the past and present, etc. (Brett et al., 2007). The intended feeling and the purpose of memorial creation plays an important role in forming a strategy in the process of developing the design, its form and content.

Never again: In “present” spaces built with “the past”, for “the future” emphasis is often put on the wish that it will “never happen again”. Moreover, especially for foreign tourists, there should not be a negative effect of the message intended to be given on memorials nor should it be trivialized (Brett et al., 2007).

Having the visitor question life experiences: Where is a similar situation being lived now? What would you do if you were in that situation? What should be done in order to prevent such a situation happening again? “The design should aim to create experiences that help create better citizens” (Brett et al., 2007).

Participatory design process: While remembering, one of the phenomena which creates the memory for a society, a country, and memorialization, which eternizes this, becomes immortalized with the design and turns into a memory site, passing through several stages. In this important process the designer should go beyond establishing empathy with the victims and their relatives and include the people in decisions about the design. It is an important requirement for human rights and democratic rights to have discussions on the representation of the event planned to be commemorated within the designing process.

Considering victims: One of the matters of debate faced in most of the memorial projects is; who owns the story to be represented and how is it to be represented? In other words “for whom?” and “for what?” questions should not be forgotten. Besides this, identity, sex, religion and race are other concepts that should be taken into consideration.

4. The effects of ideologies and political situations

Public memorials, which enable social memory, are one of the most important factors of social existence, to be reflected and to be lived in the spaces which are continuously kept under control, directed and managed by the ideologies and political situations. This management is effective on several processes, beginning from the first
stage about for whom and for what are these public memorials to be built for and maintained in practice stages, such as where and through what kind of design they will be done?

The main aim of public memorials is to “remind” people by connecting them to the past, present and future. They often witness power struggles in order to underline different statements in all of these processes in the context of social memory. Changes in ideological and political situations result in attributing new meanings, changing, renewing and demolishing these areas, and are determinative on new applications put in place of the demolished and utilization decisions. Demolishing and these new utilizations brought after demolishing are actually a kind of “cultural cleansing”.††

In this context, the demolition of the Mostar Bridge during the war in Yugoslavia in 1993, which had entered the UNESCO World Heritage List as “a symbol of reconciliation, international cooperation and of the coexistence of diverse cultural, ethnic and religious communities” (Murtic, 2011) shows that an era was closed in terms of uniting different cultures and religions (Uzer, 2009), and demolishing the bridge was considered as a symbol of rejection of Mostar’s multi-national heritage. (Ur(?) 16). Until its destruction, the Mostar Bridge had served as part of the important activities as well as daily life of the town (Uzer, 2009), and was the place of tradition where Mostar men dived in to the river from the bridge in order to show their courage and their commitment to their wives before they got married or proposed. In this context, demolishing public memorials can cause the loss of social memory, rituals and cultural values.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

Designing memory sites, which are of great importance in terms of spirituality for the societies, by integrating them to urban space in human scales enables keeping memories alive and strengthening memory and has a positive effect on urban identity (Figure 7).

- Memory sites, which are designed in a way to leak inside our daily lives, increase social information transfer by influencing our daily life styles.
- This approach, which can become an alternative to traditional memorial perception, gives a chance to compare the past with today, not only to the citizens of the city where the particular memory site exists, but also to the ones who experience that place only temporarily. Even though it can be painful, knowledge of

†† The term of “cultural cleansing” is used by Bevan, R., in Cultural Cleansing: Who Remembers the Armenians? in The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War in 2006.
the past helps to increase the awareness in this respect and supports the developments of social reflex, in order to prevent similar events ever happening again.
- This approach changes and improves our point of view towards and perception of the city. By doing so, the people who experience that city for the first time associate themselves with the memories of that city and the citizens. By knowing about the past life experiences and with this background they evaluate that city differently. In this context, it is necessary not to trivialize the intended message in the memory sites.
- Instead of the huge scale of the traditional memorials and monuments, the designs with modest and human scales have the potential to address more users.
- Commemoration serves, not only for the sake of remembering, but also for many different usages and this makes these spaces easier to become a part of our daily lives.
- Instead of searching or creating new norms or criteria in design, featuring the intended feeling results in more effective outcomes in drawing the visitor. For this reason, designers should not only regard giving information to the visitor, but also create new places with new ways of providing a relationship with the information.
- Memory places or site designs, which include commemoration, symbolism and different usages, get the chance to become living spaces outside commemoration days or rituals, as well as set better relations with the visitor. In this way, they can escape from losing their meaning and becoming invisible.
- Since the design is of a widely-esteemed urban element, this process should be done, not only by the designer, but also with the participation of the community.
- In this way, political situations and ideologies, which are the effective mechanisms in the decisions to be given related to “for whom” and “for what” these public memorials are to be built, should shape the identities of the public places. As a result of power struggles and changing ideologies some public memorials have been demolished and this situation creates the risk of destroying social memory, traditions and cultural values.
- Design disciplines, which take a role in designing and planning our environment, have the power to influence society’s sociological and psychological structure, to keep cultural values alive, to change and even destroy them. For this reason the designers, being aware of this power, should handle the issue through a perception focusing on the users and the community and by resisting, as much as possible, any political and ideological manipulations, because the main issue is the representation of the history of a nation, community or a minority in a way so as to set an example for the coming generations and to leave a mark for posterity.

References