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# THE MONUMENT AS A PARADOX

A study of the monument through the difference in memory between fragment and section

This text, started as a chapter of doctoral thesis in 2004. It continued with the visit to Peter Eisenman's Monument in memory of the murdered Jews in Berlin summer 2005. The place was photographed with the knowledge that taking pictures is in itself a creation, with the intention to make something else rather than to document the referent. And at the same time with the desire to see in photographs what I couldn't see by having the experience of being there. The text continues when teaching the course "Disembodiment"- Advanced Topics, at Cooper Union, fall 2005 specifically studying function/form/fiction in Modern Architecture and trying to find out the base for the rejection of fiction in modern architecture and its possible relation to the rejection of monument in several ways: monument as the less functional edifice, (the house being the more functional one); monument as memorable (the memorable versus the everyday); monument as monumental and ornamental; monument as the location for memories (deliberative avoidance of surfaces that hold visible traces).



“Memory is like a map. The map is only revised when one is lost...”

## Introduction

A monument while being built is related to something that happened. The reason for the monument is that this significant “something” actually happened. Here is a paradox: what “happened” wasn’t made up; the monument is made. Regardless of the way it was experienced, recorded or remembered, what “happened” has a unique existence. The monument cannot be built as a “rebuild” since it is related to something that wasn’t built. The monument is something made: fictional. What happened was real, factual.

## Fiction and Existence, or “built” and “happen”

In the monument, the only thing that can be recreated is the structure of what happened. The recreation of the totality in a symbolic manner is a reduction of the reality to its image, a souvenir, a sacrifice of the individual in name of the universal. The recreation of the experience in a referential way, as if suffering for the other (while helping identification) is perverse, since it not only takes away the meaning of the other’s suffering but offers the occasion to dramatize innocuous suffering, to monumentalize to the scale of pain what has become trivial discomfort.

## Fragment and Section. Symbolic and paradoxical. Memorial and monumentality.

In order to define the monument and its relation with what happened, with the idea in mind that the monument is somehow a paradox (to build something that happened), memory is reduced to its components (fragments, mementos, and references) and processes (can what happened be present? how can it be revisited? is it intrusive? what is its process?). The following paragraphs are an analysis of the monument through the difference in memory between piece and section or fragment and memento. As a consequence of following up the difference between the fragment and the section, the monument is characterized as memorial or by monumentality. The text will make explicit the difference between monument as memorial (the location of a paradox) and monument as loaded with monumentality (a reference with several degrees of distance to what happened).

## Memory, its components and structure

The act of remembering transports something that happened in the past up to the present. Different from remembering, the act of recording occurs in the same moment that life is being recorded, in present time. A record, being a fragment, while triggering the whole thing with intensity, lacks totality. While the record has continuity with what happened, it is unable to reconstruct the globality of the event since it doesn’t carry the structure of the whole event. Fragments occupy space, only a selection of them stays fresh and visible, the others are stored and classified, and each becomes a reference of the record. Records and references to records refresh the memory, recall what happened. The “what” and the “when” are supposed to trigger the “how”. A situation, some happening, cannot be recorded because of the diverse nature of its components: facts, place, and time require an association among elements. A section of time is

called moment, a section of a memory is called memento. A memento, being a section, is a cut of the totality, and therefore retains more of the totality than a fragment does. A section - different from a fragment - goes through the whole and makes an illusionary cut. A fragment is a physical piece that is retained from the whole.

A section is not an index or a trace; it possesses no physicality. A section is abstract and maintains a larger distance with what happened than the record. A section, by being a cut, by default, implies association among time, content and place. In consequence, in the process of memory (associative by nature), the more reliable associations are the sections of memory. The fragment will trigger associations. They may be very vivid, alive, intense and emotional but they may also differ from what actually happened with the same intensity. In other words, there is no criteria to measure the reliability of what a fragment triggers, besides the frame of the piece, the record of itself. To resume: Memento being a section is the basic while the complex unit of memory. Memento while being singular and partial, is a precise cut and can give an understanding of the whole thing. A section of memory (memento), while not being in physical continuity with the memory, is as close as it can be to the memory, its dna, it retains its structure and is the closest to a recollection. Memory is made up of a collection of a series of situation's section-mementos, a storage of records, and an elaborate archive of references. Memory is unexpected and uncontrollable. Intrusive memories, uncanny associations. Memory is uncontrollable but memory's references - and/or records - are under control. The uncontrollable is also the part of reality that fiction is missing in order to be real (definition of fiction as something built up and therefore under control). Memory (even if built in part) is something close to a recollection. The more reliable element and therefore the closest to recollection is the section of memory –memento.

## A logical analysis of the paradoxical or symbolic condition of the monument

A monument tries to be as close to what happened as it can, and it does that through memory. But to what in memory? Which is the most reliable element of memory?:

First Theory. The memento is the most reliable thing in memory. Each “memento” is in our brain, pretty much as it was but the difference between what actually happened will be decided by the way each section is put together. In a sense, the part of memory that is built later on, is the narration of the “in between,” the interstitial space among the specific situations, states and actions that we remember.

Second Theory. The more reliable element, when going back to memory, is the “fragment” since there is a physical trace of it, and since it is viewed so intensely, it feels close to the experience. Still there is a difference: what happened in reality is transformed in our mind as a vision or as an image).

Following up the First Theory: If a monument tries to show the totality and reality of what happened, what aspect in memory will be

the closest to it? Will it be a fragment of memory (record)? or a section of memory (memento)? My answer would be a section of memory. (I consider “memento” the minimum cut in memory, moment of memory, not a souvenir).

(-1-) If I stick to the theory that the part of memory that is the more reliable, the closest to the facts, is what happened in a specific moment, a section of memory, “Memento” (-2-) then to build a place for a “memento” that contains the illusion is something really close to a recollection, when the associations contained in the section of memory in the memento are not built, are just cut, there is a clear paradox: To bring to the present something that happened in the past, in a built form, is to pervert the nature of memory since the monument is built but the reality happened. (-3-) Furthermore there is another paradox: the way things come to memory is not completely controllable (association or intrusion) and the built is planned and fixed. (-4-) If I apply the definition of fictional as something that has been constructed (something that is thought out, has an existence, is there, but is not a reality- is constructed, controlled, not unexpected) I will say that a monument is fictional. (-5) If a monument is fictional, this implies that the monument is made, its process of formation (fictional) is not coherent with the content of what it is about (a section of memory, a cut through an event). (-6-) If a monument is fictional, it is not a reference of the event, since the event is something that is not been created, (not been made, but happened) and cannot be recreated. (-7-) To make a monument from something that happened (event, something real) is paradoxical.

Symbolic and paradoxial.  
Memorial and  
monumentality

Following this logic, two ways out: 1) the monument is not about rebuilding what happened (the event) but about rebuilding the paradox. (For instance the Peter Eisenman Monument in memory of the murdered Jews in Berlin. 2005)

2) the only way that building a monument will not be paradoxical is if it is assumed that memory (different from reality, it lacks reality, it is an image of reality) is already built and therefore can be rebuilt. I will stick to the the first argument which states that the structure of the monument is the structure of the paradox. The configuration of the monument doesn't have to follow the structure of the similarity, and therefore a monument doesn't have to resemble, in any way, the event that it is making reference to. In consequence, it will be completely free from any referential, symbolic, indexical or signifier content. Following the first argument, the monument is not a reference to what happened but a memorial. A place to display and locate “the paradox” of what happened, to question and to address the perverted nature of human beings.

A memorial is a location for a contradiction: the impossibility of imagining the horror before it happens, the impossibility of seeing it as real even when it is happening, the impossibility of assuming horror after it happened and finally, how necessary is to forget about it.

On the other hand, following the theory of the fragment as a reference of first degree and the memory built around it with the emotions and associations it triggers, the monument will be another reference to the fragment with a second degree of separation; the

monument will follow the logic of the fragment. It will be another layer of separation with relation to what happened, a question of translating the image into an object. In this case there is no paradox between the memory and the monument. But in this case the monument is not understood as memorial but as a monumentalized fragment, or monumentalized reference of the fragment. (For instance the Maya Lin Vietnam War Memorial and the reference to each Americans soldier, the name, the reference to a person.)

### Memorial as a device for oblivion

The monument is apparently the least functional of all architectural edifices. Following the perversion of the monument as a place for the paradox of the event, and not resembling the perversion of the event, the logical conclusion of this argument is that the monument is not a way to remember, but a device for oblivion. It locates memories, and in doing so, allows space for the future.

The monument, besides serving to commemorate, allows us to forget. The Memory is the capacity to locate, not to remember. It is not just that memory has a place, but that memory is the place. The “memorial” enabled us to be far away from memories, while being connected to them, because it implies a (known) location where memories can be found.

Anxiety stemming from the disappearance of what is lost, calms down when a place for disappearance is built. Collective memory is relieved of the burden of remembering thanks to a memorial that commemorate what happened. The monument is the place of death, and once it has a place, death is also located. The fact that dead bodies of individuals were not found, the thought that these bodies are now vagabonds, with no place, site-less, is intended to be solved by creating a site for them: a “memorial”.

A “memorial” is like the picture’s drawer a place that is visited only some times, allowing the rest of our life to be free from the weight of memory. Thanks to a monument, we can forget, and we can remember in the same way that thanks to a photograph, we can be close to our loves ones while being away from them. A monument while making a connection with the past releases the burden of being in contact with it, in the same way that a picture while lacking the body prevents from facing the presence. A memorial is an intermittent oblivion, a memory from what to go away from and to what to comeback to. The monument is a moment, what allows memory to be absent from our minds, most of the time. Oblivion, one of the deepest sadness of human beings, one of the deepest guilt, (the guilt of being alive, when others aren’t) is also one of the powerful ways of survival.

About Peter Eisenman  
edifice: “Monument in  
memory of the  
murdered Jews in  
Berlin 2005”

First impression: Red roof buildings surrounding a hole. The dimensions of the windows and their rhythms suggest dwellings. The lights coming from the houses speaks of the everyday, the known, the stable, the inhabitable. In front of them the unknown, the non-domestic but inhabitable. Non-domestic as non-domestic is the concept of planned multiple deaths in a row; a double aberration: institutionalized serial murder. A planned massacre of such alterity can be explained only by madness, but defined by the paradox of life: Life doesn't correspond with thought.

It is only defined by existence.

Second impression: The hole is a field of different but repeated concrete blocks. The ground is wavy and the different angle of inclination and height of each block give a sense of instability. The vertical middle class family residential buildings act as the back stage curtain of an empty theater, as if the everyday life of these residences were nothing but a theater. A theater of double absurdity: each day without nostalgia neither hope with the everyday rhythms broken into pieces.

Blocks of concrete. Tombs? Maybe. But the resemblance is only formal. The weight of one of these concrete blocks is 16 tons. How many human bodies are necessary to arrive at 16 tons?

Third impression: I imagine each of the middle class apartments without the residential elements: no doors, windows, balconies or lights, no references to the human body, just emptiness being collapsed into a concrete block, against the ground.

Lack of symbolic references, an edifice: a projection of the present into the future, a location for a paradox more than a resemblance of fragments or figures from the past.

August 2005