Imprimis: The Decline of American Monuments and Memorials

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The following is adapted from a lecture delivered on March 2, 2012, at Hillsdale College's Allan P. Kirby, Jr. Center for Constitutional Studies and Citizenship in Washington, D.C. Photos of the monuments mentioned in this lecture can be viewed at `hillsdale.edu/lewis`.

This has been an extraordinary year for American monuments. The memorial at Ground Zero opened last September in New York. One month later came the dedication of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial here in Washington, and soon to come to Washington—or perhaps not—is the memorial to President Eisenhower, which is to be a collaboration between architect Frank Gehry and sculptor Charles Ray. Each of these has been the subject of furious controversy, especially those in Washington.

The King Memorial was criticized for engaging a sculptor from Communist China, who saw to it that Chinese rather than American granite was used for the structure—which accounts for its "Made in China" inscription. Even worse, the memorial managed to misquote the great man: Not only did he not say, "I was a drum major for justice, peace and righteousness," but his actual words were a hypothetical statement put in someone else's mouth. Worse still is the demeanor and expression of the sculpture. King was above all an orator, and in photographs he is invariably open in stance, speaking, gesturing, demonstrating, with his energy directed outward. Yet in the monument he is depicted with arms folded, utterly detached. Instead of inspiring warmth, there is the infinite aloofness of an idol.

The proposed Eisenhower Monument has been criticized on opposite grounds. Instead of making its subject a 30-foot effigy, it turns him into a diminutive country boy. In an outdoor public space that is part formal civic plaza and part wooden urban park, columns in the background will support a wire mesh screen depicting images of the Kansas prairie of Eisenhower's childhood. And at the center will be the sculpture of Eisenhower as a dreamy country boy "looking out onto his future achievements"—an unconventional depiction, given that there were millions of dreamy country boys and only one Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in Europe in World War Two.

As different as the King and Eisenhower memorials are, the public's dismay in each instance has the same cause: These aren't the men we knew. It is not easy, of course, to make a succinct statement in sculptural form of the essence of a man's life. It is something American art has always struggled with, especially in our chronic divided loyalty between realism and idealism. But this is the least of the problems with the Eisenhower and King memorials. They fail fundamentally as monuments, not because they misunderstand the nature of their subjects, but because they misunderstand what a monument is, or should be.

As traditionally understood, a monument is the expression of a single powerful idea in a single emphatic form, in colossal scale and in permanent materials, made to serve civic life. (Materials and size distinguish monuments from memorials, of which monuments are a subset.) But I suspect that if Frank Gehry were asked to define a monument, he would say something to the effect that a monument is not a thing but a process—an open-ended conversation in which various constituencies bring different interpretations to different forms. I have heard versions of this definition for decades. And it is simply not good enough.

The spontaneous roadside memorials that mark the site of fatal traffic accidents are a relatively new phenomenon. As physical objects they are ephemera, but as a mass cultural phenomenon they are quite extraordinary, and they testify to a deep human need for memorials. It is a new form of folk art, and it is extremely conventionalized in its expression. For one thing, its repertoire of forms and materials is very narrow: crosses, flowers, hand-painted signs, and heartbreakingly, in the case of a child, stuffed animals. There is very little else, and no striving for originality. Their creators look for widely understood symbols, and they yearn for resolution and closure; they certainly do not aspire to an open- ended process.

In a way, these anonymous roadside sculptors understand what many contemporary artists do not—that monuments, because they are public art forms, must be legible. And this requires a great degree of convention. Thus most traditional monuments are paraphrases of a few ancient types: the triumphal arch, the temple, the colossal column, and the obelisk. Since the 1930s, it has been fashionable to disparage this as architectural grave-robbing, and to argue that we should create our own forms. But these forms are timeless, not simply ancient. After all, the arch is nothing more than a space of passage, made monumental; an obelisk or column is the exclamation point raised above a sacred spot; and a temple is a tabernacle, the sacred tent raised over an altar. These ideas are permanent, and it is not surprising that the one successful work of contemporary public art, the Vietnam Memorial, took its form from one of the most ancient— the mural shrine, the wailing wall.

It is because of their ability to transcend time by connecting to primal human activities—passage, gathering, shelter—that the best monuments never look dated. John Russell Pope's Jefferson Memorial does not make us think of 1940, but of Jefferson. It does this with its shape: To commemorate the author of the Declaration of Independence, Pope chose the most perfect of all forms—the sphere, a physical manifestation of the clarity of Jefferson's mind. How different is the Lincoln Memorial, a foursquare citadel; here the theme is heroic fortitude—a cincture of closely spaced columns, huddled together about the windowless central shrine, expressing endurance. Different again is the monument to George Washington, a vehement founding gesture, a single bold mark against the sky. For this, the model was that greatest of architectural point-markers, the Egyptian obelisk.

Although Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial was roundly condemned for its radical innovations—the use of black granite rather than white marble, the stress on a void rather than a positive presence, the violent scar it seemed to make on the earth—it nonetheless presented the profoundly traditional image of a stone tablet inscribed with the names of the dead. Perhaps Lin's most poetic gesture was how she solved the problem of how to list some 58,000 names. It was determined that they should appear in order of the date of death rather than alphabetically, but she did not simply start at one end in 1959 and continue on to 1975; instead she began and ended the timeline in the center, at the vertex, so that the name of the last to die would touch the name of the first. Here she gave the monument a point of resolution, the point where things begin and end,

transforming the linear timeline into something cyclical and regenerative, thus making its central point a kind of altar.

Not long ago it was fashionable to sneer at these things. Frank Lloyd Wright found the Jefferson Memorial preposterous for its archaic expression. But true monumentality has little to do with style and everything to do with simplicity and grandeur of expression. Rodin, asked to define sculpture, supposedly said that it is what results when you roll a statue down the steps—that is, when everything extraneous breaks off. The word for a style of extremely laconic expression is "lapidary," which comes from the Latin word lapis, or stone. This was the Roman term for the verbal compression necessary when one is carving an inscription in stone. And like the inscriptions they bear, the best of monuments are lapidary: They show a splendid economy of expression in saying one thing, and saying it monumentally.

A structure that offers a single great lesson is a monument; one that offers many facts and anecdotes is a school or museum. And when it offers too many, it becomes preachy, as happened with the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial in Washington. Designed by Lawrence Halprin, it provides a sequence of four outdoor rooms, representing FDR's four terms. Each presents a visual tableau, lavishly outfitted with bronze statues, relief sculptures, and carved inscriptions. For example, the first term is dramatized with a vignette of a Depression-era breadline, and the second with a vignette of an American listening to one of Roosevelt's fireside chats. Throughout the memorial runs an insistent literalism, with nothing rendered abstractly or symbolically. It is a kind of cross-pollination of a diorama with a Madame Tussaud's wax museum. Even FDR's dog Fala is pantingly immortalized in bronze.

During the design process, anti-smoking groups succeeded in eliminating Roosevelt's ubiquitous cigarette holder. Evidently Halprin and his collaborators did not recognize that Roosevelt's cigarette holder was not the sign of a lamentable addiction, but the president's most effective visual prop. He clenched it in his teeth with his jaw thrust forward so that it pointed upwards jauntily, to create an image of buoyant and unshakeable optimism. At the same time, pressure from activist groups for the disabled ensured that FDR would be depicted as wheelchair-bound and handicapped with polio—a fact he carefully suppressed in all public appearances. So the element he flaunted was eliminated, the element he concealed was stressed, and the rakish and jaunty cavalier was transformed into a differently-abled and rather prim non-smoker. I can't help but think that Roosevelt himself was much more gifted in creating inspiring visual imagery than the makers of his monument.

Monuments and memorials today are discursive, sentimental, addicted to narrative literalism, and asking to be judged on good intentions rather than visual coherence. This change began, ironically, with a critique of the overwrought memorials of the Victorian era. In reaction, the first generation of modern architects decided that we needed an entirely different vocabulary of monu- ments. So when modernism went about dislodging the structures of traditional society, culture, religion, and the political and social order, it also began dispensing with the arches and columns that paid tribute to that order.

This was not easy, however, because modernism was concerned with the future and monuments are retrospective.

One possibility for those rejecting traditional monuments was to eschew technology and turn to the earth itself. The movement known as Earth Art came of age in the late 1960s, and the Vietnam Memorial arose from it, shaping the earth through mounds and embankments. But as great as that memorial was, it was to have a strange effect on the building of subsequent monuments—and not at all the effect one might have expected. Because of the furious reception of Maya Lin's design, now forgotten because of the memorial's ultimate success, a figural sculpture was added at the last minute— the sculpture known as "Fighting Men" by the late Frederick Hart. It depicts a trio of combat infantrymen returning from patrol, grim, weary, and drenched to the skin. If your taste is for realistic figural sculpture, Hart's are the best.

But then something curious happened. Hart made a point of depicting a black, a white, and a Hispanic, but not a female soldier. So shortly thereafter, plans were made for yet a third memorial, this time to honor the women who died in Vietnam. The sculptor, Glenna Goodacre, skillfully paraphrased the Pieta—the wounded soldier reposes like the dead Christ on the nurse's lap, and in place of the billowing skirts of Michelangelo's Madonna there is a pyramid of sandbags. But there is a problem in the math: Hart's three soldiers represent some 58,000 dead men, while Goodacre's three soldiers represent the seven women who died. We are approaching the point, that is, where we are not dealing in symbolism but literalism—a straight one-to-one representation. And this, regrettably, is the ultimate lesson of the Vietnam Memorial. While America's most progressive artists openly mocked Hart's "Fighting Men" for its backward-looking realism, when it came time to propose their own monuments, fashionable designers preferred easygoing literalism to the sublime abstraction of Maya Lin.

Consider the Korean War Veterans Memorial, authorized by Congress in 1988 and designed by Frank Gaylord. Here too the subject is a platoon on patrol, in this case 19 bronze soldiers trudging heavily uphill. It was originally intended to depict not 19 but 38 soldiers—the reference being to the 38th Parallel along which the war pivoted. In the end the number was halved, presumably for budget reasons, with the explanation that it would be doubled by the reflecting mirror: 19 x 2 = 38. Here is an utter misunderstanding of the means and ends of allegory. Normally, allegory uses interlocking symbols to comment on the things we care about—truth, honor, sacrifice. Here it is inverted: Something that really matters, human lives, are being used to represent an accident of military geography, the 38th Parallel.

Why is it that the language of allegory, once generally understood by our culture as a whole, has been banished from our nation's sacred sites so completely that one needs to spot naïve roadside memorials to find unambiguous statements of grief and love? I believe it has to do with the convic- tion that became widespread in the 1960s, that we do not need formal conventions, but rather authenticity and sincerity—that we do not need etiquette, but rather hon- esty. The mantra of that era, "Tell it like it is," encouraged us to speak

from the heart, to improvise. And if the improvisa- tion faltered, as improvisations often do, then stumbling inarticulateness could be taken as a badge of sincerity.

The problem, as Emily Post knows, is that there are situations too serious to trust to improvisation. There are moments when a convention is required and cannot be improved on: the polite inquiry, "How are you?", the statement of congratulation, "I wish you the best," the statement of condolence, "I am sorry for your loss." These are not trite platitudes, but social obligations that are ritual actions. Social interaction requires social conventions. People who do not use conventional sayings, such as "I am sorry for your loss," run the danger of saying something inappropriate: "Well, at least he's out of his misery," or "My uncle had the same form of tumor," or "Bummer." If you trust to your own originality, all you can be sure of is that whatever inappropriate notion is bobbing along at the surface of your unconscious will be blurted out.

As it is with social etiquette, so it is with memorials. An artist who sweeps away the traditional conventions for dealing with the great truths of life, death, and sacrifice, can only shuffle about in the cupboard of his own store of mental images. Such was the fate of Eric Fischl, the first artist who tried to make monumental art out of 9/11—a colossal bronze that he called "Falling Woman." On 9/11, the most agonizing images were those of the trapped workers in the tow- ers, their backs to the inferno, who leapt to their deaths. But unlike the Vietnam Memorial—which succeeds because it says, in the simplest terms possible, "I am sorry for your loss"—"Falling Woman" trusted to improvisation. Rather than "I am sorry for your loss," it says, "I cannot get this out of my mind." Ultimately it is not public art at all, but private indulgence.

In the end, the Ground Zero Memorial was not as bad as that but not as good as it should have been. The key decision was to maintain the footprints of the vanished towers, which means that its dominant gesture is the collapse of the buildings and not the lives within. If it has something of the laconic restraint of the Vietnam Memorial, this is to be expected, as Maya Lin played a prominent role on the jury. An urban version of her landscape memorial, it has the same sense of void and absence, the same minimalism and austerity. In one respect, though, it fails to achieve the spatial resolution of the Vietnam Memorial. At the latter the names are in order of death, and have a kind of implacable sad rhythm. Obviously this could not be done at Ground Zero, so the names there are placed according to a random computer- generated sequence. Let me propose a rule—in a real monument, there must be nothing random or computer-generated.

Returning to the monuments that have been so controversial in Washington recently, the Eisenhower project is scarcely a memorial, let alone a monument. Its principal object, the sculpture of Eisenhower as a farm boy, is far smaller than the colossal backdrops that surround him. It will be these images, abstract depictions of the Kansas countryside and photographic images of Eisenhower's

life, which provide the dominant visual note. Lost and adrift somewhere in this theme park of billboards and fragmented colonnades is Eisenhower himself, diminished and bewildered. To ask one obvious question: What does this have to say about the guiding spirit of D-Day? Clearly Gehry was ill at ease with the martial subject matter, which is why his central image shows Eisenhower "looking out over his future achievements" and doesn't spell out to future generations of Americans what those achievements were.

As for the King Memorial, the most common charge is that it recalls the despotic sculpture of Leninist-Maoist regimes, with their avuncular but stern "dear leaders." The sculptor has spent his entire life in such a culture, and it is to be expected that his design would be accused of being a surrogate Chairman Mao image. And to be sure, there is something imperious and implacable about the face of King, a kind of lithic ruthlessness. It certainly seems fiercer than that of our other national martyr to civil rights, Abraham Lincoln. But I would propose that the difference is not so much between American and Chinese character and ideas, although those are at play, but between granite and marble. King is carved out of the former, a dense stone with a crystalline structure that is carved with the greatest of difficulty, forcing a language of sharp lines, flat planes, and generalized roundness. The marble from which Lincoln is carved is far more supple, permitting softer model- ing. When one looks at King, with double lines delineating eyes, lips, and nose, one realizes this is the most primal sculptural language of all, that of ancient Egypt.

But there is a far greater problem with the King Memorial. Its overall conception was inspired by a line from King's "I Have a Dream" speech, which prom- ises that together we will build "out of a mountain of despair, a stone of hope." So we see depicted a Mountain of Despair and a Stone of Hope. The whole ensemble is a kind of visual diagram of King's metaphor, with the Stone of Hope moved forward as neatly as a pawn advancing on a chessboard. In other words, just as the Korean War Veterans Memorial reduced its human figures to symbols of the 38th Parallel, here King is reduced to an illustration of his wordplay. A figure of speech is beautiful because it calls to mind a mental picture; but to build a scale model of a word picture is to do it violence, and to render laughable in reality what is beautiful in the imagination.

The King Memorial runs perilously close to being not a monument at all, but a book illustration—the visual diagram of ideas generated elsewhere. But it is a good index of where we stand today when it comes to the build- ing of monuments. Allegory requires an imaginative act, and is literary, whereas our culture is uncomfortable with figurative language. This began around 1977, the moment the language censors began to attack phrases like "Man does not live on bread alone," asking "What about women?" A painful literalism set in, which is hostile to figurative language in speech and to abstract allegory in art. Nowadays we tend to think literally rather than liter- arily, which explains why Frederick Hart had to portray the American military experience in Vietnam by means of three men of three distinct races—and why a women's memorial was subsequently added. The fear of leaving someone or something out is hostile to the allegorical impulse, which seeks not to itemize but to generalize, and to

speak not specific truths but great truths. It is not surprising that a culture ill at ease with the notion of absolute truth would find it very difficult to make monuments that show urgency and conviction.

What can we do about this? First, we can recognize that it is possible to make a convincing monument with the means of modern architecture. Eero Saarinen showed that it could be done with his Gateway Arch at St. Louis: an exquisite portal that opens to the west, it is our version of a Roman triumphal arch. It is abstract, but its visual logic is direct and persuasive, showing that modern materials and forms are not incapable of suggesting timeless ideas. Second, we can recognize that it is not too late. Just because a world-famous architect has submitted a design does not oblige us to build it. Third, we can remember that greatness is possible. For more than a century and a half, we built monuments with spectacular success. We have only been building them badly for a genera- tion. I look at these recent designs, which are perhaps an hon- est ref lection of our divided and uncer- tain culture, and can't help but think we can do better once more. ■

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