NO PUBLIC MEMORIALS

THE PUBLIC LANDSCAPE AND THE LANDMARK

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Introduction

This essay attempts to interpret and position our era's prodigious investment in commemorative monuments within the context of public space. When the critique of a remembered collective experience — the event memorialized — opens itself up to collective debate from that contingent of the public whose memories and narratives are at stake, collective intentions, expectations, and consequences are realigned, causing the alteration of the monument's social economy. The designer becomes simultaneously patron and client, architectural and social critic. Through a brief description of a speculative proposal for The National AIDS Memorial, I will suggest a possibility for the application of this proposition.

No Public Memorials

The late 20th century's monument/memorial has been a pluralist phenomenon, and with the continued extension of postmodernity's reach, calcified limits are redrawn. "Boundaries are only produced and set in the process of passage."[1] This point is crucial as regards the monument because it establishes a primary operative difference between the memorialization of uneven publics, that I will discuss in a moment.

Because monuments and memorials operate in tandem with narratives it is only by virtue of theses narratives that they reach beyond the periods which generated them; the state or avoidance of the codified moment's muteness rests entirely with the public patrons represented and not the monument per se. Naturally the current demand for memorials parallels the recent demand by "other voices" to be heard. The distinction I wish to attend to is the fact that such memorials as the Holocaust Museum, African American Burial Ground, Indian Memorial, and AIDS Memorial — to name several recent projects-cannot be understood as commemorating a historic closure (as for instance a war monument might), but rather as the introduction of new public limits. While the conventional memorial asks the public to look backwards causing the narratives that attend such monuments to invariably disrupt progressive public dialogue, these recent memorials mark the presence of emerging, struggling voices, anticipate the growth of anger, improved tactical savvy, and economic solidification among the minorities represented. Granted, these tales are at times as fictitious as those of their nostalgic counterparts, and in any case, they are surely to be rewritten innumerable times. But, this possibility to incite and encourage audibility is the prerequisite to becoming a public work; these monuments induce the possibility of the idea of a future perfect.

For powerful, centered groups—"strong-publics"— any work with monumental presence functions as a milestone affirming accomplishments understood culturally as worthy of commemoration. The event commemorated is of "obvious" public value, and the cultural terrain marked need not be revisited intellectually or critically. Both the historical event and aura remain in the past, awaiting replacement by the next monument. This cycle segues into a repetitive sequenceno end(s) in sight. But in spite of the fact that these monuments obsolesce rapidly and the public "gets over" the memorialized event very quickly, the privilege of the center is affirmed through the vague awareness that these artifacts have accumulated. For those members of the public unable to thrive within "strong-public" ideologies, the establishment of their own monument/memorial is the most preliminary act summoning collective affirmation.[2] The crucial roles of the weak-public's monument are to validate the very right to unified speech and to forecast collective redefinition in the immediate future. For the strong-public, the memorial placates and neutralizes history; for the weak-public it is license for greater public visibility and subsequently greater public outcry. Given the forward-looking strategy of the second case then, "memorial" becomes a deceptive and counterproductive term. I would like to continue by relying upon the term "landmark," a physical and also intellectual construction denoting the imminent passage of a boundary, as a means to oppose the limitations of historically conceived memorials.

Can we imagine that the current strong-public's tolerance for the drive to erect *landmarks* may be in fact symptomatic of condemnation? Culturally, "memorial" retains such a powerful union with an abstract past, that to memorialize for example, the American Indian, is to tolerate the resuscitation of Native American empathy only to bury the entire issue in our cultural consciousness. If guilt exists among the strong-publics, vast expenditures and brief media coverage of the new monument's unfolding and dedication, (the obituary?), arrest feelings of anxiety. In a more generous scenario, the strong-public perceives their witness of the weak-public

monument as a form of homage to the descendants of a regrettable past. The note sounded remains tied to an image of an antiquated historical context. By enlisting the term "memorial," the general public impels itself to forget the issue that motivated the monument's construction. My concern is that public identification with such "memorials" destroys the possibilities and efficacy of both external, and internal critique.

While the purpose of any competition is to generate publicity, and through publicity to perhaps solicit project funding and attention for its sponsor, competitions for *landmark* works are also stratagems for critical public repositioning. My interest here lies in the capacity of public *landmarks* to incite critical discourse within the communities that they most immediately address, more so than the *landmark's* material aspect. Yet, the *landmark's* design itself is the catalyst for these conversations and its tangible presence is fully relevant. To this end a second distinction circumscribing *landmark* must be made. Because all sites are constructed of formal, environmental, and political demands simultaneously, landmarks must be site specific. Strategies relying upon "ephemeral monumentality," bound to transient relationships between project and site, do not offer the most effective tactics. "Site specific works emphasize the comparison between two separate languages (voices) and can therefore use the language of one to criticize the language of the other."[3] Frequent interrelatedness between edge groups and the often leftover sites appropriated for such *landmarks* proves advantageous, since as discarded places, such sites resist ideological co-optation and hence skewed symbolization.

Mass Symbolization

When Michael Warner writes in the *Phantom Public Sphere* that to be public, in the West, means to have an iconicity, he gives primacy to corporeality — however re-configured by telecommunications industries.[4] While mass media does serve up images of individuals to stand in as representatives for entire groups and perceived pathologies, he neglects to acknowledge that built artifacts in our very recent past, have periodically superseded single-face group identification. Let us consider the "face of Vietnam" 25 years ago: A (any) bedraggled soldier, often photographed in isolation. This image has now in virtually every commentary of Vietnam made to the public (through books, magazines, television, the Web), been replaced by a new icon: the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial.[5] Additionally, within the community of veterans whose service is being recognized, the monument has become "our wall;" the monument to Vietnam has become public property in the most generous sense, satisfying an albeit brief, national cultural crisis. While "The Wall" illustrates one exemplary case where public competition, public patronage, and sustained public critique were fused, it remains a memorial rather than a *landmark*.[6] Its patrons primarily sought recognition for past actions; their monument was not envisioned as an instrument for significantly altering any future political condition for its constituency. Nonetheless, in mediating between the public-as-veterans and public-at-large the object became the image of the voice. A similar substitution proves

beneficial to weak-publics seeking more forceful public identification as the first inroad against weak-public status. For these publics, rejuvenated iconicity achieved through the presence of the *landmark* serves a dual task: It ignites a forum to launch internal critique, and poses an opportunity to present a mutually acceptable "unified face" to the general public. Internal dissent notwithstanding, the appearance of cohesion is invaluable. There are three corollaries to this. Its design must synthesize the strongest components of the internal critique. Attempts to secure symbolization without direct access to the real experiences of the group will not be successful. The position of the public patron and public client do not converge through metaphorical and analogous comparison but through very real and specific confrontation.

(My remaining comments bring this analysis to bear upon the open competition held in 1996 for the design of the National AIDS memorial, which will be built in Key West, Florida.)

No Private Landmarks

Personal tragedy, yields real and extreme grief for everyone. In Freud's view mourning is heuristic; if the process is allowed to play itself through, the return of normalcy and a deference for reality will be the likely conclusions. If in Freud's view grief can be normalized, how can the public and private expressions of "deviant and aberrant" publics be normalized without a dismissal of their self-identity?[7] The publics most affected by AIDS were derided socially before they were imprinted as agents of the epidemic, and, of course, they were and continue to be suspect in large part because they lack public voice to contest branding. Because the opportunity to attain social normalcy is precluded for weak-publics, a new "politics of grief" ensues, one that is particular to their circumstances and is dependent upon a reconstruction of conventional private/public exchange.[8] While grieving is in the end a solitary act, it is facilitated by interaction with an immediate, comprehending community. Even before the onset of AIDS, members of the weak-public later associated with AIDS, were impelled to structure alternative communities. Thus, for these communities, distinctions between numerous aspects of public and private life were already less categorical than for the strong-public. Conversely, for strong-publics the threatened collapse between the private and public spheres inspires a dread that approaches paranoia. The very cause of "the social interdiction of [the weak-public's] private lives"[9] is not so much the active fear of what happens in private, but the belief in the possibility that the very knowledge of these realities will destabilize the [strong-public's] realm. This is evidenced by such frequently made statements as, "What you do in your bedroom is your own business," that imply problematically "that as long your sexuality is not somehow enacted in public, [the strong-public] can assume you are the same as they."[10] History provides sufficient examples of groups persecuted publicly because fearfully and falsely imagined sexual selves were becoming entwined with the larger public. That is to say, public accusations of societal transgression hurled against marginal groups invariably

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include the intimation of promiscuity. Consider in our culture the ubiquitous slandering of women, gays, and blacks. Society does not so much attempt the preservation of the public realm by policing the public, as it does by circumscribing private life.

The new "politics of grief" is steadfastly tied to the politicization of private/public distinctions. All efforts to erect monuments — landmarks — relating publicly the private narratives of AIDS further erode private/public separateness. "Insofar as AIDS is structured as the unconscious real of the social field of contemporary America, each of us is living with AIDS: We are all PWAs (People With AIDS)."[11] In this case the maintenance of private/public distinctions by the strong-public is an absurdity; it is tantamount to a wholesale disavowal of death. With the disavowal of death comes the disavowal of all of those weak-publics associated with AIDS. Ultimately this rejection and repulsion forcefully attempts to make private life hermetic and distinct from the concerns of public life.

Even within AIDS-afflicted publics there is nervousness over the conflation of private/public life. Because "the struggle to speak or remain silent about AIDS is certainly in large measure a struggle to say or not to say the word gay,"[12] discussions of AIDS discussions of life and death — fall into the same category as "outing" and "coming-out-of-the-closet." The closet, "a distinction between private and public life, refuses integration." So it bears mentioning that for PWAs that are gay, private life is a two-fold projection onto public life. Other minority groups don't "come-out;" the notion is ridiculous because their "minor" status is formulated exactly because they are readily identified.[13] PWAs become horrific because they combine and simultaneously display our paradigmatic apprehensions: death, and private life made public.

If our new public landmarks express the elision of the barrier between our bifurcated lives, then the often heard cry "Do we really need this [landmark]?" in part proceeds from an extraordinary reluctance to allow to surface issues that are privatized and withheld from "flagrant" public view. For instance, when we ask "Do we need to honor private individuals who served in Vietnam?," we might also ask the question peering from beneath the thin membrane of private/public distinction: "Do we need to question our belief that our international military prowess can be effectively contested?" (To what degree was Desert Storm merely an affirmation of our nationhood countering the release of insecurity propelled and maintained in the public realm by the persistent iconic presence of the Vietnam War Memorial?) The question, "do we need to build (yet another) Holocaust Memorial to commemorate individuals victimized by errant politics?" affronts the public by almost asking, "do we need to acknowledge that we are repeatedly silent witnesses to butchery?"

Do we need an AIDS Memorial? Do we need to recognize that we are all PWAs? Because the experience of loss associated with AIDS is on so many levels a collective one, and its effects have been so vast, mass symbolization is absolutely necessary. In order to surpass simplistic commemorative function with the intention of effecting substantive social repositioning of PWAs, this symbolization must vitiate pressures to maintain conventional limits between private and public life.

A Public Landmark for AIDS

In a speculative design for a National AIDS Landmark, our attention focused upon the role of the relation between public critique and public patronage.[14]

AIDS, Public Landscape, Monument, Ritual of Grieving, Public Forum — we began our design process by assessing the relative health of each of these themes as they applied to the particular site stipulated for the landmark's construction. Our investigation began and remained rooted in the belief that a landmark registering AIDS losses could not function entirely through abstracted symbolic and metaphorical readings. While we intended our project to suggest various metaphorical, symbolic, and analogous relationships, we felt that to limit our response to these would not be sufficient — the stakes were too high. As we designed, and as I now write, the horrific reality that causes this landmark to be continues. Indefinitely. Precisely for this reason the project could not be a "memorial," preoccupied with memory, it had to question the duration and magnitude of the epidemic's future. In no way was it either socially responsible or politically prudent to summon memory when perhaps the wrath of AIDS has hardly begun to unfold. "The reality depicted has not yet arrived."[15]

Instead, we sought a project that could frame the private, often ambiguous and solitary associations that usually remain hidden from public sight. Moreover, we wanted to incorporate the project within the production of a clear and purposeful result, one that would sustain public critique, not in perpetuity — a naive proposition that runs counter to political action and therefore the very spirit of the landmark — but for the lifetime of the epidemic.

Our intervention registers the impact of this health crisis at the local scale responding to our belief that a highly site specific intervention was appropriate, given the reality that AIDS and all of its equally destructive social syndromes are combated primarily from within local communities, and through persistent individual efforts. Early in our design process we found that the site delimited by the competition program could not adequately address our fundamental social requirements; it offered a place for a nominal sculptural or decorative piece, but not one that we could engage a more critical, sustained purpose. Our position emerged as we realized that immediately adjacent to this "legal boundary," there existed an element that already embodied both the paradoxical programmatic issues and our own concerns regarding utility. The site given was a parcel of paving between two beaches, at the terminus of White Street, one of Key West's most active public spaces. A pier (actually a solid, limestone filled extension of White Street) stemmed from this place, projecting 1400 feet into the sea. Despite its conspicuous presence beside the concrete parcel, it was ignored by the competition organizers. The scale of the given 20-by-40 foot competition site in relation to the scale of the 1400-foot pier, to say nothing of the scale of the site in relation to that of the sea, was ironic to us in that it seemed to accept

the dismissive cultural stance consistently taken towards those affected by AIDS. The mere requirement to have the monument placed off to the side — a secondary concern beside the derelict pier that itself was being ignored — furthered our contention that the site should be adjusted to include the pier. By including the pier in the scope of the project, our landmark would become more suitable to the projected scale of visitor use, and the scale of heuristic capacity it was imperative to transfer; by transforming the pier into the *landmark* we could initiate a conversation that would make the design "publicly accessible."

To elaborate a tangible use that could be brought to bear upon the health of this landscape, we researched the history of the overlooked pier, believing it held an opportunity to instigate a critical exchange with the site's larger physical and social context. We discovered that since its construction in 1950, a gradual process of erosion resulting from altered currents had both decimated the shore, and caused the contamination of local waters. In 1990 the city of Key West initiated a healing effort by undertaking a cut/fill operation of the land displaced by the errant currents, and cut six sections from the pier's underside in the hope that restoring some water-flow might lessen further problems. With this information we began to consider a parallel course of healing. By dismantling the pier we could further promote and sustain the integrity of the shore and local waters.

Our design proposal was far less about building an architecture than planning a process for dismantlement. The slow process of cutting the pier's structure and transferring its rubble fill to the far portion of the project site where its presence would pose no environmental threats, would be registered by the periodic building of a minimal passageway. Both efforts could be realized through individual public patronage. If it was vital to the site's ecology that the pier disappear, it was also important to us that an alternate public pathway remain. In part this element serves as a name display system registering individual deaths, but because of its significant dimension, would initially remain largely empty to accommodate a sublime number of future names. The "architecture" of the proposal organizes primarily time and action, and only secondarily structures a material *landmark*. The real and speculative workings of our process always refer back to the healing of the local land's edge and the local sea waters. To this end the landscape itself must be recognized as the *landmark*, and its very preservation an issue of patron/designer — public-accountability. Additionally, we believed that our intervention would restore programmatic vitality to this place. The remade pier would be returned to the community as a significant public gathering place, a role it satisfied before the City's necessary first cuttings took place. With this process of

transformation, a necessary dialogue between the constituency represented by the *landmark* and the City would be opened and maintained; this *landmark*, like a barometer, would gauge the relationship between public-as-critic and public-as-patron, conflating the two.

NOTES

[1] Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 131. Grosz is developing an argument relying upon the writing of Brian Massumi.

[2] Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed. Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 24.

[3] Richard Serra, "Introduction," in *The Destruction of Tilted Arc*, ed. Clara Weyergraf-Serra et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), p. 12.

[4] Michael Warner, The Mass Public and The Mass Subject," in *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed. Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 242.

[5] On the Vietnam Veteran's Homepage a window link showing the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial and titled "Remembrance" is the first accessible category, allowing web surfers to visit and get an abundance of information about The Wall. This precedes even the "Veteran's Organization and Support Group" window link.

[6] For a detailed discussion of the memorial, see Mary McLeod, "The Battle for the Monument: The Vietnam Veteran's Memorial," in *The Experimental Tradition*, ed. Helene Lipstadt et al. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1989), p. 129.

[7] Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), p. 235.

[8] Daniel Harris, "On Reading the Obituaries in the Bay Area Reporter," in *Fluid Exchanges*, ed. James Miller, et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), p. 163.

[9] Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," p. 236.

[10] Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion*, p. 225.

[11] Tim Dean, "The Psychoanalysis of AIDS," in *October 63* (Winter 1993), p. 84.

[12] Helena Michie, "A Few Words About AIDS," in *American Literary History 2* (Summer 1990), p. 328.

[13] Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion*, p. 225.

[14] This project was awarded *The Boston Society of Architects Unbuilt Architecture Award*, 1996, and received the *ACSA Faculty Design Award*, 1997. It was completed with Visiting Assistant Professor Robert Gonzalez, at Arizona State University, and was in part funded by a grant from the Herberger Foundation.

[15] Jorge Silvetti, "Representation and Creativity in Architecture: The Pregnant Moment," in *Representation and Architecture*, ed. Omer Akin, et al. (Silver Spring: Information Dynamics Inc., 1982), p. 184.

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