

The Enduring Qualities of Public Monuments Functions of the monument over centuries. Catesby Leigh Updated: Feb 13, 2020 Original: Jul 17, 2015

The Enduring Qualities of Public Monuments
Functions of the monument over centuries.

Catesby Leigh

Updated:

Feb 13, 2020

Original:

Jul 17, 2015

Public Monuments," Traditional Building, Fall 2014 By Catesby Leigh

Monumentality entails objective, enduring formal qualities that contemporary designers ignore at their peril.

13

Gallery

13 Images

The tomb was the original monument in the Western world. It took various forms in prehistoric times, ranging from rock-cut chambers to earthen mounds or tumuli, which might be crowned with megalithic structures known as dolmens.

The tomb lay at the center of the life of the family or clan. This was the original community, long antedating the political community. It was not a community of the living only. It was a community of the dead, the living, and those yet to be born, and it existed to perpetuate the ancestral worship. The origins of culture itself lie in this cult of the dead. The living were tasked with ensuring they themselves would be cared for in the afterlife. They must make very sure they had dutiful offspring, whether biological or adopted, lest their shades be expelled from the family tomb by hunger and neglect, and condemned to the dreadful fate

of wandering larvae.

Time might have its way with the house of the living, but the house of the dead must endure forever. That's why the tomb is the principal architectural witness to remote antiquity. The tomb's prehistoric function, moreover, was not commemorative. In contrast to "monument," there is no Latin cognate for the modern word "memorial," understood as an element of the built environment, even though "memorial" derives from the Latin word for memory. That is because the monument, in its purest, most ancient sense, is not about "memory." It's about presence. The prehistoric tomb communicated the presence of the dead at a very visceral level.

Is it all that different with the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC? In other words, is "memorial" perhaps something of a misnomer in this instance? For here we have a monument pure and simple. Building and statue alike convey a powerful sense of physical presence. Viewed from the east, Henry Bacon's temple is the Mall's static but imposing terminus; viewed at an oblique angle from Memorial Bridge, on the other hand, it is the mighty pivot redirecting the Arlington Cemetery axis to the great spatial corridor that is the Mall. The statue within the temple, in turn, gives us Lincoln physically enlarged and vividly characterized. Seated on a high podium, he is removed from us, but he is not a "memory." And his presence does not command superstitious enslavement to a hyper-ritualized existence, as the primeval tomb-monuments did. It rather inspires that noblest of human emotions: reverence.

The functions of the monument have thus changed over the millennia, but it manifests crucial continuities as well. And both abstract and figurative elements have come to be employed in its design in very different ways. But for its size and central location, the unornamented obelisk that is the Washington Monument could be dedicated to any number of historic figures or events. Obviously it doesn't make its namesake present the way the Lincoln statue does. Yet the Washington Monument has a very powerful physical presence in its own right, and from this its resonance as a monument derives. It is the towering, luminous magnet that seemingly prevents the vast surrounding conurbation from drifting off into space. In other words, it is not only a spatial entity, it is a dimensional one, meaning it not only occupies space in a static sense but acts on its environment at a perceptual level, partly of course because it possesses the mass needed to do so.

If its lack of ornament renders the Washington Monument a proto-modernist

artifact, as has been suggested, then so are the gigantic Egyptian pyramids (themselves sepulchral edifices, for the record), not to mention the comparatively miniscule yet strikingly monumental pyramid of unmortared granite commemorating the Confederate dead in Richmond, VA's Hollywood Cemetery. Like the pyramid from which it derives, the obelisk is a highly resolved geometric form that tapers vertically to a point. As with the pyramid its spatial character is attributable to the fact that we naturally prefer to behold it from an oblique angle, so that we see two sides, rather than dead-on. And also like the pyramid its vertical orientation is akin to that of the standing human being.

The Washington Monument is thus a canonic form, treated in an unconventional manner by the lights of the classical tradition because it is completely devoid of detail that would endow it with scale. While this monument's treatment evolved over an extended period of time from Robert Mills' much more elaborate but ill-proportioned original design, the final result is remarkably appropriate to its site.

Eero Saarinen's Gateway Arch in St. Louis, MO, strikes an interesting contrast. This lofty form, a sort of giant parabolic goal post, is obviously designed to be viewed in frontal silhouette - which is to say it reads pictorially rather than spatially or dimensionally. It lacks the mass to galvanize the space around it and nothing about its design instills a desire to experience it in the round. It may look fine on a picture postcard but it is devoid of the dimensional qualities of the Lincoln Memorial and Washington Monument, not to speak of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris or the Soldiers and Sailors Arch in Brooklyn, NY. The Gateway Arch, then, does not qualify as a monument. Nor is it an anti-monument. In current parlance, it is an icon, which simply means it is very picturesque.

Unlike Saarinen's arch, Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial is categorically anti-monumental. It is not even a mass, but rather what Lin called "a wound in the earth" - a void, in other words. Her chevron-shaped indentation in the landscape, faced in black granite, grows deeper as the visitor approaches the chevron's vertex, while the ranks of names of the dead engraved in the granite grow taller. There is thus an important spatial aspect to the visitor's experience of Lin's remarkably simplistic design.

But the minimalism it exploits so effectively has proved disastrous in other settings. The 9/11 Memorial in Lower Manhattan, with its twin cavities in the footprints once occupied by the Twin Towers, is Exhibit A. Each cubic abyss is girded above ground with tilted panels bearing the names of the dead. Water cascades down the sides and then funnels down the square hole in the middle of

the floor below. What we have here is a pair of gigantic sunken commodes in eternal flush mode. The title of the competition-winning design that led to this anti-monumental fiasco, "Reflecting Absence" (emphasis mine), speaks volumes.

Monument Vs. Monumental

In its most fully developed form, then, a monument is a dimensionally oriented artifact that can be primarily architectural or figurative in nature. An esthetically resonant physical presence allows it to communicate the enduring significance of a personage, belief, ideal or event in the life of a community. Monumental buildings, on the other hand, are not usually conceived in commemorative terms. They rather incorporate formal qualities characteristic of a true monument. Of course the distinction cannot be a tidy one. The United States Capitol doesn't commemorate anybody or anything but it would not be unreasonable to describe it as a monument to our civic ideals.

Major classical monument types - temples, statues, commemorative arches, circular tholos shrines, obelisks - are of a decidedly spatial character, even if the frontal view might be the designer's main concern in a given context, as with the termination of an axis. If not an outright vertical orientation, a significant element of vertical integration (as with the Greek temple's pediment and pitched roof) is a common feature. Minor monument types, it is true, can be pictorially oriented, starting with the Greek stelai, many of which are funereal artifacts taking the form of freestanding vertical slabs with figure compositions carved in relief on one side only.

Statuary and Architecture

The ancient link between statuary and architecture is crucial to understanding the monumental tradition in Western art. Monuments have been structural entities from time immemorial. Usually erected on tumuli, dolmen chamber tombs consisted of a polygonal arrangement of megalithic uprights that supported massive capstones. Large kerb stones might gird either the foot of the mound, or its plateau, making for an emphatically spatial ensemble that dominated the surrounding landscape. Other megalithic tombs feature spatially enthralling beehive vaults covered by tumuli. (The tholos shrine has its origins in such vaults.) The largest and most artistically impressive of these vaulted tombs is the misnamed Treasury of Atreus, situated outside the Bronze Age citadel of Mycenae. Here a dramatic entry axis that led to a magnificent portal was cut into the tumulus.

In fine art, the earliest important representational work we encounter, such as

the cave paintings of France and Spain, is of course pictorial, rather than spatial or structural, in nature. Monumental sculpture, on the other hand, is by definition a spatial art. And it has a very interesting history with a critical structural aspect. Sculpture itself emerged in Ancient Egypt and elsewhere in the Near East as a pictorially oriented art. It presented a massive spectacle to the eye, but it was conceived quadri-frontally, as a combination of discrete pictorial views – front, side and rear – rather than as a spatially continuous entity that led the eye around it. That's why we encounter hybrid Assyrian creatures with five legs instead of four. The titanic Sphinx, 241 ft. long, is a rigidly quadri-frontal figure, and statues of pharaohs, their wives, and tutelary deities share its pictorial orientation while diverging from it in their more exclusive emphasis of the frontal view.

Art historians tell us that in the 7th century B.C. the experience of Egyptian statuary inspired the Greeks' passion for monumental sculpture. At the same time, majestic temple colonnades along the Nile influenced their formalization of the Doric order in stone. This pivotal cultural development involved the transfiguration of a wooden structural system employed on the Greeks' primitive temples into what one scholar has called "petrified carpentry." (Egyptian columns were themselves variously derived from palm trees or even bundled papyrus.) But the approach to monumental form the Greeks developed is far more profound than anything we encounter in Egyptian art. And it is highly unlikely they would have taken full advantage of the Egyptian achievement but for the monumental heritage embedded in their own culture.

The Egyptians probably were not conscious of the fact that we humans view the world pictorially. In other words, the lens of the human eye focuses reflected light from the world around us onto the optic screen that is the retina. Gradations from light to shade and diminution in perspective allow the flat images that appear on that screen, essentially as patches of varied color, to serve as two-dimensional, pictorial reflections of three-dimensional reality. A photograph, we must understand, is itself a mechanical recording of an optical image.

Overriding Pictorial Constraints

Over time Greek sculptors somehow grasped the fact that the pictorial mechanism of human vision was impeding their quest for a fully lifelike representation of the figure. They internalized, as no artists had ever done before, the crucial distinction between what we see and what is, and without appreciating that fact we cannot understand their concept of the imitation of nature, let alone their concept of monumentality. They struggled for generations to override the pictorial constraints of human vision.

This explains the evolution of the human figure in Greek sculpture from a rigidly quadri-frontal entity conceived in pictorial terms, much as those five-legged Assyrian creatures were, to the spatially continuous figure that leads the eye from side to side as an emphatically three-dimensional, non-pictorial entity. Hence the intensified sense of reality, of presence, the human figure in the best Greek sculpture conveys, as with the magnificent reclining Ilissus figure from the Parthenon's west pediment.

This revolutionary artistic development did not occur in isolation. As the distinguished scholar Rhys Carpenter emphasized, it involved a sort of feedback loop between the development of the Greek sculptural canon and the Greek architectural canon. The classical architectural orders were originally conceived as articulating the support of massive weight in pictorial terms. To put it another way, the mere silhouette of the British Museum's Ionic order articulates a structural equation: the gravitational equilibrium between the column and the entablature it supports. And of course it does so in an anthropomorphic way, leading us to register that structural equation in terms of our own embodied state.

What's more, the clear hierarchy of parts the classical column manifests, starting with its division into base, shaft and capital and continuing on to the array of subordinate elements within each division, contributes to its legibility. During the archaic period, this principle carried over into monumental sculpture, which often had to be read from a distance, as with pedimental compositions, so that we typically encounter a very clear delineation of the principal forms of the human figure, and the male nude especially: head, torso and limbs, with their respective components just as clearly subordinated.

A century after their historic introduction to the monuments flanking the Nile, then, archaic Greek sculptors articulated the structure of the male nude in quasi-architectural terms, but with ever increasing realism, even as they remained shackled to the constraints of pictorial vision and a quadri-frontal approach to composition. The famous Caryatids of the Erechtheum, which date to the classical period but hone closely to archaic precedent, encapsulate this historic interaction between sculpture and architecture. The structural clarity of the Ilissus figure itself can thus be said to have architectural roots.

A closely related aspect of classical monumentality in sculpture is the geometric interplay between the forms comprising the figure. Geometry, after all, was the Greeks' key to "what is" – to a reality transcending pictorial phenomena. The

head of the fallen combatant in a Parthenon deep-relief panel makes this principle clearer precisely because the face is missing. We can observe that the geometry of the shoulder muscles and pectoral muscles relates to and indeed derives from the shape of the head.

Baltimore sculptor Brad Parker calls this “shape orientation.” It demands enormous skill, not only because it variously involves the truncation, inversion or warping of shapes so derived, but also because it entails the expression of the highly complex inner structure of the body in the figure’s topography.

Classical drapery, for its part, is no longer a matter of intricate, pictorially oriented ornamental patterns as it is in archaic sculpture. Its sinuous lines of light and shade instead lead us around the figure in countless trajectories, intensifying our sense of its dimensional presence. Increasingly sophisticated compositional techniques, basically revolving around multi-axial design – as in the celebrated youthful Hermes in Naples, with its multiple alignments, including the rotation of the upper torso on the pelvis – virtually compel the spectator to experience the figure in the round rather than just taking in a frontal view.

The Parthenon

Despite these radical innovations, which allowed the finest Greek sculptors to endow the human figure with a formal coherence and organic unity that has never been surpassed, there remains a significant continuity between their achievement and the many megalithic monuments scattered around Europe: Both are structurally and spatially oriented entities. Of course, we can say much the same thing about the Greek temple, and particularly the greatest of all Greek temples, the Parthenon.

Like the megalithic dolmens – but unlike the tombs whose cave-like beehive vaults would re-emerge, ethereally transfigured, in the rotunda of the Roman Pantheon and, long after that, the rotunda of the U.S. Capitol – the Greek temple was chiefly designed for external effect. Like the archaic statue, it was a quadri-frontal entity. Architectural adjustments for optical effect, however, had been brought to an astonishingly high level by the time the Parthenon was built and endowed it with a sculptural presence of an entirely non-archaic character.

Needless to say, the Parthenon was situated on the Acropolis in a way that emphasized oblique rather than frontal views. The very slight doming of its floor was accompanied by the rise of its entablature toward the middle on all four sides and the barely detectable inward tilt of its columns and walls – actually a diagonal tilt of a little over two inches in the case of the corner columns. The marginally

greater thickness of these corner columns compensates for perceptual diminution arising from their isolation on one side. The minute swell or entasis in the shafts of the Parthenon's columns conveys a subtle sense of organic life while the resulting column profiles discourage the eye from a simplistic upward movement such as the pyramid's pure geometry compels.

While the Parthenon acts with magnetic force on its environment, its columns' inward tilt generates a tension – a countervailing outward thrust. This ambivalent dynamic further removes it from the realm of commonplace experience and even today instills in the sensitive viewer a state of heightened awareness or consciousness that the sculptural decoration, itself unsurpassed in Western art, could only reinforce. For the ancients this intensified state of consciousness was conducive to reverence and even awe.

Stonehenge

No doubt Stonehenge, the remarkably sophisticated open-air temple that antedates the Parthenon by 2,000 years, had a similar effect on the villagers who worshiped there. As with a primitive tumulus, or a tholos shrine, or for that matter the majestic dome of the Capitol in Washington, Stonehenge's circular configuration is inherently more spatial than that of the quadri-frontal Greek temple. As with the Parthenon, however, Stonehenge's architecture is derived from timber construction. Hence the mortise-and-tenon and tongue-and-groove joints used to attach its uprights and lintels of sarsen stone, a very hard sandstone.

The curving lintel stones of the outer sarsen ring were cut with formidable precision, and that ring, which may never have been completed, retained a level height despite the slightly sloping site. The inner horseshoe-shaped array of five freestanding sarsen trilithons (two uprights supporting a lintel) was graded in height and gave elemental expression to the principle of gravitational equilibrium mentioned above in connection with the Greek orders. Finally, Stonehenge was originally a burial site, but the temple, oriented to the midsummer rise and midwinter setting of the sun, was like the Parthenon devoted to a sky-god cult.

The Parthenon is a monument in the purest sense: It was created to impress the presence of the goddess Athena upon the Athenian populace with all the force art could muster, and not only by means of the lofty, long-lost gold-and-ivory statue of the goddess that was housed in the temple's principal chamber.

The Parthenon thus serves to underscore the fact that in architecture as in sculpture monumentality manifests itself most profoundly in the vividly dimensional presentation of structure in anthropomorphic terms. Classical

monumentality in particular is a relational monumentality. Grounded in the complex geometric and proportional relationships in the human body, it revolves around the interplay between lesser and greater parts, the forms they comprise, and the figure or architectural entity as a whole. Classical monumentality, and monumentality in the humanistic architectural styles that derive from the classical, is thus a monumentality of scale.

The Egyptian pyramids and the Washington Monument, on the other hand, are monumental because they are big and because they are geometrically well-resolved forms of a decidedly spatial character. They present no interplay, or at most a very limited one (i.e., that involving the Washington Monument's shaft and crowning pyramidion), between parts and whole.

Stonehenge and the dolmen tombs are monumental, but they stand apart from the monumental tradition – the classical tradition – that has yielded the most abundant fruit in Western art. The megalithic monuments bear a very significant relationship to that tradition, but they belong to a different one, a primitive one that civilization left behind. That is, until Modernist devotees of the tabula rasa, casting about for a radically new take on monumentality, looked to Stonehenge for inspiration, as is evident from a significant number of benighted entries in the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial competition half a century ago.

Indeed, the FDR memorial that eventually got built in Washington's West Potomac Park has decidedly neo-megalithic features, what with its labyrinthine array of cyclopean walls. But thanks to its sprawling landscape-oriented design, episodic narrative content and incompetent sculpture, it fully qualifies as an anti-monument.

Louis I. Kahn's Four Freedoms Park on Roosevelt Island in New York City, also devoted to FDR, is far more coherently designed than its Washington counterpart, but here again we are speaking not of an object, which is what a monument is, but a place. The tapering Four Freedoms landscape, which creates a tunnel-vision effect, merely serves to diminish the scale of its terminus, the freestanding granite niche harboring Jo Davidson's portrait bust of Roosevelt, thereby underscoring the niche's inadequacy relative to the scale of the park and the park's dramatic setting in the middle of the East River.

Of course, the Lincoln Memorial itself is no Parthenon, and we're not just speaking of stylistic differences such as the former's being crowned with a rectilinear attic instead of a pitched roof. The architecture of the Lincoln Memorial lacks the subtlety and refinement of the Athenian temple. And though

the statue of Lincoln within is a distant descendant of the enthroned Zeus in the ancient Greek temple at Olympia, Daniel Chester French was a minor talent compared to Phidias, who created both the Olympian Zeus and the Parthenon's Athena statue, and who was also in charge of the Parthenon's entire sculptural program.

The fact remains that the Lincoln Memorial not only belongs to the same tradition as its Athenian forerunner but also partakes to a significant degree of the same idea of monumentality. And this has allowed it to yield a rich return on the creative effort and economic resources devoted to its creation.

Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi was no Phidias, either. And yet his Liberty Enlightening the World is the greatest monument in the United States. Like many a 19th-century sculptor, Bartholdi had an incomplete grasp of classical form. One good look at Lady Liberty's rather crudely idealized head makes that plain enough. But she cuts an emphatically dimensional, monumental figure even so. To achieve that effect Bartholdi took his main cues from classical Greek sculpture – starting with the frontally oriented pose with the trailing right leg and raised heel. The folds of drapery girding Liberty's body, on the other hand, lead the viewer around the figure and create a spiraling dynamic that culminates resoundingly in the raised arm bearing the torch aloft. The torch, moreover, is astutely counter-balanced by the book Liberty clasps at her left side. As with its Greek prototypes, there is an artful ambivalence in Liberty's pose – it is not clear whether she has come to rest or is moving forward. What we feel is the bodily thrust propelling the torch aloft.

There are numerous Greek female figures which are heavily draped, but Bartholdi went beyond ancient precedent. He was less concerned with preserving feminine modesty than increasing Liberty's bulk, and especially her flanks, the portion of the figure most vulnerable to visual decimation against the vast backdrop of New York Harbor. As a result only limited indication of anatomical forms beneath Liberty's drapery – her breasts and right knee and lower leg – is provided. Given the tremendous challenge posed by the site, however, Bartholdi succeeded brilliantly. Liberty expands into the enveloping space, while her contours read with great clarity not only from the Lower Manhattan shoreline but from other distant vantage points as well.

Pound for pound, however, our greatest statue is Jean-Antoine Houdon's life-size George Washington in the Capitol in Richmond, VA. Houdon, one of the last of the great classical masters, had a comprehensive understanding of the structure of

the human body. The clothes on this life-size portrait statue resemble a membrane beneath which the informing body is readily legible. The border of Washington's open coat is employed, much as classical drapery would be, to intensify the statue's spatial presence: It guides the eye from the back of his legs, up his right side, along his chest, and around the back of his neck.

The shapes comprising the figure are articulated with great precision and likewise make that presence register more vividly. As with the Naples Hermes noted above, the composition is multiaxial, with a subtle tension between the turn of Washington's head and left leg and the rotation of his torso toward the right arm clasping a walking stick. Here again a dynamic ambivalence akin to what we observed with the Parthenon results. Houdon's supremely dimensional statue utterly dominates the large rotunda space in which it is situated.

Persistent, Objective Qualities

Monumentality, then, has persistent, objective qualities wedded to a persistent, objective formal vocabulary. It also has a normative history shaped by the greatest artists and architects who've ever lived. That doesn't mean its formal possibilities have been thoroughly explored, let alone exhausted. But it does mean that monumentality is not just an arbitrary concept, subject to reinvention at the drop of a hat. It follows that the patron or designer who desires monumental expression in a contemporary idiom with a tenuous or non-existent relationship to the monumental tradition faces very long odds.

A case in point is Frank Gehry's extravagant design for an Eisenhower Memorial in Washington. Gehry has conceived a four-acre postmodern theme park with an ill-conceived sculptural narrative in disordered megalithic settings plus an ersatz Great Plains landscape - all enclosed by enormous steel-mesh billboards with quasi-photographic images of the rural Kansas from which Ike hailed. The billboards hang from cylindrical, stone-clad, freeway-interchange-style pylons 80 ft. tall. Gehry's monumentally pretentious design hardly represents a viable alternative to the tradition it reinterprets or negates, depending on your point of view.

The traditional camp faces daunting challenges too. Classical architects seeking institutional work confront a degraded culture of building in which modern frame construction is geared to the production of commodities, or at best meretricious icons, as opposed to substantive architecture of a monumental character. On the fine-art side of the ledger, the traditional practice of sculpture has itself been degraded by photography's influence since the 19th century. Photography has led many a latter-day academic sculptor to espouse an essentially pictorial outlook

beholden to the manipulation of the play of light and shade on the surface of the form rather than the expression of the deep structure underlying the form.

A corollary issue, one that arises in Auguste Rodin's decidedly unclassical oeuvre, is the confusion of mass with structure. Because he could not draw this distinction, Felix de Weldon's rather lumpen Marines on Arlington Ridge are big, period, and their flat, undimensional arrangement amply reflects the photographic genesis of his design. Traditionalists might scoff at de Weldon's memorial as pseudo-monumental kitsch, which it is, but the fact remains that it points to serious deficiencies that much "classical" sculpture of recent vintage merely disguises.

An even more extreme example of photography's baneful influence is the truly awful relief portrait of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., facing the Tidal Basin in Washington. The Modernistic treatment of the King figure as an agglomeration of simplistic planes is a logical extension of photography's re-orientation of sculpture from formal depth to formal superficiality.

While monumentality poses distinct challenges for architects and sculptors, their aims hold - or at least should hold - much in common, insofar as they share a common lineage. Let's hope they can meet these challenges in the years ahead. A dubious god called "modernity" is lobotomizing our culture, which is carrying out its immemorial role of uniting past, present and future - as the ancestral tomb once united the dead, the living, and those yet to be born - to an ever-diminishing degree.

As a result the monumental tradition languishes in the ghetto to which "modernity" has consigned our amputated past. In an age without heroes, as ours has been called, reverence meanwhile gives way to nihilistic indifference or preening moral self-regard. Our ability to build enduring value into an ever-expanding human habitat is gravely impaired as a result.

In a world besieged by technology worship and an Internet-enabled deluge of pictorial trivia, it is imperative that monumental design create new space for a deeper engagement with our humanity, our communal identities, and with nature itself. Otherwise we and our children run the risk of becoming hapless partakers of a deracinated, disembodied culture, reduced to the dreadful status of postmodern larvae.

Secrets of Successful Civic Monuments

Every February, the editors of Traditional Building publish an in-depth examination of a contentious topic in the world of traditional design. The question

we're exploring in this issue: What's gone wrong with new public monuments? This topic is screaming for attention because of the numerous bland - and sometimes disastrous - contemporary monuments being foisted on the public. (Example: The monument to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. featuring a statue of Dr. King looking like an aloof despot.) With our culture's incessant striving for novelty we've lost the ability to create monuments with the power and gravitas of the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials. Contemporary monument-making all too often defers to the idiosyncratic vision of a starchitect or the currently fashionable artist. These exercises in individual ego are usually praised by the critics, but are met by public reactions ranging from indifference to bewilderment and dismay. The culmination of this calamitous trend was the recent bizarre proposal for an Eisenhower memorial in Washington, DC, designed by Frank Gehry. This sprawling unfocused plan is currently in limbo - and there is reason to hope the proposal is dead. That the project was finally put on hold is due largely to the vigilance of the National Civic Art Society (NCAS) in Washington, DC. This small organization spent countless hours documenting and testifying both to the grandiose design's inherent flaws and to the furtive process that hatched it. The NCAS went so far as to sponsor a public design competition to prove that more comprehensible and economical designs were both possible and desirable. All the demonstrated failings of the stalled Eisenhower Memorial cast into high relief the central problem: Contemporary designers have abandoned traditional symbols and conventions that are generally understood by the public, and substituted instead personal conceptions which often leave viewers unmoved and perplexed.

The Critical Role of Sculpture

To address this issue, the editors asked a well-known cultural critic - Catesby Leigh - to undertake a fundamental review of what makes a successful civic monument. Clearly, there were principles that were known in the past that our current generation has forgotten.

In his essay, Leigh makes the frequently ignored point that a monument is a thing, not a place. He goes on to show that the classical figure is the central element of the monumental tradition - and asserts that few sculptors today have the training or sensibility to create appropriate monumental figures. Further, Leigh demonstrates the crucial link between statuary and architecture in the Western monumental tradition. This relationship has been refined over the centuries by a feedback loop between the Greek sculptural canon and the Greek architectural canon. It's this symbiosis between sculpture and architecture that

generates monuments with emotional power and clarity of message.

When Henry Bacon designed the Lincoln Memorial, he - and most of his contemporaries - understood that a monument is a coherent physical object layered with meaning rather than an abstract concept subject to capricious reinterpretations. The editors hope this discussion of monumentality leads to a deeper understanding of the essential elements of successful civic monuments - and that this understanding might eventually result in new memorials that will speak eloquently to future generations.- Clem Labine, Editor Emeritus

Tags

February 2014HistoricMonuments

By

Catesby Leigh

Catesby Leigh has written about public art and architecture for publications including The Wall Street Journal, Weekly Standard, National Review, Modern Age and First Things. In 2002, he was a cofounder of the National Civic Art Society. Leigh is currently working on a book, Monumental America, an inquiry into the sources of monumentality in the nation's built environment and the challenges contemporary culture poses for monumental design.

Copyright: Parker Studio of Structural Sculpture/Weekly Standard Parker, sculptor ©