



# Compression and Decompression in Contemporary Memorial Architecture

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**ABSTRACT:** *At the turn of the century, the transcription of memories into codified forms has gone through major renovations, which some recent and ongoing phenomena are further processing. This article aims at reflecting on the current evolution of the design of memorials, and in particular at highlighting how the latest transformations in the project of monuments can be described through the oscillations between compression and decompression that seem to have become a paradigm of contemporary socio-cultural scenarios.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Memory, Memorial Practices, Memorial Architecture.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

A monument can be described as a representation in space of a discourse that is built on time. In other words, it is an instrument that embodies a space of meaning [1], through which a collective interpretation of a phenomenon is constructed or reconstructed [2], and fixed in a form that activates the memory related to a specific time, that is a manifestation of a particular socio-cultural context.

The ways in which we express, conceptualize, and mould space and time have always been the means through which major historical transformations become visible. The XXth century is usually referred to as an epoch marked by fast and groundbreaking changes in world affairs [3], and the present time is being widely acknowledged as a moment of further acceleration in the evolution of a range of phenomena. Within this context, the direction of contemporary historic flows seems to point to a growing space-time contraction. We are witnessing this process in our everyday life, in the unprecedented pace of the movements of goods and people, resulting from improved ease of global travel and advanced technologies, as well as in the instant circulation of information and ideas through the interconnectedness of internet. The space-time contraction concept, pioneered by David Harvey based on the intensification of events per unit of time and per unit of space [4], refers to various aspects of human activities and the systems where they take place, in which the combination of spatial shrinkage and temporal simultaneity is producing a range of impacts on economic, politic, and socio-cultural dynamics. Notwithstanding, this evident, ongoing compression is also generating some form of progressive expansion in the resources of time and space. For example, new means and technologies allow for the considerable reduction of the hours we dedicate in some activities, such as long-distant travelling, that sometimes is also substituted by digital connections, which enable us to work and meet without moving; the amount of time we spare is a resource that can be used to expand other tasks we perform. Furthermore, this decompression can be detected in the span of the considerably widened exchange of goods and contents, so as in the increased possibilities of reaching out to different people and cultures.

These fluctuations in the interplay between space and time are having a profound impact on the architecture culture, as they are generating important changes in the way we inhabit, move, work, meet, communicate, and remember. These changing relationships with space and time are thus fostering the evolution of memorial architecture, as this is deeply rooted in these elements. The approach to the design of monuments is indeed going through important transformations, some which seem to show the emergence of new principles, while some others represent the progress of trends that had already appeared at the end of XXth century, when this field became the object of a major revision. This ensued from a long process mainly triggered by the end of World War II and accelerated by the disappearance of its witnesses. This event, recognized as unprecedented for its atrocity as well as for its global span and impacts beyond the battlefield, generated the need to rethink of

memorialization practices, and led to the development of new types of monuments – and “counter-monuments”. This term was coined by Holocaust scholar James E. Young to describe memorial projects deviating from the aims and principles of normative commemorations, by challenging all the aspect that had defined them in the past, including their subject, meaning, form, size, functioning, and relation to the public and the context [5]. The new generation of monuments that started to appear and quickly multiply at the turn of the new century is characterized by the use of alternative design techniques, materials, and duration, and by fundamental inversions in their interplay with both space (e.g. including voids instead of solids, and absence instead of presence) and time (e.g. intertwining permanence and temporariness) [6].

This paper aims at sharing a critical reflection on the prosecution of this turn of memorial architecture, by observing further updates progressing in the last years. These have been enhanced by some recent events (such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the raise of new conflicts, and accelerated migration flows) and ongoing changes on socio-cultural dynamics (including those that ensue from the impact of internet on our relationship with space, time, and other people). In particular, this observation will highlight how the latest transformations in the project of monuments can be narrated through the lens of those oscillations between compression and decompression that seem to have become one of the paradigms of contemporary scenarios.

## **II. COMPRESSION**

One of the most evident aspects characterizing contemporary memorial projects is a significant reduction in the span and in the duration of the time frame within which the processes pertaining to their design, set up, and functioning are performed.

On the one hand, this compression can be detected in the pace of the steps that are taken to bridge the event and the realization of a tangible form aimed at crystallizing its memory. Many recent projects have been developed in relation to phenomena that had just happened. The most evident examples refer to monuments dedicated to terrorist attacks, which have become a more and more frequent recurrence. For example, a memorial was created nearby the Atocha train station in Madrid for the victims of the terrorist attack of 11 March 2004 only two months after the event [7], and a plaque appeared at King’s Cross Station in the North of London few days after the bombings on 7 July 2005. This trend was started around the symbolic “world event” [8] of 11 September 2001, as debates around forms to memorialize it initiated almost instantaneously. Impromptu memorials and public debates started to appear on that same day [9]; planning memorials seemed a viable way of containing trauma, allowing “people to begin [...] to feel as if the horrid event itself was over, already a memory” [10]. This topic involves also those grassroots monuments that may be generated by “spontaneous” gestures but more and more frequently end up evolving into permanent installations. A relevant example is the “Ground Zero Cross”. Formed by two giant steel i-Beams that broke off in the shape of a cross from the 67th Floor of the World Trade Center on the morning of 9/11 and landed in an upright position in the rubble, this element had become a site for prayers and an icon of hope and comfort; following the cleaning and reconstruction process, in 2004 the item was moved on a pedestal on the former plaza on Church Street, and in 2011 moved back to the site, where it was lowered into the National September 11 Memorial & Museum [11].

In some cases, memorializing forms are being developed even when the event is still in-progress. We are witnessing this phenomenon in relation to contemporary migration flows. In the last years, the remembering of the thousands of victims of ongoing “journeys of hope”, especially across the Mediterranean Sea (which was declared by UNHCR one of the deadliest areas in this regard), has become the object of a growing number of memorial practices. Although these are mainly resulting in temporary exhibitions and installations, various monuments have been inaugurated in recent years. These include, among the others, Mimmo Paladino’s “Porta d’Europa”, placed on the shores of Lampedusa in 2008, “La speranza naufragata”, installed in 2015 in the cemetery of Catania, and “Som i serem ciutat refugi”, set up along Barceloneta beach in 2016, the same year the “Museo Atlantico” was inaugurated off the coasts of Lanzarote.

The process, leading to the acceleration of the transcription of a collective memory while this is still ongoing, obviously needs to be observed also in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic. Beside the first official monuments, that were inaugurated since the Spring of 2021 [12], a myriad of “fast” memorials started to appear since the Spring of 2020. Although these included many “makeshift” forms, some actually resulted from structured projects – such as those held in Washington, for example the 20,000 empty chairs set up outside the White House on the first Covid-19 Remembrance Day, the event at the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool, or the installation “In America: Remember” on the National Mall. Some of these have proven to stand the test of time and formalized into a recognized memorial form – such as the National Covid Memorial Wall in London, a public mural commemorating victims of the pandemic in the United Kingdom. As to today, the 500 meter-long stretch of wall along the River Thames is maintained by a small group of volunteers, and remains a place of pilgrimage for many people.

This process is also linked to the widening of the range and type of phenomena that are being translated into memorial forms. The memorialization activities carried out in relation to Covid-19 victims, for example,

show a new approach to this kind of event, considering that hardly any memorial exist to remember the 1918 Spanish Flu, which is acknowledged as the deadliest pandemic in human history.

On the other hand, a time compression in memorial projects can be detected also in the design of those parameters that define its performance and duration. This aspect represents a major evidence of the ongoing changes in this field, as it refers to the challenging of one of the primary features of monuments. Since their first manifestations, these were meant to address permanence, as their aim was to fix the memory of past events or historical narratives in space and time. For centuries, this task has been carried out by evocative objects, imbued with symbolic values to be transferred from generation to generation. Although the conveyed meaning may have gone through some updates throughout the years (for example, by renaming a statue), the form of these monuments has mainly remained static. When artists and architects started to review the form, features, and functioning of memorials, along the second half of the XXth century, one of the disruptive aspects of this “de-monumentalization” process was the revision of their fixity. Gradually disposing of celebratory functions, new memorials started to privilege a progressive and processual dimension, which is developed by engaging, acting on, and with their audience. This is the outcome of the coalescing between the evolution of artistic languages and research [13] and the cultural urgency of reconstructing a democratic, horizontal space, in which memory does not remain a formal fact but rather is continuously processed through personal elaboration. One of the works that paved the way for the rise of these kind of monuments is the “Monument Against Fascism” by Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz, an iconic exemplification of James Young’s notion of “counter-monument”. This permanent installation, set up in a busy public square in Harburg in 1986, consisted of a 12-metre-high column with a perimeter of 1 metre and clad in lead. Through a text, translated in seven languages, residents were invited to ratify a public statement about fascism by engraving, gouging, or hammering their names or a message with the metal pencil provided directly onto the surface of the monument. When one accessible part was covered with inscriptions, it was immediately sunk into the ground. After seven years of progressive descents, all that remains visible of the monument is the lead panel on the top of the column, which is now at the same level of the street. A window in a pedestrian underpass provides a view of part of the column underground; information panels describe the creation of the monument and the reason for its installation. According to Young, this process-oriented site utilized strategies of disappearance and erasure carried out by an activated spectator to subvert the ossifying tendencies of the conventional monument and, by doing so, to sabotage the top-down trajectory of official histories and in turn instigate a more fluid relationship to the past.

This project paved the way for further experimentations with a new type of “performative memorial”, that was the expression of a reviewed notion of memory intended as a constantly evolving construct, one that may also dispose of grandeur and eternity and rather aim at developing a more engaging dialogue with the audience, even if in a compressed span of time. Although some of the examples that use this name should be more precisely included in the installations category (such as, for example, “Melted Away”, the temporary monuments series begun in 2006 by Nora Ligorano and Marshall Reese), some projects are designed to experiment with the dimension of time in a way that uses temporariness to address specific cultural or political issues related to memorial architecture. In some cases, these result from the vision of an artist, such as the series of “precarious” monuments by Thomas Hirschhorn. But this idea is being explored also through different approaches, that imply the use of a limited time span to open a dynamic flux of contents, and generally are meant as a contemporary reflection on the historic concept of monument. This is the case, for example, of the “Fourth Plinth” project set up in Trafalgar Square, in central London. This initiative revolves around one among the four pedestals installed in the square, that had remained empty due to lack of funds; after a 150 year-long debate, at the turn of the new century it became the object of a rolling programme of commissioned temporary artworks led by the Mayor’s Culture Team. Rather than being permanently set up, the plinth has become a stage where new ideas are experimented and pivotal socio-cultural topics are publicly performed and discussed. More recently, these themes were talked by similar initiatives – such as “A Temporary Monument for Brussels”, started in 2018, and the “Paper Monuments”, based on a community-driven, participatory project to envision new memorials for New Orleans.

These processes are often leading to the reduction of the distance between the monument and its public, that is asked to move from the position of a passive spectator to the role of an actor participating in the scene within which the memorial performs its functions. These projects are not anymore addressing the quest for eternity, but rather aim at triggering a more profound or disruptive engagement with the people. This outcome is meant to allow monuments to have a wider impact on contemporary societies, drawing on the idea that this does not only depend on their grandeur and longevity, but rather by their resonance. In present-day scenarios, this is built through new types of processes, structured by interactions between individuals and cultural interpretations, that are now massively oriented by communication media and telematic nets. Within this context, the deconstruction of a monument does not anymore correspond to its disappearance, due to the availability of many tools that can be used to enable the memory of a memorial and enhance its resonance.

### III. DECOMPRESSION

The major renovation phase through which memorial architecture went at the turn of the new century has already fostered the widening of the interplay that the monument develops both with its context and its public. The punctual statue, sitting on a pedestal and offered to mere contemplation, has been gradually juxtaposed to other models, characterized by broader engagements with the surrounding environment and more complex interactions with the viewers. The present-day evolution of memorial architecture is even strengthening these trends, through the further decompression of the relationships with space and people.

This process started with the descent of monuments from the plinth, and their gradual insertion into the level where pedestrians move along streets and squares. New memorials spread out through space initially by activating their immediate surroundings, for example by eliminating the fence that protected them; this action allowed the public to draw near the statue, but also to use the terraced area that often surrounded it as an “inhabitable” space, where people could sit, meet and stay. Later, this spread evolved through the experimentation with the design of new forms and functioning of the memorial, aimed at enabling it to turn the visit into an active practice. This strategy can already be detected in some milestone projects realized along the XXth century. These include the “Mausoleo delle Fosse Ardeatine” in Rome (1944-51) – that is sometimes referred to as the first “modern monument”, with its path connecting the caves where the massacre it commemorates took place to a sacrarium, intertwining artistic and natural dimensions to immerse visitors in an experience that distances itself from mere static contemplation – and Maya Lin’s “Vietnam Veterans Memorial” in Washington (1981) – that leads the public in a walk along a sunken slash, chevron-shaped, composed of two walls of polished granite bearing the names of more than 58,000 victims engraved in chronological order. These projects paved the way for numerous memorials designed to accompany people in a commemorative experience enabled by an active exploration of a more or less large site. This strategy continues to be developed; this can be detected, for example, in the latest memorials dedicated to Holocaust (such as the one designed in Ottawa by Daniel Libeskind in 2017, or the entry by David Adjaye and Ron Arad that won the competition for the Holocaust memorial in Victoria Tower Gardens in London), as well as in the proposals for the monuments that are going to be built in memory of the victims of Covid-19 pandemic (as the one designed by Gómez Platero in Uruguay). A significant step further in this transformation of the monument into a diffused spatial system was taken by Peter Eisenman, in the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin (2005); this is constructed of 2,711 grey, concrete stelae, with the same dimension but different heights (varying from zero to 4 meters), arranged on a rigid grid structure covering a 19,000 square meter site, completely open to the public. The structure generates a meander of narrow spaces, whose ground continues to deepen and raise, leading visitors through an evocative walk. This monument shows no explicit reference to the memory it bears. In this case, the memorial coalesced with a public space, the crossing of which produces a multilayered experience in which, by getting lost in space and time [14], people are given the opportunity to reflect on the absurd and surreal nature of World War II events. This spread was even further enhanced by the project of new “diffused monuments”, a paradigm set up by “Stolpersteine”, a project initiated by artist Gunter Demnig in 1992 to remember Holocaust victims by installing commemorative brass plaques in the pavement in front of their last address of choice. These projects highlight a fundamental turn occurred in the design of the memorial, which has shifted from the making of an object to the making of a place [15]. By experimenting with innovative design features and, through these, by becoming an active part of public space, these memorials stimulate the senses and invite new types of interplays, altering the relationship between visitor and monument from one of viewing to one of engaging in a variety of ways – by exploring, occupying, touching, and hearing, and participating in acts of commemoration that involve the emotional as well as the bodily dimension.

Many recent projects seem to confirm and further enhance this trend. Clear evidence is provided, for example, by the spread of “memorial gardens”, that have become one of the most diffused memorials swiftly realized to commemorate the victims of Covid-19 pandemic. Throughout history, parks and green areas have often been used as commemoration spaces; whether through the use of inscriptions, statuary, or symbolic elements, they have always resonated as repositories of collective memory. Beside garden cemeteries, many other spatial experimentations have appeared (e.g. memorial plantations, gardens of remembrance, peace gardens, etc.) especially after World War I, when large tracts of former battlefields were preserved as sacred sites, that became essential to the process of ritual pilgrimage. Parks are often intended as a place of quiet, where to enjoy some respite from the clamour of the city, independent of their integration in an urban or a natural context. They represent a sort of “decompression” area, where people can find the space and time to relax, meditate, and pray, through stillness or movement. In these areas, commemoration becomes physical, especially when the encounter with place unfolds over time through the act of walking. By shifting in emphasis from the visual to the haptic, which is rooted in the subjective experience related to the physical perception, walking activates a dynamic commemorative language, that is intimate, complex and open to multiple interpretations [16].

Through the enhancement of the place-making shift in memorial forms, landscape has taken on an even heightened meaning in contemporary commemoration. In particular, during the Covid-19 pandemic the green memorial (in the form of gardens of memory, memory woodlands, gardens of simples, transcendence gardens, etc.) was the first and most diffused form of monument set up all over the world. These spaces activate remembering as an engaged activity, that often becomes participatory (as it allows people to contribute to their design, installation, and maintenance); furthermore, they suggest that commemoration is an ongoing process, open to constant expansion and revision.

The idea that memory is not an evocation of a fixed and frozen past, but rather a fluid process located in the present is also being enhanced by other experimentations that are further challenging the forms and functioning of traditional memorial architecture, and possibly paving the way for the development of new principles and practices. For example, some “nomadic memorials”, designed to move from one place to another in order to spread the memory and reach out to wider audiences, are proposing another groundbreaking revision of the relationship of monuments with space and time. This approach draws on the possibility to evolve the interplay between a memory and a place beyond the physical level, and to expand it through the envisioning of symbolic or conceptual forms – as anticipated by the “migration” of the Berlin Wall, through the distribution of its remnants in more than forty different countries around the globe [17]. This principle is being further developed by various projects, such as “Što te nema”, a “nomadic monument” which artist Aida Šehović started to construct on 11 July 2006, the 11th anniversary of the 1995 Srebrenica Genocide, and that continues to be evolved every year in a different city [18], or “Levenslicht”, a monument by Studio Roosegaarde (2020), commemorating 104,000 Dutch Holocaust victims with 104,000 luminescent stones, that were exhibited in Rotterdam, and then traveled to over 170 Dutch municipalities with Holocaust histories, with the aim to raise awareness among local communities. Regardless of whether the event they refer to may be rooted in a specific place, these nomadic memorials leave the relation to the spatial dimension open and available to expansion. These experimentations contribute to mine the idea of the monument as a static, permanent structure, or even as a mere object, and enhance its evolution as an engaging device that is capable to take an active role within the dynamic landscapes of contemporary social and urban environments, and to foster meaningful interactions among people, places, and memorial practices.

The observation of the steps that are being made towards the unfolding of new paradigms for the design of memorial forms cannot include the growing experimentations with the digital realm. While the internet continues to gain a more and more prominent role as a place where many human activities are carried out, this dimension is now also attended to perform physical or virtual commemorations. Online memorials started to appear at the end of the 1990s as digital spaces (usually a HTML webpage document, or a page as part of a social media platform such as ForeverMissed, MyKeeper, Online-Tribute or EverLoved) created for the purpose of remembering or celebrating a person. The turn of these projects from individual into collective forms of memorialization started with the commemoration of the victims of 9/11 [19]; at the beginning of the new century, their multiplication was further fostered by the development of social media platforms and simplified website creation softwares. The development of this phenomenon was significantly accelerated during the Covid-19 pandemic, not only due to the appearance of a myriad local and national projects, but also because some of these – such as the National Covid Memorial powered by Snapchat’s interactive augmented reality technology – have experimented with innovative features that may be highlighting an interesting turn in the rise of a new type of commemorative dimension. These tools are enhancing the role of the “public”, offering more and more interactive and participatory opportunities, and are expanding the access to memory. They indeed provide a communications outlet for continued grieving, remembering, and recovering, that can be accessed everywhere and at any moment, hence spreading commemoration across time and space. The shift they are proposing can be observed also in the evolution of their language. If the first projects integrated some graphic elements that seemed to still conserve a connection with physical memorials by reproducing their prescribed meanings (for example, by using the image of stone or stone-like materials, that have been traditionally associated to monuments due to their longevity), the most recent examples are developing a new language, which draws on digital experience design, and shows their gradual unbinding from traditional memorial forms and their connections to time and space

#### **IV. EVOLVING SCENARIOS FOR MEMORIAL PROJECTS**

Although compression and decompression are opposite phenomena, they actually complement and even strengthen each other. This idea finds further evidence in the reading of the ongoing transformation of memorial architecture through this lens, as the projects that seem to be addressing these apparently contrasting trends are generating coherent outcomes. In particular, they all consistently enhance the active role of the public, which is a crucial factor in the development of a new understating of memory as a continuously and multivocally processed construct. According to various scholars, today the possibility for monuments to have an effect on the surrounding community is based on their capability to attract or activate rituals and performances

[20]. The new generation of monuments is not anymore the product of the mere vision of an artist or an architect, nor it is meant to concentrate the memorial act within their form and their passive contemplation. Rather, they are conjugated in the present and designed to activate a memorial act that takes the form of a process, generally participated and multifarious, compressing the distance between the parts involved and decompressing its performative unfolding through time and space.

This update of memorial principles and practices is nurtured by the experimentation with groundbreaking design strategies, that are playing a fundamental role not only in challenging the traditional forms and functioning of monuments but also in envisioning and enabling significant changes in the features of collective commemoration.

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