

Modernism, public space and public art

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At some stage or other, nearly all artistic productions of modernism have been criticized as being arid, vacuous and unappealing to the lay-public. Undoubtedly, scholars have successfully analyzed, defended and presented much modern art in ways that are accessible to all. Modern architecture too has been defended robustly by scholars such as Colin Rowe in such publications as the *Mathematics of the Ideal Villa* (1982) arguing that architectural output of modernism is no less significant than that of some examples from the Renaissance. But contemporary public space design has had no such luck and writing on today's public realm has tended to argue that modern public spaces simply are anonymous foregrounds for the object-fixated contemporary architecture. As for art placed in public space, extreme views such as 'turds in the plaza' are the order of the day! This paper examines the nature of modern open spaces; in selected cases the value of contemporary art placed on them, and asks whether architecture and public art enhance or diminish each other. The aim will be to outline some defining characteristics of the modern public realm and how art works in it can be an integral part. After all, intellectuals such as Jürgen Habermas (1987) have argued that modernism has unfulfilled enlightenment value. Therefore it is imperative that we assess as rigorously as possible this value in contemporary public space, public art and in their interrelations.

Key words: Modernist public space, art in public realm, feminist views on public art, statues as public art

Modernisme, openbare ruimte en publieke kuns

Byna alle modernistiese artistieke produkte is op die een of ander stadium uitgekryt as kaal, stieriel en onaantreklik vir die man op straat. Dit is ongetwyfeld waar dat geleerdes dikwels moderne kuns analiseer, verdedig en aanbied op maniere wat vir almal toeganklik is. Moderne argitektuur is ook ywerig verdedig deur geleerdes soos Colin Rowe in publikasies soos *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa* (1982) waarin hy argumenteer dat die argitektoniese uitsette van die modernisme op geen manier minder betekenisvol as sekere voorbeelde uit die Renaissance is nie. Ongelukkig is kontemporêre publieke ruimtes nie so gelukkig nie, en neig kommentaar op moderne openbare ruimtes om te betoog dat dit slegs 'n anonieme voorgrond vorm vir objek-gefikseerde kontemporêre argitektuur. En sover dit kunswerke aangaan wat in openbare ruimtes geplaas word, is ekstreme sienings soos 'drolle in die plaza' aan die orde van die dag! Hierdie referaat ondersoek die aard van moderne openbare ruimtes; en in geselekteerde gevalle die waarde van kontemporêre kuns wat binne sulke ruimtes voorkom. Die vraag word verder gevra of argitektuur en openbare kuns mekaar verhef, en of dit mekaar eerder aftakel. Die doel van die referaat is om sommige van die uitstaande karaktereenskappe van die moderne openbare sfeer te skets, en ook om aan te dui dat kunswerke 'n integrale deel van openbare ruimtes kan wees. Intellektuele soos Jürgen Habermas (1987) het tog, na alles, betoog dat modernisme 'n onvervulde verrykingswaarde het. Dit is daarom krities dat ons so deeglik moontlik hierdie waarde in openbare ruimtes, openbare kuns en die wisselwerking tussen die twee ondersoek.

Sleutelwoorde: Modernisme, openbare ruimtes, kuns in die openbare sfeer, feministiese sienings oor openbare kuns, standbeelde as openbare kuns

One does not have to go far away from this campus of Pretoria University to reflect on the relation between open space and modern sculpture. There is a considerable display of sculpture in close proximity of where this conference is taking place, especially those of Edoardo Villa. Villa is certainly a highly-respected sculptor and this author, who is an architect, is not qualified to make any aesthetic judgment on them or indeed any other public art. What he can do, however, is to reflect on the relation between sculptures, the spaces they occupy and the surrounding buildings. He will also try and evolve a definition of what the modern public realm is and consider how the space and the art work placed on them can have certain reciprocity. Exceptions to this self-imposed restraint are some critical but perceptive views of contemporary art, including sculpture by feminists. Since they are largely unfamiliar to male audiences and since the author wholeheartedly agrees with most of their opinions he will, when it is appropriate, paraphrase them. One other qualification that must be added at the outset is that it is difficult to look at recent examples of public spaces as they need time and continued use in order to establish themselves. Likewise, the art placed in them take a while to properly inhabit them. Therefore the examples discussed here will be of a certain age rather than the latest. A

juxtaposition of contemporary sculptures in their modernist setting and their historic counterparts is necessary in order to demonstrate how much better that relationship can be in our time.

Compare now the relation between any of Villa's sculptures and the spaces they occupy with that of the relation between Baccio Bandinelli's (1493-1560) Hercules and Cacus placed in front of the *piazza* of Uffizi in Florence (figure 1). Whatever one may think of the sculpture, there is something deeply satisfying about the arrangement in Florence which many modern settings including those in which Villa's sculptures are located find difficult to match. In Florence the arrangement is based on the prevailing ideas on Renaissance public space and its adornment with sculptures of the time. What are our conceptions of public realm today? What are our feelings about sculptures such as those of Villa? How are we achieving a visual reciprocity between public art and the public realm? The public spaces today are not characterized by enclosure but flow, interconnectivity and generosity of scale permitting plenty of light and air. They also eschew symmetry. Sculptures symbolizing past glory and devotion are also considered incongruous to our present sensibilities. More specifically, Villa's sculptures inspired as they were by cubism, argues a case for multiple viewing points as opposed to singular ones and a relation between space and sculpture at a macro level and the constituent elements of a particular sculpture and the residual space at a micro level. Can we really say whether these unique qualities of contemporary space and sculpture are effectively handled in any of the locations where Villa's sculptures are placed? Despite considerable controversy about the nature of Bandinelli's sculpture, it was placed in the *Piazza della Signoria* as a counterpart for the other statues like David by Michelangelo, Fountain of Neptune and Judith and Holofernes and in a way as to enhance the urbanity of the two adjoining Piazza. In comparison, the placement of Villa's sculptures is nearly always more arbitrary. It is certainly true that the emotive trajectory of Modernist sculpture is different to that of other periods. Modernist attempts to increase the emotional intensity by abstraction which many sculptors including Mr. Villa do well. In addition sculptors such as Alexander Calder see movement and fun as part of public art which has not been the case before. The point however is that this new line of enquiry needs a correspondingly new understanding of the public spaces in which these works find their home. Take for instance Calder's mobiles. How easy it is to use his works to fill voids that are popular among architects, which often are incidental spaces and not the primary spaces in buildings. The location of Calder's mobile (1977) in Washington National Gallery atrium provides us with a case in point (figure 2) While the galleries, the only reason for the building are rather barren, the atrium which in effect is a servant space where in fact is most of excitement. Without in any way denying the power of kinetic art or any other branch of modernist art it is easy to see that there is an issue here which is the relation between space and the art work that is occupied by it.

Now it is common knowledge that modernist architecture strived to be sculptural in form. Could it be that these architectural sculptures would not tolerate another in competition? In addition, more often than not, modernist architecture including simple buildings like apartments, for instance, Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation in Marseille (1947-52) and in other cities wanted to be monumental. This called for large open spaces as foregrounds so that building's monumentality could be accentuated and hence the phrase 'monumental isolation'. These spaces often became sterile even in the hands of talented architects like Le Corbusier. We need a closer look at this way of configuring modern buildings and open spaces and to consider a degree of remedial reconfiguration before one can locate public art in such modernist settings. Once again minimalist artists and landscape architects such as Isami Naguci aimed in their sculptures to bring out the beauty of their locations but often public spaces of modernism with some rare exceptions never gave much of a chance for their endeavour.



Figure 1

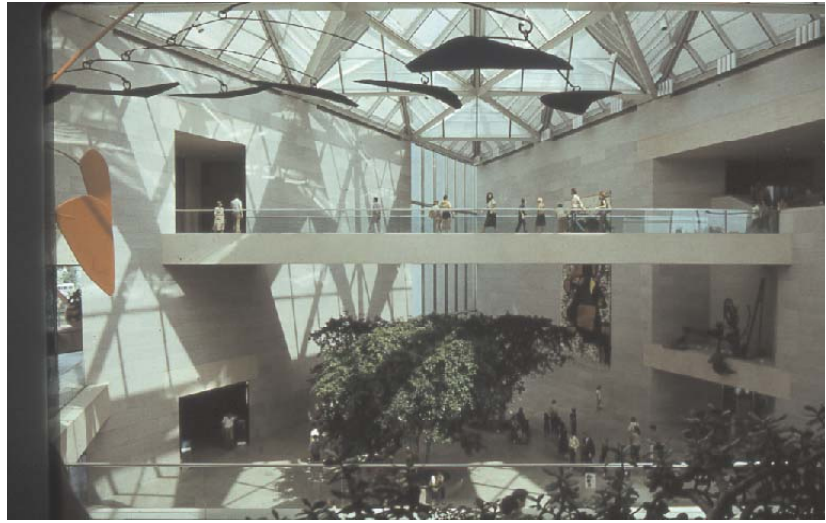


Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

With this as a background consider Villa's sculpture San Sebastiano (1986) placed in front of the extension to Johannesburg Art Gallery (figure 3). Could it be that that architecture here, unwittingly perhaps, has the effect of diminishing the significance of the sculpture because the edifice is in competition with the sculpture? And, like in so many other instances of this type of juxtaposition, one gets the feeling that the powers that be who located the sculpture were governed by the ubiquitous and curious dictum that 'when in doubt plant a modern sculpture'. Frontal placing of sculptures is from the bygone era where symmetry in building form governed by singular point of viewing which modern art, architecture and urbanism quite rightly interrogated. In deference to all this here we see the old locational principle being applied to a new art. Similar conditions prevail elsewhere in the gallery too, for instance the work in the courtyard entitled, Otjittindue (figure 4) by Willem Strydom (1985–87), except here the relationship between space, building and the sculpture is effectively mediated by trees. One cannot help feeling that trees at Pretoria University are the saving grace in what is in effect unsatisfactory positioning of sculptures next to buildings. At the same time greenery as a panacea for urban spaces needs further probing. In fact thoughtless planting too can diminish the art work as shown in the sculpture from Brazil in Figure 5. The British sculptor, Andy Goldsworthy, with whom the author and his colleagues had the privilege of running a workshop for students, understandably, once said he had difficulty in placing his sculptures in front of contemporary buildings, his preference being countryside locations as shown in Figure 7. Now, a country side setting is different from an urban setting with trees and one can surmise that even with some greenery the frontal placing of his sculptures in an unsatisfactorily conceived modernist public space would be problematic and hence his wish to retreat to the countryside.

A moment of reflection about most successful piazzas in Italy will reveal that none of them has any trees. Could it be that the intense Latin urban space consciousness finds trees in city piazzas un-urban and inappropriate? It is almost unimaginable that one can plant trees in the Piazza del Campo in Siena (late '13th early'14th century, figures 6 and 11), Piazza Sant'Anunziata, Florence (1421-51, Figure 8), Campidoglio (1538, figure 9) and St Peter's Square in Rome (1656-1657, figure 10). Why is this so? This is because the Latin urban culture advances a precise relation between trees and urbanity.¹ As Federico Tozzi (1961), the Siennese writer describes in the following passage trees in the Italian cities have a specific place informed by a particular sense of the city form (figure 7)

Where the buildings are higher there seems to be riot, they seem to fall on top of the other, like a landslide. One could count up to ten rows of roof and always higher; next to them other rows running perpendicularly. The *Torre del Mangia* rises peacefully from all that confusion. Around the town olive trees and cypresses make their own way between the houses, as if having come from the countryside, they no longer wanted to go back.

Return now to another sculpture in the Johannesburg Art Gallery entitled the Citizen (1985-86) by Bruce Arnott placed towards the vehicular access facing the original building of Lutyens (figure 12). Admittedly, for pressing security reasons, the railing and the new lanterns are done without a great deal of thought to their appropriateness. Nevertheless, notice that it is located at some distance away from Lutyen's façade of blank but moderately sculptural wall. Were it not for the fences this would probably have been an acceptable arrangement. Now, Clive Kellner, the astute chief curator of the gallery understands the problem well and has plans to turn the sculpture by 180 degrees which will only be a partial solution to the unsatisfactory frontal placing of a modern sculpture against an early modernist facade. In order that the site compositions of this kind and the place of sculpture as an integral part may be tackled satisfactorily, we need to probe the nature of modernist public realm a little more so that its *raison d'être* may be understood more clearly which in turn can help in the correct placement of sculpture.



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12

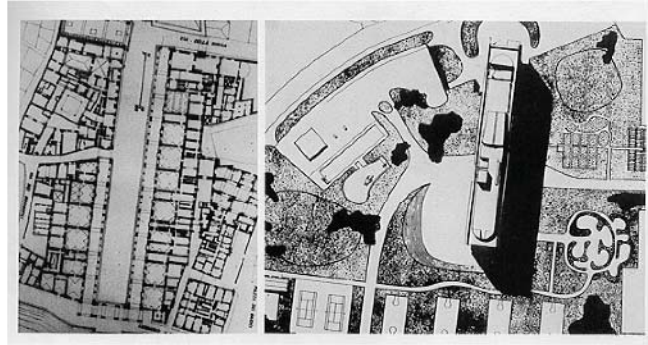


Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16

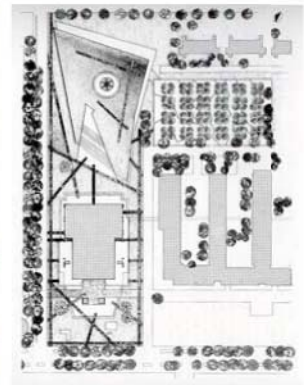


Figure 17



Figure 19

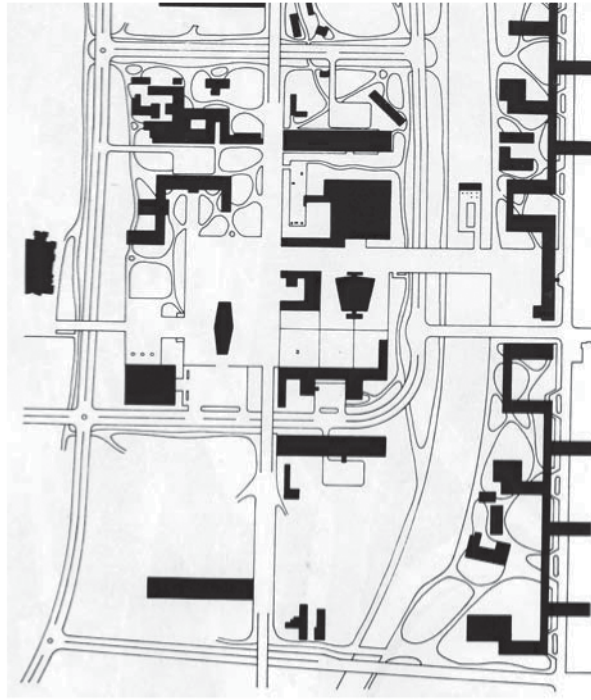


Figure 20



Figure 21

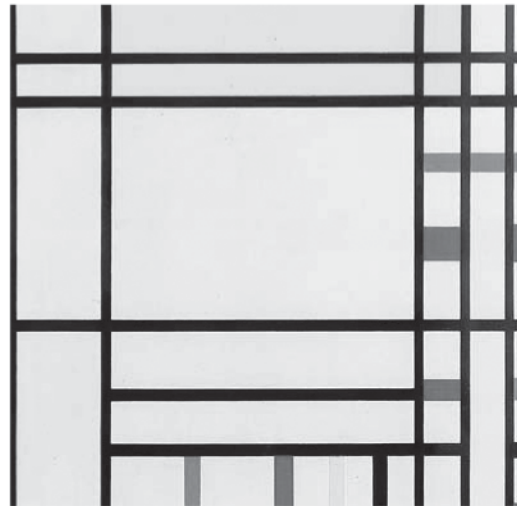


Figure 22



Figure 23



Figure 24

The extroverted urbanity of the modernist public space

Figure 13 cleverly locating the plan of Uffizi court and that of Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation side by side comes from Colin Rowe's book, *the Collage City* (1984). It shows the typical reversal of figure and ground and the object-fixatedness of modernism in a telling way. The size and shape of the Uffizi courtyard is more or less the same as that of the building mass of Unité. Figure 14 and 15 show this relation in a three dimensional way. We should not at all be surprised at Lewis Mumford's (1968) comment that Unité is an architectural sculpture masquerading as social housing. Here the point about the difficulty of placing an artist's sculpture in front of a work of architecture that is inherently sculptural becomes obvious. Very often this condition calls for the location of sculptures or installations sufficiently far away from the building. Nothing illustrates this better than Le Corbusier's sculpture, the Open Hand in Chandigarh which is located not in the immediate vicinity of any of the buildings but at some distance away from all of them in a gigantic open space.

Rowe is an acute observer and a perceptive writer. He goes on to demonstrate the difference between the pre-industrial age public realm and the modernist one in a comparison of a selected area of Parma and Le Corbusier's plan for St. Denis (figure 19 and 20). Both are drawn to same scale using figure-ground drawings in order to accentuate the space between buildings as opposed the buildings themselves. The drawing certainly points out the aridity of contemporary open spaces. But Rowe's intention is not to urge us to return to the pre-industrial urban tissue. Being an ardent supporter of the principles of modernism, he like the philosopher, Jürgen Habermas and architects like Mecanoo believed that there are many enlightenment ideas in modernism that are worth pursuing. The suggestion of Habermas is that modernism can be seen as a continuation of enlightenment tradition which is critical of all forms of conventional authority and should be replaced with ones own understanding. An excellent representation of the enlightenment viewpoint is the series of etchings of Goya entitled *Los Caprichos* (1784) and it was accompanied by an appropriate caption that reads 'the sleep of reason produces monsters'. While the linear nature of progression and grand narratives of emancipation advocated by enlightenment are questioned by many philosophers it is still seen as containing ideals of rationality, tolerance and equality of rights which are worth pursuing. In this sense modernism is an incomplete project and attempts to complete it is a worthy endeavour. All this is of course in contrast to the view of Charles Jencks, who, with a coroner's precision expressed the view that modernism died at certain hour, on a certain day in 1972 when the award-winning blocks of flats in Pruitt-Igoe, St Louis, Missouri by Yamasaki were blown up because they became slums full of criminals and drug users. The implied view of Jencks here is that the anonymity of the repetitious modernist block is the reason for the failure. But then there are many other similar housing occupied by higher income groups that escaped this problem². The intellectual onslaught on the modernist public realm is equally severe. Rowe's criticism is certainly the most constructive and embedded in it is a plea to all of us to understand the nature of public space and its relation to modern architecture. The Dutch architects Mecanoo demonstrate the value of respecting the characteristics of contemporary public space when they were asked to add a library in the open space that was left in front of a '60s building by Bakema in Delft in Holland. Mecanoo did not want to deny the original building its sizeable open space but simply reordered it with a sloping grassed-over roof for the new semi-underground library (figures 17 and 18).

There indeed are other characteristics of modernist public spaces than their size. But like with modern architecture it is always difficult to pinpoint the beginnings of contemporary urbanism. As a tentative attempt, we can say it began with something like the Place de la Concorde (figure 21). The date is roughly 1763-1772 but developments using it as a catalyst



Figure 25



Figure 26

went on for decades after. Open spaces as opposed to closed spaces of towns like Parma mentioned above and connectivity to the city at large, constitute its essence. Arthur Koestler in his novel, 'The Age of Longing' (1951) describes these qualities:

Place de la Concorde ... is an expanse of organized space. ... when you stand on it, you will see that the space has been organized around it for a mile to the west up to Arch of Triumph, and half a mile to the north up to Madelaine, and across the Seine to the Palais Bourbon. If you look northward you will see seventeenth century palazzo and between them receding in a perfect flight of perspective, a Greek temple built in the early nineteenth. An abominable idea! But the effect is one of perfect beauty because the detail dissolves in the whole

Perhaps Piet Mondrian appreciated the connectivity of Place de la Concorde to the city and its impact beyond itself and hence produced the painting simply called Place de la Concorde (Figure 22). This idea of connectivity introduces a certain spatial flow and a fluidity which are neither understood nor appreciated by those who make decisions on the future of the modernist public realm and in locating artworks that might enhance the character of the space as well as that of the installations placed on them. It is no coincidence at all that the fountain of Jean Tanguelly (1980-86) is not placed frontally on the square in front of George Pompidou Centre but laterally on Stravinsky Square in order to improve the connectivity of the modernist square to the rest of the city and to increase the spatial flow (figures 23 and 24).

The problem facing the frontal placing of sculpture in close proximity to modernist buildings is revealed further by many of Henry Moore's sculptures in such settings. We all know they are at their best when placed against the natural landscape or alternatively in historic settings which was the case when a substantial collection of his works was presented on the ramparts of Belvedere castle with the spectacular skyline of Florence dominated by Brunelleschi's dome of the Cathedral.

Feminist critique of public space and public art

Our starting point here surely ought to be that the city itself is gendered. Doreen Massey (1994) calls the modernist city, the city of the flâneure, the stroller observing without being observed, exploiting the bars, cafés and brothels. The gaze of the flâneure is always erotic and a commodified one at that. There cannot be such a thing as a flâneuse as respectable women do not roam in the public space in this way.

In addition, violence is central to the embellishment of the gendered city space as memorials, columns, monuments, obelisks and statues always signify past conquest of one sort or another (Mitchell 1993). The same violence continues in more recent public art. Suzy Gablik (1991) and many others see in Richard Serra's sculptures a series of win-lose, dominator-victim dichotomies and point out that they are a product of a belligerent ego that denigrates feminine empathy and relatedness to others. Is this a one-sided argument? The feminists and the author do not think so as the gigantism and the masculine expression much of the sculptures of artists like Serra exude, however popular they may be with patrons, do nothing to look at the city and its embellishment in a way that is not gendered but something that is inclusive of woman and children.

It is not just modernist sculptures that show these belligerent tendencies. More often than not it is the case with Modern art in general which presents the same violence in a different guise. Thus Henri Lefevre (1974) bravely and truthfully observes of Picasso's works depicting women:

...a dictatorship of the eye...aggressive virility in which Picasso's cruelty towards the body, particularly the female body which he tortures in a thousand ways and caricatures without mercy...is dictated by violence.



Figure 27

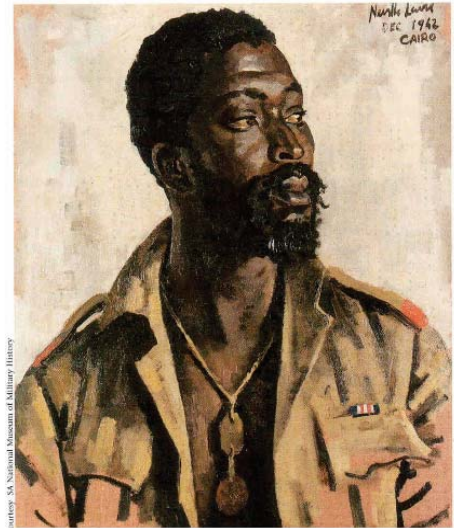


Figure 28

Of course, occasionally one gets monuments to women, such as the women's monument in Bloemfontein. Certainly this too is about violence but for once it is about the victim and not the conqueror. Never the less why is the memorial is relegated to the periphery? And, oddly, the sculptor, skilled though he was could only think of the erect column to remember the women who suffered in the concentration camp.

Feminist viewpoints of the city, public art and architecture are very extensive. They are rigorous in their analyses and the conclusions are far-reaching. The scope of this paper does now allow us to dwell anymore into this important area but the reader is referred to an entitled 'Towards an Emancipated Place' by the author (2000) for further elaboration. The article also contains additional references.

Statues as public art

We all dislike something like the statue of Nelson Mandela in Santon Square and feel that it does not leave any member of the public with an enhanced appreciation of the great man. But is it not the role of intellectuals like ourselves to explain why we feel this way rather than simply denigrate the sculpture and the sculptor who did the work and outline alternatives? What are the factors that affect the empathy of the audience? Gigantism does not help in any way. Furthermore, there is certainly a bit of Euro-centrism in all of us which makes us skeptical of the statues of politicians. In the West they do not erect statues of politicians any more. Why? Could it be partly because the West is unable to produce politicians of stature anymore? Or could it be that the affluence of the west makes people cynical of politicians whereas in the developing world we still look to politicians in our struggle for liberation? Partly also, as Figeston (1970) has pointed out that symbolic gestures exemplified by public statues are out of tune with the empirical temper of our time. This view is further enhanced by Jean-François Lyotard's position (1979) that grand gestures conveyed by something like public statues are incongruous in the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural ethos of our globalizing world and what we need is a constellation of little gestures. Edward Said (1989) holds a pointed dialogue with this point of view and suggests where freedom does not fully obtain, and it could be argued that this is the case for many poor people in developing countries including South African, grand narratives of emancipation are still necessary. One could also evoke Derrida's argument that meaning in our contemporary society is unstable (1979). Is this really the case? Or is it that

meaning shifts across time and across contexts? From the perspective of South Africa it would seem the latter is the case. Lévi Strauss, whom Derrida criticizes unfairly for arguing a case for fixed meanings is probably more helpful here. Strauss in fact puts forward the notion of floating signifiers (Mehlman 1972), illustrating it with the example of the zero as being one. If signifiers can float can they merge too? We need to delve more deeply into the Western classifications of icon and symbol into two distinct categories. After all, Nelson Mandela was and still is an iconic figure and continues to be a symbol of hope. Is it not true the same applies to historic figures like Gandhi or Nehru?

When one extrapolates all these positions, the conclusion one has to reach is that there will continue to be, at least in the developing world, a need for statues as public art but the question is what kind of statues will bring a universally apprehended dignity to these key figures. The answer lies in small narratives, the very opposite of the gigantism that is popular in the West and often thoughtlessly emulated elsewhere. Here may well lay the unique contribution of South African artists. Consider now the small scale wooden statues of the four political figures (1988) by Johannes Maswanganie (Figure 25). They are much smaller than life size. As far as the author knows they have not been placed in any public space so far but when and if they are installed in the public realm it should be done to create a proper relation between them and the spatial context. Of course it is legitimate to think that they are caricatures. But mocking is only one function of caricature and a good artist also captures the personality of the subject in telling ways as these statues reveal. Only a moment of thought is needed to realize that the Gabriel Two (1970-80) of Jackson Hlungwani is not at all about caricaturing but using diminution rather than gigantism to capture the personality of his subject in a powerful way (figure 26). This is perhaps the original contribution the South African artists have already made and can continue to make. If a semblance of caricaturing offends our Euro-centric sensibilities, one can always remove it but preserve the miniaturization and verisimilitude as Claudette Schrauders did in her sculpture of our Nobel Laureates in the very modernist Nobel Square at the waterfront in Cape Town (Figure 27). It is significant that she does not place them against any modernist building. There is a great deal still left to commemorate in South Africa. One is always surprised to find how little the majority of South Africans, especially the younger generation know about personalities such as Job Masego (Figure 28) and that his brave act in North Africa was something of a turning point in the course of the Second World War. The portrait by Neville Lewis (1942) which certainly captures the personality Masego is but one example but gives us an indication of how much there is in South Africa for us to remember and cherish. The argument here is not that artistic representation of politicians and struggle leaders is the only way forward for public art but it is that they are here to stay in most developing countries and the South African artists mentioned above have made original contribution in raising them to a level of art than those who rely on gigantism to make an impression on the audience.

Concluding thoughts

There are some positive qualities in the modernist public realm that are not always understood well by those who hanker after the closed, sometimes stuffy and claustrophobic pre-industrial space. As exemplified by literary rendering of Arthur Koestler and Mondrian's painting of Place de la Concord, modernist space acts upon the city at large, encouraging flow, interconnectivity and engagement with the extended context. This view is further extended by the way the public space around Pompidou centre was conceived and the installation work around it was placed. Careful thought is needed in placing buildings or art installations in them. Simple frontality of approach tends to produce situations where architecture and sculptures compete. We should never underestimate the drive towards willful monumentality and predilection for sculptural form in

many prima donna architects of today. The placing of buildings and public art in modern spaces in a symbiotic relation needs a different compositional outlook to which this essay alludes and needs further elaboration. Meaningful statues of leading lights in the developing world, and in particular South Africa, still have a place as art in the public realm but our artists have come up with highly original alternatives to the Western gigantism. In doing so they have challenged the western assumptions that contemporary statues have difficulty in becoming works of art. This we must cherish and actively promote. Art can certainly change how we see a place but a great deal depends on their accurate placing which in fact calls for an understanding of the particular context. When this is done art can help to appreciating places in a new way which the Nobel statues in Cape Town largely do.

Photo credit

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Notes

1. It is sometimes argued by architects who feel that these spaces feel barren without greenery that Renaissance was about domination of nature by man and hence the undervaluing of the presence of trees in public places in Italy. After all, the Renaissance English philosopher, Francis Bacon (1561-1626) argued that nature must be tortured into giving up her secrets. But we must remember that most Italian piazzas of note including the Piazza del Campo in Siena go back to medieval period when the outlook on nature was different.
2. There of course are philosophers such as Adorno and Horkheimer who have argued that wakeful reasoning too can produce its own monsters. Jencks may well regard these blocks as monsters of wakeful reasoning but the point here is that he does not articulate it this way but blindly dismisses modernism as a failure and is dead and buried.

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