

The sublime can be ridiculous: ugly beautiful memorial space: implications for the process of critique

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Discussions of architecture inevitably involve assessments of visual pleasure / displeasure. In relation to contemporary memorial space, such discussions rarely venture into the territory of the negative critique in the phase after construction. Little dialogue occurs in the public domain about anything other than the merits of any new project. The reasons frequently relate to political exigencies. However, there are additional reasons that people seldom elaborate and that may have far-reaching consequences for those who use those spaces to mourn. Even in a memorial space that challenges the educated eye of artists and architects, mourners may experience states that verge on the sublime. Beauty and the sublime in such a context have diverse meanings. That which is visually ugly may have a place that renders them beautiful. With reference to the work of psychoanalytic theorist Donald Winnicott, this paper shows why this situation arises and operates as an exemplar for the apprehension of other designed spaces that some perceive as beautiful, some as downright ugly and others who perceive them to reside in the domain of the sublime.

Key words: sublime, memorial space

Art produces ugly things which frequently become more beautiful with time. Fashion, on the other hand, produces beautiful things which always become ugly with time (Jean Cocteau).

Architectural critique in mainstream journals generally involves a preponderance of comment and analysis in relation to form. Commentators frequently note the relationship between the architecture under investigation and its precursors – especially where that form has a contemporary parallel in another locale. Architectural discourse can include explanation, exploration and positive and negative judgements regarding taste. However, it is rare to find judgements that mark a specific memorial space as fundamentally lacking or constitutive of negative qualities. At least that was so until relatively recently.

Why this culture of critique of memorial spaces has developed in that manner is uncertain; however, discourse relating to several high-profile memorial spaces indicates that negative criticism can potentially cause deep distress to people for whom these spaces and places take on aspects of the sublime. By investigating what this sublimity might mean, through a limited palette of psychoanalytic theory of D.W. Winnicott, in tandem with a brief historical account of the newly emerging critique of memorial spaces, I intend to show that memorial space has several idiosyncratic qualities.

The last twenty-five years of memorial space critique

Until the advent of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, designed by Maya Ying Lin and dedicated in November 1982 (Capasso, 1985; Ehrenhaus and Morris, 1990; Ochsner, 1993; Sturken, 1991, 2002; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, 1991), architectural commentary about memorial space existed predominantly in architectural journals. Articles appearing in journals prior to the construction of that groundbreaking memorial generally focussed on descriptive and historical critiques rather than on the appropriateness or otherwise of a specific form or conceptual driver as it related to mourners. Comments about memorial space were relatively restrictive in their reach and predominantly focussed on visual qualities including form, and to historical precedents rather than to their relationships to such phenomena as grieving, mourning or communal realisation of loss and/or trauma. That is, commentary and discourse tended to

remain silent about functional parameters involving anything other than that which could be photographed or drawn.

Critique in architectural journals is as old as the journals themselves, but only in more recent years has this critique of memorial space become an activity in which the public has taken to participating with gusto. As mentioned in relation to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, public discourse held up the final design development and construction (Anderson, 1985; Campbell, 1983; Clay, 1982). With such a precedent, many public memorial spaces since then have also attracted broad and extensive public comment. Those of greatest import include Eisenman's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe which was finally dedicated in 2005 (Benjamin, 2003; Marcuse, 1998; McKim, 2001; Mournement, 1999; von Butler and Endlich, 1998; Young, 2002). Similarly, a raft of articles appeared in relation to the design for the memorial at the site of the former World Trade Centre in New York (Blake, 2002; Cameron, 2002; Dwyer, 2002, November 12; Emmons, 2002; Johnson and The Associated Press, 2004 January 7; Low, 2004; Richards, 2002).

Trauma goes mainstream & enters the discourse of memorial space

Although not causally linked to the opening up of community involvement in memorial space design practice, there has been a radical shift in acknowledging the after-effects of war and other traumas in the domain of psychiatric and sociological discourse. Much of this research has made its way into the public domain and there are now few people who have not heard of the phrase 'post traumatic stress disorder' or its acronym PTSD. Originally identified and named in relation to military personnel involved in the Vietnam War, it is a widely acknowledged condition that is now viewed as a possible consequence of experiencing any event in which people perceive their lives to be threatened (Friedman, 2003 May 14; Leys, 2000; Norwood, Ursano and Fullerton, 2000; Shay, 1995; Silver, 1985; Silver and Iacono, 1986; Tucker and Trautman, 2000; van der Kolk and van der Hart, 1989). Therefore as a psychiatric diagnostic category of mental disorder, it may be triggered by experiences of rape, combat, assault, natural or manmade disasters and potentially in relation to such events as car accidents (National Center for PTSD, 1991).

By bringing the psychological effects of war into the public gaze through the push for compensation for Vietnam Veterans, there were social consequences in relation to the burgeoning body of literature and a more open discussion of grief, trauma and loss. This medically triggered opening for social sanctioning of speech about the consequences of trauma spilled over into the press, and also into films such as Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 film 'Apocalypse Now' or that of Stanley Kubrick's 1987 'Full Metal Jacket.' Sociological commentator and academic Marita Sturken mentions more than a dozen films and presents powerful descriptions and analyses of the US move towards greater public airing of psychological states of distress (Sturken, 1997a, 1997b) in response to the Vietnam War as well as to the AIDS epidemic.

As the Vietnam Veterans Memorial emerged out of the push and fight by veterans for recognition of the deleterious consequences suffered by their engagement in the Vietnam War, the discussions and debates that raged in relation to medical diagnoses and financial compensation spilled into the debate about the memorial and its design (Clay, 1982; Corn and Morley, 1988; Haines, 2000; Kelly, 1996; Mackenzie, 1997; Mills, 1984; Price, 2001; Swerdlow, 1985). Public debate is now commonplace in relation to the design of most public memorials to large scale events, many of which – like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial – are now decided through publicly open design competitions. Additionally, the process of eliciting designs and of ensuring their public approval means that many design competitions, like that to be built on

the site of the World Trade Center in New York, actually include public consultation as part of the process (Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, 2003).

Memorial space & Winnicott's theory: the capacity to be alone

As stated in the abstract, even in a memorial space that challenges the educated eye of artists and architects, mourners may experience states that verge on the sublime. Beauty and the sublime in such a context have diverse meanings. That which is visually ugly may have a place that renders them beautiful. Likewise, it is possible to be in the presence of an aesthetically pleasing memorial space and yet know that for many visiting, it is cold and lacks a crucial element thereby preventing them from entering the process of mourning or negotiating a path through trauma. To explain why this is so, I present an interpretation of the application of the psychoanalytic theory of Donald Winnicott in relation to the optimal state of being – that of unintegration – a consequence of the capacity to be alone in the presence of an other (Winnicott, 2002 (Paper first presented at an Extra Scientific Meeting of the British Psycho-Analytical Society, July 24 1957)).

According to Winnicott, the capacity to be alone is a psychological achievement and develops paradoxically via the capacity to be alone in the presence of an other. Strictly speaking, Winnicott defines this as the capacity to be alone in the presence of the m/other. That is, Winnicott refers to a person being alone in the presence of someone, who is, in infancy at least, the m/other (primary carer) (Jennifer M. Gamble, 2006; Winnicott, 1988, p. 114).

In the context of the current research, a memorial space as a complex domain of social and psychological elements coalesces in the physical presence on the landscape. To an individual or group visiting such a space, these physical manifestations perform – in a psychological and unconscious sense – as benevolent others who care. That is, there is the tacit presence of a caring environment and for some people there is the tacit presence of those commemorated as well. This sense of a benevolently populated environment operates in a highly significant manner and, as is evident in many of the investigations of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial already cited and my previous studies (Jennifer Margaret Gamble, 1998; Jennifer M. Gamble, 2006). Additionally, in interviews conducted over the last decade with mourners visiting public memorial spaces, it is a frequently noted experience – that of the sensed presence of another – or more specifically with the other. More specifically, the sensed presence of an other often refers to the commemorated person or people and almost as often also involves the sensed presence of a greater other, that some refer to in religious terms – that is as a deity of some sort. This is, to many people, an experience of the sublime, that which defies clarity and reason and that which goes beyond the tangible.

Of particular note, amongst the recorded interviews, and expressed frequently in information gathered over the last six months, is a pattern that begins with the experiencing of disbelief at loss that gradually develops into a sense of 'realisation' of the loss and the trauma. Often, but not always, people suggest that it is after the realisation – the literal comprehension of the reality of the situation at a deep level – that they experience a presence of some form of benevolent other at a memorial space. For some of the interviewed people, this related to a deity of some description and to about three quarters, this related to the sensed presence of the person commemorated on or in the memorial space visited. It is important to note that not everyone who visits a public memorial space has this experience and for many, the dashed expectation of such an event can be deeply distressing. For example, a man in his early thirties continued to visit a public memorial space in which his father was commemorated. He impressed upon me that his father 'wasn't there... he should have been there...but he wasn't.'

This experience caused him a great deal of anguish with which he is still coping some eighteen months later. It is the stated reason for his abandonment of his religion – a formerly major influence in his life. For this person, the experience of visiting the public memorial space was one of being alone – literally – rather than that of being alone in the presence of an other. In fact, the sense that he communicated was not merely of being alone but of being abandoned. Despite the apparently splendidly designed public memorial space visited, it failed to perform beyond an appearance of physical appeal that some would explain as beauty. For this man, the space is empty and therefore, ugly in extremis as it fails his expectations for its very reason for its existence – providing him with a sense of connection to his deceased father.

What I suggest by focusing on Winnicott's theory of the experience of being alone in the presence of another is that such a state can occur within public memorial space, and when it does, the person so-involved experiences that which many would classify as an experience of the sublime.

Alone in the presence of an other: the potential sublimity of memorial space

Were the experience of the sublime tied to the visual and formal appeal of a designed memorial space, then judging the apparent effectiveness of a memorial space – to provide some form of solace through a sensed presence – would be relatively simple. However, as indicated, the experience of being alone in the presence of an other in memorial space relates to conditions that are not necessarily dependent on visual aesthetics. As indicated, interviews with people over many years have resulted in the collection of many anecdotes relating to memorial space. Together with a sweep of chat rooms on the internet – that relate to grief and memorial space – as well as to the careful analysis of documentary footage of interviews with people in memorial space; it is evident that a much lauded contemporary architectural style does not secure the development of such experiences by those mourners who visit a memorial space. Indeed, there appear to be several highly regarded public memorial spaces that appear to attract accolades from other designers but receive virtually no positive feedback from mourners who visit them.

Several of the memorial spaces constructed in Canberra, Australia, over the last decade were designs selected as the result of design competitions. However, interviews conducted with people visiting some of them – for purposes related to mourning rather than tourism, regard them as nothing other than 'shallow missed opportunities', as stated by a man in his sixties who has friends commemorated on several of the memorial spaces situated in Anzac Parade – the main public memorial thoroughfare in the city.

Conversely, some of the people interviewed this year, in relation to memorial spaces that I find dubious in a formal architectural sense, appear to facilitate experiences of the sublime that almost defy belief. To explain, some of the memorial spaces/objects about which I interviewed people were either rocks with plaques and sundry objects attached or were what I perceived to be ugly brick walls onto which people had applied plaques and figurative representations. The memorial space/objects in this context were stylistically closer to kitsch than to anything to which an architect or professional designer could relate.

And the problem is? Critique in the danger zone

As suggested, the significance of a memorial space to mourners relates more to their experiences of the sublime – being alone in the presence of an other – than it does to the perceived visual aesthetic of any given form. Therefore, the architectural or design-oriented critique of any

given memorial space may be in direct opposition to its perceived sublimity or otherwise to those visiting the space commemorating friends or relatives. This is not problematic in the sense that any designed space may be more suitable for some people than for others. However, the intensity of affect associated with memorial space and the perceived presence of an other or others in the space means that negative criticism may be perceived to be aimed at what to some people is a very sacred space/place and to the named perceived sacred presences.

To cause ‘feathers to be ruffled’ in respect of any designed structure is not unusual in relation to the negative rating of a design. What is unusual, perhaps unique, in the instance of memorial space, is the heightened level of affect that adheres to any memorial space – that is a space and/or place that relates to loss, to trauma and to lost others. Additionally, to critique a space in which perceived higher beings inhabit is also to potentially challenge and negatively criticise people’s spiritual experiences. Given that memorial spaces/places ostensibly exist to remember, to commemorate and to facilitate the development of some form of realisation of grief and loss and with it a form of solace, this is an extremely problematic situation where a memorial space is judged to be below standard in relation to its visual aesthetics or formal design.

Application of the theory of psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott to analysis of memorial space suggests that the affective burden associated with memorial space may operate to produce a form of identification with those spaces and places such that there is a collapse of identification. What this means is that people negotiate a pathway through mourning and the comprehension of trauma through complex means that entail a process that involves paradox, emergence and realisation during which the memorial space may become a temporary stand-in for the person/ people commemorated and for parts of the cosmos deemed to be larger than the self. It is important to note too that there is often a phase in which people idealise the people commemorated.

Although I have investigated the analysis of memorial space in relation to Winnicott’s theory extensively elsewhere (Jennifer M. Gamble, 2006), nowhere do I or others discuss the implications of applying this theory to architectural critique. As with any other form of architectural design, memorial space can benefit from critique that situates it historically and within a situated context of event, temporality and geophysical and social environment. However, as indicated in reference to the work of Winnicott, for at least some of the people utilising any given memorial space, any negative or positive criticism may be interpreted as a very personal affront or conversely, a strong form of social sanctioning of the people commemorated and/or of any other sensed presences.

To single out memorial space as being above the benefits of critique is patently ridiculous, yet the distress caused by negative criticism may be an unwelcome burden for a person or community in grief. It is this affective quality that potentially poses dilemmas. For example, in relation to the critique of most architectural design, the degree of affective investment rarely reaches the extremities that it does in relation to memorial space. Unlike most other architectural renditions on the landscape, memorial space is, by definition, referring to loss, to death and often to traumatic experience on a grand scale. Critique of such spaces and places in a formal sense must therefore take place amidst the cloud of negative affect associated with the event/s and with an ocean of positive affect associated with those commemorated and potentially with revered deities. The process of critiquing memorial space must therefore occur in an atmosphere that takes account of the levels of affect and sacredness associated with them and perhaps requires a moderation of the forms it might take and possibly the arenas in which it occurs. As the ongoing push for public memorialisation continues to accelerate, there may need to be a discussion about the role of critique specifically in relation to aspects of its

functioning that goes beyond its formal qualities. Perhaps in this way, architectural discourse might take the opportunity to expand its horizons into a domain that re-appropriates language and understandings of the ugly, the beautiful and the sublime.

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