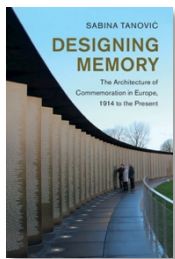


[Review] *Designing Memory: The Architecture of Commemoration in Europe, 1914 to the Present*, by Sabina Tanović



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On February 22, 2023, two days before the one-year anniversary of Russia's invasion in Ukraine, the United Nations Human Rights Office released a statement denouncing targeted attacks, not only against human lives but also against Ukrainian heritage sites, institutions, and objects of national significance. Calculated destruction of Ukrainian culture must cease, UN experts insisted: "Let us be clear: Ukrainian people have a right to their identity. Nobody can violate this right" (Xanthaki, Shaheed, and Ghana 2023). Underneath this message is the belief that attacks on architectural edifices can function as direct acts of dehumanization. This raises the question: what heritage markers could elicit such loyalty that their destruction would equal the violation of a society's collective identity? The United Nations statement listed these places, beginning with memorials and monuments.

In a world marred by violence and trauma, architects consider how they might contribute to individual and collective healing. *Designing Memory*, by Sabina Tanović, provides a relevant analysis of memorial architecture for our times and is a valuable resource for designers engaged in the work of commemoration.

When Tanović writes of the commemoration of victims of violence, her posture is somber yet perceptive. She demonstrates a moral commitment to holistic, thorough research in her examination of architecture as an "act of representation, [which] touches upon the essence of architectural creation and the question of how space mediates some of the most intricate social and cultural processes" (Tanović 2019, 1). The book is grounded in Tanović's own experience designing commemorative architecture in Sarajevo following the aftermath of its siege and destruction from 1992 to 1996. Her encounter with the Balkan city's architectural wounds shape her understanding of the "role of architects as creators of order in devastated environments" (Tanović 2019, 2). Tanović portrays memorialization as an act that balances the acceptance of terror and the rejection of its hold on an individual or society. "Hence, just like memory, architectural spaces can be aggressive and soothing at the same time," Tanović says. "Exploring the space between the two opposites is precisely where we can find the potential for the future" (Tanović 2019, 234). Memorialization requires sensitivity to the people who have experienced trauma and to the authenticity of the places that bear the physical scars of terror. Without careful attention to each facet of memorialization, the intervention of architects may result in memorials that are disconnected from people and places.

Drawing insights from history, psychology, anthropology, and sociology, Tanović situates memorialization within a global, interdisciplinary discussion of remembrance, identity, and loss. Her study is not intended to be exhaustive; rather, it's an invitation into a wider dialogue concerning the array of factors to be considered in the commemoration of the victims of violence in modern times. Instead of providing a complete explanation of memorials throughout the world, Tanović focuses primarily on commemorative works designed in Europe and the United States from the world wars through today. The concentrated scope allows the author to engage the subject matter with specificity, suggesting tangible applications. By demonstrating the richness of analysis for a particular context, Tanović invites us to employ this model of analysis within our own contexts.

A growing interest in memory studies is evidenced by the proliferation of Western literature, art, and architecture which wrestle with the past's presence in modern society. Tanović references what Andreas Huyssen has termed a *memory boom* to describe the context in which people increasingly want monuments and memorials to function as “major modes of aesthetic, historical, and spatial expression” (quoted in Tanović 2019, 72). Within this social environment, the architecture of remembrance is appealing for its symbolic affirmation of permanence in the face of rapid technological advances in our media-driven culture. Yet, if it's true that Western societies express increasing concern for places of memory, then what might our interest in memory studies reveal about the underlying qualities of our collective identity? Furthermore, how can architecture, as a form of “living history,” catalyze meaningful responses to the violence and destruction we encounter in the world? While the political association of memorials and monuments is an ever-present reality throughout history, Tanović expands our understanding of commemoration with an architectural analysis of how and why memorials emerge out of certain places and times. Her aim is not to elucidate the national motivations for commemoration but to unearth the meaning that designers of the past decade have sought to convey through the language of memorial architecture. Tangentially, Tanović invites us to consider why places of remembrance resonate with us at this time. Through her analysis, she contributes to what historians Reinhart Koselleck and James E. Young have called the “texture of memory” (quoted in Tanović 2019, 13). Architects and designers contribute to the field of memory studies through the textured cultivation of authenticity and the representation of memory in places of remembrance.

In the first chapter of *Designing Memory*, Tanović situates the reader within a historical and theoretical survey of commemorative architecture in Europe and the United States since 1914. Through the integration of theoretical commentary and case studies, Tanović directs our attention to cultural shifts from triumphal commemoration toward projects which welcome quiet reflection and active response to traumatic memory. Thus, the construction of collective identity and remembrance has come to be regarded as a necessary component to memorial architecture alongside the thoughtful confrontation of violence. A transition away from literal representations in memorials can likewise be observed in the survey of works, accentuating the contemporary preference for abstract forms that value the liminal ritual over the object. In this way, architecture functions as a signifier to transcend materiality and communicate a loss or a presence which may not be immediately perceived. The curated survey of commemorative projects presented in the first chapter allows us to deepen our understanding of memorial architecture. We see it not merely as an assemblage of formal elements or as a political statement but as a thoughtful invitation into the Janus-faced narratives which give way to collective and individual response.

The second chapter focuses on the duality of commemorative architecture in its representational, psychological, and experiential confrontations with death. As edifices of terror and healing, memorials enable

visitors to enter the mourning process by providing a spatial framework for ritual and reflection. Tanović examines the psycho-emotional tension between trauma and restoration in the production of memorial spaces that mediate collective mourning. Jay Winter emphasizes the need for these places: “the activity of remembrance, and the creation of places of collective experience, is irrepressible, expressing fundamental truths about the need of ordinary people, of many faces and of none, to face the emptiness, the nothingness of loss in war, together” (quoted in Tanović 2019, 78–79). In this way, memorials carefully draw us into the sublime so that we may return renewed and alert.

In the remaining chapters, Tanović guides the reader through a series of case studies which shift the focus of the discussion away from a theoretical and representational analysis and toward common issues in practice today. The selected works include memorials dedicated to the victims of terrorist attacks, Holocaust memorial museums, and projects completed for the centenary of the First World War. Overall, the value of this resource is in Tanović’s skilled integration of multidisciplinary perspectives and modes of investigation to form a nuanced understanding of commemorative architecture in practice. The framework of the analysis and the principles gleaned from the case studies are worthwhile starting points for architects and designers concerned with architecture’s responsibility to victims of contemporary violence and war.

Robert Bevan uses the concept of “Memoricide” to signify the destruction of heritage artifacts which function as signifiers for the collective identity of another. Memorials operate as material elements in which people may find stability—real or imagined—and communal belonging after turmoil. Thus, to the extent that the “deliberate destruction of an architectural monument aims at humiliating the other and coercing forgetting,” the attacks against cultural sites such as monuments and memorials can be said to “go hand in hand with the dehumanization of that particular people” (Tanović 2019, 88). The atrocities taking place in Ukraine are mortifying but not strategically innovative. In the words of Bevan, “[t]he continuing fragility of civilized society and decency is echoed in the fragility of its monuments” (quoted in Tanović 2019, 88). In *Designing Memory*, Sabina Tanović humbly, yet with incisive precision, examines the depth, complexity, and responsibility with which architects must reckon in the process of designing commemorative architecture. If the destruction of a memorial can be considered an act of dehumanization, then the process of creating places of remembrance can certainly participate in strengthening the collective identity and the processes that facilitate holistic healing.

Reference

Xanthaki, Alexandra, Farida Shaheed, and Nazila Ghanea. 2023. "Targeted Destruction of Ukraine's Culture Must Stop: UN Experts." Geneva: United Nations.

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