

Memorials

There is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism also taints the manner in which it is transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He considers it as his task to brush history against the grain.

Walter Benjamin

Some cities, at the insistence of mankind, seem destined to preserve the memory of that which perpetuates; the history of a nation, its cultural identity or its religion. However, the event itself gets lost forever in that determination to apprehend time and impose a memory. But how can we talk of the *petrified memory* if in the process of monumentalisation we run the risk of losing its evocative nature? Monuments, representations of history, are cultural objects loaded with ideology which act as a practice run, like a repetition of a single past coming together as an element of symbolic violence and imposing its viewpoint. However, the city also carries a memory, a latent memory. What took place is engraved on the city. Interrupted discourses, overlapping in time, which take us back to the past.

Jerusalem, Berlin or Washington, capital cities with a very different way of revealing the remnants of their history, the mark of time. With this project we come closer, as if *brushing history against the grain*, to some of the monuments, the memorials, but also to smaller fragments of memory which are inscribed on these cities, with the idea of establishing a reflection, through images, of the memorial, and its purpose as a resting place for the memory. When we talk of places of memory - an essential part of our work we perceive the dangers of monumentalising a place or a fact. And there is a great difference between the memory which, by nature, is open to change and evolution, remembering and forgetting, or reinterpretation, and the memorial, which, with the power it attains, seems more interested in being seen than revealing what it actually represents.

I

Between 1949 and 1967, a thin strip of land on Mount Zion was established as no man's land. It is paradoxical, given that for thousands of years, every single part of Jerusalem has been fought over, claimed and instituted as a great memorial. Every corner of the city, every sound, is a sign loaded with symbolism which tries to silence others. And, far from achieving this, together they form a simultaneous, deafening chorus, destined to be repeated eternally. Fragments of what are parts of different moments trapped in the structure of the city which, repeated over time, seem to be heard by those for whom they are intended.

In Jerusalem we come closer to those places identified and upheld as holy sites by Christians, Jews or Muslims, but also to those relating to more recent history: the end of British rule, the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Six Day War or the assassination of King Abdullah I of Jordan. Holy places for some, due to events told or seen at a certain moment of ancient history, while for others, places marked by highly significant events taking place in a very different moment in time. Everyman's place. Noman's land.

II

History is marked with monuments – large and small – which capture the memory. In the words of Benjamin: “He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. This marks the tone and the attitude of true memories. He must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the matter itself it only a deposit, a stratum, which yields only to the most meticulous examination of what constitutes the real treasure hidden within the earth”.

In a need for reconciliation with, and responsibility for, history, the marks of the past are visible in the city of Berlin, *scattered as one scatters the earth*, wounds which bear witness to the horror, in an attempt to restore the sense of one of the great cultural monuments of our time. On this occasion, our attention turns, through the fragment, in an attempt to *bring back to the roots*, to those places in Berlin which refer to a specific historical moment: the holocaust.

III

The original layout of the city of Washington, designed in 1781 by Pierre Charles L’Enfant, included a *grand avenue*, which was not constructed at first. The idea of creating a large linear garden was revived a century later, resulting in the National Mall, a monumental area, in the European style, which followed the concept of beauty as common property, a place for the creation of civil and moral virtue over the people. Today, the complex contains a number of memorials devoted, in a way, to “preserving” the memory of the American nation and to telling its story. But *historical truth* is fleeing, and the moment that glows from the image of the past is lost in its representation, and, like a fixed image, it remains frozen in time.

In Washington, based on the concept of building a national identity, we visited the streets mapped out in the original city design. Looking for those spaces where you find the need to sustain and compact recent history, feeding the memory, where the photographic documents of the xix century act as a model for restoring the main scenes of its history.

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