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# Memory and Place: Two Case Studies

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Fictions abound in the creation of memorials. Every memorial, every monument is a kind of re-creation—of a person, a deed, or an event—that seeks to bind future generations to a moral lesson, if not an actual truth.

In the case of heroic events, no matter how difficult, this would seem straightforward: resurrect the memory and convert it to architectural form that appropriately dignifies it. “Remember this,” the memorial would seem to say. “This was important—others sacrificed something of themselves here for you.”

In such cases, fiction may be present only as hyperbolic aggrandizement necessary to secure moral obligation. But when the need arises to commemorate events associated primarily with senseless tragedy, the path toward remembrance is often less clear. In the case of the Oklahoma City Federal Building, a field of empty chairs was used to mark where ordinary people fell victim to an attack on a government whose connection to them was merely as an employer.

In other circumstances, a tragedy may be so painful as to require the complete erasure of its memory. In this case, later generations may resurrect what their forebears needed to forget. In the light of time, they may be able to give those events proper place at the table of memory. This may even take the form of a warning: “Remember this. Your forebears were shameful. Don’t be like them.”

In yet other instances, however, the event may be so painful that, like the victim of some terrible abuse, the culture may need to protect itself by burying it altogether. In such circumstances, the act of memorialization may substitute whole-cloth fiction for the recall of actual events.

Often, some aspect of all three modes of representation exists in a memorial site. To explore these processes, two cases are presented here. The first embodies a classic case of fictional aggrandizement. In the second, the memory of significant events and suffering remains suppressed, and a new memory, aimed at future aspirations, has been installed in its place. In both cases, fiction has been used to reveal a greater truth, from which a lesson is forged for generations to come.

**Opposite:** The Lincoln Memorial, designed by Henry Bacon, at the terminus of the Capitol mall, provides a touchstone for the nation’s conscience. It presents a much different view of Lincoln from that which prevailed at the time of his death. Photos by Carol M. Highsmith.

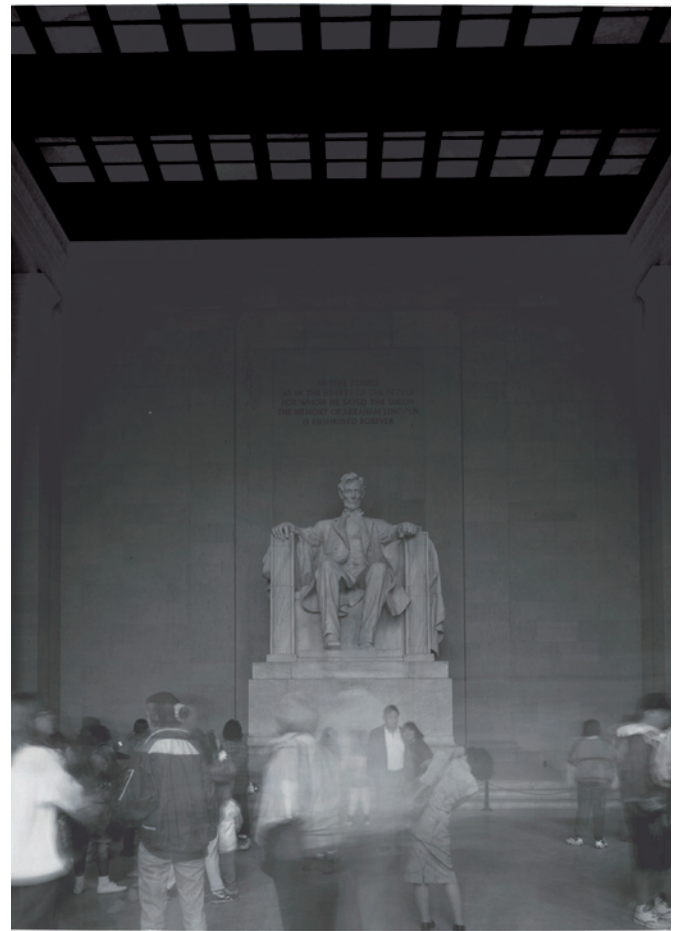
## The Creation of Place: The Lincoln Memorial

According to the art historian Alois Riegl, “a monument in its oldest and most original sense is a human creation, erected for the specific purpose of keeping single human deeds or events (or a combination thereof) alive in the minds of future generations.”<sup>1</sup> To be forgotten, to leave no trace of our existence, is a difficult thought to bear. As time moves us inexorably to a kind of disappearance, we want to believe we mattered in more than our material presence. We build, we write, have children, and construct wills. We leave an inheritance, we give a portion of our wealth to have buildings named after us—all to be remembered, and so to keep our lives important even after our last breath has been drawn.

The ancient Mediterranean world believed that without burial within native soil and without proper rites, the soul wandered eternally. Fustel de Coulanges wrote that in that world the very security of the community depended upon the correct observation of burial rites, upon which the welfare of the family of the departed depended.<sup>2</sup> As the family grew to a tribe and the tribe to a state, such concepts were extended. Creon’s failure to properly honor Polynices, for example, brought disaster upon his house, and by extension to Thebes.<sup>3</sup>

By extension, the contemporary monument asks that we remember something important to the well-being of the whole. But in collective remembrance we form a bond not only with the present community but also with communities. This projection of memory forces awareness not only of the presence of others and also the presence of time, locating an eternal present between the past and the future. Every community must contain an element of social order that reminds members of their obligations to others, both past and future. At its core, the monument is not intended to convey of pleasant memories, or even heroic deeds. Instead obligates future generations to hold to the lessons we leave for them. Remember this, we say. This is important.

The transfer of collective memory from individual memory, from subjectively held experience to collective representation, is a complex task. But for a monument to perform it, its message must be as clear to those in the future as it is to us. Traditionally, the language of the classical monument spoke openly to this end. Commemorative sculpture in public space is at least five thousand years old, and for half that period its formal language, derived from the Mediterranean world, served as the basis for almost all monuments and memorials. Substitute anyone or anything for Abraham Lincoln in



Henry Bacon's temple at the end of the National Mall, and most of us will assume it is important.

Because of this immediate and general accessibility, inscriptions are needed to explain the specific lessons those who constructed it intended for us. As he sits in his chair, facing the U.S. Capitol, Lincoln is accompanied by three such inscriptions. Directly above is a dedication: "In this temple, as in the hearts of the people for whom he saved the union, the memory of Abraham Lincoln is enshrined forever." Flanking are two inscriptions from his own speeches: on the north, his second inaugural address; and on the south, the Gettysburg Address. The words of the latter capture, perhaps as well as any since the funeral oration of Pericles, the concise notion of the classical monument.

The Gettysburg Address was delivered on Cemetery Hill on November 19, 1863, only four months after the bloodiest battle in the American Civil War. Its occasion was the dedication of a small memorial where Union

defenses had withstood the disastrous charge of General Pickett, and where some of the Union dead had been interred. The ceremonies that day included a two-hour oration by Edward Everett, former president of Harvard and the most famous speaker of his generation. It began, "Standing beneath this serene sky with the mighty Alleghenies dimly towering." It ended with a quote from Pericles's funeral oration: "'The whole earth is the sepulcher of illustrious men'. Down to the latest period of recorded time, in the glorious annals of our common country there will be no brighter page than that which relates the battles at Gettysburg."

Certainly, Gettysburg would have seemed a likely candidate for the fulfillment of Pericles's statement wrapped in Everett's rhetorical dress. In three days, beginning July 1, 1863, 23,000 Union and 20,000 Confederate soldiers had lost their lives. Double that number had been wounded. America had never before, nor has it ever since,

experienced such a loss. When Everett returned to his seat, Lincoln rose and addressed the crowd for exactly two minutes. A condensed passage of his short speech is worth quoting here:

*We are met to dedicate a portion of that great battlefield as the final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live.... It is for us, the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far, so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us....*

Here in a few words the purpose of the monument is sealed. On a specific occasion a contract was entered into, a covenant was made. Future generations will remember “not what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.”

The speech was so short that the photographer assigned to document it did not get his equipment set up in time to take a picture. And the contrast between Everett’s rhetorical might and Lincoln’s sparse words left the audience more than disappointed. The following day, the *Chicago Times* wrote, “The cheek of every American must tingle with shame as he reads the silly, flat, and dishwater utterances of the man who has to be pointed out to intelligent foreigners as the President of the United States.”

Although Congress formed the Lincoln Memorial Association in 1867, just three years after Lincoln was slain, it was not until 1914 that Henry Bacon’s design was approved and construction began. But when the structure was dedicated May 30, 1922, it contained the majestic, nineteen-foot-high figure of a seated Lincoln by Daniel Chester French. Carved from 28 blocks of white Georgia marble, the statue presented a Lincoln very different from the one who delivered the two-minute speech so criticized in 1863. French’s Lincoln was the healer of the nation, the wise forefather who endured the greatest crisis in the young nation’s history; the emancipator of the slaves, whose words, now carved in stone, would hold the nation to its obligation to justice. No American monument thus far created in our capital or anywhere else holds such authority.

More than a part of that authority is derived from its site as the terminus of the landfill that extended L’Enfant’s great axis from the Capitol outward. French’s Lincoln faces the Capitol, reflecting to the present the covenant

of the past. Here, on the platform of the memorial steps, one hundred years after Lincoln delivered his Gettysburg Address, Martin Luther King, Jr. stood and held a mirror to the nation. No other place could possibly have served as the touchstone of a nation’s conscience as he spoke these words:

*Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.*

Here was the covenant. Here was what Lincoln could not possibly have imagined, but what his words at Gettysburg hoped for: “It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us....” The contract entered into at Gettysburg was made manifest in the stones of the Lincoln Memorial—an architectural stage set for the transformation of the Republic through its own concept of justice. Make good on your covenant, he told the nation. Make your actions as real as your words:

*When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.*

The recasting of Lincoln and the resurrection of his two-minute address at Gettysburg became the symbol of a nation’s promise of justice. The ability of a place to create such powerful symbols allows them to act as a mirror. The mirror reflects not only a national consciousness, but its very conscience as well. As such, a thread between past and future is revealed, uniting the present with the past, pointing to a hopeful future. This power was not lost on President Obama as he stood facing Lincoln and the site of King’s national dream on January 20 and said:

*And because we have tasted the bitter swill of civil war and segregation and emerged from that dark chapter stronger and more united, we cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself; and that America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace.*

**Opposite:** View of the Luxor Obelisk from the Tuileries, on axis with the Champs Élysées. Photograph by author, 1980.



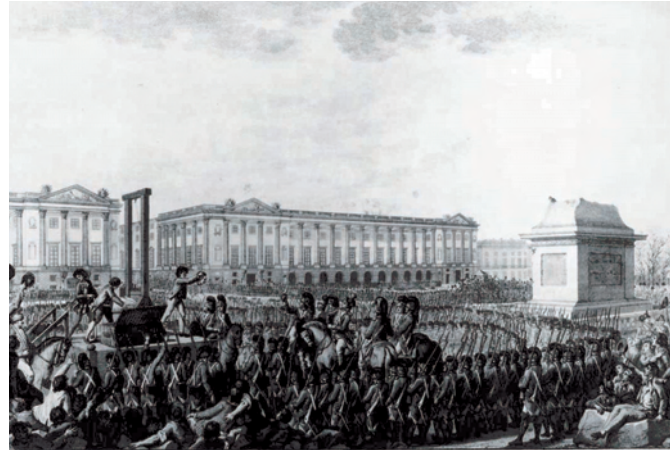
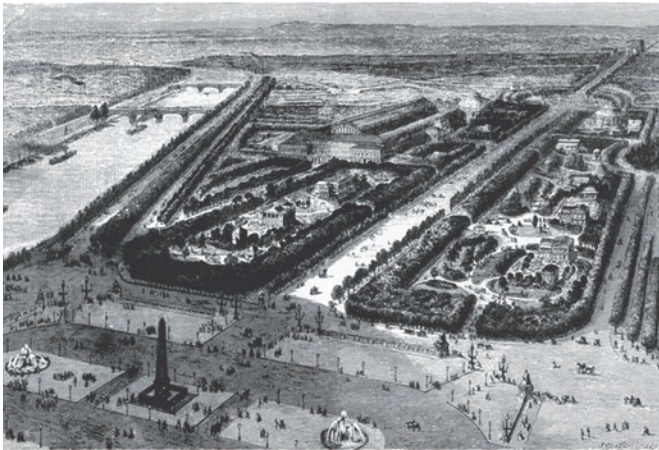
### The Re-Covering of Place: Place de la Concorde

Like a spouse making amends for a grievous act, there are places where the original event has been so camouflaged that it presents an entirely new, fictional, memory. Just to the west of the Jardin des Tuileries, in what is now known as the Place de la Concorde in Paris, an obelisk was erected in 1836. Originally carved from Egyptian granite three millennia before, it had once stood guard along with its twin at a temple entrance built by Ramses II at Luxor. It had been dug out of the sand in 1831 by a French naval engineer named Jean Baptiste Apollinaire Lebas, who subsequently secured permission from the ruler of Egypt, Mohammed Ali, to have it donated to the “people of France.”

The obelisk stood 75 feet tall and weighed in at 227 tons. It took two months to get it on board the ship *Luxor*, and another three years before Lebas successfully re-erected it in Paris. On its present base is an inscription describing this heroic feat. The dates 1831–1836 are also significant because they coincide with the establishment of the constitutional monarchy under Louis-Phillipe, which followed the failure of the “July monarchy” of Charles X to secure equilibrium between the fragments of Napoleonic France, the *ancien regime*, and the Jacobin desire for republican government.

This was neither the first nor the only monument to be erected on this Place, and it was not the first time it had been renamed Place de la Concorde.<sup>4</sup> In its most famous incarnation, it had been known as the Place de la Révolution, and had held the guillotine that beheaded more than 1,300 people between 1793 and 1795. Among those publicly executed were King Louis XVI, Marie-Antoinette, Danton, Robespierre, and even Lavoisier, the father of modern chemistry. The Committee of Public Safety was nothing if not thorough in compiling its list of enemies of the state. Its rate of executions was astonishing: almost two people, every day, for two years. It was said that the smell of blood was so strong that a herd of cattle refused to cross the Place.

The execution of the king came early in this Reign of Terror. On January 21, 1793, Louis XVI, King of France, was strapped face down to a board and beheaded. One eyewitness reported that it took two tries, and that the executioner, Charles Henri Sanson, had ordered a drum roll on the second attempt to muffle the painful cry of the deposed king after the first blade failed to cut clean through.<sup>5</sup> The huge crowd, gathered as collective eyewitness to the end of monarchy, pressed forward as the second blade fell, many with handkerchiefs outstretched to retrieve the last sample of French royal blood.<sup>6</sup>



The origin and later history of this Place is worth knowing. Originally the site of a canal, it had been leveled and the canal partially filled under the direction of André LeNotre, in 1667. The goal then was to extend the central axis of the Jardin des Tuileries to the horizon line at the crest of Butte Chaillot. By 1740, Louis XV had also ordered trees planted along the avenues extending up this slope, creating the Champs Élysées. To commemorate this act of public improvement, an equestrian statue of the king was erected at the center of the new Place.

The statue, however, clearly needed a more dignified home than the existing ill-defined crossroads between the Tuileries and the Champs Élysées. A competition for a design to enclose the Place was held in 1755. Won by Jacques-Ange Gabriel, the new Place de Louis XV came into form between 1755 and 1774. The memory of the old canal was retained by means of a rectangular boundary channel, chamfered at the corners and breached by six bridges. The equestrian statue became the focus of the Place, situated in its center at the main cross axis at the intersection of the Avenue des Champs Élysées and a new street, the Rue Royal.<sup>7</sup>

**Above left:** Bird's-eye view, Place de la Concorde, c. 1901.

**Above right:** Execution of Louis XVI, January 21, 1793. The empty podium on the right had previously supported an equestrian statue of Louis XV. It would have been the last thing the king witnessed before his death. The Hotel Crillon is in the background on the left; its twin in the right background housed the Naval Ministry. Engraving by Berthault, presented to the National Convention 1793. Source: Museum of the French Revolution, Paris, 83.319.

**Opposite:** Place de la Concorde, Paris. View to the Madeleine. Hotel Crillon is on the left. Photograph by Eric Pouhier, December 2005.

It was ironic, if not proper, that Louis XV's son would meet his fate on a platform erected just to the east of the place where this commemorative statue had once been installed (at the time, it had been removed and only its pedestal remained). But after the revolution, attempts were made to erase these memories. The Place de la Révolution suffered a series of transformations and several changes of name: Place de la Concorde, Place Louis XV again, Place Louis XVI, Place de la Chartres, and finally Place de la Concorde once more—with the obelisk to symbolize the end of a troubled era. The architect Jacques Hittorf completed the last redesign by flanking the obelisk with fountains and adding statues at each of its eight corners to represent other large French cities: Lille, Strasbourg, Lyon, Marseille, Bordeaux, Nantes, Brest, and Rouen. Thus, the Place de la Concorde was established as the center of a new, unified France.

Given the events that occurred on this site, it is unclear why an obelisk would have seemed appropriate. What was its significance for France or for Louis Phillippe? Did the hieroglyphs that no one could read contain information important to a clearer understanding of the concept of constitutional monarchy? Did Louis Phillippe imagine descent not from the House of Bourbon but from Egyptian pharaohs? Was there hope that in a new secularized France conditioned by Rousseau and Voltaire's Enlightenment an ancient Egyptian sun god, Ra, long in exile, would look favorably upon the beleaguered nation?

The answer to all is, of course, no. The obelisk was selected precisely because it represented nothing specific beyond its palpable antiquity and its similitude to objects arranged forcefully in Rome by the Counter Reformation Pope Sixtus V. If the positioning of obelisks of great



antiquity could represent the triumph of the Roman Church over the pagan world, why could not the erection of an obelisk in Paris represent a New France? Long emptied of its original symbolic value, the obelisk, in its authentic lack of authenticity, represented the fiction that France, and especially this Place, could overcome the memory of horror. Its placement and the renaming of the space represented no event, no person, no deed. Rather, in this erasure, the Place was situated in its immediate present, pointing to a hopeful future.

Nowhere in the Place de la Concorde today does the memory of its earlier incarnation reside. No sign points to its variegated past. It is, in short, not a monument to the recovery of place, but to the covering over of events that the France of Louis Phillipe would rather we forget.

### Places of Recovery

In the recovery of place, a specific memory must be projected. Such memories themselves do not of necessity make a place; nor do they reside entirely latent within it. The monument must take its place within a public framework that securely threads its course between past and future.

What point is there in simply looking backwards? The memory of a person, or a deed, or an event that we believe important must be projected forward. The monument or

memorial is thus always a projection that seeks to obligate the future to a specific lesson. To do otherwise is to lock the future into an eternal present within which nothing is to be learned.

### Notes

1. Alois Riegl, "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin," Kurt Forster and Diane Ghirardo, trans., *Oppositions*, 25 (Fall 1982).
2. Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. 15–17.
3. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, trans., *Sophocles*, Vol. II, "Antigone" (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Library, 1994).
4. Napoleon had made an earlier attempt to rename it. But without its complete refounding, without a complete purge of its former self, it could not be fully reborn as a symbol of a new beginning.
5. Henry Sanson, ed., *Memoirs of the Sansons*, Vol. II, (London: 1876).
6. David Andress, *The Terror: The Merciless War for Freedom in Revolutionary France* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, year), p. 147.
7. The composition was completed after a new church, the Madeleine was commissioned in 1764 to terminate the Rue Royal in axial dialogue with the statue of the king. At the north end, flanking the Rue Royal, two magnificent identical stone buildings were also constructed to reinforce the strength of its north side and isolate the statue in double dialogue with the Avenue des Champs Élysées and the Madeleine.