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[01]

Good afternoon.

As the session chair has said, my name is Jeremy Kargon, and I am by training and by disposition a practicing architect from Baltimore, Maryland. This presentation – “Changing Monuments and Monumentality” – evolved from a workshop proposal intended for a community-based event, the purpose of which was to build among Baltimoreans a greater awareness about city monuments.

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Like other older cities both in North America and abroad, Baltimore has a rich collection of artistically significant sculptures and memorials which, unfortunately, embody all too well Robert Musil’s wonderfully arch comment: “There is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument.” Nevertheless, my intention was to challenge local residents to consider ways in which their *current* political or social identity might affect their relationship with the legacy of these historical monuments.

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The first monument which came to mind was a Baltimore statue to Roger Taney, who was the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court at the time of Lincoln’s election in 1860. Taney was responsible for the *Dred Scot* decision of 1857, in which Taney argued that no person of African descent, whether slave or free, could be considered a citizen under the Constitution of the United States. Taney’s statue sits in Baltimore’s most prominent urban space, Mt. Vernon, and shares that space with statues of Lafayette, John Eager Howard, and George Washington, whose figure stands atop the column of his well-known monument.

Taney’s actions during the Civil War were considered treasonable by Unionists. Furthermore, the population of Baltimore today is 65% African-American. What should the City do with a statue honoring an historical figure who famously denied their ancestors’ right to be citizens? Should the city just remove the statue? Should they add an explanatory plaque to the monument? Should they, in fact, do anything?

Most importantly: Does anybody actually care?

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Well, I believe that Baltimoreans do have reason to look twice at this otherwise “invisible” monument, as well as many others. For it turns out that there is an enormous critical literature on the contemporary re-evaluation of historical monuments. Not surprisingly, it is the topic of the Confederacy and memorials to the Confederate cause which has through the years attracted the most attention in the United States. The extensive historical record has encouraged, paradoxically, widely-varying interpretations about the Civil War, especially concerning the values of the men who have been memorialized since that time.

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In addition, much of the debate is essentially identity-based, and so one’s value of certain monuments and not others correlates strongly with one’s family political history. This picture illustrates the poles of public identity in the context of the United State’s persisting racial conflict, with a ceremony near the African American Civil War Memorial, at the top, and an annual birthday ceremony for Robert E. Lee at the site of Baltimore’s Lee/Jackson monument, which I’ll describe more fully in a moment. Of course, many other memorial themes world-wide are just as controversial. But among all of them, one can see five general approaches among the many proposals for dealing with historical monuments of a controversial nature.

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Four of the alternatives might be characterized as Removal, Re-contextualization, “Musealization,” and Counter-Speech. The fifth is to do nothing at all, itself a legitimate and time-honored tactic, especially when public consensus is hard to reach.

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The meaning of “Removal” is self-evident: One simply removes the monument from public view and discards it.

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“Re-contextualization” may involve removal to a different location or else reconfiguration of a monument’s existing site to provide a new perspective on its meaning. The contrast illustrated here is somewhat extreme, but very real; and it should make clear the point that the symbolic content of a thing depends significantly upon its physical and cultural surroundings.

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“Musealization,” (which is, believe me, a word that I did not make up!) means the placement of any artifact, including a monument, in a controlled environment, in order to provide historical and theoretical information as a guide to the artifact’s interpretation. A museum building is an obvious example, but this open-air museum in Hungary is a wonderful – and only partially tongue-in-cheek -- illustration.

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On the other hand, the meaning of “Counter Speech” might appear intuitively obvious. Counter-Speech might refer to either material or act-based interventions, usually adjacent to the existing monument. A well known example can be found on Richmond’s “Monument Avenue,” where years of debate surrounding this grand boulevard of Confederate monuments led to the installation of this statue to Arthur Ashe and to further controversy on both sides of the debate.

A non-material example of “Counter Speech” might be an annual rally near the place of an unwanted monument, so that the traditional meaning of the monument may be discussed, criticized, or otherwise challenged.

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Interestingly, all of these approaches depend upon a traditional view of monuments: that is, a monument is thought to be a “thing” in itself, and the direct experience of that thing is considered to be the only authentic one. More importantly, the *content* of a monument - - its message, its impact, and its affect – is considered to be embodied entirely in one’s direct confrontation with the physical artifact, although here DeGaulle seems to have had enough of that. ;-)

Now, on the other hand, more recent critical writing has sought to explore monumentality in the context of language- and media- based theories of interpretation. Not surprisingly, these explorations represent diverse and even divergent points of view. But what they have in common is their identification of multiple readings with any particular artifact, its images, and the *landscape* in which it exists.

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These texts, among others, may be familiar to geographers and cultural historians in the audience but not to architects or to political scientists. They share the perception that the landscape itself may be considered the “medium” through which ideas are represented. Even one’s first-hand experience of a thing is necessarily refracted through one’s understanding of its constructed environment -- that is, its surrounding landscape.

(The notion of landscape includes, of course, both rural and urban environments.)

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My point is that controlled spatial and civic relationships may easily become both subject and tool for constructing alternative interpretations of a monument's historical message.

City planners might find this proposition nearly self-evident, or perhaps a matter of professional pride. The plan of the city of Annapolis, Maryland, for instance, was conceived in 1696 to announce, in the “language” of spatial relationships, that Public Welfare and the Established Church would be forever linked under the reign of the English monarch. Physical monuments, in the form of State House and Episcopal Church, were built to occupy these sites and to express that notion forever after.

But I'd like to suggest here that thinking about landscape, as a medium, also points towards novel approaches to our “problem monuments.” In the time that I have remaining, I will illustrate, briefly, three examples of these alternative methods for engaging existing monuments.

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The first involves analyzing and arranging multiple monuments' spatial relationships to effect a *meta-narrative* – a story, so to speak, about individual stories. Such a meta-narrative should reflect, as far as possible, the current social consensus about the historical record, including the acknowledgement of competing messages, memories, or justifications. In this way, no historical claim need be excluded; but no longer need past objects of celebration continue to be honored without critical comment.

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The example shown here is a constellation of memorials for participants of the Civil War: Union Soldiers and Sailors, Confederate Women, and Robert E. Lee together with Stonewall Jackson. My written essay describes each individual monument more carefully, but for now I'd like simply to observe that their relationship to each other and to Baltimore's street grid potentially establishes a meta-narrative extending geographically and chronologically over the course of forty years.

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The subject of their respective placement is an *awareness* of Baltimoreans' changing view of the memorialized conflict, if not a consensus about the “appropriateness” of these competing themes for collective memory.

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A second method to rework past monuments requires a more confident approach to urban design than required of re-contextualization. Using what might be termed *intra-contextualization*, this method requires a clear-headed analysis of a city's urban micro-climate to suggest a reciprocal relationship between seemingly "sacred" memorials and otherwise "profane" day-to-day street life.

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The illustrated example is Baltimore's Holocaust Memorial. The failure of this project's urban design has been repeatedly conflated with its artistic and conceptual shortcomings. As a consequence, the monument has gone through two renovations, each of which addressed only the memorial and the iconography of its imagery.

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What *should* have been considered was the vicinity's urban plan, in order to make at least three strategic decisions.

First, memorial sites of all kinds should contribute to the activity of *surrounding* city life. In other words, the sensitive character of this memorial's subject matter should not diminish the day-to-day business of the immediately surrounding neighborhood.

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Second, the physical density of the site should be increased with market-driven development for aesthetic and for functional reasons.

Third, an active "memory institute" should be included as part of the new ensemble, so that increased commercial development elsewhere on the site might support (and, in return, be supported by) the newly-configured institute.

The scheme indicated here is only one possible urban plan among many. Recent discussions between a local developer and the owner of the site have already been announced to the public. Yet what is at issue here is to provide not re-contextualization but rather *intra*-contextualization – that is, to create not simply a different setting for Baltimore's Holocaust Memorial, but to assure its organic interrelationship with the life of the city around it.

The final example may, at first, appear to be a non-sequitur.

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New public art has often been controversial, and public discussion of the merits of individual artwork almost always turn upon perceived aesthetic merit – pro or con -- and not upon more fundamental concerns about that work’s place in the public realm. In these cases, I propose that contemporary art in public spaces may well need to be *de-musealized*, that is, removed from the framework of art-critical discussion both verbally and spatially.

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The example shown here is a large sculpture titled *Male/Female*, conceived and executed by the artist Jonathan Borofsky. As you can see, it was installed recently in front of Baltimore’s Pennsylvania Station. Fifty-two feet tall, fabricated of aluminum, the sculpture has been described by Borofsky as, simply, “An intersecting silhouette of a male with the silhouette of a female.” Nevertheless, its enormous height and its prominent position at Baltimore’s transit gateway belie that simple description.

Male/Female is “monumental” in the traditional sense of the word, which connotes both large scale and authority’s endorsement. Its great cost and its axial placement in line with the train station entrance supports no other perception.

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The sculpture’s reception by the general public has been generally unfavorable, but most folks don’t like anything new. I don’t like it either, and I do like new things. But, more substantively, **this sculpture’s placement is yet another example of contemporary artworks’ controversial relationship with urban site design.** Public criticisms of the piece -- and much of the public comment *in its defense* -- focus upon the sculpture’s aesthetic merits, upon the “appropriate style” for public-based artworks, or upon the imperative for novelty in contemporary art. In fact, the core of such controversy is not disagreement about art *per se* but about certain responsibilities assumed by significant objects placed in the public realm. But in the absence of consensus or even awareness about these responsibilities, *Male/Female* is typical of monuments which encourage only the most unsatisfactory public discourse.

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What is needed is public debate about the elements of urban design, including new monuments, based upon an ethical consensus about how all of us use those public spaces. Such a consensus may be possible in some places and not in others; but, at the very least,

all participants in the debate (including architects, artists, their patrons, and their public audience) need to *acknowledge* that to design for the city is an ethical act.

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The ethical categories which underlie urban design may be obscure to the public and to architects, planners, and artists as well. Ethics, and the political values which they influence, are nevertheless fundamental for our ability to share common spaces and to perceive together those markers in our midst: *our monuments*.

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To wrap things up, I'd like to emphasize once again that I believe that an approach towards "Constructing Perceptions of Civic Memory," as my subtitle would have it, depends fundamentally upon our seeing through the filter of our cities' urban morphologies, their spatial relationships, and the social relationships established by their technical infrastructure. That our perceptions depend upon a kind of representation is symbolized well by this early map of Baltimore, framed by the monumental buildings and memorials of its time.

Its implicit message is this: Our civic identity relates substantially to the act of commemoration, that is, less the recognition of past persons or deeds than of our own celebration of them.

So I'll conclude with another sentence by Robert Musil, which follows his more famous comment about "invisible" monuments:

[27] *In short, monuments ought also to try a little harder, as we must all do nowadays!*

Musil's irony cuts two ways. The passivity of traditional monuments is, of course, even more unsatisfactory in our day than it was for his. Today's consumers of culture expect interactivity, spectacle, and novelty. Typical historical monuments have little chance to compete with more stimulating (and less demanding) attractions in the cultural landscape.

Recent memorial designs throughout the world have taken up the challenge, incorporating theatrical techniques and methods derived from commercial marketing. Yet, for those monuments which hope to engage a society broader than a single focus-group, those new presentation technologies must still remain subject to wider considerations of environmental and urban design. Even new monuments stand *somewhere*, and that "somewhere" remains the critical factor in city-dwellers' relationships to one another.

Here, therefore, is the second implication of Musil's irony: Our engagement with memory must take for granted our efforts "nowadays"... *and* our own efforts tomorrow. Doing so should reflect awareness that public memorials are only partial (and impermanent) answers for what we seek through the impulse towards commemoration. The construction of meta-narratives about conflicting counter-speech, which I suggested before, should be intentionally open-ended. Likewise, what I've called here the "intra-contextualization" within new urban development must anticipate the inevitability of *re*-development in the future.

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This is because our monuments and our reading of them may direct us towards particular ideas, concepts, or socially-endorsed goals. But to attain them remains, of course, not for our monuments but for ourselves.

Thank you.

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