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Erin Gannon

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# **(Post) Modern Architecture and the Commemoration of Mass Murder by the 9/11 Memorial in New York and the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin**

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**Erin Gannon**

Public memory is simultaneously incredibly important and completely intangible. It is through public memory that history is reconstructed and is passed through generations. Individuals tasked with preserving the public memory of major events in world history, particularly events involving death on a massive scale, are forced to strike a balance between remembrance of the event itself as well as the memorialization of lives lost. In two such cases, the Holocaust and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the magnitude of these events will never be both adequately and succinctly put into words, thus leaving symbolic representation as one of the only effective means of conserving their respective far-reaching impacts on public memory.

Public commemorative monuments have been constructed to memorialize the victims of both tragedies: the Holocaust-Mahnmal (Holocaust Memorial) in Berlin, Germany and the National September 11 Memorial in New York City. Both monuments are the products of international design competitions. Out of over five-hundred designs to construct a Holocaust Memorial, Peter Eisenman's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe was selected in 1999 and completed on May 10, 2005, opening to the public on the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe. Out of over five-thousand design submissions for a monument commemorating the victims of the terrorist attacks at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, Michael Arad's Reflecting Absence was chosen in 2004. The monument opened to the families of victims on the tenth anniversary of the attacks in 2011, and to the public the next day. In this essay, I will attempt to situate both of these monuments within the context of postmodern architecture, as well as place them in conversation with one another. I will argue that the ways in which they commemorate the victims of their respective tragedies are effectively the inverse of one another, representing absence and presence in memory of two monumental instances of mass murder.

## **Understanding Modern and Postmodern Architecture**

In order to better understand the postmodern elements of these monuments, a brief discussion of modern architecture is worthwhile. The modernist architecture movement primarily emerged in the mid- to late-twentieth century, during which the rapid expansion of technological innovation allowed architects to flaunt the achievements of the past century in brazen displays of both dominance and rationality. Blair posits, "Modernist architecture's prototype was 'the box,' typically massive and frequently calling attention to itself only by its size and display of its own structural elements... these typically were its only ornaments." A classic example of modernist architecture in full force, ironically enough, were the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center themselves. The Towers exemplified the modernist focus on function over form and style. When American architect Minoru Yamasaki was approached with the project in 1960, he was asked to reconcile the spatial needs of a rapidly growing commercial market within the increasingly claustrophobic setting of Lower Manhattan. He was originally presented with the need to construct twelve million square feet of office space on a \$500 million budget, and so Yamasaki proposed two twin 80-story towers. Directors of the Port Authority, who by that point had taken over the project, rejected this idea in favor of one that would make the proposed towers the tallest in the world, at 110 stories apiece. As Grudin states, "The result was a plan that stretched

the concept of the skyscraper as an economic engine at once space-saving and spectacular to an extent almost undreamed of.” Ironically, it was the pomp of the Port Authority’s demands that would ultimately result in the Towers’ collapse; in order to maximize rental space, the interior support of the building was compromised. The products, however, were two massive monolithic structures with minimal flair which were almost phallic in their demonstration of dominance – thus, the ideal modernist structures.

The term “postmodernism” emerged in the 1970s, as several theorists attempted to define a burgeoning yet seemingly inexplicable artistic trend. The works of some of these theorists became seminal pieces in discussions of postmodernism. Lyotard called it, simply, “incredulity toward metanarratives.” Baudrillard introduced the idea of the precession of simulacra and the loss of the referential. These themes, though by nature are difficult to articulate in discussions of many art forms, manifest more explicitly in terms of postmodern architecture. A particular example often credited with bringing postmodern architecture into public conversation is the building at 550 Madison Avenue in New York City, which has previously been known as the AT&T Building and the Sony Tower. The building, designed by Phillip Johnson and completed in 1983, embodies the ideas put forth by Baudrillard, in that it appears to be a reference to something with no referential. From the massive archway enveloping the building’s main entrance to the Chippendale-style broken pediment, 550 Madison Ave is known for having drawn inspiration from a multitude of modernist structures, but also for altering those stylistic sources in a way that borders on ironic. As Clendinning notes, “the building, inside and out, provides a feast for the eye, with its multiple stylistic references – interesting in themselves – combining to make a structure that is more than the sum of its parts.” Johnson’s mixing of architectural genres has led many to consider 550 Madison Ave a prime illustration of postmodern architecture, leading the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission to designate the building as an official city landmark in 2006.

Of the most consistent characteristics of postmodern architecture, Blair writes, “the postmodern architectural project must be seen as political, as a deliberate dissolution of the utopian metanarrative of modernism...” Blair outlines three tendencies of postmodern architecture: “1) a refusal of unities or universals, 2) attention to and use of context, and 3) an interrogative, critical stance.” Thus, postmodernist architecture rejects many of the key facets of modernism; the international style is replaced with contextual focus, and functionality is replaced by political motivations. However, in the context of public commemoration of a specific event, determining who and what will be memorialized seems to inherently insert a metanarrative into how commemoration can occur. This presents a paradox for postmodern architects who seek to break with the modernist style but who are tasked with designing public commemorative monuments.

The nature of the act of remembering is in itself an act of narrative construction. To create an artistic piece which comments specifically on remembrance is to create a metanarrative, thus problematizing the act of memorializing in a postmodern age. If public commemorative monuments lack the functionality and rationality of modernist architecture, but also violate the most basic underpinnings of postmodernist theory, how are they situated amongst modern and postmodern architecture alike? The key is to assess the relationship between memorials and both modernism and postmodernism, rather than to consider whether or not they belong under one category or the other. As Carpo suggests, “New monuments can have no power of historical orientation because the postmodern vision of history no longer provides any preset line of progress along which historical signs may clearly be situated.” Considerations of whether

or not the present age is also the postmodern age aside, I argue that the duality of the act of remembrance is a feature that is unique to public commemorative monuments. These memorials exist both in the time of their construction, which itself is reflective of moments in the past, but are also constructed to exist indefinitely, allowing for infinite interpretations. In this sense, commemorative monuments are living, and to attempt to associate them with any particular artistic movement is futile. Today a memorial could be seen as modernist, and tomorrow as postmodernist. In any given moment, they may possess qualities of both styles simultaneously – I propose that the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe and Reflecting Absence do just that.

### **The Tragedies: Classifying Mass Murder**

To compare the Holocaust to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks (hereafter referred to as 9/11) feels a reductive undertaking, particularly in the context of such a brief paper. However, in order to create a dialogue between their respective monuments, the tragedies themselves must be put into conversation with one another to some extent. The similarities between these events begin and end with the fact that they were both instances of extreme mass murder with lasting global impacts. The differences between the historical aspects of the Holocaust and 9/11 may provide insight in analyzing the designs of their monuments. For example, how might one visually represent an systematized genocide spanning over a decade, versus an attack that sent an entire city into complete chaos in just a few hours? How do you honor victims targeted for their religious beliefs versus victims of a mass murder which sought to bring about as many casualties as possible? How do you preserve the individuality of the victims of both tragedies? Where do you memorialize an opportunistic genocide which knew no regional borders? Where do you situate the monument to a symbolic attack on a major city within said city? In both cases, how do you measure their lasting impacts, and how do you physically represent that significance? In seeking the answers to these questions, one must turn to a thematic analysis of the monuments.

### **Thematic Analysis**

It is near impossible to deny the presence of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin. The memorial, which spans eleven acres, is made up of 2,711 individual concrete stelae, each ninety-five centimeters wide and roughly two and a half meters long, but all varying in height. It is a colossal, unmarked graveyard located in the heart of Berlin's commercial and tourist districts, but more specifically, it is a cenotaph – there are no bodies. Its presence is an evocation of absence, albeit an ambiguous one. In theory, passersby could encounter this field and have absolutely no clue what it is or what it represents, as there is not a single sign indicating that it is a memorial. There is, however, an Information Center located beneath the memorial. At the entrance a quote by Primo Levi, a renowned writer and Holocaust survivor, is displayed: "It happened, and therefore it can happen again. This is the core of what we have to say." Levi's words are a poignant reflection of why the physical presence of such a vast monument, located not even a block away from site of Adolf Hitler's underground bunker, is essential for performing public Holocaust memory. As Brody puts it, "the very placement of such an exhibit at the heart of the German capital hints that the commemoration is a distinctively German subject..." The immense presence of the monument, despite its reflections of absence, begins to answer an often-considered question, articulated frankly by Till: "How should the Holocaust be remembered in the land of the perpetrators?"

The title of the monument is an additional act of memory performance through which the concept of presence manifests. Eisenman's decision to specifically dedicate the memorial to the

murdered Jews of Europe became a subject of controversy, as despite estimates placing the death toll of other populations, such as Sinti and Roma Gypsies, at nearly 500,000, Eisenman maintains that Jews were the only true victims of “genocide” – and he was commissioned specifically to commemorate just that, genocide. Critics thus argue that “Germany is creating warped and corrosive hierarchies of suffering.” Others contend that the monument is serving to rebuild a Jewish presence. Dekel proposes that the memorial allows Jews to “function as a category of memory” inasmuch that they are “(1) remembered as a cohesive murdered group, (2) confined to the time of the Holocaust and to the space of Europe, and (3) represented by the voice of survivors...” A population bereft of its own autonomy, Jews are the central focus of this commemoration, which through performative public memory, begins to return to them their individual identities. Dekel posits further, “it is not Jews...that exist in the site as equal bearers of memories, but rather the trace of now-deceased Jewish survivors, of victims, and of universal Jewish symbols that are supposed to frame the German memorial experience.” Thus, through the absence of Jewish Holocaust victims, Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe is a presence which restores Jewish memory both in public memory and in Jewish populations today.

Across the Atlantic, the 9/11 Memorial, literally titled Reflecting Absence, can be read as operating inversely to the way the Holocaust Memorial commemorates. In referencing the 9/11 Memorial, I refer exclusively to the two fountains located at Ground Zero, seeing as the entire World Trade Center is now a mega-complex on par with commercial campuses like Time Warner and Rockefeller Center. The 9/11 Memorial, as opposed to the Holocaust Memorial’s many, massive monolithic structures, is comprised of two gaping holes in the ground, forming the footprints of approximately where the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center once stood, transformed into elaborate fountains. Each fountain spans the area of roughly one acre, both containing a smaller, inner fountain, the bottom of which is not visible standing at the edge of either pool. Around the edge of each pool, the names of every 9/11 victim are inscribed in bronze, as well as the names of the victims of a different terrorist attack at the World Trade Center on February 26, 1993. The names of victims are intricately engraved into the bronze, and the names of categories such as flight number or firefighter ladder company number are raised. As Hess notes, “Names of the dead are punched through the bronze, their loss represented by absence. By contrast, the raised lettering of the buildings, flights, and civic institutions is a reminder that they can and should be rebuilt.” In memorializing the victims of 9/11, unlike victims of the Holocaust, there is no cultural presence to restore. The individual victims of 9/11 were victims of unfortunate circumstance, and as such the memorial to them seeks to honor their memory by reminding us of their absence.

The 9/11 attacks left a jarring void in the Manhattan skyline, giving way to controversy over what to do with the vacancy at Ground Zero. The jurors of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation responsible for selecting the winning design were insistent upon constructing the memorial at Ground Zero, despite Arad’s original proposal to place the fountains in the Hudson River. Stubblefield remarks, “Because of this relocation, the empty spaces of the site became wrapped up with the violence of the attacks in direct fashion.” However, for many, there was never any question as to where the memorial would be constructed. Hess writes, “As the site of the “National” 9/11 Memorial, Ground Zero takes on a particular significance separate from other 9/11 memories, accented especially by its urban context.” The 9/11 Memorial’s location within the daily chaos of Lower Manhattan contributes to the poignancy of its reflections on absence. As visitors approach the fountains, the waterfalls literally drown out the sound of the city, providing a place of quiet reflection within sleepless

New York. On this experience Stubblefield comments, “the past is posited as an internalized domain, subject to the same indeterminate sensory connections that structure memory.” This forced subjective interpretation, coupled with the seemingly bottomless inner fountains, makes the memorial’s thematic absence an overwhelmingly visceral experience.

Representing mass murder in the public forum, more precisely, constructing a monument to mass murder that will become a site of pilgrimage for millions of people each year, is no small undertaking. Both the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin and the 9/11 Memorial in New York have become such sites. These monuments both invite their visitors to interpret the events they represent and the implications of those events in their own way, straying from the traditional model of monument, which tends to elevate a properly named statue onto a pedestal, offering little room for ambiguity. The Holocaust Memorial, with its unmarked maze of stelae and location in the heart of Berlin, is a quiet and bold reminder to the German public of the events of the Holocaust, namely the systematic persecution and execution of Jews. Its expansiveness renders it unavoidable, as waves of thousands of cenotaphic, tombstone-like structures emerge from the ground, reclaiming the Jewish community’s autonomy, in the place where they were once most bereft of it, with undeniable presence. The 9/11 Memorial, on the other hand, is an expansion of an already harrowing vacancy in the Manhattan skyline – a literal graveyard with the ashes of victims inevitably melded into the memorial’s foundation. Marked only by the names of those some 3,000 lives lost, the 9/11 Memorial offers a similarly somber and evocative portrayal of tragedy. Water from the fountains drains indefinitely into an infinite abyss, and try as visitors might to see its bottom, they cannot – it is impossible. In its infinity, the inner pool is finite and final – water drained there is lost forever, as are the lives of 9/11 victims honored there.

### **Assessing the Modern and Postmodern Elements of the Two Public Commemorative Monuments**

The Holocaust Memorial and the 9/11 Memorial are indisputably two very unique structures in the public commemorative monument canon. To what extent are these monuments modern, postmodern, or both? I would argue that these memorials are primarily postmodern in their aesthetic characteristics, but the aforementioned paradox of functionality, that by virtue of existing as memorials, they inherently take on an explicit function – to memorialize – cannot be ignored. Despite all their ambiguity, both the Holocaust Memorial and the 9/11 Memorial assume some degree of metanarrative. To situate the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe directly in between the Brandenburg Gate, a symbol of peace and freedom, and the Hitler bunker is a clear commentary on the German narrative of the Holocaust. Thus it is a metanarrative, but the memorial itself is ambiguous enough that that metanarrative is not overtly coherent. The 9/11 Memorial, with the name of every victim lining its perimeter, directs the act of memorializing by prioritizing which aspects of 9/11 deserve mourning at Ground Zero. This similarly abstruse metanarrative confers subjective interpretation unto the memorial’s visitors, but it exists nonetheless. The traditional model of monuments, consisting of pedestals and plaques, does the interpretive work for visitors, creating an explicit narrative of remembrance. Conversely, the ambiguity of the Holocaust Memorial and the 9/11 Memorial causes them to lack such structure, and as a result inherently produces individual metanarratives, which violate a widely-accepted component of postmodernism – Lyotard’s incredulity toward metanarratives. If not postmodern, then, do these monuments fit the modernist paradigm? Aesthetically speaking, unless one considers the massive rectangular protrusions of the Holocaust Memorial’s stelae as aligning with the template of modernist architecture – no. However, their functionality and general

expansiveness do begin to touch upon the rationality and emphasis on progress associated with modernism.

Despite creating a metanarrative simply by existing, the Holocaust Memorial's lack of structured narrative is postmodern in many respects. Primarily, Eisenman's design draws upon Baudrillard's idea of the simulacra. The growing stelae of Eisenman's monument, which caves in its middle and thus engulfs visitors who enter further and further into its depths, are meant to recreate the trauma, disorientation, and claustrophobia of living in a concentration camp. This intention and its effect in reality have become the subject of much controversy, as critics argue that to attempt to simulate places like Auschwitz is to risk trivializing the Holocaust. Åhr writes, "It is one thing for us to explore what took place... another to seek viscerally the sensation, or horror, of being treated like vermin. Any such attempt, however bold and gripping Eisenman's own, threatens to beguile futilely the naïfs and narcissists in all of us." Moreover, on a more abstract level, the Holocaust Memorial, in its pervasive nature and cenotaphic qualities, embodies simultaneously the four successive phases of the image outlined by Baudrillard: "it is the reflection of a profound reality; it masks and denatures a profound reality; it masks the absence of a profound reality; it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum." Consistent with the sentiment behind Primo Levi's quote at the entrance to the memorial's Information Center, the Holocaust Memorial all at once reports the existence of the Holocaust, but does so symbolically so as to mask its violence and destruction. It marks the intangible, as the bodies it honors are long since lost. Thus, the subjective experience it leaves behind for its visitors is a simulacrum – it attempts, however vain, to recreate the memory and experience of Jewish Holocaust victims for future generations. Lastly, Eisenman himself embodies a key element of postmodernism, the waning of affect. The lack of a clearly defined entrance or exit to the Holocaust Memorial has allowed visitors to make use of the monument in a number of ways, the appropriateness of which is often questionable. However, Eisenman is perfectly content with and even encourages such inappropriate use: "This is not sacred ground... kids can jump on the stones. I like the fact that people go lunch there, ...make love." A strange sentiment coming from a Jewish-American, but nonetheless consistent with the memorial's postmodern themes.

The experience of 9/11 is well-known for its mediated nature – the vast majority of Americans witnessed the attacks secondhand through television or online. It is thus fitting that Arad and co-designer Peter Walker have described Reflecting Absence as a "mediating space." As Stubblefield writes, "The implication of these statements is that the formlessness of these spaces subverts the top-down quality of the conventional memorial, lending the experience an individual and indeterminate quality that allows personal reflection to take precedence over the historical record and its codified memory." Such formlessness, despite its impact on the narrative and metanarrative established by the memorial, fits with the postmodern trend of blending genres. As Baudrillard's proposed referential disappears, the copies which have no discernable originals begin to combine, creating a new original. This amalgamation of styles promotes subjectivity on the part of the visitor, and is evident just by standing at the reflecting pools and looking around. The memorial is fenced in by the city's tallest skyscrapers, and nearly 400 trees create a canopy over the fountains, which, in combination with the roar of the waterfalls, further serve to insulate the viewer from the chaos of Lower Manhattan.

The most salient evidence of postmodernism I can point to comes from my own personal experience at the 9/11 Memorial. My cousin's late husband was aboard the second plane which hit the South Tower, and I knew his name was engraved somewhere in the memorial. Not

knowing how the names are organized, I asked an information services employee if he could direct me to the name. To my surprise, I was greeted with an eerie cheerfulness and overly enthusiastic salesmanship which could rival that of Billy Mays. I was not offended, as I have little personal connection to the name I was looking for, but the memorial employee could not have known that. I could very easily have lost a parent or sibling on 9/11, and would have been met with smiles all the same. The mutated affect of that employee rivals the inappropriateness of Eisenman's subtle encouragements of misuse of the Holocaust Memorial. I assume it is the result of extreme desensitization – I could imagine that responding to mine and many other similar requests on a daily basis could drain one's emotional resolve – but the effect contributes to the 9/11 Memorial's overall postmodern qualities nevertheless.

### **Conclusion**

Commemorative monuments are performances of public memory tasked simultaneously with preserving and creating memory. I conclude this paper by contending that both the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe and Reflecting Absence serve two specific types of public memory: prosthetic memory and flashbulb memory, respectively. As firsthand accounts of the Holocaust inevitably dwindle as the remaining survivors and witnesses pass on, the Holocaust Memorial will serve to preserve the emotional memory of the tragedy. Through the subjective experience it allows its visitors – modern, postmodern, or not – the Holocaust Memorial will create prosthetic memories for generations to come. Landsberg defines, “Prosthetic memories are memories that circulate publicly, are not organically based, but are nevertheless experienced with one's own body – by means of a wide range of cultural technologies – and as such, become part of one's personal archive of experience, informing not only one's subjectivity, but one's relationship to the present and future tenses.” On the other hand, the 9/11 Memorial speaks to a type of memory known as flashbulb memory. The 9/11 attacks are often cited as being one of the most striking examples of flashbulb memory in recent history – ask anyone who is old enough to remember where they were on September 11, 2001, and rarely will you find someone who cannot. In theory, that morning is psychologically preserved indefinitely – it is a rare moment in time shared by individuals across the world. Reflecting Absence evokes that moment. The impact of 9/11 is as far-reaching as the fountain is deep – infinite. The loss of life on 9/11 was near instantaneous, and unlike the Holocaust, that experience needs not to be recreated or heeded as a warning to future generations. It is a moment trapped within a particular public memory, temporal distance from which will only create a desire for respect, rather than simulation. As such, these two monuments reflect two of the most tragic and important events in recent world history. They are living commemorations, both experienced entirely subjectively by the individual who visits them. Regardless of the artistic age in which they were built, they will continue to persist as preservations of public memory, until they physically no longer exist.



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