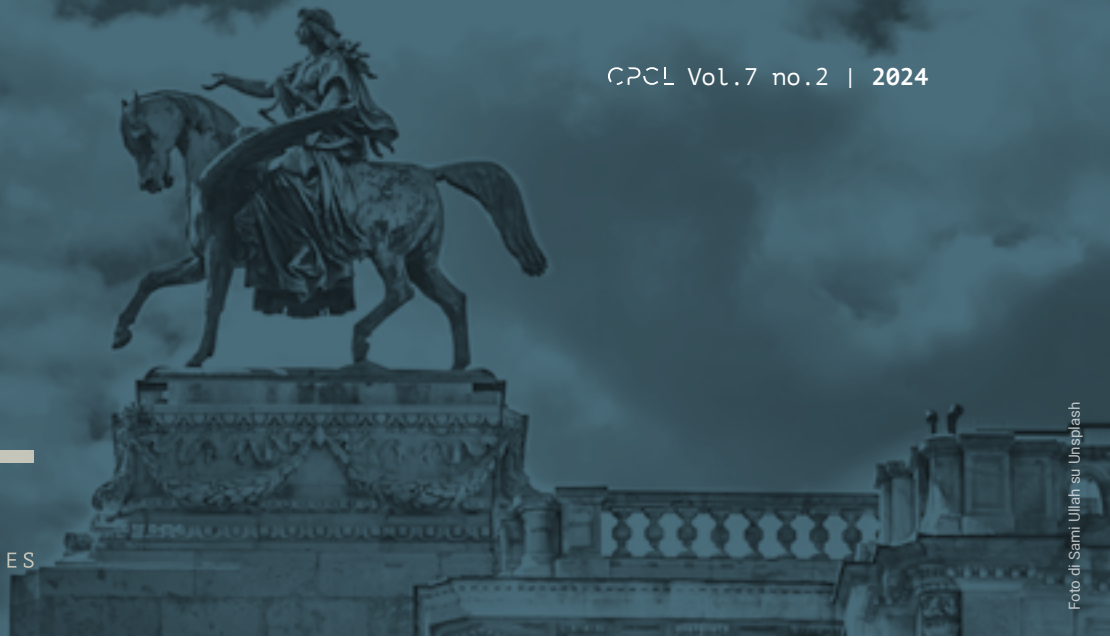




MAIN SECTION

How do we build the future on the past? Public spaces as solid forms filled with new content

Aneta Jasná — University of Pardubice, Centre for Ethics
Contact: aneta.jasna@upce.cz

ABSTRACT

This article examines statues and monuments in public space as materialized narratives that shape collective memory, political values, and social inclusion. Drawing on theories by Ann Rigney, Friedrich W. Nietzsche, Sandra Shapshay, Sharon Zukin, and others, it argues that monuments do not merely represent the past but actively structure the present by naturalizing selective, often exclusionary histories. Their durability, scale, and placement produce emotional responses of awe and humility that can reinforce domination while rendering alternative memories invisible. Recent waves of statue toppling, particularly following the Black Lives Matter protests, are analyzed not as acts of erasure but as moments of visibility that expose the instability of monumental meaning. The article conceptualizes toppling as a collective, spatial practice through which marginalized voices contest inherited narratives embedded in the built environment. Through case studies ranging from Krzysztof Wodiczko's performative public artworks, Antony Gormley's Fourth Plinth project, to the grassroots "Buddha of Oakland," the paper explores alternative forms of monumentality grounded in temporality, participation, and care. It concludes that public spaces should be understood not as fixed containers of memory but as solid forms filled with changing content. Monuments, therefore, are best approached as provisional instruments within negotiation over values, belonging, and the possibility of collective change.

KEYWORDS

Public space; Monuments and statues; Collective memory; Monumentality; Social change.

PEER REVIEWED

<https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.2612-0496/21395>

ISSN 2612-0496

Copyright © 2024 Aneta Jasná

Why do monuments matter?

The question of monuments has been examined from many angles, which has ignited ongoing debates concerning the aesthetic, political, or historical implications of representing the past. Monuments became a lens through which individuals examine the representation of the past (Siobhan Kattago), collective memory (Halbwachs), the cult of the dead (Reinhart Koselleck), the question of visibility and invisibility (Robert Musil), or the discrepancy between memory and history (Pierre Nora). This discussion also involves dividing sculptural art into groups such as statues, monuments, and memorials. For the sake of my argument, I will not research the branch that includes memorials as “sites of death, places attached to a certain event.”¹ On the contrary, my observation focuses on statues and monuments erected within public spaces, predominantly squares or centers of parks—the most noticeable places in the town, to serve their stated purpose of being visible to people who pass by.

I use the terms “statues” and “monuments” interchangeably in this paper. A statue has its own, more or less closed logic that intersects with the logic of monuments. They are often celebratory depictions of the past and are closely tied to a particular place. Due to their representative function, statues and monuments are mostly figurative and placed on pillars, which are an inseparable part of the art.² Plinths are integral to statues, as they underscore their monumentality and significance. “Public artworks placed high above the ground provide opportunities only for contemplation, whereas those at ground level are more likely to triangulate social interactions.”³ In that sense, monuments and statues do not refer only to themselves, but they are part of a broader context.

In the first part of the article, I ask why some monuments and statues evoke such anger and desire for destruction. To do so, we must ask what they represent. Ann Rigney, in her article “Toxic Monuments and Mnemonic Regime Change” (2022), claims that “monuments are materialisations of larger narratives that operate within a broader culture of memory.”⁴ In that sense, monuments “never stand alone.”⁵ They embody certain values; therefore, with their removal, people struggle with what they represent rather than with the object itself. This conflict of dynamics is a “resource for effecting change,”⁶ in which marginalized groups raise

1 Reinhart Koselleck, *War Memorials: Identity Formations of the Survivors* (1999), trans. Todd Presner, in *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, (Stanford: sup, 2002), 320.

2 Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” *October* 8 (1979): 33.

3 Quentin Stevens, “Designing for Difficulty, Agonistic Urban Design,” in *Public Space Design and Social Cohesion*, ed. Patricia Aelbrecht and Quentin Stevens (New York: Routledge, 2019), 267.

4 Ann Rigney, “Toxic Monuments and Mnemonic Regime Change,” *Studies on National Movements* 9 (2022): 7.

5 *ibid.*, 14.

6 *ibid.*, 11.

their voices to be represented in the narrative created by the built environment. "They not only give symbolic expression to the values with which the depicted figures are associated, their very physical presence is itself a way of imposing those values on society while claiming to speak on behalf of the community at large."⁷ The material presence of statues highlights the intangible. Statues materialize the absence of someone, usually the monarch, the chieftain, the poet, etc. In this way, they pass on values to the present. As Rosalyn Deutsche frames it, they embodied an image of a "glorious past."⁸

In the face of turbulent societal change, how can we build on or maintain current values while preserving past ones? As Gary Younge writes, clashes over statues express more than aesthetic differences: "[...] the issue was never confined to the statue itself. It was always about what the statue represented: the prevailing and persistent issues that remained, and the legacy of whatever the statue was erected to symbolise."⁹

Similarly, Erika Naginski emphasizes the role of an allegory that statues and monuments generate. According to this historian of architecture, allegory is an "ability to create a significant link between ideas and things."¹⁰ The more people are exposed to a particular image, the more they become familiar not only with a thing itself but with its meaning.¹¹ In that sense, the statue becomes a bearer of embodied ideas.¹² The central point of Naginski's argument is that statues do not represent a real person but are an allegory of a new social order.¹³

According to Sandra Shapshay, monuments are created with a particular awareness of the adoration and celebration of certain political or religious acts undertaken by individuals. They elicit strong emotions and sustain memory and discourse. "The purpose of any work of art (*schöne Kunst*), for Kant (as well as for Danto), is to embody ideas, particularly for Kant, moral ideas, and to spark a free play with these ideas."¹⁴ I argue that one does not devote sufficient effort to deliberating on the political and moral impacts of monuments when discussing the role of art in public spaces. Shapshay aptly points out that this impact received almost no attention from aestheticians, and she aims to establish a category called monu

7 *ibid.*, 17.

8 Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge: mit, 1996), 5.

9 Gary Younge, "Why Every Single Statue Should Come Down," *The Guardian*, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/jun/01/gary-younge-why-every-single-statue-should-come-down-rhodes-colston>.

10 Erika Naginski, "The Public Image of Demos," in *Ethics of the Urban: The City and Spaces of Political*, ed. Mohsen Mostafavi (Zurich: Müller, 2017), 87.

11 *ibid.*, 88.

12 *ibid.*, 100.

13 *ibid.*, 101.

14 Sandra Shapshay, "What Is the Monumental?," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 79, no. 2 (2021): 151.

mental, in which the aesthetic and political influences appear as an intertwined phenomenon. She defines the “monumental” as follows:

“monument—that is, a work of public, commemorative art—succeeds in being monumental (or eliciting a ‘monumental response’ in a spectator) when that spectator: *feels* a combination of awe (feeling small and humbled in the presence of something great) and ennoblement (by feeling in some way connected/unified with that great thing or what it represents), and *reflects* at least in part *favorably* upon the intended moral and political lesson embodied in the public, commemorative art.”¹⁵

Shapshay, like Rigney, expects statues and monuments to engage with the emotions of their inhabitants. Both await a response from the audience. As Rigney states with respect to monuments: “In their very materiality, they are designed to edify, generate awe, display power, inspire enthusiasm or, as in the case of more recent memorials, quiet reflection.”¹⁶ In that sense, the question is not merely a matter of aesthetic taste and appreciation, but also whether it is appropriate to feel certain emotions while using public spaces. Sharon Zukin highlights the unique role of public spaces when she writes that “public spaces construct broad social identities. These refer to people’s ability to think of themselves as city dwellers, citizens of a nation-state, and free human beings.”¹⁷ I argue that statues and monuments occupy a specific position within the category of indirect forms of discrimination. The indirect means that no signs would prevent a particular group of people from using the public space where the statue is located. Still, they embody values that can be read as reproducing spatial inequality and exclusion.

In his essay *On The Use and Abuse of History for Life* (1874), Friedrich Nietzsche reflects on the term “monumental,” not solely with respect to specific statues but more broadly with respect to a monumental perception of history. For him, monumental history is how we perceive the past. We build our present and future upon the foundation of the past. Like a tree, Nietzsche writes, humans have roots that connect them deeply with their history:

“The feeling of the tree that clings to its roots, the happiness of knowing one’s growth to be not merely arbitrary and fortuitous, but the inheritance, the fruit and blossom of a past, that does not merely justify but crown the present.”¹⁸

15 *ibid.*, 155.

16 Rigney, “Toxic Monuments and Mnemonic Regime Change,” 18.

17 Sharon Zukin, “Reimagining Civil Society: Conflict and Control in the City’s Public Spaces,” in *Public Space: Between Reimagination and Occupation*, ed. Mariusz Czepczynski and Svetlana Hristova (New York: Routledge, 2018), 21.

18 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life* (1874), trans. Ian Johnston (Arlington: Richer, 2010), 15.

Our interconnectedness with the past means that we are growing from the past into the present, and this also provides us with the knowledge that what was possible before may recur. As Nietzsche argues:

“Now, what purpose is served for contemporary man by the monumental consideration of the past, busying ourselves with the classics and rarities of earlier times? He derives from the fact that the greatness which was once there at all events once was possible and therefore will really be possible once again.”¹⁹

Nietzsche criticizes monumental history for its capacity to produce false narratives through selective favoritism toward great events and individuals. Moreover, monumental history fosters the hope that great history may recur. Nietzsche argues for the limitation of monumental history because it cannot have “complete truth.”²⁰ Not only do we deal here with a task of shattered truth, but it may feel “as if someone else’s memory had to come to be your own,” adds Dan Hicks in the prologue to his book *Every Monument Will Fall: A Story of Remembering and Forgetting* (2025).²¹ Can an inanimate object beguile us? asks Hicks, highlighting a connection among history, memory, and art in public spaces. In light of statues and monuments, I wonder whether we, through public spaces, remember history or rather someone else’s memory:

“Just as a statue can serve to mix up the person depicted with their transubstantiated likeness carved in stone or wrought in bronze, so it’s possible to mistake your own life story and values for those of a tacit inherited subculture hard-wired into the arts, culture, heritage and education sectors since the mid-nineteenth century.”²²

To connect Hicks’s thoughts on memory and Nietzsche’s critique of monumental history with the role of monuments in public spaces, one can see the conflation of the individual with the general good. To rip out and glorify only certain personalities from our history, we are running a risk in which we may mistake individual motivations for the general good.

Similar to Nietzsche and Hicks, Younge claims that history can become distorted in the shadow of monuments. We may even envision monuments as public representations of a particular time. Moreover, statues and monuments can easily be mistaken for tradition and history. Younge wrote his article “Why every single statue should come down” at the height of the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in 2021, in the spirit of the moment, arguing that not only should controversial statues be removed, but that every human or figurative statue should be toppled:

19 *ibid.*, 10

20 *ibid.*, 11.

21 Dan Hicks, *Every Monument Will Fall: A Story of Remembering and Forgetting* (London: Hutchinson, 2025), 1.

22 *ibid.*, 28.

The problem isn't that we have too few statues, but too many. I think it is a good thing that so many of these statues of pillagers, plunderers, bigots and thieves have been taken down. I think they are offensive. But I don't think they should be taken down because they are offensive. I think they should be taken down because I think all statues should be taken down.²³

Younge frames the placement of statues and monuments in public spaces as arrogant because they are built with eternity in mind and thereby limit societal change.²⁴ The narrative's inequity and selectivity, as represented in statues, are linked to the possible creation of a cult centered on a single person. The space of appearance in the public realm is always more complex than statues may symbolize. Sculpted individuals are only the tip of the iceberg in the complex chain of history from which they are torn out and placed onto a pedestal of the past.

As described above, statues constitute a form of symbolic appropriation of public space. They selectively represent certain aspects of the past while ignoring or downplaying others. For Zukin, "these symbols repress memories of some eras while selectively reinforcing others."²⁵ Influenced by Nietzsche, Younge and Shapshay's critical category of monumental history, we can better understand the role of public art and the complex moral views embedded in the monuments and statues that surround us.

The answer to the initial question of what statues and monuments represent is that they carry very strong emotions of awe or humility. They also offer a false or at least fragmented picture of the past from which an incomplete narrative stems. Statues are erected to maintain power discourse, not to spark power relations, but to maintain domination. Moreover, they may exclude people from the common world and public appearances and prevent them from dwelling with others. Given the exclusive nature of statues, I examine the collective act or action of toppling during protests in public space in the second part of this paper. I also address our capacity for new beginnings and change through the built environment. More importantly, I examine the public realm in terms of its temporality; accordingly, I argue that the built environment is not an end in itself but a means. Although statues and monuments are erected with eternity in mind, their essence depends on the fluidity of the memories and meanings we ascribe to them at a given moment; they are "never stable."²⁶

23 Younge, "Why Every Single Statue Should Come Down."

24 *ibid.*

25 Zukin, "Reimagining Civil Society," 26.

26 Hicks, *Every Monument Will Fall*, 30.

The change

I begin this section with a counterargument to what was written. In the previous section, I described statues and monuments as representative of a particular narrative and as visible elements of the built environment. In contrast, Musil writes:

[M]onuments are so conspicuously inconspicuous. There is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument. They are no doubt erected to be seen—indeed to attract attention. But you never look at them, and do not generally have the slightest notion of whom they are supposed to represent, except that maybe you know if it's a man or a woman.²⁷

The toppling of statues and monuments sheds light on what they represent and the context in which they were built. The act of toppling also makes the statues visible, even to those who have lived next door to them for the past forty years. And precisely this moment of noticing, of memory's resurrection and its giving meaning, is the essential part of monumental history. "It's about how what was unnoticed and tacit can become visible, I was saying, about an institutional culture that's failed to keep up with the reality outside."²⁸ Within the broader context of political and social change, a question arises regarding another layer of this discussion. When we examine more closely why only certain monuments are visible and spark public interest, we can also ask: why now? Hence, why are some monuments visible in the public space?

This question was central to Koselleck's research on war memorials and the semantics of historical time. Our sensibility towards the built environment is fluid and constantly shifting over time; for that reason, I see Musil's claim as only partially true:

"The connection between a demand for meaning in political and social terms and its visual expression is established by the formal language of memorials that are supposed to reach the sensibility of observers. Both the forms and the sensibility are subject to historical transformation, but they apparently change along different temporal rhythms."²⁹

I perceive the removal of statues as a litmus test of change in the lived environment through the built environment. The value of a certain thing (in that case, a statue) appears as an exchange between members of society. This became omnipresent after the murder of George Floyd in 2020, especially in the United States. More than a hundred statues and monuments were torn down in that year as a result of a fight to end systematic racial injustice that was, among others, distributed and maintained spatially. It was not only the call for a different built environment but also for a new

27 Robert Musil, *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author* (1936), trans. Peter Wortsman (London: Archipelago, 2006), 64–65.

28 Hicks, *Every Monument Will Fall*, 26.

29 Koselleck, "War Memorials," 320.

way of living together. As Kattago puts it, "One of the first signs of regime change is the tearing down of statues and monuments. This symbolic break with the old regime and beginning of a new one leads to a myriad of other questions."³⁰ But the fall or tear is only one second in the whole process of falling. The fall is the visible, but this article reacts mostly to the invisible, to the process and its layers, its context, to seek a deeper understanding of that moment, in which all of it becomes materialized: "A fall, any fall, will always be just the most visible moment in the unfolding of some wider, deeper, more longstanding process of descent or failure."³¹ There is something particular about human-shaped statues and monuments when they are torn down: the crowd treats them as human. Indeed, they are very often tied up and decapitated. I see this as an act in which the crowd acquires ownership of public spaces, not only in its spatial dispositions but also in the intangible sense—questioning the memory itself. The act of toppling does not provide answers or solutions but poses questions that initiate a new dialogue, previously absent. Additionally, it not only influences communities but also reshapes how we think about public spaces and their meanings. The toppling of statues often takes place as a result of collective action and protest. As Zukin writes, protests occur in public spaces and can also change how we perceive those spaces:

"Though central places have no monopoly as a site of protest demonstrations, they carry a significant moral weight in the history of the nation, [...] they also command widespread attention. For both reasons, collective actions in these spaces have a strong potential to shape public opinion."³²

In a similar vein, Krzysztof Wodiczko argues for the importance of rights in public space. Without accommodating all voices, the democratic assumption of public space ceased to hold. "The democratic process depends on the vitality of public space. Public space is the space of rights."³³ Such as two lithospheric plates, the durability of a built environment and understandings of the past represented by people colliding together in public spaces. What equalizes us in that earthquake situation is the possibility to participate in a political narrative. However, there is a difference between being represented (e.g., someone speaking on one's behalf) and creating the conditions for being able to speak for oneself. I argue that being part of the environment, which is occupied by statues that represent a person connected with non-belonging and exclusive ideals, steals the voice from those who are marginalized or traumatized and puts them aside from the public. Hicks describes the language of statues and monuments as "the

30 Siobhan Kattago, "Written in Stone: Monuments and Representation," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Memory Studies* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2015), 180.

31 Hicks, *Every Monument Will Fall*, 26.

32 Zukin, "Reimagining Civil Society," 17.

33 Krzysztof Wodiczko, "Art, Trauma and Parrhesia," in *Ethics of the Urban*, 126.

kind of voice where every mention of a name is a tool for silencing someone else.”³⁴ However, the art in public spaces can reverse that situation. As Wodiczko states, artists should equip people with the tools necessary for communication rather than speak on their behalf. “Media art and performative public art can play a role in recovering or unfreezing the capacity to speak by creating a situation in which marginalized or traumatized people might insert their experience into public discourse.”³⁵

There are different ways to remember. Ones that do not lean towards eternity yet still offer an intended lesson. Wodiczko’s work is primarily video art, in which he presents stories of homeless people, performed and told on camera. He then screens those videos in a continuous loop, making them a vital part of public spaces. By using a visual and audio loop of people telling stories, he undermines the durability of statues. He enters the public realm with a temporary message that highlights the lives of people who are usually rendered invisible or banished from public life. His approach creates the conditions for being heard and for giving voice to the silenced, not by placing their names on plinths or pillars, but by offering tools for inclusion. Only then might public spaces become a part of the “healing environment for free and open speaking.”³⁶ Further on, Wodiczko is asking about the equal conditions for our speech. “Who is able to tell the truth? What are the consequences of telling the truth? What are its anticipated positive effects for the city, for the city’s rulers, for the individual, etc.?”³⁷ He reframes the role of artists as those who empower people as opposed to sculpture as a mere celebration of power. Although he uses different techniques than a sculptor, I still see his work as fitting into the category of the monumental as understood by Rosalind Krauss, who argues that the new becomes more acceptable when we can associate it with forms we already know that have grown from the past, and that might develop into the future.³⁸ Wodiczko’s digital statues and holograms did not lose their monumental dimension; instead, they were used differently.

His attitude towards public art underscores the question crucial to Shapshay’s category of the monumental and Nietzsche’s term monumental history—namely, what stories are worthy of being told? Secondly, his public art dives deeper into how we tell stories. In his projects, Wodiczko sheds light on public taboos such as illegal detention, imprisonment, domestic violence, work-related abuse, mental well-being, family issues, etc. These experiences are part of everyday life yet often hidden from the public realm. However, their message is conveyed temporarily because his statues are not permanent. They are not erected with eternity in mind;

34 Hicks, *Every Monument Will Fall*, 35.

35 Wodiczko, “Art, Trauma and Parrhesia,” 126.

36 *ibid.*, 134.

37 *ibid.*, 134–135.

38 Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” 30.

on the contrary, they tend to be a flickering reflection of the personal past. Nonetheless, Wodiczko tends to arouse strong emotions and promote values of inclusion. In that sense, his artistic attitude leans toward the “ville” rather than the “cite”, toward a space of appearance rather than a public realm.

Another approach that moves towards eternity and attempts to reshape our sense of monumentality has been articulated in Antony Gormley's Fourth Plinth project in Trafalgar Square, titled *One & Other* (2009).

There has been ongoing discussion about what to add to the empty fourth plinth in London's Trafalgar Square. Younge summarized its history as follows:

The story starts in the mid-19th century, when the designers of Trafalgar Square decided that there would be one huge column for Horatio Nelson and four smaller plinths for statues surrounding it. They managed to put statues on three of the plinths before running out of money, leaving the fourth one bare.³⁹

Younge, who was Chair of the Committee formed to devise a solution for the empty plinth, outlined several proposed ideas. “Over the years there have been requests to put David Beckham, Bill Morris, Mary Seacole, Benny Hill and Paul Gascoigne up there.”⁴⁰ Ultimately, the committee decided to leave the plinth as an empty pedestal for various rotating art projects. The best known was the one formed by Antony Gormley, in which he selected two thousand four hundred real people, each of whom could spend sixty minutes on that empty fourth plinth. In total, Gormley received almost 35,000 applications, of which he randomly chose 2,400. Within this performance, Gormley raised several questions: “Who can be represented in art? How can we make it? How can we experience it?”⁴¹ In addition, he argued that an open space provides individuals with the “possibility to test their sense of self and how they might communicate this to a wider world.”⁴²

Following the proposed cases, changing public space is a means of participating in the built environment and, therefore, demands the city's openness. Such openness can be manifested as direct intervention towards the built space, for example, destruction, as in the case of tearing down the statues. However, openness can also mean starting something new. In the cases stated above, the discussion was scaffolded around the intangible, within stories, participation in the narrative, and being visible in public spaces. Therefore, in my last example, I will unpack the example known as the ‘Buddha of Oakland,’ in which a statue was placed to promote specific values and to protect its neighborhood.

39 Younge, “Why Every Single Statue Should Come Down.”

40 *ibid.*

41 Antony Gormley, “One & Other,” <https://web.archive.org/web/20090301085436/http://www.oneandother.co.uk/>.

42 *ibid.*

In a fifteen-issue ('He is Neutral,' 2015) of an American podcast series, *This is Criminal*, the reporter invited Dan Stevenson, who has lived in Oakland's Eastlake neighborhood for forty years. Eastlake was a part of town known for high crime, an experience that also shaped Stevenson's life. Once, he found an unarmed man on his balcony; however, the police did not do anything. Likewise, they did not help Stevenson solve his biggest problem—the giant pile of garbage that people used to pile up next to his house. For many, leaving garbage on the corner of 11th Avenue and 19th Street had become a habit. As Stevenson recounted on the Podcast: "Mattresses, tables, just junk, just continual junk, a lot of graffiti, a lot of urination and drug use kind of thing."

Since the police were inactive, Stevenson decided to act independently to prevent people from creating a dump next to his door. He developed a unique solution by placing a statue of the Buddha at the site where people previously discarded waste. The statue was not a colossal piece of concrete; it was only a half-meter, relatively inconspicuous sitting Buddha. When a reporter asked Stevenson why he chose Buddha, he said it was because "he is neutral."

Stevenson did not seek permission from any authority to place the statue. "It is best not to ask; you just do it and see what is happening." Since 2009, the year he put a Buddha statue in his neighborhood, people have left small gifts, such as oranges and coins, there. As an unpredictable consequence of Stevenson's act, the statue of Buddha reconnected Oakland's Vietnamese community. Over time, community members built a small house around the Buddha for prayer and worship, even when it rained. More importantly, for Stevenson, the statue helped reduce the neighborhood's crime rate by 85%. Drug dealing ended, and there were no long piles of garbage in front of his door.

A year after the initial radio interview, Stevenson was invited back to report on the current state of his neighborhood. In hindsight, he said that "Buddha brings tranquility and peace to the neighborhood. He even has a Google map point." In this new episode of *This is Criminal*, Stevenson presented a broader picture of the Buddha's impact on the Oakland community. He highlighted the statue's positive reception: "In a world where we hear the bad parts only, the positive becomes visible. It inspires people to do better things." In a broader sense, Stevenson diminished the importance of so-called hostile architecture as a mechanism for preventing crime and maintaining order, including benches with spikes and, as I argue in this paper, statues. Instead, he saw his approach to crime as more effective because it changed people's attitudes in society. He did not intend to banish people from certain places as a soothing solution but instead offered common ground. Creation, as the act of initiating something new, is not about limitation as a final solution, but rather a lengthy process of

exploring possibilities for change. Although the city's form is well planned, its content, as argued at the beginning of this article, remains fluid.

David Harvey maintains that "the question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire."⁴³ In other words, the city's atmosphere is intrinsically linked to the mood of its people. Suppose we continue to be surrounded by hostile architecture and/or statues and monuments celebrating ultimate power and injustice as our common ground. In that case, there is a risk that we remain an imprint of it, which prevents us from creating places to dwell: "Crime prevention through environmental design (cpted) is focused on keeping away bad influences and bad people."⁴⁴ However, Quentin Stevens maintains that being part of public spaces "also helps people to develop empathy and can lead to cooperation and solidarity."⁴⁵

The toppling of monuments serves as a platform for our disagreement with the values that statues and monuments embody. As tempting as this might be, Rigney considers overthrowing their durability. Monuments were built to last; however, their destruction might prove otherwise: "It may appear to represent a fixed moment in time, but that is part of the illusion produced by monuments as a technology. The medium of monumentality is always duration."⁴⁶ Powerful moments of outmaneuvering eternity bring hope that the built environment and the values that statues represent may be changed. The moment of transformation that Michael Arad describes is a sudden connection within an anonymous crowd. Those who considered themselves strangers were suddenly unified.⁴⁷ Human beings are not meant to last forever, neither as living beings nor as beings set into stone. Yet, we (as human beings) are much more than statues can tell us. Because statues, as Younge adds, always tell us more about the values of the period in which they were erected than about the story of the person depicted: "As the evolution of public spaces is inevitable, their degree of inclusivity also evolves in time in relation with local and global contexts."⁴⁸

The question of change, however, cannot be solved only by removing or erecting them. The toppling of statues is not a direct pathway to equality or social transformation. Racism does not disappear the very minute that a statue falls, as described by Rigney in the example of the statue of Edvard Colston, the slave trader from the Royal African Company. "Yes, it is argued, Colston has been decommissioned and racism is no longer

43 David Harvey, "The Right to the City," *New Left Review* 53, (2008): 23.

44 Stevens, "Designing for Difficulty, Agonistic Urban Design," 268.

45 *ibid.*, 269.

46 Hicks, *Every Monument Will Fall*, 31.

47 Michael Arad, "The Sacred, the Quotidian, and the World Trade Center Memorial," in *Ethics of the Urban*, 107.

48 Müge Akkar Ercan and Nihan Oya Memlük, "The Role of Public Spaces on Social Cohesion and Inclusivity: Metamorphosis of a Historic Park in Ankara, Turkey," in *Public Space*, 101.

publicly tolerated in the city's monuments; in that sense a corner has been turned. However, there is still inequality in housing and access to resources: so, what has really changed?"⁴⁹

Change is sometimes also mistaken for deletion by those who claim to be against toppling, but "removing statues does not erase our history."⁵⁰ In addition, Younge aptly points out that statues are not history; they are representatives of historical figures. In their toppling, we do not change history; we only transform our collective narrative:⁵¹

"Nobody thinks that when Iraqis removed statues of Saddam Hussein from around the country, they wanted him to be forgotten. Quite the opposite. They wanted him, and his crimes, to be remembered. They just didn't want him to be revered."⁵²

I state that monuments and statues attract attention because they are part of the public space. They gain different meanings if displayed in an exhibition or museum. "Displayed in this way, alongside some of the posters left by protesters, it has become a historical curiosity rather than an irritant in the public space."⁵³ Michel Foucault depicts museums and galleries as places of accumulated time, where time is locked and therefore perceived differently.⁵⁴ Deutsche considers museums and galleries as the opposite of public spaces in the context of art.⁵⁵ The difference between the perception of statues in museums and those in public spaces reveals the meanings we assign to public spaces.

Deutsche claims that public spaces denote relationships with others through which we structure our discourse.⁵⁶ She adds that the current fragmentation of public spaces, whether politically or economically, affects our perception of the common space, through which we create our place in public/political life and which fosters the sense that we are capable of change.⁵⁷ Public spaces must accommodate myriad individuals simultaneously. It is important to note that the toppling of the statues is not the result of consensus; it is part of a specific group's agenda. However, the same can be said about their erection. Therefore, there is no agreement on whether the toppling of statues should be regarded as

49 Rigney, "Toxic Monuments and Mnemonic Regime Change," 33.

50 Younge, "Why Every Single Statue Should Come Down."

51 Rigney, "Toxic Monuments and Mnemonic Regime Change," 33.

52 Younge, "Why Every Single Statue Should Come Down."

53 Rigney, "Toxic Monuments and Mnemonic Regime Change," 31.

54 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" (1967), ed. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 26.

55 Rosalyn Deutsche, "Umění a Veřejný Prostor. Otázky Demokracie," in *Stav Věcí – Sochy v Ulicích*, ed. Karel Císař (Brno: Dům umění města Brna, 2011), 163.

56 *ibid.*, 160.

57 *ibid.*, 168.

beneficial or futile; with that in mind, we can conclude that it has been a habitual part of our history. "It is not an attack on history, it is history itself."⁵⁸

To return to Nietzsche's metaphor of a tree, I agree with Wodiczko's claim that public spaces play a role in the process of healing. Hence, I consider toppling statues a collective healing process that does not deny or erase the roots from which we stem, only slightly shaping how our branches develop. As Musil writes with respect to statues: "It is easy for them to stand around quietly, accepting occasional glances; we have a right to ask more out of monuments today."⁵⁹ As he suggests, I argue that in the recent toppling of monuments, we can read much more than our history by asking where we are going rather than where we came from.

58 Rigney, "Toxic Monuments and Mnemonic Regime Change," 32.

59 Musil, *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, 67.

Aneta Jasná, Ph.D. is a philosopher affiliated with the Centre for Ethics at the University of Pardubice. Her research focuses on the philosophy of public space, feminist spatial theory, and urban ethics. She received her Ph.D. in philosophy in 2024 and was a Fulbright–Masaryk Visiting Researcher at the New School for Social Research in New York. Her work explores the relationship between the built and lived environment and the role of public space in contemporary democratic societies.

References

- Arad, Michael. "The Sacred, the Quotidian, and the World Trade Center Memorial" in *Ethics of The Urban: The City and Spaces of Political*. Edited by Mohsen Mostafavi. Zurich: Müller, 2017.
- Deutsche, Rosalyn. *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*. Cambridge: mit, 1996.
- . "Umění a Veřejný Prostor: Otázky Demokracie," in *Stav Věcí – Sochy v Ulicích*. Edited by Karel Císař. Brno: Dům umění města Brna, 2011.
- Ercan, Müge Akkar, and Memlük, Nihan Oya. "The Role of Public Spaces on Social Cohesion and Inclusivity: Metamorphosis of a Historic Park in Ankara, Turkey," in *Public Space: Between Reimagination and Occupation*. Edited by Mariusz Czepczynski and Svetlana Hristova. New York: Routledge, 2019.
- Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces" (1967). Edited by Jay Miskowiec. *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22–27.
- Gormley, Antony. "One & Other." <https://web.archive.org/web/20090301085436/http://www.oneandother.co.uk/>.
- Harvey, David. "The Right To The City." *New Left Review* 53 (2008): 23–40.
- Hicks, Dan. *Every Monument Will Fall: A Story of Remembering and Forgetting*. London: Hutchinson, 2025.
- Kattago, Siobhan. "Written in Stone: Monuments and Representation," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Memory Studies*. Edited by Siobhan Kattago. Burlington: Ashgate, 2015, 241-254.
- Koselleck, Reinhart. "War Memorials: Identity Formations of the Survivors" (1999), trans. Todd Presner, in *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*. Stanford: sup, 2002, 285-326 and 358-363.
- Krauss, Rosalind. "Sculpture in the Expanded Field." *October* 8 (1979): 31–44.
- Musil, Robert. *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author* (1936). Translated by Peter Wortsman. London: Archipelago, 2006.
- Naginski, Erika. "The Public Image of Demos," in *Ethics of The Urban: The City and Spaces of Political*. Edited by Mohsen Mostafavi. Zurich: Müller, 2017.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life* (1874). Translated by Ian Johnston. Arlington: Richer, 2010.
- Rigney, Ann. "Toxic Monuments and Mnemonic Regime Change." *Studies on National Movements* 9 (2022): 8–41.
- Shapshay, Sandra. "What Is the Monumental?" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 79, no. 2 (2021): 145–160.
- Stevens, Quentin. "Designing for Difficulty, Agonistic Urban Design," in *Public Space Design and Social Cohesion*. Edited by Patricia Aelbrecht and Quentin Stevens. New York: Routledge, 2019.
- Wodiczko, Krzysztof. "Art, Trauma and Parrhesia," in *Ethics of The Urban: The City and Spaces of Political*. Edited by Mohsen Mostafavi. Zurich: Lars Muller Publishers, 2017.
- Younge, Gary. "Why Every Single Statue Should Come Down." *The Guardian*, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/jun/01/gary-younge-why-every-single-statue-should-come-down-rhodes-colston>.
- Zukin, Sharon. "Reimagining Civil Society: Conflict and Control in the City's Public Spaces" in *Public Space: Between Reimagination and Occupation*. Edited by Mariusz Czepczynski and Svetlana Hristova. New York: Routledge, 2018.