

DISSONANT HERITAGE AND THE HAZARDS OF RETENTION

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ABSTRACT

Finally, after years of negotiation and fundraising, a Confederate monument in Athens, Georgia (USA) – decorated with fresh flowers – was ready for public dedication. Many supporters, along with clergy and local politicians, were in attendance. Just as a solemn speech had begun, though, a local newspaper records the sudden arrival of a violent storm as “wind, rain and lightning... suddenly burst forward in great fury. (Merton, 1956 : 30-247). The assembly scattered momentarily, then carried on in a nearby Baptist church. It was the first of many storms which would swirl around this memorial to Athens’ Civil War dead.

These words were let it be:

Bright Angels come and Guard our Sleeping Heroes

... which may ring strangely to our years now, it being unusual, even in a literary context, to compare the dead with the sleeping. Were these simple poetic indulgences, or did the monument’s designers intend to suggest that their object represented something more... something which was then merely dormant, temporarily defeated, but capable of being awoken to a new life? Was the true purpose of the monument to gaze forward in anticipation of this awakening, rather than to look back in reverence?

This paper will explore a few divergent contemporary interpretations of these controversial objects in the public domain, tracing the lineage of motivation leading some call for their protection and others to call for their removal.

Keyword: Heritage, Monuments, Confederate States.

INTRODUCTION

A full one hundred and fifty five years after the conclusion of the American Civil War (1861-65) which they were built to commemorate, ongoing turmoil surrounds hundreds of Confederate monuments in the southern United States.

Lumped together, the challenges posed by this controversy point to the hazards of retaining cultural heritage objects by default. They also point to the broader problem of the intentional appropriation of public space – both physical and psychological – in support of a malicious political agenda.

There are many strands of the problem presented by Confederate monuments in the American south. To begin with, the monuments themselves are far more enigmatic than it would first appear. Though hundreds of monuments were erected in towns and cities throughout the former Confederate states, each in some way commemorating the citizens and soldiers who contributed to the Confederate cause during the Civil War, many of these monuments were not constructed immediately after the end of the war. This is to say that while many of the monuments appear to be tributes to the war dead, and therefore seem to possess a funerary character, it seems that the chronology and provenance of these monuments often point to a different interpretation of their purpose.

When considering the Confederate monuments constructed between 1880 and 1920, it is clear that motivations and objectives are quite separate from simple commemoration of the Southern war dead. Specifically, monuments constructed in this period function mainly as emblems of

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the regional regime of coercive implementation of Jim Crow laws which were intended to intimidate African American citizens. In this way, they affirmed the hegemony of white supremacist political groups acting in defiance of their constitutional obligations stemming directly from the thirteenth amendment, the Emancipation Proclamation, and dramatically altered legal norms emerging from the Civil War.

In this way, the Confederate monuments to the war dead function historically – and in many cases still function up to the present day – as a powerful living emblems of white supremacist influence in the unreconstructed South. Those who paid for their creation appear to have been sending a message to the communities in which they were built which might be roughly summarized in this fashion: "We may have lost the war but we will continue to govern with the values of the defeated Confederate cause in deference of the full emancipation of African American citizens; we placed this sign among you on behalf of a vigilante army which will in tireless support of segregationist laws and policies based on a living narrative of cultural and racial superiority."

Monuments created under these social and political circumstances qualify as "dissonant" heritage and constitute a negative legacy with enormous narrative complexity within the American context. These objects have generated consternation and controversy for many decades, culminating in a series of recent events which place their legitimacy in the foreground of violent and vexatious political exchanges. The very best example of this maybe seen in the Charlottesville, Virginia "Unite the right" demonstration which occurred in August 2017. Demonstrators converged on Charlottesville to oppose the proposed removal of the Robert E. Lee statue from that city's Lee Park, leading to highly charged exchanges between demonstrators and protesters resulting finally in the murder of a young female protester by a supporter of the monuments who purposefully drove his pickup truck into a protesting group.

These dire events contributed to, and intensified, an already fraught political exchange with national repercussions. One thing that became painfully clear during the Charlottesville protest and its aftermath is that the question of how to handle the Confederate monuments in southern cities is tied to the question of how to interface with white supremacist advocacy groups whose members are willing to inflict violence and chronic intimidation upon any vocal critic of their position on the monuments issue. One could say that the Confederate monuments have become emblems of a racist political viewpoint, the advocates of which trace their cultural and

political lineage back to the failed Confederate cause of the late nineteenth-century.

The Iconoclastic Dialogue

It is difficult to discuss the question of removal or retention of the Confederate monuments without pausing at least briefly to review the broader tradition of iconoclasm in relation to public memorials. It may be noted in this regard that iconoclasm has been treated in the popular domain both as virtuous purgative process (when carried out by official actors), and as a barbaric reflex (when carried out by nonofficial actors). Too many examples exist to summarize easily, but perhaps a few will be instructive.

In April 2003 the United States Marine Corps, which had occupied the capital of Iraq following the extended hostilities in that country, decided to destroy a statue of former President Saddam Hussein which stood upon a large stone plinth in the center of Firdos Square. After grappling with several technical challenges in relation to the removal of the metal sculpture from its base, the American soldiers allowed Iraqi citizens gathered as spectators to drag the toppled sculpture away after subjecting it to assorted verbal and physical abuses. In this instance, the destruction of the monument honoring an enemy leader suited the political and military objectives of the iconoclasts well; it provided a useful public relations gesture on behalf of the occupying American military forces.

Along similar lines we might recall that a statue of King George III was toppled in New York City in 1776, during one of the first overtly defiant gestures of the Revolutionary War, leading to political independence for the United States. Many of the reasons given for this iconoclast project are similar to the reasons asserted for the removal of Confederate monuments today, and it was celebrated at the time as an important symbolic action for citizens, hoping to effect a political migration from monarchy to a representative democracy. In both of these cases, iconoclastic destruction and erasure were official and sanctioned, relative to tenuous political conditions. As a result, their actions were portrayed as patriotic and appropriate, by a generally obliging American press.

A prominent sanctioned iconoclastic event occurred on Thanksgiving day in 1970, when several members of the American Indian Movement (AIM) occupied the Mount Rushmore Memorial in South Dakota. The site of this famous sculpture - featuring four American presidents carved into the living rock of the mountain—had always been

controversial, since the Black Hills were long sacred to the Lakota Native American tribe. The mountain itself had been promised in perpetuity to them in the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868. Following the discovery of gold in the area in 1874, the United States government took the land, which included the Mount Rushmore site and sold it for mining and settlement to European Americans.

Protesting this treaty and the offense caused by carving the faces of white Europeans into the side of the sacred Mountain, two of whom owned slaves, Native American protesters briefly occupied the site and attempted to reconsecrate the mountain by planting a prayer staff at the top. While the occupiers did not physically destroy the face of this famously massive sculpture, they did enact several gestures of desecration in order to draw attention to their complaints. In this case, the iconoclasts were nonofficial and non-sanctioned actors in the public domain, so that their acts of public defilement were branded illicit and barbaric by a scandalized American press. Thus, it may be safely said that the value and legitimacy of a given iconoclastic gesture depend greatly on whether power aligns with the icon breakers or with the icons themselves. From a more neutral vantage point, iconoclasm may be characterized as a public dialogue related to objects assumed to have magical properties. Since each monumental object in the public domain carries a heavy freight of assumptions about public norms, public values, and public actions worthy of admiration across generations, there is the problem which always arises in relation to these objects regarding how to accommodate those who are discontented with the values exemplified. When those discontented viewers assert their dissatisfaction with the values embodied in the object by breaking it or removing it, they complete their part in the iconoclastic dialogue.

Here it may be useful to restate that the issue at hand is not related to an individual's desire or prerogative to install. This is about a monument of similar character placed in the public sphere with the assumption of a general and implicit acceptance of the values it projects. These public, monumental-scale objects are about the projection of power in the form of implied values assumed to be universal but which, in actuality, should be subject to recurrent cycles of review, critique and potential rejection by subsequent generations of visitors.

The Power of the Image

Freedberg, (1989), in his landmark study on the subnational and subconscious power of images, discusses the complex ways in which paintings and sculptures – aside from any

subjects they depict – arouse fear, empathy, hope, love, hate, excitement, and even sexual arousal in the minds and bodies of spectators. This power is something we tend to take for granted, but it is by no means easy to explain how a lifeless object can automatically betoken values and emotions, exert influence directly on viewers without words or language, shape their subsequent behaviors and engender new actions.

Freedberg looks at some length at the ways in which powerful images – especially those permanently fixed within the public domain – imprint their message and their values on spectators. This engraving process brings along with it a transmission of values which is somewhat automatic, and not entirely voluntary. Within any large and diverse society, no single set of values or associations maybe publicly transmitted without generating consternation and refutation. Freedberg notes that episodes of iconoclasm often reflect this "strain of antagonism," something resulting in the destruction or partial breaking of the offending object. While this may be understood in very negative terms by some, it also could be seen as a form of restorative appropriation of the mythic content of a psychically or symbolically dynamic artwork. If a disruptive object has power or seems to exert a kind of "unearthly thrall" upon its viewers, then the iconoclastic gesture maybe seen as a demonstration of individual superiority over the power of both the image, the values which it seems to contain, and its creators.

Meanwhile all objects in the public domain are inevitably subject to some form of revision, redaction, repossession, reprogramming, reinterpretation, and finally, simple organic decay. None is static. In the case of the Confederate monuments in Southern United States, commemorative objects created originally to assert majoritarian governance by white supremacist politicians have been adopted by a new generation of citizens who embrace the bigoted and exclusionary worldview the statues seem to embody. These supporters appear to accept the idea that a hierarchy of races should still shape access to privileges and resources, and that a form of loyalty may still be due to the failed Confederate State.

Dissonant Heritage

A ghostlike continuity of these seemingly defeated values echoes clearly in many of the monuments in question. The Confederate statue in Yazoo, Mississippi, constructed and dedicated in 1909, salutes local residents who died in the Civil War and then observes with poetic flourish. The idea seems quite clear that in the minds of the people who

designed and paid for this monument, a war of values would and should continue long after the military battles ended, an evolving conflict which perhaps continues up to the present. Given the intensity and violence of debate currently surrounding the destiny of these confederate monuments, it is easy to believe that the broader and deeper conflict has not yet concluded.

Defenders of these monuments have argued that their historical and documentary value, independent of our opinions in relation to the objectives or allegiances of their sponsors, should protect them from removal. This position convincingly asserts that all evidence of historic change is valuable as a public text of where we have been as a society. The negative or dissonant heritage, as embodied by the Confederate statues in the minds of most observers, is not only admissible as part of this text but perhaps is explicitly valuable because of its fallacious, failed, or morally offensive content.

Without clear and public records that our country passed through these ugly and regrettable chapters of its formation, so the thinking goes, how could we suitably remember the power and toxicity of race hatred in a country at the moment when it suddenly emerged from legal slaveholding? In a public library, by comparison, we do not discard the books which articulate unpopular philosophies or distasteful political viewpoints, mainly because we collectively assume that there is value in recalling and appreciating the patterns of thought which allow for such perspectives to exist and thrive within a larger social context.

Good examples of this general approach to dissonant heritage maybe found in the Auschwitz extermination camp sites in Poland, and in the Hiroshima Ground Zero Memorial in Japan. Both sites without any special artistic or architectural value, are preserved carefully in order to support a clear and thorough interpretation of the regrettable ideas and events which led to the wholesale slaughter of innocent persons due to the careful and strategic maneuvers of hundreds of coordinated political actors. These sites, along with many others worldwide, offer convincing examples of why the retention of places and monuments which remind us of unpleasant things can be not only compatible with liberal ideals, but also an optimized approach to constructive historic interpretation of the built environment.

Public Speech and International Law

The assertion that racist and offensive objects should be removed from the public sphere is partially supported by American caselaw. In particular, courts in United States have routinely upheld the curtailment of hate speech when it incites listeners to certain forms of violence, especially racist antagonism (Lixinski, 2018). At the same time, the first amendment of the Constitution supports free speech and the right to receive many forms of information without interference, and this hallowed freedom has proven legally impervious to many claims that hurtful or hateful content should limit its application.

The International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) requires signatory states to declare as a punishable offense any form of "dissemination of ideas based on racial superiority or hatred" or "incitement to racial discrimination". Both of these international declarations have been signed and ratified by the United States.

Questions that arise from examination of these legal guidelines include:

- Are all forms of information in the shape of historic documents, structures and physical evidence equally useful and relevant, or must some be excluded from the public domain because they have imposed harms or encouraged the adoption of harmful ideas?
- When should freedom of speech and diversity of perspective in the public sphere become limited in relation to the insults and injuries they imposed on particular segments of a society?
- Is it possible for a relatively neutral observer to render fair decisions regarding public monuments which explicitly offend and injure a group of which that observer is not a member?
- Should a racist emblem somehow placed in the public domain remain there simply because it advocates once had enough money and political influence to construct it, or continue to have enough clout to defend it?

Unveiled 1865-1890

Unveiled 1890-1920

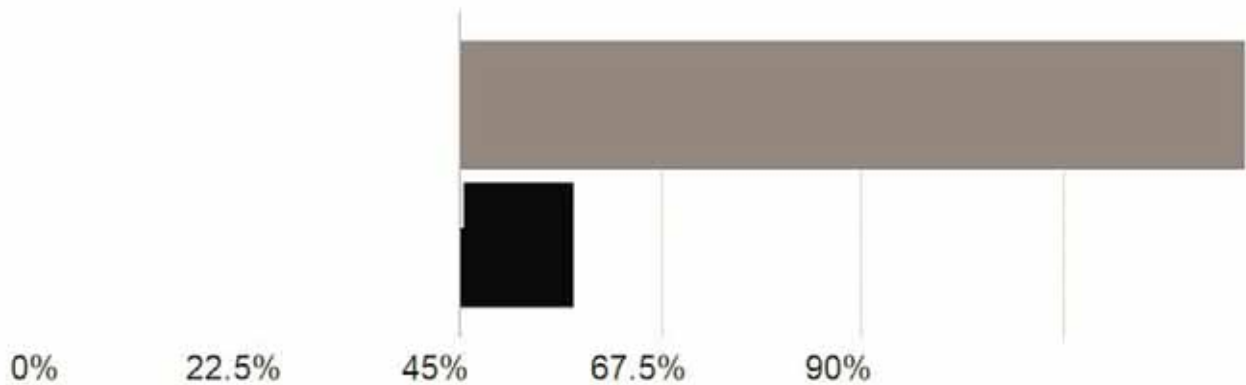


Figure 1: Confederate Monuments Located in Cemeteries

Challenges to the Retentive Standard

It should be recognized here that the default position for historic preservationists is to retain and conserve; the working assumption is that erasure of public sites and monuments is dangerously arbitrary and often political, such that preserving what exists is the safest position and the one that retains the greatest number of future options. It may be added that retention of structures and monuments in the public domain typically increases the overall diversity of experiences and psychic inputs for future generations, which may generally be said to be broadly beneficial under many divergent circumstances.

The case of the Confederate monuments in Southern United States presents a few special difficulties, however. Firstly, these monuments do not commemorate what they claim to commemorate in most cases. As described previously, many hundreds of monuments ostensibly recognizing U.S. Civil War deaths were actually erected long after the close of that conflict in order to symbolize and consolidate political power as held by recalcitrant citizens who wished to retain a segregationist society even after federal laws had prohibited such practices. So the first difficulty is that the monuments themselves, as originally conceived and constructed, exploit a historic narrative for political purposes in a manner that is non-explicit and culturally encoded. These objects may be memorials, but the narrative which they seek to

commemorate does not correspond to the narrative to which explicit references are made.

These internal contradictions are reflected in a few simple observations. For example, in the decades following the end of the Civil War in 1865, more than eighty seven percent of Confederate monuments were situated in cemeteries – suggesting symbolic emphasis on a straight forward funerary theme. Yet after 1890, only about thirteen percent of new Confederate monuments in the American south (a much greater number than had been constructed in the previous period) were found there (Figure 1). Rather, they were sited prominently and centrally in public spaces within the fabric of cities and towns. This dramatic shift in orientation may correspond to a shift in social and political function.

Similarly, of the more than seven hundred Confederate monuments built in the American south since the close of the Civil War, about two thirds were commissioned between 1890 and 1920.

Standard intuition would predict that war memorials dedicated to fallen soldiers would grow less numerous as the number of intervening years increased; the pattern we actually observe is quite the opposite. These figures provide another suggestion that a purely commemorative function – the one explicitly borrowed by the monument makers –

was not the primary function intended for a majority of all monuments constructed.

A second difficulty is that these memorials were constructed and paid for, for the most part, by individuals who actively advocated policies and social systems which systematically contravened federal law in order to maintain long-standing cultural, economic and political privileges. The assertion of these privileges inflicted great and lasting harms on minority racial groups in the communities where it was made. It is not unreasonable to suppose that the Confederate monuments celebrated, in the eyes of both of those who advocated for them and those who interpreted their message as violent and oppressive, a white supremacist political agenda. The outcome of the Civil War pushed the message below the surface; it needed to be cloaked underneath relatively innocuous patriotic forms in order to express an enthusiasm for illegal actions felt strongly by a privileged majority.

The third difficulty is that these illegal actions continue into the present time, and are defended-along with their emblems-by a group of advocates who retain significant influence, power, and virulence in southern society. By extension, the harm and oppression generated by these half-hidden assertions continues in many insidious forms as well, leading some observers to conclude that the Confederate monuments continue to have a toxic effect in those communities where they stand.

By logical extension, some conclude that removal of these monuments would facilitate certain forms of reconciliation, or at least deprive hateful thoughts of their privileged status within the public sphere. According to this line of thinking, the harms which might stem from erasing historic objects are greatly outweighed by the harms consciously experienced on a daily basis by those whose social status and political rights are undermined by the Confederate monuments' message.

The totality and incompatibility of these concerns suggest that a simple and straightforward formula for how to manage the Confederate monuments in professionally neutral and evenhanded ways is unlikely to emerge. As apparently sanctioned and sturdy objects situated prominently in a shared landscape, these objects may function in part like a Trojan Horse, a tool of clandestine conquest which appears as a simple and unassuming gift to the general public highlighting the sacrifices of duty-bound soldiers. By excepting and absorbing the Horse at face value, the Trojans made what

may be the most infamous mistake known to western military history, or, at any rate, to western literature.

Many voices in the rancorous debate surrounding the Confederate monuments in United States urge us not to make a similar error. They tell us that these monuments contain, and have always contained, subtextual messages which are purposefully dangerous and antithetical to what most consider to be the ethical and political norms preferred by the country as a whole.

Monuments and myth

One possible clue to assist with the navigation of this labyrinth is provided by Roland Barthes in his treatment of political appropriation of symbolic meanings. Barthes observes that when straight forward and superficial emblems are transformed into the raw materials of a new kind of public speech, a new "language object", then myths are formed. He argues that this process of political and cultural myth-making requires that a familiar language of signs is taken hold of, emptied, and made into a container similar to a Trojan horse. This infected vessel becomes a "speaking corpse" and a "parasitical form" which feeds off of the signs and symbols stolen from a collective symbolic vocabulary, but imposes upon those forms an abnormal regression from meaning back to form.

Barthes (1972) describes this as an impoverishment of meaning in which the outer form is retained and keeps its life while the inner chain of signs is broken and corrupted. In the semiotic language favored by Barthes and his intellectual contemporaries, a sign (comprised of a clearly defined signifier and signified) is converted into the signifier for a "second order" metalinguistic sign, or myth.

In the case of the typical Confederate monument, we find a war memorial. This is a sign which would have appeared familiar and archetypal for Americans in the late nineteenth century postwar milieu, dignifying death. This is repurposed as the vehicle for a myth of rebirth and vitality with indirect reference to "unreconstructed" white supremacist social and political hegemony in the American south. That is, we can see hundreds of examples in which a ordinary symbol, in the form of a war memorial, is appropriated for a non-ordinary purpose: the public assertion of an illegal and violent political prerogative, the continuation of a "lost cause" whose advocates had been sleeping, but have new vitality.

The power of this type of myth, Barthes (1972) argues, is partly derived from its “reliance on a history, geography, orality, cultural lineage, and ritual significance” which is inherited and borrowed from exploited symbolic forms. These borrowed forms, like many of the Confederate monuments under consideration here, become a new "vessel" for mythic speech. In the case of the Confederate monuments, this takes the form of racially- encoded hate speech.

The constitutive, familiar elements lent authority and validity to what may have be a novel message: that race relations in the American south would be managed along pre-War lines by white supremacist factions retaining, despite unambiguous military defeat, enormous power and influence in the region. They may still be functioning this way.

If this is the case, and as built environment professionals it may be our moral obligation to assume that this is so unless contradictory evidence can be readily found, then the Confederate monuments are a kind of dissident heritage fundamentally different than even an Auschwitz. In the case of surviving Nazi death camps, though underlying narratives of racial superiority and violence are highly comparable to the Confederate monuments, it may be argued that the specific narrative which pitted a powerful political group against a beleaguered cultural minority in Europe is no longer associated with active or relevant threats to Jewish citizens in Poland or Germany. The same may not be said, according to many sources and witnesses, in the case of white supremacist factions in the American south with respect

to African American citizens in that region. Accordingly, if certain chronic harms are ongoing in relation to the embedded subtexts and Barthesian mythology of these Confederate monuments, an automatic professional aversion to removal and erasure may become highly problematic. If the Confederate monuments constitute a special case, a progressive built environment professional might consider adopting a harm reduction strategy borrowed from healthcare providers who manage substance abuse. While the controversial decision to remove these confederate monuments would not address all the vexing problems they pose, nor would it fail to generate some new problems of its own, it would potentially reduce the infliction of onerous injuries in the future as felt by many citizens compelled to interact with offensive objects.

Conclusion

This paper argues that the toxicity of some Confederate monuments – in particular those constructed in the early twentieth century by advocates of unofficial racial segregation who appear to have undertaken a cynical appropriation of commemorative symbols linked to the American Civil. This calls for serious assessment of the ongoing harms associated with their retention. Where the nature and burden of these harms are unacceptable, a reduced diversity and complexity of the historic built environment should be sacrificed to an increased diversity of human experience which may be safely supported in the public domain.

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