

SHOULD MONUMENTS RESIST?

Keywords

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The social outbreak of October 2019 defined a new role for monuments in Chile. During the demonstrations, not only the statues that paid tribute to Spanish conquistadors - namely, those who built a country to the detriment of the native peoples - were torn down, but the historical (therefore constructed) backing of certain buildings' patrimonial status was also questioned. Even the Baquedano monument, located in the middle of a roundabout of the same name, at the focal center of the demonstrations in Santiago, was completely covered with new meanings during the protests.



In late May 2020, the death of African American citizen George Floyd – at the hands of the Minneapolis police, in the US – reactivated the Black Lives Matter movement, which resists and opposes racism against African American people. In the context of this movement, a series of statues that paid tribute to slave-traders and owners were attacked, generating a surprising parallel (just months away), between what happened in Chile and in other parts of the world.

Considering both events, in the debate on this issue of ARQ we asked: should monuments resist in place? Or is it preferable to protect them by removing them from the public space? What happens if their meaning changes? Are they still considered monuments? What is it that resists in them? After all, if monuments materialize the intersection between history, architecture, and the city, what can resist the most, their meaning or their material?



FIG. 1 La estatua de Edward Colston cae en Bristol, Inglaterra, el 7 de junio de 2020. *Edward Colston Statue falls in Bristol, England, on June 7, 2020.*
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FIG. 2 Estatua del General Baquedano después de las protestas del estallido social iniciadas el 18 de octubre de 2019, Santiago de Chile. *The General Baquedano Statue after the protests of the social outbreak, which started on October 18, 2019, Santiago, Chile.*
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Sinking Monuments: Notes on our Current Statuophobia

In 1936, Robert Musil famously wrote: “there is nothing more invisible than a monument.” Nothing seems further from the truth right now. In Bristol, protesters recently tossed a statue of slave trader Edward Colston into the harbor; in Antwerp, activists are defacing bronzes of King Leopold II; in the United States, citizens are toppling Confederate monuments; and across the world statues of Christopher Columbus are falling. The toppled, sunken, defaced, vandalized and beheaded statues of these past months speak to the reemergence of rage and discontent against monuments – Confederate, federal, patriarchal, colonial, racist, white –, spatial reminders of structural and representational inequality. The recent protests against racism in the United States and across the world reveal a special affinity between monuments and social protests; between citizens occupying the streets to demand justice and the dead bronzes standing in their way. The same can be said about the social upheaval that started in response to a public transportation fare hike in Chile on October 18, 2019. During months of massive protests for equality, justice and redistribution, Chilean demonstrators toppled, beheaded and vandalized monuments honoring Spanish colonizers and Republican war heroes who sought to eradicate native peoples.

Our current statuophobia is different from that of the 20th century counter-monument movement reflected in Musil’s words, as well as the 19th century monument disdain. While monuments’ lack of function upset modernists, the growing number of new unregulated monuments troubled city planners a century before. Today we are grappling with a different kind of monument malaise: our monuments no longer reflect who we are. The problem is twofold. For the one part, cities have largely failed to build monuments to represent current – or rather – aspirational values: monuments to black lives, to women, to the LGBTQ+ community, to minorities, to people of color, to immigrants, to the disabled, and to ordinary citizens. For the other part, cities have been reluctant to remove offensive, racist and colonial monuments of the past. In Berlin, for example, Black and Afro-German activists and their allies have been struggling for over a decade to remove colonial and racist street-names from the city center and to build a memorial to the victims of German colonialism. Similarly, it took 23 years after the return to democracy, for a central thoroughway in Santiago de Chile honoring September 11, the date of the military *coup*, to be renamed. Most of the monuments that have been toppled in the past few weeks, were removed by

activists and protesters. One of the only exceptions is the Columbus statue in San Francisco, which the city removed preemptively as a form of preservation. While protesters' actions might seem violent, they are a response to decades of veiled and overt racism and indifference combined to perpetuate the monumental *status quo*. In other words, without protests, much of the Robert E. Lee, Leopold II, and Columbus statues of the world would remain intact, protected by a veil of selective invisibility.

In response to our present-day statuophobia most monument supporters claim that removing monuments is an erasure of history. This widely echoed argument not only conflates history with its representation, but also assumes that all monuments were erected with the purpose of preserving the memory of a deed, event, or figure of the past. Both assumptions are false. While monuments might tell stories, they are not stone and bronze versions of peer-reviewed history books. On the contrary, monuments are the result of selection and erasure processes, strongly aimed at maintaining dominant narratives. Every statue is the product of a specific cultural and political milieu that decided to elevate a certain version of the past over multiple others. The proliferation of Confederate monuments erected after the end of the American Civil War to spread the false narrative of the 'Lost Cause' illustrates this point. These Confederate statues are not historical monuments, but purposefully ahistorical representations of the past. History at large is not in danger, what has been threatened by the recent removal of monuments is a certain version of the past, one that justified colonialism, genocide, slavery and injustice in the name of 'progress and enlightenment.'

As cities across the world grapple with the monument debris of the ongoing protests against racism and police brutality, I would like to conclude with one photograph (FIG. 1). The photograph of the bronze of Edward Colston being tossed into the Avon river, which was located later in the middle of Bristol harbor by the witty Google Maps algorithm. Colston, like most of his kind, was rescued from the bottom of the river and stored in an undisclosed location. Museums have been our preferred place for defunct objects of the past. However, I would argue that under our current circumstances there are other alternatives to consider besides exhibiting these monuments in an enclosed and regulated space. Perhaps some monuments should be left untouched – showing the accumulative signs of vandalism and re-appropriation, perhaps others could be put in dialogue with new monuments that reframe their values, and perhaps some statues deserve to stay underwater. **ARQ**

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