

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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Public monuments: Protagonists of a possible future

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Until October 18, 2019, public monuments were the least known national monument category, from those established by law 17,288. From the Technical Secretariat of the Council of National Monuments, we had already noticed the low visibility of these works and we had started an initiative to enhance their value towards the community. We wanted to highlight – as they deserve – the works of distinguished artists such as Virginio Arias, Rebeca Matte, Blanca Merino, or Gustavo García del Postigo, through heritage circuits and seminars. We had designed a whole program.

However, since that Friday, public monuments received the most evident manifestation of the social outbreak's emerging emotions. The geo-referenced registry of damages and alterations to the cultural heritage protected by law that we carried out from the Ministry of Cultures, Arts and Heritage, yielded 1,353 affected patrimonial assets throughout the country. Of these, 413 correspond to public monuments, the majority with minor damage such as scratches with spray and/or enamel and adhered elements, and 104 with greater damage, such as deformation, loss of parts, cracks, fissures, collapse, removal, replacement or fire damage.

Most of those which suffered the greatest damage represent military or police characters or events from the Independence, Conquest, and Colony periods. In short, figures installed in the public space that are not perceived by some groups as binding or worthy of pride, but as symbols of a history that in many cases they do not even recognize as their own. Thus, a misunderstanding of meanings was generated through heritage.

Through public monuments, the State was challenged by a society that manifested itself. Questions that were unheard or hadn't been formulated strongly enough arose now energetically from citizens. What heritage reflects today's society? What really represents us? Could the same sculpture be uncomfortable for some and heroic for others? And, above all, do they enable us to project the society we want to build? Yes, we were shaken.

These questions show that heritage is a dynamic phenomenon. Identity and culture are in constant change and transformation. Change that in recent decades has been even more accelerated, given the communications' globalization. It is not possible to conceive heritage, therefore, as a closed list, only under the prism of past civilizations. Heritage is built from the values of present societies.

Furthermore, public monuments, understood as elements bearing meanings, are installed in the most

democratic place within the urban context: public space. It is there where we all have free access, where diversity manifests itself, therefore, the elements that construct this space must express democracy, since it belongs to all of us.

Then, what do we do with those public monuments that represent oppression and harm for some groups and generate such a resistance that reaches violence? It is a broad question. In the Technical Secretariat of the CMN, we initiated a process of reflection, considering the experience, the international context, and our local reality. There can be various solutions: installing another monument that serves as a counterpoint in front of an 'uncomfortable' one; incorporating the superposition of an artistic action on a monument that generates dissent; removing and relocating a statue where it can be understood within context (in a museum, for example).

Whatever the new symbolic resignification, the most important thing will be the process to reach it. We will need a broad, participatory, consultative and inclusive dialogue that encompasses different visions and where, ultimately, society as a whole, builds and drives its own process. And for this, decentralization is essential, so that decisions are made at the local level, proximate and belonging to the territory, in a transparent, open and democratic manner.

However, heritage management today does not have all the tools to address this issue. This is why a change in legislation is so urgent. The current law hardly considers public monuments as "statues, columns, fountains, pyramids, plates, crowns, inscriptions"! Without context, without interpretations. Clearly, a legislation that is about to turn a hundred years old does not give enough answers to today's questions. As long as we have an anachronistic law, where all decisions continue to be made in the capital, by expert technicians, we will not have the ability to make local communities take the lead in decisions about their own heritage.

Heritage is the encounter and social cohesion in common elements. Heritage allows us to learn from the past to build a better future. That is our great challenge. **ARQ**

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