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Vertical Monument versus Horizontal Landscape Comparison of Chinese and Western Contemporary Memorial

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ABSTRACT

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VERTICAL MONUMENT VERSUS HORIZONTAL LANDSCAPE COMPARISON OF CHINESE AND WESTERN CONTEMPORARY MEMORIAL

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Abstract

At the age of globalization, like other developing countries, the faces of China's cities are losing their characteristic under the powerful influence of Western culture, sharing the same modern looks without any distinction. However, there is a type of architecture that could escape the control of this influence—memorial. Because, as the carrier of state and national collective memory, it witnesses the history of China, bears the stigma of the age. In China, memorial still has a close relationship with the tendency of political power and mainstream ideology. Meanwhile, memorial is closely related to politic, economy and culture of particular times. As the time goes by, memorial is altering and developing constantly on both spirit and form. Comparing the status of the Chinese and Western contemporary memorial, we may still be able to feel the difference between the two in culture and ideology.

Keywords: Memorial, China, West, Contemporary, Comparison

1. Introduction

At the age of globalization, like other developing countries, the faces of China's cities are losing their characteristic under the powerful influence of Western culture, sharing the same modern looks without any distinction. However, there is a type of architecture that could escape the control of this influence—memorial. Because, as the carrier of state and national collective memory, it witnesses the history of China, bears the stigma of the age. In China, memorial still has a close relationship with the tendency of political power and mainstream ideology. Meanwhile, memorial is closely related to politic, economy and culture of particular times. As the time goes by, memorial is altering and developing constantly on both spirit and form. Comparing the status of the Chinese and Western contemporary memorial, we may still be able to feel the difference between the two in culture and ideology.

For a long period of time in the history of mankind, as the tool that upper class used for maintaining their power and show the legitimacy of it, memorial carries strong political overtones and obvious features of personality cult. From the Trajan's Column of Roman period to Triumphal arch of Napoleonic, towering gigantic volume and solid stone clearly express the powerful authority and the claiming eternal of it. In First and Second World War period, due to the heavy casualties and serious damage to civilization caused by the war, there were a large number of memorials being built to remember and reflect this catastrophe in human history. Chinese modern memorial also began to appear during this period. The most important memorial at that time is the mausoleum of Sun Yat-sen (Fig.1), the president of Republic of China, the founder of modern China. He started Xinhai Revolution to overthrow the feudal rule of the Qing Dynasty, promoting democracy policy in politics, and advocating a comprehensive learning from the West. In that period of time, there were a large number of Western-style

2. Two Important Periods That Influenced The Chinese Contemporary Memorial

monument, sculpture and memorial plaza be built.

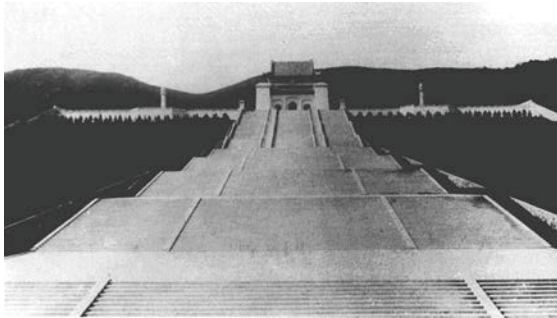


Figure 1. Figure 1. The mausoleum of Sun Yat-sen, Nanjing, 1930s

The designer of the mausoleum of Sun Yat-sen is Lu Yanzhi, a Chinese architect who studied architecture at Cornell University, and worked at Henry Killam Murphy Architects for two years. Beaux-Arts architecture training and his comprehending of official architecture style of Qing Dynasty made the mausoleum become a special Chinese modern memorial. The whole mausoleum followed the structure of traditional ancient Chinese mausoleum, which is a complete spatial sequence composed successively by memorial arch, corridor, tomb gate, stele pavilion, stairs, memorial hall and tomb (Fig.2).

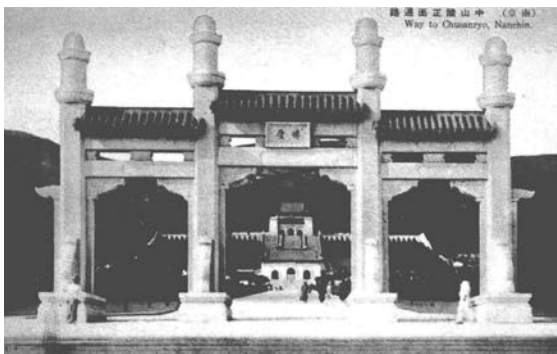


Figure 2. The mausoleum follow the spatial sequence of ancient Chinese mausoleum

A noteworthy thing is that, viewed from the air, the whole mausoleum is designed to be a bell shape for symbolizing the national awakening and caution from the president (Fig.3).

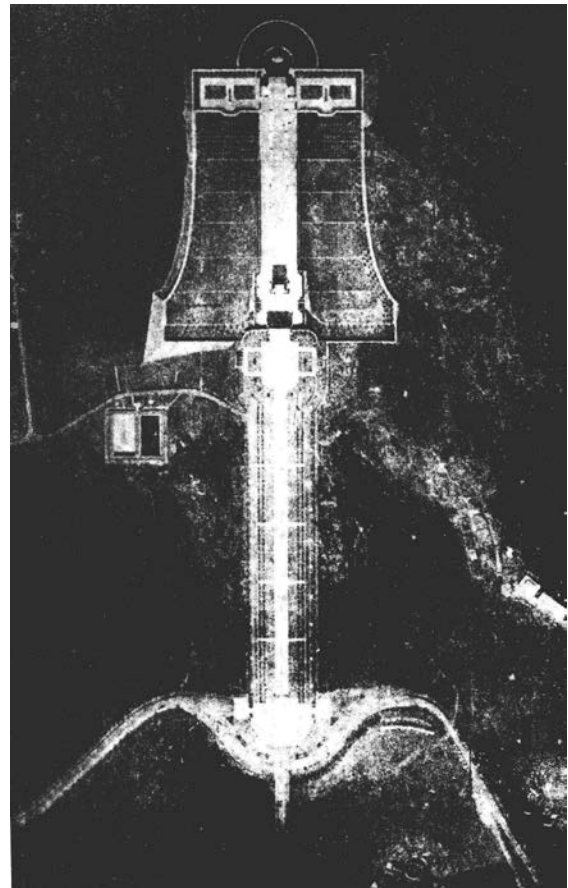


Figure 3. The whole mausoleum is designed to be a bell shape

This figurative symbolism has a significant impact on the conceiving of contemporary Chinese memorial.

After the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, in order to arouse the people's patriotic enthusiasm also enhance the united cohesion of the whole country, government built considerable thematic and narrative monuments. Affected by Soviet Union, those memorials mostly adopted expressions of revolutionary realism, romanticism and symbolism. The themes were either glorious history of heroic city after baptism of flames and smoke or epic deeds of war heroes. One of the most representative memorial during that time was Monument to the People's Heroes, which combined the characteristics of Chinese classical architecture and Romanesque architecture (Fig.4).



Figure 4. Monument to the People's Heroes, Beijing

It makes good use of thematic relief sculpture to reappear the bloody and brutal war scenes, letting visitors feel the vivid flying bullets and roaring bombers, at the same time, remember the immortal heroes who gave their lives for the safety of nation. This narrative and romanticism method, which through describing the epic scenes and typical figures in major events to express ambitious political themes, still has a deep influence on the conceiving of Chinese contemporary memorial.

3. Two Typical Contemporary Chinese Memorials

THE MEMORIAL HALL OF THE VICTIMS IN NANJING MASSACRE BY JAPANESE INVADERS

December 1937, what happened in Nanjing shocked the world. 300000 Chinese citizens were slaughtered by Japanese army in one week. To commemorate this miserable tragedy, government built a memorial at Nanjing Jiang Dongmen, one

of the biggest remains buried ruins, in 1985, and expanded it twice at 1995 and 2005 (Fig.5).



Figure 5. The memorial hall of the victims in Nanjing massacre by Japanese invaders

The main idea about the memorial was to create a grieved, solemn and isolated space for mourning and meditation. Stone walls carved with Victims' names encircled the memorial Space to form a closed square. Among the square, elements such as paths, sculptures and festival hall were used to divide it into three parts (Fig.6), representing the three themes: War, Slaughter and Peace. Entrance of memorial was designed as a broken saber, symbolizing the massacre, also intimating evil defeated by justice ultimately.



Figure 6. The memorial square enclosed by walls

On the memorial square, barren pebbles covered the entire ground to simulate the silence and deadish after massacre. Broken ruins and huge cross indicated suffering and death (Fig.7).



Figure 7. The huge bell and cross on square indicated suffering and awaken

Black granite and pool created a solemn meditation space, where people paid homage to the victims and mourned for them (Fig.8).



Figure 8. The entrance of festival hall, surrounded by black marbles

The last part was the park of Peace, which isolated from surroundings by relief sculpture wall and landscapes. Finally, huge sculpture of the goddess of peace stood at the end of the park, symbolizing the hope and rebirth after the war (Fig.9).



Figure 9. The huge sculpture of the goddess of peace, symbolizing the hope and rebirth

The whole memorial uses narrative space and symbolic sculpture to successfully create a sequence from death to grief, then to hope. Those spatial sequence and symbolic expression can be clearly found in the design of the mausoleum of Sun Yat-sen. Also, those typical scenes expressed by massive sculptures have strong heroism and romantic color, which can be found exactly on Monument to the People's Heroes. As we can see, the conceiving of the memorial hall is deeply influenced by some important monument in the history of modern China. This influencing is naturally, deeply and universally, which closely associated with the social formation and ideology of modern China.

5.12 WENCHUAN EARTHQUAKE MEMORIAL MUSEUM

Another representative contemporary monument is 5.12 Wenchuan Earthquake Memorial. May 12th, 2008, an 8.5 earthquake hit Wenchuan, caused 69,227

people dead, 374,643 injured and 17,923 missing. To recall the dead and remember this amazing destructive earthquake, government built the memorial for mourning next by the county ruins which is already razed to rubble by the earthquake. The memorial, named “crack”, was designed as the shape of lightning, attempting to express the metaphor “freeze the disaster moment on the earth as lightning speed, left eternal memory for posterity” (Fig.10).



Figure 10. 5.12 Wenchuan earthquake memorial museum seen from top

The shape of the memorial was formed by earth landscaping, which through cutting and rising the ground to model the main shape, leading the visitors into underground by sunken square and extending paths(Fig.11).



Figure 11. The shape of the memorial was formed by earth landscaping

Those so called “Memorial Paths” was formed as a huge crack, insinuating the physical and mental injury caused by earthquake. As visitors walking slowly above the ground, toward the bright and open plaza of memorial, instantly clearing world brought them back to reality (Fig.12).



Figure 12. Memorial Paths beneath the earth

Suddenly changing of the environment beckoned a completed emotional catharsis. It is obvious that using crack to analogize the injuries caused by earthquake is the similar symbolism that used in bell-shaped plan of the mausoleum of Sun Yat-sen. Both of them are placing memorial with certain implication by imitating figurative objects to express specific spirit. In addition, using “crack” to freeze the fragment moment of the earthquake, to bring visitors back into the scene when event occurred, shares the same purpose of eternal timelessness created by Monument to the People's Heroes. It can be concluded that, design of 5.12 Wenchuan Earthquake

Memorial is also strongly affected by former memorial in history (Fig.13).



Figure 13. The plaza of memorial and the entrance of the memorial

4. Comparison Of Chinese And Western Contemporary Memorial

SPACE AND FORM

Memorial itself is not a spiritual thing, but a medium, which used to transform the commemorated person or event into solid bodies, letting people experience the spirits when standing in front of them. Social and cultural evolution influences the form and expression of memorial, transforming those solid bodies from figurative monument to abstractive landscape. Germany's national Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin is the typical memorial like that.

The memorial designed by Eisenman was built in 2003. Its main part is a 20,000 square meters open-air plaza, on which standing 2,711 concrete blocks of varying height. Seeing from distance, it looks like a breeze blowing wheat fields, while close observed, it feels like walking into a huge puzzle (Fig.14).



Figure 14. Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin

Eisenman does not believe these concrete blocks have any symbolic meaning, but it is undeniable that, at first glance, they are like 2,711 sarcophaguses of victims, quietly lying there, silent recount that part of the brutal history (Fig.15).



Figure 15. 2,711 concrete blocks of varying height

But when you slowly walking into those standing stones, undulating ground and scattered blocks make you feel submerged gradually by an ocean of death. Paths less than 1 meter wide only allow one person

passing, leading you into the center of this dead ocean, where all the hustle and bustle of the city suddenly leave you away, left desperate and suffocating abyss. Looking at the end of the path, you can faintly see the light of hope (Fig.16).



Figure 16. Paths less than 1 meter wide lead into the center of this dead ocean

Following the light, you finally finish the path and turn back into reality. Until then, you can understand the value of freedom and the precious of life, at the same time, feel sympathy and sadness about the Jews who had been persecuted to death. For such an abstract object, each experienced people will have different feelings and understanding. Not like a figurative sculpture, letting people penetrate designer's intention straightly, it gives audiences myriad possible interpretations. Meanwhile, as a city landscape, the memorial square is a completely open public space, which can easily assimilate into city lives. Every citizen and tourists can go inside and experience it at any time. Public participation fulfils its

commemorative significance and value to the maximum extent.

Another typical case is Washington Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which designed by architect Maya Lin. Main part of the memorial is a V-shaped black granite wall, on which's polished surface curved over fifty thousand names of American soldiers died in the war (Fig.17).



Figure 17. Black marble wall with names reflects the surroundings

The entire wall is placed in a large lawn, using altitude difference to create a low-on-sides and high-in-middle morphology, which increases the curved names from sides toward middle. This gradual change gives audiences a strange and irresistible interest. The whole place is quiet and harmonious with the surrounding, without heroic sculpture and tablet statements of history (Fig.18).



Figure 18. Washington Vietnam Veterans Memorial, quiet and harmonious with the surrounding

People stand in front of the wall fully curved with dead names, rethinking about the meaning of war and peace, generating emotional resonance. The wall leaves the merits and demerits of this War to audiences for judging.

As we can see, ideological trend of today's Western memorial conceiving is changing. Expression of official ideology and grand narrative is transforming into voicing public emotion and collective memory. Traditional gigantic volume and figurative entities are no longer adaptable to convey more and more specific emotion sustenance under modern art and culture concept. People's understanding of commemorate becomes more and more abstract, no longer pursuing the nobility and eternity of monument itself. Formally they would like to merge memorial into daily life by city landscapes, realize the memorial behavior by public participation. Park, squares and landscape paths replace those towering monumental structures, as everyday walking and relaxing place, make the original sacred memorials full of vitality of secular and deeply rooted into people's hearts.

On contrast, Chinese contemporary memorials influenced by inherent forms, still stay at pursuing the sublimity and eternity of commemorations. Recreating the historical scenes is the most common conceiving of a memorial, which usually realized by massive monumental structures, and intuitive figurative sculptures. Symbolism is the most idiomatic method to express eternity of memory. Memorial as carrier of this eternity, is separated from temporal era in time, and appears as a historical existence. Paying tribute to these memorials is an activity that detached from people's daily lives. People only visit those memorials on special days or at certain festival, just like

only on the anniversary of death people will go to pay homage to a dead relative. It can be conclude that, when conceiving a memorial, Chinese concern more about visual memento, Western emphasize more on psychological memories.

5. Urban Functions

Memorial plays a part as spiritual identity in a city. The rise and evolution of a city, contain thoughts and feelings formed from common experience and communication of citizens, including those memorable events and characters. It is these living stories create the city's unique context and spirit, which become an important part of recognition and emotion of the city. These context and spirit are endowed to the memorials in cities mostly. In some famous cities, people always arouse those impressive monuments, which stand for marks of cities. Apparently, memorial serves as an important urban function, which is changing constantly by the development of society.

In contemporary western world, the most representative example of functional changed memorial is the reconstruction project of New York World Trade Center. In this empty space formed by the Collapsing of former World Trade Center, people conceive building a memorial park to remember those who lost their lives in the attack. But in this base with extremely complex environment, people need more than just a simple monument, but also a commercial space, office space, and a transportation complex integrating the New York subway, ferry and roads linked with airport. In this complicated urban space, memorial is no longer as a separated, pure monument, but more integrated with the environment, and other functional space, turning into a comprehensive city space (Fig.19).



Figure 19. The Site of World Trade Center is extremely complex

As Eisenman said in the introduction of new World Trade Center planning at the first round of bidding scheme, “In the tradition of Rockefeller Center and Union Square, we propose to build a great public space for New York City at the World Trade Center site. We call this Memorial Square. While the 19th and 20th century precedents for urban plazas are contained spaces, our 21st century Memorial Square is both contained and extended, symbolizing the connections of this place to the city and to the worlds... Given the nearly 2,800 people who died here and the thousands more who were physically and emotionally scarred by the horror of September 11, we believe that it is not necessary to contain or divide the site, but to expand it by extending into the surrounding streets. This is achieved through a series of “fingers,” reminders that the magnitude of what happened here was felt far beyond the immediate site. At the same time, they facilitate connections between Memorial Square, the waterfront, the proposed NYC Transit Center, and greater Lower Manhattan.”

As we can see, today’s Western memorial is being transformed from a single functional monument to a multi-functional commemorative space. The memorial in the urban space is no longer an isolated monomer, but a living urban space that combined with the future of the whole area together. In contrast, memorial in today’s China, is still performing as a single-functional structure, standing out of the

city background. The memorial hall of the victims in Nanjing is located in downtown. Instead of connecting with surroundings, it was designed to isolate from the environment to keep its purity and independence. Enclosed Memorial Square would not help attracting people to come and stay. Fixed single visit line reduces the possibilities of commemorative realization. Literally, the memorial hall likes a lonely stone, standing in the crowds, purely and sacred, but hardly integrated into the context.

6. Public Participation

Most of the memorable historical events happened among public, who have their own memories and feelings about those events. No matter what memorial built for, person or event, it should be more focus on the public spiritual level. Planning and decision-making process of a memorial shall also alter from authority determining to public participating, which, as a management of urban space, greatly changed the appearance of Western monumental space. Reconstruction project of New York World Trade Center is a classic case study about how public psychology affects the form of public memorial space and how public participation can lead memorial conceiving to a better result.

For the New York Trade Center reconstruction project, the American public responded with great enthusiasm and concern. Through twice democracy consideration meetings, public actively involved in the draft of reconstruction plan. As the winner of the final bid, Libeskind pointed out in the program narrative, “When I first began this project, New Yorkers were divided as to whether to keep the site of the World Trade Center empty or to fill the site completely and build upon it. I meditated many days on this seemingly impossible dichotomy. To acknowledge the terrible deaths which occurred on this site, while looking to the

future with hope, seemed like two moments which could not be joined. I sought to find a solution which would bring these seemingly contradictory viewpoints into an unexpected unity. So, I went to look at the site, to stand within it, to see people walking around it, to feel its power and to listen to its voices. And this is what I heard, felt and saw. Finally, based on the public monumental psychological, Libeskind implanted a Ground Zero, a quiet, meditative and spiritual space where people can journey down with deliberation to the bedrock foundation of two towers (Fig.20).



Figure 20. Two huge holes left by the collapse of World Trade Center be transformed into memorial named “Reflecting Absence”

If the World Trade Center reconstruction plan is a model of how public participation can influence the decision of public memorial space at the macro level, then the conceiving process of 9/11 National Memorial Museum is the typical case that public manipulate the design of memorial architecture at micro level. The proposal named “Reflecting Absence” intended to create a resonance space which can connect feelings of lost and empty caused by the collapse of World Trade Center. With the two holes left by the destruction of the twin towers, designer tried to express a sense of loss, to both form a manifestation of countless lives lost, and to express the meaning of rebirth on this memorial. The year after “Reflecting Absence” be chosen, the design was

questioned and criticized by the media, public and especially the relatives of the victims. Family Federation strongly opposed to the idea that memorial be built underground, especially the names of the deceased would be engraved on the underground hall. Responding for the requirements of victims’ families, design was changed. All the victims' names are engraved on a wall surrounding the two giant pools, letting people feel nostalgia for the dead, at the same time, getting the strength of reborn and hope (Fig.21).



Figure 21. Memorial nowadays should not only recall the past but more about facing the future

Contrasting the process of contemporary Chinese memorials from project plan, design to construction, public participation and rights are extremely weak. The top-down political decision and the absolute power of the few authorities are still dominant in the implementation phase of the project. In most cases, the expression of monumental carries strong official ideology, yet overlooked the true feelings of public about the history. This situation is related to role of power symbol that memorial play for a long time in history of China, also related to the passive and low enthusiasm of populace about public space design. There is still a long way to go to enhance the influence of public participating on memorial design.

7. CONCLUSION

Just as Frampton had written in his book <Modern Architecture: A Critical History>, Monuments are the expression of man's highest cultural needs. They have to satisfy the eternal demand of the people for translation of their collective force into symbols. The most vital monuments are those which express the feeling and thing of this collective force – the people. Today, memorial project is involved with all levels of society. It is a complicate, diverse complex, of which multiple aspects should be considered at the first beginning, such as integration with society, fitness with public commemoration of psychology, and the influence on people's behavior and mentality. As developed so far, the forms and social functions of memorial have made a huge change. It has stepped down the altar, moving towards secularization and humanize. By comparing we can see, there is still a large gap between Chinese and Western memorial. Chinese architects need to learn from the West in many aspects, to make China's memorial moving towards a more liberal and democratic direction.

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