

Monumental Memories

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Abstract: Disaster memorials and monuments play a vital role in the collective memory of societies, shaping how we remember, mourn, and learn from past crises. Drawing from research conducted for Brataas' book *Disaster Memorials and Monuments: History, Context, and Practice from around the World* (Routledge, 2024), this paper explores the purpose, challenges, and best practices of memorialization. With examples from three continents, the work highlights how design, community engagement, and historical narrative all contribute to the memorial process. This study provides theoretical insight and practical guidance for future memorial efforts.

Keywords — disaster memorials, community engagement, crisis communication, monuments, remembrance

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INTRODUCTION

Disaster memorials are more than physical structures; they are examples of collective memory that represent loss, resilience, and the stories societies choose to remember. As global crises become more frequent due to climate change, political conflict, and technological disruptions, the role of memorials becomes even more significant.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

This research draws on extensive literature review, site visits to memorials across multiple continents and interviews with stakeholders, including designers, public officials, survivors, and families of victims. Qualitative data from email and video correspondence further enriched the analysis.

RESULTS

The following best practices emerged:

- Allow time for reflection: Wait at least one year after a disaster before beginning memorial planning. This period is needed for those directly affected getting through the first difficult months of uncertainty, practical adjustments and financial questions.
- Engage diverse stakeholders: Compile a comprehensive list to ensure broad representation. Use inclusive consultation methods – such as live-streamed meetings and online surveys, as demonstrated in Las Vegas after the 2017 mass shooting.
- Promote inclusive design: Opt for circular or non-hierarchical layouts –like globes – to avoid conflicts over name ordering and to ensure equal visibility.
- Prioritize accuracy: Verify the spelling of all names meticulously to maintain public trust and honor the dignity of those commemorated.
- Plan for long-term sustainability: Establish a budget that accounts not only for initial construction but also for ongoing maintenance and future updates.
- Draw on global experience: Study memorialization efforts worldwide to identify best practices, anticipate challenges, and refine the approach.

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DISCUSSION

Disaster memorials serve as powerful tools not only for mourning but also for education and advocacy. They must balance the needs of grieving individuals with broader social goals such as justice and prevention, but also consider possible constraints regarding location, available space and funding. Nevertheless, there are numerous examples of disaster memorial projects that have stirred controversy and anger – such as the inclusion of perpetrators at a temporary memorial after the Columbine mass shooting and a broken plane model that commemorates an aviation disaster in Nigeria.

HISTORY

The practice of commemorating disasters through physical markers dates back millennia. One of the earliest known examples is the Famine Stele, a monument from ancient Egypt dating to approximately 200 BC. This granite slab bears 32 columns of hieroglyphic inscriptions detailing a seven-year famine attributed to the Nile River's diminished flow. Deciphered in 1891 by German Egyptologist Heinrich Brugsch after a 62-year scholarly effort, the stele reveals King Djoser's distress over widespread food shortages.

In Europe, the first disaster monument emerged following the Great Fire of London in 1666, which destroyed one-third of the city yet resulted in remarkably few casualties. Designed by Sir Christopher Wren – renowned English architect, mathematician, and scientist – the structure, simply called The Monument, was constructed between 1671 and 1677. Rising 202 feet, it commemorates the city's rebuilding and offers visitors a panoramic view from its 311-step summit, complete with a certificate upon descent. Its height was deliberately chosen to mirror the 202-foot distance between the monument's base and the site of the baker's house on Pudding Lane, where the Great Fire is believed to have originated.

CHALLENGES IN MEMORIALIZATION

The development of disaster memorials presents a range of complex challenges, including decisions related to design, location, funding, long-term maintenance, and the representation of both victims and perpetrators. These issues frequently give rise to controversy, requiring sensitive navigation and a long-term, inclusive approach. In many cases, the involvement of an impartial external facilitator can prove essential in fostering dialogue and guiding stakeholders toward a broadly acceptable outcome.

TEMPORARY MEMORIALS AND ETHICAL DILEMMAS

Spontaneous memorials, while immediate expressions of grief, can provoke significant debate. Following the Columbine High School massacre on April 20, 1999, in Littleton, Colorado – where Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold killed 12 students and a teacher before committing suicide – the community erected 15 wooden crosses in Clement Park. Intended to honor all lives lost, including the shooters, this gesture sparked outrage among some victims' families. On May 2, 1999, Brian Rohrbough, father of victim Daniel Rohrbough, demolished the crosses dedicated to Harris and Klebold, arguing that equating murderers with their victims desecrated the memory of the innocent. This incident underscores the ethical dilemmas inherent in inclusive commemoration and highlights how memorials – intended as sites of unity and remembrance – can instead deepen fractures within affected communities.

PRESERVATION VERSUS REMOVAL

The Grenfell Tower fire on June 14, 2017, in London, which claimed 72 lives, exemplifies ongoing debates over the fate of disaster sites. As Britain's deadliest residential fire since World War II, its aftermath has seen the charred 24-storey tower remain standing as of Spring 2025. Proposals oscillate between demolition – to facilitate healing and to possibly replace a building that can never be used again – and preservation – as a symbol of remembrance and a demand for accountability amid stalled justice efforts. This deadlock illustrates how physical remnants of disaster sites complicate memorial planning and a lack of leadership and decision-making from authorities.

LOCATION AND REPRESENTATION

The location and form of memorials can also stir contention. After the Lockerbie bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 in 1988, which killed 270 people, including 180 Americans, families of U.S. victims advocated for a monument in the United States. Despite resistance, a memorial cairn was erected at Arlington National Cemetery, traditionally reserved for war veterans, highlighting tensions over geographic and symbolic ownership of memory. Similarly, in Nigeria, the 2012 Dana Air Flight 992 crash memorial – a concrete monolith topped with a mangled aircraft replica – drew criticism from human rights groups for projecting a negative image of the nation's aviation sector, demonstrating how design choices can amplify public friction.

COST AND COMMUNITY IMPACT: THE NORWEGIAN CASE

Norway's response to the 2011 Oslo and Utøya terror attacks, which claimed 77 lives, offers a striking example of cost-intensive controversy. Initially, KORO, Norway's public art agency, commissioned Swedish artist Jonas Dahlberg to create three memorials: "Memory Wound" near Utøya, and "Time and Movement" and "Dialogue for the Future" in Oslo.

“Memory Wound” proposed a dramatic landscape incision, symbolizing irreparable loss with victims’ names inscribed across an unreachable water channel. Priced at NOK 17 million (USD 1.8 million), the project faced immediate backlash from local residents, who feared psychological harm and objected to its prominence in their community. Many of these neighbors had risked their lives by going out in small boats to save those swimming away from the ongoing shooting at Utøya, which made it especially upsetting that they were not consulted. Legal action ensued in 2016, and by 2017, the government canceled Dahlberg’s contract, incurring a NOK 7.8 million payout and total costs of NOK 40 million. Subsequently, Statsbygg proposed a simpler design of 77 bronze columns, completed in 2022 at a staggering total cost of NOK 700 million. This protracted saga underscores the financial and social stakes of memorialization when stakeholder consultation is inadequate.

BEST PRACTICES FOR DISASTER MEMORIALS

Drawing from these cases, a structured approach to memorial planning is essential to mitigate conflict and enhance chances for a successful outcome. A proposed nine-step process includes:

1. Initial Consultation: Engaging stakeholders and relevant parties to listen to diverse ideas and other perspectives crucial for the project's foundation.
2. Conceptual Development: Formulating and refining ideas, encompassing the thematic, narrative, and symbolic elements inherent to the memorial's design.
3. Placemaking: Discussions about the location of the memorial.
4. Financial Planning: Securing necessary funding.
5. Competitive Framework: Organizing competitions among artists, designers, or architecture firms to solicit diverse and innovative proposals aligned with the memorial's objectives.
6. Construction: Executing the chosen design, translating the conceptual vision into physical form.
7. Engravings: Discussing the use of name plates, the order of names and other inscriptions, font type, font size, etc.
8. Inauguration Ceremony: Formal introduction and public unveiling of the completed memorial.
9. Ongoing Maintenance: Establishing protocols and frameworks for continual upkeep and maintenance, ensuring the memorial's preservation and longevity

CONCLUSION

Memorialization is an act of communication that transcends architecture. When done right, it can promote healing, dialogue, and historical continuity. The lessons presented here serve as both cautionary tales and roadmaps for future initiatives.

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