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# Look back in anger

The monuments controversy revisited

By **Tristram Hunt**

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The Melville Monument, Edinburgh | © Jane Barlow/PA Images/Alamy

## IN THIS REVIEW

### MONUMENTAL LIES

Culture wars and the truth about the past  
384pp. Verso. £20.

Robert Bevan

### THE EVERYDAY LIFE OF MEMORIALS

432pp. Zone. £30 (US \$35).

Andrew M. Shanken

### ON THE STREET

In-between architecture

288pp. Heni Publishing. £34.99.

Edwin Heathcote



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**I**n February, Councillor Dan Jellyman resigned as cabinet member for regeneration on Stoke-on-Trent city council after it was revealed that he had sanctioned the demolition of Vincent Woropay's colossal brick statue of Josiah Wedgwood to enable a road-widening scheme. Commissioned for the 1986 National Garden Festival, the monument's combination of oversized brickwork and highly sculptured face made it a poignant local landmark on Festival Way, where it was positioned neatly outside Wedgwood's one-time family seat, Etruria Hall (today a Hilton DoubleTree hotel).

Embedded within this vernacular piece of public sculpture sat "memories" of the first Industrial Revolution, the rise of the Potteries, 1980s regeneration schemes and, no doubt, the myriad personal recollections of those simply driving past to the swimming pool, dry-ski slope or call-centre offices. But, as Councillor Jellyman blithely informed the road contractors when the statue was surreptitiously removed from a cultural heritage assessment, "nothing lasts forever".

Indeed, "there is nothing in the world more invisible than a monument", wrote the Austrian philosopher Robert Musil in 1927 - an aphorism that all three works under review feel the need to acknowledge, before going on to show (as Jellyman has discovered) what a meaningless statement it is. From statues of Cecil Rhodes and Edward Colston to Confederacy memorials to monuments to the victims of communism and fascism, this is an age of fervent interest in the role of public statuary and commemoration. Decolonization, Black Lives Matter and derussification, combined with the fraying of commonly understood norms of nationhood butting up against politically driven projects of ethno-nationalism, have all sparked protest, lawsuits, violence and government regulations towards the marble, stone and metal configurations shaping the public realm.

Robert Bevan gleefully enters this fray with a blistering, occasionally scatter-gun but hugely rewarding book that provides a considered and unexpected commentary on the built environment amid the culture wars. An author, journalist and heritage consultant with an impressive track record advising Unesco on preservation and conflict, Bevan's starting point is that (as if Raphael Samuel, Patrick Wright or Robert Hewison never existed) "Sympathetic accounts of heritage on the Left are few, and it is one of the great cultural tragedies of the past half century that the Left has ceded the heritage narrative to conservatives". The predominance of such conservative sentiment in planning and preservation has, he suggests, led to a sustained assault on postwar modernism and its progressive trinity of equality, democracy and welfare.

Bevan combines this ideological starting point with a highly normative defence of the meaning of truth - in the face of fake news, post-truth and false memory syndrome. "For those with the power and money to place a likeness on a pedestal, monuments are often a tool to obscure the real facts of history." Public architecture, Bevan suggests, needs to be protected from such pernicious misinformation. In his polemical style and proximity to the stones and brick, he is a true disciple of William Morris, arguing for authenticity and historical materialism, and forever railing against pastiche restoration.

*Monumental Lies* extends this critique to the current vogue for 3D reproductions of lost, damaged or overexposed historic monuments – from the Institute for Digital Archaeology’s shoddy Trafalgar Square reprint of the third-century Arch of Septimius Severus at Palmyra, blown up by Isis, to Factum Arte’s wondrous digital copy of Veronese’s “The Wedding Feast at Cana”, which is back on the walls of its Venetian refectory while the original hangs unloved in the Louvre. Even though the Victoria and Albert Museum has, for instance, been showcasing plaster-cast and electrotype copies of monuments, sculpture and even the doors of the Florence Baptistry in its Cast Courts since the 1870s, Bevan is over-concerned that “a trusted material historic record” is under almost mortal risk from the proliferation of digital imitations.

He is even more exercised by how the restoration agenda so often involves a noxious combination of classicism and conservatism bent on undermining a cosmopolitan, modernist inheritance. Bevan develops his case with a critical taxonomy of English reactionary aesthetics, tracing a line from the Cambridge architectural historian David Watkin to the conservative philosopher Roger Scruton to the Poundbury planner Léon Krier and up to the urban planning activist Nicholas Boys Smith, now chair of the advisory board of the government’s scary-sounding Office for Place.

More interestingly, he charts restoration programmes across German cities that have provided intellectual succour for a resurgent right. In Frankfurt am Main the 1970s Technical Town Hall has been demolished in favour of a half-timbering and gables, “fake” Old Town. “There is an agenda among many traditionalist rebuilders that wants to visually deny the record of both National Socialism and several decades of democracy since.” Bevan cannot abide the new Humboldt Forum built into the bombed Prussian royal palace in Berlin: “the faux-Baroque meets corporate office architecture is an aesthetic car crash”. And in Dresden Bevan describes how the reconstruction of the city’s Frauenkirche – whose charred ruins were so long (like Coventry Cathedral) a memorial to the victims of war, as well as a highly visible reminder of the Nazi past – provided a historically cleansed stage set for the public protests organized by the city’s far-right Pegida movement. He sees the painstaking restoration of Warsaw Old Town falling victim to the same forces of cultural conservatism, as a pure (eighteenth-century) nationalist past is rebuilt studiously shorn of the legacy of Nazism, communism or modernism. By contrast he is full of praise for the honesty of David Chipperfield’s reconstruction of Berlin’s Neues Museum, with its sensitive encasement of wartime relics.

Bevan’s conviction in the need to preserve a faithful historical record extends to the question of public statuary, and what to do with all those monuments to Dead White Men with dubious colonial pasts. Men such as Henry Morton Stanley, Welsh explorer and propagandist for King Leopold II’s butchery in the Belgian Congo, whose statue the people of Denbigh in 2021 voted in a public poll to keep up by a margin of 4-1. After, rightly, recounting the grotesque inequalities of gender, race and diversity when it comes to the array and protection of public monuments (in Australia, Melbourne Cricket Ground enjoyed heritage listing long before the peerless Aboriginal petroglyphs of the Burrup Peninsula), Bevan then joins the people of Denbigh in taking a stand against the sweeping away of the commemorative landscape.

Colston and Rhodes should stay precisely because they serve as useful and instructive sites of shame (*Mahnmal*, in the German classification). “Despite all the cynicism and hypocrisy and the state’s own record of erasure, monuments do help us understand the past. They are historical records.” Removing symbols of injustice provides a performative excuse not to address more systemic issues. It is an argument that the Scottish historian Sir Geoff Palmer courageously made in the aftermath of the Colston defenestration and at

the height of Black Lives Matter public activism, when he urged the maintenance and reinterpretation of the Melville Monument in Edinburgh, honouring the “Uncrowned King of Scotland”, Secretary for War and the Colonies, and staunch defender of the British Empire’s slavery economy, Henry Dundas. “I don’t want statues to be taken down. My view is you remove the evidence, you remove the deed”, he cautioned the iconoclasts. “The past has consequence and a lot of people forget that. Racism is a consequence of the past.”

Shunting statues into museums is no good either: it serves to depoliticize monuments, which should realize their purpose in the interaction between people and place, “turning them into simply aesthetic objects without necessarily tackling them as honorific objects”. Certainly, at the V&A, when it comes to, for example, Louis-François Roubiliac’s marble statue of Handel, our primary focus is on the sculptor’s lineage within the baroque tradition in European arts, rather than on Handel’s place within a Georgian patronage system dependent on Atlantic sugar and slave wealth. When it was briefly suggested that Roubiliac’s statue of Sir John Cass – threatened with removal from the Guildhall in London due to his links to the slave trade – should be transferred to South Kensington, the correct assumption would have been that its meaning and context would also have changed, from public veneration to art history.

Bevan’s solution is curiously close to the British government’s “retain and explain” stance, a very particular planning policy that all trustees of national museums and public bodies are required to uphold on pain of non-appointment or non-renewal. Rather than pulling down statues of slavers and colonial adventurers, Bevan suggests a “good faith” retain-and-explain policy, predicated on his progressive, social justice-imbued reading of the past, that risks neither denial nor leaving “problematic” commemoration unchallenged.

His template is the transformation of the largest fascist artwork in Europe – the frieze on the Casa Littoria in Bolzano-Bozen, northern Italy, with its pictorial celebration of Mussolini and clarion command, “CREDERE, OBBEDIRE, COMBATTERE”. Following a public competition to “defuse” and “contextualise” the monument, an LED installation by Arnold Holzknecht and Michele Bernardi now hangs below the frieze spelling out Hannah Arendt’s injunction “No One Has the Right to Obey”. Just like Hew Locke’s recasting of sculptures of Edmund Burke and Edward Colston into gold-draped avatars of colonial loot (“mindful vandalism”, he called it), the monument is preserved amid a process of historical transubstantiation. In the V&A British Galleries we display Locke’s “Souvenir 4 (Princess Alexandra)” (2019), a bust of Edward VII’s Queen Consort and Empress of India made from the very whitest of Parian ware, but now richly bedecked with intricate regalia featuring brassware, clay skulls, imitation pearls and a medal for the 1896 Ashanti War. The trick, Locke explains, “is to try to surround them, not change them. You can still see their power, but by attaching enough stuff, you’re pointing a very delicate and beautiful accusing finger.”

There is, of course, an easier way to avoid all this angst – the ancient Hellenistic custom of erecting battlefield trophies in timber rather than stone, so they simply decay over a generation.

Such “lived experience” is precisely what concerns Andrew M. Shanken, professor of architecture at Berkeley, as he traces the “everyday life” of memorials, “how their material properties and the places where they do their work operate in modern cities”. He is not interested in their role as “commemorative sites or as symbols of political struggle”, but in that liminal existence “between heightened moments and the mundane” – a crashing dissonance to which anyone who has watched schoolchildren joyfully jumping from

one concrete block to another, or playing chase, or snogging, within the sombre setting of Peter Eisenman's "Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe" (2004) in Berlin can readily testify.

Stanley Spencer's painting "Unveiling Cookham War Memorial" (1922) best encapsulates this study. Even though Spencer had fought in the war and lost a brother, whose name was inscribed on this very memorial, his crowd scene lovingly captures the all too human response to this sober ritual: the lounging, flirtation, sadness, conformity and lack of interest that the memorial opening sparked, only four years after Armistice Day. People "thoughtlessly strike matches on sandstone portions of eminent divines", noted the British architect Hugh Casson, in the mid-twentieth century, of public indifference to exalted memorials. He urged people to pay attention to them precisely "because they are hideous beyond description ... comical, touching, heart warming, puzzling, controversial".

Shanken's study is a more academic work of cultural geography, infused with Lefebvrian discourse and forever situating the author's arguments within highly stratified historiographical debates. But it does provide an interesting chronology on the place of the memorial within modernism, beginning with the French Revolution and the protection of the past during the rapid transformation of nineteenth-century Paris. With political secularization and the fabric of the modern city stripping away traditional markers of time and place, the proliferation of new memorials became both a symbol of change and a way of engendering some stability amid the relentless flux. The coming age of mass commemoration was captured in William Godwin's "Essay on Sepulchres" (1809). "Where is Shakespeare? Where is Homer?", he asked. Godwin's solution was a programme of mass memorialization of great men: "let us erect a shrine to their memory; let us visit their tombs; let us indulge all the reality we can now have, of the sort of conference with these men." Crucially, the fabric of the city was no longer just to be dominated by kings and queens, generals and admirals. Instead it was poets, scientists, engineers, artists, and explorers - the ideological architects of a liberal state - who would populate the public realm. Haussmann's Paris "became an outdoor pantheon of cultural and revolutionary heroes, most of them tied to national events, patriotic sentiment, and culture".

The American Civil War saw further democratization, with memorials to fallen comrades defending the Lost Cause, before we get to the unknown soldier of the First World War. Shanken closely traces the inter-relationship between First and Second World War memorials and the additions layered onto the Great War commemorations. In 1940s London the Royal Fusiliers carved an extra tribute onto their original 1914-18 memorial and, later, inserted a further, final dedication to "those fusiliers killed in subsequent campaigns".

Through various case studies - such as Giambologna's equestrian statue of Cosimo I in Florence, or the Nelson column in Dublin (ultimately removed by the IRA) - Shanken professionally charts the sociological and cultural place of the memorial. However, the dangers of interdisciplinarity are all too evident in a study that ranges too widely and rarely feels grounded in a detailed enough historical understanding.

**B**y contrast, Edwin Heathcote, architecture and design critic for the *Financial Times*, and (best job title of all) the keeper of meaning at Charles Jencks's The Cosmic House, is all about the *actualité*. His subject is street furniture, "that category of things which punctuates our journeys through cities and accompanies us in the streetscape but to which we have become inured and almost blind". And Heathcote makes a strong case for this interstitial landscape of lampposts, postboxes, guttering and benches

as “more essentially urban and enduring than the buildings which frame those public spaces”. With greater poetry than Shanken allows himself, Heathcote is similarly interested in the vernacular and everyday existence of these urban artefacts, whose real charisma “lies in the territory between the quotidian and the sublime, the constant tug of war between utility, amenity, cost and affection, between the public and the private, between architecture and landscape”. More than cenotaphs and monuments, these are the real markers of our urban existence.

Just as Shanken posited Baron Haussmann’s Paris codifying the place of the memorial in modern life, so Heathcote is ineluctably drawn towards Second Empire boulevards, pissoirs and kiosks. The shadow of Baudelaire’s flâneurs and, in its array of jottings, reflections and miscellany, Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project* looms over this hugely enjoyable volume. Born of Heathcote’s Covid-era lockdown walks, the compendium successfully combines his journalistic eye with detailed understanding of design schools and urban history. A highly informative layering of film and photography accompanies each item of street furniture, most obviously Charles Marville’s mid-nineteenth-century Paris and Cecil Beaton’s wartime London, but also the night-time depictions of city life by Brassai and John Morrison, and the cinematography of Spike Lee. Thankfully, there is very little psycho-geography.

This is a book, as the author himself instructs us, to dip in and out of. I found the essay on phone boxes especially enjoyable. From the back cover of David Bowie’s *Ziggy Stardust* to *The Ladykillers*, the phone box keeps popping up in popular culture, so often appearing “as night time beacons, lanterns in the streetscape which indicated escape from the cold and rain .... They were the smallest of civic buildings – open, indiscriminating, and genuinely public”. Heathcote also remembers what they were really like. “Their concrete floors were stained and streaked with bodily fluids and carpeted with fag-ends and the residue of suspiciously sticky substances. To enter was to be enveloped in a warm, moist mist of stale cigarette smoke and the smell of recently departed humanity, wet woollen coats and sweat.” All that before we get on to the state of the Yellow Pages, precariously suspended on hinged brackets, covered in ludicrously detailed cock and balls graffiti.

Interspersed between the nostalgia, cultural studies and art history is a sustained critique of contemporary design in the public realm. The social implications of Covid resulted in the greatest acceleration of street furniture – from testing tents to mask dispensers to sanitising stations – since the advent of electricity. Yet Heathcote cannot point to “one design [to] emerge from this moment to match the products of the Belle Epoque .... It has highlighted an inability to think through design to create lasting terms of quality and utility”. Equally indicative of the state of urban design is the aesthetics of public drinking fountains, which have declined from their late Victorian, romanesque and gothic heyday as “the most complete item[s] of English street furniture” to today’s shoddy, plastic, barely functioning installations. “They are shockingly ugly, big lumps of welded tube painted municipal green.” Once the embodiment of a civilized European city stretching back to the Romans, the modern drinking fountain captures, for Heathcote, all the abandoned nobility of modern metropolitan life.

Which returns us to Councillor Jellyman and his nonchalant destruction of Vincent Woropay’s Wedgwood statue. No “retain and explain” for Stoke-on-Trent, just a wilful removal of another marker of urban identity and historical connection in a city that has lost so many of its civic signifiers. Close by to where the bricks were bulldozed, though, you can see the everyday experience of statues evolving just as Shanken describes.

Andy Edwards's lifesize "Lady in the Park" (2014) sits on a bench in Brampton Park, Newcastle-under-Lyme, with a letter in her hand from the Secretary of State for War notifying her of the loss of her loved one, killed in action. On the floor in front is a verse by Vera Brittain, born on nearby Sidmouth Avenue, whose *Testament of Youth* speaks of how she "sat in a tree-shadowed / walk called The Brampton / and meditated on the war". The bench has itself, over the past decade, become a space for reflection and mourning, with visitors often leaving flowers and personal tributes in the lap of the Lady. On the first anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine the "Lady in the Park" was anonymously decorated with a scarf of pom-poms in the yellow and blue colours of the Ukrainian flag. Sometimes there is nothing more visible than a monument.

*Tristram Hunt* is Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum. His most recent book is *The Radical Potter: Josiah Wedgwood and the transformation of Britain, 2021*

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