

# Anti monuments and the architecture of dissent

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### Abstract

Vandalism is an alternative form of a design narrative, a subversive practice of reading architecture & urban systems and a fundamental way to make key voices heard. Architecture reflects on elaborate systems of power, capital and privilege of the times though its presence and affects everyone in the city around. In the periphery of public space, dynamic alternative practices emerge that communicate and critique. Vandalism, especially in areas of contested “ownership” in public space, is an architectural counterpoint and an arsenal of dissent available to people without conventional means of power (Akerman 2018).

The investigation this paper set out to stem from the pop-culture phenomenon where artist’s dissent creates public art against “the state”. Body of works (buildings/sculptures) have been created, on behalf of “the citizen” to stoke dissent. Dissent captured the horrors of war in alternate memorial buildings, known as anti-monuments.

### Keywords –

Anti- monumentalism , Architectural identity , Gerzes' counter-monument , Civic pride , Nonrepresentational form

Experiences that impacted people’s lives and malformed their collective memory manifests into an anti-monument. Antithesis of monuments gained ground post World War II and left Europe devastated. “The citizen” could no longer connect to the idea of monuments by the state such as a statue of a political figure etc (Agulhon 1981). For years thereon, anti- monumentalism found expression in war memorials, museums and experience centres in many parts of the world. The paradigm shift happened with people taking charge of their own collective memory (Halbwachs 1992) and sharing their sufferings with the world. The paradigm shift happened with people taking charge of their own collective memory (Halbwachs 1992) and sharing their sufferings with the world. It was now their turn to reclaim public spaces and shun the prevailing notion that monuments were not relevant to their cause.

The anti-monuments contrasted the defining attributes of traditional monuments such as the maximum visibility, imposing dimensions, expressed verticality, durability of materials, bombastic rhetoric and extreme figurativeness of events or persons who are commemorated (Duric 2017).

Architects/sculptors/artists, were now representing the public and relieving them of the baggage of collective memory. War now, was not just a game of the generals and the governments; it was now more about the citizens recruited as soldiers, martyrs and grieving families. It was about the victims of power.



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Images (1-3): Street artist Plastic Jesus’ work of public art against the Trump administration in America (Plastic Jesus n.d.)  
Source: Plastic Jesus.  
<https://plasticjesus.com/>



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Images (4-7): Monument against Fascism in the Harburg Square (Shalev-Gerz 1986) Source - Shalev-Gerz, Jochen Gerz and Esther Jochengerz. 1986. <https://jochengerz.eu/works/monument-against-fascism>

### 3. Literature Review

Anti-monuments differ from traditional commemorative works in at least one of the following five respects: subject, form, site, visitor experience and meaning. Monuments have suffered dramatic changes of symbolic meanings through historical development and the prevailing political & social succession dynamics. The process of changing of the social context has its bearing on its architectural identity. The complexities of this transition get reflected in the process of mutation of meaning, changes of ideology and the transformation of collective memory of a society. "How better to remember a destroyed people than by a destroyed monument?" (J. E. Young 1999). This was an extremist approach to the idea of looking at a monument, more like not looking at one. A few other examples have been chosen on the basis of envisioning of the anti-monument. One, the anti-monument that vanishes while the memory remains. Two, the anti-monument that inverts a pre-existing monument and its ideological significance. Three, the anti-monument that was controversial because of the unconventional symbolic reverence and lack thereof.

#### 3.1 The Vanishing Monument against Fascism, Harburg

The vanishing monument of Hamburg was a four-sided stele made of galvanized steel with a fine lead mantle, 1200 x 100 x 100 cm, weighing 7 ton (fig 4). Following a public hearing, the project by Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz, was sanctioned. Residents and visitors of Harburg were invited to inscribe their names on the lead mantle in seven different languages, as a warning against fascism. When the accessible portion of the surface was covered with inscriptions, the stele was lowered into the ground (fig 5). Having been lowered eight times, the stele disappeared in 1993. Its cover plate lies flush with the pavement, today (fig 7). Next to it, the text panel reads, "We invite the citizens

of Harburg and visitors to the city, to add their names here to ours." (Shalev-Gerz 1986)

While this monument served to interrupt and now displace memory from its traditional mode of representation, it also impeded everyday lives. The memorial forced people to live with it for 10 years and then to live without. With audacious simplicity, the Gerzes' counter-monument flouted any number of memorial conventions: its aim was not to console but to provoke, not to remain fixed but to change, not to be everlasting but to disappear, not to be ignored by its passersby but to demand interaction, not to remain pristine but to invite its own violation and de-sanctification and not to accept graciously, the burden of memory but to throw it back at the town's feet. The Harburg monument exceeded the artists' own expectations about confronting tradition and sanctity. Lowering in 1993, the remains of the column trigger in people's minds the object, issues and debates it provoked. The ethical burden of remembering the past was thereby returned to the public (Shalev-Gerz 1986).

#### 3.2 The Sunken Fountain, Kassel

In 1908, Sigmund Aschrott, one of Kassel's Jewish entrepreneurs, asked City Hall architect, Karl Roth, to design a fountain for the New City Hall building which was then, on the drawing-board. This sandstone obelisk-shaped fountain (fig 8), constructed on an historical sandstone catchment, became the characterizing feature of the City Hall's Courtyard of Honour (Rathausehrehn), constituting a counterbalance to the monumental Henschelbrunnen on the opposite side. The citizens of Kassel loved the fountain and identified with it. It became a symbol of their civic pride.

In 1939, national socialist activists from Kassel destroyed the fountain (fig 9). It became a symbol hate. This act of destruction by the Nazis, severed the bond with European civilization. Post-war

years, one symbolic act followed on the heels of another.

In 1963, long after the Nazi municipal authorities had planted flowers in the empty basin of the fountain, the Aschrottbrunnen turned into a fountain again reiterating memories repressed and resurrecting the desire to forget. In 1986, the winning proposal was from German artist Horst Hoheisel. He propped the exact copy of the original but inverted, sunken into the ground. It is a monument-shaped hole into which runs water from a surrounding pool and only its gurgle indicates its presence. (J. Young 1999)

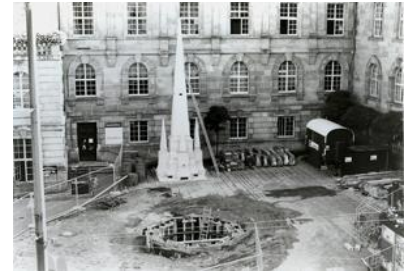
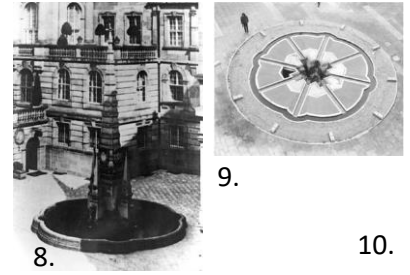
The Aschrottbrunnen (fig 10), with its absent presence, challenges the passers-by, shifting to them the burden of interpretation. One can see the base of the fountain only up close but can hear the water beneath. The two paradigmatic examples possess four features that distinguish them from traditionally built monuments. Indeed, in their inversion of form, both became nearly invisible. They invite close, multi-sensory visitor engagement and rather than being didactic, they invite visitors to work out the meanings for themselves (Quentin Stevens 2012).

**3.3 -The Vietnam War Memorial, Washington DC** - In 1982, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was completed, ten years after the end of the bitter and divisive Vietnam War, that tore the United States apart. After a decade of shame, anger and painful fights over participation of the US in the war, the sacrifice and courage of the soldiers were acknowledged. In this backdrop, the process of memorialisation poses a question. The controversial winning design entry of a 21-year-old architecture student, Maya Lin had to have a flag and a statue of three soldiers walking added, after a protest

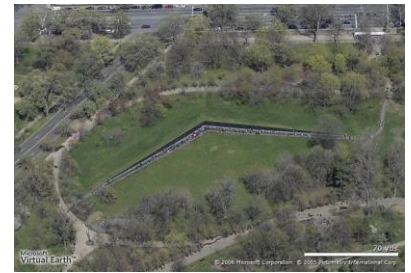
against the “apolitical” wall design. Lin’s idea, however, was to cut through the land at an angle which “opens up the earth”.

The memorial consists of a roughly 250-foot long series of polished, black gabbro walls sunk into the surrounding countryside (fig 12). Upon the walls are inscribed names of 58,000 servicemen declared KIA or MIA during the war. Visitors can see their own reflection in the black wall. The end points of the wall point to the Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial (fig 11).

A few feet away from the entrance to the wall, stands a bronze statue of three U.S. servicemen, called “The Three Soldiers” (fig 13) and act as a traditional supplement to the memorial’s more abstract nature. This was not part of Lin’s original design, but added two years later in response to an outpouring of veteran support for a memorial of this form. While the wall sits among some of the most famous monuments of American history on the Washington Mall, its striking difference from traditional forms of memorial reflect the controversy surrounding the Vietnam War. The wall reflects this sentiment and evokes the veterans’ implicit feeling of abandonment while simultaneously providing a safe haven for memorialisation and remembrance (Sturken 2000). It does not dictate the narrative of memory and instead promotes personal reflection because of its abstract form, leaving individuals to analyse and interpret the memories as they will.



Images (8-10): The sunken fountain of Kassel evolution over time (J. E. Young 1999 ) Source - Young, James. *Harvard Design Magazine*. 1999. Source: <http://www.harvarddesignmagazine.org/issues/9/memory-and-counter-memory>



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Images (11-13): The Vietnam war Veteran’s Memorial, Washington DC Source - Savage, K. “Monument Wars: Washington, D.C. the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape.” Berkeley, University Of California Press, 2005: 236-244.

## 4. Inferences and Conclusion

**4.1 Expression of dissent in anti monuments** - Divisive and counter intuitive approaches of anti- monuments stand in striking contrast to features of traditional monuments.

**4.1.1 Subject** - Traditional monuments are typically affirmative, glorifying an event or a person or celebrating an ideology. Anti-monuments on the other hand, record darker events, such as the Holocaust and chronicle suffering victims of conflict or persecution or admonish the perpetrator. Anti-monuments may highlight the evils of an ideology, such as fascism or racism, whereas traditional monuments project famous figures or acts of heroism (Savage 2005).

**4.1.2 Form** - Most notable and most common feature of anti-monumentality is its opposition to conventional monumental forms and subscription to an alternative, contrasting design techniques & materials. Fundamental inversions encompass voids instead of solids; absence in place of presence (as with the Aschrott Fountain and Harburg's disappearing Monument against Fascism); dark rather than light tones and horizontal replacing the vertical. Forms may also be sunken rather than elevated (as in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial) and shifted off-axis or dispersed or fragmented instead of unified in a single, orderly composition. Works that are patently impermanent counter the aspiration to permanence of conventional monuments and their subjects.

**4.1.3 Site** - Traditional monuments are often prominent, highly visible and set apart from everyday space through natural topography, height or enclosure. Anti-monuments, designed to serve new purposes, rarely have such characteristics. Rather than being preferred destinations, they are encountered by chance during everyday travels. The Monument against Fascism resurfaces Germany's horrific past into Harburg's Commercial Centre.

**4.1.4 Visitor Experience** - Traditional monuments are often discrete objects, demanding solemnity and deference from a viewer engaged in private introspection. While most engage primarily a sense of sight, some other are designed to be viewed from a distance. Anti-monumentalism, on the contrary, unsettles convention of reception by inviting close, bodily encounter by visitors. It stimulates senses other than sight. In the Aschrott Fountain, the sound of waters

can be heard before its traces are observed on the pavement. The designer may wish to have visitors engaged sensorially and bodily, oblivious of people's response.

**4.1.5 Meaning** - Traditional monuments are didactic, imparting clear, unified messages through figural representation, explicit textual or graphic reference to people, places or events, allegorical figures, and archetypal symbolic forms. Abstract forms can be useful for avoiding obvious thematic representation. They are used for effacing or concealing overt narratives, in order to depoliticize commemoration or to open it up to multiple and potentially conflicting interpretations. The nonrepresentational form of Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial prevents a single narrative from dominating. Rather than representing a single, obvious message about the war, her memorial allows multiple, competing publics to share the site.

**4.2** One understands that memory & counter-memory and monument & anti-monument are the same representations of the same memory and belong indeed to the same collective memorial process. The anti-memorial project, as a collective memorial process, appropriated and historicized anti-monuments as symbols of rupture for the ambivalent, always self-conscious, reunified and thereby, redeemed the victims. Not only has memory and rememory become a form of reconciliation, but has also become an identity-forming process. Indeed, there may be redemption through the anti-redemptive project; or, to use Martha Minow's terminology, consolation through provocation (Minow 1998).

While further studies are necessary, perhaps this exploration, to unravel layers of the philosophy behind the anti-monuments and their inherent characteristics, will help understand how human trials and tribulations of the times find resonance in the intent of the creator.

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