Digital Monumentality in/for Public Spaces

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Abstract: Aim of this paper is to discuss the paradigmatic changes in the conception and production of “monumentality” through the transition from analog to digital forms of communication, design and production. Before looking for a correspondence to “monumentality” in the digital era, the basic concepts that define “monumentality” like aesthetics & public space will be theorized and discussed briefly. We will be questioning via examples, whether the classical conception and production of the “monument” still pursues in the digital era or if the digital revolution is able to alter the chemistry of it.

Keywords: Monument(ality); public space; aesthetics; information and communication technologies; digital communication; design and production.

Introduction

Transition from analog to digital forms of communication, design and production deeply affects the conception and production of “monumentality” in/for public spaces.

First of all, basic concepts that define “monumentality” like aesthetics & public space (public aesthetics) will be theorized and discussed. Following that, all through the paper we will be looking for a correspondence to “monumentality” in the digital era, by speculating through examples. We will be questioning whether the classical conception and production of the “monument” still pursues in the digital era or if the digital revolution is able to alter the chemistry of it. Can digital monumentality overcome the dominance of power in the public space, by forming new aesthetical experiences? Might digital monumentality deconstruct the traditional form of the monument and generate a form of anti-monumentality? Although the questioning of the concept of “Monument” started long before we claim that, digital revolution caused a paradigm shift in its essence, in some cases, to the extent of destroying it.

Aesthetics in/for public space – public aesthetics

To come to the issue of Monument/Monumentality, one should first explain the notion of aesthetics and public space. Aesthetical values emerge from the artifacts and cultural objects of everyday life. They are to be found whether directly or indirectly through symbols, text, movement, sound, taste, color, rhythm. Aesthetical values generate aesthetical experiences, they trigger the “Critical Reasoning” (Habermas, 1962) and vice versa.

“Critical Reasoning” (Habermas, 1962) is the way individuals or societies liberate themselves from any form of domination. It is a way of self-reflection or self-expression for making an effort of producing
critical thoughts against the dominating power. In reference to Habermas (1962), the expression of aesthetical experience through this paper, corresponds to the concept of “Critical Reasoning” (but it should be underlined that what is mentioned is not a predefined, apolitical, universal mindset as he does, but the togetherness of particularly political mindsets in action, please see Habermas, 1962).

The idea of “Public Space” where “Public Sphere” occurs, is formulated and concretized by these aesthetical experiences which we call “Public Aesthetics”. In this sense, from the interfaces of mass communication tools to the popular musical tones, from TV shows to the color of pavement stones, one can talk about a very broad spectrum of the idea of “Public Space” taking form. Furthermore with the remarkable developments of the last decade, with tools and possibilities provided by new digital technologies, borders of physical “Public Space” have extended to the intangible space of information and communication. Thus the notion of “Public Space” in the scope of this paper is not only referring to a physically defined space but it is claimed to be found everywhere where “Public Sphere” occurs.

Claiming that any form of power (political, economical, religious, radical..etc.) dominating over public gives shape to aesthetical experience, today, one can no longer make distinction between “Public Aesthetics” and “Aesthetics of Power”. This is in fact the death of “Public Aesthetics” triggering “Critical Reasoning” and the rise of “Aesthetics of Power”. This claim will be exemplified by focusing on the issue of “Monuments/ Monumentality”.

“Monuments” as the aesthetical representation of power & memory in public space, are the indicators of “Aesthetics of Power”. They have been the most conspicuous examples containing the highest dose of the aesthetics of power in the form of aesthetical perception. Any kind of monument related to the dominating power is claimed of being the reason of “Closure” of the public. The crucial question in terms of public-power relationships in the context of this paper is; “How the public space could be freed from the dominance of power caused by the monuments? How one can overcome the “Closure” of the public?”

First we have to briefly introduce the theoretical background of these ideas taking roots from Habermas and particularly his pioneering book “The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society”. Habermas (1962) claims that the practice of “Critical Reasoning” of the public is loosing effect and describes it as “Closure” of an open realm due to the mass media transforming the critical reasoning practice into consumption practice. In reference to Habermas, Tanju (2007) brings the concept of “Öffentlichkeit -Openness” against “Closure”. “Öffentlichkeit -Openness” includes notions of sociality, freedom, diversity, negotiation and collectivity instead of inspection, isolation and discipline. Tanju’s (2007) suggestion is to preserve diversity of ideas to provide “Openness”.

If “Openness” would be defined as the self-expression of the independent, individual awareness reached by skimming off all superior power from it, might “Openness” possibly subvert the presence and legitimacy of “power” imbedded in public space or be able to trigger an awakening?

Considering the aesthetic experiences of the 21st century public space, we claim that the interference of information and communication technologies (ICT) in to the everyday life, had enormous effects in terms of Openness/Closure of the public. ICT have brought the notions of accessibility, interference, interaction, collectivity and particularity in to the public space. Might these notions brought by ICT, be indicators of independent critical reflection? Might those be the recipe which provides sociality, freedom, diversity, negotiation and collectivity (Tanju, 2007)? Might those show the way to overcome the so-called “Closure” of the public and provide “Openness”?

We will raise these questions in the context of examples where we face Public Aesthetics and Aesthetics of Power in the form of digital communication, design and production.
Digital monumentality in the form of public aesthetics/aesthetics of power

The intervention of the digital forms of communication, design and production in to the everyday life, as a new instrument of self-expression in the form of aesthetical experience, is an urgent discussion in the context of public space. Speculating that those digital interventions are providing virtual, hyper and real forms of aesthetical experiences, we will evaluate some interesting examples from that point of view.

- Monumentality via digital communication in cyberspace – virtual aesthetical experiences

With the interference of the virtual spaces of communication, we claim that public space co-exist both in physical and virtual realm. We claim that, reborn in the virtual realm, public space became accessible again. Virtual spaces of the www are open to interference of anyone, they support plurality, they provide interaction freed from the boundaries of time and space. Most important, www offers mental social spaces where identities can be multiplied in order to overcome the “Closure” growing out of prejudices. They offer a computer mediated communication platform for the public where monumental effects can be designed, experimented and experienced freely. Those new virtual forms of monuments are altering our realities, thus worth for consideration. One example is the Digital Monument to the Jewish Community in the Netherlands. It is described by its creators as an Internet monument dedicated to preserving the memory of all the men, women and children who were persecuted as Jews during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands and did not survive the Shoah. Below in Figure 1, there is a screen shot of the home page described as the actual monument and a screen shot of a personal page of a Jewish and his family reached by clicking to a color bar.

Every person in the Digital Monument has a separate page commemorating his or her life. This ‘personal page’ gives the person’s most basic personal details. Where possible, it also contains a reconstruction of his or her family relationships. The basic aim is to try to show the circumstances of each individual life. What emerges is a snapshot of the household in 1941 or 1942. Addresses are added, enabling visitors to take a virtual walk through streets and towns. The home page is the actual “Monument”, nothing more than a data visualization consisting of a screen with thousands of tiny colored bars. The bars are grouped together in blocks, with each block representing a family and each little bar within a block representing someone who died in the war. (http://www.joodsmonument.nl/: July 2009)

Digital Monument to the Jewish Community in the Netherlands as an Internet monument is powerful and expressive enough to claim that, digital communication can provide sociality, freedom of expression, and collectivity. Digital Monument to the Jewish Community in the Netherlands is a collective and power-freed self-expression of a social

Figure 1
Digital Monument to the Jewish Community in the Netherlands, the home page and the page of Mozes Hartog Doof and his family
community. This work, reflects the most important aspect of monumentality in a different way; not as a representative but a “presentative” of memory. Also interestingly, it is also deconstructing the traditional form of the monument and generate a form of anti-monumentality thanks to its social and collective nature.

- Monumentality via digital communication in urban space – hyper aesthetical experiences

There is a new form of monumentality appearing in urban space by the transformation of physical public spaces into hyper realms of communication. We are experiencing the formation of digital social networks, operating by urban informatics. New media technologies such as GPS, WIFI, UMTS, HSDPA, GSM etc. dramatically alter our sense of place. This experience is not real, nor virtual, it’s in between, that’s why we call it hyper. Locative, contextual, mobile media applications change the way we interact with our surroundings. They offer a new way of experiencing the city through the screens of our mobile phones, “MySpace urbanism” says Martijn de Waal. (http://www.receiver.vodafone.com/locative-media-and-the-city: June, 2009.) These new media technologies providing interaction and collectivity can reconfigure public space into a space for negotiation and exchange.

Work of the artist Noriyuki Fujimura called “GeoStickies is a geographical interactive artwork with mobile phone network. It is an interactive public art project enabling people to form and access to collective personal memory overlaid on to urban space, creating “Personal invisible monuments”. As seen below in Figure 2, it is about locating some “tags” of small events onto geographical fields, this way the audience feel correspondence between “Information Space” and “Urban Space”. The idea of “GeoStickies” is from “POST IT”. You can browse the space of “database of stickies” with walking urban space.

Interpretation of the artist about his work is to be found below, expressing clearly how he is aiming to provide an “Openness” for the Public Space.

“This artwork turns concept of “monument” to ‘personal invisible monument ...Every statue or sculpture in a public plaza has a certain historical meaning behind it. But you may agree that those sculptures do not have the same significance they used to. I assume we may not need the “tag” to big events like a huge sculpture, or we need another form of “tag” for memory. Are we no longer interested in big events or something smaller in our everyday life? If so, why don’t we try to create small (maybe personal) memorials which are associated to places?” (http://www.andrew.cmu.edu/user/noriyuki/artworks/geostickies/)

- Monumentality via digital interventions or digitally designed architectures – real aesthetical experiences

In mega-cities of the 21st century, everywhere we look, we are surrounded by digital surfaces of information, memory and power projected on the facades of buildings. We define this phenomenon as digital intervention, when digital information is “added” to the buildings.

In some cases a new kind of relationship between the city and its dwellers could be formed through digital intervention. Sometimes information surfaces could be a new way of experiencing plurality, expressing oneself, sharing a collective memory, building an identity etc. With interactive lighting
systems, LED panels integrated onto the urban surfaces, digital plasma screens, holograms, projections etc. the city could be transformed into the generator of critical public reflection.

“Voz Alta” (Loud Voice) by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, is a perfect example of a digital monument as a memorial commissioned for the 40th anniversary of the student massacre in Tlatelolco, which took place in 1968. In the piece, participants speak freely into a megaphone placed on the “Plaza de las Tres Culturas”, right where the massacre took place. As the megaphone amplifies the voice, a 10kW searchlight automatically “beams” the voice as a sequence of flashes: if the voice is silent the light is off and as it gets louder so does the light’s brightness. As the searchlight beam hits the top of the building of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, now Centro Cultural Tlatelolco, it is relayed by three additional searchlights, one pointed to the north, one to the southeast towards Zócalo Square and one to the southwest towards the Monument to the Revolution. Depending on the weather, the searchlights could be seen from a 15Km radius, quietly transmitting the voice of the participants over Mexico City. Anyone around the city could tune into 96.1FM Radio UNAM to listen in live to what the lights were saying. When no one was participating the light on the Plaza was off but the three lights on the building played back archival recordings of survivors, interviews with intellectuals and politicians, music from 1968 and radio art pieces commissioned by Radio UNAM. In this way the memory of the event was mixed with live participation. Thousands of people participated in this project, without censorship or moderation. Participation included statements from survivors, street poetry, shout-outs, ad hoc art performances, marriage proposals, calls for protest and more. In 2008, this work was done by using 4x10kW Xenon robotic searchlights, modified megaphone, computers, DMX distribution, live FM radio transmission. (http://www.lozano-hemmer.com/english/projects/vozalta.htm) Very powerful audio-visually, “Voz Alta” is a digital installation showing that digital technologies might create very impressive monumental effects. With its political and intellectual concerns, it is absolutely triggering the “Critical Reasoning” of the public. This is how digital revolution might cause a paradigm shift in the essence of “Monumentality”, in this case, to the extend of destroying it. Public space is re-vitalized, against Power as seen in Figure 3.

On the contrary, in most of the cases, digital information surfaces are nothing but a form of Capitalist “Aesthetic”. Digital intervention is made to imply efforts for persuasion and cognitive anesthesia for acceptance of the capitalist product as an aesthetic image. Any company desiring to advertise occupies public space by renting an urban surface or an urban land. Hence the perception of urban place is dominated and fully saturated by the power. Paul Virilio referring to the digital screens occupied by Capitalist Power, placed on façades of high buildings, mentions about a new kind of invisible architectural style which he calls “Electronic Gothic”. He expresses that just like Gothic Architecture, “Electronic Gothic” style affects emotional and cognitive perception of urban dwellers directly.

Figure 3
“Architecture is becoming a support for information, not to mention an advertising support and, in a broader sense, a mass media support […] The Electronic Gothic of media buildings illuminates the crossroads –Times Square for example– in the same way that, in the Gothic cathedral, stained glass windows illuminated the nave or the presbytery to tell the story of the Church…” (From an interview by François Burkhardt published as an article in the first issue of Crossing, http://architettura.supereva.com/coffeebreak/20020420/: June, 2009).

By using the metaphor of Electronic Gothic, what actually Virilio brings is that digital information surfaces projected over the urban surfaces transform every building, every wall into a monument of consumption. Digital Monuments of consumption, alter our perception of urban space, they bring nothing but a feeling of “Placeness”, they just steal the sense of public space. Looking to the most crowded cities of the world where majority of the public space is covered with information surfaces based on capital all resembling to each other as seen below, one wonders if it is possible to gain unique and original aesthetic experiences in a city “dressed-up” a “Cloth of Information”. Clearly, in this kind of cases, where the motivation is only to make profit or to pump ideological persuasion, the classical conception of the monument still pursues. Below, in Figure 4, there are pictures of Hong Kong, Tokyo, New York and Vegas, where the perception of the urban place is almost identical. These information surfaces, identical everywhere, they are not programmed to engage the space or the public’s “Critical Reflection”, they are not aware of any context, the selling image is the main purpose.

Fremont Street Experience in Las Vegas is just another form of digital information surface in its highest dose. The experience is not between the viewer and the object (not like usual digital commercial screens) but advertising is more dynamic and enveloping, acting more like an immersive cyberspace, an augmented reality. This one is more than illumination or an addition. Located in the heart of downtown Las Vegas on a historic street, it is called the world-famous, one-of-a-kind entertainment venue. Viva Vision, the biggest big screen on the planet covers the street. More than 12 million lights in the Viva Vision canopy and 550,000 watts of concert quality sound pumped to speakers throughout the venue produce an incredible array of eye-popping imagery and heart pounding music. Viva Vision shows appear nightly, free and open to the public. The giant LED screen towers 90-feet above a pedestrian mall lined with unique retail shopping kiosks and two permanent performance stages. Ten legendary casinos line Fremont Street Experience with more than 60 restaurants and thousands of loose slots. Free concerts, special events, and roaming street performers entertain the nearly 17 million visitors who come to experience the vintage Vegas attraction each year. As seen in Figure 5, this must be one of the most impressive “Electronic Gothic” monuments, where architecture is not just a support/background for transmission of information, but it is actually made
Sometimes digital interventions made by using lighting technologies are also nothing but an instrument for “Monumentation” / “Monumentalisation”. They provide an aesthetic intervention to make a building, a structure, an object or a surface to gain its “Monumental” property, due to materialization of the power. A current and striking example of “Monumentalisation” can be given from Istanbul: The first bridge built over the Bosporus built in 1970’s recently had a new decorative lighting system. All lighting fixtures were replaced by LED technology and at night there are lighting performances on it. Below there is a statement of a prime about this fact followed by its image in Figure 6. We see how the bridge is transformed to an icon of dominating government by a digital aesthetical intervention. In this case digital technologies serve as an instrument for “Monumentalisation”.

“In the opening ceremony of the lighting system of the Bosporus Bridge, Prime Mr. Nafiz Özak stated that there would be pictures of Atatürk and Turkish flags in the bridge and there would be advertisements projected on the bridge in the future.” (http://www.haberzade.com/index.php?link=haberoku.php&id=30979: June, 2009)

**Conclusion**

We have tried to re-conceptualize the role of “monument/monumentality” (in the construction of public-power relationships in the society) with the intervention of digital forms of communication, design and production into our everyday lives. We have speculated on how digital forms of communication, design and production might construct a memory, conduct a message, built an identity in order to construct or deconstruct the concept of monumentality. Clearly, as seen through some of the examples, with the impact of these technologies, our perception and conception of monumentality can be changed.
Digital technologies can serve as an instrument for “Critical Reasoning”.

- Before concluding, it is important to reveal the particularities of these technologies enabling them to bring the concepts of sociality, freedom, diversity, negotiation and collectivity into the public space. Digital technologies are;
  - Temporal and immaterial – A digital monument only occupies a temporal space, it does not stand forever as classical monuments. It doesn’t even exist in physical terms. This is why it is usually overlooked/unmanaged/unnoticed by the power, this provides an “Openness”, a moment of freedom for self-expression. Thanks to its temporality and immateriality, a digital monument might appear/disappear when needed, which makes it untouchable/unreachable.
  - Do it yourself – With the tools of digital media, anyone can make their own monuments. This allows multiple perspectives to become visible and different histories of everyone to be written simultaneously. Each new monument of any history eradicates the dominance of the ruling authority. (Solidification of history via monuments)
  - Reproducible – A digital monument is made out of programming, thus it is open to customization and interference of anyone. It is flexible, can be transformed and reproduced when needed. This provides negotiation, freedom.
  - Accessible and participatory – A digital monument is highly accessible thanks to networking technologies, thus open to anyone who wishes to participate. It facilitates the participation of a great number of people. This provides diversity, sociality.
  - Interactive – A digital monument can be context-based and open to interaction if designed so. Thus it can interact with its environment and participants. This provides sociality, collectivity and negotiation as well as diversity.

Even though it seems almost impossible to free the public sphere from the dominating power, the concept of “Öffentlichkeit” emphasized as

“Openness” by Tanju (2007) may be a meaningful conception for it allows public to become visible. “Openness” is defined as opening of the public realm to aesthetical experience, performing in order to express particular critical reasoning. “Openness” as a critical practice, could trigger small but effective awakenings and provoke questioning of the universal dominating power and its operations over the public. Openness in public space can be promoted and sustained with the help of the above mentioned potentials of digital technologies in art & architecture, through new forms of (anti)monumentality.

To conclude, the most important outcome of this paper is that: by enabling anyone to built its own monument, presenting his/her own “Critical Thinking” in the realm of public space, digital forms of communication, design and production might offer a way to defeat the concept of classical “Monument” as a simple “Re-presentation” of any kind of power.

References