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ON FEBRUARY 18TH, 2022 HERITAGE VANCOUVER COLLABORATED WITH URBANARIUM ON CITYDEBATE #12: REMOVE COLONIAL MARKERS. DEBATERS MADE A RANGE OF POINTS FROM DIMINISHING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CURRENT AND FUTURE GENERATIONS TO REMEMBER AND MEANINGFULLY CONFRONT CONTESTED HISTORY, TO WHO HAS THE POWER TO DECIDE WHAT HAPPENS TO MARKERS. YOU CAN WATCH THE DEBATE HERE. THIS JOURNAL ENTRY IS A REFLECTION ON THE IDEAS AROUND MONUMENTS AND THE DEBATE.

We demand a lot from monuments.

Whether it is to remember a loved one, memorialize a tragedy, honour life and mark new beginnings, celebrate triumph, or compose an official narrative for a range of virtuous or not-so-virtuous purposes, a monument is given the job of projecting the past into the future. They are intentionally designed to take a memory of an event or person and project it across time. The hope is to make something transitory permanent, or something close to that. Traditionally, a monument tended to tell one dominant story to the public that the creators wished to universalize as a common value. This all somehow seems unattainable.

As time passes, how stable the meaning of the story the monument is intended to tell becomes more difficult to sustain. Because successive generations become more distant from the event—they may have no memory of it at all—they have a very different relationship with what the monument was intended to represent. In the memorial design world, there is a realization that monuments have lifespans. This is true even for events with the magnitude of the Holocaust. Particularly with larger scale physical commemorations, so much effort and resources are put into monument design in order to try and prolong its message.

Another issue is with the often singular story a monument is designed to tell to the wide public. A story does not mean the same thing to different people with different ways of seeing the world, life experiences and perspectives. Yesterday's values may differ from today's. And in today's society, some of those stories are increasingly contested. The most obvious example is colonial markers that publicly celebrate and perpetuate ideas of admiration towards individuals who have committed serious violations against other people.

This divergence isn't limited to objects that were intended to celebrate rights violators. The loved ones of those killed in mass tragedies may have very different views of memorials compared to others who wish for some memorialization in physical form of the event. This was the case in Port Arthur, Australia after a gunman massacred 20 people in a café in 1996. There were family members of victims who wanted the café building demolished because they wished for no evidence of the event to remind them of what had happened. And there were also those who believed that the structure needed to remain, even if in part, because such a significant national tragedy required some form of physical memorialization.

When the topic of the removal of controversial monuments comes up, we tend to quickly centre our attention on the object. Should they be removed? Is that erasing history? Should a plaque be added to provide context? Should a separate monument be put up next to the controversial one in order to defy it? This focus comes from the idea that objects that represent something important need permanence. This is commonly seen in cultural values of Western societies and Western scholarship. These objects need to be preserved because they are the physical evidence of history and are central to preserving a common memory.

But some make the point that we really ought to be centring our attention on who has the power to decide. Nadine Nakagawa, the New Westminster City Councillor who brought forward a motion that ended in the removal of a statue of Judge Matthew Begbie, asserts that it is the wishes of the victims that matter. If the victims want removal, then that means removal. This is a point that challenges conventions and the authoritative roles of academics, historians, and related professionals who are normally considered knowledge experts. Instead, those who have suffered wrongdoing are given power to make decisions around the public memory of those events. They have essential knowledge and experience. This is especially the case for events that perpetuate injustices that are systemic in society.

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Confronted with varying interpretations that a diverse public would have of a monument, some experts in the monuments and memorial field have developed a preference for more abstract artistic memorials such as counter-monuments. The range varies, but these types of monuments all offer a way for someone to interact with the meaning of the monument. The intention is for the audience to think about, interpret and feel what is in front of them rather than be directly told what the monument means. Locally, the 215 pairs of children's shoes placed on the steps of the Vancouver Art Gallery by Haida artist Tamara Bell is one example of this.

Ultimately, this raises the question of whether a monument, or a monument alone, can be successful in being that evidence of history that the public needs to engage with. Even if juries and cultural commentators recognize the artist intent in monuments as brilliant, experience across wider groups of people is subjective. For example, not a lot of people may recognize that Washington's Vietnam Veterans Memorial is supposed to make you see and feel a giant wound in the earth.

When there is a risk that a monument is removed, it seems that is the time when the most number of people care about it most. Perhaps this means that installing and removing objects alone is insufficient. Rather than thinking predominantly of the physical monument, perhaps we need to focus on the process of memorialization. Unlike how we think of monuments as finished objects that do its job once installed, memorialization is always incomplete. Its job is never done. It requires a series of ongoing actions, in which we engage with important public memories. Like a relationship, we need to continually make an effort to work on it.