

## Monumentality in the Context of Modernity

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### Abstract

**Historically, monuments (or monumentality) were known as tools shaping the political consciousness or the objects that constructed collective memory for social groups and nations. The article will first analyze the meaning of monumentality from a historical perspective, and then compare it with the current state of architecture in the modern context. And put forward the concept that monumentality has gradually transformed into iconic building in modern times.**

### Keywords

**Monumentality; Modernity; Iconic; Modernist Design.**

### 1. Introduction

The term 'monumentality' derives from the Latin verb of 'monere', translating as 'to remind', but also somewhat obliquely as 'to warn'. The duality of meaning suggests not only a preservation of memory or knowledge, but also to alert an individual or collective with regard to future events. But, in architectural terms, what does the word 'monumentality' indicate and how does a monumental expression impact upon the discipline in the present time?

The monumental arcs back through history as buildings of significant religious or civic importance or value, whether it is Byzantine, Roman, Greek or Gothic. The public once stood in awe of monuments. But, while once the great, monumental buildings were in expansive spaces; they are now in confined urban environments with little social inspiration other than for visual gaudiness. As architecture aligned with western capitalism its built production has deviated from the civic significance of the cathedral to corporate monumentalism through the arrival of the skyscraper. The phrase 'corporate monumentalism' could easily be translated here as 'American Modernism' trading as and encapsulating the notion of 'modernity'. A great lineage of Modernist design can be found in the advancement of the skyscraper in notable projects such as Raymond Hood's Rockefeller Center, New York (1940), Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building, New York (1954), the Sears Tower, Chicago (1976) from Skidmore Owings Merrill (SOM), and later the Postmodern variant with Philip Johnson's AT&T Building, New York (1984). Add to the list SOM's 2009 offering of the Burj Khalifa, UAE and Office for Metropolitan Architecture's (OMA) CCTV Headquarters, Beijing (2012) and the genealogy is complete.

What is clear in this lineage is the conflation between monumentality and modernity. Civic buildings in Europe switched to commercial entities in the US, and has more recently shifted as the Modern monument transplanted to Asia in the form of large-scale residential. Incidentally, the outcomes of mass residential building has been catastrophically noted in the likes of Dubai, and could still be flagged in China as monumentally vacant buildings. What is palpable in the contemporary variant of monumentality, though, is a shift in program, type, density and location; not to mention a movement from public space to private entity. The linguistic derivation of the word 'monumental', therefore, may well represent the notion of 'warning' to the architecture profession as a result.

## 2. A Terse Relationship

In 'Monumentality: A Critical Matter in Modern Architecture' [1] the coauthors, C.C. and G.R. Collins, suggest modernity and monumentality have long had a tumultuous connection; extending a well-worn topic of discussion and controversy in the latter part of the twentieth century. Notable architectural historian, William J.R. Curtis, once remarked that 'architecture creates a world of its own'[8] and so no matter how drastic modernisation occurs and proliferates, the need for monumental architectural edifices does not decline or disappear. This is not a view shared throughout the profession, nor stretching back through the history of architectural discourse. Indeed, Lewis Mumford holds a completely opposite opinion. Mumford, writing in 1937, proclaimed the 'death of the monument'[2] in a text of the same name suggesting that only the 'rich and powerful' sought such 'static immortality...forgetful of the fact that stones which are deserted by life are even more helpless than life unprotected by stones.'[2] On the question of mortality and monumentality, art historian Alois Riegl stated that the 'intentional monument, as a human creation, [was] erected for the specific purpose of keeping single human deeds or events (or a combination thereof) alive in the minds of future generations [and should] recall a specific moment or complex of moments from the past and thus make a claim to immortality' [3].

Mumford furthered that 'the classic civilisations of the world, up to our own have been oriented toward death and toward fixity [and thus] the city, with its dead buildings, its lifeless masses of stone, becomes a burial ground.'[2] Also proffering that the very notion of a modern monument is a contradiction in terms, noting that 'if it is a monument, it cannot be modern and if it is modern, it cannot be a monument' [2] – 'modern' is somewhat of a misnomer here, as it seems to equate to 'contemporary' as opposed to Modernism.

Therefore, can the monument exist in present architectural practice as the expression of symbolism or represent the social collective through the interpretation of meaning free from Modernist troupes or 'static immortality'? Andrew Butterfield, in 'Monuments and Memories' published in *The New Republic* (2003), notes that 'monuments have lost their aesthetic and social legitimacy [and are] the polar opposite of Modern architecture and the progressive city.'[5] It is arguable to suggest that in comparison to the elaborately composed and beautifully formed ancient buildings, contemporary architecture's penchant for austere commercial office building, super-scale residential complexes, or shopping malls, no longer express the deep civic consideration and instead operate as pale products under the pressure of economic proliferation.

## 3. Symbolism

J. L. Sert et al, in 'Nine Points on Monumentality', published in *Harvard Architecture Review*, 1943, said that 'monuments are human landmarks, which men have created as symbols for their ideals, for their aims, and for their actions.'[4] While Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown ventured that freeway signage are the 'verbal and symbolic connections through space, communicating a complexity of meanings through hundreds of associations a few seconds from far away' [6] in their eponymous *Learning From Las Vegas* (1972). The associative value, first noted in Venturi/Scott-Brown's writing, is still prevalent today with many contemporary buildings expressing their monumentality purely as huge symbolic signs. Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG), for instance, proposed a form deriving from the Chinese character for 'person' 人 (or 'ren'), which is then separated into two buildings – one symbolising mind, the other body – for their REN Building, Shanghai, 2010. Such abstract and representational vocabularies are little more than a one-liner, but do offer the opportunity to communicate with the public by arousing base understanding and inherent shared knowledge.

Interestingly, the China pavilion at Shanghai Expo 2010 – also known as ‘the oriental crown’ – translated the symbolic elements of classic Chinese architecture into a more immediately legible architectural language. Most notably the pavilion’s chief architectonic feature is inspired by a Chinese roof bracket (known as the ‘dougong’) while the pavilion’s four giant columns simulated the classic structural support, the ‘ding’; further, the exterior was painted in ‘Chinese red’. The largest, most monumental, of all Expo pavilions, it was a purely visualised symbolic inflection, which created an informal monumentality.

#### 4. Meaning

The discipline has a rich and varied history as a result of its architects’ position on creating meaningful expression’. Louis Kahn, for example, believed that the purity of a building structure should be its dialogical theme running throughout, regardless of modernity or a search for monumentality. He believed that monumentality was attainable through powerful universal symbolism that imbued spiritual qualities, inherent in materials, which conveyed emotion for eternity. Known primarily for his institutional buildings, such as museums, laboratories, sacred spaces, universities and the National Assembly Building in Dhaka, Bangladesh (1962-83), Kahn wrote in *Monumentality* (1944), ‘Monumentality is enigmatic. It cannot be intentionally created. Neither the finest material nor the most advanced technology need enter a work of monumental character for the same reason that the finest ink was not required to draw up the Magna Carta.’ [7] The notion that it is impossible to imbue monumentality is intriguing, when stood in opposition to the concept of monumentality in the contemporary profession and no more so in China where the desire for monumental scale is tangible.

Steven Holl is possibly the most notable exponent of the super-scale project in China; and in building scale rather than emblem – removing the project from expressive meaning in favour of geometric monumentality – Holl advocates for ‘pieces of the city’ as singular projects. Examples include: *Linked Hybrid*, Beijing (2009) – eight towers horizontally connected by ‘skybridges’ as a counter to urban sprawl through density; the *Vanke Centre*, Shenzhen (2009); and, *Sliced Porosity Block*, Chengdu (2012). All of these are exceptionally expansive, super-structure buildings; or as Holl refers to the Vanke project, a ‘horizontal skyscraper’ – intensifying the notion that grandiose scale informs contemporary monumentality. The permeation of monumentality as corporate, super-scale megastructures.

The concept of the megastructure maybe nothing new, its lineage through the twentieth century is widely discussed in the works of Yona Friedman. But it is Superstudio, an Italian collective, whose gridded super-structure, *Il Monumento Continuo* (or *Continuous Monument*) enveloped the Earth’s surface as a single, anonymous super-structure. The conceptual project acted as both building and infrastructure simultaneously. It was a bold and intelligent commentary on the escalation of globalisation, with the stripping away of local cultures and tradition. The very notion of architecture is debunked in this instance, as it suggests Modernism was disseminating bland, steel-frame megaliths across the world. Did Superstudio predict China’s nascent appetite for scale? Were the collective’s political overtures a blueprint for future architecture and the ideological shift in monumentality?

#### 5. Conclusion

Monumentality remains an architectural objective despite its shifting ideological focus; it is an essential concept in architecture with monuments continuing to spring up as various aesthetic and compositional idioms. The political and social function may have switched attention from religious edifice to corporate emblem and further still to the expansive residential projects littered through Asia, but the notion of striving for architectural monumentality prevails. Simple one-liners or enigmatic monumentality may be one thing, but can the contemporary

profession intensify the notion of the monument? Can the discipline reclaim the public aspect to monuments in light of a burgeoning private sector involvement? If architecture can reframe its discourse to discuss the monument or monumentality in regard to a social perspective it may eventuate towards a reformatted and invincible architectural typology in spite of modernity.

## References

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