PRESENT PASTS

Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory

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Twin Memories: Afterimages of Nine/Eleven

In a culture as obsessed with memory such as ours, it is not surprising that the debate about how to commemorate the attack on the twin towers began to stir soon after the traumatic shock. Spontaneous memorials and "missing" notices replete with vital data and photographs sprang up everywhere in downtown Manhattan—in subway stations, on storefronts, at bus stops. Flowers at many of these sites indicated that there was not much hope to find any of the missing. A whole part of Manhattan had been turned into a cemetery, but a cemetery without identifiable bodies and without graves—a death zone in which the work of cleanup and removal went on day and night.

The ruins were still smoldering with underground fires when the architects and developers came forth, emphasizing the need to rebuild fast and big, possibly even bigger than before: no ruins allowed in the American imagination. At the same time, a consensus has emerged that there must be some permanent memorial to the tragic loss of life that traumatized New York. Any memorial will also have to commemorate what may turn out to have been a major turning point in world history, not just the history of the city or the history of the United States. How can one reconcile the desire to rebuild a prime site of real estate with the need to commemorate the dead; and with the challenge to memorialize a historical event? Anybody who knows about the frustrating debates and unsatisfactory "solutions" concerning the commemoration of historical trauma and criminal terror elsewhere, even decades after the commemorated events, must fear the worst. The Oklahoma memorial with its 168 empty chairs symbolizing the number of the victims reminds one of the theater of the absurd, and Peter Eisenman's Holocaust memorial in Berlin, once it is built, has the potential of becoming a monumental memory sore rather than the space for historical reflection that was intended. The issue here is not the imaginative ability or inability of artists, architects, and designers, but rather the objective problems of representing and memorializing traumatic events in built space, especially if that space is a death zone in living memory. And there is an added problem for the memorians in New York: How does one imagine a monument to what was already a monument in the first place—a monument to corporate modernism? No surprise that some suggested rebuilding an exact replica of the twin towers. The idea is as absurd as it is intriguing in its logic: the rebuilt twin towers as a monument to forgetting, an erasure of history, an emblem of global capital in a different sense from that of the terrorist imaginary.

The real debate about "ground zero," however, has moved on. Discussions about how to memorialize 9/11 are gathering steam, though they are not yet fully public in New York at a time when the media are still so busy with the war front. No doubt, the memorial debate will soon grow by leaps and bounds, driven by the narcissism of victimization and accelerated by its convergence with the short-term time frame of developers and city politicians. Given such objective pressures, it seems quixotic to suggest that it is not yet the time to have this debate. Considering New York's recent record of urban planning and building, slowing down seems unlikely unless forced by the economic downturn. Neither rampant nationalism nor the raw emotions of injury and anger have ever produced persuasive monuments in urban space. This, then, may be a good moment to reflect on something else. For me, the theme of memory and the twin towers conjures up images of events in the past rather than the future of memory—events that in my own imagination have attached themselves closely to the collapse of the twin towers.

In the rare moments of reflection not tied to daily news events in the fall of 2001, I've been surprised at how persistently the afterimage of the twin towers hovers in my mind. Clearly they carry symbolic meaning more forcefully than the partially destroyed Pentagon. But this symbolic meaning is not that of the terror of globalization and hegemonic power, as the
blow-back theorists argue and as it seems to function in the terrorists’ own imaginary. No single and not even a twin corporate tower could ever represent the nature of global capital, nor could its destruction equal the collapse of capital. This is infantile symbolism. For a New Yorker by choice, it is a different symbolism that counts. The image of the twin towers simply represented home in the metropolis. Often, you first saw them approaching New York from the air. Year after year, you saw them in the distance driving back home from the airports in Queens, Brooklyn, or New Jersey. Unwieldy and ugly as they were, they anchored the island’s skyline in the south. Their monumental size crowded out other landmarks. Monumentality itself is at the core of their afterimage and its effects.

Thinking about the buildings as buildings and as symbols, memories of two other images and events crowd in, superimposing themselves on the television sequences of the unfolding disaster. When I saw the twin towers collapse on television on the morning of 9/11—despite shock over the unfathomable loss of human life and a fleeting fear about a potential nuclear device on board the planes—I was instantly reminded of images showing the controlled implosion in 1972 of another icon of modern architecture: the Pruitt-Igoe Housing project in St. Louis, designed by the same architect who built the World Trade Center, Minoru Yamasaki—a haunted architect, if ever there was one. Pruitt-Igoe became an icon only through its very destruction, images of which have widely circulated both on television and in architecture books. That implosion of thirty years ago has been described time and again as a symbolic marker for the end of urban modernism and the beginning of postmodernism in architecture. The twin towers, however, were completed in 1973 and 1976, respectively, after that supposed historical break, that is, and they were built in the spirit of the classical modernist skyscraper and its vertical sublime. In 1972, it was supposedly the end of urban modernism. Now we hear talk of the end of the skyscraper, coupled with renewed fears about the end of urban life and public space. Early suggestions to protect New York by closing Times Square to traffic, transforming it into a tourist mall, were joined by such ideas as limiting access to railroad terminals and to public parks—all in the name of creating defensible space. None of that will fly. Sure, some will go live in Celebration, Florida, and New York may have to go through another bad period of economic downturn, rising unemployment, and urban decay, not just as a result of 9/11, but as a consequence of the mega-delusions and speculative frenzy of the 1990s. But New York will not end up lying flat. Neither modernism nor the skyscraper are dead. The key issue will rather be how to rethink both in relation to metropolitan public and civic space, in relation to business culture, and in relation to governmental responsibility and civic politics. The implosion of 1972 did not generate much in the way of urban renaissance. Only time will tell whether the collapse of the twin towers will generate imaginative alternatives for an urban restructuring of the southern tip of Manhattan.

The other more recent image that sadly attaches itself to the disappearance of the twin towers in clouds of smoke and debris opens up another, perhaps more political dimension. What I have in mind is the dynamiting of the two Bamiyan Buddha statues near the Hindu Kush mountains in central Afghanistan. In the spring of 2001, after having massacred many of the Shia minority Hazaras living in the Bamiyan valley, the Taliban destroyed these two sublime statues which had inspired awe and wonder for centuries on the silk road, itself one of the earlier emblems of transcontinental, if not global, trade at another crossroads of the world in another time. The Islamic Pashtuns and other Islamic Afghan tribes had lived for hundreds of years with these millennial statues carved out of a massive sandstone cliff. The Bamiyan statues stood as an emblem of cultural syncretism and religious tolerance. Suddenly, almost five years into Taliban rule, they were declared blasphemous, and a seemingly disproportionate effort was mounted by the Taliban to destroy them. Why?

Threats to the statues were first articulated by Taliban military leaders in 1998 after the American missile strike against one of Osama bin Laden’s training camps. But it was only in late February 2001 that Mullah Muhammad Omar issued a fatwa calling for the destruction of all figurative statues in Afghanistan in line with Islamic law. The Buddha statues were dynamited in mid-March. In the meantime, the international media had been flush with appeals to the Taliban and with criticisms of their cultural barbarism. Parallels were drawn with other state-sponsored iconoclasm such as China’s cultural revolution, the Nazi destruction of Jewish artifacts in the Third Reich, and the Serbian destruction of Muslim cultural sites in Bosnia. Kofi Annan and UNESCO, governments of many Asian countries with large Buddhist populations as well as major international museum figures intervened in a futile effort to save the statues. At the time, there was speculation in the press that the Taliban acted out of defiance—defiance of the international community which still refused to
recognize the Taliban government as legitimate. Links were also established in the press with the illegal antiquities trade in which the Taliban were complicit, secretly selling off Afghanistan’s cultural heritage under the veil of self-righteous religious iconoclasm.

But as we know more now about the extremely close relationship, if not dependence of Mullah Omar on Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden since the mid-1990s, it is difficult not to think about the relationship between the attack on the two sublime Bamiyan statues and the subsequent attack on the differently sublime twin towers. It is as if the dynamiting and collapse of the two statues last spring had been a carefully staged prologue to the attack in New York, symbolic actions both, intended to whip up support for bin Laden’s apocalyptic Islamism in the Muslim world. The parallels are obvious. Two figures each, one taller than the other, like brothers; both invested in the aesthetic of the sublime; but not the terrorizing sublime which makes the spectator feel small and overwhelmed, for both allowed a view from the top, from the top of the World Trade Center as from the top of the Buddha’s cave. In both cases, in the paranoid aggressive world of the Taliban and Al Qaeda, the aesthetics of the sublime represents only the demonic power of the other—the other religion, the other way of life, the infidel. But we can now surmise that the links go beyond symbolism.

The documented influence of Saudi Wahhabism on the Pakistani madrasas and on the Taliban makes it entirely plausible to suggest that the Wahhabist presence in Afghanistan that had grown during the Soviet occupation played a key role in the destruction of the Buddhas, invaluable monuments to the art and civilization of Afghanistan and the world. And Wahhab presence in Kandahar points to Al Qaeda and bin Laden. Whether or not bin Laden took an active part in formulating Mullah Omar’s fatwa, it is not difficult to imagine bin Laden and his co-conspirators enjoying the international uproar about the attack on the Buddhas as it played out over weeks in the world media while they were anticipating the deadly attack on the twins, then already at an advanced stage of planning.

Of course, there are differences. The iconoclasm of the Taliban follows the logic of a local theocracy and the religious policing of its subject population. The iconoclasm of bin Laden and his co-conspirators, on the other hand, stages a deadly world-media event in order to deal a blow to that very modernity of which bin Laden himself is a product, both in his own socialization as a construction engineer and in his political trajectory toward terrorism since the 1980s. But bin Laden’s iconoclasm goes hand in hand with a very modern iconolatry: bin Laden posing as prophet on the tapes broadcast to the Muslim world via Al Jazeera, bin Laden in front of his cave, bin Laden shooting off a submachine gun surrounded by his followers, bin Laden’s image on posters and T-shirts wherever his message resonates. The iconic visibility of bin Laden contrasts curiously with the invisibility of Mullah Omar, whom we have only known from a grainy, unfocused photograph. Now that we have seen the latest bin Laden tape and that we have read the utterly vacuous and pompous transcript of his and his companions’ allegedly prophetic dreams of flying and fantasies of apocalyptic destruction, devoid of politics and interspersed with sanctimonious incantations, it is easy to see what the dynamiting of the Bamiyan Buddhas has in common with the attack on the twin towers. This is not the banality of evil Hannah Arendt once analyzed as key to the bureaucratic mindset of Adolf Eichmann. It is rather the banality of a religious zealotry, which has caused so much suffering and destruction over the centuries whenever it has allied itself successfully with state power. What is at stake here is not the moral struggle of good vs. evil, a discourse that itself remains deeply embedded in self-righteous religious thinking. Demonizing the terrorists only reiterates what they themselves do in their hatred for the infidel. Politicized religious zealotry, whether of Islam, Christianity, Judaism, or any other religion, is not the other of modernity, but its very product. At stake therefore is the political struggle to combat religious zealotry in all its forms, with the goal of preventing it from infiltrating or capturing state power wherever it may threaten to do so. To win that struggle, strategies other than military ones are needed. Questions of political power and economic devastation need to be addressed, as well as deficits of meaning, histories of humiliation and injustice, the downside of globalization which is mostly forgotten when one looks at the world from a 1990s Western perspective only. In the meantime, the twin memories keep haunting me. And if I look closely at images of the now empty cave that held the larger of the two very human Buddha statues, I take comfort in the fact that in the back of the cave, the human outline of the destroyed statue is still visible, if only barely; another afterimage, supporting another memory that fingers.