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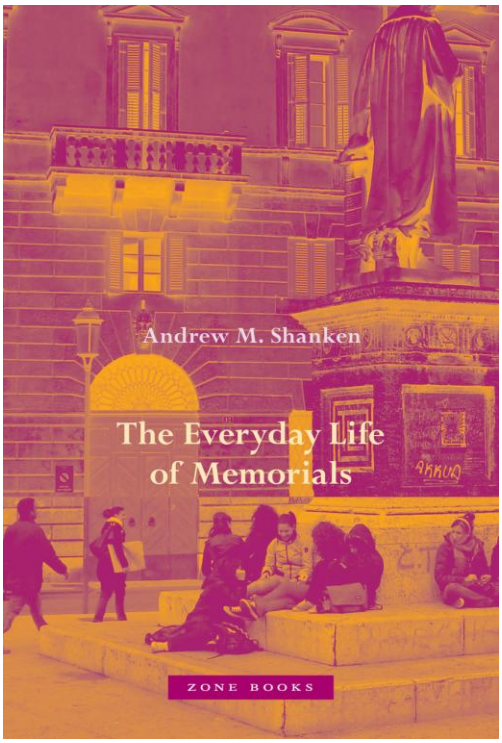
The Everyday Life of Memorials

by Andrew M. Shanken



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Reviewed by: Martyna Ewa Majewska

Andrew M. Shanken is a recognized pundit in the history of architecture and urban planning, and *The Everyday Life of Memorials* is his long-awaited reflection on how memorials live within our built environments. Beginning his inquiry around the time of the French Revolution, the author takes us on a tour of numerous European and American cities to ask how memorials emerge, evolve, and become part of our everyday. Thus, in contrast to the many recent publications on monuments and their contestation, written amid the ongoing wave of iconoclasm in the United States and globally, Shanken's book does not question the future of monuments.[1] Rather, it helps us rethink that which often remains uncontested or forgotten. By refusing to examine the headline-making controversies surrounding monuments and memorials, the book encourages us instead to attend to those commemorative structures that do not even register as such—and to understand why this is the case.

Assembled over many years, as recounted in the preface, *The Everyday Life of Memorials* is a subjective selection of musings on memorials and monuments: it studies the structures that the author visited and often photographed himself. As such, it straddles an expertly written scholarly analysis and a travel memoir, which makes Shanken's assessments of the selected memorials more intimate, more exciting, and at times even slightly humorous. Throughout, the author displays a predilection for exploring what the names that we have given to commemorative sculptures and installations may tell us about our relationship with them. Yet, although he attempts to parse the terms "monuments" and "memorials" early in the book, he ends up treating them synonymously throughout. This decision is certainly far from surprising. As Erika Doss concludes in her 2010 *Memorial Mania*, "In the United States today, the terms 'monument' and 'memorial' are used interchangeably."[2] Hence, the case studies in Shanken's book form a very broad spectrum of structures.

Shanken summons numerous oft-cited voices from the entwined fields of monument and memory studies, notably Robert Musil, but endeavors to forge a distinct path for his own central argument. While using Musil's observation that monuments are strikingly invisible as his book's opening epigraph, Shanken posits memorials to be not so much unnoticed as dormant.[3] It follows that his key questions concern why and how are memorials awakened from their sleep. "This book is about how memorials . . . move between being moribund and volatile," Shanken declares in the introduction (26). His search for answers, however, does not turn to the political, as we may expect, since he unswervingly shuns any analysis of "the ways in which memorials are used as commemorative sites or as symbols of political struggle," as he avows in the very opening of the book (15). Shanken's intended contribution is rather to integrate the exploration of monuments and memorials with what he describes as the study of the everyday. This is his way of signaling his intention to place the "lived experience and physical form" of urban structures, such as monuments, on equal scholarly footing (53). Yet, while the study of the everyday is said to encompass "vernacular architecture and everyday urbanism, landscape, and geography, as well as ordinary behavior in daily life" (40), the book does not attend to all of these aspects with equal diligence.

In line with the author's dedication to the significance of nomenclature, the first chapter, "Everyday Memory," distinguishes between the terms "everyday" and "not-everyday" in relation to memorials. Memorial sites and structures often commemorate "not-everyday" events—traumas and accomplishments—but their placement within bustling pedestrian zones and mundane settings tends to contradict their special character. Equally, the way people behave at and around memorials may strip them of their "not-everyday" aura. Here, Shanken cites the casual comportment of tourists around Holocaust memorials as one notorious example. What he argues in this opening chapter is that memorials shift between these two registers, leading "a double life" (57). They are simultaneously markers of seismic change and confirmations that time continues to flow. As such, memorials make possible a conjunction of time's cyclic and linear nature—an observation that initiates a sustained discussion of memorials' uneasy status vis-à-vis modernity throughout the book.

"Labile Memory" (Chapter 2) traces divergent trajectories of memorials while highlighting their shared mutability. Shanken's examples, drawn from Rome, Verona, and Berlin, demonstrate that as some memorials gain legal protection from damage and overcrowding by tourists, others become disused, invisible, or nameless, gradually transformed into meeting spots or parking lots. Whether or not a monument gets rescued from "the everyday" rests with city planners and local authorities, yet, regardless of the specific path of each monument, the endpoint is typically the same: loss of "specific historical meaning" (98). It is precisely this phenomenon that the book attends to most conscientiously and instructively, despite what its title might imply (and the preface makes clear that various titles were under consideration). The chapters that follow place real, everyday interactions between humans and memorials firmly on their margins. Instead, Shanken's emphasis falls on city planning and aesthetic movements that shaped the ways memorials have been placed, displaced, and grouped together.

The third chapter, "Placing Memory," commences a long meditation on the placement of memorials and its implications. By examining the changing strategies for siting memorials—from church-adjacent burial grounds to modern cemeteries and parks—the

author shows how such decisions corresponded to evolving attitudes toward death. This correlation is particularly fascinating when Shanken considers war memorialization, and he does not shy away from the difficult examples of Civil War memorials in the United States. Such memorials, placed in American cemeteries, often fulfilled contradictory functions: by metaphorically bringing the dead soldiers home, they brought along a war remote in time and space, while concealing the grim realities of death on the battlefield and ennobling its cause. In Shanken's evocative words, they "transposed the deathbed scene to a public setting, with mourners gathered around the memorial instead of the bed" (125). Relatedly, using William Godwin's essay on sepulchers of 1809, Shanken begins to point readers to the historical fictions that underpin not only memorials themselves but their placement.[4] From their inception, Shanken argues, "public parks and modern memorials were complicit in creating a symbolic universe that attempted to smooth over class realities and racial inequalities in a landscape that made their root cause invisible" (135). The author, characteristically, does not venture beyond this observation. Instead, he sheds light on the uneasy and frequently contested placement of memorials in parks—especially with the rise of movements such as City Beautiful. This reflection, in turn, reanimates the discussion of memorials' complicated relation to modern time: while they commemorated historic people and events, their positioning was exploited to create illusions of timeless, pastoral havens within ever-growing modern cities.

As the fourth chapter clarifies, modern memorials were hardly confined to parks and cemeteries. In the twentieth century, they came to occupy city squares and traffic circles. Such novel placements meant that "new conventions needed to be established on the fly" (151). Situating memorials amid urban traffic meant that they were not only "ageographic" (placed in locations that bore no relation to the commemorated events or persons) but also removed from sites associated with commemoration or contemplation. With the example of the Mexican-American All Wars Memorial in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles, Shanken demonstrates how easily the monuments placed within automobile and pedestrian traffic can become, in his words, "turned on and off" (159).

As the author lists instances of monuments erected in traffic circles around the globe—a rare glance beyond European and North American examples in this book—the analysis drifts away from memorials and centers on what he names "admonishing monuments" (169). Here, Shanken shows how quickly attempts at cautioning those in the present via figures sourced from the historical or mythologized past—using monuments as *exemplum virtutis*—fades in public consciousness. Even the figures placed in busy urban centers, such as the Duke of Wellington in London, become unrecognizable, and their message illegible, over time. Similarly, the case of the Austrian city of Klagenfurt, to which the book's fifth chapter is largely dedicated, enables the author to delineate the process whereby memorials and monuments become, through their displacement and misplacement, generic nods to history rather than tombstones of specific historic events. While delving deep into the city's unique history, Shanken uses Klagenfurt to illustrate a broader, Pan-European phenomenon observed in city planning after World War II: displaced, reorganized, and regrouped, memorials come to "demarcate and ennoble the old city; in effect, to affirm its historicity" (186). Grouping is an integral part of those transformations, and Chapter 6 is precisely about "Mustering Memory"—that is, creating entire memorial zones. As Shanken points out, the dawn of statuemania, in the second half on the nineteenth century, coincided with the emergence of zoning in urban planning

(230). "From Mexico to Macau," zoning became legally and managerially entwined with preservation (231).

Throughout the second half of the book, we are invited to contemplate the various ways in which memorials fall into oblivion, become increasingly vulnerable, or start to be unwelcome. Some commemorative statues get replaced by civic buildings, and some are zoned with other structures deemed no longer desirable. Additionally, additive memorials, such as those that commemorate multiple wars, portend the exhaustion of the conventional memorial format. At the same time, however, Shanken's critical view of additive plaques as a solution to memorials' slow but inevitable demise reveals his commitment to keeping even those memorials whose missions are no longer intelligible alive. His dismissive examination of the "the rhetorical strategy of the phrase 'dead white males'" and the "epochal . . . paradigm shift" it implies resounds with the same commitment, against the odds (299–301).

Indeed, Shanken has written a book that is steadfastly about the lives of memorials and not about the lives of people. So categorical is the author's disengagement from sociological inquiries that even in the chapter titled "What We Do at Memorials," he turns to cultural representations of memorial activations rather than studying real-life situations engendered by memorials. At no point does he broach the issue of memorials that are spontaneous, makeshift, or structurally ephemeral, and countermonuments are only discussed in passing. Even the concluding sections, titled "Time" and "Death," circle back to the issue of placement of conventional memorials. And although it is understandable that a "commentary on the political co-optation of memorials would seem to creep beyond the core concerns of the book," the rigid distance from the current *everyday* memorial feuds does leave the reader thirsty for a more adventurous second volume.[5] In the end, we must simply join in the author's resignation that memorials are actually extremely hard to define or name. As the conclusion's title bluntly suggests, "What Is This?" is a typical reaction to seeing what only upon closer inspection turns out to be a commemorative structure. We are left in stasis, with Shanken concluding that "monuments are strange" (331) and their status is "perplexing" (322).

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Notes

[1] See Robert Bevan, *Monumental Lies: Culture Wars and the Truth about the Past* (London: Verso, 2022); Nicholas Mirzoeff, *White Sight: Visual Politics and Practices of Whiteness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023); and Mechtild Widrich, *Monumental Cares: Sites of History and Contemporary Art* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2023).

[2] Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 38.

[3] Robert Musil, "Monuments," in *Selected Writings,* ed. and trans. Burton Pike (New York: Continuum, 1986), 320.

[4] William Godwin, *Essay on Sepulchres* (London: Printed for W. Miller, 1809).

[5] For a promising move in that direction, see the more recent publication coedited by the author: Valentina Rozas-Krause and Andrew M. Shanken, eds., *Breaking the Bronze Ceiling: Women, Memory, and Public Space* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2024).