Monuments as Statements of Power

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Monuments serve as witnesses to history, encapsulating and projecting the most cherished beliefs of a given community. Monuments are; auratic, offering an intimate experience of human history, and didactic, teaching the viewer about the lives of their patrons. Overall, monuments aspire to permanence, communicating ideas across spans of time that are much longer than human life. As the critic Arthur Danto has written, "Monuments commemorate the memorable and embody the myths of beginnings. …Monuments make heroes and triumphs, victories and conquests, perpetually present and part of life." In other words, monuments provide meaning that endures across time, even as it may shift from year to year. This quality of endurance, and the centrality of monuments to cultural identity, is evidenced by the current international concern over the destruction of UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Some types of monuments, like the obelisk in ancient Egypt, serve a single, representational function. At other times, monuments take the form of works of architecture that serve both symbolic and practical purposes. Palace complexes and royal residences are a common example of this type, such as Chengzu's Forbidden City in Beijing (Figure 11.1-1) or Louis XIV's expansion of Versailles (Figure 12.2-13).

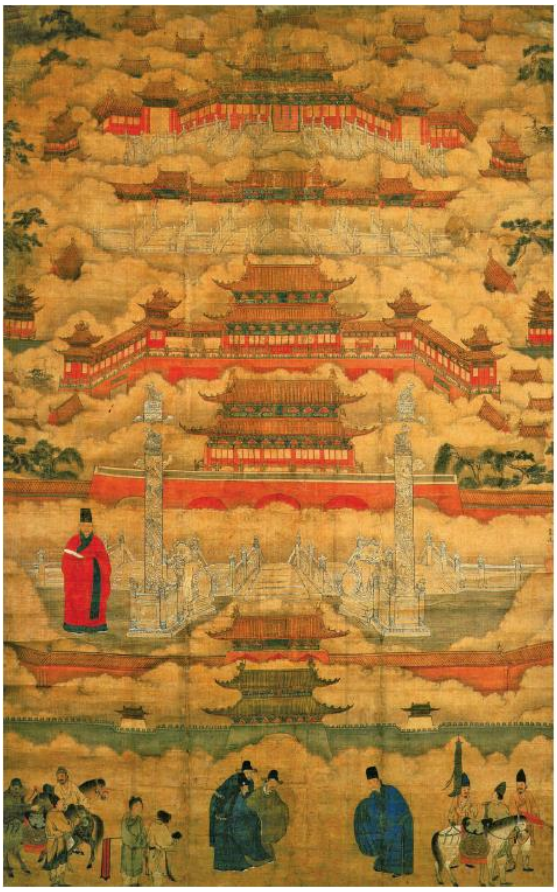

Figure 11.1-1

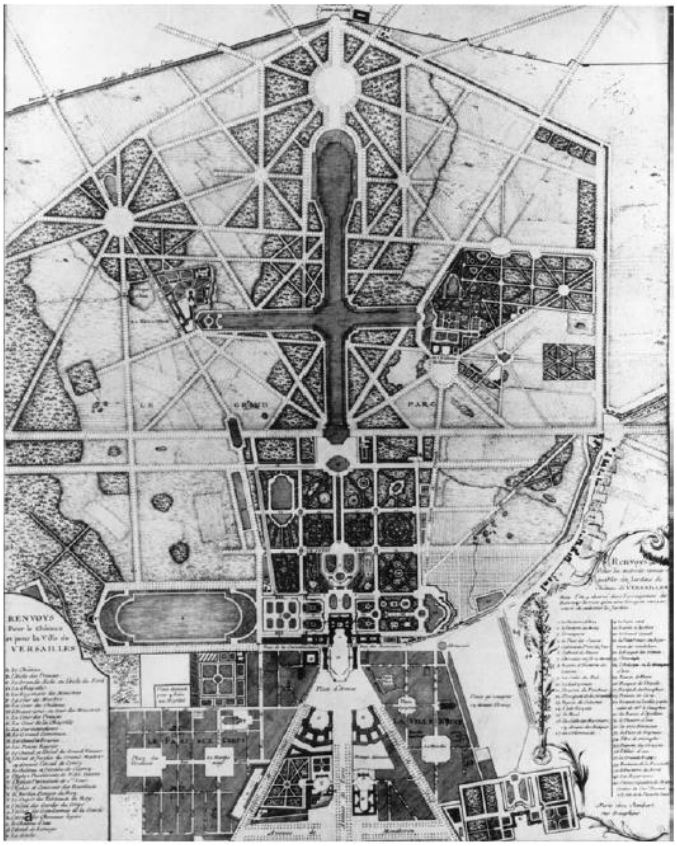

Figure 12.2-13

Monuments built specifically to signify state power often illustrate the power of the ruler, either by direct portrayals of force or by indirectly alluding to his or her strength. Monuments made in praise of peace, for example, often tacitly attribute that lack of political strife to military achievements, such as the Ara Pacis constructed under Augustus (Figure 5.1-24) to honor his successful campaigns in Hispania and Gaul.

Figure 5.1-24

In the broad view of history, what is striking is how consistent these monumental strategies have remained over many thousands of years. For example, modern and contemporary monuments often explicitly reuse the forms of ancient monuments. The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a mania for obelisks, fountains, victory columns, mausoleums and triumphal arches, which could commemorate individual lives while also promoting nationalistic agendas. Even when new or innovative forms are employed in the construction of monuments, this combination of claims to power and solemn remembrance often remains; consider the glittering skyscrapers that tower over the National September 11 Memorial at the World Trade Center site in New York City.

The history of the monument runs parallel to the history of civilization. As early societies began to organize into more complex formations, and as they began to develop their interactions with other groups, monuments became vital sites of shared meaning. They were crucial vectors of identity, acting as repositories of collective memory and narrators of social values. Artistic and architectural monuments also served as enduring proof of the power of the state, using immense scale and legible narrative ornament to attest to the might of the ruler. The intended impression for both native and foreign subjects was that a leader who could command such impressive constructions was worthy of fear and respect. In ancient Mesopotamia, for example, the continuous conflict between kingdoms meant that monuments had multiple functions: they spoke to the strength of a given civilization, they made a claim for the potency of its king, and they provided evidence to citizens of their empire's military victories. These monuments adorned highly organized and fancy cities. King Nebuchadnezzar II (r. 604-562 BCE) ascended the throne when the city of Babylon had been in existence for nearly two millennia. Seeking to return Babylon to its former glory, he undertook a vast building campaign that included renovating infrastructure, rehabilitating extant buildings, and constructing new monumental structures. He restored the city's celebrated existing monuments, like the Hanging Gardens of Babylon and the ziggurat, which appears in the Old Testament as the Tower of Babel. He also repaired and fortified eleven miles of the city wall and commissioned eight elaborate double gates to mark its entrances. The most monumental of these gates was the Ishtar Gate (Figure 4.1-5), dedicated to the goddess of love and war. The gate was approached via a long path called the Processional Way. During spring celebrations of the New Year, the king, accompanied by courtiers and priests, would parade through the city, down the Processional Way, and through the gate. Statues of the gods and goddesses, dressed in ritual attire and pulled on richly embellished chariots surrounded them. The associations established by this spectacular display were clear: spring, power, etc., serving to legitimate the reign of the king and display his divine authority.

Figure 4.1-5

The Ishtar Gate shares with other Mesopotamian monuments a problem of materiality. While neighboring civilizations—like the Egyptians—had access to stone, and hence could construct their monuments from the durable, carvable material, the Mesopotamian civilizations found creative methods of stabilizing and decorating the baked mud brick that was their staple building material. Here, the gate's remarkable ornament, consisting of polychromatic glazing on the surface of the bricks, both reinforced the structure and heightened its the processional and ritual character. The gate itself was adorned with alternating courses of bulls and dragons, representing the gods Adad and Marduk, while the Processional Way was flanked by a phalanx of striding lions, symbolizing both Ishtar and the king himself. The bricks that comprise the figures of the animals are remarkable, each separately sculpted in low relief before glazing and firing. Between this careful modeling and the application of vibrant color, the tiles are given extraordinary visual depth. The deep, brilliant blue of the background, made from mixing copper into pigment, accentuates the ochres and greens of the geometric patterns and the naturalistic tones of the animals. Along the Processional Way, each striding lion is very nearly life-size, its mouth open in a silent roar. The implied ferocity of this roar is made vivid by the detailed inscribing lines on each tile, depicting the lion mid-snarl. Many civilizations used lions as royal-religious images—consider, for example, the low-relief carving of a lion biting the hindquarters of a startled bull on the Apadana staircase

at Persepolis—but here, there is a striking difference. These lions do not just adorn the gate; rather, they march in a regimented formation, implicitly in the service of the king. The wild terror of nature is here brought under an almost military discipline, a combination of violence and order that forms a fearsome spectacle of state control.

Though monuments are not constructed solely in urban centers, there is a significant correspondence between dense urbanization and the occurrence of monuments, particularly in capital cities. As in the Mesopotamian context, early cities in the Valley of Mexico gained in importance as civilizations advanced. For example, the Mexican city-state of Tenochtitlán contained an impressive mix of monuments defining a clear capital city. Founded in 1325, Tenochtitlán acted as the beating heart of the expanding Aztec empire for two centuries; at its peak, it was the largest city in the Americas. Palaces, temples, markets, and ritual spaces, along with densely packed residential blocks, were organized into a symmetrical and hierarchical plan that gave shape to the social systems in the city. The most monumental architectural site in the city was the Templo Mayor (Figure 10.3-7), dedicated to Huitzilopochtli, the god of sun and war, and Tlaloc, the god of rain. Like a Mesopotamian ziggurat, it establishes an axis mundi; in this case, the temple is built on the spot where Huitzilopochtli gave the Mexica people a sign that they had reached the promise land. The dramatic stepped levels of the main pyramid rise towards the sky, culminating in two separate shrines at the top dedicated to the two gods. As the empire grew in territory and wealth, the temple was expanded at least six times and grew more impressive at each stage. Its stone ornament depicted frogs, serpents, jaguars, and eagles—all central to the founding myths of the Aztec people.

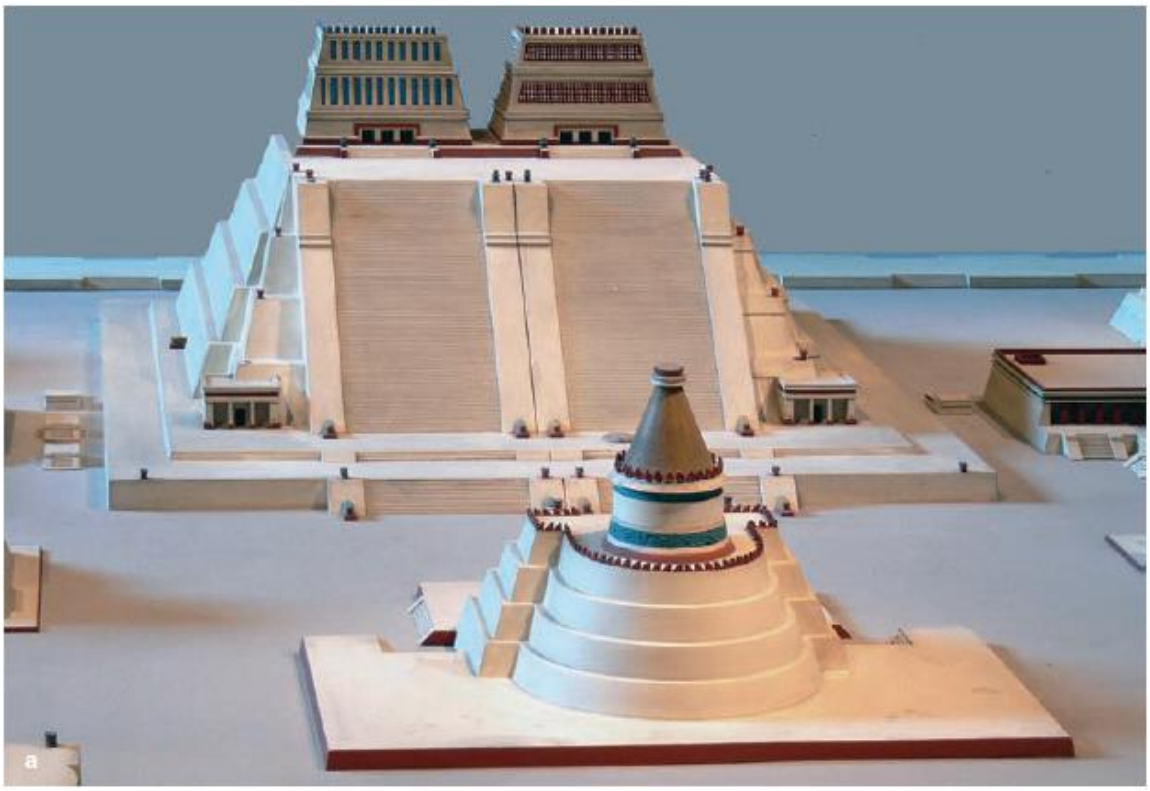

Figure 10.3-7

Surrounding the Templo Mayor were smaller sculptural monuments that paid homage to the gods and goddesses that dominated the Mexican cosmos. One such object, a stone disk, portrays the goddess Coyolxauhqui with her arms and legs cut off by Huitzilopochtli. This mythological event was an important folkloric basis for the Aztec practice of warrior ritual dismemberment. Another work of sculpture, a massive round stone nearly twelve feet in diameter, illustrates the Mexican cosmogony. At the center appears the face of the solar deity; alongside his outstretched hands clutch two human hearts, and his tongue is depicted as a ritual stone knife. Both the artistic and the architectural monuments of Tenochtitlán reinforced the centrality of acts of human sacrifice, which the Aztecs believed was the payment of a debt to the gods. For a warrior, self-sacrifice was a supreme act of courage and dedication; for neighboring civilizations, public executions acted as warnings against invasion.

During the Spanish invasion in 1519, Hernán Cortés seized the emperor Moctezuma II and ordered that a Catholic cross be placed atop the Templo Mayor, thus subjugating not only the ruler of the Aztec empire, but also its monuments. After the fall of Tenochtitlán two years later, the Spanish dismantled the Templo Mayor and used its stones to construct the vast cathedral that remains nearby today (Figure 13.3-1). (This strategy of demolishing monuments and reusing their materials is a common method of proclaiming the dominance of a new order.) The center of the new colonial center was erected over the foundations of the temple and remained in place until 1978, when a major excavation was undertaken to unearth the pre-conquest city. Today, the demolition and removal of the colonial buildings on the site have revealed the foundations of the Templo Mayor, as well as some of its sculptural ornament.

Figure 13.3-1

The monuments created by twentieth-century totalitarian governments performed a seemingly contradictory function, communicating both populism and authoritarianism. For Benito Mussolini, the success of fascism as an ideology depended on the state's ability to propagate this dual message in all forms of media, including architecture. To accomplish this two-part task, Mussolini favored a sort of erratic eclecticism in his building program rather than the use of a single, consistent style. From the strikingly modernist Casa del Fascio in Como by Giuseppe Terragni (Figure 18.3-5), a glass box whose complex geometry created equally complex perceptual effects, to Armando Brasini's kitschy triumphal arch of the Italian Pavilion at the 1925 International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts in Paris; Mussolini drew on both ancient and modern images. His political and aesthetic aim was to unite the grandeur of the Roman Empire with the efficiency of modern technologies and techniques. This intention was most clearly on view in the designs for the World Exposition for Rome (EUR), planned to occur in 1942.

Figure 18.3-5

While the urbanism of the city itself was meant to be monumental—a "New Rome" that would rival the accomplishments of the emperors—it was also adorned with grandiose architectural monuments. Over time, the dominant style of the site changed from international modernism to a sort of stripped-down classicism, with domes, arches, and grand axes signaling Italy's special connection to classical antiquity. Therefore, surfaces are clad in the traditionally Roman materials of travertine, marble, and tuff, and both an obelisk and a great arch were planned. Despite the glass-and-steel box that forms its core, the most apparent referent of Adalberto Libera's Congress Hall [insert Figure 18.3-9] is the Pantheon; its vaulted roof appears almost as if the Pantheon's dome had been turned inside out. Similarly, the Palace of Italian Civilization's (Figure 18.3-8) repeating rows of arches have an almost spectral quality, evoking the façade of the

Colosseum while ignoring arcuated structural logic. Overall, at the EUR, steel-framed buildings are costumed in imperial garb to rather autocratic effect. These monuments were intended to embody and project Mussolini's absolute authority, which he saw as anchored in Italian traditions that were, by then, thousands of years old. Halted by World War II, the site has now been repurposed as a residential and business district. Like many others worldwide, the continued existence of these monuments has led to a heated and ongoing debate about how societies should "remember" their often contested histories.

Figure 18.3-8

For Further Reading

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