The Making and Maintenance of Cenotaphs

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Funerary architecture and memorials have historically taken a variety of structural and aesthetic forms. In the 19th century, for example, Western mausolea embraced aesthetic forms relating to the austerity and simplicity of Classicism, the intricacy and visual density of the Gothic style, and symbols associated with Egyptology in order to bring a sense of apotheosis to the memory of the departed. Significantly these design styles, and their plethora of reworked forms, were not only exclusively used in the West, but were due to the engagement of colonial activities by European nations propagated in overseas territories in places such as Asia, Africa and Australasia. Accordingly cemeteries in far-flung colonies became filled with often impressively sized funerary structures similar to those found in the Motherlands, and memorials too were frequently constructed within urban spaces of towns and cities so as to commemorate prominent politicians, military leaders and the elites. In some instances, like in the case of the Victoria Memorial (1906-21) in Calcutta, India, a grandiose edifice was erected in such a manner so as to purposefully marry the Baroque European architectural tradition with indigenous design, in this instance the Taj Mahal, as a means to suitably commemorate the life of Queen Victoria, the Empress of India. However of all memorials constructed to augment collective sentiment arguably the most significant in the British and British imperial context was the Cenotaph ('empty tomb') in Whitehall, London, a simply-designed structure erected to remember the monumental loss of life generated by World War One.

Designed in 1919 by renowned architect Edwin Lutyens and erected from Portland Stone, a material known for its aesthetic properties and durability (Morley, 2002: 634-5), the Cenotaph was aesthetically composed as an excursion into mathematical invention so that the memorial could be distinguished from its surroundings in both abstract and stylistic terms. Although superficially giving the impression of symmetry the Cenotaph was in fact designed in a geodesic manner (Hussey, 1984) with entasis, a series of subtle curves branching out from axial points positioned about 900 feet below the surface of the ground and 900 feet above the ground (Lutyens, 1942), the composition therefore forming a globe that in conceptual terms united the underworld, and the ground with heaven above. In other words, its architectural manner attempted to tie those killed by war, and those that memorialise them, with eternal peace and glory.

Figure 1. Edwin Lutyens, Britain's unofficial 'Architect Laureate'. Lutyens' status at the top of the British architectural profession in the early-twentieth century meant his influence was frequently felt throughout the British Empire.

As original as Lutyens' Cenotaph was, and as timeless and non-denominational as its character can be said to be, a deliberate ploy to not offend the non-Christian nations of the Empire who contributed to the British military campaigns between 1914 and 1918, the true value of the Cenotaph was that it offered a physical and emotional setting at which to grieve the nation could grieve. As James Stevens Curl commented (1993: 316), the need for a national memorial was profound given that the country had lost so much. Importantly though, given Britain's call upon its dominions to supply men to fight in the conflict of 1914-8, the Cenotaph in London was not just a national memorial but instead it acted as an imperial memorial to an imperial war. It was, in Douglas Haig's words, a "symbol of an Empire's unity" (The Times, 10th November 1920). Significantly as well, through the replicating of Lutyens' monument in hitherto colonies such as Hong Kong, New Zealand, and Canada the memorial structure offered a means to also remember those lost within the Empire by

it purposefully being a focal point of remembrance within such dominions. Not to be ignored too, and of often overlooked worth, the mimicking of Lutyens' Cenotaph (see figure 2) throughout the empire could not only allow war memorialisation to become a local and imperial convention but it thus allowed for the tying together of communities at opposite sides of the world, and the opportunity to respect and honour this tie albeit through the remembrance of those who died in battle at ceremonies at 11 am on November 11th each year, i.e. the time war officially ended in 1918. Yet as time unfolds how does Edkins' (2003: 57) 'trauma time', i.e. the encircling myth and sacrifice evident in time, change with regards to memorials like the Cenotaph? Furthermore in light of the process of decolonization what standing shall the Cenotaph have in the contest for collective memory between post-colonial governments and their populations at large? How will transitions to the social and political process therefore affect local collective memory and the place of memorials?

Figure 2. From left to right: The Cenotaph in Whitehall, London; Auckland, New Zealand; Hong Kong; London, Canada.

Cenotaphs and Collective Memory

Winter and Sivan (1999: 39) in War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century claimed that a permanent feature of remembrance is that it is an "ongoing process of contestation", in part due to the capricious nature of trauma, and the evolution of social and political institutions. In many respects too memorials are also contested grounds for they are the corporeal and figurative sites where tangible and

intangible heritage can collide. In Hong Kong, the focus of the paper, this scenario between tangible and intangible heritage has been complicated since 1997 by the 'hand-over', and the consequent unleashing of dynamics regarding decolonialisation, i.e. the jumping from colonial to Chinese government, the push for democratization, and society's disidentification with many aspects of its past. In this milieu many questions

have been raised about local cultural heritage and the value of particular old buildings and structures in Hong Kong, and how to manage living heritage preservation for edifices firmly grounded in colonial symbolism. So, to be succinct, in light of Hong Kong society's wider transitions a reconceptualising of its heritage has emerged. In turn this has allowed for the sometimes subtle renegotiation of the city's past and the production of new trajectories about how the past is to be appreciated. Becoming embroiled into this drama is the Cenotaph in Status Square.

In appreciating Cenotaphs like the one erected in 1923 in Hong Kong, and their meaning, a few fundamental points must be grasped. To begin with Cenotaphs were instituted in London, other British cities and the settlements of the Empire so as to afford an opportunity to formally perpetuate memory of those who had laid down their lives, and to grant a place not to commemorate the end of war but to rather mourn those lost. Of especial significance to this memorialisation process is the time of 11 am and the date of 11th of November where bereavement in the form of a formal ceremony can be focused. Of note as well it must be remembered that those who died in World War One, just as in World War Two, were generally young, had died on foreign soil, had not had the chance to fulfil the promise of their lives, and many had no known grave. Moriarty (1997) has accordingly noted how the production of cenotaphs thus acted as a substitute for many families to bury their dead, and in such a context the ceremonies undertaken each year on 11th November granted, as much as anything else, these families a chance to 'lay to rest' those killed yet never found upon the battlefield through their act of laying flowers at the memorial's base.

As paramount as the value of memorials can be to mourning those lost, as previously commented upon, in Hong Kong the Cenotaph, the principal British war memorial, has an especially noteworthy yet overlooked significance, as shall now be explained. To begin with the Cenotaph not only has acted as a colonial reference point for mourning those killed by World War One and Two, it moreover has additional local value due to it being the site where the British engaged in a ceremony following their return to Hong Kong after Liberation Day on the 26th August 1945. Landing at the nearby Queen's Pier the British immediately undertook a formal service at the monument to signify their return to administer the colony from the Japanese (figure 3), and to pay homage to all those who had died in Hong Kong during the occupation. Consequently, every August 26th prior to the handover, not only was the
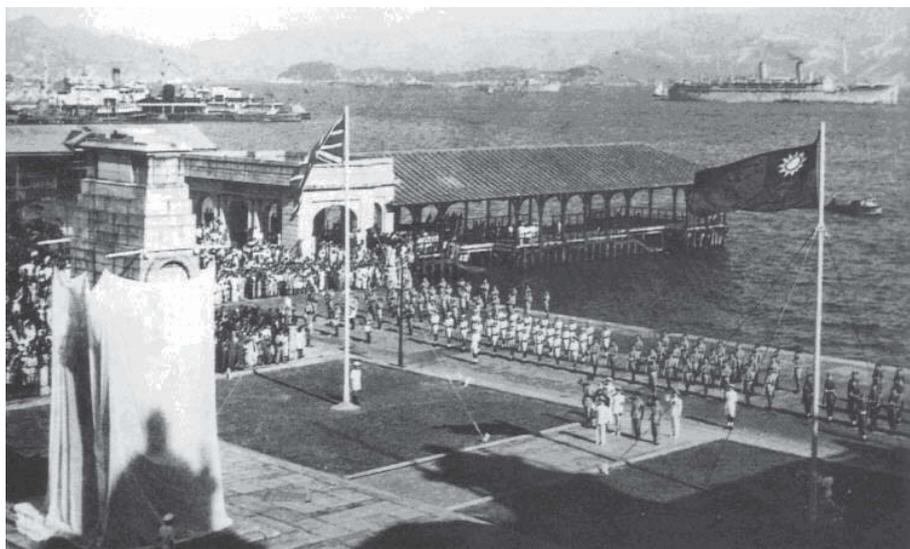

Figure 3. A ceremony at the Cenotaph in Hong Kong in August 1945 following the end of World War Two and the return of the British to administer the colony.

day made into a public holiday (Liberation Day) but a ceremony of a similar kind to that initially undertaken in 1945 at the Cenotaph was enacted within which two minutes silence would be held, a commemorative form that establishes kinship through allowing private and public recollection to unite. Notably, Liberation Day was stopped in 1997 following the hand-over, and the once official commemorative service at the Cenotaph was replaced by an informal service given by local and British servicemen.

In generic terms the act of memorialising has been expertly dealt with by numerous authors and commonly reference is made to the concept of memorials and their shelf life, i.e. the bounded period of time in which their meaning for ceremonial or reflective sites of memory is upheld (Winter, 2006: 140). As shown beforehand, in Hong Kong this shelf life has in recent years been affected by political transitions and the rerouting of the heritage appreciation path following on from the 'hand-over'. In such a circumstance the dialectical relationship between the past and society's cultural heritage capital has become interrogated by a new set of factors, and the meaning of cultural memory altered, a result not so much by the implementation of political rulings but the redefinition of the forces within civil society as it views itself not as part of a colonial structure but now a decolonial framework. These contemporary civic energies have already become manifest in sentiments centring on political regressionism after 1997, perceived obstacles to universal suffrage, the lack of participatory policy, and that much of what is old is under threat of removal, as the removal of the Queen's Pier in 2006 confirmed. But the Cenotaph has an assured status at least for the present time as it is an unusual monument, a place where people find closure from their grief, a place where national identity is grounded, a site where the narrative of local history is maintained. However, this assurity should be seen to be dwindling with each passing year. No longer are

services at its base official, fewer participants each year take part in the 26th August and November 11th memorials, and the younger generation are largely unaware of the significance of the Cenotaph to the local historical context. While its presence therefore might be viewed with some degree of sanctity by many in Hong Kong society at present, in time as the older generation who most strongly connect with the Cenotaph pass away, and society continues on its ever-onward path how can Hong Kong continue its narrative through the Cenotaph? The answer, I believe, is tenuous. Whether one takes the view of Winter (1995) in that remembering and memorials are part of a subjective mourning process, or alternatively adheres to the perspective of the likes of Mosse (1990) who state that the memorial process stems from nationalist war myths, concepts of the conqueror and the conquered, and the creation of national ceremonial spaces, it is difficult to decipher how exactly Hong Kong in the future shall appreciate its Cenotaph. If it is subjective as Winter suggests then the education of the young in Hong Kong of their local history is vital should the value of the Cenotaph be recognized in future years.

In summing up, it is significant to note that many elements determine a person and a society's process of commemoration, and the notion of nationhood in memorialisation too. As Edkins (2003: 94) has suggested when it comes to memorialising and commemoration personal and social existence is inseparable, but in the case of Hong Kong the changing political and civic nature of society as shown in this work presents new dynamics and new contests within living cultural heritage, and how memorials of a time prior to 1997 can be viewed. With the Cenotaph being highlighted as a hub of Hong Kong's past and with its purpose to assist in helping people grieve, and ultimately thus to forget about past conflicts, it would be ironic if indeed the Cenotaph itself became victim to disregard.

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