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Erasing History?: Monuments as Archaeological Artefacts

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In 2019, as an archaeology master's student, I wrote a thesis about contextualising relocated monuments. I travelled around Eastern Europe looking at post-Soviet statue parks and the way in which they had presented the context of their relocated statues. One of the strongest arguments for keeping statues, or placing them in museums, had been their educational value. The aim of my analysis was therefore to assess the effectiveness of the statue parks in Hungary, Lithuania and Russia in achieving this objective. I used a framework created by educator Melanie L. Buffington, in which she identified three different types of context – the history of the person or event being depicted, the time in which the object was created and the present time in which the work is being viewed and understood.[1] To this I added physical context – where the object was placed and its relationship to its surroundings.

My conclusion was that none of the parks had really been effective in presenting these different contexts.[2] Park of Arts in Moscow presented almost no context at all. Grutas Park in Lithuania was heavy on biographical detail but little social information, although a few statues did make good use of photographs to present the physical context, and Memento Park in Hungary had some good information available in their guidebook and through a guided tour, but these cost extra and therefore weren't taken advantage of by the majority of visitors. Without information about how individuals reacted to the statues, and behaved around them, there was little sense of how the statues were used to spread ideology or impact everyday life. To me, this information was of more educative value than just knowing who or what event the statue commemorated.

With this in mind, when 2020 saw public statues once again become a focus for protest and debate across the world, and once again seeing arguments such as, 'tearing them down would be erasing our history' or 'we don't need a statue to teach the history of colonialism' from their respective sides of the debate, it occurred to me that many people are misunderstanding the meaning of public monuments. By thinking of statues as archaeology, rather than history or historiography, although partly semantics, it changes the view of them from being about the individual being memorialised and instead focuses on what they tell us of the societies that created the statues, erected them, and perhaps altered, removed, or replaced them. Archaeology is the study of human activity, beliefs and values through material culture. Material culture being the physical objects that were created and used by humans. This includes us.

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The fact is that statues in their current form teach us very little about history. Most just have a small plaque perhaps mentioning the name of the person, perhaps their job or major achievement, who raised funds for it, or the year it was installed. Often it just comes down to a couple of words, like on the Cook statue in Sydney's Hyde Park, saying 'Captain Cook: Discovered This Territory'. Not only is this not teaching us history. It is actually itself erasing history because it is not correct, and only presents a very Europeanised version of the story. But having these memorials, and only these kinds of memorials, normalises this version of history, and perpetuates a founding myth and excluding other versions.

By seeing these statues as archaeology, we can then come to see them as a story about us, whom we celebrated, what histories we told, what values we upheld and who held power in our societies. At present, our memorial landscapes are largely celebrating white men. For example, I performed an exercise in Melbourne where I walked the two-kilometre stretch of St Kilda Road and Swanston Street from King's Domain to the State Library – one of the major roads through the city of Melbourne. I looked at all the memorials to named individuals in that space. There are fourteen, thirteen of which are men. With the possible exception of St George, all of them are white. Thinking of these as the archaeological record of our society, is it reflective of who we are and whom we look up to? If people of the future were looking back at us and interpreting us through this record, what is it communicating about us, who was celebrated and who had power? Who is missing from this record? And is this what we want our record to say?

We often hear talk about context in the debates about statues. For example, they are reflective of their time – a kind of context. Or the suggestions to leave them where they are but add additional historical context. Or move them to a museum where they can be properly contextualised. Archaeologists know that removing an object from its location can change its meaning. Objects get their meaning from their use, surroundings and relationship to other objects and the landscape. So a statue's location can alter its meaning.

A statue of a Confederate soldier, created at the end of the Civil War and erected in a cemetery, has a different context and meaning to one that was erected on the steps of a capitol building at the height of the white supremacist movement in the 1920s. The first statue might be a genuine reflection of loss and sorrow. Whereas the latter is a message of intimidation and power. Similarly, a statue of Captain Cook at Botany Bay has some relevance, whereas one in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, a place he never visited, much less so. Or, along St Kilda Rd, the fact of there being twelve monuments to white males and only one female on a two-kilometre stretch of road tells us more about our society than does any single one of those monuments on its own.

We deal with archaeological artefacts in many different ways. They may be uncovered, recorded in place and covered over again. Or they may be left in place, uncovered, with some protection and interpretation. Or they may be recorded, removed and placed in a museum or research collection. A new museum may be created specifically for the objects. There are examples of all these approaches with regards to statues. The Maitland Brown Memorial in Fremantle has been left in place but has had additional information added.[3] A Jefferson Davis statue at the University of Texas was removed to the campus museum with detail about why it was created and why it was removed.[4] And then there are the statue parks in Hungary, Lithuania and Russia which were purpose-built to house their unwanted statues.

Whichever option is taken, recording the objects is the common theme throughout each archaeological treatment. The purpose of recording is to preserve the context. We already have the historical context through documents – both biographical details and in many cases other things like council records about the creation of the statue – who proposed, authorised and paid for it. What we need to record now is the physical context before the statues are removed and what if any alterations took place. This can be done by photography, laser scanning, mapping, photogrammetry and other techniques.

If the choice of what monuments get erected is a reflection of our society, then so is the choice of which ones get preserved, vandalised or torn down. This is another form of context which should also be recorded.

Multivocal oral histories are a good way to approach this to obtain various points of view. How did different people feel in the space around the statue? When and why did the statue become controversial? What changes have they gone through over time, for example through vandalism or protest? What groups were involved in the decision to retain or remove them?

Thinking of these objects as an archaeological record, rather than just historical objects, allows for a more nuanced discussion. If we see them as a current reflection of our social values, it feels like they are somewhat out of date, and that there is room to even up the score. A Captain Cook statue at Botany Bay, for example, might be appropriate in its context as a historical marker. But it could be accompanied by an art piece commemorating the victims of colonialism – those who died on convict transports, who faced rape and violence on arrival, to the Indigenous people who died from violence or disease and had their culture and way of life disrupted. This would give a fuller picture and change the way in which we think about this event. We should also put some time into recording the objects so that they can be studied and questioned in future and provide an insight into the archaeological record of those who created them. This would enable us to use these objects to their best educational advantage and encourage critical thinking about the way in which we present history, what versions get told and whose voices are valued. Public monuments are our archaeology and we should consider what record of our society we want to leave behind.

Endnotes

1. Melanie L. Buffington, 'Confronting Hate: Ideas for Art Educators to Address Confederate Monuments', *Art Education*, vol 72, no 1, 2019, pp14-20. https://doi.org/10.1080/00043125.2019.1534435

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3. Paul Daley, 'How do we settle the "statue wars"? Let's start by telling the truth about our past', *The Guardian*, 28 June 2018. Available from: https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/postcolonial-blog/2018/jun/29/how-do-we-settle-the-statue-wars-lets-start-by-telling-the-truth-about-our-past#comment-117594733.

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