# Modern **Monument** in the Context of **Modernity**

## ----- The expression of monumentality in present time

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*"Monumentality" comes from the Latin verb of "Monere", "to remind", but also "to warn", which means something, not only serves to preserve memory or knowledge of an individual or event, but also serves to warn or remind with regard to conduct or future event.*

*Can the expression for monumentality in present time be more that?*

## 1. Introduction

The SADD graduation studio is aimed at designing the environmental Council for United Nations (will be shorted as "UNEC" in the following text), a place where significant decision will be made due to planet problems. The plot is located on the north loan of existing UN headquarter, designed by Le Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer. The primary idea was to design relatively isolate and extreme monumentality buildings. Therefore, UNEC has a great symbolic and geographical significance, which was determined from the very beginning of my concept that, it, has to be to a monument, not just any other monument, but a modern monument in the context of modernity.

However, modernity and monumentality have always had a tense relationship[1], endless discussion has been a main subject of the controversy in the 20th century. Professor William J.R Curtis once made a remark on modern monumentality that architecture creates a world of its own. No matter how drastic modernization has transformed the world, in the end the need for monumental statements does not seem to disappear. However, others like Lewis Mumford holds completely opposite opinion. He believed that the very notion of a modern monument is a contradiction in terms; if it

[1] Christiane C. Collins and George R. Collins. 'Monumentality. A Critical Matter in Modern Architecture', in: Harvard Architectural Review 4, Cambridge, Mass, Spring 1984, pp. 14-35

is a monument, it cannot be modern, and if it is modern, it cannot be a monument[2].

After reading literatures regarding to this subject, my hypothesis is that modern monument could exist in various forms in the contemporary age. As for UNEC building, by integrating of its own context and circumstance, the monumentality can be expressed in three levels. The level of **visualization**, which transformed from abstract and symbolic elements by architect; and the level of its **meaning**, implied both urban sphere and the collective force – the people; finally, the level of **sustainability**, servers the concept as a whole.

## 2. The discussion of monumentality and its expression

As mentioned above, the quote of "the death of the monument", written by Mumford, has been proclaimed for many times. He argued that monuments have lost their aesthetic and social legitimacy… (and) is the polar opposite of modern architecture and progressive city[3]. We have to admit that compared to those elaborately carved and beautifully colored ancient buildings, architecture today, such as residential buildings or large shopping malls, no longer express the deep consideration for our civilization, but pale products under the pressure of massive industrial production.

However, like German art historian Alois Riegl has said, "intentional monument, as 'a human creation, erected for the specific purpose of keeping single human deeds or event (or a combination thereof) alive in the minds of future generations… In every present, they 'recall a specific moment or complex of moments from the past', and thus make 'a claim to immortality'"[4].

The definition of a monument is strongly connected to memory, and then leads to one's reflection to the present or future. In modern time, I believed it could be put in a wider context: monumentality contains the quality of arousing people's sympathetic feeling by its appearance and the massage it conveys.

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[2] Lewis Mumford, 'The Death of the Monument"

[3] Andrew Butterfield, Monuments and Memories - What history can teach the architects at Ground Zero. From 'The New Republic'.

[4] Quote from 'Monumentality', Architecture Position, pp. 166

## 2.1 Visualization

*Monuments are human landmarks, which men have created as symbols for their ideals, for their aims, and for their actions.*[5]

Just as Sigfried Giedion has written in his 'Nine points on Monumentality', the devaluation of monumentality is the result of neglecting the sprit of collective feeling of modern times[6]. James Stirling tried to make the connection by using abstract and representational vocabularies in a single building. As he described in the article 'The Monumentally Informal",

> *'Abstract' being the style related to the modern movement and the language derived from cubism, constructivism, De Stijl and all the isms of the new architecture. 'Representational', being related to tradition, the vernacular, history, recognition of the familiar and generally the more timeless concerns of the architectural heritage.*

The symbolic elements for classicism have been transformed to readable architectural language in his design for Neue Staatsgalerie Museum (see figure 1). For example, the open rotunda is a free interpretation of Karl Friedrich Schinkel's Altes Musum and the U-shape arrangement dedicates to the classical museum typology (see figure 2). Architect intentionally arranged all these visualized symbols and signs to create an informal monumentality. Monumentalism has nothing to do with size or style, but entirely to do with presence[7].

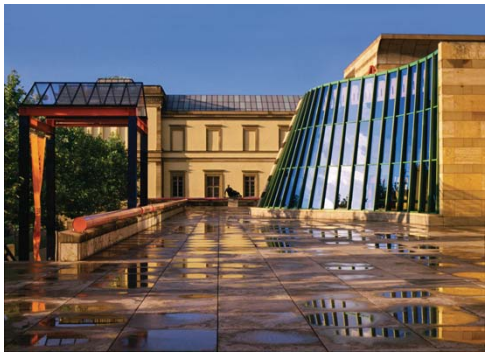


figure 1: for Neue Staatsgalerie Museum

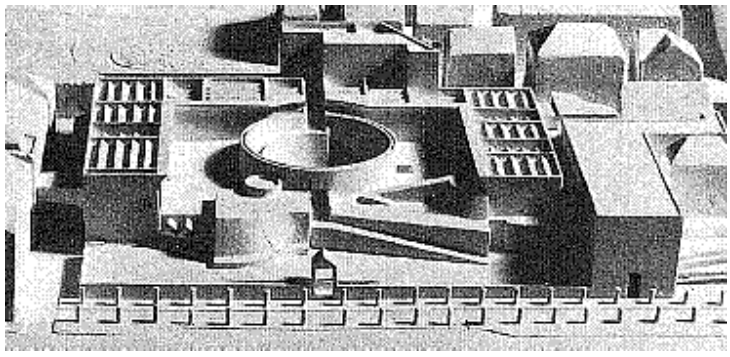


figure 2: The U shape of arrangement and the open rotunda

Similarly, the power of visualization can be greatly exerted in UNEC building from symbolical, geographical and characteristic

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5 J. L. Sert, F. Léger, S. Giedion, Nine Points on Monumentality,1943 Published in Harvard Architecture Review

6 J. L. Sert, F. Léger, S. Giedion, Nine Points on Monumentality,1943 Published in Harvard Architecture Review

7 James Stirling, the Monumentally Informal, from 'architectural position', pp. 207

perspectives. **Water** has been introduced into the design as a primary element not only because it provides visual connection between the city and the East River but also it symbolizes for calm and peace. All crucial functions such us council chamber and auditoriums are placed below water surface (use water as the roof) for security consideration. On the other hand, office area is floating above the water because it requires better view and natural lighting. (see figure 3)

Personally, I believe that the abstraction from nature is an appropriate way to accomplish the monumentality in immortality. After all, nothing is more eternal than the works of God.

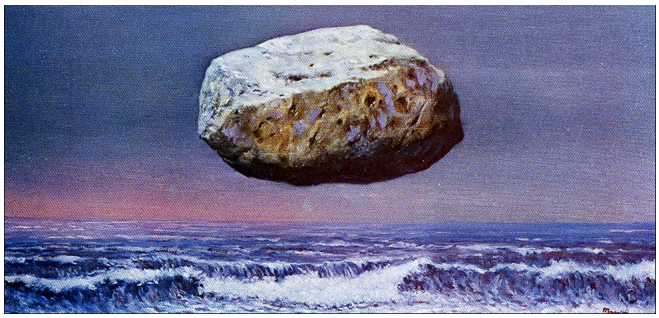


figure 3: visual image for UNEC

## 2.2 Meaning

*Monuments are the expression of man's highest cultural needs... The most vital monuments are those which express the feeling and thing of this collective force – the people.*

Visualization is merely half way to monumentality. Without deep meaningful expression, architecture is just an empty body without soul.

Architects hold different opinions towards this "meaningful expression". For Louis Kahn, the purity of building structure seems to be the dialogical theme running throughout his ideal for modernization and monumentality. He believed that monumentality in architecture might be defined as a spiritual quality inherent in a structure that conveys the feeling, in its eternity, that it cannot be added to or changed. Oscar Niemeyer, the designer of UN Secretariat, used the same expression to achieve monumentality. The Secretariat had provided a monumental symbol for the UN and showed the ideal and innovation of building technology in the mid-20th Century[8]. Ironically, after 50 years the building was renovated for its over

[8] website source, http://www.docomomo-us.org/register/fiche/united_nations_secretariat

lighting and heat leaking problems. High tech and modern constructional buildings can reflect the development of civilization, but it cannot reflect the demand of the people. I consider them as aggressive architecture, which should not be the leading quality for modern monument.

Brazil female architect Lina Bo Bardi explained to us the meaning of modern monumentality with her masterpiece, the São Paulo Museum of Art. In this building, monumentality is not intentionally designed but co-exists with the collectivity of public activities such as folk art and concerts, and construction only served for the ideal of creating monumental simplicity (see figure 4). The openness of space provides publicity and monumentality with its ability to HOLD LIFE (see figure 5), which I believe is the authentic meaning for monumentality. As in Nine Points on Monumentality puts it, monuments are the expression of man's highest cultural needs. They have to satisfy the eternal demand of the people for translation of their collective force into symbols. The most vital monuments are those which express the feeling and thinking of this collective force - the people[9].




figure 4: As construction only serves to the concept



figure 5: The open space has the ability to hold life

For UNEC design, the meaning should also relate to people, local people and people who use or visit it. After group analysis on the context of UN plot, we found that the original idea for the north lawn was to keep it vacant as a public "park". However, after 911 events the place was closed for security reasons. Water, again, can help to preserve the original idea of "park" and to ensure the security issue by separating the plot into public and private zones, without fence or artificial forces.

[9] J. L. Sert, F. Léger, S. Giedion, Nine Points on Monumentality,1943 Published in Harvard Architecture Review

The meaning of UNEC building conveyed to the user is conflict and mixed, just like the impression of New York. Below-water level lays council chamber, auditoriums, library and restaurant, which opens to the public. The expression is welcoming and excitement. On the water level, the expression is the opposite. Surrounded by large water surface and greens, people feel quite, peaceful and clam. Above-water level is relatively isolated working area with city and river view. On the roof, placed the restaurant and cafe for UN staffs with private terrace.

## 2. Conclusion

Maybe it is time that modern monument enters into a phase, a phase that it does not have to be related to memory or past but more to the present or future people. With the expression of visualization, meaning and sustainability towards its own circumstance and context, public building could achieve monumentality in the context of modernity.