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**Editorial**

# Reimagining war and conflict memorials: towards participatory and living narratives

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In the contemporary discourse on heritage, war and conflict memorials emerge as a profoundly nuanced and multifaceted subject, prompting us to reconsider what we encompass within the definition of preservable history. Inspired by the deliberations of the AMPS 2023 conference 'Prague – Heritages Past and Present – Built and Social', the contributors to this special issue endeavour to cast a spotlight on the intricate narratives and dynamics surrounding memorials dedicated to wars and conflicts. These memorials, situated within cities, communities and landscapes, do not merely stand as static entities, they are the embodiments of collective memory and cultural identity, narrating stories of resilience, loss and hope. However, the journey towards their preservation, interpretation and integration into public consciousness is fraught with complexities. The challenge of maintaining these sites in the face of urban development pressures, globalising influences and shifting societal values is significant. Furthermore, the advent of digital technology presents a double-edged sword, offering new avenues for engagement and education, while potentially distancing or alienating those rooted in traditional commemorative practices.

In this special issue, we aim to explore these themes, seeking to understand how war and conflict memorials can continue to resonate in a rapidly evolving world, bridging the gap between past and present, memory and progress. The selected articles offer innovative perspectives on how memorials, often rooted in the deepest and most painful parts of our history, can transcend their traditional roles as static commemoratives to become dynamic spaces for engagement, dialogue and education. The

transformation of memorials from mere markers of the past to active agents in shaping contemporary social practices and perspectives forms the core of our discussion.

Through a multidisciplinary lens, the contributors to this issue explore the changing narratives surrounding memorials dedicated to war and conflict, revealing the complex interplay between architecture, memory and society. A notable highlight is the exploration of the participatory approach to heritage management, as demonstrated in the analysis of the Prora project. Florian Rietmann<sup>1</sup> not only underscores the potential of community involvement in reinterpreting difficult heritage but also candidly addresses the challenges that accompany such participatory processes. The case of Prora serves as a compelling example of how memorials can facilitate a collective reckoning with our past, fostering a space for public discourse that is both inclusive and reflective.

Equally compelling is the examination of Tyneham's heritage, which unravels the intricate relationship between historical narratives, contemporary social values and identity. Milena Metalkova-Markova<sup>2</sup> emphasises the role of memorials not just in preserving history but also in actively participating in the construction of community identity, serving as a mirror reflecting the evolving values and concerns of society.

In the aftermath of calamity, the process of urban reconstruction encompasses far more than the mere rebuilding of infrastructure; it involves the mending of community spirit and the reweaving of the social fabric torn asunder by disaster. Marie Nevejan and Gisèle Gantois<sup>3</sup> delve into the compelling case of Ypres, a city whose revival post-destruction serves as a poignant testament to the resilience of human societies and the indomitable spirit of collective memory. Their article meticulously examines how Ypres masterfully integrated the scars of war into its urban identity, transforming these reminders of past conflicts into keystones of communal recovery and unity. It brings to light the intricate balance achieved between preserving spaces dedicated to the memory and fostering environments conducive to the vibrancy of everyday life – a balance crucial for the healing and forward movement of the city's inhabitants. Through the lens of Ypres, Nevejan and Gantois eloquently articulate the critical role that urban planning and architectural thought play in nurturing a community's journey towards recovery, highlighting the importance of memory spaces, not as mere monuments to the past but as integral components of living, breathing urban landscapes that honour history while simultaneously paving the way for a hopeful future.

The conversation around how societies commemorate their darkest histories is complex, nuanced and deeply indicative of their journey towards acknowledging and reconciling with the past. In her contribution, Carina Siegl<sup>4</sup> casts a spotlight on Austria's distinctive method of Holocaust remembrance through the *Stolpersteine* project, a series of brass plaques embedded in the sidewalks in front of the homes of Holocaust victims. She invites readers to delve into the nuanced differences between memorial practices in Austria and examines the profound implications these have on a nation's identity. Her article advocates for a more profound inquiry into such commemorative endeavours, suggesting that they are not mere acts of remembrance but pivotal elements in Austria's ongoing engagement with its National Socialist history. Through the prism of the *Stolpersteine*, the article explores the broader questions of memory, identity and the responsibility of a society to its past. It underscores the importance of these tangible memorials not just in honouring those who suffered, but in prompting contemporary society to reflect on, understand and engage with the complexities of its history. This approach to memory work, the article posits, is crucial for any nation's moral and historical integrity, offering a pathway to a more conscientious and inclusive understanding of national identity.

The innovative methodologies for engaging with war memorials presented in this issue, particularly through performing traditions and community narratives, mark a significant departure from traditional commemorative practices. These approaches advocate for a more interactive engagement with memorials, suggesting that the renewal of narratives and the active participation of communities can imbue these sites with new meanings, making them relevant to present and future generations.

The articles in this special issue collectively argue for a reimagined approach to war and conflict memorials, one that embraces the complexities of representing difficult histories in ways that promote understanding, dialogue and reconciliation. This shift towards participatory and living narratives is not merely a reflection of changing societal perspectives on war and memory but a necessary evolution in how we commemorate, engage with and learn from our past.

As we present this special issue, we aim to contribute to the ongoing discourse on memorialisation, offering new insights and methodologies that challenge and expand our understanding of how

memorials can serve as sites of memory, education and societal engagement. In doing so, we hope to inspire further exploration of the dynamic potential of war and conflict memorials as spaces that not only commemorate but also educate, engage and heal.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rietmann, 'Project of dictarchy'.

<sup>2</sup> Metalkova-Markova, 'Tyneham'.

<sup>3</sup> Nevejan and Gantois, 'Ypres'.

<sup>4</sup> Siegl, 'Austria's Stolpersteine'.

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