

# National Identity and Commemorative Space: Connections to the Nation through Time and Site

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Historical monuments and memorials often mobilise national history to serve contemporary political ends through the people and events they memorialise. They can also be powerful agents of erasure or forgetting, as some histories are privileged over others. This article addresses how national identity works through and on public commemorative structures and how aspects of such structures and their landscapes might reflect back on to national identity. This includes the role that aesthetic forms and designed spaces play in the representation and performance of such identities through the use of space.

This paper makes three overlapping arguments about the relationship between national identity, commemoration and public space. The first is that spatial context shapes discursive meaning. Second, ways of understanding time in national commemorative places are used to connect individuals to the nation and to co-nationals in the past, present and future; even so, site histories can complicate these narratives. Third, official and vernacular uses of commemorative sites activate landscapes in ways that both reinforce and undermine each other. These arguments are underpinned by examples from Australian and British commemorative sites, with a focus on how they are employed by their users to define or promulgate national identity.

Historical monuments and memorials are long-standing features of public space. Evolving over many centuries, memorial construction flourished in the nineteenth century and such structures were used to both symbolise and consolidate official power through figurative, allegorical and abstract spatial elements. According to Michalski (1998, p 8), around the 1870s public monuments became ‘an artistic, political and social domain in [their] own right’, rather than solely a method of lauding individual achievement. The end of the First World War saw an intense flurry of memorial construction, as communities sought to come to terms with the individual impact and national scale of the conflict. Structures such as Edwin Lutyens’s Cenotaph (1920), in Whitehall, the heart of ‘official’ London, were emblematic of wartime loss and demonstrated the demand for a central national memorial. Although it was designed as a temporary structure for the first Remembrance Day in November 1919, it was so popular it was unveiled on the same day a year later, rebuilt in stone. An annual commemorative ceremony has been held there every 11 November since. This longevity demonstrates both the significance of the event and the aesthetic impact of the site at which it occurs.

Winter (2000; 2006) has identified the twentieth century as a period of particularly intense commemorative activity, a ‘memory boom’ that started with the First World War and was subsequently reinforced by Holocaust

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## REFLECTION

remembrances. Resulting from new ways of thinking about the role of history in contemporary society, this boom reflects the impact of ‘identity politics’ and the ‘recovery of voices that had been there all along’ (Winter, 2000, p 374). Similarly, Doss (2010, p 2) describes the United States of America today as being in the grip of ‘*memorial mania*: an obsession with issues of memory and history and an urgent desire to express and claim those issues in visibly public contexts’. Because this memory boom is linked to the major conflicts of the twentieth century, the historical narrative and the way in which it is remembered are often constructed in terms of the state. National identity is thus often implicit in many aspects of such memorials and the commemorations that animate them. In particular, it is interwoven through the common involvement of public bodies in the design, sponsorship, approval or funding of memorials.

Such memorial sites and landscapes are not politically neutral. Scholars have demonstrated the long history of elites creating ‘historically inflected urban landscapes as a way to bolster a particular political order’, and of various social groups, including counter-hegemonic ones, attempting to control the use of these places (Hoelscher and Alderman, 2004, p 350). The material representations of such structures often mobilise national history to serve contemporary political ends through the people and events they memorialise, although they can also be powerful agents of erasure or forgetting, because some histories are privileged over others (Johnson, 1994).

If public memorial sites and landscapes are important as locations that enable such processes, then commemoration is one way in which national identity is performed, activated or expressed. During commemorative moments, reminiscent of the long-standing religious practice of repetitive rituals, participants are reminded of their connection with the nation and its symbolic narratives. Commemoration activates landscape through practice, but landscape also enables and encourages forms and articulations of commemoration; in other words, they are co-constitutive. This approach to landscape aligns with recent phenomenological approaches that emphasise activity and practice as the ‘primary drivers for the landscapes that emerge’ (Abbott, 2011, p 25). In this article, I discuss some of the ways that national identity works through and on public commemorative structures and how aspects of such structures and their contextualising landscapes might reflect back onto national identity. This discussion includes how aesthetic forms and designed spaces are important for the representation and performance of such identities.

I outline three overlapping points about the connections amongst national identity, commemoration and public space. The first is that spatial context shapes discursive meaning. Commemorative sites are porous, inflected and influenced by their locations and spatial contexts, as the examples discussed below demonstrate. Second, ways of understanding time in national commemorative places are used to connect individuals to the nation and to other members of the nation in the past, present and future; even so, site histories complicate these narratives. Third, official and vernacular uses of commemorative sites activate landscapes in ways that can both reinforce and undermine each other. I conclude by discussing the implications of these discursive processes for the range of audiences with a stake in national commemorations; one such implication is that multiple uses of public commemorative sites render their meanings more

complicated and less stable. In making these arguments, I draw on examples from Australian and British memorial sites with different contexts and uses. The variety in these examples reinforces the arguments by showing that memorial structures cannot be adequately understood without considering their contexts, histories and uses over time.

### Spatial context and discursive meaning

Like other discretely designed sites, individual commemorative structures or precincts are contextualised by their surroundings. An example of the discursive impact of spatial context is London's Trafalgar Square. It is located in a densely woven landscape of imperial power that includes sites with long cultural, government and financial histories expressed in architectural and urban design (Driver and Gilbert, 1999). The square itself is a commemorative precinct that celebrates the reach and power of the British Empire through its many monuments. Among those represented are Admiral Nelson, who commanded the victorious Royal Navy at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805; General Havelock and General Napier, who were both involved in controlling South Asia in the nineteenth century; and First World War naval commanders Jellicoe and Beatty. The site is an example of 'symbolic accretion', a process by which new memorial elements both augment and draw on existing narratives of identity, 'burnishing the reputation of their cause via proximity, both actual and metaphorical, with an established memorial landscape' (Dwyer, 2004, p 420).

Since 1999, this apparently straightforward narrative of martial, masculine and imperial power has been complicated by the introduction of the Fourth Plinth scheme, which involves display of a series of commissioned temporary artworks for the empty plinth in the square's north-west corner (Sumartojo, 2012). Almost all the works selected comment on national identity, in part by virtue of the national commemorative context of the square. Yinka Shonibare's sculpture *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle*, which was on the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square from May 2010 to February 2012, was an example. The sculpture was a 1:30 replica of Admiral Nelson's ship, the HMS *Victory*, from which he commanded the Battle of Trafalgar. Its 37 sails were made of colourful and distinctive Dutch wax fabric, which Shonibare had used extensively in previous works (Figure 1).

This popular installation spoke directly to the way the national past represented in the site's spatial context can be used to frame contemporary national and urban identity. For example, one of the main themes in media reaction to Shonibare's artwork was how the sculpture reminded viewers that modern British multiculturalism has deep roots in a history of imperial expansion and conflict. The installation made direct reference to the square's main monument, Nelson's Column, and relied on its location to frame its social commentary. At the unveiling of the sculpture, Shonibare was explicit about the historical and site specificity of his artwork, emphasising the connection between it and the historical events represented in the square: 'I think Nelson would be proud to see that his battle has had a significant effect on the lives of so many people. This piece celebrates the legacy of Nelson' (*The Telegraph*, 2010). Although it was not explicitly a memorial, Shonibare's *Ship in a Bottle* specifically invoked the Battle of Trafalgar and used the site to link the national present with a version of the British past.



*Figure 1: Nelson's Ship in a Bottle (2010) by Yinka Shonibare, MBE, in Trafalgar Square. (Photo: David Brossard. Creative Commons license Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0.)*

The Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux, a small village near Amiens in northern France, is another example. It is one of around 900 cemeteries along the former Western Front that required enormous resources to construct. Morris (1997, p 415) details that, 10 years after the end of the war, '550,000 headstones had been shipped to France and Belgium; 63 miles of hedge had been planted; 539 acres of grass had been sown'. The memorial was dedicated in 1938 and designed by Edwin Lutyens, who was responsible for several other Great War cemeteries and memorials, including, as mentioned, the Cenotaph in Whitehall, London. The memorial joined an earlier cemetery at the site that was also designed by Lutyens and had been completed in 1930. The symbolism of Villers-Bretonneux is typical of cemeteries and memorials across the Western Front designed by the architects under the commission of the Imperial War Graves Commission. The formal layout of headstones in rows, the symmetry of the central tower and flanking wings, and elements such as the Cross of Sacrifice reflect Lutyens's monumental preferences. The almost overwhelming number of names inscribed on the memorial's enclosing walls forges an intimate link between visitors and the memorialised dead (Figure 2).

In his study of Germany, Brands (2001, p 223) dates the widespread use of landscape elements in commemorative sites from the end of the First World War, when 'landscape architecture and inexpensive gardens [became] appropriate for war cemeteries and memorial sites'. Similarly, the architects working for the Imperial War Graves Commission after the First World War used landscape settings to various effect; Lutyens, for example, conceptualised the 'perfect' cemetery as a 'sacred, religious space in the open air', a cathedral 'banded by trees' (Geurst, 2010, p 37). The gardens were also a vital part of the spatial effect. The Head of the Imperial War Graves Commission, Sir Frederic Kenyon, was instrumental in determining the design principles for British and imperial cemeteries, and he recommended that plants should reflect the military character of the sites. Profuse flowers, such as those grown in temporary cemeteries, 'were



*Figure 2: The Australian National Memorial, Villers-Bretonneux, France. (Photo: author's own.)*

less appropriate for the permanent cemeteries, since they threatened to subvert the symbolism of military solemnity, reverence and sacrifice' (Morris, 1997, p 421).

Immediately after the war, the Western Front countryside, terribly damaged by trench warfare and artillery attack, was a palpable reminder of the loss the war had brought. In fact, the agricultural land across the former Western Front still contains dangerous unexploded munitions, with hundreds unearthed and destroyed by specialists every year (Fletcher, 2013). This landscape underwent massive reconstruction after the war: villages were rebuilt and farmland cleared of bodies and materiel so it could be made productive again. In all, 3.3 million hectares of land were affected by the war, and rebuilding in some areas began even before hostilities had ended (Osborne, 2001, p 63; see also Clout, 1996).

Official ceremonies occur at the Australian National Memorial on Anzac Day (25 April) every year. Nevertheless, for visitors to the site at times other than officially scheduled commemorative events, it can appear inactive. It is a quiet cemetery and memorial, meticulously landscaped and maintained, but without the streams of visitors who go to other First World War sites, such as nearby Thiepval. Its location in an agricultural landscape, however, means regular and sustained activity occurs around it all the time. The surrounding fields change constantly throughout the year, altering the experience of the approach to the site and the view from its central tower (Figure 3).

The memorial's manicured grounds contrast with the variable and active agricultural landscape surrounding it, thereby constructing meaning for each other.<sup>1</sup> The machinery and people labouring in the farms help to frame the memorial as an exceptional intervention, a (literally) foreign site in a fertile and productive landscape. The memorial, in turn, highlights the profound physical disruption of the war and the large numbers of dead, as well as the ongoing dangerous legacy of bombs and artillery shells. Morris (1997, p 411) describes this in similar terms in her discussion of the early post-war years:



*Figure 3: View of the cemetery at Villers-Bretonneux from the Australian National Memorial's tower, showing the agricultural use of the surrounding landscape, including clouds of dust from farm machinery. (Photo: author's own.)*

Serene surfaces of lawn and flowerbed stood as uneasy interfaces between a sanitized landscape of national grief and the shattered bodies beneath, between the official and unofficial, the public and private.

For contemporary visitors, the impact of the Villers-Bretonneux site comprises its built elements, national symbolism and the visual and emotional effect of 11,000 names of the dead inscribed on the monument's walls. Like many other such sites in the Somme area, its effect is reinforced by the spatial context, particularly the juxtapositioning of a cemetery and memorial in a fertile, lively agricultural landscape.

At both Villers-Bretonneux and Trafalgar Square, the spatial context helps to extend the meaning of the commemorative sites, through juxtaposition and reinforcement of uses, narratives and symbolism. This resonates with Massey's (1995) argument that 'places do not have boundaries in the sense of divisions which frame simple enclosures' (p 29). Instead, places are defined by their connections to their surroundings, and also to other places and times. Both examples in this section can be thought of as porous, or susceptible to their spatial contexts, and as reliant on them for meaning and impact.

### **National time and site histories**

Another aspect of the relationship between public space, commemoration and national identity is the representation and flow of time. Closs Stephens (2013, p 17) reminds us that 'nations appear to have solidity because they give the impression of having a deep history', even though they are largely products of the modern era. Commemorative sites reinforce this impression through their representations of national pasts, which can invoke 'timeless' values such as heroism and self-sacrifice to emotionally link participants to former servicepeople, the grief-stricken who mourned their deaths and the countries or communities they served. Commemorative ceremonies at such sites also help create a sense of 'national time' that transcends quotidian life, using remembrance to link us to the past and

implying futurity through their apparent permanence. The sites of these events include major war memorials in capital cities, as well as smaller memorials at the crux of community ceremonies. In combatant countries, memorials were built on many different scales in the two decades following the First World War (Inglis, 1998). In Australia, they commonly employ a traditional aesthetic, sometimes with figurative elements or 'honour rolls' listing the names of local men (and, in rare instances, women) who died in the conflict.

Site-specific rituals reinforce these material elements. Such ceremonies are perceived as unchanging and therefore linked through time to past and future generations of co-nationals. Anzac Day dawn ceremonies, with common and repeated elements such as the recitation of specific texts, the use of musical motifs and the presence of serving military personnel, are an example. The early morning start, at five o'clock, can be both disorienting and uncomfortable for contemporary participants, marking it out as a small act of sacrifice, a minor echo of the Anzacs' sacrifice. The ceremonial timing is meant to replicate the dawn assault of the Anzacs at Gallipoli in 1915, linking participants to the very soldiers the day was established to memorialise. Here, quotidian time is transformed into sacred time, the religiosity of otherwise social spaces is emphasised and tourists or visitors become 'pilgrims'.

In this way, the Anzac Day dawn service can be understood as a moment 'frozen in time' that 'symbolises and memorialises struggle ... and encourages reflection upon the significance of the past as part of the present' (McCrone and McPherson, 2009, p 215). The ritual draws on the symbolism of the sites, including the elements that remind us of death and loss, and links contemporary commemorators to a specific moment in the past that the day memorialises, in this case 25 April 1915. This 'national ritual time' also links us to generations of co-nationals who we imagine have participated in the same ceremony. The participation of children and young people, and a recurring narrative of 'passing down' such ceremonies to younger generations, also imply a national future in which the same rituals will be performed. Thus, the national ritual of the Anzac Day dawn service relies in part on the commemorative spaces, like the memorial at Villers-Bretonneux, to link co-national participants across the years.

Sites can also have histories that are counter-hegemonic or transgressive in terms of the nation, however, and this can complicate their commemorative use and symbolism. Trafalgar Square in London is such a site, being a memorial precinct with monolithic representations of the national past, but with a history of protests that have called for radical change to the state, such as female suffrage or improved conditions for the poor and working classes (Sumartojo, 2013). Nelson's Column is a specific example. The friezes at its base show a tableau of four battles, and underneath the depiction of the Battle of Trafalgar is Nelson's famous command, 'England expects that every man will do his duty'. Landseer's sculpted lions look out sternly, the last sculptures installed as part of the initial design of the square. In these symbols, and the other martial statues in the square, is a strong message of imperial power and reach, a unified narrative typical of the mid-nineteenth century in both theme and form. However, the way the site is used is anything but heroic and monolithic. Tourists and visitors climb on the plinth, teenagers test their jumping and climbing abilities and people take photographs

of each other perched between the lions' paws. The way the site is used disrupts the national narrative and introduces messiness, ambivalence and indifference about the history that the site is meant to commemorate. At the same time, in these uses of a memorial, family histories are being created and recorded that are a longstanding part of the experience of the square. Here, national time and site history work with, through and against each other. Such diverse site histories hint at my final point about national identity and commemorative spaces: that different groups use and understand public space from a range of perspectives, and these differences help generate co-existing meanings.

### Official and vernacular versions of commemorative space

If commemorative structures and rituals contribute to how national identity is articulated, a related question is: who generates the narratives? Recent scholarship on national identity insists that, just as national narratives vary, so do the groups who generate them. Here, 'tradition can be dynamic, contested and claimed by different groups at different moments in time' (Edensor, 2002, p 6). Vernacular versions of the nation are just as significant in reproducing its identity as those of the officials who organise commemorative ceremonies. Thompson (2001, p 20) similarly argues that the actions of individuals must be considered in studies of national identity and that 'the nation is constantly re-imagined and re-defined, with multiple narratives interacting and influencing each other'. This fluidity can make a nation's identity fragile and in need of constant reinforcement:

National identity never seems to be so secure and so lacking in ambiguity and ambivalence that it can be left to look after itself. So we find it ritualized, mythified, symbolized, emblemized – evidence that we are continuously working on and with it (Cohen, 1996, p 806).

This continuous process is exemplified by varied approaches to commemorative sites that reinforce or complicate each other. For example, during the 2014–18 centenary period of the First World War, the memorial at Villers-Bretonneux is the focal point of official Australian Government commemorative activity on the Western Front. It is also a place for individual 'pilgrims', many of whom are seeking the names of relatives who died fighting in the Somme. Since 2008, the 90th anniversary of the Australia–Germany battle that took place there, the Australian Government has held an annual commemorative Anzac Day dawn service. The first service attracted around 3,000 people; by 2011, this had increased to almost 4,000 people, a number that is expected to continue to grow, especially during the centenary period.

In this case, the official and vernacular appear to coincide. Thus, newspaper descriptions of the ceremony at Villers-Bretonneux have emphasised the individual experiences of those soldiers who fought in the war and the people who had come to 'honour' them. For example, coverage in *The Australian* of the 2009 ceremony focused on visitors with a family history of military service. In the same newspaper, coverage of the 2010 ceremony linked the official and personal by focusing on the family history of Australian Foreign Minister Stephen Smith, who had two great uncles who died on the Western Front. The report underlined the merging of the official and personal by quoting a line from Smith's speech:

'there was hardly an Australian family that wasn't touched by the tragedy' (*The Australian*, 2010).

The official Dawn Service – organised by the Department of Veterans' Affairs and the Australian Embassy in Paris, and with ministerial representatives, school groups and an official military presence – often employs individual family stories as part of the official narrative about the national significance of the site, as in the example of Minister Smith's speech. In other words, the vernacular and official narratives are not only conflated but work to reinforce each other. Vernacular articulations of national identity are certainly present at Anzac sites, as demonstrated by the image in Figure 4 of the Fifth Australian Division Memorial at Polygon Wood in Belgium, but they are firmly structured, literally and metaphorically, by the official narrative expressed in the materiality of the sites (Sumartojo, 2014).

This official influence would seem to reinforce Rose's (2002, p 459) point about power and cultural landscapes:

... some form of dominance must always be present for culture and/or cultural landscapes to exist ... while struggle is always present in the landscape, it is ultimately the forces of limitation and control, rather than those of interpretation and resistance, that define what the culture or cultural landscape is.

The implication is that official and vernacular renderings of commemorative space are in tension with one another, struggling to define landscapes in singular terms. However, commemorative places appear to generate multiple, and even divergent, interpretations of their meanings, as evidenced by the different uses that they can accommodate. In the case of Australian Anzac sites, the official and vernacular meanings appear to coincide, suggesting many Australians, or at least those who embark on a 'pilgrimage' to the Western Front, accept and identify with the narrative. It might also point to the nature of the sites, as cemeteries with specific accepted patterns of use and associated behaviours.

## Conclusion

An important aspect of much commemorative activity is that it happens at regular and periodic moments, sacralising time and space. This underscores how 'national time' functions in rituals to link the individual to past and future co-nationals, as discussed above. Armistice Day ceremonies on 11 November, for example, at London's Cenotaph in Whitehall, include two minutes of silence at the same time every year, so that time is used to elevate the ceremony beyond everyday life. The iconic memorial landscape of the Cenotaph is a solemn and familiar backdrop to many Britons (and other Commonwealth nationals). Whitehall is, however, also a busy central London street, the site of many UK government offices, a location of protest and a tourist destination. The periodic official activation of this landscape allows other uses and interpretations of the space – spatial meanings 'leak' into the space, despite the strong official national and commemorative narratives that are associated with them. These are not strictly 'unprescribed uses' (Inglis, 1998) – those ways of activating or being in a space that have not been purposefully 'designed into' the site – but emerge through its vernacular use. In a busy metropolitan landscape such as London, commemorative sites must often serve multiple functions; proposals for new



Figure 4: Fifth Australian Division Memorial, Buttes New British Cemetery, Polygon Wood, Belgium. Small Australian flags and clip-on koala toys decorate the official memorial with vernacular expressions of national identity. (Photo: author's own.)

memorials in London's Royal Parks, for example, must be designed with public amenity or multiple functions in mind.

Such a diversity of uses reflects the different audiences now addressed by many public national memorials. As examples, Villers-Bretonneux, Whitehall and Trafalgar Square are masculine and martial in their symbolism – if not in their use – implicitly suggesting that some groups are more nationally 'representative'. The racial and cultural diversity enjoyed by both Britain and Australia, however, means that 'national' commemorative spaces now represent very diverse nations. Shonibare grappled with this national diversity when presenting imperialism as an antecedent of a metropolitan multiculturalism that he valued highly.

This diversity has altered the mobilisation of history and the function of 'national time' in commemorative landscapes. For example, London's former mayor Ken Livingstone famously said that he thought most Londoners 'hadn't a clue' as to who was represented in Trafalgar Square's statues and memorials (Kelso, 2000). On the other hand, the site's specific symbolic history is still activated when it matters: when London won the right to host the 2012 Olympics, beating Paris by one vote, *The Sun* newspaper reported that Nelson looked down, pleased that 'the French had been sunk again' (Wheeler and Blair, 2005). The Battle of Trafalgar may be 200 years old, but it can still be mobilised to contemporary ends.

Similarly, Australian understandings of Anzac have been reframed since the First World War in light of multiculturalism and the transformation of relationships with the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth. Anzac Day ceremonies now include proud representatives of former adversaries, such as the Turkish, who march along Canberra's Anzac Parade. Here, the landscape remains open and malleable, a series of temporary events, or 'moments that will be again dispersed' (Massey, 2006). Instead of telling a fixed and final story of place, commemorative sites have the potential to demonstrate multiple meanings that change over time and with use. The extent of the malleability of the narrative, the diversity of people who choose to engage with it and the official approach to national ceremony, however, remain to be seen. What shape these aspects take will be especially relevant given the First World War centenary period that began in August 2014.

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## NOTE

- 1 While the site is maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to make it appear 'unchanging', several mature hornbeam trees were removed from the grave area in recent years. This changed the appearance of the site markedly and altered visitor amenity with the loss of shade.

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