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The Death of the Monument

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The human impulse to create everlasting monuments springs perhaps out of the desire for the living to perpetuate themselves. To achieve this in terms of biology only one means is possible: organic reproduction, and all the classic civilizations, above all the most enduring of these, that of the Chinese, have regarded the begetting of children as a sacred duty as well as a blessing. Renewal through reproduction is one means of ensuring continuity: but there is still another, springing not out of life but out of death: to wall out life and to exclude the action of time by carving monuments in durable materials: the primitive burial mounds, the big stones of the Salisbury plains and of Brittany, the pyramids and sphinxes of Egypt, the ironic gestures of Sargon and Ozymandias and the Pharaohs, of Louis XIV and Peter the Great.

Ordinary men must be content to fix their image in their children: retrospectively they may seek to ensure immortality by imposing the cult of the ancestor. But the rich and the powerful do not have trust in the powers of renewal: they seek a more static immortality: they write their boasts upon tombstones, they incorporate their deeds as well as their astronomical lore in obelisks: they place their hopes of remembrance upon stone joined to stone, dedicated to their subjects and heirs forever: forgetful of the fact that stones which are deserted by life are even more helpless than life that is unprotected by stones. In general, one may say that the classic civilizations of the world, up to our own, have been oriented toward death and toward fixity: a Heraclitus might observe that all things flow, a Lucretius might see that man is a part of eternally changing cycle of nature: but the aim of the civilization was permanence and fixity: the dead hand felt frustrated unless it could keep within its rigid grasp the fate of the living. Men die; the building goes on: the burial ground encroaches upon the city, and the city, with its dead buildings, its lifeless masses of stone, becomes a burial ground.

So long as men are oriented toward death, the monument has a meaning: no sacrifice is too great to produce it. Just as a poor religious family today will spend half a year’s income to celebrate fitly the death of one of its members, money that it would find it impossible to spare to make possible the birth or education of a child, so the civilizations of the past sacrificed their life and their income and their vital energy to the monument. The pastoral nomad alone spared himself that sacrifice, until he copied the ways of men in cities: he travelled light. Civilization today, for different reasons, must follow the example of the nomad. For the most radical change in our modern cosmos has come about through our changed conception of death and immortality: for us, death is an episode in life’s renewal, the terminus of a radical maladaptation: continuity for us exists, not in the individual soul, but in the
germ plasm and in the social heritage, through which we are united to all mankind and all nature: renewal comes in the sacrifice of the parent to the child, in the having lived to the living and the yet-to-live. Instead of being oriented toward death and fixity, we are oriented toward life and change: every stone has become ironic to us for we know that it, too, is in process of change, like the 'everlasting' mountains: time is a bomb that will split the most august temple open, if the wanton savagery of men's swifter bombs does not anticipate time.

The patterns and forms of past ages die slowly: the idea of survival has persisted despite the challenge of our modern world pictures: but the notion of material survival by means of the monument no longer represents the deeper impulses of our civilization. Indeed, one has only to behold the monuments that have been built during the last century to observe how hollow the notion is. These Valhallas and Lincoln Memorials, these Victor Emanuel Monuments and Vimy Ridge Memorials, these 'Eternal Lights' which go out when the electric power station breaks down or the bulbs blowout—how many buildings that pretend to the august and the monumental have a touch of the modern spirit in them: they are all the hollow echoes of an expiring breath, rattling ironically in the busy streets of our cities: heaps of stone which either confound the work of the living, like the grand but over-crowded and confused Public Library in New York, or which are completely irrelevant to the living. The very notion of a modern monument is a contradiction in terms: if it is a monument, it cannot be modern, and if it is modern, it cannot be a monument.

This is not to say that a hospital or a power station or an air beacon may not be treated as a memorial to a person or an event: nor is it to deny that a contemporary building might easily last two hundred years, or even two thousand years: that is not the point. What will make the hospital or air beacon a good memorial is the fact that it has been designed for the succour of those who are ill, or for the guidance of men piloting airplanes: not that it has taken form out of a metaphysical belief in fixity and immortality and in the positive celebration of death.

Here one must note a vast change in ideology: a real split. In most civilizations the activities of the living are not real unless they can be transposed into terms of death: in our civilization death is meaningless unless it can be transposed into terms of the living. In Christian culture life was a preparation for death, that is, for after life: in our emerging civilization, death is a making way for life, and all the fixed and memorial processes, the written record, the painting, the sculptured stone, the photograph, the recorded voice, are offerings to the living—to be accepted, not out of a duty to the dead, but out of a loyalty to other remoter generations capable of deriving life from them, even if closer ones cannot.

The death of the monument has been intuitively forecast by more than one spirit during the last century; for the fact is that it has implications that go beyond the conception of individual tombs, memorials, or public buildings: it affects the character of our civilization and the design of the city as a whole. Why should each generation go on living in the quarters that were built by its ancestors, in quarters many of which are stale and dirty, most of them planned for other uses and other modes of life, a good part of them mere makeshifts even for the purposes for which they were originally intended? It was Nathaniel Hawthorne who asked this
question: he put it into the mouth of the young photographer in the *House of the Seven Gables* and repeated it elsewhere; and it is only now perhaps that one can see its full significance. Our cities, planned as monuments, made of permanent materials, with heavy capital investments, duly incorporated under capitalism in the existing mortgages and land values, are incapable of adjustment to fresh needs and fresh demands; and what is true for the city as a whole is true likewise of its individual houses.

We have created for the community as a whole physical shells, when what we need is not so much shells as organic bodies capable of circulation and renewal in every part of their tissues. The protective function of the city, tendencies toward fixities and permanence of function, have been overdone: for a living creature the only real protection and permanence comes through growth and renewal and reproduction: processes which are precisely the opposite of petrifaction. Mr Clarence Stein has explained the rich architectural tradition of the Balinese as due in part to the fact that they use an exceedingly impermanent volcanic stone which lasts only about fifteen years: hence they have to renew their buildings frequently and recarve the stone, and this continued demand for art keeps alive and active a tradition in the building and the decorative arts. The glass and the synthetic materials used in our modern buildings are valid symbols of this new attitude toward life: the avoidance of encrustation, the creation of an environment that shall be a product of the living and be responsive to their demands. It would be of course a foolish waste purposely to design buildings which would collapse in fifteen years, so that they could be renewed: a perversion just as foolish as the modern one of fashioning a motor car to go out of style in five years in order merely to increase the demand for production and profit: but it is wisdom to design buildings in such materials and in such a fashion that they may be easily renewed and made over. [...]

Does this mean that the modern city is to be renewed every generation? Does this mean that the city is no longer to be an accretion of the memorials of the past, in which the needs of the living are narrowly fitted in between ancient landmarks, whose value no longer lies in direct service, but in sentiments and piety? Yes to the first question, no to the second. The accretion of the past, the very mark of the historic city, with its successive stratifications of spirit, may well remain: but the preservation of the works of the past is not to be left to chance and accident; nor will the surviving memorial itself be endangered and diminished by being made over—now with a system of gas lighting, now with a toilet, now with a 'restoration' in the barbarous manner of the Victorian restorers. On the contrary, if the city is to escape being a museum, what belongs to the past must either be put into a museum or be transformed as a whole into a museum—set aside; put to the special uses of education but no longer lived in.

The very value of the art museum and the museum of social history lies in this act of detachment. By confining the function of preservation to the museum, it releases space in the rest of the city for the fresh uses of life. Where the fragments of a local culture are to be preserved, the best means of effecting this is perhaps by the use of a local building, such as the Taft Museum in Cincinnati, the Behn Haus and the St. Annen Kloster in Lubeck, and the Historical Museum in Edinburgh. The museum gives us a means of coping with the past, of having intercourse with other periods...
and other modes of life, without confining our own activities to the mould created by the past. Starting itself as a chance accumulation of relics, with no more rhyme or reason than the city itself, the museum at last presents itself to use as a means of selectively preserving the memorials of culture: here at last is a real escape for the monument. What cannot be kept in existence in material form, we may now measure, photograph in still and in moving pictures, and summarize in books and papers: we may—and should—do this at a time when the life is still present, so that we shall have, filed away for future reference, not merely an image of the shell, but a working knowledge of the physiology of the building or the work of art.

As far as works of pure art go, this detachment may become complete: what makes a work of art eternal in the human sense is not what it carries over in the setting of its own generation, but what it signifies against the background of our own experience. It follows that while the social museum must necessarily seek to preserve the background, the museum of art properly speaking should forego any such attempt: one does not need a mediaeval house to appreciate a picture by Roger van der Weyden or Breughel the Elder, nor does one need a French salon to find sensual pleasure in a Fragonard or sober respect in a Chardin: indeed, the more complete the detachment, the more effectively we can screen a symbol from what it meant to another generation, the more specific and final is our own response. For a work of art is not a monument: if it has life at all, it exists as a contemporary fact: a museum, properly designed, with ample facilities for storage and preservation as well as for show, serves to enlarge the circle of contemporary experience. But our intercourse with the past is selective: it cannot be otherwise. The encyclopaedic culture of the metropolis, which attempts to preserve everything and to show everything, which mistakes acquisition for appreciation, and a knowledge of names and incidents for an aesthetic intuition, had turned the museum into another metropolis, creating purposeless congestion, and complete intellectual bewilderment. On the mere laws of chance, something of value must accumulate in this debris, by mere reason of its extent: but in the new museum, designed on a less acquisitive pattern, each generation should have the opportunity to be in control of the past—with no duties toward it except that of living in the spirit.

The principles of flexibility and adaptation have another side: our distrust for the monumental does not merely apply to actual tombs and memorials; it must apply even more to the physical apparatus of city life, in particular, to its mechanical equipment. These, too, are capable of taking on a monumental character; indeed the Roman roads and aqueducts and sewers have survived at least as well as the Tomb of Hadrian and the Arch of Constantine. The more the energies of a community become immobilized in such material structures, the less ready is it to adjust itself to new emergencies. A two-storey building, with small foundations, may be easily torn down, if a different type of structure or the widening of a street to accommodate a new type of traffic proves necessary. But a twenty-storey building has a deeper foundation and a more elaborate superstructure; it is served by a greater variety of expensive mechanical utilities, such as elevators: it is not easily removed: moreover the water mains and sewers and wired connections that serve such a building are all correspondingly large and expensive: one does not readily
tear such a structure down; and above all, one does not tear it down when it is to be replaced by a smaller building, or no building at all. [...] 

As a monument, the machine is subject to the same ironic deflation that applies to all other attempts to wall out life: indeed, the first condition of our survival in cities is that we shall be free to live, free to apply the lessons of biology, physiology and psychology to our use of the whole environment. In the past, what have been called the triumphs of civilization have turned out too frequently to be the studious collection of encumbrances which finally stifle the possibilities of adaptation, movement and effective improvement, and lead to its ultimate downfall.