

## 'How can you live in a city of monuments?': Reading Commemoration and Forgetting in Adelaide's North Terrace Precinct

**Emily Potter, English Department, Adelaide University**

The title of this paper comes from Antoni Jach's novel, *The Layers of the City*, in which the protagonist, researching as he calls it, 'the many layers of Paris' (1), wanders through the city's spaces. His sensory encounters are multi-dimensional: like an x-ray, the visions, sounds and smells of an ancient place are evoked in the modern city, itself in constant process. Past and present seem co-existent here. The layers of human life, like piled up bones in the city's catacombs, are the ground from which everything new emerges. The past is sustenance and generation, continually transformed as new becomes old and the future is now. At the same time, however, there is a sense of suffocation in Jach's layered city, a degree of weightiness and burden, of statues, buildings and other icons of memory that hang heavy. His question 'How can you live in a city of monuments?' (117) is a point of departure for my own examination of a weighted space in a different city centre. In focusing upon the North Terrace precinct in the Adelaide CBD, I want to highlight the problematics of an engagement with the past that concretises remembering in the monument form. When these icons are presented as cohesive models of socially being and belonging, authorised by a particular ideology of common experience, the problematics are intensified. While I advocate an approach to memory that is part of the everyday, the actual constructs within which we daily move must be examined for what they ultimately offer and inhibit. Without abandoning the monument as a participant in memory, and denying the role of North Terrace as an active precinct in civic life, the necessity is there to acknowledge its language of selection and privilege if we are to escape, what Antoni Jach terms, 'those residues of the past threatening to strangle the present' (117).

In this discussion I want to highlight the intrinsic connection between remembering and place. While memory can be seen as an intangible, unfettered and mobile amongst the words and images that seek to represent it, the apparent need by groups to claim collectivity and find forms for its acknowledgement means that remembering is often located and scripted to signify particular ways of knowing and engaging with the past. Social space, as Lefebvre points out, is a 'social product and embodies social relations' (in Jaireth 24), making it a readable text through which we can trace and define operations of history and community. When social space is formulated however, persistently constructed and kept within fixed definitions of meaning, heterogenic existence is suppressed. There is no sense of interrelated spaces, no acknowledgement of plurality. I see the homogenisation of memory at work in North Terrace and feel the urgency of dismantling this. Through a proliferation of the monument and a continual return here to perform common remembering within the tropes of nation and the state, history is fixed, rendered immobile by acts of commemoration that impose, construct, and more significantly appear unchallenged. Here the icon is established as a connective device that ironically disconnects through its exclusionary nature, disabling the potential dynamics of remembering—that is, an experience of the active and the shared. As a self-conscious voice of public remembering, the symbolic demarcation of North Terrace needs to be taken as one of many approaches to memory in our city. It is imperative that we critically examine the meanings of commemoration in this public space, not to reject its gestures of public remembering, but to examine the ideas invested within these and thus to contextualise the spaces around us in terms of what they voice and how we choose to listen. It is not 'the silence of the stone', as Marina Warner puts it (Warner 37), that makes the monument fraught, but our relationship to it. To what and how we choose to publicly lay claim is fundamentally at issue.

North Terrace is the oldest main thoroughfare in Adelaide and its significance in civic life reflects this topographic centrality. Stretching for just over one and a half kilometres, its entire length is a catalogue of public institutions that traditionally mark a City—the central railway station, the Parliament, the South Australian Museum, Art Gallery, and State Library, the Botanic Gardens, the Royal Adelaide Hospital and two universities. Specifically though, it is an area of less than 500 metres with which I am concerned, where an investment in memorialising is most extreme. In this space, the Prince Henry Memorial Gardens, between the intersections of King William Street and Frome Road, close to 180 plaques, statues and

monuments can be counted. While thinking over this paper, I spent a great deal of time walking up and down North Terrace, counting memorials obviously, but also observing the ways in which it operates as a public place. Certainly there is a general sense of ambivalence towards the memorials here. Although visually some of the more prominent can hardly be missed, and one—the King Edward VII memorial statue—is positioned in the middle of a busy walkway, pedestrians simply negotiate their way around them. The tension between a site that is so loaded with given meaning and yet implicitly part of the everyday is central to this. It is the nature of the familiar to become unseen, and in amongst the constant movement of pedestrians, the flow of traffic and the daily activities of people going about their lives, the North Terrace memorials tend to fade into a background of urban landscape. The inevitability of this is, as Robert Musil terms it, 'pregnated' in public monuments as they become part of the everyday. 'Like a drop of water on an oilskin', he points out, 'attention runs down them without stopping for a moment' (in Warner, 206). Despite the symbolic heaviness they bring to the space, their individual resonance seems lost through the number clustered in such proximity.

Yet what Musil terms 'the invisible' quality of monuments can be, in large part, attributable to aesthetics. Typically the monuments here conform to classical conventions. While the oldest date from Victorian and Edwardian times, the most recent memorials on the site perpetuate this style, using stone and bronze to suggest achievement as a permanent legacy and memory as literally fixed. Consequently, it is hard to engage in these memorials. Pedestals remove figures from touch, while the materials seem cold and hard. The structural and the ideological are implicitly connected in a taxonomy of remembrance that makes clear how we are to engage with the past and what kind of past it will be. Memory translates as something to stand outside of, isolated to specific events, particularly represented, and specific figures within them. In her writings on spatial politics and exclusions within social places, Rosalyn Deutsche identifies the monument as a tool of alienation, embodying an inclusivity that denies socio-spatial difference and conflict. 'Social divisions...(and)...social groups', she argues, '(are) expelled when historical monuments are presented as symbols of social cohesion' (Deutsche XV). The grand aesthetic common in North Terrace memorials makes visual a way of seeing history and social practice in this monolithic way where an appeal to cohesiveness is a form of historical regulation. The role of the memorial as an ideological tool has been widely discussed in recent years, especially in regard to issues of common remembering and its highly contentious nature. Malcolm Miles describes the monument as a production of 'a dominant framework of values...(an) element in the construction of a national history' (Miles 58), while Paul Connerton evokes the 'inertia' evident in these performative gestures (Connerton 3). Out of habit, we return to the familiar sites and forms of a dominant script and through repetition further cement its partialities as an encompassing truth. Inevitably the memorials along North Terrace are ideological products, reflecting the social privilege and concerns of those who supported their construction. Its earliest and most prominent memorials are consequently masculine in both style and subject, with founders, explorers, and patriotism high on the agenda. Ken Ingliss has described how frequently these memorials were planned, directed and often funded from within, as he puts it, 'the armchairs at the Adelaide Club' (Ingliss 295), an emblem itself of exclusivity and male authority, patronised by politicians and business men of time. Interestingly, the Adelaide Club was and still is situated on the southern side of the Terrace, overlooking the symbols of the vision gestated behind its doors.

While today it is possible to place these images within an historical context, seeing them as very much constructions of their time, I argue that we continue to perpetuate this paradigm of remembering. Additions to the space over the last forty years reflect a continued belief in the memorial as the means of public commemoration, and a persistent assumption of what it is that we value as worthy of remembering. The Jubilee Walkway, laid in 1986 to celebrate 150 years since the founding of South Australia, is a clear example of this. Its listing of 171 names within 150 plaques laid along the pedestrian space invokes a tradition of seeing and relaying history as a linear experience of particular achievements. Names that appear already on the Terrace, some several times over, are repeated in the bronze plaques that mirror the older monuments around them. Again there is a predominance of the white male and a valued tribute to discourses of power and an assumed social 'good'. More than this, the walkway makes concrete a image of unified identity: its claim to 'celebrate' statehood and relay the

chosen instances which have defined South Australia is a concern that lies implicitly in gestures of public commemoration. In a discussion of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra and its proposed replacement with a 'paved memorial walkway telling the history of the Aboriginal people', Subhash Jaireth uses the image of a built structure erasing what is, out of political point, temporary, to impose authorised versions of the past. The creation of a 'symbolic space' such as a memorial walkway, he argues, serves the 'monoscopic envisioning of a nationalist nation', which forces out alternatives to written historical story. 'Its present as well as presence', Jaireth continues, 'are justified and reasoned through the past it represents. The present as well as the future are, in a way, dead and buried' (Jaireth 27). Remembering is offered as a surface engagement with something that has gone, and for this reason Jubilee Walkway sits uneasily in its desire to design and make accessible a space that is relevant to all South Australians.

To observe the ways in which the Prince Henry Gardens area co-ordinates the physical movement of the passing public furthers this image of performance and construction. The landscaping of this site dictates certain public behaviors and limits access in a way that consecrates spatially the memorial sites, physically influencing a relationship of meaning between the individual and the object. All along the Terrace the sculpting of space and public access reinforces a perception of the monument's cultural importance and calls on a particular reaction—one of attention and respect to what we are given as glorified—that furthers the iconic status of the memorial. The benches situated around the South Australian War Memorial, the largest and most imposing of the monuments, while inviting an engagement of sorts, allowing the public to sit and meditate in the space, calls for more than just reflection upon the tragedy war but a feeling of deference to the monument itself. Since its dedication in 1931 the area around the War Memorial has become denser with plaques and gestures of remembrance and is consistently returned to for public ceremonies. The concept of a space that can be used and shared, I would argue, is overshadowed by a definition of commemorative practice that is tied so absolutely to a specific site. The exclusionary nature of this was physically evidenced in the Anzac Day ceremony this year during which the War Memorial was vigilantly maintained as a 'sacred' space. In what was referred to as a 'Holding Ground Ceremony', a contingent of police rangers and army cadets were stationed around the northern (and most public) face of the memorial, keeping 'guard' over the site. The act of distancing the public from official remembering in this way evokes Paul Carter's description of the constructed city-space as a 'theatrical environment' where, he argues, 'people wander directionless, disconsolate and alienated' (Carter 16), their movements orchestrated by various appropriations and directions of social space.

The performative nature of the Terrace is clear in example after example. In guidebooks and brochures tourists are invariably told to begin their exploration of the city here, its significance as Adelaide's 'cultural heart of the city' making it a "must do" on any visitors list (Adelaide Secrets 34). The number of school parties that visit the site demonstrates its role as educative bastion, a space where history can be located and learnt. Earlier this year I watched a group of primary school students wander up and down the Jubilee Walkway, laying pieces of paper on different plaques and rubbing their crayons over the texture of the inscriptions, thus literally reproducing the historical narrative beneath. Yet the strangest and most overt example of the association between North Terrace and an implied ideal of assimilated values can be seen in the South Australia Day celebrations held for the last two years along North Terrace. On this day, formally Proclamation Day—a celebration of colonial arrival on the lands named South Australia—a length of the Terrace is closed off to traffic and laid with grass upon which the public can relax while awards are presented to notable South Australians. The day's name change from an isolated point of remembrance (Proclamation), to a broader, more inclusive reference to community, enforces the sense of a formulated event within, in this instance especially, a highly fabricated space.

Plans appear every so often to 'revamp' North Terrace into an even grander central boulevard. The most recent, in May this year, announced an intention to 're-establish the character of North Terrace as the city's major civic spine', criticising its barrier-like nature which, it was claimed, separated 'the city from the cultural institutions and the River Torrens', which run behind it (Digirolamo 7). This view of the space as distinct and segmented from the rest of the city, yet still with a relevance that must be reinforced, is ambiguous, and comes out

of the site's own contradictions. How can a space that is meant to be a prominent, if not the prominent, marker of communal exchange be such if it is simultaneously seen as a bastion of traditions that are both physically and ideologically restrictive? The Aboriginal protest on what became known as Genocide Corner, earlier this year, brought these contradictions to a very visible head. Opposing the mining of uranium at Olympic Dam, protesters pitched tents on the memorial lawns in front of the high walls of Government House and hung placards about the space, imposing their historical and political narrative onto the Terrace. The choice of North Terrace as the most prominent site for such a statement underlines its position as a centralised space in public imagination. Reaction to the demonstration was largely condemnatory, with media opinion outraged against what was touted as the site's defilement. The Vietnam Veteran's Association staking a counter protest in front of the Aboriginal camp bolstered public calls for the protester's removal. The Veteran's objections came from their view of a symbolic space, with a clearly defined meaning, devalued by its mobilisation for other political purposes, particularly those situated as outside that validated meaning. The subsequent eviction of the demonstrators marks yet another act of forgetting and exclusion in an imposed historical and contemporary story of place and identity, and the discomfort that comes with the juxtaposition of memories and alternative ways of envisaging public space.

Such anxiety over the maintenance of order and meaning in our connection to memory and the places to which it is attached, points to a fundamental issue with remembering when left, as Kirk Savage terms it, 'to its own unseen devices' (Savage 131). The need to contain and control the practice of commemoration, to determine what and how we remember, and the repetition of this in various guises, is indicative of both a distaste and distrust of the non-constructed in our social practices. The danger of the memorial does not necessarily lie in its formality, its aesthetics, or even its partiality: its concerns arise out of how we limit remembering to conventional practices for the sake of familiar understanding. The idea of commemoration as a performance, integrating the actions of the public with the intentions of an authority, invokes the conscription of a common remembering to its own performative purpose. While lived experience inevitably adds to the text of place-in this sense, via a layering of marks and dialogues, one upon the other-the meanings given to this public space, heavy with a particular way of seeing, render this text artificial and frozen. A preferred remembering will inevitably leave excluded the memory-places that fall outside the constructions of what is authorised. It is here we need to look for a revitalised concept of collective and personal memory, away from the spaces to which we, out of familiarity, attribute so much and still engage in so little.

It is here in my conclusion that I draw attention to the metaphoric resonance of the River Torrens, another Adelaide icon that runs in its winding way parallel to North Terrace. In this, I leave a suggestion of how we can reconceptualise remembering in the public domain. While the river has its own story of use and control, the aligning of two distinctive sites-one fixed and the other, in its essence, fluid-reinforces the artificiality of our memory conventions. Like the transient protest on North Terrace that exemplifies a mobilisation of the space through a disturbance of questioning and difference, despite its visual erasure, the juxtaposition of the river-site with the constructed thoroughfare invites an examination of everyday practices and the nature of our remembering. The layers of the riverbed and the flow of its waters evoke a concept of memory that is ultimately free and transformative. In our search for places that hold a shared relevance, it is important to move away from a solely visual concept of public space towards a more intangible text of meaning, where, as Paul Carter describes, 'feet (in their poetic sense) overlap, merge one into the other...breaking clear...falling back into line' (Carter 16). To quote Toni Morrison, and locate this idea in a rich terrain of the intertextual, 'All water has perfect memory and is forever trying to get back where it was' (Morrison 119). Within the movement of water everything shifts, passes and flows on, with an undertow of return. As I end, it is interesting to note a recent announcement made of the relocation of the South Australia Day celebrations in 2001 from North Terrace to a space of parklands beside the River Torrens. For a reinvestment in public remembering, such shifts-no matter how small-are essential and it is only through a trust in the non-constructed that a language of memory can continue to be pursued.

#### **Works Cited**

Adelaide Secrets (Visitor Guide). 2000

Carter, Paul. 'Treading Stone'. *The Australian's Review of Books*. 4.10 (1999): 16-17.  
Connerton, Paul. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge U P, 1989.  
Deutsche, Rosalyn. *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*. Cambridge, Mass and London: The MIT Press, 1996.  
Digirolamo, Rebecca. 'Taylor's vision to turn Nth Terrace into cultural hub'.  
*The City Messenger*. 24 May 2000: 7.  
Ingliss, Ken. *Sacred Places: War Memorial in the Australian Landscape*. Carlton South, Victoria: Melbourne U P, 1998.  
Jach, Antoni. *The Layers of the City*. Sydney: Sceptre, 1999.  
Jaireth, Subhash. 'Face to Face: The Aboriginal Tent Embassy and the National Portrait Gallery'. *Australian Book Review*.  
December/ January (1999/2000): 23-28.  
Miles, Malcolm. *Art, Space and the City*. London: Routledge, 1997.  
Morrison, Toni. 'The Site of Memory'. *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. Eds. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornel West. New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990.  
Savage, Kirk. 'The Politics of Memory: Black Emancipation and the Civil War Monument'. *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*. Ed. John R. Gillis. Princeton: Princeton U P, 1994.  
Warner, Marina. *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form*. London: Picador, 1987.

Emily Potter is currently completing a doctorate in the English Department, Adelaide University. Her thesis explores the metaphoric possibilities of frozen landscapes and the relationship between subjectivity and space.

Emily Potter, *'How can you live in a city of monuments?': Reading Commemoration and Forgetting in Adelaide's North Terrace Precinct*, *Altitude* vol 2, 2002.