



Shrine the Innocents. Interior View  
(Source: Jagath Weerasinghe).

## Public Space and Monuments: Politics of Sanctioned and Contested Memory

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### Introduction

Monuments erected in public spaces are a common sight in all societies despite the variations in the reasons for their construction and actual physical differences. Throughout its recorded history, monuments have also been a relatively common structure in Sri Lanka. In its post colonial history, monuments in Sri Lanka have often been associated with politicians, from the somewhat sedate Bandaranaike Memorial in Horagolla to the rather scary Premadasa Memorial in Jampettha Street in Colombo. The civil war and the recent political violence in the south of the country has also ushered in a new phase of memorial construction identifiable at different levels, in terms of scale, sources of funding, agenda of initiators, utility and so on.

What exactly is meant by a monument, which is also often used interchangeably with the word memorial? At the outset, I must point out that in this essay I maintain no conceptual difference between the words monument and memorial, and will be using these words interchangeably with the same meaning. Hans-Ernst Mittag has observed that a monument or memorial “is an independent artwork located in a public space, which reminds us of persons or events, and derives out of this commemoration a demand of learning (quoted in Grosser 2000). It seems to me that Mittag has captured most of the essential attributes of a monument, which are also reflected in the Sri Lankan and other comparative examples I would be commenting on. However, in the Sri Lankan context, one would also see a genre of public and popular monuments that are also utilitarian and are not seen as artwork. These are the bus stands that have been converted into monuments in numerous villages and towns by the kin and friends of fallen soldiers. But all other attributes of monuments that Mittag has identified are also to be seen in the monuments in Sri Lanka.

Writing about monumental architecture, Bruce Trigger has suggested that “its principle defining feature is that its scale and elaboration exceed the requirements of any practical functions that a building is intended to perform” (Trigger 1990: 119). Although talking about the large scale monuments of the ancient world, Trigger nevertheless places in context certain fundamental aspects of monuments in most places. That is, in general, monuments are public, non-domestic, non-prosaic structures separate from the everyday. As Moore elaborates, “monuments are structures designed to be recognized, expressed by their scale or elaboration, even though their meanings may not be understood by all members of a society” (Moore 1996: 92).

But certain explanations in the definition provided by Trigger as well as the elaboration of Moore do not necessarily explain the dynamics of monuments everywhere. For instance, monuments are not always massive in scale. This is certainly the case with the small bus stand monuments and other village monuments erected in many parts of southern Sri Lanka in memory of fallen soldiers. They are not large scale for the simple reason that they have often been erected by people with meagre resources. Massive scale and elaboration in monuments are generally associated with state sponsored monuments or other monuments that attract large resources such as the Vietnam Memorial in Washington or the memorial for fallen soldiers in World War 2 in Colombo. Nevertheless, despite the variation in scale for whatever reason, monuments are designed to be recognized. If they are not, their primary purpose in making a statement would be lost. So even the subaltern monuments such as bus stand memorials in Sri Lanka are recognizable from other bus stands which are not memorials.

On the other hand, in contemporary society (unlike perhaps in the ancient world) most well known monuments do not contain cryptic meanings: they are generally obvious. Again, if meanings of monuments are unclear, their purpose in attempting to symbolize a specific message in memory of a person or event would be lost. While large scale monuments may generally be separated from the everyday, they are not always so. As such, the small scale bus stand memorials are very much a part of the everyday life of the place where they are located. That is where people wait for public transport, talk about personal things as well as the war and other topics of national importance. Similarly, while the World War 2 Memorial in Colombo was designed to be separate from the everyday, the passage of time has changed some of these intentions. So today, except on days the military and ex-service persons remember those who fell in World War 2, on every other day it is a place for lovers to meet, hide from the rest of society and talk about things that lovers generally do. And quite possibly, whatever they talk about has nothing to do with war or heroic sacrifices. What I want to stress here is that despite the ability of general definitions to identify certain key features of monuments, some of those features may change and manifest with altered meanings in different locations, under different circumstances and times.

Monuments may be a site of pride and veneration for some while for others, the same monument may usher in emotions of pain and revulsion. But the fundamental premise upon which monuments are conceived and constructed has to do with memory. In other words, the essential dynamics and politics of monuments are to a large extent, contextualized within the notion of memory. That is, monuments directly address the question of "what is to be remembered" and "how to remember." It is on the basis of addressing these twin issues that the mythic structures and narratives associated with monuments as well as their physical shape and structure emerge. By the same token, but for different reasons, monuments are also sites for forgetting. The Vietnam Memorial in Washington DC remembers the American service personnel killed or missing in action in Vietnam. But it does not remember the even larger number of Vietnamese killed in the same war as well as numerous other disruptions that war created in Vietnam. One could argue that often, monuments or memorials have to be understood in a binary context: memory and amnesia.

In this essay, I would attempt to address a number of interrelated issues. What are the purposes of monuments established in public spaces by state agencies, by individuals or by collectives with defined identities and agendas? These monuments may be shrines in the more religious sense or strictly secular edifices or secular monuments that have acquired

certain religious features in terms of the ritual dynamics that may have sprung up and evolved around them. What is it that these monuments want to remember and what do they want to forget? What kinds of memories are sanctioned and by whom, and what kinds of memories are contested and for what reasons? In order to answer some of these questions and place these questions in a useful theoretical context, I would like to briefly look at one recent monument in Sri Lanka, the *Shrine of the Innocents*, while drawing from other monuments in different parts of the world for comparative exploration and analysis.

### **The politics and the building dynamics of the Shrine of the Innocents**

As a public monument, the *Shrine of the Innocents* was opened to the public on 10th December 1999 amidst much publicity and political participation. As outlined by the designer of the monument, its visual aspects and character were conceptualized and designed upon the story of the 38 school children in the southern town of Embilipitiya who disappeared in military custody at the height of political violence in southern Sri Lanka in the late 1980s (Weerasinghe 1999). He outlines the monument's larger goals in the following words:

But, its aim is to question the conscience of the Sri Lankan society by way of the Embilipitiya incident. It does not, in any way try to curse any person or political party. It only intends to say that we, as a nation are responsible for the culture of violence in Sri Lanka (Weerasinghe 1999).

Its socio-political objectives are furthermore elaborately explained in the propaganda leaflet that was distributed at the opening of the monument:

You are now stepping into a monument to the memory of the victims of the most frightening process and machinery of organized political crimes seen since our country regained its freedom from colonial rule. Yet, this is not only a monument to the tragedies of the recent past. It is also an effort to instill in the hearts and minds of us all who enter these precincts that every citizen of this country, bears responsibility in some manner, for every victim of this gruesome culture of political violence, by letting it nurture in our midst, bloody the soil of our land and the minds of our people. It is a burden of guilt we shall always carry with us (Bandara, no date).

The project cost over six million Sri Lankan Rupees and was sponsored and coordinated by the government with the active involvement of state agencies such as the State Engineering Corporation and the Urban Development Authority. In addition, it was coordinated by the Sudu Nelum Movement (Weerasinghe 1999) which was a highly politicized agency specifically set up by the then regime of Chandrika Kumaratunga to realize some of its own political goals. The monument is located within a kilometer of the parliament on the main road from Colombo to the Parliament. The location is not accidental. In principle, the Parliament, despite the steady dismantling of democratic traditions, practices and institutions in Sri Lanka, symbolizes the apex of state power. As such, the location of the monument so close to the Parliament, in prime road side property is wrought with political and social

significance. It is clear that without serious political patronage, emanating from the topmost strata of hierarchy in the state power structure, the monument and its specific location would not have been possible. In his opening speech on the day the monument was opened to the public, the designer of the monument clearly recognized the political associations and extensions of the project beyond the mere act of remembering:

Any project of this nature, with a budget of over four million, and which was funded by the government couldn't have happened if it did not carry a political investment in it. It is the job of any political party in power to do things that carry political investments for them (Weerasinghe 1999).

The nature of this political patronage is further described in the propaganda leaflet that was handed out on the day of the opening. In it, it is observed that parents from many villages and townships throughout the country who lost their children in the violence of the late 1980s made a request from President Chandrika Kumaratunga "for a memorial to the innocent children they lost in the grinding process of political violence" (Bandara, no date). It is further noted: "But for her unstinted patronage this monument would never be a reality in our midst" (Bandara, no date).

But the politics of the project go much further. Initially, the parents of Embilipitiya, when they made a request for a monument in memory of their lost children, also came up with a possible model for the monument. That was conceived on the basis of the pain they felt at their collective loss as well as the hatred they felt towards the perpetrators of that violence. Their idea was to have a simple statue of a child on a pedestal with a demonic figure (a *raksha*) hovering behind the child trying to devour it, and they wanted the monument to be located in Embilipitiya. Clearly, this idea was not only the wish of the people concerned, but its symbolism was beyond confusion and further interpretation while it was also very consciously rooted in their collective cultural experience. What they wanted to say was very clear. On the basis of expecting the materialization of this monument, these parents and their allies in Embilipitiya also politically supported the parliamentary election campaign of the People's Alliance in 1994. That election victory made it possible for President Kumaratunga to win the presidential election later. It must be noted here that what the parents wanted and what they got, and where they wanted it, and where it was finally established got decided not on the basis of some subaltern currents coming from the people, but on the basis of multiple political decisions and agendas over which these individuals had no control.

On the other hand, the date of the opening is also politically very significant. The 10th of December 1999 on which the opening ceremony of the monument was held amidst much fanfare was exactly 11 days prior to the presidential election at which President Kumaratunga was contesting for re-election. Throughout the campaign, the politics of terror by the United National Party and the Janata Vimukti Peramuna in the late 1980s was a major election issue. One of the main platforms of the ruling party was its claim that it brought an end to that period of terror. Clearly, the rather hurried opening of the *Shrine of the Innocents* so close to the elections, and obviously prior to the total completion of the structure and more importantly, without a clear agenda for its future in terms of maintenance, publicity and improvements, was indicative of its political value to the government at the time of the election. That issue had nothing to do with the grand objectives of the monument or the wishes of the survivors

in whose disappeared children's memory the monument was conceived and initiated in the first place. By the time it opened, the monument had become part of the political agenda of the ruling coalition, far beyond the scope of the mere act of remembrance.

### **The aesthetics, the poetics and the polemics in the architecture of the Shrine of the Innocents**

In order to contextualize the *Shrine of the Innocents* and critique some aspects of it in relation to achieving its declared aims, it is necessary at this stage to describe briefly its architectural design and the symbolism of its sculptures and installations. The designer himself has noted that the "memorial is composed of a series of symbols that carry various meanings; mother goddesses, trilogy concept, an archaeological mound, paths for contemplation, pyre of wood and bones and heads...." (Weerasinghe 1999). Part of the overall design is also based on the lay-out of the 12th century Thivanka Temple in Polonnaruwa.

After coming from the street, one needs to enter the premises of the monument through a low gateway and then walk up a black paved pathway leading up to the main entrance of the monument itself. There, you are confronted by two terra-cotta-like cement images of mother goddesses on either side of the entrance. The dominant colors of these images are black and shades of brick red. The index fingers of these images are pointing towards the earth "as it is the earth that bears witness to the unbearable crimes that took place" (Bandara, no date). In a sense, the images of mother goddesses are unusual as guard-stones in the context of traditional Buddhist temples where guard-stones were usually found. They were mostly male figures. In this context, the figures being female makes a great deal of symbolic sense, as mothers and women in general were among the majority of people who had to live with the consequences of political violence: they were the people who lost their husbands and sons. They were also the ones who had to live with the consequences of torture their male kin had undergone.

Outside the monument, to the right, and in front of the two guard-stone figures there is something that simply looks like a sculpted rock. However, the propaganda leaflet suggests that this is a figure representing the protector of the law and the people, buried "hidden up to his nose in the ground" (Bandara, no date). With reference to this image, the leaflet further observes, "as he looks searchingly at the world, while all but buried in it, he brandishes a shield in his right hand" (Bandara, no date). The symbolic message of this image apparently is the inability of the law and order and secular systems of justice to protect the people when their world was crumbling around them. But if not for the help of the leaflet, which is no longer available at the site, this profound symbolism can easily be lost to those who visit the monument.

Still outside, to the left is the solitary sculpture of a young man looking towards the land that is being reclaimed. The propaganda leaflet describes this sculpture as the "image of a youth with a sense of humanity that is not destroyed, but still undergoing a deep sense of suffering and pain" (Bandara, no date). At the rear end of the monument is a sculpture that resembles a traditional funeral pyre. Both of these sculptures perhaps can let out their symbolic messages without much room for confusion. In addition, there is a paved walkway that goes around the funeral pyre-like sculpture in the shape of an eye, and then around whole the monument. This walkway has been established for meditative purposes.

The main chamber of the monument is a large space open to the sky above and dominated by bright yellow, orange and ochre on the wall surfaces. In the middle, upon 38 white pedestals are 38 brown clay objects resembling human heads. These are supposed to symbolize the 38 students who disappeared from Embilipitiya, and the symbolism in this instance is fairly apparent. The pedestals themselves are placed on a bed of hand-molded baked pieces of clay molded by the hands of the disappeared children's parents as well as human rights activists and artists (Bandara, no date). The walls adjacent to the guard stones are embedded with baked clay tablets containing words in prose and poetry written by the parents from Embilipitiya, perhaps the most personal and touching element within the monument.

Directly opposite the entrance, near the rear exit of the monument but within the chamber, is a structure that has been described as a "bas-relief triptych" (Bandara, no date). The text in the propaganda leaflet interprets the bas-relief triptych as "having in essence the design concepts that bring together a symbolic trine of the philosophies of Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity (Bandara, no date). But of course, without the guidance of the propaganda leaflet or a similar tool, this symbolic meaning would escape most visitors. In front of this is a flower altar or a *malasna* found in Buddhist temple for offering flowers. In this particular rendition of the flower altar, there is provision for offering flowers as well as oil lamps.

The layout of the interior has been conceived on the basis of a clear ordering of three inter-related elements in life and politics in recent times: The tablets with the thoughts of parents represent the narratives of violence in the recent past. At the opposite end, the flower altar as well as the coloring of the entire inner chamber is symbolic of the religious domain, where many people looked for solace when secular systems of justice and law and order failed. The clay objects on white pedestals representing human heads are indicative of violent death. In other words, this ordering enmeshes violent death in between the religious domain and the narratives of violence. This interior chamber open to the sky, with very bare sculptural interpretations within it, maintains a certain minimalist aura while simultaneously creating a somber and meditative atmosphere which creates the kind of environment in which to remember those who were lost and to ponder about the wider consequences of that period of political violence. In this sense, it seems to me that compared to the exterior, the interior of the design is successful in terms of communicating the declared objectives of the monument.

However, there are other profound aspects linked to the process of building this monument which are not represented in symbolic form within it, or in the few textual interpretations of it that has emerged thus far. One of the complaints of the parents in Embilipitiya had been the claim that their pain was never recognized and that they were unable to give their lost children formal burials. Of course, this is a situation that can be seen in all societies of terror, when the absence of a body creates serious problems of natural mourning while denying people opportunities for essential ritual obligations associated with death. In the process of hand-molding the clay objects strewn on the floor of the central chamber referred to above, the parents as a collective did get a chance for a process that can be called 'public mourning.'<sup>1</sup> Moreover, through television, this act was seen as far as Embilipitiya where the actual collective mourning took place. On the other hand, the designer of the monument feels that the burning of the clay also offered the parents a kind of symbolic cremation of

their children, a ritual that had been thus far denied to them due to the lack of bodies.

**Reading the Shrine of the Innocents: The problem of dislocation and the absence of a popular organic relationship with the monument**

If we contextualize the *Shrine of the Innocents* in terms of the brief discussion above, it is clear that the monument has to be located and understood in the context of the extreme political violence of the late 1980s in southern Sri Lanka. At the same time, the politics of the period immediately after that period of terror is equally an important context to situate the monument and its establishment. In other words, ideally, the monument is not an autonomous text that stands on its own. It is an extension of the narratives of violence and the discourses of terror of the late 1980s as well as a creation of the politics of the post violence period.



Shrine of the Innocents. View from outside.  
(Source: Jagath Weerasinghe).

On the other hand, monuments are not only about remembering specific acts or persons. A specific memorial and its own history and dynamics of conception and construction can also provide information about the time, the socio-political circumstances of its construction as well as the forces behind its construction rather than merely the events or the persons that are to be commemorated. To a certain extent, I would take this approach in my reading of the *Shrine for the Innocents* as its is clearly not simply an edifice for remembering a terrible incident or a tragic period of the immediate past. It has also much to do with power politics of the present as well as the public sense of amnesia and indifference towards the incidents that the monument is trying to remember.

The question one has to pose is not what the *Shrine of the Innocents* is attempting to commemorate, but does the process of remembering or commemorating that is supposed to be the aim of the monument being realized? If so, how is it realized? If not, how does this non realization manifest itself?

One of the fundamental problems with the *Shrine of the Innocents* has to do with its location, or more precisely, its dislocation. That is, despite (or perhaps more accurately, because of it) the political significance of the location of the monument in terms of national politics, it is physically far removed from the site of the atrocities committed against the group of young students in whose memory (and by extension in the memory of other innocent victims of political violence) the monument was conceived and established in the first place. We have to remember here that the parents who initially requested a monument wanted it to be located in their own town. Compared to this, the rather graphic monument dedicated to a woman killed by the military during the 1971 JVP insurrection in southern Sri Lanka is located in Katharagama where members of the armed forces tortured, publicly humiliated and finally killed a local woman who in local lore was considered a beauty queen. That monument details in very graphic terms--without any room for confusion or re-interpretation -- the last moments in the life of the victim. It is also situated in the midst of a community which consists of the victim's kin and friends. This was also the town where she lived prior to her death. In that sense, this particular monument is not dislocated from the site of this specific incident of violence. As such, other people who were intimately touched by the pain of that violence are still around to visit the site, clean it and offer flowers of remembrance to it, if they want to. In effect, it is part of the community itself; it is part of its everyday. It is physically and emotionally integrated into the community's routine life, and taken for granted but not necessarily forgotten.

At this moment, for purposes of further comparative analysis, let me focus attention on yet another recent monument, the dynamics of which are very different to the *Shrine of the Innocents*. I have in mind the popular shrine or monument built in memory of Baruch Goldstein in Israel, which was dismantled by the government of Israel in late 1999. To understand the emotions and the politics associated with the Baruch Goldstein monument, one needs to pay some attention to its genesis. Goldstein was an immigrant from New York City who worked as a doctor at the Jewish settlement of Kiryat Arba, located just outside Hebron. He was also a member of the outlawed anti Arab Kach movement. In February 1994, he killed 29 Palestinian Muslims as they prayed at Hebron's main mosque. He had gained access to the Tomb of the Patriarchs, considered to be the burial site of Abraham, and is sacred to both Muslims and Jews, and opened fire on the Muslim worshippers. Goldstein himself was beaten to death by those who survived the massacre.

After his death and burial, despite the contradiction between his profession (which was to save lives) and his final act (of mass murder) ultra nationalist Jewish settlers erected a shrine as a public monument in memory of Goldstein around his grave. Clearly, the circumstances of the emergence of this monument are much different from the immediate circumstances that enabled the emergence of the *Shrine of the Innocents*. His act of mass murder was interpreted completely differently by his kin and friends as opposed to most other people. Radical Israelis venerate Goldstein because they believe that he stopped a planned massacre of Jews by Muslims. It was in the context of this belief that his grave became a site for pilgrimage and veneration soon after his death. An inscription on the tomb itself claims

that Goldstein is a “martyr murdered in sanctifying God’s name” and “The holy Dr. Baruch Goldstein ...gave his soul for the people of Israel. It further calls him “honest and pure of heart” (CNN Website 29 December 1999).

The point I want to clarify here is simply the following: The shrine that was built around Goldstein’s grave and the pilgrimages that followed happened as a result of a spontaneous process ensuring that there was an organic link of the community to the monument. Moreover, the people who made it possible also had adequate political power to make it happen. More importantly, the shrine for Goldstein was located in the area where he and his family lived. It was not dislocated from that locality to another due to political or other reasons. All this meant that the monument had a strong local socio-political and emotional foundation for its emergence as well as for its possible future survival. None of the conditions outlined above associated with the Goldstein memorial was visible in the context of the *Shrine for the Innocents* in Sri Lanka. It was dislocated from the site of atrocity and from the areas where the disappeared students lived. Moreover, the surviving kin hardly had any comparable political power unlike the situation in the Israeli case. On the other hand, there was almost no spontaneity in the construction of the *Shrine of the Innocents* despite the pain of the survivors, and all potential organic links to the monument was severed by its (dis)location. By the time it was materialized, the Shrine of the Innocents had merely become a political project of the political coalition in power and not a spontaneous local project over which the local community had any voice or control.

Among other well known and less controversial location-specific monuments are some of the Nazi concentration camps such as Dachau and Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland. In these places, former Nazi concentration and death camps themselves became memorials to the Holocaust as a process as well as to individuals who perished in these camps. Auschwitz alone attracted 500,000 visitors each year. But even then, these monuments also ran the risk of actually disappearing due to disrepair and lack of funds to maintain them (Weissberg 1999: 49). Nevertheless, despite these setbacks places such as Auschwitz and Dachau, as monuments, managed to generate a dynamic of their own which linked them to the world outside. They became part of European and world history and not merely a painful aspect of recent Jewish history. Moreover, they were not simply relics of the past, but also part of the conscience of the present as a consequence of regular formal visits, teaching of history in schools, publicized on-site remembrances and so on.

In terms of the discussion above, I do not intend to argue that monuments by definition have to be located in or in the immediate vicinity of a locality where a particular event that needs to be commemorated took place. After all, many well-known Holocaust memorials themselves are located in sites far away from where the atrocities actually took place. In a sense, one could place Berlin’s Holocaust memorial in such a context. The problem here however is not simply that these memorials are not in places where actual mass killings of the Nazi terror took place, but because they are easy to forget and not notice as explained by Weissberg:

Berlin’s Holocaust memorial is located on a traffic island. Unlike any traffic sign however, it is not placed in direct view of any driver, or in a pedestrian’s path. Placed on a lawn, it stands sideways in front of the Wittenbergplatz subway station. Modest and nonintrusive, it does not beg for attention; it keeps its proper distance from a station which, like many others, served to transport Jews to various collection places --- The Holocaust memorial

in Wittenbergplatz appears itself forgotten and forlorn, a mark in thin air (Weissberg 1999: 45-46).

It seems to me that as a result of the *Shrine of the Innocents* being dislocated from its specific locality and also due to aspects of its design, in practical terms, it has the same attributes of non-intrusiveness as the Berlin memorial referred to above. While the *Shrine of the Innocents* is architecturally and visually quite unique from within, from the outside, from the street, much of that is obscured by the grassy mound that is one of its primary exterior identification markers. That is, it blends too well and comfortably into the surrounding natural landscape consisting of a small stream and an expanse of wetlands that has by now become a golf and recreation area for the affluent. In contrast, the small public park immediately adjacent to the monument is much more striking due to the rather obtrusive Coca Cola signs around it as well as due to the visibility of the white sculpture of mermaids that have been established near the stream. In contrast to these, people who travel along the main road towards the parliament can easily miss the monument and yet notice the park with its aesthetically questionable Coca Cola signs and bathing mermaids.

In this sense, it seems to me that one of the immediate aims of this important monument is lost. That is, it fails to register in the minds of the people the reality of extreme political violence in the country's immediate past, simply by not being noticed due to its rather too subtle architectural exterior. For such a message to get through and for an individual to be interested, he would necessarily have to know about the monument and make the attempt to go inside. The necessary invitation to pause, and make the attempt to visit the monument is strikingly absent at the moment. It seems to me that this lapse has come about as a result of the designer's well established background in archaeology as well as a professional artist. In this context, he has looked at the monument merely from an artistic and archaeological perspective and forgotten its essential monumental aspects. As such, this monument may be better described as an archaeologically informed work of art, rather than a monument in the strictest sense transmitting a particular message. A recent essay on the *Shrine for the Innocents* has observed that the monument is not simply reflective of the designer's background in art and archaeology, but that explanations of the monument are difficult without him, and the designer "is the key informant, not the victims represented in the monument nor their parents (Bulankulame 2000: 6-7). It is in this extended context, marked by a pronounced lack of knowledge on the discourse of monuments and dynamics of monuments that is so profound, that the project has not taken adequate notice of the necessity of visibility and curiosity.

#### **Further Readings of the Shrine of the Innocents**

I have already suggested that the lack of an organic link to the outside world is the central problem of this monument. Its dislocation from the site of the tragedy is only one reason for this outcome. Even in the present location, the design of the monument makes no attempts to ensure its visibility or link it to other aspects of life in the locality. For example, in about

ten ad hoc visits to the monument over a period of one month at different times of the day in September 2000, I met no one within the premises. I also met no one outside the premises who was interested in the monument. But on most of these occasions, particularly in the evenings, there were many people in the adjacent small park as well as many others in the nearby reclaimed land playing cricket. In addition to the problem of the grassy mound that blends the monument into the landscape and makes it relatively invisible, the design is straddled with a number of other problems as well. The entrance to the monument is not from the main road. To gain entry into it one has to gain access to the adjoining vacant and dusty land and go through a small gate. The monument premises itself is enclosed by a rather uninviting fence of barbed wire, making it a rather uninviting place. Even if people notice it, they are never sure whether it is permissible to go in or not.

It seems to me that to create an organic link with the monument that was in any case located out of context, it was necessary to make extra efforts. For instance, the existence of the monument should have ideally entered what can only be called the discourse on traffic. These are the recently installed large green luminous sign boards which appear above roads in Colombo and some suburbs. They point motorists in different directions – to specific towns, streets or other locations. Those signs could have easily incorporated directions to the *Shrine of the Innocents* in the same way existing signs guide motorists in the direction of the Parliament. The monument in any case does not have any sign that is visible from the street proclaiming what it is. Its existence also has to enter into other discourses such as travel books and school texts.

More importantly, a monument of this nature, with the important message and memories it proclaims to be carrying, should have been designed as part of a larger constellation of activities and things, taking into account the manner in which the people in the city and suburbs spend their leisure. This is particularly important given its already established dislocation. By this I mean that the monument could have been designed as part of a park for which there is ample room in the vicinity and even greater need. If that was the case, people who visited the park (which many people do anyway) may also have visited the monument. In such a context, over time, a kind of organic link with the monument and the public that it currently lacks may have evolved. This is particularly important given the lack of visibility of the monument from the main road.

In his speech, on the day the monument was opened to the public, its designer made the following wish: “I hope that the parents of the disappeared and murdered children will develop a kind of ritualistic relationship with the memorial” (Weerasinghe 1999). By this he meant that such people would make the site an object of pilgrimage and remembrance. That is why there are provisions for offering flowers and embedded clay lamps that can be filled with oil and lit, quite similar to rituals in Buddhist temples. But so far the flower altar and the lamps have been empty and dry. It does not appear that anyone has yet made it a site of pilgrimage. While talking about Euro-American national memory, Noyes and Abrahams have noted that the most successful formulations of formalized national memory are those that have incorporated pre-existing local performances (1999: 77). It is in this context that they situate the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial “designed to provide a centralizing site for vernacular practices of grave visiting and decoration” (Noyes & Abrahams 1999: 78).

It seems to me that the concept of the *Shrine of the Innocents* has misinterpreted the meaning of ritual and pilgrimage in the local context. Particularly in the Sinhala Buddhist

context, pilgrimages were always religious. In other words, they had something to do with the Buddha. Main pilgrim centers were either places where the Buddha was supposed to have visited, where his relics were enshrined or locations important to local Buddhism for other historic or mythic reasons. On the other hand, in the Sri Lankan Buddhist context there was hardly any grave visiting in the secular sense. Comparatively few people built graves as there were other culturally acceptable ways of remembering the dead through rituals. Cemeteries as sites associated with death were not considered auspicious places for the living to spend time in. In such a context, it is very unlikely that the kind of ritual linkage that the designer of the monument anticipated would naturally manifest. Such a manifestation would have to depend on a serious epistemic break in the way pilgrimages and acts of remembering the dead are defined and practiced within the ritual and popular discourse among the Sinhalese in particular and Sri Lankans in general. Such an epistemic break is unlikely to take place without a major intervention, at a large scale and national level. Such an intervention cannot be accidental; it will have to be by design.

It is then in this context that I would like to briefly explore the concept of 'calendar custom' and its applicability in reading the future, if not the present of the *Shrine of the Innocents*. Talking of calendar customs in the European context, Noyes and Abrahams notes that:

This body of observances repeated from year to year on a given date in a given place constitutes a specific form of European collective memory: memory of the collective. Calendar customs are powerful sensory experiences undergone in common, consensual in both the usual sense and the etymological one; felt together (1999: 79)

If one takes the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington DC, its rather dynamic and organic link to the society outside is not only a consequence of the political power of the initiators of the monument and the spontaneous support it received from many sections of American society, but also because the memorial is incorporated within the idea of calendar custom. Clearly, thousands of people who had nothing to do with the Vietnam war visit the memorial as tourists because it is incorporated within the travel discourse as well as the city's traffic discourse. Others, who lost kin and friends in that war also visit the memorial on the days these individuals lost their lives, on their birth days or simply on days when the living are free to visit. At the same

time, many more visit the monument on specified days such as the Veterans' Day which the American state has recognized in its official calendar. That gives the monument recognition, validity and visibility at the level of national politics of that country, while it also allows for people from different parts of the country who have been part of the Vietnam experience to congregate at the site on that particular day to remember those they have lost and to meet others who survived. In this process of calendar custom, the individual memories and experiences of many individuals have been transformed into the more elaborated and invented traditions of the nation or the state. In the words of Noyes and Abrahams, "the calendar custom creates the collectivity as an objective entity that can be remembered" (1999: 80).

It seems to me that one of the realistic ways in which to incorporate the *Shrine of*

*the Innocents* within the lives of the people in its locality and others who visit the area as well as those who live in far away places who have been intimately touched by the pain of political violence, would be to incorporate it within the notion of calendar custom. In other words, the *Shrine of the Innocents* needs a highly publicized purpose and a set of invented rituals at the national level. For instance, if there is a state declared day for the innocents, within which the dynamics of the monument could be reorganized, over time, the initial hope of the designer of the monument may yet be realized. At such a moment, perhaps the parents and others who have felt the pain of political violence may feel an obligation to visit the monument and feel its meaning and purpose as a collective.

### Concluding Comments

In concluding my reading of the *Shrine of the Innocents* I would like to focus on one key point in addition to the issues I have already placed in context. This has to do with the transformation of the monument from the emotional wish of a group of aggrieved parents to a political project designed to cater to the specific political agenda of a series of power players. It is in the context of this transformation that the monument has ceased to be a monument with public recognition and emotional attachment, and has become the residue of a political agenda that itself is forgotten by now. It was also in this context that the wish for a simple monument in the aggrieved people's own locality was transformed into an elaborate and highly symbolic interpretative work of art located near the national parliament.

It was in this extended context that the project was financed with only a government grant where there was no other attempts to establish a fund with contributions from the private sector or concerned citizens that would have ensured wider public participation, ownership and emotional linkage to the monument. It seems to me that the premature opening of the monument just prior to the presidential election in 1999 is also indicative of the cynicism with which power players had transformed the idea of the monument into a political project.

As it is, in practical terms, the monument is more a shrine to the realities of power play in contemporary Sri Lankan politics than a memorial for victims of political violence. This is particularly the case in a situation, where its future physical survival, ideological direction and popular ownership have not yet been decided. Currently, the monument is neglected without anybody or any institution taking regular care to clean the premises or water the grass. In legal terms, though supposedly completed, it is still an incomplete work site of the State Engineering Corporation. By 2007, the reclaimed land around the monument which many believed would be converted into a park and football field had become massive privately owned golf course and hotel and restaurant complex through a shady land deal initiated by the same government that also sponsored the monument. This means that the potential for public access to the wider area in which the monument is located has been effectively blocked.

The future and objectives of the monument, in the sense articulated by its designer in late 1999 can only be realized if the monument would be incorporated within the daily activities of the people in the vicinity as well as in terms of the rituals of a calendar custom at the national level. To achieve these ends, it would also need a committed agency to look into its routine activities and needs, which will be able to look beyond short term political

goals of power players. For the moment, rather than a monument for the disappeared, it the *Shrine of the Innocents* has become a monument that has effectively disappeared from public memory and consciousness.

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