

Search for the Universal

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Presented at On Monumentality: Place, Representation & The Public Realm, RAIA NSW Chapter Conference, Sydney, NSW, October 11–12, 2002
Published in "Search for the Universal," *On Monumentality* (Sydney: RAIA, 2002): 8

At the close of World War II Louis Kahn, in an essay entitled 'Monumentality', attempted to map out the direction for twentieth century architecture. He wrote enthusiastically of the possibilities provided by new technology and new science, "of living in an unbalanced state of relativity." Kahn was excited at the new structural possibilities, the new social programs, and the new monumentality of continuous structures. Much as we are today excited by globalisation, fragmentation, and computer aided design and manufacturing.¹

But in this excitement and simplification he pointed out the enigmatic nature of monumentality, suggesting that it cannot be intentionally created and that it is more about content than form: "Neither the finest material nor the most advanced technology need enter a work of monumental character for the same reason that the finest ink was not required to draw up the Magna Carta." The character and content Kahn referred to has both a spiritual and social dimension and it is perhaps not so much what is changing in humanity as what is unchanging that is the subject of monumentality.

Of course, temporal human values, deeds, and the glorification of individuals will continue to be the subject of architecture attempting to represent and monumentalise. But if we untangle the showy images, the branding and the attention seeking, we realise that the quality that remains, that continues to have meaning for us, has nothing to do with the individual, with the ego of the patron or the architect.

Monumentality is concerned not with the private interest but with what is shared—the public interest, the willing sacrifice of the interests of the individual for the collective. These are the values and content to be embodied and represented in our public institutions, in a monumental architecture. But equally, it is concerned with what is outside any temporal human institution and seeks a spiritual connection to something absolutely fundamental to our humanity, something eternal.

When we look out at the horizon over the ocean it has a calming, meditative effect; we are placed in relation to the world in a way that is at once overwhelming, emphasising our insignificance in relation to the vastness of the ocean, or the stars. But at the same time we are comforted, we are pleased to be such a small part, our egos recede and we feel momentarily connected.

Uluru, the greatest monument in Australia, communicates this sense of the eternal, of the universal, in a way that moves all of us, allowing us to experience something outside ourselves, a profound interconnection.

Architecture can also have this effect. This is monumentality in architecture. It has little to do with the size or even the purpose of the building. It is the ability to lift us beyond our short and very limited existence. Although this architecture may decay and fall into the ground, it creates relations and provokes emotions that touch some deep part of all of us.



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At about the same time as Louis Khan was writing his essay, Arthur Stace was writing one word in chalk all over Sydney: "Eternity". His fragile words washed away and rewritten again and again are etched in the memory of Sydneysiders. This word, in Copperplate script, in that hand, although so intangible, became monumental. It is also the word that more than any other explains monumentality.

The spiritual element of monumentality is our desire to reach towards to the eternal, to something beyond our limits, our brief moment. The social element of monumentality is our desire to connect to the other(s), to move beyond isolated self-interest to shared representations and values.

Both desires are an effort to move outside ourselves, to overcome in some way the tyranny of the ego, towards something greater than our individual being.