Commemorating COVID

Mitchell Joachim, Peder Anker, and Paul D. Miller

A worldwide event as consequential as the COVID-19 pandemic deserves to have a memorial.

——

How can compassionate architects and designers confront our understanding of memorial design in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic? Memorial creation has long served as a conceptual instrument to shape and preserve memory. As abstract monuments, memorials hold a unique position in cultural memory, given their ability to pay tribute to the most challenging periods of human history. As we emerge from a pandemic that has devastated millions of lives, it is essential to contemplate how we should challenge ideas about remembrance and social solidarity on an unprecedented scale.

How must shattered communities conceptualize this stage in global human history? We need to cultivate new tools to remember the precious lives that have been taken. Memory is not a perfect record of the past but a potential filter through which we see tomorrow. We have taken an interdisciplinary approach to investigate global social trauma by revealing techniques from social psychology, history, sustainable architecture, medicine, and music composition.

We have an egalitarian approach to unforgetting the COVID-19 pandemic. Memorial design has a rich history, but the challenges of the twenty-first century require us to develop new strategies for memorialization. Some of the characteristics of this global public health crisis have encouraged many to rethink linear narratives in relation to magnitude and site. Recently, the procedures of abstraction and minimalism have begun to dominate memorial art. From David Adjaye's 2013 Gwangju Pavilion to MASS Design Group's 2018 National Memorial for Peace and Justice, there are innumerable examples of abstract aesthetics being used to aid viewers to think judiciously about the form and function of memorial art. A growing number of contemporary architects and designers have used this style to generate critical questions about the purpose of memorialization. The COVID-19 Memory Research Group aims to scrutinize the architectural and design approaches that are well suited to dynamic narratives, scale, and locality in the aftermath of a global mass-trauma event.

Our current effort began by seeking a universal term. We sensibly selected the word *memoro*. In the international language of Esperanto, the term *memoro* comes from the Latin *memor*, "remembering, mindful." Although the number of active Esperanto speakers is roughly one hundred thousand, the worldwide language has become a symbol of internationalism and cooperation. A memorial planned under the COVID-19 Memory Research Group explores many impartial solutions and neutral paths toward remembrance; thus, our project title, Memoro, must reflect that acutely sensitive position. We believe that solidarity in the aftermath of the pandemic must transcend cultural, social, and national barriers. A global public health crisis necessitates a global response, and research into the memory of COVID-19 must recognize the incredible diversity of experiences that exist when it comes to this abysmal circumstance.

In our latest iteration of the Memoro project, we thought of a multiscaled platform to celebrate remembrance. This working proposal is based on small,
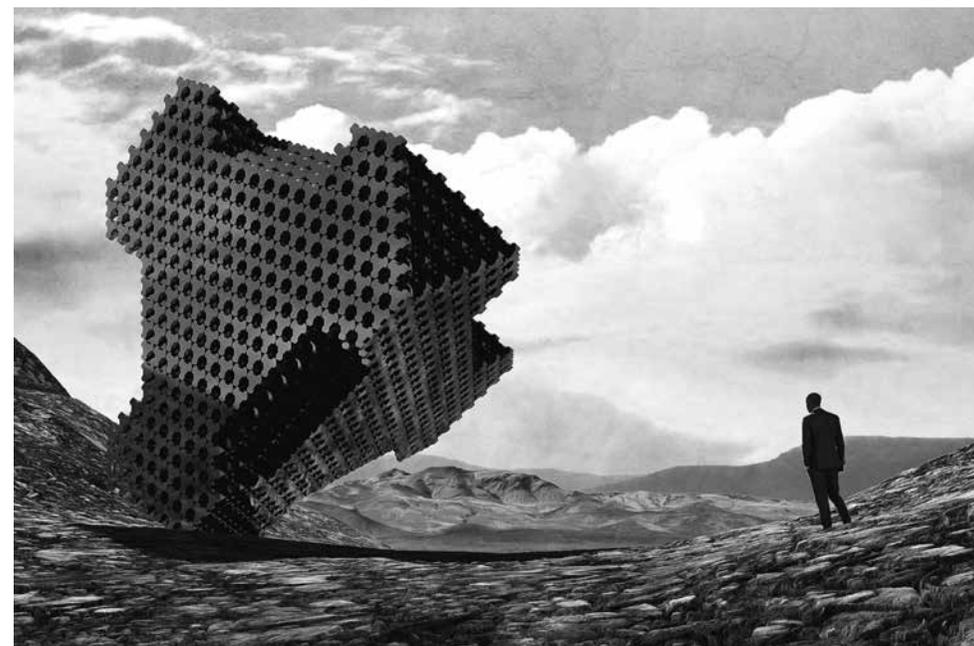
Terreform ONE, rendering of the proposed COVID Memoro / Terreform ONE

elemental distributed artifacts or geometric wedges that can be joined together to form a larger collective monument. Every hand-sized, shard-like element is unique, inscribed with the vital details of an individual who perished because of the virus. Each personal miniature artifact contains a photo, date, location, and audio data file provided by the individual's family and loved ones. Replicas of these personal geometric elements are correspondingly distributed and added to other larger monuments. These aggregate monuments are further assembled into four essential scales of public memorialization; local/community, city/town, regional/national, and continental/global. The aim is to commemorate the memory of everyday people in multiple different levels of tangible engagement. For example, a family can have a piece of the memorial at home and visit the national version that includes a duplicate artifact surrounded by others.

Millions of lives are now gone, but the memories of these precious individuals will assuredly remain with us. The COVID-19 Memory Research Group aims to develop new structures for communities to come together and reflect on the memory of those who perished due to the pandemic. This worldwide crisis was profoundly unfortunate and will not be soon forgotten.

Mitchell Joachim is an architect, the cofounder of Terreform ONE, and an associate professor of practice at New York University.

Peder Anker is a professor of history at the Gallatin School of Individualized Study at New York University.

Paul D. Miller, aka DJ Spooky, is a composer, a multimedia artist, a writer, and a professor at the European Graduate School.