

Communicating non-violence in public memorials

Cape Town, South Africa - WACC's Congress 2008 takes place in Cape Town, South Africa, in nearly one year's time. The theme of violence, especially violence against women, will not be far from the agenda. South Africa has suffered its own share of horrendous conflict during apartheid and in the years afterwards.

The country's brave attempts to create a culture of peace were made all the more poignant through the work of its Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a kind of public testament (or memorial) to the struggle.

Public memorials are usually set up by nation-states to commemorate heroes and heroines or to mark traumas in national life. As a form of communication they confer dignity on sacrifice and loss and they remind people of the need to remember.

The last forty years of the 20th century saw wars in Vietnam and Cambodia, vile dictatorships in Latin America, civil conflicts and genocide in Africa, and ethnic violence and religious nationalism in Europe. Memorials arose to the 'disappeared' of Latin America, the thousands of unnamed victims of war in south-east Asia, and those murdered during Rwanda's one hundred days of insanity.

Recently there has been a further shift toward memorialising people whose lives have been cut short by violence in public places. When fourteen women were murdered at the University of Montreal on 6 December 1989, there was a huge public outcry. Canada became the first country in the world to build memorials specifically to women who were murdered. Memorial organizers and supporters were determined to cut through the denial of violence in society, to remember the women lost instead of those who killed them.

Across Canada, there are over 50 monuments to women murdered. Each memorial tells at least two stories: the terrible one of unremitting violence against women and the triumphant one of women joining against all odds to seize public space, name the violence, and insist that society remember.

In 1991, Ottawa women were subjected to a series of particularly brutal murders. Their sense of

outrage culminated in an innovative call for change when local lawyer Patricia Allen was murdered with a crossbow in broad daylight on a downtown street. The Women's Urgent Action Committee (WUAC) held a vigil in protest of her death and decided to set up their own memorial.

One year later, on 6 December 1992, they unveiled Enclave, Women's Monument Against Violence. Two texts in French and English read: A la mémoire de toutes les femmes qui ont subi jusqu'à la mort la violence des hommes. Imaginons un monde où les femmes, libérées de l'emprise de la violence, s'épanouissent dans le respect et la liberté. (To honour and to grieve all women abused and murdered by men. Envision a world without violence where women are respected and free.)

Public memorials do not prevent murder or war. They record the sad fact that we live in a culture of violence that allows such acts to take place. In contrast, there are the many public museums, memorials and monuments to peace that deserve to be better known. The right to public memory is meaningless without these affirmations that a culture of peace is possible.

Source: <http://www.globalwomensmemorial.org/>

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