

# War memorials as a non-monologic heritage site

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## Introduction

War memorial sites are one of the most common visual and material arenas through which nations construct and share their past (Halbwachs [1941] 1992). Memorial sites have always been considered important for cultivating the national collective memory (Mosse 1990). War monuments act as a visual and material sign of the collective militarized memory, which is positioned in the public sphere and represents “the political reading of history” (Assmann and Czaplicka 1993, p. 48). By constructing the warrior ethos through monuments, the monuments wish to become an integral part of the nation's heritage to strengthen social solidarity, common legacy, commitment, and belonging (Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983). In other words, the nationalization of the slain soldiers and the glorification of the military acts has become one of the pillars of the nation's heritage to this day. Serving as symbols and keystones of the national heritage, war monuments usually express a mono-perspectival culture of memory that emphasizes the importance of militarized activities. However, in some cases war monuments can also expose and reflect lines of tensions and conflicts that fracture the national ethos, subvert it, and suggest alternative narratives of remembering (Osborne 2001).

The sanctification of the deceased in the Zionist culture contributed to the creation of a powerful communal solidarity and heritage that defined and legitimized the existence of the state of Israel (Zertal 2005). Being involved in an ongoing bloody conflict with parts of the Arab world and coping with the loss of thousands of soldiers and civilians, the geography of the institutionalized memorial sites and monuments in Israel is usually designed and manifested as a monolithic militarized narrative (Bilu and Witztum 2000). This narrative of heroism and sacrifice serves as a symbolic visual-material representation of the hegemonic collective values and justifies the tremendous loss of human lives (Levinger 1993). The design of the iconography of the memorial landscape exposes the various ways these sites are taking part in the nation's heritage construction (Amir 2006). *The Monument to the Negev Brigade in Israel* (The Monument), which was designed by Danny Karavan (1963–1968) to commemorate the fallen soldiers that lost their lives during the ‘48 war, manifests a complex

memory of this kind. The Monument is an unusual memorial site due to its visual and material language. Analyzing the design of this symbolic landscape, I use approaches that view monuments and heritage as a result of social construction that is mediated and narrated through specific historical and ideological frames. As opposed to critical perspectives that view heritage as a manifestation of power relations, this analysis does not reduce the complexity of culture by over emphasizing the effect of power. Thus, exposing the ways that The Monument is constructing the national heritage will decode various narratives and meanings that it offers through different practices and interactions with the site. Delving into these practices allows for a non-monologic reading of the monument that suggests that The Monument to the Negev Brigade is not only a result of reproducing or resisting the political agendas it is meant to convey. Hence, shedding light on the ways that the discourse of heritage is constructed, aims to widen the research about the potential roles of memorial sites in planting seeds of democratization of heritage and of ways of sharing.

## Military memorial sites in Israel

There are over a thousand monuments commemorating the fallen in Israel, which serve as tangible signs in the Israeli landscape (Shamir 2006). The monuments were established in memory of events and people that gave their life for the nation during the Zionist settlement period prior to '48 and after the state of Israel was established. The monuments are intended to serve a dual purpose – private and public – wishing to produce the sense of a shared past, and a present collective identity (Azaryahu 1992). In the private sphere, the monuments aim to console the families of the fallen and help them cope with bereavement, while honoring their loved ones who gave their lives for the nation. In the public sphere, the monuments aim to educate the nation by remembering the heroism and sacrifice of those who gave their lives so that others could live, while constructing the national heritage as the “sacred space” of the modern national secular community (Schwartz 1982).

The first monuments in Israel were built in the 1920s to commemorate the fallen in the Second World War and in the struggle against the British colonial rule in Palestine (Levinger 2006). It is important to note that at that time, martyrs' commemoration (ceremonies, political calendars, national holidays, oral poetry) also played an important role in the Palestinian nationalization process (Sorek 2013). The 1950s saw the appearance in the Israeli sphere of monuments commemorating members of the Israeli Defense Force who had fallen in the various wars and military operations that had taken place since the state's establishment. These monuments were characterized by figurative images, emphasizing the human figure and the motif of heroism and sacrifice for the collective. The role of the monuments was to arouse feelings of sympathy in the Israeli-Zionist public and reinforce the transformation of the her-

itage of the fallen into the national heritage (Bar 2020). In the following years some of the monuments were also designed as theatrical spaces hosting the annual commemoration ceremonies. Usually, the stage structure was created by casting a wide horizontal area backed by a wall bearing reliefs and an inscription. These served as the setting for the ceremony that took place on the stage (Ben-Amos 2002). The common memorial monument model featured a stone- or marble-covered wall engraved with the names of the fallen, alongside a relief of a wounded soldier or an allegorical description such as a lion figure.

In the 1970s the monuments' design began to take on a more abstract aspect, created by using abstract shapes made of concrete and iron. These monuments are large, tall, and imposing. With this appearance the monuments came to resemble environmental sculptures. Yet, despite the changing styles, most of the monuments did not convey an alternative message. New and old forms presented similar national ideological meanings. Whether it was a figurative form or an abstract form, the monuments usually presented images that displayed heroism and indicated that wars had a noble and uplifting cause on the one hand, and a sad, tragic, and dreadful impact on the other hand (Handelman and Shamgar-Handelman 1997); this was true both in the Zionist sites and in those of Palestinians living in Israel (Ben-Zvi, Khalilieh and Farah 2008).

## The Negev Brigade's involvement in the '48 war

The 1948 war was the result of more than half a century of friction between Arabs and Jews, which began with the immigration of Zionist Jewish settlers to the country. Over the years, the violent relationship between the Zionist settlers and the Arab inhabitants took on a more and more nationalist character (Morris 2008). The UN resolution of November 1947 calling for the Partition of Palestine was the spark that ignited the war in 1948. The war, called by the Palestinians *al-Nakba* (Arabic for The Catastrophe) and by the Zionist Jews *Milchemet Ha'atzmaut* (Hebrew for War of Independence, began as a "civil war" and ended as an all-out regional war after the invasion of armies from Arab countries (Syria, Iraq, Jordan, and Egypt). During the war David Ben Gurion served as the head of the Zionist Jewish *Yishuv*'s<sup>1</sup> leadership. In his view, the Negev and Eilat, nowadays the southern periphery of the state of Israel, held great economic and strategic importance. Although Ben Gurion insisted that the Negev should be divided between the Jewish state and the Arab state, he saw these areas as holding great potential for settlement and for creating a continu-

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1 The *Yishuv* refers to the Jewish settlement in Palestine/Eretz-Israel (mandatory Palestine) from the Ottoman period through the British Mandate.

ity of independent Jewish settlements to develop Israel's agriculture and economy. The fight for the Negev was therefore a central component of the war (Asia 1994).

The Negev Brigade took an important part in the war. The brigade was founded in March 1948 and included three of the *Palmach* Battalions. In October of that year, the brigade fought in the *Yoav Operation* and in the conquest of the city of Be'er Sheva. The purpose of the operation was to break through to the detached Negev, to fight off the Egyptian army, to conquer Be'er Sheva, and then to gain control over the Negev desert. Overall, 5,800 civilians and soldiers died during the war (5% of the Jewish Yishuv). There is no information regarding the number of casualties among the Palestinian civilians and soldiers (12,000 estimated). The Palmach brigade lost 324 Jewish fighters who fell while fighting in the bitter battles in the Negev desert (Cohen et al. 2011)

## The Monument to the Negev Brigade

The Monument to the Negev Brigade was designed by Danny Karavan and built from 1963 until 1968. The monument is erected on a hill on the outskirts of Be'er Sheva, the biggest Jewish settlement in the Negev desert, overlooking the city and the Hebron Mountains. The monument covers a large area of 10,000 square meters, consisting of 18 separate elements. It is made of exposed raw concrete, copper, and water. Karavan designed the monument to commemorate the fallen soldiers from the Palmach brigade, which was the major force participating in the battles in the Negev during the 1948 War (Eshel 2018).

The monument comprises geometrical elements, as well as the names of the martyrs, the symbol of the *Palmach*, the battle diary of the brigade, battle maps and records, verses, and songs. These phrases and images are engraved in concrete and copper plates. They also include the statement made by Karavan: "passer-by, you come through the gates of the synagogue of our love for the land of the Negev" (Karavan 2014).

The monument is part of 150 memorial sites that were erected to commemorate the 5,800 fallen in the '48 war (Cohen, Cohen and Mendelsohn 2011). There is approximately one monument for every 40 soldiers that lost their lives in the war. The war veterans, called the "canonical generation", were considered as heroes, and expected to symbolize the ideological narrative of the nation in a unified voice (Ben-Zeev and Lomsky-Feder 2009). Many of the monuments that represented the "canonical generation" were created in a figurative style where the army and the soldiers were shown as the authentic national patriots (Brog 2003).

As already mentioned, the Negev Monument deviates from this pattern. At the time he created the monument, Danny Karavan was already a well-known sculptor, set designer and painter who worked in the spirit of the *Land Art Movement*. Today

his sculptures are exhibited in open spaces in Israel and around the world, in numerous countries, including: The United States, France, Japan, Germany, South Korea, and Spain. From the moment of its creation the Negev Monument, one of his early works, stood out in the landscape of the previous monuments that adorned the Zionist-Israeli sphere of commemoration (Manor 2014).

## Methods

The research of The Monument was conducted during the year 2020. The field work included several participant observations of the memorial site. But my first visit to the monument happened at night, a few years before the research began. I joined a group of friends, living in Be'er Sheva, to hang out in the site. The location – a monument for the fallen soldiers – was not unusual for those living in the area. I had not known the monument before and knew nothing about the story it was seeking to tell. Despite that, the monument impressed me immediately. Trying to find my way in the dark I felt lost in it while the sculptural elements were leading me inside. Walking through the canal, hearing the whistles from the watchtower, the sound of the flowing water, and the fluttering flag provoked emotional and bodily experiences that were enveloping me into the place/story. A few years later I came back to the site as a researcher. The principal method used during the observations was filming. The monument was filmed on two different occasions. The first was on September 18, 2020. I chose to visit the monument during this period because the lockdown that was announced that day, due to COVID 19 instructions, enabled me to film the site without any interference (individual visitors, organized tours). On this visit I concentrated on the different shapes constructing the monument from various angles and during different hours of the day. My next observation was conducted on November 11, 2020. On this visit I concentrated on the relationships between the other visitors and the monument. The images were captured by using a camera (canon 80D) and a video camera. Visual methodologies were used to interpret the visual material (Rose 2001). Both the photographs and the videos were analyzed in order to expose the language of the monument and the ways this language creates and mediates the monument's narratives through shape, size, material, light, and interaction.

## Analysis

### Monuments of war as a monologic shared heritage

As The Monument is designed to commemorate the fallen of the Palmach brigade in the '48 war, the narrative of military struggle for the land is embedded in the site from the Zionist ideological point of view. The military struggle is demonstrated in the monument by using architectural symbolism that highlights the important role of the Palmach soldiers in conquering and controlling the land. The intersection between war, soldiers, and land was constructed by juxtaposing various large geometrical structures made of concrete. The cylinder, a perforated 70-foot high tower, alludes to a watchtower shelled with gunfire (Manor 2014). The horizontal composition also resembles the Tower and Stockade (*Homa U'migdal* in Hebrew) that was a settlement method and a configuration of sovereignty, used by Zionist pioneers during the 1936–1939 Arab revolt to create contiguous Jewish-populated regions in remote areas, which would later help determine the borders (Foote and Azaryahu 2007). The pipeline tunnel recalls the only water supply to the Negev. The canal conveyed water from the Jordan River, passing it on to Israel's densely populated regions to enable the development of the Negev desert settlements, and thus was glorified for its contribution to the effort to “make the desert bloom”. The long passageways that stretch along the site resemble military equipment and weapons storage and military communication canals. The ditches echo the military bunkers and pits trenches that protected the troops from the enemy's artillery and gunfire and become archetypically associated with war and with the mythization, exaltation, and justification of the war experience (Mosse 1990). The pyramid shape is reminiscent of sheets of military tents. Combined and connected, the structures represent a simulation of a war zone. A big split dome, standing opposite the vertical cylinder, integrates the human factor into the somewhat abandoned, abstract, and dramatic battlefield appearance. The names of the 324 fallen are engraved inside the curved dome's concrete walls, according to the period and battle where they sacrificed their lives. A wall situated at the entrance to the monument adds additional human artifacts, among them: the badge of the Palmach brigade, soldiers' diary passages, battle registry, songs, and verses from the Old Testament (2 Kings 2:12). To further symbolize the connection between the soldiers and the land, the monument includes within its structure traces of the human aspects by combining image and sound. Some of the walls are stamped with shoe prints that echo the existence of soldiers and pioneers who fought and established their home in the desert. As the visitors walk inside the structure of the dome and view the stamped shoe prints, they can hear, at the same time, the footsteps of the visitors walking outside the monuments. The image and the soundtrack collide and create an ongoing psychological sensation that echoes the soldiers' walking by with their troops. Moreover, creating the structures

from bare and raw cement also holds symbolic meanings. In the Zionist narrative, concrete was perceived as a strong, exposed, material that served as the basic infrastructure of the Zionist nation-building project. These rough and powerful features were associated with the image of the Zionist pioneers and soldiers (Almog 2000). Overall, the site echoes the Jewish Zionist binary meta-narrative “from destruction to redemption”, which is symbolically reflected in the spatial dualities created by the geometrical forms. The open-closed, below-above, and dark-light effects metaphorically represent the dead as opposed to the living, for whom the fallen gave their lives (Amir 2006). Through that, the symbolic architecture arouses the visitors’ patriotic feelings and emotions. The “spatially specific” positioning of the Negev Monument – on a hilltop that overlooks the landscape – further draws the visitors’ attention to the connection between the fallen and the centrality of the land in the Zionist ideology and actions. Being in the public sphere, the monument’s control can also be understood as the state’s control, not only over the land, but also over the memories attached to the land and the shared heritage it wishes to produce. In other words, the way The Monument represents man and land reflects the ways the dominant memories of the nation are constructed. These ties, which create a stone mosaic of men and land as an inherently zero-sum condition, are blocking counter historical narratives, like the contrasting memory of the Palestinian refugees who fled the Negev and the contrasting memory of the Palestinian-Bedouins who are living in the Negev to this day. Marking The Monument as a tourist site even strengthens the hegemonic national narrative, since the visitors, who are not necessarily related to the fallen, are invited to take part in the fallen memory and to be included in the national collective memory and heritage. Since the national Israeli-Palestinian conflict that The Monument represents has not been resolved yet, and since both sides of the conflict still hold different opinions regarding the war, being included in the memorial’s narrative holds an ideological-political meaning that does not apply only to the universal aspects of life and death, sacrifice and altruism. When constructing The Monument, the perspective of the enemy was disregarded. No conversation about the enemy’s ideological and political perspective was considered as a legitimate view to be expressed by visitors (Noy 2011). Being dehumanized, the enemy was excluded from the Zionist collective narrative, including the Muslim cemeteries in Israel (Bar 2020), and vice versa. This ethno-national spatial divide served to construct an essential distinction between Jews and Arabs, which not only encapsulates the ethno-national conflict, but also prevents any contradictory narration of the war that can challenge the Zionist point of view. The creation of an oxymoronic perspective that includes the other parties involved was perceived as a dangerous political transgression. Thus, the monument served as part of the political technology that safeguarded the symbolic boundaries of the nation. (Fig. 1)

Fig. 1: *The Monument to the Negev Brigade, Be'er Sheva (Photo: Sapir Bar El)*



Fig. 2: *The Monument to the Negev Brigade, Be'er Sheva (Photo: Sapir Bar El)*



## Monuments of war as a polysemic shared heritage

The Monument's presence also imposes polysemic meanings of space and place, even though the monument has been state-narrated. Some of these meanings resist the common national narrative imposed on memorial sites in Israel by recodifying the landscape outside of the narratives and signs that it was supposed to present. Even though state-narrated storied spaces are the product of social structures and relations that are framed by the dominant ideological narrative, The Monument enables the creation of meanings that open the site's politicized messages through the architectural experience it offers. The visual and bodily experiences are anchored in the ways the artificial existence of the monument is blended with the surrounding landscape. It is important to note that the land was heavily politicized and served as a crucial component of the Zionist ideology. The Zionist movement adopted a "territorial nationality" that perceived the land of Palestine/Eretz-Israel both as a holy place or space of Judaism and as the exclusive homeland and state of the Jewish people (Ravitzky 1999). To realize the affinity between history and nationality and to transform the Jewish immigrants to the (holy) land into "natural natives" of the (national) land, the landscape became an ideology, a narrative, and a practice to be performed in rituals and in everyday life activities (Gurevitch 1997). This national ethos was reproduced through intensive archeological digging (Feigh and Shiloni 2008), mapping (Benvenisti 1997), and the materialization of the land through geographical lexicons, travel books, and guidebooks (Eliasz 2008). Alongside this nationalized concept of the land, The Monument offers more connections to the land that broaden the ideological framing. This connection of man-land admires the land, but not in the same way as in the national mythologization project. This connection to the land is mainly demonstrated by The Monument's desire to integrate itself and the visitors into the landscape in which they are located; a desire that is not framed by a national agenda. "I wanted the monument to be part of the landscape, and for people to be part of it when they are inside it", states Karavan in a documentary film produced by the Israel Film Service (1976). To interweave environment, man, and monument, the abstract structures appeal to the natural surroundings that are not necessarily connected to military objects and to the war. While memorial sites aim to concretize heritage in terms of place and time, The Monument also strips place and time of the militaristic narrative. The ball, triangle, cylinder, square, and circle act and can be experienced as a reification of the desert landscapes. Some of the shapes are designed as flat surfaces that turn and twist in different directions. The delicate streams blend into the desert surrounding the site, and almost assimilate into its curved sandy hills, dunes, and slopes. The way the site stretches out into the desert, together with the soil that heaps up along its sides, blurs the boundaries between the two and suggests that the monument and the land are integral parts. The yellowish-grey color of the materials used also

contributes to this effect/message; especially the huge planks of raw bare concrete that resemble the colors of the clay and sand that make up the desert soil. In certain parts of the day, they even blur the hills surrounding the monument. A different feature through which The Monument symbolically merges with the landscape is the various ways nature invades the monument and blends in with its overall looks. The concrete body of the monument is breached with round holes and straight sections that create windows onto the landscape and envelope the desert views within the site. Grains of sand and rays of sunlight that enter through the holes consolidate the inner body of the monument with its surrounding. Some more holes punctuating the central dome blend into the darkness and light up the structure, creating an assemblage of the desert's direct sun and the darkness of the heavy object (Welch 2013). Other spiritual aspects are derived from the geometrical shapes themselves. Some objects, like the circle and the dome, are associated with spirituality, as perfection, eternity, and even the heavens are ascribed to them in different cultures. These open forms create various levels of engagement that give the visitors the experience of "being part of". By using bodily practices, they enable the visitors to walk on and through The Monument and even to be swallowed up by The Monument for a few minutes. "Disappearing" in the concrete artificial structure and shapes in the middle of the desert enables the visitors to gain a somewhat existential perspective and even a sense of dislocation that is not tied to certain ideologies. In this manner The Monument can be viewed as a "negative representation" of war since it is detached from specific meanings. This "Zionist iconoclastic" mysticism is achieved, unexpectedly, through the experiences of melting into the desert land, which appears unrepresentable and transcendent without the national territorial mythologization.

Beyond the concrete desert space, the monument also contains the four natural elements: earth, wind, water, and fire. The desert earth covers and reveals the monument; the wind whistles in the slits of the vast shapes; water flows through the concrete canals; the memorial fire blazes beside them. Although the elements are not disconnected from the national ideological contexts, the various elements also function as abstract shapes in and of themselves, illustrating the existence of the material world and representing the power of creation and life in general. In this manner, The Monument is visualized as an abstract concept that is stripped of the descriptive narratives of war while offering a performative and even existential experience to its visitors. (Fig. 2)

## Concluding remarks: Remembrance, monuments, and the idea of heritage

The Monument offers a different understanding of the bereavement phenomenology. Two overlapping practices help in visualizing and materializing the historical events of the '48 war both through the particular patriotic perspective and through some more universal existential perspectives. By using architectural symbolism, The Monument “mirrors” the memory of war that lies beneath the surface in which it is embedded. This consolidation of monument and land mobilizes and shapes the visitor's national emotions and consciousness. By using architectural experience, The Monument “mirrors” the memory of the bare desert land that surrounds it. This consolidation of monument and land awakens the visitor's romantic and spiritual perceptions and feelings. The juxtaposition of both images and representations makes The Monument a spatial alternative to the Israeli bereavement culture. The double uses and coding of space do not only provide markers for the national processes of identity formation, but also provide the possibility of framing The Monument as a different “memory maker”; a “memory maker” that can create transformation. Even though the experiences of both sides of the conflict are not valued or shared, as suggested in critical perspectives like “memory activism” (Gutman 2017) and “spatial counter-sovereignities” (Gazit and Latham 2014), the entwinement of the national and the spiritual creates the “memory place” as a more polyphonic arena that simultaneously produces different voices. In this manner, resistance is not perceived as the only analytical tool that can deconstruct the power of the nationalized heritage. Instead of veiling and exposing political agendas and forcing this interpretation to exchange one agenda for the other, the analysis of the monument allows for a more saturated meaning.

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