

Canada's heritage protection practitioners proudly refer to themselves as «happy» as the country embraces nuanced approaches to its national heritage. It entails reworking the concept of materiality in terms of controlling the durability of material traces and adapting memorial sites and public spaces to shifting values. Large number of guidelines on contemporary public art now comprise the extended vision of materiality in its physical, immaterial, ephemeral, and virtual aspects for better adjustment of monuments to contemporary society.¹

Today, during the process of adding new layers, old physical elements, such as statues or parts of ensembles, may be removed: destroyed, deaccessioned to museums, cemeteries, or institutions. These elements do not perish, they are enhanced and complemented by new layers such as physical and virtual elements, plaques, performances, and media reproductions. Overwriting is not straightforward. The history is seen as a «dynamic intentional structure»², as phenomenologists would describe it, wherein layers of history are reconfigured rather than erased, or forgotten.

In scholarship globally, the concept of national history has been evolving in two directions through the strengthening of institutions and the diversification of voices. By the 1990s, scholars productively contrasted an almost bureaucratic precision in preservation of large territories with grassroots and body-oriented approaches to public places.³ Canadian architect Melvin Charney for example highlighted two modes of Montreal's urban identity: the intimate knowledge of «quartiers» (neighborhoods) and the institutionalized mode of architecture as the city's material structure.⁴ He and other critics differentiated living memories of communities, their dynamic and «messy» nature with the rigid structure of institutionalized urbanism and heritage protection.

Gradually, the gap between institutionalized national history and grassroots approaches to public memorials has begun to fade. Thus, a more-than-representative approach that encompasses affects, movements, and everyday life uses, aims to reintegrate places and public objects into communal and shared urban living.⁵ Artists and art critics equally contributed to the ever-expanding field of public art and history by advocating ephemeral art and participatory artistic practices.⁶ Finally, the emergence of hybrid spaces and the expansion of virtual spaces provided a comprehensive foundation for considering monuments and memorials as (im)material realities.⁷

The most radical epistemological breakthrough was made in the 2010s with an increasing presence of BIPOC abolitionism and radical activism that criticized the complex phenomenology of monuments and places. Projects like *Decolonize This Place* (since 2016) highlight the presence of infrastructural injustice that reproduces

itself within institutions, places, and social settings in the city.⁸ They want to challenge the enduring paradigm of statism and land occupation in national histories and reflect the conditions under which «the daily functioning of these systems would generate racist outcomes even in the absence of racists».⁹ Canadian public policy reacted on these calls by the implementation of a recognition-based approach towards Indigenous populations displaced from the territories of Tiohtià:ke now known as Montreal.¹⁰ Today, the inclusion of Indigenous artists and making Indigenous cultures visible now serve as the means to update settle-colonialist foundations of public sphere in the country.¹¹ Municipal authorities, working alongside experts, believe that embracing new approaches to the expanded materiality of memorials will make visible issues of social injustice and respond to the demands of activist groups.

However, as I will show in the paper, the models of history behind any overwriting today are largely defined by established infrastructures that remain in shadow of activism and the implemented ideas into guidelines and existing practices. These established infrastructures are urbanism and heritage studies.

To problematize these, I will discuss the former Dominion Square now divided into two parts, Place du Canada and Dorchester Square, in 1967. Established between 1872 and 1876, Dominion Square featured the Macdonald monument (1895), Robert Burns Memorial (1930), The Boer War Memorial (1907), Crimean War Cannons (1853–1856), and other commemorative objects. The site is protected for its heritage value. Historically known as «le Carré de la puissance,» it represented one of Canada's largest cities and, symbolically, a prestigious location within the British Empire.

Singling out the Statue

The monument to Sir John A. Macdonald, the first prime minister of Canada and founder of the Canadian Confederation (1867), was installed at Dominion Square (now Place du Canada) in Montreal in 1895 (fig. 1). Macdonald was hailed as one of the architects of the Canadian nation, a distinct society within the British Empire in North America.

Since its creation, the monument displayed a complex dynamic in making national history in Quebec and in Montreal. The Anglophone vision of Montreal as a vibrant city within the British Commonwealth clashed with the cultural and linguistic identity of Francophones. Francophones had differing views on Quebec culture, with the majority emphasizing its Catholic religious community, while others centred around economic development. Macdonald's statue was symbol of this divisive view on nation's history, which had defined major remaking of the place until the 2010s.¹²

Since the 1990s, public discussion of Macdonald's legacy has increasingly focused on his racism, particularly due to his enactment of the Indian Act (1876). The Act laid the groundwork for the establishment of residential schools, which were officially recognized as discriminatory towards the culture, languages, and identities of Indigenous people since the 1980s.¹³

The first instance of denunciatory public gestures towards Macdonald's legacy in public spaces in Montreal occurred in 1992. Macdonald became notorious for his involvement in the death penalty for Louis Riel (1892), a leader of the Métis resistance in the North-West (1885) who fought for their rights within the settler's government. On the anniversary of Riel's hanging in 1992, protesters beheaded

Macdonald's statue. Subsequently, Macdonald faced criticism for his role as a prominent and vocal racist in the late 19th century Canadian government: he supported the denial of voting rights to racialized Chinese individuals and defended European and Aryan dominance in Canada.¹⁴

Later, with the growing influence of Idle No More (2012) and the Black Lives Matter protests (2013), Macdonald statues across Canada became symbols of systemic racism and targets of public disagreement and protest¹⁵. Only two out of ten statues remain, located in Ontario and Toronto.¹⁶ In summer 2020, the Macdonald statue in Montreal was targeted during an anti-racism demonstration. The statue was quickly removed from public view and since 2022 became a subject of study and public consultations.



1 Place du Canada. Macdonald monument after the removal of the statue. Montreal, 2023.

Making Place – Creating Layers

Once the issue of the monument entered the realm of public discourse in 2020, it became an object of analysis within the context of heritage and urban planning. The monument is now seen as a complex ensemble, which includes a statue, pedestal, canopy but also its location within the square.

In the 1870s, Dominion Square was established on the grounds of the former Saint-Antoine cemetery (1799–1854). In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the square became a vibrant part of a fashionable commercial district of a Canadian metropole as part of the British Commonwealth. Adjacent to the newly built Windsor station, it symbolized Canada's economic prowess and held the potential for the growth of mass tourism, exemplified by the presence of the Hotel Windsor. The reproduction of history through monuments on the Square was also vital for the image of the progressive city: by 1940, the Dominion Square comprised eight commemorative objects.¹⁷

The Place also symbolized Canada's military history within the British Empire. In the 1940s, two cannons, originally sent as trophies from the Crimean War (1853–1856), were relocated here from the historic district at Old Port. These cannons initially planned as a new form of commemoration (later coined as «failed»¹⁸) of the war that had brought a lot of public disillusionment back in England. Cannon's ambiguous status as trophies in an unwanted war soon led to their oblivion both in UK and locally, in Montreal. In 2011 when the place was renovated, the city decided to leave them in situ but accorded no budget to renovate them and did not mention the concerns about their belonging to the place (fig. 2).¹⁹



2 Place du Canada. Crimean cannon in the background of the Macdonald monument. Montreal, 2022.

In the 21st century, the place became reserved for demonstrations in line with increased control of urban activism. In 2022, the Place became a gathering spot for protesters against Russian invasion in Ukraine. People who protested Russian imperialism stood by the Crimean cannons, which served as a living but forgotten monument of yet another imperial war. These cannons are thus exemplarily objects of omission – bound to the Empire and wars, they are both visible and absent, cementing the imperial nature of the place that ignores them.

Another monument that reflects the ambivalence in the national history and the commemoration race in 20th century between Anglophone majority and Québécois, is the Robert Burns Memorial (1930). One might be surprised to learn that it was initiated by the Franco-Scottish Association of Montreal. The unveiling ceremony highlighted the political significance behind its creation: the Scots' resistance to the English throughout the history of the British Empire. In 1930, the concept of minority served in Montreal as a means to create a complex parallel of the resistance of the Québécois against the Anglophone elites.²⁰

In 2012, the place was granted heritage status by the province, which created new intelligible layers of its history. The imperial and Anglophone history of the site were employed in the expertise to endorse the establishment of a historic site that glorifies Francophone cultural dominance reached in the 20th century.

Inscriptions that marked the old Sainte-Antoine Catholic cemetery were added to «reinforce» the presence of francophone Catholics in history of the place.²¹ The prestige associated with Imperial power was reimagined within the context of urban heritage (consolidation of the downtown core) and of universal architectural history (modernist skyscrapers, buildings of International Brutalism and other styles).²²

Environmental layers, encompassing both material and immaterial aspects like landscapes and climate, expanded the potential reimagining of the place. Nature was an element where Indigenous culture comes in, however, these layers were coined as pre- or non-historic.²³

The place as a historic object has evolved into a space integrated within urbanism, enriched by the incorporation of new tangible and intangible elements of memory and potentially new actualisations of the city's history. Still, after the heritage expertise, it remained a product of layers within the traditional framework of two competing dominant cultures: Anglophone and Francophone.

Statue as a Shared Urban Object: Reconnection through Dismantling and Resistance of the Place

The call of 2020 was heard: the city decided to explore options for reinterpreting the Macdonald monument.

The monument was the first to be evaluated according to the «Cadre d'intervention en reconnaissance» adopted in August 2022.²⁴ This document challenges outdated historical conventions and acknowledges that evaluation criteria evolve with societal values. It emphasizes the significance of prioritizing collective contributions over individual ones to prevent frequent contestation of monuments.

Guided by the Cadre, the ad hoc Commission in 2022 had several goals: to reconnect the monument with the square and the city as a whole, and to evaluate the monument from the perspective of Montreal's identity and contemporary values. These values include anti-racism, the importance of the French language, and attention to the symbols of historical prestige and mass tourism.

For this purpose, the monument was «disassembled» into several elements. The city was advised to keep the pedestal and the canopy, to remove the statue to a suitable place (cemetery, museums) and «Exclure la possibilité d'une restauration intégrale du monument».²⁵ The latter meant that the traces of «vandalism» should be made visible. Another proposal presented at the public consultation suggested relocating the statue to the Centre des mémoires montréalaises as a museum of the city's oral histories.²⁶ Aesthetically, the recommendations reflect the latest trends in public art, emphasizing an expanded understanding of materiality and recognizing the monument and place as a hub for urban community. The Commission's recommendations demonstrate, however, how the specific goals of altering the monument's profile to highlight systemic injustice were situated within the broader and less contentious framework of urban imagination, focusing on accessibility.

Earlier projects related to the Macdonald monument provide more details on these trends.

In 2021, the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal proposed to imagine temporary installations at the Place as markers of changing values, highlighting the concept of mutability.²⁷ Among the projects, the most popular and recurring motives were the dismantling the figure of John Macdonald and repurposing the monumental complex into a usable whole.

A concept of a livable, walkable, or usable monument acts at the intersection of critical engagement with the past and its visualization through urban elements. Most of the projects made the pedestal usable (Lever–Stair; S'enraciner; History Under Construction, etc.), employing visual metaphors of accessibility as an antidote to the traditional isolation of the statue, while also aligning with the idea of universal



3 Lisa Hadioui/Juan Fernando Barrionuevo/Kamelia Djennane: *Swing. The Legacy of John A. Macdonald*, 2021. Digital visualisation. General view.

openness of a monument. Another (*Je me souviens*) featured a large hall with rusted walls in a somber rendering that encourages reflection on the past and the future.

The award was given to the project *Swing* (Lisa Hadioui, Juan Fernando Barrionuevo, Kamelia Djennane), which proposed to install swings in orange (the color of reconciliation) (fig. 3). Symbol of leisure time, the swings, placed in carefully curated former imperial settings in the prestigious commercial neighborhood, reveal deeper and systemic conditions of (in)accessibility. Swings are popular in commercial tourist «villages,» including downtown Montreal.²⁸ They serve as an ambiguous symbol: leisure for the majority and segregation for BIPOC groups experiencing disproportionate police control and violence in gentrified public spaces.

Analyzed from the point of view of non-visual representativity, we clearly see that the task of criticizing racism of Macdonald and his policies, has been transformed into visual solutions that speak to urban accessibility for «everyone». This accessibility is embedded within systemic barriers at the urban scale (legacy of segregation and assimilation) and at the deeper level of social control, both beyond the reach of direct participation and revision.

Conclusion

The overwriting of the monument does not erase previous layers but serves as a mechanism for actualization and integration of excising connections between the monument and the place. It is these reconnections that specialists envision as growth and as the future – a critical response to the past. However, as this paper showed, the rewriting impulse is embedded into the large and expensive infrastructures like urbanism, heritage conservation institutions and legal frameworks for urban property²⁹ As in the case of the Place du Canada in Montreal, adding of new historical layers had been made mostly in the context of the well established Anglophone-Francophone commemorative competition that thus retain and update the images of imperial and/or settler colonial prestige.

As Indigenous activists emphasize, the proposed future is one imposed by the past; it is a foreign past.³⁰ Indeed, despite the clear and articulated impulse for overwriting, the actual transformation of the Place of Canada, as the Macdonald's preliminary designs show, reinforces and encourages the use of universalist and shared values within well-established urban plans. Even some relatively new critical public values, as land acknowledgement rituals, which assert that the urban landscape covers up unceded territories of Indigenous peoples who were displaced from them, are primarily adopted as symbolic gestures of reconciliation with Indigenous communities. They failed to be visualized in public spaces. The critical impulse must thus be formulated as a question: can we offer alternative epistemologies of social and public existence that institutionally and visually transcend the well-established historical layers constantly reactivated through municipal urbanism?

Notes

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