When Modernism Met the Psychogeographic Landscape: Jellicoe's JFK Memorial Runnymede

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Here's a story of contradiction and concurrence. It's both simple and complicated.

It can be observed in the first instance at the inception of Jellicoe's design 'hook', one which—like many landscape architects' experience—starts off with a small budget, for a large brief, on a smallish plot of land up the hill from the road on which it's located: nothing particularly ideal, other than the historic moment of landing such a commission, and the confluence of history passing by on the Thames River meadows below the site.

This hook was a combination of the function to act as a memorial—to prick the consciousness of the visitor—and the necessity of a pathway up to this "one-acre of land" (actually three acres in total) the British Government gifted the United States for the purposes of this act of being awake to ideas and memory. Initially the material Jellicoe used was language; John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World, to That Which Is to Come*. Here is an American Catholic of Irish decent being memorialised to the text of a Puritan and explicitly anti-Catholic religious family road trip for the main protagonist to get salvation in death. Bunyan's story—involving what seems to be a cast of thousands, and as many locations, set as a surreal dream journey into an unknown future—seems perfect, in spite of the religiosity of Bunyan's dream-state narrative. In fact, if we are to draw, as I am in this essay, the idea that Jellicoe would have been aware of the ideas of the Situationist's technique of Psychogeographic mapping, then Bunyan's transferal of the places and people of his native Bedfordshire as characters and locations in his mythic tale of redemption almost seems like the perfect parable of Kennedy's hagiographic elevation, along with the concomitant controversies that surrounded his life and death. Bunyan's parable is written onto the site in the way in which the landscape the memorial is set in has been similarly elevated. Although the decent back down is another matter altogether, an aspect I'll touch on later in the essay.

No-one visits the memorial, nor the surrounding countryside without some a prior knowledge of the significance of the location to English history and the radiating sphere of influence of the events that have been acted out on the landscape and the marks left by various people. Also of note is the almost random distribution of memorials and buildings at Runnymede perhaps echoing the space and time that separates the people, events and geographically ceremonial functions all these structures commemorate.

At Runnymede there is a contradiction of the permanency of ideals and architectonic manifestations to those ideals and the actual lived experience of those that set these ideals down in speeches and writing. In the first instance the original 1215 Magna Carta was annulled by Pope Innocent III less than a year after it was signed and sealed, only to be revived the next year in order to unsuccessfully prevent war. Then revived again the following year as part of a peace treaty, forgotten and revived a forth time in 1225 so that Henry III could raise taxes, giving it the modern name we know it by. It was a short term, contractual and utilitarian document whose significance has transcended its negotiative and transactional history, and landed into the same world of myth, semi-myth and controversy that John Fitzgerald Kennedy has *post-mortem*.

The 35th President was only in office for two years before he was either assassinated by the superb marksmanship of Lee Harvey Oswald, or accidentally shot by a panicked secret service officer who mishandled his own weapon in the car ahead of the President's, or by a third shooter secreted on the grassy knoll. Versions of history abound. Any memorial to him will immediately resonate with both his death and brief term served and the speculative conspiracies swirling around his murder. Either way his tenure was marked more by rhetoric than legislation, some serious foreign policy missteps, the Bay of Pigs debacle most notable, with his cherished dream of the Civil Rights Act falling to Lyndon Johnson to push through Congress.

Thus in a way it then seems appropriate that his English memorial should find it's home in this kingly and baronial landscape with it's strange assemblage of other memorials. These psycho-geographic fragments, made from stone, sod, tree and water, that litter this landscape of events, are like Guy Debord's jigsaw pieces of Paris that manifests in a these solemn forms, much like a set of news-clippings could be made in the same way we view the life of JFK as a series of individual events rather than a single arc. All of the surrounding

memorials remain inward looking, like single events, aside from Jellicoe's sublime work that is the subject of this essay.

This memorial is a sequence of events in space that have been drawn out to the scale of the landscape, and therefore, does not have any inward and singular quality. Here the memorial is a set of pathways with set destinations that, themselves, rely upon and refer outward to their context to attain meaning as memorial. I will repeat that this is all assuming that any visitor has an a-priori knowledge of the subjects of memorialisation. That the resonances of history that drive the visitor aren't necessarily further knowledge, but to act out the public grief or remembrance and contemplation, or the impact of events within history upon our own times: The Magna Carta and World wars. So it's useful to look at these other works for a short while.

Monuments to the war dead similarly attest to the contradiction of being in war, with its concomitant chaos, dust, mud, blood and broken limb, to the sombre clean cut granite, marble, sandstone and meticulous bronze castings that accompany most of these structures around the globe. The major one nearby is no exception.

> The Air Forces Memorial at Runnymede commemorates by name over 20,000 men and women of the air forces, who were lost in the Second World War during operations from bases in the United Kingdom and North and Western Europe, and who have no known graves. They served in Bomber, Fighter, Coastal, Transport, Flying Training and Maintenance Commands, and came from all parts of the Commonwealth. Some were from countries in continental Europe which had been overrun but whose airmen continued to fight in the ranks of the Royal Air Force.
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> The memorial was designed by Sir Edward Maufett with sculpture by Vernon Hill. The engraved glass and painted ceilings were designed by John Hutton and the poem engraved on the gallery window was written by Paul H Scott. The Memorial was unveiled by The Queen on 17 October 1953. (Commonwealth War Graves Commission website www.cwgc.org/visit-us/find-cemeteries-memorials/cemetery-details/109600/runnymede-memorial)

Few such war memorial structures in the World give much away in terms of what actual loss in conflict might be: Maya Lin's astonishing black wound into the Earth of Washington DC, and the nearby Korean War Memorial with its dazed and ashen faced figures by Frank Gaylord, permanently walking through a garden bed, attentive to the possibility (for eternity now) they may face bullets whizzing at them any second. A brilliant retrofit of the Shine of Remembrance in Melbourne by ARM Architecture & Rush Wright Landscape Architects has given it four jagged 'bomb craters' that have transcended their morphology to become solemn courtyards; but their shape is obvious once you realise the connection for yourself, or have it pointed out to you.

Perhaps the most likely sibling to Jellicoe's design is the 'Mémorial des Martyrs de la Déportation' by Georges-Henri Pingusson on the southern tip of the Île de la Cité in Paris from two years prior to Jellicoe's commission for the subject memorial. Even though this brilliant memorial and part ossuary for some of the ashes of Holocaust victims is a revelatory journey, it's still an internalised experience, even interrupting the prime view of the Seine River with a diminished aperture covered with a grill and a sculpture of figurative abstraction. Here the only view out is mediated and symbolic; a 'last view' of the city before continuing the journey into darkness. So whilst a journey is imbued within the parti of the memorial, the experience is rather more compressed and more obviously curated than the sprawling and fragmentary experience of Jellicoe's work, whose real quality is ultimately only obtained by exiting the site.

So against even this set of exemptions the Kennedy Memorial at Runnymede is still an entirely unique place of remembrance (at least in the West) in that it is the long arc of a journey with moments, or fragments set upon it.

The surrounding landscape is littered with other commemorations. Cara Fairhaven, (one of the many 'Dollar Princesses' who saved much of the British Aristocracy from financial ruin), and her two sons gifted

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This page:
Opposite:

the 188 acres of Long Mede, Runnymede and Yard Mede as a family gift to the National Trust after her husband had purchased the land as an investment. Cara drew her fortune from her immensely wealthy father, Henry Huttleston Rogers. She made the gift in 1929 after her husband passed away, and commissioned Sir Edwin Lutyens to build two small kiosks at the southern end of the river meadow, two larger lodges at the northern Winsor end, and a set of two piers with urns and wreaths at either end to commemorate both the original signing of the Magna Carta and her husband, Urban H Broughton. These are structures of enclosure that set the scene for this strangely distemporal landscape. The former Egham Urban District Council gave a further 110 acres of Coopers Hill above the meadows to the Trust in 1963 upon which the Kennedy Memorial is located.

Sir Edward Maufe also designed the second memorial to the Magna Carta built on Coopers Hill Memorial immediately south and built in 1957 with funds from the American Bar Association. His design reflects the idea of the singular destination. A low set view is afforded from the rotunda, but the pier set in the centre of the rotunda and added to over the years still insists the visitor cast their gaze inward to an alliterative experience. One that is similarly repeated at Hew Locke's 2014 commemorative sculpture *The Jurors* commissioned on the occasion of the 800th anniversary of the Magna Carta, and Mark Wallinger & Studio Octopi's totally enclosed pisé pavilion *Writ in Water* of three years later, commissioned for the 803rd anniversary. Words dominate, the landscape simply being the setting, almost an afterthought.

The exceptions to this are the two botanically imbued memorials: The 1400 year old Ankerwycke Yew, supposedly where the original baronial deed was sealed is preserved on the opposite side of the Thames, whilst four English Oaks were planted about the Maufe rotunda, three of which similarly commemorate the Great Charter and its connection to distant lands: one for India in 1994 and two in 1987 for the United States, one of which is planted in soil taken from Jamestown West Virginia to really 'fix' the connection to the Charter and the US Constitution on the occasion of its bicentenary. Queen Elizabeth in rather prosaically planted the last oak on this site, also in 1987, to mark National Tree Week.

But none of these have the arc of experience marked out by Jellicoe's occupation of a whole landscape. Although by now I'm certain that a picture of America somehow finding its spiritual beginning on these banks, hills and meadows of the Thames has been well and truly established, thus informing the choice of site for the Kennedy Memorial in the UK.

The entry is the 'Wicket Gate', which taken from Bunyan's novel, is the allegorical entry to the "King's highway" and the gate manned by 'Goodwill' who is none other than Jesus himself. The pathway beyond the gate and up Cooper's Hill is made from sixty thousand odd Portuguese granite setts, which apparently require regular replenishment from acts of souveniring, (Spens, *Gardens of the Mind*, 1992, p. 106) and 50 steps that represent the 50 states of the USA. The path opens out to the inflective hinge point of the memorial stone, or 'catafalque' as Jellicoe called it (Jellicoe, *Studies in Landscape Design*, 1970, Vol. III, 19 p. 25), and its sense of revelation as the visitor emerges from the forest. This is part-barred from direct access by the low sweeping bough of an old ash tree that was already in-situ, and accompanied by its attendant plantings. The main planting is the American Scarlet Oak behind the stone that is usually in full autumnal colour during November, the month of Kennedy's assassination. From there the view spans out across the hillside northward. From the catafalque the visitor steps across the crenulated edge pathway of 'Jacobs Ladder' with the near horizon of the hill on one side and the Greater London area on the other. The climax of the journey is to set upon the last view from the two benches at the end of 'Jacobs Ladder'—President's and Consort's Seats of Contemplation: —curiously arranged in the same seating geometry as the open topped vehicle the President and the First Lady were in on the day Kennedy was shot—only to reverse this 220 metre long journey to the Wicket Gate, and then on through the mown path of the river meadow back to Windsor Road.

This simple yet lengthy transection of landscape, language, history, geography and a continually changing orientation is what makes Jellicoe's work such a poetic masterpiece. For a small piece of ground it ends up occupying a much larger landscape, and—by proxy—ends up memorialising a far greater sum that just one president. It also both physically and psychically connects the visitor to the other possibilities of visitation in this setting. The views are all through, off to the side, and out, rather than simply inward and contained. Here the fragments of history and geography are connected together and mapped out in these views, reconnecting them to the other elements of this landscape. It somehow seems like the landscape is then the inflection point, albeit a rather elongated one, for this whole wider landscape of memorials that contained the seismic events that formed the foundations of democracy and the rule of law that first unfolded on the island on the Thames' island opposite.

Here I should make vigorous reference to George Entwistle's excellent and thorough dissection of Jellicoe's masterpiece *From consensus to dissensus—history and meaning in flux at Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe's Kennedy Memorial landscape* published in *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes* (39:1, 2019). Entwistle does a far better academic job than I setting the background for the memorial, and its setting. He sets forth a very good argument that the reverse journey back down 'Jacobs Ladder', past the catafalque, around the bough of the old Ash, only to be plunged back into the dark woods, to emerge back out from the Wicket Gate also reverses the ascension to virtual sainthood of Kennedy, by the mere act of walking back through Bunyan's story to a time and place before the pilgrim's salvation. The memorial has no ceremonial exits, by which the inverse of normative history is countered. We 'go out the same door' we entered in from.

It's compelling argument that finds resonance and sits well with the idea that, in many respects, these sum of the parts Jellicoe has drawn out on the site and used to scoop in the broader landscape, are like the fragments of time and place that Guy Debord enunciated in

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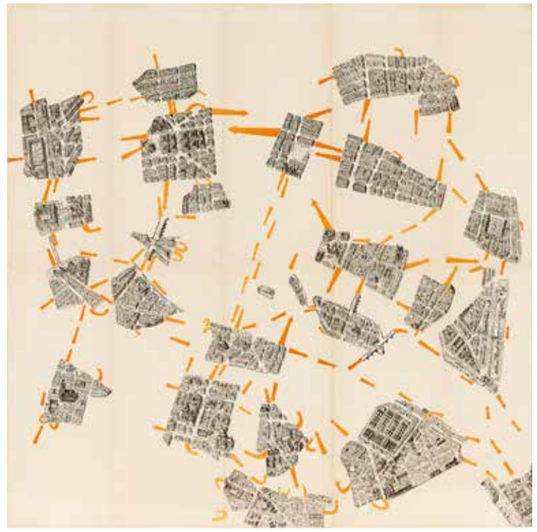
Opposite:



his writings from the establishment of the Situationist International in 1957, until its dissolution in 1972. It may seem odd to compare a fragmented and distemporal baronial landscape to the ideals of urban revolutionary architecture of the Situationists, but Thesis 125 from Debord's *Society of The Spectacle* from 1967 enunciates well this idea of the essential fungibility of history:

> Man, "the negative being who *is* only to the extent that he suppresses Being," is identical to time. Man's appropriation of his own nature is at the same time his grasp of the unfolding of the Universe. "History is itself a real part of *natural history*, of the transformation of nature into man" (Marx). Inversely, this "natural history" has no actual existence other than through the process of human history, the only party which recaptures this historical totality, like the modern telescope whose sight captures, *in time*, the retreat of nebulae at the periphery of the universe. History has always existed, but not always in a historical form. The temporalization of man as effected through the mediation of a society is equivalent to a humanization of time. The unconscious movement of time manifests itself and *becomes true* within historical consciousness.

To that extent, as in Entwistle's essay, the mapping of the arc of the journey to memorialise and then 'de-memorialise' Kennedy, yet at the same time look outward to reconnect and map the fragmentary nature of the Runnymede landscape, and situate Kennedy in this broader historical context, even with its later additions that Jellicoe could never have known would be built, the principle for this physical version of psychogeographic mapping remains. Debord continues in Thesis 126:

> Time remains immobile, like an enclosed space. A more complex society which finally becomes conscious of time devotes itself to negating it because it sees in time not what passes, but only returns.

In this way Jellicoe's memorial steps out of "time", and like Benjamin's figure of the historical materialist who "regards it as his task to brush history against the grain", (Theses on the Philosophy of History, Thesis VII, Illuminations p. 256, 1968) the memorial does more than simply forge a point of reflection. Suddenly, this view where the visitor is able to map out the history of what democracy might mean, how and when it was gained, and the inversion of the map set out by returning down the path, history is shown as unstable and unsettled. It's writing has yet to be completed, and indeed will never be completed. What the visitor might think is certain is only fragmented points in time that are subject to change.

So is this an 'anti-memorial'? Perhaps. It still 'functions' as a memorial with its dutiful solemnity. But it does consciously undermine the normative introversion of a memorial, adding the distractions of the views, and the long set of pathways, rather than reducing the complexity inherent in its context.

And as Entwistle has pointed out the inversion of the hagiographic elevation of Kennedy as the visitor descends back toward the river meadow bellow, we might consider this a form of *dérive* as Debord might have conceived such an act of experiential curation, as opposed to the vague urban meanderings with which he introduced his theory:

> Psychogeography could set for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals. The charmingly vague adjective *psychogeographical* can be applied to the findings arrived at by this type of investigation, to their influence on human feelings, and more generally to any situation or conduct that seems to reflect the same spirit of discovery. (Guy Debord, *Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography, Les Lèvres Nues* #6, September 1955, translated by Ken Knabb, www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/presitu/geography.html)

You'll remember that I referred to the obvious curation of the Pingusson holocaust memorial on the Île de la Cité, since it is largely an internalised experience. Like the idea of visiting a famous building or landmark, whilst we might be unsure as to the extent of our reaction to the visit, we are nonetheless prepared for a set of expected reactions, and the *Mémorial des Martyrs de la Déportation* duly delivers. However, the idea that the act of grieving the death of the young President might somehow be both inverted and re-contextualised via a spatial experience that acts much like a full scale rural version of Debord's famous image, the *Guide psychogéographique de Paris. Discours sur les passions de l'amour* from 1957 as well as place such a radically playful statement about history bang in the middle of such hallowed ground—and gets away with it—is certainly a type of spatial playfulness I think architects and landscape architects might still use to critically re-engage with the power brokers that commission such works and the body-politic that use the spaces we design.

Was Jellicoe aware of the Situationists? The answer to such a question is perhaps complete speculation now that he, his wife Susan (and oft' co-designer) and his major biographer, Michael Spens, have all passed. Since he did confer with Bernard Tschumi on the design of *Parc de la Villette* (Spens, 1992, p. 179) I will suggest the answer is affirmative, since he was the kind of intellectual sponge to which we hopefully all aim to be. His act of *détournement* was re-imagined on the scale of a landscape, using the fragments of the view and the passage of the visit, rather than the collaged map you might hold in your hands. And the re-imagined and subverted typology of a memorial that externalises 'memory' over this landscape so the fragments of history can be observed in-situ as it were, is extraordinarily powerful, and is perhaps the reason Jellicoe's design has taken its own special place in the pantheon of 20th Century landscape architecture; perhaps more-so in its experience than the president who is its subject.

I should leave the final word to someone far better than I on the subject of Jellicoe himself, and a quote that I think sums up the skill with which Jellicoe was able to draw upon in the design:

> [...] Jellicoe emerges as a manipulator of landscape form, as adept as his predecessors at delivering the greatest value from available raw materials on the ground. In dealing with his manifold clientele, an awareness of history and precedent has been used by Jellicoe to facilitate the education of his clients. This has seldom been any kind of barrier to the propagation of contemporary ideas as emerging from an unavowed modernist. (Spens, 1992, p. 182)

Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe died four years after these words. His works spanned 70 years of practice. The Kennedy Memorial is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, all year round and is free to visit.

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Opposite: