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Title

The Timeliness of Marble

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/76m0s0j3>

Journal

Places, 5(1)

ISSN

0731-0455

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Publication Date

1988-04-01

Peer reviewed

The Timeliness of Marble

Time itself may be difficult to perceive, elusive to our memory. We want to capture it, make a place of it. Photographs, musical recordings, stories and computer disks make us think we might do so. These illusions stir our imaginations.

The Roman Forum is another of these illusions. Histories of the Forum's venerable stones are stories built on the visible remnants of elaborate Roman masonry and landscape formation. These histories, these interpretations of use and structure, are reconsidered in each generation of viewers. The stones' significance is altered by ideas current at any time, just as they are by natural decay and repositioning.

The power of the Roman Forum comes from the existence of stones which have been built up, torn down, cast aside, buried for many years, and then excavated. Some stones were carried away to rebuild ancient structures, others to lend material and cultural authority to altogether different structures of another time and place.

This movement of the stone to recapture the look of time can, in turn, cause radical interpretations as we try to analyze the meaning of the stone itself, and its placement, its political presence. "Citizen objects in nature," so Richard Sennett called the Roman monuments in his book *Palais Royal*. His phrase aptly describes the political impact of the stones and buildings we deem artistic, or formally significant.

Some visitors to the Forum may only be interested in becoming, for a sensed moment, part of the "historical" process, walking where so many have walked, passing along the paths of legendary villains and heroes. Some see the stones only as art. They spend hours drawing, fabricating some relationships, copying others, ignoring the political struggles that may have caused the stones to be there at all.

Most urgently, the stones cause us to rethink present relationships. This habit of mind may be the most critical influence we sense as we wander and work in the Forum. What new designs might we imagine as we see two massive stones juxtaposed? How will our sense of occasion be expanded or changed? Will an expressive sense of political tensions, and of how such tensions may be actively influential in our cities, be appreciated? These questions will not be found carved on the sides of the stones. They are the inferences, the interpretations, the imaginings, that this ancient site, with its displaced stones, can excite in us.

The Forum allows these luxuries of imagination because it is both "historical," containing layers of time encrusted, and ahistorical, outside of time in its present position in Rome. Certainly, sections of the Forum are the subject of intense planning battles, but much of the land is protected from the incessant clamoring growth within the city. We have the time, and the place, to consider

the several pasts, to compare the plural presents. In this stone and landscape haven of time, we may design a future of evocative places.

Alice Wingwall

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With this issue we begin a four part series subsidized by the Design Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts. In this series we will examine sources of imagery for the design of cities and for the shaping of places that are rich in human significance.

Rome has been, for many centuries, the quintessential idea of city in western culture. It has permeated our thinking in innumerable ways. In this issue we pursue a series of mental excavations, examining the roots of the Roman Forum itself, reviewing the activities of some of those who shaped its present archaeological condition, reviewing its position in the present planning debates in Rome and looking to its visible form as a stimulus for further formal explorations. In sum these articles probe the intricate webs that link political intention, creative renewal, and both private and public reflection. Together, these are the strands from which the fabric of new places will be woven.

We are grateful to the NEA for their continued support. —D.L.