

P / REFERENCES OF DESIGN

DYNAMIC TRADITIONALISM BETWEEN ARCHAISM AND FUTURISM: OBELISKS AS CONSTANT IN GLOBAL MEMORIAL DESIGNS.

Christian Langer^{*ab}

a Free University of Berlin, Germany

b University of Georgia, United States of America

* langerc@zedat.fu-berlin.de, christian.langer@uga.edu

DOI: 10.63442/RSHF7402

KEYWORDS | OBELISKS, DECOLONIAL APPROACH, GLOBAL CULTURAL TRANSMISSION,
COSMOPOLITAN STRUCTURES, MONUMENT DESIGN

ABSTRACT | This paper examines the global transmission of obelisks from ancient Egypt to contemporary societies, employing a decolonial approach. While existing research has primarily focused on the Western reception of obelisks, this study highlights the dynamism of obelisk traditions in East and Southeast Asia, revealing a convergence of knowledge and aesthetics between East and West. The paper incorporates case studies from urban and rural Afro-Euroasia (China, India, Southeast Asia, West Africa) to illustrate the variety of designs and meanings associated with obelisks outside the Western context. It argues that modern obelisks are cosmopolitan structures but also symbols of Westernization and sources of tension in decolonization efforts. The paper emphasizes the importance of raising awareness of the spatiotemporal context of obelisks and encourages designers to reflect on their choices in monument design. However, it acknowledges the potential perpetuation of colonial narratives in futuristic obelisk designs and questions the feasibility of achieving a decolonial obelisk. The study concludes by considering the future evolution of obelisks and the challenges of disentangling them from colonial paradigms.

1. Introduction

The study of obelisks holds a significant place within the realm of Egyptology and, occasionally, Cultural Studies, drawing attention from various disciplines including architectural history, epigraphy, political history, religious studies as well as scholars interested in the reception and cultural influence of ancient Egypt up to contemporary times. This paper seeks to bring attention to obelisks as a constant in global memorial design and as a traditional structure between archaism and futurism. Enhanced by a decolonial approach, it also aims to use the opportunity to reflect on the future of obelisk design based on its historical trajectory presented in the form of regional case studies, thereby inviting designers and other practitioners to become involved. The selected case studies showcase the Egyptian origins of the obelisk followed by a discussion of the imperial Roman and subsequent early modern European and modern Western appropriations of the concept. With the latter being arguably instrumental in the global spread of the obelisk, case studies from the global South – here China, Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and West Africa – illustrate the transformation of form and function through local adaptations. This then leads to a discussion of obelisks as cosmopolitan and politicized architecture. The case studies raise the problem of whether it is possible to disentangle the concept and design of the obelisk from its conflicted history, and whether its design can become decolonial to overcome the imperial/colonial paradigm.

Existing research on obelisks can be categorized into several focal points, each shedding light on different aspects of their history and cultural significance as outlined further below. With the exception of studies focusing on the original Egyptian obelisks, most research areas collectively fall within the broader context of Egypt's reception, encompassing various forms of cultural appropriation of obelisks spanning the past two millennia. These investigations predominantly center on reception hubs in the Western world. This geographic concentration can be attributed to the proximity of these regions to global centers of Egyptology and knowledge production (Langer and Matic, 2023, pp. 4–7), as well as to the ideological association of Egyptology with the construct of the West. Egyptology has historically played a significant role in shaping the perception of Egypt as a precursor to so-called Western civilization (Winter, 2019, pp. 60–62). Given this context, it is understandable that scholarly attention has primarily been directed towards Western receptions of obelisks. However, there is a growing recognition of the need to globalize obelisk research in order to advance theoretical understandings of these monuments (Langer, 2021).

Modern obelisks serve primarily in administrative and commemorative capacities and as mere embellishments, for instance, of bridges and squares. Administratively, they often function as waypoints and boundary markers, facilitating navigation and demarcating territorial limits. However, the more extensive and research-intensive aspect lies in their commemorative function, which can be further classified into collective and individual commemoration. Collective commemoration encompasses events of suffering and triumph, including successful wars, periods of (imperial) rule, liberation from oppression, and broader societal achievements. Meanwhile, individual commemoration occurs through burials or memorials honoring specific achievements or individuals. Notably, war cemeteries often blend collective and individual commemorative aspects, marking both victories and sacrifices on both collective and individual levels, thereby illustrating the multifaceted nature of obelisks in memorialization.

2. Obelisks Around the World Through Space and Time: Mapping and Overcoming the Rift Between Spatial Foci and Reality

This section provides a concise overview of the transmission of the obelisk from ancient Egypt to the modern global South beyond the traditional research foci of Egyptology and obelisk-related scholarship. While not exhaustive, the selected case studies provide the reader with an impression of adaptability of the obelisk depending on regional contexts.

2.1 Ancient Egypt and Rome

Obelisks, originating from ancient Egypt (Egyptian sg. *tʿn*), are narrow, four-sided tapering pillars with a pyramid-shaped top, known as the pyramidion. Initially associated with solar cults, the first obelisks were placed in Egyptian sun temples during the Old Kingdom around 2500–2400 BCE. During later periods, such as the New Kingdom in the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1550–1069 BCE), pairs of obelisks became common in Egyptian temples, often inscribed with praises of the king's power and conquests. The term obelisk itself is derived from the Greek term *ὀβελίσκος* 'little skewer', which relates only to appearance but conveys nothing about the function of obelisks. Studies focusing on original ancient Egyptian obelisks delve into various facets such as their construction history, symbolic meanings, current locations, and preservation states. Scholars like Labib Habachi (1977), Fekri Hassan (2003), and Bob Brier (2016) have contributed significantly to this area, with particular emphasis on the latter aspects.

After the Roman conquest of Egypt in 30 BCE, the Roman emperor Augustus began the practice of relocating obelisks from Egyptian sites to Rome, transforming them into symbols of imperial authority. This practice was later adopted by European powers during the Renaissance, leading to the revival of Classical architecture and thought in Western Europe, further solidifying the obelisk's association with imperial power. This line of inquiry explores the transport of obelisks to Rome, the construction of new specimens, and their embellishment with hieroglyphic inscriptions, all within the context of the ideological legitimization of Roman authority over Egypt. Roulet (1972), Curl (2005) and Sorek (2010), for instance, have explored the Roman appropriation of obelisks and other Egyptian motifs extensively. Essentially, the European appropriations of the obelisk since the Renaissance are appropriations of the earlier Roman adoption of Egyptian motifs that facilitated the integration of ancient Egypt with a European identity (Langer, 2023, p. 48). The next section introduces some results of the developments set in motion during the Renaissance.

2.2 Modern West

There is a continuum from ancient to modern obelisks, with European constructions representing a further stage in the appropriation of this architectural form. Among modern obelisks in the Western context, the Washington Monument stands as the most extensively studied and recognized. Erected in Washington D.C. between 1848 and 1884, it commemorates George Washington, the first President of the United States. Torres (1985), Fazzini and McKercher (2003), Curran et al. (2009), and Gordon (2016) have examined its significance within the political and aesthetic landscape of the United States. Its design reflects a strong affinity with the Roman Republic, underscoring broader cultural connections.

Similarly, the Mussolini Obelisk commissioned in Fascist Italy symbolizes the regime's aspirations to revive the grandeur of the Roman Empire under Benito Mussolini's leadership. Other lesser-discussed obelisks in the western hemisphere include the Obelisk of Buenos Aires (1936) and the Trujillo Obelisk (1936) in Santo Domingo, commemorating historical events and figures. However, not all obelisks erected or planned in the West have received scholarly attention. For instance, obelisks planned in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union represent intriguing yet understudied phenomena. In Nazi Germany, ambitious plans included obelisks in Berlin and Munich, reflecting Hitler's vision of connecting with ancient civilizations to underline dominance over contemporary powers (Langer, 2021; Spotts 2009: 21–22, 122). Soviet obelisks, on the other hand, were realized, serving as memorials to victory over fascism in World War II and as tombstones in military cemeteries (Langer, 2021). Despite their prevalence, research on Soviet obelisks remains sparse, necessitating further exploration into their cultural and ideological significance. Crucially, even within the West, research on obelisks is patchy and focuses on specific nodes, which are primarily concentrated around the North Atlantic.

Additionally, obelisks have become ubiquitous in pop culture due to Egypt's enduring influence on Western thought and Egyptomania. They feature prominently in various forms of media, including science fiction, serving as symbols of Egyptian mystique or futuristic architecture. While they are integral to studies on

Egypt's influence on pop culture, obelisks have yet to emerge as a distinct research focus independent of broader ancient Egyptian tropes.

In conclusion, the study of modern obelisks in the West offers insights into the complex intersections of politics, ideology, and cultural memory, highlighting the enduring legacy of ancient Egyptian symbolism in contemporary contexts. For a more representative picture, research should aim to broaden the scope of inquiry, encompassing obelisks beyond the Western hemisphere and examining their designs and multifaceted roles in shaping collective memory and identity. To this end, the following section shifts the perspective to cases in the global South of Afro-Eurasia: Southeast Asia, China, India, and West Africa.

2.3 Southeast Asia

In the 1940s, Thailand and Myanmar saw the construction of obelisks as national monuments, albeit with differing levels of scholarly attention. The Victory Monument in Bangkok, Thailand, has received more extensive discussion compared to the Independence Monument in Yangon, Myanmar (Wong, 2005; Noobanjang, 2011). Both monuments, however, are deeply intertwined with the political history of Southeast Asia during the 1930s and 1940s.

Thailand, known as Siam until 1939, underwent significant political transformations following the abolition of absolute monarchy in 1932, transitioning to a Western-style constitutional monarchy under Prime Minister Plaek Phibunsongkhram (Noobanjang, 2011, p. 58; Baker and Phongpaichit, 2022, pp. 128–139). Thailand's involvement in World War II was marked by territorial ambitions, aligning with Japan's regional agenda (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2022, pp. 149–152). The Victory Monument, erected in Bangkok in the spring of 1941, symbolized Thailand's perceived victory and served as a demonstration of power, echoing the urban restructuring efforts of Mussolini and Hitler. Designed by architect Pum Malakul, the monument featured a 50-meter obelisk adorned with five bayonets atop a pentagonal pedestal containing the ashes of fallen soldiers (Noobanjang, 2011, pp. 58–60). The monument represented a departure from traditional Thai values towards a modern, Western-style nation-state, encapsulating a new essence of Thai identity (Wong, 2005, p. 63; Noobanjang, 2011, pp. 61–63). In the post-war era, it became a focal point for nationalist discourse, reflecting on the trauma of colonial territorial loss and the futility of fascist expansion (Noobanjang, 2011, pp. 57, 66–68).

In contrast, Myanmar's path to independence was shaped by its colonial history under British rule. Independence movements gained momentum during World War II, leading to Myanmar's treaty-granted independence in 1948 (Charney, 2009, pp. 46–71). The Independence Monument, erected in Yangon in the same year, replaced a statue of British Queen Victoria and commemorated Myanmar's struggle for self-determination against British colonialism (Seekins, 2011, p. 83). Standing at 50 meters tall, the monument symbolized Burmese resistance and sovereignty, particularly through its association with Burmese general Maha Bandula, who fought against British expansion in the First Anglo-Burmese War (Myint-U, 2001, pp. 12–15). Thus, while the obelisks in Bangkok and Yangon both serve as national monuments, they convey starkly contrasting narratives—one of aggressive expansion and the other of anti-colonialism,

In the Philippines, the presence of at least two distinct obelisk traditions reflects the nation's intricate colonial past. From 1565 to 1898, the archipelago was under Spanish rule, during which the capital, Manila, faced occupation by British forces from 1762 to 1764. Spanish-Filipino resistance led to the establishment of two sun-crowned obelisks in Manila and Bacolor, commemorating the Spanish defence of the Philippines (Langer, 2021). Following the Spanish-American War in 1898, the United States assumed control of the Philippines, introducing a new chapter in the nation's history and further emphasizing the obelisk as a prominent monument form. Notably, the Rizal Monument was erected in Manila in 1913 in honor of Filipino writer José Rizal (Craig, 1913), who was executed as a revolutionary in 1896 (Kissling, 1916). While the reasons for selecting an obelisk remain unclear, this monument stands as a testament to Filipino nationalism and resistance against colonial oppression.

In the early 21st century, obelisks continue to serve as common monuments in the independent Philippines, often commemorating events from the colonial era. One significant example is the collective of obelisks memorializing the Bataan Death March, a tragic event during World War II. The march, which resulted in the deaths of thousands of Allied prisoners, predominantly Filipinos (Lansford, 2001), prompted the erection of approximately 100 obelisks along the march routes (Murphy, 2014, pp. 6–8). These obelisks, featuring representations of US soldiers assisting fallen Filipino comrades, were largely funded and donated by Americans, underscoring the enduring significance of the Bataan Death March in US-Philippine relations. Despite the bilateral appearance of these memorials, the dominance of American contributions suggests a prioritization of US perspectives in commemorating shared historical experiences (Langer, 2021).

2.4 China

The Chinese obelisk tradition is slightly older than those of Thailand and Myanmar, yet roughly as old as the Philippine tradition. Since the abolition of the monarchy in China and the creation of the Republic in 1912, Chinese memorial culture has revolved around so-called martyrs (烈士) monuments (usually 纪念碑 or 纪念塔; the former denoting a stone tablet, the latter a tower/pagoda) (Hung, 2008, p. 280; van de Ven, 2003, p. 100). Initially, those who died in uprisings against Qing rule were revered as revolutionary examples. Since the mid-1940s, the Communist Party of China has promoted a martyrs cult to commemorate those who died in wars against the Guomindang (GMD) and Japan. This cult, linked with the Qingming Festival, focuses on monuments, often obelisks, erected at cemeteries where war dead are buried. These monuments serve as sites for collective remembrance. By the 1990s, China had over 5,000 martyrs cemeteries and memorials (Hung, 2008, pp. 281–284, 302), though the exact number of obelisks remains unknown. Ongoing work (Xie Zilong Image Art Museum, 2023) argues that obelisks were seen as symbols of revolutions after Chinese travellers first visited Place de la Concorde in Paris with the famous obelisk of Ramesses II from Luxor. Yet little did these Chinese travellers apparently know that the obelisk came to Paris as a gift from the Egyptian ruler to the French king 40 years after the French Revolution in 1830, and that it came to stand at the site of the guillotine and revolutionary justice was mere coincidence; if anything, the obelisk at Place de la Concorde is rather a symbol of monarchy than one of bourgeois revolution.

The most important monument of the Republic of China is located in Huanghuagang Park in Guangzhou, Guangdong (Figure 1). Initially established in May 1911, following the Second Guangzhou Uprising against Qing rule, the site houses the tomb of 72 martyrs. It grew into a complex tomb structure aligned with traditional geomantic beliefs through various construction phases between 1918 and 1935. This complex became a symbol of revolutionary fervor and resilience, hosting annual rites as part of a martyrs cult (Ho, 2004, pp. 101–104). The central feature of the tomb complex is an inscribed obelisk, positioned beneath a pavilion at the cult axis center, signifying the modernization and westernization of Republican memorial culture. This integration of a Western/Egyptian architectural form into local geomancy highlights the complexity of cultural influences. Furthermore, the park contains graves of individuals seeking to benefit from the *qi* (life energy) of the 72 Martyrs Mausoleum (Ho, 2004, pp. 105–107). This interplay between secular commemoration, spiritual beliefs, and architectural symbolism underscores the multifaceted nature of memorialization in Guangzhou.



Figure 1. The obelisk atop the 72 Martyrs Mausoleum at Huanghuagang Park, Guangzhou. Source: C. Langer, April 2023.

Today, the Monument to the People's Heroes in the center of Tiananmen Square, Beijing is the central and single most important monument of the People's Republic (Figure 2). It resembles an obelisk with traditional Chinese architectural elements, thus essentially merging Chinese and Western architectural traditions while the Egyptian roots are concealed. The location at the former site of imperial power and its height of 38 meters – taller than the old imperial palace – also signified that the people in the guise of the CPC had ultimately won and a new era was beckoning (Hung, 2001, pp. 459, 463). Designed by the architect-couple Liang Sicheng and Lin Huiyin, the monument was supposedly inspired by an ancient Chinese stone tablet, yet the literature (e.g., Hung, 2001; p. 462; Wu, 2005, 24–36) refers to it as an obelisk as well; interestingly, Liang and Lin travelled extensively in Europe and North America at young age (having studied at the University of Pennsylvania) (Hung, 2001, pp. 459–460), where they would have encountered modern obelisks beyond any shadow of a doubt. The obelisk commemorates Chinese who died in conflicts starting with the First Opium War of the mid-nineteenth century, and since its construction in the 1950s has served as a standard blueprint for martyrs monuments across China (Hung 2001, p. 472). The design frequently appears in connection with martyrs monuments in provincial capitals, which symbolically refer to the Tiananmen obelisk as the spiritual 'superior'.

Yet in recent decades, architects and policymakers have, at times, developed the design further, toward the direction of postmodernism or futuristic designs. A fitting example is the Yunnan Monument to the People's Heroes in Kunming, capital of Yunnan province (Figure 3). Completed in 1995, it was built in the political and economic center of the city and its commemorative scope reflects that of the 'inspiration' from Beijing. Yet unlike the monument in Beijing, the design has departed the traditional appearance. While the basic appearance is recognizably inspired by the Monument to the People's Heroes in Beijing, and thus the Republican tradition and the Egyptian obelisk, its individual design elements have been greatly abstracted.



Figure 2. The Monument to the People's Heroes at Tiananmen Square, Beijing. Note the presence of a Chinese-style curved roof instead of a traditional pyramidion. Source: C. Langer, January 2019.



Figure 3. The Yunnan Monument to the People's Heroes in Kunming, Yunnan. Note the postmodern appearance and reduced elements vis-à-vis the Beijing obelisk. Source: C. Langer, August 2022.

These examples give a spectrum along which modern Chinese obelisks are situated in terms of design: from the design akin to Egyptian obelisks to the communist design incorporating traditional Chinese elements and postmodern variations thereof. In this context, local adaptations are noteworthy. The Chinese population consists of 56 'nationalities', or ethnic groups. Next to their own language, these often come with their own architectural designs somewhat distinct from the Han majority. The province of Yunnan,

China's most diverse region, on the border with Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam, shows that obelisks reflect subtle differences as well. The far north of Yunnan boasts a majority Tibetan population. The martyrs monument in Shangri-La/Xianggelila (Figure 4) reflects that in that it not only combines the monument form with Tibetan elements but the memorial inscription is in both Chinese and Tibetan. In turn, the far south of Yunnan on the Myanma border is inhabited by a Dai majority. The martyrs monument in Jinghong, Xishuangbanna, incorporates local Dai architecture and language (Figure 5).



Figure 4. Dedicated to Tibetan revolutionary martyrs, the monument in Shangri-La/Xianggelila, Deqing, Yunnan combines Tibetan architectural design with Chinese characters on the front and Tibetan characters on the back (depicted here). Source: C. Langer, August 2022.



Figure 5. The martyrs monument in Jinghong, Xishuangbanna, Yunnan incorporates a Dai-style roof and combines alternating Chinese and Dai-Lü inscriptions. Note the postmodern appearance and reduced elements vis-à-vis the Beijing obelisk. Source: C. Langer, August 2022.

The Chinese obelisks showcase the, ultimately, modular character of modern obelisks and their adaptability to local conditions, in a way that Western obelisks cannot, for they adhere to the same design canon. Since first obelisks were taken out of Egypt, the shape has developed a design dynamic that would remain hidden if we only looked at Western specimens. This dynamic comes to the fore once we leave the traditional purview of research. The transmission and evolution of obelisk symbolism in China present intriguing avenues for further exploration, given the abundance of material and potential complexities in their meanings and historical trajectories. China thus presents an ideal case study to illuminate the non-Western history of obelisks, offering insights into their adaptation and significance beyond Western contexts.

2.5 India

If we talk about China, we also have to talk about India. Similarly populous as China, India is also a BRICS member and an economy very much on the rise, and thus worthy of scholarly attention. Like China with the obelisk at Tiananmen Square, India boasts an obelisk as a central national monument to commemorate military personnel killed in armed conflicts since Indian independence from Britain in 1947. Commissioned by the Modi administration and unveiled in 2019, the National War Memorial features a stone obelisk as the centerpiece of concentric rings; the base houses an eternal flame while the top is rather a bronze statue of three lions than a pyramidion (Baruah, 2019). An example more in line with Egyptian design is the Batasia

Loop War Memorial in Sikkim in the triangle between the Nepalese, Chinese, and Bhutanese borders. This obelisk commemorates the Gurkha soldiers who have died in service since 1947 (Khan, 2022). Other monuments in a clear obelisk shape that commemorate the military service of individual units are distributed all over India (Chhina, 2014, 172–202).

In the case of India, the line of transmission seems to be clear since it was a British colony. British obelisks on Indian soil are the 1911 Coronation Obelisk in New Delhi (Datta, 2022) or the 1907 Obelisk Monument in Srirangapatna (Polash, 2019), the former in classical Egyptian appearance and the former with a sphere on top instead of a pyramidion. While both the British obelisks are a testament and celebration of the British domination of India, the recent war memorial refers to independent India only. Due to a lack of research, it has to remain unclear for now whether the Indian government went with the form of the obelisk as a reaction to British obelisks or whether the shape had been normalized as a monument form in the minds of decision-makers and architects. The absence of any discussion of the presence of obelisks in the available literature suggests that they are seen as given. These circumstances illustrate the need for research into obelisks on the Indian subcontinent.



Figure 6. Batasia Loop Gorkha War Memorial. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

2.6 West Africa

Similarly un(der)-researched are apparently modern obelisks in Africa outside Egypt. Despite the apparent absence of literature, one modern African obelisk has to be mentioned here, not least because of the importance of African decolonization movements. Place de la Nation in Dakar, Senegal, is home to a white obelisk as its central feature. The Roman numerals MCMLX on its side betray what it commemorates: the independence of Senegal from France in 1960 coming on the back of anti-colonial struggle (Ollivier, 2021). Besides a lion as the national emblem on the base, the shape is akin to the original Egyptian obelisks. This example concludes the survey of obelisks.

2.7 Obelisks as Cosmopolitan and Politicized Architecture

It has become clear from the case studies presented here that obelisks have transformed considerably in appearance and meaning ever since they first left Egypt as their place of origin. At the same time, obelisks as public monuments are highly politicized. This goes back to ancient Egypt. There, obelisks were religiously and ideologically charged, embodying and expressing the Egyptian king's and the Egyptian state's nominal rule over the world and foreign people as bestowed by the Egyptian pantheon. Since Roman times, there is arguably an inherent connection between obelisks and armed conflict, whether that is the celebration of conquest or the liberation from domination.

The analysis contrasts commemorative narratives of domination and liberation, highlighting two distinct ideological traditions. The commemoration of imperial or colonial rule, influenced by practices observed in the Roman Empire and pharaonic Egypt, emphasizes the use of obelisks to assert power. The opposite tradition celebrates resistance or liberation from imperial or colonial rule. This dichotomy suggests regional and ideological divides in obelisk symbolism (Langer, 2021). Further investigation is needed to validate this hypothesis through comprehensive data analysis. In these instances, obelisks not only convey messages but embody historical narratives of domination and liberation.

Yet, despite all the focus on conflict, obelisks are ultimately cosmopolitan architecture as well. This becomes apparent once research leaves the traditional spatial confines of the North Atlantic and incorporates other regions in the analysis. Especially the Chinese obelisks with their modularity and adaptability to local conditions embody a conversation between China and ancient Egypt via the West, but also among the diverse Chinese nationalities, linking the majority Han traditions with minority cultures.

Such a cosmopolitan reading may be in line with one contemporary obelisk in Central Europe. The Nigerian-born American concept artist Olu Oguibe developed a contemporary concrete-and-metal obelisk for *documenta 14* in 2017. The Monument to Strangers and Refugees is inscribed with a Christian Bible verse ("I was a stranger and you took me in") that appeals to hospitality given to strangers (Kassel, 2024). Oguibe (2017) related the shape of the obelisk to timelessness and universality of African origin. Ironically, the artwork became the site of conflict between the artist and local right-wing groups who were against the subsequent purchase of the monument by the city of Kassel. Nonetheless, conflict surrounding obelisks deemed controversial for whatever reason should not detract from the hopeful moment that, ultimately, they represent intercultural dialogue and cultural compatibility despite any nationalist messages of individual obelisks.

3. The Future of Obelisks in Architectural Practice: A Speculation

3.1 Awareness of Practitioners

A recurring problem among the case studies discussed here is the why: why did architects choose the particular shape of the obelisk for their monument? Whereas in many cases there is no answer in the literature or archival material, in the cases where we can tell, it was usually a reference to an already existing monument; in other words, designs were simply copied, obelisks erected for monuments simply because

someone else had done the same earlier. This generally raises the issue to what extent practitioners, i.e., architects, designers and those who commission public monuments, are aware of the meanings and histories behind design choices. Oguibe's choice to construct a contemporary obelisk due to its African origin and global relevance suggests that he was aware; yet the case studies suggest that same cannot be said for many. That means that this paper and related research can also serve as invitation to designers to reflect on their choices and raise their awareness of the spatiotemporal intricacies of the obelisk.

3.2 Designing for/in the Future: Toward a Decolonial Obelisk?

It has become clear that the global presence of obelisks alone is the outcome of colonialism that may go back two millennia. The bulk of existing monuments either commemorate domination or liberation from colonial-imperial domination. Colonial and anti-colonial obelisks are thus part of the same conversation since they negotiate the relationship between colonizer and (formerly) colonized. Speaking with decolonial thought of the South American school (e.g., Mignolo, 2021; Mignolo and Walsh, 2018), even anti-colonial obelisks are still colonial obelisks since they pertain to the same logic as the monuments placed by colonizers. The question is if we can break out of this colonial logic. What would a decolonial obelisk look like? What would a decolonial obelisk even be? The obelisk's track record of over four millennia and its global variability suggests that the concept is here to stay for the foreseeable future; hence, these questions are worth pondering, or generally what an obelisk of the future may look like.

First of all, decoloniality is an option to bring about a world where colonial relationships are entirely absent. As already mentioned above, the obelisk is spread around the world in large part thanks to European colonialism and because local elites intended to westernize their memorial culture, as in the Chinese case. An alternative may be an obelisk that represents potentially everything. The Chinese obelisks highlight the modularity of obelisks. That means in theory it should be possible to combine several traditions in the same monument (Figure 7). Yet this would then raise the question which traditions to choose to represent various local identities to create a truly cosmopolitan obelisk. Depending on the choices, these may entail the danger of essentializing representations ("this is Chinese, this West African") and thus reproducing colonial attitudes toward aesthetics.



Figure 7. Obelisk design combining several traditions (Prompt: an obelisk with a pointy top and West African and Asian design elements on the body). Source: Midjourney.

A possible alternative may be an obelisk that adheres to no recognizable traditions, one abstracted so much and stripped of any elements that are easily relatable (Figure 8). Incidentally, this may point toward the path China has already undertaken with its postmodern monuments. Yet a monument that is recognizable as an

obelisk by the shape may still be primarily linked to Egypt; the absence of any inscription may be enough to detach it enough from Egypt so as to render it suitable for more widespread use. Then again, if there cannot be any markings, what is the appeal for any local iterations to emerge



Figure 8. Futuristic/minimalistic obelisk design avoiding any recognizable tradition (Prompt: an obelisk in style of a space rocket with smooth undecorated sides and a metallic look). Source: Midjourney.

Perhaps a decolonial obelisk would be an obelisk that does not exist, in the sense of the cessation of the construction of obelisks altogether. Note the somewhat circular argument by Leo Name (2021, p. 8) in this context, “There is no decolonial architecture because there is no teaching of decolonial architecture because there is no decolonial architecture”. He further asserts that architecture that maintains the link with its design roots in the Renaissance had been used by bourgeois white Europeans to conquer territories (Name, 2021, p.8). It is fair to say that obelisks satisfy these criteria, a decolonial obelisk is thus hardly possible.

Decolonial thought sets the bar admittedly high for decolonization, demanding no less than a wholesale departure from colonial structures, including modes of knowing. For the future of the obelisk, that may well mean that it would have no future outside Egypt, especially as its global transmission has been crucially facilitated by European colonialisms. Yet even within Egypt, one may wonder if modern iterations are not expressions of colonial mindsets and policies (Langer, 2017; Jurman, 2022, pp. 20–22); note that a glass obelisk is planned to become the tallest building on earth as part of Egypt’s new administrative capital (Jungfleisch and Reali, 2023, 33). This may render the modern obelisk colonial architecture by default, in line with Name’s intervention.

Yet per Mohamed Elshahed (2023), the bar may be lower when it comes to *moving toward* decolonization. He proposes the following five points in asking what it took “to decolonize architecture in contemporary practice and in history”:

1. Recognize that history is never a linear progression of figures, events, buildings, or styles.
2. Recognize the impact of colonialism in its past and present forms on architectural production, on the fate of architectural heritage, on the fate or archives, and on the capacity to write architectural history, both in the colony and in the metropole.
3. “The only primitivism is Eurocentrism”
4. Decenter architectural knowledge production, support the building of independent architectural institutions in former and present colonies.
5. In a global economy, “meaning” and “value” in postcolonial contexts are often assigned from the

colonial center, maintaining a center-periphery dynamic. Restore the production of “meaning” and “value” to local communities.

This paper relates to Elshahed’s points in the following ways:

1. We acknowledge that the transmission of the obelisk was likely a complex entanglement of agencies rather than a one-sided affair, and that the form and meaning of the obelisks around the world are fluid and subject to change.
2. We have acknowledged the Eurocentric/Western bias in scholarship on ancient and modern obelisks as well as the role of colonialism in the role of their transmission around the globe.
3. An outcome of this paper and related research is the overcoming of Eurocentrism by bringing into focus the under-researched regions and traditions outside the traditional Western focus.
4. We are moving toward the decentering knowledge production by adopting a global perspective that brings attention to local adaptations in former and present (semi-)colonies and those areas never formally colonized.
5. In turn, especially opening the research question toward a genuinely global perspective can allow local communities’ input into the ‘meaning’ of their obelisks and engender further reflection. The global perspective allows for a shift of what appears peripheral at best in the literature, i.e., regions beyond the North Atlantic, to the center of attention, which may also reflect the fact that more innovation in the design of obelisks has happened there over the past century than in the West.

In this sense, local adaptations of obelisks could satisfy the criteria of a decolonized obelisk. Yet the ultimate issue remains that an obelisk at present cannot be decolonial in the way decolonial thought would have it. Irrespective of that problem, the quest to decolonize should leave enough room for artistic creativity and experimentation.

4. Conclusion

The paper has revealed the spatial focus in obelisk-related scholarship on obelisks in the West. It has also shown the feasibility to incorporate obelisk traditions from the global South to devise a truly global history of the obelisk, to fully grasp its transformative potential in design and function. The case studies ranging from ancient Egyptian to contemporary Afro-Eurasian obelisks reveal the evolving appearance and significance of obelisks outside of Egypt, emphasizing their politicization as public monuments, a tradition dating back to ancient Egypt. Obelisks historically symbolized imperial domination or liberation from it, reflecting contrasting commemorative narratives. One tradition – what can be considered the Western tradition – celebrates domination, influenced by Roman and Egyptian practices, while the other commemorates resistance or liberation – perhaps to be called the global South or anti-colonial tradition. This dichotomy suggests regional and ideological divisions in obelisk symbolism, warranting further investigation for validation. Despite their association with conflict, obelisks also embody cosmopolitan architecture, seen in Chinese adaptations and contemporary artworks like Olu Oguibe's Monument to Strangers and Refugees. Such instances highlight the potential for intercultural dialogue and compatibility amid nationalist tensions surrounding obelisks.

The global presence of obelisks is a legacy of colonialism. This poses questions about the potential for decolonial obelisks. The paper has explored the possibility of obelisks that transcend recognizable traditions, abstracting their form, or ceasing their construction altogether as a decolonial gesture. However, decolonial thought presents challenges that ultimately question the feasibility of a truly decolonial obelisk given its historical entanglement with colonialism. Existing propositions for decolonizing architecture offer insights applicable to obelisks, emphasizing the need to recognize colonial legacies and restore agency to local communities. While local adaptations of obelisks may align with decolonial principles, the inherent ties to colonialism pose barriers to achieving decoloniality in obelisk construction. Nonetheless, the pursuit of decolonization should accommodate artistic innovation and experimentation within the realm of obelisk design, which – as this paper has shown – is a highly dynamic field worthy of

further reflection by scholars and designers alike. Next to design experimentation, that may include careful theoretical deliberations over the nature of decolonial architecture to delineate the feasibility of decolonial obelisk designs.

References

- Baker, C., & Phongpaichit, P. (2022). *A history of Thailand*. Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009029797>
- Baruah, S. (2016, March 3). Explained: India's national war memorial. *The Indian Express*. Retrieved January 10, 2024, from <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-indias-national-war-memorial-5600880/>
- Brier, B. (2016). *Cleopatra's needles: The lost obelisks of Egypt*. Bloomsbury.
<https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474242967>
- Charney, M. W. (2009). *A history of modern Burma*. Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107051034>
- Chhina, R. T. S. (2014). *Last post: Indian war memorials around the world*. United Service Institution of India.
- Craig, A. (1913). *Lineage, life and labors of José Rizal: Philippine patriot*. Philippine Education Company.
- Curl, J. S. (2005). *The Egyptian revival: Ancient Egypt as the inspiration for design motifs in the West*. Routledge.
- Curran, B. A., Grafton, A., Long, P. O., & Weiss, B. (2009). *Obelisk: A history*. Burndy Library.
- Datta, R. (2022, January 24). Coronation Park: Delhi's graveyard of colonial statues. *The Telegraph India*. Retrieved January 10, 2024, from <https://www.telegraphindia.com/my-kolkata/places/coronation-park-delhis-graveyard-of-colonial-statues/cid/1848981>
- Elshahed, M. (2023, January 5). Five points toward decolonizing architecture. *The Architect's Newspaper*. Retrieved January 10, 2024, from <https://www.archpaper.com/2023/01/five-points-toward-decolonizing-architecture/>
- Fazzini, R. A., & McKercher, M. E. (2003). 'Egyptomania' and American architecture. In J.-M. Humbert & C. Price (Eds.), *Imhotep today: Egyptianizing architecture* (pp. 135-159). UCL Press.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781843147640-8>
- Gordon, J. S. (2016). *Washington's monument: And the fascinating history of the obelisk*. Bloomsbury USA.
- Habachi, L. (1977). *The obelisks of Egypt: Skyscrapers of the past*. Scribner.
- Hassan, F. A. (2003). Imperialist appropriations of Egyptian obelisks. In D. Jeffreys (Ed.), *Views of Ancient Egypt since Napoleon Bonaparte: Imperialism, colonialism and modern appropriations* (pp. 19-68). UCL Press. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781843147596-2>
- Ho, V. K. (2004). Martyrs or ghosts? A short cultural history of a tomb in revolutionary Canton, 1911-1970. *East Asian History*, 27, 99-138.
- Hung, C. (2001). Revolutionary history in stone: The making of a Chinese national monument. *The China Quarterly*, 166, 457-473. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009443901000225>

- Hung, C. (2008). The cult of the red martyr: Politics of commemoration in China. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 43(2), 279-304. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009408089033>
- Jungfleisch, J., & Reali, C. (2023). The archaeology of the Egyptian revolution and counterrevolution: An archaeology that has never occurred. *Forum Kritische Archäologie*, 12, 30-35.
- Kassel. (2024). Das Fremdlinge und Flüchtlinge Monument [Monument to strangers and refugees]. Retrieved January 30, 2024, from https://www.kassel.de/buerger/kunst_und_kultur/obelisk.php#MzY3NzM3Njk0
- Khan, A. (2022, August 14). Independence Day: 7 war memorials to visit across India. *Architectural Digest*. Retrieved January 10, 2024, from <https://www.architecturaldigest.in/story/war-memorials-india-you-must-visit-that-will-fill-you-with-pride-and-patriotism/>
- Kissling, R. (1916). Das José Rizal Denkmal in Manila [The José Rizal monument in Manila]. *Schweizer Kunst*, 159, 68.
- Lai, D. (2005). Searching for a modern Chinese monument: The design of the Sun Yat-sen mausoleum in Nanjing. *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 64(1), 22-55. <https://doi.org/10.2307/25068123>
- Langer, C. (2017). The informal colonialism of Egyptology: From the French expedition to the security state. In M. Woons & S. Weier (Eds.), *Critical epistemologies of global politics* (pp. 182-202). E-International Relations Publishing.
- Langer, C. (2021). Von Assuan nach Yangon: Obelisk in transkultureller Perspektive. In K. Gabler, A. Verbovsek, S. Bickel, & E. Hemauer (Eds.), *Formen kultureller Dynamik: Impuls - Progression - Transformation* (pp. 115-131). Harrassowitz.
- Langer, C. (2023). Egyptology: A decolonial investigation. *Archaeologies: Journal of the World Archaeological Congress*, 19(1), 39-59. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11759-023-09472-7>
- Langer, C., & Matić, U. (2023). Postcolonial theory in Egyptology: Key concepts and agendas. *Archaeologies: Journal of the World Archaeological Congress*, 19(1), 1-27. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11759-023-09470-9>
- Lansford, T. (2001). Bataan Death March. In S. Sandler (Ed.), *World War II in the Pacific: An encyclopedia* (pp. 157-160). Routledge.
- Mignolo, W. D. (2021). *The politics of decolonial investigations*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478002574>
- Mignolo, W. D., & Walsh, C. E. (2018). *On decoloniality: Concepts, analytics, praxis*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822371779>
- Murphy, K. C. (2014). *Inside the Bataan Death March: Defeat, travail and memory*. McFarland.
- Myint-U, T. (2001). *The making of modern Burma*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511613661>
- Name, L. (2021). Coloniality and decoloniality analytics: Some basic spatial dimensions in architecture. *Pos FAUUSP*, 28(52), e168263, 1-12.
- Noobanjang, K. (2011). The Victory Monument: The politics of representations of Thai identity and colonial discourse in built forms. *Journal of Architectural/Planning Research and Studies*, 8(1), 55-74. <https://doi.org/10.56261/jars.v8i1.168667>

Oguipe, O. (2017). documenta 14 artist Olu Oguipe and the obelisk. *YouTube*. Retrieved January 24, 2024, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VmFPwI4auPo>

Ollivier, T. (2021, March 10). A Dakar, la place de la Nation, épicentre de la contestation sénégalaise [In Dakar, the square of the nation, the center of protests in Senegal]. *Le Monde*. Retrieved January 30, 2024, from https://www.lemonde.fr/m-le-mag/article/2021/03/10/a-dakar-la-place-de-la-nation-epicentre-de-la-contestation-senegalaise_6072600_4500055.html#

Polash, A. (2019, April 19). Obelisk, a forgotten monument at Srirangapatna. *Star of Mysore*. Retrieved January 10, 2024, from <https://starofmysore.com/obelisk-a-forgotten-monument-at-srirangapatna/>

Roullet, A. (1972). *The Egyptian and Egyptianizing monuments of imperial Rome*. Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004294882>

Seekins, D. M. (2011). *State and society in modern Rangoon*. Routledge.

Sellers, M. N. S. (1994). *American republicanism: Roman ideology in the United States constitution*. NYU Press. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-13347-5>

Spotts, F. (2009). *Hitler and the power of aesthetics*. Abrams Press.

Sorek, S. (2010). *The emperor's needles: Egyptian obelisks and Rome*. Liverpool University Press. <https://doi.org/10.5949/liverpool/9781904675518.001.0001>

Torres, L. (1984). "To the immortal name and memory of George Washington": The United States Army Corps of Engineers and the construction of the Washington Monument. Military Bookshop.

Van de Ven, H. (1977). *War and nationalism in China: 1925-1945*. Routledge.

Winter, T. (2019). *Geocultural power: China's quest to revive the silk roads for the twenty-first century*. University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226658490.001.0001>

Wong, K. F. (2005). *Visions of a nation: Public monuments in twentieth-century Thailand*. White Lotus.

Wu, H. (2005). *Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and the creation of a political space*. London: Reaktion Books.

Xie Zilong Image Art Museum. (2023, January 11). "影像时刻"开幕论坛回顾 | 七位学者共同探讨：摄影与中国视觉现代性 [Review of the opening forum of "Image Moment" | Seven scholars discussed: Photography and Chinese visual modernity]. Retrieved January 24, 2024, from <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/zvndeOracT4FSczTspgxBw>

About the Author:

Christian Langer, FRHistS is Assistant Professor in Classics at the University of Georgia. From 2021 to 2023 he was a Postdoctoral Fellow at Peking University, School of Arts. In 2024, he was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society (London).

Acknowledgements: This paper was supported by a Visiting Research Fellowship of the Berliner Antike-Kolleg. Thanks go to the anonymous reviewers whose comments helped improve this manuscript.

P/REFERENCES OF DESIGN

This contribution was presented at Cumulus Budapest 2024: P/References of Design conference, hosted by the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design Budapest, Hungary between May 15-17, 2024.

Conference Website

cumulusbudapest2024.mome.hu

Conference Tracks

Centres and Peripheries
Converging Bodies of Knowledge
Redefining Data Boundaries
Bridging Design and Economics
Speculative Perspectives
The Power of Immersion
The Future of Well-being
Taming Entropy: Systems Design for Climate and Change
Ways of Living Together
Cumulus PhD Network

Full Conference Proceedings

<https://cumulusbudapest2024.mome.hu/proceedings>

ISBN Volume 1: 978-952-7549-02-5 (PDF)

ISBN Volume 2: 978-952-7549-03-2 (PDF)

DOI Volume 1: <https://doi.org/10.63442/IZUP8898>

DOI Volume 2: <https://doi.org/10.63442/TADX4016>

Conference Organisers

Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design Budapest (MOME)

mome.hu

Cumulus Association

cumulusassociation.org