

*Las Aradas massacre memorial:
public space through community and commemoration*

keywords

El Salvador research by design massacre memorial participation

abstract

From the late 1970s until the civil war ended in 1992, the Salvadoran national guard and the paramilitary group ORDEN perpetrated dozens of massacres of the civilian population of El Salvador. The massacres were part of a reign of violent oppression by the US-backed Salvadoran government, which also included assassinations, disappearances, torture, forced displacement and slash and burn military tactics.

The region in question here is an area close to San José Las Flores, Arcatao, Las Vueltas in Chalatenango. In May 1980, the Salvadoran military massacred approximately 600 civilians in a small hamlet known as Las Aradas, on the banks of the Sumpul River, which marks the border with Honduras. In August 2017, the survivors established a non-profit organisation to amplify their voices and actions. Amongst other projects, the Association acquired the land of Las Aradas, where hundreds of people gather annually for one night and day, to commemorate the Sumpul River Massacre. The journey to the site requires a 3-4 hour walk across rough terrain and several river crossings. They are now in the process of realising a memorial park.

Las Aradas exemplifies the crystallisation of history and memory in a single 'public space', in turn allowing for new forms of collectivity. For example, Honduran neighbours participate in the commemoration through their logistical support (food). Different communities come together on this occasion. A theatre play is staged, to reconstruct memories of the massacre. The communities are engaged in the production of the work. Other issues are addressed collectively (waste management, political implications, maintenance, etc.)

This paper explores the context of the project, the participative design process including the communities and the features of the design proposal, as well as reflecting on the not dissimilar memorial realised in El Mozote, Morazán.

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Introduction

This paper explores the position of the body (collective and individual) in the large-scale massacre of 14th May 1980 in a hamlet known as Las Aradas in the northern province of Chalatenango, El Salvador. It seeks to reflect critically on loss and remembrance in relation to its communities, to the political framework and the architectural project for the memorial site. It investigates how and why the community situates the trauma as one of its constitutive elements and in which ways architecture plays a role.

The political body and the site: division and reconciliation

Giorgio Agamben's theory of civil war draws on two examples: the status of civil war in Ancient Athens and in Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*. He puts forward these two historic examples as 'two faces, so to speak, of a single political paradigm'¹, namely civil war and develops the necessity of its existence and its exclusion. In Ancient Greece, civil war is described by the oxymoron *oikeios polemos*, with *oikeios* translating as 'belonging to the household' and *polemos* as 'foreign war'. The family is put forward as the paradigm of civil war: 'fighting each other as if they were destined to reconcile.'² In this way, civil war generates a tension field between division and reconciliation through politicisation and depoliticisation. The founding moment of a community, the construction of a *polis* happens precisely at the moment when the *stasis* depoliticises. The architectural project for the Las Aradas site is undeniably about mourning and commemoration, but more fundamentally, it draws on the massacre as the founding myth of its communities.

The civilian unrest of the 1970s that led up to the Salvadoran Civil War (1980-1992) is closely connected to the 1932 Salvadoran Peasant Massacre. Known as *La Matanza* (the slaughter), an uprising of farmers against the government led to the killing of between 10,000 and 40,000 mainly indigenous people. Many Salvadorans reacted furiously to the military government protecting the wealth of the elite. From the late 1970s until the civil war ended in 1992, the Salvadoran national guard and the paramilitary group ORDEN carried out dozens of massacres on the civilian population of El Salvador. These killings were part of a strategy of violent oppression by the US-backed Salvadoran government. One of these massacres is known as the Rio Sumpul massacre. In search of safety and refuge, large numbers of civilians made the long journey to Las Aradas by foot, today a four-hour walk from the village of San José Las Flores, including river crossings. On arrival, the Salvadoran national guard and the paramilitary group ORDEN started the massacre and killed approximately 600 people.



Figure 1 (left): satellite view of the topography of the Las Aradas region, Chalatenango
Figure 2 (right): the way to the Las Aradas site, drawing by research team

¹ Agamben G., *Stasis: Civil War as a Political Paradigm*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2015

² *Ibid.*

Death 1 - Heidegger

If death signifies the possible of the impossible³, mourning could be understood as an immediate, relentless dealing with the insurmountable concept of death. Where plants and animals perish, only humans die. During our lives, it is impossible to imagine death (yet we find ourselves in realities that force us to deal with death); once we die, we can no longer experience death. Hence the impression of death that is always to come, as if it arrives somewhere outside of us.

In the immediate aftermath of the massacre, soldiers stayed at the site to survey the bodies. Afterwards, survivors of the massacre put some of the victims in a well close to the site to protect them from being carried away. To this day, most bodies have not been removed from the site and traces of them remain across the entire site albeit invisible to the naked eye. Exhumation is an extremely long and costly process that is not accessible to members of the community. Since the end of the Civil War, the community has been involved in memorial services on site. The construction of a small cross in 1993 and an engraved stone ten years later mark the first moments of remembrance. Two years ago, the newly created association was able to purchase the land of Las Aradas.

The *marking of the site* (by means of architecture and organised commemoration visits) and the *purchase of the land* of the massacre, the land containing the lost members of the community, means that any architectural project should only reinforce the site, accommodate certain functions, reveal or underline as the site is already used for commemoration. Apart from a series of functional questions - a roof for gatherings, shadow for camping spots, designated areas for cooking, for horses, etc - there is a clear demand for a memorial for the victims of the massacre. A way of explicitly marking the site with the names of the victims, a way of taking ownership of the massacre and the site. How can we create a public space that supports commemorations of the deaths, but which also commemorates who they are and why?



Figure 3 (left): existing monument and engraved stone, photo by research team
Figure 4 (right): El Mozote massacre memorial constructed by the Catholic Church, photo by research team

Before going more into detail, it becomes easier to understand the specific situation of the communities by looking more closely at the El Mozote massacre memorial.⁴ El Mozote, Morazán, is the only known massacre of comparable magnitude to Las Aradas. After the decision of the Interamerican Court of Human Rights, the massacre was recognised and the government of El Salvador was forced to pay reparations for the massacre. Amongst the reparations was the construction of a memorial. The Catholic Church also constructed a memorial.

³ Heidegger M., *Being and Time*, Martino Fine Books, Eastford, 2019

⁴ Medina R.A., Binford L., *Revisiting the El Mozote massacre: memory and politics in postwar El Salvador*, *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 16, No. 4, 513-533, 2014

First, the monument erected by the Catholic church in a remote location is an imposing structure situated at a crossroads which offers no space for collective commemoration. It represents a family and four statues. John Paul II is known for his critique of communism and particularly on the position of Archbishop Romero. The positions taken by Gandhi and Martin Luther King, both peaceful activists, can also be interpreted as a critique of the guerrilla movements. Mother Teresa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, when Archbishop Romero was nominated in 1978. The figure of Archbishop Romero himself is absent, if it weren't for a statue on top of a remote, fenced hill housing a seminar. In the village, next to the humble wall presenting names of the victims, and the small courtyard next to the church, the government (led by the FMLN) built a roofed podium in compliance with the decision of the court. The podium however seems to have been made with the aim of self-glorification. It does not address the needs of the local communities and is devoid of symbolic value. Supported by the church or the government, these memorials seem to fulfil an agenda alien to the commemoration of the events and alien to the feeling and experience of the people involved.

Death 2

And then again, those moments that force us to deal with death are everywhere. Those moments where we cannot not think about it; where death places itself right in front of us, no, rises up inside of us. The perforation of a reality. Not every death is the same death; there are questions of proximity, of time, of expectations. But the dead are unmistakably dead. Yet, if you die, don't I die with you as I keep on living? The space you seem to occupy in me with your being-dead propels me to my own death that I cannot possibly imagine.

Body and site: social cohesion and community

The Las Aradas site consists of a large open field, sloping down in the north-east towards the river. The Rio Sumpul is an important element in the physical orientation of the site, but it also carries important historic connotations. As the soldiers opened fire on the unarmed civilians, many tried to flee via the river to Honduras, heading to the far bank. Due to heavy rainfall the night before, many people drowned. Those who made it to the other side were met by Honduran soldiers, who forced them to go back. The river functions as a strong border, but also a threshold, a passage of some sort. Nowadays, one enters the site either via the river bank or in the middle of the plot. Trees encircle the perimeter of the site, with some standing in the open field. The use of the site is mainly structured by the presence of shade.

The possibility of the community to take care of the place of the trauma, to *leave traces* as it were, could be understood as fixing the trauma in a designated space so it becomes possible to commemorate, to reflect, to mourn *and* to start (re)building a daily life, a community. As the place of trauma (massacre) overlaps with the place of commemoration, this might seem obvious, but it is not. Choosing to commemorate (Latin *com* together + *memoria* memory, remembering, faculty of remembering; late 14c.: a calling to mind) at the exact place of the trauma leads to a vivid reliving or revisiting of the trauma itself. The proximity of the bodies of the victims to individual members of the community and the community as a whole acts as an unrelenting and ever-present reminder, as death becomes part of them through claiming the space, commemorating, coming back each year. Individual losses also become part of a communal loss, and tribute to the generation of a community. At once, daily life itself becomes possible as well: fixing the trauma in a specific place 'liberates' other places from the trauma inhabited by the communities, although it must be noted that those other places do not explicitly negate the trauma.

This daily life is about social cohesion and a shared narrative: the founding myth of the community that draws on loss and remembrance of the Rio Sumpul massacre. It is about left-wing communities embracing solidarity and peace, despite the war and 20 years of neo-liberalism, despite the very precarious economic situation they find themselves in.

Death 3 - Derrida

'I am like my father already dead and like my mother I live and I become old. '; my life births from the dead and the living at the same time.⁵ Death was already always there, in the core of life. To say 'I' is to say I am already dead.' The possibility of saying 'I am alive' goes hand in hand with my being-dead. One cannot exist without the other.

Body, site and architecture: a public space

The first gesture of the design is a clearing, a void created by a newly planted forest of fire trees. The trees are planted in a grid pattern of 7 x 7 meters, the square measures 63 x 63 meters. The public square frames the landscape, adopts the existing monuments and incorporates the new memorial with the names. It reinforces what was already there. Here, the social narrative of the community crystallises into a public square. The clearing is created by the forest that organises the daily life: the shadow under the trees makes it possible to do so. The roof for gatherings, the statue of Monseñor Romero, camping spots, cooking areas and benches find their places here. The clearing is like an empty city with life revolving around it. The forest sketches the perimeter of the clearing and radiates outwards, mixing in with the existing trees. The forest creates the clearing, but without the clearing, there is no tangible perception of the forest. The designated place for trauma (the clearing) and daily life (the forest) are thus clearly identifiable but cannot exist without one another. Consequently, the proposal is more like an agora or a forum than a park. More like a basilica than a church.

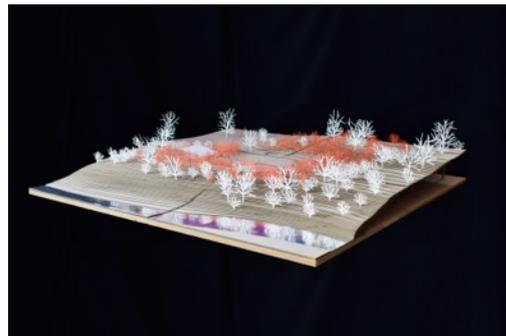
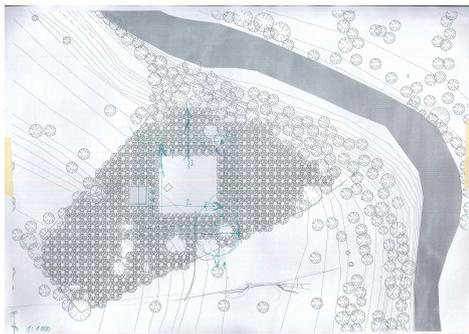


Figure 5 (left): preliminary plan of the project proposal, by research team
Figure 6 (right): architectural model of the project proposal, by research team

Existing elements on site are effortlessly absorbed into the plan; the orientation of the clearing is more or less parallel to the river, an edge touches one of the existing entrances of the site; on the other side an existing path down to the river is incorporated. One enters the site through some existing trees before reaching the new forest of fire trees whose blossom bloom in a deep, mesmerising red in May, the month when the massacre took place.

The roof consists of a series of columns that follow the same grid as the trees, holding up beams that bear the tiled roof itself. A large wall is drawn on one side, a backdrop for a speaker and a support for a mural. Different gatherings take place: different groups in the communities make music, sing, read poems, share stories and testimonies. A play reconstructing the massacre is performed. On the day of the massacre itself, the 14th, a mass is organised. Priests from different communities assemble and perform the service, dedicated to the survivors of the massacre who died that year. Political developments are discussed. The working and projects of the association are presented. The roof is a versatile gathering place, generous in its proportions.

⁵ Derrida J., *La vie la mort, séminaire 1975-1976*, Seuil, Paris, 2019 (own translation)

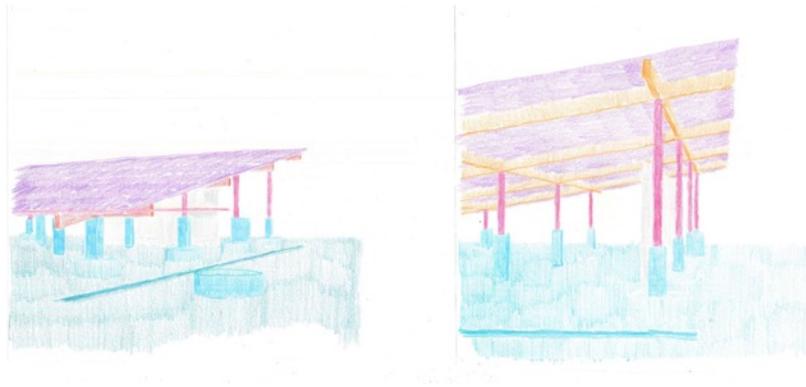


Figure 7: perspective drawings of the roof, by research team

The wall beneath the roof offers space for a mural. Murals are a long-standing tradition in South and Central America in depicting and commenting on history and politics. There is an impressive mural that portrays the Rio Sumpul massacre in the village of Arcatao, home of one of the communities of the region. During meetings, the communities expressed their ideas for the mural at the Las Aradas site. Instead of only depicting the Rio Sumpul massacre, the idea of incorporating more historic events into the mural came to the fore. Events before and after the Civil War, events during; in this way the mural can be read in multiple ways, bringing fragments of history together on one support. The wall explicitly contextualises the main gathering site - underneath the roof - and the site as a whole, without forcing the observer to read one story.

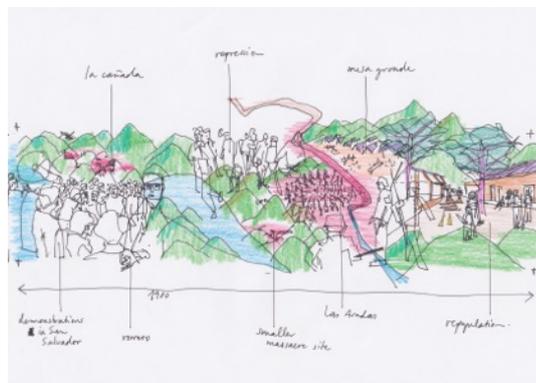


Figure 8: preliminary drawing of the mural, by research team

The memorial is almost elliptical in plan, its axes measuring 12 and 10 meters. Unlike conventional burial grounds, the exact location of the victims remains unknown. Funerary architecture very often tends to be a vertical gesture, a stone, a cross, something rising up from the surface indicating the deceased below. Here, the opposite is suggested: a surface, marking a large zone in the clearing, lower than the level of the ground. A surface that suggests continuation below the ground. The memorial marks a spot - the exact location where it is located - but hints at a larger surface. It is at once a place and a non-place, fixing the viewer's eye and redirecting it elsewhere. The visible surface is made of a concrete slab covered with ceramic tiles with the names of the victims, produced locally in collaboration with the University of El Salvador. As it is situated 40 cm below the level of the ground, the memorial will need to be cleaned for the yearly commemoration. This collective act of rendering the names of the victims visible is put forward as a collective, physical calling to mind, underlining the social cohesion of the communities.

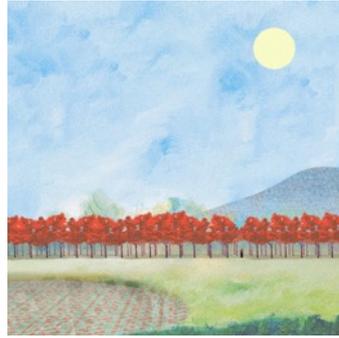


Figure 9: image of the clearing with the memorial in the foreground, by research team

One tree on the edge of the clearing is replaced with a statue of Monseñor Romero, the Archbishop that was killed in the beginning of the Civil War. The polychromic statue is a 1:1 scale representation. As a spectator, part of daily life, he stands on the edge of the square. His political and religious presence on the site functions as an homage, but also as part of the social narrative of the community. The left-wing orientation of the community is also palpable in the creation of the project itself. It relies on solidarity, organising workshops and discussions. The collectivity under the trees, where very little hierarchy is found, is testimony to this principle. Materiality of the project relies on easy-to-build principles, reducing cost and transport as much as possible, allowing collective on-site assemblages.

The Las Aradas memorial site is conceived as a strong public space. In fact, it is the most important public space in the region. Even the colonnades on the central square in Arcatao fail to mark the publicness of this space. The central square of the clearing at Las Aradas can be seen as the founding act of the city. This founding act coincides with the founding myth of the community: the Rio Sumpul massacre.

The second part of Agamben's *Stasis* explores Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*. The frontispiece portrays a king that is made up of the people, the sovereign who represents the people. Agamben puts forward the concepts of a *disunited multitude* (the people) that leads to the designation of a governing body, followed by the *dissolved multitude*, (collection of individuals of no political significance) leading up to civil war. This dissolved multitude 'is the unpolitical element upon whose exclusion the city is founded.'⁶ The frontispiece, on closer inspection, shows a near-empty city in front of the king. The population disappears when a sovereign is designated. The very same gathering and dissolution of the people is almost tangible in the Las Aradas project: the emptiness of the square; the funeral architecture as its founding act.



Figure 10 (left): Frontispiece of 'The Leviathan' by Thomas Hobbes, engraving by Abraham Bosse
 Figure 11: image of the clearing from the first row of trees, by research team

⁶ Agamben G., *Stasis: Civil War as a Political Paradigm*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2015

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