



THEOLOGIES OF RESISTANCE

Memorial Architecture
in the aftermath of El Salvador's 1980-1992
Civil War

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Atelier de recherche en *é* sur l'Architecture
2023 - 2024

TYPLOGIES

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*Memorial Architecture
in the aftermath of El Salvador's 1980-1992 Civil War*

LBARC 2239 | Atelier de recherche : Typologies

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1. Forward: *What is a Theology of Resistance?*

Historically, the *Theology of Liberation* has been one of the major socio-political humanist forces resisting the oppressive regime of the capitalist *Americanised* governments, that terrorised the civil population of Central America during the years of the Cold War. Born in the 1960s and morphed by the Marxist ideological dogmas that became popular beginning with the turn of the century, the movement offered deprived Latin American communities an alternative Christian religious formation and practice, while empowering the masses struck by poverty and social injustice [fig. 1]. It, therefore, managed to foster a spirit of solidarity and improve literacy and public health rates while focusing on a deeper understanding of the Gospel¹.

In the case of El Salvador, the socio-economic trauma that haunted the country before and after the peace accords 16th of January 1992², caused it to slip into a rampage of corruption, abuse, public safety and deprivation. Furthermore, the responsible authorities display an apparent attitude of ignorance when it comes to proceeding within the 4 successive stages of *Transitional Justice*: “*truth-seeking; the right to justice; establishing reparations for victims; and the guarantee of non-repetition in a reformed future*”³. The traumatised communities must, therefore, cope with the war-caused distress without governmental support and in a backward logic, beginning with the non-repetition of violence and healing of trauma in the hopeful search for some form of justice and/or truth. Thus, the civic fight for *liberation* naturally evolved into a practise of collective *resistance*. Today’s communities of the repopulated, and war-damaged villages express their historical unrest while paying tribute to the 75,000 civilian war victims massacred between 1980 and 1992 in the form of religious rituals and civic commemorations⁴.

1 Tamez, Elsa. “*Liberation Theology*.” Encyclopedia, (2018). Accessed May 27, 2024. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/philosophy-and-religion/christianity/roman-catholic-and-orthodox-churches-general-terms-and-concepts/liberation-theology>.

2 *The Chapultepec Peace Accords* signed on January 16, 1992, putting an end to the 12 years of civil war.

3 CIJ. “*Side by Side with Victims: What Is Transitional Justice?*” International Center for Transitional Justice, (2017). Accessed May 29, 2024. <https://www.ictj.org/media/5424>.

4 Betancur, Belisario, Reinaldo F. Planchart, and Thomas Buergenthal. 2001. *From Madness to Hope: The 12-year War in El Salvador: Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador*. USIP Library.



[fig. 1]

The association between The 14 Stages of Crucifixion and the suffering of the people massacred in El Salvador during the 1980 - 1992 Civil War; representing the belief system of the Theology of Liberation, in the context of what seems to be the Sumpul river.

Photo by Thomas Montulet, *Church at Nueva Trinidad*, 2023.

At last, “*Theologies of Resistance*” investigates the consistent efforts of the deprived communities to preserve the memory of the Civil War. These commemorative celebrations are born in most part from a strong civic identity and dressed into practices derived, more often than not, from a universal religious education. Hence, they inform, through the specificity of the historical events remembered, a collection of unique commemorative choreographies and rituals that I have entitled: *theologies of resistance*. In the context of an architectural project, these instruct the participatory design and spatial arrangements of war memorials while the peculiar, partially unprogrammed, bottom-up nature of these socio-architectural manifestations gives birth to a typology of its own: contextualised and figurative.

2. Introduction: Echoing Histories

Both the contextualised and the figurative qualities of these commemorative manifestations refer to the unconstrained need to artistically express both the physical context of their environment and the traumatic historical contexts. They evoke, when decomposing the series of elements and events that build up a commemoration, a need for reassuring their historical identity. Therefore, many commemorations reference simultaneously through their rituals: traditions which originate within the Maya, obey processions instructed by the Catholic Church and behave in ways which express socialist ideals, all integrated into an American-based consumerist culture and a strongly Latin world⁵ [fig. 2]. This reverberation of echoing histories composes the specific persona of each remembering ritual, whether these are truly embedded in the collective subconscious and culture of the community which remembers or solely a ritual which interprets general cliché ideas about their historical identity.

5 Cauich, Wilbert, and Kambal Muuch. “*La Ofrenda De Esperanza De Los Hombres De Maíz*.” Programa Pequeñas Donaciones Del FMAM, (2022). Accessed April 18, 2024. <https://www.ppdmexico.org/post/la-ofrenda-de-esperanza-de-los-hombres-de-maíz%C2%ADz>.



[fig. 2]

“With the calming smoke of the incense, spreading inside a cabin, in the center we find a kind of circle made with flowers and leaves of jabin, a leafy tree that is well known in the Mayan region. [...] Four lit candles placed at strategic points that represent the four cardinal points that in the Mayan language are: CHIKIN (West), XAMAN (North), LAKIIN (East), NOHOL (South), 13 Mayan tableware known as “luuch” that contain the sacred saka “sacred pozol”, in the center we find the largest luuch filled with water so that there is no lack of rain on the earth. Undoubtedly, the tamales could not be missing as an offering for being the day of the candelaria.

Photo by Wilbert Cauich, *Maya Ritual*, 2022.

Moreover, what seems to give the historical understanding of El Salvador even greater importance in the context of designing civil war memorials, deals not only with the religious or cultural past but also with the political future. A big majority of sites which are used in commemorative processions are simultaneously used as platforms for socio-political debates and manifestations, which generally instruct the much-needed polyvalence that memorials must convey⁶ [fig.3]. In a community meeting held on January of 2024 in San Jose Las Flores, Chalatenango, an ex-guerilla doctor representing the needs of the people, expressed their wish for memorials which not only pay tribute to the victims of war, but also represent the socialist political identity that they have fought for. Furthermore, this becomes a message of ideological independence from the consumerist state.

Consequently, the historical reading of El Salvador initiates the architectural analysis, as commemorations tend to become intersecting points between the entangled histories of the past and the discouraging promises of the future. This will grow during the course of the research into the realisation that one of the major purposes of memorial architecture is that of a *public space*⁷. This change of perspective distorts the angle from which the architectural typology is seen, from an architecture that freezes a moment of the historical past to one which directly plays a role in the continuously changing rhythms of history itself.

6 For example: “ASOCIACIÓN PRO-BÚSQUEDA.” Center for Human Rights. Accessed May 14, 2024. <https://doi.org/>

7 Mostafavi, Mohasen. 2017. *Ethics of the Urban; The City and the Spaces of the Political*. Zürich: Lars Müller Publishers.



[fig. 3]

The use of commemorative celebrations as platforms for socio-political debates and manifestations; image showing banners which represent the community's distrust in the governmental decision to adopt Bitcoin as official currency: "NO AL BITCOIN".

Photo by AgwA, *Commemoration at Gualsinga, 2022*

2.1. About Colonists and About Coffee

The Discovery of El Salvador, 1524, divides the history of the smallest country in Central America into two major timelines: the pre-Columbian and post-Columbian eras⁸. Most studies would estimate that at the time of the conquest, the Mesoamerican region of El Salvador had a demography of around 600,000 indigenous people, out of which the majority were the Pipil, the Chorti Maya, and the Lenca civilisations⁹. However, when the conquistador Pedro de Alvarado, after taking part in the Spanish-Aztec War (1519-1521), decided to continue his conquest south of Mexico and Guatemala, on the territory known at that time as *Cuscatlán*¹⁰ [fig. 4], the history of the people he found suddenly took on a radical detour. Like the rest of Central America, the region became part of the Spanish colonies which naturally encouraged the fast drop in Mesoamerican population.

Ever since the arrival of the European colonists, in 1524, a large demographic percentage of the indigenous population was eradicated due to smallpox epidemics. Others, as history unfolded, were ruthlessly massacred during the numerous wars that troubled the country or were systematically mixed, due to the interbreeding with the migratory populations¹¹. In 1609, the region became part of the unified lands of the *Captaincy General of Guatemala*, the Central American territory administered by the Spanish Empire¹². What had started as the collaborative exchange between the colonists and the Indigenous, allowing the native population own their lands for as long as the Conquistadors were allowed to export their goods, came to be by the 19th century a relationship based on the universal control of the Spanish Crown: lands, labour, food, language, religion, culture, traditions. Over 300 years, the cultural identity of Mesoamerican El Salvador morphed into the Latinised world known today¹³.

8 Armstrong, Robert, and Janet Shenk. 1982. *El Salvador The Face Of Revolution*. 2nd ed. South End Press.

9 Fowler, William Jr. 1986. *The Indigenous Population of El Salvador on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest*. Irvine: University of California.

10 The Pipil name given for a region which stretches on today's territory of El Salvador. Fowler, Bill. "The Pipils of El Salvador." Teaching Central America, Accessed June 1, 2024. <https://www.teachingcentralamerica.org/pipils-el-salvador>.

11 Fowler, William Jr. 1986. *The Indigenous Population of El Salvador on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest*. Irvine: University of California.

12 Miller, Mary E., and Megan E. O'Neil. 2014. *Maya Art & Architecture*. 2nd ed. Thames & Hudson World of Art.

13 Chapin, Mac. "The 500,000 Invisible Indians of El Salvador." Cultural Survival, (2010). Accessed April 12, 2024.



[fig. 4]

*The Cibuatan Mayan ruins, built during the 8th or early-9th century AD,
as the capital settlement of the region.*

Photo on film from personal archive, *Maya Pyramid*, 2024

The chronic financial instability that hit Spain by the turn of the 19th century slowly weakened the administrative geo-political and international control that the Empire manifested over its territory. This ultimately translated into losing most of its influence in Central America. As the industrial era took off, and the consumerist market began empowering North American or West-European states, the Industrial money-making world began being drawn towards the fertile lands of the newly Latinised territory. These years, which mark the birth of modern Central America, are decisive for two reasons: firstly, as the Spanish rule lost its imperial vigour, by 1821, all the territories that once composed the Captaincy General of Guatemala gained their independence¹⁴. This new attempt towards democratic governance unleashed another period of political instability, civil wars and alliances, which at last ended one more time in 1842, when El Salvador became, for the first time in its history, a sovereign state **[fig. 5]**.

Secondly, as the Western states were rapidly moving into the Consumerist era and France and England became leading countries of the Modern World, a taste for tea and, especially, coffee began being mainstreamed around the boulevards of Europe¹⁵. Unsurprisingly, third-world countries like El Salvador became perfect targets for the capitalist oligarchs planning to make a fortune in the cafés of London or Paris. As Shenk Armstrong puts it: “*The history of modern El Salvador begins in a cup of coffee.*” (Armstrong, Shenk, 1982). The coffee barons, which came to be known as the fourteen oligarchs, though their number surpassed that of fourteen by a lot, became not only the land owners of the new democratic state but the ruling class of the 19th and 20th centuries:

“Their names resonate today in the corridors of power: Hill, De Sola, Sol, Parker, Schonenberg, Dalton, Deininger, Duke. These immigrants and the founding elite are the seeds of the oligarchy.” (Armstrong, Shenk, 1982)

14 Armstrong, Robert, and Janet Shenk. 1982. *El Salvador The Face Of Revolution*. 2nd ed. South End Press.

15 Ibid.



[fig. 5]

The inner court inside of the National Palace located in the capital-city of El Salvador, San Salvador, built between 1905 and 1911 with materials imported from several European countries.

Photo on film from personal archive, *The National Palace in San Salvador*, 2024

2.2. 1932, La Matanza

The series of political conflicts and civil oppressions that marked the beginning of the 20th century, specifically the ones of 1932, would be the spark of the terrible 1980 Civil War: “*To be Salvadoran, means knowing that something tremendous happened in late January 1932.*” (Lindo-Fuentes, Ching, Lara-Martíne, 2007). As El Salvador became the third largest coffee *finca*¹⁶ in the world, conditions of living for Salvadoran citizens began to worsen, while the country was approaching its peaks in terms of socio-economic depression. In addition, the price drop of coffee in the 1920s forced the ruling families to reduce, once more, the wages of the population working on coffee plantations. A study conducted in the middle of the century would declare that:

“*2% of the population controls 60 % of the land; 96.3 % of the rural population has twelve acres of land or less; 58 % of the population earned \$ 10/month or less; 70 % of the children under five years of age are malnourished; illiteracy affects 42.9 % of the population; etc.*” (Armstrong, Shenk, 1982)

Hence, it is unsurprising why, around the 1930s, certain rebellious figures appeared and led the Salvadoran population of the deprived class, and, under the anti-capitalist, Marxist-Leninist discourse, attempted to create an internal populist unity and to uprising and fight in the name of their liberty¹⁷. The rebellion on the 22nd of January 1932, was led by the socialist activist Farabundo Martí, the leader of the *Communist Party of Central America*. It intended to detach the *Fourteen Families* from their position of power but was ruthlessly crushed by the military. The event came to be historically regarded as *La Matanza* and was responsible for the mass murder of around 30,000 civilians, most of them being indigenous in origin¹⁸. Ever since the days of La Matanza, El Salvador has been haunted by a conflict, which, under the long-lasting pretext of a Civil War fought between the rebellious communist-supported guerillas and capitalist state-sponsored military, will take the lives of tens of thousands of innocent civilian victims.

16 A rural property, ranch, or farm in Spain or Spanish America. (Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “finca,” accessed June 2, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/finca>.)

17 Lindo-Fuentes, Héctor, Erik Ching, and Rafael Lara-Martínez. 2008. *Remembering a Massacre in El Salvador: The Insurrection of 1932, Roque Dalton, and the Politics of Historical Memory*. Cambridge University Press.

18 Chapin, Mac. “*The 500,000 Invisible Indians of El Salvador.*” Cultural Survival, (2010). Accessed April 12, 2024.



[fig. 6]

The streets of a post-1992 repopulated village in Chalatenango, El Salvador.

Photo on film from personal archive, *Streets of Chalatenango*, 2024

2.3. The 1980-1992 Civil War

After La Matanza, political conflict kept escalating aggressively, reaching a peak between the 1960s and 1970s, as left-wing guerrillas and right-wing paramilitary death squads continued to oppose each other in violent shootings with civilian casualties. Along with the popularisation of Marxist ideologies throughout the Central-American continent, several socialist civic movements like the Theology of Liberation or other political communist organisations kept uniting Salvadoran communities under the ideal of a change in political paradigm. In 1980 the Farabundo Martí National Liberation (FMLN) was established as the only party with a communist agenda. In the context of an already ongoing Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, this attracted the unwanted attention of the U. S., which saw this uprising as a threat against the principles of democracy¹⁹.

However, the catalyst of the Civil War was an event that would remain deeply engraved in the culture and history of El Salvador to this day: 24th of March, 1980, the assassination of Óscar Romero, the defender of human rights and Archbishop of El Salvador [fig. 7]. At his funeral, attended by 250,000 Salvadorans, right-wing snipers would additionally murder other 42 civilians. Following, FMLN launched an offensive toward the government on the 10th of January 1981, which put a start to the violent series of crimes and attacks conducted between the communist guerilla groups and the, now U.S.-financially supported, paramilitary governmental forces. In the process, mostly using *scorched earth tactics*²⁰, the paramilitary kidnapped, raped, assassinated and left villages not just empty, but burned to the ground. Under the ruthless motto: *every unborn child is potentially a guerilla*, 75,000 civilians, including children, women or elders, were murdered between 1980 and 1992, and by the time the ones who managed to take refuge came back, their homes had been completely eradicated²¹:

19 Bergstrom, Blake. 2019. *Unintended Consequences: U.S. Interference in El Salvador, the Salvadoran Diaspora, and the Role of Activist Community Organizations in Establishing a Salvadoran-American Community in Los Angeles*. James Madison University.

20 “A scorched-earth policy is a military strategy of destroying everything that allows an enemy military force to be able to fight a war, including the deprivation and destruction of water, food, humans, animals, plants and any kind of tools and infrastructure.” Vaughan, D. “scorched-earth policy.” Encyclopedia Britannica, May 3, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/scorched-earth-policy>.

21 Brock, Adams . 1990. *Condoning the Killing: Ten Years of Massacres in El Salvador*. University of Texas.



[fig. 7]

The life-size statue of Archbishop Romero replaces one of the trees, metaphorically communicating not only his symbolic belonging to the community but also his role as a protector, at the Río Sumpul Memorial Massacre.

Photo on film from personal archive, Óscar Romero, 2024

“Testimonies of survivors recount stories of displacement and chaos, constant aerial bombardments, digging tatús (caves) for hiding, foraging for food, and the abduction of young children.” (Fallon, Grzyb, Montulet, 2020).

Throughout the 12 years of war, life for the politically unaffiliated population of El Salvador was dominated by the constant fear of bombardments or military operations²². The targeted areas of the country, the ones in which the guerilla camps were known to be located, were the northern regions of Chalatenango and Morazan and the east-southern region of San Miguel, departments in which the communist organisations were also the most vocal²³. Therefore, the communities which were in search of refuge, found it over the northern border, in the United Nations camps of Honduras, which were inhabited during the years of war by thousands of homeless families. The process of mass fleeing from the military gave birth to the act still known as the *guinda*²⁴, and is also the reason for hundreds of mass genocides, as many of these refugee groups got ambushed while crossing the rivers or mountains that divide the two countries [fig. 8].

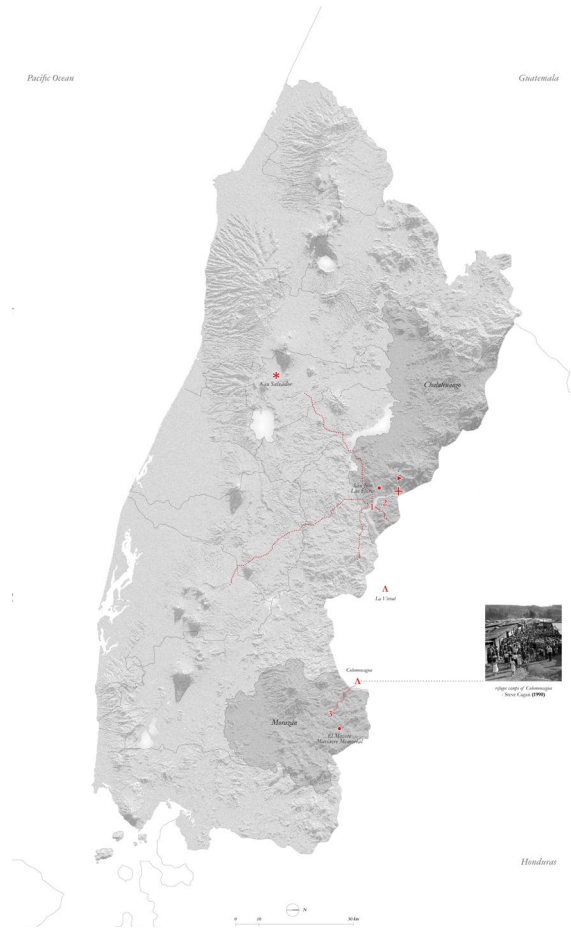
In 1989 the assassination of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and the housekeeper’s daughter attracted undesired international attention, as it started to become clear to the international public that the internal politics of the country had long been out of hand²⁵. By this time, the Soviet Union had lost the Cold War, so the United States found no reason to further financially support the Salvadoran military groups and began to encourage a state of peace. Thus, under international pressure, on the 16th of January 1992, the Salvadoran right-wing government and FMLN signed the *Chapultepec Peace Accords*, which not only guaranteed peace but also forced changes in government structures. However, the ones responsible for the cruelties of the Civil War and civilian massacres are yet to be held accountable, as political parties, right or left leaning, refuse to address the situation:

22 Fallon, Harold, Amanda Grzyb F, and Thomas Montulet. “*Guinda*.” *Vesper*, no. 3 (2020).

23 Consalvi, Carlos H. *Museo De La Palabra Y La Imagen*. <https://museo.com.sv/#>.

24 *guinda* (subst. gin-dä)= refers to the mass displacement and flight of civilians under military attack, lasting from a few days to a few weeks or more (Angelina Snodgrass Godoy, 2017); “*running aimlessly, walking day and night, sleeping in the bush out- doors, enduring hunger and heavy rains, running and hiding to avoid being found by the army and the paramilitaries in order to save one’s life*” (Grzyb et al. 2020).

25 “MURDER OF JESUIT PRIESTS AND CIVILLANS IN EL SALVADOR *The Jesuits Massacre Case*.” Center for Justice and Accountability, <https://cja.org/what-we-do/litigation/the-jesuits-massacre-case/>.



[fig. 8]

Map of El Salvador displaying the two departments of active guerilla camps, refugee camps and other mass genocides, as many of these refugee groups got ambushed while crossing the rivers or mountains that divide the two countries.

Photo from personal archive, *Map of El Salvador*, 2024

“While this is a hopeful sign for the normalization of the political process, the Amnesty Law still stands, so the human rights violations of the civil war have not yet been fully addressed.” (The Center For Justice & Accountability, 2024)

3. State of the Art: *Dealing with the Aftermath*

After the war, what was left behind was a country scarred so deep that it was unable to come to peace. Though the political conflict ended in 1992, the violations continued for a few years after and finally ended as El Salvador got close to the turn of the century and began getting increasingly more attention from the international press. El Salvador continued to develop as a capitalist democratic state, mimicking the political and economic structure of the United States²⁶.

Nevertheless, it continuously grew more financially dependent, politically unstable and socially unsafe, refusing to directly support or address the traumatic consequences of the Civil War. Today, the democratic republic led by President Nayib Bukele has managed to display an apparent image of control over public safety and internal politics, by installing a *state of exception* (martial law)²⁷. This has failed, however, to mask the abuse of power and dictatorial nature of his rule and the impulsive political decisions of his administration, as El Salvador became in 2021 the first country in the world to adopt Bitcoin as official currency, despite the economic distress that affects the majority of its population²⁸.

²⁶FRONTLINE, director. *Massacre in El Salvador*. PBS, 2021. <https://www.pbs.org/video/massacre-el-salvador/>.

²⁷MS-13 Offered to Negotiate Peace in El Salvador. Their New President Said No. VICE, 2019. https://video.vice.com/en_us/video/ms-13-offered-to-negotiate-peace-in-el-salvador-their-new-president-said-no/5d0960aabe4077371e04d873.

²⁸Bastardo, Javier. «New Bitcoin Mining Firm Sets Up Headquarters In El Salvador.» *Forbes*, (2024). Accessed June 2, 2024. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/digital-assets/2024/05/29/new-bitcoin-mining-firm-sets-up-headquarters-in-el-salvador/?sh=36b4f0c13641>.



[fig. 9]

Marketplace in San Salvador.

Photo from personal archive, *San Salvador*, 2024

On the upside, the rural communities which were traumatically affected by the conflict began recovering and redeveloping independent civic structures. After the refugees returned to their motherland, they began repopulating and reconstructing the abandoned villages of the once military-targeted departments and constructing new *Eclesial Base Communities*²⁹, a process which began before the war even ended. Over time, with the help of non-governmental organisations, more of these horizontally structured societies got involved in dealing with the traumatic memory, constructing a world of their own, sharing their truth and working towards supporting the ones who have lost their families.

In addition, the war-linked manifestations became platforms for social debate, artistic expression and political affiliation, which, at last, morphed into the specific commemorative behaviour of today. Consequently, these bottom-up strategies for social reconstruction draw the methodological outlines and provide the resources for participatory design, as contributing to the building of a memorial [fig. 10]³⁰ seems to potentially have the equivalent importance as its use³¹.

29 PRESENTACIÓN DE LA COMUNIDAD SEGUNDO MONTES DE EL SALVADOR. Universidad De Burgos. https://www.ubu.es/sites/default/files/portal_page/files/fundacionssmontes_historia.pdf.

30 “*The Association of Survivors of the Sumpul Massacre and Other Chalatenango Massacres.*” SUMPUL ASSOCIATION. March 1, 2019. <https://jsis.washington.edu/humanrights/people/asociacion-pro-busqueda/>.

31 “*The Association of Survivors of the Sumpul Massacre and Other Chalatenango Massacres.*” SUMPUL ASSOCIATION. March 1, 2019. <https://jsis.washington.edu/humanrights/people/asociacion-pro-busqueda/>.



[fig. 10]

Embroideries made by the communities of women in the rural area of El Salvador showing a village attacked by the military.

Photo from MUPI, *Scorched earth*, 2024

3.1. Bottom-up preservation of memory

In the aftermath, the involvement of international groups of researchers has boosted the active participation of communities in dealing with the memory and has raised international interest in the story of El Salvador³². However, when discussing bottom-up organisations, one must search for the origins of such societies within the context of war. Non-governmental Salvadoran groups have found their roots in initiatives that have actively participated in the civil conflict before 1992. The most revealing example of such a movement is represented by the clandestine radio station entitled *Radio Venceremos*³³ [fig. 11], founded in 1981 by the heroic Venezuelan journalist Carlos Henríquez Consalvi, popularly known as Santiago. Ever since the first broadcast, Radio Venceremos has continuously been the voice of FMLN and of the deprived communities and a consistent target for the Salvadoran military groups. After the war, Santiago founded *Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen*³⁴ (MUPI), a still active museum in the capital of San Salvador dedicated to the archiving and displaying of the history of the Civil War and to the promotion of artistic works, such as the embroideries created by the communities of women of the repopulated rural areas.

Other organisations which have taken advantage of the participation of victims have dealt with the psychological healing of trauma and the reconstruction of their community and village, left in ruin after the war. *Comunidad Segundo Montes*, located in the Morazán, is such an example of a manifestation that was born in 1990 and was the result of the immigration of thousands of refugees and the construction of the settlement which came to be known as Segundo Montes, after the leader and promotor of this initiative. Today the community still tackles problems related to historical memory, preservation of documents and testimonies, psychological distress, commemorative events violations of human rights, etc³⁵.

32 For example: (*in english*) *SURVIVING MEMORY IN POSTWAR EL SALVADOR*. <https://www.elsalvadormemory.org/home-english>

33 Peña, Fátima, and Jimmy Alvarado. "Fragments of the 'Wonder' of Radio Venceremos." *El Faro*. August 17, 2014. <https://elfaro.net/es/201408/noticias/15828/Retazos-del-Maravilla?-de-la-Radio-Venceremos.htm>.

34 Consalvi, Carlos H. *Museo De La Palabra Y La Imagen*. <https://museo.com.sv/#>.

35 "Un Proyecto De Su Memoria Histórica." *Comunidad Segundo Montes*. Accessed May 11, 2024. <https://csm-memoriahistorica.wordpress.com>.



[fig. 11]

Ever since the first broadcast, Radio Venceremos has continuously been the voice of FMLN and of the deprived communities and a consistent target for the Salvadoran military groups.

Photo by MUPI, *Radio Venceremos*, 2024

Similarly, *Asociación Pro-Búsqueda de Niñas y Niños³⁶ Desaparecidos*, founded two years after the peace accords, in 1994, has fought ever since to find the children that were kidnapped for illegal adoption by the paramilitary during the Civil War. The continuous activity of the association has proven to be effective, as many of the children lost between 1980 and 1992 are still being found today, encouraging the healing process of many affected families³⁷. Both of these examples will provide crucial support in the development of architectural projects.

Finally, the most relevant case of bottom-up associations dealing with Salvadoran Civil War memory and trauma is *Memoria Histórica Sobreviviente en El Salvador de la Posguerra³⁸* (Spanish for the Surviving Memory in Postwar El Salvador). It has given the opportunity for international volunteers to get involved in the social case of El Salvador, and thus provided the general brief for the designing of memorials. The initiative was funded by the *Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada* and is hosted by the *Western University* in London, Ontario, Canada, but has been the result of the collaborative efforts of more than 20 national and international partners³⁹.

36 “ASOCIACIÓN PRO-BÚSQUEDA.” Center for Human Rights. Accessed May 14, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009000000.003>
37 “*Hermanas Serrano Cruz*.” CEJI, (-47). Accessed May 11, 2024. <https://cejil.org/caso/hermanas-serrano-cruz/>.

38 (*in english*) SURVIVING MEMORY IN POSTWAR EL SALVADOR. <https://www.elsalvadormemory.org/home-english>

39 “*All of our projects are developed collaboratively to meet the needs of Salvadoran communities and seek justice and dignity for victims and survivors. This research is supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), Western University, KU Leuven, Aarhus University, Carleton University, The University of El Salvador, the Central American University, ACISAM – Association of Training and Research for Mental Health (El Salvador), ASALCA – The Salvadoran Canadian Association (Canada), Asociación Sumpul (El Salvador) CCR – Association of Communities for the Development of Chalatenango (El Salvador), Centro Arte para la Paz (El Salvador), The Committee of Surviving Historical Memory in Arcatao (El Salvador), CRIPDES – The Association for the Development of El Salvador (El Salvador), FutureWatch (Canada), Global MINDS Collective (Canada), Mindfulness Without Borders (Canada), Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen (El Salvador), Pro Vida -Salvadoran Association for the Humanitarian Aid (El Salvador), Tutela Legal “Dra. Maria Julia Hernández (El Salvador), and the Salvadoran municipalities of San José Las Flores, Las Vueltas, Arcatao, Nueva Trinidad, and Suchitoto”*



[fig. 12]

Filming of testimonies of survivor at the border with Honduras.

Photo from personal archive, 2024

One of the main concerns of the team of researchers investigating a few times a year the rural areas of Northern El Salvador is the precise mapping of every massacre that took place between the 12 years of war and the filming of testimonies from survivors [fig. 12]⁴⁰. In addition, the constant concern with the development of participatory and holistic methodologies has resulted in projects on themes related to intergenerational education, justice, mental health, documentation and commemoration. Consequently, this gave birth to the series of memorial projects which, ever since the first collaboration in 2017, have become the concern of the Bruxelles-based architectural office known as AgwA and the architect of Salvadoran origin Evelia Macal⁴¹.

3.2. Las Aradas: The Rio Sumpul Massacre Memorial

To introduce the *Rio Sumpul Massacre Memorial* and to coherently describe the series of strategies that define its architecture beyond its esthetical composition, a useful analytical method might be to comparatively analyse the work of AgwA and Evelia Macal with the *Morazán Massacre Memorial* [fig. 13]. The Morazán massacre has been the most mediated massacre of them all, an event that took the lives of more than 800 civilians and has been the first which drew the attention of the public towards the horrors that the military was guilty of⁴². In the aftermath of the war, under the pressure of continuous international attention, the government felt the need to react and support the construction of a memorial⁴³. The monumental concrete structure erected by the Catholic Church does not relate with its context and portrays a distorted image of the event, as through elements of religious symbolism send an anti-communist, rightist message:

40 Bello, Juan A., director. *Documentary: The Chalatenango Massacre*. Canada Council for the Arts, 2017. <https://www.trianamedia.ca/the-chalatenango-massacres.html>.

41 "Memorial Site for the Victims of the Sumpul Massacre." AgwA. March 1, 2017. http://www.agwa.be/en/projects/1718_Aradas/221/

42 FRONTLINE, director. *Massacre in El Salvador*. PBS, 2021. <https://www.pbs.org/video/massacre-el-salvador/>.

43 Stickney, Elizabeth. "THE MASSACRE AT EL MOZOTE: THE NEED TO REMEMBER." *Americas Watch* IV, no. 2 (1992). Accessed April 26, 2024.



[fig. 13]

The monumental concrete structure erected by the Catholic Church does not relate with its context and portrays a distorted image of the event, as through elements of religious symbolism send an anti-communist, rightist message.

Photo from personal archive, 2024

“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.” (Fallon, Gryzb, Montulet; et. Al. 2019).

In comparison, the *Rio Sumpul Massacre Memorial* outlines an area tangent to the border with Honduras, 3 hours of walking away from the first public road and 6 km away from the village of San José Las Flores, Chalatenango [fig. 14]. There, in May 1980, during an attack by both Salvadoran and Honduran paramilitary forces, 600 civilians were massacred while trying to pass the high waters of the Sumpul River over to Honduran territory⁴⁴. The first commemorative object on built site dates back to 1993 and consists of a cross and an engraved stone. Ever since, commemorations have taken place yearly in the area known as Las Aradas, the same place where the bodies of the ones massacred were left to decompose. However, due to the importance and scale of the massacre, the community felt the need to develop something which truly resembled a memorial⁴⁵.

44 Planchart, Reinaldo, and Thomas Buergenthal. 2001. *From Madness to Hope: The 12-year War in El Salvador: Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador*. USIP Library.

45 Fallon, Harold, Amanda Grzyb F, and Thomas Montulet. “Las Aradas Memorial Site, Chalatenango, El Salvador.” 16th Annual AHRA International Conference: Architecture & Collective Life, November 23, 2019.



[fig. 14]

Additionally, other elements are placed within the limits of this projected square, to complete the sacral experience. Firstly, the Roof (1) represents a space for gatherings and religious ceremonies but has also been used for tent hanging by the ones spending the night on the memorial site. Secondly, the Memorial of Ceramic Tiles (2) displays the name of every known victim of the massacre, leaves space for names which have not yet been discovered, and functions also as a communal place of sitting, similar to the nearby fireplace (3).

Photo from personal archive, *Aerial view of Las Aradas*, 2024

Reaching the place of remembrance, a forest of more than 200 *flame trees*, a species that blooms red flowers during May, the month of the commemoration, welcomes its *pilgrims* inside a square clearing designed to fill in the attributes of public space. Located at a parallel angle with river Sumpul, the clearing is the first delimitation of the massacre, which becomes at the moment of bloom, a monumental poetical gesture that only exists in May, in a time of reflection. Geometrically, the forest is structured with the trees on a 7 by 7 metre orthogonal grid which give the space a rhythmic, introspective quality. To add to this effect, a *life-size statue of Archbishop Romero* [fig. 7] replaces one of the trees, metaphorically communicating not only his symbolic belonging to the community but also his role as a protector⁴⁶.

Additionally, other elements are placed within the limits of this projected square, to complete the sacral experience. Firstly, *the Roof* represents a space for gatherings and religious ceremonies but has also been used for tent hanging by the ones spending the night on the memorial site. Secondly, *the Memorial of Ceramic Tiles* displays the name of every known victim of the massacre, leaves space for names which have not yet been discovered, and functions also as a communal place of sitting, similar to the nearby fireplace⁴⁷. [fig. 15] Therefore, while one could undoubtedly state that the Rio Sumpul Massacre Memorial fulfils all the expected symbolic particularities that must compose a memorial, it nevertheless manages to also play a double role, easily converting its function from sacred to profane:

“The proposal is more like an agora or a forum than a park. More like a basilica than a church.” (Fallon, Gryzb, Montulet; et. Al. 2019).

46 Ibid.

47 “Memorial Site for the Victims of the Sumpul Massacre.” Aqwa. March 1, 2017. http://www.agwa.be/en/projects/1718_Aradas/221/.



[fig. 15]

The Memorial of Ceramic Tiles displays the name of every known victim of the massacre, leaves space for names which have not yet been discovered, and functions also as a communal place of sitting, similar to the nearby fireplace.

Photo from AgwA, *Commemoration of Las Aradas*, 2024

At last, the comparative analysis provides a more complete picture of how such memorials can provide for their communities a platform for civic expression, a task that the imposing structure of the *Morazán Massacre Memorial* fails to accomplish. A pivotal detail that is responsible for the success and popularity of the *Río Sumpul Massacre Memorial* lies within the direct implication of the community, as almost all the materials used for the construction of the memorial were transported by hand and installed by the people that are taking part in the ritual of remembering⁴⁸. As such, the design, the process and the use become synonymous with the commemoration itself, allowing for continuous adaptations of the memorial and assuring the community of the power that the collective has. This encourages the continuous growth and stability of these horizontally organised societies and additionally provides a sense of identity. Only in this way could the flame trees, each individually carried by foot on site, become, within only 7 years, a symbol of regeneration for the whole surrounding area⁴⁹ [fig. 16].

To conclude, there must be one more remark made, which refers to a more technical facet of the design: working within the guidelines of bottom-up strategies and participatory methods means also a lack in resources and building techniques. Therefore, unlike the Morazán memorial mentioned before, which disposes of large quantities of concrete, bronze statues and educated craftsmen, the memorials proposed by the non-governmental affiliated communities do not have access neither to sufficient economic resources, nor to professional workers. Thus, the use of powerful symbolic elements, like the *flame trees* for example, which manage to express powerful symbolic messages while being simple in their installation on-site, become desired elements of architecture. This unavoidable sense of abstinence finally adds another dimension to the project, and pushes any proposal towards an essential gesture which condenses: *the sacred, the mundane, the contextual, the historical, the functional, the efficient and the economic*. These parameters define the brief which has guided me throughout my involvement in the project.

48 "The Association of Survivors of the Sumpul Massacre and Other Chalatenango Massacres." SUMPUL ASSOCIATION. March 1, 2019. <https://jsis.washington.edu/humanrights/people/asociacion-pro-busqueda/>.

49 Fallon, Harold, Amanda Grzyb F, and Thomas Montulet. "Las Aradas Memorial Site, Chalatenango, El Salvador." 16th Annual AHRA International Conference: Architecture & Collective Life, November 23, 2019.



[fig. 16]

Painting of the flame-tree, on a house in San José Las Flores, Chalatenango,

Photo from personal archive, *Flame-tree*, 2024

4. Theoretical Interpretation: Sacred and Profane

To transition from the analytical overview of the context to the architectural brief of the site and to provide reassurance that memorials like the one at Las Aradas remain within the contour lines that define the specific typology, the following chapter questions what is a memorial. For that, even though memorials like the *Rio Sumpul Massacre Memorial* break apart the preconception that sacred forms must be synonymous with large-scale perennial structures, the idea that monumentality and sacrality can be much more intrinsic qualities of architecture is by no means contemporary. In 1910, Adolf Loos, in his critical writing on the disturbing nature of modern architecture, stated that only funerary monuments can elude conventionality of functionalism and contain the spirit of the Arts, as it is the only function that is fundamentally a cultural process and not an intellectual one. Thus, the recognition of such unique elements of architecture is an exercise of intuition and not of judgement⁵⁰:

“If we were to come across a mound in the woods, six foot long by three foot wide, with the soil piled up in a pyramid, a sombre mood would come over us and a voice inside us would say: “There is someone buried here”. That is architecture.” (Adolf Loos, 1910).

Loos’ esoteric idea provides two possible ways of interpreting space, as it splits the discipline into architecture as action through design and architecture as a reaction to another action, in this case, manifested in forms of traditions or rituals. One example of such a cultural process, which dates back to ancestral times, is provided in 1973, during the conference held in Chicago entitled *“Mythologies of Death”*, by the philosopher and historian of religions Mircea Eliade, who decomposes the complex ceremony of burying a girl in the primitive Kogi tribe of South America, Colombia. For the Kogi, the womb, the door and the grave share fundamentally the same function⁵¹: *transcendence*.

⁵⁰Loos, Adolf. *“Architecture.”* Neue Freie Presse, (1910). Accessed February 24, 2024. <https://thecharnelhouse.org/2014/03/17/someone-is-buried-here-adolf-loos-on-architecture-and-death/>.

⁵¹Eliade, Mircea . 1963. *Mythologies of Death*. Chicago lecture.



[fig. 17]

Church at Las Minas, a simple brick box with the front elevation of a church.

Photo from personal archive, *Las Minas*, 2024

“This is the village of Death, this is the ceremonial house of Death, this is the house of Death, this is the uterus. I am going to open the house. The house is closed, and I shall open it.” (G. R.- Dolmatoff, 1990, The Sacred Mountain of Colombia’s Kogi Indians).

Thus, the ritualistic choreography, even though non-architectural in terms of built space, contains pure architectonic archetypes. Thus, Eliade’s idea of space is a necessity of our spiritual condition. For him, in no way our cultures could have evolved without this inexplicable urge to inhabit. Architecture is not just indispensable, but an inevitable byproduct of our spatial, psychological and spiritual presence.

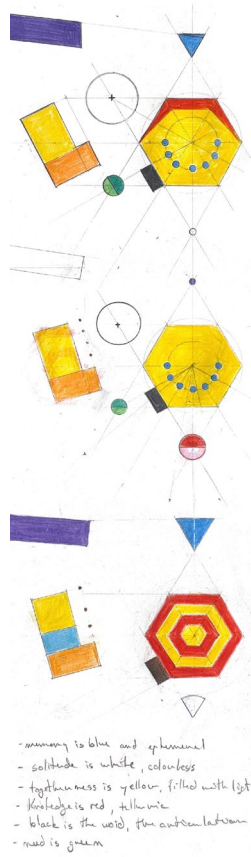
4.1. Typologies and Characteristics

The consequence of the historical overlapping of religious dogmas with architectural concepts has, therefore, resulted in the development of a spatial language that intends to somehow copy a divine model. In other words, the process of building has been regarded, at least in pre-modern times, as a process of mimicking the creation of God. M. Eliade named this phenomenon: *“Repetition of Cosmogony”*. Hence, certain archaic cultures, like the Babylonians for example, in order to remain sacred, considered that time and consequently space had to die and be reborn periodically in the image of the *First Creation*, purifying itself *ad infinitum*⁵². In addition, these architectonic creations had to respect compositions which referred to the harmonic understanding of the world, that gave birth to both architectural rituals or symbolic elements, like the cornerstone or the *axis mundi*, and the formal basis of sacred architecture: symmetry, centrality, monumentality, etc⁵³. At last, one of the results of this philological evolution of architectural language is the birth of, probably one of the first architectural types built exclusively for the use of commemorations: *the Martyrium*⁵⁴ [fig. 18].

52 Eliade, Mircea. 1971. *The Myth of the Eternal Return or, Cosmos and History*. 1st ed. Princeton University Press.

53 Eliade, Mircea . 1957. *The Sacred & The Profane: The Nature of Religion*. New York: A Harvest Book.

54 A circular building or chamber used by the early Christians as a burial place (Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “martyrium,” accessed June 2, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/martyrium>.)



[fig. 18]

Sketch on the design of Templo Memorial “Héroes y Mártires”, using the martyrium as a reference.

Photo from personal archive, *Martyrium*, 2024

The Martyrium is the evidence of the fact that the act of commemoration originates within the attributes of the Church. Even in post-war times, in repopulated villages of El Salvador, people intuitively feel the need to attach their traumatic experience to some form of religious agenda, a process that has begun with the *Theology of Liberation* and continues today. Nevertheless, worldwide, the detachment of memorials from the church has been simultaneous with the modernisation of cities, and marks the time when memorials became part of urbanistic strategies and of public spaces. Yet, the moment in which public commemoration became a mundane concern is, as Augustin Ioan states in “*The Memory of Architecture*”, the end of the First World War. In its aftermath, the display of names will turn every opportunity to commemorate into a chance of attributing a sacred polarity to spaces of public use. In time, the public commemoration of historical events became a generally accepted behaviour, which has given the memorial the task to address both sacred and profane functions.

4.2. The Ritualistic Value of a Public Space

Between the loud echoes of a Kalashnikov rifle and the muted cry outs of a childless mother there lies a world of memories. By all means, all reasons for war are theological, clashing everything that is evil with everything that is bright. But we don't write on walls the names of criminals, we don't spit their initials when we pass by. Monuments are pure *agonistic* forms⁵⁵; picking out the good names, the heroic, the innocent, carving in stone an eternal victory which, in the grand scheme of time, lasts only for a brief moment. This association between memorials, as one of the architectural types that ignites an introspective dialogue between the ones living and the memory of the dead, and a certain state of nostalgia, has placed, in the collective Occidentalized conception, the memorial into the sphere of the gloomy types, alongside the cemetery and the crematorium. Severe, monumental, grey, silent, eternal, cold, wistful, and in many ways, independent from the mundane: the consequential result of a modern, abstract representation of loss, portraying the idea that death has a simultaneous equivalent in the absence of life.

⁵⁵Mostafavi, Mohasen. 2017. *Ethics of the Urban; The City and the Spaces of the Political*. Zürich: Lars Müller Publishers.



[fig. 19]

Brutalist Church at the in the historical center of San Salvador.

Photo from personal archive, *Iglesia El Rosario*, 2024

In the northern region of Chalatenango, El Salvador, the articulation between the profane and sacred values of a memorial has naturally coordinated the reconstruction of the war-damaged communities. Empowered by the historical collective trauma, their acts betray the force of their civic sentiment, overturning the functional polarities of a memorial, from a space of introversion to a space of extroversion. Thus, memory finds a place in the public sphere not as an isolated exception but as a publicly accepted need. Therefore, instead of encountering memorials of the usual type, conveying, in abstract, monumental gestures: scars, voids, graves or other forms of cynical representation, these places of remembrance react in vivid colours, figurative language, platonic shapes and classical volumes. By using the Civil War as their founding myth, these communities manage to communicate their historical trauma through a religious form containing in one gesture both the sacred and the profane.

5. Project: Between One Commemoration and Another

Between one commemoration and another, memorials are questionable forms of architecture. Assuming that the ultimate purpose of a memorial is to inhabit and encourage the act of *commemoration*⁵⁶, one could argue whether or not such types have any other socio-architectural value other than that, since their primary function, which is to remember a historical character or historical event, is strictly related to the specific, short-lived moment of the event⁵⁷. The discrepancy between the concise and effective use of a commemoration space (like the one of El Sicaquite which only existed during the afternoon of the 28th of January 2024) [fig. 20] and the eternal appearance of the memorial (like the *Morazán Massacre Memorial* which will exist forever), gives room to question the immense gap between the ephemeral nature of memory and the perennial presence of a memorial.

56“late 16th century: from Latin commemorat= “brought to remembrance”; from the verb commemorare; from com= “all together” + memorare= “relate” (from memor= “mindful”).”

57Guinda de Mayo- 27th of May > 9th of June/ Gualsinga- 28th of August/ Templo Memorial “Héroes y Mártires”. 24th of March and other dates.



[fig. 20]

Study of the typological evolution of commemorative public spaces in the repopulated villages in El Salvador

Photo from personal archive, *Public space*, 2024

Memorials should, however, above all else, deal with remembrance. Isn't it the purpose of such types, instead of endlessly portraying monumental images of the "*humanist triumph*" or "*incalculable loss*", to inhabit within their logic the civic lessons of such horrors? And in that sense, isn't public space the ultimate declaration of peace, the memorial without names, without idols, without memory, that depends exclusively on the capacity of its community to maintain a standard of civic harmony? Public spaces develop the collective health, complexity and intelligence of all human settlements⁵⁸, and since all memorials are artefacts of the collective, we could reconsider whether the profane dimension of a memorial isn't at least as important as its sacred one and whether they should not address the future as much as they address the past.

⁵⁸Mostafavi, Mohasen. 2017. *Ethics of the Urban; The City and the Spaces of the Political*. Zürich: Lars Müller Publishers.

5.1. Guinda de Mayo : 55 *Swings*

Location: 14°01'52.2"N 88°48'23.5"W

Commemoration date: 27th of May - 9th of June

Number of victims: around 240 people were massacred and 55 underaged children were kidnapped

Between the 27th of May and the 9th of June 1982, 600 Salvadoran civilian refugees from all around the regions of Chalatenango were heading towards the Honduran borders, seeking shelter from the violent reactions of the Civil War, an action that would collectively remain known as a *guinda*⁵⁹. Being mainly women, children and elderly, while crossing the already rising waters of the Sumpul River, a large number of them unknowingly found themselves in the middle of a military conflict, between the guerilla troops and the government-sponsored battalions, which led to the brutal and intentional murder of hundreds of civilians, either shot, bombed or drowned. Furthermore, around 55 children were kidnapped by the members of the battalion and illegally sold for adoption. This has not only initiated a complex and continuing search to find them but has also become an important symbolic component in the ritualistic act of commemoration, being reminiscent of the absurd, irrational and heartbreaking events of Guinda de Mayo (the run of May)⁶⁰.

Hence, every year, in the last week of May and the first week of June, “*Guinda de Mayo*” takes place by the Sumpul River, under the El Cajón bridge, 2 km away from Cantón Los Amates [fig. 21]. During the procession, people leave Los Amates on foot, while carrying banners and flowers and after a long, sinuous climb, find themselves facing the bridge. While crossing the bridge, the approximately 250 people that join the commemoration, throw flowers into the Sumpul and continue their walk, on to the massacre spot, a large area on which a small forest of trees has grown. The banners, which often express political messages, are tied to the surrounding trees and become the visual background of the religious ceremony. Finally, the procession ends by allowing each member of the collective to express themselves freely.

59 Fallon, Harold, Amanda Grzyb F., and Thomas Montulet. “*Guinda*.” *Vesper*, no. 3 (2020).

60 Planchart, Reinaldo, and Thomas Buergethal. 2001. *From Madness to Hope: The 12-year War in El Salvador: Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador*. USIP Library.



[fig. 21]

Image of the El Cajon bridge, the pools at the Touricentro and the massacre site.

Photo from personal archive, *Sumpul*, 2024

Parallel to the procession, a mirrored image of the commemoration, representative of the profane, is the Touricentro. The well-maintained leisure complex is composed of a large roofed bar, a bathroom, four stepped swimming pools and several patios which entertain weekend family gatherings and celebrations, but unfortunately leave the nearby areas, especially the ones used during the commemoration, covered in garbage and leftovers. Additionally, the proximity between the two, during the commemoration, could be regarded as inappropriate since the activities that animate the tourist centre are susceptible to interfering with the commemoration. The challenge of the design is, thus, to create a space that allows tourist and commemorative activities to be carried out harmoniously throughout the year.

The strong presence of the profane pushes the sacred in search of another space. Therefore, the design pushes the procession away from the touristic centre, in a place where the site stretches alongside the banks of the river a few hundred metres, becoming increasingly more shaded and intimate. Probably without any commemorative intentions, the owner planted a long line of majestic trees, which will become in the future the most dense area of sacred *Ceibas* in the region. This creates the impression of walking on a processional path. This path by itself, not only defines the outlines for placing the requested memorials of names but also inhabits the entirety of the plot, taking advantage of every element existing within the limits of the site.



[fig. 22]

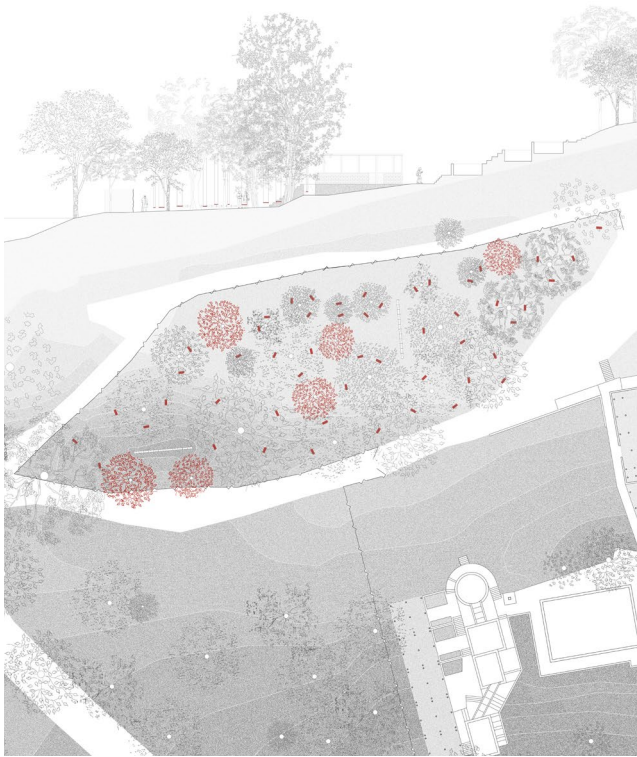
*The swing that inspired the 55 Swing Memorial, in the memory of the 55 children kidnapped at
Guinda de Mayo*

Photo from personal archive, *Swing*, 2024

The first of these elements is the *swing*. It appears that one of the most tragic events which continues to disturb the community to this day, is the abduction of at least 55 children, a recurrent act in many other massacres. This left a profound impact on Salvadoran society and created long-lasting trauma for the affected families. The logic behind, what would turn out to be *the 55 Swings Memorial*, takes advantage of an element which, on one hand, contains the jovial and innocent portrait of a child, and on the other, when placed into a small area of trees, would manifest the emotional and intellectual message of the tragic event. However, due to its intimate proximity to the Tourist centre, the memorial takes advantage in non-commemorative times, of the dynamic activities that take place around the swimming pools, turning the memorial into a playground.

A second is the *flametree*⁶¹. It is important to acknowledge that ever since planting the flame tree forest at the Rio Sumpul Memorial, they have become an important symbolic element in the region, including Guinda de Mayo. Since both massacres are commemorated in May, the month in which the flame tree blooms in red flowers, they are to be reused as an element of ritualistic language. At the other end of the site, the commemorative place hides under the shade of the already-existing Ceibas and hosts a circular mural, destined for the artistic expression of the community. By connecting the dots, *the 55 Swings Memorial the Flame Trees* and *the Commemorative Mural* at the other end, they give a direction to the monumental path of Ceibas, and ultimately compose a complete memorial park, organically elongating the 2 km procession and fulfilling the symbolic complexity and requirements of the commemoration while allowing for the Touricentro to continue its mundane activities.

61 "Memorial Site for the Victims of the Sumpul Massacre." AqWA. March 1, 2017. http://www.agwa.be/en/projects/1718_Aradas/221/.



[fig. 23]

The logic behind, what would turn out to be the 55 Swings Memorial, takes advantage of an element which, on one hand, contains the jovial and innocent portrait of a child, and on the other, when placed into a small area of trees, would manifest the emotional and intellectual message of the tragic event.

Photo from personal archive, *the 55 Swings*, 2024

5.2. Gualsinga: *That Which Has Always Been There*

Location: 14°04'39.3"N 88°49'13.3"W

Commemoration date: 28th of August and the *Via Crucis* at Easter

Number of victims: around 50 people were massacred

Around ten kilometres north of Guinda de Mayo, in the same area of Rio Sumpul that for 12 years has been torn apart by pain and violence, there is Gualsinga, which itself is not much other than a small hamlet at the crossroads of a pedestrian path and two country roads. The massacre that took place on the 28th of August, 1984⁶², marks an area a few hundred metres away from the actual massacre river site. For years the commemoration took place under what has been named a cathedral of trees [fig. 24], a circular place surrounded by old sacred trees, on a private plot which due to a change of ownership and differences in political opinions, has become forbidden for the use of commemorations.

The site hosts two commemorations yearly, one being the commemoration of the 50 civilian victims on the 28th of August and the other being the *Via Crucis*, which takes place each Easter and embodies the commemoration through the tradition of the *14 Stations of the Cross*. Both rituals begin at Gualsinga, but while the *Commemoration* is static and performs the religious mass along other festivities on-site, the *Via Crucis* is a ritual in constant movement, moving from Gualsinga towards the river, where the ceremony takes place. Here is where the religious interpretations come in hand, for while the path towards the river is crossed, fourteen trees depicting the *Fourteen Stages of the Cross* are chosen, on which objects reminiscent of the victims are placed as a symbol of their eternal presence.

62 Brock, Adams . 1990. *Condoning the Killing: Ten Years of Massacres in El Salvador*. University of Texas.



[fig. 24]

The commemoration took place under what has been named a cathedral of trees, a circular place surrounded by old sacred trees, on a private plot which due to a change of ownership and differences in political opinions, has become forbidden for the use of commemorations.

Photo from AgwA, *Commemoration at Gualsinga*, 2022

Right next to the Cathedral of Trees, in a place which used to serve as the parking lot of the commemoration, one can see on the surface of the dried-out, dusty ground the rectangular stone footprint of a building, which between the 1920s and the 1980s used to serve as one of the main churches in the area. Being nothing more than four walls and a roof, the church remains somewhat vivid in the memory of the ones who lived in Gualsiga during the years of war, not only as a place of the Sacred but also as a place used often as a marketplace or as a place for profane celebrations. Reminding of these, right next to the almost invisible ruin, in a place which might have been at the back of the church altar, one can discover a burned wooden pole, which served for climbing competitions and defined a space often used for dancing or play [fig. 25].

The challenge of Gualsinga is to design a space which could first and foremost entertain the primary needs of a commemoration. What was at first the vehement wish to rebuild a church into *a contemporary style*, turned into the need for a roof, which, under the pressure of low economic means, became the minimal need for shade. In the context of the current research, I question what are the symbolic and mundane potential values of such a space, since neither the sacred nor the profane seem to have a permanent presence on site. And in an area which is poorly inhabited, what kind of architectural interventions can create a platform for certain activities, without declaring its function?



[fig. 25]

The burned wooden pole, which served for climbing competitions and defined a space often used for dancing or play.

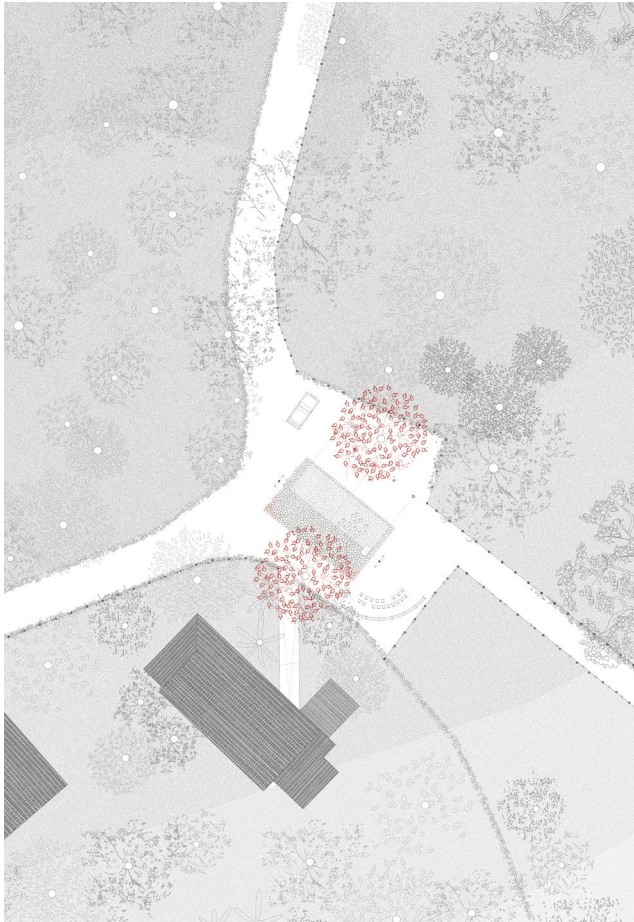
Photo from RWC, 2013

The answer seems to be found, again, within what the site already has to offer, as both historical elements, the ruin and the pole, address through their nature, the sacred and the profane. Firstly, addressing the ruin as that which defines the sacred contour lines of the space, sets a basis for the religious events taking place during the two commemorations. By refilling it with river stones and heightening its level slightly above the ground, the ruin can become both a place to sit, a stage and a monument on which the sacred objects can be placed. Additionally, the process of bringing rocks from the river back to the ruin increases its symbolic and collective value, being a reference to the first act of Church building: the placement of the cornerstone⁶³. The same idea can be implemented in the engraving of the victim names, these stones becoming the solid support of a commemorative tent [fig. 26].

Furthermore, the pole, the symbolic element of the profane, becomes the balancing element of the composition, giving a vertical scale to the space, but also accomplishing several functions, profane or sacred, since, through certain design mutations, the pole can be a hanger for poster, a signal, a hanger for objects, and a memorial, define a playground or serving as the altar of the church. Additionally, the pole can be designed to serve as a structure for an improvised roof, embroidered by the communities of women of Las Vueltas, which would protect the public from the August sun, while defining the *axis mundi*⁶⁴ of the entire space. Through the polyvalence of the space, the design assures that, in the case in which such an isolated place fails at being of use in the mundane life of the ones passing by, the memorial can remain, by itself, as a testament of the past.

63 Augustin, Ioan. 2013. *Arhitectura Memoriei; Noua Fronteră a Spațiului Sacru*. București: Igloomeidia.

64 Tarczyński, Rafał M. 2021. *Architectural Narration of Memorial Architecture Throughout 20th and 21st Centuries*. Technical University Delft.



[fig. 26]

By refilling it with river stones and heightening its level slightly above the ground, the ruin can become both a place to sit, a stage and a monument on which the sacred objects can be placed. Furthermore, the pole, the symbolic element of the profane, becomes the balancing element of the composition, giving a vertical scale to the space, but also accomplishing several functions, profane of sacred, since, through certain design mutations, the pole can be a hanger for poster, a signal, a hanger for objects, and a memorial, define a playground or serving as the altar of the church.

Photo from personal archive, *Gualsinga site*, 2024

5.3. Templo Memorial “Héroes y Mártires”: Façade Roulette

Location: 13°51'10.5"N 88°08'37.9"W

Commemoration date: though this is not a massacre site, commemorative events take place throughout the year

Number of victims: among others, 800 and 1000 people massacred at Morazán

The *Ecclesial Base Community* (ECB) at Segundo Montes was established on the 25th of March, 1990, and bears the name of its founder, the Spanish sociologist and defender of human rights⁶⁵. He published and investigated the precarious life conditions of the refugee camps of Colomoncagua and San Antonio in Honduras. In May 1989, during the International Conference on Central American Refugees in Guatemala, he proposed the return of 8400 Salvadoran refugees in an Ecclesial Base Community, inside of the department of Morazán⁶⁶. After its formation, Comunidad Segundo Montes proved itself to be a worldwide example of how participatory social strategies can not only restructure and improve the lifestyle, literacy and health in depraved, post-war regions but also offer psychological support to the victims traumatised by the tragic events of the recent Civil War.

The construction of a base camp began six years after the signing of the official expatriation documents, and eventually came to be known as the Templo Memorial “Héroes y Mártires”. Somewhere between a church and an events hall, the 1996 monastic construction, built from the very beginning with the intention of hosting gatherings around matters of religion, education and social justice, sits on top of a steep slope, within a geography dominated by the elongated silhouettes of the Salvadoran volcanoes. Due to the topography of the region, the Temple remains below the street level, being unnoticeable to the newcomer’s eye. Nonetheless, the monumental scale, incomparable to any other neighbouring building, the figurative expression of the facade and the hierarchy of elevations, all contribute to an image that overcomes its unfortunate position and expresses the sacred importance and presence [fig. 27].

65 “Un Proyecto De Su Memoria Histórica.” Comunidad Segundo Montes. Accessed May 11, 2024. <https://csm-memoriahistorica.wordpress.com>.

66 PRESENTACIÓN DE LA COMUNIDAD SEGUNDO MONTES DE EL SALVADOR. Universidad De Burgos. https://www.ubu.es/sites/default/files/portal_page/files/fundacionssmontes_historia.pdf.»



[fig. 27]

The monumental scale, incomparable to any other neighbouring building, the figurative expression of the facade and the hierarchy of elevations, all contribute to an image that expresses the sacred importance and presence

Photo from personal archive, *Templo Memorial "Héroes y Mártires"*, 2024

Parallel to it, a few metres from the accessible side of the temple, there is a white house. [fig. 28] Behind the long portico which separates the outside from the inside, there are three rooms, different in form, position and size, which, though unprogrammed, each inhabit the different needs of the ecclesial community. Thus, while the smaller ones serve as a kitchen and deposit, the large room becomes a functional extension of the temple, inhabiting the different community-oriented activities, whether trauma-related or not. Over the years, the temple has become the base camp of several important social interventions, participating actively in the psychological and civic life of its citizens, and has become, consequently, a respectable independent institution, recognised at the international level⁶⁷.

To tackle the list of requests that the representative group of women have brought forward, the project must split into two designs, different in strategy and conception. For that, one part, which is their expressed need for small interior interventions like the establishment of a new sacristy, the organisation of a documentation centre or the integration of a bathroom and kitchen, will not follow the same strict economy of means as the projects developed so far. The other, which is the design of an amphitheatre or public square, the design of a memorial of names and the design of a statue garden, fits into the pattern contoured until to this point. Thus, the design at Templo Memorial “*Héroes y Mártires*”, becomes a project of two interiors and one exterior, separated yet undeniably interrelated.

67 “*Un Proyecto De Su Memoria Histórica.*” Comunidad Segundo Montes. Accessed May 11, 2024. <https://csm-memoriahistorica.wordpress.com>.



[fig. 28]

Behind the long portico which separates the outside from the inside, there are three rooms, different in form, position and size, which, though unprogrammed, each inhabit the different needs of the ecclesial community.

Photo from personal archive, *Portico*, 2024

The design deals mainly with two concepts, one surrounding the effort of potentiating the architecture of the temple, and one based on the relationship between the two objects. The first follows the diagram of an archaic typology: the *Martyrium*⁶⁸, and corrects all the incoherent elements that disrupt the vertigo effect of the centralised hexagonal plan. Therefore, by emphasising the primary nature of the volume and encouraging a path similar to a centrifugal attraction to the temple centre, the object itself becomes an element of importance, a space which one should feel privileged to discover, through the continuous sequences of preparatory spaces.

What seems to be another quality of the temple's plan is its capacity to host many of the requested functions, without disturbing its sacred agenda. As such, the building can be in different moments: a church, a memorial, a library or a meeting space for workshops. This idea could be further developed into attributing each of these functions to a different facade, since the community seems to have already chosen a specific one for commemoration and another for social activities⁶⁹. Thus, one of the side façades hosts the *Door Memorial* [fig. 29], which, when open, creates an uninterrupted link between the inside of Temple and the outside area shaded by trees. Similarly, the next facade becomes a side Chapel for private prayer and the one after that becomes a library. However, the most important intervention deals with opening the temple towards a public exterior and towards the house.

68 Augustin, Ioan. 2013. *Arhitectura Memoriei; Noua Fronteră a Spațiului Sacru*. București: Igloomeidia.

69 This refers to the fact that the main facade is only used during the commemoration and remains closed in other times, the temple being accessible from the side doors.



[fig. 29]

Templo Memorial "Héroes y Mártires" showing the relationship between the two buildings. The red doors represent the memorial and open towards the shaded public space and towards the house. The rectangle extension of the hexagon, which used to be a private sacristy, is turned into a side Chapel. The one mirroring it is turned into a library. Thus, each facade dictates the different functions of the Temple.

Photo from personal archive, *Templo Memorial "Héroes y Mártires" site*, 2024

Consequently, the second project deals with establishing a balance between the two, both functional and formal, while also trying to integrate the essential requests of the community. By now it might have become clear that conceptually, when trying to define the site at Segundo Montes in the same ambivalent scheme of sacred or profane uses described so far, the differentiation between the two is very rigid, as the temple speaks clearly about one and the house about the other. For this reason, by treating the liminal space between the temple and the house **[fig. 30]** as a space that could interact simultaneously with both, by remembering the names and acting as a public events space all at once, the site itself could eventually become a place for the community, addressing not only the two buildings but the whole surrounding area.



[fig. 30]

The wall on which the Door Memorial is designed. Opening this wall creates an uninterrupted link with the house's portico, and when closed, provides the needed canvas for the names of the victims.

Photo from personal archive, *Opening the temple*, 2024

6. Epilogue: *A Lesson on Simplicity and Precision*

While witnessing the El Sicaquite commemoration of the 28th of January 2024 **[cover photo]**, I had the strange realisation that something that I was doing was terribly wrong. Something within that which I thought I knew up to that point, about memorials and, perhaps, about architecture. Hearing “*presente*” for the first time, shouted by the hundreds of people gathered at the commemoration, I realised that it was not memorials that stood at the core of my work, but these people. I remain fascinated, as I was then, by the idea that El Sicaquite only existed during that evening and only in the memory of those who were there, only to disappear into the tropical forests of El Salvador after its function was consumed. And I have struggled ever since to envision spaces with similar qualities, which do not remain my own, but which are offered to the people of these places as canvases to express their grief and hope **[fig. 31]**. This has been a humbling lesson on simplicity and precision.

For this, I would like to thank all the people that have helped me throughout this research, from the office AgwA, to all the people from the international team that joined the trip to El Salvador in January 2024, to Harold Fallon, Evelia Macal, Thomas Montulet, Kelsey Van Oost and Alexandra Mocioiu, who have supervised the entire evolution of this work, and the teachers of the Typology studio: Cécile Chanvillard, Christine Fontaine and Gérald Ledent, who have offered structure and guidance.

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