

## Mémorial à l'Abolition de l'Esclavage Nantes, France

KRZYSZTOF WODICZKO

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

JULIAN BONDER

Roger Williams University

*La liberté d'un homme est une parcelle de la liberté universelle, vous ne pouvez toucher à l'une sans compromettre l'autre tout à la fois.*

*Victor Schoelcher*

Memorials have been built as reminders, 'minder,' and as a warnings. The word *memorial* is related to word 'memento,' 'something that serves to warn or remind with regard to conduct or future events.' This memorial entails a complex challenge, as it needs to weave together multiple threads that will constitute the memory of slavery and the slave trade for new generations, who, being far removed from the historical events, could fathom only with great difficulty. As a **Working Memorial**, *the project will provide both space and means for remembering and thinking about slavery and the slave trade, a prolonged one-and-a-half century crime against humanity; commemorating resistance and the abolitionist struggle; celebrating the historic act of abolition; and for bringing the visitor closer to the continuing struggle against present-day forms of slavery.*

This proposed memorial is a metaphorical and emotional evocation of the struggle for the abolition of slavery, above all historic, but which still continues into the present, realized through the physical transformation and symbolic reinforcement of the existing 350 metres long urban terrain designated for that purpose along Quai de la Fosse. Through its spatial and symbolic link to the Palais de



Justice via the passerelle Victor-Schoelcher, it will further emphasize Nantes' commitment to human rights.

The project is based in the site and situation of Nantes, one that already speaks of and for itself as a "witness" (particularly in the *hôtels* along the Quai de la Fosse). The creative principle is a *mise en valeur* of that situation. Its design proceeds through two fundamental gestures, *exposure* and *immersion*, which together create a literally layered, in-depth experience through which visitors may discover and interpret for themselves the evoked dimensions of a history they may think they already know.

The design envisages a double prospect. On one side it reaches toward a town on the edge of the Loire estuary, a relation marked and supported, as it were, by the great embankment walls. Second, it engages the maritime, the means of the Atlantic trade through which the town prospered. Since the primary element of Nantes' situation is the almost intimate contact with the river, and from there the passage to the Atlantic that was the principal stage of the trade, the estuarial tides will provide an additional dynamic element for the design.

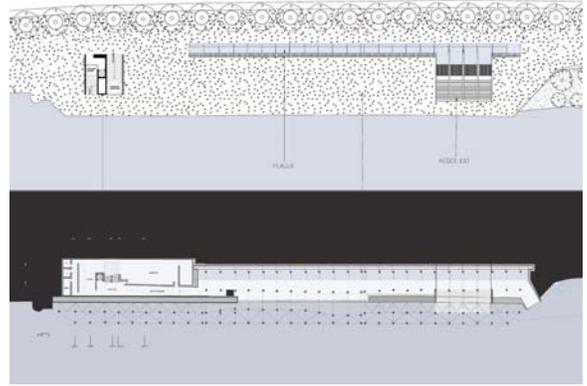


The *adaptation* of an approximately 95 metres long **existing 'empty' space** within the embankment itself for a bankside '**passage**' will provide an engagement, from both the land and water sides, with the ground upon which the city of Nantes lies. The sub-surface **passage** will be the heart of the memorial. Visitors to the memorial will descend to the underground passage and find themselves in a long space enclosed by the pre-existing 19<sup>th</sup> Century embankment wall and the 20<sup>th</sup> Century embankment concrete structures.



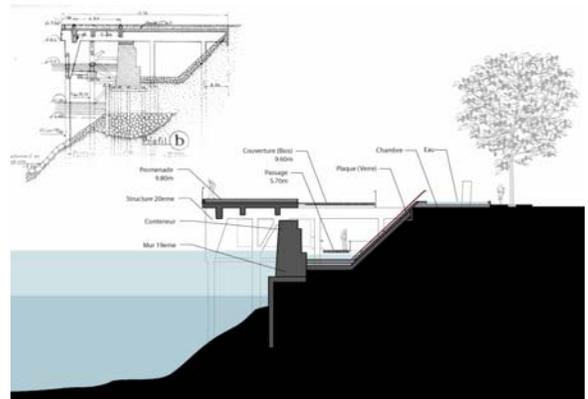
These ***found and transformed spaces*** that suggest the confinement of maritime transport, along with the uncanny proximity to the water will convey to the visitor the emotional force of the confinement implicit and explicit in the housing and transport of slaves.

This monument celebrates the great rupture of abolition with the thrust of a great slanted **plate**. This ***inserted glass plate*** uncovers and exposes the volumes and shapes of elements, above- and underground. The glass will also indirectly reflect the sky, signaling both excision from the every-day business of the town, as well as providing a symbolic view of future horizons.



The **massive glass panes** of the slanted plate, on which selected texts of the abolitionist movement by Victor Schoelcher, Toussaint L'Ouverture, and the Abbé Grégoire, among others, will be found, will function like a monumental spade. These glass panes will cut through the layers of soil on which the city has been built up over the centuries. The very complex glass compound includes various layers of texts, sandblasted glass, mirror, and other glass processes.

The passage can be accessed at both ends: on the West side through a narrow stair, and on the East side through a **Monumental Opening**. This **Opening**, a *rupture* of the ground of the city, exposes three sections of the underground structure of the Quai and of the slanted glass plate, on which the text of the 1848 Act of Abolition, or other significant abolitionist texts, will be inscribed. The Abolitionists text within this section will become significantly open to the city, to public space, to the sky. The visitor, walking along the passage will move from an experience of confinement, removal and excision to an experience marked by the presence of the **Opening**.



The Glass Plate cuts through the ground and emerges to the **commemorative terrain**, on which the existence of the maritime vessels and the magnitude of the slave trade will be evoked. Within the 350meters long **commemorative terrain**, commemorative **glass plaques** will be set listing the names of the **3829 French slave-ship expeditions** (of which 1,745, nearly half the total, sailed from Nantes), and the date of their departure, along with the number of captives they took (as well as the number of those lost in transport), as recorded in the archives of the city. The ground will consist of asphalt including basaltic and glass aggregates.

Underground, through the West Entrance, there will be an **information space**, where visitors will orient themselves with respect to the various elements of the Memorial, including a concise presentation about slavery, slave trade and abolition.

Within the passage, a **space** (like a 'situation room') destined to expose and inform the dimensions of **present-day struggles**, now mostly legal ones, against all forms of slavery or the slave trade, will be found. While these are necessarily different in kind (since slavery is now outlawed), they remain not just a response, but a responsibility, even a requirement, and their outcomes should be held to public account. This space is placed by the East Entry facing the Palace of Justice, and includes a platform for public debates and testimonies.

The system of illumination of the memorial will draw attention to contemporary post-abolition struggles. For example, the **Glass Wall** through the frequency of their pulsing, will signal the number, or the kind of people who are liberated in France, in Europe or in other parts of the world.

Beyond its symbolic purpose, and as a **Working Memorial**, the Mémorial à l'Abolition de l'Esclavage will be used as a space for testimonies and as a special meeting site during the bi-annual human-rights forum to be held in Nantes. *This would thus confirm the specificity of this site as a responsive site of memory and of struggle.* Signaling the contemporary work of liberation that courageously goes on will serve to remind us that the work of abolition that culminated in 1848 was not in vain, and that perhaps its work will one day hopefully be no longer necessary.

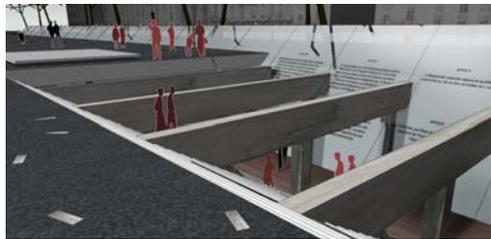
*"La relation sociale est le miracle de la sortie de soi".*

*"Society, is the miracle of moving out of oneself".*

Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*

*This Project was commissioned by the City of Nantes and its Mayor, Jean-Marc Ayrault, and it was awarded after an invited international competition. It is currently under development, and is slated to be built by 2009.*





### Mémorial à l'Abolition de l'Esclavage

#### Ville de Nantes

Jean-Marc Ayrault, Député-Maire de Nantes

Yannick Guin, adjoin à la Culture  
Jean-Pierre Brindel, Directeur, Atelier Urbaine,  
Nantes Metropole  
Comité de Pilotage

**Krzysztof Wodiczko** Artist & Professor of Visual  
Arts; Director, Center for Advanced Visual  
Studies, MIT

**Julian Bonder** Architect & Associate Professor  
School of Architecture, Art & Historic  
Preservation, Roger Williams University

#### Collaborators

Thomas Long, Design Collaboration &  
Visualization

#### Team

Snehal Intwala, Nicholas Capone, James Shen,  
Ryan McClain, Bill Panasuik, Emmanuelle Chérel

Patrick Charles, Design & Technical Consultant  
Dan Hisel, Design Consultant

#### Landscape

Maximo Rohm, Ron Henderson, Michael Blier

#### Glass

James Carpenter, James Carpenter Design  
Associates - Glass Consultants

RFR, Paris - Philippe Bompas, Nicolo Baldassini