

Monumentalizing Memory: Symbolic Struggles and Urban Landscapes in San Salvador

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The Salvadoran Civil War

Like much of Central America, El Salvador became increasingly threatened by the region's entry into the geopolitics of a bipolar world of the Cold War during the 20th century. After a period in which military and civil governments shared power, the polarization between military reformist governments and diverse sectors of the civil society, which demanded more respect for civil liberties and equitable distribution of wealth, led to an open confrontation between the government and the guerillas. The conflict between rebels, supported by Cuba and Nicaragua, against a heavily US-backed army and paramilitary became one of the last ones of the Cold War and one of the most violent in the region. For twelve years, the government's scorched-earth tactics, systematic human rights violations, and the unwillingness of both sides to cease fire led to a casualty toll of around 80,000 and around half a million refugees.

The Peace Process

The war, which did not have a clear victor, left a country torn down. As the global conflict between socialism and capitalism ended, international pressures led the country towards a peace agreement. In 1992, the Chapultepec Peace Accords, the first United Nations-brokered peace negotiations, were signed. The Peace Accords included the disarmament of the guerrillas and paramilitary groups, the holding of democratic elections, and the implementation of truth commissions to investigate systematic human rights violations during the conflict. The demobilization of violence and an overall peaceful election process, which had former combatants competing on ballots less than two years after the peace treaty was signed, were regarded as a part of an exemplary model of democratic transition. The UN's intervention in the peace was later replicated in Guatemala, Somalia, and Iraq.

Memory and Monuments:

Amongst the recommendations for moral compensation from the 1993 United Nations Truth Commission on El Salvador was: "The construction of a national monument bearing the names of all victims" (176). Although the military governments have erected various monuments commemorating civic values during the war, it was not until 2003 that the *Monumento a la Memoria y a la Verdad* was constructed. Numerous monuments have populated San Salvador commemorating the different sides of the Civil War from then on.

Research Project

Using ArcGIS maps and storytelling, my project mapped the monuments erected during the Salvadoran Civil War and after the peace process (1992) in San Salvador (1984-2017). My project tracked trends and memorialization patterns that emerged during the transition to democracy in this country. Likewise, my project aims to document information that is not easily accessible on the internet about these sites of memorialization.

Research Questions

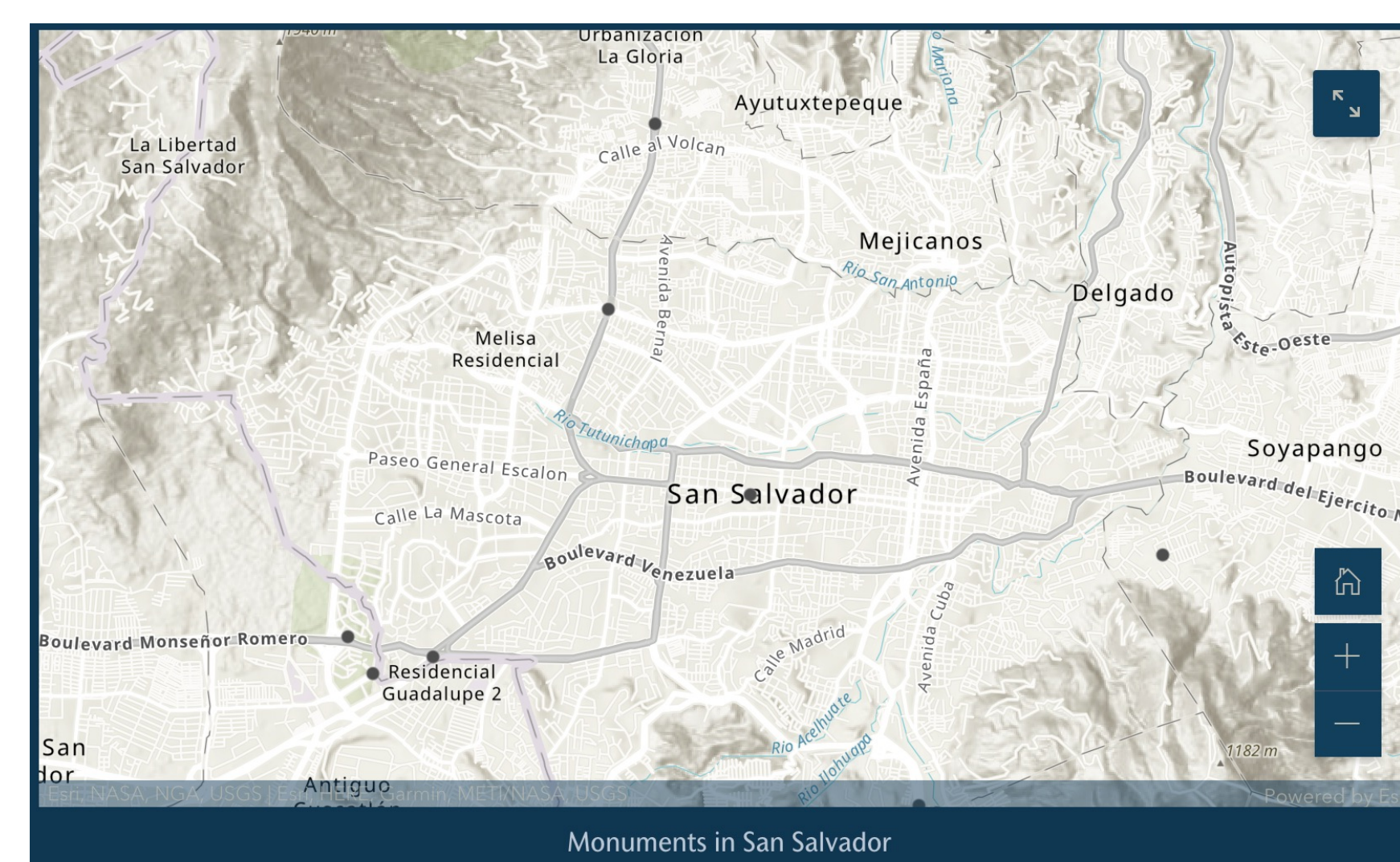
1. What trends are visible when looking at the location and the time of the construction of the monuments?
2. Are specific monuments a reaction to specific contextual events, such as constructing other monuments by antagonist political groups, or are they the product of international pressures?
3. How can the rise of monuments help us understand the politics of memorialization after the end of the Civil War?
4. What does the rapid increase in monuments in San Salvador in the last twenty tell us about Salvadoran democracy?



Monumento a la Memoria y a la Verdad



Monumento a la Constitución



Monumentalizing Memory

The monumentalizing of memory in contemporary San Salvador can be divided between those monuments that were constructed before and after the 2003 *Monumento a la Memoria y la Verdad*, which stems from the United Nations Truth Commission recommendation, as well as those built during the war and after the end of the conflict. The monuments built during the war, such as *Plaza del Soldado Salvadoreño* (1984) and *Monumento a la Constitución* (1991), commemorate Salvadoran institutions to legitimize the liberal values of El Salvador; paradoxically at the height of systematic human rights violations. Likewise, the *Monumento a la Paz* (1994) presents a depoliticized and abstract version of the Peace Accords that erases the civilian victims and political ideologies in conflict.

It was until 2003 that a monument, not without controversy, honored the Civilian victims of the conflict. From that point, the political heirs of the combatants, ARENA for the military governments and the FMLN for the guerrilla, began monumentalizing their accounts of the Civil War. This led to a symbolic competition for memory in San Salvador. Thus, while ARENA attempted to rehabilitate paramilitary leader Roberto D'Aubuisson, the FMLN erected memorials for general Schafik Hándal and the "Hasta el tope" military offensive that forced the military government to negotiate a cease of fire during the conflict. This cycle of memorialization of the war ended with the controversial *Monumento a la Reconciliación* 2017, which includes both the guerrilla and army narrative into an idea of national unity.



Monumento a la Reconciliación



Redondel Mayor Roberto D'Aubuisson



Monumento a Schafik Hándal



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