

Islands of the Past

Remnants, Relics and Rememberance in the Popular Imagination

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Proceedings of the Society of Architectural
Historians, Australia and New Zealand (SAHANZ)
Volume 40

Confence hosted by the University of Queensland
and the Queensland University of Technology,
Brisbane 2-4 December 2024

Edited by Ashley Paine and Kirsty Volz

Published in Brisbane by SAHANZ, 2025

ISBN: 978-1-7638772-0-7

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DOI: 10.55939/a5413pn2do

Citation:

Leibowitz, Vicky, and Cristina Garduño Freeman. "Islands of the Past: Remnants, Relics and Rememberance in the Popular Imagination." In *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 40, Islands*, edited by Ashley Paine and Kirsty Volz, 47-48. Brisbane, Australia: SAHANZ, 2025.

Accepted for publication on 9th June, 2024



SAHANZ Society of Architectural
Historians Australia
& New Zealand



December 2-4 2024

Brisbane, Australia

Islands of the Past

Remnants, Relics and Remembrance in the Popular Imagination

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The US Arizona WWII Memorial at Pearl Harbour, USA, and its counter-memorial, Genbaku Dome in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, Japan, bookend the narrative of WWII. Geographically and culturally distant, these island sites have historically been framed in opposition to one another. Following the signing of a Sister Park Arrangement between the USA and Japan in 2023, the two memorials are undergoing a formalised narrative transformation, and are now promoted as agents for reconciliation.¹

Despite the historical characterisation of the US Arizona WWII Memorial and Genbaku Dome as enemy sites, these isles of memory share many tropes. Both Pearl Harbour and Hiroshima are pivotal places of trauma – they are human and architectural burial sites. Imagined pasts are evoked for visitors by drawing on the latent charge of the authentic artefact; a sunken naval ship in Pearl Harbour and an eviscerated government building in Hiroshima. Both memorials are founded on material remains left in situ: each artefact carries the drowned and vaporised remains of casualties of World War II, each left unaltered to weather over time, islands of stasis existing within an evolving social, political, and temporal landscape. Both memorials co-opt remnant architecture to

control the visitor experience. The naval wreck, rusty and barnacled, is viewed from above, while the bureaucratic structure is viewed in the round. Both memorials project precarity – the US Arizona WWII Memorial is a submerged carcass drowned in Pearl Harbour's translucent tropical waters, while Genbaku Dome is a semi-stable pile of rubble in the centre of Hiroshima, its steel dome delicately pinned but seemingly ready to fall. Yet despite their evocative commonalities, these artefacts of war and their memorial framings each tell a uniquely personal account of place and reflect entrenched narratives of culture and identity.

Explored through an autobiographical ethnographic narrative facilitated by our own stranding on the island of Hawaii, we examine the ways in which these historically coupled material remains are bound together, not just by recent political agreements, but through common architectural, conceptual, and experiential approaches to difficult heritage. Each memorial seeks to mediate time and space, authenticity and imagination, by surrounding heritage artefacts with narratives of ruin, relic, and tomb, creating memorials, symbols, icons, and tourist sites that facilitate encounters with islands of the past.

1.

US Mission Japan, "Sister Park Arrangement Signed for Pearl Harbor National Memorial and Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park," *US Embassy and Consulates in Japan*, June 30, 2023, <https://jp.usembassy.gov/sister-parks-pearl-harbor-hiroshima/>.

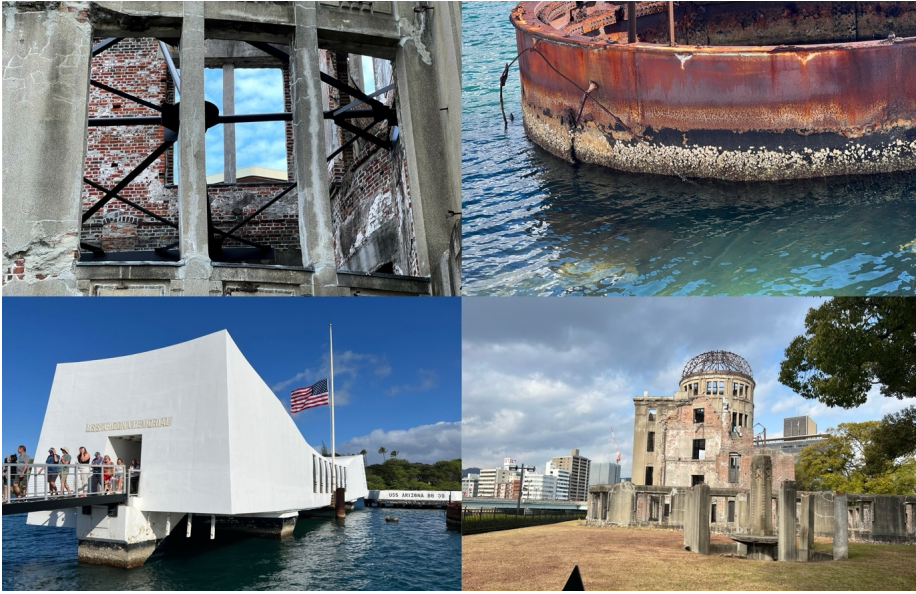


Figure 1:
Top left and bottom right: Genbaku Dome,
Hiroshima, Japan. Top right and bottom left: US
Arizona, Honolulu, Hawaii.
(Photographs by Cristina Garduño Freeman, 2023,
2024)