Space in the City's Memory: An Example of Statues in Sulaymaniyah

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Abstract: Gardens, parks, and public artworks around the city of Sulaymaniyah are among the city’s most admired features. An important hallmark of these public spaces are the statues of famous historical personalities who are remembered for serving the city, particularly those who were martyred for the sake of the Kurdish nation and were important figures of the Kurdish revolution. Despite their significance to the history of Sulaymaniyah, these statutes and the public spaces in which they exist are being reshaped and removed, at worst destroyed, to make way for new developments in the city.

Keywords: Kurdish art, public art, Sulaymaniyah, destruction of statues, Iraqi Kurdistan, intersectionality, conflict

Every city has its own character and distinguishes itself from other cities through its own unique identity. Every city’s identity is shaped by the events that took place in the city that have become part of that city’s history. Cities have the ability to define us. We can say that every city has its own ethos and core values that determine its institutions and political systems but that also deeply impact the lives of its citizens.¹ The city of Sulaymaniyah, one of the major cities in northern Iraq, has its own unique identity.² Sulaymaniyah has nurtured the writers, actors, poets, painters, and musicians of Kurdistan since its founding in 1784.³ Developed through economics and shaped by power, its streets, alleys, and buildings have been built through artistry and politics, and they have become a living part of the city. One unique feature of the city is its many gardens and parks that include statues and other works of art. Most of these statues are famous personalities of this city who are remembered for serving the city. Some of these personalities were even martyred for the sake of the Kurdish nation and were important figures of the Kurdish revolution. However, this unique piece of the city’s history and identity, particularly pieces like these statutes that hold the memories of the 1991 Kurdish uprising and the tumultuous political history since that time, are being reshaped and removed, at worst destroyed, to make way for new developments in the city.⁴

Increasingly, year by year, there is an attempt to remove these statues, which are critical

¹ Bell 2011.
² Transliterated spellings of the same name often have multiple spellings. For example, the Kurdish city of Sulaimani may also appear as “Slemani,” or by its Arabic pronunciation, “Sulaymaniyah.” When quoting another author, spelling remains as it appeared in the original text or as spelled by the organization using the term/name.
³ Cockrell-Abdullah 2018: 3-10.
⁴ Editor’s Note: Here the author is referring to the 1990-1991 Gulf War, and Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait that was later followed by the creation of the autonomous Kurdish Region of Iraq and the Kurdish Regional Government, and the start of the Kurdish civil war in 1994, mostly between the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic, which lasted roughly through the end of 1997.
pieces of Kurdish history in Iraq, and to eliminate public spaces within the city. Pieces of public area in the city are being destroyed with little plan and under various pretexts. Breaking, removing, and destroying these statues and reducing public spaces will cause big problems. These statues should not be broken and destroyed because they are pieces of Kurdish history, specifically pieces of Kurdish art history. As previously mentioned, most of the statues are of famous personalities who have been an important part of this city’s history and in the Kurdish revolution. These statues are not only tied with the history of Kurdish nation forged in Sulaymaniyah but also with the families of individuals who were immortalized, and this connection presents a continuation of those families’ legacies to both the city and the region. As a part of Kurdish art history, this type of sculptural art now represents a characteristic of our art’s identity and is an important expression of our national history. Especially in our modern present, these pieces represent evidence of our sculptural art. Though we may not like the sculptures themselves, we cannot hide or deny this fact. Further, as a part of the history of sculpting art in Kurdistan, we must retain these things in a way so that we do not lose this history. Breaking and destroying the statues of the city tells us nothing. That is why it is very important to retain these as part of an art archive for future historical evidence of Kurdish sculptural art and so that we may also learn artistically from them and further advance Kurdish art in this area.

Statue of “Kawa Asinger” (Kawa the Blacksmith). Photo from the personal archives of Ata Qazaz.
The Statue of Kawa The Blacksmith

In my opinion, the effect of this method of dealing through sculpture to express and form national history in an artistic context goes back to the artistic education of 30 years ago, the period under the dictatorship of the fascist Ba’athist regime, which raised the commander-in-chief as the father of the nation in all cities and towns of Iraq and the Kurdistan region. The survival of this form of dealing with space especially space in cities and in Sulaymaniyah shows us the difficult fact that we have not been able to deal with these problems in an artful way and that this pattern is being repeated and accumulated in the last thirty years. How do we find out about the important memories of the city that are held in these spaces? How much is tied to the history of the city? These questions are related to the story of the destruction of the statue of Kawa the Blacksmith, the history of the modern Kurdish revolution as well as the discovery of the identity of the Kurdish individual after all the failures that have occurred. But if we look at it, we will see that as a result, the devastation caused by the Kurdish authorities is much more than what happened to the city during the fascist Bathurst regime, which is a question for me whether this destruction is intended or related to the mismanagement of this city in these 30 years of Kurdish rule. Of course, the history of the statue of Kawa the Blacksmith is the best example of breaking and destroying sculptural artwork in the general space of this city. We saw this happen during the former fascist Ba’athist regime but we are also now seeing it happen again, but through the Kurdish cultural political authority which I believe works with a similar strategy and goal to narrow the public space in the city and to remove the city’s identities from public places.

Here I will give an example on this topic which is interesting and important and includes the whole subject as the art of sculpture and as the history of our nation. Here I wanted to shed light on it and can say that Kawa’s statue collected all the elements so that we can make a good reading of the history and connection of people to the place, the influence of the place on people, as well as the damages of removing and breaking the statue of this city in the present and at that time. In terms of the art of sculpting at that time, the city of Sulaymaniyah was seen in the early 1980s of the last century. At that time, the city was growing and new designs were created for the city through sculpture, greenery, public space, and the big boulevard. The idea of creating the statue of Kawa the Blacksmith is derived from the history of the Kurdish nation which, in the personality of Kawa the Blacksmith, sees itself as the Kurdish legend engaged in a war of resistance against the destruction of its identity by enemies of the Kurdish nation. Through art, this idea of protecting the identity of the Kurdish nation was created. All of this has gathered in this area which is more related to the history of the modern Kurdish revolution, especially the history of the city’s general space at the time, which previously existed only in terms of historical events.

5 Editor’s Note: Images of the sculptural work of Ata Qazaz come from the artist’s personal archive of work and through the documentary work of the author, Zamoa Daraga. The photo of “Kawa Asinger” is dated 1957. However, the date is referring to the Aqary roundabout in Sulaimani. The building of the Aqary roundabout signals developments that were happening in the city beginning in the late fifties. It is interesting to think that a year later, after this date, the July 14, 1958 coup d’etat would overthrow the Hashemite monarchy in Iraq that had been established under the auspices of the British, following World War II, creating the Republic of Iraq.
Destruction of the statue of “Kawa Asinger” (Kawa the Blacksmith). Photo from the personal archives of Ata Qazaz.

In the mid-1980s, between 1983 and 1984, in the heat of the Iran–Iraq war, the patriotic union of Kurdistan, which was then the most powerful armed party, began negotiations with the fascist Ba’athist regime. Their return from the mountains to the city and the creation of an artificial space at that time became the reason for creating the idea of Kawa the Blacksmith, which expresses the struggle of a nation against the oppression of tyranny and the justice and right of the Kurdish nation – and this idea clearly appears in the statue. Kawa stands and poses in the shape of a mythical hero. Looking away, in his right hand he holds a hammer over his shoulder, which expresses his power. With his left hand he grabs the head of Zuhak and the snakes, which represents the end of oppression. Placed on a high pedestal, Kawa holds the torch of Norouz fire as a symbol for the fire of the revolution. At that moment, it was suggested that the statue of Kawa the Blacksmith be placed on the crossroads of Ibrahim Pasha street after Tui Malik Street, Pira Merd Street, and University Street on the hill near the martyr Osman Pasha. As I mentioned earlier, at that time, the city was growing. Most of the streets were enlarged and water pipes and art statues were designed for them. This project was approved by the mayors and leaders of the Ba’athist regime along with all the city’s projects. Artist Kosrat Jamal Ghafur created the statue of Kawa Asinger. Ghafur who created the statue was then a teacher at the Sulaymaniyah Institute of Fine Arts in the sculpture department. The work was performed at the Institute of Fine Arts which was then in the building of the current girls’ center. This was done under the supervision of artist Kosrat Jamal Ghafur and with the help of some students at the institute. The work was sponsored by Ali Boskani, a well-known personality who was one of the richest people in Sulaymaniya at that time. With the presentation of this statue on August 30, 1983, it became a symbol of a protest against the fascist regime, resulting in the martyrdom and injury of many people.

6 “Asinger” in Kurdish means blacksmith.
The fascist Ba’athist regime arrested and slaughtered many young people 40 days after removal of the curtain on the statue of Kawa the Blacksmith, and broke the statue one night in hatred of that day. The people of the city protested against the authorities and there was chaos everywhere. This event became history and a symbol of revolution especially the place where the statue was built. People’s memory has been tied to this public place through an artistic work. I believe this is the first time in the history of this city that such an event has occurred between the work of art and the public space and the history of the nation which remained in people’s memories and became a symbol of revolution and modern city life at that time.

After the uprising in 1991, the idea of recreating the statue of Kawa the Blacksmith was resurrected. The statue was to be built in the same place as the original statue for the purposes of reviving that history. The incident that happened nine years ago also became the identity of the city as its contemporary history. The statue of Kawa the Blacksmith became the space that carried its characteristics as a public space in people’s memory. This is the reason for the convergence of common life and history among the cities’ citizens. It seems like an honor to recreate the same statue in the same place in order to revive history that was created among the people of the city. Artists belonging to the Socialist Party of Kurdistan were responsible for executing such an idea. The job of recreating the statue was given to two sculptors Latif Saber and Salam Rza who made the statue at the girls’ high school. This was at the beginning of the uprising. During Newroz on March 20, 1992, I was there to witness the curtain being removed from the new statue of Kawa the Blacksmith in a big ceremony.

After a few years, the mayor of Sulaymaniyah asked the sculptors to change the statue. A
foreign organization allegedly complained that the statue was a symbol of violence and was not considered to be beautiful for the Kurdish nation to cut off the heads of its enemies and make statues demonstrating this in the middle of the city. Artist Latif Saber was not happy with this request and would not fulfill it. Instead, the mayor commissioned sculptor Zahir Sadiq to edit the statue of Kawa the Blacksmith by changing the right hand of the statue, the one that holds the head of Zuhak. Instead of holding a knife and the head of Zuhak, there is instead a hammer turning Kawa into an ordinary blacksmith – neither the hero nor the symbol of revolution, changing the meaning and the history in the eyes of the cities’ citizens. Later under the pretext of putting a traffic light in four roads and to enlarge the street, they removed the statue of Kawa the Blacksmith entirely – destroying the statue for the second time.

Destruction of Public Places

Destruction of most of the city’s public places has become a phenomenon, all which have a direct or indirect connection with the history of the city and its citizens through space. The whole city includes these memories which were created as the city has progressed. Destruction of the city’s collective memory has a direct relationship with the disappearance of the city’s public spaces as part of the people’s folklore. Markers of the city’s identity are those characteristics of its place and
surroundings. Most of the public streets were themselves called artistic works, for example, the Ascan Fountain, or the Corner of the Jars, and many other places of the city. In the same way, the destruction of the old buildings has made way for car parks, and there has been deep neglect of many older places such as Mama Yara Hill and Mahafiz houses; several cemeteries within the city’s borders were also destroyed. This phenomenon has caused the city of Sulaymaniyah to face a major problem — the disappearance of the identities of the city and the weakening of the intimate relationship between citizens and their city. What comes from this is the creation of a feeling that no one considers themselves to have ownership of the city or responsibility for it. In my opinion, this problem is directly related to the reduction of the overall public city space, the destruction of the city’s original master plan with enthusiasm and greediness on the part of party officials, and the creation of several inappropriate buildings. For example, merchants have increasingly been occupying more of the city’s public spaces to build shops and markets in an unregulated way. This has reduced both greenspaces and public spaces at the city centers and the main streets where citizens used to gather regularly. Of course, development and modernization must happen, however, a big hotel and a dirty market do not contribute to the city’s history and culture in a productive way. This is how a people and the city fall into decay. More developments like this have created roads in downtown Sulaymaniyah that are full of ugly business ads, like the Ali Cobon building, which have nothing to do with promotion of the city’s history and what the city was founded on, namely, prosperity, civilization, and culture.

This disappearance of public space in the city creates a problem and separates us from our history. It means that we as a civilized city have not been able to cross the same path and enrich the city’s cultural infrastructure. Now when it comes to a particular place there is nothing that indicates that this place, this tree, or this statue is significant or has meaning. None of these things remain. This separates us from our reality especially for the young people and a new generation.
of the city who are not aware of the historical events that happened in those places. In my opinion this phenomenon will continue for several more years leading to a serious loss in memory for all citizens – the disappearance of historical buildings.

The increase in this phenomenon – the destruction of public spaces in the city and city statues – will be an important reason for the weakening of the connection between citizens and the city that affects the people’s psyche. The analysis of people’s memory of public spaces reveals the loss of characteristics and identities of public spaces, and the city losing its identity forever. In my opinion, removing and breaking these statues is not a good thing and will not benefit our nation’s history, art, or cultural processes now or in the future. On the contrary, it will cause great damage not only to Kurdish history in general but also to Kurdish art history specifically. But how will it be harmful if the decision made is to remove those statues? There is now a lot of rumors about the removal of these statues and a consensus within the cultural authority of this region that they know very well to remove these statues just as in the middle 1980s. Many statues were removed, and it seems that they will repeat the same scenario of destruction.

Here we must take a stand against the mentality that led the cultural authority of this region to destroy these statues. In the example of the statue of Kawa the Blacksmith, we can see two instances of authorities reading themselves of this symbol of revolution – one of them Kurdish. In the second instance, the authority was able to rid himself of the inheritance of the previous regime though he seems to follow the same policy and strategy of the previous regime. I believe that these actions are far from all modern conceptions of ethics and etiquette and that these actions are an effort to change Kurdish national history by changing the work of art that appears in the public spaces of this city. History is misled through actions influenced by outsider, foreign opinions of what our city should be. This city and its history is fundamentally changed because authorities attempt to make it beautiful for outside, foreign interests. This example shows us how to retake cultural power in a way that treats the important issues that have taken away the memories of the community.

Preserving Kurdish Folklore

It is very important here to point out that I do not write about the memories held in public spaces and which are expressed in public art statues that appear in these important places from a place of affection and love for these sites as much as I mean to talk about places as history, history as identity, and public spaces as those relationships that are between a people and their city. Those relationships between people and their city impact the history of the place, the history of the people, as well as the development of the civilization and its culture. The relationships that arise between people in the city through the existence of these places must be valued and seen as important. Maternity becomes a space for people to meet and create dialogue that becomes a force for advancing the path of civilization, creating a healthy life and a spirit of coexistence and forgiveness. However, this cannot be done when we do not know our own history.

We should not repeat previous mistakes. In consideration of the masterplan for a modern Sulaymaniyah, these monuments’ history should be considered with seriousness and there should be places developed to preserve these pieces of Kurdish history. I argue that it is important to reconstruct the statue of Kawa the Blacksmith in a way that fits with our contemporary present
and which is able to revive that particular piece of history and all the information that it carries with it. Along with this reconstruction, there should also be a documentation of the names of those who participated in the creation of this bit of history at the beginning of the reconstruction of the statue, along with a documentation of those who were involved with original versions of this statue, particularly those who were imprisoned, tortured, and martyred when the first statue was unveiled. This can be a part of the city’s living culture that can be displayed in the city archives.

As for the endangered statues that I have spoken about, if there is a will to do so, we can first begin by transferring all the statues that are scheduled for destruction around the city to the Old Cigarette Factory. There we can create a historical exhibit that is both scientific and artful in its documentation and preservation – perhaps among the gardens on the grounds of the Old Cigarette Factory. The Sulaimaniyah Tobacco Factory, which is known locally, was built in the mid-1950s and was operational until 1990 when the United Nations Security Council placed a near-total embargo on then Ba’athist-led Iraq after its invasion of Kuwait. After 2004, it was proposed that the factory should be demolished and replaced with an office building or a park. In 2012, a group of artists proposed to turn the space into an arts and cultural center that would be a space for exhibitions and workshops and would also include recreational areas and a library.7

We all know that the cigarette factory is now dedicated to becoming a big Cultural Center, and the Ministry of Culture is trying to make this factory an ideal place for the arts and culture of the city. The wisdom these statues hold is very appropriate for this space and the factory could also become a place for an archive of sculptural arts. The building has more than twenty-seven large rooms, adjacent streets, and gardens that could easily accommodate all of the statues of the city. In this way, it could become a place to archive the art of Kurdish sculptures, especially those created in the past 30 years. Removing these endangered statues from the public space of the city would protect them from destruction and would foster respect to these famous personalities and to the history of our nation that they symbolize. The protection of these statues would preserve and promote the work of Kurdish artists who made the statues, and help create a collection that could aid in teaching the art and cultural history of the Kurdish nation – especially this important historical period of time from 1991 to the present. Putting these statues in the cigarette factory and creating this archived collection would also help advance the sculptural arts made my Kurdish artists here in Sulaymaniyah. It would make it easier for us to critically analyze these statues, by first organizing them according to the year they were made and then considering the periods when they were made, and those problems that could be identified in the manufacturing of the work itself. This sculptural art archive would become a place for future research by our universities and art institutes and would offer numerous lessons about the history of sculptural arts in the Kurdistan region after 1991. Of course, the art there could be researched by students and used in analysis to positively support the cultural policies in the region and help create cultural policies that promote healthy public space in the city. A sculptural art archive such as this would work to raise the image of the city, the Kurdish art, and our national history, giving civil recognition to creating a public space for citizens in which national history could be represented and promoted and where citizens could gather to meet and to share. It may also be that such an archive would help us create new and modern laws and regulations that enable us to put future statues in public places in a way that we can also protect the rights of the people while presenting the beautiful art of sculpture to the

7 Levokowitz 2018.
city. Importantly the survival of these statues will be the reason for the development of sculptural art in the future and will also serve as a lesson for not repeating the previous mistakes of history and positively changing the city’s appearance for the better when it comes to artwork in the public space of the city.

Conclusion

Economics, politics, and tourism can express modernity for the future of this city. In my opinion, if changes to Sulaymaniyah’s public spaces continue as they are, the streets, parks and gardens will have a very different image in terms of the city’s environment, and we as citizens, our daily encounters, and our view of our city will change for the worse. As long as these endangered statues stay in their places and we do nothing to protect them, the situation of reduced public space in the city of Sulaymaniyah will continue to deteriorate as will the citizens’ relationship with the city – those individuals who have daily encounters with these statues. A strong and modern plan that fits well with the city’s history and that includes rebuilding the city’s important historical places is needed. The disappearance of old buildings have led to the creation of a kind of unhealthy and ugly building environment that feels copy-and-paste. Such changes around the city further enable the separation of social classes between the rich and the poor, deepening a dangerous divide. It seems that the current city planning has not taken public space and its historical and cultural significance to the Kurdish people into account. This has had a negative effect on the city’s environment causing the city to become ugly and to further have a negative effect on individual citizens’ psychology and social attachment to the city. Most importantly, it has become a tool for destroying the public pleasure and for the disappearance of the art and history of these sculptural works of art by Kurdish artists. Removing these statues necessarily removes a part of Kurdish folklore in which the work of the sculptors themselves has been lost. This leads to a separation.
between the art of sculpture of yesterday to that of today. Ironically, though the statue Kawa Asinger may be gone and the public space on which it stood now destroyed, citizens still use the name of “Kawa,” which was given to that place because of the statue, to describe the place in its current state – though they often do not know the significant history held in that place.

About the Artist

Zamoa Daraga is a well-known artist and curator in Iraqi Kurdistan. He earned his Fine Arts Diploma from the Fine Arts Institutes in Sulaymaneyah (1993) and a Graphic Arts Bachelor Degree from Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (2006) along with a Graphic Arts High Diploma also from Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (2006). We invite you to get to know him more through these resources: Kurdistan Art. A Meeting Place for Artists. Daraga Zamoa Kurdish Artist. http://kurdistanart.blogspot.com/2017/08/daraga-zamoa-sulaymaniyah-south-of.html; and through the artist’s personal Facebook page Daraga Zamoa Art. https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100063850294278.

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