

The Fourth Plinth's Significance to Trafalgar Square

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London HUA, Milestone 2
22 June 2017

All public open spaces face the issue of striking a balance between what the space was meant for and how the public at large seeks to use it. This tension pervades parks, street sidewalks, and so on, with Trafalgar Square being no exception. As investigated in this milestone's background, the square has a long and turbulent history as a space known as the meeting place for the general public to meet London's state authority on government owned land. As a place was established as such a hybrid, Owned and operated by those in power and, at the same, used by everyone, it was destined to serve as a broad representation of the nation as a whole. These tensions have only transformed and rooted themselves more deeply into the identity of Trafalgar Square. The paradoxical nature of Trafalgar Square, as a place dedicated to tradition and Imperial nationalism having served so often as a platform for questioning authority and progressive demonstration, makes the square the perfect representation of London and Londoners as a whole.

From its initial conception following English victory at the famous Battle of Trafalgar, Trafalgar square was intended as a place to pay tribute to men like Admiral Nelson and the like, as well as the country they fought and died for. While this commission of this land for such a memorial was admirable, the choice to build a monument and square representative of English Imperial power was a decision clearly calculated to send a message to, not only Londoners, but to the world as well. Reminiscent of a Roman forum, Trafalgar Square's defining feature just south of the square's center sits Nelson's Column. As a column of Corinthian order, Nelson's figure stands atop it leaning on his sword adopting a pose clearly reminiscent of Napoleon, utilizing it as a simple pedestal. Having been built in first half of the 19th century, as England emerged on the world stage touting imperial superiority. As a monument to such deliberate nationalism would prove trite if displayed on private land, Trafalgar Square stands out as a public space designed as essentially propaganda to the masses. What the square planners failed to see was that a place such as the square would not so much influence Londoner, but rather, how London's public would take shaping the square's identity into their own hands.

As touched on in the project background, Trafalgar Square was not stranger to public demonstration. Just north of London's center, Charing Cross, the land where Trafalgar Square was established has long been fraught with civil demonstration through protests and riots. While the designers and planners behind Trafalgar Square may have intended for and believed that such activism would decrease or disappear from the area by defining it as a place of national pride, quite the opposite came about a result. Trafalgar Square with its wide-open shape and location near the heart of London fortuitously served as the perfect platform for people of all ages, religions, genders, socio-economic statuses, and ethnicities to meet as community. In this way, Londoners have, increasing in modern era, made Trafalgar Square their own by the actions and

initiatives taken within it. Suffragettes, the Unemployed, Anti-Fascists, Anti-War Advocates, LGBT Rights Activists, and more all found Trafalgar Square as forum on which to let their voices be heard. Trafalgar Square serves as a space where divisive issues of the country, its people, and the world are given light and exposed. With the establishment of the Fourth Plinth Commission, the RSA successfully utilized a part of Trafalgar Square, the long empty fourth plinth, to put on display this question of who defines Trafalgar Square, the people or the squares design and intended for it.

The Fourth Plinth's commissions, under the RSA, exposes what defines Trafalgar Square, as a whole. The original reason for the plinth's emptiness is widely agreed upon as a result of lack of funding for a equestrian statue of William IV with that same William IV's untimely death. I argue the reason for its continued status as an empty plinth amongst three other decorated plinths comes a result of a uneasiness with putting the final preverbal nail-in-the-coffin, or finishing touch, on square dedicated to England's past accomplishments. The Fourth Plinth Commission ingeniously navigated this avoided issue by opening up the question of "What ought to stand on the Fourth Plinth?" into "How ought Trafalgar Square be defined?" Through establishing a successive line up of contemporary works intended to ask this new question of visitors of the square, the RSA dared the public to engage and take critical look at Trafalgar Square.

The first sculpture to populate the fourth plinth, Mark Wallinger's "Ecce Homo", and the fourth, Marc Quinn's "Alison Lapper Pregnant" stand out particularly relevant pieces that drove home the ideals of critical thinking and public definition the Fourth Plinth Commission sought to shed light on. "Ecce Homo" humble in size and demeanor, says more about Trafalgar Square on the fourth plinth than of itself. Everything that this depiction of Jesus Christ presents serves as a

foil to the grandiose occupants of the three other plinths and especially to Nelson's column.

"Alison Lapper Pregnant" takes a similar approach but coming through the lens of disability and gender, using the Fourth Plinth as a platform to question who sculpture ought to portray, directly subverting the square's prevalent male and able subjects for sculpture. I chose these two sculptures because of the poignant contrast they brought to Trafalgar square, as well as the fact that both depict a very human subject. People and their representation lays at the core of Trafalgar squares history and these structures reveal the public's influence to themselves.

From a modern perspective, there is a certain irony to the nationalism Trafalgar Square's planners sought to instill in the public and the world. For a public square built from its conception to serve as a memorial and glorification of London's historic prosperity, Trafalgar Square remains firmly planted in the present moment. The public paradoxically choose to bring to a space of tradition and Imperial nationalism, contemporary and progressive demonstrations and calls to actions. The Fourth Plinth Commission set to give a physical embodiment of bringing the Trafalgar Square into the 21st century, making sure people had their place and influence make a mark, temporary as it may be, on the space itself. Ultimately, the square's planners succeed in that Trafalgar Square went on to represent England, but I'm sure they never predicted it would be on the people's terms.