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When Sister City Relationship between Allied Countries is Ended — The Case of Osaka and San Francisco¹

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I. Introduction

Sister city relationship flourishes around the world. Currently, 1,741 Japanese local governments of some level have a sister city relationship with their counterparts in the world.² Between the U.S. and Japan, there are 426 sister city relationships and 25 sister state relationships. Out of the 50 U.S. states, 45 states are involved in sister city or sister state relationships, and 46 out of the 47 Japanese prefectures are involved.³

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1 This short article was written for the “Alliance” project of the Center for International Studies of the School of International Politics, Economics, and Communication (academic year 2019). This work was partially funded by the Center for International Studies.

2 Council of Local Authorities for International Exchange, “Sister city relationships in Japan — Overview,” <<http://www.clair.or.jp/e/exchange/shimai/index.html>> (accessed January 20, 2020).

3 The five U.S. states not involved are West Virginia, South Carolina, Mississippi, Wyoming, and Nevada. The only Japanese prefecture not involved is Nara. East-West Center and the Sasagawa Peace Foundation, “Japan Matters for America / America Matters for Japan” (Honolulu and Tokyo: n.d.), pp. 36–37. The reason Nara, an old capital and tourist attraction, does not have a sister city in the U.S. seems to be because it has two sister cities in China — Xi’an and Yangzhou — that were located on the route of diplomatic missions between China and Japan in the ancient time when Nara was the capital of Japan. The City of Nara, “A Circle of Exchange Extending to the World Beyond” <<http://www.city.nara.lg.jp/www/contents/1147399442829/index.html>> (accessed January 22, 2020). I thank my colleague Kentaro Sakuwa for pointing me to this information. The City of Kyoto, another ancient city, has a sister city relationship with an old U.S. city of Boston.

Unless some serious political crisis happens, these sister city relationships continue. On January 14, 2020, the City of Shanghai broke up its sister city relationship with Prague, Czech, after Prague signed on a sister city relationship with Taipei. In its statement, Shanghai pointed that Prague violated the “One China” principle” as the reason for the dissolution of the relationship.⁴ Sakaiminato City of Tottori, Japan, which had a sister city relationship with Wonsan of North Korea⁵ since May 14, 1992,⁶ severed its tie on October 13, 2006 after North Korea conducted nuclear weapon experiments.⁷ Broome City of Australia, which had a sister city relationship with Taiji Town of Wakayama, Japan to honor its history of having accepted Japanese immigrants who came to the city to dive and catch pearls, went almost breaking up the relationship as the documentary “Cove,” which criticized Taiji’s dolphin catching, was released.⁸ But the Broome City Council decided on October 13, 2009 to rescind a resolution to break up its sister city relationship, although the city mayor maintained that that action did not mean Broome condoned Taiji’s dolphin catching.⁹

In light of these obvious cases, it was a surprising news that in October 2018 Osaka City broke up a sister city relationship with San Francisco, which had more than sixty years’ history since 1957, in protest to San Francisco City’s placing the so-called “comfort women”¹⁰ statue on

4 *Asahi Shimbun*, January 16, 2020. I thank my colleague Tadashi Kuramatsu for pointing me to this information.

5 Sakaiminato, a fishery city, maintained scheduled boat routes to Pusan and Wonsan before World War II. In 1991, the largest number of vessels which entered the Sakaiminato Port was those of North Korea (except those of Panama, which were virtually those of various countries). *AERA*, March 10, 1992.

6 *Asahi Shimbun*, May 15, 1992.

7 Sakaiminato City Mayor Press Release <<https://www.city.sakaiminato.lg.jp/index.php?view=4523>> (in Japanese) (accessed January 19, 2020).

8 *Asahi Shimbun*, August 23, 2009.

9 *Asahi Shimbun*, October 15, 2009.

10 Whether it is appropriate to call these women “comfort women” itself has become an issue. One *San Francisco Chronicle* article used an expression “euphemistically named ‘comfort women.’” “Memorizing Wartime Sex Slaves Known as ‘Comfort Women,’ or Just Move on?” September 12, 2017. In this article, I use the term “comfort women” because some strong supporters of the statue in San Francisco use

a city's public land. On the general topic of "comfort women," many books, articles, blogs, and Twitters have been released on whether the Japanese government has apologized enough to these women, whether or not they voluntarily took the job, and how much freedom they were given when they engaged in the work. There have also been heated discussion on whether it was an appropriate action that San Francisco built a statue on its public land and whether Osaka needed as far as to sever a sister city relationship.¹¹ The purpose of this article is NOT to judge which of these positions is correct. Such discussions are widely held elsewhere and I do not intend to join these debates. Rather, its purpose is to explore why the Cities of Osaka and San Francisco reached to the point of dissolution of the sister city relationship. When the relationship was broken in October 2018, the bilateral relationship was generally good.¹² Moreover, the U.S. and Japan are allied countries — for Japan,

it with quotation marks (see "Comfort Women' Justice Coalition" in the next section).

- 11 For example, a Japanese Diet member Hiroshi Yamada tweeted "Japanese people who have consciences should not visit San Francisco." *Asahi Shimbun*, December 25, 2017.

On the other hand, Professor Kazuo Yamaguchi, an economics professor at the University of Chicago, argued that (1) whether to build a statue was a matter of San Francisco City and that City of Osaka did not have a say on it; (2) the statue project was a "human rights issue," which gave a wish that the same history should not be repeated and that it was not a criticism of Japan, and (3) it was a jump of logic from criticizing some expressions on the inscriptions of the statue to opposing the building of the statue itself. Yamaguchi, "The anti-Internationalism of the Decision of the City of Osaka — What the Dissolution of Sister City Relationship with the City of San Francisco Means" *Huffington Post* (in Japanese). November 28, 2017. <https://www.huffingtonpost.jp/entry/san-francisco-osaka_jp_5c5d5184e4b0974f75b166c3> (accessed January 11, 2020). I will come back later to the second point in the third section of the main text.

See also, Yamaguchi, "What I have Thought about International Relationship in light of Reactions to Media Reports on Osaka City's Sister City Relationship Dissolution" *Huffington Post* (in Japanese). December 5, 2017. <https://www.huffingtonpost.jp/entry/hate-speech_jp_5c5a52b1e4b012928a30279c> (accessed January 10, 2020). All the titles and contents of Japanese sources translated into English are by the author.

- 12 In September 2018, a gubernatorial election was held in Okinawa, and one of the major issues was on whether to build a new U.S. military base in Henoko area by reclaiming land in the sea. But no Okinawa cities, including Okinawa prefecture itself,

the U.S. is the only country that has an alliance partnership. Thus, why such an irregular sister city relationship dissolution occurred between the U.S. and Japan merits investigation.

II. The Process

On September 22, 2015, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors (called City Councils elsewhere) unanimously passed a resolution “urging the city to build a memorial honoring . . . women forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese army during World War II.”¹³ Then a document “‘Comfort Women’ San Francisco Memorial Call for Artists: Gift of Public Art for the City of San Francisco” was released by “‘Comfort Women’ Justice Coalition”¹⁴ in July 2016.¹⁵ The Coalition “will request proposals for a permanent public art piece to be installed in St. Mary’s Square Extension, at 500 Pine Street.”¹⁶ Then an “international design competition seeks proposals from artists for the ‘Comfort Women’ memorial that address *Memory, Dialogue, Peace and Reconciliation, Transformation and Justice*.”¹⁷ After that, “[a]n honorary jury has been empaneled to evaluate the proposals and select the finalists based on conceptual, aesthetic and material criteria. Three finalists will be identified with community input and the jury will select the Memorial artist who will participate in public meetings and community presentations, implement the project as required, overseeing the production of the work”.¹⁸

San Francisco Arts Commission chose Steven Whyte to be the sculp-

which had a sister state relationship with the state of Hawai‘i, went as far as threatening to break up a sister city relationship with U.S. cities. For a list of cities in Okinawa Prefecture which has a sister city relationship with U.S. cities, see “Sister City Relationships in Japan — Details,” Council of Local Authorities in International Relations <<http://www.clair.or.jp/e/exchange/shimai/prefectures/detail/47>>.

13 *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 22, 2015.

14 The coalition was co-chaired by two San Francisco Superior Court Judges Julie Tang and Lillian Sing. *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 7, 2017.

15 “Comfort Women” Justice Coalition, “‘Comfort Women’ San Francisco Memorial Call for Artists” <<https://sfgov.org/arts/sites/default/files/Comfort%20Women%20Memorial%20Project%20Synopsis%207.11.16.pdf>> (accessed January 19, 2020).

16 *Ibid.* (no page number)

17 *Ibid.* (emphasis added). (no page number)

18 *Ibid.*

tor of the statue. Whyte “received more than 1,000 angry mails and phone calls demanding he stop work on the project.”¹⁹ Then a completed statue of three young women and a grandmother was installed on St. Mary’s Square on September 22, 2017. The ceremony of installation lasted for more than two hours.²⁰ On the same day, Jun Yamada, Consul-General of San Francisco of Japan, sent an article to the *San Francisco Chronicle* that the statue was “alienating Japanese public.” Yamada expressed that “this new San Francisco memorial is surely designated to be yet another addition to the existing quagmire surrounding ‘controversial statues.’”²¹

In response to these developments in San Francisco, Osaka Mayor Hirofumi Yoshimura, who belonged to the leadership of the Japan Restoration Party (a party at least as conservative as the Liberal Democratic Party but took a different stance as to how Osaka City’s administrative structure should be), stated on September 25, 2017 that if St. Mary’s Square would become the city’s public premise, Osaka’s sister city relationship with San Francisco would be terminated.²² Reacting to this statement, Edwin Lee, San Francisco’s first Asian American mayor, sent a letter to Mayor Yoshimura (dated October 2, 2017) saying that dissolving the sister city relationship was an embarrassing act.²³ But St. Mary’s Square was given to the city of San Francisco on October 16, 2017, and a ceremony was held on the following day.²⁴

Given that the statue’s premise was transferred to the city, Mayor Yoshimura announced on November 24, 2017 that he will terminate the sister city relationship. His arguments were as follows. First, he requested a meeting with Mayor Lee, but received an e-mail on November 23 that “there was no room for discussion about the statue.” Second, the text enclaved on the statue, “hundreds of thousands of women

19 *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 12, 2017.

20 *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 22, 2017.

21 Jun Yamada, “‘Comfort Women’ Memorials are Alienating Japanese Public” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 22, 2017.

22 *Asahi Shimbun*, September 26, 2017.

23 *Asahi Shimbun*, October 5, 2017.

24 *Asahi Shimbun*, October 25, 2017 (evening edition).

enslaved,”²⁵ did not reflect Japanese government’s official view.²⁶ In an interview with the *Asahi Shimbun* held on December 11, 2017, Mayor Yoshimura stated that making the statue on a city’s premise was a “Japan bashing.” He also noted while there were many “comfort women” statues in Korea and China, he would not target these countries.²⁷ He planned to terminate the relationship with San Francisco within December of the year.²⁸

However, something nobody expected happened. Mayor Lee collapsed and passed away suddenly on December 12, 2017 (local time). Mayor Yoshimura showed a feeling of remorse and ordered to make the flag of Osaka City at half staff and postponed terminating the relationship until a new mayor would be elected in June 2018.²⁹

In June 2018, London Breed was elected mayor of San Francisco as the first African American woman. To Mayor Breed, Mayor Yoshimura sent a letter of ultimatum on July 24, 2018, saying that “[t]he City of Osaka . . . has currently reached a state where we must altogether reevaluate our sister city relationship with San Francisco and terminate the sister city affiliation,” because “[t]o this day, there still remains disagreement among historians regarding the number of ‘comfort women,’ the degree to which the former Japanese Army was involved, and the extent of the wartime harm, yet uncertain and one-sided claims are inscribed onto the Comfort Women Memorial plaque as historical facts.” He also stated that if San Francisco “[relocate] the Comfort Women Memorial and plaque off the city’s public property, I would have no objection to

25 *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 7, 2017.

26 *Asahi Shimbun*, November 24, 2017 (evening edition).

27 *Asahi Shimbun*, December 13, 2017. Shanghai is one of Osaka City’s sister cities. “Sister City Relationships in Japan — Details.” <<http://www.clair.or.jp/e/exchange/shimai/prefectures/detail/27>>. According to the *Asahi Shimbun* article, Mayor Yoshimura explained that he would terminate the sister city relationship with only a city in the U.S. because there has been sixty years of sister city relationship and there were Japanese Americans in the city. These points are usually raised by those who are *against* terminating the relationship, and why Yoshimura used these points as reasons for termination is not certain.

28 *Asahi Shimbun*, November 25, 2017.

29 *Asahi Shimbun*, December 14, 2017.

the continuation of our sister city relationship.” And then he set the deadline for San Francisco to reconsider “by the end of September [of 2018].”³⁰

Of course, Mayor Breed did not back off, and Mayor Yoshimura proceeded to terminate the sister city relationship on October 3, 2018. On the other hand, Mayor Breed issued a statement that in San Francisco’s view, the sister city relationship still continued.³¹

III. Analysis

Why did the Cities of Osaka and San Francisco reach the point of severing the sister city relationship? I argue that the reason was because there were misunderstandings on the nature of the statue, mainly on the Osaka side.

The document “‘Comfort Women’ San Francisco Memorial Call for Artists,” which I mentioned in the previous section, cited the full text of San Francisco City’s resolution. The resolution included following sentences: “[the resolution urges] to establish a memorial for ‘Comfort Women’ and to educate the community about stopping *global human trafficking of women and girls*”; “the Board of Supervisors of the City and County of San Francisco during the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II expresses its strong support of creating a public memorial in memory of those girls and women who suffered immeasurable pain and humiliation as sex slaves and *as a sacred place for remembrance, reflection, remorsefulness, and atonement for generations to come.*”³² The document also said “[t]he building of this Memorial in San Francisco will not be divisive but rather a great act of Unity.”³³

Surely, the “Call for Artist” included languages that touched on the nerve of some people of Japan. For example, it said “[f]rom 1931 through

30 “Mayor Opinion on San Francisco-Osaka Sister City Relationship.” This letter, which was released “in the form of an open letter,” can be retrieved as part of an article of the *San Francisco Chronicle* on August 28, 2018.

31 *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 3, 2018; *Asahi Shimbun*, October 6, 2018.

32 “‘Comfort Women’ San Francisco Memorial Call for Artists” (emphasis added) (no page number).

33 *Ibid* (no page number).

1945 during World War II, approximately 400,000 girls and women from more than 11 countries were sexually enslaved by the Imperial Japanese Armed Forces.”³⁴ It also said “[s]uccessive Japanese Administrations continue to deny the truth of that massive crime against humanity and to spend millions of dollars to hide or sanitize that war crime and other atrocities committed by the Imperial Japanese Army during World War II,”³⁵ without mentioning Kono statement of 1993 or the “final and irreversible” 2015 solution between the Republic of Korea and Japan.³⁶ But the document concludes with the sentence: “[h]elp us create this memorial as a lesson in history, as a symbol of the *on-going search for justice and peace* and a call to advocate for the rights and safety of women and girls *around the world*.”³⁷

Thus, although the “Call for Artists” contained languages that criticized Japan’s atrocities during World War II, it also sought general and universal peace for girls and women around the world today. Moreover, while the document criticized Japan’s recruiting of “comfort women” during World War II, it attempted to stop trafficking of girls and women in contemporary world. In other words, “comfort women” were the main subject of the statue, but that was because they showed “a lesson in history.” To illustrate this point, the “Call for Artists” attached twelve “examples of memorials from around the world—a theme of Peace and Justice,” which includes “Nagasaki Monument at Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum, Tokyo, Japan.”³⁸ If the purpose of building the statue was solely Japan bashing, as Mayor Yoshimura said, the document would not have included a statue in Japan seeking peace (see the

34 Ibid. (no page number) The source of “400,000” was not shown. The *San Francisco Chronicle*, which kept reporting news on the statue mainly from the “comfort womens” supporters’ side, uses the number 200,000, though it does not show its source, either.

35 Ibid.

36 As I mentioned in the introduction, there have been debates on whether these actions constituted true “apologies” to “comfort women,” but I do not delve into this point in this article.

37 Ibid (emphases added).

38 Ibid. (no page number). The word “Tokyo” seems to have been included by mistake.

pictures of the memorials at the end of this article).

The City of Osaka missed such universal and contemporary nature of the statue and interpreted that the statue was to single out Japan and criticize the country's wartime activities. I argue that this was the main reason why misunderstandings between the two cities occurred. Surely, the phrase "hundreds of thousands of women enslaved" inscribed on the statue would not have been acceptable to Mayor Yoshimura. In his letter to Mayor Breed, however, there was no indication that he understood the universal and contemporary nature of the statue.

Was there anything that the City of San Francisco could have done? Given the stiff attitude of Mayor Yoshimura, it would have been difficult to amend the relationship between the two cities from the San Francisco side, except re-designating St. Mary's Square as a private land, which would have been an impossible concession. One thing they might have been able to do, however, was to explain why they thought the Japanese government had not apologized on the "comfort women's" issue. The Japanese government takes a position that it has apologized enough, through the establishment of Asia Women's Fund in 1995 and the "final and irreversible" agreement with the Republic of Korea in 2015.³⁹ On the other hand, "comfort women" survivors and their supporters "[continue] to demand an official apology, investigation, and reparations from the Japanese government."⁴⁰ They seem to take it for granted that the Japanese government has not apologized. Thus, they could have explained why Japanese government's past efforts did not merit the name of apology and compensations. During the legislative process of Mike Honda's 2007 U.S. House resolution demanding apology to the Japanese government on "comfort women," the reasons cited included that the Kono statement was not officially endorsed by the cabinet, Asian Women's Fund included private funds, and no legislation had been passed through the Diet regarding the "comfort women."⁴¹

39 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Japan's Efforts on the Issue of Comfort Women" <<https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000473133.pdf>> (accessed January 20, 2020).

40 *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 22, 2017.

41 Okiyoshi Takeda, "How and Why Mike Honda's Resolution H.R. 121 Passed the

Showing such points would have been useful to explain why the supporters of “comfort women” statues in San Francisco thought that Japan did not apologize enough.

IV. Conclusion

In this article, I have focused on the break-up of a sister city relationship between San Francisco and Osaka on the “comfort women” statue issue. The case was noteworthy as the United States and Japan are allied countries and the general relationship between the two countries was good when the controversies happened from 2015 through 2018. After tracing the chronological events on building the statue, I concluded that the reason of the break-up was mainly due to the oversight of Mayor of Osaka of the universal and contemporary aspects of the purpose of the statue. I also noted, however, that the San Francisco side could have done more on explaining why the past apology and compensation of the Japanese government were not enough.

A break-up like this case might happen again in the future, as Korean population increases in the United States.⁴² As mentioned in Introduction, twenty-five prefectures and 426 cities, wards, towns, and villages in Japan have a sister city relationship with their counterparts in the U.S.⁴³ Some of these municipals have virtually no Koreans and Korean Americans; some may have a significant number of Koreans and Korean Americans. As long as these Koreans think that building a “comfort women” statue is a local government issue, the Japanese government cannot stop it.⁴⁴ What can be done is to think that terminating a sister

House in 2007 — An Analysis of the Legislative Process” *The Aoyama Journal of International Politics, Economics, and Communication* 101 (Nov. 2018), pp. 57–87 (in Japanese).

42 From 2000 to 2010 (when the last census was taken), Korean population (including those who also have other Asian ethnic or racial origins) increased 38.9%, from 1,228,427 to 1,706,822. U.S. Census Bureau, “The Asian Population: 2010: 2010 Census Briefs” March 2012. <<https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-11.pdf>> (accessed January 20, 2020).

43 Council on Local Authorities for International Exchanges, “Sister city relationships in Japan — Details.”

44 For example, the City of Brookhaven, located northeast of Atlanta, Georgia, built a

city relationship just because of a “comfort women” statue is a fruitless action.⁴⁵

Next two pages: “Examples of Memorials from around the World — a theme of Peace and Justice” in “Comfort Women” San Francisco Memorial CALL FOR ARTISTS, by “Comfort Women” Justice Coalition, June 2016

<<https://sfgov.org/arts/sites/default/files/Comfort%20Women%20Memorial%20Project%20Synopsis%207.11.16.pdf>> (accessed July 14, 2020). Reprinted by permission.

“comfort women” statue on June 30, 2017. Brookhaven Mayor John Ernst said, “[b]y establishing this memorial, we raise the awareness of ongoing problems of sexual and human trafficking that is taking place in the metro area and the world today.” Brookhaven “was ranked by the FBI as the America’s top city for human trafficking crimes in 2014.” This case also illustrates that a “comfort women” statue was built not just to criticize Japan’s war-time activities but also for stopping current human trafficking. “‘Comfort Women’ Statue in Georgia Latest to Irk Japan,” *The Japan Times* July 1, 2017 <<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/07/01/national/politics-diplomacy/comfort-women-statue-georgia-latest-irk-japan/#.XiVU0ExuI2w>> (accessed January 20, 2020).

As of March 2020, there are sixteen “comfort women” memorials in the United States and Canada. Tomomi Yamaguchi, “The ‘History Wars’ and the ‘Comfort Woman’ Issue: Revisionism and the Right-wing in Contemporary Japan and the U.S.” *Asia-Pacific Journal Japan Focus* Vol. 18, Issue, 6 No. 3. March 15, 2020. <<https://apjff.org/2020/6/Yamaguchi.html>>.

45 Kagoshima Prefecture has a sister city relationship with the State of Georgia, but it did not terminate its relationship because of the building of a “comfort women” issue in Brookhaven, Georgia. Council of Local Authorities for International Exchange, <<http://www.clair.or.jp/e/exchange/shimai/countries/detail/62>>.

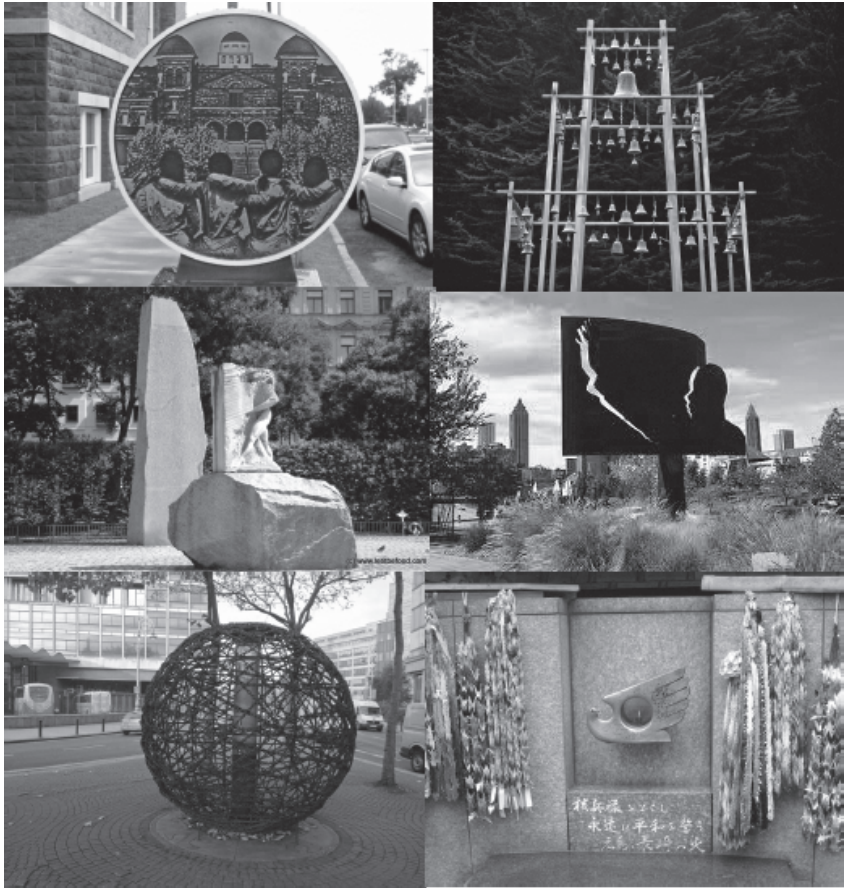


Examples of Memorials from around the World
~ a theme of Peace and Justice

Images above clockwise:

1. Bill of Rights Memorial, Sculptor Joseph Kincannon, Phoenix Arizona
2. Memorial to the missing and murdered Aboriginal Women and Girls, The Forks, Winnipeg, Manitoba
3. Battle of Tit, Monument Tunisia, Tuareg.
4. Goddess Nuva Repairs Hole in the Ozone Layer, Professor Yuan Xkun, Sculpture Times Square
5. Bourrasque-light-sculpture, Artist, Paul Cocksedge, Lyons, France
6. "Breathe", Artist Edwin Cheong, Singapore

When Sister City Relationship between Allied Countries is Ended



Artists Clockwise:

1. Four Spirits, Memorial to Four Little Girls killed in the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church. Artist, Elizabeth Mac Queen,
2. Children's Bell Tower, Designed by Bruce Hasson
3. Gates of Violence, Monument for the end of Fascism, Vienna, Artist Alfred Hrdlicka
4. Freedom Parkway, Atlanta, Gateway to the Old Ninth Ward, Artist Xavier Medina-Campeny
5. Universal Links on Human Rights, Dublin, Artist Tony O'Malley
6. Nagasaki Monument at Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum, Tokyo Japan