# Learning to Build Peace

**By Marie-Laure Desjardins**




Walls, ruins, war memorials, commemorative gardens… all testify to how difficult it is to represent peace other than by opposing it to its reverse — noise and fury. The built environment thus becomes a silent language, capable of making visible the tensions between protection and confinement, remembrance and forgetting, repair and vigilance. By questioning architecture, this text looks at the ways in which societies inscribe their wounds and aspirations in stone and concrete, but also in the living world. From walls that divide to gardens that soothe, from preserved ruins to educational sites, it seeks to show that peace is neither a natural state nor a lasting achievement, but a collective practice — one that invites us to renew the way we inhabit the world together. Published as part of ArtsHebdoMédias' textual festivities *"Representing and Thinking Peace"*, this article enthusiastically replaces the usual New Year's editorial. The editorial team therefore takes this opportunity to send you its best wishes for 2026 and to thank you for your continued loyalty.

It begins with an anxious gesture. A human being chooses stones, gathers branches, stretches a skin… to build a shelter against whatever might harm them. Before it became an art, a science or a profession, architecture was a way of taming the environment — of guarding oneself against it. The first roofs protected against bad weather, predators, potential enemies. Later, city walls enabled surrounding communities to sleep, farm and trade in safety. Because it shelters, structures space, anticipates movement, and organises relationships between individuals, architecture is intimately tied to the way societies conceive their relations with the outside and elsewhere. It preserves tranquillity by minimising openings, enclosing courtyards and gardens, surrounding the village with palisades and the city with ramparts. Civilisations build to protect human beings and their possessions.

Every wall bears witness to a fundamental ambivalence. Whether it rises around a church, as in Romania, surrounds a city, as in Carcassonne, or takes the form of a chain of fortifications, like the Atlantic Wall, it expresses a desire to "live in peace" within a perimeter deemed safe — yet it also signals the existence of a latent danger, an aggression possible at any moment. Other, more recent walls bear the trace of ideological confrontation: the Berlin Wall, whose fall in 1989 was immediately interpreted as a triumph of freedom, represents less a peace regained than a separation abolished — much like the wall between the United States and Mexico, whose first section was erected during Donald Trump's first presidency and which he now wishes to extend. Conversely, the Wall of the Federates (Père Lachaise cemetery, Paris) and the Wall of the Righteous (in the Marais district, Paris) are architectures of gratitude, honouring those who had the courage to resist oppression.

They show that peace is not merely the absence of war, but a set of acts — individual and collective gestures — that make it possible.



*Fall of the Berlin Wall, November 1989. © Raphaël Thiémard, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 2.0*

Thus, it must be acknowledged that it is often a reflection on war that enters public space. In France, war memorials are the most obvious expression of this. They stand in every village, at the heart of everyday life, reminding us of the absence of those who will never return. Their names engraved in stone underline the shared fate of those who will never grow old, and whom we must remember. A place of mourning for families, often deprived of bodies to bury, and a warning addressed to the whole community, these memorials shape a symbolic landscape — showing how foolish and dangerous it is to believe that war is something one can enter “with flowers in one’s rifle”. While these memorials are commissions created *after the fact*, other sites are sanctuarised to prevent any amnesia: such is the case of Oradour-sur-Glane, whose scars of annihilation were not erased, so that the horror of the massacre might never fade.



*Oradour-sur-Glane (Haute-Vienne), a martyred village preserved as a memorial site. © Alf van Beem, Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0 Universal*

In the same spirit, the Genbaku Dome — the only building left standing near the epicentre of the first nuclear explosion on 6 August 1945 in Japan — has been preserved as it was. This ruin has become a symbol of the devastating power invented by humankind, but it is also one of the places where our hope for peace crystallises most intensely. Listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial is not a “heroic monument”, but a silent seismograph of humanity’s destructive capacities. Its presence seems to assert that it is impossible to think peace without the extreme representation of war.

One city offers a different yet complementary example: Caen. Almost entirely destroyed in 1944 — not by the German army occupying it, but by Allied bombing carried out to liberate France — the city embodies a complex reality: peace is sometimes achieved at the price of tragedy. This is why the Caen Memorial was built, not as a mausoleum, but as an educational building, designed to recount and explain the violence of the twentieth century. It does not merely preserve traces: it organises understanding. Documents, films, archives, objects… show how peace is built, lost, and constantly threatened.



*The Caen Memorial. © François Monier / Fonds photographique du Mémorial de Caen, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0*

Beyond these two examples, another language has recently developed — one that speaks through landscape. Created in 2018 in Hauts-de-France, Belgium and the Grand Est, the Peace Gardens offer an example of what pacifying architecture can be when it seeks neither to freeze the past nor to narrate it, but to sublimate it through the living. The project was born from the desire to bring together landscape designers and architects from the nations that fought in the Great War, to design thirty gardens along the former front line — each dedicated to the memory of a country affected by the conflict. The idea is simple and powerful: to inscribe memory into a moving landscape. Where the earth was dug up, devastated, ploughed by shells, plantings, softened contours and grassy paths now appear. The gardens become places where peace is experienced as a sensation.



*Terres de Promesses, American garden, David Simonson and Coralie Taupin, Souain-Perthes-lès-Hurlus (51), 2025. © Photo Yann Monel*

Some gardens embody this connection with an almost poignant clarity. In Le Quesnoy, the New Zealand garden *Rangimarie* (a Māori expression synonymous with peace and communion) sets red — among the sacred colours of the Māori — in dialogue with the red of poppies, the flower symbol of the First World War (particularly for the British and citizens of the Commonwealth), weaving a meeting between distant cultures that were nonetheless allies in war. On the site of the former village of Old Craonne, completely destroyed by the conflict, the German garden entitled *Cultivating Memory* organises the site's rugged topography into three circles in which thousands of bulbs are planted each year. The brilliant white of snowdrops at the end of winter, the vivid mauve of crocuses in spring — these blooms embody a cycle: that of life returning where everything was annihilated. Other gardens — in Amiens, Compiègne, Navarin, Thiepval, Noyelles-sur-Mer, Vimy… — transform military wounds into poetic motifs: a golden anamorphosis appears only at the end of a path; chalk mounds evoke the resilience of nature as it covers scars; trees form clearings for contemplation; water reflects the sky and opens a space for meditation.



*Rangimarie, New Zealand garden, Xanthe White, Zoë Carafice, Charmaine Bailie and I Tui Hobson, Le Quesnoy (59), 2018. © Photo Yann Monel*

These gardens erect nothing monumental; they raise no glorious verticals. Instead, they offer a humble gesture: to cultivate. To plant again where the earth has been abused. To repair rather than rebuild. They allow us to grasp an obvious truth: peace is not a stable state, but a labour. A repeated care, season after season, so that memory neither deteriorates into obsession nor disappears into forgetting, but is born from a sensitive understanding of the past. Unlike enduring monuments, the garden changes, loses its leaves, is reborn. Its temporality is that of fragile peace — always to be grown.

This way of approaching peace through landscape also reveals another dimension of architecture — not only a matter of walls, materials and forms, but of lived spaces. To think peace through space is to think about how bodies move, meet, look at one another, or avoid one another. It is to imagine a spatiality that encourages openness rather than closure. In the Renaissance, for example, houses opened up: windows widened, more light entered. People wished to look outside without fearing the unknown. In cities, public squares became theatres of living together — places of exchange, speech and celebration. Architecture becomes an operator of hospitality. What makes peace is not only the absence of hostility, but the possibility offered to each person to inhabit the world without fear — and to invite others into it.

From this perspective, contemporary architecture, faced with ecological, political and migratory crises, stands at a turning point. Questions of borders, mobility and cultural coexistence make reflection on the spaces we must invent more necessary than ever. It is no longer only a matter of commemorating past wars, but of making future relationships possible. The ruins of Hiroshima warn us; the Caen Memorial instructs us; the Peace Gardens commit us. They powerfully show that peace is not an inheritance, but a practice. Together, they write the same sentence: peace must be represented in order to be thought, transmitted and cultivated. It is never given. It is built.

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Les Dimensions de la paix, jardin chinois, Tian Tian, Di Wang, Junmin Chu et Laurent Gouyou-Beauchamps, à Noyelles-sur-Mer (80), 2021-2022. © Y. Monel