

Pittsburgh Pride: The Rhetoric of George Westinghouse's Memorial

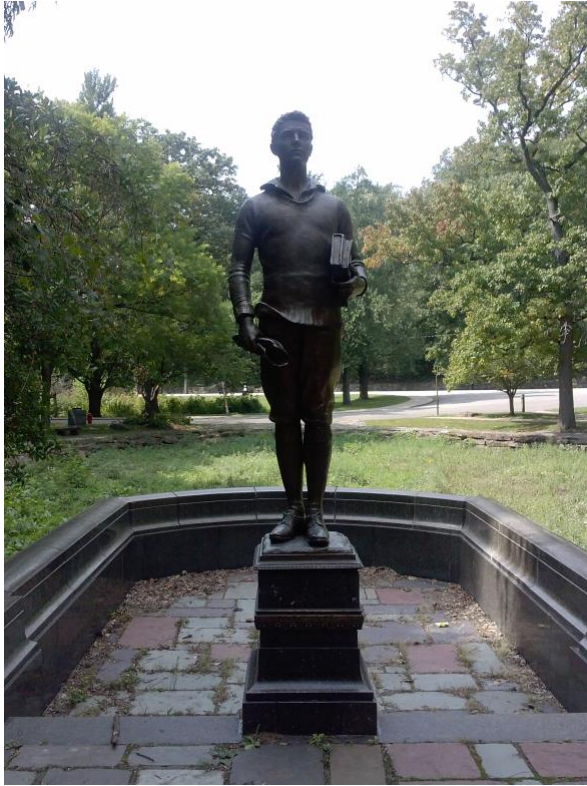
I recently conducted a research project in which I investigated the rhetorical significance of the Westinghouse Memorial to the city of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

The Westinghouse Memorial is likely familiar to all Pittsburgh park enthusiasts. The monument is nestled within Schenley Park in Pittsburgh's Oakland neighborhood and honors George Westinghouse, an industrial icon of the city. Westinghouse was an engineer responsible for pivotal advancements in the fields of electricity and transportation and his memorial is a charming natural spectacle for Pittsburghers to admire as they amble through the park. Since its unveiling in 1930, the monument has faithfully stood for almost a century, though its upkeep during that time has been markedly less consistent. After falling into disrepair, it was the subject of a \$2.7 million restoration effort in 2016, and its continued beauty today is largely a result of that effort. However, though the restoration aimed to restore the memorial to the original glory of its unveiling, in many ways, it also reflected just how much the city has changed since 1930.

The Westinghouse Memorial consists of landscaping, architectural, and sculpted elements. Foliage is planted alongside two side paths leading to a lily pond surrounded by a Norwegian granite path and Phipps Run stream. At the front of the lily pond are three panels standing in a semicircle faced by a bronze statue of a boy standing on a pedestal which itself stands on a granite peninsula jutting into the pond. A small granite wall stands on the perimeter of the peninsula, intended to make the boy appear as though he is standing at the prow of a boat. Behind the boy is a granite bench. The statue of the boy, which is formally titled *The Spirit of American Youth*, marvels at each of Westinghouse's industrial achievements as depicted on the two side panels in front of him, explained on plaques underneath. The center panel features a medallion sculpture of Westinghouse, flanked by a mechanic on one side and an engineer on the other. Underneath these figures is an inscription identifying them as well as a plaque depicting an engraving of the first air brake system, invented by the industrial giant himself.



Westinghouse Memorial and Pond, Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy, 2020,
<https://www.pittsburghparks.org/projects/westinghouse-memorial>



Spirit of American Youth Sculpture, September 2014

Link to Image File https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7c/George_Westinghouse_Memorial2.jpg

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When I visit the memorial, I am struck by how open it feels. A path surrounds the entire monument, allowing me to view it from the sides, back, and front. From all these angles, I can also see different parts of the city, from Carnegie Mellon University's campus, to the Oakland neighborhood of Pittsburgh, and then back again to the wilderness of the park. I consider this open experience of space as a fundamental component of the memorial's appeal, and so I was initially surprised to learn that this was a new feature of the restoration. When it was first constructed, the Westinghouse Memorial instead emphasized seclusion and separateness from the city, featuring weeping willow trees and fewer, more prescriptive paths. The space was intended to feel like an oasis apart from the urban environment rather than as an integrated part of the entire city.

After learning more about scholarship on the rhetoric of memory places generally, and about the history of the memorial specifically, I discovered that these two distinctive experiences of space were curated with a specific purpose in mind. The memorial makes an appeal for how Pittsburgh's identity should be conceived, and its identity in 1930 was very different from its identity in 2016. Considering the differences in its design and reception at both these times has given me a glimpse into the memorial's place in Pittsburgh's evolving rhetorical narrative.

In the early twentieth century, Pittsburgh was an industrial powerhouse; a leader in the global charge towards the progress and advancement of civilization. The city's industry was therefore a crucial component of its identity, and industrial icons such as Westinghouse were considered paradigms of this "Workshop of the World" ethos. However, the industry that was so tightly bound to the identity and pride of the city also had a downside. Pittsburgh's thriving steel mills caused environmental devastation and appalling living conditions for mill-workers. The city was so polluted that it was almost constantly coated in a layer of smog and smoke. Thus, city boosters of the early twentieth century had their rhetorical work cut out for them. A favorable conception of the city depended on a favorable conception of its industry, which required that industry be associated with progress and advancement, and not with contamination and decay. As a celebration of industry within a natural setting, the Westinghouse Memorial attempted to respond to this challenge.

In 1930, the memorial was secluded from the rest of the contaminated city. Paths were constructed so that visitors to the site had to approach from the side and weeping willow trees hid everything outside the immediate vicinity. The border between the beauty and tranquility of the park and the pollution and chaos of the city was sharply drawn. Visitors were meant to feel peaceful within and connected to the natural setting. However, even despite its strategic separation from urban environment, the memorial was still above all a celebration of industry. The iconography of the monument is unquestionably industrial, featuring a mechanic, an engineer, descriptions of industrial advancements, and of course: the industrial giant himself, George Westinghouse. The bronze of the sculptures was intended to change its appearance over time as it interacted with the smoke of the city, a cautious connection between the beauty of the memorial and Pittsburgh's industry. The memorial was envisioned to both celebrate industry's association with progress (by hailing Westinghouse and his accomplishments) and downplay industry's association with contamination and decay (by connecting industry with the beauty and harmony of nature).



"Westinghouse Memorial, Schenley Park."1930 George Westinghouse Museum Collection. Detre Library & Archives, Heinz History Center.

Image Link <https://historicpittsburgh.org/islandora/object/pitt:20170323-hpichswp-0147>



Westinghouse, flanked by a mechanic and engineer, with the first air brake system depicted underneath. October, 2014.

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However, by the late twentieth century to today, Pittsburgh's claim to fame is no longer its industrial prowess. The city's economy has shifted to post-industrial, relying largely on its educational, cultural, financial, and medical sectors rather than on its industry. Pittsburgh, like many other post-industrial cities, has begun to remake itself to into a "creative" and "livable" city, in order to attract businesses, students, professionals, and tourists. Its treatment of the icons of its industrial past has shifted to fit this new lens as well. George Westinghouse has transformed from captain of industry to beacon of creativity in descriptions of his memorial, whose restoration in 2016 provides a concrete manifestation of Pittsburgh's shift in identity.



On-site plaque marking the 2016 restoration. Photo Credit: Alicia Furlan, Pittsburgh PA, July 2020.

In their efforts to attract the outside world, post-industrial cities increasingly focus on visual appeals. Attractive aspects of the cities are rhetorically framed in specific ways in order to communicate creativity, sustainability, internationalism, and livability: all values of their target audience. Indeed, the Westinghouse Memorial, as a visually attractive component of Pittsburgh, was restored in 2016 with this in mind. Featuring vegetation less overbearing than the weeping willows of 1930 and the addition of new paths and new angles from which it can be viewed, the memorial today provides a more open feeling of space. This openness is part of the Pittsburgh Park's Conservancy's [Master Plan](#), the goal of which is to “expand Pittsburgh’s character as a green city” by integrating its built environment with its parks.

In keeping with this “green city” ideal, the memorial’s restoration includes “eco-friendly halo lighting” that is highlighted in press coverage of the memorial. Also emphasized in descriptions of the restoration are new depictions of George Westinghouse, which align the giant with ideals of creativity rather than of industrial progress. Where [comments](#) at the memorial’s unveiling in 1930 celebrated Westinghouse as “one of the great benefactors of mankind” who “brightened the pathway and lightened the burden of God's children as they toiled,” contemporary descriptions of the memorial explain how “The Westinghouse legacy continues to inspire and encourage us to *challenge the norms* [emphasis mine]” In an online magazine article about the restoration, a Westinghouse employee is [quoted](#) as praising Westinghouse’s “spirit of innovation.” Just as Westinghouse is celebrated in 2016 for his creative rather than industrial spirit, Pittsburgh too is a city transformed. The history of the city and of its industry have been repackaged and reframed to fit a new narrative, and nowhere more prominently than in spaces which have been earmarked as official sites of public memory, such as the Westinghouse Memorial.

Whether associated with progress or creativity, Pittsburgh's industry has always featured prominently in official narratives of the city's identity. Ironically however, these narratives often disregard or actively harm the city's actual industry workers. In the early twentieth century, efforts to downplay industry's association with pollution and contamination ultimately failed. Since any remedy for these conditions would have required civic support, which city boosters failed to incite, mill workers were forced to endure the smoky city without reprieve for years following the memorial's construction. Essentially, the goal of city boosters at the time was to inspire affection for and pride in a contaminated city that many disillusioned industry workers must have felt was beyond repair. Efforts such as the Westinghouse Memorial to achieve this goal ultimately failed because they could not resonate with the city's workers. The memorial pushed a narrative that equated George Westinghouse with the very spirit of Pittsburgh, a narrative that only circulated in elite circles. Furthermore, though the memorial harnessed the natural beauty of Schenley Park, working class Pittsburghers often couldn't access parks both because they were [closer to the richer neighborhoods](#) of the city and required hours of leisure time that were the exclusive purview of the wealthy.

The fate of working class Pittsburgh is no better served by the creative, sustainable, livable narrative of the twenty-first century than it was by the industrial powerhouse narrative of the twentieth. As cities invest in their cultural, educational, medical, and business sectors, they necessarily disinvest in the industrial sectors that kept food on the tables of countless now impoverished Pittsburghers. The real harm of this new sales pitch is that in reframing the city's industrial past, it renders invisible the truths of the present. Though the Westinghouse Memorial ostensibly still celebrates the industry of the city, the actual character of this industry is hidden as industry workers are driven from their jobs by disinvestment and from their homes by wealthier newcomers. The notion and appearance of livability and sustainability hides the reality of poor air quality and continued contaminated living conditions for many in the city. The fact that the creative, livable city ideal privileges some stories above others matters a great deal. If the continued plight of the working class and the environment has no place in Pittsburgh's new narrative, then they can never improve.

As one of the aforementioned park enthusiasts of Pittsburgh, I have walked by the Westinghouse Memorial several times. Before researching it further however, I would have had difficulty imagining the precision and intentionality that undercut its design and framing. I love that I can now retrospectively reflect on how the message of the space has been conveyed to me so many times before without my awareness. I have experienced the expansive and open space, walked around the paths of the memorial, and examined a celebration of an inspiring and innovative figure in Pittsburgh's history. Whether I knew it or not, my overall impression of the city was affected by the space, and in a specifically curated way. What has been truly fascinating to me over the course of my research is how contingent this impression of mine is and how easily it could have been different if I had been instead viewing the memorial in 1930, shielded from a polluted city by the impenetrable canopy of a weeping willow.



My own view of the front of the memorial as I walk by in the summer. Photo credit: Alicia Furlan, Pittsburgh, PA
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