

IAF SPACE EDUCATION AND OUTREACH SYMPOSIUM (E1)
Space for All: Decolonial Practices in Space (2)

Author: Mr. Nabil Al-Kinani
United Kingdom, place@nabilalkinani.com

DECOLONISING WEMBLEY: CONTESTING COMMEMORATIVE TOPONYMS AND IMPERIAL
LEGACIES

Abstract

The discourse of decolonisation has increasingly permeated the urban fabric of cities with colonial pasts, prompting a critical reevaluation of the symbols, narratives, and names that define their spaces. In the case of Wembley Park, a site of significant cultural and historical import, the imperative to decolonise becomes apparent through its commemorative toponyms, which are intrinsically linked to Britain's imperial events, symbols, and histories. This paper explores the complexities and challenges inherent in the process of decolonising Wembley, with a focus on the implications of retaining toponyms derived from the 1924 British Empire Exhibition—a pivotal yet contentious event celebrated for its technological and cultural advancements but critiqued for its embodiment of imperialistic and colonial ideologies.

The naming of streets, buildings, and open spaces within Wembley Park serves as an enduring reminder of an era marked by colonial dominance and exploitation. These toponyms, while ostensibly a nod to heritage, perpetuate a legacy of imperialism that is at odds with the increasingly diverse and multicultural identity of the London Borough of Brent. The paper argues that such commemorative naming practices not only sustain a form of imperial nostalgia but also contribute to a historical amnesia about the colonial atrocities associated with the British Empire.

Drawing on postcolonial theory and urban studies, the analysis presented in this paper underscores the tension between the desire to honour historical events and the need to acknowledge and rectify past injustices. It examines the ethical considerations of urban redevelopment when intertwined with colonial history and highlights the need for a more inclusive and critical approach to commemoration—one that recognises the multiplicity of narratives and the agency of previously marginalised communities.

Furthermore, the paper proposes a framework for decolonising urban spaces by reassessing the commemorative landscape of Wembley Park. It advocates for the reimagining of toponyms to reflect a shared and equitable history that fosters reconciliation and healing. Through community engagement and historical rectification, the paper envisions a decolonised Wembley that not only acknowledges the pain of its imperial past but also celebrates the rich tapestry of its present and future inhabitants.

In conclusion, this paper calls for a radical transformation of Wembley's commemorative toponyms as a necessary step towards decolonising the space. It underscores the urgency of replacing imperial nostalgia with a reflective and just urban landscape that honours the complexities of history without glorifying its oppressive aspects.