

Memorial Museums

*The
Global
Rush
to
Commemorate
Atrocities*

Paul Williams



Oxford • New York

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English edition
First published in 2007 by
Berg
Editorial offices:
First Floor, Angel Court, 81 St Clements Street, Oxford OX4 1AW, UK
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA

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Berg is the imprint of Oxford International Publishers Ltd.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Williams, Paul Harvey

Memorial museums : the global rush to commemorate
atrocities / Paul Williams. — English ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-84520-488-4 (hbk.)

ISBN-10: 1-84520-488-3 (hbk.)

ISBN-13: 978-1-84520-489-1 (pbk.)

ISBN-10: 1-84520-489-1 (pbk.)

1. Atrocities—Museums. 2. Terrorism—Museums. 3.
Historical museums. 4. Museum technique. I. Title.

D2.5.W55 2007

907.5—dc22

2007039580

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 84520 488 4 (Cloth)

978 1 84520 489 1 (Paper)

Typeset by Avocet Typeset, Chilton, Aylesbury, Bucks
Printed in Great Britain by the MPG Books Group, Bodmin and King's Lynn

www.bergpublishers.com

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4 ROCKS AND HARD PLACES: LOCATION AND SPATIALITY IN MEMORIAL MUSEUMS

ON BEING THERE

The importance of space and spatial effects in the museum experience is a topic routinely neglected within museum studies. Perhaps because the field is partially descended from art history, it has inherited a strain of decontextualized analysis more interested in the field of meaning generated by artifacts than that of the larger institution. Where space is analyzed, it is chiefly in terms of architecture and the aesthetic relation between gallery space and artworks.¹ Where non-art museums are considered, their analysis is generally limited to issues surrounding the relative disposition of exhibition space granted to topics. The single critic's object-focused walk-through exhibition analysis has remained, in the past couple of decades, the mainstay of museum criticism. However, such accounts are at odds with visitors' experiences, where the encounter with the physical dimensions of any site, and with other people, is not just physically unavoidable but wholly integral. As Sharon Macdonald avers, we still "need to move towards further elaboration of ways in which museums are unlike texts."² In line with this thinking, this chapter explores the social, cultural, and psychological dimensions of memorial museums' spatial effects.

Academic neglect of this theme is surprising, given that museums are partly distinguished from other forms of historical representation by their "sited-ness"; by the nonverbal nature of their messages that resides not just in material culture, but also in the museum's particularly visible sense of spatial orchestration. As visitors move through museums, they gain meaning as much from the size and character of spaces, the relation between them and the activities they support, as the objects and texts they contain. The museum is a cultural project in which, as John Urry puts it, "spaces, histories and social activities are being materially and symbolically remade."³ Centrality and marginalization are related through the relative attribution of space. Accordingly, visitors create "imaginary geographies" in which social divisions and cultural classifications are expressed using spatial metaphors or descriptive spatial divisions.⁴ Those at the forefront of the concept design of new memorials and museums are consciously aware of the way museums operate in two spatial registers: foremost, they are concrete objects in space intended to serve practical purposes; on a secondary level, physical design elements are used to shape the construction of visitors' mental images of the topic to which they are dedicated.

Over the past twenty years, "museumification" has become a prevalent strategy for transforming urban (and occasionally rural) space. The age of the memorial museum

has coincided with the tactic among urban planners of establishing museological “event spaces” in which historical narratives are given an aesthetic architectural form. These projects share much with Henri Lefebvre’s idea of “representational space.” Unlike “representations of space” (such as those intellectually conceived by urban planners and technocrats) or the spatial practices of everyday life (the relation between daily routine and the paths and routes that link and separate work, leisure, and private life), “representational spaces” are “heavily loaded, deeply symbolic and embedded culturally, not necessarily entailing conscious awareness. [They] call on shared experiences and interpretations at a profound level ... representational spaces are the loci of meaning in a culture.”⁵ Representational spaces are often based on images and symbols that overlay physical space, making symbolic use of its objects.⁶ Town center war memorials built around a bridge, clock, gate, bell tower, walkway, or park are archetypal example of such a space. Increasingly, however, we also see destructive histories forming the basis for the reinvention of space, from “Parque de la Memoria” on the coastal fringe of the Rio de la Plata near Buenos Aires, to the “Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe” in Berlin, to “Statue Park” in Budapest, to the “Park of Arts Museon” in Moscow, to New York’s forthcoming World Trade Center Memorial, among others. Each space is designed to accommodate public congregation, providing a tangible, physical hub for social reconciliation. These spaces bring historical commemoration into regularly used outdoor social spaces to make them an accessible part of everyday life. For, as Vito Acconci has succinctly put it, “A museum is a public place, but only for those who choose to be a museum public.”⁷ In most cases, the size and centrality of these squares and parks makes them, compared to cloistered indoor spaces, difficult to overlook.

While observable in many places, it is Berlin that serves as a prime example of a city “reorganizing itself as a permanent exhibition of its own ambitions.”⁸ Public squares and monuments from the Kaiserreich, the Third Reich, the German Democratic Republic, and the reunification era fill the city. While much writing about the spatial location of monuments, memorials, and history museums describes them as places where collective memory is locally rooted, at the same time, concrete representations of historical calamities are increasingly being promoted as a key drawcard for tourists. It might appear that the two goals – to serve both local commemoration and tourist novelty – can only mean tension. More obscure manifestations of local histories may not provide the spectacle required of a tourist attraction. Consider, for example, how local memory is manifest in Gunter Demnig’s *Stolpersteine* (stumbling stones). Since 1997 he has embedded in the pavement 30,000 small brass plaques bearing the names of Jews outside houses in German cities where they lived before the Holocaust. This project includes involving local people in researching and carrying out the installation, street by street, and sometimes amid neighborhood hostility; they have been banned by the Munich City Council on the grounds that the project will become a focus for neo-Nazis.⁹ (The *Stolpersteine* are reminiscent of “Sarajevo roses” – the form of memorialization practiced in Sarajevo where residents have painted the pockmarks made by mortar splashes on the streets

with blood red resin, marking the places underfoot where someone was killed). By contrast, spectacular monuments designed to attract the tourist gaze risk forgoing relevance in everyday city life. There is already discussion, for instance, that the visually stunning Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe may soon become an empty maze, used mainly as a children’s playground.¹⁰ Similarly, reflecting on the glut of First World War monuments in 1930s’ Europe, novelist Robert Musil wrote:

The most striking feature of monuments is that you do not notice them. There is nothing in the world as invisible as a monument. Doubtless they have been erected to be seen – even to attract attention; yet at the same time something has impregnated them against attention. Like a drop of water on an oilskin, attention runs down them without stopping for a moment.¹¹

We might speculate whether the contemporary boom in memorial sculptures and museums may one day inspire a similar lament. For now, we should observe how pressing appeals to remember are closely tied to ambitious built structures with a physical presence in the world. As Deyan Sudjic has written, “architecture matters because it lasts, of course. It matters because it is big, and it shapes the landscape of our everyday lives. But beyond that, it also matters because, more than any other cultural form, it is a means of setting the historical record straight.”¹² It appears that faith in urban architecture as a redemptive social and historical force has emerged as a key defining belief of our zeitgeist.

Given the site-specific nature of most memorial museums, an appreciation of their larger geographic location is vital (I consider this another aspect of my analysis that productively deviates from standard museological critique). Factors such as the physical size and grandeur of the institution, the prominence and accessibility of its location, and the proximity of other city features (either related or dissimilar) determines the “geographic reach” of the historic event, which in turn influences the degree to which it infiltrates public consciousness. The visibility of memorial museums (alongside other reminders like statues, plaques, street signs, and honored buildings or parks) critically affects the “scaling of public memory” – that is, the way an incident’s recollection is prompted as people physically move through cities, regions, and nations.¹³ We might expect it to follow, then, that events represented by memorial museums situated in rural or remote locations or hidden in obscure urban nooks are more likely to be overlooked. Alternatively, however (as the tradition of the pilgrimage suggests) it may be that the commitment involved in traveling to and finding more obscure sites heightens the significance of the visit. It can also contribute to the institution’s own sense of interpretive drama, in that its clandestine or remote location can help express the nature of the misdeed. Hence, the visibility and geographical proximity of memorial museums has implications for who goes, the expectations with which they arrive, and the museum’s own dramatization. I will next move through a series of themes – authenticity, absence, hybridity, and minimalism – to explore the physical qualities of actual cases. The latter part of this chapter will then go inside the walls of the memorial museum to consider internal spatial dynamics.

THE AUTHENTICITY DILEMMA

As different communities and nations attempt to cope with the continued unease and loss associated with mass violence, the damaged landscapes associated with it are increasingly being claimed as hallowed ground. Yet the relationship between the event-location of the catastrophe and the site of a memorial or museum can be unreliable or insecure. To be sure, in many cases, the site may be obvious and uncontested, as locals easily recognize and vouch for its historical accuracy: *this* building was used for *this* purpose; *these* people were killed *here*. Historic locations may have existed without much attention for years before political and economic conditions – and the will of an individual, group, or government – made it possible to be framed as “unearthed” or “exposed.” Where the site is newly claimed by a certain group or government to have been “discovered,” it has more often become the subject of contest. While sites are not often entirely forgotten by those in the locality of a heinous act, the decision to exhume it by certain people at a particular time denotes a political intervention as much as an archaeological unveiling.

Geographical authenticity becomes particularly problematic in relation to events situated in more remote or “deeper” history. At Senegal’s Gorée Island Memorial Museum, visitors pass through the old building’s dungeons to peer out its famous red-washed “door of no return,” the final threshold to the Atlantic Ocean. Museum guides and common wisdom equally hold that the building and its aperture to the ocean served as the main departure point for 15 to 20 million Africans sold into slavery between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. Yet Gorée Island’s historical role has recently been critically questioned. Historians have challenged that departing slaves likely never walked through the door at all, since Gorée was one of hundreds of slave posts dotting Africa’s west coast, from modern-day Senegal south to Angola. They claim that those slaves who did pass through the island (at least 26,000 were recorded) were actually loaded onto boats at a beach about 300 meters away,¹⁴ and that most sold into slavery in the Senegal region would have departed from thriving slave depots at the mouths of the Senegal River to the north and the Gambia River to the south.¹⁵ Further, Philip D. Curtin has challenged the idea that the dungeons of the elegant mansion ever housed anyone except perhaps the resident merchant’s own slaves.¹⁶ Despite these contentions, others counter that the door dramatically communicates the idea of stepping into the abyss and helps to create an emotional shrine to the slave trade. “For me, it’s a false debate,” says Hamady Bocoum, an anthropologist at Université Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar. “Every African village has the right to develop a memory of slavery.” Gorée Island head curator Joseph N’Diaye concurs that “even if only ten slaves left through Gorée, they would deserve to be remembered.”¹⁷ Exactly, say critics: so why exaggerate? This disagreement shows how interpretive effect remains tethered to historical accuracy. For most visitors, a historic site must possess more than a poetic or allegorical effect if it is to win their emotional and psychological investment. Indeed, it seems unlikely that if it was well known that “only ten” slaves had passed through Gorée, the island would have the kind of

symbolic importance that has made it a significant tourist site, and a mandatory stopping point recently for figureheads such as Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Pope John Paul II, and Nelson Mandela.

Clinton’s 1998 tour and speech at Gorée Island was not the only time that year he became unwittingly connected to a controversy over memorial museum authenticity. His trip only days before to Rwanda coincided with an early attempt to construct a genocide memorial in Kigali. Clinton was asked by the Rwandan government to lay a wreath at a memorial erected at the city airport in anticipation of his visit. A white concrete structure had been purpose built within the airport compound to enable a secure and convenient ceremony. It was planned that some victims’ human remains along with machetes, knives, picks, axes, and clubs would be displayed. Then-President Pasteur Bizimungu and Vice President Paul Kagame were to greet him, with Rwandan children lining the runway. When an American government official refused the request, stating that agreed-on plans did not include a memorial, the Rwandan government and groups representing survivors were reportedly bewildered and disappointed. An obvious concern that prevented the event was security (it was at Kigali airport that on April 6, 1994 Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana was due to land after returning from peace talks with Uganda-based Tutsi rebels. His plane was shot down minutes before landing, and the mass killing began within hours). However, there was also a question of commemorative ethics: the Rwanda News Agency reported that Clinton’s aides had told Kigali officials that he believed its hasty construction and its location trivialized the genocide.¹⁸ Indeed, in a country filled with genuine sites marking massacres, the airport was a rare exception. In this case, the memorial’s authenticity was interpreted, from the American diplomatic perspective, as being based in its physical appearance and location, rather than the desires of the constituency attached to it.

The perceived authenticity of a historic site is greatly enhanced when it contains tangible proof of the event *in place*. Given their sacred qualities and the sense of finality they provide an event, graves form a forceful basis for a memorial museum’s location. The Nanjing Massacre Memorial Museum, for instance, was built in the west of the city over a shallow pond that once formed a mass grave for hundreds of bodies. Photographs of this grave appear in the museum (the many others like it throughout China are known as *wan ren keng* – “pit of ten thousand corpses”), and some of the skeletal remains are displayed within a glass chamber. In places like Argentina, Chile, Cambodia, and the Balkans where death was hidden, graves stand as visual evidence of the scale of killing. As Allen Feldman has observed, “undiscovered graves – literally the emblems of surplus sacrificial history – actually constitute the moral geography of many postviolence nation-states.”¹⁹ Since their discovery across scattered sites provides no obvious central location, the question of where to rebury is loaded with import. The mutilated and tortured remains of those executed by Chile’s military government after the 1973 coup were taken to Chile’s National Cemetery “Patio 29” and buried in graves marked with small metal crosses with “NN” (*no nombre*) painted on them. In 1982, in an attempt to cover up some of their

most egregious violent excesses, the military government disinterred hundreds of bodies and disposed of them in unknown locales, and reportedly ground the bones into chicken feed. After the return of the civilian government a decade later, the remains of those that had not disappeared were found in this plot, and were identified and returned to their families with the help of forensic specialists. The bodies were then usually relocated to the crypts in the memorial wall at the opposite end of the cemetery.²⁰ Although they moved a short distance, the act of exercising control over their physical location was vital for families. An analogous example involves the way families of 9/11 victims have sought that the retrieval of human remains discovered at Fresh Kills Landfill be re-interred in a private viewing chamber at the forthcoming World Trade Center Memorial. Such cases suggest that memorial complexes can provide the valuable function of providing a burial site in situations where few suitable options otherwise exist. Their reburial in a public memorial space reflects a desire that the unnatural and historically significant nature of their deaths is socially recognized.

ABSENCE AND INVISIBILITY

Few events have engendered such fascination with themes of architectural absence and replacement as 9/11. Given few other tangible focal points, the former World Trade Center site has become a screen against which Americans' hopes and anxieties have been reflected. The coming to terms with human loss was reflected in the emotional ways people spoke about the buildings: there was a "hole in the skyline"; the weight that "anchored downtown" was "missing." Architects (normally behind-the-scenes figures) competing to design its replacement were suddenly awarded the mantle of public leaders. "Build them in their exact image" said many. "Even taller!" cheered others. In *Sixteen Acres*, Philip Nobel posits that this collective craving for a new architectural symbol reflects a pre-9/11 need for media-friendly images rather than any genuine engagement with the complexities of a post-9/11 world: "In tapping the sensibilities of the day before to make sense of the aftermath, it became clear what every effort shared: a culture of surfaces had left its artists poorly equipped for depth."²¹ In this line of reasoning, it is unsurprising then, that the most popular response to the event to date has been the "Tribute in Light" memorial that, for 9/11 anniversaries, has used eighty-eight searchlights to recreate the shape of the two vertical columns (Fig. 4.1). The project was initially called "Towers of Light"; it was renamed to shift the focus away from the memory of the buildings.²² The renaming mattered little. New Yorkers largely made sense of this human event through the lens of the city skyline; through the physical space defined by destruction and replacement. The beams of light have acted as a placeholder for a city awaiting a concrete replacement.

A vivid contrast to this hyper-real, technology-dependent, media-saturated form of commemoration can be found in Russia's Perm-36 Memorial Museum. Its location at the western edge of the Urals requires a four-hour drive along a bad road from the austere city of Perm. The journey ably demonstrates the severance of the gulag system

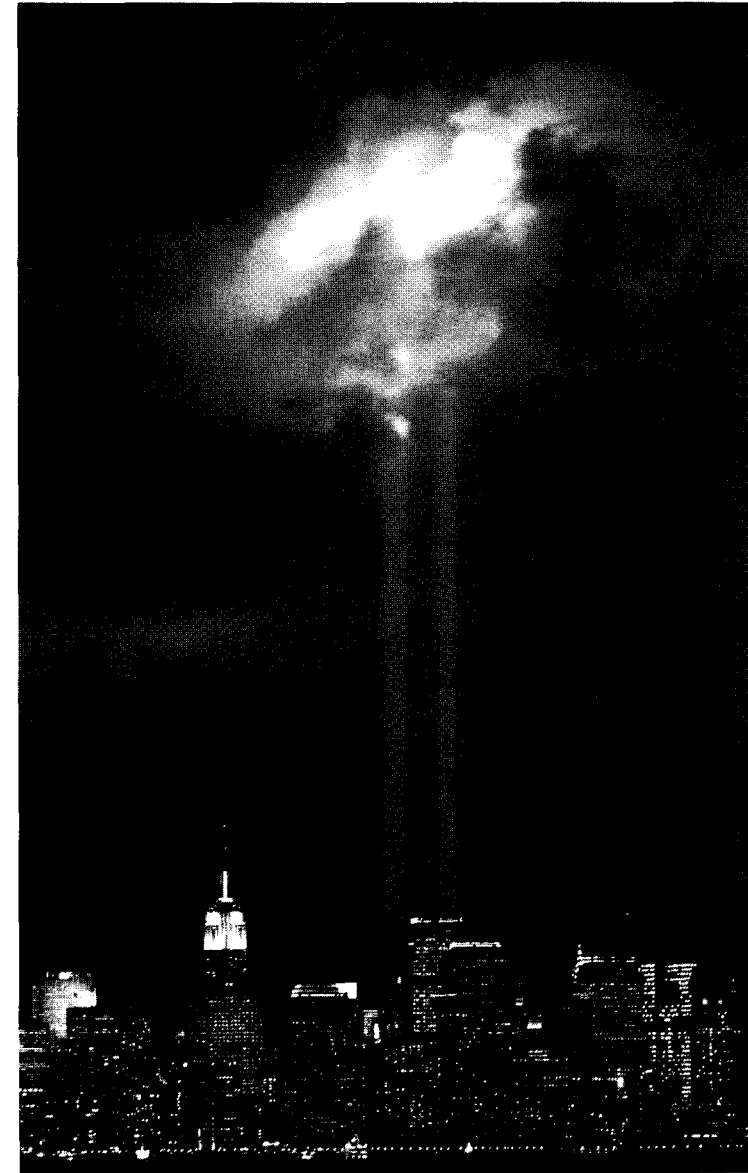


Fig. 4.1. "Tribute in Light." Copyright public domain, U.S. government.

from everyday Russian city life. Watchtowers, barbed wire, and electric fencing surround the low, often snowed-in dull wooden buildings (Fig. 4.2). The idea of prisoners laboring in such isolation (in this case, felling trees initially to build their own barracks, and then floating the timber down the Chusovaya and Kama rivers to the Volga) accentuates both the soul-destroying nature of the work and its enormous waste of money and talent.²³ It is poignant then that when a group of acquaintances

(including camp survivors and their children) began Perm-36's restoration project during the late 1980s' glasnost period, their first task was to work on those same wood-cutting machines to produce replacement boards for the derelict buildings. It is notable that neither Perm-36 nor the Solovetskii Concentration Camp Memorial near the White Sea (another notable gulag memorial) was an initiative of the state. Both suffer not just from insufficient funding, but also from cultural and political marginality. While on a working visit to Norilsk, one of the most harsh and punishing points of the gulag system, President Vladimir Putin recently laid flowers in honor of Stalin's victims in front of a plaque and cross installed in 1990. While this may have ordinarily been a more widely noted gesture, on Nanci Adler's reckoning it is the physical inaccessibility of gulag memorials that allows current state officials to contain the social reverberation that official recognition of the era might bring. (City-based Communist Party memorial tours are available, but are well beyond the means of most Russians: for US\$700 one can tour Stalin's Second World War bunker, while Moscow's KGB Museum at the infamous Lubyanka Prison is open only for prearranged tours at US\$60 per person.)²⁴ As long as efforts toward promoting official memory remain limited to isolated events and places (or affluent budgets) they will presumably remain outside mainstream Russian cultural life.²⁵

By making mapping its central interpretive strategy, District Six Museum in Cape Town produces a spatial sense of memory. Its activities suggest geography in its most

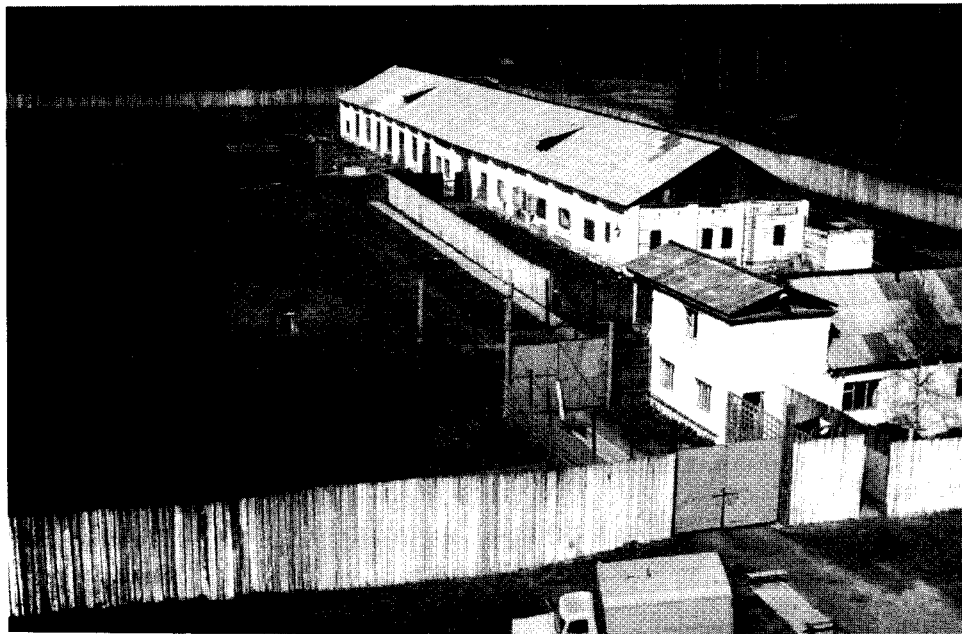


Fig. 4.2. Aerial view of Perm-36 Gulag Museum. Copyright Perm-36 Gulag Museum. Used with permission.

literal form ("geo-graphy" as "earth-writing"). Mapping, which orders and controls terrain, has an obvious relation to the spatial practices of apartheid. Housed in a church (one of the few structures remaining from the former district) the museum exists in a recursive relationship with the locality where it stands (Fig. 4.3). A panoramic photograph of the old skyline extends along one wall, allowing people to visualize the way the church once existed within it, while the floor features a large laminated street-map that recreates the former layout of District Six. Former residents use marker pens to draw houses and buildings, and write names, comments, and descriptions around the streets. The museum acts as a physical synecdoche where ex-locals and expatriates can once again "walk the neighborhood." An aspect rarely noted by those describing this institution is the experience of moving through the neighborhood to arrive at the museum. It may be that visitors deliberately overlook the existing vicinity in order to conjure the lost neighborhood more effectively. Since the museum produces a mnemonic model of a space outside that no longer exists, it can hardly avoid the trap of nostalgia (even – or especially – for tourists who never knew the original neighborhood). This effect recalls Jean Baudrillard's concept of *simulacra*; "copies of things that no longer have an original, or never had one to begin with."²⁶ While the sense that earlier generations experienced a richer, more vivacious sense of community is a key tenet of nostalgia generally, this effect might be amplified in this situation where the neighborhood is remembered as one that existed in



Fig. 4.3. District Six Apartheid Museum. Copyright District Six Apartheid Museum. Used with permission.

multicultural harmony, as the contrariety of apartheid.²⁷ The museum, like any dedicated to a past community, risks transforming the district into myth, thereby removing from memory the violence, overcrowding, and poverty that it was also marked by. Indeed, some critics have noted ambivalence about the map motif that covers the floor, arguing that it reifies the memory of the space, setting District Six in stone.²⁸ It may be that the museum represents less some longstanding comradely *organic* community, and instead has created a new *moral* community mobilized by the condemnation of apartheid.²⁹

While the theme of physically overlaid histories is given a figurative form at District Six, it is one applicable to cities generally. We glimpse in the palimpsest of urban architecture the idea of the city as text, as it has been written and overwritten by successive waves of capital speculation, political ideology, and violent conflict.³⁰ As M. Christine Boyer has written, “to read across and through different layers and strata of the city requires [that] spectators establish a constant play between surface and deep structured forms, between purely visible and intuitive or evocative illusions.”³¹ That is, history is not simply “readable” in the city’s built form, but instead exists in the interplay between concrete representations and pasts that reside in the imagination. For every notorious place brought to light as the location for a memorial museum, there are obviously a great many more that have slipped into the recesses of little recounted history. Thousands of years of European conflicts, for instance, have been inevitably disproportionately overlaid with the newly scarred landscapes and memorials of those of the last one hundred. The Armenian Genocide Memorial and Museum at “Swallow Castle” in Tsitsernakaberd, for instance, sits on the site of an Iron Age fortress, the above-ground traces of which have now all but vanished. It is intriguing to consider those little-documented and near-invisible structures that have been abandoned and almost forgotten, or have reverted back to having an everyday use. At present, a car park, a Chinese restaurant, and a mini mall cover arguably the world’s most famous non-site: Berlin’s Führerbunker. This location is interesting precisely because it is so conspicuously anonymous; government and city authorities have ensured that the ground above it remains pointedly generic in its use in order to disallow it becoming a neo-Nazi shrine. The unearthing of the Nazi Party organization has instead come about through an underground archaeology project, the nearby “Topography of Terror.” The open-air site, which has almost no artifacts or historical recreations, instead consists simply of excavated cells, affixed to which are photographs and documents related to Nazi leadership activities. Initially created as a temporary exhibition in 1987, the site is a product of years of citizen activism, with support from some left-leaning politicians, historians, and city elites.³² As the headquarters and prisons of the former Gestapo, SS, and Reich Security Service, the site is less tied to Hitler’s cult. Although it added a documentation center in 1997, the site remains quite ambiguous, neither a ruin, nor a memorial park, nor a fully functioning museum. It is simply a place of perpetrators, and remains an “open wound” that allows visitors to ideologically and emotionally make of it what they will.³³

The excavation of the remnants of cells led to a rather less productive outcome in the early 1990s in Nagasaki. Builders at the Peace Park commemorating the city’s atomic bomb destruction discovered the foundations of a prison where Korean and Chinese slave-laborers had died during the Second World War. A group of Nagasaki citizens argued that the site should be preserved to demonstrate a contrasting view of Japanese conduct during the War than the martyrs-for-peace theme portrayed in the Peace Park. However, conservative groups (with the support of city counselors and the Nagasaki mayor) were able to bury the idea (in this case literally, as the excavated site was covered over and turned into a car park).³⁴ Political interests defeated what could have been an unusually effective manifestation of a complex topic: the moral gray area that clouds any straightforward assignation of offender or victim status in the heat of wartime. The cells might have formed a physical and conceptual layer of interpretation that, like the Topography of Terror, could have been left open as a kind of contemplative space.

A final example on this theme of absence concerns the ten-storey headquarters of Sarajevo’s largest newspaper, *Oslobođenje* (*Liberation*), which was destroyed in the siege of the city in April 1992. Bosnian Serbs, angry with the paper’s reporting and with its ethnically mixed staff, shelled the building relentlessly.³⁵ It remains as it fell: two connected elevator shafts form a kind of turret, while concrete rubble is piled beneath. It has no sign, plaque, or means for physical entry, but instead can only be observed from the street as a monument to destruction. Its status as a memorial has emerged over time. Like Berlin’s Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche, which bears the scars of Allied bombing in 1943, there was, at first, neither the will nor the resources to repair or remove it. It became part of the cityscape, gradually accepted as a symbol of what occurred. The ruins also point to the role city institutions are forced to play in violence. Rather than conceive of cities as backdrops for war, terror, and displacement, urban spatiality is essential to organized political violence, both as organizational apparatuses and as enemy targets. Stephen Graham has observed that since the end of the Cold War, “the informal, ‘asymmetric’ or ‘new’ wars which tend to center on localized struggles over strategic urban sites have become the norm.”³⁶ Structures like the *Oslobođenje* building demonstrate how “contemporary warfare and terror now largely boil down to contests over the spaces, symbols, meanings, support systems or power structures of cities and urban regions.”³⁷ In this instance, the violent silencing of unwanted news reports could scarcely be more symbolically enacted or starkly physically represented.

Despite the symbolic power that sites marked by violence and the resultant destruction can wield, we should be aware of the limitations in relaying histories through single concrete locations. When a historic site is made to stand for some form of historic atrocity, a focus on physical location might mean that we miss much else of what was lost. That is, primary, authentic sites can struggle to communicate the status of nations – such as Cambodia or Rwanda – where the educational system, religious and cultural traditions, economy, social formations, and family structures were also leveled. To some degree (although this may not be always visible) the

stunted economic development, continued sporadic violence, preponderance of war-wounded, and everyday psychic malaise form visible symbols of the impact of war and genocide. These transient, occasional reminders are, in a sense, antithetical to the logic of the museum, which inhabits a zone of seclusion, typically standing outside the flow of daily city life. As enduring witnesses to history they symbolize timelessness; as sacred spaces they take people out of their normal surroundings in order to concentrate their thoughts on more elevated, cerebral ideas. By contrast, the day-to-day living out of traumatic events by unremarkable persons may represent the ultimate kind of invisibility.

HYBRID SITES, IRREGULAR USES

Of the institutional spaces converted into memorial museums, the most common is the former prison. These exist alongside their more frivolous relations – the dozens of entertainment-oriented prison museums, which include Clink Prison in London, Alcatraz in San Francisco, the Bridge of Sighs in Venice, and the Old Melbourne Gaol, to name but a few. Museums that commemorate political prisoners share with these attractions a focus on claustrophobia and harsh conditions, but generally refuse the drama of re-enactment that characterizes such places, instead focusing on contextual information. Tours of the Robben Island Museum, for instance, highlight the “elite” Section B (which contains Nelson Mandela’s cell), and the museum decorates those of others differently to display the contrast in living conditions over the years – from the spartan, single blanket quarters all political prisoners endured until the 1970s, to the addition of beds and newspapers, and even a radio supplied after 1980. The size and physical condition of the cells provides a material and spatial dimension to visitors’ indignation at apartheid injustice. Prison space is made appreciable at the Memorial of the Victims of Communism and Anti-Communist Resistance in Sighet in a different form. Beneath the original watchtower, the prison courtyard features a dozen or more naked sculpted bronze “prisoners” in various kinetic poses (Fig. 4.4). The visually arresting sculpture provides an embodied sense of scale to an otherwise barren, cold prison courtyard. The figures highlight the everyday anxious, wary movements of prisoners. By occupying a courtyard with non-disposable figures, the museum reinforces the permanence of the site’s current interpretation. Its aesthetic historicization aims to nullify the possibility of its re-emergence as an active, violent site.

Knowing life as a political prisoner is obviously a difficult projection for those who never suffered. Once a prohibitive space is made accommodating as a tourist facility, other forms of identification (personal objects, photographs, and recorded testimony) are added to make the suffering of prisoners more readily available, giving the prison greater historical context and emotional texture. In one sense, then, the exhibition space can give voice to the – normally silent – “body in pain” that is central to all forms of violence and trauma. Yet there is something about the aestheticization of the prison-museum space that, in an uncanny way, relates to the psychic disturbance



Fig. 4.4. “Parade of the Sacrificed,” by Aurel Vlad. Copyright the Memorial of the Victims of Communism and Anti-Communist Resistance, Sighet. Used with permission.

associated with incarceration itself.³⁸ As Annie Coombes has observed: “In many ways the structure of the exhibition space itself could be understood as a metonymic representation of traumatic memory. In other words our experience of the space and the display is primarily physical and profoundly disruptive. The threatening implausibility of the relative spatial registers of both cells and objects shakes our confidence in our own judgment.”³⁹

That is, the effect of constructing the imprisonment experience by forcing together alienating and empathetic objects and interpretive devices (that would never have coexisted while it was being used for punishment) may strike us as unnatural in a basic sense. In other words, can we, as visitors, reconcile the private, confined, and unimaginable pain associated with imprisonment and torture with the public historical “lesson” facilitated by curatorial “show-and-tell” techniques?

The prison-museum hybrid reawakens a connection that cultural historians have forged between the two historic entities.⁴⁰ The late eighteenth century saw the development of both the corrective surveillance developed within Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon prison, and the disciplinary self-conduct encouraged by the newly public museum. In *Discipline and Punish*, Michael Foucault describes how the state used prisons to control persons by withdrawing them from the public gaze and by making them aware of their own constant surveillance. Prison architecture, he wrote, is “no

longer built simply to be seen ... but to render visible those who are inside it; in more general terms, an architecture that would operate to transform individuals: to carry the effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them."⁴¹ Developing this insight, Tony Bennett is interested in an associated display of power in those institutions he groups as forming the "exhibitionary complex." These include museums, expositions, fairs, arcades, and department stores, which relocate objects and bodies from enclosed, private spaces into open, public realms. Throngs of visitors in these spaces came to monitor their behavior in response to the glances, gazes, and stares of others out of a wish to view themselves in an ideal image of orderliness and refinement. As the didacticism of perfect, idealized objects was ideally matched by the exemplary behavior of persons in public museums, it was hoped that inferior classes (once allowed in the museum's front doors) might learn, through imitation, proper forms of appearance and comportment.⁴² Prison inmates, of course, provided an allied lesson, through opposite means. Deprived of any objects of value and reduced to "bare life," prisoners were denied a civic identity. They instead provided a warning – generally envisaged by others rather than directly seen – about the perils of vice and immorality. Prisons remind "all who would enter, or even pass by, of the power of confinement to alter the spirit through material representation."⁴³ Museums, by contrast, offered all who entered the opportunity to raise their moral fiber through a rarified form of amusement.

In the contemporary prison-based memorial museum much of this logic is upturned. Visitors do not passively accede to the authority of the state by conceiving inmates as malevolent, as per the normal societal conception, but instead, in cases of political persecution, view them as the blameless victims of a malevolent state. Former inmates are narrated not as cautionary examples but instead as heroic martyrs. At both Robben Island and the Museum of Genocide Victims, Vilnius, where ex-inmates often serve as tour guides, this dynamic is further turned on its head. Unlike the valuable objects spotlighted in conventional museums, artifacts in the prison museum – generally desultory implements marked by want or violence – hardly inspire a sense of personal moral uplift. Instead, museum visitors will typically regulate their bodily comportment through feelings of spatial trepidation and deference to the memory of those who spent time there. In all of these ways, then, the commemorative prison museum speaks to the way that new cultural forces – specifically, the upsurge in the drive to commemorate and interest in sinister tourist attractions – remind us that the origins of prisons and museums were not formed as historical opposites per se, but as negative and positive instruments of governmental power.

Public parks share with museums and prisons a historical function as spaces of nineteenth-century social reform. Parks aimed to achieve "improvement" by immersing citizens in bucolic surrounds – and by bringing recreational behavior into view. They were developed as an antidote to street culture, and nature was seen, in the Romantic tradition, as an expression of divinity. If parks were designed as a refuge from the perils of base humanity – its conflict, squalor, and politics – it is a curious

historical reversal that sees two Eastern European cities creating parks as political graveyards. Budapest's Szoborpark ("Statue Park") opened in 1993 in a field near a highway in the southern part of the city. In 1991 the Cultural Committee of the Budapest Assembly had invited a tender around the question of "what is to be done with the statues?" The winner, architect Ákos Eleőd devised a scheme to be experienced as follows:

The park is arranged in the form of a straight path, from which "figure-of-eight" walkways lead off (so that the wandering visitor will always return to the true path!), around which statues and monuments are displayed. In the centre of the park is a flowerbed in the form of a Soviet Star. Eventually, the path ends abruptly in a brick wall, representing the "dead end" which state socialism represented for Hungary: visitors have no choice but to walk back the way they have previously come.⁴⁴

At Statue Park the sculptures are clustered close together to achieve a superfluity of ideological symbolism (Fig. 4.5). Vilnius's "Grutas Parkas" (also known as "Stalin World") is a similar sculpture garden that opened in 2001 in a wooded park. The tender put forth by the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture in 1998, for the establishment of an exposition of dismantled Soviet sculpture, was won by a local millionaire. Viliumas Malinauskas (who made his fortune canning mushrooms) designed and financed the park. A cattle-car marks the gateway to the numerous statues of Lenin and Stalin, which are surrounded by barbed wired and interspersed with guard towers. The relocation of city sculptures to a Budapest suburban field or a Lithuanian forest park has several effects. It banishes them from their "natural" habitat where they exerted significant ideological power. In doing so, it denies obvious rallying points for leftist political groups. At its time of opening – on April Fool's Day – Grutas Parkas spurred a fierce debate between its supporters and those who saw it as sacrilegious.⁴⁵ The almost comical repetition and proximity of figures within a landscape where they have little function (and risk being grown over) is an uncommonly effective distancing mechanism. Nonetheless, in the future it could also be perceived as a blatant form of reverse-propaganda. For these nations seeking to rebuild affiliations with Central and Western Europe, the parks serve as an expression of a very different brand of civility than that imagined by Victorian social reformists: as political artifacts are insolently intermingled with nature, visitors' sense of sophistication involves appreciating the irony associated with putting the past "out to pasture." Purpose-built political parks have, in these novel examples, become the way that inner cities can again be politically redeemed.

Along with prisons and parks, schools are another category of governmental site that have on occasion been transformed through atrocity. There is obviously a great degree of dissonance where places of killing are those closely associated with learning and virtue. Cambodia's Tuol Sleng was a well-regarded school before becoming a torture and killing center. A technical school campus in Murambi in southern Rwanda has emerged as a key locus for that nation's genocide memorialization. On



Fig. 4.5. Statue Park. Copyright Réthly Ákos, Statue Park, Budapest. Used with permission.

April 25, 1994, some 50,000 Tutsis were squeezed onto the campus where they had been advised to seek refuge. In just over a day virtually everyone gathered there was murdered.⁴⁶ Today the corpses are buried around the grounds in mass graves or lie in the classrooms covered in lime, awaiting burial. As a semi-sanctified space, strongly associated with innocence, the school is pointedly infused with symbolic meaning. We understand schools as semi-autonomous spaces, like museums, where we learn about history – not where it is itself violent enacted.

While we can describe the hybrid nature of museums in prisons, parks and schools within a common historical Victorian social reformist framework, other sites confound any such thematic continuities. Consider, for instance, the “Old Bridge” in Mostar, a historic town in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The twenty-meter-high, thirty-meter-long single-span bridge was built in 1566 by Ottoman architect Mimar Hajrudin, and is included on the UNESCO World Heritage List. After having linked the banks of Mostar for centuries, the Old Bridge was blown up by Croat forces in November 1993. As writer Predrag Matvejevic lamented:

When a bridge is broken, there often remains, on one side or the other, a sort of stump. At first, it seemed to us that it had crumbled entirely with nothing left behind, taking with it a piece of the mountain, the stone towers on either side, lumps of Herzegovina’s soil. We saw later, on both sides, real scars, alive and bleeding.⁴⁷

The celebrated locus for the town’s reconciliation has been the brick-by-brick restoration of the bridge, carried out between 1999 and 2004. Its restoration was lauded by the media for its practical and symbolic value, uniting the Catholic Croats on the west side of town, and Muslim Bosniaks on the east. The labor that went into unifying the ethnically divided city has itself been regarded as a productive force in the reconciliation process. In September 2005 the city decided to add another monument near the bridge. This would be a new symbol of unity, an icon that could be admired by Muslims, Croats, and Bosniaks alike. The eventual choice was quite remarkable: a statue of kung fu legend Bruce Lee! Supported by a €5000 grant from a German organization, the statue, cast in bronze and showing the martial arts master in a defensive fighting pose, has been modeled by a local sculptor and erected in the town square. Critically, Bruce Lee will be facing north, so as not to appear to be defending either side of town. A group of enthusiasts came up with the idea of honoring Bruce Lee in 2003, on the thirtieth anniversary of his death. Veselin Gatalo, leader of the Urban Movement Mostar organization, told Reuters that, “this will be a monument to universal justice that Mostar needs more than any other city I know.”⁴⁸ As Gatalo explains, the late Chinese-American actor represents the virtues of justice, mastery, and honesty – and, critically, he is useful because he is decidedly not Muslim, Catholic, Jewish, or even European.⁴⁹ The basis for this peculiarly post-modern act of commemoration may be the problem of commemorating recent political disaster (where propitiation is key) through a bodily figure. The lack of contextual significance that a Bruce Lee monument possesses may form its own lament, in the way it suggests that few alternatives existed that would not sow renewed resentments in this fragile town.

While in the cases above the idea of taking responsibility for the memory of a contentious event is achieved by concretely locating memory “at home,” this is often near-impossible for refugees, displaced peoples, and members of emigrant diasporas. A key example of such geographically detached commemoration is Hong Kong’s “Pillar of Shame.” As a counterpoint to the “Goddess of Democracy” statue (modeled on New York’s Statue of Liberty) that became a well-known symbol of hope during the 1989 Tiananmen protest, the pillar commemorates the aftermath: the 500 to 1,000 (or more) pro-democracy protesters killed. The three-storey high conical bronze monument, designed by Danish sculptor Jens Galschiot, is covered with molded contorted faces and copper plates, on which are engraved slogans from the Tiananmen protest, images of protestors, and facts about contemporary human rights abuses in China. “The old cannot kill the young forever” reads its chief inscription. The pillar was erected in Victoria Park on June 4, 1997, but only after causing grave confrontation in the Hong Kong parliament, when around 40 percent of parliamentarians walked out after the majority voted to refuse to allow the pillar to be displayed publicly. The sculpture was later the centerpiece for a 50,000-person candlelight vigil, but after scuffles between students and police it was moved to Hong Kong University. The pillar remains perhaps the best-known symbol of protest against the suppression of freedom of expression in China. Its form has since been

duplicated by sculptors in Rome and Berlin, and has been transported through parts of Mexico and Brazil, making it a movable, reproducible, transnational rallying point for various human rights struggles.

MINIMALIST AESTHETICS

In one way, the grassroots, dissenting values attached to the “Pillar of Shame” arguably makes it an edifice of its age. Its form, however, shares more with tributary statuary. In the past two decades or so, there has emerged a distrust of majestic state monuments. In reaction to both right- and left-wing monumental statist aesthetics, a more skeptical visual language of size, scale, line, color, and weight has come to dominate new artist-competition style memorial projects. Memorial architecture has followed the path blazed by modern art: from works that spoke of human affairs, to those that presented us with scenes and shapes we had never encountered in order to have us contemplate the invented qualities of these new works. Modern artists and monument designers alike wanted works “that would not be *about* things in the world but would themselves *be* things in the world.”⁵⁰ The current ideal is that subjects will physically engage with the form in order to arouse some sensory mode, rather than standing back to contemplate a semi-realistic representation.

The seminal example of this minimalist genre is probably Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The design is based around two long reflective black granite walls sunk into the ground, the tops of which are flush with the earth behind them. The names of the 58,249 American casualties are inscribed in chronological order according to the year of their death. While it was derided by some as being explicitly ideological, by associating the efforts of servicemen with a “black ditch” or “gash of shame,” most would agree that its success lies in the way it does not move the visitor in any particular direction – whether comfort, anger, or sadness. Given the distressing events they aim to evoke, the “slash” and “void” have perhaps unsurprisingly emerged as key symbolic forms in minimalist design. Daniel Libeskind is the architect most closely associated with this brand of minimalism. “Voids” and “shards” feature most notably in the Jewish Museum, Berlin (2001), the Imperial War Museum North, Manchester (2002), and in plans for New York’s forthcoming Freedom Tower (2009). In this latter case, Libeskind proposes sections of the building that would leave parts of the pit exposed, to complement Michael Arad and Peter Walker’s “Reflecting Absence” memorial. This memorial, based around two nine-meter-deep pools where the towers once stood, into which water would cascade from the edges, received a behind-the-scenes push from Maya Lin herself.⁵¹ Her design also appears to have been influential in the design of Buenos Aires’ *Parque de la Memoria* (2001). Its main feature, the forthcoming “Monument to the Victims of State Terror,” is a sinuous fissure cut into and crisscrossing the fourteen-acre park that aims to express the “open wound” permeating Argentinean society.

Some standardization in the symbolization of atrocity has emerged. Those memorials geared towards “softer” themes of healing and forgiveness tend to use emblems

associated with the elements, suggesting a source of redemption greater than the mortals who perpetuated or suffered the act. Pools of water, beams or shafts of light, stone plinths, and an eternal flame are common, and share stylistic elements with memorials to the “conventional” world wars. Newer spaces are typically designed in ways that encourage more idiosyncratic metaphorical readings. The Oklahoma City Memorial, designed by Butzer Design Partnership, features an empty chair for each person killed. Evenly spaced, they each face a reflecting pool.⁵² This design borrows from the convention of leaving seats empty at social gatherings to honor those absent, and from riderless horses at state funeral parades. More generally, it expresses themes of unfulfilled lives, people denied their place in the world, and, given that victims included children at a daycare center in the building, childhood innocence. A similar memorial at the 9/11 Pentagon Memorial Park will open in 2008. Its 184 cantilevered outdoor benches, each one inscribed with the name of a victim, will be lit from underneath to create a field of glowing light pools.

Although minimalism is traditionally associated with the avant-garde, it can also be seen, at least in the memorial field, as signaling a refuge from overtly political ideas about responsibility and blame. We can observe this in plans for the imminent \$30 million Flight 93 Memorial to be constructed at the 9/11 crash site 130 kilometers from Pittsburgh. The winner of the design competition, Paul Murdoch, has divided the 890-hectare site, to be run by the National Park Service, into three sections. The “Tower of Voices,” twenty-eight meters high (or ninety-three feet, chosen to match the flight number), will aid the visibility of the site from the road, and is to be filled with wind chimes. A semicircular arrangement of maple trees (“Crescent of Embrace”) will blaze red each fall. (Some commentators expressed uproar at this design due to the symbolism of the Red Crescent – used on the national flags of Muslim nations like Turkey, Algeria, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan – forcing Murdoch to offer to make alterations. It is likely that critics sought a more triumphant memorial, given that Flight 93 was the only instance resembling “victory” on that morning.)⁵³ On the south end of that arc, a series of low black slate walls will shield the crash site (“Sacred Ground”) from the public. The total design represents, according to Christopher Hawthorne, “Hallmark-card minimalism” for the way it attaches reassuring interpretation (such as the “Voices/Embrace/Sacred” themes) to a design that carries few concrete referents.⁵⁴ Predictably perhaps, the tenor of the names of the three sections of the memorial strongly suggest the site will delimit the possible interpretations of the event, instead upholding a message that is affirming and nationalist in orientation.

Other sites use representative spatial analogies to represent the social and cultural ruin wrought. The theme of loss – spanning possessions, culture, and people – is found in Berlin’s cobblestone stretch called the Bebelplatz, where Nazi book burning took place in May 1933. On that site in 1995 Micha Ullman, an Israeli-born artist, created a small ground level window that looks into a subterranean white room lined with empty bookshelves. The 2,711 charcoal stone steles that form Berlin’s Monument to the Murdered Jews of Europe aim to express, in a more abstract

manner, similar themes. Yet in this case it is not clear at whom a feeling of being trapped or uncomfortable, brought about by oppressive surfaces and unevenness in scale, is directed. Does it matter that the physical encounter produces a somewhat common experience among all who visit, despite critical differences in visitors' subject relation to the event? Stephen Greenblatt wrote about the entries for the competition for the memorial in the following way:

It has become increasingly apparent that no design for a Berlin memorial to remember the millions of Jews killed by Nazis in the Holocaust will ever prove adequate to the immense symbolic weight it must carry, as numerous designs have been considered and discarded. Perhaps the best course at this point would be to leave the site of the proposed memorial at the heart of Berlin and of Germany empty, to abandon it to weeds and, in Hamlet's words, to let things rank and gross in nature possess it merely.⁵⁵

Wariness about the way that memorial projects might reify or enshrine the memory of an event has turned some artists and critics in another direction: towards deliberately *not* building, or even destroying. At least one commentator expressed the view that leaving the World Trade Center's seven-storey pit of debris would best memorialize 9/11.⁵⁶ A submission for the memorial competition by artist Horst Hoheisel proposed blowing up the Brandenburg Gate, grinding its stone into dust, sprinkling the remains over the proposed site, and then covering the entire area with granite plates.⁵⁷ Hoheisel has a clear mistrust of the way that commemorative forms promise an assured, knowable position towards historical calamity. If, for Hoheisel, the event seizes him as dreadful, then his creative response will also reflect some similar negativity. While his proposal is unlikely to be taken seriously by those seeking some broadly accepted symbol of reconciliation, it is worth noting for the way it brings attention to the potential folly of assuming that a properly designed memorial can help us unlock and understand the past.

INTERIOR DIMENSIONS: INSIDE THE MEMORIAL MUSEUM

I will now move from reflections on the scale and texture of outdoor memorials to consider the ways that internal museum spaces shape interpretation. In an important article, Valerie Casey positions the "performing museum" as the successor to two preceding models: the "legislating museum" of the nineteenth century, which displayed paragons of aesthetic and intellectual excellence, and the twentieth-century "interpreting museum," where a range of techniques – from label text to docent tours – have aimed to explain and contextualize objects.⁵⁸ The emergence of the performing museum has come about from the confluence of two phenomena: a surge in memorialization (with its attendant focus on the expressive lives of ordinary people), and the spread and acceptance of more theatrical display techniques. Precisely because the high stakes associated with the topic and content of memorial museums can produce drama more effectively than other types of museums, they are

now at the forefront of this "performing museum" paradigm. Layered on top of traditional interpretive museum practices are theatrical tropes largely based on "reality effects." These include architectural styles that pointedly show the authenticity of the space through, for instance, exposed walls or glass floors that display archaeological finds, stage-set-like scenes and rooms (such as reconstructed officers' quarters or torture cells), and the use of personal testimony (where, using an audio device or video screens, a survivor virtually "accompanies" visitors as he or she moves through galleries).

In the performing museum, the total physical environment itself becomes the attraction. In a process analogous to the planning of a theater production – where play texts are selected, casts auditioned, sets designed, and lengthy rehearsals take place – museum objects are spatially arranged and decorated, placed in showcases and lit, and given explanatory panels and audio-visual augmentation before the show opens. Yuichiro Takahashi has explored this parallel by drawing attention to Richard Schechner's concept of "environmental theater" as a model for the visitor's exploration through museum exhibition space. Schechner's experiments in the late 1960s and 1970s were based around upsetting the unidirectional gaze which had the audience solely focused on the stage. Instead, he brought the set and actors in, around and behind the audience. Further, Schechner held performances on the streets and in nature. Properly three-dimensional staging and polyphonic articulations were intended to make audiences aware of their own bodies in space.⁵⁹

Rather than viewing designed, curated museum space in a solely cognitive sense, as theatrical environments museums are as equally concerned with, as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes, the visceral, kinesthetic, haptic, and intimate qualities of bodily experience.⁶⁰ A richer appreciation of this physical dimension can help us to question the common insistence that memorial space is fundamentally about the representation and symbolization of events. This can be appreciated by returning to the case of Daniel Libeskind's use of architectural "voids" in the Jewish Museum, Berlin. For one critic, the voids represent "the tragic failure of the Enlightenment project, simultaneously with the memory of its human victims."⁶¹ For another, the museum aims to "evoke and particularize an absence more than a presence: the unnamable of the voice of God, but also absence as an accusing form of presence of an incinerated culture and community, in whose cremation modernism was burned as well."⁶² While not discrediting creative interpretive readings of space, it is important to note that this museum's affective power lies not just in ideas, but also in the experience of its awkward, foreign, claustrophobic spaces. The building's design is barely evident from the street, and its zigzag motif is difficult to grasp as a whole – even when one is in its midst. When the door is locked by a docent behind visitors in the thirty-meter-high "Holocaust void," the immediate impression is only of darkness and disorientation. As one's eyes adjust, the imprisoning effect of the concrete space becomes evident, and abjectly alienating. Outside the tall, empty, unheated space, lit only by a single high slit that gives no view of the sky, one can just hear the muffled sounds of the city outside, yet never well enough to feel reassured. All of this is felt in the body.

A useful analogy that illuminates the importance of sensory experience in the memorial museum is that of churchgoing. We can speculate that people attend not so much to learn information (such as details of scriptures), but because they wish to be in a total environment that rehearses and affirms a sense of being in place. Both memorial museums and churches make concrete the notion of sacred ground and bring people together (as a *congregation* perhaps) under a single topic of communion. (There are other related parallels: both teach in a moral tone, emphasizing our common propensity for grave sins and hideous acts toward others and advocate the need for ongoing self-examination). While the Durkheimian concept of “civil religion” is not new to the theorization of the museum visitor experience, it has largely been conceived in ways that relate to the broad social effect produced by mass communion. What now deserves attention is the slippery topic of an individual’s quality of feeling that stems from being in a certain place, around others interested in exercising the same moral concern. An accent on the physical is in line with the idea, central to the study of trauma, that we remember not so much in a cognitive, declarative fashion, but in one that is bodily and sensory. This is especially pertinent when the themes related to us by memorial museums are those of physical discomfort, pain, and alienation.⁶³

Psychoanalytic theories of trauma posit that those most affected by a catastrophe crave some experiential return to the event. This principle has also suggested to museum educators that in order for visitors to grapple with what others endured, the idea of an event must be “burned in.” This phrase is Friedrich Nietzsche’s: “If something is to stay in memory it must be burned in: only that which never ceases to *hurt* stays in the memory’ – this is a main clause of the oldest (unhappily also the most enduring) psychology on earth.”⁶⁴ His observation is closely allied with the Freudian notion of “repetition-compulsion”; those working in memorial museums who follow it would suggest that an effective display would release in survivors a subconscious desire to return to the time in which the trauma occurred in order to mentally re-enact it. As Jenny Edkins has written:

It is not just because the traumatic experience is so powerful that it is re-lived time and time again by survivors. It is because of the failure to allocate meaning to what happened. Trauma is not experienced as such – as an experience – when it occurs. Instead, in the words of war correspondent Michael Herr, it just stays “stored in the eyes.”⁶⁵

This observation might partly explain why 9/11 families reportedly crave in the forthcoming memorial museum a first-hand reconstruction of that day’s events.⁶⁶ Following the demise of the contextual historicism of the International Freedom Center (discussed in the next chapter), consultants’ new proposals were explicitly there-and-then:

The notion is keep this as an immersive experience. You’re in the moment experiencing it, in the way the 102 minutes unfolds as a book. You’re in the Twin

Towers, you’re in the White House. We’re taking you to a number of rounds, and the air traffic control towers. We are very caught up in the chaos of it. It’s not a chronology of 10:52 this, 10:58 that happened. It’s much more episodic in the way that it unfolded as a chaotic jumble. And we want to tie all of these things directly back to these artifacts so that the voice, the anecdote, the oral history is tied directly to the object and directly to the experience.⁶⁷

While it is possible that this re-enactment might eventually allow those most affected to assert mastery over what occurred, for others an immersive exhibition risks producing a cinematic attraction. As a theme discussed in museology more widely, the issue of the privileging of spectacle is one that holds special gravitas in memorial museums – although the trend is often referred to as the “Disneyfication” of museums, the pageantry found in memorial museums surely suggests the antithesis of “the happiest place on earth.”

While the auratic artifact in the museum has always been capable of invoking a physical response in the visitor, what has changed is in the way we have seen “a dematerializing of the museum object as it perpetuates a selective semi-fictionalized account of the past that reflects cultural memory.”⁶⁸ In other words, there is an increasing sense that the object is not so much the truth from an earlier time, as a prop in the larger dramatization of the story. Information and objects are valuable primarily in the staging of experience. This shift should not be underestimated: in this scheme, the object’s importance diminishes – it is the interpreting visitor who becomes the museum’s focus. The experience of how it feels and what it means to “be-in-place” is the museum’s outcome rather than its by-product. Anyone who stands alone in a cell in Cambodia’s Tuol Sleng is immediately aware of the creeping uneasiness of occupying the space (let alone touching anything); anyone who makes the trip to Russia’s Perm-36 cannot help but feel the isolation and loneliness of the location. The preserved aftermath of these sites, where some original artifacts are maintained *in situ*, is itself a tactical effect that requires a willful dedication to keeping otherwise changeable sites static.

Of a museum’s internal spatial tactics, perhaps the most conventional is the “walk-through” the chronological history from beginning to end. Beyond this, the possibilities are more interesting. The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum reworks this linear sequence by producing a sense of *in medias res*. A large disturbing photograph of around fifty corpses at Ohrdruf concentration camp is the first image visitors to the museum see. It aims to slightly mirror the shock experienced by American soldiers who initially encountered the camps. A different method of creating a dramatic spatial atmosphere is found at Budapest’s Terrorháza, where one descends from the light of the street into dark basement cells, and from objective history into subjective terror:

One enters the museum through a doorway embroidered with the similar insignia of both totalitarianisms ... to the sound of solemn music interrupted occasionally by the clang of a prison door or the ranting of some demagogue,

one walks from the top of the building, through the last 60 years of Hungarian history, each floor illustrating some aspect of oppression – the fascist murder of Jews, the communist show trial of Cardinal Mindzenty, the starvation of the peasantry, the sudden liberating eruption of the 1956 Hungarian revolution, its suppression, the systematic round-up and punishment of the revolutionaries (including the execution of children), and the long banality of “goulash communism” under Janos Kadar’s cynical dictatorship – until one reaches the lowest level of all. This is the cellar torture chambers, narrow cells with bare boards for beds, where the regime’s victims were beaten, scalded, electrocuted, suffocated, drowned, and shot in their innocent thousands.⁶⁹

The path begins with the mere suspicion of wrongdoing, triggered by the recorded “clang of the prison door.” However, as visitors step into a slow-moving elevator and descend deep into the building, a three-minute video shows a guard explaining execution methods. Visitors then exit at the basement torture chambers, and their fears of what was overheard earlier are confirmed. The physical and emotional movement, in other words, is also from the head to the stomach.

Newly designed and appointed museums located in non-site-specific places are those that typically contrive a high degree of theatricality. Both Los Angeles’ Museum of Tolerance and The Musée Mémorial pour la Paix in Caen rely heavily on creative *mise en scène* to enliven the imagination. The construction of an outdoor café representing 1930s’ Berlin at the Museum of Tolerance has life-size mannequins seated against a gray backdrop (Fig. 4.6). Visitors hear the mannequins at the tables talking to one another, some expressing concern at the developing political situation, while others are nonchalant. At the Musée Mémorial pour la Paix, visitors to the Occupation-themed exhibition are greeted with a large board bearing the question: *40 million de collaborateurs ... 40 million de résistants?* In a fashion similar to the red-prejudiced/green-non-prejudiced doorways at the Museum of Tolerance (discussed further in Chapter 6), the museum neatly divides the gallery space into two corresponding parts of the divide, one dealing with collaboration, the other resistance. Visitors must choose one of the long gloomy hallways without knowing which is which. According to Yves Devraine, self-described “scenographer” of the Caen museum, “the impression is oppression.”⁷⁰ He aims to produce a sensory experience that triggers memories, which, he believes, reside in the human subconscious, irrespective of one’s proximity to the event – or even whether they one was alive at the time:

I have always been tempted to call myself more a time-space producer than an “arranger-director,” since I try, most of all, to relate the dynamics of the time to my own reflections. For example, maps are fixed, standard, static documents but I try to “stroll” within them, within a drawing to relive the times, moving along from one place to another, sometimes feeling the need to sit in a corner and “breathe” the smells of a given period – the beginnings of remembrance.⁷¹



Fig. 4.6. Café Kranzler display at the Los Angeles Museum of Tolerance. Copyright Simon Wiesenthal Center. Used with permission.

The danger is that the insertion of objects into an obviously fabricated visual environment risks compromising their interpretation as *evidence* of atrocity, precisely because we associate drama with manipulation. The tactic whereby a sense of the political and social zeitgeist is produced through popular media – posters, films, songs, et cetera – from the period is enticing, given its immersive qualities. Yet they can also be misleading, warns Pierre Sorlin:

General grief, grief about one’s country, about a lost generation or a group of the dead is an abstract feeling, a representation in which things that people have seen or gone through can be subsumed. Reconstructing this grief is haphazard but it is documented by what people wanted to read, by the songs they wanted to sing and the films they wanted to watch. These sources have their limitation. They are imaginary products which reduce to a few images long hours of misery or struggle and offer a synthesis of tragic events all the more unreal in that it has been performed by professionals used to mimicking all sorts of emotions.⁷²

Building on Sorlin, it appears that there are at least two key potential difficulties with this increasingly popular tactic. One is that an immersive *mise en scène* may be suitable chiefly when invoking situations where survivors no longer exist. The notion of creating a setting that relives a time seems unsuitable for those affected people who,

rather than seeking a secondhand experience, instead desire a place for personal recollection. Second, we wonder whether the production of performative spaces might produce a leveling of experience, where every experience becomes part of a predictable aesthetic scene of “negative histories.” Might a growing willingness to make atrocities the subject of evocative visitor experiences see the memorial museum move in the direction of a morbid theme park?

CONCLUSION: UNCERTAIN TOPOGRAPHIES

Memorial museums operate against the conventional premise that we preserve markers of that which is glorious and destroy evidence of what is reviled. There is now a widespread sensibility that if events are to be remembered, they require a concrete locus for public attention. “Memory attaches itself to sites, whereas history attaches itself to events” wrote Pierre Nora.⁷³ We exist in a time when there is great confidence in the idea of physical locations as appropriate repositories for genuine local memory and as loci that will help others gain a tangible sense of an event. For those with first-hand knowledge of what transpired, this remembrance works on a sensory level: the reinstatement of a location can trigger memories not likely to emerge elsewhere. As Maurice Halbwachs wrote:

... every collective memory unfolds within a spatial framework. Now space is a reality that endures: Since our impressions rush by ... we can understand how we recapture the past only by understanding how it is, in effect, preserved by our physical surroundings. It is to space – the space we occupy, traverse, have continual access to, or can at any time reconstruct in thought and imagination – that we must turn our attention.⁷⁴

Location affords not only the ability to picture the traumatic episode, but also to reawaken the feeling of an event triggered by ambient textures of sound, light, and smell. The notion of the memorial museum as a live sensory experience goes some way towards ameliorating the “crisis of reference” that nags suspiciously at the role of the object and the image discussed in the previous two chapters. It is, arguably, a sense of place – rather than objects or images – that gives form to our memories, and provides the coordinates for the imaginative reconstruction of the “memories” of those who visit memorial sites but never knew the event first-hand.

As various examples from this chapter demonstrate, urban sites are overlaid with histories piled upon histories and will inevitably change further. Museums, for their part, have typically supported temporal fixity. That is, the permanence associated with their vow to exist in perpetuity for future generations is one typically reserved not only for their collections: we generally assume that, once established, museums are a rare city institution that will stay in place. Yet we also know that museums themselves form valuable targets in acts of violence. Beginning in April 1992, Serbian attacks on Bosnian cities and towns deliberately and successfully targeted

national museums, libraries, and archives, in the process wiping out the larger part of the written history of Bosnia. In April 2003, a significant (but still unknown) portion of the National Museum of Iraq’s 170,000 ancient artifacts was looted. Hence, along with more mundane occurrences such as deficiencies in funding, patron support, and building evictions, museums do disappear, as much as they momentarily arrive, or linger little-noticed in the background. Along with certain monuments, historic houses, squares, parks, bridges, cemeteries, and street names, museums are markers that remind us of a range of questions about our personal relationship with the past: do we seek them out to aid remembering, or bypass them to enable forgetting? Do we embrace them as cornerstones of community, or isolate them as sections of tourist routes? Such questions suggest that the significance of memorial museums cannot be established *a priori*, but is decided through social attitudes towards them and the quality of the practices with which they are popularly associated.

This kind of phenomenological account of space can usefully draw on Michel de Certeau’s distinction between *place* and *space* to consider the benefits and drawbacks of fixing memory at a particular site. In his reasoning, a place comprises an organization of things that is referential, static, and permanent. A space, by contrast, is identified when vectors of direction, cadence, and time are appreciated. In this distinction, the “place” of the city, for instance, is composed of buildings, streets, and parks, while the “space” of the city incorporates the movement of people, including the (difficult to quantify) summation of users’ feelings and impressions. As Certeau puts it:

Places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state, symbolizations encysted in the pain or pleasure of the body. “I feel good here”: the wellbeing under-expressed in the language it appears in like a fleeting glimmer is a spatial practice.⁷⁵

Where place is defined in formal, stable terms, obeying “the law of property” that ascribes one function to any single location, *space* carries a variety of meanings awarded by multiple users.⁷⁶ His distinction between *maps*, as scientific representations of place that erase the itinerary that produced it, and *tours*, as an everyday narration of movement, also clarifies this distinction. Hence, we can see how memorial museums straddle two functions: on the one hand, they are unusually visible, vibrant, and unregulated locations in which visitors can “practice space” in their own idiosyncratic manner in casual outings with no fixed, determined structure. On the other hand, there remains a strong ritual component to visitation. Grave and often official impositions of meaning also firmly situate memorial museums as perpetual, reliable city spaces, perhaps as functional as any other. Hence, memorial museums are especially interesting in the way they seek to support a wide, open-ended variety of practices in visitors, yet also aim to make some authoritative statement about where and

how to remember the past. They will continue to remain interesting and controversial spaces precisely because they uncommonly represent structures associated with serious historical narratives and institutional permanence, yet also offer a personal freedom of response, interpretation, and use.

5 A DIPLOMATIC ASSIGNMENT: THE POLITICAL FORTUNES OF MEMORIAL MUSEUMS

THE FREEDOM CENTER AND ITS ENEMIES

In August 2005, while one day poring over details of the dispersed global field of memorial museums at the core of this book, I unexpectedly found many of them referenced by front-page headlines at New York's newsstands. "Making a Mockery of Ground Zero" decried one.¹ "Another Insult to America's Heritage at Freedom Center," another chimed in.² The story concerned the political deliberations surrounding the International Freedom Center (IFC), which was to be the museum component of the World Trade Center Memorial. Over 28,000 square meters the IFC planned to "focus on the historic stories of freedom that help to give context and definition to the attacks. Stories of New York City, America, and the world, will, in different ways, explore the architecture of a free and open society – probing the question, what makes for a free country and why does it matter?"³ While details are scarce, proposed exhibits included a large mural of Iraqi voters (scrapped in favor of less provocative photographs of Martin Luther King Jr. and Lyndon Johnson). Documentary films would tell the stories of, "a recent immigrant kitchen worker that tells of the lure of economic freedom in the U.S.," "a successful African-American bond trader whose background is linked to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s," and "a Russian immigrant whose family fled Stalin."⁴ The scheme was that "the memorial to the victims will be the heart of the site, the IFC will be the brain." Planners envisaged the IFC as the "magnet" for the world's "great leaders, thinkers, and activists" to participate in lectures and symposiums that examine "the foundation of free and open societies."⁵

The hot topic for the media was the advice the IFC sought from an organization called the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience. Founded in 1999, some of its members include District Six Museum, South Africa; Memoria Abierta, Argentina; Gulag Museum at Perm-36, Russia; the Terezin Memorial, Czech Republic; the Liberation War Museum, Bangladesh; and the Maison des Esclaves, Senegal.⁶ Supported by several non-profit groups including the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Open Society Institute, and The Trust for Mutual Understanding, the Coalition aims to aid activists and museum professionals in using historic sites to highlight human rights issues. In July 2003, representatives from the Coalition began meeting with the IFC, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, and Studio Daniel Libeskind. The choice quotes at the center of the newspaper stories were taken from the proceedings of the Coalition's 2004