

Holzer Kobler Architekturen

KEYNOTE LECTURE

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DESIGNING MEMORIES

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ICOM INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF MEMORIAL
MUSEUMS IN REMEMBRANCE OF THE VICTIMS OF
PUBLIC CRIMES

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DESIGNING MEMORIES

This keynote lecture will reflect on “Designing Memories“ and especially the challenge of how, as an architect and designer, to communicate the unimaginable.

In the past years institutions and initiatives, governmental and non-profit organisations have increasingly approached architects and artists to design new types of spaces with an inherent connection to memory, memorial and remembrance.

The profession and training as an architect is based on the idea of creating and constructing spaces that convey significance. In the case of memorials the focus is on the visitors and the victims for whom the memorial is created. Our utmost priority when dealing with these places is to preserve the dignity of the victims. A memorial is often also a place of a (historical) incident, a grave yard, a place for memory and a place of information, all combined. As architects we believe in the power of the original space itself, and the designed room enhances and strengthens the feelings of the visitors. We need to create a platform for remembrance and strive to ensure that the events which took place at a certain location and point in time will not occur again.

We need to ask ourselves if it is possible to design meaningful space as a memorial of crimes that are beyond our imagination? And, if so, how can the different themes related to this topic be designed and/or exhibited? What distinguishes the forms and how should the forms be differentiated according to their relationship to the aggressor or the victim? Is there a place for “neutral“ spaces in the context of memorials? Furthermore the question of the perspective must be addressed. Which alternative standpoints are offered to the visitors? How can one grasp the attention of the visitors and transcend it beyond the premises?

To analyse the possible challenges and various attempts on how to answer the previous questions, I have chosen a few existing examples of memorials and will show a few exhibitions designed by our office.

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PASSAGES

Memorial for Walter Benjamin, inaugurated May 15th, 1994 in Portbou, Spain. Artist: Dani Karavan

The Walter Benjamin Memorial in Portbou raises the claim to be “a sculptural installation thoroughly integrated in the landscape. (...) Rather than the work incorporating the landscape, the landscape becomes the catalyst that activates the work. In Karavan’s intervention the cliffs of the Costa Brava and such archetypal natural Mediterranean elements as olive trees, stone and wind weave a story about their past of exile and at the same time enact an exercise in contemporary memory.”¹



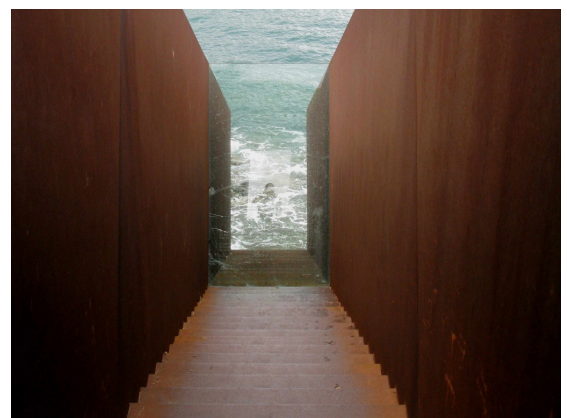
Source: www.walterbenjaminportbou.cat

“Passages” is a memorial for a single and at the time well known person whose fate is representative of many nameless contemporaries. Their places of emigration might be unknown, but Benjamin’s ended in Portbou. The theme of exile is communicated through the location and the landscape. The memorial is situated at the authentic place of his tragic end. Karavan created a tunnel-like passageway that implements the contrast of closure and opening. The visitors enter a passage that leads down through the cliff before it falls into the sea below. A continuation or passage is blocked by the glass screen at the end of the stairway on which a quotation by Walter Benjamin is etched:

“It is more arduous to honour the memory of the nameless than that of the renowned. Historical construction is devoted to the memory of the nameless.”

These words clearly explain the spatial syntax of Karavan’s approach. The spatial transformation of the stairs (vertical transition) and the closing and opening of the downward path are the primary spatial and formal elements of the memorial.

The memorial offers a space of emptiness, the presence of absence. It is a place in which feelings, impressions, memories and sorrow can co-exist.



Source: www.walterbenjaminportbou.cat

¹ <http://www.walterbenjaminportbou.cat/en/content/lobra> (recalled: 01.11.2015)

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THE MEMORIAL TO THE MURDERED JEWS OF EUROPE

Inaugurated May 10th, 2005 in Berlin, Germany.
Architect: Peter Eisenman, exhibition design: Dagmar von Wilcken

“The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe“ consists of a series of concrete pillars of varying heights set up in a grid-like structure on an unevenly inclined terrain.

Referring to its prominent and historical location, its size and its importance one could say it is THE Holocaust memorial for Germany and its citizens.

The idea for a memorial that is dedicated to all the European Jewish victims of the Holocaust has its origins in a citizens' initiative. The journalist Lea Rosh and the historian Eberhard Jaeckel published a first call for the creation of such a memorial in January 1989. The citizens' initiative gained support quickly and formed into the “Association for the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe“, which proposed the site of the former Reich Chancellery as the location.

After years of political debates about the location, the funding, the aesthetics and two competitions the design of the architect Peter Eisenman and the sculptor Richard Serra emerged as the winner. Serra withdrew from the project, Eisenman had to modify their design and add an underground “information centre“. The main theme of the information centre is the persecution and extermination of the European Jews as well as the historical crime sites. The concept for its exhibition design was commissioned to Dagmar von Wilcken in 2001. The site and the information centre complement each other. While the stela field is dedicated to the unimaginable mass of victims on an abstract level, the exhibition concept focuses on individual victims, their personal memoirs and their fate.

The site and information centre attract nearly half a million visitors per year.

Both the site and the information centre are public spaces and are completely free of charge. The stela field is a landscape connected to the urban fabric. There is no threshold and there is no differentiation between the pavement of the sidewalk and the pavement of the field that runs through the entire memorial. The key to the design of the stela field itself is its spatial and formal gesture of vertical transition, closure and opening and a permanent change of perspective. The further visitors



Source: de.wikipedia.org, photo by K. Weisser



Source: www.pinterest.com, photo by Holland Stephens

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walk into the grid, the more their senses get absorbed - disorientation and the strong feeling of being lost might emerge. A kind of remoulded memory is present.

The information centre is below the surface. The exhibition is presented through seven stations, combining different themes of the Holocaust. The architecture itself is formally interconnected as some of the stelae hang down from the ceiling in varying sizes.

The memorial pulls the visitors into its grid and leaves them alone with the feeling of disorientation while the information centre offers the clarification of facts. These two positions seem to be contradictory, yet they are not. The spatial narration of the memorial includes the masses and the individual, the unknown victims and the known victims. Both spaces are formally interconnected which clearly states that no hierarchy exists between these groups.

ON TRIAL: AUSCHWITZ/MAJDANEK.

Exhibition at the Jewish Museum Berlin, Germany, 2013.
Exhibition Design: Holzer Kobler Architekturen

The new permanent exhibition is dedicated to the two biggest German trials of National Socialist officials – the Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt (1963–65) and the Majdanek trial in Düsseldorf (1975–81).

A series by the painter Minka Hauschild called “Majdanek Trial Portraits” (1996) depicts 44 participants of the trial as seen in the documentary film “The Trial” (1984) by Eberhard Fechner. The large-scale arrangement of the portraits into a single, collective work creates a cohesive link between the space, the content and the art. At first glance the pictures appear neutral. It is only through the additional information that the stories of those portrayed and their respective roles as perpetrators, victims and witnesses are revealed.

While the paintings are the access point into the theme, the visitor's irritation is the access point to the content. Visitors try to figure out who the victims and the perpetrators are and find themselves confused about their stereotyping behaviour. How does a victim look like, how does a perpetrator look like?



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As the exhibition revolves around the works of art on the wall the concept for the rooms was to create simple media stations that complement the paintings. The gap between the space embellished by the art and its shocking content is necessary. Allowing the room to breathe by minimalizing the dark-coloured media stations and furniture, contrasts with the paintings and offers the visitors a space where they can process their irritation and sentiments.



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MILITARY HISTORY MUSEUM

Dresden, Germany, 2011. Architect: Daniel Libeskind, exhibition design: Holzer Kobler Architekturen in cooperation with HG Merz Architects

German military history is part of German cultural history. This notion forms the basis for the redevelopment of the German Army's Military History Museum in Dresden. The concept and design of the exhibition are intended to create a dialogue between conventional and unconventional views and to make this complex topic accessible to the whole of society in a completely new way.

Daniel Libeskind's design of the building "boldly interrupts the original building's classical symmetry. The extension, a massive, five-story 14,500-ton wedge of glass, concrete and steel, cuts into and through the former arsenal's classical order. An 82-foot high viewing platform (the highest point of the wedge is 98 feet) provides breathtaking views of modern Dresden. While pointing towards the triangulation of the area where the fire bombing began in Dresden, the wedge creates a space for reflection.

The new façade's openness and transparency is intended to contrast with the opacity and rigidity of the existing building. The latter represents the severity of the authoritarian past, while the former reflects the transparency of the military in a democratic society. The interplay between these perspectives forms the character of the new Military History Museum.²



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The architectural composition symbolizes destruction, or makes this trace visible. The wedge marks the flightpath of the bombers. Therefore the space is cut up, cut through, a new space is created. The exhibition design

² Quelle: <http://libeskind.com/work/military-history-museum/> (recalled: 03.11.2015)

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was confronted with these two architectures and two very different systems.

The two architectures - the existing building and the “wedge”, the addition, were used to structure the permanent exhibit.

The primary approach in the exhibition applies to

- shifting perspectives
- spatial transformation
- unexpected exhibits
- irritation as a means of accessing the theme

The permanent exhibition encompasses the exhibition in the new extension, the wedge, and is a thematic-parcours, the cure, the unconventional. And the exhibition in the original building which is the chronology-parcours, the required, the conventional.

A circuit was created to introduce twelve thematic exhibitions presented in the wedge. These different areas are designed to help visitors who are less familiar with the military and its history to find an individual approach through subjects such as “War and Memory”, “Military and Technology”, “Protection and Destruction” or “Military and Society”.

It was important to show the visible connections inherent to the architecture on the one hand and on the other hand to display the objects in such a way that the visitors could establish links between the themes and unexpected connections between their own daily lives and military history. The anthropological approach also allowed it to examine the readiness in society to use violence and its implications.

Several examples underline this approach:

The circuit begins with the “Dresden View” on the fourth floor of the new building. The theme, destruction of the cities, consists of objects on loan from:

- Wieluń, Poland (German aggression)
- Dresden (Allied aggression)
- Rotterdam (German aggression)

This juxtaposition of the places and the aggressors presents the theme of cause and effect from a unique point of view. Furthermore the visitor has access to the outer area of the wedge where a place for reflection was



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left empty - the visitors' view is guided outside towards Dresden and the architectural consequences of the destruction at the end of World War II as well as the following reconstruction. Aggression and violence are presented at the same time as a "historical, cultural and anthropological phenomenon."³

The central element of the thematic exhibition "Animals and the Military" is a specially designed catwalk, a direct reference to Noah's Ark. While Noah was saving the animals and in consequence saving life on earth the further the visitor digs into the military purposes for using animals the more he/she realises that saving was not one of them.

The animals in war were used as weapons or prevention for testing gas or to bear goods. The information about the specific animal's purpose is provided in the form of films. Furthermore the content of the exhibition becomes visible at a second glance: one can find the dog with a belt around his body and realize at a second glance that this is a real bomb-belt. As in all historical museums the objects on display are originals and consequently transport more than one significance. Here we see a dog, man's faithful friend and a suicide bomber at the same time.

Following the thematic exhibition the section "War and Memory" is presented by a compact shelving installation. There are three huge rolling-stack or compact-shelving units with video installations at either end. Whether opened or closed, the rolling stack shelves can only be accessed in parts, only fragments can be perceived. Just as our memory is fragmented, incomplete and one can only access singular areas.

One's perception of history is never the same, different fragments of memory at different times in history combine and create an ever-changing personal perception of the situation.

In this case we encouraged the client to include works of art as part of the exhibition. Initially the museum's authorities were not convinced that the combination of fictional narration should be combined with historical facts and objects. At some point this changed however and we received the necessary support to implement the video installations from female contemporary artists. These installations interrupt and shift the visitor's



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perception. In the middle of all these silent objects the films introduce a critical viewpoint for a wide range of visitors.

The works of contemporary art present the theme from a female point of view in a predominately male occupied field and offer a second approach to the topics. All video installations address people or events from military history and show how they were perceived differently through time.

HEIMATKUNDE. HOW GERMAN IS IT?

Exhibition at the Jewish Museum Berlin, Germany, 2011.
Exhibition design: Holzer Kobler Architekturen

On its 10th anniversary the Jewish Museum Berlin took the opportunity to take stock. The special exhibition “How German is it?” showed works from 30 artists addressing key aspects of their perception in and of Germany. The design of the exhibition reflected the ambivalent cultural relationships dealt with by the works of art.

As no space is neutral, the exhibition space sought to reflect the content: a white cube was installed in the elegant 18th-century baroque building, partially reproducing the layout of its exhibition rooms.

Slightly tilting and rotating this implanted structure created a contrast between old and new. The gently sloping floors and crooked walls disorientated the visitors and distorted the usual horizontal and vertical reference planes. Lines of light marked the division between the existing and the intervention, between old and new, between a concrete reality and a dematerialized reality. Visitors were thrown out of balance, known references were displaced and as the horizon tilted, the visitors asked themselves: “where is home?”



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Epilogue

Spatial and narrative aspects inherent to the design process are helpful and necessary for the transportation and communication of themes dealing with remembrance and memory. A memorial or place of memory should include space for emptiness, space for retreat or withdrawal, space for consideration and dismay. An atmosphere should be created in which arising and reactive moods and sentiments can develop. In this context the architecture is to alter and guide the visitor's perspective and the curator's point of view by transforming and redefining space. Visitors should be moved by an image that triggers their emotions and their thoughts. The curatorial concept should be transformed into a spatial narration that looks beyond the initial instructions and other forms of indoctrination.

IMPRESSUM

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