

Adaptive Reuse for Museums on Sites of Perpetrators

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Abstract

The relationship between architecture, memory, and space plays a crucial role in the musealization processes of sites associated with traumatic events of the second half of the twentieth century. Specifically, museums of memory located at so-called “sites of perpetrators”—such as former prisons, seats of totalitarian power, and concentration and extermination camps—are distinguished by their capacity to transform architecture into a «document». In these contexts, buildings are not merely exhibition display but become integral components of the narrative, embedding within themselves both the tangible and intangible traces of past events. A paradigmatic example of this approach is the case of the *Topographie des Terrors* in Berlin, noted for its capacity to maintain an indissoluble connection with the memory of the site. Other museum interventions, such as the *Kazerne Dossin* in Mechelen (2012), demonstrate how architecture can function as a narrative tool and space for collective reflection, mediating between traumatic pasts and contemporary memorial sensibilities. In sites of extermination, the introduction of visitor centers and museum pavilions, designed in dialogue with existing structures, responds to the necessity of welcoming visitors and providing appropriate interpretative tools. These architectures are characterized by an essential formal language, the use of raw materials, and spatial solutions aimed at prompting introspective experiences. From this perspective, the “adaptive reuse” of memory sites is a cultural act of design that preserves the symbolic significance of spaces, restoring meaning through measured architectural language. Exhibition design thus serves as a narrative instrument capable of activating dialogue between material traces and visitors. Consequently, these museums are not mere repositories of history but experiential spaces wherein memory takes form, and heritage becomes an opportunity for collective reflection.

Keywords: Sites of Perpetrators, Museums of Memory, Interior Reuse

Introduction

The twentieth century is widely recognized as the century marked by the greatest tragedies in world history. Many scholars have underscored its tragic nature, calling it the «century of fear» (Foa 1996), the «century of hate» (Moriani 1999), and the «age of violence» (Thomson 1960). Events such as the two World Wars, the Holocaust, and the Cold War broke the linear flow of historical time, giving rise to what has been called «trauma time» (Edkins 2003). Due to this nature, the term trauma has entered the vocabulary of historical drama and become central to memory studies. In the early 1990s, a significant research trend emerged in the

United States focusing on the trauma-memory nexus. Shoshana Felman, a literary critic, and Thomas Laub, a psychoanalyst, were among the first to explore this theme, particularly in relation to the Holocaust, seen as a crisis of testimony, an «event without witnesses» (Felman and Laub 1992). Cathy Caruth further developed the concept in her influential book *Trauma. Explorations in Memory* (1995), which gathered essays on pedophilia, war, and the Holocaust. Jenny Edkins, in *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (2007), followed Caruth's path by analyzing how societies remember traumatic events through memorials, museums, and commemorative practices. The twentieth century also forced a confrontation with the troubling legacies of war: ruins, debris, but also entire buildings and large infrastructures scattered across Europe's landscapes and cities. Both World Wars, especially the second, left behind military structures that now dot the land. This often neglected heritage has become a subject of scholarly attention only from the last 15 years, particularly within fields like «conflict archaeology» (Saunders 2009). There are key differences between the two World Wars, reflected in the various defense systems built, such as the Atlantikwall, the Maginot Line, the West Wall, and the Salpa Line. These fortifications often stretch across multiple countries. The Atlantikwall, for instance, runs from the French-Spanish border to North Cape in Norway and stands as one of the most powerful examples of conflict-related archaeological landscapes in Europe (Bassanelli, Postiglione 2011). Another legacy of the Nazi regime is the system of concentration and extermination camps, some of which were destroyed to hide evidence, while others remain visitable. In recent years, this uncomfortable heritage has been labeled in various ways: «disturbing remains» (Roth and Salas 2001), «dissonant heritage» (Tunbridge 1996), «heritage that hurts» (Uzzell and Ballantyne 1998), and «difficult heritage» (Macdonald 2011). The central challenge lies in how to reactivate and interpret these sites: «Should sites that will serve to remind people of past troubles be retained or removed? Is it better to confront this materiality, or ignore and forget it? Then, what is an appropriate way of presenting and interpreting sites of conflict?» (Schofield et al. 2002, 1).

Museums of Memory and Adaptive Reuse

Since the 1990s, a new type of museum has emerged: memorial museums, dedicated to remembering traumatic events such as wars, genocides, terrorism, and violations of human rights. These museums go beyond the preservation of artifacts; they serve a strong ethical and educational role, combining two core meanings: *memento* (a saved trace or fragment) and warning (*monito*), urging us to never repeat the horrors of the past (Padiglione 2008; Bassanelli 2015). This museological category was theorized notably by Terence M. Duffy in 2001, who classified museums dealing with difficult topics: Holocaust and genocide museums, slavery museums, civil rights museums, and torture museums. In the same year, the ICOM founded IC MEMO (The International Committee of Memorial Museums in Remembrance of the Victims of Public Crimes), confirming the international recognition of this field. Memorial museums differ from traditional history museums: they do not neutrally recount distant events but deal with traumatic episodes still vivid in the collective memory. They often arise on original historical sites, welcome visitors personally connected to the tragedy, and function as research and educational centers. According to Dominique Poulot, these are «museums of contemporary history» (Poulot 2005). In contrast to traditional war museums, which date back to the 19th century and often celebrate military valor, memorial museums focus

on mass suffering and human vulnerability. In *Memorial Museums*, Paul Williams offers the most comprehensive treatment of this new museum type, defining them as «a specific kind of museum dedicated to a historic event commemorating mass suffering» (Williams 2007, 6), and examining key issues such as the role of objects and photographs, the significance of place, and the construction of identity. Memorial museums are characterized by their use of performative expression, aiming to engage visitors in a direct and emotional way. This aligns with the broader concept of the performative museum, as theorized by Valery Casey in *The Museum Effect* (2003), where she outlines three phases in museum development: the legislative, the interpretive, and the performative. The rise of the performative museum is linked to society's commemorative obsession and the increasing use of technological tools. Memorial museums, dealing with traumatic events, are at the forefront of this model. Often located on the original sites of the tragedies, they feature reconstructed or preserved spaces, such as torture cells, and heavily rely on testimonies, videos, images, and sounds that guide the visitor through a deeply immersive and interactive experience. Often emerging within existing buildings, this evolution of museography strongly intersects with another crucial phenomenon of contemporary design: adaptive reuse, a subject on which numerous seminal studies have been published in recent years. In this regard, memory museums represent an exemplary ground for the practice of «interior reuse» (Forino 2008). They not only transform pre-existing structures, but profoundly reinterpret them, engaging with the living matter of place and history. Architecture thus becomes a critical act, a rewriting of the existing that does not aim for superficial reconciliation but, as Vittorio Gregotti reminds us, for the construction of fields of conflict, where the non-coincidence between past and present generates knowledge, awareness, and design tension (Gregotti 1984).

Museums on Contested Sites

The relationship with place and with traces is one of the fundamental aspects of memory museums. In these spaces, the connection to history is even more powerful, as they themselves embody a tragic memory. One of the most significant historical examples is the Italian case of the Risiera di San Sabba, where the project for a museum of the resistance was won by architect Romano Boico and completed in 1975, after two competitions¹. The architect's idea for this place, the Risiera was the only Italian concentration camp with a crematorium, was to treat it as a sacred area where the existing buildings have a strong emotional impact. The entrance is marked by two parallel walls 11 metres high, 45 metres long and only 3 metres wide, which give visitors an unsettling and oppressive feeling. This route also evokes the past, as prisoners used to walk in the same direction. At the end of the long passage between the high concrete walls, you enter the courtyard. It is impossible to look outside at any point; visitors find themselves completely enclosed within these bare, austere buildings. A further example of significant historical value is represented by the Topographie des Terrors (Berlin, 2008). From 1933 to 1945, this site housed the three main institutions of the Nazi totalitarian apparatus. Despite being located in the heart of the city and visible to all, the site remained neglected for a long time, a symbol of an uncomfortable memory that had yet to be processed. The first musealization initiative dates back to 1987, when part of the grounds was opened to the public through excavations that revealed the underground cells of the Gestapo, where political prisoners were interrogated, tortured, and killed. The site was subject to two design competitions: the first, won by

Peter Zumthor in 1993, was never realized due to lack of funding; the second, in 2005, was won by Ursula Wilms and landscape architect Heinz W. Hallmann. Zumthor's project best interpreted the site's character, creating a highly evocative architecture centered on the ruins of the old building. His intent was to evoke the temporary barracks of the 1980s exhibition, enclosing the traces within a new architectural shell: a square volume, partly underground, which houses the new exhibition spaces, archives, library and staff offices. The project was selected specifically for its modest and pragmatic nature. Among the requirements was to «avoid any attempt at artistic or architectural elevation in favour of greater attention to the place of the executioners» (Bernardi 2023, 103). The winning project, much more anonymous in character, consists of a large gray metal box placed in the central part of the site, housing the exhibitions and documentation center. Around it, an outdoor pathway allows visitors to view the site's remnants. Peter Zumthor's project was completely different. According to the architect himself, his aim was to create a building that would evoke emotions in visitors. In line with the architect's poetics expressed in previous projects, such as the architecture created to protect the Roman excavations in the city of Chur (1986), the *Topographie des Terrors* is presented as an abstract element characterised solely by the relationship between structure and material. Zumthor's design appears as a long, narrow bar built of prefabricated concrete beams, assembled horizontally and vertically to form a structural frame reminiscent of timber construction. He described it as an enveloping space, an architecture built from remains. Although this project was never realised, it served as a reference point for buildings constructed in similar contexts. Museums built on sites of perpetrators hold great historical and memorial value; being located on sites of memory turns them into experiential spaces themselves. Most projects of this type are being developed in countries like Belgium, France, and Germany. In September 2012, the *Kazerne Dossin* project was completed in Mechelen, Belgium, a building used as a transit camp from 1942 to 1944 for Jews, Roma and Sinti. As in every site marked by contested memories and complex historical events, the first gesture of memorialization is the placement of a commemorative plaque on the facade of the barracks in remembrance of the deportations. A commemorative site for Belgian history, it has now been transformed into a memorial museum. In the 1970s, the former barracks just outside the old city walls were converted into a nondescript residential complex, with the courtyard turned into a garden above an underground car park. This transformation risked erasing memory, but the community's pain endured. In 1995, the *Joods Museum van Deportatie en Verzet* (JMDV) (Jewish Museum of Deportation and Resistance) was inaugurated in part of the old barracks. A decade later, the Flemish community chose to confront this past by launching a public competition for a study center, memorial, and museum on deportations. Bob Van Reeth (AWG Architects) won with a proposal to house the study center and memorial within the original barracks and to add a new museum building along the northern city wall, framed by a public square (Colenbrander 2014). The new building resembles a watchtower, fully closed on its middle floors and opening at the top with large openings, further emphasized by a balcony running along the top floor. Part of the barracks, now the memorial, was restored and hosts a documentation center and three galleries inside former prison cells. The new building contains the permanent exhibition, focusing on four main themes: the Shoah from a Belgian perspective, the role of victims and perpetrators, rehabilitation, and human rights. A pure, stereometric volume blocks the view of the historic barracks, which remain visible only from the terrace level.

The Case of Visitor Centers

A more in-depth look must be given to the many extermination sites that have recently been transformed into memorial museums through the addition of visitor centers and the preservation of surviving remains. Numerous extermination camps have built new facilities to serve as welcoming and interpretive centers, employing advanced technologies. These buildings share similar architectural choices: minimalist language in both form and material. In Mauthausen, the Besucherzentrum by Mshp Architekten was inaugurated in 2003. It is a large museum-information center, constructed of reinforced concrete. Architects Herwing Mayer, Christoph Schwartz and Karl Peyrer-Heimstatt (Mshp Architekten) have incorporated the new building by placing it along the south-east side of the hill. However, it remains an imposing structure characterised by its choice of materials, raw concrete and few openings. The project crosses a plot of land devoid of vegetation, and this sense of desolation and sadness is accentuated in the outdoor garden, where shapeless stones have been placed to create a space that is both open and closed. The project crosses a plot of land devoid of vegetation, and this sense of desolation and sadness is accentuated in the outdoor garden, where shapeless stones have been placed to create a space that is both open and closed. The building uses a minimalist style, evident both in its exterior and interior spaces. Similarly, the Dokumentationszentrum in Bergen-Belsen (2006-2007), designed by Brunswick architects Jürgen Engel and Michael Zimmermann, dialogues with the remains of the camp. The museum is a long, narrow building forming a path marked by tight passages flanked by high walls, with some gallery-like segments that underline its introspective character. The only large window is located at the end of the main exhibition hall, framing the camp landscape, barack silhouettes and memorial visible in the distance. The entire building is made of concrete, used for both exterior and interior surfaces. The exhibition, designed by architect and scenographer Hans Dieter Schaal, takes the concept of the path as its organizing principle. Alongside documents, there are listening stations where visitors can hear interviews with survivors.

The exhibit design echoes the building's sober lines and monochrome tones. In more recent projects, a shift seems to be emerging, one that moves toward reconciliation. While some characteristics persist (minimalist language, parallelepiped volumes), a more conciliatory approach to place begins to emerge. An example of musealization that differs from previous ones is the Kamp Vught (2000-2002), the largest of the three Dutch camps. Maria Clara Ruggeri Tricoli describes it as a project seeking to convey «a new, more livable, more humane time» (2009, 249). Built at the entrance of the camp, the building is a minimalist parallelepiped acting as a filter «between present and past, between an undefined public space (a parking lot) and the spatial abstraction of the camp» (Ruggeri Tricoli 2009, 248). The exhibition halls are mostly empty, dominated by white, and connected through volumetric interlocks. Exterior finishing and three large windows opening onto the landscape suggest a more serene interpretation of the themes. Even its placement—aligned with the camp's original barrack grid – seems to take possession of the site, imposing a calm and peaceful presence upon it. In France, recent years have seen projects aiming to reconcile history and memory. The Mémorial de l'Internement et de la Déportation by Jean-Jacques Raynaud, inaugurated in 2008, includes a documentation center and a pathway through the preserved barracks and outdoor space. A key intervention was to give the site a façade that functions as a threshold and preparatory space for the visit. A new white concrete building parallel to

the barrack layout now acts as a screen. The preserved barracks function as both exhibition spaces and exhibited objects. Recent layers were removed to reveal historical traces in original materials and colors. The aim is to stage the stratification of history rather than reconstruct it. Finally, the Rivesaltes Memorial by Rudy Ricciotti, Passelac, and Roques (2015) sits on a site with a complex past: an internment camp from 1939 to 1942, and after the Algerian War, a reception center for Harki families. The project places a new semi-buried concrete building among the barrack ruins, partially covered by vegetation, a 260 meter long, 4 meter high, 30 meter wide tunnel alternating contemplative spaces, exhibition rooms, educational spaces, and an auditorium. Notably, the building is never taller than the surrounding ruins. The now overgrown northern barracks are preserved as historical traces. It is an architecture that appears almost as a denial, like the first counter-monument projects created in the 1980s, which sought to shift the rhetoric that had always accompanied monuments.

Conclusions

Recurrent within the field of memorial museums—particularly when these intervene on sites inscribed with a difficult, contested, or suppressed past—are practices of *adaptive reuse*. Among the most prevalent design strategies emerge, on the one hand, the deployment of an abstract formal vocabulary; on the other, the non-antagonistic insertion of new volumes in relation to preexisting structures.

Architectural responses gravitate toward pure geometries, essential parallelepipeds, blind façades, and unrefined materials—concrete, frosted glass, exposed stone—through which space is articulated as mental before it is physical. Primarily, the building or its remains are to be construed as a document. The ruin is approached as a text: to be read, deciphered, exhibited. Within this framework, the recovery of original structures—cells, barracks, walls—constitutes an act of interpretation prior to, and indeed beyond, conservation. The project assumes, in this sense, an exegetical function. What these interventions share is a specific stance toward history: not monumentalizing, but dialogical. Architecture operates as both physical and conceptual threshold, establishing the conditions for an active confrontation with the past. The examined projects converge toward a spatial conception of the museum as pathway rather than container. The visitor's experience is frequently structured as a cognitive and corporeal itinerary: sequences of thresholds, constrictions, crossings, and landscape apertures. The contemporary intervention is thus called upon to construct distance – not as a mode of erasure, but as a means of understanding. The dialectic between old and new—as exemplified in the tension between restored barracks and the abstract volumes of new visitor centers—produces a temporal disjunction that provokes reflection. This distance is at once architectural and political: it transforms the space of memory into a critical space.

Notes

1. In 1966 the Municipality of Trieste launched a competition for the Museum of the Resistance at the Risiera di San Sabba, but none of the ten submissions was selected. In 1968 the Municipality announced a second competition, which Boico won with a new proposal.



Fig. 1-2. Rudy Ricciotti Architect, associated with Passelac & Roques Architectes, Memorial du Camp de Rivesaltes, Rivesaltes (FR), 2005-2014, Courtesy Kévin Dolmaire

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