

# **Shoah Presence: Architectural Representations of the Holocaust**

**Eran Neuman**

**Studies in Architecture**

SHOAH PRESENCE:  
ARCHITECTURAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE HOLOCAUST

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# Shoah Presence: Architectural Representations of the Holocaust

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*To my father, Moshe, once a Holocaust victim, always a human being*

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## **Introduction: Holocaust Commemoration and Architectural Representation**

### **MY FATHER**

In August 1999, my parents, Moshe and Ruth Neuman, came to visit me and Avner, my life partner, in Los Angeles. We had been living on the West Coast for almost a year by then; we left Israel so I could pursue my postgraduate studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. My parents came to visit, ostensibly to enjoy a vacation in sunny L.A. but really to make sure “the kids” were doing well. On the second or third evening of their stay, we went out to dinner at one of the city’s high-end restaurants, Asia de Cuba. The beautiful Asia de Cuba is located in a Philippe Starck-designed hotel, the Mondrian, on Sunset Boulevard in West Hollywood. From the restaurant balcony, we could see Los Angeles spread out before us, a quasi-suburban fabric carpeted with twinkling lights and ribbons of highway. My father, Moshe, a Holocaust survivor—who was deported in 1944 from his small village, Nyircsászári, in the east of Hungary, first to the ghetto in the nearest big city, Nyirbátor, then to Auschwitz-Birkenau and finally to Dachau and its satellite camps—liked to eat well. Wherever he traveled, he would seek out the best restaurants, so Asia de Cuba, with its Asian-Latin fusion cuisine, was a perfect choice for him.

In the restaurant, sitting among a smattering of Hollywood stars, my father started to question me about my postgraduate studies. A self-made master carpenter who had a practical approach to life, a survivor who lost his entire family and never finished high school, let alone an academic degree, because of the war—my father wanted to know why I had to pursue postgraduate studies when I already had an academic degree (B.Arch) and a profession (architect). Not that he was questioning the importance of education; on the contrary, he pushed my two older sisters and me to study constantly throughout our lives. He just wanted to know the nature of postgraduate studies for architects. In his mind, it was practical studies that advanced an architect’s expertise. Enrolled in a critical studies program at UCLA, I had to explain that I was studying history and theory, which would certainly make me a better architect, should I want to practice in the future and not pursue an academic career.

My father insisted. He wanted to know about the courses, the seminars, the classes, my classmates, everything. Hesitating, I decided to tell him about a seminar I was just completing with Professor Anthony Vidler on architectural representation. In this mind-opening course, I was drawn to write about Holocaust representation in and by architecture. The spring of 1999, when I took the seminar, was shortly after the opening of Daniel Libeskind's extension to the Berlin Museum with the Jewish Department (better known today as the Jewish Museum of Berlin). The building garnered global attention from professionals and the general public and I, as a second-generation Holocaust survivor, was totally fascinated and enthralled by its expressiveness and uniqueness—especially since this large-scale building in the global spotlight dealt with the Holocaust. In the seminar, I wrote about the representation of history in and by architecture, using the Holocaust as a case study (much like in this book, and I will elaborate on this later).

I was hesitant to talk about the subject, because I was unsure of my father's reaction. After his release by the US Army from Mühldorf labor camp, a satellite of Dachau, he immigrated to Israel in 1948, in essence "leaving behind" the Holocaust in Europe. He never spoke about it at home, never dealt with it in front of my sisters and me, and effectively started a whole new life in Israel, life without the Holocaust. As far as I could tell, he was a healthy man who did not want to dwell much on the traumatic events he had experienced in the war.

My concerns about his reaction proved to be unfounded. There, in Asia de Cuba, my father was curious about the topic I chose for the seminar, asked questions and wanted to know more about the issue of representation and the ways in which architecture comes into play when it deals with the representation of history. He was even willing to tell his story of the war—what had happened to him and his family, where he was during his 14 months in the hands of the Nazis, which was documented down to the tiniest detail by the Germans. He spoke about the Nazi officer that helped him stay alive by leaving some extra food behind for him; the black American soldier who took care of him, effectively saving his life, when he was released from the camp seriously ill; and the return to his village to find out that at the age of 16 he was left alone in the world, with only one living relative. It was not I who started my father talking. For 30 years, I had never dared to ask. My sisters and I knew that our father was a survivor, but we did not ask many questions and he did not supply any details. Now in L.A., in a fancy restaurant, it seemed out of context to talk about the wartime atrocities and my father's experience. It was Avner, my partner, a journalist and later a screenwriter, who started to "interview" my father and ask questions—one after the other. My father replied, as if he had been waiting for years for someone to ask him about it. The story was ready in his mind and the details started to pour out, describing a horrific tale of being in captivity, in dehumanized conditions, in extreme psychological circumstances, with the threat of death constantly looming. For almost three hours, he sat there in Hollywood and told the story. I was silent. My mother, who knew all the details, interjected every once in a while to add something she recalled. Avner interviewed.

Dinner was over, we went back to our apartment, I woke up the next morning and I could not recall a single detail of my father's story. I had completely repressed it, unwilling to deal with the narrative, with the horrific details and their significance.

I completely rejected my father's representation of his Holocaust story, even if mediated by Avner. It was a failure of representation; the mind could not absorb the details. I had always been drawn to this period in history, reading and learning about it since I was very young. Yet I could not relate to it as a personal narrative that is part of my conscious life. Years later, when I was a fellow at the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. (USHMM) and had become a professional in Holocaust studies—at least, a specialist regarding the connection between the Holocaust and architecture—I asked my father to tell me the story again. This time, I took notes. As a researcher in a Holocaust study center, I could not continue to not know the details. I was asked by many of my colleagues about my father's story and I needed to have ready answers. This time, I was treating the task as a professional. In L.A., the revelations had been premature. The Holocaust could not be represented to me. Yet it is clear that even as an academic, I will never be able to leave the topic. The Holocaust is part of my DNA and I am bound to deal with it throughout my life.

And still later, in February 2011, I went to Dachau for the first time. The circumstances were completely different. I was visiting Munich with two of my graduate students to explore new technology for our digital design laboratory. We drove from Zurich to Munich and I asked my two young students if they had any interest in or objection to visiting the concentration camp. Both are Jewish, one religiously observant and the other secular, and they immediately responded affirmatively. As soon as I entered the site, I instantaneously burst into tears. I could not tolerate the thought that my father had been interned in this camp just before being transferred to Mühldorf. Dachau in early 2011 was in a different condition, functioning differently, than during the time my father was held there in captivity. Now it was a concentration camp transformed into a museum and a commemorative site. It did not include the 34 barracks that had been lined up one after the other and had to be demolished due to their poor condition. And a few of the guard towers, as well as the policing facilities, were also missing. Dachau today is a place of mourning and contemplation, emanating a strong aura of the events that took place there, but it is far removed from the site as it was in early 1933, when it was built as the first concentration camp in Europe. Today Dachau includes two barracks that were reconstructed as an example of the structures that used to be on site (the location of the 32 missing barracks is marked with a concrete frame on the ground where they used to stand). Postwar additions to the site include four chapels, one for each of the four religions practiced by the prisoners that had been in the camp; a Catholic Carmelite convent outside the camp's northern wall; a memorial for the Jews killed in Dachau; and several other memorials. I asked my students to leave me alone for a while so I could wander around alone, as I needed time to see, absorb, contemplate and commemorate.

Dachau became a personal place for me. The personal experience intermingled with my father's story. I recalled him sitting in Hollywood and telling the story. I could not dissociate the two experiences: back in Los Angeles, with my father present physically and me missing mentally, and now, here in Dachau, without him physically, but with him mentally. These two experiences were also tightly connected to the question of place memory and commemoration. While my

experiences are personal and related to my own biography and my life, they nevertheless raise larger questions about Holocaust commemoration places, sites and architecture. After all, the Nazi atrocities against Jews, Romas, homosexuals, communists and all others they defined as non-Aryan took place in space, in architecture and sometimes even through the active agency of architecture. The question that crossed my mind there in Dachau concerned the role of this architecture today. Furthermore, how can architecture relate to these events when dealing with the commemoration of these events offsite?

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

The following pages deal with these questions. Yet to be able to delve into the issue in a more profound way, I had to define and categorize sites related to the Holocaust into two groups: one, organized and non-organized sites of commemoration in the places of annihilation; and the other, offsite sites of commemoration in various scales and typologies—organized and non-organized, institutionalized and personal. I deliberately decided not to deal with places like Dachau, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Bergen-Belsen or any killing site that was used by Nazis, whether organized as a concentration camp, a mass grave dug in the woods for burial of corpses, or a place randomly chosen for executions. Instead, I decided to concentrate on places that were chosen for commemoration that have no direct connection to the places of mass murder. Thus, I chose to discuss three museums (and I will elaborate later on the choice of museum as an example of architecture that deals with Holocaust commemoration)—the Ghetto Fighters' House in northern Israel, Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, D.C.

While my fourth example is a bit different from the other three, I also decided to relate to the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin by Peter Eisenman. The first difference lies in the fact that the Memorial is situated in the very heart of the German capital, next to where the Nazi governmental compound, including the Reichskanzlei, or Reich Chancellery, and Hitler's bunker, once stood. This location creates a link to the mass murder because the wartime events were an extension of these places in the heart of Berlin. The second difference between Eisenman's Memorial and the three museums is that the Berlin site was conceived not as a museum, but as a memorial. I chose to include it specifically because I wanted to examine it in the context of places that had been used by the Nazi regime but were not where the actual killing was carried out. This way I could also examine the ways in which the Germans inserted into their current reality aspects of the Nazi regime that did not take place on site. Today, Berlin is saturated with Holocaust-related memorials. The plaques set into the city's pavements in memory of the Jewish families deported to camps, or the sign placed outside Wittenbergplatz listing the names of the camps are just two examples of how Berlin is dealing with its past. Eisenman's Memorial is one of the latest additions to this trend. My examination of this addition will consider the ways in which Eisenman conceived the question of Holocaust representation.

The common ground of the sites enables an examination of what happens when a historical narrative is inserted into another reality. Dealing with concentration

and death camps raises a completely different theoretical and historical set of questions, which, in my view, calls for separate consideration. These questions have to do mostly with the preservation of sites and less with the interpretation and representation of a historical event, such as the Holocaust, by architecture in a new context. In this book, I deliberately sought to examine historical representation in a new context, much like any historiography proposes: producing a historiographical text based on facts and documents that, in fact, create a new entity out of these references. The Ghetto Fighters' House, Yad Vashem, the USHMM and the Memorial in Berlin are cases in which the Holocaust was framed by architecture as a historical case study to be represented to the general public. Thus, these four places serve as architectural texts that reflect beliefs, ideologies, points of views and perceptions about the events that took place in Europe during the 12 years of the Nazi regime. This book deals with the histories of these cases.

## ARCHITECTURE AND THE PROBLEM OF REPRESENTATION

But what is the question raised by these museums and Eisenman's memorial, what are the main issues they address and how does architecture face these issues? In many ways, the Holocaust museums are historical texts. Similar to any historiography, these museums offer an account of history and react to it in the present. Yet there are differences between historiography when it is conducted as a separate discipline and architecture when it relates to history and tries to make historical comments by its own means. The formulation and refashioning of history as a modern discipline is generally attributed to nineteenth-century German historian Leopold von Ranke,<sup>1</sup> and to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel<sup>2</sup> and Karl Marx<sup>3</sup> and their dialectical materialism. Their focus on primary sources as the basis for historiography, their insistence on the documents' authenticity and the call to narrativize the historical sequence raised some profound philosophical questions about the nature of history writing. Not only did they allude to questions concerning the voice of the historian, and her or his authorship and agency—which were later addressed by philosophers such as Michel Foucault<sup>4</sup> and Jacques Derrida,<sup>5</sup> on one side of intellectual map, and Theodor Adorno and Jürgen Habermas, on the other, as well as by Hayden White<sup>6</sup> and Dominick LaCapra<sup>7</sup>—but they also related to the ways in which historical processes take place. Hegel and Marx pointed out the dialectic nature of the sequence of events. Others emphasized the multi-directionality of the ways in which events function in creating consciousness and setting the stage for the next event to take place.

Nonetheless, whether one accepts one model of historiography or another, it is important to emphasize that the main medium of history writing is textual, in particular, written language. Before concluding their research and historical account, historians may examine a variety of sources and rely on visual, audio and even tectonic means of representation; indeed, they may even use visual aids such as graphs, images, diagrams and so on in the historical representation. Yet, at the end of the day, the main mechanism by which the historical representation is formulated into history is by the written word. Historians refer to the documents

they find, examine their authenticity, interpret the findings and then narrate the events they are addressing. This mechanism and the media that most historians use set the parameters by which history is told, gains credibility and is received. The written word, the text, is a format that allows the examination of past events on both the conscious and the unconscious levels. The text provides meanings that are apparent and exposed, while also enfolding hidden meanings between the lines.

But what happens when other cultural practices try to represent history, practices that do not emerge from the discipline of history and do not directly apply its methods of the written word and the text? For instance, what happens when theater performs history, or cinema provides historical accounts in mega-movies, or art and architecture present history by their own means of representation? These practices may indeed return to history in order to relate to it, but not only is the means of relating to history—cinematic, theatrical, performative, visual and so on—different, but the logic, scope and framework might be completely different, too.<sup>8</sup>

History can be represented in many ways. When it comes to history as a discipline, beyond the mechanism of writing and textuality as its main media, there are certain values that apply to historical representation. As a representation of past events, history must be accurate, truthful, reliable and exact. If a historian does not maintain these values, she or he would be either a bad historian or one deliberately trying to deceive. These values are not necessarily limited to history writing and textuality; they can be applied to other cultural practices as well. For instance, in cinema, documentary films sustain, or at least try to sustain, authentic representation, remaining true to the source of events they represent, accurately, reliably and exactly. In many ways, documentary films outdo history writing, because they are based not only on the textual representation but also include visual and audio representation. This, by the way, may be also their drawback, since they may not be as multilayered as textual representation. The visual and the audio provide interpretations that the textual does not and in this way, limit the possibilities for the emergence of subconscious ideas related to the topic under discussion. Like cinematic representation, architecture also provides a historical representation alluding to historiography. In architectural preservation and conservation, architects attempt to reconstruct historical structures that are truthful to the original, accurate and reliable. To that end, they treat the source of the preserved structure as a text that has to be reconstructed in the same way it was initially made. These architects and preservationists often follow the same building techniques, use the same materials and attempt to recreate the old building's same formal appearance.

The big difference between building preservation and conservation and historical writing or documentary films is that the former combines representation and the real in one entity. Architects engaged in conservation work on the historical reference itself—namely, the building. Usually, they do not recreate a new building in a different context, but reconstruct an existing building. The reconstruction is dissimilar to other cultural practices because it engages existing artifacts, such as buildings. Thus, architects do not have to represent history but rather present it as is. The representational aspect of building conservation can