

The Fool's Journey: Holocaust Museums and Jewish Misrepresentation

by

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Submitted to OCAD University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of Master of Arts in Contemporary Art, Design and New Media Art  
Histories (CADN)

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2021

## ABSTRACT

*“Instead of self-imposed pride and importance, maybe it makes sense to humble ourselves, and acknowledge, that we are all Fools making our way from darkness to light, learning life lessons as we go.”* This statement, which I wrote to myself at the outset of this project, serves as a guiding principle as I reflect on the topic at hand. In this project, I explore how a universal and apolitical approach to Holocaust museum narrative might be fostered, by examining the relationship of the Israeli state and Zionism as a global political by-product of this state apparatus viewed through the lens of the Holocaust museum as a pedagogical tool. My research questions the ways in which museum architecture, and particularly Holocaust museums, contribute to and perpetuate the ideological regime of Zionism as a cultural, political and pedagogical project. I am interested in how Zionist propaganda has been manifested in Holocaust museums’ architecture across the contemporary world as a cultural system of information dispersal, ideological training and hegemonic control. This research will also attempt to examine secular spiritualities, in particular Jewish New Age mysticism, to suggest a more holistic and universal approach to storytelling techniques that have been lost within the current standards of Holocaust museum architecture.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend thanks to those who have helped me throughout the writing of my MRP. I would first like to thank my supervisor, Eric Nay, an Associate Professor from the faculty of Liberal Art and Sciences, whose expertise was invaluable in coming up with effective research questions, methodology and overall direction of the project. I have received a great deal of support, encouragement and reassurance from Eric which helped me through doubts and uncertainties. His insightful feedback pushed me to sharpen my thinking, writing style and bring my work to a higher level. I would also like to thank my secondary advisor, Gerald McMaster, a Professor from the faculty of Liberal Art and Sciences, whose expertise in spiritual practices was really helpful for my research which touches upon alternative Jewish spiritualities. Gerald made many valuable suggestions that are reflected in my work. I am very thankful to Keith Bresnahan, an Associate Professor from the faculty of Arts and Science, who has taken over Eric Nay's position during the summer, in Eric's absence, in order to help me finalize my work. I greatly appreciate Keith's support, suggestions and feedback to my multiple re-writes and additions to the MRP. I can't thank him enough for his patience, professionalism and prompt responses to my questions during the toughest part of the MRP writing.

I would like to acknowledge Marie-Josée Therrien, an Associate Professor from the faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences, who sparked my interest in Museum Architecture. When taking her course, I realized that architecture can be manipulative and serve a political agenda, and due to this realization, my entire vision for the MRP was formed.

I would also like to acknowledge the important work of the scholars in the field of Zionism, Jewish New Age spiritualities, and Museum Architecture in terms of its political agenda and propaganda. Among them are Stephanie Rotem, James Young, Peter Eisenmen, Jennifer Hansen-Glucklich, Jaques Hersh, to mention a few. Due to their questioning of mainstream narratives I was able to analyze famous Holocaust Museums at an unusual angle and to come up with some alternative methodologies and suggestions.

I want to acknowledge my fellow students, who listened to the proposal of my MRP and came up with insightful questions and suggestions. I am very thankful to my family, particularly my parents and my husband, and my friends, who believed in me, encouraged me and supported my vision. I am very grateful for their genuine interest in the subject matter, for their listening ear, stimulating discussions and feedback for certain parts of my research.

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## **The Fool's Journey: Holocaust Museums and Jewish Misrepresentation**



**YAD VASHEM:** <https://cac.mcgill.ca/>

An image showing the glass wall at the exit from Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **METHODS**

This Major Research Paper explores the question of how Holocaust Museum architecture perpetuates Zionist ideology through its form, materiality, and exhibition practices. My investigation is theoretical, analytical and semi-auto-biographical, drawing from my own experiences inside the hegemonic state-run educational system practiced in Israel; the settlement practices of Israel which I experienced first-hand, and which I am now seeing and critiquing in contemporary Holocaust museums. Deploying a critical framework informed by Antonio Gramsci, Chaim Weizmann, James Young and others, as well as architectural theorists and artists such as Peter Eisenman, Josef Albers, and Amy Sodaro, I hope to demonstrate how architecture has been used as a method to express and educate others about the formation of the Jewish state as a by-product

of the Holocaust or *Shoah*.<sup>1</sup> Additional sites of investigation will include museum artifacts and popular responses to these Holocaust museums in travel blogs and other sites.

I will argue that an understanding of the ideological power of architecture leads to another key question of my research, namely: how can buildings educate us? And are they even supposed to take on this role? This question is important to analyze within the context of Holocaust museums in particular, and a number of case studies and a rich variety of literature will help me formulate a response as a critique of the contemporary Holocaust museum industry. While some theorists advocate for the significant role of the building in the museum's narrative, others remain in favour of buildings which merely serve as containers for archival content. I intend to explore the role of museum architecture from both points of view as a critical method using the existing literature, as well as analyses of case studies.

I will conduct comparative analysis of three Holocaust museums: Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum in Jerusalem (further Yad Vashem), Jewish Museum Berlin (JMB) and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. (USHMM). I intend to investigate the architecture of each museum and determine the ways in which museum buildings create the Holocaust narratives, which, in their turn, express the leading political agenda of each country. In Yad Vashem, the agenda is “distinctly Zionist one that relies on the symbolism of autochthony and redemption in contrast to Jewish suffering in exile” (Hansen-Glucklich 1). The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum communicates the idea of American exceptionalism and democracy, while the Holocaust narrative of the Jewish Museum Berlin, uses the symbolism of the void to emphasize the loss of Germany’s Jewish communities as “irreparable rupture and self-inflicted wound” (Hansen-Glucklich 1).

This research paper will argue that all three museums “take advantage” of the Holocaust narratives to perpetuate positive images of their home nations: Israel, the United States, and Germany, and further that all three museums fail to effectively communicate the realities of the Holocaust due to their restrictive pursuit of strengthening political agendas and state ideologies.

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<sup>1</sup> *Shoah* means “catastrophe” in Hebrew. Both terms are used in reference to the mass murder of Jews under the German Nazi regime during 1941-1945.

## **EXPECTED OUTCOMES AND GOALS**

This MRP will ideally contribute to the scholarship of contemporary Holocaust memorials and museums, how we teach critically about the Holocaust, and further our understanding of the role of architecture in Holocaust education. The project adds to an already rich contemporary critique of the remnants of Zionist pedagogies and practices, and raises awareness of how powerful Zionism remains within contemporary Judaism, as well as how it contributes to both Americanism and global imperialism.<sup>2</sup> Stephanie Rotem, who is an architect and Head of the Museum Studies Program at Tel Aviv University, refers to the Zionist ideology she sees promoted by Yad Vashem as the “Americanization of the Holocaust” (9). In turn, Israeli values of democracy and independence can be seen as shared values with the US, which proclaims itself an ally of Israel as the only democracy in the Middle East. In fact, these values serve as a cover-up for violence and colonialism, which are characteristic of both Zionism and American Imperialism. Therefore, Zionism can also be seen as an American product, one which helps the US promote its violent agenda in the Middle East.

I attempt to suggest possible ways of producing counter-Zionist practices in relation to museums and the use of historical/museological narratives, in presenting arguments for the effectiveness of a range of narratives as opposed to the singular hegemonic educational methods and messages that characterize mainstream Israeli narratives and Holocaust museums in different countries.

## **CRITICAL POSITION/ AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTES**

This project is autobiographical in many ways. I am specifically addressing this issue at this stage in my life because I am interested in teaching and education following my own experiences of living, being educated, and working as a teacher in Israel. I gained certain perspectives on both the ideological power of propaganda and the role of art in communicating political agendas as a material form of pedagogy in my lived experience that I am now able to see critically as an educator, scholar and artist. I am skeptical, like many today, of Israel’s perceived entitlement to occupied land, and see how this attitude of entitlement was cultivated by mass media, literature,

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<sup>2</sup> According to Meriam-Webster dictionary, Zionism is “an international movement originally for the establishment of Jewish national or religious community in Palestine and later for the support of modern Israel.”

schools, religious organizations, museums, memorials and learning centres. Yad Vashem is a vivid example of an instrument of Zionist propaganda: it is also an example of the material manifestation of Zionism in the form of populist museum architecture.

My fundamental research question is: Can there be an artifact, even a Holocaust museum, that can explore Judaism and Jewish identity that does not perpetuate Zionism? By analyzing New Age spirituality seen through the lens of Jewish thought, while drawing from a variety of contemporary scholars, I will show how secular and apolitical practices such as Tarot cards can serve as alternative methodologies for Jews and Jewish thought to dissociate themselves from Zionism yet continue Jewish tradition. I suggest that this is a tool that could re-animate the narratives that need to be remembered through memorial museums and self-exploration.

## **THE PROBLEM OF THE MODERN HOLOCAUST MUSEUM**

Modern-day Holocaust museums reproduce an ideology of entitlement to “the promised land” and settler practices. By promoting the politics of Zionism, Holocaust museum architecture contributes to the construction of false collective memories of Jewish identity dependent upon the conquest of Palestinian lands, which this thesis calls into question using the Holocaust museum as a particular kind of political artifact. This phenomenon is also perpetuated in the architecture itself experientially, particularly as circulation becomes a prescribed “journey” for the building’s visitors, as a methodology to teach ideologies.

Contrarily, as a foil to the absolutism of the Holocaust Museum, I will use the words, ideas and even the designed artifacts of “Jew Age” Jews who are able to explore their spirituality while being critical of Zionist thought and practices. I will use architecture as a lens to analyze these practices, specifically using the Yad Vashem memorial museum in Jerusalem as well as other recent Holocaust museums to demonstrate my point.

## **THE AMERICAN PROBLEM: ARCHITECTURE AND IDEOLOGY**

The ideological capacity of the Holocaust museums can be easily tied back to Americanization as a form of global hegemony and power. How does Zionism contribute to global imperialism? How does the Israeli educational system haunt global design? Holocaust commemoration practices, and

the buildings which remind us of the Holocaust, contribute to worldwide distribution of American imperialist propaganda as a by-product, but what else do they do? This effect is reached by indirect advertisement of imperialist values through identical Zionist values such as violence and colonization masked as independence and democracy.<sup>3</sup>

Peter Eisenman, an internationally recognized American architect and educator, author and critic, believes that a real architecture for Holocaust memorialization is one that creates “a physical experience that does not rely on a representation of the Holocaust as its major narrative but rather seeks to present what architecture is and can be” (Eisenman 1). It means that the value of architecture is in its technical performance and creative expression of the narrative, and *not* in the narrative itself. The same is true about any other kind of art which is about “mastery” and means of expression and not about the storyline. Powerful architecture does not tell stories – *it makes them happen!* Yad Vashem is a highly effective example of an architecture that makes the story happen, because it is understood by the viewer and the intended feelings in the viewer are achieved, however manipulative it may be. The two other museums I explore here, JMB and USHMM, have architectural narratives that interfere and compete with the narrative of the museum in intriguing ways, which is not necessarily negative, but such architecture is less effective in expressing its agenda - whereas in Yad Vashem, architecture does not *tell* the story: *it is* the story in itself. This is why it is powerful in delivering a clear message.

## **PROBLEMATIZING THE PROBLEM: ALTERNATIVE EPISTEMOLOGIES AND “JEW AGE” SPIRITUALITY**

Unlike most Israeli Jews who are exposed to the propaganda of Zionism and Americanism, Diasporic Jews often do not wish to identify with a state that violates the human rights of another people and serves the interests of U.S. imperialism worldwide. The active number of Jewish organizations and figures vocally criticize Israeli policies of occupation outside of Israel, compared with those within the state of Israel itself. Jacques Hersh, a French author and researcher of International relations, quotes Tony Karon, a South African journalist, as saying, “the simple fact is that almost two-thirds of us have chosen freely to live elsewhere and have no intention of ever

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<sup>3</sup> Today, with the surge in anti-Muslim rhetoric, xenophobia and Trumpian anti-immigration hatred, this phenomenon takes on additional meaning and importance.



settling in Israel.” (Hersh 2). While this chosen life for diasporic Jews outside Israel can be seen as a simple choice of lifestyle, it may also contain an implicit critique of Zionism’s aims: as Hersh notes, “Many active anti-imperialist Jews in the Diaspora were caught off-balance by the realization that Israel, as the embodiment of the victimhood of the Jewish people, could be capable of victimizing another people and of following a pro-U.S. imperialism foreign policy” (Hersh 2). According to Hersh, “The existential purpose of Israel has [also] come into question for many Israelis...” (1), for whom the idea of a "chosen people" in a “promised land” is losing its appeal (21).

This is one source for the contemporary Israeli interest in New Age spirituality combined with Judaism, colloquially referred to as “Jew Age” (Ruah-Midnar and Oron 33), as an increasingly popular countermovement meant to challenge the unilateral message of Zionism. These practices are significant as a method meant to disentangle Judaism from its inherent political and geopolitical implications and its claim to an exclusive and absolute truth.

## **TAROT AS COUNTER METHOD**

A part of such movements, new religious paraphernalia (tashmishei kedusha) has become a form of sacred art in Israel. Jew Agers use Jewish, traditional, religious articles, which are sometimes newly designed and are often revamped versions of older iconography/symbols. For example, Tarot cards with Jewish themes and Hebrew letters each bearing a sacred meaning, are used for counseling, diagnosis and therapy, such as cards based on the stories of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, master of Jewish mysticism (Mark). Tarot is a visual language that helps tap into our subconscious self and bring about things to our conscious awareness that we fail to acknowledge. It is both a device and a system for gaining insight, guidance and answers to life questions. Tarot can be also a storytelling technique, just like museum architecture; I suggest that it can serve as alternative methodology, a tool of secular spirituality that could animate narratives of memorial museums through the prism of self-exploration.

A Tarot deck is designed as a virtual journey of the Fool through the major life lessons, overcoming obstacles, which resembles the Holocaust museum “journey” through the darkness of the Holocaust into the light of liberation. Unlike the one-sided narratives of the Holocaust museums,

however, Tarot offer room for interpretation, growth and alternative action, suggesting insight on how to tell stories of suffering, loss and redemption. Moreover, once the Fool reaches the World, the journey is not over: he starts his quest all over again and learns new lessons, because life wisdom is endless, and he always sees things in a new light. I will argue that the artifacts needed for representing trauma are not buildings, objects or experiences in a conventional sense, but rather an architecture that is ungrounded and unbuilt, which inspires authentic emotional response and contributes to natural healing.<sup>4</sup>

As part of my exploration of the subject matter, I conducted a Tarot reading, asking the cards to reveal the essence of each Holocaust museum under analysis. The purpose of this experiment is to provide insight at the Holocaust museums from a different perspective, which allows for interpreting them through the prism of our intuition, which the Tarot bring into our conscious awareness. I used a deck created by Salvador Dali, who believed that by experiencing Tarot we can interpret images and symbols the same way we interpret our dreams, that reflect our subconscious selves. Dali used Hebrew letters for 22 major arcana cards, following Kabbalistic teachings of the Tree of Life which consists of 10 nodes representing the archetypes and 22 lines, each corresponding to a Hebrew letter, which connect the nodes that stand for relationships between the archetypes. Similar to Tarot cards, the Kabbalistic Tree of life depicts human existence, human psyche, values, deities and energies, bringing spiritual and physical worlds together. I pulled three cards: Seven of Swords to represent Yad Vashem; Death for Jewish Museum Berlin and the Queen of Pentacles for the US Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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<sup>4</sup> That is, the natural healing of the individual or collective psyche. I want to distinguish this here from other, ecologically based visions of restorative or healing architecture, as the next stage of 'green' architecture, where more is given to the environment over a building's lifetime than is taken during its construction and operation. (Alec Couchman – Warren and Mahoney, Excerpt from 'A Deeper Shade of Green', ed. Johann Bernhardt (<https://sooryu.files.wordpress.com/2008/09/regenerative-restorative-architecture.pdf>))



### RE-IMAGINED JEWISH TAROT CARDS by Salvador Dali

An image showing three Tarot Cards arranged on a surface

Seven of Swords card is a sign of betrayal, deception, getting away with something, stealth, manipulation. This card corresponds to my argument that Yad Vashem's narrative is built upon constructed "truths" and manipulative propaganda. We can see a bloody creature on the left, that represents our second I, the internal truth, which reflects how Yad Vashem is disconnected from reality and is oblivious of the violent practices of Israel.

The Death card stands for endings, beginnings, change, transitions. It can also be interpreted as an absence, loss, and emptiness. This card brings into our conscious awareness that the Jewish Museum Berlin was conceived as an empty museum, as a representation of loss and unfillable void, however, it was eventually transformed into a traditional museum filled with exhibitions, which resulted in the loss of its initial purpose and appeal.

The Queen of Pentacles speaks of a personality, that is success-oriented, grounded, practical, motherly, materialistic, ambitious. This card's message is that the US Holocaust Memorial Museum is commodified, commercialized, patronizing, communicating American values such as wealth, success, property, and violence disguised as equal opportunities, independence and democracy. These values and beliefs are symbolized by the Queen sitting in front of or possibly inside a cage, holding on to a giant coin and she also has flowers in her hand: she is drawn to nature, but this desire is overpowered by money, while the demon in the right upper corner is a symbol of bad conscience and ill intentions. (The cards are drawn when upside down, you draw

them led by intuition, so one reading is done per one question, so if I ask the same question and draw cards again, it is not going to be accurate or legitimate).

## **GEO-POLITICAL BACKGROUND**

### **THE STATE OF ISRAEL**

Since my research is focused on the Holocaust museums and their contribution to Zionism, it is important to begin by explaining Zionism. Zionism is the term used for the movement aimed at re-establishment of the state of Israel as a Jewish homeland. It is important to first be familiar with the history of Israel and its state formation to understand how Israel exists today as both a place and as an ideology. The conflict between Palestinian Arabs and (now Israeli) Jews began as a struggle over land. From the end of the First World War until 1948, the area that both groups claimed was known internationally as Palestine. Jewish claims to this land are based on the biblical promise to Abraham and his descendants of this land as a historical motherland of the ancient Jewish kingdoms of Israel and Judea. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abraham and said, “To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates — the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.” (Genesis 15:18-21).

Another reason for the claim was the need of the Jewish people for an escape from European anti-Semitism, abuse and genocide. Palestinian Arab claim to the land is based on their residence in the country for hundreds of years prior to the formation of the Israeli state; the fact that Palestinians represented the demographic majority until 1948 is not insignificant. The majority of the Arab world does not take seriously the biblical promise to Israelis and Jews worldwide, and further does not believe that Palestinian Arabs should vacate their land to compensate Jews for Europe’s crimes that they have nothing to do with (Beinin and Hajjar 1).

The state of Israel reinforces its citizens’ certainty about their entitlement over former Palestinian territories using a complex system of ideological tactics with education, both at home and abroad, as a central tool. As Theodor Herzl, the founder of political Zionism, wrote in his manifesto *The*

*Jewish State* (1896), “‘the Jewish question’ was first and last a national issue that had to be resolved by the building of a state for the Jewish people” (Badie and Morlino 2766-2767). The mass extermination of European Jews can be seen to have legitimized the cause of Zionism, to the extent that the Holocaust was viewed as proof that Jews could not survive and prosper in the Diaspora and that any purported integration and assimilation of Jews in other nations was an illusion. The Shoah-paradigm, which portrays the Holocaust as an exceptional event in human society, ignoring other examples of extreme genocide around the globe, became useful in reinforcing public opinion of the justification for the creation of the Jewish state and for the “deflection of criticism of Israeli policies, especially in the occupied territories of Palestine”(Hersh 35).

Since colonization is only possible through seizing of property (both material and intellectual) by means of violence, “...the retention of land by a colonial power is rewarded the more absolute it is” (Nichols 181). Violence committed against millions of Jews became a valid reason to occupy Arab territories by means of violence as well. The scale of the Holocaust tragedy is widely perceived as valid justification for the occupation of Palestinian land, considering that this land was (believed to be) historically Jewish anyway. “The land without a people for the people without a land” was a famous saying used by the new Israeli Jews about Palestine. By dehumanizing Arabs and by denying their national identity or claims to this space, the new Israeli Jews succeeded in their conquest (Greenstein 2).

In the contemporary world, where it is common for countries to apologize for their shameful past, their genocide toward other nations, how long will Israel be in denial? It has to be noted that Israel’s history of colonization is distinct from that of other Imperial nations, in that there is a 2000-plus-year history of Jewish religious and cultural connection to this historical land, prior to the advent of the State of Israel. Therefore, it can be argued that Israel had humanitarian reasons for the land occupation, to some degree. However, for Palestinian Arabs the establishment of the state of Israel was a settler movement and a discriminatory colonial praxis, supported by even more powerful imperial states such as Great Britain and later the US.

## **ISRAEL’S YAD VASHEM: THE KEY CASE STUDY**

When I first visited the renovated Yad Vashem museum in 2007, I was overwhelmed with emotions, by the feeling of oneness with this courageous, heroic nation, by the sacred Jewish spirit and the shared memory of the past events. When I reached the glass wall at the end of the dark and suffocating tunnel and saw the breathtaking panorama of Jerusalem, I burst into tears of joy and redemption. I felt an incredible relief, almost to the point that the systematic murder of Holocaust victims was not in vain, because the Shoah enabled the Jews from all over the world to return to our historical motherland. This feeling was strengthened by the Biblical quote displayed on the gate at the entrance: “I will put my breath into you, and you shall live again, and I will set you upon your own soil” (Ezekiel 37: 14).

The museum architecture itself fulfilled its ideological function by providing a simulation of a journey through the dark which ends with the liberating light at the end of the tunnel, a spatial and emotional progression which seemed absolutely brilliant and felt cathartic to me at that time. It was not until 2016, when I took a course in museum architecture at OCADU and realized that architecture can be instructional and manipulative, that I began to question my prior experiences in the museum. Architecture is never innocent or a blank slate. It was in this realization that I came to recognize how I had been conditioned by the constructed narrative of Yad Vashem to feel certain ways, in the specific ways intended by the designers of the museum, for all who would visit it. Now removed from this context and living in Canada, freed from my former ideological veil, I feel compelled to critically explore the spatial and emotional operations of the contemporary Holocaust museum and its role in shaping national narratives.

The Holocaust museums contribute to the sense of entitlement to the land among Israeli citizens. The primary case study of my research, Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum, located in Jerusalem and designed by Jewish-Canadian architect Moshe Safdie in 2005, is interpreted here as a vivid example of Zionist propaganda in built form. I was most struck by how this museum promotes Jewish exceptionality through an enactment and celebration of the trauma of the Shoah. This effect also reinforces nationalist identities, fosters hatred, and objectifies the “promised land” message of the Israeli State through the Gramscian construction of collective memories using both suffering and liberation as emotional hinges tied to identity formation. In the end, I have come to

see this building as another ideological tool to justify the occupation of the Palestinian lands and the negation of Palestinians as a people.

I chose Yad Vashem as the major illustration of my research paper because its architecture serves as a powerful ideological and pedagogical tool of Zionism. I am attempting to prove that the architecture of Yad Vashem is intended to express collective memories and collective Jewish identity in manipulative ways which instruct the viewer to have a redemptive experience and to associate the Holocaust with the establishment of the state of Israel. I am trying to prove that the ideological propaganda carried out by Yad Vashem is a considerable contribution to global design and ideological colonization based on promoting American Imperial values masked as liberalism.

## **THE MUSEUMS**

### **INTRODUCTION: THE CONTEMPORARY HOLOCAUST MUSEUM**

This section provides an analysis of three of the most significant and best-known Holocaust museums. My thesis is that the architecture of the Holocaust museums, in these different locations, is intended to perpetuate Zionist ideologies as a form of pedagogy, and that the architecture of these museums plays a major role in how the Holocaust is taught and positioned by cultural institutions as a method of communicating Zionist ideologies — particularly for an audience removed in time and place from the traumatic events that are being taught. In my analysis of the museums in Jerusalem, Berlin and Washington, I will test my hypothesis by analyzing three very different buildings, built in very different contexts, to prove that all of them behave pedagogically, ideologically and even functionally in similar ways – in service of Zionism.

It is challenging to create innovative design solutions for the problematic subject matter of the Holocaust in a building without turning the Holocaust museum into “a chamber of horrors” or a “Holocaust Disneyland”. As Stephanie Rotem, an architect and the Head of the Museum Studies Program in Tel Aviv University has explained, “By conveying the values that cannot otherwise be expressed, the architecture of the museum contributes to the museum’s narrative and, through it,

to the construction of a collective memory of the Holocaust” (23). How does this work? How does architecture manufacture identity for the Jewish people and construct a narrative about the Jewish people for others, and work to construct or shape collective memory? These are some of the questions I wish to address here.

In this section, I conduct a comparative analysis of the three most iconic Holocaust museums globally: Yad Vashem, the Jewish Museum in Berlin (JMB) and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM). My analysis considers three key criteria:

- How does each museum interact with, and how is it informed by, its site?
- How is architectural language, and architectural symbolism in particular, used as a pedagogical tool to shape narrative / visitor experience?
- How is each museum’s Holocaust narrative shaped by the political and ideological contexts of its country of origin?

In the pages that follow, I focus on exploring the connections between the architecture of Yad Vashem and the establishment of the State of Israel as an intertwined project, realized through architecture as a pedagogical method. I will be analyzing the museum’s physical building in terms of critical elements used in its design that are meant to construct collective memories for all Jewish people and to perpetuate the ideology of Zionism as unproblematic (i.e., not addressing the competing claims of Israelis and Palestinians to this territory). The Museum architecture, location and exhibition practices in Yad Vashem, the Jewish Museum in Berlin, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, are examined to reveal architecture’s role in representing state-controlled collective memories of the Holocaust, while linking these memories to a highly fabricated past.

## **ARCHITECTURE AS STORYTELLING**

As noted above, powerful architecture does not tell stories – it makes them happen. In the words of Peter Eisenman, “As scarecrows are to crows, one might say, successful monuments are to political subjects - not in view of the fact that they may frighten us away (although they may do this too) – but in view of the fact that they operate a ‘mechanism of presence’ and hence disturb us, in seemingly ambivalent ways, on exactly this basis.” It is in this sense, Eisenman continues,



that “We may hence speak of the ‘psychic investment of monuments’, of how they are haunted with power, of how they attempt to keep the ghost of authority upon them animating in imaginative and fantasmatic ways the spaces they occupy” (Eisenman 21). In other words, what Eisenman is identifying here, is the ways in which monuments – and here I would include Holocaust museums – are similarly haunted by authority and power which they impose on the visitor. We are not scared away by the monuments, but we are conditioned by them to act and feel a certain way. A look at the history of Yad Vashem will shed some light on these ghosts whose presence shapes the contemporary museum.

### **YAD VASHEM – A BRIEF HISTORY**

In 1942 Mordechai Shnenhabi, a member of a secular Kibbutz, suggested building a memorial named Yad Vashem, which literally means “memorial and name” as a response to the mass murder of Jews in Nazi-occupied countries. Ironically, at that time most of the people who would become the Holocaust victims were still alive (Margalit 22). In 1953 the Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Yad Vashem Law was enacted by the Knesset (the legislative body of Israel). Minister of Education, professor Ben Zion Dinur was appointed first Chairman of the institute (Silberklang 6). Construction of Yad Vashem on Har HaZikaron [Memorial Hill] in Jerusalem, also known as Mount Herzl, began in 1954 and was completed in stages between 1957 and 1981. Subsequently, the Children’s Memorial was completed in 1988, and the Valley of the Communities in 1993. The delay in its eventual construction was caused first by the threat of a Nazi invasion of Palestine and then by the Arab-Israeli war of 1948 and its aftermath (Bartov 85).

In 2005 Yad Vashem was expanded into its contemporary form by adding the Holocaust History Museum, which resulted in the complex becoming three times the size (over 3000 square meters) of the former memorial complex. The tremendous undertaking, lasting a decade, resulted in an over \$40 million-dollar addition (yadvashem.org). The Holocaust History Museum today occupies over 4,200 square meters, mainly underground. Its 180 meter–long linear structure, in the form of a spike, cuts through the mountain with its uppermost edge acting as a skylight protruding through the mountain ridge. (yadvashem.org) The museum complex includes the Holocaust History Museum, the new Hall of Names, a Museum of Holocaust Art, an Exhibitions Pavilion, a Learning Center, and a Visual Center (Silberklang 22).

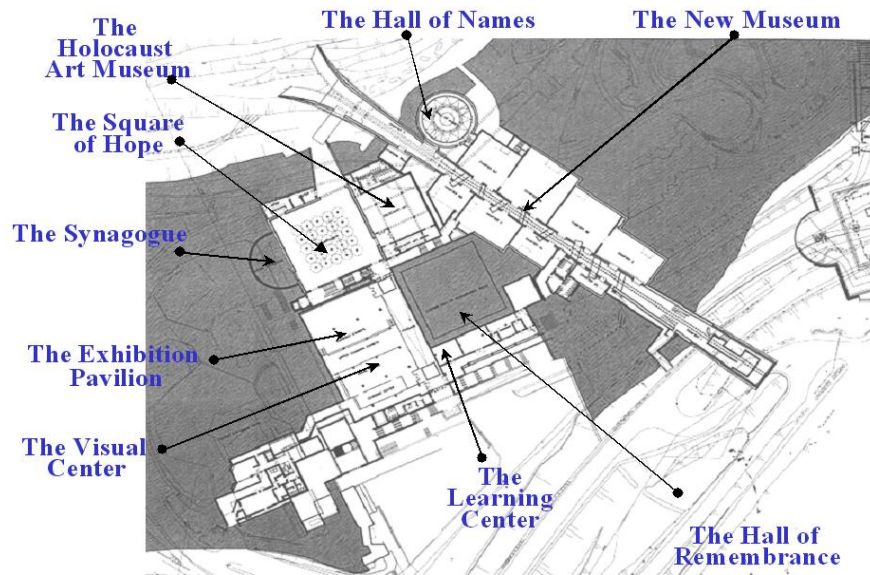


figure 1 (Safdie 2006a, 2006b)

An image of a map of Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial Centre featuring the new museum building, the Synagogue, the Learning Centre, etc.

Fig. 1. Museum campus plan: gateway wall; entry piazza (underground parking below); visitor centre (mevoah); museum shop; administration building; entrance bridge; Holocaust History Museum; Hall of Names; courtyard; museum of Holocaust art; exhibitions pavilion; visual centre; learning centre; synagogue; café; Warsaw ghetto square; avenue of the righteous among the nations; Hall of Remembrance; children's Holocaust memorial (Safdie 2006a, 2006b).

a



b



d



c



figure 2 (Safdie 2006 a, 2006 b)

Fig. 2. (a) Northeast bird's-eye view of museum campus, from bottom right to top left, respectively: transportation drop-off area, aqueduct, piazza, mevoah, bridge; (b) aqueduct; (c) interior of mevoah; (d) view of visitors entering bridge (Safdie 2006a, 2006b).

Yad Vashem is the most visited museum in Israel (circa 1000.000 visitors annually) followed by Israel Museum in Jerusalem, dedicated to archeology, art and sculpture, which has around 800.000 visitors every year according to online sources. Yad Vashem, Israel's official Holocaust memorial museum, was ranked fourth recently on the popular travel website TripAdvisor's list of the Top 25 Museums in the world. It was also ranked #1 out of 148 attractions to visit in Jerusalem. (<https://embassies.gov.il>) The Yad Vashem archive collection is the largest and most extensive Holocaust archive in the world. This includes 55 million pages of documents, nearly 10,000 photographs, films and videos with testimonies of survivors. The library contains more than 80,000 titles, newspapers, documents ([yadvashem.org](http://yadvashem.org)).

Moshe Safdie, a Jewish-Canadian-American architect (born Haifa, Israel, 1938), was commissioned in his design of the Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum to articulate a convincing Jewish collective identity and memories in spatial-architectural terms. Educated in Israel during the formative years of the state, he moved to Canada with his family as a teenager and graduated from McGill University in 1961 with a degree in architecture. Perhaps best-known for his master plan for the 1967 World's Fair (Expo '67) in Montreal, in 1970 Safdie established a Jerusalem branch office, commencing an intense involvement with the rebuilding of Jerusalem (<https://cac.mcgill.ca/moshesafdie/biography.html>). Safdie's architecture realized the museum's narrative in the experience of visitors to this site, through a calculated effect of expressing "an ideological connection between the Holocaust and the foundation of the Israeli State" (Rotem 27). The entire constructed journey through the history of the Holocaust envisioned by Safdie fosters the feeling of Jewish exceptionality by providing a visitor with a near-cathartic experience. The visitors' journey through the dark, narrow spaces representing the horrors of the Holocaust leads to ultimate relief when it ends on the sunlit balcony with scenic views of Jerusalem, the capital of Israel. Through experiencing the indescribable scale of the Holocaust tragedy, which is presented as a redemptive and cathartic journey, the visitors become part of an experience in which the victims of the Holocaust make sense and the suffering of the Jews becomes justified through the acquisition of the promised land.

## **YAD VASHEM AND SITE**

The museum was built on Mt. Remembrance, which is a well-known symbol of resurrection in Israel, close to the grave of Benjamin Theodor Herzl, the statesman founder of National Zionism. This proximity establishes a (conceptual, symbolic, physical?) tie between the Holocaust and Zionist ideology and further enhances the idea that the State of Israel is a legitimate and unquestionable outcome of the tragedy of the Holocaust. The building of Yad Vashem is not naturally integrated into the landscape. There are many ways in which museum architecture interacts with its site to serve expressive and ideological ends – for instance, the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, the Baksı Museum in Turkey, or the Canadian Museum of History in Quebec, are embedded into already existing landscape and cityscape to emphasize oneness with the land, establishing a naturalness to the mission of the museum and existing social dynamics.

The architecture of Yad Vashem is pursuing an opposite purpose: to disrupt the landscape, in order to emphasize a new formation, a new state that unapologetically asserts itself in its historical Motherland. Thus, it is less its integration with its physical site than its proximity to other symbolic monuments that is significant here. The building of Yad Vashem is cutting through the landscape, penetrating the mountain and asserting its presence, so the visitors literally walk inside the mountain (Figure 3). The building, constructed of concrete, does not abide by the Jerusalem municipal law that all the buildings have to be built from or clad with the local white limestone. The law dates back to the British Mandate of 1918 and is still symbolically fulfilled to preserve the uniqueness of Jerusalem. ([jewishvirtuallibrary.org](http://jewishvirtuallibrary.org)) This non-conformity of Safdie's museum to regulations can be read as a manifestation of independence of Israel and its demand for visibility and recognition. According to Safdie, "only concrete could achieve a sense of the symbolic extension of the monolithic bedrock, free of joints, mortar, or any other embellishments" (Fangqing 96). Therefore, Yad Vashem appears proudly plain, un-embellished and non-conforming to the surrounding architecture.

The views from the site of Yad Vashem from within the building were constructed to overlook the now lush (artificially cultivated) pine landscape, which turned the surrounding plateau into "spaces of constructed visibility" (Rotem 28). This ground used to be barren desert; while the site was chosen because it did not bear significant historical baggage, its subsequent landscaping illustrates



how Israelis have cultivated the desert in many places in Israel and turned desert into forests and orchards.



figure 3 (safdiearchitects.com)

A bird's eye view image of Yad Vashem museum and surrounding landscape

## **YAD VASHEM AND PROGRAM**

The exhibitions that the visitors encounter in the museum are mostly photographs, documents and artifacts telling the story of the Holocaust and the preceding events. (Figure 4)

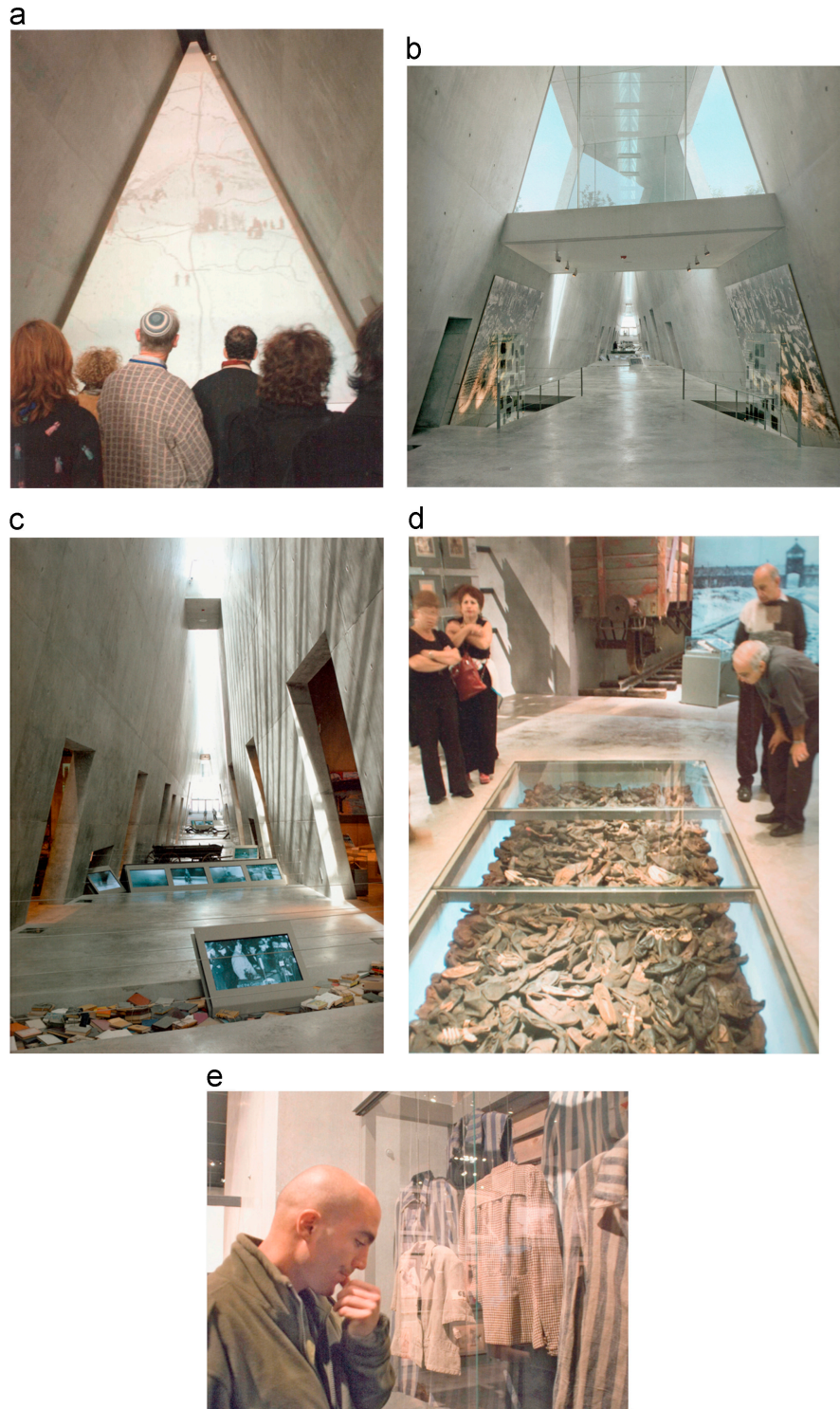


figure 4 (Safdie 2006 a, 2006 b)

Fig. 4. (a) Video and art display of ‘The World that was’, with visitors standing in front watching and thinking; (b) interior corridor space with multi-layered photo displays, above which an exterior

terrace can be clearly seen; (c) interior view of lighted-filled central corridor, with barriers filled with artifacts and large entrances to galleries on either side; (d) interior space of Gallery 5 – The ‘Final Solution’: Jewish Uprisings in the Midst of Destruction – visitors are looking at the floor display of victims’ shoes; (e) interior space of Gallery 7 – The Last Jews: The concentration camp universe and the death marches – visitors are looking at window display of victims’ camp clothes (Safdie 2006a, 2006b).<sup>5</sup>

The photographs of the heroes are strategically located close to the exit in the “Hall of Names” and are placed on an elevated surface which creates an effect of triumph as a logical outcome of a triumphant and liberating journey (Figure 5). The entrance into the museum is dark and unwelcoming (Figure 6), but the culmination of the journey inside is, in the architect’s own words, “a volcanic burst of light and life.” (Rotem 30) (Figure 7). The visitors find themselves in front of a huge glass wall, overlooking the hills of Jerusalem.

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<sup>5</sup> Other recent exhibitions at Yad Vashem include “The Rise of Hitler”; “East-European Jewish Life before the War”; “From the Outbreak of War until the Nazi Invasion of the USSR”; “Destruction”; “Armed Jewish Resistance”; “The Final Stages of the Holocaust”; “Photographs of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising”; and “Photographs of Partisans” (Rotem 39).





figure 5 (yadvashem.org)

An image of Hall of Names section of Yad Vashem featuring a 10-meter-high cone displaying 600 photographs of the Holocaust victims that represent a fraction of the six million Jews destroyed by the Nazis

Safdie's architectural design forces the visitors to connect this view with the exhibitions inside and to conceive Zionism as the logical outcome of the Holocaust (Rotem 30). The Jewish visitors feel belonging to this land, they perceive Israel as their physical or spiritual home, they feel like hosts for all the non-Jews who empathise with them and recognize the State of Israel. The non-Jewish visitors feel like guests in the Holy Land, which welcomes them with their breath-taking nature and hospitality. Regardless of nationality, the visitors come out of the museum with a feeling, that if the Jewish State had existed before the Second World War, the Holocaust would never have happened!



figure 6 ([vegansagainsttheoccupation.com/](http://vegansagainsttheoccupation.com/))

An image showing a dark and unwelcoming entrance to Yad Vashem museum



figure 7 ([israelmyglory.org](http://israelmyglory.org))

also <https://lbnexaminer.com/2019/06/>

An image showing Yad Vashem museum visitors facing the glass wall at the exit which is full of light

Visitors can see the glass triangular wall at the end of the concrete prism from the start, but they cannot reach it without overcoming the zigzags through the entire route — the central corridor is broken up by deep grooves in the floor that display museum artifacts, which force the visitor to go over all the exhibitions before exiting (Figure 4). “To the best of my understanding,” explained

the exhibition designer Dorit Harel, “it was not an option to refrain from showing visitors certain historical episodes. Visitors should experience every part of the exhibition, without short cuts or abridgments. I felt therefore that the movement pattern would have to be closed and prescribed.” “In this way,” writes Harel, “I transformed the architectural prism into an ideological timeline of longitude - the axis of historical memory” (Harel, in Rotem 64). The architect and the exhibition designers worked as a team in order to promote the prescribed journey with all its intricacies, similar to the victims of the Holocaust, who could not escape or take shortcuts. The visitors’ patience and compliance are rewarded with a magnificent view and ultimate relief after wandering in the dark for hours, which is immediately associated with liberation and redemption, and consequently with a logical conclusion: The State of Israel is fully justified by the Holocaust.<sup>6</sup>

## **YAD VASHEM AND IDEOLOGY**

The Jewish nation has historical and spiritual connection with the contemporary state of Israel; Yad Vashem’s architecture draws on this and reasserts it, creating and reinforcing the illusion that they have always belonged to this land. The “journey” through the museum provides the feelings of belonging, oneness with the great nation, and identifying as a legitimate host in the Holy Land. These constructed collective memories of the “Exodus,” of creating the permanent Jewish home together, of fighting antisemitism together, help to create an imaginary Jewish identity. The Hebrew word “Aliyah”, which literally means “ascending” is the official name for the immigration, or rather repatriation, to Israel. So, once the Jews from all over the world decide to come and live in Israel, they “ascend” to their Motherland. Positioning Yad Vashem on (and in!) the mountain reinforces this political agenda of giving the untouchable status to “return” or “ascension” to the Holy Land.

Yad Vashem, like most Holocaust museums in Israel, including Ghetto Fighters' House (Kibbutz Lohamei HaGeta'ot), the Theresienstadt Martyrs Remembrance Association (in

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<sup>6</sup> Perhaps needless to say, the occupation of the Palestinian lands is not even questioned.

Kibbutz Givat Haim (Ihud), Massuah Institute for the Study of the Holocaust (Kibbutz Tel Yitzhak), From Holocaust to Revival Museum (Kibbutz Yad Mordechai), Forest of the Martyrs (Jerusalem), and others, promotes Jewish “exceptionality” through the exceptionality of the trauma of the Holocaust.<sup>7</sup> The museum implicitly reinforces nationalist propaganda and the feeling of entitlement to the “promised land,” through constructing collective memories of suffering and liberation through the museum site and architecture, which justifies the ongoing occupation of Palestinian lands. Very few visitors are aware that the lands acquired by Israel were seized by colonial practices of the state such as violence, murder and conquest. Part of colonization of a territory is an ideological and intellectual colonization of the nation's past, which comprises collective memories.

The constructed collective memories of building the State of Israel as the only outcome of the Holocaust are themselves, I would argue, colonized — that is, enslaved by the ruling colonial ideology for the purpose of serving it. Colonization of collective memories means occupation of the people's memories by colonial content, replacing the real memories with imaginary ones, which are synchronized with colonial ideology and values of the settler society. Since colonization is only possible through seizing of property by means of violence, “the retention of land by a colonial power is rewarded the more absolute it is” (Nichols 181). In the case of Israel, while Palestinians continue to assert a right to land and national identity, the dominant propagandistic narrative weighs the incomparable scale of the Holocaust against the violence inherent in the establishment of the Israeli state, with the latter deliberately obscured and diminished into insignificance in the process.

### **Constructing narratives at Yad Vashem**

Yad Vashem went even further than merely arranging the narrative — it created the entire simulation of the Exodus which is immediately associated with the Holocaust as the formative point of the Jewish State.

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<sup>7</sup> We will see below how this exceptionalism is conjoined to American exceptionalism, in the case of the U.S. Holocaust Museum

## Galleries, New Holocaust History Museum

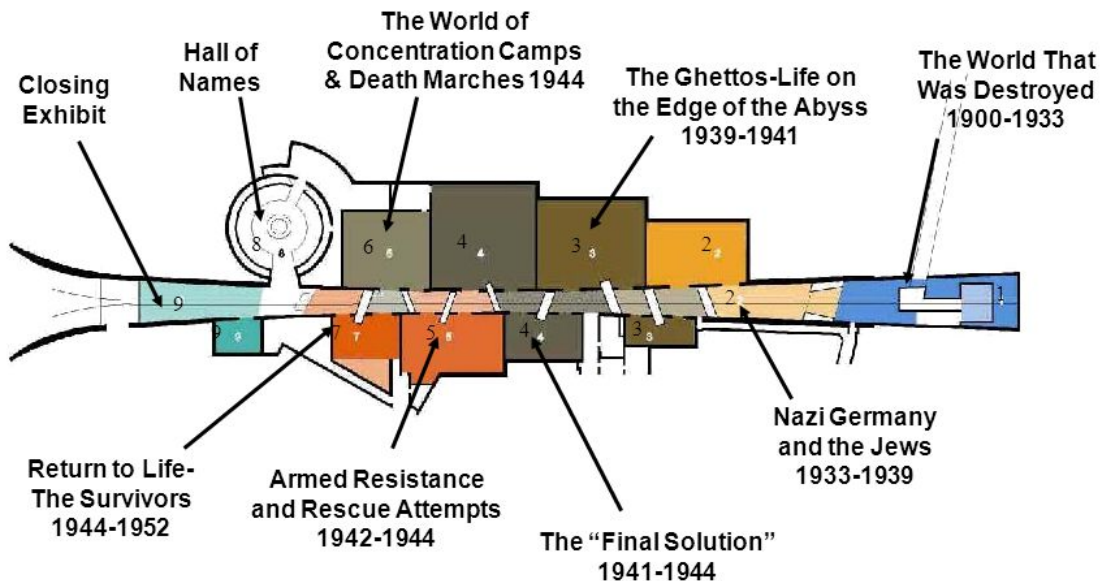


figure 8 (slideplayer.com)

An image of the Yad Vashem museum floor plans featuring 9 galleries

This simple floor plan illustrates how visitors enter through a narrow entrance, and — forced to follow a prescribed route, not being able to avoid transition barriers — are led through numerous exhibition spaces ending in “Reflection on the Holocaust” exhibition, so once they exit to the Observation Terrace, they experience a feeling of relief after being trapped in dark spaces (Figure 6). Moreover, they associate the tragedy of the Holocaust with the triumph of Israel — and this effect is reached mostly through the architecture alone! Safdie’s architecture greatly succeeded in its propaganda of Zionism by means of simply leading the visitors in a certain way, by manipulating the landscape, museum spaces, lighting, to a certain point of psychological relief.

The architecture of Yad Vashem constructs a narrative about an opposing force to Nazism, namely, Zionism, with the conclusion that Zionism should prevail in order to ensure the protection of the State of Israel. Since Zionism enabled the Jews to “return home”, it should not be questioned. The visitors of Yad Vashem cannot help experiencing a peaceful departure from the horrors of the Holocaust, the finality of the historical events. One of the Yad Vashem visitors notes: “For me, walking through all those terrible images...I felt so many emotions. Walking out onto the balcony, I felt a peaceful breeze and heard nothing but the leaves rustling. As far as my eyes could see, I saw trees dedicated to the righteous. In that time of atrocities and betrayals so many chose to stand against evil. They are the true heroes! #neveragain” (Lundrigan 135).

According to former Israeli prime minister (2001–2006) Ariel Sharon, “Israel is the only place in the world where Jews have the right to defend themselves, and that proves the Jewish people will never know another Holocaust.” (<https://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/16/world/africa/dignitaries-help-israel-open-holocaust-museum.html>). The former United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan, has affirmed a connection between the United Nations and the state of Israel, both emerging from the ashes of the Holocaust, which was also a "driving force" behind the adoption of the universal declaration of human rights (<https://www.un.org/press/en/2004/hr4773.doc.htm>). Therefore, the architecture of Yad Vashem sacralises the State of Israel through sacralising the Holocaust. Instead of portraying the victims for what they are, the victims of a tragic injustice and unfathomable genocide, they are granted status of heroes and martyrs, as if they chose their destiny in order to make Israel happen! The questionable ethics of this manipulative museological presentation, seeks to ‘make sense’ of the senseless deaths of the victims: here, in Yad Vashem, they are used for the purposes of indoctrination and hegemonic control over the message of Zionism as the ‘positive’ outcome and response to the Holocaust.

## ANALYSIS

Unfortunately, the universality of human nature and its challenges is not included in the narrative of Yad Vashem. The museum architecture and its exhibitions promote nationalism and Jewish singularity through creating overly presentational collective memories and feelings of liberation and redemption instead of inspiring further investigation and dialogue. The feeling of redemption creates a sense of finality, of a resolved issue. The incomprehensible violence of the Holocaust is

linked in the minds of Israelis with the *necessary* occupation of the Palestinian lands in such a way that the legitimacy of the land acquisition is not even questioned. Moreover, Yad Vashem serves as justification of violence as a state building force and as an indispensable part of legislation, backed by the Bible.

The hegemony of Yad Vashem in the museal commemoration of the Holocaust was threatened by the Holocaust memorial in Washington, established in 1980. Israel could not compete with the US in creating the Holocaust spectacle, so it decided to cooperate — it cloned American values such as independence, democracy and freedom in the new Yad Vashem, which immediately attracted attention of the United States. The American Society for Yad Vashem (ASYV), established in 1981, advances the museum's mission for the Holocaust education and commemoration (yadvashem.org). Rotem goes so far as to term the Zionist ideology promoted by Yad Vashem the “Americanization of the Holocaust” (Rotem 9). In their turn, Israeli values of independence and strong national identity were used by the Americans to promote their ideology of fighting for freedom by all means, including violence. In 2008 President George W. Bush declared that the United States was proud to be the “closest ally and best friend in the world” of a nation that was a “homeland for the chosen people” that “had worked tirelessly for peace and... fought valiantly for freedom” (Hersh 20). Not only did the United States position itself as an ally of Israel, it also adopted Israeli justifications of violence to make this land ‘safe for democracy’ in their own foreign-policy and military interventions in the Middle East.

## AMERICANIZATION

While at first glance Zionism would seem to run counter to Americanism, insofar as it is against the *assimilation* of Jews in America — *assimilation* being one of the goals of US capitalism and hence contradicting Zionism — if we investigate this matter on a global scale, it becomes obvious that the ideology of Zionism feeds the ideology of Americanism since both of them are imperialist movements. Zionism strengthens American imperialism. Paul Sweezy wrote in 1967 about the war between Israel and its Arab neighbors: “The upshot of concentrating the struggle against the local partner in the Israeli-imperialist alliance is thus the opposite of what is intended: it keeps the Arab world divided and weak, and it strengthens the grip of imperialism” (Hersh 33). Leo Huberman, an American socialist economist and founder of the periodical *Monthly Review*,

believed that: “Arab socialists should turn their sights on the real target — if they are to be part of a ‘holy war,’ they should direct that war against enemy No. 1 which is not Israel but feudalism and imperialism” (Hersh 33).

In 1915 Louis D. Brandeis, an American-Jewish lawyer, who was an associate justice on the Supreme Court of the United States from 1916 to 1939, pointed out some connections between Jewish and American law and history, which he said shared a commitment to reason and social justice: "America's twentieth century demand is for social justice that has been the Jews' striving ages-long. Their religion and their afflictions have prepared them for effective democracy. Persecution made the Jews' law of brotherhood self-enforcing.... the widespread study of Jewish law developed the intellect and made them less subject to preconceptions and more open to reason" (Rosen 1). Zionist propaganda is both highly specific (the Holocaust must not be repeated, which is why Israel is necessary), *and* generalizable and transferable as ideology: imperialist violence, is needed in order to bring peace, democracy, to all corners of the globe and strengthen capitalism worldwide. Yad Vashem makes this explicit in its linking of the Holocaust to contemporary Jerusalem. In the next sections we will observe how JMB and USHMM both contribute to the same narrative of inevitability of the State of Israel and use the Holocaust as justification for it.

## **BERLIN**

The Jewish Museum in Berlin (JMB) is similar and different to Yad Vashem in many ways. On the one hand, the JMB is similar to Yad Vashem, because part of it is dedicated to the Holocaust tragedy. Its architecture is also similar, because it was initially built as Holocaust memorial. What sets it apart, is that JMB was conceived as an empty museum in order to express the idea of loss and inability to fill the void that resulted from the mass extermination of Jews in Germany. While Yad Vashem provides a redeemable, life-asserting journey to the visitor, filled with national pride and celebration that the Jews prevailed, JMB provides an atmosphere of irreparable damage, guilt, and regret. It does not provide a “relief” or finality and leaves many visitors feeling confused and disoriented. While the museum architecture of JMB might seem similar to that of Yad Vashem, especially in its interior spaces, the role of architecture appears to be absolutely different, because it creates a narrative



incompatible with the overall narrative of the museum. Unlike the architecture of Yad Vashem, which is a story in itself, the JMB's architecture remained an exhibit in itself, which will be illustrated in the next chapter.

The Jewish Museum Berlin was designed by Daniel Libeskind in 2001. Libeskind, born in 1946 in Poland, raised in Israel and educated in the US, was commissioned for the extension of the Berlin Museum with a Jewish Department in 1989 which was later named The Jewish Museum Berlin (further the JMB) (Reeh 3). JMB was initially envisioned by Libeskind, who is the son of Holocaust survivors, as a Holocaust memorial which would represent physical disappearance of Jews from Berlin and the erasure of the Jewish culture from German society (Reeh 9). Although Libeskind's building is highly conceptual and extraordinary, utilizing complex symbolism derived from Jewish religion and culture, it does not serve the complex purposes of the institution. The current concept of JMB is that it is supposed to house multiple narratives of the Jewish *presence* in Berlin, but instead it ended up being all about the *absence*. "Libeskind had emphasized how the human and cultural destruction during the Shoah eroded the possibility of representing the history of Jewish culture" (Reeh 13).

According to Reeh, Libeskind's rationale for the museum was to create a memorial with multiple voids not intended for galleries, which would make his building an exhibit of itself. However, the architect contradicted his own vision by creating a representation of the Holocaust, which is one of the key events of Jewish history. Moreover, while representing the Holocaust, Libeskind expressed certain features of Jewish identity, such as being loyal to the cultural and religious practices, being private, and having high endurance for suffering, which are part of Jewish culture and value system. Therefore, the void proved to be fillable, but the question is: does the void need to be filled symbolically or physically, and with which content exactly? The voids within the JMB, intended as emptiness, are nonetheless full, representing a closed symbolic system: we are forced to see this space in the manner intended, just as Yad Vashem directs and manipulates us to accept and 'feel' its narrative message.

Libeskind's museum was regarded an outstanding piece of architecture by many scholars, including Vidler 1996, Huyssen 1997, Offe 2000 and others; as James Young writes, the

architecture of what Libeskind calls decomposition “derives its power not from a sense of unity but from what Anthony Vidler has called the ‘intimation of the fragmentary, the morcellated, the broken’”(Young 2000, 23). Along with praise, the museum has also been widely criticized for its lack of functionality and unclear conceptualism: “Once inside the Jewish Museum...the hyper-cleverness of Libeskind's strenuously extraneous references...are quickly obliterated by his profoundly disturbing manipulations of space” (Filler 1). Libeskind intended his building to provide a physical effect of disorienting and destabilizing visitors, somatically inducing feelings of displacement, emptiness and loss which was reached by zigzag circulation, the tilted floors and irregularly pierced walls and having visitors periodically encounter deadlocks and making them go all the way back (Reeh 6) (Figure 9).

A visitor from 2002 challenges the responsibility for the void, writing:

The building evokes a sense of what (and whom) is missing. It doesn't tell the history of how and why the void came to exist. Are the German people still not able to stand in front of their history and acknowledge that a machine of their culture was the instrument of a peoples' destruction? In comparison to the Holocaust museum in Washington, D.C., this is very delicate – it leaps over the driving questions of HOW and WHY. Perhaps in its intent to be a monument memorializing those killed it chooses to steer clear of politics. Ok [sic], but where in Berlin, in Germany, do we have the consciousness of this history opened up for a society's self-examination? (Lundrigan 130)

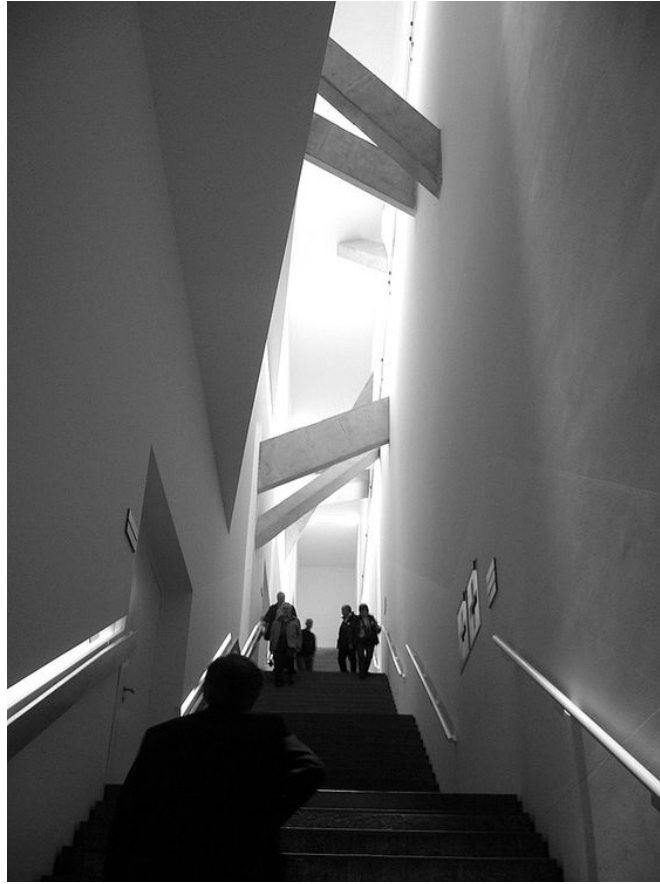


figure 9 (Pinterest.ca)

also [https://c2r4a1.blogspot.com/2006\\_10\\_01\\_archive.html](https://c2r4a1.blogspot.com/2006_10_01_archive.html)

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/legalcode> (permission is granted to use images with proper crediting)

An image showing one of the deadlocks of the JMB with irregular walls and stairs

The building is folded and twisted, resembling a lightning or a snake; however, the exterior shape of the all concrete, 5-6 stories high building can only be seen from a bird's-eye view (Reeh 7) (Figure 10). By positioning his building this way Libeskind wanted to emphasize the invisibility and the lack of awareness of the Jewish culture in Berlin. JMB consists of two buildings — a Baroque old building, that formerly housed the Berlin Museum and a new building by Libeskind. The new building is housed next to the site of the original Prussian Court of Justice building which was completed in 1735 now serves as the entrance to the new building. The two buildings have no visible connection above ground. (Figure 11).

The Libeskind building, consisting of about 161,000 square feet, is accessible only via an underground passage from the old building which signifies the absence of connection of the Holocaust to the old history of Germany, the incomprehensibility of the Shoah. The absence of the separate entrance also indicates the only way of acquiring knowledge of the Jewish history is through the Holocaust (Reeh 10).



Figure 10 ([commons.wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org))

Also <https://99percentinvisible.org/article/legible-cities-fitting-outstanding-architecture-everyday-contexts/>

An aerial view of the JMB museum building and surrounding landscape



figure 11 ([libeskind.com/work/jewish-museum-berlin](http://libeskind.com/work/jewish-museum-berlin))

An image showing the façade of the JMB and the original Prussian Court of Justice building next to it

The zigzag plan of the building implies twists and turns that add a labyrinthine quality to the architectural design and to the visitors' experience (Figure 12), such that visitors do not know in which direction they are walking and how they have progressed since the point of departure (Reeh 10). In the basement, visitors encounter three intersecting, slanting corridors — the three axes symbolizing three paths of Jewish life in Germany — continuity in German history, emigration from Germany, and the Holocaust: symbolism hardly discernible by an average viewer. The third axis leads to the bare concrete 79-foot tower, unofficially named “The Holocaust Tower,” neither heated nor cooled, its only light coming from a small slit in its roof. It provides a claustrophobic sensation of entering a gas chamber (Reeh 10).

Unlike the straight line of the floor plans in Yad Vashem, indicating the straightforward journey from the darkness of the Holocaust to the light of redemption, the zigzag shape of JMB communicates intricacies of Jewish immigration in Germany, uncertainties of assimilation, and differences between the old and the new Germany.

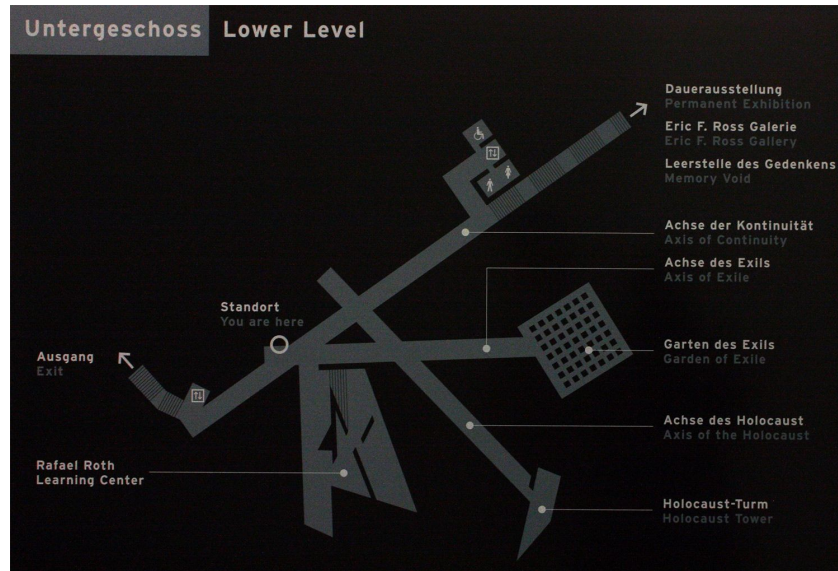


figure 12 ([pixelmaedchen.wordpress.com](http://pixelmaedchen.wordpress.com))

An image of zigzag-shaped floor plans of the JMB lower level

The galleries for the permanent exhibition of JMB occupy the upper floors. Illuminated by daylight, these exhibition spaces differ from the dark and tilted corridors of the underground (Reeh 10). The distinction between the dark and light galleries does not benefit the temporary galleries that always end up in the dark regardless of their displays. On the whole Libeskind's complex ideation does not work well with the exhibition materials or day-to-day demands of the museum presentation. [One can see this at work in other museums by Libeskind, including the ROM addition in Toronto and Denver Art Museum, which repeat some of the formal qualities of the JMB without any implied ideological symbolism. In the end, slanted walls and dead ends are counter to the aims of many exhibitionary practices]. The museum's current director, former U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Michael Blumenthal, engaged the New Zealand exhibition designer Ken Gorbey to re-brand the narrative of the Holocaust memorial into a *presentation* emphasizing the achievements of the Jews. Gorbey came up with a series of thirteen "topical islands," only one of which deals with the Holocaust. The dozen others deal with subjects ranging from the eighteenth-century "court Jew" Oppenheim to the rebirth of the Jewish community in Germany after the Second World War (Filler 1). The architecture of Libeskind's design is thus being ignored or actively countered in the exhibitions mounted in this space.



JMB displays objects in the new conceptual space as property or possessions, primarily of individuals, to confirm identity not only as Jews or as Germans, but as “both at once...models for a post national identity that can be plural rather than singular” (Chametsky 223). The museum space is turned, via the objects it displays, into a marketplace rather than the chamber of horrors it reminded one of before its "occupation" by these collections. The depressing, accusatory atmosphere of being trapped and disoriented now changed into an "edutaining" (educational + entertaining) space: “The objects on display include a medieval copy of a fourth-century Roman decree mentioning the presence of Jews in Germany for the first time, a set of circumcision instruments (Figure 13), a pair of blue jeans tailored by the German Jewish '49er Levi Strauss, and the protective glasses worn by Moses Mendelssohn while he earned his keep in a silk mill. Computers are integrated throughout the installation, dispensing information on Jewish customs and rituals: the typical mishmash of contemporary pop museology” (Filler 1).



figure 13 (pensieve.typepad.com)

An image showing circumcision instruments on display at the JMB

JMB's permanent exhibition, "Two Millennia of German Jewish History" occupies about 4,500 square meters organized axially through the long, narrow, circuitous corridors of the museum's two upper floors. It is subdivided into fourteen sections which deal with: the movement of Jews into Central Europe with the Roman Legions, the memoirs of the Jewish woman Glückel of Hameln (1646–1719); differing eighteenth-century Jewish class affiliations; the German-Jewish

contribution to that intellectual awakening; the mid-nineteenth assimilation of liberated Jews to the developing German national identity, in the period of unification; "The Emergence of Modern Judaism," "Modernism and Urban Life," "East and West" and "German Jews – Jewish Germans" to mention a few. The First World War and the Weimar Republic are also represented as well as Nazi policies and Jewish fates. "The Present" is represented very fragmentarily featuring some of the post-War and post-Holocaust German-Jewish experience (Chametsky 227).

The JMB's architecture, initially problematic due to its "hyper-cleverness"(punctuation?) became more problematic in relation to the exhibitions. Most voids were filled, but some still remain empty making visitors avoid them wondering what the purpose of the empty spaces is. (Figure 14) The "Memory Void" is filled with 10.000 metal plates of cut iron formed into screaming caricature-like faces by an Israeli artist Menashe Kadishman (Chametsky 236). (Figure 15) Filler considers this installation and the ones similar to it to be pathetic and gimmicky in comparison to the tragedy they comment on, turning JMB into a Holocaust 'theme park.' It is hard to imagine how Libeskind's design can be re-branded for a historical museum covering multiple narratives, which has to ignore or actively counter the overpowering, almost contradictory narrative of its own, which only comes together in the exception of the Holocaust component, where architectural design and object-display work together as intended.

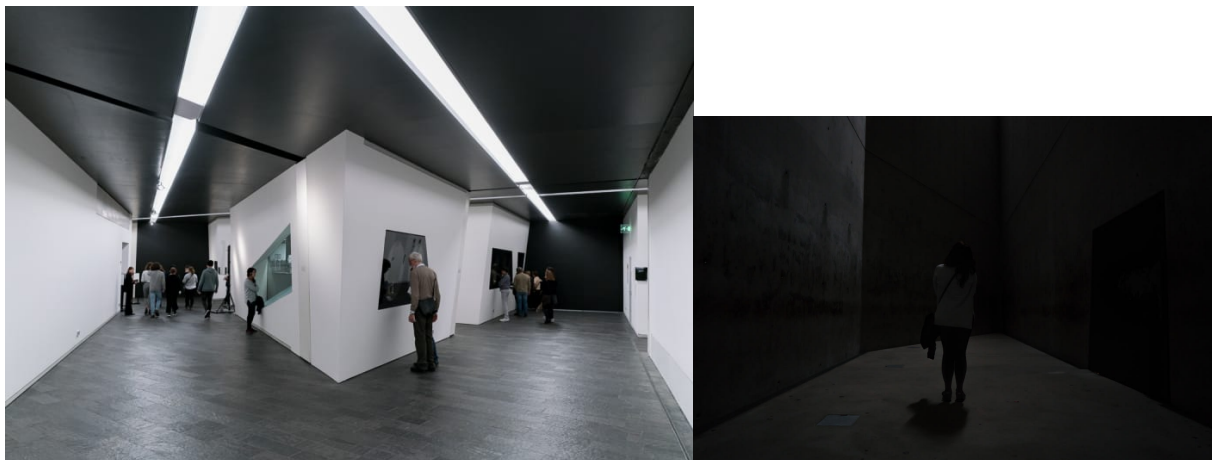




figure 14 (divisare.com)

An image showing the JMB galleries with many empty spaces



figure 15 (imgur.com)

An image of one of the JMB installation entitled “Memory Void” featuring 10.000 metals plates shaped as screaming-like faces

The JMB architecture is overly concerned with *representation* of the Holocaust narrative, being concerned with *what to depict* precisely, more than with a means of making this visual language readable. By over-performing, Libeskind reduces the role of his architecture to storytelling – and even this is not clear. Peter Eisenman has usefully explored the relation of Holocaust architecture to *representation* and *presentation*: “... it is necessary to lessen the importance of a representation... in favor of something I will call a ‘presentation in the present.’” (Eisenman 1).

## REPRESENTING TRAUMA

Thousands of exhibitions that are presented in JMB now undermine the initial purpose of the building: to express the impossibility of representation of the Jewish history. The necessity of a relationship between museum architecture and the exhibitions is considered crucial by many scholars. David Fleming wrote in *Positioning the Museum for Social Inclusion*: “The degree to which we are able to blend... narratives with the architectural spaces will define the success of the museum.” (Fleming 60).

The mission of architecture which aims to express traumatic events is not *representation* (portrayal) of trauma, which is the role of the galleries, but rather an effective and engaging presentation (performance) of the narrative. *Presentation* means less conceptualization and misleading symbolism and more technical and effective ways of demonstrating of what is already there. However, architecture dealing with trauma and collective memories cannot be too performative, because, paradoxically, it will end up being *representational* due to its abstract nature being altered into something too concrete and literal. For example, the zigzags of JMB represent the intricacies, the wanderings of the Jewish people; the deadlocks the visitors face represent the trapped victims of the Holocaust; the voids represent the inability to bring the Jewish culture back to Germany. All these ideas are already expressed in the exhibitions, so the JMB architecture merely *reproduces* and sometimes *overpowers* the narrative of the galleries.

Therefore, *blending* of the architecture and the narrative of JMB is impossible due to the intrusive and redundant character of the architecture in relation to the exhibitions and its narrow focus on the Holocaust which does not accommodate the versatility of the galleries. *Highlighting* and *enhancing* the narrative is hardly happening for the same reasons which is only natural, because the content was created to fit the “container”, which could have been an artwork in itself, but ended up being misused. The JMB architecture would have more value if the museum remained empty the way it was when it just opened its doors. In that case the visitors could have a contemplative experience that would allow them to reflect on the impact of the Holocaust in Berlin and to physically and emotionally feel the loss. However, if the museum was intended for educating the visitors about the Holocaust and for housing its narrative in multiple exhibitions, then its architecture is an overdetermined obstacle to this goal.

Architecture can help create experiences and simulations of traumatic events, but its success depends on the compatibility with the narrative told by the artifacts. Therefore, the Holocaust museum exhibits need to be as *representational* (true to life) as possible to preserve the factual value of the tragedy, whereas architecture should not compete with the exhibitions in creating *representation* (likeness, reproduction). On the contrary, it needs to be concerned with finding the right *presentational* (displaying, emphasizing) techniques which would *reinforce* the Holocaust

narrative rather than re-tell it all over again. This distinction can help us solve the dilemma whether it is ethical to use *presentational* techniques when depicting traumatic memories. The answer is yes, as long as the art, particularly architecture, does not overpower the artifacts in the shared spaces as is the case with JMB, and does not manipulate the viewer's feelings by constructing imagined collective memories in the shared spaces which contain the Holocaust material, as in Yad Vashem.

Yad Vashem is a perfect example of *presentational* architecture that celebrates the singularity of the Jewish identity and justifies colonization of the Palestinian lands. The central mission of JMB seems to be the opposite: “Focus on domesticity and on broad cultural commonalities, rather than stressing uniquely Jewish institutions, habits and needs ... marks the anodyne, if not uncontroversial, path through German Jewish history and into present day Germany that JMB has chosen to follow” (Chametsky 227). If this statement is true, then the museum's ideological goal was *not* achieved through its architecture, which does not contribute to the museum's current narrative.

## **ADDRESSING PLURALITY**

Since the main goal of JMB is reinforcing the plurality of German identity and its post-nationalism, the museum architecture needs to be in sync with these ideals. Its visual language should contain commonalities of cultural practices, aesthetics, signs, and traditions, which constitute multivalent identities such as Jewish-German or Christian-Judaic. The elements of such visual language could be eclectic architecture featuring traditional design and decorations of the two cultural groups which could differ as well as overlap. For example, some Judaic and Christian symbols or elements of design could be combined in architecture, which would communicate the oneness of history and the idea of dialogue and consolidation rather than that of segregation and exceptionality. What we observe in the JMB architecture is, however, the opposite: the viewers are invited to associate a Christian symbol and the Holocaust which does not contribute to post-national identity formation: according to the museum's explanatory pamphlet, the small crosses cut into the exterior paneling are meant to make you “feel compelled to think about the links between the cross and destruction. (Figure 16). You wonder about the connections between the

church and the Holocaust” (JMB museum pamphlet, quoted in Fleming 1). But this wondering is at once overdetermined by the architectural message, and too-little developed — the Christian element is almost entirely subsumed by the Holocaust message, and nothing else here leads us to imagine or narrate that connection.



figure 16 (99percentinvisible.org)  
An image showing crosses cut into the exterior paneling of the JMB building

In the following section I discuss the US Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), which, although similar to YVHHM and JMB in terms of communicating the Holocaust narrative through architecture, constructs this narrative through a prism of American ideals, producing a kind of “Americanization” of the Holocaust. Out of all three museums discussed here, USHMM creates the most experiential visit for the viewer by turning the visitors into *witnesses* of the Holocaust. We are about to discover whether this kind of experience is meaningful and immersive, or merely an ersatz Holocaust amusement park.

## THE AMERICAN HOLOCAUST MUSEUM (USHMM)

“...a very heart pulling museum – but do we learn when you think what is happening in the World?” (house-of-wander.com)

How is the US museum different? Unlike Yad Vashem and JMB, whose countries of origin have either geographical or historical connection to the Holocaust, USHMM has no direct spatial relationship to the atrocities of the Shoah and is far removed from the Holocaust sites (except for the role of the USA as a co-liberator of Jews from concentration camps). Jill Bennett, an internationally renowned scholar, author and critic, writes in *Practical Aesthetics* that when there is no geographical connection between the museum and the collective identity it represents, this gap has to be bridged by emotional connection, by universality of the phenomenon and of the identity (Bennett 61). Therefore, USHMM could succeed in universalizing the Holocaust as a major phenomenon that affected humanity as a whole, and possibly view it in context of other cases of genocide in the world. However, instead of admitting the very own crimes against humanity like slavery and genocide of the Native Americans, we can observe American exceptionality and othering at work in the USHMM. The so-called Americanization of the Holocaust is achieved through the positioning of the museum, framing visitors as witnesses through permanent exhibitions, and above all through the narrative created by the museum architecture.

## THE HOLOCAUST ON THE MALL

In order to create a fictitious geographical connection to traumatic events, USHMM had to come up with imaginative ways of integrating distant and abstract memories into the physical and emotional landscape of the presence on the Mall in D.C. Choosing the site for this ambitious project was crucial because the museum mission was not only educating Americans about the Holocaust, but even more so about promoting American ideals. USHMM is located just off the National Mall, south of Independence Avenue, 500 yards south-east of the Washington Monument, in the centre of Washington, D.C. The Mall is perceived as the centrepiece of American democracy, according to *The Washington Post* — bordered by the national museums,

the Capitol and the White House, and linked directly to memorials to Washington, Lincoln, Jefferson and the fallen of Vietnam.

(<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1987/07/18/yes-the-holocaust-museum-belongs-on-the-mall/9cbee31d-391d-457e-9477-10af9d0b50fa/>)

(Figure 17)



figure 17 ([pcf-p.com](http://pcf-p.com))

An image showing the USHMM building next to the Mall in the centre of Washington, D.C.

Given this, does the museum belong on the Mall? Many critics, like Benjamin Forgey, believe that it does, because it is a daily reminder of the dark side of humanity that people need to be aware of, in contrast to the other national museums and monuments on the Mall that communicate national pride, as well as ethnic identity (the National Museum of the American Indian, and the Black Experience Museum, for instance). However, for some the museum location may seem unsettling, because of its proximity not only to U.S. government buildings but also to shopping and entertainment districts. Was USHMM conceived with tourists in mind? Is it a coincidence that it is located among the most popular tourist attractions in Washington, D.C.?

## THE ARCHITECTURAL LANGUAGE OF DOOM

When the American architect and Holocaust survivor James Ingo Freed accepted the commission to plan the United States Holocaust Memorial, he was concerned about depicting the tragedy so far removed from the US (Sodaro). Freed was born in 1930 in Essen, Germany and escaped to America from the Nazi regime with his parents in 1939, avoiding the near certainty of deportation



to a concentration camp. As he began working on his project of USHMM, he visited several Holocaust sites in Europe and as a result integrated the death camps' "aesthetics" into his design, not to mention some authentic objects integrated into exhibitions such as an authentic railroad car, bunks from Auschwitz, trees, stones, and many other artifacts from their original sites. When it was impossible to obtain original items, they were re-created, like the Auschwitz entry gate and the Warsaw Ghetto wall (Sodaro 39). These "artifakes" are created as a backdrop to the Holocaust narrative, resembling a Hollywood set.

The building of USHMM fits with American national iconography but fails to express the horrors of the Holocaust. As a result, the façade of the building does not provide any idea about what the visitors might find inside. (Figure 18). The hexagonal shape of the Hall of Remembrance symbolizes both the Star of David and the six million Jews who died in the Holocaust. Freed intended his building as "abstractly symbolic", without implying the forms of the Holocaust on the outside, only on the inside. The question arises: why does this museum not communicate what is on the inside? What was the purpose of the façade not matching the interior?



figure 18 (<http://box5711.temp.domains>)

An image of the façade of the USHMM building

The banners in this image, proclaiming the Nazi Germany "State of Deception" and calling out on the Nazi propaganda, could be easily applied to the museum itself and to America as an ultimate "State of Deception".

***“Hell, I lost my grandfather. I lost my grandfather in the Holocaust... Museum”.***

**A. Jeselnik**

Scholars of Holocaust memory Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer have argued that the difference between Holocaust museums “reside[s] in the ways they construct the museum visitor.” (Lundrigan 108). USHMM re-defined the visitor experience by referring to visitors as “witnesses” of the Holocaust. From the moment the visitor enters the building, the architecture begins to communicate terror, disorientation, alienation and claustrophobia.

According to Lundrigan, visitors go into the building through one of two entrances, as intended by the building designers, replicating the division of old and young on arrival at the Nazi death camps.

*Washington Post* architectural critic Benjamin Forgey describes the experience: "The entry sequences themselves are disorienting. Directions are not clearly labelled. The visitor must choose — go left, go right, go down, go up, go forward" (Linenthal 91 quoted by Laura Dove). From here, the visitor enters the Hall of Witness (Figure 19), where, in the words of James Freed, "Brick wall, exposed beams, boarded windows . . . will let visitors know that they are in a different place - that the Holocaust is an event that should disturb and be felt as well as perceived." (Dove: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CAP/archive/holo/arch.html>)

The walls of the Hall are punctuated with planes of glass that bear the names of the countries whose citizens were murdered by Nazis. The bridges above the Hall of Witness resemble the bridges which the Nazis built over the Jewish ghettos so that the Germans could avoid contact with the Jews. The banded steel is stretched along some walls to illustrate some crematoria building techniques that prevented the heat from splitting the walls.





figure 19 (ushmm.org)

An image of the Hall of Witness at USHMM featuring the brick wall, the stairs and the bridge above the Hall

From there the visitor is taken to the 4<sup>th</sup> floor to the permanent exhibition which is designed to culminate in the hexagonal Hall of Remembrance (Figure 20). The space feels neutral and allows for contemplation. Freed intentionally obstructed the architectural language in this hall, avoiding turning this space into a theme park. Why, though, was a theme-park design deemed suitable for the Hall of Witness? Why does the architect create virtual reality in one part of the museum and not the other?

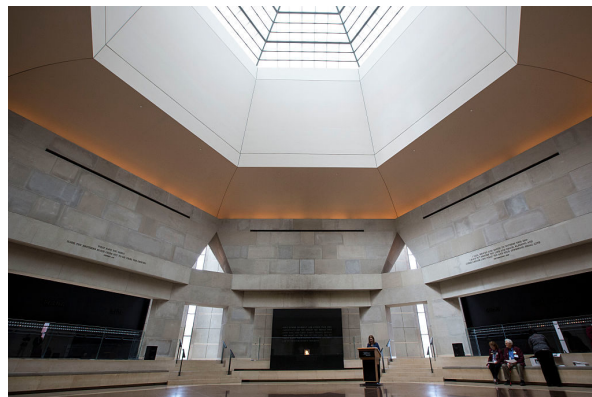


figure 20 (news.artnet.com)

An image showing the hexagonal Hall of Remembrance at USHMM aimed for contemplation

## AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Unlike Yad Vashem and JMB, USHMM uses direct representational techniques and re-creates death camp iconography both metaphorically and literally. Freed explained that this is done in order to overcome geographic and temporal distance and to allow the visitors to experience a new level of identification with the victims and transform them into Holocaust witnesses (Hansen-Glucklich 77). The USHMM is what Hansen-Glucklich refers to as an “architecture of experience, as it seeks to lead visitors into a vicarious encounter with the sites and spaces of the Holocaust” (158). This way the museum creates a simulated experience, a so-called “Holocaust ride”: how, then, can Freed claim that his museum is NOT a ‘Holocaust Disneyland’?

The “ride” is reinforced by providing each visitor with a passport, a real identification of the Holocaust victim or survivor, and each visitor’s “journey” unfolds according to the real-life story of a particular Jew. This “appropriation” is further enhanced by massive exhibits of shoes, clothing, suitcases etc., of the victims instructed to strip right before entering the gas chambers (Figure 21). According to visitor notes, the majority of people feel uncomfortable and sad after viewing the exhibits, and there is no resolution for these feeling in USHMM (Lundrigan 13). If the artifacts, documents, photographs of the victims, site-specific memorials etc. are presented with the help of constructed objects or imaginary narratives, then the viewer experience becomes fake, prescribed and manipulated and in some cases even traumatizing.



figure 21 (house-of-wander.com)

An image of one of the USHMM exhibits showing a massive pile of shoes of the victims instructed to strip before entering gas chambers

While credit for this experience is certainly due to Ralph Applebaum's design of the museum's permanent exhibitions, I suggest that Freed's architectural setting also plays a key role here, with the latter even superseding the former in some visitor accounts. As a visitor noted in the comments from the USHMM, 25 January 2003, "I'm too overwhelmed to comment on the content of the museum. What could one say? I will say, however, the architecture of the building is fantastic" (Lundrigan 119-120). This statement sounds somewhat humorous, because the visitor separates the architecture from the artifacts and perceives the architecture as the highlight of the museum, as something worth mentioning and admiring. Being unable to process their experience of the artifacts in a meaningful way, the visitor points out the only part of the visit on which they can make comment: the museum's architecture. This visitor review illustrates how the architecture is disconnected from what the artifacts need to convey and how it runs its own narrative independent from the narrative of the exhibitions. This also means that the visitor's emotional response to the artifacts is so strong, that it is challenging – if not impossible – to create appropriate context for them by means of architecture. Therefore, the very use of intimidating artifacts needs to be reconsidered.

### **PUSHING A POLITICAL AGENDA: AMERICAN EXPRESS**

*The Museum's primary mission is to advance and disseminate knowledge about this unprecedented tragedy; to preserve the memory of those who suffered; and to encourage its visitors to reflect upon the moral and spiritual questions raised by the events of the Holocaust as well as their own responsibilities as citizens of a democracy (ushmm.org).*

This statement makes the emphasis on "citizens of a democracy," hypocritically separating Americans from the (Nazi) "State of deception". Another factor that sets USHMM apart from Yad Vashem and JMB is framing the Holocaust narrative as in a way that serves "American civil religion" (Hansen-Glucklich 77). Throughout the permanent exhibition, American ideals such as democracy, freedom, individual rights etc., are sacralised and opposed to the ideals of fascist Germany, completely ignoring the fact that Germany has successfully moved away from the Nazi ideology – or the role of the American government in accommodating Nazis and helping to relocate them after the Second World War. These 'American ideals' are communicated by means

of the quotes on the walls by the “founding fathers”, and visual and audio records of American troops as death camp liberators – leaving out the decisive role of the Soviet army in the liberation of the major camps. The effect of American exceptionality is achieved through strategic placement of the museum in the centre of the nation’s capital, amid the symbols of national pride. As a result, the Holocaust is viewed as an example of an atrocity that was stopped with the profound contribution of the USA, figured as liberator.

Along with the site and exhibition practices, the museum architecture constructs and advances American exceptionality. The façade of the building refuses to communicate what it represents, and instead blends in with the city centre of the Washington, D.C. and its numerous monuments, while the literal representations of the death camps’ iconography contributes to the othering of the Holocaust as something that happened in Europe and is impossible in the United States. The prescribed “journey” through the Hall of Witness and ending up in the Hall of Remembrance forces the viewer to have a certain understanding of the Holocaust backed with such emotions as sadness and confusion. The contemplation the viewer is supposed to have after leaving the Hall of Witness is not facilitated due to the neutrality of the architecture of this part, leaving the visitor feeling “empty”. It seems like the Hall of Witness was building up to something big, but then the visitor encounters disappointment in the Hall of Remembrance. Unlike the architecture of Yad Vashem, which is highly manipulative, but consistent through the entire “journey”, the architecture of USHMM is confusing and disappointing, because it uses several different vocabulary systems, which do not act as a whole. For this reason, in spite of being highly ambitious in promoting American values, the USHMM architecture does not provide a solid understanding of the Holocaust and constructs instead three imagined distinct identities: Jewish, German and American.

## **CONCLUSIONS:**

The three museums were analyzed according to three main criteria: interaction with the site, architectural language and political agenda. Let us summarize the findings and compare the museums according to each parameter.

My hypothesis is that architecture can be a powerful tool of ideological propaganda that can evoke prescribed feelings and foster collective experiences that involve constructed memories and identities. Yad Vashem did not interact with the site – it snatched it by penetrating the mountain, even making the land itself serve its triumphant narrative! Ruining nature and ignoring the landscape, at the same time cultivating trees for constructed views, is by no means an effective interaction with the site. The architectural language, as it was discussed above, greatly succeeded in communicating the museum narrative, which is clear to every viewer. As for universality, it definitely failed, simply because it was never Yad Vashem's goal to begin with: all that the narrative is aimed to achieve is Zionist propaganda, which brings us to the next success of the museum – political agenda. We can conclude with a fair degree of certainty, that the museum architecture plays the most important role in ideological propaganda of Zionism in Yad Vashem.

JMB failed in its interaction with the site, because the museum building, shaped as a series of zigzags, which represent the intricacies of the destiny of Jews, can only be seen as such from an aerial view. As conceived by Liebeskind, it was supposed to be an almost invisible building, representing the absence of Jews in Berlin, and because it is hardly noticeable from the street, it requires a giant sign, which is erected on the sidewalk by the museum. The architectural language fails as well, as discussed above, because the architecture echoes and sometimes contradicts the narrative of the exhibitions, which leads me to conclude that JMB would have been better off as it was conceived: empty. It does succeed at attempting to depict universality and post-nationalism by representing both German and Jewish identities, by realistically portraying Israel, which many authorities find anti-Semitic.<sup>8</sup> However, these efforts are insufficient, because the architecture does not support the post-national narrative, being packed with anti-Christian symbolism, cartoonish installations, and unnecessary voids and deadlocks.

In my opinion, the USHMM fails miserably on all accounts. The site only adds to the Americanization of the Holocaust, promoting solely American ideals and trivializing the tragedy by the close proximity to the Mall. The architectural language is inconsistent, confusing, overly

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<sup>8</sup> (Israeli government considered certain exhibitions “pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel”. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/23/arts/design/berlin-jewish-museum-israel-bds-welcome-to-jerusalem.html>) In fact, the exhibition in question “The Holy City” featuring 19<sup>th</sup> century Jerusalem represented all major religions, but many critics concluded that the exhibition gave an impression of Muslim dominance.

theatrical, making USHMM look and function like a theme park. Questions of universality and post-nationalism are out of the question, because the very purpose of the institution is the Americanization of the Holocaust. Despite all possible attempts at propaganda of American exceptionalism, the message is not clearly communicated because the visitors are “distracted” by overwhelming and dramatic exhibitions. Being reduced to “witnesses” of the Holocaust, the visitors do not feel engaged as ambassadors of peace, and do not associate themselves with American liberators.

Unlike Yad Vashem, which provides a realistic journey to the visitors, USHMM produces a simulacrum of a journey, the so called “Disneyfication” of the Holocaust, which leaves the visitors entertained at best, but unfulfilled. Therefore, the overall success of propaganda carried out by the Holocaust museums comes down to architecture and how its narrative makes political agenda of the museum clear and powerful. Yad Vashem is the only museum that was consistent in its overall narrative, paying due attention to architecture and realizing how powerful it can be. The architecture of Yad Vashem made an immense contribution to ideological propaganda of Zionism and hegemonic control. Moreover, it did a better job in promoting Americanism, as a result, because Zionist values are identical to American ones. While USHMM somewhat evoked feelings of patriotism in American citizens and vaguely advertised American ideals, Yad Vashem was able to sacralise the State of Israel and announce it untouchable. Yad Vashem proved to be the most successful museum, but also the least innocent.

## **SITE**

YVHHM asserts its presence cutting through Remembrance Mountain, providing walkways for the museum visitors right inside the mountain. The trees surrounding the museum building were planted purposely for the museum, to provide a peaceful feeling to the visitors when exiting the museum. Landscape serves as an enhancer of the imaginary journey of the Jewish people to freedom – the major narrative of Yad Vashem. JMB, on the contrary, is hiding between other buildings and is barely seen from the street. Its invisibility is supposed to communicate the loss of the Jewish people in Berlin as a result of the Holocaust. USHMM is neither hiding nor interfering with the landscape, because it is positioned as an integral part of American identity, in the heart of Washington, D.C., adjacent to a busy mall, fitting into D.C.’s landscape of government buildings.

The location that could aid in universalizing of the Holocaust, being visited by countless tourists from all over the world, is instead adding to the Americanization of the Holocaust, making it all about America as a liberator.

## **ARCHITECTURAL LANGUAGE**

The architecture of Yad Vashem uses effective and clear language, which is understood by the viewer. The journey through the museum is both physical and metaphorical, representing the return of the Jewish people to their Motherland, which was acquired as a natural outcome of the Holocaust. The visitor experience in Yad Vashem is straightforward, and the initial discomfort and disorientation is rewarded with a resolution in the end. Conversely, neither JMB nor USHMM provide a visitor with any kind of conclusion they could draw from their “journeys”. The architectural narrative of JMB does not compliment, let alone drive, the narrative of the exhibitions. The feeling of disorientation remains with the viewer throughout the entire visit. Filled with indiscernible symbolism, JMB’s architecture fails to communicate both Jewish identity and post-national identities it was supposed to represent. The voids of the interior architecture represent the inability to undo the damage, although they do not work well with the exhibitions, which are trying to fill these voids! The architecture of JMB is in opposition to the exhibitions and their narratives. The architecture of USHMM uses several vocabulary systems none of which is clear to the visitor, and none of them enhances the narrative of the artifacts. The grotesque and overwhelming artifacts make the architecture of the interior insignificant, while the façade of the museum fits with the iconography of Washington, D.C., which does not communicate the Holocaust theme of USHMM.

## **POLITICAL AGENDA**

The political agenda of YVHHM is clearly based in Zionism as an ideology opposing Nazism. The propaganda of Zionism is carried out through architecture, exhibitions and the site. All these components are strategically used in order to create a powerful narrative of the formation of Israel as a natural outcome of the Holocaust. The political agenda was successfully implemented in the overall narrative of Yad Vashem. JMB, initially conceived as an empty Holocaust memorial, that would facilitate contemplation of the erasure, ended up hosting multi-faceted exhibitions without a clear direction, and only part of them is dedicated to the Holocaust. The political agenda had to

change from representing guilt and regret into portraying post-national identities and suggesting ways of healing from the trauma, which is expressed in the exhibitions, but is not in any way backed by the architecture. Therefore, the true political agenda cannot be successfully carried out; the architecture is too confusing and takes away from the museum's narrative. The celebration of American ideals is too obvious in USHMM, which emphasizes what it means to be American by showing what it means *not* to be American. Through othering the Holocaust and portraying it as something foreign to Americans, USHMM seemingly succeeds in pushing their political agenda, however, because of the mixed messages the architecture gives to a viewer, the main message is somewhat lost in translation and is not fully clear.

## RE-IMAGINING HOLOCAUST MUSEUMS

We need Holocaust museums that inspire dialogue and cooperation, not “final solution” museums that provide a fake remedial experience or, on the contrary, a sense of hopelessness. Contemporary Holocaust museums offer no practical means of directing compassion, leaving the viewer at a loss. The JMB makes a step in the direction of opening up a space of resistance to hatred between diverse groups and toward supporting universal humanist ideals. There is, however, a long way to go before contemporary museums work out ways of *representing* traumatic events and national identities of the past and *presenting* the new opportunities for trans-cultural dialogues and developing post-national identities of the future.

The Holocaust museums examined here contribute to a reinforcing of otherness, othering Europe from America, Jews from non-Jews. They are not connected to the future; they do not produce dialogue. Most Holocaust museums reinforce feelings of belonging to the Jewish nation or of not belonging to it: whether visitors feel like the victims or the oppressors, they are unable to direct their self-pity or the sense of guilt at constructive thoughts and actions. We need, I suggest, a post-national approach to the Holocaust museum: all Europe is responsible for the Holocaust, not only Germany, and humanity needs recognition and human rights, not only Jews.

The voids of JMB serve more for the feeling of loss of the viewers, than the feeling of loss of the Jewish culture in Germany. Yad Vashem offers false redemption, while JMB presents constructed desperation and inescapability. The former offers a one-sided solution of nationalism,



the latter claims that the solution is in post-nationalism. Both fail to suggest a way to bridge the gap between national and post-national identities. USHMM does not even investigate Jewish identity; instead, it makes the museum narrative all about America.

There are more similarities than differences among the three museums. All of them have limiting, narrow-minded approaches to depicting the tragedy of the Holocaust. All of them depict traumatic events in manipulative ways. All of them have selfish goals that do not promote universal values. All of them fail to produce a truthful, compassionate narrative of the Holocaust that would facilitate dialogue and social change. None of the architects contribute to eliminating antisemitism. We can observe, that the overall success of the mission statement and indoctrination of the visitors is problematic without powerful architecture whose language is clear to the viewer. The architecture of Yad Vashem is successful because it is clear and straightforward and because it drives and enhances the narrative, unlike the other two museums that confuse the visitors, and the role of architecture can never be underestimated.

## **JEW AGE SPIRITUALITY AS AN ALTERNATIVE APOLITICAL METHODOLOGY**

This MRP has analyzed the ways in which three Holocaust museums, located in different countries and constructed over the past 30 years, offer very different approaches to the problems of remembrance, commemoration, and exhibition practices; it has also shown the ways in which all three museums remain trapped in fantasies of nationalism, Zionism, and the possibilities of stable representation, fixed meaning, prescribed museum journey, and highly conditioned visitor experience. As a counter to these limiting methods, I identify New Age spirituality, seen through the Jewish lens, as a potentially productive route out of this impasse, as a universalistic and apolitical call to a multi-ethnic and post-national truth. As I suggested above, the practices of New Age spirituality can also be seen as a storytelling technique, just like museum architecture, and one that could potentially animate narratives of memorial museums through the prism of secular and spiritual self-exploration. The proliferation of such shifts today has pointed to dramatic changes in the priorities of Israeli educated elites. People strive to find meaning, purpose and solace, not only in the building of a new nation or a more just society, but also in improving minds and souls by concentrating on the emotional and spiritual needs of individuals and their functions within their communities. Organized religion fails to offer true growth because of political

implications along with its claim to exclusive truth, which encourages hostility towards other religions and cultures and spiritual practices. One-sided Holocaust Museum narratives resemble the principles of organized religion in this regard, failing to encourage true peace-making, trans-culturalism and spiritual growth.

Looking back at the Tarot reading conducted at the beginning of this study, we can observe, that the messages conveyed by the cards about the three museums proved to be accurate. Yad Vashem revealed its manipulative political agenda, JMB proved that its loss of the narrative did not communicate the loss of the Jewish people. USHMM showed its materialistic and narcissistic nature. All three museums, however, resonate with the Fool, the Tarot card numbered “0”, which is shaped as the wreath on the World card, as a preview, promise of reaching the World upon completion of the journey. Unlike museum architecture, Tarot cards do not tell you where to go, what to do and what to think: they offer information and it is up to the querent what to make of it. Moreover, once the Fool reaches the World, the journey is not over: he starts his journey all over again and learns new lessons, because life wisdom is endless, and he always sees things in a new light. Unlike the one-sided narrative of the memorial museums, Tarot offer room for interpretation, growth and alternative action, and they can shed light and give people insight on how to tell stories of suffering, loss and redemption.

Maybe, if Jewish museums focused more on the souls that are lost, including the non-Jews, and created an appeal of “Never again”, that applies not only to antisemitism, but any kind of discrimination in the world, their Holocaust narratives could bring people together in our common effort of establishing justice in the world. Instead of self-imposed pride and importance, maybe it makes sense to humble ourselves, and acknowledge, that we are all Fools making our way from darkness to light, learning life lessons as we go, which requires a lot of trial and error, willingness to change and grow, and most importantly, keeping an open mind to become truly independent thinkers, free of imposed ideologies and constructed memories. Perhaps the methods sought to achieve such goals are internal and the artifacts needed are not buildings, objects or experiences in a conventional sense. What is needed is an “architecture” – whether physical, spiritual, or narrational – that is ungrounded and unbuilt and can contribute to natural healing.

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