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The Politics Behind Unbuilt Memory

Memorial to the Six Million Jewish Martyrs, New York
"Topography of Terror" Documentation Center, Berlin

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Why unbuilt memory?

As is often the case, many studies on 20th-century collective memory and identity in art and architecture generally tend to consider finished memorials. In some way, the story surrounding the finished memorial can be much more complete than an unbuilt memorial could ever have been, since finished memorials are often analyzed from the very beginning to the very end, when the public finally see them for the first time. However, paraphrasing James E. Young, one of the most well-known scholars in the field of Holocaust memorials, an unbuilt memorial often contains a more instructive - and perhaps even more interesting - story than a finished memorial.¹

A very general explanation of this statement can be given by the fact that memorials marking an event of inhumanity such as the Holocaust are amongst the most intriguing and complex of artifacts. Such memorials, like all public monuments commemorating the nation's illustrious, fulfill essentially two roles. Firstly, memorials are the tangible places where the victims are explicitly recalled and the perpetrators are implicitly mentioned. The second role - which is a direct consequence of the first one - concerns the intangible aspect of the "places of memory" (also understood in Pierre Nora's words: *lieux de mémoire*²). Many scholars, beginning with Young, have agreed that memorials, "as intersections between public art and political memory",³ are to be considered as mirrors into which people and nations of a specific epoch look and see a reflected image of society's aesthetic and political intentions.

These underlying intentions are rooted in the morality of remembering, but above all they act for the benefit of affirming and preserving the collective identity of a group or country.

As stated by sociologists of memory - Maurice Halbwachs being one of them - the process of preserving an agreed upon collective identity is highly selective, since it implies the reception of some elements and the rejection of others. This may help understand, at least in part, why - sometimes - an architectural project for a memorial remains unrealized.

The political implications in preserving public identity in New York and Berlin

The two unbuilt projects of this study, which would have become masterpieces in the history of memorial architecture, have very different backgrounds as well as having different purposes. One displays a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust to be built between the late sixties and early seventies in New York City, the home of the greatest concentration of Jewish and Holocaust survivor population of any metropolitan area in the United States while the other shows a documentation center which deals with the perpetrators of the Holocaust and to be realized in Berlin a few years after the German reunification.

Both projects remained unrealized not so much because of economic and/or technical reasons but because of the political implications which related either to the aesthetic representation of public memory and identity or to the architectural approach to a historical site. It must not be forgotten that memorials are usually to be situated in a specific “place of memory”, which is the public space. In the time of Greek *polis*, the public space - the *agora* - was the “real political space”, as Hannah Arendt formulated in her reflections on the original concept of politics.⁴ In the modern city, the public space (a square, a street or a park) has become the place of “the people” as a political entity.

The New York project never came into fruition because of the persistent collision of aesthetic ideals between the city authorities, the designer and the Jewish client. The Berlin project remained incomplete because of the ongoing political trouble related to the issue of German national identity after the Holocaust.

Memorial to the Six Million Jewish Martyrs, New York

Toward the end of 1967, Philadelphia-based architect Louis I. Kahn presented his proposal to the Committee to Commemorate the Six Million Jewish Martyrs (CCSMJM), consisting of a heterogeneous coalition formed by a group of Holocaust survivors with the backing of about thirty New York City-based American Jewish organizations. It was for the first American

Holocaust memorial and was to be erected on a site in Battery Park, an area located at the southern tip of Manhattan Island.⁵

The project depicted an abstract scheme made up of nine transparent glass blocks on a square platform. The number of blocks did not have any particular recognizable reference, nor did their form or material. The architect's primary thought was to create a monument as "an environment of light"⁶ which should present a "non-accusing character"⁷ and be conceived "for people of all faiths and backgrounds".⁸ However, some members of the CCSMJM expected a memorial which would give a clear expression of the tragedy of the Holocaust and, therefore, did not approve this scheme.

This forced Kahn to revise the project, adopting a more explicit plan, based on six similar blocks arranged around a central, distinct block, which evolved into a small chapel. The model of this latter scheme received acclaim from national architectural press as well as from the public at the Museum of Modern Art, where it was displayed for a month, in 1968.

The project also obtained the preliminary approval of two civic bodies responsible for endorsing it: the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR), and the Art Commission of the City of New York (ACNY). As will be explained in the following paragraphs, the role of the latter in influencing, shaping and preserving the material culture of New York identity may have been decisive in the context of this study.

Despite the favorable preface, Kahn's memorial was never built. The CCSMJM had tried to raise the \$1.5 million necessary to realize the monument, but were unsuccessful in meeting their goal.⁹ However, going beyond the economic matters, through my research I have found another, equally important, reason for failure to realize this project.

This reason is mainly of a theoretical nature and it confirms the observations made by previous commentators, which have analyzed the project's history in order to define why the memorial was never built.¹⁰ These observations regard the memorial's aesthetic language.

A large number of CCSMJM members - many of whom were sympathetic to modernist art and design - would support an abstract memorial while other parties felt "uncomfortable with a monument that was neither figurative or overtly narrative".¹¹

The decision of the CCSMJM to select Kahn as the designer of the memorial had been aesthetic as well as political. Indeed, the CCSMJM must have thought that with a design by a well-known modernist architect such as Kahn "it would have a better chance of gaining approval by the City Art Commission".¹²

When Kahn accepted the commission in early 1967, he embarked on a project that had already had a twenty-year history of practical attempts to erect the first American Holocaust memorial in New York City. These practical attempts included design proposals by sculptor Jo Davidson in the late 1940s, by architects Percival Goodman and Eric Mendelsohn in the early 1950s, by sculptors Nathan Rapoport and Neil Estern in the mid-1960s.¹³ Many of these attempts had presented proposals with specifically Jewish or extremely tragic content and, therefore, they had not gained approval of the ACNY.¹⁴

In the case of reviewing potential projects for public monuments, the ACNY was extremely sensitive to the choice of the theme and artistic language, which should have been brought into line with the assimilationist ideals of the American society.¹⁵ A Holocaust memorial in America has been considered as being a monument to ethnic victims, whose particularistic (i.e., exclusively Jewish) components have to be “universalized” (i.e., “americanized”) within the larger society’s public and cultural identity.¹⁶

Moreover, the abstraction was not only a shrewd option within the cultural context of postwar American art and architecture,¹⁷ but it was also the most straightforward way of making implicit any reference to the Holocaust or to a minority religious group.

However, despite all efforts of the designer to comply with the expectations of all CCSMJM’s members, Kahn’s project never satisfied those who demanded a representation which would “center the attention of the visitor on the Jewish Catastrophe”.¹⁸ Therefore, within the CCSMJM there was a serious disagreement between those who were sympathetic to Kahn’s proposal and complied with the ACNY’s aesthetic inclinations, and those who expected a monument having to make explicit reference to the tragedy of the Holocaust and to the Jewish identity.

“Topography of Terror” Documentation Center, Berlin

The other unrealized project, a building that would house a documentation center for the Foundation “Topography of Terror” (*Stiftung “Topographie des Terrors”*) and designed by Swiss architect Peter Zumthor, was the result of a limited architectural competition organized by the Berlin Senate in 1992.¹⁹ It was to have been realized on the historical site of the so-called “Gestapo-Terrain” (“Gestapo-Gelände”), which housed the headquarters of the Gestapo, the SS leadership, the Party Security Service (SD) and the Reich Main Security Office between 1933 and 1945.

After the war, the West Berlin authorities had razed most of the bombed buildings and cleaned away all the rubble, so every trace of the past was removed. After 1961, with the construction of the Berlin Wall - which ran along the north side of the terrain - the site fell into a state of disrepair and became a peripheral part of West Berlin.

Since the history of this site was rediscovered in the late 1970s, there have been numerous public debates within the city on what form of remembrance should be built on the terrain.²⁰ As the first concrete result of these debates, a historical exhibition was held during the 750th anniversary of Berlin in 1987 in a temporary hall, placed on top of the basement pantry of the former SS building ruins. The ensuing public debates, as well as the consequent success of the exhibition,²¹ have been a milestone in the history of the terrain since 1945, because they displayed the “Topography of Terror” as an “open wound” (“*offene Wunde*”)²² of the city, where the past deeds of the perpetrators should be disclosed to the public and adequately documented.

Zumthor proposed a large, elongated framework composed of concrete posts laid over each other in a crisscross pattern, in such a way as to form a “transparent shell”.²³ The architect not only wanted “to let this historic site speak for itself, and to preserve and display those few remaining vestiges of the National Socialist buildings”,²⁴ but he also wanted to create a place of reflection.²⁵ A place which should “set in motion a physical, emotional, non-intellectual process” and where “the visitor should feel moved, not just observe”.²⁶ In other words, Zumthor wanted to give the documentation center the characteristic of a memorial, to include an emotional approach to the original site and its history.

Although Zumthor’s proposal was in compliance with the client’s and user’s requirements, its memorial approach to the terrain’s history led to its downfall. The project remained unfinished. In this eleven-year “never-ending architectural saga”²⁷ of the “Topography of Terror”, only the three concrete stair towers were built and then dismantled at the end of 2004, although a solid group of architects, intellectuals and artists promoted a cause for their preservation.²⁸ The construction costs of the stair towers were estimated at around €13 million.²⁹ A few months later, a new architectural competition was held by the German Federal Government and the current building for the “Topography of Terror” was opened in May 2010.³⁰ According to Zumthor, on this project “the decision not go ahead with the building was the result of political machinations by the Federal Government”.³¹

Using as a pretext Zumthor’s experimental construction techniques and spiraling costs,³² the project had been officially considered as being “unbuildable” and “too expensive” by the

Berlin Senate and German Federal Government, which had been joint sponsors of the Topography of Terror Foundation since 1994.³³ In fact, the Federal Government did not look favorably on Zumthor's architectural approach to the terrain, which would have suggested a constant reflection on one of the trickiest aspects of German history.

As previously mentioned, the "Topography of Terror" is the tangible "place of memory" which directly deals with the traumatic memory of the perpetrators within the "land of perpetrators", responsible for the murders of millions of European Jews. It differentiates from other commemorative sites and memorials in Berlin, such as the Jewish Museum and the Holocaust memorial,³⁴ through its approaches to the past: Zumthor's failed attempt seems to confirm that, even now, Germans can inherit a violent legacy as perpetrators but they aren't able to identify with that heritage morally.³⁵

Unbuilt memory: A collision between the architectural idea and the preservation of identity

The two projects of this study are seen as practical attempts to turn the intention of memory into an architectural work. Every architect takes the intention of memory and elaborates on it according to his/her architectural thinking, which may or may not be in tune with the client's or local political bodies' expectations.

Kahn's intention - which was to conceive the memorial as a universal space "for people of all faiths and backgrounds" - did not meet the expectation of those CCSMJM's members who demanded a more particularist monument, whose theme and art representation should reflect the Jewish identity. Zumthor's architectural approach to the historical site - which implied a continuous reflection upon the German nation as the perpetrator of the Holocaust - would have highlighted an element of the past which the German identity has not yet been able to cope with publicly.

To sum up, in a nutshell, both projects remained unrealized because opposing demand between the architectural idea (i.e., the designer's intention of memory) and the preservation of identity promoted by the client or by local political bodies responsible for approving design proposals drew both projects into a collision course from which neither could survive.

Notes

¹ Cfr., James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory. Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1993, p. 290.

² The concept of *lieu de mémoire* owes its origin to French historian Pierre Nora, who has meticulously analyzed a series of “objects” - both material and abstract - which have marked the French identity (the 14th of July, the Eiffel Tower, Joan of Arc, the Larousse dictionary, etc.). *Lieu de mémoire* has become a specific term, which has been added to Le Grand Robert de la langue française (under the heading “mémoire”) as “unité significative, d’ordre matériel ou idéal, dont la volonté des hommes ou le travail du temps a fait un élément symbolique d’une quelconque communauté”.

³ James E. Young, *Memory and the Monument after 9/11*, in R. Crownshaw, J. Kilby, A Rowland (ed.), *The Future of Memory, Berghahn*, New York and Oxford, 2010, p. 78.

⁴ Cf., Hannah Arendt, *Was ist Politik? Fragmente aus dem Nachlass*, ed. Ursula Ludz, Piper, München, 1993.

⁵ The history of Kahn’s design for the Memorial to the Six Million Jewish Martyrs in New York City is summarily described in many monographs. More detailed accounts on this project are described in: Susan G. Solomon, *Secular and Spiritual Humanism: Louis I. Kahn’s Work for the Jewish Community in the 1950s and 1960s*, Ph.D thesis, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1997, chapter five; and Mark Godfrey, *Abstraction and the Holocaust*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2007, pp. 113-139.

Susan Solomon’s research has been very helpful. In her PhD dissertation she examines the project for the memorial in the context of Kahn’s other designs for the American Jewish community, concentrating on the relationship between Kahn and his Jewish patrons, which had rarely been without problems.

⁶ Kahn’s statement for the press release, May 3, 1968, The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Louis I. Kahn Collection (LIKC), File 030.II.A.36.6.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Letter, David Lloyd Kreeger to Kahn, November 1, 1966, The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Louis I. Kahn Collection, File 030.II.A.36.7.

⁹ Cf., letter, Executive Committee of CCSMJM to representatives of participating organizations, May 1974, Institute for Jewish Research (YIVO) Archives, New York, Rochelle G. Saidel Collection, ID: RG 1967: “The Memorial Committee was [...] affect with the formidable task of raising 1.5 million dollars. [...] With the worsening economic situation, cost estimated for the monument increased as inflation mounted. Israel’s struggle for survival in recent years (the Six Day War, War of Attrition, and Yom Kippur War) and the crisis of Soviet Jewry have [...] complicated our task by making it more difficult to raise funds”.

¹⁰ Cf., Susan G. Solomon, *Secular and Spiritual Humanism*, cit., and Mark Godfrey, *Abstraction and the Holocaust*, cit.

¹¹ Susan G. Solomon, *Memorial to the Six Million Jewish Martyrs New York, New York, 1966-72*, in David B. Brownlee, David G. De Long (ed.), *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture*, Rizzoli International, New York, 1991, pp. 400-403.

¹² Rochelle Saidel, *Never Too Late To Remember*, cit., p. 71.

¹³ These practical attempts are well documented in Rochelle G. Saidel’s book, *Never Too Late To Remember. The Politics Behind New York City’s Holocaust Museum*, Holmes & Meier, New York, 1996.

¹⁴ Before Battery Park, the city of New York had set aside a site in Riverside Park and in Lincoln Square Park, both on the Upper West Side, for the Holocaust memorial. Davidson’s, Goodman’s, and Rapoport’s schemes had been rejected by the DPR and ACNY, because they appeared “too Jewish” or “too tragic” for a public park. The design of Mendelsohn (representing two eighty-foot high tablets with the Ten Commandments) and that of Estern (the bronze relief depicting the image of Cain and Abel), instead, had gained the approval of the ACNY, because of their “broader Judeo-Christian appeal” (cf., Michelle H. Bogart, *The Politics of Urban Beauty. New York and its Art Commission*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 2006, pp. 200-206). Despite ACNY’s approval, both projects came never to fruition.

¹⁵ Cf., Michelle H. Bogart, *The Politics of Urban Beauty*, cit. It is worth mentioning that the ACNY was formed in 1898 specifically around the issue of monuments in a multiethnic immigrant city like New York: “The events leading up to the ACNY’s creation were driven by monuments. However, this discussion is not principally about sculptors or artworks but about who would control the disposition of monuments, the structure of urban spaces, and the appearance and identity of the city” (p. 13).

In the case of public monuments, members of the ACNY tended to prefer traditions of Anglo-Americanism (or, involved with the so-called “White Anglo-Saxon Protestant), but accepted the melting pot idea (which implies the cultural assimilation of ethnic or religious minority in the larger society).

¹⁶ According to some scholars, “Americanization is an example of universalization, or at least departicularization” (Cf., Shaul Magid, *The Holocaust and Jewish Identity in America: Memory, the Unique, and the Universal*, in “Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society”, 2, 2012, pp. 100-135, here p. 113).

¹⁷ This may have originated in the cultural context of the early 1950s, when Abstract Expressionism was used as a “weapon of the cold war” (cf., Eva Cockcroft, *Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War*, in “Artforum”, 12 10, 1974, pp. 39-41) and “came to be associated with the freedom of the individual (read both anti-Fascist and anti-Communist) while figuration provoked associations with the Socialism Realism of the Communists and the Third Reich” (Joan Marter, *The Ascendancy of Abstraction for Public Art: The Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner Competition*, in “Art Journal”, 53, 4, 1994, pp. 28-36, here p. 28).

¹⁸ Letter, Abraham G. Duker (Director of Libraries, Professor of History and Social Institutions, Yeshiva University and member of the CCSMJM) to Kahn, November 13, 1967, The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Louis I. Kahn Collection, File 030.II.A.36.4.

¹⁹ It was an architectural competition by invitation, in which 12 designers were invited by the Berlin Senate to take part and Peter Zumthor was declared the winner.

²⁰ Debates included calls for a memorial and calls for a history museum. It is worth mentioning that a first competition for a memorial was held in 1983. The aims of this competition had been widely criticized, because the site was to have become an “all purpose terrain for memory and recreation” (to borrow James Young’s words). Therefore, the City Council decided not to pursue the project any further.

For a selection on the history of these debates, see Stefanie Endlich, *Denkort Gestapogelände*, Schriftenreihe Aktives Museum, vol. 2, Berlin, 1990; Matthias Hass, *Gestaltetes Gedenken. Had Vashem, das U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum und die Stiftung Topographie des Terrors*, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2002, pp. 149-239; Rudy Koshar, *From Monuments to Traces. Artifacts of German Memory, 1870-1990*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2000, pp. 226-285; Karen E. Till, *The New Berlin: Memory, Politics, Place*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2005; James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1993, pp. 81-90.

²¹ Although the Topography of Terror was only intended to be open for a few months, more than 300,000 people visited it in the first year, and it was left open indefinitely “until something better will take its place” (*bis etwas Besseres an seine Stelle treten kann*), as Berlin’s Senator for culture Volker Hassemer formulated.

²² *Abschlussbericht der Fachkommission zur Erarbeitung von Vorschlägen für die künftige Nutzung des “Prinz-Albrecht-Geländes” (“Gestapo-Geländes”) in Berlin-Kreuzberg*, Berlin, 1990, pp. 14-15.

²³ Peter Zumthor, *Peter Zumthor 1985-2013*, Scheidegger & Spiess AG, Zürich, 2014, p. 59.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Cf., Peter Zumthor, *Centro Internazionale di documentazione “Topographie des Terrors”*, “Casabella”, 639, 1996, p. 2; Claudio Leoni, *Peter Zumthor’s “Topography of Terror”*, “Architectural Research Quarterly”, 18, 2, 2014, pp. 110-122.

²⁶ Chiara Baglione, *Costruire la memoria. Conversazione con Peter Zumthor*, “Casabella”, 728-729, 2004-2005, p. 76.

²⁷ As reported in some German newspapers of the time (for example, “Unendliche Baugeschichte”, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, May 19, 2000).

²⁸ Cf., Claudia Schwartz, “Der Stillstand geht weiter”, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, November 11, 2004; Berthold Seewald, “Ohne Bewusstsein”, *Die Welt*, November 18, 2004. Twenty-five architects - among them Sir Norman Forster, Rafael Money, Richard Meier, Renzo Piano, Mario Botta and Jean Nouvel - and more than forty artists - for example, filmmaker Wim Wenders, writer Peter Handke and artist Jochen Gerz - objected to the destruction of the staircases.

²⁹ Cf., “Zumthor-Treppentürme in Berlin abgerissen”, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, December 21, 2004; “Hat der Zumthor-Entwurf für die Topographie des Terrors wieder Chancen?”, *Tagesspiegel*, November 15, 2004; “‘Topographie des Terrors’: ein Weihnachtshäppchen für den Abrissbagger”, *Tageszeitung*, Dezember 3, 2004.

³⁰ The present building - designed by Berlin architect Ursula Wilms and Aachen landscape architect Prof. Heinz W. Hallmann - did not earn much positive reputation from architectural press. It has been criticized for “washing away traces of the past rather than preserving them” (Claudio Leoni, *Peter Zumthor’s “Topography of Terror”*, cit., p. 118; Layla Dawson, *Topography of Terror has washed away too much dirt in presenting its Nazi history*, “The Architectural Review”, July 2010, p. 29).

³¹ Peter Zumthor, *Peter Zumthor 1985-2013*, cit., p. 60.

³² The costs increased from €21 million to €42 million

³³ *The Establishment of the “Topography of Terror”*, topographie.de, Stiftung Topographie des Terrors, website consulted on October 11, 2016: “In May 2004 the state of Berlin and the German federal government, as joint

sponsors of the Topography of Terror Foundation, decided not to complete the building project because of exploding costs and technical building problems”.

³⁴ At approximately the same period of time of the Zumthor’s project history, two important *Gedenkprojekten* commemorating the victims of the Holocaust were erected in Berlin. They are the Jewish Museum (designed by Polish-American architect Daniel Libeskind and officially opened in September 2001), and the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe (blueprinted by American architect Peter Eisenman and unveiled in May 2005). Both buildings were established and financed by the Federal Government.

³⁵ Karen E. Till, *The New Berlin: Memory, Politics, Place*, cit., p. 122.