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Memory of Absence: Krakow's Jewish Ghetto Memorial as Counter-Monument

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Abstract

In 1992, scholar James Young published an article in *Critical Inquiry* examining the rise of the counter-monument in Germany. Young considered the counter-monument a memorialization strategy particularly suited to a country seeking to remember and honor the victims of its own national crimes.¹ Although Young was particularly interested in vanishing monuments, such as the *Harburg Monument against Fascism* designed by Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev Gerz, his description of the characteristics of a successful counter-monument fits numerous Holocaust monuments and memorials erected not only in Germany but across Central and Eastern Europe in recent years. According to Young, the counter-monument provokes its viewers, demands interaction, has the possibility to change over time and insists that memory work be the burden of the viewer, not of the monument itself. Krakow's Jewish Ghetto Memorial, the so-called "empty chairs memorial," was designed by architects Piotr Lewicki and Kazimierz Latak and inaugurated in 2005. The Ghetto Memorial both occupies and blends into the civic environment of Plac Bohaterow Getta (Ghetto Heroes Square) and intentionally invites interaction from passersby who use the chairs while waiting for public transportation. Its design reflects the specificity of its site, through its allusion to furniture being piled in the Square prior to the deportation of the Jews. However the memorial also employs design strategies used in other contemporary memorials such as those to the 1995 bombing at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City and that to the 9/11 terrorist attacks at the Pentagon in Washington, DC. This paper examines Krakow's Jewish Ghetto Memorial as an example of a counter-monument and considers its impact on viewers and its efficacy as a public memorial space.

Keywords

memorials, Holocaust, counter-monuments, memory, monuments

The Counter-Monument as Memorial Strategy

When James Young coined the term counter-monument in the early 1990s, he used it to refer specifically to several German monuments that shared a condition of invisibility, either by virtue of their initial placement or their eventual disappearance. Chief among these were Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz' *Monument Against Fascism, War and Violence—and for Peace and Human Rights*, unveiled in Harburg in 1986; Horst Hoheisel's *Monument to the Aschrott-Brunnen* built in Kassel in 1989; and Norbert Radermacher's memorial on the former site of a labor camp in Berlin, conceptualized in 1989 and realized in 1994. A brief survey of these memorials will serve as a guide to the concept of the counter-monument as described by Young.

When originally installed in an urban plaza in Harburg, a suburb of Hamburg, the *Monument Against Fascism* designed by Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz consisted of a twelve-meter high, one-meter square pillar, its surface covered by a thin layer of soft lead. At each corner of the pillar a steel-pointed stylus was attached and an inscription next to the monument invited viewers to inscribe their name on the pillar. As a section of the pillar became covered with names (and other graffiti), the column would be lowered into the ground, presenting a fresh surface for inscriptions, until the entire pillar was submerged. Between 1986 and its final descent in 1993, the monument was lowered eight times.² Today all that is visible at the site is a small viewing window and a plaque describing the project with photos of the pillar during the stages of its gradual descent.

Another project by Jochen Gerz, *2146 Stones—Monument Against Racism*, also functions as a counter-monument and is discussed by Young in subsequent essays. The *2146 Stones* are installed in front of Saarbrücken Castle, the seat of the Provincial Parliament. The original paving stones in the square were removed and replaced with stones that had each been inscribed with the name of one of the 2146 Jewish cemeteries that were in use in Germany prior to World War II. The inscribed stones were placed, however, with the inscription facing the earth, leaving the impressionism of an untouched square. While the project was initially carried out in secret and without legal permission, it was eventually sanctioned by the Parliament and the square has subsequently been renamed from Castle Square to the Square of the Invisible Monument.³

In Kassel, Horst Hoheisel was awarded the commission to "rescue" a destroyed historical monument, the *Aschrott-Brunnen*. This was a neo-Gothic fountain that had been gifted to the city of Kassel in 1908 by one of its Jewish citizens, Sigmond Aschrott, and destroyed by the Nazis in 1939, leaving only the remnants of the base. Hoheisel opted not to re-create or preserve the original fountain, instead constructing what Young terms a "negative-form monument"⁴ by building a hollow concrete form that followed the design of the 1908 fountain and then inverting it and sinking it into the ground, leaving the hollow open for water to run down into, rather than spraying upward.

Finally, in the Neukölln district of Berlin, on the former site of a forced labor camp, Norbert Radermacher conceived another form of semi-permanent memorial using projections of written text. The movement of passersby triggers the projection of varying texts discussing the history of the site, which is now a sports field. The text moves slowly downward until reaching the sidewalk, where it becomes most legible, before disappearing, to be triggered by the next person passing the site. The memorial thus occupies a space between presence and absence; neither permanently vanishing like the Gerz' monument, nor explicitly occupying a negative space, like Hoheisel's fountain, the perpetual appearance and disappearance of the text may evoke the idea of a memory lapse and our need for continual reminders of the past.

For Young, these projects meet the criteria of a counter-monument, which

“...flouts any number of cherished memorial conventions: its aim is not to console but to provoke; not to remain fixed but to change; not to be everlasting but to disappear; not to be ignored by its passersby but to demand interaction; not to remain pristine but to invite its own violation and desecration; not to accept graciously the burden of memory but to throw it back at the town's feet.”⁵

In a general sense, the counter-monument can be read as complicating the act of remembering. Whereas a traditional monument, such as those to the fallen soldiers of World War I, might be seen as providing a discrete, tidy space of memory and commemoration, the counter-monument is messy, challenging and provokes its viewers. It does not stay neatly within bounds of space or time but calls our attention to the ongoing work of memory and to those lapses of memory that threaten to compromise our reckoning with the past.

Take a Seat: Chairs as Memorial Elements

The *Jewish Ghetto Memorial* in Plac Bohaterów Getta (Ghetto Heroes Square) in Krakow does not, at first glance, appear to follow the conventions of a counter-monument as discussed by Young. It does not disappear, it is not a negative-form, it does not invite people to mark or deface it. However, I argue that this memorial can be read as a counter-monument, particularly when considered in the context of other contemporary memorials that use a similar motif as a defining feature: the chair or seating unit.

The architects of the Krakow memorial, Piotr Lewicki and Kazimierz Latak, write that their design was inspired by films and photographs showing Jewish victims of the Holocaust carrying their possessions through the squares of Europe as they were moved from house to ghetto to transport.⁶ After the 1943 liquidation of the Krakow Ghetto by the Nazis, Zgody Square (renamed Plac Bohaterów Getta) was described as left full of useless, dilapidated objects, abandoned when their owners were killed or taken to the camps. Lewicki and Latak reduced that image of a square filled with abandoned goods to a simple symbol: the empty chair, standing for loss and absence.

The use of a chair or seating unit as a marker is not uncommon in contemporary memorial architecture. Perhaps the most immediately recognizable example, at least for some Western audiences, is that of “Field of Empty Chairs” included in the *Oklahoma City National Memorial and Museum*, designed by the Butzer Design Partnership and dedicated in 2000. The memorial honors the victims, survivors, rescuers and all who were affected by the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. The Oklahoma City memorial covers a 3.3 acre site and is comprised of several elements, including a reflecting pool, gates, and orchard. The group of 168 sculptural chairs is located on the footprint of the original Murrah Federal Building, each inscribed with the name of a person killed in the bombing. The nine rows in which the chairs are arranged represent the nine floors of the building. Nineteen of the chairs are built on a smaller scale, in memory of the children who were killed. In each row, the chairs bear the names of those who were working or visiting on the corresponding floor at the time of the attack. At night, the chairs are lit from within, and the inscribed names appear to glow on the etched glass.⁷

The first of the 9/11 memorials to be completed, that at the Pentagon, also uses a seating element, in this case a bench, as a key feature. Designed by Julie Beckman and Keith Kaseman and dedicated on September 11, 2008, the Pentagon Memorial is comprised of 184 Memorial Units, which are constructed from stainless steel and granite and appear to float, cantilevered over individual reflecting pools. The victims' names are inscribed on a nameplate at the front edge of each bench. As with the Oklahoma City memorial, nighttime lighting is an integral component of the memorial. Additionally, the Memorial Units are arranged according to a complex scheme that reflects whether the victim was killed on the ground at the Pentagon or on the hijacked plane, as well as the age of the victim.⁸

In both the Oklahoma City Memorial and the Pentagon Memorial, seating elements serve a defined purpose: to identify and commemorate specific individuals killed in the attacks and, through variations in scale and placement, to provide information about the location and age of the victims. A similar memorial strategy has been employed in Christchurch New Zealand, where artist Peter Majendie has created an installation of 185 unique white chairs, honoring the victims of the 2011 earthquakes that devastated the city.⁹ Although not an official or necessarily permanent memorial, the installation has been widely acclaimed by Christchurch residents and visitors and one of the shortlisted designs for the permanent memorial also features chairs, in an apparent nod to the success of Majendie's project.¹⁰ As with the Oklahoma City Memorial and the Pentagon Memorial, a critical element of the Christchurch installation is that the chairs function as both a collective reminder of loss and as specific reflections on individual deaths.

The Contemporary Counter-Monument

The three examples just discussed show how a chair or seating element can be used in contemporary memorial architecture to embody a sense of both collective and individual loss and absence. Other memorial tropes – the simple wall inscribed with names, the photographs of the dead, the anniversary recitation of victims’ names – are frequently deployed to emphasize the memory of individuals; indeed the inscribing of individual names, particularly on war memorials has a long history. When confronted with the scope and scale of deaths in the Holocaust, however, combined with the uncertainty at times of who died where or when, some memorial designers have rejected the idea of individual naming in favor of highlighting collective loss. Near Krakow two early memorials, that at the Plaszow concentration camp (1964) and at Auschwitz-Birkenau (1967), borrow heavily from traditions of Soviet modernism in their heavy, anonymous forms and overbearing design. In Vienna, Rachel Whiteread’s *Judenplatz Holocaust Memorial* (2000) with its concrete library of inverted volumes, stands in silent homage to the lost knowledge and history of Europe’s Jews. And in Berlin, the 2,711 stelae of Peter Eisenman’s *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* (2005), spread over a 10 acre site, challenges expectations of a memorial space. The visitor does not know precisely how to behave; should all the forms be treated as sacred spaces, not to be touched except perhaps in reverence and respect? While the solemnity of the events commemorated here might suggest that this is the case, the memorial’s integration with the surrounding city encourages a different, more casual, interaction as children play around the space and visitors rest on the concrete pillars. Another memorial that complicates our understanding of appropriate use is Peter Arad’s *Reflecting Absence*, the National 9/11 Memorial built on the former site of the World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan. According to its architect, the *Reflecting Absence* is intended to function as a space of both reflection and relaxation with its great pools and waterfalls in the footprints of the Twin Towers and the adjacent, landscaped Memorial Plaza. Perhaps because the architect had been explicit since the beginning of the design process about his intention for the memorial to blend into the fabric of lower Manhattan, its use as a space for eating, reading, and resting has not received the kind of negative attention that Eisenman’s memorial attracted. However, that does not keep 9/11 Memorial staff from trying to limit some of the more potentially disruptive behaviors, such as climbing on the stone benches. However, even this policing has not been without criticism; as Adam Gopnik writes in the *New Yorker* magazine, “The idea that we celebrate the renewal of our freedom by deploying uniformed guards to prevent children from playing in an outdoor park is not just bizarre in itself but participates in a culture of fear that the rest of the city, having tested, long ago discarded.”¹¹

The Jewish Ghetto Memorial as Counter-Monument

While some of the stelae of Peter Eisenman’s *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* may have come in practice to function as seating elements, arguably that use was not part of the original intent in the design of the memorial. However, the functional aspect of the chairs in the *Jewish Ghetto Memorial*, at least those arrayed in proximity to public transportation, has since the memorial’s inauguration been an accepted, even expected part of the design. It is difficult to know for certain whether the memorial’s architects intended this practical usage, as they write in their description of the memorial project that, “The remembrance of those who are no longer with us has been expressed by an accumulation of ordinary objects... [which] stripped of their everyday practical functions, have acquired a symbolical aspect.”¹² They do appear to have given consideration to the effects of time and on the memorial’s surfaces, stating that for materials, “We have chosen patinated bronze, corroded cast iron, galvanization that becomes dull, paving blocks of grey syenite and ordinary concrete.”¹³ Whether the designers intended the chairs to function as chairs, or only as symbols of loss and absence, the citizens of Krakow seem to have no problem in accepting a dual role for them: as practical and symbolic. That the chairs work as useful seating in addition to serving as prompts for memory and reflection allows for their categorization as counter-monument. To return to Young’s definition of the term, the *Jewish Ghetto Memorial* fits several of the criteria of a counter-monument: “not to remain fixed but to change; not to be ignored by its passersby but to demand interaction; not to accept graciously the burden of memory but to throw it back at the town’s feet.”¹⁴ Through its integration with the public, lived space of the city the memorial will wear and change as time passes, people will interact with and use it and thus, wittingly or unwittingly, participate in the memory work that memorials are intended to provoke. That is not to say that every time someone sits in one of the memorial’s chairs to wait for a tram they will reflect on the sins of their city’s past, however the insistent civic presence of the memorial does encourage and ongoing and evolving reckoning with that history.

Perhaps the best way to situate the Krakow *Jewish Ghetto Memorial* as a counter-monument is through a comparison with another Holocaust Memorial that also uses chairs as visual elements but that fails to meet the expectations for a counter-monument as set forth by Young. In October 2000 the city of Oslo, Norway dedicated a memorial to the approximately 700 Jews who were deported from that city in 1942 and 1943. Designed by the British sculptor Antony Gormley, the memorial consists of eight seatless chairs, arranged on a small patch of grass between the wall of the Akershus Fortress and a city road, overlooking the fjord from which ships carrying the deported Jews would have undertaken their journeys. The location is not a central one and the presence of the road next to the site does not invite interaction with the memorial – reflective or otherwise. The seatless chairs are rendered functionally useless and the space of the memorial does not encourage lingering even if one could sit on them. The memorial

appears to embody a concern that Young attributes to the designers of counter-monuments: “Instead of searing memory into public consciousness, they fear, conventional memorials seal memory off from awareness altogether.”¹⁵

Krakow’s *Jewish Ghetto Memorial* does not have the self-destructive or self-effacing quality of those counter-monuments designed by the Gerzes, Hoheisel or Radermacher. Yet in its insistent presence and interaction with the space of the city it precisely refuses to “seal memory off from awareness” and instead prompts its viewers to continue the work of memory in the present and future.

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- 5 Young, 277.
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- 12 "New Zgody Square – Remodelling of Bohaterów Getta Square."
- 13 "New Zgody Square – Remodelling of Bohaterów Getta Square."
- 14 Young, 277.
- 15 Young, 272.

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