2013

How we represent and memorialize the Holocaust: museums, sites and memorials in the United States

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How we represent and memorialize the Holocaust: museums, sites and memorials in the United States

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the University Honors Program
University of South Florida St. Petersburg

29 April 2013

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Introduction

The Holocaust was a monumental event that changed the way that we as human beings think about our relationship to one another. It is an event in history that has remained present in the world’s perception of Germany as a reunified country, acted as a blemish on the national histories of countries such as Poland and France, and has been offered as a reason for the existence of the state of Israel. For these reasons and others (political, cultural, metaphysical, and existential), the Holocaust remains an event that begs for adequate analysis and representation.

The Holocaust presents ethical and epistemological quandaries that challenge standard approaches to representation and historicization, as well as posing a threat to the perceived integrity of modern humanity. To some, the idea of being modern means that we have evolved beyond ‘barbaric’ practices of the past. Others still want to say that the Holocaust was a uniquely German event, separate from the rest of modern humanity. In these and many other ways, the Holocaust is often perceived as the exceptional event in modern history, rather than an event that is symptomatic of modernity.¹

The Holocaust is a very charged historical event and in some ways, an event that feels unique. There appear to be a number of moral and ethical questions at stake when one writes the history of the Holocaust; this is arguably true of many histories, but it often feels more immediate with reference to the Holocaust. According to some, and perhaps for precisely these reasons, the ethical implications of this event call for a new historical discourse, a new way to talk about the Holocaust.² The events of the Holocaust beg ethical questions such as: What does

² Saul Friedlander, Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the ‘Final Solution’ (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 11-12
mass murder through industrial means say about modern society? What are the consequences of categorizing people into different groups, and what forms of categorization are acceptable, which are not? What does it mean for a political regime to employ racial policies to maintain power?

Histories have two related but nonetheless distinct components: knowledge and comprehension. Knowledge is what we know about an event or historical phenomenon. We use primary sources and texts as a record of what happened, yet these sources offer us but an incomplete form of access to (or understanding of) the past. The knowledge of an event tells you what happened, but the next step further is comprehension.

In most representations of the Holocaust, “some claim to ‘truth’ appears particularly imperative.”\(^3\) This is important because of the feeling that there needs to be some sort of accurate record of the Nazis crimes against humanity. Thus, an assembly of the facts alone is not enough to create something with claims to “truth.” However, this can imply that some interpretations or representations are wrong or transgress the boundaries of what is acceptable. All forms of knowledge have implied truth to them, and being based on knowledge, comprehension is taken to have truth in it as well. They both use knowledge which is grounded in truth, but they tell different stories. In this search for truth, there are several concerns that need to be looked at, including “the opaqueness of the events and the opaqueness of the language as such.”\(^4\) This opaqueness is, in a sense, another way of phrasing the “unknowability” of the Holocaust.

The opaqueness of language that Friedlander is referring to is the concept that there are not words to adequately describe the magnitude of the events, at least not without doing them some sort of ethical and emotional injustice. Language as such has its limits and the Holocaust as an

\(^3\)Friedlander, Probing the Limits of Representation, 3.
\(^4\)Friedlander, Probing the Limits of Representation, 4.
event challenges those limitations. The unknowability of the Holocaust is the idea that there is something about it that those of us who were not there can never truly understand or comprehend. Opaqueness refers to the inability to adequately represent the events, and unknowability is the inability to adequately comprehend. Nevertheless, the attempt is still made to both represent and comprehend the Holocaust, though this must be done conscientiously.

For Friedlander and others, the real issue at stake is not what we know, but what we understand. This understanding is made all the more difficult by the “opaqueness” that Friedlander discusses. This sense of “unknowability” associated with the Holocaust, and so too its history and remembrance, along with its ethically charged nature, makes it necessary to be aware of the intentions and methods behind Holocaust memorialization. Whether it is the political or cultural dynamics that shape a particular national or historical narrative, or the temporal and linguistic barriers to that representation, each of these factors should be kept in mind when one engages with the memory of the Holocaust.

The difference between narrative and chronicle is related to the difference between knowledge and comprehension. In *Metahistory*, Hayden White discusses the nineteenth century positivist approach to history. The positivists believed in a scientific and factual based approach to history, one that claimed that knowledge of empirical facts is sufficient for comprehension. In this discussion, the tension between facts and comprehension becomes apparent. In an article relating the theories of White to the historiographical works of Friedlander, Wulf Kansteiner states that, “Facts become history and can help fulfill the social and communicative function of
history only when they are integrated into narrative frameworks that might have all kinds of qualities, but factual accuracy is not one of them.”

The process that attempts to bridge this gap between knowledge and comprehension is narrativity. Hayden White describes the process of creating historical narratives as an “attempt to mediate among the historical field, unprocessed historical record, other historical accounts and an audience.” This process includes writing a story that has a particular beginning, middle, and end. In short, when a historian writes a narrative there are many choices that are made, most of which are conscious choices that shape his/her narrative and shape our comprehension of the event.

A good example of how narratives, using the same knowledge can present a different comprehension of the same events, is the intentionalist vs. functionalist debate. Both of these look at how the Nazi’s came to ‘the final solution.’ The intentionalists believe that everything done by the Nazi party from the time they were in power was intentional and that extermination was their ultimate goal. The functionalists argue that all the actions taken by the Nazis were done in reaction to success or failure of previous decisions. For the functionalists this means that the Nazis’ ultimate goal was not to exterminate the Jews, but that extermination through the final solution ended up being the most functional option based on how events occurred. These two interpretations do not disagree on the factual record but on how they interpret this record.

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7 White, footnote, 6.
8 The other choices could be made unconsciously based on the historians mentalité.
Therefore, this shows how the same information can be presented in two different ways, highlighting the importance of narrative choices in comprehension.

Therefore, facts presented in the form of a chronicle are not sufficient for comprehension and the creation of a narrative is necessary. This is an important point that White makes about the Holocaust. As noted above, the Holocaust is a particularly charged event that (perhaps) requires a new method of historicization. White expresses this same idea as “the mismatch between nineteenth-century tools of representation and twentieth-century catastrophes,” a mismatch that he claims “cannot be primarily attributed to some qualities inherent in the events themselves, although modern genocide, warfare, and capitalism are certainly unprecedented events. Instead, a sense of incommensurability has developed only in hindsight as some modern events, including the ‘Final Solution,’ have been perceived to transcend the limits of representation.”

White thus claims that the nineteenth century modes of historicization, such as positivism, were never adequate as a historical method. With the Holocaust’s particularly ethical implications though, it would seem that this is the event that made the need for a new historical approach seem imperative.

The call for a new historical approach has also been put forth by historians such as Dominick LaCapra. He agrees with White that the traditional empirical techniques are inadequate to represent certain historical events. He feels that the Holocaust in particular calls this into question as an event “which tests our traditional conceptual and representational categories,” and claims that the study of the Holocaust “may help us to reconsider the requirement of

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10 Friedlander, Probing the Limits of Representation, 3.
Historians such as White and LaCapra call for a new approach to historical representation in an attempt to comprehend events such as the Holocaust for what they were and what they continue to mean, a balance that, they claim, may be beyond traditional historiographical approaches.  

Hayden White also writes about different modes of emplotment in historical works. These are essentially genres in which narratives can be written and range from epic, tragedy and comedy.  

For the sake of looking at Holocaust memorialization more specifically, we also have ‘genres’ of remembrance. Our ‘genres’ are sites, memorials, and museums. Each of these types of sites has a different “feel”. With that, there are important things to take into account when one analyzes these sites.

Museums, memorials and sites are instruments that allow us to try and comprehend the past. Each of these genres does this in different ways and these differences should be taken into account when trying to understand the ways that the Holocaust has been memorialized. As we discussed with the theories of Hayden White, the choices made in the creation of a narrative are always important and carry weight in the shaping of the final product. As we have seen in looking at museums, their purpose is to create a particular, though not necessarily absolute, narrative which communicates a certain message for their visitors to go away with. The messages of memorials and sites are more ambiguous. There is a message inscribed in both of these genres, but there is also more room for visitors to construct their own meaning on top of this.

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11 Friedlander, Probing the Limits of Representation, 11.  
12 Kansteiner, “Success, Truth, and Modernism,” 33  
13 Hayden White, Metahistory, 6.
While memorials and sites share the above distinction from museums, they remain different from one another. Memorials are constructed in commemoration of events, people, or ideas. Events may be a large and all-encompassing one like the Holocaust more generally, or very specific occurrences like the Vel d’Hiv Roundup in Paris. Sites on the other hand are very specific physical locations (i.e. buildings, camps, killing sites, etc.) in which such events actually took place. These sites themselves house memories of the events and imply a sense of ‘hallowed ground.’ This characteristic is what sets a site apart from either a museum or a memorial where the connection to the event is often more secondary.

Museums and memorials are both created in order to facilitate a particular experience, they are planned. The impressions and experiences with which a visitor is left are shaped by the mission and goals of the creating institution or body. Memorials that are in locations significant to the event or, especially in the case of sites like the camps, hold their significance in the actual events, derive a large part of their meaning from them. The sort of experience one has at a site or memorial is very different from the experience of a planned museum narrative.

The role of space is important in how one understands memorial representations of the Holocaust, particularly in the ways that it can shape and contain a narrative. First, there is the question of a memorial’s geographical location. For instance, the memorial may be in the location of a significant event. An interesting example is Auschwitz; it is synonymous with the Holocaust and the final solution, and now is a museum. The meaning of the museum’s narrative is entrenched in its location at the remnants of Auschwitz. The location is itself significant and implies meaning directly related to the event. Auschwitz’s existence as a site allows for interpretation of what is seen and what is now unseen simultaneously. The knowledge of the events that took place at a site allows visitors to bring with them a narrative of the site. This does
mean that the site itself is creating a narrative but that the knowledge of what happened there shapes the perception of a narrative. Thus, the location of a memorial often, while not having an implied narrative, leads us to impose our own.

The second aspect of space is the architecture and physical layout of memorials and museums. Often times, the architecture and space are used like words are used by historians, to create a particular story. A building or space can be designed to create a certain feeling or promote an idea much like a written narrative uses words to create certain feelings and to emphasize certain ideas. A prime example, which will be discussed in more detail below, is Yad Vashem in Israel. The physical architecture of the building is dark and haunting inside, as one goes through the Jewish history during the Holocaust. The museum at the end, however, opens up onto a large opening overlooking the city of Jerusalem, representing the homeland of the Jewish people. The story of the Jewish people and the Holocaust is told through the architecture of the building, whose narrative is created by the architect or designer.

The site of the work/death camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau is an example of a memorial, site and museum, in a way all in one. This fact makes it an important place to look at when discussing not only the difference between a memorial and a museum, but also the importance of locations when understanding a site/memorial/museum. The Auschwitz-Birkenau complex is located in the suburbs of Oswiecim in Poland. It is the most notorious of the concentration camps and has become, in some ways synonymous with the ‘Final Solution’ and the Nazi’s atrocities. Thus, the memories held at the site shape the impression that the visitors take away. The memories communicate the stories of the millions of people who were murdered by the Nazis

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14 Moshe Safdie, Joan Ockman, and Diana Murphy, *Yad Vashem: Moshe Safdie - The Architecture of Memory* (Baden: Lars Müller, 2006), 20-26
while in their walls. Therefore, what separates a memorial or museum from a site is the memories of what took place there and the sacredness associated with them.

The site is very well preserved and a lot of money is spent on keeping its authentic buildings intact. The idea of keeping such a place preserved is an interesting phenomenon. As Ruth Kluger discusses in Still Alive, the preservation of these sites from a German perspective is more about restitution than honoring the dead. The site is a place of such tragedy and pain, yet people choose to keep it standing. On the one hand it seems morbid to preserve such a place. On the other hand, though, it stands as a reminder of what happened on that spot. We believe that this is the more compelling argument and is best articulated by the following quote from the Auschwitz-Birkenau Preservation page:

Despite the passage of time, the largely complete complex of buildings at Auschwitz I and the remains of Auschwitz II – Birkenau, through their authenticity, make a powerful impression on each new generation. The grounds and the remains make it possible to conceive of the entire Auschwitz system of camps and sub-camps, and the totality of the system of camps and death camps in the Third Reich.

Therefore, the preservation of this site is important for future generations to better comprehend the reality of the camp and the camp system. In other words, the structure of the site itself, influences the perceptions of visitors. A narrative that could only be told through the actual site and the experiences that one had there.

The importance of this memorial and museum (Auschwitz State Museum) comes from its location. It is a site of the history of the Holocaust, the events played out there. Much as in the Hall of Remembrance at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, absence and empty space speak

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volumes. The emptiness of an occupied space holds more meaning in some ways than museum narrative alone can communicate. This makes Auschwitz-Birkenau an absence memorial. A memorial emphasizes something that is absent, in this case the millions of people who were killed. When one visits this site, the barracks, the crematorium and the sheer size of the camp would strike them. However, what makes these buildings and structures so horrific is what is no longer there, the victims and perpetrators. Imagining thousands of people stuffed into the small barrack, would be haunting when looking at it vacant. This is much like the boxcar at the USHMM, stepping into it is haunting because of what is no longer there. This then is the power and the function of an absence memorial; it memorializes the dead by the prominence of their absence.

The site also houses a museum on the history of the site. As we discussed with museums, they tend to tell a more definitive narrative, in that they choose how to portray and explain the events. This means that the viewers are meant to leave with a more particular message. The memorial and site components of Auschwitz-Birkenau though tend to be more open to the viewers’ perception, in a sense viewers create their own narrative based on their perception.

In this paper, we will analyze the challenge of memorialization and some issues to be considered when looking at representations of the Holocaust. This will be done through an engagement with the ways in which the Holocaust has been memorialized as well as some of the implications of these memorializations. We are going to do this by first looking at the role that museums play in memorialization. We will focus on the narratives and the architecture in order to analyze the way which museums construct messages and meaning. We are then going to turn our attention to the differences between the genres of memorialization (museums, memorials and
sites) in order to highlight the nuances of remembrance. We will mainly use examples found in the United States, using international examples as counterpoints for discussion.
How we represent and memorialize the Holocaust: museums, sites and memorials in the United States

Though the Holocaust is an event that took place predominantly in Europe, the memory of it has a strong presence in the United States and around the world. As of 2009, there were sixteen museums, more than 150 learning centers, and seemingly countless memorials dedicated to preserving the history of the Holocaust in the United States. The United States has clearly embraced the importance of Holocaust remembrance; and yet, it is unclear whether a particular or unified national culture of Holocaust remembrance has emerged.

The international coverage of the Adolf Eichmann trial in 1961 renewed interest in the Holocaust and its remembrance. However, it was in the late 1970s that the Holocaust begun to be considered more widely for memorialization in the United States. In 1978 The Holocaust aired on television, signaling the resurgence of the Holocaust into American popular culture. Around that same time President Carter announced the creation of the President’s Commission on the Holocaust, a committee to discuss the most appropriate way to create a national memorial to the Holocaust in the United States. A counter argument to the creation of a national American memorial was that it may reinforce ‘the Holocaust’ as standing for all of Jewish history, rather than remembering the cultural contributions of the Jewish people they would only be remembered for their extermination. When the decision to create an American national memorial was made, it echoed the belief of Elie Wiesel that the Holocaust is not understandable.

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18 Edward T. Linenthal, Preserving Memory: the struggle to create America’s Holocaust Museum (New York, Viking, 1995), 12.
19 Linenthal, Preserving Memory, 13.
by mankind (except for those who were there) but that it is an event that carries an ethical imperative to remember.

Resolving to memorialize the Holocaust in the form of a national memorial was not the same as resolving how to memorialize the event. This thesis is interested in looking at whether or not a defined, settled narrative has developed within a culture of remembrance. Regardless of the answer to the previous, we are concerned with what the content of various examples of American memorializations has become over time, how each representation of Holocaust history is similar and/or different when compared to others. What these variations say about the cohesiveness of the culture of American Holocaust memorialization.

While the U.S. did not play a major role in the Holocaust (we were not perpetrators or directly complicit), when the war ended we, perceived as a free nation, became a haven for many survivors of the Holocaust. Therefore, many survivors immigrated to the U.S. where they made a new home. The U.S. is an appropriate place to look for Holocaust memorialization, both in the form of educational museums and commemorative memorials, despite its distance from the location of the historical events.

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1 Memorials

The United States, as we have noted, became the home of many survivors and their families. As a result, many memorials were built in the U.S. and were sponsored by survivors, much like the regional museums. These memorials, while they do not memorialize and remember events that happened in the U.S., do memorialize a loss felt by a large group of people in the U.S. and are therefore important.

An example of one such memorial is the New England Holocaust Memorial in Boston. The New England Holocaust Memorial was dedicated on October 22, 1995. The impetus for the creation of this memorial came from a Holocaust survivor. Steven Ross was imprisoned in 10 different concentration camps, until he was liberated from Dachau at 14. Steven and his brother, Harry were the only surviving members of their family. They were liberated by the Americans, who gave them a cloth to wipe their tears, which he later found to be an American flag, which he kept “as a symbol of freedom, life, compassion and love of the American soldiers.”

He was brought to America through the U.S. Committee for Orphaned Children at the age of 16. In the United States he earned three college degrees and worked for the city of Boston, doing work to help people in the inner city. His treatment by his American liberators guided his decision to make a life for himself in America. He was driven to create a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust as a way to remember and memorialize his family who had perished.

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This memorial’s founding is an example of how memorials and regional museums in the U.S. are shaped by the stories of local survivors. Many of the survivors that ended up in the U.S. came here with stories to tell, loved ones to remember as well as soldiers to appreciate. Steven Ross, being a prominent person in Boston, chose to tell his story there. The result was the New England Holocaust Memorial.\(^\text{23}\)

The memorial consists of six tall glass pillars that are lit from the bottom up at night (Figure 1.1). The number six is significant in that it represents the six million Jews who were killed in the Holocaust, as well as the six death camps and the six years of the war. On the glass there are six million numbers etched to represent the tattoos that the prisoners of the camps were forced to

\(^{23}\) The New England Holocaust Memorial, “History,” http://www.nehm.org/the-memorial/history/
have as identification (Figure 1.2). All of these aspects are very symbolic of the Holocaust and explicitly represent different facets, including the victims and the camps.

The memorial is also symbolic in that it is strategically placed along the historical Freedom Trail, which is meant to represent freedom. Having this located along this path is strategic, in order to make a point:
To remember their suffering is to recognize the danger and evil that are possible whenever one group persecutes another. As you walk this Freedom Trail, pause here to reflect on the consequences of a world in which there is no freedom—a world in which basic human rights are not protected. And know that wherever prejudice, discrimination and victimization are tolerated, evil like the Holocaust can happen again.  

The memorial is supposed to be represented as an example of what can happen when people’s freedoms and rights are not respected. It is meant to be a lesson to all those who walk upon it, to stop and think about the importance of freedom. We think that this is the main message of many of the U.S. memorials. The U.S. in the eyes of many survivors, including Steven Ross, is seen as a place of sanctuary and freedom, and upon coming here they want to express the stark contrast of that freedom with the oppressive Nazi regime. While this feeling may or may not be shared by people around the world, it is a recurring theme in the U.S. relationship with the Holocaust and their survivors and shows up in many of the memorials.  

The Holocaust memorial in Charleston, South Carolina is another example of a memorial in the U.S. Much like the New England Holocaust Memorial, survivors in the area put the idea for the memorial forth. The main difference between this museum and the one in Boston is that the structure of the Charleston memorial focuses much more on absence. The memorial consists of a sculpture which is encompassed in a

Figure 1.3 View of the screen of the Charleston Holocaust Memorial  
(Photo from: Jonathan Levi Architects, “Holocaust Memorial,”  
http://www.leviarccom/holocaust.swf)

tall rectangular screen made of stainless steel (Figure 1.3). Inside the screen is a Jewish prayer shawl made of bronze (Figure 1.4). Opposite the screen is a bench, where the viewer is meant to sit and contemplate the boundary created and their relationship to it.\textsuperscript{25}

In its essence, this memorial is very simple. It also uses a lot of empty space. The meaning is meant to be taken from the empty space. This makes the memorial an absence memorial. The empty space, much like in the USHMM’s Hall of Remembrance, is meant

to be evocative of what, or more namely, who is missing. This then is an example of how memorials, unlike museums, force the viewers to place meaning on what they are viewing. Viewers are creating their own understanding and their own relationship to the narrative, through the architecture.

The Rafle du Vel' d'Hiv (Vel d'Hiv roundup) was a mass roundup of foreign born Jews living in Paris. French police officers carried out the mass arrests, not at the behest of the occupying Nazi officials but at the order of the Vichy government (the “so-called French government” at the time). The roundup began the morning of 16 July 1942 and by day’s end, the number of Jews confined in the Vélodrome d’Hiver numbered upwards of 11,000. The prisoners in the stadium were men, women, children and elderly. The arrests had left out no one. Within a week, the imprisoned Jews were moved from the stadium to the concentration camps Drancy, Pithiviers, and Beaune-la-Rolande. From there they were deported to killing centers in the East.  

The French public at the time was not in full support of these deportations. “Public condemnation of the arrest and deportation of Jews was primarily sparked by the difficult sight of women arrested along with their babies.”  

The Vel’d’Hiv has become synonymous with the collaboration of the Vichy government, it was the largest roundup of Jews and the images of imprisoned women and children that it evokes are very powerful.

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There are two defining characteristics of this memorial that set it apart from the Holocaust memorials in Boston and Charleston; one of which is location. The Vélodrome used to imprison the Jews in the summer of 1942 was destroyed by a fire in 1959. The Vel’ d’Hiv memorial in Paris rests near the site of the stadium and that in itself is significant because of the memorial’s proximity to the event it is meant to commemorate. The other characteristic that differentiates this memorial from the others looked at previously is the founding force behind the memorial’s creation; this is an example of the country’s need to memorialize an event as a way to recognize its historic complicity, it is an atonement memorial. An atonement memorial is a memorial that is
created in order to atone for something one has done. In the case of the Vel’ d’Hiv, the French created this memorial, not only to remember the victims of the event but also to atone for the role that they played in it, for their complicity. By creating this memorial the French recognize their complicity and sought to make up for it by honoring the victims.

![Figure 1.6 Plaque at the base of the memorial](http://www.flickr.com/photos/87511907@N07/8012654790/)

The Vel’ d’Hiv memorial was created by a Polish sculptor by the name of Walter Spitzer and it was opened in 1994. The plaque at the base of the memorial (Figure 1.6) reads: “The French Republic in homage to victims of racist and anti-Semitic persecutions and of crimes against humanity committed under the authority of the so-called ‘Government of the State of France.’ 1940-1944 We will never forget.” The design of the memorial is visually representative of the event. The “floor” of the sculpture is curved upwards at one side, calling to mind the curved tracks of a vélo-drome. The figures represented are as varied as the victims of the roundup; an

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28 A Page in History, “These black hours will stain our history forever,” http://blog.claimscon.org/2010/07/16/these-black-hours-will-stain-our-history-for-ever/
older man, a pregnant woman, and a family with young children. The manner in which they are positioned shows distress and fear. These sculptures are very recognizable as people, specifically people from the Vel’ d’Hiv roundup, there is little to no abstraction at work here. Though the meaning intended by this memorial is very clear, there is still room within it for visitors to impose their own significance, if not in its architectural, aesthetic design, then in its location and even in its very existence.
2 The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: Museum History

We turn now to our primary example of museum narrative. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) was first conceptualized in 1978 when President Jimmy Carter created the President's Commission on the Holocaust. This commission was led by a group of historians, scholars, survivors, and religious leaders, as well as members of the United States Congress, and was brought into being to research and discuss the function of “a permanent living memorial museum to the victims of the Holocaust.” In its early stages, it was unclear if what was being planned would be a museum or a memorial. In the years since its opening in 1993, the USHMM has worked to define itself as both educational museum and commemorative memorial to the victims of the Holocaust.

In 1979, the commission presented a report to President Carter in which it outlined its sense of what ought to be the mission of the new museum, as well as what information should be included in the museum and how the narrative of the Holocaust should be presented. In his letter introducing the report, Elie Wiesel laid out theoretical guidelines that would become the basis of the project that later became the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. In his letter, Wiesel discussed the importance of remembering the Holocaust:

Like it or not, the Event must and will dominate future events. Its centrality in the creative endeavors of our contemporaries remains undisputed. Philosophers and social scientists, psychologists and moralists, theologians and artists: all have termed it a watershed in the annals of mankind. What was comprehensible before Treblinka is comprehensible no longer. After Treblinka, man's ability to cope with his condition was shattered; he was pushed to his limits and beyond. Whatever

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has happened since must therefore be judged in the light of Treblinka. Forgetfulness is no solution.\textsuperscript{30}

In light of this, Wiesel made clear why the Holocaust should be remembered. It is not just for those who died during the Holocaust, but also for those who continue to live after the events of the Holocaust. This addresses what Wiesel considered the main function of this U.S. museum, to tell the story of the Holocaust so as to “…serve as warning to future generations.”\textsuperscript{31}

In addition to articulating the importance of the project, Wiesel presented the president with the commission’s recommendations, including several specific things that the commission’s members felt should and should not be done in the creation of this museum. The first of the commissioners’ recommendations was that the museum should have an emphasis on the Jewish story. They reasoned that “[w]hile not all victims were Jews, all Jews were victims, destined for annihilation solely because they were born Jewish.”\textsuperscript{32} Therefore, they felt that the museum should recognize all victims but emphasize the Jewish experience. As we will see in the section below about the narrative of the museum, this issue was addressed by at once separating and integrating the threads of the Jewish and non-Jewish victims.

The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum opened in 1993 and has become an authority on Holocaust memory and education. The museum has had 30 million visitors since its opening, and its website is visited by people from over 100 different countries on a daily basis.\textsuperscript{33} The website of the USHMM has become an internationally recognized and authoritative source on Holocaust history. In an interview with museum representatives Laura Magnus and Ramee Gentry, they emphasized that the museum takes this responsibility as an authority very seriously and works to

\textsuperscript{30} Elie Wiesel, “Report to the President, 1979.”
\textsuperscript{31} Elie Wiesel, “Report to the President, 1979.”
\textsuperscript{32} Elie Wiesel, “Report to the President, 1979.”
\textsuperscript{33} United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website, “About the Museum,” http://www.ushmm.org/museum/about.
keep their information current with new findings. Though the website has been translated into more than twenty languages, the USHMM website does not translate into languages such as Hebrew and German because there are other museums (Yad Vashem and the Jewish Museum Berlin) that fill this need. Therefore, the museum reaches a large group of people and has grown into the “permanent living memorial museum to the victims of the Holocaust” called for by President Carter.34

3 Architecture

James Ingo Freed was approached about helping to design a U.S. Holocaust Museum in 1986. Freed, born in Germany to a Jewish family, escaped to the U.S. just after Kristallnacht. His whole family escaped, and he grew up never discussing what happened in Germany or what they left behind. This being so, Freed felt that he never emotionally or intellectually engaged with the Holocaust. After he was asked to help design the museum he finally, although reluctantly, engaged with the history that he narrowly escaped.\textsuperscript{35}

This engagement both helped and hindered his creation of a building to house the memory and history of the Holocaust. The event proved difficult for him to represent with a traditional building; he felt that the building needed to somehow connect with the Holocaust. At the same time, however, he did not want to crudely represent the Holocaust because he felt that the Holocaust was too complex to be represented in one entity. Freed thought that it was impossible to make a building that \textit{is} “the Holocaust.” A building can elicit emotions related to the Holocaust, but cannot \textit{be} it. Therefore, the building needed to refer to the Holocaust but could not do so directly. Saul Friedlander’s concept of the opaqueness of the Holocaust is similar to this idea. The Holocaust is an event that is hard to comprehend and therefore difficult to represent adequately. Freed increasingly became aware that this building would have to be abstract.

However, Freed did not feel that a completely abstract structure would be appropriate because it would accurately a represent the human side of the Holocaust. The Holocaust was not an abstract event devoid of human involvement, and the building needed to reflect this. Freed’s

primary inspiration for his design came from his visit to the Auschwitz concentration camp. When Freed saw the watchtowers and the ovens, he realized the significance of the human aspect of the Holocaust and how much human agency played a role in the mass murder of so many people. Not only were these aspects representative of the deaths of these people, they also showed him how much the Nazis’ plan was focused on efficiency. With this, he knew there had to be a focus on the industrial and technological aspect of the Holocaust infused in his building.\textsuperscript{36}

While the museum’s design is not meant to reference anything in particular from the Holocaust, the entryway is nonetheless reminiscent of a train station platform. This choice evokes the memory of the Holocaust, as trains were the main means of transportation used for deportations. Freed felt that it was more important for his visitors to feel the Holocaust rather than trying to understand it, because it is not something easily understood. He “wanted to somehow put you in its grasps.”\textsuperscript{37} Freed used these ideas in the creation of a building that is symbolic in nature. This symbolism is meant to disorient visitors, to put them in the shoes of a victim of the Holocaust, also helps to structure and communicate the narrative in the museum’s permanent exhibition. Though the building itself carries a certain meaning, the physical space the building has created is versatile and allows for the curators to make changes to the permanent exhibit.\textsuperscript{38}

The museum is a five story building with a limestone and concrete façade at the main entrance and a Hexagonal memorial on the other end known as the Hall of Remembrance. The ovens at Auschwitz were again an inspiration for Freed when it came to the structure of the museum. He noticed that the pieces of the oven were built onto the wall, not into it. He took this

\textsuperscript{36} Freed, \textit{Designing the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum}, 18.
\textsuperscript{37} Freed, \textit{Designing the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum}, 18.
\textsuperscript{38} Interview with Laura Magnus and Ramee Gentry, 3 January 2013.
industrial style and incorporated it into the Museum’s main structure. To do this, he used exposed steel frames, which were bolted rather than welded together, built on top of each other.\textsuperscript{39} The main building is entirely made up of red brick which creates an ominous feeling.\textsuperscript{40} (Figures 3.1 and 3.2).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure3.1.jpg}
\caption{Aerial view of the USHMM, the eight red brick towers bookended by two white limestone façades. This view highlights the ‘train station’ motif and the industrial influences hidden within the architecture. (Photo from “An Architect’s Journey” pp.25)}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{39} Freed, Designing the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 18.
\textsuperscript{40} Freed, Designing the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 19.
When you walk in through the main entrance, you are brought into the Hall of Witness (Figure 3.3). The hall is designed like a boarding platform in a train station, and is the main reception area of the museum. You walk in facing a black granite wall on one end; the ceiling above is a large steel and glass skylight. The skylight is built down on the second floor in order to be perceived as more immediate and noticeable than if it had been on the fifth floor. This hall acts as a transitional space. It is meant to re-orient the visitors, to separate them from the city of Washington, D.C. and to prepare them for what they are about to go see. Freed felt that this separation was important because one could not just walk in from the city of Washington and
into the Holocaust, but needed to be prepared psychologically first, which is the purpose of the Hall of Witness.

Visitors gain access to the museum’s permanent exhibition by elevator, which starts on the fourth floor, and winds down around the Hall of Witness and then ends back at the first floor. Two key elements in the structure of the exhibit are noteworthy and illustrate Freed’s emphasis upon the industrial/technological aspects of, as well as the role of humanity in, the Holocaust. The first of these elements is the elevators (Figure 3.4). The elevators are steel and represent technological advancement. Freed explains this connection to technology in this quote: “Just as the refined technology of modern Germany led to the efficiency and speed of the Holocaust, you

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41 Freed, *Designing the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, 30.
are delivered to it by technological means."42 These elevators are also in control of your fate. Once you are in the elevators you cannot go back down, you are forced to go through the exhibit, as that is the only way out at that point.43

![Elevator to Permanent Exhibition](image)

**Figure 3.4 Elevator to Permanent Exhibition**

This image evokes an ominous feeling, even if you do not know to what it is referring. Visually, you can see the influence of the crematorium ovens in the design of the elevators. (Photo from "An Architect's Journey" pp.37)

The second element that is worth mentioning is the glass bridges that connect the floors across the Hall of Witness (Figure 3.5). One bridge has the first names of victims of the Holocaust, while the other has the names of communities destroyed fritted into them. The names

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42 Freed, *Designing the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, 37.
43 Freed, *Designing the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, 37.
humanize the Holocaust, reminding you of the cultural life that was lost with these communities as well as that the victims of the Holocaust were each individuals. However, in Freed’s vision, the bridges also refer to the technological side of the Holocaust. The bridges are hung by steel beams and made of glass. The fact that one can walk across these without worrying about falling shows our trust in technology, even though the reality of the bridges should seem very dangerous. According to Freed, this is supposed to represent how technology brings us down dangerous paths when we trust it.  

![Glass bridges](image)

**Figure 3.5 Glass bridges.**
*(Photo from "An Architect’s Journey" pp.40)*

These two points highlight a major element of the museum: the role of technology. An apparent theme throughout is that technology is not what it seems and that it can be the cause of destruction. Freed put it best: “One starts with the idea that technology is good because it can bring us better lives. One has faith that technology is going to humanize and improve the world.

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44 Freed, *Designing the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, 40.
Well no, not so. It is a normative vision gone sour. The Holocaust is thus representative of how technology can be a dangerous thing, a point Freed tries to express in the architecture of the museum.

Figure 3.6 The Hall of Remembrance
(Photo from the Florida Holocaust Museum website, Inside the Museum, http://www.flholocaustmuseum.org/Exhibits.aspx)

Figure 3.7 Rose window in the ceiling of the Hall of Remembrance
(Photo from the Florida Holocaust Museum website, Inside the Museum, http://www.flholocaustmuseum.org/Exhibits.aspx)

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45 Freed, Designing the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 21
At one end of the building, and at the conclusion of the permanent exhibit, is the Hall of Remembrance (Figure 3.6). This hexagonal building was Freed’s interpretation of a Holocaust memorial. He felt that a memorial to the Holocaust could not be the same as other memorials, such as the memorials along the mall in Washington. He felt that the memorial to the Holocaust should fit in with the rest of the institution, and that it should be a living memorial, a place of learning and reflection. Therefore, he felt that the Hall of Remembrance needed to be a place people used, not an object to be viewed.46

The building in which the Hall of Remembrance is housed is itself quite simple. The light comes in from skylights cut into each corner of the hexagonal shape as well as a skylight on the ceiling that is meant to be reminiscent of an oculus (Figure 3.7). The room is meant to be a place of contemplation, and the architecture is designed to allow for that. There is an ambulatory that circles the walls for people to sit on while they contemplate what they have seen in the museum. The center of the room is completely empty, and this void is meant to be the “core of remembrance.”47

In looking at the architectural design of the Hall of Remembrance, another theme of the museum’s architecture, the sense of absence or void, becomes apparent. It can be seen in the number of empty spaces which are meant to represent what is not there, a concept seen in the design of many other Holocaust memorials, such as the Charleston Holocaust memorial and the preserved sections of Auschwitz (both discussed previously). This void can also be seen in the Hall of Remembrance. The void here is meant to be contemplated, it is meant to represent the people who are not there, the six million people who perished in the Holocaust. In this the void is

46 Freed, Designing the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 24
47 Freed, Designing the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 50
representative of those who are to be remembered.\textsuperscript{48} The void represents “the absence of what was or might have been.”\textsuperscript{49}

Much as with the Hall of Remembrance, the utilization of empty space in order to illicit emotion and contemplation is seen in the remains of concentration camps. These camps were used by the Nazis for labor and execution, and were the main mechanisms of the Holocaust. Because of deaths that occurred there, these spaces are laden with memories, memories of what happened here. But the actual physical space is now empty for the most part, left empty after liberation and are now preserved for visitors from all over the world. The empty spaces of these sites are meant to make one think of those who are absent, those who perished. In the case of a camp such as Auschwitz though, one is not only confronted with the absence but also with the apparatuses that caused these people’s demise. While spaces like the Hall of Remembrance were created specifically to use this absence as a tool of contemplation, camps and other sites use this absence to remind people of what occurred there. This is a distinction that should be considered when viewing museums, memorials or sites in comparison to one another, or on their own.

Each aspect of the Holocaust that Freed is employing metaphorically in the building’s construction is meant to be inferred, not told. Ultimately, the architecture, as well as the narrative (discussed in the next section), is all meant to be interpretive, to have room for the viewer to shape for themselves some of the meaning that they take away. The purpose of the building and its role as a museum is most adequately expressed by Freed himself:

The intent of this building is to be an open-ended resonator of your memory, of your own imagery. A resonator returns; you feed it and it feeds you back. As architect I created another memory that is abstract, but which could also act as a resonator for the memories

\textsuperscript{48} Freed, \textit{Designing the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum}, 50.
\textsuperscript{49} Freed, \textit{Designing the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum}, 38.
of others. The ambiguities create conditions that jog recollections of the past. Your own experiences and memories reverberate. The more you look, the more you see. The more you know, the greater the difficulty of understanding.\textsuperscript{50}

While there are not actual memories of the Holocaust in Freed’s architecture, it is meant to resonate in the consciousness of visitors and to elicit memory and contemplation from its visitors. It makes use of absence to make room for each person to have their own experience with the memories and the emotions of the Holocaust.

The Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum (Yad Vashem) in Jerusalem is a good contrasting example of museum architecture shaping the museum experience. While Freed and the USHMM use absence to encourage contemplation, they also have a different relationship to the Holocaust than does Yad Vashem and most of Jerusalem. Located in the Jewish state of Israel, Jerusalem’s Holocaust museum has a particular message that it is trying to convey. While the USHMM is meant more to be ambiguous and one is supposed to obtain their own meaning from the experience, Yad Vashem communicates a very specific message. The architecture of the building is a prime example of this, and a comparison of it with the USHMM is useful in understanding the differences between these two museums.

As noted above, the USHMM is a building that tries to bridge the imperative to make reference to the Holocaust with the desire to include abstraction and ambiguity. The goal is to enable visitors to contemplate their experience of the museum and the larger meaning of the Holocaust. The abstraction of the architecture therefore facilitates this for the USHMM. To get a sense of the “work” being done by the architecture, we turn now to Yad Vashem, the structure of which seems to have more direct symbolic value, while still open to ones interpretation, that

\textsuperscript{50} Freed, \textit{Designing the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum}, 23.
presents the viewer with a specific way of thinking about the Holocaust, one that is shaped by the perspective of many people within Israel.

The museum itself is cut into a mountainside, the museum’s position within its surroundings “an archaeological scar symbolically healed by the landscape itself.”\(^{51}\) This idea for the architecture is representative of the scar of the Holocaust and the founding of a homeland as the healing that was needed. The exhibit cuts back and forth across a diagonal through the museum, leaving the viewer disoriented, even though in the center they can see the light at the end of the tunnel. (Figure 2.6) The tunnel gets narrowest when presenting the deaths at Auschwitz-Birkenau, making the viewer feel the most constricted there. Then the tunnel widens out until finally opening up to an open-air platform overlooking the landscape surrounding the mountain, as well as the city of Jerusalem in the distance. (Figure 2.7) The architecture of this museum tells a story of life, death and redemption.\(^{52}\)

\(^{51}\) Safdie, Ockman, and Murphy, Yad Vashem: Moshe Safdie - the architecture of memory, 21.
\(^{52}\) Freed, Designing the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 21-22.
Figure 2.3.8 View down the center of the tunnel of Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum
This view shows the zigzag pathway down the museum, meant to disorient the visitor with views of the “light at the end of the tunnel” though one cannot escape the designed path.
(Photo: from “The Architecture of Memory, pg. 43)
Figure 2.3.9 View of balcony at the end of Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum
This view from below the ending side of the museum serves to emphasize the “opening out” aspect of the museum’s architectural design, as well as to call to mind the idea of the State of Israel as the homeland of the Jewish People.
(Photo from: “Architecture of Memory” pg. 107)
In the comparison of the USHMM and Yad Vashem, we see two slightly different narratives. The U.S.’s narrative is more ambiguous while Yad Vashem’s is a bit more direct. What can be gained from comparing narratives such as these is the knowledge that narratives of the same events can differ. The reason they differ is due to choices made in their creation. While neither of the interpretations are wrong, we need to be aware of the differences and the reasons and the consequences of choices in the narrative.
4 A Narrative Museum

As you enter the Hall of Witness at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum you feel as if you are entering the foyer of a train station. This feeling of being in transit, of being part of the history that the museum shares, continues throughout the permanent exhibition, calling upon visitors to experience the museum rather than just view it. After taking a booklet that resembles an identity card, visitors crowd into an elevator and listen to a brief introduction from a museum docent. That docent explains the purpose of the booklets: to tell visitors the story of a real person who lived during the Holocaust. The video screens at the top of the elevator show scenes of the liberation of the concentration camp Ohrdruf, images that include emaciated prisoners lined up against barbed wire fences and piled into narrow bunks.

Figure 4.1 Opening of the museum’s permanent exhibition. This opening tries to communicate to the visitor the scale of the event which is difficult to comprehend. (Photo from: “The Holocaust Museum in Washington” pg. 74-75)
The elevator’s doors open to a black wall with “THE HOLOCAUST” written in large capital letters. The next set of panels display photos from the liberation of Ohrdruf. The exhibit thus begins with visuals of the “end” of the Holocaust, before going back and explaining the chain of events that led to the destruction of European Jewry.

A primary difference between history museums and most other sorts of museums is that they are usually organized to communicate a narrative that shapes the museum’s exhibits. What makes the USHMM stand out in comparison to other history museums is that the role of the defined narrative is very explicit and evident throughout the permanent exhibition. One of the goals of many historical museums, in addition to creating educational/informative displays, is to collect and preserve historical artifacts (objects, archival documents, photographs, and written published works from the period). For example, the Smithsonian American History Museum in Washington, D.C. has a vast collection of artifacts in its care, and the exhibits that it organizes are largely influenced by the contents of its collections. From their collection, exhibits are then built around thematic narratives and arranged based on that. While the USHMM does house a large collection of artifacts, it decides what to put on display based on how an artifact fits into the museum’s narrative. Some museums may approach the creation of an exhibit by looking first at their collection to see what they want to display, what is the most important to emphasize, and then create a narrative around those chosen artifacts. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum takes the opposite approach; they look at the story that they are trying to tell and choose

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53 David Bathrick, *Visualizing the Holocaust* (New York: Camden House, 2008), 5. [An interesting discussion of the role of ‘liberation photography’ taken by the Allies can be found in David Bathrick’s introduction to *Visualizing the Holocaust*. In the section entitled “Seeing Against the Grain” Bathrick references Hannah Arendt’s assessment of post-liberation photos: “These photos mislead us, she contends, because they depict almost exclusively concentration camps located more to the west as a specific moment of chaos and disintegration in the final days of the war and not how the camps variously functioned for most of the three years before that.” It was these photos that came to stand for the camps as a whole.]
objects that best represent and communicate it.\textsuperscript{54} This quote from the museum publication \textit{The Holocaust Museum in Washington} summarizes its understanding of its identity as a narrative museum.

The narrative history museum… has strong educational potential. It uses its exhibits as building blocks in a continuous story line and displays them in their historical context. A well-constructed narrative exhibition affects visitors not only intellectually but also emotionally; it arouses processes of identification. Visitors project themselves into the story and thus experience it like insiders while at the same time remaining at a distance, with the intellectual perspective of outsiders.\textsuperscript{55}

Narrative museums have a very clear advantage over other more traditional history museums in that they have the ability to shape and control what visitors see and interpret from their exhibits. The understanding that one walks away with from a narrative museum is more structured. This type of museum exhibition works well when memorializing the Holocaust because it is an historical event that begs for some sort of emotional or moral connection to the information presented. This requires a structured narrative that communicates a defined story while at the same time drawing on one’s emotions throughout their visit to the museum.

The historical narrative offered in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s permanent exhibition is organized chronologically and with a series of thematic foci. The exhibit moves top to bottom, from the fourth level down to the second. Each floor of the museum’s permanent exhibition is organized around a theme or a phase of the history. This portrays to visitors the progression of events, perhaps supporting the idea that the “Final Solution” was not a foregone conclusion at the beginning of the Nazis’ rise to power, but rather an evolution of policy driven by ideals.

\textsuperscript{54} Interview with Laura Magnus and Ramee Gentry, Washington, D.C., 3 January 2013.
The fourth floor is devoted to the Nazis’ rise to power and their growing appropriation of a history of anti-Semitism in Europe. The panels on either side of the prescribed visitor path detail the means by which Adolf Hitler rose to power, the gradual escalation of laws excluding Jews from German society, and the beginnings of more radical and violent anti-Semitic action. One of the most striking aspects of the design for this section of the exhibit is the way in which the non-Jewish victims of Nazi persecution are represented. An issue that arose when creating the USHMM’s permanent exhibit was how to adequately represent and include other persecuted minority groups without diminishing the very Jewish nature of the event. The Jews were the primary targets of Nazi racial policy, but other groups were also actively targeted for discrimination and, for some, extermination. The USHMM is explicit in its aim to represent the experiences of all victims of the Holocaust and Nazi persecution, and it aims to do so without taking away from the thread of Jewish history and experience that is a significant part of the Holocaust.\(^{56}\)

The way that the museum decided to deal with representing both the Jewish and non-Jewish victims of the Holocaust was to give the latter group separate treatment. The first instance of this separation (Figure 3.1) of Jewish victims from non-Jewish victims comes after a display detailing the violence of Kristallnacht. Adjacent to a circular path surrounding the worn remnants of several Torah scrolls is an alcove, set off to the side. This corner of the exhibit informs visitors of the other victims of Nazi racism, groups such as the Roma and Sinti, homosexuals, mentally disabled, Jehovah’s Witnesses, communists, and other political opponents. The Roma and Sinti are treated separately from the other non-Jewish groups, as their

numbers were greater than those of the persecuted communists and other minorities, and they were targeted largely on racial grounds just as the Jews were.

Figure 4.2 Museum visit, Washington, D.C., 3-4 January 2013. Diagram by authors.
This diagram shows the physical arrangement of the anti-Semitism portion of the fourth floor exhibit.
The alcove is out of the way enough that one could bypass it without realizing. The consequence of this is that many people going through the main path of the museum may never see anything about other victims of the Holocaust. This is a choice that was made though in order to keep the focus on the Jewish victims while still including other victims.

The narrative goes on to discuss the evolution of the Nazis’ plans to further exclude Jews from German society through forced emigration. The world’s responses to this forced emigration in the late 1930s are shown in a treatment of the failed voyage of the St. Louis and the flight of Europe’s Jewish intelligentsia. America’s refusal of entry to the 900 Jewish immigrants on the St. Louis has become a source of controversy. The ship, which had been denied entry in Havana despite the Cuban visas that the Jews on board possessed, attempted to dock in Miami but was turned back to Europe. Though the Jewish immigrants of the St. Louis were allowed entry to several Western European countries (Britain, France, Belgium and Holland) the majority of them soon came, once again, under the thumb of the Third Reich.57 This instance of refusal to aid Jewish refugees is an example of the United States’ inaction during the early years of the Nazis persecution of the Jews. Nonetheless, some Jewish members of Europe’s cultural and intellectual life, as well as some non-Jews who were targeted because of their philosophical and political beliefs, were able to find refuge in Britain and the United States, for example Albert Einsetin, Sigmund Freud, and Thomas Mann. For the U.S. and Great Britain this meant enriched cultural and scientific circles. Its placement in the USHMM’s exhibit highlights the loss suffered by Germany’s intellectual and cultural community in the postwar years.58

After outlining the Nazis’ racial policies, the fourth floor exhibit continues with a section on the annexation of Austria and Western European appeasement of Germany over the Sudetenland. The secretive T₄ Euthanasia Program, a program used to kill mentally and physically disabled adults and children, is also shown. It is placed as a standalone display and emphasizes the results of these tests. This section of the exhibit ends with a set of panels detailing the invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939 and the outbreak of the Second World War. As the Nazis moved into Eastern Europe, first into Poland and then later into the Soviet Union, they gained control over more and more of Europe’s Jews. It was this war of expansion that allowed for the Holocaust to be carried out on the scale that it was, a point that is woven into the narrative of the exhibit without being the focus at any particular point.

As with the USHMM’s architecture, the structure of its narrative is brought into starker relief through international comparison. An interesting comparison to make with the Imperial War Museum (IWM) in London is how they choose to relate the events of the war to the events of the Holocaust. On the IWM’s first floor there is a walk through exhibit about some of the wars that Britain has been involved in since the beginning of the twentieth century (beginning with the First World War, then the Second World War, the Cold War, and the Gulf Wars).59 Within the exhibit on World War II there is a large section covering the rise of Nazism. The cases are full of armbands, flags with swastikas, Hitler Youth uniforms, and a portrait of Adolf Hitler. The case dealing with the Holocaust is much smaller, very brief in its treatment of the event. Instead of integrating the Holocaust into the history of the war, they separate it into its own separate exhibit, “The Holocaust Exhibition.” The IWM’s narrative differs most from that of the USHMM’s in that they present the war and the Holocaust in two separate narrative threads.

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59 Though this portion of the IWM is currently undergoing refurbishment/restructuring in preparation for the WWI commemoration in Summer 2014.
The reason for this difference in interpretation and exhibition style lies in the culture of Holocaust remembrance and recognition in Britain in the post-war years. That is to say that there was little effort to display such an exhibition in Britain until after the opening of the USHMM in 1993, when the absence of a corresponding British institution became more apparent. The Imperial War Museum’s primary goal (both the London branch and its other locations) has been to memorialize and represent the experience of the British at war during the twentieth century. As such, many of their exhibits have had an almost exclusive focus on how they can be placed “in a specifically British context of war.” In 1991 the IWM created and displayed an exhibition entitled “Belsen 1945.” This exhibit made use of the video footage of the Bergen-Belsen liberation held in British archives. However, its focus on the British liberators, rather than on the camp’s Jewish victims, is evidence of the museum’s philosophy through the 1990s, one that shifted in the latter portion of the decade.

With this in mind, it is easier to understand why the IWM organized their Holocaust exhibition in the way that they did. The relatively brief treatment of the Holocaust in the World War’s ground floor exhibition makes sense as that exhibit’s primary goal is to memorialize the success of the British at war and abroad. The museum’s Holocaust exhibition, opened in June 2000, is a very extensive treatment of the lives and experiences of Jews in Eastern Europe, utilizing an impressive amount of survivor testimony to supplement the artifact displays and factual panels. The effect of this two-tiered structure for representing the Holocaust and World War II is to maintain the ‘Britishness’ that is at the museum’s core while at the same time giving a fuller and more layered treatment to the events of the Holocaust. This narrative choice on the

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part of the IWM contrasts the more eastern European focus of the USHMM’s narrative on the Nazi’s invasion and occupation of the east as it relates to the Holocaust.

When the exhibit design team was creating the USHMM’s permanent exhibition they were faced with many challenges as to how one would script the history of the Holocaust into a multifaceted narrative that hangs together as one entity. The end result is part chronology and part thematic. Events leading up to the outbreak of war in 1939 could be represented in a sequential way. However, this method was felt to be inadequate to represent the “Final Solution,” and a thematic organization was embraced “based on an analysis of the recurring main stages of the implementation of the ‘Final Solution’: ghettos, deportations, concentration camps, death camps.”61 This manner of structuring the third floor of the exhibit, covering the period 1940-1945, aims to create an emotionally charged experience for the visitor.

This section of the exhibit begins with a small alcove off to the right of the entrance to the main floor. In it the experience of Western European Jews, and those who fled west to France, Belgium and the Netherlands, is detailed. There is a map that shows the locations of concentration camps operated in both Occupied France and Vichy. A half panel about the Vel’ d’Hiv Roundup in Paris describes one of the largest deportations of French Jews. Another two panels summarize the tragically famous story of Anne Frank. Western Europe’s connection and experience of the Holocaust is displayed in a manner that serves to reinforce the scale at which it occurred in the East. The impact of the Third Reich was felt far more acutely in Eastern Europe, where there was a higher concentration of Jewish communities. Thus the exhibit continues with its thematic portrayal of the new way of life in Eastern Europe, as imposed by the advancing Nazis.

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The emphasis of the third floor exhibit is on the evolution of the war and the Final Solution in Eastern Europe. The first portion has an overview of life in some of the infamous ghettos; the Warsaw Ghetto, Theresienstadt, the Łódź Ghetto, the Kovno Ghetto, and the Kraków Ghetto. A panel with the words “Four Hundred Ghettos” documents the height of the ghettoization process, giving a sense of the scale of the enclosed network of ghettos and camps put together by the Nazis. This section also presents the mass killing actions taken against Eastern European Jews by the mobile killing squads (the Waffen-SS). Highlighted are the massacres in Babi Yar and those carried out in Romania.

Not yet reflected in the permanent exhibit of the USHMM is new information that proves the Nazis’ system of slave labor camps and ghettos to be far more extensive than previously thought. A recent New York Times looks at the vast network of concentration camps, ghettos, and work camps, which were run by the Nazis during the Second World War. The key point to be made is that the numbers of ghettos and smaller work camps wildly exceeds previous estimates by scholars. They now have catalogued 42,500 camps and ghettos within the Nazi system. This is much higher than what researchers had expected to find (somewhere in the neighborhood of 7,000). What has been found is that there are hundreds of camps whose existence was unknown save for the people who had been imprisoned there. Integrating new historical information such as this, which will likely be on the agenda of curators in the coming year, is the type of exhibit re-work that is done on a near constant basis at the USHMM.

The most compelling portion of this floor is the path from the section on ghettos and deportations to life in the camps. As you leave panels depicting crowds of Jews being herded

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onto cattle cars, and artifact windows with pieces of luggage and personal possessions, an open railcar dominates your field of vision. There is a momentary choice open to each visitor, whether or not to walk *through* the railcar as a part of one’s museum experience. (This is one of the many ways that the museum’s design team attempted to cope with the psychological needs of visitors, some of whom may not be able to handle viewing particular films or being inside an artifact like a railcar).63

The railcar was used during the war to transport Jews to ghettos and camps and was donated to the museum from Poland. It sits on train tracks that formerly led to the killing center at Treblinka. The eerie sense of foreboding that comes over you as you step into the cattle car is a very intense physical and emotional experience for visitors. The design of this section forces visitors to put themselves in the place of deportees. As you exit the railcar on the other side you view a panel with the heading “Who shall live and Who shall die,” immediately communicating the idea that this world of concentration camps and death camps is like nothing with which we are familiar. In the photo the deportees are sorted by doctors and officers. Those who looked able to work lived.

The next image to confront visitors is a fiberglass casting of the infamous Auschwitz iron archway, with the words “Arbeit Macht Frei” above. This section of the exhibit focuses on the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, probably the most famous of all the Nazi camps and killing centers, and it is one of the few where there are buildings and artifacts that still remain. The word “Auschwitz” has come, in public discourse and in colloquial terms, to be a symbol for *all* concentration camps. This word, this camp, has become synonymous with the expression of, to many people, the complex problem of opaqueness. “What happened in Auschwitz…” is a

phrase that carries far more meaning in the public sphere than just the words alone would suggest. It is a phrase signifying an entirely other set of events, all “Auschwitz” and all at once inexplicable. This is what makes “Auschwitz” iconic, both in name and in perception. 64

The barracks that dominate the center of the exhibit (see image) was taken from the Auschwitz site museum and reconstructed at the USHMM in Washington. The prisoners’ bunks that flank the entrance to the barracks were taken from the Majdanek concentration camp. Inside the barracks is a concrete barrier that blocks graphic film of Nazi medical experiments from the view of young children. Behind the film barrier is a detailed scale model of the gassing process employed at Auschwitz-Birkenau. This model was commissioned for the museum and designed by sculptor Jan Stobierski. From the faces of individual people, piled into shower rooms and clawing their way out of the gas filled chambers, to the exposure of the practical cogs that lifted elevators of bodies to the ground level to be burned, the detail in this display emphasizes the dehumanized and mechanical nature of the Holocaust.

64 Friedlander, Probing the Limits of Representation, 5.
The second floor exhibit opens with a series of panels about the efforts to rescue Jews across Europe. The village of Le Chambon in France was a refuge for Jews in hiding. The heroic efforts of Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish diplomat who issued Schutzpasses (passport documents) that saved several thousand Hungarian Jews from deportation. The Polish underground resistance group Żegota, a network that worked to provide false documents to thousands of Polish Jews. And the Danish who, by smuggling Jews to Sweden on small fishing boats saved nearly every Danish Jew from the Nazis. When designing the exhibit, some “felt that rescue and resistance were quantitatively marginal phenomena in the Holocaust, and that devoting separate thematic sections to them toward the end of the exhibition would distort the historical truth by
inserting into the story line an unwarranted, massive upbeat element.” While these concerns are understandable, the inclusion of these examples strengthens the contrast between the darkness of life in the camps and the hope for new lives after.

Connecting the section on liberation with the ending display is a corridor that puts images and stories of children opposite those of prolific and infamous perpetrators such as Adolf Eichmann. The corridor contrasts the themes of childhood innocence and evil. Immediately following this section is a bridge to the concluding display, with a wall to the left holding images and panels that confront bystander guilt. Many Europeans were neither victims of the Holocaust nor perpetrators, they were witnesses, witnesses in the sense that they saw some of what was going on and may have had opportunities to help and did not. The message here is clear: it is very easy to become guilty by saying nothing, by doing nothing. From our experience of the museum, bystander guilt and the effect that that had on the story of the Holocaust is the main parting message of the exhibit.

The permanent exhibition ends on something of a hopeful note. There are sections on Jewish resettlement in America and the founding of the state of Israel. But perhaps the most moving aspect of the final display is the amphitheater with video testimonies from survivors recounting “their experiences of loss, suffering, and anguish, as well as rescue, resistance, compassion, and hope.”

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65 The Holocaust Museum in Washington, 54-55.
66 The Holocaust Museum in Washington, 148-149.
First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out--
Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out--
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out--
Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me--and there was no one left to speak for me.

- Martin Niemöller

The exhibit concludes with this oft-repeated but nonetheless powerful quote, one that is perhaps all the more powerful after the exhibit in that its placement is designed to leave one contemplating the role of a bystander. When visitors leave the USHMM’s permanent exhibition, there are two choices before returning to the Hall of Witness: to visit the Wexner Learning Center’s “From Memory to Action” exhibit or to visit the hexagonal Hall of Remembrance. Both choices allow one to apply the information they have just received, but they do this in different ways. The Hall of Remembrance is a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, the walls adorned with the names of well-known killing sites and dozens of rows of tea light candles. “From Memory to Action: Meeting the Challenge of Genocide” includes a survivor registry and encourages visitors to reflect on what they have seen in a more concrete way. The museum’s self-professed goal as a living memorial is to encourage action rather than inaction when individuals are faced with instances of racism and hate. While the message and lessons of the USHMM are derived from a very particular history, they are universal in their applications.

Another interesting comparison is between the narratives of the USHMM and of the Yad Vahsem Holocaust History Museum. These narratives are very different, but that difference does

not lie in the information that is presented but rather in how it is presented. The narrative of Yad Vashem has a much more specific message. The path of the exhibit zigzags across the tunnel-like structure in a much stricter directed path than at the USHMM. It takes you from pre-war Jewish life out to a panoramic view of Jerusalem, the homeland of the Jewish people. One of the most important differences here is that the narrative does not culminate with the Nazis’ ‘Final Solution’ but rather with the Zionist “homecoming” of the Jewish people, which is represented at the end by a balcony overlooking Jerusalem. The Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum has a more specific message that one should take away from the museum; there is less room for interpretation of the narrative, even while there is still room for personal interpretation. Conversely, at the USHMM, while the message is hinted at, it is left up to the visitors to determine for themselves just what meaning they will walk away with.

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69 Safdie, Ockman, and Murphy, *Yad Vashem: Moshe Safdie - the architecture of memory*, 20.
5 Mission and Outreach

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.70

According to the museum’s website, the mission of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is focused on the spread of Holocaust education to the public in a variety of ways. With the use of exhibitions, research, preservation of artifacts, and the leading of annual Holocaust commemorations like Days of Remembrance, the USHMM encourages an awareness of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism.71

While on a research trip to Washington, D.C. to visit the museum we spoke with two of the museum’s curators, Laura Magnus and Ramee Gentry. Magnus works as the museum’s National Programming Manager working primarily with the management of the travelling exhibitions and the dissemination of educational materials across the country. Gentry is the coordinator of the permanent exhibition, working with the rotation of artifacts within the exhibit and the maintenance of the exhibit.72

In this interview, we discussed the mission of the USHMM and how they feel it has evolved since the museum’s opening in 1993. As for how the mission has evolved over time, they both feel that it is more a question of remaining relevant. The museum has, in recent years, needed to reevaluate its relevance to a changing audience of a younger generation. The museum now is very conscious of the ways in which it can make its message relevant to a changing world. “It is

72 Interview with Laura Magnus and Ramee Gentry, 3 January 2013.
not really a shift in mission. The museum realizes that the way that we convey the mission and why we are here, why we are relevant. We put a lot of thought into ‘as the WWII generation dies out’ how do we continue to make clear to people the relevance of this institution. And what value we can give, what lessons we can give well into the future. Not a change in mission, but we are thoughtful of the changing group of people that we are communicating to.”

One of the target audiences of the USHMM is the American public and the museum sponsors leadership programs and ethics workshops for law enforcement, military personnel, and judicial officials. They feel that these programs help to apply the moral messages of the Holocaust to contemporary issues, therefore keeping the museum pertinent.

Another issue that we discussed in the interview with Magnus and Gentry was the museum’s focus on Holocaust education and their place as a leader for the nation’s regional museums in this endeavor. The USHMM provides training programs to teachers around the country that provide standard curricula for teaching the Holocaust in schools. This is one of the ways Magnus and Gentry identified that the museum reaches people throughout the country, many of whom may never be able to visit the museum in person.

Another way that this is done is through the support of regional museums. When Magnus spoke about the relationship between the USHMM and other regional Holocaust museums and learning centers she was careful to note that this relationship is not official. Many of these institutions are part of the Association of Holocaust Organizations which keeps them loosely connected to one another. Of the organization’s hundreds of international members the United States has 152 member organizations. “The Association of Holocaust Organizations (AHO) was established in 1985 to serve as an international network of organizations and individuals for the

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73 Interview with Laura Magnus and Ramee Gentry, 3 January 2013, [[[0:14:22.0]]]
advancement of Holocaust education, remembrance and research.”

The museum loans some of its artifacts to these regional institutions and sometimes borrows objects in return. Magnus hopes that these smaller institutions look to the USHMM as a resource for educational programs and that they can work together to accomplish the often shared goal of spreading Holocaust education.

This interview allowed us to talk with museum representatives who could speak to the official positions of the museum. This gave us insight into the USHMM’s vision and goals for the future, chief of which is their focus on proving the relevance to a changing audience. Magnus’ new role as the National Programming Coordinator served to highlight the museum’s tenuous relationship to other regional centers.

In fact, it may be in the USHMM’s best interest in terms of resources to foster relationships with regional Holocaust centers and to further support them in their efforts to provide Holocaust education across the country. The regional museums and centers play an important role in that they have the ability to reach people who cannot travel to Washington to visit the national museum. In this way people all over the U.S. can benefit from the experience and knowledge of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

In looking at the relationship (or lack thereof) between the USHMM and other smaller museums, whether or not there is a unified national ‘narrative’ for Holocaust remembrance seems unlikely. The official link between such institutions is very weak and as a result the standardizing of narratives and exhibits seems difficult. The narratives of regional museums and their unique influences is explored in the next section with the Florida Holocaust Museum.

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74 Association of Holocaust Organizations, official website, About the AHO, http://ahoinfo.org/aboutaho.html
75 Interview with Laura Magnus and Ramee Gentry, 3 January 2013.
Regional Museums – The Florida Holocaust Museum

Located in the downtown area of St. Petersburg, Florida is the Florida Holocaust Museum, a regional museum that houses a one-floor permanent exhibition “History, Heritage, and Hope” along with several travelling art and history exhibits. The FHM began as the Tampa Bay Memorial Museum and Education Center, which opened its doors in 1992. The makeup of the founding committee was rather eclectic, a mixture of local Holocaust survivors and prominent businessmen, with international Holocaust scholars such as Elie Wiesel and Thomas Keneally named to the Board of Advisors. The whole endeavor was spearheaded by local philanthropist Walter Loebenberg, a Jewish refugee who fled from Nazi Germany in 1939 and fought for the Americans in the Second World War. Each of these people, those who had direct connections to the Holocaust and those who did not, was strongly committed to the creation of a memorial museum and learning center in the Tampa Bay area.76

The goal and mission of the Florida Holocaust Museum is essentially to honor the memory of the six million Jews who perished in the Holocaust. They do this both with their permanent exhibit and with the museum’s efforts to educate about hate and discrimination. In addition to providing local schools with age-appropriate Holocaust educational materials, the FHM also hosts school tour groups and organizes a survivor presentation for each group. “The Museum is dedicated to teaching the members of all races and cultures the inherent worth and dignity of human life in order to prevent future genocides.”77

The narrative of the FHM’s permanent exhibit begins with the history of anti-Semitism and an outline of Jewish life in Europe. It then moves on to a brief account of the Nazis’ rise to power and the beginnings of their racial policies in the mid-1930s. Attacks on Jewish life meant to exclude Jews from German society begin with a Kristallnacht display that uses photographs and synagogue-related artifacts. The next sections cover the beginnings of the war, ghettoization, gradual escalation of the Nazis’ Final Solution plans, life in concentration camps, stories of rescue and liberation, and the legal justice found in the Nuremberg proceedings. The final area connects the past with the present by presenting recent genocides (Bosnia, Cambodia, Rwanda and Darfur) and applying lessons of resistance to hate and discrimination to everyday life.

In comparing the narratives of the FHM and the USHMM the differences have more to do with the scale of the exhibit rather than the thread of content. The permanent exhibit of the FHM follows the same general chronology as that of the USHMM, but it is done in a much smaller space. With just one floor to work with, as well as a smaller collection to draw from, the FHM had to communicate their narrative of the history of the Holocaust in approximately one-sixth the amount of space. That said, the museum still hits upon all of the major themes and key events that the USHMM’s narrative does. An interesting point of contrast between the two is the more local focus that the FHM has in its permanent exhibit. They include photographs of local survivors and feature their artifacts in the sections on pre-war Jewish Life, life in the ghettos, and emigration. There is also a featured artifact case and set of exhibit panels that cover the voyage of the St. Louis, in a way very similar to the USHMM’s coverage of the same event.
Standing as a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust is one of the FHM’s most iconic artifacts: Boxcar #113 069-5. The railcar, used to transport deportees to camps and killing centers in the East, sits on tracks from the Treblinka killing center. The room that holds the car is at the heart of the museum, near the end of the permanent exhibition and visible from the second floor galleries. The figure it cuts is very imposing; much more so than the boxcar in the USHMM’s permanent exhibit. In fact the difference between the two uses of what is essentially the same artifact is striking. In the USHMM exhibit the boxcar is used as a transitional piece from the section on life in the ghettos to life in the camps. When visitors walk up they are at the same level as the floor of the car, moving inside and through it. The way that the boxcar is built into the prescribed path emphasizes its place within the USHMM’s narrative. The railcar’s use in the FHM’s exhibit is less experiential on the part of the visitor and more visual. The visitor stands alongside the car at the level of the tracks, looking up at a structure that looms overhead. The boxcar’s use here is more as a final note, the last impression that the museum’s exhibit leaves you with.
The FHM, while a smaller museum than the USHMM in Washington, serves a similar function in the Tampa Bay and Florida communities. They aim to educate the public and future generations about the dangers of hate and discrimination. These two museums do so with exhibits that share common denominators in terms of their narrative, though on vastly different scales. The FHM is much more a community-based museum, “[using] original artifacts, historical photographs and documents to tell the story of the Holocaust with a special emphasis on the personal stories of local survivors.”

One of the primary differences between the USHMM and the FHM is the influence that the experience of local survivors has on the exhibits that are presented. The Florida Holocaust Museum’s most recent travelling exhibition, “Courage and Compassion: The Legacy of the Bielski Brothers,” tells the story of three Jewish brothers in Belarus who rescued more than 1,200 Jews from nearby ghettos and sustained a hidden community in the forest. The exhibit was created at the suggestion of Brendan Rennert, a Tampa local and grandson of Tuvia Bielski, who came to the museum’s curator Erin Blankenship in May of 2008 with a proposal. The film Defiance, based on the Bielski brothers’ wartime actions, was being released in 2009 and Rennert was interested in creating a museum exhibition to coincide with the film’s release.

Taking up the challenge to create a completely new exhibition around the powerful story of the Bielskis led to the museum working with the family to track down former forest partisans to give oral testimony. Rennert and other members of his family also had original artifacts that they were willing to loan and donate to the museum to help build the content of the exhibit. The layout and design of the exhibit makes you feel as though you are in a forest. The dual sided panels also create a feeling of disorientation, an important feature to facilitate a connections.

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between visitors and the stories they are being told. The goal of the exhibit has been “to encourage the average person that he/she too [can] be an upstander. The Bielskis were working class, not highly educated men, who did an extraordinary thing by saving these people and by the acts of sabotage they did against the Nazis.”79 The FHM’s Bielski Brothers exhibit is an example of how exhibits, and many of the memorials and regional museums around the United States, were founded at the behest of and as a result of great effort by survivors and their families.

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79 Interview with Erin Blankenship, FHM Curator, 24 March 2013.
7 Consequences of Narrative Choices

What such choices regarding narrative form show about Holocaust memorialization more broadly is the influence that a spatial container (such as the museum itself or the exhibit layout) can have on the way that the history is perceived. In his works on Holocaust memorialization, James E. Young discusses “Holocaust memory and a critical awareness of how that memory is gained.”

The impact of memorial space (and location) is related to the impressions of Holocaust history that are given and acquired at museums and memorials around the world. The architectural design encompasses the history that a museum is trying to communicate, shaping the comprehension of visitors as much as the design of the exhibit itself does. One of Young’s main points is that there can never be one unified narrative because the interpretations of those creating the memorials and of those viewing them are different. The cultures and societies that create Holocaust memorializations are always changing themselves, and as a result the way that they relate to the memory of the Holocaust is changing as well. “Memory never stands still.”

Each museum or memorial creates a slightly different narrative in which to place the Holocaust and to relate its history, the USHMM’s exhibit communicates the chain of events specifically from 1933-1945, whereas Yad Vashem situates the Holocaust into a larger narrative of Jewish history and struggle for survival across hundreds of years. What Young suggests, at least in part, is that the more important consequence or effect of narrativity is that there is the need for an awareness of the nuanced differences in the narrative interpretations of each museum and memorial’s presentation. After looking at different examples of narrativity, from museums in the United States and Israel, to memorials in France and the U.S., what has become very clear

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81 James E. Young, The Texture of Memory (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), x.
is that there are no definite meanings to be drawn from narratives. They are always open to interpretation and that interpretation will be based as much on what you are being told as it will be on how you are presented the information and what perspective you bring to the table.

As to the question of whether or not a ‘national’ narrative of Holocaust memorialization exists in the United States, we did not find one. There is no unified national American narrative of the Holocaust partly because of the varied experiences of Holocaust survivors, on which the American culture of remembrance is based. The memorials and museums that have been created in the United States are very diverse in terms of how they craft their representations of the Holocaust, and it is for this reason that it is not possible to have one national narrative. That said, what we have noticed is that while there are enough variances that preclude us from calling all of the narratives in our examples ‘the same,’ the similarities in meaning at times outweigh the differences.
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