CONFRONTING DIFFICULT MEMORY THROUGH ABSENCE SPACE IN CONTEMPORARY MEMORIAL ARCHITECTURE

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ABSTRACT - *Contemporary Western society often strives to confront and cope with loss through projects that commemorate various events, both long past and recent. This is particularly true in cases of the trauma-laden remembrance of modern atrocities. Memorials are perceived as spaces that can provide necessary healing environments for the victims and their relatives, but are also planned to encourage remembrance by future generations. After the Second World War, designers faced with representing the Holocaust delivered radical approaches to spaces of memory, in many cases promoting oblivion or questioning the motives of memorializing in the first place. Contemporary memorials often address the representation of difficult memory with spaces of absence as the most tangible answer to loss and trauma. To understand this approach, this article investigates several memorial spaces responding to recent traumatic events, such as the* Atocha 11M Memorial *in Madrid, designs for planned memorials in Oslo and Utøya, the* Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe *in Berlin, and the* Vietnam Veterans Memorial *in Washington, D.C.*

INTRODUCTION

A century after the outbreak of the First World War, Western society recognizes a spectrum of traumatic events, supported by the explanatory vocabulary for modernity's multiple wounds – total war, genocide, and terrorism –

and their resulting anxieties – shell shock, survivor's guilt, and post-traumatic stress disorder.[1] These inevitably affect commemorative practices, both personal and public. Consequently, the contemporary memorial is an expanding architectural genre commemorating not only present-day atrocities, but also traumas from a rather distant past, as demonstrated by the recent Norwegian memorial to seventeenth-century victims of the infamous witchcraft trials in Vardø (2011). Although many participating nations buried their Unknown Soldiers much earlier, the *Tomb of the Unknown Soldier* dedicated in 2004 in New Zealand similarly indicates the still-present influence of First World War commemorative practices. Many established memorials and monuments standing on the sites of World War One battlefields are being enlarged to satisfy contemporary needs. The same is true of numerous Holocaust memorials, proliferating in number across Europe, but perhaps even in greater numbers across the United States. However, an often-asked question is whether contemporary Western culture, equipped with sophisticated and convenient data banks, encourages oblivion instead of remembrance, as some sort of destructively efficient *pharmakon*.[2] At the same time, there are doubts about whether the burgeoning genre of memorial architecture forgot about the "wound" and focused on the "knife".[3]

After the Great War the construction of a vast number of war memorials commemorating millions of casualties was understood as part of a collective mourning process. These sites were recognized as psychological focal points, enabling the bereaved to mourn both individually and collectively. Still, the commemoration of such a large number of victims required a kind of spirituality that religion and existing rituals were unable to provide. Understanding loss and trauma was necessary to develop a framework of mediation, and was spontaneously channelled through different forms, such as the above-mentioned *Tomb of the Unknown Soldier* which was a focal point for "remembering everyone by remembering no one in particular."[4]

Disillusionment following the Second World War urged for an appropriate language of memorialization that needed to reflect on the hopelessness of

1. Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 131.

2. The consequence of this fast-growing architectural field has been recognized as fostering a specific 'hybrid' way of remembering that over time reinforces amnesia instead of active memory. See Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

3. Paul Virilo, *Art and Fear* (London and New York: Continuum, 2003). Paul Virilo criticized the pitiless character of our age and that of modern art. Virilo used Baudelaire's phrase: "I am the wound and the knife" where the knife allegorizes the violence of war and the wound represents how people respond to it.

4. J.R. Gillis, "Memory and Identity: The History of the Relationship," in *Commemorations: the Politics of National Identity*, ed. J.R. Gillis, Princeton University Press, 1994, 11; See also Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

post-war Western culture in which traditional commemorative plaques and statues appeared as futile attempts at redemptive language.[5] While responses to the tragedy of war were significant in art, literature, and philosophy, architects refrained from responding to the devastation in general, and the Holocaust in particular.[6] Priority was given to the reconstruction of many demolished cities, with rare cases of leaving ruins untouched, for instance in Oradour-sur-Glane in France. The impact of the modernist's vision of architecture as a "pure creation of the mind"[7] in efforts towards an international style, divorced from context and focused on function, was often blamed for the lack of response to issues of memorializing. Although this is apparently no longer the case, the difficult question of the representation of destruction remains. Several scholars argue that instead of addressing loss, which connotes destruction and disappearance, designers today choose to explore notions of absence, which suggests 'non-presence' and the anxious possibility of reappearance.[8]

Memorial spaces can be perceived as a summoning framework for memories related to traumatic experiences, also known as 'difficult memory', through which people can begin to process and channel their emotions. In fact, recent research indicates that designers of memorial spaces can create effective memorials for traumatic memory by understanding how memorial architecture facilitates the mourning process.[9] In this sense, memorials function as containers for loss, encouraging active participation through their spatial realities, and offer a material framework for the process of "working out trauma."[10] Furthermore, parties involved in the creation of a memorial normally focus on making their message tangible enough to be interpreted by future generations. Depending on their social and cultural context, contemporary designers do this by using a variety of volumetric and kinaesthetic elements to create strong holding environments in which active works of memory may take place. By more closely observing the architecture of several memorial spaces that facilitate coping with difficult memories,[11] we can better understand what this process entails and how these spaces work in practice.

5. Mark Godfrey, *Abstraction and the Holocaust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007).

6. Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, *Building after Auschwitz: Jewish Architecture and the Memory of the Holocaust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), 47.

7. Steven Connor, *Postmodern Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 218.

8. Doss, *Memorial Mania*, 145.

9. Nicholas Watkins, Frances Cole, and Sue Weidemann, "The War Memorial as Healing Environment: The Psychological Effect of the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* on Vietnam War Combat Veterans' Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Symptoms," *Environment and Behavior* 42 (2010), 351-375.

10. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* 14 (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 243, 256. In his watershed essay *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), Freud argued that mourning was necessary in order to avoid melancholia, since melancholics lack focus and are unable to put their loss into perspective. According to Freud, two psychological liaisons, recognized as strength of the attachment and the attachment

CONFRONTING THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF REPRESENTATION

Some of the first attempts to commemorate locations where mechanized destruction of life occurred during the Holocaust clearly echoed the Adornian question about the tension between ethics and aesthetics inherent in acts of artistic representation.[12] In a 1957 international competition for the memorialization of Auschwitz, such issues certainly came to the forefront in the unanimous jury approval of a proposal by a Polish team led by architect Oskar Hansen.[13] The proposed memorial was designed along the principles of 'Open Form'[14] and consisted of a kilometre-long black tarmac road intended to run diagonally across the grounds of the former camp, omitting the infamous Birkenau gate. This omission emphasized the principles of Hansen's open-structure approach of proposing to leave the whole site of the camp intact, with its gate never to be used again, and the road as the only means by which visitors could experience the space and at the same time confront the inevitable oblivion of the place. The architect argued that the diagonal road would display the mechanism of the camp, but was also imagined to be, as Hansen put it, "the crossing over which creates the climate for reception and participation, which visualizes the subtext of spatial interactions. The road is the site for spontaneous gestures."[15] Despite its popular reception and its emphasis on the individual participation in space, the project was abandoned for several reasons, of which the most pronounced was the disagreement of Auschwitz survivors, who found the proposal too abstract and "not in keeping with the literalness of their experiences."[16]

Such radical designs for Holocaust memorials continued to appear in later years, for instance Horst Hoheisel's idea to blow up the Brandenburg Gate (1995) in order to memorialize destruction with destruction, or Daniel Libeskind's competition entry to redesign Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp (1993) in which he proposed to build residential and commercial buildings while destroying all Nazi buildings and flooding the site with water. After 1985, artists and architects strove for new forms of memorialization and the public was confronted with memorial projects which aimed to destabilize

itself, are elements of mourning in the psychical working out process. This was explained as an internal process of constant invocation of painful memories until the strength of the attachment and the attachment itself are neutralized.

11. Several recent architectural journals devoted their issues to understanding difficult memories, related to traumatic experiences, contested views of a common past, amnesia and memory loss, in relation to memorial projects dedicated to commemorating them. See for example "Interventions and Adaptive Reuse, Difficult Memories: Reconciling Meaning", *IntAR Journal* 4, April 2013.

12. Theodor Adorno's statement "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric", one of the most-cited reflections on the Holocaust, tackles the meaning of a representation that reproduces the cultural values of a society which made the Holocaust possible. In later years, Adorno revised this statement, arguing for the necessity of representation for the acknowledgment of suffering. In Theodor W. Adorno, *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 252.

13. The team members were Zofia Hansen, Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz, Edmund Kupiecki, Julian Pałka, and Lechosław Rosiński.

the very notion of memory by introducing absence of form, or rather the invisible form. This so-called counter-memory generation, by predominantly German artists, resulted in numerous projects inspired by the participatory acts of visitors. Among the well-known realized works are the *Monument against Fascism* (1986) in Hamburg by Jochen Gerz, which invited people to write on the column's surface while it gradually sunk into the ground, and Hoheisel's inverted *Aschrott Fountain* (1987) in Kassel.[17] Often, these projects have strong sensory qualities, such as Hoheisel's untitled "Warm Memorial" (1995) for Buchenwald, a stainless-steel plate maintained at human body temperature and placed where the wooden obelisk erected by the inmates upon liberation once stood.[18]

The popular motif of inversion and destabilization of the ground can also be recognized in another, more recent project, the national *Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe* in Berlin (2005). The project was approved by the German *Bundestag* in 1999, five years after the first competition, whose winning design of an enormous gravestone was dismissed due to its controversial symbolism and sheer scale.[19] The second competition was organized in 1997: a result of many fraught colloquia that doubted the legitimacy of the future memorial as the main national monument. As such, it was feared, it would take precedence over numerous other sites of memory across Germany, and would produce a "great burial slab for the twentieth century, a hermetically-sealed vault for the ghosts of Germany's past."[20] A collaborative project between Richard Serra and Peter Eisenman entitled *Waving Field of Pillars* (Fig. 1), designed to encourage a participatory approach by visitors, was selected as a finalist. The proposal, comprising a thousand pillars and at first glance recalling a vast cemetery, was chosen for several reasons. It was believed that its multiple forms would encourage individual involvement with the memorial, without giving an absolute solution, which would establish memorialization not as a fixed fact but as an ongoing process. Additionally, the memorial's form and scale resisted reproduction through photography and would thereby further encourage participation. The memorial also imposed a sense of either *Unheimlichkeit,* or a sense of danger in

14. The concept of 'Open Form', as described by Hansen at a meeting of the International Congress of Modern Architects (CIAM) at Otterlo in 1959, was a philosophical idea of shaping social space that would be open for a free intervention of the audience and of time. Hansen always emphasized the human element above the technological aspects of architecture.

15. Katarzyna Murwaska-Muthesius, "Oskar Hansen and the Auschwitz "Countermemorial 1958-59," *Art Margins* (20 May, 2002), http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/featured-articles/311-oskar-hansen-and-the-auschwitz-qcountermemorialq-1958-59. Accessed November 12, 2014.

16. James Young, *The Texture of Memory – Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (London: Yale University Press, 1993), 136.

17. The place where the column once stood is now an empty platform. The column is completely buried in the ground, but it is possible to view it from a window at street level. Similarly, the counter-memorial in Kassel constitutes the reconstructed Aschrott fountain installed where it used to stand but turned upside-down and partially buried; only the base of the fountain with the water flowing into the earth is visible.

18. Hoheisel developed the memorial with architect Andreas

Fig. 1
Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe, Berlin (Credits: Author)

demanding from visitors that they find their own way in the field of pillars, which were to stand on sloping ground and in that way destabilize the visitors' position in space.[21] After the revision of the design, which included a significant reduction of the number of pillars, an adjustment of their height and spacing, and the addition of a row of trees to act as a buffer between the city and the memorial, the proposal was welcomed as much more suitable.[22] As for anticipated acts of vandalism, it was believed that there were simple anti-graffiti solutions and that possible desecration through climbing on the memorial's pillars with their text-less surfaces was considered irrelevant, since the pillars were "neither intended nor consecrated as tombstones."[23]

The pillars are the outcome of an overlapping of two invented topographies on rectangular grids, placed above each other and undulating differently, thus defining the tilt of the pillars. The incongruent relationship of the two planes cannot be traced in practice, but only experienced through their destabilizing effect. Although Eisenman's design process used abstract elements

Knitz. The names of fifty-one national groups victimized in Buchenwald are inscribed on the plate. See James Young, *At Memory's Edge, After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 105.

19. The winning design by Berlin architect Christine Jackob-Marks consisted of a massive sloped surface, occupying the whole site, with eighteen boulders from Masada in Israel. The names of 4.5 million murdered Jews were to be inscribed on the memorial. The connection to Masada was problematic as it was a historical site of Jewish mass suicide during the revolt against the Romans. The proposal was, among other things, criticized for being "too German". Committee-member James Young argued that the competition brief was too ambiguous to begin with. Participants from the first competition were invited to the following one, including a few additional competitors including Peter Eisenman, Daniel Libeskind, Jochen Gerz, Rebbeca Horn, and Dani Karavan. Young, *At Memory's Edge*, 190.

20. Young, *At Memory's Edge*, 194.

21. Ibid. 206.

22. Since the committee wanted more place for commemorative events but was simultaneously concerned about the memorial

in a rational approach to produce unpredictable results, as reflected in the arrangement of the pillars, the architect resisted describing the memorial as abstract. Instead, he referred to the design as "indexical".[24] Eisenman, who in 1995 competed for the Holocaust memorial in Vienna, remained faithful to his idea that instead of producing meaning, a memorial should question the conditions of horror by creating a "powerful and evocative spatial experience that will precipitate discussion about the past [so as] to ensure that [it] will never [be] repeat[ed]."[25] Well aware of the Adornian doubt, Eisenman used the uneven ground on which the pillars were installed as an element of displacement for two reasons: in opposition to the traditional notion of architecture as site-specific and ground-based, and in connection to the Nazi ideology of "blut und boden" or the sanctity of German soil. Therefore, decomposing the very base of the architectural form would counteract its inherent ability to give meaning.[26] Augmenting this idea with a generous use of concrete as material for the pillars, the architect hoped to evoke the feelings of loneliness and disorientation described by the survivors.[27]

A final addition to the revised proposal, on the insistence of the Minister of Culture at that time, was an underground museum space called *Ort* which was meant to contribute a pedagogical aspect to the overall concept, and which was to be integrated with the architectural language of the memorial above. This was done by adjusting the disposition of the museum, consisting of four different rooms memorializing the Holocaust in different ways, so that the exhibition contained within would follow the layout of the field of pillars above.[28] In this context the pillars can be read as empty memorial plaques on unidentified graves; an upside-down world in which the pillars of the memorial are in fact the confirmation of this inversion (Fig. 2).

INHABITING ABSENCE

Ever since the collective ritual of mourning moved into the private sphere and the notion of 'invisible death' was established as a consequence of modern cultural values, death became taboo; something that is constantly present

turning into an uncontrollable labyrinthine space, the original design had to be adjusted. At this point Serra left the project, leaving it in the hands of Eisenman, who further revised the design in order to meet the demands. Young, *At Memory's Edge*, 211.

23. Ibid. 211.

24. The notion of 'index' was described by Rosalind Krauss as a sign that is caused by its referent, without necessarily resembling it; a shadow of a body, for instance. Godfrey, *Abstraction*, 244.

25. Rosenfeld, *Building after Auschwitz*, 174. Eisenman's proposal for the Vienna competition consisted of a plaza surrounded by wrinkle-like, high walls, a form derived from a series of maps of Vienna's ghettos from 1421 and 1678 overlapped by the map of the German Reich after the Nazi Anschluss of 1938. His other proposal for the Jewish Museum of San Francisco (1996) was also developed around the notion of a powerful and disturbing spatial experience in which he tried to evoke Auschwitz as "a feeling of loneliness and being lost." Ibid. 176.

26. Rosenfeld, *Building after Auschwitz*, 176.

27. Interviews with the survivors were conducted by the architect as part of the research preceding the project. See Godfrey, 248

Fig. 2
Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe, the Museum
(Credits: Lepkowski Studios, Berlin)

but never truly discussed, a paradox represented in Tony Smith's minimalist work *Die* (1962). The piece consists of a dark steel cube whose dimensions derive from a symbolic relation between death and the traditional measurement for burial in the United States: six feet. The *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* in Washington D.C. (1982, Fig. 3), commonly considered to be a milestone in memorial architecture, is often referred to as a tomb due to its dark granite surface with thousands of engraved names of the dead or missing and the numerous objects visitors leave at its foot. Whether this comparison does it justice is difficult to say, since the memorial does reference death, excluding any deductive input or instruction. Instead, it invites introspection by merging one's reflection with the names on the highly-polished surface of the walls. Visitors appropriate the space of the memorial by observing this intricate coexistence of reflections and names, often tracing names with a piece of paper or caressing the surface and thereby touching the names.[29] The sensory features of the memorial provide the necessary environment for the process

28. The four rooms of the museum are as follows: the first room has floor panels showing the last letters and testimonies of victims, organized in the same grid as the pillars above; the second room displays prewar photographs of families accompanied with a description of their fate; the third room introduces an acoustic component as names and information about the victims are announced from the speakers, while their names are projected onto the walls; finally, the fourth room offers information about the former concentration camps and other sites.

29. Charles L. Griswold, "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Washington Mall: Philosophical Thoughts on Political Iconography," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Summer 1986), 709.

Fig. 3
Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Washington D.C.
(Credits: Willemien B. de Vries)

of mourning to take place through presentation, confrontation, and recognition of loss.[30] In this way the memorial reflects the notion of a tomb as "a monument placed at the limit of two worlds."[31] It evokes the absence of life while at the same time creating the intangible realm of loss.

This highly symbolic space can be addressed as a 'deep structure', a notion historian Richard Etlin used to categorize architectural spaces for commemoration of the dead, describing them as spaces with "particularly intense experiences in which sentience, the feeling of vital life, takes on a particularly intense colouring."[32] For Etlin, these are paradoxical places of absence for they are "neither of this world nor of the next."[33] Dedicated to certain abstract concepts, spaces of absence were designed to be empty so that people could communicate with higher ideals, a practice that was popular during the Enlightenment. For instance, Etlin's last category, entitled the 'Architecture of Shadows', is the

30. Watkins, Cole, and Weidemann, "The War Memorial", 364.

31. Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, *Etudes de la nature* (1784), quoted in Erika Naginski, *Sculpture and Enlightenment* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2009), 103. The quotation continues, "It presents us first with an end to life's meaningless anxieties and the image of eternal rest; and it gives rise to the confused sense of happy immortality, whose likelihood depends on the virtue of the one whose memory we contemplate."

32. Richard A. Etlin, *The Symbolic Space: French Enlightenment Architecture and Its Legacy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), XIX.

33. Ibid. 173.

embodiment of a 'space of absence'. This particular type originates from Etienne-Louis Boullée's eagerness to represent the uncanny feeling derived from the silhouettes and shadows of nature, the melancholia dominating the natural end of life that he sought to translate "in a precise manner into architecture."[34] In doing so, Boullée aspired towards creating a feeling of the sublime by using Edmund Burke's theory about the architectural elements necessary for creating it. One of Burke's principles included the 'artificial infinite', a method based on the succession and uniformity of elements constituting a composition as requisite for imagining their progress beyond the actual limits of the overall composition. Uniformity of the participating parts was necessary: they continued the progression of the succession and in that way created an effect of infinity, which was again a source of a feeling of the sublime. This principle can be recognized in the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, in the list of the names that appears almost endless, and also in Eisenman's memorial in which the repetition of pillars creates a field that seems to expand beyond the limits of the location.

While Berlin's *Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe* omits any personal designation and is often referred to as a popular playground,[35] the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* in Washington defines a space which is highly personal in character and whose ambiguity is perceived as persuasion.[36] By naming the dead and embracing the living through inviting visitor participation, the memorial creates a powerful space of absence that resonates an often-quoted thought by Adolf Loos about the tomb and monument being the only part of architecture that belongs to art.[37] For Maya Lin, the designer of the memorial, the initial goal was to materialize the unrepresentable pain of loss. As Lin explained:

> I thought about what death is, what a loss is… a sharp pain that lessens with time, but can never quite heal over. A scar. The idea occurred to me there on the site. Take a knife and cut open the earth, and with time the grass would heal it. As if you cut open the rock and polished it.[38]

34. Étienne-Louis Boullée, *Architecture, essai sur l'art* (1796-97), quoted in ibid. 197.

35. Franziska Bollerey, "Modesty versus Monumentality: The quieter way of speaking about Holocaust in Europe," *Ezelsoren-Bulletin of the Institute of History of Art, Architecture and Urbanism, IHAAU*1 (2008), 25-43.

36. Sonja K. Foss, "Ambiguity as Persuasion: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial," *Communication Quarterly* 34 (Summer 1986), 326-340.

37. Loos explored this potential in his design for a mausoleum for Max Dvorák (1921). The mausoleum was imagined in black Swedish granite, giving the impression of a well-grounded, heavy cube, topped with three levels forming a stepped pyramid, while the interior was to be decorated by Oskar Kokoschka's frescoes. The outside appearance and the simplicity of its form reflected the notion of death as a heavy and introvert subject, confined within the walls of its primitive construct. Only in the interior of the mausoleum would the space become a holding environment for intimate feelings, as Kokoschka's art was invited to "depict the emotion aroused by the

Fig. 4
Plan for the July 22 Memorial, Utøya, Norway
(Credits: Jonas Dahlberg Studio)

commemoration inside the tomb". The private experience of the artist as portrayed in his art would therefore become "a design for an unconscious archetype in which personal memory is blended with the collective one". In Benedetto Gravagnuolo, *Adolf Loos: theory and works* (New York: Rizzoli, 1982), 170.

38. Maya Lin as quoted in Robert Campbell, "An Emotive Place Apart," *American Institute of Architects Journal* 72 (May 1983), 151.

39. For the jury's evaluation of Jonas Dahlberg's proposal, see "Swedish artist Jonas Dahlberg to design July 22 Memorial sites in Norway," July 22 Memorials, http://www.minnesteder.no/en/the-swedish-artist-jonas-dahlberg-will-make-the-memorial-sites-after-22-july/. Accessed 30 May, 2014.

Notably, the same approach was taken in the winning entry by the Swedish artist Jonas Dahlberg for Norway's July 22 memorial sites competition (2014) to commemorate the attacks in Oslo and Utøya, a nearby small island on which Anders Behring Breivik massacred 69 victims in 2011. The artist's proposed design depicts a physical incision, a symbolic wound, into the Sørbråten peninsula which faces Utøya (Fig. 4). The literal cut into the landscape, with the names of the victims to be engraved on the vertical stone surface, was welcomed as radical and brave, as "the void that is created evokes the sense of sudden loss combined with the long-term missing and remembrance of those who perished."[39] It only seems that the 'healing' component found in the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, manifested in the ability to touch the names intertwined with one's own reflection, is removed in this case, since there will be a gap dividing the wall with names and the viewing gallery. This aspect will be reintroduced however in the Oslo memorial, where the excavated

Fig. 5
Plan for the July 22 Memorial, Oslo, Norway
(Credits: Jonas Dahlberg Studio)

cut from Sørbråten will be relocated. The memorial will take the form of an amphitheatre facing a curved stone wall, with the names of the victims at eye level (Fig. 5).

THE MEMORIAL AS A SPACE OF ABSENCE

After a terroristic attack occurred at several train stations in Madrid in 2004, causing the deaths of 192 people, the public expressed their grief by leaving letters, poems, religious images, and other objects at the sites where the bombings occurred. As this collection was becoming an obstacle, a 'cyber shrine' known as *Espacio de Palabras* was installed in the same year at the entrance of the Atocha[40] and El Pozo stations so that visitors would be able to leave their messages of condolence in an electronic form until a permanent memorial was built. These 'video walls' attracted a wide audience and were

40. Madrid Atocha (in Spanish, *Estación de Madrid Atocha*, also named *Madrid Puerta de Atocha*) is the largest railway station in Madrid. It is the primary station serving commuter trains.

therefore recognized as powerful instruments of preserving memory, with their meaning easily shared and instantly understood. Despite their success, an international competition was organized[41] and the task of creating the M11 memorial at a roundabout of the Atocha station was awarded to a team consisting of five young architects – FAM Arquictetura y Urbanismo SLP.[42] Under the motto *Light dedicates the moment of the day for each person*, the initial plan was to create a sacred space for the bereaved and in memory of the victims, an oasis in the busy traffic around Atocha station. Despite the competition's request to treat only the space of the roundabout, the designers decided to take a risk and suggested the main memorial space be located underneath the area limit allowed by the competition. In this way the idea of creating a serene and intimate space within noisy surroundings became more realistic. The design process began with multiple variations of models carved from ice blocks to emphasize daylight as a focus of the overall design. In contrast to the poetic ideal of light as an immaterial component in the creation of space, the actual memorial was built from materials resistant to the aggressive surroundings. At the same time this material had to be translucent to allow daylight and the changing angles of sunlight to penetrate the introverted space, accentuating the names of the victims, which were to be inscribed on the walls.[43] One of the initial ideas was to create an organic, blob-like structure that would carry the statements of public mourning. However, in the process of designing, and after consulting engineering experts, it was planned that the organic shape would be retained within the cylindrical architectural form so that it would be fully visible only from the interior space of the memorial.

The memorial was inaugurated on March 11, 2007 and as imagined by the winning team it was realized in two levels: the quiet, underground space and the prominent cylindrical marker at street level (Fig. 6). The underground space is accessible from the Atocha station, divided from the station hall by the uneven glass facade, creating a hazy membrane between the two environments: the busy realm of the station and the silent meditative room of the memorial (Fig. 7). The entrance to the memorial is a large glass door

41. The competition, attracting almost 300 proposals, was organized by the Madrid City Council and the Ministry of Public Works and Economy.

42. The office *FAM*, or *Fascinante Aroma a Manzana* (Fascinating Smell of Apple) was established in 2002. The members of the team were Esaú Acosta, Mauro Gil-Fournier, Raquel Buj, Miguel Jeanicke, and Pedro Colón de Carvajal.

43. In later stages, the names of the victims were replaced by the messages of condolence left on the site as part of the public's spontaneous mourning.

Fig. 6
11M Memorial, Atocha Station, Madrid, Spain
(Credits: Author)

Figure 7
11M Memorial, Atocha Station, Madrid, Spain
(Credits: Author)

leading first to a small, darkened vestibule with the victims' names printed alphabetically on an illuminated frosted glass panel, behind which is the main memorial space. Hence, visitors are encouraged to reflect upon the names for a few seconds, while the entrance serves as a transitional space towards the space of absence waiting ahead. Once in the main room, the blurred reality of the Atocha station, still visible through the glass facade on the right, seems more distant. The interior walls are designed as reflective dark blue surfaces in an attempt to make the edges of the space difficult to define. Visitors are invited to move around as they wish, but the central circular opening in the ceiling is the main source of light and therefore acts as a magnet (Fig. 8). The opening reveals ETFE foil[44] with the inscriptions of many messages of condolence in multiple languages (Fig. 9). Since the foil is transparent, it allows the outside part of the cylindrical tower to be fully visible as the text swirls upward towards the glass beams carrying the roof of the structure. At night, artificial lightening accentuates the cylinder and its changing

44. Ethylene tetrafluoroethylene, ETFE, is a fluorine based plastic, designed to have a high corrosion resistance and strength over a wide temperature range.

Fig. 8
11M Memorial, Atocha Station, Madrid, Spain
(Credits: Author)

quality gives it the appearance of a large candle pot enigmatically protruding from the roundabout. During daytime, depending on the angle of the sun, the organic form of the cylinder's inner membrane is slightly visible, as the sunrays break through the glass brick facade.

Since each detail is designed to augment the notion of a sacred realm, the material performance of the memorial ought to be impeccable. However, due to its rapid deterioration caused by improper maintenance, whole segments of the cylinder's inner foil are damaged to the point that specific parts of the text are illegible, which results in a great distraction from the overall experience. Furthermore, although the initial outburst of public grief is memorialized in the apex of the memorial, new messages of condolence cannot be added to its 'clean' and protected space. The apparent need for such interaction is demonstrated by the objects visitors place at the cylinder's base of the street level part of the memorial. In this way the protruding

Fig. 9
11M Memorial, Atocha Station, Madrid, Spain
(Credits: Author)

eleven metre high cylinder, prominently positioned before the station, can be perceived as an abstract cenotaph. The cylindrical form whose translucent materialization suggests its hidden content is an inviting feature in space; its purpose is somewhat ambiguous, as it can easily be interpreted as an odd part of the station's technical space. It invites more thorough inspection before one discovers its function as a guardian of a place of tragedy and its consequences – the death of individuals.

CONCLUSION

Set aside for intimate contemplation and imaginative investment while echoing Boullée's aesthetic principles for translating melancholia into architecture, the Atocha memorial focuses on words of hope and suggests the infinite for both the dead and the living. In this sense, the memorial shares qualities with the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial*. Both memorials are spaces of absence that signify personal deaths, but at the same time encourage interaction with space and potentially facilitate the mourning process. In this respect, the Norwegian memorial designs seem to incorporate these aspects, balancing between the dramatic and more intimate space for reflection. Conversely, the *Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe* in Berlin, conceived with the goal of destabilizing the visitor and thereby creating a sense of an impending danger, omits any personal references. In this way the memorial risks a questionable transformation of the memorial space into an ideal adrenalin boost for the ignorant. Echoing radical proposals for commemoration of Auschwitz and Sachsenhausen, the absence demonstrated by the waving field of pillars is literal and understandable only to the more persistent, willing to hunt for the actual purpose of the memorial. Unlike the designers of the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* and the 11M memorial who were aware of the importance of the personal appropriation of memorial spaces by visitors and its transitional qualities in facilitating the process of mourning, Berlin's memorial is a coded intellectual statement, an exercise in memory work on a gigantic scale which further exposes the memorial to controversies and acts of vandalism. In that way, indeed, it focuses more on

the 'knife' then on the 'wound'. Whether these memorials manage to provide strong holding environments for memory and preserve remembrance for the future generations is difficult to say. Nevertheless, the exploration of the spaces of absence they promote appears to be more powerful when designating individual absence rather than abstract presence.

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