

# Architecture of places of remembrance as a form of structuring collective experience based on the example of Polish contemporary places of remembrance

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*Relation between good and beautiful makes people think.  
In a sense, beauty is a visible form of good,  
just like good is a metaphysical condition of beauty.*

John Paul II's Letter to Artists, Vatican City 1999

The aim of this presentation is to demonstrate issues concerning places of remembrance, paying special attention to the elements which create meaning and structure collective experience. The analysis will be conducted not only on the level of architectural materials but the current knowledge about psychology of perception (narrative perception) will also be included.

Another aim of the presentation is to assess Polish current architectural projects against the background of international accomplishments. Projects implemented by students from Warsaw University of Technology Faculty of Religious and Monumental Architecture under the management of professor Konrad Kucza-Kuczyński will be presented. The presentation is intended for young scientists of different branches, not only those of architecture and construction.

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## The Report

In the second half of the 20th century there was a rapid development of architecture of places of remembrance, i.e. museums as well as forms commemorating tragic war events. The end of 20<sup>th</sup> century brought new tragic events not connected to war in its traditional meaning. Terrorist attacks, disasters and catastrophes resulted in a search for new language in contemporary architecture which would respond to these events. A traditional monument became insufficient. Using new forms of expression architects search for a universal architectural language. The trauma of the Second World War left a distinct impression on the post war generation and "contemporary society still experiences some traumas and their paradigms have become the most important reference point dominating all sciences about man" [1]. Europe had to "recover from the shock", i.e. the holocaust — mass and industrialized genocide. Nowadays, however, Europe has to face the pointlessness of terrorist attacks. Monuments — statues and museums do not only

serve the purpose of commemorating the events, but additionally constitute a form of collective therapy. Many buildings and monuments were built almost half a century after the tragic events<sup>1</sup> and only some just after the events [2]. This shows the complexity of the problem.

At the beginning of the 1980s, contemporary psychology introduced a new notion of narration and man as a narrating being (homo narrans) [2]. "Apart from literary narration there are also historical, religious, ideological, scientific as well as artistic, musical, psychological, personal, colloquial narrations and also small and big narrations" [2]. Architectural narration can also be added to this group because an "architect is like

<sup>1</sup> Museum of History of Jews in Berlin, architect D. Libeskind, 1997–2000; Museum of Polish Jews, architects Lahdelma and Mahlamaki, Architects competition in 2005 the project is now being carried out; The place of remembrance of the camp in Bełżec, architects: M. Dunikowski, P. Czerwiński, and P. Uherek, 1996–2004; Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, architect P. Eisenman, 1997–2005; Jerusalem Museum of Holocaust Yad Vashem, architect M. Safdie, 1996–2005.

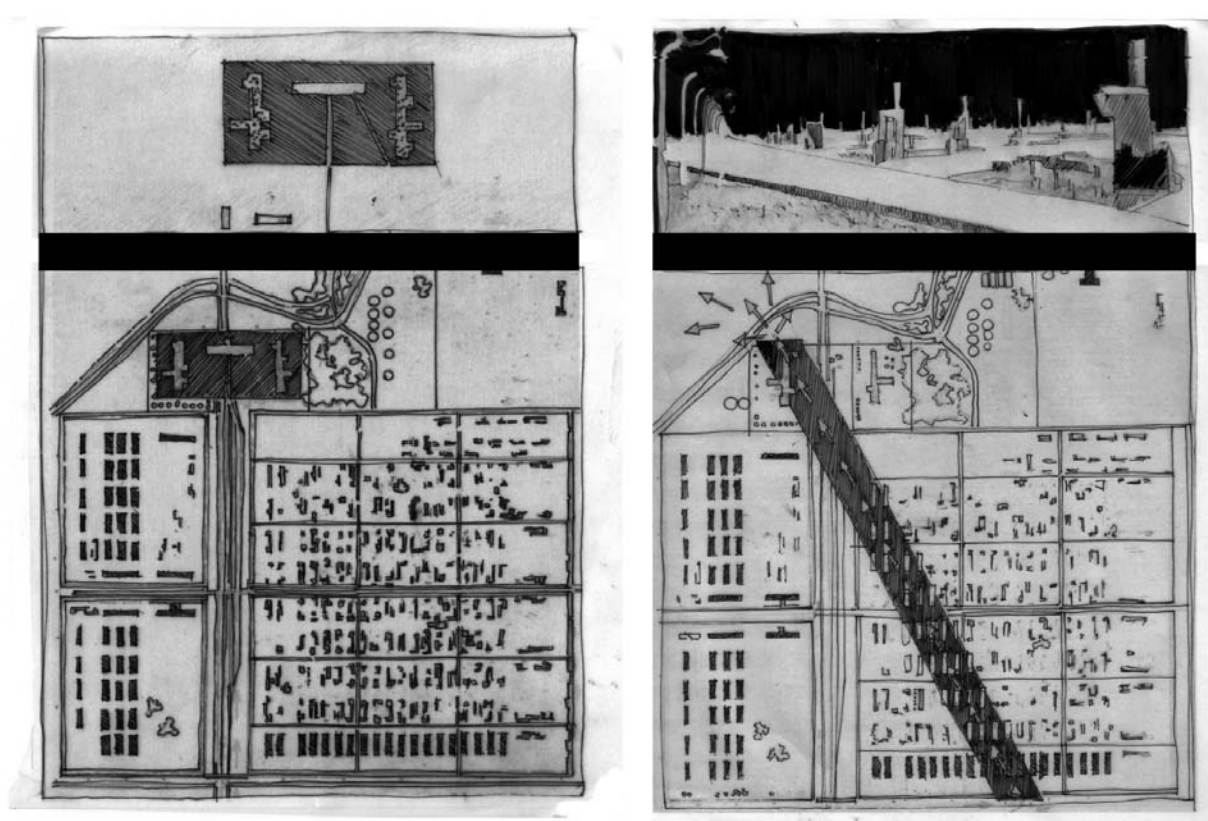


Fig. 1. The project for place of remembrance in German Death Camp in Oświęcim-Brzezinka — the Road, by O. Hansen; drawing A. Wierzbicka.

a theatrical producer, a person arranging the stage of our lives” [3]. Contrary to other branches of art, architecture has both a practical and an aesthetic function. “That is why one could say it would be a vast impoverishment of architectural work if all the elements of beauty, which cannot be expressed in material gains, were to be eliminated from it” [4]. In ancient times Plato assumed that beauty was not an object or a thing but ideas which are unchanging and universal in their meaning.

The function of places of remembrance of various character is to transfer not just aesthetic principles; the idea in these projects is a superior value — “the sacred seen as participation [...] appears as a specific quality given directly, even if it is conditioned by some specific objects presented and not some other ones” [5]. Here, the notion of the sacred refers to objects which are not buildings of religious worship<sup>2</sup> [6], “so the purpose of museums can be seen as material but also spiritual (serving the purpose of retaining identity, among other things) [7].

<sup>2</sup> M. Eliade assumed that the reality of sacrum is comprised of various phenomena taken from the reality of profanum: [„the sacred is different from the profane in terms of quality and may manifest itself in any way and at any place in the secular environment because it has got the ability to transform every object into a paradox by means of hierophany i.e. the object is no longer itself as a cosmic object although apparently it remains unchanged”].

Perceiving museums as carriers of culture Diane Grihard, divided them into sanctuaries, storehouses, performances and commercial centres of culture [8]. This division points to a religious nature of these objects distinguishing them from other public buildings. In this case places of remembrance serve the purpose of satisfying basic identity and affiliation needs and “contradicting the need for these needs would mean renouncing human existence” [9]. The object is not only a place where the memories are kept but also a meeting place. Places of Remembrance become “a way of cultural organisation of space creating specific possibilities for interpersonal communication” [10]. An architect — creator faces a dilemma of expressing something inexpressible by matter. Witold Rybczyński, an architect, wrote that the beginning of a building or a project is always a special moment “[...] we are guided by intuition<sup>3</sup> [11] not by the common sense and because of that the beginning may seem like a magic moment” [12]. Designer of the Jewish Museum states<sup>4</sup>: “If, during his or her work on a certain project, an architect distances himself or herself from what he or she wants to transmit and starts to focus on figures and good taste, then he or she ceases

<sup>3</sup> Intuition is an ability to assess without conscious understanding.

<sup>4</sup> Museum of History of German Jews, architect D. Libeskind, 1997–2001 competition 1998.

to actively participate in the truth of creation. Then he or she should return to this truth and should find it" [13].

This truth as an idea in commemorative projects assumes the form of conceptual narration structuring collective experience. Collective trauma requires other treatment, i.e. a special attention as it afflicts not only an individual but the whole nations or ethnic groups and, as every suffering, it calls for therapy. In this specific case the objective of architecture is not only to retain the memory of those events but also to constitute a semblance of group therapy. The object brings back the old times through a narration which looks for meaning of these pointless events. What then is a narration in places of remembrance?

Like in therapy, places of remembrance "through questioning the metaphors coming from «deep structures» or those, which have a specific «nature» and narrative ideas transfer the thoughts thanks to which the stories told have not only a greater power of affecting our lives but also can be developed in millions of other ways, thereby increasing the feeling of possibility" [14].

Objects commemorating the events from the Second World War, especially the extermination of Jews, constitute the most numerous group. An important post-war solution is a competition project for a monument called "Droga" [*The Road*] for the Museum in Oświęcim-Brzezinka. This project was prepared in

1957 by a team led by Oskar Hansen and consisting of Zofia Hasen, Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz, Edmund Kupiecki, Julian Pałka and Lechosław Rosiński. The concept proposed by them defied the idea of a traditional monument and a monument sculpture suggesting that the whole area of the concentration camp be treated as a huge monument instead. The dominant element was to be a 1-km long and 70-m wide black asphalt road which cuts across the camp and petrifies all that was left along the route. Other buildings on the both sides of the road, i.e. camp barracks, chimneys, barbed wire fences, the railway ramp and crematoria were to be left to time, to entropy. The authors of the project assumed that: "The process occurring off the road would play the role of a biological clock. Trees grew there; we saw roe deer and bucks passing through. We wanted to preserve the elements on the road, preserving this all-too-human experience for others, just like the lava preserved Pompeii. 'The Road' monument is a search for continuity. It starts with life, passes through death, and then returns to another life. Life and death define one other within it". In the project "not the monument in a closed form but an open form, the most important element of which was space and time constituted the basis for the project "Droga" [15]. The idea the project was not greeted with enthusiasm by the former prisoners of Auschwitz, who expected more figurative depictions. Finally, the project was not carried out (Fig. 1).

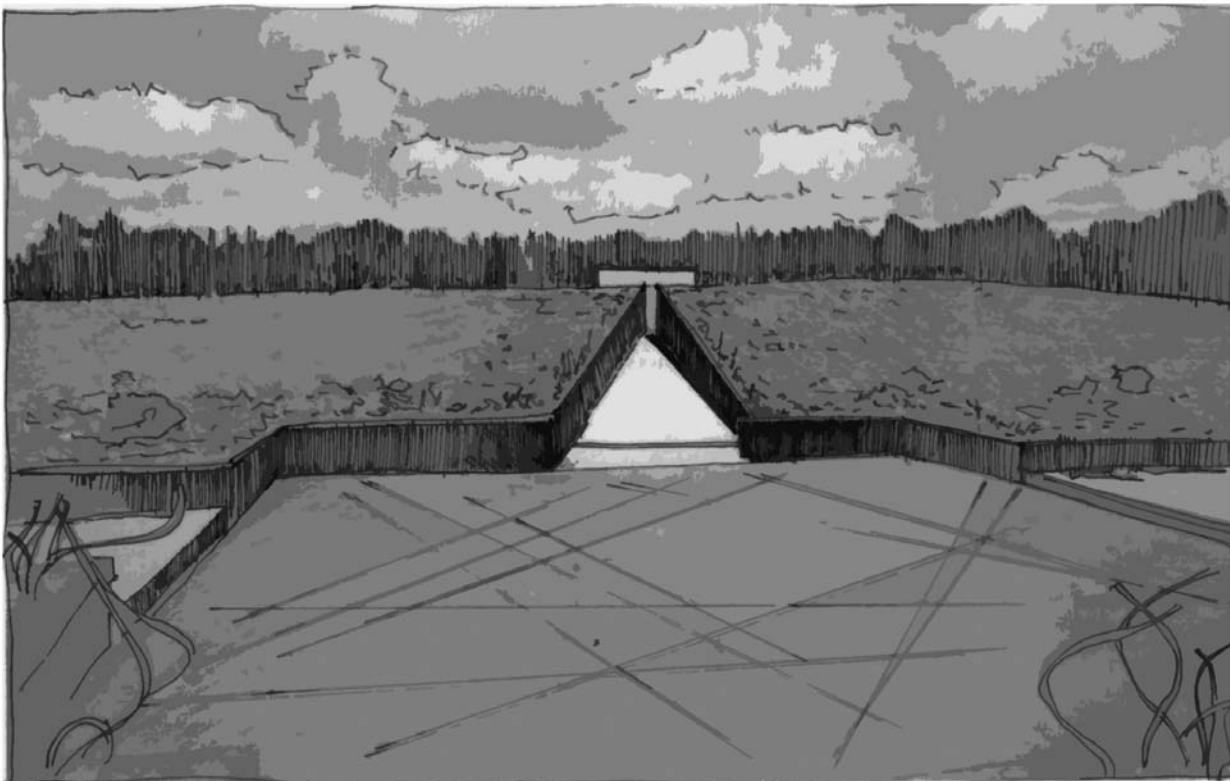


Fig. 2. The German Death Camp in Bełżec — place of remembrance; drawing A. Wierzbicka.

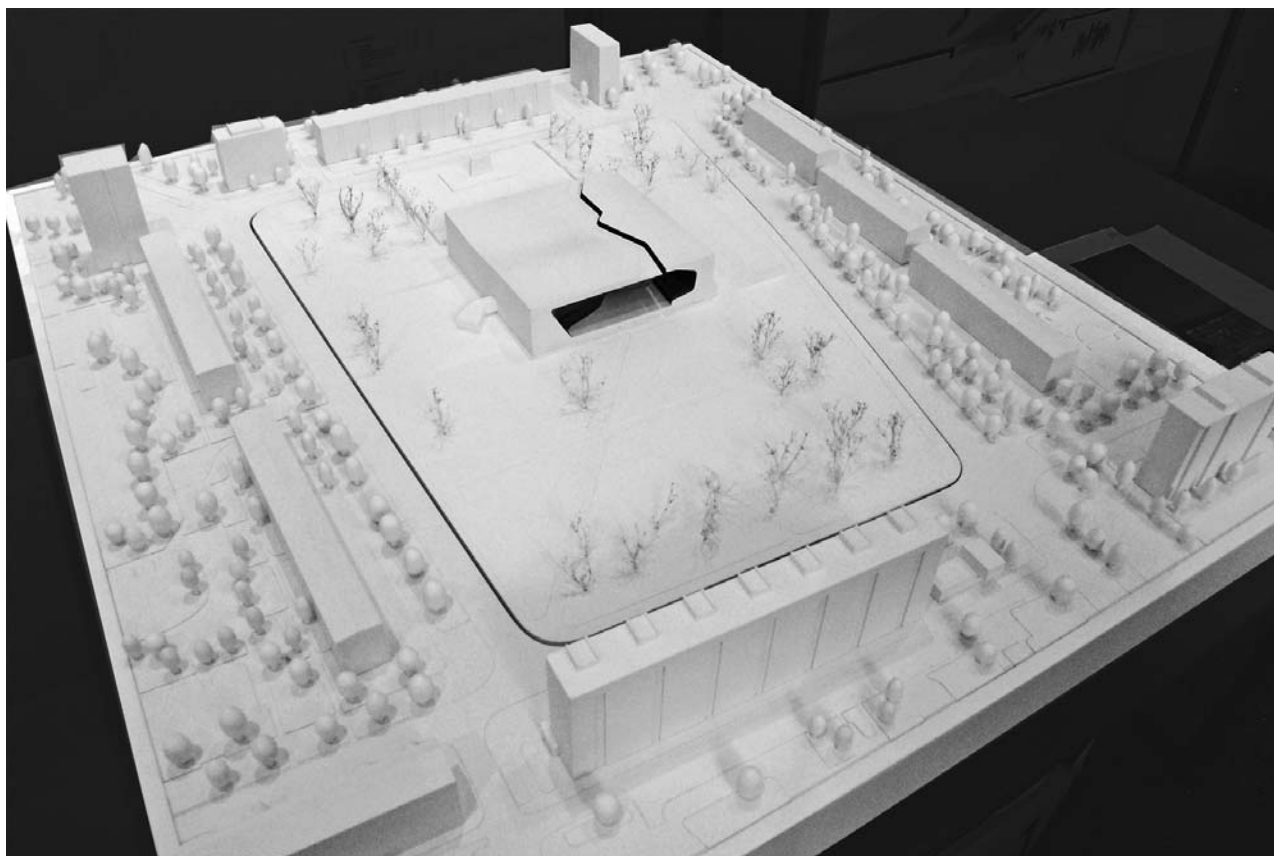


Fig. 3. The Museum of Polish Jews in Warsaw, competition model, drawing A. Wierzbicka.

The second significant Polish monument is a place of remembrance at the site of the former death camp in Bełżec, selected by competition. Implemented by sculptors (Andrzej Sołyga, Zdzisław Pidek, Marcin Roszczyk) in cooperation with an architectural workshop — DDJM Biuro Architektoniczne. The project was implemented between 1996 and 2004. The main function of the monument in the former death camp is paying homage to the murdered Jews in accordance with the Judaic tradition. The architectural and sculptural conception encompasses the whole area of the camp. The most important element of the composition is the symbolic space of the collective grave. The main entrance to the cemetery has been located in the place where the siding was situated. The cemetery consists of two parts: the “Ramp” and the building of the Museum, both of which form a cemetery wall from the side of the gateway. The only way from the “Ramp” is the “Road” leading to the “Crevasse”, which resembles a crack in the ground. Those two elements create the “Crevasse — Road”, which cuts the ground in half and uncovers the hidden elevation of the ground, thus revealing the dimension of the crime [16]. Like in Hansen’s project also here the road constitutes the axis of narration, structuring collective experience (Fig. 2).

Another important project of international significance is also the Museum of Polish Jews in Warsaw (now

being carried out). The project was chosen as a result of an international competition in 2005 and its author is a Finnish architectural workshop of architects R. Mahlamaka and I. Lahdelm. The intention of the authors was to make an object itself a narration and not merely a combination of symbols connected with Jews. The author says, “I think that the use of symbolic signs is not the only issue here. Architecture is an abstract combination of forms and materials. However, for such an exceptional object it is essential to give it — by use of symbols — its own expression and character. The term Yum Suf, which is connected with a very important moment in Jewish history — a turning point” [17]. It is Yum Suf — crossing the Red Sea by Israelites — that structures the collective experience not only of Jews but of all societies, thus giving hope for a new history (Fig. 3).

Summing up the issues of conceptual narration in architecture of places of remembrance, it is obvious that conceptual narration is present in many contemporary projects carried out in Poland and abroad. Narration becomes an objective for the dialogue between the viewer and the form. Significant foreign project which use conceptual narration include: The Memorial for murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin designed by an architect P. Eisenman between 1997 and 2005, the Jewish Museum in Berlin designed by an architect

D. Libeskind between 1997 and 2000 and The Museum of Holocaust Yad Vashem designed by an architect M. Safdie in Jerusalem between 1996 and 2005. In all the above projects the viewer takes part in a personal autonarration which structures the collective experience.

Authors of monuments in places of remembrance devoted to tragic terrorist events also use narration; e.g. in project Ground Zero in New York designed by an architect D. Libeskind or in the monument commemorating the events from 11<sup>th</sup> March 2004 in Madrid made by architect Mauro Gil-Fourner, Estudio F.A.M 2004.

One can expect narration to constitute an important starting point for designing places of remembrance of holocaust, terrorist attacks, transportation catastrophes and “in the face of more and more numerous signs of social need for values and paradigms — model conduct closed in big narrations [...] Man’s conscious life is — existentially speaking — a narration” [2].

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