
Connecting with Tragedy Through Landscapes of Memory: Memorial Design, Tourism, and the Post- Genocide Memoryscapes of Cambodia, Rwanda, and Germany

Shannon Davis and Jacky Bowring

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Abstract

In recent years the act and practice of memorialisation has become increasingly complex due to the influence of globalisation. As the world grows ever smaller, the opportunities offered to us to engage the international memoryscape are many and far-reaching. Memoryscapes—memorial landscapes—are today infused by the tension between local needs and global expectations, offering highly concentrated places in which to investigate the physical expression of memory. Multiple pressures (both internal and global)—including the demands of time, religion, politics, and economics—dictate both the form and narrative expressed by memorials in post-genocide societies. With growing tourist industries, countries emerging from regimes of genocide (such as Cambodia and Rwanda) are today engaging the international visitor through their memoryscapes of genocide. This article explores the post-genocide memoryscapes of Germany, Cambodia, and Rwanda, investigating their ability through memorial form (representational or non-representational), to “connect” international visitors with foreign “memory”—a type of memory with which they may have little previous association.

Keywords: memory, memorial, genocide, design, interpretation

Introduction

Western nations are today loaded with symbolic sites, dates, and events that provide a kind of social continuity that contributes to a collectively shared memory, and establishes spatial and temporal reference points within societal groups.¹ In recent years, the critical view of memorialisation has become increasingly complex, in part due to the influence of globalisation. Architect, Peter Tonkin, and artist, Janet Laurence, state that in the twenty-first century: “We are in the midst of a worldwide obsession with memorializing that has been unequalled since the age of the dictators”.² Monuments, history museums, memorial museums, public sculptures, grave-yards, commemorative sites, and memorial landscapes are created and dedicated to people, places, and events. At an unrivalled moment in history, spaces dedicated to the memory of the past are found throughout the world, and seem increasingly to commemorate a past involving mass death.

Historically, individual nations have held sets of meanings and interpretations in relation to their past which were developed into memorials and commemorative spaces to reinforce peoples’ identification with specific social values. In doing so, they create a collective national identity.³ “Globalisation”, has, however, led to an increased interconnectedness amongst the world’s populations. As William Wishard suggests, globalisation is far more than non-Western nations adopting free markets and democratic political systems: “At its core, [globalisation] means that the full scope of western ideas and modes of living are gradually seeping into the fabric of the world.”⁴

The influence of globalisation, and under particular consideration here, of “Westernisation”, is clear in the expression of public memory of genocide in Cambodia and Rwanda. For example, Serge Thion states that the paradigm of genocide for the West is still very much centred on the Holocaust: “Jews and Khmers do not mourn and bury the dead in the same way and there is a risk that our Western concept of ‘memory’ could be entirely irrelevant to the Khmers who obviously have their own.”⁵ Tourism today allows for, and supports, the permeability of our world that globalisation has provided, creating a globe that is fully accessible to those who have the will and means to explore it. It has become clear that tourist interest in recent world tragedies is a growing phenomenon in the twenty-first century.⁶

Memorialisation, and the form that memory takes, is understood within contemporary thought as being unbounded in its expression. From its readily understood and widely accepted expression—through art, music, theatre, literature, sculpture, and architecture, to spatial or experiential places, to the less tangible expressions through the creation of national holidays, appearance on currency, or even an official judicial decision—memorialisation occurs in many forms. The social act of memorialisation, and the physical embodiment of memory in the landscape, as particularly considered here, sees “tragedy” today investigated as a genre of design. This is a category of design that explores and expresses it in both tangible and intangible forms to meet the many needs and expectations of

those involved. From built, spatial, and visual form to symbolic, experiential, or abstract form, the expression of tragedy in our landscape today demands a broader perspective than has been experienced in history: “The romantics thought that memory bound us in a deep sense of the past, associated with melancholia, but today we think of memory as a mode of re-presentation, and as belonging ever more to the present.”⁷

Considered in this way, the act of interpretation therefore sees memorials become as much about the present as they are the past. This article investigates the development of the post-genocide memoryscapes of Cambodia and Rwanda in relation to the evolution and development of the German memorial landscape. It also explores how sites of genocide memorialisation in these countries—sites within a history, culture, and place with which many visitors have little previous personal association—attempt to “connect” the international tourist with tragic history through memorial form and their landscapes of memory.

Design interpretation

It has long been accepted that architecture and landscapes possess “meaning”; to be more than mere structure or space.⁸ It is also held that the creation of meaning within a site is not just about the intended meaning stated by the designer at conception, but that it is created and recreated with every individual experience. Design interpretation opens a project to the wider world, to a larger community, changing and relating to cultural and societal difference throughout time.⁹

As Juan Bonta states, “Interpretations—like forms themselves—fulfil a cultural, historically conditioned role. We interpret buildings in certain ways because in so doing we can throw some light upon aspects of the world in which we live.”¹⁰ We interpret memorials, built or otherwise, for similar reasons—to elucidate in the present, a part of our world for which an expression of memory has been communicated. Coupled with the act of interpretation is the notion of “pre-understanding”, a concept introduced by Martin Heidegger. According to him, this concept acknowledges the fore-structure of how we see and understand things, the cultural historicity we bring with us unreflectively to a reading or act, in this case the act of memorial interpretation.¹¹

It could be said, therefore, that the practice of design interpretation becomes more relevant than the design or creation of form itself. The ability of a memorial to “connect” with people and create meaning stands in its ability to be interpreted—to speak to the group or individual through time. Germany, and its treatment of memorialisation during the post-Holocaust period, today provides an example from which memorial development and the opportunity for interpretation can be considered, acting here also as a base from which these can be analysed in Cambodia and Rwanda.

Creating a memoryscape of genocide—representation and the interpretation of memory through design

In its function as a political tool within post-conflict societies, memorialisation can be used as a form of social remembering and forgetting, often selecting and distorting memory to serve present needs. Today the German memoryscapes of genocide illustrate a progression of time, politics, and societal needs, depicted clearly through the creation, design, and development of an extensive landscape of memorial sites. From the preservation of concentration and extermination camps (such as the Sachsenhausen Memorial and Museum), to Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz's anti-memorial, *Monument against Fascism*, and Peter Eisenman's *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, Germany has confronted Holocaust memory and its physical expression in many ways over the last 60 years.

While athletes and visitors from all over the world were participating in the 1936 Berlin Olympics, just 20 kilometres north the Sachsenhausen concentration camp was being expanded and developed to serve the Reich capital (Figure 1). Sachsenhausen was a “preventative detention camp” to which the Gestapo took people it regarded as political enemies of the National Socialist regime, and those it persecuted for social, biological, or racial reasons.¹² Of the more than 200,000 inmates held at the camp between 1934 and 1945, tens of thousands died as a result of extreme physical abuse, malnutrition, disease, execution, and medical murder. The second chapter in the history of Sachsenhausen began soon after the camp's liberation in August 1945, when the Soviet Secret Service moved its “Special Camp No. 7” to Sachsenhausen where those who had held official positions in the Nazi state were imprisoned. Remaining operational until 1950, 12,000 prisoners are believed to have died during these five years under Soviet control.¹³

Figure 1. Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp, Oranienburg, Germany. Photo by author (2007).



The Sachsenhausen National Memorial was erected by the German Democratic Republic (1961-1990). During this time its past as a camp run by the Soviet Secret Service was concealed. The official interpretation of the memorial “was to serve solely as a reminder of the concentration camp”.¹⁴ The part played by the Soviet Union in the military downfall of the National Socialists was the central idea expressed by the memorial site’s culture of remembrance.

The memorial constructed at the centre of the site, titled *Tower of Nations* (Figure 2), was the central memorial and emblem of the Sachsenhausen National Memorial during this time. Eighteen red triangles mounted on the obelisk-like structure represent the prisoners’ main countries of origin in remembrance of the camp’s political and foreign prisoners. The memorial was designed to make a heroic statement of the communist resistance in Europe, a concept made particularly clear by Rene Graetz’s sculpture, *Liberation*, that sits in front of the tower and which depicts two liberated prisoners standing next to a Red Army soldier. Jutta Dommaschk states: “The historical topography was transformed by the systematic re-organisation of the site and its conversion into a monumental glorification of the defeat of SS rule”.¹⁵

For the Sachsenhausen memorial, like many spaces of public memory created during this time in Germany, leaders of the German Democratic Republic were primarily interested in representing “historical policy” and not in preserving the traces of history. As a result, the demolition and elimination of some “specific” history occurred, and entire groups of victims were disregarded and actively forgotten. After the reunification of Germany in 1990, the memorial at Sachsenhausen became the Sachsenhausen Memorial and Museum and today houses a series of permanent exhibitions which cover a “more complete” history of the camp from 1936-1957.

Figure 2. Tower of Nations, with sculpture, *Liberation*, in front, Sachsenhausen Memorial and Museum, Orenianburg, Germany. Photo by author (2007).



The importance of retaining these concentration and extermination camp memorials throughout Europe is because they are spaces to experience the actual place of suffering, to provide a place to mourn, and to learn about the specific history. Like many memorial sites within Germany, Sachsenhausen today stands as a “representational” memorial dedicated to the preservation and documentation of first-hand evidence. By the 1990s, however, the discussion over how to remember Europe’s murdered Jewish community intensified, and a new national memorial was proposed. In 2005, Eisenman’s *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* was officially dedicated. Unlike the representational, didactic Sachsenhausen memorial, it offers an expression of genocide memory within a “non-representational” abstract form.

Covering an inner-city block, the memorial is surrounded on three sides by busy city streets, and is, on the ground plane, a topography of 2,711 concrete stelae (Figure 3). Astrid Schmeing observes its effect on memory construction:

It is not a representation of memory so much as it is part of memory. It is an unconventional memorial that does not suggest how to remember. A conventional memorial would perhaps provide a figure to be ‘looked at’. The figurative object, witnessed by the observer’s external perspective, would provide a sense of wholeness of ‘completion’, which would suggest ‘how to remember’. This memorial, however, refuses to do so. There is no figure, and one does not even face an ‘object’. Instead, the individual moves within and inside the components of the memorial. One’s body becomes involved as a part of it, and the memorial is only complete when faced by each, single participating observer. Any form of memory transported to it by the observer becomes part of the memorial.¹⁶

Figure 3. Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, Berlin, Germany. Photo by author (2007).



With no site description, the “non-representational” form of the *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* possesses no “official” narrative or interpretation. Peter Eisenman, the architect, stated at the opening ceremony that a key purpose of the memorial was to allow “future generations to draw their own conclusions. Not to direct them what to think, but allow them to think.”¹⁷ Having no single entrance, no centre, no endpoint, and no explanation, the memorial stands today as a prompt for individual interpretation. This architectural awareness, that the needs and challenges that face society change through time, is met through the central aim of the memorial by the invitation to self-reflect.

Indicating the importance of historical layers within the memoryscape, Paul Spiegel, President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, stated at the opening ceremony of the memorial: “without historical memory, without the authentic places of annihilation, every abstract memorial will, in the long run, lose its effect as a sign against forgetting”.¹⁸ The *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, when considered within the wider memoryscape of Germany today, stands as a central point of remembrance: “May it contribute to keeping alive the memory which threatens to grow dim as the voices of the contemporary witnesses to the Holocaust fall silent.”¹⁹

Representation and the interpretation of memory—Cambodia

For Cambodia, the official interpretation of memorials developed within the post-genocide period was put forward by the Vietnamese/Cambodian government of the time to display evidence and seek approval for Vietnam’s invasion and subsequent occupation of the war-torn nation.²⁰ Mai Lam, the Vietnamese war crimes researcher involved in creating both national memorial sites—the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum (Figures 4 and 5) and the Choeung Ek Memorial Centre (Figures 6 and 7)—constructed an official memory for Cambodia. The memorial sites “encouraged viewers to make connections between the DK [Democratic Kampuchea] regime and Tuol Sleng on the one hand, and Nazi Germany ... on the other”.²¹

With little change to the memorial sites over the past 20-30 years this official narrative continues to direct interpretation of the national memorial sites today. Strongly orientated around the preservation and documentation of first-hand evidence—victim remains, clothing, torture equipment, mass graves, and photographs are displayed as central features—the genocide memoryscape of Cambodia is a clear illustration of instructive didactic representational memory. As such, individuals, whether an international tourist or a local citizen, have limited opportunity for individual interpretation.

Figure 4. Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Photo by author (2007).



Figure 5. Portraits of S-21 prisoners displayed as a central focus within the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Photo by author (2007).



Figure 6. The Memorial Stupa at Choeung Ek houses the skeletal remains of 8,000 exhumed victims of the 1970s genocide. Choeung Ek Genocidal Centre, Cambodia. Photo by author (2007).



Figure 7. Interior view of the Memorial Stupa, Choeung Ek Genocidal Centre, Cambodia. Photo by author (2007).



Interpretation and the representation of memory—Rwanda

Also strongly orientated around aspects of presentation, documentation, and education, the Kigali Memorial Centre in Rwanda (Figures 8 and 9) was designed by a United Kingdom-based genocide prevention charity in conjunction with the Kigali City Council. Today the memorial is a place to bury the dead (258,000 victims of the 1994 genocide rest within the grave terraces). It is a place for family and friends to mourn the victims, and also for visitors to learn about the process and reality of genocide, both local and global.

The memorial states an official aim to educate Rwandans about the processes of genocide in a hope to prevent its return both in Africa and the world. Sarah Steele states:

*... the direct participation of Western consultants and Holocaust survivor artists in the construction of the site, the integration of tri-lingual [Kinyarwandan, English and French] exhibits and the inclusion of materials that seek to involve and engage an international audience suggests that it is not simply an unintended product of Western participation in the building of the Centre, but rather a reflection of a desire to engage a broader visitor base.*²²

This approach deconstructs the genocide in Rwanda as a “tribal” problem, “By highlighting that genocide is not a symptom of African barbarity, but rather a violence that has been perpetrated in many societies” seeking to “break down ethnicised narrative”.²³ Attempting to squash any remnants of genocide ideology within the nation, the Rwandan government and Aegis Trust were acutely conscious of creating a representational memorial that educated on the overall process of genocide, the facts and figures, the personal stories and narratives, and also the international context of genocide during the twentieth century. The government, in attempting to stem the flow of genocide ideology, is actively working to create a genocide education programme which will eventually be aided by the educational facility of the Memorial Centre.

Figure 8. Main exhibition building, Kigali Memorial Centre, Kigali, Rwanda. Photo by author (2008).



Figure 9. Mass Grave terrace, Kigali Memorial Centre, Kigali, Rwanda. Photo by author (2008).



Memorial design, tourism, and post-genocide memory

The “official interpretation” of these national memorial sites put forward by the respective governments of Cambodia and Rwanda has dominated the memorial form, and therefore the experience and interpretation, of Western visitors to these memorials through the site design and information provided.

Set alongside these strong official narratives and the didactic, representational nature of the memorial form, the national memorial sites of both Cambodia and Rwanda also elucidate clearly a visual and spatial relationship to the Western treatment of memorialising the Jewish Holocaust. The sites therefore transform a distant event for many visitors into one that is more “comprehensible”—through “pre-understanding”. Termed “cues to connect”, the concept of placing an unfamiliar cultural expression within a frame of familiarity for the viewing public is one based on Joan Nassauer’s “cue to care”.

She illustrates how, when placed within a social landscape of “care”, ecologically valuable habitats become visible through the frame of human intention, and culturally acceptable through the familiar cultural language of a tended landscape.²⁴ Nassauer realised that to get people to engage with a site, it was necessary to have something familiar for them to identify with—a cue.²⁵ Used within this research, the term “cues to connect” defines those design strategies or site features at genocide memorials in Cambodia and Rwanda that (either consciously or unconsciously) engage Western visitors by placing the “distant” or

“less familiar” history expressed at these sites within pre-understood and culturally acceptable “Western” frames.

In this way, the represented narrative of memorial sites in these two countries was seen to become more accessible to the Western visitor. For example, the octagon is an architectural symbol that crosses both the Jewish and Christian faiths, where the eight-sided form has manifested itself in religious representation in a range of ways throughout time. In the Jewish faith, eight is the number that symbolises salvation and regeneration, and is associated with the eighth letter of the Hebrew alphabet called ‘Chet’ which has the symbolic meaning of “new birth” or “new beginning”.

In early Christianity, eight was the number which symbolised the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the formation of the New Covenant. The eight-sided form can today be seen prominently in European religious architecture, and also in religious forms such as the church font used in baptising Christian children. In relation to genocide memorialisation, the octagon is a prominent form in the architecture of many genocide memorial sites including: the “Hall of Remembrance” at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, Beth Shalom—the U.K. Holocaust Centre; and the Kigali Memorial Centre, Rwanda (Figure 10).

Examples, where the “less familiar” history of Cambodia and Rwanda is seen to become more accessible to the Western visitor through pre-understood cultural frames (particularly those commonly seen in the memorialisation of the Jewish Holocaust), are numerous. These include the display of victim clothing and genocide artefacts, the lists of victim names engraved into stone walls, rooms of victim photographs, the emotive horror of the display of mass graves, the direct connection made through comparative exhibitions such as the “Genocides of the World” exhibition at the Kigali Memorial Centre, and the emotive wording used in on-site information boards.

Figure 10. The octagonal architectural form plays a prominent role in the symbolic language of the Kigali Memorial Centre, Kigali, Rwanda. Photo by author (2008).



The act of providing (intentionally or not) on-site Western “cues to connect” is a significant aspect of memorial form in both Cambodia and Rwanda, and indeed plays an important role in the international memory of genocide. The case study sites of the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and the Choeung Ek Genocidal Centre in Cambodia, and the Kigali Memorial Centre in Rwanda, provide powerful experiences for the Western visitor. These facilities direct an interpretive perspective through their representational memorials that encourages a global connection to these places and people through the development of pre-understood Western frames.

Particular examples of this “connection” are seen in the visitor book entries at the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. With the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and the West’s “war on terror” in Afghanistan and Iraq, the tone of entries in the visitor books speak of a globalised world burdened by the reoccurrence of tragic actions. It also illustrates how international visitors connect with the site through “Western” events and memories. For example, one visitor wrote in 2004: “The USA supported the Khmer Rouge. Now they have their own S-21 in Guantanamo where they keep and torture people without trial.” Another, from Ireland, commented in 2003: “Cambodia will never move forward unless they deal with this history. Why don’t the big shots like Bush and Blair help, instead of starting another war?”

The post-genocide memoryscapes of Cambodia and Rwanda today act as repositories of meaning—potent containers of memory. For Western tourists, corporeal artefacts common to all human civilisations (such as skulls, bones, and clothes presented on-site in these “foreign” nations) cross traditional cultural and linguistic boundaries. They connect the “human” self to site and context through the intrinsic reality of death and what it is to be human. Vital to the landscape of memory, these sites are likely to always be sacred places within post-genocide nations. As is seen today, however, with the hopes and expectations of Berlin’s *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, a “new” generation of non-representational memorials, dedicated to the practice of individual interpretation, may have the greatest ability to prompt self-reflection—to have “meaning”.

The German memoryscape of genocide, where the informational didactic layers of “architectural parlante” offered by such representational memorials as Sachsenhausen, are today layered with a non-representational memorial space for “willed participation” with the creation of the *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*. The physical embodiment of genocide memory within the memorial enhances its potential to be sustained. Although this research indicated that Western visitors do engage with the existing representational memorial landscapes of Cambodia and Rwanda, restrictions on the interpretative qualities expressed at these sites sees a vulnerability in their long-term sustainability—in their enduring ability to speak through time and culture—as the needs around them change.

Arthur Danto, philosopher and art critic, wrote: “We erect monuments so that we shall always remember, and build memorials so that we shall never forget.”²⁶ As war generations disappear, what yesterday and today could be narrated by first-hand witnesses must tomorrow be passed on through memory. Set within

the cultural landscape, genocide memoryscapes are today emerging as key sites of memory in an ever more globalised world. Their role in ensuring the acts of remembering and not forgetting must rest upon their effectiveness as sites which prompt meaningful connection with genocide, giving form to the aspiration of “never again”.

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