

Architecture and Auschwitz

Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp

Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum, editors

Indiana University Press, 1994

638 pp., 55 illustrations

\$39.95

Auschwitz, 1270-1995

Deborah Dwork and Robert-Jan van Pelt

W.W. Norton, 1996 (forthcoming)

250 pp., 220 illustrations

\$30.00 (cloth)

In Fitting Memory: The Art and Politics of Holocaust Memorials

Sybil Milton and Ira Nowinski

Wayne State University Press, 1991

341 pp., 135 illustrations

\$39.95 (cloth)

The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning

James E. Young

Yale University Press, 1993

398 pp., 100 illustrations

\$40.00 (cloth), \$20.00 (paper)

The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History

James E. Young, editor

The Jewish Museum, 1994

194 pp., 350 illustrations (29 color)

\$32.00 (paper)

The concentration camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau in southern Poland is an example of one of the most purely functional of architectures. Prefabricated horse stables were selected for use as barracks to house the plan capacity of one hundred thousand slave laborers; the simplest and most efficient ovens were constructed to incinerate, at first, the dozens or hundreds who collapsed daily under inhuman work loads and, later, the thousands who arrived in packed cattle cars to be removed from the face of the earth as quickly as possible. At first, the crematoriums were coupled with morgues designed to keep the stored bodies cool. Later, the morgues were converted to gas chambers that needed heat to facilitate the evaporation of the prussic acid pellets: a design problem for architects. As new con-

struction was needed to furnish increased "capacity," architects drew up plans from an entirely functional perspective.

However, architecture is never exclusively functional; it is always also representational and expressive. Even the horse stable barracks and crematoriums of Auschwitz express the perverse logic of the Nazi worldview. Conversely, the post-Auschwitz architectures of "Auschwitz"—namely the museums and memorials commemorating the systematic murder of millions of human beings—serve primarily as representations. Built to symbolize the horrors that transpired, these memorials unavoidably also express the relationship of their creators to those events. All architecture encapsulates functions and meanings current at the time of its creation. Through careful analysis, we can seek to uncover those original meanings.

As the Soviet Army approached Auschwitz in the winter of 1944-1945, the German managers of the combined slave-labor camp and death factory demolished the crematoriums and gas chambers in an endeavor to remove that evidence from the historical record. However, they neglected to destroy some of the blueprints for the machinery of death; these were seized by the liberators and wandered in part into KGB archives in Moscow. Recently accessible to researchers with greater freedom to interpret, these blueprints force us radically to revise many of our preconceived notions about the unimaginable and incomprehensible universe of the concentration camps.

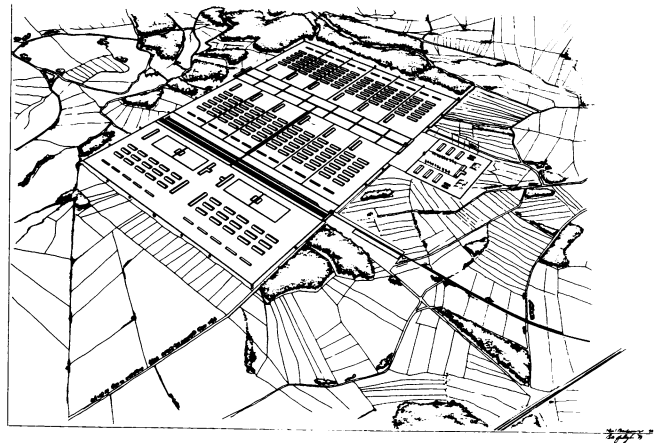
The recently renewed onslaught of those who deny the existence of gas chambers at Auschwitz has prompted a number of researchers to examine the available documentary evidence in excruciating detail. Their results not only confirm the testimony of hundreds of thousands of survivors and witnesses, but also open a new window into the minds of the Nazi megalomaniacs, revealing a horrifying utopian dimension to their dreams of a postwar, post victory world.

Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp, edited by the heads of the Israeli and United States national Holocaust museums, assembles twenty-nine cutting-edge essays on various aspects of Auschwitz. The essays are grouped into six parts, addressing the camp's history, the scope and details of the genocide perpetrated there, the perpetrators, the inmates and victims, the resistance within the camp, and the knowledge and behavior of the outside world toward the camp. Each of these carefully written essays makes fascinating reading for specialists and laypeople alike. Although there is invariably some overlap, the self-contained nature of the individual contributions allows readers to submerge into a small part of this hell of human inhumanity, gain insights into its working, and resurface before being overwhelmed by its enormity.

Especially in light of the assertion of many survivors that we will never be able to imagine, much less understand, the mechanics of “planet Auschwitz,” this thematic approach succeeds in addressing many of the most pressing questions without attempting to “explain” the whole: How many people were murdered? What was the technical procedure used to kill them? How did that process evolve over time? What kinds of people ran and serviced the machinery of death? Didn’t the victims resist? What was it like for women? For children? How was Auschwitz kept secret? Did the exploitation of the victims’ corpses contribute to the German war effort?

For architects, the essays by Robert-Jan van Pelt and Jean-Claude Pressac will be the most immediately interesting. Their excursion into “The Machinery of Mass Murder at Auschwitz” begins in 1937 in Dachau, where a local heating contractor submitted a design for a “single-muffle” furnace (a crucible with room for one coffin or corpse) crowned with an ornamental tympanum and costing just over 9,000 reichsmarks (RM), or about \$37,000 in today’s currency. Its designer calculated that it would require 175 kilograms of coke for a single incineration, but would run long enough for three incinerations without requiring additional fuel. Only small amounts would be needed for further operation. By the time the Dachau contract was finally awarded in 1939, the firm Ludwig Topf and Sons had submitted a bid for a stripped-down double-muffle furnace rated at two corpses per hour, costing only 8,750 RM. At that time, the death rate in Dachau ranged from ten inmates per month during periods of mild weather to six inmates per day in the winter. The use of a morgue to store the corpses was an obvious fuel-saving measure.

The next chapter of the story began after Hitler crushed Poland later that year. A small Polish border town at an important railway junction connecting Berlin, Vienna, Warsaw, and Ukrainian Lvov was selected as the site of a prisoner of war (POW) camp. In addition to its strategic location, it offered abundant water and rows of stone barracks built for migrant workers in 1916. That town was Auschwitz. Topf and Sons received the crematorium contract here too, but when petroleum was rationed after the German army invaded France and the Low Countries, a Berlin competitor’s ovens, which were easily converted to coke, gained a considerable advantage over Topf’s oil-burning models. Kurt Prüfer, Topf’s engineer for the concentration camp contracts, a middle-aged man with a jovial smile and keen business sense, designed a coke-burning furnace for Auschwitz. With electric fans, the capacity of the furnace was raised to three and a half corpses per hour, and it could run twenty hours before requiring a three-hour period of maintenance. The rated capacity was fairly accurate: In November 1941,



1. Bird's-eye view of an early design for the Auschwitz-Birkenau slave-labor camp. On the left is a quarantine camp with thirty housing barracks; the main camp is composed of two symmetrical rows of six subcamps with twelve housing barracks each. Ultimately, only one row of four and a half subcamps with thirty-four barracks each was constructed. The gas chamber-crematorium and loot-processing areas were later built along the upper-left edge of the camp. (From Deborah Dwork and Robert-Jan van Pelt, *Auschwitz, 1270-1995* [New York: W.W. Norton, 1996].)



2. Heinrich Himmler (center, with glasses) showing Rudolf Hess (hands folded) a model of a prototype farm for German settlers to be built in the area around Auschwitz. (From Yisrael Gutman and Michael Bernbaum, eds., *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp* [Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994], p. 102.)

an identical model installed at a concentration camp in Austria cleared a backlog of six hundred corpses in 12 days.

Such precise figures abound in the reconstruction of the history of mass death at Auschwitz. Because the SS destroyed most of its records before abandoning the camp, such calculations provide a means to estimate not only the total number of deaths, but also, based on the dates of construction of various facilities, when those deaths occurred. Van Pelt and Pressac trace the construction of two additional furnaces at the Auschwitz POW camp in 1941. It takes little imagination to sense what this implied for the Polish prisoners who were attempting to survive in the camp.

Meanwhile, the Nazi elite was making plans for postconquest Eastern Europe. In March 1941, SS chief Heinrich Himmler visited Auschwitz and decided to make it the center of a new German industrial colony. The existing POW camp at Auschwitz was to triple in size to hold thirty thousand prisoners, a new slave labor camp at nearby Birkenau was to be built with a capacity of one hundred thousand POWs (expected from the conquest of the Soviet Union, which was slated to begin that summer), and a third camp (Monowitz) for ten thousand slaves was to be built for a planned industrial complex to be run by the IG Farben conglomerate of German chemical firms. The one hundred thousand laborers of the second camp (Auschwitz II, or Birkenau) were to develop a regional infrastructure, straightening rivers, building dikes and roads, draining marshes, creating a network of self-sufficient model farmsteads, and building an attractive model city for the German technical personnel of the huge industrial center. The master plan for Birkenau was devised by Karl Bischoff, a German architect who had been out of work after having completed airfields in Northern France for the aerial blitz on Britain, and his assistant, Fritz Ertl, a graduate of the Bauhaus.

This plan is one of the foci of van Pelt's other essay in the *Anatomy* collection, "A Site in Search of a Mission," and it is discussed in greater detail in a standard-setting book that the architectural historian coauthored with Holocaust expert Deborah Dwork, *Auschwitz, 1270–1995*. The reconstituted town of Oswiecim/Auschwitz had to be appealing enough to draw technical experts and their families from cities in the German Reich. In 1941, architect Hans Stosberg of Breslau drew up several designs for this city of about forty thousand in the immediate proximity of the slave-labor camps. His planning continued well into 1943, long after Germany's fortunes in the war had changed and the realization of this utopian vision seemed dubious.

One of the most chilling aspects of the work of these architects derives from the fact that it spanned the period in which the

majority of Europe's Jews were annihilated. As Dwork and van Pelt point out, the human extermination program had a finite and rather short duration, so that no rationally planning Nazi architect would have incorporated permanent changes to accommodate it.

Dwork and van Pelt methodically expose the inhumanity manifest in the details of Bischoff's plans. When Birkenau's capacity of one hundred thousand slave laborers was raised by 25 percent, Bischoff merely crossed out the original capacity of 550 men per horse stable barrack and replaced it with 744: The Soviet POWs were so emaciated when they arrived that more bodies could be squeezed into each bay. Dwork and van Pelt calculate that each inmate was accorded a total interior living space of six feet by three feet by three feet, "the size of a shallow grave." These 53 cubic feet compare unfavorably not only with the 293 cubic feet officially allotted to prisoners in concentration camps within Germany, but also with the 400 cubic feet per SS guard in Auschwitz itself.

The expressions of architectural inhumanity did not stop there, however. Dwork and van Pelt's excursus on sanitation at Birkenau leaves little room for doubt: Nazi architects were hardly less white-collar murderers than the bureaucrats sending out death quotas from SS headquarters. A fall 1941 blueprint shows how, within one year, latrines evolved from a barrack with urinals on the outer walls and lidded seats separated by modesty panels over a ventilated masonry trench, to an open sewer inside a rough shed. One beam ran longitudinally above the sewer to serve as a backrest for inmates perched at its edge. Planks thrown across the sewer forced inmates to balance in a squatting position. The historians calculate: If 150 inmates could defecate into this 118-foot-long pit at the same time, forty-six complete "seatings" would have been necessary for all of the seven thousand inmates per latrine each morning, a procedure that could take a total of ten minutes according to camp rules. Faced with the imperative to economize, Auschwitz's architects had reduced the latrine ratio to 66 percent of the already hopelessly inadequate minimum, reasoning that during the day the slaves would defecate in the land reclamation areas where they worked. Why should they consider peak loads when building for subhumans? The designers of the death camp knowingly turned it into a mire of excrement—which almost proved to be their undoing.

Because materials were in short supply and the preparatory work for the agricultural colony was to be of limited duration, they decided that the sewage could flow through open canals into the Vistula River. Here the limits of SS power became visible: Municipal and provincial officials complained to SS headquarters in Berlin, which quickly responded with plans for a new sewage system. The

SS had to comply with normal planning procedures and submit to inspections during construction; thus local officials had the power to stop the expansion of the Auschwitz complex. Architects were responsible for making hell on earth palatable to its surroundings.

Within the camps, however, the SS was omnipotent. It commissioned the crematorium architects of Topf and Sons to design, redesign, and refine its products for corpse storage and disposal to installations for the production, exploitation, and elimination of corpses. The designers outdid themselves in attention to detail, suggesting wooden exhaust fans that would not corrode from potentially high concentrations of prussic acid in the gas chamber exhaust air. They carefully engineered ventilation systems to keep special dental gold extraction rooms adjacent to the ovens from becoming unbearably hot. In pursuit of increased efficiency, they designed hypertrophic eight-muffle furnaces. There is a great deal that architects and planners can learn about the ethics of their profession by studying these works.

The meanings expressed by the architecture of Auschwitz have been preserved to be read by posterity; we must only seek them out. But neither can all of us visit the sites, nor have most remains of Nazi megalomania been preserved to such an extent. By definition, the extinction of Europe's Jews was a commission of limited duration. Extermination centers like Treblinka, whose sole purpose was to remove human beings from the face of the earth and process their belongings, were completely obliterated on completion of their allotment. Corpses strewn in overflow pits when the crematoria could not process them were exhumed and burned, the terrain plowed over and planted. In comparison, the racist utopia at Auschwitz was too vast, included too many permanent buildings, and had to be evacuated in such haste that similar measures were not possible.

The spectrum between the extremes of preservation and complete destruction is as broad as the number of Nazi camps is large. A recent photographic documentation emphasizes the extent and nature of preservation and decay at many sites of the Holocaust. This impressive array of black-and-white photographs by Ira Nowinski was published with brief texts by Sybil Milton, a senior researcher at the Washington Holocaust Museum, under the title *In Fitting Memory: The Art and Politics of Holocaust Memorials*. Milton's terse text, historically informative captions, and comprehensive annotated bibliography allow readers to tour the sites of the Holocaust vicariously and draw their own conclusions about the relationship between past and present.

Where there are few or no remains expressing the nadir of human depravity, the afterworld faces the task of creating appropri-

ate memorials. Is it possible to construct a symbolic memorial to remind us of the architects who converted morgues to gas chambers, chutes for corpses into stairs for the doomed? James E. Young, professor of English and Judaic Studies at the University of Massachusetts, has made himself into one of the world's leading authorities on memorials of the Holocaust. His most recent monograph, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, assembles histories, descriptions, and interpretations of dozens of monuments and memorials from primarily four countries: what one might call greater Germany (East and West Germany as well as Austria), Poland, Israel, and the United States. Young also curated an exhibition of Holocaust memorials for the Jewish Museum in New York and edited the accompanying catalog, *The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History*.

Both of these lavishly illustrated works contain much thought-provoking material that will interest lay readers and specialists alike. The catalog, with its larger format and superior reproductions, will appeal more to a visually oriented audience, whereas the cohesiveness and detail of Young's monograph offers more to readers interested in probing the depths of meaning behind public memorial art.

Each of Young's works has its drawbacks, however. The catalog is weakened by the brevity of the glimpses it offers into a wide array of topics: Except for Young's title essay, most articles are only five to ten pages in length and seldom go beyond a personal, impressionistic overview. Whereas the Milton/Nowinski documentation refrains from overinterpretation, the catalog's authors tend to posture authoritatively while only scratching the surface of their complex subjects.

In the case of the catalog's "Five Profiles," personal testimonies from the makers of some of the most interesting and prominent Holocaust memorials, however, this personal authority is unquestionably appropriate. No architect who has seen the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, for example, should miss the interview with its designer, James Ingo Freed. The lack of historical depth in the catalog essays is paralleled by a lack of historical illustrations. It is a shame, for instance, that the photograph of the museum's 14th Street facade was not paired with a view of the synagogue in Essen, Germany, which Freed names as its inspiration. In addition, no illustrations in the catalog enable readers to realize how the museum's architecture evokes that of the Nazi camps. Leafing through the first fifty photographs of "Concentration Camp Archaeology" in the Milton/Nowinski collection conveys an impression of what Freed experienced on his exploratory tour of former concentration camps.

Young's *Texture of Memory*, in contrast to the brief essays in the exhibition catalog, tends to be overly wordy. Especially where Young attempts to develop a more general theory of memorial art, his fluid writing style sometimes slips into literary jargon or vacuous phraseology, imbuing memory, for instance, not only with texture, but with "faces" and "shards" as well. On the other hand, even if the overarching theoretical statements are not always entirely convincing, Young's examples clearly support his main thesis, namely that remembering is a process, dependent as much on the subjects who remember as on the objects being remembered or prompting memories. In the case of the new Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, for example, Young writes, "Holocaust memorials not only reflect the aesthetic tastes of their communities, the topographies of their landscapes; in both process and execution, they tend also to embody the community's broader ethos." Put simply, memorials reflect and embody memories as they shape them. Thus in "reading" memorial architecture or sculpture, we must attend to the historical context in which it was created, or we run the risk of reading our own meanings into it.

The evolution of Auschwitz as a memorial site is a case in point. Jochen Spielmann's article on the "Topography of Remembrance" at Auschwitz in the exhibition catalog offers a collage of interesting facts and unanswered questions about the postwar trajectories of the three Auschwitzes, but it leaves us poorly equipped to understand the politics determining the development of those memorial sites. Young does a somewhat better job in his chapter on Auschwitz in *The Texture of Memory*, but his recapitulation of the evolution of the memorial designs for Birkenau tells us little about the factors shaping that process. The detailed historical approach of Dwork and van Pelt in the epilogue of *Auschwitz, 1270–1995* makes more sense of the Birkenau memorial.¹ Their careful attention to the built environment and the changing postwar contexts in which the memorials were designed at least attempts to explain why the design favored in 1957, a black granite swath gashing across the camp, covering the barrack foundations but broken by the outlines of the crematoriums, was not realized: It was too insensitive to the commemorative needs of the survivors. In light of the relative lack of importance of survivors at most other former Holocaust sites, however, even this suggestion begs as many questions as it answers.

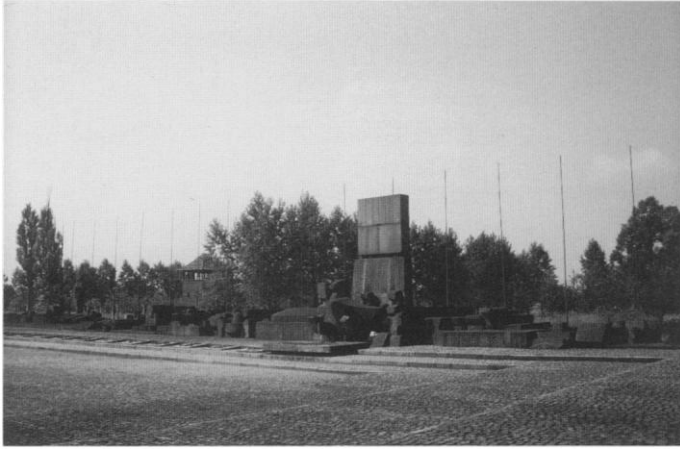
As Auschwitz recedes in time and the century on which it made such an indelible stamp draws to a close, the interest in the symbolic means of preserving its memory is increasing. Milton/Nowinski's and Young's books find their counterparts in two German collections of contemporary photographs of concentration camp memorial sites, one of which won the 1994 Kodak photo-

graphic book award.² A comparison of the American and German collections raises an important issue: how the photographs and publications about memorials tend to favor certain objects and skew our perceptions of the past. Whereas the Germans have collected pictures of former concentration camps, which were primarily sites of political persecution and economic exploitation, the Americans focus on sites of racial extermination and its commemoration.³

The problem of commemorative art and its interpretation is more fundamental than one of national emphases. If the beautiful color photographs of models of Holocaust memorials for New York and Boston in the exhibition catalog, for instance, or the atmosphere captured in Nowinski's shots are primarily aesthetically stimulating, one could infer that the monuments might detract from their implied aim: recalling the events of the Holocaust to mind. Milton probes this question in her chapter on "The Aesthetics of Memorial Photography," and Young addresses it in the preface of his monograph.

Let us examine a case in point. Young is fascinated by a memorial in a remote suburb of the north German city of Hamburg, a "Monument against Fascism" designed by Jochen and Esther Gerz in 1986. (Young devotes ten pages of his book to reproducing a previously published article about it, and the catalog includes an interview with the artists.) This twelve-meter-high "counter-monument" was sheathed in soft lead and equipped with styluses for viewers to inscribe their personal feelings about resisting fascism. In six stages over the course of as many years, the monument was lowered into the ground, so that since 1991 only a small portion is visible through a window in a pedestrian tunnel.

This disappearing monument, and other equally avant-garde memorials published in the works in question, prompt us to reflect more about the process of remembering than about the events concerned. Should a memorial be judged by its aesthetics or the novelty of its design, rather than according to its emotive and evocative power? The monument at Auschwitz-Birkenau, a jumble of coffin-like stones with a protruding abstract smokestack stump that lies between the ruins of two crematoriums, is hardly the most powerful of the designs presented in these works. The site itself, however, with the dynamited ruins of the gas chambers and ovens, with the dozens of solitary brick chimneys left standing after the transportable wooden barracks were taken to Warsaw to house refugees, has an unparalleled memorial force. The black granite causeway designed for Birkenau in 1957 was perhaps so successful because it capitalized on that force; the present memorial does not attempt to compete with the remains. At Treblinka, which was as thoroughly effaced as the human beings it eradicated, a cleft, capped,



3. The monument at Auschwitz-Birkenau, dedicated in 1967. (Photo by Jochen Spielmann.)

mushroomlike tower surrounded by thousands and thousands of jagged tombstones (seventeen thousand, to be more precise) inscribed with the names of towns whose Jews were reduced to ashes allows visitors to wander and ponder the infernal past of the serene place. As memorials become more removed in time and space from the past they purport to represent, the more evocative they must be.

This principle explains why the premier Holocaust memorials in the United States are museums, whereas the most powerful European monuments are usually linked spatially to the remains of their historical referent. Museums, archives, and libraries bind symbolic markers more closely to the past. It would be rhetorical to ask whether any monument or museum could be complex enough to prompt the ethical reflection that the story of careerism and complicity told by Dwork and van Pelt almost unavoidably does. No

monument can replace the words, although once we have read them, their artistic embodiment might be able to represent them with a single, pregnant image that we could more easily carry with us and recall to mind. That should be the final aim of any study of Auschwitz and its memory.

A recent survey of public policy teachers revealed that a majority felt the Holocaust had great relevance for their work, but the vast majority did not include it in any way in their teaching. These works reveal many ways in which architecture is linked to the Holocaust, and they offer rich material for thinking about both the ethics of the profession, and the representative and expressive dimensions of its products.

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Notes

1. A shorter version of their interpretation can be found in Deborah Dwork and Robert-Jan van Pelt, "Reclaiming Auschwitz," in Geoffrey Hartman, ed., *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1994), pp. 232–51.

2. Reinhard Matz, *Die unsichtbaren Lager: Das Verschwinden der Vergangenheit im Gedenken* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1993); and Dirk Reinartz and Christian Graf von Krockow, *Totenstill: Bilder aus ehemaligen deutschen Konzentrationslagern* (Göttingen: Steidl, 1994). The titles translate as *The Invisible Camps: The Disappearance of the Past in Commemoration* and *Quiet as Death: Pictures of Former German Concentration Camps*. The latter book won the Kodak prize. Both books accompany exhibitions that are traveling in Germany and throughout Europe.

3. The gap between these two extremes is bridged by a recently published collection of photographs by German-American photographer Erich Hartmann, *In the Camps* (New York, W.W. Norton, 1995).