

**What roles do Museums play in shaping our understanding  
of the holocaust?**

## Joanna Laidler Introduction

Memorials and museums have become the public repositories of holocaust education and remembrance, and yet each is imbued with their own inescapable ‘texture of memory’.<sup>1</sup> Museums are not ‘unreconstructed realities’<sup>2</sup> of the past but ‘texts’, which can and should be examined. By comparing the Jewish Museum Berlin (JMB) to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), this essay considers the important and sometimes contradictory roles that museums play in shaping public perceptions of the holocaust. A contrasting study of the two museums highlights how museums construct meaning, and how a museum’s representation of the past can affect our understanding of those events.

This essay is divided into two parts. The first section examines the relationship between the evolving functions and forms of the museum and how these institutions depict historical events. In particular, it explores how changes in museum architecture, layout, methodologies and content have developed our understanding of the holocaust. The second section considers issues unique to portrayals of the holocaust. For instance, it illustrates the difficulties involved in presenting an appropriate ending to the holocaust and issues pertaining to a museum’s geographical and political context.

### I. Museum reinvention, representation and audience perception

The role of the museum in shaping our understanding of the holocaust must be viewed in the context of the shifting purposes and perceptions of the museum itself. For Michel Foucault, the concept of the museum as a “heterotopia of time” did not arise until the 19th century, when the ‘idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside time and protected from its erosion’<sup>3</sup> emerged. At this point the state run institution of the museum was created in order to organise ‘a kind of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in a place that will not move’<sup>4</sup>.

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1 Young, James, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*, ‘The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning’, Bloomington, Indiana University Press (1988), p172

2 Ibid., p175

3 Lord, Beth, ‘Foucault’s Museum: difference, representation, and genealogy’, *Museum and Society*, Vol.4, No.1, (2006), p4

4 Ibid.

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the role of the museum shifted away from the ‘ivory tower of exclusivity’<sup>5</sup> and towards the construction of more socially responsive and inclusive forms of representation. Museum architecture, mediums, design and content were influenced by post-structuralism, and the implicit denial of absolute truths within representations. In the post-modern age, ‘the real is no more than a stuck pile of dead matter, dead bodies and dead language’<sup>6</sup>. Consequently museums, such as the JMB and the USHMM, engage audiences in self-reflexive dialogues regarding the subjectivity of experience and the roles of the curator and audience in the construction of knowledge<sup>7</sup>. These museums purposely subvert public expectations of the museum and challenge presumptions that the museum can present neutral, factual and truthful information about the holocaust in forms that are easily understandable or digested.

#### *Interaction, self-reflexivity and discussion*

The JMB and USHMM utilise modern technologies, mediums, and methodologies to create a different exhibition space and experience for the public, whilst simultaneously acknowledging their role as a museum.

Both museums employ ‘an experiential model’<sup>8</sup> in order to engage the ‘MTV generation’<sup>9</sup>. In Berlin, touch screen computers illustrating how the Nuremberg laws affected Jewish citizens and emotionally charged questions, such as “what would you take with you if you had to leave?”, encourage visitors to relate to German Jewish citizens during the Nazi era. In Washington, ‘victim identity cards’ handed out to all visitors enable museum audiences to

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5 Anderson, Gail, ‘Introduction’, in *Reinventing the museum – historical and contemporary perspectives on the paradigm shift*, Walnut Creek, AltaMiraPress (2004)

6 Baudrillard in Walsh, Kevin, *The representation of the past -Museums and heritage in the post-modern world*, London, Routledge, (1992), p55

7 Crane, Susan, ‘Distortion and History in the Museum’, *History and Theory*, Vol. 36, No.4, (1997), p45

8 Young, James, ‘America’s Holocaust: Memory and the Politics of Identity’, in *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, Baltimore, (ed.) Flanzbaum, Hilene, The John Hopkins University Press, (1999), p77

9 Branham, Joan, ‘Sacrality and Aura in the Museum: Mute Objects and Articulate Space’ *The Journal of the Walter’s Art Gallery*, Vol. 52/53, (1994/5), p44

embody real individuals who suffered during the holocaust, whose stories become ‘momentarily re-humanised and reinvigorated’<sup>10</sup>. Thus, auditory and digital technologies and interactive displays are used to situate the museum’s narrative through the eyes of its victims, and to universalise the suffering experienced by minorities.

The two museums differ in their use of ‘real’ objects. Tom Freudenheim, former Deputy Director of the JMB, stated that the museum was designed so that ‘objects are used to tell the story, not the story used to tell the objects’<sup>11</sup>. Thus, items in the museum reflect smaller narratives that personify the individual victims of the holocaust through items such as childhood mementos, and handwritten letters. Contrastingly, the USHMM displays large artefacts or ‘relics of the holocaust’ in their permanent exhibition. For instance, visitors are able to walk on stones from the Warsaw ghetto, and can explore half of a real barrack imported from Birkenau. The museum uses these objects to authenticate its historical narrative and to allow the museum to ‘operate as an unmediated scene of destruction’<sup>12</sup>, thereby shortening the imaginary distance between audience and victim.

Each museum is self-referential, and constantly refers to its overall purpose and goals. In the JMB, a quote from the architect informs visitors that the Holocaust tower is “open to entirely different, personal interpretations”. Similarly, the USHMM foregrounds historiographical debates and depicts ‘the relationship between survivor testimony and historical analysis’<sup>13</sup> in the museum’s accompanying text. Thus, both museums encourage pluralistic meanings and use different mediums to delineate the traditional function of a museum.

### *Architectural articulation of the unthinkable*

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<sup>10</sup> Young, as above at n8, p77

<sup>11</sup> Dasgupta, Gautam. & Marranca, Bonnie, ‘Berlin’s New Jewish Museum: An interview with Tom Freudenheim’, *A Journal of Performance and Art*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2000), p40

<sup>12</sup> Crysler, Greig, & Kusno, Abidin, ‘Angels in the Temple: The Aesthetic Construction of Citizenship at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’, *Art Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (1997), p56

<sup>13</sup> Crane, as above n7, p62

Daniel Libeskind<sup>14</sup>, and James Freed<sup>15</sup> created buildings that attempt to communicate the feelings of disfigurement and discontinuity caused to Jewish life and culture by the devastation of the holocaust. Both designs estrange visitor preconceptions and reinforce the subjectivity of individual experience. Consequently, the buildings themselves become ‘an essential preliminary for any genuine contact with holocaust memory’<sup>16</sup>.

The JMB consists of two buildings. The first is an older Baroque style structure that housed the former Berlin Museum during the cold war, and the second is Daniel Libeskind’s incongruous addition entitled ‘between the lines’. Libeskind stresses the need to make ‘visible and accessible’<sup>17</sup> the huge absence of Judaism within contemporary Germany and the complicated link between German and Jewish history. Consequently, the new and old buildings are only connected by an underground passage. The architecture in the new building is designed to be confronting and ‘anti-redemptive’<sup>18</sup> and incorporates ‘complex trajectories, irregular linear structures, fragments and displacements’<sup>19</sup>. Thus, the underground exhibits are badly lit, cold and disorientating, with sharp, vertical lines projecting into space and vast areas of rough cement. Similarly, Libeskind’s inclusion of functionless horizontal and vertical ‘voids’ are intended to represent the irretrievable losses and absences created by the holocaust and to introduce the idea ‘of a physical interference with chronology’<sup>20</sup>.

Freed’s aims for the USHMM were to ‘take the conditional circumstances of [the museum’s] location and weave them together with its content’<sup>21</sup>. Thus, the museum’s façade conforms to the strict aesthetic guidelines outlined by the Fine Arts Commission, but its interior

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14 Daniel Libeskind designed the addition to the Jewish Museum Berlin

15 James Freed was architect for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

16 Langer, Lawrence, *Using and Abusing the Holocaust*, Indiana, Indiana University Press, (2006), 140

17 Libeskind in Langer, p138

18 Young, James, ‘Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum in Berlin: The Uncanny Arts of Memorial Architecture’, *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2000), p3

19 Ibid., p10

20 Libsekind in Langer, as above at n16, p139

21 Freed in Young, ‘America’s Holocaust’ as above at n8, p74

‘metaphorically removes visitors from the capital’<sup>22</sup>. Visitors are separated from the city ‘formally and spatially’ upon entering the museum through the use of raw steel, glass, and limited natural light. The museum’s interior is ‘brooding and oppressive and unsettling spaces are punctuated with constricted passageways and crooked, false perspective stairwells and pathways’<sup>23</sup>. Visitors are physically removed from their previous contexts and perceptions as they are transported in industrial elevators, and led across bridges made of glass blocks.

*Memorialising museums: a battleground between form and content*

To differing extents, both architectural designs blur the distinction between museum and memorial.<sup>24</sup> However, by subverting the distinction between aesthetic form and educational content, audience expectations as to the role of the museum are often frustrated.

In Libeskind’s building there is a distinct lack of displayed objects. The museum does not use all available display space and so visitors walk through empty rooms and corridors, constantly reminded of what is not there. The lower level is made up of large installations, designed to confront visitor expectations of a museum. The “Holocaust Tower” encompasses a dark enclosed space, punctuated by a strip of light, whilst the “Memory Void” portrays tens of thousands of silently screaming bronze faces designed by an Israeli artist Menashe Kadishman. These powerful structures generate emotive responses, but arguably render the museum’s objects insignificant<sup>25</sup>. Thus, a criticism of Libeskind’s design left anonymously in the museum’s guestbook is that the museum ‘is more a monument and a waste of resources than an informative collection of research and history’. The museum does not conceal its intentions to memorialise the past, however its obtuse design and layout seem to ‘forbid showing much else beside itself’<sup>26</sup>

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22 Ibid., p76

23 Branham, as above n9, p44

24 Crysler and Kusno define a memorial as a ‘place where those who have had a direct or indirect experience of the holocaust can remember and by symbolically remembered, by the state, the city, or a local community’, p55

25 Museum Director Bothe, in Young, ‘Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum in Berlin’, as above at n18, p13

26 Ibid.

Whilst the construction of the USHMM preceded the design of the permanent exhibition, the museum's 'hall of witness' clearly demarcates its function as a memorial. By separating its commemorative and educative roles, the USHMM mediates audience perceptions and creates a built 'environment that support[s] the interpretative story'<sup>27</sup> rather than opposes it.

The USHMM and the JMB subvert traditional mediums, forms and functions of the museum, through their use of post-modern technologies and architectural practices. Both museums employ these features to engage modern audiences, but also to challenge their experiences, expectations and understanding of the holocaust.

## **II. The “barbarity” of poetry after Auschwitz<sup>28</sup>: representations and the ownership of memory**

The role(s) of the museum in representing the holocaust raises questions about the purpose, nature and form appropriate to depict the cataclysmic events of Nazi persecution. The holocaust was so horrendous, so charged with emotive intensity that 'when art seeks to command it, it is art which is rendered vacuous and drained of authority'<sup>29</sup>. Representations often fail in their attempts to assimilate or render the events meaningful, or alternatively are criticised for trivialising or exploiting the murders of millions. Similarly, issues of form, style, content and meaning become 'moral and aesthetic conflict[s]'<sup>30</sup> when, due to the nature of the subject matter, they create uneasy demarcations between art and atrocity.

As public repositories of holocaust memory, museums must negotiate questions of aesthetics, their own cultural, political and geographical contexts, and the meanings attributed to them by their audiences through the dialogue between 'the icons and ourselves'<sup>31</sup>. They are sites where

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27 Linenthal, Edward, 'The Boundaries of Memory: The United Holocaust Memorial Museum', *American Quarterly*, Vol. 46, No. 3, (1994), p407.

28 Theodore Adorno's popular, and decontextualised aphorism that "writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric"

29 Clendinnen, Inga, *Reading the Holocaust*, chap. 'Representing the Holocaust', Melbourne, Text (1998), p286

30 Langer, 123

31 Young, James, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, as above n1, p189

‘subjectivities and objectivities collide’<sup>32</sup>, and so they often become public forums whereby prevailing cultural attitudes and assumptions are aired and challenged. Yet, museums are also troubled by these conflicting roles. Balanced precariously between their functions as educators and commemorators<sup>33</sup>, holocaust museums have increasingly become contested sites of memory where theoretical issues of holocaust representation are considered.

Holocaust museums reflect the boundaries of appropriate representation according to the societies and contexts in which they operate. For instance, the issue of how to adequately portray the horrors of “the final solution” without being disrespectful to its human victims has been resolved differently in various locations. In Auschwitz, visitors walk past vast quantities of human hair, whilst in the USHMM its curators chose not to display the hair and instead used photographs of the hair taken at Auschwitz. In part, the decision was contextual, as it was argued that it was the location of Auschwitz, as the site of the atrocities’ that gave it the ‘validity’<sup>34</sup> to display the macabre objects. In contrast, the USHMM as a national museum on the National Mall had to ‘behave accordingly’<sup>35</sup>. In part, the decision also illustrates the power of “survivors” to influence public representations of the holocaust. Hilberg argues that the ‘rules of holocaust speech were that any survivor, no matter how inarticulate, is superior to the greatest holocaust historian who did not share in the experience’<sup>36</sup>. Thus, the subjective and commemorative qualities of holocaust memory are sometimes as valid as historical analyses and curatorial goals where moral conflicts over representation arise.

The Holocaust transcended all previous expectations and understandings of humanity. Consequently, representations of the holocaust often appear as grossly inadequate imitations. Holocaust museums have attempted to convey the enormity, meaning and consequences of the holocaust in ways that are both commemorative and educational. However, this essay argues that their choices are inevitably shaped by the museum’s purposes, influences and context.

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32 Crane, as above n7, p46

33 Ibid., p55

34 Linenthal, as above at n27, p423

35 Ibid.

36 Hilberg in Ibid., p 425



*The politics of nationhood and the construction of the past*

The political, social and cultural forces explicit to a museum's historical and geographical location affect how the museum constructs and portrays the holocaust. A similar sentiment is echoed by James Young, who argues that 'by themselves, monuments are of little value, mere stones in the landscape. But as part of a nation's rites of the objects of a peoples national pilgrimage, they are imbued with national soul and memory'<sup>37</sup>. Both the JMB and the USHMM are museums commissioned by the state. As such, their interpretations and representations of the holocaust have been mediated by the political needs and cultural sentiments of the periods in which they were designed and built.

Holocaust atrocities were orchestrated and perpetrated by Germans, which inhibits distance from its recent history. This sentiment was articulated by Freudheim, in stating 'one way or another, if you are in Berlin you cant escape the holocaust. All of Berlin is a memorial site'<sup>38</sup>. However, due to the ambiguity of erecting monuments to remember national crimes, the erection of holocaust museums and memorials in Germany remain a 'tortured, self-reflective, even paralysing preoccupation'<sup>39</sup>.

In Berlin, the time between the contemplation of a separate Jewish museum and the museum's creation spanned decades of careful planning and public consultation. In part, this was due to the difficulties in articulating architecturally and conceptually 'the terrible void that made this museum necessary'<sup>40</sup>. However, the delay also illustrates the challenging and painful memories that the museum represented for German citizens and Jewish survivors. While the Society for a Jewish museum, rejected plans to house the museum in the Prinz-Albrecht Palais<sup>41</sup>, the Mayor of Kreuzburg criticised Libeskind's design for not leaving civic spaces for the public to use as parks<sup>42</sup>. These debates, which highlight the incongruent forces

37 Young, 'America's Holocaust' as above at n8, p69

38 Dasgupta, & Marranca as above in n11, p46

39 Young, James, *The texture of Memory – Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, New Haven, Yale University Press, (1993), p20

40 Young, 'Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin', as above at n18, p9

41 The Prinz-Albrecht Palais was the former Berlin home of the Nazi party

42 Young, 'Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin', as above at n18, p13

of German national identity and guilt, plagued all sites of historical remembrance within post-war Germany.

Ultimately, the museum's final designs and construction were influenced by the political climate pervading Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the passage of time. A reunified Germany could no longer evade 'confrontation with what is most difficult, painful and most useful to confront'<sup>43</sup> and the events of the holocaust were sufficiently distanced to be configured within (and around) German identity.

In contrast, the USHMM is geographically and temporally separated from the events of the holocaust. Thus, the appropriateness, legitimacy and 'role of a museum in a country, such as the United States, far from the holocaust'<sup>44</sup>, have been questioned. The USHMM's aims and motivations are pluralistic. It's former Project Director, Michael Berenbaum believes the museum should "Americanize" its content in order to depict the story of the holocaust in a way that would resonate with all Americans<sup>45</sup>. Consequently, the uniquely American dimensions of the holocaust are underscored. The first sights and sounds visitors experience in the exhibition are the sound clips and footage of Americans liberating the concentration camps, clearly locating audiences among the victors and rescuers. The USHMM also seeks to illustrate American egalitarian ideas and principles by juxtaposing democratic systems of government against the Nazi controlled regime. This can be seen in photomontages depicting the UN mandated creation of Israel and posters of Truman's relaxed immigration policies. It is also represented symbolically through the museum's location on the mall, which enables the Washington Monument and the Jefferson Memorial to stand 'watch on this temple of evil'<sup>46</sup>.

The museum represents American democratic ideals, yet its construction came before national museums dedicated to African Americans or American Indians. Consequently, critics such as Rosenfield have questioned whether 'any story of the crimes of the Nazi era can remain

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43 Novick, Peter, *The Holocaust in American Life*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin (1999), p14

44 Charles Maier in Young, 'America's Holocaust' as above at n8, p72

45 Flanzbaum, Hilene, 'Introduction: The Americanization of the Holocaust', in *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, Baltimore, (ed.) Flanzbaum, Hilene, The John Hopkins University Press, (1999), p5.

46 Crysler, & Kusno, as above at n24, p63

faithful to the specific features of those events and at the same time address contemporary American social and political agendas<sup>47</sup>.

*Subverting commemorations to an “extinct race”*

Hitler had plans to build a museum in Prague dedicated to the extinct Jewish race in order to ‘supplant their memory of events with his own’<sup>48</sup>. He did not wish to eradicate all memory of Judaism in Europe, but to reconfigure it. Today, public understandings of Judaism are subverted by the spectre of the holocaust. Museums that do not reinforce the richness and continuity of Jewish culture and existence often memorialise Jewish destruction rather than survival or success, and reduce the spectrum of Jewish experience to one traumatic event.

The JMB is not a holocaust museum, but a museum dedicated to the history of German Jews. A unifying theme within the museum, articulated by former Deputy Director Tom Freudenheim is that while the holocaust is ‘a very important and critical part of that story...it isn’t the whole story of the history of the Jews in Germany’<sup>49</sup>. Thus, the museum’s layout and structure consciously situates the holocaust within a historical and cultural framework of continued Jewish existence. The “permanent exhibition” is a chronologically ordered narrative of Jewish life in Germany, where visitors have no shortcuts and no choice but to view all periods of German Jewish history on their way towards an exit. Only one of fourteen permanent exhibits focuses on the holocaust<sup>50</sup> and it is not separated from other sections, so that a poster depicting Jewish family life in the Weimar period is nonchalantly placed next to details of Nazi terror apparatuses. However, the very existence of a separate museum dedicated to German Jews displaces Jewish and German identities. By segregating Judaism from German cultural history, the museum arguably embodies a ‘mere replication of the ghetto at a higher level of a cultural institution’<sup>51</sup>.

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47 Flanzbaum, as above at n45, p4

48 Young, James, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, as above n1, p189

49 Dasgupta, & Marranca as above in n11, p42

50 The permanent exhibit is entitled “Persecution, resistance, extermination”

51 Young, ‘Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum in Berlin’, as above at n18, p2

However, the USHMM is a museum dedicated to the holocaust, and so the ‘remnants of destruction’<sup>52</sup> become the central disseminator for American understanding of Jewish identity and culture. The museum relies heavily on artefacts and images of destruction in lieu of articulating the intricate cultural life of European Judaism. In this way, “‘the Jews’” are constructed as a singular category, a Jew(ish) object of torture and extermination’<sup>53</sup>. However, the museum does attempt to contextualise the enormity of the tragedy, by depicting images of Jewish life before and after the holocaust. Yaffa Eliach’s private collection of photographs from her town<sup>54</sup>, represent the vibrancy of everyday existence for the town’s 12, 000 Jewish residents before the vast majority were murdered by the Einsatzgruppen. These images link Judaism with the holocaust, but also try to memorialise the living inhabitants of the town, rather than the generality of faceless dead.

### *Resolving the unresolvable*

No new meanings have been distilled from the holocaust, and its very nature ‘continues to defy assimilation’<sup>55</sup>. Thus, museums have struggled to resolve their exhibitions in ways that offer hope and redemption, without trivialising the consequences of the holocaust or ‘coming dangerously close to falsehood’<sup>56</sup>.

The JMB seeks to link Jewish life before and after the holocaust and includes explicit and symbolic references to the future of Judaism. Thus the seven ascending stairs leading upwards into walled emptiness are suggestive of history, which is not yet written, and the Israeli soil used in ‘the garden of exile’ represents the lives begun in new lands after the holocaust. These hopeful suppositions about the future are juxtaposed with the past, which is encompassed in the museum’s ‘memory and responsibility’ section. Sensitive issues such as German complicity and current anti-Semitism are discussed through contemporary mediums and

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52 Young, ‘America’s Holocaust’ as above at n8, p82

53 Crysler, & Kusno, as above at n24, p56

54 Entitled ‘The Ejszyszki Shtetl Collection’ and ‘The End of a Shtetl’

55 Clendinnen, as above at n29, p184

56 Smith in Linenthal, as above at n27, p426

popular representations, in order to portray the complexities of a nation's understandings of the holocaust.

In its exhibit entitled 'return to life', the USHMM also displays successful stories of immigration and cultural assimilation, as Jewish refugees arrived in America. However, visitors are not offered a complete or satisfactory resolution to the horrors they have already experienced. Instead they are guided past recordings of survivors, entitled 'testimony', which do not 'in any way "resolve" the Holocaust through language of spiritual triumph'<sup>57</sup>. The fractured and confused video and audio snippets convey the 'chaotic reality' of holocaust experience and disrupt the seamless narrative that audiences were privy to within the exhibition space.

### **Conclusions - the fractured Star of David and the American eagle**

Upon entering each museum, visitors are handed brochures, name-cards and maps with museum insignia. In the USHMM the museum logo is an American eagle clutching an olive branch and a bundle of spears in each claw, with the words 'for the dead and the living we must bear witness'<sup>58</sup>. In the JMB there is no pedagogical message, and the only symbol used is that of Libeskind's building, the broken Star of David. These differences encapsulate the divergent representations of the holocaust that the two museums portray. The USHMM is influenced by its context, its desire to engage the American public and its willingness to use the past to impart moral lessons. In contrast, the JMB offers no redemptive meanings, and intentionally leaves viewers with architecturally created absences and voids. Unlike the USHMM, the JMB also situates the holocaust within a broader Jewish history and encourages views to consider the past, present and future of Jewish culture.

Both museums seek to engage their audiences and to further their subjective and objective understanding of the holocaust. Yet, a contrasting study of the two museums illustrates the different 'textures of memory' that each museum conveys. Museums act as public repositories of holocaust memory, and yet memory itself is 'never shaped in a vacuum [and] the motives of memory are never pure'<sup>59</sup>. Inevitably, museums can only represent the past through the 'prism' of the present. Thus contemporary ideologies, technologies, aesthetics and contexts

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57 Linenthal, as above at n27, p428

58 Crysler, & Kusno, as above at n24, p57

59 Young, 'America's Holocaust' as above at n8, p71

shape holocaust museums, and these museums have a significant (and often under examined) role in shaping any meanings, knowledge and understanding derived from them.

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