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THE ARCHETYPE OF THE LABYRINTH IN THE ARCHITECTURE OF HOLOCAUST MEMORIALS

ARCHETYP LABIRYNTU W ARCHITEKTURZE MIEJSC PAMIĘCI HOLOKAUSTU

Abstract

This paper emphasises the restoration of labyrinths in the memorial architecture of the 20th century. Projects mentioned in the article evoke different interpretations of 'labyrinth'. There are examples of memorials in Berlin and in Israel designed by different architects. This paper concentrates on holocaust memorials and reveals the universal language of architecture which is based on archetypes. Thereby, young generations can comprehend values such as freedom and security.

Keywords: labyrinth, architecture, archetype, memorial, holocaust

Streszczenie

Artykuł podkreśla powrót archetypu labiryntu w architekturze miejsc pamięci w XX wieku. Przedstawione projekty ukazują interpretacje architektoniczne mitycznego symbolu z Berlina i Izraela. Przykłady memoriałów związanych z holokaustem podkreślają, jak ważna jest uniwersalność języka architektonicznego opierająca się na archetypach. Dzięki temu młodsze pokolenia mogą lepiej rozumieć wartości, bez których życie nie jest możliwe, jak wolność i bezpieczeństwo.

Słowa kluczowe: labirynt, architektura, archetyp, memorial, holocaust

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1. Memorial Sites

Memorial sites belong to a category of space in which we return to a sacred atmosphere especially in places dedicated to the victims. Contemporary architects who create holocaust memorials are facing the task of commemoration and the education of universal values. Memorial spaces that commemorate extermination camps are very valuable as a way of preventing human failure. Contemporary school programs also devote their attention to the concept of such places. The analysis of memorial sites can be an opportunity for critical reflection on the image of the past and it can deter young people from making future mistakes. Messages provided by mass media are often more temporary than architectural experiences that can transmit the memory of generations.

Gabriela Świtek, in the book *Aporie architektury*, noticed that the art of memory reveals itself after a catastrophe [11, p. 128]. However, we can observe that architecture in general has always been a memorial of our emotions, lifestyle, thoughts and finally, culture. A book can be closed, a film can be turned off, but architecture is a vivid memorial that can have a great impact on our lives and identity.

2. The Value of Archetypes

The creation of museums, monuments and art projects is increasingly practiced by a generation that did not experience the events that are being commemorated. This memory is passed on by ancestors, contemporary accounts and novels. It could be obvious that contemporary designers would not be able to create this kind of architecture. However, there is a memory, which Carl Gustav Jung called the collective sub-consciousness which consists of codes defined as archetypes [4, p. 625]. This special memory connects generations, cultures and civilisations and we inherit it instinctually; thereby, architects strive to communicate with us through this ‘universal language’.

Jung acknowledges that archetypes symbolise mental energy [5, p. 187, 211–216]. We can find them in mythology, fairy tales, religion, and dreams. This is the reason why archetypes, like labyrinths, are commonly used by modern architects. This symbolism can provide universal messages and it can speak a language which people from different backgrounds understand. Moreover, labyrinths are very democratic structures which can be experienced by everyone regardless of origin or belief. The holocaust memorials which are presented in the article were inspired mostly by multicursal labyrinths that help to reflect on the choices we must face in our lives.

3. The Stone Labyrinth

The World Holocaust Remembrance Centre, Yad Vashem, is an interesting example of a memorial in Israel. The museum complex consists of place called ‘The Valley of the Communities’ built of large rocks that create a labyrinth of high walls.



III. 1. Valley of the Destroyed Communities, geographical organisation of the names of the communities (Source: [9])

This labyrinth is located at the western edge of the Yad Vashem complex – it was designed by Lipa Yahalom and Dan Tzur at the beginning of the 1980s. The structure is made up of over one hundred sections which are separated from each other by walls of Jerusalem stone. The aerial view shows an open maze depicting a world that has disappeared. The form commemorates the Jewish communities from Europe and North Africa – these communities were exterminated during the holocaust. The experience of wandering through the site evokes confusion, separation, solitude and brings reflections on life and death. The names of the communities are carved on the rocks and the labyrinth represents their location on the world map [9, p. 87]. Walking through the labyrinth of high walls makes the visitors feel small and surrounded by the enormity of the destroyed world. This structure both commemorates and awakens the history of a people who have lived in Europe for more than one thousand years and are trying to preserve their identity.

The labyrinthine structure was also inspired by Ezekiel's prophecy about the hand of the Lord, which had set him in the middle of a valley full of bones. The prophecy symbolises the resurrection of the Jewish people. The labyrinth was supposed to be reminiscent of a labyrinthine open grave dug into the ground. The lack of vegetation inside the labyrinth symbolises destruction but the plants on the top of the rocks symbolise new life [9, p. 86].

In this place, everyone feels the special need for silence – silence to remember and to capture the sense of memories that take us back to the past.

This place shows the scale of destruction of a world filled with outstanding culture, religion, politics, tradition and social life.

4. The Labyrinth of Exile

The interpretation of the labyrinth was used also in the Garden of Exile as a part of the Jewish Museum in Berlin created in 1989. The structure, designed by Daniel Libeskind, lies at the end of the Axis of Emigration and it is composed of forty-nine concrete columns filled with vegetation. The similarity to the stalls in Yad Vashem creates the sense of a strong association with the Jewish Community.



Fig. 2. Jewish Museum in Berlin. New Wing. The Garden of Exile. Credit: Judisches Museum Berlin, photo: Jens Ziehe (Source: [12])

The geometry is based on forty-eight columns filled with soil from Berlin which symbolises the creation of the independent State of Israel in 1948. The middle column is filled with earth from Jerusalem. Vegetation and plants only grow on the top of the seven-meter-high columns and are irrigated by an underground system. In the garden, one loses a sense of confidence and stability. Moreover, the surface is inclined relative to the main building of the museum. According to the architect Daniel Libeskind, the sense of uncertainty and confusion relates to the concept of a Jew as an immigrant who had to leave his home and his life [8, p. 26].

‘Victims’ was a collection of architectural pieces and each of them is an ideological island. There were structures reminding us of images of loneliness, fear like labyrinths and other dominants like towers, chambers, pavilions made a construction of time. The dark past was supposed to meet with the joyful present, but it remains full of mysteries and labyrinthine questions.

6. The Memorial to The Murdered Jews of Europe

In 1998, the second competition for the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin was won by the American duo, Peter Eisenman and Richard Serra – their submission was selected during a public debate on the project. At the request of the German Chancellor, the project had to be modified, taking into account the creation of the underground museum, which eventually formed the information centre [10, p. 4]. Eventually, Peter Eisenman created a labyrinth of high stone blocks. It is reminiscent of the concept of Jewish cemeteries, where coffins were arranged one above the other because of the lack of space. However, the designer himself interpreted his concept differently, which did not show such clear Jewish symbols but more the approach to a multi-dimensional maze [7, p. 157]. The artist wanted to see a man entering the monument and losing his sense of security. He mentioned the feeling of loneliness which every human being faces in dangerous situations. The designer wanted to show the universal message which referred not only to the fate of the Jews.



Ill. 4. Peter Eisenman, Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, Berlin
(Credit: Eisenman Architects' Office)

The form of the labyrinth helped to express the loss of orientation and the feeling of suddenly interrupted history [7, p. 158].

7. Conclusion

Projects mentioned in the article evoke different interpretations of the labyrinth. The archetype appears as a concrete garden in Berlin or a valley which reminds us of an open grave in Yad Vashem or an external monument, which takes part in the practices of everyday life like the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin. These labyrinths may be different, but they refer to the same important values, without which our life is impossible. These values are freedom and security.

The architects of the holocaust memorials have discovered the profound meanings and ambiguity in the symbol of the labyrinth, which evokes feelings of entrapment and fear in a seemingly open form. This architecture reminds us of how crucial it is to put an effort into reaching for qualities like freedom and security and sharing them with other people; thereby, we can protect ourselves from tragic events.

Marek Czyński, in the article 'Labyrinths of Contemporary City', shows that cities are reminiscent of labyrinths – their spatial design influences our behaviour [1, p. 265]. Therefore, labyrinthine memorials may also symbolise cities and indicate the importance of urban design in stimulating good values. Labyrinths as memorials force us to see that nowadays, there is a fine line between asylum and enslavement, freedom and danger, in our cities [1, p. 262].

Labyrinthine projects intend to encourage radical debate over the shapes of contemporary memorials and try to develop a new idea of remembrance. This involves not only the aesthetic dimension of memory, but the question of how to reach the imagination of future generations nowadays, without contemporary witnesses of the holocaust. Memorials referring to labyrinths base on the symbolism of passage and allow to understand our inner nature. Usually, museums or information centres do not provide such a deep experience.

It is sometimes difficult to reconcile freedom and security, but we cannot stop searching for this balance in our everyday lives if we are to live them decently. The architecture of memory should be aimed at this universal message.

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