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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Museum architecture as spatial storytelling of historical time: Manifesting a primary example of Jewish space in Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum

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Abstract

Museums commonly adopt storytelling in their interpretive framework by use of audiovisual techniques to convey the meanings contained within artifacts. In addition to audiovisual mediation, this study demonstrates the idea that museum architecture itself can also be regarded as a medium of spatial storytelling, specifically of historical time, which is manifested spatially and cognitively for museum visitors.

The Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum (YVHHM) in Jerusalem is considered a spatial storytelling tool that successfully establishes an architectural dimension and thus displays, reveals, and interprets historical time during the Holocaust. The research method of this study is drawn from a case study of YVHHM and consists of a literature review of scholarship in museum studies about artifacts and exhibition techniques of storytelling.

The study concludes that the architectural space and landscape of YVHHM create a primary example of Jewish space and its specific engagements with historical time by use of spatial layout and circulation, spatial form and symbolization, and spatial qualities of lighting and material. These components construct a tangible, sacred, and cultural artifact; such artifact inherits, preserves, and records Yad Vashem, Modern Jerusalem, and the Nation of Israel and is an ideal physical and spiritual “home” for Jewish people worldwide.

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1. Introduction

If museums are to have a cultural role as distinct from that of the theme park, it lies in helping us orient ourselves and make discoveries in a world in which inherited common-sense conceptions of time and place are increasingly redundant (Lumly, 1988, p.18).

Human beings live in a material world; that is, they wear clothes and eat food. Man-made artifacts, from tiny pieces of jewelry to giant buildings, connect humans together as a society. Museum architecture collects significant artifacts within itself and thus occupies a dominant position in the contemporary era. Regardless of generating debate in the academic arena or converging foci in the field of practice, museum architecture is distinguished by researchers from other types of architecture, owing to its social significance for interpreting and mediating human history, culture, and civilization by conveying significant meanings contained in artifacts. Section 2 adopts storytelling in its daily display routine for interpretation and mediation and offers a historical overview of storytelling in museum architecture from early modern to postmodern societies, which consists of scholarship in museum studies about artifacts and exhibition techniques of storytelling. Section 3 selects the Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum (YVHHM) as a particular case study of a spatial storytelling tool as a primary example of Jewish space. By revealing and manifesting the *historical time* of the Holocaust by use of spatial layout and circulation, spatial form and symbolization, and the spatial qualities of lighting and material, the idea of spatial storytelling contributes toward a unique embodied experience for the general public to support the process of “self-learning,” as well as interpreting and mediating memory through tangible artifacts and architecture. Section 4 elaborates the conclusions of the study.

2. Storytelling in museum architecture: A historical overview

2.1. From collecting to self-learning and interpreting

Prior to providing an overview of storytelling in museums, a brief review of museum transformation should be made to contribute to the underlying reason that drives storytelling to be adopted in the daily display routine of museums; that is, the achievement of the social function of museums to mediate meanings with the general public.

In museums, the distinction between natural or cultural themes, represented by objects or artifacts in museum collections, must be abandoned (Dudley, 2009, p.xvi). The notion of nature as the isolated island of matter waiting for humans to peel the shell through the application of culture will no longer serve (p.xvi). The world is not a coin of raw material as opposed to constructed material goods but “rather a complex continuity of material relationships running from our bodies across the world, which are variously constructed into meanings of different kinds, of which ‘nature’ is one (p.xvi) and of which ‘culture’ is another. Culture is neither a universe in parallel with nature nor does it sojourn ambiguously in our minds. “Culture is

created continually as we material beings engage with our material surroundings to produce the individual and social habits that add up to ongoing life” (p.xvi). Thus, the term “artifact” does not only refer to a thing made by human beings in a narrow sense but also refers to any displayed object in museums in a material sense.

In the pre-Enlightenment period, early museum collections began as private demonstrations by wealthy individuals or families and could be regarded as particular places for the rich to present their wealth to the general public and to preserve their reputations. Displayed in cabinets of curiosities, the content of collections varied from rare or curious objects d’art to natural objects and man-made artifacts. As products of the Enlightenment, the first public museums as “displays of artifacts for the edification and entertainment of the public” (Lumly, 1988, p.3) opened in Europe during the 18th century. According to observations by René Huyghe (1906-1997), a French writer on the history, psychology, and philosophy of art, the public museum and printed encyclopedia appeared at about the same time. For Kenneth Hudson (1916-1999), an industrial archaeologist, museologist, broadcaster, and author, the public museum and printed encyclopedia could be regarded as expressions of the 18th-century spirit of the Enlightenment, which produced “an enthusiasm for equality of opportunity of learning” (Hein, 1998, p.3). These movements were driven by the simple idea that a collection “which has hitherto been reserved for the pleasure and instruction of a few people should be made accessible to everybody” (Hudson, 1975, p.6).

According to George E. Hein, Professor at Lesley College, Cambridge, USA, the development of public museums in the 19th century can be divided into two stages. In the early stages of the 19th century, collections were focused on displays of “imperial conquests, exotic material, and treasures brought back to Europe by colonial administrations and private travellers or unearthed by increasingly popular excavations” (Hein, 1998, p.3) and were only open to those who were “fortunate enough to be allowed to enter and observe the splendo[u]r of a nation’s wealth” (p.4). In the latter stages of the 19th century, museums were viewed as one of several institutions that could offer education to the general public as they helped the general public to “better themselves and appreciate the value of modern life” (p.4). Different from schools where the general public received formal education, museum architecture was understood to be “the advanced school of self-instruction” (p.5) and offered opportunities for the general public to conduct self-directed and selective learning. However, this idea was difficult to achieve because of the divergence of the overall educational role of schools and museums during that particular period in history. In addition, the new generation of curators was more interested in the accumulation of collections rather than in the public use of museums (p.5).

In the last three decades, the educational role of museum architecture has become venerable and notably because “the very nature of education in the sense of what we mean by the term and what we expect of educational institutions has changed” (Hein, 1998, p.6); learning is not to be achieved by means of written words in the traditional sense but should be “viewed as an active participation of the learner with the environment” (p.6). During the time that

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