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**"Introduction" to *Presenting Difficult Pasts Through Architecture:  
Converting National Socialist Sites to Documentation Centers***

Rumiko Handa

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# Presenting Difficult Pasts Through Architecture: Converting National Socialist Sites to Documentation Centers

Rumiko Handa

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

## Introduction

This study deals with the question of how architectural design, when applied to historical places, can assist in bringing an extremely difficult – notable and troubling – past to the present in meaningful ways. In particular, it examines postwar architectural designs that converted National Socialist perpetrators' places into documentation centers on National Socialism whose explicit purpose is, above all, to present and discuss the community's involvement in the National Socialist ideology and actions.

Although the cases I have selected for close study vary stylistically and in many other ways, these centers have a number of common attributes that make the comparison valid. First and foremost, they not only exhibit the history of National Socialist operations but also deal specifically with the themes of the city's and its citizens' involvements in the movement and regime. Second, they are authentic sites, being located at historical places where National Socialist operations actually took place. Third, they were the perpetrators', as opposed to the victims', places. Fourth, they are in a city, which makes them part of everyday life for many. Because they shared these conditions, the selected centers faced the same set of challenges: how to make present the history of National Socialism and the community's involvement as its agents, corroborators, or bystanders in an authentic perpetrators'

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place, where evil deeds were conceived, but in a place that also had a prior history of peace and is now part of people's everyday life.

In all of Germany, four centers exist, which satisfy all the criteria above. They are, in chronological order of their opening, in Cologne, Nuremberg, Berlin, and Munich. NS Documentation Center of the city of Cologne, opened on June 17, 1997, occupies the majority of the building that was used as the Gestapo regional headquarters, and features a permanent exhibition on the history of the city during the National Socialist regime.<sup>1</sup> The task of designing the conversion was commissioned to Peter Kulka, an architect and professor based in Cologne, and Gerd Fleischmann, a typography and exhibition designer. Later, in 2009–2010, Konstantin Pichler, who assisted Kulka in the 1997 design, collaborated again with Fleischmann to expand the space the center occupies in the building and installed a number of media stations throughout the exhibit. Documentation Center Nazi Party Rally Grounds in Nuremberg, opened on November 4, 2001, is housed in a portion of the building intended as a congress hall but which was still under construction at the end of the war, and allocates 1,300 m<sup>2</sup> for the permanent exhibition, titled “Fascination and Terror,” on the causes, connections, and consequences of the National Socialist tyranny.<sup>2</sup> The center building is the result of an international invitational competition held in 1998. Peter Kulka, mentioned above, was among those invited. The winner was Günther Domenig (d. 2012), an architect and professor from Graz, Austria. Gerhard Wallner from his office assisted Domenig in developing the design and supervising the construction. Topography of Terror Documentation Center, Berlin, which opened on May 6, 2010, occupies the majority of a large city block where a number of buildings that housed Gestapo and SS headquarters had stood but which were demolished after the war. It offers three distinct areas of exhibits: The first is inside the newly constructed center building, which holds a permanent exhibit titled “Topography of Terror: Gestapo, SS and Reich Security Main Office on Wilhelm- and Prinz- Albrecht-Straße,” as well as a changing exhibit;<sup>3</sup> the second is the exterior gallery in the excavated area along the frontal street; and the third is composed of 15 stations scattered throughout the site and threaded by the route of a self-guided tour, titled “Topography of Terror,” which covers the history of each historical building whose physical remains are visible.<sup>4</sup> The center design

was won in an open international two-stage competition whose result was announced in January 2006. The winner was the team of Ursula Wilms, an architect associated with the Heinle Wischer und Partner in Berlin, and Heinz W. Hallmann, a landscape architect and professor from Aachen.<sup>5</sup> And NS Documentation Center Munich, which opened on May 1, 2015, is a brand-new building on the former site of the so-called Brown House that housed Hitler's office at one time. It devotes 1,000 m<sup>2</sup> to the permanent exhibition, titled "Munich and National Socialism," which examines the topics of the origins and rise of National Socialism in Munich, the special role of the city in the terror system of the dictatorship, and the difficult process of coming to terms with the past since 1945.<sup>6</sup> The center is housed in a building designed by Büro Georg Scheel Wetzlar Architekten, based in Berlin, who won the two-stage open international competition in 2009.

Before we go any further, I need to explain what I mean by "National Socialist perpetrators' places" that were converted to "documentation centers on National Socialism." And to do so, we need, first, to distinguish them from those places that deal with the history of National Socialism and the Holocaust, but which are located in a site that did not host the operations of the Third Reich. Examples of the latter include internationally renowned institutions, such as the Jewish Museum designed by Daniel Libeskind and the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe by Peter Eisenman, both in Berlin, and, outside Germany, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum by James Ingo Freed, of Pei Cobb Freed & Partners. The distinction between the two groups is important as it helps to highlight some significant opportunities and challenges that these four documentation centers have in common. The authentic location has the potential of making the content of the exhibit more immediate to the visitor, which becomes both an opportunity and a challenge to the architects and designers to generate a design that bridges the difficult past and the present that critically examines that past.

Second, "perpetrators' places" present a set of opportunities and challenges different from those that "victims' places" do. Here, victims' places would include concentration camps or forced labor camps, while perpetrators' sites are "places where the crimes were conceived but not necessarily perpetrated."<sup>7</sup> The distinction between these two groups may seem insignificant, if not fairly obscure, at first.

Perpetration was committed also in victims' places, and victims were consequences of perpetrators' operations, even if the former did not occupy the latter's offices. However, the distinction between the two, *Täterorte* and *Opferorte* in German, is important in the context of postwar German memory culture and politics as special difficulties and challenges have existed in memorializing the perpetrators' places. Winfried Nerdinger, a well-known and respected architectural historian and the inaugural director of the NS Documentation Center Munich at the time of its opening, articulated the concepts, and drew attention to the distinction.<sup>8</sup>

In the postwar history of memory culture in Germany, it generally is the case that the commemoration of victims and resistances came a long time before people began turning the perpetrators' buildings into memorial sites. This is understandable. At victims' places, the visitors' focus is first and foremost on the victims, and the reflections on the perpetrators come as a result. Take, for example, the former Bergen Belsen concentration camp, which now functions as a memorial site. The exhibition focuses on how the victims were treated, the grounds provide a number of memorials for specific individuals or groups of people, and the whole site is a somber place of contemplation. In comparison, at perpetrators' places, we not only are reminded of the genocide as we are at a victims' place but also must put ourselves in the shoes of perpetrators in the context of National Socialism and the Holocaust and perhaps reflect on how we are to refrain from turning into perpetrators ourselves in any settings. Additionally, each city and its citizens likely are associated with perpetrators, or at least with corroborators or bystanders. This is an extremely difficult experience, while the recalling of an experience in which one was the victim is also extremely painful but in a different way. It therefore is understandable, if not defensible, that the commemoration of *Täterorte* generally came later than the memorialization of *Opferorte* in Germany. But at the same time, it is highly meaningful to offer *Täterorte* as a lesson for the future. At *Täterorte*, it is especially important to present the critical stance of the present-day society.

The small number of these centers and the relatively (and in some cases, extremely) recent dates at which they opened demonstrate how difficult and complex German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, coping with or dealing with the past, has been. Willful forgetfulness,

self-victimization, and fear that preserving perpetrator sites as historical relics inadvertently would promote neo-Nazi sentiments predominated. As a result, many perpetrator buildings that were not destroyed by Allied bombing were demolished or converted for mundane purposes after the war. And at those that were converted to other purposes, clear and overt identification of the National Socialist-era usage of the building is not commonplace.

While the four documentation centers shared the above challenges and opportunities, their responses varied depending on different factors. These cities had played different roles in the National Socialist regime. The pre- and postwar histories of the four sites also are different. Germany's postwar memory culture and politics as well as the ways German communities dealt with the past shifted in time. Experience with designing such sites also accumulated through time. The four buildings present varied conditions as places of memory. In two cases (Berlin and Munich), the building already had existed on the site while the third (Cologne) was under construction as a private citizen's residential and commercial property when the National Socialists adopted it for their purpose, and the fourth (Nuremberg) was designed anew by them. In three cases (Cologne, Berlin, and Munich), the building was fully in use by the National Socialists, while in the third (Nuremberg), it was still under construction. In two cases (Berlin and Munich), the historical buildings, heavily damaged by the Allied air raids, were destroyed after the war, while in the two other cases (Cologne and Nuremberg), they survived fairly unscathed and were used for new, mundane purposes. And finally, in two cases (Berlin and Munich) a completely new building was constructed on the site, while in one case (Cologne) the interior of the historical building was altered to house the center with the exterior fairly unchanged, and in the fourth case (Nuremberg) the old and the new are presented simultaneously.

Next, what do I mean for an architectural design, when applied to historical places, to assist in presenting an extremely difficult past in meaningful ways? As a matter of fact, some would say that, while historical places have a way of referring to the past, what helps them do so is something other than the architectural design whose task simply is to convert them into documentation centers. Winfried Nerdinger stated that, while there is no denying that "the stone turned

into history” (“Stein gewordenen Geschichte”) is the “strongest form of visual memory” (“die stärkste Form der optischen Erinnerung”), it “must, however, be made intelligible by appropriate instructions” (“allerdings durch entsprechende Hinweise ablesbar gemacht werden muß”). The statement appeared in his 1988 piece titled “Umgang mit NS Architektur – Das schlechte Beispiel München” (“Dealing with NS architecture – The bad example of Munich”), which then was further developed and presented, under the title “Umgang mit den Spuren der NS- Vergangenheit – Indizien zu einer Geschichte der Verdrängung und zum Ende der Trauerarbeit” (“Dealing with the traces of the Nazi past – evidence of a history of repression and the end of mourning work”), at the Karl Hoper Symposium, held at the Hochschule der Künste Berlin on November 12–17, 1990. He stated:<sup>9</sup>

Aber die stärkste Form der optischen Erinnerung in einer Stadt an ein geschichtliches Ereignis ist die ständige Konfrontation der Öffentlichkeit mit der Stein gewordenen Geschichte, mit der Architektur einer Epoche, die allerdings durch entsprechende Hinweise auch für die Nachgeborenen ablesbar gemacht werden muß.<sup>10</sup>

(But the strongest form of visual memory in a city of a historical event is the constant confrontation of the public with the history of stone, with the architecture of an epoch, which, however, must be made intelligible to the subsequent generations by appropriate references.)

Making the “the stone turned into history” “intelligible” is, then, is the way to accomplish the challenging task of, on the one hand denying the National Socialist propaganda the building carried and, on the other, promoting critical reflection on the history. The question should be asked: How do we provide the “appropriate instructions”? Nerdinger answered this question elsewhere:

*Saxa loquuntur* – die Steine sprechen, diese römische Sentenz sollte ergänzt werden, denn sie sprechen nur zu dem, der ihre Geschichte kennt. Zu den Aufgaben eines Architekturohistorikers zählt es, Bauten zum Sprechen zu bringen,

damit sie ihre Geschichte erzählen und helfen, historische Zusammenhänge zu verstehen. Wenn Gebäude, Plätze oder Städte in einen Dialog mit dem Betrachter treten, vermögen sie, als authentische Zeugen historische Erinnerung zu bewahren oder zu erzeugen. Architektur gibt der Erinnerung einen Ort und verankert sie damit stärker als Schrift oder Wort im Gedächtnis von Individuen und Völkern: ...<sup>11</sup>

(*Saxa loquuntur* – the stones speak, this Roman sentence should be supplemented, because they only speak to the one who knows their story. One of the tasks of an architectural historian is to make buildings speak so they can tell their stories and help [the audience] understand historical contexts. When buildings, squares, or cities enter into a dialogue with the viewer, they are able, as authentic witnesses, to preserve or create historical memory. Architecture gives memory a place and thus anchors it more than writing or word in the memory of individuals and peoples. ...)

As Nerdinger suggested, the task of making readable the history of a place typically is assigned to historians, and, in the case of history museums, to the exhibits, and not to architectural designs that are applied to historical buildings. Instead, people, including the architects themselves, expect architectural designs to fulfill the role of providing a container to hold the exhibit or of supplying a visual attraction that draws people to the exhibits. While I do not take lightly the roles of exhibits, I believe architectural design has much to offer in assisting in presenting the past in meaningful ways. This study will demonstrate this position by observing the four documentation center designs and analyzing the effects of certain aspects of these designs, some of which may have been intended by architects and designers and others have not.

In the above context, it is important to consider the possibilities of presenting the past not in any ways but in meaningful ways. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, when Hitler desired to emulate Roman architecture with his own buildings, he was seeing the ruined Roman buildings presenting the empire's power and reach even nearly two thousand years later. It would be greatly problematic if the contemporary

population – visitors or inhabitants – saw National Socialist buildings and saw, just as Hitler desired, their power and reach. In this sense, the strategy that the community adopted toward many National Socialist buildings, namely, normalization, that is, making the meanings of those buildings banal by giving them a mundane usage, did make sense. However, when it came to using the perpetrator places for documentation centers, we may want to use these places to their fullest extent. The question therefore is how, if at all, architectural design can help them present not only the past but also the contemporary stances against the past.

The book is divided into eight chapters. Chapter 1 will focus on the postwar treatments of physical environment. In order to provide a context within which to situate the four building projects of the documentation centers, I will discuss two small groups of cases, selecting them from the four cities in which these centers in question are located, namely, Cologne, Nuremberg, Berlin, and Munich. And the two groups are: first, National Socialist *Täterorte*, to discuss denazification and normalization; and second, buildings that were not used for National Socialist operations but were damaged during the war and required substantial rebuilding, to discuss the various design strategies of rebuilding.

Chapter 2 will outline the history of each documentation center site. While they share many similarities, especially on the conceptual level, the particulars are of course different, which will be important when we try to identify and examine notable design strategies that have been effective in assisting in meaningful presentation of the past. For each site, I will illustrate each place's situations before, during, and after the Third Reich. The regime adopted preexisting buildings to their purposes in Berlin and Munich, took over a building still under construction in Cologne, and designed a new building in Nuremberg. The buildings in Berlin and Munich were damaged during the war and, although they were not irrecoverable, were torn down. A citizen's movement demanded excavation, and some remaining underground structures were unearthed in Berlin. In Cologne and Nuremberg, the buildings survived the war fairly unscathed, and subsequently were adopted to new mundane purposes before the documentation center projects.

Complex issues surround the question of how, if at all, the architectural design converting historical *Täterorte* into documentation centers on National Socialism can contribute toward the meaningful presentation of the past. The issues have to do with what we expect from today's architectural design in general as well as what roles architecture played in the National Socialist era in particular, which resonate in historical buildings. Chapter 3 will review the expectations toward historical buildings as well as toward architectural design, and in particular, Hitler's view of architecture, which inevitably accompanies historical perpetrator buildings, and the resistance to architectural design that seems to be laden with the architect-artist's self-expression as it was exemplified in the criticism against the winning scheme by Peter Zumthor for the 1993 competition for the Topography of Terror documentation center in Berlin.

Chapter 4 presents the intellectual frameworks which will be used in Chapters 5–8 so that we will have a systematic understanding of various mechanisms that are at work when architectural designs assist in presenting the past in meaningful ways. The framework has been developed by looking at architectural design from the points of view of representation (a piece of architecture as an artifact that represents ideas) and interpretation (the viewers take certain meanings out of their experiences), and in reference to philosophical works in semiotics and hermeneutics, particularly those of Charles Sanders Peirce and Hans Georg Gadamer. My framework identifies four distinct mechanisms: First, a building may refer to the time of its origin by way of its *formal characteristics*. Second, a building may recall an otherwise neglected past by bearing *physical traces*. Third, a building may commemorate a particular event or individual by being *designated* to do so. Fourth, as a *memento*, a building is a reminder of a past simply because an event took place there, even when there is no deliberate designation, formal characteristics, or material trace.

For the consideration of architectural designs taking advantage of the historical building's formal characteristics, in Chapter 5, I will observe a number of strategies at work on the site. They are:

1. physically isolating the National Socialist-era building from the postwar additions;
2. contrasting between the new and the old by way of form, including style, geometry, and materials; and
3. creating a place from which to view the historical.

In discussing what physical traces were left on the historical building or place and how architectural design can incorporate them as a reminder of the past, in Chapter 6, I have classified those actions by their agents. They are:

1. the National Socialist regime during 1933– 1945, who constructed and/ or used the building;
2. the Allied forces, who damaged and/ or used the building during the war or postwar occupation;
3. the postwar German communities, who used, altered, or even destroyed the building; and
4. the architect, who converted the place into a documentation center.

We can observe how each architectural design harnessed some of the above, depending mostly on the availability at their site.

Chapter 7 expands the possibilities of buildings' presentation of the past by way of designation. While "to be designated" means to be given "a specified status or name," the documentation centers' designation requires an additional layer, that is, one that acknowledges the places' pasts. We will observe how the designation both about the present and the past is physically pronounced at the documentation centers, on the immediate front of the building, to the street, and beyond. Granted, architects may not take the design of such pronouncements – signposts, poster cases, and so on – as a significant part of their contributions, or these tasks may not be included in their scope of work. And when it comes to the question of naming the institution, it often is the case that community leaders or stakeholders are in charge of that decision. However, by examining the variety of pronouncements and their effectiveness, this chapter tries to draw the attention of architects and their design collaborators to what they could do to enhance their design work in this area.

Expanding the concept of memento, which requires the person to have personally experienced the past being recalled, to quasi-memento, especially for the younger generations and the international audience, Chapter 8 will discuss how the physical environment allows the visitor to gain memento-like experiences, that is, to put themselves in the shoes of those who actually experienced the past events. Some of this is accomplished by the exhibitions, but there are instances in which architectural designs do so on their own or by enhancing the exhibitions. Highlighted strategies include:

1. incorporation of oral history;
2. large-scale photographs that are as big as the architectural space allows;
3. incorporation of the spatial experiences that could have happened in the past into the current exhibition route; and
4. creation of new spatial experiences that put the visitor at unease.

When I began working on this topic, the typical question I received from the audience at conferences in the United States, Canada, or Japan, was why I had become interested in it. I am neither a Jew nor a German. The question therefore has implications, which I need to address here. That is, what credentials I could possibly bring to the topic when I am an outsider? I fully admit that the lack of cultural background certainly is a disadvantage, and I apologize in advance if any part of my assumptions or summations are out of place or even erroneous from a cultural point of view. However, that same lack of background may allow me to cast a fresh eye on the topic. At the very least, my considerations could possibly represent the centers' international audience.

With my last book, *Allure of the Incomplete, Imperfect, and Impermanent: Designing and Appreciating Architecture as Culture* (2015), I argued that it is a fallacy that a piece of architecture is complete when construction is finished, and advised that the architects, when designing a building, should take into consideration the afterlife of their buildings. I offer this point of view to the designs of documentation centers, which inevitably had to take into consideration the afterlife of the National Socialist buildings and places.

Lastly, I need to mention that this study employs careful on-site observations of the buildings as well as of the visitors including myself, supplemented by a study of documents, both published and unpublished, and both in text and image. This work should not be taken as a report on the center architect's design intentions but rather, as a search for architectural design's potential contribution to the meaning of life.

## Notes

- 1 Barbara Becker-Jákli and NS-Dokumentationszentrum (Historisches Archiv der Stadt Köln), *Cologne during National Socialism: A Short Guide through the EL-DE House* (Köln: NS Documentation Centre of the City of Cologne: Emons, 2011). See also the Center's official website for 360-degree tour, information about the building's history, permanent and temporary exhibits, and more at <https://museenkoeln.de/ns-dokumentationszentrum/default.aspx?s=314>. The website also includes the information about the Gestapo prison memorial, located in the building's basement, which had been used as a Gestapo prison during the Third Reich, and was opened for the public as a memorial since December 4, 1981.
- 2 Hans-Christian Täubrich et al., *Fascination and Terror: Documentation Centre Party Rally Grounds: The Exhibition* (Nürnberg: Museen der Stadt Nürnberg, 2001).
- 3 Andreas Nachama, *Topography of Terror Gestapo, SS and Reich Security Main Office on Wilhelm- and Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse* (Berlin: Stiftung Topographie des Terrors, 2010).
- 4 Erika Bucholtz et al., *Site Tour "Topography of Terror" History of the Site*, 2016.
- 5 Erika Bucholtz et al., *Realisierungswettbewerb Topographie des Terrors, Berlin: 309 Entwürfe – Katalog zur Ausstellung der Wettbewerbsarbeiten* (Berlin: Bundesamt für Bauwesen und Raumordnung: Stiftung Topographie des Terrors, 2006).
- 6 Winfried Nerdinger, *Erinnerung gegründet auf Wissen / Remembrance Based on Knowledge. Das NS-Dokumentationszentrum München / The Munich Documentation Centre for the History of National Socialism* (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2018). See also NS-Dokumentationszentrum München et al., *Munich and National Socialism: Catalogue of the Munich Documentation Centre for the History of National Socialism* (München: Beck, 2015).
- 7 Timothy W. Ryback and Florian M. Beierl, "Opinion | A Damnation of Memory." *The New York Times*, February 12, 2010, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/13/opinion/13iht-edryback.html>

- 8 Winfried Nerdinger, "Umgang mit den Spuren der NS- Vergangenheit – Indizien zu einer Geschichte der Verdrängung und zum Ende der Trauerarbeit," Wolfgang Ruppert, Hochschule der Künste Berlin, and Karl-Hofer-Symposion, *"Deutschland, bleiche Mutter" oder eine neue Lust an der nationalen Identität? Texte des Karl Hofer Symposions, 12. – 17.11.1990*, ed. Wolfgang Ruppert (Berlin: Hochschule der Künste, 1992), 51– 60.
- 9 Nerdinger, "Umgang," 1992. Also: Winfried Nerdinger, "Umgang mit NS Architektur – Das schlechte Beispiel München." *Werk und Zeit*, no. 3 (1988): 22– 6. This was also stated in the preface of his collected papers *Architektur Macht Erinnerung Stellungnahmen 1984 bis 2004* (2004).
- 10 Nerdinger, "Umgang," 1992. Also: Nerdinger, "Umgang," 1998. This was also stated in the preface of his collected papers *Architektur Macht Erinnerung Stellungnahmen 1984 bis 2004* (2004).
- 11 Winfried Nerdinger, *Architektur – Macht – Erinnerung: Stellungnahmen 1984– 2004*, ed. Christoph Hölz and Regina Prinz (München: Prestel Verlag, 2004), 9.



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