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Concrete, yet not

*A grey grid forms an intangible
Holocaust memorial in Berlin.*

By Christopher Knight

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BERLIN -- Evolving plans for a 9/11 memorial at ground zero in Manhattan have generated much hand-wringing lately, and with good reason. Even in the best of circumstances an effective memorial to the victims of a cataclysmic event is extremely difficult to design; once built, a failed memorial isn't likely to be altered or removed. A cautionary example recently opened here in the German capital, and it offers a textbook case of what not to do.

Titled "The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe," it took more than 15 years to plan, design and erect. The sculpture occupies a prominent site in the center of the city, a block south of the Brandenburg Gate and Pariser Platz, an area of shiny new hotels, private banks, apartment buildings, embassies (including one across the street just being built for the United States) and other urban renewal developments. Roughly the size of two football fields, the memorial is composed from a massive grid of 2,711 concrete blocks, which tilt almost imperceptibly this way and that, some just a few inches high and others 15 feet tall. The ground undulates, sloping down toward the center, to create a surging gray maze through which visitors are invited to roam.

The project has been a source of controversy since the idea for a memorial gained momentum, shortly after the Berlin Wall came down. For one thing, the murdered homosexuals, Gypsies and disabled people who were also slaughtered systematically by the Nazis apparently do not warrant remembrance and recognition at this prominent location in the heart of the once-divided city. The establishment of a permanent hierarchy of suffering is a cruel legacy of an otherwise important project.

For another, the design is abstract. The original scheme was a partnership between two noted Americans: the sculptor Richard Serra and the architect Peter Eisenman. Serra is a master at the manipulation of brute materials to create powerful sculptural space, but he left the project early on, apparently concerned that changes requested in the design would compromise the work. That left Eisenman, an architect whose reputation has come from his theoretical writing more than from built architecture.

The Postminimal design is clearly meant to advance the precedent formed by Maya Lin's great Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., which overcame initial skepticism to emerge as the first powerful monument ever built in something other than a representational style. But it doesn't succeed. Entering Eisenman's memorial, which emerges from the sidewalk without signage or other barriers, the effect is less visceral than dryly intellectual.

Your mind knows that the place is supposed to confuse and disorient. It creates a theatrical sense of slowly enveloping claustrophobia and entrapment, meant to parallel the rising tide of Nazism 70 years ago. But you never feel it in your body. Walking among the tombstone-like shafts, there is no sense of threat. Menace is absent. Absurdity begins to loom.

The design might not employ figurative symbols and representation, but it is metaphoric. The problem with metaphor — a figure of speech — is that it doesn't inhabit your gut.

Instead, the memorial is marked by the disheartening sense of being engaged in a game. Children intuitively understand this. Games of

hide-and-seek spontaneously erupt among the concrete slabs. Playful amusement is not what one wants at such a site — and surely not what was intended. At the gargantuan scale of this anonymous field of abstract forms, the metaphor becomes bombastic, the theater melodramatic.

Compare this soulless effect to the one engendered by "Places of Remembrance," a 1993 memorial in a residential neighborhood around Bayerischer Platz, or Bavarian Square. Modest, incisive, unpretentious — it is the most genuinely moving and unsentimental Holocaust memorial I have seen. It sent a chill down my spine while putting a lump in my throat.

Designed by Berlin artists Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock, "Places of Remembrance" is composed of 80 signs mounted on streetlights in a leafy neighborhood that was a center of Jewish life early in the 20th century (Albert Einstein was among the residents). One side of each sign features a simple image that relates to the place — a loaf of bread near a bakery, for example, or a dog.

The other side has a bit of text, taken from orders issued after the Nazis came to power in 1933.

"Aryan and non-Aryan children are forbidden to play together. 1938." "Jews may no longer keep pets. 15.2.1942" "Jews may only use those benches at the Bavarian Square that are marked in yellow. Eyewitness report 1939." "In order to avoid making a bad impression on foreign visitors, signs with extreme content are to be removed; signs like 'Jews are not wanted here' are sufficient. 29.1.1936."

One sign features only a solid black rectangle, no image. The other side says: "Ban on Jewish emigration. 23.10.1941." This is the end.

In an ordinary urban neighborhood, the banality of evil hovers just overhead. So does death-by-a-thousand-cuts, which led inexorably to Auschwitz and the ovens. The texts identify when specific historical events occurred but — notably — they're all written in the present tense. History does not live in some remote past. The stunning inhumanity codified in law and social custom lives on in other guises today.

Compare this to the monumental sterility and distraction of "The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe." An information center was added to the enormous sculptural field, below ground at one end, and it includes the familiar timelines and didactic information about the tragedy found in many historical museums.

The information center is like a caption beneath a photograph, meant to explain the disembodied imagery above.

Indeed, the memorial is certainly photogenic — which may be a legacy of its having been designed as a computer graphic. Having seen it first in pictures, I was enthusiastic about its potential. So I was wholly unprepared for the sense of disappointment — and even dismay — that being there in person engendered.

Tour buses will pull up, cameras will come out and travelers will bring their pictures home. "This is me at the Brandenburg Gate, this is me at the Pergamon Museum, this is me at the Holocaust memorial, this is me at the Sony Center." It's pure solipsism, rendered in tons of concrete. Your visit to a memorial gets commemorated, rather than the victims of unspeakable barbarism.