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## Monument to Ambiguity

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### *Berlin*

Last month, this city focused on the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II, part of this year's cultural theme: "Between War and Peace." At the Museum of European Cultures, "Die Stunde Null" (Zero Hour) showed Berlin in the immediate postwar period -- destruction, starvation, imaginative attempts at re-creating some semblance of normality -- with a special focus on the various art museums, their damage from Allied bombing raids, and how much was saved and destroyed. The German Historical Museum's "1945: The War and Its Consequences" dealt with the politics of memory in postwar Germany, East and West. And its "Legalized Robbery: The Exchequer and the Plundering of the Jews in Hessen and Berlin, 1933-1945" was truly frightening. The booklet for "Between War and Peace" lists 38 exhibitions this year for Berlin alone.

But the highlight event seems to have been the May 10 dedication of the "Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe" near the Brandenburg Gate and across from the new American Embassy. A sotto voce refrain is that it took more time to get the memorial built (17 years) than the span of the Nazi period (12 years).



The 'Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe' contains 2,711 stelae, some of which are 12 feet high.

It's not as though Berlin isn't already filled with an array of monuments to the war. Indeed, one can hardly pass down a street without confronting signs reminding one of what took place at a given location (e.g., where a notable person lived prior to emigration or expulsion, where Jews were assembled for deportation), quite aside from the various specially designed memorials.

The two most notable memorials are probably 80 lamppost signs in the once heavily Jewish Bavarian Quarter, designed in 1992-93 by Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock, enumerating the 1930s laws gradually restricting Jewish life in Germany, and Micha Ullman's spooky underground "library" (1995), which sits in the middle of Bebelplatz, where the infamous 1933 book-burnings took place (off-limits this season, while construction takes place). Moreover, the Jewish Museum Berlin, designed by Daniel Libeskind and opened in 2001, is rich with Holocaust symbolism and near the as-yet-unfinished Topography of Terror, which sits on the site of the SS headquarters and prison.

From its origins as something of a public-relations stunt by a major German TV personality, Lea Rosh, the "Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe" was a project mired in debate: Is another memorial necessary? Should it be an "artistic" or "educational" concept? Few politicians dared take public stands against the project, although many people quietly voiced their misgivings -- including many in the Jewish community.

While the controversy surrounding the recently opened memorial is likely to subside, this vast field of stelae, or perhaps of dreams/nightmares, will be around for a while. The original design, by the noted American sculptor Richard Serra (born 1939) in partnership with the prominent American architect Peter Eisenman (born 1932), was selected in the second competition round -- the first round had failed. Design changes started almost immediately, first after Mr. Serra's withdrawal from the project (rumors flew that he felt that the design was being compromised), and subsequently by critics, who found the concept too sterile and ahistorical. Mr.

Eisenman, however, appeared willing to accommodate a range of pressures to assure that his design would be built, in whatever form.

The field of 2,711 concrete stelae -- a massive accretion of blocks gradually emerging from the ground -- is not meant to symbolize anything, so the designer tells us. They are set slightly askew -- just enough so that one notices it, but not assertively; indeed, they almost look like a contractor's error. No, they are apparently not meant to be gravestones, although the varying angles might be a sly reference to the famous Jewish cemetery in Prague, with its rows of old and out-of-kilter tombstones. No, there are no signs to tell passersby what they are passing by or whether they might be invited in to explore the many neat rows of slightly leaning stelae.

This is more a monumental abstract installation piece than a memorial. But walking between the many undulating rows of stelae -- 303 of which are more than 12 feet high and thus tower over the visitor -- memory returns: This was originally a joint Eisenman-Serra project. One is almost, but not quite, caught in a maze that really hovers and warns. The mysterious threatening quality that makes Mr. Serra's best work so compelling is missing here; perhaps that's why he left the project shortly after the design had been selected. The anonymity of the entire area lacks even the sense of wonder of a large Serra piece -- although this Eisenman memorial takes up more space than even Serra's most ambitious works.

On a sunny Berlin morning, however, there is an appeal in the way the shadows make for a design that could be a print by M.C. Escher -- an impression that's even more pronounced when the memorial is viewed from on high in Norman Foster's dome of the nearby Reichstag: The multiplying chiaroscuro of linear blocks is stunning.

After time spent trying to get some feeling from Mr. Eisenman's sterile composition, it's interesting to visit Mr. Libeskind's Garden of Exile at the Jewish Museum Berlin. His 49-column square is claustrophobic and unsettling, as it was meant to be, with a sense that nothing in the world looks quite right from there. There is no suggestion that one could picnic or play in Mr. Libeskind's maze, as is likely to happen at the new memorial, once people get used to it. After all, the Eisenman work is just across from the Tiergarten -- a park that's home to

picnickers, joggers and nude sunbathers in a happy Berlin mix.

The Information Center (an odd misnomer) at the back of Mr. Eisenman's memorial represents another part of the compromise between those in favor of a straightforward memorial and those who wanted some sort of educational component. An underground building that whips the patient visitor through yet another version of the Holocaust museums that seem to be everywhere -- probably as a way of keeping us from paying too much attention to the seemingly endless genocides that have taken place since 1945. The elegant gallery ceilings reflect aspects of Mr. Eisenman's above-ground architecture -- strangely his best design work in the entire memorial -- and the compact series of rooms suggests telling the story in a direct manner (names, faces, families, places, statistics) might be more powerful than an abstract and voiceless memorial.

The Germans are correct in asserting that no other country has ever taken such a monumental (pun intended) step toward memorializing its own crimes. That's just not what national memorials generally do. But Berlin is a city in which almost every street evokes complex historical events; Germany is a country rich with sites of its tragic past. The most interesting of the rejected memorial proposals, "Bus Stop," by Ms. Stih and Mr. Schnock, would have provided continuous transport between these many sites, thus really helping people confront history. The Eisenman memorial represents a kind of cowardice. It's not especially unseemly; it's not a clearly readable symbolic statement about the Holocaust; it's not the great work of outdoor sculpture it might have been. It's just big -- very big. Maybe that's really its most significant emblematic relationship to the murders the project is meant to commemorate.

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