

## Chapter 12

## Memory and the

### Politics of Identity:

### Boston and

### Washington, D.C.

All those who walk this Freedom Trail pause here to contemplate the consequences of an absence of freedom.

—Alex Krieger

#### **Boston: An American Process**

Not long after the unveiling of *Liberation*, a Boston survivor decided to initiate a similar memorial in his city to thank the American soldiers who had liberated him at Buchenwald. The survivor organized a small memorial committee and approached sculptor Nathan Rapoport, who agreed to design a version of *Liberation* for Boston. But when the committee turned to other survivors for support, they found unexpected resistance instead. "Maybe some were liberated by Americans," a fellow survivor complained, "but my family and I were never liberated at all. They were killed at Auschwitz while American bombers flew overhead, and I barely survived the death marches to Germany." While other survivors sympathized with their friend's motive, they also feared that in *Liberation*, a millennium of Jewish civilization in Europe and all the lives lost would be reduced to the one degrading moment they shared with American liberators. Bitter arguments ensued, community support withered, and the project was put on hold.

Yet Boston will soon have its Holocaust memorial. Moreover, the chain of events that followed even suggests itself as an object lesson in American memorial building. For what began as one survivor's thwarted memorial mission eventually grew into a sophisticated and self-reflexive public art project. Still in

process, the Boston memorial provides a uniquely instructive glimpse of the inner workings—the tempestuous social, political, and aesthetic forces—normally hidden by a finished monument’s polished, taciturn exterior. In this section on what has come to be called the New England Holocaust Memorial, I examine the working parts of a memorial in process, the ways in which a memorial’s shape is determined as much by its own coming into being as by the ideals that first inspired it.

For a short time after “liberation” was rejected as its motif, the Boston project seemed doomed. But once relieved of its singular theme, the proposal for a Holocaust memorial was revived—and soon took on a second life. The committee hired a professional executive director, who in turn assembled an influential committee of local Jewish leaders, philanthropists, and academics. Kitty Dukakis, the Jewish wife of then-Governor Michael Dukakis, was recruited as honorary chairperson. And after being invited to serve as one of the founding chairpersons, Mayor Raymond Flynn helped arrange for the city to cede a prime piece of downtown real estate to the project, the Union Street Park.

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America

Located between Faneuil Hall and City Hall, this long strip of land was both problematic and promising. For years, it had served as a no-man’s land, a traffic island created accidentally by the city’s urban renewal project of the 1960s. With cars whizzing by on both sides, some feared a memorial set there would get lost in the traffic’s noise and tumult, hardly the setting for quiet meditation. On the other hand, it was centrally located and right alongside the Freedom Trail, visited by some sixteen million tourists a year. In effect, it would become one more stop on the trail: two stops after the Boston Massacre site, one after Faneuil Hall, and one before the Paul Revere House on a route wending from the Boston Common to the Bunker Hill Monument. No matter what shape the memorial here finally takes, it will be located both spatially and metaphysically in the continuum of American Revolutionary history. Almost thirty years after New York City forbade the survivors their place in American history, Boston will integrate the Holocaust into the very myth of American origins.<sup>1</sup>

Acutely aware that contested memory would be an inevitable part of this, or any, public memorial commission, the New England Holocaust Memorial Committee decided not to suppress argument and dissent but to turn debate itself into one of the project’s reasons for being. Theirs would be a memorial whose memory-work began with the committee’s own discussions, community education, even public challenges to the memorial. The process of the memorial’s self-definition, finding its role in the community, would become the memorial’s first function: it would either be built on the basis of its self-justification or, in failing to persuade the community of its mission, remain unbuilt. In either case, according

to the committee, the project will have served both memory and education, and provided a public forum for the Jewish community's own self-definition amid American civic culture.<sup>2</sup>

To this end, the Memorial Committee sponsored a number of public debates on the merits and liabilities of the memorial, attended by survivors and their children, local politicians and urban planners, artists and architects. Over the course of several months, public symposia were called to view images of other Holocaust memorials, to hear art historians discuss the function of memorials. Survivors lectured on their experiences, took questions from a curious audience, and argued over the forms memory should take. At a public symposium held at Harvard's School of Design, Maya Lin reflected on the process of building the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial and its implications for the Boston memorial. By consulting the community every step of the way, making them part of a process they may even disagree with, the committee also made them accountable. In Boston's academically charged environment, debate began to assume the dignified, nearly sacred proportions of philosophical discourse. Where other communities had fretted over the unseemly appearance of squabbling and dissent, the committee in Boston encouraged it, and in so doing allowed debate to drive the process forward. Even the press, previously skeptical and reluctant to cover the memorial much beyond its controversy, had begun to show an interest in the critical issues in editorials and feature columns.<sup>3</sup>

At about the time the committee decided to hold an international competition, a few of its members admitted that they had hoped their own memorial visions might somehow be realized. "Let me tell you what I see there," said one of the most prominent backers, "a statue with water perpetually running over its sides, as if it were crying." After an awkward silence, another supporter piped up, "Maybe we should just invite someone we already know to do it. Why can't we ask Maya Lin to make us a monument? Then at least we know we've gotten the best." To which Alex Krieger, a Harvard professor of architecture, rejoined: "That is precisely why we must have an international competition. The only way to find the inspiration of a Maya Lin is to invite everyone to participate. Without the open competition in Washington, there would have been no Maya Lin memorial." Krieger's argument eventually carried the day. But the cost, moaned another committee member, what will such a competition cost? A lot, came Krieger's reply.

For as healthy and invigorating as the debate seemed in the community's eyes, it also had its practical costs. As the executive director soon discovered, an enlightened and creative memorial process is not always compatible with fundraising. The very debate and lively discussion that had attracted the public's attention

scared off potential donors, who tend to shy away from controversial projects. Executive Director Stephen Dickerman was constantly amazed by the hesitation on the part of the city's most generous philanthropists—who all supported the project in name, but continued to gauge the support of others before giving large sums themselves.

And then there was the matter of a jury. Most of the committee recognized that the choice of jury members constituted the first step in their community's choice of the monument. So, in appointing a jury, the committee's overriding aim was to gather as formidable a group as possible, an authoritative body whose integrity and credentials could withstand any storm their final decision might provoke. There was also the matter of balance: at least two of the jurors needed to be of international stature, so that no single authority would dominate the proceedings. Each of the major relevant disciplines would have to be represented: urban and landscape architects, local art critics, curators and artists, a historian and survivor. In the end, the jury was composed of Marshall Berman, a cultural historian; Rosemarie Bletter, an architectural critic and historian; Henry Friedlander, a modern German historian and survivor; Frank Gehry, world-renowned architect; Katy Kline, an art historian, critic, and curator; Michael Van Valkenburgh, a renowned landscape architect; and Elyn Zimmerman, a sculptor and environmental artist. All would be held accountable by their respective constituencies.

In the fall of 1990, announcements in several trade journals proclaimed the opening of an international competition for the New England Holocaust Memorial. More than 1,000 potential designers registered for the competition, of whom 520 finally submitted designs. Entrants hailed from seven countries and included architects, artists, sculptors, and landscape designers. The thick registration packets they received included a detailed statement of purpose, site description and photographs, discussion of the site's architectural and historic context, a summary of other public art works in downtown Boston, survivors' testimonies, and a resource bibliography. The registration packet was meant not only to provide topographical and social context, but also to invite artists to enter into their own dialectic with memory.

The principles of the memorial and competition were defined thus:

This will be a memorial to the Shoah—the Holocaust—in which the Nazi Third Reich systematically murdered six million Jewish men, women, and children. . . . The memorial will be for the six million—a place to grieve for the victims and to mark the loss of their culture to history.

The Nazis and their collaborators victimized many other groups, murdering countless other people, each of equal worth

and importance. Still others, including survivors, those who aided them, and those who liberated them, were caught up in this great tragedy and carry the burden of that memory throughout their lives. In seeking a universal understanding of the Shoah, we acknowledge the place of each experience in the horror of that collective history.

To remember this suffering is to recognize the danger and evil that are present whenever one group persecutes another. The Holocaust was the ultimate act of prejudice—in this case, anti-Semitism. Wherever prejudice, discrimination and victimization are tolerated, evil like the Shoah can happen again.<sup>4</sup>

In its carefully written statement of purpose, the Boston Memorial Committee remained acutely conscious of its place in America, its mission in a plural society. Beyond this definition, it left the forms open to potential designers, hoping to inspire as much memory as it would eventually codify.

The range of responses was extraordinary: one entrant, a professor of art and design from North Carolina, had made this a semester-long class project, where students examined every aspect of the event, public art, and memorial design before submitting a meticulously researched team design. Others included teams of artists and architects from New York City, the principals from prestigious architecture firms, young, old, trained, and amateur. In several other cases, the entrants underwent profound personal and spiritual changes. Many wrote to say that the experience itself had brought a new depth to their work, a greater appreciation of their medium's limitations. Were the monument itself never built, the committee might still console itself for having generated this kind of massive memory-work on the part of 520 souls: hundreds of hours multiplied by hundreds of teams and individuals.

Originally, the jury had planned to select three finalists and to make a small number of merit awards. But after three days of deliberations, without a trace of consensus, a variation on the initial plan emerged. "You will notice," Krieger observed wryly in announcing the results, "that there are seven jurors and seven finalists when there were originally supposed to be three."<sup>5</sup>

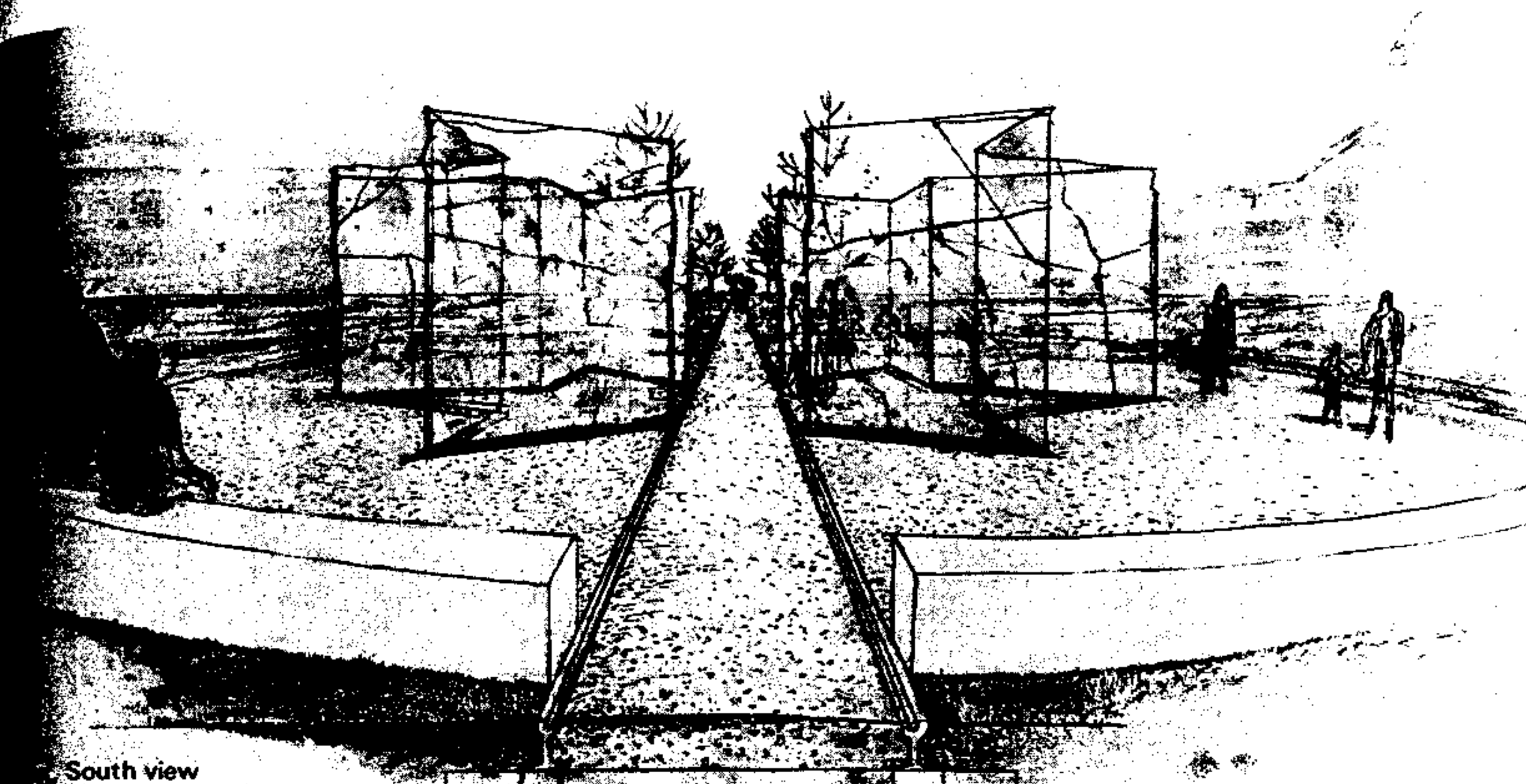
Even at this stage, the community was invited to respond to the models and thereby to sustain debate, if only hypothetically, since their votes would not bind the jury. The process, if not the monument, would be interactive; it would remind the community as often as possible how much memory depended on them, and not on the space. To this end, the models of the seven finalists were unveiled and exhibited publicly before the final decision was made. Visitors to the exhibition were asked by both the design committee and the local Jewish newspaper,

the *Advocate*, to voice their likes and dislikes. Among specific questions posed to visitors were: What do these memorial designs help us to remember about the Holocaust? How do these designs and the Freedom Trail location help us see the relevance of the Holocaust in today's world? What sort of experience can a Holocaust memorial provide to the individual and to the community?

As was expected, responses reflected a wide cross-section of public opinion. A few had difficulty accepting the Holocaust's place on the Freedom Trail, wondering what it had to do with the American Revolution. Others felt it would heighten the significance of all Americans' former oppression and liberation. Many wanted to broaden the general scope of memory to include non-Jews as well as Jews, so that it would invite as much of the general population as possible into its space. Still others had specific suggestions for alternatives, recalling other memorials in other places. And of course, a few denied that the Holocaust had ever happened. Like the "countermonument" in Hamburg, this memorial had begun to serve as a great fingerprint for society.

Though the *Advocate* tallied responses to particular models, ranking them in order of popular opinion, its poll was not to be binding on the jury. That the jury chose the popular favorite does leave some room, however, for speculation as to whether the poll had some bearing, after all. For in fact, while the first stage was a blind-jury selection, the second-stage model submissions included the names of the designers, names whose significance could not have escaped the jury members. The winner, Stanley Saitowitz, was well known to the influential architects on the jury, Gehry and Van Valkenburgh. It may not have been a matter of calculated political deliberation, but at the final stage, the jurors also understood (even if unconsciously) that the better known the winner, the easier it would be to garner public and political support for the monument's construction.

The thousands and thousands of hours spent by the 520 teams on their memory-work bore an incredibly rich response, as exemplified in a few of the finalists' own statements. Nancy J. Locke and Jan Langwell, for example, proposed "an endless meadow" of two-foot-high yellow grass, sunk beneath a three-foot-high granite walk, both extending the length of Union Park. Definitions and meanings of the Holocaust would remain multiplaned, as fluid as the meadow, broken only by the concrete path over it. "The great emptiness of the fields hides the real horror of the event that cannot be expressed through words or sights," the designers wrote. "Explanations are replaced by a void—a beautiful, empty, boundless place. . . . The space above the meadow is as well a void, cut out in a mass of trees set on a grid."<sup>6</sup> Like a number of public respondents, the judges may have felt this recalled too much the Germans' planting over of the death sites with splendid grain fields, that it consoled visitors more than it provoked them.

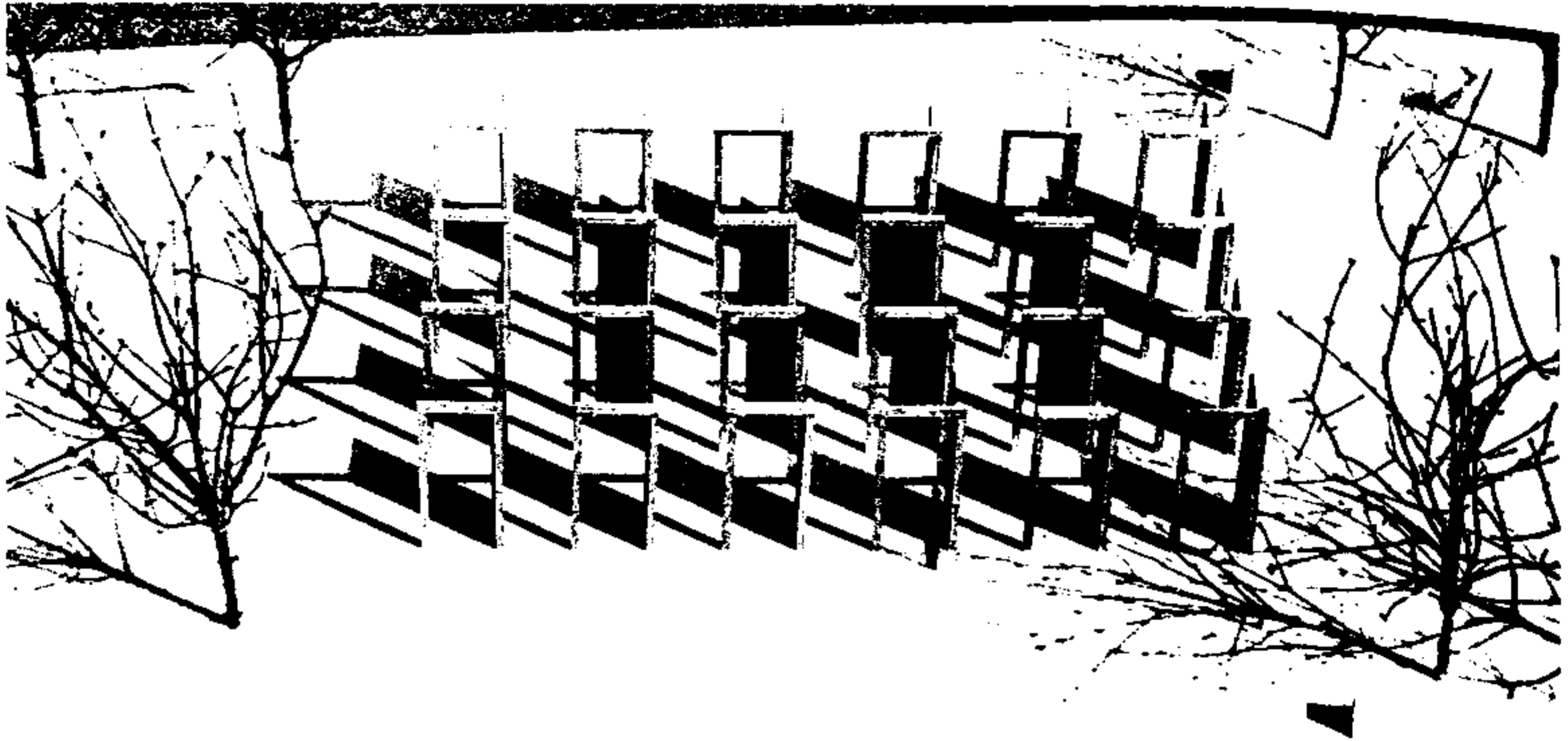


South view

Two other designs were less reassuring, more haunted by events. Architects Chung Nguyen and Chuong Nguyen proposed cutting a great scar into the park space, 240 feet long, 40 feet wide, and 6 feet deep. "This path is seen as a wound that slits open the ground, unleashing the silent cries [of the murdered]," they wrote. At the same time, the path would be bridged in several places, self-conscious attempts to suture the wound, to repair the breach, through a memory-structure. In a similar vein, Troy West, Anker West, and Ginidir Marshall conceived of a series of monumental glass panels, fourteen by fourteen feet tall, connected by steel cables and configured in a great star of David. It would be bisected by a concrete path and railroad rails. In both cases, the artists evoked the sense of brokenness and simultaneous attempt at mending recalled in the broken tombstone memorials in Poland.

Three other designs drew inventively upon concept as much as form, inviting visitors to interact with the memorial and then to reflect critically on their presence there. In a proposed work by sculptors Cissy Schmidt and Matthew Pickner, twenty-four thresholds with doors ten feet high would be spaced in a grid on a granite floor amid the green grass and trees of the park. Wide-open doors on the outer thresholds would invite passersby in to contemplate words like Tolerance, Liberty, Justice, and Equality, cut out of their metal panels to reveal the sky and light behind. As visitors proceeded further, they would find the interior thresholds and doors half-closed, more difficult to enter; negative-value words like Prejudice, Tyranny, and Injustice would be printed in raised black letters

New England  
Holocaust  
Memorial  
Competition  
finalists Troy  
West, Anker  
West, and  
Ginidir  
Marshall  
proposed a  
broken glass  
star for the  
Boston  
competition.  
Photo:  
Courtesy of  
New England  
Holocaust  
Memorial  
Committee.



Finalists Cissy Schmidt and Matthew Pickner proposed twenty-four doors, a series of choices between tolerance and liberty, prejudice and tyranny, for the Boston competition. Photo: Courtesy of New England Holocaust Memorial Committee.

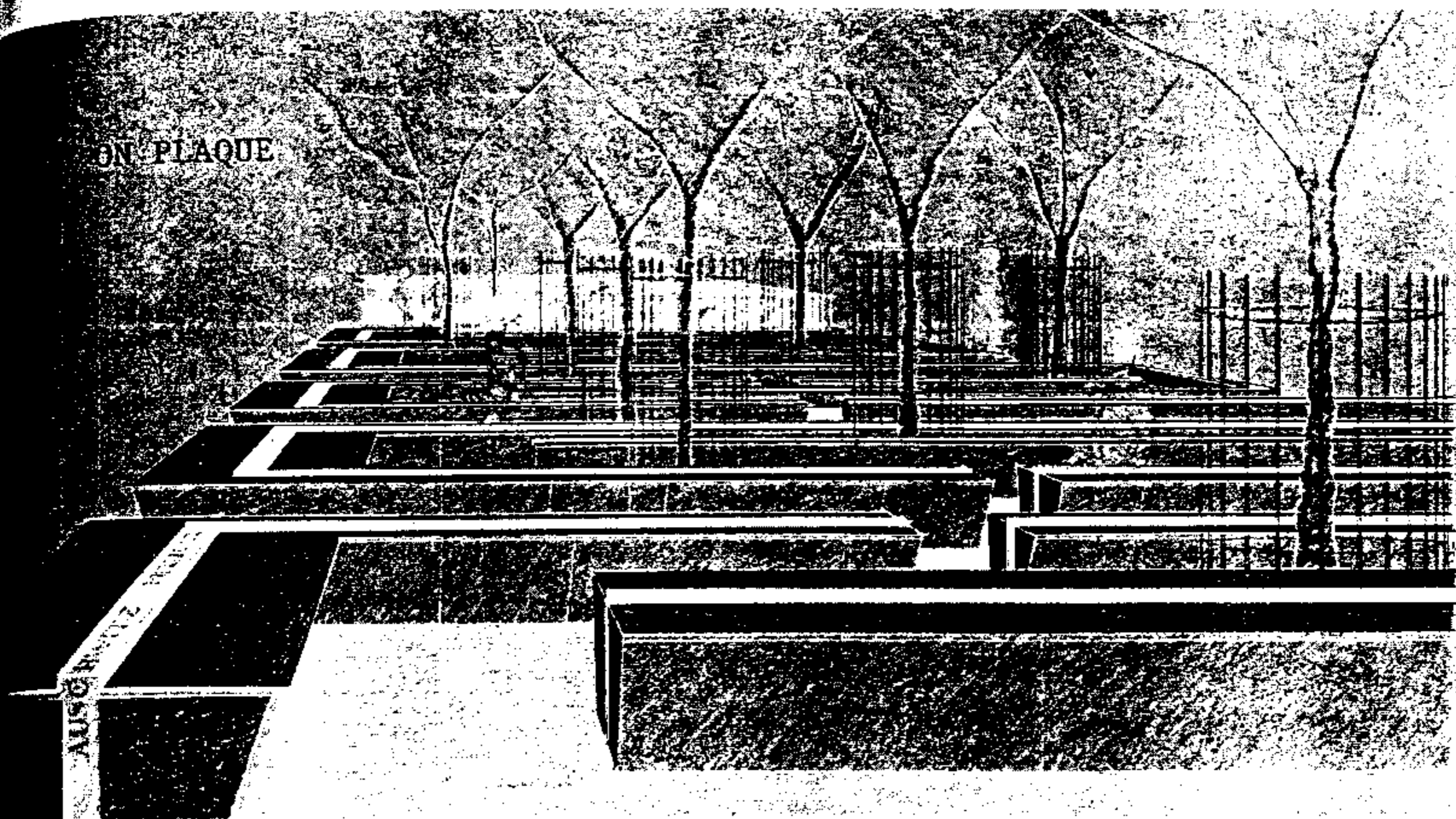
allowing no light to pass through these doors. One interior threshold and door would be closed entirely, a dead-end, inscribed on one side with the Memorial Committee's statement of purpose, and on the other with the words: "As they marched to their deaths, they recited for each the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer of mourning. They knew there was no one to say it for them."

In a similarly inspired vein, architects Robert J. Stein and Jerry Wedge suggested a labyrinth as spatial metaphor for the Jews' impossible journey during the Holocaust. Pedestrians would enter one end of a maze of polished, black marble benches, each inscribed with the names of concentration camps. Locust trees growing in the midst of the maze would be guarded by iron fences, so that visitors would be kept from touching them. The labyrinth would be a three-hundred-foot-long piece of environmental art, according to its designers, a part of the modern living city which would continuously invite new passersby into its recesses of memory.

Of the conceptual monuments not chosen, perhaps the most original was New York architect Hali Jane Weiss's "echo chamber." Based on the premise that some subjects simply elude the systems of knowledge and logic practiced by writers and architects, "this memorial design," wrote Weiss, "recedes from form so that the ineffable can enter in its own way. Conceptually, it juxtaposes fact and mystery, loss and regeneration, technology and nature, the ordinary and the sacred." In fact, the execution would have been as profoundly subtle as its concept was ambitious: a blend of sound and sense, visitor presence and victim absence. This design would have left the park's trees and lawns largely untouched, only the ground plane changed.



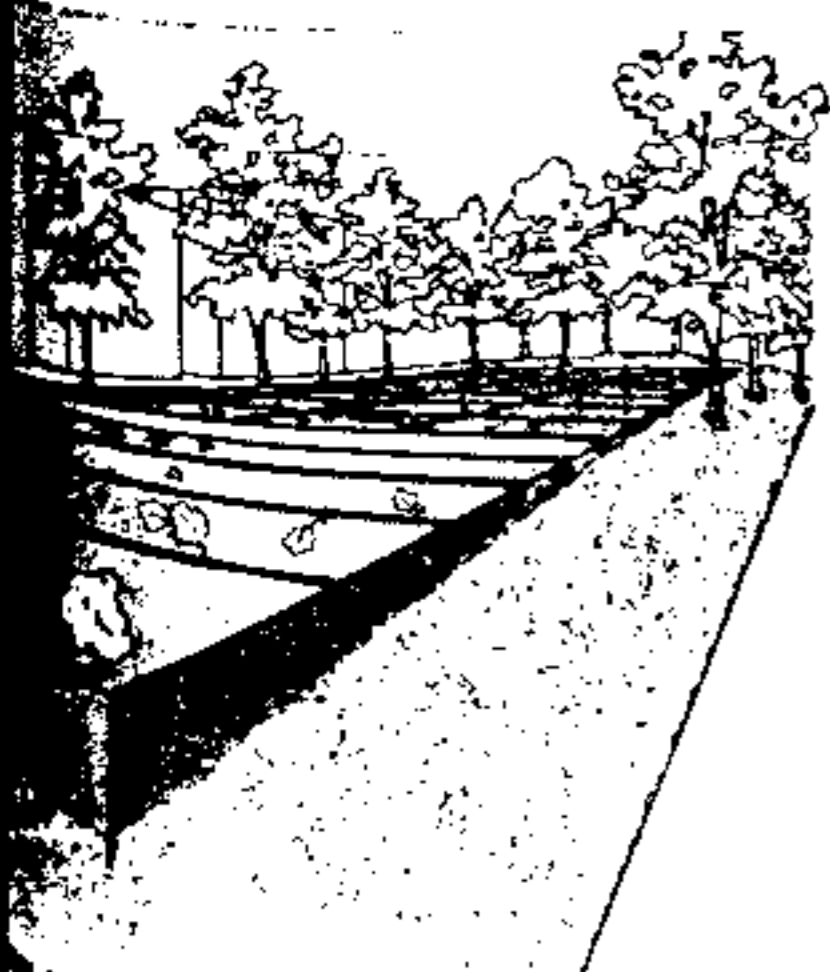
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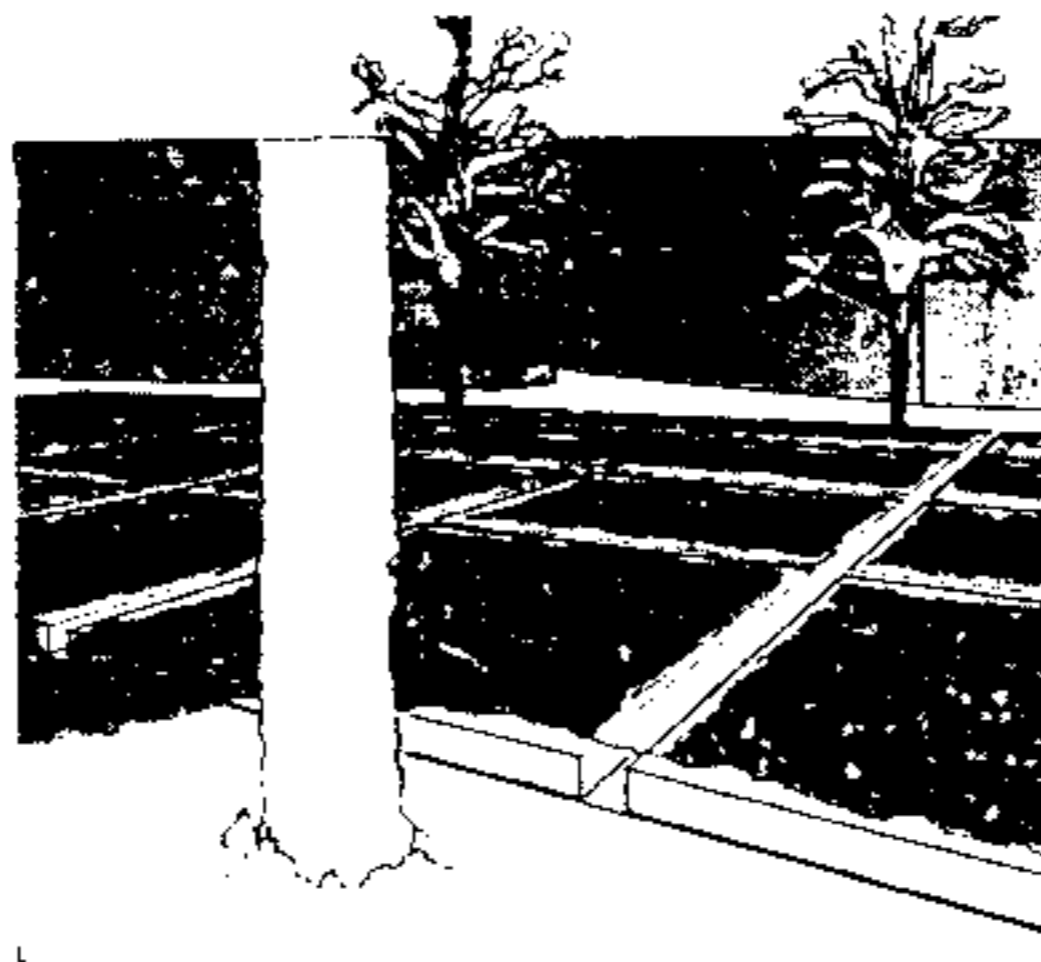
Finalists Robert J. Stein and Jerry Wedge suggested a three-hundred-foot labyrinth of benches, marked with

names of concentration camps. Photo: Courtesy of New England Holocaust Memorial Committee.

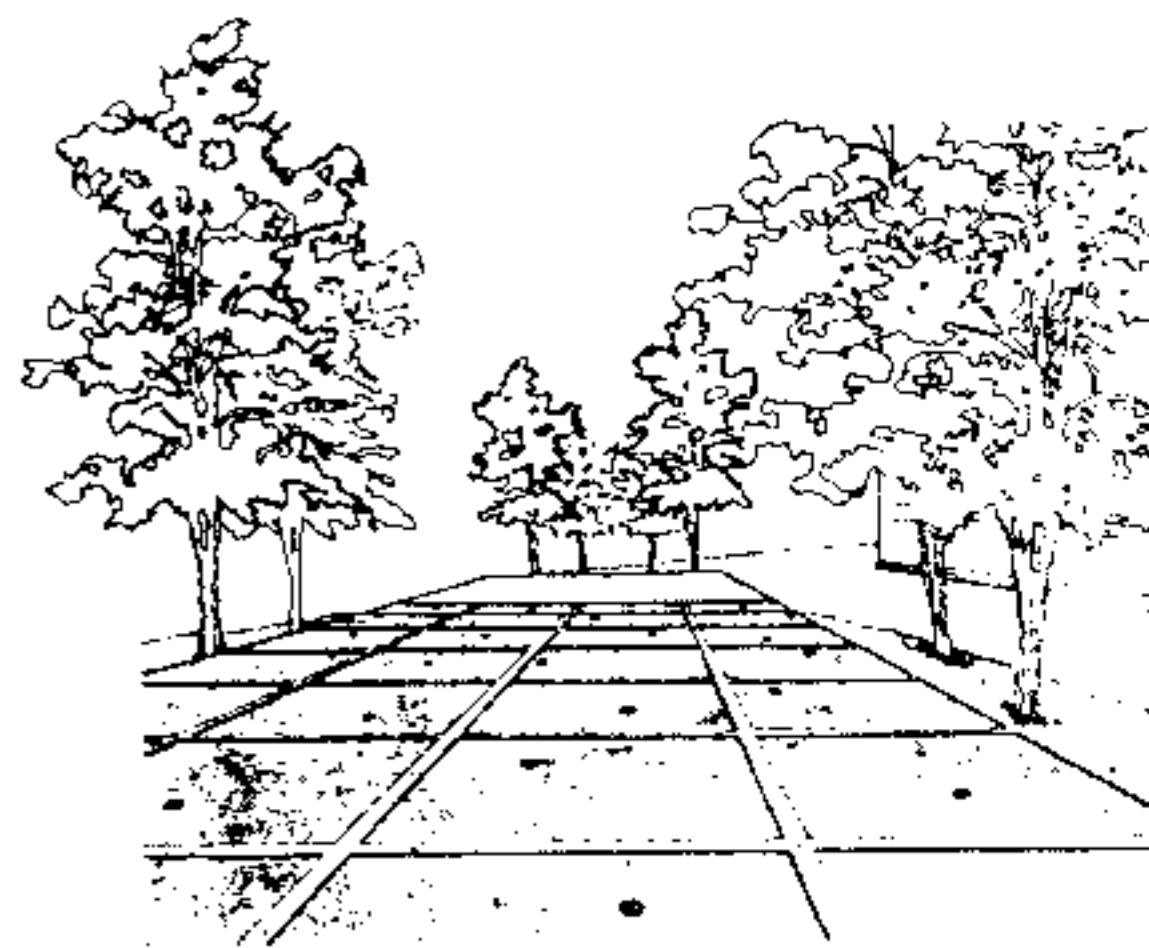
Finalist Hali Jane Weiss designed a memorial echo chamber for the space in Boston. Photo: Courtesy of New England Holocaust Memorial Committee.



VIEW EAST IN AUTUMN



VIEW EAST AT NIGHT IN WINTER



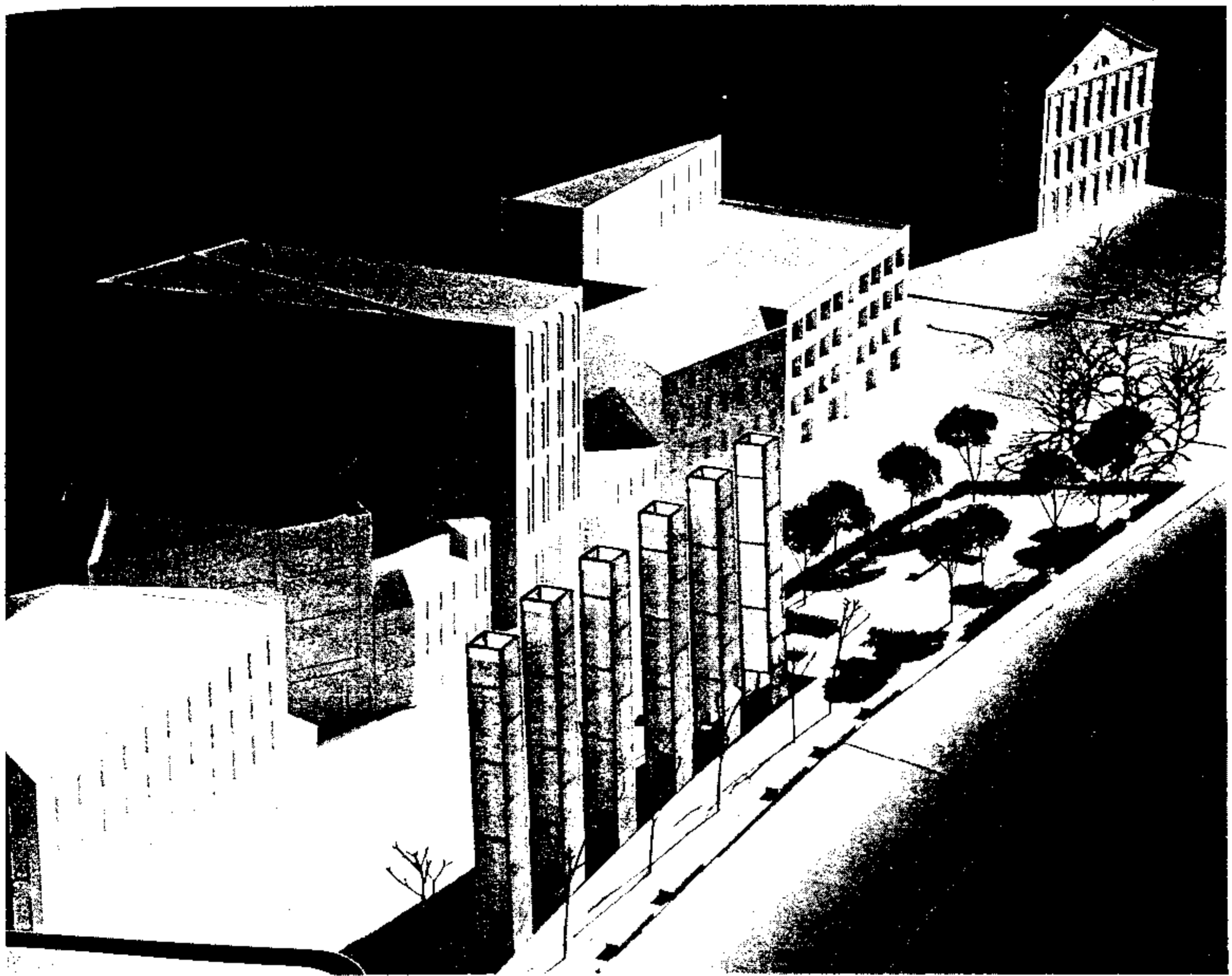
VIEW NORTH IN SPRING

Using about one-third of the park space, a large, hollow rectangle of steel would be set flush in the earth, embedded with thirty-six small flames encased in thick clear glass, randomly spaced throughout the square. Our footfalls would reverberate loudly with every step, punctuating our movement over the surface of the memorial. Like an enormous drum, the surface would, in Weiss's words, "echo from the wound of people walking across it. The low-tuned reverberations in the sound chamber resonate in the non-verbal chamber of our being. The steel confronts our internal voids and the slate, grass and light begin to fill them." In this way, we would become experientially aware of the hollowness of this ground, now a symbolic grave, self-conscious of our very actions this space. With every step, we would attract undue attention to ourselves, each step a slow drumbeat to accompany our funereal procession.

Though its conceptual ingenuity made it a favorite with several of the more academic art and architectural historians, the echo chamber was not chosen partly because of its very subtlety. It would have remained invisible from the street and sidewalk, quiet in the absence of visitors. From above, the site would have been partly screened by the trees left in place, even covered over by leaves in the autumn. At night or in fog, only the thirty-six flames would be visible, flickering like *Jahrzeit* candles in the darkness. Though they admired its conception, the jury felt that it would have been a difficult memorial to "sell" to a public conditioned to "the monumental."

In the end, the jury selected the most audacious memorial design, by the most prominent architect of the final seven. The design, by San Franciscan Stanley Saitowitz, along with Ulysses Kim, Tom Gardner, and John Bass, calls for six 65-foot-high armor-strength glass towers, set in a row, each illuminated from below by a black granite pit filled with electrically heated volcanic rocks. Visitors will be able to walk on a path leading through the bases of these towers, over the iron grates covering gleaming pits of light, beneath the hollow chambers of glass pillars. From a distance at night, the towers will cast a bright glow, illuminating the sky above and the faces of buildings nearby. Their glow can be expected to attract curious passersby in other parts of the city the way old-fashioned spotlights once did. It will be unavoidable, filling the empty park with light and life, pits of fire and pillars of ice.

From the beginning, Saitowitz and his colleagues envisioned the memorial as a process which included an almost ritualistic preparation of the site. Construction would, in the original plan, begin on Holocaust Remembrance Day with the "brutal cutting of all the trees on half the site." The remaining stumps would recall both the lives of Jews interrupted by death (as did the iconography of broken trees in Polish Jewish tombstones) and the destruction of life that usually pre-



cedes its memorialization—a truism for all memorial markers. We are reminded that destruction is part of memory-construction. Once again, while engaging in concept, this proposal will probably encounter stiff resistance from several quarters, including the Parks Commission and environmental groups. Were the debate lively enough, the memorial function might even be fulfilled without cutting the trees at all. Only after further debate will the great glass towers be erected atop the glowing pits, covered over with iron grating, each named after one of the six death camps: Chelmno, Treblinka, Majdanek, Auschwitz, Sobibor, and Belzec.

Jurors were struck by both the experiential and symbolic potential in this design. “By day, the play of natural light on the forms and the light filled shadows cast by the glass towers will be an ever changing phenomenon,” they wrote, “constantly renewing the memorial experience.” By night, the glow will create a new presence in that part of the city, lending life to forms hitherto unseen after dusk. The jurors felt that both the scale of the towers and their material would serve to mediate between soaring steel and glass skyscrapers on one side and the

Stanley Saitowitz's winning entry for the New England Holocaust Memorial competition comprised six glass towers, illuminated at night. Photo: Courtesy of New England Holocaust Memorial Committee.

older, colonial brick architecture of Faneuil Hall on the other, between new Boston on the west and old Boston on the east. The pits would glow hot, emitting warm air upward through the glass pillars, perhaps attracting homeless people in the winter for warmth. Jurors also recognized that the glass would attract vandals, as well, its seeming fragility an invitation to rock throwers, hammers, and chisels. But even this did not bother one of the jurors, cultural historian Marshall Berman, who remarked, "If all the skinheads in New England come and throw rocks at [the memorial], it will only become more eloquent. It will then be like a representation of the Kristallnacht of the 30s."<sup>7</sup>

The jurors were also moved by the memorial's abstractly symbolic references to Jewish culture, the ways its universal forms and light would include, rather than exclude, other groups. Like the six granite pillars in Los Angeles, these would suggest a number of possible references and so would not insist on any single meaning. In the architects' words,

Once completed, many meanings attach to the memorial: Some think of it as six candles, others call it a menorah. Some a colonnade walling the civic plaza, others six towers of the spirit. Some six columns for six million Jews, others six exhausts of life. Some call it a city of ice, others remember a ruin of some civilization. Some speak of six pillars of breath, others six chambers of gas. Some sit on the benches, are cooled by the water and warmed by the fire. Some think it is a fragment of Boston City Hall, others call the buried chambers Hell. Some think the pits of fire are six death camps, others feel the warm air rising up from the ground like human breath as it passes through the glass chimneys to heaven. By remaining open in significance, the space's forms would sustain their liveliness in both present and later generations' minds.

As I write, the memorial-building project in Boston proceeds apace. It may be years before funding is completed, years more before the Boston Redevelopment Authority approves a final version. Debate will persist, some of it angry, some restrained: Do we etch numbers in the glass or not? And what about the trees? Do we cut them? How do we guard the monument from vandals? There will be further fundraising glitches and dinners, lectures and controversies. Some of its supporters will abandon the project, while its former detractors join in building. By the time it's built, the glass towers may well be half their proposed height, may not even be lighted except on commemorative days. Many of the controversies will be charted in its evolving forms, others forgotten or ignored by it. Each of its changes will function to chart the process itself, the ebb and flow of public

sentiment and will. These, too, will become part of the memorial's performance. To the extent it continues to evolve and show the twists and turns of public needs and concerns, it will remain memory forever in process, never completed.

### **The U. S. Holocaust Memorial in Washington, D.C.:**

#### **Memory and the Politics of Identity**

Of all Holocaust memorials in America, none can begin to match in scope or ambition the national memorial and museum complex nearing completion in the heart of the nation's capital. Situated adjacent to the Mall and within view of the Washington Monument to the right and the Jefferson Memorial across the Tidal Basin to the left, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial and Museum will be a neighbor to the National Museum of American History and the Smithsonian Institute. At the time of this writing, nearly six thousand people have donated 105 of the projected 147 million dollars needed for its opening in 1993. It will contain ten thousand artifacts collected from around the world, including an authentic Treblinka box-car, a Danish fishing boat used in the rescue of that country's Jews, an actual barrack from Birkenau, and two thousand pairs of children's shoes from Auschwitz, among thousands of other imported remnants. Its archives and library of a hundred thousand volumes will make it the largest Holocaust repository and study center in America.

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Memory and  
the Politics  
of Identity

Established in 1980 by an act of Congress, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council was charged with fostering Holocaust remembrance in America in three fundamental ways. The council shall, in the words of the resolution,

1. provide for appropriate ways for the Nation to commemorate the Days of Remembrance, as an annual, national, civic commemoration of the holocaust, and shall encourage and sponsor appropriate observances of such Days of Remembrance throughout the United States;
2. plan, construct, and oversee the operation of a permanent living memorial museum to the victims of the holocaust, in cooperation with the Secretary of the Interior and other Federal agencies as provided in section 1406 of this title; and
3. develop a plan for carrying out the recommendations of the President's Commission on the Holocaust in its report to the President of September 27, 1979, to the extent such recommendations are not otherwise provided for in this chapter.<sup>8</sup>

Sticking both to protocol and to America's pluralist tenets, the statement reflects the lowercase holocaust defined by Jimmy Carter when he appointed the President's Commission in 1978: eleven million innocent victims exterminated, six million of them Jews.<sup>9</sup> Beyond Carter's pluralist definition of the Holocaust, however, is the way this memorial would integrate the Holocaust into the heart of America's civic culture.

"What is the role of [this] museum in a country, such as the United States, far from the site of the Holocaust?" Charles Maier has asked. "Is it to rally the people who suffered or to instruct non-Jews? Is it supposed to serve as a reminder that 'it can happen here?' Or is it a statement that some special consideration is deserved? Under what circumstances can a private sorrow serve simultaneously as a public grief?"<sup>10</sup> Before such a museum could be built on the Mall in Washington, explicitly American reasons would have to be found for it.

The official American justification for a national memorial in the nation's capital was also provided by President Carter in his address at the first Days of Remembrance ceremonies at the Capitol Rotunda, 24 April 1979:

Although the Holocaust took place in Europe, the event is of fundamental significance to Americans for three reasons. First, it was American troops who liberated many of the death camps, and who helped to expose the horrible truth of what had been done there. Also, the United States became a homeland for many of those who were able to survive. Secondly, however, we must share the responsibility for not being willing to acknowledge forty years ago that this horrible event was occurring. Finally, because we are humane people, concerned with the human rights of all peoples, we feel compelled to study the systematic destruction of the Jews so that we may seek to learn how to prevent such enormities from occurring in the future."<sup>11</sup>

Not only would this museum depict the lives of "new Americans," but it would reinforce America's self-idealization as haven for the world's oppressed. It would serve as a universal warning against the bigotry and antidemocratic forces underpinning such a catastrophe and call attention to the potential for such slaughter in all other totalitarian systems.

For, as a national landmark, the national Holocaust museum would necessarily represent the Holocaust according to the nation's own ideals, its pluralist tenets. In the words of a memorial brochure, therefore, the Holocaust began "before a shot was fired, with persecution of Jews, dissenters, blacks, Gypsies, and the handicapped. The Holocaust gathered force as the Nazis excluded groups of people from the human family, denying them freedom to work, to study, to travel, to practice a religion, claim a theory, or teach a value. This Museum will illustrate that the loss of life itself was but the last stage in the loss of all rights."<sup>12</sup> In being defined as the ultimate violation of America's Bill of Rights and as the persecution of plural groups, the Holocaust encompasses all the reasons immigrants—past, present, and future—ever had for seeking refuge in America.

When cultural critics protested that such a museum, though necessary, would be a blight on the Mall, the Memorial Council countered, "This Museum belongs at the center of American life because as a democratic civilization America is the enemy of racism and its ultimate expression, genocide. An event of universal significance, the Holocaust has special importance for Americans: in act and word the Nazis denied the deepest tenets of the American people." That is, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial defines what it means to be American by graphically illustrating what it means not to be American. As a reminder of "the furies beyond our shores," in one columnist's words, the museum would define American existence in the great distance between "here" and "there."<sup>13</sup> In effect, in being placed on the Mall, the museum will enshrine not just the history of the Holocaust, but American ideals as they counterpoint the Holocaust. By remembering the crimes of another people in another land, Americans will recall their nation's own idealized reason for being.

This will be the beginning of what the museum's project director, Michael Berenbaum, has termed the "Americanization of the Holocaust." In Berenbaum's words, the museum's story of the Holocaust will have to be "told in such a way that it would resonate not only with the survivor in New York and his children in Houston or San Francisco, but with a black leader from Atlanta, a midwestern farmer, or a northeastern industrialist. Millions of Americans make pilgrimages to Washington; the Holocaust Museum must take them back in time, transport them to another continent, and inform their current reality. The Americanization of the Holocaust is an honorable task provided that the story told is faithful to the historical event."<sup>14</sup> Of course, as Berenbaum also makes clear, the story itself depends entirely on who is telling it—and to whom.

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### **Layers of Meaning: Topography, Architecture, Exhibition**

The story also depends on several other layers of meaning: in the memorial's location in Washington, in the heart of America's monumental civic culture; in the architectonic form of the edifice itself, its place in relation to nearby buildings, to architectural trends and fashion; and in the exhibition narrative housed by the museum. Each conveys a different meaning that bears some relation to the other dimensions of the memorial's total text.

From the beginning, many people, like the architectural critic for the *Washington Post*, were unsettled by "the symbolic implications of the memorial's placement [adjacent to the Mall]—that the Nazi extermination of 6 million Jews [could be] an integral part of the American story."<sup>15</sup> Even local survivors came forth with their reservations, testifying against the memorial for its not being relevant to the American national experience and for enlarging the idea of the

Holocaust to include non-Jewish victims of the Nazis. Still others feared that such a memorial contradicted the very essence of the national Mall, that by recalling such horrible events, the memorial would cast a dark shadow across a monumental landscape dedicated to all that was high and virtuous in America's origins.

To all of which the memorial committee's chairperson, Harvey Meyerhoff, responded that precisely because the Mall celebrates human history and creativity, the Holocaust museum belongs on it, a reminder of dark side humankind's civilized works. "If the Smithsonian represents the accomplishments of civilization, the Holocaust raises fundamental questions about the capacity of individuals and of society, of technology and human genius for evil," Meyerhoff wrote.<sup>16</sup> This too, he seems to say, is part of Western civilization; this too can become part of a past on which we now build a "more perfect union."

Meyerhoff goes on to acknowledge that "because the Holocaust Memorial is located in the heart of our nation's capital and because it is a national memorial, the uniquely American dimension of the Holocaust will be consistently represented in the museum." The American dimension will include not only the American soldiers' part in defeating Nazi Germany and liberating the camps, but also less "memorable" aspects of the country's history: the restrictions on immigration, the rejection of refugees during the war, and the refusal to bomb the death camps. Ironically, of course, the memorial will thereby Americanize the Holocaust, making it a pluralistic, egalitarian event.

Finally, putting the memorial on the Mall will also set a national standard for suffering. It will formally monumentalize the Holocaust, hold it up as an ideal of catastrophe against which all other destructions will be measured. After the Vietnam Veterans' Monument nearby, the Holocaust memorial will become the second antimemorial on the mall: a national memorial institution that is also self-critical, that suggests a self-correcting national policy and actions.

The next layer of meaning was negotiated in the building's design. Chosen from a large field of competitors, James Ingo Freed, a principal in I. M. Pei's New York architectural firm, began by articulating the fundamental problems facing him on all fronts. He would have to begin, he said, by bridging the two landmark buildings on either side of the memorial's 1.7-acre lot: the grey limestone and neoclassical lines of the hulking Bureau of Engraving to the south, and the ornate red-brick Victorian Auditors Building to the north. From here, his aim would be to "take the conditional [that is, situational] circumstances of [the museum's] location and weave them together with its content."<sup>17</sup> This is, in some ways, the double-edged dilemma facing any architect and monument builder: How will design and material, which are used for the way they speak to the environment,



speaking to content? Specifically, in the case of a Holocaust memorial, how will the brick and limestone chosen for its neighborhood architectural resonance make meaning as a Holocaust edifice?

At the same time, Freed wanted to use this space to challenge—or at least to critique—Washington's monumental facade. How to challenge the Mall's monumentality from a monumental structure on the Mall? How to do this while remaining answerable to the capital's Fine Arts Commission, whose first principle is to regulate and keep a relatively uniform appearance on the Mall? How to make a building that would disturb consciousness on the one hand, while having to conform to a highly regulated and uniform architectural set of guidelines on the other?

For the self-conscious architect, every structure is also a metaphor, created for one physical purpose but also to stand figuratively for an idea, a time, an event, a people. In Freed's eyes, for example, "the metaphor of the guard tower was the watching, the overview, the distancing of the persecutors from the prisoners." How then would his building figure the memory it was designed to house? The essential problem of design for a plural nation was resolved by Freed in a relatively simple, yet profound formulation. It is important, in Freed's words, that "memory be sufficiently ambiguous and open ended so that others can inhabit the space, can imbue the forms with their own memory."

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Memory and  
the Politics  
of Identity

Like other memorial designers before and after him, Freed insists on keeping forms open-ended, abstract enough to accommodate all rememberers, especially those who come after, who will after all comprise the great bulk of visitors. By not forcing what he called "one reading" on the visitors, Freed hoped to leave the symbols inclusive and inviting to all. "We wanted an evocation of the incomplete," he wrote. "Irresolution, imbalances are built in. For instance, the screen in the front portal is not there to force a reading, but to make evident the need for interpretation." The objective, Freed continued, was to "make it cohere without being explicit, without being one thing."<sup>18</sup>

"It is my view," Freed writes, "that the Holocaust defines a radical, but hopefully not a final, break with the optimistic conception of continuous social and political improvement underlying the material culture of the West."<sup>19</sup> The question, then, is how to preserve this sense of break in a setting whose very *raison d'être* is to unify memory and understanding of the nation's past. Would Freed suggest Holocaust memory as a part of, or separate from the Mall and all of its national ideals? Would it call attention to itself as an exception to, even a violation of, these ideals—thereby seeming to destroy the architectural harmony of the capital? Freed recognized early on what was only confirmed for him by the Fine Arts Commission in their first evaluations of his proposal. Differences, challenges,

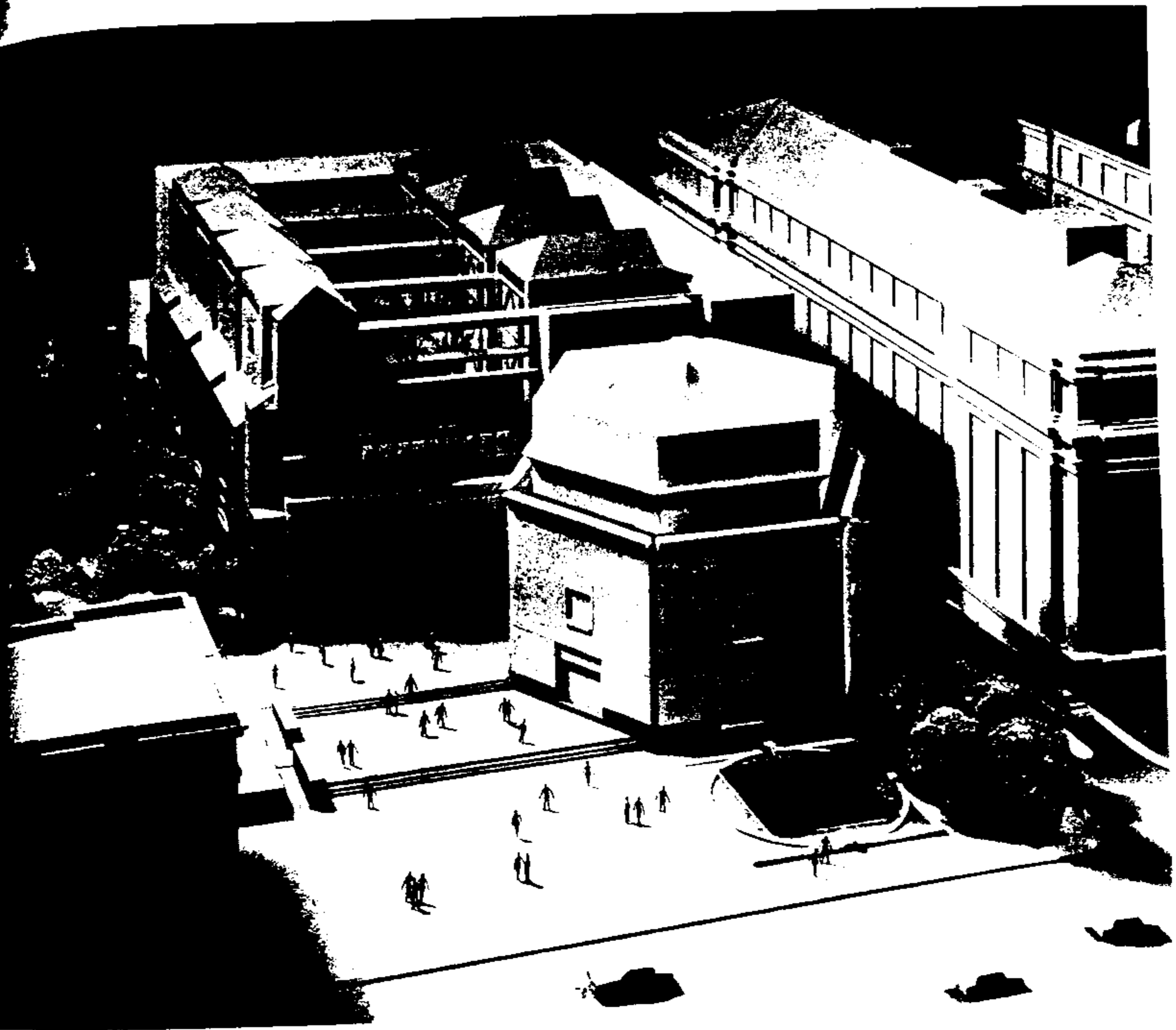
and resistance to surrounding motifs would literally have to be sanded away if the building were to be erected at all.

The commission rejected Freed's first design in 1986 on several grounds, mostly having to do with its sheer size and assertiveness. "The character of the building," according to Charles H. Atherton, the commission's executive secretary, "itself had an almost unintended link to fascist architecture. It was almost brutal. You could not escape identifying it with the architecture favored by Hitler. It seemed to be more a memorial to the perpetrators of the crime, not the victims."<sup>20</sup> Atherton went on to suggest that one of his commission's primary roles was to protect the integrity of the Mall, to keep any single project from upstaging the rest of the Mall's monuments.

One year later, the memorial's design was resubmitted, this time much more successfully. The entire project had been scaled back, though one part of it still stuck out a little too much: the Hall of Remembrance, a large, limestone-clad hexagonal building attached to the museum extended some forty feet beyond the line of its two neighbors. Back and forth they went, the Fine Arts Commission trying to scale back the museum's obtrusiveness and to bring it into line with the rest of the Mall's monuments, Freed trying to preserve his challenge to monumentality, a sense of disturbance on the Mall. Finally, Freed and the Memorial Committee members agreed to move the building back into line, reducing some of the space of the rest of the museum, but not taking any space away from the exhibits. This design was approved by the Fine Arts Commission in an 8–2 vote on 30 July 1987.<sup>21</sup>

The result is an exterior that will indeed join the Capital "urbanistically" and an interior that metaphorically removes visitors from the Capital. If, on the outside, this building had to conform with its surroundings, the architect could ensure that, once entered, it removed visitors from Washington as quickly as possible. "When you walked out of Washington, I wanted to separate you from the city formally and spatially; but before you stepped into the Hall of Witness, I also felt that you had to go through an acoustical change, a disturbance like a drum-beat. Something to tell you that you are coming to this place, to make you pay attention."<sup>22</sup> Since it is Freed's conception, I allow his words to become part of his architectural text. This is not to resolve questions with the architect's authoritative answers, but to show that in some places, the architect does not have answers—nor does he believe he should have answers. He relates going through his project-workers' drawings and pulling out any neat resolutions precisely to leave the space problematized, its difficulties intact.

When visitors enter, therefore, they will find themselves in a great "raw steel structure, without cover or enclosing planes, except that the walls have panels



Model of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, designed by James Ingo Freed of I.M. Pei Associates, located four hundred yards

from the Washington Monument, just off the Mall in Washington, D.C. Photo: Courtesy of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

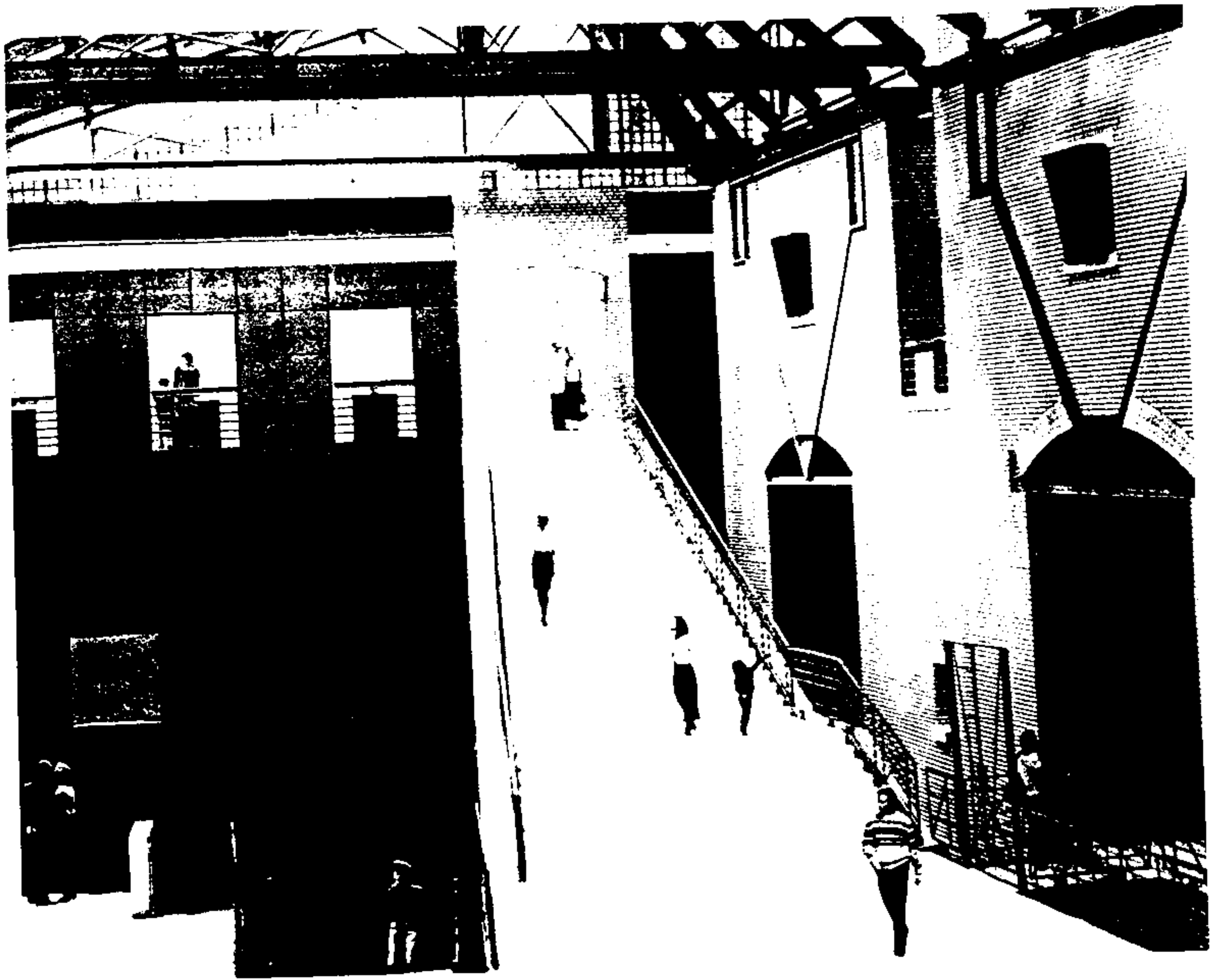
of glass. These panels are the Walls of Nations, where every nation that suffered deaths is identified by a panel of glass." Visitors will then proceed diagonally through the Hall of Witness, the path lighted by a diagonally cut skylight high above. Elevators at the end of this path will take visitors to the fourth floor, where the historical exhibit will begin. But to enter the exhibit, visitors must cross a bridge made of glass blocks, what Freed describes as "a dangerous path."<sup>23</sup>

The visitors' last stop at the detached Hall of Witness, like their first, will also resonate brokenness, an irresolution of form and meaning. In this great, open, sky-lit gallery, absence will reign, architectural emptiness to recall the void left behind by a people's mass murder. All structures and materials reflect brokenness, irreparability: from the floor of verde antica marble, naturally cracked and disintegrating, to a gigantic crack in the granite wall symbolizing a breach in civilization, to the roof and its skylight, skewed and fragmented with metal trusses. Lines inside are deliberately skewed and twisted, without reassuring angle or form.

The discontinuity and fragmentation preserved in the museum's interior architectural space could not, however, be similarly conveyed in the exhibition narrative itself. For, like all narrative, that created in the exhibition will necessarily depend on the continuity and coherence of its telling of history. Because the exhibits are not installed at the time of this writing, and will be in a state of relative flux until the museum's actual opening, I reflect here only on the written narrative of the project director's "walk-through."

According to Berenbaum, visitors will begin their exhibition walk-through with an immediate, personal leap of identity.<sup>24</sup> On entering the museum, all visitors will be asked to type their age, gender, and profession into a computer, after which they will be issued an identity card of someone like themselves who was caught up in the Holocaust. At three stages of the exhibit, visitors will have their cards updated, so that with every passing year in exhibit-time, the personal history of what might be called our phantom-guide will be revealed further. At the end of the permanent exhibition, visitors will insert their cards into a television monitor and meet the companion face-to-face through oral history—or, if the phantom-companion died, the memory of the deceased will be conveyed by surviving family and friends.

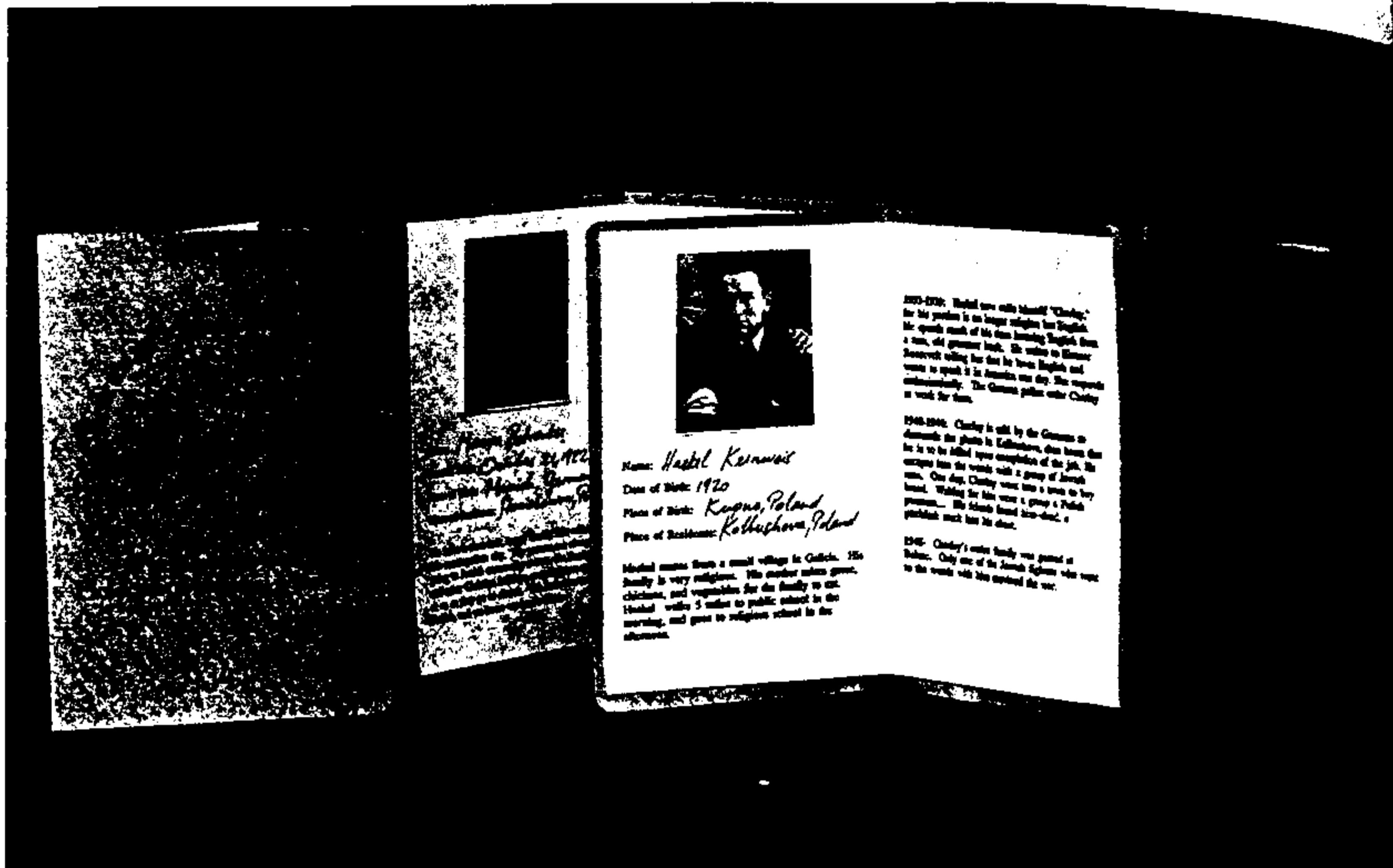
On the one hand, such a device allows individuals a chance to personalize history, to know it "as if it happened to us," in the Passover refrain. For a moment, at least, the victims are rehumanized, invigorated with the very life force of the visitors themselves. But at another level, the device perpetrates a small but significant deception. For by inviting visitors to remember their museum experience as if it were a victim's Holocaust experience, the personal identity card asks



Model of the Hall of Witness in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, which will serve as a central gathering space. Note the open rafters, skewed angles, and cracks on the wall—all to

suggest a breach in architectural norms after the Holocaust.

Photo: Courtesy of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.



A personal identification card similar to this will be issued to visitors to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Each card will contain personal data entered into a computer by visitors, turning all into victims for the day. Photo: Courtesy of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

us to confuse one for the other. While the "experiential mode" has come into increasing favor by museums, it also encourages a certain critical blindness on the part of visitors. Imagining oneself as a past victim is not the same as imagining oneself—or another person—as a potential victim, the kind of leap necessary to prevent other "holocausts." All of which obscures the contemporary reality of the Holocaust, which is not the event itself, but *memory* of the event, the great distance between then and now, between there and here. For this, not the Holocaust itself, is our pre-eminent reality now, no less than the Holocaust was the victims' pre-eminent reality then.

In addition, a further twist has been detected by Jonathan Rosen: "The irony is that many Jews during the Holocaust scrambled to acquire false papers in order to survive the war—the papers of non-Jews. There is a reverse principle at work here, as if everyone were expected to enter the museum an American and leave, in some fashion, a Jew."<sup>25</sup> If this is true, then precisely the opposite effect of a unifying experience has been achieved: Americans enter whole, only to exit in their constituent parts.

This is a victim-imagined museum: the visitor—now victim—returns to see it all through the victim's eyes. The Holocaust was, after all, a Holocaust only for the victims, something else for the perpetrators. By this logic, a perpetrator-made

Holocaust museum would turn visitors into potential murderers: the professor who collaborated, the schoolchild who taunted her Jewish classmates, the Hitler Youth who ended up in the SS, a concentration camp guard. How people became killers might be almost as interesting as how people became victims, though not nearly as inviting a motif as the latter, nor much of a basis for a national museum meant to affirm national ideals and values.

Despite their identity cards, the visitors' experience will begin appropriately with America's first direct Holocaust experience—through the eyes of the American GIs who liberated Buchenwald and Dachau. In this opening section, we will view footage of the camps at their liberation filmed by the Army, images that will convey both the shock of the Americans and the gratitude and relief of survivors on being liberated, many of them about to become new Americans. With a little chronological slippage, in fact, it could be said that as potential Americans, many of the victims in these films were already somehow American. Indeed, many became American solely on the strength of their experiences as Holocaust victims: for them, the Holocaust was the beginning of their becoming American, making the Holocaust an essentially American experience.

And then, unlike European Holocaust museums that begin and end with the destruction of its Jews, and unlike museums in Israel that often show the prewar European Diaspora as already half-dead, the U.S. Holocaust Museum will reflect an essential exilic bias, showing the great vibrancy and richness of Jewish life lost in the Holocaust. The tragedy in this context is not just how European Jewry was destroyed, or the gruesome remains at the end, but the richly complex life lost—the thousand years of civilization extirpated, unregenerated, unrepaired. The Holocaust is defined here not as mere killing, but as an immeasurable loss. (Even Israeli museums that include life before and after the Holocaust are not so generous in their appraisal of pre-Holocaust Jewish life in Europe—so decayed and decrepit in the Zionist view, so defenseless and weak, that it almost deserved to perish. For to do otherwise, to represent Diaspora Jewry in overly generous terms would be to undercut Israel's very reason for existence).

Because the American experience of Nazi Germany in the thirties was necessarily mediated by newsreels, papers, and radio broadcasts, the media experience itself is recreated in the next section. Visitors will enter a typical American living room in 1939, complete with a radio broadcasting news reports, newspapers and magazines discussing contemporary events. This was the American experience, in all of its limited and necessarily mediated ways.

After this, the visitors will reinsert their personal identity cards and so be transformed again from Americans to victims. To reach a section on the ghetto, visitors will traverse a narrow bridge like the ones that linked the outside world to

the ghettos then. Then they will walk on authentic cobblestones from the Warsaw Ghetto and view other artifacts, such as a sewing machine, a baby carriage, a policeman's bicycle, and other items showing the range of life in the Ghetto: each artifact a metonymic reminder of the actual life once animating it. Though director Jeshayahu Weinberg believes such artifacts make the factuality of the Holocaust self-evident, an immunization against the negationist lies that deny the Holocaust, they also suggest something the Holocaust was not: a collection of ownerless items, junked. Of course, this is true for other museums as well, but any time an entire people is represented by the artifacts of their lives, something of life itself is lost. Because this museum will be showing entire cases of victims' shoes, their hair, and other remnants brought from the Auschwitz museum, the earlier critique I made of that museum would apply here as well.

After the ghetto experience, the narrative will turn to mass murder, beginning with the Einsatzgruppen, the mobile killing units of the SS responsible for murdering some 1.5 million Jews in the Soviet Union. According to Berenbaum, however, this part will also be X-rated: a four-foot-high tin wall will keep young children from looking into the abyss, visible only to their elder siblings and parents. From here visitors will enter a section on the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, whence they will be herded over a bridge narrowing from sixteen to five feet wide, crowded together while they view films of the deportations. For those survivors who, in Berenbaum's words, "don't need to see or feel what they can never forget," or who grow claustrophobic, or who just cannot bear the horrible images, there will be a detour, an escape ramp away from the crowds and horror.

A section on concentration camps will follow, replete with an actual barrack imported from Birkenau. Again, according to Berenbaum, this and other artifacts will be used to refute the lies of Holocaust negationists. Once inside the barracks, visitors will view a scale model of the gas chambers designed after a similar model on view at Auschwitz. Canisters of Zyklon-B, long deactivated, will attend this section, along with contracts of the construction companies who built the gas chamber and crematorium complexes, guaranteeing a longevity of twenty-five years. "Issues of corporate behavior—with all their ethical ramifications—must be confronted squarely in this tower," Berenbaum writes.

After the death exhibits, visitors will find both respite and some sense of vindication in sections on resistance and "the courage to care." Here the stories of ghetto fighters and partisans will be told alongside those of other heroes, such as Raoul Wallenberg (who saved a hundred thousand Jews in Budapest) and the French village of Chambon, where Jewish children were hidden and protected.

Finally, like the museum narratives in Israel, where lives were rebuilt after the



Holocaust, this exhibit will end with the "return to life." For this is the story of an ideal shared by America and Israel: both see themselves as lands of refuge and freedom. What will follow is a story of immigration, the long journey from "Old World" displaced persons camps, ravaged towns, and anti-Semitism to the "New Worlds" of Jewish statehood and American egalitarianism. It is the story of America's absorption of both immigrants and their memories, the gradual integration of Holocaust memory into American civic culture. At the end, the museum will suggest itself as the ultimate triumph of America's absorption of immigrants, the integration of immigrant memory into the topographical heart of American memory. All of which visitors will meditate upon in the Hall of Remembrance, a hexagonal hall adjacent the permanent exhibition gallery.

In his introduction to the museum walk-through, Berenbaum addresses the reciprocal exchange between a monument and its surroundings. It is not only a matter of a monument's meaning being shaped by its context—the Holocaust Americanized, in this case—but also of the surroundings being re-viewed in light of the Holocaust memorial. "When people leave the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum," Berenbaum writes, "the monuments to democracy that surround it—to Lincoln and Jefferson and Washington—will take on a new meaning." Such American icons of democracy will either be affirmed for the ways their ideals prevented similar events in America or, in the eyes of Native Americans, African Americans, and Japanese Americans, reviewed skeptically for the ways such ideals might have prevented, but did not, the persecution of these groups on American soil. Every visitor will bring a different experience to the museum, as well as a different kind of memory out of it.

In America, the traditional impulse to anchor memory in historical crisis is further complicated—and exacerbated—by a number of additional factors unique to the contemporary Jewish American experience. For in America's culture of assimilation, where explicitly religious differences are tolerated and de-emphasized, it is almost always the memory of extreme experience that serves to distinguish the identity of minority groups from the majority population. Indeed, one of the central topoi of American New World identity, beginning with the progenitors of America's "majority population"—the pilgrims—is the memory of Old World oppression.

During the rise of civil rights activism in the 1960s, in particular, new-found ethnic pride among African Americans, Jewish Americans, and Native Americans depended in great measure on the power of a remembered past to bind otherwise alienated groups. The myth of the American melting-pot rapidly gave

way to a sense of America as patchwork quilt of ethnic, religious, and national constituencies. Jews, no less than other American ethnic groups, began to reassert their national identity, turning no less than other groups to their memory of mass suffering. As African Americans recalled their enslavement and Native Americans their genocide, Jewish Americans recalled the Holocaust as the crux of their common heritage.

In fact, without the traditional pillars of Torah, faith, and language to unify them, the majority of Jews in America have turned increasingly to the Holocaust as their vicariously shared memory. This preoccupation with the Holocaust may have led, in turn, to the massive outpouring of support for Israel in May 1967—when the Jewish state seemed threatened with destruction. For many Jewish Americans, the point of common identification with the Jews of Israel seemed to lie in their potential destruction. In a perverse way, love of Israel and Holocaust memory now seemed to be two sides of the same coin: the more acute Holocaust memory, the greater the fear that Israel stood on the brink of another Holocaust—and the greater the relief and pride when Israel emerged victorious.

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America

Ironically, if true to the Israeli notion of a "Galut mentality," when Israel came to be perceived as less a potential victim, it also became less a source of identity and pride among American Jews. And as identification with Israel waned during the late 1970s, reaching its nadir during the Lebanon war, the other half of secular American Jewish identity—Holocaust memory—assumed a greater proportion of Jewish time and resources. Accordingly, as Israel absorbs more and more formerly victimized Soviet Jews, and is perceived to have been victimized itself during the Persian Gulf War in 1990, its stature as source of identity in American Jewish eyes will surely rebound. In this way, the fates of Holocaust memory and sympathy for Israel may always be intertwined.

Over time, the only "common" experience uniting an otherwise diverse, often fractious, community of Jewish Americans has been the vicarious memory of the Holocaust. Left-wing and right-wing Jewish groups, religious and secular, Zionist and non-Zionist may all draw different conclusions from the Holocaust. But all agree that it must be remembered, if to entirely disparate ideological ends. As a result, while Jewish day schools, research institutes, and community centers run deficits, millions of dollars continue to pour into Holocaust memorial projects and museums. As unattractive as this reality may be, its significance has not been lost on savvy fundraisers across the spectrum of Jewish organizations. For example, full-page advertisements in the *New York Times* appealing for donations to support the exodus of Soviet Jews in 1990 described this rescue in the image of another Holocaust prevented. "It starts with hate mail, name calling,

and grave desecrations," the caption reads over a photo of Yad Vashem's memorial hall. "We all know how it ends. And now it looks like it's starting all over again in the Soviet Union."<sup>26</sup> On a more local level, nearly all community centers and Jewish Federation offices also include some reference to the Holocaust, a suggestion that every stone to build a new Jewish community be regarded as an implicit sign of Hitler's defeat.

By extension, Holocaust museums are increasingly becoming the centers for historical education, activism, and fundraising. Consequently, instead of learning about the Holocaust through the study of Jewish history, many Jews and non-Jews in America learn the whole of Jewish history through the lens of the Holocaust. Without other kinds of museums to a Jewish past, even to current life in the Diaspora to offset them, Holocaust memorials and museums tend to organize Jewish culture and identity around this one era alone. As a result, not only will the Holocaust continue to be suggest itself as a center of American Jewish consciousness, but it will become all that non-Jewish Americans know about a thousand years of European Jewish civilization.

In the end, the American Jewish community may not be able to have it both ways: it will be difficult to sustain the exclusively Jewish character of the Holocaust and continue to make it a public event. A Jewish memorial to the Shoah is one thing, a civic memorial to the Holocaust another. Each answers to a different constituency; each reflects different kinds of meaning in memory. Public Holocaust memorials in America will increasingly be asked to invite many different, occasionally competing groups of Americans into their spaces. African Americans and Korean Americans, Native Americans and Jews will necessarily come to share common spaces of memory, if not common memory itself. In this, the most ideal of American visions, every group in America may eventually come to recall its past in light of another group's historical memory, each coming to know more about their compatriots' experiences in light of their own remembered past.