

“For the Dead and the Living We must bear Witness”- The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

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How does one design a memorial for Atrocity, signify inhumanity and despair of global proportion, enrich Life by commemorating Death?



fig. 1

When the United States Holocaust Memorial Council commissioned Architect James Ingo Freed of Pei Cobb Freed & Partners to design The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the challenge was to use the spatial medium to convey the criminality of the systematic, industrialised extermination of some six million Jews and other so-called enemies of the Nazi state and educate people.

The 250,000sq ft building complex, which houses a museum, research and education and learning centre bears ample testimony to his achievement. Located between the Washington Monument and the Jefferson Monument in the capital

city, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum gives a deeply moving, wholly absorbing experience and a historical lesson to all visitors.

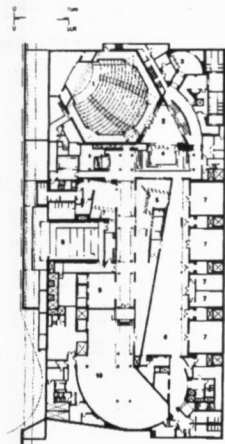
The modest exterior view does not give any clue of what it stores inside (fig. 1). However, the rather unusual limestone screened curved portico wall through the metallic revolving entrance intrigues the visitor to venture further.

Passing through the 'Hall of Flags' and then a metallic podium, he arrives at the 'Hall of Witness'. It is a double-height space sandwiched by moulded brick walls in between the narrow long gap formed by two wings of the museum (fig.2). A

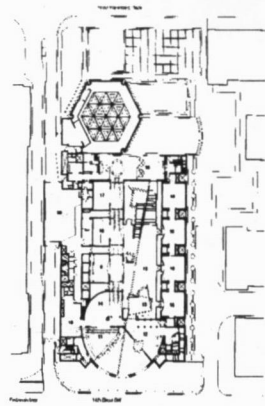
heavy skeleton of steel trusses holds the very light, thin glass roof of the sky light, allowing light being screened through a criss-cross pattern. Overhead, beyond the skylight, is a series of glazed bridges with floors entirely of block glass, connecting the two wings. This spatial interplay makes the people crossing from one wing to the other look like ghostly shadows and the observer feels as if he is 'being watched' in anonymity.

The grand staircase is a welcoming sight to the visitor in his sudden urge to find a way out of this rather uneasy setting. Looking up, he sees people coming out through a well-lit framed entranceway, where the staircase ends up. The continuous flow of





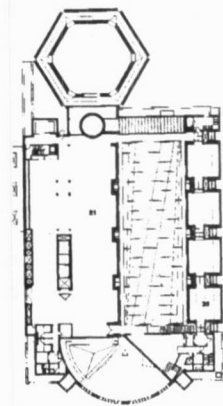
Concourse level



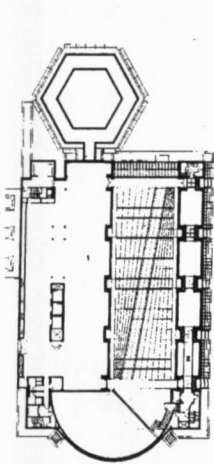
First/main floor



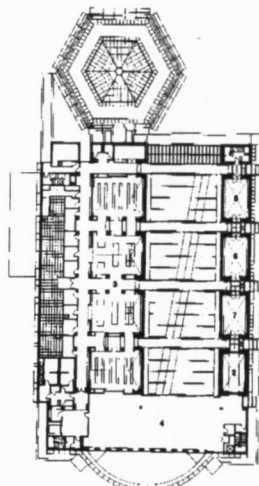
Second floor



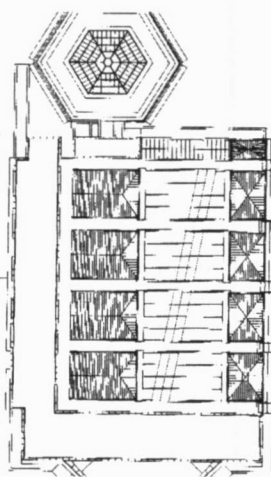
Third floor



Fourth floor



Fifth floor



Roof

Plans

- | | |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. Meyerhoff Theater | 14 Hall of Flags |
| 2. Theatre lobby | 15 Hall of Witness |
| 3. Green room | 16 15th Street entrance |
| 4. Amphitheatre | 17 Patron's Lounge |
| 5. Stairs to Hall of Witness | 18 Cloakroom |
| 6. Education, Conference Centre | 19 Bookshop |
| 7. Classrooms | 20 Loading dock |
| 8. Cinema | 21 Permanent Exhibition space |
| 9. Lift lobby | 22 Ante-chamber |
| 10 Temporary Exhibition Space | 23 Hall of Remembrance |
| 11. Entrance for individuals | 24 Galleria |
| 12. Group entrance | 25 Hall of Learning |
| 13. Stage | 26 Tower of Victims |

fig.3: Floor Plans

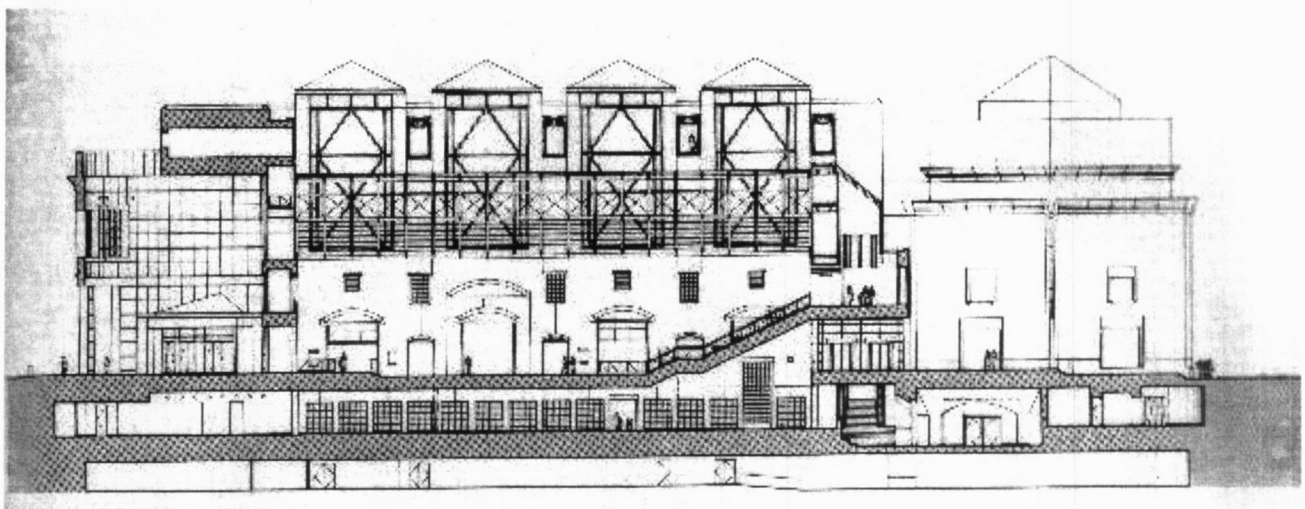


fig.4: Section looking South

people descending down entices him to ascend, against the tide. The move upwards is spontaneous but he realises at the entranceway that it is only a one-way gate to come out from a yet unknown interior (fig. 5).

Embarrassed and feeling almost 'defeated' he comes down to search for the nearest exit and finds the lift lobby.

The sudden psycho-spatial drama with its high tempo stirs his deeper emotions. *'Am I the witness for the dead and the living?'* Thinking aloud, the visitor gets into the lift.

This journey upwards unfolds another unique experience. Large solid grey lifts with low ceiling and video monitors take the visitors straight on to the fourth floor. While the video monitors make him feel more conscious of himself, the hidden microphones keep on playing voice intones: *"We do not know what it is, some sort of a prison"*. However, his defensive mood is shattered at the very moment he steps out of the lift. The unusual loud banging of the lift door while getting closed makes him feel as if he is thrown out at once!

Before entering the permanent exhibition spaces he is given a passport as an identification card, which describes the story of a real person who may have been a victim, a survivor, a rescuer, a helper or an executor. Soon the visitor becomes one of the millions of similar persons while witnessing the genuine remnants such as shoes, pieces of clothes and photographs.

The permanent exhibition area spans three floors. Starting on the fourth floor the visitor is made to walk downwards up to the first floor. This journey takes him through a chronological progression of events, which begins with the life before the Holocaust in the early 1930s. Within the darkened surrounding of the fourth floor, the "Nazi Assault 1933- 1939" unfolds itself with the photographs, archival films and artifacts displayed. The

story begins with informative panels showing the calculated deprivation of property, human rights and eventually the lives of the Jews, Gypsies and the handicapped. Documentaries, newspaper headlines, vintage newsreels, documents, letters and architectural casts augment the exhibit. Two small theatres screen films on anti-Semitism and on Nazi regime's rise to power.

The spatial progression leads the visitor through a sequential order of events; the early years of Hitler's rise to power, tyranny and genocide, the camps and ghettos. The life of ghetto and concentration camp is depicted on the third floor in "Final Solution: 1940 - 1944". Personal articles, food bowls, and work implements are interspersed with actual railcar, which

visitors can walk through, and a scale model of a gas chamber. Sensitive topics are presented discreetly for optional viewing, by sunken video monitors surrounded by chest high walls.

At the first floor, the "Aftermath 1945 to Present" illustrates various rescue and resistance efforts. Resistance fighter's weapons, photos of rescuers, prison martyrs and survivors are on display together with film footages of Nuremberg trial, arrival of liberating armies in camps. A deep sigh of relief goes out as the visitor crosses through 'The Period of Liberation' from Hitler in 1945.

'Holocaust was the systematic extermination of the Jews by the



fig. 5

Nazi state and involved **efficient segregation, deportation and ultimately the killing** of many millions'. This perception is carved into the visitor's mind with the experience of this spatial entity.

Freed, in this amazing architectural creation has presented us with what Antoniadis (1980) calls, 'useful and mind elevating whole'. The elements that are 'visible' and 'invisible', spaces that are 'tangible' and 'intangible' have been orchestrated, facilitating a deep emotional and intellectual experience.

In casting this experience, Freed manipulates spaces in such a way that the visitor feels as if he is segregated from the rest of the world and deported into an arena where emotions are at war, but only to set himself free from the mundane towards a 'divine' realm.

The spaces segregate and deport the visitor, reminding him of the actual historical precedence where people were segregated from their families, friends and communities and deported to unknown places of death.

A sense of segregation is evoked spatially as the visitor passes through the narrow pressure points such as footbridges, the entryway to the reconstructed barracks, and the cattle truck, which were used to transport masses of people to the ghettos and camps.

Visible elements of genuine objects such as the authentic barracks from Auschwitz, a cattle car used to transport Jews, thousands of shoes from camps piled together, sacks of hair, stacks of bags, rows of photographs, letters and diaries together with the invisible the odor of death, cold dark spaces and the materials used such as brick walls, wooden floor, cold metal handrails and railway sleepers bring back the agonizing experience of people who went through the atrocity making us

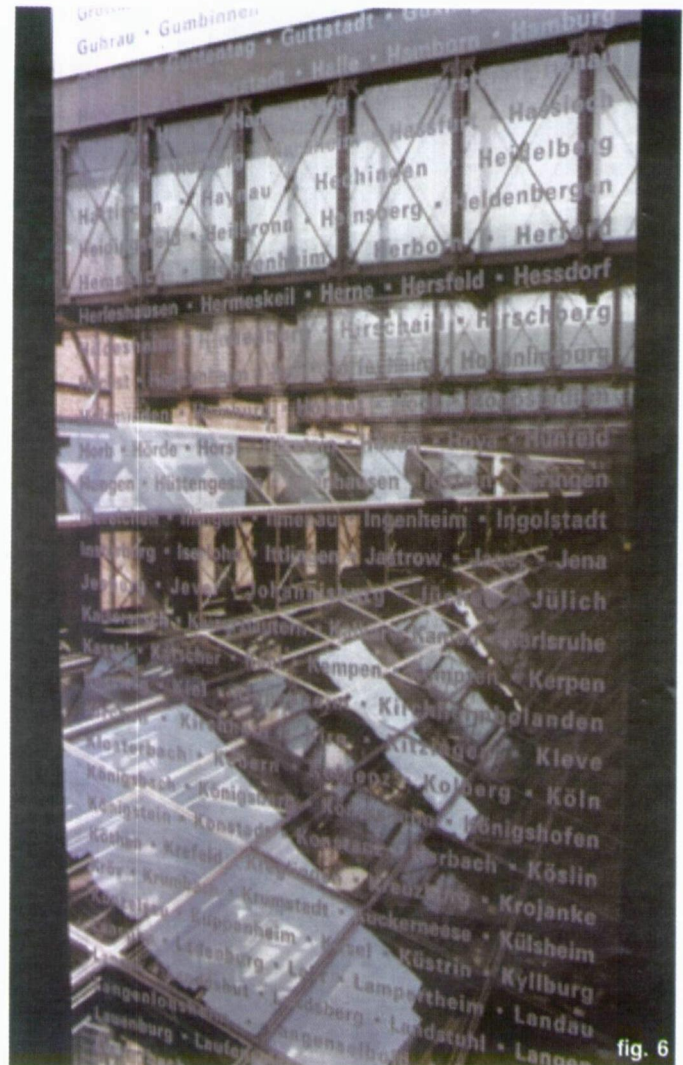


fig. 6

think of what we are witnessing even today.

At once, the visitor feels the urge to escape from this setting, yearns for light, life, a feeling as if he himself is one of the victims in the camps. Freed provides an escape but it is momentary. The glass bridges provide light, a sudden glimpse of hope and freedom from the cold dark enclosed exhibition spaces (fig. 6). Looking beyond, he gets the panoramic view of Washington DC and the Washington Monument, which symbolises democracy and human rights.

Crossing over to the other wing he steps into the 'Tower of Victims' next (fig.8). Photographs of inhabitants killed in a Polish village, Shtetl Ejszysk are packed back to back to form the wall of this dark three-

storeyed tower. As the visitor crosses over from one end to the other the faces on the photographs gaze and scrutinise him.

In reality, it is he who questions himself of what the world has lost with these millions of people!

"For the Dead and the Living We must bear Witness", engraved in bold black lettering, above the entrance of the 'Hall of Remembrance' is a silent reminder to him of the duty he owes towards mankind.

The 'Hall of Remembrance' is different to any other space found in this building. It is a star-spaced hollow space symbolizing the Star of David. With light flowing from the glass dome above and through the



fig. 8

side-slits, a flame is lit directly in line with its entry point. This is the place for emancipation, to let go one's long imprisoned feelings and emotions (fig. 9).

Finally, the visitor comes back to the framed entrance leading to the 'Hall of Witness' that 'defeated' him at the beginning of his journey. At the top of the stairway, this time he perceives the space below at a higher elevation. Now it is "transformed" into a space of joy, full of light and life!

In contemplation he realises that the transformation is within, and resulted in winning over his emotions while joining the flow of his fellowmen to descend the stairway (fig. 10).

References

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www.ushmn.org



fig. 9

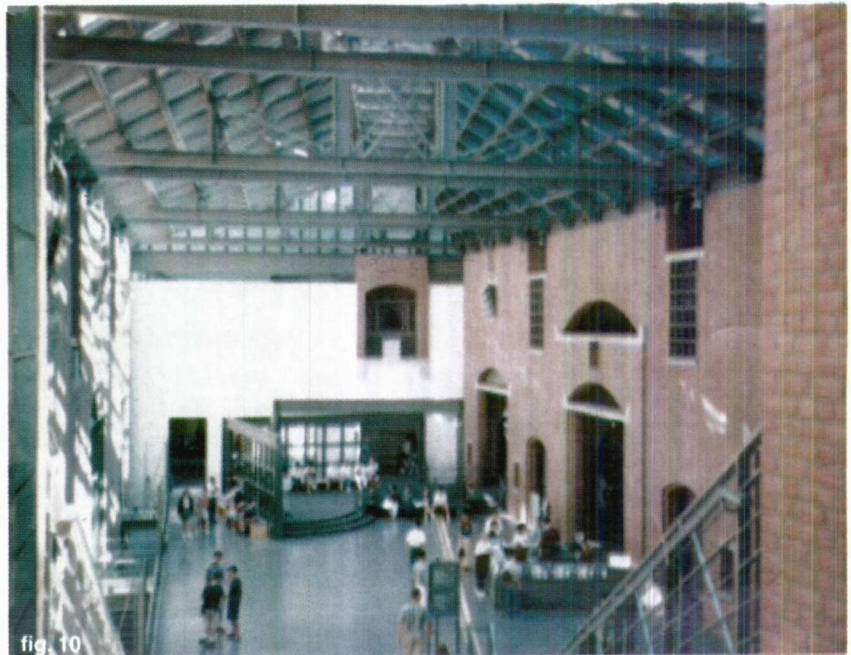


fig. 10