

# INTERVENTIONS

## *Feature Essay*



*CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION*

Volume 6:1

(ISSN 2454 -9495)

July 2024

## **Mangled Memories in Masonry: The Semiotics of Trauma Architecture**

*\*\*Oly Roy*

**Abstract:** In a world of growing psychological awareness, trauma, as an “extreme” human experience has moved into prominence. Understood largely as an “unpresentable event”, trauma finds expression not based on the experience itself, but on the temporally dilated memory of the experience. Therefore, not only narratives of trauma but other semiotic representations attempt to bear witness to this ‘psychological wound’ that Cathy Caruth views as “an unresolvable problem of the unconscious that illuminates the inherent contradictions of experience and language” (1996). Collective processes of trauma which originate from sustained historical violence, including, but not limited to racist brutality, ethnographic persecution and even class domination have found representations that are both socially specific and psychologically perspicacious. Apart from oral and written narratives, these representations can find semiotic translation in the form of various sculptural and architectural renderings such as interactive and sophisticated exhibitions, memorials and museums. Since semiotics looks at the oppositional relationship of things as key to communication and cognition, this signification helps in encompassing a broader range of experiences. Explored from the perspective of semiotic manifestation, architectural renderings of collective psychological trauma must be understood as different from mere buildings as they suggest the existence of extrinsic meaning beyond the governing functionality of the structure itself. Built on this complex system of relationships generating meaning from form, my study will attempt to investigate the semiotics of architectural trends in select trauma memorials and museums to show how these spaces emerge as sites of memory and engage in self-reflexive meditations based on the ‘politics of nostalgia’.

**Keywords:** *Memory, trauma, architecture, museum, violence*

Trauma and Architecture are terms that bespeak of an intrinsic ambiguity in relation to their historical and cultural contexts. In a world of growing psychological awareness trauma has gained centrality. Understood largely as an “unpresentable event”, trauma finds expression not based on the experience itself, but on the temporally dilated memory of the experience. In an architectural discourse on trauma, Sigmund Freud’s fundamental idea of *Nachtraglichkeit* or deferred action becomes significant as it distinguishes between traumatic event or experience and its delayed revival as a memory. Collective processes of trauma which originate from sustained historical violence, including, but not limited to racist brutality, ethnographic

persecution and even class domination have found representations that are both socially specific and psychologically perspicacious (see Alexander 2012). Apart from oral and written narratives, these representations can find semiotic translation in the form of various sculptural and architectural renderings such as interactive and sophisticated exhibitions, memorials and museums. Since semiotics looks at the oppositional relationship of things as key to communication and cognition, this signification helps in encompassing a broader range of experiences. Explored from the perspective of semiotic manifestation, architectural renderings of collective psychological trauma must be understood as different from mere buildings as they suggest the existence of extrinsic meaning beyond the governing functionality of the structure itself (see Alexander 2004). Architecture, therefore, can explore the experience of trauma to produce spatially and temporally situated physical responses.

This essay attempts to take up select trauma museums and memorials to explore how the discipline of architecture evolves different responses to trauma: from redesigning of the traumatic event within the conventions of architectural representation, to political strategies for its urban diffusion and social redistribution, from reinvention of the memory of trauma to design strategies that imitate the forms of destruction (see Stoppani 2016). For this, it is important to understand the need for the evolution of memorial museums into sites of memory and the process by which such a change took place. In the second half of the twentieth century, memorial museums globally proliferated a broader interest in the past. Memorial museums now came to be seen as sites of memory which reflect on the manner in which “societies relate to the past, from seeing the past as merely precedent to the nation’s glorious future toward an emphasis on coming to terms with past violence and oppression.” (Sodaro 2018: 13) Responding to the political demands of past negativities, memorial forms have had to change to accommodate and address the past more adequately, harbour its memory, and learn from it. The paradigm of memorialization has evolved throughout the twentieth century with new cultural forms of remembrance gaining precedence. These new forms of memorialization do not seek to emerge as triumphant reminders of the glories of the nation-state as was the case in the nineteenth century but can rather be perceived as structural reminders intended to “teach the lessons of the horrors of past conflicts, violence, and genocide, to ensure that that which society might most like to forget is never forgotten” (Sodaro 2018: 13). Moreover, they appear to have adapted new forms, shapes and content that are reflective of a more global outlook.

Architecture as a discipline, with its own specific history, assumptions, knowledge and practices, is affected by and invested with social, political, economic, ideological and symbolic

values. Architecture of contemporary museums inspires active relationships between space, exhibitions, installations and visitors. Memorial museums combine the archival tasks of historical museums with the commemorative function of memorials. Their designs occupy central place in public discourse as they exert influence well beyond their doors. These designs have often been part of sincere debates about the role they play in terms of creating national identity as well as identity for victims, survivors and perpetrators. Since trauma plays a seminal role in significantly altering the life and identity of both its victims and perpetrators, representation and narration of trauma is often a socially, politically and philosophically challenging endeavour. Architecture can confront reality and represent it in the form of long enduring forms. Thus, collective trauma which often struggles to find specific representation and unified historical narration can attain semiotic reflection in the form of structural or architectural designs that delineate the core of the trauma as perceived through the socio-political as well as psycho-philosophical lens.

Thus, a deeper look at the architecture of specific museums will help us recognize how these spaces encompass a sense of particularism. Each museum has its own specific design that hopes to capture the essence of the trauma it represents, the emotional stress of the experience and the way the trauma has been worked through (see Murphy 2016). So, the designs are semiotically specific and particular in their representation. The architecture of memorial museums or trauma museums can also be said to be oriented towards replicating the emotional force of the violence. Trauma is a highly emotionally charged experience and the architecture of the museums attempts to replicate this emotional force of the violence. The structural design of the museums reflects on the sentiments of the victims and the survivors and often allows the visitors sensory experiences that will help them feel the emotional force of the brutality that led to the collective cultural trauma. Since trauma itself emanates from an experience steeped in disorientation and incoherence, the architecture of trauma museums recreates the same within its structure. Use of deconstructed building structures, empty spaces or voids, artifacts related to the traumatic event and other sensory details help in situating the visitors in the moment of trauma, allowing them to experience the incoherence and disorientation of the unfolding moment (see Stoppani 2016).

Memorial museums play a significant role in the reimagining of social relations between nation and victims, victims and survivors as well as between survivors and perpetrators. These are spaces where nations negotiate the long-range meaning of traumatic events that shape the history of a nation and its people. They engage sympathy and generate

solidarity amongst people. These memorials are powerful landscapes that demonstrate the evidence of violence and intrinsically embody the traumatic core of the memories (see Simko 2020). Since these spaces are not merely commemorative but also have archival significance, one can perceive how information and emotions fuse together in this space. Galleries, Informative videos as well as other forms of detailed information are delineated through these spaces, sometimes as an integral part of the structure or as externally manifested exhibitions which engage and instruct the visitors to be wary of the genesis and proliferation of trauma. Finally, it is important to note how these structures embody the past and locate it spatially in the present, with an outlook towards the future in the form of lessons that can be learnt from the experience of visiting and viewing the structures. Such architectural forms therefore tie the past to the present and the future and allow for a symbolic portrayal of psychological trauma enmeshed in concrete, glass and steel.

To further my discussion on the semiotics of trauma architecture, I have selected three primary trauma museums whose architectural designs embody the essence of lived experiences of trauma and render them in forms of masonry. These include: The Jewish Museum, Berlin (Germany), The National Museum for Peace and Justice and The Legacy Museum located in Montgomery Alabama (USA) and The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh (Cambodia).

### **The Jewish Museum, Berlin (Germany)**

There are some traumas that not only affected cultures and communities, but changed the entire course of modern history. Opened to the public in 2001 and spread across 160,000 square feet, The Jewish Museum, Berlin (Germany) exhibits the social, political and cultural history of the Jews in Germany spread across centuries. Best known for explicitly presenting and integrating the repercussions of the Holocaust on Jews, the museum was designed by Daniel Libeskind. The museum's architectural design presents a conscious effort to manifest the history, experiences and emotions of the victims of the Holocaust for the first time in post-war Germany.

Created a year before the fall of the Berlin Wall Daniel Libeskind's design followed three primary insights: the impossibility of understanding the history of Berlin without sustained focus on the contributions made by its Jewish citizens; the need to integrate the

memory and meaning of the Holocaust into the consciousness of the city of Berlin; and the necessity of acknowledging the deliberate erasure of Jewish history by Germany.

The architectural design of the building has a few predominant structural centres. The Kollegienhaus (Fig 1) is where the tour of the museum commences. A baroque building constructed in 1933, it has with no visible connection above ground to Libeskind's 'deconstructivist-style' new museum. The Kollegienhaus was constructed with an intention to rekindle an interest in Jewish creativity a few days before the Nazis captured power in Germany (see Young 2007). The building was then closed down by the Gestapo in 1938. At present, the baroque old building allows visitors to access through an underground passageway the modern, twisted, zig-zag new museum building designed by Libeskind.



Fig 1: Kollegienhaus (Right); Libeskind's Building (Left)  
Source: Berlin.de

The next predominant structural design used extensively by Libeskind in the building are the Voids. Following their entry through the Kollegienhaus, the visitors descend by stairway through the dramatic Entry Void, into the underground which connects the old and the new buildings while preserving the apparent autonomy of the structures on the surface. Voids (Fig 2) are allowed to cut through the zig-zagging structural plan of Libeskind's building (Fig 1) to create notions of spaces that signify absence, alluding symbolically to the forced absence of Jews from German history. The Void is of central importance to the architectural design of the museum and visitors encounter as many as sixty bridges that open into the Void (see Reeh 2016).

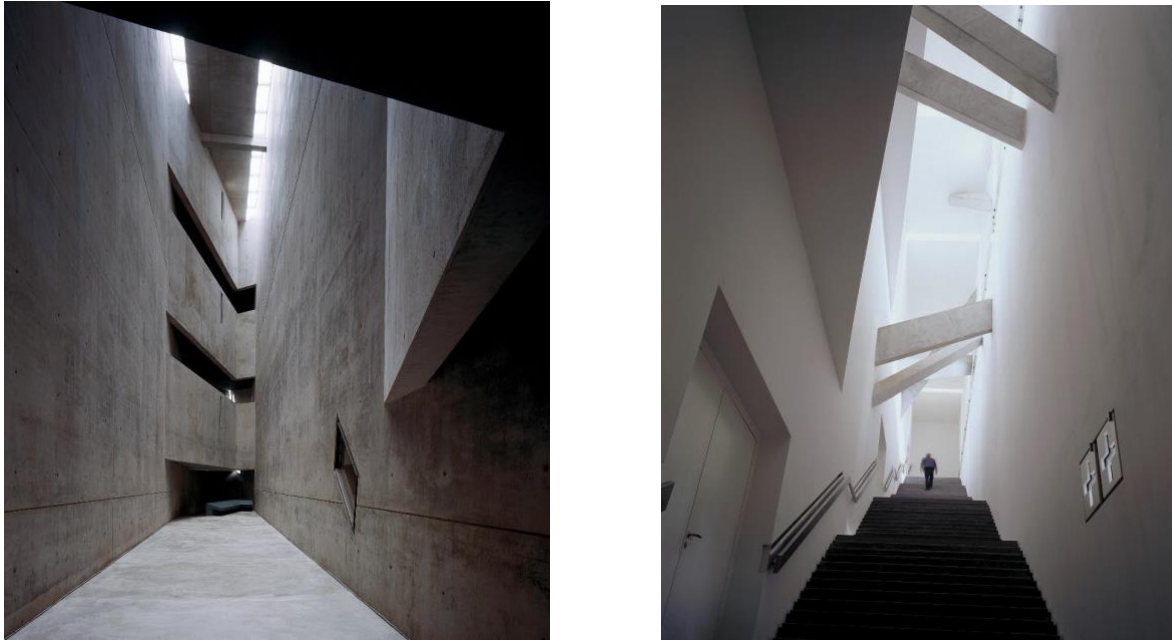


Fig 2: The Voids in Libeskind's Building  
Source: jmberlin.de

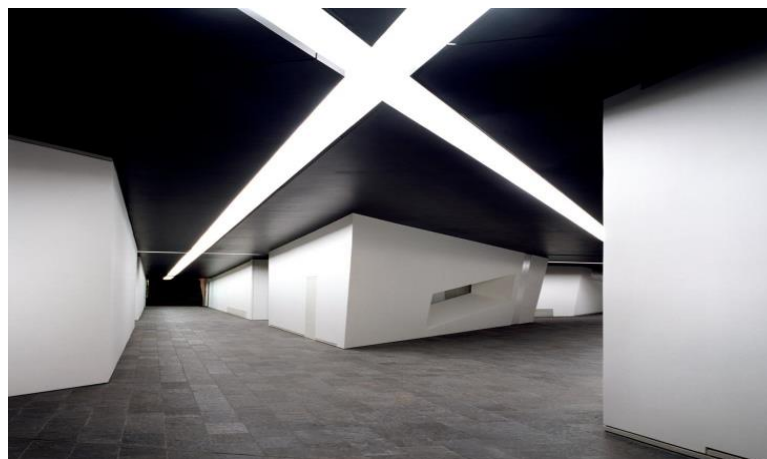


Fig 3: The Axes in the Basement  
Source: jmberlin.de

Following the descent, the visitors encounter three underground axial routes (Fig 3) each designed to narrate a story of its own. The first of these axial routes leads to the Holocaust Tower, a dead end expressing "That which can never be exhibited when it comes to Jewish Berlin history: Humanity reduced to ashes" (Libeskind 2000). The Tower (Fig 4) is a 79-foot tall empty concrete silo wherein light penetrates only through a small opening in the roof. The second of the axes leads out of the building towards the Garden of Exile and Emigration (Fig 5), commemorating the memories of those who were forced to leave Berlin. The garden has oleaster growing atop forty-nine pillars, forty-eight of which have soil from Berlin, and one



from Jerusalem. The third axes being the longest, traces its path leading towards the Stair of Continuity, signifying the continuity of Jewish life in German history.



Fig 4: The Holocaust Tower  
Source: jmberlin.de



Fig 5: The Garden of Exile  
Source: jmberlin.de

The third axes also leads to the Exhibition Spaces where various artistic installations and displays allow the visitors to emotionally, sensorily and intellectually discover the nuances of the collective trauma caused by the Holocaust. Two such installations are mention-worthy and fit the scheme of Libeskind's global design seamlessly. The installation titled '*Shalekhet – Fallen Leaves*', was created by Israeli artist Menashe Kadishman (Fig 6). It features ten

thousand steel visages scattered on the floor of the Memory Void, the only voided space in Libeskind's building that can be physically accessed by visitors. Kadishman's artwork is dedicated not only to the Jews killed during the *Shoah* or the Holocaust, but to all traumatised victims of violence and war. Visitors are encouraged to step on the faces and listen to the clanging sounds created by the metal sheets rattling against each other, a sensory experience resonating the pain and torment of man-made atrocities.



Fig 6: The Memory Void- Shalechet (Fallen Leaves) by Menashe Kadishman  
Source: jmberlin.de

Another installation named 'Gallery of the Missing' (Fig 7) is a project created by the German artist Via Lewandowsky involving three sound installations titled 'Order of the Missing'. Encased in black mirrored glass showcases, they display objects of Jewish culture destroyed during the Holocaust like the Encyclopaedia Judaica, the Jewish hospital in Frankfurt and the sculpture "Großer Kopf" (Der Neue Mensch: The New Man) by Otto Freundlich. The shape and structure of the black glass bodies resembles 'voids' of Libeskind's museum design. Visitors are invited to use infrared headphones to listen to sound recordings with explanations about incidents, culture and history.





Fig 7: The Gallery of the Missing  
Source: flickr.com

Through its architecture, design and installations, The Jewish Museum (Berlin), therefore, offers a comprehensive knowledge and experience of the trauma that numbed an entire community of people and etched itself indelibly into the memory of a nation: The Holocaust.

### **The National Museum for Peace and Justice and The Legacy Museum, Montgomery Alabama (USA)**

The nature of collective trauma is such that it seeps into the darkest recesses of memory and spills beyond the pages of history. It survives as a shadow lurking in the civilized corners of the immediate society and must therefore find expression in terms of historical understanding and contemporary representations. Opened to the public in 2018, The National Museum for Peace and Justice is USA's first memorial dedicated to "the legacy of enslaved Black people, people terrorized by lynching, African Americans humiliated by racial segregation and Jim Crow, and people of colour burdened with contemporary presumptions of guilt and police violence". (Equal Justice Initiative 2018)

The memorial museum curated under the guidance of the EJI (Equal Justice Initiative) was conceived as a space that could memorialize victims of racial terror lynchings and others forms of brutality. The central notion fuelling the architectural design of the space was the need to reflect on the African-American community's history of trauma and their on-going strife with racial injustice. The museum's design grapples with this painful racial history as it examines the truth through lenses of the past, the present and the future. The memorial space

also encourages unified recognition for the experience between non-victims (white Americans) and trans-generational victims so as to facilitate better understanding of social relations based on reimagination of history, contemporality and justice (see Doss 2010).

The main memorial square stands atop a hill with a pavilion housing over 800 rusted steel monuments (Fig 8 & 9). The six-foot tall monuments represent individual counties where lynchings occurred. Some have the names of the victims inscribed on them while others are marked as 'Unknown'. The EJI has expressed its hope that “the National Memorial inspires communities across the nation to enter an era of truth-telling about racial injustice and their own local histories” (Equal Justice Initiative 2015). The monuments are placed in a manner that they initially confront the visitors at eye level, after which the floor drops and the visitors have to gaze upon them from below, thus creating the impression of bodies being hanged at the gallows.

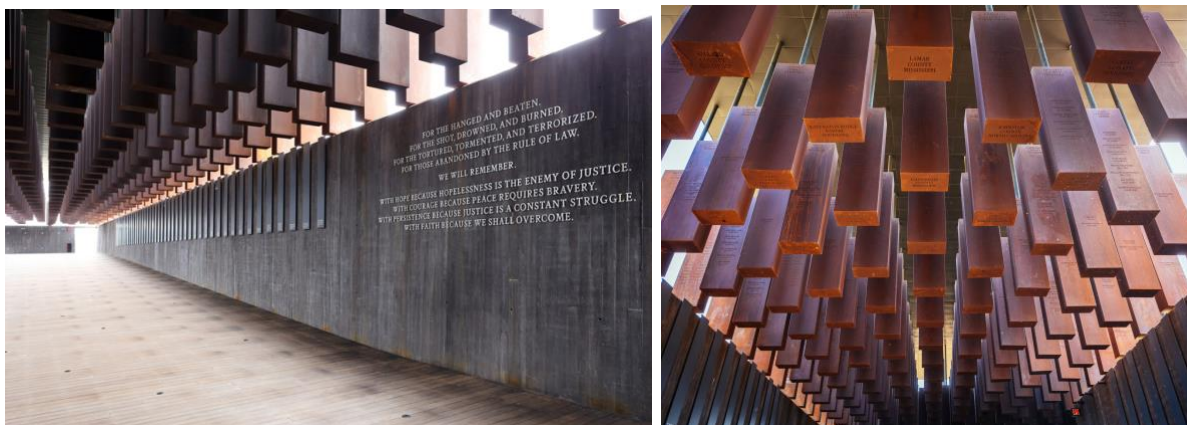


Fig 8: “The experience of the gallows is inverted and the living stand in judgement by the dead.” (Equal Justice Initiative 2015)

Source: massdesigngroup.org

The Memorial for Peace and Justice was primarily conceived keeping in mind the need for the visitors to experience the terror of slavery, lynchings as well as the horrors of the Civil Rights era. Multiple art installations and informative panels build in collaboration with various design groups facilitate a deeper understanding of the past horrors while continuing to add reflective pieces on issues of racial bias in the contemporary times. The panels focus on the history of enslavement of African-Americans and discuss how lynching became an ‘exceptionally powerful mechanism’ to coerce the Black community into subordination and instil fear in them by making a spectacle out of their abuse and mistreatment: “Victims were tortured for hours before their brutalized bodies were left out on display to traumatize other black people.” (Taylor 2019)



Fig 9: “These lynchings were terrorism... because these murders were carried out with impunity, sometimes in broad daylight... attended by the entire white community and conducted as celebratory acts of racial control and domination.” (Equal Justice Initiative 2015)  
Source: architizer.com

The Memorial Museum also houses a sculptural art installation by Kwame Akoto-Bamfo (Fig 10) which depicts the barbarity and brutality of the transatlantic slave trade. The installation features seven figures including three men, three women and a baby- all bound in shackles with copper-coloured rust, representing blood, streaming down their bodies. The woman appears to scream out as she clutches her baby in one arm while reaching out to grasp a man with the other. But the man cannot look at her and ‘turns away in shame’, recognizing his inability “to grant the security and protection he would have loved to give” (as explained by Akoto-Bamfo). The sculpture is evocative of the pain, trauma and humiliation that the inhuman practice of slavery created and sustained.



Fig 10: Kwame Akoto-Bamfo's installation  
Source: massdesigngroup.org

The Memorial also has installations like Dana King's sculpture dedicated to the women who sustained the Montgomery Bus Boycott, indicating the brutalities and resistance of the Civil Rights era. Installations representing contemporary issues of racist brutality (Fig 11) can also be found in the Museum space, like the row of figures with raised arms depicting police brutality in present day USA. The Museum also displays writings by Toni Morrison, Martin Luther King Jr and Elizabeth Alexander.



Fig 11: Hank Willis Thomas' *Raise Up*  
Source: moc.media

A few blocks away from the Memorial stands the Legacy Museum wherein the central focus is on understanding the perpetuation of the narrative of racial inferiority and injustice in USA. The Legacy Museum's exhibits and informational panels emotionally articulate the need for working through the pain of the past trauma. Maya Angelou's "On the Pulse of the Morning" is painted on the outside wall of the museum for all passers-by to witness (Fig 12).



The museum upholds the intention that “History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be un-lived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again” (Wall Graffiti outside Legacy Museum, Montgomery Alabama)

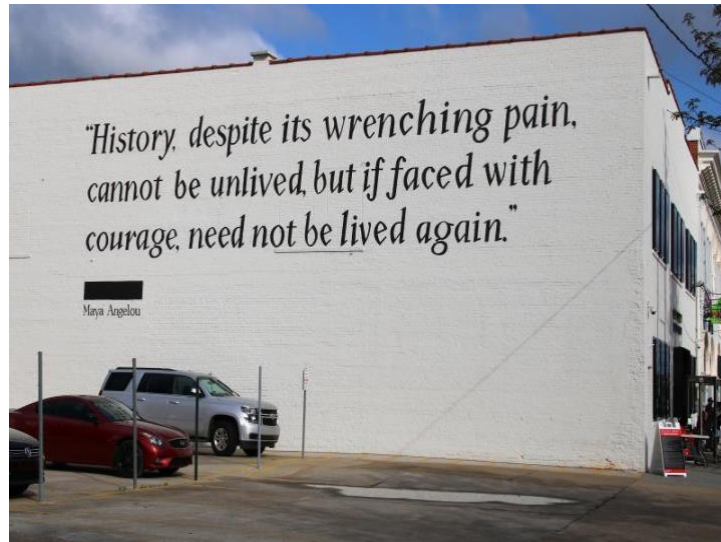


Fig 12: Outside the Legacy Museum  
Source: capegazette.com

### **Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, Phnom Penh (Cambodia)**

Housed in the former Tuol Sleng prison, the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum was opened in July, 1980. Tuol Sleng, meaning Hill of Poisonous Trees, was a Secondary School converted into the renowned detention and torture centre for Cambodia’s Khmer Rouge Regime between 1976 to 1979. The prison saw an estimated twenty thousand detainees who were tortured at the site before being executed at the Choeung Ek Killing Field. The museum has found itself at the centre of multiple controversies owing to the conflict between the Vietnamese backed Cambodian Government and Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge Guerillas. The museum attempts to evoke an emotional and sympathetic response from its visitors to help facilitate the preservation of the collective memory of the genocide and to encourage the construction of a new Cambodian national identity (see Lesley 2008).

To dissipate support for the Khmer Rouge Regime, the Government of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea encouraged Cambodians from all regions to visit the site which was run by the Vietnamese Army Colonel Mai Lam. The museum presents a very disturbing visual experience that is less pedagogically inclined, spread across four three-storey buildings. Building A was a former torture unit and houses rusted metal bedsteads, shackles, spikes,



spears, and other metal torture devices (Fig 13). Each room in the building exhibits a large photograph of a blood-soaked corpse (see Maguire 2005).



Fig 13; Source: Google Images

The next building, Building B, exhibits thousands of ‘mug-shots’ of prisoners clicked when the victims arrived at the prison (Fig 14 & 15). The photos indicate the multitude of detainees at the prison and capture the harrowed expression of their eyes. Their facial expressions range from ‘a frown, a smirk, bewilderment, anger, shock, withdrawal, fear, most often fear’. The building also preserves an archive containing several written ‘confessions’ of former inmates. The space within the museum carefully curates past artifacts to generate the sense of terror and trauma, as felt by the victims of the Regime.



Fig 14; Source: Google Images



Fig 15; Source: Google Images

The third building, that is, Building C has individual cells with faded blood stains on the floor (Fig 16). The building is rumoured to have been kept untouched and thus the blood stains are allegedly from the actual victims. The visitors are allowed to wander around the cells and experience the trepidation and horror of living behind the metal doors, awaiting death. The last building of the complex is the Building D.

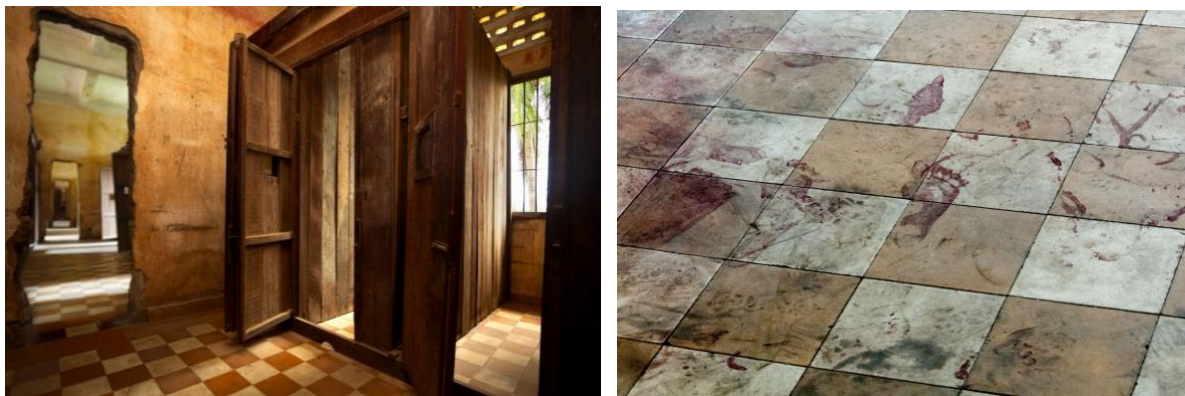


Fig 16; Source: sonyanadtravis.com

Various artifacts from the torture centre such as beds, chairs used by the inmates are housed in this building. The rusted relics depict the horrifying realities of past brutality as they impinge themselves on the consciousness of present visitors. The site also contains torture devices kept in glass display cases with paintings by one of the few survivors of the prison, Vann Nath (1946-2011) graphically detailing how they were used. Nath was commissioned by the PRK Government to capture ‘on canvas the horrendous torture and excruciating suffering’ experienced by the inmates within the prison walls.

The Museum also displayed a skull map made with the skulls of 300 victims of the communist Khmer Regime (Fig 17). The skull map was on display from 1979 to 2002. The map served as a testament to the regime's brutality. Owing to natural decay of the skulls, it was dismantled by officials in 2002 while Buddhist monks prayed for the souls of the tortured individuals.



Fig 17: Skull Map of Cambodia  
Source: commons.wikimedia.org

Tuol Sleng is frozen in time. It encapsulates the visual and sensory details of the traumatic brutalities that became synonymous with its name. Apart from historic information, it also establishes itself as a testimony to the violence that the Khmer Rouge Regime perpetuated in Cambodia over several years.

The Museum tour ends with a visit to the The Choeung Ek killing fields which house the mass graves (Fig 18) containing around 8,895 bodies that were found at the site after the fall of the Khmer Rouge Regime. Several of the bodies belonged to political prisoners of the regime detained at the Tuol Sleng prison. Choeung Ek (Fig 19) has now been converted into a memorial with a Buddhist Stupa as the central attraction. Shattered and decomposing human skulls line the glass display of the Stupa. Choeung Ek also contains the pits from which bodies have been exhumed. Overall, it presents yet another harrowing visual and sensory experience evoking the trauma of past inhumanities (see Fournet 2007).





Fig 18: Choeung Ek Mass Graves/Killing Fields  
Source: Google Images

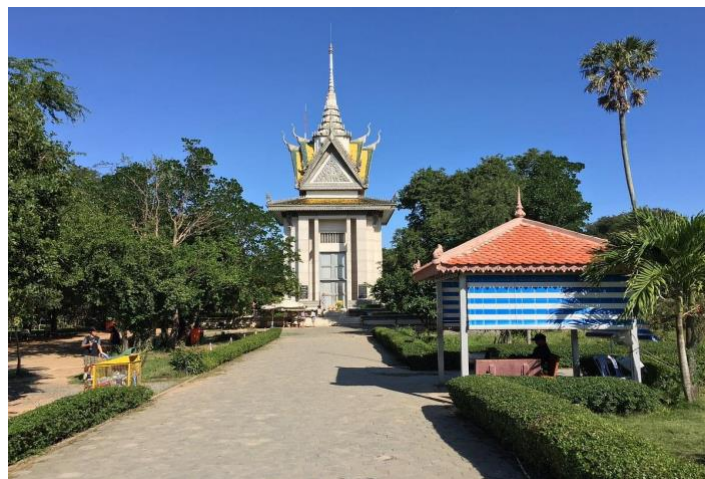


Fig 19: Choeung Ek Genocidal Centre  
Source: Google Images

As evident from the above discussions, the architecture of memorial museums today has come to play a crucial role in semiotically depicting different historical, political, factual and material aspects of a traumatic experience. For instance, The Jewish Museum of Berlin explores ideas of collective shame and remembrance, The National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, USA captures the incomprehensibility of racist atrocities and consequent invisibility imposed on the Black community, and The Tuol Sleng Museum of Cambodia works towards the creation of a collective and national identity by freezing the

memory of past political brutalities in the country. Thus, it is through architectural expressiveness that these memorial museums have come to be regarded as sites of memory and thus semiotically represent authoritative accounts of identity defining events and serve as templates for reimagining and articulating the psychology and emotional force of unrepresentable and sustained experience of trauma.

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\*\* **Oly Roy** is Assistant Professor of English at St. Xavier's College, Burdwan, West Bengal.