

MEMORY AT THE MEMORIAL

A memorial remembers and commemorates. It is, at its core, a sombre spatial interpretation of loss. What, then, is Peter Eisenman's *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*? Looming behind Eisenman's supposed memorial is the work of Lord Norman Foster of Thames Bank — the Reichstag dome — which won the latter the Pritzker Prize. Both structures are memorials — the former to the Holocaust, and the latter to the layered history of the German parliament and democracy. While Foster's Reichstag takes inspiration from practical ideas of governance and transforms them into symbols of a nation, rooted in its history, Peter Eisenman shows his inability to move beyond linguistics and semantics, ultimately resulting in the failure of the 'memorial' to memorialise.



Image 1: Peter Eisenman's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe [2005]. In the background the glass cupola of Norman Foster's Reichstag [1999] is visible prominently. | Courtesy of Eisenman Architects.

Foster's Reichstag cupola looms over Eisenman's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in a remarkable comparison between two diametrically opposed interventions in architecture that had their root in one singular fissure in history — the Third Reich. Yet, both architects process history and memory in significantly different manners, and that affects both the meaning and the significance of their work.



This story begins in January 1933, when, after a remarkable amount of backroom manoeuvring by former Chancellor von Papen and President Hindenburg, Adolf Hitler was nominated to the post of Chancellor in the hopes that he could be amicably controlled.¹ Just 28 days after his nomination

¹ Walsh, Ben. *Modern World History*. Hodder Education, 2011, pg 100.

to the post of Chancellor, the Reichstag burned down — the Nazis blamed it on the Communists and used it to instigate the suspension of civil liberties that would last until the end of the Second World War. That was also the same month that the first Nazi-run concentration camps began functioning.²

By the time the British Army's 11th armoured division liberated Bergen-Belsen on April 15, 1945, the situation inside the camp was dire. 13,000 corpses lay around, decomposing, while another 60,000 prisoners awaited urgent medical attention.³ While the war in Europe was coming to a close after six years of vicious attrition, the stark reality of death stared the joys of victory in the face. By the end of the War, more than 6 million Jews and an additional 11.3 million people had been killed by the Nazis through concentration camps and other methods of persecution.⁴

The nature of death and dying in those camps — machines for death and dehumanisation — was expected to be brought forth in what was expected to be a long-drawn process of commemoration and memorialisation. It is both this and the underlying subversion of the democratic process by extremist agendas like the spectre of National Socialism that must be remembered. Germany, however, wasn't done with conflict — the Yalta and Potsdam conferences reinforced the split of Germany into four, with Berlin, in the middle of Soviet Germany, to be equally divided within the four victors — the UK, the USA, France, and the Soviet Union.⁵ It was only with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the 1990 reunification of Germany that the city and the country was finally in control of all its landholdings and was able to begin the process of memorialising, as one nation, the tragedies of war, repression and genocide that had marked the time gone by.

Two years after the reunification of Germany, in April 1992, the speaker of the Bundestag, Philipp Jenninger, invited Norman Foster and thirteen other architects to compete in a competition to “rebuild the Reichstag as the new home of the German Parliament.”⁶ The Reichstag itself had a storied past as a house of democracy — under Kaiser Wilhelm II, the parliament itself was no more than a paper-stamp, but following the defeat of Germany in the First World War, the Weimar Republic presides over an overtly rocky period between 1918–33, when the Nazis take power and consolidate it with the Reichstag Fire. During the War, it is used as a defensive position, and bombed during the Allied firebombing of Berlin. After the Second World War, the building is ransacked and graffitied by the Soviet Red Army due to its symbolic importance for the communists.

² Walsh, Ben. *Modern World History*. Hodder Education, 2011, pg 100.

³ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. “The 11th Armoured Division (Great Britain).” Holocaust Encyclopedia. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-11th-armoured-division-great-britain>.

⁴ The death toll for Jews was taken directly from here, while the statistics in tabular form were added to give the 11.3 million figure for ‘other’ deaths, which are broken down by group here: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. “Documenting Numbers of Victims of the Holocaust and Nazi Persecution.” Holocaust Encyclopedia. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/documenting-numbers-of-victims-of-the-holocaust-and-nazi-persecution>.

⁵ The UK, the USA, and France assimilated their portions into a single entity known as the Federal Republic of Germany [colloquially known as West Germany].

⁶ Foster, Norman, “Introduction” in Foster, Norman and Abel, Chris. “The Extent of Modern Architecture.” *The Reichstag: Foster+Partners*, Prestel, 2011, pg 8.



Image 2: General Zhukov, Marshall of the Soviet Union, looks at the Reichstag, which has been graffitied by Soviet soldiers.

The layers of symbolism for the German state, therefore, run deep within the built space of the Reichstag. In a stroke of good fortune, the Reichstag stayed with the Western Allies, but the Berlin Wall passed right next to the entrance of the Reichstag.



Image 3: The Berlin Wall passes right next to the Reichstag, which is on the left-hand side of this image, taken in 1969.

When the wall came down and Germany was reunited, the Bundestag voted with a slim majority to move itself to Berlin once the Reichstag was overhauled.⁷ Norman Foster, who had earlier designed a parasol that would encompass the entire building, would be pushed to make a realistic design for the cupola, which had been demolished following extensive damage in the Second World War and then covered over in the 1960s modernist intervention by Paul Baumgarten, who, in his own drive of modernist moral fervour, changed the Reichstag for the worse. Foster recounts:

“After the Second World War, the remains of the dome had been removed and the facades ‘restored’, losing much of their ornament in the process. Inside, everything visible was entirely of the 1960s. What survived of the historic interiors had been concealed behind a lining of plasterboard and asbestos.”⁸

While Baumgarten was a celebrated West German architect, the modernism of the interior clashed with the International Style buildings that were slowly becoming conspicuous across the Wall, in East Berlin. The Soviets adopted the style as a compromise between moving beyond the shackles of the past tainted by the historicity of the old idioms, and its cost-effective method, which enabled them to partake in large scale construction and works projects at a minimal cost.⁹ The looming spectre of modernism and its interventions on the side of Soviet architecture should have been immensely disqualifying for Baumgarten’s intervention, and the appointment of Norman Foster to

⁷ The German Bundestag. *From the Reichstag to the Bundestag: Dates, Pictures, Documents*, Exhibition Catalogue, translated by the Language Service of the German Bundestag, The President of the German Bundestag, n.d. Accessible https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/503968/13a796061fd39a6b548fb86f7df6412/exhibition_dome_accessible-data.pdf.

⁸ Foster, Norman, “Introduction” in Foster, Norman and Abel, Chris. *The Reichstag: Foster+Partners*, Prestel, 2011, pg 9–10.

⁹ Neghaiwi, Brenna Hughes. “Berlin’s Boulevard of Broken Dreams, Part 1.” *The Paris Review*, The Paris Review, 7 Nov. 2014, www.theparisreview.org/blog/2014/11/06/berlins-boulevard-of-broken-dreams-part-1/.

rebuild the building was a sign that the Republic learned from its mistakes — Baumgarten’s intervention had also rendered the building virtually useless as a parliamentary building.^{10 11}

By the time Norman Foster had come around to even thinking of intervening in the building’s storied history, it had already evolved into a loaded and potent symbol that needed nuanced handling to slowly reveal the layers of history. At the heart of Foster’s intervention was the idea of palimpsest, which, in the case of Rome, Sigmund Freud explains as follows:

“Now let us make the fantastic supposition that Rome were not a human dwelling-place, but a mental entity with just as long and varied a past history: that is, in which nothing once constructed had perished, and all the earlier stages of development had survived alongside the latest And the observer would need merely to shift the focus of his eyes, perhaps, or change his position, in order to call up a view of either the one or the other.”¹²

Foster’s architectural note acknowledges this powerful force in architecture and how his design peels back layers of the palimpsest to show this memorial to the four stages of Germany. He writes:

“... when those layers were carefully stripped away, we found vivid imprints of the building’s past — original mouldings, masons’ marks and graffiti left by Russian soldiers in 1945. I argued that these fragments should be preserved: an approach that initially met with opposition from some quarters. Our philosophy prevailed and as a result the Reichstag now also functions as a ‘living museum’ of German history.”¹³

This recognition of history is further amplified in his introduction to *The Reichstag Graffiti*:

“... it is also a building with history, within which our rebuilding represents only the most recent chapter. When I spoke of History, implicit within my definition was a philosophy of intervention: of how the new should meet the old. As time went by this philosophy extended to include an understanding of how the scarred and graffiti-marked fabric of the Reichstag records the building’s troubled past

... We cannot escape history. As a society, I believe it is vital that we remember the tragedies and traumas of the past, even as we plan eagerly for the future.”¹⁴

Foster’s Reichstag builds upon the importance of symbolism in a conscious effort to incorporate lessons learned from the past to, as he admits, posit a way into the future that is considerate of the past.

The Reichstag dome is a poignant reminder of the transparency with which government must function, and it simultaneously harkens back and pays homage to the glass dome built by Paul Wallot, the original architect of the Reichstag, in 1897, when the latter was contemporaneously described as “a mark of modernity but not a signal for democracy and open government.”¹⁵ The dome, open to the public, is the highest point in the building, and is open and accessible to the public. The hierarchy of height in the building symbolises the hierarchy of power — from the dome,

¹⁰ The German Bundestag. *From the Reichstag to the Bundestag: Dates, Pictures, Documents*, Exhibition Catalogue, translated by the Language Service of the German Bundestag, The President of the German Bundestag, n.d. Accessible https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/503968/13a796061fd39a6b548bfb86f7df6412/exhibition_dome_accessible-data.pdf.

¹¹ Abel, Chris, “Rebuilding the Reichstag” in Foster, Norman and Abel, Chris. “The Extent of Modern Architecture.” *The Reichstag: Foster+Partners*, Prestel, 2011, pg 21.

¹² Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and its Discontents*, W.W. Norton & Co., 1961, pg 14–15.

¹³ Foster, Norman, “Introduction” in Foster, Norman and Abel, Chris. *The Reichstag: Foster+Partners*, Prestel, 2011, pg 10.

¹⁴ Foster, Norman, “Introduction: The Living Museum” in Foster, Norman, et al. *The Reichstag Graffiti = Die Reichstag-Graffiti*. Jovis, 2003, pp 10–13.

¹⁵ The dome was never built at the insistence of Kaiser Wilhelm II, who preferred to use the same design but encase it in a round of metal sheeting. Barnstone, Deborah Ascher. *The Transparent State: Architecture and Politics in Postwar Germany*. Routledge, 2005, pg 176.

the ‘public’ can look down upon the press galleries, and then further to the plenary chamber where politicians hone their craft.

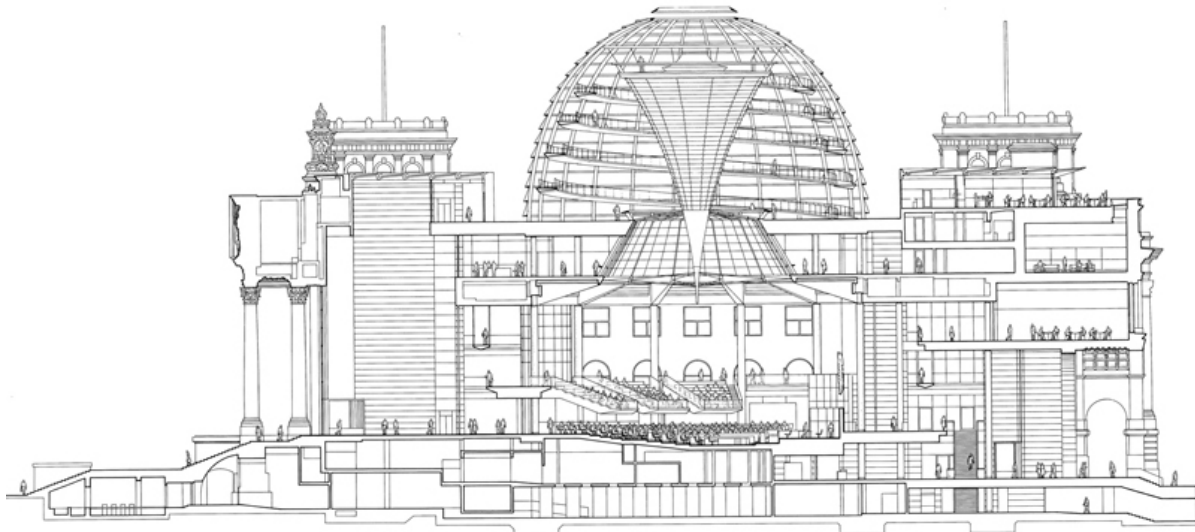


Image 4: Side plan for the Reichstag | Courtesy Foster + Partners.

From the plan above, the hierarchy of power is immediately visible — the ‘public’ is ultimately the system of checks and balances for both the government and for the press, and that remarkable symbolism came forth from the manner through which the Nazis gained power in January 1933 and then proceeded to consolidate it — back room manoeuvrings. The openness of the Reichstag looks back to the damage done by this and pushes against it in highly symbolic terms. It creates a spatialised contract between the democratic elements necessary for functioning: one that is of the people, by the people, and for the people of Germany.

The opening up of the West portal, upon which Kaiser Wilhelm II had in 1916 inscribed the words ‘Dem Deutschen Volke’ [The German People] under the cornice with recast material from a captured French canon,¹⁶ was similarly significant. Previously reserved for important occasions and guests of the state, the doorway was opened as the main entrance to the public, as seen to the left of the plan above. The public entrance, previously confined to the aft, was now up front and centre, and occupied the most important focal point on the front façade — a timely reminder that government was, at the end of the day, drawn from and no different from the public itself, and therefore by pushing the primacy of the public in the hierarchy, it enabled the public to become an active participant in this participatory democratic republic by examining the orientation of their power. They were far more than marks on a ballot paper — they were the centre of the built space of this new stage of their democratic exercise.

The memory of the past was very much alive in this building — and Foster ensured that its history clearly became a force to be reckoned with — one that was integral to the current understanding of the self and of the republic. It was not a burden to be done away with, or an incomprehensible force that was admittedly influential in the shape of the present. And this is where Foster’s postmodernist

¹⁶ Schulz, Bernhard. *The Reichstag: The Parliament Building by Norman Foster*, Prestel, 2000, pg 19.

practice diverges so significantly from that of Peter Eisenman, whose alleged memorial continues to lie in the shadow of Foster's earlier magnum opus.



Construction on Eisenman's 'Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe' started a year before Foster finished his intervention on the Reichstag. Its roots were immensely controversial — three competitions and two variations later, Eisenman's partner on the project, the famed minimalist sculptor Richard Serra, had called it quits, while Eisenman continued to alter his design. When it was opened, it thrived solely on controversy. A fundraising slogan resulted in further controversy, with many accusing it of Holocaust denial.¹⁷ Many were also quick to denounce the memorial, as James E. Young, the spokesperson of and member of the *Findungskommission* for the memorial admits:

“... served to antagonize the critics and harden the positions of the memorial's opponents, who included many of Germany's elite historians, writers, and cultural critics, including Reinhart Koselleck, Julius Schoeps, Salomon Korn, Stefanie Endlich, Christian Meier, and eventually Gunter Grass and Peter Schneider.”¹⁸

Young proceeds to call the Mayor of Berlin at the time, along with other critics, “petulant child who did not get his way.”¹⁹ It is evident from Young's reaction and account that there was a clear top-down approach, where instead of stakeholders being consulted and incorporated into the process, the memorial was approached within increasingly complex and publicly irrelevant notions of ‘artspeak’ with no consideration for the audience whatsoever. The totalitarian nature of architecture like Eisenman's is evident through fear of retribution from those who impose their litany of tyranny onto those who know better but are afraid to stand up and say it out loud for fear of embarrassment.

What makes architecture exceptional — in a different manner, perhaps — is its inherently physical nature and the significant of its built impact on people who inhabit those very spaces, and this is precisely what separates the Reichstag from the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. As Sir Roger Scruton points out in his seminal book, *The Aesthetics of Architecture*, the very reason that architecture can find root and prosper is that built worlds inhabit a special status. Let us call this ‘architectural exceptionalism’. Scruton reasons that:

“I doubt that we could consistently view architecture either as a form of personal expression, or as a self-conscious gesture designed for the ‘modern consciousness’ alone. Architecture is public; it imposes itself whatever our desires and whatever our self-image. Moreover, it takes up space: either it crushes out of existence what has gone before, or else it attempts to blend and harmonize. Architecture ... imposes a vision of man and his aims independently of any personal agreements on the part of those who live with it.”²⁰

Architecture is public art at the extremity — but what it lacks as a public art is the social contract of viewership. The Social Contract in the tradition of Hobbes, Locke, and Rosseau was contingent upon consent. However, from Scruton one can derive the non-existence of this contract, which governs the consent of viewership. Architectural exceptionalism can be misread to equate the contract's nonexistence with the nonexistence of the human condition — the denial of agency does not mean that the grantee of such a hypothetical power does not exist or does not matter.

¹⁷ “Holocaust Ad Campaign Backfires.” *CNN*, Cable News Network, 6 Aug. 2001, www.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/europe/08/06/germany.holocaust/index.html.

¹⁸ Young, James E. “Germany's Holocaust Memorial Problem—and Mine.” *The Public Historian*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2002, pp. 65–80. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/tph.2002.24.4.65, pg 69.

¹⁹ Young, James E. “Germany's Holocaust Memorial Problem—and Mine.” *The Public Historian*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2002, pp. 65–80. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/tph.2002.24.4.65, pg 80.

²⁰ Scruton, Roger. *The Aesthetics of Architecture*. Princeton University Press, 2013, pg 15.

Architecture's major attribute is that it is imposed upon, and architectural exceptionalism's duty is to consider the condition and the needs of the humans that will inhabit said space and will therefore need to give implicit consent. The nonexistence of a social contract between the architect and a user is not a vindication of responsibility and duty on part of the architect — it brings out what is the most important skill for any architect: empathy. And that is what Foster, through his numerous designs and debates for the Reichstag, partook in — a conciliatory process between the intellectual and the built, where he understood his role of intervention instead of the totalitarianism of complete birth.

Rather adamantly, Eisenman continued to press for the need for his work in his peculiar version of artspeak that is riddled with *nuova scienze*, which he jumps from occasionally when it is in peril.²¹ The nihilism is evident in Eisenman's essay, 'The Silence of Excess', for a book commemorating his memorial, where he mentions Theodor Adorno's much cited pronouncement, "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric."²² Eisenman equates one of the bleakest periods of human history with that of the end of what we know, instead of treating it as a rupture that *must* be understood so that humankind does not perpetrate upon itself the same crimes against humanity that it did before. Eisenman imposes his own unitarian fervour onto the rest of the world, and in a perversion of architectural exceptionalism, renders a memorial without any sense of memory — one where nothing marks the passing of those 6 million Jews it is to commemorate, and one where any sense of history is enforced by those who knew better. In a series of statements made to Johan Åhr, Eisenman adds to his inconsideration:

"... "it has nothing to do with Jewishness per se." And "it is not about memory," Eisenman alleges. "Am I thinking about the Holocaust when I go to the memorial? Not me!"²³

Eisenman simply makes it easier to make the argument that the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe is not a memorial at all. The refusal of memory and consequently that of remembrance is central to the obfuscation that Eisenman mobilises in his pursuit of self-guided remembrance is irredeemable in light of the horrors of the Holocaust. The denial of the existence of meaning within the forest of stele that look eerily like gravestones — but are not, apparently, because of Eisenman's vehement protests — signals to the viewer that the past *must not* be understood, and the incomprehensibility of the past is consecrated by the magnitude of the stele forest. That the memorial has state sanction runs in diametric opposition to Foster's Reichstag, which attempts to work with the past instead of in opposition to it.

It is at this stage that the Burkean warning against excessive abstraction comes to the forefront — the disinclination "to give praise or blame to any thing which relates to human actions, and human concerns, on a simple view of the object in all the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction"²⁴ — is a prescient warning in light of Eisenman's non-memorial. The lack of a rooted

²¹ Alexander, Christopher, and Peter Eisenman. "Contrasting Concepts of Harmony in Architecture: The 1982 Debate Between Christopher Alexander and Peter Eisenman." *Katarxis N° 3*, Katarxis, Sept. 2004, www.katarxis3.com/Alexander_Eisenman_Debate.htm.

²² Eisenman, Peter, "The Silence of Excess" in Rueterberg, Hanno. *Holocaust Memorial Berlin*, Lars Müller Publishers, 2005, n.p.

²³ Åhr, Johan. "Memory and Mourning in Berlin: On Peter Eisenman's 'Holocaust-Mahnmal' (2005)." *Modern Judaism*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2008, pp. 283–305. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/30133319, pg 284.

²⁴ Burke, Edmund. *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, James Dodley, 1790.

orientation from the purposive form of the memorial leads to the mere existential meaninglessness that is responsible for the travesty of its current usage, and why it has been so prone to scandal even after its opening to the public. Eisenman pushes his abstraction in such abstruse a manner that it becomes virtually impossible to consider any pathway through it that is in itself totalitarian, opening up avenues for misuse due to incomprehension. From selfies to yoga to smoke breaks to dating application profile pictures, the memorial is a suitable site for trivial activities that have no relation with the remembrance of the Holocaust and its victims.²⁵

Eisenman's memorial forsakes the concept of a public audience in its entirety. The extremist response that stems from his antihumanist claims removes the human from any consideration, and the same goes for form and function. While Barthes famously concluded his essay with the understanding that “the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author”, he assumes the existence and centrality of the dialogue in the interaction of meaning and significance between the Author and the Reader.²⁶ For Eisenman, there is no manner with which his ‘memorial’ could be endowed with layers of meaning — either people ‘get it’ or they do not, but there is no level at which the public can peel back layer after layer, depending on its own capability and interest, and then push forth an understanding, like they can do with Foster's Reichstag. What Foster engages in is what Christopher Alexander terms a search for the “real nature of human feeling”²⁷ — a search that leads to an architectural praxis cognisant of that which “belongs to the ninety percent of our feeling, where our feelings are all the same.”²⁸

The layers of meaning that Foster champions in his Reichstag building are available to both the discerning eye and the unsuspecting viewer. The ability of conscious displays of memory in the memorial to German democracy and the altar of the future is able to produce a layered enchantment within the viewer, who is not subsumed within with a lack of information or a totalising unitary access to the Reichstag's latest incarnation. The best determinant of this lies in the number of visitors that come each day to both memorials — the Reichstag gets, on average, 6000 daily visitors,²⁹ while the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe a fifth of that.³⁰ The people have voted with their feet for which particular articulation of memory shall remain representative and pertinent.



²⁵ Gunter, Joel. “‘Yolocaust’: How Should You Behave at a Holocaust Memorial?” *BBC News*, BBC, 20 Jan. 2017, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38675835.

²⁶ Barthes, Roland. *The Death of the Author*, translated by Roland Howard, 1967.

²⁷ Alexander, Christopher. *The Nature of Order: The Phenomenon of Life*, The Center for Environmental Structure, 2002, pg 4.

²⁸ Alexander, Christopher. *The Nature of Order: The Phenomenon of Life*, The Center for Environmental Structure, 2002, pg 5.

²⁹ “What the Parliamentary District Offers Visitors.” *Deutscher Bundestag*, Deutscher Bundestag, 2017, www.bundestag.de/en/documents/textarchive/summer2017-516024.

³⁰ 1275 visitors daily on average for 2018. Seemann, Uwe. “Numbers of Visitors in the Information Centre.” *Stiftung Denkmal Für Die Ermordeten Juden Europas*, Stiftung Denkmal Für Die Ermordeten Juden Europas, 2018, www.stiftung-denkmal.de/en/memorials/the-memorial-to-the-murdered-jews-of-europe/numbers-of-visitors.html.

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