

Genius Loci and Memory: World War II Memorial Museums in Rural Poland

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Poland is a country rich in World War II memorial sites. Due to the ongoing “memory boom,” new memorial museums are continuously being established. This paper presents an analysis of selected Polish memorial museum sites located in non-urbanised areas, specifically in Markowa, Michniów and Bełżec. The author poses the research question: How do these examples use the authentic attributes of their locations to preserve the genius loci and create a modern spatial design? The characteristic features of these museum complexes were examined in terms of architecture, spatial planning and the thanatourism potential of each site. The aim of the study is to explore the relationship between contemporary spatial design language and the context and meaning of place.

Keywords: architecture; memorial; genius loci; spatial design; museum

Introduction

In recent decades, commemorative architecture has emerged as a crucial field of cultural expression, reflecting the global “memory boom” and a renewed need to reinterpret the traumatic past through spatial form. In Poland – as a country with numerous sites of mass death rooted in the events of the Second World War – this trend resonates particularly strongly. Nearly all extermination camps and many concentration camps were established on its territory. Each of these is a memorial site and a highly frequented tourist destination.

The ongoing creation of new memorial museums illustrates not only the diversification of architectural language but also a shift in cultural attitudes towards remembrance. Increasingly, memory is understood as an active, participatory process rather than a static monument. Consequently, architects are called upon to design spaces that mediate between the historical event, the material environment and the visitor’s emotional experience. It is crucial for memory studies to evolve and foster an interdisciplinary dialogue. While the voices of historians and cultural studies scholars are prominent at numerous conferences on memory, the contributions of architects – the creators of new narratives about the past – are still notably absent.

Subject, Scope and Method of Research

The subject of the research presented in this paper is the commemorative architecture associated with the Second World War. The study focuses on Polish memorial spaces centred

around museums related to the events of the Second World War. The selected case studies meet the following criteria:

- *Time*: constructed in the twenty-first century, in order to trace the latest trends in the design of memorial sites,
- *Contemporary architectural object*: established after 2000 and must include a newly designed architectural object, a deliberately composed surrounding landscape, and an intentionally developed interior and exhibition design conceived in relation to the new architecture. These criteria led to the exclusion of examples such as Museum Dulag 121 and Piaśnica Museum, which, despite being newly established institutions, are located within adapted historic buildings. Consequently, their architectural form does not constitute a contemporary design intervention, and their analysis as examples representing current trends in memorial museum architecture would not be methodologically justified.
- *Place*: the areas surrounding the museum building should be located in sparsely urbanised or non-urbanised areas, due to the direct link between the project site and the original site of memory.
- *Access to field research and architectural documentation*: the structures were subjected to direct observation during site visits. Architectural documentation published by the project authors, along with satellite images, enabled additional compositional analysis.¹
- *Typological diversity*: case studies were selected through purposive sampling because they represent typological diversity. They differ in historical context, commemorative function and spatial narrative and provide a diverse analytical spectrum while maintaining sufficient comparability in terms of period of construction, geographical context and commemorative purpose.

Three locations were chosen: Ulma Family Museum in Markowa, the Mausoleum of the Martyrdom of Polish Villages in Michniów, and the Museum – Memorial Site in Bełzec. Each of the selected examples is characterised by a unique sense of place and an atmosphere of genius loci which has been incorporated into the design of the new memorial complexes. The study examines the formal and semantic context of the presented examples and their impact on the perception of the space.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the relationship between the contemporary design language used for the spaces surrounding Polish memorial museums and the context of the site and its local genius loci. The cognitive/educational objective is to present issues related to Polish commemorative museum architecture of the Second World War, as well as its associated semantic context.

Field research trips were conducted in the years 2017–2021 in order to carry out on-site inspections and perform autoethnographic study. A holistic analytical method was applied that combines an examination of:

- *spatial design* (site planning, building surroundings, with special emphasis on landscape elements and monumental forms),

¹ This criterion allowed for the exclusion of examples, which are not constructed yet and impossible to visit on site, such as Kamienne Piekło II – proposed on the area of former Gross-Rosen Camp in Rogoźnica. Such a site, however, can be an example to broaden the overall conclusions about architectural tendencies in Polish memorials.

- *architectural design* (the museum building, with special emphasis on function, architectural form, colour palette and materials),
- *interior design* (with commentary on the exhibition's narrative).

This approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the visitor's experience of the place – an experience that takes place across large and small scales, through time and movement.

The research employed a critical review of the relevant literature to establish a comprehensive understanding of the investigated subject, complemented by direct observation of case studies, identification of the implemented design strategies, and an original interpretation of the role of the site's genius loci. The study adopted a qualitative comparative case study methodology. To ensure methodological consistency, all case studies were analysed using the same five-component analytical framework comprising: (1) historical and spatial context, (2) spatial design, (3) architectural design, (4) interior exhibition design and (5) interpretation of genius loci. Applying an identical analytical structure to each case enables systematic comparison while preserving the specificity of individual memorial sites.

Literature review and definitions

The literature on the subject can be divided into several thematic groups:

Literature concerning the study and definition of memory. This collection includes the works of Maurice Halbwachs² and Aby Warburg,³ who defined collective and social memory, and Pierre Nora⁴ the author of the definition of a “place of memory” which is still used today.⁵ Aleida Assmann⁶ presents an analysis of the functioning of cultural memory in Western civilisation, focusing on the ways in which societies preserve, transmit and reinterpret their past, with particular emphasis on the role of monuments, museums and memorial spaces. The Polish perspective on memory studies should also be noted, represented by the works of Barbara Szacka,⁷ Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska,⁸ and Andrzej Szpociński.⁹

Literature supporting the analysis of museums and their surroundings that function as memorial sites related to the Second World War. This includes the scholarly output of Agnieszka Gębczyńska-

² HALBWACHS, Maurice. *Społeczne ramy pamięci* [The Social Frameworks of Memory]. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2008.

³ WARBURG, Aby. *Atlas obrazów Mnemosyne* [Mnemosyne Atlas]. Warsaw: Narodowe Centrum Kultury, 2015.

⁴ NORA, Pierre. Między pamięcią a historią: Les lieux de Mémoire [Between Memory and History: Les lieux de Mémoire]. In: *Tytuł roboczy: Archiwum*, (2), 20090, p. 4–12.

⁵ Lieux de mémoire – sites of memory as any manifestation of the will to remember, encompassing places, art, objects, events, etc.

⁶ ASSMANN, Aleida. *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

⁷ SZACKA, Barbara. O pamięci społecznej [On Social Memory]. In: *Znak*, (5) 1995, p. 68.

⁸ SARYUSZ-WOLSKA, Magdalena. *Spotkania czasu z miejscem. Studia o pamięci i miastach* [Encounters of Time with Place: Studies on Memory and Cities]. Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2011.

⁹ SZPOCIŃSKI, Andrzej. Miejsca pamięci (lieux de mémoire) [Places of Memory (lieux de mémoire)]. In: *Teksty Drugie*. 2008, (4), p. 11–20.

Janowicz,¹⁰ Maria Wierzbicka,¹¹ Joanna Kabrońska¹² and Halina Taborska.¹³ For the spatial analysis of museum facilities, Diane Ghirardo's¹⁴ typology of museums based on their function, as well as analyses of a museum's significance in the broader context of its spatial impact from the perspectives of Marek Pabich¹⁵ and Mateusz Gyurkovich,¹⁶ can be helpful. Another relevant author is Paul Williams, who emphasises that we are currently dealing with a fever of commemoration, and notes that the emerging memorial museums are complex structures in which the way space is organised influences the emotional and reflective experience of visitors.¹⁷

Diane Ghirardo identifies four types of museums: the sanctuary, the repository, the commercial cultural centre, and the museum as spectacle.¹⁸ The latter relies on a striking architectural form to evoke specific emotional responses, functioning similarly to theatrical scenery that shapes the visual experience of a city. A particular category within this group consists of museums created to commemorate traumatic historical events. Described by Bill Niven as combimemorials¹⁹ – a fusion of memorial and architecture – these buildings often blur the boundaries between museum, sculpture and monument. Their external form is closely connected to the atmosphere and narrative of the exhibition, which itself becomes an essential part of the visitor's experience.

Another term which should be explained is “counter-monument”. This is an enduring hybrid of the traditional monument and artistic installation that operates through distinct aesthetic and emotional strategies. Such monuments often employ voids, surprise and negation to actively engage the recipient.²⁰ These techniques compel the visitor into a necessary dialogue, forcing the reinterpretation of historical events and the pursuit of non-obvious conclusions and complex

¹⁰ GĘBCZYŃSKA-JANOWICZ, Agnieszka. *Architektura na terenach byłych nazistowskich obozów koncentracyjnych. Funkcjonalna zmienność upamiętniania* [Architecture on the Sites of Former Nazi Concentration Camps: The Functional Variability of Commemoration]. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Neriton, 2019.; GĘBCZYŃSKA-JANOWICZ, Agnieszka. *Polskie założenia pomnikowe. Rola architektury w tworzeniu miejsc pamięci od połowy XX wieku* [Polish Monument Projects: The Role of Architecture in Creating Places of Memory from the mid-20th Century]. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Neriton, 2010.

¹¹ WIERZBICKA, Anna M. *Architektura jako narracja znaczeniowa* [Architecture as a Semantic Narrative]. Warsaw: Oficyna Wydawnicza Politechniki Warszawskiej, 2013.

¹² KABROŃSKA, Jolanta. *Architektura jako forma pamięci. Rola architektury w tworzeniu współczesnego horyzontu wartości* [Architecture as a Form of Memory: The Role of Architecture in Creating a Contemporary Horizon of Values]. Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Politechniki Gdańskiej, 2008.

¹³ TABORSKA, Halina. *Sztuka w miejscach śmierci. Europejskie pomniki ofiar hitleryzmu* [Art in Places of Death: European Monuments to the Victims of Nazism]. Kraków: Austeria, 2019.

¹⁴ GHIRARDO, Diane. *Architektura po modernizmie* [Architecture After Modernism]. Toruń: Wydawnictwo VIA, 1999.

¹⁵ PABICH, Małgorzata. *O kształtowaniu muzeum sztuki. Przestrzeń piękniejsza od przedmiotu* [On Shaping the Art Museum: A Space More Beautiful than the Object]. 2nd ed. Katowice: Muzeum Śląskie, 2007.

¹⁶ GYURKOVICH, Miron. *Hybrydowe przestrzenie kultury we współczesnym mieście europejskim* [Hybrid Spaces of Culture in the Contemporary European City]. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Politechniki Krakowskiej, 2013.; GYURKOVICH, Miron. *Współczesne muzeum w strukturze miasta* [The Contemporary Museum in the Urban Structure]. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Politechniki Krakowskiej, 2007.

¹⁷ WILLIAMS, Paul. *Memorial Museum. The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*. New York: Oxford Berg Publishers, 2007.

¹⁸ GHIRARDO, Diane. *Architektura po modernizmie*, p. 70.

¹⁹ NIVEN, Bill. From Countermonument to Combimemorial: Developments in German Memorialization. In: *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 6(1), 2013, pp. 75–91.

²⁰ YOUNG, J.E. The Counter-Monument..., pp. 267–296

emotional responses. James E. Young traces the origins of counter-monuments to Germany in the 1980s. They emerged as a result of tensions within German society regarding the legacy of the Second World War and express, among other aspects, the ambivalent responses associated with the interpretation and evaluation of history. Counter-monuments sustain the discourse on memory and serve as an inspiration for the creation of subsequent memorials and scholarly literature.

Literature addressing the perception of architecture and its effect on the beholder. This group includes, for example, the works of Juhani Pallasmaa,²¹ who critically reflects on the role of the senses in the experience of architecture, emphasising the predominance of vision in the perception and interpretation of architectural space. At the same time, Pallasmaa argues for a balanced multisensory approach, highlighting the importance of touch, hearing and smell in shaping the experience of architecture, particularly through the perception of materials, textures, temperature and the atmosphere of a place. It is the sensory perception of a place, as well as the interpretation of its semantic context, that makes “space” become “place”, according to Yi-Fu Tuan’s theory.²²

Additionally, the analysis presented in this paper focuses on the perspective of the observer and participant at a memorial site, that is, the perspective of an individual who travels to and visits sites marked by a difficult history. This type of travel is known as thanatourism, a field successfully researched and defined by Sławoj Tanas²³ after, for example, A.V. Seaton, Malcolm Foley and J. John Lennon. To explore relationship between thanatourism, emotional reception, and the well-being of visitors one can reach for the works of J. Magano²⁴ and I.L. Bauer.²⁵ This perspective can also be complemented by the concept of dissonant heritage, proposed by J. E. Tunbridge and G. J. Ashworth,²⁶ which highlights that sites of difficult heritage are not neutral representations of the past but rather contested spaces where meanings, memories and interpretations are continuously negotiated.

Another key figure in the study is Christian Norberg-Schulz, who introduced the ancient Roman concept of *genius loci* into contemporary architectural theory in his work *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (1980).²⁷ He argued that every place has a unique character that cannot be reduced solely to its physical features, as it also includes its atmosphere, meaning and the way it is experienced. According to Norberg-Schulz, the identity of a place emerges

²¹ PALLASMAA, Juhani. *Mysząca dłoń* [The Thinking Hand]. Kraków: Instytut Architektury, 2015.; PALLASMAA, Juhani. *Oczy skóry. Architektura i zmysły* [The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses]. Kraków: Instytut Architektury, 2012.

²² TUAN, Yi-Fu, *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience*. London, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

²³ TANAS, Sławomir. Tanatourystyka – kontrowersyjne oblicze turystyki kulturowej [Thanatourism – The Controversial Face of Cultural Tourism]. In: *Peregrinus Cracoviensis*, 17, 2006, p. 81–92.; TANAS, Sławomir. Tanatourystyka – turystyczne wykorzystanie przestrzeni śmierci [Thanatourism – The Touristic Use of the Space of Death]. In: KLIMEK, Łukasz and Beata CISOWSKA (eds.). *Miejsce po - miejsce bez* [A Place After – A Place Without]. Kraków: Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Krakowa, 2015, pp. 301–314.

²⁴ MAGANO, José, José António FRAIZ-BREA and Ângela LEITE. Dark Tourism, the Holocaust, and Well-being: A Systematic Review. In: *Heliyon*, 9(1), 2023, e13064. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e13064>.

²⁵ BAUER, I.L. Death as attraction: the role of travel medicine and psychological travel health care in ‘dark tourism’. In: *Tropical Diseases, Travel Medicine and Vaccines*, 7(24), 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40794-021-00149-z>.

²⁶ TUNBRIDGE, J. E., and G. J. ASHWORTH. *Dissonant Heritage: The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict*. Chichester: Wiley, 1996.

²⁷ NORBERG-SCHULZ, Christian. *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*. New York: Rizzoli, 1980.

from the interaction between the natural landscape, the built environment, and its overall character expressed through form, scale, materials and light. Therefore, architectural design should not only introduce new structures but also interpret and develop the existing spirit of a place. His ideas challenged the context-free approach of modernism by emphasising the importance of creating spaces that support orientation, identification and a sense of belonging.

In this study, the author uses the term *genius loci* to refer to the spirit of a place as subjectively perceived by the recipient, encompassing the experienced atmosphere, awareness of the historical and cultural context, and also the relationship between architecture and its surrounding space and natural landscape.

Case Studies

The Ulma Family Museum in Markowa²⁸

Context

The Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews in World War II is located in Markowa, a small village in the Podkarpackie Voivodeship. It captivates and attracts visitors with its exceptional architecture, situated in an unfrequented setting. Shortly after its opening in 2016, it became renowned for its highly atmospheric multimedia and narrative exhibition.

The museum's content commemorates the story of the Ulma family, who provided shelter to their Jewish acquaintances in their home during the war, an act for which the entire family was executed by the Nazis. It serves as an example of a martyrological memorial museum. It commemorates the Ulma family's story while also disseminating knowledge about the circumstances of persecution during World War II and other instances of Jews being saved in the region.²⁹ The Ulma family lived in Markowa, establishing a direct link between the museum and the original site of memory.

The museum functions as an exhibition, educational and opinion-forming institution. In addition to exhibition and administrative spaces, the building also houses a conference hall and offers cultural event organisation.³⁰ The museum serves as a recognisable landmark on the tourist map, drawing visitors to the small village of Markowa.

Spatial design

The museum complex is situated along the main road in Markowa, in a sparsely urbanised area. The site is surrounded by green landscape and loosely spaced buildings with gable roofs – mostly single family houses – and the Markowa Community Cultural Centre. The composition of the complex welcomes visitors with an open plaza, its shape defined by the triangular, wedge-like form of the museum building. The plaza's smooth, empty concrete surface suggests that the space is intended for representative purposes (the centre of the square is devoid of volumetric elements), allowing for official gatherings and ceremonies. Seating is provided only along the southern edge of the plaza, which borders the roadway and provides a favourable vantage point for observing the museum's architecture. The site itself features large grassy areas covering most of the rising terrain into which the museum's form is embedded. This green space naturally transitions into a small park-like area – the Orchard of Remembrance –

²⁸ Address: 37–120 Markowa 1487; designers: Nizio Design International, Mirosław Nizio, Mariusz Niemiec, Bartłomiej Terlikowski, Agnieszka Czumut, Witold Skarzyński, Andrzej Koper, Anna Derach; opening: 2016.

²⁹ Museum's site, accessed 5 November 2025, <https://muzeumulmow.pl/pl/>.

³⁰ Museum statute, accessed 5 November 2025, <https://muzeumulmow.pl/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/STATUT-1-skonwertowany.pdf>.

where fruit trees have been planted along orderly paths. Thus, in this case, nature serves not only as a backdrop but also as an integral element of the spatial composition. It is also a public park space, inviting people to spend time walking, irrespective of the museum's operating hours. This area is unique precisely because of its combination of commemorative function and the quotidian character of a public space.

Part of the complex surrounding the museum is a memorial wall. It is covered with plaques bearing the names of Poles from the Podkarpackie region who saved Jews during the war. The plaques are arranged in bands on the wall, which become denser as they approach the museum building, evoking the effect of radiating beams. On the plaza's pavement, in a free composition, are illuminated glass plaques with the names of Poles who saved Jews in Podkarpackie but paid for this gesture with their lives. Both monuments represent a gesture of subjective commemoration through the publication of specific individuals' names, showing a tendency to move away from traditional anonymous commemoration. On the plaza in front of the museum entrance, there is also a memorial glass plaque set into the pavement, dedicated to the victims of the Holocaust, commemorating both the Jews and the unknown Poles, inscribed in Polish, Hebrew and English.

Behind the building, there are additional commemorative elements. The first is a monument to the Ulma family in the form of three stones – two smaller ones supporting the larger one – upon which is placed an eagle (the coat-of-arms of Poland), a commemorative stone plaque and a cross. The monument stands on a small concrete square erected in a slight depression in the terrain. The surrounding low walls contain a niche intended for the spontaneous leaving of votive candles. This traditional conception of a monument contrasts with the park section, the Orchard of Remembrance. The Orchard features glass plaques with the names of 1,500 localities where instances of Poles (Righteous Among the Nations) saving Jews were confirmed. This design conceptually alludes to the Garden of the Righteous at Yad Vashem Institute's Mount of Remembrance in Jerusalem, where plaques commemorate both places and the names of the Righteous.³¹ The conceptual design of the memorial park in Markowa intentionally references the ancient tradition of the Garden of Memory (*hortus memoriae*) as a contemplative space.³² This spatial strategy aims to realise the idea of the original *sacrum* through the recipient's direct engagement with nature. By drawing on this enduring historical archetype, the park's architecture moves beyond conventional monumentality.³³

Architectural design

The building's mass is divided into two distinct forms: a wedge-shaped, above-ground structure and a rectangular volume hidden beneath a green embankment, the wall of which also forms the boundary of the plaza in front of the main entrance. The first of these, clad in distinctive Corten steel, houses the exhibition area and the entrance zone. The front facade of the building takes the form of a simplified, archetypal house alluding both to the surrounding architecture and to the museum's content and message. It concerns the story of an ordinary family who lived in just such a simple, gable-roofed house. From a bird's-eye view, the building

³¹ Museum's site, accessed 5 November 2025, <https://muzeumulmow.pl/pl/muzeum/sad-pamieci/>

³² ZACHARIASZ, Agata. O upamiętnianiu miejsc, wydarzeń, osób i zwierząt w historycznych i współczesnych ogrodach i parkach [On the Commemoration of Places, Events, People, and Animals in Historical and Contemporary Gardens and Parks]. In: *Czasopismo Techniczne. Architektura*, no. 2-A/2012, pp. 51–70.

³³ ŁAKOMY, Katarzyna. 'Ogrody pamięci' w sztuce ogrodowej i architekturze krajobrazu ['Gardens of Memory' in Garden Art and Landscape Architecture]. In: *Czasopismo Techniczne. Architektura*, no. 2-A/2012, pp. 7–17.

is seen to have a wedge shape that aggressively cuts into the terrain from the northwest. In conjunction with the reference to the positively associated form of a house, a contrast between gentleness and the horror of the place becomes apparent. Apart from a single rectangular glazed opening on the front, the museum building is a monolithic form, devoid of perforations and covered in corroding steel.

Lighting is an important and integral part of the design. Warm, point-light sources in the plaza's pavement, illumination from the Orchard of Remembrance and the lighting of the architecture itself lend the site a unique character. Colours and materials play a significant role in this project. The exterior composition is based on three strongly interacting elements: the rusty hue of Corten steel, the grey of stone and concrete, and the intense green of the surrounding grass and plantings. Both the grey and the green are natural colours for the surrounding space; however, the deep, shimmering rustiness dramatically stands out, immediately drawing the eye and emphasising the tragedy of the Ulma family's story. Corten steel is characterised by its process of corrosion and change over time, which can also be interpreted as controlled decay. Through the building's form and its distinctive rusty colour, the museum relates to its surroundings through contrast.

Interior design

The interior which houses the exhibition, designed by the MWE-Warszawa Studio, is a homogenous space with walls formed by elements of the narrative exhibition. There are very few typical displays of artefacts in showcases; most of the content consists of audiovisual materials presenting not only the story of the Ulma family but also the realities of life during the war, other stories of Poles saving Jews, and the background of Polish–Jewish relations in a local context. The dominant element in the interior is a luminous glass cube that imitates the actual house of the Ulma family. It contains exhibits related to daily life, such as beds and books. From the outside, the cube is a minimalist form in white, contrasting with the surrounding grey walls and dark exhibition elements. Black rectangular elements are scattered across the centre of the space as a part of the multimedia exhibition and seats. A striking accent in the interior is a fissure between the converging walls at the sharp corner. It is filled with strong light, creating a poignant, almost transcendental effect of a gateway suffused with light, yet the opening is so narrow that one cannot pass through it.

The limited number of original artefacts prompted the exhibition organisers to turn to interactive methods of conveying content. The visitor can actively choose the information they absorb and use multimedia resources (e.g., films with memories from specific individuals involved in the story). The narrativity of the interior plays a significant role in predisposing visitors to specific emotions. The entire exhibition is housed in a single room, so suggesting a chronology of events and segregating exhibition areas of different characters was an additional task for the designers. The interior, architecture and design of the surroundings, along with the materials and lighting, cohesively guide the narrative and attune the visitor towards focus and contemplation.

Genius Loci

This is an example of a museum memorial space in a sparsely urbanised area. Despite the martyrological and solemn character of the museum, the visitor is not overwhelmed by either the content or the architectural form. Although the Ulma family's story ends tragically, it refers

to an aspect of the Holocaust that speaks of acts of goodness and offers hope. This is also visible in the architecture: the form of the house is not coquettish but has a certain comforting, warm resonance, and the accompanying illuminated green space invites not only contemplation but also social gatherings and walks. The genius loci of this place has been combined with the needs of Markowa, which lacks a distinct centre and heart of the village. The park area can serve as a meeting place that is not overly dominated by the commemorative function.



Fig. 1: *The Ulma Family Museum in Markowa.* Photos and top view sketch by the author.

Mausoleum of the Martyrdom of Polish Villages in Michniów³⁴

Context

The Mausoleum of the Martyrdom of Polish Villages in Michniów is a branch of the Kielce Countryside Museum and a remarkable landmark on the map of the Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship. It is a museum commemorating the numerous pacifications of villages during World War II. Michniów (in the Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship) was brutally pacified in July 1943 and has become a symbol of all 817 Polish villages that suffered repression during World War II. The site commemorates the deaths of 200 individuals buried in a mass grave on the property. Thus, it is not only a martyrological museum but also a mausoleum. Michniów already had a symbolic memorial site: a mass grave for the victims, complete with a red sandstone monument; established as early as 1945 it remains a significant element in the composition

³⁴ Address: 26–130 Michniów 38; designers: Nizio Design International, Mirosław Nizio; opening: 2021.

of the complex to this day. The link between the museum and the memorial site is therefore intrinsic.

Michniów is a small village; the museum is located in a sparsely urbanised area and constitutes a significant point on the tourist map, with the potential for regional impact. The built environment of Michniów consists of single-family houses scattered along the provincial road 751. The village lacks a distinct centre, market square, church or cultural centre, and the new development is the largest in entire village. The mausoleum grounds are in close proximity to the surrounding houses; the wall enclosing the site adjoins nearby farmsteads. The elongated plot extends from the road to the edge of the forest, where a stone monument marks the execution site of the forester Władysław Wikło along with his wife and six children, the first victims of the Michniów pacification on 12 July 1943. Today, a forest Way of the Cross, created by foresters, leads from the edge of the mausoleum grounds to this memorial site, uniting further commemorations in the construction of a common narrative.

The museum presents the history of the pacification of Polish villages during the war, with a special focus on the fate of Michniów as a representative example. It is also a research centre that collects data, prepares exhibitions, and organises academic events and educational seminars. It conducts online activities, creating an interactive map of Polish villages that were subjected to acts of repression during the war. As a mausoleum, it pays homage to the deceased. Upon entering the grounds visitors pass the mass grave, and at the end they encounter numerous signs of commemoration for victims, not only from Michniów but from other villages as well. The facility was designed to become a centre for martyrology, a place of reconciliation, and a means of counteracting racism and xenophobia.

Spatial design

The plot adjoins a group of single-family houses arranged along the road and their adjacent green areas on the southeastern side. To the east, it borders a forested area.

The journey through this site begins in a free-form space composed of stairs and platforms. In this section, the visitor passes important compositional elements such as accentuating monuments and a chapel with seating for the faithful. This layout encourages guests to climb up the slope towards the museum building. The area is enclosed by a wall along the longer edges of the plot and by the forest – there is no fence along the road, yet visitors are invited to walk only up to a conventional boundary, suggested by a lawn without a clear passage. To walk through the further part of the open area, one must enter the building.

The development is accompanied by extensive site planning the journey along the spine of the museum building culminates at the edge of the forest in a contemplative space, a place of numerous commemorations and monuments, including some brought from other pacified villages. The building is immersed in greenery, surrounded by grass on which burnt wooden crosses are freely arranged. There are 817 of them, forming the so-called “Forest of Crosses,” commemorating all the pacified Polish villages. Their density increases as one approaches the forest’s edge, intensifying both the spatial composition and the tension arising from the exhibition’s content with the rising terrain. Walking paths are formed by trails on the sides of the building which diverge (most easily seen from an aerial view) in an extension of the diagonal lines of the skylights and the deformations of the building’s mass. The site design also includes the area around existing monuments, a parking section and the House of National

Remembrance, which previously served as a museum and is now a library and a research and administrative centre.

The area around the building is grass, and a strongly influential natural element is the wall of the forest that adjoins the plot on the eastern and southern sides. The village of Michniów is, in a way, cut into the area of the Kamień Michniowski nature reserve, part of the Sieradowice Landscape Park. The forest edge is an important compositional element of the complex and the axis of visitation leads towards it. Nature is not so much a backdrop for the composition but rather determines it. At the very end of the axis, the sublime character of the memorial space intensifies and transforms into a partly green place of reflection and the beginning of the Way of the Cross through the forest to the original site of memory.

As early as 1993, a monumental figurative sculpture, the *Pieta of Michniów* by Waclaw Stawecki, was erected on the site of today's museum. Standing several meters high, it depicts a woman in the traditional folk costume of the Świętokrzyskie region bearing a dead man in her arms. In 1997, the House of National Remembrance was opened there. Another monument near the museum is a tombstone-like form with a commemorative plaque bearing the names of the 200 inhabitants of Michniów who lost their lives as a result of the village's pacification. These two free-standing and formally traditional monuments are not the only ones on the site. The entire wall that demarcates the plot, alluding to the type of fence used to enclose a farmstead, constitutes a linear monument: the Wall of Remembrance. On its concrete surface, in a free composition, are placed Corten steel plaques with the names of all 817 pacified villages.

Another monument – or rather, a dispersed memorial space – is formed by the entire area surrounding the building, which includes both the pre-existing crosses known as the “Golgotha of Michniów” and newly designed crosses that complete the composition. From the moment visitors cross the line of the building's front facade, they are in a commemorative space; both inside the building and outside, they move among various memorials and monuments. Thanks to the free and scattered composition of the crosses, which intensifies near the forest, the visitor experiences a gentle transition from a space unmarked by memory to the culmination of the commemorative impression at the forest's edge.

The historical monuments on the mausoleum's grounds can be described as autonomous, whereas the new development offers a comprehensive memorial complex.

Architectural design

The plot is located on a terrain with a 10–15% slope; in response, the architects proposed a linear mass whose axis rises with the terrain. The building's form resembles a traditional cottage, thus alluding to the historical landscape of the area and referencing the archetype of rural architecture. The form is divided into segments which are offset from each other by half a meter in height (inside, movement from one segment to the next is enabled by ramps). In this way, they adapt to the slope of the land and symbolise the escalation of the conflict. Visitors begin their journey through the building in the House of Silence, a room with a cross at its centre that functions as a kind of purgatory, a place for quiet reflection and focus before the emotional journey, as well as a space for religious services. As visitors move through the exhibition, horizontal glazed openings allow for continuous visual contact with the external part of the composition.

The building's structure is based on concrete pillars connected to the foundation slab, meeting at the ridge line. The pillars support a concrete shell that serves as both the facade

and an insulating layer. The partitions conceal technical installations, as well as electrical and telecommunication infrastructure.

A characteristic feature of the design is the use of impregnated burnt wood as a recurring element in the interior design. A wood imprint was also used on the concrete outer shell, and the use of burnt and dried wood as formwork makes the grooves in the concrete sharp and deep. Burnt wood is also repeated in the interior as the building material for the constructions that form the background and structure of the exhibition, as well as in the monumental composition of the burnt crosses on the lawn. The aforementioned perspectival connection between the interior and exterior ensures that the perception of the entire complex is based on the three colours used in its material components: the grey of concrete, the deep brown of burnt wood, and the green of natural elements. Light is a significant element of the design. During the day, natural light illuminates the interior through the gaps between the cut sections of the cottage, and at night the building, seen from the outside, is intersected by bands of light from within. This nocturnal effect is intended to evoke associations of flames consuming the buildings. The form and scale of the complex mean that the museum establishes a relationship with its surroundings based on contrast. This kind of museum architecture – characterised by a dramatic external form, sharp shapes, disturbing overloads and raw materials – can provoke difficult emotions such as confusion, stress or anxiety. This represents a new type of museum architecture, known as museum–spectacle, and serves as a combimemorial.

Interior design

A visit to the mausoleum in Michniów is an emotional and memorable experience. The suffering of villages is a topic rarely explored in history education and in public discourse related to the war, so the information contained in the exhibition is an element that draws people to this place. The exhibition is divided into thematic blocks presenting the political circumstances of the village pacifications, their course, the resistance, the victims and the perpetrators. Subsequent parts of the exhibition pathway represent the successive stages of escalating repression.

The form of the exhibition is relatively traditional: there is a relatively small amount of multimedia content and it is based on archival materials, largely photographs and graphic materials with descriptions. The decor and the presentation of the architectural narrative in the interior are quite uniform, even monotonous, which is nevertheless defensible given the relatively small size of the museum and the amount of content. The meticulousness of the exhibition design and the synthetic quality of the architecture, along with the musical background, make viewing the exhibition an extremely emotional and engaging experience, devoid of sensory overload but rather inviting contemplation at one's own pace, in solitude and amidst nature. The narrativity of the place can be found in the exhibition, the architecture and the surroundings.

The exhibition's content correlates with the form of the building, as the individual segments that make up the architecture become progressively more deformed and unsettling. At the entrance, at the beginning of the path, the form is simple and stable. As the visitor continues to move, the segments that constitute it appear increasingly unstable, jagged and dynamic. The eloquence and symbolism of the architecture define the building as a combimemorial.

The first five segments are enclosed interiors with the exhibition, enhanced by musical effects, while the next six segments are open, jagged spaces, resembling ruins and a mutilated

structure. Each segment represents a different exhibition theme. Museum guests return to the exit through a corridor themed “For Helping Jews”, which not only raises awareness of the penalties for aiding Jews but also serves as a positive accent at the end of the journey, drawing attention to the multiplicity of stories related to acts of kindness amidst the cruel circumstances of the war. There is also a space designated for seminars and temporary exhibitions.

Genius Loci

This is an example of a martyrological museum in a small village. The space is introverted, isolated by a wall and enclosed, creating a barrier in the landscape. The spirit of the place is preserved as the new spatial composition strongly intersects with the existing memorial elements. The unique but newly created character of the place is accomplished through an architectural masterpiece corresponding to the local archetype, unusual topography and natural elements, treating them not only as material substance but also as a foundation for symbolical narrative. The solemnity and drama of the portrayed history do not allow for the development of functions other than commemorative ones. This site, through its form and unique genius loci, has a high potential for thanatourism but a low potential for becoming a village centre.

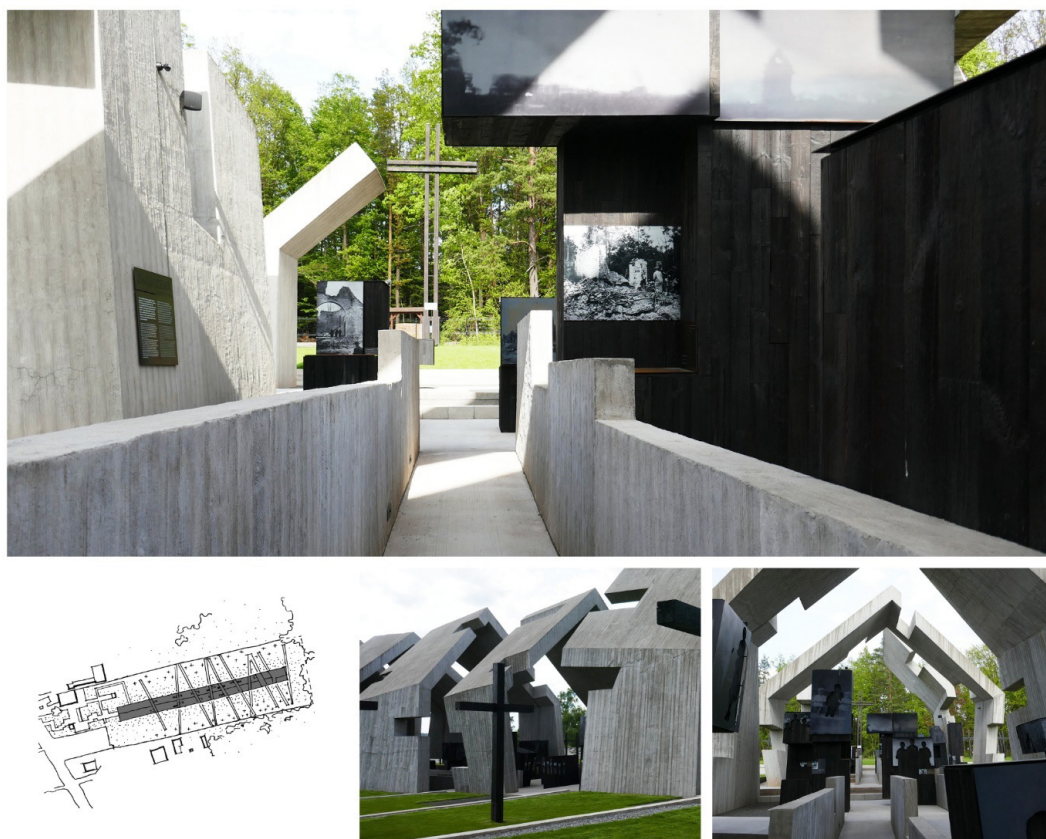


Fig. 2: *Mausoleum of the Martyrdom of Polish Villages in Michniów.* Photos and top view sketch by the author.

The Museum – Memorial Site in Belżec³⁵

Context

In the spring of 1943, the Nazis proceeded to liquidate the Belżec extermination camp, the first to use gas chambers on a mass scale and employ internal combustion engines for this purpose. By June of that year, all buildings had been dismantled and demolished, and the camp area was afforested.

In 2004, the Museum – Memorial Site in Belżec was established as a branch of the State Museum at Majdanek in Lublin (another extermination camp). Six months later, the new memorial complex was unveiled, a project that had been in development since 1995. The camp grounds were transformed into a comprehensive memorial site. No original buildings survived to serve as a starting point for the new design. However, it is a site rich with content, which was translated into a new, poignant form, intrinsically linked to the place of memory. The only material witnesses to the camp's history are the old oak trees, which were left untouched and around which the new site plan was adapted. The site is surrounded on three sides by a dense forest; only the front adjoins a built-up area, comprising both industrial facilities and residential houses.

The building houses an exhibition space, an auditorium, office and administrative facilities, and a space for contemplation. The building's surroundings are also replete with content, forming an engaging landscape design that serves a commemorative function. Due to the Act of 7 May 1999 on the Protection of the Grounds of Former Nazi Extermination Camps,³⁶ the functional offer of the museum on the grounds of the extermination monument must be limited compared to examples of historical museums.

Spatial design

The camp grounds were almost entirely covered with blast-furnace slag (mixed with dust and barren soil), creating the effect of an apocalyptic, funereal wasteland. This solution is not merely a formal device but also secures the burial site of victims in the mass graves. This was one of the fundamental parameters of the new project.

Looking from the entrance, a fissure is visible between piled stones, forming a path that leads towards a granite wall inscribed with a passage from the Book of Job in Polish, English and Hebrew. The path appears to descend, exposing the rising terrain as one approaches the wall. The observer begins the journey seeing the vastness of the memorial complex and, thanks to the increasingly high walls along the path, gradually sinks into it, eventually losing all visual contact with the surroundings. Just below the wall that closes the axis, the observer finds themselves in a narrow space, overwhelmed by massive stone surfaces. This is the Ohel Niche, where the walls bear symbolic inscriptions of victims' names. From the niche, two symmetrically diverging sets of stairs lead back up to ground level. They guide visitors to the

³⁵ Address: Ofiar Obozu Zagłady 4, Belżec; designers: A. Solyga, Z. Pidek, M. Roszczyk, M. Chylińska, DDJM; opening: 2004.

³⁶ "On the territory of the Monument of Extermination and its protection zone, economic activity may be conducted only to the extent necessary to protect the Monument of Extermination from destruction or damage, to ensure order and cleanliness on its grounds, for its ongoing conservation or the marking of its boundaries or the boundaries of the protection zone, and for the necessary services for persons visiting this Monument" – Ustawa z dnia 7 maja 1999 r. o ochronie terenów byłych hitlerowskich obozów zagłady [Act of 7 May 1999 on the protection of the grounds of former Nazi extermination camps] [online]. (Dz. U. 1999 no. 41, item 412). Internetowy System Aktów Prawnych [Internet System of Legal Acts]. Accessed 6 November 2025, <http://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU19990410412>.

next stage of the journey: a path surrounding the entire monument, constructed of concrete slabs adapted in a stepped manner to the different levels of the terrain. On these slabs rest cast-iron names of the Jewish communities from which the victims of the Belżec extermination camp originated.

Belżec is situated in nature, in a sparsely urbanised area. The surroundings are dominated by tall, lush greenery. A built-up area is visible only from the southwestern (front) side, with both residential housing and industrial buildings. The other boundaries of the site are surrounded by dense greenery – part of the Roztocze Środkowe Mesoregion. This provides a sense of isolation from the outside world. Thus, the contemplative path around the monument maintains a character of peace and quiet in the company of nature. Individual trees also serve as accents in the composition of the site itself, as natural witnesses to the wartime events. The monument was constructed in harmony with the natural distribution of these trees, and the path surrounding the complex is interrupted where it encounters one. Therefore, in this case study nature serves both as a backdrop – and an exceptionally lush and expressive one, providing a function of solace around the dramatic monument – and as an essential element of the composition.

The first commemoration at this site was created in 1963. The dominant element of this monument was a crypt–mausoleum in the form of a stone cube, which contained symbolic remains and excavated items belonging to the victims. Another memorial was a figurative sculpture depicting two prisoners, one supporting the other. It was a modest commemoration, sparse in information, and the inscriptions and information plaques lacked any mention of the victims' nationality.

The 2004 site plan is one of those rare examples where it is difficult to delineate a space not imbued with a commemorative character. The entire surface of the site has a poignant effect on the visitor and despite its multi-element composition it creates a coherent whole in the form of a large-scale memorial complex. However, several of the most characteristic elements, which capture the visitor's attention as powerful commemorative forms, can be distinguished. These are: the main pedestrian axis, which seems to sink lower and lower with its central point being a cast-iron platform with a stylised Star of David on the pavement; the Ohel Niche; the contemplative path encircling the site; a sculptural form resembling a pile of dismantled railway tracks; and the trees – silent witnesses to the events.

The memorial design at Belżec stands as a compelling architectural example realising Anna Maria Wierzbicka's theory³⁷ on the symbolic composition of contemporary sites of memory. Wierzbicka posits that such commemorative spaces are often structured around a set of dominant symbolic elements that articulate their historical narrative. These key components, visibly integrated into the Belżec landscape, include the gate, symbolising transition; water and the tree; the use of stone; the element of light; the path or road, representing a journey; the border, marking a profound separation; and the sacred axis, providing a central focus for remembrance. The deliberate arrangement of these factors transforms the physical site into a powerful, theory-driven narrative space.

Architectural design

The entrance to the camp grounds is located where the transport ramp once stood. The museum building alludes to the form of a train. It is an elongated rectangular prism, clad in raw

³⁷ WIERZBICKA, Anna M. *Architektura jako...*, p. 138.

concrete, which visually blends into the vast terrain. The museum's architecture is neutral and does not compete formally with the memorial complex, but rather discreetly complements it. Corroded metal bands appear on the facades and roof, referencing the rhythm of railway tracks. The architecture is simple and restrained, both in its external form and in the morphology of its simple interior, which has been filled with the scenography of the exhibition. A unique space is the contemplative part, which affects the visitor in an exceptionally sensory way. It forgoes an informational function and focuses exclusively on subverting the senses: sight through darkness, and hearing through the resonating acoustics in the quieted interior. It is a space economical in its means of expression, yet through narrative it evokes specific emotions in the visitor (anxiety, uncertainty, a sense of threat) to provide a fuller and more empathetic understanding of the victims' tragedy.

The entire complex is maintained in a uniform, almost monochromatic colour scheme. The dark grey scattered slag forms the backdrop for the site's colour palette. It is complemented by the grey-beige shade of concrete, which appears on the museum building, the pavement, and in fragments of the monument. In the pavement at the centre of the monument is a cast-iron Star of David which has taken on a dark rusty hue. This colour is also visible in other details, such as the decaying cast-iron inscriptions on the pavement, elements of the museum's facade, and the dramatically bent bars around the small square with the pattern of a stylised Star of David. The rusty colour serves as an accent here. Through its scale, materials and dramaturgy, the site contrasts with its surroundings.

Interior design

The journey through the Memorial Site in Belzec is an extremely emotional experience, not only due to the tragic stories that unfolded here but also through the eloquence and narrativity of the monument as a space. The entire memorial complex is shaped in a way that evokes extreme emotions – it is unsettling, dramatic, moving. The exhibition, on the other hand, is designed in a modest and factual manner. The interior does not overwhelm with emotional stimuli, leaving that function to the monument outside. The scenography is restrained and primarily presents exhibits in display cases, photographs, textual content and a small number of multimedia stations. Inside, the fullness of narrativity is taken over by the contemplative space. The interior also hosts a space for meditation and intense emotions, contrasting with the fact-based exposition. A dark, empty concrete hall with rich acoustics, it is reminiscent of a gas chamber, inducing a moment of reflection and emotion in the visitor. This emotion-provoking room brings to mind Daniel Libeskind's Holocaust Tower in Jüdisches Museum in Berlin.

Genius Loci

This is an example of a martyrological museum located on the grounds of an extermination monument, referring to a history that leaves no room for hope. This is visible in the form of the spatial composition and its details, maintained in an aesthetic of drama and tragedy, which is softened and quieted by the proximity of nature. It is a location with a unique and tragic genius loci reflected in an isolated, enclosed, even abstract spatial composition due to being detached from the outside world.



Fig. 3: *The Museum – Memorial Site in Bełżec* photos and top view sketch made by the Author. Photos from the collection of the Author.

Interpretation of Case Studies

The selected case studies present different strategies for redesigning places burdened with a difficult history. Each of the analysed memorial museums is closely linked, both semantically and spatially, to the events it commemorates. In each of these cases, architects and designers utilise the characteristic topographical, functional and compositional features of the site to create new spatial complexes with contemporary aesthetic and symbolic value. At the same time, their form and layout emphasise the authentic characteristics of the place – its *genius loci*.

Markowa is a small village where a martyrological museum is located. The museum's surroundings include a park and an open recreational space, conducive to walks and social gatherings. The facility is well-connected communicatively and visually with its surroundings, which eliminates any sense of isolation. Despite the lack of a distinct village centre, the museum in Markowa partially functions as a public space through the organisation of social and educational events – it is a place that integrates the local community, combining the dimension of memory with daily life.

In Markowa, the local archetype of rural architecture was employed, becoming a significant element in the contemporary interpretation of the *genius loci*. The front facade of the museum alludes to the characteristic profile of a house with a gable roof, but this form is simplified

and transformed in the spirit of modern aesthetics. Towards the rear of the building, the ridge lowers and descends to the ground, creating a fluid transition between architecture and landscape. Thanks to this solution, the building combines the simplicity and symbolism of a traditional house with a modern architectural language, maintaining a balance between reference to the past and contemporaneity.

In the case of Michniów, the key element shaping the spatial concept is the unusual narrow, elongated plot situated on rising terrain. The design is based on a linear composition that symbolically leads from a compact architectural structure to increasingly open spaces. The museum building gradually “thins out” and transitions into the form of a landscape arrangement, evoking associations with the Way of the Cross. This symbolism gains a special dimension when the visitor reaches the edge of the forest – the site of the historical event that prompted the museum’s creation. The spatial concept simultaneously resolves problems arising from the limited shape of the plot and its proximity to residential buildings. The high fences and the enclosed nature of the site intensify the feeling of claustrophobia, which in this case has a symbolic justification. Despite this, the museum does not serve as a local centre, as its martyrological function and solemn character limit its potential for social integration within the context of a small village like Michniów.

The genius loci here is utilised through a reference to the archetype of traditional rural architecture. The inspiration for the museum building’s form was a typical house, covered by a gabled roof. The architectural design transforms this archetype in a symbolic way: as one moves along the axis of the complex, its form gradually undergoes deconstruction. This process can be read as a spatial metaphor for disintegration, destruction and loss. Additionally, observing the circulation layout of the entire site from a plan perspective, one can discern a reference to the historical layout of the village of Michniów, a “street village” (*ulicówka*), which strengthens the relationship between the memorial site and the local spatial context.

Bełżec has the most enclosed character with regard to space, resulting from the dramatic nature of the commemorated events. This is a special place: an area designated as a monument of extermination and thus a legally protected site. The area is surrounded by a wall and entry is through a controlled access point. Visual contact with the surroundings is limited to views of greenery, which are an element of the spatial composition. Bełżec is situated in a sparsely urbanised area, which intensifies the impression of isolation and focus on the symbolic dimension. Unlike the two previous examples, this space is not designed for the daily use of the local community. Its function is exclusively educational and reflective it is dedicated to visitors coming from outside, for whom it constitutes a place of contemplation and confrontation with the past.

The local architectural archetype was not used here. The immediate vicinity of the memorial site currently consists of industrial areas located on the outskirts of the town. In the project’s concept, this space was intentionally separated from the urban context. Three sides of the complex are surrounded by greenery, and the fourth is enclosed by a high wall which enhances the feeling of isolation and detachment from the real environment. In this case, the genius loci is purely symbolic – it does not derive from the physical characteristics of the place, but from its historical significance. The emotional weight of the space is built through the use of raw forms, dramatic material contrasts and an ascetic composition, factors which guide the visitor into a state of focus and reflection.

The spatial compositions at Michniów and Belżec represent large-scale memorial complexes that can simultaneously be defined as counter-monuments.

Conclusions

The analysis of three contemporary Polish memorial museums in Markowa, Michniów and Belżec allows us to capture the current trends in the development of commemorative architecture in Poland. Each of the studied complexes, despite different historical and formal contexts, represents an attempt to find a contemporary language of commemoration through a profound dialogue with the place. In each case, the genius loci – understood as landscape, topographical memory and the emotional weight of the space – constitutes the fundamental starting point of the design process.

In Markowa, local history and the symbolism of the home have been transformed into a form that carries hope and affirms the value of goodness in the face of tragedy. In Michniów, the architecture is more expressive; it materialises suffering and destruction, becoming a visual metaphor for disintegration and loss. In Belżec, by contrast, the means of expression are asceticism and monumental silence; the architecture recedes into the background before the landscape, becoming an almost invisible medium of memory.

The common denominator among all three realisations is the pursuit of emotional impact through simplicity of form, reduction of means and integration with the landscape. Here, architecture does not dominate the content but becomes a tool for its transmission – a material commentary on history. Contemporary Polish memorial museums are increasingly moving away from pathos and monumentality towards a subtle narrative based on the visitor's experience.

The comparison of the analysed examples proves that the history of a place and its genius loci are key determinants in the design of museum memorial spaces. Contemporary commemorative architecture, by drawing on the local context, today fulfils not only a commemorative function but also an educational and therapeutic one, enabling an encounter with the past in a way that engages the intellect, emotions, and senses.

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