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MEMORY LANDSCAPES

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Abstract

The article examines contemporary strategies for designing memory landscapes and the role of architecture in shaping the experience of the past. The study aims to demonstrate architecture as an active medium of memory. The research is based on a literature review and case studies. The study shows that contemporary memory spaces create opportunities for reflection and personal interpretation of the past.

Keywords: *memory, memory landscapes, memory space, spatial experience*

Streszczenie

Artykuł analizuje współczesne strategie projektowania krajobrazów pamięci oraz rolę architektury w kształtowaniu doświadczenia przeszłości. Celem badań jest ukazanie architektury jako aktywnego medium pamięci, wpływającego na relacje między człowiekiem, historią i miejscem. Zastosowano analizę literatury oraz studia przypadków wybranych realizacji. Wyniki wykazują, że współczesne przestrzenie pamięci odchodzą od jednoznacznych narracji, tworząc miejsca sprzyjające refleksji i indywidualnej interpretacji historii.

Słowa kluczowe: *doświadczenie przestrzeni, krajobrazy pamięci, miejsca pamięci, pamięć*

1. INTRODUCTION – LANDSCAPE AS A MEDIUM OF MEMORY

Memory does not exist independently of space. Every experience of the past is rooted in specific places whose materiality, topography, and cultural significance shape the ways history is remembered and interpreted. Maurice Halbwachs, regarded as the founder of the concept of collective memory, argued that individual recollections are always reconstructed within specific social frameworks (*cadres sociaux*)[1]. By extension, space can be understood as one of the fundamental structures organising the process of remembering. Place preserve the experience of communities, becoming enduring points of reference for successive generations. In this perspective, memory is not merely a record of the past but a dynamic process emerging from the relationship between the individual, society, and the surrounding environment.

This reflection was further developed through Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory). Nora observed that, as direct intergenerational transmission of memory gradually diminished, contemporary societies increasingly created material forms that

[1] M. Halbwachs, *Społeczne ramy pamięci*, trans. M. Król, Aletheia, Warszawa 2022, pp. 416–417.

embodied collective memory[2]. Sites of memory are not limited to the locations of historical events. They may take the form of buildings, monuments, landscapes, cemeteries, ruins, or cultural artefacts whose significance arises from an ongoing process of social interpretation. Nora emphasised that memory is not an immutable quality permanently attached to a place; rather, it is continuously reconstructed through the interaction between the material traces of history and successive generations that reinterpret their meaning.

Contemporary memorial architecture increasingly departs from the traditional model of the monument as the dominant spatial symbol. Monumental forms, characteristic of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were primarily based on representation and the communication of a clearly defined ideological message. The visitor's role was to decode an officially prescribed historical narrative. Following the Second World War, however, this model of commemoration was widely challenged. James E. Young, in his studies of Holocaust memorials, identified the emergence of a new category of commemorative works known as *counter-monuments*[3]. Rather than representing history through symbolic or monumental forms, these interventions create spaces that encourage individual experience, reflection, and emotional engagement. Memory, therefore, is no longer enclosed within a material object but emerges through the encounter between the individual and the place itself.

This transformation coincided with a growing interest in landscape as a cultural construct. Contemporary understandings of landscape extend far beyond its aesthetic or natural qualities. Increasingly, landscape is perceived as a record of overlapping historical layers, human activity, and natural processes unfolding over time. Andreas Huyssen describes contemporary cities as urban palimpsests in which successive historical layers never disappear entirely but remain embedded beneath later architectural and urban interventions[4]. Consequently, memory manifests itself not only through individual monuments or buildings but also through the spatial structure of the landscape, its topography, and the surviving traces of past events.

Such an understanding fundamentally redefines the role of architecture. Rather than creating new commemorative objects, architecture increasingly becomes a means of interpreting existing places. Contemporary architectural interventions often reduce their formal expression in order to reveal meanings already embedded within the landscape. This approach is particularly evident in projects located at authentic historical sites, where preserved topography, archaeological remains, and natural vegetation possess commemorative value equal to that of the newly introduced architectural elements.

These ideas also resonate with the phenomenological approach to architectural theory. Juhani Pallasmaa argues that architecture is experienced not solely through vision but through the engagement of the entire human body and all the senses[5]. Light, sound, material textures, temperature, and even smell collectively shape the atmosphere of a place, influencing the way it is perceived and remembered. Memorial architecture therefore communicates

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[2] P. Nora, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, "Representations" 1989, no 26, pp. 7–24.

[3] J.E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, Yale University Press, New Haven–London 1993, pp. 27–28.

[4] A. Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2003, p. 7.

[5] J. Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (4th ed.), John Wiley & Sons, 2024, pp. 34–38.

history not through literal representation but through embodied and emotional experience. The visitor is no longer a passive observer of a monument but an active participant in a spatial sequence that encourages a personal interpretation of the past.

A similar understanding can be found in the work of Peter Zumthor. The architect repeatedly emphasises that the value of architecture lies not in formal originality but in its capacity to create a distinctive atmosphere (*Atmosphäre*)[6]. Architectural design should emerge from the local context, materials, history, and character of the landscape. In this perspective, architecture does not compete with its surroundings but becomes their natural continuation. The authenticity of place thus acquires particular importance, enabling visitors to engage directly with the material traces of history.

Contemporary memorial architecture increasingly moves away from dominant formal expressions in favour of shaping the visitor's experience through light, materiality, topography, and the relationship with the surrounding landscape. In this approach, architecture acts as a mediator of memory, leaving space for individual interpretation.

Within this perspective, the landscape functions as a medium of memory, actively generating meaning through its topography, archaeological remains, vegetation, and the natural processes of time. Architecture deliberately limits its own presence, revealing and reinforcing the authentic qualities of the site.

This perspective provides the framework for the following analysis of selected case studies, illustrating different strategies for employing landscape as a carrier of memory – from the protection of archaeological remains to the near-complete subordination of architecture to the existing spatial and historical context.

2. CASE STUDIES

2.1. STRATEGY I – INTERPRETING HISTORICAL REMAINS

Shelter for Roman Ruins in Chur (1986) is one of Peter Zumthor's earliest architectural works[7] and represents one of the most compelling examples of architecture engaging in dialogue with historic fabric. The project was commissioned following the discovery of the remains of a Roman settlement during archaeological excavations in the historic centre of Chur, the oldest city in Switzerland. Rather than reconstructing the ruins or presenting them within the conventional framework of a museum, Zumthor proposed a restrained architectural intervention whose primary objective was to protect the archaeological remains while creating conditions for their thoughtful and immersive experience.

The project consists of three pavilions protecting the Roman walls and the original ground level. Their lightweight form does not compete with the archaeological remains but instead frames and enhances their perception. The characteristic permeable façades, composed of horizontal timber slats, filter light, air, and the sounds of the city, emphasising the coexistence of past and present.

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[6] P. Zumthor, *Atmospheres: Architectural Environments – Surrounding Objects*, Birkhäuser, Basel–Boston–Berlin 2006, p. 11.

[7] T. Durisch (ed.), *Peter Zumthor 1985–2013. Buildings and Projects*, vol. 1, *1985–1989*, Scheidegger & Spiess, Zürich 2014, pp. 35–48.

The structure is precisely fitted to the excavated ruins, while the contrast between timber and stone, together with the dark background surfaces, accentuates the materiality of the historic fabric. Visitors move along a system of timber walkways suspended above the excavation, allowing the remains to be viewed from multiple perspectives while preserving their integrity and, in selected locations, providing direct access to the archaeological site.

Light plays a central role in shaping the spatial experience. Passing through the permeable façades and roof skylights, it highlights selected fragments of the ruins. The minimalist exhibition design remains subordinate to the authentic archaeological fabric, with architecture serving as a discreet backdrop. Despite the passage of time, the project retains its relevance through Zumthor's timeless architectural approach, grounded in materiality, light, and the experiential qualities of space.

Shelter for Roman Ruins is more than a protective enclosure for archaeological remains. It is an architectural intervention that deliberately choreographs the experience of memory. Through a carefully composed sequence of thresholds, elevated walkways, filtered daylight, semi-darkness, and the constant presence of urban sounds, it creates a space suspended between past and present. Memory is not communicated through a linear narrative or conventional museum display; rather, it is experienced bodily and sensorially, emerging through movement, light, materiality, and direct engagement with the site's authentic archaeological fabric.

2.2. STRATEGY II – INTEGRATING MULTIPLE LAYERS OF MEMORY

Everything to Eternity is a remarkable example of contemporary memorial architecture located on the Álftanes Peninsula in southwestern Iceland – an area of exceptional historical and cultural significance. It was here that one of the earliest settlements on the island developed, while today the nearby estate of Bessastaðir serves as the official residence of the President of Iceland. The site therefore constitutes a multilayered cultural landscape in which traces of history, cultural heritage, and contemporary national identity converge.

The project was created through the collaboration between the Icelandic artist and sculptor Kristinn E. Hrafnsson and the architectural practice Studio Granda. Its origin lies in a deeply personal tragedy. In 2006, the parents of the nineteen-year-old Guðrún commissioned Hrafnsson to design a memorial for their daughter, who had died prematurely. Initially conceived as a conventional funerary monument, the project gradually evolved into something far more comprehensive. Both Hrafnsson and the architects of Studio Granda recognised the exceptional potential of the site, transforming the commission into a place addressing broader themes of memory, mortality, and the continuity of history[8].

The child's parents selected the historic cemetery of Garðar, adjacent to Garðakirkja Church, as the site for the memorial. Set within the distinctive landscape of Iceland's coastline, the area preserves traces of medieval settlement. Site investigations conducted by Studio Granda led to the discovery of one of the best-preserved archaeological sites in Iceland, fundamentally transforming the project's direction. Rather than constructing a conventional memorial, the design evolved into the protection of a nearly 79-hectare cultural landscape surrounding the cemetery.

[8] Studio Granda, *Everything to Eternity*, "Studio Granda", https://www.studiogranda.is/Gen/EverythingToEternity/Text.html (access: 11.07.2026).

The project's concept, *Everything to Eternity*, emerged from the site's topography and the traces of the former settlement embedded within it. Instead of a dominant architectural object, the designers introduced a subtle landscape intervention consisting of an approximately 200-metre-long dry-stone wall and a shorter companion wall, both constructed using traditional masonry techniques and carefully integrated into the surrounding landscape.

The composition is completed by a corten steel gate bearing the inscription *Everything to Eternity*. Its perforated surface is designed to indicate the position of the North Star, reinforcing themes of permanence, orientation, and continuity. Another essential element is the Garðarlind spring, which, according to local tradition, never freezes and serves as a symbol of life, continuity, and the cyclical regeneration of nature.

Everything to Eternity exemplifies a site-specific architectural approach in which form emerges directly from a careful interpretation of place and history. Rather than dominating the landscape or imposing a singular narrative, the project reveals existing layers of memory while allowing space for personal interpretation. Equally significant is the carefully choreographed sequence of movement: a stone path leads visitors from the cemetery through the narrow passage between the walls and the corten steel gate toward the Garðarlind spring. This spatial sequence transforms the experience into a symbolic journey – from the memory of death toward reflection on the continuity of life, the passage of time, and the enduring presence of the landscape.

2.3. STRATEGY III – MINIMAL INTERVENTION IN THE LANDSCAPE

The *Katyń Death Pits*, designed by Zdzisław Pidek and Andrzej Sołyga as an integral component of the Polish War Cemetery in Katyń, represent one of the most compelling examples of contemporary memorial architecture employing landscape as its primary medium of expression. Rather than reconstructing historical events or creating a monumental memorial, the project seeks to mark the site of the crime through a carefully considered intervention within the existing topography of the Katyń forest. It is the landscape itself – the authentic witness to the events of 1940[9] – that becomes the principal carrier of memory.

The death pits identify the locations of the mass graves of Polish officers executed by the NKVD[10]. The designers deliberately rejected vertical memorial forms in favour of an almost entirely horizontal gesture embedded within the terrain. The graves are marked by organic, irregular surfaces formed from cast-iron plates of varying shapes[11].

Rather than meeting seamlessly, the individual elements are separated by narrow gaps that allow nature gradually to reclaim the space. Depending on the season, these openings become filled with young grass, damp soil, fallen leaves, or small pools of water. As a result, the project does not exist as a static artefact but remains subject to the ongoing transformations of the surrounding landscape.

The plates appear to hover slightly above the ground. Their irregular contours follow the natural topography, integrating seamlessly into the existing forest environment without

[9] T. Wolsza, *Zbrodnia katyńska – chronologia, skala, ofiary i nieukarani zbrodniarze*, "Muzeum Historii Polski", https://muzhp.pl/wiedza-on-line/zbrodnia-katynska-chronologia-skala-ofiary-i-nieukarani-zbrodniarze (access: 10.07.2026).

[10] *Cmentarze katyńskie*, "Muzeum Katyńskie", https://muzeumkatynskie.pl/zbrodnia-katynska-2/cmentarze-katynskie-2/ (access: 10.07.2026).

[11] *O projekcie*, "Katyń Pro Memoria", https://katynpromemoria.pl/o-projekcie/ (access: 10.07.2026).

disrupting its character. The absence of clearly defined edges causes the boundary between the intervention and the surrounding landscape to dissolve gradually. The dark surfaces seem to emerge from the earth only to disappear back into it. A subtle relationship is thus established between architecture and landscape, in which neither element dominates the other.

A crucial aspect of the project is the preservation of the site's authentic fabric. The trees growing between the graves, the forest floor, and the natural vegetation were not subordinated to an architectural composition. On the contrary, they became integral components of it. Consequently, memory is represented not through a monumental object but through the landscape itself, whose material presence and biological processes continually evoke the passage of time. Here, time is inscribed through changing vegetation, weather conditions, and seasonal transformations, making memory a dynamic and evolving experience rather than a fixed historical statement.

Despite its restrained form, the project remains a powerful commemorative space. The cast-iron surfaces allow visitors to perform individual acts of remembrance, such as placing candles, flowers, or personal tokens. Each plate may be interpreted as an individual place of burial; however, it is their collective arrangement that conveys the scale of the tragedy. The repetition of similar elements, combined with subtle variations among them, reflects the tension between the individual fate of each victim and the magnitude of the crime as a whole.

Particularly significant is the designers' decision to avoid literal representation. The *Katyń Death Pits* do not communicate history through symbols, inscriptions, or figurative imagery. Instead, their narrative is constructed through topography, materiality, and the relationship between the visitor and the landscape. Rather than observing a monument from a distance, visitors move among the actual burial sites, experiencing both their scale and the profound silence of the forest. Movement, direct contact with the natural ground, and awareness of the site's authenticity become the project's primary means of expression.

The *Katyń Death Pits* exemplify a form of memorial architecture that almost entirely relinquishes formal expression in favour of the agency of the landscape itself. The project neither competes with history nor seeks to interpret it through elaborate symbolism. Instead, it reveals the site's existing qualities and allows memory to emerge through the relationship between nature, time, and human presence. In this sense, the work of Zdzisław Pidek and Andrzej Sołyga perfectly illustrates a contemporary understanding of the memory landscape as an open, multilayered environment co-created through the visitor's experience – one in which architecture does not dominate the site but serves as a discreet instrument of interpretation.

3. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that contemporary memory landscapes increasingly prioritise the creation of conditions for individual engagement with history rather than the transmission of fixed historical narratives. In such projects, architecture assumes the role of a mediator between people and place. Memory emerges through the interaction between the visitor, the landscape, and the preserved historical fabric, remaining open to personal reflection and multiple readings.

The case-study analysis also made it possible to identify three distinct strategies employed in the design of contemporary memory landscapes. The first focuses on the protection and

interpretation of authentic historical remains through architectural interventions that structure their perception, as exemplified by *Shelter for Roman Ruins* in Chur. The second strategy integrates multiple layers of memory – individual, collective, archaeological, and landscape-based – within a single spatial framework, as demonstrated by *Everything to Eternity*. The third approach involves reducing architectural intervention to a minimum in order to foreground the authenticity of place, allowing the landscape itself to become the primary carrier of memory, as seen in the *Katyń Death Pits*.

The selection of these three case studies was deliberate. Together, they form a sequence that illustrates a gradual shift in the relationship between architecture, landscape, and memory. The first example focuses on archaeological remains; the second combines a historic cemetery with archaeological traces embedded within a broader cultural landscape; the third centres on a cemetery landscape in which the authentic site of burial becomes the principal medium of remembrance. This progression made it possible to examine how the role of architecture changes depending on the nature of the historical substance being commemorated.

The results of the analysis suggest that, as the significance of a site's authenticity increases, the need for explicit architectural expression diminishes. While in the first case architecture performs a clearly interpretative role in relation to the preserved ruins, in the subsequent examples its presence gradually recedes, becoming primarily a means of organising space and guiding the visitor's experience. A clear transition can therefore be observed – from architecture as the dominant compositional element towards landscape as the principal medium of memory.

The study confirms that contemporary memorial architecture increasingly relies not on creating new symbols but on revealing meanings already embedded within a place. In this approach, the landscape becomes the primary medium of memory, while architecture serves as a subtle interpretative tool that enables engagement with the site's authentic historical fabric.

The future of memorial design therefore lies not in the monumentalisation of history but in strengthening the relationship between people, landscape, and heritage. The most compelling forms of commemoration emerge through the careful framing of places where history remains physically present.

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