



The spectre of the thing: The construction of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Holocaust memorial¹

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ABSTRACT

The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Holocaust Memorial is situated on the western side of Green Park in Darlinghurst, in Sydney, Australia. Darlinghurst is considered the heart of Sydney's gay and lesbian population, having been the site of demonstrations, public meetings, Gay Fair Days, and the starting point for the AIDS Memorial Candlelight Rally. It is also very close to both the Sydney Jewish Museum and the Jewish War Memorial. The planning and construction of the Memorial between 1991 and 2001 was a process framed by two competing imperatives. Balancing the commemoration of a subset of victims of the Holocaust with a positioning of the event as a universal symbol of the continuing persecution of gays and lesbians was a challenge that came to define the ten year struggle to have the memorial built.

KEYWORDS

Aesthetics, Gay and Lesbian activism, Holocaust memorials, Monuments, Queer memorialisation.

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Introduction

The planning and construction of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Holocaust Memorial between 1991 and 2001 was a process framed by two competing imperatives - balancing the commemoration of a subset of victims of the Holocaust simultaneously with a positioning of the event as a universal symbol of the continuing persecution of gays and lesbians. This was a challenge that came to define the ten year struggle to have the memorial built. The Holocaust does not resonate as deeply in Australia as it does in Europe, the United States, and the Middle East. Within eighteen months of the formation of a memorial committee, many of the memorial's supporters came to see the Holocaust connection as a barrier to the mobilising of popular support. . The issue of relevance was further exacerbated by the AIDS crisis (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome caused by the human immunodeficiency virus, or HIV), which was first reported in 1981, reached its peak during 1995, and though still an issue, is now in decline. Approximately 32 million people have died from AIDS-related illnesses globally (Becerra, 2021). In the opinion of many in the gay and lesbian community, it was a holocaust much more relevant to their lived experience than an historical event distant in both time and place.

Domestic context

At the time the memorial was first mooted in the early 1990s, gay activism in Australia was undergoing a transformation. As Willett (2000) observes, during the 1970s and 1980s there was a fairly orthodox understanding of gay and lesbian activism, one dominated by committees and organisations supporting positive developments and confronting the negative or inadequate. The memorial committee falls easily enough into this category. Yet by the 1980s gay and lesbian politics had become less about protest and more about celebration, a development particularly evident in the growing popularity of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. Where there was activism, it focussed on the AIDS crisis, which involved the care and support of those afflicted, mourning the loss of community members, and acknowledging the impact of the disease on the community (Willett, 2000). This focus on the AIDS crisis was not surprising, for at its peak in the early 1990s, AIDS was killing 1000 Australians each year; in New South Wales alone deaths had already reached 3000 (Health Outcomes International & The National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research, 2007).

The desire to claim a space in the commemorative landscape for gays and lesbians reflected a "queer turn toward memory", one that challenged the "forgetting and erasure" that historically underpinned the marginalisation of the gay and lesbian communities (Dunn, 2011). As Wotherspoon (1991) observed in the year the memorial committee was formed, gays and lesbians in Australia belonged to a community with a history. At its very first meeting, the memorial committee argued that in spite of persecution and marginalisation, gays and lesbians are "part of the rest of the world [and do not] live in isolation." Central to this acknowledgement was a desire for external recognition, though it was on this occasion couched in almost apologetic terms: it would be a "positive move for Governing bodies to acknowledge our existence and a little about our global history" ('Gay Holocaust Monument Association,' 1991). Given that by the early 1990s the AIDs pandemic was regularly being discussed using the Holocaust as a reference point, the decision to link it to a commemoration of the wider persecution of gays and lesbians was not entirely without local resonance. A public memorial to some aspect of the gay and lesbian experience was probably inevitable, but in time the Holocaust connection became a distraction to those tasked with fund raising.

The new mood of celebration that permeated gay and lesbian politics and the activist focus on the AIDS crisis shifted attention to elements of the gay and lesbian experience that reflected local concerns. In France, Alain Emmanuel Dreuilhe had already positioned AIDS as a turning point in gay history, an assessment that relied on the "cultural memory of the Holocaust to help shape the relationship between disaster, community formation, and political legitimacy" (Caron, 2010, p.

156). Awareness of the Holocaust in Australia was, from the 1970s onwards, driven primarily by survivors. In 1933 the Jewish population of Australia was 26 472; by 2000 it was 100 000, with 35 000 to 40 000 arriving between 1933 and 1963, fleeing either Hitler or having survived the Holocaust themselves. Indeed, it is entirely possible that post-war Melbourne had the highest percentage of Holocaust survivors of any Jewish Diaspora community in the world (Rubinstein, 1991). The efforts of these survivors culminated in the establishment of Holocaust museums in Melbourne (1984), Perth (1990), and Sydney (1992), though the leaders of the Jewish community played, at best, a marginal role in these initiatives (Berman, 2001). This drive for Holocaust commemoration will eventually see Holocaust memorials and museums established in each capital city concurrent with the controversial \$500 million expansion of the Australian War Memorial, concern over what some saw as the paucity of funding allotted to the National Archives, and the ongoing debate about the Frontier Wars and the traditional narrative of European settlement as a benign and civilising process. In August 2020 the state government of Western Australia allocated \$6 million dollars to help fund the construction of a new Jewish Community Centre in Yokine, a suburb of Perth, which would include a Holocaust education centre. In late September 2020 the Morrison government announced funding of \$3.5 million to support the establishment of a Holocaust Museum and Education Centre in Brisbane, Queensland. In October 2020 the then Minister for Education Dan Tehan (2020, para. 3) announced that \$2.5 million of government funding would be likewise directed to the establishment of the Adelaide Holocaust Museum and Steiner Education Centre in Adelaide, South Australia. In January 2021 Alan Tudge, the Minister for Education and Youth, and Andrew Barr, the Australian Capital Territory Chief Minister added \$750 000 to the growing total to assist in establishing the Canberra Holocaust Museum and Education Centre in the nation's capital. In March 2021 the federal government committed \$2 million dollars towards the establishment of a Holocaust education centre in Hobart, Tasmania, in a move that angered some Aboriginal activists, who argue that "history much closer to home was being ignored" (Cooper, 2021, para. 3).

Jewish immigrants and the gay and lesbian community would not have instinctively seen each other as fellow survivors of genocide National Socialism, or persecution more generally, with a shared commemorative imperative. Some of the memorial's supporters engaged with this reality by characterising it as a product of the AIDS crisis rather than as a competing initiative with a singular focus on Nazi persecution. Indeed, two of the memorial's early advocates, Mannie De Saxe, who worked with the Community Support Network, a counselling group aligned with the AIDS Council of New South Wales, and Kitty Fischer who worked with the Ankali Project, which provided training to volunteers providing emotional and social support to socially isolated people living with HIV, were on the frontlines in the struggle against the virus. Yet in an Australian context, where the cultural memory of the Holocaust does not resonate as deeply as elsewhere, linking the two events obscured rather than illuminated the broader ideological considerations that increasingly animated the memorial's supporters. As the early supporters of the memorial were replaced on the committee or drifted away from the project, the Holocaust link was increasingly subsumed into the wider story of the persecution of gays and lesbians. These 'second generation' supporters saw an explicit link with the Holocaust as a barrier to "convey[ing] the universality of the vision of our project in the public arena" (The Gay and Lesbian Holocaust Memorial Project Newsletter, 24 November 1992).

International context

In spite of the apparent disconnect between the name Sydney Gay and Lesbian Holocaust Memorial and the broader ideological concerns of its supporters, the committee's approach was consistent with international trends in Holocaust commemoration. From the 1980s onwards, there had been a growing international drive to commemorate the 100 000 gays and lesbians arrested by the Nazis (50 000 of whom were jailed for their 'crime', and though most served their sentence in regular prisons, between 5 000 and 15 000 were sent to concentration camps, where approximately sixty percent died). Beginning at the site of the concentration camp at Mauthausen

in 1984, memorials soon followed at Dachau, Neuengamme, Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen, and Risiera San Sabba. Cities around the world also followed suit, among them Amsterdam, Berlin, Bologna, Den Haag, Frankfurt am Main, Cologne, Anchorage, San Francisco, Rome, Palm Springs, Trieste, Laxton, Nottinghamshire, Vienna, Natzweiler-Struthof, Bas-Rhin, Barcelona, Tel Aviv, Manitoba and Ottawa. Sydney is the only one of these cities with a Holocaust memorial dedicated to persecuted gays and lesbians located outside Europe, North America, and Israel.

The relativising of the Holocaust in order to make links with contemporary persecution was also in step with the evolution in the understanding of it as a “cosmopolitan memory” (Levy & Sznajder, 2002), a “traumatic event for all of humankind” (Alexander, 2002, p. 6), and the “archetypal sacred-evil of our time” (Moses, 2003, p. 6). Most Holocaust museums and memorials adopt this approach and are driven either by nationalistic or humanistic imperatives. The former makes a connection between the Holocaust and the broader history of the nation in which it is located. The moral, political and social implications thereby become a vehicle to explore contemporary political issues. The latter approach, which informs the Sydney memorial, considers “the universal humanistic lessons of the Holocaust” as an element in the “fight against prejudice, discrimination and racism” (Berman, 2006, pp. 34-35). The Jewish experience has thereby been gradually de-historicised and in the process the Holocaust has become emblematic of the destruction wrought by all forms of racism and intolerance (Alba, 2007). A case in point is the inscription at the Sydney memorial, which does not mention the Holocaust, instead casting its net very widely in terms of who is commemorated:

Remember you who have suffered or died at the hands of others, Women who have loved women; Men who have loved men; And all of those who have refused the roles others have expected us to play. Nothing shall purge your deaths from our memories.

This approach, however, is relatively new to Australian audiences, who have traditionally been reticent to make the imaginative leap between the Holocaust and their own history, particularly the treatment of Indigenous Australians (Moses, 2003). Such an acknowledgement would position white Australia as both perpetrator and resistor of genocidal acts. This preference for historical specificity in matters to do with the Holocaust is at odds with other developments, for Australian culture is now “saturated with traumatic memories and understandings of victimhood that incite profound sympathy and give voice to those who have suffered.” As Twomey (2015, para. 17) contends Australians increasingly view history “as a wound or scar that leaves a trace on a nation’s soul.”

In some contexts, the globalisation of Holocaust memory has proved problematic. Some conservatives in America have criticised the linking of the Holocaust to the persecution of gays and lesbians as a victimist discourse which seeks only to garner sympathy as a precursor to laying claim to broader political and social recognition (Stein, 1998). Just recently, attempts to analogize the situation in June 2019 on the United States border with Mexico to concentration camps in Europe during the 1930s and 1940s drew the ire of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The Museum made it clear that it “unequivocally rejects efforts to create analogies between the Holocaust and other events, whether historical or contemporary” (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2019). Edna Friedberg (2018, para. 9), a historian in the Museum’s William Levine Family Institute for Holocaust Education argues that “when we reduce it to a flattened morality tale, we forfeit the chance to learn from its horrific specificity.” Nevertheless, to date there have been few issues of this nature with the Sydney memorial. Indeed, the Sydney Jewish Museum actively includes the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Holocaust Memorial in commemorative events. In April 2018 a Yom HaShoah commemoration (Holocaust Remembrance Day) was conducted by two rabbis at the memorial in collaboration with the Pride History Group. The ceremony the following year continued the emphasis on globalising the lessons of the Holocaust, for though the organisers sought to commemorate the gay and lesbian victims of Nazi persecution, “above all, we remember the millions of LGBTIQ who in the years since the Nazi regime crumbled were still forced to hide their sexual identity for fear of persecution that did not end in 1945”

(Sydney Jewish Museum, 2019). Justice Marcus Enfield spoke at the dedication of the memorial and referenced “blinkered views from certain sectors of the community” who believed that this “detract[ed] from the recognition of the persecution of [the Jews] (*Australian Jewish News*, 9 March 2001, n.p).

What little disquiet there was in 2001 tended to be very measured. Professor Colin Tatz, the director of the Australian Institute for Holocaust and Genocide Studies argued that “Homosexuals certainly were not the target of annihilation in the manner that Jews were ... People have to be careful of jumping on the coat-tails of one group’s suffering and appropriating it for their own” (*Australian Jewish News*, 9 March 2001, n.p). Professor Konrad Kwiet of Sydney University and former chief historian of the Australian war crimes commission and resident historian at the Sydney Jewish Museum, supported a memorial to persecuted homosexuals. He warned, however, against drawing too strong a parallel between the Holocaust, which he argues specifically refers to the attempted extermination of the Jewish people, and the persecution of gays and lesbians (*Australian Jewish News*, 9 March 2001). In contrast to these controversies, the New South Wales Jewish Board of Deputies Holocaust Remembrance Committee acting chairperson Val Stern saw no threat in the Sydney memorial’s relativising of the Holocaust. Instead, she “applauded any move which increases the awareness of the horrors of persecution, prejudice and intolerance” (*Australian Jewish News*, 6 September, 1991, p. 9). Mannie De Saxe, a member of the original group which conceived the memorial in 1991, recalls that there was some opposition from the Jewish community to a link being made between the persecution of gays and lesbians and the Holocaust, particularly given its proximity to the Jewish Museum (personal interview). Both he and Kitty Fischer, another founding member and an Auschwitz survivor whose life was saved by a gay inmate, were Jewish, so in his view there was “a very strong connection; it wasn’t just out of the blue.” So muted was the concern that Luci Ellis, one of the committee’s early presidents, does not recall any community concerns about the Holocaust connection (personal interview).

The memorial’s story

As James Young (1993b) contends, memorials tend to remember all history except their own, and the Sydney memorial is no exception. The memorial was first mooted by Holocaust survivor Dr Kitty Fischer, who in 1949 migrated to Australia and after a wide and varied career both here and overseas, settled in Sydney in 1984. She believed that she owed her life to a homosexual inmate at Auschwitz who befriended her when she was incarcerated in late 1944. During the 1980s, Fischer, by then living in Sydney, did volunteer work providing support for people who were HIV positive. Given her personal experience of the concentration camps, the relevance of the Holocaust to the gay and lesbian community probably appeared self-evident. When the *Sydney Star Observer* reported the formation of the Gay and Lesbian Holocaust Memorial Committee in May 1991, the appropriateness of the link was not an issue. Andrew Clark, the group’s spokesmen, had no qualms about making the imaginative leap between it and the persecution of gays and lesbians in contemporary Australia:

The blood of the martyrs in the Holocaust is no different to the blood being shed now through homophobia. The language used by the Nazis when they were kicking someone to death is the same used by gay bashers today (*Sydney Star Observer*, 17 May 1991).

Clark’s language choices were not mere hyperbole. In June 2018 the New South Wales police reviewed 88 deaths between 1976 and 2000 and found that possibly 27 of them were gay hate crimes. The violence reached a “bloody crescendo” in the late 1980s and early 1990s as the AIDS crisis worsened, with upward of 20 assaults each day, most going unreported or un-investigated, which some believed was the direct result of an “unsympathetic” police and judiciary (Duffin, 2018).

Ten people, Fischer among them, attended a Special General Meeting at the Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby premises in Sydney on 28 July 1991. The group committed to doing “all things necessary to construct and maintain a monument” (The Gay & Lesbian Holocaust Memorial Project, 1991). Until the association could be incorporated, which is a formal legal structure adopted by a large range of not-for-profit organisations in Australia, it continued to operate as a collective. Aside from Fischer, the group was at this point entirely male, which perhaps goes some way to explaining the initial and short lived commitment to commemorating only the homosexual males persecuted or murdered during the Holocaust. Nevertheless, the group unanimously adopted a statement of aims that was, by contrast, very broad. The memorial would commemorate all victims of “lesbian and gay oppression around the world through the ages.” The three examples explicitly identified were the “nazi holocaust”, “the soviet gulags AND [the] ongoing bashings and murders in Australia and throughout the world” (capitalisation in the original) (The Gay & Lesbian Holocaust Memorial Project, 1991). It was hoped that the memorial would encourage community formation, for the Australian gay and lesbian communities were, it was believed, “searching for [their] identity, with and post AIDS, and to do this, we need to search for our identities internationally.” Drawing inspiration from the *Homomonument* in Amsterdam which was dedicated in September 1987, an early contributor suggested to the committee that the memorial take the form of a pink granite triangle set into the pavement. In spite of the breadth of the vision statement, the initial discussion was at this stage far narrower, both in terms of the memorial’s design, and the people it commemorated than it eventually became. In gold lettering etched into the marble was to be an explicit identification of it as a Gay Holocaust Monument commemorating only the male victims of fascism (‘Gay Holocaust Monument Association’, Letter, 1991).

The question of which community the committee was serving is an interesting one. In reality, much of the focus was inward looking, for the memorial was positioned as a site of resistance and protest rather than commemoration. In one promotional pamphlet, (circa. 1990s), the memorial was characterised as a reminder to “lesbians and gays in Sydney not to become complacent – that no matter how open and accepted we feel at the moment, there is always the chance that tomorrow, full scale persecution could start again.” The conflation of historical and contemporary persecution in the same publication, which ranged from Nazi Germany to Russia and the Soviet Union, Colombia, Iran, Peru, Cuba, Angola, Tasmania, and the “victims of bashings and murders occurring in Sydney and elsewhere to the present day” served only to reinforce this message. Where an engagement with the wider community was discussed, the content and tone displayed an assertiveness that was at least in part born of anger and frustration. The memorial would be a “visible and permanent reminder to the heterosexual population that we will not forget those who hide their love in China, those imprisoned in Angola or those who face vilification and loss of work in Tasmania” (‘Why the triangle’, n.d.).

The initial choice of site was Taylor Square, but when confronted by a wait time for approval of anywhere between five and ten years, the committee opted instead for the newly named Stonewall Gardens (itself a name redolent with meaning) in Green Park, Darlinghurst. It was an appropriate choice given that Darlinghurst is considered the heart of Sydney’s gay and lesbian population, having been the site of demonstrations, public meetings, Gay Fair Days, and the starting point for the AIDS Memorial Candlelight Rally. It is also very close to both the Sydney Jewish Museum and the Jewish War Memorial. It also suited the South Sydney Council, who wished to redevelop the park, as well they might. As the committee itself acknowledged, the area was “run down, dark at night, and is frequented by the homeless, sex industry workers and IV drug users [and] was one of the most dangerous streets at night for bashings in Sydney.” Perhaps unnecessarily, they added that “people avoid Green Park” (The Gay and Lesbian Holocaust Memorial Project, 1991a, p. 8). It was hoped that the Park would also be the site of an AIDS memorial, but that was subsequently established five and a half kilometres away in Sydney Park and dedicated on 27 May 2001, three months after the Holocaust memorial.

Funding was immediately an issue, however, and though the Australia Council provided grant monies in 1991 and 1992, by 1998 only \$25 000 had been raised, well short of the \$40 000

required (although various figures were quoted across the life of the project, some as high as \$68 000). The Community Cultural Development Unit of the Australia Council provided \$15 000 to fund an arts position for Andrew Clark. The Artists and Designers Participation in Environmental Design programme of the Community, Environment, Art and Design Committee of the Australia Council provided a further \$5500 to finance the bulk of the design work once a winning design had been chosen. Nevertheless, that left the committee to raise the greater portion of the required funds. They proved dedicated and innovative fund raisers, though at times they must have despaired at ever reaching the required amount. They engaged in a wide variety of activities - social events at the Exchange Hotel in Oxford Street, Sight Nightclub, Club 77 on William Street East Sydney, and at Kinselas in Taylor Square, a costume party, monthly dinners, information forums and presentations, chocolate drives, a stall at the Mardi Gras Fair Day, and selling t-shirts and posters.

A design competition with a prize of \$2000 was announced in the second half of 1991, although it was eventually replaced by a shortlist of four who were paid to develop their original ideas from which a final design was selected. One of the central requirements was that any design needed to use the pink triangle as either the basis for the whole design or as a motif used as part of the whole. The winning design by Russell Rodrigo was unveiled at the Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby Offices on 14 September, 1992. At the dedication ceremony in 1992, which also saw the dedication of Stonewall Gardens, the programme positioned the design as a commemoration of “all lesbians and gays who have at any time in history been persecuted or murdered because of their sexuality.” It was hoped that the memorial would serve as both a reminder of “past injustices, and as an inspiration to us all to fight for that justice which is still to be gained” (Stonewall, 1992). Although the use of the pink triangle was a non-negotiable for the committee, past injustices were an increasingly secondary issue for those pursuing a more contemporary agenda.

At the 1992 Annual General Meeting the decision was taken to change the group’s name from the Gay and Lesbian Holocaust Memorial Project to the Gay and Lesbian Memorial Project. As Luci Ellis, the then Association President, observed, “the intent of the memorial was never to be only about the Holocaust, but [instead] to specifically reference the Holocaust.” On practical grounds, even as a reference point, the Holocaust link was seen as problematic. Ellis recalls:

It was the early nineties, and the AIDS crisis was in full swing. Nobody in Sydney wanted to donate money to something that wasn’t AIDS related, particularly if they thought it was about something that had happened decades earlier in Europe (personal interview).

Nevertheless, the change proved controversial. Mannie De Saxe who by then had been voted off the committee, was opposed to any effort to shift the Holocaust to the periphery of the memorial’s narrative. Almost thirty years later he remains adamant that it was a “very bad idea” (personal interview). Others saw a darker force at work and suggested that it was driven by an anti-Semitic agenda. In reality, however members of the new committee believed, probably correctly, that the Holocaust connection did not resonate sufficiently in the local context to generate the level of financial support that was required. Ellis, who championed the initiative, recalls that a gay Jewish man attended the meeting with the intention of nominating for the committee and opposing the change. When he heard the arguments he was swayed sufficiently to support it and subsequently became an effective fundraiser.

The success in obtaining a site and a design for the memorial was, however, a false dawn. The initial drive to build a memorial began to dissipate in the face of legal difficulties and the continuing issue of funding. In 1996, three years after the intended completion date, the *Sydney Star Observer* announced that the memorial project had been axed. There was some disquiet about the fate of the funds already raised. De Saxe wrote a letter to the editor of the *Sydney Star Observer* in 1996 and again in February 1998 requesting that donations be returned. Two months later, the same paper reported that the project had been revived with Robert Marsden acting as the newly reconstituted group’s solicitor. Marsden indicated that the funds now totalled \$25 000 and that

efforts would be made to raise the final \$10 000. With further funding from the South Sydney City Council and after almost a decade of struggle, the memorial was dedicated on 27 February 2001 in the presence of Cr. John Fowler, Mayor of South Sydney, Ms Luci Ellis, President of the Gay and Lesbian Holocaust Memorial Project, Mr John Marsden, Chairperson of the Gay and Lesbian Holocaust Memorial Project Incorporated, The Hon Justice Marcus Einfeld, and Ms Lou-Anne Lind, President of the Sydney Pride Centre. In the midst of the success, the committee was emboldened enough to confront the issue of relevance. They showed no small amount of dexterity in arguing that the distance of the memorial from the camps and the sites of Nazi occupation and atrocities was a strength rather than a weakness, one that would permit both mourning and celebration:

The proximity to the Jewish museum and the textual and pictorial imagery used will ensure this space never loses its reverential and memorial quality. The location near Oxford Street will assist in a reading of this memorial allowing for events of joyful celebration to be staged here without fearing the sacredness will be destroyed. Indeed, it is anticipated this multiple layering will increase its importance ('The Gay and Lesbian Memorial', Dedication and Presentation Ceremony Programme, 2001).

In spite of the long delays that included Andrew Clark quitting the project in 1992, and the subsequent threat of a legal squabble over the group's finances when the initiative looked ready to be cancelled in 1996, the committee members consistently harboured quite lofty ambitions. The tone had been set very early when one of their first promotional pamphlets noted that though there were a few similar monuments in Europe, "ours will be the envy of Gay and Lesbian communities around the world" ('Gay Holocaust Monument Association', 1991). The long struggle to marshal a broad supporter base and to raise the necessary funding never saw a softening of this rhetoric. At the dedication ceremony in 2001, the committee, no doubt relieved to have finally completed the memorial, channelled some of this early confidence when they celebrated the memorial's "iconic status as a symbol of the community" and its potential to be "the most utilised memorial of its kind" ('The Gay and Lesbian Memorial', Dedication and Presentation Ceremony Programme, 2001).

Ethics and aesthetics

When he was first approached to design what became the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C, James Ingo Freed was less than enthusiastic. Believing instinctively that the architecture would need to generate an emotional rather than an intellectual response, he was doubtful whether it was even possible to address the aesthetic issues inherent in any engagement with an "unimaginable, unspeakable, and un-representable horror" (Young, 1993a, p. 16). As Freed conceded, "looking over your shoulder, you were always aware of the spectre of this thing, those millions of bodies" (Freed, 1993, p. 89). In effect, Freed would need to engineer a monument that would evoke a nightmare (Argiris, et al., 1992, p. 48). As Bewes (1997) observes, Auschwitz is an affront to human rationality (p. 145). Any attempt to depict it must find a way to do so and "not ... insult the millions of real dead" (Lyotard, 1989, p. 364). Rodrigo's design does not insult the dead, but nor does it offer a visceral engagement with the Holocaust as an incomprehensible evil. Instead, its central message is hope, a design decision symptomatic of a determination by all involved to unmoor the memorial from its historical roots.

At a surface level, the Holocaust is certainly referenced in the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Holocaust Memorial. The memorial is a pink triangular glass prism, symbolic of the ones worn in concentration camps to identify and humiliate male homosexuals, but which is now considered a "symbol of gay pride" (Pamphlet announcing the formation of the committee, 1991). The black triangle, the symbol used to identify lesbians, is present in the form of a triangular grid of black steel columns intersecting the prism. The two triangles appear as a fractured Star of David, thereby linking the more specific experience of gays and lesbians with the Jewish tragedy. The black columns are sentinels which are intended to symbolise individual resilience and strength.

During the day the memorial reflects its surroundings, which in the eyes of some of its supporters, ensures that “the past and the present become one.” At night, the Holocaust image on the face of the memorial “glows softly, a symbol of hope and the life within and beyond” (The Gay & Lesbian Memorial, Dedication and Presentation Programme, 2001).

Given the visual appeal of the memorial, there is not only a disconnect between its name and its ideology, but also between its ideology and its aesthetics. This is not something unique to Rodrigo’s design, for as Marcuse (1978) observes, “art cannot represent suffering without subjecting it to aesthetic form and thereby ... to enjoyment” (p. 55). Fine and popular art often make a moral compromise with pleasure (Duncum, 2008), a reality that the Sydney Pride Centre embraced, for in their view, there needed to be room for both grief and celebration:

Standing there, we understand that this is the place to leave our tears ... [and there] are the times of our choosing, times when our celebration is given added power by our proximity to this icon of our identity (Lesbian & Gay Solidarity Melbourne, 2016).

This approach is also evident in other explorations of the Holocaust which have celebrated the survivors, rescuers, and liberators in order to construct narratives that are, to a point, factually accurate but are nevertheless optimistic and uplifting (Kansteiner, 2012). Hayden White (2012) identified the same issue, noting that many historians saw the flood of memoirs, autobiographies, novels, plays, movies, poems and documentaries as threatening to “aestheticize, fictionalise, kitschify, relativise, and otherwise mythify what was an undeniable fact (or congeries of facts)” (p. 191). As the families that picnic near the memorial would probably attest, it has aestheticised, and indeed naturalised the history it seeks to commemorate.

Though not played out on such a large physical scale, the design and construction of the Sydney *Gay and Lesbian Holocaust Memorial* also confronts the tension between aesthetic imperatives and the ethical considerations inherent in the memorialisation of an event that many consider beyond comprehension. From the earliest attempt to memorialise the Holocaust in 1943 at the Majdanek (or Lublin) Concentration Camp to the most recent efforts, three characteristics have emerged as typical of the genre: they are addressed to transnational audiences, they communicate multiple meanings; and they use a new repertoire of symbols, forms, and materials to explore those meanings. Having dispensed with the use of stelae, towers, and realistic statuary by the 1960s, Holocaust memorials no longer resembled traditional war memorials. Instead, they adopt larger, more expansive, abstract, avant-garde forms (Marcuse, 1978). The Sydney memorial is more conservative in its symbolism, perhaps reflecting the fact that the project was already well underway before the design competition, the predominance of activists rather than visual artists, and the strict parameters in terms of imagery, size and placement outlined in the design brief.

Though in step with some of the approaches to commemorating the Holocaust in evidence internationally, the memorial does not embrace abstraction with any degree of confidence. Rodrigo opted for a very different approach than Peter Eisenman, the designer of the *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* in Berlin, which is comprised of 2711 concrete stelae arranged across a five acre space. Like Rodrigo, Eisenman is an architect. Both created memorials to the Holocaust that demand a subjective engagement; indeed Rodrigo argues that a minimalist approach allows the memorial participant to become part of an embodied experience of memory, mediated by architectural form and space. They are thereby transformed from a spectator into performer (Rodrigo, 2009). Eisenman pursued a deconstructivist approach, one informed by the paradoxical view that the rupture of the Holocaust had made such an architectural representation impossible (Rosenfeld, 2016). This reflects his intellectual debt to philosophers such as Theodor W. Adorno, who argued that poets or artists engaging with the Holocaust will always fall short in their efforts to impose meaning “on the otherwise meaningless, of form on the formless, or of familiarity on the radically unprecedented” (Trezise, 2001, p. 43). Eisenman argued that his memorial “symbolises silence and emptiness. It does not say ... what it is and what it means.” It was intended to be a place devoid of meaning and information, one that would “speak without speaking”

(Rosenfeld, 2016, p. 290). In contrast, Rodrigo saw in the abstraction of minimalism proof that “some form of figuration is required in order for an empathic link to be evoked in the memorial participant, for projection and identification to take place.” Effective memorial design, in Rodrigo’s view, requires a balance between “abstraction and figuration, between ambiguity and specificity” (Rodrigo, 2009, p. 11).

In spite of the memorial’s failure to find an enduring place in the commemorative landscape or to act as a significant site of remembrance or resistance for the gay and lesbian communities, the place of the Holocaust in the memorial’s ideology still lingers. Nevertheless, when Rodrigo came to submit his PhD to the University of Sydney in 2009, he referred to the memorial as the ‘Gay & Lesbian Memorial’, choosing to dispense with the narrower and more explicit link to the Holocaust. By then he was characterising the purpose of the memorial as more than just the “tens of thousands who were tortured and murdered during the Nazi Holocaust and the untold number who perished in other incidents of persecution throughout history, but also victims of ongoing assaults and murders in Australia and elsewhere.” He also saw a clear didactic purpose in that he wanted it not only to be a focus for the gay and lesbian community, but also “an educational device to help overcome prejudice, fear and discrimination” (Rodrigo, 2009, p. 193). In 2001, he came close to apologising for the Holocaust link, acknowledging that the manner in which the memorial was promoted may have seen “erroneous references made.” He went as far as to accept that “it’s possibly valid that there’s no equivalence between the two [persecutions] (*Australian Jewish News*, 9 March 2001, n.p).

In contrast to Rodrigo’s approach, the City of Sydney Council, who by 2018 were responsible for the memorial (the South Sydney Council was merged with the Sydney City Council in 2004), retained the narrower view of its purpose, though they expanded the description of the people it included. Three decades after it was first mooted the memorial is now seen, at least officially, as a means to commemorate the “thousands of LGBTQI people persecuted during the Nazi regime in Germany, including thousands murdered in concentration camps” (City of Sydney, 2018) Interestingly, where once there were concerns that the Jewish community of Sydney might oppose a memorial, they continue to make use of it during commemorative activities on Holocaust Remembrance Day and a visit for the delegates at the 25th Jewish LGBT+ World Congress in March 2019. The gay and lesbian communities, which naturally cut across all racial, ethnic, religious, and class boundaries are perhaps not as drawn to a monument with such a clear aesthetic and ideological link to an event that has played little or no part in their own identity formation.

Conclusion

The memorial’s physical distance from in situ or primary sites and the declining resonance of the Holocaust in the Australian context are just two issues that have contributed to its marginalisation. As Ellis observes, the next generation of supporters has not come through to champion it and the early supporters have moved away or died (personal interview). The memorial might yet successfully evolve, as other memorials have before it, and become a site of gay and lesbian resistance. At this point, though, it does not resonate sufficiently as a commemorative structure or as a counter monument that challenges traditional power structures. As the influential scholar Pierre Nora (1996) argues, memory is “vulnerable”, “fragile”, and “subject to the dialectic of remembrance and forgetting” (pp. 1-3). It remains to be seen whether in the long term the memorial can effectively challenge the erosion of memory.

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Endnotes

¹ There is an issue here of nomenclature. Across the literature this term, as well as gay, lesbian, homosexual, LGBTQI+, and queer, are used, sometimes interchangeably. The authors have maintained the terminology used by the various researchers, while using 'gay and lesbian' in the context of the memorial for consistency. They acknowledge, however, that this term does not fully reflect the diversity of the people commemorated by the memorial.