

Museum Studies

An Anthology of Contexts

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Chapter 8 | Terence M. Duffy

Museums of 'Human Suffering' and the Struggle for Human Rights

Museums of 'human suffering' and human rights cover a broad field, and 'suffering' is, moreover, a relative concept, ranging from the poverty of arriving immigrants at Ellis Island or the cramped apartments of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum (both in New York City), to the mass violence of genocide museums like the one at Tuol Sleng in Cambodia. This article concentrates on museums and projects whose exhibitions make a resounding appeal for the protection of human rights. Many of these exhibitions are implicitly controversial, since human rights cannot easily be separated from the political domain. National tragedies loom large in the permanent collections of museums throughout the world – from war museums to national galleries, from natural disasters to diaspora. And remembrance is certainly an emotive issue, fraught with socio-political implications, as was seen in Northern Ireland during the discussion process to create a Memorial Museum to the victims of conflict.¹ We look at different types of museums that commemorate human suffering and tragedies, and discuss the emergence of distinct 'human rights museums' as related to the concept of creating a human rights culture – the very antithesis of 'human suffering'.

Museums of Remembrance

The Palestinian Life and Remembrance Museum will be located in Jerusalem, and already possesses an embryonic exhibition in the Palestinian Authority. The project has received funding from Palestinian donors, the European Union and the World Bank for a programme devoted to Palestinian history in the context of what Palestinians see as their *Nakba*, or 'national catastrophe of exile'. The museum defines its primary role as exhibiting the Palestinian struggle for political and human rights, and completion is important for the Palestinian sense of national identity.

The 'Deir Yassin Remembered' Information Centre shows the events of 9 April 1948, when commandos of the Israeli Irgun attacked Deir Yassin, a Palestinian village.

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Over 100 Palestinians were killed and the village was destroyed. The project has a virtual programme on the Internet and envisages a museum on the site. There are at present no plaques or exhibits at Deir Yassin itself. Yet its task is to perform the same role for the Palestinian people as Yad Vashem does for Jewish citizens: to act as a memorial for suffering. For Palestinians, it is a chilling fact that the Deir Yassin massacre took place within sight of Yad Vashem. The subject-matter is impassioned and reveals the continued stark political divisions in Arab–Israeli relations.

The Museum of the Nanjing Massacre in Tokyo presents Nanjing as a symbol of Japanese atrocities committed during the war against China. The founder, Guo Peiyu, a Chinese artist, exhibits some 3,000 ‘faces’ in clay, to ‘express the souls of the 3,000 victims of the Nanjing massacre’. The museum is a powerful statement against war and violence, and an articulate protest against Japan’s imperialist adventuring as well as a statement to those who deny that Nanjing ever happened. It is a unique museum offering a presentation of Chinese suffering in a gallery located in the Japanese capital.

Holocaust and Genocide Museums

Holocaust museums exist throughout the world. These include the above-mentioned Yad Vashem in Israel, the national Holocaust Museum in the United States, and interpretative centres at many former concentration camps. New initiatives include the Holocaust Education Center in Tokyo; and the Lithuanian Museum of Victims of Genocide in Vilnius, complemented by the exhibitions of the Lithuanian State Jewish Museum and the Jewish Memorial. An innovative new programme is the New York Holocaust and Genocide Project (HOP). In 1998, a Jewish museum dedicated to the Holocaust opened in Berlin, and it hopes to acquire Steven Spielberg’s Shoah Archive of interviews of Holocaust survivors. Other museums on genocide worldwide are as follows:

- On 24 April 1915, hundreds of Armenian leaders were massacred by Turkish police; hundreds of thousands of Armenian civilians were ‘escorted’ away from their homes and across the borders in what amounted to death marches. This date is still commemorated by Armenians worldwide as Genocide Memorial Day. After the First World War, the Turkish government held ‘genocide trials’ during its investigation into the fate of the Armenian minority, but the episode still remains one of considerable sensitivity in Turkish and Armenian history. The Vatan Armenian Research Center at the University of Michigan exhibits these events. In recent years international attention has focused on the Armenian tragedy and the importance of its remembrance. This genocide was carried out by the Central Committee of the Young Turk Party and directed by a special organization, the Teshkilati Mahsusa. In recent years, international attention has been drawn to this tragic event, and, on 18 June 1987, the European Parliament voted to recognize the Armenian Genocide. American President Bill Clinton, among other national leaders, has commemorated the ‘tragedy’. There are plans for the creation of a Genocide Museum in Yerevan.
- A proposal has been made to establish a Museum of the Genocide of Gypsies in Bucharest, Romania. Some 250,000 gypsies perished in Second World War concentration camps (Dachau, Belsen and Buchenwald; 16,000 were held at Auschwitz). There is comparatively limited coverage of their extermination in the

Holocaust, because the diasporic nature of gypsy communities has militated against any comprehensive collection of their wartime heritage. There are a number of Holocaust memorials to gypsies, especially in the Netherlands, but the Romanian project appears to be the first tangible step towards the creation of a distinct museum exhibiting the genocide of European gypsies.

- The Nigerian peace activist Prince Samuel Adebowale has written of the importance of creating an Ogoni genocide museum to record the events that took place in Ogoniland between 1993 and 1995, which he describes as a 'systematic annihilation' of the Ogonis. During these years MOSOP (the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People) confronted Nigeria's military dictatorship through non-violent struggle. The present Nigerian political situation would now seem to be more favourable for the establishment of the genocide museum envisaged by the prince.
- During the Spring of 1994 at Ntarama, south of Kigali, Rwanda, followers of the Hutu-led Rwandan government massacred approximately 5,000 ethnic Tutsis inside the Ntarama Catholic Church. Today a sign on the road announces the site. Ntarama, like hundreds of churches, stadiums and gathering places around the country, is a place of genocide, where civilians were slaughtered in a genocidal campaign organized by Hutu hardliners. This place constitutes a frightening indictment of human suffering and the violation of human rights.
- The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh, documents the history of the S-21 interrogation compound set up by the Khmer Rouge in April 1975. In 1979, Tuol Sleng became a museum documenting those tragic years and contributed to the process in which Cambodian people have confronted their history. At the Choeung Ek 'killing field' where the victims of Tuol Sleng were murdered and buried, a memorial stupa was erected in 1988 in the form of a traditional Cambodian pagoda. Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek have been exploited by successive Cambodian governments in their manipulations against the Khmer Rouge. Somehow Cambodians must extricate themselves from the 'ghosts of history' so that these sites may one day contribute to a culture of peace and human rights.²
- The Concentration Camp Museum at Jasenovac, Croatia, stands as witness to one of the most tragic of the many Second World War concentration camp museums. Immediately after occupying Yugoslavia, the Nazis organized a system of concentration camps under the command of the Ustasha Supervision Service, of which Jasenovac was the largest. In Croatia during this period, Orthodox Serbs, Jews and gypsies, and pro-Yugoslav Croats were systematically massacred. It would seem that in an effort to 'erase' the events of these years the Jasenovac Memorial Museum was targeted by Croatian artillery during the recent conflict in the Balkan region. In September 1991 Croatian paramilitary formations occupied the memorial grounds for one month before the area was taken by Serbian forces. Before leaving, Croat forces blew up the bridge on the Sava River which unites the two parts of the memorial grounds. Archives concerning the history of the genocide, the museum and the exhibition premises were demolished. Most of the 8,000 exhibits were destroyed or removed as Croatian troops retreated. Jewish war veterans and Jasenovac survivors appealed to the international community, reporting that 'the execution grounds of Jews, Serbs and Romany...with the documentation about the genocide, have been devastated'. However, two months later on 22 December 1991, Croatian armed formations, disregarding a cease-fire, once more fired on the Jasenovac Memorial Grounds for several hours.

The museum and cemeteries at Donja Gradina were further damaged. In January 1992, the Yugoslav Government submitted a 'Memorandum on the Crimes of Genocide in Croatia in 1991 and 1992, and the Outrages Committed against the Jasenovac Memorial-Grounds' to the United Nations. This document stated that Jasenovac was the only war monument in Europe which has been subjected to ruthless outrages since the Second World War, and that the Croatian Ministry of Education, Culture and Religion had previously abolished the Jasenovac Memorial Grounds, 'to erase the scene of the worst crime of genocide from the historical memory'. Today the entire Jasenovac site, battle-scarred and disused, constitutes a compelling reminder of the power of history and of how important it is for certain dominant regimes to erase and rewrite history. And this sobering fact alone calls for constant vigilance in the face of forgetting and denial of the past.

Museums of Slavery and the 'Slave Trade'

Americans need national sites to record the legacy of slavery. By 1820 some 10 million Africans had been transported across the Atlantic to the Americas. Most slaves lived on small farms and so their experiences are poorly documented. Nevertheless, some progress towards exhibiting the lives of slaves has been made, and there are proposals for creating museums on the sites of the 'Underground Railroad' that operated from 1830 to 1865 to help slaves escape from the South to the non-slave states.

There is also a 'slave ship' museum in Florida. In 1972 the Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Society discovered the wreck of the *Henrietta Marie*, which sank in 1701. Despite nearly three centuries of seaborne encrustation, divers identified the ominous shapes of iron shackles. The Mel Fisher Society meticulously prepared the remains from the ship for a touring exhibition, and the *Henrietta Marie* made her true entry into American (and international) consciousness. Her sparse but history-laden artefacts confront us squarely with the tangible evidence of a past that can be neither changed nor denied.

An African 'slave museum' has opened at Gorée, off the coast of Senegal, near Dakar. This was the largest slave-trading centre on the African coast from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, and was ruled by the Portuguese, Dutch, English and French respectively. The museum site juxtaposes bleak slave quarters with the elegant houses of the slave-traders. Today it continues to serve as a reminder of human exploitation. The Gorée Museum of Slavery is a powerful indictment of the exploitation of the Senegalese and the human legacy of the 'slave trade'.

A comparable European museum is William Wilberforce House in Hull. The United Kingdom's first slavery museum, it opened in 1906. It illustrates the campaigns of the famous anti-slavery campaigner and the history of the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, formed in 1787. As a result of Wilberforce's efforts, slave trading was abolished by the English Parliament in 1807.

Museums of African-American Civil Rights

In recent years, more museums on African-American Civil Rights have been set up, in Birmingham (Alabama), Memphis (Tennessee), and Atlanta (Georgia); and there are collections in the Museum of African American History in Detroit, the Museum of

Afro-American History in Boston, The Museum of Slavery in the Atlantic, Maine, and the Slave Voices Library at Duke University.

New York's Afro-American Black History Museum offers interactive exhibits on the history of slavery; the Tuskegee Airmen, the first Black American combat pilots; the Black Panther Party; and the 'Million Man March' of the Nation of Islam which has vigorously opposed racial inequalities in the United States. These museums share the common theme of defining the struggle of African-Americans for human rights seen through African-American eyes and show the continued concern with 'Sankofa' – the search for roots.

Prison Museums and Museums of Torture

Prison and torture museums present a somewhat difficult subject: the serious study of human rights, and their abuse, is their primary *raison d'être*. Although varied in the quality of their collections, torture museums make an important contribution to our thinking about human rights. Evidence of the history of punishment from ancient times is archived in Rome's Museum of Criminology. Likewise, the Guillotine Museum at Liden, Sweden, holds an exhibition on the inhuman practices in prisons in the past. In France, Carcassonne's Museum of Torture presents a collection of medieval torture instruments.

The Salem Witch Trials of 1692 in New England are documented in the Peabody Essex Museum in the state of Massachusetts. Witch House, home of Judge Jonathan Corwin, who presided over the hearings which condemned twenty innocent people to death, contains other archives. The exhibits reveal much about the hysteria and brutality of colonial America, but are likely to interest a general rather than an academic audience.

Among the prison museums is Robbin Island in South Africa where President Mandela and his ANC comrades were incarcerated. The museum's austere courtyard and tiny cells speak of Nelson Mandela's decades of endurance and the brutality of South Africa's apartheid regime. Another equally bleak exhibition is offered by the notorious Alcatraz Prison in the United States, the remote maximum-security prison whose goal was punishment rather than rehabilitation. It was finally closed on 21 March 1963. Prison museums do, in fact, encourage a sense of empathy with prisoners and raise important questions concerning liberty and standards of custodial treatment.

Exhibiting Human Rights

All of these categories of museum, through their exhibitions and their presentation of human experience, make a significant contribution to the struggle for human rights. It is encouraging that recent years have seen the emergence of distinct 'museums of human rights' in various parts of the world:

- The World Centre for Peace, Freedom and Human Rights opened in Verdun (France) in 1994.
- Liberty Osaka, with a focus on civil and human rights, has been open in Osaka (Japan) since 1990.

- Sakai City opened a Human Rights Museum in 1994.
- The Kochi Liberty and People's Rights Museum was founded in Japan, in 1994.

Human rights are also a concern of the burgeoning family of peace museums whose collections and exhibitions range across the spectrum of peace, justice and human rights. In the exhibits of all of these institutions the personal impact of 'human suffering' is paramount. As Mary Robinson, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, has recently said in respect of Kosovo, 'Every violence is a personal and family tragedy, regardless of the age, sex or nationality of the victim.'³

The museums discussed in this article envisage a genuine human rights culture and the extension of its protection for everyone. These museums exhibit historical and contemporary situations involving gross violations of these rights. It is encouraging that there is an emerging group of museums of human rights that might be custodians of what one could term a 'human rights culture'. UNESCO's programmes have made an enormous contribution to education for human rights and to their dissemination and protection. It is hoped that human rights museums might also contribute to this process. It is certainly the privilege of these museums of 'human suffering' to show the worst moments in the experiences of peoples in the hope that such portrayals will contribute to the advancement of human rights worldwide.

Notes

- 1 T. M. Duffy, 'Towards a Peace Memorial in Northern Ireland', *Peace Museums Newsletter*, spring 1998, pp. 2-5.
- 2 S-21 is discussed in greater detail in T. M. Duffy, 'The Killing Fields Revisited: The Tuol Sleng Museum and the Memorial Stupa of Choeung Ek', *Museum International*, No. 177 (Vol. 46, No. 1, 1993), p. 411.
- 3 Mary Robinson, 'Statements Regarding Developments in Kosovo'. United Nations Human Rights Website, 11 February 1999.