

THE DEATH OF MEMORY

Memory fades over time. Events that were once clear fade into blurred and shaky snapshots of pieces within the whole. The individual slowly loses the ability to fully recall treasured moments, or perhaps thankfully cannot remember negative past experiences.

Memories, in the form of stories, books, photographs, artifacts, and other such forms, are passed down to younger generations, if they are passed on at all. However, the listener does not experience these events and moments as someone who took part in them, but rather as an outside observer privy to a select amount of private information. The stories and memories recounted thus lose some of their meaning and significance. The greater the generation gap between the experienter and the listener, the weaker the impact.

This is especially problematic when the memories and experiences involve events and places of importance. Often, when an event is unusually positive, like winning the lottery, the experienter remembers it well but listeners cannot understand the event with the same clarity and context as the experienter. The same is true for negative experiences - massively negative events are either blocked out completely by the experienter until they cannot remember what happened, or they are preserved far better than other memories, with extra clarity and details. These memories, too, are impossible to convey to listeners without losing the power and effect of the experiences.

History is cyclical. Similar ideas occur many times over the course of human progress, taking different forms without losing their main focus. Often, the memories of those who lived through one period are forgotten or have lost their meaning by the time the ideas of that period reappear. Thus, the ideas are able to take hold once again. If the ideas benefit humanity, such as interest in science and medicine, then history's cyclical nature has helped make the world a better place. However, ideas that do not benefit humanity are also repeated, and will continue this repetition until the cycle is broken, or at least slowed.

The most important factor in continuing the repetition of positive events, and reducing the repetition of negative ones, is education. Typically, only those who have lived through negative experiences, and the later generations that were affected, maintain the memory and knowledge. Others do not have the experience or knowledge to understand, slow, or stop history's negative cycles.

Because people cannot gain memories of events, positive or negative, until they have experienced them, this poses a difficult problem. History's negative cycle cannot be slowed or stopped unless people have lived through it, but the cycle will not begin again until their memories are faded or forgotten. Thus it cannot be prevented.

However, there is the possibility that an educational effort with a powerful impact may be more effective than typical storytelling. The listener will never fully know or understand the experiences of the person they are listening to, because the memories will never truly belong to the listener; however, if the memories and experiences have a stronger impact, they and their effects will last longer in the minds and understandings of the listener. As a result, the listener becomes a quasi-experienter, and is able to carry forward lessons learned from past events. This has the power to slow history's negative cycle without also slowing its positive cycle.

The remaining concern is the means and methods of accomplishing such a thing. Current educational practices do their best, but books and movies can never fully replicate experiences, especially to the degree needed to radically change history's course. However, other methods of education, in this case museums, are better equipped to accomplish this.

My approach is to design an atypical museum – one that creates quasi-experiences – as a means of more impactful education. The negative events throughout history will not be replicated directly, but will be represented architecturally in order to make the exhibits more powerful. This will allow visitors to learn about past atrocities in a way that gives them more context in reality than a book does, and will create a more profound and lasting effect. This is done through spatial proportions, material usage, ambient sounds, circulation, environmental control, and the design of exhibit spaces.

Multiple concrete forms cover the site. Their exteriors are similar, but their interiors vary greatly. Some areas are tighter, some more open. Many buildings are intimidatingly large, while many are uncomfortably small. The circulation between them is unclear, and up to the user to determine the desired pathway. While one can see the city in some areas, it remain inaccessible while one is in the museum. The site's industrial and transportation-oriented surroundings create an environmental distance from the rest of the city. A garden provides brief reprieves, but leaves the rest of the site visible.

Each building exhibits a place and event in history, one brief moment within history's continuous cycle. Certain buildings create a strong experience and display nothing at all. As a whole, the buildings create a diverse showcase of past atrocities, and educate visitors about both the past atrocities as well as means and methods of preventing horrors from reoccurring, in hopes that history's negative cycle can be slowed or stopped, and the world made a better place.

