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Rethinking the Role of Gardens as Active Resources for the Spatialisation of Memory in House Museums: Best Practices at the Art Museums of Skagen

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Rethinking the Role of Gardens as Active Resources for the Spatialisation of Memory in House Museums: Best Practices at the Art Museums of Skagen

One of the distinctive features of house museums refers to their ability to put visitors in contact with history through direct experience, that is, enabled by the activation of objects and spaces as communicative and socio-cultural catalysts. Unlike other institutions, these heritage systems perform this task through a spatialisation of memory, based on the signification of the museum building not only as a “container” but also as “content”.

The performance of this task is generally assigned to interior rooms, while the gardens that often complement these sites are managed as mere backdrops for circulation, rest, or other facilities.

This paper aims to problematise the recurrent use of house museum gardens as mere containers, and to shed light on their strategic potential not only as spatial but also as cultural resources. This goal is addressed through a qualitative, interpretive case study that provides evidence of this potential by examining the experiences developed in the last twenty years at the Art Museums of Skagen (a single institution incorporating three sites), which exemplify how gardens can contribute to the spatialisation of memory performed at historic sites.

Keywords: house museums; house museum gardens; spatialisation of memory; heritage activation.

Introduction

Many museums’ spatial programmes include green open spaces. Gardens may surround or anticipate the venue, mediating the relationship with the context and welcoming the public. When they are integrated in the layout of the building, they mainly serve as “decompression” areas for contemplation and respite, offering room for pause at the middle or end of the visit.

In most cases, they are complementary spaces which accommodate organised walking,¹ rest² or the congregation of audiences,³ as well as providing a pleasant backdrop for such facilities as reception areas or coffee shops.

Although they participate in the construction of visitors' experience,⁴ generally gardens do not have an active role in the exhibition or educational functions of cultural institutions – with the exception of those museums that include sculpture gardens or outdoor galleries dedicated to special artworks, arranged to be integrated within the sequence of visitable spaces.

Another exception can be found in house museums. Here gardens are often part of spatial systems that document the life of a prominent figure or were the theatre of meaningful events. Nevertheless, their potential in these contexts is rarely realised.

In recent decades, the advancement of an integrated approach to the management of house museums has promoted more attentive and comprehensive concern for all the features of a site,⁵ and the meticulous maintenance dedicated to buildings, furnishings, and collections has started to extend to landscapes. Nevertheless, these institutions struggle to assign to gardens a role more strategic than that of a mere facility, and to use them not only as a spatial but also as a cultural resource.

To provide evidence of the potential of these spaces, the paper illustrates the situated practices promoted by the Art Museums of Skagen, where gardens are managed not only to enhance connections with the city and to contextualise its venues but also as effective tools that contribute to preserving, displaying, and disseminating the history and the collection of the institution. This qualitative and interpretive case-study approach combines a literature-based conceptual discussion with an analytical reading of archival evidence, artworks, photographs and curatorial projects carried out by this museum, which is treated as a theoretically generative example. By shedding light on a series of experiences promoted over the last twenty years, this article investigates the strategies and constraints involved in activating outdoor green spaces within the “spatialisation of memory” performed by historic sites. At the same time, this exploration aims to foster the debate on the specificity of curatorial practices related to house museum gardens as heritage resources, since they require an interdisciplinary effort that differs from those applied to interior spaces.

Historic house museums' gardens: an untapped heritage resource

House museums are a special type of cultural institution, acknowledged for their considerable social and political significance which stems from the unique capacity to “evoke history and put the visitor into direct contact with it”.⁶ These sites are historical artefacts in which space–time coordinates are redefined, transforming the experience of walking through a place into an encounter with a system of tangible and intangible signs, capable of triggering a narration

¹ HILLIER, B., and T'ZORTZI, K. Space Syntax: The Language of Museum Space. In: *A Companion to Museum Studies*, edited by S. Macdonald. Malden & Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, p. 292.

² HENDERSON, J. *Museum Architecture*. Gloucester: Rockport Publishers, 1998.

³ HUANG, H. The Spatialization of Knowledge and Social Relationships. In: *Proceedings of the 3rd International Space Syntax Symposium*, edited by Peponis et al. Atlanta: Georgia Institute of Technology, 2001, pp. 43.1–43.14.

⁴ As widely debated, the museum's experience results from the coalescence of all the various intellectual, emotional and sensorial stimuli collected from entrance to departure into a “single package in the mind of the visitor”, FALK, J. H., and DIERKING, L. D. *The Museum Experience*. Washington: Whalesback Books, 1992, p. 84.

⁵ LAWLISS, L. Preventive Conservation and the Historic House Landscape. In: *Preventive Conservation for Historic House Museums*, edited by J. Merritt, Jane, and J. A. Reilly. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010, p. 117.

⁶ PINNA, G. Introduction to Historic House Museums. In: *Museum International*, 53(2), 2001, p. 4.

that immerses the public in an atmosphere of the past. Unlike other heritage institutions, the exhibition systems employed by house museums depend on the configuration of space – as visitors' experiences are defined by the qualities of the place through which they move (e.g., its layout, furnishings and decorative elements) – treating the museum building itself not merely as a “container” but as “content”. At the same time, the project of space corresponds to the project of time in such institutions, as spatial features and objects are turned into active display tools by fixing or reproducing the condition of the site at a specific moment in its history.

The distinctive task of house museums can thus be outlined in their capacity to perform a spatialisation of memory, as space is activated as a communicative and socio-cultural catalyst that conveys a narrative emanating from the experience of the interiors themselves.

Within cultural studies, the term “spatialisation” refers to the process of producing and locating social relations and practices in a social space, considered in both its physical and conceptual dimensions. This is “an invisible set of relationships which tends to retranslate itself, in a more or less direct manner, into physical space in the form of a definite distributional arrangement of agents and properties”⁷.

In house museums, heritage is spatially constituted through the activation of rooms and objects. These are set up to operate as vehicles that reenact and communicate stories, socio-cultural relations, and the “structuring structures” (i.e., Bourdieu's *Habitus*) that evoke the essence of the historical identity of the original owners or dwellers.

This process usually focuses on the activation of interior spaces and is not always extended to the gardens that may complement house museums. Their integration into the exhibition system is limited to a small number of cases in which outdoor spaces have played a particularly important part in the past of the site or in the vision of its inhabitants.

In some contexts, the garden may have been the theatre of important events or may have resulted from a specific project of the owner. When this role is acknowledged, this space is included in the musealisation process and arranged to be an eloquent part of the visit. This strategy can be observed, for example, at Claude Monet's house in Giverny: here the gardens were designed by the artist to serve as an open-air laboratory for his experimentations with light and colour, and today they are an integral part of the exhibition path.

In some other situations, gardens may have been conceived and arranged as display spaces by their original owner, and thus continue to perform their role after the musealisation of the site. This instance refers especially to artists' house museums such as Millesgården, outside Stockholm; Einar Jónsson Museum in Reykjavik; Musée Robert Tatin in Cossé-le-Vivien; and Barbara Hepworth Museum and Sculpture Garden in St Ives.

Nevertheless, in most cases, house museum gardens are not activated as part of the exhibition path. Generally, their contribution to the site's history is not made visible to the public: they merely serve as complementary spaces or pleasant backdrops for facilities or events.

The reasons behind the limited exploitation of this potential are varied and complex. Major difficulties clearly arise from the scarcity of funding that affects most of these institutions, many of which struggle financially. This condition also results in limited access to specialised skills and competencies, which represents a significant problem considering the highly complex nature of this task.

⁷ From Pierre Bourdieu's class, “Physical Space, Social Space and Habitus”, held at the University of Oslo on 15 May 1995.

Scientific and cultural issues can also restrain house museums from deploying their gardens as heritage resources. These institutions are expected to conserve or reconstruct authentic atmospheres which are difficult to manipulate, and the complexity of their set-up and management is exacerbated by preservation issues. Although emphasis is usually placed less on the value of individual objects than on the whole set of elements that define the place's identity, house museums derive their significance from the authenticity of the spaces and items on display.⁸ The concept of authenticity is not univocally defined and remains subject to multiple perspectives and negotiations. Furthermore, the practices that enable authenticity involve strict conservation measures that are needed to guarantee the accurate and truthful appearance of the material elements that characterise the place. These approaches are generally based on a "fossilisation" process⁹ that is incompatible with the very nature of a garden.

The conservation of a historic garden cannot be approached through the application of the same principles and practices developed for built heritage. While a building and its interiors can, to a certain extent, be "frozen" in time and space (by fixing all their components in a specific condition associated with a selected period in the life of the site), gardens cannot. On the one hand, the identification of appropriate and consistent conservation strategies is made particularly difficult by the rapid decay of many of their features, the distinctive use of living or relatively short-lived materials, and the complexity arising from the scale of the layout and the often-indistinct overlays resulting from its evolution. On the other hand, gardens being organic living bodies, their conservation requires embracing the processes related to the passage of time and their effects on space: if they are alive, they mutate, and preventing them from doing so would lead to their disappearance. This notion was introduced by the Florence Charter (1981), which originally acknowledged gardens as an important category of cultural heritage. Specifically, it identified them as "living monuments"¹⁰ whose distinctive character is defined by the nature of their main material, the plant: something that is alive, perishable and renewable.

A museum object is generally a movable, accessioned and relatively stable item that can be inventoried, conserved and displayed according to established procedures; its authenticity and legal status are primarily attached to its material integrity, provenance, and ownership. A living collection, by contrast, consists of organic elements whose value depends not only on material survival but on continuity, replacement, propagation and care.

In a historic garden, some elements – such as trees, dunes, propagated plants or documented flower species – may acquire an object-like significance within the museum's collection logic. Nevertheless, the garden as a whole is better understood as a curatorially shaped environment whose value does not depend on the conservation of a specific item but rather on the continuity of a spatial assemblage that conveys meaning through the interplay among people, selected objects, plants, paths, views, uses, atmospheres, and the memories they bear.

Accordingly, when this article describes gardens as part of the museum's "collection", the term is used primarily in a curatorial and interpretive sense. Some garden elements may indeed be accessioned, inventoried, listed or protected by planning regulations; others may instead acquire museological significance because they sustain the site's narrative, memory, use or atmosphere. The relevant question is therefore not whether the garden as a whole can

⁸ PAVONI, R. Towards a Definition and Typology of Historic House Museums, *Museum International*. In: *Museum International*, 53(2), 2001, pp. 16–21; DONNELLY, J. F. *Interpreting Historic House Museums*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2002.

⁹ PINNA, Introduction to Historic House Museums..., p. 4.

¹⁰ MÜLLER-STRATEN, C. Botanische Gärten aus der Sicht der Museologie. In: *Englera*, 30, 2013, pp. 29–40.

be treated as a conventional museum object, but how its heterogeneous components can be documented, interpreted and protected without denying their living, processual and spatial character.

As every garden is a patent manifestation of the notion of the palimpsest¹¹ – a system resulting from the stratification of the material and immaterial consequences of entangled human actions and natural events – controlling and “fixing” its space-time coordinates is particularly difficult. Specifically, the conservation of these heritage systems requires a new understanding of authenticity, measured against the inherent differences between “artefact” and “naturefact”¹². The paper explores these topics by presenting the experiences developed over the last two decades in the gardens of the Art Museums of Skagen, with the aim to critically discuss the potential of this often untapped resource and to share some strategies to unfold it.

A noteworthy case: the Art Museums of Skagen and their gardens

Art Museums of Skagen is the institution responsible for conserving, researching, and displaying the world’s largest collection of works by the Skagen painters, members of the artists’ colony that settled in the northernmost town in Denmark at the end of the nineteenth century.

Located in Jutland, at the point where the Baltic Sea meets the North Sea, Skagen was a small fishing village with neither harbour nor railway. Its remote and scenic landscapes offered opportunities to practise *en plein air* painting and to draw inspiration from the unique and rugged natural setting and the picturesque life of the fishing community.¹³ The outstanding qualities of the place quickly attracted several young artists from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen and the Royal Swedish Academy of Arts – such as Michael Ancher (1849–1927), Holger Drachmann (1846–1908), Carl Locher (1851–1915), Viggo Johansen (1851–1935) and Peder Severin Krøyer (1851–1909), who were later joined by other prominent authors, composers, singers and actors from across Scandinavia.

Skagens Museum was founded in 1908 by some of the artists themselves, with the aim to exhibit and promote the work of the colony that had started to form in the previous decades around the town’s inn, Brøndums Hotel. Initially set up in the late Krøyer’s house in 1911, the museum did not have a purposely designed venue until 1928, when a new building by architect Ulrik Plesner (1861–1933) was realised on a site donated by the Brøndum family next to their hotel – where Havehuset (the garden house)¹⁴ and Krøyer’s Studio already stood. This area comprised one of the oldest gardens in town, planted with trees and bushes along the edges, covered in grass and complemented by flowerbeds, creating a lush context markedly different from its surroundings. Skagen is a relatively narrow isthmus shaped by the movements of the sea, and for centuries the landscape of this windswept place has been

¹¹ MEINIG, D. W. Introduction. In: *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays*, edited by D. W. Meinig. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 6.

¹² In the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2011), while defining the term “artifact”, Risto Hilpinen uses the term “naturefact” for naturally occurring objects used intentionally for some purpose, hence lying in between natural elements and artefacts.

¹³ Skagen was a place where people were seen as having an almost “pre-rational contact with nature and tradition”. VARNEDOE, K. Nationalism, Internationalism, and the Progress of Scandinavian Art. In: *Northern Light: Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavia, 1880–1910*, edited by K. Varnedoe. New York: The Brooklyn Museum, 1982, p.18.

¹⁴ Havehuset is one of the oldest buildings in the area, functioning as an annex to Brøndums Hotel; in 1880 it became Anna and Michael Anchers’ first home.

harsh and dominated by drifting sand. The difference between the flourishing nature of this “oasis” and the townscape was emphasised by the construction of the museum building and its annexes, added in 1982 and 1989, both designed by architect Jacob Blegvad (1921–2010). Recently, between 2014 and 2016, a major intervention by Friis and Moltke Architects led to the removal of the out-of-date extensions and to the construction of a large new body, the Skifer Wing. This intervention expanded Plesner’s building without altering the original structure (which has been designated as worthy of preservation with conservation value 2) or imposing any substantial transformation to the system of open spaces, aside from the establishment of some outdoor facilities aimed at welcoming the visitors.

In 2014, Skagens Museum merged with two buildings that had served as homes and studios for some of the best-known figures among the colony – Anchers Hus¹⁵ and Drachmanns Hus.¹⁶ Their integration into the collection of the institution widened its mission and scope, and led to its name being changed to Skagens Kunstmuseer (Art Museums of Skagen).

Today the institution is composed of three venues: the art museum and the two house museums. Each site includes gardens which are managed as composite heritage resources. The active role of these outdoor spaces extends beyond accommodating specific activities (e.g., public events) and facilities (e.g., coffee shops) or connecting the buildings with the city, as they also contribute to the conservation, exhibition and enhancement of the museum’s history and heritage.

This role is only partially referred to the outdoor display of some of the statues from the collection. As this museum is housed in three historic buildings in which the institution and its collection originated, the gardens are an integral part of the heritage system that bears witness to the life and work of the Skagen artists’ colony.

Gardens represented an important source of inspiration for artists who enjoyed *en plein air* painting. But by accommodating gatherings and shared activities (such as meetings, parties, games, clay shooting and fireworks), they also helped forge personal and professional bonds among the members of the group and fostered those dialogues and exchanges that nurtured the development of their artistic research. These spaces thus played a key part in the formation of the colony’s identity.¹⁷

This aspect also relates to the way the artists used gardens to define their position and gaze. In the early phase, in the 1880s, they depicted themselves or one another only inside their own properties, which were represented as flourishing, almost idyllic spaces – in opposition to the landscape characterising the village, that was harsh and desolate. This contrast was not merely an invention: it reflected the real condition of the town during the colony’s time, when gardens were “lush like a primeval forest”,¹⁸ forming an actual oasis within a land invaded by sand and shaped by wind. Nevertheless, this difference has been emphasised to separate different spheres: the harsh landscape was associated with the harsh life of the local community (Figure

¹⁵ This was the house of Anna and Michael Ancher from 1884, and it became an important location for the Skagen artists’ life and work. After the death of their daughter, Helga Ancher, in 1967 the building was opened as a museum for the public to enjoy the rich and well-preserved collection of artworks, furniture and the family’s private belongings.

¹⁶ The house where painter and poet Holger Drachmann lived with his wife Soffi Drachmann (né Lasson), from 1902 until his death in 1908, was opened to the public in 1911, to display the property and its contents in their original conditions as a memorial museum to this iconic figure.

¹⁷ BØGH JENSEN, M. Photographic Self-fashioning: The role of photography in community-formation by the Skagen Painters. In: *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, 17(1), 2025, pp. 1–18.

¹⁸ CLAUSEN, C. C. Stenografiske Interviews: Michael Ancher. In: *Hver*, 8, June 27, 1909, p. 668.

1), in contrast with the “domesticated” spaces of the artists (Figure 2), who wanted to appear as neutral eyewitnesses in order to preserve the authenticity of their images of the naïve good-natured local population.

The role of the gardens in the physical and conceptual construction of the Skagen painters’ cultural landscape is therefore crucial to understanding this artistic phenomenon.

Activating the gardens of the Art Museums of Skagen as communicative and socio-cultural catalysts: strategies and projects

Drawing on the relevance of the three historic buildings that house the Art Museums of Skagen, a specific institutional objective is to expand visitors’ experience beyond the enjoyment of artworks and to integrate the narrative layers conveyed by both indoor and outdoor spaces.

This task was extended to the gardens around the year 2000 through the joint efforts of gardener Steen Bundgaard Sørensen and director Annette Johansen. This concept was further sharpened after the art museum merged with the two houses in 2014, through the vision developed by the new director, Lisette Vind Ebbesen.

The following sections illustrate the strategies and projects that have been developed over the last twenty years to enable the gardens as active cultural resources, thereby contributing to the spatialisation of memory promoted by the institution.

Conservation (and perpetuation): saving and promoting iconic “naturefacts” as memory tools

The conservation of historic gardens presents particular challenges that revolve around the need to bring together cultural, ontological and ecological perspectives which often appear to address contrasting notions. Although in the last decades preservation principles and practices have embraced the idea of “process”,¹⁹ the conservation paradigm is generally pursued by stabilising the assets’ presence in space and time. On the other hand, as living monuments, gardens cannot be fossilised in the way house museums are; their survival can only be guaranteed through an approach that acknowledges them as living natural systems. Their conservation must therefore be based on protecting their capacity for transformation, considering evolving technical needs and procedures, and managing threads generated by ongoing phenomena (such as climate change or the spread of diseases and pests caused by wind and water, global trade, or human intervention).

The critical issues implied in the preservation of historic gardens do not necessarily entail the complete loss of all the traces and identity features presentifying the memory of the past of the site. The gardens at the Art Museums of Skagen still contain numerous elements that bear witness to meaningful phases in the physical and cultural formation of the place. This is the result of particularly attentive management which ensued from the acknowledgment of some naturefacts as part of the heritage system preserved by the museum. This recognition led to the development of specific projects focused on their preservation, such as the integration of an expert gardener on the staff since 1997. A conservative approach to some elements of the gardens was also fostered by their being listed as heritage resources in documents issued by various governing bodies. Both municipality and district authorities impose special conditions governing the management of naturefacts, especially in the Skagen area, where some features stand out due to their particular bond to the context’s history. For example,

¹⁹ PEREIRA, H. N. Contemporary Trends in Conservation: Culturalization, Significance and Sustainability. In: *City & Time*, 3(2), 2007, pp. 15–25.

regulations advocate the protection of the naturally formed dunes,²⁰ a representative trait of the local windy and sandy landscape. In the gardens around the art museum and Anchers Hus, some sand formations have been attentively preserved,²¹ immersing visitors in an experience of the place that transports them back to the time of the artists' colony.

Great importance is also attached to the conservation of historic trees, which the Municipality's plan for the central area describes as elements "of particularly great importance for the cityscape".²² This attentive management allows contemporary audiences to see elements in the gardens that can be observed in paintings and historic photos. For example, most of the trees surrounding the eastern and southern sides of the art museum's inner park have remained unchanged, such as the old pear tree that still stands at the centre of Anchers Hus' front garden.²³

This tree is a living witness to the life and work of the Skagen colony. As documented in several artworks, pictures and diaries, it was party to many private and collective events.²⁴ Due to its position, in the middle of the public frontage and alongside the path that leads to the house, over time it became a focal point of the heritage system (Figure 3, 4). When Anchers Hus was integrated into the Art Museums of Skagen, it became one of the particularly valuable assets of the collection. Accordingly, over the last decade, it has been the object of specific projects aimed at guaranteeing its preservation (Figure 5). Such efforts cannot not be merely interpreted as compliance with regulatory requirements; rather they represent a curatorial choice, based on the acknowledgment of the role that this tree plays in shaping visitors' experience.

Further evidence of this stance is offered by the programs being formulated for this plant's future. Despite efforts to preserve its health, its age already significantly exceeds the average lifespan of this kind of pear tree, so it is likely to die at some point in the not-too-distant future. The museum has already started to address this problem and, after consulting various experts, is planning to replace it through a cloning process.²⁵

This is one of the possible strategies exemplifying how to address the problem of iconic elements that may disappear due to their organic nature, taking a conservation-oriented approach based on the merging of ecologic and cultural stances.

With regard to trees, which may be long-lived but can also be threatened by unforeseen factors (such as disease, decay or harsh weather conditions), the work carried out at the Art Museums of Skagen includes various experiments. A further response to this challenge is exemplified by the case of a large horse-chestnut tree that once stood at the entrance of Drachmanns Hus and suffered severe decay due to borers. As it leaned dangerously over the house and it could

²⁰ The District conservation plan *SKA.200.C2* states that: "Terrain adjustments of more than +/- 0.5 m may not take place", addressing the need to avoid any alteration for naturally formed dunes (p. 27).

²¹ When the expansion of the museum took place from 2014 to 2016, a natural dune formation near Krøyer's studio in the garden of Skagens Museum had to be removed to allow machinery and building materials to pass. The dune was subsequently restored.

²² See pdf Lokalplan, *SKA.200.C2* (pp. 12–13).

²³ This tree is present in the 1889 drawing by Anna, *The pear tree, autumn*, figure 3; considering it was absent in a photograph from the housewarming-party in 1884 (inventory number HAFF2869, Art Museums of Skagen), we can assume it was installed soon after the arrival of the Anchers.

²⁴ Several photographs show it was decorated during some festivities (inventory numbers HAFF1423, HAFF1425 and HAFF886, Art Museums of Skagen).

²⁵ The tree has been grafted by Blomstergården in Viborg, where one of the country's largest copy collections of living materials from historic fruit trees is located. Therefore, when the pear tree falls, it will be substituted with a new one with the same DNA.

not be saved, it was cut down in March 2020. Although the tree was not listed, its presence was acknowledged as an important part of the site's identity, hence its loss became the object of a special project through which its essence has somehow been preserved. Its wood was saved and transformed by an expert woodturner into small decorative birdhouses, bowls and wine corks that were sold in the museum's shop. This project also became an opportunity to disseminate the history of the tree and the heritage site through the publication of detailed articles in local newspapers.

These experiences show that a conservative approach in historic gardens requires a highly critical and contextual development: it cannot result from the application of a formula but requires specific evaluation of each situation, reconciliation of multiple variables, and definition of tailored strategies and choices. The work carried out at the Art Museums of Skagen offers useful insights into this topic. It exemplifies possible strategies that enable the conservation of iconic elements that play an important role in visitors' experience – not only by reviving specific stories and promoting the overall historic identity of the place but also by leading visitors through intellectual, emotional and bodily immersion in specific space–time coordinates, fostering more incisive processes of interpretation and the construction of deeper bonds with the heritage system.

At the same time, these projects validate the idea that conservation can take place in a historic garden only if it coexists with transformation, and that this coexistence does not necessarily disrupt the authentication process. The special conditions of such “living” heritage assets require museum professionals to experiment with new approaches that are consistent with the notion of continuity that is intrinsic to the site's ontological identity.²⁶ Natural elements that shape the artists' gardens have continued to change since the time of the colony: trees have grown, flowers have been replaced, fences and furnishings have been updated. In continuation of this transitional nature, when managed with critical thinking, open spaces can find a certain form of authenticity.

Reenactment: reconstructing the cultural landscape of the artists' colony

Unlike the strategies used to manage the interior spaces of a house museum, those enabling the preservation of a historic garden draw on the notion of “conservation through transformation”. This is based on the fact that many of its components undergo a lifecycle and it is not possible to maintain them on site unless their mutation is incorporated into the process. This notion is particularly important with regard to certain assets, such as bushes and flowers. Their nature is characterised by a limited lifespan, hence their presence can be conserved only through renewal involving partial or complete replacement (e.g., most flowers wither in wintertime and reemerge in spring; others die and must be resown).

If such elements have a meaningful part in narrating the identity of the place, their regeneration may become the object of a reenactment strategy, intended to repeat or reperform past actions in a way that recalls or, in some cases, reproduces a historic scenario.

Reenactment has a long-standing relationship with museographic practice. Its potential lies in the possibility to activate a special interplay between space, content and narrative through the construction of meaning, engaging visitors in an evocative experience that allows them to relive spatial conditions, rituals or events from the past.

²⁶ POULIOS, I. Moving Beyond a Values-Based Approach to Heritage Conservation. In: *Conservation and Management of Archaeological Sites*, 12(2), 2010, pp. 170–185.

This strategy is generally used to conserve and display intangible assets and manifestations, but it also has possible applications in the enhancement of living heritage systems. In house museum gardens, in particular, it can be applied to those elements that have disappeared due to their lifecycle, the memory of which can be revived through strategically designed reproductions that reintegrate them into the space and allow them to contribute to shaping visitors' experience.

While any substitution inside a house museum may have highly critical implications, the regeneration of some naturefacts does not nullify their validity as heritage resources, since both the disappearance and replacement of the original ones were not accidental but inherent consequences of an authentic natural cycle.

Elements such as bushes and flowers that were present in the gardens at the time of the artists' colony have a limited lifespan. It is therefore not their "body" that makes them part of the heritage system but rather the contribution they made to the construction of the local cultural landscape, as documented through photographs and paintings. In fact, the scenes depicted by the Skagen painters often include flowers in both indoor and outdoor settings. This is actually a manifestation of an identity trait of the life and work of the artists: their gardens contained numerous flowerbeds, and interiors were usually decorated with lush compositions in arranged baskets and vases.

Flowers have always had a strong connection with the domestic-cape of Scandinavian cultures.²⁷ The Skagen colony showed a special appreciation for them also as a source of inspiration.

Visitors walking through the rooms of the Art Museums of Skagen may notice that flowers are a recurrent presence in the artworks on display. At the turn of the century, director Annette Johansen launched a project aimed at reintroducing into the institution's open spaces the flowers that had inspired those works (Figure 6, 7). After their identification, based on evidence found in paintings, photos, letters, diaries, receipts and other documents, bushes of clematis Jackmanii, Alba Maxima rose,²⁸ rhododendron, yellow iris and poppies began to appear, first around Skagens Museum and, after the merger, in the house museums' gardens. The presence of these flowers complements the work of the galleries by contributing to visitors' emotional and bodily immersion in the museum's contents.

Unlike the remaining historic trees, which are direct witnesses to the artists' lives, the validity of these flowers as heritage resources does not lie in their coexistence with the colony. Rather, their rootedness in the cultural landscape is made explicit by their presence in the artworks, validating their "cool" authentication.²⁹ This connection is also communicated to the public through thematic guided tours and informative panels contextualising the role of specific flowerbeds within the site's history. The cultivation of flowers changes throughout the seasons and varies each year under the careful planning of the museum staff. These changes contribute to bearing witness to the memory of the artists' colony, as both paintings and photos show

²⁷ LINDHEIM, T. Hagen i naturen – og i kunsten. In: *Drømmen om en hage*, edited by Tone Sinding Steinsvik, Sverre Følstad and Sandra Lorentzen. Åmot: Blaafarveværket, 2017, p. 24.

²⁸ LEHMANN, M. H. A Masterpiece – In Retrospect. In: *The Book About 'Roses'*, edited by Skagens Museum. Skagen: Skagens Museum, 2025, pp. 8–29.

²⁹ As conceptualised by Erik Cohen and Scott A. Cohen, "cool" authentication is a formal expert-driven validation based on institutional proof and aligned with objective authenticity (while, on the contrary, "hot" authentication is informal, subjective and based on shared belief or emotion among a certain group of people). COHEN, E. and COHEN, S. A. Authentication: Hot and Cool. In: *Annals of Tourism Research* 39(3), 2012, p. 1296.

that most of the plants in the gardens underwent numerous transformations. The curatorial value of the flowers thus lies in the continuity of species, iconography, cultivation practices and visitors' perceptions.

The strategy of reenacting iconic elements from the past life of these spaces has been recently applied to the kitchen garden at Anchers Hus – an element that had disappeared over the years. According to the available documentation,³⁰ it probably lay behind the original building, near the back door from the kitchen, and was removed in 1913 following the construction of the extension. Subsequently, the area underwent significant modifications and was left as a lawn for a long period, with wild vegetation along its borders. After the house was merged into Art Museums of Skagen, the site was redeveloped with the idea of reviving the presence of the kitchen garden, which was eventually inaugurated in Spring 2021.³¹

This reenactment differs from that relating to the flowers, because the absence of clear evidence and documentation made it impossible to design a form and position that closely resembled or were consistent with the original state. The reproduction of the kitchen garden was the result of a reinterpretation: because of its role in narrating the history of the place, the reactivation of this feature was considered more valuable than its material authenticity. Consequently, this reenactment was based on reconciling cultural, ecological and practical parameters – especially those relating to its form (a modern circular layout that is easier to manage) and position (at the centre of the back garden).

This type of spatialisation of memory corresponds to what has been defined as “constructive authenticity”. This notion is based on the idea that an “authentic experience” can be produced not only by original objects and spaces but also by those that do not possess inherent authenticity, provided that they can still evoke the spirit of the place and produce a “perceived authenticity” shaped by points of view, beliefs, perspectives or influences.³²

Staging: engaging visitors through experiential museographic strategies in the gardens

Art Museums of Skagen is developing various strategies to activate its gardens as display spaces through the spatialisation of elements that played a key part in constructing the identity of the place but cannot be conserved or fixed over time. Some of these projects are based on the reconstruction of items that have disappeared (for example through the reinstallation of flowerbeds or the kitchen garden). Others experiment with the staging of significant experiences, enabled through special spatial arrangements aimed at engaging visitors and deepening their understanding of the historic cultural landscape.

This strategy draws on the widely debated idea that to make the visit a transformative experience for contemporary audiences, museums must offer visitors immersion in highly stimulating environments, potentially enabling interactions.³³ Although this museographic trend is mainly being explored through new technologies, the first-hand experience of a

30 Evidence was found in letters (Fabritius 2018) and in the unpublished memoirs of the maids in the house (in the archive at Art Museums of Skagen).

31 The new kitchen garden was established by the museum in collaboration with the people who ran the nearby café; currently, it is curated by people from a local restaurant who integrate the harvest into their plates.

32 WANG, N. Rethinking Authenticity in Tourism Experience. In: *Annals of Tourism Research*, 26(2), 1999, p. 351; BJERRE, A. Managing, Interpreting and Negotiating Authenticity in a Historic House Museum. In: *Nordic Museology*, 37(2), 2024, pp. 38–56.

33 BLACK, G. *The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

space activated as a narrative tool (as occurs in house museums) remains a powerful means of producing resonant impacts.

Being located across three historic sites in which spaces, objects and atmospheres are closely connected to the institution's contents and mission, Art Museums of Skagen has many opportunities to use this strategy. In the gardens, this is implemented through special arrangements designed to engage visitors through evocative gestures, rituals and atmosphere.

One application of this strategy involves arranging spaces to recreate specific historic events and to involve visitors in their reenactment. For example, on Helga Anchers' birthday (19 August), the garden in front of her house is decorated with Japanese paper lanterns, as her family used to do at the time of the colony.³⁴ This tradition is now reproduced every year, turning this setting into a means of staging specific memories and allowing the public to encounter them in an "eventful" way.

Other projects involve activating thematic locations that enable visitors to "take part" in the artists' colony by "entering" some of the famous scenes depicted in the paintings – many of which are set up in the gardens. For example, in 2017 a table³⁵ was installed on the left side of the front garden at Anchers Hus. This was not mere furniture, it was a device inviting the public to recreate the scene depicted in Peder Severin Krøyer's famous 1888 painting *Hip, Hip, Hurrah* (Göteborg Konstmuseum), of which the museum owns a study. The artwork depicts a lively group of artists raising their glasses around a festive table amid greenery. Krøyer's inspiration came from the house-warming party that Anna and Michael Ancher held in their garden in 1884.³⁶ This painting was selected for staging not only because of the visible and strategic position of its location (next to the entrance to the house museum, where visitors can stop without disrupting circulation) but especially because of its programmatic significance: it highlights the artists' conviviality and constructs a sense of community, since it does not depict those who were present at the party but rather those who belonged to the colony.³⁷ In other words, this painting is not an emblem of a particular celebration but of the Skagen colony itself, and its reenactment is meant to situate visitors among the artists through the interactive spatialisation of a memory.

This device engages the public in an "Instagrammable" experience, which marks the point at which interpretation may slide into theatricalisation. Its curatorial legitimacy relies on transparency: participants are guided through the experience by museum staff so that they understand which elements are historically documented, which are reconstructed and which are interpretive invitations.

Beside staging specific events or scenes, this strategy can also guide visitors towards a more engaging understanding of distinctive features of the heritage site. At Drachmanns Hus, for example, it is used to enhance the understanding of the area's history through immersion in a purposely designed spatial experience.

When the house was built, the area was on the outskirts of town, characterised by large spaces between dunes and cottages. As documented by photos and postcards, when Drachmann

³⁴ This tradition is documented by many photos (e.g. inventory numbers HAFF886, HAFF1423 and HAFF1425 in the collection at Art Museums of Skagen).

³⁵ This is a modern reconstruction; at some moments in time it accommodates a tablecloth with explanatory texts and a glass top over it to protect it from the weather.

³⁶ FABRITIUS, E. P. S. *Krøyers Hip, hip, hurra! Et kunstnergilde*. Copenhagen: Vandkunsten, 2005.

³⁷ BØGH JENSEN, M. *At male sit privatlin. Skagensmalernes selvskenesættelse*. Skagens Museum: Skagen, 2005, pp. 93–94.

bought the property, the garden was a natural park.³⁸ Over time, the surrounding context changed drastically, but the vegetation inside the garden continued to grow. After the merger with Art Museums of Skagen, the area was only partially cleared and some of the lush volumes of spontaneous plants were conserved, to recall the original nature of the site. In particular, on the southwest side, a large portion of the overgrown vegetation was preserved and narrow walkways of mowed grass were carved through it.

Walking through this space provides the public with an intense bodily and emotional experience. This area displays a form of “controlled wilderness” that preserves the memory of the wooded landscape associated with the site’s history. The contact with a “wild” space – something that is unexpected in the context of a museum visit – is intended to immerse the public in an original atmosphere that recalls the past and stimulates curiosity and enjoyment. This spatialisation of memory exemplifies how landscape design can enable the experiential display of a heritage site’s values and can be interpreted as a laboratory for expanding knowledge and enhance audience engagement.

(Ecologic and cultural) propagation: spatialising memory beyond the historic site

In addition to strategies based on spatial arrangements that enable past and present times to coexist, Art Museums of Skagen is experimenting with a further approach to reviving and disseminating significant memories of the artists’ colony. One of these involves using flowers that are rooted in the institution’s history, exploiting their inherent capacity to “travel” through time and space.

Flowers can not only be endlessly revived but also transferred to other places, for example, when grown in vases or cut and gathered into bunches, where they can act as tokens of remembrance. When planted and cultivated in different gardens or houses, plants and flowers can become living keepsakes that establish and continuously nurture a connection with the museum.

The latest project exploiting this concept consists of creating seed bags that visitors can buy in the museum shop to reproduce the same landscape they see in the paintings. In 2024, the institution started a collaboration with Brede Havekiosk to produce three different collections, associated with three artworks conserved in the galleries.³⁹ When sown in visitors’ homes, the seeds are meant to grow a piece of history in a pot.

The first experience was carried out in 2020, when similar seed bags were produced to propagate the *Staudevalmue* (*Papaver orientale*). This special flower has long been cultivated in the Ancher’s garden – as reported by many drawings, including “Helga and the poppies” (ca. 1886), currently on display in the house museum. Because the flower continues to be cultivated at Anchers Hus, gardeners were able to collect and package its seeds.

Another project involved the reproduction of *Pelargonium*, a distinctive flowering plant that was (and continues to be) a recurring presence on the windowsill of Skagen houses. Gardeners were able to propagate the plant from the cuttings taken from a specimen cultivated at the museum, whose origin can be traced back to the time of the artists’ colony. This *Pelargonium* was initially cultivated by Ingeborg Østergaard (1886–1969), the daughter of Skagens Hotel’s owner, to whom Drachmann had written several letters, referring to her as “Skagens Rose”.

³⁸ The house had a small plantation, today protected as a forest reserve (*fredskov* in Danish), as a neighbour.

³⁹ Anna Ancher’s *In the vegetable garden*, and Michael Ancher’s *The girl with the sunflowers* (1893) and *Anna Ancher returning from the field* (1902).

Since the early 2000s, the museum has collaborated with a local school to sell the propagated plants on Mother's Day.

As a process, the propagation of plants (and in particular of flowers) has always been a widespread practice. This project therefore not only gives visitors the opportunity to grow a piece of the colony's history in their houses, it helps revive an old tradition that formed part of the artists' life and involves the public in a form of "cultural propagation".

Learning from Art Museums of Skagen: the potential of house museums' gardens as active heritage resources

The work carried out at Art Museums of Skagen shows a range of possibilities to unfold the potential of historic gardens as active heritage resources, while also expanding the critical reflection that remains necessary in relation to their curation and use. This insight may contribute to acknowledgment that these spaces possess a special "voicefulness"⁴⁰; although often overlooked, this quality may offer new opportunities to enhance interpretation, exhibition and dissemination practices in house museums. Ultimately it may even help overcome some of the assumptions that constrain their operation in contemporary scenarios. Some possibilities seem to emerge from the distinctive nature of these assets that cannot be preserved by applying the same principles and practices that "fossilise" interior spaces and rather require the development of a new approach. The diverse heritage attributes of gardens could thus contribute to envisioning and enabling more engaging ways of revisiting history.⁴¹ Potentially, they might also pave the way for innovative curatorial practices that transcend the boundaries of traditional interpretation and master narratives.

The special ontological conditions and conservation requirements of gardens also give rise to new needs concerning how heritage sites address different scales of time. To preserve their history, they must remain alive "in the present". This principle implies that their management must respond to contemporary and emerging challenges, including those generated by climate change, the biodiversity crisis and mass tourism. The strict connection between past and present that is inherent in the curation of house museum gardens could become an opportunity to promote new interpretations and uses of heritage. Specifically, it could enable the development of new visions of the past, activate the past as a tool for rethinking the present, and even support the search for "stories that matter",⁴² which is one of the greatest challenges facing historic house museums today.

The living nature of historic gardens may also foster the development of a new "syntax" for organising visitors' experience. While relationships between objects and people in galleries are usually orchestrated through "staged encounters", the experience of open green spaces calls for a more open construction.

Gardens thus seem to be an ideal setting to provide visitors with the possibility to "practice their own forms of often quite unpredictable agency".⁴³ Accordingly, they could become laboratories for enhancing museum practices – as exemplified by the Skagen case.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that activating gardens as heritage resources entails methodological, curatorial and operational risks. Visitor-oriented staging can simplify

⁴⁰ RUSKIN, J. *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. New York: Dover, 1880 (1989), p. 186.

⁴¹ LASC, A. et al. *Revisiting the Past in Museums and at Historic Sites*. New York: Routledge, 2021.

⁴² WEST, P. Of Babies and Bathwater. Birthplace 'Shrines' and the Future of the Historic House Museum. In: *Born in the U.S.A.*, edited by S. C. Bruggeman. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012, p. 264.

⁴³ BENNETT, T. *Making Culture, Changing Society*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

complex historical narratives or privilege visually appealing scenes over more nuanced forms of interpretation; successful garden programmes may reinforce touristification, while increased use may place additional pressure on fragile material and botanical systems, thereby accelerating physical wear, generating ecological stress, and expanding maintenance costs.

Another issue requiring more explicit theoretical articulation concerns the status of authenticity in the activation of historic gardens. In such contexts, authenticity cannot be reduced to the survival of original material fabric, nor can it be assessed according to the same criteria ordinarily applied to interiors, furnishings or movable objects. Since gardens are living, processual and continuously transformed environments, their authenticity emerges from the interaction of several registers: material authenticity (when historic elements such as trees, dunes, paths, or spatial relations survive); biological or processual authenticity (when continuity is sustained through cultivation, growth, decay, replacement, and care); documentary authenticity (when elements grounded in paintings, photographs, written sources, or inventories are reintroduced into the site); and experiential or constructive authenticity (when contemporary interventions evoke historically meaningful atmospheres, practices, or relations without claiming to restore an original state). These registers do not operate interchangeably and should therefore be clearly differentiated. Material and documentary evidence provide the strongest curatorial basis, processual continuity is specific to gardens as living heritage, while constructive or experiential forms of authenticity require particular caution, especially because their mediated character must be made explicit. In this sense, the activation of historic gardens depends not on the recovery of a single authentic condition but on the careful organisation of different degrees and modes of authentication, each of which must be critically justified, documented and communicated to visitors.

The experience developed at Art Museums of Skagen represents a model of good practice whose development was facilitated by special conditions: the presence of three historically resonant venues, the availability of a rich visual and textual archive, a direct and demonstrable relationship between artworks and garden spaces, continuity in horticultural expertise and care, and the institutional capacity to invest in long-term maintenance. Institutions with limited staff, smaller gardens or weaker documentation may need to adopt these strategies selectively, or adapt them into more modest and context-sensitive forms.

This qualification does not diminish the relevance of the Skagen experience. On the contrary, several of the strategies presented have a considerable degree of methodological transferability – particularly those related to conservation and propagation, as they may be adapted wherever gardens contain documented natural features, historic plant material or reproducible living elements. Reenactment and staging, by contrast, are more dependent on the density and reliability of the available evidence, the ecological tolerance of the site and the management of visitor flows.

What may be transferred most productively from Skagen, therefore, is not the specific formal configuration of each intervention but the curatorial logic underpinning them: the identification of garden elements endowed with documentary, mnemonic, or experiential value; the selection of an appropriate mode of authentication; and the explicit mediation of the interpretive status of each intervention.

The Skagen case thus points less to a replicable model than to a critical threshold. Garden activation can enrich the spatialisation of memory only when it resists the temptation to convert the past into an easily consumable environment, and when it remains anchored in

documentation, ecological care and interpretive transparency. Its significance lies not in resolving the tensions among conservation, experience, and public appeal, but in making those tensions productive.

Supplementary Figures



Fig. 1: Michael Ancher, *Woman planting seed potatoes* (1910) © Art Museums of Skagen, SKM1197.



Fig. 2: Two artists and a friend resting in the garden in front of Havehuset, where Skagens Museum later was built in 1928. Peder Severin Krøyer, *Michael Ancher, Helene Christensen and Anna Ancher in Brondum's Old Garden* (1885) © Art Museums of Skagen, SKM25.



Fig. 3: The main entrance of Anchers Hus (1905 ca.) © Art Museums of Skagen, HAFF2737.



Fig. 4: Anna Ancher, *The Entrance to Our Garden* (1903) © Art Museum of Skagen, SKM63.



Fig. 5: The entrance of the front garden at Anchers Hus (2024) © Art Museums of Skagen.



Fig. 6: Peder Severin Krøyer, *Roses* (1893) © Art Museums of Skagen, SKM1851.



Fig. 7: The Alba Maxima rosebush growing in front of the Havehuset (2026) © Art Museums of Skagen.

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Protection of Traditional Knowledge as a Part of Cultural Heritage in Industrial Property Law

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Protection of Traditional Knowledge as a Part of Cultural Heritage in Industrial Property Law

Protection of cultural heritage is a formidable task that requires the lawmaker to establish values crucial to preserving the identity of a given community. The concept of cultural heritage is understood differently in different national systems, where it primarily describes cultural activities aimed at preserving tangible and intangible cultural heritage, while in international law its meaning signifies the right to self-determination and existence, particularly in countries with a colonial history. However, due to the expanding influence of international regulations on national legal orders, the two indicated meanings of cultural heritage are mixed. This is reflected in the use of legal institutions, which ratio legis does not refer the function of protection of cultural heritage at all. The aim of this article is to explore whether and how cultural heritage is protected in industrial property law.

The article addresses the understanding of the concept of cultural heritage and the means of its protection in industrial property regulations in selected countries. Based on the analysis, the general conclusions establish models for the protection of cultural heritage in industrial property law. The article aims to show that cultural heritage is a broader concept than cultural activities and that it is also protected by intellectual property law.

Keywords: cultural heritage; intellectual property; traditional knowledge

Introduction

The development of knowledge is an integral part of the development of every community. The acquisition of new skills contributes to economic growth and improves living standards.¹ Transmitted customs and habits are often based on years of experiences. They are based on a certain kind of innovation that has become widespread within a given community over time. The globalisation of world markets and the legacy of colonisation have contributed to the exploitation of indigenous peoples' practices and knowledge in economic transactions. This raises the question of whether the civilisational achievements of indigenous peoples should benefit from intellectual property protection.

¹ KUPER, Adam. *The invention of primitive society*. New York: Routledge, 1988, p. 47; PRINEAS, Peter, LEMBIT, Roger, FISHER, Nicholas. *Australia's wilderness: an inventory. A report to the Australian Conservation Foundation*. Fitzroy: Australian Conservation Foundation, 1986, p. 21.

Initially, international legal action was aimed at protecting indigenous peoples' right to self-determination.² Over time, however, indigenous peoples began to demand not only the right to autonomy and respect for their cultures and customs, but also the establishment of a fair system for the use of their traditional knowledge by manufacturing companies, primarily pharmaceutical and textile companies.³ This required determining whether knowledge possessed only by a certain group of entities could constitute intellectual property.⁴ In Europe, these issues were not socially significant due to the lack or scarcity of indigenous peoples. However, this was different in African, South American and Asian countries whose territories had been under European rule for many years. This required legislators to determine whether the solutions used by indigenous peoples and adopted by colonizers constituted the indigenous peoples' intellectual property, and if so, what legal means should be used to protect them.⁵

These issues are evident in international law relating to the protection of cultural heritage. In national legal systems, this concept is equated with cultural activity. In international regulations, it is understood from an anthropological perspective, as a manifestation of human activity, both material and immaterial. Thus, it remains strongly linked to the protection of indigenous peoples and their "culture", which is a manifestation of autonomy and the right to self-determination.⁶

Methodology

The study utilises an analytical approach, analysing legal sources related to the understanding of the concept of cultural heritage and its components. A historical-legal approach was also employed to present the evolution of the understanding of culture and cultural heritage, as well as cultural property and cultural activities in law over the years. The analysis encompassed acts of international law that have served as a catalyst for national legislation to introduce legal protection for traditional knowledge. The analysis examined whether legal acts relating to the protection of industrial property contain references to traditional knowledge and, if so, how this affects the protection resulting from exclusive rights when traditional knowledge is implemented in industrial property.

Knowing the conceptual scope of cultural heritage, we determined the legal means of protecting it that have been developed in international law. It was determined that protection applies to both tangible and intangible heritage, and that the legal means of protection, although institutionally similar, remain distinct.

Next, an analysis was conducted of national legal systems that explicitly refer to the protection of traditional knowledge in legal acts concerning industrial property protection. Such legal systems are few in number. In most cases, traditional knowledge is not recognised in legal acts as a circumstance or institution affecting the scope of protection resulting from exclusive rights. Based on this, the protection of cultural heritage in industrial property law was distinguished as a specific form of legal protection of cultural heritage.

² LENZERINI, Federico. *The Culturalization of Human Rights Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 203.

³ BARSH, Russel. Who steals indigenous knowledge? In: LOVALL, Erin (ed.), *Proceedings of the ASIL Annual Meeting*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 153-161.

⁴ RILEY, Angela. Straight stealing: Towards an Indigenous system of cultural property protection. In: *Washington Law Review*, 80, 2005, pp. 69-164.

⁵ HUNT, Alan. *Governing Morals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 74.

⁶ DUTFIELD Graham. *Intellectual Property, Biogenetic Resources and Traditional Knowledge*. London: Earthscan, 2004, p. 32.

Based on the analysis, specific models of traditional knowledge protection in industrial property law were identified (inductive method). The special role of cultural institutions, including museums, in supporting the continued functioning of solutions derived from traditional knowledge in contemporary societies and the need for their protection was also demonstrated (axiological method).

Relations between culture, cultural heritage, cultural activity and cultural property

The concept of culture appears in the metalanguages of a vast portion of the humanities. It is defined differently in various fields of knowledge. However, no synthetic definition of the term has been developed.⁷ E. Casey analysed the linguistic etymology of the concept of culture, pointing out that

the word culture itself in Middle English meant “a cultivated place”, and this word itself derives from the Latin *colere*, meaning “to dwell, to care for, to cultivate, to worship”, and *cultus*, meaning a cult, especially a religious one. To be cultured means to possess culture, that is, to inhabit a place intensely enough to cultivate it – to be responsible for it, accountable for it, to care for it.⁸

Currently, culture is defined in two ways: objectively and subjectively. In the first variant, culture is understood as any transformation (intellectualisation) of nature. Any human activity undertaken for reasons other than instinctive reflexes is a component of cultural heritage.⁹ The second approach limits the definition of cultural activities or products to those which have positive effects in the moral or ethical sphere, or that aim to improve the existing state of affairs.¹⁰

These two ways of defining culture indirectly influence their legal understanding. Scholarship in this area determines the conceptual scope of legal protection of culture by defining what culture is. This is particularly evident in the case of cultural activities, which legally refer to a subjective understanding of culture. It is a similar case with the meaning of “cultural property”, which has a legal definition. In the 1954 Hague Convention,¹¹ Article 1 indicates that,

for the purposes of this Convention, the following shall be considered to be cultural property, regardless of their origin and owner:

- a) movable or immovable property which is of great importance to the cultural heritage of a nation, such as monuments of architecture, art or history, whether religious or secular; archaeological sites; complexes of buildings possessing historical or artistic interest in themselves; works of art, manuscripts, books and other objects of artistic, historical or archaeological importance, as well as scientific collections and important collections of

⁷ KROEBER Alfred Louis, KLUCKHON Clyde. *Culture. A critical review of concepts and definitions*, Massachusetts: Peabody Museum Papers, 1952.

⁸ CASEY Edward. Early on Memory and the Past. In: CASEY, Edward (ed.), MORANO, Donald (ed.), *The Life of the Transcendental Ego. Essays in Honor of William Earle*. New York: Suny Press, 1986, p. 183.

⁹ WEBER, Alfred. *History of philosophy*, New York: Charles Scribren's Sons, 1897, p. 570.

¹⁰ SMITH, Anthony. *Kulturowe podstawy narodów*. Kraków: Wyd. UJ, 2009, p. 201.

¹¹ Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, together with the Regulations for the Implementation of this Convention, and the Protocol for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, signed at The Hague on 14 May 1954 (Journal of Laws 1957, No. 46, item 212).

- books, archives or reproductions of the above-mentioned property;
- b) buildings the principal and practical purpose of which is the preservation or exhibition of movable cultural property as defined in subparagraph a), such as museums, large libraries, repositories of archives, as well as shelters intended to preserve, in the event of armed conflict, movable cultural property as defined in subparagraph a);
 - c) centres containing a significant amount of cultural property as defined in subparagraphs a) and b), hereinafter referred to as “historic centres”.

A similar definition is contained in Article 2(1) of Directive 2014/60/EU, according to which “cultural object” means an object which, before or after its unlawful removal from the territory of a Member State, has been classified or defined by a Member State under national legislation or administrative procedures as a national treasure possessing artistic, historic or archaeological value within the meaning of Article 36 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU).¹²

However, the meaning of cultural heritage is determined by an objective understanding of culture, as will be presented hereinafter.

Evolution of legal meaning of cultural heritage

The origins of contemporary legal protection of cultural heritage can be traced back to the nineteenth century, and more specifically to the decisions of the Congress of Vienna, held in 1814–1815, which stipulated that works of art should not be removed from their places of origin during wartime.¹³ A similar provision was also introduced by the Second Hague Convention of 29 July 1899. Pursuant to Article 56 of the Convention, the property of the communes; that of religious, charitable, and educational institutions; and those of arts and science, even when State property, shall be treated as private property. All seizure of, and destruction, or intentional damage done to such institutions, to historical monuments, or to works of art or science, is prohibited, and should be made the subject of proceedings.¹⁴

However, the work of Nicholas Roerich, author of the draft Pact for the Protection of Cultural Values of 1929, ratified by 21 members of the Pan-American Union in 1935 as the Treaty for the Protection of Artistic and Scientific Institutions and Monuments (Roerich Pact),¹⁵ played a significant role in building awareness of the need to protect cultural heritage. Although this document did not become global law, it stimulated the emergence of an international movement promoting the need to protect cultural goods and values.¹⁶ The entire Roerich Pact consisted of just eight articles. Article 1 calls for: “monuments, museums, scientific, artistic, educational, and cultural institutions, as well as their employees, to be recognised as neutral both in time of peace and war, and as such respected and protected by belligerents”. Article 4 states that:

In order to identify the monuments and institutions in question, the signatory states and those that accede to this treaty shall, at the time of signature or accession, or at any time

¹² Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (Official Journal C 202 of 7 June 2016).

¹³ Schutz des kulturellen Erbes. In: Öffentliche Sicherheit, 1–2/2011, p. 13. (Author not indicated)

¹⁴ Laws of War: Laws and Customs of War on Land (Hague II); July 29, 1899.

¹⁵ <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/instree/1935a.htm> (accessed 12.10.2025).

¹⁶ MCCANNON, John. *Nicholas Roerich. The Artist Who Would Be King*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2022, pp. 362–395.

thereafter, forward to the Pan-American Union a list of monuments and institutions for which they wish the protection agreed upon in this treaty.

The Roerich Pact served as a model for the subsequent Hague Conventions of 1954,¹⁷ 1972¹⁸ and 2003.¹⁹

Cultural heritage is the collection of all cultural property. Article 1 of the 1972 Convention states that:

for the purposes of this Convention, the following shall be considered as “cultural heritage”:

- monuments: works of architecture, works of monumental sculpture and painting, elements and structures of an archaeological character, inscriptions, caves and groupings of these elements, having outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science;
- groups: separate or combined buildings which, by reason of their architecture, their unity or their integration with the landscape, have outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science;
- historic sites: works of man or the joint works of man and nature, as well as archaeological zones and sites, having outstanding universal value from the historical, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological point of view.

The 2003 Convention expanded this concept to include “intangible cultural heritage,” which refers to the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills – as well as the associated instruments, objects, artefacts, and cultural spaces – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage; that are transmitted from generation to generation; that are continuously recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interactions with nature and their history; and that provide them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus contributing to respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. However, the Convention introduced a limitation on the protection of intangible cultural heritage, specifying that, for the purposes of this Convention, consideration will be given exclusively to intangible cultural heritage that complies with existing international human rights instruments; the requirements of mutual respect between communities, groups, and individuals; and the principles of sustainable development.

Article 2 of Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Significance of Cultural Heritage of 27 October 2005²⁰ states that cultural heritage comprises resources inherited from the past which identify peoples, regardless of ownership, and constitute a form of preservation and expression of constantly changing values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions, as well as

¹⁷ The Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, together with the Regulations for the Implementation of this Convention, and the Protocol for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, signed at The Hague on 14 May 1954 (Journal of Laws 1957, No. 46, pos. 212).

¹⁸ Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, adopted in Paris on 16 November 1972 by the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization at its seventeenth session (Journal of Laws 1976, No. 32, item 190).

¹⁹ UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, signed in Paris on 17 October 2003 (Journal of Laws 2011, No. 172, pos. 1018).

²⁰ Journal of Laws 2023. pos. 396.

encompassing all aspects of the environment resulting from the interaction between people and their surroundings over time.²¹

In legal terms, cultural heritage is a narrower concept than culture. It encompasses only cultural goods that meet specific legal requirements. For tangible goods, this means possessing exceptional, universal value from the perspective of history, art or science; for intangible goods, it means compliance with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect between communities, groups and individuals, and with the principles of sustainable development. By introducing the concept of cultural heritage, attempts are being made to move away from the objective scope of culture in the anthropological and ethnological sense, resulting in limiting the scope of cultural protection solely to cultural heritage. It should be noted that the term “heritage” – understood as the totality of values inherited from ancestors – has evaluative implications, i.e., a positive connotation. When “heritage” consists of assets that represent no value, there is no longer any talk of inheritance; rather, it is said that nothing was inherited, that there was no inheritance. The lack of value of an inheritance, in a sense, negates inheritance. The legal granting of protection to cultural norms is based on this connotation.

Components of cultural heritage and legal means of their protection

Cultural heritage can be divided into two main components: material cultural heritage and intangible cultural heritage.

The legal protection of tangible cultural heritage can be considered from both international and national perspectives. The protection measures are identical and include maintaining registers of cultural heritage sites, regulations related to their maintenance, conservation and restitution, and financing-related activities. As indicated, granting legal protection to tangible heritage primarily involves determining what the legislator considers to be components of this heritage.

Under international law, the 1972 Convention establishing the World Heritage List contains guidelines and procedures for inscription on the list. The inscription process is as follows: states/parties select properties worthy of inscription and include them on their national Tentative Lists. Next, national Tentative Lists are submitted to the World Heritage Centre. All states or parties then prepare nomination proposals, but can only nominate properties from the Tentative Lists. The nomination proposals are then submitted to the World Heritage Centre, which registers them and forwards them to experts from the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). After receiving positive expert opinions, the World Heritage Committee decides whether to inscribe a property on the World Heritage List. Inscription is determined by the property’s “outstanding universal value” and whether it meets at least one of the ten cultural or natural criteria. If an application to include a given property on the list is not accepted, it can be resubmitted only if exceptional circumstances arise, for example, new discoveries or new scientific information about the property or criteria other than those presented in the first application.²²

The safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage is guaranteed by the 2003 Convention, on the basis of which UNESCO established the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage to

²¹ <https://rm.coe.int/1680083746> (accessed 20 October 2025).

²² LEASK, Anna, FYALL Alan. *Managing World Heritage Sites*, New York: Routledge, 2006, pp. 10–12.

ensure better protection of intangible cultural heritage worldwide and raise awareness of its importance.²³ It is published by the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. The first list was established in 2008, and since 2010, three lists have been in force.²⁴ The first – the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity – includes “cultural practices and expressions that help to demonstrate the diversity of this heritage and raise awareness of its importance”. The List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding includes elements of culture that, according to the communities and countries concerned, require urgent action to keep them alive.²⁵ The third list is the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices, which compiles the experiences of the parties to the Convention in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, demonstrating how they have overcome challenges in transmitting their living heritage, including traditional practices and knowledge, to future generations. These methods and approaches are collected to serve as lessons learned and models that can be adapted to the circumstances of other countries.²⁶

Traditional knowledge as a part of cultural heritage

The above-discussed inconsistencies in the understanding of the concept of culture and the related cultural heritage reveal that the law understands culture in two ways, similarly to the understanding among cultural studies scholars. It should be emphasised, however, that cultural heritage in its objective sense – that is, encompassing the entirety of a community’s tangible and intangible achievements – remains present in the legal framework of cultural heritage protection related to the protection of the right to self-determination and the so-called right to culture.²⁷ This right includes the authority of a community to decide on the choice of axioms on which its functioning is based and how this manifests itself in everyday life. The solutions adopted are based on norms of conduct developed through evolutionary development. These principles may be characterised by an innovative value which, under intellectual property law, may give rise to patentability, and thus entitle the invention to registration and legal protection.

It should also be highlighted that traditional knowledge will always precede the development of material cultural. To create something, one must first know how to do it. Therefore, traditional knowledge is prior to other human production. Its legal protection cannot be the same as that of material objects. Such protection of traditional knowledge must precede the violation of traditional knowledge, for example, through the mass production of goods based on that knowledge, without permission from the indigenous community from which it originated. Numerous studies have revealed that the unauthorised use of indigenous peoples’ achievements contributes to problems such as indifference or a lower sense of self-esteem

²³ SCHREIBER, Hanny. Niematerialne dziedzictwo kulturowe jako element softpower państw. In: *e-Politikon. Politykaw Kulturze. Kultura w Polityce*, 18, 2016, p. 55.

²⁴ SKOUNTI, Ahmed. The intangible cultural heritage system: Many challenges, few proposals. In: *Santander Art and Culture Law Review*, 3(2), 2017, p. 69.

²⁵ HAFSTEIN, Valdimar. Intangible heritage as a list: From masterpieces to representation. In: SMITH, Laurajane, AKAGAWA, Natsuko (eds.), *Intangible heritage*. New York: Routledge, 2008, p. 117.

²⁶ ALIVIZATOU, Marilena. *Intangible heritage and participation. Encounters with safeguarding practices*, New York: Routledge, 2022, pp. 120–124.

²⁷ NAJMAN Michał. *Prawo a kultura. Analiza skuteczności kształtowania norm kulturowych na drodze prawnej*, PWN, Warszawa 2025, pp. 114–115.

among members of the indigenous community, which in turn leads to a loss of innovation and, consequently, the disappearance of cultural diversity.²⁸

Protection of traditional knowledge has particular meaning not only for indigenous peoples but for the whole global community. It is not always possible to predict what kind of knowledge can be useful in future. Implementing solutions from other cultures leads to lower levels of self-independence and creativity. The unification of use of unique information may lead to the disappearance of the core of a majority of cultures, diminishing humanity's chances for survival in the long term.

Protection of cultural industrial heritage in international law

Legal protection of the industrial property of indigenous peoples, generally understood as traditional knowledge,²⁹ has been recognised in numerous international legal instruments³⁰ and is derived from Article 27 of UDHR (The Universal Declaration of Human Rights³¹).³² From the outset, a distinction was made between the protection of industrial property and folklore, but initially these issues were treated uniformly.³³ The Belem Declaration³⁴ stipulates that “all other inalienable human rights be recognized and guaranteed, including cultural and linguistic identity” and that “Mechanisms [shall] be established by which indigenous specialists are recognized as proper authorities and are consulted in all programs affecting them, their resources, and their environment.”

Similarly, the Kari-Oca Declaration and Indigenous Peoples' Land Charter³⁵ state that:

procedures must be put in place to compensate indigenous peoples for the use of their knowledge and biological resources,” and that “the misappropriation of traditional medicines and traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples should be considered a crime against humanity. [...] As creators and bearers of civilization, who have given and continue to share with humanity their knowledge, experience, and values, we ask that our

²⁸ REYNOLDS, Brenda. *Systematic Review on Trauma Interventions for Cultural Genocide Survivors*. Doctoral Thesis, Chancellor: California Southern University, 2025; LUMAS-WRIGHT, Monique. *Trauma across culture. A phenomenological study exploring the historical effect of colonialism, genocide, and resilience on descendants of indigenous peoples in the United States*. Malibu: Pepperdine University, 2024; MAHMOOD, Shakeel, et al. The need to strengthen Australian health and social policy to support survivors of the Stolen Generations. In: *BMJ Global Health*, 11(5), 2026, pp. 1–7; BUSHELL, Vanessa, STEVENS, Bruce. The stolen generation: Psychological effects of the systematic removal of indigenous children from their families and culture. In: *Ethos: Official Publication of the Law Society of the Australian Capital Territory*, 178, 2000, pp. 17–20.

²⁹ LI, Luo. *Intellectual Property Protection of Traditional Cultural Expressions. Folklore in China*. London: Springer, 2014, p. 38.

³⁰ CURCI, Jonathan. *The protection of biodiversity and traditional knowledge in international law of intellectual property*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 5.

³¹ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly by resolution 217/III A on 10 December 1948 in Paris.

³² HANSEN, Stephen, VANFLEET, Justin. *Traditional Knowledge and Intellectual Property: A Handbook on Issues and Options for Traditional Knowledge Holders in Protecting their Intellectual Property and Maintaining Biological Diversity*. New York: AAAS, 2003, p. 9.

³³ OGUAMANAM, Chidi. *International Law and Indigenous Knowledge. Intellectual Property, Plant Biodiversity, and Traditional Medicine*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006, p. 76.

³⁴ <https://www.ethnobiology.net/wp-content/uploads/Decl-Belem-Eng-from-Posey.pdf> (accessed 20 October 2025).

³⁵ https://cendoc.docip.org/collect/cendocdo/index/assoc/HASH51e7/4adac409.dir/Kari-Oca_and_Earth_Charter_1992.pdf (accessed 20 October 2025).

intellectual and cultural property rights be guaranteed and that their mechanisms benefit our populations. (...) Protection, standards, and mechanisms for the artistic and artisanal creations of our peoples must be established and implemented to prevent plunder, plagiarism, exploitation, and abuse.

The Rio Declaration, in Principle 22, emphasises that:

indigenous peoples and their communities, as well as other local communities, play a significant role in environmental management and development, because of their experience and traditions. States should recognize and appropriately support the identity, culture and interests of communities and enable them to participate effectively in achieving sustainable development.³⁶

The implementation of the indicated Principle is detailed in the Convention on Biological Diversity. Its Preamble highlights the importance of

recognizing the close and traditional dependence of many indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles on biological resources, and the desirability of sharing equitably benefits arising from the use of traditional knowledge, innovations and practices relevant to the conservation of biological diversity and the sustainable use of its components.³⁷

The objectives of this Convention include the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components, and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilisation of genetic resources, including by appropriate access to genetic resources and transfer of relevant technologies, taking into account all rights over those resources and technologies, and by appropriate funding (Article 1).

Subsequently, the Mataatua Declaration on the Intellectual and Cultural Property Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted on 18 June 1993, emphasises that:

indigenous peoples are the custodians of their traditional knowledge and have the right to control the dissemination of such knowledge; they have the right to create new knowledge from their traditional cultures, and the rights to the intellectual and cultural heritage of indigenous peoples are recognized by the people who are its creators.³⁸

Following this, the Julayinbul Declaration on the Intellectual Property Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted in November 1993, stated that:

³⁶ Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, adopted at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro from 3 to 14 June 1992, <https://libr.sejm.gov.pl/tek01/txt/inne/1992.html> (accessed 12 November 2025).

³⁷ Convention on Biological Diversity, opened for signature in Rio de Janeiro on 5 June 1992, Dz. U. 2002 nr 184 poz. 1532.

³⁸ https://www.wipo.int/export/sites/www/tk/en/databases/creative_heritage/docs/mataatua.pdf, (accessed 20 October 2025).

Indigenous peoples and nations are willing to share their intellectual heritage with all humanity, provided that the fundamental rights to define and control that heritage are recognized by the international community. Aboriginal intellectual property, under Aboriginal customary law, is an inherent and inalienable right that cannot be invalidated, extinguished, or stolen. Any use of the intellectual heritage of Aboriginal peoples and nations is subject to respect for Aboriginal customary law, and any use without express consent is strictly prohibited.³⁹

Similarly, the Santa Cruz de la Sierra Declaration on Intellectual Property, adopted in September 1994, noted that

studies must be carried out to design a system of protection and recognition that is consistent with the traditional concept of intellectual property, and mechanisms must be developed to prevent the misappropriation of traditional knowledge and biological resources, and appropriate mechanisms must be established to maintain and ensure the right of indigenous peoples to deny unrestricted access to the cultural resources of their communities and to enable the challenge of patents and other rights based solely on what is essentially indigenous.⁴⁰

In addition, the 1995 Tambunan Declaration on the Protection and Preservation of Indigenous Knowledge⁴¹ and the Suva Declaration on Indigenous Knowledge and Intellectual Property Rights noted that “indigenous peoples do not benefit from the intellectual property rights system. Traditional knowledge and cultural resources are depleted, exploited or appropriated by outsiders such as multinational companies, institutions, researchers and academics who seek profit and increased profits.”⁴² It further states that “indigenous peoples have the right to repatriation of indigenous cultural resources held in foreign collections, as well as compensation and the granting of royalties for the commercial use of these resources,” and that

opposition to the provisions of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade that facilitate the expropriation of indigenous knowledge and resources should be urged. It calls for building the legal capacity of indigenous peoples to preserve their oral traditions and supporting indigenous peoples’ initiatives to record their knowledge in accordance with their customary access procedures.⁴³

³⁹ FOURMILE, Henrietta. Making things work. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Involvement in Bioregional Planning. In: BRECKWOLDT, Roland (ed.), *Approaches to bioregional planning*, Canberra: Department of Environment, Sport and Territories Publishing, 1996, p. 236.

⁴⁰ <https://www.segib.org/wp-content/uploads/DeclaraciondeSantaCruz.pdf>, (accessed 20 October 2025).

⁴¹ ANDERSON, Jane. *Indigenous/ traditional knowledge and intellectual property*. Durham: Duke University School of Law, 2010, p. 62.

⁴² PIRES DE CARVALHO, Nuno, From the Shaman’s Hut to the Patent Office. A Road Under Construction. In: MCMANIS, Charles (ed.), *Biodiversity and the Law Intellectual Property, Biotechnology and Traditional Knowledge*. London: Earthscan, 2007, p. 242.

⁴³ CHEN, Jim. Across the Apocalypse on Horseback: Biodiversity Loss and the Law. In: MCMANIS, Charles (ed.), *Biodiversity and the Law Intellectual Property, Biotechnology and Traditional Knowledge*. London: Earthscan, 2007, p. 48.

All of the above demands for legal protection of traditional knowledge were confirmed at the Indigenous Peoples Summit held in Kimberley in 2002.⁴⁴

The legal protection of indigenous peoples' intellectual property was codified in the 2003 Convention, which recognised traditional knowledge as part of intangible heritage, and later in the 2007 Declaration.⁴⁵ The last one emphasises that indigenous peoples have the right to enjoy human rights and fundamental freedoms recognised in the UDHR and international human rights law (Article 1). It highlights the right of indigenous peoples to self-determination, including determination of their own political status and the freedom to choose their own path of economic, social and cultural development (Article 3). It also states, in Article 8, that member states should

provide preventive and remedial mechanisms for acts aimed at the deprivation of the rights of members of indigenous peoples, their dispossession or deprivation of their lands, territories, or resources, as well as forced assimilation or integration in any form, and propaganda designed to promote or incite racial or ethnic discrimination against them.

In Article 11, the declaration also recognises the right to

practice and revitalize traditions and customs, including the right to preserve, protect, and develop past, present, and future expressions of indigenous cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites, objects, designs, ceremonies, technologies, visual and performing arts, and literature.

Article 31 further notes that

indigenous peoples have the right to preserve, control, protect, and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and cultural and traditional expressions, as well as the expressions of their sciences, technologies, and cultures, including human and genetic resources, seeds, medicines, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literature, sports, traditional games, and the performing and plastic arts, as well as the right to control, protect, and develop their intellectual property related to this heritage, traditional knowledge, and cultural and traditional expressions.

However, the declaration concludes with a statement that somewhat diminishes its groundbreaking significance. Article 46 states that

nothing in this declaration shall be interpreted as implying that any State, people, group or individual has the right to perform any act or to engage in any action that would be inconsistent with the provisions of the Charter of the United Nations or be construed as encouraging or authorizing any action, and which would divide or impair, in whole or in part, the territorial integrity or political unity of sovereign and independent states. In the exercise of the rights proclaimed in the declaration, the human rights and fundamental

⁴⁴ Kimberley Declaration (2002), http://www.ipcb.org/resolutions/htmls/kim_dec.html, (accessed 20 October 2025).

⁴⁵ UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2007, No. 61/295.

freedoms of all shall be respected. Restrictions on their exercise shall be permitted only when provided for by law and consistent with international human rights law. Any restriction should be non-discriminatory and necessary only for the purpose of ensuring that the rights and freedoms of others are recognized and respected and for meeting the essential requirements of a democratic society. The provisions contained in the Declaration should be interpreted in accordance with the principles of justice, democracy, respect for human rights, equality, non-discrimination, good government, and good faith.

This demonstrates that traditional knowledge can be legally protected both as cultural heritage (intangible) and as intellectual property.

Shortly after the 2007 Convention entered into force, an effort was made to further elaborate on the provisions of the Declaration on Biodiversity. The Convention on Biological Diversity's Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from Their Utilization was adopted at the tenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties on 29 October 2010, in Nagoya.⁴⁶ Article 7 of mentioned Protocol indicates that:

in accordance with domestic law, each Party shall take measures, as appropriate, with the aim of ensuring that traditional knowledge associated with genetic resources that is held by indigenous and local communities is accessed with the prior and informed consent or approval and involvement of these indigenous and local communities, and that mutually agreed terms have been established.

Article 12 states that:

in implementing their obligations under this Protocol, Parties shall in accordance with domestic law take into consideration indigenous and local communities' customary laws, community protocols and procedures, as applicable, with respect to traditional knowledge associated with genetic resources. Parties, with the effective participation of the indigenous and local communities concerned, shall establish mechanisms to inform potential users of traditional knowledge associated with genetic resources about their obligations, including measures as made available through the Access and Benefit-sharing Clearing-House for access to and fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the utilization of such knowledge. Parties shall endeavour to support, as appropriate, the development by indigenous and local communities, including women within these communities, of: (a) Community protocols in relation to access to traditional knowledge associated with genetic resources and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising out of the utilization of such knowledge; (b) Minimum requirements for mutually agreed terms to secure the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the utilization of traditional knowledge associated with genetic resources; and (c) Model contractual clauses for benefit-sharing arising from the utilization of traditional knowledge associated with genetic resources. Parties, in their implementation of this Protocol, shall, as far as possible, not restrict the customary use and exchange of genetic resources and associated traditional knowledge within and amongst indigenous and local communities in accordance with the objectives of the Convention.

⁴⁶ <https://www.cbd.int/abs/doc/protocol/nagoya-protocol-en.pdf> (accessed 15 July 2026).

Intellectual property law has developed in parallel with the development of international law protecting indigenous cultural rights. Although its historical origins are slightly older, the early 1990s saw the implementation of sustainable development principles, particularly in relation to the benefits arising from so-called Western cultures leveraging the achievements and innovations of indigenous cultures. This is confirmed by an analysis of the 1994 TRIPS Agreement,⁴⁷ which does not include any reference to the rights of indigenous peoples or their participation in benefits from industrial property registration.

It was not until 2000 that the Intergovernmental Committee on Intellectual Property, Genetic Resources, Traditional Knowledge and Folklore (IGC) was established. This committee is responsible for developing international legal principles that protect the heritage of indigenous peoples and local communities from unauthorised use and biopiracy in three main areas: the conservation of genetic resources, the protection of traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions.⁴⁸ The IGC's work resulted in the development of the so-called Geneva Agreement, the 24 May 2024 Treaty on Intellectual Property, Genetic Resources and Associated Traditional Knowledge.⁴⁹ The treaty aims to increase the effectiveness, transparency and quality of the patent system for genetic resources and traditional knowledge associated with genetic resources, and to prevent the granting of patents for inventions that are not new or innovative in relation to genetic resources and traditional knowledge associated with genetic resources (Article 1).

However, the regulations developed are merely ostensible protection, as evidenced by Article 3 of the Treaty. According to this provision, when utilising genetic resources or traditional knowledge, parties are obligated to disclose them, if known. If not, a declaration that the applicant seeking industrial property registration is not aware of any information in this regard is sufficient. This is confirmed by Articles 5.3 and 5.4.5.3, which state that “no Party may invalidate, revoke, or render unenforceable a patent grant solely by reason of the applicant's failure to disclose specified information” (5.3), provided that “each Party [provides] in its national law post-grant sanctions or remedies where there was fraudulent intent in requiring disclosure of specified information” (5.4.5.3).

Protection of cultural industrial heritage in national laws

Industrial property law encompasses the protection of inventions, industrial and utility models, trademarks, geographical indications and the topographies of integrated circuits. In relation to the protection of cultural heritage, the protection of industrial property is reflected in the protection of traditional knowledge and in the protection of ornaments or designs used by cultural groups (trademarks or commercial marks). Due to the fact that the latter are generally related to the use of folklore, which is more connected with protection by copyright, in this article these issues are discussed in a limited scope, namely, in relation to regulations containing restrictions on the use of folklore as trademarks or commercial designations, if any.

⁴⁷ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/PL/legal-content/summary/wto-agreement-on-trade-related-aspects-of-intellectual-property.html> (accessed 15 July 2026).

⁴⁸ <https://www.wipo.int/en/web/igc> (accessed 15 July 2026).

⁴⁹ World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) (2024). WIPO Treaty on Intellectual Property, Genetic Resources and Associated Traditional Knowledge. <https://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/text/592504> (accessed 15 July 2026).

Under Polish law, it is inadmissible, in accordance with Article 129 (1) item 8 of the Industrial Property Law,⁵⁰ to grant a right of protection for a trademark containing an element of high symbolic value, in particular of a religious, patriotic or cultural nature, the use of which would offend religious sentiment, patriotic feelings or national tradition. However, there are no detailed references to the protection of traditional knowledge.

A similar regulation regarding trademarks was introduced in Article 23 of the Lao Act on Intellectual Property,⁵¹ according to which “A mark consisting of or containing, without authorisation, images of cultural symbols or historical monuments, or the name, image or likeness of a national hero or leader, or a mark that is offensive or contrary to the noble traditions of the nation, may not be registered”.

Panamanian legislation also provides, in Articles 91 and 146 of the Intellectual Property Law,⁵² that words, letters, signs or symbols used by indigenous or religious communities or non-profit associations to determine how products are processed or to distinguish finished products or services, or those that constitute an expression of their cult, custom, originality or religious practice, are not subject to registration as a trademark (Article 91) or commercial designation (Article 146), unless the application is filed for the personal benefit of one of the communities or associations to which this Article applies.

For many years, European and American producers have been “patenting” solutions used for centuries in folk medicine. This practice is called biopiracy.⁵³ The problem of this phenomenon stems from the lack of awareness among indigenous peoples of the wealth of knowledge they possess.

One example is Indian regulation, which explicitly states that designs that essentially constitute traditional knowledge, or involve the combination or duplication of known properties of a traditionally known ingredient or ingredients, are not considered inventions (Article 3 of the Indian Patent Law).⁵⁴ This regulation has resulted in cases where patents based on traditional Indian knowledge have been challenged. One such case is the patent filed by W.R. Grace and the US Department of Agriculture at the European Patent Office in 1997 for an invention involving the use of neem oil as a method for combating fungal infections in plants.⁵⁵ The use of neem oil against plant fungi has been known in Indian culture since antiquity. Nevertheless, the US patent was upheld because it covered novel methods for extending the shelf life of azadirachtin, the active ingredient in neem oil.⁵⁶ Another example of infringement of India's intangible heritage was the 1995 patent issued by the University of Mississippi Medical Center for the use of turmeric in wound healing. India opposed this patent, arguing that the medicinal properties of turmeric had been known in India since ancient times. The patent was invalidated in 1997.⁵⁷

⁵⁰ Act of June 30, 2000, Industrial Property Law, Journal of Laws 2023, item 1170, consolidated text.

⁵¹ Law No. 01/NA of December 20, 2011, on Intellectual Property (as amended).

⁵² Law No. 35 of May 10, 1996, on Industrial Property.

⁵³ UDGAONKAR Sangeeta. The recording of traditional knowledge. Will it prevent ‘bio-piracy’? In: *Current Science*, 82(4), 2002, p. 413.

⁵⁴ The Patents (Amendment) Act, 2005 (Act No. 15 of 2005).

⁵⁵ SHIVA, Vandana. Biodiversity, intellectual property rights, and globalization. In: DE SOUSA SANTOS, Boaventura (ed.), *Another knowledge is possible: Beyond northern epistemologies*. London: Verso 2007, pp. 280–283.

⁵⁶ SINGH, Ompal, KHANAM, Zakia, AHMAD, Jamal. Neem (*Azadirachta indica*) in Context of Intellectual Property Rights (IPR). In: *Recent Research in Science and Technology*, 3(6), 2011, pp. 82–83.

⁵⁷ KUMAR, Sanjay, India wins battle with USA over turmeric patent. In: *The Lancet*, 350(9079), 1997, p. 724.

Part of the legal regulations for registration requires consent to the use of traditional knowledge if the invention is based on it. An example is Section 30(3A) and (3B) of the South African Patents Act,⁵⁸ which provides that any applicant filing a patent application with a complete specification must, before the application is accepted, file with the registrar a declaration in the prescribed manner stating whether the claimed invention is based on or derived from indigenous biological resources, genetic resources, or traditional knowledge or uses. The registrar requests the applicant to provide evidence in the required manner of their title or entitlement to use indigenous biological resources, genetic resources, or traditional knowledge or use if the applicant files a declaration acknowledging that the invention for which protection is sought is based on or derived from indigenous biological resources, genetic resources, or traditional knowledge or use.

A similar provision has been adopted in Egyptian legislation. Section 3(3) of Article 3 of the Council of Ministers Resolution No. 1366 of 2003⁵⁹ states that if the application concerns an invention or utility model covering plant or animal biological material; traditional medicinal, agricultural, industrial, or handicraft knowledge; or cultural or environmental heritage, the application must be accompanied by documentation confirming the creator's use of the source from which the material was lawfully obtained, in accordance with the legislation in force in the Arab Republic of Egypt.

A slightly different approach to the protection of traditional knowledge under patent law is provided by Chile in Article 3 of its Industrial Property Law,⁶⁰ which guarantees that the protection provided by the industrial property rights it regulates will be granted, while preserving and respecting the biological and genetic heritage and traditional national knowledge. The granting of industrial property rights constituting protectable elements developed based on material derived from this heritage or knowledge is subject to the acquisition of this material in accordance with applicable law.

Similarly, in the Philippines, Section 35 of the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act⁶¹ stipulates that the use of traditional knowledge is subject to the free and prior informed consent of such communities, obtained in accordance with the customary law of the community.

In other regulations, the protection of traditional knowledge is based on the legal obligation to indicate the source of the invention, provided it is traditional knowledge and the patent is directly based on it. In Switzerland, Article 49a(b) of the Innovation Patent Act⁶² stipulates that a patent application must include information on the source of traditional knowledge of indigenous or local communities of genetic resources to which the inventor or patent applicant had access, provided that the invention is directly based on this knowledge or genetic resource. A similar solution was adopted in Germany (Section 34a of the Patent Act⁶³), Spain (Article 23 Section 2 of the Patent Act⁶⁴) and Sweden (Article 5a of the Patent Decree⁶⁵); however,

⁵⁸ Patents Amendment Act 2005 (Act No. 20 of 2005).

⁵⁹ Prime Minister's Decree No. 1366 of 2003, issuing Executive Regulations of Books One, Two, and Four of Law No. 82 of 2002 on the Protection of Intellectual Property Rights.

⁶⁰ Law No. 19.039 on Industrial Property (Consolidated Law approved by Decree-Law No. 3).

⁶¹ The Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997 (Republic Act No. 8371).

⁶² Federal Law of 25 June 1954 on Patents for Inventions (SR 232.14).

⁶³ Patent Act (as amended up to Act of 4 April 2016), Federal Law Gazette 1981 I p. 1.

⁶⁴ Law No. 24/2015 of 24 July 2015, on Patents.

⁶⁵ Patents Decree (1967: 838).

it is limited to the applicant's obligation to indicate the geographical origin of the biological material on which the invention or utility model is based.

Some regulations recognise traditional knowledge as the property of the people who possess it. For example, Article 117 of the Botswana Industrial Property Act⁶⁶ stipulates that:

ownership and other rights to traditional knowledge belong to the owner of traditional knowledge. If traditional knowledge is collectively owned, rights to it will be exercised and enjoyed collectively, in accordance with cultural practices. Notwithstanding the foregoing, local communities that have individually registered similar or identical elements of traditional knowledge have the opportunity to individually exercise and enjoy their rights to traditional knowledge. The applicant community, comprising persons of various nationalities, including those from Botswana, will have the right to register and acquire rights to traditional knowledge in Botswana and other countries.

Article 121 of the said Act grants the owner the following exclusive rights:

- (a) where the subject of protection is a product, the right to prevent third parties from manufacturing, using, storing, offering for sale, selling, commercialising, importing or exporting the product or any element thereof without consent;
- (b) where the subject of protection is a domesticated animal, a cultivated plant or any microorganism, the right to prohibit third parties from reproducing, propagating or preparing for reproduction without consent by offering for sale, selling, importing, exporting or any form of commercialisation;
- (c) where the subject of protection is a design or an object of a functional or aesthetic nature containing any element of handicraft, the right to prohibit third parties from making or reproducing an object with a similar configuration in terms of shape, colour, material, technique and the general style or visual impression of handicraft that is characteristic of it;
- (d) where the subject of protection is a name, symbol, emblem or any distinctive sign of a religious, spiritual, cultural or economic nature, the right to prohibit third parties from making or reproducing any element of handicraft without consent using, whether in a maternal context, language, or any other language, consisting of an identical or similar mark on a product or product related to services, labelling, packaging, or other materials reproducing or incorporating the marks for commercial or other purposes.

No one is permitted to distort registered traditional knowledge in any way, in particular to distort the spiritual or cultural identity of the community possessing the traditional knowledge, or to perform any act that implies the direct or indirect use of the knowledge for any purpose, including scientific or academic research, without the owner's consent. Notwithstanding the foregoing, if the subject of protection is a product placed on the market in Botswana by the owner or by a third party with the owner's consent, commercial activities in relation to the product cannot be considered to distort or in any way contribute to the cultural identity of the community. If, after registering the traditional knowledge, the owner takes reasonable steps to

⁶⁶ Industrial Property Act, 2010, Act No. 8 of 2010.

keep some elements of the traditional knowledge secret, no one shall disclose or acquire the undisclosed knowledge in any way contrary to honest commercial practices.

The use of traditional knowledge requires the Minister's consent only if it is in the public interest and only if the use does not distort or insult the cultural identity of the local community, and the local community receives a fair share of any benefits arising from such use (Article 124).

A similar solution was adopted in Kenya, where Article 10 of the Protection of Traditional Knowledge and Cultural Expressions Act⁶⁷ states that:

each community has the exclusive right to permit the use of its traditional knowledge and to prevent any person from using its traditional knowledge without its prior informed consent. In addition to all other available rights, remedies and actions, owners will have the right to initiate legal proceedings against any person who uses traditional knowledge without the owner's consent. Each community will establish and adopt its own community rules specifying the procedures for granting permits to use its traditional knowledge. The rules will be submitted to the district authorities during the registration of traditional knowledge.

However, the scope of protection is more limited than in the Botswana regulation. Section 19 of the Kenya Act stipulates that:

the protection of traditional knowledge or cultural expressions shall not restrict or hinder the normal use, development, exchange, dissemination and transmission of traditional knowledge or cultural expressions by members of a particular community within the framework of and in accordance with the customary law and practices of that community; and shall extend only to uses of traditional knowledge or cultural expressions whether or not for commercial gain; and shall be subject to such other exceptions as may be necessary to meet the needs of non-commercial uses, including teaching and research for educational purposes, personal or private use, criticism or review, reporting of current events, use in legal proceedings, making recordings and reproducing traditional knowledge or cultural expressions for the purpose of inclusion in an archive or inventory solely for the purpose of protecting the knowledge or cultural heritage, and incidental uses.

The Ethiopian legislator also emphasises, in Article 6 of the Law on Access to Genetic Resources and Community Knowledge and the Proclamation of Community Rights,⁶⁸ that:

local communities have the following rights to their genetic resources and community knowledge: the right to regulate access to their traditional knowledge; the inalienable right to use their genetic resources and traditional knowledge; and the right to enjoy the benefits arising from the utilisation of their genetic resources and traditional knowledge.

Local communities have the right to benefits arising from the utilisation of their traditional knowledge, in particular to obtain a 50% state share in monetary form from the benefits from

⁶⁷ The Protection of Traditional Knowledge and Cultural Expressions Act, Act No. 33 of 2016.

⁶⁸ Access to Genetic Resources and Community Knowledge, and Community Rights Proclamation No. 482/2006, <https://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/text/179080> (accessed 20 October 2025).

utilisation their genetic resources. A law granting ownership of traditional knowledge to local communities was also adopted in the Brazilian regulation, which in Article 9 of the Provisional Law No. 2.186-16 of 23 August 2001⁶⁹ states that:

indigenous and local communities that create, develop, store or cultivate traditional knowledge associated with genetic heritage shall be guaranteed the right to: recognition of the origin of access to traditional knowledge in all publications, applications, exploitation and dissemination, and the right to prevent unauthorized third parties from using, testing, researching or exploiting the associated traditional knowledge; and from disseminating, transmitting or transferring data or information constituting the associated traditional knowledge or part thereof. They shall also have the right to receive benefits from the economic exploitation by third parties, directly or indirectly, of the associated traditional knowledge to which they hold rights, in accordance with this Provisional Law. Any traditional knowledge associated with genetic heritage may be recognized as belonging to the community, even if only one member of that community possesses that knowledge.

A similar solution was also adopted in Peru in a law introducing a system for protecting indigenous peoples' collective knowledge derived from biological resources.⁷⁰ This law distinguishes between traditional knowledge that is protected and that is in the public domain. Article 42 of the law stipulates that:

indigenous peoples possessing collective knowledge shall be protected from disclosure, acquisition, or use of this collective knowledge without their consent or inappropriately, provided that the collective knowledge is not in the public domain. It is also protected from unauthorized disclosure if a third party has legally obtained access to the collective knowledge covered by the protective clause.

The issue is treated similarly in Kyrgyz regulation in the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic on the Protection of Traditional Knowledge.⁷¹ Article 2 stipulates that:

the holders of traditional knowledge are local communities, natural and legal persons of any legal structure and ownership, who are holders of traditional knowledge. A local community means the population permanently residing in the territory of a village, commune or city, and other specific territories of the Kyrgyz Republic, possessing its own national and cultural traditions, way of life, and traditional knowledge in various fields of human activity that can improve the standard of living.

According to Article 7:

Legal protection is granted to traditional knowledge that has practical application in the relevant field of human activity and that has positive effects in that field. It does not include

⁶⁹ Provisional Act No. 2.186-16, dated 23 August 2001.

⁷⁰ Law No. 27811 of 24 July 2002, introducing a Protection Regime for the Collective Knowledge of Indigenous Peoples derived from Biological Resources.

⁷¹ Law of the Kyrgyz Republic "On the Protection of Traditional Knowledge" of 31 July 2007. N 116 (Закон КР "Обохранетрадиционныхзнаний" г. от 31 июля 2007 года N 116).

traditional knowledge that causes or may cause harm to human life and health or to the environment.

And Article 17 states:

The production, use, import, distribution, offering for sale, sale and other commercial introduction of traditional knowledge in items containing and created from it for production or commercial purposes is considered an illegal use of traditional knowledge if it occurs without concluding an agreement with the holders of traditional knowledge. In the event of non-use or insufficient use of the registered Traditional Knowledge by the holder of the certificates within three years from the date of issue of the certificates, any person wishing to use the protected Traditional Knowledge, if the holder of the certificate refuses to conclude an agreement for the use of Traditional Knowledge with such person, subject to conditions consistent with common practice, shall be entitled to apply to the court for such permission to use the Traditional Knowledge in question.

The role of museums in implementing legal means of protection of traditional knowledge

Alongside the importance and specificity of traditional knowledge as part of cultural heritage, it is also important to note the specific obligations that are placed on cultural institutions in implementing the legal protection of traditional knowledge. As mentioned, the role of museums in protecting intangible heritage is specific and distinctly different from the protection of material culture. While the latter focuses on the conservation and preservation of cultural assets in their preserved form, in the case of traditional knowledge, particular attention should be paid to the dynamic nature of culture. Cultural norms are not fixed axioms but evolve in the course of civilisational development. Preserving traditional knowledge must not, therefore, lead to it being “frozen” in time or being practiced merely as a tourist attraction. Rather, approaches to preserving such knowledge should strive to ensure its continued practice in society.

The stated goal of protecting traditional knowledge imposes on cultural institutions, including museums, the obligation to seek out and promote regional traditional knowledge within their jurisdiction. Just as tangible goods are undiscovered (e.g., archaeologists can find them hidden underground), solutions that meet the requirements of traditional knowledge should also be sought, particularly when their innovative nature can generate economic benefits, for example, as a basis for patent protection.

Furthermore, museums should recognise their obligation to archive and preserve traditional knowledge. This process will enable museums not only to understand the origins of practices but also to predict their potential evolution. It is important to emphasise that archiving traditional knowledge does not aim to embed it, as is the case with cultural tourism, where practices have lost their axiological foundation and have adapted to be as attractive as possible to visitors.

The educational role of cultural institutions in protecting traditional knowledge is also crucial. This involves, in particular, raising awareness of the importance of traditional knowledge within local communities, as well as globally. Instilling in people’s minds the importance of cultural diversity – and contrasting it with a mercantilist and utilitarian understanding of reality that

promotes economic values above all else – is crucial. That educational role also manifests itself in raising awareness of the relationship between traditional knowledge and the development of innovation. Awareness of the importance of practices perceived as commonplace in certain communities but unknown in other regions leads to abuses, as exemplified by cases such as the attempted patenting of neem oil or turmeric. Perceiving one's own traditional knowledge as a source of further development fosters the diversification of development paths, as pursued by the concept of sustainable development.

The final element of museums' activities in preserving traditional knowledge is organising activities aimed at disseminating traditional knowledge. As indicated, traditional knowledge is a living cultural heritage. It is subject to change and modification. Disseminating it promotes its cultivation and thus prevents its disappearance. Lesser-known practices can be implemented by a larger number of individuals in their daily lives.

Conclusions

Protection of cultural rights in industrial property law can take various forms. It may not cover traditional knowledge at all, treating it as part of the public domain, or it may grant ownership to indigenous communities directly, on statutory grounds, or implicitly, making the granting of protection dependent on obtaining the consent of the holder of traditional knowledge.

Another solution is protection that, although not recognising traditional knowledge as the property of local peoples, obliges the applicant for protection to provide information about the source of the material or solution used in the invention. Some of the analysed legislation distinguishes traditional knowledge into knowledge protected under industrial property law and knowledge that is in the public domain. It should be emphasised that the obligation to indicate the sources of traditional knowledge to the local (state) patent office protects indigenous peoples, as well as residents of the country of origin of traditional knowledge, from being burdened with the costs associated with patenting solutions based on this knowledge, as well as from the loss of income opportunities associated with the commercial use of traditional production or treatment methods.

This simultaneously creates uncertainty when patenting solutions based on so-called traditional medicine, herbal medicine and environmental management systems. Solutions that protect traditional knowledge are fundamental to eliminating income inequalities between countries that are able to allocate significant financial resources for research and development involving biological material found in developing countries, and countries that cannot afford to do so, even if they are aware of the wealth of resources they possess. It is noticeable that most legal regulations that recognise the rights of local communities to traditional knowledge apply to countries in the so-called South, i.e., the poorer part of the globe.⁷²

With regard to the right to culture under industrial property law, there are significant discrepancies in the protection of the right to culture, understood as the right to self-determination. On the one hand, traditional knowledge is universal, but this universality is limited to a certain group. This group therefore has the right to the benefits resulting from its dissemination and commercialisation, a right not universally respected. The postulate of treating traditional knowledge as an achievement of all humanity is dictated by mercantilist considerations. Profiting from ideas cultivated for centuries is piracy and does not deserve

⁷² TODARO, Michael, SMITH, Stephen. *Economic Development*. Boston: Pearson Addison Wesley, 2009, p. 4.

legal protection. The exploitation of indigenous resources, both tangible and intangible, in Western countries has led to an increase in the costs of creating innovative solutions. One way to minimise these costs is to use ready-made solutions, including traditional knowledge. This reveals the perception of development as a superior value over the protection of cultural diversity.

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

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

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 Bełzec. 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. Tanatoturystyka – kontrowersyjne oblicze turystyki kulturowej [Thanatourism – The Controversial Face of Cultural Tourism]. In: *Peregrinus Cracoviensis*, 17, 2006, p. 81–92.; TANAS, Sławomir. Tanatoturystyka – 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 Czmur, 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 Wacław 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.

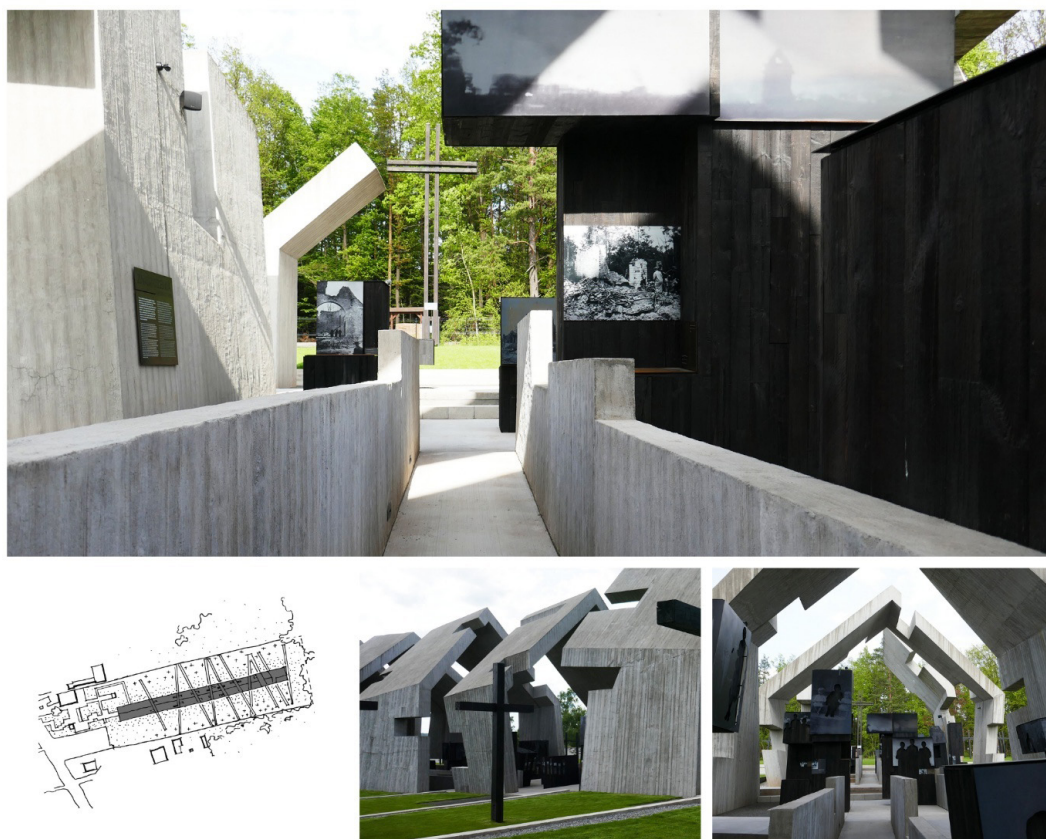


Fig. 2: *Mausoleum of the Martyrdom of Polish Villages in Michniów.* Photos and top view sketch by the author.

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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Migration museums' social and cultural offer for Ukrainian war refugees: A case study of the Emigration Museum in Gdynia

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Migration museums' social and cultural offer for Ukrainian war refugees: A case study of the Emigration Museum in Gdynia

With the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine in February 2022, many institutions and organisations have been faced with the challenge of integrating and including numerous refugees. Migration museums, statutorily responsible for informing and educating about migrations and asylum in both historical and contemporary contexts, have become notable actors in this regard. This article presents a case study of the Museum of Emigration in Gdynia (MEG) and the activities undertaken by this institution for war refugees from Ukraine. The text is based on participant observation, source documents, individual in-depth interviews and a literature review. The results of the analysis demonstrate that cultural institutions, including migration museums, can take over integration activities from NGOs in a crisis situation, relying on stable infrastructure and financial liquidity.

Keywords: migration museums; integration of migrants; social inclusion; war refugees from Ukraine; Emigration Museum in Gdynia

Introduction

In recent years, Poland has undergone a transformation from an emigration country to an immigration country. The main reasons for the significant increase in the number of foreigners in the country were (and remain) the need for workers and the full-scale aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine starting 24 February 2022, which triggered a mass migration of war refugees. The latter situation in particular has resulted in many institutions and organisations, including those of a cultural nature, being confronted with new challenges. In the case of cultural institutions, the influx of refugees from Ukraine has raised new questions

about the social role of these actors, both in the context of *ad hoc* aid measures and long-term ones related to social integration and inclusion.

Margherita Sani notes that in recent years, there has been a significant increase in the social role of museums: from temples of knowledge to forums for debate and discussion, from a repository of objects to a socially responsible institution focused on people.¹ In turn, referring to the role of museums in shaping intercultural dialogue, Simona Bodo points to three main tasks that museum institutions can perform in the context of cultural flows and integration activities. These are:

1. informing audiences about other cultures, which have historically been misrepresented or completely ignored in museums;
2. integrating new citizens into mainstream culture by helping them learn about the history of the country of settlement, its language, values, and traditions; and
3. promoting cultural self-awareness in immigrant communities through their involvement in, for example, interpreting and preserving collections.²

Museums, and especially migrant museums, which should be seen as institutions with special social responsibilities, in conditions of increased mobility and growing crises, can carry out all of the above-mentioned activities. As this paper demonstrates, museums can also effectively replace other actors, including NGOs, by taking over from them activities of an integrative nature when these, for example, for financial reasons, are unable to continue them. Thus, in addition to their original aid projects, museums can ensure the continuity of other socially relevant projects.

This text is a case study of the activities undertaken by the Emigration Museum in Gdynia (MEG) for war refugees from Ukraine. It also describes MEG's takeover, following the blocking of US aid funds by President Trump's administration, of selected projects implemented by the Vchasno Centre, set up by an international NGO, the International Rescue Committee (IRC).

The article is based on participant observation, analysis of materials and documents produced by the MEG, individual in-depth interviews, and a literature review.

Theoretical Framework: Museums as Relational Institutions and Safe Spaces in the Context of Migration

Contemporary museum theory increasingly conceptualises museums not merely as repositories of heritage but as relational institutions embedded within social processes and community dynamics. This shift reflects broader transformations within museology, often described as the transition from authoritative, object-centred institutions towards socially responsive and participatory environments.³ Within this framework, the relationship between the museum and the community becomes a central analytical axis, particularly in contexts shaped by migration, displacement and social change.

¹ SANI, Margherita. Museums, migration and cultural diversity – Recommendations for museums. In: *Museum Studies*, 58, 2017, p. 12.

² BODO, Simona. The challenge of creating “third spaces”: guidelines for MAP for ID pilot projects. In: BODO, Simona, GIBBS, Kirsten, SANI, Margherita (eds) *Museums as places for intercultural dialogue: selected practices from Europe*, MAP, 2009, p. 22.

³ ROSS, Max. Interpreting the new museology. In: *Museum and Society*, 2004, 2(2), pp. 84–103.

The theoretical reorientation of museums towards community engagement can be traced to early critiques of traditional museum authority, most notably the distinction between the museum as a “temple” and as a “forum”.⁴ The latter model positions museums as arenas for dialogue, negotiation and public participation, thereby redefining the institutional role from knowledge transmission to facilitation of social exchange. Subsequent developments within new museology further emphasised the social agency of museums and their capacity to shape cultural narratives and collective identities.⁵

This paradigmatic shift underpins the emergence of participatory approaches in which audiences are understood as co-producers of meaning rather than passive recipients. Simon’s model of the participatory museum conceptualises engagement as a structural principle that reshapes institutional practice through collaboration, shared authority and audience-driven contributions.⁶ Participation thus becomes both a methodological tool and an ethical stance, enabling museums to build sustained relationships with communities and to address issues of representation and inclusion.

The relational model situates community engagement at the core of contemporary museum practice. Research on social inclusion demonstrates that museums can act as agents of cultural democratisation by creating spaces where diverse voices are acknowledged and incorporated into institutional narratives.⁷ In this context, engagement is not limited to outreach activities but involves reconfiguring institutional structures to accommodate dialogue, co-creation and mutual learning.

Conceptualisations of the “social museum” emphasise reciprocity between institution and community, highlighting the shift from representing communities to collaborating with them.⁸ Empirical studies further demonstrate that visitor participation generates multi-vocal narratives that reshape interpretative frameworks and reinforce the museum’s role as a platform for collective expression.⁹ These developments position museums as socially embedded actors whose legitimacy depends on their ability to foster inclusive relationships and address contemporary social realities.

Migration museums provide a particularly salient example of this relational orientation. By engaging with narratives of mobility and belonging, they function as sites where historical interpretation intersects with present-day social engagement.¹⁰ Such institutions facilitate encounters between local populations and migrants, thereby contributing to broader processes of identity negotiation and public dialogue.

Parallel to the participatory turn, museum scholarship increasingly explores the notion of the museum as a safe space or space of care. Rather than conceptualising safety as an inherent property of institutional space, recent research frames it as an emergent outcome of relational

⁴ CAMERON, Duncan F. The museum, a temple or the forum. In: *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 14(1), 1971, pp. 11–24.

⁵ ROSS, Interpreting...

⁶ SIMON, Nina. *The Participatory Museum*. Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2010.

⁷ DODD, Jocelyn, SANDELL, Richard (eds.). *Including Museums*. Leicester: RCMG, 2001.

⁸ NESSEL-LUKASIK, Beata. Muzeum społeczne. Żywa idea czy nowy model? In: *Polski Przegląd Migracyjny / The Polish Migration Review*, 10, 2025, pp. 40–53.

⁹ FILIPCZYK, Kamila. W muzealnym sztambuchu. Polifoniczny dialog zwiedzających w księgach pamiątkowych Muzeum Emigracji w Gdyni. In: *Polski Przegląd Migracyjny / The Polish Migration Review*, 10, 2025, pp. 54–73.

¹⁰ SUTHERLAND, Claire. Leaving and longing: Migration museums as nation-building sites. In: *Museum and Society*, 12(2), 2014, pp. 118–131.

practices, ethical engagement, and participatory methodologies.¹¹ This perspective foregrounds the affective dimension of museum experience, emphasising emotional safety, recognition and belonging.

Studies of community engagement programmes demonstrate that museums may function as spaces of care by fostering supportive relationships and facilitating the expression of personal narratives.¹² Such environments are particularly significant when working with individuals affected by displacement, trauma or marginalisation. However, scholarship also cautions against idealised notions of safety, arguing that safe spaces must be understood as negotiated and contingent, shaped by power dynamics and institutional reflexivity.¹³

Participatory strategies play a crucial role in constructing safer environments, as they enable participants to exercise agency and reclaim narrative authority. Yet these approaches require careful ethical consideration, particularly in contexts involving forced migration, where issues of vulnerability and representation are central.

Migration museums exemplify the convergence of relational museology and care-oriented approaches. Their engagement with contested histories and lived experiences positions them as contact zones where multiple perspectives intersect.¹⁴ By integrating participatory practices with inclusive narrative strategies, these institutions can foster dialogue across cultural differences and support processes of social recognition.

Within this framework, the museum as a safe space should be understood not as a static condition but as a dynamic process grounded in relational ethics and community collaboration. This perspective highlights the importance of institutional reflexivity, long-term engagement, and sensitivity to the social and emotional dimensions of cultural participation. Consequently, analysing migration museums through the dual lenses of community relationship and safe-space practice provides a productive framework for examining their potential role in supporting refugees and facilitating inclusive social environments.

The role of migration museums in including people with asylum and migrant experience

The term “migration museums” refers primarily to museums that deal with the topic of migration in a holistic way. In their permanent and temporary exhibitions, as well as in their educational programmes and activities, they address historical and contemporary migration and explain who migrants and refugees are.¹⁵

In recent years, a number of such institutions have been established in different parts of the world. Among the best known are Ellis Island Immigration Museum in New York (USA), the Immigration Museum in Melbourne (Australia), Pier 21 in Halifax (Canada), Deutsches Auswandererhaus Bremerhaven (Germany), Cité Nationale d'Histoire de l'Immigration (France), and the Red Star Line Museum (Belgium).

As a rule, migration museums carry out a variety of activities to support social inclusion processes, as discussed above. In this article, we refer as well to the outputs of the research project

¹¹ BOERSMA, Susanne. The Museum as a 'Safe Space'. In: *The Aftermaths of Participation*. Transcript Verlag, 2022.

¹² MUNRO, Ealasaid. Recognising museums' community engagement programmes as spaces of care. In: *Geoforum*, 48, 2013, pp. 54–62.

¹³ BOERSMA, The Museum...

¹⁴ SUTHERLAND, Leaving and longing...

¹⁵ PETELSKA, Michalina. Migration museums: A proposed typology. In: *Muzeologia a Kulturne Dedicstvo*. 4, 2022, p. 28.

entitled “Along the route of migration museums in the European Union – towards multicultural societies, where mobility is a fundamental right. Good practices and recommendations concerning social inclusion in receiving countries”.¹⁶ The project aimed to analyse cultural and social measures for migrants, undertaken by migration museums in European Union countries.

The project was conducted between September and December 2024 and analysed the offer of a dozen migration museums in the EU. The methodology used was mixed-method combining desk research with empirical elements: in-depth individual interviews (IDI) and workshops with representatives of cultural institutions and researchers working in the field of culture, migration and mobility. The project also encompassed study visits to selected institutions (mainly migration museums). The activities undertaken aimed to identify good practice in the field of integration and inclusion of migrants. A review of the offer of selected museums made it possible to create a catalogue of activities that can serve as inspiration for various entities from the cultural sector in terms of creating an active and inclusive community. Examples of good practice include, among others:

- migration museums and other cultural institutions functioning as a friendly, safe space for regular meetings for a local community of migrants and non-migrants (e.g. artistic, culinary, linguistic);
- working on projects that include second- and third-generation migrants as well as people from the local community with experience of migration contributing to the common narrative;
- cultural institutions operating as meeting and discussion platforms for local communities (including people with experience of migration), where attention is paid to diversity of ideas and viewpoints;
- making space for a different narrative on migration, art and culture from the one dominant in the country of settlement – in this way, people from other cultures identify with the institutions, recognising them as their own or at least familiar;
- inviting international communities to co-create the narrative and the offer of cultural institutions – part of the concept of co-creators;
- involving the so-called gatekeepers (introducers from migrant communities) in cultural institutions, as well as appointing foreign ambassadors for these institutions, creating migrant councils and establishing cooperation with multicultural associations; and
- constructing a message that shows migration (and as a consequence, also migrants) as part of the history of the host country. This bridges the gap between “visitors” and “natives”, as mobility is embedded in the identity of a nation.¹⁷

As the above-mentioned good practices demonstrate, cultural institutions (and especially migration museums) can use a variety of instruments and tools to integrate migrants and refugees into local communities. This is well summarised in the words of Bodo, Gibbs and

¹⁶ The project was carried as a grant from the National Plan for Reconstruction and Increased Resilience – Programme for supporting the activities of cultural and creative industries to stimulate their development. The main objectives of the project were to become acquainted with good practice in EU museums and other cultural institutions regarding migration, such as promoting mobility and multiculturalism, creating an inclusive offer for male and female migrants (as audiences, creators, employees), and acquiring the knowledge and skills needed to create and promote an inclusive multicultural offer. For more information, see www.mmue.online.

¹⁷ Museums of migration in the EU, <https://mmue.online/en/good-practices/>.

Sani:

We are aware that museums and other cultural institutions play only a small role in the complex process of promoting integration and respectful coexistence of different communities and cultural practices. But we also believe that this contribution has a remarkable potential to challenge prejudices and stereotypes and create shared spaces and a sense of belonging.¹⁸

Case study: the MEG

In Poland, the first and, so far, the only museum that seeks to tell the story of emigration from the Polish lands in a comprehensive way, as well as to spread knowledge about the Polish diaspora, is the Emigration Museum in Gdynia (MEG). It is a self-governing cultural institution organised by the Municipality of the City of Gdynia. The ceremonial opening of the institution took place on 16 May 2015.

The museum was inspired by the historic Marine Station, a key element of the emigration infrastructure created in Gdynia in the interwar period. It is a place inextricably linked to the history of emigrants who left Poland in search of a better life. The French Quay, where the station building is located and where famous Polish transatlantic liners, led by the MS Batory, once moored, is a symbolic place for Polish emigration. Many famous Poles, including Witold Gombrowicz¹⁹ and Zbigniew Brzeziński,²⁰ departed from this place. In 2007, the local government decided to give a new purpose to a building that had formerly served, among other things, the emigration movement.²¹

According to the Functional and Programme Framework of the Emigration Museum in Gdynia – which was drawn up to facilitate a competition to design the artistic and spatial concept of the permanent exhibition – the institution was to pursue four basic objectives: education about migration and its benefits, permanent and temporary exhibitions, inclusive social activities and integration, and research on migration, emigration, inclusion and integration. The main audiences for the Museum were defined as school-age children and adolescents, inhabitants of Gdynia, tourists from Poland and abroad, and the Polish community.²²

The statute identifies two basic scopes of the institution's operation: presenting the history of emigration from Polish lands and disseminating knowledge about the phenomenon of

¹⁸ BODO, Simona, GIBBS, Kirsten, SANI, Margherita. Introduction, In: BODO, Simona, GIBBS, Kirsten, SANI, Margherita (ed.) *Museums as places...*, p. 7.

¹⁹ Born in 1904, Witold Gombrowicz was a Polish novelist, short story writer, playwright, and philosopher. He is one of the most frequently translated Polish-language authors and has been named one of the most outstanding Polish writers of the twentieth century. He lived in exile from 1939 onwards.

²⁰ Born in 1928 in Warsaw (left Poland in 1938), Zbigniew Brzeziński was a Polish–American political scientist, a Professor of Political Science at Columbia University and Johns Hopkins University, a geostrategist and diplomat, National Security Advisor to the US during the presidency of Jimmy Carter, and an advisor to presidents Lyndon Baines Johnson and John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

²¹ SZERLE, Marcin. Konieczność a przymus. Zagadnienia migracyjne w założeniach ekspozycji stałej Muzeum Emigracji w Gdyni. In: *Studia Historica Gedanensia*, 5, 2014, pp. 395–407.

²² MEG. Functional and programme framework of the Emigration Museum in Gdynia. Appendix No. 6 to the Rules and Regulations of the competition for the artistic and spatial concept of the permanent exhibition of the Emigration Museum in Gdynia, www.gdynia.pl, http://www.gdynia.pl/g2/2012_06/55765_fileot.pdf.

migration in the world.²³ However, the institution's mission and vision has an important role in shaping MEG's profile and activities. The mission and vision were established in 2021, before the full-scale invasion by the Russian Federation and the resulting influx of war refugees. They are contained in these sentences:

We connect stories, we bring people together. The Emigration Museum in Gdynia is a place open to the world. This is where the stories of emigrants and immigrants, human experiences, hopes, and fears meet. To understand who we are today and who we can be tomorrow. [...] We want to create a reality in which there is room for everyone. No matter who they are, where they come from, or where they live.²⁴

Following the mission and vision, the museum began work on developing a new offer for people who had experienced migration. It aimed to create a space to facilitate to dialogue and integration, the exchange of experiences and a better understanding of the cultures of migrants' countries of origin. This activity was significantly intensified after 24 February 2022.

Support to war refugees from Ukraine: MEG's offer

In response to the arrival in Gdynia of a large number of war refugees from Ukraine, the museum almost immediately launched ad hoc support activities. Some of the staff also became involved in activities at the reception points set up by the Polish Government. A special play and rest area for Ukrainian families was created on the museum grounds – cosy space was created, where LEGO® sets, games, picture books and art supplies awaited children and young people, and Ukrainian- and Russian-speaking animators offered creative activities. Parents, meanwhile, could relax, access the internet and deal with bureaucratic matters relating to settling into a new country. More than 300 people benefited from this support.²⁵

Later on, a more comprehensive social and cultural offer was developed for migrants, including, in particular, people from Ukraine. For example, the project "Museum Shares! Ukraine",²⁶ a guided exhibition tour (in English, Russian and Ukrainian) was developed, and Polish language courses for war refugees were initiated.²⁷

In addition, an offer aimed at integrating the local and migrant communities was introduced. It included projects such as "SUPPLEMENT" – "Purpose of Stay"²⁸, a series of "Everyday Hospitality" events²⁹ ("Incoming Connections" city walks guided by migrants' stories, "At the Shared Table" meetings, "Everyone will fit in" family workshops, and "Mural" art project), a children's exhibition called "Removals"³⁰, a pop-quiz overlooking the Baltic Sea³¹ and the Gdynia Language Swap.³²

The above programmes were part of a wide range of integration activities for migrant men and women, carried out by various entities in Poland in general and in Gdynia in particular.

²³ MEG. Statute of the Emigration Museum in Gdynia, Annex to Resolution No. XXII/533/16 of the Gdynia City Council of 22 June 2016. Public Information Bulletin of the City Hall of Gdynia, <https://bip.um.gdynia.pl/status-i-organizacja,1223/statut-muzeum,387459>.

²⁴ MEG. *Idea*, <https://polska1.pl/wiedza/idea/>.

²⁵ MEG. *Report on the Activities of the Emigration Museum in Gdynia 2022*, p. 11.

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ Polish language course! <https://polska1.pl/kurs-na-jezyk-polski-bezplatny-kurs-jezyka-polskiego>.

²⁸ "SUPPLEMENT – Purpose of stay" <https://polska1.pl/suplement-wystawa-czasowa-cel-pobytu/>.

²⁹ Everyday Hospitality, accessed 10.08.2025, <https://polska1.pl/codzienna-goscinnosc/>.

³⁰ Removals, accessed: 11.08.2025, <https://polska1.pl/wystawa-czasowa-przeprowadzki/>.

³¹ Pop-quiz overlooking the Baltic, accessed: 11.08.2025, <https://polska1.pl/pop-quiz-z-widokiem-na-baltyk>.

³² Gdynia Language Swap. <https://polska1.pl/projects/gdynia-language-swap/>, 2023–2025,

However, the scope and catalogue of these initiatives was reduced in the first months of 2025 as a result of USAID funds being blocked by President Trump's administration. Several actors, most notably NGOs, were forced to cease or limit their ongoing activities benefiting migrants and war refugees. One of these was the aforementioned international humanitarian aid organisation the IRC, which used to run the Vchasno Centre in Gdynia. The IRC is an organisation that supports people in need both directly on the ground and in partnership with local organisations. In Poland it provides financial assistance to those most in need, offering legal and psychosocial support, including safe spaces for women and children.

Gdynia's Vchasno was created as a meeting place. The centre's team sought to help rebuild a sense of community and provide a place where war refugees could find respite from the challenges of everyday life and get the support and information they needed.³³ The centre provided a diverse range of activities: workshops and courses for children, a toddler's club, a female seniors' club, girls' and women's meetings, a discussion book club, art meetings, a speaking club (in Polish and English) and creative workshops. All services offered were free of charge. The centre operated until 15 March 2025, when it was closed due to the withdrawal of funding.

The prospect of the facility's closure caused anxiety among both staff and the beneficiaries of the support. There were fears of the disintegration of the community created and the destabilisation of the life situation of those benefiting from activities at the Centre. Under these conditions, the proposal put forward by the MEG during a meeting with the coordinator of Vchasno to utilise the available funds and space to relocate some activities to the Museum was received with enthusiasm. In the next step, discussions began with the Centre's staff to identify transferable activities and their approach to establishing cooperation with MEG. Once the arrangements were made, at the meeting closing Vchasno's activities, the Museum staff presented a proposal to the community around the Centre to continue some of the projects in the museum space. In the following weeks, using equipment donated by Vchasno, rooms were prepared for workshops and meetings. On the last weekend of April 2025, the first events took place. In this way, the MEG supplemented its offer aimed at migrants from Ukraine with a Book Club and a Senior Women's Club, which were relocated from Vchasno Centre.

The Book Club is a space for conversation, sharing passions, and building a community around literature. Meetings are held once a month to discuss a book chosen by the participants' vote. It is a great opportunity to share impressions after reading, hear different interpretations and make new friends. The Book Club is conducted in Ukrainian and is open to anyone who wishes to join this initiative. As for the Senior Women's Club, it is not only about casual conversations between neighbours, acquaintances and friends; it also offers art workshops, which are an integral part of the meetings. The club meets every two weeks on Saturdays and is conducted in Ukrainian. Both the Book Club and the Senior Women's Club have enabled the ongoing initiatives and the communities created around them to continue. A key element of success was establishing cooperation with animators from the Vchasno Centre, which guaranteed the stability of the groups and continuing forms of support.

All these activities are part of MEG's constantly expanding offer aimed at people with migration experience, called "Our Home". The purpose of the "Our Home" project is to create a space at the Emigration Museum in Gdynia to promote dialogue and integration, an exchange of experiences, and a better understanding of the history of migration and the cultures of

³³ SZYPELT, Karolina. Centrum Społecznościowe "Vchasno" zaprasza, www.gdynia.pl.

countries from which we all come. The project is aimed not only at migrant communities and people with migration experience but also at the host society, that is, at anybody (from the neighbourhood) who wants to participate. It involves numerous initiatives and activities: networking, groups and initiatives run or co-run by migrants and those working on their behalf; information-sharing sessions, such as thematic meetings and workshops; and consultations, providing ongoing discussions with migrants to ensure that the museum's offer is best suited to the real needs of the target community. One of the flagship projects in this regard, already mentioned before, is the Gdynia Language Swap (GLS). It is a space for meeting, spending time in an international group, sharing experiences and learning language in sessions where participants can be either students or teachers. During meetings held every two weeks on Saturdays, participants can learn a foreign language, practice conversations and familiarise foreigners with the secrets of the Polish language. Participants are assigned a conversation partner based on their experience, individual needs and language skills; everyone may come to the meeting with friends or invite someone who has recently arrived in the city from another country.

These activities fit within the context of writings by Peter Dahlgren and Joke Hermes, who emphasise that contemporary museums must strive to engage their audiences by offering the right mix of aesthetics, experience, information and fun, while maintaining a sense of community.³⁴ The activities of the Emigration Museum in Gdynia are in line with this vision of a modern cultural institution.

Conclusion

The case of the Emigration Museum in Gdynia demonstrates that migration museums can act as relational institutions whose social significance extends beyond traditional exhibitionary functions. As outlined in the theoretical framework, contemporary museology increasingly interprets museums as socially embedded actors that facilitate dialogue, participation and community-building rather than merely preserving heritage.³⁵ The activities undertaken by MEG confirm this shift from the museum as an authoritative space toward the museum as a relational forum, where cultural participation becomes intertwined with social responsibility.

The empirical findings suggest that the relationship between the museum and the community is not limited to symbolic representation but is constructed through sustained interaction, co-creation and responsiveness to emerging social needs. The museum's response to the arrival of war refugees from Ukraine illustrates how participatory and community-oriented approaches enable cultural institutions to adapt rapidly in crisis situations. By creating programs that involve language exchange, social gatherings and collaborative cultural activities, the has institution moved beyond traditional outreach toward practices aligned with the participatory museum paradigm.³⁶ In this sense, MEG exemplifies how community engagement becomes a structural principle shaping institutional identity and practice, rather than a supplementary activity.

Moreover, the transfer of selected initiatives from the Vchasno Centre to the museum space demonstrates how cultural institutions can function as stabilising infrastructures during periods of institutional disruption. The ability to sustain community initiatives when NGO-led projects

³⁴ DAHLGREN, Peter, HERMES, Joke. (2015). The Democratic Horizons of the Museum. Citizenship and Culture. In: WITCOMB, Andrea, MESSAGE, Kylie (eds) *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies: Museum Theory*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, pp. 117–138.

³⁵ ROSS, Interpreting...; CAMERON, The museum...

³⁶ SIMON, The Participatory...

were discontinued highlights the potential of museums to act as long-term anchors within local social ecosystems. This capacity reflects the broader theoretical understanding of museums as socially responsive actors capable of supporting inclusion and facilitating collective resilience.³⁷

The analysis also supports the conceptualisation of museums as spaces of care and potential safe spaces. Importantly, safety should not be understood as an inherent characteristic of the physical environment but as an outcome of relational practices, ethical engagement and participatory methodologies.³⁸ MEG's initiatives – such as the creation of informal meeting environments, language-based social interaction and community-led clubs – have fostered conditions that enable participants to experience recognition, belonging and continuity despite displacement. These findings align with scholarship emphasising that museums can create affective and supportive environments by facilitating storytelling, shared experience and mutual learning.³⁹

At the same time, the case study confirms that safe-space practices emerge through negotiation rather than institutional declaration. The success of the relocated Vchasno activities depended on collaboration with community facilitators and continuity of social networks, illustrating that safety and trust are relational processes shaped by ongoing engagement and institutional reflexivity.⁴⁰ This observation reinforces critiques of idealised notions of safe space, suggesting instead that museums can create “safer” environments through inclusive structures and attentive care practices.

From a broader perspective, migration museums appear particularly suited to this relational and care-oriented role. Their thematic focus on mobility, identity and belonging positions them as contact zones where diverse social experiences intersect and where narratives of migration can be negotiated collectively.⁴¹ The case of MEG illustrates that when museums embrace participatory and community-driven approaches, they can contribute not only to cultural interpretation but also to social cohesion and integration processes.

In conclusion, analysing migration museums through the dual lenses of relational museology and safe-space theory provides a productive framework for understanding their role in contemporary migration contexts. The example of the Emigration Museum in Gdynia suggests that cultural institutions can complement – and in certain crisis conditions temporarily replace – other social actors by offering stable infrastructures, participatory environments, and ethically grounded spaces of care. Rather than functioning solely as sites of representation, migration museums may therefore operate as active social agents that foster inclusion, sustain communities, and support people with migration experience in rebuilding social connections within host societies.

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³⁷ DODD, SANDELL, *Including Museums...*; SILVERMAN, Lois H. *The Social Work of Museums*. London: Routledge, 2010.

³⁸ BOERSMA, The Museum as...

³⁹ MUNRO, Recognising museums'...

⁴⁰ BOERSMA, The Museum as...

⁴¹ SUTHERLAND, Leaving and longing...

- BODO, Simona, GIBBS, Kirsten, SANI, Margherita. (2009). Introduction. In: BODO, Simona, GIBBS, Kirsten, SANI, Margherita (eds) *Museums as places for intercultural dialogue: Selected practices from Europe*. MAP, pp. 6–7.
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The National Museum of the United States Army: Tradition and Modernity in the Presentation of Historical Military Collections in the Context of Shaping National Identity and Protecting Historical Memory

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The National Museum of the United States Army: Tradition and Modernity in the Presentation of Historical Military Collections in the Context of Shaping National Identity and Protecting Historical Memory

This article critically analyses the mission, governance, exhibition strategies and security model of the National Museum of the United States Army (NMUSA), focusing on the institution's role in shaping national identity and managing historical memory. The study draws on a March 2026 study visit, participant observation, semi-structured expert interviews and institutional and legal documents. The museum's official statements and staff accounts are treated as empirical material requiring interpretation rather than as neutral descriptions of reality. Using Laurajane Smith's concept of authorised heritage discourse, Tony Bennett's analysis of the museum as an apparatus of cultural governance, Sharon Macdonald's concept of difficult heritage and Robert N. Bellah's theory of civil religion, the article examines how NMUSA legitimises the US Army through narrative selection, inclusive representation, institutional authority and emotional experience. The analysis finds that the museum makes previously marginalised soldiers visible but generally incorporates histories of segregation, discrimination, Japanese American internment and colonial violence into a reconciliatory narrative of loyalty, reform and national unity. Its immersive and multisensory technologies can increase accessibility and engagement, but they also create conditions for identification with the soldier's perspective, the gamification of military action and the marginalisation of civilian suffering and political responsibility.

Keywords: National Museum of the United States Army; critical museology; authorised heritage discourse; difficult heritage; security; immersive technologies; national identity

Introduction

Military museums have never been merely neutral repositories of weapons, uniforms, documents and personal memorabilia. From their nineteenth-century origins, they have selected, ordered and interpreted the past in ways that have supported particular political communities. The Heeresgeschichtliches Museum in Vienna, for example, established in 1856, developed within a dynastic and monarchical framework. Its collections and displays helped legitimise the Habsburg state by emphasising loyalty to the emperor, continuity of military tradition and the integrative role of the army in a multinational empire.¹ The Musée de l'Armée in Paris, established in 1905, performed a different but equally political function. Created in the context of the Third Republic, it linked military history to republican patriotism, national recovery after the Franco-Prussian War and the construction of civic unity. The contrast between these museums demonstrates that military collections may serve different regimes, but they do not cease to participate in the production of political legitimacy.²

Since the 1970s, military museums have increasingly emphasised education, contextualisation, social history and visitor participation. Displays once addressed primarily to specialists have been replaced by interpretive environments that seek to explain the relationship between armed forces and society. Weapons and uniforms remain important, but they are increasingly embedded in accounts of political decision-making, everyday life, technological change, gender, race and the experience of combat. This transformation should not, however, be interpreted as the disappearance of ideology. It is more accurately understood as a change in the techniques through which museums produce authority, emotional identification and a sense of belonging.³

In the United States, the public memory of war was long organised around monuments, national cemeteries, battlefield parks and memorial landscapes. Arlington National Cemetery and Gettysburg National Military Park are prominent examples of institutions that connect military sacrifice with national history. During the twentieth century, separate museums devoted to particular branches of the armed forces and specific conflicts expanded considerably. The National Museum of the United States Army (NMUSA), opened to the public in 2020 at Fort Belvoir in Virginia, represents a culmination of this process. It presents the history of the US Army through artifacts, personal stories, educational programmes and extensive digital and immersive media.⁴

The NMUSA is a particularly important case for critical museology because it combines several characteristics that are often considered signs of a contemporary and socially responsive museum: attention to diverse groups, interactive learning, personal testimony, visitor-oriented interpretation and multisensory technologies. At the same time, it is institutionally embedded within the US Army and the Department of Defense. This dual position raises the central

¹ See: MCISAAC, P. M. Preserving the Bloody Remains: Legacies of Violence in Austria's Heeresgeschichtliches Museum. In: *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur Neueren Germanistik*, 2011; BIEDERMANN, B. Collecting and Exhibiting "Austria": A Museological Perspective on Collections from the House of Habsburg to a "House of Austrian History". In: *Journal of the History of Collections*, 30(1), 2018, pp. 153–166.

² MUSÉE DE L'ARMÉE. *Histoire du Musée de l'Armée*. Paris: 2015, pp. 9–18; CHARLE, C. *La République des universitaires 1870–1940*. Paris: Seuil, 2018, pp. 112–118; MUSÉE DE L'ARMÉE. *Histoire du Musée de l'Armée*. Paris: 2015, pp. 9–18; CHARLE, C. *La République des universitaires 1870–1940*. Paris: Seuil, 2018, pp. 112–118.

³ Interview with Olivier Stein, curator of the exhibition of the Bavarian Army Museum in Ingolstadt [obtained on March 2, 2026].

⁴ In the United States, most military museums established after World War II are in areas where the most significant historical events took place. Interview with Tad Schnauffer II, PhD, Strategy and Research Manager at the University of South Florida's Global and National Security Institute [obtained on September 24, 2025].

problem of the article: whether an inclusive and technologically advanced military museum becomes a space of genuinely critical reflection, or whether inclusion and immersion constitute updated methods of legitimising the military institution and the state narratives associated with it.

Research Objective and Questions

The objective of this article is to examine the NMUSA as an institution of public memory. The museum's mission, governance, educational programming, volunteer participation, security arrangements and exhibition technologies are analysed as interconnected mechanisms through which historical authority is produced and the contemporary US Army is presented to the public.

The study addresses four research questions. First, through which selections, omissions, narrative sequences and institutional voices does the NMUSA construct an authorised and state-sanctioned account of US Army history? Second, does the inclusion of African American, Japanese American, Latino and Native American soldiers constitute a sustained confrontation with segregation, internment, discrimination and colonial violence, or does it incorporate these histories into a reconciliatory narrative of patriotic service? Third, how do simulation, virtual and augmented media, three-dimensional visualisation and multisensory design organise visitors' attention and emotional identification, and under what conditions might they gamify or trivialise war and suffering? Fourth, how do Army governance, Department of Defense employment, public funding, veteran volunteering, collection management and security practices reinforce the authority of the museum's narrative?

The article argues that the NMUSA combines genuine educational and commemorative functions with ideological and nation-building work. Its contemporary character does not remove the political function historically associated with military museums. Instead, it changes the language and techniques of legitimation: overt dynastic or elite-centred glorification is replaced by narratives of social diversity, equality, individual testimony, institutional reform, service, sacrifice and shared civic belonging.

Theoretical Framework: Heritage, Power, Difficult Memory and Civil Religion

Research on national museums has repeatedly demonstrated that such institutions are active participants in nation-building processes. Studies by Peter Aronsson and Gabriella Elgenius describe national museums as strategic symbols through which states mobilise history, legitimacy, continuity and collective identity.⁵ Fiona McLean and Annie E. Coombes similarly argue that museums do not merely reflect pre-existing identities. Rather, they participate in defining the boundaries of national belonging, identifying foundational events, legitimising particular historical narratives and determining which social differences are made visible or marginalised.⁶

A central concept within this theoretical framework is Laurajane Smith's authorised heritage discourse. Smith emphasises that heritage should not be understood as a passive collection of objects inherited from the past, but as a cultural and political process through which institutions

⁵ ELGENIUS, G.; ARONSSON, P. (eds). *National Museums and Nation-Building in Europe 1750–2010: Mobilization and Legitimacy, Continuity and Change*. London–New York: Routledge, 2015.

⁶ McLEAN, Fiona. Museums and the Construction of National Identity: A Review. In: *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 1998, no. 3(4), pp. 244–252; COOMBES, A. E. Museums and the Formation of National and Cultural Identities. In: *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, ed. D. Preziosi; C. Farago. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004.

define what is valuable, authentic, representative and nationally significant. Authorised heritage discourse privileges particular experts, institutions, material objects and interpretive traditions, while presenting the resulting selections as natural, consensual or self-evident. This perspective shifts analytical attention away from the question of whether institutional narratives are simply true or false and toward the mechanisms through which specific interpretations of the past acquire authority. Such mechanisms may include the selection of exemplary historical figures, the sequencing of events, the use of official terminology, the privileging of institutional voices, the treatment of historical injustice and the emotional organisation of the visitor's experience.⁷

On the other hand, Tony Bennett's concept of the exhibitionary complex provides a complementary perspective. Bennett interprets museums as institutions of cultural governance that educate and regulate citizens by arranging objects, bodies, knowledge and modes of observation within a publicly accessible order. Museum power is not exercised solely through explicit political statements. It is also embedded in spatial organisation, exhibition design, classification systems, interpretive language and prescribed patterns of visitor behaviour. In this sense, museums produce disciplined ways of seeing. They encourage visitors to observe history from particular positions, recognise selected social virtues and understand themselves as members of a broader political and moral community. Architecture, ceremonial language, institutional testimony, security practices and interactive technologies may therefore contribute to the normalisation of particular institutions, values and political arrangements.⁸

Moreover, Sharon Macdonald's work on difficult heritage offers a framework for assessing how museums address histories that disrupt celebratory national narratives. Difficult heritage refers to pasts that are socially and politically troubling because they implicate a community, institution or state in violence, exclusion, discrimination or wrongdoing. Such histories cannot be evaluated solely by determining whether they are included in an exhibition. The more important analytical question concerns how they are framed. They may be presented as unresolved structural problems, morally disruptive events, isolated historical deviations or obstacles that have allegedly been overcome through reform and national progress. A museum may therefore acknowledge segregation, persecution, displacement or internment while simultaneously reducing their critical force by incorporating them into a reassuring narrative of reconciliation, inclusion and institutional improvement.⁹

Robert N. Bellah's concept of civil religion helps explain the symbolic vocabulary through which museums may connect diverse historical experiences to a unified national narrative. Civil religion is not equivalent to a particular religious denomination or formal theology. It is a public system of meanings, rituals, exemplary figures, collective memories and moral values through which the nation is represented as a community of sacrifice, obligation and historical destiny. Within museums devoted to political, military or national history, concepts such as service, honour, duty, courage, loyalty and sacrifice may function as civic-sacred categories. They provide a symbolic language through which social diversity can be incorporated into a shared national story without relying on explicit theological claims.¹⁰

⁷ SMITH, L. *The Uses of Heritage*. London–New York: Routledge, 2006.

⁸ BENNETT, Tony. *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. London–New York: Routledge, 1995.

⁹ MACDONALD, Sharon. *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond*. London–New York: Routledge, 2009; SMITH, L. *Uses of Heritage*. London–New York: Routledge, 2007.

¹⁰ BELLAH, R. N. Civil Religion in America. In: *Daedalus*, 117(3), 1988, pp. 97–118. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20025171>.

The representation of minority groups may have a particularly ambivalent role within such narratives. On the one hand, the inclusion of previously marginalised actors may correct their exclusion from public memory and expand the recognised boundaries of national history. On the other hand, their experiences may be incorporated primarily through examples of loyalty, service, heroism and sacrifice. In such cases, inclusion can simultaneously reinforce a civil-religious narrative in which commitment to the state becomes the principal measure of political belonging. The recognition of diversity does not therefore automatically produce a critical or pluralistic interpretation of the past. It may also provide a more inclusive language for legitimising an existing national order.¹¹

Taken together, these approaches establish the central critical premise of the study: museums should not be assessed against an unrealistic ideal of political neutrality. They should instead be analysed as institutions that select, order, authorise, spatially organise and emotionally mediate the past. The principal question is therefore not whether a museum possesses an ideological dimension, but how its ideological work is performed. This requires examining which voices are granted authority, which contradictions are exposed or contained, which forms of violence are contextualised or depoliticised and whether visitors are provided with interpretive resources that enable them to question the institutions, values and historical narratives represented in the exhibition.

Research Methodology and Limitations

The article is based on a qualitative critical case study of the NMUSA. Empirical material was collected during a study visit to the Washington, DC area in March 2026 and included participant observation of permanent galleries and educational spaces, semi-structured expert interviews and analysis of institutional materials and legal acts regulating the museum's organisation and operation. Interviews were conducted with museum employees and associates, including representatives of communications and visitor services, as well as volunteers who were US Army veterans. Topics included governance, volunteer work, collection management, security, educational strategies, visitor engagement and multimedia installations. Comparative interviews with representatives of European military museums, including Olivier Stein of the Bavarian Army Museum in Ingolstadt, were used to contextualise rather than rank the institutions.

The analytical procedure combined thematic coding with critical discourse and exhibition analysis. Field notes, interview statements, institutional documents, spatial sequencing, labels, selected objects, personal stories and interactive installations were examined using the five categories defined above. Particular attention was paid to discrepancies between declared aims – such as inclusion, education, pluralism and reflection – and the narrative effects produced by selection, juxtaposition, omission, emotional framing and the assignment of visitor roles.

Triangulation was used to prevent the museum's official narrative from becoming the article's analytical conclusion. Institutional claims were compared with observable exhibition choices and with historically conflictual contexts, including Army segregation, the incarceration of Japanese Americans, persistent racial discrimination and federal policies toward Indigenous peoples. Staff and volunteer testimony was used to reconstruct organisational practice and institutional self-understanding, not to verify the museum's neutrality or inclusiveness.

Institutional context formed a separate level of analysis. The fact that staff members are civilians rather than active-duty soldiers was considered alongside their formal employment

¹¹ Ibidem.

within the Department of Defense, the role of the US Army Center of Military History, Army budget funding, and the participation of trained veteran volunteers. Civilian employment was therefore not treated as proof of institutional independence. It was interpreted as one component of a professionalised system through which the Army manages its historical representation without requiring uniformed personnel to perform every curatorial or visitor-facing function.

The study has several limitations. It is based on one intensive visit rather than repeated longitudinal observation, and it does not include a representative visitor survey, reception interviews, eye-tracking or experimental measurement of the effects of immersive media. It also does not provide a complete quantitative content analysis of every label, artifact and digital installation. Claims about audience effects are therefore formulated as interpretations of the positions and emotional possibilities created by exhibition design, not as proof that all visitors respond identically. The conclusions concern dominant institutional patterns observed during the visit and should remain open to verification through future audience research and comparative analysis.

Literature Review

In Europe, the issue of the relationship between museums, collective memory and national identity is primarily explored within the fields of heritage studies, memory studies and critical museology. Among the most important works in this area are: *National Museums and Nation-building in Europe 1750–2010: Mobilization and Legitimacy, Continuity and Change*,¹² edited by G. Elgenius and P. Aronsson, in which national museums are analysed as strategic national symbols and tools of nation-building; and an article by F. McLean, *Museums and the Construction of National Identity: A Review*,¹³ portraying museums as active participants in the negotiation of identity-related meanings. Also of significant importance is A. E. Coombes's study *Museums and the Formation of National and Cultural Identities*,¹⁴ which demonstrates that the politicisation of museums and their incorporation into the project of national homogenisation has deep historical roots.

In Central Europe, the relationship between museums and the shaping of national identity and collective memory is a significant area of research, particularly in relation to the political transition following 1989. These issues are addressed by authors such as A. Ziębińska-Witek, who analyses the process of “musealising communism” as a tool for constructing national identity through the selective interpretation of the past and the creation of heroic and sacrificial narratives.¹⁵ Other authors who have addressed the issue of the role of museums in shaping

¹² ELGENIUS, G.; ARONSSON, P. (eds). *National Museums and Nation-Building in Europe 1750–2010: Mobilization and Legitimacy, Continuity and Change*. London–New York: Routledge, 2015.

¹³ McLEAN, Fiona. *Museums and the Construction of National Identity: A Review*. In: *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 1998, no. 3(4), pp. 244–252.

¹⁴ COOMBES, A. E. *Museums and the Formation of National and Cultural Identities*. In: *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, ed. D. Preziosi; C. Farago. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004; COOMBES, A. E. *Museums and the Formation of National and Cultural Identities*. In: *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, ed. D. Preziosi; C. Farago. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004.

¹⁵ ZIĘBIŃSKA-WITEK, A. *Musealisation of Communism, or How to Create National Identity in Historical Museums*. In: *Muzeológia a Kultúrne Dedičstvo*, 2020, no. 8(4), pp. 59–72.

national identity include P. Tišliar, V. Kolaříková, and A. Bitušíková.¹⁶

In the United States, the discussion on the role of museums in shaping national identity is further developed in a volume edited by P. Hamilton and J. B. Gardner,¹⁷ which situates museums within the broader context of debates over memory, representation, and the state's role in managing the past. Another important work is J. B. Gardner's book entitled *Contested Terrain: History, Museums, and the Public*,¹⁸ depicting the museum as a forum for public conflict over the interpretation of history. In a similar vein is I. Karp and S. D. Lavine's (eds.) *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*,¹⁹ which analyses the political dimension of museum exhibition.

From Dynastic Collections to Contemporary Military Memory

The history of military museums illustrates continuity within change. Nineteenth-century institutions often legitimised ruling dynasties, officer elites and established political orders. Twentieth-century republican and national museums broadened the social basis of military memory, especially after mass warfare transformed soldiers into representatives of the nation as a whole. In the United States, museums connected to military academies and service branches developed from the nineteenth century onward, including collections at the US Naval Academy and West Point. During the twentieth century, branch museums and conflict-specific institutions expanded, eventually creating a dense national landscape of military remembrance.

The most significant transformation at the turn of the twenty-first century was not simply an increase in the number of institutions, but a change in exhibition practice. Static arrangements of objects were supplemented by personal narratives, reconstructed environments, digital interfaces, simulations and experiential learning. These methods broadened access and made complex collections intelligible to non-specialist audiences. Yet the movement from object-centred to experience-centred presentation also increased the museum's ability to organise emotion and identification. Contemporary military museums can therefore exercise ideological influence without relying on explicit slogans or heroic portraits of political elites.²⁰

The NMUSA embodies this transformation. It presents itself as a national institution capable of connecting the history of the Army with the experiences of ordinary soldiers and diverse communities. Its narrative authority derives partly from the scale of its collections and partly from its direct relationship to the US Army. The museum's modernity lies less in abandoning national ideology than in presenting national belonging through the language of participation: the visitor is invited not merely to view the Army's history, but to encounter, simulate and emotionally inhabit selected aspects of it.

¹⁶ TIŠLIAR, P. Museology as a University Subject in Slovakia: History, Program and Course Design. In: *European Journal of Contemporary Education*, 2017, 6(1), pp. 159–166; BITUŠÍKOVÁ, A. Kultúrne dedičstvo a globalizácia: Príbeh jednej lokality UNESCO. In: *Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo*, 2014, 2(1), pp. 9–18; KOLAŘÍKOVÁ, V. National Identity in the Exhibition of the Silesian Museum: A Case Study Based on the Methodology of Dispositive Analysis. In: *Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo*, 2024, 12(1), pp. 5–27.

¹⁷ HAMILTON, P; GARDNER, J. B. (eds). *The Oxford Handbook of Public History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

¹⁸ GARDNER, J. B. *Contested Terrain: History, Museums, and the Public*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001.

¹⁹ KARP, I; LAVINE, S. D. (eds). *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2019.

²⁰ MACDONALD, S. *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today*. London–New York: Routledge, 2013, pp. 134–140.

Founding, Governance, and Institutional Authority

The NMUSA was created through cooperation between the US Army and the Army Historical Foundation, a nonprofit organisation involved in fundraising and promotion. Successive Secretaries of the Army supported the project during planning, construction and opening, while bipartisan political backing reflected a broader consensus that the public presentation of military history serves educational and patriotic purposes. The location at Fort Belvoir, close to Washington, DC, the Pentagon and major federal institutions, does not merely provide convenient access; it situates the museum within the symbolic and organisational geography of the military state.²¹

This institutional connection is decisive for interpretation. The NMUSA is not an autonomous civic museum that happens to collect military objects. It is an official national museum created within the organisational environment of the US Army, managed through Army historical structures and funded primarily from the military budget. Its location, governance, collection management, funding and declared mission give it privileged authority to define the Army's past and public meaning. In Smith's terms, the museum is a state-backed producer of authorised heritage; in Bennett's terms, it forms part of an exhibitionary apparatus through which military service is normalised as a legitimate, moral and nationally integrative institution.

According to information obtained during the study visit, the museum employs approximately forty-five full-time staff members. These employees are civilians within the Department of Defense rather than active-duty soldiers. This distinction is operationally relevant, but it should not be mistaken for institutional autonomy. Civilian staffing may reduce the direct presence of military command in everyday visitor services, yet the museum remains embedded in the Department of the Army and is overseen within the wider system of Army historical institutions. The absence of uniformed personnel from curatorial positions therefore changes the mode of administration rather than removing the museum from military governance.

The US Army Center of Military History manages the collection and supervises exhibition standards across Army museums. Centralisation supports conservation, consistency and professional standards, but it also places interpretive authority close to the institution whose history and legitimacy are at stake. The resulting narrative should therefore be read as an official and professionally mediated self-representation of the Army, not as an external adjudication of contested military history.

A volunteer corps of approximately three hundred people also plays a major role in the museum's operations. Interviewees estimated that around eighty percent are former Army personnel, many with long service records and experience of the Vietnam War or the First Gulf War. Veteran volunteering has important educational and community functions. It allows former soldiers to maintain a relationship with the institution and gives visitors access to personal testimony. At the same time, veterans constitute an interpretive community whose authority is grounded in lived experience and service. Their presence can humanise the narrative, but it can also reinforce identification with the Army's institutional perspective. Personal memory is not

²¹ KENNICOTT, P. (November 12, 2020). 'Trump Has Tried to Coopt the Army: This New Museum Shows Why That Won't Be Easy. In: *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/national-army-museum-opens-fort-belvoir/2020/11/11/cd07ea06-2442-11eb952e-0c475972cfc0_story.html

automatically identical with official memory, yet within the museum it is selected, trained and organised through institutional procedures.²²

Volunteer recruitment takes place through the museum's channels and veterans' organisations. Training introduces volunteers to exhibition content, operating rules, visitor interaction and institutional procedures. Scheduling is coordinated through a museum application. These practices demonstrate that testimony and interpersonal interpretation are not spontaneous additions to the museum; they are incorporated into its managed communication system.²³

According to museum representatives interviewed during the visit, the institution's total holdings comprise approximately 600,000 items, while selected objects are displayed in publicly accessible galleries. The scale of the collection supports the NMUSA's claim to national comprehensiveness. Donations from soldiers, veterans and private individuals expand the holdings while linking the museum to communities that regard the Army as a central part of personal and family history. Donor recognition and annual events also create a social infrastructure around the museum. These activities are not merely financial mechanisms; they cultivate a constituency that participates in preserving and endorsing the institution's narrative.²⁴



Fig. 1: The “Global War” gallery dedicated to World War II. Source: personal collection.

The Experiential Learning Center provides structured educational activities for children and families. Sessions are conducted by qualified museum staff and use interactive materials to introduce military history through problem-solving and participation. Such programmes increase accessibility and can encourage collaborative learning. From a critical perspective, however, educational innovation must be evaluated together with the historical questions it permits or excludes. Participation becomes analytically meaningful when it enables visitors

²² The National Museum of the United States Army. Volunteer Program, <https://www.thenmusa.org/get-involved/volunteer>; Army Historical Foundation. Volunteer Opportunities at the National Museum of the United States Army, <https://armyhistory.org>; Army Museum Opens Near Washington. *Stars and Stripes*, November 11, 2020, <https://www.stripes.com/news/us/army-museum-opens-near-washington-1.651673>; RUANE, M. E. The National Museum of the United States Army Opens at Fort Belvoir. *The Washington Post*, November 11, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/the-national-museum-of-the-us-army-opens/2020/11/11/>.

²³ Interview with Elizabeth C. Pietrafesa, Assistant Visitor Services Coordinator, National Museum of the United States Army, Fort Belvoir, [obtained on March 17, 2026].

²⁴ Interview with a retired marine master sergeant, Ron Malczewsky, volunteer/exhibition docent at the National Museum of the United States Army, Fort Belvoir [obtained on March 17, 2026]; The National Museum of the United States Army, <https://www.thenmusa.org/>.

to examine competing perspectives, institutional responsibility and the consequences of war, rather than only to master tasks associated with military action.²⁵

Security and the Performance of State Authority

The NMUSA is protected by an integrated physical and electronic security system. Information gathered during the study visit indicated the use of surveillance, intrusion alarms, controlled access to restricted areas, protective display cases, entrance screening and coordination among museum guards, military police and local law-enforcement services. The facility's security model is understandable given the value of the collections, the symbolic importance of the institution and its location within a military environment.

Security is not the primary subject of the exhibition analysis, but it forms part of the museum's public meaning. The controlled entrance, visible screening procedures and institutional protection distinguish the museum from an ordinary cultural venue and situate it within the security architecture of the state. In Bennett's terms, the museum's authority is communicated not only through labels and objects but through the organisation of space and conduct. Visitors enter a carefully regulated environment in which the Army appears simultaneously as the subject of history and the guarantor of order.

The museum is funded primarily through the US Army budget, supplemented by public grants and private donations. This funding model directly contradicts any interpretation of the NMUSA as ideologically detached from the state or the armed forces. Veteran and donor participation broadens its social base, but does not neutralise its official character. Instead, state funding, military governance, philanthropy and commemorative community-building combine to produce multiple and mutually reinforcing sources of legitimacy: federal authority, professional expertise, personal military experience and voluntary civic support.

Immersive Technologies: Education, Affect and Critical Distance



Fig. 2: *A hybrid exhibition combining a cylindrical projection screen with physical exhibits.* Source: personal collection.

The NMUSA uses a consolidated repertoire of digital and interactive techniques: multimedia interfaces, three-dimensional visualisation, audiovisual environments, vehicle simulators and virtual, augmented or multisensory forms of experience. During the March 2026 visit, interviewees also described planned installations incorporating movement and environmental effects such as wind, water and scent. Listing these devices is not analytically

sufficient. The relevant issue is how they distribute attention, define the visitor's role and mediate the ethical and political meaning of warfare.

²⁵ Interview with Susan L. Smullen, Public Affairs Officer, National Museum of the United States Army, Fort Belvoir, [obtained on March 16, 2026] and authors' field observation, Experiential Learning Center, The National Museum of the United States Army, Fort Belvoir, March 17, 2026.

The use of modern technology does not automatically mean that a museum teaches history more effectively. Three-dimensional models, digital screens and simulations can make valuable objects easier to access, explain difficult subjects and attract visitors' attention. Their educational value depends, however, on whether they present events in the proper historical context and encourage independent reflection. Immersive technologies allow visitors not only to observe an exhibition but also to take part in a representation of those events. In a simulator, a visitor may take on the role of a soldier, commander or vehicle operator and complete specific tasks. This can be engaging, but it usually presents war from a military perspective. It may leave out political decisions, civilian suffering, destruction, displacement and the long-term consequences of conflict. As a result, visitors may focus more on completing the task successfully than on understanding the causes and consequences of war.

Simulations do not have to be propaganda, and emotional engagement can support historical understanding. The problem begins when participants are rewarded for speed, accuracy or efficient performance. War may then start to resemble a game, while death, suffering and moral dilemmas move into the background. Sound, movement and other sensory effects may also create a strong impression of realism, even though the installation presents only a selected part of the historical reality. For this reason, museums should explain after each simulation whose perspective was presented and what was left out. They should also include the experiences of civilians, opponents and soldiers who questioned official policy. In this way, modern technology would not replace historical reflection but would help visitors understand the complexity of war more fully.



Fig. 3: *Immersive projection integrated with physical artifacts in the museum's narrative environment.* Source: personal collection.

The museum's technological model performs two inseparable functions. It can improve accessibility and produce memorable encounters, while also increasing the institution's capacity to organise affect and identification. Because the NMUSA is an official Army museum, this affective power has political significance: it can make military history appear immediate, technically compelling and personally meaningful while leaving the state's responsibility, contested policy choices and civilian costs less experientially present.

Minority Soldiers, Inclusion and Difficult Heritage

The National Museum of the United States Army gives considerable attention to groups that were marginalised in earlier national and military narratives. These include African Americans, Japanese Americans, Latinos and Native Americans. This is an important change because older accounts of military service focused mainly on the experiences of white male soldiers. However, the mere presence of minority groups in the museum's narrative does not yet amount to a full reckoning with the past. It is also important to examine how their histories are presented and whether the museum addresses the responsibility of state and military institutions for their earlier exclusion and discrimination.

The history of African American military service is presented through, among other examples, the Buffalo Soldiers, the participation of Black soldiers in the world wars, and the 761st Tank Battalion. The exhibition emphasises their courage, combat service and contribution to victory. It also refers to racial segregation and the integration of the armed forces following President Harry S. Truman's decision in 1948. In this way, military history is connected with the struggle for civil rights. This does not necessarily mean, however, that the narrative is fully critical.²⁶

The problem arises when segregation is presented mainly as an obstacle overcome by heroic soldiers. In such an interpretation, institutional racism moves into the background, while the main emphasis is placed on the patriotism and loyalty of Black service members. The narrative proceeds from exclusion, through battlefield success, to later integration. As a result, the Army may be presented primarily as an institution of progress, even though it had previously participated in maintaining segregation. This approach may also understate the scale of discrimination that continued after segregation was formally abolished.

Japanese American soldiers, especially members of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, are presented in a similar way. The museum portrays them as symbols of courage and loyalty while also recalling the forced incarceration of Japanese Americans during the Second World War. Bringing these two experiences together is important, but it may suggest that victims of state injustice had to prove their Americanness through exceptional service and sacrifice. When the central message becomes their loyalty rather than the state's responsibility for incarceration, the injustice is presented mainly as a background to patriotic heroism.

A similar narrative pattern applies to Native Americans, including the Navajo Code Talkers. The museum emphasises their language skills, commitment and importance to the war effort. A critical analysis should also consider dispossession, forced assimilation, boarding schools and state policies aimed at weakening Indigenous languages and cultures. Otherwise, a clear contradiction emerges: the Navajo language is celebrated as a valuable military resource, while the state had long pursued policies that contributed to its suppression.

Moreover, Latino soldiers are also included in the museum's broader narrative of diversity. However, the material collected during the study visit did not allow for such a detailed analysis of their representation as in the cases of African Americans, Japanese Americans or the Navajo Code Talkers. Their presence nevertheless follows a similar pattern: belonging to the national community is confirmed through military service, courage and sacrifice. As a result, the museum creates a more inclusive narrative, but one that is still controlled by a state institution. Minority groups become visible, yet their histories are most often presented through military loyalty,

²⁶ The National Museum of the United States Army. Ruben Rivers, 2026, <https://www.thenmusa.org/biographies/ruben-rivers/>.

heroism and self-sacrifice. On the one hand, this restores public recognition to groups that had previously been overlooked. On the other hand, it may subordinate their experiences to a broader patriotic narrative in which the struggle for justice is overshadowed by demonstrations of loyalty to the state. Inclusion does not therefore necessarily mean the absence of ideology. It may instead represent a contemporary way of expressing it.

Sharon Macdonald's concept of difficult heritage helps explain the difference between simply displaying an uncomfortable history and genuinely confronting it.²⁷ A museum does not address difficult heritage merely by mentioning segregation, incarceration or discrimination. It should also examine institutional responsibility, the lasting consequences of these actions, conflicting memories and the limits of later reforms. At the NMUSA, difficult subjects are present, but they are most often placed within a narrative that moves from exclusion, through heroic service, to integration. This limits their ability to challenge the positive image of the Army.

Laurajane Smith's concept of authorised heritage discourse helps explain how the museum controls the terms under which minority groups are included in official history. Their experiences receive the greatest visibility when they can be presented as examples of loyalty, sacrifice and eventual inclusion in the national community. The Army is therefore shown both as a place of past inequality and as an institution capable of overcoming it. Responsibility for coercion and discrimination is shifted into a past that appears closed and overcome. This does not mean that the presence of minority groups in the museum's narrative is without value. The NMUSA genuinely corrects earlier exclusions and restores public recognition to the service of groups long omitted from official history. At the same time, the museum's narrative often softens the structural nature of these conflicts, presents state injustice as a test of minority patriotism and interprets unresolved problems as evidence of national and military progress.

Secularism and the Civil Religion of Service

Religion is not treated as a separate theme in the NMUSA's exhibitions. References to chaplains, religious practices and spiritual life appear mainly in personal stories connected with particular conflicts. The museum also reflects the religious diversity of the Army and does not present any single faith as the basis of military action. In this sense, the exhibition can be described as secular and pluralistic. However, this does not mean that the museum is free from ideology or symbolic meanings with an almost sacred character. Robert N. Bellah's concept of civil religion is useful here. The museum organises its story of the past around values such as service, sacrifice, honour, courage, duty and loyalty. These values are not linked to one particular church, but they give military history a strong moral dimension. Fallen soldiers, decorated units, veterans' memories and military objects become symbols of shared national values.

The way minority soldiers are presented also strengthens this narrative. African Americans, Japanese Americans, Latinos and Native Americans are shown as evidence that the national community can overcome social divisions. Their service and sacrifice are presented as a confirmation of national unity and of the moral importance of the state and the Army. However, this raises the question of whether the museum also presents them as people who resisted injustice, or mainly as examples of loyalty to the state. The civil religion present in the

²⁷ For a museological application of the related concept of difficult knowledge, particularly in relation to the presentation of war, oppression, discrimination and other socially troubling histories, see TIŠLIAR, P.; JAGOŠOVÁ, L. Difficult Knowledge as an Exhibition Theme in Small Museums: Case Examples from the Czech Republic. In: *Art Inquiry. Recherches sur les arts*, 2024, 26, pp. 83–109.

NMUSA can therefore coexist with religious diversity. It does not depend on the dominance of Christianity because its symbolic language is national and civic. The Army is presented as a community in which differences can be overcome through shared service. This helps explain why the museum's narrative still performs an ideological function, even when it avoids open triumphalism and explicit religious symbolism.

Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that the NMUSA's contemporary features cannot be separated from its ideological function. Professional museology, diverse representation, civilian staff, veteran participation, public education, security and immersive technology together construct an authoritative account in which the Army appears historically central, socially inclusive, technologically competent, morally reformable and indispensable to the national community. These elements do not make the museum a simple propaganda instrument, but neither are they politically neutral.

The authorised heritage discourse operates primarily through selection, sequencing and the unequal distribution of emotional force rather than through complete censorship. Segregation, incarceration, discrimination and colonial violence can be mentioned while their disruptive potential is reduced. Injustice is often positioned before heroic service and subsequent reform; visitors are thus invited to acknowledge wrongdoing without seriously questioning the institution's present legitimacy. The Army becomes the arena in which national contradictions are overcome, even where it participated in creating or enforcing them.

The same logic applies to technology. Immersive media do not merely make exhibitions more attractive. They cultivate bodily and emotional proximity to selected experiences. When the visitor is positioned as a participant in a military task, identification with the soldier can become stronger than reflection on the political system surrounding the task. Without deliberate counter-perspectives, immersion may convert military history into an experience of competence, danger and sacrifice while marginalising civilian vulnerability and contested political judgment.

The museum's institutional structure further supports the narrative. Civilian employment does not remove Army oversight; veteran testimony does not exist outside institutional framing; private donations do not transform the museum into an independent civic forum. Rather, these arrangements diversify the sources of legitimacy available to the institution. The NMUSA speaks simultaneously with the authority of the federal state, professional curatorship, lived military experience, philanthropy and educational innovation.

A more critically engaged exhibition would not require the museum to abandon its commemorative mission. It could preserve recognition of service while making institutional contradictions more visible. Segregation could be presented not only as a condition endured by Black soldiers but as a policy maintained within the armed forces. Japanese American military service could be placed in direct dialogue with the legal and administrative machinery of internment. The story of Navajo Code Talkers could be connected to federal efforts to suppress Indigenous languages. Combat simulations could be accompanied by civilian testimony, political context and structured debriefing. Such measures would transform inclusion from a reconciliatory symbol into a sustained examination of power and responsibility.

Conclusions

The National Museum of the United States Army serves an important educational and commemorative function. However, it is neither a completely independent nor a politically neutral institution. The museum was established at the initiative of the United States Army, operates within the Department of Defense and is funded primarily from the military budget. The way history is presented is influenced by its management model, collection selection, veteran involvement, educational programmes, security system and exhibition organisation. Together, these elements form an official narrative of military history in which the Army is portrayed as one of the most important institutions of the American national community.

The inclusion of African Americans, Japanese Americans, Latinos and Native Americans in the exhibits broadens the existing narrative and restores the memory of previously marginalised groups. Their presence, however, is portrayed primarily through the lens of loyalty, courage, service and sacrifice. The museum mentions racial segregation, forced internment, systemic discrimination and colonial violence, but it typically portrays these phenomena as problems of the past that were gradually overcome by the state and the military. As a result, while suffering and injustice are acknowledged, institutional responsibility and the long-term effects of these events are not presented with the same force.

Immersive technologies, such as simulators, projections and multimedia solutions, have both advantages and limitations. On the one hand, they enhance the appeal of exhibitions, facilitate understanding of events and allow visitors to become more emotionally engaged. On the other hand, they can reduce critical distance and lead audiences to view war primarily from a soldier's perspective. Simulations can also make military operations seem like a game and portray conflict as a technical problem, overlooking its political causes, the suffering of civilians and its long-term social consequences. Therefore, their educational value depends on providing the appropriate context, presenting different points of view and creating space for critical reflection after the experience is over.

The broader conclusion is that contemporary military museums continue to serve an ideological function, but they do so in a different way than in the past. In the past, their message was based primarily on glorifying rulers, the officer elite, victories and war trophies. Today, greater emphasis is placed on diversity, personal stories, interactivity, emotions and highlighting the institution's openness and inclusivity. As a result, the ideological message becomes less direct and, as such, may be more effective. The state narrative is no longer presented exclusively in a solemn and triumphalist manner, but as a personal, engaging and seemingly more humanistic experience. Contemporary military museums, therefore, do not abandon the task of building the legitimacy of the state and the armed forces, but rather use more modern and subtle tools to achieve this.

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“Trauma Objects” and Buildings as War Museums: From the Personal and the Critical to the National and the Heroic

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“Trauma Objects” and Buildings as War Museums: From the Personal and the Critical to the National and the Heroic

This paper examines the interplay between war museums and history from below by analysing initiatives that deal with the civilian communities attacked on October 7 in Israel. The initiatives are based on “trauma objects” and buildings that were damaged in the battles and belonged to members of the community. As leftwing communities that were labelled as “traitors”, the preservation initiatives make use of practices from below that could be assumed to take on a sectorial character that challenges the national–heroic discourse and accuses it of abandonment. Analysing the transgressive crossing from above to below reveals that it does not create a crossing from the national to the personal or from the heroic to the critical. On the contrary, it is precisely the curatorial practices from below that have helped nationalise the narrative, deny rifts and rebuild the consensus. The findings ask about the possibility of avoiding a curation of effacement through actions from below in the representation of war.

Keywords: military museums; material culture; history from above/below; national/personal narrative; heroic/critical

Shaping the historical narrative is an important tool of state power and of the nation. In this context, it is impossible to overstate the national importance ascribed to presenting the historical narrative in war museums.¹ Extensive research literature has dealt with the curatorial practices and representation methods at war museums through which the state often attempts to construct and manage national identity and collective memory, also known as narrative “from above”.² The narrative from above is mediated by war museums through the extensive use of rare and even sacred military material culture³ that facilitates the shaping of a stable, linear and closed narrative that produces national and heroic discourse.⁴ War museums are reluctant to represent a history from below that integrates personal and civilian voices possessing a critical

¹ MOSSE, George L. *Fallen soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1990, ISBN 0195062477.

² WINTER, Jay. In: MUCHITSCH, Wolfgang (ed.). *Does War Belong in Museums?* Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2013, pp. 21–37. ISBN 978-3837623062.

³ WELLINGTON, Jennifer. *Exhibiting War: The Great War, Museums, and Memory in Britain, Canada, and Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2017, ISBN 978-1107135079.

⁴ SOON-WON, Park, DAQING, Yang, and GI-WOOK, Shin. In: SOON-WON, Park, et al. (eds.). *Rethinking Historical Injustice and Reconciliation in Northeast Asia*. New York: Routledge, 2007, pp. 149–169. ISBN: 9780203967041.

agency that might act against the national narrative and evoke an “uncomfortable” history.⁵ This conceptualisation has consolidated a binary formula according to which curatorial practices from below undermine those from above, personal discourse contests the national one, and the critical takes the place of the heroic.

War museums in Israel also tend to mediate history from above through the extensive use of military material culture. As such, they fulfil the much-discussed role of constructing a cohesive national identity.⁶ The history of war from below is heard mostly on the margins of the military museum space, giving voice to the refusenik or the Palestinian “other”.⁷ This tradition will face new challenges after 7 October 2023. The attack, which started at 6:29 am, targeted mostly the civilian communities located near the Israel–Gaza border (also called the “Gaza Envelope”). Communities were invaded, their residents were brutally murdered and kidnapped, and their properties were looted and burned. Most of the communities in the “Gaza Envelope” identify with the Israeli leftwing movement that conducted intensive demonstrations against the rightwing government before the war and was thus labelled by large parts of Israeli society as a “privileged hegemony”, a “fifth wheel” and even as “traitorous”.⁸ After the loss that these communities suffered, two major initiatives conducted by the Israel Antiquities Authority and Yad Ben Zvi Institute were entrusted with collecting, conserving and displaying the personal objects and buildings that were impacted by the attack, in order to preserve the material culture of war. Although these initiatives are acting on behalf of the state, they are characterised by curatorial practices from below: the items gathered possess an everyday life, they have an ordinary and civilian character, giving rise to a mobile and fragmentary display of familiar and distinctly unheroic material culture. This curatorial decision stands in stark contrast to the way war is represented in museums both around the world and in Israel. Thus, one could assume that this approach creates a sectorial display that challenges the national–heroic discourse and points to failures in defending the home front resulting from various sociopolitical interests, such as the intentional abandonment of the “traitors” from the left.

This study examines whether using curatorial practices from below has indeed produced a historical narrative that challenges history from above. Has the personal narrative replaced the national one and challenged the heroic with a critical alternative? By analysing the character of the collections and the narratives presented in the numerous interviews given by directors and employees of the initiatives, this unique material-scape was examined against the backdrop of the binary distinction between history from above/below. In light of the analysis, I argue that crossing the lines from above to below does not necessarily attest to a displacement of the plane of reference from the national to the personal and from the heroic to the critical. Moreover, it is precisely the use of personal history from below that allowed for the expropriation of

⁵ CAIADO, André. The Representation of “Difficult Pasts” in Military Museums: The Portuguese Colonial War in the Portuguese Armed Forces Museums. In: *Museum Worlds*, 10(1), 2022, pp. 61–77. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/tdevorado.240>; JONES, Simon. Making Histories of War. In: KAVANAGH, Gaynor (ed.). *Making histories in museums*. Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1996, pp. 152–162. ISBN: 978-0718500078.

⁶ See, for example, ALMOG, Oz. *The Sabra: The Creation of the New Jew*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

⁷ ODED, Shay. Hamuseonim bechevra ha’arevit beIsrael kamkor lebitui leumi vehamorshet shel ha’ochlusiya hamekomit, Ofkim begeografia [Folklore Memorials and nationalism: Museums and collections in Israel’s Arab society], In: *Horizons in Geography*, 77, 2011, pp. 74–88. [In Hebrew]

⁸ See, for example, KORIEL, Ilana. “Hitlehamot shel shney hatzdadim”: hakaba”t sheyara baavir bechatzarim shoohchar lema’atzar bait. *Ynet*, 25 July 2023, [“Blatantry on Both Sides”: The Officer Who Fired in the Air in the Premises was Released to House Arrest] accessed 5 May 2026, <https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/bj2e47pq3>. [In Hebrew]

the war from the local plane, the denial of sectorial conflicts, the initiation of processes of nationalisation, and the re-establishment of the national consensus. This claim calls for a re-examination of the museal presentation of war from below, and questions the possibility of reshaping the relations between the individual and the state's agents of memory through curatorial practices from below.

Transformations in representing and curating the history of war from above in the military museum

The struggle between history of war from above and history of war from below centres on defining the trustworthiness of the sources of information that feed the historical narrative, and the extent to which they correspond with the complex reality they describe.⁹ The methodological rejection of the definition of “scientific objectivity”, perceived as part and parcel of a specific sociopolitical context, has made it possible to voice views and objects from below. Voices and objects from below are testimonies of “ordinary people/objects” that witnessed the historical event in real-time (in the case of people) from their own subjective point of view. Although voices from below are no less caught up in varying context and agencies, the simultaneous existence of different positions and points of view allows for the democratisation and pluralisation of the historical narrative from above. The historical struggle has found its expression in the representation of war in museums as well. The museum establishment tends to present the history of war from above, as part of the effort to construct a cohesive national identity. The display from above uses rare representations of material culture combined with simulations, visual fabrication, staging, acoustic realism and audio-augmented objects that create a generalised narrative of war.¹⁰ These methods of representing and curating the material culture are usually based on stable, linear and closed narratives that turn the museum into a carrier of national, heroic and patriotic discourse.¹¹

Narratives from below that tell unheroic or controversial stories dealing with defeat and trauma become spaces of struggle¹² and employ practices of repression and amnesia in order to avoid offending patriotic pride and national consensus.¹³ Even when the war museum wishes to represent a picture of the past that causes unease, it is usually toned down so as not to offend the viewers' feelings.¹⁴ Only in states in which the forces of nationalism are weakened and war is a distant memory do war museums tend to focus on historical–technological aspects of military equipment, rather than on its national–heroic aspects.

⁹ WHITE, Hayden. The Value of Narrativity in Representation of Reality. In: *Critical Inquiry*, 7(1), 1980, pp. 5–27. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/448086>.

¹⁰ BEN-AMOS, Avner. The Palmach Museum in Tel Aviv: The Past as a Space of Education, Entertainment and Discipline. In: *Museum History Journal*, 8(2), 2015, pp. 147–167. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1179/1936981615Z.00000000047>; CLIFFE, Laurence. Interfacing with History: Curating with Audio Augmented Objects. In: *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 41(1), 2024, pp. 143–161. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2024.2431899>.

¹¹ HAYMOND, John A. The Muted Voice: The Limitations of Museums and the Depiction of Controversial History. In: *Museums & Society*, 13(4), 2015, pp. 462–468. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29311/mas.v13i4.347>.

¹² CRANE, Susan A. Memory, Distortion and History in the Museum. In: *History and Theory*, 36(4), 1997, pp. 44–63. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/0018-2656.00030>.

¹³ BOWES, Stuart. On Museums, Conflict, and Forgetting: An Immutable Cultural Heritage? In: *Working Papers in the Humanities*, 17, 2022, pp. 45–53. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59860/wph.a589b42>.

¹⁴ CERCLE, Cristian. The Military History Museum in Dresden: Between Forum and Temple. In: *History and Memory*, 30(1), 2018, pp. 3–39. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2979/histmemo.30.1.02>.

A dramatic change in the museal representation of war began with the increasing legitimacy given to voices and objects from below that represented the margins of the battlefield: civilians, women fighters, refugees, antiwar movements and other "others". These war museums have adopted curatorial methods that deconstruct the conception of the museums as a sacred "temple" and create agonistic encounters.¹⁵ Some of them even juxtapose contrasting narratives in order to create a shared transnational story,¹⁶ or decentralise heritage-scapes through performative means that create multilayered knowledge and cultural/historical resistance.¹⁷ Some have even introduced fantasy and fiction as means of confronting the harsh events of war. However, these efforts do not always reach an agreed-upon outcome,¹⁸ and have even been perceived by visitors as propaganda.¹⁹

Transformations in representing and curating the history of war from above in the military museum: the Israeli case

History from above has been the dominant component in linking Israel's wars with its national-Zionist identity. Military history from above began to be undermined only after the First Intifada and the First Lebanon War, and in light of the civil and political crises created by these events.²⁰ However, the challenge to history from above in Israel did not come from below, and barely represented voices from below. The discourse that critiqued history from above was mainly produced by senior historians who worked at leading universities and earned the moniker "The New Historians".²¹ More than representing a struggle from below, these historians represented an intergenerational and interinstitutional struggle between competing elites. A history of war from below, based on personal voices of Jewish civilians and combatants who challenged the history of war from above and the national-heroic narrative it validated, was very seldom heard. These voices were represented only in a handful of initiatives, for example: critical voices of soldiers represented as part of the "Breaking the Silence" project.²²

The marginal presence of any history of war from below is also reflected in the map of war museums in Israel. Israel is saturated with museums dedicated to wars, since the country has been in a state of war almost since its foundation in 1948. Despite being a relatively small country, there are 20 active official war sites and museums in Israel, operated either by the Israeli Defence Force or by various government ministries or associations affiliated with government ministries. The first museal institution in Israel to deal with war and its victims

¹⁵ BULL, Anna C., HANSEN, Hans L., KANSTEINER, Wulf, and PARISH, Nina. War Museums as Agonistic Spaces: Possibilities, Opportunities and Constraints. In: *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 25(6), 2019, pp. 611–625. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2018.1530288>

¹⁶ KRUMEICH, Gerd. Divided Heritage on the Hartmannswillerkopf. In: MARKOVICH, Dalya Y & DATSCH Christiane (eds.). *Shared Heritage Revisited. National and Postnational Dimensions on the Example of Germans, Palestinians and Israelis*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2024, pp. 355–372. ISBN: 978-3-8394-6699-5.

¹⁷ REEVES, Audrey, and HEATH-KELLY, Charlotte. Curating Conflict: Political Violence in Museums, Memorials, and Exhibitions. In: *Critical Military Studies*, 6(3–4), 2020, pp. 243–253. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2020.1797328>

¹⁸ KOHN, Richard H. History and the Culture Wars: The Case of the Smithsonian Institution's Enola Gay Exhibition. In: *Journal of American History*, 82(3), 1995, pp. 1036–1063. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2945111>.

¹⁹ CLARKE, David and WOYCICKA, Zofia. Cultural Diplomacy in the War Museum: The case of the German-Russian Museum Berlin-Karlshorst. In: *History and Memory* 31(2), 2019, pp. 78–116. DOI: 10.2979/histmemo.31.2.0078.

²⁰ RAM, Uri. Zichron vezahut: sotziologiya shel vikuch hahistoryonim beIsrael, Te'oria vebikoret [Memory and identity: Sociology of the historians' debate in Israel], In: *Theory and Criticism* 8, 1996, pp. 9–32. [In Hebrew]

²¹ MORRIS, Benny. The new historiography: Israel confronts its past. In: *Tikkun* 3(6), 1988, pp. 19–23, 99–102.

²² <https://www.shovrimshatika.org/about/organization>

was Yad Vashem, dedicated to the millions of Jews murdered in the Second World War (the Holocaust). Since the foundation of Yad Vashem, there has been a dichotomous distinction between museums dedicated to soldiers and those dedicated to civilians; between those fallen in the state of Israel and those murdered in the Diaspora. Only in exceptional cases are Jewish soldiers who fought in the uniforms of other armies in the Diaspora represented, such as in two veteran museums founded by immigrants from the former USSR who had fought in the Red Army in the Second World War.²³

Most of the war museums narrate a history from above, adopting curatorial methods that seek to assert ownership of the land, to create a Jewish narrative continuum between past and present,²⁴ and to establish intergenerational ideological continuity.²⁵ Changes in the museal representation of war began only after the “great wars” between Israel and the Arab states ended; with some of these states Israel even signed peace agreements or established alliances and cooperations (for example, Egypt, Jordan, the Maronite Christians in Lebanon). When the First Intifada broke out, the Middle East was ignited again – and with it the arena of war museology. The volatile and bloody atmosphere stirred up a renewed struggle over the way war events were presented in the museum, and over the curatorial methods employed. A new kind of war museum dedicated to the struggle between Israel and Palestine started to appear and be updated in “real-time”. One example of this is The Israeli Intelligence and Terrorism Centre in Ramat Hasharon (and its counterpart, Abu Jihad Museum in Palestine). These museums adopted a dynamic approach to curation that provided an active interpretation of current events reported from “the field”. The exhibits (for instance, ammunition taken as booty), methods of representation (for example, photographic documentation of events), and modes of representation (such as simulations of a prison cell or a terrorist tunnel), turned them into arenas of activity in the national struggle between the two groups. These curatorial methods turned the war museums themselves into active “conflict zones”.²⁶ Another kind of museum that started operating in the arena of war museums is the “mini war museum”. These are hosted by civilian museums that do not normally engage with war, and present objects from the civilian quotidian that tell the story of war. One such example is the Egged Bus Museum in Holon, which presents the history of Israel’s bus company. Alongside historical buses, there are special exhibits showing the No. 2094 bus that was attacked at Nehalim Junction, and the burned Coastal Highway bus that was hijacked and blown up with its passengers. Despite these new representational practices that correspond with real-time reality and integrate the real-time reality of war into “regular” museums, these changes kept reinforcing narratives from above. War museums founded after the First Intifada, like those that preceded them,

²³ ROBERMAN, Sveta. From Exclusion to Inclusion: Jewish WWII Soldiers in the Israeli National Narrative. In: *Israel studies*, 14(2), 2009, pp. 50–71. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2979/isr.2009.14.2.50>.

²⁴ AMIT, Gish. “Kibush hayam ha’avri”: Museon hetse’l kbity letfisat hyam be’atos harbizyonisti, Te’oria Vebikoret [“The conquest of the Hebrew sea”: The IZL museum as an expression of the sea’s perception in the revisionist ethos], In: *Theory and Criticism*, 24, 2024, pp. 113–131 [In Hebrew]; BROOD, Offer. The War of Independence Exhibited: A study of Three Israeli Museums. In: *Israel Studies*, 21(1), 2016, pp. 82–108. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2979/israelstudies.21.1.82>. [In Hebrew]

²⁵ FRENKEL ALROY, Tal. Beit Hapalam”ch: goof reshon rabim – polifoniot ketfisha matodologit vecetafisat olam estetit, Te’oria vehistoria [Beit Hapalmach: First person plural. A memorial site as a polyphonic space]. In: *History and Theory*. <https://journal.bezalel.ac.il/archive/3974>. [In Hebrew]

²⁶ MENDEL, Yonatan and STEINBERG, Rose A. The Musicological Side of the Conflict: Israeli Exhibition of Terror and the Palestinian Museum of Prisoners. In: *Museum & Society* 9(3), 2011, pp. 190–213. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29311/mas.v9i3.184>.

have similarly engaged with history as a means to create political justifications and strengthen national cohesion.

Methodology

The study focuses on initiatives led by the Israeli state that seek to document and represent the historical account of the war that took place on 7 October 2023, in the Gaza Envelopes communities. The attack, which started at 6:29 am, was directed at a specific sector in Israeli society: residents of the kibbutzim and rural communities adjacent to the border with the Gaza Strip. The population of the attacked communities was mostly composed of Jews from the Ashkenazi and secular middle class, who traditionally belong to the Israeli left. Some of the residents were prominent peace activists who had taken part in protests against the judicial reforms (called "regime change" by their opponents) led by the rightwing government on the eve of the murderous attack. In light of this, this sector was identified by large parts of the Israeli society as "traitors". Some of the victims' words after 7 October even hinted at a deliberate abandonment of the Gaza Envelope communities, due to their labelling as a distinct identity group that actively opposed the Right's measures and even aspired to topple the government.

The initiatives started operating a number of weeks after the attack. Their activities form part of an integrated move by ministries and government bodies seeking to create a future museal "heritage space" recounting the battles in the Gaza Envelope for future generations. The initiatives collectively fall under the responsibility of the Prime Minister's Office. The two initiatives examined here are operated by the Israel Antiquities Authority and Yad Ben Zvi Institute.

The Israel Antiquities Authority conducted photographic documentation to create 3D simulations of all the buildings damaged in the battles, including private homes, public buildings and a *migunit* (concrete structure erected in public spaces that serves as a mobile shelter). The simulations were created using drones, photogrammetric technology and laser scanning. Creating a 3D model of one structure requires 35,000 pictures taken from every possible angle. To date, the initiative has created models of 500 damaged buildings in some 20 communities. A total of 350 terabytes of data holding around 2 million pictures were collected for this purpose. The simulations will be uploaded to the Web, where they will serve as a virtual museum in which anyone from anywhere in the world will be able to enter the battlefield and walk around it. Some of the reconstructions have already been made accessible to the public, among them the site of the Nova festival in the state it was found after the massacre was carried out.

The initiative operated by Yad Ben Zvi Institute is charged with collecting, documenting and storing all the objects that were damaged in the homes and public buildings in which battles were fought in the civilian communities. The collection of such objects is subject to approval by the surviving families of those murdered. Each item taken out of the houses is given a catalogue number and is recorded in the Eshmor system – heritage collection management software developed for the initiative. So far, the initiative has collected thousands of items. It is still unclear under what museal framework will be applied and how the objects will be presented to the public. What the two initiatives have in common is their engagement with the scene of a war that took place in civilian communities and the desire to go back to the things themselves – to the ways in which the victims were living until the catastrophe struck and to the brutal way in which their daily routine was cut short.

The initiatives were examined using a wide variety of sources. Firstly, public lectures given by the initiatives' directors were attended and documented. Secondly, all the reports on the initiatives and the interviews of the initiatives' directors and workers made by the Israeli written media were collected. This included surveying six newspapers, news websites and magazines during the two-year period in which the initiatives operated (2023/2024). The reports and interviews were written by various authors representing right and left political agendas in Israel: *Haaretz*, *Israel Hayom*, *Davar*, *Calcalist*, *Zman Israel* and *Ynet*. Thirdly, a survey was conducted of the recorded reports produced by Israel's public broadcasting corporation channel: Kan 11. Using critical discourse analysis,²⁷ the narratives of the agents of memory were cross-referenced with the written and filmed narratives and examined by means of a thematic analysis. The analysis identified two discourse shifts: "from the personal to the national" and "from the critical to the heroic". This led to examination of the political-ideological foundations of the initiatives.

Building War Museums from Below: From the Personal to the National

The initiatives are based on the material culture – objects and buildings – that remained in the Gaza Envelope communities after the fierce battles that took place there. The objects and buildings that were damaged in battle serve as central witnesses for the historical account and the display. Giving the power of testimony to a "third party" relies on the assumption that the objects/buildings left on the scene store the echoes of the war. As mentioned, this notion is not new to war museums. Nor is taking items out of their immediate space and context (the communities that turned into battlefields) and moving them to new space and context (the museum) perceived as compromising their role. However, in most war museums the items exhibited are carefully selected. The objects/buildings that find their way into exhibition spaces are rare and generalised military objects/buildings – weapons, helmets, bunkers – which represent the war symbolically and even become sacred. As representatives of the historical narrative from above, the militaristic-national connotation of these objects/buildings is clear. Most objects/buildings were left on the battlefield and will, with the exception of those on display, find their way into the dustbin of history.

The objects and buildings that comprise the future war museum of the Gaza Envelope communities differ fundamentally from the inventory described above. The rare is replaced by the ordinary, the generalised-sacred by everyday life, and the military by the civilian, giving the exhibitions the characteristic of war museums from below.

Firstly, the Antiquities Authority and Yad Ben Zvi people in charge of the conservation process indiscriminately and without sorting record and scan every damaged building and collect and scan every damaged object. They also collected bodily remains, which were handed over to ZAKA (Disaster Victim Identification) for burial according to Jewish tradition.²⁸ Rarity is thus replaced by multiplicity. All the attacked houses were scanned, and the scans catalogued and stored in archives. Objects underwent a process of bureaucratic organisation: logging, description, photography, packing, transporting, and temporary storage. The idea guiding the conservers is that every object/building that was at the battle scene has a story to tell. All of them hold within them the remnants of war. As Dr Nirit Shalev-Khalifa, Director of the Department of Visual History, Documentation and Curation at Yad Ben-Zvi explains, "It can

²⁷ FAIRCLOUGH, N. Critical Discourse Analysis. In: GEE, James Paul & HANDFORD Michael (eds.). *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. New York: Routledge, 2023, pp. 9–20. ISBN: 978-0-203-80906-8.

²⁸ *Davar: With the Help of Archeologists: At Least 18 Victims Defined as Missing have been Identified*, accessed 5 May 2026, <https://www.davar1.co.il/462303/>. [In Hebrew]

be for example a Tami4 filtered water device that was shot or burned and no longer looks like it did before [...] We built and examine each and every object that was damaged."²⁹



Fig. 1: *Destroyed House in Kibbutz Kfar Azza.* Photograph: Dalya Markovich.

Every object and building is defined as an important "slice of life" that constitutes a direct testimony of the war. There is no hierarchy of importance. The multiplicity of objects and buildings paint the "big picture" with as much precision as possible. As Shalev-Khalifa explains: "We try to draw a picture of where everything stood in the house, from a glass that was placed on the table to wall drawings that were there and [are] now burned."³⁰

The same strategy was applied in scanning the buildings. As David Zell, Head of Research, Development and Heritage at the Antiquities Authority and the initiative's executive director, explains, "We produce a digital model with precision down to the millimetre [...] that allows you to produce a 3D model with a texture like an incredibly sharp picture"³¹

The collected objects and buildings, the damaged fragments dredged up from the "field", were turned by the conservationists into a 1:1-scale war map. This is neither a simulation of reality made using rare or unique objects/buildings rescued from the battlefield, nor a simulacrum of reality made by reenacting these rare or unique objects/buildings. The wish to collect everything is the wish to create a complete story that stands against the partiality inherent to any museum or archive.³² However, the multiplicity of voices from below was not meant to create a multiplicity of positions or sectorial identities. Rather, as Nathaniel Isaac, Director General of the Heritage Ministry, puts it, it was meant to show the exhibits as they "were received and collected and photographed in real time"³³ (see Figure 1). As Zell argues, this approach is "Objective and true to the original [being based on] coordinates and with no significant intervention by the documenter"³⁴. The multiplicity, therefore, presumes to represent the past, piece by piece, in "real time" and in an "objective" and apolitical way that

²⁹ RUBINSTEIN, Roy. How Will We Remember 7 October? This is How the State Conducts the Complex Race to Commemorate the Massacre. *Ynet*, accessed 5 May 2026, <https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/hyrxuyfwa>. [In Hebrew]

³⁰ LEVI, Eyal. Shimur hazichron hamar: haproyekt shemetaad et heres 7 beoctover [Preserving the Bitter Memory: The Project Documenting the Destruction of 7 October]. *Israel Hayom*, 7 January 2024, accessed 5 May 2026, <https://www.israelhayom.co.il/news/local/article/15057391>. [In Hebrew]

³¹ *Calcalist*: Heartbreak at 3D: The Huge Documentation Project of the 7 October Massacre, accessed 5 May 2026, <https://www.calcalist.co.il/real-estate/article/r1hifai2a>. [In Hebrew]

³² MBEMBE, Achille. The Power of the Archive and its Limits. In HAMILTON, Carolyn et al. (eds.). *Refiguring the Archive*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2002, pp. 19–27. ISBN: 1402007434.

³³ KAN 11: *So They Cannot Deny: A Glimpse at the Huge Memory Project that will Commemorate the Horrors of 7 October through Advanced Technology*, accessed 5 May 2026, <https://www.kan.org.il/content/kan-news/newstv/p-11894/s1/657742>. [In Hebrew]

³⁴ *Davar*: A Day at Kibbutz Nir Oz with the Team Documenting the Envelope's Ruins, accessed 5 May 2026, <https://www.davar1.co.il/482710/>. [In Hebrew]

strips away the documentation of any characteristics of identity and belonging to a particular group.



Fig. 2: *Objects in a house in Kibbutz Be'eri.* Photograph: Dalya Markovich.

Secondly, the testimonial power of the objects and buildings collected in the initiatives is attributed to their everyday life character. The power of the representation of everyday life allows it to replace the rare-generalised objects and buildings with the common original – “the thing in itself”. Each of the objects/buildings is perceived as an “untouched” capsule of everyday life space/time of all Israelis. Everyday life therefore constitutes a direct expression of the common, which refuses to become a generalised rare or iconic representation. There are no metonymies among the conserved objects and buildings, for example: a bulletproof vest representing an infantry soldier or a concrete block representing a bunker. Ami Shahr, Director of Conservation at the Antiquities Authority, says: “In the end the user will be able to open and see this thing and wander around in it the way it was” (i.e. when it was a “regular” part of Israel).³⁵

In such an interpretive space, in which generalisation is replaced by the desire to capture all everyday life originals and all the ordinary details “as they were”, there is only denotation: the objects and the buildings that were damaged in battle are the common objects and the buildings in which every Israeli lives. Thus, their power does not stem from the symbolism they contain but precisely from the lack of symbolism and from their ordinary character that resembles “all of us” (see Image 2).

If there is any connotation, then it refers to the ultimate Jewish catastrophe: the Holocaust. The Holocaust is described as the event which is experienced and felt when encountering the damaged everyday life objects/buildings. In other words, the ensemble of everyday life objects/buildings represents *the* Jewish catastrophe of all the Jews in Israel and the world. For example, Shimon Elkabetz, father of the late Sivan Elkabetz, who preserved all of Sivan’s belongings in her destroyed apartment at kibbutz Kfar Aza, observes, “Even after the ZAKA people cleaned the atrocities [dismembered bodies and body parts], it’s difficult to look at. During a tour you feel like you’re in Auschwitz.”³⁶

Internet commentators wrote similar words after being exposed to vandalised everyday life objects/buildings. As one commentator wrote: “It feels like items from the Holocaust period, God what has happened to us!! It’s still not registering” (broken heart emoji).³⁷ Everyday life thus breaks through the borders of the community-based historical event into the distant collective past (“Auschwitz”, “The Holocaust”) and common Israeli current life. This is a space that has been diverted from a sectorial status to an ethnic–national one, making it possible to rescue the local and the particular from the attacked categories of “privileged leftist hegemony”, “fifth wheel” and “traitorous” and integrate them into the Jewish people’s continuum of national events.

³⁵ *Zman Israel: Conserving the Catastrophe: The Antiquities Authority Documents the Destruction in the Gaza Envelope*, accessed 5 May 2026, <https://www.zman.co.il/512537/popup>. [In Hebrew]

³⁶ *Calcalist: Heartbreak at 3D: The Huge Documentation Project of the 7 October Massacre*, accessed 5 May 2026, <https://www.calcalist.co.il/real-estate/article/r1hifai2a>. [In Hebrew]

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

Thirdly, objects from civilian areas were collected. The military objects/buildings that typically star in war museums are replaced here by civilian ones drawn from everyday ordinary life (see Figure 3).



Fig. 3: *Objects in a house in Kibbutz Be'eri.*

Photograph: Dalya Markovich.

Through the objects/buildings, the initiatives aim to reconstruct private day-to-day life from below, from the intimacy of the disrupted civilian space. It is an intimacy that exists in the first-person singular, and thus creates a civilian personalisation of the war, expropriating it from the battalions, brigades, divisions, bases, corps and macro-military manoeuvres. The result is the civilian material culture of an area that has become military, and in which there is no representation of the army or of militarism. In other words, it is a display of war articulated through the home and through civilian homeware. However, the narrative created by the civilian picture from below is not separate from the military one. According to Eli Escusido, Director General of the Antiquities Authority, "People will be able to search for every house [...] and see how the Envelope's residents lived before the attack, and what happened in the houses during and after it", i.e., when the area became a military zone.³⁸ The

civilian narrative thus not only overlaps with the military one, but also complements it and the sense of national solidarity it wishes to create.

To sum up, in an unusual curatorial move, the initiatives are gathering material culture from below, with no sorting or selection, and based on all the regular everyday life objects and buildings that were damaged in the civilian area. These practices turn their backs on the material culture that represents the story of war from above, and on the modes of its representation. Ostensibly, by using material culture from below, the war narrative should be displaced onto a more personal level, enabling the surfacing of unique representations and sectorial (ethnic, class and ideological) differences. But in wishing to encompass the whole of reality, the objects and buildings do not seek to create multivocal pluralism. On the contrary, the multiplicity of voices from below does not testify to a multiplicity of positions, identities or social and ideological positionings. The ordinary objects of everyday life and civilian testimonies actually serve to expropriate the event from the personal/communal dimension and reintegrate it in the national narrative in order to strengthen the national consensus. "We are here to document a national memory",³⁹ said a representative of the Antiquities Authority people. Blurring the boundary between the personal and the national and between the civilian and the military turns the entire home and country into one fighting front, restoring the definition of the collective as a nation under attack fighting for its survival. The personal voice from below reestablishes the voices of the agents of national history and heritage precisely by exhibiting the individuals and their private loss.

³⁸ RUBINSTEIN, Roy. How Will We Remember 7 October?...

³⁹ KAN 11: *So They Cannot Deny: A Glimpse at the Huge Memory Project that will Commemorate the Horrors of 7 October through Advanced Technology*, accessed 5 May 2026, <https://www.kan.org.il/content/kan-news/newstv/p-11894/s1/657742>. [In Hebrew]

Building War Museums from Below: From the Critical to the Heroic?

Sites and museums that present the history of war from above usually produce a display characterised by a stable narrative that tells a story linearly and is based on exhibits that embody the heroic and the extraordinary. Stability is achieved by locating the exhibits in a permanent building usually directly affiliated with the landscape and the symbolic space in which the events the museum presumes to describe took place.⁴⁰ At the same time, the space–time experience created by the museum differs from the one that exists in reality. The museum’s collections seek to reflect the reality in light of a certain ideological thesis, and therefore adopt an approach of “methodological unity” that establishes a linear narrative. Even though the linearity functions at times as a transparent working assumption, its importance lies in its ability to create a war story that resonates with heroic solidarity.

The objects and buildings comprising the future war museum of the Gaza Envelope communities generate a fundamentally different composition from that described above. The stable is replaced by the mobile, the linear is replaced by the fragmentary, and the heroic is replaced by the familiar, giving the exhibitions the characteristics of war museums from below.

Firstly, the narrative of war from below created by the initiatives is characterised by a mobility that replaces the stability and permanence typical of displays from above. This mobility stems from extricating the exhibits from their “natural” space of appearance. Once collected from the battlefield, the objects and buildings function as a nomadic arena moving between different storage spaces – containers, warehouses and internet sites – and between varying exhibition arenas – the Web, public spaces, community centres and campuses. The initiatives are, by definition, sites of continuous transplantation. Dispersing historical narratives in different spaces unconnected to the spaces in which the events took place is perceived as hindering the display’s ability to tell a stable and permanent story. The better the historical narrative of the war is embodied in the museum’s curation, structure and location, the greater validity it is perceived as having. It seems, however, that in this case it is the spatial mobility of the historical narrative that creates a unifying narrative power. Presenting the story concurrently in diverse spaces creates pockets of war simultaneously sown in every place/time. The nomadic display is mixed with the “day-to-day” and activates the collective dimension by turning the war narrative into a ubiquitous story, the story of all of us. Furthermore, the exhibits’ mobility also plucks them from being a static representation of an already-finished past and turns them, in their constant movement, into active elements in the present time and for the next generations.⁴¹

Secondly, the war narrative from below created by the initiatives relies on a fragmentary collection of objects and buildings, replacing the linear continuum with a partial and broken one. Fragmentary collections stand in contrast to the urge for cohesion that characterises the curatorial methods of war museums from above. Fragmentariness poses a danger. It might turn the war story into a collection of episodes and anecdotes, hampering the tightness and cohesiveness aspired to by the historical narrative from above. The initiatives are deliberately composed of a collection of fragments, a result of the conditions “on the ground” – mainly the multiple areas damaged in the fierce battles. Collecting the objects/buildings together

⁴⁰ DROZDZEWSKI, Danielle, WATERTON, Emma, and SUMARTOJO, Shanti. Cultural Memory and Identity in the Context of War: Experiential, Place-Based and Political Concerns. In: *International Review of the Red Cross*, 101(1), 2005, pp. 251–272. DOI: 10.1017/S1816383119000110.

⁴¹ HASSON, Nir. Between Pictures and Bicycles: Here are Stored the Fragments of the Lives of the Residents of the Gaza Envelope. *Haaretz*, accessed 5 May <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/2024-04-22/ty-article-magazine/.premium/0000018f-00a8-d64a-a9af-84eb5c7e0000>. [In Hebrew]

constitutes a de-facto narrative dispersion: the wheelbarrow of the late Johnny Siman-Tov from kibbutz Nir Oz; the remains of the doctor's clinic at kibbutz Be'eri; the domestic objects of the residents of Kerem Shalom.⁴² Ostensibly, the multiple contexts of the fragmentary collection disrupt the anonymous-generalised unity that enables an object to be turned into a story, and a story into a symbol. However, the fragmentary character of the collection and display method used by the initiatives does not privatise the war story. The numerous and discontinuous parts do not diminish the authority of the national metanarrative. On the contrary, it is the fragmentariness that makes it possible to silence the context in which the exhibits resided and blur their sectorial affiliation, while constructing "intra-textual" relations between the personal and the national. According to Shalev-Khalifa, the objects "are defined as 'trauma objects', that is, an ordinary and everyday object that has changed following a catastrophe. Once it is on display, it has enormous power. Precisely because it has been extricated from its context."⁴³

The "trauma objects" are not part of a whole; they are *the* whole that has been extricated from the original context and has become the national whole, serving the nation now and in the future. Shalev-Khalifa continues: "In time [the rescued microscopic parts] will serve to commemorate".⁴⁴ And Zell adds: "The models [of the various damaged buildings] can be a virtual museum, a national treasure, which will accompany us for years to come".⁴⁵ And Micha Cohen, founder of the Blue Helmets unit that provides emergency response to sites and heritage assets, who was enlisted for the initiative, claims that the Gaza Envelope residents "have experienced a trauma that we have all experienced. It's us, in the present, not a historical story from the past".⁴⁶

The damaged and distorted and scattered parts – "they" – have turned into "us", the first-person plural, and into a "national treasure" belonging to all of us. The power of the fragmentary collection therefore lies in creating a syntax that is bigger than the sum of its parts. It is a syntax that makes it possible to assemble its exhibited parts not as the closed and sectorial stories of closed and labelled communities, at least by some of the Israeli public. It is a syntax that makes it possible to read the trauma of the Gaza Envelope, through the objects/buildings, as a unifying national event, showing no trace of the rifts and controversies afflicting Israeli society.

Thirdly, the war narrative from below created by the collections presents the familiar. The familiar stands in contrast to the heroic tinge attached to objects/buildings that are usually displayed in war museums from above. Before the war broke out, the objects and buildings exuded what every domestic and civilian environment aspires to: a sense of belonging and security. The war expropriated the houses and the objects from their private context. From the moment they were damaged, taken out of context, and placed in an archive, catalogue, internet site or mobile display, the familiar also began to function as an arena of unease, of the

⁴² Ibidem.

⁴³ ABRAMOV, Eti. "Heritage is Part of Resilience": The Belongings of the Kidnapped and Murdered. *Ynet*, accessed 5 May 2026, <https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/yokra14104268>. [In Hebrew]

⁴⁴ Ibidem.

⁴⁵ Ibidem.

⁴⁶ Ibidem.

uncanny. Shalev-Khalifa says, “In one fell swoop, familiar objects became a material and formal testimony of the enormity of the destruction”.⁴⁷

However, while the visibility of the familiar–ruined creates a display that emphasises the enormity of the destruction, it refrains from creating a narrative of destruction. It is the familiar, which is simultaneously also threatening and alien, that makes it possible to see the everyday–damaged as a representation of heroism. As Cohen observes, “You see the blood on a simple multi-lock door and think ‘Dear God, how do these people carry on?’ How do we carry on?”⁴⁸ Thus, the damaged banality of the objects/buildings, the familiar (“a simple multi-lock door”), starts to take on a meaning that in principle is absent from it – heroism (“how do these people carry on?”). The banality and familiarity which allow each viewer to see in the exhibits their own reflection and the possible collapse of their own daily routine (“how do we carry on?”) also make the object/buildings extraordinary due to their vulnerability, lending them a heroic dimension. The identification creates a double sense of both closeness and distance which deepens the consensus around the familiar–damaged and silences any echoes of the internal social struggles characterising the Israeli society. When identification with the banal is mixed with ascribed qualities of endurance and heroism, it reinforces the national taken-for-granted.⁴⁹ Thus, the mobile, the fragmentary and the familiar – not stored inside museums or visitor centres but dispersed in multiple and nomadic public spaces – turn the civilians into a heroic “army” that unites the nation under its wings and blurs criticism of both communities and the state. As already mentioned, it is the new conditions of appearance of the objects and buildings from below that create a heroic and uniting display which dissolves personal and sectorial voices and calibrates itself with the national history through individuals and their personal loss.

Discussion

War museums serve as important agents of national memory in the modern age. Curatorial practices from above play a major role in shaping the national narrative of war. The reliance of the curation from above on military material culture based on rarefication and generalisation creates museums’ ability to exhibit the war event as an “unmediated” affinity with the past in the spirit of the hegemonic national discourse. In contrast, practices of curation and representation from below that are characterised by regular everyday life and civilian objects and testimonies tend to represent personal and fragmentary voices that can serve to contest the national picture of the past.

Unpredictably, and even though they are operated by the state, the initiatives analysed deviate dramatically from the curatorial practices used in war museums from above, as they are populated with most of the damaged objects/buildings that were gathered from civilians’ daily routines and their characteristics correspond, in the main, with modes of representation from below. Turning most of the objects/buildings, with no sorting or selection, into an inventory of valuable artefacts contests the museum’s tendency to rarify the objects exhibited between its walls; using everyday life objects/buildings undermines the ability to produce a generalised symbolic representation; and gathering solely civilian objects/buildings stands in contrast to the military metanarrative and the bunkers, tanks, airplanes and guns that populate it.

⁴⁷ KEREN, Yoav. The Items Collected from within the Ruins at Kibbutz Be’eri, More than 100 of whose Members were Murdered. *Israel Hayom*, accessed 5 May 2026, <https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/yokra13747114>. [In Hebrew]

⁴⁸ ABRAMOV, Eti. “Heritage is Part of Resilience... [In Hebrew]

⁴⁹ BILLIG, Michael. *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage Publications, 1995. ISBN: 0803975252.

The mobilisation of objects/buildings and their fragmentary and discontinuous dispersal also deviates from the ways war is typically presented to the public from above. A close look at curatorial and representation practices and at the characteristics of the exhibits reveals a picture that undermines the oft-repeated claim that history from below allows for the surfacing of diverse voices, multiple perspectives and even sociopolitical critique. In other words, the passage from above to below does not represent a passage from the national to the personal or from the heroic to the critical. It seems that, on the contrary, the characteristics of display from below contribute to replicating the military national–heroic consensus. Despite national history from above suffering a drop in its public standing in recent decades, as the Israeli public's opposition to the political stasis has grown, the war seems to have brought it back to life.

The exposure of the personal dimension did not create a community-specific narrative but rather acted to synchronise personal experiences with the national narrative and national time, and to redeem the event from being presented as a sectorial trauma (belonging to the "kibbutzniks", the "leftists" the "traitors"). Refraining from dealing with Israel's social tensions and divided party politics was made possible by placing the personal at the centre. This move can be seen as a tactical apoliticality that prevents the personal from functioning as political, and enables a depoliticisation of war that transcends class differences and ideological partisanship. Using the personal, which refers to every man and woman in Israel, enables the denial of the ethnic, class and political elements that characterise the attacked group and that could have been perceived as divisive. This phenomenon deviates from the trends that characterised the public field of commemoration in Israel before the war, indicating that national memory is no longer a symbolic resource that demarcates the boundaries of all ethnic–class–political groups in Israel. In particular, it suggests that the rift in Israeli society allowed hegemonic groups to develop narratives that are no longer based on traditional national "heroism" but rather on a personal loss and trauma that aligns with global post-national discourse.⁵⁰ In contrast to the "traumatic nationalism" notions of significant groups in the Israeli society, the attack on the communities created a narrative of trauma that is displayed as an attack on the Israeli society as a whole and as a national trauma.

The findings raise questions about the possibility of a curatorial action from below that would challenge the consensual picture of the past. The practices employed by the initiatives point to a certain artificiality in the binary distinctions between below/above, personal/national and heroic/critical. They also point to the underlying assumption that a multiplicity of personal voices necessarily embodies a multiplicity of opinions and perspectives and a critique of the conditions that led to the catastrophe and the breakout of the war. In light of this, the ways in which war museums can serve as venues for voices that oppose a "curation of repression" become unclear. A question mark hangs over the ways in which it is possible to enact an autonomy of display against the ideological centralism embodied in solidarity. When practices that strive to democratise display also serve to replicate the taken-for-granted it becomes necessary to re-examine the conditions that enable the presentation of an event outside the boundaries of the consensus. In light of recent events, it may be too early to suggest that post-nationalist tendencies will push war to the back of the collective identity, forcing war museums to deconstruct the patriotic experience and replace it with discourses that seek to

⁵⁰ LOMAKY-FEDER, Edana. Competing Models of Nationalism: An Analysis of Memorial Ceremonies in Schools. In: *Nations and Nationalism*, 17(3), 2011, pp. 581–603. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8129.2011.00492.x>.

stabilise the conditions that establish political calm.⁵¹ The rise of fundamentalism on the one hand and nationalism on the other forces us to think about war as a continuous current event which repeatedly re-emerges and powerfully unsettles liberal Western democracies. As such, it necessitates thinking anew about the modernist configurations – from above or from below – that have characterised the presentation of war in museums, and about novel ways that might operate outside this equation and broaden the representations of war in the current times.

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⁵¹ WHITMARSH, Andrew. “We Will Remember Them”: Memory and Commemoration in War Museums. In: *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies*, 7(5), 2001, pp. 5–11. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/jcms.7013>.

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