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## ПРЕДСТАВЛЯЕМ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ

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### М. Богуниа-Боровска МУЗЕЙ КАК МЕСТО СОЦИАЛЬНЫХ СВЯЗЕЙ. ФАБРИКА ШИНДЛЕРА В КРАКОВЕ И МУЗЕЙ ИСТОРИИ ПОЛЬСКИХ ЕВРЕЕВ ПÓЛИН В ВАРШАВЕ

МУЗЕЙ КАК МЕСТО СОЦИАЛЬНЫХ  
СВЯЗЕЙ. ФАБРИКА ШИНДЛЕРА В КРА-  
КОВЕ И МУЗЕЙ ИСТОРИИ ПОЛЬСКИХ  
ЕВРЕЕВ В ВАРШАВЕ

THE MUSEUM AS A SPACE OF SOCIAL  
RELATIONS. OSKAR SCHINDLER'S  
ENAMEL FACTORY MUSEUM IN CRACOW  
AND POLIN MUSEUM OF THE HISTORY  
OF POLISH JEWS IN WARSAW

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**Abstract.** Museums are ambiguous spaces. On the one hand, they provide some models built on social perceptions, and on the other, they are places open to interpretation. They are relational spaces. Spaces of various types of relations like institutional, interpersonal, international, intergeneration or intercultural relations. They are also places of relations and dialogue, establishing and negotiating meanings. In any event, museums are also, and perhaps above all, stories

about people, events and the effects of their meetings.

The article presents the results of qualitative research devoted to the reception of the museum, which was conducted in two museums – the Museum of Oskar Schindler's Enamel Factory in Krakow and the Museum of the History of Polish Jews POLIN in Warsaw. The project was titled «My way, my choice». Special attention is paid to the imaginative and relational character of the museum space.

**Ключевые слова:** музей, повествовательный музей, музейное пространство, социальные связи

**Keywords:** museum, museum spaces, narrative museum, communication space, social relations

*Contrary to what it seems, buildings do not belong to the world of objects. They are alive, they breathe, they are like human beings. They have bodies and souls.*  
Daniel Libeskind 2008: 11

*The way in which a community remembers its past shows what it would like to be now and in the future.*  
Dariusz Kartowicz 2014: 180

### **What are museum spaces in the modern world?**

Museums as social institutions exist in virtually all societies. The idea of a museum fulfills the human need to gather, store, preserve and present knowledge about mankind's achievements. Museums are places of pride and reflection. They are spaces that cumulate the development of our civilization, culture, technology and art. They are places of social relations. They are places of interpersonal contacts of different generations that did not overlap in time. These generations want to meet and communicate with each other. Museums are places-monuments or places-ideas. They are spaces of freedom and autonomous thinking. Museums are spaces of emotions and reason, feelings and arguments, facts and ideas. They are places of nostalgia or rebellion. They are tools for creating social concepts about the societies' identities. They are open spaces. They are places of making choices. They are tools of power, places to create the vision of what is good and what is bad. Museums tell their stories about people, about societies, about events — about what is important for the identity of a given community. Museums are places of culture and communication.

Museums can be analyzed from numerous perspectives. Generally, they are spaces that hold many meanings. On the one hand, they are certain models based on social

ideas; on the other hand, they are places that are open to interpretation. They are relational spaces — spaces of various types of relations (for example, institutional, interpersonal, international, intergenerational or intercultural relations). They are also places of relations and dialogue, of establishing and negotiating meanings. In all cases, museums are also (or above all) stories about people, events and results of their encounters. For sure they are polysemic, so there might be many ways of interpreting them (especially since their visitors do not have identical knowledge nor identical skills or experience.)

Generally, people tend to have a strong need to preserve knowledge about the past. They want to gain knowledge about the events that are parts of themselves. They want to understand the motives and actions of past generations. They want to compare and confront themselves with what they could not experience in person. From the vast number of events, societies choose the ones that were important and fundamental for the community and the human existence; these events are then immortalized in museum spaces. Above all, museums are places of social concepts. Bronislaw Baczko argues that they can be fixed and expressed in a certain model. “Thanks to social concepts, a community defines its identity; creating its own representation, it defines social roles and positions, it expresses and imposes certain common beliefs, establishing certain patterns.” [Baczko, 1994: 40]. Of course, this process aims at establishing or maintaining social order by defining individual and group identity. “Defining one’s group identity means defining one’s territory and its borders, defining one’s relationships with others, creating images of one’s friends and enemies, of one’s rivals and allies” [Baczko, 1994: 40]. Our thesis here is that museums are social spaces which offer social concepts that are usually expressed in certain models. Museums as models tend to establish or maintain (as Baczko observes) certain social order. Museums help to define and decide one’s group identity, and to define one’s “territory”. Also, they help to define one’s connections and relations with others, to decide who is one’s enemy or friend. In other words, museums as spaces of social concepts are places where people confront their expectations and ideas about given events, characters, relations, phenomena or stories. They are places where our concepts meet other people’s concepts about different worlds. In this sense, museums are above all spaces of social relations.

During the long period of communism in Poland, museum spaces were reserved for events that were accepted by the authorities. Exhibitions were normally aimed at promoting the government’s propaganda, though this was not always successful — as in the case of a 1953 travelling exhibition called “This is America”. By organizing this event, the communist authorities wanted to present the American society and its lifestyle. They meant to expose the banality of American achievements and mock them. Plastic pens, garish T-shirts and erotic gadgets were meant to demonstrate rather primitive interests of Americans and the generally low level of American culture. However, Polish visitors tended to feel wildly enthusiastic about the objects exhibited. This can be an example of how the organizers’ intentions were interpreted in a completely opposite way. Nonetheless, museum spaces were meant to serve the official propaganda. They were tools of power, which did not allow any room for dialogue or interpretations.

Nevertheless, after the fall of communism we experienced the need to tell our story; the need to activate our memory and to show the historical events important to the

Polish nation. This was an enormous gap and a need that was gradually more and more visible in Polish society. There were no museums dedicated to war; no museums dedicated to the history of Poland, no museums dedicated to the Solidarity movement. At some point we realized that there were so many events important to the Polish society in the last decades that we really did need to create some spaces dedicated to them. This was essential also due to the fact that, after the fall of Berlin wall, new historical interpretations appeared both in Europe and around the world. Germany, shaping its historical policy in a very conscious way, started to ascribe the success in abolishing the communism to itself — which in fact started with the Solidarity movement in Poland. In 2000, while the Gdańsk Shipyard stood silent, the end of communist era was celebrated in Berlin. It was definitely high time for Polish society and its politicians to start creating our long-term historical policy consciously. We could not wait inertly and expect everyone to appreciate our role in world history — we had to start acting by ourselves. This was also important for building the identity of Polish society, as well as for propagating the knowledge about historical events. This was the time of pursuing memory. A strong need appeared: the need to deal with a decade-long lack of museums telling about the important events in Poland's history.

### **The Warsaw Uprising Museum — birth of social interest for narrative museums in Poland**

This need started to be slowly catered for. It turned out that the meaning of museum spaces had been noted and appreciated. In the last few years museums in Poland proved to be incredibly popular and frequently visited. This phenomenon seems to have started in 2003, when a group consisting of historians, specialists in the Polish language and culture, philosophers and political scientists (jointly described as “museologists”) accepted the challenge of preparing and building the Warsaw Uprising Museum. The museum was inaugurated on July 31st, 2004 and proved to be an immense success. This event started a new process of creating (both socially and institutionally) various museum spaces. These museum spaces present both older and more modern historical events, usually in a very contemporary, narrative and open form. The opening of Warsaw's first narrative museum triggered the fascination with our past — both the history of Poland and the history of local communities. A movement of reconstructing historical events was born at that time and gained enormous popularity. A scholar analyzing this particular phenomenon argues that “ (...) this movement has an enormous potential of influencing the Poles' knowledge about their history and about the microhistory of the place where they live [Szlendak, 2012: 5]”. The fact that people are keen to participate in this movement opens numerous opportunities for local and higher authorities: “ (...) simultaneously a unique culture business is being built, which brings resources for local communities and cultural institutions [Szlendak, 2012: 5]”. However, in this case, what seems to be more important is the fact that the reconstruction groups are helping to create an “imagined community”. They also help to participate in the culture actively. People developed an appreciation for both local and national history. They started to actively gather knowledge about it. The need to familiarize oneself with the Polish story appeared.

The opening of the Warsaw Uprising Museum triggered the social need for knowledge, truth, openness, discussion and dialogue. For many decades these values were a scarce good in Poland. This museum was the first of its kind in democratic Poland. It intended to present Warsaw insurgents as heroes and to show their heroic role in their fight for freedom, even though the uprising failed. There were different opinions about this approach to the subject, but certainly the museum plays a very special role in building the historical awareness. It was the first such initiative in Poland, and it started the process of opening numerous other narrative spaces in Poland. The opening of the Warsaw Uprising Museum seems to reveal a need that has already existed in the society: the need to create museum spaces that helped to understand above all the WW2 period and also the contemporary history of Poland. The Poles were “hungry” for museums that would tell them their story, especially as there had been a lack of such spaces for so many years. When this “hunger” was discovered, numerous museums were designed and opened. Nowadays we boast a few museums that are essential for shaping the nation’s historical policy. The Museum of the Second World War, the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, the Oskar Schindler’s Enamel Factory Museum, the European Solidarity Centre, the Frederic Chopin Museum, the John Paul II Institute, the Museum of Polish History, the PRL Museum are among the most important ones. They are modern narrative exhibitions where “ (...) the artifact is not the focus, it merely helps to tell a fascinating story about the history. The key factor is the awareness of the authenticity of the place and the objects exhibited there. The power of a narrative museum lies in the fact that it triggers emotions” [Legutko, 2014: 155]. Jan Oldakowski, who directed the Museum of Warsaw Uprising for many years, described such a museum’s recipe for success: “Visitors are here to look for the truth about their history. They want to discover the source in an interesting way: photos, voices, speeches, sounds and even smells of historical streets [Oldakowski, 2014: 155]”.

Narrative museums are interactive and multimedia spaces. They are spaces where the present does not exist for a while. They are spaces where the time freezes in the period of the events that the museum presents. Such museums engage all senses and stimulate the visitor’s imagination. They have to engage and encourage visitors to physically feel “the times gone”. The exhibits have to be hands-on. There has to be a possibility to touch and feel the structure or surface of the objects. A visit to a narrative museum can be compared to a visit to an amusement park for children. By entering a narrative museum, we experience a different world. It enables us to feel the emotions of those days, the feelings that those people experienced, the authenticity of events. Such a museum should be a place to revisit, and its offer should be “varied, attractive for people of all ages and all levels of development. We wanted our visitors to come back over and over again, as they come back to places that they know and like, but they always discover something new in them [Dąbkowska-Cichocka, 2014: 71]”.

The Warsaw Uprising Museum was created in the atmosphere of immense social engagement and interest. It was co-created by many people, in particular by Varsovians and by the participants and witnesses of the uprising who were still alive. All those people played an important role in determining the museum’s concept — a concept that was heavily based on their narration. Prospective visitors wanted to hear

not only about the events, but also about the people: the insurgents, their motives to participate in the uprising, their families, and their lives. The museum's concept encompassed various types of activities, not only the exhibition. Jan Oldakowski, the director of the museum, explained the importance of such a modern museum form: "(...) exhibition is just a part of all activities. It is difficult to imagine a museum without it, but this is an institution of culture that has to trigger emotions or respond to these emotions. We became more authentic by including our other activities, we created the atmosphere, we aroused social energy. Even when there was still no exhibition, you could just drop by, fill in the survey, record your memories, leave a keepsake [Oldakowski, 2014: 130]". Then the director added that "from a certain point of view, we knew that this museum would be inaugurated step by step, and that it would grow together with the people that would tell us things [Oldakowski, 2014: 149]". The idea of a narrative museum is de facto travelling in time, travelling to a different world. In order to understand those times and the decisions that were made back then, one has to enter into a relation with that reality and the people that lived those days. The facts are merely one part of the exhibition; they are not sufficient to fully understand the atmosphere of a historical moment other than the current one and in which we are based. The whole narration takes place in the present time, which helps us to identify ourselves with the events shown.

The idea of a narrative museum and its immense popularity is related also to the issues observed in the new humanist approach, which emphasizes the importance of people who had been earlier ignored by the main current in history. For example, among the victims of the communist system we had the Warsaw insurgents, but also the Jewish community and the "good Germans" who helped the Jews during WW2. In Poland, the lives of these people — victims of official, or conventional, history — were for long decades forgotten and marginalized. They were out of the story about the past. When the concept of the new humanist approach appeared, these people returned and were allowed to tell their stories and their subjective point of view. Thus, the process of rescuing memory and presenting the new vision of the past was started.

The insurgents and people who had participated in the events could tell their own vision of what happened; they also influenced the creation of the museum space. The witnesses who were still alive had a real impact on the way how the uprising was going to be remembered. This process differed from a typical traditional model of scientific investigation, where factual materials played the key role. The new approach, Ewa Domańska observes, "(...) is based on non-scientific, non-standard ways of pursuing knowledge and its presentation, which favours among others subjectivism, emotions, empathy, sincerity (...), propagating relational thinking and experimenting with different media, with different styles of presentation" [Domańska, 2006: 26—27]. The Warsaw Uprising Museum found a compromise by joining the scientific factual perspective with the subjective narration of people who had witnessed the events. Apart from presenting facts, it was important to convey the atmosphere of those events and their times. The success of this museum can be contributed to the skillful combination of these two perspectives and to a truly authentic way of showing the people's world.

Museum spaces started to open in Poland at a very specific time. The Warsaw Uprising Museum opened exactly 15 years after the fall of communism and exactly

on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of the Uprising. Other museums, such as the European Solidarity Centre, the John Paul II Institute or the Oskar Schindler's Enamel Factory Museum referred to the modern history witnessed by many people who are still alive. These museums are dedicated to telling the story of the last decades. It is worth referring to different categories of memory proposed by Jan Assmann. Being particularly interested in the memory of social and cultural area, he observed a certain pattern: cultural memory seems to appear only after the communicative memory has died out. Communicative memory is about the things still remembered by the witnesses who are still alive. This is one's closest past. This memory "is shared among all contemporaries. Its typical variety is the generational memory. Social groups gain it during the historical process. This memory is created with time and passes away with time, or, to be more precise, with the group members, who are carriers of memory. When people carrying the memory pass away, it is substituted by new memory" [Assmann, 2009: 82]. Assmann argues that communicative memory passes away after eighty years. People who witnessed some important events as adults, tend to focus on their past after forty years of their life; they feel a strong urge to preserve it and somehow record it in order to pass it to the next generation. Communicative memory, commonly described as live memory, does not "live" more than eighty years. After this period an institutional cultural memory appears.

It seems that while creating museum spaces in Poland, these two types of memory did have some overlap. The need for museums in Poland erupted, and this was caused by various factors: the strong awareness of the lack of any space for dialogue and historical memory preservation, the enormous time gap due to the communist system, when all appearances of politically incorrect memory were destined to die. This is why the communicative and cultural memories were created, reproduced and preserved simultaneously. The clash of these two memories resulted in many heated debate and polemics among various scientific and political groups. The clash of the live memory (represented by witnesses) and the cultural memory (expressed in an institutional form) triggered the still-happening negotiation process and a never-ending dialogue. In other words, the private memory of many subjects and actors of the events in the most recent history of Poland (related to the Warsaw Uprising, or the Solidarity movement, or actions undertaken by Oskar Schindler during WW2) seems to have undergone the process of institutionalization. Efforts to preserve both types of memory were made at the same time, thus the only way of bringing these processes together was giving them a space that was open for interpretations. The pattern of such a space is expressed in the form of a narrative museum that is open for interpretations and subjective views — though it also creates social concepts. Thanks to this, such a museum "is seen as a type of social activity, and not formal discourse [Kurz, 2007: 156]". The spaces of modern museums seem to have become spaces of social activity, as well as spaces of discourse about the meaning of historical events and their interpretation. Even if a certain museum projects certain meanings, the openness of its space leaves room for polemics, dialogue and various interpretations. Moreover, narrative museums — that were absent in Poland for so long — aroused social energy and participation in their creation process. Also, they made people more interested in their past, and they strengthened Polish patriotism and pride. The first museum of

this kind, the Warsaw Uprising Museum, triggered many social expectations about the stories that were to be told about our past.

We presented the Warsaw Uprising Museum as an important example for a few reasons. Firstly, fulfilling the idea of a narrative museum, it opened a new era in the Polish museology. Secondly, it activated Poles' interest in their past and history. Thirdly, it triggered discussions about the role of historical policy in Poland and about creating this policy consciously. Fourthly, it started the processes related to building our national identity and to the necessity of adopting a position towards many fundamental issues connected with the life of the country and its citizens. Finally, it fuelled the development of museology in Poland. Each new project required various consultations, discussions with members of different milieus, negotiations about the concepts of further museums. As we have stated so far, each museum (in spite of its openness) consists of certain social concepts, and not only historical facts. Therefore, it constitutes a certain model — certain proposal that can be either accepted or rejected. Nevertheless, it is always a proposal. The process of creating museum spaces is, though, a dual process. On the one hand, after years of communism the Poles were searching for their heroes. They were looking for reasons to feel proud of their compatriots' acts; to feel proud of the risky but brave decisions that those people had made. They needed some positive stories that could be mythologized in esthetic museum spaces. On the other hand, thanks to museum spaces people started to reexamine and rediscover the stories that did not have positive connotation, but which enabled them to understand for example the past Polish-Jewish coexistence and relations in Poland.

### **“My way, my choice. Me in a museum space”.**

#### **Subjective perception of museums.**

The museum as a social space requires the presence of visitor. Visitors are the missing element in the social process of museum space existence. Museum can exist without any exhibits, it can be interactive, it can communicate its message only through its architecture — it can be even completely devoid of objects, but it has to have visitors. In the following analysis I would like to refer to the research I carried out as a part of the visual sociology classes that I teach at the Institute of Sociology at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow. Two museums were chosen to participate in this research. One museum in Cracow — Oskar Schindler's Enamel Factory, and one in Warsaw — the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. The Warsaw Uprising Museum — which served as an example for describing the social processes related to recovering memory, the new humanist approach and the new form of museum spaces — was analyzed too frequently in the media and also during university discussions. We wanted to avoid the situation in which the knowledge and information about the museum could influence its impact significantly. Moreover, one of our research aims was to carry out a comparative analysis of two modern museums that were opened in the last decade. Hence, we selected two museums located in two cities. They do, however, feature a similar theme: both museums selected by us present the history of Polish Jews.

During the visit to both museums the students were required to make some observations, and to take photos of places and exhibits that drew their attention and stimulated

their reflection. The project was entitled: “My way, my choice. Me in a museum space”. Its aim was to achieve a subjective report from a visit to the two museums, or rather a report from a journey through these museums. The research was qualitative. We assumed that every visit to a museum is a unique one, even if one had already been there. Each time one visits a museum, one has different knowledge, knows more documents or films that can change one’s reaction. One can even be in a different mood. Even the fact that we have already visited a given museum can influence our opinions. Students were asked to write an essay in which they compared the two museum spaces, told about their observations and pointed out the places that impressed and influenced them most. We were interested in a subjective reaction to the museums, to their exhibitions, design, information; a subjective reaction to all things that the students encountered in the museums. We were interested in the forms of interacting with the exhibits, design, information, the museum’s surroundings — everything that could add up to the final personalized reaction to these places. The questions were very general, for example: What kind of encounter was that? What did these places tell you? In what way? Were the ways you took through the museums different? Or maybe they were very similar? Which elements did you choose while visiting the museums? What seduced/surprised/disappointed you? How would you draw up the story in this type of space? Who would you tell about? In order to unify the description, we proposed some sets of antithetic categories, which also helped to order the research material<sup>1</sup>.

### **A journey through the museums**

The POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews opened its doors in April 2013 in the area of the former Warsaw ghetto. The Core Exhibition, presenting the thousand-year-long history of Polish Jews, was opened on October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2014. This was the permanent exhibition visited by our students. The museum is also an important and innovative centre of research, education and culture — a platform for social change, offering a profound, transformative experience and promoting new standards of narrating history<sup>2</sup>. The second museum visited by the students, Oskar Schindler’s Enamel Factory, is located in Cracow, at 4 Lipowa Street, in the old German Factory of Enameled Vessels, which during the WW2 was owned by Oskar Schindler. Nowadays the museum houses an exhibition called “Cracow — the occupation time (1939—1945)”<sup>3</sup>.

### **The exterior and interior museum space**

The location of a museum is of great importance. Its surroundings can be heavily loaded with meanings. The surroundings of a museum may be related to what is presented inside, or may be completely irrelevant. However, normally the interior of a museum corresponds somehow to what can be seen outside. The interior and ex-

<sup>1</sup> Examples of categories proposed for description: free — engaged, past-oriented — future-oriented, history of the main current — contra-history, consensus — conflict, linear narration — multidirectional narration, image — word, void — plenitude, visible — hidden, presence — absence, order — chaos, subject — community, closed — open, finished — unfinished, liberating — crinating, freedom — enslavement, box construction — branch construction, continuous — fragmentary, revealed — hidden, white — black, good — evil, optimism — pessimism, victim — assassin, up — down, clarity — darkness, exhibit — antiexhibit, way — labyrinth, subjective — objective, outside — inside.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.polin.pl/en/about-museum> (date of access: 19.09.2015)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.mhk.pl/mission-and-history/3> (date of access: 19.09.2015)

terior sides of a museum space enter into a relation. Both museums are located in authentic places. Oskar Schindler's Enamel Factory stands in a part of Cracow called Zablocie, exactly in the place where Schindler's factory existed. The POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews is located in the area of Warsaw ghetto. One respondent mentioned this: *My adventure in the museum started with visiting the museum's surroundings. It was a bit of a strange experience for me, since I always imagined that such institutions should be surrounded by a nice and big area. The museum is just one of many buildings in the street, it isn't visible or particularly marked for the passer-by, or potential visitors... When I was walking around the building I saw some construction cranes, apartment blocks under construction and some objects made of sheet metal that I couldn't identify. After seeing such a landscape I wasn't particularly enthusiastic about further sightseeing, but soon I felt completely different. It was enough to enter the museum...* (M1). However, this statement is related to the esthetics of the surroundings, and not to the historical context itself. Not all the museum visitors are aware of the authenticity of the place. When such awareness exists, the relation of the exterior and the interior plays an important role, even though there might be some tacky, everyday elements interfering with this space. The feeling that the modern world and the area with a painful past are not coherent shows the fact that this space is already meaningful and that its "profanation" with the everyday reality is distinctly perceived. *In this context, the location of both Oskar Schindler's Enamel Factory and the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews is important. The first museum was a witness of the history of the Jews who worked there during the Nazi occupation period during WW2. There really was a factory on Lipowa Street, the Jews really worked there and this place is still important in the city's space, as it employs many people (museum curators, people who work there and so on). In this context, it is interesting to see that this place was both the place of ordeal and a chance for survival, and nowadays we can see here a kiosk selling Indian food or some hipster bars for young and fashionable rebels* (M2). It is worth noting that the Polin museum is a multifunctional object. Inside there is an elegant bar and a conference centre. This specific space is frequently hired for organizing posh events and corporate meetings, since the building is very elegant and centrally located, and the surroundings are very neat as well.



Photo credit: Małgorzata Bogunia-Borowska, 2015

*In its turn, the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews is a new space, built especially to present the exhibits and to show the history of Jews in Poland. It should be noted that the building is situated on the Anielewicz Street; Mordechaj Anielewicz was the leader of the Jewish Combat Organization and Jewish troops during the uprising in Warsaw ghetto (M2). Zabłocie is an industrial part of Cracow. Oskar Schindler's factory was located in the same place where today we have the museum. When entering this district one feels its industrial character. The museum in Warsaw is located in the authentic space of the former ghetto; the street that leads to it is called after Mordechaj Anielewicz, the leader of a Jewish militant organization. The area and the surroundings of both museums are therefore authentic, though touched by contemporary times (in Cracow, new apartment blocks, and in Warsaw, restaurants and food stores). The Lipowa Street in Cracow is a little hidden in Zabłocie; it is more difficult to find the museum. In its turn, the area around Polin distinctly communicates its meaning via sculptures, monuments, a symbolic "tree of the collective memory" and a monument dedicated to Jan Karski.*



A monument in front of the Polin museum in Warsaw.  
*Photo credit: Małgorzata Bogunia-Borowska*



The tree of the "collective memory" in front of the Polin museum  
*Photo credit: Małgorzata Bogunia-Borowska*



A monument of Jan Karski in front of the Polin museum  
 Photo credit: Małgorzata Bogunia-Borowska

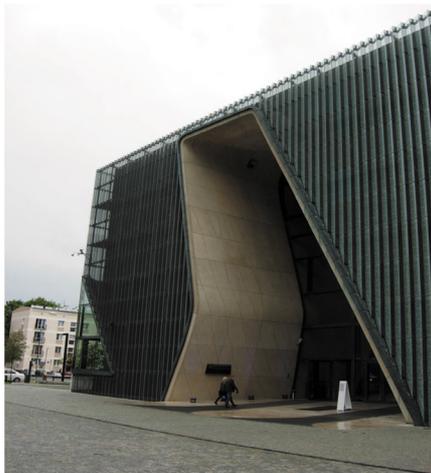
### **The architecture of a building — the form as a communication space**

Both museums are located in authentic space. Their locations are nevertheless different. The museum building in Cracow is rather humble, hidden, not easily reachable. It is not conspicuous, and it does not suggest any interpretation. We can say that the building is as neutral as possible. One does not know what to expect inside and what story will be told. The Polin museum in Warsaw is much less neutral. The architecture and the form of the building are meaningful. The form is interesting as far as its esthetics is concerned, but its meaning is equally interesting. The respondents did mention this: *Polin is a place that draws your attention right from the outside of the building that houses the exhibition. One starts to ponder whether the building is only a “wrapping” of the exhibition or an integral part of it? It is a very modern form, very “cold” and stern. On the one hand, it is a simple form, on the other hand it is a building full of details and small elements. The first subjective association that came to my mind when I saw the building was its similarity to a shelter — a massive building with thick walls, meant to protect what is inside (M3).*



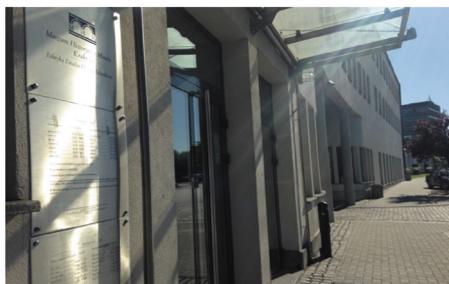
The Polin museum  
 Photo credit: Małgorzata Bogunia-Borowska

*The museum is built in the form of a monolithic glass cube. When you come closer, you see that this geometrical form is “hollow” inside — outside it is neutral as far as its meaning is concerned, it could be a shopping center or a warehouse, but it grabs your attention, it provokes interpretations, it arouses curiosity, it invites you to go inside (M4).*

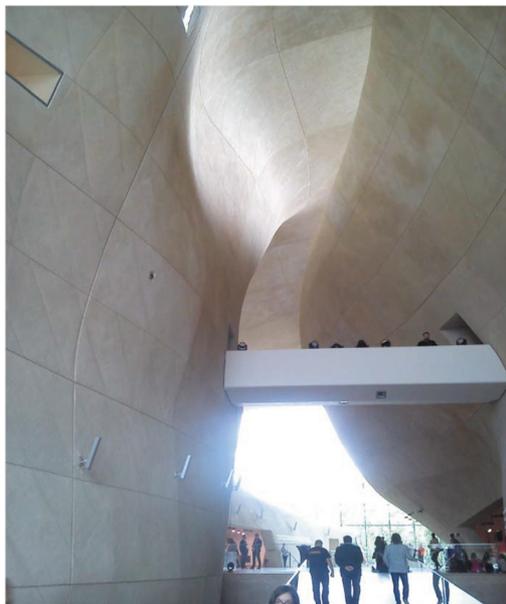


Main entrance to the Polin museum  
Photo credit: Szymon Wyrembak

One respondent compared the design of the Polin to a glass-covered shopping centre. It is an interesting association, since it draws our attention to the fact that there are new spaces emerging in our cities. Normally such a modern, multi-format, glass form means that the building is a museum or a shopping centre. Places of historical narration or places of commercial narration. This comparison is worth remembering, as for many respondents the Polin was too close to the esthetics of a commercial and entertainment place (instead of a place of reflection and thoughtfulness). A few respondents state that this limit was even crossed. The Polin building is multifunctional. It is worth noting that very often it hosts corporate events. As the building's design is elegant and modern, it seems to be very popular and is frequently used for commercial purposes.



Main entrance to the Oskar Schindler's Enamel Factory Museum  
Photo credit: Justyna Wilkosz



The interior of the Polin  
Photo credit: Tomasz Fryzel

The interior of the Polin seems to have impressed the respondents. The monumental form triggers reflection. The Polin space is open for interpretations; it is provoking. *The interior, however, is completely different. The dark elevation is a contrast to the bright interior dominated by cream colour accentuated by the sunbeams that pass through the glass roof. You can see the sky through the roof. The divided, wavy ceiling makes me think of the biblical journey to the Promised Land and the parting of the Red Sea. When you stand in the middle of the entrance hall, you might feel that you are in the middle of a desert and that from here you will start your journey. The two joined parts of the ceiling might also symbolize the two nations, Poles and Jews, whose past, present, future, culture and religion — in spite of many differences — are points that bring them together. Another report includes a metaphor referring to nature. It turns out that the inconspicuous form is “torn” inside by a hall that can be associated with some natural creations: a canyon or a cave. This contrast between the exterior and interior is a surprise, even an intimidating one. The museum space appears to be a hermetic microworld, similar to caves or American canyons, something paradoxical, claustrophobic and vast at the same time. What is also paradoxical is that the culture (the industrial form of the building, the apartment blocks surrounding it) coexists with the illusion of the interior’s natural origin (it seems that the interior was created in the process of erosion, by water and atmospheric factors). This connection of the human and natural element reminds me of what one of the museum’s designers, Jacek Leociak, said in his interview for Zofia Wiślacka and Artur Zmijewski — that during the excavations in the place where they were going to build the museum, they found a little spoon from the ghetto, “that*

*grew into a tree branch”<sup>4</sup>. The human element blended with the organic element (M4). This is an attempt to clarify the complexity and inseparability of the Polish-Jewish historical relations that are strictly connected to this space. You can see the multidimensionality in the original architecture of the interior: the light that comes through the windows (hope) brightens up the empty space in the middle (tragic moment of history). This approach makes us think about how long-lasting and complex the Polish-Jewish relations are, and that they reach far beyond the most presented issue of WW2 and its consequences. (M9)*

The exterior and the interior museum spaces create a place of relations; they evoke emotional and rational reflections. A museum is a space of emotions and reason, consensus and resistance. Its architecture becomes a part of this space of relations. The form creates the place. It creates meanings. It gets you involved or rejects you. It makes you feel calm or anxious. Daniel Libeskind wrote: “a building (...) can tell a lot of stories. It can show you the world from a completely different perspective [Libeskind 2008:11]”. In case of the museum in Cracow, its concept is less sophisticated, more authentic and simple. It is an authentic place of past events. Its authenticity and its naturalness are its strength. The Polin museum is monumental, modern, industrial. The form creates a space that absorbs you, drags you in. However, its architecture might be slightly too “commercial”. It seems to be a little too similar to other modern buildings, also the ones used exclusively for commercial purposes.

### **Museum space as a journey through an unknown world**

The museum in Cracow is called the Oskar Schindler’s Enamel Factory, but it is really a tale about the city. Those who expect it to be a tale about the German entrepreneur Oskar Schindler will be surprised. It is Cracow that is the focus of narration. The everyday life in Cracow between 1939 and 1945 was under constant pressure, as the Nazi directives regarding the city’s inhabitants were constantly changing. *Cracow is the narrator that tells you about the Cracow Jews, about the city dwellers’ everyday life, about the cruelty of war. It also tells you about the changes it suffered during the Nazi occupation. This history is a multidirectional one, and Cracow itself becomes a multidimensional space (M6).*

As far as the Polin is concerned, the focus is on the long history of Jews. One space shows us a fragment of history that took place in one city. The other one presents the long history of Jews. In the Oskar Schindler’s museum the visitors travel back into the WW2 city occupation times very quickly. This happens due to personalisation. The first room of the museum is a photo studio. This everyday situation allows us to enter the rituals of people’s everyday life and to identify ourselves with them. The photos of individuals, couples and families enable us to identify ourselves with the people who lived in Cracow at that time. *Already entering the first room transported me — the visitor — to the past times, the WW2 era. There were photos on the walls — some of them black and white, some in colour, some were backlit. There was also some old photo equipment. All this made me feel a sense of nostalgia; I felt that in a moment I will experience a story about the common people living in an unusual period (M1).* Another respondent

<sup>4</sup> Leociak J., Papier-mâché rubble [online] interviewed by Z. Waślicka, A. Żmijewski, web address: <http://www.krytykapolityczna.pl/artykuly/kultura/20150331/leociak-gruz-z-papier-mache-rozmowa> (date of access: 15.06.2015)

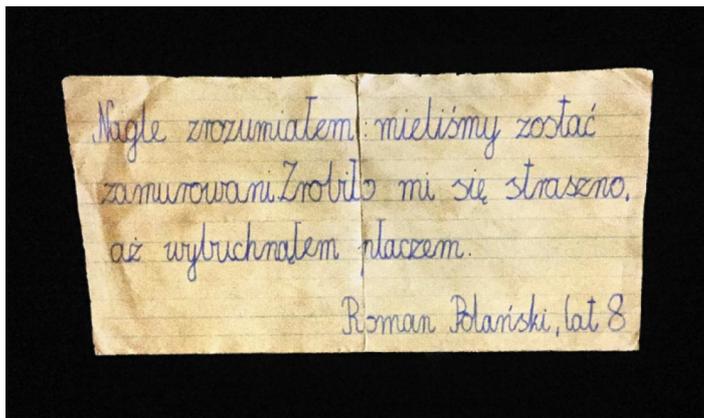
points out: *In Schindler's factory the first room is a photo studio. On the walls we can see photos of people who can be treated as characters in the story that we are going to hear. There are loudspeakers, and you can hear the photographer's voice, you feel as if they were taking photos somewhere in the adjacent room. These photos have a symbolic meaning of stopping time; they help visitors to establish a certain emotional bond with the people photographed (M7).* This simple trick induces the creation of a natural bond between visitors and the imagined people from the past — who become the visitors' guides. They help visitors to enter the everyday life of Cracow. The best way to tell a story is to establish relations between people from the past and present. Thus, objective events become part of a subjective and individualized experience. Some respondents happen to experience the museum from a woman's perspective. *The narration I followed while visiting the museum was a story told from a woman's perspective. I saw many elements that could be part of a woman's world: a pram, a room arranged to be a hairdresser's salon, parts of woman's clothing, intimate letters or some scenes from domestic life in which ladies were particularly important. While following the sightseeing route I felt like a woman living in WW2 occupied Cracow (M7).*

Personalisation and identification with the past make it possible to create a situation of dialogue and communication. *I started my journey at the photo studio filled with family portraits, wedding photos, first communion photos, baptism photos, and instantly I felt being part of the dialogue that the museum established with me. Who are these Cracovians in the photos? Are they Jews, are they Germans, are they Poles? (M10)*



The Oskar Schindler's Enamel Factory  
Photo credit: Joanna Oracz

*Moreover, the space is arranged in such an authentic way that sometimes you can just forget that this is nothing but a museum, and you end up completely drawn into the story being told. It was a very appropriate thing to just let the exhibition elements speak for themselves and tell their own story. I was particularly touched by the letters whose authors were describing their world. I knew those letters were authentic, so it fired up my imagination and I started to imagine what these authors looked like, or what the places they described looked like (M7).*



The Oskar Schindler's Enamel Factory

Roman Polański's letter which says "I suddenly understood it. We were going to be immured. I felt horribly scared, and I burst out crying. Roman Polański, aged 8"

Photo credit: Anna Kobiela

The subjective engagement of emotions as well as building relations with representatives of the past make visitors more sensitive to individualized stories and to the tragedy of the times in which they lived. It is a way of speaking about the history, about the past, about the history of human lives. Is this type of engagement possible when you attempt to tell the complete history of Polish Jews? Many respondents felt lost while facing so much information, so many facts and stimuli. They reported feeling depressed when leaving the museum; they felt disheartened by their own perception limitations. Many respondents expressed the wish to go back and once again try to build some relations based on the knowledge and historical content. Only two respondents felt positive about the Polin. Its space seems to intimidate and create distance, which has to minimize the interactivity of the place. Our respondents felt that the Polin contains too much information; it is a vast intellectual challenge. This might be the issue that creates distance. The respondents felt that the museum did not allow them to build a more intimate relation with a person who would make the whole story more personal. *The creators of the museum faced an enormous challenge: they had to present the linear history and at the same time to show the complexity of events, their simultaneity, and the relations among them. Therefore, the museum is full of digressions, "appositions", a lot of info about many details, "small stories". The visitors feel overwhelmed with a plethora of stimuli, facts and quotations; they find the exhibition chaotic and unclear, maybe even inaccessible. I feel that this might be the effect that the museum creators strived for — they didn't want to show the history in the form of an academic lecture. Instead, they wanted the visitor to experience its real complexity and ambiguity. So the creators probably did not aim at a coherent, smooth narration. They wanted to point out that there might be many narrations (M4).*

Another respondent notices the museum's distance and its difficulties in establishing an interpersonal relation. It seems to tell its story with a certain air of its tradition and culture's superiority. The visitor might therefore feel a little bit as an outsider. One

*feels that the Polin is more of a guardian of Jewish tradition; it is a homage to the Jews' rich culture. It results in a feeling that the history is told at a distance. The content of the narration (and not the way of narrating) makes the exhibition look external in relation to visitors. I felt like an intruder; I felt that I am looking at things that don't belong to me. The exhibition aims to tell the past as faithfully as possible, but without establishing any relations with modern people. (M6)*

There were even some attempts to modify the Polin's space. *I would divide the whole exhibition thematically instead of dividing it into time periods. I would assign the following topics to the rooms: Jewish culture, Polish-Jewish relations, history of Jews in Poland during WW2, Jews' everyday life, the influence of the Jewish presence on the situation in Poland. I would choose a famous person of Jewish origin — this person would then be the main character of the Polin's space and he/she would guide the visitors around his/her world. In this way, it would be easier to understand the Jewish history in Poland (M8).* There are also some attempts to comprehend the totality of the Polin's space. In order to do this, the respondents were looking for some key other than the everyday life and identification with concrete characters. From such a perspective, the history of mankind becomes more than just lives of individuals who had experienced certain events. *The Polin is not a museum focused on the extermination of Jews. It connects light and darkness, life and death, and this is fascinating. The guide about the permanent exhibition says that the museum (that stands right opposite to the monument to the Ghetto Heroes) symbolically completes this monument. The monument commemorates the ordeal and death of Polish Jews, and the museum tells us about their lives (M9).* However, this does not refer to the human existence in its subjective form. It rather refers to the interpersonal relations of groups and communities that contribute to the history of mankind. One respondent seems to have noted this universalism of the world of human communities and their stories. You can see the multidimensionality in the original architecture of the interior — the light that comes through the windows (hope) brightens up the empty space in the middle (tragic moment of history). This approach makes us think about how long-lasting and complex the Polish-Jewish relations are, and that they reach far beyond the most exhibited issue of WW2 and its consequences. (M9)

Nevertheless, some respondents feel that the museum shows the Jews and their way of life in a rather pompous way. *I couldn't resist the feeling that I am looking at the monument that pays homage to one thousand years of presence of Jews in Poland. I am wondering why it wasn't possible for me to immerse myself totally in the narration. I had a constant feeling of walking around something — just as I walk around monuments (M10).* Both museums feature the form of a linear walk through their spaces. However, it is in the Polin that the respondents reported the feeling of being lost or walking in a maze. *The Polin is built like a Russian matrioshka doll: the exhibitions are all complements of the exhibitions we have already seen; they are built over the exhibitions we have seen. Unfortunately, there seems to be no element that would bring all these parts together. The space has a form of a branch; I felt like I was inside a maze from which it is very difficult to walk out (M11).* The Polin's space turns out to be more difficult for the visitors to comprehend. This might as well have been the idea of the museum's creators. Maybe they wanted to show the vastness

and importance of the century-long history, the complexity of culture, the coexistence and conflicts between Jews and Poles. This issue is so enormous that it can easily overwhelm us. Maybe “tiring” the visitors is a way of making them aware of what they could miss if they had not decided to learn about their neighbours?

### **Museum as an amusement park and entertainment**

Both museums are narrative spaces that use modern multimedia technologies. They are very useful in order to connect modern visitors with the past. A photo of a person living in the occupied Cracow helps visitors to identify themselves with the issue and to personalize it. Nevertheless, too many multimedia effects can actually make it difficult to establish a connection with the past; the space might become trivial as well. As a result — instead of a space of dialogue, social relations and reflection — we get a space of fun and entertainment. The solemn atmosphere is substituted by attractive gadgets and special effects. A museum space turns into an amusement park. *We are hit by innumerable audiovisual techniques, endless colours, drawings, props, contents. Everywhere we can hear the recordings of people telling us about the old times. We can read old chronicles, we can watch films that are supposed to help us to imagine the life of that period. Almost everything can be touched (...)* The amount of information presented there is just overwhelming. *Paradoxically, I think that instead of making us feel the presence of the old times, this makes us feel their absence* (M13). Many respondents express similar opinions. *While walking through the Polin I felt that I would never be able to find the exit. I also felt that I wasn't able to internalize all the information in an appropriate way. I have to admit that I just passed through some exhibition rooms looking at them just as I look at the pictures in a book, without any closer reflection* (M12).



The Polin Museum  
Photo credit: Natalia Krućko



The Polin Museum  
Photo credit: Dorota Wyganowska

The overuse of media technologies and the information overload make us feel as we were in a computer game or an amusement park. This effect trivializes the story. It distances the “past” people from the “nowadays” people who came to the Polin to meet them. *As a result of this, the museum is perceived more as an amusement park than a space for meeting the past. I think that the Polin’s attractiveness, its “special effects”, should help us focus on the museum’s content and not on these “special effects” — sometimes quite tacky — themselves (M4).* The story being told is very important, but if the visitors cannot relate to the people from the past, the museum space will be a space of fun rather than a space of contact, dialogue and social relations. *It is also influenced by the fact that the museum — trying to be modern, multi-faceted and metaphore-filled — becomes overwhelming. It actually doesn’t try to educate its visitors, but it entertains them, becoming something of a circus performance (M2).*

One more opinion that expresses similar views on the Polin: *the Polin’s concept is close to what I think is an ideal way of narrating such stories, i. e. using all kinds of media and various multimedia materials. However, at the same time we shouldn’t lose our common sense, so that the museum won’t turn into a thoughtless amusement park (M9).* Another opinion describes the Polin’s space as a place of entertainment. *I remember the second space as a playground with history created using modern technologies and numerous props (M13).* Nevertheless, some respondents say that all these special effects might be used for the purpose, so that the silence in the Holocaust hall could be even more spectacular. *The Holocaust constitutes a very important and presumably the most touching element of the exhibition. Eliminating all sound effects in the moment of entering the first room about the extermination is a great idea; it causes anxiety and focuses the visitor. It is a good example of skillful, modest use of audiovisual effects. Quite paradoxically, the most shocking element of the exhibition is silence, and not special effects (M9).*

## Museum as a space of meetings and social relations

Relatability is at the core of a museum. Museums are places of various interactions taking place between different generations, between past, present and future worlds, between different people that meet accidentally, look at similar exhibits, hear each other's comments, sometimes talk to each other. Museums are interactions between generations and people from different countries and cultures. They are interactions of knowledge and imagination, facts and images. Museums are spaces for people. Museums without people are empty. Museums without people do not create any social relations. They are meaningless. They are dead<sup>5</sup>. In the two museums that we have analyzed we could observe two different ways of building relations between the world here and now, and the world of the past. Oskar Schindler's museum features a symbolic place of contact: "The Ark of the Saved". It is a round object made of enameled products. Inside it features the names and surnames of the Jews, Schindler's workers, who were saved from the extermination. The only source of light is a hole in the ceiling. When you stand in the middle, you feel surrounded by the people who once worked in this factory. It is a symbolic, or metaphysical, way of building the relation of an individual "me" with a group of "others". *In Schindler's factory you felt that the people from the photos are present all the time* (M6). The climax moment came when you met them in "The Ark of the Saved". As far as the Polin is concerned, mirrors were the tools that enabled the visitors to establish symbolic relations. It was the chance to place oneself in the space of the history. *Mirrors were the thing that surprised me in the Polin. We could see them in most exhibition rooms. For me, they were the element that helped me to try and place myself in that space, to look at myself as one of the exhibition elements, to integrate my image of myself into what I see around me, to ponder on the differences between modern people and the people from the past* (M13). Apparently, human beings need a medium of communication that would enable them to establish relations with the past. It might be "The Ark of the Saved", it might be mirrors, it might be, as in the Jewish Museum in Berlin, a void, and the usage of light and shades.

## Social relations in a narrative museum

The effect that a museum can produce depends on many factors. The form and concept of a museum tend to be influenced by political, economic and social factors (nowadays also technological factors). Increasingly, museum visitors participate in a play that features different decorations and props. The visitors themselves become actors and co-authors of the perceptive event. A narration museum becomes an audience-engaging story. These people sometimes visit the museum, but this story includes also the ones that just live close to the museum building. The Polin is surrounded by a recreational area used by the residents of the apartment blocks nearby. They also enter into various relations with the museum. It would be interesting to know how this proximity influences their lives and their perception of the museum.

The form of a museum normally expresses a certain idea; it creates a certain vision of what should be remembered and in which way. A narrative museum seems

<sup>5</sup> Even if a museum is filled with void and it does not feature any exhibits (as the Jewish Museum in Berlin designed by Daniel Libeskind), it needs visitors who will understand the meaning of this void. Empty museum space, which symbolises the absence of people, triggers a special contact with the Jewish people who are gone.

to be accessible for wider audiences, but it does not exclude viewing it from a critical perspective. This particular form of a museum eliminates certain limitations; it levels out the distance that is so present in the traditional museum spaces where people from the past and modern days had certain problems with establishing a relation. This narrative form might be as well slightly less objective. It is based on emotional engagement and relations building. Perceiving this type of space may be influenced by one's mood, one's current situation, one's companionship, by a given context or a given political situation. Such narrative form of a museum is, however, a good way to revive the past and the people who are long gone. Theodor Adorno argued that what is deposited in a museum loses a connection with what is still alive. Museums should not be dead spaces. Without people they are meaningless. They would be spaces of oblivion and forgetting. "A museum and a mausoleum have more in common than just the phonetic similarity of both words. Museums are family tombs of works of art [Adorno, 1998: 20]".

The modern museums described in this paper — even if they represent a momentary fashion — did trigger an interest for the past. They triggered the process of recovering memory. They filled the space with living people. They aroused emotions, and sometimes also awoke minds. They provoked criticism or fascination, resistance or support. They became spaces of dialogue and relation. They became spaces where people can meet: the ones who are alive and the ones who are gone. Such meetings have created stories, interpretations and more or less profound social relations. Such encounters and social interactions do shape social reality and allow us to verify social images, which are part of memory and knowledge about history.

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