



Hagy Belzberg's powerful new home for L.A.'s Museum of the Holocaust takes visitors on an unforgettable journey beneath the surface

By Katya Tylevich / Photography by Iwan Baan

NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND



Buried below a gently sloping hillside in West Hollywood's Pan Pacific Park, the museum is almost invisible to passersby.



Until October 2010, the oldest Holocaust museum in the United States, born in 1961, had been homeless and “couch surfing” from one temporary location in its native L.A. to the next. Today the newly completed Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust, comprehensively designed by architect Hagy Belzberg of Belzberg Architects, sinks so organically and permanently into the public landscape of Pan Pacific Park, in one of L.A.’s highest-traffic neighbourhoods, it might as well be part of West Hollywood’s natural flora. The low-rise structure is made of glass and formed concrete, with a shotcrete finish, and camouflaged by a green roof of park grass, the walls and corridors digging like roots into the soil and ushering visitors underground.

I initially visited the museum without Belzberg there to explain it to me. After all, the objective of the architecture and the integrated exhibits is that they speak for themselves, and impart a personal and at times isolating experience for the visitor, who often encounters feelings of stark solitude in the pressing, dark environment. But when I arrive, it’s all sunshine.

I stand outside, struck by the tension between this postcard-sunny day in L.A. – blue sky, picnics and laughing children everywhere – and the grim subject into which I’m about to descend. I feel awkward. When I later tell Belzberg this, he basically says: good. “In the late ’30s and early ’40s in Europe, people were also going to the park and having picnics, while very bad things were happening only a few yards away,” he says. “Such a dichotomy still exists today. We go about our business while terrible things happen nearby. I’m replicating that with the museum.”

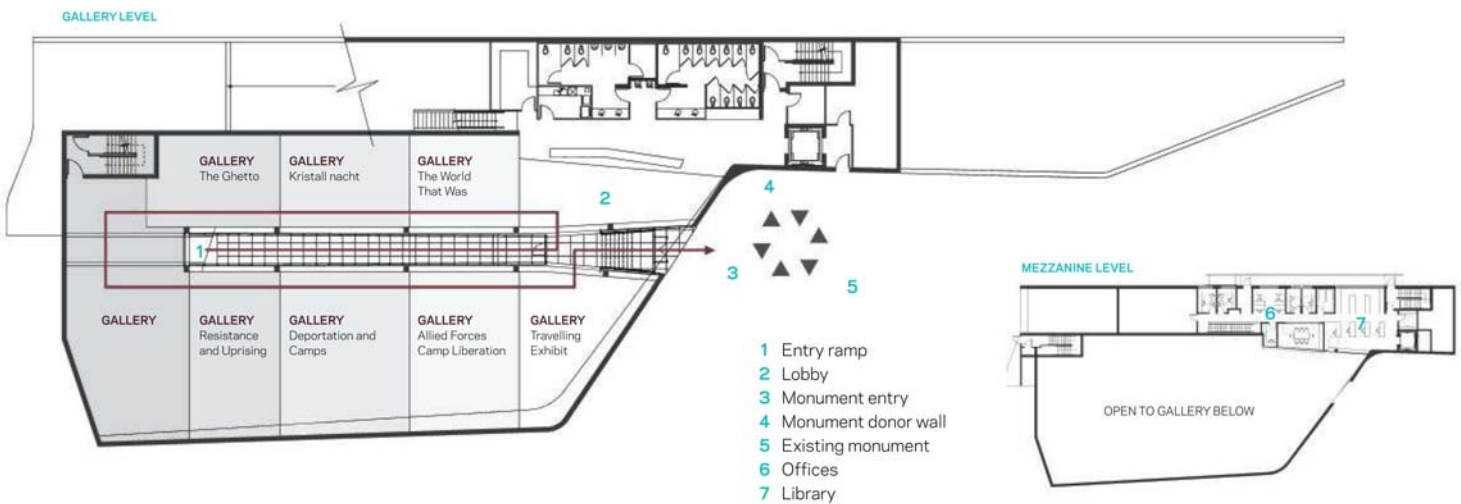
I step inside, inching toward the “terrible things nearby,” as the natural light grows dimmer and the ceiling falls steadily lower. The museum folds onto itself violently along those recesses where the events exhibited and examined are most disturbing. The building is a “container for a story,” says Belzberg, but the story is not episodic; therefore, the walls do not touch the ceilings, and the space is not divided into rooms. There are no “end scenes” in this larger picture. Instead, the architecture navigates visitors through a chronological panorama of documents, artifacts and primary sources, and organizes information much as the human brain might. “We don’t go through life in snapshots,” says Belzberg. “We perceive our future



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←← The entrance leads to a darkened interior, signalling that the material housed within is emotionally charged. As the subject matter becomes more bleak, the gallery spaces become smaller, with lower ceilings and limited light.
 ← When natural light is used, it is diffused by translucent glass, revealing movement but no clear views to the outside.

Zinno





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in a larger continuum, and I try to demonstrate that within the museum. When you’re able to see the ceiling soar overhead, you see where you came from, and you’re also given a hint of where you’re going. And really, isn’t that pretty much how we see each of our lives?”

The museum’s continuum eventually propels visitors toward depictions of liberation and rebuilding, where the structure takes a physical turn, and gradually, carefully, begins to stand a little taller again and admit more natural sunlight. Nearing the exhibition’s exit, the architecture starts to decompress, as does the mood it imparts to visitors. In other words, the space holds its breath and exhales in sync with each viewer. The building is a “companion to your experience,” says Belzberg, “but it does not tell you how to experience. Rather, the architecture empathizes with you.”

It is not uncommon for a museum’s architecture and its displays to be products of two different brains: container first; contents later, designed by someone else. But in the case of the Holocaust Museum, Belzberg designed not only the museum’s body but also its vital organs: the displays, lighting, furnishings and graphics. Belzberg further worked with the curators in creating a matrix along which imagery is presented. The displays are able to move around on a grid system below the slab to provide data within any



← The sloping walls and columns were formed from digital models, and sculpted while still wet by a local pool contractor.
 → Audio tours via iPod Touch are available in multiple languages and learning levels, from grade school to scholar.
 ↓ The museum's west elevation faces onto the street.



configuration. "The only thing we didn't design," he continues, "is the software for the interactive media," which was the work of the New York office Potion.

Owing to Belzberg's holistic approach, the exhibits are figuratively inseparable from the walls that house them. Architecture and artifact reinforce each other in terms of the metaphors they communicate. But the exhibits are not rigid, and do not require the architecture to physically support them. They are infinitely flexible, not only because they allow for literal shape-shifting within the museum, but also because they can tell multiple stories, at multiple levels, to different people. In a dark, claustrophobic display nook titled Concentration Camps, for instance, only one viewer at a time may approach each video monitor, resulting in a striking personal confrontation with the subject matter. The proximity of history, and the chill of isolation, are made that much more tangible by a system that responds, one on one, to each user. Each visitor is equipped with an iPod Touch, which allows the relatively small museum (exhibit space is just under 1,115 square metres) to grow "endlessly large," as Belzberg puts it. He notes that one of the greatest challenges he faced was figuring out how to engage all participants, ranging from grade school, to grad school, to long out of school.

He explains that the museum was explicitly designed with the idea that 40,000 L.A. Unified School District students are expected to move through it, as part of their required curriculum: "And in a city like Los Angeles, where there are over a hundred languages spoken, we had to seriously consider how to integrate students." Accordingly, the iPod puts visitors in control of the experience, down to choosing the language in which they want to learn. It can also teach at a fifth grade level or a scholarly level, and it allows the same person to experience considerably different elements, depending on how he or she uses the information at hand.

Furthermore, the navigational cues over which viewers have no control are intentionally subtle. "We wanted to avoid a kitsch environment with obvious concentration camp iconography, liked barbed wire," says Belzberg. "There is also no Jewish identity, to ensure that everybody feels ownership of the story and the space. When that happens, everybody feels protective of the museum's contents," he says. "I understand that I put the building underground, and I use imagery very delicately, but I want to make clear that the result is not an apologetic building. The architecture will not tell you what to experience, but it is very direct. It says: This content needs to speak for itself." **AZ**