AN EVERLASTING NAME

FEW HISTORICAL EVENTS GENERATE SUCH EMOTION AS THE HOLOCAUST. THE YAD VASHEM HOLOCAUST MUSEUM IN ISRAEL HOUSES A FITTING TRIBUTE TO THE VICTIMS OF THAT TERRIBLE PERIOD, BLENDING FORM WITH FUNCTION IN A SYMBOLIC GESTURE OF HONOUR AND REMEMBRANCE

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY SHELLEY EGÖZ
THE RECENTLY BUILT YAD VASHEM

Holocaust History Museum in Jerusalem, designed by Israeli-born Canadian architect Moshe Safdie, combines function and symbolism to elicit an overwhelming emotional experience. It embodies commemoration through architecture and landscape on a grand scale; a powerful response to one of the most incomprehensible human atrocities of the 20th century.

Yad Vashem – the words mean “memorial” and “name” in Hebrew, thus creating an “everlasting name” to the Jewish victims of the Nazis – is Israel’s official Holocaust commemoration authority. It engages in research, documentation and education about the Holocaust, and is housed in an 18-hectare campus on a hill called the Mount of Remembrance overlooking Jerusalem.

The events of the Holocaust were the
principal reason for the establishment of a Jewish state, and the Yad Vashem authority was set up in the early 1950s, a few years after Israeli statehood, to ensure that legacy endured. The mount complex has continued to evolve throughout the past 50 years. Today, the site includes various administration buildings, archives, a library, museums and exhibition spaces as well as outdoor monuments and memorials.

One such memorial is the Valley of Communities, a park designed by Israeli landscape architects Yahalom-Zur in 1992. This maze-like environment, carved deep into the surrounding land, is supported by huge limestone boulders which make up tall walls on which names of communities are engraved in a manner reminiscent of tombstones. Visitors are introduced to the names of hundreds of geographic regions where Jewish European communities once lived rich and vibrant cultural lives. The design employs a limited palette of materials; it is unpretentious, restrained and humble. The experience, due mainly to the large scale of the maze, is extremely moving.

Another provocative monument is the Memorial to the Deportees designed by Safdie in 1995. An original wooden cattle cart that was used to transport Jews to death camps from all over Europe is dramatically positioned on the edge of a constructed railway over an abyss, facing Jerusalem. While this monument evokes a sense of horror – that of life hanging over a cliff – its projection toward Jerusalem symbolises the hope and survival of the Jewish people against all odds, culminating in their national revival and fulfillment of the traditional dream of return to the holy city.

A decade ago, a $157-million plan to redevelop the site in anticipation of accommodating two million visitors a year was drawn up. The most visually striking element of this plan is the Safdie-designed History Museum, which opened to the public in 2005. The $88 million building and its interior exhibit narrate a dark story in 20th-century history. Reminiscent in its symbolic form of the Memorial to the Deportees, the building dramatically cantilevers over the landscape, but on a much grander scale. The structure is a 175-metre long triangular concrete prism cutting through the hillside to form a spine that connects the whole site. At both edges, it spills over, floating above the landscape. Inside, the exhibit presents history through personal stories and artefacts. The scale of the atrocities can be...
something too abstract to come to grips with, but the visitor’s engagement in the details and individuals’ anecdotes may help to better relate what happened to their fellow human beings.

Visitors walk along the underground concrete exhibition hall, daylight penetrating only through ceiling shafts. Contemporary audio-visual techniques stimulate a multi-sensory emotional experience; moving through the tall triangular space makes one feel dwarfed. The austere architecture evokes a sense of awe and respect.

The journey through the building ends at a balcony that offers a panoramic view to a pine forest landscape, a symbol of regrowth and rooting oneself in the land. The sensory nature of the experience is reinforced by the fresh fragrance of pine resin.

The exterior of the building is a bold
architectural gesture. It holds tension and stability juxtaposed in the mountain landscape. The elongated triangular form is dynamic, jutting through the mountain, descending into darkness for a while, then returning to daylight.

The larger-than-life scale of the monument represents the incomprehensibility of the events depicted, and the dynamism embodied in the building attests to a historical account of resilience. The Holocaust History Museum is a fitting legacy and everlasting name to those who perished in the 20th century’s worst human catastrophe.

The Valley of Communities is made up of limestone boulders with names of Holocaust victims engraved upon them, in the manner of tombstones.