Memorials are often manifested in monuments. Landscape architecture, however, views environments as patterns. Rather than focusing on objects in space, as architecture often relates to landscape, landscape architects endeavor to achieve multi-faceted aesthetic and emotional spatial experiences. Sometimes it is a simple, minimalist and under-stated approach that brings forward the most powerful, meaningful and moving spaces. Such is the experience of the Valley of Communities holocaust memorial in Jerusalem.

In 1979 the Yad Vashem institute in Jerusalem, a museum commemorating the holocaust survivors, announced a limited competition for architects and artists to design a memorial to the 5000 Jewish communities annihilated in the WWII holocaust. One entry, the work of landscape architects Lipa Yahalom and Dan Tzur, was chosen to be implemented.

The Valley of Communities project was built on the western side of Memorial Mount in the Yad Vashem grounds. A valley was artificially carved into the hills and skillfully constructed as a huge stone maze for visitors to walk through. Large stones display engravings of the names of the 5000 European towns and villages where Jewish communities had been erased by the Nazis.

The huge bulging limestone rocks comprise the dominant fabric of the site. The use of raw, unprocessed material is very impressive and contributes to a sublime atmosphere and sense of awe. The marks of the carving machines that uprooted the stones from the ground are exposed, conveying tension, displacement and a sense of brutality and aggression. Sheets of gray stone with the names of the lost communities are integrated into the rocks. The typography, in Hebrew and Latin letters, carefully designed by graphic designers David Grossman and Yaki Molcho, is especially dense and engraved deeply into the stones, reminiscent of traditional Jewish gravestones.

At the centre of the valley, there is a small amphitheatre for group gatherings. From that point there is access to an underground space in which educational activities for school children take place.

After the construction a revegetation plan was implemented to recreate the existing landscape. While elements of displacement are expressed through the brutality of the large-scale stones, the rehabilitation of the landscape reflects the perseverance of Jewish life despite the Nazi effort to annihilate all Jews. This ambiguity of a representation of destruction alongside cues for hope is a thread that runs throughout the design, whether it is the large stones that make dark niches through which rays of sun spill into the space, or the hint of symbolism generated through the use of particular vegetation. This subtlety is articulated for example by the planting of an occasional single olive tree in the maze space. The olive tree, native to the land of Israel, is a symbol of peace and hope, deriving from the biblical myth about Noah and the arc in which the branch of the olive tree brought to Noah by the dove signified the end of the deluge and the beginning of new life.

Another evocative plant is the indigenous Cyclamen. Known in Hebrew as Rakefet, it is frequently portrayed in children’s stories and nursery rhymes. This pink, small, beautiful and delicate native flower grows in rocky environments, seemingly against all odds, and is
"Memorials are archetypes. They speak of life’s meaning, of value systems held in common, of significant challenges and events in the history of a tribe or a nation. Memorials speak to us over the ages. They transmit universal truths and experiences; they pass the torch of meaning from one generation to the next.” Lawrence Halprin, 1997:6
commonly viewed in Israel as a symbol of the victory of beauty against adverse conditions. Single Cyclamen are sparsely planted within the spaces of the memorial.

On a spatial level it is mainly scale that is used to create a sense of awe. The enormous rocks dwarf human beings and bestow a sense of humility and helplessness. The thousands of inscribed names of towns and villages create a sense of loss which is beyond our human capacity to absorb. The knowledge that each one of the 5000 communities consisted of between hundreds to thousands of human lives exacerbates the poignancy.

When dealing with powerful emotions designers are often challenged to draw the thin line between good design and a theme park “lowest common denominator” experience. This project meets the challenge. The integrity and sophistication of the design of The Valley of Communities lies in its simplicity: extreme minimalism, spatial manipulation and subtle symbolism succeed in creating a moving experience without descending into vulgar sentimentalism.

The design is simple yet not at all simplistic. It is rich and complex: it embodies layers of meaning drawn together through the articulate use of scale, form, material and plants. The Valley of Communities epitomises landscape architecture at its best: it is an example of how patterns, rather than a monumental object set in space, have power to elicit emotion and profound thoughts. Tangible elements are tools that mould a space to become meaningful. The strength of this design, however, is in its refrain from interpretation: it is for the visitors themselves to experience and contemplate. This approach reflects deep respect to the millions of lost lives and is a true memorial that passes “the torch of meaning from one generation to the next” (Halprin, 1997).

REFERENCES:

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Top: The use of scale to create a sense of awe (photo: Shelley Egoz).
Bottom: The names of lost communities are inscribed in a manner reminiscent of traditional Jewish graves. The Cyclamen plants are a sign of triumph (photo: Shelley Egoz).