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Should We Adopt a Pragmatic Approach to Holocaust Heritage in the 21st Century?

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This essay proposes that a pragmatic approach be taken towards Holocaust heritage in the 21st century and beyond. Its point of departure is the recognition that it is now nearly 80 years since the end of the war and we are not making heritage decisions today about such sites based on inheriting them 'untouched' in 1945 and dictating their future role as sites of education, remembrance and pilgrimage. Rather, in acknowledgement that many decades have passed and that buildings from many sites of Holocaust heritage have been put to other uses, I argue that a pragmatic solution is required rather than an insistence that Holocaust heritage must have no function today other than one based solely on remembrance and memorialisation. This essay discusses whether we should be prepared to accept compromises and give up idealistic perceptions of a single 'right' solution that dictates the heritage futures of such sites. The research for this discussion is based upon the 2019-24 International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) project [Safeguarding Sites](#), chaired by the author. This essay thus prizes an approach that safeguards Holocaust sites, but questions what we mean by 'safeguarding', arguing that Holocaust heritage is not like the archaeological site of Pompeii; we have not inherited it untouched and preserved in volcanic ash, nor have we had ownership of it continuously since the end of the war.

'Holocaust heritage' describes a range of remains, buildings and sites of concentration camps, killing centres, mass graves, ghettos, forced labour camps, prisons, detention centres, places of deportation and the like that were involved in the Holocaust. They are sites of victimhood, which is not to say that sites of perpetration should be excluded from this definition. Places such as the [House of the Wannsee Conference](#), or the villas occupied by camp commandants on the outskirts of many concentration camps fall within the concept (such as that recently preserved at [Westerbork](#)). Nonetheless, the [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#) (USHMM) has calculated that the Nazis and their allies 'ran more than 44,000 camps, ghettos, and other sites of detention, persecution, forced labour, and murder' during the Holocaust, and so it is the sites of victimhood that rightfully form the core of our understanding of 'Holocaust heritage'.



Only a small fraction of the 44,000 sites is today a heritage site or memorial; it has not been calculated how many hold this function. Of the sites that are open to the public, not all former camp, ghetto or prison buildings are under the control of the memorial that runs the heritage site today; for example, [Terezín Memorial](#) does not own all of the buildings of the former ghetto, including the iconic [Dresden Barracks](#), where the football match took place, captured on film, in the Nazi propaganda film *The Führer Gives a City for the Jews*. For various reasons, many of them financial or practical, the full extent in the landscape of each of the historical sites of Holocaust heritage has not been 'purchased for the nation' over the last 80 years or was even standing soon after liberation. We are all familiar with the barracks set on fire at Bergen-Belsen in May 1945.



Figure 1: The Hall of Crosses, Risiera di San Sabba, Trieste (Image credit: G. Carr)

Even where the state or province has owned the site and opened it to the public for many decades, there have also been changes to the layout of a site because of management decisions, especially at sites in Eastern Europe after the end of the Cold War. But such changes to what tourists and pilgrims see today are found all over Europe. At the Polizeihäftlager at the Risiera di San Sabba on the outskirts of Trieste in Italy, for example, the camp became a refugee camp until 1965 for those fleeing communism after the war. Here, the crematorium does not survive and is instead symbolically shown by metal paving on the ground. The architect Romano Boico, who was awarded the contract to turn the camp into a memorial site in the late 1960s, is quoted as saying:

'I planned to remove and fence off rather than to add. Having eliminated the ruined buildings, I cordoned off the area with eleven-metre high concrete walls, designed to create a disquieting entrance. The cordoned off courtyard intentionally becomes an open-air



cathedral. The prisoners' building is completely emptied, the wooden frames stripped as bare as was necessary...' (Presentational material in the museum at the Risiera di San Sabba, observed September 2022.)

The 'prisoners' building' referred to is today called the 'Hall of Crosses' owing to the visual effect re-created by the bare beams of the old factory after removing the upper three floors, according to Boico's architectural design (Figure 1). With Boico's reference to turning the courtyard into a 'cathedral' and the prisoners' building into a 'Hall of Crosses', we can see how Catholic Italy visually minimised the Jewish history of this building. Similarly, Holocaust sites in Eastern Europe beyond the Iron Curtain emphasised national or Soviet narratives at the expense of the Jewish victims. The sites we see today have been impacted by management, memorial, and architectural decisions just as much as by factors such as decay and demolition of buildings that are falling apart after 80 years.

We believe that the historical authenticity of a site resides in its buildings and features, but we must lose our naïveties about the realities of restoration. Visiting [Mauthausen Memorial](#) today (Figure 2), one learns that the barbed wire around the camp and concrete on the ground are not original; one sees for oneself how modernised the restored barracks that hold the museum are. The Memorial director, Barbara Glück, (pers. comm.) has been asked to make 400 changes to the site that involve removing some of the original features, which could cause trip hazards for visitors, replacing stairs with ramps and the like. The elevator added to the site in 2018 proved [controversial](#). But controversial or not, this represents a pragmatic change to a site like so many that have been carried out at sites throughout Europe since 1945.

The former concentration camp of [Gusen](#), near Mauthausen, was knocked down and a village built upon its footprint after the war. While some original camp buildings remain, such as the crematorium, others have been converted into domestic houses. At [Melk](#), also in Austria, prisoners were placed in pre-existing army barracks; the barracks have reverted to housing soldiers today, having simply been returned to their pre-war use. While Holocaust heritage today may be viewed as 'sacred' and 'untouchable', such a view suggests that one is simply unaware of the plethora of changes that have already happened at sites across Europe since 1945.

Moving from the 'sacred' to the 'profane', we might observe at the former concentration camp at Staro Sajmište in Belgrade, Serbia, that the camp buildings have been reused in a variety of ways over the decades. The Old Fairground site in Belgrade was first constructed as a series of international pavilions in 1937, which show-cased the products and technical innovations of various countries. It was a display of European modernity. But after the Nazis occupied the country, the site was reused first as a camp for Jewish and Roma women, children and the elderly (the men were sent to Topovske Šupe, elsewhere in Belgrade), and then for Serbian partisans and Chetniks after the murder of the previous inhabitants. For the most part, the old pavilions still stand, although many of them are dilapidated. Today, the Italian pavilion houses homeless people and refugees; the Czechoslovakian pavilion is an artists' workshop, and the Hungarian pavilion is now a series of private houses. In better



repair, the Turkish pavilion is a popular restaurant. The memorials at the site are a little distance away, by the nearby River Sava. None of the pavilions have memorial plaques attached, and one cannot help but observe that reuse of the buildings have ensured their survival. If the refugees, the homeless, the artists and the restaurant owners were thrown out in order to preserve what remains of the buildings, would that be an ethical step forward? What should these buildings be used for? Should every single one become a museum, empty of the living and a shrine to the dead? Or can we be pragmatic about it and acknowledge the benefit of the presence of this local community, among whom we include the Roma? Does it make sense to move out the societally marginalised, persecuted and dispossessed among the living in order to remember the marginalised, persecuted and dispossessed among the dead? This, perhaps, is the clearest example of what the pragmatics of Holocaust heritage is about.



Figure 2: The elevator built in 2018 at Mauthausen memorial, Austria (Image credit: G. Carr)

Let us return, finally, to the concept of 'safeguarding'. To safeguard a site of Holocaust heritage is not just to turn it into a museum, memorial, or Holocaust education centre, or perhaps a centre to discuss human rights, democracy and citizenship. This narrow set of options for reuse are uncontroversial and are what we have always aspired to. However, pragmatics suggests that we must be prepared to compromise. In the 21st century, Holocaust sites face many challenges, not least of which is the climate emergency. The rise in extreme weather events has seen the severe and ongoing collapse of the roof of the Dresden Barracks at Terezín over the last couple of years, caused by storms. The former camp of Fossoli in Italy suffered an earthquake in 2012 and is now significantly less well preserved than it was. The site of the suggested mass grave and cemetery of prisoners from the camps in the Channel Island of Alderney is at sea level and the sea is only a couple of hundred metres away. These sites are all suffering from climate change and they are not alone. But during a cost of living crisis caused only partially by the war in Ukraine, can we justify spending millions of Euros on restoring and converting buildings in remembrance of the dead when the living need it more?



The war in Ukraine reminds us that Holocaust sites are threatened and being destroyed right now. One day we hope to restore these sites, but the living need our money and attention too. Other threats and risks faced by Holocaust sites in the 21st century include the rise of extreme politics, with its associated problems of vandalism and 'unwanted guests' at sites; the misappropriation of narratives of the Holocaust by certain national governments; the risk of budget cuts to Holocaust heritage sites when certain political parties hold the purse strings; and the pandemic, which has also caused a drop in budgets as a result of reduced numbers of visitors. It can sometimes feel that one is fighting fires on many fronts, and indeed we are, quite literally, in some places. We are reminded of the arson attack on a barrack at [Sachsenhausen Memorial](#) in 1992.

There are many challenges that confront us in our desire not just to protect and safeguard existing Holocaust heritage memorial sites in the 21st century, but also in our desire to identify, rescue, excavate or safeguard other less well-known sites that have been forgotten or ignored by our local communities. Indeed, local communities are an important component in this conversation because they offer a source of potential help and support. Our best intentions can be thwarted if they are against our plans as heritage professionals. If the local community feel strongly about keeping their restaurant, their sports centre, or artists' studio in a building that we perceive to be 'Holocaust heritage', we should perhaps be prepared to be pragmatic in our conversations and negotiations with them. How far are we willing to compromise? If there is an accurate information plaque next to the site and a memorial plaque attached to any extant building, and if they are willing to allow ceremonies at the site, should we be prepared to accept this position? Local communities are not homogeneous, and we must also consult stakeholders who include Jewish and Roma communities, as well as any other victim groups who may or may not live locally. Their needs must be taken into account, but just as we, the Holocaust heritage professionals, need to consider pragmatic solutions, so perhaps - if we follow this argument - should they.

Of course, there are hard red lines where we should not compromise: a new [sausage museum](#) at a Buchenwald sub-camp or a [pig farm](#) on a Roma concentration camp are clearly unacceptable. Similarly, sites of perpetration should never be turned into shrines to the perpetrators in question. But between the hard red lines, the points of compromise and the idealism to which we aspire lies a wide territory.

This essay is not about compromise for the sake of compromise. Nor is it a call for us to surrender our long-held ideals. Rather, it is a recognition that we, as heritage professionals, have not inherited 'untouched' or 'sacred' Holocaust sites and have not been in possession of the entirety of these sites since 1945. We need to adopt a pragmatic position because there is no other choice; it is already too late to do otherwise. As citizens of the 21st century, we face existential crises today that are both of our collective making and almost beyond our collective control. We must acknowledge the changes that have happened over the last 80 years and the greater changes and challenges that confront us. To refuse to adopt a pragmatic approach is now unrealistic.



Mentioned in the text

[Camp Westerbork Memorial Centre](#)

[International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance](#)

[House of the Wannsee Conference](#)

[Mauthausen Memorial](#)

[Sachsenhausen Memorial and Museum](#)

[Terezín Memorial](#)

[United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#)