New Period of Memorial Places? The Possibilities of Architectural Thinking that form Individual and Collective Process of Remembrance

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Abstract

The connections between architecture and remembrance are well-known and have several layers of meaning. I would like to express a possible interpretation of this relationship, focusing on some contemporary memorial places in Europe and Budapest, which are strongly based on architectural viewpoints. At the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, some very impressive examples can be recognized that are not narrative, do not have a direct message or ideological atmosphere, but can involve the spectators to participate in the very complicated process of memory (we can mention Peter Eisenmann's well-known Mahnmal-project in Berlin or Gunter Demnig's concept of 'Stolpersteine'.) The topic is extremely complex in Central-Eastern Europe, where the history of the 20th century caused a lot of traumas. In 2014, I was the leader of a postgraduate architectural school's architect group which won a competition for the World War 2 memorial place of Eötvös Lóránd University. We wanted to mark the whole garden of the university instead of just putting a sculpture in it. The sign designed by us is huge (250 m long), and at the same time almost impossibly small (1 cm high); and it was realized on the facade of the university's historic buildings. The names of the victims and the most important data known about them are carved into these bronze stripes. In 2015, we won the Piranesi Award Honorable mention of the Architectural Days of Piran. By throwing some example projects, I would like to give a possible answer to the very complex question of remembrance and architecture. The new types of monuments seem to start a new period, when the architectural thinking becomes increasingly important in thinking about memorial places. Our research at Budapest University of Technology and Economics helps to discover how architects can capture locality, and how they can build databases to be used from the very first step of the design process. This research is always a multidisciplinary effort joining not only the various branches of architecture, but also involving IT specialists, meteorologists, civil engineers, economists, etc.

1. Introduction

The connections between architecture and remembrance are well-known and have several meanings. I would like to express a possible interpretation of this relationship, focusing on some contemporary memorial places in Europe and Budapest, which are strongly based on architectural viewpoints. At the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, some very impressive examples can be recognized that are not narrative, do not have a direct message or ideological atmosphere, but can involve the spectators to participate in the very complicated process of memory. The topic is especially complex in Central-Eastern Europe, where 20th century history caused a lot of traumas, after World War II as well.

I think this theme has always interested architects, however, I got really close to this quite complex and multi-layered problem of architecture and remembrance only when I was the leader of a postgraduate architectural school's architect group which won a competition for the World War II memorial place of Eötvös Lóránd University in 2014.

By 2014, in order to remember a very old trauma that cannot be felt and sensed personally anymore but is still present in an inconceivable and incomprehensible way, it became necessary to fundamentally and truthfully clarify the validity of the results of 20th and 21st century politics of memory manifested in monuments. The process of understanding and discernment was not easy, the process was helped the most by the studying and understanding the monuments. In these studies, we could primarily catch a special architectural way of thinking and means of expression instead of the sculptural or artistic ones. And though these works are very different in genres, but what they have in common is that they become effective in a community space, their power comes from a close symbiosis with the space, and space itself is the medium of remembering. So this writing intends to report the experiences of a

research work carried out in the course of an actual architectural task, together with the theoretical and practical problems of the realized memorial site.

A number of thinkers drew attention to the paradox of erecting a monument, the basic contradiction of which is that a community's responsibility for their own past and self-identity cannot be delegated to monuments, yet the monument, with its inevitably symbolic gestures, attempts to do exactly this. As Robert Musil said: *"There is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument. They are no doubt erected to be seen – indeed to attract attention. But at the same time they are impregnated with something that repels attention"* [1]. Those contemporary monuments appear to be successful, and be able to break through the paradox of erecting monuments, which do not want to express anything, but miss any kind of narrativity and heroism, enable several different interpretations and mostly remain almost unnoticed. These are the monuments that can be considered some kind of 'counter monuments' according to the terminology of renowned professor of memory research James E. Young. German artist Jochen Gerz, the monuments of whom will be discussed later, said in an interview: *"The common feature of art called counter monuments by James E. Young is that they make people disappointed. That is the theme is disappointing since the piece of art does not display the heroic past, but the negative past; and this disappointment is not only the loss of illusions but also tearing the lies, and eliminating fraud. This is not the activity of the higher forces, but starts at eye level with you and me"* [2].

Monument, memorial or memorial sign? While the tradition rooted in the 19th century defined places of remembrance primarily with monuments; memorials and memorial signs increasingly came to the fore from the second half of the 20th century. James E. Young accurately distinguishes between monument and memorial place: *"Monuments … will refer here to a subset of memorials: the material objects, sculptures and installations used to memorialize a person or thing. … A memorial may be a day, a conference, or a space, but it need not be a monument. … To the extent that we encourage monuments to do our memory-work for us, we become that much more forgetful"* [3]. This distinction is not an end in itself, but is also a difference in interpretation which expands the meaning of the traditional concept of monuments, and at the same time highlights the importance of the role of very specific places, often architectural spaces or public place activities being played in memory processes.

In Hungary in 2014, the government erected a monument to the German occupation occurred at the end of World War II, depicting the Hungarians as clear and exclusive victims, who, however, were partly collaborators based on historical facts. Instead of the

Figure 1. ELTE memorial place of World War II victims, opening ceremony, MM group, Budapest, 2014 (photographer: Ákos Polgárdi)

always complex and multi-layered complexity of historical facts, the monument offered a radical and painfully simplistic interpretation. However, the vulgar and banal shaping of the monument causes even greater concern, because it has become a caricature of itself rather than a central place of collective memory. The official, state memorial set by the Hungarian government and the semi-public memorial implemented to the initiative of ELTE university community with our cooperation are the two end points of the culture of memory. These much honored thoughts confirmed our initial ambition constantly kept in mind to create a memorial that is open, responsive, induces personal reaction and thus interaction. As architects, we found this aim achievable by primarily using architectural means instead of sculptural or artistic ones (Figure 1).

2. Examples of architecture-rooted monuments

But what have we learnt, what can we learn from the good examples that approached the complexity of remembrance processes mainly with architecture-rooted means? I would like to mention a few very different examples, which, however, have in common that they try to make the act of remembrance the possibly most personal and in this way experiencable by using space and its designation, as well as the continuity of perception and reception. They do not suggest any message, they are not clear and certainly do not represent anything, for this reason, they seem to be appropriate memorials. They have in common that they are often confusing, they are not monumental, and they create the broadest possible associations. They do not

want to warn, teach or explain, but they teach how to remember, in the noblest sense of the word.

2.1. Text in space

The remembrance of World War II and other 20th century dramas associated with massive losses naturally led to memorial sites formed by listing and three-dimensionally displaying the victims' names and data. In these examples memory itself is very specific (if we think about a direct remembrance of individual persons, families and fates); at the same time the huge amount of displayed names is reinterpreted, and as an abstract text it becomes a universal dramatic sign as a space-defining element for several memorials.

In Prague, Czech Republic the name, date of birth and death of 77,297 Czech and Moravian victims killed in Theresienstadt (Terezin) was hand-painted on the wall of Pinkas Synagogue. The unimaginable amount of names covers the entire space, more precisely lines it. From this flow of text created by Václav Boštík and Jiří John from 1954 to 1959, only the red letters of the alphabetically arranged family names stand out. From a distance, the density of names and data, which appears in the space in an incomprehensible amount, apply only as the texture of the walls. However, when having a closer look, the readable and delimited body text affects visitors as a dramatic memorial sign of individual and family tragedies. Besides the clear reading of certain names and dates in a close up view, from a distance only the text's specific ornament can be sensed in the space, as a total marking and transubstantiation. This well-known example is not unique. Already in 1949, five years before the Prague example (!) the survivors placed marble plates with engraved names of 894 local victims of the Holocaust on the inner wall of the synagogue of Gheorgheni (Gyergyószentmiklós), a small town in the territory of today's Romania. In both cases, the textface, created by the mere listing of names and data, lines and radically transubstantiates the architectural space.

While the former examples were realized in a devastated community's local spaces once used by this community, it is worth mentioning here a famous memorial in Washington DC. Based on the winner concept of young architect student Maya Lin, the memorial of the 58,196 US victims of the Vietnam War was completed in 1982 in Washington. The V-shaped granite wall that intersects the park is a strong topographic intervention, creating a designated new space of remembrance, placed in the park, yet separated from it. The wall, which was created as a section of the terrain, displays the names of the war victims, grouped by year and alphabet, from 1959 to 1975. The names can be read at eye level, and – by the site action of rubbing them to paper or by depositing
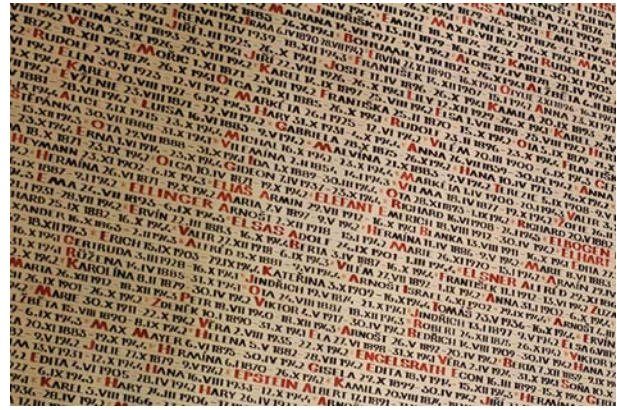

Figure 2. Pinkas Synagogue, Václav Boštík and Jiří John, Prague, 1954-59
(photographer: Øyvind Holmstad)

souvenirs – we can talk about personal and collective memorial space at the same time. The transformation of the park's topography has created a sign identical with the park itself, and the powerful flow of text listing the names of the soldier victims appear by covering this sign.

Also, the concept of the "stumbling stones" (Stolperstein) created by Gunter Demnig is based on the text, which, however, is hardly noticeable but still creates dramatic signs. For many years, the German artist has been placing 10x10 cm size cobblestones wrapped in copper sheet in front of the former residence of the victims, indicating their name, birth and death data. From 1996 to date, over 50 thousand pieces were laid across Europe. The artist's calendar is pre-filled months ahead, and the network of small signs becomes denser by time. They are barely visible still clear in situ memorial signs, the power of which is given by spatially identifying and indicating the former residence with the exact data of the victims (Figure 2).

2.2. Progress in space

The essence of some memorial projects, basically displayed in public places, is the implementation process itself. These examples address the local community who are intentionally involved in the realization of the monument either through their active work or even with the promotion of their reflection. These pieces of art cannot be unveiled, handed over or completed from one moment to the other, the act of remembrance and the completion of the works overlap in time, so they clearly interact with each other.

The monument, designed by Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz, realized in 1986 Harburg, Germany was a 12 m high lead coated pylon that became complete with a single text – calling passers-by to protest against war, violence and racist fanaticism. This notice could be

satisfied by engraving the messages in the column using steel styluses placed next to it for this purpose. When signatures covered the surface up to the accessible level, the pylon was lowered into am underground shaft prepared in advance. By 1993, i.e. by the end of the seven-year process the monument was lowered below ground, and today it is only a sign in the pavement. Here, the purport of the monument is memory itself that is the remembrance of a seven-year long process jointly carried out.

Jochen Gerz's square of the "Invisible Monument" also carried out a radical concept. Gerz and his colleagues collected the names of all German settlements where Jewish cemeteries were in use before World War II. Then, from 1989 to 1992, they removed the paving stones of the alley leading to Saarbrücken Castle at night in secret, engraved the name of one settlement to each stone and placed back them with the inscribed side facing the ground. The square was named after the "invisible" placement of the 2,146 cemeteries' names. The uniqueness of the monument is that its message is not primarily conveyed by the basalt cobbles but more on word of mouth: the concept is not obvious when standing on the square, the settlement names cannot be read, paradoxically, the meaning is reinforced by the hidden nature of the memorial.

Picture 7–9: Harburg Monument against Fascism, Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz, 1986 (photo: (7));Invisible Monument, Jochen Gerz, Saarbrücken, 1989-92 (photo: Martin Blanke (8), Jochen Gerz(9))

2.3. Installation in space

Extremely exciting are the examples that are able to combine the artistic and sculptural approach with the architectural one. In these model-like, powerful works the monument itself is a visual art project, essentially an installation, the spatial and space defining position of which, however, creates a memorial with architectural approach.

In 1956, a revolution took place in Budapest, which aimed at the liberation from the Soviet occupation and communist dictatorship. The peaceful demonstration began on October 23, but the protesters received a brutal volley answer from the governing power, shooting people from the top of the surrounding houses on Kossuth Square in front of the Parliament. More than 70 people died and hundreds were injured in the fusillade. Until the beginning of the regime change in 1989, remembering this tragic event publicly was not possible. In 1991, in one of the buildings overlooking the square József Kampfl sculptor and Ferenc Callmeyer architect created a low-key, yet dramatic memorial by installing dozens of steel spheres on the walls, resembling enlarged bullets. In this case, the creation of

a sculptural installation and the indication of the building and the square were realized simultaneously.

In Berlin, a memorial to the book burnings committed by Nazis was completed by the design of Micha Ullman in 1995. This project was an installation again that created an underground room surrounded by empty bookshelves. This strange, negative space can only be seen through the glass slab placed at the pedestrian level. It is barely noticeable at daylight, while works as an illuminated public plaza sign at night. The constructed room is actually a mock-up, which displays the symbolic library space deprived of the destroyed books. Seeing the installation from above, from an unrealistic perspective raises the project to a specific spatial position, in addition, it places all this to a secular public environment.

In 2001, a memorial was erected in Leipzig to the 14 thousand deported and murdered Jewish victims at place of the great synagogue burnt down in 1938 (specifically on top of its remaining foundation walls). The project – designed by Leipzig architects Sebastian Helm and Anna Dilengite – consists of 140 bronze chairs standing at place of the former synagogue's chairs. A special installation was implemented on the small square, evoking the interior of the former synagogue and at the same time creating a public place situation that inclines reactions in which these chairs which function both as sculptures and as household objects (people often sit on these chairs to take a rest or sunbath). The personal approach of remembrance is the key to success here that lies precisely in such gestures: when the monument allows direct reception and ordinariness just as much as solemn community actions.

In World War II, during the German occupation a horrible series of events were committed by the German-collaborator battalions of the Arrow Cross, who gathered and took the Jews to the Danube and shot them into the river. This tragedy was commemorated in the heart of Budapest in 2005 with the memorial designed by Can Togay and Gyula Pauer. Following their concept, real-scale, life-like bronze modeling of 60 pairs of men's, women's and children's shoes were placed and fixed to the paving stones of the wharf. The representation is almost brutally naturalistic and narrative, yet, an indication of the specific location has created such a dramatic memorial, where the urban-natural sight of the wharf and the river flowing under the viewer's feet raised the clarity of the installation up to a universal semantic field in an unambiguous and good sense (Figure 3).

2.4. Space as a memorial

Perhaps the best known example is the Holocaust Mahnmal in Berlin, completed in 2005 by the design of

Figure 3. Memorial of the Great Community Synagogue, Sebastian Helm and Anna Dilengite, Leipzig, 2001 (photographer: Johannes Ackner)

Figure 4. Holocaust Mahnmal, Peter Eisenmann, Berlin, 2005 (photographer: Jean-Pierre Dalbéra)

Peter Eisenmann. Undoubtedly, having this huge memorial realized right in Berlin, the former and today's German capital is of a symbolic importance. The concrete blocks have different heights – variable from 20 cm up to 4.7 meters – but their 2.38 x 0.95 meter footprints are uniform in size, totally covering 19,000 sqm of area in the political and cultural center of the city, next to the Brandenburg Gate. Eisenmann's work, as it continuously changes when wandering around it, made space itself the memorial that induces remembrance. It is a blood-edge architectural composition offering a number of associations: from tombstones to a variety of urban situations, e.g. one can find the topography in ruins, the houses and streets of a destroyed city in this monumental work, as of course many other things. But exactly this is the point: interpretation, even usage remain fairly personal. In addition to the reception of a dramatic effect, the profane use of public spaces is just as present on the memorial site (I have seen children playing hide-and-seek, riding bike and running on and

around the blocks). We should take critic Nicolai Ouroussoff's side, who wrote: *"this is able to convey the scope of the Holocaust's horrors without stooping to sentimentality – showing how abstraction can be the most powerful tool for conveying the complexities of human emotion"* [4] (Figure 4).

The examples that break with memorials conveying heroic and clear message of past, but are open to interpretation and reception could be listed long. I chose these few works, quite different from each other, in order to illustrate the richness that has appeared in tools and creative approaches during the past decades; and also to argue that the vast majority of these solutions results from spatial architectural concepts strengthening the sense of place. It seems that these examples implemented in recent decades have been a kind of paradigm shift in memorial architecture.

3. Memorial in the university garden

In 2014, I was the leader of a postgraduate architectural school's architect group which won a competition for the World War II memorial place of Eötvös Lóránd University [5]. We wanted to designate the whole garden of the university instead of just putting a sculpture in it. The sign designed by us is huge (250 m long), and at the same time almost impossibly small (1 cm high); and it was realized on the facade of the university's historic buildings. The names of the victims and the most important data known about them are carved into these bronze stripes. In 2015, we won the Piranesi Award Honorable mention of the Architectural Days of Piran, and the project was published in several forum [6, 7].

It was a special job, actually was a gift of fate, from the preparation of the competition entry to the actual realization. It was a special community planning project for the young architects and masters of the postgraduate architectural school of great tradition, and at the same time it offered a unique opportunity to realize a new type of memorial in Hungary too. This new type, basically rooted in space and scale that are basic architectural concepts, has become well-known in Western Europe in the second half of the 20th century and in the 21st century.

Our memorial sign – after studying the examples cited earlier – tried to display their universal meaning and forms of expression in the historic and spatial context of Trefort-garden. The examined examples – as we could see – have in common that they are not primarily independent signs, but they all mark something. Thus, their value as a sign is not valid in itself but only in their context with the designated space and location. Eötvös Lóránd University is one of the most important universities of Hungary with the largest traditions, which

Figure 5. ELTE memorial place of World War II victims, opening ceremony, MM group,
Budapest, 2014 (photographer: Gábor Sióréti)

in 2013 decided to search for its former academic citizens who were exiled, deported, and fallen victims to World War II and to commemorate them. And not at an abstract place, but there where they once attended as teachers and students: in the Trefort-garden campus located in the heart of the capital (Figure 5).

3.1. The location

Trefort-garden, the courtyard of the university, or its private public space if you like, is a location that primarily serves as a passage or circulation area today, it is by no means a peaceful place for meditation. The garden is surrounded by significant, listed historic university buildings, predominantly appearing with clinker brick architecture. In our opinion, only a monument has a chance that becomes invisible part of this environment and may become a dramatic sign at the same time – depending on the openness of the receiver. Today, already six different statues or plaques are located in the garden. But seemingly they are almost invisible, despite their large size and central position. Our intention was not to increase the number of monuments in the garden, but we tried to make the garden itself the place of remembrance. To leave a sign somewhere or to mark something – is not the same. We thought that designating the same place that was used by the former victims or by today's academic citizens can give a unique chance for the planned memorial. The place of remembrance can be the everyday space of past and present university life; and achieving this was our basic goal.

Scale become the keyword, since the garden is of a considerable size, but the sign should relate to the whole. Therefore our sign became huge and at the same time almost impossibly small. An intervention in Trefort-garden, which is total and almost imperceptible in parallel. We hope the memorial will be able to objectify the unique and dramatic loss of the university associated to the specific era, without placing it in the focus of the weekdays of today's academic citizens. It allows people either to keep a distance (in this case it remains a hardly perceptible stripe on the wall), or to lean close, to understand and remember (when the massive quantity of legible names and data, as well as their spatiality encompassing the entire garden establish a connection to the memory of the victims, more direct than any other sign or expression) (Figure 6).
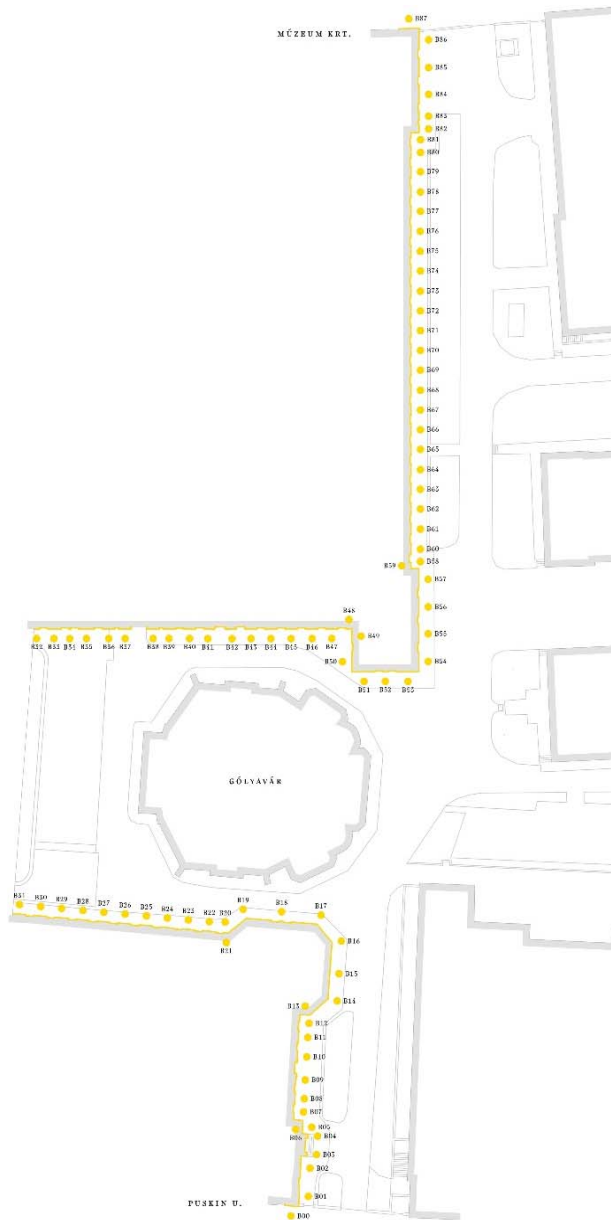
Figure 6. ELTE memorial place of World War II victims,
site plan, MM group, Budapest, 2014

Figure 7. ELTE memorial place of World War II victims,
MM group,
Budapest, 2014 (photographer: Ákos Polgárdi)

Simplicity and openness were considered essential. On the one hand, the increasing number of the victims' name and data, to be found in further research, can be continuously added to the memorial. On the other hand, also the reception of the memorial was planned to be progress-like: this means either the reading of names and data, walking along the wall or the occasional, intentional or accidental encounter with newer and newer names. The victims' names, birth and death date, place of death and their status create a thickening or thinning spatial text in a complete or fragmented, incomplete form depending on the research results.

The 1 cm high bronze stripes are integrated in the mortar joints (to the plane defined by the mortar surface of the joints), this way they became part of the buildings. The victims' names and data are engraved in this bronze surface. There is no order: our concept neither distinguishes between victims, nor groups them in one place, but it illustrates in space and – by means of going along – also in time that this is about an individual tragedy and a loss of community at the same time. On the memorial sign running linearly, a simple sentence appears at one place, which is placed inversely to the brick plane instead of the mortar's plane, protruding out of the bronze base plane. This sentence, defining the memorial itself, can be read in Hungarian, in English and in Braille: *„In memory of all those university citizens who have fallen victim to the anti-Jewish laws, Holocaust and World War II. ELTE, 2014"* (Figure 7).

3.2. The sign

Bronze rods with a section of 1x1 cm were installed into the mortar joints of the two brick buildings standing on the campus area located between Múzeum Boulevard and Puskin Street, with the total length of 200 meters, using 180 kg bronze. Names and data of 6 mm high letters were engraved in the 1 cm high bronze stripe with the university's own purpose-designed fonts, in a total of 9,454 characters. The memorial sign consisting of a single line, contains 198 former academic citizens' name and personal data (date of birth and death, place of death and the status of the victims) that have been found so far, distributed randomly but homogeneously.

3.3. Typeface as space creating element

As we started to deal with the details of implementation more and more deeply, it became obvious that typeface has a special significance. Not only because the memorial's typography is determinative by its nature, as the monument is primarily based on indicating names

and data. Rather, because a vast majority of the victims did not, could not have any tomb to engrave their name in. So our thinking about fonts and typography had to start from this responsibility.

It would have been obvious to use the fonts typical of the era or the ones that could be found in the university documents of the time. The era of World War II was perhaps the most important, revolutionary period of 20th century typography, during which sans-serif fonts have appeared and become canonized, and the subtypes were elaborated that exist even today. In the 20s and 30s, the geometric and humanist grotesque typefaces appeared in parallel. This progressive turn is presented in the typeface of the memorial, designed by Ákos Polgárdi. The most restrictive criteria were the formal aspects, since the letters were engraved into the bronze surfaces with CNC milling machine. In this case, CNC milling presented two fundamental challenges. On one hand, the accuracy of the end mill and the fineness of the created form – compared to the size of the font – could not be perfect; on the other hand, the plane of the text got behind the supportive plane, making it difficult to read because of the resulting shading. This effectively made it necessary to apply the aforementioned grotesque (i.e. sans serif) typeface, since any decorative element (here the serifs) would have created further stem connections, making the characters hardly recognizable due to the shadow effect.

During CNC milling, manufacturing custom-made tool heads made it possible to create the desired, relatively large depth despite the small font size, this way to achieve the necessary plasticity and legibility. The machine had been working for 20 days, following the path set by the typeface, until it milled the names and data of the 198 victims into the bronze surface.

These were not in the least merely abstract professional-technical issues, but they increasingly directed our attention to scale, one of the most fundamental questions of memorials. Zooming, the possibly most radical realization of getting close, also led to the thoroughness of elaboration (Figure 8).

The sign, visible and tactile on two buildings of Terfort-garden, became one with the buildings on which it was installed. By rejecting any new formation and leaving everything to a single rule, i.e. the strict limitation based on the height and depth dimensions of the chosen brick joint, we have not done anything other than followed the frames set by the former builders. And all this proved to be decisive. We had to pay attention to nothing else except following this rule (Figure 9).

4. Conclusion

By throwing some example projects, I would like to give a possible answer to the very complex question of

remembrance and architecture, through some different architectural concepts. New types of monuments seem to start a new period, when architectural approach becomes increasingly important in thinking about memorial places.

Why has the location, architectural and urban space become and continue to become the scene of remembrance, and why the fact of designating becomes increasingly important instead of the sign itself? Our memorial was realized in Budapest already one and a half years ago, and it was a result of a process of uplifting experience that made it possible for us to carry out a research on contemporary monuments with architectural approach, and at the same time it enabled

Figure 8. ELTE memorial place of World War II victims, steps of the process, MM group, Budapest, 2014 (photographer: Albert Farkas)

Figure 9. ELTE memorial place of World War II victims, steps of the process, MM group, Budapest, 2014 (photographer: Nóra Szigeti)

us to take a commitment as practicing architects by implementing the memorial for Eötvös Lóránt University, Budapest.

Nomenclature

Boštík, Václav	3
Callmeyer Ferenc	4
Demnig, Gunter	1, 3
Dilengite, Anna	5
Eisenmann, Peter	1, 5
Gerz, Jochen	2, 4
Helm, Sebastian	5
John, Jiří	3
Lin, Maya	3
Musil, Robert	2
Ouroussoff, Nicolai	5
Pauer Gyula	5
Polgárdi Ákos	7
Shalev-Gerz, Esther	4
Togay, Can	5
Ullman, Micha	4
Young, James E.	2, 3, 6

Founding source

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