

# DIFFICULT MEMORIES: RECONCILING MEANING

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Volume

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Department of Interior Architecture, Rhode Island School of Design

# MUSEOGRAPHY FOR TRAUMATIC MEMORIES<sup>1</sup>

## RE-ENACTING THE PAST

by MICHELA BASSANELLI + GENNARO POSTIGLIONE

In the debate on Contemporary Memory, there are two terms included constantly in the incipit of the major literary works on this topic: *obsession and hypertrophy* (Huysen 2003, Agazzi and Fortunati 2007, Macdonald 2009). The theme of Memory has become a subject of discussion in different fields of knowledge: from social to biomedical sciences, from visual culture to media. In the last decade, critics (Caruth 1995, Antze and Lambek 1996, Edkins 2003) have focused more specifically on the aspect of Memory related to traumatic and painful events: "If the 1980s were the decade of a happy postmodern pluralism, the 1990s seemed to be haunted by trauma as the dark underside of neoliberal triumphalism" (Huysen 2003, 8).

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 marked a decisive, cultural break in the manner in which we look back at the past, opening the season of commemoration: the *memento*—the renewed and strengthened remembrance urged by the death of the survivors of the Second World War—sets itself as the renewed imperative of "NEVER AGAIN," which is reflected in the numerous memorials and museums recently built in all Europe to commemorate those years of terror.

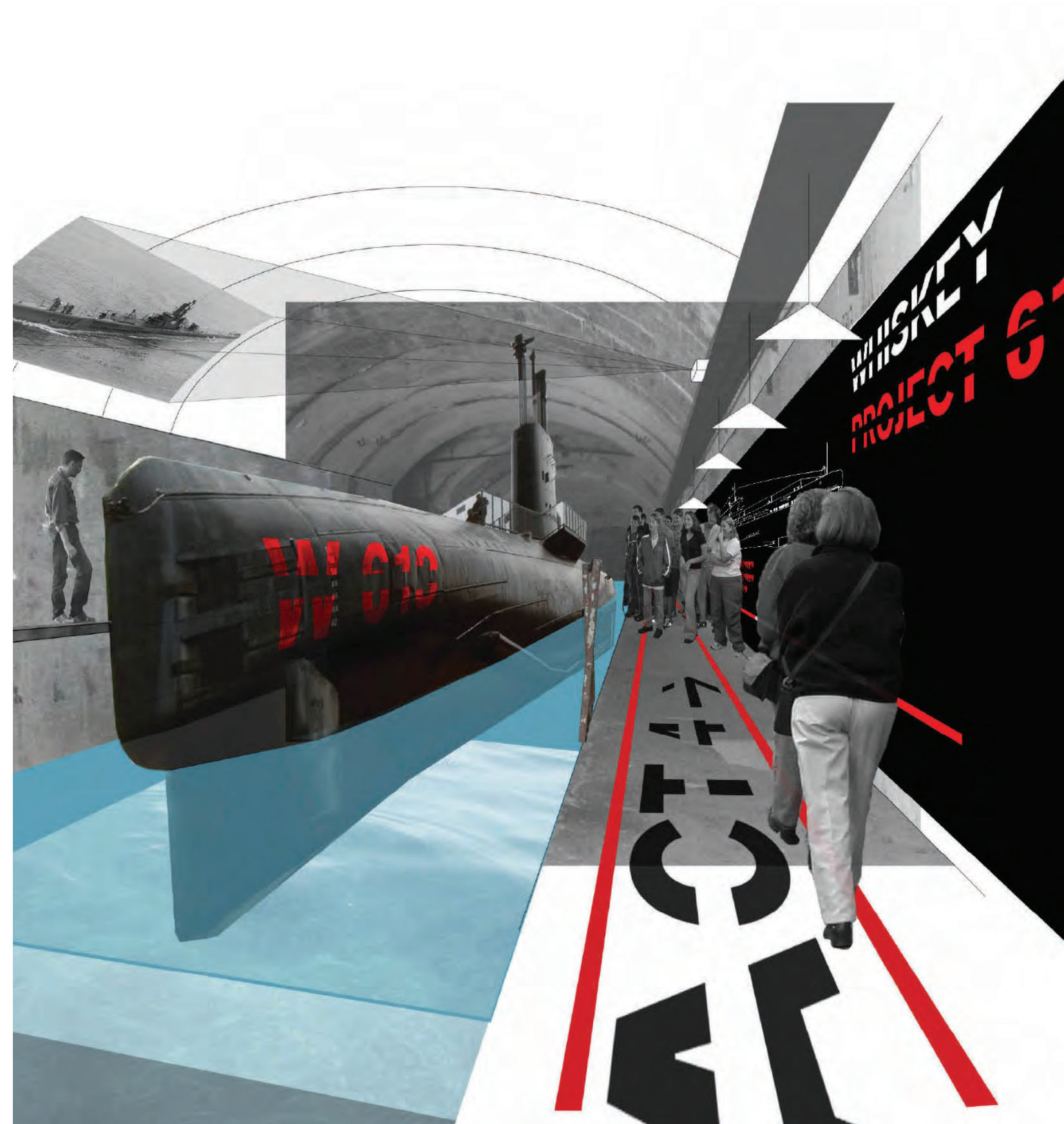
*During the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty first, visible markers of the past—plaques, information boards, museums, monuments—have come to populate more and more land and cityscapes. History has been gathered up and presented as heritage of a meaningful past*

*that should be remembered; and more and more buildings and other sites have been called on to act as witnesses of the past. (Macdonald 2009, 1)*

The current society is "bulimic"—Pierre Nora speaks of the "commemorative bulimia of our era"—it preserves all sort of objects, writings or traces which can testify to and keep the memory of an event or a person. Andreas Huyssen—one of the first scholars to have dealt with the changes of Memory in the 20th century—identifies, in the nature of the major events which have characterized the so-called *short century*, the reasons that have led to the proliferation of studies on Memory.<sup>2</sup> The reasons for this "explosion" are both socio-economical and political, as clearly shown by the attitude adopted by many nations at the end of the Second World War—Germany and France in particular—that tried to redefine their identity through a reprocessing of their difficult and contradictory past. The tragic events of the 20th century have brought the emergence of numerous definitions of Memory; terms such as *oblivious memory* (Fussel 1975), *broken memory* (Assmann 1999) and *silent memory* (Tarpino 2008), an attempt to translate, in simple words, the horrors of what was endured.

### Heritage of War: Ruins and Rubble

In Europe, the 20th century, more than any other, was characterized by a long period of wars of different forms, extension and intensity, from the Great World



Panorama Museum of the Cold War, 2011

## **Int AR - Difficult Memories: Reconciling Meaning**

Main Title - **Re-appropriation: Museography for Traumatic Memories<sup>1</sup>**

Subtitle - **Strategies for Re-enacting the Past**

Authors - Michela Bassanelli, Gennaro Postiglione

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## Difficult Memories

In the debate on Contemporary Memory, two are the terms included constantly in the incipit of the major works of the literature on this topic: *obsession* and *hypertrophy* (Huysen 2003, Agazzi and Fortunati 2007, Macdonald 2009). The theme of Memory has become a subject of discussion in different fields of knowledge: from social to biomedical sciences, from visual culture to media. In the last ten years the critics (Caruth 1995, Antze and Lambekm 1996, Edkins 2003) have focused on a particular aspect of Memory of traumatic and painful events: “If the 1980s were the decade of a happy postmodern pluralism, the 1990s seemed to be haunted by trauma as the dark underside of neoliberal triumphalism” (Huysen 2003, 8).

Above all, the fall of Berlin Wall in 1989 marked a decisive cultural breach of the way to watch the past, opening the season of commemoration: the *memento*—the renewed and strengthened remembrance urged by the death of the survivors of the Second World War—sets itself as the renew imperative of “NEVER AGAIN,” which is reflected by the numerous memorials and museums recently built in all Europe to commemorate those years of terror.

*During the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty first, visible markers of the past—plaques, information boards, museums, monuments—have come to populate more and more land and cityscapes. History has been gathered up and presented as heritage as meaningful past that should be remembered; and more and more buildings and other sites have been called on to act as witnesses of the past.* (Macdonald 2009, 1)

The current society is “bulimic”—Pierre Nora speaks of “commemorative bulimia of our era”—it preserves all sort of objects, writings or traces which can testify and keep the memory of an event or a person. Andreas Huysen—one of the first scholars to have dealt with the changes of Memory in the 20th century—identifies in the nature of the major events which have characterized the so-called *short century*, the reasons that have led to the proliferation of studies on Memory.<sup>2</sup> The reasons for this “explosion” are both socio-economical and political, as clearly shown by the attitude adopted by many nations at the end of the Second World War—Germany and France in particular—which tried to redefine their identity through a reprocess of their difficult and contradictory past. The tragic events of the 20th century have brought the emergence of numerous definitions of Memory like: *oblivious memory* (Fussel 1975), *broken memory* (Assmann 1999) and *silent memory* (Tarpino 2008) in the

almost impossible attempt of translating in simple words the horrors of what was lived.

### **Heritage of War: Ruins and Rubbles**

The 20th century more than any other was characterized, in Europe, by a long period of wars of different form, extension and intensity, from the Great World Wars to local ethnic conflicts. Each conflict left its own inheritance: ruins and rubble, but also buildings and infrastructures which dot European cities and territories as visible reminders of a past people would prefer to forget.

*The residues of this architecture create uncertainties, reveal ambiguities and cause embarrassment: only with great difficulty (and just recently) museums have been created inside them to collect and tell the history and the meaning of these buildings.*

(Pirazzoli 2010,138-139)

Especially the Second World War left material and immaterial traces all over the European territory; in Hitler's political strategy, there was the desire to build for the eternity, enormous buildings that would have gone further than the Reich itself. Some of this constructions remained on papers while others have been built and still dominate their original contexts for which they have turned into unwelcome guests. An example of these monumental buildings with their "superhuman dimensions" are the Flaktürme—the anti-aircraft gun blockhouse towers—raised since 1940 by Architect Friedrich Tamms throughout Germany. These towers in reinforced concrete were positioned in strategic places of cities like Berlin, Hamburg and Vienna in order to protect them from Allied Forces' attacks. In Vienna the communication tower in Esterházy park was converted into an aquarium (Haus des Meeres). Just how good this reuse is, in terms of reconciliation between the populace and its wartime heritage, is quite difficult to say—mainly because it simply rejects and refuses any linkage with the painful memories and histories stored in the building (fig.1-2). Another tower in search of an adaptive reuse is the fortress-shaped attack tower in Arenbergpark, which since 1995 has served as the MAK Depot of Contemporary Art. For the past decade, MAK Director Peter Noever has been promoting an ambitious plan to reuse the structure in its entirety for what he calls the Contemporary Art Tower (CAT).

Similarly, during the Great World Wars and later the Cold War, long lines of defence (and consequent political tension) were built as borders between neighbour States, for example *Der Atlantikwall*, *The Maginot Line*, *The West Wall* and *The Salpa Line*, but they were also used also in more local conflicts (like the ethnic wars of ex-

Yugoslavia). These fortified systems are intrusive presences which sometimes cross only one country and some others cut through several ones. Today, the Atlantikwall, the defence line which crosses all the States on the European Atlantic coast (from the French-Spanish border till North Cape in Norway), is one of the greatest expression of the *Archaeological Landscape of Wars* (fig.3). Composed by a sequence of places dense with memories: bunkers, cemeteries and museums, this linear system presents itself as an immense commemorative open-air site.

### **How to hand down these Memories?**

The Holocaust drama, and in particular the slow disappearance of its direct witnesses, has caused a series of considerations concerning the way of handing down those memories. Reinhart Kosellek observes that a passage from an *historical present* of the survivors to a *pure past* is happening: “soon only the official documents will speak, integrated and enriched by photos, videos and biographies” (Koselleck 1994, 117).

The 20<sup>th</sup> century was the Witness’ Century,<sup>3</sup> the century of the survived man who showed the truth of overwhelming facts and, at the same time, the absolute banality of evil. During the first 1960s, Eichmann’s trial and the Frankfurt ones emphasized the importance of the witness in the construction of a shared history. The body of the survivor became a sort of public body “mindful of many who cannot speak anymore, who have no eyes, ears, or numbers engraved on their skin anymore” (Tarpino 2008, 15). The flow of time and the natural generation exchange result in the disappearance of the last witnesses, leaving us the ethical task of passing on the stories to the new generations, giving them a *monito* (stern warning) of not repeating the tragedies of the past and not forgetting: “ [...] as the witnesses to your life diminish, there is less corroboration, and therefore less certainty, as to what you are or what you have been” (Barnes, 2011).

In this context, the places of Memory could represent the new witnesses called to tell the stories hidden in them with their traces, tangible or intangible. In addition, they can become the possible tools to overcome the trauma. Pierre Nora, in the 1980s, defines the concept of *lieux de memoire*, which is also the title of his impressive work in seven volumes (1984-1992) dedicated to the places of Memory founded in France, as: “significant units, of either material or ideal order, which the will of men or the effect of time has turned into symbolic elements of the memorial patrimony of a community” (Nora, 1984). Therefore, a place of memory is a space, such as a

museum, a monument, a particular territory or site which embodies traces of historical or traumatic events to a point of becoming a container of collective memory. In an even more evident way, *places of trauma*,<sup>4</sup> like memorials are characterized by multiple and different stratifications of memories linked to people who have actually lived those experiences. One of this case is the “Topographie des Terrors,”<sup>5</sup> headquarters to the three major totalitarian institutions of Nazi apparatus (Secret State Police, the SS and the Reich Security Main Office), a place load of atrocious memories and destroyed after the war. In 1985 an excavation has dug out the remains of a basement containing kitchens and guard posts. This discovery opened in the heart of Berlin a big wound, a memory that was removed from the minds and eyes re-emerged again. Today, this place is home to the documentation centre “Topography of Terrors” which includes historical documentations archives, a large public library and a permanent exhibition. The project was realised by the competition announced in 2006 and won by Ursula Wilms and the Landscape Architect Heinz W. Hallmann.

### **Different Strategies of Re-appropriation: the Museography**

Our position considers that material traces of conflicts may become, as already mentioned, the new witnesses able to pass on difficult memories to new generations and to start the indispensable process of re-appropriation needed to revise the traumas and to negotiate a new relationship between memory, place and daily life. Some ephemeral projects, which moves in-between art and architecture, have emphasized the symbolic value and the meaning of “removed memory” of this painful heritage. Two artists, Magdalena Jetelova and Ejdrup Hansen, have designed some installations in specific sections of the Atlantikwall. In Jetelova’s case, the project, performed for the 50th anniversary of the landing of Allied troops, consisted in the projection on the rough surface of the concrete bunkers, of some excerpts from the book “Bunker Archaeology” by Paul Virilio (1975). Ejdrup Hansen, instead, in the installation “*The Line – The Light*” (realized the 4<sup>th</sup> may 1995), projects a beam of light that connect a bunker to another along the west coast of Denmark. The project was switched on from 22:00 to 24:00 as a symbol for celebrate fifty years of peace. The light retraces the coastline of the invasion, from the syncopated and dazzling light of the bombs in the night, to the steady light of calm, silence and reflection (fig.4). The light is a possible tool for recall past traces, for reflect and commemorate. Another important and meaningful project that work at the same way is “Tribute in

Light” by the artists Julian LaVerdiere and Paul Myoda. The main idea is to fill the void of the Twin Towers, a beam of light to remind the attack. Similarly, it is many years that the association “Vivre le Rue”<sup>6</sup> organizes cultural events in Saint Malo street, miraculously survived to the bombing that destroyed the city of Brest during the Second World War. Within a participated process, the French collective “Collectif Etc” has converted an unused space between two houses, all reduced to ruins, in a theatre, thanks to the installation of temporary wooden structures. The theatre becomes a strategy of re-appropriation that brings back life into the ruins (fig.5-6).

In the last years, learning from the artistic experiences on war heritage, projects were born that use the museography as a tool of re-elaborating the collective trauma and reconcile memories, promoting actions of knowledge, conservation, communication and the valorisation of the traces, material and immaterial, that are layered in the landscapes and urban territories.

*This objective involves in particular a real meeting of the people concerned with their own successive memories: a true reconciliation, in certain cases, between tangible and non-tangible heritage. To this end, architectural heritage, museums and all cultural areas must become places of life for the local populations. Synergies between past cultural heritage and contemporary creations, live arts and crafts should be promoted in order to encourage the dialogue between generations and the integration of cultural heritage in local daily life.*

(Euro Med 2007)

As Luca Basso Peressut affirms: “the landscape changes continually, it is a living and dynamic body [...] The diffused museum involves polarities and underlines the textures of a material memory of a complexity which is subjected to changes. This is, therefore, a contemporary condition of doing architecture [...]”(Drugman, Basso Peressut, and Brenna, 2002). The concept of diffused museum extends its borders and presents itself like a real designing action. On one hand, the museum wants to preserve the memories and on the other to make them accessible to the community: “The museum into the places become a possible strategy of intervention and the catalyst of projects aiming to the valorisation of historical sediments existing in the territory” (Basso Peressut, 2007). The museography, in this way, promotes a reintegration of traces and rubbles in the life cycle of things and people. The findings not only represent a redeem to the loss of memory but can be used to uncover other stories and rediscover other memories suppressed so far.

### **The Museum of Porto Palermo in Albania as a case study**



In support of the thesis that the Museography for the “Conflict Heritage” can play an important role not only in valorisation and recovery practices but also in reconciling and overcoming the trauma and going further than the concept of a memorial or a memorial museum, we present the project of a museum in the submarine base at Porto Palermo in Albania developed by Studio Terragni in collaboration with Jeffrey Schnapp.

The submarine base of Porto Palermo (Gjiri i Panormes) in Albania—160 km southwest of Tirana—was built during the Cold War on Enver Hoxha’s wish, he was dictator in Albania from the end of the Second World War until his death in 1985. During the ‘60 and ‘70s, under the threat of enemies’ attacks, thousands of bunkers were built across the country, the so-called “pillboxes” (more than 750.000 units) and 200 tunnels used as guard posts and shelter of weapons. The tunnel of Gjiri Panormes was built by 2000 people, most of them convicts, in order to accommodate four Russian submarines of 90 meters. Studio Terragni with the collaboration of Jeffrey Schnapp, was called to propose a project for converting the submarine base into a museum. Surely the Albanians had seen the design for the “Galleries of Piedicastello” in Trento (fig.7), transformed in Historic Museum of Trentino, a space completely dedicated to history and memory.<sup>7</sup> In an interview, published by Columbia University’s “SLUM Lab” magazine, Elisabetta Terragni describes in this way her sensations during the visit of such a complex structure, not only for its size—650 meters long by 12 high—but also for the painful values:

*The excitement of walking for the first time through an abandoned tunnel (be it a civil or military infrastructure) speeds up your thinking: you realize that you cannot undo such a violent intervention into earth and rock, nor build in accord with it. The challenge lies in inventing another purpose, another future for a new useless condition. Your will is suspended by the overwhelming size and self-contained nature of tunnels. You’re disinclined to add to or otherwise change the structure. (Terragni 2011, 50)*

A building full of meanings, sometimes difficult—the history of the military base is afflicted by the deaths of prisoners who died during its construction—which gains a new life as museum of the Cold War; a place where people can know and learn the past in its various expressions, overcoming a difficult history both locally and internationally. Terragni, with the collaboration of Daniele Ledda for the graphic part, has created an exhibition conceived as a sort of trip in an underground world. The base becomes the scene on which the events which marked its history are the main characters. The exhibition unfolds a spatial sequence of seven environments that deal with different themes: “The I and IV acts are transition ones which mark the

passage from inside and outside [...], The VII act concludes the track with a navigation toward the fortress of Ali Pasha. The acts II, III, V, instead, have a historical—documentary cut” (Terragni 2012, forthcoming).

The exhibition tells the Cold War from two perspectives that dialogue on the walls: one dedicated to local history of Albania—from 1946, the year of the birth of the People’s Republic, to 1992, the year of Democratic Party’s assumption of power—and the other relating to the history of the world’s superpowers. From the graphical point of view, a unique sign cuts at the centre each letter and word used in the exhibition (fig.8-9-10). This choice is based on the association Albanians have made to the word Gjiri for four decades: “a concealed cut through the bay’s promontory, a symbol of the erasures and wounds of the Hoxha period” (Foppiano 2011, 102).

The submarine base is now a place of memories and histories that re-emerge on the surface of the reinforced concrete walls. As Terragni said: “Our aim was never to restore, but rather to give a new life and meaning to a space that was respectful of its past” (Foppiano 2011, 103). This is why the proposal of Studio Terragni to house a Museum of the Cold War makes sense: it opens up towards a future in which people can finally achieve reconciliation with their past, and in which these pieces of war heritage can find their appropriate dimensions and place, neither visually removed nor presented as mausoleums of pain.

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Fig.9 Proposal of the main entrance of Panorama Tunnel, 2011

Elisabetta Terragni (Studio Terragni Architetti; Installation and Architecture), Jeffrey T. Schnapp, (Meta Lab(at) Harvard; Curator- in-Chief); Daniele Ledda xy comm ( Graphics).

Fig.10 Panorama Museum of the Cold War 2011,

Elisabetta Terragni (Studio Terragni Architetti; Installation and Architecture), Jeffrey T. Schnapp, (Meta Lab(at) Harvard; Curator- in-Chief); Daniele Ledda xy comm ( Graphics).

Fig.11 Panorama Museum of the Cold War 2011,

Elisabetta Terragni (Studio Terragni Architetti; Installation and Architecture), Jeffrey T. Schnapp, (Meta Lab(at) Harvard; Curator- in-Chief); Daniele Ledda xy comm ( Graphics).

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<sup>1</sup> This paper ensued from: the National Research Grant PRIN 2008 'The intervention in archaeological areas for activities related to museums and cultural communication'; and the Research Project 'MeLa - European Museums and Libraries in/of the Age of Migration' funded within the European FP7 2010.

<sup>2</sup> See Huyssen 1995.

<sup>3</sup> On the role of witness see: A. Wieworka *L'ère du témoin* (1998) and D. Bidussa, *Dopo l'ultimo testimone* (2009).

<sup>4</sup> See Assmann 1999.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.topographie.de/en/>

<sup>6</sup> [http://lamaloine.vivrelarue.net/Rue\\_St\\_Malo.htm](http://lamaloine.vivrelarue.net/Rue_St_Malo.htm)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.legallerie.tn.it/>







