

Space for Reflection

Construction on The Johannesburg Holocaust and Genocide Centre commenced in January 2012 with the opening of the Permanent Exhibition in March this year, it is now fully functional and officially open.

PROJECT TEAM
CLIENT: Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre
ARCHITECT AND PROJECT MANAGER: Lewis Levine
COLLABORATING ARCHITECTS: Asher Marcus, Clara da Cruz Almeida, Daniel Trollope
ACOUSTICAL DESIGN: Ivan Ling
LIGHTING DESIGN: Pamboukian lightdesign
QUANTITY SURVEYOR: Hamlyn Gebhardt
PROJECT PLANNER: Richard Waller
SITE FOREMAN: John Martin
STRUCTURAL ENGINEER: BSM Baker
STEEL DESIGN AND FABRICATION: Dymond Engineering
ELECTRICAL ENGINEER: Monty Miller Associates
ELECTRICAL INSTALLATION: JM Electrical
PERMANENT EXHIBITION: Clive van den Berg with Carina Comrie and Lauren Segal

Light is reflection. Forget about the fitting. It's about a wall, it's all about volume and surface, it's all about everything else and a light source. That simple statement opened my eyes" said Lewis Levine the architect of the Johannesburg Holocaust and Genocide Centre remembering a discussion he had had with Paul Pamboukian (lighting designer for the Centre) years back. It never let him go.

Designing the Centre Levine returned to the question, what is illumination really? He set about designing "a building that beams with a veneration for life. "I wanted that kind of feeling to come into the building. One must talk about recovery, upliftment and moving forward." The lighting would be elementary, and subtly applied it would also add a warmth to the complex. The idea of thinking about "light as surface, about light as texture, about light as a tapestry, contour, or space" was applied throughout the building. "It is about evoking an emotional experience too."

Levine the architect was also project manager, construction and procurement manager of the building. The slow building process, dependent on financial contributions and in many instances building materials donations, allowed for experimentation. The lighting was designed to be centrally controlled which lead to clean solid and beautifully constructed English Bond Brickwork wall, used in the concentration camps, without switches or plug points. "My idea generally, was to explore these self-illuminated surfaces as much as I could." This contrasts to working with traditionally elegantly sculptured light fittings as objects with a personality. "The idea of making as many of your own components as possible, from windows to façade systems, to whatever you can manufacture, even your own lighting fittings, which are simply hidden sleeves, hidden tubes, shafts and containers to mount light in, informed the entire design."





The lighting thus emanates from hidden sources. The floor skirting strip, for example, is lifted and fitted with power, data cables and LED strip. It runs throughout the building. Placed symbolically it gives legibility to its new primal function of illumination. The rim of light becomes a feature that floats the wall. "We got a steel strip from which we bent up a whole series of profiles to fit the LEDs in, to conceal the source, and then made the composite." It was also applied to the staircases where the handrail, based on the inner contour of the hand, is angled to take a strip LED that casts a determined wide beam over the treads.

The foyer with slatted timber ceiling strips has daylight panels either side to the east and west. The dump rock wall lights up late mornings for a short while, top lit directly through the skylight, by the passing sun. "The notion that you light a surface with the sun, with artificial light, is the same thing. You don't think differently when you work with light. The challenge is to work both with natural and artificial light." By contrast the supporting I-beams are up lit, fitted with LED strip tucked into the corners and angled to give a soft mellow glow.

Levin queries the suspended linear strip lights in the entrance lobby. "They don't really add to the space. If you look at the bathroom fittings, we made them up, suspended they up light the ceilings and are virtually invisible." LED strips concealed along the exposed concrete structural beams would have illuminated the soffits.

For the barn roof of the resource centre and temporary exhibition space on the first-floor strip lighting channels are fixed to the support beams as accents. They are side daylight, a deliberate feature with a strong symbolic reference as well, most atrocities were committed in daylight for all to see. Temporary exhibitions are sandwiched between the top and lower light. In the resource

centre the protruding box, reminiscent of the inside of a murky railway freight waggon, is floated as a negative element on the light strip, which could be interpreted as representing the track.

The dump rock wall crossed with railway track, symbolic of a modern ubiquitous industrial system, representing modernity but also oppression and suffering. The re-used pieces of track on the entrance façade are contrasted with the inverse groove for track mounting left bear in the foyer "are like a light beam, shafts of darkness but also shafts of light. "If you imagine a follow-through between the way you construct something, the way it looks and the way you light it, it all becomes one". The mass weight of the material only becomes apparent through the lighting.

The cobble stones of the entrance square (courtyard), conjuring up memories of a traditional European town square, are taken from commercial gravestone leftovers that were cut into small 50 x 50 mm pavers. The shiny polished side is scattered between the untreated rough-hewn stone. "They became symbolic of unnamed souls that accompany us as we use the building. Once again, they carry memory."

The most obvious symbol, the rail track, used literally, sinuated or in associated form finds its ultimate expression in the I-beam section laser-cut into the steel plate as a silhouette frieze above the entrance, which conceals an air-conditioning duct on the roof.

"What is the symbolic language applied to the Centre? The notion of reducing a building that represents or symbolises or feels with these histories is a daunting and haunting task that one does quite hesitantly. One struggles with presenting the unrepresentable. For example, how does one pour concrete into an idea?" states Levin. With carefully considered light of no symbolic value, but applied as a material to enhance textural expression, the Centre imbues a gentle feeling of loftiness and reflection. LID

