

**MELANIJA BELAJ**

FACES OF HUNGER. AN EXHIBITION ABOUT  
(THE LACK OF) FOOD IN THE  
ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUM, ZAGREB

THOUGHTS ON DIFFICULT HERITAGE AND AFFECTIVE  
CURATORSHIP

ABSTRACT

The article reflects on certain important elements related to the creation of an exhibition at the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb, starting from the research process to the exhibition setup and guided tours, which are based on the concept of ‘difficult topics’ in museum practice, as well as on insights from the *affective turn* in museums during past few decades.

INTRODUCTION

The *Faces of Hunger* exhibition (2022–2023) resulted from collaboration between the Ethnographic Museum and Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research, Zagreb, and specifically between two ethnologists who had conducted research on food over many years – Tanja Kocković Zaborski and Melanija Belaj, respectively.<sup>1</sup>

At a time when global strategies are being devised to combat and eradicate hunger, the aim of this exhibition was to raise awareness of hunger, especially imposed

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1 Reference to this study: Melanija Belaj: *Faces of Hunger*. An Exhibition about (the Lack of) Food in the Ethnographic Museum, Zagreb: Thoughts on Difficult Heritage and Affective Curatorship. In Anikó Báti and Patricia Lysaght (eds.): *Living Eating Habits, Revitalized Foodways and the Concepts of Tradition and Food Heritage*. Budapest: ELTE RCH Institute of Ethnology – Museum of Ethnography, 2025. pp. 135–146.

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hunger, but also self-imposed hunger.<sup>2</sup> The exhibition not only showed the theme of hunger throughout history, but also emphasised specifically the struggle against hunger in today's society. While primarily focusing on Croatia, the exhibition also presented the topic within the broader context of global hunger.

We have become more aware of hunger as a reality during times of crisis that have recently affected the world – the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns, earthquakes affecting Zagreb itself and the towns of Petrinja, Sisak, and Glina, in Croatia, as well as those that occurred in Turkey and Syria, and, finally, the wildfires and floods that broke out across Europe. Ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East keep reshaping the world's economic landscape, affecting the distribution and availability of food, and leading eventually to shortages, poverty, and – hunger. We came across many issues in the course of our research of the phenomenon of hunger, but decided to highlight just a few of these in this exhibition – specifically the matters that we raised in our conversations with our informants during our research, which effectively articulated multiple issues associated with hunger. By means of these, the exhibition as a whole would be able to establish good communication with audiences, enabling us to tell the story that hunger shows both a dark and a bright side of human nature and reality.

In the exhibition, and consequently in the exhibition catalogue also, the topic of hunger was approached, both conceptually and visually, in three different ways. Thus, the extensive material which had been collected, was divided into three main sections or themes.<sup>3</sup> The largest section formed the part of the exhibition called 'The Fight against Hunger', which discussed how, throughout history, people have fought, and many still fight today, against hunger. A part of this section of the exhibition was dedicated to recent events in earthquake-affected areas, and to life during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown in Croatia. In the second section of the exhibition – 'Hunger as a Political Tool' – we depicted the use of hunger for political purposes. Examples of this from both global and national history clearly showed that hunger has been, and still is, used as a means of both mass and individual manipulation, resistance, power display, conflict initiation, and killing. In the third section of the exhibition – 'Hunger and Our Body' – the focus was on the relationship between

2 Some parts of this paper are incorporated into the text: Belaj, Melanija: 'It's Either a Struggle or It's Fear – A Reflection on the Co-Author's Involvement in the Exhibition Faces of Hunger', *Etnološka istraživanja* 29 (2024), 240–254.

3 Belaj, Melanija: 'Uvod' ('Introduction'), in Kocković Zaborski, Tanja ed.: *Lica gladi* ('Faces of Hunger') exhibition catalogue (Zagreb: Etnografski muzej and Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku, 2023), 1–5.

hunger and the body – which apparently is becoming increasingly distorted in today's consumerist world – and the issue of self-imposed starvation. Thus, through uncontrolled fasting and dieting, eating disorders are increasingly developing, even among younger populations.<sup>4</sup>

## THE LEGACY OF HUNGER

Hunger, as the main theme of the exhibition, was a very challenging topic to develop for presentation to a museum audience. This is because hunger should not be addressed only as a biological condition, but also as a cultural and social fact, thus necessitating discussion and engagement with several academic disciplines in today's world. As I mentioned in the 'Introduction' to the exhibition catalogue, hunger has been, and also remains, one of the driving forces of human progress – in the development of cities and social life, in the economy, and especially in agriculture, for example. Hunger compels us to think about the future, about the need to build up stocks and about the preservation of seeds. The history of human food consumption has been profoundly shaped and managed by sustained periods of hunger.<sup>5</sup> The experience of hunger – more so than that of food abundance – has defined human history. The agony of hunger has pursued humanity from its very beginnings, and the reasons for its occurrence are diverse – ranging, for example, from climate change, adverse weather conditions and natural disasters, to various social, political, and economic upheavals. Hunger is intertwined with all aspects of life, and it can be approached from entirely different perspectives and scientific disciplines, such as, for example, medicine, archaeology, history, social work, nutrition, gastronomy, ecology, agronomy, sociology, economics, botany, mythology, psychology, ethnology, and cultural anthropology.<sup>6</sup> This is also confirmed in the reflections of two authors, Margu rite Corporaal and Ingrid de Zwart, who, in their article, 'Heritages of Hunger: European Famine Legacies in Current Academic Debates', explore the legacy of hunger in Europe, analysing how historical famines shaped contemporary academic discussions and museum practices that deal with the theme of hunger.<sup>7</sup> In their aforementioned article, the authors highlight the need for a multidisciplinary approach to the study of hunger, thereby combining historical,

4 Belaj: 'Uvod' ('Introduction'), 1.

5 Belaj: 'Uvod' ('Introduction'), 1–5.

6 Belaj: 'Uvod' ('Introduction'), 3.

7 Corporaal, Margu rite and de Zwart, Ingrid: 'Heritages of Hunger. European Famine Legacies in Current Academic Debates', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 28/1 (2021), 30–43.

sociological, cultural, and economic perspectives, in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of a complex phenomenon – something that I myself was aware of at an early stage in the course of my own deliberations on, and possible approaches to, the topic of hunger. During our research for the exhibition, many complex topics emerged, requiring further discussion, in-depth treatment, and representation. Corporaal and de Zwarte also point out that various episodes of hunger, such as the Great Famine in Ireland (1845–1849) and the Holodomor famine in Ukraine (1932–1933), left lasting effects on social, political, and cultural structures in European countries. They also comment on the ways in which these events were interpreted in museum practices, emphasising the importance of understanding historical famines, not only as past events, but also – and I might add, to an even greater extent – as dynamic factors potentially influencing present and future European societies.<sup>8</sup> The intertwining of the exhibition creators' perception of hunger in the setting up of the exhibition, with the ways in which hunger aspects were historically accepted by potential audiences, necessarily affected the presentation of the theme, or specific aspects of it, within the exhibition. During our research and exploration of hunger throughout world history, the abovementioned periods of the Great Famine in Ireland and the Holodomor famine in Ukraine, emerged as significant 'moments', which warranted the dedication of an exclusive section of the exhibition to them. Just when we were working on the Holodomor aspect of the exhibition, war broke out in Ukraine, instantly altering the lives of so many people and gradually affecting the economic landscape of both Europe and the world. It was crucial, therefore, that we should consider carefully how to approach this matter in the exhibition. As Corporaal and de Zwarte note, presenting hunger in museums brings into focus a series of challenges because it is difficult to depict suffering and tragedy in a way that is sensitive both to the victims and to their descendants, but also informative and engaging for audiences. Reflecting on the perception, and the contemporary relevance, of hunger, both in academic discussions and in museum practice, the authors give special attention to the link between the memory of hunger-periods and the creation of heritage around them. They also point out that, in these processes, heritage can be seen as a 'place where memory is embodied'<sup>9</sup> in selective ways, according to the 'demands of the present', or the

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8 Corporaal and de Zwarte: 'Heritages of Hunger. European Famine Legacies in Current Academic Debates', 30–43.

9 Apaydin, Veysel: *Critical Perspectives on Cultural Memory and Heritage. Construction, Transformation and Destruction* (London: UCL Press, 2020).

'imagined future'.<sup>10</sup> Corporaal and de Zwart further observe that we can simultaneously witness the interaction between the construction of heritage and the dynamics of cultural memory (and forgetting). This is because the collective memory of a culturally active community can also serve as an incentive to create new heritage, such as monuments, commemorative rituals, and museum collections, or to preserve material and intangible artifacts and practices.<sup>11</sup> The authors very aptly identify potential problems in conveying and representing hunger, within a specific historical context, to today's audience, by emphasising that the social use and relevance, today, of past experiences of hunger, depend on how this particular heritage is transmitted. It is important, during this transmission process, therefore, to bridge a potential gap between the heritage that is remembered and today's perceptions of it by museum visitors. This is especially true when trying to evoke empathy in a contemporary audience, which often has, as the authors point out, a 'different cultural background'.<sup>12</sup>

During the preparation of the exhibition, it was crucial, therefore, to tackle these challenges and to avoid an inherent risk – that of sensationalism or trivialisation – while considering, interpreting, and presenting inherently difficult and painful topics for prospective audiences. At the same time, however, we needed to ensure that we did not succumb to the 'brutalization of the viewer', to the 'normalization of atrocity', or to the 'sanitisation' of topics – such as Silke Arnold-de Simine highlights in her study of the boundaries of affect in museums.<sup>13</sup> During our research, we visited a Croatian concentration camp (1941–1945) memorial location – the Jasenovac Memorial Site<sup>14</sup> – initially in search of the cookbook by an inmate, Andela Heder<sup>15</sup> – but also seeking any other possible exhibits or stories that we could

10 Ashworth, Gregory John and Graham, Brian. J.: *Senses of Place, Senses of Time. Heritage, Culture, and Identity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2005), 4.

11 Corporaal and de Zwart: 'Heritages of Hunger. European Famine Legacies in Current Academic Debates', 31.

12 Corporaal and de Zwart: 'Heritages of Hunger. European Famine Legacies in Current Academic Debates', 41.

13 Arnold de-Simine, Silke: *Mediating Memory in the Museum. Trauma, Empathy, Nostalgia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), 46.

14 Jasenovac Memorial Site is in the immediate vicinity of the former Jasenovac concentration camp, Camp III (Brickworks). The activities of Jasenovac Memorial Site have developed in different directions and include compiling, researching, scientifically processing, preserving and exhibiting the museum buildings and documents on how the Jasenovac Ustasha camp system operated; an educational programme; organising exhibitions and publications; ongoing co-operation with surviving prisoners and organising commemorative events in honour of the Jasenovac victims <<https://www.jusp-jasenovac.hr/Default.aspx?sid=6468>> accessed 20 November 2024.

15 During January 1942, in the Jasenovac concentration camp, prisoner Andela Heder captured some recipes in her notebook. After a full day of exhausting work, prisoners would talk about the types of

present in the exhibition. Through conversations with colleagues and by reviewing the materials we had prepared, we came across many horrifying facts, and profoundly sad fates and life stories, in this context. After going through archival materials, published documents, and gaining insight into the complex, destructive, sorrowful, and dense history linked to the Jasenovac Memorial Site, we had to consider carefully what to display in the exhibition and how to carry it out, without falling into potential traps mentioned by certain authors when it comes to eliciting empathy in museum audiences. There is a risk, by following the principle of ‘mediated empathy’, of distorting historical context<sup>16</sup> or, alternatively, of overly dramatising and theatricalising historical scenes where the emphasis is more on emotional impact than on adhering to historical facts, resulting in a ‘dramatic condensation of the historical narrative’, which, consequently, becomes less acceptably informative.<sup>17</sup>

Jennifer Bonnell and Roger I. Simon, in their 2007 text on so-called difficult exhibitions, note, that over the past thirty years, many museums have attempted to move away from singular emphasis on ‘affirmative presentations of patriotism, triumph, and great deeds,’ and to increasingly incline towards greater acknowledgment of the complexity of heritage.<sup>18</sup> In the aforementioned text, Bonnell and Simon aim to stimulate discussion about presenting ‘painful histories’ and ‘difficult topics’, acknowledging that these are increasingly displayed and elaborated on in museum practice, while also recognising the lack of discussion on this topic within museology. They initiate the discussion by reflecting on difficult exhibitions through two concepts – the first being that of ‘burdensome gift’, which they describe as a demanding legacy carrying with it the expectation of an empathetic response. The second is the concept of ‘intimate encounter’, which is an exhibition experience that gives visitors the potential for insight that can support new ways of connecting with, and within, the world.<sup>19</sup> The authors also consider the kinds of exhibitions that can be considered difficult to present. In addition to the controversial ones, there are exhibitions where the concept of difficulty can be perceived through the visitor’s

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food and ingredients of certain dishes, mostly desserts. There was very little paper to write on in the camp, so Andela Heder used very small letters in order to write down as much information as possible <[https://www.jusp-jasenovac.hr/Uploads/61/5019/5024/5058/9174/sjecanje\\_na\\_andjelu\\_heder.pdf](https://www.jusp-jasenovac.hr/Uploads/61/5019/5024/5058/9174/sjecanje_na_andjelu_heder.pdf)> accessed 27 November 2004.

16 Gourievidis, Laurence: *The Dynamics of Heritage. History, Memory and the Highland Clearances* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

17 Kelly, Niamh Ann: *Imaging the Great Irish Famine. Representing Dispossession in Visual Culture* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2018), 180.

18 Bonnell, Jennifer and Simon, Roger I.: “‘Difficult’ Exhibitions and Intimate Encounters’, *Museum and Society* 57/2 (2007), 65–85.

19 Bonnell and Simon: “‘Difficult’ Exhibitions and Intimate Encounters’, 66.

level of understanding which includes difficulty in respect of both cognitive and affective aspects of experiencing the exhibition. An exhibition may evoke the burden of 'negative emotions' – uncomfortable, troubling, or conflicting emotional states. Difficult exhibitions can also heighten anxiety through identification with victims of violence or disease, as well as contribute to the retraumatisation of those who were once victims of such experiences.<sup>20</sup>

Eva Silvén and Andres Bjorklünd argue that one of the roles of museums is to confront controversial aspects of history, as well as to take responsibility for preserving individual experiences of broader social processes.<sup>21</sup> This responsibility also involves demonstrating compassion and playing an engaged role in managing society's emotional crises, thus highlighting the museum's unique position, as a non-commercial space, for reflecting on existential issues from historical and cultural perspectives.<sup>22</sup> An exhibition about difficult moments in history, in terms of the relationship between the visitor and presented material, should, according to Bonnell and Simon, be able to create content conveying the message that facing history can foster hope for the future.<sup>23</sup>

Clearly, something that may be experienced as a difficult theme does not depend on specific objects or related events, but rather on the way in which an exhibition transmits its message about a particular topic. It is precisely in this transmittal process, that the acceptance of 'burdensome gift' or 'intimate encounter' with the core message, its particular element, or a complete idea, story, or central thought of the exhibition, occurs. Bonnell and Simon view the 'intimate encounter' as the visitor's individual experience of an exhibition element, that is, the impression and understanding of the exhibition through the complex lens of personal experience of what is being presented, with the possibility of a 'transformative critique of one's understanding of the world,' also occurring.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, the 'intimate encounter' can be perceived as a form of sensitivity that has the capacity to unsettle one's being, while simultaneously allowing for reflective criticism and transformative insight into one's relationship with the past. A particularly

20 Bonnell and Simon: "Difficult" Exhibitions and Intimate Encounters', 67.

21 Silvén, Eva and Bjorklünd, Andres: 'Detecting Difficulty', in Silvén, Eva – Bjorklünd, Andres eds.: *Difficult Matters. Objects and Narratives that Disturb and Affect* (Stockholm: Nordiska Museet, 2006), 248–264.

22 Silvén and Bjorklünd: 'Detecting Difficulty', 256.

23 Bonnell and Simon: "Difficult" Exhibitions and Intimate Encounters', 65–85.

24 Bonnell and Simon: "Difficult" Exhibitions and Intimate Encounters', 69.

important aspect is empathy, which Bonnell and Simon believe, presupposes a similarity of feelings. This reconfigured empathy shows responsibility towards the emotions of others and raises questions that change our experience of the world and our actions within it.<sup>25</sup>

#### AFFECTIVE CURATORSHIP AND 'BURDENSOME GIFT'

Marzia Varutti explores the affective turn in museums, specifically what it means for museum theory and practice, while developing the concept of 'affective curatorship'.<sup>26</sup> This term refers to curatorial approaches that focus particularly on emotional impact on museum visitors. Varutti observes that affective curatorship subtly transforms curatorial practice and the way we think and feel about museums, as she believes that the affect, as a curatorial, theoretical, and analytical perspective, offers key insights into new roles for museums in times of increasingly-demanding emotional engagement.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, Varutti argues that the affect opens new analytical perspectives on the power of objects.<sup>28</sup> She draws on Sandra Dudley's reflections, who warns of possible polarised views of museums and their activities, where museums are seen as being either solely dedicated to the preservation of objects (in an essentialist sense) or entirely focused on serving society.<sup>29</sup> Dudley emphasises the need for a middle-ground approach in this regard, one that explores objects as having an impact on visitors, thus treating objects as potential bridges between the museum and its visitors, as well as between the visitors themselves.<sup>30</sup> Varutti also observes how the affective power of each museum element is further enhanced by multimedia and multisensory museum environments that combine visual, textual, material, and digital elements. These museum components interact to create a mixture of emotions, physical sensations, memories, moods, and imaginative moments, collectively forming what we call 'affect'. The experiencing of a strong emotion in a museum can, according to Varutti, be conceptualised as the result of encountering something that deeply touches us, and she refers to these encounters as 'affective encounters'. The terms, 'affective encounter', intimate encounter, and 'burdensome gift', are categories through which the *Faces of Hunger* exhibition can

25 Bonnell and Simon: "'Difficult' Exhibitions and Intimate Encounters', 70.

26 Varutti, Marzia: 'The Affective Turn in Museums and the Rise of Affective Curatorship', *Museum Management and Curatorship* 38/1 (2023), 68–75.

27 Varutti: 'The Affective Turn in Museums and the Rise of Affective Curatorship', 61.

28 Varutti: 'The Affective Turn in Museums and the Rise of Affective Curatorship', 63.

29 Dudley, Sandra H.: *Museum Materialities. Objects, Sense and Feeling* (London: Routledge, 2010), 4.

30 Dudley: *Museum Materialities. Objects, Sense and Feeling*, 4.

be observed. Particularly important is the experience of guided tours by the curators through the exhibition, which can be viewed from the perspective of affective curatorship, where the exceptional experience by the curators, as I have noticed is a recognition and perception of emotions shared through the exhibition, captured in the immediate impression felt by the visitor or a group of visitors. For the authors of the exhibition, this was a particularly enriching and transformative experience, though at times also very challenging. Questions arise regarding whether the exhibition successfully conveyed emotion; whether the manner in which communication and interaction with the audience, was conducted – either directly or indirectly – created a ‘burdensome gift’; and whether the ‘intimate encounter’ adequately reflected the individual experience, not only of the person ‘reading’ the exhibition, but also of those whose experiences were being conveyed through it.

The two sections of the *Faces of Hunger* exhibition were quite challenging to present as they addressed difficult themes or dark subjects – ‘Hunger as a Political Tool’ and ‘Hunger and the Body’ – the latter exploring eating disorders. The subthemes of these two sections were also challenging – since in both, particularly regarding some topics, death was clearly discernible. In the section, ‘Hunger as a Political Tool’, major famines in different parts of the world – in Ireland and Ukraine, for example – were depicted, as were world wars, the latter by means of objects from concentration and refugee camps, and also with reference to the Homeland War in Croatia (1990–1995),<sup>31</sup> the sieges of Dubrovnik (1991–1992)<sup>32</sup> and Sarajevo (1992–1996),<sup>33</sup> and hunger strikes. Dealing with the visual representations of, and the guided tours through the exhibition involving items from Jasenovac concentration camp – which, after reviewing the rich associated materials, we concluded had essentially been a camp of hunger – were particularly challenging and intriguing. A few items from the Jasenovac camp were exhibited as part of the exhibition: a postcard, the cookbook of Anđela Heder, and the spoon of prisoner Berger. During one of the guided tours led by a museum colleague, when the spoon of prisoner Berger was mentioned, a visitor, having separated from her own tour group, stated that this was her father’s spoon. At that moment, my colleague, along with the rest of the visitors, was taken aback. The visitor in question later told me that my colleague was literally left speechless

31 The Homeland War was a defensive war for the independence and territorial integrity of the Croatian state 1990–1995). <<https://enciklopedija.hr/clanak/domovinski-rat>> accessed 20 November 2024.

32 The siege of Dubrovnik during the Homeland War started on the 1st of October 1991 and lasted until 30th of May 1992. <<https://enciklopedija.hr/clanak/dubrovnik>> accessed 20 November 2024.

33 During the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1991–1995) Sarajevo was under the siege from 1992 until 1995. <<https://enciklopedija.hr/clanak/sarajevo>> accessed 20 November 2024.

– that she was not only without words, but literally without voice, unable to say anything or to continue the tour of the exhibition. The silence was broken by the visitor. She said almost comfortingly and soothingly that it was okay, that it was a good thing that it was her father's spoon, because it was proof that her father was all right. He survived the camp and returned home, and the family decided to donate the spoon to the Jasenovac Memorial Site. Later on, in subsequent tours of the exhibition, my colleague and I referred to this piece of information – the fact, the testimony of the visitor – which, along with the object already burdened with history, became part of its new history, a new narrative of the difficult theme of the years of hunger, the period of history, and the site of the camp where people were starved to death. Along with the spoon as an important object, the fate of which was not fully known until that moment in one of the guided tours, we also drew the visitors' attention to the cookbook of Andela Heder where the recipes from happier times were recorded, as a testament of hope and comfort, and serving as a pledge for the future that those kinds of times would return again some day.

The second dark section of the exhibition dealt with eating disorders. This part of the exhibition also involved collaboration between the museum and the Day Care Centre for Eating Disorders at the Sveti Ivan Psychiatry Clinic. Working together, they designed the 'Remek Tijelo' (wordplay: the 'Masterpiece Body') campaign and held an online competition in this context, for students in upper grades of elementary schools and the first and second grades of high schools. As part of the competition, students had an opportunity to apply to participate in the competition, using all the tools available, to express what 'Remek Tijelo' meant to them. The authors of the best submissions in this regard were rewarded by participating in the 'Course for Prevention of Eating Disorders'. This course consisted of eight workshops, held every other Saturday, and led by trained therapists from the Day Care Centre for Eating Disorders. About twenty girls, some of whom came from as far away as Osijek in eastern Croatia, became ambassadors for the prevention of eating disorders. They were expected to pass on the knowledge they had gained while on the course to the students in their schools and to anyone else interested in the matter. One of the exhibits in this section of the exhibition itself was a poster composed of the drawings created by the patients of the Day Care Centre for Eating Disorders at the Sveti Ivan Psychiatry. The drawings on the poster reveal the fragile and uncertain worlds of the patients, and it is this raw vulnerability that profoundly resonates with visitors. It creates an intimate space for emotional connection between the visitors, the exhibition's creators, and those whose message the exhibition – or certain parts of it – aims to convey.

## CONCLUSION

The *Faces of Hunger* exhibition examined core aspects of its creation, from research to installation, resulting in a carefully-balanced, non-intrusive environment for audiences. Marzia Varutti outlines three analytical approaches for the evoking of emotion in exhibitions – directly engaging with emotions, using design and architecture to subtly elicit emotional responses, and incorporating activities that foster emotional engagement. In *Faces of Hunger*, these perspectives are interwoven with each other, encouraging a compassionate response to the complex subject of hunger. Audience feedback and engagement, from both the professional community and the public, demonstrated the exhibition's success in fostering responsible communication and interaction, preserving the individuality of those represented, and enhancing each visitor's personal experience. *Faces of Hunger* exemplified how carefully-designed elements, spatial architecture, and active visitor participation, can promote reflection, understanding, and empathy on challenging social issues.

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