

Love triangle

Thanks to this brand-new complex by Moshe Safdie, Jerusalem's Yad Vashem museum is in great shape for the future

History can become outdated. The Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial museum in Jerusalem, entering its sixth decade, was past its prime and overcrowded; the exhibits too dusty and the technology too retro.

A Holocaust museum in Israel presents the problems of history, memory and geography. The museum will, by default, be the country's version of a worldwide press release - the end of the line in a long chain of Holocaust-driven architectural responses around the world. These include Daniel Libeskind's well-received Jewish Museum in Berlin and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, the online exhibitions and archival records of which firmly plant Yad Vashem's existing collections in the rusty past. Competition with these larger spaces notwithstanding, the reasons for new construction lie as much in pragmatism as in poetics. The original Yad Vashem was built in 1953, with a predicted number of 300,000 visitors. Now, 50 tourist buses arrive daily, bringing the number of annual visitors up to 2 million.

The museum determined that 35,000 sq ft of new space was needed - the scale of such an overhaul led the museum to consider an entirely new plan. Moshe Safdie is probably Israel's best-known architect. Famous for his 1967 Habitat project in Canada and the recently opened Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv, he had already designed the Children's Museum and the Transport Memorial on the Yad Vashem site.

Safdie approached the design by delving into what he called 'the secrets of the site'. The iconic part of the new complex is a 200m-long concrete prism that cuts through the plateau overlooking the Judean Hills. 'I didn't want to build a new structure on top of the hill,' says Safdie. 'I thought of going underground, but I didn't want the building to feel buried. Because of the shape of the hill, I realised I could cut through the mountain, and have a structure visible at both ends.'

Safdie wanted the design to be absolutely minimal, and his insistence on using concrete (even convincing city planners to override the 1977 mandate that all structures in Jerusalem be faced in the eponymous stone) was worth it. While Safdie cautions the visitor to 'make up your own symbolic meaning', the experience of walking through the hall that closes in to a point of claustrophobia then immediately curves outwards, has upped the ante for this kind of emotive architecture. History has not only caught up; it has raised the bar. ★
www.yadvashem.org, www.msafdie.com

