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The Kindersley Stone marks the Selwyn Gardens entrance to the College

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Through the Lens

Alan Marcus, Visiting Fellow Lent Term 2010



Taking the long walk from the entrance of the New Jewish Cemetery in the Žižkov district of Prague, to the site of Franz Kafka's grave on a frosty January morning, one is struck by the immense sense of space the grounds occupy. The cemetery is evidence of a once significant population of Czech Jews. While Kafka died in 1924, a plaque below his tall gravestone lists the names of his three sisters, Gabriele, Valerie and Ottilie, who perished in the camps after being transported by the Nazis to the Łódź Ghetto, Theresienstadt and Auschwitz in 1942-1943. Prague features the oldest functioning synagogue in Europe, Staronová synagoga,

dating from 1270, and Europe's oldest Jewish cemetery, Starý židovský hřbitov, near the heart of the city. Yet, as a consequence of the Holocaust, Prague's remaining Jewish community now numbers only some 1,400. I came to the city to make a film in Josefov, the former Jewish quarter, and its prominent sacred spaces that have been transfigured by the banality of mass tourism. The resulting film, *The Cemetery* (2010), is one of four 30-minute practice-as-research experimental works that together with a collection of writings comprise the project, *In Time of Place* (www.abdn.ac.uk/timeofplace). The four-year study, which has received primary funding from the Carnegie Trust, explores sites associated with Jewish identity and the Holocaust in Prague, Venice, Dachau and Boston.

During my period as a Visiting Fellow at Wolfson College and CRASSH (Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities) for the Lent term 2010, I gave talks on another of the films in the series that looks at contemporary Dachau, *In Place of Death* (2008), at the Architecture Department, the Divinity School and at CRASSH. The film grew out of a video installation piece, *Beautiful Dachau* (2006), which received its first showing at an avant-garde exhibition in Madison, Wisconsin. The film's title was prompted by a tourism poster on a bus shelter outside the camp's entrance, which read: 'Beautiful Dachau: things to see and do'. The jarring slogan immediately speaks to the challenge facing the picturesque Bavarian town of Dachau, with a population of over 40,000, in its attempt to rebrand itself as a place of culture and remembrance. Seventy years of stigmatisation have followed from Himmler's choice of the town as the location for the Nazis' first state concentration camp in 1933, shortly after they came to power. As discussed in writings on the subject (*Visualizing the City*, Routledge, 2007), the video installation and film seek to suture the relationship between Dachau the camp, Dachau the town and the city of

Munich of which it is a suburb. In a place of death surrounded still by guard towers and barbed wire, there are now over 600,000 tourists visiting each year. Another large section of the former SS grounds now forms the Dachau Golf club and its fairways, and the main compound, with its original SS training academy, headquarters and villas, is occupied by the Bavarian riot police. In my work, I consider how these post-war redefinitions of space contribute to our understanding of the evolving status of an iconic place that symbolized fear, brutality and mass murder.

As a music student in Munich in the mid-1970s, I thoroughly enjoyed getting to know the city, though was unaware that nearby Dachau was the mother camp and transit hub for some 120 sub-camps dispersed throughout Munich and its environs. The question thus arises, what if Munich was known as Konzentrationslager (KZ) Munich, rather than the focus being placed almost exclusively on KZ Dachau for the dense web of camps? Arguably, we would think about cosmopolitan Munich in very different terms today. In fact, Dachau was formerly known principally as an artist colony and the summer home of the Bavarian Royal family. The main road and umbilical cord which links the two towns is still called Dachauerstrasse, which ends in the centre of Munich at the main train station. The project investigates some of these issues of identity and social engagement. Without using archival footage, narration or conventional interviews, the film attempts to offer an observational study of contemporary Dachau, viewing the interactions of tourists and other users, as they pose for pictures in front of the ‘Arbeit Macht Frei’ gate or the crematorium’s ovens. Rather than present conventional forms of documentary narrative signposting, the film relies on shot selection, visual and aural juxtaposition and metaphor to convey meaning. In the last four years, *Beautiful Dachau* and *In Place of Death* have received over two-dozen screenings associated with conference keynotes and invited talks at Harvard, Princeton, Cambridge and other universities, before colleagues



The entrance gate at Dachau

working in film and visual culture, visual anthropology, history, memory studies, architecture and urban studies and Jewish and Holocaust Studies.

Another of the films in the *In Time of Place* series, *The Ghetto* (2009), was screened this year at a conference on *Mapping and Memory* at the University of Liverpool and a *Creative Conflicts* conference held at the University of Dundee. *The Ghetto* was filmed in the historic Jewish quarter of Venice, where the word ‘ghetto’ is commonly thought to have originated from. In a locale which

had a high urban density and where the Jews were forced to live behind gates watched over by Christian guards, the Jewish population has decreased considerably, totalling around 440 for the whole of Venice. The main square, Campo de Ghetto Nuovo, features two Holocaust memorials, a reminder of those who were rounded up in 1943-1944 and transported to the death camps, including Chief Rabbi Adolfo Ottolenghi. Only eight of them survived to return to Venice. As the film reveals, while the five synagogues and various Jewish shops and establishments remain, the palpable absence of Jews is contrasted with a square often filled with people. These are predominantly tourists and non-Jewish local inhabitants, who are drawn to the square because of its size and popularity as an impromptu playground for children. Other readily identifiable users are the contingent of police patrolling the square's perimeter, gondoliers, and a Hasidic group, the Chabad-Lubavitch, who have opened a kosher restaurant, a headquarters and a religious school. The film examines the layers and interactions of the different users as the day progresses, and how their presence alters our perception of this historic space.

During the course of my background research, which has included time spent at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, the National Holocaust Museum archives in Washington and conducting interviews with survivors such as Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel, I have become increasingly interested in the intertwined functions of memory and memorialisation. Since the founding of the Washington Holocaust Museum in 1993, whose library and archives are impressively comprehensive and researcher-friendly, Holocaust memorials have been created in most large American cities, and many smaller ones. How are we to interpret this phenomenon, coming at a time when fewer and fewer survivors remain? Clearly one of the reasons is to educate younger generations, and it has become an acceptable way of providing a surrogate visible grave for those whose lives disappeared up the chimneys of Chelmno, Sobibór, Majdanek and other extermination camps. To address this question, I selected the New England Holocaust Memorial in Boston as the subject of the fourth film in the series. The memorial is a striking and interactive structure consisting of six tall glass columns with steam rising up, engraved with millions of numbers, designed by San Francisco-based architect Stanley Saitowitz. Of particular relevance is the memorial's unlikely location on a large traffic island, with six lanes of busy traffic on one side, and a dozen restaurants and bars on the other, including one which claims to be the oldest tavern in America, and another the oldest restaurant in the country. Yet, this location is also strategically placed on Boston's 'Freedom Trail', though not included formally with the historic revolution-era sites that dot the trail. It also sits across from City Hall and the old Faneuil Hall – the site of key meetings of rebellion leading to America's independence from British rule. *The Memorial* (2010) contextualizes the site's symbolic significance in juxtaposition to Boston's other memorials, and documents tourists' and other users' interactions with the site.

My time as a Visiting Fellow also reconnected me in a tangible way with the marvellous four years I spent undertaking a different area of work at the Scott Polar Research Institute and Clare College, when I conducted research in four Inuit communities in the Canadian Arctic, leading to an MPhil and PhD, and the publications, *Out in the Cold*

(1992) and *Relocating Eden* (1995). This year's research theme at CRASSH has been 'the future university', and my contribution focused on the architectural paradigm produced by Ralph Erskine in the form of Clare Hall (where I was a Visiting Fellow in 2001). A British-born architect who received his training and education in the UK, including the Friends School at Saffron Walden, Erskine relocated to Sweden in the 1930s and went on to become one of its best-known post-war architects. In the late-1960s, Ralph Erskine was asked to design a new college, founded by one of the oldest in Cambridge, Clare College. The architect sought to construct spaces that would actively promote social integration between scholars and their families, postgraduates and visiting fellows, with an egalitarian design that still embraced the expected functions of a Cambridge college. The ambition was to foster a provocative new ethos. Clare Hall provided 'the shock of the new' from the outset by doing away with college gowns, a porter's lodge and high table. In this radical environment, almost a third of the first residents were children. In contrast to the established colleges, family life was architecturally foregrounded as a fundamental component of college interactions.

My work on Clare Hall, though, was triggered by the proposition that the college design was in fact a rendition of an earlier Erskine plan for an arctic town. In the late-1940s, Erskine devised a scheme for a new arctic community, which soon led to his specializing in cold weather architecture and large urban developments. Over the years, my research has included fieldwork at four Erskine sites that sprang from that early design. They include two locales above the Arctic Circle, in Svappavaara in northern Sweden and Resolute Bay on Cornwallis Island in the Canadian arctic. While both of these new town developments were curtailed after a single apartment building was built, Erskine's plan for his arctic design was ironically realized well below the Arctic Circle in England – in the contrasting form of the Byker council housing estate in Newcastle, and Clare Hall on Herschel Road.

As a result of working on these two quite different projects during my time at Cambridge this year, I experienced the great pleasure of talking about the research with colleagues at the Scott Polar Research Institute, including the Director, Professor Julian Dowdeswell (and former classmate at Magdalen College School, Oxford), Clare Hall President Sir Martin Harris (formerly Vice-Chancellor of the University of Manchester during my tenure as a lecturer there), and historian of the period of the Third Reich and new President of Wolfson, Professor Richard Evans. In addition, there have been a number of other Cambridge historians, architectural theorists and film specialists I have enjoyed exchanging ideas and having meals with.

Dr Alan Marcus is a Reader in Film and Visual Culture and Head of Department at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland.