Strengthening the Atrocity Prevention Capacity of Memory Spaces
Policy Paper

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Introduction

“Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” This sentiment from philosopher George Santayana is frequently used to highlight an inherent link between remembering past violence and preventing its recurrence. It implies that memory is essentially good and that it always makes positive and preventive contributions in societies dealing with the legacies of large-scale violence.

Sadly, this is not always the case. Although engagement with the past can indeed build societal resilience in the present, nationalist leaders can just as easily use the past as a tool to justify violence, extremism, and exclusionary ideologies. Because of this, those who want memory to contribute to the prevention of violence, rather than an increase in risk, have to approach memory initiatives purposefully and thoughtfully, designing them with prevention in mind. This involves using what Alex Bellamy has called an “atrocity prevention lens,” which requires us to view the personal and professional decisions we make from the perspective of whether they will increase, decrease, or have no impact at all on the risk for identity-based violence.

In October 2020, the Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities (AIPG) began a three-and-a-half-year process to investigate when and how memory spaces—that is, memorials, monuments, museums, and other memory sites—can contribute to preventing atrocity violence. This project took as its basis a belief that 1) preventing atrocities is an achievable goal that can be measured by assessing how a program or initiative reduces the risk that marginalized populations will be the targets of discrimination and violence and 2) spaces of memory can, but do not always, play a role in prevention.

To see exactly how memory spaces are contributing to mitigating the risk factors related to atrocity violence, the AIPG team developed a database of over 1500 memory spaces in over 70 countries around the world. 258 of these spaces from 56 different countries responded to an in-depth survey about how their programming responds to contemporary risk. Additionally, AIPG visited 109 memory spaces across seven countries from different global regions, each representing a different approach to memory culture: Argentina, Cambodia, Colombia, Morocco, Northern Ireland, Rwanda, and South Africa. The lessons learned from the surveys and site visits were compiled into a toolkit, entitled Beyond Remembering: An Atrocity Prevention Toolkit for Memory Spaces, which guides memory workers on how to develop programming that responds directly to atrocity risk. The toolkit provides a series of exercises and guiding questions to orientate the directors and staff of memory spaces on how to integrate an atrocity prevention lens into their work. It also provides detailed examples of programming developed by memory spaces to respond to atrocity risks related to governance, conflict history, economic conditions, and social fragmentation.

This policy paper provides a brief overview of the findings and key takeaways of this multi-year project, with the aim of helping policymakers and funders who are working to support memory spaces in increasing their contributions to preventing atrocities through remembering a painful past. Those interested in more in-depth analysis can find it in Beyond Remembering, which is freely available in multiple languages on the AIPG Publications Page.
Responding to Risk

Generally, the public views the prevention of mass atrocities in a very limited way: intervention in the midst of mass killing. If this is our understanding of prevention, then it becomes difficult to imagine how a memory site or memorial could contribute to prevention at all. More opportunities for engagement emerge, however, when we take a much broader view of prevention that incorporates elements of upstream prevention—the actions we can take long before crisis breaks out to prevent a situation from escalating—and downstream prevention—the actions we can take in the aftermath of violence to rebuild our societies in a way that makes recurrence of violence less likely. Furthermore, like atrocities themselves, prevention is a process that requires varied contributions from multiple stakeholders. When it comes to preventing a complex social and political process like genocide, there is no single answer or intervention that will solve everything. Complex problems require complex solutions, and spaces of memory can be one of a variety of elements contributing to the collective and collaborative work of prevention.

Contrary to what many may believe, mass atrocities are not necessarily difficult to predict. The risk factors that pave the way for genocide, crimes against humanity, and other forms of large-scale, identity-based violence are well known. Scholars, practitioners, and policymakers have studied them and collected them into a series of risk assessment models, which clearly lay out these risk factors. If we can identify the risk factors that increase the likelihood that a society will experience atrocity, and if we understand mass atrocities as complex processes that require many little solutions rather than one big solution, then we have a concrete way to contribute to prevention: we can take actions that help to diminish, rather than increase, the risks for identity-based violence.

Because of this, the first step to effective upstream prevention starts with an honest assessment of which groups of people face the greatest threats to their rights, wellbeing, and physical security, along with what known risk factors for atrocity exist in a given context. For memory spaces in particular, it is also essential to consider the complex ways in which past violence remains present in social interactions, political practice, economic structures, and institutions. For memory spaces to contribute to prevention, they must first successfully build a bridge between the past and the present, both for the memory workers and the audiences who fill their spaces.

The most successful prevention measures always respond to the specific realities of a given context, and this is no less true when it relates to programming at memory spaces. When developing programs to contribute to prevention, memory spaces should consider several factors. The first relates to the size and frequency of a space’s audience. Traditionally, the “mechanism” whereby memory spaces have a preventive impact has been understood as the potential transformation that individuals undergo by visiting the space. Accomplishing such a transformation, however, can be difficult depending on how and when visitors come to the memory spaces. According to the memory spaces we surveyed, most visitors to the memory spaces (56%) visit the respective spaces
once per year or less. 34% of all visitors only visit the memory spaces once or twice in a lifetime. It is not impossible for a memory space to achieve such transformative change with such fleeting opportunities to engage with their audiences, but it is certainly a tall order and requires multiple strategies.

There are some memory spaces, however, that have more sustained engagement with visitors. 30% of the spaces we surveyed report that the average visitor comes at least several times per year, and 3% report that visitors come weekly or daily. Although this may be an impossible (or even undesirable) goal for some memory spaces, those that do have more sustained engagement with visitors certainly have more opportunities to produce the changes they hope to catalyze. Most of the spaces that see these high levels of visitor engagement are not national memory spaces. Rather they exist at the grassroots, community level. As a result, these small, community memory spaces have a huge potential to initiate programs that have a real and enduring impact on the communities in which they are located.

Additionally, memory spaces must consider their resources and capacity to implement new, preventive programming. Offering such programming can require money, staff, and other forms of support that some memory spaces simply do not have. For example, when asked if their site offers any form of exhibitions or programming intended to reduce the likelihood of discrimination or violence against an identity group in the present, 25.4% of respondents said that they do not. When asked why they do not, 46.8% of responses referenced either a lack of capacity or money. Many spaces continue to develop creative solutions to accomplish their work, despite a lack of resources or support. But governments and other funding entities would be wise to take seriously the good that could come from supporting such initiatives in a more intentional way.
Memory Spaces and Governance

Many risk factors related to governance fall outside of the purview of memory spaces, but they may play a big role in mitigating one factor, in particular. A state legitimacy deficit occurs when members of a society do not trust the government to act justly and to have their best interests at heart. In the aftermath of large-scale, identity-based violence, high levels of distrust in the government are typically present, especially in the groups of people who were directly targeted by violence. Oftentimes, the state itself was the perpetrator of this violence. To mitigate this risk factor, the new, post-atrocity government must reestablish the rule of law and show the groups of people who were marginalized in the past that they can now trust that their rights will be respected and protected equally. Rebuilding trust in such an environment is difficult, to say the least.

Memory spaces are one tool that governments can use to rebuild trust. First and foremost, when the government establishes or permits the establishment of an official memory space, it serves as an act of acknowledgement—the first step in a longer process of repairing the harms that have been done to victimized groups. In some cases, however, governments spend a great deal of resources in the creation of stunning memory spaces, but if these spaces remain largely empty of people and programs, it may be all for naught. Freedom Park in Pretoria, South Africa, is an example of a beautiful and expansive memory space that has seen less than impressive visitation numbers. Beautiful, symbolic spaces are powerful, but only when they are accessible to the public and activated with context-sensitive programming and events that matter to community members.
Second, governments can signal systemic change by transforming certain spaces into memory sites, thus symbolically marking a return of the rule of law and a new age for groups that have formerly been targeted. An example of this comes from the former Escuela Superior de Mecánica de las Armada (ESMA) in Buenos Aires, Argentina. This former naval training school was the largest clandestine detention and torture center during Argentina’s military dictatorship of 1976-83. Today, it has been transformed into a memory site, cultural center, and host to a number of human rights institutions, including the national secretariat of human rights. Symbolic transformations like this can do much to rebuild trust and indicate a clear break between the policies of the past and the present by fostering transparency about what occurred at these sites.

Governments can also help to rebuild trust by supporting memory spaces created by civil society organizations, rather than only focusing on building or administering their own memory sites. Actively supporting community-based memory spaces can demonstrate good-faith efforts on the part of the state to rebuild relationships with civil society.

Overall, the data indicates that AIPG’s online courses effectively enhance knowledge, confidence, and capacity among our alumni, enabling them to make tangible contributions to atrocity prevention efforts around the globe. There is strong interest in continued learning and opportunities for collaboration, highlighting the impact of AIPG’s Online Education Program. However, our ability to increase our reach and expand our course offerings is moderated by a dearth of funding.
Memory Spaces and Conflict History

One factor that most risk assessment models agree places a society at elevated risk for atrocity violence is a recent history of genocide, politicide, or other large-scale, identity-based violence. Because memory spaces exist to acknowledge and deal with a painful past, they offer a special opportunity to address the legacies and root causes of past violence in the present.

Sometimes the risks related to conflict history are not only social and political, but physical, as is the case in Cambodia, where millions of unexploded landmines continue to dot the countryside. The Cambodian Landmine Museum and the Apopo Visitor Center are examples of two memory spaces who tell the story of the violence that brought these landmines to Cambodia while also actively working to demine the country so that fewer people will suffer harm in the present and future.

Memory spaces can also confront other aspects of risk related to conflict history. The Casa de los Hombres y las Mujeres de Triana (House of the Men and Women of Triana) is a memory space created by members of an Afro-Colombian community in rural Colombia. In remembering the harms they suffered during the decades of armed conflict, they also hold workshops and training to preserve cultural practices that are at risk of destruction, including the use of traditional medicines and the production of artisanal handicrafts.

Community-based memory spaces are also well positioned to offer rehabilitation services to those harmed by past violence. The South East Fermanagh Foundation (SEFF) in Northern Ireland, for instance, provides legal assistance and mental health care to the "innocent victims" of "the Troubles." And the District Six Museum in Cape Town, South Africa, which commemorates the destruction of the diverse neighborhood of District Six when it was declared a "whites only" area during Apartheid, now administers the Seven Steps Club, named for a hub of social life in pre-removal District Six. The Seven Steps Club is a space for former residents of District Six to come together and rebuild the community that was lost by forced displacement.
The roughly 800 members are invited to meet monthly, when they not only reminisce about the past, but develop initiatives to deal with current issues in South African society. These examples illustrate how memory spaces can do more than just remember the past: they can actively confront the legacies of past violence that increase risk in the present.

Visitors at the District Six Museum in Cape Town. Photo by Kerry Whigham.
Many economic risk factors for atrocity have to do with the larger macroeconomic environment, and it is unlikely that a memory space could have an economic impact on that scale. Still, the economic aspects of identity-based violence can be devastating, and they often remain unaddressed. Groups that have, in the past, been targeted because of their identity many times continue to experience broad economic hardships relative to other groups. Certain memory spaces are working to mitigate the risk factors related to economic disparities that lead to low levels of economic opportunity.

For example, the Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum (LMLM), which is located in the township of Lwandle outside of Cape Town, South Africa, has developed several innovative programs to address economic risks. The LMLM was established to tell the story of Lwandle, which began as a series of hostels for Black migrant workers during Apartheid. Today, Lwandle has around 20,000 residents, all within an area of 1.2 square kilometers. Many of these residents live below the poverty line, with little economic opportunity. Consequently, the LMLM developed several programs. The site has started to offer career development services and workshops to help people improve their resumes, better their interviewing skills, and find job opportunities. Additionally, the LMLM offers workshops on making traditional handicrafts, including crocheting and beadwork. The workshops are held twice a week for several months, and at the end of the period, there is a showcase for the entire community where participants can sell their wares. These workshops have become so popular that there is a long list to join. They have become a mode both for responding to economic hardship and for empowering local women.

One economic risk factor that is also deeply tied to issues of identity relates to an unequal access to basic goods and services. Often groups who have faced persecution in the past continue to experience relative inequality when it comes to accessing resources like food, water, education,
health services, and cultural programming. Some memory spaces play a role in addressing these disparities, making specific efforts to improve access for communities that have otherwise been ignored.

One example comes from the Museo de la Memoria (Museum of Memory) in Rosario, Argentina. While the museum itself is located in the city center of Rosario, those who live on the periphery of the city are rarely able to access the museum due to financial constraints and lack of access to easy and affordable transportation. In response, the museum developed its department of Territorial Outreach (Articulación Territorial), which is designed to engage communities, and most especially young people, who live at the edges of the metropolitan area and have much less access to resources than those in the city center. Their programming focuses on human rights education, using the story of the past to talk about continuing issues in the present. In this program, young people are asked to think about what state violence looks like today. The museum trains them on understanding human rights and identifying violations. The youth then return to their communities to conduct surveys of community members of human rights violations they have experienced. In addition to documenting these violations, however, the young people are subsequently trained to connect the members of their communities with the proper resources to file complaints for the violations they have experienced and to receive redress. Programs like this simultaneously train young people to be human rights advocates and leaders in their communities and connect community members with the resources that they either did not know existed or to which they did not have access. By teaching young people about what state violence has looked like in the past, this memory museum is working directly to help communities identify and respond to new instances of violence in the present.
Memory Spaces and Social Fragmentation

The category of risk that memory spaces may be the most well positioned to address are those related to social fragmentation. Given that memory spaces are places where people come together in public, there is a great deal of opportunity for them to literally and figuratively bring together people who have been divided or persecuted by identity-based violence.

Identity-based social divisions are a risk factor when social relationships within a society are predetermined by the identity group to which someone belongs. One strategy that some memory spaces use to confront these divisions is to create or highlight identity categories that supersede the divisive ones. Northern Ireland’s Rainbow Project, for example, provides a community space for LGBTQ+ youth and adults from both nationalist and unionist communities, who, despite being from different sides of the country’s traditional divide, face similar forms of marginalization because of their LGBTQ+ status. Highlighting their LGBTQ+ identity categories can help to diminish the power of the more salient identity categories, while simultaneously creating unity across division and strengthening the bonds within this new identity group.

Another strategy that some memory spaces use is to serve as a space of contact between identity groups that may not otherwise develop relationships with each other. One example comes from the Scuola di Pace Monte Sole (Monte Sole Peace School) outside of Bologna, Italy. Monte Sole is the site of the largest war crime in contemporary Italian history. One of their flagship programs is called Peace in Four Voices. These youth camps bring together forty young people from four different countries. Half of the participants come from Italy and Germany—two countries that were once in conflict but now coexist peacefully. The other half come from groups that have been divided historically and remain divided today—for example, Israelis and Palestinians or Serbians and Kosovo-Albanians. Throughout their week at Monte Sole, participants interact with each other as individuals rather than as representatives of their respective countries and cultures. Workshops and small group discussions push the young people to cooperate and develop bonds that, according to the space’s directors, last long beyond their week together. Particularly for the young people coming from divided societies with few chances to interact with different groups in their daily
lives, this model opens opportunities for interaction and cross-cultural understanding in a space that does not “belong” to either group.

Memory spaces can also respond to identity-based social divisions by spotlighting the identity groups that face marginalization in the present. Sometimes, these groups are directly related to the historical violence commemorated by a memory space. For instance, many Holocaust memory spaces focus on highlighting and combating antisemitism in the present. But memory spaces can also draw connections between groups that were marginalized in the past and other groups facing marginalization in the present. For example, the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool, United Kingdom, begins by telling the story of historic instances of enslavement, like the transatlantic slave trade, but then also educates visitors about conditions of contemporary slavery.

One direct approach to preventing atrocities involves taking actions to decrease the capacity of perpetrators to carry out violent acts. In Colombia, where guerilla fighters and the armed forces have roiled the country in decades of armed conflict, one constant threat for the conflict to persevere is the continued recruitment of young people into joining armed groups because of a lack of other opportunities. Several memory spaces in Colombia have developed strategies to mitigate this risk. The Asociación de Familiares de Víctimas de Trujillo (Association of Relatives of Victims of Trujillo, or AFAVIT), which is headquartered in the Parque Monumento (Monument Park) in the small town of Trujillo, noticed that many young people were recruited because there was little keeping them in Trujillo. Given this, they started an after-school music program, where young people are given an instrument of their choice and taught to play. This ever-growing band meets multiple times a week, giving the young people both a passion and a community to which they are accountable. Regular concerts at the memory space, which are open to the public, provide them with a sense of achievement and belonging, making it ever less likely that they will be recruited to fight. Practices like these demonstrate how memory spaces can directly contribute to mitigating violent conflict by taking resources from those who wish for it to continue.
Conclusion

These examples demonstrate just a small sampling of the various ways AIPG has found that memory spaces are contributing to mitigating the risk factors that we know to be associated with atrocity violence. In doing so, they are making the connection between memory and prevention more real, more concrete.

Of course, the environment in which each of these spaces are working varies greatly. Some of them partner directly with governments and foundations who recognize the potential of these sites and provide continued financial support to ensure this work can happen. The majority, however, operate on shoestring budgets and without active support from individual philanthropists, foundations, or governments at the local, national or international level.

Memory spaces present an underutilized opportunity in our global efforts to prevent future genocide and other atrocities. They can do much more than simply educate the public about what occurred in the past. Through programming and other initiatives, they can actively diminish the risk for atrocities and bolster the resilience of groups facing marginalization and discrimination. Small, grassroots memory spaces, in particular, can serve as a resource, given their capacity to develop long-term relationships with local community members that respond to the very specific needs of those communities. Although their audience numbers may never reach the levels seen by national memory museums, the impact they have in their communities can be far deeper.

Moreover, in a moment when governments, foundations, and individual donors worldwide are seeking to localize their funding in recognition of the fact that the most promising solutions to a society’s problems emerge directly from the communities most affected by them, memory spaces present an ideal venue for local impact. With intention and the necessary support, memory spaces can be true bastions of preventive action, honoring those who have died by working to ensure no others today ever face a similar fate.
Recommendations

For Directors and Staff of Memory Spaces:

- Consider whether the prevention of the recurrence of identity-based violence is a key part of your space’s mission. If it is not, consider adding this to your mission, asking which ways your space can uniquely contribute to mitigating risk for atrocity. If it is, conduct an honest assessment of how intentionally you are applying an atrocity-prevention lens to your programming and exhibitions. Exercise 4 in the Beyond Remembering toolkit may be a good place to start.
- Ask which identity groups face the highest levels of risk and marginalization in your community and think about how you can design program choices and exhibitions that will improve the situation for those groups. Exercise 1 in the Beyond Remembering toolkit may be a good place to start.
- Assess the risk factors that exist in your society, then discuss which of these factors your space is positioned to respond to through programming or other initiatives. Exercise 2 in the Beyond Remembering toolkit may be a good place to start.
- Activate your space. Memory spaces can be community hubs for bringing together groups of people who have been separated by deep divisions within a society.
- Be explicit about connecting the past and the present in your memory space rather than hoping that visitors will do this on their own. Ask how the violence your space commemorates looked in the past, then explore how violence against at-risk groups looks today. How does this violence manifest socially, politically, economically, and institutionally? Exercise 3 in the Beyond Remembering toolkit may be a good place to start.

For National and Local Governments Engaging with Memorialization within Their Own Society:

- Consider memory initiatives and memory spaces as key actors in national and local transitional justice strategies. As you develop policies and programs to respond to the four traditional pillars of transitional justice—truth, justice, reparations, and reform—consider the role that memory spaces can play in these processes.
- Work with memory spaces to strengthen your government’s capacity to acknowledge past harms or shortcomings, which can also help strengthen trust between governments and citizenry and build a government’s legitimacy.
- Approach memory spaces as key potential partners in developing programs and policies with local impact. Trust in the ability of grassroots memory sites to develop enduring relationships with communities, and actively support programs that foster such relationships.
- Assess how sites of past violence are used today. Transforming former sites of violence into sites of memory—or even into new state institutions—can symbolically mark a change from the past, the re-establishment of the rule of law, and a commitment to build a more inclusive future.
- Don’t just think about image; think about action. Designing beautiful memory spaces can be powerful, but if the spaces aren’t activated through programming, they are unlikely to have an impact when it comes to prevention.
• Support memory, but don’t control it. Governments do not have to manage memory spaces to benefit from their existence. Governments can also build trust through supporting memory spaces that are administered by civil society groups.

For Governments Engaging with Memorialization within Societies Other than Their Own:

• Advocate for memory spaces and memory work to play a key role in transitional justice strategies and policies, emphasizing the crucial part they can play in truth-seeking, restorative justice, symbolic repair, and educational reform.
• Highlight the work and efficacy of community-based memory spaces by sending delegations to these spaces during official visits, in addition to visits to larger, national sites.
• Work with memory spaces in your efforts to localize. As development agencies continue to work toward localizing their work, community memory spaces can serve as key partners in these localization efforts. Their capacity to develop long-term relationships with communities, especially those that have been harmed or underserved by development goals in the past, make them an ideal locus to center localized development activity.
• Think of memory spaces as potential hubs for training, relationship building, and monitoring. Memory spaces can also serve as hubs for the monitoring, evaluation, and learning processes that accompany international grants. They can provide a venue for international actors to engage with local communities in a symbolic space that demonstrates a commitment to acknowledging past injustice and building new, more just relationships in the future.

For Foundations and Individual Donors:

• Reconsider funding strategies and requirements to encourage opportunities for community-based memory spaces. Community memory spaces can sometimes struggle in obtaining foundation grants and individual philanthropy because they lack the capacity to meet the often-complicated procedural requirements necessary for many large grants, and they lack the visibility of attracting many individual donors. Adjusting these requirements open pathways for a low-cost way to make an outsized impact.
• Trust that community-based memory spaces themselves have the clearest idea about the solutions that could work in their communities. Rather than asking these memory spaces to fit a pre-determined model for success, empower memory spaces to be creative in developing models of success that will work in their specific context.
• Facilitate partnerships and collaboration by funding memory space networks and consortiums. Foundations and donors that are unable to deliver smaller grants may still consider accepting grant applications from memory space consortiums. Oftentimes, local memory spaces develop partnerships with each other. Grants present an opportunity both to stimulate these partnerships and multiply the impact of grants.


10 Waller, Confronting Evil.