Peter Eisenman, Architecture ’60, Designs New Holocaust Memorial in Berlin

BY JASON HOLLANDER

Y ears ago, Peter Eisenman, Architecture ’60, walked into an Iowa cornfield and soon found himself lost in the height and rippling expanse of the stalks. The effect was so unsettling, evoking such an incomparable feeling of loneliness in the architect, he used the experience as a basis for the “Monument to Europe’s Murdered Jews,” which is currently being constructed in the heart of Berlin, surrounded by the Reichstag (Parliament) and other government buildings.

“I think the experience [of walking through the memorial] might be something close to what it’s really like to be alone in some place,” said Eisenman, who recently spoke to a standing-room-only crowd in the main hall of Columbia’s Deutsches Haus. Eisenman is eager to point out that the memorial itself will offer no formal descriptions and will not make any specific reference to Judaism or the Nazi atrocities.

“I didn’t want names,” he added. “The space it isn’t a graveyard. It’s not to try and make it a thing of nostalgia, not to try and make it a thing of memory, not to try and make it a thing of nostalgia, just to preserve the absence of context, the blank stones and distorted walking paths are all that will be available to visitors.

“It is a field of pillars that attempts to decontextualize the Holocaust,” explained Eisenman to The Toronto Globe and Mail in 2001. “Not to try and locate it, not to try and make it a thing of nostalgia, not to try and make it be able to be rationalized.”

Of course, the construction of a Holocaust memorial in Germany did not come to pass without controversy. The idea of the memorial itself endured more than 14 years of debate before digging on the site finally began this year. More than 500 designs were evaluated and re-evaluated before Eisenman’s idea, originally submitted in 1997, was eventually victorious in June 1999 by a 314-209 vote in the German Parliament.

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“Moving Arrows, Eros and Other Errors (Architectural Association) and Houses of Cards (Oxford University Press).”

A model of Peter Eisenman’s “Monument to Europe’s Murdered Jews.”

Having spent the greater part of his career immersed in architectural theory, Eisenman, at the age of 71, now finds himself at work building more than ever. His firm, Eisenman Architects, has recently designed a museum for the Staten Island Institute of the Arts and Sciences and a retractable-roofed football stadium for the Arizona Cardinals. Eisenman has also designed arts centers for both Ohio State and Emory Universities. He was recently part of an architectural team that was a finalist for the new World Trade Center site design.

After receiving a B.A. from Cornell, an M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Cambridge, Eisenman began creating a body of written work influenced strongly by the fields of philosophy and linguistics. He names Friedrich Nietzsche and Noam Chomsky among those from whom he drew inspiration and has been prolific among those from whom he drew inspiration.

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