Signs of the Shoah: The Hollandsche Schouwburg as a site of memory

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Chapter 5: The Proliferation of Spatial Memory: Borders, Façades and Dwellings

‘God bless all six of you, thank you for all the joy you brought. If we do not meet again in the future, please think of us with the love of a child. Goodbye all six. Father and mother.’ Handwritten words are projected onto the façade of the Hollandsche Schouwburg (see figure 5.1). The art installation Last Words by Femke Kempkes and Machteld Aardse was part of the Amsterdam Light Festival that lasted from December 6, 2013 until January 19, 2014. The two Dutch artists employed correspondence that was sent from the Hollandsche Schouwburg by Jews who were awaiting deportation in 1942 and 1943. After the war, these historic documents became part of the collection of the Jewish Historical Museum. The abovementioned example was a handwritten letter by Herman and Mathilde Chits addressed to their children (see figure 5.2).
Last Words brought the inside of the memorial complex outside, temporarily transforming the otherwise blank façade into a spectacular projection screen, countering Robert Musil’s observation that there is nothing in the world as invisible as a monument.¹ Passersby were confronted with the history of this site, whether they wanted to or not. The artist included a letterbox where people could leave their comments. Some of the reactions demonstrated indignation, claiming it was disrespectful to openly exhibit such private and painful messages. However, the great majority of the people described the work as impressive and commended the project for keeping the memory of these people alive. An interesting consequence of the artwork’s public character was that it addressed a different crowd than the memorial museum usually does. People who visited the light festival and followed the Illuminade route, which led along eighteen different light artworks, were often struck by the serious and tragic nature of Last Words,


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especially since most of the other installations were more lighthearted. In addition, people who coincidentally passed by the Hollandsche Schouwburg or exited the tram that stops directly in front of the building could hardly miss the illuminated art installation. Where the former group could have anticipated this artistic intervention, the latter was temporarily shaken out of its daily routine. As such, *Last Words* had a similar effect as Gunter Demnig’s Stolpersteine, the stumbling-blocks that address people who are not consciously looking for a memorial, but rather come across and stumble over them unexpectedly. It resolved, even if only temporarily, an inherent problem of sites of memory such as the Hollandsche Schouwburg that become invisible after a while. The light projection intervened in the public space and expanded the memorial complex’ scope.

In the first chapter, we discovered that space has both a dynamic and stable character that allows people to imagine a personal connection to past events. In the previous chapter, the traces of the past, the affective experience of ‘being there’ and the imaginative self-inscription of the visitor played a central role in the construction of a meaningful relationship with the past inside the memorial complex itself. The premise of this chapter is that this process of meaning production is not encompassed by a site, but can spill over to neighboring structures and spaces, overriding the border between private and public realms. This spatial proliferation of memory can either become a problem of conflict and transgression or offer an opportunity of integrating this living memory with public and private spaces and bringing it into contact with the urban dweller. In the first section, the spatial proliferation of memory is discussed. In spite of the natural attempt to fix memory to one specific site, demarcations and borders do not stop this proliferation. Memory spills over to other neighboring structures, possibly leading to conflict and contestation as will become clear in the case of the town of Oświęcim. The interaction with neighbors is therefore a crucial aspect of memorial sites. In the second section, the interaction between the Hollandsche Schouwburg and the city dweller through the façade is discussed. Despite the fact the exterior of the building does not reflect its commemorative function; the façade provides an interface that brings passersby in contact with the memory of this site. This interaction remains limited however, and in the last section of this chapter we will investigate the collaborative project Open Joodse Huizen which strategically places this interaction with the public and local inhabitants at its core. The question is then whether these forms of spatial memory proliferation can be seen as the overtaking of public spaces at the expense of other practices, uses and memories, or whether these projects are temporary, non-invasive and offer room for negotiation.
1. **Proliferation and Demarcation of Sites of Memory**

The borders of sites of memory are unstable and permeable. According to political scientist Margaret Farrar, we cannot categorically distinguish private from public spaces when it comes to sites of memory: ‘in their slippage between public and private, porous landscapes contain and communicate both individual and social memory that influence thought and action at an almost subterranean level.’ It is precisely this slippage that can cause conflict and which needs to be addressed by memorial museums.

The Hollandsche Schouwburg is located in a densely populated city district, a fact that is emphasized by the photographic installations in the garden as described in chapter 4. The realization that the assembly of Jews was organized in the middle of a city, and not exclusively at remote transit camps, presents visitors with a dilemma: how was this possible? Why did the former neighbors allow this to happen? It might also raise some self-critical questions: what would I do? Did these people have any agency? The enlarged historic photograph by Lydia van Nobelen-Riezouw confronts them with an image of Gretha Velleman who is cheerfully waving at the photographer only several months before she was murdered in Auschwitz (see figure 4.1). The photograph suggests a direct connection between past and present: we are at the very spot where Gretha was standing, a historicist fallacy about which media theorist Siegfried Kracauer warns us.

When this large panel was introduced in 2010 as part of the Museum Night festival, it faced the neighboring residence from where the photograph was taken, thereby reenacting the visual relationship between Lydia, the photographer, and Greetje. After the festival, the panel was not removed but kept in place for visiting groups that were taken into the garden. When a neighbor filed a complaint, arguing he did not want to see the photograph on a daily basis, it was rotated 90 degrees. The photograph no longer faces the neighbor but rather the visitor directly upon entering the garden.

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2 Margaret E. Farrar, “Amnesia, Nostalgia, and the Politics of Place Memory,” *Political Research Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (December 1, 2011): 731. She borrows the term porosity from Walter Benjamin, who described the city of Naples as a theater of memory, Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street, and Other Writings* (London: NLB/Verso, 1979), 167–176.

3 On the whole the advocates of such historicist thinking believe that they can explain any phenomenon purely in terms of its genesis. That is, they believe at the very least that they can grasp historical reality by reconstructing the series of events in their temporal succession without any gaps.’ Siegfried Kracauer, “Photography,” *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 3 (April 1, 1993): 424–425.

4 A complaint was filed on 25 November 2010, arguing that the enlarged photograph with a bright blue frame was too visible, which the neighbor experienced as unpleasant. The director of the museum had a meeting with the neighbor and decided that the installation would be repositioned. Personal communication with Joël Cahen and Annemiek Gringold, June 19, 2014.
The story of the rotated panel has become part of the narrative of the tour guides and appeared in a weblog in 2012, in which it was directly linked to the issue of passive collaboration:

The photograph [of Gretha Velleman] is not placed correctly, but was rotated. Not because it could not be positioned as such, but rather because the neighbor did not want to constantly see the Jewish girl from his balcony. This makes you wonder. ‘Wir haben es nicht gewusst.’ Or maybe it is a continuation of something else: we did not want to know.’

The visitor asserts that the correct placement involves the reenactment of the angle from which the photograph was taken. The current position, in which the visitor sees the photograph directly rather than having to walk to one corner of the garden, is interpreted as a displacement caused by the unwillingness of the neighbor to be confronted with the past.

In its initial position, both the visitor and neighbor are addressed by the photograph, however fundamentally different. Where the former visits the Schouwburg, the latter is interpellated on a daily basis which can be experienced as a disturbance and even an accusation. Anthropologist Karin Barber uses literary theorist Mikhail Bakthin’s concept of addressivity to argue that any kind of coherent complex of signs produces a specific kind of public. ‘The addressivity of texts – their ways of “turning to” an audience – not only reveals cultural assumptions about how people exist together in society, but also plays a part in constituting audiences as particular kinds of collectivity.’

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6 The term interpellation was used by Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser who argues that state ideology constitutes concrete individuals as subjects by addressing them in a certain manner. For him, this ideology has been naturalized and internalized by individuals. He gives an example of a police officer who calls out hey, you there, without you knowing he was specifically hailing you. ‘Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject. […] Naturally for the convenience and clarity of my little theoretical theatre I have had to present things in the form of a sequence, with a before and an after, and thus in the form of a temporal succession. There are individuals walking along. Somewhere (usually behind them) the hail rings out: ‘Hey, you there! One individual (nine times out of ten it is the right one) turns round, believing/suspecting/knowing that it is for him, i.e. recognizing that ‘it really is he’ who is meant by the hailing. But in reality these things happen without any succession. The existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing.’ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” in Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays (London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 174–175. Althusser’s focus on state ideology has been criticized, for instance by Michel Foucault who argues Althusser neglects to investigate how for instance the body is effected by power, see Michel Foucault and Colin Gordon, Power/knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 58. However, the notion of interpellation is still relevant for our case, especially since we consider how public objects address both people who come to visit and those who are confronted with it unintentionally.

installation was initially turned towards the neighbor and juxtaposed – almost conflated – with the proximity of the neighboring houses in the current and historical situation. It therefore is not surprising that the neighbor wanted it removed. His balcony does not face a busy street, but rather a quiet courtyard garden: not entirely private, but also not completely public.

The decision by the museum management to concede to the neighbor’s wish to rotate the photograph was an act of diplomacy. In doing so, the museum directorate acknowledged the fact that the people who live in the direct vicinity are also affected by the actions, designs and events organized at this memorial site. For years, it has been the museum’s policy to take the neighborhood into consideration: before special events, such as the Yom HaShoah and May 4th commemorations, neighbors are informed by mail to ensure there is no inconvenience either way. Different local neighborhood committees have been involved with the May 4th commemoration. When there are disturbances, these are often experienced as transgressions by commemorating visitors. In 1998, a couple of bare-chested students observed the Yom HaShoah commemoration while hanging from their window. A NIW-reporter resented their disrespectful behavior and confronted the residents, who showed little interest in the matter.

In general, the historical embedment of the neighborhood and the policy of the museum’s management to take neighbors’ wishes into consideration prevent major conflicts. At other sites of Shoah memory, the interaction with the direct environment has been cause for conflict. Demarcation commonly is an important regulatory element: beyond these lines, different rules apply. However, as we have seen above, memory tends to spill over, especially when sensitive issues such as passive collaboration or appropriation of victimhood play a role. An example of a highly problematic form of memory spill can be found in the town of Oświęcim. Sociologist Geneviève Zubrzycki demonstrates how national and religious debates continue to flare up around the delimitation of Auschwitz and takes the eight-meter high papal cross just outside the grounds of Auschwitz as a starting point for her study. She argues that the actual geography of the camp sites around the town causes many controversies. According to her, there is a continuous struggle

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8 According to the commemoration brochure, the 4th of May commemoration of 2014 was organized by the Plantage-Weesperbuurtvereniging, the Vereniging Vrienden van de Plantage, the IVKO-school that was formerly located across the street, and the Stichting Hollandsche Schouwburg. In 1987 and 1992 it was organized in collaboration with the local 4 & 5 mei Comite Watergraafsmeer (the greater city district to which the Plantagebuurt belonged), see De Waarheid April 18, 1987 and NIW May 1, 1992. For more on the local character of this commemoration, see chapter 3.

9 The inappropriate behavior during commemorations was already a topic in the early years after the liberation. The organization of former political prisoners, Expogé, had to enforce such behavior through ‘commemorative education’, see Van Ginkel, Rondom de stilte, 205.

between non-Jewish Poles and Jewish Poles and other groups defending the memory of Auschwitz pertaining to the borders of the camp:

Poles clearly demarcate the physical site of Auschwitz I from its surroundings, Oświęcim, whereas for many Jews the containment of “Auschwitz,” the symbolic site of the Shoah, within the physical space occupied by the former camp Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II Birkenau is not appropriate. Since the entire area is filled with Jewish ashes, “Auschwitz” extends well beyond the physical walls of Auschwitz I; it spreads its sacredness into every corner of Oświęcim, which Poles in turn regard as an unfair imposition.11

The Dutch artist Hans Citroen and his wife, the Polish architect Barbara Starzyńska, demonstrate a similar friction in their exploration of Auschwitz / Oświęcim. In this case, the West-European observer Citroen, whose grandfather was murdered in Auschwitz, confronts local inhabitants who grow flowers on former camp grounds and use barracks as workshops for cars. His indignation contrasts sharply with the apparent indifference of locals who seem ill-informed and disinterested in the stories Citroen brings with him. They interview the director of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, who claims that given the fact there were more than forty sub-camps, it would impossible to fill the entire landscape with signs.12 Starzyńska, who grew up in this area, argues that she was brought up with the idea these two imagined landscapes were completely separated realms: ‘Auschwitz is the camp and Oświęcim is the city’.13 However, after decades of examining her hometown, she comes to the conclusion that it is impossible to distinguish between the two.

In both these works, the separation of the historic site Auschwitz and the current town Oświęcim is a key strategy to inhabit the landscape after the war. Delimiting the site is essential in order to maintain a livable environment for local inhabitants. At times, however, this conflicts with the notion of the Shoah as an event that cannot be delimited, the Shoah as concentrationary universe or planet Auschwitz where fundamentally different norms apply.14 Zubrzycki argues that

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13 Ibid., 24.
14 The French Buchenwald survivor David Rousset coined the term concentrationary universe in 1946, see David Rousset, L’univers concentrationnaire (Paris: Éditions du Pavois, 1946). This term was picked up by Hannah Arendt in her work on totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966). In his testimony during the Eichmann trial, Auschwitz survivor and writer Yehiel Dinur, who published under the name Ka-Tzetnik, used the term planet Auschwitz to describe the total rupture between his incarceration and life before and after. Omer Bartov argues that throughout his oeuvre, Dinur in the end came to the conclusion Auschwitz was not another planet, but part of this world; however, this is not how his work is usually received. Omer
non-Jewish Poles try to enclose the site by relying on physical demarcations; while for many Jews Auschwitz signifies a universe in itself that cannot be confined. It might be more productive to analyze this conflict in terms of local inhabitants opposed to outside visitors, rather than non-Jewish versus Jewish Poles, as Citroen and Starzyńska have done. Their project raises other issues, for instance that of the patronizing West-European and American perspectives.

In situ sites such as Auschwitz are more than mere representations of the past. They have a dual nature as indexical markers that both embody and represent the past, as discussed in the previous chapter. Nevertheless, the impossibility of demarcating Auschwitz relates to the well-known argument that the Shoah cannot be fully represented. For writer Elie Wiesel and filmmaker Claude Lanzmann, the total destruction of the Nazi persecution can never be properly represented since nothing can ever stand in place of the unimaginable event itself. Literary researcher Andreas Huyssen puts it somewhat more nuanced. ‘Memory as representation, as making present, is always in danger of collapsing the constitutive tension between past and present […]’. This conundrum is at the core of a lot of contemporary art, memorials and architecture related to the Shoah. These often do not aim to fully represent, but rather, in the words of Jean-François Lyotard, to make present ‘the existence of something unrepresentable’. Here, we turn to the unique character of sites of memory. According to philosopher Dylan Trigg, such sites are negative spaces that absorb the places that were previously there and are ‘defined not only by what has ceased to exist, but also what cannot be accommodated spatially.’ For him, sites of memory do not display the past, but rather the absence of that past, an unbridgeable void between past and present that cannot be overcome.


For a critical review, see Anika Walke, “Review of Citroen, Hans; Starzyńska, Barbara, Auschwitz-Oświęcim: The Hidden City in the East” (H-Urban, H-Reviews, June 2012).


The impossibility of fully representing the past has been discussed in the previous chapter when we looked at the category of the index. According to Van Alphen, Armando’s art circles around that which cannot be represented through a continuous or contiguous relationship. Thus, the footprint makes a person present through signaling his or her absence by encircling the space once occupied by an actual foot. The indexical sign does not aim at standing-in for that what it refers to, collapsing past and present; but is based on a spatially and materially defined relationship with the past. At sites of memory, we are dealing with latent and contingent indexicality, traces of the past that remain yet to be mediated and performed in the present, a process that requires the active engagement and imagination of the visitor. These traces or sites are meaningful because they were once contiguous with historical events. They cannot actively tell the entire story of the past, but function rather as neighboring bystanders, or silent witnesses. This relationship is a spatially defined negative of what is no longer there. It is not surprising that Armando spoke of the guilty landscape: these traces cannot speak or bear witness to the horrible past and even cover up the past by literally growing over sites of memory. However, this approach conflates the spatial and temporal continuity of the index, as if these traces could provide direct access to the past because of an authentic and uninterrupted link to that past. This relationship to the past is always already mediated; the index is a sign that does not replace its referent. It is not the index that bears witness, but the visitor or the observer that bears witness through the index.

The indexicality of sites of memory is not predetermined, and therefore delimited, by an unbroken link to past events, but rather enables the active construction of a spatially defined relationship with the past in the present. This means that this process cannot be easily restricted or predicted: almost everything at sites of memory can be transformed into meaningful traces of the past, and since the site itself is negatively defined by what no longer exists, its borders are potentially limitless and often the subject of negotiation and conflict. This certainly has been the case at Auschwitz. For some people, delimiting the site conjures up notions of belittling and relativism and the continuation of any life in the near vicinity of the death camps can be seen as sacrilegious. Clearly distinguishing the historic camps from the current town is seen by some to be an attempt of finding closure and putting the history of destruction at a distance. However, sites are more than mere representations or palimpsests to be read.21 They are actual places that enable divergent usages and practices.

The conflicts discussed above are based on a model of competition where only one interpretation of the meaning and usage of a specific site is allowed.

21 Andreas Huyssen warns us of the possible ‘imperialism of écriture’ Huyssen, Present Pasts, 7.
However, in spite of the seemingly stable nature of space, it is precisely its polysemic, layered and open character that allows for memories to attaches to sites. Michael Rothberg describes two models of memory politics, competitive and multidirectional memory. The former is based on the logic of scarcity and strongly connected to identity politics: ‘many people assume that the public sphere in which collective memories are articulated is a scarce resource and that the interaction of different collective memories within that sphere takes the form a zero-sum struggle for preeminence.’ He suggests to look at memory as a more dynamic and multidirectional process that is ‘subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative.’

Rothberg stresses that both identity and the public sphere are constructed in this process:

pursuing memory’s multidirectionality encourages us to think of the public sphere as a malleable discursive space in which groups do not simple articulate established positions but actually come into being through their dialogical interaction with others; both the subjects and spaces of the public are open to continual reconstruction.

The notion of multidirectionality might suggest that there is no competition or conflict, and that issues over the use of space and interpretations of the past are all discursive practices without real consequences. In practice however, both memories and other interests clash in the public sphere. It is important to leave open the possibility of competing memories and conflicting uses of public space in order to prevent the appropriation by one party that imposes its own narrative. Conflicts about the demarcation of sites of memory can often be framed as conflicts about private and public space. If we return to the neighbor who wanted the photograph removed, his argument was that he did not want to see the photograph on a daily basis when opening his curtains. For him, his view was a private privilege disturbed by this large panel. The museum initially argued that the photograph was placed on their property and needed to face this private home in order to demonstrate from where the picture was taken. As a consequence, the panel appropriated this house as part of the public museum narrative, transgressing the border between private and public space. By complying with the neighbor’s request, the museum acknowledged its responsibility towards its neighbors.

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22 Rothberg, Multidirectional Memory, 2–3. This is reminiscent of Certeau’s concept of poaching as the active interpretation and borrowing of the ideas and properties of others at the basis of everyday life. ‘Everyday life invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others.’ Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, xii. See also chapter 12, “Reading as Poaching”.

23 Rothberg, Multidirectional Memory, 5.
2. The Façade and the Passerby: Dissonance and Interaction

Rather than demarcating and closing a site of memory, borders function as spheres of interaction with the direct environment. Memory is not encompassed by a site, but instead proliferates, transgressing the commonsensical boundary between private and public space. As we have seen in the previous section, this proliferation can easily lead to conflicts. However, it can also provide an opportunity to address a broader public and open up a dialogue with both neighbors and passersby. In the previous section we looked at the relationship between the courtyard of the memorial and the adjacent private homes. In this section we study the façade of the Hollandsche Schouwburg and how it interacts with passersby on the street.

Little remains of the original theater built in 1892. The largest part of the building has been changed beyond recognition. When it became a memorial museum in 1962, the former theater function remained part of the design through historic superimposition, as we have seen in the previous chapters. The courtyard, constructed in 1962, mimicked the former theater hall; the view from the window on the first floor was augmented in 1993 with a transparent curtain imprinted with a photograph of the former hall in 1930; and the garden overlaps with the former backstage area and has a similar contrasting function in relation to the rest of the memorial museum. The former theater functions are employed as a metaphor in order to demonstrate the absence and loss of Dutch Jewry and commemorate the

Figure 5. 3. Photograph Mara Jong Kon Chin
deportation period.

The most prominent material remnant of the original theater, however, is the façade (see figure 5.3). Strict building regulations and the monumental status of the Schouwburg have prohibited radical changes to the exterior. Nonetheless, there have been alterations over time. Before the war, the partially brick façade was painted white. After the war, five large statues on top of the building and a baluster were removed. When the memorial was constructed in 1962, the front doors were replaced with an open fence, which in turn was replaced by glass doors in 1993. In spite of these changes, the building’s appearance remains theater-like rather than a memorial museum. The fact that the building continues to carry the old name of the theater reinforces this. This begs the question whether the white façade, which people might associate with high culture and entertainment, does not conflict with the commemorative function of this site of memory. In order to explore this question, we will look at how the façades of buildings relate to their urban environment and how this process allows for both an accretion of dissonant functions and memories and affords different uses, performances and interpretations by artists and passersby.

In chapter 1.3 we have seen that there exists a tension between the stabilizing potential and the performative character of an urban space. On the one hand, city landmarks such as St. Paul’s, to use to Halbwachs’ example, or the Eiffel tower, offer a fixed framework of understanding and orienting oneself in a city. On the other hand, these landmarks do not predetermine the experience of city dwellers, since they do not orient themselves merely on the basis of known sites but may also interpret the façade of buildings in order to understand with what they are dealing. In his description of walking through London, Halbwachs makes the following observation: ‘An architect directs my attention to the character and arrangement of city buildings.’ This refers to the 19th century architectural conception that a character of a building should correspond to its true function. A prison should look austere and fortified, while a house of culture, such as a theater, must trigger another, more cultural set of associations. The façade is a building’s main interface and enables the city dweller to interpret and understand the function of a building at first glance. The cityscape can be seen as an architectural arrangement that allows people to orient themselves and interact with the urban built environment.

Urban planner Kevin Lynch used this idea to investigate the mental images of cities held by its citizens. His work concentrates ‘on one particular visual quality:

24 For a full account of the architectural changes, see Krabbe, “Spreken tot de bedroefden.”
the apparent clarity or ‘legibility’ of the cityscape. By this we mean the ease with which its parts can be recognized and can be organized into a coherent pattern.\(^{27}\) The process of reading a city is based on both landmarks and generic structures. According to Lynch people reduce a city to such a legible pattern in order to feel safer. People understand that this image is a reductive representation, and it is (ideally) an open structure, adaptable to change and communicable to others.\(^{28}\)

The idea of the legible cityscape describes the initial interaction between the city and its visitors and is based in an almost modernist belief in functional city planning. In practice however, the city is not a text that is laid out in order to be read, but rather an ever-changing realm of potential, yet-to-be-invented interactions and functionalities. What happens when the legibility of a façade fails?

The façade of the Hollandsche Schouwburg has the appearance of a theater or another cultural institution. City dwellers who do not know the history of this site and after finding out that it is a Shoah memorial museum are sometimes shocked by this dissonance; which begs the question whether the façade properly represents the building’s function. However, changing the façade would entail destroying an iconic image. This is a central problem when we look at urban sites of memory that had different functions before, during and after the event that is being remembered, such as the Hollandsche Schouwburg. You cannot erase these other functions without removing a crucial part of the site’s history. The consequence can be a sharp dissonance between an initial reaction to a building and a subsequent realization of its ‘true’ function.

Lynch’ legible cityscape is based on a static relationship between the built environment and the city dweller. Another way to look at the interaction between a façade and the passerby is in terms of affordance: the passerby can interpret the façade in unforeseen ways. Affordance is used in technology studies as a middle-ground between determinism (the possible applications of an artifact is determined by its design) and social constructivism (the use of an artifact is determined by its user). Sociologist Ian Hutchby explains:

> Affordances are *functional* in the sense that they are enabling, as well as constraining, factors in a given organism’s attempt to engage in some activity; for instance, walking, or hiding, photocopying a document, and so on. Certain objects, environments or artefacts have affordances which enable the particular activity while others do not. [...] The *relational* aspect, by contrast, draws our attention to the way that the affordances of an object may be different for one species than for another. Water surfaces

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\(^{28}\) ‘A highly [legible] city in this peculiar sense would seem well formed, distinct, remarkable; it would invite the eye and the ear to greater attention and participation. [...] Such a city would be one that could be apprehended over time as a pattern of high continuity with many distinctive parts clearly interconnected.’ Ibid., 10.
do not have the affordance of walk-on-ability for a lion or a crocodile, but they do for an insect waterboatman. Affordances can be learned: an amateur photographer is unable to use a camera in more sophisticated ways than a professional photographer. And affordances can emerge after something was constructed: the television and telephone cables that are now used to access the Internet were in existence even before the internet ever existed. Artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and philosopher Brian Massumi apply this concept to buildings. ‘The façade of a building is [...] an affordance.’ They argue that most people know how to interact with generic types of buildings, but at the same time this relationship needs to be developed and actualized in practice:

The relation always arrives [...] in advance of its next sequential unfolding.

In other words, its arrival is a promised event that has yet to occur: an

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appointment with a known by not yet actually afforded outcome. To afford oneself of the outcome is to eventuate the relationship, to perform it, to follow through with its actual step-by-step unfolding. The relationship between a building and a passerby may be conceived of as a durational unfolding and not an act of properly ‘reading’ a façade and connecting it to the correct function of the building. This resonates with the notion of latent and contingent indexicality that is based on a similarly emerging relationship between an in situ memorial museum and the imaginative investment on the part of the visitor.

By separating the façade from the function of a building we can better understand how to cope with possible dissonance. The façade suggests possible ways of interaction, for instance to maintain a comfortable distance or to come closer. It does not necessarily need to predetermine all forms or interaction, and certainly not the function of the building, since this can change over time. In the context of the original function of the Hollandsche Schouwburg, the theater façade was designed to draw people closer in order to look at the program next to the entrance. Here, the memorial museum has placed bright blue posters with the motto ‘Geen voorstelling van te maken’, translated as ‘scenes beyond imagination’ and a photograph of people waiting for their deportation (see figure 5.4). Victor Levie who designed these posters told me: ‘There was a clear need from within the Jewish community not to make this monument too visible. It is quite present already, this façade, very different from the memorial in the Wertheimpark that is flat and horizontal.’ He was commissioned to find a solution for the traditional poster holders. ‘I thought this was a good idea. To reconstruct the entire façade would have been too drastic. It needs to be a balance between a theater and a deportation site.’ His idea was that the two posters holders were visible from the other side of the street and the curious would actually cross the street to take a better look. ‘Some people must think, what kind of play is on? This confusion is productive.’ The passerby expects to find a theater program but instead is confronted with intolerable cruelty that would not easily be represented on stage. The posters make clever use of the information affordance of the façade in order to enhance rather than diminish the dissonance between the theater and memorial. The relationship between the façade and the passerby needs to be performed in time and space and therefore surpasses the model of legibility.

Ibid.

The motto plays with the double meaning of the Dutch word voorstelling, which means both a theatrical performance and imagination. According to Annemiek Gringold, the building official employed to enforce the code regarding the external appearance of buildings initially did not allow these posters to be placed because the color deviated too much with historical façade and the alderman of Cultural Affairs Carolien Gehrels had to intervene to make this possible. Interview with Annemiek Gringold, August 6, 2014.

Interview Levie.
The new posters use an affordance which the old façade offered in order to communicate its new commemorative function without radically changing the external appearance of the building. The façade is not a medium that transmits a static message but rather a dynamic interface between the building and passersby. In the winter of 2013 and 2014, artists Machteld Aardse and Femke Kempkes used the façade in a different and novel way to bring the inside of the memorial outside and to trigger an interaction with the city dweller with their light projection Last Word. Aardse and Kempkes were approached by the Jewish Historical Museum to develop an artwork for the Hollandsche Schouwburg as part of the Amsterdam Light Festival. I interviewed Aardse, who was especially touched by the stories of Jewish victims who tried to continue their lives under the most deplorable conditions:

When we visited the exhibition, we saw these short letters by people who had been incarcerated in the Hollandsche Schouwburg and tried to communicate what was happening to them. Jaunty notes, full of hope and love. We now know what happened afterwards. Those letters hit home, you can place yourself in the author’s position. [...] Even though they are disconcerting, the letters carry hope to their neighbors, friends and family.34

![Figure 5. Photograph Andrea Jutta Röell](image)

After their visit they came up with the idea to project a selection of these letters, together with fragments from diaries, onto the façade. The selection of twelve letters and fragments was made in collaboration with curator Annemiek Gringold.

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34 Interview Machteld Aardse, July 16, 2014.
The texts were prepared for projection with the help of the graphic editing program Photoshop. ‘The letters are authentic, but we needed to manipulate them in order for them to work on the façade. For instance, we inverted black and white. And then there was a tree to consider, [...] we had to take the leaves into account.’ Some of the letters had been dictated and typed out at the Hollandsche Schouwburg when it was used as deportation center (see figure 5.5); others were handwritten, both in the Schouwburg and elsewhere (see figures 5.1 and 5.6). Aardse liked the combination. The typed letters were more legible site-specific, but the handwritten fragments were more direct. ‘One letter was the most gruesome of all. It reads ‘I have taken cyanide’, it is a suicide note. You see scrawling, the difficult and stress of the moment. The letter is very hard to read and almost becomes a drawing instead of a letter.’ Gringold wanted to add something to the projection to make sure the installation would not become too abstract and to ensure the memory of the actual victims. As a compromise, they added a series of portraits of victims in the alcoves underneath the larger projection. The slides did not run parallel to the letters and some of them did not contain a portrait. ‘We wanted the public to realize that there were many other people besides the authors of these notes.’

Compared to the posters, the projection was spectacular and brought the inside of the memorial outdoors. Where the posters try to draw people in, the memorial museum was closed during the projections and people could not go inside. Last Words addressed people who happened to pass by more actively than

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35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
the posters do. ‘People will think, “what is this?” and when they see the date next to the message, they will realize what it is. We hoped that people would take the time to stop and perhaps even share stories in front of the building, which turned out to be the case.’

The façade itself was used as a projection screen, but because another public was addressed – not only the mindful and curious city dweller who notices the posters, but also people who were not paying attention to their environment – it made the Schouwburg more visible. The installation provided a platform for sharing stories:

Throughout the process, people constantly approached us with their own stories about the Holocaust and the Hollandsche Schouwburg. [...] I was talking to an architect who was working in the building opposite to the Schouwburg, who was very moved by our project. He told me that his own father had picked up letters that were thrown out of the trains near Vught in order to send them along to the addressees. And here we were, working with these letters.

Visitors also shared stories in front of the Schouwburg. In order to collect these, the artists placed a mailbox for reactions. The artists have shared 75 copies of notes with me, some with several reactions (for an impression, see the collages of figures 5.7 and 5.8). Judging by these messages, visitors were mostly impressed by the

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37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
Many of them were already familiar with the history of this site, but nonetheless heavily struck by the projection. Some of the letters contained similar language to the messages attached to the tulips in the courtyard, discussed in chapter 4.3, such as an appeal ‘never again’ and ‘never forget’. One note related it directly to the conflict in Rwanda and Syria. Another person found the projections too public and disrespectful, arguing that these letters belong in the archive.

*Last Words* made use of two indexical markers: the Schouwburg and the letters. The façade of the immobile theater was used as a projection screen. Because the slides were adjusted to its irregular shapes, it was not reduced to a neutral and flat surface. It had an active role in the illuminating artwork and provided a sense of ‘being there’. The letters were indexically linked to their authors and especially the handwritten notes are bodily traces of the moment of writing.39 One of the visitors left the following note behind:

It takes some moments getting used to. [Unreadable handwritten text.] But when a typed letter appears, something magical happens. Words are simultaneously legible and illegible. They seem to disappear constantly. The [...] physical reality of the Schouwburg seems to provide a bridge to the disappearing hope of the author.40

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39 Van Alphen argues that the postcards Armando uses are indexical traces because of contiguity between the card and the author. Van Alphen, *Armando*, 12.
40 Note 10, provided by the artists.
The artwork set up a playful circulation of indexical signs and offered viewers the opportunity to participate in this circulation. The fact that the letters were highly mediated and modified and the façade was used as a projection screen did not prohibit people from imagining a connection with the history of the site and the authors of the letters. Their own participation however was restricted to leaving a message, but there was no follow-up: the circulation of letters ended with the mailbox. In the next section we will look at a memory project that is more collaborative, the Open Joodse Huizen.

3. The House as Index, the House as Dwelling: Collaborative Memory Projects

In the first section of this chapter we investigated the porous borders of sites of memory that due to the encircling character of indexicality play a crucial role in the production and mediation of memory. Sites of memory interact with their direct neighbors and therefore conflicting interests may arise. In this section, we will turn our attention to other types of memory projects: interventions in the public sphere that employ the latent indexicality of urban spaces. Rather than looking at how memory proliferates from one central site, we will study decentralized projects that use the entire cityscape or landscape: the Stolpersteine, Shimon Attie’s light installations and the Open Joodse Huizen project. Since these projects have no spatial boundaries, the issue regarding the interaction with local inhabitants is even more crucial. All these projects raise serious issues concerning the possible tensions between the house as a public indexical marker of the Shoah and as a private dwelling.

Gunter Demnig’s Stolpersteine commemorates the victims of the Shoah in front of the buildings in which they lived before their deportation with engraved brass plaques measuring 10 x 10 centimeters. Currently, there are almost 50,000 memorial plaques placed throughout Europe, emblazoned with the names, birthdates and places where victims were murdered. The plaques turn these buildings into indexical signs by pointing out the absence and therefore the murder of their former inhabitants. Entire neighborhoods can be transformed into a network of memorials. Initially, several citizens and city administrations were reluctant, arguing that the Shoah was memorialized enough already and that these stones could be dangerous for the flow of pedestrian traffic. Several homeowners argued that the price of their property would be diminished and that they did not

41 The stones can be found in Germany, Austria, Hungary, the Netherlands, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Russia, Croatia, France, Poland, Slovenia, Italy, Norway, the Ukraine, Slovakia, Switzerland and Luxemburg. See http://www.stolpersteine.eu/en/technical-aspects/, accessed on July 10, 2015.
want to burden their children. However, as the project grew, this reluctance was no longer voiced publically. Munich is the only large city where Stolpersteine are not allowed, because Charlotte Knobloch, former president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, argued it was offensive to walk on the names of the dead. In other German cities, new dedications are in general supported by local politicians and find little formal resistance.

Anthropologist Rob van Ginkel inventoried several reactions to Stolpersteine in the Netherlands, where most initiatives were taken by homeowners who want to memorialize the history of their own residence. Though most people were enthusiastic about the project, others criticized the fact people and pets could walk over these names. One person is quoted as saying ‘Why should I be confronted with this all the time? Would you want to have such a sign in front of your house?’ Van Ginkel argues that some of these criticasters applied the Not in My Backyard-principle: they support the commemoration of the Shoah, but not if it intrudes in their daily lives. However, reducing their objections to this principle provides only a limited understanding of the motives of these people and makes it easy to discard their objections as selfish. As we have seen in the previous section, people find it difficult to live in a space that is simultaneously a memorial. Stolpersteine transforms a building into an indexical sign that points to the absence, and execution, of its previous inhabitants. Objections should therefore not be discarded but taken seriously. A more productive approach would be to involve local inhabitants in these types of memory projects.

An important characteristic of the Stolpersteine project is that it turns both the house and the passersby who ‘stumble’ over these plaques into passive observers of that unspeakable crime. This passivity can be experienced as highly problematic: what can you as a passerby do with this minimal information? The script of the stone inculcates you as a witness but offers no ritual form to help cope with this situation. Being condemned to passivity can be experienced as an accusation: not Armando’s guilty landscape, but the guilty passerby who does not know how to act.

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Memory specialist Kirsten Harjes argues that the Stolpersteine provide little context. This can frustrate local inhabitants who, in turn, may be annoyed by such an intrusion:

The stumbling stones have to strike a difficult balance between being a public monument, i.e. a public, official piece of collective memory standing for the dead and for the city’s wish to commemorate the dead, and being located in the semi-private space right in front of people’s doorways. [...] Forcing people of various ages and ethnicities to integrate the memory of the Holocaust into their daily lives – or to actively ignore it – does not necessarily have positive effects [...].’

Harjes argues that, these small memorials should be contextualized. Dedication ceremonies and commemorations can provide more information for local inhabitants, as well as brochures, websites and smartphone applications. Rather than making city dwellers stumble, taking them out of their daily flow, and confront them with the past without giving them a means to properly commemorate, they should be actively involved and given the opportunity to enter into a meaningful relationship with the past. Even if this is not possible on a permanent basis, annual commemorations could provide such a platform.

The permanency of the Stolpersteine can be experienced as an intrusion in the urban space and daily lives of citizens. Conversely, temporary installations can also cause conflict. Between 1991 and 1996, the American artist Shimon Attie constructed a series of light installations throughout Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands, in which he projected historic photographs onto façades and other surfaces in different cities. When Attie first arrived in Berlin during 1991, he observed an unexpected absence of the murdered Jews, while his imagination was already repopulating the city streets. He searched for historical documents and projected them throughout Berlin. These installations were subsequently photographed and circulated as independent artworks. James Young argues that his work reflects on the notion of mediation and public space:

Attie recognizes at the outset that public spaces, even the dreariest in our day-to-day lives, also reflect meaning and significance back to us. They also

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become ‘art’ in the eyes of the beholders, at once framed and composed by our reflective gaze.48

One of these places was the train station of Dresden where Attie projected portraits of murdered Jewish victims onto the literal means of deportation. Here, postwar Germans were confronted with the memory of an American Jewish artist. For his 1995 project in Amsterdam, The Neighbor Next Door, he used projected films that were clandestinely made by Jews in hiding. In these films, we see Nazi soldiers and collaborators marching along the street, observed by Dutch bystanders. The films were projected from the windows of an apartment on the Prinsengracht onto the pavement, staging the historical perspective of the hiding Jews and confronting today’s inhabitants with an image of passive collaboration.

During the installation of one of his projections in Berlin, Attie encountered a furious resident and they had this exchange of words:

[he] came running out of the building shouting that his father had bought the building ‘fair and square’ from Mister Jacobs in 1938. ‘And what happened to this Mr. Jacobs?’ Attie asked the man. ‘Why, of course, he was a multi-millionaire and moved to New York.’ Of course.49

The incident was filmed and broadcast on national television. Though it is tempting to dismiss the resident’s arguments as anti-Semitic and ignorant, they point to the importance people attach to their direct environment. Attie himself argues that his ‘point was to intervene in a public space and project right onto those space’.50 However, the public nature of these spaces is not simply defined. Harjes argues that memorial projects such as the Stolpersteine transgress the borders of public and private spaces. Her claim that, aside from the legality of the matter, the fact that people experience pavements in front of their residences as semi-private spaces; is crucial to her argument. The accusatory tone of Attie’s project that tries to break into the daily lives of local residents and confront them through the juxtaposition of past and present will move some people; but also aggravate others who dismiss his artworks as provocative. As such, there is little room for people to critically interact with Attie’s projects. Projecting a photograph onto the façade of a house without informing the resident is a rather aggressive strategy, especially when the subsequent confrontation is filmed, broadcast and as such made part of the performance.

The abovementioned projects transgress the notions of public and (semi-)private space. The interaction between these is central to the organization of society and intricately related to political thought. As urbanism specialist Ali

49 Ibid., 72.
50 Attie quoted by Young, ibid., 67.
Madanipour argues, the private and public sphere are interdependent in spite of the fact that these two are often presented as each other’s opposite. The boundaries between these two realms are often ambiguous and contested, which can lead to contestation and conflict. According to urbanism specialist Martijn de Waal, the sharp and essentialist distinction between public and private spaces as the foundation of societal exchange is crucial in the political conceptions of Hannah Arendt, Richard Sennett and Jürgen Habermas. According to De Waal these three describe the public sphere as rational and impersonal where strict protocols and rational arguments should overcome private identities and personal motivations. For Sennett it is precisely a certain remoteness that allows city-dwellers to live together. Other thinkers, such as Marshall Berman and René Boomkens, argue instead that the public realm is not a rational and objective sphere, but rather an environment where the messiness of everyday life takes place.

Both Madanipour and De Waal argue that a binary opposition of public and private is too crude. The former argues that ‘the establishment of neighborhoods can extend the private realm by creating a semi-private, semi-public realm, where a smaller number of urban residents may be aware of each other and of their differences from the rest of the citizens.’ De Waal has a similar argument but stresses the temporary and performative nature of these intermediate spaces. He uses the term parochial to describe places such as gay bars or a particular bench in a public park that is part of the public sphere and accessible to everybody but at specific times and under certain circumstances, are appropriated by particular and often exclusive groups. De Waal describes how city spaces are subjected to processes of change and appropriation where a public bench can become private or parochial through a particular use or performance.

If we reconsider the cases above in these terms, we see that the conflicts regarding the borders or locations of memorial sites are often framed in terms of public and private space and in a competitive model of either/or. The key lies in finding a mode of coexistence and in employing the polysemic and open character of space. De Waal’s suggestion to look at spaces as processes can be helpful. When memory spills over to proximate buildings or structures, or when the past is mediated through spatial and artistic interventions, it is important to consider the interaction between public and private realms. The conflict between Attie and the Berlin resident foreclosed a real interaction between these two parties, and the projection on the façade cruelly appropriated this residence as a part of the public realm. In contrast, the complaint of the neighbor concerning the photographic

52 Martijn de Waal, The City as Interface: How New Media Are Changing the City (Rotterdam: Nai010 Publishers, 2014), chapter 4.
53 Madanipour, Public and Private Spaces of the City, 209.
54 De Waal, The City as Interface, 16.
installation was resolved with diplomatic tact. In the case of the Stolpersteine, one can see how the growing awareness of this project caused a decline in formal objections. Nowadays there are more requests than Demnig can process and since he insists on being personally involved in every stone-laying, this has resulted in long waiting periods. Because of their modest size, they can navigate between being visible and invisible memorials, enabling locals and passersby to temporarily turn the sidewalk and the building into an indexical marker; regardless of the private or public status of the space. However, the international scale of the project is not so modest and might suggest completeness where completeness is impossible.

When a memorial project enters the public realm and is not encompassed by one specific and demarcated location, it needs to take the other functions and users of that realm into account. Traditional site bound memorials often create a semi-closed space where visitors can withdraw themselves from daily life in order to commemorate in silence, such as the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin. Others are more integrated into public space and function as memorials mainly during annual commemorations, such as the National Monument on Amsterdam’s Dam Square. In both these cases, there have been conflicts about proper behavior, ranging from the rebellious Damslapers in the 1960s who used the National Monument to sleep on and the Damschreeuwer who disturbed the annual commemoration in 2010, to people jumping from stone to stone and using the memorial as a barbecue-site in Berlin, which led to the introduction of a code of conduct. When we look at a decentralized project such as the Stolpersteine, the issues of spatial demarcation and proper conduct are different because of the ubiquity of these plaques and the lack of contextualization. Because the plaques point to the location where victims of the Shoah lived during the war, the building itself is made part of the memorial, breaching the border between the public sidewalk and, often, private residence. The great potential of this project is also its weakness; it transforms a large part of European urban spaces into a latent memorialscape with no clear boundaries. It does not prescribe or prohibit any behavior, vandalism aside, even if some people take offense by literally stepping on the stones. In this sense, the Stolpersteine allow other than commemorative usage of the spaces they inhibit. However, they fail to involve local inhabitants from the outset.

Joodse Huizen is an example of a collaborative, decentralized and non-permanent commemorative project that involves local residents. It was an initiative of Frits Rijksbaron, an inhabitant of Amsterdam who discovered the history of his newly acquired home when he read the property deed. He contacted the Amsterdam’s 4 & 5 Mei Comité the municipal organization responsible for the annual commemoration and celebration of World War II, to further develop his idea. Together with Mediamatic, a cultural enterprise that develops new media technologies, the Jewish Historical Museum and Het Parool, a metropolitan
newspaper that has its roots in the resistance movement during World War II, a list was compiled, containing the addresses of residences from which Jews were deported based on the information of the digital Jewish Memorial. On April 22, 2011 this list was distributed as a supplement with Het Parool. Included was a poster with the text: ‘1 of the 21,662 houses where Jews lived who were murdered during World War II’. Locals were asked to see whether their house was a ‘Jewish house’ and if so, to hang this poster visible to passersby on the 4th of May (see figure 5.9). Many Amsterdam residents did so and the poster remained visible on different locations after the 4th of May. One year later, the project was repeated, now complemented with the option to print out a personalized poster. People were encouraged to visit the Digital Monument to the Jewish Community in the Netherlands where they could look up their own address and automatically print a poster featuring the first names of the former residents in large print, their last names, place and date of birth and death and the address in smaller print (see figure 5.10). Different from the Stolpersteine and Attie’s projections, this project was a collaborative effort that was only possible with the involvement of local citizens. Its aim was not only to make the posters visible from the street, but also to have residents investigate the history of their own dwelling. This form was not a permanent marker on the sidewalk installed by an external organization, but rather a temporary poster suspended as an act of commemoration.
In 2012, a new project was launched; Open Joodse Huizen, an initiative of Denise Citroen who had previously been coordinator of the USC Shoah Foundation Institute in the Netherlands. She collaborated with the Jewish Historical Museum to develop this grass-roots commemorative project. It was inspired by the poster project Joodse Huizen but had a different approach. Rather than using posters telling passersby that a Jewish victim of the Shoah had lived here, the current inhabitants of these so-called Jewish homes host small-scale commemorative meetings. Each meeting is organized by volunteers and follows a general scenario. During the first 15 to 20 minutes, either a relative, an (amateur) historian or the current inhabitant recounts the life of the family that lived there. They are encouraged to use different forms, such as reading from letters or diaries, a musical performance or a poem recital. During the following 15 to 20 minutes, there is time for questions and remarks by the visitors. This interactive part offers a platform not only for questions but also for other stories and enables these meetings to be dialogical and communal. The private home is temporarily transformed into a semi-public site of memory in collaboration with the current owner. Due to its
success, the project that began in Amsterdam was extended to 12 other municipalities, encompassing 164 locations in 2015 and accommodating nearly 9,000 visitors.\textsuperscript{55}

Over time, Citroen visited many homes with a history connected to the Shoah. When I interviewed her, she describes how, as an outsider consciously looking for traces of the past, she is perceptive of the smallest details that current inhabitants often do not notice:

Strangers invited me to their houses and showed me all kinds of things. They opened up cupboards because there was something hidden in the back. Often they said, ‘Don’t mind the mess’, but I wasn’t there for the mess, I was trying to look back in time, look past the interior and transformation, looking for old details such as door knobs or small holes and realized that there once had been a mezuzah. […] I do this together with them, they often have questions; they live there and feel the vibes of their own house.\textsuperscript{56}

This demonstrates a clear sensitivity to the latent and contingent indexicality of these residences. In collaboration with the current inhabitants, Citroen looks for material clues that may help to put the past into a meaningful context.

The strength of this commemorative project resides in the decentralized organization that not only involves local citizens but depends on their active collaboration. Different from both the Stolpersteine and the poster project Joodse Huizen, where the passerby receives significant but also a small amount of information that is not contextualized, people are invited inside to hear more about the lives of these victims. By opening these private homes to a small public, the border of private and public space is blurred which creates an intimate and informal setting with a low threshold for interaction. An important part of these commemorations are questions and remarks from the public, something which is more difficult to include in a more formal and larger commemoration. Furthermore, the information that somebody who was killed during the Shoah has lived in a house does not tell the entire story. This information is only a snapshot in time: you do not know whether these people lived at this address for a long or short period of their lives, or that this is the address from where they were taken.\textsuperscript{57} Most people however will associate this knowledge with vivid images of forceful deportations, which might only be part of the story. Citroen goes on to say:

\textsuperscript{56} Interview with Denise Citroen, July 8, 2014.
\textsuperscript{57} The address information on the digital monument is based on several sources. The most prominent sources are the register lists of Jewish residents that each municipality had to provide to the Nazi occupiers, most of them drawn up between February and May 1941. See http://www.joodsmonument.nl/page/274122?lang=en, accessed on July 18, 2015.
Many people, most often non-Jews, who live in these houses immediately associate this piece of information with boots on the staircase and violence. [...] I respond with the remark that you don’t know if that is what happened in this specific residence. It is important to get to the right story, or at least as close to that story as one possibly can. [...] Every house as a right to its own history. This is important for everybody, also for the current residents.58

The problem of this association with violence is that one remembers these people first and foremost as victims, rather than as citizens who had ordinary lives. This is why the setting of these commemorative meetings is so essential: they are not held at a site of persecution, but rather in their former private environments where their life stories are shared.

The question remains then, why do current residents have a natural tendency to want to know more about the lives of former inhabitants? Literary theorist Ernst van Alphen provides two possible reasons. People want to appropriate the house by creating continuity with its past and adding their own history to the house in order to no longer feel like a stranger. Alternatively, they are unconsciously afraid the house is haunted and try to dispel the threat of the dead’s uncanny return by familiarizing themselves with the past.59 This issue is relevant for Van Alphen himself because he currently lives in a house built and inhabited by the Jewish architect Harry Elte. Elte lived here until 1942 when he was deported to Theresienstadt where he died in 1944.60 In his book Caught by History, Van Alphen investigates how this knowledge influenced his own experience of living in that house. The danger is that the public memory of the Shoah may overshadow any private memories. Van Alphen explains that:

The memory of the Holocaust is bearable, and even then hardly, only in an institutionalized form: in the form of official memorials, in the form of Holocaust museums, in the form of an annual day of commemoration. The memorial and the museum are public places that convey memory – a collective memory, that is. Collective spaces can be the bearers of such memories because they don’t affect me, my life, privately. The issue of these collective spaces, then, is the maintenance of privacy itself.61

Residents can experience the proliferation of spatial memory as an invasion of their private space. Nothing is more private than your own home and when that home is transformed into a sign of the Shoah, this can become unbearable. Learning more about the life of this former inhabitant may replace the abstract and bare fact of

58 Interview Citroen.
59 Van Alphen, Caught by History, 169.
61 Van Alphen, Caught by History, 203.
victimhood with a more elaborate biography. It is not enough to place the history of these houses in a larger historical framework, since this does not provide room for self-inscription and re-appropriation on a personal level. As we have seen in chapter 4, this self-inscription is a creative process that is based on imagining a connection to the past. The Open Joodse Huizen meetings are open to other forms of sharing stories, such as musical performances and other recitals. By revitalizing the memory of the former inhabitants, a moment is created where one can envision how these people had lived their daily lives. This can subsequently enable a cohabitation of two living memories: that of the former and current inhabitants.

The latent and contingent indexicality of sites of memory allows people to imagine a connection with the past. This type of memory proliferates spatially and cannot be delimited by a particular location. We have seen that the borders of sites of memory are more often realms of interaction and contestation than of demarcation and closure. The subsequent memory sprawl can lead to conflict when the semi-private space of citizens is invaded, but can also offer opportunities when memory projects are truly open and collaborative. In the case of the Hollandsche Schouwburg, its façade addresses the passerby through the dissonance of its architectural composition and its current function, a tension that is played out for example by the mock theater posters. The artwork Last Words turned this façade into a spectacular projection screen, confronting the passerby with the intimate and private last words of Jews who were incarcerated here during the war.

The memory sprawl of the Hollandsche Schouwburg as a former deportation site goes beyond its direct environment as it is part of other networks of persecution. Initiatives such as the Stolpersteine and the (Open) Joodse Huizen create decentralized networks of micro-memorials that have an enormous potential range in geographical terms. These projects transform everyday buildings into indexical signs of the Shoah, a phenomenon that can possibly violate the privacy of local inhabitants. It is therefore important to involve citizens in co-producing new narratives of the past. The Hollandsche Schouwburg, as part of the Jewish Cultural Quarter, has an important institutional role as facilitator and hub for the production, collection and sharing of personal life stories of victims and the imaginative self-inscription of local residents.