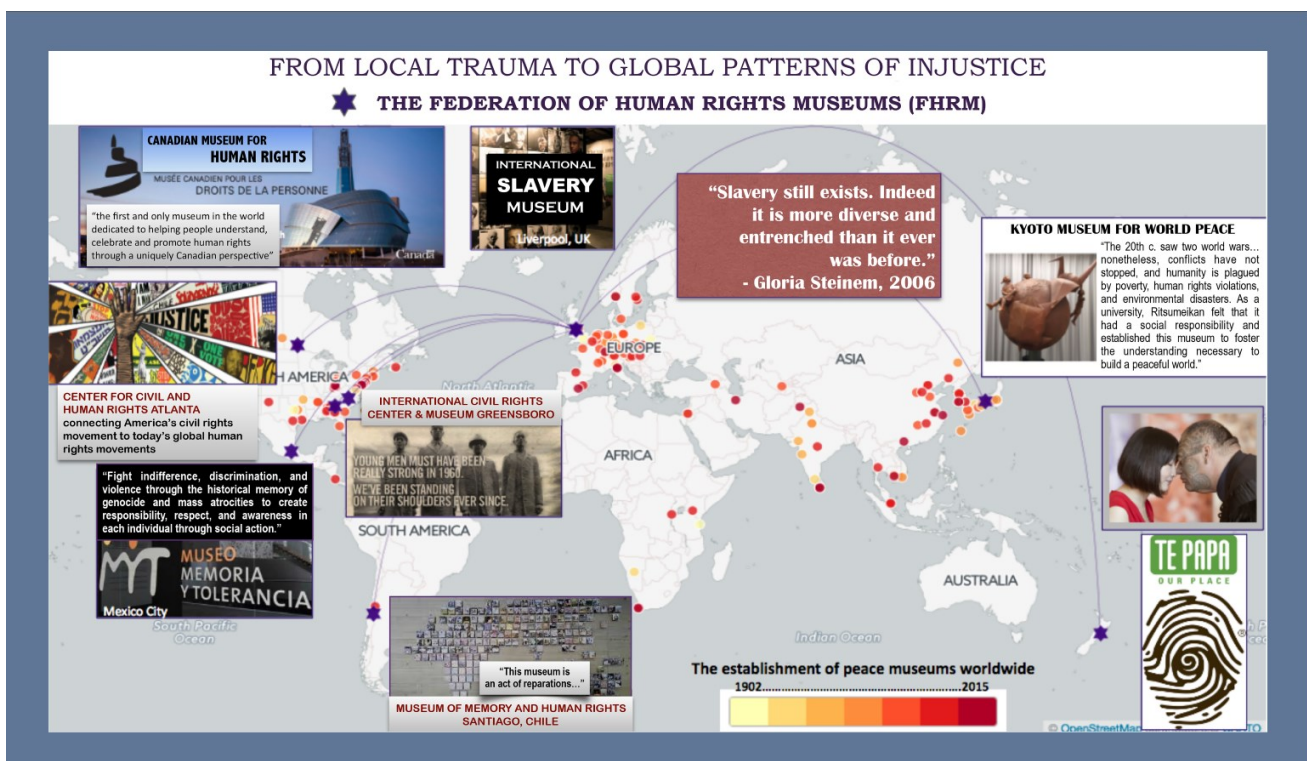


Reflection from 2017 Faculty Seminar: Visit to Museum of Memory & Human Rights, Santiago, Chile

Prof. Franziska Seraphim

This museum is what I was personally most looking forward to, but each of our activities seems to outdo the previous one or put it in a new perspective. The museum visit is greatly enhanced, retrospectively, by the visit to Villa Grimaldi. Still, each was clearly a highlight in its own right.

The museum is less a museum of the atrocities themselves, although it gives important historical background and context, than it is explicitly about the making of memory. We began with a short video about the coup itself followed by a tour through much of the museum's 2nd floor by our guide Renate, an incredibly poised and well-spoken young woman whose mother came to Chile from Germany in the 1980s as part of a grassroots solidarity movement. As a museum of memory, the materials on display were all donated by the families of victims, coordinated by a civic organization, Casa de la Memorial, founded in 2009 specifically for this purpose. Lots of legal documents, photos of arrests, violence, victims, perpetrators, some torture objects, protest posters from around the world, videos of testimonies, drawings by survivors, also a video of a folk dance that mothers of the disappeared would dance without a partner--symbolizing the missing. An electronic map with lit spots of all the detention centers--harrowing in their density around the middle of the country but also their spread along the enormous length of the country, including offshore detention centers, on navy boats. The tour ended in a particularly moving place surrounded by candle-like lights with a good view of the large wall of photos of the murdered and disappeared, all donations by families, and still growing. The singer Victor Jara's murder loomed large over the entire exhibit.



Although the museum was tastefully and well put together, there was no heat and the blinds were drawn, making for a chilling and dark experience. Unsurprisingly, there is no warm memory. Displays had Spanish-only explanations. My initial impression was that despite its name the museum was exclusively about remembering the 17 years of the Pinochet dictatorship, but that is, indeed, too narrow an interpretation. Because I encountered the museum first online in the context of visually documenting the recent movement worldwide towards “human rights museums,” I looked especially for signs how this museum understands its connection to mass atrocities elsewhere and found three ways to consider.

First, the overall architecture (this museum was designed by a Brazilian architecture firm) and use of outdoors space is hugely reminiscent of Holocaust museums in Berlin, especially the Museum of the Topography of Terror, but also in Washington, D.C. and Yad Vashem in Jerusalem in terms of the abstract sharply angular, box-like concrete structures, open-air plazas, the descent into terror, literally. Inside, the commemoration of victims by masses of individual photos in a large space lit with candles or special lights is also an important commonality. This museum is equipped with a computer station that allows visitors to look up individual names and then find the corresponding photo (or blank space) on the wall--minus the unknown disappeared, of course. One could write an entire paper on this.

Second, the entrance hall features a large collection of cases of mass human rights violations represented by picture tiles organized into a world map. This is the signature image of the museum on the web and was the inspiration of the Introductory panel to BC History Department’s current exhibit. But upon further inspection, it turns out that the “cases” (in form of the tiles) that make up the world map do not at all correspond to geography. In other words, all of Eurasia is plastered with tiles that have little if anything to do with the atrocities that occurred there but are a mix of South American and African as well as other atrocities. This was surprising and a bit unsettling, and I’d like to know more about why such a decision was made.

Third, there is a third floor, which we did not visit because of time constraints, that serves as space for special exhibits, and it has housed photo exhibits of mistreatment of Chile’s indigenous populations, the Colombian painter Fernando Botero’s paintings of Abu Ghraib, and various human-rights themed festivals and exhibits, according to Wikipedia. Renate told us about a visit a month ago by Irish singer Sting, who wrote a famous song about the Chilean atrocities in the 1980s. I attach here a visualization in BC’s exhibit that contextualize this museum as part of the Federation of Human Rights Museums worldwide to place it into a global context.

RETHINKING THE PEACE MUSEUM IN AN AGE OF GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

The heightened awareness of the need to deal with enduring injustices, belated justice, and transitional justice has been accompanied by an explosion of museums.

What distinguishes this recent trend is

- A shift from an invocation of “world peace” in general to the need for concrete analyses of global patterns of human rights violations
- A critical rethinking of the social and ethical role of museums as safe places for conversations about historical and ongoing injustices (ex.: The Federation of Human Rights Museums)
- An emphasis on global networking among museums and with organizations dedicated to historical justice both locally and globally (ex: The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience)