I spoke with Mr. Eisenman on Feb. 17, 2007, at his home, not far from the campus of Yale University, where he is the Louis I. Kahn Visiting Professor in the School of Architecture. The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, in Berlin, opened in 2005.

MO: On the telephone, you said that architecture is abstract and you mentioned the second commandment right away. I'd like you to elaborate on that.

PE: Architecture, in what we conceive to be the world, is real things. And real things are viewed as . . ., I mean, they are what they are. You may not call them abstract. But they don’t necessarily only represent. They are things in themselves in the sense that something may represent something, but it’s a thing. Jacques Derrida talks about words being things in themselves. If something is a thing in itself and also a sign of something else, then there is what I would call an abstract relationship between the thing and the sign because the sign may be unintentional, it may be intentional, etc. Signs to me are images, in the broadest possible sense. Therefore, when the Commandment says “build unto me no graven images,” what I was trying to do was to reduce the sign value. You can’t reduce it altogether, but of my Holocaust Memorial, I tried to make it not abstract, but in a sense, merely a dumb thing. You look at the field. If there were just one [slab], it would be symbolic. If there were two or three, there would be certain . . . But when you start multiplying them and they no longer become a thing, but they become a field of things, then the field takes on a different relationship. It’s viewed by some people as a cemetery, by some people as a deserted city, a ruin of a city; some people see it as a foundation. People will always attach meaning to something: to colors, to shapes, to things.

What I was trying to do, was to reduce, as far as possible, the possibility of a single interpretation. Because the whole problem is that then it no longer has what I would consider a resiliency or flexibility. In other words I didn’t want it to look like anything, so that someone could say this looks like “a this,” as far as possible. Now clearly that’s not possible. People argued against this; the Jewish community was very upset that it didn’t look Jewish enough. What did that mean? It didn’t have Jewish inscriptions, Jewish stars, Jewish letters, some kind of appreciation of what this was. And I understand that but I could never put Jewish stars on things, or crosses on things, because they’re too literal and too banal. You know, once you see a star or a cross, then you get it. And what I wanted was an experience that would be unable to be “gotten” so easily. The proportions, that is, the width between the pillars, is smaller than the width between your stove and your sink, which is a normal dimension. So it’s not a normal dimension for a household. And it’s not a normal dimension for walking, either, especially when it goes up and down and when the pillars get taller. I wanted, as I have said many times, an out-of-body experience, that is, the sense that that experience in the present is an important experience, one that you remember. You cannot easily synthesize it into your normal experiences. That was number one.

Number two, I wanted it to be, in a way, like Proust’s Time Regained, when he talks about the footsteps on the cobbles on Méséglise Way being like the footsteps he’s reminded of on the cobbles in Piazza San Marco.1 I wanted the footsteps on these particular cobbles to resonate with other footsteps, whether they be marching Nazi soldiers, goose-stepping in Berlin, where the people walked to trains to take them to Auschwitz, or whatever

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kinds of memories that this kind of sound and experience could call up. Because it’s an out-of-body place; it’s not something normal. When you’re walking in there, all kinds of things come to mind. It’s also a place where there’s a potential for something that doesn’t happen very often, and that is to feel lost in space for a moment. People have lost their children in there. I mean the minute a child goes around the corner, forget it, you can’t find it. Not that people are lost, but they are lost in relation to others. And so, for me, I don’t think of it as an abstract space, necessarily, but I think of it as a space without easily image-able conditions. I think it is nothing to do with what anybody would call Jewish space or Jewish art. I don’t know what that is. What makes Catholic space? what makes Christian space? Is it the tradition of those forms? I don’t know. But there’s certainly no necessary tradition of a space like this in Berlin.

The other, last thing I would say is that the city itself, any city, speaks. Every surface in this room speaks, the way the corner is done, the way the wood is done, the way this house sits in the salt marsh, the way it sits next to the Mill Pond. There are all kinds of references. So when you look around the site [of the Memorial], you see the Tiergarten on one side, the Goethe Memorial; you see the U.S. Embassy; you see Frank Gehry’s Deutsche Bank; you see East German DDR housing; you see embassies; you see all kinds of significations, things that are speaking. And this place doesn’t speak; it is silent. And silent in another way because when you’re walking in it, the city becomes silent. The sounds of the space become something really important. I hadn’t realized this, but when I was there, it was really interesting because the sound is very different in the space. I was very moved one day, when I was there, when a blind man was walking in the space and he was touching the stones and feeling the hot and the cold from the shadow, and listening to the sound. And it was clear to me that this blind man saw more than a sighted person, and could have much more of the experience that I wanted because he didn’t need to use his eyes. And that is basically what I meant by the question of image, the question of signs, the question of abstraction. You can say, “it’s abstract,” but it is more the idea of thingness, of being in space, which I think is interesting about it.

MO: Do you want this piece to be more of a “thing” in that sense than some of your other work?

PE: No. First of all it’s an entirely different commission. I don’t think that my other work could be like the memorial in Berlin, but it has this similar kind of attitude toward space and time, and people using space and time. I think any number of my projects . . . it’s not a question of looking, nothing’s going to look like it. But, my Wexner Center in Columbus, Aronoff Center in Cincinnati, even my housing at Checkpoint Charlie, if you look at the first submission for that, the sort of garden I did for it was a field of slabs. And so I think it couldn’t be characteristic because of the nature of the project. I just wanted to solve the particular problem of that site, and that place. I wasn’t thinking about Maya Lin, we certainly weren’t thinking about Danny Libeskind. We were just working on that particular site. And, I know the German woman who was the lead architect in my office, she’s always really resented the idea that we were looking at Danny Libeskind, because both of us don’t like the E.T.A. Hoffman garden. But I think if you look at my Judenplatz Memorial in Vienna, which is the first one I did, which didn’t get built, but was in the competition with Rachel Whiteread, you have to look at all the echoes of what we were trying to do in the Judenplatz, that are in this one in Berlin.

MO: You don’t like Libeskind’s Memorial?

PE: He didn’t do a memorial. I love . . . I’m doing a book I can show you, a book called Ten Canonical Buildings Since 1950 and his is one of them, so I can’t say that I don’t like his buildings.

MO: What about the chimney-like space? Is it an attempt at an isolating experience?

PE: Well, maybe it is. It’s not interesting to me to talk about those things. And whether it’s an isolating experience or not . . . is my Wexner center an isolating experience?