



interpret europe

European Association for Heritage Interpretation

Heritage interpretation

for architects and landscape architects

www.interpret-europe.net

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Contents

What is heritage interpretation?	4
Interpretive design techniques	5
Best practice examples	6
Interpret Europe	20
Benefits of membership in Interpret Europe	21

What is heritage interpretation?

Heritage interpretation is a creative approach for enriching our experience of heritage, helping us not only to learn facts but also to discover meanings and relationships, usually through first-hand experience.

Heritage interpretation seeks to relate natural and cultural heritage to the individual's world by inspiring thoughts and emotions. This will in turn ignite a thirst for knowledge and further engagement. The term 'heritage interpretation' (HI) was introduced by Freeman Tilden in 1957 in his book *Interpreting our Heritage*. His ideas caught on in many parts of the world and describe the whole visitor experience from initial concepts of communication, through guiding and illustrative media, to the natural and built environments.

Heritage interpretation is about encouraging and facilitating meaningful experiences of heritage.

Good interpretive design

- addresses how people **experience themselves** in relation to the heritage
- creates **resonance**, offers **paths to deeper meaning**
- sparks **curiosity**, enables **discovery**
- fosters **stewardship** for all heritage

Good interpretive design enriches visitor experience, adding to the heritage's attraction and significance.

Interpretive design techniques

- **Sensitise** visitors with an **immersive, sensory experience** in **real spaces**, not just intellectual ones
- Make it **interactive**
- Make it **emotional**
- **Surprise!** Provoke curiosity and reveal new and interesting perspectives which can make even the familiar seem special
- **Relate** the site to its historical and contemporary context
- Employ **narratives** to support some **central ideas**
- End by giving visitors space and time for **reflection**, and **opportunities to learn** more about what they have experienced

“Through interpretation, understanding; through understanding, appreciation; through appreciation, protection.

National Park Service

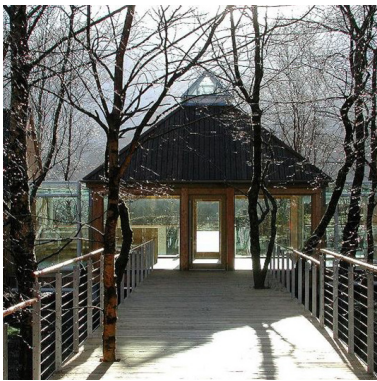
“The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.”

Freeman Tilden

Best practice examples

Glencoe Visitor Centre

Glencoe, Scotland



page 7

Naturum Visitor Centre

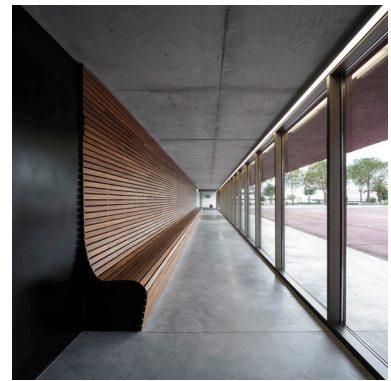
Kosterhavet National Park, Sweden



page 9

Centre for Interpretation of the Battle of Atoleiros

Fronteira, Portugal



page 11

Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision

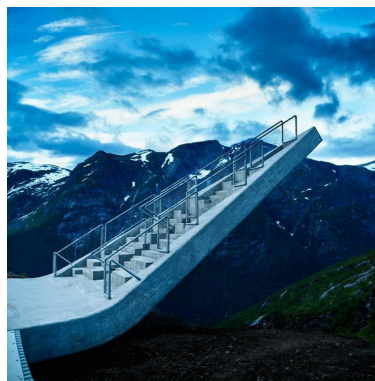
Hilversum, The Netherlands



page 13

Utsikten Viewpoint

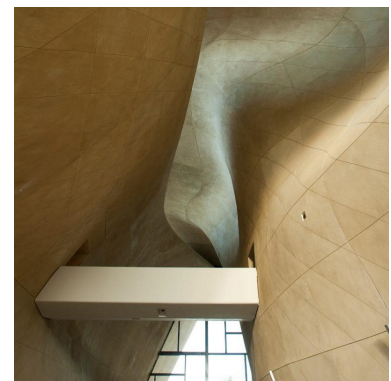
Gaularfjell, Norway



page 15

Polin

Warsaw, Poland



page 17



Glencoe Visitor Centre

Glencoe, Scotland

2002

Architecture: Gaia Architects

Award-winning sustainable architecture and landscape architecture, which enable visitors to experience a uniquely beautiful and evocative location in different ways and to participate in its ethic of profound respect for, and stewardship of, landscape heritage.



Photo: Gaia Architects

Brief

The former National Trust for Scotland visitor centre at Glencoe was out-dated and poorly situated in the heart of the glen. It intruded upon the ambience of the location and was facilitating the destruction of one of Scotland's most treasured environments. To renovate or build in the same place would have compounded an earlier error. A decision was therefore made to find a new site and to return the old one to its former ecology. The aim was to allow visitors to experience a uniquely beautiful and evocative place, whilst avoiding or mitigating any damage; to leave the lightest footprint possible in Glencoe, reconciling access and conservation.

Interpretive response

Gaia responded with a low-lying, modern complex designed to reflect the massing, proportions and scale of a small hamlet or clachan in Gaelic. Careful siting of the new buildings avoided the loss of healthy trees, and strict building site boundaries avoided damage though heavy machinery. Stilts and pad foundations minimise disruption to roots and groundwater. The building is made with 100% untreated timber, uses carbon-neutral fuel, is PVC and glue-free, uses only natural paints and stains, and has on-site water gathering and treatment. All the materials are easy to separate and identify for repair, reuse or recycling. Few materials used are polymeric or bonded and all but sacrificial elements of the construction are nail-free, so that they are removable, for maintenance or replacement. The clachan form allows for future expansion or contraction and is designed for easy dismantling. Gaia had a two-year involvement beyond handover, to ensure that the operation and maintenance was in accordance with the design intentions.

Visitors are greeted by a stream, accompanied by some native birch woodland, flowing naturally through the middle of the centre. Significant flora was relocated from the building footprint. The interplay between buildings, stream and new planting was balanced to optimise diverse ecologies, including sunlight and shade. Existing healthy, mature trees were supplemented with new growth. All planting was sourced from the bio-region.

The centre's painstaking stewardship of its natural and historical context is, in heritage interpretation terms, a 'deeper meaning' experienced here by its staff and visitors.





Naturum Visitor Centre

Kosterhavet National Park,
Sweden

2009

Architecture: White Arkitekter AB

A visitor center provides a 'gateway to nature'. Designed in the style of the traditional boathouses, the centre provides an introduction to both the cultural and the natural heritage of the national park.



Photo: Åke Eson Lindman

Brief

The Naturum was one of the largest architectural investments by the Swedish government in modern times. It is located in the Kosterhavet National Park on the island of Sydkoster, Sweden's westernmost outpost. The brief was to create a visitor centre that would provide a 'gateway to nature'. The building should communicate the qualities that led to designation of the archipelago as a national park. The Naturum would contain exhibition rooms, an auditorium, offices for the national park's administrative staff, a library, a petting zoo and a small water laboratory where visitors can make their own discoveries.

Interpretive response

Echoing the archipelago's traditional side-by-side boathouses, the long sides of this irregularly shaped building consist of repeated gable motifs, six facing the sea, five facing the land. These are bound together by diagonal roof ridges which together form the zigzag pattern of the roof, letting the Naturum become a coherent building that stands out from its neighbours. Similar yet different. The three-dimensional puzzle of the roof is apparent from the outside but is most evident inside the building. The shape of the roof is an interpretation of Kosterhavet National Park's most tangible element – water. A vast plate glass window cut into the gable opposite the entrance gives visitors a cinematic view out to sea and floods the interior space with natural light.

The building's structure consists of laminated wooden columns and primary beams. Inside, the walls, the ceiling and the floor are all clad in fine-sawn and white-glazed pinewood. The wooden façade is treated with a traditional mud paint, Falu rödfärg, and then coated with wood tar to make it more resistant to the harsh climate and to give it a more distinctive, older-looking tone.

The Naturum does not merely 'fit in' to its context by adopting traditional structures, materials and finishes. It draws our conscious attention to them by giving them an unexpected 'twist'.





Centre for the Interpretation of the Battle of Atoleiros

Fronteira, PORTUGAL

2012

**Architecture: Gonalo Byrne
Arquitectos Oficina Ideias em
Linha – Arquitectura e Design**

**A medieval battle is evoked through the
language of architecture and landscape
architecture.**

Photo: Fernando Guerra



Brief

The Centre for Interpretation of the Battle of Atoleiros, in Fronteira, is intended to raise awareness of a battle which occurred in 1384, and its importance in the context of the dynastic disputes between the kingdoms of Portugal and Castella at the end of the 14th Century.

Since it was not possible to locate the centre at the original site of the battle, the city council approved a high-profile site in the town centre. Through the architecture, visitors should gain interesting perspectives on the battle and on its historical and landscape contexts.

Interpretive response

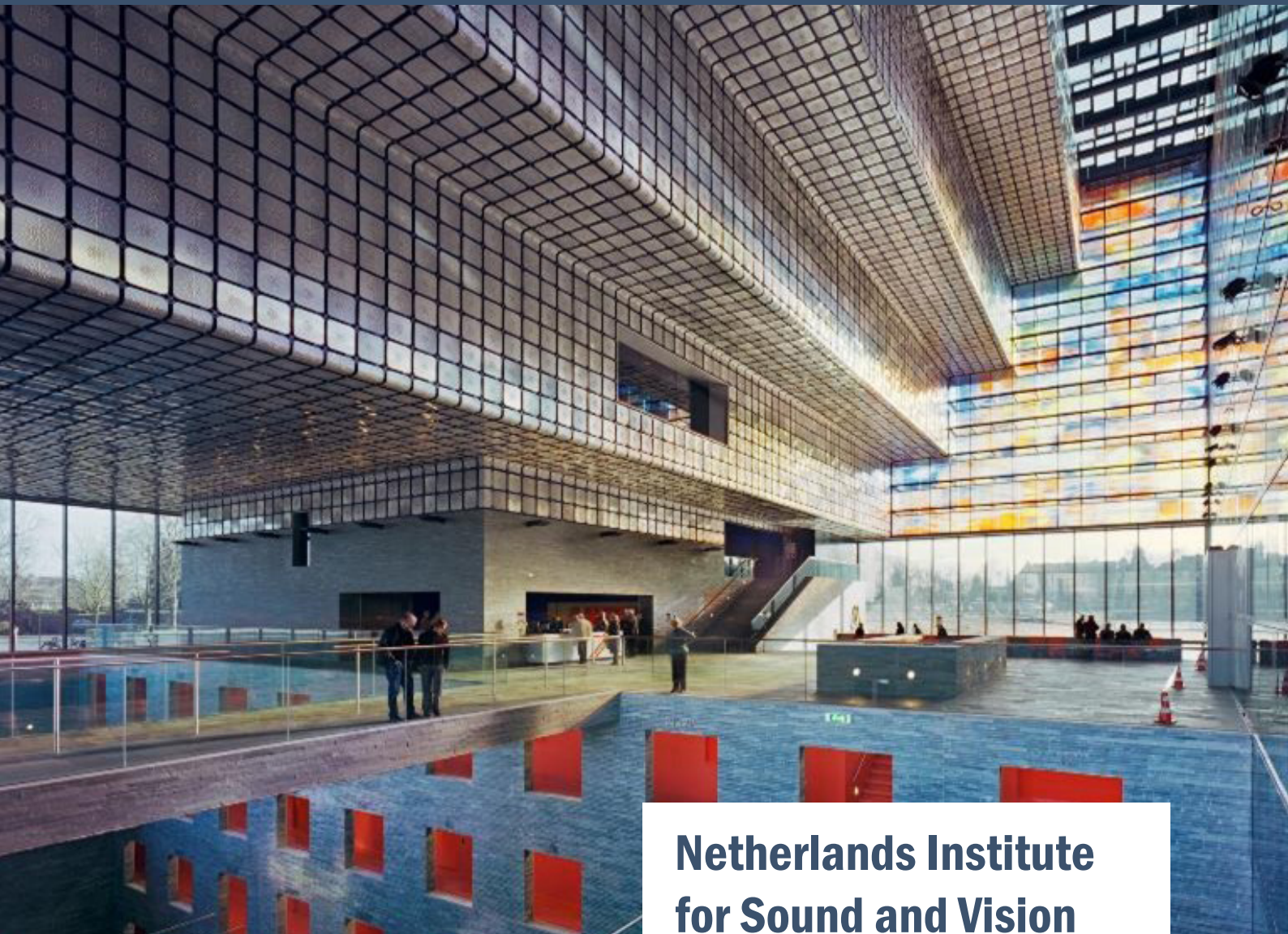
The massing evokes a confrontation between a larger and a smaller body, like two opposing armies. The building generates a strong gravitational presence. Like an earth sculpture suffused with its own tonalities, its curious patination evokes distant times and may resemble a stained vertical battlefield. Similar colours and textures unite the building with the park, while recalling the battlefield's original landscape. Southern Portugal's landscape has a golden, reddish tone. The façade of the building also recalls the rough surfaces of traditional medieval buildings, employing pigmented concrete worked with raw and irregular surface textures similar to the primal textures achieved by human hand. This texture is further enhanced by interposing lines of schist in the horizontal joints of the building.

A long bench at the end of the exhibition circuit provides a space for reflection. Will visitors here have a sense of being lined up for battle? Might the bus-loads of visitors arriving and departing beyond the plate glass become assimilated by the inner eye into a vision of the battle they have just been learning about in the exhibition?

In the park, block-like seating elements are strewn about to evoke the dynamic confusion of battle, while bands of indigenous planting recall the original landscape context.

In its subtle use of architecture to recall aspects of a distant event in the past, the Atoleiros visitor centre seeks to make intangible heritage tangible. It thereby opens up the battle once more to interpretation, while being careful not to set debatable interpretations of it in stone.





Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision

Hilversum, The Netherlands

2006

**Architecture: Neutelings Riedijk
Architects**

**An immersive architectural expression of
Netherlands's radio and televisual heritage,
bursting with surprises, changing perspectives
and eye-catching visual narratives.**

Photo: Neutelings Riedijk Architects



Brief

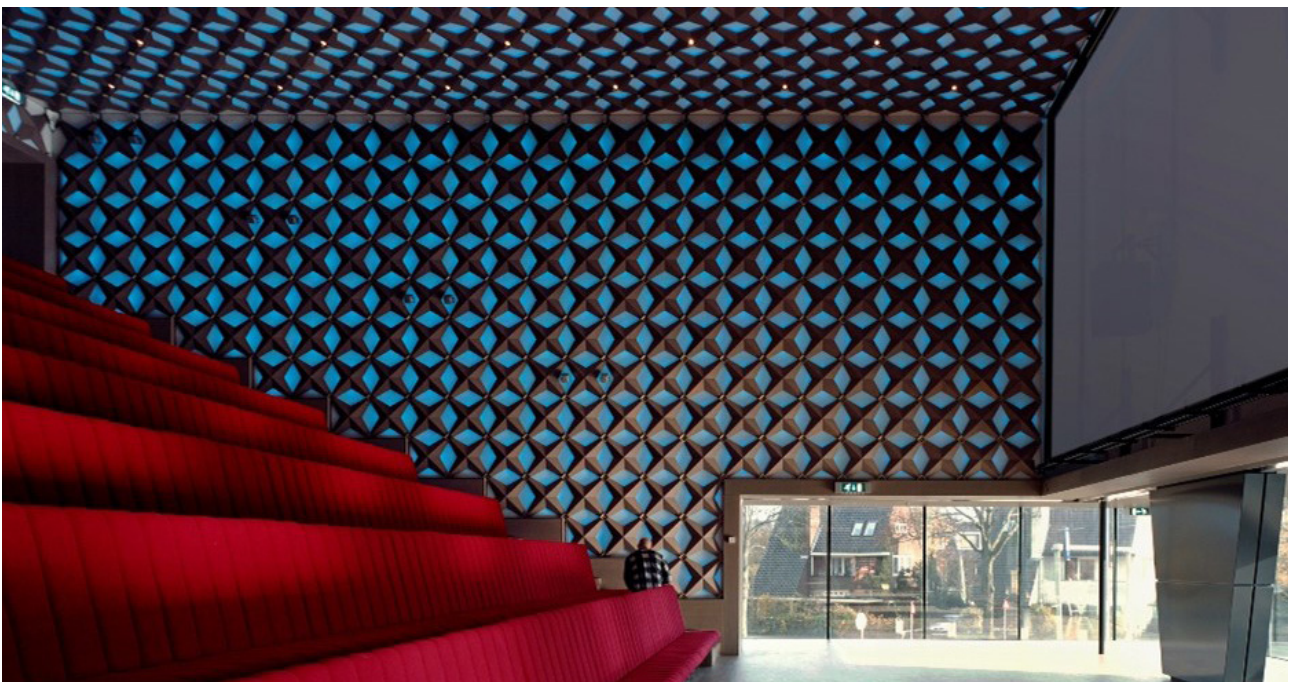
The Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision should house three distinct elements: the national archives, where all the audio-visual material ever produced since the early days of Dutch radio and television is preserved, the TV and radio exhibition centre for the public and a research institute for media professionals.

Interpretive response

The three distinct elements are each designed as separate volumes. The audio-visual archives which require strict climatic conditions and no daylight, are conceived as a five-layered underground vault. The exhibition rooms are organized in a huge ziggurat shape floating in the air. The institute's offices are housed in a simple slab on the side. Together, these three distinct volumes form one giant cube, half above ground and half underground, while leaving a large empty space in the middle. This central space holds together all the components of the institute. It is the central public atrium for visitors, professionals and collaborators, used for gatherings of the television community in the Media Park. The upside-down cascade of the stepped museum floors, clad in metal plates, registers as a wall sculpture that shapes and scales the internal space of the building. From the entrance the visitors are guided via a bridge over a deep canyon that dramatically shows the scale and sheer size of the archives vault. One of the canyon's sides is a flush wall with windows that radiate an orange glow, as if the concealed sounds and images speak to the visitor from within the archives. On the other side of the canyon rises a series of inverted terraces that contain the viewing studios for professional researchers. Daylight streams in through the skylights down to the lowest levels of the vault.

Coloured and tempered light enters through the glazed frontage of the superstructure. The glass façade is based on original TV-images taken from the archives of the institute and translated into 2100 different coloured high relief glass panels, composed by the graphic designer Jaap Drupsteen. Iconic images of Dutch TV-history appear and disappear throughout the day and night depending on light conditions, like modern-day stained-glass windows.

The building achieves a high level of interpretive quality by explaining its purpose clearly to visitors while immersing them in a joyous expression of the audio-visual heritage held in its vaults.





Utsikten Viewpoint

Gaularfjell, Norway

2016

Architecture: CODE architecture

The Utsikten viewpoint enhances visitors' experience of the national park. The drama and emotional impact of the landscape is heightened through a thrilling assemblage of ever more precarious viewpoints.

Photo: Einar Aslaksen

Brief

The brief was to create a viewpoint for the site known as Utsikten, 'the view' in Norwegian; a natural place to stop when driving over the Gaular mountain along the Western coast of Norway. For those who have made the journey over the mountain itself, the site affords a sudden and surprising vista overlooking a majestic landscape. For those driving up from below, Utsikten constitutes the ever-visible apex of the ascent rising up through a series of hairpin bends.

Interpretive response

CODE's design for Utsikten is a large, triangular concrete platform situated right at the side of the road. The platform is 80 cm thick but appears to rest lightly atop the terrain with raised, wing-like corners that protrude outwards and upwards into the air. Similar to how a picnic blanket is neatly arranged in order to create a proper setting for a meal, the concrete platform at Utsikten has been developed to create the proper setting for a stopover. The cars drive all the way up to the outlook, and visitors can move around between the corners to experience the spectacular scenery from various angles.

The finished platform appears as a precise, self-contained, geometric object in the landscape, like an alien craft, which seems to have alighted briefly on this spot. Over time, however, the concrete will acquire a patina and its colour will approximate that of the surrounding mountains. The rails have been made from thick steel pipes as a conspicuous seam along the platform's edges and reliefs, with netting that is more or less transparent. The concrete includes surfaces that have been milled, honed, sandblasted or boarded in order to accentuate the platform's shape and zonal divisions. The raised corners are structured to provide sitting and standing room, while incisions provide access to the restrooms, exits to the terrain, or outlets for rainwater. During rainy weather it is also possible to find shelter beneath these corners.

Interpretive architecture relates to something beyond itself, responding in this example to the height, the views, and the landscape as a whole. The viewpoint intensifies our exhilaration at standing here on top of the world by exaggerating and diversifying the viewpoints available. The sculpted platform is an attraction and a landmark in itself, providing human focus within a seemingly limitless landscape.





Polin

Warsaw, Poland

2013

**Architecture: Architects Lahdelma
& Mahlamäki**

**The building resonates with deeper meaning,
speaking eloquently both of the time of
its construction and of the Warsaw ghetto
uprising, whilst serving as a vessel for past,
present and future stories of Polish Jews.**

Photo: Juha Salminen, Wojciech Krynski

Brief

Warsaw was once one of the most important cities for European Jews. Before the Second World War there were half a million Jewish inhabitants in the city. In the mid-1990s, the founding director of Tel Aviv's Diaspora Museum and the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC, Yeshayahu Weinberg, convened an international working group to plan a new museum dedicated to the history of the Polish Jews. 150 researchers from different countries in Europe, Israel and North America participated in gathering the material on the history and lives of the Jewish people. By 2003, the fundamental idea and preliminary exhibition plan for the museum had been completed. In Spring 2005 an international architectural competition was held for the design of the building to house the museum.

The museum building is a multifunctional centre for research, exhibition, education and culture relating to the Jewish heritage. The core exhibition area comprises almost five thousand square metres in area. The exhibition presents the different forms and periods of Jewish culture in Poland from the Middle Ages until today – the Holocaust is just one of the themes of the exhibition.

The park in which the museum now stands once formed the core of the Warsaw ghetto. A treasured memorial stands there to remember the famous uprising. The museum should complement the memorial by telling the story of Polish Jews not only through the collection, but also through the views they create of each other and to the rest of the city.



Interpretive response

Lahdelma & Mahlamäki Architects' winning proposal set a tone of modesty rather making than a loud statement. Their goal was to usher in a silence around the building; to create a monument rather than a landmark. The basic form of the building is compact and reserved, not detracting from or overshadowing the surrounding park. The competition jury stated in its evaluation that the concept had been realized "without unnecessary rhetoric, with simplicity and elegance". From a distance, the building envelope blends into its surroundings – dappling the light and reflecting the city in its staggered panels. As one gets closer, the panels reveal clusters of letters – spelling POLIN in Roman and Hebrew letters. The word translated into English means 'Poland' or 'rest here'.

Cut right through the building is a soft, undulating chasm. Daylight shining through the exterior glass envelope onto the curved walls within dissolves the hardness of the concrete, opening up a tranquil and gentle space for reflection. The chasm might evoke hope and beauty or symbolise the parting of the Red Sea or the rift in Polish-Jewish history; its significance is intentionally left open, allowing people to attach their own meanings to it. Regardless of what each visitor conjures up, it remains a contemplative, emotionally powerful space mediating between the busy city outside and the wealth of history contained in the museum. The massive glass wall on the western side of the museum opens it up finally to the park, the monument, and the city beyond.

An important aspect of heritage interpretation is in relating heritage to its context, both historical and present-day. POLIN does this very well, not by making statements, but by opening up significant views and allowing visitors make the connections.



Interpret Europe

Interpret Europe is the major Europe-wide professional association for heritage interpretation. It is a membership-based organisation, registered as a charity in Germany, with more than 1,000 members from 57 countries. Interpret Europe's mission is to empower all who work to inspire meaningful connections with Europe's natural and cultural heritage while helping to shape our common future.

Interpret Europe's membership includes -

- Individuals such as guides, architects, designers, writers, planners and destination and communication managers
- Institutions or organisations encouraging people to experience and learn about natural or cultural heritage
- Businesses offering interpretive planning or support services

Interpret Europe acts as a European platform for co-operation and exchange, especially on research and education. It organises events for networking and training and supports the development of national associations for interpretation in European countries.

Interpret Europe is itself a member of -

- [Global Alliance for Heritage Interpretation](#)
- [European Heritage Alliance](#)
- [Climate Heritage Network](#)
- [Cultural Heritage Forum](#)

The Cultural Heritage Forum evolved from the official Stakeholder Committee of the 2018 European Year of Cultural Heritage. It is the European Commission's permanent Expert Group on Cultural Heritage.

Interpret Europe's Freiburg Declaration suggests how stakeholders can contribute to the development of the interpretive profession. Interpret Europe's study Engaging Citizens with Europe's Cultural Heritage was awarded the European Commission's 2017 Altiero Spinelli Prize (First Prize). Interpret Europe has recently been commissioned by UNESCO to create a certification course in interpretive planning for use at World Heritage Sites.

Interpret Europe supports the application of heritage interpretation in the field of architecture and landscape architecture by offering a five-day course recognised with a certificate in interpretive planning, the CIP. The course takes place several times a year in different locations around Europe.

Benefits of membership in Interpret Europe

- Networking opportunities with more than 1,000 professionals from 57 countries
- Heritage Interpretation viewpoints, articles, events, awards, funding schemes, newsfeeds on internal social media channels
- Notification of breaking news through special IE news e-mails
- Monthly IE webinars (free for IE members, some for professional members only)
- Quarterly information through comprehensive IE newsletters
- Annual IE conferences with proceedings including papers on new developments
- Significantly reduced fees for IE conferences and other events
- The general entitlement to join up to two IE groups for networking
- The general entitlement to register for IE training and certification courses
- Recognition of IE membership through use of its logo in e-mail signatures or on websites

Are you interested in knowing more?

Please go to our website at –

<http://www.interpret-europe.net>

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office@interpret-europe.net

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