

The culture of memories and presentations on the historical site. Nazi Transit Camp Westerbork in The Netherlands: a process of change

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Camp Westerbork seemed to have vanished from the earth but a monument was erected in 1970 which served as a permanent reminder of its sad history of the blackest pages in Dutch history. 140.000 Dutch Jews were murdered in the Nazi extermination camps during the second World War. More than one hundred thousand people were deported from the Westerbork transit camp. 102.000 of them did not return.

For a long time the former camp site was a barren desolate landscape. The emptiness symbolized the irreplaceable loss of the loved ones who did not return. But the need to make the past more transparent, especially for younger generations, did change this place of memory ('Lieux de memoires'). A museum was set up, in the landscape appeared historical marker points, and more memorials raised. Recently a barrack is rebuilt, the ruined house of the former German camp commandant has been fully restored ('guilty heritage' – the only remaining originally building) and historical goods train carriages are purchased as exhibits. How far can one go in reconstructing the past? The intended purpose and destination of the site is a constant subject of discussion. There is, on the one hand, a strong predilection for a new materialization of memories – the experience of 'real' objects – and, on the other hand, a trend towards visualization and experience, in which reconstructions of the past are important. Views on history, memory, authenticity and imagination engage one another, but are in conflict to each other as well.