

# UC Berkeley

## Places

### Title

A Living Memorial: Commemorating Yitzhak Rabin at the Tel Aviv Square [Speaking of Places]

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6fg2j06d>

### Journal

Places, 12(2)

### ISSN

0731-0455

### Author

Engler, Mira

### Publication Date

1999-01-15

Peer reviewed

# A Living Memorial:

Commemorating Yitzhak Rabin at the Tel Aviv Square

Mira Engler



*Above and opposite page: Grief and concern about the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin found an outlet in improvised monuments near Tel Aviv's city hall and in markings on the surface of the building and nearby walls. Above: Effie Sharir, ©1995 Yediot Aharonot. Opposite page: Mira Engler*

The Tel Aviv City Hall square, site of prime minister Yitzhak Rabin's assassination after a rally November 4, 1995, has become a stage to an extraordinary act of spontaneous public commemoration. In a country replete with official, iconic monuments to its past, this public place has witnessed the formation of a new kind of memorial — a stage for democracy, a place for public communication and action. The geography and the civic and symbolic nature of the site have nurtured the formation of a living memorial, a vital meeting place for political exchange and commentary.

Kikar Malchei Israel (Malchei Israel Square), as it was called before the assassination, is Tel Aviv's central civic square and has always been associated with mass celebrations, fairs and political demonstrations. It covers five acres (the largest paved public space in the city) and is surrounded on three sides by main streets with five- to six-story, mixed commercial and residen-

tial buildings. On the north side, a wide set of stairs connects the space with an elevated platform that bears the twelve-story, modernist City Hall building and bridges over a four-lane street. During mass gatherings, the platform serves as a stage, with City Hall as a backdrop.

The mass rally that day, called to support the peace process and uproot verbal and physical violence, stood in sharp contrast to its tragic end. Upbeat Rabin, who had just finished singing the famous Israeli "Song for Peace," had left the stage and descended the stairs through a backstage area toward his waiting car when three shots caught him from behind. The temporal, spatial and symbolic aspects associated with the event charged the site with intense feelings of humility, guilt and betrayal, as well as determination and hopefulness.

## The Evolution of a Square

A shocked nation, for the first time stricken by an enemy from within, witnessed an unprecedented collective grief, which was anchored to this particular place. The public trauma and grief were not followed, as in private mourning, by a sense of desperation and disorientation, solitude and social dysfunction. Rather, they were cast into new and evolving social, political and physical patterns. The square served not only as a container and anchor for mass commemorative activities but also as a scroll and canvas, as well.

*The first month: spontaneous commemoration.* The initial spontaneous commemoration was woven into patterns of imagery that were ritualistic, symbolic and emotional in nature. Groups of people, mainly youngsters who were later called "children of the candles," formed circles, recited poems and sang songs for peace around puddles of memorial candles, flowers, posters and portraits of the slain leader. The circles started at the point of assassination and spilled over to the main square area. Portraits and candles, some arranged in symbolic forms — the Star of David, the Menorah and the universal peace symbol — or as letters spelling words were the initial focus of these rituals.<sup>1</sup>

Before long, extemporaneous expressions of pain, anger, protest and shame mixed with a deep sense of guilt, found an outlet in the form of physical markings. People fastened their feelings directly to paving, walls and structures, creating a collage of highly emotional writings. The texts concentrated first on the walls and columns of City Hall that were underneath the platform and on the adjacent shopping center wall, but soon they spread outward.

Within the next few days an improvised monument, referred to by the Israelis as the *Gal'ed*, marked the place of the murder.<sup>2</sup> It began with modest, personal offerings and evolved into an assemblage of objects originating in Israel's national history, religious tradition and universal symbolism. The core of the monument constituted carefully crafted artifacts, such as a large basalt stone carved with Rabin's name, a metal drum pierced by bullets brought from a target practice range in Latrun (a site symbolic of Israel's War of Independence), the holy tablets of Decalogue with an inscription of only the Fifth Commandment ("Thou shall not kill") and a sculpture of a white dove. Other prominent objects included a clock standing still and marking the time of Rabin's murder, an olive tree symbolizing peace and the national flag. Newspaper pictures and stories about Rabin's life, memorial candles, flowers and personal notes were constantly added or taken away.



By the end of the month-long mourning,<sup>3</sup> horizontal surfaces stretching halfway into the square were covered with candles, posters, flowers and personal offerings with only narrow paths cutting through. Graffiti,

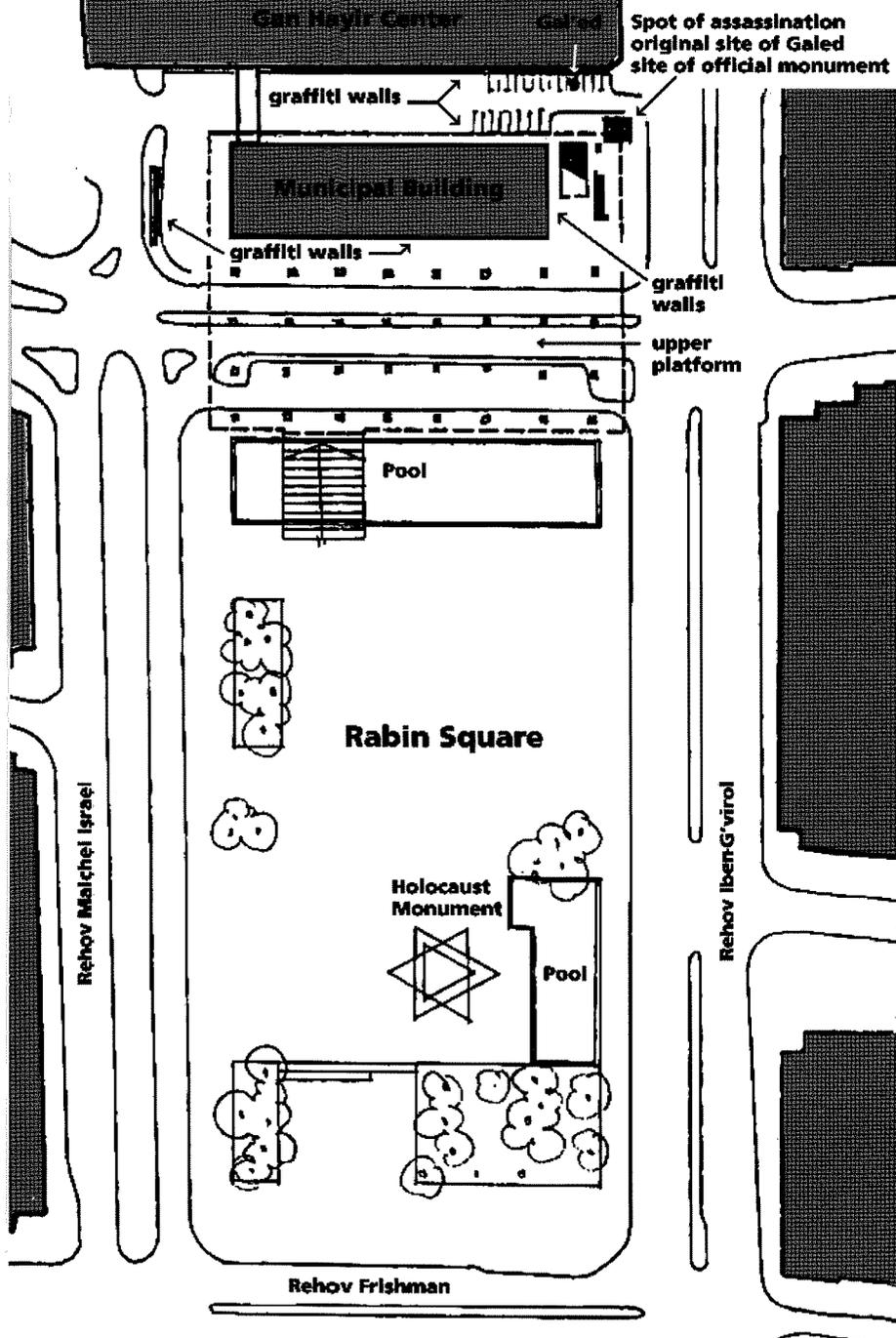


tattooed onto the skin of the place, reached out to the peripheries of the square. Every vertical surface within the boundaries of the square, including signage, rails, benches and the Holocaust Memorial, became canvas for a collage of text and images. Spray, brush paint and markers were collaged with notes, pictures, newspapers cut-outs, bumper stickers with fresh slogans, and poems typed on paper. The graffiti were created by thousands of individuals but seemed a coordinated piece, like a concert conducted by an invisible maestro.

*The first year: recovery and reorganization.* Following a mass memorial rally one month after the event, a stage of recovery and reorganization in the mourning process took place. On the one hand, the city government, whose officials had to make their daily path through the site to enter the building, sought to put things back in order, to return to routine. On the other, many citizens were determined to activate the place on behalf of Rabin's legacy.

In the name of good management and order the city began cleaning the layers of wax and removing the offerings from the pavement, erasing most of the physical traces. Most of the graffiti walls and the *Gal'ed*, however, remained intact due to constant presence and pressure of groups that began taking ownership over the place. After some of the walls were cleaned, they were covered with fresh messages.

Activists started using the site as a platform for new political organizations supporting the peace process and protesting against violence, such as Amutat Dor Shalom (The Peace Generation Association) and Mishmarot Hashalom (The Peace Guards). These



Plan of City Hall Square, with assassination site at upper right-hand corner.  
Graphic: Mira Engler

groups not only sought to advance their political cause but took it upon themselves to activate and tend the site of the assassination, to become a living memorial. The square became a stronghold of these groups and their political aims.

New rituals centering around the murder site were soon established. Most prominent were gatherings on Friday afternoons and holidays, which transformed the place into a hub of political activities with a core of dedicated activists, many of their supporters and curious passersby all involved in debates, discussions, petition signing and distribution of supportive material.

The conspicuous public geography of the space, its openness as well as intimacy, make it well-fitted for varying group sizes. Small groups congregate near the monument while large crowds spill over to the parking area. The surrounding walls, pillars and rails are used to hang banners and large placards needed for decor. During inhospitable weather the roofed area underneath the platform shelters people and information booths. Groups playing music and singing became a common scene as chairs are set up in a circle.

During the first year several events bestowed new meanings on the site. Rabin's governmental coalition was defeated in the May, 1996, elections, after which the place became associated with a sense of betrayal, defeat and victory to the cause of the murderer. People came to protest and ponder the sake of Rabin's legacy. In September, on Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, the site was filled with those who came to soul-search and reflect on past year's events. During the Jewish holiday of Succoth, a Succah (a temporary shelter symbolizing the Israelites' temporary dwellings in the Sinai desert during their journey to the promised land) was erected next to the makeshift monument endowing the site with religious authority. The Gal'ed was rearranged daily, while the graffiti grew thick with fresh layers of messages.

Simultaneously, there was an awareness of the importance of giving the memory an official representation and of the long-term effect that the values communicated by that representation would have. Shortly after the assassination, the Tel Aviv city government began receiving proposals for placing memorials to Rabin in the square. According to historian Batia Donner, most of the proposals were written by ordinary citizens and many were verbal and devoid of any visual illustration. Quite a few of those proposals did not discuss concrete objects, but advocated the establishment of a sort of Hyde Park in the square. One person wrote: "This suggestion is based on a fear that the abyss rent open by the killing would lead to a cultural battle and on a conscious perception of the need to reinforce the core of democracy, to allow divergent views to coexist along with openness and communication."<sup>4</sup>

Institutional commemoration commonly follows established national patterns. Official response to the assassination of Rabin, however, had to face new dilemmas with no precedent to follow. City officials — trying to respond to increasing public pressure but seeking to avoid any political orientation, fearing that it would



deepen ideological divisions — could only agree on a physical monument that describes the problem and represents a desire for national unity. They were unable to confront the more difficult underlying issues, or to rethink the process and consider the potential of a dynamic, polemical public commemoration.

As a result, the city acted in an undemocratic and careless manner. The process of artist and proposal selection was not made public and was hastily carried out through a process that, to an unknown degree, involved Rabin's family and some active members and artists of the peace groups. As it turned out, the so-called committee that was formed was merely presented with the final selection.

Then, in September, ten months after the event, the Gal'ed was moved to a parking space just across from the site of the murder to make space for the official memorial, which would be dedicated during an anniversary ceremony. Despite its very awkward location — tucked within a row of parked cars — people kept coming to the Gal'ed to reflect, extend offerings and messages, and take pictures.

*The first anniversary and second year: institutional commemoration.* The official monument, Yad Yitzhak Rabin (Yitzhak Rabin Memorial), located a few feet away from the point of assassination, was dedicated at an official ceremony on November 1, 1996, in the presence of Rabin's family members and many dignitaries.

The design, by architect Claude Grundman-Brigtmann, resembles a rupture in the ground. It comprises sixteen squares of rough-textured basalt stones from the Galilee (the northern region of Israel), arranged in a grid and contained by a steel frame. The stones protrude from the surface as if shaken by an earthquake. A soft light emits from below. According to the artist, the design represents the shock the nation has undergone and the necessary attempt to contain the evil. The steel frame represents a desire for a national unity and the light underneath the stones symbolizes eternal hope.

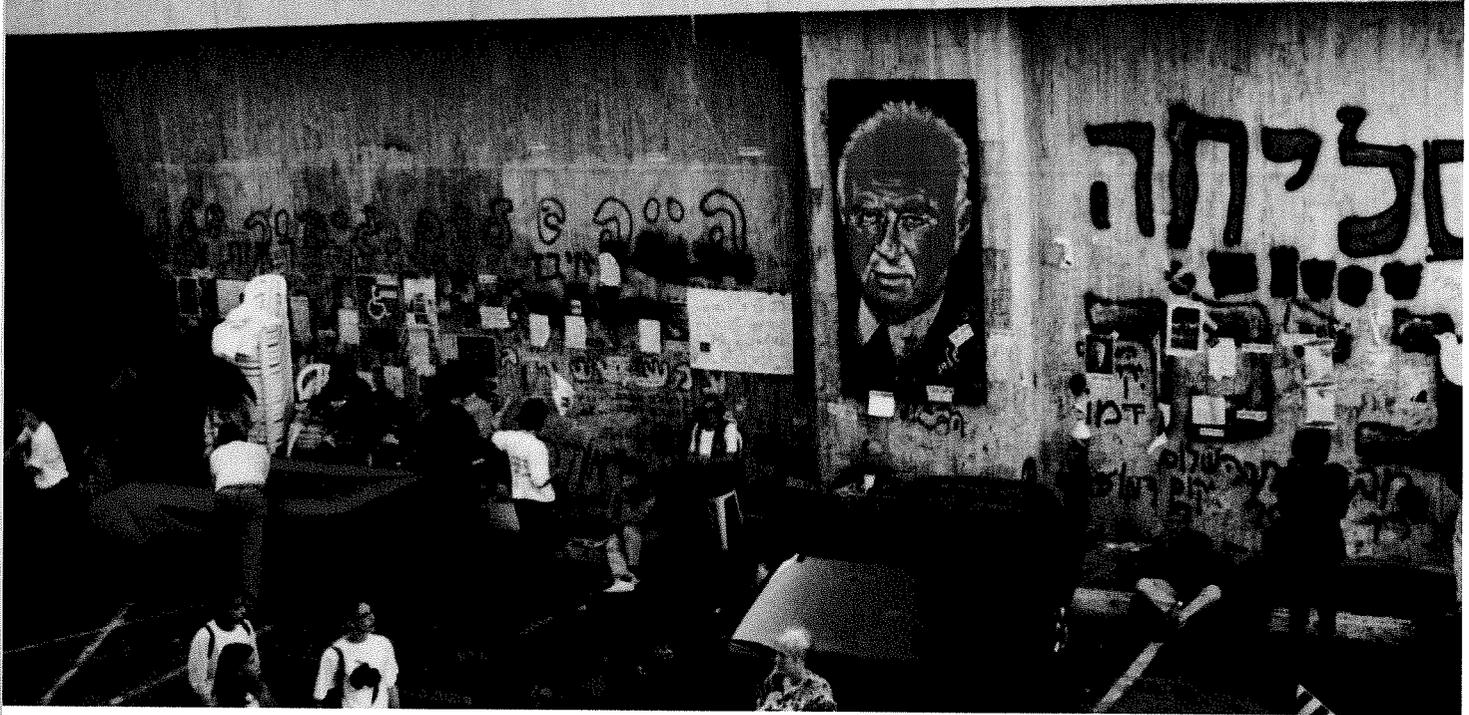
On the night before the dedication ceremony, the Gal'ed was removed — officials claimed it would be exhibited in a future museum dedicated to Rabin. The speeches made at the ceremony implied that the permanent, refined and stately monument would finally

**Graffiti spread onto numerous surfaces, including the walls of City Hall.**

*Photos: Mira Engler*

אם דרך שלום  
דרך שלום

ח ! ולא נסלח!  
אשמורה השלום



Activists began using the site as a platform for new political organizations supporting the peace process that Rabin championed.

Photo: Mira Engler

ensure that Rabin's memory would pass on to future generations in an orderly way. Nobody pondered the fate of the other existing forms of spontaneous public commemoration.

During the following year, the place acquired new routines and established its role as a seismograph for developments in the peace process. It continued to swirl with activists and supporters on Fridays and holidays. Following terrorist attacks, military tragedies and landmark government deliberations, the site became energized and charged with a greater determination to make a difference. Newspaper headlines were constantly pasted onto walls and became a changing scene, a reflection of the political state.

#### The (Hand)writing on the Wall

During this time a battle over the graffiti was carried between the city and the groups that inhabited the place. The graffiti have undoubtedly been a central, meaningful element in the mourning and remembrance processes, but no serious, open, public discussion concerning their role, meaning and fate has taken place.

To many people, graffiti connote social dysfunction, vandalism, street culture and urban ghettos. But motivations for using graffiti are quite varied, including venting aggression and protesting social oppression, transmitting political messages, marking territory, communicating with the dead and making memorials. Graffiti of extemporaneous emotional nature are a common response to sudden, shocking events.<sup>5</sup>

The graffiti on the Tel Aviv City Hall walls were different in nature and motivation from other graffiti in several ways. First, written words, not images, were used almost exclusively. For hundreds of years, the written word was almost the sole means Jewish people could use to express their culture, thus writing has a historic importance to Israelis, especially as a tool of spontaneous expression.

Second, graffiti are typically anonymous, hiding their creators' identities. But the writers on the walls in the square signed their names, indicated their affiliations (including schools and kindergartens) and the places they came from, and dated their comments. Because the texts included this personal information, they helped transform the square from a public space into an intimate place.

Third, the texts went beyond the urge to express emotions, or vent pain, anger and frustration. They were deliberate acts of public participation and communication; they offered a way for people to stop being quiet and passive, to take a stand, to fuel and reinforce the democratic process that became threatened. The graffiti derives further significance in this context as it became a concrete expression of what has since been called “the writing on the wall,” a maxim used as a metaphor for something whose unequivocal visual presence cried out to be noticed. It was a warning sign of fate, now ascribed to another pattern of reality perception.

The walls became a medium for pondering and taking a stand on human nature, right and wrong, national values, democracy, politics, war and peace. The messages were sometimes expressed as wall poetry (popular or amateur songs), sometimes as proverbs (“His death commended us peace”), sometimes simply as a declaration; often they included quotes from the Bible (particularly, the story of the attempted sacrifice of Isaac or Yitzhak, in modern Hebrew), and most notably, questions directed to God, to the people or to Israel’s leaders.

Early on, while the city was considering covering up the aesthetically disturbing graffiti, growing pressure from Mishmarot Hashalom and its supporters resulted in a decision to seek professional advice. Graphic designer David Tartakover was asked to examine the graffiti at the square and develop recommendations for handling it. Meanwhile, two picture books featuring the graffiti were published and an exhibit featuring large photos of the graffiti opened at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art.<sup>6</sup> This exposure elevated the graffiti to the level of historical document and artwork, giving it added legitimacy. Nevertheless, for many people, the graffiti’s unofficial nature, unconventional aesthetics and uncomfortable connotations were still hard to tolerate.

In November, 1996, the city agreed to follow Tartakover’s recommendations.<sup>7</sup> He proposed leaving the graffiti (except for what he called “inappropriate messages”) on the concrete walls of City Hall, but erasing the text from all other elements — doors, rails and columns, and from an adjacent stone-covered wall (except for two boldly written words, *Sliba, Nizkor*, which mean “Forgive us, we’ll remember”). The erasure, Tartakover explains, “will help to accentuate the remaining parts.”<sup>8</sup>

The saved graffiti will be likely coated with a clear, protective cover and might be illuminated with special lighting. Short poles with connecting chains will distance viewers and passersby from the wall to help “frame” and “elevate the graffiti to a museum-like display,” Tartakover says.

The wide east column under the building and close to the point of the assassination will remain a surface on which people can continue writing messages. The wall will be painted over periodically. Though, “if hateful statements will be written, they will be erased,” Tartakover adds, unable to explain who will decide what is hateful or inappropriate.

Nevertheless, in January, 1997, without any notice, the city painted over city hall’s eastern wall, where the entrances to the building are located, with beige paint — forever sealing the writings. The following Friday, fresh graffiti reclaimed the painted wall, protesting the arbitrary act by the city. “You can paint the wall a hundred times but cannot erase the blood,” and “The walls, witnesses of the murder, cannot and will not be silenced,” two of the quotes read.

This marked the beginning of a battle between the city and the committed group that regularly occupied the place. The graffiti walls were sacred; their erasure was seen an act of desecration. Since then the eastern wall has been painted over twice again, yet fresh graffiti have persisted.

The second anniversary of the assassination, in November, 1997, was marked with an unprecedented mass rally in the square. The place is frequently attended by visitors and passersby who place flowers and candles on the outer edge of the monument.

The official monument, Yad Yitzhak Rabin, located a few feet away from the point of the assassination.  
Photo: Mira Engler



A year after the assassination, graffiti continued to grow thick with new layers of messages.

Photo: Mira Engler



Sometimes a busload of tourists stops for a visit, which often culminates in picture-taking in front of the monument, though many tourists spend time reading and sharing thoughts with others about the writing on the walls. Local youth groups and schoolchildren on class trips are often seen at the site, primarily engaging the walls. They write messages and poems directly on the walls, or notes that they paste on top of existing graffiti.

#### A New Kind of Monument

The power and importance of the Gal'ed and the graffiti are related to the emotional energy they embody and the degree to which that energy is accessible to ordinary citizens. The official monument, on the other hand, had the effect of detaching the memory of the assassination from any spontaneous intervention, of regulating the interpretation of that memory and adapting it to the needs of the established value system, of replacing memory with history.

Philosopher Pierre Nora claims that if we were living our memories we would not need to create monuments or sites of memory, or in his words, "*lieux de memoire*." Memory and history are not alike, he maintains. Memory is a subjective testimony, lived tradition as passed on through story telling. History is an objective, factual order of past events or people formulated by the state and embedded in monuments to serve the national myth.

The myth of national unity, which the official monument commemorates, was assassinated and ridiculed on November 4, 1995. Rabin's assassination forced Israelis to confront two radically new national conditions and check them against the existing value system. The peace with Arab neighbors and the deep divisions within society redefined the enemy and shattered the base of national unity. The designer of the official

monument saw her role as merely giving the idea of a nation torn apart a symbolic, static form.

The assassination required a new kind of memorial, which neither city officials nor the designer of the monument understood. The artist missed an opportunity to act as a facilitator or a choreographer of energies and actions already shaping the place. The spontaneous commemoration (the Gal'ed and graffiti) succeeded where the institutional commemoration failed. Moreover, the civic, political exchange and organization and the rituals that were established serve as a viable, counter monument; a living memory alongside the official monument. The memory is kept alive by people who after two years still continue to inhabit the site, interpreting, activating and making the memory of the event a vital driving force for civic transaction and individual reflection.

The selected graffiti walls, however, will be censored and transformed from an active, living institution into a fixed, sacred element. Clearly, the criteria for the selection are aesthetic. The small wall section left for continuous, though regulated, public input is but a token to the idea of democracy.

The city government could indeed have a role as a facilitator. It should reap the opportunity to use the emotional energies to reinforce democracy and civic life in the city's most important public space. The memorial created by the public at the square should be seen as a strategy that re-engages the notion of citizenship and social responsibility as inseparable from the individual.

The physical space could enhance this endeavor. Graffiti walls should continue to serve and encourage future writings without censorship and new structures or partitions could be added for additional space for writings. The area around the site of the murder could be made a place for speakers and small gatherings, similar to Speakers Corner in Hyde Park, London, where podiums, steps and paved areas provide orators and audience with stages for verbal exchange and debates. The area could take the form of small circles for children's activities, for reading poems and stories. The city should develop a program of temporary art installations located throughout the square and dealing with social and political issues.

A meaningful monument to Yitzhak Rabin could only be based on a strategy that fuels communication and actions, that engages the cornerstones of democracy and the road for peace.

## Notes

1. This pattern, though at a much smaller scale, repeated itself at Rabin's grave site at Hertzl Mount in Jerusalem, in front of his Tel Aviv home and in many urban centers.
2. *Gal'ed* is a Hebrew term for a place that commemorate an event or a figure. It derives from ancient Hebrew and means a stone or a heap of stones that witnessed an event, have been marked off and have become sacred. It is close to the English term "cairn."
3. Jewish religious tradition prescribes several mourning periods: the first week of mourning following the burial, the Shivah, in which the family spends time together at the house of the dead while friends pay a visit; the thirtieth day of the mourning, on which the family reveals the gravestone; and the anniversary date, on which the family returns to visit the grave.
4. See catalogue of the exhibition "Map of Memory, Spectrum of Commemoration in Memory of Rabin," edited by Batia Donner, Eretz-Israel Museum, Tel Aviv, November 1996.
5. Robert Reisner, *Two Thousand Years of Wall Writing* (Chicago, IL: Cowles Book Company, Inc. 1971)
6. Hanoch Saar, *Shalom-Haver* (Tel-Aviv, Israel: Saar House, 1995) and Gadi Dagon (photographer), *Graffiti at Yitzhak Rabin Square, November 1995* (Tel Aviv municipality, Israel, 1996)
7. The tendency of the city to accept Tartakover's suggestions was clarified to me on a casual visit with Meir Doron, the city's general manager, on one of the Friday gatherings in the square on 8 November 1996. Meir Doron is also the force behind the establishment of and decisions about the official monument.
8. I spoke with David Tartakover on the telephone on 3 October 1996. He was then in the process of writing his recommendations to the city.
9. Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History," translated from *Les Lieux de Memoire*, in *Zmanim, an Historical Quarterly* 45 (Summer, 1993).