

Immersive Spatial Narrative as a Tool for National Identity Reconstruction: A Literature Review for the Underground Extension of the National Museum of Cameroon

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Abstract: More than sixty years after independence, Cameroon faces a deep structural identity crisis inherited from colonial and postcolonial history, a “double erasure” of both precolonial cultural structures and the memory of the independence struggle. The National Museum of Cameroon (NMC), housed in the former Presidential Palace, suffers from architectural and museographic inadequacies that prevent it from fulfilling its role as a place of collective memory. This article presents a systematic literature review examining three interconnected questions: the nature and mechanisms of Cameroon's postcolonial identity crisis; the theoretical framework of immersive spatial narrative as an architectural tool; and the precedents of memorial architecture capable of generating national cohesion through space. Drawing on sociology, phenomenology, museology, and architectural theory, the review identifies four founding principles — narrative three-dimensionality, event intentionality, sensory corporeality, and polyphony of the route and establishes the conceptual basis for a narrative, immersive, and identity-centered underground extension of the NMC. The article demonstrates that such an extension represents not merely a functional response but an architectural act of political and social significance.

Keywords: *Spatial Narrative; Immersive Architecture; Postcolonial Identity; National Museum of Cameroon; Memorial Museology; Collective Memory; National Cohesion; Underground Extension.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Architecture has always been one of the most powerful instruments societies possess for materializing their shared memory. From the temples of ancient civilizations to the great national museums of the nineteenth century, built space has served as the primary medium through which communities inscribe their history, transmit their values, and construct a sense of belonging. Yet in postcolonial Africa, this relationship between architecture and identity remains deeply fraught, marked by the legacies of colonial displacement, the instrumentalization of heritage institutions, and the persistent gap between official memorial spaces and the populations they are meant to serve.

Cameroon illustrates this paradox with particular clarity. More than sixty years after independence, the country faces

what recent academic literature characterizes as a “double erasure”: the systematic dismantling of precolonial cultural structures by the colonial administration on one hand, and the deliberate suppression of the history of the independence struggle on the other [1][2][3]. This dual amnesia has left a memorial void that the country's official commemorative spaces have largely failed to fill. The Monument of Reunification in Yaoundé is ignored by the majority of its inhabitants [4]. The National Museum of Cameroon (NMC), housed in the former Presidential Palace, suffers from architectural inadequacies inherited from colonial ethnography, lacking any structuring national narrative [5][6]. Recent rehabilitation projects have addressed functional needs while remaining silent on the narrative and immersive dimension of the visitor experience [7].

It is in response to this documented gap that this article develops. Its central question is: *how can the architectural extension of the NMC be conceived as a device of immersive spatial narration, capable of fostering the appropriation of the place by its users and contributing to national cohesion?* To answer it, this article presents a systematic and critical literature review structured around three axes: first, the sociological and historical foundations of the identity crisis and its spatial manifestations; second, the theoretical framework of spatial narrative as an architectural principle; and third, the analysis of international architectural precedents whose strategies are transposable to the Cameroonian context.

The contribution of this article is threefold. It synthesizes, for the first time in the Cameroonian academic architectural literature, a set of theoretical frameworks that are usually treated separately; postcolonial sociology, architectural phenomenology, and museum theory around a single operative problem. It identifies the precise gap that the NMC extension must fill, distinguishing it from previous functional proposals. And it establishes the theoretical principles that will govern the design process, providing a rigorous foundation for the architectural proposition that follows in subsequent research stages.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: IDENTITY, COLLECTIVE MEMORY, AND NATIONAL COHESION

➤ *Identity: A Dynamic Construction*

Before analyzing the crisis traversing contemporary Cameroon, it is necessary to define precisely the three fundamental concepts structuring this research: identity, collective memory, and national cohesion. These notions, often employed as self-evident in political discourse, are in reality complex, dynamic, and closely interdependent constructions whose clarification conditions the rigor of all subsequent analysis.

Identity is not an immutable essence but a permanent construction resulting from interactions between individuals, groups, and historical contexts. Thiesse (1999, cited in [3]) defines it as a set of “heroes, national virtues, a language, cultural monuments, folklore, key places and a typical landscape”; a fabrication that summons the past to give it meaning oriented toward the present. In the African postcolonial context, Nessak [8] specifies that this sense of belonging, the affective attachment to an origin, a culture, a language, and traditions, is constructed, transmitted, but can also fragment under the effect of traumatic ruptures such as colonization. This process of identity construction raises the question of its spatial supports: in what places and through what architectural and museum devices does a society choose to stage and transmit the narrative of what it is?

➤ *Collective Memory: The Social Cement of a Shared Past*

Theorized by Halbwachs (1925), collective memory is above all a social phenomenon: all memory is formed and reactivated within groups sharing common frames of reference — family, ethnic community, nation. It requires material supports: places, monuments, spaces. Molo and Kounga

(2021) recall, following Ricœur (2003), that “memory, history, and forgetting constitute the three components of identity logics,” and that it is the museum, as a specialized institution, that must stage them [5].

This memory is distinct from academic history: it does not operate through critical reconstruction, but through affective identification, oral and ritual transmission. In African societies with strong oral traditions, memory is lived, sung, danced, and is not preserved behind glass cases. It is precisely this performative character that poses a fundamental challenge to museum institutions inherited from the colonial model, designed for the conservation of objects rather than the activation of living memory.

➤ *National Cohesion: The Political Horizon of Shared Memory*

National cohesion is the capacity of a plural society to maintain a common sense of belonging beyond ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences. Kounga [5] defines it as “a process whose outcome induces the common feeling of belonging and solidarity in the construction of the nation.” It is built, not decreed. It is in this perspective that the NMC becomes strategic: it could “play a relay role for the State in maintaining the balance of identities” [5], offering a space where multiple identities meet without erasing one another.

In Cameroon, with its more than 250 ethnic groups and its bilingual Franco-British history, this balancing function is all the more crucial. Heumen Tchana [6] formulates it clearly: the National Museum must be “a museum for all Cameroonians, in their diversity of regions, origins, languages, social categories, religions.” National cohesion does not rest on the erasure of differences, but on bringing them into dialogue.

Nora (1984) adds a decisive nuance: the rupture of the natural transmission of memory in modern and postcolonial societies makes necessary the creation of “places of memory” [22]. “We speak so much of memory because there is no longer any”; this formulation illuminates the Cameroonian condition. The double erasure analyzed in the following section is not a passive loss; it is the dissolution of the social frameworks that allowed collective memory to reproduce itself. It is in this void that the museum institution becomes a social necessity.

These three concepts form a logical chain: identity is constructed from collective memory, which provides narratives, figures, and values. This memory needs spatial and institutional supports to be transmitted, and it is this shared transmission that produces national cohesion the feeling of belonging to the same community of destiny despite the plurality of origins. It is precisely this chain that postcolonial Cameroon struggles to make function, and the historical, political, and architectural reasons for this difficulty form the subject of the following sections.

III. THE POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITY CRISIS IN CAMEROON

➤ *Manifestations of the Identity Crisis*

Nessak [8] identifies the multiple factors characterizing the crisis of Cameroonian identity: tribalism, secessionism, and conflicts between autochthons and allochthons as symptoms of a partial perception of what constitutes being Cameroonian. This crisis manifests as an “invisible stagnation”: the rejection of self, aggravated by what Mbembe (2020) calls “the spectacular return of animism”; not in the form of ancestor worship but of the cult of the self and consumer objects. The citizen no longer perceives himself as an agent of historical change, but as a subject undergoing forces that surpass him.

Molo [3] links this crisis to the colonial legacy: the manipulation of identity fractures divides and subjugate perpetuates itself in the present, fueling latent ethnic conflicts. The absence of a national “historical consciousness” is exploited by groups that claim while stigmatizing.

➤ *The Concept of “Double Erasure”*

Contemporary Cameroonian identity is the product of a structural and political amnesia operating on two complementary fronts the “double erasure.”

The first-dimension concerns precolonial social and cultural structures, systematically dismantled or folklorized by the colonial administration. Galangau-Quérat and Girault [1] show that the urban citizen of Yaoundé or Douala lives in a profound disconnection from these traditional systems of meaning: the more than 250 cultural groups of Cameroon have seen their specificities erased in favor of a “national unity” decreed but never constructed. Initiatives like the Route des Chefferies attempt to reconnect these links, but the rupture remains profound.

The second dimension, analyzed by Mbondobari [2] through the “Cameroonian maquis,” is the systematic erasure of the independence war (1955–1971) waged by the UPC; a war of bombings, displacements, and assassinations of leaders like Ruben Um Nyobé, without equivalent in West African independence movements. Two injustices are superimposed: the colonial refusal to meet the demands of the UPC, followed by the “complicit silence of postcolonial authorities who erased this chapter from official history.” School textbooks and commemorations have long presented a sanitized version, creating what Molo [3] calls a “prevented memory” an unresolved trauma that continues to haunt national consciousness.

➤ *The Sociology of “Distraction Economy” Spaces*

Faced with the memorial void of the double erasure, populations have developed compensation strategies through alternative spaces of socialization that succeed where official memorial institutions fail. Deudjui [9] highlights a key phenomenon: Cameroonians do not frequent bars en masse out of a taste for alcohol, but because there is “a phenomenon in our society”, the sociology of the bar revealing that these places fulfill a social function beyond consumption. Public

space is thus dominated by what Stiegler calls an “economy of attention,” embodied in two typologies: the bar and the evangelical revival church, illustrated in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2. These spaces offer a sensory and emotional intensity that museums do not provide, responding to the memorial void by circumventing it rather than confronting it.

Oldenburg (1989) qualifies the bar as a “third place” between work and home, whose neutrality and accessibility facilitate human relationships. The round of drinks binds groups together, and alcohol acts as a social lubricant, creating an immersive space that saturates the senses and encourages temporary forgetting.



Fig 1 Alternative Spaces of Socialization in Cameroon (bars).

Source: adapted from Deudjui, 2022.

Fallut [10] shows how revival churches fill the void of the failing State by offering social services, narratives of meaning, and sophisticated narrative techniques, testimonies, staging, active participation. Functioning in an egalitarian and decentralized manner around prosperity theology, they mobilize the body: two hours of singing where “the faithful dance, exult, or weep” liberating a “quietude from all that has been physically expelled.” The pastor leads an “entertaining” service where the faithful participate and interact in an immersive dramaturgy without equivalent in the museum institution.



Fig 2 Revival Churches in Cameroon.
Source: Melanie Soiron Fallut.

These two spaces divert emotional energy toward forgetting or the afterlife, without fostering critical historical consciousness. It is precisely this deficit of historical consciousness, by contrast with the immersive intensity of these popular spaces, that reveals the limits of the museum institution analyzed in the following section.

IV. LIMITS OF EXISTING MEMORIAL ARCHITECTURE IN CAMEROON

➤ *National Unity Monuments: An Imposed Memory Without Dialogue*

The Monument of Reunification in Yaoundé (1973–1976), shown in Fig. 3 and commissioned by the Ahidjo regime, immediately illustrates this failure. Ngo Binam Bikoi and Kay Nicole (2013, cited in [4]) reveal that the majority of inhabitants did not know it and considered it a quasi-forbidden zone; since 1976, no commemorative ceremony has ever been organized there.



Fig 3 Monument of Reunification, Yaoundé.
Source: Visit-Yaounde.com.

The Monument des Cinquantenaires in Buea (2014) reproduces the same logic: Mengolo Mbel (2020) sees it as an arena where the State imposes a nationalizing memory without mediation; no signage, no brochure, no guide condemning the site to being merely symbolic architecture without educational reach.

These two cases pose the fundamental problem: in Cameroon, official memorial spaces have been conceived to be looked at, not lived a single reading imposed from above, without conditions for appropriation from the base.

➤ *The National Museum of Cameroon: An Unfinished Institution*

The NMC, shown in Fig. 4, concentrates in itself the contradictions and unfulfilled ambitions of Cameroonian cultural policy. Understanding the current limits of this institution requires retracing its history, which is above all the history of a perpetually deferred project.



Fig 4 The National Museum of Cameroon.
Source: Guide.en-vols.com.

The museum's history begins in February 1973 with the formation of its first collections through donations from private individuals and traditional chiefdoms, as well as collection missions launched by the ministry responsible for

cultural heritage [6]. But this nascent collection did not yet have a building commensurate with its ambitions. As early as 1980, a UNESCO mission conducted by Manfred Lehmbruck was carried out in Yaoundé at the request of the Cameroonian government, with the primary objective of developing a national museum construction project. Its conclusions were not adopted [6] this first missed opportunity prefiguring a long series of unfulfilled promises.

In November 1988, a presidential decision assigned the former presidential palace (a 1930 colonial building of approximately 5,000 m² of usable space and 15,000 m² of gardens) to the future National Museum [5]. The study mission entrusted to Galitzine-Loumpet resulted in the MUSCA project with ambitious museographic orientations, but which declined from 1992 onwards, after engaging approximately 3 billion CFA francs in preliminary works [5]. The museum opened a first time in January 2001 during the 21st France-Africa Summit, without museography or organizational chart being completed [6]. This pattern of partial openings and interrupted reforms continued through the 2010s, each phase improving the container without rethinking the visitor experience.

➤ *Collections: Structural Imbalance and Representational Deficit*

The NMC holds significant collections: royal thrones and bronzes from the Grassfields, weapons and agricultural tools from the Sudano-Sahelian zone, archaeological pieces, Mboum adornments, as shown in Fig. 5. But their origin reveals a structural imbalance: the Sudano-Sahelian, Grassfields, and Fang-Béti zones represent 99% of the collections; the Sawa zone (Littoral and Southwest) represents only 1% [5].

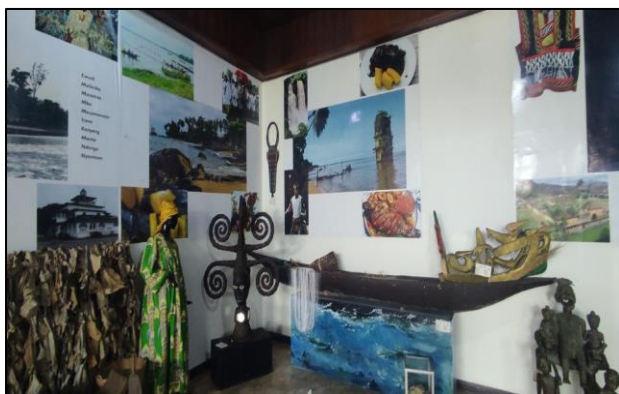


Fig 5 Interior View of a Gallery of the National Museum of Cameroon.

Source: Makool R., 2026.

This imbalance means that millions of Cameroonians cannot recognize themselves in the collections of their national museum. Koubga [5] is explicit: “if the national museum wants to generate national consciousness, it must present fairly the cultural elements of each area to avoid a feeling of superiority or inferiority.” A museum that structurally excludes certain communities reproduces the erasure logics described in the preceding sections.

➤ *Narrative and Museographic Limits*

The museographic weakness is the symptom of a deeper problem: the absence of a coherent national narrative. Koubga [5] notes that Cameroonian museums were created without scientific and cultural projects, reducing them to warehouses of objects. Heumen Tchana [6] extends this observation: “the collection for itself is no longer justified; the museum must be founded on a cultural project that makes sense.” Result: the visitor wanders without a guiding thread linking objects to national history, to the independence struggles, or to contemporary aspirations. This absence of narrative structure is not a museographic detail it is the fundamental failure that makes the NMC unable to play its role in the construction of national cohesion.

➤ *Modernization Attempts and Their Limits*

Several modernization initiatives have been undertaken, but with a constant: they improve the container without rethinking the visitor experience. Prior to the 2009 rehabilitation works, an underground extension of the NMC, illustrated in Fig. 6, had already been envisioned, with the explicit aim of not altering the visible heritage envelope of the listed building. This proposal was never the subject of a known academic or institutional publication. It nonetheless constitutes a significant precedent: the question of a non-visible enlargement of the museum had already been raised institutionally prior to the rehabilitation works, even though this direction was not retained at the time. The present research inscribes itself in the continuity of this reflection, formalizing it on the architectural and programmatic level.



Fig 6 A prior Underground Extension Proposal for the NMC.

Source: Makool R., 2026.

The Expertise France/AFD project (2020–2023, one million euros) organized four workstreams governance, collections and reserves, scientific and cultural policy, space layout aiming notably at the development of a museographic and architectural program. This program was formalized through a technical cooperation agreement between Expertise France and the École Nationale Supérieure des Travaux Publics de Yaoundé, under a thirty-six-month financing arrangement from the French Development Agency (AFD). This agreement mobilized multidisciplinary teams of architecture students supervised by architect-teachers, in direct collaboration with the NMC directorate and international scenography experts [7]. It is worth noting, however, that these works centered on bringing spaces up to international museographic standards do not address the narrative and immersive dimension of the visitor experience. The question of how space can foster the appropriation of the place by its users to promote national cohesion is not raised.

The proposal by Aba Nkasse et al. [7], the only academic publication proposing a concrete NMC extension project (ENSTP Yaoundé / ENSA Nantes), articulates four functional blocks, as shown in Fig. 7: Block A (exhibition, boutique), Block B (library, offices), Block C (cultural center, workshops), Block D (conferences, restaurant), along with interior scenographic proposals. On the formal level, the neoclassical approach fuses heritage elements, references to chiefdoms, and contemporary forms. This contribution is valuable as a programmatic starting point: it validates the relevance of an extension and proposes solutions for accessibility and sustainability. It remains, however, silent on the central question of this research: how does the museum space become a narrative and immersive device in the service of national cohesion?

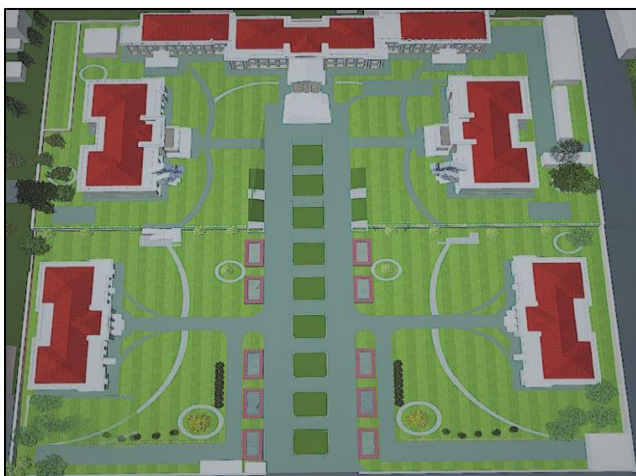


Fig 7 Site Plan of the Extension Proposal by Aba Nkasse et al. (2025).

Source: IJISRT25FEB201.

The entire body of literature Nfi [4], Mengolo Mbel (2020), Heumen Tchana [6], Koubga [5], Aba Nkasse et al. [7] converges toward a double finding: spatial and functional inadequacy (a building never converted to contemporary museographic requirements); narrative and identity inadequacy (absence of a coherent national narrative

mobilizing collective memory in the service of national cohesion). Modernization attempts, including the most recent, address the first without touching the second. It is this gap that the architectural extension must fill: not merely functional, but narrative, immersive, and identity-centered.

V. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SPATIAL NARRATIVE AND IMMERSIVE ARCHITECTURE

➤ *From Museum Container to Museum Device*

Museology and museography are two complementary disciplines often confused: museology reflects on the foundations and purposes of the museum in its relations to society; museography designates the set of techniques for spatial arrangement, scenography, lighting, circulation, and mediation [11]. The ICOM [12] defines the museum as “a permanent institution, not-for-profit and in the service of society, which is dedicated to the research, collection, conservation, interpretation, and exhibition of tangible and intangible heritage [...] offering its public varied experiences of education, entertainment, reflection, and knowledge sharing.” In rupture with the 1974 definition, this shift is decisive: the museum is no longer merely a conservation institution, it has become an instrument at the service of society.

This shift requires distinguishing two components. The museum as container: the physical envelope subject to technical constraints climate control, protection against photodegradation, circulation, security, accessibility. The museum as device: the way in which space, through its intrinsic spatial qualities, organizes the visitor's experience, orients their route, produces emotions, and constructs meanings. This device dimension is essentially architectural in nature; it does not reduce to technique or museography, but engages the spatial project in its entirety.

Kaplan (in MacDonald, 2006) frames the political dimension: museums are “secular sites of contestation and representation, places where groups competed to define and redefine themselves as nations.” Connerton (1989, cited in [13]) formulates it directly: “the control of a society's memory largely conditions the hierarchy of power.” In Cameroon, Heumen Tchana [6] notes the tension: the museum “retraces the past while the government seeks to inscribe itself in the present by covering the walls with images glorifying its major projects” an instrumentalization that compromises the credibility of the museum narrative and, with it, the mission of national cohesion.

➤ *From Universalist Museology to Contextual Museology*

The difficulties of the museum model inherited from the colonial period in producing national cohesion stem from the inadequacy between a universalist paradigm designed for societies with written and visual traditions, and African cultural realities. Universalist museology rests on implicit presuppositions: superiority of the written over the oral, of the archive over living tradition, of the isolated object over ritual practice making the museum a place where culture freezes behind a glass case. Exported to Africa as an instrument of

alienation, this model aimed “to make known the ethnic diversity of the Other, that is to say, of the African, to European eyes” [5]. After independence, new elites reproduced the model without questioning its form. Faced with this observation, Alpha Oumar Konaré, president of ICOM in 1991, called to “kill the Western model of the museum in Africa” [5] posing a question without satisfactory institutional answer: what model replaces it?

Contextual museology, stemming from the ecomuseum concept developed by Hugues de Varine and Georges Henri Rivière (1970s–1980s), breaks with the museum separated from the community: rooted in a territory, managed by the community, it valorizes living heritage rather than dead objects. In Cameroon, Galangau-Quérat and Girault [1] demonstrate through Bamiléké community museums that these experiences respond to needs of identity reconstruction, conservation, and tourism development, and that the Route des Chefferies, anchored in traditional political structures, maintains the living link between objects and communities where the centralized national museum fails.

Crooke (in MacDonald, 2006) identifies the effects specific to this model: when “the community selects its own stories, chooses the objects to display, and provides its own interpretation,” “success is founded on the contribution of the collective exercise to the formation of community identity, cohesion, and empowerment.” This ascending logic is the antithesis of the NMC, where the State decides what is worth conserving and showing a verticality that is counter-productive in a country of more than 250 ethnic groups traversed by deep memorial tensions. Contextual museology imposes on the project a decisive lesson: the extension of the National Museum cannot simply add rooms according to the existing model; it must reinvent the relationship between the institution and its publics through participatory devices.

➤ *Spatial Narrative: Theoretical Foundations*

Spatial narrative is an architectural theory formalized by Sophia Psarra in *Architecture and Narrative: The Formation of Space and Cultural Meaning* [19]. It poses the foundation: architecture produces meaning not only through its abstract forms, but through the way in which the geometry and configuration of a building define the visual fields and bodily routes of the individuals who traverse it. Three dimensions articulate to constitute what she calls the architectural narrative: conceptual space (the abstract ordering principles organizing the composition); perceptual space (what the body experiences while moving); and social space (the interactions that the configuration makes possible or impossible). It is the dynamic relationships between these three dimensions that make a building a narrative device or a mute container.

Fernando Lambert (1998) had formulated it from literary theory: space functions as a “narrative actant” an active agent of the narrative, not a simple backdrop. Spatial configurations influence the perception of time, orient attention, shape the experience of those who traverse them. ElHadji (2025) transposes this to architecture: a space conceived as spatial narration transforms into “a strategic tool for the creation of

architectural meaning,” engaging the visitor's body and senses in an active relationship to the designed space.

Bernard Tschumi [14] specifies the mechanisms through his concept of architectural event. Narrative architecture is not composed of static volumes: it is a sequence of events, where each crossed threshold, each transition between two spaces, each friction between the visitor's body and the geometry of the place produces a new situation. Tschumi isolates three inseparable components of all narrative architecture: space (geometry, volumes, light), movement (physical displacement of the body in the sequence), and event (the situation produced by friction between the first two). Where Psarra defines the dimensions of spatial narrative, Tschumi provides the mechanics of its production.

This principle is not an invention of contemporary museology. It sinks its roots in the architectural promenade theorized by Le Corbusier from the 1920s, and applied to an explicitly museum program with his *Musée à croissance illimitée* (1939) a continuous spiral where the flow of discovery of the collections is entirely dictated by spatial progression [15]. Samuel (2010) demonstrates that the Corbusian promenade is an initiation device, an intentional sequence of thresholds, compressions, and dilatations, which engages the visitor in a narrative arc whose spatial progression produces a calculated emotional effect. Amaldi (2024) extends this reading by showing that it is the dissociation between the trajectory of the body and what the gaze embraces that keeps attention alert and intensifies experience. For the NMC, whose current route follows a purely geographical logic dictated by the former presidential palace [5], it is precisely this principle that a narrative extension must reintroduce.

➤ *Phenomenology and Sensory Architecture*

Juhani Pallasmaa [16] adds the sensory dimension that neither Psarra nor Tschumi fully develops. His diagnosis is clear: contemporary Western architecture suffers from an “oculocentrism” that produces spaces conceived to be photographed, not inhabited. Yet smell, touch, and proprioception are the senses most directly connected to the limbic structures of emotional memory. An odor triggers what Proust called involuntary memory, where an image leaves the intellect indifferent. For a museum seeking to reactivate a buried collective memory, non-visual senses are not accessories they are narrative vectors in their own right.

Peter Zumthor [21] reinforces this position: the atmosphere of a built space is irreducible to its material description; it is a totality that the body perceives before the intellect analyzes it. The material stone, earth, metal, water carries cultural memories that bypass rational discourse and reach the visitor at a more archaic level. For the NMC extension, this principle implies that the choice of materials is not a secondary aesthetic decision but a primary narrative one: local materials (laterite, volcanic stone, hardwoods from the equatorial forest) carry in their texture and smell a Cameroonian cultural memory that imported marble or industrial concrete could never convey.

Austin [23] and Duncan and McCauley [24] complete this framework by demonstrating that bodily engagement promotes learning and retention far beyond passive contemplation. When the visitor must physically act cross a threshold, climb a slope, navigate a darkened space, their brain encodes the experience in episodic memory rather than merely semantic memory. The emotional and physical investment produces a form of ownership of the place: the visitor does not look at history, they have lived it, even briefly, in their own body.

➤ *Jenkins's Taxonomy of Narrative Modes*

Jenkins [20] proposes an operative taxonomy of narrative modes that architectural space can produce, directly applicable to the museum context. He distinguishes four modes according to the degree of freedom granted to the visitor in the construction of meaning: evocative architecture (the intrinsic qualities of space produce images and emotions); performative architecture (the visitor must act physically to access meaning); integrated narration (the narrative is invisibly woven into the structure, to be discovered progressively); and emergent narration (meaning is co-constructed according to route choices, without imposed narrative).

This fourth mode deserves particular attention in the Cameroonian context. For a nation of more than 250 ethnic groups carrying conflicting and often competing memories, emergent narration is a political posture as much as an architectural one: it allows the coexistence of plural narratives without hierarchizing or erasing them. An immersive museum that imposes a single national narrative risk reproducing the authoritarian verticality that has historically characterized Cameroonian cultural policy and generating, as MacDonald (2006) notes, “feelings of alienation and resistance” among communities that do not recognize themselves in the imposed story. Emergent architecture opens, on the contrary, a polyphonic space where each community can enter, traverse, and co-construct a meaning that belongs to it while connecting with others.

➤ *The Four Founding Principles of Narrative and Immersive Architecture*

From the theoretical contributions reviewed above, four founding principles of narrative and immersive museum architecture can be extracted.

- Principle 1: Narrative Three-Dimensionality. According to Psarra [19], spatial narration operates simultaneously on three registers: conceptual (the abstract organization of space), perceptual (the corporeal experience of movement), and social (the interactions that configuration produces). A narrative architecture project must work on all three, not just one.
- Principle 2: Event Intentionality. Tschumi [14] establishes that space does not narrate by accident. The architect programs an intentional sequence of frictions between the visitor's body and the geometry of the place. Without sequencing intention, there is no narration only a succession of rooms.

- Principle 3: Sensory Corporeality. Pallasmaa [16] demonstrates that non-visual senses constitute the most powerful narrative vectors on the memorial level. Sound, smell, texture, and air pressure are architectural narrative materials in their own right. Museum research confirms that physical bodily engagement promotes learning and retention far beyond passive contemplation.
- Principle 4: Polyphony of the Route. Jenkins [20] establishes that the degree of freedom granted to the visitor in the construction of meaning determines the type of narrative produced. A linear narrative imposed from above may be effective for a culturally homogeneous community. In Cameroon, emergent narration is not a theoretical luxury it is a condition of the social legitimacy of the museum in the face of the country's memorial plurality.

These four principles complement and condition one another. Intentionality (Tschumi) creates the sequence; three-dimensionality (Psarra) gives it its architectural consistency; sensory corporeality (Pallasmaa) makes it an experience lived rather than contemplated; polyphony (Jenkins) opens access to the plurality of memories. It is the articulation of these four dimensions that defines narrative and immersive museum architecture as a device adapted to the problematic of this research.

VI. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ARCHITECTURAL PRECEDENTS

Six architectural precedents were selected on the basis of their conceptual relevance, their grounding in postcolonial or post-traumatic problematics, and the quality of available academic sources. Each illustrates spatial devices that have demonstrated their effectiveness in transforming memorial experience into a vector of social cohesion in contexts comparable to that of Cameroon.

➤ *The Apartheid Museum (Johannesburg, South Africa, 2001)*

Inaugurated in 2001, the Apartheid Museum (Mashabane Rose Architects) was conceived to “viscerally materialize” the apartheid system, not as a container of archives but as a corporeal experience. Its commission stemmed from a casino licence conditioned on a major heritage benefit [17]. The ambition: to produce what Duncan and McCauley [24] call “narrative and emotional perception,” in which emotion becomes an integral part of spatial perception.

The entrance threshold is the central device, illustrated in Fig. 8: visitors are randomly classified as “White” or “Non-White” and forced to take corridors separated by metal cages. The body reacts before the intellect separated families, the body producing immediate anxiety. Gabion walls, bare brick, and raw concrete express the weight of the state apparatus [17]; steep ramps create a “claustrophobic and controlled” route, punctuated by seven pillars symbolizing the pillars of a long-deferred equitable constitution.



Fig 8 Exterior View of the Entrance Sequence, Apartheid Museum.

Source: Apartheidmuseum.org.

For the NMC, this model suggests an introductory sequence with provisional separation: corridors linguistically or administratively distinct, recalling the *indigénat*, then immediately resolved by a convergence toward a luminous common forum. The brutality of separation followed by spatial reunion would emotionally translate the necessity of national cohesion in the face of historical fragmentation [13].

➤ *The NMAAHC (Washington D.C., USA, 2016)*

The National Museum of African American History and Culture (David Adjaye Associates, 2016) responds to a double challenge: inscribing the permanence of a marginalized group in the landscape of the National Mall dominated by white neoclassical marble, and proposing a complete narrative arc from suffering to resilience. Hourston Hanks (2012) sees in it “structured stories that unfold in space and time,” which the vertical section of the building materializes as a tool of chronological narration [17].

More than half of the historical spaces are underground, as shown in Fig. 9: the visitor descends into increasingly narrow and dark rooms, low ceilings, rarefied light, muffled acoustics, evoking the holds of slave ships. This configuration produces the affective atmosphere of Pallasmaa [16]: embodied emotions not reducible to an individual reaction. The route then progressively ascends: dilated spaces along the floors devoted to civil rights, upper galleries flooded with light. Externally, the Corona in bronze aluminum filigree a reference to Yoruba crowns and New Orleans ironwork filters the light and signs the building's identity.



Fig 9 North-South Section of the NMAAHC.

Source: Nmaahc.si.edu.

For the NMC, Adjaye's logic is transposable not by formal analogy but by spatial analogy: where the NMAAHC descends to evoke suffering before ascending toward light, the NMC's underground extension can organize an inverse but symmetrical progression an entry through the depth of precolonial and colonial memory, toward increasingly dilated and lit spaces as the narrative advances toward contemporary national plurality [16].

➤ *The Jewish Museum of Berlin (Germany, 2001)*

The Jewish Museum of Berlin (Daniel Libeskind, 2001) theorizes the architecture of absence. Its “Between the Lines” project crosses two geometric lines whose chaotic intersection dictates plan and elevations. The intention joins Fraser and Coulson (2012, p. 195) on “incomplete stories”: the gaps in the narrative are not failures, but productive spaces. The invisible what has been destroyed structures the visible, refusing the idea that the Shoah could be understood through the sole exhibition of documents.

The route begins with deliberate disorientation: inclined axes in raw concrete (Exile, Holocaust, Continuity), slanted walls, non-horizontal floors, what Hale (2012) identifies as vectors of empathy in environmental psychology. The “voids,” shown in Fig. 10 inaccessible and non-climatized concrete shafts piercing the entire height are the central device. In the Holocaust Tower, a slit allows an unreachable light to enter. In the Memory Void, Kadishman's “Shalekhet” installation forces the visitor to walk on thousands of steel faces: the din of metal corporally engages commemoration [17].

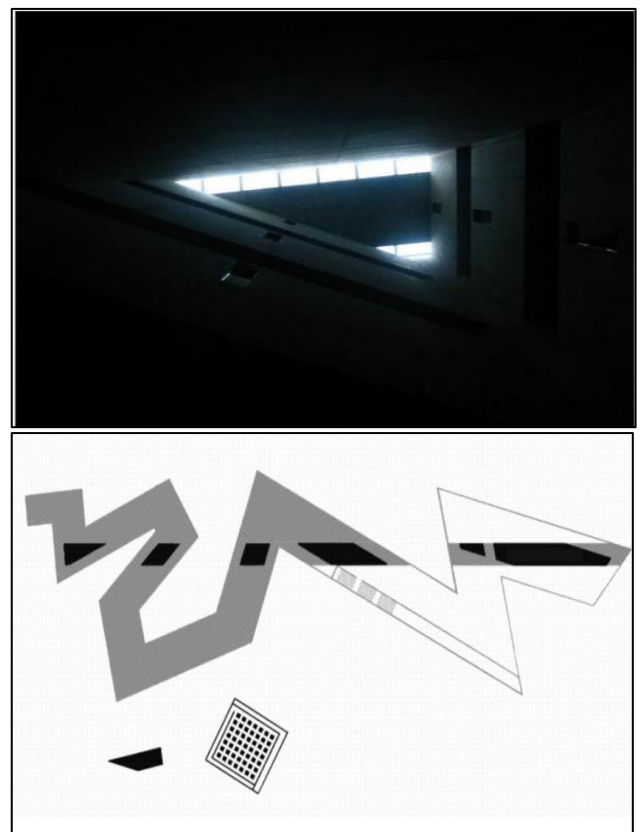


Fig 10 The Voids, Jewish Museum of Berlin.

Source: Galan A., 2018.

Faced with the Cameroonian archival voids precolonial structures erased, martyrs whose traces have been purged, conventional exhibition fails. The NMC could integrate “Memorial Voids” in raw concrete or laterite: interstitial spaces deliberately empty of objects, traversed by suspended bridges or textured floors generating noise underfoot. These devices would embody the weight of absence before entry into the galleries of intercommunity dialogue.

➤ *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice (Montgomery, USA, 2018)*

Designed by MASS Design Group for the Equal Justice Initiative (2018), the National Memorial for Peace and Justice are the first national memorial dedicated to lynching victims in the United States. Its erection among Confederate monuments constitutes an explicit spatial and civic position, illustrating the thesis of Hoelscher (in MacDonald, 2006): “the control of a society's memory largely conditions the hierarchy of power.”

Eight hundred Corten steel monoliths, one per American county that has recorded a lynching. The topographic treatment produces the central effect, illustrated in Fig. 11: at the entry, the floor is level with the pillars; a gentle slope then causes the visitor to descend while the ceiling remains fixed, progressively raising the monoliths above their heads. Result: a feeling of being crushed and an evocation without literality of hanging bodies, through the sole control of gravity. As complement, 800 identical pillars lie in an adjacent park, waiting for each county to claim its own to erect *in situ*: a decentralized memorial infrastructure for civic repair [17].



Fig 11 The Suspended Monoliths Route, National Memorial for Peace and Justice.

Source: modelofarchitecture.org.

For the NMC, to give body to the tens of thousands of victims of the Cameroonian independence war, a covered peristyle could integrate trunks of Azobé wood local imputrescible timber, symbol of resistance, suspended from an orthogonal roof, bearing the names of bombed villages and martyrs. The slope of the floor would place the visitor under these masses, establishing the bodily posture of humility that Duncan and McCauley [24] identify as a vector of active commemoration.

➤ *The Kigali Genocide Memorial (Rwanda, 2004)*

Inaugurated at Gisozi (Rwanda) in 2004, ten years after the genocide, the Kigali Genocide Memorial (KGM) is a hybrid institution: mausoleum (more than 250,000 victims), historical museum, peace education center, and garden of reconciliation. Its mission directly illustrates Koubga's thesis [5]: the national museum must present fairly the trajectories of all communities to foster a national consciousness.

The KGM articulates a graduation of scales: from the macro-historical (mass graves) to the micro-narrative (individual story). The “Tomorrow Lost” exhibition is its core: large photographs of children are accompanied by name, favorite dish, favorite toy, and the manner in which each was killed. Faced with the abstraction of millions of victims, this reduction of scale forces absolute empathy objects becoming “containers of stories” [17]. Video testimonies from survivors complete the immersion. Outside, terraced meditation gardens (Garden of Unity, Forest of Memory), shown in Fig. 12, provide psychological decompression; an unfinished Wall of Names, updated as identifications are made, keeps the memorial evolutionary.



Fig 12 The Reconciliation Gardens, Kigali Genocide Memorial.

Source: kgm.rw.

Rooted in orality, Cameroonian culture is particularly receptive to history transmitted through speech. Spatially spatialized 3D audio devices would allow the visitor to hear a survivor or a ritual song, creating the direct connection that Pallasmaa [16] attributes to haptic and auditory senses. The 15,000 m² of underutilized NMC gardens could, like Gisozi, become decompression routes where Cameroonian biodiversity (southern ferns, northern acacias) frames spaces of sociability fostering national cohesion [5][7].

➤ *The Grand Louvre (Paris, France, 1989)*

The extension of the Grand Louvre, entrusted to Ieoh Ming Pei by President François Mitterrand and inaugurated in 1989, is the most directly relevant architectural precedent for this research on the typological level: it is the first major underground museum extension of a classified historic palace, realized without touching the protected surface of the existing building. The challenge posed to Pei is structurally identical to that posed by the NMC extension: how to massively add new space beneath a state building of strong symbolic charge, in a protected interior courtyard, without denaturing or competing with the existing building? Pei's response is not technical, it is architectural and narrative: to make the descent itself the central device of the visitor experience [18].

The founding device is the glass Pyramid installed at the center of the Cour Napoléon. Its abstract geometry, foreign to the classical vocabulary of the palace, does not seek to imitate the existing: it interpellates it. But its role is not decorative. It is a luminous threshold. Through it, the light of the sky descends vertically to the underground hall, making the visitor's physical descent a conscious psychological transition, illustrated in Fig. 13: leaving the surface of the present time to enter another space, underground, dedicated to memory and knowledge.



Fig 13 Section and Interior Route, the Louvre Pyramid.

Source: parametric-architecture.com.

This transition is the primary narrative device. The central helical staircase, descending from the base of the Pyramid toward the Napoleon Hall, is an architectural promenade in the Corbusian sense: the body descends, the gaze rises toward the light, the dissociation between the trajectory of the feet and what the eye embraces maintains attention in permanent tension [15]. The visitor does not traverse a corridor; they perform a passage. Below, the hall distributing the three wings of the museum is vast, well-lit, and readable: the body reorients after the compression of the descent, in a decompression space before entry into the collections.

Pei demonstrates that a strong contemporary intervention does not erase the historic building, it enhances it by contrast. The 1930 presidential palace and the underground extension of the NMC can maintain this same relationship of productive tension: one reading the official and colonial history, the other housing popular, precolonial, and postcolonial memory. Additionally, Pei's inverted pyramids show that an underground space is not condemned to the artificial: devices for capturing and conducting natural light, light wells, lanterns, interior courts can maintain a sensory link with the surface and sky, avoiding the claustrophobic atmosphere that harms the memorial experience [16].

VII. SYNTHESIS: TOWARD A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE NMC EXTENSION

➤ *Convergence of the Literature*

The literature reviewed in this article converges toward a set of findings that collectively define the research problem and point toward its resolution. On the diagnostic level, the Cameroonian identity crisis is a structural rupture born of a double erasure, of precolonial structures and of the UPC war, whose memorial void has pushed the public toward alternative spaces (bars, revival churches) whose immersive efficacy reveals, in negative, the failures of the National Museum: architectural inadequacy, absence of a scientific project, representative imbalance, and modernizations of the container without rethinking the visitor experience.

On the theoretical level, the contributions of Psarra [19], Tschumi [14], Pallasmaa [16], and Jenkins [20] converge toward four operative principles for narrative and immersive architecture: primacy of the body as narrative vector; spatial progression translating historical trajectories; intimate narration rather than static rhetoric; and participatory interactivity as a lever of social capital.

On the typological level, the comparative analysis of architectural precedents adds a fifth principle: the underground extension, exemplified by the Grand Louvre of Pei [18], makes descent a narrative device in itself. Entering underground is not a technically neutral choice, it is a spatial act signifying the passage from the surface of official colonial history to the depth of buried popular memory. This typological inversion is precisely adapted to the symbolic situation of the NMC: the extension does not compete with the historic palace; it completes it by giving access to what the palace's walls have always kept invisible.

➤ *The Gap This Research Addresses*

The literature makes clear that no existing or proposed architectural project for the NMC has yet addressed the central question of this research. Aba Nkasse et al. [7] provide a valuable functional framework but remain silent on the narrative and immersive dimension. The Expertise France/AFD project [7] brings the museum up to international standards without reforming the visitor experience. The Route des Chefferies offers a model of participatory museology but operates at a decentralized regional scale. The international precedents demonstrate that the architecture of memory can be a powerful instrument of national cohesion, but none has been applied to the specific context of Cameroon's postcolonial memorial crisis.

The extension this research proposes is conceived to fill this gap: a space that is not merely functional but narrative; not merely modern but immersive; not merely representative of national diversity but capable of generating, through spatial experience, the feeling of belonging to a shared community of destiny.

➤ *Implications for Architectural Design*

The theoretical and comparative framework developed in this article generates a set of architectural design implications that will govern the subsequent design phase. The underground typology is validated not only as a technical solution for preserving the classified historic building, but as the primary narrative device of the entire project: descent as psychological transition from the present to the depths of Cameroonian memory. The route must be conceived as an intentional sequence (Tschumi) operating on the three registers of Psarra with spatial markers translating the phases of historical memory: precolonial structures, colonial rupture, independence struggles, contemporary plurality. Non-visual senses must be mobilized as primary narrative vectors (Pallasmaa): local materials for their olfactory and tactile memory, spatially spatialized sound for oral transmission, controlled light for emotional atmosphere. Spaces of Memorial Void (after Libeskind) must be integrated to embody the weight of archival absences without claiming to fill them. And the route must include zones of polyphonic emergent narration (Jenkins) where the visitor co-constructs their own relationship to Cameroonian history, without a single imposed narrative.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This article has established the theoretical and critical framework for research aimed at conceiving the underground extension of the National Museum of Cameroon as a device of immersive spatial narration. Through a systematic review of the literature spanning postcolonial sociology, architectural theory, phenomenology, and museology, it has demonstrated that the failure of existing Cameroonian memorial spaces is not merely technical or financial it is above all conceptual. These spaces have been conceived as containers rather than devices, as monuments rather than experiences, as top-down impositions rather than shared constructions of meaning.

The theoretical framework developed here resting on the four principles of narrative three-dimensionality, event intentionality, sensory corporeality, and polyphony of the route provides a rigorous and contextualized response to this conceptual failure. The comparative analysis of six international architectural precedents demonstrates that these principles have been operationalized with transformative social and political effects in contexts of memorial crisis comparable to that of Cameroon. And the typological choice of the underground extension, grounded in the precedent of Pei's Grand Louvre, adds a spatial dimension of exceptional narrative power: making descent itself a passage from colonial official history to the depths of buried Cameroonian memory.

The contribution of this research to the Cameroonian academic architectural literature is to establish, for the first time, a theoretical bridge between the sociological reality of the national identity crisis and the architecturally operative principles capable of addressing it. Architecture alone cannot resolve a political crisis. But it can create the spatial conditions in which Cameroonians can meet, recognize themselves, and together construct the meaning of their shared history. This is the foundation on which the design proposition of the subsequent research phase rests.

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