



ABOUT THE GALLERY

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THE FREEDOM MEMORIAL
MUSEUM GALLERY

Freedom Memorial Museum Gallery

Fewer Words to [Designing] Freedom: An Exegetic Essay

Curatorial Design by Leonido M. Gines, Jr.

Text by Leonido M. Gines, Jr.

The Freedom Memorial Museum Gallery is a small project by the Human Rights Violations Victims Memorial Commission (HRVVMC) that intends to provide the public with a preview of the narrative of human rights violations during the martial law period of the Philippines and beyond (1972–1986). The gallery's design process interrogated concepts that architects, artists, curators, and advocates of social justice tried to evoke—victims, human rights, text, mood, corners, spatial memory, transitional justice, and freedom.

While it took fewer words than what the above concepts can offer were articulated in this exegesis, designing freedom through this project is a process (and event) that hopes to open the discourse on spatial justice for the designers. Such processes—reading into and interrogating concepts, and the conceptualization of displaying freedom narratives—were necessary to designing freedom. The project, a prequel to the forthcoming Freedom Memorial Museum building, intends to open on the eve of the celebration of the EDSA People Power Revolution.

INTRODUCTION

Expected to open on February 22, 2024, the Freedom Memorial Museum Gallery (TFMMG)¹ was planned in 2023 as a small exhibition on narrative themes and curatorial points of interest on and about the human rights violation victims of the martial law period. The project required some research (some of which I have accumulated in years of study, experience, and observations) on a range of issues surrounding that violent *longue durée*—a long-term traumatic collective event and memory of political detentions, torture, killings and numerous inhumane tactics of injustice.²

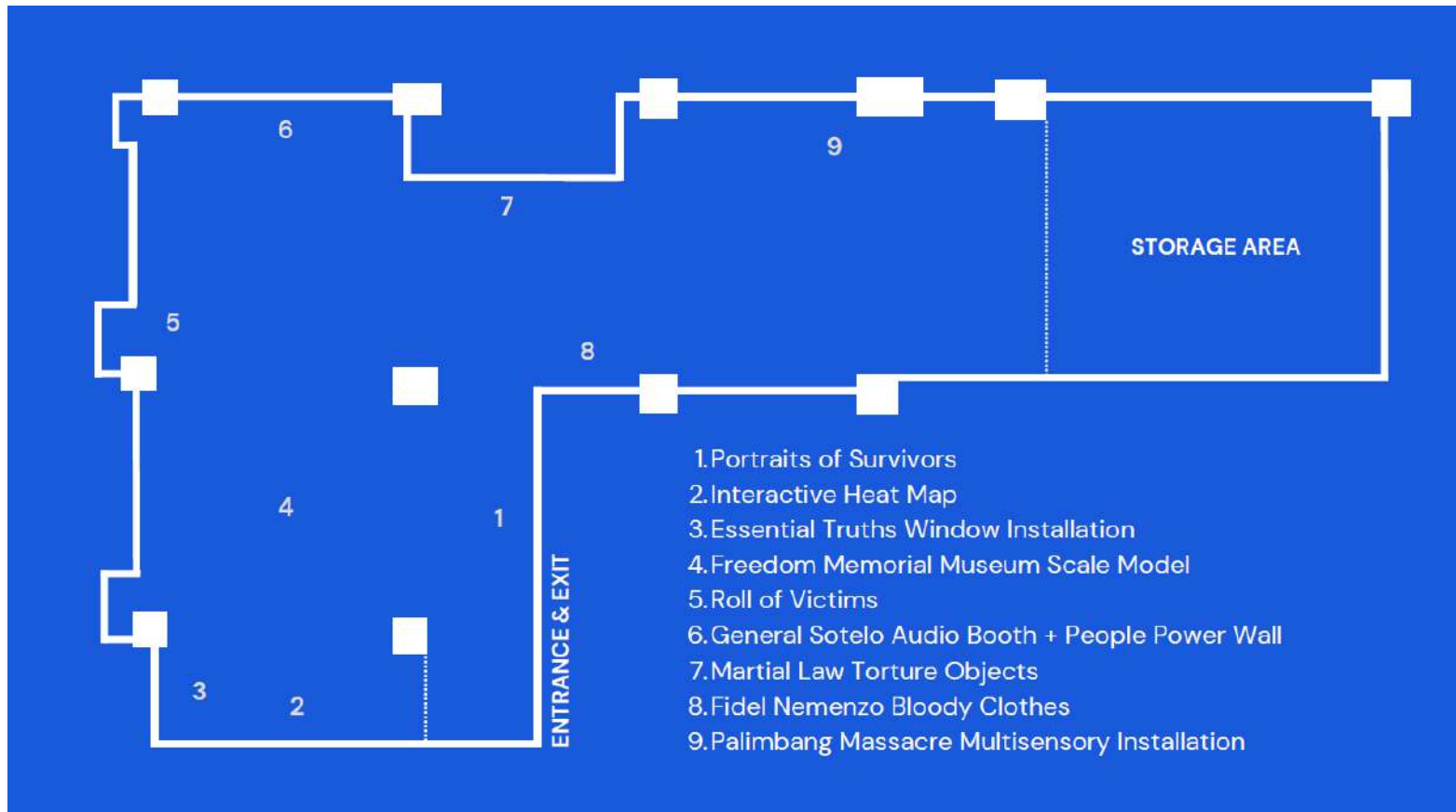
Marquee at the entrance to The Freedom Memorial Museum Gallery.



Leonido Gines, Jr.

Leonido M. Gines Jr. is an architect with background and expertise in museum and exhibition design, and cultural resource management and planning, urban and design anthropology, and architectural theory and criticism. He teaches at the University of the Philippines College of Architecture (UPCA) under the history, theory, and criticism (HTC) studio laboratory. He is also an urban anthropologist interested in the intersections between city architecture and urban olfaction.

His current research interests revolve around the idea of volatile realities surrounding the vernacular, the technological and the cultural aspects of space and place, whereby the systemic cultural and social networks of agencies intersect with current disruptions in the built and ecological environments. He views this intersection from the transdisciplinary and interconnected methodological approaches between architecture, urban design, anthropology, design ethnography, and cultural theory.



The curatorial narrative brief presented to the Design Team.

This small gallery attempts to capture only portions of this memory, and the design configures them in small narratives, teasing out the remembering in stories and objects, and teasing the prospective visitors to the larger “Freedom Memorial Museum” that will be constructed soon. The project was commissioned by the Human Rights Violations Victims’ Memorial Commission (HRVVMC), under its Executive Director Carmelo Victor Crisanto.

[1] JUSTICE.

When the Philippine government was given both the legal and congressional mandate³ to be the stewards of the victims of the martial law regime, HRVVMC oversaw the reparation claims. Over 9500 victims were recorded under its purview and with the task of administering reparative justice through acknowledgment and remuneration. We, as designers, initially read Architect John Hejduk, whose project, aptly entitled “Victims,” was an exploration of temporal dimensions of the architectural object and which he described as “a construction of time.”⁴ Due to the limitations of the gallery’s space and the brief, the designers took a different turn towards the “temporal text” as the object itself. Many museum administrators and

¹ By the time this essay is published, the gallery has already been opened to the public. Acknowledgement is due to the TFMMG staff, Ms. Cza Lopez, Mr. James Olivar, and Mr. Jake Lim for the project’s brief and their always generous demeanor.

² The Commission on Human Rights—Human Rights Violations Victims’ Memorial Commission identified ten major violation categories under their official list of Martial Law era victims. See their website on the official Roll of Victims (hrv-memcom.gov.ph).

³ The Human Rights Victims Recognition and Reparation Act was the law that provided compensation to living and surviving kin of human rights violations victims during the martial law period (1972–1986). Before this law, a US (Hawaii) federal court found Ferdinand Marcos Sr. guilty of gross human rights violations and his estate was ordered to pay damages to the victims. Part of the management of these successes allowed the HRVVMC to create projects like the Freedom Memorial Museum (FMM) and this project, the FMM Gallery.

⁴ Hejduk, J. (1985). *Victims, a work*. London: Architectural Association.



Exhibit Section 1: Portraits of survivors, photographs by Rick Rocamora.



Exhibit Section 7: Martial Law torture objects display.



Exhibit Section 9: Lightbox image representations of the Palimbang massacre.

⁵ Has justice already been served? My conversations with some curators and scholars have already revealed that views on justice and the victims have already changed in the past two decades (Reena Manalo's forthcoming curatorial thesis research on martial law transitional justice issues discusses these changes, including the view that some no longer want to be called 'victims'), partly because of the different political climates and the advent of popular (mis)information dissemination.

⁶ A *lieu de memoire* is a 'container' site of memories. Pierre Nora was considered the main proponent of this concept, and he argues that collective cultural remembering is 'stored' in spatially determined sites like monuments and museums, and also in ephemeral sites such as literature and other discursive disciplines. I import this concept as part of the design research to direct spaces, objects (albeit limited), and ephemeral collections (narratives, stories, interviews, symbols, signs, etc.).

⁷ Edward Soja (2010) mentions the abstraction and continual process of contestation over the rights to the city as part of the theoretical dimensions of spatial justice that is worth exploring.

curators agree that this part of victims' reparative and transitional justice⁵ can be provoked in museological dialogues.

The justice afforded by these historically critical victories, in part, may be contained and maintained in a new spatial memory: *lieux de memoire*⁶ can be created. It is in this condition that design can explore spatial justice, despite this seemingly small and temporary venue. We had limited control over the project's brief, but there is this potential: space can be the event for spatial justice.

Spatial justice offers the continuation of the process of contestations, and the re-imagining of rights within sites and events. The legal and congressional victories themselves are already 'examples of spatial justice in action'.⁷ Activating events and ideas in creative space (and in the geography of justice itself) is part of the internal design determination.

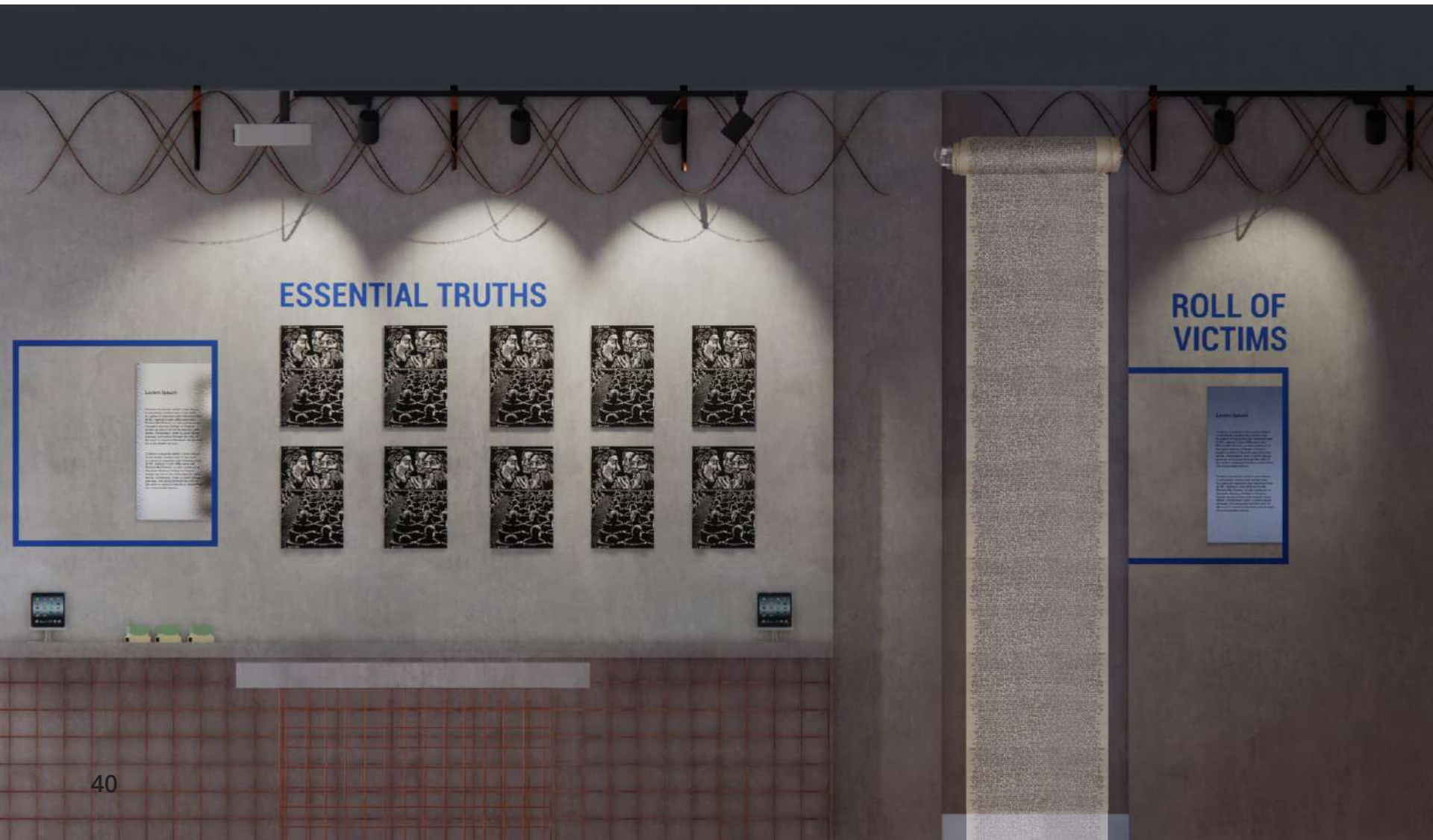
[2] DESIGN.⁸

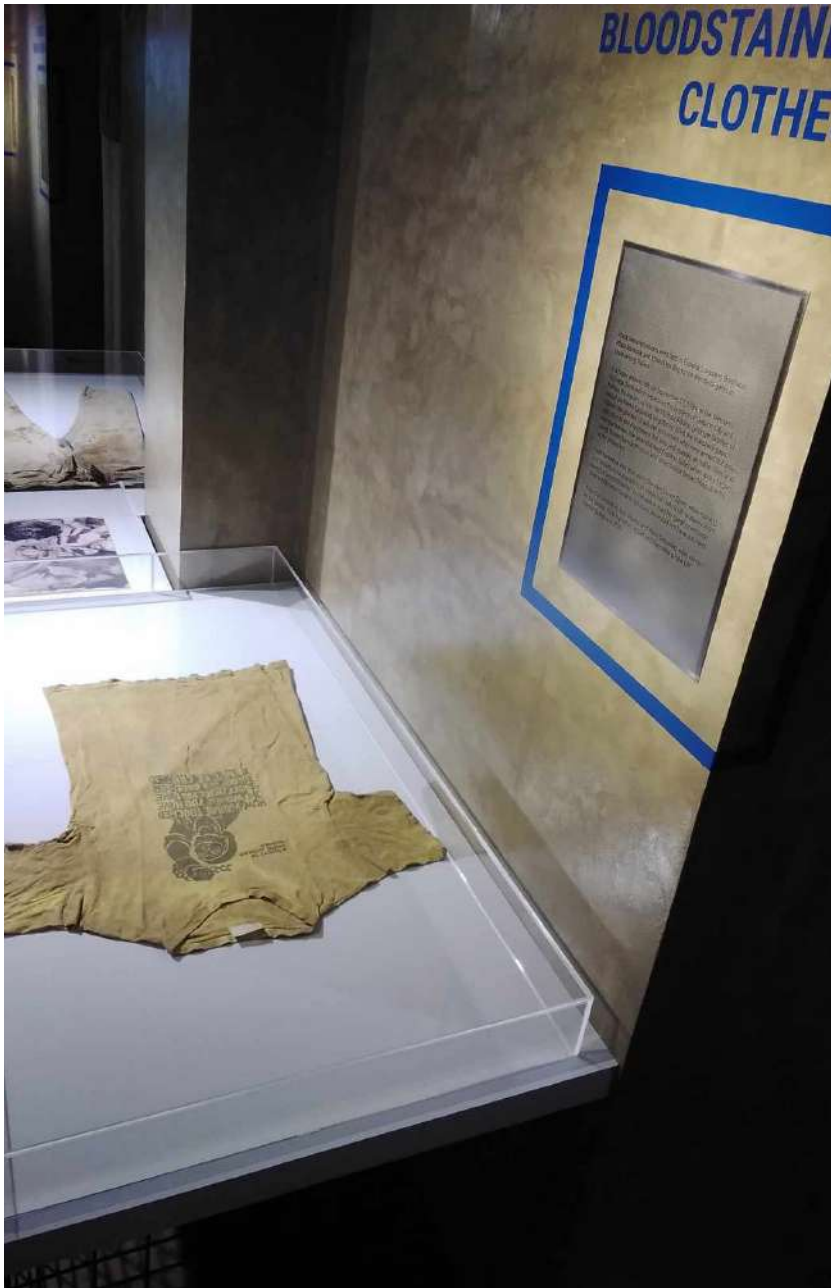
The deterministic narrative of spatial justice for the gallery means limiting the display of objects from the client's repository and focusing on the ephemeral instead. In this gallery, to design means to follow the brief, to set the 'mood,' to reference the display elements, and to feature the essentials.

The design is bare as it is flat (with its raw/brutal finishes, focused lighting, and minimal display tactics), limiting it with its briefness. Moods are only set by lighting, color, and sectional texts, features only follow their references: rust colors, barbed wire, brutal concrete grays, dark, charcoal black. Aside from everyday objects as display, only texts stand out as signified and signifiers of such mood—the backdrop to understand the victim. There is no pretense to heritage palimpsests and authenticity, only the pretense of the mood itself. The mood hopefully helps remember, listen, and feel the authenticity of injustice.

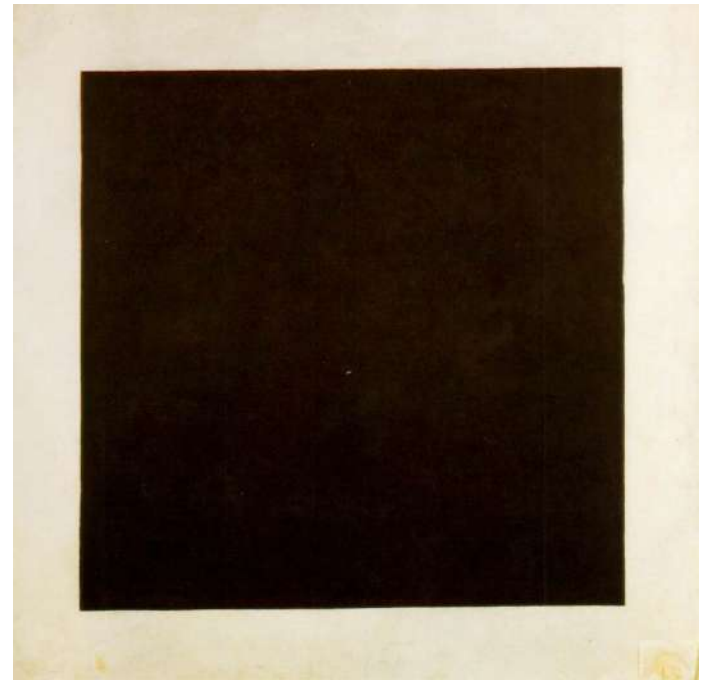
⁸ The design team for this project includes Architect Manolet Garcia, architecture graduates Rock Monreal and Gershom Hoy, and architecture student Rodrigo Gamas.

Elevation montage of Exhibit Sections

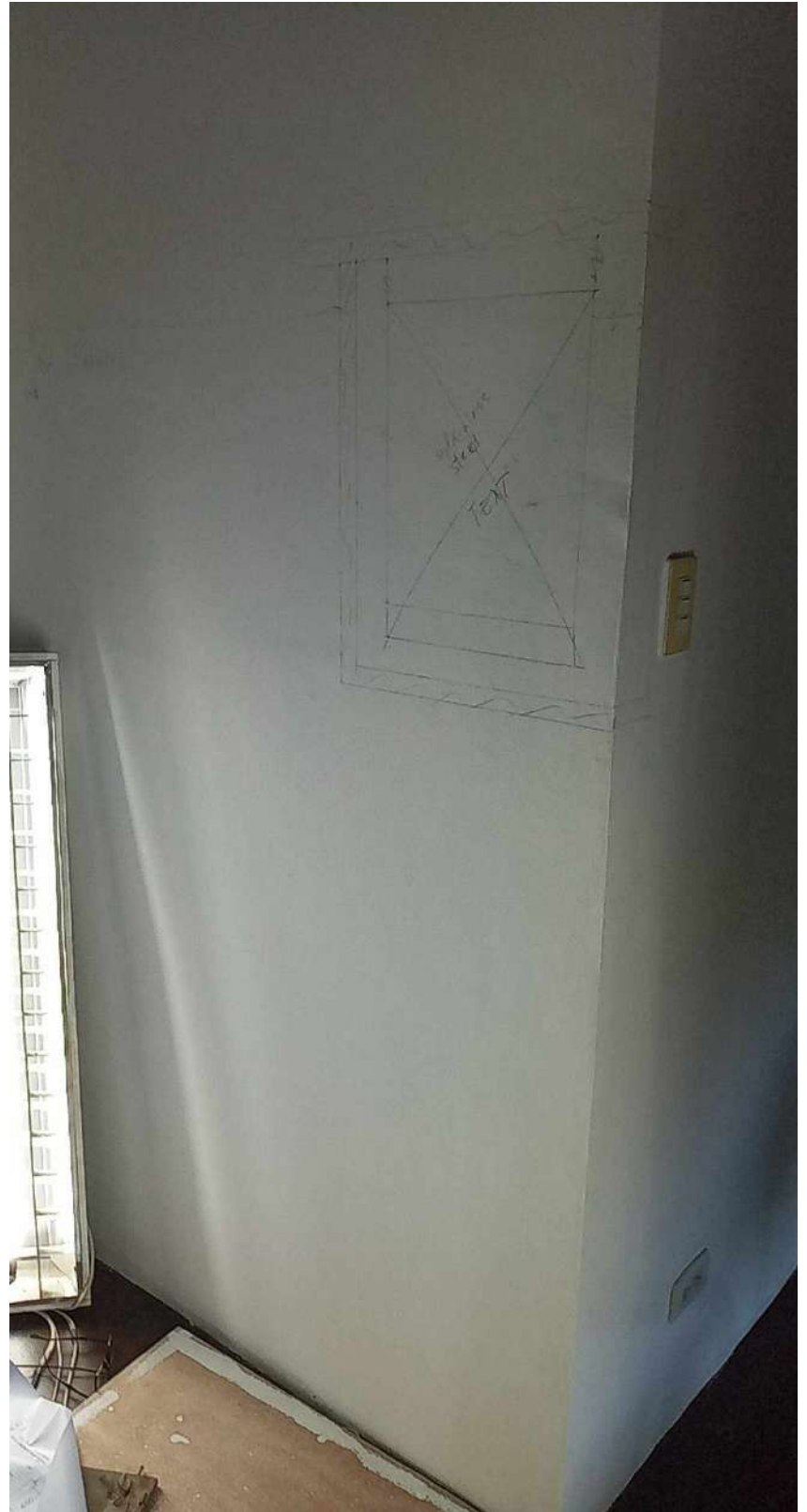
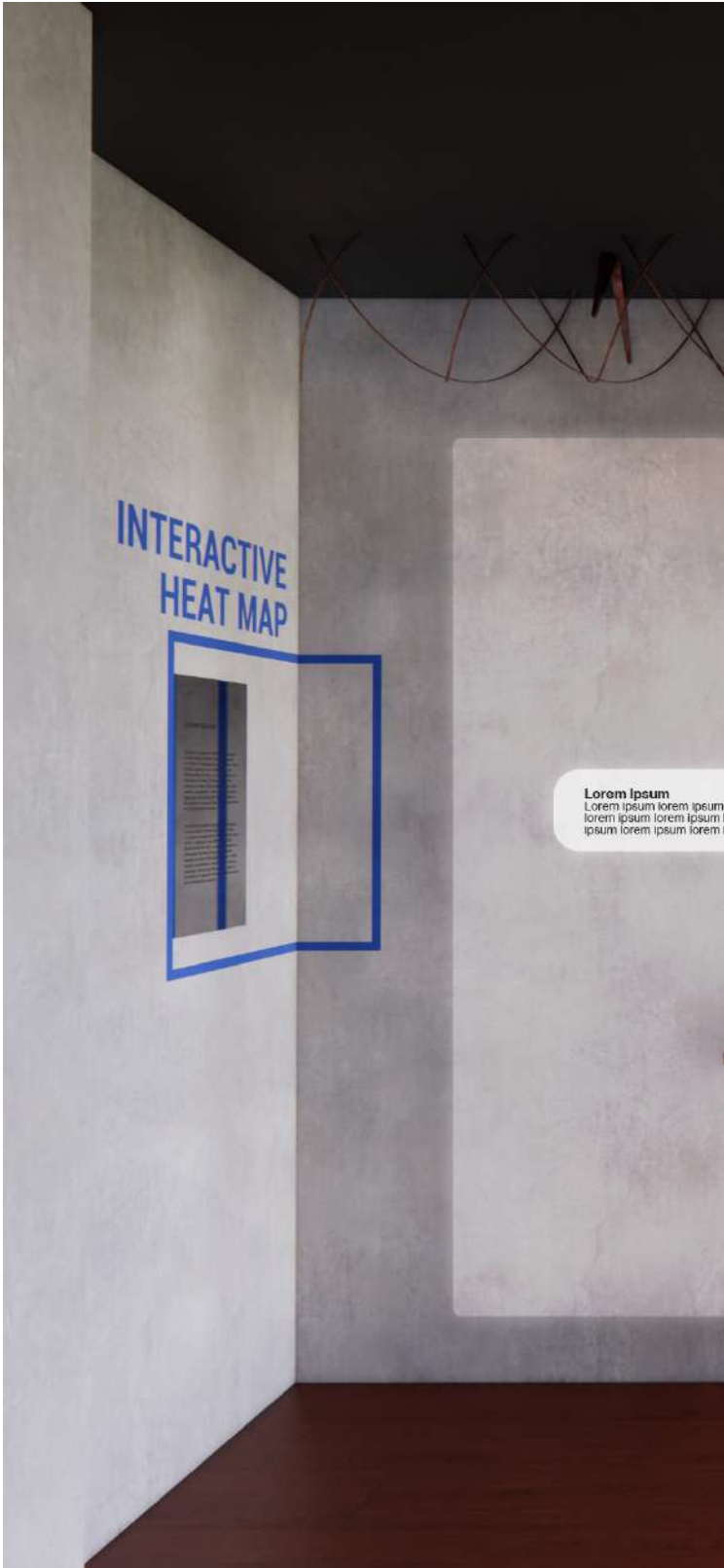


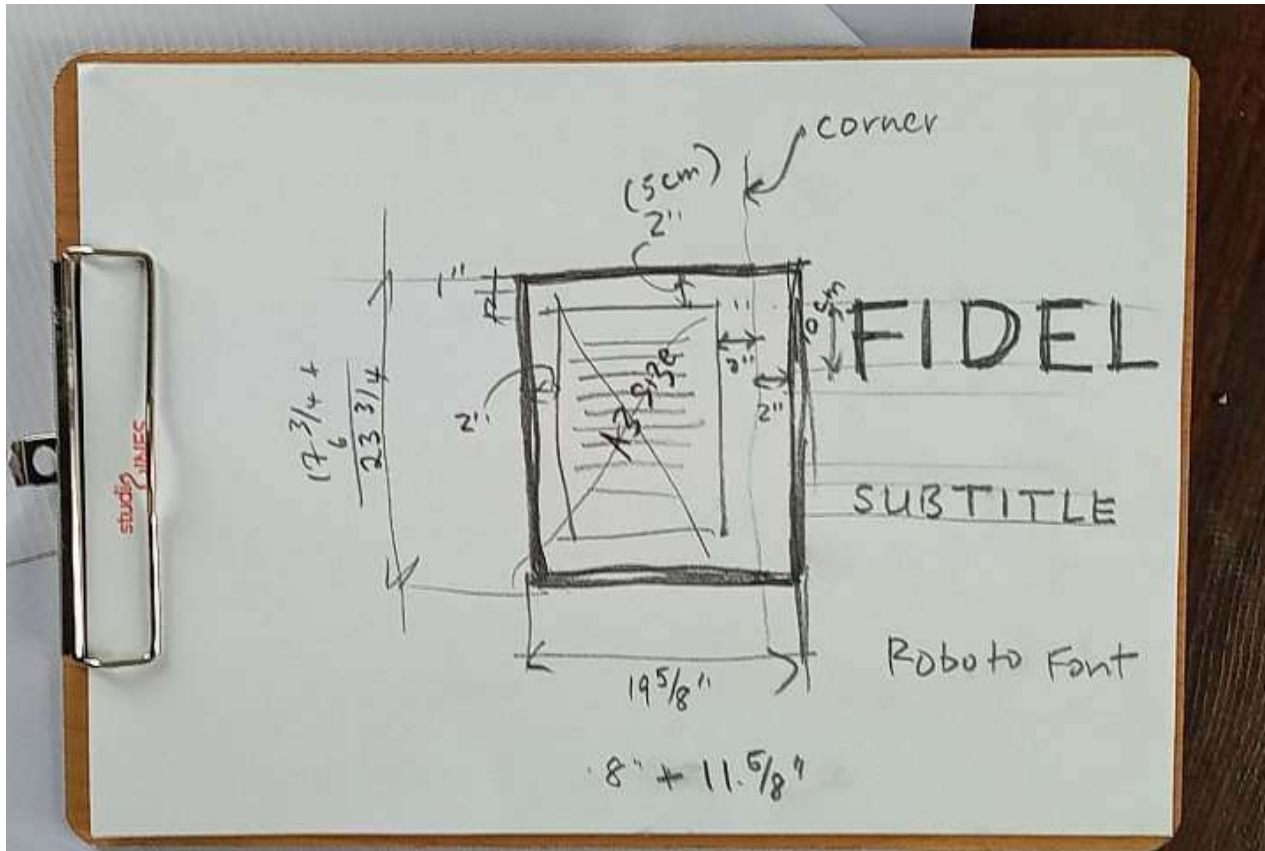


In Exhibit Section 8: Fidel Nemenzo blood-stained clothes, the design elements are apparent, showing the mood intent in lighting, a reference object to martial law --- the barbed wire on the ceiling, the framed corner text-as-artifact next to the section title, a sample display case of actual artifact with possible additional display area underneath, the raw concrete finish.



Kazimir Malevich's painting "Black Square," above, was exhibited at a corner, below, invoking its place as a reference to traditional beliefs that icons are always displayed in sacred corners.





On site, drawing and actual installation preparations of the corner icon in Exhibit Section 8: Fidel Nemenzo blood-stained clothes.

[3] CORNERS.

Corners, conceptualized as temporary edges of the folds⁹ that pause the continuity of surfaces, are treated by the design team to be an important element of the gallery. Corners must halt and pause the visitor before proceeding, to read the main devices for critical thinking. The section headline and text become the device, the idea that introduces the advocacy content and the display (artwork, artifact, image, presentation), yet these texts, designed to be etched on steel, also become the exhibit artifacts on their own. In this gallery, corners are marked by a blue frame, and within this frame, the non-steel object of the curatorial device: is the gallery's narrative text.

Artist Kazimir Malevich¹⁰ used corners to evoke their spiritual and ritualistic significance and to display there what he deemed the most important and iconic of his paintings, "Black Square." The gallery's temporariness, expected to close when the future museum opens, means that these curatorial texts on steel become artifactual objects in the future.

⁹ Corners don't cut the fold itself; they only pause the flow and continuity of the surface. Before turning the corner... They are like pleats, but not smooth enough to confirm continuities. Each text etched on steel conveys a message for this gallery, a total of nine sections were conceived: 1. Portraits of survivors by Rick Rocamora; 2. Human rights violations heat map of the Philippines; 3. Essential Truths artwork by Egay Fernandez (with activity desk); 4. The Freedom Memorial Museum scale model; 5. The Roll of Victims; 6. People Power Wall with Gen. Sotelo Audio Booth; 7. Martial Law torture objects; 8. Fidel Nemenzo's blood-stained clothes; and 9. The Palimbang Massacre lightbox installation.

¹⁰ Malevich's iconic "Black Square" painting was displayed in the upper corners of walls, believed to be part of his view that art should invoke spirituality and affective living, in a sense an ode to Russian Orthodox belief of displaying icons in the same way.





Exhibit Section 6: EDSA People Power wall.

[4] FREEDOM.

The realities now are uncertain, if not volatile, for advocates of this cause. The most obvious condition of volatility is the distribution of the (new) Marcos's machinery in government. Will the Freedom Memorial Museum be a reality soon? Will the voices of the victims become enshrined and en-sited? Or will voice and sight be once more oppressed?



Exhibit Section 2: Human rights violations heat map of the Philippines, identifying current volatile conditions for human rights.

Just as the current conditions are volatile, the agency to determine, to design, and to will freedom is envisioned in this gallery. This challenge to understand our local freedoms now needs to be recontextualized to acknowledge the sacrifice of the martial law victims. During martial law's *longue durée*, activists and victims were mostly college youths, then aged in their late teens and early 20s. Today's youth, or the college population, have now aged a few years (as their 'education' is extended), and have lesser motivations for sacrifice. But they are better informed, more engaged, and have more sense to understand human rights. Volatile realities seem to result in fewer words to design freedom, but there must be hope in their resolve.

These few words to freedom don't necessarily entail that the gallery's curatorial narrative is the same as this essay. It is the hope, though, that the narratives to freedom themselves in this soon-to-open gallery will engage visitors, youthful to elderly, to start and ignite the wider discourse on this will to freedom, once again.

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Exhibit Section 3: Egay Fernandez's artwork on the ten essential truths about martial law attempts at imaging them and encouraging visitors to reflect and comment on their visit to the gallery.



Exhibit Section 4: The scale model of the Freedom Memorial Museum, the winner of the design competition announced in 2020 will be displayed in the gallery to help visitors visualize this anticipated project.