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ТРАДИЦИИ И АВАНГАРД В АРХИТЕКТУРЕ НЕМЕЦКИХ СИНАГОГ



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Материалы к лекции архитектора
Мануэля Герца

Москва
сентябрь 2015 г.
проект «Эшколот»
www.eshkolot.ru

Institutionalized Experiment: The Politics of “Jewish Architecture” in Germany

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The eruv, both as a concept and as a pragmatic tool within everyday Jewish life, can be seen as the typical architectonic and urbanistic response to the condition of diaspora. Germany represents perhaps the diasporic condition par excellence. One would therefore expect the installment of eruvim to be a recurring feature of urban life. However, no eruv currently exists in Germany, and the physical presence of Jewry in that country follows an ideology that is, surprisingly, opposed to that of the eruv, a presence that can be described as anti-eruv and maybe anti-diasporic.

Abstracted from its religious context and analyzed in terms of its urban strategy, the eruv stands for the creation of a specific urban realm that nevertheless remains accessible to all groups of society and open to all uses. Two main characteristics of the eruv with respect to its urban methodology are the addition of multiple layers of meaning to the urban realm and a strategic approach of many small-scale interventions to affect a large area. Illustrating these characteristics, the recently installed eruv in Northwest London required only the construction of approximately 30 poles connected by nylon wire to complete the enclosure of an area of six and a half square miles.¹ The measurements of these fixtures, conceived of as gates by the rabbis, as defined in the talmudic Tractate Erubin, are described in reference to the Jerusalem Temple, specifically its gates leading to the *ulam* (entrance hall) and the *hekhal* (the holy place).² One of the main highways, for example, becomes part of that eruv boundary, and for one day of the week it symbolizes the wall of the Jerusalem temple for Orthodox Jews.

The liveliness of a city segment and the changes in the activities carried out within that urban realm do not depend on a single, visible, and centralized intervention or building but on many small-scale changes, declarations, and shifts of signification that are only noticeable to the informed and do not affect the unacquainted. The eruv can be described as containing a minimum of “Jewishness” in a maximum of space. I argue that the physical presence of German Jewry follows exactly the opposite strategy, that it represents a model of an “anti-eruv,” and that this model has a specific political relevance for the architects, for the Jewish communities, and for the political establishment.

Despite the danger of over-simplification, we may say that the Talmud in general and the eruv in particular represent methods of collective memory and the means to construct a collective identity (as argued by Charlotte Fonrobert in her article in this issue). They were developed as responses to the catastrophe of the destruction of the Temple and the

¹ For a detailed discussion of the London eruv, see Jennifer Cousineau’s article in this issue as well as M. Herz and E. Weizman, “Between City and Desert: The Eruv as an Evolution of an Architectural Sign,” *AA-Files* (London) 34 (1997): 68-76.

² See Babylonian Talmud, Tractate erubin 2b.

Diaspora that followed. The eruv is a tool to project a vision of ancient Jerusalem and its Temple onto the banality and the mundane of the everyday city and to give a people, who were spread out all over the world, a sense of unity and identity without sharing a central physical place. In other words, it is a tool to cope with the separation of nation (identity and culture) from polis (location and common space). If the approach currently followed in contemporary Germany is contrary to that of the eruv, then the question of its collective reception and, hence, its political consequences should also be noticeably different.

When the city government of Munich started developing a concept for a new Jewish community center in 1999, it invited scholars from all over the world to help formulate the program and guidelines for this daunting task. Regardless of the multiple voices that were heard (mine, among them), a general strategy had been laid out from the beginning. The Jewish community center was to occupy one of the few remaining open squares in the city center, close to the major shopping areas. The community center was to contain a synagogue, a Jewish elementary school, a Jewish school with evening courses for the general public, a multipurpose hall, and connected spaces for community activities (a Jewish museum, a Jewish restaurant, a Jewish café, and a Jewish bookshop). This general strategy, which basically amounts to concentrating all Jewish presence into one city square, was developed in mutual partnership by the local head of the Jewish community, Charlotte Knobloch, and the governor of Bavaria, Edmund Stoiber. It is to be a central structure, to contain within a minimum of physical space a maximum of ‘Jewishness,’ the antipode to the diasporic “ideology” of the eruv. It is a prime example of the concept of ‘Jewish architecture’ that exists only in Germany, and it is how a Jewish presence in Germany is manifested physically and expressed within the urban fabric. In large cities like Cologne and Hamburg as well as in smaller cities like Wuppertal and Mainz, the approach has been similar.

To speak of a ‘Jewish’ architecture is obviously quite problematic, in part because it leaves undefined whether Jewish users, Jewish architects, or buildings with a Jewish theme are referred to. Examples would be the new synagogues and community centers, the architects Daniel Libeskind and Zvi Hecker, the Museum of the Jewish artist Felix Nussbaum in Osnabrück, and the Holocaust Memorial by Peter Eisenman in Berlin. In spite of the risk of generalization, it seems most suitable for this analysis to choose a definition as comprehensive as possible and therefore to speak of a contemporary “architecture with Jewish context” instead of a ‘Jewish’ architecture. In Germany, the Jewish communities began to grow rapidly in the 1990s because of the influx of Jews from the former Soviet republics. Consequently, many new community centers and synagogues, as well as elementary schools, museums, and other buildings with a Jewish context, were built.

This architecture has a specific spatial and formal quality. One can discern a tendency toward expressiveness – that is, a concern with form and shape and their means of representation, and, in the broadest sense, the refutation of generally accepted conventions. However, there is only a limited natural affinity of Jewish architects with this expressiveness, and a number of those buildings have not been built by Jewish architects, so the reasons for

this quality have to be sought elsewhere and cannot be traced back solely to the planners and designers.³ An explanation that only references the decision-making process of the architect or sees the architectural outcome exclusively as a product of the relationship between the architect and the client is too individualistic and apolitical, and therefore it does not address the main issue. Especially in respect to the theme, which is of vital political and social interest to Germany, another layer of explanation has to be added to the simplistic reference to the architect's preferences. Indeed, one can only understand the specific expression of that architecture with a Jewish context in Germany when it is situated in a collective, and thereby political, context, having a direct influence on the architect's designs.

What exactly is the character of those buildings with a Jewish context in Germany? First and foremost, it seems fair to state that "good" architecture has been consistently realized. Regardless of the location and size, whether one looks at major buildings in the capital of Berlin or at a small synagogue in a provincial city, and whether it is a classic or a straight style of architecture or of sculptural expression, the spatial and conceptual quality achieved in those buildings is exceptionally high. In particular, their concepts are rich in metaphor, unfold a plenitude of historical and thematic relationships, and often have a finely tuned and well-formulated argument with respect to the building's shape and its "morphogenesis." In this sense, they are examples of proper architecture. It has been mentioned often that the Jewish Museum in Berlin by Libeskind as well as the "Topography of Terror" by Peter Zumthor, which has been awaiting its completion in that city, are among the most interesting and outstanding examples of contemporary architecture worldwide.

Aside from this rather general issue of conceptual and spatial quality, a tendency toward breaking the rules can be observed in those buildings. In various ways, the buildings refute the generally accepted forms of planning and construction and acquire an anarchic quality. Not only is this "rebelliousness" present in the visible and formal but it also includes the institutional and bureaucratic aspects of construction. Although the process of decision-making and the planning stage went beyond any previously known and accepted scale in the case of the "Topography of Terror" and even more so in the case of the Holocaust Memorial, Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin is probably the building where this disregard

³ In recent years a certain "phantom" discussion in the academic field of architecture has taken place on the relationship of Judaism with the style of deconstructivism, certainly one of the most expressive and, formally speaking, radical movements within the field. Triggered by the fact that three of the main contenders within this "style" are Jewish – Peter Eisenman, Frank Gehry, and Daniel Libeskind – it has been argued that the history of the Jews, their insecurity and instability, and their historically developed opposition to the Greek notion of "stasis" lent itself to this formal approach. It was obviously backed up by its philosophical counterpart, where postmodernism and tendencies of deconstruction were strongly influenced by Jewish thinkers such as Derrida or Lyotard. Even though there is a certain truth and logic to these arguments, many facts showing the opposite phenomena can be discerned: Jewish architects like Richard Meier, with his pure and static forms, and non-Jewish proponents of extreme expressiveness, like the Iranian Zaha Hadid, show that any correlation of religion to a specific formalism has a very weak basis. On the relationship between architecture and Judaism, see, e.g., Andrew Benjamin: *Present Hope: Philosophy, Architecture, Judaism* (London, 1997). On the opposition of Jewish and Greek thought, see Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (London, 1970).

of the institutionalized methods of planning have been made most visible and apparent. Planned and approved at a time that fell completely under the fierce rule of the senator of planning and city development, Hans Stimmann, with his dystopian vision of a conservative and Teutonic, petrified Berlin, the Jewish Museum is the only building that escaped schematically banal contextualization. Especially when observing how other world-famous architects like Frank Gehry had failed in opposing and liberating themselves from that strict ideology,⁴ the level of radicalism and consistency in the Libeskind building is spectacular.

The building managed to circumvent rules that are sacrosanct to the pursuers of historical conventionality and the so-called “critical reconstruction,”⁵ such as compliance to the street lines. In addition, the cladding of the facade with zinc does not correspond to the official decree of a stone-clad Berlin. One can distinguish further rule violations by this building as well as by various additional buildings with a Jewish context in Germany, many more so than with other buildings, whether they be museums, churches, or community centers. The aim of an architecture that confronts the bureaucratic discipline and breaks with the accepted rules and regulations is to express a critical stance toward Jewish the established conventions. Libeskind writes, for example, that his Jewish Museum confronts the rationality of Berlin – that same rationality which has led to utter catastrophe, with the power of irrationality. He goes on to say that the so-called “voids,” the empty spaces that cut through the building, are meant to express the unbearable burden: the consequence of the destruction of the European Jewry.⁶ Architecture here is taken as a critical voice for society and the political system. Conventional patterns of thought and values are to be questioned and fundamentally reassessed. The buildings are meant to have a disturbing and disquieting power through the radicalism of their design and their construction. By means of architecture, a critique of established values of German society is publicly expressed.

It is fair to say that this disregard of convention is hard fought in each and every case. Sometimes it has taken years for the building plans to overcome all objections, years until all technical and legal difficulties have been solved and the building is built in the most uncompromising way. The individual architect, though, is not the only source

⁴ Slightly contradicting my argument, Frank Gehry’s “DG-Bank” is the famous exception to the rule of a “Jewish architect” being forced to surrender and build rather conventionally. I should add that Gehry’s building looks tame only on the outside and fulfills all conservative requirements for the street view while being very expressive and daring internally. Moreover, Gehry is not known for being a “Jewish architect” in the public’s view in Germany.

⁵ “Kritische Rekonstruktion” is a term developed by the architect Josef Kleihues, one of the main proponents of that very conservative building style in Berlin during the 1990s. Aiming at a homogenization of the cityscape, it uses an idealized neoclassical repertoire of forms as vocabulary. Because this repertoire stems from the time of the emperor, it can hardly be said to be democratically linked and is very backward looking; it was strongly criticized by many architects and cultural critiques as being the wrong move for the new capital of the reunified Germany. For a thorough and critical discussion on the architecture of “Kritische Rekonstruktion,” see the German magazine *Arch plus*, no. 122 (June 1994). For some original thoughts, see Hans Stimmann: “Kritische Rekonstruktion und eine steinerne Architektur für die Friedrichstadt,” in *Neue Berlinische Architektur: Eine Debatte*, ed. Annegret Burg (Birkhäuser, 1994).

⁶ Daniel Libeskind, *Radix–Matrix* (Munich, 1994), 100-102.

of the designs. Since those buildings perform a vital political function in Germany, one has to observe and analyze them on a political level, as well. An anarchic quality can be observed in a multitude of buildings from various architects, which indicates that interest in circumventing the rules also arises from a different side.

No other buildings exist in Germany that are inaugurated with greater expenditure, larger ceremonial events, and more intense public response and media coverage than synagogues and other “Jewish” buildings. Only recently, the new synagogue of Wuppertal, a provincial town in central Germany, was inaugurated in the presence of the German president at the time, Johannes Rau, and his Israeli colleague Katzav. Hardly any other buildings are given this amount of attention. The significance given to this event, which seems almost of fundamental importance to the state, is astounding in view of its provinciality and practical irrelevance, considering the number of people who will use the synagogue actively. When the Jewish Museum was inaugurated in September 2001 in Berlin, the gala evening of the official celebration was the biggest and most exclusive social event that had ever taken place in Germany. Never before had so many celebrities of politics, economy, culture, and media met in one place.

It is very telling that the opening of the new German House of Parliament was celebrated with much less fanfare and less enthusiasm, even though it was supposed to mark the start of a new era of Germany after reunification. Indeed, it seems that this new chapter was marked by the opening of the Jewish Museum rather than the first debate in Parliament.

During the fall of 2004, Zumthor’s design for the “Topography of Terror” was withdrawn by the city of Berlin, even though construction had already started, and a new competition for that project was launched in June 2005. The cost limit could not be met by the demanding construction of Zumthor’s design. Apart from the financial aspect, it has now become apparent that the client was never in favor of that design, despite being part of the jury more than six years ago, but it had resigned itself to the city’s interest in having a “landmark” building because this would draw more international attention. The example of the Wuppertal synagogue shows that the symbolic value of this building exceeds its “functional” value by far, especially from the perspective of the non-Jewish population. Regardless of whether the synagogue is being actively used or whether it forms a functioning center of activity for the local community, its very existence serves as proof of a secured Jewish presence in Germany. Therefore, an expressive building with radical architecture is in the interest of the public, as there is no danger of it being ignored. In a strange mutual dependence and joining of interests, German Jewry steps out of the inner courtyards. The Jews in Germany do not feel shame anymore about living in the land of the Holocaust, and they see no need to hide themselves. German non-Jews wish to affirm the security and full acceptance that the Jews in Germany now enjoy, thereby closing that terrible and shameful chapter of history. They need the Jews and their buildings to achieve this aim. A fearful Jewry that hides itself in the inner courtyards or in ordinary buildings of commonplace nature would always be an expression of an explicitly “abnormal” situation.

The Federal Republic of Germany needs the institutionalized experiment in the shape of “wild” buildings and the tolerated breaking of rules to establish its own foundation and to liberate itself from the “unbearable burden” of the Holocaust. The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, with a reference to Jacques Lacan, describes the critical left as a “progressive fool, a ‘social critic’” who feels a “hysterical satisfaction [when] snatching a little piece of *jouissance* [joy] away from the Master.”⁷ But, according to Žižek, this theft never questions the position and power of the ruling authority fundamentally. On the contrary, it only strengthens and stabilizes it within the existing order. This is exactly the role performed by Jewish architecture in Germany today. The architects attempt to create an architecture that rebels against the rule of the established conventions and thereby to position it as a critical voice within the general public, critically assessing and questioning major aspects of German society. However, this superficially critical stance is tolerated and propagated by the institutions.

This architecture in fact reinforces the established and conservative society; the supposedly critical stance is not fundamental, and it allows the official Germany to distinguish itself and present itself positively within the international arena. The government gives those buildings a small space to play anarchy in, where the architects cannot damage and disturb anything essential but achieve good effect as a decorative embellishment. Here is the architect as the court’s fool.

These examples of constructed Jewish presence in Germany, with their supposedly critical view, are received gratefully by the conservative voices within the Federal Republic of Germany. In spite of all the struggle that is necessary to produce the buildings, often of exquisite architectural quality – whether it be the Jewish Museum in Berlin, the Holocaust Memorial, or a synagogue in Duisburg – they proclaim a solidarity with the conventional and conservative opinions, and strengthen the existing power structure. The architecture, which is supposed to express the equal rights and secured standing of Jews in Germany, performs a vital official and state-certified function: it is the litmus test for the allegedly healthy German-Jewish relationship, for the well-being of the Jews in Germany. It is the fool’s architecture as an institutionalized experiment resulting from a mutual dependence.

How can an architecture of Jewish context in Germany be both a distant observer and a critical voice within society? The basic initiative of the architecture of Libeskind, Zumthor, or Hecker, for example, does not include an endorsement of the German state but, on the contrary, is characterized by doubt. Those doubts are important when architecture is to play a vital and active part within society. Why, then, is this kind of architecture so enthusiastically supported and embraced by the political establishment and immediately integrated into the system? I believe that it is an attempt to annul the critical power of architecture within society, to integrate it into the established discourse and to normalize it. Has the Jewish Museum in Berlin lost its critical force, when Germany’s biggest party ever is organized for its opening? Can this expressive architecture be so easily embraced

⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London, 1997), 47.

for conformist uses, precisely because of its “anarchic” quality, because it carries with it explicit signs of rebellion? Is it perhaps the very postmodern nature of these buildings, with their multiple readings and open systems of significations and meaning, that allows them to be taken on board by the existing political environment as a supporting partner? I must address these same questions in view of my own Jewish community center in Mainz, which still awaits completion and is characterized by a similar expressiveness and forceful formal quality.⁸

How would Germany’s politicians react if, instead of dramatic synagogues and visible as well as publicly effective Jewish buildings, an ordinary and everyday presence of Jewish bookshops or grocery stores were developed? If a strategy of the eruv would be attempted in Germany today, what could this approach look like? Instead of a small number of key buildings containing Jewish functions in a centralized space, a decentralized and commonplace Jewish presence in the shape of kosher butchers or mezuzahs on doorframes would spread throughout the city, thereby establishing a minimum of ‘Jewishness’ in a maximum of space. Would this mundane and unspectacular presence of Jews in Germany still perform the function of expressing a politically useful “normality”? Probably not. Jewish bakeries do not lend themselves to symbolic, political, or publicly effective usage and are therefore resistant to the embrace of the political establishment and conservative state interest. After the fools, the time has come for the mundane.

⁸ See the American journal *Architecture* (Oct. 2001) and the Israeli magazine *Studio* (June 2000) for more detailed presentations of the design.