Chapter 12

Between Memory and Normalcy: Synagogue Architecture in Postwar Germany

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Not long ago, on September 21, 2008, one of Germany’s newest synagogues, Congregation Beit Tikvah, was formally dedicated in the Westphalian city of Bielefeld. Architecturally, Beit Tikvah is a simple whitewashed structure with striking arched forms that evoke the rounded stone tablets of the Ten Commandments. As is true of nearly all Jewish houses of worship erected in postwar Germany, Beit Tikvah was built to replace its predecessor, Bielefeld’s Turnerstrasse synagogue (1905), which was destroyed on Kristallnacht in November of 1938. Beit Tikvah was also built to accommodate the needs of Bielefeld’s growing Jewish community, which, like others in Germany, has dramatically swelled in size thanks to the influx of Jews from the former communist East in the years since 1990.¹ In one respect, however, Beit Tikvah is architecturally unique. It is the only synagogue in the Federal Republic that used to be a Protestant church.² Originally erected in 1898, the Paul-Gerhardt-Kirche stood as a church for over a century until it was acquired in 2007 by the Bielefeld Jewish community, which was looking for new worship space. Soon thereafter, the community hired local architect, Klaus Beck, to renovate the building. In pursuing the project, Beck combined the old with the new, preserving the church’s ground plan but transforming its steeple and pointed windows into rounded forms graced with Hebrew characters. Today, the building’s transformation is undetectable. Few pedestrians who pass by Beit Tikvah would have any idea that it was once a church.

The unique construction history of Beit Tikvah is symbolically significant on many different levels. For one thing, it speaks to the current state of Christian-Jewish relations in Germany. Initially, some of Bielefeld’s Christian
citizens were deeply concerned about the church’s evolution into a synagogue, seeing it as a worrisome sign of waning religiosity. After all, the building’s sale to the Jewish community in 2007 went forward after church leaders concluded that dwindling attendance augured poorly for its future viability. The decision was controversial, however, and a radical group of dissident congregants went so far as to occupy the church for three months to try and hinder its sale to the Jewish community.\(^3\) There is no evidence that antisemitism fueled this activism. In fact, after the protests faded and the synagogue was finally dedicated several months later, many Christians stressed that the building’s transformation symbolized the common religious roots of Christianity and Judaism. Bielefeld’s Jews were naturally happy to share such expressions of interfaith fellowship. But most preferred to see the building as a sign of a different kind of reconciliation—between Germans and Jews in the wake of the Holocaust. When the prime minister of Nordrhein-Westfalen, Jürgen Rüttgers, declared in a speech delivered at the synagogue’s dedication that the new building symbolized “confidence and hope,” the president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, Charlotte Knobloch, agreed, stating that the building symbolized “the renaissance of the Jewish community in Germany.”\(^4\)

The significance of Beit Tikvah extends beyond Christian-Jewish rela-
tions, however, and touches on intra-Jewish relations as well. Indeed, the building’s construction history can be interpreted as the by-product of important transnational forces that have shaped postwar Jewish life. One of these is immigration. The originator of the synagogue project was the Bielefeld community’s longtime leader, Irith Michelsohn. Born in 1953 in Tel Aviv of German immigrant parents, she later returned to the Federal Republic and eventually assumed a leading role both in the local Jewish community of Bielefeld and nationally in the Reform-oriented Union of Progressive Jews. Despite her ample leadership skills, however, Michelsohn had an imperious management style that ended up causing controversy. Her pursuit of the synagogue project sparked a major conflict within the Bielefeld Jewish community, some of whose members saw it as violating halakhic rules against utilizing profane structures for religious purposes (opposition to the project prompted thirty members to split from the congregation in 2007). As a result of the burgeoning discord, Michelsohn (together with the other members of the synagogue’s five member board, including Cologne-born cantor Paul Yuval Adam) was voted out of office in 2008 and replaced by a slate of candidates hailing from the former Soviet Union. On the surface, this power struggle appeared to pit two factions within the larger Bielefeld community against one another: an older, more established German group against a recently arrived eastern European faction.

Yet the story gets more complicated. Following Michelsohn’s electoral defeat, the news emerged that she was not halakhically Jewish, having been born to a German Jewish father who had converted to Catholicism and later married a Catholic woman in Israel. This revelation, together with allegations that Michelsohn was guilty of various financial improprieties, prompted the emergence of further opposition against her from many of the Bielefeld’s community’s eastern European Jewish members. To a degree, Michelsohn’s weakened position as the Bielefeld Jewish community’s leader was an ironic by-product of her own history of immigration. Although her German Jewish heritage should have given her a privileged status in the Jewish community, the revelation of her partly Christian background placed her in the same position as many recent eastern European Jewish immigrants to Germany who have also had their backgrounds halakhically questioned. And yet, just as these transnational forces complicated Michelsohn’s personal life, they may have stimulated the synagogue project that remains her most important legacy. Although Michelsohn vigorously defended her Jewish identity in public, she was clearly discomfited by her mixed religious background and may have tried to symbolically transcend them by pursuing the synagogue transformation proj-
ect. Indeed, it is arguable that by leading the push to convert the Paul-Gerhardt-Kirche into the Beit Tikvah synagogue, Michelsohn strove to architecturally commemorate her own religious journey from Christianity to Judaism.

As is shown by the case of Beit Tikvah, synagogue architecture in Germany is intimately tied to issues of postwar German Jewish identity. Ever since the collapse of the Third Reich in 1945, Jews in Germany have faced major challenges constructing a cohesive sense of community. The Jewish population’s small size and heterogeneous composition made the process of postwar reconstruction a painstaking one. Scholars have extensively examined the social, economic, and political dimensions of this struggle, but they have focused less on its cultural aspects. One topic that has received comparatively little attention is synagogue architecture. Examining the architecture of postwar German synagogues, however, provides a unique perspective on postwar German Jewish life. As architectural historians have long argued, buildings both reflect and constitute a community’s identity. German synagogue architecture thus closely mirrors the evolution of German Jewish life in the postwar era. Needless to say, a wide range of challenges, struggles, and successes have defined postwar German Jewish life in this period. In an important sense, however, all of them have revolved around the larger task of coming to grips with the legacy of the Holocaust. This chapter examines how the postwar evolution of German Jewish synagogue architecture reflects shifting conceptions of German Jewish memory and identity since the Holocaust. It explores the extent to which the interplay between architecture and identity has been shaped by transnational forces. And it concludes that Jewish houses of worship ultimately can be seen as standing in an uneasy tension between memory and normalcy. Synagogues in postwar Germany express the Jewish community’s intention to reestablish normal lives for themselves in the present without entirely losing sight of the traumas of the past.

**Synagogue Architecture and Transnationalism**

The history of synagogue architecture in postwar Germany can be divided into three phases. The first lasted from 1945 until the mid-1970s and witnessed a flurry of synagogue construction for Germany’s scattered Jewish communities. Most of the synagogues of this period were designed according to modernist principles and displayed few allusions to the Holocaust. In the second phase, from the early 1980s until German unification in 1990, there occurred a postmodern turn in German synagogue architecture. During this period, far fewer
synagogues were constructed, but those that were displayed a greater sense of historical sensitivity and a willingness to confront the Nazi legacy. Finally, in the two decades since reunification, there has been a veritable synagogue building boom in Germany that has been typified both by stylistic diversity and competing approaches to wrestling with the legacy of the past.

Throughout these phases, the evolution of synagogue architecture has subtly reflected the influence of transnational forces. Some of these have been socioreligious in nature. Because most Jewish communities in Germany after 1945 were too small to support more than one synagogue—and because their populations were diverse, encompassing German Jews, eastern European Jews, and even Israeli immigrants (all of whom often followed different religious traditions)—synagogue designs had to be flexible enough to be welcoming to all. In the early decades of the postwar period, the need to accommodate diverse groups helped ensure that the designs of most synagogues were architecturally modest. Modern architecture served this goal perfectly. By abstaining from historical reference and privileging function over form, modern architecture was sufficiently neutral and anonymous to serve as a common stylistic denominator for groups that otherwise might not have agreed upon that much socially or religiously. Modernism was also able to provide Jews in Germany with at least one thing that they were able to agree upon—the desire for privacy. Regardless of whether the Jewish community’s members hailed from Germany, Poland, or Israel, they shared a common desire to avoid attention from outsiders. The self-effacing character of early postwar synagogues reflected this larger impulse.

In the last generation, however, this trend has begun to change due to a different set of transnational forces related to developments within the field of architecture. For centuries, the history of Western architecture has been an international affair, with design principles emerging in, and being shared between, different nations (the efforts of certain architects to claim national traits for their work notwithstanding). Modern architecture is a case in point, with the aptly named International Style being the result of a complicated process of cultural exchange between the United States and Europe between the 1890s and 1920s.\textsuperscript{12} To be sure, the influence of this architectural movement on early postwar synagogue design in Germany reflected the influence of universalistic, non-Jewish forces; yet a more Jewishly inflected movement subsequently brought its influence to bear on later synagogue design in Germany. With the emergence of the international movements of postmodernism and deconstructionism between the 1970s and 1990s, German synagogue architecture became more historically allusive and visually expressive. Both movements enabled
synagogue designs to confront the Holocaust’s legacy in new ways, but deconstructivism deserves particular mention. Since two of the movement’s leading figures, Peter Eisenman and Daniel Libeskind, arrived at their radical architectural theories by meditating on the legacy of the Holocaust, the influence of their work on recent German synagogue design can be seen as another example of transnational cultural exchange. In short, what appeared to be an American import to Germany— deconstructivism— was itself the by-product of a German export— the legacy of the Holocaust.

The Modernist Era

In the wake of the Holocaust, the size of the German Jewish community had shrunk to around twenty-five thousand and the demand for synagogue space was comparatively small. Roughly two dozen synagogues were built in the early postwar decades in major towns and cities. Most of these buildings displayed an ahistorical modernist sensibility in the sense that they were designed with an eye toward functional, formal, and liturgical concerns and abstained from any historical references. As German Jewish architect and current vice president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, Salomon Korn, has written, early postwar synagogues “showed no signs in their architecture of the historical context in which they were created—the period following the wave of synagogue destruction and genocide.” Korn has speculated that, in this period, the “memories and fears of the victims may have been too severe to find public expression in architectural form.” Especially as many Jews in Germany felt the “shame” of survival, the imperatives of “self-protection” led them to embrace an “architecture of . . . neutrality and silence instead of [an architecture of] . . . admonition.” For the most part, Korn is correct, yet it would be a mistake to see Jews in Germany as entirely advocating amnesia in early postwar synagogue design. Even in the ahistorical modernist buildings of this period, there were subtle signs of remembrance.

To be sure, most synagogues were defined by modernist anonymity. While prewar Jewish houses of worship had been grandiose and assertive, postwar synagogues projected modesty and inconspicuousness. In the city of Offenbach, for example, one of Germany’s most prominent early postwar synagogue architects, Hermann Zvi Guttmann, designed a synagogue (1955–56) that differed substantially from its prominent early twentieth-century predecessor on the Goethestrasse by being located in a tree-lined garden behind an attached Jewish community center. Similarly, Helmut Goldschmidt’s synagogue
in Münster (1960) abandoned its nineteenth-century Moorish predecessor’s welcoming street-front entrance in favor of a blank wall and a more forbidding entryway that reached the sanctuary only via a winding series of foyers. Finally, some Jewish houses of worship, such as Franz May and Karl Heinz Wrangel’s Hamburg synagogue (1960), had next to no identifying Jewish traits at all. None of these synagogues alluded to the recent Nazi experience in any way, preferring instead to focus on formal experimentation. This ahistorical impulse was typical of the modernist movement, of course, and was an international trend that affected nations throughout the Western world during this period. It is notable, for example, that the parabolic forms that defined many of Guttmann’s synagogues, such as the one in Hannover (1963), exhibited the same curvilinear features of the Nierentisch aesthetic that marked everything from living room tables to McDonald’s iconic arches in the 1950s. The anonymity of German synagogues, in other words, was hardly a specifically German phenomenon but was symptomatic of the era.

That said, allusions to the Nazi experience were not entirely absent in early postwar synagogues. Guttmann’s work represents a notable exception in the way that it subtly explored aspects of the Nazi era that others ignored. In his posthumously published autobiography, Guttmann explained that his embrace of parabolic forms was part of a symbolic effort to counteract the architectural belief in “limitlessness” that had historically led to the “Tower of Babel.” (A parabola resists the urge to verticality by rising upward only to descend gently to the ground.) There is suggestive evidence that Guttmann’s biblically colored remark was meant to refer allegorically to the architecture of the Nazi regime, whose pomposity could be countered by the parabola’s modesty. It is notable that Guttmann redemptively described the parabolic shapes of his Jewish cemetery hall in Hannover (1958–60) as “the gate to the afterlife,” a concept that he said Jews had to believe in, for “how could Jews not believe in the afterlife after all that happened?”

Even more significant is the fact that Guttmann also used parabolic forms in his design for the Jewish memorial chapel on the grounds of the Dachau concentration camp outside Munich. Built in 1964–67, the chapel is a stone-clad structure, half buried in the ground, that features a parabolic roof, topped with a white marble menorah. It was one of the first buildings after 1945 to incorporate concentration camp iconography into its very form, most notably in twin black metal railings and a large iron gate that was crafted to resemble barbed wire. Guttmann said that his building was meant “to commemorate the horrible era of . . . persecution.” At the same time, however, he also wanted it to remind “survivors not to lose hope.” Guttmann communicated this re-
Fig. 12.2. Hermann Zvi Guttmann, Synagogue, Offenbach, 1955–56. The synagogue, which is set back from the street behind the attached community center, reflected the postwar German Jewish community’s desire for privacy. (Photo courtesy of Alfred Jacoby.)

Fig. 12.3. Helmut Goldschmidt, Synagogue, Münster, 1960. (Photo courtesy of Rüdiger Wölk at Creative Commons.)
demptive message with the stone menorah that rose through the chapel’s roof. Crafted of marble quarried from the northern Israeli town of Peki’in—where Jews have lived without interruption since the time of the Second Temple—the menorah was intended by Guttmann to “symbolize the continuity of Judaism” despite the ravages of history.  

Not all Jewish religious architecture was so affirmative in addressing the Holocaust, however. This is shown by a final example: the Jüdisches Gemeindehaus, or Jewish Community Center, in Berlin. Designed from 1957 to 1959 by the Bochum-based architectural firm of Dieter Knoblauch and Heinz Heise, the Jewish Community Center was a largely nondescript, modernist building built of glass and steel. It displayed one unusual feature, however: remnants from the prewar Fasanenstrasse synagogue, which were salvaged after 1945 from the Nazi-ransacked, and later war-damaged, edifice and incorporated into the new Jewish Community Center’s façade. Proposed by Berlin Jewish com-

Fig. 12.4: Hermann Zvi Guttmann, Jewish memorial chapel, Dachau concentration camp 1964–67. The parabolic chapel was one of the first postwar buildings to make use of Holocaust iconography, seen most clearly in the allusion to barbed wire in its wrought iron railings. (Photo courtesy of Gavriel Rosenfeld.)
munity leaders, the inclusion of the front dome and a separate *Mahnsäule* (admonitory column) was meant to remind the German people of “[the] great guilt of the past.” As the *Festschrift* for the community center from 1959 declared:

Everyone who passes by this house should gaze upon the warning column. Jews [should do so], in the awareness that the past obligates [them] to be wary of the future. . . .

Non-Jews should remain . . . constantly aware of the guilt of the past, since what has happened cannot be . . . undone through reparations.

This was a powerful message on behalf of remembrance. It was reinforced architecturally, moreover, by the presence of the ruined Kaiser-Wilhelm Memorial Church around the corner on the Kurfürstendamm, just as it received institutional support from one of the most prominent Jewish supporters of admonitory remembrance in postwar Germany, the head of the Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland and of the Berlin Jewish community, Heinz Galinksy. In the end, though, the Berlin Jewish Community Center was exceptional. For the first several decades of the postwar period, most German synagogues preferred anonymity and silence to public admonition.

**The Postmodern Era**

With the rise of postmodernism in the 1980s, however, German synagogue architecture underwent an important transformation. Now that architects throughout the West were returning to history as a nurturing tradition, it was merely a matter of time before architects in Germany began to demand a more direct architectural confrontation with the Nazi legacy. Salomon Korn was the chief representative of this trend, declaring in 1988 that the “time has . . . come for synagogue architecture to shift from a stance of reticence towards a painful, but necessary, one of remembrance.” Korn strove to implement his recommendations in his own architectural work, most notably in his Jewish Community Center of Frankfurt (1980–86). In designing it, Korn made the “historical cracks, fissures, and fractures of German-Jewish history the point of departure.” Believing that “architectural metaphors” could “symbolize the past’s effect on [the] . . . present,” Korn integrated an oversized version of the ten commandments into the building’s entrance, including numerous cracks on its surface as “a warning of the fragility of German-Jewish relations over the course of . . . history.” Korn stressed this point by placing a cornerstone listing
Fig. 12.5. Dieter Knoblauch and Heinz Heise, Jewish Community Center, Berlin, 1957–59. The architects incorporated portions of the demolished Fasanenstrasse synagogue in their building. The most prominent element was a stone portico at the building’s entrance. (Photo courtesy of Gavriel Rosenfeld.)
names of the 10,000 Frankfurt Jews deported by the Nazis beneath the tablet. Yet he did not want his building to be merely an architectural admonition. He also strove to lend the building a more optimistic dimension by including three stylized menorahs in its facade as a “symbol of hope.”24

Korn’s belief that synagogue architecture needed to contend with the past reflected the increasing attention to the Third Reich’s legacy in the late 1980s—
especially the fortieth anniversary of Kristallnacht, the most pivotal event in twentieth-century Jewish architectural history. Few synagogues had a chance to confront the Nazi legacy during this period, however. Indeed, there was only one other major synagogue built in Germany during the 1980s and it represented a different kind of postmodern return to history. In 1988, German Jewish architect Alfred Jacoby’s design for the new synagogue of Darmstadt was dedicated. Boasting a series of high-tech domes and references to the Moorish revival of the nineteenth century, the synagogue’s use of postmodern historical references was far more nostalgic than Korn’s in Frankfurt. In embracing this strategy, Jacoby intended to move beyond the limitations of early postwar modernist synagogues, which he said were symbols of “insecurity” that failed to engage with their surroundings. Instead, he self-confidently aimed to design a building that would clearly be “legible as a synagogue.” Significantly, this goal reflected Jacoby’s desire to break free of the inhibitions rooted in the Nazi experience. Declaring “we must confidently display our Jewish identity,” the architect asserted that “a synagogue should not be an architectural memorial to the Holocaust.”

Not surprisingly, Jacoby’s neohistoricist design did not go over well with Korn, who criticized it for having “glossed over [the] . . . scars left . . . by the . . . destruction of Jewish architectural culture in Germany.” Yet the synagogue satisfied German political leaders’ desire to move beyond the past and foster the future-oriented goal of German-Jewish reconciliation. In the end, Korn’s desire for German synagogues to confront the Holocaust’s legacy seemed destined to remain unrealized. As he lamented in 1988,

it appears as though [the impulse to acknowledge the Holocaust] . . . has come too late! Most Jewish communities in the Federal Republic are too small and old to survive into the next several decades. Today, the construction of synagogues and community centers is largely complete. . . . While [some] . . . will certainly be built here and there, synagogues as a category of architecture have no meaningful future . . . in Germany.

Synagogues since Reunification

As things turned out, Korn’s prediction was the opposite of prophetic, for a short few years later the end of the Cold War utterly transformed Jewish life in Germany by bringing about the influx of nearly two hundred thousand eastern European Jews. This development had immediate repercussions for the development of Jewish architecture in Germany, for by dramatically increasing the
size of the Jewish community it forced congregations to expand their buildings or construct new ones. Between 1989 and 2009, plans for about thirty synagogues were considered and, at present, about twenty have been constructed. These buildings have been defined by two competing trends. Unlike the early postwar era, when Jewish houses of worship were defined by privacy, modesty, and anonymity, those built since 1990 have been far more conspicuous and have radiated a sense of normalcy. At the same time, they have also dealt more directly with the memory of the Holocaust.

The first trend has been amply displayed in the work of the most prolific designer of recent synagogues, Alfred Jacoby. Since completing his synagogue in Darmstadt, Jacoby has designed nearly a dozen Jewish houses of worship, completing seven. In sharp contrast to Korn, who called for a symbolically allusive form of German synagogue architecture that could lay bare the scars of the recent past, Jacoby has employed a more restrained modernism in the effort...
to heal them. Opposed to making “Holocaust memorial[s]” out of his synagogues, he has said, “It is more important to have a vision of the future” and design synagogues in “a New Spirit,” as the title of an exhibition of his work proclaimed in the late 1990s. Although Jacoby conceded that the “destruction . . . imposed on the Jews . . . during the Nazi period” could not be “undone through any healing process,” he emphasized the need to design for “the survivors and those born after the war who needed a . . . future orientation.” Quoting historian Fritz Stern’s assertion that reunification in 1990 gave Germany a “second chance” to do right by history, Jacoby declared: “the new synagogues are stone vessels, within which a second chance for Jews and non-Jews to co-exist in this country might be able to germinate.”

The best way to promote this goal, according to Jacoby, was to design synagogues that integrated themselves into the German urban environment while self-confidently asserting themselves as Jewish religious structures. A good example is his Aachen synagogue (1991–95), which uses yellow brick in a nod to regional building traditions, while also resembling Jerusalem stone. Similarly, the synagogue’s flat dome and overt Hebrew lettering on the façade makes its Jewish identity unmistakable, while at the same time the wide expanse of glass in its façade allows views of the activities inside the building and suggests openness and ecumenicism. The same is true of his synagogue in Heidelberg (1994), whose assertive cylindrical forms and overt use of Hebrew in its façade suggests a new level of Jewish self-confidence within the postwar German cityscape.

If Alfred Jacoby’s work represented the effort to strive for normalcy by moving beyond the past, other synagogues reflected the desire to hold its lessons in memory. In recent years, several synagogues have been influenced by the important architectural movement of deconstructivism. Established in the late 1980s, the movement traces its origins partly to the theoretical writings of Peter Eisenman and Daniel Libeskind. Beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Eisenman and Libeskind began to argue that Western architecture was at a dead end; modernism was exhausted and postmodernism was hopelessly derivative. They further believed that the two movements were guilty of aesthetically glossing over, and distracting attention away from, the era’s many problems, whether economic recession or the threat of nuclear war.

The two architects’ most symbolically significant reason for rejecting modernism and postmodernism, however, was their conviction that they were inappropriate for the post-Holocaust world. Declaring that both movements were rooted in classical principles of order, stability, and harmony, Eisenman and Libeskind cited the Holocaust’s legacy in calling for a new architecture of
dislocation, fragmentation, and loss. As Eisenman put it in 1982, “since the Holocaust and with the increasing potential for nuclear disaster, we live in a world of what I call memory and imminence—of what was before and what could potentially be. . . . It seems to me that architecture could reflect this condition symbolically.” To be sure, Eisenman and Libeskind had multiple motives in pursuing their radical architectural agendas. But the fact that they explicitly invoked the Nazi genocide’s legacy partly reflected the transnational forces that shaped postwar Jewish life. Although they hailed from different backgrounds (Eisenman was born in the United States in 1929, while Libeskind was born in Poland in 1946 and later moved to America after a time in Israel), both architects shared childhood encounters with antisemitism that made them feel like outsiders and encouraged them to develop a rebellious streak in their architectural thinking. Their experiences further led them to be receptive to another important international phenomenon, the upsurge in Holocaust consciousness (epitomized by the broadcast of the NBC docudrama Holocaust and the chartering of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Fig. 12.8. Alfred Jacoby, Synagogue, Aachen, 1991–95. The synagogue strives to establish a sense of normalcy for the Jewish community by blending into its site, using local materials, and communicating a sense of openness with its glass façade. (Photo courtesy of Alfred Jacoby.)
in 1978), which increasingly defined Jewish identity throughout the Western world after the late 1970s. It was perhaps predictable, therefore, that both architects eventually looked to the Holocaust as providing justification for their radical architectural work. In short, deconstructivism was, at least in part, shaped by American Jewish architects meditating on the tragedy of the German Jewish experience.

In the years that followed, Eisenman and Libeskind produced a variety of pathbreaking buildings that visually expressed their deeper historical vision. Among the most important were Eisenman’s Wexner Center for the Visual Arts in Columbus, Ohio (1983–88), and Libeskind’s Berlin Jewish Museum (1989–2001). These works were defined by a variety of traits that came to be seen as hallmarks of deconstructivism: the use of twisted, tilted, and scarred volumes; an archaeological interest in the history of site; and an eagerness to fuse new and old architectural forms in a state of dialectical tension. To be sure, the antitraditional impulse underlying deconstructivism was meant to symbolize more than just the disorientation of the post-Holocaust world. Yet the Nazi genocide’s legacy was certainly among the more important philosophical and historical forces that shaped the deconstructivist movement as it entered the architectural mainstream and began to influence buildings worldwide.

In Germany, deconstructivism shaped the design of several new synagogues after the turn of the millennium. One of the most important was the new synagogue of Mainz. Designed by the German Jewish architect Manuel Herz and completed in 2010, the synagogue betrayed deconstructivist influences not only in its architect’s background (Herz worked for Libeskind in the 1990s) but in its dramatic external appearance. Subtly borrowing from Libeskind’s practice of basing the design of Jewish buildings on Hebrew letters—seen most dramatically in his Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco (2009), which was based on the Hebrew word “chai”—Herz based his Mainz design upon the Hebrew word “kedusha.” Loosely translated as “holiness,” the word inspired the irregular shape of Herz’s synagogue. Herz took the Hebrew word as it appeared on the written page and traced an irregular line above its individual letters, arriving at a jagged segment that formed the contours of the building’s sawtooth exterior form.32 Herz saw the synagogue project as part of a positive effort to create a “Jewish conception of space” and affirm the Jewish community’s postwar revival. Yet he did not pursue these goals without keeping an eye on the past. Paying attention to the history of the site, Herz made a pointed effort to preserve in his design the surviving architectural remnants—four fluted columns from the entry portico—of Mainz’s original neobaroque synagogue (1912) that was destroyed on Kristallnacht. This ensured that the
ensemble would function like the Jewish community center on the Fasanenstrasse in Berlin—as a gesture of faith in the future and an admonition about the past. In declaring his hope that the synagogue would “elicit attention, raise questions, . . . and [even stimulate] . . . annoyance,” Herz shared Jacoby’s belief that synagogues in the new Germany should no longer be inconspicuous, but highly visible structures.  

A second synagogue that displayed the postmodern era’s new sensitivity to Germany’s fraught history was the new synagogue and community center complex of Dresden (1997–2001). Designed by the Saarbrücken firm of Wandel Hoefer Lorch + Hirsch (WHLH), the building was influenced by the Holocaust’s legacy in several ways. As was true of new synagogues in other German cities, Dresden’s was built on the site of its destroyed predecessor, the famous nineteenth-century synagogue designed by Gottfried Semper, which was destroyed on Kristallnacht. The architects illustrated this historical rupture by orienting their plan to the vanished synagogue. The design comprised two structures: a synagogue and a separate community center separated by a small empty plaza, where the original nineteenth-century synagogue once stood. The new synagogue was a minimalist cube made of concrete blocks that—in a de-
Fig. 12.10. Manuel Herz, Synagogue and Jewish Community Center, Mainz, 1999–2010. The Hebrew word Kedusha (holiness) provided part of the inspiration for the building’s form. (Plan Manuel Herz.)

Fig. 12.11. Manuel Herz, Synagogue and Jewish Community Center, Mainz, 1999–2010. The tall angular structure at right is the synagogue sanctuary. Its form derives from the letter “Kuf” in Kedusha and alludes to a shofar. The stone columns at left are remnants of the prewar synagogue. (Photo by Manuel Herz.)
constructivist gesture borrowed from Eisenman—twisted noticeably several degrees so that it appeared unbalanced. This feature resulted from the architects’ decision to situate the synagogue’s plan perpendicular to the street, but then to torque it from above by some fifteen degrees in order to make it parallel with the floor plan of the vanished Semper synagogue. Between the synagogue and the community center across the plaza, the architects traced the outlines of Semper’s synagogue in glass shards, evoking the destruction of Kristallnacht. They also included fragments of the original synagogue, inserting stones salvaged from its excavated foundation into the retaining wall around the complex and reusing the original Star of David from the synagogue’s roof over the entrance to the new sanctuary.

In explicitly evoking the past, the building was more strident than Jacoby’s more accommodating synagogues. Its modern form refused to adapt to the city’s baroque skyline, its location atop a walled-off enclosure removed it from the street, and its windowless façade lent it the appearance of a fortress—a fact that more than a few annoyed Dresden residents complained about in the local press. The building’s assertiveness reflected the commitment of Christian German architects to admonish German society not to forget the lessons of the
Nazi era. The firm’s principals have long been involved in commemorative projects related to the Holocaust and decided to make the building assertive in order to alert Dresden’s citizenry to the Jewish community’s renewed presence in the city.\textsuperscript{36} They have recently done the same in Munich, whose new Ohel Jakob synagogue— especially its rough limestone façade— contrasts sharply with the medieval turreted forms of the adjoining Jakobsplatz and displays signs of a Jewish sensibility in its evocation of Solomon’s Temple.\textsuperscript{37}

Taken together, the Jewish houses of worship built over the last two decades in Germany have displayed unprecedented inventiveness and have redefined the genre of synagogue architecture. That they have done so is largely due to their architects’ refusal to ignore Germany’s dark past, in which they have found creative inspiration. While some, such as Alfred Jacoby, have tried to heal the wounds of the Holocaust by designing affirmatively Jewish buildings that fit harmoniously into the German built environment, others, such as Manuel Herz and the firm WHLH, have tried to highlight the Holocaust’s legacy by producing eye-catching buildings that provocatively draw attention to themselves. All of these innovative structures attest to the vibrancy of contemporary German Jewish culture.

**Conclusion**

Germany’s newest synagogues also highlight the influence of transnational forces. In the final analysis, synagogue architecture in postwar Germany has been shaped by social and cultural trends that have been decidedly international in scope. These include changing postwar immigration patterns and developments within the discipline of Western architecture. The most important was the migration of Jews from eastern Europe to Germany after 1945. Arriving in two waves—the early postwar wave of the 1940s and 1950s, drawing mostly Polish, Hungarian, and Romanian Jews, and the much larger wave of Soviet Jews since 1990— eastern European Jewish immigration to Germany was the indispensable precondition for the construction of new synagogues in the first place. The second important catalyst was the emergence of postmodernism and deconstructivism, both of which were instrumental in liberating architects to draw on history as a source of inspiration for their building designs. Finally, the concurrent rise of Holocaust consciousness throughout the Western world prompted some architects— particularly deconstructivists— to seek inspiration in the legacy of the Nazi genocide. All of these factors have
helped German synagogue architecture achieve new levels of expressiveness and sophistication.

Whether or not the creative tension generated by the simultaneous embrace of memory and normalcy will continue to shape German synagogue design in the future is unclear. While a few major projects (most notably Libeskind’s design for a new liberal synagogue in Munich) remain to be completed, the building boom of the last two decades can largely be viewed as finished. With this development, the considerable attention that has recently been devoted to German synagogue design will gradually fade. Assuming the German Jewish population remains stable in its current size, the synagogues that have recently been completed will eventually become familiar, well-integrated objects in their respective cityscapes. In short, they will become architectural embodiments of normalcy.

NOTES

1. Bielefeld’s population has grown from around thirty-five Jews in 1990 to over three hundred today.

2. The synagogue will soon lose this singular status, however, as similar plans are being pursued in Speyer and Hannover. Thomas Lackmann, “Die große Himmelsgasse,” Der Tagesspiegel, November 28, 2009, http://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik-geschichte/die-grosse-himmelsgasse/1640054.html.


5. The UPJ (Union progressiver Juden in Deutschland) was established in 1997 as a rival of the established Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland.


8. Michelsohn’s father was from Nuremberg and her mother was from Riga. Michelsohn was not legally Jewish when she joined the Jewish community in 1999. Moreover, Michelsohn married a Catholic man and brought up her three children in the Catholic Church before getting divorced and embracing Judaism. For details see: Samuel Alois Wasser, “Die Tore der Reue und der Umkehr stehen immer offen,” http://www.freie-juedische-meinung.de/ru/j-dische-gemeinden/bielefeld/112-ledie-tore-der-reue-und-der-umkehr-stehen-immer-offen.


13. Most of these synagogues were in West Germany. The only new synagogue erected in the history of the German Democratic Republic was in Erfurt (1953). Knufinke, “Neue Synagogen in Deutschland nach 1945,” 98–99. A new synagogue was established in Dresden in 1950, but it was a renovation of an older mortuary chapel.


15. Ibid., 307–8.


19. Ibid., 54.

20. Ibid., 61.


22. Ibid., 130.


24. Ibid., 307.
25. “Die Bürgerschaft gibt der Jüdischen Gemeinde eine Synagoge zurück: Einwei-
hung der Synagoge in Darmstadt, 9. November 1988: Ansprachen (Darmstadt: Magis-
27. Ibid., 308.
28. The figure of thirty is cited in “In welchem Stil sollen wir bauen?” Frankfurter
Allgemeine Zeitung, May 18, 1995. New synagogues were built in Aachen, Bad Kreuzn-
ach, Bamberg, Bielefeld, Bochum, Braunschweig, Chemnitz, Dresden, Duisburg,
Gelsenkirchen, Heidelberg, Kassel, Krefeld, Lörrach, Mainz, Munich, Offenbach,
topic/387.html. Existing synagogues were renovated in other cities, such as Magdeburg,
Floss (Bavaria), and Kitzingen (Bavaria). Currently, other synagogues are being planned
in Speyer and Potsdam.
29. Alfred Jacoby, “Synagogenbau in Deutschland nach 1945.” Synagogen in Kas-
sel, ed. Esther Haß, Alexander Link, and Karl-Hermann Wegner (Marburg: Jonas,
2000), 87.
30. For a more detailed discussion, see Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, Building after Aus-
chwitz: Jewish Architecture and the Memory of the Holocaust (New Haven, CT: Yale
32. The letter “shin,” for example, generated a sawtooth form, while the letter “kuf
contributed an upward-thrusting, sharply angled structure. See Manuel Herz, “Meor
34. For a discussion see Wandel, Hoefer, Lorch, and Hirsch, “Geschichte und Bau-
konzeption der Neuen Synagoge Dresden,” in Denkschrift zur Einweihung der Neuen
Synagoge und des Gemeindehauses zu Dresden am 9. November 2001, ed. Adolf Dia-
mant (Frankfurt: A. Diamant, 2003), 19.
35. Adolf Diamant, ed., Denkschrift zur Einweihung der Neuen Synagoge und des
36. They designed the cubic Börneplatz memorial in Frankfurt (1992–96), their
Track 17 memorial marking the deportation of Jews from the Grunewald train station in
Berlin (1998), and the memorial site at the Hinzert concentration and forced labor camp
near Trier in 2005.
37. For a discussion see Wolfgang Jean Stock, “Ein Haus der Begegnung: A House
of Meeting,” in Jüdisches Museum München / Jewish Museum Munich, ed. Jutta Fleck-
enstein and Bernhard Purin (Munich: Prestel, 2007), 79–89.