

The Judenplatz Museum in Wien

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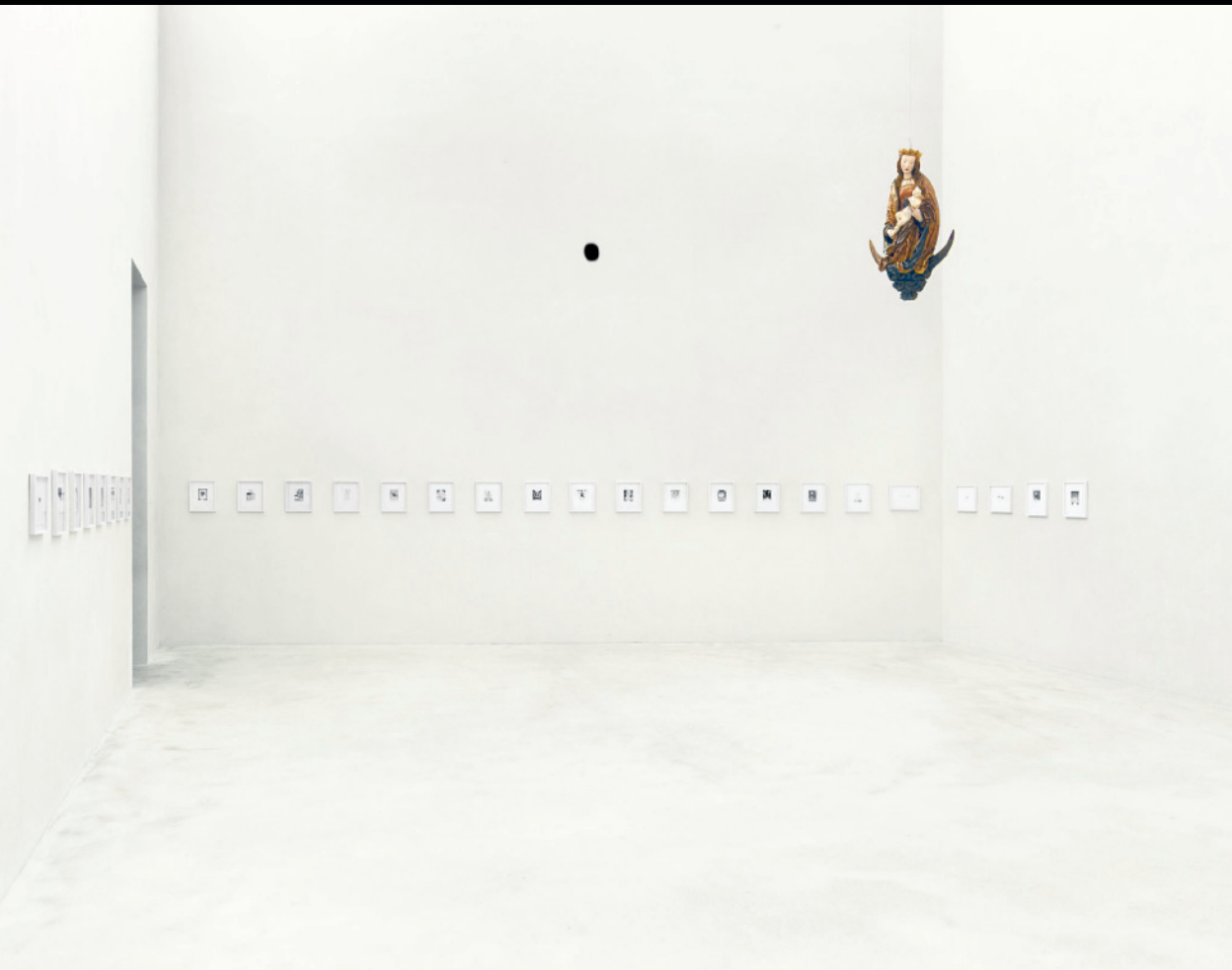
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(Article begins on next page)

RELIGION AND MUSEUMS

Immaterial and Material Heritage

EDITED BY
VALERIA MINUCCIANI



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On cover:

Kolumba. View of one of the rooms of the exhibition
“Art is Liturgy. Paul Thek and the Others” (2012-2013).
On the walls: “Without Title”, 28 etchings by Paul Thek,
1975-1992. Hanging from the ceiling: “Madonna on the Crescent”,
a Southern-German wooden sculpture of the early sixteenth century
(© Kolumba, Köln / photo Lothar Schnepf).

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The Judenplatz Museum in Wien

MARIA MADDALENA MARGARIA, Politecnico di Torino

In 1995, during excavations in Judenplatz in Vienna, emerged the remains of the medieval synagogue Or-Sarua destroyed in 1421 during what, by the press, has been dubbed the “Wiener Geserah”.

Since the fall of 1420 Duke Albert V began a persecution of the Jews that culminated dramatically in 1421 with the murder of hundreds of Jews and the decision of Rabbi Johan to comply with a collective suicide by setting fire to the synagogue in Or-Sarua full of Jews who died as martyrs.

Next to the discovery of the synagogue remains the project of construction of a monument in memory of Holocaust victims was brought forward, being located just in the same square, the center of the old Jewish ghetto.

The design of the monument and the discovery of archaeological remains have not been, however, a contemporary fact. In fact, the idea of creating a monument in memory of the Jews exterminated by the Nazis began in 1988 thanks to the work of Simon Wiesenthal. It was formed a committee and organized a competition for the construction of the building that was won by the British artist Rachel Whiteread.

The memorial was supposed to be ready by the end of 1996, but after much controversy and works for the archaeological excavations, the inauguration took place only in 2000 with the contemporary museum display of a medieval synagogue by the architectural firm Jabornegg & Pálffy.¹

The result of these two works is a real place of remembrance highly symbolic and didactic. A few times, in my opinion, an artist and an architect have been able to develop a language so poetic and harmonious.

The Misrachi-Haus is the only access to the Museum and the excavations, and the building of the Holocaust monument, although built in the square just above the excavations, play exclusively the function of the monument. These complete complex gives rise to a great emotional impact, which led to some controversy.

In an interview with BBC radio Rachel Whiteread about the Holocaust memorial in Vienna says:²

The Holocaust Memorial is a concrete sculpture made from case books. So it's sort of like a library but it's kind of inside out not really, it, it has a kind of double reading to it. It has two doors on the front. It has a ceiling rose in the roof which acts as drainage, and it has this concrete plinth

around it with an inscription and names of all of the concentration camps in which people died in Austria. It was an idea that I, I'd lived in Berlin for a long time. When I lived there I thought a lot about what had happened during the War, and I think that if I hadn't had that experience I wouldn't have even approached or begun to approach such a subject. And when I was asked to put in a proposal, which I did, and I hadn't a clue that I would get it. I really didn't think that I would get it because it was against all sorts of other people that were much more experienced than I was, and it was a piece that was to be in a square called Judenplatz which is a, a sort of quite domestic scale square, and it was as if one of the rooms from the surrounding buildings had been taken and put in the centre of the square, and all of the books were completely blank. You had no idea what was supposedly in them, and the pages were facing outwards so you couldn't read the spines of the books, so that was essentially the idea, a sort of blank library. There's all sorts of interpretations...

And she adds

Exactly and various other things which I obviously thought about when I was making the piece or thinking about making the piece, but it's also quite like a bunker and it was something that I thought about and something that I was accused of. I remember at the jury when I went and stood in this very terrifying room and I said what do you mean it's like a bunker? I, I've no idea what you're talking about, and acted completely innocently, but it was something that I really felt quite strongly about. And I'd been to see a lot of the bunkers around the Atlantic wall and I didn't want to give the city of Vienna a beautiful object. I wanted to give them something that they had to think about and that wasn't ugly but that had a presence and quite a severe presence in the city, which I've done very successfully I'd say in terms of, you know, how people have to look at it and it's not an easy thing to look at and I would hope it makes people quite uncomfortable, but it's also quite poetic. You know it has all sorts of different ways and layerings to reading it. You know I'm finally very proud of it, but it took an awful lot of doing and you know it wasn't a pleasant thing to go through...

The idea of an artefact not ugly, but not beautiful, in the common sense, to shake out some of the minds of passers-by is, in my opinion, the winning idea of this project. Beyond the symbolic value of the books that also recalls the famous Kristallnacht, the most important aspect lies in being able to shake the mind of the passer-by who seeing the monument feels a sense of inadequacy and a need for exploration.

It is therefore shareable the choice of a symbolic use of architecture declined, for once more to its meaning to the function.

On the other hand also the exhibit choice of archaeological part has no less impact.

The museum Judenplatz, small and austere, is run by the Jewish Museum of Vienna and is totally focused on the medieval period and the "Wiener Geserah".

The concept of the bunker, which was attributed to the monument of Rachel Whiteread is taken by architects Jabornegg & Pálff. Both, apparently, having to tell the story of a living and painful past, have chosen the emphasis of the non place where time and place lost their connotations, leaving space for memory.



Fig. 1. Museum Judenplatz, view of the exhibition rooms (photo Maria Maddalena Margaria).

I do not mean this in the sense of non-place defined by Augé, but spaces without an actual geographical and temporal connotation, aseptic, where is the memory to speak. A sort of mortuary of the past. The museum, in fact, opts for a very minimalist style, but also very refined in its details enhanced by a choice of cold materials: concrete and steel (fig. 1).

Once you have crossed the doorway of the baroque palace that houses the museum you are catapulted into another place. The hall anticipates in all the sense of the museum. Cold, with no frills with a single

touch of warmth in the wooden counter. But here we are still in a limbo of life.

The ground floor houses the lobby and the rooms dedicated to the temporary exhibitions. During my visit in December 2012 it was taking place a photo exhibition on the daily life of Austrian Jews nowadays.

From the hall you go down to the lower floor permanent exhibition space and access to the synagogue. Each room has a deep sense of initiation starting from the stair: a bare structure in concrete, glass and steel, very symbolic in its apparent simplicity.

When you are at the underground level you feel the sensation of entering into a bunker with thick steel doors that mark the gap with the present and with life. The rooms follow one after the other without a specific order, telling the story of the synagogue of the past and of his faithful. All is silent, a deathly silence exacerbated from windows made of glass supported by light steel legs. In this context the multimedia reconstruction, al-

though very interesting, is out of tune with the environment and breaks the reverential silence. Perhaps it would be more suitable as a deepening on the upstairs floor. A long corridor, further marked by two steel portals, and a staircase, leading to the excavation room.

The walls of the excavation room are covered with galvanized brass, the floor is formed by a metal grid in which are inserted 60,000 blocks of clay, which absorb the light and attenuate it. In the room there are no “multimedia-games” or details, ex-



Fig. 2. Museum Judenplatz, excavation room (photo Maria Maddalena Margaria).

cept for some writing on the wall and here the remains of the synagogue talk. We are at the climax of the visit, we were prepared to silence and reflection. We are in one of the rare cases in which archaeology has been allowed to speak (fig. 2).

The whole complex, memorial and museum, is therefore a real interpretive center which do not just want to show and present, but ask to reflect and reason. The memorial is a library that can not be accessed, so it's books cannot be read and their story is lost because unknown. The short engravings on the basement are symbolic;³ remnants of the past who live of their silence, see what they were and find out what they are... The museum complex Judenplatz is, in my opinion, one of the best examples of the representation of the past in a symbolic way.

¹ Detail 2/2001.

² http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/whitread_transcript.shtml consulted in December 2012.

³ On the based of the memorial are engraved text, on the concrete floor a text in German, Hebrew and English, indicating the crime of the Holocaust and the estimated number of Austrian victims: Zum Gedenken an die mehr als 65.000 österreichischen / Juden, die in der Zeit von 1938 bis 1945 von den / Nationalsozialisten ermordet wurden // וחצרוש/םיירטסוא סידוהי מ-65.000 מ-הלעמל רבו // ש"מי מייטסילאיצוסלנויצנה סיעשופה י"ע. / 1945-1938 // In commemoration of more than 65,000 Austrian Jews / who were killed by the Nazis between / 1938 and 1945.

The second writing shows the name of the places where Jews were exterminated: Auschwitz, Bełże, Bergen-Belsen, Brčko, Buchenwald, Chełmno, Dachau, Flossenbürg, GroßRosen, Gurs, Hartheim, Izbica, Jasenovac, Jungfernhof, Kaiserwald, Kielce, Kowno, Łagów, Litzmannstadt, Lublin, Majdanek, Maly Trostinec, Mauthausen, Minsk, Mittelbau/Dora, Modliborzyce, Natzweiler, Neuengamme, Nisko, Opatów, Opole, Ravensbrück, Rejowiec, Riga, Šabac, Sachsenhausen, Salaspils, San Sabba, Sobibor, Stutthof, Theresienstadt, Trawniki, Treblinka, Włodawa, and Zamość.

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