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The Kolumba Museum: a living dialogue rather than a static monument

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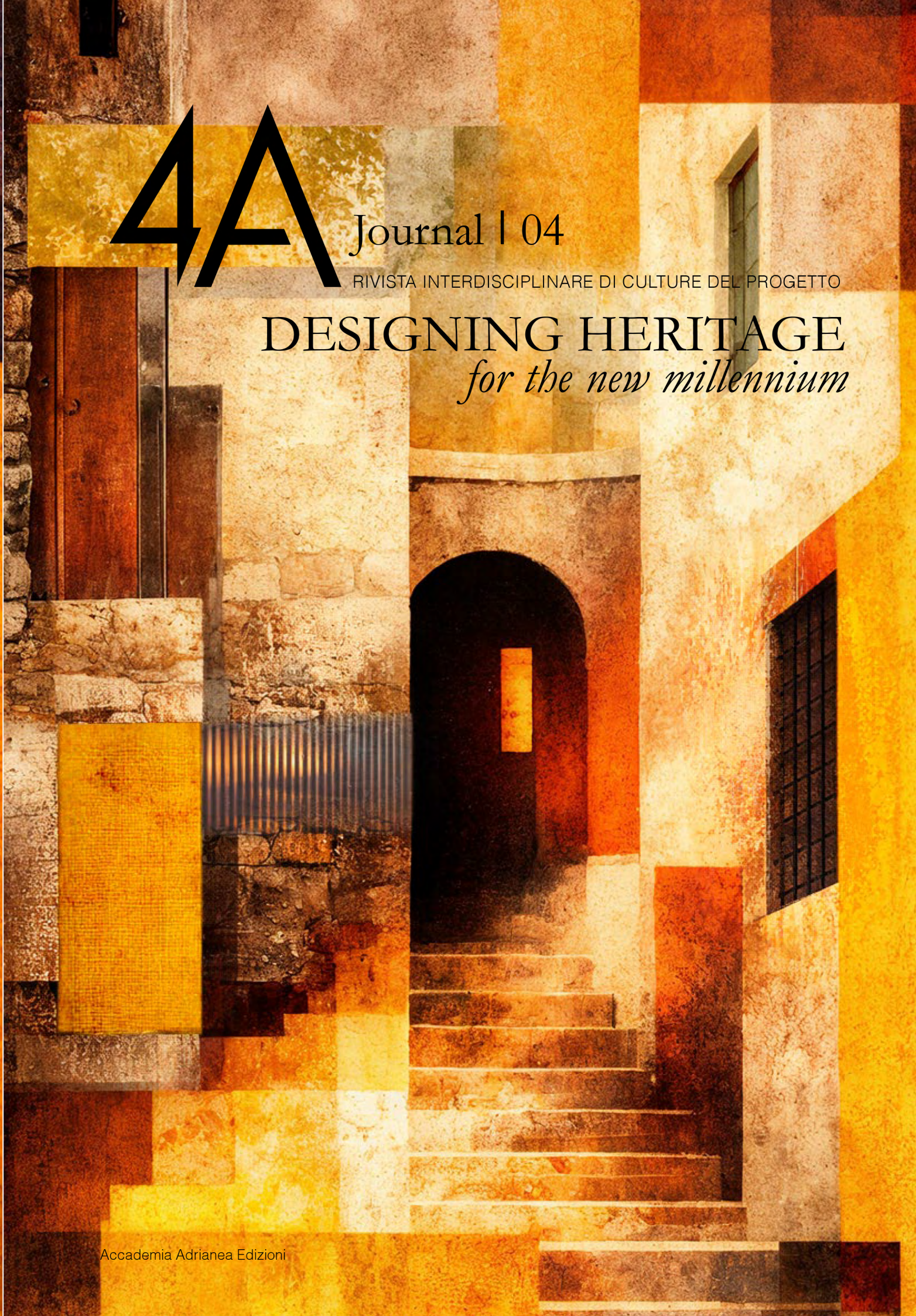
RIVISTA INTERDISCIPLINARE DI CULTURE DEL PROGETTO

DESIGNING HERITAGE

for the new millennium



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ARCHITECTURE AS A MEDIATOR BETWEEN MEMORY, MATERIALITY, AND BECOMING.

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Francesco Leoni

CONSERVATIONE CRITICA, ATMOSFERA, NARRATIVA SPAZIALE, PERCEZIONE FISICA

Nel secondo dopoguerra, la ricostruzione architettonica in Europa seguì in larga misura due direttrici divergenti: da un lato, il meticoloso restauro dei monumenti perduti, spesso mosso dal desiderio di una restituzione storica ma culminante in un'autenticità discutibile; dall'altro, la radicale rottura modernista, che affermava il rinnovamento attraverso una disgiunzione formale e ideologica. Kolumba, tuttavia, si discosta consapevolmente da entrambe le traiettorie, allontanandosi dalla concezione convenzionale di conservazione del patrimonio e evitando di isolare e musealizzare ciascun livello storico in un processo che mira invece a rendere percepibili le differenti stratificazioni.

Consentendo alla storia di manifestarsi attraverso l'atmosfera, la materia e la luce, il progetto incoraggia una modalità di memoria immaginativa ed empatica, nella quale i visitatori sono invitati non soltanto a osservare il passato, ma a dimorare entro le sue tracce.

In quanto costrutto ibrido di riuso adattivo, Kolumba ridefinisce la relazione tra la rovina e il nuovo, suggerendo che il patrimonio architettonico acquisisce vitalità non attraverso una conservazione immutabile, bensì mediante una trasformazione critica e una reinscrizione del senso. Tale approccio riecheggia nelle le teorie contemporanee della conservazione critica, secondo cui la preservazione è intesa come un processo dialogico, una negoziazione tra strati temporali, presenza materiale e significato culturale. Attraverso questa metodologia, l'architettura di Zumthor trascende la retorica del restauro, proponendo invece una continuità estetica ed esistenziale che consente al passato di persistere come esperienza vissuta e reinterpretata nel presente contemporaneo.

CRITICAL CONSERVATION, ATMOSPHERE, SPATIAL NARRATIVE, EMBODIED PERCEPTION

In the aftermath of World War II, architectural reconstruction in Europe largely followed two divergent paths: on one hand, the meticulous restoration of lost monuments, often driven by a desire for historical restitution but resulting in questionable authenticity; on the other, the radical modernist rupture, which asserted renewal through formal and ideological disjunction. Kolumba, however, consciously departs from both trajectories diverging from the conventional notion of heritage conservation and avoiding to isolate and musealize each historical layer in a process that aims to make the different strata appreciable.

By allowing history to manifest through atmosphere, texture, and light, the project encourages an imaginative and empathetic mode of remembrance, in which visitors are invited not merely to observe the past but to dwell within its traces.

As a hybrid construct of adaptive reuse, Kolumba redefines the relationship between the ruin and the new, suggesting that architectural heritage attains vitality not through immutable conservation but through critical transformation and re-inscription. This approach resonates with contemporary theories of critical conservation, in which preservation is understood as a dialogical process, a negotiation between temporal strata, material presence, and cultural meaning. Through this methodology, Zumthor's architecture transcends the rhetoric of restoration, proposing instead an aesthetic and existential continuity that allows the past to persist as a lived and reinterpreted experience within the contemporary moment.

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ARCHITECTURE AS A MEDIATOR BETWEEN MEMORY, MATERIALITY, AND BECOMING.

The Kolumba Museum: a living dialogue rather than a static monument.

Francesco Leoni

Designing a religious museum for a Christian Archdiocese inherently requires a particularly sensitive, abstract and sacred approach.

If, moreover, the project is set within an architectural and urban palimpsest marked by a particularly rich and complex stratification, in the fabric of a city with a strong historical and cultural identity, the delicacy of the intervention becomes paramount. The liturgical and religious requirements intertwine with museographic and urban considerations, further contributing to the enrichment of an already particularly layered stratification.

Originally mentioned around 980 AD and initially conceived as a modest single-nave Romanesque structure, subordinate to the Domkirche, St. Kolumba emerged as a significant medieval parish church. It had been reconstructed as a three-aisled church in the 12th Century, and later, in the 15th century, further enlarged into a five-nave late Gothic hall church. The interior underwent Baroque redecoration in the 17th century, followed by restorative interventions during the 19th century.

Founded in 1853 by the Society for Christian Art, the Kolumba Art Museum embodies these characteristics in a particularly pronounced manner. Serving as the principal museum of the Archdiocese of Cologne, its central aim is to provide an integrated exploration of two millennia of Western cultural history within a single architectural continuum, encompassing a rich spectrum of religious artworks spanning from the first century to the present day.

Although its name explicitly references the former Church of St. Kolumba, the vestiges of which constitute the physical and symbolic foundation of the current structure, the museum extends far beyond mere commemoration. Kolumba positions itself as a spatial and temporal palimpsest, an interpretive construct that reveals and rearticulates the successive historical layers accumulated over centuries within this fragment of Cologne. In doing so, it underscores the site's profound continuity of meaning and enduring presence within the city's urban and cultural stratification, transforming it into a living archive of collective memory and faith.

It, infact, integrates the remnants of the Gothic St. Kolumba church, Gottfried Böhm's post-war chapel *Madonna in den Trümmern* and significant archaeological findings, all unified within a coherent and modern architectural framework.

In the aftermath of World War II, architectural reconstruction in Europe largely followed two divergent paths: on one hand, the meticulous restoration of lost monuments, often driven by a desire for historical restitution but resulting in questionable authenticity; on the other, the radical modernist rupture, which asserted renewal through formal and ideological disjunction. Kolumba, however, consciously departs from both trajectories diverging from the conventional notion of heritage conservation and avoiding to isolate and musealize each historical layer in a process that aims to make the different strata appreciable. Instead, a synchronic approach is embraced, one that seeks to integrate the various levels sedimented by history and time, establishing a continuous dialogue between historical thresholds and the contemporary intervention. In doing so, it enriches and enhances a site that might otherwise risk becoming a sterile and didactic still life.

Rather than attempting to reconstruct the former Gothic church, Zumthor's design elects to preserve its ruins as a living site of memory, allowing them to speak through absence and material trace.

This choice marks a critical shift from the restorative logic of imitation or replacement to what might be called a hermeneutic mode of reconstruction. It recognizes the fragment as testimony and the ruin as a locus of temporal dialogue. In doing so, Kolumba aligns with a broader cultural movement toward critical conservation, wherein the past is neither erased nor nostalgically idealized, but interpreted and integrated into the continuum of the present.

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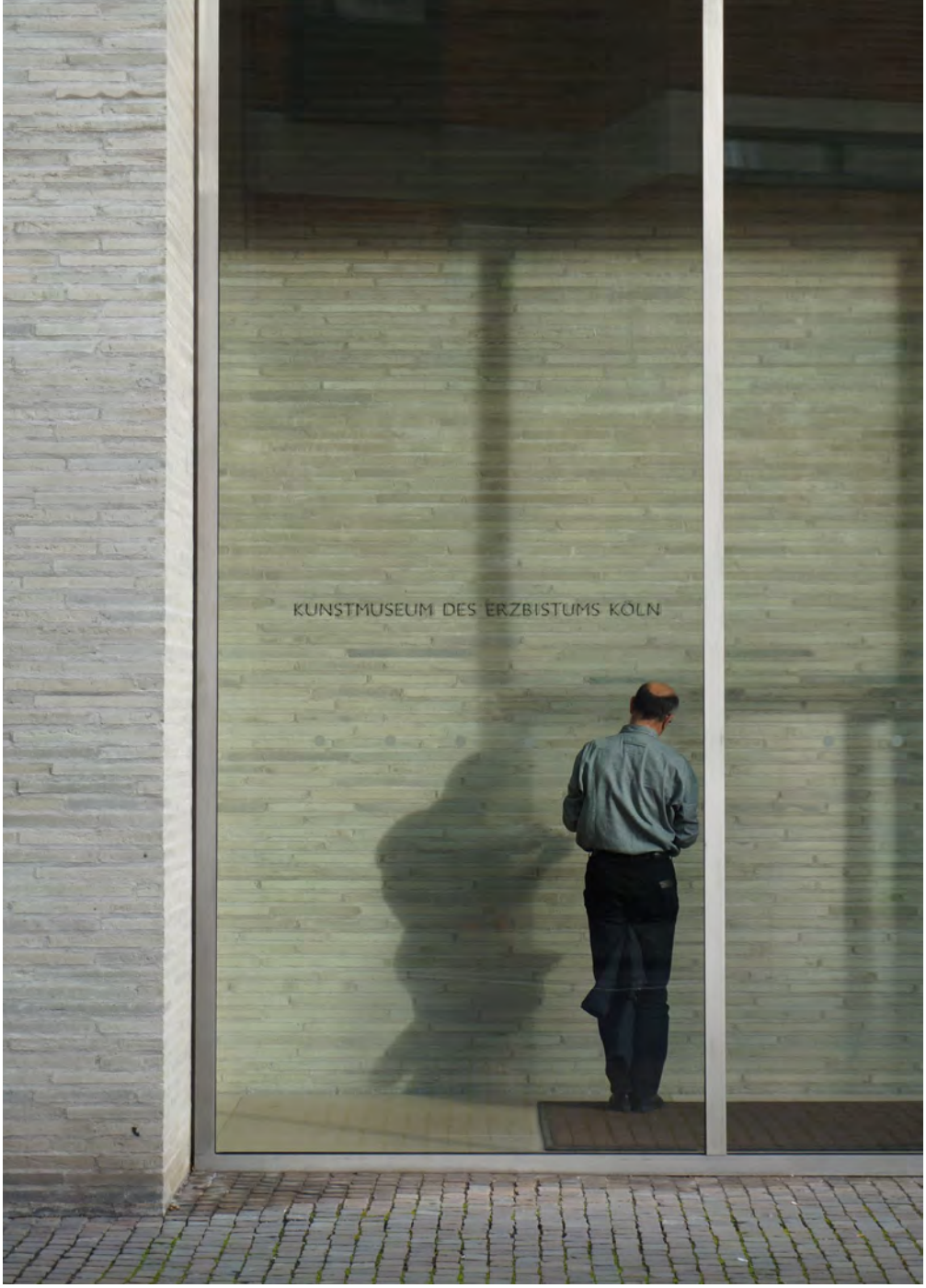


The result is not a monument to loss, but a space of dwelling within history, where architecture mediates between memory, materiality, and becoming.

The museum's critical acclaim and enduring resonance signal a broader paradigm shift in the understanding and treatment of damaged heritage. It privileges an experiential, affective, and symbolically charged engagement over purely restorative or documentary approaches. Kolumba thus stands as a formative precedent for architectural responses to sites of trauma and loss, advancing a design ethos that honors memory through presence rather than replication. Instead of reconstructing what has vanished, Zumthor's architecture enables the past to reverberate within the spatial and cultural consciousness of the present, transforming the act of remembrance into a living dialogue rather than a static monument.

In this sense, Kolumba articulates what might be called a phenomenology of healing, where the architectural experience itself becomes a ritual of reconciliation between destruction and renewal, silence and articulation, time and continuity. By allowing history to manifest through atmosphere, texture, and light, the project encourages an imaginative and empathetic mode of remembrance, in which visitors are invited not merely to observe the past but to dwell within its traces. Here, architecture transcends its role as a functional container to become a medium of cultural therapy. A space where memory and modernity coexist in an ongoing dialogue that redefines the very idea of urban resilience and collective continuity.

Like much of the city of Cologne, the Church of St. Kolumba was almost completely

destroyed during the Second World War. Unlike other cases, however, a decision was made to preserve the ruin as a monument to wartime destruction.

Among the few artefacts that survived the bombing was a statue of the Virgin Mary, dating from around 1460–70. Owing to its resilience, it was later venerated and perceived as miraculous, in 1947, architect Gottfried Böhm was commissioned to design a chapel that would house the *Madonna in den Trümmern* ("Madonna in the Ruins") within the remnants of the former church. The octagonal, tent-like structure chapel, consecrated in 1950, was later incorporated as a central and integral component of the new Kolumba Museum.

The commonly held perception of Peter Zumthor's work as among the most 'spiritual' in contemporary architecture aligns seamlessly with the specific requirements of the Kolumba project. Moreover, his firm and long-standing belief that any architectural endeavor must be deeply rooted in its context and in the act of place-making significantly contributed to the realization of a museum so strongly characterized and imbued with a pervasive 'sense of presence.'

His work, centered on the construction of atmospheres that evoke emotional responses, reminiscent of Proust's madeleine, as evidenced in his eponymous book Atmospheres,

provided the perfect milieu for the development of such a unique project. It manages to combine a receptivity to transcendence with an almost pedagogical approach to the musealization process.

This sense of aesthetic abstraction is further heightened by his masterful craftsmanship, his intentional manipulation of natural and artificial light, and his profound appreciation for the tactile and sensory properties of materials, all of which contribute to the configuration of spaces that are adamantly precise and, as such, transcendent.

Zumthor's statement during the museum's opening ceremony: "This project emerged from the inside out and from the place" attests to the Swiss architect's design approach, which consistently regards pre-existing elements as the seminal components of any architectural project. The project, in turn, develops by following the cues provided by its context, in this case, the ruins, which actively guide its definition.

Thus, traces are never conceived as mere complements to the contemporary intervention; rather, they constitute the very substance from which the project originates. In these terms, instead of suppressing the existing fabric, the design seeks not only to enhance it but also, through the dialogue between the new and the existing, to unravel and illuminate the surrounding, in this case urban fabric, by means of a process of interpretative signification of the ruin.

This perspective clearly elucidates the architect's own statement that "the new has to motivate us to better see the existing."

Zumthor departs from the conventional approach to architectural design on a highly stratified palimpsest, where the various historical layers are generally displayed, and often forcibly, kept distinct and separate from one another, particularly from the contemporary layer. Instead, he adopts a methodology that interprets the thresholds of history as a continuous flow, without interruptions or sharply defined separations.

The passage of time is perceived through the skillful and deliberate use of materials and the techniques employed to shape them, as well as through the constant control of light and

its nuances, which accentuate or soften the patinas of different epochs. In this way, a careful and revealing dialogue between past and present is constructed to unveil the essence of the place without stagnating in a merely didactic unfolding of temporal layers. Each stratum thus becomes part of a single, unified artifact rather than forming an architectural Frankenstein, where emphasis lies on scars and seams rather than on the poetic creation of atmosphere.

Within this attitude that demands exceptional sensitivity and experience, the architect's capacity to evoke suggestions and emotions is rediscovered, transcending a purely didactic function. Instead, the work acquires an additional, and perhaps most significant, semantic layer. Through this approach, a profound unveiling of the "truth" of architecture is achieved, to ontologically embrace and integrate the complexity of the site and its successive stratifications into a unified narrative of which Zumthor is the storyteller.

Peter Zumthor's approach is characteristic of someone who privileges the creation of emotional and evocative environments over narrative or didactic ones. His attention to the definition of atmospheres and the construction of a "sense of presence" reinforces this stance and explains why the Kolumba is often described as a "museum of reflection."

However, reflection, in this context, is merely the result of the visitor's total immersion within the atmospheres crafted by the architect, atmospheres that constitute, in a consubstantial manner, the very conditions necessary for the emergence of understanding and contemplation. It is a wholly emotional process that unfolds through the experience of a profoundly artistic space.

In this sense, it is the architecture itself, along with the architect's design choices, that functions as an active matrix, shaping the visitor's perceptual and cognitive approach. Once immersed in this environment, the visitor becomes highly receptive, engaging with the cultural experience in an intimate and participatory way.

Such an approach to design transcends mere interpretation or communication of the place in question; instead, it penetrates its inner essence, establishing an impetus for an immersive and all-encompassing experience. The museum visit thus becomes a deeply personal journey, engaging multiple senses and generating a multitude of cultural reflections, thereby defining a framework for heritage interventions in which spatial experience itself becomes a foundational moment.

The 1970's archaeological excavations, as said, uncovered the remains of religious structures ranging from the medieval period to the Gothic era, superimposed on earlier Roman settlements occupying the same site. These discoveries, particularly significant in bearing witness to two millennia of Cologne's urban and spiritual life, deeply influenced Peter Zumthor's design for the new museum. In order to preserve and protect the findings, the Swiss Maestro chose to elevate the structure on a grid of foundation pillars, thereby creating an open ground-level space accessible to visitors.

The central space at the entrance level, where the relationship between the ruins, the historical preexistences and the new intervention becomes most evident and immediate, presents a coexistence of historical layers immersed in a diaphanous atmosphere. Here, chiaroscuro effects, carefully selected materials, and the architectural space itself contribute to creating a sense of unity, facilitating both the visitor's experience and the interpretation of the palimpsest contributing in the creation of a recognized "uncensored memory landscape".

Peter Zumthor's project, therefore, is not conceived merely as a museum of the Archdiocese, but takes on a far more iconic and transcendent meaning. It becomes intimately tied to the evocative resilience of the city of Cologne in the face of time, centuries, and wartime destruction. The ability to hold together, within the same space, layers that span from Roman settlements to medieval and Gothic churches, culminating in the preservation and enhancement of post-war ruins and the integration of the 1970s chapel, reveals a remarkably refined capacity for spatial and temporal mending. At the same time, it succeeds in constructing an emotionally

and intellectually rich atmosphere, deeply rooted in the sacredness of the site.

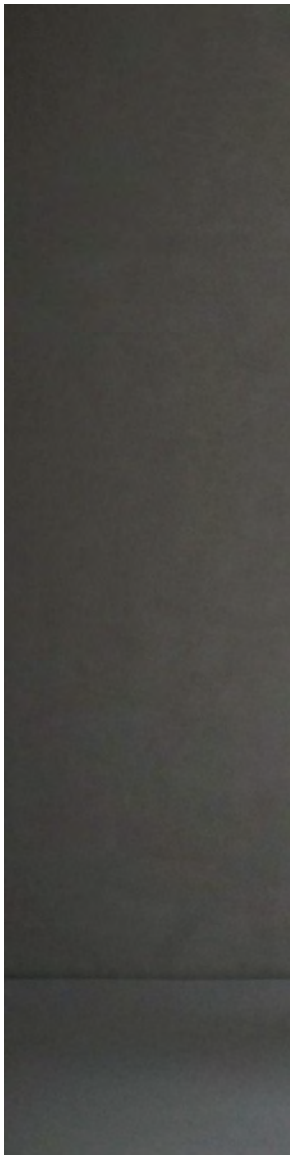
The museum's exterior volumes convey a powerful sense of mass, deliberately avoiding any possible misinterpretation as a volumetric reconstruction of the former church. This is an abstract architecture, enigmatic, almost alien, and decidedly non self-expressive. Its communicative dimension remains mysterious, leaving the observer with a lingering sense of curiosity and attraction.

At the same time, the building engages in a subtle dialogue with the pre-existing structures, both materially and in terms of construction techniques and technologies. The very texture of the masonry is defined through bespoke handmade grey bricks, produced using traditional hand-pressing methods, and laid along the thickness of the Gothic church's surviving walls, though with formally independent translations. The grey tonal variations of the new material gently reconcile with those of the ruins, almost suggesting a continuous evolution between the old and the new, in which the integrity of the existing fabric is both preserved and enhanced.

The dematerialization of the new masonry, reminiscent of a delicate lattice or screen, generates subtle interactions of light that pierce the outer walls and shift according to hour, season, and weather conditions. This creates a perceptible continuity between interior and exterior, further emphasized by the sounds of the city and the fluctuations of temperature and wind that filter through the pores and interstices of the brick envelope.

A permeable threshold is thus established between interior and exterior that both synthesizes and constructs the dialogue between the atmospheric, introspective, and contemplative interior spaces of the museum and the vivid, public, and extroverted life of the city of Cologne beyond its walls. This threshold seems to disappear in the upper floors where the use of "floor to ceiling" large windows open up the views and the connections with the urban fabric and life.

This atmospheric dynamism is further accentuated by the chromatic qualities of the materials and the textures of their surfaces. The meticulous thought underlying each element and its craftsmanship invites the visitor to become more reflective and attuned to the surrounding context.



It is precisely these material and sensory choices that contribute to the attempt, on the one hand, to emphasize the different historical layers, and on the other, to weave them together and narrate them as an unbroken temporal continuum.

The lighting of the various spaces also changes according to their functional and experiential needs. Transitional areas often feature brighter, more vibrant light, reinforcing the sense of movement, whereas the exhibition rooms are illuminated by softer, warmer light, fostering moments of inspiration and contemplation and accommodating different gradations of brightness in harmony with the curatorial concept and the enhancement of the artworks.

In this sense, shadows are no less important than light: their alternation and subtle gradations play an essential role in defining the atmospheric quality of each space.

To liberate the archaeological space on the ground floor, the museum's exhibition halls were elevated to a height of approximately twelve meters, with the entire volume resting on slender circular metal columns that are strategically positioned among the ruins without compromising their structural integrity. This design choice allows for the free enjoyment of a volumetrically impressive space, enabling visitors to move fluidly among the different historical layers.

Furthermore, the extrusion of the new walls directly above the foundations of the former Gothic church defines the spatial boundaries of the environment in continuity with the original layout. The dialogue between the new intervention and the pre-existing remains, illuminated by shafts of light filtering through the latticework of the new brick façades, producing a constantly shifting luminous aesthetic, renders the archaeological area vibrant, generating countless visual compositions and perspectives. Alongside this

effect, the dematerialization of the external walls concur in freeing the masonry from the load of the materiality and in attributing to this massive volume a more ephemeral and light-hearted connotation.

This main space thus takes shape as a kind of showcase that both contains and exhibits the collection, here composed of the Late Roman, Frankish, Romanesque, Late Gothic and ultimately the presence of Gottfried Böhm's chapel, *Madonna in den Trümmern*, which appears encapsulated within the new structure, allowing for its preservation and enhancement amid the ever-changing urban fabric surrounding it.

The creation of this self-contained world, however, still seeks to affirm the continuity of history through the new intervention, which rises directly from the Gothic walls, adopting new structures of identical thickness and employing textures and tones that recall the preceding layers.

The delicacy and fragility of the remains from the various historical periods can thus be appreciated thanks to the segmented walkway in reddish sandalwood, which weaves through the space and allows visitors to experience their magnificence from multiple and ever-changing perspectives.

Zumthor's design is widely recognized for its capacity to orchestrate experiences of the spiritual and the transcendental, achieved through the generation of pre-reflective atmospheres that precede cognition yet awaken a poetic mode of awareness within the visitor. These atmospheres, operating at the intersection of sensory perception and existential intuition, exemplify what Merleau-Ponty describes as the embodied act of perception, a mode of encountering the world through the body as the primary site of consciousness. Within this framework, architecture becomes not an object to be observed, but a field of lived experience that unfolds through touch, light, sound, and temporal duration.

Conclusions

At Kolumba, the strategies of integration reveal a deliberately active and phenomenologically grounded approach to architectural intervention. Zumthor's design does not simply coexist with the remains of the past; it inhabits them, constructing through their material traces and interlacing new spatial narratives within their silences. The elevation of the main museum body, poised delicately upon slender metal columns, together with the immersive archaeological hall and the careful encapsulation of Böhm's *Madonna in den Trümmern*, represent the pursuit for a layered, multifaceted compositions exemplifying an architecture that is at once precise, contemplative, and poetic.

Through these gestures, the ruins are redeemed from their passive state as relics and become active agents of experience, contributing to what Norberg-Schulz might describe as a renewed "genius loci", a rearticulation of place that allows memory and materiality to coexist in dynamic equilibrium. The "filter walls" simultaneously shielding and revealing, articulate a threshold condition that mediates between interiority and exteriority, echoing Pallasmaa's notion of the "haptic realm", where space is apprehended through the senses and embodied perception.

In this sense, Zumthor's intervention functions as a form of architectural hermeneutics, aligning with Ricoeur's understanding of memory as an interpretive act, a continuous dialogue between remembering and reinterpreting contributing in evolving discourse on heritage architecture, which moves beyond mere preservation. The past is not monumentalized as a static object but is reinscribed within the continuum of lived experience, asserting itself as a tangible, sensorial presence within the present. This re-contextualization transforms heritage from an inert testimony into a performative field of encounter, where visitors participate in the unfolding of meaning through perception, movement, and reflection.

The museum's austere material vocabulary, combined with Zumthor's meticulous modulation of natural light and the palimpsestic depth of its historical setting, cultivates a space that is both intellectually resonant and emotionally profound. In Heideggerian terms, Kolumba can be read as an architecture of dwelling, a place where being is grounded through careful attention to presence, temporality, and belonging. Its quiet interiors and tactile surfaces invite a dwelling in slowness, allowing the visitor to inhabit time rather than merely traverse it.

Kolumba stands as a persuasive paradigm of critical conservation, exemplifying how architectural practice can transcend the binary between preservation and innovation. Rather than merely safeguarding historical traces, Zumthor's intervention reinterprets them within a living field, transforming the site into a temporal palimpsest where distinct epochs coexist through a carefully choreographed material and spatial dialogue. In doing so, the project advances a model of heritage as an active process of negotiation and reinterpretation, rather than static commemoration. Its layered narrative, simultaneously archaeological and contemporary, invites a reflective encounter that resonates with present-day sensibilities while sustaining the ontological depth of place. Thus, Kolumba not only reconciles past and present, but also redefines architectural conservation as a generative, interpretive act, capable of producing new meanings from the sedimented memory of the built environment.

The museum exemplifies an innovative mode of engagement through which contemporary audiences can interpret and re-experience historical heritage, enriching its intrinsic value and perceived authenticity by means of spatial and sensory encounters embedded within the pre-existing fabric of the site. Far from being a static vessel for preservation, Kolumba operates as a living organism of memory, where historical fragments are not only safeguarded, but reactivated, acquiring what Walter Benjamin might call "afterlives" within a renewed architectural continuum.

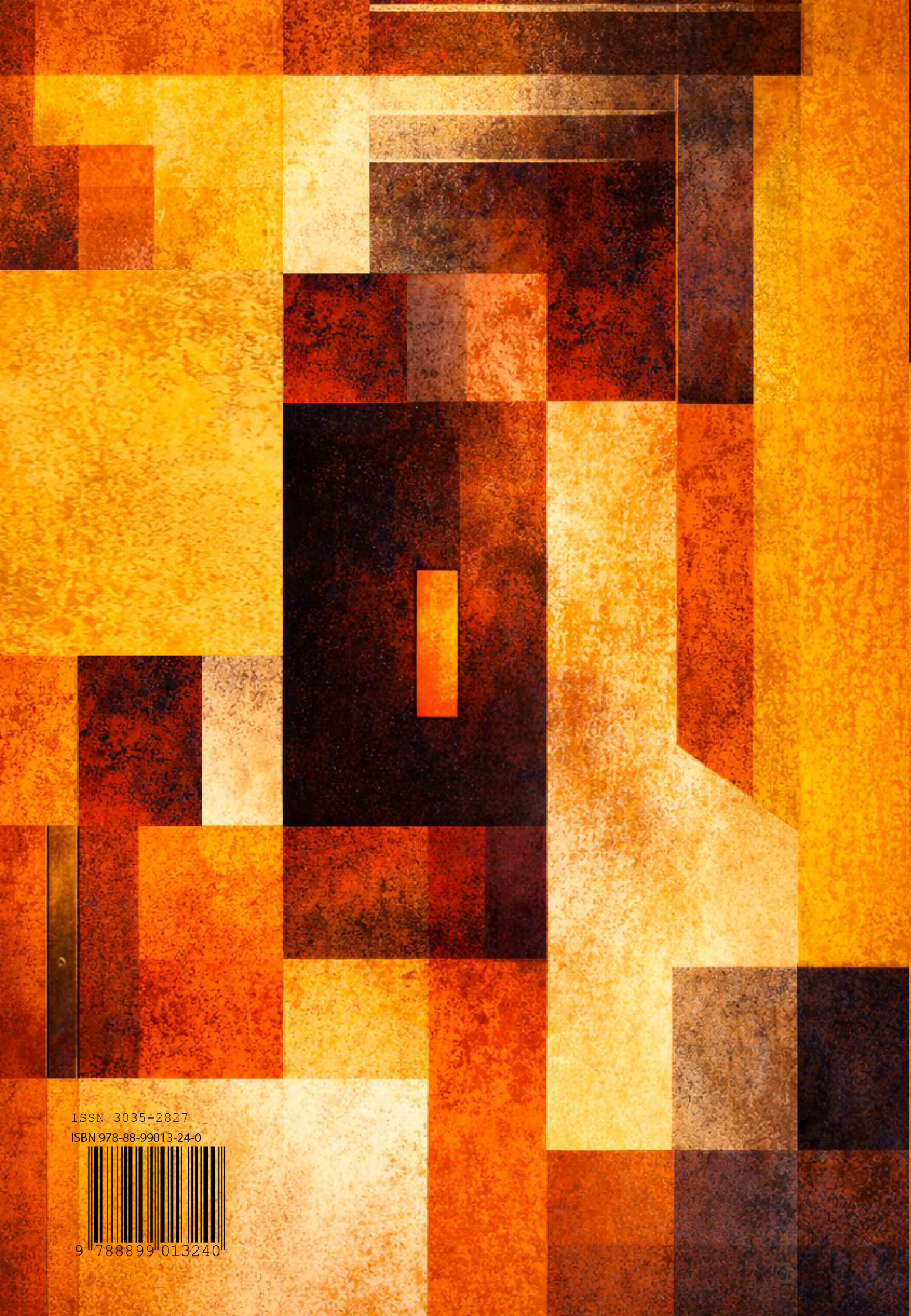
As a hybrid construct of adaptive reuse, Kolumba redefines the relationship between the ruin and the new, suggesting that architectural heritage attains vitality not through

immutable conservation but through critical transformation and re-inscription. This approach resonates with contemporary theories of critical conservation, in which preservation is understood as a dialogical process, a negotiation between temporal strata, material presence, and cultural meaning. Through this methodology, Zumthor's architecture transcends the rhetoric of restoration, proposing instead an aesthetic and existential continuity that allows the past to persist as a lived and reinterpreted experience within the contemporary moment.

In this way, Kolumba Museum transcends its museological function to become what Bachelard might call a topography of intimacy, a place of reverie and phenomenological depth, where imagination and memory intertwine with the material world. Amid the vibrant urban life of Cologne, the museum thus emerges as a sanctuary for contemplation, a spatial meditation on silence and being, where the sacred is not asserted through symbolism but revealed through presence.

Ultimately, Kolumba enacts a paradigm shift: it redefines the memorial not as a fixed locus of mourning but as a dynamic topology of remembrance, where history, architecture, and sensibility coalesce into a living experience of time.

Because, as Zumthor affirms, "past and present meet in good art."



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