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Impressive and Invisible. Reflections on the Urban Disposition of Synagogue Buildings in Germany Since 1990

Introduction: Religion in Central European urban space

The city is a human habitat of the highest complexity and non-simultaneity. Here, society asserts and perpetuates historical patterns on the one hand, and articulates and negotiates demands for change, on the other. This is particularly evident in the realm of religious practices, where the supra-temporal perspectives of religions, the persistence of rituals, beliefs, and built form, and the sometimes fast-moving every-day realities of today collide.

Yet, the religious topography of our Central European cities seems to be an unambiguous matter. After more than a millennium, in which society, the dominance of Christian practice of faith and the built environment mutually influence(d) each other, quite stable spatial and symbolic dispositions have developed. In 1970, French sociologist Roland Barthes summed this up and described the center of a European city as a place of abundant social interaction, "a marked site, it is here that the values of civilization are gathered and condensed: spirituality (churches), power (offices), money (banks), merchandise (department stores), language (agoras: café: and promenades)."[1]

From the architectural standpoint, his summary is expressive and apt. It fore-shadows, however, the challenges that arise when the multi-religious modern society wants to express itself and become present in an urban space that is conceived and contextualized as mono-religious. The historical presence of Jewish communities, the intra-Christian diversity that began with the Reformation at the latest, and the religious heterogeneity of modern times still hardly play a role when we talk about the structural and symbolic dimensions of our cities. This contrasts evidently with the rising architectural and urban visibility of synagogues and mosques in Germany, as observed by religious studies and architectural research. It raises the question of how these communities manage to rewrite the traditional urban dispositions in their own sense and to shape their own spaces in the juxtaposition of architectural signs. More-over, it remains unclear how this development relates to the likewise stated decon-struction of Christian architecture and institutional infrastructure.

In order to gain new insights, the project *Transformations of Sacredness* uses the example of the three Abrahamic religions to examine the interplay of socio-

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1 Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs* (New York, 1989), 30.

economic change, religious architecture and the city in Germany since the unification in 1990. In close cooperation between religious studies and architectural history, we apply a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches to look at places of worship that have been newly built or subjected to significant structural or functional changes, including demolition, during the last thirty years. This essay outlines the observations from the quantitative surveys of synagogues and discusses them in the context of the overall study.

The data basis

The total numbers of Abrahamic believers and places of worship in Germany are unknown, but some data is known: The two main churches currently list a total of 44,400 churches, plus approximately 130 synagogues and Jewish prayer houses, 2,500 to 3,000 Muslim prayer rooms and mosques, as well as a large number of churches of various Christian denominations.[2] Even in view of this vague information, it is evident that the buildings recorded in the database so far can only represent a tiny section of the religious topography and its recent change. We mainly recorded processes that have been noticed and discussed by experts and the public, especially if they have been communicated supra-regionally.[3] As a result, the data with regard to churches and mosques is rather discourse-oriented, while the small number of Jewish congregations as well as the extensive and easily accessible basic research in this area promoted a very balanced nationwide survey.[4]

Our database lists 1,517 buildings with worship spaces that have been significantly altered, rebuilt, converted, abandoned or demolished since 1990. They are located in 771 places, have links to 392 organisations and 548 people, mostly planners and commissioners (as of August 31, 2021). Churches clearly dominate (1,122 entries) and show a wide range of occurrences between new construction and demolition and a

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2 See regarding numbers, for example, Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz, ed. *Katholische Kirche in Deutschland. Zahlen und Fakten 2019/20* (Bonn, 2020), 72–73. For further reading about the number of mosques, see Doris Kleilein, "Knowhow im Moscheebau," *Bauwelt* 3 (2017): 6; Armin Käfer, "Bund finanziert Imamausbildung mit," *Badische Zeitung* (October 15, 2010), https://www.badische-zeitung.de/bund-finanziert-imamausbildung-mit–36598241.html, accessed September 12, 2021; Christoph Strack, "Islam made in Germany – ein einzigartiges Ausbildungsprojekt," (June 14, 2021), https://www.dw.com/de/ausbildungsprojekt-islamische-imame-made-in-germany/a-57879191, accessed September 12, 2021; Ulrich Pick, "Moscheen in Deutschland. Fromm, unauffällig – und gefährlich?," (August 3, 2016), https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/moscheen-in-deutschland-fromm-unauffaellig-und-gefaehrlich.724.de.html?dram:article_id=361983; Thomas Schmitt, and Jonas Klein, "Moscheen – islamische Sakralbauten in Deutschland," *N aktuell* 13 (September 2019): 6, s.p.

3 The church-related survey profited from a data corpus from the Wüstenrot Foundation (Dr. Stefan Krämer, Dr. Tino Mager, Dr. René Hartmann), which was created as preliminary research for the competition "Kirchengebäude und ihre Zukunft. Sanierung – Umbau – Umnutzung" (Church Buildings and their Future. Redevelopment – Reconstruction – Conversion). It combined objects from publications and specialist journals as well as findings from a larger online search, especially on the projects of relevant architectural firms.

4 Here, only cemeteries and mourning halls are conceptually and informationally difficult to grasp for a quantitative analysis and the assignment of relevance.

regional focus in the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia. The mosques (317) mainly comprise architecturally significant facilities in the old Federal States, while the so-called backyard mosques, which have already been the subject of much discussion and represent more than eighty percent of Islamic places of worship in Germany, were not the focus. However, they must always be considered in the analysis of urban change. The 77 synagogues and prayer houses surveyed include buildings of the most diverse types with an evenly distribution throughout Germany.

Synagogue buildings in Germany

The urban and architectural reality of synagogues in Germany proves to be more diverse in the overview than the literature seems to have depicted so far. Although the data on congregations and synagogues is readily available, it is difficult to form an overall picture in the synthesis of historical observations, architectural-historical analyses of the pre- and post-war situation and the publications on the more recent buildings by Alfred Jacoby and other planners. For example, the project proposal initially formulated the thesis that "synagogues experience a special public perception and are characterized by experimental architecture, often in city centers," an assumption that needs to be taken with a pinch of salt.[5] The quantitative survey led to a series of observations, which we briefly present here. Subsequently, we will discuss the direction in which questions for further research arose over time.

The enormously high building-related activity of the Jewish communities during the past three decades was perhaps the most significant result of the survey in the overall context. In a sense, this was to be expected, as the growth of the communities due to the influx of so-called contingent refugees from the successor states of the Soviet Union was a central impetus for the present research project. Nevertheless, these activities affected a good half of the communities, an order of magnitude that is still noticeable in the comparison of the overall survey even when all biases in the coverage are taken into account.

Significant building and conversion activity is also evident, for example, in the New Apostolic Church (NAC), which is adapting its congregational structures and worship spaces to declining membership, and various Muslim umbrella organisations, but in each case against the background of larger institutional structures and/or numbers of congregations and worshippers. Therefore, the question arises as to how Jewish

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5 Concerning the project and database, see https://sawa.ceres.rub.de/en/, as well as the outline of the project at an early stage in Kim De Wildt, et al., "Transformations of 'Sacredness in Stone': Religious Architecture in Urban Space in 21st Century Germany – New Perspectives in the Study of Religious Architecture," *Religions* 10.11 (2019):, 602, especially 11/16; https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10110602. Accessed September 3, 2021.

communities managed to realise their projects in the midst of the internal integration process. It might be worthwhile to do further research in order to derive experiences or even guidelines that will make it easier for other religious minorities to anchor themselves in the German religious topography. For it became apparent in many cases during the surveys how demanding it can be to deal with the real estate market, building and planning law and the companies carrying out the work. So far, we can only assume that the anchoring of Jew citizens in the center of society, the unequivocal recognition as a religious body and the explicitly formulated political will to support and promote Jewish communities could have a certain influence on success.

The entirety of the building-related activities of Jewish communities splits into three groups of roughly the same size. They include new buildings and conversions as well as other activities such as building maintenance, renovation, extensions and reconsecration. Maintenance, restoration and small modifications are a matter of course in every building's life story. In case of religious buildings, such measures, like the practices of worship or the rite de passage of each member of the community, strengthen the congregation within and add to its relationship with the building and the neighborhood. In our study, they played but a minor role since they do not usually intend to change the community's impact on its built environment. Yet, such activities get attention by the neighbourhood and contribute to the social visibility of the community. It might be valuable to study its impact on the urban religious landscape in detail to gain insight in the role of overlapping and mingling social networks for urban stability.

The other building-related activities recorded are more obvious in their influence on public discourse and urban space. A specific case are the re-consecrations after extensive renovations, restoration or after the translocation of a historic building. Here, different processes mix to a degree that complicates analysis. The celebrations of the completion of the construction work on the synagogues in Görlitz and Lübeck made national news in 2021 (Figs. 1 and 2). In Lübeck, a congregation re-appropriated its established synagogue. In Görlitz, however, the festivity addressed a building of architectural value but currently without congregation.[6]

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6 The congregation is in the process of institutionalisation and will use side rooms of the reconstructed building in the near future. Concerning the building, see, for example, the entry on the homepage of Deutsche Stiftung Denkmalschutz (German Foundation for Monument Protection), https://www.denkmalschutz.de/denkmal/ehem-synagoge-goerlitz.html, accessed September 10, 2021. Concerning Jewish life in the city, see, for example, media coverage such as Karin Schuld-Vogelsberg, "Die Synagoge wird 100 Jahre alt. Doch als Gotteshaus wird sie nicht genutzt," *Jüdische Allgemeine* (March 14, 2011), https://www.juedische-allgemeine.de/unsere-woche/die-perle-der-lausitz/, accessed September 12, 2021; Silke Schröder, "Will die Görlitzer Stadtverwaltung jüdische Geschichte tilgen?," *Jüdische Rundschau* 10.74 (October 2020), https://juedischerundschau.de/article.2020-10.will-die-goerlitzer-stadtverwaltung-juedische-geschichte-tilgen.html and "Wächst eine jüdische Gemeinde?," *mdr* (June 13, 2021), https://www.mdr.de/religion/juedisches-leben/synagoge-goerlitz-juedische-gemeinde-100.html, both accessed September 10, 2021.

Fig. 1: Lübeck, Carlebach Synagoge, 1880, Ferdinand Münzenberger (1846–1924) (Photograph: Phasus, 2021, Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 4.0).

Fig. 2: Görlitz, former synagogue, 1911, Lossow & Kühne (Photograph: H. J. Janßen, 2019, Wikimedia, CC BY-SA 4.0).

Here, past and present, religious topography, liturgical practice, *memoria* and monument protection are inextricably intermingled and embodied in the materiality of a single building. The cultural narrative might even overlay the reality of religious life.

The situation with conversions is different. Here, the synagogues seem to dissolve in the city space since they largely disappear behind the building typology of the adopted structures. They cover a wide range of structural and urban conditions that the congregations have to cope with in each case. The thirty conversions of existing buildings affect residential buildings, buildings previously used for commercial or social purposes, and churches. In some cases, the congregation uses the entire property, in others only parts of it. The reasons for choosing a particular building also vary. The community *Adass Jisroel* in Berlin moved into rooms of a historic residential building in 1990, which the community had already used before the Shoah; others occupy Jewish-connoted places anew, as in Bamberg, or set up in rooms to which there are no historical connections, as in Marburg (Figs. 3 and 4).

Fig. 3: Bamberg Synagogue, former Sewing Silk Factory Kupfer und Hesslein (Photograph: Ulrich Knufinke, Bet Tfila – Research Unit for Jewish Architecture, Braunschweig, 2006).

Fig. 4: Marburg Synagogue, 1931, Emil H. Schweizer, former AOK Health Insurance Fund offices (Photograph: Hydro, 2016, Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 4.0).

Often, conversions remain hidden inside; occasionally, they become visible to the outside and give passers-by a hint as to the shift in function.

The impact of re-use on the religious topography are most evident with the adoption of churches. The majority of cases involve modest buildings embedded in everyday environments, where but a ridge turret and the high windows of a hall hint at the specific function. Yet, some go along with a privileged urban disposition and/or a significant building. There is, for example, the heritage protected church building of the early eighteenth century in Cottbus or the community center *Etz Chaim* in Hanover. In Cottbus, urban disposition and architectural typology fit the expectations in Roland Barthes's summary while the new use adds a level of ambiguity that has been present for centuries but remains discussed only occasionally.[7]

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7 The discussion concerning the building typology of a synagogue was very present following the Jewish emancipation in Germany, both within the congregations and in public. The Shoah interrupted the fruitful discussion about the interrelation of form, faith, belonging and modern society that similarly involved and still involves church architecture. Concerning the Synagogues, see for example Ulrich Knufinke, *Synagogen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert. Bauwerke einer Minderheit im Spannungsfeld widerstreitender Wahrnehmungen und Deutungen*, in: Gideon Botsch et al. ed.: *Islamophobie und Antisemitismus – ein umstrittener Vergleich* (Berlin/Potsdam, 2012), 201–226, and Aliza Cohen-Mushlin, and Harmen H. Thies, ed. *Synagogenarchitektur in Deutschland. Dokumentation zur Ausstellung* (Petersberg, 2008).

Fig. 5: Cottbus Synagogue, 1714 (tower 1870) [former Schlosskirche] (Photograph: Clemensfranz, 2010, Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0).

Fig. 6: Hanover, Community center *Etz Chaim*, 2009, Ahrens & Grabenhorst, former Gustav Adolf Church, 1971, Fritz Eggeling (1913–1966), (Photograph: Beate Löffler, 2019).

Fig. 7: Dresden Synagogue, 2001, Wandel, Hoefer und Lorch + Hirsch (Photograph: Maros Mraz, 2009, Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0).

The conversion of the post-war church in Hanover created a structure whose urban position suggests the dominant religion, but in its expression develops a new form of architectural dignity that inspires further research concerning the contemporary expression of faith and transcendence (Figs. 5 and 6).

These observations invite us to understand the change in religious topography not just as a change in the use of urban space alone. They ask us to involve religious buildings in a comprehensive discussion of the communication of power created by the building typologies of our cities once more and to question the understanding of religious space in modern society in general. This background might also explain some of the architectural interest or disinterest in new synagogue buildings in Germany.

There are 23 newly built synagogues and at least four projects in different states of realisation in Germany since 1990. In an architectural sense, most share what might be described as non-typological expressions of architectural dignity: stereometric bodies, balanced proportions, a precise handling of surfaces and a conscious attribution of spaces and volumes (Figs. 7–11).

While these are characteristics shared with smaller museums or other cultural institutions, it would be interesting to investigate to what extent the models of Hermann Zvi Guttmann's (1917–1977) post-war buildings proved to be formative and how some of Alfred Jacoby's (*1950) designs relate to that as well.[8]

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8 Unfortunately, this is one of the moments when quantitative recording raises questions that it cannot answer itself. The literature for answering them is at least partially available. To realise it, however, the focus must be shifted to such a degree as to be impossible in the current project. For work in this regard, see, for example, Elisabeth Rees-Dessauer, *Zwischen Provisorium und Prachtbau – Die Synagogen der jüdischen Gemeinden in Deutschland von 1945 bis zur Gegenwart* (Göttingen, 2019).

Fig. 8: Chemnitz Synagogue, 2002, Alfred Jacoby (*1950) (Photograph: Sandro Schmalfuß, 2015, Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0, edited).

There are two or three observations, however, that might denote a shift concerning the architecture of synagogues in Germany. Firstly, but for Alfred Jacoby, the commissions involved small and mid-sized offices, often without a background in religious architecture. This is in contrast to the strong role of Jewish architects since the post-war reconstruction. Second, synagogue projects in Germany and publications related to the past and present of synagogue architecture gained attention in architectural media such as BauNetz.de or Bauwelt.[9] While the reports favour known architects and significant buildings, there is some indication that the topic itself became more visible among planners by now. This might be due to, thirdly, the two new synagogues in Dresden, 2001 and Munich, 2006. The office Wandel, Hoefer and Lorch (+ Hirsch) realized both buildings, which gained extensive attention in the media (Fig. 7 and 9).

What distinguishes these two buildings from other new synagogues in Germany, however, is that this discussion seems to have ultimately left the subject area of synagogue construction: the buildings were finally understood as religious architecture and as examples of contemporary form finding in a broader sense. This is arguably not only due to the space-creating qualities of the two buildings but also the professional networks of architects and the architectural zeitgeist, but it is also significant for the understanding of our religious environment.

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9 This is relevant, since architectural discourse does not really discuss mosques in Germany apart from the Cologne Central Mosque by Paul and Gottfried Böhm or the Islamic Forum in Penzberg by Alen Jasarevic, while a number of such buildings abroad gain attention.

Fig. 9: Munich, Ohel Jakob Synagogue, 2006, Wandel, Hoefer and Lorch (Photograph: Katrin Keßler, 2017).

Fig. 10: Bochum Synagogue, 2007, Peter Schmitz and Ulrike Beuter (Photograph: Maschinenjunge, 2008, Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0).

Fig. 11: Konstanz Synagogue, Wilhelm und Hovenbitzer/Prof. Fritz Wilhelm 2019 (Photograph: Waithamai, 2019, Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 4.0).

On the one hand, the buildings in Dresden and Munich can serve as representatives of other synagogues, prayer houses and community centers in Germany, referring to the Jewish sacral topography in Germany. Many synagogues gained attention as part of the congregation's history, needs and aspiration but despite the works of many colleagues, architectural writings are still of limited supply. On the other hand, the two buildings tie Jewish architecture into the challenging search for religious architecture in modern societies. As such, they connect to a contemporary 'rediscovery' of the sacred building as an architectural subject, whereby the structures, which are not infrequently discussed across all religions and borders, are considered largely independently of their liturgical function or historical significance.[10] Parallel to this, the various intra-religious negotiations on the appropriate form of the worship space proceeded and

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10 Phyllis Richardson, *Neue sakrale Architektur. Kirchen und Synagogen, Tempel und Moscheen* (München, 2004); Robert Klanten, and Lukas Feireiss, *Closer to God: Religious Architecture and Sacred Spaces* (Berlin, 2010); Karla Cavarra Britton, ed. *Constructing the Ineffable. Contemporary Sacred Architecture* (New Haven, 2010); Chris van Uffelen, *Sacred Architecture + Design. Churches, Synagogues & Mosques* (Salenstein, 2014); James Pallister, *Sacred Spaces. Contemporary Religious Architecture* (London, 2015). See also the planning-related publications such as Nicholas W. Roberts, *Building Type Basics for Places of Worship* (Hoboken, 2004); Rudolf Stegers, Dorothea Baumann, Negar Hakim, *Entwurfsatlas Sakralbau* (Basel, 2008).

continue to proceed,[11] occasionally tying back once more into a more general question of how to 'house' the experience of transcendence.

Church and mosque rub up against the historical subtexts of their architecture in the present: their building typologies reproduce, in order to remain legible in urban communication, with towers and domes, halls and building decoration, also a claim to power that was inscribed in the historical form and is often still thought of today. The absence of an unambiguous building typology of the synagogue, sometimes perceived as problematic in architectural design, is a strength here, because it allows the congregations to renegotiate the link between religion-related space and community-related space with each new conception and to re-define the building's relationship with its environment anew whenever they undertake building-related action. As such, the congregation does not have to fulfil or deconstruct typological expectations. Thus, their solutions for understanding and organising spaces might contribute to an understanding of a contemporary interlinking of religion, modern society, historical profundity and concepts of the future beyond the Jewish communities themselves.[12]

Changes in religious topography: Synagogues and further contexts

The synagogues, prayer houses and community centers were and are a sometimes visible, sometimes invisible part of German cities. While their spatial development during the last decades is specific and tightly linked to the Jewish history in Central Europe, it is part of the negotiation of religious heterogeneity in modern society. As such, it allows tracing and understanding public discourses and architectural shifts as well as gaining insights in the processes of 'place keeping' and 'place making.'[13] Reading the recent developments of Christian, Jewish and Muslim communities in Germany in parallel, it becomes apparent that their participation in urban space

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11 E.g., Wolfgang Jean Stock, and Walter Zahner, *Der sakrale Raum der Moderne: Meisterwerke des europäischen Kirchenbaus im 20. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 2010); Edwin Heathcote, and Laura Moffatt, *Contemporary Church Architecture* (New York, 2007).
12 The issue of security is arguably of relevance as well. While this awareness was in the background of the evaluation of a building and its urban situation, it would need specific research to understand the extent of its influence on the design process.
13 See Irene Becci, "New religious diversity in Potsdam: keeping, making and seeking place," in *Religion in der Stadt. Räumliche Konfigurationen und theologische Deutungen*, ed. Christopher Zarnow, Birgit Klostermeier, and Rüdiger Sachau (Berlin, 2018), 101–118. Compare as well Nina Clara Tiesler, *Muslime in Europa. Religion und Identitätspolitiken unter veränderten gesellschaftlichen Verhältnissen* (Berlin, 2006).

varies significantly. Here, the different historic, legal and social backgrounds have an impact and create intrinsic developments.

However, it is obvious that the discourses that accompany the emergence or disappearance of emblematic religious architecture reflect a social reality. The architecture, its forms and its use of space express the inner reality of the religion in question, which is already an integral part of our cities. The discourses are therefore not concerned with their existence per se, but with their specific role in society today. Even if synagogues will probably remain special cases in Germany's sacred topography, not least because of the comparatively small number of worshippers, they are a normal part of the urban structure at the same time. The solutions they found for this structural accommodation are an important contribution to the negotiation of the architectural-symbolic coexistence of religions. They show both the organisational-financial challenges of a minority religion and an active participation in the design of the built environment, with all the visibility or invisibility that the communities choose for themselves.