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Idea and architecture of the extended synagogue memorial

I think it was at the end of 2010 that Pastor Ela Griepenkerl and Dr Jochum from the Association for Christian-Jewish Cooperation asked me for an idea regarding a possible redesign of the synagogue memorial at the Schifferwall. A little later, we met at the site of the relocated 1950 stele in the rear shadowy section of the – not very inviting – small park, hardly able to talk with the noise of traffic roaring past. Providing a space for remembrance and commemoration: that was the aim we soon agreed upon. The stele was to be enclosed, protected and preserved, and thus also the memory of the destruction and the spirit of that time and the suffering that it gave rise to.

In first sketches, I tried to find a well-founded form. The focus returned to the destroyed synagogue and its floor plan, and based on that the attempt of reproducing in the floor plan of the memorial the historic assembly room with its original dimensions (7.03 m x 7.03 m), surrounded by approximately man-high walls creating an internal space. In addition to that, the anteroom including all external openings, once again corresponding to the historic dimensions, as a buffer and separation from the road space. No reconstruction, not either in the play with materials! Space was to be provided for remembrance and commemoration, for a pause to think and to reflect, to mourn and possibly also to regret.

At its geometric centre the stele of 1950, to be approached by steps of two squares with eight corners, specially marked, located at the centre of the star of David, one of the most important Jewish symbols - the Shield of David,

protection and safeguard (as I have read) – here at the lowest point of the space, the symbol abused for stigmatisation, contempt, humiliation and extermination of the Jewish citizens of our towns by the Nazis. In the background the menorah, the seven-lamp candelabrum, the light regained, symbol of enlightenment. This is what I have understood it to mean. And in further explanation of the eight corners and steps mentioned earlier: they stand for the eight survivors of the Great Flood of approx. 5500 years ago (according to historical research): Noah and his wife, their three sons with their wives. They spent almost a year drifting in their “box” on the no longer “hospitable sea”, after a gigantic environmental disaster (as we would call it now) caused the Mediterranean to breach into the Black Sea with a height difference of 100 m, turning fresh water into salt water and destroying all life along the shores in an instance. After a year, driven by wind and currents, the “box”, the ark, “beached” in the south-eastern Ararat range in modern Kurdistan. Noah and his family descended from the mountain, as described in the Old Testament story uniting Jews and Christians, and following this salvation entered into the “new covenant with God” and moved to Mesopotamia.

“Salvation” and “new” are the keywords here. Or, it just strikes me, did the pen in the architect’s hand drawing the lowered squares shaping the empty space symbolize a bow to the stele? The one does not exclude the other.

A further remark on the architecture: the “human scale”, a concept recently resurfaced in the professional debate, was to applied to all components of the memorial, up to and including the plaques with the names. This concept is also known as the golden ratio, *sectio aurea*. In the 1950s, Einstein and Le Corbusier retransferred the corresponding measurements of the human body to the metric system. Einstein referred to the result as a musical scale, because of it also reflecting musical ratios, Le Corbusier as “modulor”. Applied to this memorial:

wall height 226 cm, wall thickness 20 cm, step height 8 cm, height of the plaques 140 cm, width 53 cm, distance to floor 33 cm. Even the distances between the turnbuckles in the concrete walls still follow this ratio. Maybe you can sense it? And: artisan work was given preference over industrial production. The concrete was poured on site, “poured stone” as the Romans called it, made from sand and gravel, lime and cement, all natural materials from the soil. Unadorned iron the lattice work in the openings with a diffuse, destructive, destroyed order, each one different. The Obernkirchen sandstone cut from the rocks with different surface treatments and very carefully put into place.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the craftsmen involved and to express my appreciation! It was a pleasure to watch your commitment to your work! Please pass these thanks to your bosses!

The path towards this day has been long and sometimes stony and arduous. That is not unusual in a project such as this, in which hidden, unspoken thoughts and emotions also play a part.

Last but not least: I would also thank the municipal building department, namely Mr Cohrs and Mr Schuldt, for the excellent cooperation! This project has meant a lot to me! And I hope that it will also be a valuable contribution to our town’s culture of remembrance!

“The properly shaped emptiness of space and surface is no mere negation of imagery, but its very opposite! Its relation to the former is like that of silence to the spoken word. If humans are receptive to it, they will experience in it a mysterious presence.” (Romano Guardini 1929)

Thank you for listening!