



Babi Yar is a site of Jewish death. With a new synagogue, this architect vows to ‘bring back Jewish life’

Irene Katz Connelly May 11, 2021

On the haunted ground of Babi Yar, the walls of a synagogue are opening and closing like the pages of a pop-up book.

Over the course of two nights in 1941, SS officers and their local Ukrainian allies murdered almost 34,000 Jews at this ancient ravine, perpetrating one of the largest and most infamous massacres of the Holocaust. Before the end of World War II, Nazi forces killed up to 100,000 people there, including Roma, Ukrainians and the mentally ill.

It's almost impossible to adequately memorialize the atrocities that occurred here, but that's what the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center is trying to do. (The Forward styles this site "Babi Yar," but when referring to this organization will use its chosen spelling.) An international nonprofit whose board includes heavyweights of the Jewish philanthropic world like Ronald Lauder and former Sen. Joe Lieberman, as well as many Ukrainian representatives, the foundation is planning a many-pronged memorial that will include research institutes, a library and a museum.

But the first building to appear on the site is a house of prayer.

"When we start commemorating Babyn Yar, let's start with a synagogue, which brings back Jewish life to the site," said Manuel Herz, the architect in charge.



Image by Manuel Herz Architects

Manuel Herz, the a Swiss-based architect who designed the Babyn Yar Synagogue.

Based in Switzerland, Herz has an impressively varied body of work: He's known for a synagogue he designed in Mainz, Germany, and his recent projects include a hospital in Senegal and a public housing complex in France. He came to this commission determined to avoid the bleak and somber style that has come to characterize the architecture of Holocaust monuments. "We know these memorials," he said. "They work through authority, and I think we should not impose ourselves onto the site."

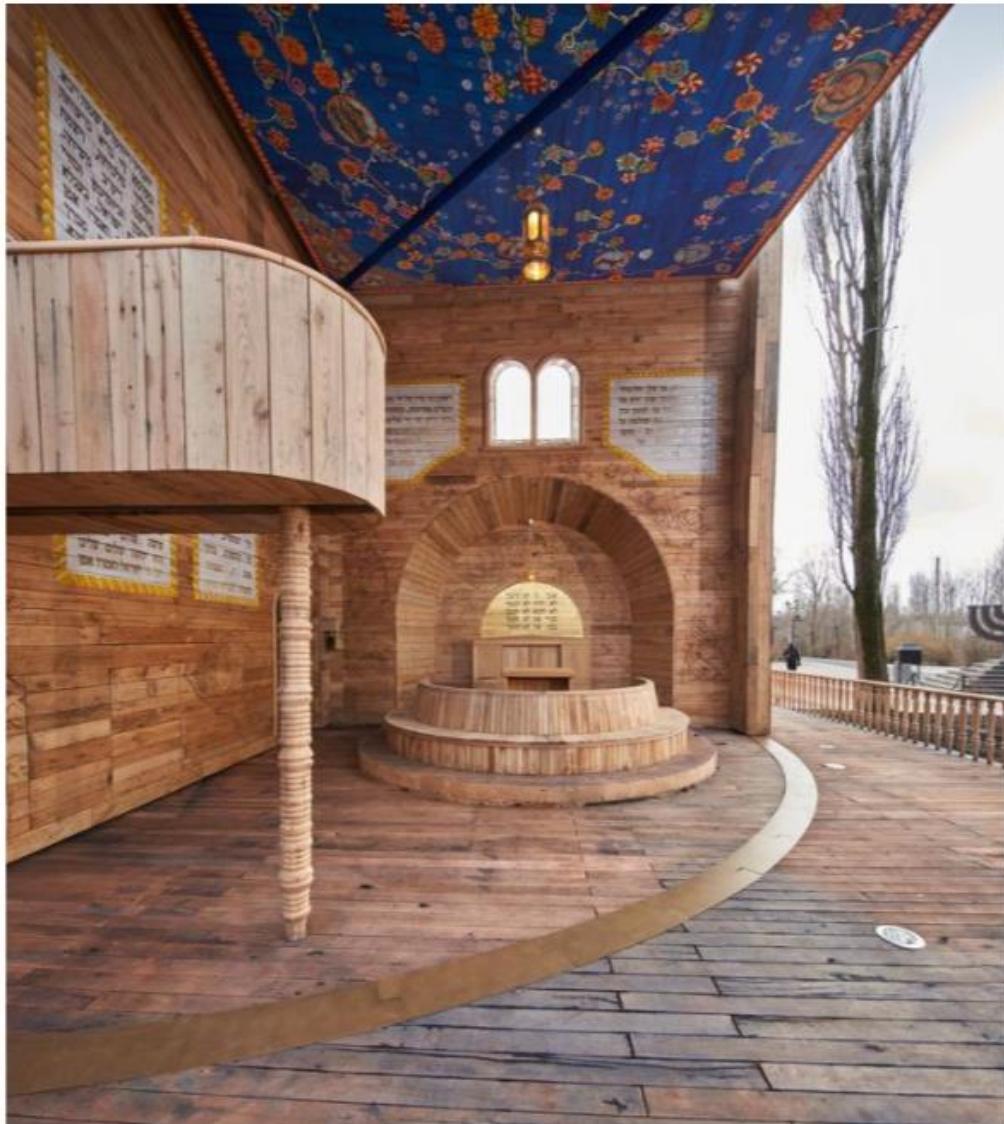
The structure he designed is modeled after the colorful wooden synagogues that once dotted the Pale of Settlement, except for one

distinctly modern feature: the entire building can be manually opened and closed, transforming from a tall wooden rectangle to an open-air sanctuary adorned with intricate carvings and paintings.

I spoke with Herz about this very unusual synagogue and the difficult task of paying tribute to events too horrendous to fully comprehend.

The initial challenge: I asked myself, how can you build on this site that has seen so much death, that is soaked in blood? Not only metaphorically: The plants and trees that are growing in this area are growing out of corpses. The intuitive thought would be to say, "Should we build at all? And if we build, shouldn't it be so minimalist, sober, monolithic?"

To the first question I answer very clearly: Yes. And then even if it's seductive to do a very somber intervention, I think it's not the right approach. The crime is so monumental. You can never match the monumentality of the crime through monumental architecture. I wanted to do something that is much more suggestive in its architectural response.



Herz modeled his design after the wooden synagogues that once dotted the Pale of Settlement.

The Jewish texts behind the building: The writing of the Talmud started when the Temple was destroyed and Jerusalem became inaccessible. To an extent, the Talmud has replaced Jerusalem as a national unifier, so it has a spatial dimension. But beyond that, what we do when we go to a synagogue is read a book together, either a *siddur* or the Torah. This book opens up a new universe of stories: stories of morality, history, love, righteousness, law and so on.

In a way, pop-up books are a wonderfully similar analogy to that. They're thin volumes, and we're always seduced when we see them in bookshops. We open them and wander through the spaces; we want to explore them like little kids. This fascination, and the cabinet of wonders opened up by these pop-up

books, is almost like what happens when we come together in synagogue.



Image by Manuel Herz Architects

When closed, the synagogue looks like a tall, narrow book.

The synagogues he studied: There's a wonderful history of wooden synagogues that existed in western Ukraine and southern Poland — the Pale of Settlement. They're stunningly beautiful, but they've all been destroyed. I wanted to reference them, the iconography painted on the walls, and I sent this particular photo [shown above] to the client. At some point I was thinking, "What was actually written here?" I thought maybe it was the *kaddish* or the *shema*, but I asked a family friend to translate and he said it's not a typical blessing. It is a relatively obscure blessing about turning a nightmare into a good dream. This is such a beautiful coincidence, because that's exactly what we're trying to do. It's the leitmotif of the Babi Yar synagogue.

The ceiling's significance: I used the flowers and the iconography of the old wooden synagogues to recreate the star constellation that was visible over the skies of Kyiv on September 29, 1941 — the night the massacres started. So on the one hand it's a beautiful ceiling, but it's also linked to the terrible

massacre that anchors this building in history.



Image by Manuel Herz Architects

The flowers painted on the synagogue ceiling represent the constellations that were visible on the first night of the massacre.

The Holocaust monument that *did* inspire him: The architect John Hejduk, who used to be the head of Cooper Union, came up with a proposal in the early 90s for the commemoration of the Gestapo headquarters in Berlin. Instead of a big building, he proposed a series of interventions that have something quite ritualistic about them. “Interactive” is a terrible word, because it suggests buttons to be pressed, but something that brings in the visitors and makes them part of a ritual. It was never built. But I remember as a student, looking very vividly at this proposal.

How he wants visitors to feel: I don’t want to have a single reaction. Some people will be awed, will think it’s beautiful. Some people will think, “Is beauty the right way?” I could imagine someone going there and saying it’s a sacrilege to say something beautiful to this place. I would prefer that people are not numbed by the memorial but step into a more discursive relationship with it.



Image by Manuel Herz

One of the blessings inscribed on the synagogue's walls is a prayer to turn nightmares into good dreams.

A new ritual: When we close the synagogue, it becomes a narrow, tall volume that takes up very little space. The process of opening is a collective one: The *minyan* comes together to open the synagogue. I like the idea of introducing a new ritual to the site. I think that's a good step.