

For a Broad Open Discourse about the Reconstruction of the Bornplatz-Synagogue

We welcome the commitment of leading Hamburg politicians visibly to strengthen the Jewish community and the diversity of Jewish life in our city through substantial public efforts. They are thus setting a clear example of action against any form of antisemitism.

Such action could include the building of a new synagogue. In our opinion, however, a historicizing reconstruction of the main Bornplatz-Synagogue does not seem to be the right approach, for a number of reasons. We therefore deem it necessary for all interested social groups, institutions, and individuals to take part in a broad, open, and public discussion on the pros and cons of this project, alternate forms of its realization, or different possibilities as how to fulfill the desire of the Jewish communities for a representative centre at a central location in our city.

1. The reconstruction of historic buildings destroyed by war or political acts of violence is a questionable endeavour. History cannot be undone, but rather must be accepted as fact so that lessons can be drawn from it.
2. Constructing a historical replica of the Bornplatz-Synagogue is particularly problematic because it would make the results of criminal actions invisible and thereby obscure the memory of this crime. A reconstruction could quickly cease to be a reminder of victory over National Socialism by, instead, creating the illusion that 'nothing had ever happened'.
3. A reconstruction of the synagogue at its former site would destroy a venue central to the 'memorial culture' of Hamburg, which has acquired this significance not only through official public ceremonies but also through the devotion to it of the former Jewish community, the 'Association of Former Citizens of Hamburg in Israel' and many current social groups as well as individuals from Hamburg. In addition, the air-raid shelter erected immediately next to it would have to be demolished, which, as a protected building, serves to remind us both of the devastating bomb attacks as well as, by its location, of the interrelation between this war and the Holocaust.
4. In 1906, the Jews of Hamburg were at the height of their times with the historic style of architecture of their synagogue (cf. the neo-Renaissance Town Hall of 1896/97 and the neo-Baroque central office of the Trade Unions of 1906). In addition, in 1931, the Liberal Jewish Community, through its Temple in Oberstrasse, demonstrated its support for the 'Modern Style'. These days, however, a reconstruction of the Old Synagogue directly linking itself to the 'Wilhelminian' original would be in diametric contrast to the progressive character of the former Jews of Hamburg. Such a reversion to 'Wilhelminian' architecture should not be the model for the present. Instead, we should find a contemporary answer to the current needs of both the Jewish community and our urban society.
5. The artist Margrit Kahl's ground-level mosaic delineating the vaulting and the floor plan of the destroyed synagogue with black and grey tesserae, is only *one* part of the monument. The other one is the empty space created by the demolition of the Great Synagogue, which, by the simultaneous presence and absence of the synagogue, creates a 'Denkraum', a room for thought and reflection (cf. Julia Mummenhoff in an official description by the Hamburg Department of Culture). The mosaic, therefore, cannot just simply be moved or integrated into a new building because this relationship is a fundamental part of this place of remembrance. This empty space, with its ground floor mosaic in lieu of the vanished synagogue, always arouses deep emotions among visitors, whether they be schoolchildren or guests from abroad.

6. The artistic rights of Margrit Kahl, the creator of this ground-level monument, a public work of art, must also be respected; in 1988, she could not have expected that her work would only last for thirty years.

This mosaic is regarded as one of Margrit Kahl's most important works and is appreciated in many international publications, among others in the digital photographic archives of Yad Va-Shem in Jerusalem. A destruction of this mosaic would considerably diminish her artistic legacy and estate, administered by the 'Forum für Künstlernachlässe', and disregard and destroy part of our cultural heritage.

7. Some people argue that only the Jewish Community should determine the location and the architectural form of the synagogue. This could be interpreted as meaning that the Jewish Community regards itself as cut off from our urban society. But as we are concerned with a project of considerable importance both for urban development and our memorial culture, there should be a public process of negotiation with a diversity of Jewish and non-Jewish voices. Urban construction is the result of an integration of many social interests and points of view.

8. According to the current Jewish community, the aim of the reconstruction of the Bornplatz-Synagogue is for this project to act as a reminder of what Hamburg's Jewry once was – a very significant community that was eliminated through the Shoah. To ensure this truly occurs, those who are most in need of being reminded of that past, the non-Jewish Germans, should participate in the project.

9. Contemporary examples of new synagogues in Constance, Gelsenkirchen, Munich, or Dresden show how Jewish communities can translate their needs into current architectural styles reflecting the era of their creation. Thus, the present main synagogue at Hohe Weide, officially opened in 1960, stands as a model of sacral architecture of its time.

10. Even within the Jewish community there are critical voices pleading for a reconsideration of this reconstruction project (cf. the contributions by Peggy Parnass and Michael Rodzynek in the local paper 'Hamburger Abendblatt' of December 1st and 7th, 2020, as well as several interviews with Prof. Miriam Rürup). These voices, too, should be listened to in the forthcoming discussion process.

11. With its slogan 'Against antisemitism – In favour of the Bornplatz-Synagogue' the campaign promoting the reconstruction of this synagogue is conflating two subjects which do not automatically belong together. People can *object* with good justification to a historic reconstruction of the Bornplatz-Synagogue and at the same time *support* no less ardently the fight against antisemitism.

By presenting these arguments we want to encourage a process of discussion. Supporting Jewish life means, among other things, allowing both Jewish and non-Jewish voices to be heard and to debate with one another. That is why we do not just argue against the historic reconstruction but strongly in favour of a wide discussion about how Jewish life in the Grindel-district can be reimagined and created in an up-to-date, future-oriented form, taking into account the existing local realities.

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