

Conference Impressions by Silvia Planas

of the Annual Conference of the Association of European Jewish Museums in Munich and Hohenems, 16-19 November 2013

You are where you thoughts are. Try having your thoughts wherever you want to be.

This quote by Nahman of Breslav (17th century, Ukraine) can be a good reference for analysing the idea linked to the title of the conference held in the cities of Munich and Hohenems:

Where we are. Site. Space. Context.

The Conference took place at the Jewish museums of Hohenems and Munich and provided the participants with very interesting information on various aspects of museum design as well as theoretical discourse and contents of Jewish museums. In addition, it was also an effective way to get in touch with different worldwide museum designs concerning Jewish culture. The organization, perfect in every aspect from logistics to content planning, proposed us to consider the close interrelationship that exists between a museum and its location. A location that is both physical and spatial, but also contextual and even temporary. How is the museum introduced in its context? How is the reality that surrounds it being projected? How is it linked to the space in which it is situated? What is its involvement regarding the urban growth, the history of its location, the museum's development within its context?

The presentation of the Museum of Jewish History in Girona (Catalonia, Spain) at the Conference offered an opportunity to show our project, to be allowed to explain us beyond our own physical context and our social and historical environment. Being a museum that collects, preserves and spreads the history of a Jewish community in a place where Jewish life has been missing for more than 500 years, our centre has very special characteristics quite different from other Jewish museums, except the Museo Sefardí in Toledo, which case is similar to ours despite having another perspective and museum displaying programme. While almost every museum represented at the Conference has a recent historical context in which they include its explanations based on the history of a Jewish community that lived in that place until less than a century ago (and in many cases they came back after the Shoah), Girona's museum is projected in a space empty of this direct contact. Therefore, it's a museum built on memories, on forgotten and rescued stories, on thoughts that are from the present projected into the past, seeking to recover this history. It is a place that takes in thoughts in order to give a meaning to willpower, a fact reflected in the recovery of a part of our own memory.

Through some of the examples presented at the Conference it became clear that the site, context and environment define the museum and its speech. Among several cases, all of them very interesting, I could highlight some, only because of their similarities with our experience. For example, the presentation of the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam regarding the "Open Jewish Houses" project was very exciting, as it made us think about the importance of the physical and conceptual space in which the museum design is conceived. In this case, the

museum goes outside on the streets and builds an identity speech with the collaboration of Amsterdam's city council and its residents. This speech is based on personal stories, private and individual, which are inserted into a context of daily life, a temporary and urban space, where they create a collective history. The location and its context both affect the creation of this history based on stories belonging to the people who lived there, during a very precise time: World War II and the Nazi repression.

Another upcoming event, despite the enormous temporal historical and conceptual distance with Girona's museum is the project presented for Oshpitzin. This proposes a museum discourse by using basically new technologies that allows the recognition of areas that in the past were considered as areas of Jewish life. The approach of the project allowed me to understand what it could mean to experiment through implementing a very difficult concept in a museographical available and understandable system: right next to the death camp, until very shortly before installing the horror as the perpetual memory of the place, there was a Jewish life, then it was exterminated at Auschwitz. Again, place and context surround and define the concept of the Museum.

The workshops were equally productive and interesting, also focusing on the theme of the site, space and context. The workshop devoted to educational practice proposed a special and difficult question: try to make yourselves feeling uncomfortable in the museum or visiting the museum. And from there, try to think what things, situations or issues within your museum can cause discomfort and, therefore, reject potential visitors: an interesting experience of internal and external reflection.

The organization predicted a series of activities also maintained a close relationship with the purpose of the meeting: *Site, Space, Context*. And so we had the opportunity to visit the Kunsthau Bregenz (Austria), through a fantastic exhibition of Barbara Kruger, called *Believe + Doubt*. As if it were a part of the academic program of the Conference, the exhibition also speaks of the place, location, context, and individual and collective integration into the environment. Beyond that, though, the museum itself is closely related to the context and the environment. This could grasp thanks to the precious explanations of our guide, who referred several times to clear the relationship between the building, structure, and content. It was presented as a relationship that woven from a very specific and not arbitrary use of light, capturing this within the exhibition space, and the relationship of this exhibition space outside, the magnificent nature that is the surrounding of the lake and everything that arises from it.

As the end of the trip, we were offered the full experience of living around the Jewish Museum Hohenems, and thus, to understand how context influences content, seen as a long history of coexistence survives adversity temporary and is embodied in the streets and spaces around the museum, and with the same intensity inside the museum. The Jewish Museum Hohenems offers a delicate, interesting, friendly, comfortable and instructive exhibition, being a place that collects, preserves and disseminates the history and also induces to think over history. It is a museum that demonstrates, in the way to close the circle, that our stories and we become real only where we deposited our thoughts.

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