

Turner Temple Memory Site

SEARCHING FOR A REFLEXIVE ARCHAEOLOGY

The History of the Turner Temple

The Turner Temple was built in 1871/72, based on plans by Karl König. It was the third synagogue in Vienna after the main temple in Seitenstettengasse and the temple in Leopoldstadt. The building replaced a provisional house of prayer at today's Sperrgasse 9 and was an important object of identification and a symbol of the autonomy of the Jewish community of Sechshaus, which had become independent of the city's parent community in 1867. The construction of the temple was realized with the Sechshaus Jewish community's own resources by a supreme effort only a few years after the Austrian Jews had been granted equal rights as citizens.

In the night of the November pogrom of 1938, Nazis started with burning books and sacred objects on the forecourt of the synagogue. Finally, they also set the temple on fire. The firemen called to the site only protected the surrounding houses by preventing the fire to spread. The property was Aryanized in 1940 and went to a haulage contractor who built a garage on the remnants of the temple ruin that had been pulled down in the meantime. The garage was extended in the 1950s; a gas station was erected at the site of the former main sanctuary. The erstwhile community center located next to the temple was only pulled down in 1973, when the City of Vienna purchased the property and built a residential block there.

The Genesis of the Memory Site

"This is the former site of a synagogue. It was burnt down and destroyed by fanatic supporters of Hitler's regime in the 'Night of Broken Glass.' Never forget!" For a long time, these few words on a commemorative plaque not visible from the street were the only public reference reminding us of one of the formerly most important synagogues of Vienna and its destruction by the Nazis.

In 2010, KÖR – Kunst im öffentlichen Raum Wien initiated a competition which not just aimed at creating a present-day symbolic memory site on the premises of the destroyed temple that would tell of the history of the temple and its importance for the Jewish inhabitants of the district, as well as of its destruction and its repression. The site should also be accessible for today's inhabitants and be used as a meeting place.

The competition had been preceded by initiatives of Agentur dielooop and Verein cobra and their recognition and exploration of the remarkable Jewish history of the district as an integral part of life before 1938.

The jury decided that the project submitted by the team Auböck + Kárász and Andraschek & Lobnik should be realized.

The Design of the Memory Site

A web of black concrete beams was chosen as the central design element for the memory site. It symbolizes the collapsed, burst and burnt roof truss of the Turner Temple, which the Nazis set fire to in the night of the November pogrom of 1938. The graphic effect of the web opens up the square, structures it, and provides a furnishing element for the site. The stairs all around define the square as a meeting place.

Colorful floor mosaics forge a bridge between the tragic past and today's optimism. They show fruits, plants and leaves, pomegranates, figs, olives, and dates. These fruits are fruits from the south that are mentioned in the torah and are of specific importance in the Jewish religious calendar. They may be understood as leftovers from or starters of a festive meal and recall the destruction of the synagogue and what happened to the neighborhood's Jewish citizens. They also invite to participate in a new coexistence of people of different provenance and religion.

The designers of the square, Auböck + Kárász und Andraschek & Lobnik, wanted “to create a memory site which would make the events that took place there in 1938 visible and graspable in their full vehemence at first sight or, for a beginning, simply convey an unusual and irritating experience. A place which does not hide or cover up anything. A site set off against its environs. A site of contemplation and mourning. The place was to unfold its beauty, draw a picture, and create a space at the same time – to reveal the past and open up the future. A place both simple and complex.”

The Architect of the Turner Temple

The temple’s architect Karl König was born into a Jewish family in Vienna in 1841. He ranks among the chief exponents of Viennese late Historicism. His parents had come to Vienna from Bratislava shortly before his birth. König’s talent as a draftsman was recognized and encouraged quite early on. He attended the Imperial and Royal Polytechnical Institute, the later Technische Hochschule, and studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Friedrich Schmidt’s master class. His brilliant perspective drawings made Heinrich Ferstel aware of him. Ferstel held a professorship at the Polytechnical Institute, where a new chair for architecture had been established. The young Karl König became his assistant and thus began his long teaching career. König mainly devoted himself to studying the history of architecture. The first building he realized was the Turner Temple. In 1873 he was appointed associate professor and in 1875 full professor of Architectural Morphology. He left the Israelitische Kultusgemeinde to remain non-denominational. He succeeded Heinrich von Ferstel after his sudden death in 1883. In 1901 he was elected Rector of the Technische Hochschule. Karl König died of heart failure in 1915.

His most prominent buildings include the Philipp-Hof, which was located next to the Albertina and was destroyed in 1945, the Agricultural Products Exchange on Taborstraße, the Palais Herberstein on Herrengasse, and the House of Industry on Schwarzenbergplatz.