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Observations on  
architecture and the  
contemporary city

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## Gaza Strip

Three decades after World War II reduced many European cities to the rubble out of which modern high-rise housing arose, Charles Jencks declared that “Modern Architecture died in St. Louis, Missouri, on July 15, 1972, at 3:32 p.m. (or thereabouts), when the infamous Pruitt-Igoe scheme, or rather several of its slab blocks, were given the final *coup de grâce* by dynamite.” Jencks called for a “Post-Modern” architecture to rise from this rubble. Little more than three decades later, the punitive destruction in Gaza of Pruitt-Igoe’s typological antithesis – the ubiquitous single-family tract house – does not seal the death of suburbia at large. Neither does the ruin of entire cities in Louisiana and Mississippi signal their end. However, seeing houses reduced to rubble always implies catastrophe – social, political, or natural – and urges upon us the continual reinvention of architecture.

# 6

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# Disguised Visibilities: Dresden/“Dresden”

1. William A. Davis, “Dresden Builds a Future” *Boston Sunday Globe*, Travel Section, March 5, 2000. For a longer and more complete discussion, see Mark Jarzombek, “Urban Heterology: Dresden and the Dialectics of Post-Traumatic History,” *Studies in Theoretical and Applied Aesthetics* (Spring 2001): 1-92, and Jarzombek, “Bellotto’s Dresden: Framing the Dialectics of Porcelain,” *Thresholds* 25 (Fall 2002): 38-42.

A Boston newspaper headline recently proclaimed: “Dresden Builds a Future: German City Reconstructs its Demolished Past.”<sup>1</sup> We may well ask, what does it mean “to build a future”? What do we understand by a “German city”? Even the word *Dresden* is something of a conundrum, for the city actually consists of two cities, one on each side of the Elbe. On the north side, one finds Dresden Neustadt, which was laid out in 1732 over the ruins of the old medieval township that was destroyed in a massive conflagration in 1685. A good portion of the “New City” is now, ironically, the oldest part of Dresden, since sections of it were spared in the bombing raids of 1945. By contrast, the city that lies on the south side of the Elbe was almost completely destroyed in the war and then bulldozed away for what the socialist city fathers advertised as a “New Dresden,” built in a modernist manner. Dresden is now in the process of being worked over yet again, with this newest of the new Dresdens divided into two zones. The area near the train station is becoming a postmodern commercial center, while the area along the Elbe is becoming a kind of heritage site, with the Dresden castle, the ministry buildings, several museums, and the famed 18th-century baroque masterpiece, the Frauenkirche, all being rebuilt to their pre-World War II configurations.

Not only is the physical fabric being remade, but also the city’s image, one based, partly out of necessity, on multiple historical images of the city, which creates a complex interweaving and overlapping of competing, even contradictory, urban narratives. This comes sharply into focus in the movie shown to today’s tourists at the Transportation Museum located in the heart of the newly created heritage district. The film, *Das alte Dresden, in den 30er Jahren* (“Old Dresden, in the 1930s”), shows tourists riding through the city on sightseeing buses. With similar buses being used today for the same purpose, the film suggests a sense of continuity between the new and the old. However, not only are the destruction of the war kept out of view, but also the effects of socialist modernism. There are also profound gaps in the film’s representational structure. A disclaimer at the beginning of the film states that the viewer should realize it is



AN ADVERTISEMENT FOR *DAS ALTE DRESDEN, IN DEN 10ER JAHREN*. PHOTO COURTESY THE AUTHOR.

not a contemporary production, but it does not make apparent several factors. First, the film was made several decades ago, ironically enough by the socialist regime as an accusation against the West. Second, some of the movie's clips are from Nazi propaganda films, which might not be evident to the viewer. Though the film's primary purpose now is to serve as a "historical document" for a city that feels entitled, like any other, to a wholesome image of itself, the 1930s would have been portrayed very differently from the point of view of the Dresden Jews who were deported and exterminated.

Given the myriad slippery signifiers that are entangled in the construction of this new Dresden, I will limit my discussion to two particularly important buildings, the Frauenkirche and the nearby synagogue. I would like to move beyond the usual pronouncements about the "complexity" of the German situation to point to the lingering question of modernity, and above all, to insist that rebuilding and repairing, just as much as war and destruction, bring us to the heart of that question. Furthermore, modernity in all its shapes and forms – whether as a socialist obliteration of bourgeois culture or a capitalist-inspired restoration of history and normalcy – is always and foremost a historiographic force. In other words, history requires the techniques of modernity to move forward to the same degree that modernity requires the techniques of history. This dialectical tension need not always require a condition of trauma as its energizer, but trauma, nonetheless, brings it into the open as a philosophical challenge to our age. How does one locate history's discourse within the framework of modernity's operations if modernity – writ large in the form of architecture – has already preempted that effort?

After the war, most Dresdeners assumed that the Frauenkirche would eventually be rebuilt, but it did not happen; rebuilding churches was not part of the socialist utopia. Instead, in the 1970s, once it was clear nothing was going to be done, the ruins, by then a heap of blackened stones, were designated an official memorial to Allied atrocities. When the government of reunified Germany made the decision to rebuild the church, the announcement opened a floodgate of remembrances, not only about the circumstances of its destruction, but also about the so-called second destruction of the city by the socialist regime.<sup>2</sup> Overnight, the Frauenkirche became the symbol of the city's rebirth, which was highlighted by the return of religion after decades of "godless" socialist rule. Time was of the essence,

2. See, for example, Jürgen Paul, "Dresden: Suche nach der verlorenen Mitte," in *Neue Städte aus Ruinen* (Munich: Prestel, 1992), 333.



THE REBUILT FRAUENKIRCHE INCORPORATES THE DARK STONES SAVED FROM THE ORIGINAL CHURCH.  
PHOTOS: JÖRG SCHÖNER.



since the city fathers wanted the church rebuilt for the grand celebration of the city's eighth centennial in 2006. The task was thus undertaken in the mid-1990s with the help of the advanced computer modeling system CATIA, which the French company Dassault Systèmes developed in the early 1980s for the design of the complex three-dimensional surfaces of fighter jets. With CATIA, the metal pieces of the planes could be designed on the computer and then sent directly to computer-driven machinery for manufacture. In the case of the Frauenkirche, the new stones could be sized and cut to perfection and then delivered to the site, where they could then be "hand assembled" by masons.

One of the main problems of reconstruction was what

to do with the old stones, which had to be purged from their association with the socialist-era counter-memorial. The builders separated, measured, analyzed, and then retooled the stones so that they could be placed into the fabric of the new walls of the church at the very spot where they once belonged. Though preservationists called this a “critical restoration,” the placement of most of these stones was arbitrary. Some stones were parts of capitals and moldings, but most were just generic blocks that could be – and indeed were – put anywhere. What started as an honest attempt to make a building with an embedded memory became an aesthetic act governed by the positivistic conceits of the restorers. Perhaps more to the point, the stones sprinkled across the facade became pawns in the random-placement algorithm of a computer program that released them from the gravitas of their historical situation. Who would have thought that rootless capitalism could ever be so elegantly portrayed?

Controversy about the Frauenkirche filled many pages in the German press, but it was largely an either/or debate.<sup>3</sup> Did one want to celebrate the German capacity for a “critical” resolution to a “difficult” problem, or did one want to keep an ostensibly “real,” but ideologically irrelevant and visually displeasing memorial in the center of town? The forces of politics and capital guaranteed the success of the former. But then where, one may ask, can citizens mourn their dead or reflect on the painful events at a human and secular level, away from a state-sponsored, technologically enhanced, and ideologically purified memorial? There is such a place, but it has been largely overlooked by official historians. On the busy Sophienstrasse, next to the castle, one encounters *Trauernder Mann* (Mourning Man), by the Dresden-born sculptor Wieland Förster.<sup>4</sup> It depicts a man with his knees pulled up tightly to cover his face in a way that was intended by the artist to express not only grief but also shame. Like Niobe, the Queen of Thebes in Greek mythology who averts her face in silent grief, *Trauernder Mann* evokes the anguish of a self-inflicted tragedy. Initially, during the socialist regime, the statue was rejected by the city fathers, but in the 1980s, with the arrival of glasnost, permission was granted for its display.<sup>5</sup> Though many socialist-era sculptures were removed after Germany’s reunification, this one survived the cleansing because it was not considered overtly ideological.

In our current phraseology, the statue qualifies as both a memorial *and* a counter-memorial. It is classical and respect-

3. The controversy, which peaked in 1990, is a complex one. See, for example, Jürgen Paul, “Eine Wiedergutmachung an Dresden: Die widerhergestellte Kuppel der Frauenkirche gäbe der Stadt ein Stück geschichte zurück,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 290 (December 1990). In comparison, see Manfred Sack, “Sterben und sterben lassen: Über den Umgang mit Ruinen und mit dem Verfall,” *Die Zeit* 33 (August 10, 1990). Christiane Hertel has discussed this controversy in detail in “Reconstructing Dresden,” an unpublished essay, which will be included in her book *Laocöon as Rocaille: Essays on Art and Critique in Eighteenth-Century Germany*.  
 4. Wieland Förster was born in 1930 in Dresden. He studied sculpture at the HfBK in Dresden from 1953 to 1958. He now lives in Berlin.  
 5. Peter H. Feist, “Denkmalplastik in der DDR von 1945 bis 1990,” in *Denkmale und kulturelles Gedächtnis nach dem Ende der Ost-West-Konfrontation* (Berlin: Akademie der Künste, 1999), 194.

WIELAND FÖRSTER, *TRAUERNDER MANN* (MOURNING MAN), 1985.  
PHOTO COURTESY THE AUTHOR.



ful, and yet because its referent is not only the war but also the socialist optic, it might be perceived by some as unsettling. The West likes to think it has mastered the trauma of war and the techniques of repair more effectively than the socialist regime that it has replaced. But socialist modernity, especially in this muted and classical form, should not be denied a rightful place in the space of urban reflection. Its siting will be critical in this respect. Originally *Trauernder Mann* was in Georg-Treu-Platz, only a few steps from the Frauenkirche. However, it was moved to the more remote Sophienstrasse because of construction work in the area. Though it is likely that the statue will be returned to Georg-Treu-Platz, I would argue that it should be placed at a point equidistant from the Frauenkirche and the nearby synagogue. I would also argue that this equidistance be pointed out to the viewer, so that the statue can be seen as a place where one can indeed experience both grief and shame.

I make these assertions mainly to critique the tendency to construct urban history to parallel state-supported discourses. Heinz Quinger's guide to the city's art and architecture, for example, mentions in its very first sentence the wartime destruction of the city, but without any mention of its Nazi past or the complete destruction of Dresden's Jewish community. This is certainly not out of any disrespect, but his image of the new post-reunification Dresden is built, once again, almost entirely around the narrative of its destruction and rebuilding, with the intervening socialist phase interpreted as an anti-image that can more or less be ignored when thinking of "Dresden" in cultural and artistic terms. *Trauernder Mann* is only briefly mentioned.<sup>6</sup> Another book, *Dresden, a City Reborn*, deals with a broad spectrum of

6. Heinz Quinger, *Dresden und Umgebung: Geschichte und Kunst der sächsischen Hauptstadt* (Cologne: DuMont, 1993), 152.

7. John Soane, "The Renaissance of Dresden after 1985" and "Dresden: Its Destruction and Rebuilding, 1945-85," in *Dresden, A City Reborn*, ed. Anthony Clayton and Alan Russell (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 110 and 80, 83. Much of Soane's work, rooted in solid scholarship, constitutes an important contribution to our understanding of the history of the city. But Soane's obvious disdain for the socialist period, though understandable, makes it difficult to accept the book as a way to read the current situation in Dresden. Soane teaches at South Bank University in London, where a technical committee has been established for the purpose of managing the manufacture of the great golden orb and cross.

8. The film, which has since been recovered, was shown as part of the kick-off campaign for rebuilding the synagogue.

9. Leo Schlageter was an artillery officer during World War I. He had joined the Nazi Party, which was founded in 1920, at an early stage. His membership card bore the number 61. When the French occupied the Ruhr in 1923, Schlageter helped to organize resistance on the German side. He and his companions blew up a railway bridge to make the transport of coal to France more difficult. For his part in the action, Schlageter, who was captured by the French, was condemned to death. He refused to disclose the identity of those who issued the order to blow up the bridge, and was shot by a French firing squad on May 26, 1923. The renaming of Rathenau Platz as Schlageterplatz was of course a calculated one. His bombing of the bridge was thus linked with the destruction of the synagogue.

Dresden's history, but, written by English scholars, with an introduction by the Duke of Kent, it dutifully lauds the English contribution to the rebuilding of the Frauenkirche. The church's new golden orb, made by English craftsmen and personally handed over to the city by the duke himself, is featured in the only color plate in the first edition of the book. In contrast, socialist art is described as "primitive," and socialist attitudes toward history as based on "scandalous neglect" verging on "ideological desecration."<sup>7</sup> Clearly, one ideological bias has superseded another.

Another set of urban aporias arises at the city's synagogue, which, though close to the Frauenkirche, lies just a few meters outside the restoration zone, a placement that reveals the artificiality – if not the modernity – of that "restoration" project. Though it is no longer part of Dresden's famous skyline, the original structure, designed in 1840 by Gottfried Semper, once formed the eastern anchor of Dresden's Elbe silhouette, the western edge having been defined by Semper's opera house. Though Semper's synagogue may never have been as remarkable a piece of architecture as the opera, it represented in real and visual terms the integration of Jews into German culture that had occurred in the second half of the 19th century. It was precisely the synagogue's historical and architectural significance, as well as its location, that caused the Nazis to vent their fury against it with such venom. In Nazi eyes, it was the only blemish on an otherwise ideal German skyline. They not only burned the synagogue on *Reichspogromnacht* but also blasted away its remains while making a military training film on how to "scientifically" demolish buildings.<sup>8</sup> To add insult to injury, Rathenau Platz, onto which the synagogue had fronted, was renamed Schlageterplatz after Leo Schlageter, one of the earliest members of the Nazi party.<sup>9</sup> He was viewed by the Nazis as among the first martyrs to the Nazi cause, having been arrested and shot in 1923 by the French for detonating a bridge in protest of the French occupation of the Alsace. His deed resonated triumphantly over the devastated synagogue site.

Though the socialists erected an elegant memorial to the extermination of Dresden's Jews on the site, with reunification, it was decided to build a new synagogue, even though almost all of the 60 Jews then living in Dresden had come from Russia and had only a limited knowledge of the rituals of their religion. But the government pressed ahead, with Saxony's Minister-President Kurt Biedenkopf reminding Dresdeners that the synagogue needed to be built not only<sup>as</sup>



VIEW OF THE DRESDEN SYNAGOGUE BY WANDEL HOEFER LORCH + HIRSCH. RIGHT: THE COMMUNITY CENTER IN THE FOREGROUND, DESIGNED BY THE SAME ARCHITECTS, SITS ACROSS FROM THE SYNAGOGUE. PHOTOS: NORBERT MIGULETZ.



10. Kurt Biedenkopf, "Construction of the Dresden Synagogue" from a brochure advertising the new synagogue, "My House shall be called a House of Prayer for all Peoples," 1996. Biedenkopf made a similar remark in a speech to the first meeting of the Association of Sponsors in 1997.

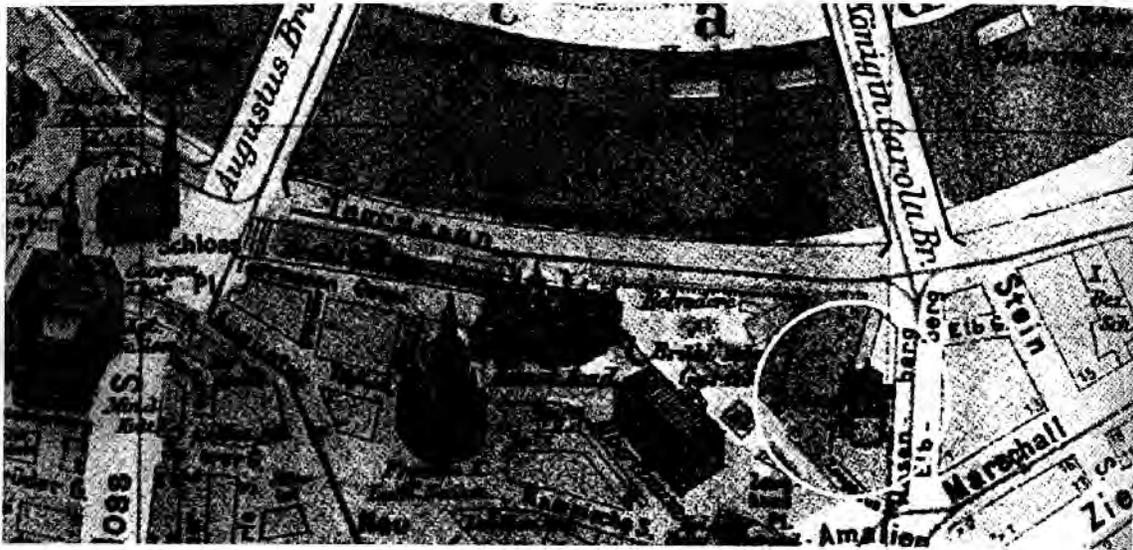
11. Henry Landsberger, who was born in Dresden, and whose grandfather was the rabbi of the synagogue before the war, has been instrumental in organizing the campaign for the new synagogue. Parallel projects are also underway in cities like Darmstadt, Ulm, and of course, Berlin. The Dresden-Meissen Diocese raised \$50,000 for the construction of the synagogue. *The Catholic News* reported that in Dresden, "Today, we have a chance to do things differently and can dare to attempt to make amends."

12. The judges, under the chairmanship of Professor Karljoseph Schattner, originally awarded Wandel Hoefler Lorch + Hirsch, a firm from Saarbrücken, third prize, with Livio Vacchini of Locarno and Heinz Tesar of Vienna coming in first and second. Discussions with the congregation changed the order.

a symbol of justice and restitution, but also because it had once been an "an important element in the picture of the city."<sup>10</sup> What, then, is the nature of that "picture" today?

Though the site of the new synagogue is the same as the old, Semper's building could not be reconstituted, since the site had been altered by the construction of a socialist-era bridge embankment.<sup>11</sup> The new building, designed by the architectural firm Wandel Hoefler Lorch + Hirsch from Saarbrücken and completed in 2002, consists of two almost prismatic boxes facing each other over an open courtyard.<sup>12</sup> One box twists as it rises, so that its top is oriented toward Jerusalem. In the courtyard between the two boxes, the architects, in an effort to introduce the site's "memory" into the design, delineated the footprint of Semper's synagogue. The building's client was the State of Saxony, given that the few immigrant Jews living in Dresden were in no position to help fund the project.

The building was well received in the professional press, but as an uncompromising statement of formal purity, it sets in play a series of problems that, though perhaps inadvertent, are nonetheless troubling. For example, it is not mandated by Jewish law or custom that a synagogue face Jerusalem. It should, if possible, face east. It seems that the designers confused Judaism with Islam and its mandate that mosques must face Mecca. An even more complex problem stems from the bold modern design. Unlike the rebuilt churches and palaces of the city center, which will regain at least visually their "age-value," as Alois Riegl might have put it, the synagogue's modernity will always point to the problematic of Jewish otherness. The Jews, invited to strike new



MAP SHOWING THE LOCATION OF THE SYNAGOGUE (CIRCLED) AND OTHER NOTABLE BUILDINGS, INCLUDING THE FRAUENKIRCHE. FROM A PAMPHLET PUBLISHED BY FÖRDERVEREIN BAU DER SYNAGOGUE DRESDEN, 2002. IMAGE COURTESY THE AUTHOR.

roots in Dresden, are given a visibly modern building, whereas all other Dresdeners can reclaim their “identity” in the recreated historical context of the city center. In other words, the synagogue does not belong – and will never belong – to the “picture” of the reconstructed silhouette. The building’s alien and twisted form is not lost on the neo-Nazis, who have a strong representation in Dresden. Even though the building is under 24-hour military guard, someone managed to scrawl a swastika on its surface on opening day.

The synagogue’s situation is not made any better by its immediate urban context, which includes several other examples of what one could label as “unwanted modernities.” The cornice of the synagogue, for example, lines up with the imposing facade of the neighboring former Reichsbank, designed in 1928 by Heinrich Wolf, who became an important Nazi-era architect. That building, clad in the same soft yellowish sandstone as the synagogue, suffered only slightly during World War II, and is now being restored. The synagogue also blends in with the socialist-era housing blocks down the street. In fact, this set of three buildings constitutes an urban profile all its own, one that puts the Jews, the Nazis, and the socialists into a visual and historiographic relation that contrasts with the uniformly neo-historicist core of Dresden.

In essence, the new synagogue and the reconstructed Frauenkirche, each at the center of contrasting urban silhouettes, are symbolic of two different events, the Holocaust and the bombing of German cities during World War II. Both buildings are specifically designed as a resolution to the trauma of the past, and in that regard, both, one can say, do the honorable thing and deserve some credit. Nonetheless, both

are bound up with a catastrophe of another kind. In the case of the Frauenkirche, Saxony gave itself a neo-historical reconstruction, in which the past is officially honored and dutifully abstracted. Though a modern building, the advanced technology used to reproduce its baroque forms magically disappears into the rhetoric of progress, innovation, and nostalgia. In the case of the synagogue, the state gave the Jews the cruel beneficence of a patently unresolved, and unresolvable, modernity. The Jews of Dresden, such as they are, will be asked – one could even say “forced” – to be Jewish. Assimilation is impossible.

The two buildings contradict the very thing they set out to heal, each displaying the inherent disjuncture between architecture and its fate to be forever within the entrapments of modernity. To go to Dresden and see the new Frauenkirche only as healing the trauma of the war, when in actuality it tries to heal the traumas of socialist secularism and capitalist technology, and to see the synagogue as healing the trauma of the Holocaust, when in actuality it returns the city to the trauma of modernism, is to overlook the complex aporias of the city’s urban self-reflections. For over and against the city known as Dresden there looms a more complicated “Dresden,” one that stands before us not as a “German” problem, but as a more fundamental urban problem having to do with a dialectic that, in the form of confusions, proximities, and fated overlappings – as well as in the slippery realm of ethical pronouncements and obligations – constitutes the flesh and blood of all modern urban life. Navigating through this heterological system is the burden of both the citizen and the historian.<sup>13</sup>

The irony is that the text against which that episteme articulates itself is something that no fiction writer could have imagined. Who, in the early 1930s, could have believed that something like the Holocaust would take place? Who, even in the early 1940s, could ever have thought that Dresden would be destroyed in the war? Who could ever have thought that Dresden would afterward be bulldozed into oblivion? And who, even in the 1980s, would ever have thought that the city would be part of a united Germany and that it would be rebuilt in the blink of an eye? The city, as the register of these fantastical events, becomes the locus of a memory to which no one person can ever have access, for it only succeeds as memory when we are challenged to enter the shadows of our own various modern subjectivities. What is needed, therefore, is an insistent deconstruction of the differences between fiction and reality that also exposes the

13. Important for me in this respect is Werner Fläch, *Negation und Andersheit: Ein Beitrag zur Problematik der Letztimplikation* (Munich: Ernst Reinhardt, 1959).

illusions on which our urban epistemologies are constructed.

In thinking of the city, one must, therefore, resist reducing modernism to a negative, or to the level of a “trauma,” that stands in a presumed temporal opposition to meaning, memory, and history. Instead, one must see cities as a transformational work operating out of, and on behalf of, various modernizing *and* historiographic forces which have not one but many diverse articulations and presences. Their torts, both real and imaginary, require a compensatory probing that holds in suspension the narrations of trauma. A critical urban epistemology would begin *and end* with this problem, and thus with the city’s struggle to continuously relocate itself in its representational history.<sup>14</sup> To paraphrase Adorno, changing his word *art* to my words *the city*, one can say that the city desires to be what has not yet been, even though everything that the city is has already been. Playing one end of this scenario against the other to expose the paradox of modernity as something “built despite itself” is no doubt little more than a theoretical project, but it is a form of action in its own right. For only in understanding the city in this way, from the inside out as well as from the outside in, do we come to respect the dialectics of incompleteness. The contemporary city as a humanistic construct may not be all that we hoped for, but as a construct that reflects the necessarily incomplete geographies of history, it is more than one could ever have imagined.

14. I am not championing some cynically open-ended ideological scheme of multiplicity. Rather I want to highlight the system of exchanges and mis-exchanges between architecture as a discipline and architecture as an element in public discourse. Both politics and the art object fall short under the basic rules of this game, but this does not mean that the historian has to give up the principle of objectivity, or the premise of critical action. It does mean, however, that just as objectivity has to remain both grounded *and* ungrounded, the historian has to accept a degree of ambiguity between what he or she does as “a historian,” and the multiple locations of “history” in contemporary politics. The synagogue project in Dresden, trapped in a similar in-between space, becomes the perfect metaphor for this problem. A final figure of importance in this respect is Hans Gadamer, who, in studying Plato in *Wahrheit und Methode*, elaborates on the prioritization of the question over the answer. I end with Adorno, however, because I feel that the idea of a negative dialectic more accurately frames the paradox of, on the one hand, wanting to express something without being able to and, on the other hand, of being able to express something without wanting to.

MARK JARZOMBEK IS DIRECTOR OF THE HISTORY, THEORY, AND CRITICISM SECTION OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ARCHITECTURE AT MIT, WHERE HE HAS TAUGHT SINCE 1995.