Taking care and installing architectural landmarks serve both to indicate a traumatic event and to keep it alive in the collective memory. The Babyn Yar Synagogue captures one of the deadliest Jewish holocaust executions in Ukraine, by making the memorial architecture an active space that unites the massacre with the current Jewish presence and culture at the site. Thus, remembering would involve both caring for the collective and taking care so as not to repeat the horrors of the past.

Babyn Yar is a wooded area with a deep ravine located west of Kyiv, Ukraine, that used to mark the edge of the city. It is the site of one of the worst massacres of the Nazi regime: approximately 35,000 Jews were shot and killed by German troops between September 29 and 30, 1941. Over the following weeks and months an additional 100,000 Jews, Soviet war prisoners, communists, Ukrainian nationalists, Romani people and patients of a nearby psychiatric hospital were murdered on the grounds of Babyn Yar. A ‘holocaust by bullets,’ it represents one of the worst atrocities of our modern era.

The territory of Babyn Yar is marked by gorges and an accentuated topography. It was precisely this topography that the SS officers utilized, killing tens of thousands of people without having to excavate mass graves. A new topography of death and murder was created. Thus, the very soil of Babyn Yar can be considered as sacred.

Over the following years, and during the Soviet era, the topography of Babyn Yar was repeatedly altered. Parts of the ravine still exist, but other parts have been flattened. Today the area is used as a city park. Only a few memorials within Babyn Yar speak of the horror that took place on the site.
Planta emplazamiento / Site plan
E. / S. 1:1.000

LEYENDA / LEGEND
1. Sinagoga / Synagogue
2. Edificio Seminario / Seminar Building
3. Memorial Menorah / Menorah Memorial

Axonométrica / Axonometric drawing
S. E. / N. S.

LEYENDA / LEGEND
1. Plataforma / Platform
2. Cielo raso con constelación de estrellas / Ceiling with star constellation
3. Balcón de mujeres / Women’s balcony
4. Escalera al balcón de mujeres / Stairs to women’s balcony
5. Aron ha-Kodesh
6. Ner tamid - Luz perpetua / Ner tamid - Eternal light
7. Bimah
8. Asientos / Seats
9. Columna Zitzit / Zitzit - column
10. Ventana / Window
11. Bendición de los sueños / Dream blessing
12. Sh’ma Yisrael
13. Bendición de la mañana / Morning blessing
14. Kaddish
The Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Foundation has started a process of implementing a series of small and large interventions over the subsequent years to commemorate the history of the site in all its complexity. The Babyn Yar Synagogue represents the first building of this initiative. It is conceived of as a synagogue that will commemorate the history, but also reestablish a living Jewish presence on the site today.

**The Design**

If we conceptualize the synagogue as a building typology we would consider it to be a book. During the religious service, a congregation comes together to collectively read a book – the Siddur (the book of prayers) or the Bible. The shared reading of the book opens a world of wisdom, morals, history and anecdotes to the congregation. It is this notion that informs the design of the new Babyn Yar Synagogue.

We combine this idea with a different type of book, something quite playful: the pop-up book, a magic book that unfolds into three dimensions. When we open this flat object – the book –, new worlds unfold that we could not have previously imagined. In a sense, the pop-up book can act as a metaphor for the Synagogue; furthermore, it triggers fascination: no one can resist the temptation of opening these books of wonders and exploring them. This quality of an unfolding ‘cabinet of wonder,’ is what the project aimed to accomplish.

The site is located among the trees, just behind an existing small monument, a Menorah dating from the early 1990s. The building sits on a wooden platform that hovers slightly above the ground. Great care was taken to avoid a deep foundation, so as not to disturb the existing soil. The building itself is a wooden construction with an inner steel framework. When closed, the building is flat and vertical, of approximately 8 m in width and 11 m in height. The building is manually opened, and then unfolds into the three-dimensional space of the synagogue. The opening process is a collective ritual, performed by the congregation as a manual and physical task, intentionally without the support of a motor. The unfolding space, with the Bimah (reading platform for the Torah) at the center, with its benches and balcony, is a new universe opened by reading the book as a community.

Its material is old oak wood, coming from all parts of Ukraine. This ensures that the building has a unifying quality, present even in its building material. The wood is over a hundred years old, which connects the time prior to the massacre, to the contemporary era.

The main prayers of the Jewish liturgy, such as the Sh’mi Yisrael, or the Kaddish, are written on the walls. But perhaps more surprisingly, other blessings such as the blessing for turning a nightmare into a good dream, are displayed on the main wall, above the “Aron ha-Kodesh,” the place where the bible scrolls are kept. This blessing was written on the walls of the historic Synagogue of Gwozdziec in Western Ukraine, from the
seventeenth century, and it is a perfect theme for the new synagogue.

The ceiling is painted with a myriad of symbols and iconography also referencing the interior of the historic synagogues of Ukraine. It celebrates a colorful universe that will become visible above the heads of the visitors. But these symbols have an additional meaning: together, they recreate the star constellation that was visible over Kyiv on the night of September 29, 1941. Thus, looking up into the ceiling of the new synagogue will create a subtle link to the night on which massacre took place. ARQ
Planta Sinagoga cerrada / Closed Synagogue plan
E. / S. 1:100
Open Synagogue plan
Elevación Sinagoga cerrada / Closed Synagogue Elevation  
E. / S. 1:100

Corte AA / AA Section  
E. / S. 1:100
Decoración de muros y cielo / Wall and ceiling decoration
Planta de techo y detalle de bisagra / Roof plan and hinge detail
S. E. / N. S.
Axonométrica técnica / Technical axonometric drawing
S. E. / N. S.
SINÁGOGA EN BABYN YAR
BABYN YAR SYNAGOGUE

Arquitectos / Architects: Manuel Herz Architects
Equipo de proyecto / Project team: Manuel Herz, Maxim Gabai, Ben Olschner, Isabella Pagliuca, Angeliki Giannisi
Ubicación / Location: Babyn Yar, Kiev, Ucrania
Cliente / Client: Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Foundation
Director creativo / Creative director: Ilya Khrzhanovsky
Supervisión del sitio / Site supervision: Oleksandr Laptev
Administración de proyecto / Project management: Oleksiy Makukhin

Ingeniería / Engineering: Dmytro Pisarevaliy, Yaroslav Novitskiy
Pintura de cielo / Ceiling painting: C.I.Form, Kyiv
Pintura de muro / Wall painting: Galina Andruschenko
Contratista general / General Contractor: Budsok, Kyiv
Superficie construida / Built area: 150 m²
Año de construcción / Construction year: 2021
Fotografía / Photography: Manuel Herz Architects

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Manuel Herz Architects is an architectural practice based in Basel, Switzerland. Its work focuses on research and operates on a very wide range of typologies, locations, and scales. Its completed projects include the Synagogue of Mainz, the Ballet Mécanique apartment building in Zurich, and a social housing project with a kindergarten in Lyon. Presently under development are a hospital in Tambacounda in eastern Senegal, a large-scale residential complex in Cologne, as well as other projects across Europe and Africa.