

Zvi Hecker. An Antique Book with New Pages

Wolfgang Pehnt

The Israeli architect Zvi Hecker is not one of those professionals who constantly rush from continent to continent for different projects. It is true, he has travelled extensively, but this was a destiny imposed by his condition as a Jew. Born in 1931 in a Cracow, he moved with his parents to Samarkand, returned to his native city at the end of the Second World War and then emigrated to Israel in 1950. After these obligatory voyages, he has also travelled of his own free will, teaching in Canada, the United States and Vienna. Today he has a studio in Tel Aviv and another in Berlin.

In the Sixties, Hecker built works together with Alfred Neumann, his teacher at the Technion of Haifa, and with his contemporary Eldar Sharon. The best-known result of this collaboration is the City Hall of Bat Yam (1960-63), in which the architects tackle a pressing issue of the Sixties, with polyhedral structures of crystals in dense stratifications. During this period they also built a small synagogue in the desert of Negev. The years to follow were less productive. More recently, Hecker has been able to construct three large, important works: the Heinz Galinski School in Berlin (1990-96), the Palmach Museum of the Socialist-Zionist Resistance Movement in Tel Aviv, not yet inaugurated, and the Jewish Community Center in Duisburg. The latter is the result of a competition involving six studios, won by Hecker in 1996, over prestigious competitors, including Daniel Libeskind.

In spite of his life of mobility, Hecker is not what you would call a global player, nor is he what stock market speculators would call a day trader. He remains unmoved by the fluctuations of the aesthetic opinion market. He asks questions of himself and others, and moves on only when he feels he has found a complete answer. Although he doesn't have a fetishist's taste for details, he repeated reworks his design, correcting and recorrecting: his German architect-contact Inken Baller knows this very well. Of his own initiative Hecker does not detach himself from his constructions, even when they are finished; and he is not indifferent to the criticism voiced regarding the rugged materials used for the Duisburg Center: exposed concrete, unpainted steel, zinc facings, unpolished stone. A poverty of materials imposed by the poverty of the budget. But in any case shiny elegance is not Hecker's cup of tea: if devotion and service to God are ancestral impulses of humanity, then shouldn't -mustn't- the place where they are practiced have archaic, primitive qualities?

Hecker's Jewish origins are called into play in an entire series of commissions, including the last three in Berlin, Tel Aviv and Duisburg. The industrial port city in the western part of the coal mining region, where the Ruhr and the Emscher flow into the Rhine, was a free city of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. The decline in mining activity has dealt it a hard blow: unemployment is higher here than in other regions. A Jewish community has existed in Duisburg since the 12th century. After the pogrom of 1938 and the Holocaust, its population, together with the Jews of Mülheim, was reduced to no more than sixty persons. The community began to grow again only thanks to the immigration of Russian-German Jews, and today it also includes another city of the Ruhr basin, Oberhausen. Its more than two thousand members can now make use of the Center on the Springwall of Duisburg.

Hecker approaches figures full of symbolism, but of geometric origin, with an open spirit and great freedom, as is customary in Central Europe. He has worked at length with the spiral, especially with the geometry of the sunflower, based on points of intersection of radii and arcs of a circle. This spiral movement generates, with its combination of rough materials, a residential building (1982-89) in Ramat-Gan, a suburb of Tel Aviv. In the school in Berlin, this figure is combined with that of a book with open pages: in Hebrew, the same word means both "book" and "school". This image, along with others, also lies at the base of the design for Duisburg: the plan, in fact, also is also a reminder of a star, or at least a part of one. Or perhaps the open fingers of a hand? Or a fan, opening to the outside world? Or a step of a Goliath crane, a remnant of the industrial past of the region in the wood freight yard of Duisburg?

Even in its exterior appearance the building in Duisburg cannot be summed up in a single, unified image. The dual radial disks that support it—five and a half of them, in number—are perforated at the ends, both above and in the elevation. Thus to create the effect of a sequence of open doors, contrasting with a definition in terms of space or volume: they are both, one penetrating the other. Those who from the exterior pass the sequence of doors follow a west-east itinerary leading from the secular parts to the sacred ones: to the synagogue.

In the Jewish Community Center of Duisburg the center of the circle, the hub of the wheel from which the dual disks radiate, does not form a tangible nucleus. Neither is it an accessible void, a space. Unlike the courtyard of the school by Hecker in the Grunewald of Berlin, here the access courtyard does not coincide with the nucleus that generates the geometric figure. In Duisburg the

point of gravitation of the plan is located in some undefined part of the surrounding terrain, in the midst of the old edification.

Ambivalence is one of the characteristics—and one of the qualities—of this new construction by Hecker. The architect avoids useless displays. The materials are not unusual: white stucco, concrete, wooden casings. The Jerusalem stone, imported from Israeli quarries, is used here in the red rather than the yellow tones, limited to the floorings and the parapets of the interior. The volumetric parameters of the building conform to those of the existing edification, whose random, banal qualities are appreciated by Hecker; here and there he even makes connections with it in terms of alignment or maximum height.

The edifice does not appear to have a main facade; even the entrance seems rather marginal. The visitors turn right, crossing an audaciously protruding transverse element (with the dwelling of the architect) and reaches a small internal courtyard. Somehow the entrance is found between the third and fourth radii, covered by a bridge faced in corrugated sheet metal. A solution that shocked the competition jury, but which Hecker insisted upon maintaining: he wanted the entrance to appear random, as he felt this was suitable for a community of the Diaspora.

With a certain informal air, the wings that contain all the necessary functions synagogue, multipurpose hall, administration, meeting rooms, apartments are nestled between the radii, taking the name of the street literally—"Springwall"—springing first forward, then back. As always, Hecker has conserved the pre-existing trees, incorporating them in the design. On the eastern side, a triangular prism is wedged between the last radii, as if the intermediate spaces were insufficient. This is the most important religious part of the complex, the synagogue, containing the ark of the Thora; Hecker would have liked to face it entirely in slate, but to cut costs he was forced to paint it black. Inside, the hall of the synagogue, with the traditional women's gallery, is partially veneered in lightwood, and partially faced in the Jerusalem stone, a reminder of the tablets of the Mosaic Law.

Hecker associates the five curves of the edifice with the various phases of coexistence between Jews and Germans: the first is the arrival of the Jewish community, the second its gatherings in the Burgplatz of Duisburg, the third the first stable place of prayer on the Universitätsstraße, the fourth the old synagogue on the nearby Junkernstraße, the fifth—facing east—the new beginning. Is this not truly a book of bricks, whose "pages" also stand for the first five letters of the Hebrew alphabet? For a culture that has not been able to define itself in terms of a territory, and which depended for its continuation, in exile, completely upon the written and interpreted word, the book represents the fundamental moment of unity. The wandering people could not carry the temple on its travels, but it could carry books. Now the book is also open in Duisburg.

The Community Center is one of the buildings that the Emscherpark International Architecture Exhibition has selected and presented in its closing year, 1999. It is also part of a renewal zone around the internal port of Duisburg with which the city, disadvantaged until today, wants to raise its status and initiate a program of structural change. Norman Foster has handled the regulatory plan for the new residential and service quarter, and Herzog & De Meuron have recovered and restructured old buildings in the zone. Foster and his studio have transformed the so-called Hafenforum, a former granary, into an office building. The Swiss architects have transformed a mill and warehouse to create the Küppersmühle, a contemporary art museum: of dubious value as an institution that encourages the ambitions of private collectors, but nevertheless an intelligent work of architectural transformation.

The complex by Hecker stands at the edge of the city park, which has also been reorganized, and extends into it. The park has been approached by the Israeli sculptor Dani Karavan as a "garden of remembrances". When the commission for the Center was assigned to Hecker, Karavan's plan was already well on its way to completion; this led to a certain friction between the artist and the architect. Alongside the many architectural relics Karavan has inserted in his park, Hecker's building imposes a strong presence, emanating its imaginary force lines well beyond its physical limits; force lines that Hecker would have liked to visually emphasize, with rows of bricks at ground level. This detail was not included. The "garden of remembrances" evokes the industrial past of the zone; now, thanks to the new Jewish Community Center, a fragment of religious and political history, with its high points and abysses, adds a further metaphysical dimension to the site.

Wolfgang Pehnt

Wolfgang Pehnt, "Zvi Hecker. An Antique Book with New Pages", in: Casabella, 675, February 2000