

The Memorial Museum of Jewish Culture in Prague. An Example of Urban Regeneration

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The theme of this paper regards the results of the main research activities carried out in the Architectural Design Laboratory. The last years of the Laboratory were dedicated to set up a research on a specific case study. The project site is the Old Town of Prague, the ancient Jewish Quarter called Josefov Ghetto with the cemetery and the synagogues and Klášter sv. Anežky České (the Convent with cloister and Church of St. Agnes of Bohemia). The project was supported by a series of analysis and investigation of cartographic, iconographic, and bibliography materials, which allowed us to investigate aspects regarding the urban history, the city and the particular context of application. This exploration about the context is compared to the potential of the place, the physical characteristics, the settlement structure's and the aesthetic characters. The analysis was related by different phases. The first phase involved a site inspection of the area for observing the main architectural buildings. This work was necessary for surveying properly the site and for investigating the current situation of the area. A second step was reserved for processing drawings, maps and three-dimensional models, which allowed us to reconstruct the context and the existing buildings. Finally, this process involved the architectural definition of the project, which integrated strategic choices of new settlement with the structural analysis and technological aspects. In any case the proposed design theme – the exhibition space – is an opportunity to consider this area in a more general reorganization and consolidation of the cultural town-centre. The project structure will take in consideration two important aspects: the relationship between the existing architectures and the water front and the strong characterization of the place, included between the oldest settlement of the city and the fortifications built in medieval times (Bromley *et al.* 2005). To exemplify this approach to the theme of the proposed project, it is necessary to look at the analysis of some projects. These projects have developed in different ways the issues proposed by the place, chosen as project area. These issues can be summarized as follows: the relationship with the Vltava river and its overlooking; the relationship with the existing convent and integration to the museum system of St. Agnes; the relationship with the characteristics of the site and its various urban settings; the architecture of the connections and the definition of the pathways. The importance of this method is to consider the practice of composition as a slow and careful approach, starting from the place where it takes shape, through a continuous progression to find the appropriate features of the architectural space. The space is perceived as a sensitive experience, able to stimulate the meaning and the essence of the architectural experiences. The architectural project, in this sense, becomes an important object of knowledge, and a real creative act. Our research attempts to set-up a procedure that has as main objective an experimental method to design, according to the resources of local context and focused on urban regeneration (Roberts 2000). An architectural project is a physical fact within the City, because it has a structure that makes it different from the other artistic practices (e.g. painting, sculpture, cinema, music and so on) and its responsibility is rather significant, because the project realized usually affects space and context in different way: through the physical impact; through the figurative impression; through the space suggestion.

Keywords: *city and water, city centre regeneration, history, cultural heritage, Prague, urban regeneration, urban rehabilitation.*

1. Introduction

The theme of this paper regards the results of the main research activities carried out in the Architectural Design Laboratory of the Politecnico of Milan. The laboratory is coordinated around a work group composed by Professor Domenico Chizzoniti and consists of a group

of collaborators: Phd Architects Letizia Cattani, Matteo Noviello, Gaia Preta and Luca Preis. The last years of the Laboratory were dedicated to set up a research on a specific case study.

The project site is in the Old Town of Prague, the ancient Jewish Quarter called Josefov Ghetto. It is the urban center of Staré Město (Old Town).

The design theme – the exhibition space – is undertaken in a more general reorganization, revitalization and on the whole the consolidation of the cultural town center. This theme has been the subject of numerous hypotheses, prompting several transformation projects of the old city center, and has recently attracted a wide critical debate.

The proposal is to design a museum for the Memory of Jewish Culture, integrated with an existing facility, the convent cloister of Saint Agnes of Bohemia (sv Klášter Anežky České). The convent of Saint Agnes was founded in 1234 and currently used as an exhibition center that houses the Czech collection of paintings and sculptures of nineteenth century. The project should be placed in the area next to the convent, near the Vltava River.

The exhibition program provides to show the social, cultural and religious aspects of the Jewish Bohemian tradition.

The project structure will take in consideration two important aspects: the relationship between the existing architectures and the water front, simultaneously the strong characterization of the place, included between the oldest settlement of the city and the fortifications built in medieval times (Bromley *et al.* 2005).

The projects that are here presented are the first results of this experiment, made starting from the academic year 2010–2011.

2. The context

The city of Prague has produced throughout its history a degree of fascination on foreign visitors. There are many witnesses of its history, of its spells, and there are even many authors who describe the secret places, the magic of the alchemists, the legend of the Golem. More than any other European capital, Prague is characterized by different places, water and land, short stories and novels, imagination and fantasy, myth and legend (Apollinaire 1998).

The urban morphology of the Bohemian capital, made up of independent architectures, complex, but able to give the city a substantially unitary image, becomes the perfect place for staging mythological and legendary stories.

A key role in the city's history and its present configuration is represented by the presence of the river Vltava. Along the river were formed the first villages and over the centuries, it became the unifying element of all those independent urban realities. The Vltava River, which runs through the city, is like a fixed scene and divides the first two fortified towns that will give rise to the urban history of Prague.

The hills of Hradčany and Petřín, side by side from the plateau of Letná, represent the landscape of the western bank, where around the 9th century appeared the Prague Castle.

On the opposite bank, the one to the east, the slope of the land forms a natural amphitheater with the Vítkov mount and is characterized by a second cape, called Vyšehrad, where a century after the construction of the Castle of

Hradčany, a new fortification was erected. In this way, the position of the two castles had influenced the subsequent development of the settlements of the whole basin.

A third place, no less important than the first two, is located on the right bank of the Vltava. Here were businesses communities around a market square near which rose the court of Tyn (with the round of St. John and the round of the Holy Cross), and that is now the center of the Old Town of Prague: Staré Město. Along the river, in the north-east, at the island Švanice, there was setting up a village of merchants, mainly from Germanic territories.

Notable historical events had happened in 1172. The Hradčany Castle had become a real monumental presence, enough to be surrounded by imposing walls and represented the political center of the city. On the place of natural ford of the Vltava, in those years the first bridge crossing, called Juditin, was built. It represented the first physical link between the political part of the city (Hradčany) and the commercial sites (Staré Město).

The city that was configured around the XIII century was a city made up of many buildings of great architecture. It begins the important season of the Gothic Prague, today admirable for its exceptional state of preservation of the buildings, that includes the city of Prague like one of the best-preserved Gothic city in Europe.

In 1231 around the Old Town, on the right bank of the Vltava River, a boundary wall with thirteen towered gates was built that led to a remarkable transformation of the urban fabric, thus giving rise to a third city. This town planning intervention confirms the importance of morphological transformations in relation to the building typology: no more introverted houses, with living spaces only from the first floor, but a different distribution of functions which included the shop and the shop windows on the ground floor and residential on the upper floors.

So far we have talked about the history of the capital city of Prague and its “magic” vocation.

This suggestion is probably increased in the collective imagination since Rudolf II had been turned his curiosity to the artists of his time but also to the scientists like Kepler – who discovered the first laws of planetary motion – Tycho Brahe, the astronomer or Jost Bürgi, inventor of the logarithms up to John Dee and Giordano Bruno and their search for philosopher's stone. According to this desire for discovery, the Bohemia region takes part in European Humanism with a very special connotation which is characterized by increased attention to the esoteric sciences.

Another fact not imputable to chance, is the extraordinary opening that occurs, during the Reign of Rudolf II of Habsburg, to the Jewish community, the same who built the myth of the Golem, a clay giant who moved to the ghetto to defend, according to Rabbi Löw, the Jewish community from harm.

Another important legend of Prague is contained in the “Zlatá ulicka u Daliborky”, The Gold Road, located in the district of Hradčany (Ripellino 1973). The series of buildings, built in the Mannerist style, initially housed the guards of the emperor and their families, but according to

legend was also home to the alchemists, committed, through potions and magic spells to transform lead into gold.

3. The project's site: from the old convent to the new museum.

The small digression above tries to support a second question that this research is intended to deal with. The first question concerned the “magic” aspect of the city, the second, not separated from the first, the “ostensive” character of the city. With the Baroque period, a large number of architects moved to Prague. Following a series of projects to rebuild parts of the city (by which entire structures were destroyed to make way for large urban facilities), new urban settlements were built (Di Battista 2012).

These new centers, in a time of strong Catholicizing during the Thirty Years' War, are represented by buildings for worship, mostly intended for the Jesuit tradition. The overabundance of decoration, the deconstruction of the fronts through the use of soft lines and spaces covered by domes, is one of the city's attempts to “show” itself. Prague becomes a destination for travelers attracted by its preciousness and the architectural quality of its buildings and it appears almost like an open air museum.

Thus, from the Gothic tradition, through the experimentalism of the alchemists, through the richness of the Baroque period, to think about the project as an exhibition gallery in the center of Prague, means to confront with the “ostensive” character of Prague, reinterpreting the character of the city and its urban history.

The question of museum and exhibition places in Prague has impassioned many architects of Bohemia. This theme has been the subject of numerous hypotheses, prompting several transformation projects of the old town, and has recently attracted a wide critical debate.

In contrast to the decentralization of museums, the objectives concern the reorganization of the city exhibition places system through the integration, transformation and consolidation of the existing facilities.

The proposal to design a museum for the Memory of Jewish Culture, integrated with the old convent cloister of Saint Agnes of Bohemia, involves a new construction and safeguard of the monumental ancient convent, a heritage of local cultural system.

Founded by Princess Agnes, built in 1233 in the northeast of Staré Město, the convent of the Poor Clares was extended in 1240 through the inclusion of the second monastery of Minorites of Prague. The complex was extremely extended and its construction is an extraordinary example of “architectural ensemble” from different points of view, because it represents the first convent of the Poor Clares beyond the Alps, and at the same time the first Gothic architecture in Prague (Fig.1).

The architectural complex, now preserved, is of remarkable artistic quality. The oldest part of the complex of the convent is the church of San Francesco. Next to the north side of the original church of San Francesco, the eastern wing of the convent, quite long, reaches to the north the river Vltava. Inside the building here are the gallery space, the chapter house, the staircase, the refectory, the kitchen and the hallway with the administrative area. The first floor

was reserved for the nuns' dormitory. Next to the south facade of the convent develops the system of the cloister; it was probably built in the years 1238-45. The complex, in late Gothic style, is developed on a square plan of six spans on each side, with cross vaults with ribs. The convent of the Poor Clares was enclosed by high stone walls, still existing today, which formed the fortification of the city towards of the river (Stankova 1991).

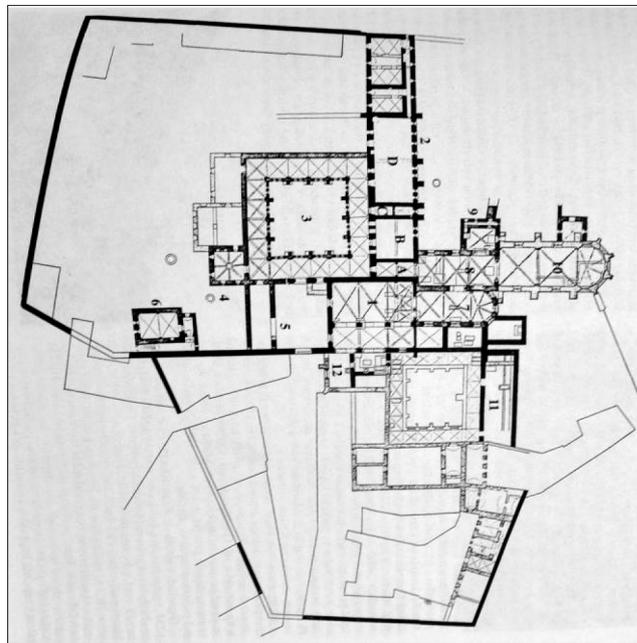


Fig. 1. Convent of Saint Agnes of Bohemia, ground floor plan, 1233

The project should be placed in the area next to the convent, between Kozi Street, U milosrdnyche and Na Františku street, near the Vltava River, now occupied by outdoor sport facilities and a parking area (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3).



Fig. 2. General Urban Plan, 1996

The project site is in the Old Town of Prague, the ancient Jewish Quarter called Josefov Ghetto. As we said, the tradition includes it as one of the most ancient settlements of the city (Talen 1999).

Only later, the old Ghetto structurally identified itself with the construction of its own walls between the 12th and the 13th centuries. The intersection of space and the large concentration of the functions, make the Jewish Ghetto a true city within a city. Being unable to expand outside the walls of the enclosure, the space of the Ghetto was occupied, over time, minimizing the empty spaces by compressing the functions and the buildings (Sedlaková 1997).

Destroyed between 1893 and 1896 for health reasons it was replaced by the more rational Josefov Quarter, according to the initiatives in favor of the Jewish minority.



Fig. 3. General view of the project area from the Vltava River

The Quarter proposed a new urban morphology inspired, on a smaller scale, to the Parisian *grands travaux*: Pařížka Street overlaps its straight path to the complex plan of the ancient quarter, which is completely destroyed. As evidence of the old Ghetto, remain monumental buildings such as synagogues Staronová, Pinsakova, Spanelska and the old Jewish cemetery (Peretta 1997).

The old Jewish Ghetto, called Josefov, only with the urban renewal of the last decade of the 19th century, became a place of experimentation of new modern trends so that today it is identified for its independent character, in contrast to all medieval architecture (Romanesque and Gothic) that surrounds it.

For these reasons and its proximity to the Josefov Ghetto, the site chosen is definitely an element of contact between two macro scales: an urban macro scale, because of its location, at the northeastern edge of the old town, along the right bank of the Vltava River and directly overlooking its course, places it in a space as a link between the oldest settlement of the city, Staré Město, and the area close to the fortifications built in medieval times. The other one is more directly linked to the function that will host the new architectural entity, in relation to the current function of the Convent of St. Agnes, as National Museum of Czech art and sculpture.

From here comes the suggestion created by the possible integration of two different but complementary exhibition systems.

4. Method of work

This introduction allows us to explain how the approach to the theme of the project has followed a well-

defined working structure. It was built starting from the analysis of the problem and its specific issues.

In our specific study case, this problem is represented by the proposed design theme: the exhibition space. It is also an opportunity to consider the project area of St. Agnes in a more general reorganization and consolidation of the cultural town centre.

This step was supported by a series of analysis and investigation of cartographic, iconographic and bibliographic materials, which allowed us to explore aspects regarding the urban history, the city and the particular context of application too. This was compared to the potential of the place, the physical characteristics, the settlement structure and the aesthetics characters.

The analysis was accompanied in different operating phases.

The first phase involved a site inspection of the area with the redesign of the main architectural buildings. This work was necessary to design the current condition of the area.

A second step was reserved for processing three-dimensional models, physical and virtual, which allowed reconstructing the scale of the context, the dimensions of the buildings, the resources and the constraints of the area. For example, at this stage we reconstructed the physical and orographic characters of this site, with special attention to the differences in height between the various zones of the project area and the place of the old convent of St. Agnes.

Starting from the questions offered by the theme, the definition of architectural design has gone through the formulation of a series of assumptions, without forgetting the issues undertaken by the project program, in this specific case, a building for the exhibition. These assumptions were tested in the third phase, through references to models considered paradigmatic. These examples were considered for their thematic affinities and their aesthetic characters and used instrumentally in the composition of space and in the architecture design. When we talk about “architectural composition” we refer to the combination and the union of various elements, establishing relationships between each other giving rise to a single complex system. The practice of composing is the assembly of some references to produce design prototypes, employed to verify the coherence of the activities program and the respect to the figurative aspects.

These references are chosen as components of this creative process not only because of their form, or simply referring to their geometry, but even for the capacity to induce a particular behaviour of use.

These components, following a dialectic process, have as final objective a critical synthesis, in which the figures, kept in an unbreakable relationship, became architectural program.

These references become the raw material of an architectural project that begins to be conceived, to be designed and to be analyzed not only as a simple idea, but as an object of sensitive knowledge.

Finally, this process involved the architectural definition of the project, which integrated strategic

choices of new settlement with the structural analysis and technological aspects.

Our approach to the architectural design has always included the reliability of the assumptions proposed by comparing them with the questions posed by the site and the project theme.

The main research activity carried out in the Architectural Design Laboratory has been preceded by a study of the cultural and scientific aspects of the Jewish Museum, starting, for example, with the basic questions: “Why a museum? What to say? What to transmit? For whom?” In order to understand the dynamics of the main Jewish museum design, according to the drawn ideas and suggestions for the design.

- The Museum shows the social, cultural, artistic and religious aspects of the Jewish world and illustrates its characteristics and vitality.
- The Museum documents the evolution of the relationship between the Jewish minority and the other culture and the behaviours that have changed over time as the anti-Jewish prejudice and discrimination.
- The Museum retraces the origins and history of the Jewish people, to understand the historical event of the Shoah and keeps the memory of those who were victims.
- The Museum spreads and promotes knowledge with the aim of changing prejudice and discrimination against the Jewish people and to affirm the universal values of respect and recognition.
- The Museum tries to contact as many people as possible with permanent and temporary exhibitions for adults and children, study activities, training and dissemination.
- The Jewish Museums around the world are connected together to create a network of knowledge.

Generally the Jewish Museum is divided into two paths, in relation to each other, but distinct: the Path of Judaism and Historical Path. Similarly, The Memorial Museum of Bohemian Jewish Culture, was thought from an exhibition structure regulated by two axes: the path of Judaic civilization, and the path of the Jewish Bohemian history (Minerbi 2008.)

The first one has the task to explain some important questions about the specificity of Jewish culture, the characters, the diversity compared to historic communities. This path is organized with multimedia elements and objects able to give an account of the richness and complexity of Jewish civilization and answer to the questions: “Who are the Jews? – What is Judaism? – What is their difference?”.

Through the exhibition of specific objects, photographs or documents it could be possible to explain the basic features of Judaism: the traditional Jewish life, especially the most important steps of the “cycle of life” (birth, maturity, marriage, until the death); the major occurrences of the “cycle of the Jewish year” (festivities or liturgical celebrations). The Path of Judaism is an essential part of the Museum. It should be placed at its beginning and it has

an exhibition area much smaller than that intended for the Historical Path, which remains the main axis of the museum and has the task to propose few elements of knowledge.

The second path is the path of Bohemian history of Judaism; it attempts to illustrate the history of the Jewish community of Prague and of Bohemia, from the birth of the first settlement – the Jews arrived there after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem – to the foundation of the Ghetto, which seems to exist before the coming of the Slav natives, until the full integration into the local society. The Historical Path is considered the main axis of the exhibition and the Museum. Its narration can take place in a single exhibition that includes entirely the Jewish historical events; otherwise it can be divided into several paths, by separating the Holocaust theme from the long previous period. This path is built according to a chronological flow, along a linear presentation, in order to be better transmitted and understood. The path across the national history of Judaism allows us to better understand the relationships between the Jewish minority and the larger society, because it tells the historical events in all its aspects: the political, the social, the cultural, and the material life.

We have seen so far, that the program of the project involves the exhibition of the social, cultural and even religious aspects of the Bohemian Jewish tradition (Rybár 1991). A specific part of the museum is dedicated to the events of the Holocaust, in an attempt to affirm the values of respect and recognition of social minorities.

Moreover, the program of the project provides the permanent exhibition, temporary exhibitions, activities related to education, disclosure and entertainment. In order to make concrete the Cult of Memory and overcome the idea of an “ideological museum” or “propagandistic museum”, the main idea of our project is to design a place where the Story gets any questions, where the Truth is not simply offered at the visitors, but a place where it is necessary to find the Truth, through the meditation and reflection (Picciotto 2007).

Therefore, there are spaces for teaching practices, small libraries and reading areas, laboratories, screening rooms and archives. The teaching facilities of the museum are an important element in its functional program and in the planning of its activities; they are the point of contact between the museum itself and most of its users.

All these parts are essential aspects of a Jewish Museum; they were organized through the sequence of thematic areas, according to the expected needs in every single architectural solution.

5. Results

To exemplify our approach to the theme of the proposed project, it is necessary to look at the analysis of some projects. These projects have developed in different ways the issues proposed by the place, chosen as project area. These issues can be summarized as follows:

- the relationship with the Vltava river and its overlooking;
- the relationship with the existing convent and integration to the museum system of St. Agnes;
- the relationship with the characteristics of the site and its various urban settings;

- the architecture of the connections and the definition of the pathways.

The relationship with the river has been addressed from a thorough study of the architectural character of the buildings that overlook along its course. The building of the convent of St. Agnes, from medieval times, has a closed front toward the river, characterized by a high wall on which there are few openings (Fig. 4). This introverted disposition, closed inside, is one of the aspects characterizing the medieval buildings in the city of Prague.

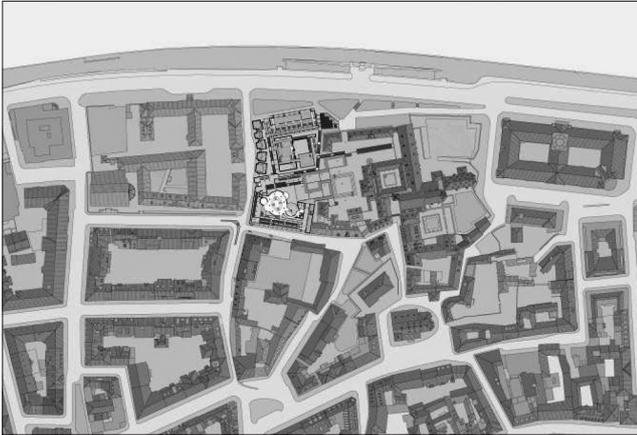


Fig. 4. Plan of the project area

The project is divided into two parts: the first, concerning the historical path is solved through a circular central plan. The second part, the path of Judaism, consists of an oval central plan. Both spaces are joined by a ramp, which leads into the historic part of the place, joining it with the cloister of St. Agnes. This path divides the exhibition area from the services spaces, classrooms, library and auditorium (Fig. 5). The composition in this case also invokes a precarious structure, made up of fragments that are combined with a montage, taken as a free ensemble of forms and figures. This alternation builds a rhythm where the presence of the vacuum accurately identifies the elements of the composition (Fig. 6 and Fig. 7). The project analyzes all these aspects and is characterized by the choice of a facade made by the alternation of full and empty spaces.

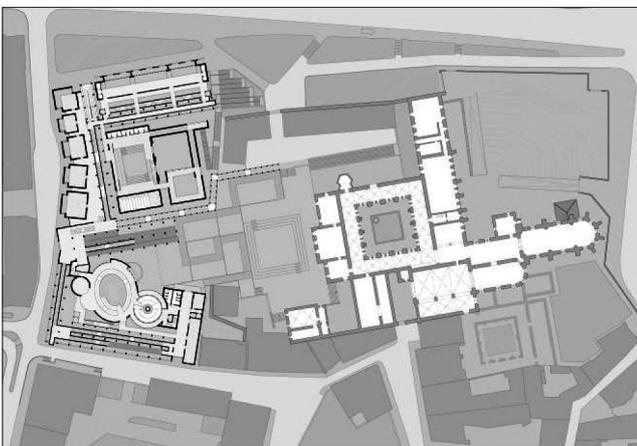


Fig. 5. First floor plan

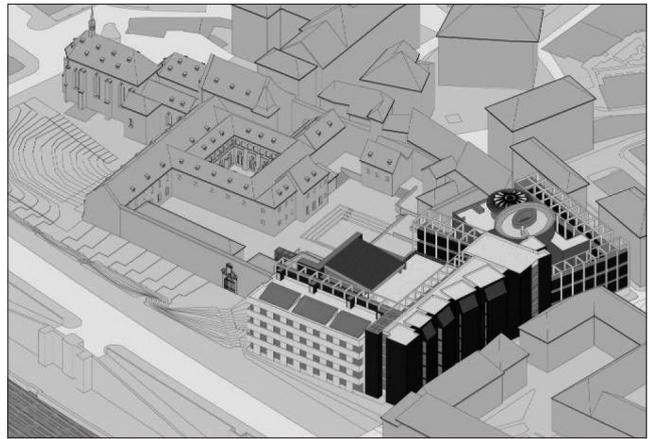


Fig. 6. Axonometric view of the project

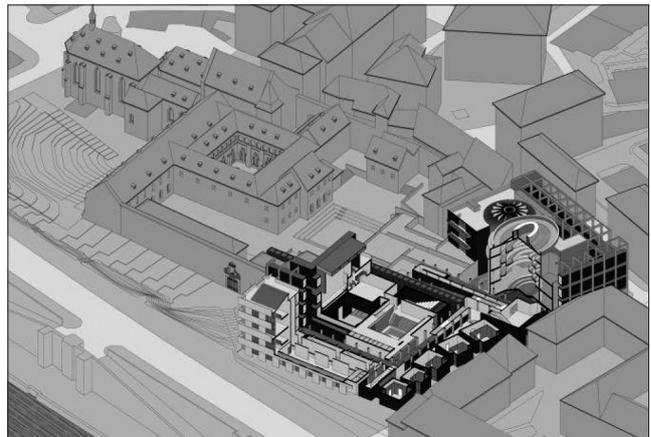


Fig. 7. Axonometric cross-section of the project

The relationship with the existing convent of St. Agnes has focused on the attempt to rethink the space outside of the existing convent, suggesting a possible integration with the Jewish's Museum project (Fig. 8).

The integration between the two spaces passes through the demolition of the existing wall to open the project area to that of St. Agnes. The project proposed is built starting from the identification of a typological matrix represented by the existing building cloister of the convent of St. Agnes.

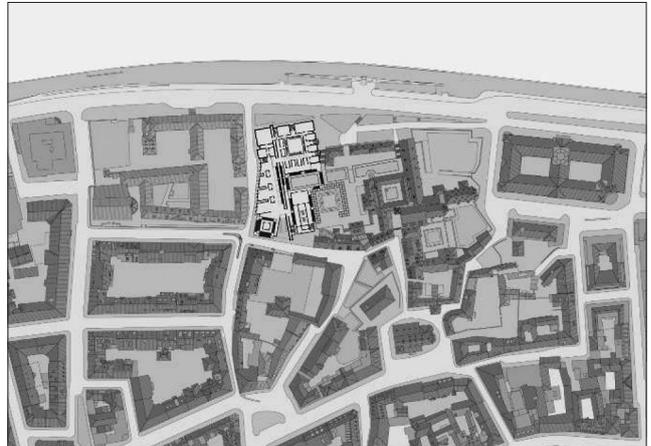


Fig. 8. Plan of the project area

The typological structure of the cloistered space, a central closed court, is taken as a reference in the project reproducing the size and measure of the space (Fig. 9).

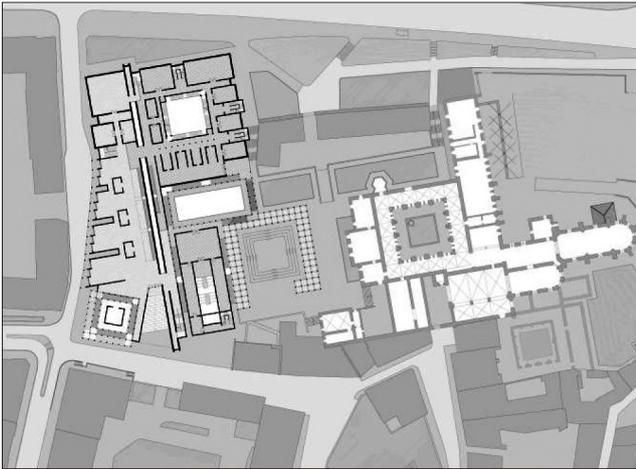


Fig. 9. First floor plan

Even this becomes a practicable space and it is built as a overlooking on a space with steps, designed to accommodate outdoor activities. This frame is connected with the central axis of the project that hosts the connection paths with the other activities of the Museum (Fig. 10).

The exhibition spaces overlook along Kozi Street, whereas the spaces for educational activities are located in a central plan overlooking the Vltava River.

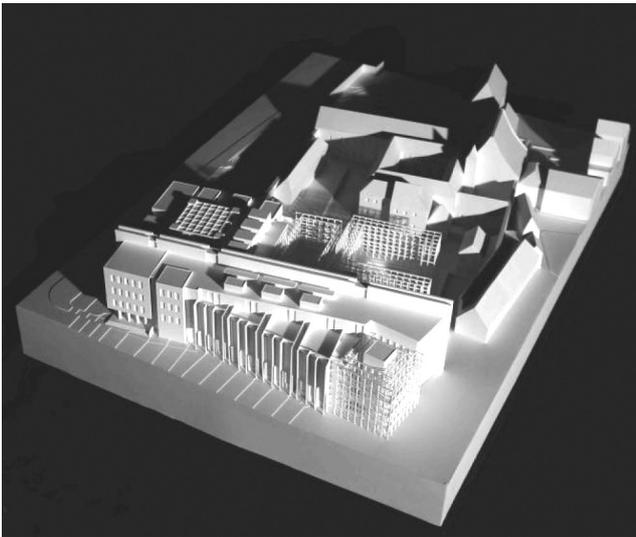


Fig. 10. View of the project model (1:200)

The relationship with the site, its morphological and urban aspects has been studied starting from the identification of the most important alignments (Fig. 11).

One of these is the alignment imposed by the existing building of the convent of St. Agnes. The other one is represented by recent urban design, which characterizes the urban blocks around the convent (Vlček 1996). In this case the project is built around a longitudinal structure that is the central axis of the paths. This structure, consisting of concrete walls, follows the alignment of the existing boundary wall of the convent (Fig. 12).

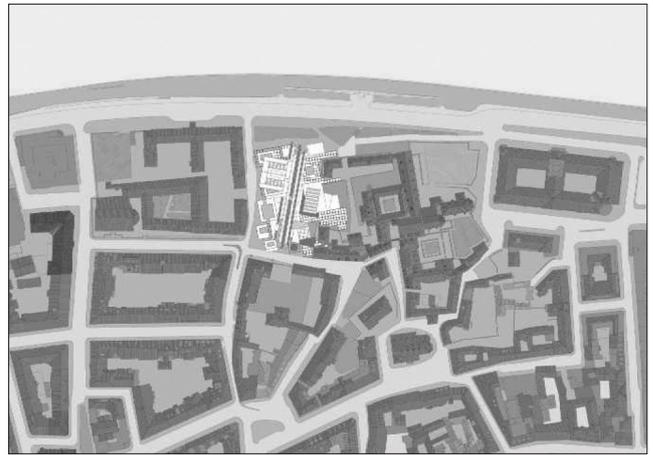


Fig. 11. Plan of the project area

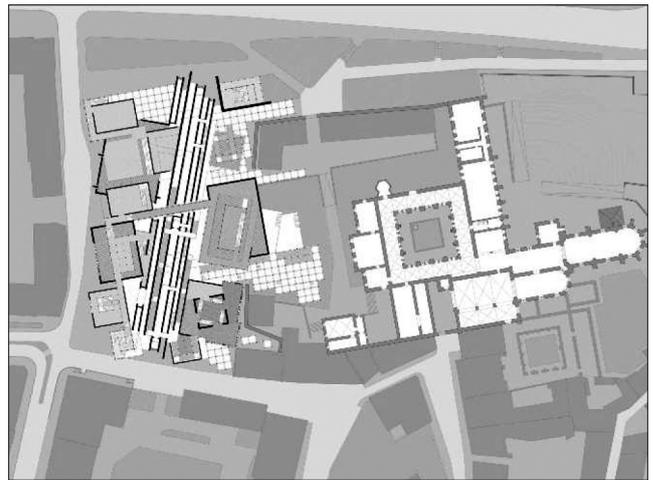


Fig. 12. First floor plan

It suggests an interpretation of “inhabited wall”, a double wall thickness (according to the idea of a thick wall, but empty, so inhabitable); the wall becomes a practicable space, a place for exhibitions, a living space. Closely related to this structure there are a number of figures that host the main activities of the Museum. It is a free assembly of figures which presents a series of rotations, not casual, but oriented according to the different alignments of the surrounding urban fabric. These changes affect the interior space of each figure (Fig. 13 and Fig. 14).



Fig. 13. View of the project model (1:200)

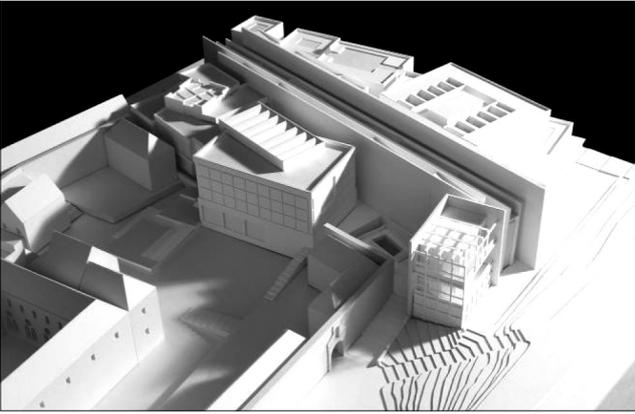


Fig. 14. View of the project model (1:200)

The project in this case, is built starting from two independent elements but closely related to each other: the spaces of connection, or “service spaces”, and spaces for the main activities or “served spaces” (Fig. 15).

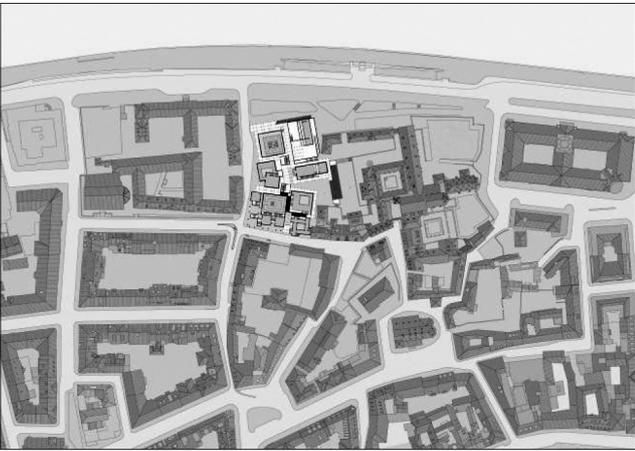


Fig. 15. Plan of the project area

The service spaces have the same importance of the served spaces. The sequence of spaces is linked together by connecting vertical and horizontal elements: ramps, stairs and elevators. These connecting elements have their own identity: therefore, they are characterized by a structure, independent, distinct and recognizable in its development.

This structure forms the backbone of the project built as a frame of beams and pillars (Fig. 16).



Fig. 16. First floor plan

Through this structure spaces that host the activities of the Museum are connected: exhibition halls, workshops, library, study rooms.

Each of these spaces is characterized by a clear choice typological: the central plan which includes an idea of a central space (Fig. 17 and Fig. 18).

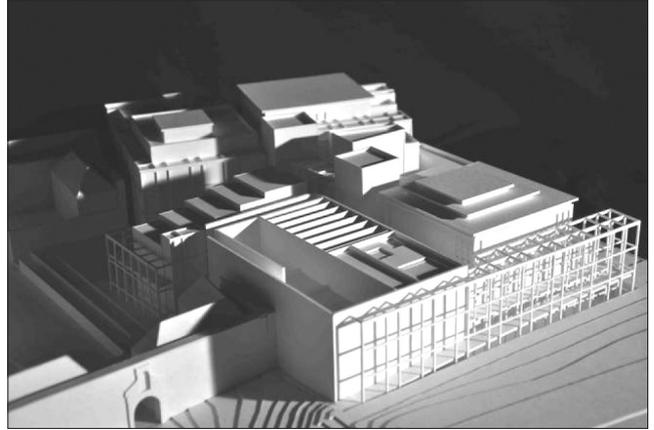


Fig. 17. View of the project model (1:200)

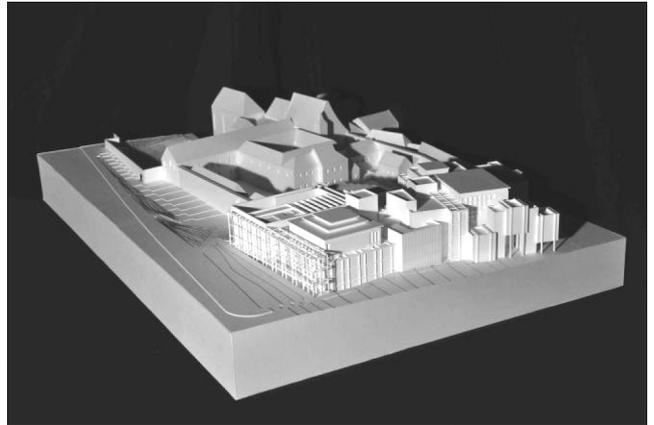


Fig. 18. View of the project model (1:200)

6. Conclusions

The importance of this method is to consider the practice of composition as a slow and careful approach, starting from the place where it takes shape, through a continuous progression to find the appropriate features of the architectural space.

The space is perceived as a sensitive experience, able to stimulate the meaning and the essence of the architectural experiences. The architectural project, in this sense, becomes an important object of knowledge and a real creative act. The result of our research is the set-up of a procedure that has as main objective an experimental method to design, according to the resources of local context and is careful of an idea on urban regeneration (Canella 1978).

An architectural project is a physical fact within the City. Architecture itself is a physical fact, because it has a structure that makes it different from the other artistic practices (e.g. painting, sculpture, cinema, music and so on) and its responsibility is rather significant, because the realized project usually influences spaces and contexts within the City.

Choosing appropriate references to compose an architectural prototype is the main condition that allows us to interpret the project as an integral part of existing structures, closely linked to the urban context and pertinent to the functional program of Museum. These references, in our experimental practice of design, are no longer simply quotes, inflexible transpositions or figurative expressions of a pure academicism. These components represent the interpreters able to ensue an early indication or a primitive version of project, by figurative items concerning the idea of space (Canella 1991). Contrary to the conventional approach, our strategy is focused on researching the appropriate components relating to a specific idea of space, “by trial and error” until the prototype is able to express properly the main objective of the project.

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