

Sixty years on 'grandchildren are reconstructing what their grandparents' generation destroyed'

Recreating Kristallnacht's lost synagogues

FROM REGINE WOSNITZA, BERLIN

SIXTY YEARS AGO, on November 9, 1938, 200 German synagogues were burned down during Kristallnacht, the night of anti-Jewish violence when Jewish-owned property was attacked and windows smashed.

Currently, there is an interest in trying to replace what was lost. On Monday, on the 60th anniversary of Kristallnacht, building will start in Dresden on the first post-war synagogue in the former East Germany, while students at Darmstadt University are engaged in creating virtual synagogues, from Germany's past, for view on the Internet.

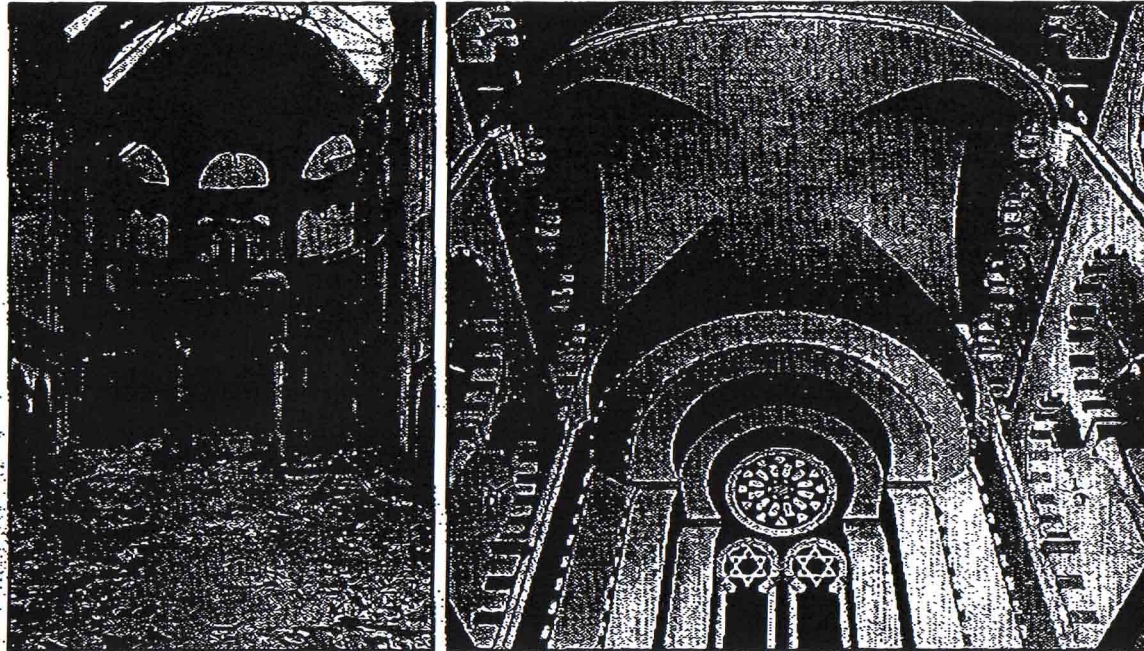
The site — <http://www.cad.architektur.tu-darmstadt.de> — takes you to the grand hall of the Central Synagogue in Frankfurt-Main. You can look down at the Ark from the high balconies and up again at the colourful ornamental windows.

Marc Grellert, a student at Darmstadt University, has made this virtual view possible.

"This method of reconstructing the past has its advantages over photos and drawings," said Jewish architect Salomon Korn, the project's adviser since its inception in 1994.

At that time, xenophobia in Germany was rising and the first synagogue since the Third Reich was burned down in the northern city of Luebeck.

"This is a political project, we do not just want to reproduce nice pictures," said Mr Grellert, who had the initial idea. "I hope this project prevents this period in history from falling into oblivion."



Then and now: Kristallnacht destruction of a Berlin synagogue in 1938 and (right) a virtual section of Frankfurt's Central Synagogue created with 1990s technology by students Marc Grellert and Daniela Borowicz

Under the guidance of Professor Manfred Koob, the students have "reconstructed" three Frankfurt synagogues with a technique called computer-aided design.

By the end of 1999, they hope to have put another 15 virtual synagogues on the Internet, with supplementary historical information.

The project will give an insight into an almost lost part of architectural history.

Before the Third Reich, 90 per cent of the synagogues in Germany

were built by non-Jewish architects. The synagogues that they designed reflected the architectural spirit of the times and shaped the panoramas of German cities.

The team in Darmstadt is adamant that the virtual reconstruction should be funded from outside the Jewish community. But this has proven a major stumbling-block.

None of the 18 German companies approached for sponsorship, including Deutsche Bank and Degussa, was willing to contribute.

"We expected an interest in what the students were doing, but the companies told us they had other aims," said Professor Koob.

Meanwhile, the students are having to make do with a small grant they have received from the Ministry of Education and Science.

Mr Korn said: "It is remarkable that the grandchildren are reconstructing what their grandparents' generation destroyed."

The synagogue to be built in Dresden will occupy the same site as

the splendid 1838 shul, built by German architect Gottfried Semper and destroyed on Kristallnacht.

Holocaust survivor Roman Koenig, who heads Dresden's Jewish community, said the project gave him "a sense of satisfaction because it shows that the injustice of what happened can revert to justice."

The need for a new synagogue was spurred by a fivefold growth in Dresden's Jewish population following an influx of immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

Ten years ago, with only 50 members, the community was on the verge of extinction. Today it numbers 250.

Siegfried Reimann, a Lutheran priest, said he found it unthinkable that the Jewish community should have to pay for a new, larger synagogue, when the Nazis had destroyed their old one. In 1996, along with others, he formed a fund to raise money for its construction.

Although both the city of Dresden and the state of Saxony have promised financial support, the project is still short of millions of marks.

Mr Reimann reacts with anger to those who say the £6 million project is an unreasonable expense because the Jewish community today is so small.

"Back then, the Germans did not help the Jews," he said. "Now they can do something and at least help rebuild the synagogue."

■ The 60th anniversary of Kristallnacht will be marked in Austria on Monday when the foundation stone will be laid for the first major synagogue to be built in Austria since the Anschluss, writes Lucian Meysels. The synagogue is to be built in Graz, Austria's second largest city