THANKS TO
Zeynep Celik, Michelle Hoeffler, Fyllio Katsavounidou, Debbie Kim, Zach Kron, Johan Lindquist, Jim O'Brien, and Matt Simitis for editorial, technical, design, and proofreading assistance. Tom Fitzgerald, Soo Im, Zach Kramer, Susan Midlarsky, and Rebecca Zacks for computing assistance.

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EDITORIAL POLICY
Thresholds is published and distributed biannually in January and June by the Department of Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The editorial goal is to maintain a spirit of immediacy by finding emerging sensibilities and providing a forum for provocative opinions and works in progress regarding our theme. Thresholds attempts to print only original material. No part of Thresholds may be photocopied or distributed without written authorization.

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FUNDING
Thresholds is funded in part by grants from the Department of Architecture and by M.I.T. Alumni support also plays a major role, and contributors donating $100 or more will be recognized as patrons.

PRINTING
In 1997, the city of Dresden held a competition for the design of a new synagogue (Fig. 1). It was to replace the one by Gottfried Semper, built in 1861, which had been firebombed on Kristallnacht, November 9, 1938. The new synagogue, as explained by none other than Kurt Biedenkopf, the Minister President of the state of Saxony, was “essential for the religious and social life of the Jewish congregation.” It was also, he added, “an important element in the picture of the city.” But with only about a hundred or so Jews in Dresden, and with few of them having long-standing ties to the city—many being Russian immigrants with little familiarity with Jewish traditions—the State of Saxony had no choice but to become the de facto client. Biedenkopf, together with some of Dresden’s Protestant and Catholic leaders, spoke for the missing Jewish voice.

Why would the German government plan a synagogue for a non-existent congregation?
The constitution of the Federal Republic, created in 1949 under the auspices of the Allies, required that the state dedicate itself in perpetuity to the resistance to Fascism. This meant that with Reunification in 1989, the former East Germany would have to be brought up to West German standards and, in particular, to those relating to the Holocaust. This explains why Biedenkopf, seeking to elevate the status of Saxony in the eyes of the world community, put the case of the Dresden synagogue in the bluntest of terms. "It was the citizens of Dresden who destroyed the original building," he noted, "and, accordingly, it is an act of justice that they support the construction of a new one."

No doubt the issue of Jews-in-Germany is just as complex in Dresden as elsewhere in that country, but in Dresden Jews are linked, as in few other places in Germany, to the memory of a synagogue that was once a prominent element in Dresden's urban silhouette. It was part of a row of monarchical and administrative buildings that lined the bluffs over-looking the Elbe River and that formed the representational identity of the city. But the synagogue's significance lies not so much in its uniqueness as in the fact that it was wrapped up in the broader history of the city. It had not only been firebombed but, like the rest of the city's center, destroyed in the devastating and needless Allied
bombardment at the end of the Second World War. And after the war, the rubble was all bulldozed away by socialist urban planners to make room for a vast tabula rasa—over two square miles of it!—on which a new ideal socialist city was to rise (Fig. 2). The site of the synagogue was swept clean, a logical, but not altogether inconvenient resolution for the socialist regime. The Frauenkirche, a magnificent example of German Baroque, was, however, left as pile of darkened rubble to serve as "a monument to Allied atrocities."

With the 1989 Reunification, Dresden underwent another extensive redesigning. This time, of course, the urban designers came from the former West, and their mission was to counter the utopian intent of the socialist project with their own. And indeed, in the last ten years, the once vacuous, socialist city center has been given a "downtown" that is now brimming with bank buildings, shopping centers, tourist offices, ATM machines, and cinemas. But most importantly, it was decided that the row of former monarchical buildings that once lined the Elbe river would be completely rebuilt. The buildings that had been restored under the socialists, Gottfried Semper's famous Zwinger and his Opera House, for example, were appropriated into a project that now came to include the reconstruction of the castle, its stables, the Frauenkirche, the Bühlsche Terasse, as well as other

Fig. 3. The Dresden Castle. Is it 1999 or 1939?

Fig. 4. Detail of Dresden @1900, showing the location of Semper's synagogue.
former government buildings, palaces, and museums. The result is a concatenation of buildings, which, when viewed from certain angles, are now identical down to the last finial to what was there before the war (Fig. 3).

Dresden's Synagogue lies at that southern end of the newly established Kulturmeile, as it is now called (Fig. 4). But reconstruction of the original building would be nonsensical. The site had been seriously altered by a near-by socialist-era bridge. The new building thus has to be a contemporary one. But in an age with little faith in its capacity to equal the great urban architecture of the past, the decision for a new building has had fateful consequences.

The winning entry, coming from the firm Wandel, Hoefer, Lorch from Saarbrücken, calls for two almost-prismatic, whitish boxes, separated by a garden (Fig. 5). It is a play of several operative abstractions. One points to 1930s High Modernism, another to a 1950s, Louis Kahn-esque grandeur, and another to the 1980s United States memorial minimalism. As such, the design is a modernist version of the hybridized ideology of the Kulturmeile. It is both "German" and yet "American."

But despite the seemingly up-to-date look of the building, it will never erase the problematics of rupture. If the status of the Frauenkirche has been elevated from a pile of rubble to become the living symbol of the restored city, the synagogue, without a religious community to nurture it, is demoted to the status of a generic "Holocaust monument" (Fig. 6). There is thus set in play a series of problems that, though at some level inadvertent, are nonetheless both inescapable and troubling. The "Friends of Dresden" web page, for example, celebrates the reconstruction of the Frauenkirche (Fig. 7) at the cost of $175 million (and with the same French military software that Gehry used to design Bilbao) but makes no reference to the synagogue in its shadow. The irony is that the synagogue is the only building in the Kulturmeile that is dedicated neither to tourism and entertainment nor to the social and symbolic practices of the dominant high culture.

For better or worse, the building's design only reinforces this. As an uncompromising statement of abstract purity—two white boxes on the Elbe shore—the building is a misfit in the late-Baroque landscape of the Kulturmeile. It is the only public structure with no columns, domes, or aedicules. As such, it advertises not only its status as entartete Architektur but also the caesura of the local Jewry—such as it is—from their own impossible-to-reconstruct identity. Originally, when Semper was hired to design the
building, his structure was celebrated in parades and speeches as an example of just how far the Jewish community had come in integrating itself into the image of Saxony. Not only does that ambition no longer have a place in the urban profile, but any future effort at integration is made impossible. Jews, once again set off as outsiders, are condemned to the prison house of their representative modernity. But since this is a building that has to be built, it will become forcefully transformed from a structure planned as an honor to memory into a de facto intruder. And so we have the bizarre situation in which the State, in trying to honor the presence of the Jews on the Elbe, forces them into conflicting postures respective to modernity, history, and memory that makes the whole enterprise fated to revive the perpetual crisis of Jews-in-German-history.

Construction will be no easy matter. The site is still covered not only by several meters of rubble but also serves as the conduit for several of the city's major infrastructural pipelines. At stake is more than just a question of how to dig a foundation. The rubble has become a monument in its own right, which will raise numerous issues about memory and ownership. In other words, the "ground" on which this synagogue will be built—much like the "ground" on which the city itself rests—is an anxiety-provoking proposition.

The word "synagogue," therefore, has to remain in quotation marks. And yet one has to fight for the building as an expression of cultural healing. This double attitude can never be revealed all too openly, and, in revealing it now, I hope to turn the paradox of building in on itself. Bauen—as an ontological act—is not just building. But if Heidegger understood this all too well, preserving Bauen for only the most exalted and purified of purposes—possible only after a process of purification and destruction that he called Zerstörung had taken place—then this building inverts the premise. If German Jews, because they were until the nineteenth century at least largely excluded from the exalted world of agrarian land-ownership, were also excluded from the supposedly noble privilege of Bauen and its phenomenological reclamation of the soil, then this "building" forces us to value (and thus to historicize) that which is philosophically Unbaubar (unbuildable). It will have to remain physically and psychologically inaccessible. It will have to remain literally a billboard, for as a billboard it is a frank acknowledgment of the limits, both physically and politically, of the bureaucratic modernities that claim to speak for Jewish "memory."

My critique is not leveled against the spirit of good will or against the certainly legitimate needs for healing. Rather, it focuses on the need to expose