

## Traces

*Highlighting history through intervention. Transformation of a historical Jewish complex in Oslo.*

I am a Norwegian Jew and have lived my entire adult life in Norway. I relate to Norwegian society and everything that pertains to being Norwegian, having developed a national sentiment and love for the country. Equally, the Jewish part of me has been nurtured over the years, which has fostered a way of life that many Norwegians are not familiar with. Often, I have experienced a need to explain to my Norwegian friends why my great-grandparents settled in Norway, how my grandfather escaped the war, why I eat certain things or what holidays I celebrate.

The lack of knowledge about Jewish culture is perfectly understandable since the Norwegian Jewish minority makes up only 0.03% of Norway's population. After "the Jewish section" was removed from the constitution in 1851, allowing Jews to enter the country, the Jews wanted to become an integrated part of Norwegian society. They maintained their Jewish beliefs and traditions, but adapted local norms, gave their children Norwegian names, celebrated Constitution Day, engaged in politics, sports, art, culture, and fought in the resistance movement during the Second World War. As a result, Norwegians generally have poor knowledge of their fellow Jewish countrymen and their history. An attitude survey conducted by the Holocaust Center in 2015 shows that 12.5% of the population had pronounced prejudice against Jews.

Jews have been living in Norway for almost 170 years. The Jewish heritage is integrated in Norwegian history, and equally Norwegian history is incomplete without the heritage of the Norwegian Jews. In this project my aim is to raise the awareness and knowledge about the Norwegian Jewish history and culture.

### **Site, history and existing situation**

The project is located in the Hausmanns quarter in downtown Oslo, a typical worker district from the 1890s, and an area that Norwegian Jews first settled in when arriving in Norway. On the site there are two existing buildings of different character:

The first, facing Calmeyers street, is a typical apartment building from the 1890s (15A) and the second a synagogue building (15B) sitting in the courtyard from 1921. There are two separate entrances from Calmeyers street. One leading to the apartment building and the second, through a courtyard to the old synagogue.

Both buildings were gathering points for Norwegian Jews before the II World War and were considered one complex. Today the buildings are divided into two addresses and it is therefore hard to understand the buildings relation to each other. The apartment building in Calmeyers street is the building from where the highest amount of Jews were deported during the deportations in the autumn of 1942. Therefore, the buildings play an important role in Norwegian history.

A private real estate company owns both buildings today. The building towards the street consists of badly maintained rental apartments, while the synagogue building is rented out to various actors, among others the Jewish Museum in Oslo, which is in desperate need of more space.

## **Intention and research topics**

The intention of the project is to create a Knowledge Center for Norwegian Jewish Culture and History in the historic Jewish complex in Calmeyers street. The purpose of the center will be to elucidate, communicate and make Norwegian Jewish history and culture accessible to the public, in the hope that understanding will increase and prejudice will be reduced. This will be done through my architectural interventions in the existing buildings. The project does not include exhibition design.

The center is not to be seen as a memorial, but rather as a way to convey the history and culture of the Norwegian Jews, as well as relating it to the present.

## ***How to remember a tragedy?***

After the Second World War countless museums have been erected to commemorate the dead. Many of them are dedicated to the Jewish population who became the main victims of the war. As a part of my pre-diploma, I mapped Jewish museums in Europe, and more specifically, Jewish museums situated in old synagogues. There are hundreds of Jewish museums all over Europe that are located in old synagogues, buildings that lost their purpose together with their members, and have either stood empty for many years, or have been reused for several other purposes.

The museums mainly focus on the tragedy's that took place, but often lack a focus on everyday life.

Although many European cities have a historic "Jewish quarter", many Jews lived among Non-Jews and were well-integrated into society. They lived in regular apartments and had regular jobs. In the beginning of the diploma-semester I mapped all the buildings that the Jews in Oslo lived in before the deportations. It clearly shows how scattered they were.

When telling the ordinary parts of the victim's life, people become aware that Jews are ordinary people like everybody else, which helps break down prejudices. The museums play a big part in how and what we remember. Therefore it is important to convey that the tragedy happened to ordinary people.

The war crimes were as fatal for Norwegian Jews as they were in any other country in Europe. They have to be remembered, but how? Unfortunately there are few traces that witness of what happened. In Norway material belongings were often stolen or sold by the people who took over the apartments when their owners were gone. Item-based exhibitions are therefore hard to realize.

However, we know where they lived, which windows they opened when letting fresh air in, on which walls the pictures hung and which stairs the policeman went up before arresting them. ***The buildings are the witnesses.***

Although object-based exhibitions are powerful, I believe that architecture has just as strong capacity to convey feelings and impressions as objects.

People acquire knowledge in different ways. Some learn best through lectures, others like to sit in a quiet room and read. I believe that a knowledge center should offer several ways of learning. Therefore the center's program will also consist of a library and a lecture/consort hall that can be visited without having to go through the exhibition spaces. These functions are also a good way to open up for different knowledge that relates, but not necessarily deals with the Norwegian Jewish story. Books about other minorities can be held in the library and debate can take place in the auditorium.

***How to highlight an anonymous building without making it stand out?***

***How to camouflage a building that is to be discovered?***

Today, almost all institutions that have a relation to Judaism must deal with terror threats and security measures. The new center in Calmeyers street is not an exception.

During my mapping in the pre-diploma I found a tendency in early modern synagogues, more specifically in Italy, Spain and Portugal. Due to the law prohibiting Jews from constructing new buildings, they were forced to use existing buildings as synagogues. The exteriors were often retained to conceal the function of the building. The synagogues were often located between two other buildings so that they were perceived as dwellings and were often via a courtyard, instead of directly from the street: both for reasons of security and to comply with laws requiring that sound of Jewish worship were not to be audible by Christians.

This approach created a natural protection. Only those who knew about the synagogue's existence found the right facade and door that often led into striking synagogue rooms.

Similar to my findings in the pre-diploma, the anonymity of the buildings in Calmeyers street provides them with natural protection. They also align with Norwegian Jews' ideas of integration. The ideas of becoming an undistinguishable part of their surroundings and not stand out. However, unlike the old synagogues, the project is of public nature and therefore it is desired for it to be found. This is a paradox that I tried to explore in the diploma.

## **Calmeyers gate 15A**

The exterior of the building belongs to the street life and Oslo's urban landscape. The building's façade and height will therefore remain untouched. Keeping the current exterior will also maintain the buildings anonymity and help to secure it.

The building consists of five levels with bearing brick walls. One of the five walls stretches from gable to gable to divide the span of the overlaying wood beams that create the floors. The middle wall contains door openings. Wrought iron staircases connect the floors vertically. Trusses support the roof.

I will argue that the apartments are of less importance since they are ordinary and similar to any other urban block from the same period that you can find in Oslo. However the actions that found place inside the walls of the apartments are extraordinary and that is the tale that needs to be told. Therefore, a transformation of the interior will be justified. By introducing something new in an old structure, one becomes aware of what has been there before.

The original plan on the courtyard-side of the middle wall is kept, but the street-side is altered. Here the existing floors are cut and replaced with new concrete floors, spanning from the new elevator core and supported by new brick pillars at the ends. The cross section of the floors varies, thickest towards the core, resulting in angled ceilings. The new floors are placed half a story from their original location. In that way the visitor has to move from the old part, through the old door openings in the middle wall and up the new steel staircases that connect the old and the new floors. Both the mismatch between the new floors and the existing windows and the traces of the old beams in the brick walls are reminders of what once was an apartment building. New openings in the existing brick walls are cut in order to connect the exhibition spaces. Each opening is marked with new steel support. The existing staircase maintains a fast route through the building, while the new staircases between the shifting floors create a long route. The original staircase is one of the most important parts of the project, as this is the element within the building where you can see (and imagine) wear-off caused by everyday use the best. The traces.

The top floor consists of workspace and offices dedicated to the center's employees.

Two indoor connections to the old synagogue are established. In the second floor a steel and glass bridge stretches over the courtyard and meets the synagogue's façade. The level of the courtyard is raised in order to establish an underground path between the buildings' underground levels. A small library with double space height is located in the old basement.

Today there is one gate facing the street before entering the passage into the courtyard. A second gate will be added in the end of the passage so that it becomes a security sluice. The existing reception, located to the right for the synagogue entrance today, will be moved to the front towards the street. There will be made a cut in the wall towards the passage in order to create a window between the new reception and the sluice.

## **Calmeyers gate 15B**

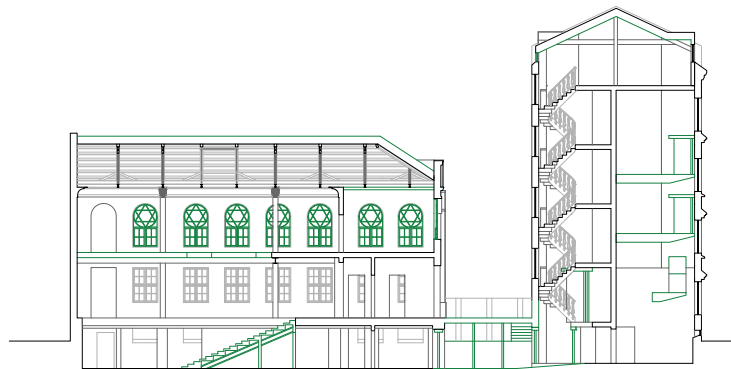
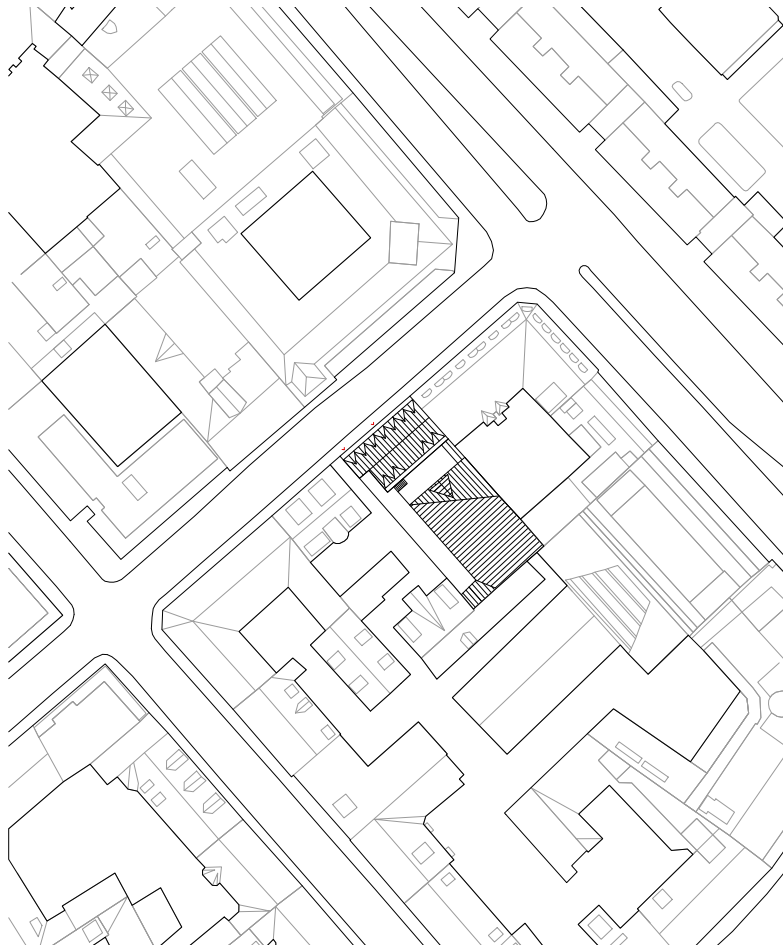
Like other religious buildings, synagogues have articulations that reveal their function. In my opinion, the synagogue building has a much greater architectural value than Calmeyers gate 15 A. This is due to the peculiarity and rarity of the building in Norwegian context. When it was built, the synagogue in Calmeyers street was one of three functioning synagogues in Norway. Today, there are only two.

A lot of changes have been done to the building during the years. The original exterior from 1921 was changed after the war, but repainted last year in what are to be believed the original colors. There are no known photographs of the original building.

The synagogue was built according to the orthodox tradition, which means that men and women sat separately. The mezzanine in the second floor (women's gallery) was sealed off with a concrete slab. The original windows with the Jewish star were replaced and lost during time. The columns, capitals and stucco are today hidden behind false walls and ceilings. The original attic, which hides an unusual truss-construction, consists of small dorms.

Consequently, it is hard to imagine how the main room of the synagogue appeared when it was used as a space of worship and assembly.

Although the building is not to be brought back to its original function, it is inspired by its original qualities and ideas: large and beautiful spaces where people gather, teach, learn and experience. These ideas are reinterpreted into one big space, where the construction of the roof is exposed, the mezzanine and the old windows are copied, the columns and the ornaments are revealed and the floor is cut in order to fit an auditorium. The auditorium is constructed in concrete and has fixed chairs. Besides a place to sit, it also functions as a continuation of the new established underground connection between the two buildings. The two existing staircases are to be kept, refurbished and functioning as fire escaping routes.





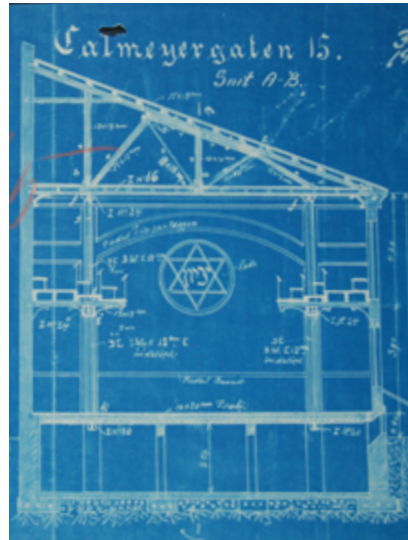
The apartment building and the passage today.



The synagogue building today.



The only known photograph of the original synagogue-building, taken from inside the passage (1923)



Original drawing (1920)



A small concert and lunch serving in the courtyard.



Lecture in the museum. Parts of the exhibition are pushed to the sides.