



No museum is an island: the Jewish Museum Berlin

BY AGNES MONKA

People will judge you by your actions, not your intentions." So goes the adage that even well-meant behavior may result in unforeseen condemnation. Or, in other words: It's not enough just to *want* to do the right thing. In this sense, the last few months must have been rather painful for Peter Schäfer, the highly esteemed German scholar of ancient religious studies. Indeed, the former director of Europe's largest Jewish museum, himself a Catholic, has been accused of quite a few offenses of late: spinelessness, poor leadership and even anti-Semitism.

It all began with the best intentions, and in the German Bundestag, no less. In mid-May, parliament agreed – in a joint motion involving the CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP and the Greens – to resolutely oppose the BDS movement and to fight anti-Semitism, thus condemning the BDS movement itself as anti-Semitic. The resolution also demands that the German government provide no financial support to any project that "actively assists" BDS.

BDS stands for boycott, divestment and sanctions. The main goal of the movement is to use a financial, scientific and cultural boycott of Israel and/or the occupied territories to force changes to the country's occupation policy. Reactions to BDS have run the gamut, a reflection of the enormity and complexity of this issue. In Germany, historical memory of the boycotts in the 1930s make supporting BDS a particularly difficult leap.

The fact that the Bundestag motion has had an outsized impact on the Jewish Museum Berlin is a

consequence of the cultural center's organizational form. While other Jewish museums across the globe tend to be municipal in structure, the JMB is a federal institution. There is a board of trustees appointed by the German president that comprises mostly politicians. Three-quarters of the museum's budget comes directly from federal coffers. So, if the federal government approves and actually implements the motion at issue, it means that the museum may not make overtures to or support any person or project that "actively assists" BDS.

In practice, this could mean that the museum must meticulously scrutinize every potential guest – artists, politicians, athletes, Jewish or non-Jewish – to discover where this person stands in relation to the BDS movement and what form their potential connections to BDS take.

Three weeks after the vote in the Bundestag, 240 Jewish scientists petitioned the federal government not to implement the motion. They issued a statement averring that

BDS is not per se anti-Semitic and that the boycott is "a legitimate and non-violent means of resistance." They expressed that the Bundestag motion does not help in the struggle against anti-Semitism and accused the body of letting itself be instrumentalized by the Israeli government.

A day later, on June 4, the Berlin daily newspaper *taz* ran an article on the matter. Not long after, the Jewish Museum Berlin tweeted a link to the article and used wording from the letter of protest without citation or any indication of indirect speech.

Over the years, the museum has rarely trafficked in reading recommendations on political themes, and never in such a polarizing way. Was it just an oversight? Or is this the expression of an opinion that, after months, has given Schäfer's critics incontrovertible proof of their suspicions that the Jewish Museum, under his leadership, is courting anti-Semites in some mis-conceived notion of tolerance?

In any case, the muffled tweet was only the straw that broke the cam-

el's back. The previous year, Schäfer had already been the subject of all sorts of criticism. Under pressure from the Israeli ambassador, the museum disinvented the openly gay Palestinian peace researcher Sa'ed Atshan, presumably for his close ties to the BDS movement. Officially, however, the event was moved to a different location "for technical reasons."

In December 2018, Benjamin Netanyahu complained to the German government: "The Jewish Museum, which is not connected to the Jewish community, regularly holds events with prominent supporters of BDS." Another bone of contention was the "Welcome to Jerusalem" exhibition that, according to the Israeli prime minister, reflected a "Palestinian-Muslim view of Jerusalem." He ultimately demanded that the German government discontinue funding for the museum. Although these statements were decidedly rebuffed by the board of trustees, the damage was done.

Peter Schäfer went on to commit another faux pas in March 2019,

when he welcomed the Iranian cultural attaché as a guest and allowed the media to photograph them having coffee and cake. In an interview with *Der Spiegel* after the fact, Schäfer admitted the foolish mistake. He had hoped to speak with Moujani about a potential exhibit. In its official statement on the affair, the Iranian embassy, announced that Schäfer and the office of cultural affairs were in agreement that anti-Zionism does not equate to anti-Semitism.

Despite these incidents, Schäfer's contract was soon afterwards extended for a year. This shows that there is little to support the claim that it was Netanyahu that pushed Schäfer from his job.

After the tweet, however, the situation quickly became uncomfortable. The museum spokesperson was fired, effective immediately. One week later, Schäfer offered the chairman of the board of trustees, Monika Grütters, his resignation, citing his desire to avoid any further damage to the museum.

Grütters called an emergency meeting of the board and named

Christoph Stölzl to steward the museum on a temporary basis. The founding director of the German Historical Museum is expected to calm the heated atmosphere at the JMB and to supervise the permanent collection until a new director is found.

Schäfer failed in his plan to make the museum an open forum for a diverse set of ideas, a forum in which all perspectives may be given equal merit, even those relating to the state of Israel and the conflict in the Middle East. He evidently lacked the tact and discretion required to negotiate the highly sensitive relationship between the Jewish community and the work of the museum. The Schäfer era has shown how quickly people can be misunderstood – willfully or not and despite good intentions – and then swept away by political forces beyond their control.

Acting museum head Stölzl has asserted what in retrospect appears to be a rather pragmatic truth: "One should be wary of making the Jewish Museum in Berlin a focal point of discussion about the conflict in the Middle East."

In light of this disillusioning outcome, the question again looms as to the future direction and target audience of the museum. Is it for Berliners? For tourists? Is it a museum by Jews, for Jews, about Jews or all of the above? How independent will the museum be in terms of its program? To whom is the museum accountable? Hopefully we'll have some answers from the new leadership expected in March 2020.

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BY JAN KEPP

The small Saxony-Anhalt city of Dessau hasn't always had it easy. During World War II, an aircraft and vehicle factory located here drew 20 devastating Allied air raids on this city, after which barely one stone was left untouched. Builders in the GDR cleared more space in what remained of the town to build a model socialist city, and after the official demise of East Germany in 1990, profiteers hurriedly filled any remaining vacant lots with hideous shopping malls. The city center can now at best be appreciated as an unseemly panopticon of architectural aberrations.

For decades, however, most who visit the city have headed straight for its northern edge, as it is home to one of the most famous places of pilgrimage for fans of architecture and design from all over the world: the Bauhaus Building (1926) by Walter Gropius and the Masters' Houses also designed by Gropius, which provided housing for Bauhaus instructors and were intended to showcase model homes for modern living. In 1926, the epoch-making art, design and architecture school moved to Dessau from Weimar. For architecture historians, this ensemble of buildings, carefully restored in recent decades, encapsulates the singular nucleus of contemporary architecture. Many of the features that are now part of the architect's standard repertoire – extensively glazed facades, open floor plans, functional kitchens and flat roofs – had their origins here in Dessau.

To mark the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Bauhaus in 1919, the city of Dessau (like Weimar before it) has received

its own museum as a birthday gift from the German government. Dessau seized this opportunity by choosing a space in the city center for the new building, which stands between a park and a pedestrian zone, so that a bit of Bauhaus glamor would reflect on the long-ravaged inner city. While not a bad strategy, the result is fairly disenchanting.

It's hard to admit, but the outside of the new Bauhaus Museum in Dessau has all the charm of a faceless exhibition hall you would expect to see at any trade fair site

in the world. Its long cuboid form crouches between the architectural eyesores of the GDR and the post-Wall era, looking a bit like a temporary pavilion where new cars or a fashion collection would be on display. The young Spanish designers at the Barcelona-based Addenda Architects had a budget of just €30 million, and it shows. Almost every detail reveals the project's financial constraints – this is no masterpiece.

The entire ground floor consists of a single hall, as it was designed to be a forum for future exhibi-

tions as well as educational and training events. Depending on light conditions, its extensively glazed façade allows people to see out from the inside or in from the outside, an intentional transparency designed to minimize the effect of the museum building obstructing views between the inner city and the park.

But does it work? Being in the hall in the daytime feels a bit like being in an aquarium, in a diffuse weightlessness completely cut off from the noise of the city, yet distracted by the traffic, the passers-

by outside and the possibility of being under their constant gaze.

A museum is first and foremost a place for exhibiting things. With this in mind, the architects topped two staircases with a gigantic black box, a type of windowless concrete tank that spans the ground floor hall like a bridge. This provides a space where the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation collection can finally be appropriately presented. The collection comprises roughly 49,000 objects, making it the second-largest fund of resources – after the Bauhaus Archive in Berlin – covering the history of the art and architecture school. The team of curators deliberately focused not on the later myths surrounding Bauhaus, but on its everyday teaching activities. The exhibition is titled "Versuchsstätte Bauhaus" (Bauhaus – an experimental institution), suggesting that it's less about the objects than about creative processes, ideas and inspiration.

The exhibition first confronts visitors with a number of questions that echo the artistic and technical visions of the early 1920s. Can a person be modeled? Can you sit on a column of air? Can light also be form? These were the questions, posed in the spirit of the time, that inspired the Bauhaus staff, students and followers to try out new, unusual and sometimes seemingly crazy ways of approaching art, design and architecture, to break with conventions and to



Costumes from Oskar Schlemmer's Triadic Ballet (1927) on display at the Bauhaus Museum in Dessau

A black box on an aquarium

The new Bauhaus Museum in Dessau is not a major architectural triumph, but it does offer fascinating insight into the creative processes of the legendary school

experiment with colors, shapes and spaces. Not everyone liked it. Many people in Dessau regarded the innovative school and its highly permissive teaching methods with suspicion, while some were openly hostile. The dawn of this "new era" was more than suspect to many of the city's middle-class inhabitants.

The vast black-box hall is above all dedicated to the school's unique teacher-student relationships. The artist Paul Klee bequeathed to his student Gunta Stölzl "fundamental insights into the laws of form" to inspire her textile designs in the weaving workshop, and some of her design work shows how she tried to explore surfaces, forms and spaces on the basis of Klee's ideas. The various teacher-student couplings are exemplary of Bauhaus methodology, its teachers' approaches and the ways in which the students were encouraged to be independent in forging their own artistic paths.

A long, orange bar somewhat resembling warehouse shelving divides the space and provides the surfaces and volumes for presenting the creative work of Bauhaus students and instructors. These objects span the full range of functional design, from lamps and furniture to plans for apartments, buildings and entire neighborhoods.

Dessau now has its long-awaited Bauhaus Museum. The new building in Weimar has become a magnet for visitors within just a few months. Let's hope this unremarkable box of a museum will ultimately become a treasure chest for Dessau.

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