

The Starmach Gallery in Kraków: The Gallery of Contemporary Art in a Former Jewish House of Prayer

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The Starmach Gallery in Kraków: The Gallery of Contemporary Art in a Former Jewish House of Prayer
The adaptation of the former Jewish Zucker House of Prayer as a gallery of contemporary art is a unique phenomenon due to both the complicated history of the heritage building itself and the unique personality of the current owner. Andrzej Starmach, an art dealer and collector in one, has gathered an extraordinary collection of contemporary Polish art, managing to stay ahead of popular trends. For many years, the Starmach Gallery was a lone beacon of culture in the run-down Podgórze district, which is now flourishing, becoming a location of numerous museums. Through their recent donation of their outstanding collection of Polish contemporary art – built up over a period of many years – to the city of Kraków, Andrzej and Teresa Starmach have left their mark on the history of Polish art collecting.

Keywords: Polish contemporary art, collecting, heritage, memory, adaptive reuse.

The collector and his gallery

In her book *The Private Museum of the Future*, Dora Imhof compared large public museums to cruisers, steadfastly headed in a predetermined direction under the watchful eye of politicians, supervisory boards and steering committees. They stand in contrast to private collectors, bustling around like agile motorboats, their actions swift, ideas unpredictable and concepts radical. Private collectors explore uncharted roads and go against popular tastes and widely held notions.¹ They take risks because only time will show whether their achievements are appreciated or not.

One example of such a collector, independent and always doing things his own way, is Andrzej Starmach (b. 1953), an art historian and art dealer who has been running the Starmach

¹ IMHOF, Dora. Introduction. In: BECHTER, C; IMHOF, D. (eds.). *The Private Museum of the Future*, JRP/Ringier, Zurich, 2018. p. 15.

Gallery in Kraków together with his wife, Teresa, since 1989.² Thanks to his efforts, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, works by Jerzy Nowosielski, a painter still alive at the time, became some of the most sought-after and highly regarded Polish paintings. It was also thanks to Starmach that a monograph on Nowosielski was published by the prestigious publishing house Skira.³ Previously, in the 1990s, canvases by the long-deceased painters Jacek Malczewski, Wlastimil Hofman and Jerzy Kossak⁴ fetched the highest prices on the Polish market. Nowosielski's market success led to a breakthrough and paved the way for other classics of Polish post-war art: works by Wojciech Fangor, Stefan Gierowski, Jan Lebenstein and eventually those by much younger artists began to show up at auctions. Władysław Hasiór was another artist whose work was brought back from oblivion and, in a sense, popularised by Andrzej Starmach. Starmach exhibited Władysław Hasiór's works for the first time at the Art Basel International Art Fair in 2013. Art dealers and critics from across the world were amazed that as early as the 1960s Poland had such an original artist, on a par with world-famous geniuses of art. In order to offer and popularise Hasiór's works across the world, Starmach first needed to collect them. He purchased them at good prices, especially in Scandinavia, where the artist had exhibited several times in the 1960's.⁵ It was in Scandinavia that Starmach's passion for collecting art began. As a student, he worked first in Finland and then in Sweden, purchasing paintings with the dollars he earned. For example, a very good painting by Nowosielski, 70 cm x 50 cm, was purchased for a mere 20 dollars(!). Unfortunately, this painting had to be sold in 1996, when Starmach was building his gallery in the Podgórze district.⁶

Starmach states that he identifies primarily as a collector:

In the history of world art collecting, a recurring motif is that art dealers create their private collections. For example, the Beyeler Foundation Museum near Basel grew out of an art dealer's private collection. If an art dealer is serious about their work, they cannot treat art merely as a commodity. If you do not love art, do not wish to own works of art for yourself, you cannot seriously pursue this profession.⁷

Alongside running a commercial gallery, Andrzej and Teresa Starmach created a private collection of Polish avant-garde art from the post-Second World War era. The profile of this collection, however, differed slightly from the profile of the gallery's activities. In the gallery's early years, the exhibitions featured Kraków-based artists from several different generations, including Marek Chlanda, Wojciech Ćwiartniewicz, Tadeusz Kantor, Kazimierz Mikulski, Jerzy Nowosielski, Andrzej Pawłowski, Maria Pinińska-Bereś, Teresa Rudowicz, Maria Stangret, Jacek Maria Stokłosa, Andrzej Szewczyk, Teresa Tyszkiewicz, Andrzej Welmiński and others. Meanwhile, their collecting tastes, besides a fascination with Jerzy Nowosielski's paintings,

² STARMACH, Andrzej, MILISZKIEWICZ, Janusz. Jak być bogatym? In: *Satander Art and Culture Review* 1(2), 2016, p. 9.

³ SZCZEPANIAK, Andrzej (ed.). *Jerzy Nowosielski*. Milano: Skira. ISBN 978-8857241531. Kraków: Galeria Starmach, 2019.

⁴ MILISZKIEWICZ, Janusz. Sztuka w blasku pieniędzy. In: *MOC AK Forum* 1/2013 (6), 2013.

⁵ MILISZKIEWICZ, Janusz, TORAŃSKI, Błażej. *Obrazy ze świata fikcji*. In: *WP Finanse*, 2015.

⁶ STARMACH, Andrzej. Warto przepłacać za najlepsze obrazy. In: *RZECZPOSPOLITA* 19.11.2009.

⁷ STARMACH, Warto przepłacać.... NB: while talking with authors of this article he admitted that in his opinion Beyeler Foundation is the most beautiful museum in the world (talk with A. Starmach in his gallery, Kraków, 29 October 2024)



Fig. 1: *Andrzej Starmach in his gallery, above Tadeusz Kantor's painting "Les Enveloppes" (1966), photograph by Artur Jasinski.*

revolved around the constructivist abstraction pursued by Warsaw-based painters connected with the Foksal Gallery. This group included Henryk Stażewski, Edward Krasiński, Koji Kamo and Henryk Winiarski. Over time, the works of Warsaw artists were balanced by the addition of pieces by Kraków artists, primarily members of the so-called Kraków Group, including Tadeusz Kantor, Andrzej Pawłowski, Maria Stangret, Jadwiga Maziarska, Tadeusz Brzozowski and Jonasz Stern.⁸ The dialogue between these two artistic circles – constructivist abstraction

⁸ ROTTENBERG, Anda. In One's Own Footsteps. In: SZCZEPANIAK, A. (ed.) *kolekcja. dwadzieścia lat galerii starmach*. Kraków: Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie 2009, pp. 25-29.

and geometric abstraction – defined the main axes around which an impressive and likely the finest collection of Polish contemporary art was created.

The Starmach collection has been publicly displayed several times. Two major survey exhibitions showcased at the Starmach Gallery resonated widely – the *First Exhibition of Modern Art. Fifty Years Later* in 1998 and *Modernists and Socialist Realism* in 2000. In 2009, the exhibition *A Collection: Twenty Years of the Starmach Gallery* was presented at the National Museum in Kraków, featuring 363 works from the Starmach collection. This significant and widely debated exhibition, accompanied by a four-volume catalogue,⁹ provoked a discussion about the relationship between private collectors and public museums. There were accusations that the presentation of a private collection at the National Museum enhances the market value of the exhibited works due to its reputation. Concerns were raised about why the museum did not agree with the collector that the works displayed at the National Museum would not return to the market. Interestingly, previous exhibitions of private collections did not provoke such controversies, such as those of Rafał Jabłonka and Krzysztof Musiał, despite both of them being art dealers who run their own galleries and both exhibitions being shown in public museums. This narrative illustrates the sensitivity surrounding the overlap between the private and public spheres, especially when substantial financial resources are at stake.¹⁰

The Starmach Gallery has played, and continues to play, a crucial role on the artistic map of Poland by hosting exhibitions of both leading Polish and international artists, including notable figures such as Nobuyoshi Araki, Joseph Beuys, Louise Bourgeois, Andy Warhol, Sherrie Levine, Alberto Giacometti, Greg Bogin, Henrik Spohler and Nicolas Groszperre. Besides organising exhibitions held at its venue, the Starmach Gallery has also hosted exhibitions in other cities, promoting Polish contemporary art both within Poland and beyond its borders, including in Stockholm, London, Paris, Vienna, New York, Rome and Budapest.¹¹

From 1989 to 2024, the Starmach Gallery organised over 150 exhibitions within the walls of its venues, primarily featuring solo exhibitions of painters, sculptors, graphic artists, illustrators and photographers. Works by Nowosielski – as well as those by Abakanowicz, Chlanda, Kałucki, Kantor, Lutyński, Stangret and Tarasin – have been exhibited numerous times. It is important to highlight that every exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue, which at times was quite substantial in size. For instance, on the occasion of the retrospective exhibition of Jerzy Nowosielski at the Zachęta Gallery in Warsaw, the Starmach Gallery and the Nowosielski Foundation published a catalogue consisting of 731 pages, featuring 750 works by the artist.¹² The crowning achievement of the Starmach Gallery's publishing activities was the release by Skira of the first English-language monographs on contemporary Polish artists: Henryk Stażewski in 2018¹³ and Jerzy Nowosielski in 2019.¹⁴

Initially, the Starmach Gallery was housed in the mediaeval basement of a tenement building at ul. Rynek Główny 45 in Kraków. On 17 May 1997, the gallery opened in a new location in Kraków's Podgórze district, at 5 Węgierska Street, in the former Zucker House of Prayer,

⁹ SZCZEPANIAK, Andrzej, (ed.). *kolekcja. dwadzieścia lat galerii starmach*. Kraków: Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie 2009.

¹⁰ JAGODZIŃSKA, Katarzyna. *Czas muzeów w Europie Środkowej. Muzea i centra sztuki współczesnej (1989–2014)*. Kraków: Międzynarodowe Centrum Kultury, 2014, pp. 274–275.

¹¹ SZCZEPANIAK, Andrzej. *Starmach Gallery. Profile and history*, <http://www.starmach.eu/app/pl/about>

¹² STARMACH, Andrzej (ed.). *Jerzy Nowosielski*. Kraków: Galeria Starmach, Fundacja Nowosielskich, 2003.

¹³ SZCZEPANIAK, Andrzej (ed.). *Henryk Stażewski*. Milano: Skira. Kraków: Galeria Starmach, 2018.

¹⁴ SZCZEPANIAK, Andrzej (ed.). *Jerzy Nowosielski*. Milano: Skira. Kraków: Galeria Starmach, 2019.

built in 1879–1881, where it continues today. The building at 5 Węgierska Street also houses the Nowosielski Foundation, established in May 1996 on the initiative of Zofia and Jerzy Nowosielski. The aims of this institution are to support and promote phenomena of great value in contemporary culture, both Polish and global; to support the achievements of artists from different generations and different fields; and to document Jerzy Nowosielski's works and conduct research on his work.¹⁵

The Starmachs' decision to move their gallery from the Main Square to the then run-down and remote Podgórze district seemed very bold, irrational even. The location on the famous A-B Main Square line, the main tourist route and promenade of Kraków's bohemia, was abandoned for a quiet little street on the outskirts of the city. Starmach says that the decision was directly inspired by a trip to the United States together with his wife in 1992.¹⁶ While there, they visited many famous New York galleries of contemporary art. Such galleries are frequently located in adapted post-industrial buildings or garages in SoHo and Chelsea districts, changing their image and bringing about cultural, social and spatial transformations.¹⁷ Artists, followed closely by art dealers (gallerists), are usually at the forefront of gentrification processes, a phenomenon not limited to New York. They make such districts "cool" while simultaneously precipitating further changes and transformations which can be seen in different ways: some are positive – the districts are revitalised; others can be seen as negative – residents are replaced and these places, as Sharon Zukin puts it, "lose their soul".¹⁸ One of such rediscovered district is Kraków's Podgórze, forgotten several decades ago but now fashionable and vibrant. Podgórze Museum, which opened in 2018, traces the history of this district.¹⁹

The history of the Zucker House of Prayer

The World Jewish Restitution Organisation estimates that before World War II, there were over 3,300,000 Jews,²⁰ 966 synagogues and 766 houses of prayer in Poland.²¹ The name "house of prayer" was conventional in a sense as it could refer both to a separate building used for studying, teaching and interpreting the Torah and to rooms designated for these purposes by a synagogue, *cheder* or *yeshiva*. Houses of prayer also served other functions: besides providing religious and moral instruction, they also served as places where the local community held meetings, handouts were given to the poor, books were collected and Hebrew was taught. They were established on the initiative of religious associations and private individuals. Sometimes they were grand buildings, rivalling synagogues in terms of size, quality of architecture and richness of furnishings. Like synagogues, they traditionally featured separate halls for men and for women, as well as a Torah ark (*aron ha-kodesh*) and a bimah. In Poland, a Jewish house of prayer was also called a *bet ha-midrash*, a *minyán* and a *bożniczka*.²²

¹⁵ <http://www.starmach.eu/app/pl/foundation>

¹⁶ STARMACH, Andrzej, MLISZKIEWICZ, Janusz. Jak być bogatym... 2016, p. 11.

¹⁷ HALLE, David, TISSO, Elizabeth. *New York's New Edge: Contemporary Art, the High Line, and Urban Megaprojects on the Far West Side*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

¹⁸ ZUKIN, Sharon. *Naked City. The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. pp. 35–61.

¹⁹ <https://muzeumkrakowa.pl/oddzialy/projekt-muzeum-podgorza>

²⁰ <https://wjro.org.il/our-work/restitution-by-country/poland/>

²¹ MOJKOWSKI, Jacek, TURSKI, Mieczysław. Mienie żydowskie. Majątek z popiołów. In: *POLITYKA* 6 (2075), 1997, p. 4.

²² GRZESIAK, Krystyna. Co wiemy o żydowskich domach modlitwy na przykładzie Krakowa. In: *Krakowskie Studia Małopolskie*, 4/2000, pp. 26–27.

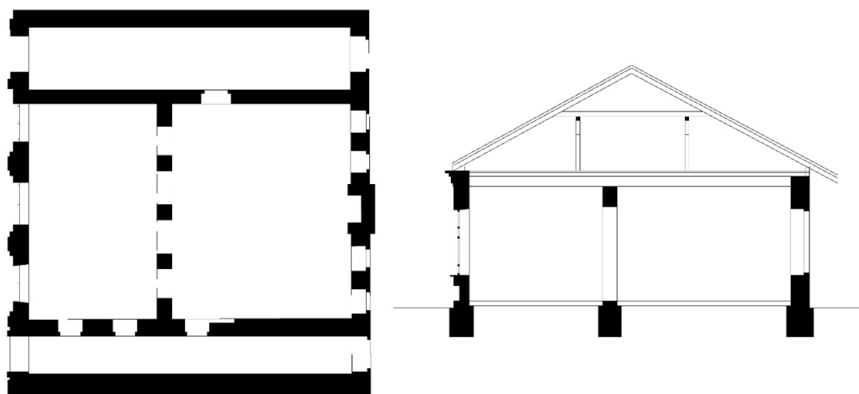


Fig. 2: *An original design of a Jewish house of prayer in Podgórze*, author: Jan Ertel (1881), own work on the



basis of archival documents reproduced in Karski 2023, p. 52.

Fig. 3: *The former Zucker House of Prayer, currently housing the Starmach Gallery*, photograph by Artur Jasiński.

The Zucker House of Prayer, also called *Bet ha-Midrash Chasidim* (Hebrew for House of Study of the Hasidim), was built in 1879–1881 on the initiative of Dawid Zucker for the Bet ha-Midrash Chasidim Society for Prayer and Support. It belonged to the Israeli Religious Community in Podgórze. It is a red brick building in the Neoclassical style, drawing influence from Romanesque architecture. The brick facade is an excellent example of the round-arch style (*Rundbogenstil*) of architecture of Kraków. The facade from the Węgierska Street side

(from the west) is symmetrical and has three gables, a taller one in the middle and two smaller ones on either side, adorned with pediments with round windows. The entire facade is crowned with an arcaded frieze and a rich cornice of hand-moulded bricks. The building was entered into the register of monuments on 30 January 1996, under number A-1015, as a “former house of prayer”.²³

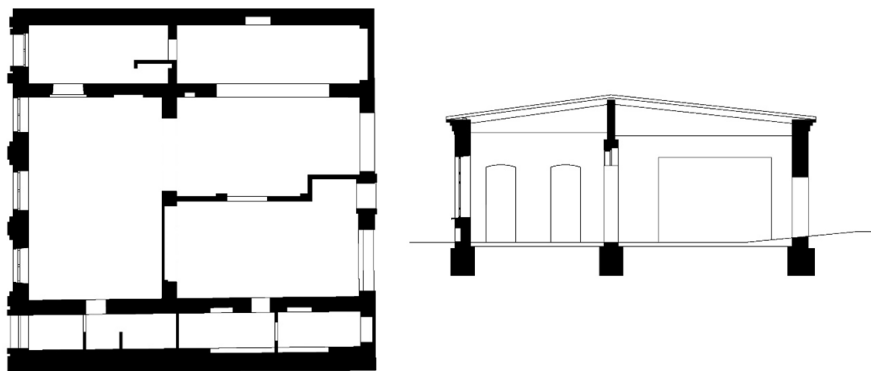


Fig. 4: The layout of the building in 1995, own work on the basis of: “Survey of a Post-industrial Building”, Kraków, Węgierska 5, 1995, author: architect Jacek Stawiarski.

The first mention of this building dates back to 1876, when an application for a building permit was submitted to the City Hall of the Royal Capital City of Kraków. The design was prepared by the architect Jan Ertel and the building plans bear his signature.²⁴ It was a single-storey building, built on a rectangular plan. Its central bay featured halls for men and for women, with two corridors on the sides serving as walkways. The left corridor led to the men’s hall, while a slightly narrower right corridor led to the women’s hall. The two halls were separated by a wall with four characteristic semicircular arcades, parallel to the facade. A recess for a Torah ark lay on the centre line of the building on the eastern wall, as tradition dictates, while a bimah stood at the centre of the men’s hall. The building had wooden beamed ceilings, probably richly decorated, and a gable roof.²⁵ The hallways led to the courtyard of the property. On its opposite end were facility areas, which in 1909 were extended and adapted into the caretaker’s lodgings and a kosher kitchen used for baking matzos.²⁶

The Zucker House of Prayer was the largest house of prayer in Podgórze and, as such, became the scene of important events. A meeting of Zionists attended by Ozjasz Thon was held there in 1919, elections to the Jewish Community Council in Podgórze took place there, and in the 1930s a tzadik from Bobowa visited the house of prayer while leading a procession of the faithful.²⁷ In 1941–1943, the Germans closed down all Jewish religious and social

²³ <https://sztetl.org.pl/pl/node/86089>

²⁴ KARSKI, Kamil. Żydowskie domy modlitwy, łażnia oraz cmentarze w Podgórzu. In: FIGIELA, P. (ed.). *Zanim wyrosły mury. Żydzi w Podgórzu*. Kraków: Muzeum Krakowa 2023, p. 54.

²⁵ GRZESIAK, Co wiemy o żydowskich..., p. 32.

²⁶ TRAUTSOLT, Krystyna. Telewizyjny teatr Studio w Krakowie. *Architektura* 2/1989, p.37.

²⁷ KARSKI, Żydowskie domy modlitwy..., pp. 54–55.

organisations and confiscated their property. A devastated Zucker House of Prayer served as a storehouse for items taken from Kraków's synagogues.²⁸

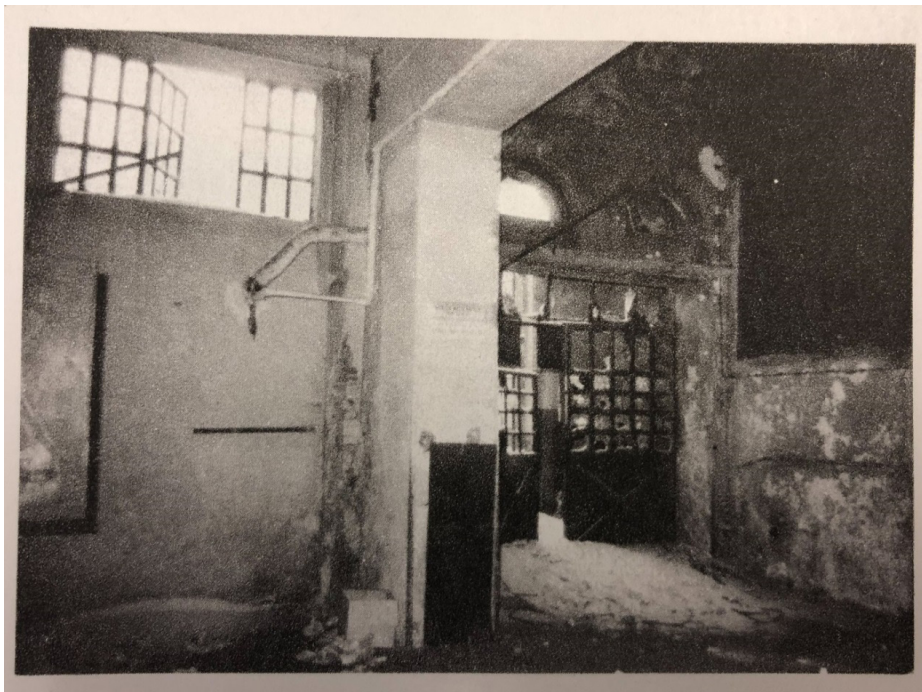


Fig. 5: *The devastated interior of the Zucker House of Prayer, 1986, photograph taken from Architektura 2/1989, p. 37.*

After World War II, Jewish religious buildings, including houses of prayer, ceased to serve their original functions. Some of them were demolished, others rebuilt. As abandoned property, they were handed over to new owners, who adapted them to their needs. Many of them were handed over to production cooperatives. Adaptive reuse projects rarely took into account the buildings' original function or their historical or artistic value.²⁹ Improper use and the lack of supervision by a conservator further contributed to their destruction.³⁰ Such was the fate of the Zucker House of Prayer. From 1945, it was used by the "Trud" Cooperative of Deaf-Mute Disabled People. The building was rebuilt: the wall with the arcades was partially taken down and the wall between the main hall and the corridor was demolished. The resulting space was divided into smaller rooms with partition walls. Large holes were made in the eastern wall, and another hole was made in the recess for an altar cabinet, where the Torah ark used to stand. Window and door frames were replaced and the roof covering was changed. Over the years, the building that had once been a house of prayer, then a production facility, fell into complete disrepair. Only its brick facade survived in relatively good condition.³¹

²⁸ <https://sztetl.org.pl/pl/node/86089>

²⁹ WILCZYK, Wojciech. *Niewinne oko nie istnieje*. Łódź-Kraków: Atlas Sztuki i Korporacja ha!art, 2009.

³⁰ GRZESIAK, Co wiemy o żydowskich..., p. 27.

³¹ Ibidem, p. 33.

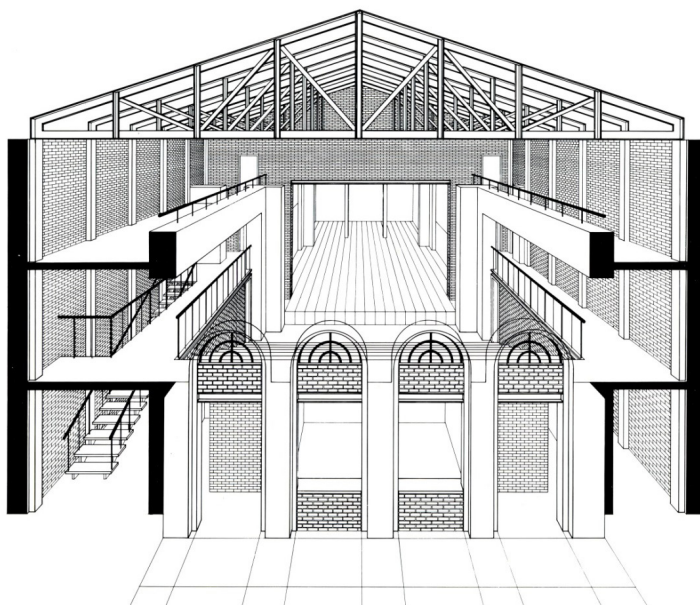


Fig. 6: *Project to adapt the former Zucker House of Prayer as the Studio Television Playhouse, 1986, axonometric view, from Artur Jasiński's archives.*

In 1986, after the “Trud” Cooperative had left the building, its adaptive reuse as the Studio Television Playhouse was proposed. The building was meant to become a studio for recording plays for Kraków Television.³² This idea originated with the editor Krzysztof Miklaszewski. One of the authors of this article (Artur Jasiński) had a chance to participate both in compiling surveys and inventories³³ and designing the playhouse.³⁴ At the time, the building seemed more like a completely devastated post-industrial relic than a religious building of historical interest. Most people at that time had no idea that Jews had been part of the history of Podgórze.³⁵ The “Jewish space” in Poland was practically non-existent, having disappeared with the Holocaust.³⁶ It was only through archival research that we realised we were dealing with a Jewish house of prayer, prompting us to incorporate design features and details inspired by the original function of the building into the design. For example, the original layout of the rooms was restored and the motif of a seven-branched candelabrum was used on the arcades separating the theatre room from the foyer. A curtain reproducing a drawing of the altar wall with a Torah ark where it once used to stand was meant to be an element directly inspired by the religious heritage of this building. This concept directly reflected the idea that a narrative method could be used when adapting former places of worship for secular functions, which emerged many

³² TRAUTSOLT, *Telewizyjny teatr* pp. 35-43.

³³ Archiwum Urzędu Miasta Krakowa, sygn.. BA. B99.P-1/849. *Inwentaryzacja architektoniczno-budowlana dla potrzeb adaptacji budynku bożnicy im. Zuckera na teatr*; Kraków 1986, msp, t. 1-7.

³⁴ Architects: Stanisław Deńko (team leader), Jacek Czech, Artur Jasiński, Robert Kuzianik.

³⁵ SROKA, Łukasz, T. *Między Klasem a Krakowem. Historia Żydowskiej Gminy Wyznaniowej w Podgórzu*. In: FIGIELA, P. (ed.). *Zanim wyrosły mury. Żydzi w Podgórzu*. Kraków: Muzeum Krakowa, 2023, p. 41.

³⁶ LEHLER, Erica T., MENG, Michael. *Jewish Space in Contemporary Poland*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2015, p. 1.

years later.³⁷ The former Zucker House of Prayer was never turned into the Studio Television Playhouse. It was only 10 years later, in 1996, that the Starmach Gallery opened there, after extensive renovations.

Adaptation of the House of Prayer as the Starmach Gallery

The design for adapting the former Zucker House of Prayer as a gallery of contemporary art was prepared by Kraków architect Jan Rumian, while Professor Piotr Krakowski, a historian of art, was responsible for the conservator's supervision.³⁸ The construction work was carried out by Sigma construction company.³⁹ The usable area of the building after adaptation was approximately 580 m².



Fig. 7: *The devastated interior of the House of Prayer, the men's hall in the foreground, the women's hall on the left, 1995, photograph by Marek Gardulski, Starmach Gallery's archives.*

The front elevation was painstakingly repaired, new doors and windows were installed, and the interior was designed in minimalist style: white walls, steel roof structures painted black and dark, and concrete floors. The original division into the women's hall, the men's hall and two side corridors was not retained. A new transverse wall was erected, sectioning off part of the former men's hall to create a high and long warehouse along the eastern wall. Unfortunately, this new partition wall changed the original proportions of the interior and covered the altar recess, which is now hidden in the warehouse and inaccessible to the public. The only relic preserving the original character of the interior is four pillars with semicircular arcades. An additional bay, housing a small exhibition room and an office space, was added from the side

³⁷ WIERZBICKA, Anna Maria, ARNO, Maria. Adaptation of places of worship to secular functions with the use of narrative method as a tool to preserve religious heritage. In: *Museológia a kultúrne dedičstvo*, vol. 10, 2022, Is. 4, pp. 63–67. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46284/mkd.2021.10.4.5>

³⁸ <http://www.starmach.eu/app/pl/about>

³⁹ <https://www.sigma-aib.com.pl/ofirmie.html>

of the courtyard, while office, storage and welfare facilities were created at the far end of the courtyard, in a side annexe. The architecture is sparse, creating a “white box” atmosphere, typical of modern museum interiors, which makes it possible to exhibit various types of art. There are no direct references to the previous, religious function of the building inside it. This quite popular and safe strategy for the adaptive reuse of historic buildings can be defined as functional adaptive reuse⁴⁰ or, following the typology proposed by Pieczka and Wórzeczka, preservative strategy with interventions in interiors.⁴¹

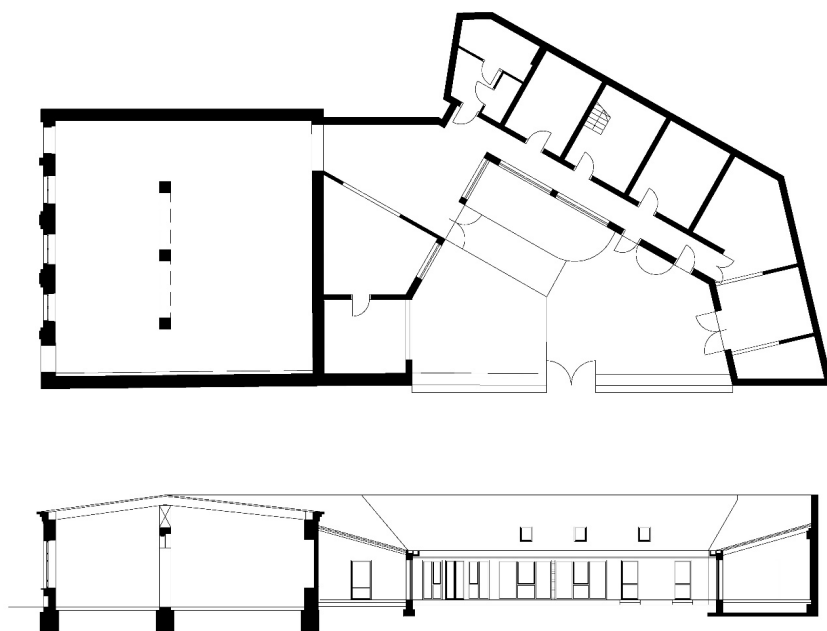


Fig. 8: *The design for the adaptive reuse of the former house of prayer as an art gallery, own work on the basis of a technical design, author: Jan Rumian, June 1996.*

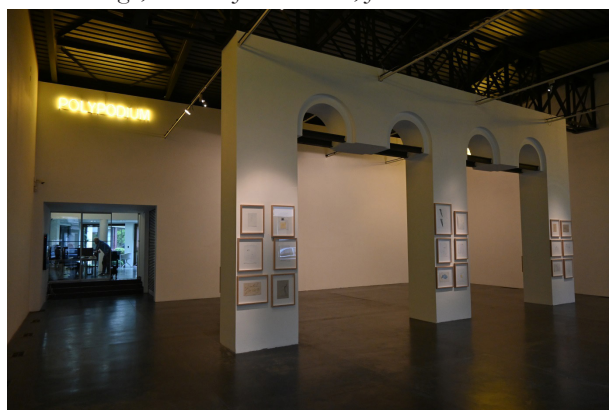


Fig. 9: *The main hall of the Starmach Gallery, photograph by Artur Jasiński.*

⁴⁰ ROBERT, Phillipe. *Adaptations. New Uses for Old Buildings*. Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991.

⁴¹ PIECZKA, Michał, WÓRZECZKA, Bogusław. Art in Post-Industrial Facilities – Strategies of Adaptive Reuse for Art Exhibition Function in Poland, In: *Buildings* 11(10), p. 10.



Fig. 10: *The Starmach Gallery, an interior detail: the former arcaded wall separating the men's hall and the women's hall (eżrat nashim), photograph by Artur Jasiński.*

What distinguishes this design from many other galleries of contemporary art in adapted historic buildings is its original religious function. Analyses and research show that post-industrial buildings are most often adapted into exhibition and gallery spaces in Poland.⁴² This is due to two factors: an abundance of post-industrial buildings which appeared in Poland in the wake of the political transformation and economic changes after 1989, and the growing needs of the burgeoning cultural sector, in particular the public sector. Such icons of contemporary architecture as MOCAK Museum of Contemporary Art in Kraków (2010), the Tadeusz Kantor Museum (2014) or the Silesian Museum (2015) were established in adapted post-industrial buildings. There is wide public approval for these developments: they are seen as efforts to preserve and protect cultural heritage and are appreciated for their environmentally friendly nature, consistent with the “reduce, reuse, and recycle” principle inherent in sustainable development policies.⁴³ The use of religious buildings for non-religious purposes is another story, especially in Poland. Although museums created in buildings that previously served religious functions make up nearly 7% of all national museums in Poland,⁴⁴ they are primarily religious, historical or regional in nature. Andrzej Białkiewicz notes that the preservation of religious heritage is a problem as these buildings “retain an aura of worship that is very intense and significant in Poland.... [I]t should be stressed that in Poland, the intangible value of a

⁴² PIECZKA, WÓWRZECZKA, *Art in Post-Industrial Facilities...*, p.1.

⁴³ PLEVOTELS, Bie, CLEEMPOEL Van, Koenraad. *Adaptive Reuse of the Built Heritage. Concepts and Cases of an Emerging Discipline*. London-New York: Routledge 2019; WONG, Liliane. *Adaptive Reuse. Extending the Lives of Buildings*. Basel: Birkhäuser 2017; WONG, Liliane. *Adaptive Reuse in Architecture. A Typological Index*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 2023.

⁴⁴ RUSNAK Marta. Adaptacja budynków sakralnych na cele muzealne w Polsce. Historia i skala zjawiska. In: *Architectus*, 2015, 3 (43), p. 86.

historic building and its former religious functions are much more respected than in other European countries.⁴⁵

According to Białkiewicz, one example of the transformation of a religious building for other functions is the adaptive reuse of a former Bernardine monastery in Wrocław as the Museum of Architecture under the supervision of professor Edmund Małachowicz in 1956–1974.⁴⁶ Interestingly, Białkiewicz's research completely disregards Jewish religious buildings, synagogues and houses of prayer that were not destroyed during World War II and were later rebuilt and adapted for other purposes.

Podgórze district – restoring memory

Polish Jews were murdered during World War II and faded from memory for many years. Jewish cemeteries were left to overgrow; *matzevah* were sometimes used for building materials; Jewish property was plundered; and buildings, including religious ones, were demolished or rebuilt for other purposes. As communism fell and Central and Eastern Europe regained their freedom, the time came to restore the historical memory. This process was characteristic of the largest metropolises: Berlin, Budapest, Prague, Vilnius and Warsaw.⁴⁷ One of the most characteristic and dynamic places to witness this process was Kraków's Kazimierz district, in which as many as seven synagogues survived, even though the city's Jewish residents had been murdered. It became the scene of the Jewish Culture Festival, organised for the first time in 1988,⁴⁸ and was put on the map by Steven Spielberg's 1994 film *Schindler's List*. Spielberg decided to direct his film in Kazimierz rather than in Podgórze, where the Jewish ghetto was located, for logistical reasons: the panorama of Podgórze at the time was spoiled by newly erected buildings and a television tower in the Krzemionki Hills.⁴⁹ The film created a tourist boom and an increased interest in the fate of Kraków's Jews during World War II, which in turn contributed to the popularisation and commercialisation of Kazimierz. All this led Monika Murzyn-Kupisz to ask the important question of whether restoring Jewish memory and exploring heritage can be reconciled with consumption and mass tourism, as well as a pseudo-Jewish stylisation of historical space.⁵⁰

Podgórze has successfully escaped the fate of the fashionable and crowded Kazimierz. Its location on the right bank of the Vistula River and suburban character protected this district against the first wave of gentrification. Things changed after the construction of the Bernatek Footbridge (2010), the Schindler Museum (official name: Oskar Schindler's Enamel Factory,

⁴⁵ BIAŁKIEWICZ Andrzej. *O zmianach użytkowania obiektów sakralnych / Adaptive Reuse of Sacred Buildings*. Kraków: Politechnika Krakowska 2016, p. 240.

⁴⁶ BIAŁKIEWICZ, *O zmianach...*, p. 244.

⁴⁷ PURCHLA Jacek. Świat po katastrofie – w poszukiwaniu utraconej pamięci. In: MURZYN-KUPISZ, M.; Purchla, J. (eds.). *Przywracanie pamięci. Rewitalizacja zabytkowych dzielnic żydowskich w miastach Europy Środkowej*. Kraków: Międzynarodowe Centrum Kultury, 2008, p. 7.

⁴⁸ MAKUCH Janusz. *Festival Kultury Żydowskiej: na pograniczu dwóch światów*. In: MURZYN-KUPISZ, M.; Purchla, J. (eds.). *Przywracanie pamięci. Rewitalizacja zabytkowych dzielnic żydowskich w miastach Europy Środkowej*. Kraków: Międzynarodowe Centrum Kultury 2008, p. 245.

⁴⁹ LEHLER Erica T. (2013). *Jewish Poland Revisited. Heritage Tourism in Unquiet Places*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013, p. 31.

⁵⁰ MURZYN-KUPISZ Monika, *Przywracanie pamięci czy masowa konsumpcja? Dylematy odkrywania żydowskiego dziedzictwa kulturowego krakowskiego Kazimierza*. In: MURZYN-KUPISZ, M.; Purchla, J. (eds.). *Przywracanie pamięci. Rewitalizacja zabytkowych dzielnic żydowskich w miastach Europy Środkowej*. Kraków: Międzynarodowe Centrum Kultury 2008, pp. 365–384.

a branch of the Kraków Museum) (2010), MOCAR Museum (2011), the Kantor Museum (2014) and the campus of the Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski Kraków University (2003–2008), accompanied by the construction of a large number of residential and commercial buildings in the Zablocie area. This district has thus been given a new lease of life, while so far managing to avoid thematisation and theatralisation. It seems that the old historical elements – in particular those inspired by its Jewish history, such as the Schindler Museum, the Ghetto Heroes Square with a sculptural installation by the Lewicki-Łatak Design Studio, and the Trail of Remembrance created around the Podgórze Ghetto – are not eclipsing the contemporary feel of this new district. A range of clubs, restaurants and galleries are now fleeing crowded Kazimierz for Podgórze in search of creative space (and lower rental rates). From this perspective, Andrzej Starmach's decision to move the gallery from Kraków's market square to Podgórze, taken nearly 30 years ago, now seems prophetic. Jarosław Działek, who traces the history of the independent art market in Kraków, observes that Starmach's gallery, one of the leading private galleries in Poland, was like a lone cathedral in an artistic wasteland in Podgórze for an entire decade. It was only the second decade of the twenty-first century that brought changes: old Podgórze and post-industrial Zablocie became the new "promised land" for Kraków's artists and art dealers, offering them cheaper run-down real estate and, just as importantly, a reference to their impoverished and peripheral industrial past. However, here, too, gentrification processes have already begun, with developers quickly developing and transforming these districts to meet the needs of an increasingly affluent middle class.⁵¹



Fig. 11: A commemorative plaque on the Starmach Gallery, photograph by Artur Jasiński.

⁵¹ DZIAŁEK Jarosław. A Spatial History of Independent Art Spaces in Krakow from 1970s to 2019. In: *Arts* 10, 2021, pp. 15–17.

Conclusion

Lastly, it is time to address the recurring questions around whether adaptive reuse of former religious buildings for other functions is appropriate,⁵² and whether dignity can be retained in the process of the secularisation of the sacred.⁵³ Researchers usually note that the adaptive reuse of religious buildings for new functions may be the only way to save them and preserve them for generations to come. Nevertheless, in practice, the adaptation of religious buildings is far more challenging than the adaptation of other historic buildings for other functions.⁵⁴ Their owners, conservators and designers are faced with a dilemma: how to transform them for other functions while preserving their symbolic value and retaining religious furnishings, such as altars, reliquaries, tabernacles or tombs.⁵⁵ Monika Murzyn-Kupisz mentions the Starmach Gallery, located in the renovated house of prayer on Węgierska Street in her analysis of dilemmas surrounding the exploration of Kraków's Jewish heritage. She concludes that Jewish material heritage can still serve utilitarian functions while retaining them, as is the case with numerous schools or the former Jewish hospital on Skawińska Street, today one of the clinics of the Jagiellonian University Medical College. Religious buildings can also be adapted for new functions, the best-known examples being the Starmach Gallery in the former Zucker House of Prayer and the Centre for Jewish Culture housed in a renovated and extended house of prayer on Plac Nowy.⁵⁶



Fig. 12: *Miroslaw Balka's SEMPER FRAGMENTUM exhibition, drawings hung close together on the pillars and a graphic installation at the back, where the Torah ark used to stand, photograph by Artur Jasiński.*

Contemporary art is no stranger to controversial subjects. The Starmach Gallery has exhibited such bold works as photographs by Nobuyoshi Araki and perverse drawings by

⁵² MIGALSKA Kinga. The Question of Appropriateness. Museums Established in Synagogues in Communist Poland: The Case of Łańcut and Włodawa. In: *Arts* 8(4), 2019, p. 167.

⁵³ KUREK Jan. Laicyzacja sacrum. Współczesna adaptacja świątyń do nowych funkcji. In: *Przestrzeń i Forma* 15, 2015, p. 234.

⁵⁴ MINE Tarak Zeren (2013). Adaptive re-use of monuments "restoring religious buildings with different uses", In: *Journal of Cultural Heritage*, vol. 14, Issue 3, Supplement, June 2013.

⁵⁵ ARNO Maria (2021). Adaptation of Historic Sacred Buildings for Secular Purposes keeping the Sacred Function as a Link Between Past and Future. In: *10th Annual Conference of Architecture and Urbanism 2021*, p. 111.

⁵⁶ MURZYN-KUPISZ, *Przywracanie pamięci ...* p. 385.

Nowosielski and Balka. According to Starmach, the answer to the question of whether it is appropriate to exhibit such works is quite clear: art in the historic interior of the former house of prayer gains the setting it deserves.⁵⁷



Fig. 13: *SEMPER FRAGMENTUM* exhibition, a sculpture made of *trylinka* paving blocks, 100 cm x 100 cm x 210 cm, photograph by Artur Jasiński.

In the summer of 2023, the Starmach Gallery held the *SEMPER FRAGMENTUM* exhibition by Mirosław Balka. It was the first exhibition in the quarter of a century since the opening of the gallery to directly refer to the Jewish roots of this place. The context of the Hasidic house of prayer was of great importance here because Mirosław Balka frequently pays attention to the context and architecture of the buildings in which he exhibits his works.⁵⁸ He is also interested in history: Balka talks about the heritage of memory, interpreted in a personal way, composed of non-obvious signs and associations. His well-known work dedicated to Jewish memory – a concrete tunnel with the inscription *AUSCHWITZWIELICZKA* – is displayed nearby, in a square by Kotlarski Bridge. Apart from a collection of archival drawings – grouped together and hung, in contrast to how exhibitions are usually presented, not on the walls but on the gallery's pillars so that none of them “dirties” the walls of the former place of worship – the remaining works, prepared especially for this exhibition, have a symbolic meaning. A sculpture composed of six blocks made of *trylinka* stacked on top of one another stands in a little back hall. *Trylinka* is named after its inventor, Władysław Tryliński, and was patented in 1933. Concrete pavements made of *trylinka* were produced in German labour camps and used in the Schindler factory and the Plaszów Camp, for example. On the eastern wall, on the centre line of the building where the Torah ark stood when it was a house of prayer, the artist placed a set of nine framed, graphically processed photographs corresponding to his sculptures made

⁵⁷ <http://www.starmach.eu/app/pl/about>

⁵⁸ SZCZEPANIAK Andrzej (ed.). *Mirosław Balka. Semper fragmentum*. Kraków: Starmach Gallery, 2023, p. 41.

of fencing mesh.⁵⁹ This composition is a sort of stained glass window in which the facade of the building and a yellow neon light showing the number 766 are reflected. The yellow light brings to mind the yellow colour of the Star of David badges that Jews were forced to sew onto their clothes during the Nazi occupation, while the number 766 refers to the number of Jewish houses of prayer that existed in Poland before World War II. Here, the history of the Zucker House of Prayer, adapted into a gallery of contemporary art, comes full circle.



Fig. 14: *A graphic installation where the Torah ark used to stand, reflecting a neon number 766, referring to the number of Jewish houses of prayer that existed in Poland before World War II, photograph by Artur Jasiński.*

Post Scriptum

In November 2023, the press revealed that Andrzej and Teresa Starmach had decided to donate a significant portion of their collection of the most outstanding works of Polish contemporary art, built up over a period of many years, to the city of Kraków. MOCAR Museum of Contemporary Art received 79 works, mainly paintings and sculptures, including by Władysław Hasior, Tadeusz Kantor, Edward Krasiński, Magdalena Abakanowicz and Mirosław Balka. MuFo Museum of Photography received a collection of 344 works, including works by artists such as Maria Deskur, Jadwiga Sawicka, Andrzej Lachowicz and Marek Piasecki.⁶⁰ This donation is comparable to that made by Feliks Jasiński, who over a hundred years ago gave paintings by Wyspiański, Malczewski, Wyczółkowski and others, to the National Museum in Kraków together with a collection of Japanese art. By making this donation, Andrzej and Teresa Starmach have left their mark on the history of Polish museology and art collecting.

⁵⁹ ROITENBERG Anda. *Zawsze fragment*. In: SZCZEPANIAK, A. (ed.). *Mirosław Balka. Semper fragmentum*. Kraków: Starmach Gallery, 2023, p. 31.

⁶⁰ MUCHA, Dominika (ed.). *Daj mi wszystko: dar Teresy i Andrzeja Starmachów dla Krakowa*. Kraków: MOCAR 2023.

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