

The **National Museum of Italian Judaism and the Shoah (MEIS)**, located in Ferrara, a town in Central Italy with a glorious past and a relevant presence of a Jewish Community, was established by the Italian Parliament on December 27, 2006. In this way, the continuity of the more than bi-millennial Jewish presence in Italy has been fully recognized and celebrated. Italian Jews are an important component of Italian society, and their stories are essential in order to better understand Italian history and civilization. Their cultural contributions both to Judaism in general and to the European culture at large were extraordinary. During the centuries, the Jews of the Italian peninsula helped forge an intense web of relations between European political realities and Mediterranean nations, economies, and religions. Although a minority, they played a fundamental role in the connection among civilizations. If, on one hand, it is time to recognize the richness of the mutual exchanges between Jews and non Jews in Italy, it is undeniable on the other hand the existence of a persistent hostility towards Jews, even among Italians. Such a negative attitude lasted until the first half of the XX century.

According to the law, this new museum will achieve the following goals:

- sharing knowledge and increasing consciousness about Italian Jewish history and culture, with a wing dedicated to the testimonies of the racial persecutions and the Shoah, which took place in Italy;
- promoting cultural initiatives and organizing events (lectures, exhibitions, movies, national and international conferences and shows) on themes such as intercultural dialogues, peace building, hospitality and mutual appreciation between different people and religions.

Above all, the National Museum of Italian Judaism and the Shoah intends to illustrate the originality of the Italian Jewish history in the larger context of the European and Mediterranean environment; at the same time, it will promote cultural initiatives that are able to underline the vast patrimony of ideas, artifacts, and experiences that were produced in Italy by the Jews over more than two millennia. To realize these resolutions, there will be both a section with a permanent exhibition (to be created) and a section with temporary shows, plus a variety of collateral institutions, such as a library, a research centre, a children's wing, seminars and courses, lectures and presentations of new books. The museum will be at the cutting edge of technology. Some of these activities will be in place before the official inauguration of the museum, whose first portion will be opened in Autumn, 2017.

More than a traditional Museum, based on an existing collection, the MEIS is conceived as an "interpretation centre", where objects on display will be the result of a research aiming to represent the issue characterizing its identity. A centre of cultural production, in a deep dialogue with Museums, archives, libraries, Universities, Academies, cultural and scientific institutions, both Jewish and non Jewish, at national and international level.

The site where the museum will be established is the large architectural complex of a former prison, which is in the city of Ferrara. This complex was built in 1912 and closed in 1992. A qualified architectural restoration and recreation will adapt the actual buildings and transform a place, once destined for reclusion and discrimination, into a special space that will emphasize inclusion and integration. The site of this new national museum is located not too far from the city's historic Jewish ghetto, local Jewish attractions, and the ancient synagogues. It will be included in a comprehensive tour of the many Jewish sites of the city.

The Museum will be a sort of "book" of memories. In that perspective five volumes, symbolically representing the five books of the Torah, are added to block C (the only original building, that is the old prison) to construct the new museum complex, creating the symbolic value of the work. The theme of the book, in itself powerful, is incorporated into spaces that are simple and flexible, adaptable to future exhibitions and therefore not tied to a fixed spatial layout. The five building-books, hung to make the park visually accessible, will hold the various functions of the museum and make the space within the walls articulate. Within, the museum is seen as a place full of the possibilities of change. Taking inspiration from the theatre with its scene changes, the load bearing walls of the building operate like a series of sets, allowing variety and a free hand with the exhibition space. Key passages from the Torah, inscribed in low relief or with lettering in relief, form the outlines of the volumes of the "book" and let light into the interior. The complex would be composed of independent units, making it possible to complete the work in stages. The division into several parts furthermore allows each component to be an autonomous part of the whole museum, allowing the exhibition halls, the auditorium, the library and the restaurant to be under completely autonomous management, with independent entrances, services and paths. The lighting throughout the spaces is from above, made indirect and diffuse through photovoltaic brise soleil. The city can be seen through vertical openings in the ceilings of the exhibition halls, thereby bringing the city inside.

Water, as a tribute to the Estense city, collected in basins in the park which will be created all along the complex, will help to the creation of a comfortable microclimate and noticeably lowers the perceived temperature.

With regard to the preexisting structure, the project selected the design which conserves only block C with the jail cells and the walls surrounding the penitentiary complex. This plan requires a rigid examination of the existing building for structural integrity and discarding the attitude that undertaking conservation work means having no choice. Consistent with this decision, the use of contemporary architecture refutes all mimetic approaches; but is rather an occasion to recreate the equilibrium necessary to make the complex fully functional. The restoration must be seen as an essentially simple plan, in which the physical life of the structure is handed over to the future while still conserving traces of its past.

A few words on the permanent collection. As is generally agreed, a museum is not only a collection of objects, even beautiful ones, but an instrument and place to communicate ideas, memories, culture. While a collection of important objects, works of art, ordinary items, may serve as powerful reminders of the narratives and history of Judaism, so do charts, diagrams and images. Here, images are used to educate and instruct the visitors. Creating a multimedia design for a museum rich with historical memories and iconographic references such as the MEIS requires taking advantage of the wide range of possibilities that video affords. On one hand there is the need to organize and make accessible historical materials such as film footage, photographs, drawings, papers of all kinds in the most effective way possible. On the other, there is the need to make use of high impact large scale moving images and scenes to aid the spectator in quickly identifying the main areas within the architectural space and to allow visitors to immerse themselves in the atmosphere that these create. These are two actions with differing dynamic projections which must be holistically integrated.

The historical material, which may be organized according archival practice, also is capable, through video, of offering the public a new, more direct, means of involvement, more immediate, in depth and spectacular, without losing the gravity of its informational value. To achieve this, we can use “natural interface,” which is at the forefront of interactivity design.

But, in conclusion, we have to admit that the MEIS is an “atypical” Museum, as it is not based on a permanent collection with the main goal to show it. Therefore it could be considered more as an “interpretation centre”, with the aim to find artifacts and objects, as well as material and immaterial witnesses, able to represent the essential issue of its identity and to communicate it.

The establishment within the MEIS of the Centre of the Catalogue and Documentation for the Jewish heritage in Italy, in co-operation with the Italian Jewish Heritage Foundation, will be also an important step on the road to create in Ferrara a Museum which has to be a real cultural and research Centre on Italian Judaism, its bi-millennial history and its contribution to Judaism and to the development of the Italian society.