

THE SYNAGOGUE AT BABYN YAR:

TURNING THE NIGHTMARE OF EVIL
INTO A SHARED DREAM OF GOOD



EXHIBITION PARTNERS & COLLABORATORS

The exhibition was conceived and created by historian and curator Robert Jan van Pelt and architect Manuel Herz. It includes photographic murals of the Babyn Yar ravine in Kyiv by Maxim Dondyuk, directed by Edward Burtynsky. Originally produced and installed by Douglas Birkenshaw for Koffler Arts in Toronto, the exhibition is now on an international tour with Dala Projects and Tanata Productions.

These world-renowned collaborators have joined forces to create this truly unique exhibition, a testament to the exceptional importance of the memorial synagogue at Babyn Yar built in 2021 - and the resonance of its history today. The exhibition also gives full breadth to the beauty, eloquence and engineering magic of the synagogue, its iconic power as an emblem both of unimaginable human cruelty and suffering, but also of the unquenchable power of the human spirit for renewal, courage and hope.

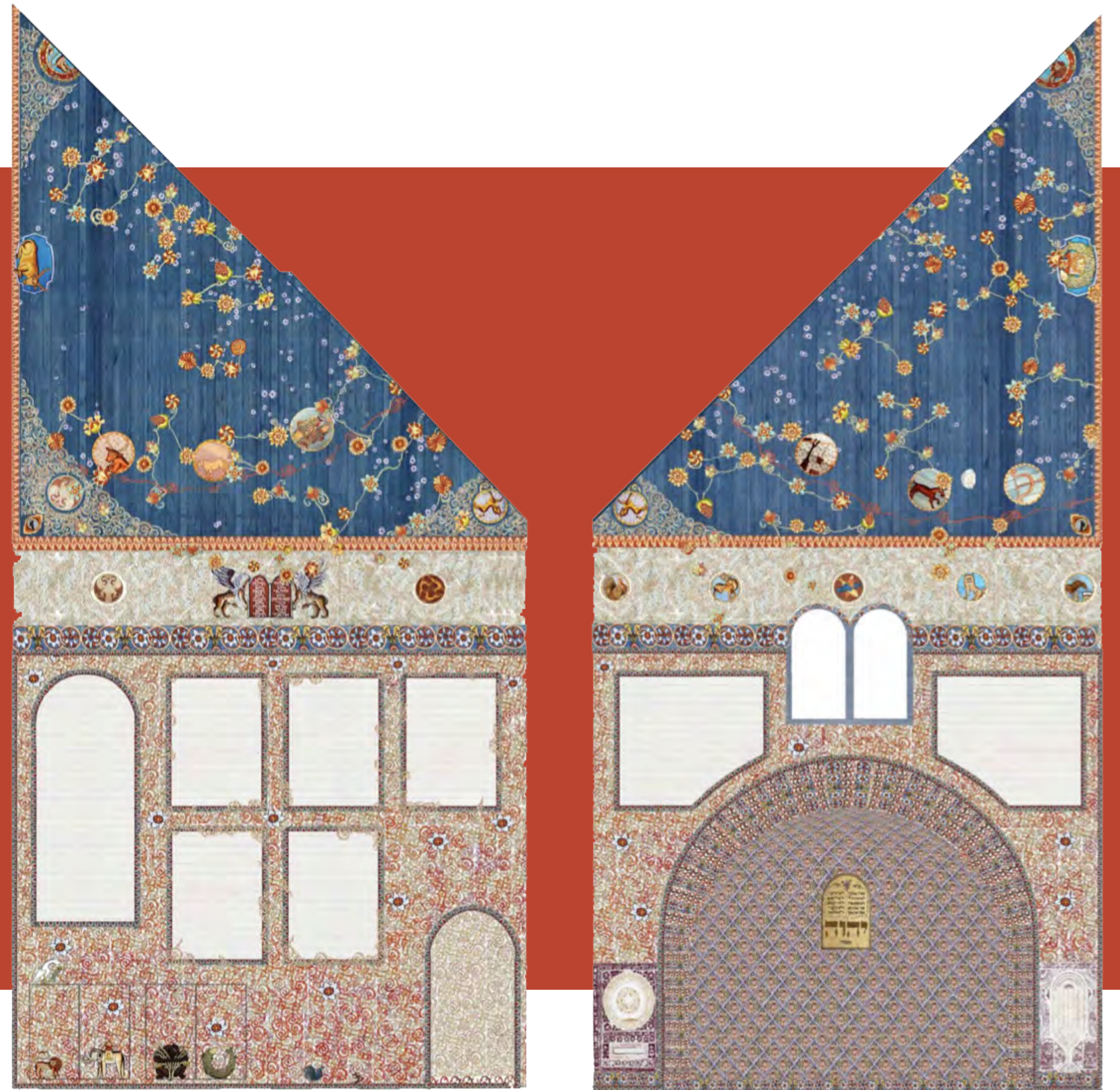
kofflerarts



THE IDEA

The first major massacre of the Holocaust took place over two days in September 1941 (on the eve of Yom Kippur) in the Babyn Yar ravine, Kyiv, Ukraine.

80 years on, honor was paid to those murdered during these unspeakable events through the creation of an extraordinary, jewel-like wooden synagogue by the visionary Swiss architect Manuel Herz. This place of memory, reflection and prayer now stands as a living sanctuary of hope for humankind.





The exhibition presents the Babyn Yar Synagogue in multiple layers and narratives. It aims to retain and unfold the many interweaving accounts, histories and discourses of the synagogue. This unfolding is meant figuratively, but – at least to some degree – also literally, giving an overall shape to the exhibition design: an exhibition akin to a “Wunderkabinett” or a cabinet of wonders. The exhibition consists of several elements that each have their own “speed”, each conveying the narratives in a specific medium, some

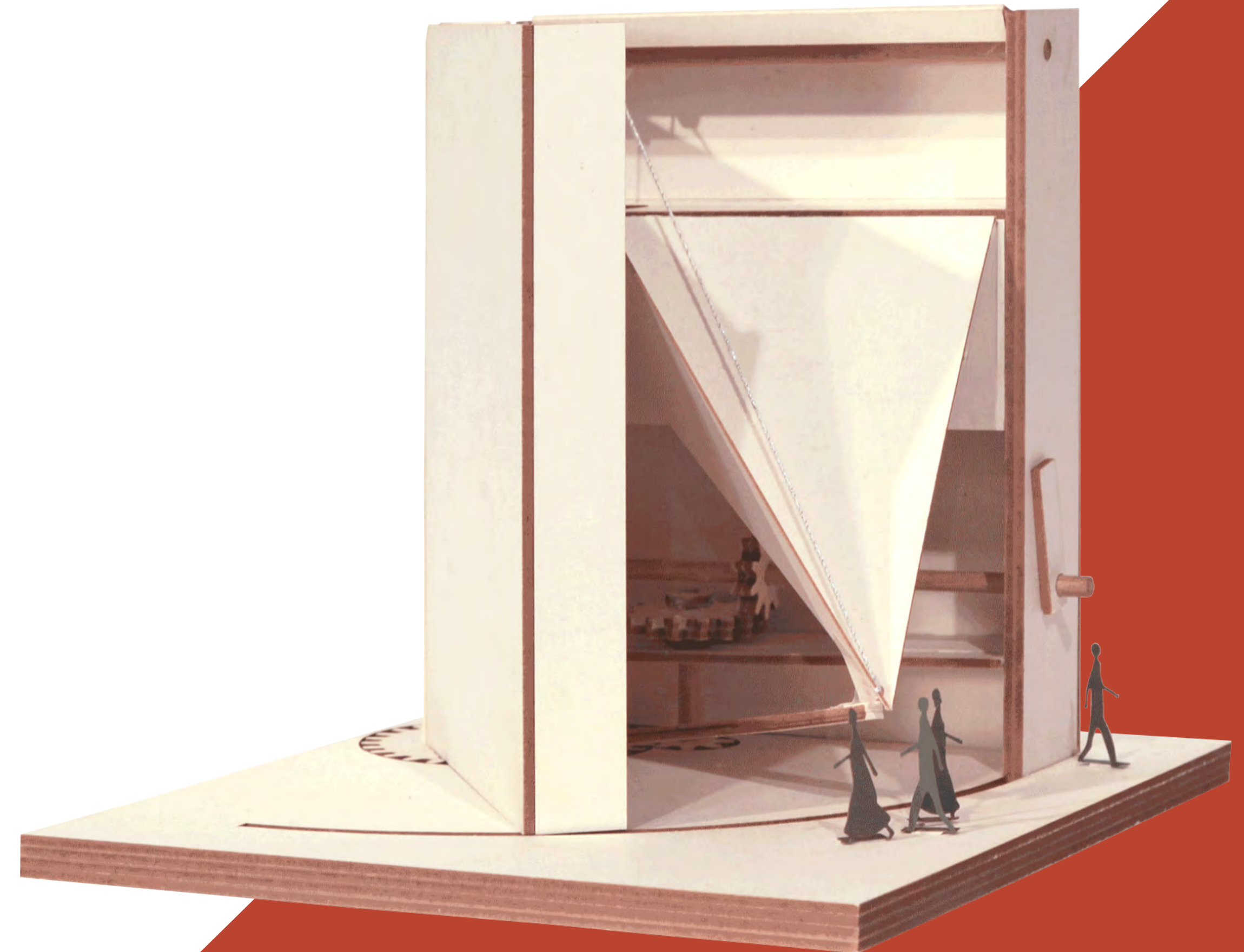
more immersive, some more abstract, some through archives and some through visual experience.

“Profound historic tragedy and poetic artistic beauty may exist side by side in our world,” says curator and architectural historian Robert Jan van Pelt. “The memory of the tragedy can provide depth to the experience of beauty, while the latter may, to some extent, illuminate the abyss of our loss.”

If we conceptualize the synagogue as a building typology in its purest essence, we can consider it as a book. During the religious service, a congregation comes together, to collectively read a book - the Siddur (the book of prayers) or the Bible. The shared reading of the book opens a world of wisdom, morals, history and anecdotes to the congregation. It is this notion that informs the design of the new Babyn Yar Synagogue.

We combine this idea with a different type of book, something that is quite playful: the pop-up book. The pop-up book is a magic book, that unfolds into three dimensions. From a flat object of a book, when we open it, new worlds unfold, that we could not imagine before. In a sense, the pop-up book can act as a metaphor for the Synagogue. Furthermore, the pop-up book triggers fascination: no one can resist the temptation of opening up these books of wonders, and explore them. This quality of a “cabinet of wonder” and a new universe that unfolds, is what I wanted to create in the location of Babyn Yar.

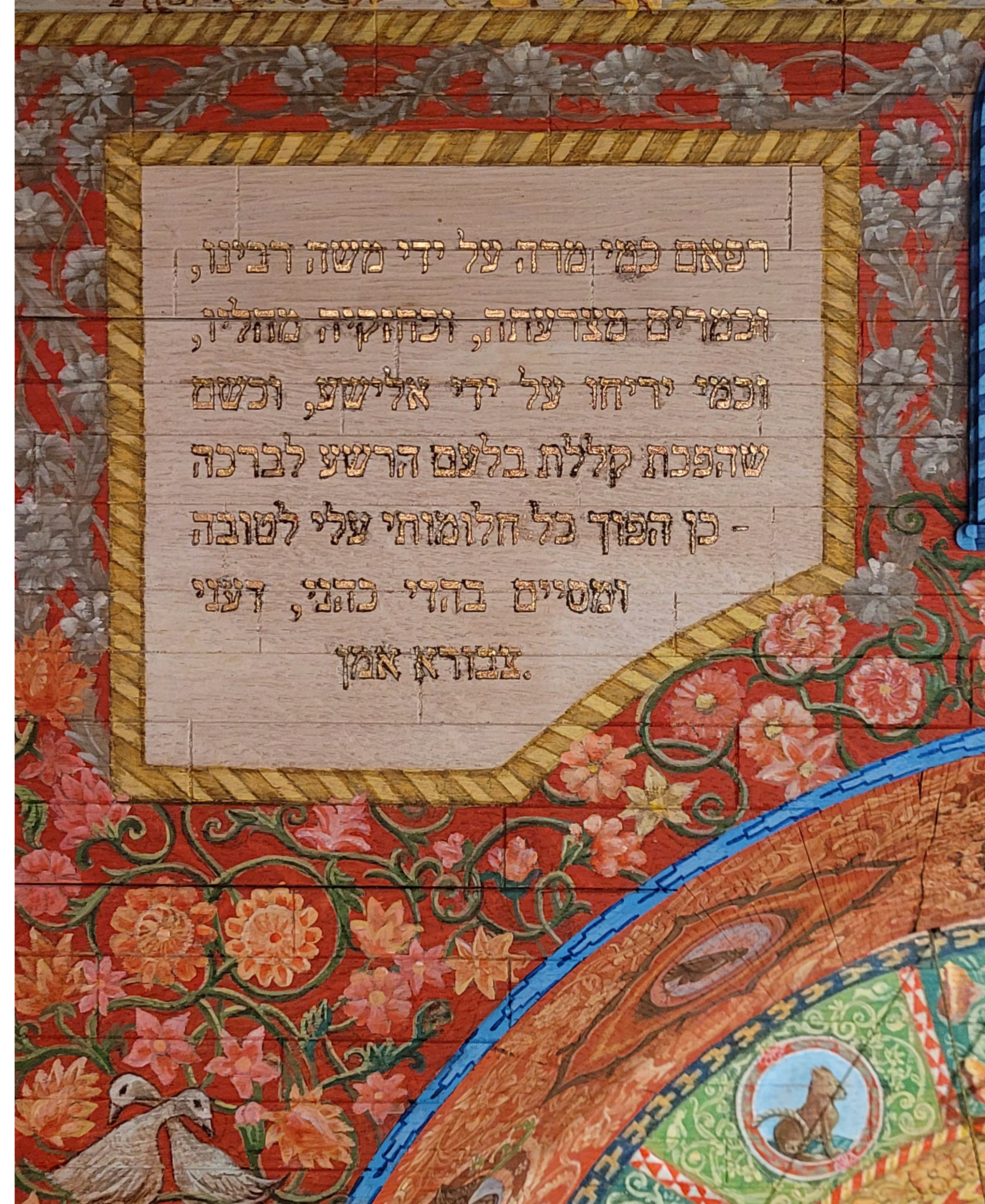
-Manuel Herz



THE EXHIBITION

The Synagogue at Babyn Yar: Turning the Nightmare of Evil into a shared Dream of Good was the 2023 headline project for Toronto's Koffler Arts, created in partnership by the Dutch-Canadian historian and curator Robert Jan van Pelt, the Swiss architect Manuel Herz and the Ukrainian-Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky, together presenting the Babyn Yar synagogue for the first time in its full historical, political, artistic and spiritual contexts.

The exhibition, which opened on the resonant date of 17th April 2023, (the eve of Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Memorial Day), in many ways is the most ambitious project Koffler Arts has ever presented, capturing two moments in time of exceptional global resonance – the creation and dedication of this incredible synagogue (with antecedents ranging from traditional Jewish culture to children's pop-up story books) and the current Russian war against Ukraine. As this brochure goes to production and threats of war enflame the Middle East, further resonances with the drama of Babyn Yar are almost too strong for words.



This unique 'Wunderkabinett' synagogue, conceived to bring hope and joy to a site so charged with the most profound grief, has made an impact far beyond Ukraine's borders. But its local impact has also been immense, creating a new bridge between the Jewish community in the Ukraine and the community at large.

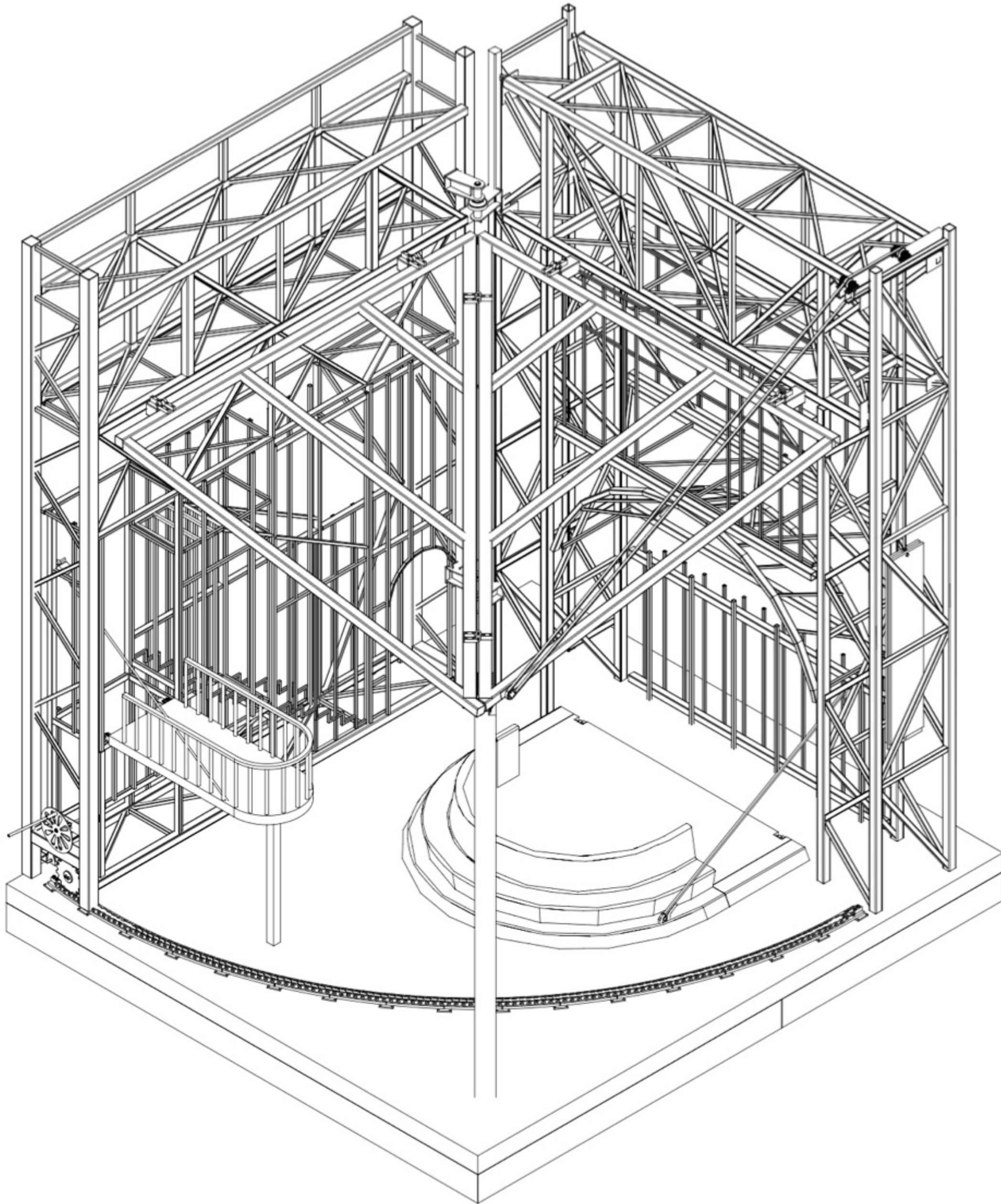
The main part of the exhibition focuses on the synagogue, its unique site and importance, but visitors enter through an ante-room recording the Babyn Yar massacre itself, giving context to the rest of the installation and introducing the single largest massacre by bullet of the Holocaust by means of short texts and a searing selection of images from September 1941.





In the main exhibition space, the visitor will be entirely surrounded by immense, ultra-HD images newly created by Edward Burtynsky in collaboration with the Kyiv-based photographer Maxim Dondyuk, showing the site as it is today. They will give the visitor a unique sense of being in the physical presence of the synagogue and its environs, complemented by a 1:10 scale wooden model, completed just before the Russian attack on Kyiv, and brought to Toronto especially for the exhibition's global premiere.

Other parts of the exhibition will give the visitor a multi-level experience and understanding of the synagogue project, in ways that allow for many different depths of engagement and visit lengths anywhere from thirty minutes to several hours. The story of the project is compellingly told through documents and artifacts, through a beautifully detailed projection of the extraordinary painted Baldachin Ceiling of the synagogue, and through a specially made film expanding the exhibition with further contextual visuals, videos, still images and other documentary material.



THE PROJECT

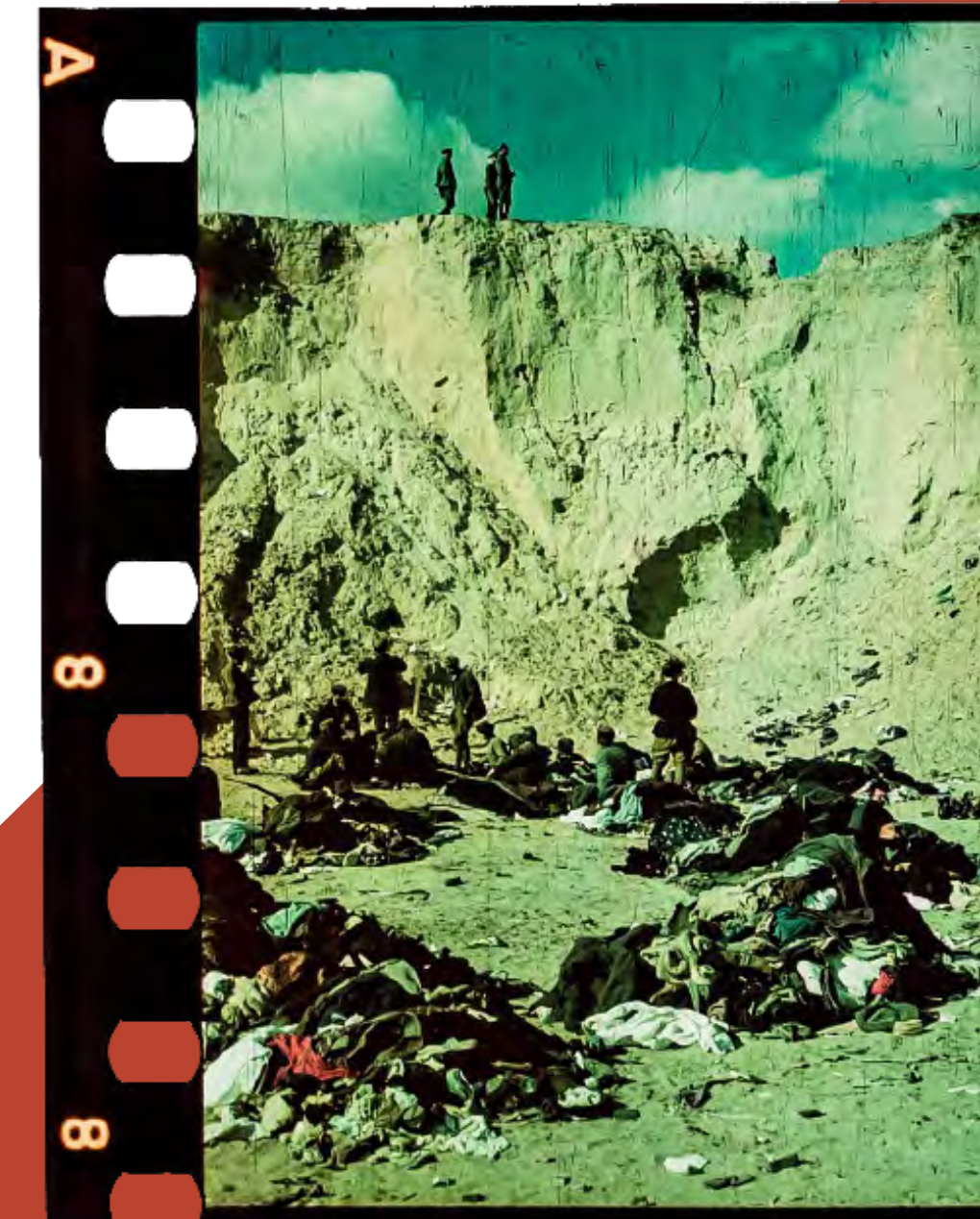
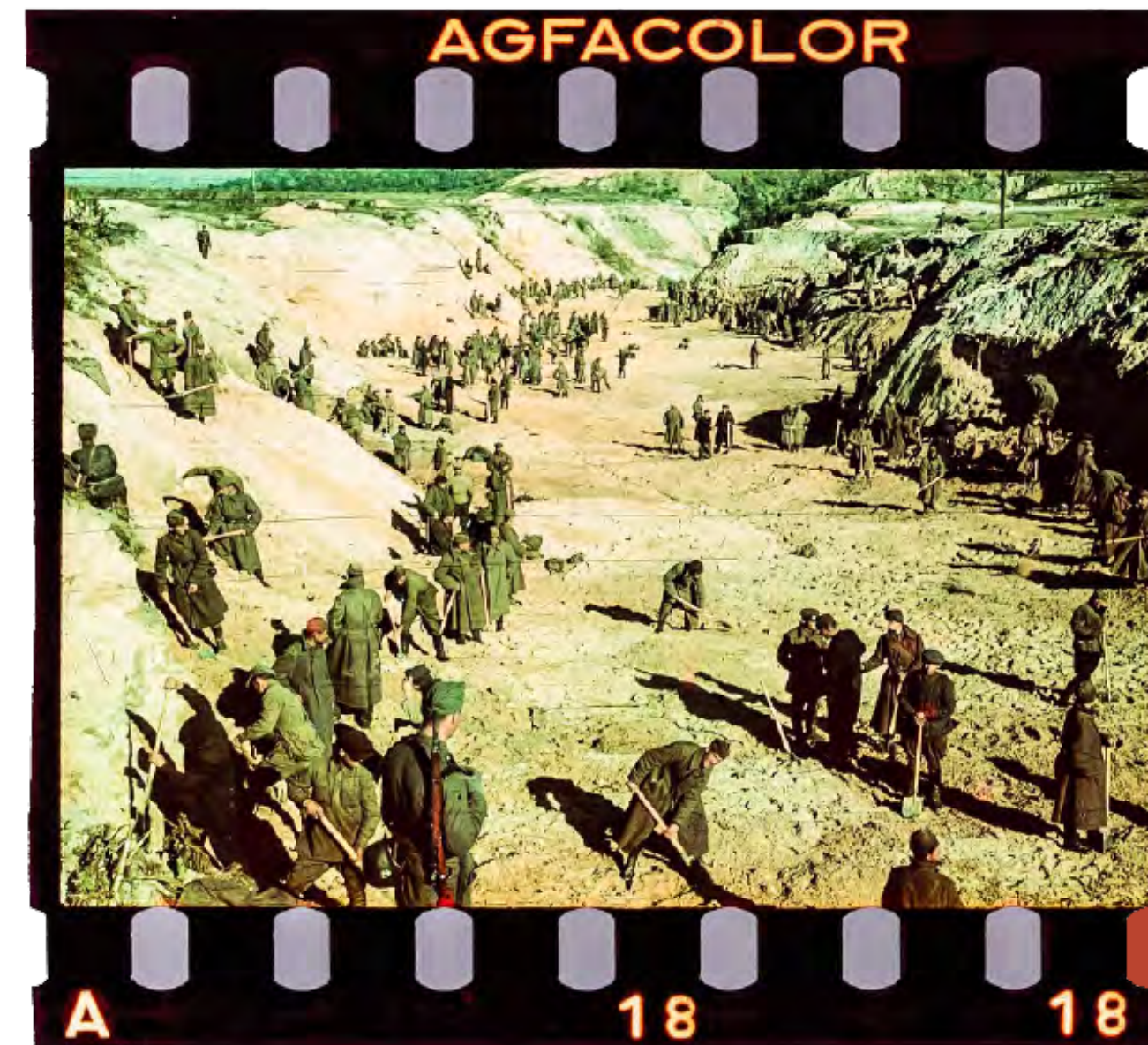
The Babyn Yar synagogue gently touches a soil imbued with immense tragedy, while also recollecting in its design, inspired by a Siddur that can be opened and closed, the idiosyncratic spatial understanding that has characterized the Jewish concept of space since the Babylonian exile. Also reflected in the design are the distinctive and at times quirky architecture of the painted wooden synagogues of the East European shtetl, as well as the playful forms of an animated understanding of the world intuited by children, all too often forgotten by grown-ups.

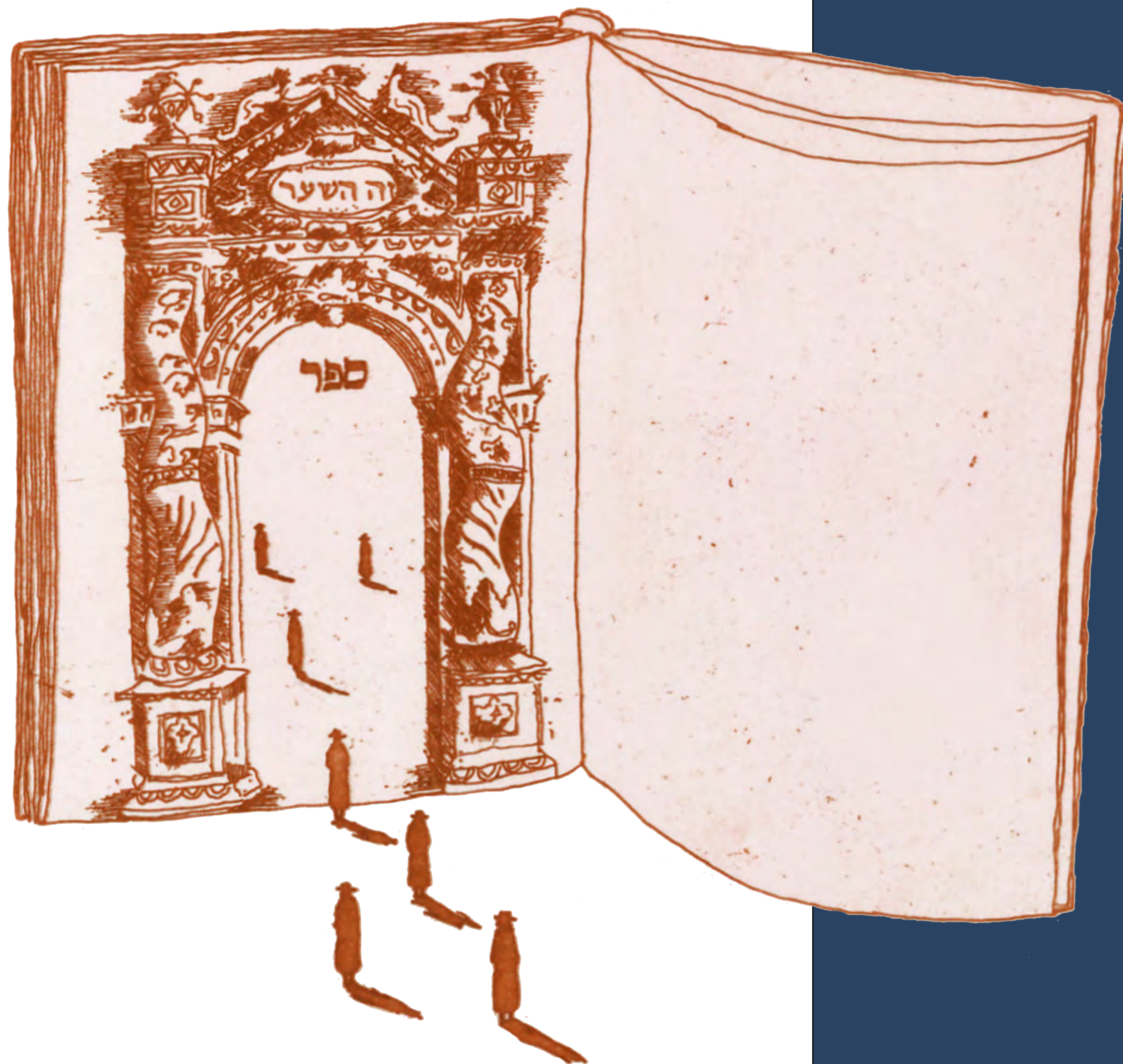


In April 2021 the dedication of the Babyn Yar synagogue posited, against the background of the immeasurable tragedy of the past, a joyous vision of a better future for life in Ukraine. In the months that followed, this synagogue became a daily meeting place of Jews and non-Jews, allowing the former to introduce key notions of the Jewish beliefs and religious practices to their neighbors.



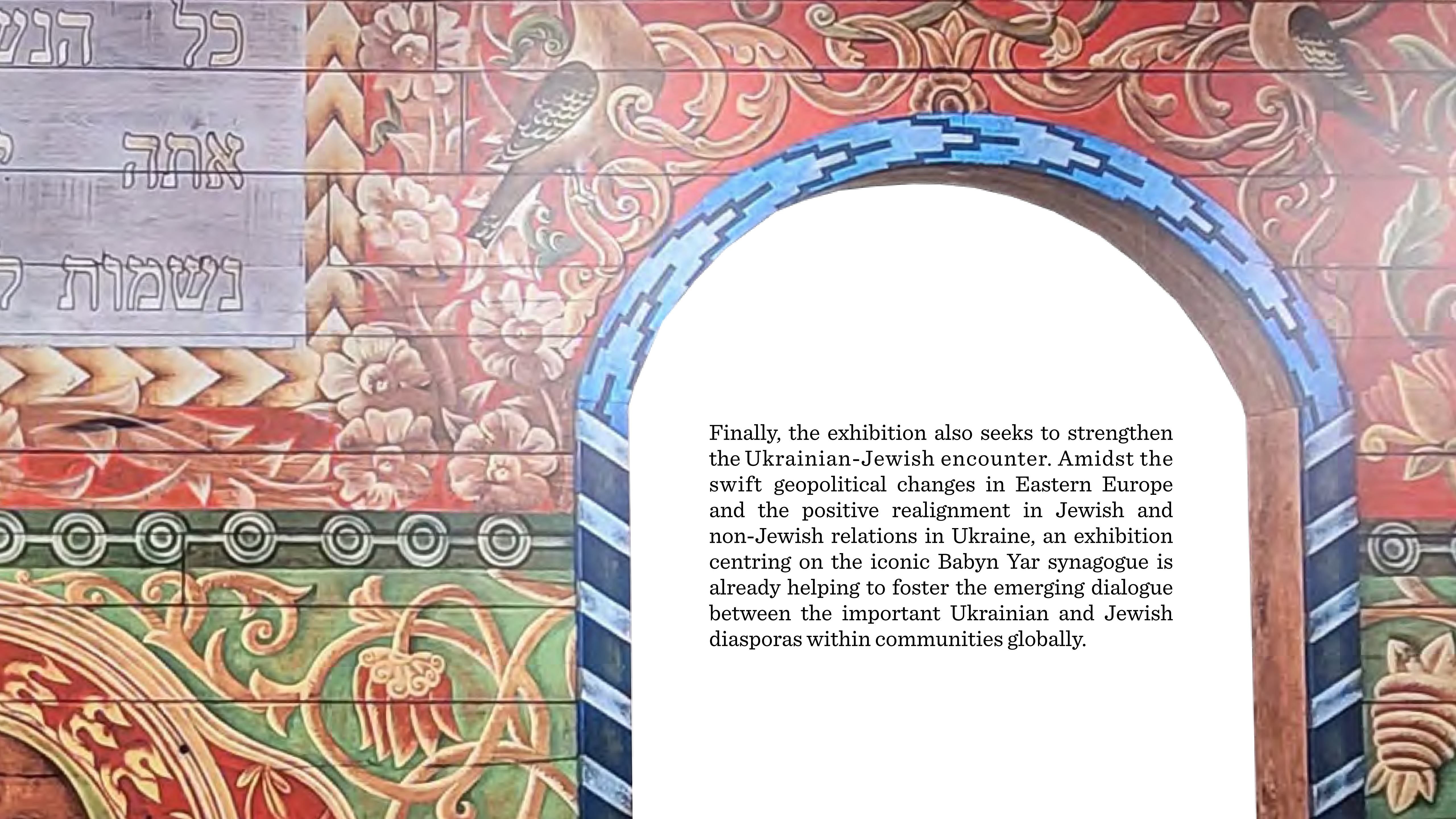
The Synagogue at Babyn Yar: Turning the Nightmare of Evil into a Shared Dream of Good includes a short presentation of the Babyn Yar massacre and its afterlife in both official Soviet and informal Jewish memory; the dramatic history of the Babyn Yar site after 1945; the current condition at Babyn Yar as an eloquent natural reserve and public park; the debate within the Architectural Board of the Babyn Yar Foundation on Jewish spatial and architectural traditions that triggered the idea to construct a synagogue; the key idea of Manuel Herz's project in the double context of now utterly bygone East European Jewish architectural traditions and the tradition of the moveable pop-up books or Harlequinades; a documentation of the Synagogue's design development; the remarkable mobilization of Ukrainian builders and artists that allowed for the construction of the synagogue in record time; the profoundly moving commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the massacre at the new synagogue in October 2021; the threats to the synagogue in the current war, and the profound significance of the synagogue for the future of Jewish architecture.





As it opens in a time of immense peril for the Ukrainian people, it also seeks to bring an awareness of what the Ukrainian people, non-Jewish and Jewish, are fighting for. The project, realized in a broad collaboration between official and civil society in Ukraine, stands for the aspiration to make a bold new beginning in a land cursed with too many unresolved pasts, both repressed and remembered.

The first chapter of the Torah teaches us that the secret of beginnings lies with God, but the fourth chapter, describing the story of Adam and Eve after the expulsion from paradise, teaches that humans were given the secret of how to begin again. This “beginning again,” embodied in the Babyn Yar synagogue, is in many ways a greater secret than mere beginning.



Finally, the exhibition also seeks to strengthen the Ukrainian-Jewish encounter. Amidst the swift geopolitical changes in Eastern Europe and the positive realignment in Jewish and non-Jewish relations in Ukraine, an exhibition centring on the iconic Babyn Yar synagogue is already helping to foster the emerging dialogue between the important Ukrainian and Jewish diasporas within communities globally.



KEY OBJECTS & MOMENTS

- Historical photographs
- Immersive photo murals
- Models and objects of inspiration for the synagogue
- Synagogue model (operational with gears, crank, bespoke music, lighting)
- Contemplation theater with projection of Babyn Yar skyscape

EXHIBITION SPECIFICATIONS

Size:
1,600 - 3,500 sqft

Availability:
Spring 2024 and onward, globally

BOOKING INFO

Contact Dala Projects for booking inquiries

hello@dalaprojects.com

<https://dalaprojects.com/exhibitions/babynyar>



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PROJECTS