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## Natalia Romik, PhD

Architect, artist, curator

### Warsaw

from February to July 2025

Born in 1983 in Warsaw

MA in Political Science from the University of Warsaw, PhD in Architectural Design from The Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London

#### PROJECT

## The Architecture of Hiding

In my new project – devoted to the architecture of survival – I would like to continue and expand my previous research devoted to the architecture of Jewish hideouts from the times of the Second World War. I will not only research new cases of Jewish hideouts, but will also add a new, comparative layer to my studies by researching the cases of new hideouts, currently built and used by migrants in their attempts to enter the territory of the European Union, especially the ones built and used at the Polish-Byelorussian border. For over a year, the Białowieża Forest has been a place of flight for thousands of refugees from Africa and the Middle East; for some it became their final, tragic destination. They are forced into hiding by the regime of Lukashenka and the harsh antimigrant policies adopted by the Polish government, which pushes and deports them back. In July 2022, together with the informal research collective Researchers at the Border, I conducted preliminary studies of a hideout made by Syrian refugees in the Białowieża Forest. It is a tree hut, “furnished” with sleeping bags, shoes, and blankets. We documented this place using a 3D scanner. In my new research phase, I would like to explore this phenomenon further and carefully compare it with the case of Jewish hideouts from the Second World War, but not to generate false historical parallels and while respecting the gravity of a current situation.

In the following phase of my research, I plan to widen my field of study by applying this interdisciplinary methodology to the examples of makeshift hideouts and other architectures of hiding created in the context of the ongoing migration crisis. An important part of the new phase of my research process will be experimentation with new artistic forms to mediate the materiality of the contemporary architecture of hiding.

#### Recommended Reading

Koszarska-Szulc, Justyna, Natalia Romik, and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, eds. (post)JEWISH Shtetl Opatów Through the Eyes of Mayer Kirshenblatt. Warsaw: POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, 2024.

Wenzel, Mirjam, Kuba Szreder, Natalia Romik, Aleksandra Janus, and Katja Janitschek, eds. Hideouts: Architecture of Survival; Reflections on the Exhibition by Natalia Romik. Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2024.

Romik, Natalia. Post-Jewish Architecture of Memory within Former Eastern European Shtetls. London: UCL Press, forthcoming.

# From the Post-Jewish Architecture of Former Shtetls to Hideouts, the Architecture of Survival: Artistic Investigations into Architectural Memory

In my artistic research, I focus on the architectural legacy of former shtetls and the hidden architecture of hideouts built and used by Jews to escape the Holocaust. Integrating architectural design, contemporary art, and Jewish studies, my work explores the material traces of lost communities and challenges their erasure.

Through numerous books, exhibitions, and artistic and architectural projects, I investigate the transformation of Jewish spaces—synagogues, prayer houses, mikvehs, workshops, and homes—after the Holocaust. I highlight their repurposing by non-Jewish communities and the resulting marginalization of Jewish histories. Through archival research, site-specific artistic interventions, architectural surveys, and designs, I examine the “post-Jewish” architecture of these spaces, engaging with their spectral presence in contemporary urban landscapes.

Building on this, my research also explores the architectures of survival—spaces used by Jews to hide during the Holocaust. Over the past four years, I have gathered over 100 survivor testimonies about hiding places that have since disappeared. It is estimated that out of the 3 million pre-war Jewish citizens in Poland, only 50,000 survived by hiding among the non-Jewish population. Their makeshift refuges—modified attics, sewers, cellars, tree hollows, and even empty graves—had to provide shelter, food, air, and water in extremely confined spaces. My interdisciplinary approach includes artistic reconstructions and forensic studies of this vernacular architecture to honor the resilience and ingenuity of those forced into hiding.

This research culminated in the exhibition *Hideouts: The Architecture of Survival*, commissioned by the National Gallery of Art in Warsaw and CCA Trafo in Szczecin in 2022. The exhibition documents and commemorates Holocaust hideouts through films, photographs, objects, and silver castings of architectural details from still-existing hiding places. I will discuss the paradoxical nature of these structures—built to be invisible—and reflect on their historical significance within the politics of memory.

During my stay at WIKO, I plan to extend my research to the present, addressing contemporary conflicts and the ways in which people are still forced to build and use the architecture of survival, connecting past histories of survival with present-day crises.

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## PUBLICATIONS FROM THE FELLOW LIBRARY

Romik, Natalia (Berlin, 2024)

Architekturen des Überlebens : Reflexionen zur Ausstellung *Hideouts* von Natalia Romik

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1869047478>