FROM THE HIDEOUTS TO THE TOWERS OF PLAGUES

NATALIA ROMIK

Natalia Romik is a graduate in political science, practitioner of architecture, designer, and artist. In 2018, Romik was awarded a PhD at the Bartlett School of Architecture at University College London for a thesis on the post-Jewish architecture of memory in former Eastern European shtetls. She combines academic research with methods of contemporary art and architecture to explore the post-Jewish architecture of memory. From 2007 to 2014, she cooperated with the Nizio Design studio, was a consultant for, among others, the POLIN Museum core exhibition design, and was a co-author of the revitalization of a synagogue in Chmielnik. Romik is a member of the SENNA Architecture Collective, responsible for designs including the exhibition at the Museum of Jews in Upper Silesia in Gliwice and the permanent exhibition at the Brodno Jewish Cemetery. In 2018, she co-curated the exhibition *Estranged: March '68 and Its Aftermath* and, in 2024, *(post)JEWISH… Shtetl Opatów through the Eyes of Mayer Kirshenblatt*, at POLIN. Her art projects include: *Nomadic Shtetl Archive, Open Anti-Fascist Studio*, *The Dream-Catcher—Mobile Sauna*, *JAD*, and *X² Plagues*. She was a postdoctoral fellow of the Foundation for the Memory of the Shoah. Her research concluded with the exhibition *Hideouts. The Architecture of Survival*, presented in 2022 in Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw, Trafo CCA in Szczecin, and the Jewish Museum Frankfurt. In 2022, she was awarded the Dan David Prize. – Address: Stalowa 47 /10, 03- 425 Warszawa, Poland.
E-mail: natalia.romik.12@alumni.ucl.ac.uk.

Five months in early spring and summer 2025 spent in West Berlin became an extraordinary convergence of my research horizon—focused on contemporary interpretations of

hideouts—and the finely woven web of intellectual coexistence (gradually turning into friendship) among the scholars of the Wissenschaftskolleg.

As a public historian and architect, I have been engaged for over four years in a spatial exploration of the hideouts built by Jews during the Second World War in Central and Eastern Europe. My project *Hideouts. The Architecture of Survival* examined the history and architecture of nine such places in Poland and Ukraine, where Jewish people sought refuge during the war. While the topic of Jews going into hiding and the aid they received has appeared in various contexts of Holocaust studies, comparatively little is known about the architecture of the hiding places themselves—partly because so many have eroded with time, but also because research has often focused more on the fates of those in hiding and their rescuers than on the spaces that enabled survival. It is estimated that, of the three million Jewish citizens who had lived in pre-war Poland, only around 50,000 survived the Holocaust by hiding among the so-called "Aryan" population. Some managed to survive entirely on their own, while others were helped by their compatriots. They hid not only from Nazi persecutors but also from other outsiders, including blackmailers, the so-called *szmalcowniks*. Most survivors had to adapt existing spaces—attics, sewers, and cellars—to serve as their shelters, or to construct new ones in the hollows of trees, even in empty graves. This fragile infrastructure of survival not only had to conceal human presence, but also had to sustain basic life functions: to provide air, water, food, warmth, and a means to dispose of waste—often within only a few square metres.

At the Wissenschaftskolleg, I decided to explore the theoretical frameworks of contemporary migration and refugee crises, as well as the spatial mechanisms of exclusion that connect to my broader research on the techniques of building hideouts and shelters in the contemporary world. These reflections led me to study sites such as Ukraine, the Polish-Belarusian border, Palestine, and Israel.

The first *hiding place* I examined that extended beyond the "Holocaust typology" was located in the border zone of the Białowieża Forest between Poland and Belarus. Since August 2021, a so-called "refugee crisis" has been unfolding along this frontier. People on the move—refugees from the Middle East and Africa—continue to take this route, perceiving it as one of the few remaining passages into the European Union. This situation has been cynically exploited by Lukashenko's regime, while both the previous and current Polish governments have responded by constructing barbed-wire barriers and, more recently, a 5.5-metre-high, 180-kilometre-long wall. Refugees perish in the swamps and dense forests, especially in winter; to date, more than 130 deaths have been officially

recorded. Together with Dr Natalia Judzińska (a Holocaust scholar and activist from *Researchers on the Border*), Dr Aleksandra Janus, and surveyor Przemek Kluźniak, we conducted research and geodetic measurements of a shelter built and used by people on the move—a makeshift hut constructed from pine wood. Our scans and video recordings serve primarily as evidence: proof that even today, people around the world are still forced to hide, building secret shelters for survival. In the case of Ukraine, I was drawn to the example of the Drama Theatre in Mariupol, which served as a shelter during the Russian invasion in 2022. This tragic episode is described in detail in the forthcoming book *Society of the Frontline: A Guidebook of Kyiv Perennial*, edited by Vasyl Cherepanyn (Berlin, 2025). Another example that captured my attention were the hideouts built by Palestinian civilians in the cemetery of Khan Yunis, which provided refuge during the massive bombardments of Gaza carried out by the IDF. Yet another form of contemporary hiding emerged during the October 2023 Hamas attacks, when Israeli kibbutz residents and participants of the Supernova electronic music festival were forced to seek impromptu shelters to protect themselves from violence.

This new project, which is still evolving, is conceived as a long-term endeavour. Like *The Architecture of Survival*, it will involve scholars and practitioners from diverse disciplines and fields of expertise, each contributing to an ongoing investigation of the spatial, ethical, and political dimensions of hiding in times of crisis.

The rhythm of my research unfolded in parallel with the tempo of Wiko's lectures, seminars, and critical conversations—an intense and inspiring intellectual atmosphere that constantly expanded the scope of my reflections. Many of these encounters revolved around the theme of the contemporary "plagues of the world": There was, for instance, John Kampfner's analysis of the German elections and the rise of the AfD; the discussion "Between Past and Present: The Politics of Memory" with Sherene Seikaly, Per Leo, and Michael Rothberg; and the workshop on the war in Ukraine organised by Alina Mozolevska. I also attended the discussion "After Prison and Exile" at the neighbouring Forum Transregionale Studien, in which Yassin al-Haj Saleh and Rasha Abbas explored the evolving meanings of imprisonment and exile in the Syrian experience and their impact on both individual lives and collective struggles. These encounters—and many other informal conversations—ultimately inspired the idea of creating an artistic installation titled *The Towers of Plagues*.

Over several weeks, I asked the Fellows and the wonderful staff to nominate *one object* that they felt represented a contemporary plague of the world. The response far exceeded

my expectations: I received a vast range of propositions, from witty critiques of contemporary culture to reflections on political crises, ongoing wars, genocides, and profound meditations on the human condition. The project continued a series I have been developing over the past three years. In 2022, I created the *Pyramids of Plagues* for the Venice Biennale of Architecture and, in 2024, for the Festspiele Europäische Wochen Passau.

Several visits to flea markets around Berlin, together with friends from Wiko, resulted in the collection of around eighty glass objects: nineteenth-century vases, Art Deco glasses, colourful glassware produced in the GDR, and even Venetian glass. In the installation, each glass vessel contained within it a smaller element—chosen by the participants as representing a contemporary plague—encased in another layer of glass. The vertical towers, varied in colour and form, were assembled using a special liquid adhesive and exposed to blue UV light. The process required careful balance: just enough pressure to hold the glass together without causing cracks or spills. The Monday afternoon when a group of us Fellows gathered in our living room—temporarily transformed into an improvised art studio—to build the *Towers of Plagues* remains one of the most beautiful moments of my time at Wiko. That act of collective work will stay with me forever.

In my understanding, this gesture of creation referred to the Lurianic concept of *tikkun ha-olam*—the repair of the world, an effort to mend the primordial fracture caused by the "shattering of the vessels." It was, symbolically, an act of what Ewa Majewska has called *weak resistance*: small, persistent gestures of care and repair in the face of overwhelming global crises. The semi-transparent, crystalline form of the glass containers—at once fragile and resilient—symbolises the vessels from the Kabbalistic tradition, in which divine energy was enclosed, and whose shattering marked the beginning of human suffering. At the same time, these vessels represent our attempts to contain, comprehend, and perhaps even control the modern plagues that afflict our world. The project draws loose inspiration from the biblical story of the ten Egyptian plagues (עשר המכות) described in the *Book of Exodus*. During *Pesach* (the Feast of Passover), one of the most symbolic celebrations in Judaism, drops of wine are sprinkled onto the plate during the *Seder* dinner as each of the plagues—vermin, pestilence, darkness, and the death of the firstborn—is named aloud. This ritual gesture, both solemn and intimate, acknowledges human fragility and collective endurance in the face of catastrophe.

The ceremonial unveiling of *The Towers of Plagues* took place during our Farewell Party, accompanied by the aria "Their land brought forth frogs" from the oratorio *Israel in Egypt* by George Frederic Handel, performed by David William Hughes. The

installation was conceived as a response to a shared, deeply felt sense of anxiety—a recognition that we live in a world still marked by the lingering effects of the pandemic, where human and women's rights are continuously violated; antisemitism, anti-Muslim hatred, and racism are resurgent; territories and nations remain occupied; millions of workers are exploited; brutal wars persist; and both younger and older generations begin to experience the tangible consequences of climate catastrophe.

Yet this fear does not prevail. It is met by the courage and perseverance of communities—the *righteous ones*—who refuse to surrender to despair and, through their daily gestures of care, protest, and solidarity, prevent the plagues from spreading further. They resist, they rebuild, they protect. It is to them that this exhibition—and this work of remembrance and repair—is dedicated.

***

In order to honour my Co-Fellows and Wiko staff, I would like to quote their nominations, listing them below.

Towers of Contemporary Plagues*—Wiko project of Natalia Romik, realised with the generous help of Wiko friends* (Anna Gil Bardají, Racha Kirakosian, Leyla Dakhli, Sara Magalhães, Kärin Nickelsen, Florian Meinel, Mathias Énard, David William Hughes, Nadja Schäfer, and Kuba Szreder)
Bashir Bashir: Picture of people in Gaza—genocide
Leyla Dakhli: A piece of red fabric resembling the uniform worn by prisoners in Sednaya (Syria), it stands for torture and annihilation of human dignity
Gábor Egry: Non-refillable plastic ballpoint pen, subspecies of the plastic waste, ubiquitous with all kinds of logos, becomes empty abruptly, no chance of refilling, while unclear how to dispose of it
Mathias Énard: Asian hornets are a terrible plague that kills bees in huge proportions, devastating entire populations of both wild and domestic bees
Anna Gil Bardají: Masculinism is an ideology that often frames men as victims of gender inequality, while downplaying or opposing feminist movements, frequently reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies and resisting progress toward gender equity
Ian Johnson: *Return of the Soul from Purgatory*: a samizdat book from China, 2024, symbolizing the plague of forgetting and how people fight against it

Racha Kirakosian: A squeezy toy with missing eyes—the lack of humour is a form of illiteracy

David William Hughes: A *Fiktionsbescheinigung*—representing the difficulties of immigration, the opacity of bureaucracy, and the absurdity of German bureaucratic language

Hartmut Leppin: The commodification of anything and everything which coincides even with the loss of the sensory character of money

Nadja Schäfer: The digital inbox (computer mouse), once a practical tool, is increasingly turning into an endless sea of information snippets that threaten our concentration and productivity

Sara Magalhães: Smartphone—designed to miscommunicate, ensuring we (don't) miss communication

Florian Meinel: Mirror—the technology of self-images has distanced us from one another and eventually brought us the government of narcissistic clowns

Cheryl Misak: Anti-nausea pills, which, alas, won't make us feel any less ill about the state of the world

Kärin Nickelsen: The Tower of Babel: an emblem of humanity's insatiable greed, ambition, and envy, which has led to destruction, disunity, dispersal, and despair. Yet, the Tower is also an emblem of what humans would be able to accomplish collectively, if only they joined forces and controlled their egos.

Herlinde Pauer-Studer: A pen, to write, write, write—against the Carl Schmittians and for female political liberalism

Natalia Romik: Earth and sand—an example of annihilation of nature, ecological disaster and human interference with nature

Yasemin Yildiz: A fingerprint—will you be able to cross that border or not?

Volodymyr Ryzhkovskyi and Ivana Bago: Gummies. The endless expanse of supermarket shelves with sweets, snacks, and candies—luring the children with their fake, illness-inducing abundance, their bright colors and emblems in the shape of smiling animals, the same animals that those children will only see in zoos or future paleontology books. Walking past those shelves, buying from those shelves, then coming home to watch the news, and witness mothers in Gaza holding the emaciated little hands of babies and children about to die of thirst and starvation.

Sherene Seikaly: A charm to keep away the plagues

Roni Taharlev: Poster of Benjamin Netanyahu—evil power

Joanna Tokarska-Bakir: Hard drive parts—polarisation

Asonzeh Ukah: Wine symbolizing human blood—I have never stopped thinking that the greatest plague haunting humankind and its society is the human person. Misanthropy is an age-old idea we no longer take seriously because humans think they are the centre of the universe. I am nominating humankind as a plague against its kind and the world and the universe.
Nikolaus Wachsmann: This fragile red sphere represents the plague of global warming. Come to think of it, perhaps also of Karneval.
Abraham Winitzer: Square adapter thing (for iPhone?) for our insatiable addiction to the electronic age
Eva von Kügelgen: Stone, cobblestone, potential Stolperstein—if fear turns into hatred, our hearts become stones and will not function, neither for our own lives, nor for connecting with others in empathy
Jana Petri: A tampon or a menstrual pad—menstruation is often accompanied by discomfort, pain, and the weight of social stigma. These negative perceptions are rooted in long-standing taboos and a widespread lack of education about menstrual health—an issue that touches the lives of over 4 billion people around the world.
Gesine Rodewald-Bongers: Parts of the MAC computer—representation of social inequality
Maike Schaper: Amazon—sweet poison of the affluent society
Daniel Schönpflug: Brass knuckles—a symbol of hatred and violence between humans