

Floor Plan

Melissa Gould / Alvin Curran

FLOOR PLAN

Floor Plan is a life-sized architectural blueprint drawing of a formerly existing Berlin synagogue, reproduced (to scale) on a grassy strip between Brucknerhaus and the Danube River in Linz. Fluorescent tubing installed in the earth articulates the floor plan of the destroyed building transforming it into a ghostly drawing of light.

Rising three-dimensionally from the "drawing" is a partially constructed interior wall built of charred books arranged in stacks of varying heights. Above those book columns is a horizontal line of fire representing the top of the wall. This WALL OF FIRE provides a vertical element and focus to the Floor Plan. It also serves as a visual metaphor:

- the "eternal light" used traditionally in all synagogues throughout the world
- the fires of Kristallnacht that burned throughout Germany and Austria on 9 and 10 November 1938
- the fires that consumed much of European Jewish between Kristallnacht and June 1945
- fire = life

In addition to the presence of the fluorescent lights and WALL OF FIRE, other details include scattered wooden pews and fragments of plaster statuary appearing throughout the space. 100 square tiles (see "A Note on the Subtitle: FROM ADLER TO ZYLBER") with images and corresponding Jewish surnames-whose meanings in the German language evoke images of nature (Blumenthal, Goldberg, Himelblau, Mond, Vogel, etc.) – are another important element for Floor Plan.

Sonically, the music of Floor Plan Notes From The Underground (Die unterirdischen Noten) reflects the apocalyptic facts implicit in Floor Plan as well as the real threat of destruction of all biological life on this planet. A sonic plasma of a continuously shifting polyphony combines the musics of hundreds of thousands of unaccompanied human voices singing in Hebrew, Yiddish and other languages; the cries and speech of the Animal Kingdom, especially those threatened with extinction – elephants, whales, wolves, etc.; the sounds of ancient instruments of ritual – the drum, the ram's horn, the conch shell and jaw's harp; foreboding industrial, electronic sounds as well as the sounds of natural disaster. This is all heard emanating from some 75 loudspeakers buried in the earth alongside the light drawing.

AN HISTORICAL NOTE

Floor Plan uses an actual architectural floor plan as the basis of its design. The Synagogue of the Reform Congregation, Johannisstrasse 16, Berlin-Mitte is the model. Designed by Gustav Stier (1807–1880) in 1853, built in 1853–4 and unveiled in 1854, the Synagogue was damaged on Kristallnacht, 9/10 November, 1938 and destroyed during the Second World War. The original floor plan was drawn up by Gustav Stier and L. A. v. W. Loeillot i. Berlin.

A COMPLEMENTARY INSTALLATION OF FLOOR PLAN: FLYING CARPET/ FLIEGENDER TEPPICH BY MELISSA GOULD

While in Berlin, Alvin Curran and I lived in Wielandstrasse 18 (Friedenau) which was directly underneath the end of the flight path to Flughafen Tempelhof. Preparing to land, the planes were so low and monstrously loud that we always wondered when they were going to come through the roof. It was this same airfield that was used during the Cold War to bring Berliners food and supplies. At the peak of usage planes landed there one every minute.

Flying Carpet is a silent meditation on war and peace with the shadows of airplanes substituting for the sight and sound of the real thing – shadows that are both a visual and spiritual counterpoint to the glowing light of Floor Plan. **A Biographical note on Floor Plan by Melissa Gould**

"Rooms of memory: The evolution of an idea"

I have always been obsessed with the past, both in its physical remains and in that which can no longer be seen – specifically the spaces that have ceased to exist except in memory.

In 1976 on an empty lot in Providence, Rhode Island (USA), I made a life-sized architectural "drawing" of an imaginary house in primary colored highway paint on the smooth, grey concrete. The space was bounded by "Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn and Da Bronx". There was a "Dining Room" and a "Living Room". All the words were painted on the ground in large block letters – a mirror of a blueprint usually rendered in ink on paper. In the Living Room I drew a chalk outline, police style, of an absent "corpse". The idea was that there had been a murder and few clues provided an explanation. There were a small table ("A") and chair ("B") placed on corresponding painted markings. The figure outline, being chalk, did not survive the first rain (and it rained frequently in Providence) but the rest of the drawing remained for several years until a building was constructed over it.

Having grown up in a small house, much of my childhood was spent in the fantasy of inventing floor plans for imaginary "dream houses"; I also plotted many diagrams on graph paper where I obsessively rearranged the objects in my bedroom, just by moving my pencil.

When my maternal grandmother died in 1977 I wanted to duplicate her spacious Riverside Drive apartment as another life-size architectural drawing (this time using lime, like on a baseball diamond or soccer field) in the famous Sheep Meadow of Central Park. Unfortunately, the opportunity to realize this Memorial never materialized.

My next imaginary house was installed within a high-walled stone foundation that remained from some previous structure, just down the street from my original murder site I arranged circa 20 black and white "found" photographs of no-longer-existing-rooms which I reprinted in a uniform size and hung at eye level, (behind glass with frames" of grey and green masking tape) evenly spaced along the four walls. I tried to find interiors with emotional weight in addition to being windows into another time; among the images I used were a childrens' playroom aboard the Titanic, Hitler's office in the Chancellery as well as a strange room with furniture (including an upright piano) completely made of ice, which I discovered in an old National Geographic Magazine. The pictures remained up for a short time and could be experienced and enjoyed privately by anyone passing who happened to notice the "exhibition". One day I went to check on my project and found that the photographs, glass and all, had been mysteriously removed without a trace. Now MY space no longer existed -IT TOO had been truly ephemeral. There was something satisfying about this weird and unorchestrated full circle.

During the year in which I lived in Berlin I was able to make intimate contact with the past in powerful ways. I was fortunate in gaining permission to spend some time photographing the inside of "Mussolini's Embassy" which presently houses the Italian Consulate. Led carefully into an unused (and unheated) portion of the building I was left on my own for a few hours. The rooms were in a dangerous state of destruction and decay. Floral wallpaper pieces backed with yellowed German newspapers from the 1930's (printed in old, heavy script) lay like parchment peels of loose bark on the dusty floor. A large reel from a film projector was tossed about like an abandoned wagon wheel ... I imagined that it was from Mussolini's private screening room and wondered what the last movie had been. A broken couch sat bursting with horse hair and ornately engraved walls stood quietly displaying carvings of stars, fire and candelabras. Unhinged doors leaned in broken-toothed rows against walls like a series of disrupted tombstones. I explored and documented the heatless rooms with their impending doom of collapse until I was gratefully retrieved.

Later that year, in Vienna, armed with a map like a child on a treasure hunt, I was able to connect the dots of my father's past - charting his residence from the house in which he was born to the last place he and his family had lived in before being forced to flee in 1938. I imposed myself on a gracious young Persian couple in an apartment on Jaegerstrasse and was taken through rooms where my father had eaten meals, slept, celebrated birthdays and holidays and studied the Classics among giant pieces of dark furniture. Farsi books and modern objects now adorned the space but the view from the windows was much the same one as I envisioned my father had seen with his own eyes.

Back again in Berlin, my friend, the American composer Arnold Dreyblatt, knowing of my obsessions, introduced me to the two-volume set "Synagogen in Berlin" [\(1\)](#) which documented an exhibition held in 1983 at the Berlin Museum. The books contained documents, photographs, and reproductions of original architectural diagrams of the 34 synagogues that had stood in Berlin in 1933. I originally wanted to create a piece somehow uniting all the locations in a conceptual way. But when I started to ride my flea-market bicycle from site to site I soon became overwhelmed by the impression of memory and the facts of the past, combined with the empty sadness of modern ugliness. Some commemorative plaques were mounted here and there but a general sense of unreality permeated the presence of modern life, (sometimes in the form of a playground or coal depository) so calmly reinstalled on the locations of so many former holy places. I thought of the San Clemente Church in Rome, Italy, where successive generations all built houses of worship over the ones constructed by previous believers. I then became committed to the task of recreating the skeleton of an actual synagogue in an unassociated, more park-like setting; in front of the Reichstag, in the Tiergarten, or on Pfaueninsel were more what I had in mind. I selected a synagogue and went directly to the archives of the Technical University in Berlin to study and photograph the original architectural drawing. FLOOR PLAN began to emerge.

Then one afternoon, while rummaging through the shelves of the library in the Juedische Gemeinde on Fasanenstrasse, I happened quite accidentally upon a thick volume, "Le memorial de la deportation des Juifs de France" [\(2\)](#) published by Serge Klarsfeld. Curiously flipping through the pages, I unexpectedly found my grandfather's name on a transport list. Facts: names, dates, numbers - all plainly there. In that moment I had the feeling like that of seeing a black and white photograph come to life in full color. My father had never even known the exact details and circumstances of his own father's death. Forty-five years later I, sadly, was able to provide them. Another full circle.

Finally, on a very personal journey, I travelled alone to Auschwitz, as the sole family member to have gone there of their own free will. I stood in rooms empty except for mountains of suitcases, metal bowls, eyeglasses, prosthetic limbs and hair - arranged like separate anthropological inventories - in permanent silence behind museum-glassed windows. I passed through the empty, dimly-lit gas chamber.

Throughout my stay in Berlin, a comment allegedly ascribed to the late American composer Morton Feldman kept coming to mind. When asked if he would consider living in Germany since he was such a major figure in New Music there, Feldman is said to have erupted in caustic response: "Ridiculous - the dead are still screaming out from under the sidewalks!" Deeply haunted by Feldman's impossible and moving vision together with my own daily preoccupations during this period, I asked Alvin Curran if he would consider making a sound installation for this work.

*MELISSA GOULD,
April 1991, Oakland, California*

NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND
BY ALVIN CURRAN

The concept

In 1987 I was a resident-composer on the D.A.A.D. program in Berlin. It was a period of early-middle convulsion in my work. I was writing string quartets for the KRONOS Quartet, doing MIDI electronics and making massive concerts for computer-controlled ships' horns. But during that privileged year of being a guest artist in Berlin, one troubling theme kept returning to disturb my peaceful life - the history of the city itself, that is, its recent history. Melissa was seriously busy researching the past and slowly I was drawn into her concerns - in part to try to understand the

incomprehensible events, in part to understand my own diaspora identity; (I was born in 1938 in the USA, just one month after Kristallnacht). Melissa's research quickly evolved into a conceptual art work, FLOOR PLAN. Though intent on other music projects at the time, I turned my full attention to her work, for in it I envisioned a musical counterpart: a wall of sound made from 6,000,000 voices that would run parallel but rise up, unseen, from her architectural design installation – a wall of sound that would come out of the earth itself. A sonic mirror of FLOOR PLAN, NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND was born.

There is always a touch of the "impossible" in my environmental works, whether it be in the placement of 22 ships' horns along one kilometer of the Danube (Ars Electronica '87) or in uniting hundreds of musicians in six different countries in a simultaneous radio performance (CRYSTAL PSALMS '88). But even with these and other experiences in creating large-scale projects, the challenges presented to me by FLOOR PLAN/ NOTES were yet of a different order. Making music in caves, in large ports, or on rivers was one thing; making music with the sounds of millions of imaginary voices coming from beneath the ground was quite another.

THE MUSIC

For me, the themes at hand, from the systematic destruction of European Jewry to that of today's Kurds – the plausible predictions of the end of all life on this planet, however inconceivable, monstrous and repulsive – are confronted here more directly than ever in the music. They serve in fact as strong motivational medicine for me to unite some of the principal sound sources and compositional structures present in much of my work: massive mixed choruses singing melodies from everywhere and nowhere; the unintelligible yet moving voices of the animal kingdom (elephants, lions, buffalo, elk, whales, dolphin, nightingales, loons, etc.); the sounds of ur-instruments those of the human collective memory – the shofar (ram's horn), conch shell, drum, jew's harp, reed organ, fog horns, etc.; the obedient virtual sounds and spaces of modern digital technology are present here in all "6,000,000" tracks of sound mixed at once.

The music heard will be a combination of slowly changing automated mixes of 3–4 quite complex tapes of varying musical densities. Amplified to a good audible level, this steady flow of sonic plasma will move unpredictably but interminably through the underground chamber of loudspeakers.

THE PHYSICAL STRUCTURE

However simple the concept, the actual task of creating an evenly distributed wall of sound emanating from under the earth was not an easy one. After all, who would ever want to bury loudspeakers in the ground?! After a long list of ideas and materials was considered, including the use of cement water/ sewage conduits, a final design was arrived at during my residency at Mills College in the winter of 1991. With the help of two assistants, Sue Ruscigno and Martin Hammer, a small experimental model was constructed under the supervision of Chris Brown, director of Center for Contemporary Music at Mills College, and myself.

In this (Ars Electronica), the very first full version of NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND, the buried sound system – a continuous wooden sound chamber 100 meters long will be installed under a 4–6 centimeter layer of grassy earth, at a distance of 1.5 meters from and parallel to FLOOR PLAN's fluorescent lights – like a sonorous outer shell of the Synagogue itself.

In a square trench one meter wide by 80 centimeters deep a layer of drainage gravel will be placed. Plywood boards 6 centimeters thick will line the trench in a "V" shape. On connecting horizontal struts 12-inch co-axial loudspeakers of water-resistant plastic will be placed faced down every 1.5 meters in order to reflect and diffuse the sound evenly. A similar plywood covering with many 8 centimeter holes in it and its underside lined with fine screen will be placed on top of the trench and then covered with a light layer of wooden chips, followed by sod and earth.

The circa 75 25-watt, all-weather loudspeakers, connected in series and parallel, will be powered by a number of stereo amplifiers.

ALVIN CURRAN, April 1991, Oakland, California

A NOTE ON THE SUBTITLE "FROM ADLER TO ZYLBER"

At 8:55 on the morning of 6 November 1942 convoy number 42 left Drancy, France for the concentration camp Auschwitz in Poland. One thousand Jews were on board; 221 of them children. My father's father, a Viennese Jew, was among the passengers. The journey took three days. Upon arrival 227 people were selected for work. The rest were gassed immediately, my grandfather included. At the war's end, four people from convoy number 42 were known to have survived.

The 100 names I use in FLOOR PLAN- GRUND RISS are selected from the transport list of convoy 42; FLOOR PLAN is a continuation of that journey.

MELISSA GOULD, 23 April 1991

1. Adler	26. Gartenberg	51. Lichtenbaum	76. Steigerwald
2. Bach	27. Geisholz	52. Maltz	77. Stein
3. Baum	28. Gelbtrunck	53. Mandel	78. Steinberg
4. Bernstein	29. Gerstztenkorn	54. Mandelbaum	79. Steinhaus
5. Blumen	30. Gold	55. Mandelstam	80. Sternberg
6. Blumenthal	31. Goldadler	56. Milstein	81. Sternschuß
7. Blumztein	32. Goldberg	57. Mond	82. Strausberg
8. Breholz	33. Goldblatt	58. Morgenstern	83. Strausz
9. Breitenfeld	34. Goldenberg	59. Rehfeld	84. Sucher

10. Buchwald	35. Goldstein	60. Reis	85. Szainholz
11. Buxbaum	36. Groen	61. Rosenberg	86. Tauber
12. Diamant	37. Grunfeld	62. Rosenschien	87. Tenenbaum
13. Eigewald	38. Haas	63. Rosenzweig	88. Vajnapel
14. Eisen	39. Hazenberg	64. Rotszteyn	89. Vogel
15. Eisenberg	40. Himmelblau	65. Rozenblum	90. Wald
16. Engel	41. Hirsch	66. Rozentel	91. Waldkirch
17. Faingold	42. Hirschfeld	67. Schatzberger	92. Weinblum
18. Fernbach	43. Honig	68. Schonbach	93. Weinfeld
19. Feuer	44. Katz	69. Schwalb	94. Weinstein
20. Fisch	45. Kern	70. Schwartz	95. Weiß
21. Fischbach	46. Kirschbaum	71. Silberberg	96. Winter
22. Fischbein	47. Kleinberg	72. Silberstein	97. Wolf
23. Friedberg	48. Kupermine	73. Silberwasser	98. Zweigenbaum
24. Frost	49. Lauberstajn	74. Spiegel	99. Zwetschkenbaum
25. Fuchs	50. Lewenkoff	75. Spritzer	100. Zylber

(1)

SYNAGOGEN IN BERLIN – Zur Geschichte einer zerstörten Architektur. Berlin: Berlin Museum und Verlag Willmuth Arenhövel 1983, Teil 1 & 2. → [back](#)

(2)

Le memorial de la deportation des Juifs de France. Paris: Serge Klarsfeld, 1978.