

## Profile: Paul Jaskot

**By: Jeremy Kuperberg**



*Paul Jaskot, Department of Art, Art History & Visual Studies, Duke University*

When Paul Jaskot first began studying Nazi-era architecture as a graduate student in Art History at Northwestern University, he was told it was "career suicide." In the 1980s and 90s, Jaskot says, the subject of the Holocaust *itself* was barely present in art history, only discussed in terms of Nazi looting and "degenerate art." And from the other side, Holocaust Studies had not really embraced art history beyond propaganda and postwar memorials. Ever since that time, he has worked at getting art historians to take political questions seriously, and to recognize the direct ties between material culture and genocidal policy.

Jaskot describes the primary question driving his career of scholarship as follows: "How did architecture help to really implement policy goals during the Nazi period?" In order to address this question, he has repeatedly been forced to interrogate basic assumptions in Holocaust Studies. For his dissertation, for example, Jaskot studied the relationship between forced labor concentration camps within Germany and the monumental building economy in Berlin and Nuremberg. Prior to this research, scholars had largely framed stone-quarry camp labor as "busy work," designed with the sole goal of murdering those labeled as "undesirables" under Nazi rule. Jaskot's work shows however that, "it was also about a very real agenda, providing bricks and stone for specific monumental building projects. So that moment really got me quite fired up about not only the extreme relationship of art to this genocidal regime, but also the fact that we didn't know about that."

Jaskot became involved with HEF somewhat serendipitously just as he was discovering this passion as a graduate student. In order to bolster his historical understanding of the SS, Jaskot began working with historian Peter Hayes, who was intimately involved in many facets of HEF's work. He soon attended his first Lessons & Legacies Conference, which he remembers as

sorely lacking in discussions of art history. But above all, Jaskot solidified his career-long relationship with HEF through participation in the third Summer Institute on the Holocaust and Jewish Civilization at Northwestern University. "It was a great group, and being a student was really a lot of fun," he remembers. "It was really eye-opening to me, both the intellectual environment and the material they were presenting. That convinced me that I needed to do more."

Upon leaving Northwestern for nearby DePaul University, Jaskot was able to stay connected to the Summer Institute by volunteering to lead Chicago architecture tours for each year's cohort. Eventually, he took over as the program's director when Hayes stepped down, serving in this role from 2007-2013. Jaskot looks back on this time fondly, saying: "I had 6 years of really wonderful interdisciplinary scholars thinking together. And that was really, really profound. Especially as the field gets bigger and bigger, we need to rely on a collaborative intellectual environment." More recently, Jaskot has worked with his Summer Institute cohort-mate Alexandra Garbarini as co-organizer of the Lessons & Legacies Conference and co-editor of that conference's volume (number thirteen in the L&L series).

Now at Duke University in the Art, Art History & Visual Studies Department, Jaskot continues to apply the lessons from his graduate experience to his work today by challenging assumptions in Holocaust Studies and increasing interdisciplinary communication. In his research, Jaskot is working with historical geographer Anne Kelly Knowles on a digital mapping project of the Nazi concentration camp and ghetto systems. One result of this work has been to push back on the idea, taken for granted by many researchers, that spatial uncertainty in testimonies of camp survivors is purely a product of faulty memory. Instead, Jaskot finds that the SS designed and maintained camps such as Auschwitz to be spatially disorienting. "When you look at construction at Auschwitz," he explains, "it was constantly changing. It was a chaotic built environment. We've always looked at the perpetrator documents – 'Here's the plan, and here's the finished product.' But that middle ground, which was *years*, was confusion. You were living in a building site!" Perhaps by taking survivor testimony more seriously, Jaskot argues, we can more accurately represent both camp architecture and victims' experiences.

As an instructor, Jaskot has taught a course on "Art and the Holocaust" across multiple universities since 1995, and his syllabus has evolved significantly over this period. At first, he describes the challenge of stitching together seemingly disparate readings in order to ensure that the Holocaust itself remained the central topic of the course. "There was work you could talk about with "degenerate art" and propaganda. But once you hit 1939 and the war, you were done. So once you really hit the main question of the Holocaust, that is the murder, there really weren't a lot of sources in art history to talk about." Today, he says, keeping the focus on the Holocaust is a lot easier due to the volume of literature produced in the ensuing decades discussing photography, Jewish artists, and architecture during the Holocaust. As an instructor, scholar, and Summer Institute director, Jaskot himself has had a central role in making these inter-disciplinary connections possible.