

Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau*:

A Reconstruction by Peter Bissegger

The *Merzbau* (Merz building) installed to your left is a modern reconstruction. Kurt Schwitters's original *Merzbau* was destroyed in an Allied air raid in October 1943. Only a few photographs and written descriptions have survived to document its original state. The three most informative black-and-white photographs of the *Merzbau* were taken by Wilhelm Redemann in 1933.

It was from these photographs that the Swiss stage designer Peter Bissegger, in close collaboration with Kurt Schwitters's son, Ernst Schwitters, built a replica between 1981 and 1983. That replica is now housed in its own room at the Sprengel Museum Hannover. The building of the replica had been suggested by the curator Harald Szeemann, who then included it in his exhibition *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk* (Tendencies Toward the Total Work of Art) in 1983. Many details, especially the contents of the maze of alcoves and grottoes, were not visible in the photographs and could not therefore be reproduced for inclusion in the replica. A second replica was made in 1988 for display in exhibitions at other venues. Despite the differences between the original and the replica, the latter in no way fails to convey the spatial experience that Schwitters sought to create in his walk-through sculpture.

How the *Merzbau* evolved

Schwitters had begun working on his Dada-inspired "Merz Columns" in his studio as early as 1920. Busts, ordinary everyday objects, and all kinds of *objets trouvés* stood on pedestals collaged with colored and printed paper. The walls of his studio, too, were collaged over large areas and hung with works. The studio was on the upper floor of his parents' house, a large bourgeois residence comprising several apartments in Waldhausenstrasse, which at that time was on the southern outskirts of Hannover. Schwitters lived with his family on the second floor.

In 1927, Kurt Schwitters moved his studio into one of the rooms of his parents' apartment that was later to become known as the "actual *Merzbau*." In 1931 he began to link the columns together to form one large architectural/sculptural ensemble: "The *Merz Columns* became the *Merzbau*, a whole room, created in the round." Not until the individual pieces were joined together to form an integral walk-through sculpture did this constructivistic assemblage of wood and gypsum assume—with the exception of just a few accentuating colors—its typically uniform, entirely white appearance.

