

Along the Spree promenade a wall of nineteen sheets of glass, each roughly three metres tall, both separates an exterior court of the Jakob Kaiser Building from the Spree promenade and establishes a link between the two. Laser technology has been used to engrave the text of the nineteen fundamental rights enshrined in Germany's Basic Law in the glass at eye-level, so that they seem to hover in front of the building, which houses the offices of parliamentary parties. In this installation, titled *Basic Law 49* and relating both physically and conceptually to the seat of the national parliament, Israeli artist Dani Karavan focuses on the notion of the word as law. This ties in with other verbal works of art in nearby parliamentary buildings – with Jenny Holzer's LED display in the Reichstag Building, which features a continuous succession of speeches made in the German parliament; with Joseph Kosuth's metal letters

inserted into the floor of the Paul Löbe Building, which reproduce quotations from Thomas Mann and Ricarda Huch; and with Maurizio Nannucci's neon installation in the library rotunda of the Marie Elisabeth Lüders Building, which encourages reflection on the nature of equality and freedom in the form of sentences from a text by Hannah Arendt shown in luminescent blue letters.

Karavan ranks as one of the most important international artists engaged in redefining the experience offered by landscape and urban spaces. His approach was well suited to the challenged posed by a central site in Berlin's parliamentary quarter: his work cannot be classified in conventional terms as architecture or sculpture, environmental or conceptual art, but combines elements of each in space-encompassing *Gesamtkunstwerke*. In his well-known *Negev Monument*,

for example, he used concrete sculptures, wind harps and trees to create a profoundly evocative site amid the vast expanse of the Negev desert in Israel. In Germany Karavan's compelling site-specific works include the *Way of Human Rights* (1993) outside the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg and the installation *Ma'ilot* (1986) in front of the Museum Ludwig in Cologne. For Berlin he designed a memorial to the Sinti and Roma murdered by the Nazis. Unveiled in October 2012, it features a black disc-shaped basin of water in the centre of which is a stone on which a fresh flower appears every day. A deeply moving place of mourning and admonishment, this memorial to the victims of an unconscionable crime also gives expression to a hope that intolerance and hostility towards minorities can be overcome.



Dani Karavan Basic Law 49



Dani Karavan, born in Tel Aviv in 1930, based in Tel Aviv, Paris and Florence

Basic Law 49, glass panels and strips of corten steel, 1998-2003
Jakob Kaiser Building, exterior courtyard of Block 3 and Spree promenade, Berlin



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The artist's chief formal concern in the installation outside the Jakob Kaiser Building was to set up a link between the building and the promenade that would possess a maximum of transparency. Hence the choice of glass panels, rather than railings or some other kind of fence. The connection between inside and outside is emphasised by floor elements consisting of strips of grass edged with corten steel. These radiate outwards from the courtyard, passing beneath the glass panels to the outer edge of the Spree embankment. In addition, one tree in the row along the Spree appears out of line, as though it has leapt over the glass wall into the courtyard. Stairs leading up to the courtyard from inside the building are crowned by six exterior vent stacks. Karavan has designed these stacks (which are necessary to meet technical requirements) so that they

rise from the floor of the courtyard like the funnels of a stranded steamship. Their positioning, though asymmetrical in relation to the building, underscores the linear radial composition of the floor elements. The wide-ranging spatial arrangement testifies to the artist's penchant for crossing aesthetic frontiers, with architecture and the urban landscape merging to form a new aesthetic whole.

Karavan's formal conception encompasses verbal content essential to his intentions. The Basic Law's nineteen fundamental rights are inscribed on the glass panels, one per panel, in the original wording of 1949, and they appear next to the Spree, which once separated East Berlin from West Berlin. In this way, they evoke the difficult period of the young German democracy's foundation in Bonn, in the western part of the country, and also warn against taking reunification for granted or

ignoring the prehistory of current political activity in Berlin. People walking along the Spree promenade are thus reminded of the achievement of the men and women in the parliamentary council who in the space of a few months, from September 1948 to May 1949, drew up a democratic constitution that to this day embodies the rule of law in Germany. At the same time, the 1949 wording on the glass panels makes the essence of the Basic Law and the fundamental rights enjoyed by all Germans literally transparent and gives them visible form in a new and compelling way.



Art at the German Bundestag Dani Karavan

