The Future of Jewish Monuments, exhibition essay, The Joseph Gallery, Hebrew Union College, New York,

Samuel D. Gruber, Dr., Syracuse University
THE FUTURE
OF
JEWISH
MONUMENTS

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JOSEPH GALLERY
HEBREW UNION COLLEGE—JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION
JEWISH HERITAGE COUNCIL, WORLD MONUMENTS FUND
It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the Joseph Gallery and to our exhibition "The Future of Jewish Monuments," co-sponsored with the Jewish Heritage Council of the World Monuments Fund.

It is particularly significant in this era of a reunified Germany that we take a moment to contemplate the attempted destruction of Jewish life in Europe only fifty short years ago. The synagogues of Berlin, Cracow and Warsaw all felt the violence of the Nazi regime and, in fact, many of our most beautiful edifices are no longer standing. These buildings symbolized the vibrancy and life of a Jewish community, which for the most part, no longer exists. As Jews we must not only remember the beauty of what was, but we must also dedicate ourselves to preserving what still remains of our heritage and culture.

Through this exhibit we hope you will have the opportunity to glimpse into the past, and reflect on how we can insure the future. The images presented in the Joseph Gallery will heighten your awareness of all that was and all that can be for Jews around the world.

Norman J. Cohen
Dean

What is a Jewish Monument?

Among the oldest Jewish traditions is the commemoration of memory through monuments. Early in the Torah we read that Jacob erected a pillar to mark the grave of Rachel (Gen. 35:20). The custom of marking graves continued throughout the periods of the First and Second Temples, and into the Rabbinic period. As well, the custom continued until the present day. Today inscribed and decorated gravestones (matzevot) fill Jewish cemeteries around the world. Moreover, the term monument is also used in reference to commemorative markers, whether inscribed or sculpted.

Generally, most people seem only to think of Holocaust memorials when the topic of Jewish monuments is discussed. In the language of preservationists and governmental agencies which often manage historic sites, a monument is a site or structure of special historic, cultural or architectural significance. This exhibition considers monuments and their preservation in a broad sense, accepting as a Jewish monument any site that recalls the Jewish past. Monuments, which can teach and remind us of this past, include the remains of ancient settlements, Jewish quarters in larger towns, and individual sites of Jewish religious activity such as cemeteries, ritual baths, study houses and synagogues. The founding of a communal burial ground was usually the first collective act in any Jewish settlement, but the erection of a communal synagogue marked the stability of the community and its belief in its own future.

The Jewish Diaspora reflects a history of complex migration patterns throughout the world. Extensive communities grow out of continuing displacement and resettlement. Indeed, the Jewish people made their mark in many places. While modest learning and humble prayer were of great importance, Jewish communities expressed their identity in grandiose architectural terms as well. The synagogues of Rome, Toledo, Vienna, Prague, Cracow, and Vilna, for example, provide us such testimony.

Some sites are irrevocably associated with Jewish life. They continue that association even when no longer frequented by Jews. Jewish quarters (often as Ghettoes) in Venice, Rome, Prague, and Cracow used as witnesses to some of the greatest achievements of Jewish culture. They have become part of the collective Jewish identity. In many of these neighborhoods efforts are underway to retain (or reclaim) part of this Jewish character. Through the reasons for neglect in Cracow, Venice and New York differ, many of the solutions recommended by planners and preservationists are similar. Plans include the restoration of surviving Jewish buildings and the construction of new exhibitions and research facilities to promote the study of Jewish history and culture.

Synagogues and study houses have served as sacred spaces of pious thanks and worldly pride. However, until the nineteenth century by choice or circumstance, Jewish structures rarely rivaled Christian or civic architecture in size or decoration. Yet, Jewish buildings often attained a stately grace far beyond what is generally presumed today. Many richly decorated synagogues such as those in Toledo existed throughout Spain before the expulsion of the Jews in 1492. Italian Jewish refugees, when settled elsewhere, replicated their safety by building impressive new synagogues. Many such buildings existed within the borders of the old Ottoman Empire, or in Italy and Holland. Legal restrictions and Jewish tradition may have prohibited orientation, but given the opportunity to build, Jews often did so. Rabbi Hayyim Legends expressed a common view just a few years after the arrival of Spanish Jewish refugees in Fez (Morocco) in 1492: "God blessed us with his bounty enabling us to build stately synagogues, adorned with paintings and poetry. And God blessed us with beautiful jeshiels and synagogues ... Torah scrolls dressed in satin and silk ... and decorated in silver ... so that the reputation of the Messiah..."

On the cover: Former synagogue, Örla (Poland). 1990. (Photo: S. Gruber/BWM)
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Generally, most people seem only to think of Holocaust memorials when the topic of Jewish monuments is discussed. In the language of preservationists and governmental agencies, historically and often managing historic sites, a monument is a site or structure of Special Historical, Cultural, or Architectural significance. This exhibit considers monuments and their preservation in a broad sense, accepting as a Jewish monument any site that recalls the Jewish past. Monuments, which can be revered and revered, can be of this past, include the remains of ancient settlements, Jewish quarters in larger towns, and individual sites of Jewish religious activity, such as cemeteries, ritual baths, study houses and synagogues. The founding of a communal burial ground was usually the first collective act in any Jewish settlement, but the erection of a communal synagogues marked the stability of the community and its belief in its own future.

The Jewish Diaspora reflects a history of complex migration patterns throughout the world. Extensive communities grew out of continuing displacement and resettlement. Indeed, the Jewish people made their mark in many places. While mostly studying and humble prayer were of great importance, Jewish communities expressed their identity in grandiose architectural terms as well. The synagogues of Rome, Worms, Prague, Czegow, and Wika, for example provide us such testimony.

Some sites are irrevocably associated with Jewish life. They continue that association even when no longer frequented by Jews, Jewish quarters (often in the ghettoes in Venice, Rome, Prague, and Czegow stand as witness to some of the greatest achievements of Jewish culture. They have become part of the collective Jewish identity. In many of these neighborhoods efforts are underway to retain (or reclaim) part of this Jewish character. Though the reasons for neglect in Czegow, Brno, and New York differ, many of the solutions recommended by planners and preservationists are similar. Plans include the restoration of surviving Jewish buildings and the construction of new exhibitions and research facilities to promote the study of Jewish history and culture.

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Again and again, however, Jewish prosperity, like good luck, came to an end. Acts of confiscation, criminal charges, pogroms, decrees of expulsion and extermination have thwarted individual Jewish settlements and terminated entire episodes of Jewish communal life. In some places, so few physical reminders of the Jewish presence exist that mere survivor gives a building special meaning.

Why Should Jewish Monuments Be Preserved?

Monuments teach us something about ourselves. Certainly, for the layperson, the experience of old buildings is an important means of establishing a physical relationship with the past. The Old World Center of the Synagogue and the early advocate of the preservation and restoration of Jewish sites, wrote in 1978 that:

"...we are suffering from an addiction of a sense of history. We do not know ourselves because we do not know where we come from. We are aware of the historical connections because of the existence of the State of Israel and popular interest in archaeology. We are aware of Hitler and the destruction he brought about. But we have lost an awareness of the history of the Jewish people among the peoples of the world. We know nothing of the origins of Jewish thought, the glory of Jewish scholarship and its development, nothing of the mutual indebtedness of Jews and Christians. Our young generation is reluctant to read, but eager to see. They are anxious for new experience. If Jewish travelers in years to come visit places like Worms and Speyer, they will be able to enter the core of Jewish existence. In Worms, Mainz and Speyer there is also a lesson for the Gentiles, especially for German Gentiles. They, too, are eager to see; they want to learn what unites us rather than what divides us. In places such as Worms and Speyer, they will witness part of their own history. The topic of reconstruction should command the attention of all. (National Jewish Monthly, June 1978)

Extant synagogues -- either as archaeological remains, such as those at Sardis (Turkey) and Dadia (Italy), or the hundreds of excavated synagogue sites in Israel, or as fully intact buildings such as those of Prague, Rome, or Czegow -- all speak eloquently about the ancient continuum of Jewish history. The remains of buildings such as the great synagogues of Rynman, Chmielnick, Dechanskie, Wlodzow, and elsewhere offer testimony to that continuum. For this reason, if for no other, these sites should be preserved.

Interest in the preservation of Jewish sites corresponds to a wider interest in historic preservation throughout the world. However, there is an older tradition regarding the preservation and restoration of Jewish cemeteries and buildings. The Jewish community is obligated to maintain its cemeteries and synagogues. Jewish law contains specific directions for both. Historically, synagogues were sometimes abandoned, but communities made every effort to rebuild synagogues after calamities — whether through acts of God or man.

The synagogues of Prague, enriched by repairs and rebuilding, offer the best documented examples of both religiously motivated and antiquarian restoration endeavors. The now-demolished Old Synagogue and the Attenual allow us to trace the vicissitudes of Jewish life and the totality of their communities to hold on. The former synagogues of Toreto, last vestiges of a Jewish "Golden Age", were among the first Jewish sites to be recognized as National Monuments and to be widely studied and restored.

The Holocaust raised the need to preserve Jewish monuments to an entirely different level. After the destruction of Jewish communities, preservation was no longer the concern of antiquarians or of individual congregations facing occasional building repair. Surviving Jewish sites — synagogues and cemeteries foremost among them — became the targets of a lost world. Tending these shuttered and abandoned sites became more than an exercise in historicism. Protection and preservation has become an act of commemoration, and the responsibility of world humanity. For some, restoration of synagogues and other Jewish sites is a message to the world that Hitler has indeed been defeated and malevolence has survived.

On the cover: Former synagogue, Orba (Poland), 1980. (photo: S. Gruber/WMF)

Former synagogues, Soboticz (Slovakia), 1989. (photo: S. Gruber/WMF)

Former synagogues, Dechanskie (Poland), 1990. (photo: S. Gruber/WMF)
Why Should Jewish Monuments Be Preserved?

Monuments teach us something about ourselves. Certainly, for the layperson, the experience of old buildings is an immediate means of establishing a physical relationship with the past. The late Werner Cattenhorn, founder of the Rashi Association, and an early advocate of the preservation and restoration of Jewish sites, wrote in 1978 that:

we are suffering from an attrition of a sense of history. We do not know ourselves because we do not know where we come from. We are aware of the biblical connections because of the existence of the State of Israel and popular interest in archaeology. We are aware of Hitler and the destruction he brought about. But we have lost an awareness of the history of the Jewish people among the peoples of the world. We know nothing of the origin of Jewish thought, the glories of Jewish scholarship and its development, nothing of the mutual indebtedness of Jews and Christians. Our young generation are reluctant to read, but eager to see. They are anxious for new experience. If Jewish travelers in years to come visit places like Wiborg and Speyer, they will be able to enter the core of Jewish existence. In Wiborg, Mainz and Speyer there is also a lesson for the Gentiles, especially for German Gentiles. They, too, are eager to see; they want to learn what unites us rather than what divides us. In such places as Wiborg and Speyer, they will witness part of their own history. The topic of reconstruction should command the attention of all. (National Jewish Monthly, June 1978)

Existent synagogues — either as architectural remains, such as those at Sarid (Turkey) and Osio (Italy), or as the hundreds of excavated synagogue sites in Israel, or as fully intact buildings such as those of Prag, Tokol, or Cavallino — all speak eloquently about the unbroken continuity of Jewish history. The ruined buildings of Poland such as the great synagogues of Rymanow, Chiszmerin, Dzialoszyce, Wieliszew, and other places testifies to that continuity. For this reason, if no other, these sites should be preserved.

Interest in the preservation of Jewish sites corresponds to a wider interest in historic preservation throughout the world. However, there is an older tradition regarding the preservation and restoration of Jewish cemeteries and buildings. The Jewish community is obliged to maintain its cemeteries and synagogues. Jewish law contains specific directives for both. Historically, synagogues were seldom abandoned outright. Communities made every effort to rebuild synagogues after calamities — whether through acts of God or man.

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The Holocaust raised the need to preserve Jewish monuments to an entirely different level. After the destruction of Jewish communities, preservation was no longer the concern of antiquarians but of individual congregations facing occasional building repair. Surviving Jewish sites — synagogues and cemeteries foremost among them — became the legacy of a lost world. Tending these shattered and abandoned sites became more than an exercise in historicism. Protection and preservation has become an act of remembrance, and the responsibility of world humanity. For some, restoration of synagogues and other Jewish sites is a message to the world that Hitler has indeed been defeated and Judaism has survived.

The Preservation of Jewish Monuments

The most systematic destruction of synagogues and other Jewish sites took place in Germany, and it was in former West Germany that the most thorough rebuilding and restoration programs began after the Second World War, and have continued until today. The medieval Rashi synagogue in Worms was faithfully reconstructed in the years 1958–61, and remains the best-known of these projects. Funds from the then West German government and the city of Worms paid for the careful rebuilding. Although the Rashi synagogue had been re-dedicated it now functions more as a museum and educational institution than as a synagogue; since Worms no longer has a Jewish population, German students and tourist groups regularly visit the building, an adjunct museum, and its study center to learn about Judaism and Jews. The synagogue provides a place for Germans and Jews to come together to confront their past. The synagogue in Worms is built in 1975, is now an architectural monument, but its role as a symbol of the intractability of the Jewish people.

Dozens of other projects have been initiated throughout former West Germany, but only a small number of synagogues which existed before the war have been restored in any manner. Most of the hundreds of German synagoge buildings which survived the war are small structures now used as houses, stores, barns and for other more profane purposes. In the province of Bielefeld, over two hundred synagogue structures known to survive, only two continue to function as synagogues. Only in recent years efforts have been made to even identify these buildings as synagogues.

In Central and Eastern Europe hundreds of synagogue buildings which survived World War II are abandoned or have been adapted for different use. Monumental synagogues in towns centers serve as community centers, concert halls, museums, art schools and archives; they are also used as sports centers and warehouses. Few remain active as synagogues or restored as museums or memorials. Of the thousands of synagogues that existed within the modern borders of Poland, only about 250 buildings can now be identified. The famous wooden synagogues of Poland were burned to the ground; only monastic structures remain. Of these, only four still serve as synagogues. A handful have been restored in some manner and serve as Jewish museums. In Poland there is the desire by some local conservation and public authorities to restore several more, including the 16th-century synagogue of Pnizcow, the oldest surviving synagogue building in the country.

In Czechoslovakia, a situation similar to that in Poland exists for the approximately 300 surviving synagogue buildings in Bohemia and Moravia. It is estimated that another 300 synagogue buildings still exist in Slovakia. In Hungary and Romania the post-war Jewish population has been able to maintain more synagogues, and to better oversee the care of their cemeteries. Nonetheless, hundreds of former synagogues and Jewish community buildings have been sold or seized. Romania has by far the largest number of functioning synagogues in any Eastern European country. However, the communities that use these buildings are diminishing, as survivors die and young people leave. In Hungary, the government has been active in adapting some of the almost 200 synagogues to new purposes such as museums, concert halls and libraries, trying to present these synagogue buildings in forms most acceptable to surviving Jews.

There is an increasing interest in the documentation and preservation of Jewish heritage. Jewish organizations and institutions in the United States, Canada, and Israel have initiated programs to document Jewish sites and to preserve them. Scholarly organizations, including the International Survey of Jewish Monuments, the Center for Jewish Art at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the American Institute and the World Monuments Fund have initiated programs to document Jewish sites and structures. Efforts of varying degree have been made by government preservation agencies in individual countries to inventory Jewish sites as part of the ongoing process of documenting all monuments. In some cases, certain sites, once identified, have been classified as special historic interest, and have been protected from government protection and even preservation funding.

Overall, however, there have been few government-sponsored preservation projects for Jewish monuments. Where there is no Jewish constituency, there is little pressure for such work. Where there are Jews, even in small numbers, they are often responsible for the upkeep of sites. As a result, they may not have worked with government conservators.

Italy is an exception. In addition to restoring many Renaissance and Baroque synagogues, Italy has recently carried out the restoration of the 1604 Tempio Maggiore in Rome. In Venice, foreign preservation groups have adopted synagogue restoration projects and raised the necessary funds to complete them.

Many Italian synagogues, such as that at Cremona, have been restored in recent years. In the following years the Second World War. Their furnishings were sent to Italy to serve synagogues for the growing population there. Today, however, Italian Jews are working with state and private organizations to restore and in some remaining synagogues including those at Casale Monferrato, Venice, Ferrara, Pesaro and Ancona. The participation of Italy's Ministry of Culture shows that the synagogues are seen as part of the historic patrimony of all of Italy.

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Rashi Synagogue, Worms (Germany). (photo: S. Gruber/BMF)

On the cover: Former synagogue, Orta (Poland). (photo: S. Gruber/BMF)

In France the government has been largely responsible for the recent restoration of the eighteenth-century synagogues of Casablanca and Carpentras, both classified as National Monuments. In Holland, the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam is also classified as a National Monument, and more than half of the funds for its restoration came from the state. Elsewhere in Holland many synagogues have been restored, yet many more have been changed into theaters, museums, churches and even mosques. The most dramatic transformation has been the adaptation (in 1988) of the complex of four Ashkenazic synagogues in Amsterdam into a Jewish Historical Museum. This government-sponsored project maintains the Jewish profile of the building complex but makes it, and much of Jewish history and culture accessible to large numbers of visitors. The synagogue space has been altered but the original form, and the original furnishings of the synagogues, have been left intact.

Despite this, the Rashi Synagogue, which replicates an earlier appearance, no reconstructions were made in the Amsterdam Museum: the women's galleries which had been destroyed as well as the furniture of the New Synagogue and the Oberne Shul were replaced by modern elements. According to curator Edward van Weulen, "most galleries, stairways, doorways, and passages have thus a distinctive contemporary design and are clearly recognizable. They serve as a reminder of what is no longer, but also symbolically in past and present." There is no attempt here to recreate the past. To experience an active synagogue one must visit the nearby Portuguese Synagogue.

The Amsterdam Museum is an example of how preservationists are sawing aspects of the identity of former synagogues, even when the buildings serve new purposes. Many new Jewish museums are being founded in former synagogues, such as in Amsterdam (Holland), Manchester (England), Dublin (Ireland), Essenstadt (Austria), Bouwallon (France), and Tyniec (Poland). Other synagogues now serve multiple purposes. In Stuttgart (Germany) the newly restored synagogue will also serve as a concert hall for the town which has guaranteed the building's maintenance. These projects are costly, and there is a limit to the number of Jewish museums and Jewish centers that countries with small Jewish populations can support. Sometimes, just affixing a plaque on a former synagogue recruiting its history and the fate of its community can raise a building from anonymity and help recreate the history of a community.

In countries not directly affected by the holocaust, the reasons for the abandonment of old synagogues are different, but the needs are the same. Prosperity, not affliction, may have caused Jews to move from the neighborhoods first settled by nineteenth-century immigrants. As Jews moved to better neighborhoods, they left behind scores of synagogues together with tenements and sweatshops. New immigrant groups have occupied these same neighborhoods in England, Canada and the United States. Here too, former synagogues now serve as churches and even mosques. Synagogues have also been adapted for residential and commercial use.

In the United States, historic former synagogues in San Leandro and San Diego (California), Gorisiana (Texas), Hartford (Connecticut), Madison (Wisconsin), Washington, D.C. (Maryland), and elsewhere have been saved from the wrecker's ball. Many of these buildings were no longer synagogues, and have been now restored to serve secular functions. Active synagogues with small congregations have benefited from preservation activities in New York City and Baltimore. Other projects are underway in Boston, Philadelphia, San Francisco and Phoenix. In other cities across the country, and in many small towns, local groups have come together to save former synagogue buildings, recognizing that these are an important part of Jewish history and local community history.

The many examples of preservation projects represented in "The Future of Jewish Monuments" demonstrate both the wide range of the types of Jewish monuments and the variety of contexts in which they are found. Each place benefits or suffers from individual circumstances. Preservation planning for a particular site must emerge from these circumstances. This overview presents some solutions that have worked, as well as the problems that remain. The tags of the Moroccans have written: "It is not your duty to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it." (Mishnah Avot 2:21.)

Samuel Gruber
Director
Jewish Heritage Council

Former synagogue, Tbilisi (Spain). (photo: J. Dodds)

Rashi Synagogue, Worms (Germany). (photo: S. Gruber/BMF)
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Exhibition Curator: Samuel Gruber
Exhibition Design: Paul Hunter

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