


11-1990

The Future of Jewish Monuments

Samuel Gruber

Samuel D. Gruber
Syracuse University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/rel>

 Part of the [Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture Commons](#), [Architectural History and Criticism Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), [Historic Preservation and Conservation Commons](#), [History of Religion Commons](#), [Jewish Studies Commons](#), [Other History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gruber, Samuel D. The Future of Jewish Monuments, exhibition essay, The Joseph Gallery, Hebrew Union College, New York, November, 1990.

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts and Sciences at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religion by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.



**THE FUTURE
OF
JEWISH
MONUMENTS**

NOVEMBER 17, 1990-JANUARY 15, 1991

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 grew 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 Rouen, Toledo, Worms, 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 Ghettos) in Venice, Rome, Prague, and Cracow 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 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 exhibition 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 assumed today. Many richly decorated synagogues such as those in Toledo existed throughout Spain before the expulsion of the Jews in 1492. Iberian Jewish refugees, when settled elsewhere, celebrated 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 ostentation, but given the opportunity to build, Jews often did so. Rabbi Hayyim Gagim 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 mansions, adorned with paintings and pottery. And God blessed us with beautiful *yeshivot* and synagogues ... Torah scrolls dressed in satin and silk ... and decorated in silver ... so that the reputation of the *Mellah*

On the cover: Former synagogue. Orla (Poland), 1990. (photo: S. Gruber/WMF)

(Jewish quarter) resounds throughout the land of Ishmael in our time" (S. Bar-Asher, "The Jews of Morocco: 1492–1960. Aspects of Their History from the Spanish Expulsion to Settlement in Israel," *Encyclopaedia Judaica Yearbook*, 1983/5, 172). The great synagogues — from those in ancient Alexandria (which is said to have been so large that signal flags were needed to tell the congregation when to rise and when to sit) to Amsterdam and Budapest — testify to a strong desire among Jews to express themselves in architecture.

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 survival 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 immediate means of establishing a physical relationship with the past. The late Werner Cahnman, 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 travellers 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 a 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 Ostia (Italy), or the hundreds of excavated synagogue sites in Israel, or as fully intact buildings such as those of Prague, Toledo, or Cavaillon — all speak eloquently about the unbroken continuum of Jewish history. The ruined buildings of Poland such as the great synagogues of Rymanow, Chmielnik, Dzialoszyce, Wodislaw, 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 seldom abandoned outright. 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 Altneushul allow us to trace the vicissitudes of Jewish life and the tenacity of their communities to hold on. The former synagogues of Toledo, 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 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 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 Judaism has survived.



Former synagogue. Sobatica (Yugoslavia), 1989. (photo: S. Gruber/WMF) Former synagogue. Dzialoszyce (Poland), 1990. (photo: S. Gruber/WMF)

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 has been re-dedicated it now functions more as a museum and educational institution than a synagogue, since Worms no longer can boast of a Jewish population. German students and tourist groups regularly visit the building, an adjacent mikva, 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, built in 1175, is now an architectural monument, but it also serves as a symbol of the indestructibility 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 synagogue buildings which survived the war are small structures now used as houses, stores, barns and for other more profane purposes. In the province of Hesse, of over two hundred synagogue structures known to survive, only two continue to function as synagogues. Only in recent years have efforts 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 town 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 memorials or museums. 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 masonry 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 political authorities to restore several more, including the 16th-century synagogue of Pinczow, 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 populations have 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 Annenberg 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 of special historic interest, and have benefitted 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 1904 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 Conegliano Veneto, built in the seventeenth century were dismantled in the years following the Second World War. Their furnishings were sent to Israel to serve synagogues for the growing population there. Today, however, Italian Jews are working with state and private organizations to restore *in situ* 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.



Jewish Cemetery. Venice (Italy), 1990. (photo: S. Gruber/WMF)



Demolition of synagogue. Brno (Czechoslovakia), 1986. (photo: E. Owen)

In France the government has been largely responsible for the recent restoration of the eighteenth-century synagogues of Cavillon 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 will come 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 Ashkenazi 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 often the original furnishings of the synagogues, have been left intact.

Unlike 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 Obbene Shul were replaced by modern elements. According to curator Edward van Voolen "most galleries, stairways, doorways, and passages thus have a distinctive contemporary design and are clearly recognizable. They serve as a reminder of what is no longer, but also symbolically link 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 saving 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), Eisenstadt (Austria), Bouxwiller (France), and Tykocin (Poland). Other synagogues now serve multiple purposes. In Szegeed (Hungary) 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 recounting its history and the fate of its community can raise a building from anonymity and help rewrite 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. Newer 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), Corsicana (Texas), Hartford (Connecticut), Madison (Wisconsin), Washington, DC, Baltimore (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 benefitted 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 emanate from those circumstances. This overview presents some solutions that have worked, as well as the problems that remain. The sages of the Mishnah have written, "It is not your duty to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it." (*Pirke Avot 2:21*)

Samuel Gruber
Director
Jewish Heritage Council

Former synagogue. Toledo (Spain). (photo: J. Dodds)



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





**Joseph Gallery
Hebrew Union College-Jewish
Institute of Religion**

**Brookdale Center
One West Fourth Street
New York, New York 10012
(212) 674-5300**

Gallery Hours:

**Monday-Friday 10am-4pm
Selected Sundays**

This exhibition has been developed
by the Jewish Heritage Council,
World Monuments Fund
Exhibition Curator: Samuel Gruber
Exhibition Design: Paul Hunter

Hebrew Union College-Jewish
Institute of Religion provides a
wide variety of academic programs
at centers in New York, Cincinnati,
Los Angeles and Jerusalem.
The College-Institute includes a
Rabbinic School and Schools
of Sacred Music, Education,
Communal Service, Graduate
Studies and Biblical Archaeology.

Alfred Gottschalk, President
Richard J. Scheuer, Chairman,
Board of Governors
Paul M. Steinberg, Vice President
and Dean of Faculty
Norman J. Cohen, Dean
Lawrence W. Raphael, Dean for
Administration
Kerry M. Olitzky, Director, School of
Education
Linda Robinson, Director of
College and Community Relations

Laura Kruger, Chairperson, Gallery
Committee

Gallery Committee: Sally Broido,
Jocelyn Chait, Phyllis Cohen,
Gloria Bloch Golan, Renee and
Chaim Gross, Cissy Grossman,
Reva Kirschberg, Judith Maslin,
Claire Miller, Edith Peiser, Rabbi
Malcolm Stern.

This exhibition is in cooperation
with the Hebrew Union College-
Skirball Museum.

Copyright 1990 Hebrew Union College-
Jewish Institute of Religion