

## **Digital Preservation of the Synagogues in Greece (*tentative title*)**

### **Combining high and low tech to bring lost synagogues back to life (*tentative title*)**

#### **The digitization project**

Documenting the invisible; mapping the invisible; adding an historic and architectural layer on urban space, to bring to life a lost heritage. This project focuses on people and architecture. Architecture of synagogues in Greek cities. The project aims to give a form and a voice to invisible buildings and places once vibrant with Jewish life. The project aims to make architectural and historic evidence visible through digital technologies and conventional dissemination methods (primarily publications and exhibitions). The project has been currently submitted for funding in Greece.

How to make synagogues that do not exist visible again? The project relies on the Elias Messinas Archive of detailed surveys of synagogues throughout Greece, compiled within a span of three decades. Surveys of synagogues performed before these synagogues were demolished; then the surveys were digitized in CAD, providing detailed information on these synagogues and their architectural details. The survey work was enhanced with photographic documentation of the buildings, not only in the current state they were captured, but also with historic visual evidence of the buildings from archives and private collections. As a result, the digital project, aims to be as accurate as possible. The visual documentation, is further enriched with human stories on these buildings and local traditions with regard to the use of the synagogues. Many of these stories have already been published by the author in a trilogy titled: "The Synagogue" in Greek (2022-2024). The first of the series is currently in preparation for publication in English.

Further research on the synagogues of Greece includes digital documentation of artifacts from the Jewish Museum of Greece and the Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki, in order to capture the textures, colors and the atmosphere of the interiors of these synagogues. The research and digital representation of these invisible cultural heritage buildings, is developed in collaboration with academic institutions on Architecture, History and Ethnography in Greece. Finally, the representation of these invisible synagogues explores the potential of AR by experts in AR technologies, in order to (virtually) reconstruct these synagogues and recapture their presence and experience, in the most profound manner.

The project aims to be disseminated through installations, signage, exhibition, website and educational programs, and on an interactive experiential virtual "walk" in VR, using tools of AR representing the lost historic synagogue buildings and their surroundings.

The interactive experiential virtual "walk" in VR will be enriched with advanced visualizations and pop-up information, sounds and detailed visuals. Further, it will be made, through special digital technologies, accessible to HC and other sensitive groups.

## Background and Research

Jewish life in Greece has its roots in antiquity. Ruins of synagogues and the writings of Josephus, provide evidence of numerous vibrant organized Jewish communities, wealthy enough to erect prominent synagogues with magnificent mosaics, such as in Aegina (c.4th CE) and Chios (c.4th CE). These Greek speaking Romaniote communities had their own customs and liturgy and their synagogues a very distinct architectural typology in their interior organization, inspired by the bipolar synagogues of Venice. In Rhodes, evidence shows that we may have a different typology, inspired by the magnificent basilica in Sardis, where the main entrance and the dual Holy Ark share the southeastern wall of the synagogue. During the Ottoman rule, cities on the geographic area of Greece, included within their walled cities and/or within Jewish quarters, confined and often closed by gates, where vibrant Jewish communities, lived and shared the urban fabric and the market space with Greek, Muslim and Armenian communities. In Ottoman times, a new typology prevailed, characterized by a rectangle - almost square - with 4 columns in the center. Within this defined area, under a decorated flat dome or a daylight lantern, stood the *Bimah* of the synagogues, facing the Holy Ark. The seating surrounded the *Bimah* with benches or wooden chairs. The deportations of the Jewish communities in Greece took place between 1943 and 1944, under German and Bulgarian occupation. After World War II, with 87% of Greek Jewry annihilated, only a fraction of Jewish institutions survived. Many synagogues were destroyed and some survived used as storehouses or other uses. Starting in 1970s, with the dissolution of the remaining Jewish communities throughout Greece, many surviving synagogues followed their fate. Their plots were sold, and the building demolished. As a result, between the end of 1970s and the middle of the 1990s many of the abandoned synagogues that stood in Greece, were lost forever. Forever? Not quite.

Starting in 1993, the author, surveyed and documented all synagogues throughout Greece, including a number of synagogues that either stood in ruins or were later demolished. Through his research, that spans three decades, the author has also retrieved an important survey archive belonging to another Greek architect - Shemtov Samuel - from 1960-1961. Although Samuel did not survey all standing synagogues at the time, yet, he has left a rare archive of surveys of a number of synagogues demolished before 1990, which were not surveyed by the author. The two archives combined, the author's and Samuel's, comprise today, the Elias Messinas Archive, the most complete and detailed survey archive of synagogues in Greece worldwide.

This archive has been the basis for the first complete digital Archaeological Registry of Jewish sites and synagogues in Greece, which the author created in collaboration with the team of the Ministry of Culture of Greece in 2023. This digital map, lays out for the first time, in points and polygons, invisible Jewish sites, made visible, through extensive research and visual evidence retrieved by the author.

Finally, the collaboration with cinematographer Gil Lupo has been a powerful media to bring attention to invisible places, made visible on the actual sites, although little has survived on the ground. Through through film, narration and juxtaposition of visual and architectural materials, the viewer sees and learns about an invisible layer of the place, destroyed gradually after the Holocaust, yet, very important for the understanding of the history and urban evolution of the city.

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## Keywords

Lost Jewish heritage, inclusive urban design, narrative in architecture, future talks