DESTRUCTION, RECONSTRUCTION & PRESERVATION

SOME APPROACHES TO CULTURAL HERITAGE & MEMORY

How Should the Great Synagogue of Vilna Site Be Commemorated?

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**Introduction:**

1. By training, I am an architect, a conservation architect, and archaeologist. Therefore, everything I say here today stems, in large part, from a conservational perspective.
2. Lacking sufficient knowledge of the topic, I will not be speaking about the synagogue in Vilna, nor about the projects under discussion.
3. Because we work in conservation, the specific cases I mention today are mostly UNESCO-identified world heritage sites.
4. What does cultural conservation have to do with memory?
5. A short journey through the history of architectural conservation in Israel in the last fifty years
6. “Addressing the past entails expanding one’s ability to tune into different frequencies – the dialogue created between different points of view and different expanses of time, which do not, for better or for worse, coalesce into a single unified tableau. Different points of view and perceptions of time ignite one another in relevant contexts, and from this flows their essential vitality” (G. Bar Or, “*Shlemat Beton*,” in *Beniyat ha-Aretz: Shikunim bi-Shenot ha-Hamishim*, M. Tuvya and M. Boneh, eds., 1999).

**1. Masada**

Declared a world heritage site in 2001 – the first site submitted by Israel to UNESCO.

The site’s history spans thousands of years, from the Chalcolithic period (4500 BCE) to the Byzantine (7th century CE), but the site’s historical zenith – and the source of its modern significance – is a short, roughly hundred-year period—the Herodian era and the Great Jewish Revolt, between the end of the first century BCE and the end of the first century CE.

In the Herodian period (first century BCE), the site – impressive, isolated and borne of paranoia– was constructed by Herod in the middle of the desert, atop a high and inaccessible plateau. There he chose to build royal pleasure palaces, bathhouses, walls and gates, expansive storehouses for food, and hidden cisterns.

In the period of the Great Revolt (first century CE), rebels from the Jewish Sicarii faction took refuge in the partially abandoned site, and used it as a base for raids of the surrounding settlements. At the close of the Roman campaign, the Tenth Legion crushed the Jews’ revolt against the Romans, beset the mountain fortress, and conquered it after an extended siege.

According to Josephus, the last of the besieged rebels decided to kill their own wives and children, and afterwards each other, so as not to surrender to the Romans and be carried off as slaves.

They then chose ten men by lot out of them, to slay all the rest; every one of whom laid himself down by his wife and children on the ground, and threw his arms about them, and they offered their necks to the stroke of those who by lot executed that melancholy office; and when these ten had, without fear, slain them all, they made the same rule for casting lots for themselves, that he whose lot it was should first kill the other nine, and after all, should kill himself.

Masada gradually faded from history, and interest in the site’s tale was revived only in the nineteenth century.

In the 1950s, wide-ranging excavations were carried out at the site, followed by an initial series of academic publications.

The most famous archaeological dig was conducted in the first half of the 1960s under the leadership of Yigal Yadin, who explained the discoveries there and even restored some of the ruins in accordance with his own ideological perspective. Towards the century’s end, and leading up to the site’s declaration as a world heritage site by UNESCO in 2001, new excavations were carried out on the mountain, this time under the leadership of Ehud Netzer – also an admirer of the fortress’ general Elazar Ben Yair and his problematic decision.

**The Myth**: Zionism, as an anti-exilic movement, utterly rejected the phenomenon of martyrdom (dying in God’s name), and thus consciously adopted the Masada story beginning in the 1930s, as the conflict between Arabs and Jews was reaching a particularly violent stage. The veneration of the Masada myth aided the Zionists in their many struggles, internal and external alike.

Members of youth movements and primary school students would climb Masada at sunrise, experiencing spiritual upliftment from the story and the surrounding view.

Trainee soldiers would ascend to the crest of the mountain to swear their oath to army and country, an activity consummated with the slogan: **“Masada shall not fall again!”**

The thrust was that liberty was preferable to life – a harsh and cruel message nurtured over the years in Israel through the use of the Masada site as a tangible physical anchor for the story.

The murder and suicide of a thousand men, women, and children is a traumatic event by any stretch of the imagination. Its conversion to a narrative of heroism serves to illustrate for us the post-traumatic responses and complexes collectively dubbed the “Masada complex.”

The site quickly became a tourist destination, with roughly 750,000 visitors every year.

In order to prepare Masada for the hordes of visitors, processes of conservation and restoration theretofore unprecedented in scope were carried out at the site.

But what exactly did the archaeologists and conservationists conserve?

Not the sad remainders of the harried lives of the Sicarii rebels, but rather the palaces of Herod the Great.

The youths making the arduous ascent on the Snake Path, excited to reach the peak and undergo the experience of “heroism,” as well as the crowds of tourists ascending with the aid of the cable car, expecting to encounter remnants of the famous story, see almost nothing from the era of the revolt and the rebels’ subjugation by the Roman legionaries. They see fantastic Roman palaces, spectacular mosaic floors, fortified walls and gates. All these, impressive as they might indeed be to the viewer, have nothing to do with the Masada story.

Only gazing out towards the savage expanse of the desert and the ruins of the Roman siege fortifications therein can illustrate, even somewhat, the dramatic events that took place on the mountain.

**The Result:** the myth is disconnected from the Hellenistic-Roman site’s conservation/restoration. The number one tourist site in Israel receives thousands of visitors daily, in addition to official guests of the state brought in by combat helicopter for a “basic course in Israeliness.”

Massive performances at the base of the mountain bring additional thousands to the site, yet they too fail to remember the story. The ongoing conservation, and the process of making the site accessible to the wider public, have created a site bearing contradictory messages, relating tales of defiance and “heroism” against the background of outstanding monumental architecture from the Herodian period.

**2. Jaffa-Tel Aviv**

Jaffa, on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea, is among the world’s most ancient port cities. Over the last thousand years, until the beginning of the twentieth century, Jaffa served as one of the primary ports on the Mediterranean, and as such acted as a magnet for a host of different populations, an important nexus of commerce, and a focal point for cultural, architectural, and social influences that would exert themselves over the entire region.

Jaffa was completely destroyed by Napoleon Bonaparte’s army at the end of the eighteenth century, and rebuilt in the following years by the Ottomans (under the governorship of Muhammad Abu-Nabbut).

Jaffa modern development began with the onset of the Industrial Revolution and the European powers’ renewed interest in the Middle East. The city walls were destroyed in the mid-nineteenth century, during the conquest of Palestine by Ibrahim Pasha. Jaffa’s surrounding areas, rich in fertile soil and sources of water, provided ample land for the wide-ranging cultivation of citrus fruits, olives, and grapes. The neighboring port enabled the exportation of agricultural goods, and significantly contributed to the economic and urban development of the city and its environs.

The spread of settlement beyond the city walls led to the development of commercial and residential areas outside the city and the construction of new suburban neighborhoods, among them the Christian al-Ajami, the Muslim Manshiyeh, and additional Jewish neighborhoods, among them Neve Tzedek. In 1909, “Ahuzat Bayit” was founded, which would soon change its name to “Tel Aviv.” At the outset of the 1920s, Tel Aviv became an independent city, separate from Jaffa. Shortly thereafter the Jewish neighborhoods outside Jaffa’s walls were appended to the new city.

With the rise of Zionist nationalism in the closing days of the nineteenth century, Palestinian nationalism too began to develop, leading to a host of tensions during the era of Jewish settlement and territorial acquisition in Palestine. Jaffa increasingly became a focal point for the developing Palestinian nationalism. The city counted among its residents people active in society, economics, and politics, who constituted some of the critical elements in the foundation of modern Palestinian society. The events of the Great Arab Revolt, which erupted in 1936, began in Jaffa. When the British Mandatory authorities decided to suppress the revolt, they began in the Jaffa area, which they saw as the center of Arab nationalism. The suppression included aerial and ground-based bombings intended to create paths for travel through the Old City. More than two hundred buildings were destroyed as a result. The pathways carved out by the British today serve as the primary axes of movement in the Old City.

During the Israeli War of Independence, multiple sections of Jaffa were destroyed in a series of military operations. After the war, only about thirty percent of old Jaffa remained fit for habitation.

In 1950, Jaffa was annexed by Tel Aviv, the city born out of Jaffa rising up and overtaking its creator in an act of Oedipal tragedy. In 1960, the Tel Aviv Municipality began carrying out a series of projects intended to restructure the areas of Old Jaffa that had, since 1948, turned into a no man’s land, as well as a hub of criminal activity. The area was cleared of residents, some of them refugees from Jaffa who had lost their homes in 1948. The intellectual erasure of Jaffa advanced with increasing vigor, continuing even today. Thus, in less than one hundred years, the history of the centuries of ups and downs experienced by the Jaffa region was erased – and atop it was constructed a new narrative. The area that had only few years prior been a bustling, organically developing urban kasbah became open-air gardens filled with greenery, a backdrop for romantic wedding photographs. Israeli culture took possession of the area, which was tailor-made to suit the values of the new Israeli society, and fashioned it into a zone of romance, replete with references to the romantic, storybook Old Jaffa which had never truly existed. Anyone desiring to know Jaffa’s “original” culture need only approach one of the many culinary establishments under Arab ownership scattered along the length and breadth of the city, which constitute seemingly “authentic” establishments, yet ones whose connection to the original culture and society of Jaffa is tenuous indeed. An Israeli can find Palestinian Jaffa only on a plate.

The area of the Manshiyeh quarter, north of the Old City and the former Muslim cemetery, began to develop along the coast at the end of the nineteenth century, after the expansion beyond Jaffa’s walls. This area was not spared the erasure that befell Jaffa. Between 1949 and 1950, having moved past the battles of the War of Independence, and after the territory had been annexed by Tel Aviv, then-mayor of Tel Aviv Yisrael Rokeach and municipal engineer Yaakov Ben-Sira embarked on an expansive initiative in Manshiyeh. Partially destroyed during the war, the quarter was subjected to further demolitions under the auspices of the municipality – which continue to this day.

The great demolition operation of the years following 1948 led to the creation of a wide-ranging no man’s land, which in the 1970s would be designated as Tel Aviv’s future Central Business District. From the Central Business District’s original plans, there remain a handful of hotels. Along the coastline, the area that was once a bustling urban district has been covered by broad and verdant park, which today serves chiefly as a picnic site. Of Manshiyeh’s historical structures, there remains in the heart of the park “Beit Gidi” – the Irgun museum, built atop the ruins of a residence. Not far away stands the surviving Hassan Bek Mosque. These two buildings constitute a prominent reminder of the processes of demolition and erasure that brought about the current abundance of parking garages, the hotel district, Charles Clore Park and “Conquerors Park” – a fitting name indeed.

But the demolition and erasure did not come to an end in the 1970s. While the proposed destruction of the Jewish neighborhoods of Neve Tzedek has sparked fierce opposition, and one by one each neighborhood has been marked for conservation with stringent restrictions, the neighboring area of Manshiyeh has seen new, wide-ranging plans allowing for generous building without any allowance for conservation. The plans, led by the Tel Aviv Municipality, are perhaps the final blow in the process of erasing every authentic trace of Manshiyeh and creating a continuous sequence of “Jewish” development between Neve Tzedek and the coast and hotels.

The Saray as a symbol of Palestinian Jaffa’s cultural significance for the Zionist authorities

The result:

In Jaffa, conservation serves as an additional tool for the suppression of the local Palestinian culture

Physical planning erases memories and constructs an alienated and unrooted reality (“the trauma of the occupier”)

An additional reinforcement of the dominant position of Tel Aviv

Tel Aviv, founded in 1909, was declared a World Heritage Site in 2003 – the White City of Tel Aviv, the Modern Movement – according to the following criteria for outstanding universal values in World Heritage Sites:

**Criterion 2:** The White City of Tel Aviv is a synthesis of outstanding significance of the various trends of the Modern Movement in architecture and town planning in the early part of the 20th century. Such influences were adapted to the cultural and climatic conditions of the place, as well as being integrated with local traditions.

**Criterion (iv):** The White City of Tel Aviv is an outstanding example of new town planning and architecture in the early 20th century, adapted to the requirements of a particular cultural and geographic context.

The White City, whose conservation began to attract interest in the 1980s, is neither particularly “white” nor “modern.” In the 1930s, the era most of the houses in the area now declared a heritage site were erected, a professional dispute broke out among local architects over the issue of the proper form of the first Hebrew city, which would accurately represent the “new Jew,” strong and unburdened of exile. Despite this, the architectural styles suggested by the period’s architects were all influenced, one way or another, by local styles and the demands of the warm local climate, along with a host of influences from the architects’ European homelands. Only in the 1980s and 1990s, after achieving sufficient distance from the “fresh” traumas of the 1930s and 1940s, did Israeli society begin to accept the styles of a half-century prior as a single “modern” style representing the era of the first building blocks of the new Zionism in the Land of Israel. But just as Jaffa had never been romantic or storybook, this modern style had never been new, clean, pure – rather, it was replete with allusions to local styles, expressions and imitations of European forms foreign to the environment, and, more than anything else, a Gordian connection to the culture and identity of the European, exilic Jew – the very culture the Zionists in the Land of Israel sought to erase and forget.

The result today is that the “White” City becomes a sort of taxidermy city, preserved, in the guise of aesthetics, only for the economic benefits it might bring – beautiful to behold and attractive to tourists and foreign investors. Between the cream-white guise the city’s buildings don and the historical Tel Aviv, colorful, multifaceted, and variegated, there exists only the most tenuous of connections – just as in Jaffa.

**3. The Hurva Synagogue in Jerusalem**

The site now occupied by the “Hurva” Synagogue, in the “Courtyard of the Ashkenazim” in the heart of Jerusalem’s Jewish Quarter, has hosted venerable synagogues since at least the fifteenth century, and possibly even earlier. At the end of the seventeenth century, the active synagogue on the site collapsed. The destroyed synagogue was rebuilt in 1700, apparently funded by Rabbi Judah the Pious while he still resided in the Diaspora. The new structure was dozens of times larger than the site’s earlier synagogues. That same year, after the synagogue’s completion, a group of Ashkenazi immigrants under the leadership of Judah the Pious arrived in Palestine and settled in the Courtyard of the Ashkenazim. Rabbi Judah died just a few short days after his arrival. It seems that the economic aid he rendered and his sudden death led to the naming of the synagogue in his honor.

The Jewish community’s heavy debts to its creditors led the city’s Arab population to burn down the synagogue in 1720, destroying the Courtyard of the Ashkenazim.

The site remained abandoned for more than one hundred years, for both political and economic reasons. It was not until the 1820’s that the Jewish community paid off its debts, thus gaining permission to rebuild the synagogue. Construction on the site began anew in the 1830s with the establishment of a religious study hall in the Courtyard of the Ashkenazim. Construction of the synagogue only commenced around 1856, after struggles to receive permits from the authorities and dedicated efforts to drum up monetary contributions from across the Jewish diaspora. The synagogue was dedicated in 1864. It was designed by the Ottoman architect Assad Effendi, who had been dispatched by the sultan to renovate the religious structures atop the Temple Mount, in the Byzantine/Ottoman style of a mosque. The same architect also designed the al-Omariyyeh mosque, located near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the Old City. The mosque is almost completely identical to the synagogue building.

There are those who say that the Ottoman building style of the Hurva synagogue served as the inspiration for the Great Synagogue in the first Hebrew city, Tel Aviv, built at the beginning of the 1920s.

In the 1948 war, the faithful abandoned the synagogue site. The Jordanian army destroyed the synagogue, along with dozens of others in the area, including the neighboring synagogue Tiferet Israel, built in the nineteenth century. In 1967, with the capture of the Old City by the Israelis, a discussion began concerning the site’s redesign, one which touched on the foundations of the construction of Jewish and Zionist identity in the “united” Jerusalem. The central question, then as now, as with many projects dealing with destruction and memory: whether to recreate the old building, or to build a monumental modern structure to suit the zeitgeist.

Jerusalem mayor Teddy Kollek preferred the monumental solution, approaching the architect Ram Carmi with a request to design the new synagogue. Carmi rejected the offer, claiming that only an architect of the stature of Louis Kahn was worthy of designing a synagogue for a site as important as the Hurva. Kahn himself visited the site and presented his design for the new synagogue in 1968. Nevertheless, Kahn’s plans were rejected by the authorities, and a wide-ranging public debate began over the site’s future. In the decades that followed, various designs for the synagogue were presented by a series of architects, each of whom suggested something different. The planning process kept changing – from a monumental design to a functional one, from a plan for conservation to, finally, one for restoration.

An interesting turnabout occurred in 1976, when, in the wake of the rejection of another plan for the building, it was decided to reconstruct one of the old synagogue’s arches. The reconstructed arch stood for approximately thirty years as a clear and present reminder of the trauma of the Jordanian occupation and the destruction of the Jerusalem’s Jewish Quarter and the synagogue in the 1948 war. The symbolic arch made a profound impression on many visitors.

In 2002, a government decision was made to fully restore the old synagogue, with a budget of approximately ten million dollars. Reconstruction plans were approved immediately afterwards, on the basis of archaeological surveys carried out in earlier years by the Antiquities Authority, as well as historical photographs. The reconstruction that proceeded in the following years was an architectural polyphony in every sense. Portions of the structure exposed by the archaeological digs remained. Other portions that “disturbed” the construction of the new building were destroyed, and on top of them arose the restored building, whose “restoration” was carried out in the maximal possible accordance to the original, while still employing modern construction technologies. Thus, the building’s walls were built with double thickness, not out of any real need but rather with the goal of preserving the thickness of the original walls, which had been constructed with an entirely different sort of technology.

The new-old building, absent any modern conservational principle, erased beneath its foundations the memory of the famous arch, as well as the tumultuous history of the site in the past 150 years. One senses that with the multiplicity of disputes over the status of Jerusalem in general and the Old City in particular, a process was carried out with the goal of erasing a complex history, ignoring the synagogue’s destruction and restoring the past with a hollow historical “restoration” that strives to put the synagogue and its dome on the same level as the domes that have dominated the Old City for centuries – the Dome of the Rock and the rotunda dome of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The effort to omit testaments to the Ottomans’ and Jordanian’s control of the Old City and Jewish Quarter crowded out any critical discussion of the site’s essence.

Today, most of the synagogue’s worshippers belong to the small Lithuanian ultra-Orthodox community of the Old City. Ironically, the synagogue that served the hasidic followers of Judah the Pious passed into the hands of the Lithuanian *mitnagdim*, who lack any historical connection to the site.

The forced and empty “restoration” of these sites constitutes a classic post-traumatic process, one which seeks to erase the memory of trauma through avoidance and total repression, thereby rewriting history and promoting the contemporary Jewish hold on the location by ignoring the past.

**The Result:** The restored arch of the Hurva was, until its destruction, one of the most outstanding architectural symbols of the Jewish Quarter in Jerusalem. Despite being only a very partial restoration of the destroyed monument, its prominence and conspicuousness among the Quarter’s buildings symbolized for many, both religious and secular alike, the historical perseverance of the Old City’s Jewish community.

The monument’s full restoration to its nineteenth century status invalidates its significance as a national symbol for secular and religious alike.

The restored synagogue’s opening was met with protests by the local Muslim population, who saw the initiative as a troubling alteration to the Old City status quo, and by secular and religious Jewish groups, who feared the damage done to the Hurva’s cultural significance as a national symbol.

**4. The Neues Museum – Berlin**

Site history and grounds for its declaration as a world heritage site:

Berlin’s “Museum Island” was declared a world heritage site in 1999. The old museum was built between 1843 and 1855 as the second museum on the island, and designed by Friedrich Stüler, a student of Karl Friedrich Schinkel.

The museum housed Egyptian antiquities, classical and especially neoclassical art and handicrafts.

The building was bombed in the Second World War and badly damaged.

During the period of Communist control of East Berlin, it was decided to embark on the massive project of rehabilitating the museum and opening it to the public.

The English architect David Chipperfield was selected to plan the museum’s renewal. Through a lengthy and exhausting process of public participation, and with the help of a large crew of researchers and experts, the museum underwent a series of conservation efforts considered to be among the most successful and thought-provoking of our time.

- Conservation efforts as a means of addressing the traumas of the national project symbolizing German unification

- The creation of a multilayered location for the promotion of an ongoing discussion of various memories, while giving a place of honor to each of the building’s past eras.

**The Result:**

The opposite of the Masada site. In the reconstructed Masada, one is led along according to established Zionist myth, while taking in monumental Herodian architecture, thus strengthening a story which lacks physical testimony Through impressive restored architecture completely disconnected from the story, one can relegate the horrors of murder and suicide that took place thousands of years ago on the besieged mountain to the subconscious. Repression, as is well-known, is undesirable if the goal is a therapeutic process and the construction of a fair and just society. For chiefly political-ideological reasons, the national site continues to deny other potential messages, and instead perpetuates the values which still stand in service to the politics of occupation and contention with the trauma of the occupier.

In the Hurva synagogue, on the other hand, the restoration of the “glorious” past strips away the trauma of their War of Independence and the mythos of heroism and the renewed conquest of the Six Day War of their content. The restored structure contributes nothing to the construction of the Zionist ethos, instead ignoring and repressing it.

In Berlin, one goes supposedly goes to visit a “museum.” But the displays (except for the statue of Nefertiti) which constitute the visit’s rationale remain on the level of largely “transparent” window dressing, whereas the works of conservation perpetuated on the exterior and interior walls allow you to experience all the eras of the museum’s history, and instead of repressing its traumas, making them readily apparent. Here there is no possibility of repressing the past and peering only into display cabinets, because through them can be seen portions of burnt, plaster-less walls testifying to historical horrors and traumas, which allow us to engage in a process of routine awareness of traumatic events, and thus to contend with them in order to develop emotional and social strength.

In conclusion,

When dealing with a place charged with past traumas, we, the planners and conservationists, must adopt a therapeutic conservationist approach, one which does not erase even a single layer and presents the place’s history and its various messages as conveyed by all affected parties.