

Conserving Historic Religious Buildings:

Focus on the World Monument Fund's Jewish Heritage Program

by John H. Stubbs

It is a pleasure to be here today on behalf of the World Monuments Fund to mention briefly some of the organization's experiences over the past 15 years in conserving Jewish heritage sites.

Conserving Religious Buildings

I was asked to introduce the subject of the Jewish Heritage Program at WMF by first saying a few things about conserving historic religious buildings in general, as we at WMF have observed the process over the nearly 40 years of the organization's existence. These remarks will be from our perspective as a private not-for-profit organization based in New York (U.S.A.), with the mission to do whatever it can to raise awareness for the importance of conserving significant historic buildings and sites wherever they may be found throughout the world. (Due to the nature of this conference, I will be discussing religious buildings only, which comprise approximately 40 percent of all the architectural heritage types that WMF is involved with.)

First, we must keep in mind two obvious facts: 1) Religious historic buildings are found in every country on earth, and 2) no matter what their age and quality of construction, at one level or another each is in a dynamic state of physical change. As

such, the sheer enormity of the task of even conceptualizing the challenges faced in conserving all of them seems impossible. Indeed, when it comes to solutions, the task seems even more bewildering. Choices must be made, though fortunately, in the heritage conservation field of today, these choices are made more manageable by a plethora of available technological and methodological developments for documenting and researching cultural heritage of all kinds. In addition, new solutions in architectural conservation are coming to light all the time, which show by example the possibilities and which gradually raise the standards of ‘best practices’.

The architectural conservation profession today is widely utilizing computerized inventories and documentation systems, geographic information systems, innovative uses of the internet, and the like that in turn are being utilized increasingly by government agencies, property owners, site managers, and educators operating at all levels. In addition, there have been a number of amazing developments in architectural conservation science. All of this exists against the background of the fact that since the 1960s the concern for conserving human-built cultural heritage has noticeably become supra-national, a trait which probably above all else defines the modern social phenomenon of ‘architectural conservation for the sake of conservation’.

The reasons for the explosive growth of the worldwide interest in heritage conservation are many. They include: pride, devotion, respect for the historic, and the need for maintaining a ‘sense of place’. Of course, heritage conservation can play vitally important roles in public education as well. And, as we have heard, there are often cultural, religious, political, and economic ramifications as well. Within the specialized subject of conserving Jewish heritage sites such as synagogues in Eastern Europe, for

instance, the principal concerns usually relate to the memory that these buildings embody by their very existence, and what they symbolize.

In any case it is probably safe to say that those gathered at this conference entitled ‘The Future of Jewish Heritage in Europe’ have progressed beyond the question of ‘why’ conserve religious architecture, in particular Jewish heritage sites. At this stage, our main questions are more likely ‘what’ we should preserve and ‘how’.

Now to this question: What to preserve? The answer lies in knowing as much as possible about what we are dealing with; what distinguishes religious architecture.

Religious buildings have certain things in common:

- each satisfies, or satisfied, specific liturgical and practical needs;
- each represents a symbol of a faith, or faiths;
- each, therefore, embodies associated spiritual values.

In addition, religious buildings are usually distinguished by being highly reasoned creations that are often designed with special stylistic, structural, spatial, and orientational considerations—sometimes even designed with additional numerological and astronomical considerations—usually according to set rules. It is in religious buildings, more than any other building type, that one finds lavish, loving attention to detail in elements ranging from construction systems to the details of ornamentation and furnishings.

It is for these reasons that most religious buildings and sites are easily recognizable such as these two marvels in Bali. Note the role of siting of both. The island temple of Tanah Lot, seen here during low tide, is a major Hindu site in Indonesia, which, like all functioning religious sites, has special holy days, as depicted here. Kighi

Pogost in Karelia in northern Russia is a marvel of construction, originally constructed with fitted wood joints, with not a single metal nail or fastener. The roof of the Jain temple in Jaisalmer, located in Rajasthan state, is another example of lavish attention to detail in religious buildings. Such examples bring to mind the words of modern master architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who said “God is in the details.”

There are whole enclaves of historic religious buildings, as found at Pagan in Myanmar, which had some 2400 temples and shrines in its heyday in the 12th century, two-thirds of which survive today. And there are smaller, but equally distinguished individual constructions such as this proud symbol of religious architecture, the Larabanga mosque in Ghana.

Elsewhere in Africa, there is Masaka Cathedral, seat of the Catholic faith in Uganda, built in the Gothic revival style that was popular in England in the 19th century. Another example of a style being used in a place foreign from its source is seen in the remains of the baroque façade of the former principal church in Macao, built by Portuguese Jesuit missionaries.

Two vernacular religious buildings which represent simple local building customs and life are seen in the stave church of Varga in Norway, and in the Pieve di San Gregorio near Assisi, Italy. The term authenticity has a special meaning at sites like these.

On the other hand we have religious buildings that are world icons in architecture such as Angkor Wat in Cambodia and Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. Note in the interior of Hagia Sophia the palimpsest of inscriptions from the Koran and other religious details that were added to a building that was built as the centre of Christian worship during the

Byzantine period. Since the 1930s, Hagia Sophia has served all faiths, and today it mainly serves as an attraction to visitors of Istanbul. Due to their grandness as works of art and architecture, both Angkor Wat and Hagia Sophia have acquired added cultural significance, and both stand as symbols of their countries.

Certainly more could be said about characteristics of religious architecture, but I also must move on to describe WMF and its Jewish Heritage Program. Perhaps the simplest way to do this is to describe a program started by the World Monuments Fund in 1996 called the World Monuments Watch List of 100 Most Endangered Places. It is a biennial listing of 100 seriously threatened architectural sites of all kinds that are brought to our attention through a nomination process. A constantly changing panel of heritage conservation experts and representatives of other organizations selects the 100 sites from as many as 350 nominations every two years, with the new list serving as the prime agenda for WMF's fundraisers and project development staff for the following two years.

The World Monuments Watch program operates on two main assumptions. 1) When the plight of an endangered building or site is put in a wider context (i.e., given international attention) then support for conservation-minded actions often follows. 2) Strategically-placed funding for conservation measures can start a train of positive actions that can soon remove a site from peril.

WMF administers several grant programmes, which under the right conditions can be used to strategically intervene at endangered historic architectural sites. These grants usually range between \$10,000 and \$100,000. The grant selection committees are very keen on seeing contributions made by others, especially non-US donors, and in

forging new project partnerships. I should say here that we also strongly consider the capacity of the nominators to fulfil the proposed conservation actions.

The criteria for listing are simple. 1) The site must possess some degree of historical or architectural significance. 2) It must be in eminent danger of being lost or seriously compromised. And, 3) there must be a view on the part of the nominator for what can be done to save the site.

Understandably the program has turned up a goldmine of information on what's out there to do, what works and what doesn't in conservation practice, and it has done much to introduce us to like-minded preservationists from all over the world.

Importantly, since WMF raises most of its funds on a project-by-project basis, the Watch program has also done much to help us identify financial partners

Thus far we have been able to remove approximately 65 percent of some 374 sites from the list and put them on the path to recovery. A number have been completely restored, and most of the rest have been turned and are moving in the right direction. Remarkably few (about 10 percent) have been non-starters.

About The Jewish Heritage Grant Program

The World Monuments Fund established its Jewish Heritage program in 1988 at a fortuitous moment in world history. The Eastern bloc was about to collapse, and when it did, a tragic loss was revealed throughout the region—of noble monuments, vast historic properties, and beautiful religious sites of all kinds that were on the brink of destruction. Indeed, much had already been lost. Within this context, Jewish heritage sites represented a special case, since the Jewish population that would have served as the

stewards of this heritage had been decimated even before the Communists took over, in the hideous events of the Holocaust.

With the nearly complete disappearance of Jews from Eastern Europe, the memory of religious and social traditions was in danger of being lost altogether from communal memory. Throughout the region, old synagogues, ghettos, and cemeteries lay in sorry states of destruction and decay. Their supporting populations had simply disappeared. Determining which sites were a priority to save and creating a constituency for this endeavour was the initial purpose of the Jewish Heritage Program at the World Monuments Fund, founded under the leadership of The Hon. Ronald S. Lauder.

The World Monuments Fund had become aware of the plight of Jewish monuments well before the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe. In the 1970s, the Scuola Canton Synagogue in Venice had been adopted as an early project of WMF's Venice Committee. The completion of its restoration, the incorporation of the synagogue into the visit to the Jewish museum in the Venetian ghetto in the late 1980s, and subsequent conservation research and planning for the Jewish Catacombs in Rome established the organization's record of interest in Jewish heritage sites.

Heartened by the success of these projects, the World Monuments Fund Jewish Heritage Program set out to do more to protect the spectacular array of fine buildings that were crying for attention in Europe and elsewhere, such as in Morocco and India. As was mentioned last night, a gathering in New York in 1990, entitled 'The Future of Jewish Monuments', chiefly organized by Dr. Samuel Gruber, brought together advocates of Jewish heritage preservation from around the world for the first time. Out of that event

came a priority list of ten synagogues that were in serious danger of being lost, for which there was a call for action and support.

We found that this task was more difficult than we had thought. At the time, a concern for abandoned sites was not considered a priority or theme for Jewish philanthropy. Most Jews considered their heritage to be intangible. Holocaust survivors showed little interest in reopening a chapter in their lives that they considered closed. Jewish charities considered Israel, and the relocation of Jews there, to be their overriding priorities. This attitude has slowly but surely changed over the last decade, as we heard this morning.

By 2000 the emergencies facing eight of the original ten target sites had been addressed, and WMF felt it could expand the scope of the program. Renamed the Jewish Heritage Grant Program, the re-focused program channels support from donors to a wide range of sites throughout the world by awarding grants on a competitive application and selection basis. Rather than promoting concern for the survival of specific Jewish sites, the emphasis now lies on strengthening local stewardship by awarding funds to communities and groups that have demonstrated their ability to maintain and preserve important sites under their care.

Working with WMF's Jewish Heritage Program

As for the details of how to nominate sites to the World Monuments Watch list, the Jewish Heritage Program and other programs of the World Monuments Fund, all of the instructions are on our Uniform Request for Assistance found on WMF's website, or

in hard copy that can be sent from WMF's offices in New York or Paris. With regard to this program in particular, interested parties should note the following points.

WMF receives applications year round, though sites are prepared for selection by a selection committee that meets in late June of each year. Successful applicants are notified in July, and a coordinated press release is sent out in August or early September.

I mentioned the three main selection criteria already: significance, urgency and viability.

Grants are dispersed in two or three stages depending on the nature of the proposed project. The first payment is usually in the amount of 50 percent, the second is awarded on substantial completion of the proposed task, and the remaining 10 percent is awarded on receipt and approval of a completion report. It is expected that JHP grants are spent in no more than eighteen months after notification of an award.

In 2003 we received thirty-six nominations and eleven sites were selected. Most sites were synagogues in Eastern Europe—not surprisingly, since the program urges nominations of this kind of heritage at this time. Cemeteries are not eligible at this time.

Most nominators in the past have tended to address urgent conservation issues, with many needing funding for roof repair work. Many nominators need support for planning and articulating the possibilities for preserving and presenting sites that often requires little more than support for architectural planning, engineering studies, archival research, cost analyses, etc.

In conclusion I would like to briefly mention two past JHP projects (of many) that can serve as examples.

Poland, Tempel Synagogue, Krakow

Soon after German Jews founded the Reform movement in the early 1800s, Polish Jews enthusiastically adopted its modern ideas of prayer service and synagogue design. In 1862 a new Reform congregation in Kazimierz—then an independent town, now a neighbourhood of Krakow—commissioned a stylish new headquarters called the Tempel Synagogue. The pinnacled exterior combines Romanesque rows of arches and Gothic Revival quatrefoils (four-petaled openings). Its gilded interior is an even headier mixture, with neoclassical swags and paired columns amid effusions of Moorish flora based on precedents at the Alhambra in Spain. Like all Reform sanctuaries of its era, it has no central bimah (reading platform). No other 19th-century synagogue exists in Poland, and few other Reform sanctuaries in Central Europe can compare with the Tempel Synagogue's fanciful décor. The Nazis stabled horses in the Tempel Synagogue. After the war, a few hundred Jews resettled in Krakow.

The World Monuments Fund consolidated the various repair efforts in 1994, commissioning a comprehensive building survey and preservation plan. Following WMF's subsequent commitment to replace the roof, the Citizens' Committee for the Renovation of Krakow's Monuments agreed to stabilize the building's foundations to provide a new heating system. The Committee later agreed to restore the stucco of the building's façade. The Getty Grant Program sponsored research on the interior finishes, which established that 80 percent remained intact.

Greece, Etz Hayyim Synagogue, Hania

Etz Hayyim ('Tree of Life') Synagogue in Hania, Crete, has been brought back from the brink of extinction. A 14th-century church turned 17th-century synagogue, it was looted and bombed by the Nazis. After World War II, it became a pitiful combination of barnyard, dump, and furniture warehouse. By the time it made the World Monuments Fund List of 100 Most Endangered Sites in 1996, an earthquake had destroyed much of its roof and its walls were collapsing. Grants from the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation and the Rothschild Foundation, among other sources, have funded Etz Hayyim's improbable transformation into a vibrant cultural centre.

Jews have lived on Crete for some 2,400 years, dealing in wine and cheese, especially at the port town of Hania. They survived regime after regime, from the Romans through the Moors, Byzantines, Venetians, Ottomans, and Greeks. The original structure at Etz Hayyim, with its pointed Gothic arches, was probably dedicated to St. Catherine. In converting it to a synagogue, Hania's Jews used fragments of the older structure's lintels, sills, and trim. They added a barrel-vaulted mikvah, and buried prominent rabbis in stone sepulchres around the courtyard. The only other synagogue in Hania, a medieval sanctuary next door to Etz Hayyim, was bombed in 1941. In 1944 the Nazis forced the community's 263 Jews onto a deportation ship, which was torpedoed and sunk by a British submarine. Etz Hayyim is the only relic of Jewish life on the island.

During its 1996-99 restoration, the cedar-beamed roof was given a protective lead coating, the interiors re-plastered, an ark and reading platform recreated, and the spring-fed mikvah re-plumbed. Nearly a dozen inscribed stones were uncovered in the process, quoting scripture or paying tribute to people who built the structure or were buried there.

The reborn synagogue also contains a library and exhibits focused on Greek Jewish history and a growing collection of antique and ritual objects donated by Jews around the world. Concerts and lectures are offered frequently and the Jewish holidays are celebrated, along with weddings and bat mitzvahs of new community members. Prayers are held three times a day, though there's rarely a minyan on Crete—followers of any faith are welcome at Etz Hayyim.

As for the kinds of projects WMF is supporting with the current JH Program, I will leave it to you to browse through the list and their brief descriptions contained in the brochures placed on your seats.

For 15 years now, the World Monuments Fund, with the help of numerous supporters and advocates, has supported preservation activities at 46 Jewish Heritage sites in 23 countries. We have witnessed, and I think it is fair to say stimulated a lot of change in thinking about the merits of conserving Jewish Heritage Sites through WMF's usual approach involving advocacy and strategically-placed funding—toward, importantly, real and visible projects that can serve as exemplars. Speaking personally, this work has been immensely interesting, not only due to the quality of the architecture involved, but because of the wonderful people encountered in this process. Indeed, much can be learned from conserving and presenting this kind of heritage. It speaks to the threat of a generation gap mentioned earlier; its usefulness; its appropriateness; and almost above all else, its construction, as opposed to the opposite (which we know all too well in today's world!). It is heartening to see at this conference what I think we all hope will be a renewed widespread, coordinated effort to do more along these lines in the future.