

# CAN PRESERVATION BRING BACK THE GENIUS LOCI? CREATING A JEWISH PLACE IN A TOWN WITH NO JEWS

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## Introduction

The Jewish Suburbia, a historic urban complex outside the old city walls of Bardejov, Slovakia, was a place with a distinct character. This large, self-contained compound that was first developed in the early nineteenth century includes an Old Synagogue, a congregational study/prayer hall (*Beit HaMidrash*), and a ritual bathhouse (*Mikvah*). The Suburbia served as the spiritual and social center of Bardejov Jewish life well into the twentieth century when Bardejov was home to a vibrant Jewish community, comprising approximately one-third of the town's total population of 10,000<sup>1</sup>.

With the mass deportation of Bardejov Jews to death camps in 1942, during WWII, the Suburbia was deserted. Only ten percent of the Bardejov Jewish population survived the Holocaust<sup>2</sup>. The handful of Jews that remained in Bardejov after 1949 did not use the Suburbia and its ritual buildings. The community was too small and unable to maintain the structures and so the Suburbia slowly fell into despair. It was later used as a commercial warehouse and storage facility for a large building supply company. Today, survivors and descendants of Bardejov live all around the world, but there are no Jews residing in Bardejov. The people, who gave this place its *Genius loci*, are no more.

In 2000, the Jewish Suburbia – together with the historic center of Bardejov – was included in UNESCO's<sup>3</sup> World Heritage List based on "its tremendous historical, architectural and urbanistic value"<sup>4</sup>. The historic town center, which was already declared a Town Reservation in the 1950s<sup>5</sup>, continues to be a lively

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<sup>1</sup> Fish, Emil A. (ed.). *The Memorial Book of Jewish Bardejov, Slovakia: Dedicated to its People, History, and Legacy*. Pasadena, California: The Bardejov Jewish Preservation Committee. 2014.

Hudák, Peter. *K osudom bardejovskej židovskej komunity v rokoch 1918–1989* [The fate of Bardejov's Jewish Community, 1918–1989]. Ph.D. Dissertation: Constantine the Philosopher University, Nitra. 2013.

<sup>2</sup> *ibidem*. While some of the survivors returned to Bardejov after the war in 1945, most of them left by 1949 with the beginning of communist regime. The majority immigrated to Israel and the USA.

<sup>3</sup> The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

<sup>4</sup> *Slovakia in the UNESCO Treasury*. © RAX,s.r.o., 2005: 106.

<sup>5</sup> *ibidem*.

urban center and the location of the city hall. However, the Jewish Suburbia, despite UNESCO's recognition, is still used as a warehouse and storage facility. Recent efforts by local organizations and individuals and by survivors living abroad seek to restore the Jewish Suburbia so that it will serve as a cultural heritage site. Yet preserving the past and communicating Jewish heritage is complex and problematic, because the reasons for the abandoned architectural and urban sites in Central-Eastern Europe are the atrocities of the holocaust and involve the memory of the victims.

The question that this paper tries to address is whether architectural preservation can bring back the historic cultural meaning – the spirit of place – and reinstate the representation of heritage sites in the urban landscape, without the people who occupied it – those who produced the *genius loci*.

## Jewish Heritage in Slovakia

Most of the synagogues, Jewish communal buildings, and Jewish cemeteries in Central-Eastern Europe were razed by the Nazis as part of their agenda to annihilate the Jews. Yet hundreds of Jewish communal properties abandoned, empty or misused remained in the region. In Slovakia, most of the Jewish historic sites were handed over to the state authorities in the 1950s as the few Jewish communities that remained consisted of less than one tenth of their prewar size<sup>6</sup> and did not have the financial means to care for the large and unused structures. Jewish properties remained abandoned, empty or misused “simply because of the insufficient Communist economy, which was not oriented towards profit making or town beautification”<sup>7</sup>.

The perception of Jewish heritage and Jewishness changed with the 1989 Velvet Revolution, when various Jewish issues were placed on the public agenda “including the return of confiscated communal and individual properties”<sup>8</sup>. The local Jewish community, with support of Jewish associations from abroad, began the process of restoration of cemeteries and communal buildings. The interest of the broader Jewish community in the Jewish heritage of Central-Eastern Europe also influenced the involvement of foreign organizations such as the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, established in 1985 by U.S. Public Law 99-83 as “In many countries, none [Jews] were left to continue to care for the communal properties that represented an historic culture in the area and constitute an integral part of the Jewish religion”<sup>9</sup>. The Commission began its operations in 1990.

Growing interest of the global Jewish community manifested itself also with ‘roots tours’ of survivors and their descendants who could now, after the fall

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<sup>6</sup> The number of the Jews in Slovakia continued to decline after the Soviet invasion in 1968. Heitlinger, Alena. *In the Shadows of the Holocaust and Communism: Czech and Slovak Jews since 1945*. New Brunswick (USA) and London (UK): Transaction Publishers. 2006: 19; 21.

<sup>7</sup> Gruber, Ruth Ellen. *Jewish Heritage Travel: A Guide to East-Central Europe*. Northvale – Jerusalem: Jason Aronson, Inc. 1999: 9.

<sup>8</sup> *ibidem*, p. 143.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.heritageabroad.gov/About.aspx>

of Communism, be allowed to visit their birthplace. In Slovakia, The Slovak Jewish Heritage Route, which was established in 2006, is a unique project “linking the most important synagogue buildings in Slovakia”<sup>10</sup>. The Route, a result of comprehensive research, is “part of a long-term vision that includes the establishment of a sustainable and multi-faceted Slovak Jewish Heritage Program”<sup>11</sup>.

The Bardejov Jewish Suburbia was added to the Slovak Jewish Heritage Route in 2010 after the Old Synagogue, within the complex, was partially restored by the Central Union of Jewish Communities in Slovakia – the legal owner of the site. While an official plaque indicates that the Suburbia is part of the Slovak Heritage Project, “The Synagogue is closed. The commercial section of the compound is accessible during shop hours”<sup>12</sup>.

## The Bardejov Holocaust Memorial

Despite UNESCO’s official recognition – in 2000 – of its iconographic stature, the Bardejov Jewish Suburbia remains occupied by a building supply company. While the Synagogue has been partially restored, the interiors of the *Beit HaMidrash* and the *Mikvah*, and the Suburbia grounds have not, and are exploited as a commercial warehouse and storage facility for pipes, metal and other plumbing and construction supplies and equipment.

In 2006 the Bardejov Jewish Preservation Committee (BJPC) – a USA based non-profit organization founded by Bardejov survivor Emil A. Fish – was established with the missions:

(1) to restore the Jewish properties of Bardejov, (2) build awareness and promote knowledge of the important cultural and historical legacy of Jewish life in Bardejov, (3) memorialize the roughly 4,500 Jews from the Bardejov area who perished in the Holocaust, and (4) establish a permanent cultural center dedicated to Bardejov’s Jewish History in the town’s Jewish Suburbia. By achieving these goals, the Committee hopes to thwart the neglect and disappearance of the remaining traces of Jewish history from Slovakia and to honor and preserve the memory of the Jewish victims of the Holocaust who once were such an intrinsic element of the fabric of life in Bardejov and other Slovakian towns<sup>13</sup>.

Different from the owner of the site – the Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities in the Slovak Republic (ÚŽŽNO)<sup>14</sup> – the BJPC represents Bardejov survivors and their descendants, people whose personal memories are embedded

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.slovak-jewish-heritage.org>

<sup>11</sup> *ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.slovak-jewish-heritage.org/bardejov-old-synagogue-compound.html>

<sup>13</sup> Fish, Emil A. (ed.). *The Memorial Book of Jewish Bardejov, Slovakia: Dedicated to its People, History, and Legacy*. Pasadena, California: The Bardejov Jewish Preservation Committee. 2014: 116.

<sup>14</sup> ÚŽŽNO is the abbreviation of the Slovak name of the organization: Ústredný zväz židovských náboženských obcí v Slovenskej republike.

in Bardejov and its Jewish places. For them, the state of the Suburbia, and the decision of ÚZŽNO to vacate only the Old Synagogue while *Beit Hamidrash* and the *Mikvah* continue to be under long-term use agreement for commercial purposes, has been a disgrace and humiliation. With their personal memories and a wish to honor the lost Jewish community of their hometown, the BJPC tried to raise local and international awareness of the ‘status quo’ of the Jewish Suburbia years after its recognition by UNESCO.

In 2010 restoration plans for the Suburbia were prepared by architect Ján Krcho for the City of Bardejov, transforming its three buildings into a cultural complex. BJPC tried to push for the fruition of these plans, and the partial restoration of the Old Synagogue in 2010 came about partly as a result of these efforts. The committee continued its pressure to vacate the commercial buildings and began to raise money to fund the creation of a Holocaust Memorial in the Jewish Suburbia. The intention was to add to Krcho’s plans a Memorial Wall, dedicated to the holocaust victims from Bardejov, by inscribing their names on the walls of the synagogue or *Beith Hamidrash*. The goal of the BJPC was to complete the Memorial by May 2012 for the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorating the deportation of Bardejov’s Jewish population in 1942. As it was impossible to negotiate vacating the Suburbia, a Holocaust Memorial inside the complex was not feasible.

The solution came with the acquisition of a vacant lot of approximately half an acre, adjacent to the Suburbia, where residential row houses, once home to Jewish residents before the deportation, stood. The houses were demolished in the 1970s and the site, owned by the City, was given to the BJPC by the Mayor of Bardejov for the purpose of building the Holocaust Memorial (Fig. 1). The agreement between the City and BJPC to build the Memorial on the site was signed in 2012 during the commemoration event in Bardejov.

Construction of the Memorial began in March 2013 and was completed in June 2014 with the dedication of the Memorial. The ceremony was attended by more than 450 participants – Bardejov citizens, dignitaries, and guests from around the world. It received major local and national media coverage.

The Bardejov Holocaust Memorial is designed as an enclosure of an open space: The external wall facing the main street (Dlhý rad) represents the houses that were once there and incorporated the idea of reconstructing the façades of the three demolished houses from historic photos and historic maps (Fig. 2). At the same time, Giora Solar, the principal architect and designer of the Memorial, explains:

In detailing the façades, it was quite clear that they should be schematic. They would not try to replicate the old houses, but rather would reflect how they used to look. Conservation ethics and practical considerations (maintenance, potential vandalism etc.) necessitated the use of modern materials; therefore the façades were built of exposed concrete. The houses are represented by their external walls...showing their openings and part of the slope of their once gabled roofs<sup>15</sup> (Fig. 3).

<sup>15</sup> Fish, Emil A. (ed.). *The Memorial Book of Jewish Bardejov, Slovakia: Dedicated to its People, History, and Legacy*. Pasadena, California: The Bardejov Jewish Preservation Committee. 2014: 132.

**Legend:**

-  Holocaust Memorial Site
-  Jewish Suburbia
-  Existing Buildings
-  Entrances to Memorial

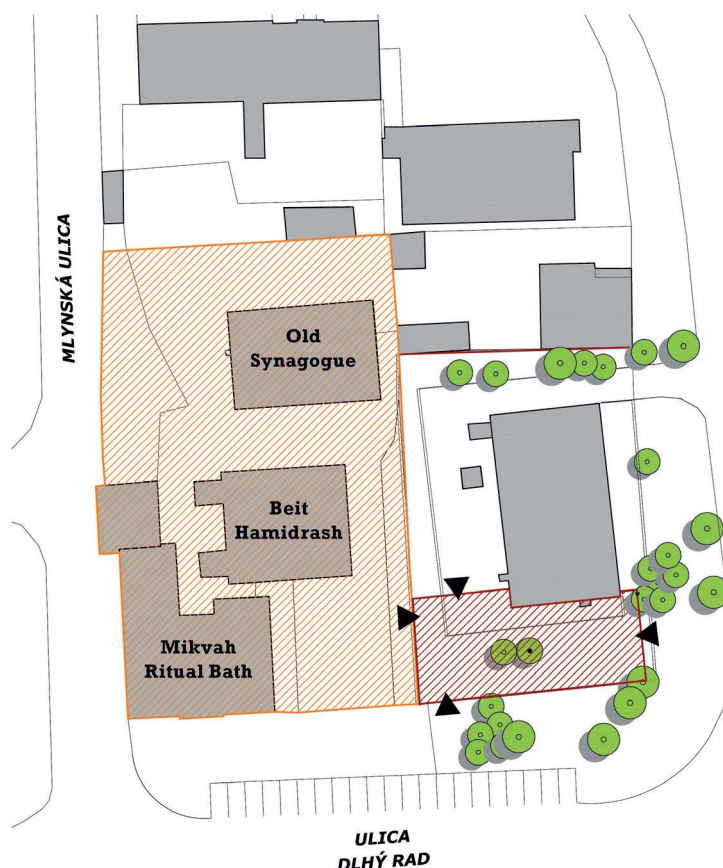


Fig. 1. The Jewish Suburbia and the Memorial site

Source: Drawing by OLEJAR Architect INC. for BJPC.

The interior of the Memorial includes fourteen Name Tablets, which were created in the shape of tombstones, on which the names of 3,381 Holocaust victims from Bardejov and surrounding villages are inscribed. Two of the fourteen tablets are blank. They are for the nearly 900 names that have, as of yet, not been verified as either victims or survivors. Although the likelihood of survival is remote, these names will be added only when the information is authenticated by descendants, family members, or new research<sup>16</sup>. Five History Tablets tell the story of the Jewish

<sup>16</sup> *The Bardejov Jewish Preservation Committee*. Information Brochures, Pasadena, USA.

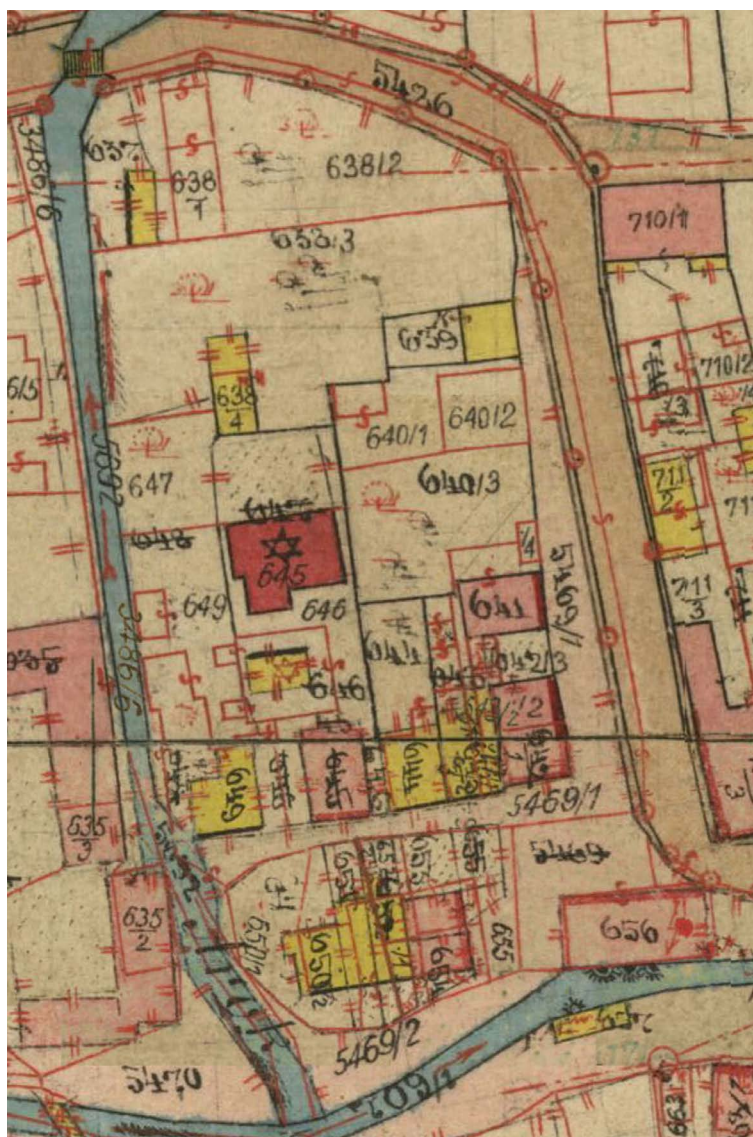


Fig. 2. Old map of Bardejov showing the Suburbia, 1869  
Source: The Monuments Board of the Slovak Republic, Prešov Regional Centre.

community and describe the centuries-old legacy of Jews in Bardejov and the tragic dissolution of their community. One of the tablets recognizes the Righteous of Bardejov – those who, at great peril to their lives, helped Jews during the Holocaust. A most important element in the complex is the Star of David monument, located in front of the only remaining original wall. The three-dimensional star – on which the words “Never Again” are cut into the steel in Hebrew, English, and Slovak – is placed on train tracks, representing the transports that took Jews from Bardejov’s train station to the places from which most of them did not return (Fig. 4; Fig. 5).





Fig. 3. Exterior view of the Memorial from Dlhý rad street  
Source: photo by Marián Šoth.



Fig. 4. Interior view of the Memorial  
Source: photo by Marián Šoth.



Fig. 5. View of the Jewish Suburbia from the Bardejov Holocaust Memorial site

Source: photo by Marián Šoth.

## Heritage Sites versus Memorials

In the introduction to their book *Synagogues without Jews and the communities that built and used them*, published in 2000, Rivka and Ben-Zion Dorfman state:

The hundreds of synagogues that still stand all across Europe – deserted or used for menial purposes – raise the question of what to do with them.... Some Jews maintain that, once defiled, synagogues bereft of Jews should be razed rather than be put to mundane use. In our view, every synagogue and cemetery still standing in central Europe is the landmark of a former Jewish presence. We believe that wherever feasible, these synagogues should remain. Let them stand as monuments across the continent of Europe, each a witness to a *kehillah*<sup>17</sup> that was born, flourished, and vanished<sup>18</sup>.

A few years later, in the introduction to his book, *Synagogue Architecture in Slovakia: A Memorial Landscape of a Lost Community*, published in 2007, Maroš Borský states:

<sup>17</sup> *Kehillah* (Hebrew) means [Jewish] Community.

<sup>18</sup> Dorfman, Rivka and Ben-Zion. *Synagogues without Jews and the communities that built and used them*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society. 2000: 5.



The fact remains, however: restored but vacant synagogues, whose congregations, rabbis, and Torah scrolls were consumed in the flames of the Holocaust, will stand for future generations as silent witnesses of a closed chapter of Slovak History: Slovak Jewish culture and its tragic obliteration<sup>19</sup>.

Borský, the Dorfman, and other scholars, historians, and researchers confuse the notions of preservation with commemorations. Indeed, one cannot discuss Jewish Heritage in Europe without the immediate connotation to the evils of the Holocaust and the communities that were lost. "When thinking about places of Jewish interest in East-Central Europe, or of the Holocaust, people tend to think more about the places of horror, where Jews died by the millions, rather than those places where they lived in even greater millions."<sup>20</sup> Thus far, Holocaust memorials have been built throughout the world in growing numbers, and most of the Jewish heritage sites became both memorials and tourist attractions, an issue that also raises controversy:

Using Jewish Heritage sites for tourism and as a municipal economic development strategy raises difficult questions about authenticity and representation, and about the balances between education and remembrance and public and private funding. There is also the issue of the extent to which Holocaust sites and museums differ from other tourist attractions<sup>21</sup>.

Heritage sites, especially those that comply with UNESCO's criteria (iii) and (iv)<sup>22</sup> such as Bardejov and the Jewish Suburbia<sup>23</sup>, are recognized for their achievements rather than death and commemoration. The success of such preservation projects often has to do with how well preservation was able to communicate the heritage with its visible and invisible elements, so as to integrate both the physical and the social aspects of the urban environment.

Memorials, on the other hand, are usually located in more isolated places. "The memorial is a special precinct, extruded from life, a segregated enclave where

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<sup>19</sup> Borský, Maroš. *Synagogue Architecture in Slovakia: A Memorial Landscape of a Lost Community*. Bratislava, Slovakia. The Jewish heritage foundation-Menorah. 2007, p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> Gruber, Ruth Ellen. *Jewish Heritage Travel: A Guide to East-Central Europe*. Northvale, Northvale – Jerusalem: Jason Aronson, Inc. 1999.

<sup>21</sup> Heitlinger, Alena. *In the Shadows of the Holocaust and Communism: Czech and Slovak Jews since 1945*. New Brunswick (USA) and London (UK): Transaction Publishers. 2006, p. 148.

<sup>22</sup> UNESCO Cultural criteria: "(iii) to bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared; (iv) to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history;" <http://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/>.

<sup>23</sup> "Bardejov Town Conservation Reserve: Bardejov is a small but exceptionally complete and well-preserved example of a fortified medieval town, which typifies the urbanisation in this region. Among other remarkable features, it also contains a small Jewish quarter around a fine 18th-century synagogue. Justification for Inscription: Criterion (iii): The fortified town of Bardejov provides exceptionally well preserved evidence of the economic and social structure of trading towns in medieval Central Europe. Criterion (iv): The plan, buildings, and fortifications of Bardejov illustrate the urban complex that developed in Central Europe in the Middle Ages at major points along the great trade routes of the period" <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/973>.

we honor the dead”<sup>24</sup>. For example, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall, huge in size and including 58,000 names, is isolated in a section of the national memorial in Washington, D.C. Other memorials, which are within an urban environment, usually consist of statues or art pieces as part of a city square or an urban park. Peter Eisenman’s Holocaust Memorial in Berlin is an ‘Urban Memorial’ that captures a vast area of 19,000 square miles (204,440 sq. ft.) between the former East and West Berlin. Yet while his design defines space and creates a *place* within the urban environment, it is not a heritage site.

## Envisioning the Past: Perception of Place

In the preface to his classic book, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (1980), Christian Norberg-Schultz states:

Man dwells where he can orient himself within and identifies himself with an environment, or, in short, when he experiences the environment as meaningful... It implies that the spaces where life occurs are *places*, in the true sense of the word. A place is a space which has a distinct character. Since ancient times the *genius loci*, or “spirit of place” has been recognized as the concrete reality man has to face and come to terms with in his daily life. Architecture means to visualize the Genius Loci, and the task of architecture is to create meaningful places, whereby he helps man to dwell<sup>25</sup>.

This implies that the traditional ‘place’ carries with it much more than a shelter. Norberg-Schultz carries on the discussion of the concept of place in its existential or mental implications and demonstrates how “human identity is to a high extent a function of places and things”<sup>26</sup>. The qualities that Schultz is looking for in creating the *genius loci* are physical qualities of form and design, qualities that represent deeper notions of place-space as they provide possibilities for identification and affect social structure.

In contrast, the results of preservation in the context of Jewish heritage in Slovakia as well as in Central-Eastern Europe are restored empty buildings where ‘no life occurs’. Restored synagogues, their remnants, or their empty sites, became memorials to Holocaust victims and serve as silent memorials to the life that is no more. They attract tourism, mainly Jewish tourism, but are usually of no interest to the local community as they did not become part of present-day city life.

The Bardejov Holocaust Memorial was built as a *Memorial*, not as a heritage site. At the same time, this new space could not have become the place it is, if not adjacent to the Jewish Suburbia with its cultural and historical significance. The

<sup>24</sup> Young, James E. *The Texture of memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*. New Haven – London Yale University Press. 1993, p. 3.

<sup>25</sup> Norberg-Schultz, Christian. *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*. New York: Rizzoli International. 1980, p. 5 (*author’s italicized emphasis*).

<sup>26</sup> *ibidem*, 21; see also Abel, Chris. *Architecture and Identity Towards a global Eco-culture*. Oxford: Architectural Press. 1997.



Fig. 6. Architectural rendering of the Bardejov Holocaust Memorial (right) adjacent to the Jewish Suburbia  
Source: rendering by Puchlick Design Associates for BJPC

Suburbia “is one of the most interesting Jewish monuments in Central Europe. It is a valuable architecture unit of Jewish communal institutions clustered in a small complex, the sole surviving witness to a once prosperous center of Jewish communal life in northeastern Slovakia”<sup>27</sup>. While the Memorial has two main entrances facing the street, a third potential opening was designed so that in the future there could be direct access between the two sites (Fig 1; Fig 5).

Since the dedication ceremony in June of 2014, more than 1000 people visited the Memorial, including teachers, students, local citizens, dignitaries, and tourists – from all parts of Slovakia and from around the world. It has become a place with its own new spirit: An attraction for descendants and survivors who still – emotionally – consider Bardejov their home; an attraction for local citizens who remember their Jewish neighbors and come to find their names on the Name Tablets, and an attraction for the younger generation for whom the stories, and the history of the Bardejov Jewish community, are new.

Another important issue is the Memorial’s visual presence towards the street –the urban environment of the city. With the architects’ wish to evoke the old houses that once occupied the site for the sake of historic representation, it was also their intention to ‘fill-in’ the void and re-create the continuity of the original street (Fig. 6). Indeed, an article that was published in a prestigious Slovak architecture magazine and describes the Bardejov Holocaust Memorial is titled “Urban Monument”<sup>28</sup>. Miloslav Olejár, the architect who was part of the Memorial’s design team, additionally mentions the visual interface, which corresponds to the inclusion of the Jewish community in the non-Jewish society with the transparent gates that allow anyone passing by to get a glimpse of the inside<sup>29</sup>.

Pedestrians, who in the past were unaware of the Suburbia, now notice its existence as the new urban landscape created by the Memorial makes it part of the Suburbia complex. The Memorial, a place with a new spirit, reawakened the *Genius loci* of the old Suburbia.

<sup>27</sup> Borský, Maroš. *Synagogue Architecture in Slovakia: A Memorial Landscape of a Lost Community*. Bratislava, Slovakia: The Jewish heritage foundation-Menorah. 2007, p. 94.

<sup>28</sup> Komrska, Jan. “Urbánný pamätník” [Urban Monument]. *Časopis ARCH, mienkotvorný mesačník o architektúre a inej kultúre - tradičné periodikum slovenských architektov*. No.12. 2014, pp. 24-29.

<sup>29</sup> ibidem.

## Conclusion

In November 2014, the EEA and Norway Grants awarded 517,000 Euros for the complete restoration of the Old Synagogue in the Suburbia. While efforts to restore the Suburbia and the synagogue have been ongoing for years, it is clear that the new Holocaust Memorial and the place it created at a central location in the town have raised awareness to the significance of the site and the importance of the restoration of the whole complex.

The location of the Bardejov Holocaust Memorial outside the Jewish Suburbia began as a compromise to overcome political and physical obstacles. Yet the creation of a new *place*, which connects physically and spiritually to the existing traditional site, may have produced a new model for preservation of heritage sites: While the spirit of place, the *genius loci*, has been usually tied to the people who occupy it, this Jewish place in Bardejov where no Jews live reclaims its significance as a result of a new construction. What makes this site unique is the mutual relationship between the old and the new. The construction of a place with new visual representation and a new spirit brought back the spirit of the old as they have become one.

Only when the Suburbia is completely restored as a cultural, civic, and educational center, will we know if the old complex and the new Memorial indeed provide a visual representation of the past and at the same time also a meaningful place that is a living tribute to the once-thriving Jewish community of Bardejov.