

The Monument: From Real to Virtual Space. A Case Study of Jewish Heritage

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Abstract

In today's society, one experiences an increasingly acute crisis of identity, operating with concepts such as monumentification or museification, ranking, listing, and indexing an alarmingly growing number of artefacts, buildings, and other heritage assets, therefore inevitably trivializing and diminishing the value of the concept of the monument. Thus, on one hand, in real life, one has to take into account various issues related to maintaining, preserving, restoring or rehabilitating an existing built heritage, which undergoes different evaluation criteria adapted to the contemporary social realities and norms of the group. However, the issues raised by the concept of monument and the questions of the built heritage are not only matters regarding the physical reality. Consequently, the topic surpasses the boundaries of the everyday, transgressing into virtual space. Therefore, the analysed case study proposes an insight into the way in which architecture is built, experienced or lived in virtual life. "Second Life" offers such an example. Accordingly, the paper will focus on the concept of monument, which was previously clearly defined, but which now seems to surpass its initial boundaries, asking to be redefined, so that its meaning broadens, transcending into the virtual.

Rezumat

În societatea contemporană se înregistrează o criză de identitate tot mai acută, care uzitează de concepte precum monumentificare sau muzeificare, identificând, clasând și indexând un număr alarmant de mare de artefacte, clădiri sau alte valori patrimoniale; prin urmare, contribuind la banalizarea și diminuarea sensului conceptului de monument. Astfel, pe de o parte, în viața reală, trebuie să se ia în considerare diferite aspecte legate de menținerea, conservarea, restaurarea sau reabilitarea patrimoniului construit existent, care se supune diferitelor criterii de evaluare, adaptate la realitățile sociale contemporane și normelor impuse de grup. Cu toate acestea, problematicile ridicate de conceptul de monument și de patrimoniul construit nu privesc doar realitatea fizică. Așadar, subiectul depășește limitele cotidianului, translatându-se în spațiul virtual. Prin urmare, analiza studiului de caz prezentat propune o introspecție în modul în care arhitectura este construită, experimentată sau trăită în viața virtuală. „Second Life” este un astfel de exemplu. În consecință, articolul se va concentra asupra conceptului de monument, care a fost definit anterior, dar care, acum, pare să își depășească propriile limite, necesitând o redefinire, astfel încât sensul său să devină mai cuprinzător, transgresând în mediul virtual.

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1. The Monument. A Cultural Framework for Studying Its Mechanism

From a psychological point of view, a culture, its environment, and the individual's behaviour are closely interwoven. According to Burrhus Frederic Skinner [1, p. 419], “*in the broadest possible sense the culture into which an individual is born is composed of all the variables affecting him which are arranged by other people. The social environment is in part the result of those practices of the group which generate ethical behaviour and of the extension of these practices to manners and customs.*” Thus, there is a very complex *mechanism*, which governs all aspects of the individual's life as well as aspects of social culture. For example, Skinner notes that the individual gains from the group “*an extensive repertoire of manners and customs*” [1, p. 415], in addition to the boundaries imposed by *ethical behaviour*. Practically, the community has already labelled every feature, behaviour or action, as being “right” or “wrong”; consequently, issuing reinforcements for appropriate conducts and social performances and penalties for those which are disapproved. But what determines the group to act like this, “protesting” against the individual?

As Skinner highlights [1, p. 417], one of the most cited examples is to demonstrate that a certain odd behaviour was previously justified by a specific set of environmental, social, historical and / or geographical conditions. For instance, when discussing food categories – namely “good” or “bad” – the evaluation process bases itself on distinguishing between eatable / uneatable, appealing / unappealing, toxic / nontoxic foods. Thus, a child who attempts to eat “bad” food receives the powerful criticism of the group. “*‘Good’ and ‘bad’ foods are eventually specified in ethical, religious, or governmental codes*”, as Skinner remarks. [1, p. 417] From an evolutionary point of view, this evaluation follows a three-stage mechanism.

First, for example, a “bad” food can become “safe”, due to one of these factors: the change of environmental, climate and living conditions, or the change of culinary customs reflected by cooking or preserving foodstuffs. Nevertheless, such alterations of the initial criteria might not affect the original food categories. Secondly, the categories might lose their primary purpose or justifications, failing to provide the group an explanation for why a certain food is good or bad. Thirdly, the classification might intensify the confusion if the group has already reassigned a new explanation to its original reasoning.

Following this chain of thoughts, in the case of Jewish culture, we may identify examples of similar mechanisms, functioning based on the idea that an individual must be accepted by a group in which it is customary to obey a very specific type of behaviour – a cultural feature of this particular group. For instance, in their pursue to build an independent and identity way of living, while sharing the same ideals and fate, Jews invented *the shtetl* – a template of communitarian cohabitation, which developed throughout the centuries, discarding its origins and refining itself into an original and specific urban formula (of a small town or of a borough): “*it is built on the same social structures, contains the same impulses and resources, the same attachment to a collective destiny both dark and glorious. In other words, in its broad outlines, the shtetl is one and the same everywhere.*” [2, p. 293] The values of the shtetl were conserved, regardless of its location or living conditions. Throughout time, the shtetl consolidated itself as a unitary and autonomous entity (“*the shtetl enjoyed an independence which bordered on autonomy*”) [3, p. 9], each individual's position being shaped in direct relation to Judaism, through “*the strength of shtetl self-criticism.*” [4, p. 426] Thus, each of the community's members and every aspect of their lives are part of the shtetl – seen as a “system” coordinated by the Judaic Law, which was only perfected by the passing of time and historical constraints, thus permanently strengthening its cohesion and power wielded upon the Jews: “*in the closely knit community, where each is responsible for all and all are responsible for each, privacy is neither known nor*

desired. Everyone is subject to inspection and criticism, everyone is free to inspect and criticize. The strongest sanction is public opinion, the highest reward is public approval. [...] And it is the will of the people that implements the ruling of the rabbi in his court. [...] The only absolute authority is the spirit of the Torah." [4, pp. 421-422] Each member of the community used to find their place within its structure, regardless of their occupation or task: "*in the shtetl the Jew could be himself – a member of a community.*" [3, p. 9] In this type of community, the power exercised by the group, its reinforcements and penalties weigh so much that Elie Wiesel, recalling the behaviour of the Jews in a shtetl, states: "*a Jew from the shtetl thinks of other Jews even after leaving the shtetl – even when the shtetl ceased to exist. In the shtetl, the Jew felt that the entire world was looking upon him, and passing judgment on his actions.*" [2, p. 293]

2. The Monument. A Cultural Survival Practice

As Skinner remarks, a culture is basically made up of a wide range of factors, previously chosen and developed by others, and which now coordinates all aspects of an individual's life. Moreover, the social environment itself might be understood as being the result of the same practices of the group, which also generate appropriate conducts and social performances, and which, in the end, develop into (arbitrary) habits, traditions, and customs. [1, p. 419]

Furthermore, as Skinner shows [1, p. 430], in certain aspects, the mechanisms of a cultural group resemble the natural process of selection of evolutionary theory. Just as certain genetic features develop / evolve or decline / degenerate, the behaviour of the members of a group is reinforced or discarded off through penalties. However, there is another type of selection: either by accident, or by design – be it a habit, a tradition, a custom or a controlling and / or mnemonic device. [5; 6] Thereupon, Skinner notes: "*cultural practices which are advantageous will tend to be characteristic of the groups which survive and which therefore perpetuate those practices. Some cultural practices may therefore be said to have survival value, while others are lethal in the genetic sense.*" [1, p. 430]

From this point of view, there is a very eloquent example in Jewish culture. For Jews, "the community" can be understood as "an extended family": sometimes implying the meaning of "congregation", as a form of social-religious organization (including several families of Jews, who might be related), gathered around a synagogue, while, in other situations, implying the body formed by these "congregations." In close relationship to the concept of "extended family", there is a term called *eruv*, which designates a special spatial unity (connected to the concept of possession) and which is related to the life of a group. The *eruv* is valid only during the Shabbat and Yom Kippur, representing an abstraction of the dogma adjusted to the circumstances and constraints of the Diaspora. Basically, the *eruv* symbolises the space of a Jewish community, a "common possession" – including public spaces and even non-Jewish properties. It is enclosed by imaginary "walls", inside which Orthodox, Conservative or Traditionalist Jews can move around, during these special days, while carrying with them certain things (especially food for the holyday meal, their keys, particular garments, etc.), small children or pushing baby strollers, "activities" otherwise forbidden. As a term, *eruv* means "mixture" and hints to the food (anything else besides water and salt; usually a whole loaf of bread) which the community (a group of Jews) bring together, in order to symbolically unite their properties – "*it is food that is the essential element for this most Jewish idea of creating space, even while the food collected for the eruv stays in a synagogue or other central location, and is not consumed.*" [11, p. 302] This socio-religious and spatial mechanism is at least two thousand years old, but there are opinions which claim that it dates back to King Solomon's time. The interdiction stated by the Shabbat Laws refers to *the bearing* of objects, things, food, or even children, from a private space into a public one and vice versa, or beyond a certain boundary of the public space – where

the notion of public (open, exterior space) and private (enclosed, interior space; the home) are mainly concerned with the character of the space, and not necessarily to its legal status. Throughout time, the eruv has suffered successive reinterpretations, complying with different rabbinical views. Beginning with the Middle Ages, in the cities of the Diaspora, the walls of the ghetto or, in some cases, the whole defensive curtain wall represented the symbolic boundaries of the eruv, thus, the Jews could move around within these limits, while still obeying the dogma. In other circumstances, when respecting certain requirements, several Jewish houses, sharing common courtyards, could form an eruv. Nowadays, with the consent of the local authorities, the role of the former defensive walls has been taken by metallic wires, stretched out between lighting poles or other types of support for certain urban network cables, by embankments, or by building walls, thus forming symbolic boundaries, inside of which Jews can move around according to the ritual. Moreover, the “openings” between the pillars, which are thus “united”, stand for the doorways of the “wall” enclosing the eruv. [12, pp. 484-485]. Despite the fact that before the Second World War, the eruvs (or *eruvim*) were widely encountered in Central and Eastern European countries, now, in Europe, there are only a few functional ones left – the most significant being in Antwerp, Amsterdam, and Paris. In the contemporary context, Manuel Herz concisely defines both on a conceptual as well as on a pragmatic level the significance of the eruv: “as the typical architectonic and urbanistic response to the condition of Diaspora [...] The eruv as an urban space can be described as containing a minimum of ‘Jewishness’ in a maximum of space.” [13, p. 49]

As we have previously shown, from this point of view, culture is a form of employing control upon the individual and, implicitly, both upon the manner in which they relate to space and upon the manner in which they *conceive* their space. Most often, the individuals end up revoking their own psychological comfort, in order to keep and obey cultural norms. Of course, the built environment plays an important role in the larger topic of the behavioural mechanism of the group. Within this discourse, *the monument* is a distinctive case. A loose definition of the monument would be that it is a space which the group decides to preserve as a memory of a certain behaviour, practice, event, lifestyle, or any other characteristic which defines the core of the group from a social, historical, or cultural point of view. [7, p. 156; 8, pp. 7, 8]

3. The Monument. A Cultural Survival Value

Returning to Skinner’s parallel to the theory of evolution, the monument, seen as a mnemonic environment, can be understood as a tactic of survival of behaviours, habits, traditions, and customs. Paraphrasing Michel de Certeau [9, pp. 122-137], one could argue that *the monument* is an invention, an incredibly dynamic heterogeneous entity. As a group develops and evolves, its culture is permanently sabotaged, eroded, by contemporary social practices, thus, the monument becomes an island of tradition, a “*sailing vessel*” [10, p. 185], isolated from everyday change.

Just as cultural practises or behaviours are strained because the group acknowledges their survival value, monuments have a crucial role in the life of a community, precisely because, beside their value as a mnemonic device of behaviours, habits, traditions, and customs, they have also the ability to adapt themselves, constantly improvising a new meaning – as they are, what Michel Foucault calls, “*crisis heterotopias*”. [10]

In the case of Jewish culture, there is a spectacular example of a spatial typology, which is at the same time a mnemonic device, an active communitarian space, and sometimes even a monument – a *true heterotopia*. *The synagogue* represents the image of the Diaspora, seen as the sum of Jewish communities and congregations, gathered around a polarizing nucleus, which through its symbolical value, unites them in spirit, constantly supporting them in order to ensure their

continuity and, at the same time, to offer them the possibility to organize and conduct the ritual according to their tradition, until the prophecy of the new Temple is fulfilled. As *an institution of faith*, the Temple of Solomon is *a utopia*. However, the synagogue could be defined, as opposed to the concept of the Temple, as being a heterotopia, namely one of the places “*utterly different from all the emplacements that they reflect or refer to*” and which they evoke. [10, p. 178] Between them there is the cult and the Torah, “*a kind of mixt, intermediate experience*” [10, p. 178]. According to Foucault’s definition of the heterotopia, *synagogues* can be identified as being: “*real places, actual places, places that are designed into the very institution of society, which are sorts of actually realized utopias in which the real emplacements, all the other real emplacements that can be found within the culture are, at the same time, represented, contested, and reversed, sorts of places that are outside all places, although they are actually localizable.*” [10, p. 178] The synagogue is a special (identitary) symbol of the Jewish presence in the space of the Diaspora, but at the same time it is also a sign of “communitarian” spirit (a mark of the communitarian life), of communal living, of mutual respect and understanding, of togetherness. The synagogue, *as a crisis heterotopia*, is the true symbol of Jewish life in the Diaspora, of Jewish history, as well as of Jewish continuity, of a space in between sacred and profane, of ritual space which exists literally as well as metaphorically *outside time*. The synagogue represents a hidden link between architecture and community, seen not as a simple way of gathering the “same” kind of people, but as a connection among them and the beliefs, expectations, thoughts, motivations that they share, alongside their behaviour, the values that they cherish, and their life philosophy. Although, in Central and Eastern European contemporary society, synagogues are most often highly touristic objectives, sometimes even functioning as museums, landmarks of Jewish life and heritage in the Diaspora, as a symbol, besides their fundamental role and sometimes deprived of their former glory, values, and meanings, continue, however, to constantly and faithfully maintain, wherever they might be located, their original, intrinsic spiritual meaning. Nowadays, the synagogue, *as a crisis heterotopia*, is yet another *means of escape* from repression and hostility, representing *the ultimate refuge for the Jewish community and its specific life principles* – from a mental point of view it is *the Arc of salvation*, an ideal heterotopia, which *floated* and still *floats*, surviving its unfavourable history, sometimes even through its absence. [14] Frequently, the sites where synagogues have been demolished or destroyed, remain as open wounds (sometimes physical ones and other times just spiritual ones) in the lives of contemporary cities. The attempts of reconstruction, reconstitution, or remembrance aim only at keeping alive this *presence through absence* – e.g. Berlin (*Jüdisches Gemeindehaus Fasanenstraße*, 1958-1959, *Fasanenstraße Synagoge*, on its former site including remains of the historical synagogue), Munich (*Jüdisches Zentrum Jakobsplatz*, 2004-2007, close by the site of the former main synagogue of the city), Mainz (*Jüdisches Gemeindezentrum Mainz*, 2008-2010, on the site of the former *Hindenburgstraße Synagoge*, suggestively renamed *Synagogenplatz*).

“*In front of the monument [...] one is what one believes in, what one worships, what one commemorates, not as an inalienable individual, but as a member of a community which shares the same values.*” [15, p. 147] Ciprian Mihali’s observation is important, because, for a group, the monument possesses a mnemonic role, but which has no longer to do with everyday behaviour actions or customs; instead, in this instance, it has an *ideological* mnemonic function. It is representative, on a conceptual level, assimilating “*layers of significance which help to determine and preserve the cultural identity*”. [16, p. 117] Thus the monument is essential in constructing a group identity, providing credibility and authenticity. Further on, Mihali states that “*the original significance of the monument does not survive the generation who built it, the next ones usually end up endowing it with their own requirements and political interests*” [15, p. 161] – therefore, the monument can be seen as palimpsest of group identity. [8, p. 10]

4. The Monument. A Tactic of Cultural Survival in Virtual Reality

On the other hand, contemporary society, under the impulse of globalization, seconded by an ever growing crisis of identity [16, p. 116], is tempted to “*monumentify*”, to “*museify*”, and to list as heritage any “*artefact which is out of production*”, which, through the trivialization of its recognised meaning, inevitably leads to “*the predictable end of the historical monument*”. [16, pp. 35-37, 115-117] However, the issues raised by the concept of monument and the questions of the built heritage are not only matters regarding the physical reality. Consequently, the topic might surpass the boundaries of the everyday, transgressing into virtual space.

The exploitation of *Jewish cultural heritage* and *Jewish world*, through ample cultural projects, which imply the use of the Internet, several types of databases, and digital archives, is seconded by peculiar and unprecedented processes of creation of “virtual communities”, where the “communitarian space” is provided by the Internet. This presupposes the initiation of “virtual worlds” and, most recently, the fabrication of “a phenomenon” called *Second Life* – “*The largest-ever 3D virtual world created entirely by its users*”. [17] It practically offers “another life”, similar or completely different to the one which one lives, as well as the possibility of socialising differently than the experience of other social networking services such as “hi5”, “Facebook”, “Twitter”, “Google +”, etc. Thus, the Jewish world drifted into the virtual, establishing the “Jewish virtual world” – which is quickly becoming a way of storing data and exchanging information, exploring and exploiting everything that has to do with Jewish culture and identity, of course on a digital level. The virtual museum, photo archives, scanned documents and books, which can be accessed on-line or downloaded, are already outdated: *now, even the Jewish life is endowed with a virtual component*.

Through definition, *Second Life* (launched in 2003 and counting up to now over 20 million users) is a virtual “place”, “a virtual online world” (based on 3D animations), in which life has the same coordinates, the only difference being that everything is imagined, virtual. In other words, one can reinvent themselves, using an avatar, thus being able to be anyone, to socialise with anyone, to culturalise oneself, to travel anywhere, to become famous, to sell or buy properties, to do business – basically, anything one might wish, being offered a wide variety of blogs, forums, groups, the opportunity to connect to one or more virtual communities. [17]

However, there remains the question of *ethnic identity*. Julian Voloj provides an answer in his article on the emergence of a Jewish community in *Second Life*. [18] In 2006, the *Temple Beth Israel* synagogue was “created”, at random. First, the Torah Scrolls were “created”, using textures downloaded from the Internet – instead of the already existing ones, but which were considered to be unsatisfactory and whose origin remains unknown. Then, the Holy Ark (Aron Kodesh), in which the Torah Scrolls are kept, was “created” and, finally, the synagogue itself, which is also known as *The Second Life Synagogue*. Thus, this is the “*foundation myth*” of “*the first Jewish space in Second Life*”. The community grew and evolved, through the creation of other several facilities and specific building types, mainly grouped in the two Jewish neighbourhoods, which emerged: synagogues, community centres, ritual baths, museums, art galleries, cafés, and more are to follow. In 2007, *Second Life* was the first “virtual community” to establish “a Jewish community”. Meanwhile, other websites became available; thus *the story goes on*. [19]

The building types which emerged in *Second Life* thoroughly replicate the needs and functions of the real life. For example, the *Temple Beth Israel*, the first synagogue built in *Second Life*, is a liberal one, and it hosts several facilities, which play an important role for the community, including a room for the study and discussion of the Torah. Next to it, there is another synagogue, which belongs to the Orthodox Jewish community. However, there are certain features which are attributable to the existence in virtual space. For instance, *Temple Beth Israel* has at its entrance five panels, which display five different time zones (from the United States of America, Europe, and Israel) – thus, even the ritual of lighting of the candles is in accordance with the correct time zone.

Interestingly, Mihali's theoretical construct, according to which, as time passes, the monument means more to the group than to the individual, can be translated also to a discussion regarding the difference between real and virtual "monuments". Namely, virtual environments impregnated with meanings are not build only by individuals, but by institutional entities, as well. For example, *the US Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C.*, created a virtual counterpart entitled *the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Second Life* – which displays not only a permanent collection, but also organises temporary thematic exhibitions, events, and other commemorative acts, dedicated to its virtual users.

Being one of the several major real life groups with a strong cultural character, the Jewish culture has found an unusual means of preserving and continuing its behaviours, habits, traditions, and customs. The virtual environment proofs itself to be "the ultimate preservation method". However, as Skinner remarks, "*since survival always presupposes competition, if only with the inanimate environment, it does not appear to define a 'good' culture in the absence of competition. There appears to be no way in which we can test the survival value of a culture in vacua to determine its absolute goodness. Conversely, the temporary survival of a culture is no proof of its goodness. All present cultures have obviously survived, many of them without very great change for hundreds of years, but this may not mean that they are better cultures than others which have perished or suffered drastic modification under more competitive circumstances. The principle of survival does not permit us to argue that the status quo must be good because it is here now.*" [1, p. 431-432]

5. The Monument. Beyond Reality

Regarding the symbolical dimension of this possibly *new monument* (the *Temple Beth Israel*, also known as *The Second Life Synagogue*), one could conclude by underlining that its religious character is subordinate to its social and symbolic one, while the aspect of the "building" is not a mark of its durability, but of a "*will to last*" [15, p. 148] – it is *the first synagogue built in Second Life* –, thus its label of "monument" is initiated.

Mihali defines *the monument* as "*the expression of the continuity of a community and its will to resist the avatars of the present and the future*" [15, p. 148]. As a "monument", the *Temple Beth Israel*, symbol of Jewish life in virtual reality, as a focal point of the virtual Jewish community's existence, as the centre of religious, social, and cultural (virtual) life, becomes, as Mihali paraphrases Henri Lefebvre from *La production de l'espace*, "*the metaphorical and metonymical bearer of a territory and of a society 'across a game of substitution in which the religious and the political symbolically (ceremonially) interchange their attributes, the ones of power: thus, the force of the sacred and the sacred of the force substitute and strengthen each other*". [15, p. 154]

Thus, the complex problem of the Jewish Diaspora, which exceeds the quantifiable values regarding its life and identity, has provided the opportunity to develop a virtual "built" environment, which could eventually raise the question of "preserving" such a *virtual heritage* – for example, the first synagogue to be built in "Second Life". Would the synagogue still have the same strength and the same sacral, social, and symbolical value, as the one granted through its presence?

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