A DIPLOMA JOURNEY/

Astrid Rottman - *"Ion Mincu" University of Architecture and Urban Planning, Bucharest, Romania.*
Diana Pascu - *Sapienza University of Rome, Italy*

astridrottman@yahoo.com

Abstract. A city is more than the sum of its physical spaces; it is a repository of individual and collective memory. As Italo Calvino beautifully stated, a city consists of *"the relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past"*. Infused with our emotions and experiences, the spaces we live in become the places of our existence. Endowed with meaning, these locis are where our lives, social relationships and cultural practices are rooted. Based on a theoretical concept belonging to Professor Augustin Ioan -, a term that refers to those sites that already contain heritage information about their past, unfortunately hidden in the present and still waiting to be retold, we initiated, for the UAUIM Diploma Session 2024, a collective student research project that recalls an area of the former Jewish quarter of Bucharest. Starting from the memory of the sites and the generative element of the study - the Beth Hamidras Synagogue - the project proposes an urban intervention that brings together a series of buildings (mostly architectural monuments located along Calea Moșilor) in a possible pedestrian route that will reactivate the Jewish quarter and that will today host functions appropriate for such a central area. Given the advanced state of disrepair of the buildings, the project starts with their restoration and also proposes a series of architectural interventions that will integrate them into the socio-cultural context of the city. The pedestrian route, detailed by specific morphological elements, will be the main element to coagulate the public interest in the area. The paper will focus on our one-year research journey, from the first moments spent on-site to the final Diploma Project defense (July 2024). Our architectural experience is described as an emotional and thought-provoking process that we went through together—tutor and students—not only to rehabilitate a part of Bucharest's heritage but also to unveil its hidden, silent memory.

Introduction. In Non-Referential Architecture — a text conceived by Valerio Olgiati and written by Markus Breitschmid — it is stated: *"the purpose of a building is to encourage people to think"*, *"it is best to understand the building as an object that makes people creative"*, and the building *"helps its occupant to construct sense"* [1] in what they undertake. Therefore, we can conclude that the thinking and creativity of people living in meaningful buildings bring added value, contributing to global development and evolution of our world. This could be one of the simplest yet most meaningful tasks of contemporary architecture.

Architectural education produces the future creators of such spaces. Teaching architecture is about cultivating deep conceptual thinking, pushing boundaries, and fostering creativity in design. Moreover, one of the biggest challenges of a diploma project is developing an original solution to a real-world architectural problem. The design must go beyond mere functionality, striving to be innovative, visually striking, and seamlessly integrated into its context.

Based on a theoretical concept that belongs to Professor Augustin Ioan - texterritories, a term that refers to those sites that already contain heritage information about their past, unfortunately hidden in the present but still waiting to be retold" [2] we initiated, for the UAUIM Diploma Session 2024, a collective student research project that recalls an area of the former Jewish quarter of Bucharest.

Revival of Historic Jewish quarters. Jewish quarters in Central European cities were historically vibrant centres of Jewish life, rich in cultural, religious, and social significance. However, the devastation of the Holocaust nearly obliterated the Jewish population in the region, leaving behind empty synagogues, cemeteries, and cultural sites. Under communist rule, the remnants of Jewish heritage were largely neglected. Many of these areas fell into disrepair, with buildings repurposed for non-religious uses or left abandoned. The suppression of religious expression by communist authorities further contributed to the erasure of Jewish cultural identity in the urban landscape.

After 1989, the collapse of communism opened up opportunities for cultural and historical projects that had previously been suppressed. Democratic governments began to recognize the importance of Jewish heritage as part of the broader cultural fabric of Central Europe. Since the early 1990s, there has been a growing focus on Holocaust memory and its historical sites, contributing to this renewed engagement. Numerous museums, festivals, and commercial venues have started to highlight lost Jewish traditions, making this heritage increasingly visible in urban landscapes. In many cities, Jewish religious and secular culture is now recognized as an integral part of local and national heritage, history, and identity, even in places where Jewish communities have dwindled or disappeared entirely.

The Kazimierz district in Kraków is one of the most notable examples. Once a centre of Jewish life, it fell into disrepair after the Holocaust and during the communist era. Starting in the 1990s, significant efforts were made to rehabilitate the area, restoring synagogues, museums, and cultural centres. The town was established in 1335 as a separate area from Kraków, initially not as a Jewish district. Jews were invited to settle here after being expelled from Kraków in 1495. Divided into two main parts — the Christian section to the north and the Jewish district to the south — by the late 15th and 16th centuries, the town became an essential centre for Jewish life, with many synagogues, study houses, and other public institutions being built. The district was incorporated into Kraków in the 19th century, leading to urban modernization, such as the building of new roads and squares.

The houses in Kazimierz were typically narrow and deep, reflecting the original medieval urban fabric. Many featured arcaded courtyards, with ground floors used for shops and workshops, while the upper floors served as residences. Public mikvahs (baths) were essential communal buildings. The district also housed numerous yeshivas (Jewish schools), hospitals, and charity houses, often built in a functional style to meet the community's needs. During World War II, the Jewish community of Kraków was decimated. After the war, Kazimierz fell into disrepair, with many buildings abandoned or poorly maintained. In the early 1990s, Kazimierz was considered the slum of the city.

Since the fall of communism in Poland, there has been significant interest in reviving Kazimierz's Jewish heritage. Major efforts have been made to restore and preserve synagogues, cemeteries, and historical buildings. The Old Synagogue now functions as a museum, showcasing the history of Kraków's Jews, while the Tempel Synagogue hosts concerts and cultural events. The Jewish Culture Festival in Kraków has become an annual event that attracts visitors from around the world. Today, Kazimierz is a vibrant district blending its Jewish heritage with a modern cultural scene. It has become a popular area for locals and tourists, featuring numerous cafes, art galleries, and cultural centres. It serves as a poignant reminder of the once-thriving Jewish life in Kraków, even though there is no substantial ethnic community to represent it.

While Kazimierz has experienced a cultural and tourist-driven renaissance, the Jewish Quarter in Bucharest is still in the process of rediscovery and far for its restoration. The two districts illustrate different paths of urban development and cultural preservation, shaped by their unique historical experiences and the impacts of WWII and subsequent political regimes.

The Jewish Quarter of Bucharest was a residential area situated on the left bank of the Dâmbovița River, with its central axis along Calea Văcărești and the beginning of Calea Dudești. During the interwar period, the Jewish community constituted the largest ethnic minority in the city.

The first documented mention of Jews in Bucharest dates back to 1550, when records list eight Jewish individuals, two of whom were noted as shop owners. The oldest part of the Jewish Quarter is believed to be the Popescu District (Mahalaua Popescului), located around the Sfântul Gheorghe area. By 1798, this district housed 155 dwellings.

The first synagogue in Bucharest was built during the reign of Constantin Brâncoveanu, but in 1715, Prince Șerban Cantacuzino ordered its destruction and banned the practice of Jewish religious ceremonies. The synagogue was eventually rebuilt after Prince Nicolae Mavrogheni restored religious rights to the Jewish community in 1787.

Following the Great Fire of 1847, the Jewish residential area expanded southeastward, extending to the Văcărești-Dudești area and along Calea Moșilor. After the unification of the Romanian Principalities in 1859, the Jewish population grew significantly. Ashkenazi Jews from Moldavia (originating from Poland and Galicia) settled near the Sephardic Jews along streets such as Sf. Vineri, Văcărești, Udricani, Mircea Vodă, Anton Pann, and the beginning of Calea Dudești. In the latter half of the 19th century, dozens of synagogues were built, mostly around Calea Văcărești.

The architectural style of Jewish homes introduced a new layout: dual-purpose buildings serving both residential and commercial needs. These structures typically featured a storefront on the ground floor or in the front rooms, with living spaces at the back. The built heritage of the Jewish community also included schools, synagogues, social institutions such as asylums and hospitals, and luxurious bank buildings owned by affluent Jewish families. During the interwar period, Bucharest's architectural landscape was strongly influenced by avant-garde works by Marcel Iancu and the modernist designs of Jewish architects like Marcel Maller, Rudolf Frankel, Jean Monda, Isak Mahler, Herman Clejan, and Boris Zilberman.

In the 1930s, census data indicated that Bucharest was home to approximately 70,000 Jews, a number that swelled to 140,000 during World War II due to an influx of refugees. Between 1938 and 1944, the Jewish population faced severe antisemitic legislation, leading to widespread loss of rights and social exclusion. Jewish properties were confiscated, professional practices were banned, and Jewish students were barred from universities and schools.

During the communist era, the Jewish Quarter was marginalized and neglected in terms of infrastructure and real estate investment. After the 1977 earthquake, the area became a target of Nicolae Ceaușescu's aggressive urban restructuring policies, resulting in extensive demolitions during the 1980s. This transformation erased much of the original architecture and drastically altered the street network.

Many synagogues were destroyed due to various historical events: some were set ablaze during the 1941 Legionnaire Rebellion, others were damaged in the 1977 earthquake, and still others were demolished under the communist regime in the 1980s. Today, only six synagogues remain in Bucharest, with just two still functioning as places of worship, representing the surviving architectural heritage of the Jewish community. Currently, the Jewish population in Bucharest is estimated at around 2,000, primarily elderly individuals, most of whom are retirees.

Calea Moșilor, previously known as Podul Târgului din Afară (The Outer Market Bridge), has been one of Bucharest's most important thoroughfares since its early days, even before the city's official founding. This road was part of a major trade route that connected the city to the eastern parts of the country, passing through Moldavia and reaching as far as Lviv (Lvov), as well as leading to the old ports of Galați and Brăila.

Podul Târgului din Afară began near the Royal Court, in the area known as Piața Sf. Anton, similar to other royal roads (Podul Uliței Mari, Podul Calicilor, Podul Beilicului). It led to the market outside the city, where Bucharest's animal fair took place. As the market was relocated to various locations (eventually to the current Obor area), Calea Moșilor gradually expanded eastward. The importance of this road can be seen in the Purcel (1789) and Ernst (1791) maps, where it stands out as the most densely built of all Bucharest's radial roads, a vibrant commercial artery filled with shops, taverns, and inns. It is no coincidence that in 1825, this road became the first paved street in Bucharest and had one of the first electric tram lines (1894-1899), connecting Obor Square to Sf. Gheorghe Nou Square and Cotroceni.

The changes between 1936 and 1943, following the adoption of the "*Bucharest Urban Planning Master Plan*" of 1936, extended Colței Street, which became I.C. Brătianu Boulevard, reaching the square at the foot of the Mitropolie Hill. This extension affected the cohesion of the old commercial centre of the city, splitting it in two on either side of the boulevard. Expropriations and demolitions led to the disappearance of many shops and stores. The completion of the final section of this new artery, between Sf. Gheorghe Square and Unirii Square, inaugurated on November 27, 1943, had a modernizing but also destructive effect. Some streets disappeared, while others were shortened (Gabroveni, Șepcari, Bărăției, Carol, etc.), disrupting the connection between Sf. Anton Square and Calea Moșilor.

Unfortunately, the war and the communist era halted the natural restructuring and development of the area. The systematization projects of the 1970s led to its decline. Between 1978 and 1983, part of it was demolished and widened, with old houses being replaced by 8-10 story apartment blocks. In contrast, the portion where buildings escaped demolition was neglected and fell into ruin. Altered built heritage, dysfunctions in property usage, and large unused residual spaces caused the accelerated degradation of this part of Bucharest's historic centre, which continued even after 1989.

Texterritories. Between 53 Calea Moșilor and Sfânta Vineri Street. Our diploma journey started last October, with a simple walking tour along Calea Mosilor. Liana Gavrilă, one of the students knew that somewhere in the area, hidden between the trees, there is a small abandoned synagogue.

The synagogue built in 1830 have an interesting history, but the most remarkable fact is that during the Bucharest pogrom (January 1941) it was burned and almost completely destroyed. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that among the 125 victims of the Bucharest pogrom, 11 people lived in the area near the synagogue.

Based on the historical significance of the site, we decided to develop a project that proposes an urban intervention. This initiative connects six buildings, mostly architectural monuments, into a potential pedestrian route aimed to revitalizing the Jewish quarter. The route, characterized by unique morphological features, is designed to draw public interest to the area. By integrating passages through buildings and interior gardens reminiscent of old Bucharest, the project aim to establish an alternative pedestrian path, away from the heavy car traffic on Calea Moșilor.

Considering the advanced state of disrepair of the buildings, the project began with their restoration and also includes a series of architectural interventions to reintegrate them into the city's socio-cultural fabric.

The first site is located at 53 Calea Moșilor. *"Unfinished Section Studio"*, Andra Urzică's proposal, focuses on the adaptive reuse of an abandoned, unfinished structure - a modern ruin - built in 1996. Rather than demolishing the building or allowing it to deteriorate further, the project aims to embrace its incomplete state as an opportunity for creative freedom and growth. The project offers a thoughtful critique of the modern obsession with completion and perfection, suggesting instead that unfinished spaces—like unfinished ideas—are ripe with potential. [3]

"As I began researching for my thesis, I quickly realized this wouldn't be a typical project. This building symbolized a larger movement, and I knew I had to explore the concept of a modern ruin. This discovery launched me on an incredible journey, not just to design a structure but to rethink how we might reinvent spaces deemed unworthy of attention. In the end, I feel I've grown, not just as a designer but as a person. This journey took me through every stage of the learning process—excitement, fear, frustration, satisfaction, and joy. I wouldn't change a thing. It taught me that even though the path may be difficult, hard work, perseverance, and the support of my professor and colleagues, can lead to personal and creative growth." Arch. Int. Andra Urzică

The second building, located at 84 Calea Moșilor and historically known as Neculescului Inn, has a rich architectural and historical background. Built in 1817, the building has undergone significant transformations in its function and appearance over time. Mădălina Rizon's proposal is to convert this historical structure into a Cultural Center with a multimedia hall in the basement—an excellent way to preserve its legacy while giving it a new, modern role. [4]

"For me, the course of the project was an experience marked by strong emotions. The beginning was filled with uncertainty, but the confidence we had in the project pushed us to find solutions. As we progressed, we encountered both challenges and moments of joy, and the emotional investment in the project brought us closer, creating a bond that went beyond mere academic collaboration. Over these months, we learned important lessons together about perseverance, adaptability, and the importance of clear communication. The challenges we faced shaped our journey and taught us that success often comes from overcoming obstacles. Looking back, the experience was transformative, and this project became more than just an academic requirement; it was a profound journey of discovery, collaboration, and personal growth." Arch. Int. Mădălina Rizon

The next building, Gheorghief House, located at 82 Calea Moșilor, also has a fascinating history. Hrisov Gheorghief, its original owner, was a Bulgarian merchant who later became a prominent banker and co-founder of Bucharest's stock exchange. He built this house in 1867 as his residence. Diana Pascu envisioned a School of Fine Arts and Good Manners here, presenting an intriguing way to breathe new life into the building by linking its past with an educational and cultural future.

"I will never forget the day of our final presentation. After months of work, we gathered with our professor outside the university, feeling a deep sense of accomplishment. It wasn't just about presenting our findings - it was about the journey we had taken together, and the belief that our project had real potential. We had poured so much of ourselves into this work, and in that moment, it felt like we had achieved something meaningful. I genuinely believe that our project can serve as a source of inspiration for the rehabilitation of the area, and I hope, in some small way, we've left a lasting impact." Arch. Int. Diana Pascu

The most significant site, encompassing the synagogue building, the structure at 74 Calea Moșilor, and the adjacent parking area, has been transformed into the Bucharest Pogrom Memorial. A brief history of the Beth Hamidras Synagogue reveals its establishment in 1812, initially operating in a house basement before moving to a building donated by an elderly woman named Tanube. Constructed in 1830, the synagogue was destroyed in the Great Fire of 1847 but was rebuilt in the latter half of the 19th century. During the Legionary Rebellion, the synagogue was set on fire again, leading to its complete destruction. Tragically, 23 Jews attending a religious service were arrested and later executed in the Jilava Forest. The synagogue was restored in 1947 with a modified facade, but likely due to damage from the 1977 earthquake, it was converted into a warehouse in 1978. Today, the building remains closed to the public and is inaccessible for visits.As Liana Gavrilă points out, over time, urban gardens have become an integral part of Bucharest's built environment, serving as historical witnesses. These spaces should not be viewed as uncontrolled remnants but as areas with

potential—a void defined by its enclosures. This idea forms the foundation of her proposal, which reimagines such spaces not as empty voids waiting to be filled with meaning but as places enricWhed by the interactions and relationships of their users. (5)

"My desire to study this site began at the start of the academic year with a walk along Calea Moșilor, where I discovered the Beth Hamidras Synagogue. I didn't know what function I would approach, but I knew I wanted that site. What followed were weeks of research during which I experienced various emotions, primarily uncertainty.

It was the largest project I had undertaken in all my years of university, on a site that was quite difficult to manage, and for the first time, I started with no prior knowledge about it. Confidence came only very close to the end, when I started to see the results more clearly, and all the elements of the project began to come together. It was quite a long journey." Arch. Int. Liana Gavrilă

From the commemorative public space, a system of passages will lead to Stela Spătaru Square, a very intimate place, formerly the site of the Stela Church, which burned down in the great fire (1847). Here stands the House of Guilds, completed in 1862 by architect Luigi Lipizer. Irina Melinte proposed for this site a multicultural bookstore. Since the courtyard of the building is adjacent to the courtyard of the Coral Temple, we could consider, why not, a pedestrian passage between these two public spaces. (6)

"The development of the project was both rewarding and demanding. It required a careful balance between research and creativity, as well as a deep understanding of both the technical and cultural aspects of heritage conservation. Each step pushed me to grow professionally and personally.

I learned to navigate the difficulties inherent in working with historical buildings, adapting modern construction techniques to preserve and extend their lifespan while respecting the city's identity. In the end, what began as an experiment evolved into a deeply meaningful journey, a project that not only expanded my knowledge and skills but also strengthened my bond with a city. I am proud to be a part of." Arch. Int. Irina Melinte

Crossing Sfânta Vineri, we find ourselves at Baia de Fier Street, where another historical building monument awaits rehabilitation. This street was originally named Lazar after the famous Taica Lazar, a Jewish merchant of second-hand clothes who became a landmark for street vendors. Here Alina Alexandru want to propose a small commercial complex featuring recycled objects.

Conclusion. The communist period that followed the war amputated Bucharest's collective memory in two essential ways:

(a) the distortion of historical truth by erasing the notion of the Holocaust from the national historical chronology, and (b) the demolition, mutilation, or neglect of Bucharest's built heritage, particularly in the area of the former Jewish quarter. By the time of the 1989 Revolution, the city's collective memory was in a state of amnesia. Thus, our diploma project transcends the demands of a complex architectural proposal. Our urban intervention is meaningful not only because its concept, form, materiality, or spatial qualities align to create an experience that is logical, unique, and self-contained, but especially because its texterritories (Augustin Ioan's concept) gain materiality through TerriStories (a pedagogical approach that combines the exploration of spatial atmospheres with social-spatial inquiry through storytelling), a term introduced by Klaske Havik, professor at TU Delft University of Technology.(8)

The city is a vessel of memory. *"Like empty shells on the shore after the sea of living memory has receded"* (9), the spaces we pass through daily are silently waiting to reveal their stories—this time, through the architectural vision of the younger generation.

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More information about the projects (site memory, concept, design, technical details, etc.) can be accessed through the references listed in the bibliography.

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Figures.
FIGURE 1 – The multicultural rute
FIGURE 2 – A. Urzică, "Unfinished Section Studio" - interior perspective
FIGURE 3 – M. Rizon, "Revitalization of the Neculescu Inn" – courtyard perspective
FIGURE 4 – D. Pascu, "School of arts and good manners – Gheorghief House" - courtyard perspective
FIGURE 5 – L. Gavrila, "Memorial Museum of Bucharest Pogrom" - interior perspective
FIGURE 6 – I. Melinte, "The house with ogives" - interior perspective

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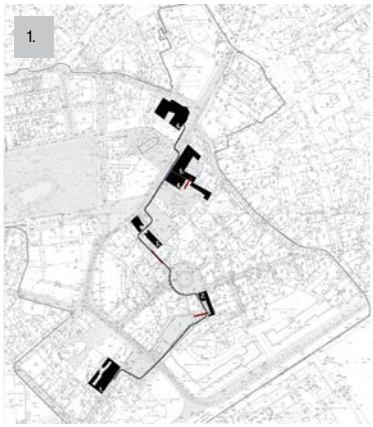

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