

Małgorzata Gonia

Institute of Art History, Adam Mickiewicz University Poznań, Poland
Corresponding author: Małgorzata Gonia, email: gonia.malgosia@gmail.com

The New Synagogue in Poznań. A Forgotten Legacy of the Jewish Community of Poznań?

Abstract: Poland is a country which features numerous sites associated with Jewish culture, including former synagogues. Many were rebuilt after World War II when they lost their religious function. Some of them remain undeveloped. A neglected site with an interesting history is the New Synagogue in Poznań, a living testimony to the history of the Jewish community of Poznań. This paper aims to present the New Synagogue, an example of a forgotten, non-utilised element of Jewish cultural heritage, that simultaneously has a potential tourist value. The research methods included desk research, field observation and a survey seeking the opinions of the New Synagogue from the inhabitants of Poznań. The outcomes imply that the synagogue's future is an important topic for the city residents. The respondents believe that the building if adapted for cultural purposes might add considerable value to the tourism offer of Poznań and reveal its multiculturalism, which is rarely highlighted these days.

Keywords: the New Synagogue, Poznań, Jews, cultural tourism, multiculturalism, Jewish heritage

1. Introduction

Before World War II, Poland was one of the biggest Jewish Diaspora in the world. The Jewish nation evolved and existed next to Poles since the 10th century. Approximately three million Jews lived here before 1939. Shoah, the mass murder perpetrated by the Third Reich, killed 90% of Polish Jews (Małkowska-Bieniek, 2009). In addition to taking many human lives, the Holocaust also destroyed a significant amount of Jewish material culture. Nonetheless, its traces, most generally termed the Judaica, have remained in Poland. Jewish cultural sites include religious and ritual buildings, cemeteries, and a variety of objects related to Jewish culture, such as objects of worship or objects related to daily life (Małkowska-Bieniek, 2009; Balińska, 2016; Corsale, 2021).

Poznań is a city featuring a rich history related to Jewish culture; yet, it is not often visited for this reason. Although the history of the Poznań Jews forms an important part of its

history, the Holocaust contributed to the collapse of the Jewish community and its material heritage. Since not many monuments have been preserved or they have been preserved in poor condition, the community's past splendour has faded from the common consciousness of residents (Muszyński and Bergman, 2006).

This paper focuses on the New Synagogue in Poznań. It is the only free-standing Jewish temple in the city that has survived to the present day. However, for 85 years it has not fulfilled its

original function, and its architecture has been vastly altered. The building poses a problem to the city authorities and the inhabitants of Poznań due to its difficult history. Simultaneously, it seems that its history makes it potentially an attractive site for cultural tourism.

The main purpose of this article is to find out what the inhabitants of Poznań think

about the New Synagogue. The research will answer questions about the significance of the site to the inhabitants of Poznań and their ideas and expectations regarding the future of the

building. The residents' opinions will let us know whether the New Synagogue could become a new, attractive site of value for the city.

2. Research area and methods

2.1. Research area

The object of research is the New Synagogue in Poznań, situated in the northern part of the Old Town, less than 300 metres away from the Poznań Town Hall, at the corner of Wroniecka Street and Stawska Street (Fig. 1). The

building was erected on the route of the main tourist and cultural walk of Poznań – the Royal-Imperial Route. A tramway line passes close to the northern wall of the building.



Figure 1. Location of the New Synagogue against the background of the buildings of the Old Town of Poznań (1 - The New Synagogue; 2 – Poznań Town Hall; 3 - The Holy Blood of Lord Jesus Church; 4 - Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Our Lady of Consolation Jesuit Monastery) (Source: own study based on field survey and Head Office of Geodesy and Cartography)

The New Synagogue was located in the former Jewish district partially overlapping with the Old Town. Its boundaries were delimited by the following streets: Żydowska,

Dominikańska, Kramarska, Małe Garbary, Stawna, Szewska, and Wroniecka. The district was a social and religious centre of the Jewish Community of Poznań from its foundation in

the mid-14th century until World War II. During that time, nearly 20 synagogues were built within the district (Stęszewska-Leszczyńska, 1992).

At the end of Wroniecka Street, looking to the north, there was the Wroniecka Gate – one

of the four gates to the medieval city of Poznań. Its proximity to the complex of synagogues provided the Jews with a convenient transport connection to the suburbs where they also used to live (Stęszewska-Leszczyńska, 1992).

2.2. Methods

At the concept stage, the methods of research concerning the New Synagogue as a forgotten element of Jewish cultural heritage and the multiculturalism of Poznań included desk research (analysing legacy data on Jewish heritage in Poland and Poznań; compiling and analysing information about the adaptation of former synagogues in Poland; analysing and using literature concerning the history and the present of the New Synagogue in Poznań).

During the empirical stage of the research, site observation allowed us to become familiar

with its present condition. We also used a diagnostic survey based on a self-designed questionnaire. The key issue was to evaluate the level of awareness of the New Synagogue among the residents of Poznań, their interest in the site and suggestions concerning its revitalisation.

The survey was conducted on 19 and 20 February 2024. The link to the questionnaire was posted on social media. Many inhabitants of Poznań responded. The research covered 481 correctly completed questionnaires.

3. Theoretical background

3.1. Former Synagogues as Jewish Heritage Tourism Sites

Jewish heritage tourism is a segment of cultural tourism, oriented at Jewish heritage (Sandri, 2013; Corsale, 2017; Jimber del Río et al., 2020; Bogan, 2022). Cultural tourism is a broadly understood term. A.M. von Rohrscheidt (2008) defines it as: “travelling whose main purpose is to bring participants into contact with monuments, ensembles and places officially and universally recognised as cultural heritage of the world, country or region”. M. Duda-Seifert (2016) found that, in connection with the recently growing interest in cultural tourism, more and more cities leverage various elements of their cultural heritage to create new tourism products. In Poland, the process of rediscovering the heritage of national and ethnic minorities commenced after the political system transformation and intensified after 1995,

when attention paid to various cultures, including Jewish culture, increased.

In many cities of Poland, the most common trace of Jewish heritage is synagogues [in Greek *synagōgē* means a 'gathering', 'congregation'; in Hebrew *bet ha-kneset* is a 'house of congregations'; the Polish terms denoting a synagogue are *bóznica* and *bożnica*, both meaning the 'House of God']. They are the centres of religious and social lives of the Jewish community, places where they teach and study Torah and gather for religious worship (<https://encyklopedia.pwn.pl/haslo/synagoga;4010140.html>). Most synagogues in Poland have been devastated and destroyed during World War II. The surviving buildings are usually not used as religious sites any longer. Some of them have been reconstructed and adapted to new uses (Olbińska, 2016). As

indicated by M. Gosztyła and K. Jandziś (2014), “the survival of monuments is largely associated with granting them utility features”. It also applies to synagogues, which, when adequately managed, now perform various functions. The revitalised facilities have a broad spectrum of functions – from adaptation to cultural, residential and even economic purposes (Trojnieł, 2012). After the war, many former synagogues were converted into museums, community centres, libraries, cinemas, concert halls and memorial rooms devoted to Jewish culture. Thanks to their educational and exhibition value, the converted and restored synagogues can become significant places on the cultural map of the city enriching the range of its tourist attractions.

The relationship between Polish Judaica such as former synagogues, and the development of cultural tourism was examined based on the findings of E. Małkowska-Bieniek (2009). The researcher paid attention to the potential of the Jewish heritage for tourism, indicating that Polish Judaica constitutes an attractive offer both for organised groups and individual tourists. Places such as Jewish cemeteries and former synagogues are highly attended. A flagship site, which, after revitalisation, became a peculiar 'tourist magnet', is the Old Synagogue located in the district of Kazimierz in Krakow,

listed by UNESCO. E. Małkowska-Bieniek (2009) reports that in 2008 it had over 86,000 visitors. L. Kozłowski (2013) found that, in 2012, this number was 120,000, which explicitly illustrates a growing interest in the site among tourists.

According to E. Małkowska-Bieniek (2009), cultural tourism associated with Jewish cultural heritage is mainly concentrated in the eastern and southern regions of Poland. Tourists seeking examples of Judaica do not often visit Greater Poland and Silesia. The stock-taking of synagogues in the Greater Poland region by I. Markuszewska (2013) demonstrated that out of 74 pre-war buildings only 38 have survived to date, and most of them are in an unsatisfactory condition. However, examples of revitalised sites, which contribute to the dissemination of Jewish culture and the development of cultural tourism associated with Jewish heritage, also exist in this area. It is worth mentioning the New Synagogue in Ostrów Wielkopolski, where, in 2011, Forum Synagoga was established, which has become a thriving centre of culture. Unfortunately, in Greater Poland, there are still many vacated and devastated buildings that used to be synagogues. Sometimes, the only source to learn about their former function is memorial plaques (Markuszewska, 2013). An example is the New Synagogue in Poznań.

3.2. The New Synagogue in Poznań – History and Present Status

The construction of the New Synagogue was an essential building project for the Jewish community of Poznań. Funded with their own money and donations, it was an expression of power. The fact that, due to land division, to build a new synagogue the municipality undertook the commitment to demolish the old synagogues located at Żydowska Street (building numbers 15-18), also testifies to the project's importance. The construction of the New Synagogue was the responsibility of the Berlin company Cremer & Wolfenstein,

selected by architecture tender. The consecration of the New Synagogue, which was recounted in many Polish and German newspapers, took place on 5 September 1907.

The Synagogue, next to the Poznań Cathedral, was the second biggest church in the city capable of accommodating from 1100 to 1200 faithful (Stęszewska-Leszczyńska, 1992). It was built from red brick, combining the neo-Mauritanian and neo-Roman styles (Fig. 2). The rich interior, and its monumental, sophisticated architecture made it one of the

most beautiful and impressive synagogues in Greater Poland and the most important Jewish temple in Poznań. Because of its size, the New Synagogue was an essential element of the city landscape. As indicated by T. Chrzanowski (1991), although the rules claim that

synagogues should be smaller than churches and their location should be less exquisite, thanks to the richness of their forms they often competed with significant city buildings such as churches, inns or town halls (Fig. 3).

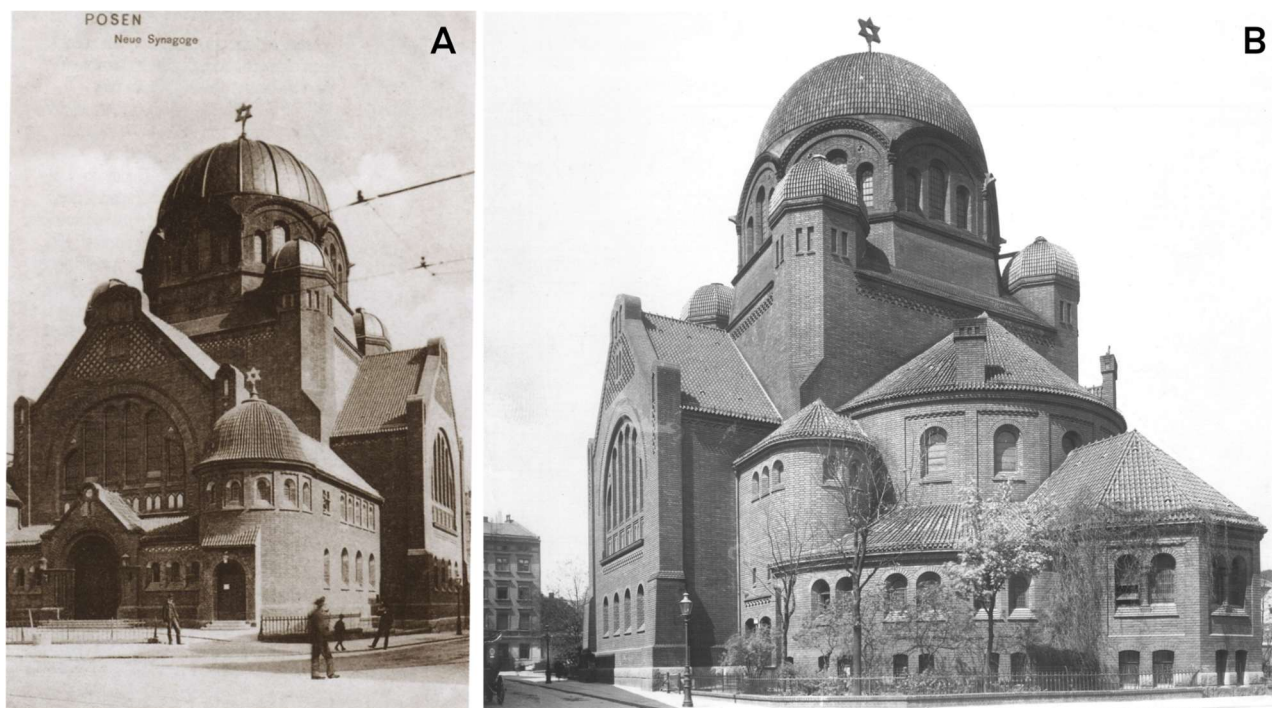


Figure 2. The New Synagogue: (A) the façade before 1940, (B) the apse before 1940. Source: <https://www.whitemad.pl/nowa-synagoga/>



Figure 3. A panoramic view of the Old Market Square looking to the north: (A) with the visible dome of the New Synagogue, (B) towards the Town Hall; the dome of the New Synagogue is visible in the background (Source: <https://cyryl.poznan.pl/tag-objektu/synagogi/>; <https://polona.pl/preview/f6c4dda9-9205-4f38-a249-9371c685ff8d>)

The lavish synagogue fulfilled its function for 32 years only. The last service was

celebrated on 9 September 1939, three days before the German Nazi army entered Poznań.

On 4 April 1940, the Nazis removed three Stars of David from the synagogue's domes and started converting the building into a swimming pool. The reconstruction destroyed the interior and deprived it of all sacredness. The body of the building was made simpler, the domes were dismantled, the windows and doors were rearranged, and the place that used to gather the faithful was turned into a swimming pool, which involved the demolition of the crucial part of the synagogue – the Torah ark (Aron Ha-Kodesh). The brick walls were covered with plaster.

Both, at the time of the Polish People's Republic and after the transformation, the site was still a city swimming pool eagerly attended by students from many schools of Poznań. The building was returned to the Jewish Community of Poznań on 6 May 2002. Representatives of the community desired to turn the former synagogue into the Centre for Dialogue and Judaism, but, due to insufficient funds, the intended adaptation was not put into effect and the building remained a city

swimming pool. The facility was closed in September 2011 because of its poor technical condition.

In 2019, the Jewish Community decided to sell the former synagogue to an entrepreneur from Lower Silesia, thus losing the future decision-making power (<https://www.architekturaibiznes.pl/ratujmy-synagoge-poznan-apel-skandal-dziedzictwo,27230.html>). Since that time, despite plans to convert the site into a hotel or residential building, the private investor has not undertaken any measures to at least protect the building from further decay. The level of deterioration has been explicitly increasing year on year. The roofing structure is collapsing, large pieces of plaster peel off the walls, and the roof has many holes (Fig.4). Traces of the hacked-off inscription CITY SWIMMING POOL can still be seen on the façade. The building is surrounded by temporary fencing. A notice board in front displays information about the former Jewish district of Poznań.



Figure 4. The New Synagogue: (A) a present view of the façade, (B) a south-eastern wall (Source: photo by autor)

3.3. Community Activities Related to the New Synagogue

Activities associated with the New Synagogue are mainly performatory as they do not ensure actual support but only publicise the problem. At the beginning of the 2000s, when the synagogue was still used as a city swimming pool, it attracted the attention of the artistic community of Poznań. Using art involving

illumination and video projections, visualisation and live music, the artists attempted to maintain the memory of the place and the tragic fate of the Jews of Poznań.

The conceptual work by Rafał Jakubowicz from 2003, titled *The Swimming Pool*, gave rise to a series of artistic activities in the New

Synagogue. It was an illuminated projection of the Hebrew word *Brechat schija* (meaning the 'swimming pool') on the façade of the building, above the Polish inscription CITY SWIMMING POOL (Fig. 5). The artist commemorated the performance by designing a postcard depicting three boys in the swimming pool. *The Swimming Pool* by Jakubowicz was shown during many exhibitions in cities such as Warsaw, Wrocław, Bratislava, Dresden, and Tel Aviv. However, it was never exhibited in Poznań.

Next, Janusz Marciniak actively commemorated the New Synagogue. The cycle of his activities devoted to that place was opened in 2004 by his work titled *Atlantis*.



Figure 5. Illuminated projection reading *the 'Swimming Pool'* on the façade of the New Synagogue (Source: <https://sztukapubliczna.pl/pl/sztuka-moze-byc-uzytecznym-narzedziem-w-walce-rafal-jakubowicz/czytaj/123>)

The New Synagogue has raised the activists' interest for years. Following the fire in June 2023, Maciej Krajewski, an activist and cultural animator running the art gallery Łączę Poznańska, approached the city authorities of Poznań with an online petition. He applied to protect the New Synagogue from continued deterioration and highlighted the educational, social and cultural potential of the building. On 5 September 2023, the Łączę Poznańska Association organised a rally. The supporters demanded that the New Synagogue be listed in the Regional Register of Monuments (<https://oko.press/synagoga->

Accompanied by the Academic Choir directed by Jacek Sykulski, the artist arranged 600 blue candles shaped into the Star of David on the water surface inside the former swimming pool (Fig. 6). In interviews, Marciniak emphasised that he aimed to depict the building of the synagogue-swimming pool as a living monument commemorating the destroyed Jewish world (<https://chaim-zycie.pl/tworczosc-artystyczna>). The following two works by Marciniak, devoted to the New Synagogue – the installation “9.09.1939” (2005) and the performance titled *Alphabet* (2006) – were similar.



Figure 6. Illuminated installation modelling the sky above the New Synagogue on the last service day (Source: <https://chaim-zycie.pl/tworczosc-artystyczna>)

poznan-plywalnia). Long months of efforts taken by activists led by Krajewski were effective in February 2024 when the regional conservator instituted the proceedings for entering the New Synagogue building into the Regional Register of Monuments (<https://www.portalsamorzadowy.pl>).

The above shows that from the early 2000s signs of interest in the fate of the New Synagogue can be observed, in particular, in the artistic and activist circles. This is a current issue in many information portals and social networks, very often taken up by the media, and particularly by online press. Although the

weight of the problem is recognised, so far individual opinions of the persons involved

have not had an actual impact on the future of the building.

4. Results

The online survey was held on 19 and 20 February 2024 among 481 respondents living in Poznań. These were 250 native residents of Poznań, accounting for 52% of respondents, and 231 were incoming residents (48%). The slight majority were females, constituting 66% of respondents (319 people). The most numerous group of respondents were aged 26-35 (38.5%), 36-45 (19.5%) and younger – aged 18-25 (18.7%). People aged 46-55 represented 15.0% of respondents, and older than 55 – 8.3%. Nearly 3/4 of respondents completed tertiary education (71.9%), and 4.8% had a higher academic degree. Other respondents completed secondary education (13.1%) and undergraduate studies (10.2%).

The survey questionnaire contained 10 questions with a rating scale and one open-ended question to provide feedback on the New Synagogue. The questions verified knowledge about the site and interest in its future.

As many as 408 respondents (84.8%) recognise the New Synagogue building, and 178 (37.0%) have learned about the site from their families and friends (Fig. 7). The respondents, particularly those from Poznań, claim that they have always been aware that the building existed (9.0%), and 1/5 of respondents (18.5%) went to the City Swimming Pool at the Synagogue.

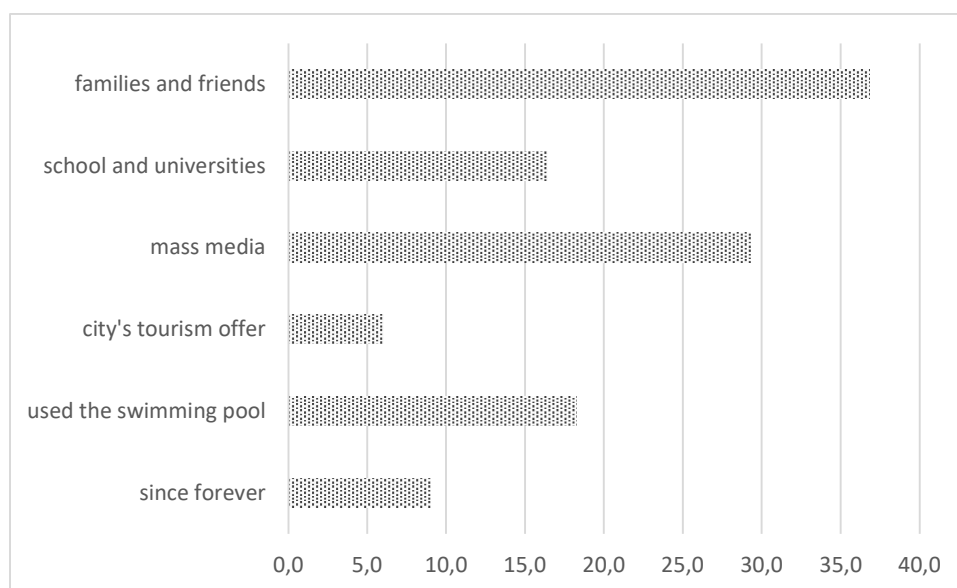


Figure 7. Sources of respondents' information about the synagogue (%) (Source: own elaboration)

In addition, some respondents (16.4%) learned about the existence of the site at school and at the university. Mass media were a significant source of information on the New Synagogue to respondents (29.7%), while the city's tourism offer was of lesser significance (6.0%).

A decisive majority of respondents (82.1%) supported the restoration of the New

Synagogue. All the factors in favour of the renovation, indicated in the survey, were important to respondents and highlighted the site's significance to the examined group of the inhabitants of Poznań. A little over half of the respondents considered the site to be a significant element of the history of Poznań associated with the Jewish community (54.1%), testifying to the multiculturalism of

the city (50.1%), and an element of heritage to be nurtured (51.4%) (Fig. 8). As many as 46.6% see it as a new tourism amenity in the city. A small percentage of respondents

(6.0%) claim there is no need to renovate the building and wish it be demolished or transformed into a modern hotel or apartment building.

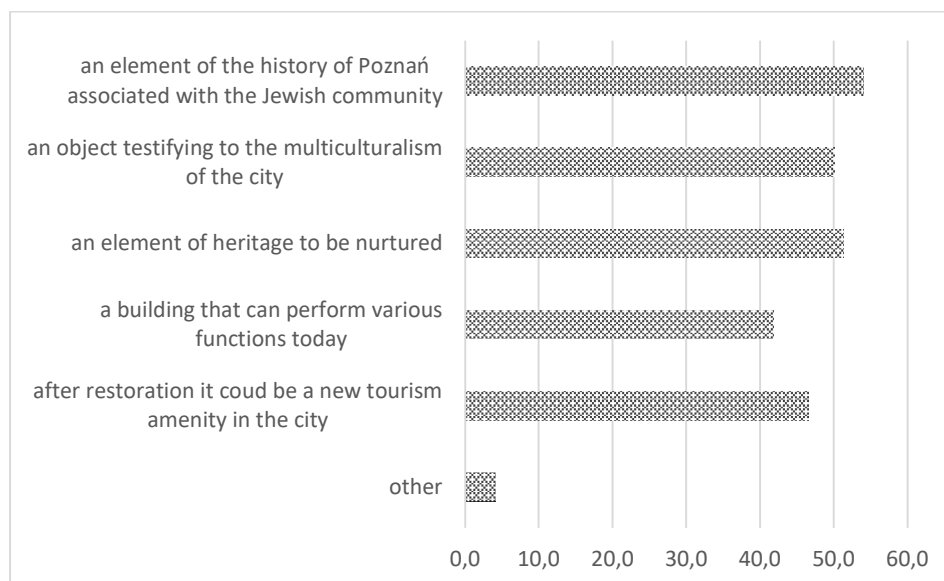


Figure 8. The factors in favour of the renovation of the New Synagogue building according to respondents (%) (Source: own elaboration)

Respondents asked about a potential function the New Synagogue might have in their opinion, mostly replied it could be a museum/memorial devoted to the Jewish community of Poznań (61.7%) and a centre for culture (54.7%) with an exhibition space (44.3%), concert hall (30.1%), theatre stage

(20.8%), and a cinema (16.8%) (Fig. 9). Respondents also favoured options such as a café (24.1%) and a bookshop (18.9%). An insignificant percentage supported turning the synagogue building into a hotel (5.0%) or residential building (1.2%).

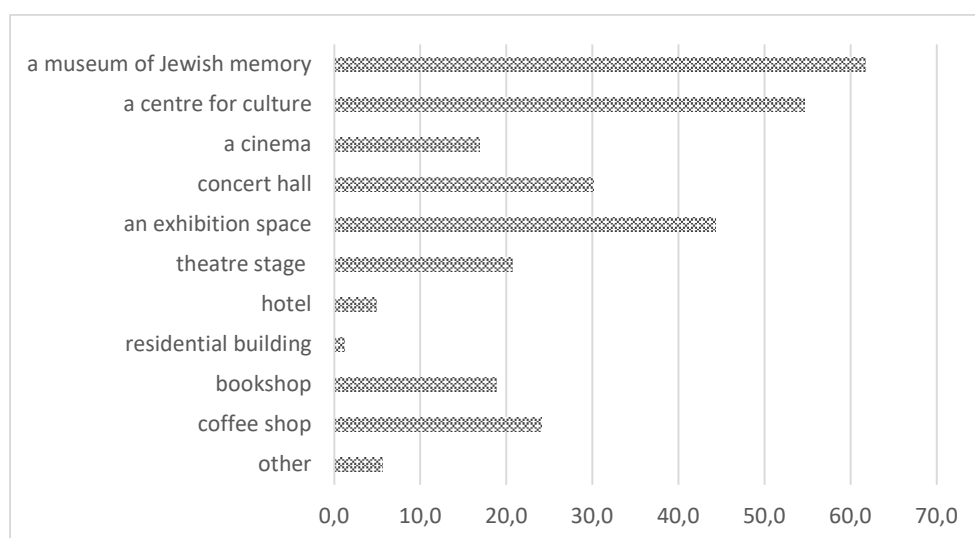


Figure 9. The potential function that the New Synagogue could fulfil according to the respondents (%) (Source: own elaboration)

A reply to an open-ended question about one's thoughts concerning the New Synagogue was given by 150 respondents, that is, 31.2% of the survey population. The respondents showed a thoughtful approach, and their often extensive feedback revealed emotions accompanying the New Synagogue topic. Nearly half of the respondents (46.7%) felt sad to see the decaying building, mostly due to the lack of respect for Jewish culture. Their statements often expressed low mood and disappointment regarding the derelict state of the site, which is significant for the city of Poznań. To quote an example: "The building looks very miserable and my heart aches that no one is doing anything about it. It is our culture and our heritage". For some people, the sight of the damaged building is a symbol of dramatic past events related to the Holocaust: "Every time I drive by [the New Synagogue] on Solna Street, I feel sad about the history the building has faced, and how painful it must have been for the Jews who survived the war when they saw what the Germans had done to their temple".

Next to the historical meaning of the New Synagogue, some respondents considered it an important building due to its attractive location in the very centre of the city (28.0%). Respondents found the building a significant landmark of the city landscape, which is "eye-catching from the distance". However, some claimed that "in its current condition it defaces the area and scares people". Respondents noticed that a building situated close to the Old Market Square has a big negative impact on how the city residents and tourists perceive the area (18.7%). Concurrently, most respondents

were convinced about the enormous potential inherent in the site, which, once restored, could become a "landmark of the city" (40.7%). In their opinion, the renovated New Synagogue could become an attractive site contributing to the revival of the city centre of Poznań. Most respondents suggest that the synagogue building should become a place "of considerable cultural value", "expanding knowledge" and "building awareness of multiculturalism in Poznań". They believe that proper renovation of the building could make it "a peculiar cultural centre focused on promoting tolerance and multiculturalism", "a centre for culture and reconciliation" or create "an egalitarian place for everyone, without museum pathos, with a space to have a meal, rest, read, or watch something".

Some replies referred to restorations of other, inactive synagogues in Poland. References were made to the famous Krakow synagogues and the lesser-known, smaller ones in Buk near Poznań and Chmielnik.

Nearly ¼ of respondents (23.2%) were familiar with other Jewish cultural sites in Poznań, including remnants of the former Jewish cemetery near the Poznań International Fair (54.0%), the Jewish district in Poznań (32%), and the tenement house being the seat of the Jewish community administration at 10 Stawna Street (23%). The respondents also indicated the locations of the former forced labour camps: lake Rusalka (7%), Malta (2%), and the Edmund Szyk Stadium (2%). They also mentioned monuments and memorials of the Jews of Poznań such as the Golem at Al. Marcinkowskiego (5%), or an obelisk at the Righteous Among the Nations Square (3%).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The survey aimed to identify the attitudes of the residents of Poznań concerning the New Synagogue. The replies show that the building is highly significant to respondents. Most respondents (82.1%) were interested in the site's future and strongly supported initiatives

to renovate the synagogue and ensure its conservation. The most common reason for wanting to save the building is the awareness of its historical value and cultural qualities. A popular argument for restoring the facility turned out to be its location. According to

respondents, the renovated synagogue could become a strategic point in the city centre, attracting visitors and adding value to the city's tourism offer.

In addition, the research verified the high level of awareness of the former multiculturalism of Poznań. Respondents realise that for centuries the city has been a place where different cultures and religious denominations intermingled. Artur Żyto has previously addressed a similar issue by analysing the familiarity of Poznań residents with sites associated with the Evangelical community (Żyto, 2017). Research showed that most respondents were able to identify individual sites, and "the interest of residents in the Evangelical heritage is becoming an opportunity to learn about the legacy of this religious minority [...]" (Żyto, 2017).

Relevant to the outcome of the research is the emotional approach of respondents to the New Synagogue, which is revealed especially in the open-ended question. The respondents' thoughts explicitly demonstrate that the future fate of the site is not indifferent to the people of Poznań. Many of them present personal, often sentimental attitudes. The story of how the biggest and certainly the most beautiful synagogue in Poznań was turned into a swimming pool evokes compassion, empathy and understanding for the tragic fate of the former Jewish community in Poznań. It is noteworthy how small a percentage of respondents support converting the building into a hotel (5.0%) or a residential building (1.2%). This type of adaptation would

almost completely obliterate the site's unique history, depriving it of its original identity. The vast majority of respondents (61.7%) see the renovation of the New Synagogue as an opportunity to create a valuable cultural site commemorating the Jewish community of Poznań. For this type of transformation of a former synagogue, respect for the historical values of the building has been preserved. Respondents thus appear to have a deep respect for the past and are aware of the importance of cross-cultural understanding and acceptance.

A similar result was obtained by M. Duda-Seifret (2016) who analysed the profile of cultural tourists visiting the White Stork Synagogue in Wrocław. The author described the survey respondents as "people who actively engage with and reflect on the places they visit" (Duda-Seifret, 2016). The respondents were eager to share their impressions about their visit to the White Stork Synagogue, speaking openly about how they felt – "depressed, sad, moved". Respondents also declared "the need for respecting and showing tolerance towards other nations and joy at the restoration of Jewish community life in Wrocław" (Duda-Seifret, 2016).

The research confirms that the New Synagogue in Poznań has the potential to become an important object on the city map of Poznań and to appear in the consciousness of residents as a building worthy of attention. The respondents' responses and opinions indicate a strong need to save the site from destruction and to preserve it as a building for new cultural, educational and social purposes.

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