The 7 Most Endangered 2014

Programme run by **Europa Nostra**,
the Voice of Cultural Heritage in Europe,
in partnership with the **European Investment Bank Institute**

Synagogue in Subotica, Serbia

Report

Table of Contents

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1. Summary

The synagogue itself is a superb example of Hungarian Art Nouveau architecture standing in a central position in the city of Subotica, Serbia. It was designed in the late 1890s by two Hungarian architects Marcell Komor – the early concrete structure and Dezsö Jakab – the decorative elements from Hungarian folk art.

For the last ten years the work of restoring the synagogue in Subotica has been piecemeal, occurring as and when interest was shown, and relatively small amounts of money became available. As a result the works carried out have not always been satisfactory and, for example the work on the cupolas has not eliminated the occurrence of water infiltration.

Independently of the EN/EIBI visit in October 2014, the Hungarian Authorities subsequently came forward to offer needed technical assistance and €1.6 million of cross border financial support for conservation of the synagogue interior and laying out the garden.

The aim of this report is to emphasise the need for a holistic approach to the restoration of the synagogue instead of the short term piecemeal approach adopted to date. It also sets out some steps necessary for completing all the outstanding project works, in the hope of attracting sufficient donor interest and finance for the successful implementation of the entire project. However, because of the limited access to the overall project documentation, it was impossible to get a full and detailed picture of all project works foreseen by the various partners concerned, and to give specific recommendations for the way forward. This technical report therefore remains based on the findings made during the October 2014 visit and the partial information and documentation made available by the City of Subotica until the day of today.

2. Location and Purpose

Location Synagogue of Subotica,
Trg Jakaba i Komora 6, 24000 Subotica, Serbia

GPS 46°10’14.16” N – 19°66’14.50” E

Purpose Restoration of the Synagogue of Subotica and garden.

3. Context

The EN / EIBI visit to Subotica on 14th & 15th October 2014 included careful inspection of the external and internal state of the synagogue structure, its decorative works and the surrounding garden area. A number of other buildings of architectural significance to the city were viewed including the theatre and town hall in order to place the synagogue in the context of the city. The synagogue is quite clearly a most important, if not *the* most important, element of the city’s architectural heritage.

At the meeting with the Mayor of the City of Subotica, it was inferred that the overall project definition would be complete and the full cost known only when the results of the two studies below were

submitted at the end of November 2014. The Mayor also underlined that there was enough expertise, capacity and finance available to complete the restoration of the interior and the garden and thus finish the project. However this would not seem to include alleviation of the water infiltration in the area of the cupolas nor would it seem to include a solution to the problem of rusting rabitz, which is likely to prove difficult and costly to overcome.

The two studies under way were for

- installing a low temperature heating system to counter the humidity adversely affecting the interior of the building.

- laying out and planting the garden area surrounding the synagogue.

The two studies have now been completed, but their content has not been communicated to the EN/EIBI team.

In the light of the above, it is neither possible to define the full project works nor to develop a related finance plan. However, the initial impression was that the works defined by the City would prove to be incomplete. This impression arose from the status of the work done and outstanding as observed by the EN/EIBI team during the October 2014 visit.

4. Project Planning and Project Cost

The planning of the project should concern not only the works necessary for restoring the synagogue and its estimated investment cost, but also its subsequent medium to long term use and its estimated annual operating and maintenance costs (plus provision for periodic more substantial maintenance such as repainting the external surfaces). Additionally to determine the extent, to which, if at all, the annual costs could be covered by self-generated annual revenues.

Before any works start it is recommended for professionally prepared projects to have a complete definition of the structural and decorative works necessary and of their estimated costs, as well as finance plans for both the investment cost and the subsequent annual running costs. Not least for the investment cost, to permit continuity of work until completion, since stopping and starting project works automatically involves unnecessary delays and additional costs.

In the case of the restoration of the synagogue, the impression was that to date little, if any, thought had been given to the project works beyond the restoration of the external facades and cupolas. This was demonstrated by the sudden and late introduction of studies for controlling the internal humidity of the building and the layout and planting of the garden.

With regard to the future use of the synagogue, the Jewish Heritage Fund within the World Monuments Fund is supporting and funding the installation of a permanent exhibition within the synagogue on the history of Subotica's Jewish community, the history of the Synagogue and the Conservation project. However it is not clear how much space this exhibition will occupy and so far there is no detailed plan of usage, activities and facilities (e.g. seating, heating for comfort, lighting, kitchens and toilets) agreed

between the interested parties. Consequently the estimated future maintenance and operating costs remain unknown.

Subsequent to the EN/EIBI visit, it is understood that an agreement has been reached between the **City of Subotica** and the **Hungarian National Council of Vojvodina** for the latter to use the building for 99 years. This appears to be a type of leasing arrangement for the organisation of educational and exhibition programmes of which the terms are not known. The **Subotica Synagogue Foundation** is reported to be responsible for maintaining the building while the **Jewish Community** will have a consulting role. However, the precise nature of the responsibilities of these four organisations has not been explained to the EN/EIBI team, nor has a finance plan for the annual operation and maintenance been mentioned.

To summarise, it remains unknown whether the cross border finance offered by Hungary is sufficient to complete the entire conservation of the synagogue building and whether a sound finance plan for the operation and maintenance has been concluded.

5. External Restoration

Structural works on the main cupola and four lower cupolas and their supporting structures have already been carried out, however the work was unsatisfactory and has not stopped water infiltration and the original ventilation vents have been closed.

At the time of the EN/EIBI visit, the external works were almost complete on two opposing external facades. The material being used for restoration of the facades was Röfix, a cement-free industrial mortar recommended for masonry in historic buildings. The composition of the mortar is made up of natural hydraulic lime - NHL according to EN 459-1 (without cement), additives for improved processing (without organic components) and quality crushed limestone sand. Although in some parts of the facades cement has been used.

Regarding the facade bricks and tiles, where it was not possible to restore them, new ones were used. The original bricks and tiles used for the Synagogue were described as terracotta in Jakab Dezső's technical description, however they were not in fact terracotta, but a mix of gypsum with some additives. The bricks and tiles now manufactured by the Zsolnay factory for the restoration of the synagogue are terracotta, but not in the same size and shape as the originals, because they were not in the original Zsolnay records/catalogues. Aesthetically, work on the facades done with new bricks and tiles and Röfix look more like a reconstruction than restoration, and the track of time and ageing of the building is not visible in the restored parts. Furthermore, the original main entry doors have been replaced by newly made copies claiming that it was impossible to restore the old ones.

While the two almost finished facades look good to the untrained eye, the EN experts accompanying the visit were clearly of the opinion that the restoration to date of the synagogue was not done in line with the highest standards of the conservation practice. Given the unsatisfactory quality of these works, it is essential that a professional civil engineering consultancy should review the structural status of the whole building, identify problem areas and propose appropriate solutions before any further structural or decorative works are authorised.

6. Internal Restoration

The internal dome and the decorative finish of the vertical steel columns are constructed from rabitz, which has rusted and from which sections of plaster have already fallen.

Rabitz *is a form of construction based on wire netting attached to steel rods normally of 5-8mm diameter. A gypsum plaster is then applied to the wire netting rather as it was to wooden laths in the past. The advantage of rabitz is the ability to form it into complex shapes for cornices and arches. The disadvantage is that the mild steel netting used in the original construction of the synagogue was not protected against corrosion. In humid conditions mild steel rusts and expands, causing pieces of plaster to break off. Today mild steel netting is normally sold galvanised against rust by dipping in molten zinc – a process known as "hot dip galvanisation".*

A lasting method of repairing the exposed rabitz sections still needs to be defined. The impression is that the city authorities seem unaware of the difficulties that may be encountered in the search for a lasting solution to the problem of the rusting rabitz netting. The provision of a low temperature heating system to counter the humidity may prevent further rusting, but to what extent the exposed rusted netting needs replacing and indeed that not exposed, but expanded by rust, is unknown at this time.

Given that the declared expectation was that the interior restoration, including seating, heating, windows, lighting, kitchen and toilet facilities, would be completed by the end of 2016, the EN/EIBI team felt that such a tight timeframe would not allow a quality and holistic approach to be applied to the implementation of the overall project.

7. Project Leadership

It is understood that the Hungarian National Council of Vojvodina will take over responsibility for coordinating the interior and garden conservation works funded by €1.6 million provided by the Hungarian Government under the guidance of experts from the Hungarian Forster Center for Cultural Heritage Management (See www.herman-project.eu/partner/forster-center). These works will be overseen by the Serbian State Institute for the Protection of the Cultural Monuments of Serbia, which has the legal authority to define requirements for conservation works, approve conservation projects, and monitor implementation. The Subotica Municipal Institute for the Protection of the Cultural Monuments of Subotica has a significant role in working with the City Authorities and Hungarian National Council on the coordination and preparation of the restoration process.

Decisions on the future usage of the synagogue have, as mentioned above, been agreed between the City of Subotica, Hungarian National Council of Vojvodina and the Subotica Synagogue Foundation and the Jewish Community. However details of the exact responsibilities of each organisation have not been explained to the EN/IBI team.

Our understanding is that there is an agreement that the use of the synagogue will be given to the Hungarian National Council of Vojvodina, as the Hungarian Government is the key donor for the interior restoration of the synagogue. The interpretation and presentation project for the synagogue has been funded and supported by the Jewish Heritage Program within the World Monuments Fund. The scope of

work includes the research, design and installation of a permanent exhibition within the Synagogue on the history of Subotica's Jewish community, the history of the Synagogue, and the conservation project in English, Hungarian and Serbian. However, several parties concerned seem not yet to have drawn up a detailed plan for the usage and necessary facilities (e.g. toilets, kitchens or heating for comfort). Consequently, the estimated future maintenance and operating costs remain unknown.

8. Future Training in Restoration Skills

The project for the restoration and re-use of the Synagogue turned out to be very challenging, from political, financial, technical and management point of view. Consequently, many lessons (positive and negative) for the future could be drawn from the Subotica Synagogue case and experience, for the benefit of policy makers and managers, experts and students concerned. The logical sequencing of works, restoration techniques, materials employed and their durability should especially present learning opportunities for experts and students on local, national and international levels. The restoration of the Synagogue could thus become the catalyst for the creation of a centre of excellence and training for conserving Art Nouveau architecture in the city of Subotica and the wider region.

EN Serbia has applied to the Headley Trust (*One of the Sainsbury Family Charitable Trusts with an interest in conservation and recording of heritage in Serbia amongst other countries*) (See www.sfct.org.uk) and received a grant for a research and education project which should bring additional expertise, build local capacities and contribute to future conservation works for Art Nouveau heritage sites (see http://europanostraserbia.org/en/seminar-on-conservation-of-synagogue-in-subotica/). The proposal has also involved students from the University of Novi Sad in Subotica to use this as a 'live' project to learn about material analysis and how to apply that to informed conservation. Furthermore, the budget includes the employment of two trainees on the conservation work to learn 'hands-on' traditional skills and hopefully improve their prospects of employment in this field.

The Synagogue of Subotica, as a superb example of Hungarian Art Nouveau architecture, deserves a change of direction from the current piecemeal approach and short term solutions, which are failing to provide the quality of restoration that it merits. The restoration of the Synagogue demands a holistic approach to planning and implementation of the entire project.

Without such a structured and holistic approach it is likely that progress will continue to be haphazard and ineffective; it is then unlikely to attract potential donors who would need convincing and complete plans and documentation being produced.

In the event of a sound holistic approach being adopted in the future, EN/EIBI should stand ready, if required, to help find additional expertise and finance to complete the investment plan and its implementation, in accordance with the highest standards of conservation practice.

9. Recommendations

Several points should be addressed before allowing the project to proceed namely:

- The potential use should be agreed as this is essential as the basis of the works.
- The full definition and programme of all outstanding works should be defined, even if the works are to be phased in execution.
- A realistic estimate of the cost of all the outstanding works should be established, preferably by independent professionals.
- A realistic programme, maybe in phases, should also be established. For example completion of outstanding structural works and waterproofing should occur before internal rabitz and decorative works start.

Appendix 1

References and Documents

- Nomination form to Europa Nostra "7 most endangered…"29th October 2013
- EIB Institute Pre-Mission Questionnaire 21st August 2014
- Response to Pre-Mission questionnaire 21st September 201

Mission details 14th & 15th October 2013

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Visit to Synagogue 14th & 15th October 2014