

Piotr Trojnieł  [orcid.org/0000-0002-9137-1258](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9137-1258)  
ptrojnieł@wp.pl

Department of Architecture of Local Cultures, Faculty of Architecture, Białystok  
University of Technology

## THE PROBLEM OF THE ARCHITECTURAL ADAPTATIONS OF SYNAGOGUES IN NORTH-EASTERN POLAND

### PROBLEM ADAPTACJI ARCHITEKTURY POSYNOGOGALNEJ NA OBSZARZE PÓŁNOCNO-WSCHODNIEJ POLSKI

#### Abstract

The intention of the subject is to analyse and evaluate examples of the adaptive reuse of synagogal architecture in the area of north-eastern Poland. Several dozen synagogues survived the period of wartime destruction and genocide in these areas, constituting a testimony to the presence of Jewish people there. Both the Holocaust and emigration led to a situation in which these buildings found themselves without owners after the war. During the post-war reconstruction, the problem of their adaptation to new functions arose.

**Keywords:** architectural adaptation, synagogue

#### Streszczenie

Podstawowym zamierzeniem artykułu było poddanie analizie i ocenie przykładów adaptacji żydowskiej architektury sakralnej na obszarze północno-wschodniej Polski. Czas zniszczeń i zagłady wojennej na tych terenach przetrwało w różnym stanie kilkadziesiąt budynków synagog będących świadectwem obecności Żydów na tych terenach. Holocaust i emigracja sprawiły, że po wojnie zabrakło właścicieli tych obiektów, a w czasach odbudowy powojennej pojawił się problem ich przystosowania do nowego przeznaczenia. Przekrój nowych funkcji w adaptowanych obiektach jest zaskakująco szeroki.

**Słowa kluczowe:** adaptacja architektury, synagoga

## 1. Introduction

The primary intention of taking up this subject was to perform an analysis and evaluation of examples of the adaptive reuse of formerly Jewish religious architecture in the area of north-eastern Poland. Several dozen buildings have survived the period of wartime destruction and genocide in these areas in various conditions, constituting a testament to the presence of Jewish people in this area. The Holocaust and emigration led to a situation in which these buildings found themselves without their rightful owners and users, and leaving a problem of adapting them to new functions appearing as part of the post-war reconstruction. The scale and essence of the problem has been properly illustrated by Wojciech Wilczyk's artistic project entitled *Niewinne oko nie istnieje*, which presents the post-war fate of synagogues across the whole of Poland [7]. Some of the structures that had been destroyed were rebuilt and adapted to new functions. Other structures, that the war had left in good condition, were paradoxically demolished.

A change in the situation of the heritage of Jewish religious architecture was brought by the Act of 1997 on the Relationship between the State and Jewish Religious Communities. It is on the basis of this act that the Polish Jewish community began to reclaim former synagogues and prayer houses. This justifies the necessity of engaging in studies and developing appropriate methods of revitalising and adapting this category of architecture to functions that honour their former status and that preserve the distinct cultural values that are important not only to the Jewish community, but also, and perhaps most importantly, to Poland.

After performing initial research, a group of twenty three synagogues and prayer houses that survived the war in the area of north-eastern Poland and methods of their adaptive reuse were analysed.

After analysing the collected materials, a division of the buildings and designs of their adaptation was performed in terms of function, which is also associated with the scale of the alteration of their architectural structure.

Four primary groups were distinguished:

- ▶ buildings adapted to functions associated with culture (community centres, cinemas, museums, libraries);
- ▶ synagogues adapted to sports-related functions (sports halls, gymnastic halls, etc.);
- ▶ buildings adapted for use as offices, residential buildings, hotels, commercial spaces, schools;
- ▶ outbuildings, storage buildings.

## 2. Adaptations to functions associated with culture – Synagogues in Tykocin and Siemiatycze

Post-war adaptations to functions associated with culture were planned and executed in numerous synagogues all across the country. As Kazimierz Urban pointed out at the start of the nineteen-fifties, such 'social and cultural purposes' or 'cultural and educational' uses

predominated in the conversion of former synagogue buildings. Functions associated with the promotion of culture, and, by association, tradition and history, aided the preservation and recreation of the architectural decoration of the synagogues that underwent adaptation. The adaptation to a museum building is the option that interferes the least with the structure of former synagogues. Such an adaptation makes it possible to preserve the integrity of the prayer hall and preserve the aron hakodesh, as well as the centrally-located bima. The best examples of this type of adaptation are synagogues in Włodawa and Łęczna, and in Podlachia (Podlasie Region) – the Great Synagogue in Tykocin (Fig. 1). In these buildings, the original interior structure was preserved with the maintenance of the former form of the main prayer hall being a priority (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1. The Great Synagogue in Tykocin, 2013 (photo by Piotr Trojnieł)



Fig. 2. The Great Synagogue in Tykocin – interior, 2013 (photo by Piotr Trojnieł)



Fig. 3. The Great Synagogue in Siemiatycze, 1925 (photo by Jankiel Tykocki)



Fig. 4. The Great Synagogue in Siemiatycze, 2019 (photo by Piotr Trojnieł)



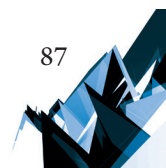
Fig. 5. The Great Synagogue in Siemiatycze – interior, 2019 (photo by Piotr Trojnieł)

One of the examples of the aforementioned adaptation method in the area of north-eastern Poland is the Great Synagogue in Siemiatycze (Fig. 3, 4) – an original building that is important because of the use of an elongated spatial layout which would go on to become the typical solution found in nineteenth-century synagogues. The basilica-type layout of the prayer hall is particularly noteworthy; it is probably the first instance of its use in a synagogue in Podlachia and one of the first in Poland. The building played the role of a storage building during the occupation and survived the war as a result; however, its interior and furnishings were destroyed. During a renovation project performed in the nineteen-sixties, the synagogue was converted into a community centre with a cinema hall. Due to the adaptation assuming the function of the main prayer hall as an audience area, the bima was removed. The historical spatial structure of the building interior was preserved. Arched arcade openings in the gallery-mezzanine in the prayer hall were, however, sealed with walls, while partitioned-off spaces were adapted for the purposes of the community centre's exhibition halls (Fig. 5).

### **3. Adaptation to sports-related functions – the Samuel Mohilewer synagogue in Białystok**

The Samuel Mohilewer synagogue, also called *Beit Szmuel*, was one of the most interesting synagogues of Białystok. The architectural design of the synagogue was submitted to the Construction Department in Grodno in 1897; however, its exposed site and proximity to the palace of the Branicki family led to an extension of the construction permit issuance procedure. The Beit Szmuel synagogue was a temple of progressive Jews, which is probably the reason behind the Gothic revival style of its architectural detail, which is rarely encountered in synagogal architecture in Podlachia, and which was further combined with the Baroque composition of the frontal facade [1, p. 53–55]. The design of the richly-decorated two-storey facade was performed in such a way as to feature certain simplifications relative to the design (Fig. 6). The synagogue is also an example of an adaptation to a sports-related function. Adaptive reuse in the form of a sports-related function was facilitated by the traditional functional and spatial layout of the synagogue, with its large main prayer hall space. In the case of these types of solutions, the main hall was typically remodelled into a gymnastics hall or some other form of space used for practicing sports, while the remaining spaces were converted to auxiliary functions (locker rooms, bathrooms, etc. – Fig. 7, 8). This is similar to the case of the synagogue in Suchowola, which was also adapted into a sports hall and the only elements that allow one to glean the previous function is the axial composition of the back facade with tall, arched windows and an external addition that housed the aron hakodesh niche. Only renovation work that was technically essential was performed, with the facade details being removed and the building extended and remodelled during the adaptation to the new function.

Analyses have shown that traces of the original function are erased and destroyed in synagogues that are adapted to sports-related functions. The bima is removed, similar to the location of the aron hakodesh. The traces of the former function are completely erased, which is why adaptations of this type should be viewed negatively.



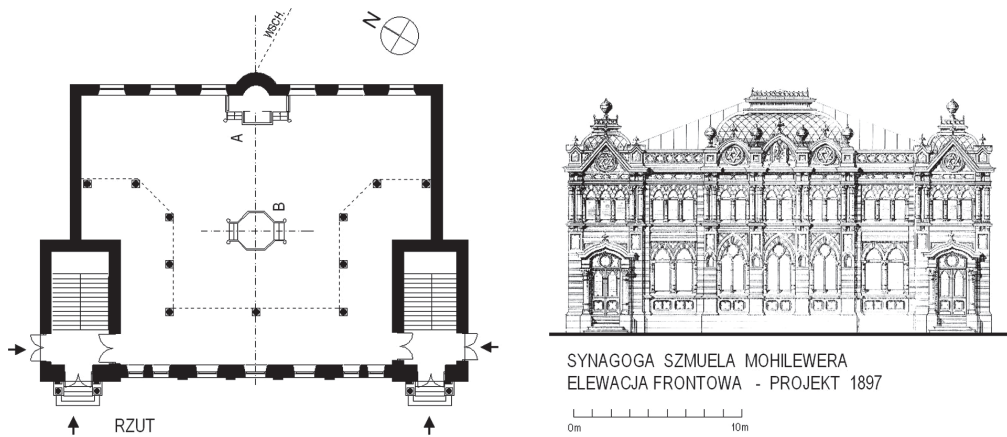


Fig. 6. The Samuel Mohilewer synagogue – architectural design, 1897



Fig. 7. The Samuel Mohilewer synagogue – adaptation and extension, 2013 (photo by Piotr Trojnieł)

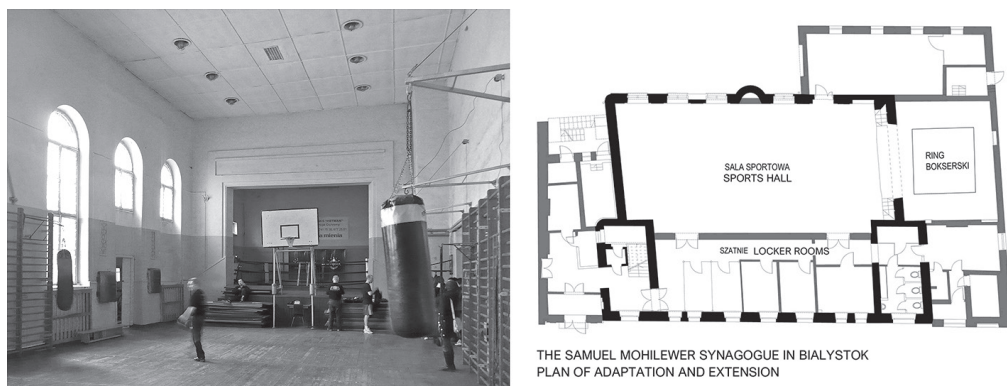


Fig. 8. The Samuel Mohilewer synagogue – photo of former Main Prayer Hall, 2013  
Plan of adaptation and extension (drawing by Piotr Trojnieł)

#### 4. Adaptations of synagogues for use as offices, residential buildings and hotels – the Talmudic House in Kolno

The surviving building of the former synagogue in Kolno (Fig. 9) was rebuilt after wartime destruction, erasing the traces of the former function and adapting it to a storage building [6, p. 139]. After 1958, it was adapted to a country department store and functioned in this form up until the end of the nineteen-eighties. In later years, the building was not in use; this was probably associated with the unclear legal situation of the former synagogue. It was only in 2008 that the building was taken over by the Jewish Religious Community in Warsaw and its adaptation to a function associated with providing services to tourists was planned. The building was sold, however, and the new owner adapted it to a restaurant with a hotel section. The design was prepared in 2009 by the Expans design office from Łomża [8] and assumed the preservation of the state of the external massing that was the result of post-war remodelling and subsequent adaptation projects. The post-war single-storey extension located in the north-western corner was preserved and converted into a kitchen for the coffee shop and the main restaurant space. The architectural design did not use the opportunity to recreate the tall arched windows in the side facades of the former prayer hall. The small rectangular windows that had existed prior to the adaptation were preserved, although earlier conceptual design proposals assumed the recreation of these windows in an earlier form. The gables of the frontal and eastern facades were also designed to feature additional rectangular windows, which is associated with the function of the hotel placed in the attic spaces of the existing building. As part of the adaptation, the vestibule on the ground floor was designed to house an entrance hall with the hotel's reception



Fig. 9. The Synagogue in Kolno, 2016 (photo by Piotr Trojnieł)

area, toilets, a dressing room, and a small coffee shop with a buffet. An open space intended to serve as a multi-functional hall was designed above the ground floor of this section of the building. Inside the former prayer hall, a large restaurant hall that could be converted to be a conference or wedding reception space was designed. Along the northern and southern side walls, mezzanines were designed with an open stairwell supported by a steel structure, which raises doubts and disrupts the proportions of the former prayer hall (Fig. 10). This is probably an expression of the desire to secure additional usable floor area in this space. The organising of wedding receptions here is also questionable.

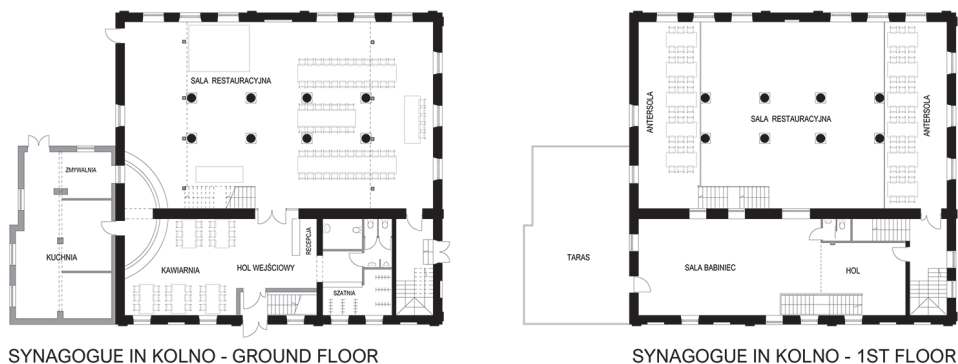


Fig. 10. Plans of the Synagogue in Kolno – design of extension and adaptation, 2009

Analyses of other buildings have shown that adaptations to office, residential and hotel functions are characterised by large-scale alterations in the external form of the building, erasing the traces of their original function, examples of which include former synagogues in Augustów, Białowieża, Rutki-Kossaki and Mielnik. In addition, the remodelling of the interiors and secondary divisions using partition walls and floor slabs cause the past functional layout to be less apparent. Adaptations of this type have been assessed negatively.

## 5. Adaptation for use as outhouses and storage buildings – the Jentes Bet Midrasz synagogue in Krynki and the synagogue in Czyżewo Osada

The Jentes Bet Midrasz synagogue in Krynki was built in the second half of the nineteenth century; it was founded by Jenta Rafałowska-Wolfson, hence its name. The hypothesis concerning the building's construction at the end of the nineteenth century is supported by the eclectic architecture of the building in the so-called brick style, which was distinct for Podlachia towards the end of the nineteenth century (Fig. 12). The building was built on a floor plan with a shape similar to that of a square, in the frontage of what is now Czysta Street (formerly Łazienna Street), with its eastern facade facing towards the street. The synagogue was orientated, as demonstrated by the niche in its eastern facade and a pair of lesenes signifying the placement of the aron hakodesh. The building survived the war and was adapted to an outbuilding storage space and has served its successive owners in this form to this day.



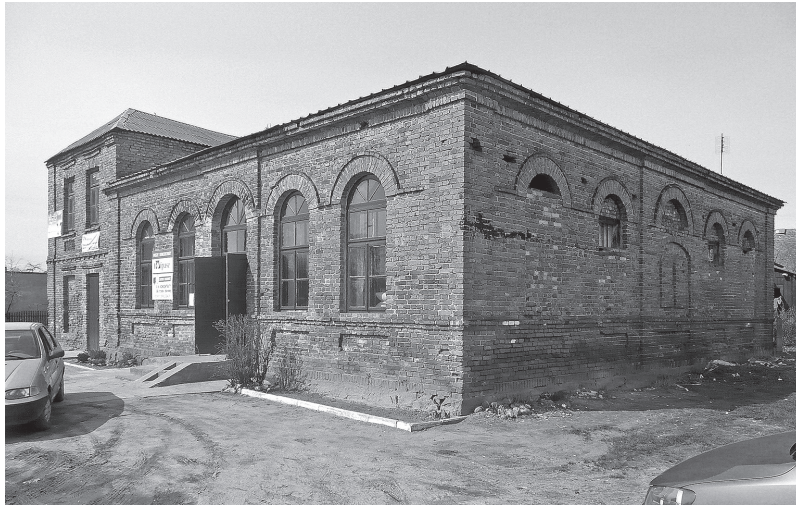
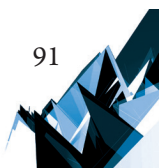


Fig. 11. The Synagogue in Kolno, 2016 (photo by Piotr Trojnieł)



Fig. 12. The Jentes Bet Midrasz synagogue in Krynki, 2013 (photo by Piotr Trojnieł)

Another interesting building is the synagogue in Czyżewo. After the war, around 1950, its damaged north-western corner was rebuilt and the building was adapted to serve as a storehouse; it has been used in this capacity to the present day (Fig. 11). Designs of the synagogue's adaptation to a municipality office building that were prepared in 1982 have remained unused. In 1995, as a part of a renovation project and adaptation to the function of a shop and storage space, the windows were replaced and the layout of the southern facade was corrected, restoring its quintaxial layout.



The adaptive reuse of synagogues as outbuildings, seemingly random in functional terms, facilitate the decay of the buildings and the erasure of their past as religious structures. These adaptations are limited solely to the necessary remodelling and renovation, thanks to which, these buildings, despite ongoing technical degradation, paradoxically remain similar to their original form, enabling reconstruction combined with adaptive reuse.

## 6. Demolished buildings

Buildings that had survived the war but were later demolished constitute a separate and essential group. These were the synagogues in Ciechanowiec (New Bet Midrash, Knyszyn (Bet Jeszurun), Krynki (the Great Synagogue) (Fig. 13), Sokółka (the Great Synagogue) and Suwałki (the Great Synagogue) (Fig. 14). Despite planned adaptive reuse for cultural purposes, and despite their good technical conditions (excluding the Great Synagogue in Krynki), these synagogues were demolished. It appears that, particularly in the case of the representative structures of the Great Synagogues in Krynki, Sokółka and Suwałki, this constituted a loss to the architecture of the region.

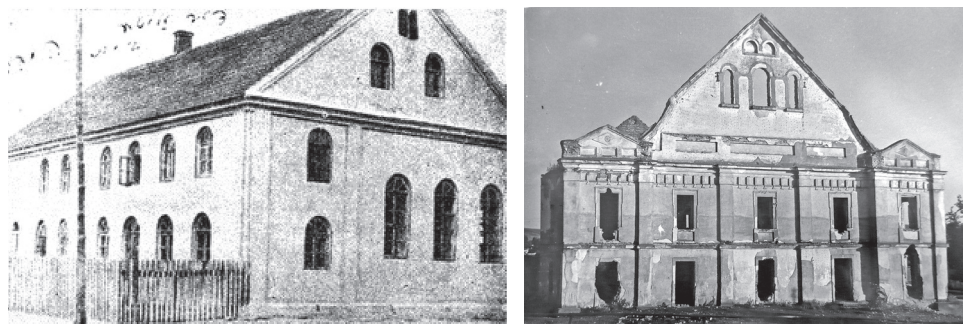


Fig. 13. The New Bet Midrash in Ciechanowiec, 1958 (source: Ciechanowiec Yizkor Book)  
The Great Synagogue in Krynki (photo by J. Kazimierski, J. Szandomirski)

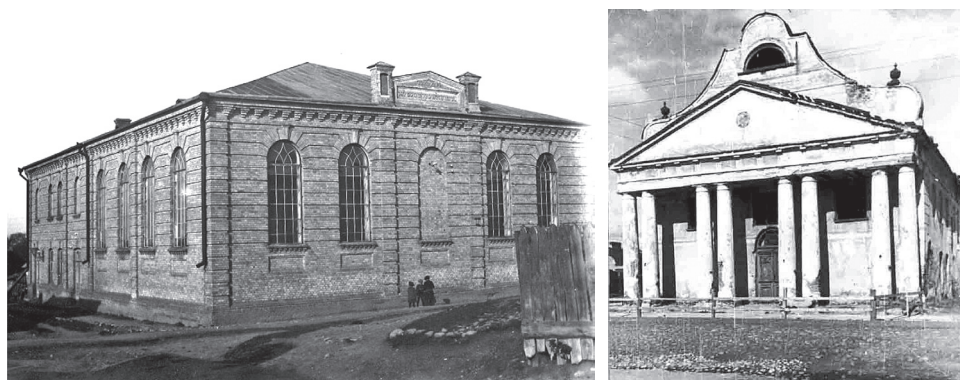


Fig. 14. The Great Synagogue in Sokółka, 1955 (source: Archive of the Sokółka Land Museum)  
The Great Synagogue in Suwałki (photo by W. Paszkowski)

## 7. Conclusions

The array of new functions observed in the adapted buildings is surprisingly wide. From museums, numerous community centres, cinemas, libraries, shops, restaurants, residential functions, to storehouses and outbuildings. In the case of many of these, the question of whether we are dealing with the profanation of the religious spaces of the former synagogues begs to be asked. Ewa Kuryłowicz, in the context of the adaptation of former religious buildings of various faiths, introduced the term 'dignity in the identity of architecture', defining the limits of alterations in adaptation projects of this type of architecture as delineating 'a stage in which the dignity of their spaces is not being stripped away' [3]. In this context, it appears that many synagogues – not only those confined to the area of north-eastern Poland – have been stripped of their dignity. Post-war adaptations in numerous cases have, either deliberately or unintentionally, destroyed the elements that were proof of their past functions, but, as Adam Mazur pointed out, however, that synagogues adapted to new, surprising purposes are not only 'used', but are also brought to life [7, p. 11].

The author's studies have shown that the functions that can result in the least amount of interference with the adapted functional and spatial structure of a synagogue are those associated with culture. The function that interferes with the layout of a synagogue the least is its adaptation to a museum. This type of adaptive reuse of a synagogue building makes it possible to preserve the integrity of the prayer hall and maintain the aron hakodesh, as well as the traditionally centrally-placed bima, as is the case with the Great Synagogue in Tykocin. Solutions that provide an opportunity for flexibly adapting the spaces, as in the case of a recently completed adaptation – the White Stork Synagogue in Wrocław – which is not only a prayer house, but also a community centre (where lectures and concerts are organised), a museum and where the bima was recreated as a mobile form, placed at its central location for the duration of prayer.

Studies of other examples of historical synagogues in the region have shown that, despite their adaptive reuse to functions associated with culture, as in the case of the Cytron Synagogue in Białystok, their external form and internal structure has either been subjected to significant alteration or was destroyed. These actions were also associated with destroying a synagogue's bima and aron hakodesh. This demonstrates that the adaptive reuse of synagogues as culture-generating functions does not always guarantee the safeguarding of the dignity of their space, and is also often associated with their profanation.

The function associated with culture, which is the most suitable in the case of the adaptive reuse of historical synagogues provided that functioning in their original capacity is no longer possible, must be combined with an informed shaping of their functional programme tailored to the building being adapted. Only this combination of programmatic assumptions associated with recreating forms of historical architecture will allow us to properly respect the surviving solutions of the internal structure of the buildings undergoing adaptation, which in the case of synagogues, should be based on preserving the integrity of the prayer hall spaces. It appears that such assumptions have been implemented in the latest successful adaptations of historical synagogues in Płock, Chmielnik (Fig. 15) and Ostrów Wielkopolski.



Fig. 15. The Synagogue in Chmielnik, Design of adaptation: Nizio Design, 2018 (photo by Piotr Trojnieł)

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