

# Architectural and Material Research of Peter Behrens Synagogue in Žilina, Slovakia

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The paper briefly presents ongoing research on the Neological synagogue in Žilina, the work of the world famous German architect Peter Behrens. The article is based on the collaboration with docent Magdaléna Kvasnicová who began the research on the occasion of the planned reconstruction of this monument and its conversion to an exhibition space – Kunsthalle.<sup>1</sup>

We would like to show some recent results of the research which is being executed by several experts on history of architecture and restoration from various academic institutions, from the Faculty of Architecture of the Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava, the Department of Architecture, the Institute of Construction and Architecture, Slovak Academy of Sciences and the Department of Conservation and Restoration of the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava.<sup>2</sup>

The aim of the research is to reveal as much as possible the original form of this work by Peter Behrens which would be fundamental for the restoration of the building and its conversion to a Kunsthalle.<sup>3</sup>

## The broken mosaic of the original concept

There is in Slovakia no other building built by such a world known architect than the synagogue in Žilina. Therefore, our research was focused firstly on identifying the “primary layer” of the synagogue, and on defining the concept of the famous architect.

The oeuvre of Peter Behrens is published in almost every relevant publication on history of 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture, and so it is with the Žilina synagogue, which is included in the majority of published works on 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture in Slovakia.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless our knowledge of the original appearance of the

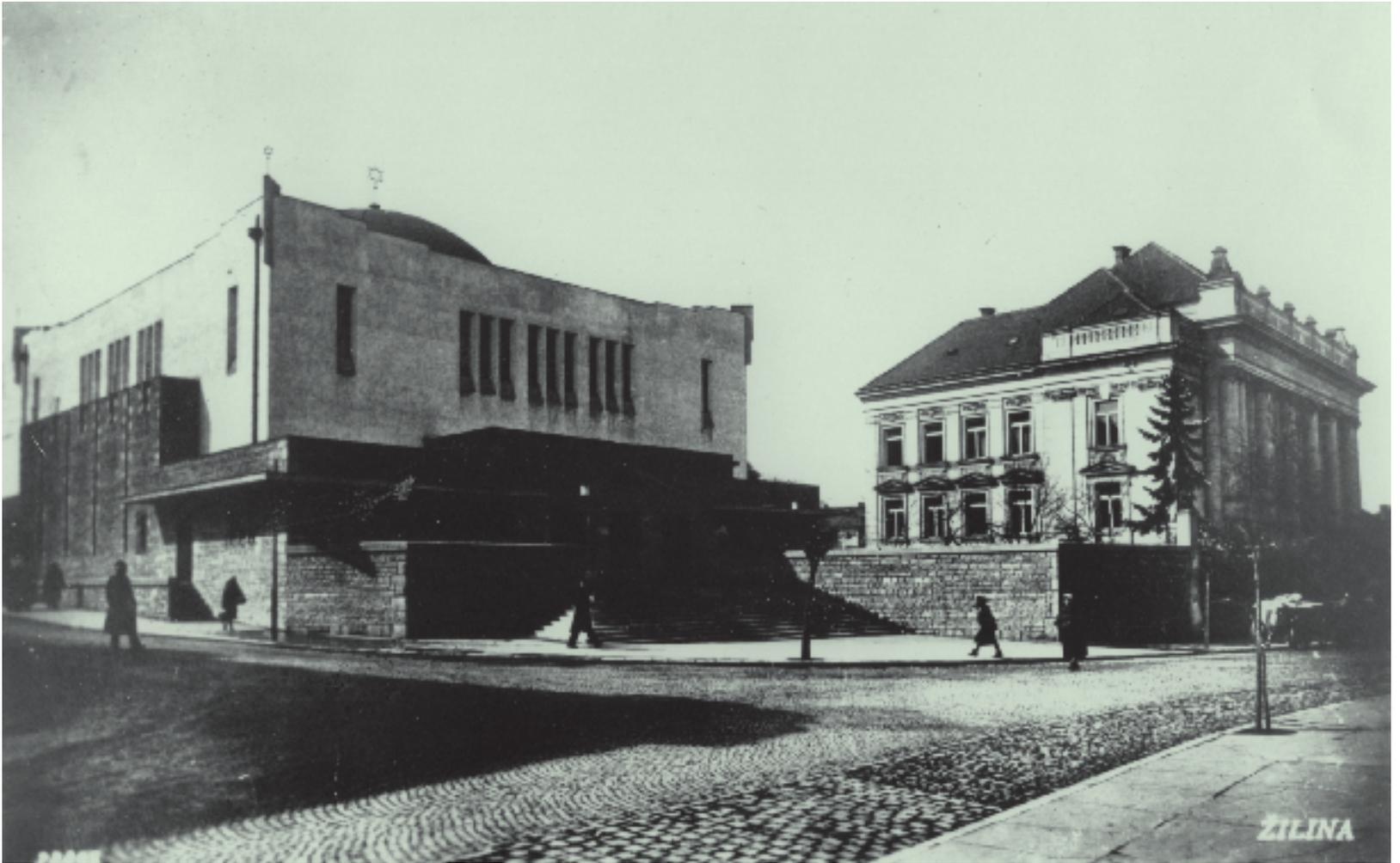
building is rather fragmentary, and we are still having lots of problems in reconstructing how the synagogue originally looked, especially its interiors.

Our research is therefore concentrated in two directions. There is archive research concentrated on the detection of the original concept through the visual and written materials of the period, and in addition there is physical or material research of the building in situ using non-destructive as well as destructive restoration methods. Through these two approaches we aim to assemble a mosaic which reveals the look of the original work and the story of its reconstructions and transformations.

The Žilina synagogue is a relatively young monument, being only 80 years old; nevertheless in some parts of the building we are still faced with doubts, as in cases of research into much more older architectural monuments. The reason for this uncertainty is that the rebuilding of the synagogue in the post-war period destroyed some parts of the material evidence, and archival documents are as well preserved only in fragments. For example there are only two pictures of the synagogue’s main hall interior from the 1930s. And we have identified only a few parts of the implementation plans. So we can find the most complex records of the synagogue’s primary conditions in contemporary articles from the time of the construction of the building.

## Modernistic or conservative masterpiece?

Behrens’ Neologist synagogue in Žilina originates in one of the greatest eras of our architectural history. This is the period between the two world wars, the period of the so-called International style, the style



of functionalism and modernism in architecture. In this era architectural production in Czechoslovakia was on a high quality level and as well in keeping with production in the world centers.

Peter Behrens' work in Slovakia, the synagogue in Žilina, hasn't such a progressive modernistic concept as other works of star architects designing their works in Czechoslovakia, for example Adolf Loos's Villa Muller in Prague or Mies van der Rohe's Tugendhat house in Brno. Behrens probably hadn't this kind of ambition. The Austrian art historian, Max Eisler, who wrote the first review of the Žilina synagogue, emphasized this conservative approach of Behrens in the introduction of his text from the year 1929, when he wrote about the competition.<sup>5</sup>

The competition for the design of a new synagogue which Behrens won in 1928, was not an open competition. As Eisler wrote: "Only three artists were invited: Peter Behrens from Berlin, Josef Hoffman from Vienna and one architect from Budapest."<sup>6</sup> This nameless architect was Lipót Baumhorn (1860 Kisdör – 1932 Kisdör), a specialist on synagogue architecture in the traditional 19th century eclectic style. From this small indication we can surmise how he looked at the conservative approach in contemporary architecture. And Eisler continues somewhat sarcastically in his critical view on the competition: "The cultural council of Žilina thought, that thanks to the invitation of famous and well-established artists they could avoid failures, but experiments as well..."<sup>7</sup>

But these expectations of the review author were not entirely fulfilled; both Josef Hoffmann (1870 Brtnice – 1956 Vienna) a famous architect of the Vienna art nouveau, and also Behrens' pioneering

modernism, introduced fresh ideas and experiments into the competition.

Professor Dulla, who wrote the most extensive study on Behrens' synagogue work in 2004,<sup>8</sup> identified the design of Josef Hoffmann as the most modern of all three submitted concepts. On a difficult corner building plot in the city center Hoffmann created a very non-monumental and simple project whose shape was reminiscent of a nomad tent. As professor Dulla emphasized, Hoffmann's project was in high contrast with the monumentality of the historicist design of Baumhorn, with ornamentation mixed of Oriental and Classic typical for him and which we can also see in his other constructed works, such as the synagogue in Eger.

From the point of view of monumentality, the Behrens' synagogue is situated somewhere between these two projects. He designed the synagogue as a massive cube with rough plastering which is settled on a base articulated with naturally-shaped stone cladding. The huge dome on the top of the cube is almost invisible concerning the overall/entire view of the whole building. So the building itself does make an impression of significant monumentality, but it doesn't clash with the actual city structure of Žilina so much; it looks much more unrecognizable than we would expect.

Peter Behrens, the teacher of Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius, was almost 60 when he entered the competition for the Žilina synagogue. At that time, he was a respected professor at the Vienna Academy of Arts. In the period of the end of the 1920s, his architecture balanced between various approaches, on the one hand between

Peter Behrens Neologistic synagogue in Žilina, 1932; source: Archive of 20th Century Architecture, Institute of Constructions & Architecture, SAS



Detail of the sound survey on the interior's east façade.  
Photo: Peter Szalay, 2012

modernism and functionalist approaches, and on the other hand between forms inspired by historical medieval architecture.

We can see this contrast also in two huge industrial projects – the complex of the Tobacco concern in Linz,<sup>9</sup> which is his most functionalist concept, and the administrative complex of the Hoechst AG Company in Frankfurt –Hoechst,<sup>10</sup> which illustrated his inspiration from the language of expressionism and medieval architecture.

We can state that the Žilina synagogue is situated somewhere in the middle between these two examples. On the sketch of the synagogue interior made for the competition we can see an allusion to Behrens' expressionist approach from the Frankfurt Hoechst administrative building, especially on the drip stone shaped decoration of the shrine or pillars. But this expressionist decoration element was not carried through into the constructed interior, which was simpler.

The exterior fundamental form of the synagogue, the dynamic shape of the roof cornice with the stone elements in their corners, indicates Behrens' inspiration from Expressionist and also medieval architecture. His relationship to and influence from historical construction technologies are visible in the stone cladding of the ground floor, which was masterfully handcrafted. The contrast of the almost graphical structure of the stone cladding on the ground floor with the simple plaster surface of upper part of building also reflects a contrast between traditional handcraft work and the modern cement plaster technology of the upper part of the façade.

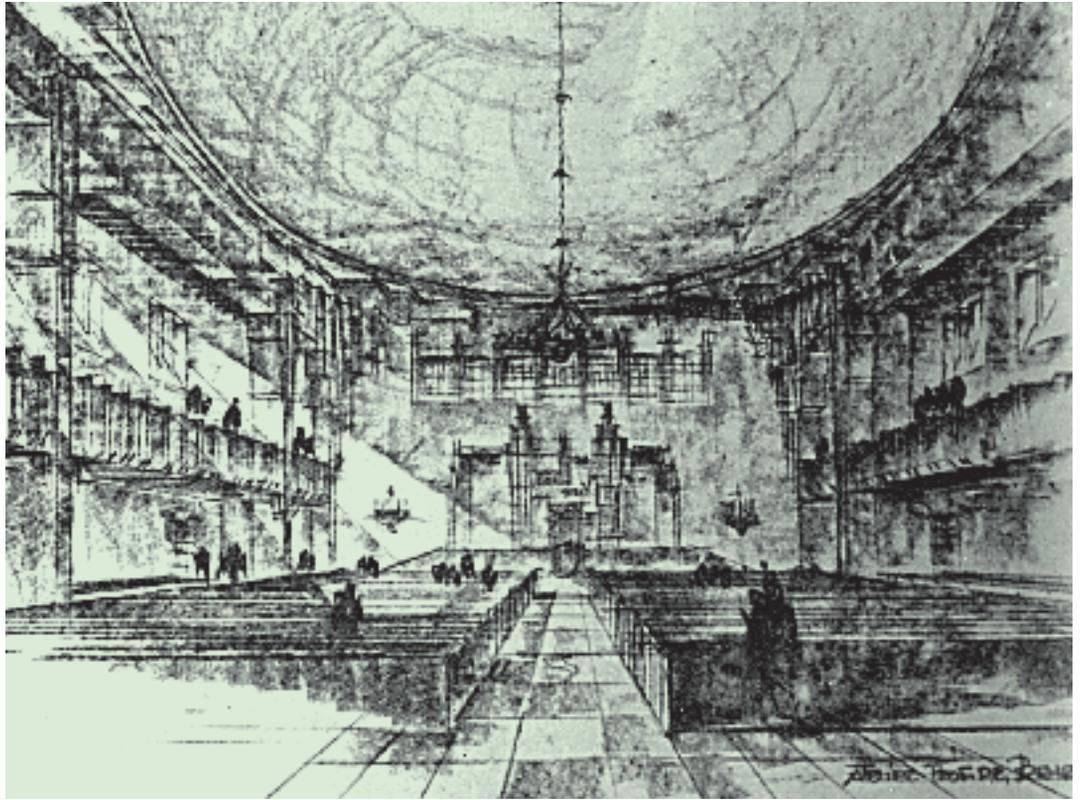
#### **Interior: a mirror of history**

The interiors of the synagogue witnessed the turbulent history of the building in contrast with the exterior, which was kept without any radical changes throughout the whole existence of the building. Of course the radical changes of the interior's disposition were sometimes visible on the facades of

the building, where the changes included the window apertures and some others minor details, but generally the principal conception of plaster and stone cladding remained untouched. It shows that the architects who took part in the reconstruction knew the value of the synagogue as a treasure of the famous architect's artwork.

The statement of the Slovak Architects Union at their session in Žilina in 1954 also proves this, since they demanded that Behrens' synagogue be declared a heritage work to be used for the purposes of a museum and as a memorial to the famous architect. This statement was initiated by the central union organization in Bratislava in December 1953, with the intention to prevent future rebuilding and interventions to the building.<sup>11</sup> But this effort by the architects' union was not immediately successful, since the synagogue was declared a cultural heritage only in 1963. However the architects did retain the outside form of the building without caring about the interiors, which is still nowadays not unusual in the designs of heritage reconstructions.

In 2011 when Doc. Kvasnicová's research began, the object's interiors were in very different conditions in comparison with Behrens' original design. The function of the building was changed from a temple to a warehouse at the beginning of WW II. After the war the state returned the building to the Jewish community, but the small group of surviving people could not properly take advantage of such a huge building. In 1948 the municipality of Žilina bought the synagogue and the object became the property of the city organization, PKO-Park of Culture and Recreation.<sup>12</sup> In this time, the synagogue was turned to a more proper function as a cultural and representational space. In the early 1970s, Behrens's synagogue changed owners again, becoming the property of the Žilina University of Transportation. It was used it as a lecture and representational hall for more than 20 years. In recent years it was used as a cinema.



Drawing of the synagogue interior from the competition in 1928.  
source: Archive of 20th Century Architecture, Institute of Constructions & Architecture, SAS

All these owners intervened more or less and changed the character of the building. The last extensive reconstruction of the interior was not so damaging. For the rebuilding of the main hall they covered all vertical surfaces with chipboard panels, the dome of the main space was hidden under a soffit made of aluminum elements, and of course an auditorium was built in to the temple hall and a projection room, needed for the function of a lecture hall as well as for the cinema, was constructed in the north gallery.

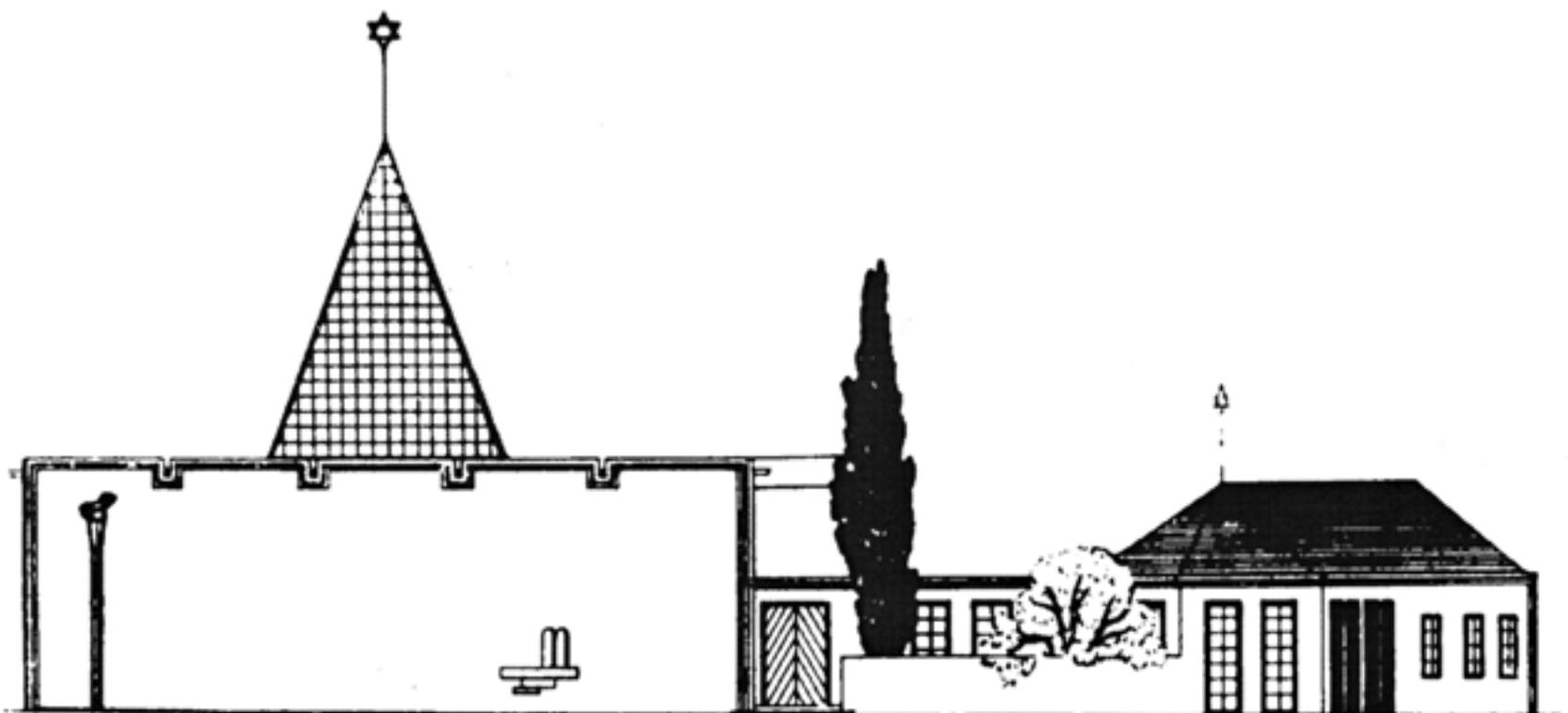
The most significant and also most destructive change executed here was the turning of the aspect of the main hall. The synagogue was, as was customary, oriented with their shrine or aron-ha-kodesh to the east and the main entrances to the north and south. During the first conversion of the building to

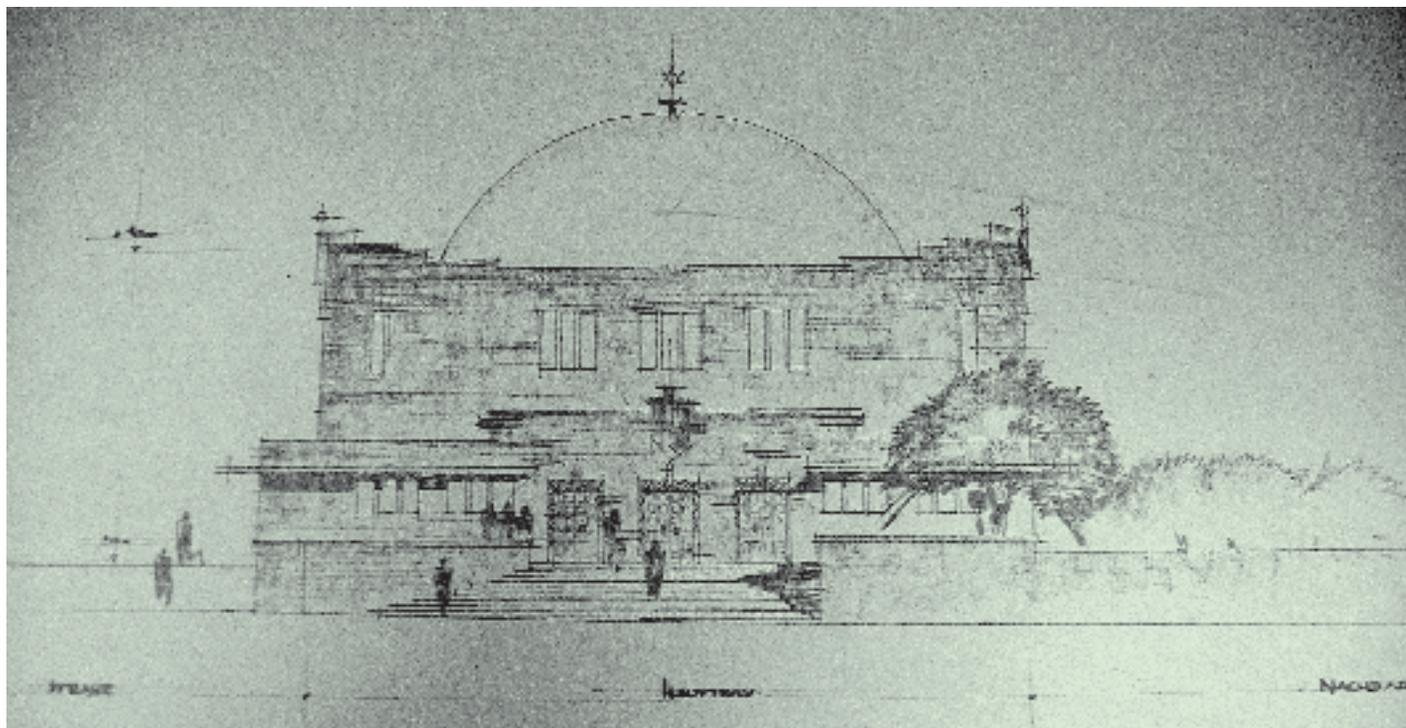
a cultural facility in the early 1950s, the architects situated the stage and then the screen in the south side of the hall.

The removal of the chipboard "fairing" from the interior at the beginning of the year 2012 unveiled the first stage of the conversion of the building made in the early 1950s, clearly showing the change of layout. Following this removal we could see the conversions of the synagogue to a cultural space, theater and dance hall. This first reconstruction was made in the period of so-called socialist realism, which was characteristically represented in the painted and stucco decorations.

Motifs inspired by historical and vernacular ornaments were somehow apparently applied in the traditionalist interior concept, the dome bearing with the pillars, surrounded by galleries. It was sufficient

Josef Hoffmann's competition design;  
source: Archive of 20th Century Architecture, Institute of Constructions & Architecture, SAS





Peter Behrens' competition design for a synagogue in Žilina, 8. February 1928;  
source: Muzeum Pfalzgalerie Kaiserslautern

only to put some neo-Classical or vernacular decorations on the interior's surfaces. Without the need for any significant transformation, the synagogue interior itself became "clearly understandable" to the working class, the usual justification for Classical architectural forms.

After the partial removal of the "fairing" in 2012 some parts of the surface of the original layer were uncovered, making it possible for the restorers Ivan Pilný and Ján Hromada to carry out surveys. These proved Behrens' eclectic architectural thinking. The horizontal white and red stripping of the interior is the allusion to Oriental architecture but also to medieval architecture, for example the Dom of Speyer, but Behrens utilized it in an unusual way.

The oriental decoration was widely used and very popular in the design of synagogues dating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We can find horizontal stripping with the same colour concept on the many synagogue constructions, but generally this decoration was not used in the interior, but on the exterior.

The historical allusions are also suggested on fragments of the shrine wall surfaces. Behrens there used

a soft vertical fluting made of stucco with a coating imitating gilding. In contrast to these eclectic elements the painting of the dome with a simple and abstract shape of Star of David shows Behrens' relationship to the modern and avant-garde art and his connection to the Expressionist movement.

#### The process of the restoration as an "experimental performance" in the Kunsthalle

The entire research was initiated by the NGO Nová synagóga, New Synagogue, which is an initiative of Marek Adamov, the head of the successful independent cultural organization Stanica in Žilina, the philosopher and theoretician Fedor Blaščák, and the architect Martin Jančok.

Their goal is to establish an art exhibition space – Kunsthalle – in the synagogue premises. The system of fund-raising for the restoration of building through donations and smaller grants inspired them to create an unusual concept for the conservation of the interior surfaces, while still using the space for exhibition activities. The method of double usage of the space was proposed by Martin Jančok, who

Panoramical picture of the conversion to a cinema, 2011,  
photo: Martin Jančok





Interior of the synagogue after removal of the 1970s facing uncovered the "social realist" layer, 2012, photo: Peter Szalay

designed the conversion of the heritage site from the very beginning of the project and who, together with the whole implementation team, was awarded the prestigious Bauwelt magazine prize.<sup>13</sup> The metamorphosis of his projects also shows a development of the understanding of – values of – original synagogue surfaces. This kind of system, which is often used by restorers in churches, could also be exploited in the Kunsthalle, with the restorers being a "performance" part of future exhibitions. In Slovak heritage reconstruction this would be a pioneer, and we hope also a successful experiment.

*The study is based on research supported by the Slovak Research and Development Agency, in frame of the project APVV-0375-10 Differentiated typology of modernism: the theoretical basis for maintenance and conservation of works of modern architecture.*

<sup>1</sup> The architectural-historical research of doc. Magdaléna Kvasnicová was finished in November, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> The other members of the research team are Ivan Pilný- Department of Restoration, Academy of Fine Arts Bratislava, Ján Hromada restorer, and Gabriel Hartl – Institute of History and Theory of Architecture and Monument Restoration, Faculty of Architecture, Slovak Technical University in Bratislava.

<sup>3</sup> The basic information about project is published at the webpage of project (<http://www.novasynagoga.sk/?lang=en> 14. 3. 2013)

<sup>4</sup> KUSÝ, Martin: Architektúra na Slovensku 1918 -1945. Pallas, Bratislava, 1971, p. 110; FOLTÝN, Ladislav: Slowakische Architektur und die tschechische Avantgarde 1918-1939. Dresden 1991. DULLA Matúš, MORAVČÍKOVÁ Henrieta: Architektúra Slovenska v 20. Storočí. Bratislava Slovart, 2012, pp 85, 86, 283, and 351. ; BORSKÝ, M.: Synagogue Architecture in Slovakia. a Memorial Landscape of a Lost Community. Unipress Trutnov, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> EISLER, Max: Entwürfe für eine neue Synagoge. Menorah 7, 1929, 2, s. 86-95.

<sup>6</sup> EISLER, Max: Die Synagoge in Sillein. Menorah 9, 1931, 11-12, s. 526

<sup>7</sup> EISLER, Max: Die Synagoge in Sillein. Menorah 9, 1931, 11-12, s. 526

<sup>8</sup> DULLA Matúš, MORAVČÍKOVÁ Henrieta: Architektúra Slovenska v 20. Storočí. Bratislava Slovart, 2012, pp. 283.

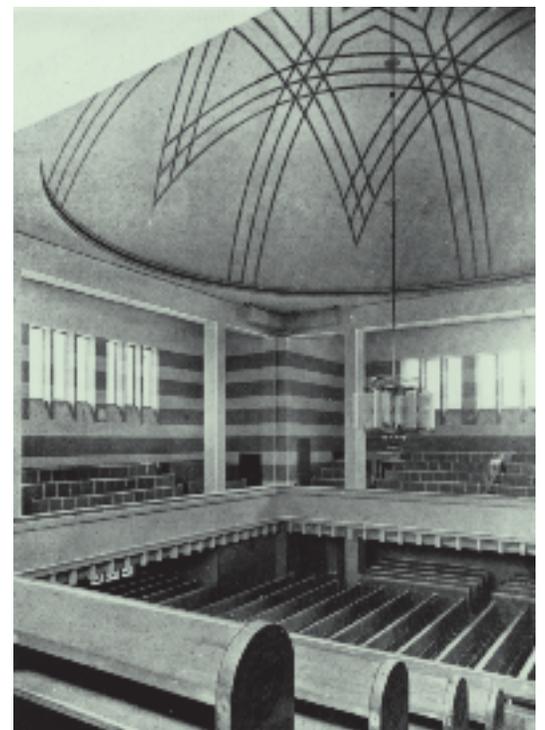
<sup>9</sup> Behrens built the „Tabakfabrik“ in cooperation with his former pupil Alexander Popp (1891 St. Leonhard am Forst – 1947 Linz) in 1929 – 1935. BINA Andrea, FELLNER Sabine, THIEL Georg: Tabakfabrik Linz, Kunst Architektur Arbeitswelt. Anton Pustet Verlag, Wien, 2010, pp. 342.

<sup>10</sup> The Technical Administration Building of Hoechst AG, was built in years 1920 -1924. BUDERATH, Bernhard: Peter Behrens – Umbautes Licht, das Verwaltungsgebäude der Hoechst-Aktiengesellschaft (exhibition catalogue), München, Prestel, 1990, pp. 192.

<sup>11</sup> ŠOA Žilina, Fond MsNV Žilina.

<sup>12</sup> The documents about the process of selling the property to Žilina city are in the States regional archive in Žilina, ŠOA Žilinafond PKO Žilina.

<sup>13</sup> Bauwelt prize, Revitalisierung von Peter Behrens' Neuer Synagoge, Bauwelt 2013, no. 1. pp 23 -25.



Detail of the dome, 1931; source: magazine FORUM, 1931