



Elias V. Messinas, Architect

THE SYNAGOGUES *of* GREECE

An Architectural & Historic Treasure for Museums, Libraries and Research Institutions
by Dr. Elias V. Messinas, Architect and Urban Planner | *January 2023*

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The Synagogues of Greece

The Physical Archive

Dr. Elias V. Messinas, Architect and Urban Planner

The Story: Dr. Elias Messinas

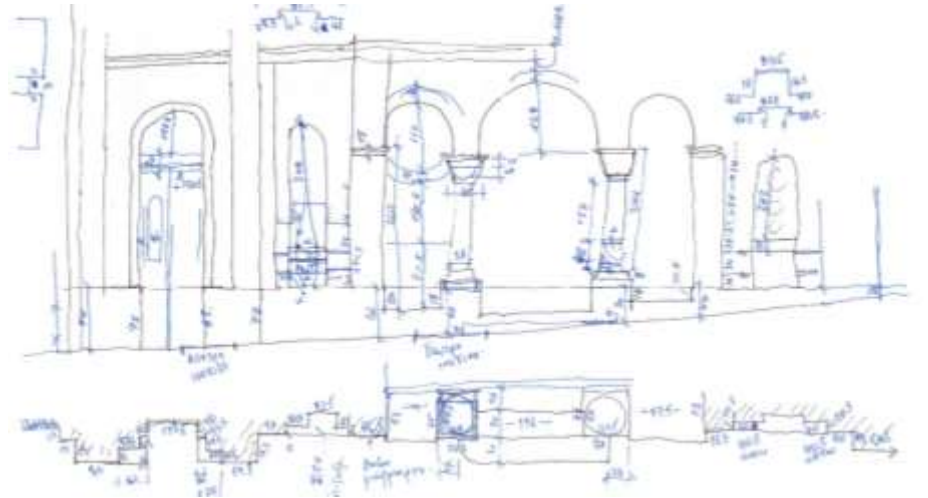
The survey and study of the synagogues of Greece was initiated by Greek architect Elias Messinas since 1993, graduate of Yale School of Architecture, member of the Jewish Community of Athens. A practicing architect, holder of degrees from Bezalel Academy, M.Sc. in Environment and Development and a Ph.D. from the National Technical University of Athens. He was a Post-doc fellow at the Technion.

Elias has shared his work in numerous articles, and lectures, books **“The Synagogues of Salonika and Veroia”** (Athens, 1997), **“The Synagogues of Greece”** (New York, 2011) and **“The Synagogue”** (Infognomon, 2022), and exhibitions at Yad Vashem, Goethe Institute (Thessaloniki, Greece), and Catholic University (USA).

Nominated for the Tallberg/Eliasson Global Leadership Prize 2020 and the European Prize for the restoration of the Monastirioton synagogue, Elias’ work has been supported by the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, WMF, Getty Grant Program, Graham Foundation, Jewish Heritage Research Center, International Survey for Jewish Monuments, Sephardic House, Vicky Safra, Fortonne and Albert Sarfatty, Lucius Littauer Foundation, and Kress Foundation.

Elias teaches sustainable design at Patras University, and Holon Institute of Technology.

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Survey drawings © Elias Messinas.

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The Story: Survey and Study Project

The Survey and Study of the Greek Synagogues project was initiated by Elias in 1993. It was urged by the destruction of Greek Jewry in the Holocaust – annihilated by 87%; Thessaloniki by 92% - and the **need to document and preserve the physical memory of what survived.**

Prior to WWII there were nearly 100 synagogues throughout Greece of many traditions – among them Sephardic, Romaniote, Italian, and Ashkenazi – with only a dozen surviving today.

During the project Elias succeeded in documenting and reconstructing in drawings and models nearly 20 synagogues, including some that have since been demolished – e.g. Beth El in Komotini, Beth Shaul in Thessaloniki, and the imposing eclectic synagogue of Xanthi.

This portfolio is the only such complete portfolio of Greek synagogues. It is a valuable addition to any institution collection. It enables comparisons and a more accurate study for researchers to fill-in the missing pieces of the puzzle in synagogue architecture, connecting the remaining synagogues in Spain, Italy, Greece and Turkey.

What is also about this portfolio is that it is a living archive. Still being updated, as Elias, as a professional architect, is responsible for a number of restoration and renovation projects of Greek synagogues.

Synagogues of Greece Portfolio by Dr. Elias V. Messinas, Architect and Urban Planner



Reconstruction of Beth Shaul synagogue in Thessaloniki prior to WWII. The synagogue, built in 1898 by the Modiano family, it was demolished by the Nazis in 1943 following the deportation of the Jewish community. The model was exhibited at Yad Vashem in 1999-2000.



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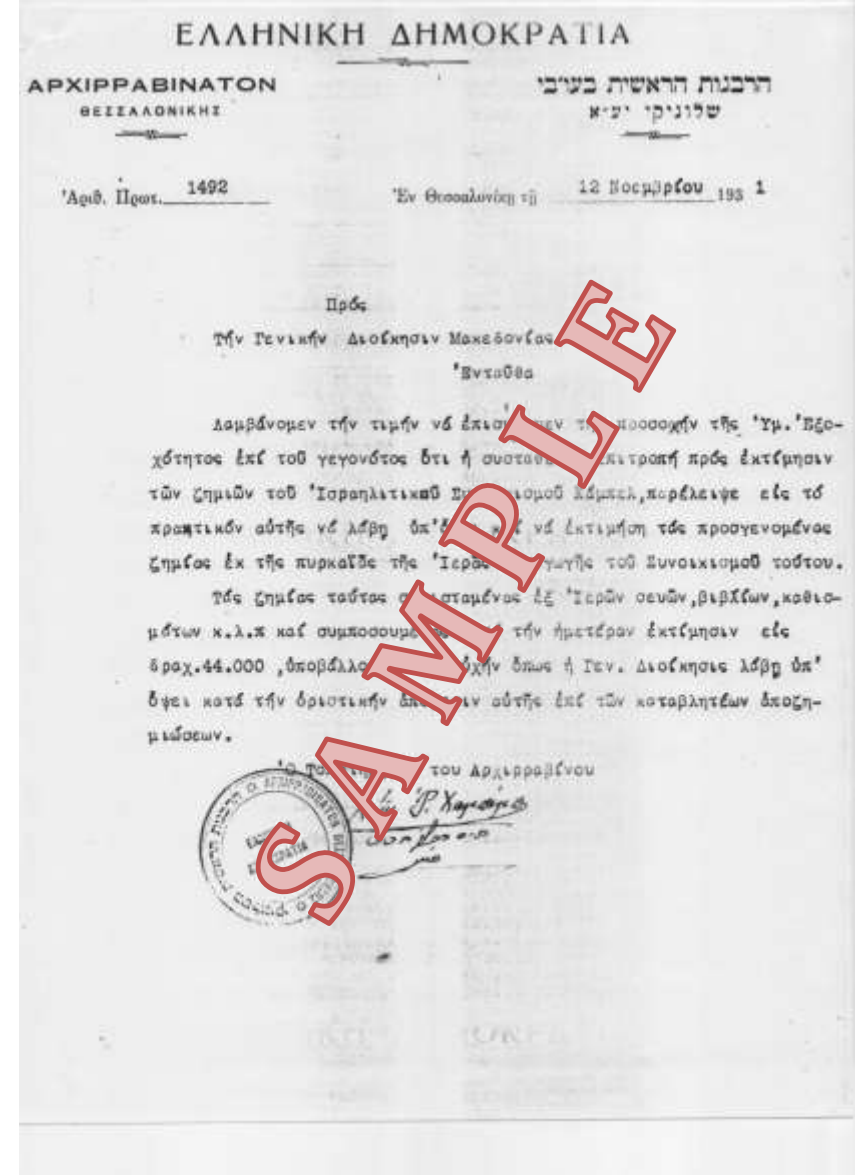
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The Story: Archival Research

Under the mentorship of Prof. George Sariyiannis of the National Technical University of Athens, Elias undertook in 1993-1998 and ongoing, to research **archives and private collections**, and to **interview locals and Holocaust survivals**, to retrieve any information that would shed light in the construction, history, use, and repair of the synagogues in Greece. Including among others:

- The Hellenic Ministry of Interior Archive (city plans)
- The Geographic Service of the Hellenic Army (aerial photos)
- The Planning Office of the City of Thessaloniki.
- The Jewish Museum of Greece, Athens
- The Organization for Reconstruction of Jewish Communities, Athens
- The Central Board of Jewish Communities Archive, Athens
- General Archives of Greece, Athens
- Weiner Library, London
- Photographic Archive Roger-Viollet, Paris
- Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, Jerusalem
- Yad Ben Zvi Archive, Jerusalem
- Joint Distribution Committee, Jerusalem
- ANU - Diaspora Museum Photographic Archive, Tel Aviv
- Avraham and David Recanati Photographic Archive, Tel Aviv
- The Municipality of Kos
- Gabriel Welter's personal archeological notebooks Archive, Aegina

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Archival document of 1931 documenting the fire that broke out during the anti-Semitic attack to the Cambell quarter in Thessaloniki, and the damage caused to the synagogue (Central Archive of the History of the Jewish People, Jerusalem, Israel).

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Portfolio of Architectural Drawings

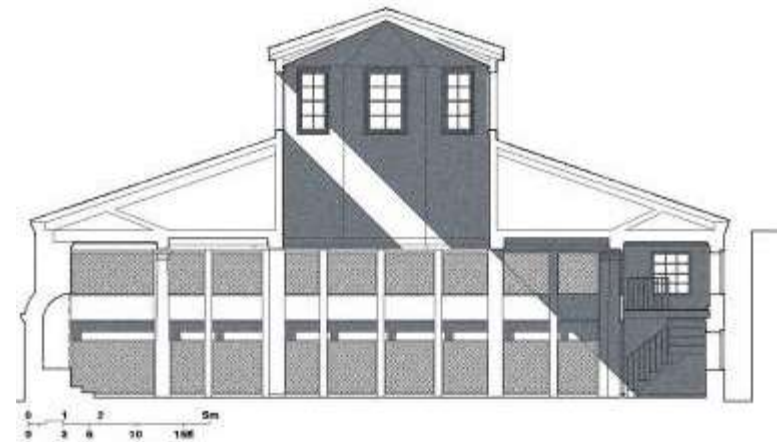
The Portfolio of Architectural Drawings includes architectural survey and drawings of synagogues in 18 cities of Greece:



The digital Architectural Portfolio of the synagogues of Greece includes cities where

- Synagogues are standing today
 - Synagogues were surveyed by Messinas and were later demolished
 - Synagogues meticulously reconstructed by Messinas based on aerial maps, city plans and photographs, and
 - Synagogues the surveys of which have been published by others (for reference purposes only).
-
- A drawings description document is also included.
 - The project is on-going, therefore more folders may be included.

Synagogues of Greece Portfolio by Dr. Elias V. Messinas, Architect and Urban Planner



Reconstruction section drawing of Beth El synagogue in Komotini, Northern Greece. The synagogue was surveyed in 1993 prior to its demolition in April 1995. © Elias Messinas



Reconstruction elevation drawing of Beth El synagogue in Komotini, Northern Greece. The synagogue was surveyed in 1993 prior to its demolition in April 1995. © Elias Messinas

The Synagogues of Greece

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Physical Archive and Collection: Content

In addition to the architectural drawings the archive includes:

- Twenty-four (24) ring binders organized by city with research materials (photocopied materials, interviews, notes, **survey photographs** by Messinas format 10X15 cm organized in A4 pages.
- A separate ring binder with the original **survey sketches and notes** in transparent A4 pockets, organized alphabetically.
- A separate ring binder with the 35 mm **negatives** of the survey photographs, organized alphabetically in A4 transparent pages.
- A separate ring binder with 35 mm **slides** of synagogues, organized per city, organized alphabetically in A4 transparent pages.
- Forty (40) folders - a separate folder for each city - with **larger drawings, maps and aerial photographs** and other visual materials.
- Two (2) separate ring binders with **historic photographs** sizes mostly 13X18 and their negatives size 5X5. The photographic material is organized in transparent A4 pages by city. The photographs are copies from private archives and collections. Some photographs may require additional permission and copyright clearance.
- Seven (7) separate ring binders contain research copies of **archival documents** related to the history of the Jewish communities prior to WWII, the originals of which belong to archives, and therefore copyrighted and requiring permission. Format A4 format, partially organized by city.
- Online drive with digitized and additional visual materials.

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Physical Archive and Collection: Objects & Books

The physical archive includes building pieces salvaged from demolished synagogues. The materials were salvaged from debris and demolition:

- A piece of **decorated plaster** from the demolished synagogue in Komotini – dating from c.19th.
- A piece of **plaster Tuscan-order column capital** from the demolished synagogue in Komotini – dating from c.19th.
- A metal **sign 'SYNAGOGI'** (Synagogue) – dating from 1950s - from the synagogue in Kavala, offered to Messinas by the Jewish Community representative that escorted him to the building prior to its demolition.
- A **roof tile** of the factory 'Frateli Alatini' in Thessaloniki, belonging to the demolished synagogue of Xanthi – dating early 1920s.
- A **floor tile** – size 20X20 dating from early 1920s – salvaged from the demolished synagogue in Xanthi.
- A **mezuzah** – size 15X5 dating from early c.20th – from Northern Greece, belonging to the family.

The physical archive also includes approx. **100 books** on Jewish history and architecture with a focus on Greek Jewry, in English, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Polish, etc. The book collection includes some collectors' items. Finally, the collection includes the **website** Kol *ha*KEHILA: the newsletter of the Jewish Monuments of Greece (<https://kolhakehila.org>)



The Synagogues of Greece

The Digital Version of the Archive

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Digital Portfolio of Drawings & Photographs

The portfolio is also **offered in a digital 'light' format** including architectural drawings, such as floor plans, sections and elevations, based on surveys and reconstruction drawings, and photographs – survey and visit photographs.

They enable the continuing research and study of the synagogues, the dissemination of the material for publication and exhibition, and thus made accessible to other researchers and the general public within the institution. The digital portfolio (1993-2022) includes:

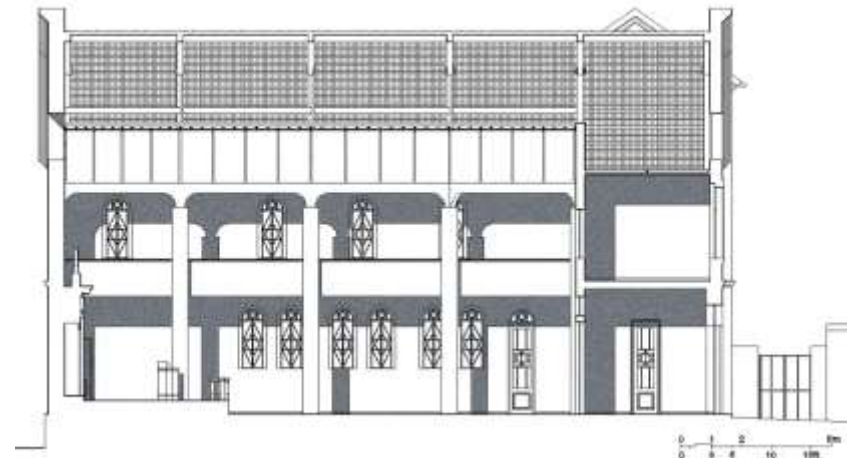
- Digital folders of cities with JPG files of architectural drawings of synagogue buildings in 18 cities.
- Each folder includes floor plans and may include sections and elevations, some rendered drawings and three-dimensional drawings, a total of approx. 200 drawings.
- Digital folders with relevant images of Jewish sites and synagogues in 22 cities in Greece. Approx. 1500 digital images.
- DOC and PDF files with labels and descriptions for the above drawings and photographs.
- Links to one book (English) and one doctorate manuscript (Greek) by E. Messinas, on the synagogues of Greece for online reading. They include historic images, city maps and aerial photographs.

The portfolio can be used for review, research, exhibition, and publication within the institution.

Synagogues of Greece Portfolio by Dr. Elias V. Messinas, Architect and Urban Planner



Reconstruction of elevation and section of the impressive synagogue of Xanthi, northern Greece, built in 1926 and demolished in 1995. The synagogue was surveyed by Messinas in 1993 and 1994. Next to it the Jewish Club, which was demolished earlier, but also reconstructed, thanks to an earlier survey of 1962. © Elias Messinas



The Synagogues of Greece

Updates of the Digital Archive

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The Living Archive: Updates

Elias Messinas has been invited since 2014 to restore and renovate, publish and exhibit synagogues throughout Greece. His recent work includes additional research, surveys, technical and electro-mechanical improvements, to historic buildings, making them accessible and more energy efficient. This work continues to enrich the portfolio with additional materials, providing a living documentation for these historic buildings.

Projects include:

- The **Registry of Jewish sites**, Hellenic Ministry of Culture.
- The identification proposal for the **synagogue** in Veroia.
- The restoration of the **Monastirioton synagogue** in Thessaloniki.
- The restoration of the **Yad LeZikaron synagogue** in Thessaloniki.
- The restoration of the **Yavanim synagogue** in Trikala.
- The interior restoration of the **Shalom synagogue** in Kos.
- The **preservation of the mosaic of the synagogue** in Aegina.

Numerous publications by Elias Messinas:

- The Synagogues of Greece | The synagogue of Veroia, etc.

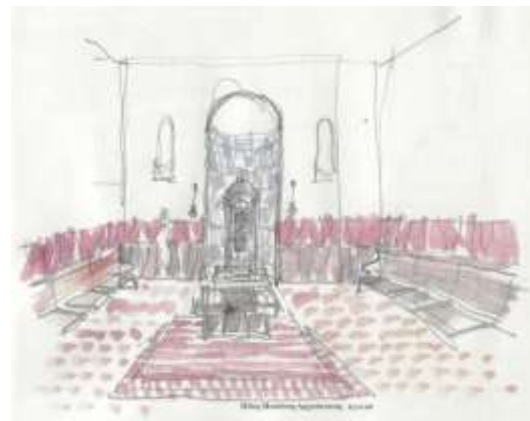
Exhibitions:

- The **mosaic of Aegina**, Archaeological Museum in Aegina.
- The **synagogues of Greece**, Greek HeritageCenter, Petah Tikvah.
- The **synagogues in Thrace**, Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki.

Additional projects may include:

- The **restoration of the synagogue** in Larisa, **VR or potential reconstruction of synagogues** in northern Greece, etc.

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Sketch of the interior restoration of Shalom synagogue in Kos © Elias Messinas.



City Registry of the synagogue in Kos. © Municipal Archive.



*Restoration of the synagogue Monastirioton in Thessaloniki.
© Elias Messinas*

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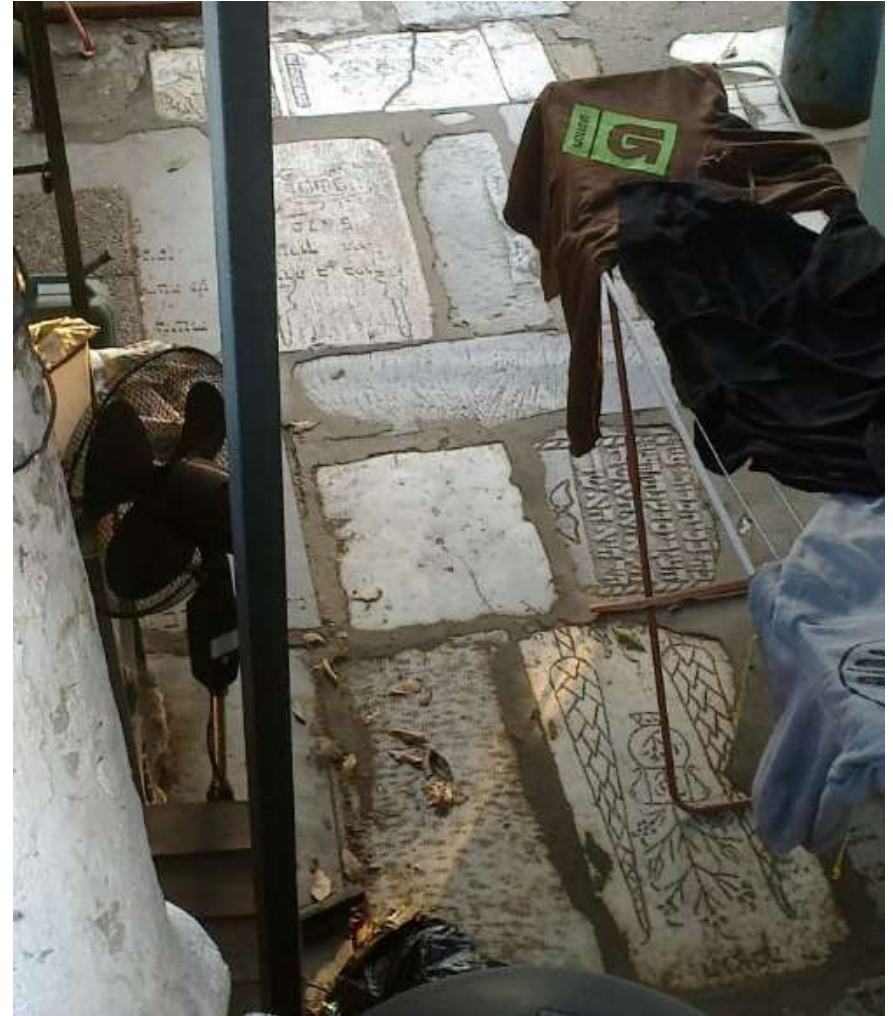
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Thank you for your interest.



Modern day Jewish archaeology: Jewish tombstones in a private courtyard in the Upper City of Thessaloniki circa 2014. The tombstones were removed from the ancient Jewish cemetery of Thessaloniki, Greece after its demolition in November 1942. Photograph © Elias Messinas