



**Does a virtual place make you feel you've been there,  
or does it emphasize its physical absence?**

November 1947: Sarah Shammah makes a dangerous journey back to her hometown of Aleppo, Syria, to meticulously photograph every corner of the centuries-old Great Synagogue she grew up in. She has an emotional and almost mystical attachment to the place.

Days later, as the partition plan for Palestine is approved by the United Nations, the synagogue is destroyed in riots. Sarah manages to escape with her negatives.

**Place** uses Sarah's smuggled photographs to take you back to one sunny winter day in the life of this ancient building. As you explore, its denizens share their stories about the invisible strings that tie them to the space, bringing it to life with fragments of their existence. **Place** is like stepping inside an old, cherished piece of film, with all the grain and softness that human memories are made of.



Sarah was a woman acting in a male dominated society: the Middle East, the Jewish community, and the synagogue itself, were ruled by men. But she managed to do an impossible thing for a woman of her time. What started as an effort to show the synagogue to the world, turned into the definitive documentation of it, using the most effective medium she had - photography.

Within **Place**, these photos are the building blocks for the most effective medium we have in our time - virtual reality. It's a bittersweet feeling of being there, and being painfully aware that this place is gone, for those who miss it and for those who didn't know they did.

# The Experience

The experience introduces us to Sarah at the start of a troubling time in the Middle East, as the advancing partition plan for Palestine creates tensions between Jews and Arabs. Sarah feels a sense of urgency to capture her beloved synagogue, and we follow as she leads her photographer through the building. On the way, we meet the building's caretaker, his daughter, and the chief rabbi, each with their own perspective on their place in time.

After years of careful research, our virtual synagogue is now a photorealistic reconstruction, based on the 52 photos Sarah took and many other materials, among which a historical scale model. The characters and stories we encounter inside the synagogue are based on real people, some of whom are still alive.

**Place** takes us back to the synagogue as it was in 1947. A black and white photograph, a different world, inhabited by the people who went before us. It invites us to look at the past and reflect on the present. And perhaps consider what it means to be exiled from a place you call home - no matter if you are Jewish, Palestinian, Syrian or Ukrainian - and left with only photographs and memories.



For centuries, Aleppo has been a vibrant merchant city, a buzzing intersection of cultures in the heart of the Middle East. The Jews in Aleppo were an ancient, very tight-knit and proud community. Their Great Synagogue, built twelve hundred years ago, housed the Aleppo Codex, the world's oldest and most important Bible manuscript, listed as UNESCO World Heritage.

Today, it is an overgrown ruin and the Aleppo Jews have built their homes elsewhere in the world, but rumours of rebuilding the synagogue can be heard occasionally.

To us, the Great Synagogue is a symbol of tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Core team member Avi Dabach is a direct descendant of one of the building's last caretakers. His grandfather's only wish was to be able to return to Aleppo, but there is nowhere to go back to now.



# Technology



**Place** is a unique synergy of innovative technologies. The synagogue is reconstructed through photogrammetry, mapping, and archival photographic information dating back to the early 1900s.

The characters have been recreated from period photo portraits using AI techniques to turn 2D images into 3D models, brought to life by motion capture and kinematics. Agent-based pathfinding algorithms allow our characters to find their own ways through the complexities of this space. We apply these same algorithms to the visitor's movements, so they too find their own way.

- 6DoF PC VR
- Compatible with HTC Vive, Valve Index, tethered Quest 2





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