Kaplan, Dana Evan, "Architectural Representations of Jewish Identity and Achievement in America's Golden Age", Australian Journal of Jewish Studies XXXV, (2022): 41-62

Architectural Representations of Jewish Identity and Achievement in America's Golden Age

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Introduction

This article will discuss the American Jewish community's embrace of a Modernist architectural style for the many synagogues that were built in the years after World War II. Previous architectural approaches had become antiquated and anachronistic, and American Jews felt the need for a new philosophy that could manifest itself in bold and innovative building designs that could bring pride and joy to both synagogue members and communities at large. Many hoped that this Modernist style could convey a pluralistic theology of a benevolent God who was accepting of all, and that this could help deliver the message that American Jews were patriotic citizens contributing to the spirit and tranquility of the towns and suburbs where they were now moving. Despite the nihilism that was associated with Modernism as a philosophy, most American Jews felt that its message of freedom from rigid structures was entirely compatible with the Judaism that they were trying to nurture. During the two decades of the Baby Boom between 1946 and 1965, there was great optimism that Modernist synagogue architecture could herald a new era of strength and vitality for the Jewish religion and for the American Jewish community.

The post-World War II economic boom in the United States was so dramatic that it was widely referred to as "The Golden Age of Capitalism" (Marglin and Schor 2011). Sociologists and historians analyzing and writing about this period soon afterwards started to use this idea in relation to all sorts of specific areas of development. For example, the 1950s are referred to as a 'golden era for the automobile in America' (Heitmann 2018, 137). So too, Jews living in the United States began using the same terminology in reference to the post-war Jewish experience. Benjamin R. Epstein, the director of the Anti-Defamation League during the years after World War II, wrote that American Jews experienced a golden age during this period, achieving 'a greater degree of economic and political security, and a broader social acceptance than had ever been known by any Jewish community since the Dispersion' (Sarna 2005, 276-77). Holocaust historian Lucy Dawidowicz referred to the entire post-war period as years of 'recovery and renewal' for the Jewish community, calling the years 1945-67 'the Golden Age in America' (Dawidowicz 1982, 125).

In the years after WWII, the American Reform movement as well as the other American Jewish denominations grew dramatically in both numbers of members as well as numbers of congregations. While the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) — the Reform congregational body — had

265 affiliated temples with 59,000 member units in 1940, by 1955 there were 520 congregations with 255,000 units. Large numbers of previously unaffiliated American Jews started joining congregations, mostly in the suburbs. Whereas in 1930 only about 20 percent of American Jews were members of a synagogue, by 1960 almost 60 percent were (Kaplan 2003, 20).

This increased rate of synagogue membership was directly connected to the mass movement to suburbia. The growth of the interstate highway system allowed for easy access to urban centres to which the breadwinner of the family could commute. Entire new communities were created by developers such as William Levitt, who created no less than seven different "Levittowns" in different areas of the United States. These rapidly spreading suburbs created all of the institutions that these new communities needed and wanted. Centred on the large suburban synagogue, the new American Judaism appeared to flourish (Kaplan 2005, 61-78). Along with the new suburban lifestyle, many Jews embraced new modes of living and new social expectations.

While open expressions of ethnicity were still somewhat looked down upon in the post-war era, religiosity was regarded as a sterling American virtue. This association facilitated the creation of civil ceremonies and government-sponsored slogans on a national scale. On Flag Day 1954, President Dwight Eisenhower urged Americans to be good citizens by believing in God. 'Our government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith — and I don't care what it is' (Bellah 1970, 170). The link between religious affiliation and patriotism was reinforced by a series of government decisions in the following years. The Knights of Columbus succeeded in a campaign to convince the Congress to add the words "Under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance. In 1955, Congress added the phrase "In God We Trust" to all American currency, and in 1956 it became the nation's official motto, replacing "E Pluribus Unum".

Religion, it seemed, was becoming more important for societal reasons rather than theological ones. Many of those who joined synagogues in the post-war period were seeking to achieve social respectability rather than to find religious truth. In addition, many Jews who had left thriving neighborhoods like the Lower East Side of Manhattan for the suburbs suddenly felt like they had been cut off from their immigrant culture. While they appreciated the brand-new houses, some felt a sense of rootlessness, a loss of cultural environment. Joining a synagogue connected them with a venerated religious institution that boasted of a long and distinguished history. It did not replace the feeling of walking on the cobblestone streets of the old neighborhood with half-sour kosher pickles being sold on the sidewalk, but it partially compensated for it by providing a physical symbol of their inchoate sense of identity.

Shaping the future

The building boom in the American Jewish community took place in the context of a rapidly changing American society, one that was reinforcing religious identities at the same time as it was threatening established values. From the period even before WWI, the 'Protestant Establishment' dominated American religious discourse. This collective consisted of the seven mainline denominations — Baptist, Congregationalists, Disciples, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, and Presbyterian. Jews as well as Catholics were emphatically not a part of the religious establishment, although they were generally tolerated and sometimes included in specific events as token representatives of minority faiths. As American society opened up in the aftermath of WWII, American Jews saw the possibility of being fully accepted and were eager to do what they could to promote this opportunity.

While American Jews had never been subjected to the persecution that their ancestors had faced in Europe and elsewhere, they had had to overcome significant discrimination because of antisemitism. There are numerous prisms through which to see this phenomenon. One approach is to look at changing Jewish status in the context of "whiteness". In the times of mass immigration from eastern Europe, prevailing classifications 'created an off-white race for Jews to inhabit' (Brodkin 1998, 1). The argument has been made that Jews who have grown up in different eras and have experienced changes in racial characterizations have created a 'double vision that comes from racial middleness' (Brodkin 1998, 1-2).

American Jews still felt marginalized when they looked at an ideal conception of 'whiteness', but at the same time might experience a sense of belonging when contrasted with a conception of 'blackness'. As opposed to the popular view that 'whiteness' simply refers to the color of a person's skin, some posit that it is a much more complicated mix of race, class, ethnicity, nation, family, gender, sexuality, and other factors (Brodkin 1998, 1). By implication, American Jews were striving to become accepted in society in order to become 'white folk', and that if they could become universally recognized as such, they would be able to achieve great things in their individual lives. Therefore, building suburban synagogue complexes would help middle-aged Jewish men to advance in their careers and their lives. The growth and vibrancy of American Judaism as represented by the building of magnificent new synagogues could therefore benefit the individuals involved in this endeavour.

In the years immediately after 1945, most observers believed that religion was enjoying a religious revival. Americans were moving into the suburbs in huge numbers and were having children. This baby boom — which consisted of those born between 1946 and 1965 — was largely responsible for the creation of the demand for religious facilities of all types. Church affiliation and involvement was one of the central values of post-WWII suburban civic religion. Religions, and the various denominations within each religion,

moved as quickly as they could to build the facilities that were suddenly in great demand. Jews joined in this effort, despite the fact that many — or even most — were more comfortable with Jewishness as an ethnic identity rather than Judaism as a religious faith.

Despite — or perhaps because of — this ambivalence, the post-war period saw a tremendous building boom of synagogues, most of them in the suburbs. In the two decades between 1946 and 1965, there were many hundreds of new synagogue buildings erected. It could be asserted that building new synagogue buildings was the central religious activity for American Jews of this period (Sussman 1985, 32). Many felt not only the need to affiliate with a religious institution for societal respectability, but even more so the need to provide what was then seen as essential auxiliaries to family life in suburban settings. They needed synagogues that could host activities similar and comparable to ones important to Protestant and Catholic communities. This would include the full gamut of family-focused programming including religious school, *bar* and *bat mitzvah* training programs, family Shabbat dinners, brotherhood and sisterhood organisations, and the many other socio-familial pursuits associated with religion in the 1950s. There was a widespread expectation, among not only the architects but the building committees and boards of these synagogues, that an innovative and modern Jewish approach to synagogue architecture could be in the process of being developed.

As Australian architectural scholar Maryam Gusheh explains, 'In response to the synagogue's integration of religion with cultural activities, centralized building types were revised as layered and multi-hierarchical constellations' (Gusheh 2019). Synagogues began to be developed on campuses, and were not necessarily housed in single buildings as they were previously. This suited their purpose as more than a place of worship, where social and educational pursuits were given elevated priority. The architects designing these new spaces also wanted to create statements that reflected the confidence that was being felt by American Jewry (Stolzman 2004, 61). American Jews were feeling a level of acceptance that their parents had only dreamed about and they wanted their synagogues to demonstrate their increased status in American society. These suburbanites were looking for ways to identify themselves socio-religiously as they endeavoured to spend time participating in family-focused activities that could connect them with a community.

Rachel Wischnitzer, author of that generation's authoritative book on synagogue architecture, pointed out that the new synagogues focused on providing better amenities for children, who had previously been relegated to small, cramped, out-of-the-way areas in most pre-war structures. 'The new synagogue has brought convenience and comfort to the children taken from basement classes to the main floor, where they may enjoy well-lit and aired rooms and where they may freely circulate — the library, social hall and the

outdoors being within easy reach.' The facilities were also designed to meet the growing needs of women, and appeared to be accommodating a social trend reflecting their higher status. 'The new layout has given the women a place in the synagogue by doing away with the two-tier arrangement' (Wischnitzer 1955, 183). Wischnitzer adds that, 'One likes to think that because men and women share more equally the benefits of the synagogue and the responsibilities for its maintenance and operation — and this trend is observed alike in the American Reform, Conservative and Orthodox synagogue — it offers today's young generation much greater stimulation for physical and spiritual growth' (Wischnitzer 1955, 183-185). Indeed, most of the architectural trends of the post-WWII period were equally applicable to synagogue buildings affiliated with the three major Jewish denominations.

Suburban Jews saw the synagogue not only as an institution that could help them to reinforce their identity as good Americans, but could also assist them in achieving a range of personal, familial, and communal goals. Most, however, were not 'religious' in the normative understanding of this term. Ironically, this religious institution was seen instead as a place that could reinforce secular ethnicity, a symbolic connection where members could show interest in selected cultural aspects of their roots without feeling the need for a long-term commitment to any system of beliefs or set of ritual practices. In his 1957 book *American Judaism*, sociologist Nathan Glazer commented that 'American Jews, if they believe in anything, believe in the instrumental efficacy of religion' (Glazer 1957, 132).

It seemed that only a small minority of suburban Jews were focused on the potential spiritual impact of the buildings for which they were fundraising. The desire to demonstrate outward affiliation placed the emphasis on external appearances, while little attention was paid to inner religious development. Theologian Will Herberg described this environment as one where many practiced 'religiousness without religion, a religiousness without almost any kind of content or none, a way of sociability or "belonging" rather than a way of reorienting life to God'. Frequently, Herberg continued, it was 'a religiousness without serious commitment, without real inner conviction, without genuine existential decision' (Herberg 1955, 260). This was a harsh portrayal of suburban religiosity. Even though religion was low on the order of priorities, there were certainly ideological touchstones along with the sociological aspirations that building a new house of worship was intended to meet.

Building with meaning

With suburbanisation sweeping the post-war landscape, a great deal of debate began to take place among all of the denominations over how to respond to this tremendous opportunity to influence how hundreds of synagogue buildings were going to look. There were those in the national leadership who were working daily on ways to communicate that their denomination held

certain beliefs or advocated for certain values. For these torchbearers, this was an unknown yet unparalleled opportunity, because these buildings would very likely be seen by virtually every non-Jew as well as every Jew that would be living in and around that particular suburb. Those denominational leaders who advocated for a modern approach believed that it was necessary to break away from the architectural models of the past. They argued that while the architectural models of the nineteenth century that relied heavily on Moorish, neo-Romanesque, Gothic, and even Egyptian elements might have been meaningful at the time, they were now in danger of becoming archaic or even meaningless to both the members of the synagogue as well as local non-Jews.

Throughout Jewish history, synagogue architectural choices reflected the self-identity of the community that was building the structure. While there were certainly (primarily economic) constraints to this, if a community had the capacity to build any type of structure that they wanted, they would certainly try to ensure that it manifested not only the values that they shared among themselves but also the values that they wanted to be communicated to the broader public. To cite one example from nineteenth-century Australia, the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation (also known as Margaret Street *Shul*) was built in 1886 in a neo-Moorish style also called Byzantine (Kalmar 2001). It also includes Gothic and Romanesque architectural style features as well, both inside and outside of the building (Creese and Arnold 2021, 165).

According to Jennifer Creese and Joyce Arnold, when the Jewish families that established this synagogue came to Brisbane, they wanted to build on social and economic connections that they had already formed with other relatively affluent segments of Australian society in order to 'become high-profile members of the growing new society'. Australian Jews could fit in by emulating the values of wealth, class, mobility, and respectability that they observed among the non-Jewish elite. The authors argue that the Jewish community's sense of belonging 'within the moral framework of Australian society' meant 'performing these values' through the visual appearance of their communal buildings (Creese and Arnold 2021, 168).

What seems particularly interesting — and perhaps counterintuitive — is that the Jews of Brisbane did not try to fit in by building a synagogue that looked similar to the local churches. Rather, they wanted to construct a place of worship that was distinctive, so that non-Jewish Australians would respect them as representing Australian religious and civic values on one hand but also projecting the community's unique identity on the other. Since Jews were considered to be the 'Orientals of the West', they wanted to build on this perception and manifest it in a positive manner by designing a magnificent synagogue that was immediately identifiable to their contemporaries as a Jewish religious building of note (Creese and Arnold 2021, 169).

But that which was awe-inspiring in the nineteenth century lost much of its meaning in the second half of the twentieth. Many of the temples built in the United States from the 1840s to the 1930s had high, vaulted ceilings and

utilised heavy materials, including wood and sometimes stone. The sanctuaries themselves were intended to have an intense, emotional impact on the worshiper, to make them feel that there was an otherworldliness that induced reverence and obedience. The architecture conveyed the message that God was omnipotent, not a deity to be negotiated with but rather to be feared. The rabbi was the ritual representative of the congregation, performing a rigidly structured liturgy to meet the demands of that all-powerful and all-demanding divine entity. Advocates of a more modern architecture worried that presenting God as an all-powerful being who needed to be feared would be a very difficult theological conception to sell in the post-war suburbs. Rather, they argued that the architecture needed to communicate the belief that God was loving and benevolent, and wanted to invite all types of people into his house, no matter what their beliefs, interests, and practices.

The specific approach that they were referring to — aptly named 'Modernist architecture' — emerged in the first half of the twentieth century and became dominant in the post-war period. This style came about as a consequence of the development of new technologies of construction, including the use of steel, reinforced concrete, and glass. The guiding principle was that form should follow function, meaning that the architectural style should reflect the use of the building. Modernist architecture stressed minimalism, stripping a structure to its essentials and rejecting ornamentation. The subject is reduced to its necessary elements, focusing on the connections between two perfect planes as well as the void spaces left by the removal of three-dimensional shapes. There was an emphasis on elegant lighting to highlight the lines, planes, and voids created by the design.

Modernist architecture was based on Modernism, a radical philosophical approach to not only artistic endeavours but to all of life, one that repudiated European culture as being morally bankrupt. While there was a great deal of variety in their thinking, most Modernists rejected history — in the sense that they did not believe in the need to be bound to the strictures of the past. They stressed self-consciousness relating to social traditions, which logically led to questioning and perhaps abandoning those traditions. Instead of feeling obligated to realistically depict their subjects, Modernist artisans tended to favour abstractions. Promoting innovation and stressing experimentation, they emphasised new techniques, processes, and materials. Modernism encouraged the reexamination of every aspect of existence. The hope was that by critiquing what had seemed to be established norms, it might be possible to build a better world.

Modernists hoped to become part of a new emerging culture that would undermine tradition and transform contemporary society. Many Modernists were associated with Nihilism, the rejection of all belief systems and networks of ethical principles. They therefore spurned all of the structures of thinking on which society was based, including religious principles. Modernists rebelled against conventional middle-class morality because they

felt it exerted an unacceptable degree of control over human emotion and therefore the human spirit. They wanted to liberate all of humanity from the repressive hand of the tyranny of tradition. Freedom was their central value, and they searched for cultural precedents for it. This desire for freedom was magnified by the tremendous number of scientific discoveries and technological advances taking place in the early decades of the twentieth century. In order not to become anachronistic, human culture had to continually redefine itself in order to keep pace with what was happening in the world.

Many of the Jewish supporters of Modernism argued that this architectural style was perfectly matched with the structure of the Jewish faith. They argued that Judaism stood for the expression of human emotion and the liberation of each individual from rigid societal expectations. This was particularly true for Reform Jews. Modernism justified the Reform movement's rejection of Jewish law as a binding system for religious practice. Likewise, Modernism's casting off of traditional norms reinforced the Reform movement's rebellion from the pre-modern Jewish belief system. Reform Jewish thinkers wanted to tear down the edifice of tradition and draw inspiration from the radical societal changes that they were observing taking place all around them. Modernism fit seamlessly into their worldview.

Rabbi Alexander S. Kline — one of the Reform rabbis most interested in American synagogue architectural developments at the time — explained that this new approach was 'consistent with the progressive, flexible, ever-modern spirit of Judaism... the essentially dignified and austere simplicity and straight lines of modern architecture are logically suited and congenial to the austere and straightforward ideals and teachings of our religion'. As a result of what he saw as the high degree of compatibility between modernist architecture and Judaism, 'if ever there was real hope for developing a distinctively Jewish style of synagogue architecture it is now' (Kline 1954, 45). In comparison with the struggles that American Christians faced convincing their followers to accept new approaches to church architecture, American Jews had a much easier task because they had no dominating architectural tradition to maintain. Many felt that modernism was a style that could synthesise the abstract beliefs of a pure monotheistic faith with the promise of freedom that the American suburbs presumably offered (Gusheh 2019).

There was a tremendous amount at stake. There were those who believed that Modernist architecture could provide an image which would be both distinctively modern and could be moulded to reflect a distinctively Jewish character as well. Others wanted to rely much more heavily on pre-WWII models of American synagogue buildings as well as potentially Eastern European, Western European, and even Asian synagogue design precedent. Even within the Reform movement, which was the denomination that pushed for a Modernist architecture approach the hardest, there was a considerable amount of diversity of opinion. One group, led by the new UAHC president

Rabbi Maurice N. Eisendrath, wanted to encourage its congregations to adapt Modernist conceptions without hesitancy and without delay. Others were much less confident that Modernist architects could create highly functional buildings that could foster the spiritual warmth and communal intensity that they felt the new suburban synagogues would need to fully engage their members over the long term.

It was the Reform movement that first began to embrace Modernist architecture and advocated its acceptance among temples that were members of the UAHC, its congregational association. In fact, more than any of the other American Jewish denominations, the Reform movement is credited with taking proactive measures to encourage progressive approaches to synagogue architecture. Shortly after World War II, the UAHC established an architects' advisory group that could serve as a resource for congregations planning to build a new synagogue structure or expand an existing building. Prominent New York City architect Harry M. Prince was the first coordinator of this loose association of professionals who were willing to volunteer time to UAHC congregations. The group was variously called the Synagogue Architects Consultant Panel (Solomon 2009, 13), the National Architects Panel on Synagogue Planning (New York Times 1972), and the Architects Advisory Panel of the UAHC (Robbins 1967). The group did not offer any set planning guide, so each architect was free to provide advice from their own personal perspective. This model was most likely based on the one already being used by the Interdenominational Bureau of Architecture, which had begun offering advice to Protestant congregations in 1945, at which time they published an influential book entitled *Planning Church Buildings* (Conover 1945). The UAHC published a similar guide in 1946 for congregations planning to move to the suburbs.

The leaders of the UAHC continued to actively facilitate discussion and debate in the coming years over the question of how and in what ways synagogue design could reflect and promote modern religious values and ideals. In 1947, Rabbi Jacob D. Schwarz, the director of the UAHC's Commission on Synagogue Activities, organised two conferences on synagogue architecture that were held in New York City in June and Chicago in November. The conference in New York — entitled 'An American Synagogue for Today and Tomorrow' — hailed that 'this is a new era and there are many important problems that precedent will not decide'. The program handed out at the conference stated outright that one of the goals was to show that 'the American synagogue of the future shall be a well-planned modern and distinctive building, avoiding the false traditions and the architectural mistakes of the past'.

The speakers at the conference castigated previous approaches to synagogue design while not necessarily proposing any particular style of architecture that should shape the synagogue of the future. Some felt that while it wasn't stated outright, it appeared to them that one of the main goals

was to discourage historicism while encouraging Modernism. Percival Goodman, the most prolific post-WWII synagogue architect, recalled later that the conference speakers were adamant about the direction that synagogue design should take. 'Most of us who spoke made a plea for the acceptance and support of modern architecture, describing its integrity, reasonableness, and beauty' (Goodman 1957, 136).

The prominent architect Peter Blake edited a volume on synagogue design for the UAHC in 1954. Sharing the same name as the 1947 UAHC conference in New York City, *An American Synagogue for Today and Tomorrow* — with the added subtitle *A Guide Book to Synagogue Design and Construction* — was written as a reference manual. The more than three dozen contributors shared the common objective of making the synagogue in modern America 'a better building — better technically, better economically, better functionally and better esthetically' (Blake 1954, vii). Nevertheless, perhaps precisely because there had been so many rapid changes in society at that point in history, 'religious architecture must satisfy an ancient demand more adequately than before — the demand for some kind of stabilizing element, for some kind of anchor' (Eisendrath 1954, xviii).

Directing the vision

Rabbi Eisendrath, the liberal leader of the Reform movement, became a strong champion for modern architectural design of the Reform temple. In writing the Introduction to this book, Eisendrath noted that virtually every group of faith could be easily identified by their physical houses of worship. 'Not so the synagogue — at least not in the America of our day or, certainly, of the day before yesterday.' He voiced disappointment that even though every Jew, no matter how assimilated, knows that 'it is by our religion that we are primarily distinguished from our fellow Americans, our religious edifices, our Houses of God, were for a long time virtually the least distinctive embodiment of our Jewish faith'. Eisendrath expressed the belief that Jews needed to build synagogues that could be 'uniquely Jewish houses of worship' and at the same time 'American in form and spirit'. He argued that '[m]ere mimicry of the architectural forms developed by the faiths of others will not conspire ... to establish a conscious and creative synagogue in America'. Eisendrath held the conviction that 'only a synagogue which forthrightly proclaims the essence of Judaism itself and is likewise indigenous to the soil and soul, the substance and spirit, of America, will enshrine and proclaim for us the teachings and truths we hold dear' (Eisendrath 1954, xiii).

In an endorsement of Modernist architecture, Eisendrath explained why he believed that a clean, simple approach to design could best project the religious message of Reform Judaism. 'We Reform or Liberal Jews believe ... that our synagogues shall consistently convey the simple essence of our progressive faith.' Restoring the true faith of Israel required Reform Jews to simplify or even eliminate many of the medieval practices that had been piled

onto the original powerful core of the religion. 'As we have discarded many of our outmoded rituals and observances of the past, so our houses of prayer ought to be expressive of the fundamentals rather than of the incidentals of our faith. In their elegant simplicity and simple elegance they should stir and inspire both the worshiper within and the passer-by with an unequivocal conviction that "surely God is in this place"' (Eisendrath 1954, xiii-xiv).

German Jewish architect Eric Mendelsohn is widely credited as being the most influential architect in the very earliest part of the post-war building boom, despite the fact that he only oversaw the finished construction of two synagogue buildings during his lifetime (Goldberg 1986). Mendelsohn argued that post-war synagogue architecture needed to express a vibrant, contemporary sense of spirituality and not give people the feeling that Judaism was an antiquated relic. In 1946, even before any of his architectural designs had been used to create an actual synagogue building, Mendelsohn stated that 'this period demands centers of worship where the spirit of the Bible is not an ancient mirage, but a living truth, where Jehovah is not a distant King, but our Guide and Companion. It demands temples that will bear witness of man's material achievements and, at the same time, symbolize our spiritual renascence.' He felt that this was a brand new world requiring a completely new approach to architecture that every artist looking for new challenges would be eager to engage. 'A question no architect can pass upon, but the answer will inevitably be recorded in the pages of history now being written' (Meier 1963, 24).

In 1947, Mendelsohn presented a programmatic agenda for the post-war synagogue that repudiated the theology upon which the earlier architecture had been based. 'Thus our temples should reject the anachronistic representation of God as feudal lord, should apply contemporary building styles and architectural conceptions to make God's house a part of the democratic community in which he dwells.' Mendelsohn felt that a modern synagogue building that was overly imposing might be in conflict with the increasingly egalitarian ethos of the times. He believed that it was important that a Jewish sacred space should make the visitor feel they were in an enlightened house of worship, both in a metaphorical and a literal sense. 'Temples should reject in their interiors the mystifying darkness of an illiterate time and should place their faith in the light of day.' The building ought to instil the sense that God is inspiring those assembled, whatever the occasion. 'The House of God should either be an inspiring place for festive occasions that lift up the heart of man, or an animated gathering place for a fellowship warming men's thoughts and intentions by the fire of the divine word given forth from altar and pulpit right in their midst' (Mendelsohn 1947).

Sacred space, in one conception of modern architectural synagogue design, is not limited only to the area devoted specifically to prayer. Indeed, anything educational or even social was considered to have equal sanctity.

Therefore, the entire building could be considered to be sacred, not just the sanctuary and chapel. In the traditional understanding of a synagogue, there are three main functions of the building: a *beit knesset*, a house of gathering; a *beit midrash*, a house of study; and a *beit tefilah*, a house of prayer. Percival Goodman, who designed more than 50 synagogue buildings in his lifetime and became the most prominent Modernist synagogue architect after the death of Eric Mendelsohn, explained how the tripartite division between the social, educational, and liturgical parts of the synagogue could be balanced and integrated. He believed that 'our religion, unlike the Christian, is horizontal: all is holy, the temple, the home, the mountain, and the valley. The Christian concept is vertical: from a point on the ground, man aspires to God. So all is profane except this aspiration. Our faith makes it possible for me to design the social part, the educational parts and the worship as a unity for all our activities shall be a hymn in His praise' (Elman 2000, 58).

Symbolically important

Some Modernist architects were eager to take on synagogue planning projects because, unlike many business buildings, synagogue design projects were hoping to emphasise 'transcendental impact' while using light and space to form a symbolic narrative (Gusheh 2019). With no required framework and with only a mandate to design innovative buildings that would reflect a new modern, fresh, forward-looking approach, architects played around with many creative ideas. One concept was to make the building look like a gigantic prayer shawl that would envelop the community, suggesting that God's presence would bring them near within that space. Another thought was to depict the building as the heavens, a metaphorical representation of the ultimate spiritual place. There were also proposals to design synagogue buildings in the shape of Hebrew letters, as a concrete representation of the back-and-forth argumentation of talmudic discourse, or even in a structure resembling the Western Wall.

Some symbolically far-reaching ideas were actually successfully constructed. Goodman drew on the idea of the pillars of fire and cloud when he designed Temple Israel of Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1955. Two forty feet-high concrete panels are showcased across the entire front of the building, bearing a representation of the pillar of fire and the pillar of cloud which guided the Children of Israel through the desert during their wanderings. Carved into the panels are the first words in English of each of the Ten Commandments. Rising more than two stories, the concrete masses display the text superimposed on sweeping furrows and crevices made to look like rising flames and smoke (Kampf 1966, 118). These two towering panels dominate the facade of the building, opening like the pages of a book and juxtaposed at a slight angle. The space between them contains a series of Jewish stars running vertically on panels of glass in shades of redwood and blue. They convey the message that the synagogue is centred around the Ten

Commandments and the revelation at Mt. Sinai at which time those commandments were given.

Frank Lloyd Wright used the imagery of Mount Sinai in his plans for the Beth Sholom synagogue in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania. Completed in 1959 and dubbed 'Sinai in the Suburbs', it was the only synagogue that Wright ever designed. He carried on an extensive correspondence with the synagogue's rabbi, Mortimer J. Cohen, who referred Wright to a biblical commentary that described the Israelite tabernacle as a 'traveling Mt. Sinai'. Wright loved the idea, saying 'At last a great symbol!... a mountain of light' (Gruber 2003, 105). Utilising Mayan Revival architectural style, Wright created a signature roof made of metal, glass, and plexiglass, with a steep slope which emulates the shape of Mount Sinai. The panels of the roof let in light and illuminate the sanctuary in the daytime; at night the artificial light from the sanctuary is projected into the night sky like a beacon. The sanctuary itself is set down in a bowl, as if sitting within the base of the mountain, with the peak of the roof soaring more than 100 feet above. Rabbi Cohen told Wright that he wanted a sanctuary in which the congregants would 'feel as if they were resting in the very hands of God' (Maule 2014).

Some suggested constructing a building in the shape of a Jewish star, although this design concept proved difficult to implement in real-world construction. If the architects were unable to design the entire building as a Jewish star, many simply had a Star of David affixed to the outer wall facing the street in a way similar to how a church might put a cross up on their building. Even Noah's Ark was considered as a symbolic representation for a synagogue building. This icon would potentially be carrying the survivors of a great catastrophe, so it would automatically reference the aftermath of the Holocaust, yet to some the form is seen as an entertaining, lively, upbeat biblical story that is suitable for children. In reality, the story of Noah is set in the early part of the Book of Genesis, before Abraham and God make their covenant and long before the Torah was given by God to Moses at Mt. Sinai, and this symbolism was seen to be too universal. Like their contemporaries during this time who were trying to find a specific image or symbol which they could use to envision an entire building, the architects pulling inspiration from this story were hoping to find a theme that could make theirs instantly recognisable as a Jewish religious structure.

Other synagogue planners, however, felt that it was not a matter of creating a unique, conspicuous design. There were those who held an inchoate desire to commemorate the destruction of European Jewry. Most American Jews were indeed deeply shocked by the Holocaust. Perhaps these architects subconsciously wanted a way to respond that would involve creating structures to send the message that they were still there and planning to be there for a long time. Nevertheless, they did not want to give the impression that the buildings they were erecting were primarily for commemorating the catastrophe that had happened in Europe. That was in the past. They wanted

their synagogue buildings to reflect their forward-looking focus on the future. To do that, they embraced modern architecture as a way to physically represent their progressive social and religious ideas as a visible part of the new American landscape.

Although in later decades this desire for a physical presence as a form of memorial would lead to the creation of many Holocaust monuments, there was relatively little overt interest in doing this in the 1950s. The Holocaust was still considered to be too horrific and possibly too parochial to be discussed extensively in public. In addition, Jews wanted to stress their inherent Americanness and did not want to draw attention to their bonds of solidarity with their co-religionists who had lived in other countries. Susan G. Solomon remarks that, 'synagogue construction apparently supplanted memorials in the 1950s because their construction was more forward thinking and dynamic' (Solomon 2009, 15-16).

Nevertheless, the shock of the Nazi genocide as well as the theological difficulties that it raised manifested themselves in both the architecture of the synagogue building as well as its interior design. In several of the early synagogue building projects, the deliberate choice of materials and design was meant to express the raw anguish and grief of the Jewish community that would inhabit that sacred space. The use of rough concrete and exposed steel in synagogue buildings constructed in the post-war years reflects a deep ambivalence over affirming the goodness of God in the light of such manifest injustice. An example of this technique is Temple Beth Zion in Buffalo, New York, which has concrete walls that tilt out and project upwards, appearing to defy gravity. The sanctuary has a soaring ark which is designed to inspire awe and humility at the same time, articulating the inconsolable grief that Jews felt in the aftermath of the Holocaust (Stolzman 2004, 61).

Practical issues and influences

In addition to the challenges of stylistic substance, one of the difficulties synagogue architects faced was a practical one. The average Friday night or Saturday morning attendance would be a small percentage of the members who would come to services on the High Holy Days. Philip Johnson, who designed Congregation Kneses Tifereth Israel in Port Chester, New York, in 1956, explained that 'the problem of designing the contemporary synagogue is a nearly impossible one'. Why? 'The difficulty comes from the habits of the High Holy Days, when the attendance, shall we say, swells. Now a space is either great small or great large, but it can hardly act like an accordion and be great small and large' (Gruber 2003, 110). Johnson was diplomatically pointing out the fact that there was a drastic difference in attendance during the year between churches and synagogues. In the latter part of the 1950s and into the 1960s a series of Gallup polls found that almost half of American adults said that they had attended religious services in the past seven days (Newport 2013). Affiliated Christians attended Sunday services at a very high

rate in the post-war years, although this percentage varied by denomination. In contrast, most non-Orthodox synagogues saw a dramatically lower percentage of members attending weekly services on either Friday night or Saturday morning.

An architect designing a synagogue had to create a building that on the High Holy Days could accommodate many times the weekly attendance. The most common solution was to build the sanctuary parallel with the social hall, which was frequently connected by the entry vestibule, and divide the three sections with movable partitions. The partitions would remain in place during the year and would be rolled back, or even removed, for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. This multi-functionalism was alternatively called a 'flexible plan' or 'expandible sanctuary' to indicate that the size of the main prayer space could be changed easily to accommodate the expected but infrequent influx of large numbers of 'twice-a-year Jews'.

Architect Ben Bloch is credited as being the first to propose a flexible synagogue plan with the sanctuary and social hall connected by movable partitions (Bloch 1944, 104-105). The idea of using folding or sliding doors had been used in school buildings and even church buildings for quite a while, but their use had been in subsidiary areas and had not been utilised to connect the largest gathering spaces together (Wischnitzer 1955, 135). The idea of designing the placement of the sanctuary adjacent to the social hall and/or entryway was pioneered by Cecil Moore in 1946 during the construction of a new synagogue for Congregation Anshei Israel, a Conservative temple in Tucson, Arizona. Moore designed the building with a formal sanctuary showcasing exposed brick walls and wooden pews. Behind the sanctuary was a social hall of about equal size, with a vestibule located to the right and the left. For the majority of the year, the social hall would stand empty behind the congregation during services. Reports vary as to whether partitions were ever installed to close off these two rooms, but, regardless, future architects designing new buildings started to include sliding partitions to visually and physically close off this extra space when it was not needed.

These new synagogue architects also had to consciously create buildings for the highway age. Some suburban communities actually had laws that required houses of worship to provide parking lots relative to their size. Goodman specifically anticipated that virtually all of the worshipers would be arriving by car and that the suburban community would note the presence of a Jewish place of worship if they could see the structure from the main roads. He therefore constructed buildings that would prominently convey a dramatic religious message to those driving by on the freeways. For example, when drawing up plans for Congregation Shaarey Zedek in Southfield, Michigan, in 1963, Goodman designed the sanctuary to stand on an expansive open bluff overlooking Northwestern Highway, rising far above the flat landscape. With its steep galvanized metal roof sitting atop a band of recessed

stained glass windows, it looked almost as if the roof was floating above the structure.

Goodman's *modus operandi* was to create horizontal buildings that had a clearly identifiable style. As one recent pictorial volume on synagogue architecture notes, 'He designed or influenced so many synagogue buildings that many American Jews — whether or not they are conscious of Goodman — consider his style to be synonymous with their concept of the modern American synagogue' (Stolzman 2004, 179). Many of these sanctuaries were deliberately designed to be insular. Much of the light came from artificial lighting, and natural light frequently came from windows which were placed high up in the sanctuary, which would allow light in but would not allow those praying to see outside. Those windows that were larger and lower were usually made from stained glass, which would likewise not allow the worshipers to see outside. Like most of the other architects of the time, Goodman included theatre-style seating plans that had long been used in Protestant churches. With fixed seats bound to the floor at defined angles, in relatively large sanctuaries, services would need to be conducted as dramatic presentations rather than participatory interactions.

Many of the modernist synagogues designed at this time were also intended to serve as relatively neutral backdrops for elaborate Judaica religious objects. Prior to the early decades of the twentieth century, many believed that art in general was antithetical to Judaism. It seemed that the very phrase 'Jewish art' was viewed as a contradiction in terms (Fine 2003, 47). However, the emergence of modern synagogue architecture created demand for a specifically Jewish style of art that could be displayed in the building as well as in the home (Stolzman 2004, 58-59). This encouraged the development of a whole new profession, that of the Jewish ritual artist. Much of this art was focused on stained glass windows — which were utilised widely in churches — but there was also major commissioned art that was distinctive to synagogues, such as Torah arks, tablets of the Ten Commandments, and menorahs, as well as smaller items such as Torah covers, Torah bells, and eternal lights.

Goodman conceived of a style in which the artwork would be integrated into synagogue design, where the Judaica would be fused into the very architecture. While earlier generations had focused almost entirely on the design of the building, Goodman argued that structural symbolism alone was inadequate. Rather, art and the artist had to have a significant function in the synagogue environment. Because Goodman's conception of a synagogue is based on an actual congregation gathered together rather than simply an abstract theological concept, he believed that artwork would enrich the personal enjoyment that each individual would derive from their presence in the building. He also wanted the artists to be able to articulate religious themes of their own choosing without having to conform to a rigid framework. Art had to be given an environment in which it could breathe and

develop organically. Each artwork had to be consistent with the overall design, but on the other hand had to be able to speak with its own voice (Kampf 1966, 41).

This approach was such a departure from pre-WWII norms that his first major project of this sort was called 'the first truly modern synagogue' (Baigell 2006, 108). This building was his 1951 design of Congregation B'nai Israel, a Conservative synagogue in Millburn, New Jersey, in which he invited several avant-garde artists interested in spirituality, religious symbolism, and mysticism to design Expressionist artistic works in a variety of media within and outside of the building. The three most prominent pieces of Judaica art that Goodman included were a Torah curtain by Adolph Gottlieb, a wall mural by Robert Motherwell, and an abstract lead-coated copper outdoor sculpture by Herbert Ferber symbolising the burning bush. This was an example of how architects were beginning to facilitate the commissioning of major works of Jewish art to be incorporated into new synagogue designs (McBee 2010). These works were placed throughout the synagogue building with the goal of making them integral components of the architecture itself.

Conclusion

During the post-war years, hundreds of new synagogue buildings were designed and built throughout the United States. Looking through some of the documents produced at the time, one could see the tremendous sense of excitement and hopefulness that existed in that period, which was clearly reflected in the architecture. While there was tremendous shock and horror at the Holocaust that had occurred just a few years prior, there was a great deal of optimism that American Jews could build a thriving Jewish culture in an increasingly tolerant society. Many denominational leaders felt that a distinctively Jewish style of Modernist architecture could play an important role in building this new American Jewish identity.

Modernist architecture could help to create a vibrant synagogue campus on which all different kinds of activities important to suburbanites could be pursued, rather than just prayer. It could project a modern, forward-looking image to those viewing the synagogue building from the outside, helping Jews to reinforce their position as one of the three major faith communities in post-war America. Looked at from the inside of the building, it could eliminate the perception that Jewish theology posited the existence of an all-powerful God who needed to be feared, replacing it with a pluralistic theology of a benevolent God who accepted everyone who came into the synagogue building regardless of their, beliefs, level of observance, or religious commitment.

In an article detailing a design competition for a synagogue and community building to be constructed in Flemington, New Jersey, architect Philip Nobel noted that the wave of Modernism certainly appeared to be consistent with the theological positions of Judaism at that time and hence

had a great deal of potential. As Nobel put it, 'Modernism changed the stylistic equation, making it possible for the first time to try to capture the essence of Judaism without recourse to forms associated with other cultures' (Nobel 2001). Architects designing synagogues felt they needed to make a clean break from the contaminated European style in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Modernism was an eminently suitable architectural style for a religion professedly opposed to the glorification of an object over its substance. It seemed that a clear, new direction in the development and ownership of a distinctly Jewish architectural language was taking shape in the United States.

Unfortunately, Modernist synagogue architecture did not achieve its aspirations. While some of the synagogues from this era remain to this day the homes of active congregations that cherish the architectural visions manifested in their physical environments, many others expressed apathy or even derision for the distinctive features of their buildings. In cases where congregations had to merge or even close as a result of shifting demographics, first-person accounts clearly indicate that most had no idea about the architectural significance of the houses of worship they were leaving behind. For example, when Temple Emanu-El in East Meadow, New York, merged with Temple B'nai Torah in nearby Wantagh in 2018 and moved out of its Modernist 1957 building, news reports focused entirely on the merger issue, making no reference to the historical and architectural significance of the abandoned structure (Gruber 2018).

While many of the congregants failed to appreciate the architectural statements being made by the Modernist designs, synagogue building committees were driven to distraction by the many design and engineering problems that the Modernist architecture had created or exacerbated. Some of the buildings had high ceilings in large spaces that caused air conditioning and heating bills to skyrocket. Others had large community spaces that were impressive to look at but were not functionally effective because of poor sound, lighting, or other logistical problems. In some cases, there were technical design problems that needed to be addressed by reworking structural components. Some buildings had engineering faults which eventually led to the need for extensive and expensive renovations.

At best, the use of Modernist architecture in Jewish sacred space leaves a mixed legacy, with some synagogue buildings hailed as architectural masterpieces but others faulted for being impractical, with major structural defects, and not meeting the rapidly changing religious, cultural, social, and educational needs of American Jews in the latter half of the twentieth century. Even after several decades of growth and progress, no consensus ever emerged amongst architects or temple leadership on what constituted meaningful Jewish sacred space. Nobel himself notes that 'no vital, popular style ever coalesced around the synagogue'. The multiplicity of design elements and nuanced visions began a period of architectural floundering that

continued up until the end of the twentieth century and beyond. Despite the great hope that Modernism would become a compelling and distinctive style for synagogue buildings, the legacy of Modernist architecture was largely a 'communicative failure' (Nobel 2001).

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