

Jewish Nature, Jewish Mobility, Jewish Space: Elkins Park 1953

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Between 1945 and 1975, over 1000 synagogues, synagogue-centers and community centers were built by Jewish Americans in the suburbs of the United States. These suburban institutions, several of which were designed by architects such as Percival Goodman, Erich Mendelsohn, Philip Johnson, and Frank Lloyd Wright, have become icons of Jewish American stability and arrival in American culture.¹ One of the most famous synagogues from this building boom is the Beth Sholom Synagogue in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, which was commissioned by the synagogue's Rabbi, Mortimer J. Cohen, and designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1953 and completed in 1959. Presented in numerous articles and books on architecture and Jewish art, the building often is cited as an example of the high-period of Wright's late-career and a significant contribution to the design of synagogues. The building is one of 18 synagogues in Israel's "Museum of the Diaspora's" "synagogue room" and is one of 17 Wright buildings chosen by the American Institute of Architects that are considered a "major contribution to American culture." Discussions of Beth Sholom are numerous and primarily fall into two types of explorations: the role of the building in the late-career of Wright and the role of the building in modern synagogue design.² All of these examinations are useful to an understanding of the building, but Beth Sholom's fame also makes it a useful building to analyze in order to understand its role in the shifts transforming Jewish American culture in the 1950s. The mountain of articles and letters that document the design process of Beth Sholom reveal that the building emerged from a critical moment in Philadelphia's Jewish history, if not the Jewish history of the entire United States. In particular, Beth Sholom was designed at a time when Jewish Americans were unsure of the relationship between Judaism and the American suburban landscape, a landscape they were encouraged to inhabit by their own congregations and large and powerful Jewish organizations. In many ways Frank Lloyd Wright and Mortimer Cohen used the design of Beth Sholom to orient Judaism, as they interpreted it, to the more natural and car-oriented life-world of suburbia. Beth Sholom can be seen as an "organizational" work, a work

that was as much a work of architecture to be experienced as a device to enable the geographic shift of Jews towards the American suburbs.

When Mortimer Cohen wanted to create a new suburban sanctuary for his urban congregation there were numerous debates as to whether "suburban" Jewish communities should be established in Philadelphia and throughout the United States. In the 1950s, many Jewish families moved to the larger homes and more secular neighborhoods of American suburbs, but many more Jews remained in the city; the move of Jews to the suburbs was not *de facto*. In early 1950s Philadelphia, one fifth of Jews lived in the suburbs while the rest mostly lived in the same neighborhoods many had occupied since 1930. Arguments for a new Jewish American suburban culture emerged from large and powerful national Jewish institutions such as the Industrial Removal Office, the American Jewish Committee, and the B'nai B'rith Organization. Responding to pre-war anti-Semitism in U.S. cities, many Jewish institutions often professed suburbanization as a way to further Jewish assimilation into American culture. A suburban Jewish culture with its potential commodity-oriented lifestyle projected a much more capitalist vision of Judaism in America, especially as McCarthyism appeared to "expose" urban Jewish communities as one of the sites of communist politics. Similarly, the construction of new synagogues in the suburbs was seen as an embrace of a new religion-oriented American culture, which could also be interpreted as antithetical to communism as well as more conservative and family-centered.³ Despite these arguments, critics against the push for a Jewish suburban culture were numerous. Journalists in Philadelphia's Jewish papers claimed that a car-based, suburban Jewish culture would destroy a sense of Jewish community and bifurcate congregants between a religious, poor and urban group and a more secular, wealthy and suburban faction. Many Jews often protested the materialism of the suburbs, believing that the preservation and distribution of wealth was somehow more "Jewish," than the individual acquisition of material goods.⁴

While Mortimer Cohen was aware of the arguments against suburbanization, he was aligned with the institutions arguing for a Jewish American suburban future and against the entrenched representatives of urban Jewish communities. According to the Conservative Jewish Encyclopedia, Cohen was one of the first Rabbis of his time to argue for a complete move to the suburbs as a way to assure the stability of Jews in American culture. It is from this context that Cohen sought out Frank Lloyd Wright to design the new suburban sanctuary: Cohen knew that Wright was a famous architect, an “American” icon, and that Wright also was one of the few architects of his stature in the United States to argue for the movement of all Americans to the suburbs, an argument that Mortimer Cohen needed to make to his congregants.

Cohen was introduced to the writings of Frank Lloyd Wright through the dean of Temple’s School of Architecture and congregant for his synagogue, Boris Blai, and it was Blai who encouraged Cohen to hire Wright to design the new synagogue. Frank Lloyd Wright’s discussion of the role of the suburbs in American cultural development were outlined in numerous articles and books such as *The Vanishing City*. In this book, Wright explained what he called the “organic” union between American culture and ideal urban planning. Wright’s conception of the organic meant several different things; in the context of architecture it implied a sympathy with natural form, the use of new materials and cantilevers; in urban planning it represented a form of settlement that was sympathetic with nature and that was an expression of an idealized American governmental and technological order.

Wright claimed that a form of sprawling suburban living was the organic expression of the privileged relationship between American society, land and the automobile. These ideas were formalized in Wright’s designs for “Broadacre City,” in which he developed his vision for de-centralized planning based on the settlement of every American on one acre of land in “Usonian” houses. In addition to a prominent place for religious buildings, Wright envisioned a public sphere within Broadacre City via community centers, oftentimes called “automobile objectives,” that mixed natural scenery and cultural programs.

When Cohen and Wright began work on the design of Beth Sholom’s new synagogue, each of the men developed theoretical ideas for the building that naturalized the formation of a Jewish community among the more pastoral setting of the suburbs. In an early letter to Wright that included several drawings for the proposed synagogue, Cohen wrote:

“According to Judaism, the spiritual in man is organically part of himself as a physical entity. It is not superimposed; it is interwoven with his very being; it is something that grows in him and out of him, as a tree grows out of a seed.

*...Judaism is interwoven with his body, his community, his people, humanity and the great mother – Nature herself.”*⁵

In addition, Cohen explained the “democracy” of the temple to Wright and the organic relationship between Judaism and the natural world, evident in the numerous “tree” metaphors within Jewish theology.⁶ Similarly, Wright spoke of his ideas for the synagogue and Broadacre City interchangeably in his introductory lecture to the synagogue and at a contemporaneous lecture at Temple University. The synagogue would be one aspect of Wright’s suburban communal vision, and this appealed to synagogue leaders who wanted to project a more assimilated and suburban image.⁷

In the design stage of Beth Sholom’s interior and exterior architectural form, the concepts of Cohen’s and Wright’s ideology evolved. Wright’s designs typically incorporated or were sympathetic to natural imagery – trees, rock beds, etc... – and for Beth Sholom he sought an explicitly “Jewish” natural metaphor. Cohen sent Wright three images of Mount Sinai, which according to the Old Testament is the site where Moses received the Ten Commandments from God. The pictures Cohen sent contained captions that described how Mount Sinai was the Israelites’ first religious shrine and the landscape surrounding the mountain the site of one of the Israeli people’s most significant “encampments.” Cohen wrote that the design should not only recall the form of mount Sinai, but that the synagogue design should imply a “wandering mount sinai,” a “moving mountain” that both appeared to rise out of the land, and move, taking its encampment of Jews to the suburb of Elkins Park.⁸

Wright’s design for Beth Sholom with its truncated pyramid-like form resting on a heavy boat-like base captured the sentiments of Cohen’s concepts, and Cohen was elated in its close representation of his ideas. In a series of articles in Philadelphia’s Jewish newspapers, Cohen explained how the formal referent of the temple established an important relationship between biblical history and contemporary Jewish demographics. As Mount Sinai was the site that marked the end of Israelite wandering and the beginning of a new era of peace for the Israelite people, Cohen claimed that this building, understood as a representation of Mount Sinai, would be a place for the Jewish people to gather and acknowledge a new chapter in their history: “To realize its destiny, the American Jewish community must renew the covenant of Mount Sinai and ready itself for the ever continuing revelation of God to his people. Each generation of Jews must ascend the rugged heights of Mt. Sinai.”

Cohen explained the symbolism of the building in a series of press releases sent to Life and Time magazine with specially commissioned dramatic night-time and day-time perspectives of the temple. Cohen wrote to these magazines: “As you know the entire American Jewish community, in September of 1954, will

celebrate the 300th anniversary of the coming of Jewish settlers to these United States. Our intention is to associate the new synagogue with this tercentenary celebration in Philadelphia, so that it may be regarded as a religious shrine commemorative of that historic event."⁹ Images of the synagogue, as well as other ten commandments-based imagery were widely published throughout the United States and used for the tercentenary.

Armed with a complex image for the synagogue that allowed them to naturalize the movement of the Logan community as part of the continuing evolution of Jewish history, the two "co-designers" (the way Wright enjoyed referring to Cohen) continued to orient the synagogue to suburbia. Cohen educated Wright on each of the common ritual objects used in synagogues—the Eternal Light, the Ark, the Menorah, etc...., and Wright and Cohen intended to integrate these objects with automotive experiences. This approach mimicked a strategy that Wright employed for a Christian church in the Crystal Cathedral project of 1923. In the Crystal Cathedral project Wright proposed a spiraling road in the manner of Tatlin's Monument to the Third International. The road would have wound up the church to a garden chapel at its summit so that worshippers could reach a religious space purely by car.

At Beth Sholom, Wright proposed that the building be designed so that the "ner tamid" or "eternal light" — a common feature of synagogues that is typically centrally located above the "ark" or cabinet for the torahs — not only be clearly visible from every seat within the synagogue, but on the exterior it would be visible specifically from automobiles passing the major road in front of the synagogue. A religious symbol also derived from the story of Moses, Wright designed the ner-tamid integrated into a larger, billboard-like monolith, and the light coming from the ner-tamid was drawn in the manner of a searchlight, whose high-beams projected a Jewish cultural symbol into Elkins Park.

In addition to the Ner-Tamid, Wright and Cohen designed other aspects of Jewish religious culture as part of a vehicle-based light-show. The menorah, a Jewish ritual symbol representative of a candelabra, was reinterpreted as a series of cascading search lights on the building's exterior designed to orient cars toward the synagogue. Cohen proposed that lights could also be used to relate the building to the nearby suburban airport. Cohen suggested that the top of the building have a blinking red light, integrated into a Hebrew banner, that exclaimed "I am the lord thy god," which according to the old testament are the first words god uttered to Moses before giving him the ten commandments: these blinking letters would serve as a form of signage and as a search light for airplanes overhead. This last idea was rejected by Wright and the Board of Trustees of Beth Sholom who did not want such a public display of Hebrew on the exterior of the building.

As the synagogue was constructed protests emerged from the urban Jewish community and the suburban neighborhood of Elkins Park. Wright's frequent comments that Beth Sholom would demonstrate the way a Jewish house of worship could be integrated into the "American" landscape, and thereby end the differences between American religions, was threatening to more religious Jews in Philadelphia. Cohen received numerous letters from Jewish congregants dismayed at the arrogance and "assimilated" aura of the new building. In one letter, Cohen's Mount Sinai references so artfully used to argue for Jewish suburbanization were turned against him; Riv Aptekman wrote: "I would rather give my pennies to AJA, JNF, than to Frank L. Wright and his *egel hazahav* (the golden calf), you call a synagogue....there is one Jew (and also a few goyim) in Philadelphia who are not inspired by Frank L. Wright and his creations for Jewish worshippers."¹⁰ Neighbors in Elkins Park voiced protests that what Wright and Cohen were creating was not a synagogue but a "Jewish" road-side attraction that would attract sightseers and that would result in traffic accidents and traffic jams.¹¹

Many art and architecture critics examined the theoretical arguments that drove the design ideas of Beth Sholom and other contemporaneous suburban synagogue and community centers. William Schack in his review of a book that featured Beth Sholom, wondered why so many religious buildings were becoming more and more like the airports and commercial buildings surrounding American cities. He said the synagogue is becoming too automobile-centered, a "scene of constant arrivals and departures."¹² Leo Steinberg, in a review of the same book, warned of the naturalization of Jewish wandering, via buildings that claimed to express the dynamism of Jewish movement across the United States.¹³

While Cohen read and addressed the numerous criticisms of Beth Sholom, an automobile objective that attracted both Philadelphia's and other Jews to Elkins Park was precisely what he wished to create and what he realized at Beth Sholom. By all accounts, Cohen's intentions to use the synagogue as an architectural argument for the movement of Jewish Americans to the suburbs was a success. By the time of the synagogue's completion in 1959, Beth Sholom's congregants in Logan had begun to move to Elkins Park in earnest and the remaining minority had switched to other synagogues in the inner city. In addition, Beth Sholom had become a major tourist attraction for American Jews outside of Philadelphia. The synagogue's stunning design was reproduced in Jewish and mainstream American papers and magazines, and directions on how to reach the synagogue were published in just about every Jewish paper in the United States. Cohen not only encouraged Jews from around the country to visit, but celebrities also were encouraged to visit the synagogue: Anne Baxter, the famous movie actress and grand-daughter of Frank Lloyd Wright, was by the most famous of the celebrities to come to the synagogue. Her arrival to Beth Sholom was significant for Cohen and his

congregants also due to her recent appearance in Cecil B. DeMille's *Ten Commandments*. The film, like Beth Sholom, located a burning Mount Sinai as a central symbol of Jewish life, which de Mille called a symbol of the liberation of all people.

As more and more visitors came to see the synagogue, Cohen developed a small travel guide in order to fully indoctrinate tourists in the meaning of the synagogue's imagery. Laid-out in the manner of an automobile guide cum Jewish prayer book, the text in the book decodes the synagogue's forms. Below a picture of the synagogue's exterior Cohen wrote among other things: "the temple is a Wandering Sinai, accompanying Israelites on their journey into the wilderness." In the pages that follow, visitors are encouraged to see a pool in front of the synagogue as representative as a symbolic washing basin in front of the ancient Israeli temples, and then to gaze up to see the Menorah references on the exterior of the building; entering the building one should look up to see a chandelier representative that Cohen claims is representative of the kaballah; and upon exiting and getting back into one's car visitors are encouraged to look back to see the car-oriented eternal light from Old York Road. Cohen wrote: "All who pass Beth Sholom Synagogue at night can see from the street, framed in its glass windows, the great ner Tamid aglow, the eternal light proclaiming god's presence within."¹⁴

Today, numerous bus tours arranged by Jewish youth and adult groups take visitors from New York, New Jersey, Long Island and Rhode Island on trips to see Beth Sholom and to learn the story of its creation by Mortimer Cohen and Frank Lloyd Wright. The synagogue continues to appear in articles about synagogue design and continues to be used as an example of the successful Jewish integration into American culture. The formal referents of Beth Sholom have been endlessly furthered and elaborated upon in books and articles with names such as "Together they built a Mountain," and in chapters titled the "Slopes of Beth Sholom." One recent author seemed to be unaware of the problems of association when he stated that Beth Sholom references Mount Sinai and a Native American Teepee, thereby aligning Jewish Americans with other ethnic American nomads. The debates surrounding the construction of Beth Sholom and other suburban synagogues and community centers of the 1950s have either been lost or are presented as the ideas of marginal, overly religious Jews. In a contemporary Jewish Encyclopedia the entry on Mortimer Cohen, uncritically claims that he was one of the first rabbis in America to successfully establish an argument for suburban Jewish communities.¹

In the past ten years, Beth Sholom and the other synagogue and synagogue centers of the first wave of Jewish suburbanization began losing congregants. Beth Sholom loses approximately thirty families per year who either move to suburbs farther away in wealthier and even more assimilated neighborhoods or move

into downtown urban areas their grand parents left long ago.² In some instance more religious Jewish congregations take over the older buildings and their massive parking lots are the site for the development of new recreational programs or are sold for housing to facilitate an easier walk to temple. Many Jewish cultural studies theorists have claimed that the drop-off in synagogue membership and building is being matched by a new phase of intense construction of other Jewish buildings. One might claim that the era of massive synagogue building is over and the era of Jewish museum building has begun, and this can be seen in the more than 200 Jewish cultural museums and Jewish oriented holocaust museums just constructed or being constructed throughout the United States.

As older structures are abandoned and new one's begun, it will be important to observe the new theoretical model and metaphoric image that will simultaneously negotiate the abandonment of important Jewish buildings and the creation of new structures. A monolithic response to the complexity of Jewish American experience seems impossible today, but inevitably a simple spatial type form that claims to represent contemporary transformations and demographics will be advanced. As this occurs, we should be aware of how it will frame the heterogeneity of Jewish American experience.

REFERENCES

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²From a conversation with director of Beth Sholom, 2003

NOTES

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²Of these the most thorough histories are Patricia Talbot Davis, *Together They Built a Mountain*, (Philadelphia: Sutter House, 1974) and the more recent, George Goodwin, "Wright's Beth Sholom Synagogue" in *American Jewish History*, 86.3 (1998) 325-348

³On this subject see Glazier, *Dispersing the Ghetto*, 1996 and Norman Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry*, 2001

⁴Arnold R. Ginsburg, "Synagogues in Elkins Park," *Philadelphia Jewish Times*, May 29-30, 1953

⁵Mortimer Cohen, Letter to Frank Lloyd Wright, (1953?), Folio 1, Beth Sholom Archives

⁶ibid.

⁷Frank Lloyd Wright, "American Synagogue, Congregation Beth Sholom," speech delivered June 3, 1954, Folio 1, Beth Sholom Archives.

⁸Mortimer Cohen, letter to Frank Lloyd Wright, January 20, 1954, Folio 1, Beth Sholom Archives and Davis, *Together They Built a Mountain*, pg. 32-35

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¹⁰ Rivle Aptekman. Letter to Mortimer Cohen, undated; and Seymour Levitan. Letter to Mortimer Cohen, September 13, 1954, both in Folio 2, Beth Shalom Archives

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¹⁴ Mortimer Cohen. *Beth Shalom an Interpretation*, 1962