Modern Architecture and the Jewish Problem: “Jewish Architecture” Reconsidered

David E. Kaufman

Though unfamiliar in the past, the phrase “Jewish architecture” has lately been introduced to the lexicon of Jewish culture, popping up in book-titles (and sub-titles) such as: New Jewish Architecture from Berlin to San Francisco (2008); Louis I. Kahn’s Jewish Architecture (2009); Jewish Architecture in Europe (2010); and Building After Auschwitz: Jewish Architecture and the Memory of the Holocaust (2011). Beyond focusing on architectural design by and for Jews, such publications have re-opened the older and broader debate over the nature of Jewish Art. For example, in introducing the new Posen Library of Jewish Culture and Civilization, editor James Young raises the familiar quandary of what makes art Jewish, and layers on a series of provocative questions:

What is Jewish art, or photography, or architecture? What makes Barnett Newman, or Philip Guston, or Mark Rothko Jewish artists? Do Newman’s meditations on martyrdom constitute “Jewishness” in his work? Do Guston’s reflections on identity and catastrophe make him a “Jewish artist”? . . . And architecture. Is there such a thing as “Jewish” architecture? The current generation of Jewish architects is certainly legend (think of Frank Gehry, née Frank Owen Goldberg, Richard Meier, Peter Eisenman, Daniel Libeskind, Santiago Calatrava, James Ingo Freed, Moshe Safdie, and [Robert] A. M. Stern, to name but a few of the most prominent). But what are we to make of Gehry’s suggestion that the undulating steel forms for which he is so famous are inspired by the live carp his grandmother kept in a bathtub before turning it into gefilte fish?¹
As Young observes, the present architectural field boasts a number of stars of Jewish background, and his interrogation of a “Jewish architecture” proceeds from that context. While these Jewish architects attained prominence over the past four decades, public discussion of Jewish architecture only began in earnest in the early 2000s, when several of them first offered designs for “Jewish” buildings—e.g., Frank Gehry’s Jerusalem Museum of Tolerance, Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museums in Berlin and San Francisco, and Moshe Safdie’s Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum—all included in Angeli Sachs and Edward van Voolen’s 2004 museum exhibition, *Jewish Identity in Contemporary Architecture.* By highlighting some notable examples of the recent construction boom in new synagogues, Jewish schools, and Holocaust museums—many but not all designed by Jewish architects—Sachs and van Voolen have made the case for the emergence of a contemporary Jewish architecture. Complicating the picture, however, the catalogue includes an incisive essay by a leading historian of synagogue architecture, Samuel Gruber. At the very opening of his essay, Gruber bluntly states: “There are many Jewish architects, but there is no such thing as a ‘Jewish’ architecture.” He later expands on the exhibition’s theme of “Jewish identity in architecture,” offering this formulation:

When architects have attempted to impose Jewish identity on a building through design and decoration, this was often done in opposition to prevailing Christian forms, rather than through the embodiment of specifically calculated Jewish features or the overall adoption of something recognizable as a Jewish sensibility . . . A less common way Jewish identity has been addressed in architecture and design has been the conscious consideration, application, and integration of Jewish devices, themes, and other expressions of meaning into a building’s design so that to some degree the structure not only has a Jewish function after its completion, but is in fact imbued with Jewish identity during its creation (“Jewish Identity” 23).

Gruber’s first criterion of Jewishness in architectural design—that the building not look Christian—is based on a negation; whereas his second criterion—that the architect “imbue[s]” the structure with “Jewish identity”—is vague at best. While both may be valid observations, we are nevertheless left without a practical, working definition of Jewish architecture. As an architectural historian, Gruber shies away from the phrase “Jewish architecture” and leans toward a minimalist view of the phenomenon. Whereas Jewish historian Gavriel Rosenfeld leans in the opposite direction, having made an exhaustive study of “Jewish architecture” in his 2011 *Building After Auschwitz: Jewish***
Architecture and the Memory of the Holocaust. Moving beyond his own expertise in Holocaust memory, Rosenfeld surveys the post-sixties generation of Jewish architects represented in every major movement of contemporary architecture. In particular, he highlights the modernists Richard Meier and Peter Eisenman (two of the famed “New York Five”), post-modernists Stanley Tigerman and Eric Owen Moss, neo-classicists Allen Greenberg and Robert A. M. Stern, and internationally renowned deconstructivists Libeskind and Gehry. His book offers the most extensive argument to date in support of the notion that there is such a thing as Jewish architecture. Yet contrarily, and much to his credit, Rosenfeld begins by acknowledging the problematical aspects of the rubric “Jewish architecture”:

The very idea of Jewish architecture raises many conceptual problems, most of which derive from the fact that no single style of architecture has ever existed across the vast temporal and spatial parameters of Jewish history. In the absence of a unifying style, it is unclear what the concept of Jewish architecture might mean. Does it refer only to Jewish religious structures? Or also to secular buildings used by Jews? Does Jewish architecture have to be designed by Jewish architects to qualify as Jewish? Or do synagogues created by non-Jewish architects qualify as well? What, moreover, are we to make of Jewish-designed buildings that have no specific Jewish functions? And what about structures erected due to Jewish patronage? These questions underscore the difficulty of defining Jewish architecture (2).

Many of his questions directly parallel the larger debate over the term “Jewish Art,” and certainly, questions of its meaningfulness and applicability endure—as is well demonstrated in other articles in this volume—engaging historians, critics, and artists alike (see esp. Bland). Jews in the modern world have embraced the arts as never before, and the consequent proliferation of Jewish artists in many areas of modernist art has given rise to the far from settled question: ought their creations be thought of as Jewish Art? This paper applies the question to the artistic profession of architecture, and is my own attempt to answer the query posed by Young and Rosenfeld—what is Jewish architecture?

The characterization of any given field of endeavor as “Jewish” is highly subjective and must therefore remain inconclusive insofar as it encompasses issues of psychological proclivities, cultural sensibilities, religious memory, etc. Yet such characterizations often begin as objective statements of quantification, a more certain matter of numbers. Psychoanalysis was called the “Jewish
science” because its principal creator and nearly all its early adherents were Jews. Hollywood has been called “an empire of their [that is, the Jews’] own,” in other words, a “Jewish industry,” since the founders of all the great studios were immigrant Jews and Jews arguably tend to dominate its culture to this day. And diverse arenas of American popular culture such as Broadway musical theater, pop songwriting, stand-up and television comedy, urban photography, classical violin, abstract expressionist art, etc., have all been deemed “Jewish” fields for the same reason—simply because Jews are so prominent in the ranks of their practitioners. The question then follows: what of specifically Jewish content (or at least intent) is then infused into these cultural products? In the particular case of Jewish Art, granted, the artists are mostly Jews; but must we then also take for granted the inference that Jewishness is at the core of their art? To assume that it must be so a priori is a form of essentializing that ought to be avoided. Nevertheless, the question of whether there is Jewish Art, in general, and Jewish architecture, in particular, is worthy of serious consideration—just as is the case when we are faced with a preponderance of Jews in any given cultural arena.

But architecture does not fall easily into this category. Of all the artistic expressions of modernism, architecture may be the one least often linked to Jews. Whereas modern art (painting, drawing and sculpture), music, theater, and literature are all often associated with Jewish artists, producers, patrons, and critics, modern architecture has only sporadically been subject to the same association. Though Jewish architects and especially patrons may be found throughout the history of modern architecture, the conventional historical narrative most often seems bereft of Jews and their particular cultural influence. Yet Rosenfeld’s narrative tips the scale the other way by privileging the current period—during which time a significant group of Jewish architects has emerged—and the impression is given that the field of architecture does indeed contain many Jews. But, in the longer perspective, this is a gross distortion, both due to the actual proportion of Jewish architects, as well as the tendency of those Jews who do find their way into the architectural profession to downplay their Jewishness, that is, to be assimilated Jews—contrary to the architects touted by Rosenfeld, whom he describes as self-consciously Jewish in both their personal identity and public work.

Of course, there are always exceptions to the rule, and further examination of the subject will reveal Jewish participants in the field in sometimes surprising ways. Louis Sullivan’s partner, for instance, was a rabbi’s son named Dankmar Adler; and two of Frank Lloyd Wright’s most important clients
were named Kaufmann and Guggenheim. But as these last examples suggest, one possible reason for the relative lack of Jews in modern architecture is the common reliance of architects on commissions from corporate sponsors, and especially in the past, big business was traditionally hostile to the incursion of Jews. Many of those mid-twentieth century Jews who aspired to careers in architecture would later recall the discrimination they faced from potential employers and clients in the pre-Civil Rights era. Another probable cause was the tendency of the professional field of architecture, much like its cousin engineering, to discourage Jews from attending its training schools; and for much of the twentieth century, this tendency became self-fulfilling, as Jewish architects seemed as anomalous as black quarterbacks. Though both these stereotypes have been challenged in recent decades (the 1990s and 2000s especially), for most of the preceding century “architect” was never one of the multiple professions associated with Jews—unlike doctor, lawyer, accountant, etc. As Tigerman quipped in 1982: “no archetypal Jewish Mother ever boasts of my son, the architect [as she would] ‘my son, the doctor’.” Ostensibly speaking from personal experience, Tigerman further noted that “to be an architect and to be a Jew is obviously to be a schizophrenic” (Rosenfeld 224). Architecture, in sum, is not generally seen as a Jewish profession; nor did it become, until very recently, one of the forms of modern art conventionally associated with Jews.

What constitutes Jewish architecture therefore cannot be a matter of the collective influence of a significant population of Jewish architects—there is none. Instead, the Jewishness of architecture is perhaps better seen as a function of the individual relationship between an architect, his client, and the commission. Ideally, it requires more than one of these factors—i.e., a Jewish architect, Jewish patronage, or a building of Jewish function—to justify describing the architecture as “Jewish.” When just one of these factors is highlighted to the exclusion of others, the suggestion of architectural Jewishness often falls short, as exemplified by Fredric Bedoire’s ambitious study, *The Jewish Contribution to Modern Architecture, 1830–1930*. First published in Swedish in 1998, it was translated into English and issued by KTAV publishing house in 2004. An exhaustive survey of all Jewish-sponsored architecture in a modern historical context, the book offers a compelling account of how wealthy Jews, as patrons of the arts, have made a significant contribution to modern architecture. But does that make modern architecture “Jewish” in any meaningful sense? Bedoire tries at first to avoid the essentialist argument as he writes: “My intention is not to demonstrate a Jewish architecture, should any such thing exist”; but then he seems to contradict himself as he continues: “...
intend] to underscore the presence of Jewishness in European and American architecture of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to show that the Western world would have looked completely different without the Jews, and that many of the most intensified and complex formal manifestations of the age are directly related to the Jewish clientele” (507). There is no such thing as “Jewish architecture,” he says, but there does exist “Jewishness in architecture.” It is a subtle distinction without significant difference. Even if there were a meaningful distinction, by privileging Jewish patronage over designer and function, the argument falls well short of establishing useful criteria for the Jewishness of modern architecture.

Rosenfeld’s Building After Auschwitz offers a somewhat more convincing argument for the notion of Jewish architecture by utilizing all three considerations. Through much of the volume, he makes a solid case for a contemporary Jewish architecture. Only when he follows Bedoire’s example and treats just one factor at the expense of the others—in this case, the Jewish background of the architect—does his argument fall flat. As I am suggesting here, the definition is far better applied when more than one of the factors is in play, operating in relation to one another. Thus, for example, Frank Lloyd Wright’s well-known design for a synagogue in suburban Philadelphia—recently explored in great depth by Joseph Siry in Beth Sholom Synagogue: Frank Lloyd Wright and Modern Religious Architecture (2011)—fits the definition of Jewish architecture. Though designed by a non-Jewish architect, it is a Jewish-functioned or -themed building (in this case a synagogue) designed for a Jewish client and users (a Jewish congregation). As Siry discusses at length, the rabbi of the congregation, Mortimer Cohen, participated extensively in the design process, the Jewish religious expert thus becoming an active collaborator with his famous architect. “Jewishness”—Jewish themes, questions, sensibilities, values, and most of all, relationships (as in the classic theological relationship between God, Torah, and Israel)—was thereby infused throughout the dialectical process that is architectural design, and the result can quite rightly be called “Jewish architecture.”

This is even more apparent when all three factors are operative, as when a Jewish architect designs a Jewish building—a building whose purpose specifically promotes some aspect of Jewish culture—for a Jewish clientele. This Jewish architectural trifecta is the focus of a number of recent studies in addition to Rosenfeld’s survey, including: Moshe Safdie’s Yad Vashem: Moshe Safdie—The Architecture of Memory (2006); Susan Solomon’s Louis I. Kahn’s Jewish Architecture: Mikveh Israel and the Midcentury American Synagogue
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(2009), and Walter Leedy’s *Eric Mendelsohn’s Park Synagogue: Architecture and Community* (2012). In the first case, a Holocaust museum is designed by a Jewish architect—but this is not just any Holocaust museum and not just any architect. Both the museum and its architect are Israeli, adding a third dimension to the picture. The “client” in this case is the entire nation of Israel, and even more broadly, the worldwide Jewish people—for Yad Vashem was designed to be the central site of Holocaust memory, the Holocaust being unquestionably an event of monumental significance to Jews around the world. It furthermore serves a special function in Israel by preserving historical memory of European anti-Semitism, to which political Zionism emerged as a response. By its very location, therefore, Yad Vashem illustrates the link between the Holocaust and the State of Israel. As the most prominent Israeli architect working internationally, Safdie was well situated to offer a design sensitive to all the issues of Jewish and Zionist history. And indeed, the design, as completed in 2005, contains much in the way of Jewish perspectives and Zionist values. For example, the structure of the main museum exhibition wing is a submerged concrete bunker, piercing the crest of a Jerusalem hilltop. As such, it has the impact of an open wound on the landscape, a permanent rupture of the natural order—evoking a characteristically Jewish way of seeing the Holocaust, as an unfathomable human tragedy and unprecedented catastrophe in both Jewish and world history. At its end, however, the linear construction flares open as a curvilinear unfolding, revealing a vista of the landscape beyond. The view presents the beauty of nature as the antithesis to human destruction, pointing us instead toward the redeeming and reviving post-Holocaust achievement of Zionism—Israel. Having given us a design that conveys the arc of Jewish history (or at least one interpretation of it) so powerfully, it is impossible to think of Safdie’s Yad Vashem as anything but Jewish architecture.

Nevertheless we still must ask: should all Holocaust-themed architecture, whether museums or memorials, be properly considered Jewish architecture? Certainly, memory of the Holocaust is a central component of contemporary Jewish consciousness, and its tangible manifestation in architectural design is by definition an expression “of an altered Jewish self-awareness.” As Sachs and van Voolen further note: “The starting point was to break the silence and anchor Jewish life and Jewish history—including the history of destruction—conspicuously in society and the urban landscape” (8). Like Rosenfeld, they automatically classify Holocaust architecture as a form of Jewish architecture. Yet there remains at least the possibility of an architecture of Holocaust memory that does not qualify as Jewish architecture. Imagine for example that the
Ukrainian government commissioned a local non-Jewish architect to build a state museum at Babi Yar. The exhibit would certainly make note of the over 30,000 Jews who were killed at the site, and perhaps part of the motivation for the building would even be to attract Jewish visitors to the Kiev area. But the building itself would still not qualify as Jewish architecture, since Jewishness would not have primarily informed the design process nor would it be present in the transaction between Jewish architect, client, and subject. Or, to cite a case that is not hypothetical: can the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam be counted as an example of Jewish architecture?—a significant, even sacred site of Holocaust memory, certainly; but Jewish architecture? I think not. From an architectural standpoint, it is a Dutch-designed building that only became associated with the tragedy of Anne Frank after the fact. Architecturally, there is nothing particularly Jewish about it. Typologically, therefore, it may be more precise to place Holocaust architecture in a separate category; for otherwise, we accede to the notion that Holocaust consciousness is the crux of Jewish identity, that it is Jewishness. While for some that may be true, my own predilections regarding Jewish Art and culture suggest treating Holocaust architecture as its own category, related to but generally subsidiary to Jewish architecture per se.

In his lengthy study of Jewish architecture, Rosenfeld ultimately divides the subject into three categories: 1) synagogue architecture; 2) Holocaust museums and memorials; and 3) all architecture designed by Jewish architects. But to my mind there is only one form of Jewish architecture that is unequivocally Jewish, and that is the architecture of the modern synagogue. This is not simply due to the generally religious character of the synagogue, for that would be tantamount to equating Jewishness with religiosity—much like the over-privileging of Holocaust consciousness noted above. Such religious practices as synagogue attendance and communal worship are a conspicuous part of Jewish religion and hence of Jewish culture, but in neither case do they constitute the single defining element of Jewish life. As with memory of the Holocaust, Jewishness cannot be reduced merely to synagogue Judaism however important a role it may play in Jewish life. Nevertheless, synagogue design ought to be considered the principal type of Jewish architecture since, conforming to the definition above, it is the most commonplace product of the interplay between Jewish sponsorship (of the congregational community) and Jewish function (the diverse needs served by a synagogue). Add a Jewish architect to the mix and it only increases the potential Jewishness of the negotiation.

Based on the foregoing, two other building types might reasonably be added to the category of Jewish architecture: the Jewish school and Jewish
community center; and in fact, both have tended to be designed in a more Jewish vein, often by Jewish architects, in recent years. Yet as I have argued above, the synagogue—more than the school and center—is the quintessential expression of Jewish architecture for at least two other reasons as well; for it is the concrete expression of both religious Judaism and of Jewish social and communal life, that is, it engages both sides of the Jewish equation. In the first instance, the design of a synagogue is a rare opportunity for an architect to explore the spiritual and transcendent qualities of religion, in this case of Judaism. The synagogue presents a unique architectural challenge insofar as it is at heart the Jewish equivalent of a “church”: a one-room building devoted to the worship of God. None other than Philip Johnson made this point in his foreword to Rachel Wischnitzer’s *Synagogue Architecture in the United States* (1955). And more recently, Young has seconded the sentiment and emphasized the religious element in Jewish architecture as follows:

Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish museum designs, to my mind, signal a return to the conceptual religious foundations of Jewish architecture. . . . That is, just as a prayer *Minyan* turns any space into Jewish sacred space, akin to the Temple of Jerusalem, “Jewish architecture” is rooted in conceptual space, constituted not by formal structural elements, walls and cornices, but by what goes on within the volume of that space. . . . In this light, Jewish architecture is less about the building’s space in the landscape and more about the space such buildings open up inside us for prayer and contemplation, for our individual contemplation of the Jewish relationship to God, life, history, culture and identity. Jewish architecture consists of this exchange between Jews and the buildings they inhabit, not in a particular building design (“Daniel Libeskind’s New Jewish Architecture” 60).

Religious architecture, as is the case with religion overall, is ultimately less about the formal structures built to contain religious experience and more about the aspiration to transcend such worldly constraints. The design of the synagogue, much like that of the church, has always expressed the religious dialectic between spiritual longing and divine promise. But then, the synagogue is more than a church, serving many other functions and aspects of Jewish life as well. In addition to housing religious services, the synagogue structure also contains within it all the multiplicity and complexity of Jewishness beyond religion, including: Jewish culture, education, politics, economics, ethnic variation, immigration history, public image, inter-group relations, modes of acculturation, geographic shifts, collective memory (including Holocaust
commemoration), etc. This observation is all the more valid in the modern context, for over the past two centuries, synagogue architecture has been engaged in what Wischnitzer has called “the quest for a Jewish synagogue style” (45ff.).

Rarely content to simply mimic church design and engage in an unmediated revivalism, designers of modern synagogues have consistently sought to develop a stylistic and functional language appropriate to the Jewish synagogue—that is to say, to invent a Jewish architecture. Though often unsuccessful in aesthetic terms, their results have nonetheless made a mark on the landscape of modern religious architecture, in bold and sometimes surprising ways. The quest for a modern Jewish architecture has thus mirrored the greater aspiration of Jews to make their mark in modern society and contribute to contemporary culture; the architectural quest thus serving both as metaphor and as mechanism. The following brief survey of the two hundred year history of modern synagogue design in America and elsewhere is intended to demonstrate the notion that Jewish architecture is that which expresses the Jewish experience in built form, and captures, at one moment in time, the flow of Jewish history.

Though the modern movement in art and architecture does not commence until late in the nineteenth century, the modern experience of Jews begins at least a century earlier—and thus the new synagogues of the contemporary era in Jewish history can be said to manifest a certain “modernism” well before the appearance of modernism itself. In 1794, during the early years of post-Revolutionary America, the Jews of Charleston, South Carolina erected a new synagogue edifice for Congregation Beth Elohim. As later illustrated by Solomon Nunes Carvalho, the synagogue’s exterior looks like a church of the period; but it conforms to traditional Jewish practice on the interior. The building thus neatly conveys the rapprochement that newly enlightened and emancipated Jews had made with the modern world: joining the general society and becoming good citizens in the public sphere, while preserving their separate identity as Jews in private. A similar duality would be demonstrated a few decades later in the 1826 Seitenstettengasse synagogue in Vienna, whose exterior is unidentifiable as a Jewish house of worship, but whose interior is a resplendent oval-shaped synagogue sanctuary. The modern synagogue therefore reflects both the successful social integration as well as the fragmented identity characteristic of the modern Jewish experience.

In addition to the modernization of the Jew, the modern synagogue would also reflect the modernization of Judaism. Erected in 1810, the “Jacobstempel”
of Seesen, Germany, became the first synagogue structure of what soon would be called “Reform” Judaism. The small private synagogue, built for the modern school founded by Israel Jacobson, was revolutionary in the arrangement of its seating, location of its bimah (Torah-reading platform), and inclusion of musical accompaniment (as well as a bell in its tower). Over the next two centuries, such innovations in Jewish practice, often highly contentious, would play out in the arena of synagogue design. As historian Jonathan Sarna has demonstrated, the issue of mixed seating—men and women sitting together—was particularly challenging to the builders of synagogues, and has continued to define religious boundaries—between Orthodoxy and more liberal Jewish expressions—ever since (Sarna). In the main, the history of the nineteenth century Reform synagogue, most often called a “temple,” mirrors the history of modern Judaism. But it also reflects the economic progress made by Jews during the same period, especially given that upward mobility both fosters religious acculturation and spurs the “conspicuous construction” of extravagant synagogue structures—producing “cathedrals” of an enlightened Judaism that are monuments to Jewish success at the same time.

The period in architectural history preceding the modernist revolution, and to which modernism was the response, was characterized by historical revivalism. Especially in nineteenth century religious architecture, varied styles associated with various historical periods were revived to express the diversity and pluralism of modern religion and culture. Architects of Jewish buildings were inclined as well to borrow their stylistic language from the prevailing trends of the day—for two distinct reasons: first, because it allowed them to reflect the general tendency of modern Jews to assimilate to the surrounding culture; and second, because they started, as it were, with a blank slate, due to the lack of an historical style of specifically Jewish architecture that could be revived in the first place. Yet as Gruber notes above, synagogue architects did often consciously distance their work from Christian norms of religious architecture in order to express and highlight a sense of Jewish difference. For example, though exceptions can be found, rarely did synagogue architects design in the predominant church style of Gothic Revival. Instead, they moved through a century-long search for a distinctive style appropriate to both the public- and self-image of modern Jews— aspiring to an equal status with the Christian majority, yet desiring to remain distinct from Christianity at the same time.

Thus synagogue architects experimented at various times with:

Egyptian Revival—as in Philadelphia’s Mikveh Israel of 1825; Greek Revival—as in Charleston’s Beth Elohim of 1840 (built to replace the earlier structure
destroyed by fire in 1838); Romanesque Revival—as in Baltimore's Har Sinai of 1849; Moorish Revival—as in Cincinnati’s Plum Street Temple of 1866; Byzantine Revival—as in New York’s Temple Beth El of 1891; Roman Revival (Neoclassical)—as in New York’s Shearith Israel of 1897; and so on. Sometimes historical styles were blended in eclectic fashion—as in the Romanesque/Byzantine/Moorish Herter Brothers design for New York’s Eldridge Street Shul of 1886. But without focusing on the stylistic issues embodied by any one of these trends, we can say that on the whole, the nineteenth-century synagogue was a study in variability. By cycling through so many distinct styles, the synagogue established a “Zelig”-like profile of adaptability and assimilation—not unlike the modern Jew.

It was perhaps inevitable that modern synagogue architects would attempt the invention of an explicitly Jewish style—in direct response to the common observation that there was no historical architectural style associated with Jews. As early as 1849, American Jewish clergyman and newspaper editor Isaac Leeser lamented the lack of a Jewish style, as he commented on the Egyptian Revival design of the new Beth Israel of Philadelphia: “We heard something said about the style being Hebrew, but unfortunately for our reputation there are no accessible remains of our ancient buildings, wherefore our style must be more in imagination than reality” (Wischnitzer 46). The search for an identifiably Jewish style would eventually lead architects to look at the precedent of ancient Israel. One key example of this tendency was Arnold Brunner’s 1901 Henry S. Frank Memorial Synagogue, also in Philadelphia. In his design, Brunner, the architect of the 1897 Shearith Israel and one of the earliest of a growing number of Jewish architects, made direct reference to the archaeological remains of ancient synagogues in Palestine, only recently excavated. Wischnitzer adds: “The architect was inspired by the ancient Galilean synagogue exterior at K’far Bir’im” (101). By linking the building to both the earlier history of synagogue architecture and to Jewish life in ancient Israel, Brunner was attempting to infuse his design with an identifiably Jewish heritage. The same strategy is employed by numerous designers of Jewish buildings today who so often incorporate Jerusalem stone as a building material that it has become a cliché.

Early in the twentieth century, there was some effort to invent a specifically Jewish architectural style—as in the 1918 B’nai Jeshurun in New York, whose designers called their Mediterranean pastiche “Semitic style.” The trend enjoyed its greatest expression in Palestine itself, as the “new Jews” of the Zionist community or Yishuv, inspired by Ahad Ha’am’s ideology of cultural
Zionism to create a modern Hebrew culture, also attempted to create a Jewish architecture. Boris Schatz, founder of the Bezalel Art School in 1906, was instrumental in this movement, and he himself played a role in the iconic design of the Tel-Aviv Gymnasium (high school). While not all architecture made in the Jewish State is necessarily Jewish, the Zionist enterprise created a situation in which Jewish architects would often design Jewish-functioned buildings (synagogues, schools, cultural centers, museums, and now including Zionist institutions as well) for a Jewish clientele (the society of the Yishuv)—together creating the conditions for the emergence of a Jewish architecture. The self-conscious invention of Jewish culture is, moreover, characteristic and reflective of the modern Jewish experience.

At the same time that a modern Jewish architecture was emerging in Mandatory Palestine, the Jewish diaspora was also seeing the development of new forms of Judaism and Jewish life, and hence a different movement of Jewish architecture emerged—one not based on the development of a national identity in Israel, but on religious experimentation in America. I have in mind the architecture of the early twentieth-century synagogue-center, a subject on which I have written extensively and which I will try to summarize in brief here. The synagogue-center was an innovative form of Jewish institutional life, combining the religious functions of the synagogue with the social, educational, and recreational functions of the “Jewish center” (a generic term including Jewish settlement houses, educational alliances, modern Talmud Torahs, YM/YWHAs, etc.—later, in postwar suburbia, it would generally come to be known as a “Jewish Community Center,” or JCC). The synagogue-center’s architecture would reflect its multiplication of function, as in Louis Allen Abramson’s designs for Manhattan’s Jewish Center of 1918 and the Brooklyn Jewish Center of 1920. The former hid its synagogue sanctuary and swimming pool behind the façade of an urban apartment house, and the latter contained the same multi-faceted program within a more horizontal building that would jokingly be called a “shul with a pool.” In both cases, as in the hundreds of imitations around the city and across the country, these newly characteristic institutions perfectly captured the multiplicity of modern Jewish life. In the Jewish past, such multiple functions were served by a panoply of institutions; but in the American present, the “department store” mentality had taken hold, whereby all possible needs would be served under one roof. In this sense, the synagogue-center and its Progressive-era architecture together embodied the modern rationalization of Jewish life. The principal underlying motivation no longer prioritized fealty to God and adherence to Halakha (Jewish Law)
but rather tended to focus more on the efficient servicing of individual and communal needs. One such rationalist expression of modern Judaism was Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan’s program of “Reconstructionism,” which, to a certain extent, was inspired and first enacted by his early experimentation with the synagogue-center idea (Kaufman).

Following World War II, Jewish communities on both sides of the Atlantic embraced the modernist style of architecture. Its application to the modern synagogue has been well documented (e.g., Solomon ch. 1), but let us focus here on how it reflects postwar Jewish life. The first great modern synagogue architect was Erich Mendelsohn, who was himself a refugee from Nazi Germany and thus personified the post-Holocaust Jewish experience. As Gruber put it: “The very act of building his (six) major synagogue designs was a sign of the Jewish phoenix rising from the ashes” (“Jewish Identity” 26). His design for St. Louis’ B’nai Amoona Synagogue (1947), for example, combined the earlier functionalist rationalism of the synagogue-center with the more expressionist emotionalism of modern art and architecture. This design-duality might perhaps be read to reflect the tension between the extraordinary optimism and the extreme despair, which together characterized the twentieth century, a tension especially acute for postwar Jews who lived in the shadow of the Holocaust but who also witnessed the establishment of the State of Israel. Similarly, another major Jewish architect of the time, Louis Kahn, incorporated the complexity inherent in modern Judaism in his (unbuilt) designs for Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia (c. 1962). As one of the most revered of modern architects, Kahn is best known for his use of natural light, which he considered the most essential element in architecture. Of course, light also happens to be a central metaphor in Jewish tradition, evoking both the divine “light” of the Torah as well as the modern intellectual culture of the Jewish enlightenment. In his chapter on Kahn, Rosenfeld also shows how the secular architect may have found inspiration in the historical precedents of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem and of the symbology of the Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) in his later synagogue designs. In Kahn’s designs as in Mendelsohn’s, the progressive ideals of modernist architecture were employed to express the inherently conservative values of traditional Judaism.

Two other Jewish architects, less famous than Mendelsohn and Kahn, but whose works might better reflect the American Jewish experience, must be cited here as well: Percival Goodman and Sidney Eisenshtat. The one based on the east coast, the other in the west, they together encapsulate the synagogue building boom of postwar suburbia. Goodman, surely the most prolific of
American synagogue architects, is credited with over “50 synagogues and religious buildings around the United States, including the stone-clad Fifth Avenue Synagogue at 5 East 62d Street in Manhattan; Congregation Adath Israel in the Riverdale section of the Bronx, a strongly sculptural mass of concrete and red brick, and Shaarey Zedek in Detroit, a building with a stark prowlike concrete roof cutting into the sky.” *New York Times* architecture critic Paul Goldberger further notes: “His synagogues were assertive, modernist structures, reflecting Mr. Goodman’s belief that the vocabulary of modern architecture could be transformed into something rich enough to express powerful religious feeling. . . . His goal was to design synagogues that interpreted Jewish tradition in modern ways, and he saw the architect as critical to the process of expressing religious identity in the 20th century.” Most of Goodman’s synagogue designs, as in his 1954 Temple Beth El of Providence, Rhode Island, tended to be more intimate and human-scaled spaces than Mendelsohn’s and more practical and functional than Kahn’s. One of his main contributions was his emphasis on the artistic program of the new suburban synagogues. Goodman encouraged his congregational clients to adorn their new synagogues with artistic decoration and symbols of the Jewish religion. Though unintended, the new emphasis on décor and symbolism echoed the detachment of postwar Jews from Judaism. Their Jewishness was no longer an outgrowth of an organic Jewish culture, but was instead a conscious choice to add a little Judaism to their suburban existence. The ubiquitous parking lots of the commuter community synagogues signified something similar—the “drive-in” quality of suburban Judaism. Once again, modern synagogue architecture is “Jewish” insofar as it reflects the modern Jewish experience.

The work of Eisenshtat is perhaps an even better exemplification of “Jewish architecture.” In addition to the synagogue projects he completed in Southern California and elsewhere, Eisenshtat also undertook commissions to design other “Jewish” buildings in the Los Angeles area such as the Hillel House at USC (from whose School of Architecture he had graduated in 1935), the Westside Jewish Community Center, the House of the Book at the Brandeis-Bardin Institute (c. 1970), the University of Judaism master plan (completed, 1977), and even the Friar’s Club in Hollywood (1961). His noted synagogues include Los Angeles’ Temple Emanuel (1951) and Sinai Temple (1959), as well as B’nai David of Detroit, Michigan (1956) and Temple Mount Sinai in El Paso, Texas (1962). An Orthodox Jew, Eisenshtat was said to refuse payment for his synagogue projects. He also claimed to approach synagogue design from a distinctly Jewish perspective, pointing out that “people pray differently. For
instance, in Catholicism, priests are intermediaries of God; in Judaism there is no intermediary. Therefore, I see the structure for synagogues not as pyramidal but as horizontal” (De Wolfe). Hence most of his sanctuary designs employ a circular plan, a common feature of synagogue architecture intended to simultaneously express the unity of God’s creation and the egalitarian nature of Jewish worship and assembly. Clearly influenced by Mendelsohn, and described both “as an expressionist and as a minimalist,” Eisenshtat endowed his synagogues with an especially dramatic quality, befitting the revivalism of postwar Judaism (Gruber, “Sidney Eisenshtat”).

Figure 1. Temple Emanuel, Beverly Hills. Courtesy Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills.

But Eisenshtat’s most significant representation of American Jewish life might just be posthumous. In 2011, the congregation that gave him his first synagogue commission, Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills, completed an extensive renovation and restoration of their landmark 1951 building (fig. 1; for a photograph of the modern renovation done by Rios Clementi Hale Studios, see Pl. XII). Funded largely by members of the congregation in the film industry, and guided by the combined vision of Rabbi Laura Geller, Building Committee chair (and Hollywood producer) Scott Stone, and architect Mark Rios, the renovation has been largely deemed a success (Rus). One of its more remarked-upon features was the renewal of many of the original artistic works adorning the synagogue exterior and interior. Wall sculptures, stained glass windows, and interior murals that had been obscured for years were suddenly
"revealed" and "seen" as if for the first time. Perhaps the best example is the colorful mosaic mural created by Joseph Young in 1955 for the entry vestibule of the synagogue. The mural portrays the multiple functions of the ideal synagogue, representing the postwar synagogue-center as a house of prayer, study, and assembly. Also, as noted at the time, the work was "considered to be the first major mosaic installed in a Jewish Temple since ancient Biblical times."6

Hidden by grime and ignored for decades, the Young mural is now a newly appreciated highlight of the restored Temple Emanuel. Similarly, the reconfigured sanctuary has reinvigorated congregational worship and to a significant degree, re-energized the communal life of Emanuel. In sum, the temple renovation in Beverly Hills beautifully represents the revival of American Judaism and the transformation of the American synagogue, taking place at the turn of the twenty-first century. Once again, synagogue architecture (and art) can be seen to reflect its broader cultural context.

Finally, we come to the more recent efflorescence of Jewish architects. Whether their creative output ought to be considered a form of Jewish architecture has been the guiding concern of this essay. As suggested earlier, the Jewish origins of the architect alone provide no assurance of the Jewishness of the architecture. Beyond the question of origins, more careful observers pay attention to the actual life experience of the architect and his/her own relationship to questions of Jewishness. Despite Rosenfeld’s cataloging of numerous contemporary Jewish architects, this can be seen most clearly in the career arcs of three in particular: Stanley Tigerman, Peter Eisenman, and Daniel Libeskind. Rather than being known for designing synagogues, all three have themselves raised the relevance of being Jewish to the practice of architecture, and thus contemplated the possibility of a Jewish architecture. According to Rosenfeld, “Eisenman’s development as a Jewish architect was prompted by his agreement to produce a design for the Jewish Museum of San Francisco in 1996”; and quotes Eisenman as follows:

For the San Francisco project, Eisenman sought to create what he called a “new kind of Jewish architecture.” Eisenman’s ideas for San Francisco were concerned with “the Jewish situation as we approach the 21st century—post-Holocaust.” As he put it, the building “should be an expression of what it means to be a Jew—morally, spiritually, culturally,” . . . Eisenman concluded [in his letter to the museum committee], it was “wrong” to ask the question: “How can a Jewish Museum express its Jewishness?” Especially “since the history of Jewish building . . . has been explicitly against any overt symbolism,
any so-called graven images, . . . it would seem quite natural,” he concluded, “that the architecture of this museum [would] be questioning rather than expressing.” (172)

Eisenman was relating his own postmodern and deconstructivist impulses as an architect to the process-oriented and open-ended nature of the Jewish rabbinic tradition embodied in Oral Torah. Something like the intricate inter-textual practice of Jewish study, contemporary architectural practice resists straight lines, right angles or conclusive answers, urging us instead to consider every side of a question. Remarkably, given their history of assimilation, contemporary Jewish architects have begun to relate this aspect of Jewish tradition to their avant-garde designs, whether or not the building serves a Jewish purpose. In this regard the self-reflexive Jewish declarations of Tigerman, Eisenman, and Libeskind suggest that they may be seen as exemplars of a Jewish architecture. If the defining feature of contemporary Jewish life is the individual search for Jewish identity, and if the main arbiter of contemporary Judaism is “the sovereign self” (Cohen and Eisen), then such personal evocations of architectural intent are what make their work reflective of contemporary Jewish experience. In the end, it is not Frank Gehry’s use of the [gefilte] fish motif in his architecture that makes it Jewish; it is his own musing over its source, his own wrestling with the enigma of his Jewish identity, that implies a Jewish architecture. Yet like the aforementioned three postmodernists, Gehry’s to-this-date failure to take a synagogue commission (he may perhaps have grown too big—though that did not stop Frank Lloyd Wright or Phillip Johnson) indicates that something essential is missing from his trajectory as a Jewish architect. As we have seen in this brief survey, the phenomenon of Jewish architecture is best seen in the design and construction of synagogues—for the simple reason that a synagogue, which etymologically means “place of synthesis,” serves to unite the individual Jew with the Jewish community and to submerge the ego-driven self within the spiritual collectivity of “Am Yisrael” (the Jewish people).

In the final analysis, the individualistic architectural musings I have just described do not truly conform to my thesis that Jewish architecture is that which mirrors the greater Jewish experience. For minus the element of a collective Jewishness, neither architects nor architecture (nor any other art) can ever fully be thought of as “Jewish.” To make the point as clearly as possible, let us compare the phrase “Jewish architecture” to the more familiar “Gothic architecture.” It would appear faintly ridiculous, would it not, to define Gothic architecture as the design product of an individual Goth architect working
out the anomalies of his “Goth-ish” identity. Yet Jewish architecture is routinely defined in such terms. The definition works to a degree, as the modern Jewish experience has tended to reduce Jewishness to the level of individual consciousness and thus created the category of Jewish “identity.” Hence the term “Jewish architecture” is often conceived of as the expression of an architect’s Jewish identity in his/her design. As suggested here, such a definition has now become the most common compensation for the lack of a recognizably Jewish style of architecture. But just as “Gothic” now refers to the entirety of a medieval civilization, so too should the term “Jewish” more accurately reflect all its social, political, cultural, communal and religious associations. Jewish architecture is best understood not as the individual intimation of an assimilated and idiosyncratic Jewish sensibility, but rather as the more holistic expression of a collective Jewish experience, a shared Jewish culture, in all its complexity and fullness. A Jewish architecture has indeed begun to emerge at the turn of the twenty-first century—but rather than thinking of it merely as the product of an architect who happens to be a Jew, it makes far better sense to see it as the artful manifestation of our contemporary Jewish civilization.
Notes

1. Also see Young’s parallel discussion in “Daniel Libeskind’s New Jewish Architecture” 45–46.
2. The exhibition was held at the Joods Historisch Museum in Amsterdam.
4. Many contemporary Jewish historians have suggested a periodization for Jewish modernity beginning earlier than the late eighteenth century; see esp. Meyer ch. 1, “When Does the Modern Period of Jewish History Begin?”
5. My examples will all be American, but European buildings could be cited just as well.
6. Quoted from the original news item reproduced on the Facebook page for Temple Emanuel Beverly Hills (Joseph L. Young fan page).


