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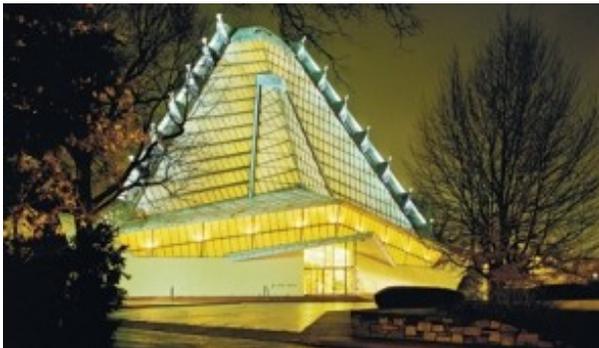
Frank Lloyd Wright's Philadelphia synagogue depicts spirituality through modern architecture

Frank Lloyd Wright allegedly had an anti-Semitic streak, but the synagogue he designed proves that even modern architecture can express a spiritual idea.

By Noam Dvir Tags: [Jewish World](#) [Passover](#) [Jewish holidays](#)

Situated in a quiet suburb north of Philadelphia is Beth Sholom - the only synagogue designed by Frank Lloyd Wright during the architect's long and storied career. The building marks an epilogue of sorts: Wright designed the synagogue near the end of his life and died only months before its dedication in 1959.

"Wright was conscious of the fact that he was nearing the end of his life, and it was vital to him to bring to fruition architectural ideas he considered essential. It's no coincidence that during that time he also designed the Guggenheim Museum in New York," says Prof. Joseph Siry, a historian of architecture.



The Beth Sholom Synagogue.

Photo by: Balthazar Korab Photography Ltd.

"He dreamed of a building along the lines of Beth Shalom throughout his career. I think that as people get closer to their death they think a great deal about what they're leaving behind."

The synagogue's story is told in Siry's 2011 book "Beth Shalom Synagogue: Frank Lloyd Wright and Modern Religious Architecture." It's a thick volume filled with hundreds of pictures and sketches that present Beth Shalom as the climax of Wright's work on religious buildings. Siry also investigates the curious relationship between Wright and Rabbi Mortimer Cohen that spawned the avant-garde design.

The Conservative Jewish community of Beth Shalom was founded in 1919 in Philadelphia's Logan neighborhood. Many members left for the suburbs after World War II, so in 1950 they moved the congregation to the suburb of Elkins Park.

Cohen, who had served as the community's rabbi since its inception, played a key role in designing the new synagogue. He was revolted by the monumental synagogues in American city centers based on kitschy historical styles; he envisioned a synagogue with the look and feel of a modern building. Cohen felt that Wright could combine the modernist language and necessary symbolic expression. The first meeting between the two took place in September 1953, and six months later the plans were submitted to the Beth Shalom board.

By the '50s, Wright was famous around the world. His projects included the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo, the Johnson Wax corporate headquarters in Wisconsin, and Fallingwater, a private home in Pennsylvania that became the most famous house designed in the 20th century. Even though Wright had designed several outstanding religious structures, he had never been asked to design a synagogue.

But as the son of a Unitarian priest and a believer, he was raised to respect Judaism. Cohen took part in the planning process and spent endless hours in conversation with Wright.

"I asked Mr. Wright to plan a synagogue, not of yesterday or of today, but of tomorrow. A synagogue that would present the Jewish spirit at its finest," Cohen said at a fundraising event for the building. The two men decided that the building should carry a powerful symbolic message and express American Jewry's modern character.

The image chosen for the synagogue was the receiving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. The building is a pyramid (a tetrahedron) borne atop a low, flat mass. The pyramid is made out of light aluminum, with transparent plastic (formerly glass) panels.

The extraordinary prayer sanctuary, which contains over a thousand seats, is inside the pyramid. During the day, the sanctuary is illuminated by natural light, while at night the synagogue shines on the outside world. It echoes the intensity and drama of Mount Sinai, which according to tradition was shining when the Jewish people received the Torah.

The building proves that even modern architecture, lacking ornamentation, can express a clear, spiritual idea. Below the sanctuary, on the ground floor, is a lobby that leads to a mid-size prayer sanctuary. Along its sides are two large symmetrical halls and two wedding suites - for men and for women - where wedding couples and their guests can prepare for the ceremony.

Sand-colored carpeting

Jewish symbols are integrated all around. The fountain in the entry plaza symbolizes the copper basin where in ancient times worshippers washed their hands before prayer services and sacrifices. Suspended from the pyramid's edges in the prayer sanctuary are three menorahs, marking the division between priests, Levites and the rest of the Jewish people.

Hanging from the ceiling in that hall is an elaborate fixture that contains 12 colors representing the 12 tribes. Stairways are fitted with sand-colored carpeting to echo the journey of the Children of Israel through the desert.

"The issue of symbolism troubled Rabbi Cohen a great deal," says Siry. "He was concerned that the community was increasingly losing the connection to its roots in Europe, since most of its members had been born American citizens. He felt that the building should induce a symbolic atmosphere in all its constituent parts."

Wright and Cohen saw eye to eye on this, which perhaps is no surprise. Wright often said a significant building needed the support of an excellent client.

Religion was an inseparable part of Wright's thought process in architecture. "There is a spiritual component to nearly all his work, particularly in the most successful work," says Siry. "He relates to architecture as to a spiritual question. For example, he referred to the Guggenheim Museum as a temple. He often compared buildings to cathedrals, which in his view were the height of architectural design - how an office building was a 'corporate cathedral.'"

Siry's book includes several fascinating revelations about Wright's work. He shows how the idea of building a house of prayer in the shape of a pyramid came to Wright three decades before the Beth Sholom project. It was his Steel Cathedral project, planned in 1926 for the Episcopalian priest William Norman Guthrie. Wright designed an immense steel pyramid that contained a modern prayer space.

The book features sketches of the project, which evidently served as an inspiration for Beth Shalom. According to Siry, Cohen apparently did not know about the plans for a steel cathedral, and he suggests that even if Cohen knew about it, he might not have ended his collaboration with Wright. The synagogue plan, after all, includes an array of Jewish symbols; it's unmistakably a synagogue.

Wright's dark side

Siry's book was released this January and has won much praise. Still, some of his colleagues say the study fails to answer the basic question of why Wright avoided planning a synagogue for so long.

The answer, says Prof. Gavriel Rosenfeld of Fairfield University in Connecticut, is that Wright had an anti-Semitic past. In a piece in *The Forward*, Rosenfeld says Wright hurled anti-Semitic remarks at his Jewish employees and made anti-Semitic comments about architects Richard Neutra and Rudolf Schindler.

Rosenfeld claimed that Wright identified with the isolationist anti-Semitic ideas of automaker Henry Ford. Wright's comment about Jewish warmongers cost him his friendship with the historian and critic Lewis Mumford. So it's possible that Jewish communities were wary about commissioning Wright to plan synagogues, or Wright might have intentionally avoided such projects. Still, Wright worked for many Jewish clients, though always on secular projects.

Siry lives in Middletown, Connecticut, and teaches in the art and art history department at Wesleyan University. He has also written a book about Unity Temple in Oak Park, Illinois, another building by Wright. Siry has also written two books about Louis Sullivan, a mentor of Wright's considered the father of the modern skyscraper.

Siry notes that Wright was the first American architect to make the who's who list in the United States. His picture often appeared in newspapers; he even appeared on the television show "What's My Line?" An excerpt of the program on YouTube has registered more than 130,000 hits over two years.

"Wright's work is considered to be at the forefront of modern architecture and continues to garner much attention even now," says Siry. He notes the Guggenheim, which was renovated three years ago. Its retrospective exhibition on Wright broke visitor records at the museum.

So what is the secret behind Wright's attraction?

"His buildings have a very unique form, and many of them are precedents. His originality is captivating, and his life story is fascinating. I think that when compared to other modernists, he had an ability to develop very complex forms, and not design boxes," Siry says.

"His architecture challenges people's understanding of what architecture is. You have to bear in mind that he designed all his buildings before the computer age. I constantly wonder what he might have planned if he had had the digital tools that exist now."

The best evidence of Beth Sholom's success as a public building is its current condition. It has barely changed since it was dedicated, and the congregation, which now numbers around 1,300 families, makes sure to maintain it meticulously. Community members set up a preservation fund that has mounted a historical exhibition in the building's lobby; every week there's a full program of guided tours. In 2007, it was declared a National Historic Landmark, an honor very few synagogues in the United States can boast.