Dow Jones Reprints: This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit www.djreprints.com

See a sample reprint in PDF format. Order a reprint of this article now

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.
WSJ.com

ARCHITECTURE | DECEMBER 22, 2009

The Rabbi and Frank Lloyd Wright

By JULIA M. KLEIN

Elkins Park, Pa.

Rabbi Mortimer J. Cohen was a visionary with chutzpah. In November 1953, on the advice of a mutual acquaintance, he wrote the most famous architect of his day to ask if he would consider designing a suburban Philadelphia synagogue. What was needed, the rabbi informed Frank Lloyd Wright, was "a 'new thing'—the American spirit wedded to the ancient spirit of Israel." Cohen took the further liberty of enclosing his own sketches.

Wright, then 86 and based at Taliesin West, in Scottsdale, Ariz., had turned down previous requests to build synagogues. But Cohen's invitation to develop a distinctively American architectural idiom for a Jewish house of worship enticed the architect. Six years later—despite fund-raising woes, the daunting complexity of Wright's design, and flooding from a burst pipe—Beth Sholom's imposing glass pyramid in Elkins Park, Pa., was dedicated to wide acclaim.

This fall, the Conservative synagogue, designated a National Historic Landmark in 2007, celebrated its 50th anniversary by inaugurating a visitor center and public tours, available three days a week or by appointment. Together, they offer an intriguing look at the congregation, the architecture, and the extraordinary collaboration between Cohen and Wright.

Old York Road, the artery that links Philadelphia to its northern suburbs, is lined with synagogues, representing the mid-20th-century Jewish migration from the inner city. But Beth Sholom has always stood apart. The building, unusual in both form and materials, radiates otherworldliness. Symbolizing Mount Sinai and evoking a vast desert tent, the hexagonal structure towers above the leafy avenue by day. By night, it emit an eerie silvery glow that illuminates the roadway.

Most passersby—until recently, I was among them—have never seen the synagogue's remarkable interior. Th main sanctuary, which holds more than 1,000 worshipers, combines grand architectural gestures with Wrigh signature detailing. The beige-carpeted floors slope downward, while the walls of the temple soar dramaticall skyward, a dynamic contrast that creates vertigo and seems to obliterate the distinction between heaven and earth.

Wright, who borrowed liberally from his own unbuilt 1926 design for the Steel Cathedral for a Million People, employed the metaphor of the congregation "resting in the very hands of God." The visitor center, housed in a converted lounge within the temple, opens with an image of Wright's roof plan superimposed on a photograp of the rabbi's palms.

The dominant geometric form of Beth Sholom is repeated triangles. Wright also used motifs from Mayan and Assyrian art and trompe-l'oeil finishes. Beams of aluminum-clad steel, cast aluminum and painted concrete are all pewter-gray. Fiberglass paneling on the interior and corrugated wire glass on the exterior make the temple translucent.

Wright called the sanctuary's chandelier, made of panels of colored Plexiglas and resembling a three-dimensional kite, a "light basket," Emily T. Cooperman, preservation director of the Beth Sholom Synagogue Preservation Foundation, says. He ultimately opted against stained-glass windows. "Let God put His colors on, for He is the great artist," Wright declared. An ingenious interactive display demonstrates the results: Visitors can navigate through 360-degree views of the synagogue's interior and exterior at different times of day and during each of the four seasons.

The exhibits, which rely on cutting-edge media rather than artifacts, were designed by Picture Projects of Brooklyn, N.Y. Architectural work on the project, which also includes new signage, a ramp and a gift shop, was done by Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates and Andrea Mason Design.

James Kolker, who was project architect for VSBA (and had his bar mitzvah at Beth Sholom), says the visitor center represents "the beginning of the next 50 years of the preservation . . . that will be needed"—including fixing the synagogue's leaky roof, another Wright signature.

The centerpiece of the visitor center is an elegant 22-minute documentary, "An American Synagogue: Frank Lloyd Wright, Mortimer Cohen and the Making of Beth Sholom." Narrated by Leonard Nimoy, the film draws on vintage photographs and the rich correspondence between Cohen and Wright. Beth Sholom was founded in the Logan section of Philadelphia in 1918. Its name, in honor of the end of World War I, means "House of Peace." The relocation to Elkins Park was an attempt to serve an increasingly suburban membership.

A three-pronged timeline outlines the history of American synagogue architecture, the building of Beth Sholom and Wright's architectural career. Another display reproduces key letters between Wright and Cohen, in which they exchanged ideas, compliments and occasional complaints. Touch-screen technology allows visitors to dig deeper with minimum effort.

Finally, the center offers oral histories, with video images, from congregants. Most are not compelling to outsiders. One exception is the recollections of Ray Perelman, a local philanthropist who was on the Beth Sholom board when Wright's plans were unveiled—and who claims to have immediately recognized their genius.

The relationship between the rabbi and the architect is at the heart of the Beth Sholom story. Wright even put Cohen's name on his architectural drawings, a highly unusual move.

Cohen, a sophisticated man who led the congregation for more than four decades, often cajoled and flattered the narcissistic Wright. "I have read of and followed your achievements with amazement," the rabbi writes as he baits the hook. "Here is hosanna, in the highest!" he exclaims in response to Wright's initial designs. "I leave to your greatness my hopes and dreams," he says later.

Wright, for his part, complains—he is worried about payment, among other things, and reminds Cohen that he has only postponed, not waived, his customary fee. (Just a misunderstanding, the rabbi reassures him.) But Wright also flatters and comforts Cohen. On April 15, 1958, the rabbi laments to the architect: "Our money

raising efforts languish. Collections have come to a dead stop. People are losing faith. . . ." Wright responds briskly, "Do cheer up!" and tells him that all will be well.

The building was finally completed. But Wright, who died on April 9, 1959, was not there to see it. For Cohen, the Sept. 20, 1959, dedication must have been a bittersweet occasion. A half-century later, the new visitor center eloquently unearths the human underpinnings of one of Wright's greatest architectural achievements.

—Ms. Klein is a cultural reporter and critic in Philadelphia and a contributing editor at the Columbia Journalism Review.

Copyright 2009 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved
This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com