“The Synagogue of Light”: Suburban Re-imaginings of the Synagogue after the Holocaust

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Fig. 1. A. THE SANCTUARY OF NORTH SHORE CONGREGATION ISRAEL VIEWED FROM THE BIMA (ABOVE) 1.B. A RENDERING OF ITS PREDECESSOR (BELOW) GLENCOE, ILLINOIS.
THE SANCTUARY

Looking down the road from the entrance of my street, I find myself at a bend that draws the county line between Chicago’s Cook and my suburban town’s Lake County. The street enters Lake-Cook Road at a ‘T’, and adjacent to this intersection lay chain-link fences that envelop acres of neo-classically rolling hills on a pristinely maintained golf course. If I turn to the left and walk around this bend, a familiar scene greets me. A building, half-hidden by dense woods, is distinguished from the road by a long grassy berm, three entrances, and large signs reading North Shore Congregation Israel (Fig. 2).

Moving closer, I behold a scene that what one would not necessarily expect when arriving at a house of worship. At the main entrance to the property, a sea of asphalt defining a large parking lot strikes the viewer. This mall-sized lot would continue down to the beach if it were not interrupted by the blockwork of my Hebrew School.
Looking to the right, past the school, an enormous white gesture bursts above the old oak trees. The sanctuary erupts out of a low, flat, window-enclosed hallway that unites the entire synagogue into a total system. Dedicated in 1964, North Shore Congregation’s sanctuary was designed at the height of architect Minoru Yamasaki’s career. American born Yamasaki is famous for the design of large civic structures such as the World Trade Center Towers and the St. Louis International Airport, having earned a name for himself in the 1950’s and 60’s with sleek and forward looking designs.¹

The synagogue’s long horizontal campus is met in the middle by a cul-de-sac driveway flanked with well-landscaped bushes and manicured flowers. From the road, a passerby would see a glass-walled hallway illuminated by an orange glow and the sanctuary behind it. Between the hallway and the sanctuary is the Memorial room, a large community room used for after-service refreshments and Hebrew school events. In this room are displayed the names of deceased benefactors of the synagogue as well as a Torah rescued from a Berlin synagogue destroyed during Kristalnacht.

Behind the Memorial room’s smooth, pale wooden panel face door is the even more impressive main congressional space. Seen from the outside, the site has a grand external profile with an immense sense of weightlessness and ease that contradicts the several tons of concrete that define its walls and interior space. The sanctuary’s exterior paint glows pearly white in an otherwise dark skyline, and looking closely, it is possible to see the interior light leaking from the glass inset into the roof and sides of the building (Fig.3).

¹ Olitsky, 135
² Olitsky, 135
Having spent my childhood growing up in the shadows of this site, a Reform synagogue serving a mostly secular community in Glencoe and Highland Park, Illinois, I found myself wanting to return to it for my last major assignment at Wesleyan University. I am most intrigued by the nature of its architectural design and chose to research this building to understand its connection to a broader Jewish-American architectural history. Although I was much more involved in youth programs during my high school years, whether in an early Medieval architecture lecture or an anthropology seminar, I often found myself thinking about the main sanctuary. My mind would drift to moments that signaled my growing awareness of the spatial qualities of the sanctuary.

For example, during services as a child, I would often look up from the Rabbi on the bimah and follow the tall arc from its base towards the great curved ceiling. The six poured concrete arches that hold up the immensity of the roof and walls are highlighted by windows, and culminate in a point reminiscent of a large tent. I remember looking at these structures,
amongst hundreds of worshippers, and noting between call and responses how they looked like so much more than just ceiling vaults. I imagined as if they were two hands held together in prayer, or God’s hands enclosing the congregation. Never forgetting this moment, I often find my eyes drifting up when I enter the space.

The congregation, North Shore Congregation Israel Synagogue, is the largest and oldest Reform synagogue on the North Shore of Chicago, and was founded in Glencoe, Illinois by members of Chicago’s Sinai Congregation in the 1920s. Due to the location of the Sinai Congregation on the South Side of Chicago, these new suburbanites constructed a space for education and for housing High Holiday services closer to home in the northern suburbs. With 384 members, the congregation built its first site in downtown Glencoe in 1928, using Sinai as a model for community organization and religious worship (Fig. 1B).  

I chose North Shore Congregation Israel as the topic of my essay is because it sits astride a fascinating discourse in Jewish-American identity that followed World War II and the Holocaust. I would like to retrace and reflect on the decisions taken by the Temple Board in their choice to construct a new synagogue that differed greatly from its predecessor in both design and ethos. Reform Judaism in America has a surprisingly long architectural history, and in this essay I want to use my synagogue in Glencoe as a lens through which to render that history. Yet before we enter into an in-depth analysis into the site, I think it would be beneficial to unpack the history of the American synagogue, and its development as a space constantly in dialogue with American ideals of Enlightenment and Modernity.

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2 Olitsky, 135
“Empirical knowledge, reflection on problems of the cosmos and of life, philosophical and theological wisdom of the most profound sort…must be credited to Christianity under the influence of Hellenism…”

- Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

For the first millennia of Judaism, religious life revolved around Jerusalem- and more importantly the house of God on earth, the Temple. Following the destruction of the Second Temple in the 1st century Common Era, the synagogue became one of the few fixed architectural Jewish spaces that persists to today.\(^3\) Interestingly, these sites were never meant to have the same significance as a church, but were instead created as a temporary replacement for the original Temple in Jerusalem. The vast majority of Jews were scattered in the Diaspora, and fully expected to be repatriated to the Holy Land. Indeed, their mantra was “next year in Jerusalem.”

In the centuries that followed the Temple’s destruction, it became evident that the diaspora would be long lived. As a result, Judaism transformed itself and rejected its priestly tradition for rabbinical learning and individual and communal prayer. Synagogues began to reflect these changes in worship, and the space became less of a temple to God, and more of a place for the congregants to commune with God. The synagogue became a place to assemble the congregation in order to receive the Torah. Giving the space its connection to the Temples are the arc and the *bimah*. These two critical objects and grant the synagogue its true religious potency. The *bimah* provides a space for reading and sharing of knowledge and the Ark houses the Torah scrolls, which are holy because they contain the word of God.\(^4\)

The Ark and the *bimah* also share a unique spatial history in Jewish culture as well. In Sephardic synagogues, the arc and *bimah* stand on opposite ends of the space with the audience facing the “axis” between the two. Allowing for more of a “a dialogue between the two

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\[^3\] Gruber, 18

\[^4\] 2003, 17-19
furnishings”.

In the Ashkenazi tradition, the *bimah* is placed in the middle of the sanctuary, in relationship to the arc wall, with the congregation surrounding this raised platform. It is fascinating to note that at the beginning of the 19th century, American Jews moved the *bimah* to sit facing the eastern wall in front of the arc and *bimah*, “creating a stage-like platform.” Gruber explains that this was intended as a spatial reordering and “the result [was] a more hierarchical arrangement that [lent] increased ‘decorum,’ which many nineteenth century Jews sought.”

Moving the *bimah* to create a more rational ordering of the space is just one example of the modifications to Jewish worship that would occur in the nineteenth century. It appears that national discussions surrounding decorum or proper modern behavior would act as a catalyst for Jewish reforms in America. This section explores why it is that these Modern notions were so influential on Colonial Jewish-American life.

To gain a perspective on the development of an American-Jewish identity, its relationship to the Modern and Protestant ethics, and the perceived links between this type of “modern” religiosity and the development of a centralized space—I turn for inspiration and information to two main sources: Jack Wertheimer’s *The American Synagogue* and Marc Lee Raphael’s *The Synagogue in America*. Both texts begin with a similar narrative of the first Jews arriving in the Americas.

The accounts begin not in New Amsterdam, but Amsterdam proper. Following the expulsion of Sephardic Jews from the Iberian Peninsula in 1490’s, the uprooted community reassembled in cosmopolitan and mercantile Amsterdam. The first documented arrival of a Jew in the New World would not occur until the 1630’s, during the approximately thirty year Dutch occupation of Brazil. The Dutch community “vigorously welcomed Jews,” due to “mercantile

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5 2003,15
6 2003, 17
experience and networks of friends and family throughout the Atlantic world.” The Jewish community would later develop and expand in other Dutch and English colonies, “[enabling] them to play a significant role in the commercial revolution and in the territorial expansion that developed the New World and established the colonial economies.” This final point will be important to remember when I discuss changes that occurred in 19th century. As colonial American Jews were mostly of a mercantile class, they too would become deeply invested in the ideology of rationality and progress.

When Portugal reconquered Dutch Brazil, however, the Jewish community was once again forced to flee the Inquisition and sail back to Amsterdam. However after the ships were attacked at sea they were forced to land in New Amsterdam, marking the humble origin of the North American Jewish community. This exiled community would eventually make New Amsterdam its home, welcoming the slow trickle of Jews into the colonies. Although one typically associates the Ashkenazi tradition with North American Jewry, the original American Jewish community indeed descends from the Sephardic tradition.

During this era, colonial congregations were small and their power was extremely centralized. Raphael argues that this centralization of power was driven by the reliance of the congregation on the participation and dues of the community, which was increasingly assimilating. Drawing on models and economic support from wealthier Sephardic communities in Europe, synagogue hierarchy was developed with the Hazzan, or cantor, as the center of power. Because a fully educated and trained Rabbi would not arrive in America until the mid-19th century, the hazzan assumed the unfulfilled position of educator and leader. The hazzan

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7 Raphael, 1
8 2011, 1
9 Wertheimer 2-5
10 2011, 10
would also manage diverse activities ranging from the daily management of the building to circumcisions and ritual slaughtering, which traditionally were overseen by individuals in independent positions.

It is important to emphasize at this point the utilitarian function of the synagogue at this time. The synagogue offered education, burial, and the celebration of life rituals dictated by the Torah. Indeed, the synagogue maintained its significance to members by facilitating the daily struggle of maintaining a Jewish identity. The Sephardic congregations in the United States also felt obliged to maintain “‘decoram [sic] and decent behavior,’”\textsuperscript{11} so that the congregation could prove, to their non-Jewish neighbors, the ability of the Jewish community to grow moral and productive citizens. This ideology would significantly influence future changes in Jewish life.

During the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, the rise of economic thought and the Industrial Revolution placed a new value an individual’s time. Parallel with the notion that institutions, like organized religion, should grow moral citizens is Max Weber’s concept of the “trained official.”\textsuperscript{12} Weber argues that Western capitalism was successful in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century because it had mastered transforming bodies into agents of the state or company. The ability to measure and compare production time, to divide labor into smaller bits, to speed antiquated processes through machinery, and to measure the limits of the body and nature itself became the ‘Holy Grail’ of modern management. As citizens within the structure, Jews appropriated this somewhat zealous ideology for their own. Due to the desires of the older generation to assimilate and the reality of quickly assimilating youth, rituals, rites, prayers, and spaces were modified to fit this powerful “progressive” ideology.

\textsuperscript{11} 2011, 11
\textsuperscript{12} Weber, 16
As Jewish immigrants continued to trickle into late colonial communities, the synagogue began to assume more a diverse role in people’s lives: providing a space for Jewish companionship, for weddings, a place for the distribution of kosher meat, and very importantly, a place to receive and give tzedakah (charity). The synagogue, again, sustained its relevance to communities by creating a space for interaction and the maintenance of an identity that could not otherwise be maintained.

Yet the drive to construct synagogues during the colonial era also reflected values outside of the Jewish community as well. In reality, Jewish worship does not demand a permanent site for communal gathering. However colonial Jews felt pressure from the Protestant community to respond to what was believed to be an American “demand” for modern worship, marked by public worship, rational organization of the services, and its rejection of the type of mysticism associated with Catholicism or Old World practices.

These notions are closely linked to the Protestant ethic that values the ability of an individual to be disciplined and aggressive in business, yet remain within the graces of God. Before this Protestant ethos, the Catholic Church stressed that it was sinful to attempt to accumulate wealth through both lending and trading. Previously, it was primarily Jews or other religious and societal “misfits” who were able to amass wealth. It is also important to note that Jews had few options for earning a living because land ownership was forbidden, forcing these communities into urban or secluded areas. As Christians were banned from loaning money, Jews became the moneylenders in Medieval and Renaissance Europe, leading to stereotypes of Jews as an avaricious people.

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13 1987, 2
14 1987, 3
15 Steinberg, 136-149
Immigrating to America, the Jews found themselves in a predominantly Protestant nation where “capitalism is identical with the pursuit of profit, and forever renewed profit, by means of continuous, rational, capitalistic enterprise.” Finding a community accepting of their business-orientation, the Jews created a niche for themselves by organizing and constructing synagogues as demanded by modern values. The logic being that “a decent respect to the custom of the community, in which [they] live, should actuate [them] to observe public worship.” Driven by a pressure to assimilate into this moderately accepting community, the Jews constructed sites of worship in order to show their connection to local principles. These sites would grow to hold a vast amount of power in the community.

Jacob R. Marcus, a famous Reform rabbi, argues that the model Jews based this system of organization upon was indeed their neighbor’s. “The Jews, seeking acceptance, laboring at integration, took instruction and example from their Protestant neighbors, [choosing] the synagogue as the institution that would establish their community...” Indeed “in its hegemonic aspect the colonial American synagogue did parallel contemporary Protestantism” as it moved “toward the integration of [its] communicants into one rounded out religious, social, and eleemosynary whole.”

The six major colonial Jewish sites in Philadelphia, New York, Richmond, Charleston, Newport, and Savannah even existed within a network that could rely on nearby communities for aid and educational materials. The Jewish community’s ability to pray under the banner of a similar God also allowed wealthy communities to accept these groups and maintain their status

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16 Weber, 17
17 1987, 2
18 1987, 3
19 1987, 3
as “enlightened citizens.” The flourishing of Jewish communities, as well as a full array of distinct sects of Protestantism, was at the time felt to be proof of the democratic nature of American society.

Yet what further steps did these congregations take to ingratiate themselves to outside communities? Forgoing a connection to the few grand synagogues built in Europe; these communities referred to synagogues as temples and hoped to create a space of similar modernity and ideological legibility. While styles such as Gothic were too closely associated with Christianity, Greco-Roman revival architecture stood as a great alternative in design type. With a heavy emphasis on the façade, a new development for what had traditionally been secretive houses of worship, the style facilitated acceptance and assimilation into the larger American community. Synagogues thus became a reflection of the taste of the community that embraced the standards of the day. A superb example of the use of revival architecture is Kahal Kodesh

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20 1987, 5
Beth Elohim in Charleston, South Carolina, the first Reform Congregation in the nation dedicated in 1840 (Fig. 4). The design and styles seen at Kahal Kodest echo the ideology often associate with American National Monuments. Enlightenment, rationality, modernity, and an understanding of Western culture were all expressed through the building’s exterior decorations.

THE BIRTH OF REFORM JUDAISM IN AMERICA

“In fact, the State itself, in the sense of a political association with a rational, written constitution, rationally ordained law, and an administration bound to rational rules or laws, administered by trained officials, is known, in this combination of characteristics, only in the Occident, despite all other approaches to it.”

- Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

As the nation entered the period of the Civil War, immigration was largely halted from Europe, and an isolationist, xenophobic American nationalism took hold. Subsequently, the German Jewish immigrants, who had almost tripled the American Jewish population by this point, intensified their efforts to rapidly assimilate. A testimony cited by Raphael, by Joseph Krauskopf in 1887, observes that modern worshippers could not “reconcile [their] modes of thought and higher aspirations with the musty ghetto religious practices.”21 A member of a congregation in Wilmington, Delaware in 1895 recounts, “[the Reform] Jews believe in being comfortable when they worship. In place of shutting off women and children in a latticed balcony, they want them in their pews. In place of keeping on their hats, in church, they see no problem in removing them… they want hymns or sermons in English.”22 It thus became increasingly essential for Jewish worship to resonate with the communities’ lay experiences.

The ensuing blend of American ideals and old Jewish life had several key manifestations. Most importantly was the abolition of bar mitzvahs, the cornerstone of Jewish male adulthood.

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21 2011, 24
22 2011, 21
Additionally, the removal of Torah readings from weekly services, the removal of Hebrew during prayer, and banning tallit (prayer shawls) and head-covers were all commonplace. In their stead, synagogues began offering confirmation services, reading of the Torah three times a year, family pews, and choral music. Major efforts were also made to make the prayer service emulate Protestant worship services. The rabbi, like a pastor, led prayers, unlike the antebellum worship service conducted by the cantor. During this time, the laity also assumed governance over all other activities and aspects of temple life. The creation of Men’s and Women’s clubs became extremely common.

At the forefront of the Protestantization, or Americanization, of Judaism was Chicago’s Sinai Congregation that was founded on the South Side of Chicago in 1861, long before the establishment of North Shore Congregation Israel. The president of the congregation, in a statement to the community, describes the changes made by the synagogue to accommodate the community’s desires for more rational worship. “We have discarded many obsolete rites… Our work will not be completed until we have removed every unnecessary vestige, until we have built on the old foundation a new structure, in keeping with the modern style of religious architecture… [For] the observance of certain obsolete customs is inconsistent with true religion… When darkness gives way to light, Sinai congregation will have the proud satisfaction of having served in the front ranks among the founders of a religion, broad enough for all humanity to stand on.” The congregation’s late 19th century synagogue embodies these goals. With stained glass roses, wrought iron railings, and Mansard roofs, the building borrows greatly from the Romanesque as well the Victorian architectural traditions (Fig. 5).

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23 2011, 21
24 1987, 13
My paternal grandmother and her parents were members of this congregation for years. My grandmother, Dorothy, often told me that when she was growing up in that temple in the 1920’s and 1930’s, the chief Rabbi, Louis Mann, who also had a Ph.D. in Sociology, preferred to be addressed as Dr. Mann rather than Rabbi Mann. She would slowly recall his sermons, remembering them address ethics more than religion. Dr. Mann was also a founding member of the National Society of Christians and Jews, Planned Parenthood, and the B’nai B’rith Hillel Foundation.25

Fig. 5. THE ORIGINAL CHICAGO SINAI CONGREGATION ON THE SOUTH SIDE OF CHICAGO

Rather than adhering to old county rules in order to maintain a unique identity, this community strove to make Judaism compatible with life in America. There was palpable zeal to accept the notions of rationality and modernity that I see described by Max Weber as markers of Modern thought. Paramount to Weber’s argument is the idea that the West has prevailed through

25 1987, 15
the systematic abolition of irrational modes of being and governance through the creation of a bureaucratic class. He even adds that no age had experienced, “...the absolute and complete dependence of its whole existence, of the political, technical, and economic conditions of its life, on a specifically trained organization of officials. The most important functions of the everyday life of society have come to be in the hands of technically, commercially, and above all legally trained government officials.”

As synagogues challenged themselves to adopt the progressive narrative, congregation membership slowly began dropping in the latter half of the century. Decades of reforming Judaism to meet the criteria of modernity, which in and of itself calls into question the value of religion, had left many synagogues empty. In 1885, rabbis met in Philadelphia to create a new platform that would successfully keep members more regularly engaged in synagogue activities as well as reincorporate the Torah into services.

Synagogues of this era, predating the Great Depression, were built in a style that developed and amplified the previous century’s traditions. The best and perhaps last example of pre-Depression and pre-World War II era American synagogue architecture is New York City’s Congregation Emanu-El (Fig. 6), dedicated in 1930 just a few months after the market crashed in 1930. North Shore Congregation Israel’s first site (Fig. 1B) dedicated in 1928, also presents a fine example of this era of design. Both buildings represent what Gruber labels, the “optimistic and opulent” style of pre-war synagogue architecture in America. In labeling this generation of buildings as optimistic, it appears that Gruber is touching upon the ideology of the nineteenth

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26 Weber, 16
27 1987, 92
28 2003, 68
29 1996, 134
30 2003, 47
century, with assimilation facilitated by the choice of popular church architectural form and design.

Yet the paradigm of assimilation into larger society through reforms, which were incorporated into architecture and liturgy, was brutally challenged in the wake of World War II and by Modernity’s implication in the Holocaust. A new architectural and spiritual identity needed to be forged to enable the community to regrow in the subsequent decades. The following section attempts to unpack why Modernism and Enlightenment thought became unattractive in the years following the Holocaust.

Fig. 6 NEW YORK CITY’S EMANU-EL SYNAGOGUE
JEWS THEOLOGY AND THE HOLOCAUST

“The Holocaust was born and executed in our modern rational society, at the high stage of our civilization and at the peak of cultural achievement, and for this reason it is a problem of that society, civilization, and culture.”

- Zygmunt Bauman, Modernity and the Holocaust

As we have seen, in the years preceding World War II Jews in America and Europe reached a certain level of assimilation into their host communities. It would seem to some that the millennia of anti-Semitism and the legacy of Jewish expulsion and persecution from Western and Central European had come to an end. Although Jews in Russia were subjected to terrible and violent pogroms, this reality was generally regarded as the product of the “backward” nature of Russia. Because of this poverty-driven violence, Russian Jews continued to pour out of Eastern Europe towards New York and the Midwest.31 During this era, Jewish theology strove to understand the violence and expulsions through a concept known as theodicity.

_Theodicity_ is defined by Zachary Braiterman as “the justification of God.” Braiterman, writing nearly sixty years after the Holocaust, aims to “...expand this [term] to include any attempt to justify, explain, or find acceptable meaning to the relationship that exists between God, evil, and suffering.”32 Because the Jewish people suffered so much throughout the first two millennia of the Common Era, there were many attempts within the Jewish community to develop an explanation as to why Jews, as the “Chosen People,” were subjected to such prejudice, discrimination, and ultimately violence at the hands of the states of Europe.

It became a popular belief that the Jews’ suffering was a test from God to legitimize the special nature of the nation of Israel. Like the Torah’s description of the Jewish diaspora from Egypt, modern Jews were able to connect their current predicament to the trials and tribulations

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31 1987, 93
32 Braiterman, 21
of their ancestors. “We suffer because we are God’s Chosen People” seemed comforting because it placed the violence within a logical framework.

Prior to World War II, brutality against Jews or their expulsion from certain European nations could be explained by ignorance and hatred based on rumors, socio-economic unrest, or “God’s plan”. Yet the Holocaust marked a much more complicated trauma that seemed irreconcilable with the notion *theodicy*. It is true that the World War II was a product of socio-economic unrest following the Great War, yet the manner in which the Holocaust was implemented was very much a modern phenomenon using industrial like efficiency and scientific anti-Semitic ideology. Having established the existence of a superior Aryan race with pseudo-scientific methods, it was self-evident to the perpetrators of the Final Solution that the Jewish population of Europe was a mortal threat and as a result needed to be exterminated. The sense of moral certitude and scientific objectivity with which Holocaust was promulgated are reflections of its true horror.\(^\text{33}\)

Backed by the authority of universities and scientists, Eugenic theories were exploited and propagated by the bureaucratic German war machine. Because the Führer, and thus the state, was the mastermind of the atrocities, the German people within the system felt as though they had no choice or ability to alter the course of events. The analogy of people merely being cogs in the metaphorical machine of Nazi Germany was extremely common. In some cases this may have been true, making earlier Jewish involvement in the bureaucracy of Weimar and Imperial Germany problematic.

With ideologies of Modernity and progressivism figuring prominently in Nazi justifications of the Final Solution, mere *theodicy* no longer seemed appropriate or believable.

\(^{33}\) Arendt, 136
Braiterman in fact finds an ideological movement in the 60’s and 70’s that was marked by a shift from the idea of *theodicy* to that of *antitheodicy*. He describes *antitheodicy* as precisely the opposite of theodicy: the refusal to accept, rationalize, or explain the connection between God’s will and the suffering. To him, the Holocaust greatly complicated the project of 20th century Jewish modernity. “Modern Jewish thinkers” had attempted to “‘make it new’ by turning against 19th century views of progress and other canons of Enlightenment reason and historicism.” By this he means the “series of disjointed efforts to renew traditional, social, and textual patterns broken by the uneven encounter [of Judaism] with Western culture”. Concurrently, Auschwitz represented for Jewish thinkers a theological “point of no return.” It was a “uniquely modern catastrophe” with “uniquely modern implications.”

Because Jewish assimilation in Europe and Germany, in particular, was so dependent upon Jews joining the bourgeois or bureaucratic classes, Jewish scholars faced the critical question of where to replant the roots of the Jewish experience. The violence of the Holocaust made it simply too difficult to accept the event as congruent with God’s plans for the Jewish people, and Modernity was too steeply implicated in the rhetoric of the Nazi party. Reform Judaism needed to reconsider the apologetic character of the reforms that were made during the prior century. Although there had been an effort to dismantle the Protestantization of Reform Judaism at the conference in Philadelphia, many remnants remained within architectural designs and the structure and content of the liturgy.

Complicating the issue of redefining Jewish post-Holocaust discourse was a lack of language—or the perceived failure of language—to discuss the events of the war. Terms such as

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34 1998, 31
35 1998, 6
36 1998, 8
37 1998, 5
“Holocaust” or “Arbeit Macht Frei” had not yet entered the historical dialogue. It required several decades and a deluge of memoirs, books, comics, films, and scholarship to establish a lexicon with which to address this catastrophe. Thus, Jewish congregations and theologians everywhere struggled to create a framework within which to understand the events of the Holocaust in the immediate years after the war.\(^{38}\)

In the post-war period, new patterns of urbanization in the United States also drew entire communities of European ancestry out of the city and into the suburbs in a process commonly referred to as “white flight.” With such large numbers of people straining the ability of existing congregations to house and serve the growing population, it became essential for new congregations to form and construct new sites. The lure of suburbia had brought a concentration of white people, including Jews, out of the major cities. In Chicago, large Jewish communities developed in the suburbs of Skokie, Lincolnwood, and Highland Park. With population trends pointing to continued flows of people into the suburbs, many communities, including the Jewish communities in the suburbs of Chicago, began to construct sites that would accommodate them.

These newly established congregations faced the same quandary that contemporary theologians faced. In a post-Holocaust world, what is the appropriate language to express their Jewish identity? More specifically, to a growing community in the sprawling suburbs, what is the appropriate visual language to both foster and project that identity? The Jews’ connection to Western history and architecture was severely tested and strained by the Holocaust. Architects at this time struggled to create buildings that could match the new quandaries of Jewish life, identity, and nationhood. These remained troublesome issues for decades. The best solution

\(^{38}\) 1998, 60-63
seemed to be to abandon the architectural and liturgical references that lead to and were ultimately devoured by the Holocaust.

A Frank Lloyd Wright synagogue, designed for congregation Beth Sholom in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, and dedicated in 1957, pioneered this resolution. Wright’s synagogue boldly rejected typical symmetrical or Occidental references in his design. In lieu of this external heavy tradition of architecture, he instead chose to focus on symbolic meaning and the building’s form. Rejecting stone and mortar for steel and glass (Fig. 7). This space was received as an architectural landmark, and gave the Reform community a new language with which to envision and design synagogues. Using unprecedented amounts of glass for a synagogue, Wright attempted to symbolize Mount Zion from the exterior and symbolize an ancient tent on the interior. Looking not to Europe, but to ancient Jewish traditions and stories, this building became immensely influential on the future design of Jewish Reform synagogues. Seeing how effective a tool symbolism was in creating a unique unburdened space, Beth Sholom would become a common architectural reference, and ultimately had a large impact on North Shore Congregation Israel’s development.

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39 Siry, 4
40 2003, 105 – 109
NORTH SHORE CONGREGATION ISRAEL

As an outpost of Congregation Sinai in Chicago, North Shore Congregation Israel inherited the extensive reforms made at the end of the 19th century. In the years preceding World War II, congregants were pleased to worship in a Reform synagogue that echoed their identities, unburdened by ancient rituals or concerns. Following World War II, the congregation, like most religious institutions at the time, saw a huge boost in membership. The community size exploded from five hundred families to over eighteen hundred in the late 1950’s. It became apparent in 1959, that even after a 1952 expansion, a new building would be necessary to accommodate this growth.41

The temple board chose the architect Minoru Yamasaki to design and build the new synagogue on the site of the original temple in Glencoe. However, within two years a site

41 1996, 135
directly on Lake Michigan became allowing for the construction of an all-new synagogue at a new location.\textsuperscript{42}

It is fascinating to note here that in addition to the creation of a new building, the board voted to reintroduce Friday worship as well as the introduction of Hebrew into the curriculum at Hebrew School. Perhaps the board members sensed the failure of past Jewish education to provide solid Hebrew studies. Below is an excerpt from the program given to potential architects.

In a fifteen-page essay entitled \textit{The Architect and the Congregation}, board member Henry Goldstein writes to the rabbi, president, and board of the congregation on both the meaning of the synagogue as well as the specific requirements for the new site. Written in 1959, he calls for an architect who understands the complex needs of the congregation and could inspire future generations of worshippers.

``An architect stands always at the beginning of Genesis; every synagogue he creates must go through the pangs of its own birth, struggling to become, striving to emerge out of the chaotic mass of modern moods and traditional backgrounds, out of the congregation’s spirit and needs, finally bursting into forms as a vibrant, harmonizing symphony.

It is such a synagogue which can break the silence of stone and steel, a synagogue which combines within its body the glories of Israel’s past, the melodies of its present, the aspirations of its future…

The synagogue of the past has been distinctive only through its location in the ghetto, or by the star or menorah or Hebrew lettering which decorates its facade, but never by its architecture. The synagogue may have been modeled after Byzantine architecture, with its horseshoe arches, colorful mosaics, interiors with the graceful line and dome, reflecting the Near Eastern origins of Judaism. Or it may have emulated the style of the Gothic Cathedral, though not often, because the steeples and bells have become the very symbols of Christianity.

The Gothic structures were towering, immense,

\textsuperscript{42} Goldstein, 10
taking in the entire cities or villages, dwarfing the man who entered them, placing him in the perspective of a small, helpless, dependent being, uncomprehending of the resplendent pageant of the service going on around him. Man in a cathedral was a mute, passive worshipper. For as Christianity considers this life to be secondary and a stepping stone to a better life that follows after death, Judaism is occupied with man, with life on earth, with man in direct relationship to the source of all reality, as an involved worshipper in the midst of a congregation of worshipers.

Many synagogues exist in a city, each concerned with the spiritual needs of the individual, who is the center of the Jewish drama of life. No priesthood conducts the service; the Jew responds with his own soul to the exaltation and the adoration of prayers, which he not only understands but which are from the words of his mouth and the meditations of his heart.

So, unlike other religions, Jews have no dominating architectural tradition to maintain. It should be consistent with the progressive, flexible, ever-modern spirit of Judaism. Reform Judaism particularly wrestles with reality. It captures the uniqueness of the people inhabiting its buildings, it comprehends the spirit of Judaism and its ceremonial manifestations reflecting the beauty and majesty of the Jewish faith. It starts from the inside out.

The synagogue historically has been the combination of community center, educational and cultural center, and religious institution. This may appear as three buildings but it poses just one problem to the architect. Even though a greater area is devoted to other than purely religious purposes, the symbol of the religious element must be seen by those within and those without. Architecture is not a thing unto itself but a frame for the life of the people of the congregation. They will paint the picture that is framed by the architecture. Is the frame to be broad enough and big enough or small enough in some cases to truly make a good setting of the picture of the congregation as it goes on through the years?

Beyond the form which follows function in the obvious sense; beyond the need for a sanctuary and auditorium with an expanding seat capacity, classrooms, chapel, Rabbis’ studies, lounges, offices and other practical and very important requirements of the congregation; beyond the form which grows out of the limitations of space, the architectural tradition and tenor of the total community--beyond all these, there is the profound function which emerges in the authentic role of the synagogue in the Jewish experience.
Only after the congregation has studied and grasped this profounder aspect of the synagogue function can it provide the architect with the necessary data for his design. A spiritually sensitive architect and artist, and better yet, one to whom the religious experience is not alien, may be of inestimable help in this area. However, the architect cannot be the theologian just as the rabbi cannot be the architect. The rabbi fits into the picture to give the direction or guidance to the architect in that which is Jewish...."  

THE ARCHITECT AND THE CONGREGATION

“It is such a synagogue which can break the silence of stone and steel, a synagogue which combines within its body the glories of Israel’s past, the melodies of its present, the aspirations of its future.”

-Henry Goldstein, *The Architect and the Congregation*

After meeting with Merle Brenner, the archivist at North Shore Congregation Israel, I began looking my synagogue with entirely new eyes. I started to understand it within a larger historical narrative of Jewish identity, and I was fascinated to discover that the synagogue’s construction was accompanied by several changes in the structure of religious education and prayer as well. Shabbat services moved back to Friday, Hebrew was taught again in the school, and B’nai Mitzvot were re-introduced. It would seem that the temple board and rabbi understood the necessity of these traditions in creating a unique Jewish identity. Those preferred Temple Shalom approach to reform began their own congregation, Am Shalom, at the site of the original building.  

Entering North Shore Congregation’s building with Merle, I first noticed the floor composed of white tiles flecked with black. Meeting the floor are windowed arcades topped with a groin-vaulted ceiling. I was struck by the brightness of the interior. The walls, the floors, the

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43 Goldstein, 1-4
44 1996, 135
columns, and the ceiling were all painted lead-white, attesting, I would later learn, to architect Yamasaki’s assertion that this be a “Synagogue of Light.”

Following Merle from the office down the hallway, I am led to a wall of warm wood paneling that marked the Memorial Hall, and beyond it, the main sanctuary. We did not enter through these doors, but through the side kitchen and into the basement of the sanctuary where I remember hanging out in high school. Past the familiar doors reading “Uth Room” (Youth Room), I followed Merle into a labyrinth of poured concrete. The hum and sizzle of boilers and heaters grew louder and quieter as we filed down a narrowing hall. She stopped us before a set of stairs and put her key into a door that matched the other utility closets around it. We were at the back of the main sanctuary where two pairs of stairs led from the bima to what turned out to be the basement.

Merle informed me that the archive space is the room where the Rabbi traditionally prepares his thoughts before giving High Holiday services. The room was converted- at her request- into an archive. In this room, which could not have been more than six by six feet, were archival boxes laid floor to ceiling, carefully labeled and stacked to maximize the use of the limited space. At the other end of the room were doors to the bathroom and to another room that mirrors the one we entered. This was Merle’s office, and it contained an equivalent amount of archival materials.

Switching on a magnifying glass lamp that threw extremely dim, blue light onto a small architect’s table, she laid in front of me several manila folders specifically marked for the few prior requests I had made. Two blue, leather bound books from the shelves entitled ‘56-’57 and ‘57-’58 made a large thump as she plopped them on the desk in front of me. “Start here,” she

\[45\] Siskin, 1
said. It almost felt like a test to see if I was a capable researcher. The building I was interested in investigating was constructed in the sixties, so I was unsure as to why she gave me a tome filled with Board Minutes, Loan Agreements, and Membership information from the preceding decade. But within the first few pages I realized I struck the mother lode of information for my project.

Amongst the notes and minutes I found the first synagogue design plan presented to the congregation in the late 1950’s. Although I had read much about Post-War architecture’s connection to the Holocaust, I had a difficult time finding specific references in the North Shore Congregation archives. That was until I found Henry Goldstein’s essay that explicitly called for a sanctuary and architect that would break with previous architecture traditions. Reconnecting the congregation with Israel’s past and future as well as creating a space reflecting Judaism’s distinct relationship with God seemed to be the Board’s chief objectives.

No longer confined by a devotion to the spirit of Modern spaces and worship, Yamasaki was chosen specifically for his use of naturalistic, organic forms and references.46 His non-Western designs loosely suggesting an escape from traditional Occidental symbols. Although naturalistic forms were his inspiration, the architect’s ultimate goal for this building was for it to be a “conflation of light and form”.47

Using nontraditional materials, Yamasaki proposed the use of smooth, poured concrete instead of gridded and symmetrical stone. He designed the space to use white paint in lieu of dark brick, and large and prominent windows instead of high and small stained glass. It seems Yamasaki was chosen because he created a synagogue without using traditional Western materials or references, while still preserving a deep symbolic meaning for the space. The sanctuary’s sole interior decoration is composed of a Hebrew quote and the Ten Commandments

46 “A Synagogue by Yamasaki”, 1
47 “A Synagogue by Yamasaki, 3
constructed out of white marble. In choosing white and light as the space’s symbolic references, Yamasaki emphasizes the Commandment’s primordial significance in Judaism highlighting God’s healing and redemptive powers. In his design, Yamasaki responded to the needs and aspirations of the Jewish community in era.

Included in the archival material as well were pamphlets expressing the symbolic meaning of the building, advocating Yamasaki’s emphasis on the use of light in his design. The cover of the booklet sent to all members of the congregation has a dark blue background and unfilled space on the top half of the page. On the bottom half, silhouetted images of bricks comprising a wall sit dense and ominous. The blackness and unmoving nature of the bricks screams oppression. The text, titled “The Architecture of Light,” follows the form of the bricks and draws the eyes to two candles. Both lit and silhouetted in white. One sits atop the wall, another sits halfway through the wall, where one of the bricks has been broken. This imagery seems to reference the Yahrzeit candle, which is a candle lit in memory of the deceased on the anniversary of their death. In using this imagery, the motivation of the Board becomes a little clearer. Perhaps using the new structure as an opportunity to express the ability of the community to overcome the recent past— a rebirth, so to speak, after the horrors of the Holocaust.

With the funding and support of the congregation, the plan to construct at the site was executed and Yamasaki’s design was selected to replace the existing synagogue. As the land at the site was small, the building compound was to be extremely dense with gardens enclosed within a groin-vaulted portico, as a way to connect the exterior and interior spaces. Again his design was rooted heavily in naturalistic, yet abstract, forms and shapes.

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48 The word comes from German-Yiddish, Jahr (year) Zeit (time). The candles are lit on the anniversary of the person’s death, beginning the first year after their passing.
Before construction began, however, an estate and mansion owned by make-up mogul Syrma Busiel (Lady Esther) and bearing the name Esther Estate became available. The site was less than five minutes from the original synagogue, and had fantastic views of the lake as well as expansive grounds. Merle noted that although Lady Esther was Jewish, she did not intend for the site to go to the congregation, because many local residents feared that the building would disrupt the residential nature of the area. Yet, the congregation won the bid, and, the new structure was greatly re-imagined. Tearing down the mansion and leveling the land, Yamasaki redesigned the building to fit into this larger campus. Retaining his interest in erecting a “Synagogue of Light,” Yamasaki modified the visually dense nature of his first design into a longer, more horizontal campus.

ARCHITECTURE OF LIGHT

**Design Concepts:** As stated by Mr. Yamasaki: “The challenge is the adding of the qualities of delight, or visual pleasure and reflection to the principle of function, economy and order which we so well understand. . . . through the use of sunlight and shadow, through the play of form against form, through ornament and the element of surprise. Through a deeper understanding of our culture and society, we will be able to reflect the democratic principles of love, wisdom and beauty in our buildings. We have tried to interpret the highest ideals of the people who shall live in harmony with the structure.”

Beyond the grand language often employed by architects in site proposals, Yamasaki’s use of “light,” both symbolically and as an element of design, attempted to extend beyond aesthetics. Indeed a similar document to the one above, entitled “Temple Tour Notes,” highlights the important features of the design. This document, with no clear author, expounds on light as

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49 “Temple Tour Notes”, 1
the “central theme of the Sanctuary and … a major theme in Judaism” as expressed in the sanctuary.

This symbolic analysis begins with references to the windows. Windows allow light to enter the building and indicate a relationship between the outside world and the interior space of prayer. The importance of the linkage between the outside world and the inner confines of a Jewish house of worship are also commanded in the Zohar, which is the foundational work in Kabbalah, or Jewish mystical thought. Yamasaki created this linkage in a highly original manner. He placed the windows at ground level, so that from the interior the seated congregants would feel as though the space might continue into the field and trees beyond the glass (Fig. 8). A temple office worker at the time of my visit noted how much this feature underscored the sense of safety Jews feel in America. In Europe, it is and was necessary to have the windows situated at a higher plane to avoid being broken. They also allow for the congregation to commune with nature as a creation of God.

Fig. 8. THE WINDOWS OF THE MAIN SANCTUARY ARE AT GROUND LEVEL TO FURTHER LINK THE INSIDE AND OUTSIDE WORLD.
Another symbol employed by Yamasaki to incorporate the light is the continuous use of bright white paint on the walls and ceiling of the sanctuary. Once light enters the space, the walls reflect it, creating an energetic and animated atmosphere. The roof and walls of the sanctuary are quite similar in appearance and appear contiguous. As a result, it is difficult to distinguish the walls from the roof. Unlike traditional orthogonal design, with clear distinctions between windows, walls, and the ceiling, this sanctuary challenges the dominance of pure form in Western architecture, blending the distinctions between all three. The intermingling of walls, roof, and white paint allows the structure to give off a sense of weightlessness and almost transforms the concrete to have the appearance of a canopy.

Drawing on Jewish symbolism and history, Yamasaki used ancient references as the fabric for the design of the building itself. In lieu of incorporating these symbols into a traditional stone synagogue, these symbols, and their references, became the foundation for the rest of the design itself. After the building was constructed the congregation, as well as the neighboring community, were pleased with Yamasaki’s bold vision.

**REFLECTION**

The earliest memories I have of North Shore Congregation Israel date from my preschool years of going to Sunday school and learning about Jewish traditions and rituals. Even as a small boy, I was awed by the scale and design of the main sanctuary. Yet I was unaware of the space’s connection to a larger architectural tradition. Through this research I now realize that the design of the building, and particularly the sanctuary, echoed and reinforced much of what I was
learning in religious and Hebrew school as a child: to remember Israel’s great biblical past as well as its current and future aspirations and successes. Yamasaki’s expansive, open, and striking vision very eloquently captured this spirit of post-war American Reform Jewry.

In opposition to my experience, prior to World War II Jews in America, according to my grandparents, were supposed to calmly turn the other cheek and accept the genteel anti-Semitism that they occasionally encountered. Don’t make waves, don’t antagonize people, keep a low, hyper-assimilated profile—these were the cornerstones to success in America. This attitude was reflected in the synagogue design of the time. The use of Western materials and references for American synagogues would continue from the beginning of American Jewry until the Final Solution in Nazi Germany was revealed. After the Holocaust, Jews were forced to confront their ability to remain within the Modern tradition. They stopped modifying, removing, or apologizing for the ancient traditions of Judaism. In this setting, a discourse surrounding the land of Israel arose, wherein the glory of the past and the brightness of the future were the main focus of Jewish discussions.

This theological shift was accompanied by an architectural shift, pioneered by Frank Lloyd Wright. His synagogue created a new symbolic visual language with which to define Jewish spaces and laid the foundation for the building of spaces like North Shore Congregation Israel. Like Wright’s Beth Sholom Synagogue, North Shore Congregation Israel presented a new material and symbolic mode through which the outside non-Jewish community could come to understand the Jewish religion, its people, and their values in the post-Holocaust era. Forgoing the Jewish-American tradition of designing in dialogue with local history, local customs, or other people’s visual language, Yamasaki worked in a symbolic, almost ahistorical style. In lieu of these traditional markers, his design stressed the form and religious symbolism within the space.
The sanctuary thus sits directly within the narrative of Jewish experience in America dating from the arrival of the first Sephardic-Dutch Jews in New Amsterdam, to the creation of the contemporary Jewish subject.

Likewise, this building strove to connect the congregants to both the past, through the use of naturalistic forms and canopy like walls, as well as to the future, through its use of pure white and the disruption of Western pure form. North Shore Congregation Israel’s new site allows for the community members to reclaim, or rather, rewrite, their own identity and look forward to new Jewish traditions in America.

This building has not only piqued my interest, but held it as well because it sits astride a fascinating junction in the discourses surrounding Modernism and Post-Modernism that would continue into the 1970’s and 1980’s. As the synagogue was constructed after the Holocaust, to Jewish theologians, this building would lie within the Jewish Post-Modern tradition. Google tends to agree, listing Postmodern under “Architecture Style” when you search North Shore Congregation Israel. However, if we look a little deeper into the architect’s history, we find that Yamasaki is also the architect known, in the art history community, as designing a public housing complex whose destruction would mark the traditional starting point of Post-Modernism in the 1970’s. After the city of St. Louis bulldozed the eleven story, thirty three building Pruitt-Igoe housing complex in 1972, fewer than twenty years after its construction, it seems that Yamasaki’s interest in creating spaces for people, within the humanist tradition, often did not transcend from theory into experience. Grand ideology of people-oriented spaces failed to address the daily needs of the community, and the complex is largely panned as an exemplary case of poor Modern design. This complicates the case for my synagogue. I constantly ask myself if Yamasaki was successful in creating a space that escaped the trappings of Modernism
that were so implicated in the Holocaust. Or, did he fail, and create a space almost too big to function within the sinking high Modern tradition? This is a question that remains unanswered from our current historical viewpoint. Nevertheless, in the decades following the construction of the new site, the congregation continued to grow and facilitate the education of young Jews, setting the stage for community interaction and development in the upcoming decades.
Works Cited


Figures

Figure 1A:
Interior View of the Main Sanctuary

Figure 1B:
Rendering of the Sanctuary, Am Shalom (Formerly North Shore Congregation Israel).

Figure 2:

Figure 3:

Figure 4:

Figure 5:

Figure 6:

Figure 7:

Figure 8:
Side View of Main Sanctuary, North Shore Congregation Israel. Photograph. 1964. Courtesy of North Shore Congregation Israel.

Bibliography