


Joseph Siry

*Beth Sholom Synagogue: Frank Lloyd Wright and Modern Religious Architecture*

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011, 736 pp., 10 color and 295 b/w illus. $70 (cloth), ISBN 9780226761404

Walter C. Leedy Jr. and Sara Jane Pearman

*Eric Mendelsohn’s Park Synagogue: Architecture and Community*

Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2012, 192 pp., 59 b/w illus. $45 (cloth), ISBN 9781606350850

Beginning in the late 1940s, a number of Jewish intellectuals and organizations began to focus attention on Jewish art and architecture, raising the questions: How could the synagogue building better express contemporary American Judaism? What was the role, if any, of historical architectural tradition? Prominent commentators like art historian Rachel Wischnitzer-Bernstein and architect Percival Goodman noted that, although an ancient building type, the synagogue has never developed a characteristic form or style. The reasons for such an absence of uniformity are many, including the Jews’ peripatetic existence, laws prohibiting land ownership, the synagogue’s egalitarian nature and its multivalent role, and the desire to assimilate. The lack of architectural traditions led designers to borrow and adapt from what they saw around them, including mosques in the Middle East and Christian churches in the West. Greek-, Byzantine-, and Moorish-styled synagogues predominated in Europe, and immigrants brought these traditions with them to the United States. Both Wischnitzer-Bernstein and Goodman proposed modernist architecture as a fruitful new direction, emphasizing its functionalism and freedom from historical associations.

Two of America’s most famous synagogues, both constructed in the 1950s and both explorations in the modernist style, are the subjects of recent books of varying depth. As its title indicates, Joseph Siry’s *Beth Sholom Synagogue*, from the Sacred Landmarks series published by the University of Chicago Press, is about more than Frank Lloyd Wright’s Beth Sholom synagogue in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania (1954–59). The story of that commission and design is the culmination of six initial chapters that provide context for Wright’s ideas about modern synagogue design. Siry begins his book by examining the relationship between Judaism and Chicago’s liberal Unitarians (led by Wright’s uncle the Reverend Jenkin Lloyd Jones), focusing on the ways in which Wright’s view of Judaism was colored by the Unitarian engagement with comparative religious studies and their belief in the equality of religious traditions and the natural unity of religious worship. Siry suggests that this perspective predisposed Wright to understand and value Judaism. Working for Adler and Sullivan on three Chicago synagogues helped to familiarize Wright with the particular requirements of Jewish worship while at the same time allowing him to view firsthand the process of designing religious spaces corresponding to liturgical needs and congregational desires. Siry begins with the story of Beth Sholom’s design process as a cooperative venture between Wright and Cohen. In addition to synthesizing decades of Wright’s prior theorizing and experimentation in religious and theater design, the building also represented the culmination of Cohen’s personal views on modern American Judaism. The rabbi believed Conservative Judaism was a...
A middle-class movement perfectly suited to the postwar American milieu of democratic freedom and prosperity and as such struck a more successful balance between tradition and modernity than its Orthodox or Reform counterparts, which had their roots in Russia and Poland, and in Germany, respectively. Also there was a natural affinity, Cohen felt, between historic Judaism and American democracy. The notion of such a connection resonated with Wright, who had long been a vociferous advocate of political equality and individualism. Together the two men would create a synagogue to express the merger of democracy and religion. In Wright’s eyes, Beth Sholom would be “an American synagogue, for American worship” (378).

Wright had never designed a synagogue by himself before Beth Sholom, although, as he told Cohen, he had rejected three previous offers because “they wanted my name; they didn’t want my ideas” (367). From the beginning of the project, Cohen inundated Wright with information about Judaism’s history, its contemporary identity, and synagogue architecture, and in a lengthy early letter even sketched a potential floor plan. Given Cohen’s view of the needs of Conservative congregations, he advocated design expressions suited to the contemporary United States rather than to the old borrowed styles or Christian layouts. Practically, this meant for Cohen a synagogue in the modern style with a centralized bimah—the center platform to emphasize Judaism’s inherently democratic character. Wright, however, preferred the bimah on a frontal stage, allowing him to adapt his well-evolved auditorium concept. Their friendly debate produced a compromise: although the bimah was placed on a stage, it was portable and could be moved to the sanctuary’s center if desired.

Although they diverged on the bimah issue, Cohen and Wright were of like mind concerning the building’s basic metaphor, to the point that each later attributed the idea to the other. There is no question that the steeply pointed roof of Beth Sholom is intended to evoke the image of Mount Sinai, the site of God’s revelation of the divine law to Moses and the Israelites. From a distorted hexagonal ground plan the structure rises first to a concrete cradle and then to a three-sided, pyramid-like dome (or tower) of ribbed-wire glass with aluminum ribs. The dome’s great size—almost as tall as Adler and Sullivan’s famed Wainwright Building—creates a manmade mountain form that towers high above the surrounding trees. The choice of Mount Sinai was fraught with meaning for Cohen, and Siry deftly details this in an extended section. Cohen considered Moses’ encounter as foundational to Conservative Jewish theology and viewed the appropriation of Mount Sinai’s form as a way to visually distinguish his building from contemporary synagogues that were either generically modernist or based on obvious symbolism like the tent or the Tablets of the Law. Cohen even sent Wright photographs of the revered mountain for inspiration. Serendipitously, the mountain form also recalled Wright’s fantastic Steel Cathedral project of a quarter century earlier, allowing him to integrate the metaphor into an existing architectural prototype.

Siry also details Wright’s other design choices and describes the building’s construction. Individual sections address the tower, the bimah, the ark, the chandelier, and the small, ground-level Sisterhood Sanctuary (for smaller services and weddings)—always explaining their relevance in Jewish theology and often comparing Beth Sholom to works by other architects, like Bruce Goff’s Crystal Chapel project (1949–50) or Louis Kahn’s unbuilt Adath Jeshurun Synagogue (1954). The book’s final chapters discuss the synagogue’s afterlife following Wright’s death, including Cohen’s campaign to nationally publicize the building, as well as its current condition.

Siry’s weighty tome proves that Wright studies can remain vibrant in the proper hands. Serving as the foundation for any future investigations of Wright’s religious work, the book will be valuable not only to Wright fans but also to anyone interested in the larger issues surrounding synagogue architecture in the twentieth century. For those readers less attracted to the in-depth analysis that Siry has mastered, Eric Mendelsohn’s Park Synagogue: Architecture and Community offers a brief but generally satisfying monograph of another landmark American synagogue.

Written by Walter C. Leedy Jr. and completed after his death by Sara Jane Pearman, Eric Mendelsohn’s Park Synagogue relates the history of Mendelsohn’s Park Synagogue in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, completed in 1950, and its Conservative Jewish congregation. The Anshe Emeth congregation has a long history, dating back to 1869. Like Beth Sholom, it moved from its original downtown home during the period of early twentieth-century suburban expansion. In the opening sections on the congregation’s early history, Leedy and Pearman are particularly interested in its leadership and the specifics of financial and site restrictions that affected its buildings. They close the first chapter in 1941, when Rabbi Armond Cohen and the congregation’s leadership realized that shifting demographics and financial woes necessitated relocation.

The book’s subsequent chapters survey the acquisition of a new site in Cleveland Heights, design constraints faced by all synagogue buildings, local architects’ initial proposals, the courting of Mendelsohn, and Mendelsohn’s designs and final building. The congregation’s connection to the famous architect apparently began when Rabbi Cohen visited the Museum of Modern Art’s 1941 Mendelsohn exhibition in New York. Cohen remembered the architect and a few years later persuaded the congregation’s leaders to overcome their objections to an out-of-town architect by emphasizing Mendelsohn’s ability to create visually striking buildings. According to the authors, Mendelsohn began making sketches for the project in December 1945, which means this was the architect’s first American synagogue design, predating the acclaimed B’nai Amoona Synagogue in St. Louis (1946–50) by a month or two. And it was a striking vision indeed that Mendelsohn proposed—a wedge-shaped plan with interior courtyard, extensively glazed walls with streamlined horizontal emphasis, and an oversize spherical dome above the sanctuary. There was no precedent for this type of formal exuberance in American synagogue architecture.

The book’s slim size and orientation to a general readership restrict Leedy and Pearman from developing the kind of personal and professional context for
Joseph Manca

George Washington’s Eye:
Landscape, Architecture, and Design at Mount Vernon

$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 9781421404325

In contrast to the prominence its most famous resident holds in American history, Mount Vernon occupies a peripheral position in the nation’s architectural heritage. The product of two extensive renovations (ca. 1757 and ca. 1773) expanding a house originally built in the early 1740s, Mount Vernon owes just enough of its design to make comparisons with Neo-Palladianism tempting were it not for the many aberrations that prohibit its consideration alongside such canonical examples as Drayton Hall in Charleston, South Carolina (1742), and Mount Airy in Virginia (1764). Such elements as its off-center cupola and asymmetrically disposed windows have been assumed to be unintentional consequences of George Washington’s contributions to the project as a historically important but architecturally minor “gentleman-amateur.” Typically judged to have been far less successful in his adoption of academic planning strategies than his more celebrated peers (notably Thomas Jefferson), Washington and his house make rare (and sometimes unflattering) appearances in principal works on American architectural history, with most historians making no mention of them at all (although they all include Monticello). At best, the house—especially the apparent “disarming irregularities and indecisions”—has served as a foil for later twentieth-century architects or as a case study for the historic preservation movement. Never portrayed as a full-fledged architect, Washington is typically described as a patron only, and not a “splendid” one at that.

In both its breadth and depth, George Washington’s Eye: Landscape, Architecture, and Design at Mount Vernon challenges the assumptions that have prompted this scholarly exclusion. Neither clumsy patron nor unschooled amateur, Washington emerges as a thoughtful designer within a study that complicates and enriches our understanding of what it meant to be an architect in eighteenth-century America. More than an incompetent exercise of Anglo-Palladian ideas, the house is a scrupulously determined extension of the president’s persona. In his detailed consideration of the entire environment of Mount Vernon, from the gardens to the arrangement of paintings within the house, Joseph Manca thoroughly contextualizes the design of the estate within European trends,