

“In the Presence of A Presence”—Frank Lloyd Wright’s Beth Sholom Synagogue and the Search for Success in Architectural Symbolism

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When Rabbi Mortimer Cohen first wrote to Frank Lloyd Wright (1869-1959) in 1953 to request his services in building a new synagogue for his Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, congregation, he used the following words to describe his vision for the new structure:

There is a dream and hope in my heart of erecting a synagogue...that will be an inspiration for generations to come, so that people will come from all over the country to see it and find here a ‘new thing’—the American spirit wedded to the ancient spirit of Israel.¹

Cohen spoke for millions of other rabbis throughout the United States in his letter to Wright. His vision was a shared vision: that of a synagogue which could break free from dependence on the trite architectural historicism which had characterized synagogues since their inception; a building that would for the first time in its architectural history become a successful expression of the tenets of the Jewish faith.

It was a pivotal time for the American synagogue. The same year Cohen wrote those words to Wright, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), a nationwide organization of Reform Jewish communities, was in the midst of gathering advice from some of America’s most well-known synagogue architects for a publication later titled *An American Synagogue for Today and Tomorrow*. Intended as a reference guide for American Jewish congregations faced with the overwhelming task of constructing a synagogue, the collection of essays and architectural case studies was a response to a unique situation facing these congregations after 1945, when a huge increase in membership prompted an upsurge of new synagogue design.² This new opportunity to use religious architecture as a means for the Jewish community to express itself and its values introduced a great debate regarding how those things could effectively be expressed.

Regardless of that uncertainty, Rabbi Cohen knew exactly what he wanted in a synagogue, as his letter attests. Wright

subsequently accepted the commission that was offered him and the result was Beth Sholom synagogue, a towering glass-and-steel mountain of light (Figure 1). This paper is an examination of Wright’s controversial design in light of scholarship, then and now, surrounding the question of “what makes synagogue design successful?” This article explores the concept of religious symbolism in architecture as it relates to the Jewish faith as well as discussing the guidelines of the UAHC and other scholars regarding synagogue design after 1945. Applying these criteria to Wright’s design reveals Beth Sholom as a religious structure that not only satisfied the hopes and dreams of the congregation’s leader, Rabbi Cohen, but was, and remains, an appropriate and successful expression of the Jewish religion.

Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath summarizes the status of the American synagogue in his introduction to the UAHC’s *An American Synagogue for Today and Tomorrow* of 1954. He accurately points out that “frequently we cannot be sure as we pass a synagogue whether it is a mosque, a Greek or Roman temple, or even a Gothic shrine to Christendom.”³ In this statement Eisendrath refers to the architectural triteness that has characterized Jewish religious structures since ancient times. Due to various factors including oppression by a dominant society, the synagogue has never been allowed to develop an individual architectural idiom of its own.⁴ Even amidst the more tolerant atmosphere of the United States, small numbers and this architectural deficiency has produced countless synagogues that appear more akin to mosques, temples and basilicas.

It was at the close of the Second World War, with the suburbanization of this country and the resulting boost in numbers of those affiliated with organized religion, that the American Jewish community finally grew out of minority status. After 1945, Jews in the U.S. constituted a third of the population, which posed problems of space in their religious structures.⁵ The resulting explosion of concern for synagogue architecture allowed congregations to be imaginative and path

¹ Brendan Gill, *Many Masks: A Life of Frank Lloyd Wright* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1987) 464.

² Lance J. Sussman, “The Suburbanization of American Judaism as Reflected in Synagogue Building and Architecture, 1945-1975,” *American Jewish History* 75.1 (1985): 31.

³ Peter Blake, ed., *An American Synagogue for Today and Tomorrow* (New York: The Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1954) xiii.

⁴ Paul Thiry, et. al., *Churches & Temples* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1953) 38J. For a detailed recounting of the history of the synagogue as an architectural entity and a discussion of the influence of dominant societies on their architectural development, see Thiry, esp. pp. 3J-27J.

⁵ Sussman 31.

breaking in planning their new worship spaces. The architects selected to design them each took drastically different approaches in defining their buildings as Jewish religious spaces, since the challenge that now presented itself was that of creating religious architecture that was successfully Jewish.

The task set before Frank Lloyd Wright as he accepted the commission was to shatter the mold of architectural subjugation and to make Rabbi Cohen's dream a reality. By mid-century Wright had established a reputation as one of the greatest American architects of the twentieth century. His Prairie Style designs, which emphasize horizontality and organicism, revolutionized early twentieth-century architecture in the way space and light were utilized. Creativity and innovation were hallmarks of Wright's style, as was his eagerness to break with the historicism of the past to embrace new ideas, lines and forms.

In 1953 Mortimer Cohen had been serving the Jewish community of Beth Sholom for thirty-three years. He was first called to serve as Rabbi to the group in 1920, shortly after it was formed in Philadelphia. Named "House of Peace" to celebrate the end of World War I, the congregation survived the Depression and another world war before the nation-wide movement to the suburbs threatened its existence as an urban congregation. Rabbi Cohen was hesitant to make the move to the suburbs but knew it was imminent if the community were to remain together. To that end, in the early 1950s, land was purchased in the suburb of Elkins Park, where a school and community center were built with plans to add a worship space when an architect was found.⁶

Cohen began sketching ideas for the synagogue almost right from the start. Specifically, he desired a building that would not borrow from other architectural styles, envisioning a structure that was inspired by Mount Sinai, the location where God handed Moses the Tablets of Law. Cohen boldly included these sketches in his first correspondence to the architect.⁷ Anyone familiar with the egotism of Frank Lloyd Wright might assume that this forwardness on the part of the patron would not be tolerated. However, Wright never seemed to balk at these or any of the other ideas Cohen put forth regarding the building. In fact, he gave the Rabbi the honor of publicly naming him co-designer of the finished synagogue. For this reason, architectural historian Brendan Gill has aptly termed this commission the closest thing to collaboration between patron and architect in Wright's long career.⁸

Shortly after his acceptance of the project, Wright included a sketch of the synagogue (Figure 2) along with a letter to Cohen, describing it as "a religious tribute to the living God."⁹ The drawing was of a towering pyramid form of glass and steel; a literal Mount Sinai, which seemed to fit Cohen's prescriptions perfectly, the sketch was actually a design with which Wright had been working since 1926 (Figures 3 and 4).¹⁰ The Rabbi was enraptured with the plan and expressed this approval to the architect, claiming "you have taken the supreme moment of Jewish history...and you have translated that moment with all it signifies into a design of beauty and reverence."¹¹ While the four years of construction were fraught with typical Wrightian obstacles and deterrents, the structure managed to reach completion, more or less, in time for a dedication on September 20, 1959. Unfortunately, Wright was not alive to see his building consecrated; he passed away in April of that year. His widow, Olgivanna, spoke on his behalf at the ceremony.

This towering mass of light stands 115 feet high and was constructed of corrugated wire, glass, fiberglass and over 160 tons of steel framed by a steel tripod covered with stamped aluminum ornamentation. Seven triangular spikes on each frame-post emit beams of light in the darkness, symbolizing the seven lights of the menorah. The tripod supports a matrix of cream fiberglass panels on the interior and clear glass walls on the exterior, with five inches of air space between. The concave, hexagonal foundation is comprised of reinforced steel and concrete, which Wright designed in the form of two hands cupped together, meant to establish the feeling that visitors were resting in the hands of God (Figure 5).¹²

Upon entering the front lobby one is presented with a central staircase leading downward to a small chapel, and two side staircases leading upward to the main sanctuary. These side flights twist and turn in the manner of Wright's earliest religious work, Unity Temple (1905-1907).¹³ The compression of the low ceilings here is resolved by the release sensation of entering the main worship space with its soaring verticality, where glass walls filtered by white plastic allow a warm glow to fill the space from floor to one hundred-foot ceiling (Figure 6). Seating for 1,030 surrounds the *bimah*, or reading platform. Just behind this platform is the central feature of the space, the ark.

The walnut doors of the ark stand before a giant monolith that invokes the shape of the stone tablets given to Moses at Mount Sinai. A curtain conceals twelve torah scrolls, one to

⁶ Gill 463.

⁷ Gill 463.

⁸ Gill 462.

⁹ David Larkin and Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, *Frank Lloyd Wright: The Masterworks* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1993) 264.

¹⁰ Larkin and Pfeiffer 264. The sketch in Figure 3 was done by Wright in 1926 for a pastor friend who was toying with the idea for a massive reli-

gious space he called the Steel Cathedral. Again in 1936, Wright prepared the sketch in Figure 4 as an idea for a small chapel to be built on the grounds of Fallingwater (1936) in Bear Run, Pennsylvania. While neither project was ever realized, both concepts bear a resemblance to the finished Beth Sholom in their pyramidal form and walls of steel and glass.

¹¹ Larkin and Pfeiffer 264.

¹² Larkin and Pfeiffer 264.

¹³ Gill 466.

represent each of the tribes of Israel. The large triangular form resting above the ark doors holds the *ner tamid*, or eternal light. Following the wishes of Cohen, Wright designed this feature to dramatize the vision of Isaiah in which God reveals himself to the prophet surrounded by winged seraphim who cry, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts." The words of the angels appear above the eternal light in the Hebrew characters.¹⁴

Hovering above the bimah and congregational seating floats a triangular stained-glass chandelier. The colors appearing here were chosen by Cohen, and each connotes a different element of human character according to the Kabbalists, a group of Jewish mystics. In the words of Cohen, the entire schematic of the sanctuary ornamentation works to unite "the warmth of Jewish mysticism and the cool reason of Jewish mind and Jewish Law."¹⁵

From both exterior and interior, it is clear in this design that the primary theme is light, which in itself is a powerful symbol within the Jewish faith.¹⁶ Architectural historian Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, along with other scholars and Wright himself, have all remarked the power of light to determine the atmosphere within the sanctuary depending on the weather conditions. Pfeiffer refers to the design as "an architectural expression of light as form."¹⁷ Externally, the symbol evoked by the pyramidal mass is biblical Mount Sinai. Along with the visual allusion to the menorah in the beams of light, it can definitely be said that a component of Wright's architectural program includes the use of symbolism, a practice which has been called into question since the explosion of new synagogue design at mid-century.¹⁸ There are generally opposing views surrounding the debate over the use of religious symbolism in synagogue design; there are those who advocate and encourage its use, and those who believe symbolism is both unnecessary and inappropriate for a faith in which "the reverence of sacred moments [is favored] over the creation of sacred sites."¹⁹

By observing the architectural trends throughout the history of the synagogue, it becomes evident that religious symbolism in architecture, having its roots in the Catholic tradition, is largely a foreign concept to the Jewish religion. The

Gothic cathedrals of the middle ages used such symbolic architectural elements as the spire and pointed arch as subtle pointers to the heavens. Similarly, sculpture and stained glass functioned as didactic tools to teach the illiterate masses the stories of the Bible. In the quattrocento, Pope Nicholas V used architectural symbolism on a large scale, firmly establishing it as a persuasive tool of the Church. Upon his election to the papal throne in 1447, he proposed a massive plan to redesign the city of Rome in order for each building to convey a particular ideological point. Preeminent among these points was Nicholas's religious doctrine of "amplifying devotion and protecting the church."²⁰ He believed that architecture possessed the ability to persuade man's will and drew on the treatises of Alberti in support of this: Alberti proposed that the goal of the artist was to "move men from vice to virtue."²¹ Thus, Nicholas used the concept as a means of altering the values of the viewer, hoping that upon experiencing the architecture the citizens of Rome would at once identify with the messages conveyed and be persuaded to adopt the ideologies they expressed. Today architectural symbolism has become commonplace in both Catholic and Protestant religious structures.

This has not been the case, however, in the history of the synagogue. Until at least the eighteenth century symbolism in architecture was simply not an option for the vast majority of synagogues built in Western Europe.²² On the contrary, most Jewish religious spaces were built to be as inconspicuous as possible to avoid discovery by societies who often punished and ostracized those who espoused the Jewish faith.²³ Furthermore, the traditions of Judaism are such that the use of didactic imagery such as stained glass has never been a necessity. In fact, in the Orthodox and Conservative traditions, the use of graven images is strictly forbidden.²⁴ A major objective of Nicholas in the fifteenth century seemed to be that of "recruiting," or reaching out to the individuals without a church in an attempt to reconcile them to religion. Missions and discipleship have been a priority of the Catholic Church and Nicholas applied architectural symbolism in that cause. The Jewish religion does not proselytize to the extent of Catholicism and Protestantism. For these reasons religious symbol-

¹⁴ Mortimer J. Cohen, *Beth Sholom Synagogue: A Description and Interpretation* (Elkins Park: Westcott & Thompson, 1959) 6.

¹⁵ Cohen 33.

¹⁶ Rev. William Haney, *Jewish Symbols and Frank Lloyd Wright's Beth Sholom Synagogue: A Study of Tensions* (Columbia: The Unitarian Universalist Church, 1988) 33.

¹⁷ Yukio Futagawa, ed. *Global Architecture: Frank Lloyd Wright* (Japan: A.D.A. Edit Tokyo Co. Ltd., 1976).

¹⁸ Phillip Nobel, "What Design for a Synagogue Spells Jewish?" *New York Times on the Web*, 2 December 2001 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/02/arts/design/02NOBE.html?ex=1008418581&ei=1>>

¹⁹ Nobel 1.

²⁰ Carroll William Westfall, *In This Most Perfect Paradise: Alberti, Nicholas V, and the Invention of Conscious Urban Planning in Rome, 1447-55* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State UP, 1974) 33.

²¹ Westfall 52.

²² Thiry 16J.

²³ Thiry 16J.

²⁴ John Knox Shear, ed., *Religious Buildings for Today* (F.W. Dodge Corporation, 1957) 43. While the three divisions of Judaism (Orthodox, Conservative and Reform) generally do not consider themselves to be in great conflict with each other, there are distinct differences between many of their values which bear a substantial influence on the design of their respective religious structures. See Rabbi Solomon B. Freehof's essay, "The Three Jewish Groups in the Western World" (Thiry) for a discussion of the three sects and the architectural elements unique to each.

ism has not been a presence in Jewish synagogue architecture.

The argument against the use of symbolism in Jewish religious design is problematic as well. Often in an attempt to prove that synagogue architecture can be effective without relying on symbolism, many structures, such as Phillip Johnson's (1906 -) K.T.I. Synagogue (1956) in Port Chester, New York, appear closer akin to warehouses than religious spaces.²⁵ As suggested above by Rabbi Eisendrath of the UAHC, extreme application of this viewpoint has resulted in synagogues that are indistinguishable as sacred spaces and become interchangeable with the secular buildings that surround them. The UAHC's 1954 guidebook attempts to put forth some general suggestions regarding what its members agree can be considered successful elements of synagogue architecture and design. Foremost among these suggestions is the idea of expressing a spirit of sacredness. Eisendrath describes the ideal synagogue as one that, in its "simplicity...should stir and inspire both the worshiper within and the passer-by with an unequivocal conviction that 'surely God is in this place.'"²⁶ Scholars such as Alfred Werner concur, suggesting that a synagogue and the art within should lift man to a higher level of emotional experience.²⁷ The framework provided by the UAHC and reaffirmed by other scholars suggests that architectural symbolism, when used, should be a means to an end; a subtle component in the overall scheme. Most importantly, the architecture should convey a sense of sanctity and in the words of Rabbi Alexander Kline, act as "expressions of the Jewish spirit."²⁸

It is this very concept which makes Wright's Beth Sholom a success. The architect's use of light and space in the design creates a feeling that Brendan Gill has described as being "in

the presence of a Presence."²⁹ In a recent article appearing in *Architectural Record*, architect Alison Snyder discusses the power of light as an element in religious spaces, noting aptly that its use "allows the 'other' or 'eternal' world to come within the reach of worshippers, so they may experience transcendent, contemplative and spiritual states of mind."³⁰ Snyder's statement was in reference to a synagogue design of modernist American architect Pietro Belluschi (1899-1994), whose ambition in designing religious architecture was to express the presence of that which cannot be expressed in words. Belluschi, in turn, derived many of his architectural principles from the philosophy of theologian Paul Tillich, who believed that visual art, including architecture, possesses an ability to "arouse emotions and create experiences not communicable in words."³¹ A term Tillich coined to express this feeling is "holy emptiness," which he defined as a "meaningful emptiness where one sensed a deeper...dimension, a space filled with the presence of something that could not be expressed in any finite form."³²

In Tillich's definition one finds the very essence of Beth Sholom, a space that is both vast and protected, sheltered yet soaring. Rather than dominate the architectural program, the symbols of light, the menorah and the allusion to Mount Sinai subtly contribute to an ultimate feeling of sacredness. "Standing defiantly aloof from architectural history," as author George Goodwin describes the synagogue,³³ this totally unconventional design of Frank Lloyd Wright has offered up a truly successful synagogue for today and tomorrow, a space where worshippers may rest safely in the hands of God while experiencing the warm glow of His presence.

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²⁵ Alfred Werner, "Synagogues for Today's Jews," in *The Synagogue: Studies in Origins, Archaeology and Architecture*, ed. Harry M. Orlinsky (New York: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1975) 356.

²⁶ Blake xiv.

²⁷ Werner 356.

²⁸ Blake 44.

²⁹ Gill 473.

³⁰ Allison Snyder, "Daylight by Two Modernists and an Old Master," *Architectural Record* 182.11 (1994): 28.

³¹ Merideth Clausen, *Spiritual Space: The Religious Architecture of Pietro Belluschi* (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1992) 25.

³² Clausen 26.

³³ George Goodwin, "Wright's Beth Sholom Synagogue," *American Jewish History* 86.3 (1998): 348.



Figure 1. Exterior, Beth Shalom Synagogue, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, 1954. Frank Lloyd Wright, architect. Photograph courtesy of Beth Shalom Synagogue.

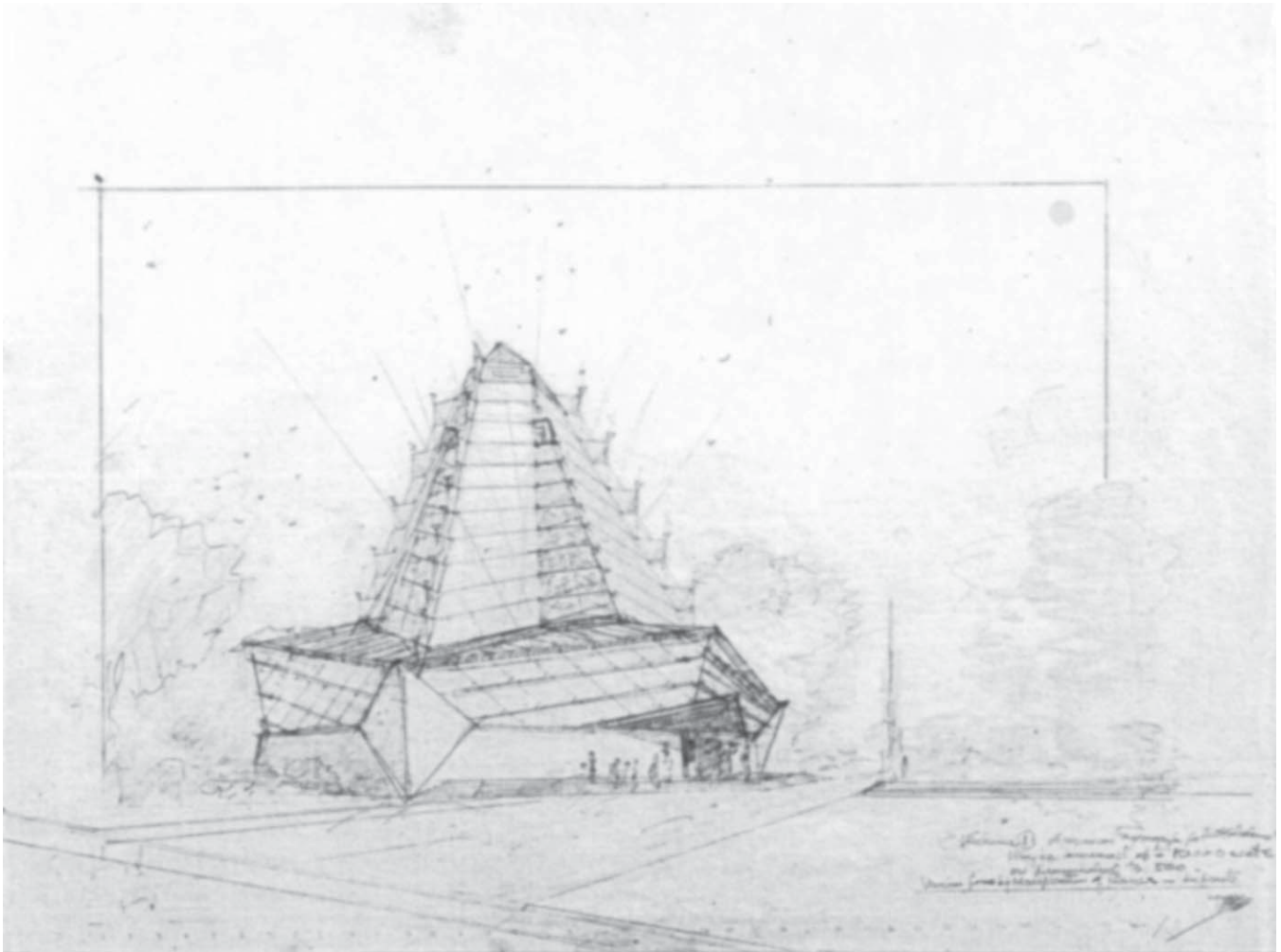


Figure 2. Beth Shalom Synagogue, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, 1954. Conceptual Sketch. Color pencil and pencil on tracing paper, 29 X 18 inches. *FLLWFDN# 5313.001*. The drawings of Frank Lloyd Wright are Copyright © 2002 The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, Scottsdale, Arizona.

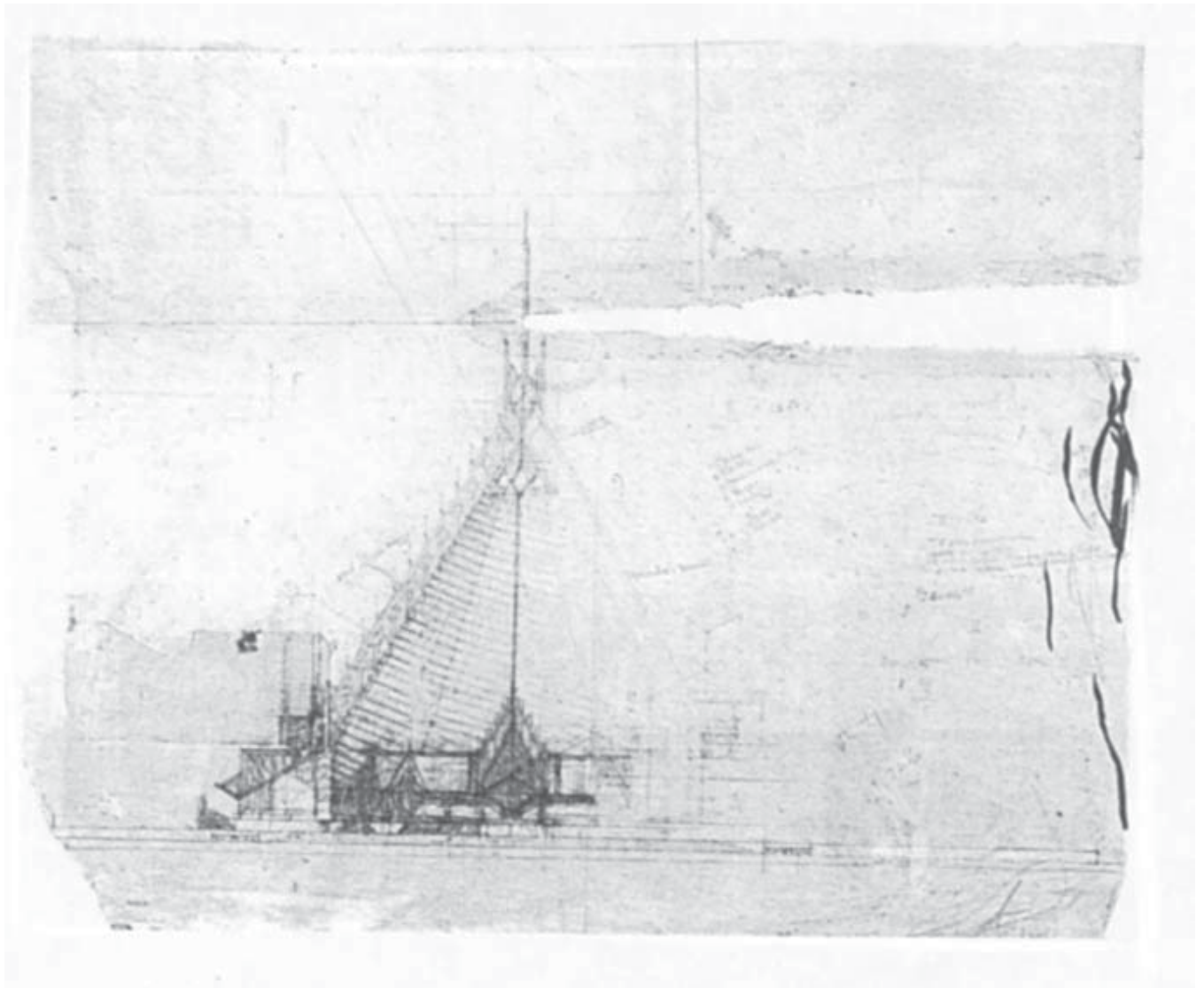


Figure 3. Steel Cathedral (Project), New York City, 1926. Elevation. Pencil on tracing paper, 27 X 28 inches. *FLLWFDN#2602.001*. The drawings of Frank Lloyd Wright are Copyright © 2002 The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, Scottsdale, Arizona.

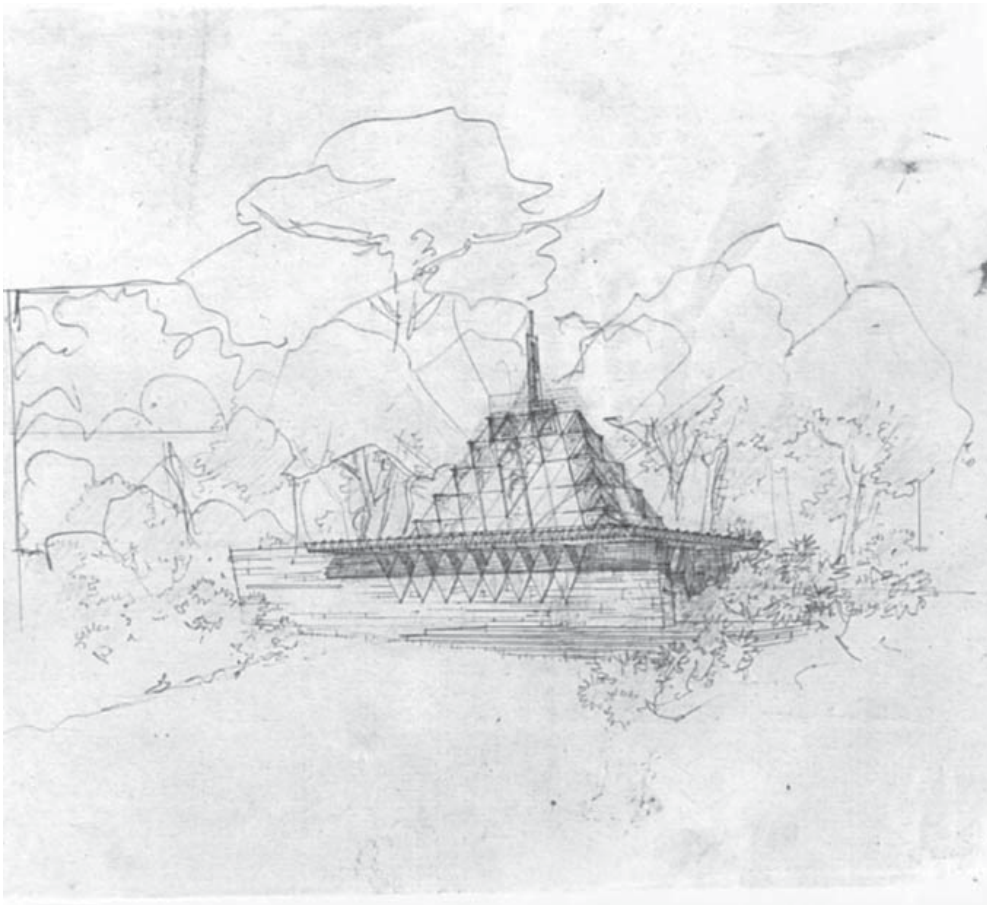


Figure 4. Rhododendron Chapel (project), Mill Run, Pennsylvania, 1953. Perspective. Pencil on tracing paper, 34 x 19 inches. *FLLW FDN# 5308.001*. The drawings of Frank Lloyd Wright are Copyright © 2002 The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, Scottsdale, Arizona.

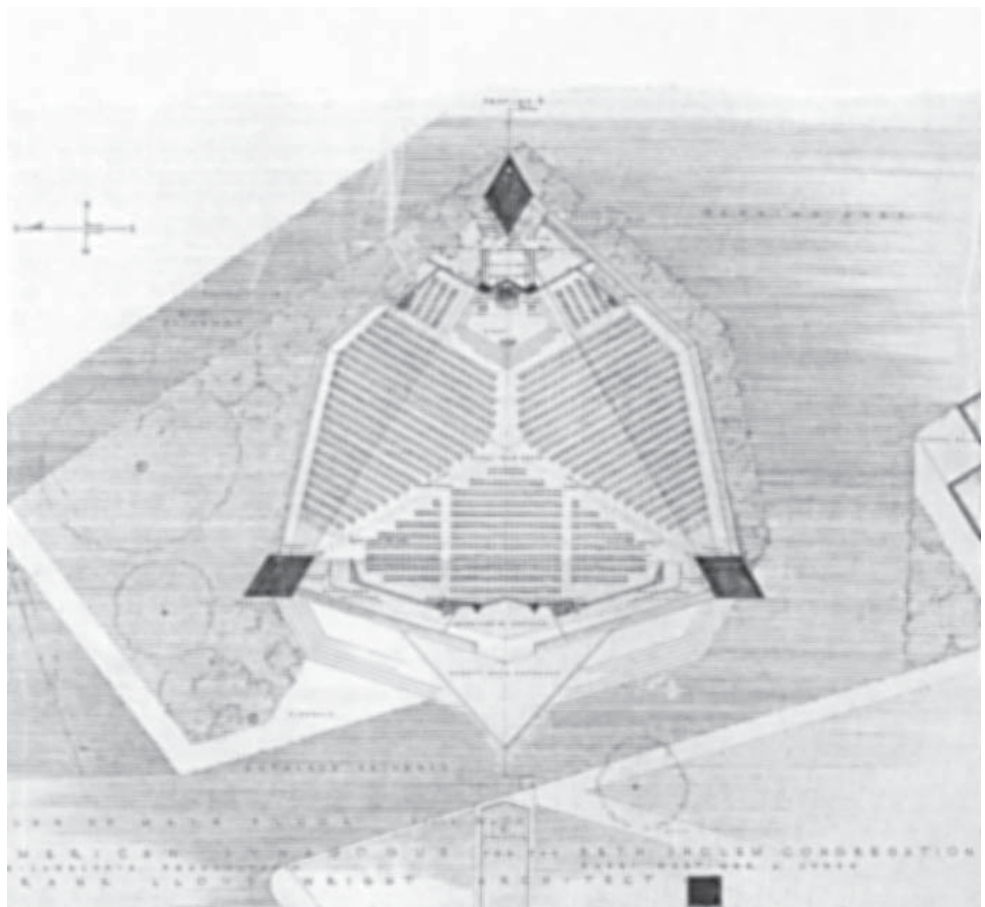


Figure 5. Beth Shalom Synagogue, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, 1954. Plan of main floor. *FLLW FDN# 5313.24*. The drawings of Frank Lloyd Wright are Copyright © 2002 The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, Scottsdale, Arizona.



Figure 6. Interior, Beth Shalom Synagogue, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, 1954. Frank Lloyd Wright, architect. Photograph courtesy of Beth Shalom Synagogue.