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## Polish Influence on American synagogue architecture

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JEWISH ARTISTS  
AND CENTRAL–EASTERN  
EUROPE

ART CENTERS — IDENTITY — HERITAGE  
FROM THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY  
TO THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Edited by  
Jerzy Malinowski, Renata Piątkowska,  
Tamara Sztyma–Knasiecka



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Druk cyfrowy

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## Polish influence on American synagogue architecture

This article is divided into two parts, defining two distinct episodes in the history of American synagogue architecture and decoration. Both episodes were influenced by synagogue art traditions from Eastern Europe, particularly from Great Poland. The first involves the spread of a tradition through immigrant communities and their artisans, in every way part of a centuries-old continuous tradition — except that it has been transplanted to a new continent. The second episode is more studied and reflective. It is the result of American synagogue architects and congregations consciously confronting and referencing previous traditions, but seeing that tradition not as part of a vibrant cultural continuum, but rather as a vanished heritage — in which both artists and the synagogues they created went up in the flames of the Holocaust.

This second movement — which was conceived by architects and their congregational patrons as one part memorial and another part revival — was sparked not by the arrival in America of hundreds of thousands of immigrant Jews, or any Jewish movement, but rather by the publication in English of a single book: *Wooden Synagogues* by Maria and Kazimierz Piechotka, published in Polish in 1957 and in English in 1959.<sup>1</sup>

Both episodes are mostly about impressions and feelings rather than carefully

thought meanings or religious or social positions. Art and architecture elements — such as twin towers, paired lions, zodiac symbols or the use of wood — were adopted, embraced and continued for their general, not specific historic and cultural associations.

This article is not a detailed study of Polish or American synagogues. It is intended as an introductory and comparative study, and one that will, I hope stimulate more interest in and study of the art and architecture of American synagogues.

Between the years 1875 and 1878, a survey listed 270 synagogues serving 250,000 Jews in America.<sup>2</sup> Increasingly, these Jews were affiliated with the new Reform movement with its center in Cincinnati, but also with popular centers in all major U.S. cities, and it was spreading quickly through the small towns of the South, Midwest and far West.<sup>3</sup> The architecture of all American synagogues had several sources, but by the mid-century, synagogue architects drew their inspiration from trends in Central Europe which favored historicism (especially Medieval styles) and the new “Moorish” or “Oriental” Style. The Plum Street Synagogue in Cincinnati was

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<sup>1</sup> Piechotka, Piechotka (1959).

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<sup>2</sup> The oft-cited demographic survey was carried out by the Board of Delegates of American Israelites. See, for instance: Weissbach (2005: 13).

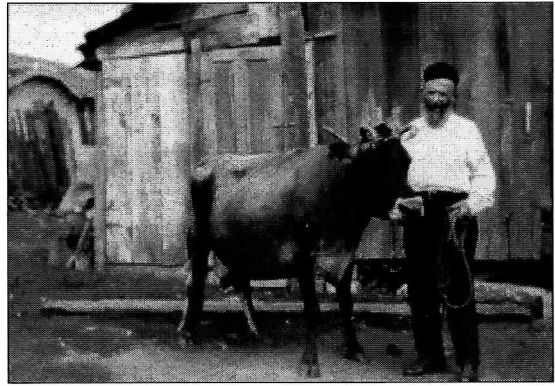
<sup>3</sup> On American synagogue architecture see: Wischnitzer (1955). For a selection of 20<sup>th</sup> synagogues see: Gruber (2003).



the first major American example of this in 1866, and it was soon followed by scores of others. Later, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many congregations replaced these *Rundbogenstil*, Gothic or Moorish synagogues with new buildings designed in the Italianate or Classical style, which became the preferred architectural expression of Central European reform Jews, especially in face of the new Eastern European Orthodox communities, which began to grow in number due to the massive Jewish immigration after 1880.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century hundreds of thousand of Jews from the former lands of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth settled in the United States and Canada. Most stayed in and around the major ports of entry — big cities such as New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Boston, but thousands of others migrated to small towns across the continent where they founded small Jewish communities and built small synagogues.<sup>4</sup> Until 1920, Jews continued to arrive in the United States in great numbers. In many cases they replicated, albeit on a smaller scale, the village life of the “Old County.” Such was the case of my Great–Grandfather Pesach Susnitsky, who settled in the small town of Brenham, Texas, about 1880, and helped found the synagogue in 1893. It is the oldest Orthodox synagogue in Texas (Figs. 1, 2).<sup>5</sup>

These immigrant builders used no architectural manuals — and indeed — there were at that time no such manuals for synagogues, nor even compendia of illustrations. Instead, they used their limited funds on local (American) building traditions to which they added embellishments that recalled — mostly from memory — traditions from home. Thus, a simple American vernacular building — that might even recall a small–town church (note the pointed windows of the B’nai Abraham) that would be decorated with framed



1. The author’s great–grandfather Pesach Susnitsky and his cow, Brenham, Texas. Susnitsky came to America from a village near Kalvaria (now Lithuania), ca 1880; he settled with other Orthodox Jews in a small Texas town, where their religious community and many of cultural patterns of the “old country” were recreated.



2. B’nai Abraham Synagogue, Brenham, Texas (USA), built in 1893. This was the second synagogue built by the Brenham Orthodox Community; the first one, also a wooden building, was destroyed in a fire soon after its erection. The simple wood–frame building combines elements of American vernacular church architecture with an interior organized and decorated to recall Polish–Lithuania synagogues; photo by Shirley Moskowicz Gruber.

paper–cuts, embroidered textiles, carved wood, and sometimes wall paintings.<sup>6</sup> The process and even the effect led to obvious — though still general — similarities with many of the vernacular wooden synagogues in the former Polish territories. The story of Brenham was repeated across America, for example in the brick Ahavath Gerim Synagogue in

<sup>4</sup> There is a large literature about Eastern European Jewish immigration to American and Jewish settlement. Among the best summaries are: Hasia (1992); Sarna (2004).

<sup>5</sup> On the Brenham synagogue see: Gruber (1994: 33–39), and Weiner, Miller (2007: 185–205).

<sup>6</sup> See: Zimiles (2007). On Jewish papercuts see: Shadur (2002).

Burlington, Vermont; the wooden synagogues of Stevens Point, Wisconsin or Tupper Lake, New York; or the small brick B'nai Abraham Synagogue in Virginia, Minnesota.<sup>7</sup>

The small communities of Brenham, Burlington, Tupper Lake, Stevens Point, etc. were *ad hoc* creations, but organized efforts were also made to disperse the immigrants, including the development of agricultural communities. The only settlements that were in any way successful in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were those founded in Southern New Jersey with the aid of the Alliance Israelite Universelle, the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society and the Baron de Hirsch Fund. This is not the place to discuss the political, economic and social challenges of these communities, but we can look quickly at the architecture.<sup>8</sup> For more than any other place in America, in these new communities we see an attempt to create a new type of *shtetl* — one that is Americanized. But just as *shtetl* culture in Poland was in decline — in large part due to the pull of cities; so too, in America, these communities could hardly be sustained. A few communities around Vineland, New Jersey, however, survived due to replenishment from new waves of immigrants and the development of a thriving poultry industry during the interwar years.<sup>9</sup>

All of the buildings in these communities were simple wood frame constructions — typical of cheap American building of the period. Looking at the synagogues in Alliance and the other colonies, we can see that the influence of Eastern Europe is not far (Fig. XXXIII). These are not copies, but inside, the feel of a Polish *shul* was unmistakable — from the sound of Yiddish spoken, to the *minhag* used, to the carved lions above the *aron ha-kodesh*.

More expressive communities chose to embellish their synagogues with towers,

often with onion domes. These too, probably, had their source in Poland, though they must also be the result of efforts to compete with the larger two-towered synagogues of the big cities popular in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Churches too could have provided this model, but unlike Central Europe, few if any churches used this motif. In Corsicana, Texas (Fig. XXXIV) the two-towered (former) synagogue stood out as different in the community — but it was still proudly located on Church Street with the other religious buildings. Its form closely resembles that of Sierpc and Gąbin (Gambin), Poland, and similar synagogues.<sup>10</sup>

On the Lower East Side of New York from 1880 to 1905 there were 350 congregations using about 60 synagogue buildings, of which 48 were former church buildings. There were also dozens of converted storefronts, houses, and other buildings used as places of worship for small *minyans* — or *shtiblach*. Congregations were most often organized by place of origin and those from the lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth — what is now Poland, Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine, dominated.<sup>11</sup>

In 1926 there were 3,228 congregations existing in 1,782 synagogue buildings across the entire United States serving a population of over four million Jews. A majority of the synagogues was erected by new immigrants from Eastern Europe and many of the workmen and artisans who built and decorated these synagogues were immigrant Jews. Although there is little documentation overall about the planning and designs of these synagogues, we have the names of a few of the best known artists, particularly those who were commissioned for special work such as the construction and decoration of Arks. Murray Zimilas has re-introduced the work of some of these artists to the world in his

<sup>7</sup> The best overview of small town Jewish settlements in the United States is Weissbach (2005).

<sup>8</sup> On these topics see: Brandes (1971) and Eisenberg (1995).

<sup>9</sup> For a memoir of life in Vineland communities and the development of the poultry industry see Goldhaft (1957).

<sup>10</sup> Pictures of these synagogues can be found in Piechotka, Piechotka (1959).

<sup>11</sup> On the synagogues of the Lower East Side see: Wolf, Fine (1978).



3. Synagogue, Gąbin, Poland. Two-tower façade; photo from: M. and K. Piechotka, *Wooden Synagogues* (Warsaw: Arkady, 1959).

wonderful and evocative exhibition at the American Folk Art Museum.<sup>12</sup>

Abraham Shulkin (1852–1918) was born near Minsk and who moved to Sioux City, where he was a cattle dealer as well as wood carver.<sup>13</sup> In Sioux City Shulkin carved the now well-known Ark for Adas Yeshurun Synagogue in 1899 (Jewish Museum, New York). The rich and dense carving of animals and vegetal motifs recalls the grand Arks of synagogues such as Wołpa (Wołpa, near Białystok, Poland, now in Western Belarus), Włodawa or Olkieniki.<sup>14</sup> A Mr. Cohen from Montreal was responsible for at least one surviving Ark made for a congregation in Nova Scotia, Canada.<sup>15</sup> Best known is Samuel Katz born in 1885 near Lwow. He came to America in 1907 and over the next decades he made at least two dozen Arks, including the one at the Adams Street Shul

in Newton, Massachusetts, that is still extant (1912).<sup>16</sup>

Carved Ark elements became required and commonplace in American Orthodox *shuls*. As most of these have now closed, Ark fragments are now dispersed — their origin are often unrecorded (Fig. 4).<sup>17</sup> Several popular elements of synagogue decoration of Orthodox immigrant congregations survive in the Walnut Street Shul, in Chelsea, Massachusetts. The origins of the congregation date to 1887, but the building, designed by Harry Dustin Joll, is from 1909. The space is dominated by the 10-meter-high solid oak *aron* decorated with carvings of lions, a Decalogue and Torah symbols (Fig. XXXV).

<sup>12</sup> Zimiles (2007).

<sup>13</sup> Zimiles (2007: 22–23, 104, 106, 108).

<sup>14</sup> On these Arks see: Piechotka, Piechotka (1959: *passim*) and Yaniv (2006: 83–102).

<sup>15</sup> Zimiles (2007: 23).

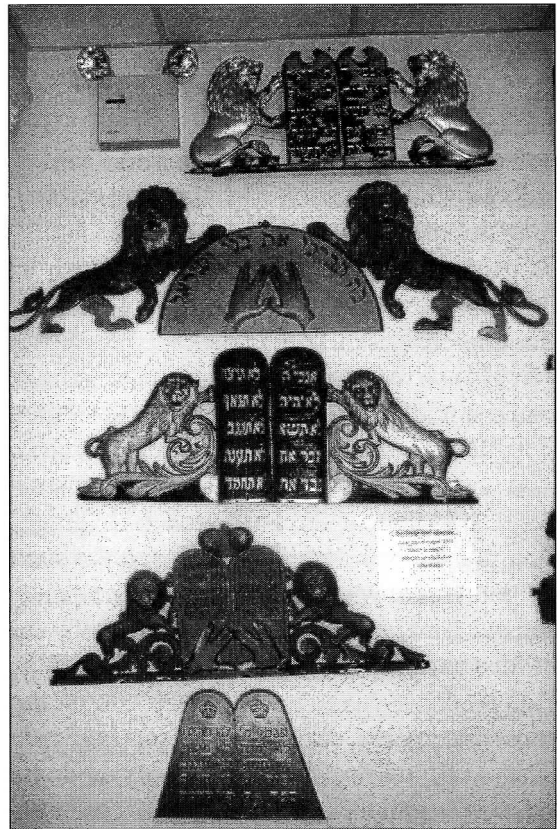
<sup>16</sup> Zimiles (2007: 23–24).

<sup>17</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, as many small *shuls* closed, pieces of these Arks began to appear in junk and antique shops and many passed into private collections within information on the provenance. A few Jewish Centers accumulated multiple examples of Ark carving. Rabbi Abie Ingbar, Rabbi Emeritus of the Hillel Cincinnati rescued many synagogue artifacts from the Midwest, including many Ark pieces. Some of these were included in the exhibition *Gilded Lions and Jeweled Horses: The Synagogue to the Carousel*. There is also a significant collection at the Museum at Eldridge Street in New York.

Such Holy Arks were built well into the 1920s by Orthodox immigrant congregations, as can still be seen in the *circa* 1925 example at Congregation Beth Israel in New Haven, Connecticut. In Chelsea we also see abundant painted decoration of a type favored in larger congregations, especially in urban areas. Similar examples survive in New York City, Toronto (Canada) and elsewhere. These have never been inventoried, and are poorly documented and little studied.

Favorite motifs in these decorations are curtains — often painted around and behind the Ark as in Chelsea, and also at Kneseth Israel in Toronto. These curtains then reveal varied scenes, sometimes paradisaical and symbolic landscapes. On a formal level, these curtains create a *trompe l'oeil* opening of space, but they may also refer to the revelation that results in proper study, prayer and veneration of the Torah. Faux-curtains as part of the interior synagogue design had appeared in some wooden synagogues, such as Nowe Miasto, where painted drapery frames images of stags decorate the convex part of the ogee-shaped profile of the cupola. Szymon Zajczyk thought these paintings were not earlier than the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>18</sup>

We do not know when this device was first incorporated into a Jewish context, but it probably migrated into Jewish use after it became popular for the representation of both religious and royal images in the Renaissance and afterward.<sup>19</sup> It is found frequently



4. Ark fragments from New York's Lower East Side Synagogues, now housed at the Museum at Eldridge Street (Eldridge Street Synagogue), New York; photo by Samuel D. Gruber.

and prominently in synagogues in Poland and in neighboring lands. An early original example is the painted wooden synagogue of Horb, Germany, decorated by Eliezer Zusman between 1732 and 1740, now reconstructed in the Israel Museum.<sup>20</sup> A large red curtain is painted above and behind the Ark at the Kupa Synagogue in Krakow, but it is not certain when the painted curtain was first applied there (Fig. XXXVI).

Curtains were standard behind many secular portraits, and parted curtains were used

<sup>18</sup> For discussion and illustration, see Piechotka, Piechotka (2004: 283).

<sup>19</sup> The use of painted decorative curtains for backdrops in holy images was fairly common in Italian art in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, with examples by Duccio (Rucellai Madonna) and others. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century Fra Angelico used the device in many of his Madonna paintings. Fra Angelico also used painted curtains to frame the Madonna. The best example of this is his *Linaiuoli Tabernacle* of 1433–1435 (Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saint John the Evangelist and the Saint John the Baptist) in the Museo di San Marco, Florence. The parted curtains can be part of an elaborate curtained throne space, as in Rogier van der Weyden's *Virgin and Child with Saints* (Städelsches Kunstinstitut in Frankfurt am Main, Germany), or in the

case of Giovanni Bellini's enthroned Madonna in the Votive Picture of Doge Agostino Barbarigo of 1488, open onto a undefined but larger space. We also see sculpted curtains framing figures in tomb sculpture as in the tomb of Doge Francesco Foscari, ca 1457, in the Church of the Frari (Venice).

<sup>20</sup> On Zusman's and the several synagogues he decorated, see: Piechotka, Piechotka (2004: 138–145).



especially for portraits of royalty in Renaissance and post-Renaissance art. Framing curtains continue to be used as backdrops for photo portraits of modern-day royalty. The use of the curtain to frame the Torah set inside an Ark decorated with a crown (*keter*), may possibly refer to this tradition.

In America, painted decorations such as curtains were also a favorite device to allow the transformation of a pre-existing space to Jewish use. Many immigrant congregations could not afford to build synagogues, so they bought old buildings — most often churches. The most dramatic transformation of such a space is that of the Bialystoker congregation in New York which redesigned the staid Willett Street Methodist Church. The paintings at Bialystoker Synagogue are from the 1930s, and they were repainted in the 1990s. Bialystoker Synagogue also has one of the most intricately carved Arks in America.<sup>21</sup> The walls of the lower sanctuary and the women's gallery are painted to resemble marble and the curved ceiling is a pale blue featuring soft white clouds and stars. The twelve zodiac signs of the Hebrew calendar adorn the ceiling above the women's gallery. Those signs in human form were changed to avoid figural human representation. Boris Khaimovich has recently written at length about the tradition of painting the Zodiac in synagogues, and has analyzed several examples from Romania and Ukraine which are roughly contemporary with the American examples.<sup>22</sup> Since most of the painters of the American decorations remain anonymous, it is not possible to be certain which, if any, specific regional traditions they drew upon for their inspiration.

Many of these characteristics come together at the First Independent Hebrew Congregation of 1905, in Queens, New York,<sup>23</sup> and similarly at the recently restored Keneseth Israel in Toronto, built in 1911, where the sweeping red drapes, painted above the Ark, represent the popular verse from the *Pirkei Avot*: "Be as bold as a leopard, light as an eagle, swift as a deer and strong as a lion to do the will of your Father in Heaven." Musical instruments, illustrating Psalm 150, are on the lower half of the wall.<sup>24</sup> All these motifs were popular in Poland and in America, especially in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The history of the use of these motifs still needs more study. Unfortunately, in Europe, most examples are destroyed and in Europe and in America, congregations and communities have left virtually no written documents concerning the decoration of their synagogues.

For many people, especially Jews, the Second World War and the Holocaust represented the end — or at least the failure — of history. This was certainly the case for synagogue architects, who after a building hiatus of fifteen years — from the onset of the Great Depression until the end of the war — were being asked to build new synagogues in record numbers. I've discussed the social, demographic, political and economic reasons for this in my book on modern American synagogues. For now, let's just say that there was near-universal rejection of the use of historical styles for new buildings. Modernism of many forms became the norm for synagogues worldwide beginning in the late 1940s and continuing today. The historic styles and older synagogues were so despised, in fact, that hundreds were sold or

<sup>21</sup> On the Bialystoker Synagogue and its decorations see: Wolf, Fine (1978: 60–63). For more recent pictures see: <http://www.bialystoker.org/virtual.htm> (accessed: June 1, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> See: Khaimovich (2008: 31–46). There is a growing literature on the representation of the Zodiac in ancient synagogues, but still little on more contemporary examples. See for example: Friedman (2005: 51–62); Magness (2005: 1–52) and Hachlili (1977: 61–77).

<sup>23</sup> Illustrated in Israelowitz (1982: 70–71). The synagogue was closed in 1985 and became the French Bethany Baptist Church. All exterior Jewish symbols have been removed. This author does not know if any of the synagogue's wall paintings remain, nor what has become of the elaborately carved Ark.

<sup>24</sup> History and photos of the synagogue are on-line at: <http://www.ontariojewisharchives.org/exhibits/Toronto-Synagogues/index.html>.

demolished as Jews left their old urban centers and moved to the suburbs.

The second episode of Polish influence slightly altered this course. When the Piechotka book was published in English in 1959, American Jews, and especially Jewish architects took note. Up until that time only one modern synagogue — Percival Goodman's B'nai Israel of 1951, had extensively used wood.<sup>25</sup> Architects responded especially to the Piechotka's drawings to which, as architects, they could relate. And over the years there has been a persistent stream of design where elements from these drawings have been incorporated and adapted to otherwise modern designs. The connection to the *Wooden Synagogues* became a connection to the lost Jewish culture of Eastern Europe, and could be seen as a scrape of that culture — albeit mostly symbolic — that was salvaged from the wreckage of history.

Architects adamantly maintained that late 20<sup>th</sup>-century America was nothing like Europe before the War. This was best expressed by Richard Meier — then a young architect — in the catalogue to the 1963 exhibition *Recent American Synagogue Architecture* at the Jewish Museum in New York, that he organized. Meier wrote "It is not necessary to point out that a wooden synagogue built in New York today in an Eastern European Style, similar to the marvelous Polish buildings of the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, like those at Wołpa, Grodno and Zabłudow (Zabłudów), would be wholly inappropriate to the place, the cultural environment; and the available funds and technical resources. None of the buildings exhibited here in drawing, photographs and models were intended to exploit historical sentimentalism dependent the tangible reminders of the past."<sup>26</sup> Still, at least one of the synagogues in the exhibition, the Sons of Israel Synagogue then being erected for an Orthodox congregation in Lakewood, New Jersey, did recall in its profile and its originally planned exterior treatment, some

of the wooden synagogues of Poland. A model of the synagogue as well as plans and sections were included in the exhibition.<sup>27</sup>

Meier thought highly enough of the book that he later gave a copy to painter Frank Stella; the book greatly influenced Stella's Polish Village series of the 1970s. Another building in the exhibition was still under construction — Pietro Belluschi in Rochester used the form of a dodecagon inscribed in a circle for his wooden sanctuary drum in what remains one of the most stunning American synagogue spaces (Fig. XXXVII). Belluschi combined the Eastern European reference supplied by the congregation's rabbi with his familiarity with wood learned as an architect in America's Pacific Northwest.<sup>28</sup>

Other architects in the 1970s used wood in their synagogues to evoke the past. They also played on central plan as frequently depicted in the *Wooden Synagogues*, but used geometric forms they were personally comfortable with. Louis Kahn's wood clad Beth El Synagogue at Chappaqua has a near square interior,<sup>29</sup> and Percival Goodman at Temple Adath Yeshuran in Syracuse took just a slice of a wooden synagogue and inserted in into his tent-like sanctuary which in other respects owes more to Frank Lloyd Wright's Beth Shalom Synagogue than to Poland. In this way he created a kind of Jewish post-modernist collage (Fig. 5).

No synagogue of the 1980s demonstrates more clearly the directions in which modern American Judaism has ventured — directions that more than coincidentally keep referring to past traditions as new forms of organization and new styles of worship are developed — than The Jewish Center of the Hamptons, also known as Gates of the Grove Synagogue, designed by Norman Jaffe and built in 1989. The building draws on local vernacular and traditional Jewish sources in its use of wood,

<sup>25</sup> On the Millburn synagogue see: Kampf (1966: 75–86).

<sup>26</sup> Meier (1963: 7–8).

<sup>27</sup> Richard Meier had, in fact, began his career (1958–1959) in the office of Davis, Brody and Wisniewski. On the synagogue today see: Gruber (2003: 158–163).

<sup>28</sup> See: Gruber (2003: 122–127).

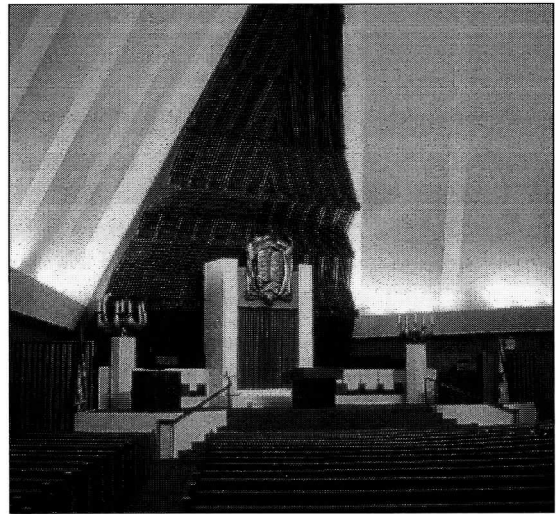
<sup>29</sup> Illustrated in: Gruber (1999: 117).

and its shingled exterior (Fig. XXXVIII). The texture and color of the shingles relate this building to a rural tradition in the “Old Country” and in America. The use of wood immediately ties the building to the tradition of wooden Synagogue, but only in a general way; architect Norman Jaffe was thinking of the East European *shtetl*, but not imitating it. He talked about the mystical nature of light and tried to capture some of this through the use of skylights. “Which is more important, the light that falls on the *shtetl* or on Chartres or Westminster Abbey?”<sup>30</sup>

This building also recalls the architecture of Jewish summer resorts, and the Jewish agricultural communities and of course the Hamptons. The building rejects most of the developments of American suburban architecture of the post-war era. There are no concrete or hard materials, nature is ever-present. The emotional charge of the place is not due to technological achievement, but to carefully crafted details and intimate space.

At an example of Temple Israel in Greenfield, Massachusetts, a Conservative Synagogue, architect and congregation also created a new combination from disparate traditions. The Old World and the New World meet in a modest wood structure that seems both rooted in its New England colonial and rural heritage and in the *shtetl* architecture of Eastern Europe.

The exterior is clad in flush pine siding and thus fits in with the New England vernacular clapboard building tradition.<sup>31</sup> The deep-set windows and atypical roof geometry both contribute to a level of geometric abstraction, but are also historically rooted in Polish synagogue design. “This is a contemporary building. It recalls and extends the characteristic forms of Eastern Europe and synthesizes them with modern concepts,” writes Goodman.<sup>32</sup> The prayer hall is surmounted by



5. Temple Adath Yeshuran, Syracuse, NY; Percival Goodman, architect (1976). Goodman took just a slice of a wooden synagogue and inserted it into his tent-like sanctuary, creating a kind of a Jewish post-modernist collage; photo by Samuel D. Gruber.

a wooden barrel vault of richly stained wood. While this, too, harks back to Eastern Europe, it is also firmly set in the American synagogue tradition. Early synagogues such as the first Beth Elohim in Charleston had wooden vaults,<sup>33</sup> in the tradition of the Amsterdam Esnoga. “By using wood throughout, we have a building that reflects the European tradition and is most appropriate to the New England setting.” This synagogue has the austerity of a New England Congregationalist church or a Pennsylvania Quaker meeting house. Unlike many Polish wooden synagogues, the wood of the ceiling is emphasized and there is no wall or ceiling painting and no ornamental embellishment of the Ark.

The Hampton Synagogue, in fashionable Westhampton, New York, is another example of more explicit reference to Polish wooden synagogues, as represented in the Piechotka book. Eddie Jacobs was the architectural designer and artist for the facility, and because this is an Orthodox synagogue, the explicit reference to prewar Poland is not restrictive.<sup>34</sup> The sources for the architectural design of

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Oppenheimer Dean (1989). See also: Gruber (2003: 184–191).

<sup>31</sup> For a description and photos see: Gruber (2003: 206–209).

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in: Greenberg (1996: 29–32).

<sup>33</sup> See: Wischnitzer (1955).

<sup>34</sup> Gruber (2003: 200–205).

the building are readily apparent. The architect used the form of a tent referring to the real tent used by the first congregants for the building was erected (and, of course, to the Tabernacle of the Israelites — a popular theme with modernist including Frank Lloyd Wright and many others). Here, the tent has been intermingled with the tradition of the wooden synagogues of Eastern Europe. The supports of the tent are all wood, and four tall thin piers rise up in the center surrounding the centrally place *bimah*. (Fig. XXXIX). These piers that are little more than tall 4 x 4 recall the thin supports in the wooden synagogue of Wołpa, destroyed in the Holocaust

and extensively illustrated in the *Wooden Synagogues*, including a now-classic full-page sectional drawing.<sup>35</sup>

Similar to the Hampton Synagogue is Congregation Beth Shalom Rodef Zedek in Chester, Connecticut.<sup>36</sup> The final building was designed by architect Stephen Lloyd, and completed in 2001. Renowned minimalist artist Sol LeWitt, who was a member of Beth Shalom, worked with local architects and provided the early sketches for the design. His minimal, linear geometric style was perfectly suited to adapt the Piechotka's line drawings of wooden synagogue framing into a new — and more overly symbolic — form.

### Recreating Wooden Synagogues Today

A few years ago there was a lot of attention about Congregation Beth Israel in Berkeley, California, which planned to build a new synagogue that would copy, or at least resemble, the destroyed Polish wooden synagogue of the town of Przedborz.<sup>37</sup> In the end, this project was abandoned because of cost to the small congregation, but not before it generated a lot of fancy brochures, and a fair amount of press — some laudatory and some derisive. Despite this setback, the urge to build, or rebuild wooden synagogues continues. The Israeli Holocaust historian Yaffa

Eliach dreams of recreating a wooden synagogue in the newly created historic park built to recall the lost *shtetlach* of Eastern Europe. She founded the Shtetl Foundation to carry out this project in 2003.<sup>38</sup> There are also plans to build a wooden synagogue in Poland at one of the scansen museums. But these efforts, unlike the more creative interpretive works of architects, fall mostly in the realm of nostalgia and even entertainment. Perhaps better to be considered in the realm of Yiddishland of which Eva Geller writes elsewhere in this volume.

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<sup>35</sup> Piechotka, Piechotka (1959: Figs. 257–272).

<sup>36</sup> For photos see: Stolzman, Stolzman (2004: 240–243).

<sup>37</sup> Information from website of the Congregation Beth Israel, <http://www.beth-israel.berkeley.ca.us/> (accessed Dec., 31, 2001; file of International Survey of Jewish Monuments). On the failure of the project, see Bell (2003).

<sup>38</sup> According to the Foundation website “The mission of the Shtetl Foundation is to document and celebrate the rich and vibrant Jewish History in Europe before its destruction during the Holocaust with the building of a full-size replica of a typical East-European Shtetl in Rishon Le-Zion, Israel. Construction is scheduled to begin in 2003.” See: <http://www.shtetlfoundation.org/> (accessed June 1, 2009).



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XXXIII. Tiphereth Israel Synagogue, Alliance, New Jersey (USA), built in 1889. Looking at the synagogues in Alliance and other Jewish agricultural colonies, we see clear influence of Eastern Europe; the buildings are not copies, but inside the feel of a Polish *shul* was unmistakable — from the sound of Yiddish spoken, through the *minhag* used, to the carved lions above the *aron ha-kodesh*; photo by Samuel D. Gruber.



XXXIV. Former Beth El Synagogue, Corsicana, Texas (USA), 1898–1900. The two-towered (former) synagogue stood out as different in the community — but it was still proudly located on Church Street with other religious buildings; photo by Samuel D. Gruber.



XXXV. Walnut Street Shul, in Chelsea, Massachusetts; Harry Dustin Joll, architect (1909). Faux curtains highlighting the Ark were common in Polish and immigrant synagogues; photo by Samuel D. Gruber.





XXXVI. Krakow, Poland. Kupa Synagogue. A large red curtain is painted above and behind the Ark, but it is not known when the painted curtain was first applied; photo by Samuel D. Gruber.



XXXVII. Temple B'rith Kodesh, Rochester, NY; Pietro Belluschi, architect (1963). Belluschi combined the Eastern European references supplied by the congregation's rabbi and his familiarity with wood learned as an architect in America's Pacific Northwest; photo by Paul Rocheleau.



XXXVIII. The Jewish Center of the Hamptons, East Hampton, New York; Norman Jaffe, architect (1989). The building draws on local vernacular and traditional Jewish sources in its use of wood and its shingled exterior; photo by Paul Rocheleau.



XXXIX. The Hampton Synagogue, Westhampton, New York; Eddie Jacobs, architect (1994). The piers recall the thin supports in the wooden synagogue at Wolpa (near Bialystok, Poland, now in Western Belarus), destroyed in the Holocaust, but extensively illustrated in the *Wooden Synagogues* (by Picchotkas), including a now-classic full-page sectional drawing; photo by Paul Rocheleau.