

Concrete Folklore Experimental Architecture in Israeli Synagogues in the 1960s and 1970s

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The exhibition focuses on five iconic synagogues, designed in the State of Israel in the 1960s and 1970s. It aims to take a deeper look at the buildings, going beyond their famous exteriors, and exploring their interior design, their ritual furniture, ceremonial objects and Jewish art articles created in coordination with the architects. As its name suggests, the exhibition studies the interface between modern concrete architecture and ritual items, revealing the ways avant-garde architecture revitalizes previous synagogue design traditions.

Over the years, the synagogues' beauty and their remarkable technological innovations won them general popularity and favorable reviews in architectural circles. However, those have generally focused on their external appearance, and neglecting their contribution to synagogue design tradition. At the same time, the buildings were criticized for being "toys," lacking religious content, reflecting the attitude of their secular architects.

Throughout the years, budgetary constraints made it difficult to maintain the buildings, sometimes leading to their neglect. In recent years, some of the buildings have undergone changes: they were repainted, and new artifacts and wall paintings were added to them without professional guidance. Such changes damaged their unique architectural identity. Critics have attributed those changes as well as various technical flaws revealed over time to architectural failures.

The exhibition seeks to return to the time of the synagogues' inauguration, and re-examine their contribution to shaping a Jewish-Israeli identity. This curatorial decision was meant to offer the spectators an opportunity to observe the innovative aspects of the buildings, and their contribution to the tradition of synagogue design.

The displayed synagogues form two groups, designed ten years apart. The first group includes three synagogues inaugurated in the late 1960s: The central synagogue in Nazareth Illit, the IDF officers' school synagogue in Mitzpe Ramon and 'Ohel Aharon' synagogue in the Technion campus in Haifa. The second group comprises two synagogues inaugurated in the late 1970s: The Eliahou Khalastchi Central Synagogue of the Babylonian Jewry in Beer Sheva and 'Heichal Yehuda' synagogue of the Salonica Community in Tel Aviv.

The examination of the synagogues focuses on several features:

Period – The buildings represent two periods in Israeli architecture: In the formative years of the State (1948-1967), Israeli architecture reflected an institutional effort to mold a national Zionist identity. The Six-Day War of 1967 changed the Israeli perception of space. Consequently, Israeli architects looked for a new local stylistic language.

Style – The buildings of the first group illustrate the influence of modern European architectural movements, mainly Brutalism and Structuralism, which is evident in the use of rough concrete. The buildings of the second group are influenced by post-modern architecture, manifested in direct expression of the images that inspired the design, namely, the seashell and the tent.

Users – The three synagogues of the first group have national significance, and their interior arrangement is typically Ashkenazic. In contrast, the synagogues of the second group are the first synagogues built for Sephardic communities - the Babylonian (Iraqi) Jewry, and the Salonika (Greece) community.

Identity – The secular appearance of the buildings corresponded to the mood that prevailed in Israeli society at the time of their construction. However, the shapes of the buildings evoked criticism: The architectural critic Aba Elhanani argued that the contemporary design of the synagogues reflected the confusion of "someone who handles religious buildings with secular hands." From a different perspective, the secular handling of religious material culture may also be perceived as manifesting the search for reintegration of Jewish and Israeli identity.

The exhibition examines the synagogues from a present-day perspective. The visual language of Concrete Folklore encompasses the space design, graphic design and photography. These perspectives are all used to establish associations between the contemporary, the traditional and the historic, and between the documentary and the interpretive. The works of Eli Singalovski, Hili Greenfeld and Naama Roth reflect the artists' reactions to the synagogues on display and are discussed in further detail in Dana Gordon's commentary included in this catalog. By revisiting the buildings, the exhibition seeks to explore the significance of Jewish architecture in the State of Israel, and promote the maintenance and preservation of unconventional synagogues. Ultimately, the exhibition aims to take another look at the place Judaism occupies in Israeli society, culture and architecture.

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