


When Secular Architects Design Jewish Houses of Worship

It's rare to find marvelously aesthetic houses of worship in the Jewish world, but there are some exceptions to the rule

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"Ohel Aharon" at the Technion in Haifa. Combines tradition and innovation. Credit: Eli Singalovski

In contrast to Christianity, Judaism is not perceived as having inspired beautiful buildings; Jewish religious structures are more often regarded as merely functional.

But the exhibition "Concrete Folklore," at the Architects House Gallery in Jaffa, displays synagogues built in Israel, mainly in the 1960s and '70s, that reveal an aesthetic side of Judaism. They may have aged somewhat, especially their interiors, but these synagogues still stand out as prominent landmarks in the history of Israeli architecture.

Architect Naomi Simhony is guest curator of the exhibition, in collaboration with Dana Gordon, curator of the gallery itself. A

doctoral student whose research deals with synagogues in Israel's early years, Simhony says she approached the subject as a secular person looking at how architecture has given physical shape to the Jewish faith. "Unlike Christianity, Judaism doesn't give architectural guidelines. It doesn't define the exteriors," she says. "There is a list of things that must be placed inside, like benches and the ark. When non-observant Jews see the list – and most of the synagogue architects represented in the exhibition were secular – the list becomes an adventure."

Synagogue design is a much-neglected topic in the architectural dialogue, despite how widespread it is in Israel, says Gordon. That was one reason for mounting the exhibition: "As a secular person, I visit hospitals and schools – but not synagogues. This is a type of building that has value and a significant presence in the Israeli landscape, and [in the show] we look at it from a secular architectural viewpoint and examine its importance." The synagogues in the exhibition were photographed afresh by Eli Singalovski.



Reading lamps at the Central Synagogue in Nazareth Illit. Credit: Eli Singalovski

One of the synagogues featured in the exhibition was designed by Nahum Zolotov in Nazareth Illit as part of a 1959 competition organized by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. In one photo, the structure rises above the residential buildings, while in an adjacent photo the huge Church of the Annunciation soars over old Nazareth below – highlighting the competition between Christianity and Judaism for a presence in the city.

- When the Jews believed in other gods
- The anti-apartheid fighter who turned Palestinian ruins into Jewish tourist sites
- The messianic Zionist religion whose believers worship Judaism (but can't practice it)

The dominant element of the plan is an inverted concrete dome that roofs the structure. Zolotov (who died in 2014) explained in an interview with Simhony that the form of the dome was selected as a counterpoint to the hilly landscape on which the synagogue was built, to address acoustic needs, and to recognize the dome as a traditional motif in religious architecture in general, and in the area of Nazareth in particular. Two halls were planned for the synagogue: a simple one for use by congregants on weekdays, and a large, elaborate one designed for the High Holy Days and ceremonies. One feature of the exhibition and its catalog is a focus on artworks in each synagogue. The one in Nazareth Illit has a bronze sculpture of doves on a bowl (by Moshe Sternschuss); stained glass windows and concrete reliefs by Ruth Zarfati; and the holy ark and Eternal Light by David Allouf.

A shell from Salonika Beach

Another structure featured in the exhibition is the Ohel Aharon synagogue on the Technion campus in Haifa, which was planned by architect Aharon Kashtan in 1969. The synagogue brings together tradition and renewal, Simhony says. The concrete shell of the synagogue is an adoption of modern construction techniques, but at the same time Kashtan drew on the legacy of synagogues of the past, a subject he had researched and written about. The contemporary synagogue harks back to those of 17th-century Poland, which typically had four columns to support the roof, but which simultaneously framed the bimah as the central element of the prayer hall.

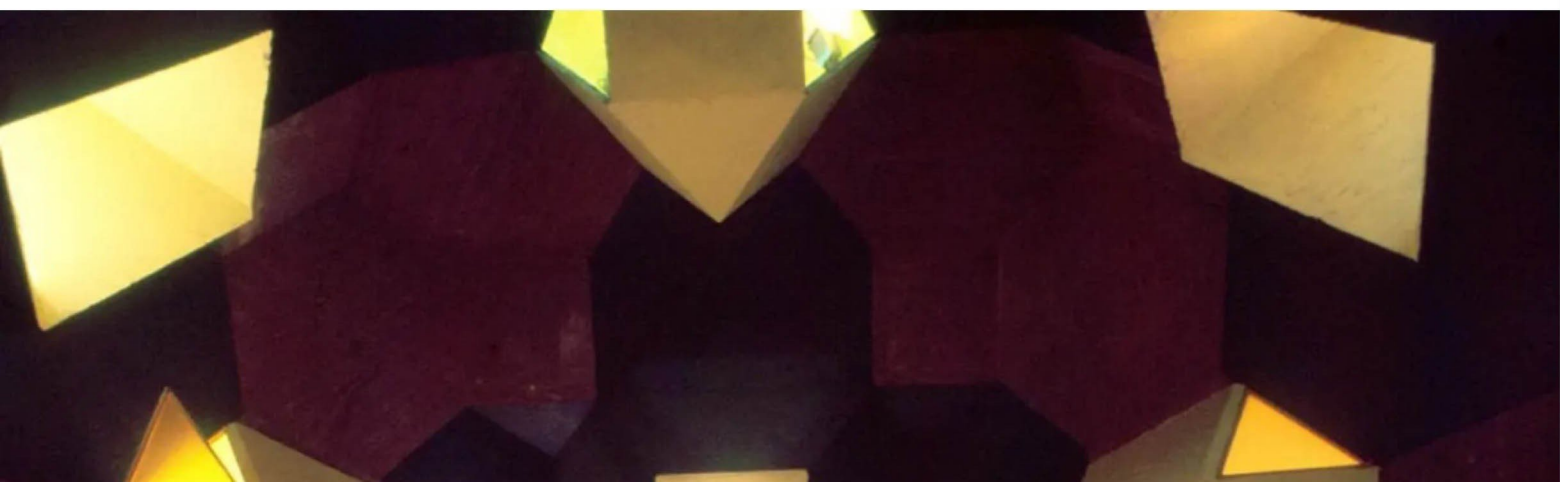




"Babel # 2" - The Eliyahu Khalastchi synagogue in Be'er Sheva. Designed as a six-point star. Credit: Eli Singalovski

An innovation in Ohel Aharon is the structure that supports the dome: two intersecting concrete arches supported by four columns. A window in the center of the dome brings an infusion of natural light to the bimah, and (in accordance with Sephardic tradition) allows the celebration of weddings under an open sky. An underground seating area, excavated below the main hall of the synagogue, provides an additional venue for events and celebrations.

Heichal Yehuda, on Ben Saruq Street in Tel Aviv, is a familiar landmark to the city's residents. The building was planned in 1980 by architect Yitzhak Toledano and structural engineer Aharon Rouso, with the collaboration of architect Amiram Niv. The shape of the building was inspired by the seashells on the beaches of Salonika in Greece, from which the founders of the congregation hailed. The first Sephardic synagogue in old north Tel Aviv, Heichal Yehuda contains study rooms, a memorial room, a library, an office and two prayer halls.

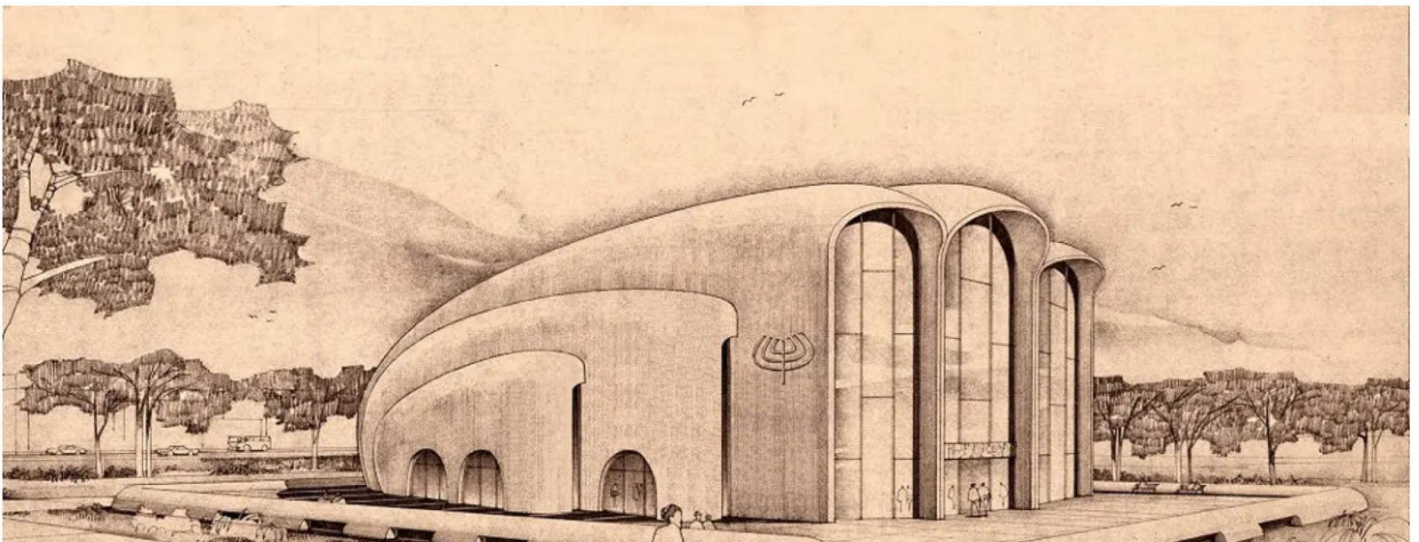




The bimah at the synagogue at Training Base 1 in southern Israel, which is also featured in the exhibition. Credit: Zvi Hecker

The exterior is covered with white mosaic stones, a popular finish in Israeli architecture at the time. The shell-like form stands out on both the exterior and the interior of the synagogue. The main prayer hall follows the tradition of Mediterranean and Middle Eastern communities, with seating encircling the bimah. The main constructional challenge here was how to support the entrance to the building without columns. The solution was seven adjoining vaults made of thin concrete slabs, supported by massive beams. Here too the curators highlight the art in the synagogue, especially the dozen stained glass windows with motifs of the Jewish holidays, designed by artist Josef Shealtiel.

The Eliyahu Khalastchi synagogue in Be'er Sheva was built for the city's Iraqi community, also by architect Nahum Zolotov, with Tamar de Shalit responsible for the interior design. The synagogue takes the form of a six-pointed star. Zolotov reinterpreted the traditional internal division of a synagogue, Simhony explains. The ark is in the northern corner, facing Jerusalem, while the triangular area behind the ark is designated for study. The bimah is at the center of the hall, encircled by seating. The women's sections are in the triangular areas, separated by almost-transparent glass dividers, recalling the Iraqi Jewish tradition of men and women sitting together during prayers. The outside wall, made of concrete slices supported by a dozen ribs, soars to a height of 18 meters. Zolotov related that he got the idea of the tent-like synagogue exterior from the biblical verse (Genesis 26): "from there he went to Be'er Sheva... and he pitched his tent there..."





The "Heichal Yehuda" Synagogue in Tel Aviv. The first Sephardic synagogue established in the old north of Tel Aviv. Credit: Norberto Ka

The artistic side of the synagogue is represented by a traditional “shaviti” plaque, in calligraphy, positioned above the ark. Simhony explains that the contrast between the plaque, the background of naked concrete, together with Tamar de Shalit’s ark, emphasizes the tension between contemporary concrete construction and the religious purpose of the building – which is what the exhibition is all about.

The synagogue buildings are presented in their entirety – as projects that represent the collaboration of architects, artists and engineers in creating buildings that are in themselves works of art. It is not just a matter of walls, but of doors, windows, benches and ritual objects, designed specifically for each particular synagogue. The same cannot be said of contemporary buildings, neither synagogues nor public structures.

“Concrete Folklore” presents architecture with a narrative, but doesn’t force-feed its audience. Not present are the synagogue of Neve Dekalim, shaped like a Star of David, or the one inspired by the biblical burning bush at the IDF officers school in the Negev.

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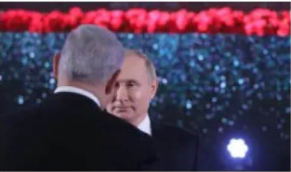
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