# SYNAGOGUE DESIGN: FORGING AN AESTHETIC UNBOUND BY TRADITION

**Traditionally, the synagogue has taken on the form of the surrounding architecture of the countries to which the Jews have been dispersed. The consequences have not always been fortunate. Synagogues in America have been built in almost all styles: "Borrowed from the pattern book of past history . . . as imitations of Greek temples, medieval chapels, and Renaissance domes," as Eric Mendelsohn described it. Styles that Rabbi Merzel of Seligmann's Beth David termed "Yiddisha Mishagothic." But the implications do not have to be this unfortunate. The lack of historic formal precedent can free the architect to face, unhampered, the abstract problem of religious space within the context of contemporary architecture.**

**The problems of synagogue design are complex. The building must serve many functions: as a place of assembly (as its name implies), as a house of study, and as a house of prayer. The sanctuary must be capable of spatial elasticity by allowing itself to be enlarged for the high holy days, yet must function as naturally for the reduced congregation during the remainder of the year. The location of the ark and bema in their polarity are traditionally specified. The bema, at the center of the sanctuary, creates the difficult problem of the round church. The separating screen between men and women, demanded by Hebraic tradition, is resented as much by the architect as it is by the contemporary congregation, for it tends arbitrarily to divide the spaces as it does the sexes.**

**The formal problems of designing a synagogue are complex, but the prime architectural requirement is probably the most stimulating: it merely has to be beautiful — "as simple as that," to quote Philip Johnson.**

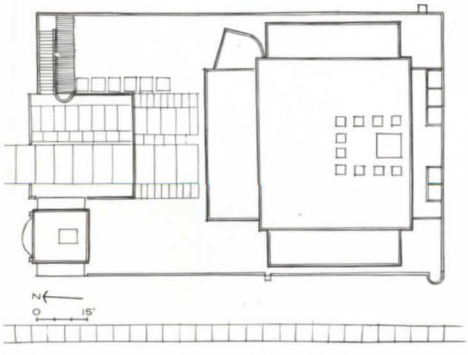
BETH DAVID SYNAGOGUE, *Binghamton, New York.* ***Architect:*** *Werner Seligmann; Kenneth Carswell and Charles F. Rogers, Assistants.* ***Site:*** *Urban corner lot among large homes built around the turn of the century. Building area within setback restriction, 80′ x 120′.* ***Program:*** *Orthodox synagogue with a sanctuary for 400 persons; a social hall for 200 and classrooms; daily chapel that will also house the library; offices; a ritual bath; separate cooking facilities. Parking space not required.* ***Structural System:*** *Steel frame and concrete block; concrete slab floors with metal roof deck.* ***Mechanical System:*** *Warm water, gas fired.* ***Major Materials:*** *Exposed concrete block, copper fascias, exposed concrete.* ***Cost:*** *$160,000.* ***Consultants:*** *Edward A. Fassler, Mechanical Engineers; Snyder and Troxel, Structural Engineers.* ***Photography:*** *Louis Reens.*

## Beth David Synagogue

Beth David Synagogue was one of the first commissions to go to this young architect, Werner Seligmann. He modestly states that the design was "influenced," and, in places, overdesigned. There are minor design excesses, it is true, but these can be forgiven an architect who coarsed his block and took a major interest in even the most minor detail. And if there are undeniable influences of Corbusier and Wright, then the building is equally undeniably Seligmann.

The architect, working with a restricted site, separated the secular from the sacred by raising the sanctuary to the second floor so as to differentiate it from the social and school spaces on the floor below. The fascias of both sanctuary and chapel roof are of copper, which, in its richness of material, stands in contrast to and serves to differentiate it from the secular areas. The chapel forms a pivotal point for the building and serves as an isolated room used for daily prayer and study.

The synagogue is entered through a gate opening onto an exterior court, with exposed stairs leading directly to the roof outside the second-story sanctuary. The



SITE PLAN

court is a social area for members of the congregation, who use it like a front stoop for visiting. It contains a unique Seligmann feature: a truncated concrete column on which to lean or perch small children while tying their shoes.

The sculptural forms of the building—its massing, window openings, and projecting skylights—overcome the all-too-frequent boredom of exposed block and concrete. Seligmann has produced a lot of good building for very little money. Toward the rear, on the street side, a mound of earth has been supplied for the planting of three trees, which, unfortunately, have not taken root. It seemed to this observer that the mound and the architect's desire to cover the building with ivy are unnecessary. Beth David can stand by itself.

The interior spaces of the first floor await additional funds for their completion. To the rear of the building is a sunken area the architect intends to use as a congregational "living room." To its right, on the same level as the classrooms, is a multipurpose space whose exposed wide flange soffit forms a proscenium arch. The adjoining corridor and classrooms furnish dressing rooms.

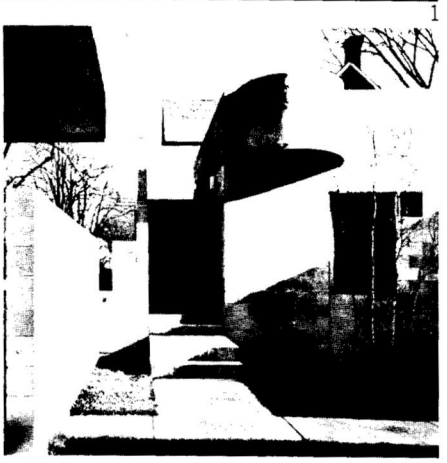
Seligmann has delineated the bearing and nonbearing walls by leaving the block of the former exposed and covering the screening walls with white plaster. This logical contrast of materials gives the space an appropriate richness, without reducing the quality of ruggedness accentuated by its economy and its detailing. It is unfortunate that the sanctuary columns do not read in the interior in terms of the function they perform.

The bareness of the interior is partially due to the suppression of the enthusiastic participation of the congregation in doing the interior decoration. It has been decided that no contribution to or alteration of the interior can be made without the approval of the rabbi, the building committee, and the architect. Of course, the rabbi's proprietary interest sometimes backfires, as when he was approached by a member of the congregation who remarked, "Rabbi, if this is your synagogue, your toilet is leaking."

Seligmann's handling of the small circular chapel, with its high ceiling and curved plastered wall, has the feeling of a truly religious space suited to its function—that of study and prayer. It is a space that quietly asks for silence, although it is questionable if the ark, transplanted from the former synagogue to add something old to the new building, is quite wise here. The symbolism overpowers the architectural meaning.

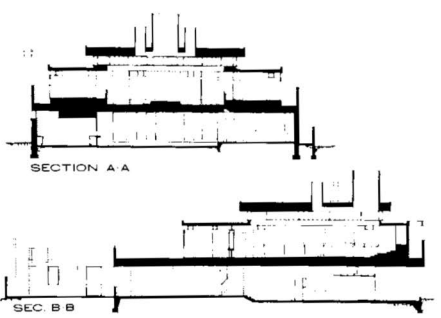
1

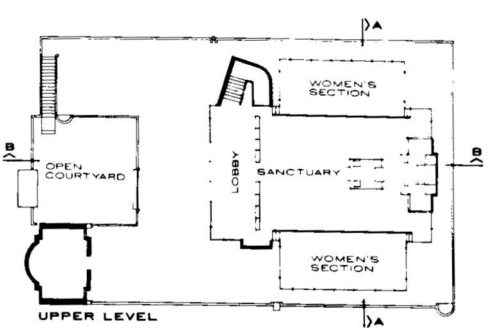
2

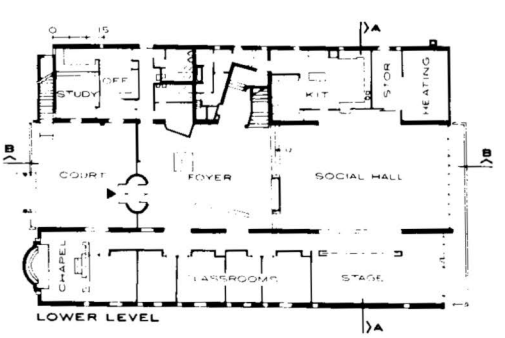


3

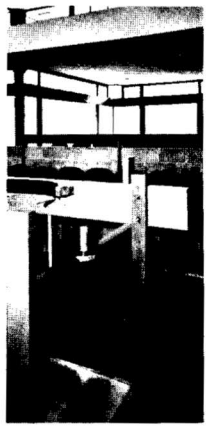
*Sanctuary seating and bema woodwork designed by Seligmann was assembled and finished by congregation members (facing page). Entrance court from rabbi's study* ***(1)****. Stairs to sanctuary from entrance court* ***(2)****. Rear of synagogue with windows into recreation area and sanctuary* ***(3)****.*



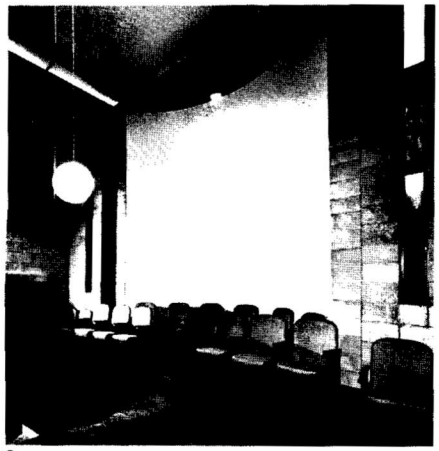



1

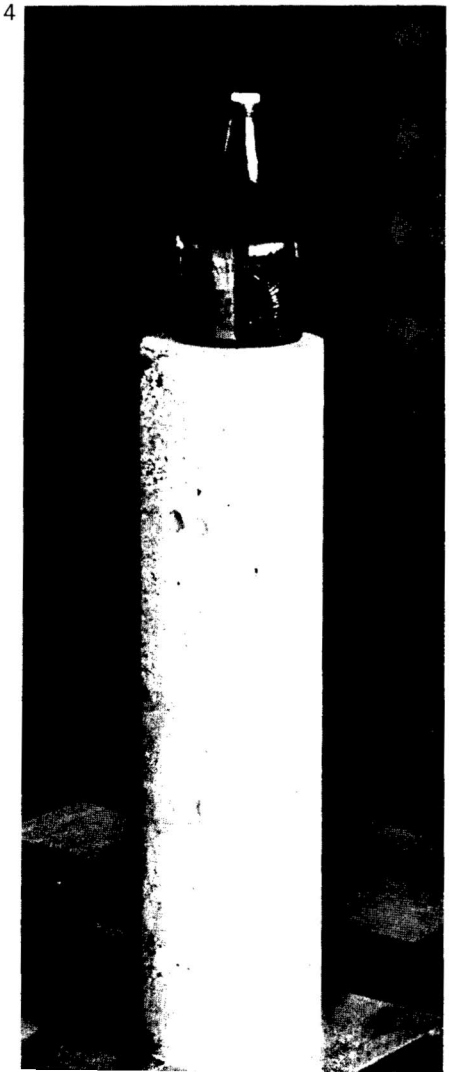


2



3

4



The white plaster of the interior walls adds a texture and exposure of a material that is very much in keeping with the character of the building. Very few architects have the courage to expose the beauty of this material: as the children's marks on the classroom walls and corridors attest, it is a handsome yet impractical solution. Exposing white plaster has nothing to recommend it but its beauty.

The furniture of the rabbi's office, as well as most of the synagogue woodwork, was detailed by Seligmann. The office looks out onto the court and across to the wall of the chapel. It is a pleasant, contemplative space, which, one hopes, will remain so, undisturbed by the occasional acts of vandalism that have marred the synagogue.

The interior stairs that run from the first floor to the sanctuary have been particularly well handled. The perforating skylight, and the detailing of the handrail in its sculptural proportions as it ascends, form an apt entrance to the sanctuary.

The planning of the sanctuary presented the usual difficult problem of polarity and processional. The architect had hoped to use the Sephardic tradition with the bema at the end, facing the ark. The rabbi and the congregation insisted upon the traditional central location.

The bema and the surrounding processional area are illuminated by skylights that project sculpturally from the roof. Once again, in the controversy over symbolism, the rabbi wanted seven skylights, symbolically relating to the Menorah. The architect found this an impossible number and suggested eleven, to conform to the number of tribes of Israel—a number, incidentally, of which he was uncertain, he confided later. This observer counted ten. Symbolically or not, it is a fine solution, shedding natural light on the interior. Doubtlessly, the learning and humor of Rabbi Merzel will find a fitting symbolic interpretation.

*Interior stairs to sanctuary* ***(1)****. Bema details* ***(2)****. Chapel interior* ***(3)****. The enviable degree of ecumenicism at Beth David is demonstrated by the slotted bottle of Christian Brothers brandy for synagogue building contributors* ***(4)****.*