Introduction

The word synagogue comes from the Greek *synagogein*, to bring together or assemble. The synagogue refers both to the place where Jews assemble for worship, study and communal activities and to the congregation itself. The traditional synagogue structure is one that is a *mikdash me'at*, a miniature sanctuary, designed in the mode of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. Although rabbinical authorities prescribed specific requirements for synagogue design, they have been open to interpretation over the course of time.

From a technical point of view, to have the status of a synagogue a structure need only be a place where at least ten Jews assemble regularly for prayer. There are some Halachic or rabbinical prescriptions of architectural details.

- The synagogue should be the tallest building in the city. This requirement is qualified in "difficult" situations such as when the Jews are the minority of the city's population.
- The synagogue should have windows to allow worshippers to see the heavens and achieve a suitable frame of mind for prayer. The windows also permit the worshippers to know whether it is time for morning or evening prayers. The windows should face Jerusalem. According to one source, there should be twelve windows, symbolic of the twelve tribes of Israel.
- The synagogue must have an Ark, containing the Torah scrolls, placed against the wall facing Jerusalem (usually the eastern wall). Sometimes the plot plan in urban conditions prohibits the Ark from being located along the eastern wall of the building. Several older synagogue structures have been designed with the Ark facing along the northern, southern and even western walls.
  - The Rambam, Maimonides, rules that the reading platform (*bimah* to the Ashkenazic or German Jews; *tebah* or *alememar* to the Sephardic Jews) must be located in the center of the sanctuary so that the congregation should be able to hear the reading of the Torah. This was the customary practice until the Haskalah, or Enlightenment, of the early nineteenth century in Germany. The German Reform movement designed its synagogues and temples with the *bimah* placed along the eastern or Ark wall. Eventually it became the actual platform on which the Ark stood. The rabbis of Hungary and Galicia initially put a ban (*chayrem*) on this practice, but it spread and was adopted even among some Orthodox congregations.
  - The traditional synagogue contains a separate section for women, in accordance with the practice in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem.
  - The synagogue contain a *ner tamid*, a continuously burning lamp, symbolic of the eternal light which burned in the Temple of Jerusalem.
  - The biblical injunction against representational art has created several interpretations about synagogue art. The Orthodox do permit sculptural reliefs around the Ark, two dimensional murals on walls and ceilings, and stained-glass windows portraying
lions, eagles and deer as well as the signs of the zodiac. The Conservative and Reform go even further and permit the portrayal of two dimensional images of the human form in murals and stained-glass windows. No group, however, permits the portrayal of a three-dimensional human form in the synagogue.

Other than incorporating these features, there has never been an accepted form of architecture identified exclusively with the synagogue. It has always tended to reflect the community, the era and society in which it developed. Architects have designed synagogue buildings in the style of a Greek temple, a Byzantine and Moorish mosque, a Gothic cathedral, and more recently, in the form of a sculptural abstraction.

The earliest congregations in the country were Sephardic and followed the Spanish and Portuguese ritual. The first Jewish pioneers arrived as merchants and traders from the Caribbean islands and South America. They were members of the Dutch West Indies Company. The first synagogues were located in New York City, Newport, Philadelphia, Savannah and Charleston.

The next wave of immigration arrived following the Napoleonic Wars in the early nineteenth century. Entire Jewish communities in Germany and Poland were uprooted. These were the Ashkenazic Jews who settled in New York City, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Chicago, Boston and San Francisco.

As the congregations grew and moved to more fashionable areas in town, architects were commissioned to design new synagogue buildings. The architectural styles reflected contemporary architectural trends and also showed the influence of the congregation’s country of origin. Jews migrating from Germany or Hungary in the mid-nineteenth century often built their new synagogues to resemble those left in the old country.

The mass immigration of Jews fleeing persecution in Eastern Europe between 1880 and 1920 set a new direction in synagogue architecture. This group was composed primarily of Orthodox Jews. Most settled in the older sections of the cities. There was a master plan developed during this period to try to relocated many immigrants away from the inner-cities of New York, Boston, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Hartford and Chicago. Baron Maurice de Hirsch devised a plan to create the Jewish farmer in America.

From the scores of experimental Jewish farm settlements from New Jersey to the Dakotas, the only ones to survive are located in southern New Jersey. The Woodbine (New Jersey) Brotherhood Synagogue was built one hundred years ago and has recently been declared a National Historic Landmark.

The period following World War I witnessed a virtual halt in Jewish immigration. The existing Jewish populations were dispersed to newly-developed sections of the cities. A postwar housing boom was accompanied by a synagogue construction boom. The architectural styles incorporated during this period ranged from Neoclassical to eclectic, an amalgam of every conceivable architectural idiom.

It was not until after World War II that the architectural style of the synagogue was no longer influenced by the ecclesiastical motifs of the past. New materials and technology, coupled with stylistic freedom, have created a new genre of synagogue design. Architects have been guided by the watchword of the modern school of architecture, "form follows function." The contemporary synagogue of the United States reflects multiple functions contained under one roof. Spatial requirements include such items as the sanctuary, Hebrew school, social hall, gymnasium, catering
facilities and parking areas.

The late Percival Goodman designed over fifty synagogues throughout the country. He embodied the teachings of the Brutalist School, incorporating exposed structural details of concrete, brick and wood, with an open, flexible plan, creating sculptural abstractions.

Discarding the elaborate ornaments of earlier architectural periods and styles, the synagogue architect has developed a more direct and honest approach to creating functional design. The contemporary

synagogue in the United States reflects a synthesis of the traditional rabbinical guidelines with the expression of stylistic freedom.

Some of the noted architects who have designed synagogues include Frank Lloyd Wright, Louis Kahn, Walter Gropius, Philip Johnson, Paul Rudolph, Robert A.M. Stern, Davis, Brody & Wisniewski, Percival Goodman, Eric Mendesohn, Minoru Yamasaki, Adier & Sullivan, Harrison & Abramovitz and Sidney Eisensthtat.
Beginnings...

The first Jewish settlers in North America were largely Sephardic. They were descendants of those Jews who had lived in Spain and Portugal for over one thousand years but were forced, in the year 1492, either to accept Christianity or leave the country. This Spanish Inquisition was just one event in their Diaspora and their search for freedom and a peaceful existence.

In 1654, Portugal took possession of Brazil from Holland and expelled its Jewish residents. Some of the Jews returned to their home port of Amsterdam, Holland, while others settled in nearby Caribbean islands such as Curaçao, Jamaica, and Barbados. One ship carrying twenty-three Jewish men, women, and children was captured by Spanish pirates on the high seas of the Caribbean. All of their possessions were taken from them. They were left on a small island where they were ultimately rescued by a French frigate which was on its way to Montreal, Canada. Along the way, the French captain dropped off these Jewish refugees. They landed in the Dutch West Indies colony of New Amsterdam in September, 1654.

The governor of New Amsterdam, Peter Stuyvesant, was a notorious anti-Semite. He refused to let these penniless Jews into his colony. It was not until pressure was applied by his commanding officers in Amsterdam that these twenty-three Jews were permitted to live freely in America. The provision for this freedom was that they "not become a burden on the society." They had to take care of their poor and destitute. This was the first official Jewish settlement in North America. New Amsterdam later became New York.

The first Jewish congregation, Shearith Israel or "Remnant of Israel," was organized by this group which felt that they were the only Jews left on the earth. This Spanish & Portuguese congregation was organized in September, 1654, just before Rosh Hashanah. It is still a vibrant congregation in Manhattan.

For the first two centuries after their settlement in New Amsterdam, the Jewish community in America increased very slowly. By the time of the American Revolution in 1776, of a total population of three million, only some two thousand were Jews. From the Colonial period through the early 1800s, a sizable percentage of America's Jewish community assimilated into Christian society through marriage and by lapsed.

Between 1820 and 1850, about 200,000 Jews arrived from the Ashkenazic countries of Germany and Bohemia. They were fleeing from political oppression and grinding poverty. It was during this period that the Reform movement developed in Europe and in the United States.

Most of these German Jews started their business careers as peddlers. They would journey out into the country, knocking on doors of isolated farmhouses and tried to sell to the farmwives a few stockings, spools of cotton thread, needles or cheap household crockery. They worked long hours and saved every penny until they could purchase a horse and
wagon, or set up a small dry goods shop. This was the start of such great department stores as B. Altman's, Macy's, Bamberger's, Filene's, and Bloomingdale's.

The third and largest wave of Jewish immigration came between 1881 and 1924. The new arrivals were Yiddish-speaking Jews from Russia, Poland, Galicia, Rumania, and Hungary. The Russian Jews fled in the wake of the bloody pogroms instigated by the Czar's government. Oppressive laws combined with the constant threat of massacre drove the Jews of Eastern Europe from their homes in tremendous numbers. When this wave of immigration was stopped by U.S. law in 1924, the Jewish population in the United States had grown to nearly 4.5 million.

Most of the Eastern European Jews settled in the major cities such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Boston, Newark, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. In the late 1880s, attempts were made by the Baron de Hirsch Fund to shift poor Jewish families from the teeming tenements of the city slums to the fresh air in the farm communities. Rural settlements were established in New Jersey, Connecticut, upstate New York, and as far away as the Dakotas and Kansas. Most of these Jewish

Agricultural settlements failed and were abandoned, because the Jews lacked both experience and guidance in farming. Those in New Jersey, however, did prosper. There are still many Jewish egg and poultry farmers in southern towns of Vineland, Toms River and Lakewood.

During the turbulent 1960s, many Jews moved from their established Jewish communities in the large cities and settled in the suburbs. During this mass exodus to suburbia, hundreds of synagogue buildings were literally "left behind." There is a section at the end of each chapter in this book which provides data on where many of these former synagogues were located.

The trend of the 1980s is preservation and restoration. Young couples are moving back to the old sections of the inner cities and are "fixing up" the century-old brownstones or abandoned factories. Sadly, there are few synagogue structures in the United States that have been restored as synagogues, turned into Jewish museums or even designated historic landmarks.

The Jewish population in the United States is approximately six million.