

H-Net Reviews

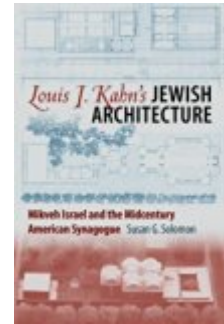
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Susan G. Solomon. *Louis I. Kahn's Jewish Architecture: Mikveh Israel and the Midcentury American Synagogue*. American Jewish History, Culture, and Life Series. Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2009. Illustrations. xi + 215 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58465-788-0.

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How Jewish Does it Look?

Susan G. Solomon's book is the story of an unfulfilled architectural vision. In 1961, Philadelphia's Mikveh Israel, one of the oldest Sephardic Orthodox congregations in America, commissioned the renowned architect Louis I. Kahn (1901-74) to design its new synagogue. Beset by financial difficulties and internal division, the congregation first asked Kahn to devise a scaled-down plan, and though he tried to meet their terms, Mikveh Israel fired him by early 1973. With America's bicentennial approaching, the congregation seized the opportunity to secure grant funds by a complete change of plans: on July 4, 1976, the building officially opened in Independence Mall as the Museum of American Jewish History cum synagogue. Kahn's synagogue model remained on the drawing board.

Solomon's main point is that Mikveh Israel's initial appointment of Kahn and his subsequent dismissal represent in a microcosm the larger developments of religious practice and Jewish identity in post-1945 America. The first chapter outlines the historical background of growing optimism, which Solomon sees as "the underlying theme" of American Jewish life in the 1950s (p. 9). While Jews constituted about 3 percent of the population in Cold War America, Judaism was promoted to be the country's "third religion" (after Protestantism and Catholicism) and Jews were gradually elevated to an insider position in American society. Furthermore, upward mobility, middle-class status, and growth of suburban communities increased the demand for worship,

education, and socialization spaces, as American Jews linked religious identification with acceptance in the larger society. Concomitantly, the 1950s witnessed a surge in synagogue building, and different architects applied functional modernism as the main form for the quickly spreading suburban synagogues (both Reform and Conservative), which increasingly operated as community hubs.

When Mikveh Israel appointed Kahn, postwar optimism still reigned and synagogues served as a central means to celebrate the Jews' full integration into American society. During the life span of Kahn's commission, however, American Jewry had profoundly changed: Jewish interests turned inward, and the Holocaust and Israel emerged as the focal points for Jewish identity. Moreover, influenced by the counterculture's antiauthoritarian and alternative lifestyle, the Havurah movement of the late 1960s aspired to create a sense of small-group intimacy, and exhibited deep distrust of Jewish institutions like the suburban synagogue. By the year Kahn was dismissed, synagogues had lost much of their centrality, membership declined, and museums and Holocaust memorials became the new loci of expressing Jewish identity.

The book's main argument is succinct and clear, aided by the numerous pictures throughout all chapters. Those include not only Kahn's drawings and completed works, but also the exterior and interior designs of synagogues

and other buildings by a host of architects from the nineteenth century to the present. Solomon does not hide her admiration for Kahn's synagogue model, with its use of natural light and seating arrangements, including the main floor and women's gallery, that are "boldly defined" and appropriate for the Sephardic rite (p. 106). This is not Solomon's first book about Kahn: in 2000, she published *Louis I. Kahn's Trenton Jewish Community Center* and her high esteem for the architect remains undeterred. While praising Kahn, Solomon directs her harshest words to Percival Goodman (1904-89), one of America's leading architects of synagogues. She terms him "cynical," argues "he never aspired to a sense of dignity or poetry," and sees his approach as guaranteeing "mediocre design" (pp. 25, 77). Whereas the picture of Goodman's Shaarey Zedek Synagogue in Southfield, Michigan (1963), has impressed this reviewer, Solomon calls the Frank Lloyd Wright-like pyramid massing "large but dull" and "flourish without content" (pp. 123-124).

In her conclusion, Solomon maintains that to make synagogues more effective, architects today should be "taking a cue from Kahn" by investigating what the congregation really wants, and then "provide something that greatly transcends those requirements," giving the congregants "more than they were able to ask for" (p. 161). That claim demonstrates one of the book's major weaknesses. Solomon pivots too much on architecture in suggesting a prescription for improving the state of synagogues in contemporary America. She admits that "it may be too much to ask of architecture" to solve problems like declining membership, costly dues, and rabbis that seem detached from the lives of their congregants (p. 161). But more important, there is a myriad of ways today to live and manifest one's Jewishness outside both the synagogue and the established Jewish community. No synagogue architecture could address the problems that bedevil most Jewish congregations in America.

Perhaps the main difficulty with Solomon's thesis involves Kahn himself. The book's title is "Louis I. Kahn's *Jewish Architecture*," but it remains unclear whether the

fact that Kahn was born Jewish and designed several synagogues imbued his architecture with any significant Jewish content. Kahn was born in tsarist Russia (today's Estonia) as Itche Schmuilowsky. Kahn's parents brought him to America as a toddler prior to changing their family name to Kahn, and he grew up in Philadelphia. Solomon acknowledges that Kahn "knew little" about Judaism, and his association to his ancestral religion "was always tenuous" (pp. 4, 58). If anything, his strongest ties to Judaism were through Zionism and Israel: he visited the Jewish state many times, lecturing and working on plans for various urban projects. Kahn extolled "a universal religion," or in his words, "not ritualistic religion" (p. 69). In a 1965 address, Kahn referred to the Mikveh Israel sanctuary as a "church," forcing Solomon to note, "he found it difficult to identify communal experience with any particular creed" (p. 111). Even when he designated a permanent freestanding sukkah (a booth for the Feast of Tabernacles), it was historian Maxwell Whiteman who explained to Kahn the meaning of that religious practice. Yet Solomon tries to show that Kahn did infuse Jewish content into his work by arguing that like Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel, Kahn believed in balancing time with space. Noting that "there is no way to connect Kahn directly to Heschel," she still speculates that "Kahn had a deeper understanding of contemporary Jewish thought than his biography would suggest" (pp. 65-66). In her attempt to prove Jewish content in Kahn's architecture, Solomon reminds one of the old saying that a drowning man (or scholar) will clutch at a straw. Being Jewish by birth did not necessarily instill Jewish motifs in Kahn's synagogue architecture.

In the epilogue, Solomon mentions that synagogue design "is generally considered too uninteresting, a non-story" (p. 160). While the subject matter probably guarantees that non-academicians will show little interest in the book, I found Solomon's study to be interesting, and despite its flaws it is very valuable not only for historians and architects but for rabbis and communal workers as well.

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