

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

BETH SHOLOM SYNAGOGUE

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Beth Sholom Synagogue

Other Names/Site Number: Temple Beth Sholom

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 8231 Old York Road

Not For Publication: N/A

City/Town: Elkins Park (Cheltenham Township)

Vicinity: N/A

State: PA County: Montgomery

Code: 091

Zip Code: 19027-1595

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Private: X

Public-Local: ___

Public-State: ___

Public-Federal: ___

Category of Property

Building(s): X

District: ___

Site: ___

Structure: ___

Object: ___

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

1

1

1

3

Noncontributing

1 buildings

___ sites

1 structures

___ objects

2 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register:

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: N/A

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

BETH SHOLOM SYNAGOGUE

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this ___ nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Signature of Certifying Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting or Other Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is:

- ___ Entered in the National Register
___ Determined eligible for the National Register
___ Determined not eligible for the National Register
___ Removed from the National Register
___ Other (explain):

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

BETH SHOLOM SYNAGOGUE

Page 3

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

6. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic: Religion Sub: Religious facility, church school

Current: Religion Sub: Religious facility, church school

7. DESCRIPTION

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: Modern Movement (Wrightian)

MATERIALS

- Foundation: Reinforced concrete
- Roof: Metal (steel, aluminum)
- Walls: Concrete, metal, glass, synthetic
- Other:

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

BETH SHOLOM SYNAGOGUE

Page 4

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance

Beth Sholom Synagogue is nationally significant as one of Frank Lloyd Wright's most important commissions during his long, productive, and influential career. Constructed between 1954 and 1959, the building is Wright's only synagogue among a relatively small number of religious commissions. Both a product of its time and place, and symbolically and liturgically grounded in Judaic tradition, the glass pyramid is an unforgettable presence in the suburban Philadelphia landscape, day or night. Its power as a building stemmed from the fruitful collaboration between the famous architect and the congregation's rabbi, Mortimer J. Cohen. A letter to Cohen accompanying the initial set of plans presented the design to the congregation as a "promised hosanna" and a "coherent statement of worship." Beth Sholom Synagogue is one of a group of sixteen Wright buildings singled out in 1959 by the American Institute of Architects and the National Trust for Historic Preservation as his most important "to the nation...which ought to be preserved in their original form."¹ The building remains essentially unchanged and exhibits an unusually high degree of integrity.

Site and Location

The Beth Sholom Congregation property sits at the crest of, and commands a south-facing ridge near the top of a dramatically steep rise on Old York Road in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania. Elkins Park is a community in the inner ring suburbs just beyond Philadelphia's northern city limits in Cheltenham Township, Montgomery County. Wright sited the synagogue building to take advantage of this location, and it is visible from a distance, particularly at night when lit. Beth Sholom Synagogue stands out from the surroundings and buildings in its immediate viewshed and its dramatic presence acts as a beacon of faith, both during the daytime and at night. The area was first settled during the colonial period as an agricultural district located well to the north of the city of Philadelphia's initial boundaries. By the mid-nineteenth century, the area surrounding Beth Sholom had been established as a region of elite country estates. With the expansion of the city's boundaries through consolidation in 1854, Philadelphia became adjacent to what would come to be known as Elkins Park, in honor of traction magnate William L. Elkins, whose large estate stood in the vicinity.

The area within which the Beth Sholom property sits attained a suburban, middle-class character in the decades following World War II. The adjacent residential development was a key reason for the synagogue's eventual construction in that locale. Old York Road is the axis along which a number of other Jewish congregations relocated from Philadelphia neighborhoods during the postwar period. The suburban lanes branching off of Old York Road near the Beth Sholom property have a relatively modest scale and are lined with medium-sized, detached single-family houses on treed lots.

The Beth Sholom Congregation property sits on the east side of Old York Road, which in this area is a four-lane

¹ See Aline Saarinen, "Preserving Wright's Architecture," *New York Times*, April 19, 1959: X-17, "Watch on Wright's Landmarks," *Architectural Record* 126 (September 1959): 9, and Anne E. Biebel et al., "First Unitarian Society Meeting House," National Historic Landmarks Nomination (U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2004): 17-18, fn. 27. The list included: W. H. Winslow House, River Forest, IL; Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio, Oak Park, IL (NHL, 1976); Ward Willitts House, Highland Park, IL; Frederick C. Robie House, Chicago, IL (NHL, 1963); Aline Barnsdall "Hollyhock" House, Los Angeles, CA; Taliesin, Spring Green, WI (NHL, 1976); "Fallingwater," Bear Run, PA (NHL, 1976); S. C. Johnson & Son, Inc., Administration Building, Racine, WI (NHL, 1976); Taliesin West, Phoenix, AZ (NHL, 1982); Unitarian Meeting House, Madison, WI (NHL, 2004); S. C. Johnson & Son, Inc., Research Tower, Racine, WI (NHL, 1976); V. C. Morris Shop, San Francisco, CA; H. C. Price Tower, Bartlesville, OK; Beth Sholom Synagogue, Elkins Park, PA; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY; and Paul R. Hanna House, Palo Alto, CA (NHL, 1989). Sometime between 1959 and 1964, Unity Temple in Oak Park, IL (NHL, 1970) was added to the list, making a total of seventeen buildings. See R. R. Cuscaden, "Frank Lloyd Wright's Drawings, Preserved," *Prairie School Review* 1 (1964): 18.

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

BETH SHOLOM SYNAGOGUE

Page 5

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

state road (Route 611) that runs essentially north-south. Foxcroft Road forms the northern border of the lot, which backs up to other properties on its southern and eastern sides. Containing just under four acres, the property slopes downward to the south and east from its highest point located in the northwest quadrant—the site of the Wright-designed synagogue building. The synagogue sits back slightly from Old York Road, and is fronted by a grass lawn and low, reinforced concrete fountain of Wright's design on axis with the main door on the building's west elevation. The fountain consists of a shallow, lozenge-shaped pool with low-level jets. An access drive—also part of the original Wright scheme—curves around the fountain in front of the building from Old York Road to Foxcroft; it is currently not in frequent use. To the south of the main synagogue building is the non-contributing administrative and educational building, which consists of the Sheerr Religious School and the Samuel and Anna Cross Annex built in 1951 and 1969, respectively. The east, or rear of the property consists primarily of a paved parking lot that serves the complex and can be accessed from either an entrance on Old York Road positioned to the south of the administrative-education building, or from Foxcroft Road to the east (rear) of the synagogue. A covered walkway—not part of Wright's scheme—connects the two edifices. Garden areas have been established between the buildings and around the non-contributing building.

Exterior

The synagogue that Frank Lloyd Wright designed for the Beth Sholom Congregation remains in excellent condition, with virtually no alterations since its construction. There have been no substantial repair or replacement campaigns since its completion, and regular maintenance has consisted of: repainting the exterior, selected repair of some of the exterior glazing panels, and maintenance of other surfaces.

The synagogue building is composed in a single, complex volume. It consists of a glazed, pyramidal tower, broad in form and made up of three sides, and a base of reinforced concrete, steel, and glass. These components rise from an irregular, yet bilaterally symmetrical, hexagonal plan in which the main (west) elevation faces Old York Road where the southeast and northeast elevations come to a point opposite, facing east. This axis orients the worshipers to the arks placed near the building's eastern point, facing in the direction of Jerusalem, an orientation that reflects a planning convention used in many Conservative Jewish synagogues built in the mid-twentieth century.

The pyramidal building both shelters and expresses the main sanctuary space on the interior through its massive, yet simultaneously airy presence. This duality corresponds to two dominant metaphors voiced from the beginning of the project by Rabbi Mortimer J. Cohen (1894-1972), Wright's collaborator: that of a tent and that of a mountain (see Section 8 for a discussion of the symbolism associated with the building at the time of construction and after). Both the exterior and interior are organized on repeating motifs of triangular and hexagonal forms realized in both two and three dimensions both in the fundamental structure and as decorative overlay.

Below the glazed pyramid, two horizontal, interlocking layers of distinct materials comprise its base. The lower layer is reinforced concrete painted in a sand color and rakes slightly inward on all sides as it rises. On the rear (east) portion of the building, this part of the base is a larger portion of the whole because it drops further downward, responding to the falling contours of the sloping site. The corners of concrete base (facing northwest, southwest, and east) are prismatic and diamond-like in form and project at an angle that visually accentuates the upward lift of the pyramid's steel tripod above. Lamps resembling menorahs embellish the west sides of the northwest and southwest projections, which flank the main entrance piercing the center of the base's west side. A concrete platform reached by five low stairs painted red in the manner of the original scheme extends across this elevation and provides access to the doors. Triangular, frosted-glass light fixtures are inset

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

BETH SHOLOM SYNAGOGUE

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Page 6

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

into the base and articulate the point of intersection between the platform and the wall. A one-story glass and bronzed metal entrance pavilion juts outward from the center of the facade, which is sheltered by a broad, triangular canopy that extends outward from the top of the concrete portion of the base. The front of the canopy is decorated with repeating, aluminum coated metal panels designed on a variation of the building's triangular theme, echoed again in the handles of the two sets of glazed doors. Two slender posts rise upward from the forward portion of the entrance pavilion for added structural support.

The second layer of the building's base provides transition between the concrete below and the glazed pyramid above. This layer is also hexagonal in plan, but extends upward and outward from the concrete base, using the same materials, metal and glass, used in the pyramid above. The lower half of this layer, immediately above the concrete, is sheathed in raked courses of glazing panels, and the upper portion, comprising the roof of the base, is covered in rectangular metal panels edged with the same repeating motif as used on the entrance canopy.

The pyramidal tower is the most memorable feature of the building's exterior. On the whole, the scheme is a very complex variation – in scale, geometry, and materials—on nineteenth-century construction techniques commonly used in greenhouses in which lapped glass panes set in either iron or wood frames served both as roofing and glazing material. With Beth Sholom, the raked courses of panels are set on and in a metal frame consisting of both large vertical and smaller horizontal members. The three structural-metal legs of the tripod are articulated by seven lamps set at regular intervals and by the familiar geometric decorative motifs. The glazing appears to hang from the tripod, not unlike the sides of a tent from its poles. The courses of glazed panels follow the angle of the lines in the transitional layer of the base. The exterior panels themselves consist of a double layer of corrugated, sand-blasted glass reinforced with chicken wire, all of which superficially resembles the fiberglass and acrylic panels common to the period.² On each of the pyramid's three sides, a central bevel projects slightly from the other glazed sections. These bevels, which in the early versions of Wright's design were intended to hold stained glass panels, are articulated by metal vertical members topped by a decorative metal panel. The upper portion of the building is topped by an aluminum finish cap which continues the decorative rectilinear motif of the other metal portions of the exterior.

Interior

The two-part arrangement of the exterior reflects a two-part arrangement of interior space: the upper, main sanctuary contained within in the glazed, tripod tower situated over a smaller sanctuary and social and service spaces on the ground floor of the base. As in elevation, the interior floor plan is bilaterally symmetrical along the east-west axis. Virtually all of the original, Wright-designed details survive unaltered, from the room divisions to finishes, including: light fixtures, furniture, colors, flooring, and trim. The main doors on the west elevation give onto the Harold L. Neuman Memorial Foyer, a typically Wrightian compressed entry area enclosed by glass and plain plaster walls, and topped by an interior extension of the exterior entrance canopy. Beyond the second set of doors and a descending stair on the main entry access is the Rabbi Mortimer J. Cohen Foyer. The doors are similar to others in the public areas and characterized by simple, bronze-finish metal

² One persistent misconception about Beth Sholom Synagogue's exterior glazing is that low-flying military jets from nearby Willow Grove Air Force Base in breaking the sound barrier, have caused the failure and subsequent replacement of the exterior panels with ones crafted from acrylic. Fieldwork conducted as part of research for this nomination revealed that the double-layer, corrugated reinforced glass system survives, with only a small number of failures in random panels over the decades. The corrugated structure of the glass panels, which resembles acrylic panels of the period, coupled with a degree of yellowing on the exterior is likely to blame for this confusion, compounded by construction correspondence discussing the possibility of using plastic for an *interior* glazing layer. The dialogue between Wright and several of the members of the congregation related to the glazing can be found in the Beth Sholom Correspondence Binders (BSB) Volume 4, Beth Sholom Congregation Archives, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania.

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

BETH SHOLOM SYNAGOGUE

Page 7

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

frames surrounding single glass panels and opened by the building's signature door handles. Echoing the exterior entrance platform, the floors of the two entry foyers are covered with Cherokee red linoleum and feature the inset, floor-level triangular fixtures used outside. The walls are articulated in smooth- and rough-finished plaster. Handrails with an aluminum finish and decorative planters constructed of walnut and decorated with the repeated geometric decorative motif also contribute to a seamless interior-exterior composition. The doors to the men's and women's lounges are located to the right and left of the stair in the second foyer.

Further along the entrance axis on the other side of this foyer, a second descending stair provides access to a smaller worship space known as the "Sisterhood Sanctuary." The auditorium seating, in copper-colored leather upholstery, is angled toward a reader's platform, the *bimah*, at the eastern end of the diamond-plan space from which worship services are conducted. The floor slopes toward the *bimah*, featuring Wright-designed furniture and aluminum-finish decorative panels, over which hangs a lamp of eternal light, the *ner tamid*. In addition to the *ner tamid*, the room is lit by recessed lights in a ceiling cove above the *bimah* and triangular ceiling fixtures found elsewhere on the lower level.

Two mirror-image public spaces flank the Sisterhood Sanctuary and interior foyer: the Robin Lounge on the north and the Presidents' Lounge on the south. These are both entered using stairs descending from the foyer and feature Cherokee red linoleum flooring and corner fireplaces, but differ slightly in their furnishings. The President's Lounge includes access to space once used as a service kitchen, but used primarily for storage.

The upper level of the interior is taken up almost entirely by the remarkable main sanctuary, reached by two generous staircases rising from the Neuman Foyer. Pairs of glazed doors to either side of the doors into the Cohen Foyer give access to the stairs. Only after arriving at the top of the stairs are visitors able to perceive the sanctuary space in its entirety. This dramatic introduction to the space, which extends upward for the full height of the glazed tripod tower, is a unique and powerful moment in experiencing Beth Sholom Synagogue. This perception was a planned contrast intended to have an awe-inspiring effect on the approaching worshippers. From the top of the stairs, the space not only opens upward, but also downward with a floor sloping toward the space's center. The *bimah* rises at the sanctuary's eastern end, placing the rabbi and the other officiates at approximately the same height as those people seated midway down the seating area for the congregation, a crucial point of the design.

Original Wright-designed decorative elements are concentrated at certain points in the room for both effect and meaning, as well as for the more practical aspects of religious practice. At the northwest and southwest corners of the room at the point where the tripod legs meet the concrete base of the building, a pyramidal concrete form rises upward and echoes similar forms projecting from the corners of the base on the exterior. These triangular features hold memorial plaques constructed of walnut and topped by panels bearing panels with an abstracted flame-like design. The flame motif is repeated in several places throughout the room, most notably in the bright seraphim-wing lamp rising above the ark, framing a key focal point: the word "*kadosh*" or "holy" in Hebrew letters. The *bimah* contains a number of pieces of Wright-designed furniture, including: chairs for the rabbi, cantor, and others, two lecterns, and two menorahs standing on either side at the edge of the platform. To either side of the ark, a half height wall is topped by a perforated screen that is visually enlivened by zigzag or saw-tooth pattern, which nods to the triangle theme used throughout the building. The area behind the screen houses the organ and what was originally the rabbi's study.

One of the most significant elements of Wright's scheme for the main sanctuary is the large chandelier hanging

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

BETH SHOLOM SYNAGOGUE

Page 8

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

from the glazed tower's cap and suspended in the middle of the space. The form of the stained-glass chandelier is an inverted, three-sided pyramid; one of the corners points directly eastward toward the *bimah*. The materials and treatment of the tower's interior is similar to the exterior, with the structural members of the tripod finished with aluminum-finished panels bearing familiar geometric patterning. The translucent inner layer of glazing panels between the supports is clearly visible.

The plan, form, and detailing of the synagogue designed by Frank Lloyd Wright for the Beth Sholom Congregation survives in its entirety and maintains a high degree of physical and historical integrity. There have been no major changes or wholesale replacement of materials since the building was completed.

Contributing structure:

Access drive

As originally completed, an access drive extended south from Foxcroft Road between the synagogue and fountain, providing automobile access for the main entrance before turning eastward into the parking lot on the property's east side. Sometime after 1965, the segment of the road between the synagogue and the school building, connecting to the parking lot, was removed with the construction of the annex and present covered walkway. The portion of the drive parallel to the synagogue's west (main) face—a design integral with both the entrance stairs and fountain—is considered a contributing structure.

Contributing object:

Fountain

Part of the original design for the site, Wright situated a fountain with a shallow, lozenge-shaped pool and low-level jets on axis with the building's main doors on the west elevation. The fountain is located across the entry road from the doors and is a symbolic representation of the *laver*, a place where ancient practitioners of Judaism washed before entering sacred spaces or performing sacred rituals. The fountain is considered a contributing object.

Non-contributing building:

Sheerr Religious School and Samuel and Anna Cross Annex

Situated to the south of the Wright-designed synagogue, the Sheerr Religious School Building and the Samuel and Anna Cross Annex were not part of Wright's work for the Beth Sholom Congregation. Since Wright's design is the basis of the synagogue's national significance, this administration-education building is a non-contributing building. The L-shaped Sheerr Religious School Building, now comprising the building's northern and western sections, was completed on plans by Philadelphia architect Israel Demchick two years before Wright's involvement with the Congregation. It was the first building constructed after the congregation's purchase of the property in 1949. This portion of the reinforced concrete building contains two-stories on an L-shaped plan, and is faced in yellow brick with reinforced concrete details, metal strip windows, and a flat roof. The original entrance, oriented to Old York Road and now rarely used, is on the building's western side and fronted by a flat-roofed portico supported on a single reinforced concrete column. The second portion of the building is also L-shaped and comprises the southern and eastern sections of what now is a building with a footprint in the shape of a square doughnut. This portion of the building was completed in 1969 on plans by Philadelphia architects Thalheimer and Weitz, and is similar in detail to the Demchick portion, with its flat roof and rectilinear volumes faced in tan brick. The original school building and its later addition are considered

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

BETH SHOLOM SYNAGOGUE

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Page 9

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

non-contributing.

Non-contributing structure:

Covered walkway

A covered walkway connects Beth Sholom Synagogue and the Sheerr Religious School and Samuel and Anna Cross Annex. It extends from the entrance canopy over the main door on the east side of the school/annex to an entrance on the southeast side of the synagogue. Because the flat-roofed canopy was not part of Wright's design and was completed ca. 1969 with the Cross Annex—after the period of significance—it is considered a non-contributing structure.

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

BETH SHOLOM SYNAGOGUE

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form



8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

Nationally: X Statewide: Locally:

Applicable National Register Criteria A B C X D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): A X B C D E F G X

NHL Criteria: 4, Exception 1

NHL Theme(s): III. Expressing Cultural Values
5. Architecture, landscape architecture and urban design

Areas of Significance: Architecture

Period(s) of Significance: 1954-1959

Significant Dates:

Significant Person(s): N/A

Cultural Affiliation: N/A

Architect/Builder: Wright, Frank Lloyd

Historic Contexts: XVI. Architecture
S. Wrightian

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

BETH SHOLOM SYNAGOGUE

Page 11

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.

Introduction

Beth Sholom Synagogue is nationally significant as one of the most important works of the great American architect Frank Lloyd Wright. The building's significance is equal to that of such other National Historic Landmarks as Wright's First Unitarian Society Meeting House in Shorewood Hills, Wisconsin (1950; NHL, 2004), and the Johnson Wax Company Administrative Offices and Research Laboratories in Racine, Wisconsin (1936-39, 1944-50; NHL, 1976), and the Marin County Civic Center in San Rafael, California (1962; NHL, 1991). Beth Sholom was one of a handful of Wright buildings singled out in 1959 by the American Institute of Architects and the National Trust for Historic Preservation for their invaluable contribution to American culture. Brendan Gill, who among the well-known Wright authors speaks most eloquently on Beth Sholom and its importance, described the process of designing Beth Sholom Synagogue as "one of the most important events in Wright's career."³

Wright's contributions to architecture and overall influence in this country and across the globe are, perhaps, unmatched. He worked on well over one-thousand projects including houses, office buildings, churches, schools, libraries, bridges, stores, and museums. Of these projects, an estimated 430 were seen to completion (not including work that may have been done on projects with other principal architects) and a vast majority of these are still standing.⁴ As Wright's only commission for a synagogue and his only non-Christian ecclesiastical design, Beth Sholom Synagogue possesses singularity among an already rarified group of Wright-conceived religious buildings. It also holds weight within Wright's long and distinguished career for the unusually collaborative relationship between Wright and Beth Sholom's rabbi, Mortimer J. Cohen (1894-1972). The finished building is a striking religious design quite unlike any other and is a benchmark in Wright's career, mid-twentieth century architectural trends, and in the story of American Judaism.

Beth Sholom Congregation

Beth Sholom Congregation was founded in the Logan neighborhood of north Philadelphia in 1919 in a period of rapid expansion for Conservative Judaism in American cities.⁵ Beth Sholom's first building (constructed from plans by local architect Jacob Feldstein), was located at the intersection of Broad Street, the city's principal north-south thoroughfare, and Courtland Street. Most of this area was characterized by dense residential and industrial blocks largely developed between the Civil War and World War I, while religious institutions, commercial structures, and larger residences were built on major roads, of which Broad was the most prominent.

Just as Beth Sholom's founding corresponded to the pre-Depression pattern of expansion for Conservative Judaism in the United States, the congregation's decision to move out of Philadelphia after World War II reflected the postwar "synagogue boom" in the American suburbs. As historian Jack Wertheimer has noted, this boom stemmed from a substantial demographic shift within Conservative Jewish congregations. In this, Jews coming of age after the war broke with the patterns of previous urban generations and joined the general

³ Brendan Gill, *Many Masks, a Life of Frank Lloyd Wright* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 461.

⁴ For a catalog of Wright's work, see: William Allin Storrer, *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright: A Complete Catalog* (1978) (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995).

⁵ Jack Wertheimer, "The Conservative Synagogue," in Wertheimer, ed., *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987): 116-23.

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

BETH SHOLOM SYNAGOGUE

Page 12

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

American population in the postwar middle-class exodus from cities.⁶ The younger members of the Beth Sholom Congregation were thus becoming more integrated into general American culture than their parents and grandparents, who had lived in “densely populated Jewish enclaves.”⁷

Rabbi Mortimer Cohen (who had been with the congregation since its founding) and Beth Sholom’s board began contemplating the move that would lead to Wright’s commission in the late 1940s. They purchased the Elkins Park property in January, 1949, under the pretext of building a new school for the congregation rather than a new synagogue since there was resistance among some members on the issue.⁸ Philadelphia architect Israel Demchick (1890–1980), a member of the congregation who also specialized in synagogue design, was hired for the project.⁹ The building was completed in the fall of 1951 and soon dubbed the “Beth Sholom Annex.” The leaders of the congregation had noted in 1949 that “in the course of the past five to ten years, we have watched the tendency of our children, when they marry, to move northward” from Philadelphia into lower Montgomery County, including the area around Elkins Park.¹⁰ Spurred by Rabbi Cohen, the leadership wished to “keep Beth Sholom a young and strong Congregation” by moving the temple to Elkins Park and spent the next couple of years diplomatically persuading congregants to back the cause.¹¹ In 1953, Rabbi Cohen learned of a possible merger between two other Jewish congregations who planned to relocate to a site near Beth Sholom’s property in Elkins Park. In addressing the board of directors, he maintained:

that time is in our favor and that if we work fast we could be The Synagogue in this area and find that we meet the needs of sufficient members to maintain a fine and growing institution in an area which is fast becoming populated with Jewish families.¹²

Rabbi Cohen went on to voice his fear that if Beth Sholom did not move with all deliberate speed, that they would lose members to competitors in the area. The board concurred, and a full move to Elkins Park began in earnest.

Frank Lloyd Wright, Rabbi Mortimer Cohen, and an “American Synagogue”

Wright’s career has been loosely divided into five chronological periods that provide a flexible framework for comprehending the constancy and change in his work over time. The divisions are as follows: Early Period (1890-1900), First Mature Period or Golden Age (1900-12), Second Period (1913-29), Third Period (1930-41), and Fourth Period or Second Golden Age (1941-59). At the time of the Beth Sholom commission, Frank Lloyd Wright was enjoying a major resurgence of his career, life, and fame during his “Second Golden Age.” At the time, the architect-octogenarian was further refining designs for his Usonian houses, and overseeing such large-scale projects as the Price Tower (1952-56), the Dallas Theater (1955), the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church (1956), and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (1956-59). During the same period, the Guggenheim Museum exhibited his work as *Sixty Years of Living Architecture: The Work of Frank Lloyd Wright* (1953), and he published such works as *Genius and the Mobocracy* (1949), *The Future of Architecture*

⁶ Ibid., 125.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Leo and Vera Posel to Beth Sholom Congregation, July 6, 1949, Montgomery County Deed Book 2001, 287 et seq., Office of the Montgomery County Recorder of Deeds, Norristown, Pennsylvania.

⁹ See Emily T. Cooperman and Sandra Tatman, “Demchick, Israel,” Philadelphia Architects and Buildings Project, http://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar_display.cfm/22676, accessed April 1, 2005.

¹⁰ *Beth Sholom Letter* [newsletter], September 19, 1949, Beth Sholom Congregation Archives (hereafter BSCA), Elkins Park, Pennsylvania.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Minutes of the Board of Directors, September 14, 1953, BSCA.

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

BETH SHOLOM SYNAGOGUE

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Page 13

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

(1953), *The Natural House* (1954), and *The Story of the Tower: The Tree That Escaped the Crowded Forest* (1956), chronicling the contemporaneous Price Tower commission.

Frank Lloyd Wright's engagement with Beth Sholom began with a suggestion made by sculptor Boris Blai (1890–1985), then dean of the nearby Tyler School of Art. Blai had come to know Wright while teaching at Florida Southern College and suggested that Wright might provide a means for creating “The Synagogue” that Rabbi Cohen sought.¹³ In November 1953, Rabbi Cohen wrote to Wright and introduced himself. This crucial first contact would establish the foundation of their working relationship in several respects. Rabbi Cohen couched his idea for the new building in terms that related to the greater social “mainstreaming” of the synagogue's younger congregants, placing its design within a broader American cultural context. After introducing himself and the plan for a new synagogue, Rabbi Cohen went right to this point:

There is a dream and hope in my heart and in [Dean Blai's] of erecting a Synagogue...(in simple, modern design) that will be an inspiration for generations to come, so that people will come from all over the country to see it and find here a ‘new thing’—the American spirit wedded to the ancient spirit of Israel.¹⁴

Rabbi Cohen further elaborated on the fundamentally democratic, and therefore American, aspects of Judaism:

Judaism has been and is a democratic religion whose leaders are not set apart from the congregations, but lead and guide from the very midst...In spirit, Judaism is so close to the American democratic spirit that we need a new type of Synagogue to express this remarkable spiritual fact. Our churches, too, once they become fully democratized will recognize this marriage of Christianity and Americanism by building a new type of building to embody this conception. Judaism has already, through the ages, created that type of democratic building in the traditional synagogue.¹⁵

It was undoubtedly Cohen's democratic, ecumenical argument that persuaded Wright to accept a commission for a building type he had heretofore eschewed. As George Goodwin has noted, Jewish clients were a significant and substantial presence in Wright's career; Wright cannot be accurately described as anti-Semitic.¹⁶ However, in a speech at an initial fundraising dinner for the Beth Sholom project in June 1954, Wright admitted that he had “been asked to design a Jewish synagogue once or twice before...and I have always declined. I said I would design an American Synagogue for Jews in America, but I would not design a Jewish Synagogue.”¹⁷ Robert McCarter has noted that Wright believed “his own [transcendental] principles related to...all religions.”¹⁸ Rabbi Cohen's recontextualization of Jewish experience and religion within the broader American culture provided Wright a point of intellectual access for the project and appealed to the universal elements of spirituality that he embraced. It is not surprising that Wright subsequently used his unbuilt “Steel Cathedral” project from 1926, envisioned as housing a multitude of (Christian) faiths, as the point of departure for the design of Beth Sholom Synagogue.¹⁹

¹³ Mortimer J. Cohen (MJC) to Frank Lloyd Wright (FLW), November 16, 1953, Beth Sholom Correspondence Binders (hereafter BSB), vol. 1, BSCA.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ George M. Goodwin, “Wright's Beth Sholom Synagogue,” *American Jewish History* 86, no. 3 (1998): 325. Goodwin also notes that Dankmar Adler—partner in the firm of Adler & [Louis] Sullivan (the office in which Wright worked early in his career)—was Jewish and had a substantial Jewish clientele.

¹⁷ Speech given by Frank Lloyd Wright, June 3, 1954, typescript in BSB, vol. 2, BSCA.

¹⁸ Robert McCarter, *Frank Lloyd Wright* (New York: Phaidon, 1997), 291.

¹⁹ A reference to the Beth Sholom commission and this unbuilt schema can be found in Edgar J. Kaufmann, Jr., “Frank Lloyd Wright: 3 New Churches,” *Art in America* 45 (Fall 1957): 22-23. The Beth Sholom Congregation archives also record that

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

BETH SHOLOM SYNAGOGUE

Page 14

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Wrightian Abstraction, Jewish Use and Meaning

Although providing a solid foundation, the collaboration between Frank Lloyd Wright and Rabbi Mortimer Cohen by necessity moved beyond this initial conceptual understanding into design and construction of the project. Rabbi Cohen's first letter established another important facet of the working relationship between the clergyman and the architect—specifically, that the rabbi would take the lead in explaining and interpreting Jewish practices and beliefs as Wright proceeded with the building's design. Enclosed with that letter were lengthy notes that explained relevant aspects of Jewish liturgy and philosophy as well as the congregation's needs and programmatic desiderata. These and later communications not only concerned appropriate conformance to Jewish religious practice, but also extended to an articulate commentary on spiritual and metaphorical meanings imbued on the forms envisioned by Wright. Cohen was able to verbally ground the abstract features of Wright's design, and infer religious meanings that were both specific to Judaism and more generally to the Judeo-Christian tradition.

In March 1954, the dialogue between Wright and Cohen expanded to include the first completed set of perspective and plan sketches. Their understanding for the building that stressed a broad, American spirituality characterized Cohen's March 19 response to the drawings. He stated: "if my interpretation of your remarkable design for Beth Sholom varies from what you have intended, I could claim the divine right of every individual to the evoked idea of his own spirit (and I know I would be respected by you for this emphasis upon the divine right of the individual)."²⁰

Wright seems to have been contented with the nature of his collaboration with Rabbi Cohen, which was strongly suggested in newspaper announcements about the commission and anticipated synagogue. Articles published in the *Sunday Bulletin* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* on May 23, 1954, provide vivid explication of the building's symbolic meanings. The two most enduring of these—the understanding of the building as a "traveling Mount Sinai" and metaphor for the hands of God holding the people of Israel—were included in these early publications.²¹ As part of public relations and fundraising efforts, Cohen compiled commentary for the congregation along the general lines of his March 19 response letter to Wright about the initial drawings.²² The two had likely discussed and formulated some of the ideas about the building's physical and symbolic presence during their first meeting in New York in December 1953, but no detailed record of this conversation exists.

For the duration of the project, Wright and Cohen together worked out the design and its various meanings, a relationship made possible by their complementary personalities, Wright's vision, and his relative ignorance in the details of Judaism. In the learned, articulate, and ambitious rabbi, Wright found more than an informative client simply supplying him with explanations of the Jewish faith and its practice. He also discovered a partner dedicated to the creation of a deeply meaningful religious building. Wright acknowledged Cohen's dedication

Rabbi Cohen had to justify the choice of the gentile Wright as the architect of the new synagogue building. This was done on the basis of King Solomon's choice of the non-Jewish Bezalel for the architect of the Temple.

²⁰ MJC to FLW, 19 Mar. 1954, BSB, vol. 1, BSCA

²¹ BSCA. Rabbi Cohen referred to it as a "replica of Mount Sinai" in 1954. See "Frank Lloyd Wright has designed his first synagogue. . . ." *Architectural Record* 116 (July 1954): 20. Wright is also quoted as describing the general experience of the visitor to the building itself as being like: "'resting in the very hands of God'." See "Frank Lloyd Wright: A Selection of Current Work, A Synagogue," *Architectural Record* 108 (May 1958): 178. A photograph taken by Philadelphia commercial photographer Jacob Stehman published in several locations superimposed Wright's initial plan on Rabbi Cohen's hands shown together and palm up, with thumbs slightly outstretched. This photograph is now in the collection of the Athenaeum of Philadelphia.

²² MJC, "Frank Lloyd Wright's Synagogue," BSCA.

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

BETH SHOLOM SYNAGOGUE

Page 15

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

to that end in the letter that accompanied the first set of drawings completed in March 1954, which presented the design as “a coherent statement of worship.”²³ The interpretive process launched by Rabbi Cohen is one of the salient features of Beth Sholom’s significance.²⁴ This process continues to this day and the building has thus been, from the beginning, an analogue to a sacred text.

A clear demonstration of their cooperative design can be traced in the formulation of the geometry of the building’s plan. In his first letter to Wright, Rabbi Cohen had supplied a sketch plan for the building in the shape of an elongated octagon.²⁵ On February 2, 1954, Wright telegraphed Rabbi Cohen asking, “any objection to fundamental hexagon or triangle instead of octagon,” to which Rabbi Cohen deferred to the architect, “no objection...leave entirely to you.”²⁶ The fundamental geometric order for the design was established in this exchange. This ordering is hardly unique to the Beth Sholom project—it is a hallmark of Wright’s mature work. Wright used triangular or hexagonal forms and motifs in several late-career ecclesiastical projects, including the Anne Pfeiffer Chapel at Florida Southern College, Lakeland, Florida (1940), and the First Unitarian Society Meeting House in Shorewood Hills, Wisconsin (1950). He had previously experimented with hexagons, most notably with the Paul R. Hanna “Honeycomb” House in Palo Alto, California (1936), which is also among the seventeen works identified by the AIA and National Trust as being exceptional in his career.²⁷ The irregular hexagon plan is unusual, however, in Wright’s work, and probably rose out of Cohen’s initial concept.

Another instance of Wright and Cohen’s relationship with this commission regards Cohen’s directive about the entrance canopy sheltering the building’s main entrance. In response to Wright’s initial scheme for a comparably modest canopy, the rabbi wrote:

As I understand it at present, it seems to be purely functional. It serves the purpose of covering the people, if it rains. It is also ornamental, yet not obtrusively so. I would like to make it symbolic in the spirit of the whole design. I would like to see the covering, in stylized form of course, represent the hands of the ancient priests, outstretched in blessing. The priests, in Biblical days, used to send the people away, and also greet them, with what we call ‘the priestly benediction.’

‘May the Lord Bless you and keep you;
The Lord make His face to shine upon...etc.’

Numbers 6.24

My thought is this: Imagine your two hands together in prayer. Then, pivoting them on the thumb and first (index) fingers, revolve them up until both hands are in one plane. This will give you the triangular effect of the present covering. Now, I would so shape the copper and the other material in the covering as to make suggestively – and not too obviously – the hands of the priests.

²³ FLW to MJC, 14 Mar. 1954, BSB, vol. 1, BSCA.

²⁴ The relationship between Cohen and Wright was explicitly and implicitly noted in period press. In particular, see “Promised Hosanna,” *Time* May 31, 1954, 54, and “Glass-towered Synagogue, Frank Lloyd Wright’s First,” *Architectural Forum* 100 (June 1954): 145.

²⁵ A copy of this sketch is included in MJC to FLW, November 16, 1953, BSB, vol. 1, BSCA.

²⁶ Telegram, FLW to MJC, February 2, 1954, BSB, vol. 1, BSCA.

²⁷ In this case, Wright apparently decided to use a hexagonal module as an effort to create an earthquake resistant building. See “A Frank Lloyd Wright House at Palo Alto, California Designed to Resist Earthquakes,” *Architect and Engineer* 130 (August 1937): 3.

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

BETH SHOLOM SYNAGOGUE

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Page 16

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

I attach herewith – with due apologies – my horrible sketch.²⁸

Wright changed the design, resulting in the canopy still welcoming visitors today.

Construction and Reception

With the completion of the initial drawings, fundraising began in June 1954 followed by a groundbreaking ceremony on November 14, 1954.²⁹ Wright and his staff completed working drawings for bidding purposes early in 1955. Haskell Culwell, builder of the Harold C. Price Company Tower in Bartlesville, Oklahoma (1956), completed a three-dimensional model of the Beth Sholom design in April 1956. After the failure to find a satisfactory local contractor, Beth Sholom hired Culwell to build the new synagogue.³⁰ The delays incumbent in fundraising slowed the project, whose budget kept climbing, and design of the interior details continued early into 1957, well past the planned start of construction in the summer of 1956. The project struggled toward completion in 1957-58; Wright visited the site for the last time in January 1959. He died four months later, never seeing the completed building, which was officially opened on September 20, 1959.³¹ Except for the almost predictable problems with leaks, Beth Sholom Synagogue as envisioned by Frank Lloyd Wright and Rabbi Mortimer Cohen has been used continually for worship services and has survived essentially unaltered, since 1959.

Time magazine introduced the project to its readers in 1954 by observing, “The Jewish people have built their places of worship all over the world, but never have they produced architectural monuments to rival those of other faiths;” with Wright’s design, “U.S. Judaism was hoping to close the gap.”³² The completed building did indeed “close the gap” and it became a tangible and evocative symbol of the future of American Judaism and stands among Wright’s most important buildings. In 1957, before it was even consecrated, Edgar J. Kaufmann, Jr., whose father commissioned Fallingwater, remarked that the design is “a prism of light, a rock of strength, joyous and austere at once, this synagogue Wright has designed is original in every architectural detail yet clearly it proclaims the authority of ancient tradition.”³³ The National Trust for Historic Preservation and the American Institute of Architects recognized the design as one of Wright’s most significant contributions to, and reflections of, a national culture in 1959. Three years later, it was one of the illustrations in a *New York Times* article entitled “Suburban Synagogue Designs Linked to New Patterns of Life,” which discussed recent commissions as central to Jewish suburban life and reflecting an historic Jewish tendency to “adapt local building styles to their own use.”³⁴ Beth Sholom was a noted mid-twentieth-century, wholly American example within this continuum. As a building and, more particularly, as a place of worship, Frank Lloyd Wright’s Beth Sholom Synagogue is an architectural statement whose strength and clear success was recognized by contemporaries, if not fully, by later scholars.

²⁸ MJC to FLW, April 8, 1954, BSB, vol. 1, BSCA.

²⁹ “Wright Starts Synagogue Work” *New York Times* November 15, 1954, 16, for groundbreaking.

³⁰ Correspondence with Culwell is preserved in the BSCA. See also “Skies Clearing for Wright’s Ramp Museum, Synagogue,” *Architectural Forum* 104 (February 1956): 9; Goodwin, 340-42; and Patricia Talbot Davis, *Together They Built a Mountain* (Lititz, PA: Sutter House, 1974).

³¹ “Wright’s Temple to be Dedicated,” *New York Times*, September 13, 1959, 16.

³² “Promised Hosanna,” *Time*, May 31, 1954, 54.

³³ Edgar J. Kaufmann, Jr., “Frank Lloyd Wright: 3 New Churches,” *Art in America* 45 (Fall 1957): 23.

³⁴ “Suburban Synagogue Designs Linked to New Patterns of Life,” *New York Times*, July 29, 1962, sec. 8: 1. It also helped to illustrate Ada Louise Huxtable, “Triple Legacy of Mr. Wright,” *New York Times Magazine*, November 15, 1959, 18-19.

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

BETH SHOLOM SYNAGOGUE

Page 17

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

George Goodwin notes the building has been under-represented in the scholarly literature on Wright when compared to other significant commissions, particularly ecclesiastical ones.³⁵ Rather than a comment on the building's value, this relative lack of attention is more symptomatic of the place of synagogues within the scholarly literature on American architectural history. Compared with research conducted on Christian churches and other religious building types, synagogues have received little attention from architectural historians. Serious scholarship on synagogues has been principally pursued through other disciplines, particularly by specialists in Jewish history.³⁶ Some of this lack has been relieved by such works as Robert McCarter's monograph, *Frank Lloyd Wright Architect* (1997), which followed one of the most thorough discussions of the building in Brendan Gill's *Many Masks, a Life of Frank Lloyd Wright* (1988).³⁷

Brendan Gill's *Many Masks* not only offers the most eloquent analysis of Beth Sholom Synagogue, but also a satisfying explanation for the relative lack of attention given to the commission. Gill positions Beth Sholom as "one of the most important events in Wright's career."³⁸ He accounts for the project's low profile in period and later literature by remarking that "it was under construction at the same time as the Guggenheim Museum and it remained in the Guggenheim's shadow then as it does today."³⁹ Gill also cites its geographic location and related social contexts as a substantial cause for this lack of attention, stating:

Wright had been working on the plans for the Guggenheim over a period of many years and had gained much publicity both for the museum and for himself . . . the Guggenheim was being built on Fifth Avenue, in the heart of the most publicity-conscious city on earth; the synagogue was being built in the near-anonymity of Elkins Park, a wealthy, predominantly Jewish suburb of Philadelphia. For decades, Philadelphia had been a rival of Brooklyn as the butt of wisecracks The shadow cast by the Guggenheim was also in part of Wright's making.⁴⁰

Gill's argument fortunately advances beyond being merely advocating for an overshadowed, even spurned building by providing a coherent assessment of Beth Sholom as a work of art and architecture relative to the Guggenheim. He notes that:

Beth Sholom is nothing like as photogenic as the voluptuously roly-poly Guggenheim. Its aggressively angular shape, both inside and outside, is sufficiently difficult to comprehend in three dimensions, as the human eye confronts it, and all but impossible to reproduce it photographically, in two dimensions . . . the synagogue is the male counterpart of the female Guggenheim. It is awesome but not winsome. We earn our delight in it by stages, while in the Guggenheim delight is instantaneously bestowed upon us.⁴¹

Perhaps most significantly, Gill has captured most articulately Wright's success in creating what the architect characterized as a "coherent statement of worship." While the building may not have been "ingratiating," that was certainly never its purpose: it was intended to inspire awe and a sense of the divine through a building that provokes an experience of the sublime in the Burkean sense. No other of Wright's religious buildings is discussed in the literature as Gill does here, again comparing Beth Sholom to the Guggenheim:

³⁵ Goodwin, "Wright's Beth Sholom Synagogue," 326.

³⁶ Among these might be noted Wertheimer, op. cit., as well as Leon A. Jick, *The Americanization of the Synagogue, 1820-1870* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1976). It should also be noted that an issue of *American Jewish History* 90:1 (2002) was devoted to a reappraisal of Jick's work.

³⁷ McCarter, *Frank Lloyd Wright*, 297-301.

³⁸ Gill, *Many Masks*, 461.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 461-62

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

BETH SHOLOM SYNAGOGUE

Page 18

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Standing in the Guggenheim, one is conscious of the formidable ego of the designer, present at every turn of the ramp. Standing in Beth Sholom, one senses that the ego of the designer has been subsumed into the work, which in Wright's case amounts to a near-miracle. Even to visitors who, like me, hold no formal religious beliefs whatever, the structure conveys the sense of an immanent collective sacredness, purged of individuality. Wright had promised the congregation of Beth Sholom that their temple would be a 'Mount Sinai cupped in the hands of God,' and for once his outrageous rhetoric amounted to the truth.⁴²

Beth Sholom Synagogue is nationally significant as one of the most important works by renowned architect Frank Lloyd Wright. In satisfying Rabbi Mortimer J. Cohen's desire for an "American" synagogue, the high-style, high-profile design both extended from, and is a legacy of, mid-century trends affecting the translation of Jewish identity from city to suburb. The building's ultimate success in melding modernity and novelty with traditional meaning and iconography stemmed from an uncommon degree of collaboration between Wright and Cohen. Their ability to work together resulted in a unique building for the United States, whose spaces enhance its religious purpose among regular users and present larger audiences with an unparalleled architectural experience.

⁴² Ibid.

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

BETH SHOLOM SYNAGOGUE

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Page 19

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Primary sources:

Correspondence Volumes. Beth Sholom Congregation Archives. Beth Sholom Synagogue, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania.

Board of Directors' Meeting Minutes. Beth Sholom Congregation Archives. Beth Sholom Synagogue, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania.

Beth Sholom Congregation Archives. Beth Sholom Synagogue, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania.

Published Sources:

Blake, Peter. *The Master Builders: Le Corbusier, Mies Van der Rohe, and Frank Lloyd Wright*. New York, Norton, 1996.

Davis, Patricia Talbot. *Together They Built a Mountain*. Lititz, PA: Sutter House, 1974.

"Frank Lloyd Wright: A Selection of Current Work, A Synagogue." *Architectural Record* 108 (May 1958): 178-79.

"Frank Lloyd Wright Has Designed His First Synagogue..." *Architectural Record* 116 (July 1954): 20.

Friedman, Murray, ed. *Philadelphia Jewish Life: 1940-1985*. Ardmore, PA: Seth Press, 1986.

Gill, Brendan. *Many Masks, a Life of Frank Lloyd Wright*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1988.

"Glass-towered Synagogue, Frank Lloyd Wright's First." *Architectural Forum* 100 (June 1954): 145.

Goodwin, George M. "Wright's Beth Sholom Synagogue." *American Jewish History* 86, no. 3 (1998): 325-348.

Jick, Leon. *The Americanization of the Synagogue, 1820-1870*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1976.

Kaufmann, Edgar J., Jr. "Frank Lloyd Wright: 3 New Churches." *Art in America* 45 (Fall 1957): 22-25.

Levine, Neil. *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996.

McCarter, Robert. *Frank Lloyd Wright, Architect*. New York: Phaidon Press, Inc., 1997.

"Promised Hosanna." *Time* May 31, 1954, 54.

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

BETH SHOLOM SYNAGOGUE

Page 20

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Rossman, Mr. and Mrs. Herbert D. *Beth Sholom Synagogue Golden Anniversary 1919-1969*. Philadelphia, 1969.

“Skies Clearing for Wright’s Ramp Museum, Synagogue.” *Architectural Forum* 104 (February 1956): 9.

Stoltzman, Henry & Daniel. *Synagogue Architecture in America, Faith, Spirit & Identity*. Victoria: Images Publishing Group, Ltd., 2004

“Suburban Synagogue Designs Linked to New Patterns of Life.” *New York Times* July 29, 1962, Sec. 8: 1.

Wertheimer, Jack, ed. *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

“Wright Starts Synagogue Work.” *New York Times* November 15, 1954: 16.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- Previously Listed in the National Register.
- Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
- Designated a National Historic Landmark.
- Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: # PA-6033
- Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other (Specify Repository): Beth Sholom Archives, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

BETH SHOLOM SYNAGOGUE

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Page 21

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: 3.850 acres

UTM References:	Zone	Easting	Northing
	18	489216	4436896

Verbal Boundary Description:

The property includes the entirety of parcel number 31-00-30211-50-2 in Cheltenham Township, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania.

Boundary Justification:

This boundary is the entire property conveyed by Leo and Vera Posel to the Beth Sholom Congregation on June 9, 1949, as found in Montgomery County Deed Book 2001, page 287. The property includes the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed synagogue and all associated non-contributing buildings.

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

BETH SHOLOM SYNAGOGUE

Page 22

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

11. FORM PREPARED BY

Name/Title: Emily T. Cooperman, PhD
Director of Historic Preservation
Cultural Resource Consulting Group

Address: 1500 Walnut Street, Suite 702
Philadelphia, PA 19102

Telephone: (215) 985-0995

Date: April 10, 2006

Edited by: James Jacobs, PhD
National Park Service
National Historic Landmarks Program

Telephone: (202) 354-2184

DESIGNATED A NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK
March 29, 2007