

BETH SHOLOM SYNAGOGUE
Old York and Foxcroft Roads
Elkins Park
Montgomery County
Pennsylvania

HABS NO. PA-6033

HABS
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46-ELKPA,
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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Location: Old York and Foxcroft Roads, Elkins Park, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania.

Significance: Beth Sholom Synagogue represents the later work of nationally recognized architect Frank Lloyd Wright. It is among the designs that the American Institute of Architects has suggested be preserved as an example of Wright's contribution to American culture.

Description: Beth Sholom sits 50' northeast of a busy street in suburban Elkins Park, where single-family homes comprise most of the surrounding neighborhood. Nearby is the town hall and several churches. Connected to the south side of the synagogue is a two-story rectangular brick building which contains the congregation's offices and school. In front of the synagogue is a concrete basin with a metal fountain designed to represent the Laver, where ancient priests washed themselves to prepare for services.

The synagogue is a 110' steel, aluminum, and glass pyramid. Structural steel, most notably three masts which form a tripod, supports the distorted hexagonal tower. These beams rest on concrete piers which in turn connect to a stucco-covered reinforced concrete wall which wraps around the base of the building. The pyramid's translucent double tent has an exterior layer of wire glass and interior of corrugated plastic; between the panes are steel T-beams faced with aluminum. At the top is a stamped aluminum cap. The pyramid's six corners alternate between two designs. Those marking the steel tripod are covered with stamped aluminum and feature aluminum cresting shaped to represent seven seven-branched menorahs. Inside these menorahs are lights designed to illuminate the night sky. Wrapping around the other three corners are aluminum and wire-glass trapezoids which extend up approximately two-thirds of the wall. Below each of these trapezoids are triangular blocks projecting from the pairs of concrete piers. Faced with wire glass, these extensions have shallow-pitched aluminum roofs. The main entrance projects southwest beneath a triangular canopy; it includes a pair of bronze and glass double doors, and a concrete stairway.

The interior of the synagogue has two levels. The main sanctuary is reached by ramps leading up, along the walls, from either side of the vestibule. An aisle runs from each pier to meet in the center of floor; from here, a single aisle continues to the front of the bimah, or altar. This arrangement divides the synagogue's 1,040 seats into three sections, all facing the bimah. Dominating the bimah is a large white monolith ornamented with the flaming wings of the Seraphim and the Hebrew words "Holy." In front of the monolith is a dark walnut ark holding the twelve

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Torah; its doors are edged with glass, so that light can flow from the interior. On either side of the monolith are six arches representing six books which form part of Jewish law. The interior of the sanctuary contains many other symbolic elements; the most striking is a triangular chandelier hanging 27' above the center of the floor.

The lower level is reached from steps leading from the vestibule. This floor is symmetrical: immediately to the left and right are women's and men's restrooms, respectively; past these are two large lounges. One lounge leads to rooms used for wedding preparations, and the other, to a kitchen and lounge used for meetings. Directly ahead, through glass and bronze doors, is the diamond-shaped Sisterhood Sanctuary, which contains 225 seats that descend in a semi-circle around the bimah, or altar. On the bimah, which projects into the center of the sanctuary, are a rectangular ark made from walnut, two large menorahs, and furniture, all of which Wright designed.

History: The Beth Sholom Congregation was founded in 1919 in the Logan section of Philadelphia. Over the years its members began moving to the suburbs, especially those north of the city. This shift accelerated after World War II, and so the board of directors for Beth Sholom decided to purchase land in Elkins Park. They initially bought land east of Old York Road, where they built a school and social center in 1953.¹

The congregation then decided to construct a new synagogue. Rabbi Mortimer Cohen sketched a plan for the building, which he imagined as an octagon whose bimah was located in the center of floor and surrounded on three sides with seats. Rabbi Cohen showed this design to Boris Blai, Dean of the School of Arts at Temple University, who told him only Frank Lloyd Wright could realize such a design. In late 1953 Cohen sent his sketch to Wright, who accepted the commission.

Since the Unity Temple (1906) Wright had designed a number of places of worship but never a synagogue. In addition to Rabbi Cohen's sketch, a number of sources inspired Wright's final design for Beth Sholom. Synagogues traditionally reflect the architecture of the areas in which they are built, so Wright included frequent triangular designs reminiscent of the tepees of Native American who originally occupied this site. He drew on elements he had employed earlier: he used a pyramid in 1926 for a never-built interfaith cathedral; the seats for the auditorium at Florida Southern College (1940-59) were arranged much like

¹Mortimer J. Cohen, Beth Sholom Synagogue (Elkins Park, PA: n.p., 1959), 1-2.

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those at Beth Sholom. Judaism also strongly influenced the design. The building's distorted hexagonal shape was meant to represent a pair of hands cupped together, so worshippers felt they were resting in the hands of God. The pyramid called on both the image of Mt. Sinai and the "Tent of Meeting" described in the Book of Exodus; the interior is filled with references to the faith's important tenets. Many of the ideas came from Wright's continuing conversations with Rabbi Cohen; these discussions, as well as the rabbi's initial sketch, influenced Beth Sholom's design so much that the dedication states the building was "Conceived by Rabbi Mortimer J. Cohen" and "Designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, Architect."²

Designing Beth Sholom proved easier than building it. The congregation initially planned to locate the synagogue across the street from the school. That property's deed restrictions, however, prevented the construction of a religious building until 1960. The congregation then purchased three tracts immediately north of its existing building but then ran into zoning regulations and public opposition. Cheltenham Township had a height restriction of 65', while neighbors complained about a lack of parking space and called Wright's design "a monstrosity." In November, 1954, though, the township Board of Adjustment reversed itself. It decided the excess height should be considered a spire, which was exempt from the building code, and declined to judge the synagogue's aesthetic merits.³

Construction began in 1957. Certain elements of the design were altered, most notably the substitution of aluminum for copper on the pyramid cap and the canopy roof. Dedication took place September 20, 1959, five months after Wright's death. The American Institute of Architects has subsequently designated it as one of seventeen buildings Wright designed that should be retained as examples of his contribution to American culture.

²Brendan Gill, *Many Masks: A Life of Frank Lloyd Wright* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1987), 461-473; Cohen, 2-9.

³Appeal No. 663, November 11, 1954, Board of Adjustment, Cheltenham Township, Pennsylvania; "Foxcroft Folks Ignore Genius, Flay Wright's Design For New Synagogue," *Times Chronicle*, August 26, 1954.

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