

BETH SHOLOM SYNAGOGUE OPENS ITS DOORS TO A NEW VISITOR CENTER

On an unseasonably warm November afternoon in Elkins Park, PA, the Beth Sholom Synagogue Preservation Foundation dedicated its new visitor center. Designed and constructed between 1953 and 1959, Beth Sholom was the only synagogue that Frank Lloyd Wright designed. It was completed six months after his death. The synagogue's design, which has been described as a "Mt. Sinai wrought in modern materials," originated from an unrealized steel cathedral that the architect designed in 1926.

In his keynote address for the visitor center's opening, *New Yorker* architectural critic Paul Goldberger described two paradoxes of sacred architecture: the architect's need to rely on materiality to convey what is immaterial, and the fact that architecture is guided by rationality and logic which are the antitheses of great sacred spaces that aspire to defy such boundaries. Goldberger praised "the sheer power of presence" of Wright's design, while also comparing it to the "ineffable" aspects of Le Corbusier's unorthodox design for Ronchamp.

Yet, despite Wright's success in achieving the ineffable, Beth Sholom Synagogue, like many of the architect's buildings, has had its share of material issues. Confronted with rising maintenance costs and a contracting congregation, Beth Sholom President Mark Manstein, and foundation President Herbert Sachs have taken a proactive approach to leveraging public interest in all things Wright. In 2006, they commissioned architectural historian Emily Cooperman to prepare a National Historic Landmark nomination for the synagogue and the site was successfully listed in Spring 2007. The substance of the visitor center's exhibitions is a product of Cooperman's exhaustive research.

Housed within a Wright-designed multi-purpose room underneath the main sanctuary and adjacent to the synagogue's Sister Sanctuary, the visitor center was a collaborative effort between Cooperman (scholarly content), Picture Projects (exhibit design/planning/new media) and



GREGORY DIETRICH

The new visitor center illuminates Wright's concepts for a broad audience.



BETH SHOLOM CONGREGATION

Beth Sholom Synagogue, Elkins Park, PA, Frank Lloyd Wright, 1953–1959

Andrea Mason (exhibit design architect). In addition, Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates Architects and Planners provided project management and store design services.

Exhibits include reproductions of original drawings and correspondence between Wright and his client, Rabbi Mortimer J. Cohen; mounted and touch-screen timelines exploring the historical evolution and construction of Beth Sholom, the development of synagogue architecture in the United States, and Wright's career; an oral history project featuring interviews with various members

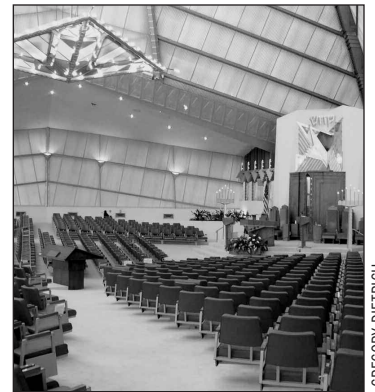
of the congregation; and a documentary on the design and construction of Beth Sholom entitled "An American Synagogue: Frank Lloyd Wright, Mortimer Cohen and The Making of Beth Sholom," narrated by Leonard Nimoy.

One of the most striking elements of Wright's design was his incorporation of natural light, which filters into the main sanctuary through the lens of faceted glass and fiberglass panels. As a means of highlighting this distinctive feature, Picture Projects created an interactive exhibit called



BETH SHOLOM CONGREGATION

Roof line detail



GREGORY DIETRICH

Sanctuary

"360 Degrees of Light," which enables the viewer to see this magnificent sanctuary from a variety of angles during a variety of seasons. In commissioning this permanent exhibition to tell the story of Beth Sholom and its master architect, the preservation foundation has enriched the experience of the synagogue, while enabling it to thrive as an intact masterwork that will flourish well beyond the early 21st century. —Gregory Dietrich

For information on visiting and a virtual tour:
www.bethsholompreservation.org/