



1 Aerial view of the St. Louis riverfront, 1933.

Design Agendas:

Modern Architecture in St. Louis, 1930s–1970s

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Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum
Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts
Washington University in St. Louis

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Eric Mendelsohn and B'nai Amoona

Kathleen James-Chakraborty

The unequal opportunities available to Black and white immigrants to St. Louis before 1950 are embodied by the former synagogue B'nai Amoona, a Conservative congregation, erected from 1946 to 1950 in University City, an inner-ring suburb of the city of St. Louis. Designed by the German émigré architect Eric Mendelsohn, who had in the 1920s been one of Europe's most influential modern architects before he fled the Nazis, the synagogue represented the cultural as well as spiritual aspirations of its congregants, not to mention their increasingly substantial economic achievements.¹ This came, however, at a time when few new buildings were being built for African Americans, and the boldest new buildings for them would be the high-rise public housing blocks of Pruitt-Igoe, designed by the Japanese-American architect Minoru Yamasaki, a member of another American minority community.

The mobility available to the city's Jewish community encompassed their approach to their own faith, where boundaries between denominations were sometimes fluid. B'nai Amoona was originally the city's only German-speaking Orthodox congregation; many of its more economically successful members eventually joined Reform synagogues. Abraham Halpern, the congregation's rabbi from 1917 to 1962, steered it into Conservative Judaism, the middle ground between these two poles. In 1919 B'nai Amoona moved from the second of the former churches it had occupied to a rather unremarkable building at the intersection of Academy and Vernon Avenues in the city's

West End (fig. 27). This was designed by Alfred Meyer and looked so much like a church that it was later easily sold to the Black congregation of the Holy Metropolitan Baptist Church, the second time that B'nai Amoona passed its house of worship on to African Americans. The additional structures that quickly clustered around this building during B'nai Amoona's occupancy of the site included school and office facilities as well as a library. Within a generation, however, most of those who worshipped at B'nai Amoona had moved further west into University City and beyond, trading the increasingly run-down housing, which included small multifamily dwellings as well as row houses—left behind for their African American neighbors—for more spacious, freestanding, single-family homes.

In the wake of World War II, progress on civil rights came more rapidly for Jews than for African Americans. After the Holocaust, Jews in the United States gained a new measure of acceptance from some of their Christian neighbors.² The immediate benefit, for instance, was much greater for them than for African Americans when in 1948 the Supreme Court ruled, in the St. Louis-based case *Shelley v. Kraemer*, that racially restrictive covenants were unenforceable. Even as Jews still had to campaign for access to the housing, universities, jobs, and leisure facilities available to other whites in St. Louis and elsewhere, many demonstrated a confident commitment to modernism as an aesthetic choice rather than as something imposed on them by, for instance, a public housing authority and its architects. At the same time, however, many congregations looked inward in the wake of the recent destruction in the Holocaust of the European communities from which their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents had so recently come. They were also awake to the responsibility that the Shoah placed upon them, as the United States and the fledgling state of Israel replaced Europe and North Africa as the centers of Judaism worldwide.³ Halpern assured the congregation that the second synagogue building whose construction he oversaw would respond to these new realities.

His focus on the needs of his congregants did not mean by any means that Halpern was indifferent to the concerns of his Black neighbors. In the 1950s, as St. Louis struggled to desegregate, he, like many other rabbis across the country, repeatedly spoke out against the Ku Klux Klan and Jim Crow. In a 1958 sermon, delivered in the building Mendelsohn designed, he declared:



27 Alfred Meyer, former B'nai Amoona Synagogue, St. Louis, 1919.

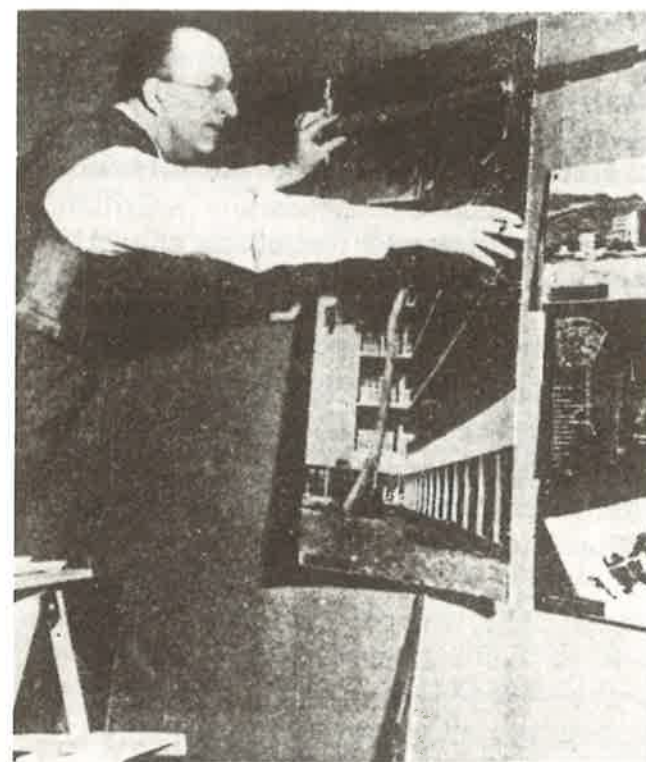
To the prophet all men were equally the children of God and were to be treated with justice, irrespective of race or color or creed.... But the world today refuses to accept this truth and continues to hold to the anti-religious concept of race superiority. This brings into full focus the tragedy of Jim Crowism that is practiced so unjustly even in our own country. To me Jim Crowism is most revolting, and is all the more so when practiced by most churches and institutions of learning. It is a horrid manifestation of a distorted conception of religion. The courageous stand by [Catholic] Archbishop [Joseph] Ritter of our city is an oasis that must be emulated by all religious leaders.⁴

The reference—to Ritter's insistence on integrating the archdiocese's schools—was not a unique example of interfaith solidarity in the city. Not only would B'nai Amoona write a new page in the history of the architecture of synagogues in the United States; its impact on the architecture of Christian churches, many of them Catholic, across the St. Louis metropolitan area was yet another signal of Jewish integration into the white mainstream.

Eric Mendelsohn and St. Louis

Erich Mendelsohn (he and his wife anglicized their names following their departure from Germany in 1933, with her changing from Luise to Louise) was born in 1887 in the then-German city of Allenstein (now Polish Olsztyn). At the age of thirty-four he became famous within Germany following the 1921 publication on the cover of the weekly magazine *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* of what was then the still unfurnished shell of the Einstein Tower, located in Potsdam, just southeast of Berlin.⁵ His design for this solar telescope was the most startling manifestation of the short-lived vogue for Expressionist architecture that swept through avant-garde German architectural culture immediately after the end of the war. Mendelsohn quickly regrouped, however, designing far more pragmatic and yet urbane structures with streamlined curves that captured the new technological spirit of speeding motor cars and safety razors. These had an almost immediate nearly global impact, with apartment blocks, cinemas, office towers, and department stores showing his influence.

In 1933 the architect fled Nazi Germany for London and then Jerusalem before departing in 1941 for the United States, to which he had first traveled in 1924.⁶ Upon his arrival he was quickly granted an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Its impact, however, was muted by the attack on Pearl Harbor. A few years later, in 1944, the show traveled to St. Louis (fig. 28). Mendelsohn's connections there included his former German client Erwin Weichmann (later Winston), for whom he had built a small store in the then-German city of Gleiwitz (now Polish Gliwice). Other allies were the lawyer Victor Packman; Gilbert Harris of the local YMCA; Charles Nagel Jr., the director of the City Art Museum (now the Saint Louis Art Museum), which hosted the exhibition; and Joseph D. Murphy, the future dean of architecture at Washington University, as well as various notables from the city government and the business community. When he visited the city in conjunction with the exhibition, Mendelsohn, who had not yet received any commissions in the United States, aspired to a professorship at Washington University and a role in the city's urban planning efforts, but he had already identified synagogue design as a possible, if less exciting, way to relaunch a career that had hitherto been dominated by secular work.



ERIC MENDELSON. European architect, mounting his own exhibit in building design for display at the City Art Museum.

28 Eric Mendelsohn installing his exhibition, *Architecture by Eric Mendelsohn, 1914-1940*, at the City Art Museum (now the Saint Louis Art Museum), 1944, from an article in the *St. Louis Star-Times*.

From St. Louis he traveled to Davenport, Iowa, to discuss a synagogue project that never materialized. In Davenport he noted "no racial restrictions, antisemitism scarcely present as at St. Louis." From there he went to Omaha, where he was hosted, as in Iowa, by a local rabbi interested in a new building.⁷ Mendelsohn returned briefly to St. Louis in June of 1945. With the war finally over and congregations in a position to make concrete plans, he was back again by the end of October, this time to meet B'nai Amoona's building committee, which had already purchased a site in 1942.⁸ The result would be the architect's first commission since his arrival in the United States four years earlier.

Mendelsohn's first building had been a chapel built in 1913 for the Jewish cemetery in his native Allenstein, and although religious structures comprised a relatively minor part of his subsequent practice, he continued until his departure in 1933 to design synagogues and other buildings for Jewish congregations in Germany, where modern architecture was not an

unusual choice during the 1920s.⁹ Although most of these were destroyed as a result of the Nazi's anti-Jewish pogroms during Kristallnacht in 1938, they established his reputation for Jewish congregations in the United States as the world's most celebrated Jewish architect. For many, it was also an advantage that he was a dedicated Zionist, whose commissions in British Mandate Palestine included a hospital for Hadassah, the American women's organization that was active in many Jewish congregations.¹⁰

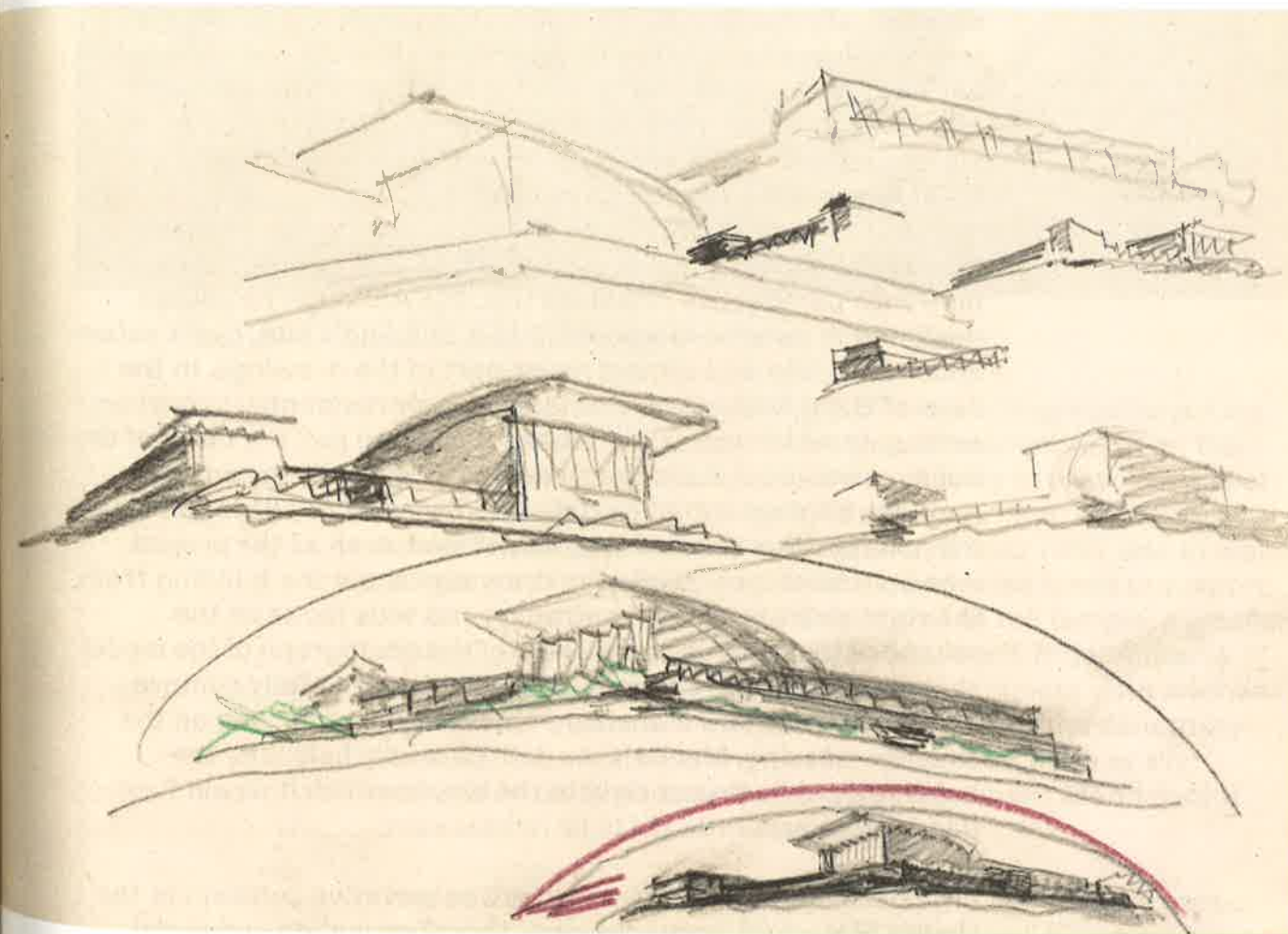
Although Mendelsohn brought significant experience to his work in the US, he in no way repeated his earlier work. He produced an entirely new conception for B'nai Amoona, one that also differed from his later American synagogue schemes, each of which was carefully tailored to the conditions of its own site.¹¹ Although Mendelsohn's major English work, the De la Warr Pavilion in Bexhill-on-Sea of 1935, was much of a piece with his German commercial work, his buildings in Mandatory Palestine erected across the course of the following five years exhibited his willingness to begin again by paying meticulous attention to local conditions. The United States, with the world's most advanced construction industry, which had already inspired him on his first visit to the country, was yet another very different situation that had little in common with the project of establishing a Jewish homeland in relation to Arab building traditions that Mendelsohn very much respected.

Designing B'nai Amoona

The challenges Mendelsohn faced with the B'nai Amoona synagogue were multiple. First, what direction should postwar synagogue design take to address the specific circumstances of the country's increasingly prosperous and assimilated Jewish communities? Second, in what direction would his own architecture evolve in relation to very different conditions from those in which he had already built in Europe and in Palestine? While it is not clear that conditions specific to St. Louis, aside from the details of the site itself, informed these choices, certainly Mendelsohn attempted to integrate into an architectural culture which he saw in terms of Frank Lloyd Wright, Eliel Saarinen, and William Wurster, more than his fellow German émigrés Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.

B'nai Amoona pioneered a new approach to synagogue design, one that he advanced in the plans of his subsequent synagogues for Cleveland Heights, Grand Rapids, and St. Paul, even as he developed entirely new compositions for each. Mendelsohn defined his approach in an article published in 1947:

[Our] temples should reject the anachronistic representation of God as a feudal lord, should apply contemporary building styles and architectural conceptions to make God's house a part of the democratic community in which he dwells. Temples should reject in their interiors the mystifying darkness of an illiterate time and should place their faith in the light of day. The House of God should either be an inspiring place for festive occasions that lift up the heart of man, or an animated gathering place for a fellowship warming man's thoughts and intentions by the fires of the divine word given forth from altar and pulpit right in their midst.¹²

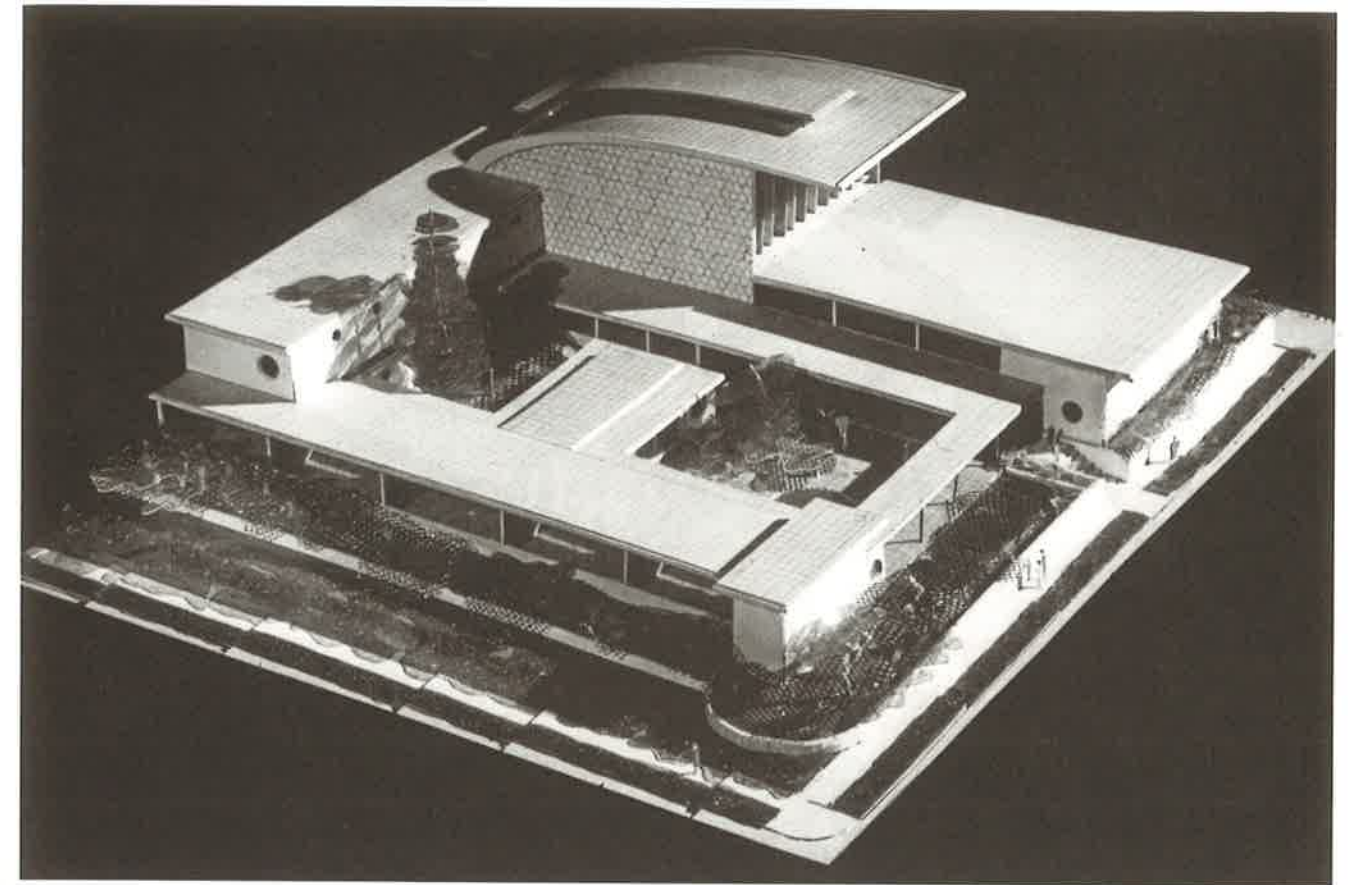


29 Eric Mendelsohn, B'nai Amoona Synagogue and Community Center, 1946-50, University City, Missouri, perspective drawings, second version, seven views, 1946.

Such a synagogue made a dramatic break with the many larger and much more richly decorated neo-Byzantine temples erected across the country in the 1920s by prosperous Reform and Conservative congregations. Mendelsohn's site on the corner of Trinity and Washington Avenues lay just over a mile from one such building, United Hebrew Temple (now the Missouri Historical Society Library and Research Center) prominently located on Skinker Boulevard. Erected in 1924 by Maritz & Young with Gabriel Ferrand, this Reform synagogue—an excellent example of the type—was a point of reference for Mendelsohn only in one later project and then only obliquely, the Park Synagogue in Cleveland Heights, whose domed sanctuary he designed after B'nai Amoona but which was largely completed earlier.¹³ Although B'nai Amoona occupied a less prominent site and was not as imposing as United Hebrew, its emphatically modern appearance, shorn of all historical references, pointed toward the future rather than the past. Moreover, while United Hebrew had faced lawsuits from Christian neighbors seeking to prevent the congregation from building on such a prominent site, in more progressive postwar conditions B'nai Amoona faced no such obstacles.¹⁴

Mendelsohn's design process began, as was characteristic for him, with perspective drawings (fig. 29). Although he always designed in careful relationship to a building's site, overt reference to the site was almost never part of the drawings. In the case of B'nai Amoona he treated a largely residential suburban setting, in which many might have chosen to pull the mass of the building well back from the street, as a relatively urban one. A model, photographed as if an aerial view (fig. 30), made clear the juxtaposition of masses he envisioned, even as the project was built in stages. While the drawings show the building from the right side of the main entrance, and thus focus on the volume of the sanctuary, the angle of the photograph of the model shows the opposite side, allowing the viewer to fully comprehend the layout of the ancillary spaces. While focusing on the exterior massing, Mendelsohn also carefully balanced the building's public presence with the way in which it would function for its users.

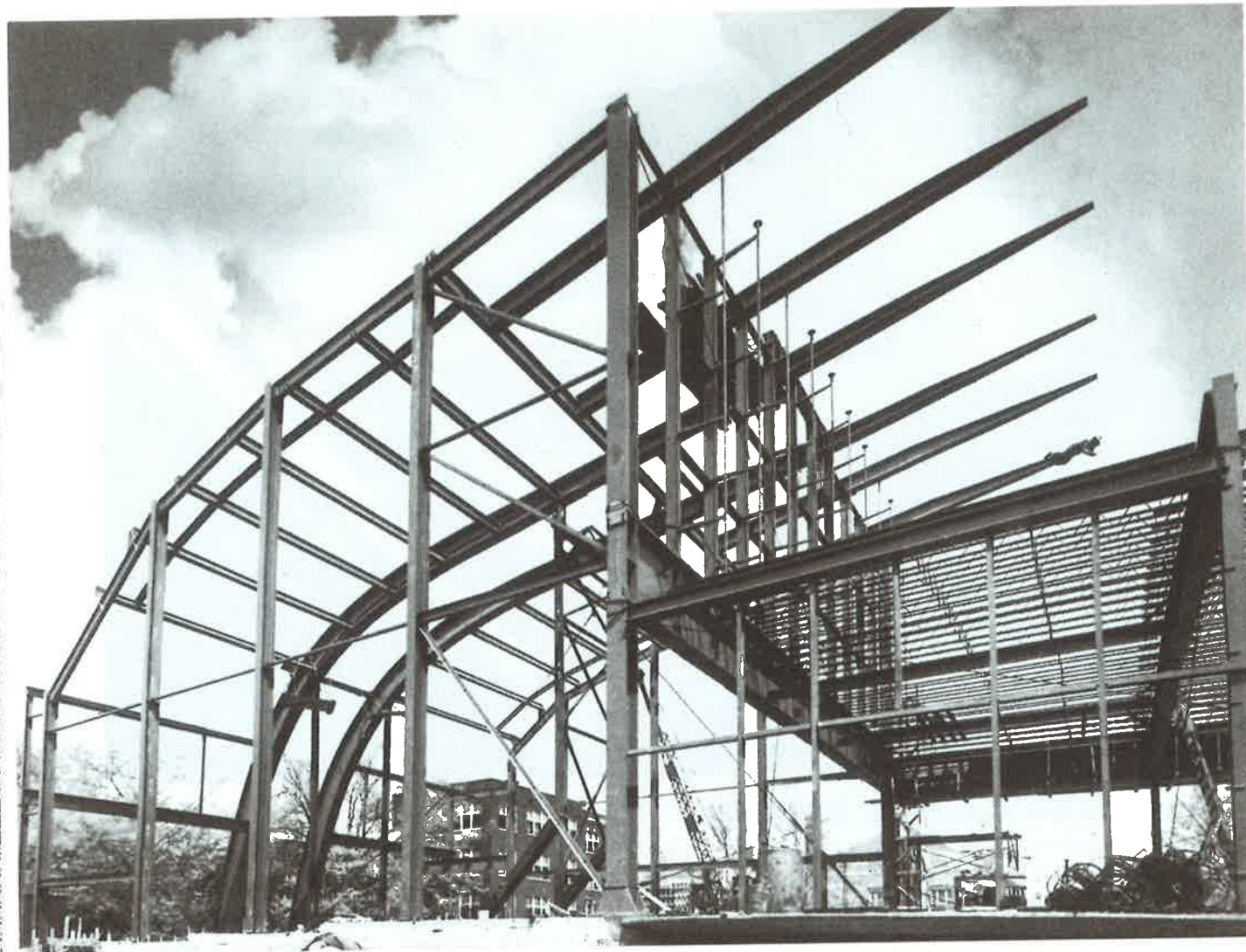
From its beginnings in the 1910s, Conservative Judaism in the United States privileged the provision of education and social facilities that nurtured a sense of community.¹⁵ This would prove key to Mendelsohn's understanding of the synagogue in his new



30 Eric Mendelsohn, B'nai Amoona Synagogue and Community Center, 1946–50, University City, Missouri, model 1947.

homeland, even when building for Reform congregations. One outcome of the Holocaust was a greater commitment on the part of assimilated Jews across the country to establish a sheltered environment in which children could meet each other while learning Hebrew and the tenets of their faith, and in which adults could relax together, network, and raise funds in support of Israel and local charities.¹⁶ In addition to the temple, a smaller chapel, and offices for the rabbi and his staff, B'nai Amoona contained classrooms and a social hall complete with kitchen facilities. The social hall was separated from the sanctuary by a folding wall, allowing the temple space to be easily expanded on High Holy Days, an arrangement Mendelsohn repeated in all of his other synagogues.

Key to the construction of the building (fig. 31) was the participation of the contractor, Isadore E. Millstone.¹⁷ Millstone learned about Mendelsohn while a student at Washington University in the mid-1920s.¹⁸ Although he himself was a member of United



31 Construction of the B'nai Amoona sanctuary, 1946–50, University City, photograph 1949.

Hebrew Congregation, for which his father had worked, he never faltered in his commitment to B'nai Amoona, later helping to fund its conversion into the Center of Creative Arts (COCA), which he also helped oversee. While Mendelsohn had not built in the United States before and did not fully understand local construction practices, Millstone, who had been in business since 1927, was able to guide him. Millstone must also have admired Halpern, whose strong commitment to civil rights he shared. He worked to ensure that Blacks were not shut out of St. Louis construction unions and that they received the training necessary to join them. It also helped that Millstone shared Mendelsohn's Zionism and his commitment to modern

architecture.¹⁹ He accompanied Louis Kahn on a trip to Israel shortly after it achieved independence, where they strategized about how to house its refugee population.

The Place of B'nai Amoona in Postwar Architecture

Mendelsohn's achievement garnered enormous positive attention for B'nai Amoona both locally and nationally.²⁰ The building's bold forms, clad in a warm orange-tan brick, mediated effectively between the radical innovations he had helped pioneer in Germany in the 1920s and midcentury modern architecture in the United States, especially the work of Frank Lloyd Wright and Eliel Saarinen (figs. 32, 33). In the wake of its completion, the modernist synagogue and the community buildings that supported it became showcases of up-to-the-minute architectural thinking across the country, while in the St. Louis metropolitan area B'nai Amoona's presence kicked off a series of innovative church designs, including by Mendelsohn's friend Joseph Murphy and the young Gyo Obata.

In 1945 the Finnish-born Saarinen was still the most prominent European émigré architect practicing in the US. In 1942 Saarinen, to whom Mendelsohn was first introduced in 1924 on the same trip on which he became acquainted with Wright, completed the First Christian Church in Columbus, Indiana (see fig. 12), one of the most modern religious structures erected in the country.²¹ The same year the two architects had dinner together in Detroit.²² Although B'nai Amoona ostensibly resembled First Christian only in its use of brick, the presence in Columbus of a classroom block organized around an interior courtyard established a typological similarity between the two complexes.

B'nai Amoona sparked a golden age in synagogue design in the United States, one which would see high-profile buildings by major architects, including Wright's celebrated Beth Shalom completed outside Philadelphia in 1959 and such other groundbreaking facilities for Jewish communities as Louis Kahn's iconic 1955 bath house at the Trenton Jewish Community Center. A new generation of Jewish-American architects—including Richard Meier, who curated an exhibition on the subject at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1963, and Peter Eisenman, who traveled to St. Louis to see B'nai Amoona shortly after its



32 Eric Mendelsohn, B'nai Amoona Synagogue and Community Center, University City, Missouri, 1946-50.

33 Eric Mendelsohn, B'nai Amoona Synagogue and Community Center, University City, Missouri, 1946-50, sanctuary.



completion—was inspired by Mendelsohn's example, even though synagogue design played little role in their work.²³ Arguably just as important was the more low-key work of Percival Goodman as well as the many local architects whose synagogues were outstanding examples of the modern architecture emerging in suburbs from coast to coast.²⁴

B'nai Amoona also inspired the erection of modernist churches throughout the St. Louis metropolitan area, as white Christians joined Jews in reimagining the appearance of sacred space.²⁵ Murphy, for example, enjoyed the support of Archbishop Ritter in the series of churches he designed in the 1950s that followed Mendelsohn's example and that of pioneering German church designers such as Dominikus Böhm. All of Murphy's designs shared with Böhm's churches and Mendelsohn's synagogues the undivided spaces believed to foster an empathetic sense of community among congregants.²⁶

The most important exponent of modern religious architecture in the St. Louis metropolitan area was Gyo Obata, who designed both synagogues and churches, at least one of which was clearly influenced by Mendelsohn's example. The Abbey Church at Saint Louis Priory School (Priory Chapel) in the Creve Coeur suburb of St. Louis (see figs. 39, 52–54), consecrated in 1962, was developed in part out of Obata's admiration for Mendelsohn's unbuilt design for a Baltimore synagogue.²⁷ Equally important, however, was the degree to which the presence of B'nai Amoona convinced clients from across the region that modern designs could be both practical and prestigious.

This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 101019419). For a fuller explication of Mendelsohn's B'nai Amoona project, see my book *In the Spirit of Our Age: Eric Mendelsohn's B'nai Amoona Synagogue* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society, 2000), from which much of this essay is derived.

- 1 Rachel Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace: Jewish Upward Mobility in Postwar America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 3.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 See Israel Goldstein, "American Jewry Comes of Age," *B'nai Amoona Sixtieth Jubilee* (St. Louis: B'nai Amoona, 1942), unpaginated, for a statement of this position even before the extent of the Holocaust then underway had become clear. See also Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 6.
- 4 Bernard S. Raskas, ed., *A Son of Faith: From the Sermons of Abraham E. Halpern, 1891–1962* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1962), 39. Lila Corwin Berman, in her *Metropolitan Jews: Politics, Race and Religion in Postwar Detroit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), details the engagement of Detroit's Jewish leadership, including its rabbis, in civil rights efforts, as well as the tensions this generated within the Jewish community.
- 5 *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, September 4, 1921, cover.
- 6 For more on Mendelsohn, see Kathleen James, *Erich Mendelsohn and the Architecture of German Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Regina Stephan, ed., *Erich Mendelsohn: Architect, 1887–1953* (New York: Monacelli, 1999); Bruno Zevi, *Erich Mendelsohn: Complete Works* (Basel, Switzerland: Birkhäuser, 1999); and Carsten Krohn and Michele Stavagna, *Erich Mendelsohn: Buildings and Projects* (Basel, Switzerland: Birkhäuser, 2022).
- 7 Eric Mendelsohn, letter to Louise Mendelsohn, March 16, 1944, Erich Mendelsohn Archive, Die Briefwechsel von Erich und Luise Mendelsohn, 1910–1953, Kunstbibliothek, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, accessed July 30, 2022, <http://ema.smb.museum/de/briefe>.
- 8 Mendelsohn's wife, Louise, later remembered that he had made contact with Halpern through the Austrian writer René Fülöp-Miller, who spent part of the war years at the same farm north of New York City. Annotation to Erich Mendelsohn's letter to Louise Mendelsohn, March 6, 1944, Erich Mendelsohn Archive, accessed July 30, 2022, <http://ema.smb.museum/de/briefe>.
- 9 See my essay "Small Buildings for the Jewish Communities in Tilsit, Königsberg and Essen," in Stephan, *Erich Mendelsohn: Architect*, 167–77; and Carol Herselle Krinsky, *Synagogues of Europe: Architecture, History, Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 93–96, 302–9.
- 10 Ita Heinze-Mühlleib, *Erich Mendelsohn: Bauten und Projekte in Palästina (1934–1941)* (Munich: Scaneg, 1986).
- 11 See Walter C. Leedy Jr., *Erich Mendelsohn's Park Synagogue: Architecture and Community*, ed. Sara Jane Pearman (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2012); see also Michael Craig Palmer, *Erich Mendelsohn's Synagogues in America* (London: Lund Humphries, 2019).
- 12 Eric Mendelsohn, "In the Spirit of Our Age," *Commentary* 3 (1947): 541.
- 13 For the history of American synagogue architecture, see Sam Gruber, *American Synagogues: A Century of Architecture and Jewish Community* (New York: Rizzoli, 2003); and Rachel Wischnitzer, *Synagogue Architecture in the United States: History and Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1955).
- 14 "History," United Hebrew Congregation (website), accessed July 14, 2022, <https://www.unitedhebrew.org/about/history/>.
- 15 See David Kaufman, *Shul with a Pool: The "Synagogue Center" in American Jewish History* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 1999).
- 16 See Edward S. Shapiro, *A Time for Healing: American Jewry since World War II* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1992).
- 17 For an overview of Millstone's impact on St. Louis, see Dirk Johnson, "A Suicide at 102 Unites a City in Thanks for a Man's Life," *New York Times*, June 16, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/16/us/16millstone.html>.
- 18 Isadore E. Millstone, interview with the author, June 1998.
- 19 Susan G. Solomon, *Louis I. Kahn's Trenton Jewish Community Center* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000).
- 20 See for example Robert E. Hannon, "Contemporary Synagogue: A Structure by a Famous Architect and for University City Congregation," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, December 24, 1950, Pictures Supplement, 5; and "Synagogue in St. Louis," *Architectural Forum* 98 (April 1953): 109–15.
- 21 Albert Christ-Janer, *Elie Saarinen: Finnish-American Architect and Educator* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 88–92, 97–101.
- 22 Eric Mendelsohn, letter to Louise Mendelsohn, March 19, 1942, Erich Mendelsohn Archive, accessed July 14, 2022, <http://ema.smb.museum/de/briefe/?id=1245>.
- 23 Richard Meier, *Recent American Synagogues* (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1963), which republished Mendelsohn's article for *Commentary*. Steven Skrainka, interview with the author, June 1998, for Peter Eisenman's interest in B'nai Amoona.
- 24 Kimberly J. Elman and Angela Giral, eds., *Percival Goodman: Architect, Planner, Teacher, Painter* (New York: Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, 2001). Later synagogues in the region designed by notable modern architects include Congregation Temple Israel in Creve Coeur (Gyo Obata, 1962); Shaare Zedek in St. Louis (Bernard Bloom, 1950); and United Hebrew in Chesterfield (Pietro Belluschi, 1989).
- 25 See my essay "Moderate Modernism: Sacred Architecture in St. Louis and Its Suburbs," in Eric Mumford, ed., *Modern Architecture in St. Louis: Washington University and Postwar American Architecture, 1948–1973* (St. Louis: Washington University School of Architecture, 2004), 27–40.
- 26 Kathleen James-Chakraborty, *German Architecture for a Mass Audience* (London: Routledge, 2000), 63–69.
- 27 For more on Gyo Obata, see Winifred Elyse Newman's essay "Gyo Obata's 'Other' Modernism" in this volume, 81–101.