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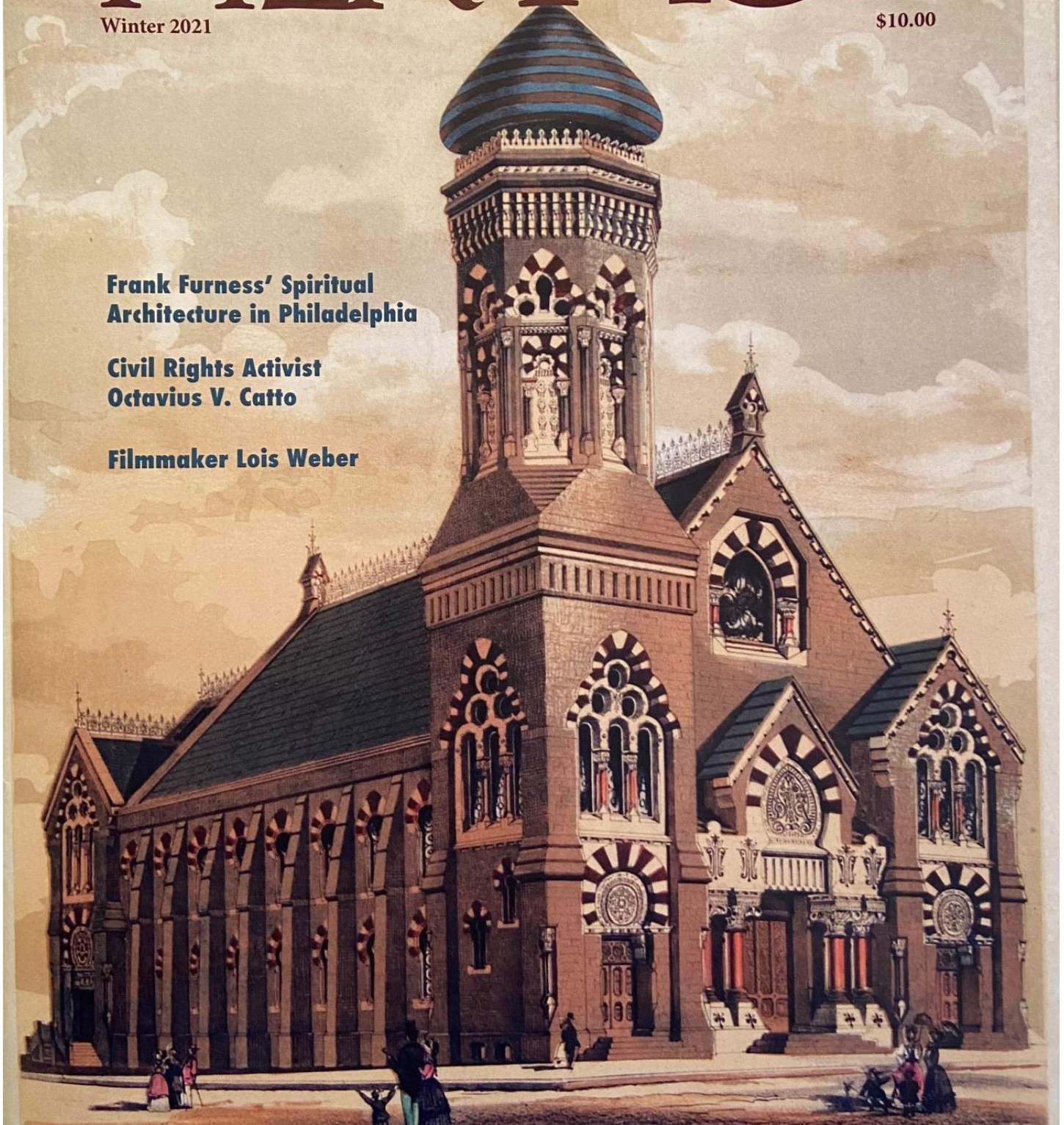
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**Frank Furness' Spiritual  
Architecture in Philadelphia**

**Civil Rights Activist  
Octavius V. Catto**

**Filmmaker Lois Weber**



# P·E·N·N·S·Y·L·V·A·N·I·A HERITAGE®

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# Reforming Faith by Design

Frank Furness' Architecture  
and Spiritual Pluralism Among  
Philadelphia's Jews and Unitarians

Matthew F. Singer

## Philadelphia never saw anything like it.

The strange structure took shape between 1868 and 1871 on the southeast corner of North Broad and Mount Vernon streets, in the middle of a developing residential neighborhood for a newly rising upper middle class. With it came a rather alien addition to the city's skyline: a boldly striped onion dome capping an octagonal Moorish-style minaret that flared outward as it rose skyward.

Moorish horseshoe arches crowned three front entrances. The massive central doorway was topped with a steep gable beneath a Gothic rose window that, in turn, sat within another Moorish horseshoe. Composed of alternating bands of yellow and red sandstone, the arches' halo-like tops appeared to radiate from central disks incised with abstracted floral shapes. Buttresses shored the sides of the building, which stood tall and vertical like a Gothic cathedral.

Carved in Hebrew and English above the two side entrances, a biblical passage proclaimed a universal message from Jewish scripture: "My House Shall Be Called a House of Prayer for All People" (Isaiah 56:7). This new home—and first purpose-built synagogue—of the city's venerable Congregation Rodeph Shalom was the first major commission of young architect Frank Furness (1839–1912).

What an exotic figure this building must have cut in staid Quaker Philadel-



At North Broad and Mount Vernon streets, Rodeph Shalom's first purpose-built temple—designed by Frank Furness—announced the growing presence and aspirations of the newly developed neighborhood's prospering German Jewish community.

HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

phia. In a city of red-brick rowhouses built primarily in neoclassical styles, Rodeph Shalom's new temple mixed Islamic, Byzantine and Gothic elements.

Founded in 1795 as the first Ashkenazi (Central and Eastern European) Jewish congregation in the Western Hemisphere, Rodeph Shalom previously occupied existing buildings, moving from storefronts to former churches. Its new North Broad Street neighborhood was home to a growing community of Jews with origins in Germany and other German-speaking countries in Central Europe. Some of Philadelphia's German Jews had American roots extending back to the 1700s. Most, however, fled the turmoil and hardship that followed Europe's failed democratic revolutions of 1848, which dashed hope for

full Jewish emancipation and equality and sparked new spasms of anti-Semitism.

Pedestrians gazing upon Rodeph Shalom may have wondered whether their wandering minds conjured an apparition from a faraway time and place. In fact, Furness' design was the opposite; it represented the progressive vanguard in its own time and place. The artfully arranged stone, mortar and glass of this dramatic "house of prayer for all people" was a trailblazing manifestation of the era's most advanced ideas regarding architecture—and religion.

## Faith in Form and Fellowship: A Forgotten Philadelphia Story

Rodeph Shalom's new temple gave shape to the visions of two men of widely differ-

ing backgrounds. Its architect, Frank Furness, was the youngest of four children in the family of Massachusetts-born, Harvard-educated Unitarian minister William Henry Furness (1802–1896) and Annis Pulling Jenks. Rodeph Shalom's rabbi, Marcus Jastrow (1829–1903), was a native of Prussian Posen who received his final rabbinic ordination in 1857. Jastrow served a tumultuous tenure as the politically outspoken rabbi of Warsaw's progressive German Jewish synagogue at a time of Polish rebellion against Russian rule.

Jastrow arrived in Philadelphia in 1866 at the invitation of Rodeph Shalom to serve as its first progressive, reform-minded—that is, nonorthodox—rabbi. He was a product of Germany's vaunted university system, having studied at the University of Berlin and the University of Halle-Wittenberg, where he received his doctorate in 1855.

It is likely this education that spurred Jastrow and Rev. William Henry Furness to connect. Many in the West considered German universities the standard-bearers for higher education. American liberal Protestant clergy and those studying for the ministry, including Reverend Furness and his lifelong friend and fellow Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) were fascinated by the German-developed “Higher Criticism,” a method of studying Christian and Jewish scripture as works of human literature rather than Divine Writ.

Jastrow and Reverend Furness went on to spearhead a union of two groups with vastly disparate experiences: recent Jewish immigrants who fled persecution in German-speaking Europe and Unitarians representing the United States' prominent, privileged and powerful British “Old Stock.”

An extended but closely knit group of friends, families and colleagues formed around the Furnesses and Jastrows. Resolved to live together in harmony and on equal footing—and help others do the same—they formed a network that broke longstanding barriers between faiths, created a fresh sense of aesthetics, explored new subjects and methods for education, and worked to achieve their vision of a more just, equal and enlightened society.

This Philadelphia story is not wholly unique in post-Civil War America. The nation's most liberal religious groups—Reform Jews, Unitarians and members of the religious but nontheistic Ethni-

cal Culture movement—formed a late-19th-century vanguard shaped by advances in science, shifts in religious thought, and the growing social ills of the Industrial Era. Reform Jews and Unitarians joined in what historian Benny Kraut termed a “rapprochement,” one focused on forging a “New Civilization” united by a universal “Religion of Humanity.” Reform Jewish rabbis and Unitarian ministers exchanged pulpits and joined in fighting for a politically secular America.

And yet, Philadelphia's story *is*, in key ways, wholly unique. The history of engagement between Unitarians and Jews there began in 1825 with the arrival of Reverend Furness, not in the post-Civil War era. Unlike other rabbis and ministers active in the rapprochement, Furness and Jastrow committed themselves to building a religiously pluralistic society rather than preaching a universal religion.

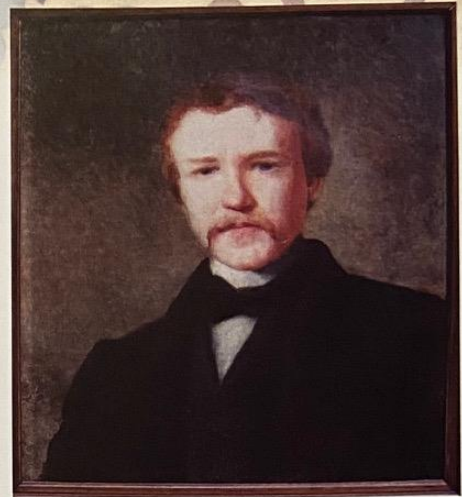
Jastrow and Furness communicated their ideas to the public in sermons delivered from the pulpit and distributed in newspapers, magazines and books. But it was through Frank Furness' talents that his reverend father and their family's rabbi friend found a way to give shape to their ideals.

#### Finding Home, Friends and Grounds for Change in Philadelphia

American Unitarianism—which developed in New England in the 18th century—departed from mainstream Protestantism in three tenets: the belief that man is by nature good rather than “fallen”; faith that God is a source of love and universal salvation; and rejection of the concept of the Trinity. Reverend Furness brought Boston to Philadelphia when he arrived in 1825 to serve as the first formally educated and ordained full-time minister of First Unitarian.

Philadelphia's Jewish community grew from some 300 souls in 1776 to roughly 750 in 1830. During this time, the city became the first in the Western Hemisphere with two Jewish congregations. Predating the founding in 1795 of the Ashkenazi Rodeph Shalom was Mikveh Israel's establishment by Sephardi Jews (those with roots in Spain and Portugal) in 1740.

In the 1830s Philadelphia's Jews “Americanized” their congregations with the introduction of sermons, use of the term “minister” for prayer leaders, and



Young Frank Furness was captured in this portrait by his brother William Henry Furness Jr. around 1861, the year he completed his architectural training and began three years of decorated service in the Union army.

PRIVATE COLLECTION

the establishment of Sunday schools for children.

Rebecca Gratz (1781–1869), described as the “most famous Jewess of the 19th century,” was devoted to her faith and active in Mikveh Israel. The large and prosperous Gratz family were stalwart members of the synagogue. Equally active in secular spheres, they founded and contributed to cultural and educational institutions such as the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA).

Gratz's adulthood was filled with good works. She established, supported and worked with Jewish and nonsectarian “benevolent” organizations serving the poor. Not only a leader within the Jewish community, she became a celebrated figure in broader Philadelphia society.

In 1838 Gratz established the coeducational Hebrew Sunday School Society, the first of its kind in America. In running the school and numerous other matters, Gratz worked closely with Mikveh Israel's innovative minister, Isaac Leeser; however, it was Reverend Furness whom Gratz described as “our favorite orator.” Her correspondence mentions regular visits and conversations with the reverend and his wife. She and other members of Philadelphia's Jewish community regularly enjoyed Furness' oratory by attending services at First Unitarian.

In 1831 Thomas Sully—considered the preeminent American portraitist of his day—painted three portraits of Gratz. The



In 1831 Thomas Sully painted this portrait of Rebecca Gratz, still youthful at age 50 with flashing eyes showing intelligence and determination. She was generous in advancing charitable and educational causes.  
THE ROSENBACH, PHILADELPHIA, 1954.1936

year before, Sully, a leading member of First Unitarian, painted a portrait of Reverend Furness. William Strickland (1788–1854), a prominent architect, gained the patronage of Philadelphia’s Jews and Unitarians, designing a Greek Revival temple for First Unitarian in 1828 and an Egyptian Revival synagogue for Mikveh Israel in 1829.

As early as the late 1820s, Gratz and Reverend Furness set the stage for a rapprochement that took shape between Philadelphia’s Americanizing Jews and liberal Christians starting in the late 1860s, one *given* shape in forward-looking art and architecture.

#### A Man of God and Abolitionism

Reverend Furness’ role as through line in this century-spanning story testifies to his long, full life and ministry at First Unitarian from 1825 until his death in 1896. With Furness in its pulpit, the church grew prominent. Emerson and other eminent New England-based Unitarian ministers—along with the Transcendentalists of Concord—traveled to the city to preach there and spend time with Furness’ growing family.

Emerson’s Transcendentalism rejected creed, dogma, canon and a hierarchical, centralized church. That is, it rejected organized religion. Instead, it emphasized individual intuition, emotion, experience and direct mystical communion. Reverend Furness, in contrast, was committed to scripture, Unitarian Christianity as theol-

ogy and denomination, and public gathering in church for prayer. Nonetheless, in testimony to his high regard for Emerson as a friend and guide, Furness was a founding member of the Transcendentalist group and identified with the philosophy throughout his life.

Furness’ tolerance, intellectual curiosity and goodwill extended beyond Unitarianism and even outside of Christianity. He respected Jews as the people of scripture and as contemporary individuals with whom he socialized and shared intellectual and civic pursuits. His 1830 sermon “An Apology for the Jews,” published in the journal *The Liberal Preacher* in 1831, emphasized Christianity’s Jewish roots and lauded the Jewish people for maintaining their faith in the face of unrelenting and often violent persecution. Furness urged his listeners and readers to “cherish toward the Jews.” As a condemnation of Christian prejudice against Jews delivered by a Christian minister, Furness’ “Apology” is a sermon without precedent in American history.

If Furness’ first concern was with the Man of Nazareth, his second preoccupation was with the suffering of Africans enslaved in the United States. In the 1820s and 1830s Philadelphia experienced a series of nativist and racist riots. The violence reached its apex in May 1838 with the torching of recently completed Pennsylvania Hall, built as a meeting place for abolitionist groups.

Appalled by this destruction, Furness became a tireless, high-profile advocate of abolitionism in a city with many Southern sympathizers. This placed him in a constant state of mortal threat. First Unitarian congregants guarded him during his many public appearances. Furness delivered the closing address at the fourth annual convention of the American Institute of Architects in 1870. In it, he declared the vocation of architecture as something akin to his own calling: “You are, by the ordination of Heaven, street preachers, and whether you hold forth sound doctrine or false, we must listen to you.” Furness spoke as a prophet of what was to come in Philadelphia: a cityscape imbued with liberal religious ideals.

#### An Advocate for Jewish Equality and a Plural Society

In 1858 Marcus Mordecai Jastrow assumed the pulpit of a progressive Jewish congregation in Warsaw with a predominantly German Jewish membership. There, he

protested Russian oppression of Poland and its people.

The Russian government responded by jailing Jastrow for three months in 1862 and then deporting him to Germany. Jastrow became a cause célèbre in the Jewish communities of Europe and the United States.

Rodeph Shalom’s congregants persuaded the acclaimed yet beleaguered Jastrow to leave his native Germany. He arrived in Philadelphia and Rodeph Shalom’s pulpit in 1866. In 1868 work began on his new congregation’s first purpose-built temple. During that two-year window, he was befriended by William Henry Furness, came to know the reverend’s family, and—as indicated by the architectural commission—grew so impressed with the young and little tested Frank Furness that he hired him to build a grand temple for Rodeph Shalom.

In his 1860 sermon “Israel’s Election,” Jastrow argued for the integration of Diaspora Jews into their “host” societies and extended that imperative to include the emancipation of all peoples, including enslaved Africans in the Americas.

Among the earliest addresses by Jastrow to be published in the United States was *Sermon Delivered in the Synagogue Rodeph Shalom on Thanksgiving Day*, delivered in



William Henry Furness was photographed by Frederick Gutekunst, circa 1875, half a century after his arrival in Philadelphia to assume spiritual leadership of the city’s First Unitarian Church.  
NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

1868 in response to Pennsylvania governor John W. Geary declaring Thanksgiving a Christian holiday, specifically, Jastrow implored his fellow Americans to remember that “it was the banner of freedom and equality to all under which God gave thee victory and success! Be cautious and never change this universal banner into an exclusive one!” For Jastrow, achieving equality for non-Christian faiths was a national imperative rather than a concern limited to Jews.

In *Frank Furness: Architecture and the Violent Mind*, art historian Michael J. Lewis noted that Jastrow and Reverend Furness responded in a groundbreaking way: They brought their congregations together to give thanks. The Union Thanksgiving Service launched by Jastrow and Furness in the 1870s continued to be celebrated through 1910.

Jastrow and Reverend Furness were preachers, pastors, scholars, authors, social activists, community leaders and public figures of international reputations. Although fully committed to their respective faiths, they championed ideals of religious and cultural pluralism.

### Learn from Emerson and Ruskin, Listen to One's Self

Today, the only thing that distinguishes the childhood home of Frank Heyling Furness from its equally plain, red-brick neighbors is a blue Pennsylvania State Historical Marker that stands in front of the rowhouse.

While occupied by the Furnesses, however, this nondescript dwelling was a place of extraordinary activity. In addition to Emerson, the family welcomed to their home the educator, writer, reformer and Transcendentalist philosopher Amos Bronson Alcott who, though most associated with New England, led schools in Philadelphia and neighboring Germantown from 1830 to 1834. Among the Furness family's locally based visitors was Lucretia Mott, a Quaker preacher, abolitionist and advocate for women's rights. Walt Whitman, who lived in Camden from 1872 until his death in 1892, was well-acquainted with the Furnesses and a likely guest in their home. The Furness abode was a lively hub for the city's leading artists. Among the reverend's congregants and friends were printmaker John Sartain and painters Rembrandt Peale and Hugh Bridport.



Marcus Jastrow, here in about 1861, was named rabbi of Warsaw's progressive synagogue in 1858. After his imprisonment for supporting Polish independence from Russia, he immigrated to Philadelphia to serve as rabbi of Rodeph Shalom in 1866.  
MUSEUM OF WARSAW

It was, as well, the breeding ground for accomplished children. Frank is the best known today, but his siblings were acclaimed in their day, perhaps more so. William Henry Furness Jr. was a painter, primarily of portraits. Annis Lee Furness Wister was a translator of German literature. Horace Howard Furness became the leading Shakespearian scholar of the 19th century.

While studying painting, William Jr. befriended the acclaimed Beaux-Arts trained architect Richard Morris Hunt (1827–1895). Frank Furness wrote that an 1855 visit by Hunt to the Furness home inspired “a fascinated admiration, which is destined to end only with my life.” Furness apprenticed with Philadelphia architect John Fraser (1825–1906) and continued his training and began his work in Hunt's New York studio.

Furness served with noted bravery in the Union Army during the American Civil War. Soon after war's end, he returned to Philadelphia and married Fannie Fassitt. He also joined in partnership with George Hewitt and together they introduced to Philadelphia a new architectural approach—the Modern Gothic—as the city boomed into a major industrial center.

In “Hints to Designers,” Furness recommended the use of natural motifs in design: “Take as a model some simple leaf or flower—plant-form is the clearest of all the numerous volumes that kind Nature offers to the student of ornamentation.” Furness' emphasis on nature was Emersonian. In “Nature” (1836), Emerson wrote, “Nature is loved by what is best in us. It is loved as the city of God.”

Joining Emerson's outsize imprint on Furness was John Ruskin (1819–1900). William Henry Furness Jr. purchased a copy of Ruskin's *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* for the Furness home upon the book's publication in 1849, when Frank was 10 years old.

Ruskin was a passionate proponent of the Gothic, which he praised as a historic form uniquely appropriate for the design of contemporary structures of all types: “Gothic is not only the best, but the *only rational* architecture, as being that which can fit itself most easily to all services, vulgar or noble.” In championing the Gothic, Ruskin forged an unlikely paradox; a long-discarded medieval building style became the go-to mode for modern 19th-century architecture.

Rather than the soaring “pure” and “high” Gothic of German and French cathedrals, Ruskin praised the hybrid style of St. Mark's Basilica in Venice. European, North African and Middle Eastern forms mixed in St. Mark's, creating a distinctive style that was—compared to Gothic architecture elsewhere in Europe—low-slung, irregular, sprawling, and rich with ornament, pattern and color.

Emerson spoke to rebirth of each *individual's* vibrant moral soul through spiritual searching, intellectual rigor and creative expression. Ruskin urged for reviving the individual soul *and society* by looking to the past with an eye to the present and future.

Frank Furness was shaped by Emerson's Transcendentalism and Ruskin's Gothicism, but his vision was his own. He was what his father called a “street preacher.” The temple he designed for Rodeph Shalom was his first sermon.

### A Moorish-Gothic-Transcendentalist Synagogue

Frank Furness' remarkably prolific career—he completed more than 600 projects—began in earnest with the synagogue for the congregation of his new family friend,

Rabbi Marcus Jastrow. His previous, more modest projects included, fittingly, a church for the Unitarian Society of Germantown in 1866–67.

Rodeph Shalom presented an opportunity that any architect at any stage in their career would value, let alone one as young as Furness. He was invited to design Rodeph Shalom in its entirety, outside and in, including furniture, finishes and fittings.

Furness' Rodeph Shalom is best understood in the context of Reform Judaism's development in the 19th century. It began in Germany as an effort to bring Jewish theology, ritual and worship into alignment—in style, not substance—with contemporary German Protestantism. Not simple mimicry, this spoke to German Jewry's long battle for emancipation and equality, its embrace of Enlightenment ideals, and its high regard for German culture. Thanks to American separation of church and state and the resulting freedom of congregations and denominations to make changes in their practices at will, Reform Judaism grew and evolved quickly in America in the 1800s, when the overwhelming majority of the country's Jews were of German descent.

Furness' temple was akin to a Gothic cathedral, which became a preferred form for large Protestant churches in 19th-century America. Large "cathedral" synagogues signaled Jewish acculturation with the Protestant mainstream—and the emergence of a Jewish "elite" existing parallel to its Protestant counterpart.

The temple's abstracted floral decoration evoked Gothic and Moorish precedents while embodying Transcendentalism's emphasis on nature. It included no Jewish symbols or signifiers other than a scriptural passage—"This House Shall Be Called a House of Prayer for All Peoples"—incised in Hebrew and English above the temple's side entrances and two Stars of David on a relatively modest reader's desk.

Seating 1,600, Rodeph Shalom's sanctuary reflected the congregation's growth, increasing prosperity, and reform orientation. In traditional synagogues the Holy Ark that holds the Torah is placed at the sanctuary's eastern end with a *bimah*, or reading platform, in the middle. Furness placed the Holy Ark and the *bimah* together on a massive chancel at the sanctuary's east end, focusing the congregants' attention on a single stage in the manner of a Protestant church.

In traditional synagogues, women sat in balconies or behind screens. Rodeph Shalom's new temple included a large balcony but men, women and children sat together. The largest freestanding element on the chancel is an enormous

pulpit. Sermons delivered in German—later, English—rather than Hebrew were central to the changes desired by Reform Jews.

Oversized organ pipes crowned the chancel's dome-topped canopy. More than anything else, the inclusion of an organ distinguished reform from traditional synagogues. Organs heightened aesthetics and fostered a new sense of decorum. In traditional Jewish services, congregants proceeded through liturgy largely at their own rate. The organ, along with a rabbi, cantor and choir, ensured worship in unison.

Sadly, Furness' temple was razed in the mid-1920s to make way for a larger, multi-functional, and more fashionable (in the Roaring '20s) synagogue designed by the Philadelphia architects Simon & Simon in 1927–28.

Today, what remains of Furness' temple is a suite of furniture he designed for the sanctuary's *bimah*. Its brass-plated *ner tamid* (Eternal Light), two throne-like high-back chairs, and the reader's desk bearing Stars of David now have pride of place in the current building's chapel. The massive, architectonic pulpit is showcased in a spacious entry lobby and museum space built during an expansion and renovation by the Philadelphia-based firm Kieran Timberlake in 2015.

The pulpit flares dramatically, exaggerating the angle of the temple's minaretlike tower. Like the architecture, it features scalloped arches and incised, or low-relief, floral decoration, including abstracted rosettes that recall the temple's rose window. Across

the pulpit's front, three stout columns echo with similar columns flanking the synagogue's entrance and supporting the chancel's canopy.

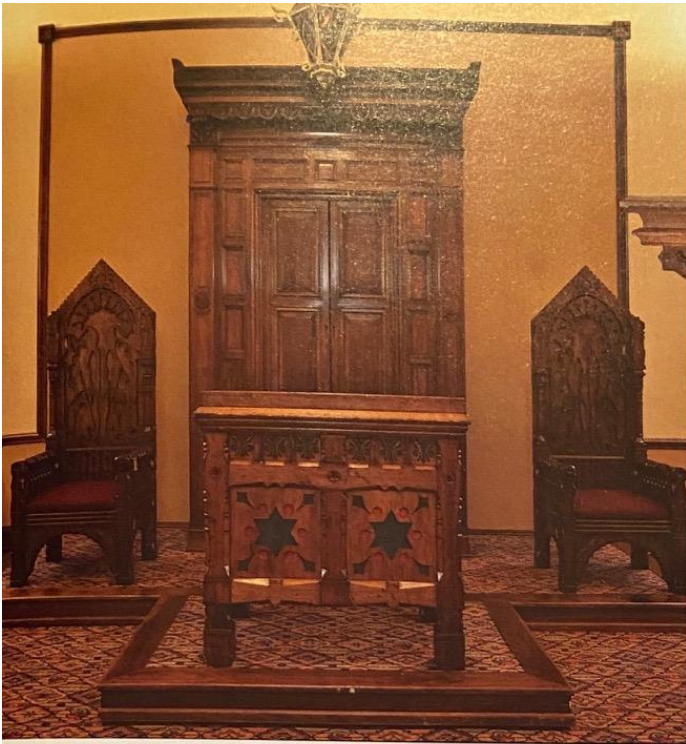
To a degree not seen in the United States until Frank Lloyd Wright arrived at his Prairie style in the early 20th century, the temple and furnishings designed by Furness for Rodeph Shalom were seamlessly of a piece. They were elements of a *gesamtkunstwerk*, a total work of art. Furness applied this all-encompassing vision to a string of commissions for Philadelphia's broader Jewish community, including a rather homey chapel for Mount Sinai Cemetery



The dramatic, stagelike *bimah* of Rodeph Shalom with its suite of Furness-designed furniture echoed the temple's architecture. Oversized, ornamental organ pipes trumpeted the congregation's tradition-breaking reformist use of instrumental music.  
CONGREGATION RODEPH SHALOM, PHILADELPHIA



The Rodeph Shalom congregation presented Frank Furness with his first major commission and a rare opportunity: creating a "total work of art" with unified exterior, interior and furnishings. This is the 1,600-seat sanctuary.  
CONGREGATION RODEPH SHALOM, PHILADELPHIA



Most of the sanctuary's Furness-designed furniture—including a brass-plated *ner tamid* (Eternal Light), high-back chairs, and reader's desk—grace the chapel of the larger synagogue built by Rodeph Shalom in 1927–28.  
FURNITURE, CONGREGATION RODEPH SHALOM, PHILADELPHIA / PHOTO, PHMC



Rodeph Shalom's monumental Furness-designed pulpit nearly replicates the building's architecture—with carved details reminiscent of the rose windows and the squat columns—while underscoring American Jewish reformers' introduction of English-language sermons.  
PULPIT, CONGREGATION RODEPH SHALOM, PHILADELPHIA / PHOTO, PHMC

(1891–1892) that could be described as a “Moorish bungalow.”

**A “Temple of the Fine Arts” as “Ideal Church”**

The great public art museums established in the United States and Europe in the 19th century were conceived in spiritual terms as places of gathering where examples of great art were presented in awe-inspiring buildings, providing uplift and imparting—in beauty of style and content—ethics and morality.

In 1880 John Ruskin wrote of the “social improvement” presented by museums as a top-down dynamic: “The first function of a museum . . . is to give example of perfect order and perfect elegance . . . to the disorderly and rude populace.” As discussed by Mark Orłowski, Ruskin propounded the mutually supporting relationships among art, nature, religion, individual betterment and social reform. His views encouraged thinking of museums as secular churches.

Art scholar Charles Eliot Norton called for building museums as “Ideal Churches.” Furness answered this call in 1871 when designing a new home for the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, following the completion of Rodeph Shalom. In remarks

given during the museum's opening, Reverend Furness invoked the spiritual by dedicating “this Temple of the Fine Arts . . . with fervent prayers and good wishes.”

PABA is the oldest continuously operating museum and school of art in the United States, founded in 1805. Its first home was a neo-classical building at Tenth and Chestnut streets. Needing additional space and with the possibilities promised by Philadelphia's

coming Centennial Exhibition of 1876—the first world's fair held in the United States—PABA planned a new building.

Above the entrance of Furness' PABA, a massive pointed arch contains an elaborate rose window. Furness' design for Rodeph Shalom featured rose windows, as did most of Furness' ecclesiastical commissions. Among his secular projects, however, only two have rose windows: PABA and the University of Pennsylvania Library. These



Frank Furness' 1871–76 design for the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts features—like Rodeph Shalom, completed in 1871—a Gothic rose window and Moorish arches, along with the eclectic addition of a French mansard roof.  
COURTESY OF THE PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY OF THE FINE ARTS, PHILADELPHIA





PAFA is a school and museum. Furness designed it with classrooms on the first floor. A grand stairway—its ceiling painted celestial blue with gold-leaf stars—imparted a sense of spiritual ascent.

COURTESY OF THE PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY OF THE FINE ARTS, PHILADELPHIA

two buildings, which stand to this day as the most prominent of Furness' masterworks, were conceived as secular cathedrals: PAFA, a cathedral of art; the library, a cathedral of knowledge.

With PAFA's school occupying most of the building's first floor, visitors to the museum galleries had to walk to the second story. Making the most of this logistical requirement, Furness created a majestic stairway that turned walking upstairs into a ceremony of spiritual ascent. The massive dome above the stairs is painted a deep, heavenly blue with gilded stars. Visitors to PAFA arise from the workaday streets of Philadelphia through the sublime promise of the celestial to a paradise of art.

#### A Pre-Raphaelite Meeting House in Stone and Glass

In 1882 Frank Furness received the commission for what remains First Unitarian's bustling center for worship and good work. For Furness, this was an opportunity to create a lasting new home for his "home" congregation, one that thrived during his father's 50-year ministry and represented the denomination that shaped the architect's values. The church Furness created for First Unitarian was highly individualistic—even eccentric—on the outside, but invoked modesty, humanism and egalitarianism within.

The exterior of First Unitarian was like a spray of building blocks: bold shapes assembled seemingly at random. Its most

distinctive element—a monumental tower with an exceedingly tall and steep roof—was barely attached to the rest of the structure. Later church leadership removed it in 1921.

This unusual exterior belied the serenity of the sanctuary inside. Just four steps above the floor, its chancel contradicts expectations for churchly grandeur and minimizes the distance and distinction between congregant and clergy. Rather than load-bearing columns, broad arched trusses

hold the weight of the ceiling and roof, allowing for unobstructed sightlines.

Other than a starburst cross on the pulpit and subtly cross-shaped ends on the trusses' masonry supports, Furness' First Unitarian lacks Christian iconography, just as Jewish symbols were all but absent from Rodeph Shalom. In keeping with Transcendentalism and Ruskin, the church's decoration celebrates nature. Its spire holds aloft a flower rather than a cross.

First Unitarian's sanctuary glows with sunlight filtering through stained-glass windows by Tiffany Glass Co., John La Farge, and other masters.

Furness' preferred stained-glass maker, Henry Holiday (1839–1927), was associated with the Pre-Raphaelite movement. Six of First Unitarian's 16 stained-glass windows are Holiday's work. *Charity* (1887) was commissioned by Frank Furness and donated by friends of the church as a memorial to the architect's mother. She is shown distributing food and clothes to the needy. Tragedies in the family of Horace Howard Furness are memorialized in *Woman Enthroned* (1906) and *Woman Enthroned, with Lilies* (1910).



Furness's 1882 design for the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia was Gothic in the modest manner of an English country church rather than a soaring cathedral. Its distinctive high-peaked, semidetached tower was removed in 1921.

PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION



First Unitarian's arched trusses echo those of Rodeph Shalom and allow unobstructed sightlines in the broad sanctuary, as seen in this view from the front entry, across pews, and toward the chancel.  
PHOTO, PHMC

Horace Howard commissioned *Woman Enthroned* in memory of his wife, Helen Kate Rogers Furness, his partner in Shakespeare scholarship. The window quotes *King Lear*: "Thoult come again never never never never never." *Woman Enthroned, with Lilies* was dedicated to the memory of his only daughter, Caroline Augusta Furness Jayne. The thrones in both windows recall the high-backed chairs designed by Frank Furness for Rodeph Shalom. Neither window has any obvious religious content.

The rose window on First Unitarian's front façade is the work of John La Farge. Installed in 1891 its subject is the Hebrew prophet Isaiah as depicted by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel. The prophet holds a book—most likely the Bible, given the context—while a cherub gestures to light.

In an 1860 sermon, Reverend Furness recounted a story in the book of Isaiah in which "the prophet assures his countrymen, if they will loose the bands of wickedness and undo the heavy burdens, and let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke, that then their light shall break forth as the morning."

A decade earlier, Isaiah's words were used to announce the universalist mission of the temple designed by Frank Furness for

Rodeph Shalom: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people." The revolutionary humanism of Isaiah's prophetic voice expressed the ecumenicalism of a united group of reform-minded Unitarians and Jews in late-19th-century Philadelphia.

#### A Circle of Sociable Progressives

Morris Jastrow (1861–1921) was raised and educated to succeed his father in Rodeph Shalom's pulpit. After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania, he pursued advanced secular education at the University of Berlin, earned his doctorate at the University of Leipzig, and was ordained at the Jewish Seminary of Breslau. He resigned from the rabbinate, however, after just one year's service at Rodeph Shalom and went on to become the first Jewish faculty member at the University of Pennsylvania. He cut a wide swath at Penn as a professor of Semitics and rabbinic literature central to establishing comparative religion as an academic discipline. In addition,

Henry Holiday, Frank Furness' preferred stained-glass artist, was associated with the Pre-Raphaelite movement. Horace Howard Furness commissioned Holiday to design *Woman Enthroned, with Lilies* in 1910 in memory of his daughter, Caroline Augusta Furness Jayne.

PHOTO, PHMC



he began work there as a librarian in 1888 and served as curator of Middle Eastern antiquities in the collections that became the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

Morris and his wife, Helen Bachman, were close friends of Horace Howard and Helen Kate Rogers Furness and, with them, were members of the “Furness-Mitchell Coterie.” About 20 individuals—nearly split between women and men—formed this elite group of accomplished leaders in literature, medicine, education and anthropology. Historian Christine Moon Van Ness notes that by the turn of the 20th century, the nationally recognized Coterie dominated the city’s cultural and intellectual life.

In addition to his work at Penn, Morris lectured frequently at Philadelphia’s religious-but-nontheistic Ethical Society and was an educator in the broader Ethical Culture Movement. He was a founding member and longtime president of the Contemporary Club, a fully secular offshoot of the Ethical Society devoted to progressive arts, letters and social reform.

At the time of Morris’ studies in Germany, the literary approach to biblical study known as “Higher Criticism,” so influential for Rabbi Jastrow and Reverend Furness, evolved into the “scientific” or “historical method” of scriptural study. To identify the who, when and where of their development, Jewish and Christian scriptures were studied in the context of other texts of their eras.

In applying the scientific method to the Torah, Morris saw striking parallels between many of its narratives and Babylonian mythology. Did this shake his faith? Did he lose belief in Judaism as a singular revolutionary spiritual development? His copious writing does not state that, but his resignation from the rabbinate and subsequent involvement with Ethical Culture suggest the possibility.

Felix Ader (1851–1933), the son of Rabbi Samuel Adler of New York City’s Temple Emanu-El, was, like Morris Jastrow, the

heir apparent to his father’s pulpit. His European study caused him to break in a manner even more dramatic than Jastrow, but one that resonated with the Philadelphian. Adler established something of a new religion. His Ethical Culture Society was founded in New York in 1876. Without creed, Ethical Culture held the perfectibility of human behavior as its highest ideal.

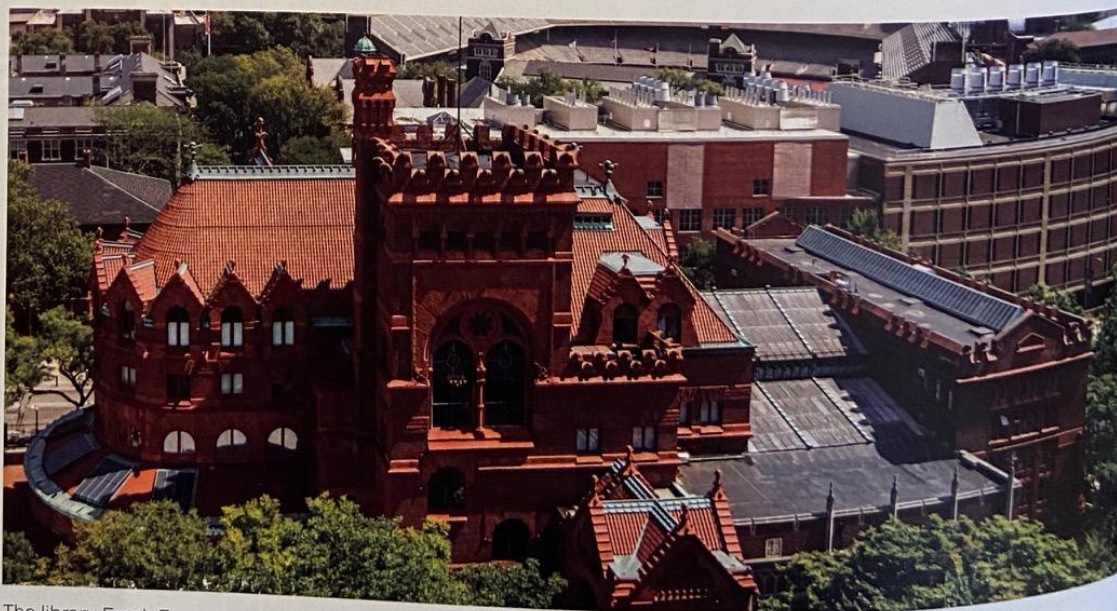
In 1885 Philadelphia became the third city with an Ethical Culture society. Of 42 individuals who joined the society in its first year, as many as 18 were Jewish (nearly 43 percent). Horace Traubel, Walt Whitman’s acolyte and biographer, and the founding editor and primary writer of *The Conservator*—which functioned as Ethical Culture’s unofficial organ—described himself as a “half-breed” of “Jewish stock.”

*The Conservator* was a forum of goodwill between different—albeit consistently liberal—faiths. In an 1890 cover story, Reverend Furness discussed, again, the positive qualities of Jews and Judaism. That same year, Rabbi Jastrow wrote approvingly in *The Conservator* of Joseph Krauskopf, the rabbi of Keneseth Israel—a congregation of more “radical” reform orientation than Rodeph Shalom. In presenting their thoughts in *The Conservator*, the clergymen acknowledged—and implicitly endorsed by association—Ethical Culture. This was most unusual. Established by disaffected, radical Unitarians and Reform Jews, Ethical Culture was seen as competition for the hearts and minds of liberal, assimilated Jews, and—in its nontheism—as heretical.

In October 1886 Horace Traubel and Ethical Society “leader” (the society’s equivalent to “minister”) S. Burns Weston met to discuss the formation of a social and literary club in Philadelphia. This club was to be egalitarian, open to women and men of any profession. The Contemporary Club held its first meeting at the Philadelphia Ethical Society on November 3, 1886.

Nearly every member of the Furness-Mitchell Coterie joined the Contemporary Club in its first year. Among the members was Walt Whitman, whom the club upheld as its guiding light. Programs presented by the Contemporary Club in 1890 included a poetry reading by Whitman; Morris Jastrow on a panel discussing “Books Which Have Helped Me”; and Joseph Jastrow—Morris’ brother, a psychologist—addressing “Recent Phases of Psychophysics.” In the 1892–93 season, Whitman and Reverend Furness spoke in memory of Abraham Lincoln, and Morris Jastrow joined two Protestant ministers in pondering “The Next Step in Christianity.”

The period from 1895 to 1897 at the Contemporary Club is especially noteworthy in Philadelphia and American Jewish history. Among newly listed members are Mayer Sulzberger and Solomon Solis-Cohen who, with Cyrus Adler, formed the core of the “Philadelphia Group” of nationally prominent Jewish intellectual and communal leaders. Their contributions to American Jewish life included the Young Men’s Hebrew Association, American Jewish Historical Society, Jewish Theo-



The library Frank Furness designed for the University of Pennsylvania in 1888 was a secular building with a church-like appearance (note the rose window)—“a collision between a cathedral and a railroad station.”



Like a Gothic cathedral, Furness' design for Penn's Anne and Jerome Fisher Fine Arts Library includes a half-round apse. This soaring, circular shape gives the library's reading room the appearance of a sanctuary.  
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA / PHOTO, SCOTT SPITZER

logical Seminary, Philadelphia's Gratz and Dropsie colleges, and the Philadelphia-based Jewish Publication Society.

It was at the Contemporary Club that the process begun by William Henry Furness and Marcus Jastrow—and earlier by Furness and Rebecca Gratz—came to fullest fruition. Jews and Christians, free-thinkers, and sympathetic others came together on a common ground of social equality to share forward-looking thoughts on art, learning and life.

#### **A Cathedral or Train Station of Knowledge?**

In 1888 Frank Furness was commissioned to design and build a state-of-the-art library for the University of Pennsylvania. His brother Horace Howard was chairman of Penn's Library Committee and his brother-in-law and fellow Unitarian, Fairman Rogers, chaired the university's Building Committee. The library (now the Anne and Jerome Fisher Fine Arts Library) was the

first home of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, where Penn librarian Morris Jastrow was a curator. Rabbi Jastrow spoke at the opening of its installation of religious ceremonial objects.

Furness' library was his last major secular building designed with a churchlike appearance. It was, and remains, a cathedral of knowledge.

As shared by Furness scholar Michael J. Lewis, the late John McCoubrey, longtime professor of art history at Penn, described Furness' library as "a collision between a cathedral and a railroad station." Like Rodeph Shalom, First Unitarian and PAFA, its front façade features an imposing tower and is crowned by a rose window.

The library's most visually distinctive component is a rectangular block that, like the apse of a church, ends in a half-circle. Within is the library's sanctuary-like reading room.

In its architecture and holdings—and the many familial and collegial relationships it represents—the library designed by Frank Furness is material testament to a Philadelphia story that began in 1825 with the arrival of Rev. William Henry Furness and continued into the 20th century. It stands, to this day, atop the arc of the Jastrow and Furness families' intertwined evolutions and contributions to their era's social, spiritual and aesthetic ideals and accomplishments—most prominently, the "landscape of reform" Frank Furness built in Philadelphia.

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#### **Further Reading**

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