FAITH IN BEAUTY AND PROGRESS

TEMPLE BETH EL

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ABSTRACT: In the 1920s Harrisburg's acculturated Reform and Conservative Jews found in City Beautiful aesthetics and ideals the architecture and ideology appropriate for expressing publicly their cultural identity as thoroughly modern Americans *and* Jews. Temple Beth El and Temple Ohev Sholom, both built on Front Street in uptown Harrisburg, stand as the ultimate material outcome and testimony to the synergistic interweaving of early twentieth century American and Jewish progressivism. A book commemorating Temple Beth El's 1928 dedication, produced by J. Horace McFarland's Mount Pleasant Press in 1930, documents in word and image connections between the founding of the congregation, the building of its temple, and the sensibilities and goals of the City Beautiful movement.
KEYWORDS: Beth El Temple, Temple Ohev Sholom, synagogue architecture, Conservative Judaism, Romanesque Revival

Separated by less than a half-mile, the synagogues Temple Ohev Sholom and Temple Beth El have held dignified pride of place since the 1920s along a gracefully curving, verdant, and desirable stretch of Front Street and Riverfront Park in uptown Harrisburg. Both are substantial limestone edifices with central, colonnaded front entries poised above street level, reached by flights of steps interspersed with terraces. These stairs and the buildings themselves are lined with carefully selected shrubbery and surrounded by gently rolling green lawns dotted with trees. The elevation and unmistakable solidity and heft of the temples, along with their location in Harrisburg's Uptown—a developing middle-class and upper-middle-class residential neighborhood in the 1920s—bespeak permanence, progress, and optimism.

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Henry H. Brenner, Beth El's founding and longtime president, wrote of his congregation's temple:

> It is built on a foundation of concrete. The materials of which the structure is built are mortar, granite, and steel—it is built to endure. Its capacity is twice the requirements of the present membership, and it is located in Harrisburg's newest and finest residential section—it is built for the future.[1]

This future was one envisioned by a long-persecuted immigrant religious minority—Jews—that had experienced a strikingly rapid Americanization in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America. They emigrated from Germany and central Europe from the mid-nineteenth century, establishing themselves quickly as middle- and upper-class Americans and developing modernizing, liberal Reform Judaism as America's hegemonic Jewish denomination by 1880. A second significantly larger group of 3 million eastern European Jews—hailing from the Russian-ruled Pale of Settlement, Poland, and neighboring countries—arrived in the United States between 1880 and 1924. More traditional in their religious practice and culturally isolated, they nonetheless acculturated almost as rapidly as their predecessors, integrating fully into American society and affiliating mostly with Conservative Judaism, a movement both progressive and moderating that came to hold the center position between Reform and Orthodox Judaism.

In Harrisburg these two groups achieved, by the second decade of the twentieth century, a striking level of acculturation and prosperity that found its clearest expression in the construction of two new synagogues in the uptown district: Ohev Sholom (1920) and Beth El (1928).[2] The influence of the Beaux Arts aesthetic evident in the two temples' adherence to classical forms and proportions, the quality of their design and construction, and their prominent, landscaped siting evoke the goals, sensibilities, and ideals of Harrisburg's City Beautiful movement. Harrisburg's acculturated Reform and Conservative Jews both found in City Beautiful aesthetics and ideals the architecture and ideology appropriate for expressing publicly their cultural identity as thoroughly modern Americans *and* Jews. Ohev Sholom and Beth El's Front Street temples continue to stand as the ultimate material outcome and testimony to the synergistic interweaving of early twentieth-century American and Jewish progressivism.

BETH EL AND THE CITY BEAUTIFUL

Local architect Frank Gordon Fahnestock Jr. designed Ohev Sholom synagogue after the model of ancient temples of Greece and Rome.[3] Clayton Lappley's plan for the new temple of Beth El was, however, a "modernized Romanesque" structure (figs. 1 and 2).[4] This style represents a slight deviation from the classical Greco-Roman norm of the City Beautiful movement and its octagonal plan imparts a suggestion of the exotic (because it was, in the terms of the times, considered "Eastern" and "Oriental") Byzantine style.[5] However, Beth El's "modernized Romanesque" is streamlined, monochromatic, refined, and rigorously attuned to both accuracy in incorporating historical precedents and early twentieth-century understandings of how a "modern" building should function and look. This is entirely in keeping with the Beaux Arts approach to architecture espoused by the City Beautiful movement (figs. 3 and 4).

The design and construction of Temple Beth El echoes the City Beautiful emphasis on "synthesizing beauty and utility."[6] Clayton Lappley explained that "every one of the multitudinous details of the building shall be so decided as to give the greatest convenience and adequate beauty without

FIGURE 1. Contemporary view of the "modernized Romanesque" front façade of Temple Beth El. Photo by Julian H. Preisler, 2012.

FIGURE 2. Contemporary view of the rigorously Greco-Roman classical front façade of Temple Ohev Sholom, featuring Doric columns and facing the Susquehanna River. Photo by Julian H. Preisler, 2012.

unnecessary expense."[7] The central and defining volume of the temple is an octagon. Within it, correspondingly, is an octagonal sanctuary that measured 64 × 64 feet and sat 550 people in its original layout (fig. 5). The building and the sanctuary are sufficiently tall to allow for arched clerestory windows on each side of the octagon excepting the one that holds the bimah (chancel) and Torah Ark, which is surmounted by a choir loft.

Atop the roof's central peak is the greatest flourish of shape and color on the building's exterior: a crown-shaped, lantern-style cupola graced with curvilinear, sculpted elements. Its verdigris patina is both a dramatic contrast and pleasing complement to the temple's otherwise grey-white limestone exterior surfaces. The cupola is further surmounted by a spire holding a Star of David. This detail makes clear that Harrisburg's ambitious, rising generation of young Jews felt themselves not only liberated from a ghettoed past but also proud and secure as *Jewish* Americans.

The congregation members responsible for the building were either immigrants who arrived in the United States as children or first-generation native-born Americans. Their families had fled poverty and persecution in the Russian-ruled Pale of Settlement, especially Lithuania, and came to

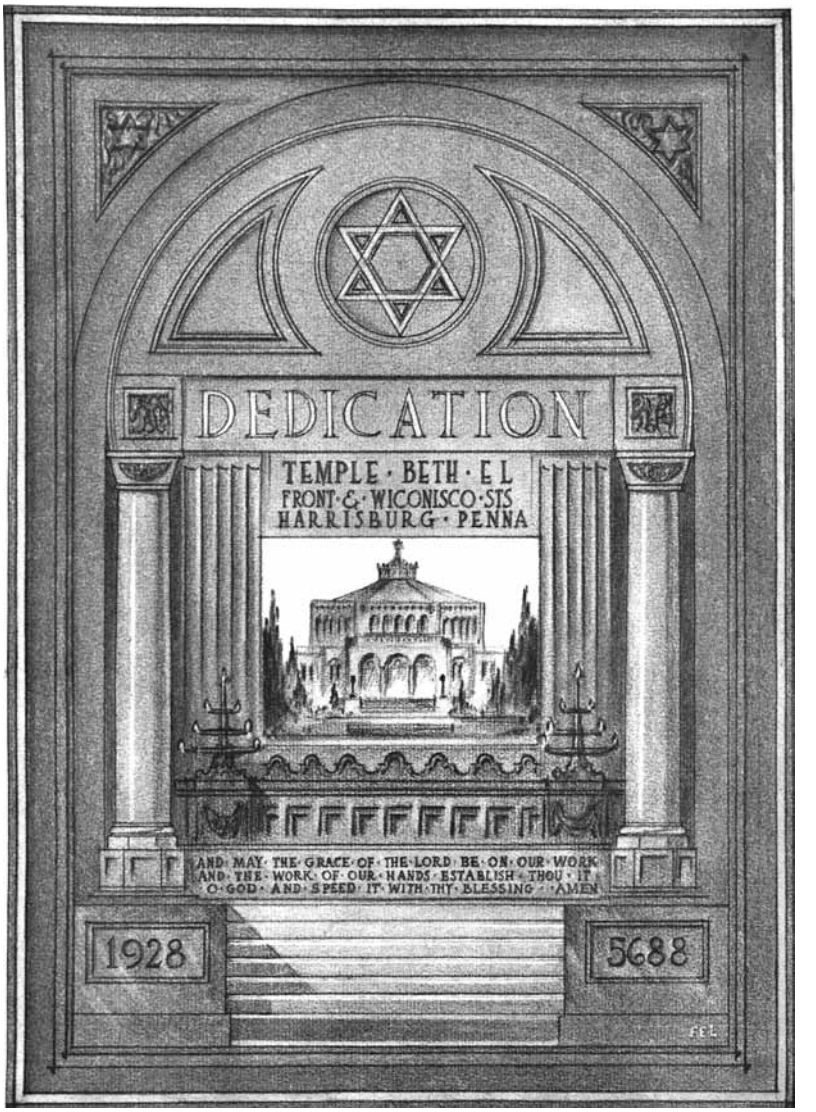

FIGURE 3. Title page from *Temple Beth El: Dedication* (1930), commemorating the synagogue's recent completion, designed and printed by J. Horace McFarland's Mount Pleasant Press, Harrisburg.

thrive in American society.[8] Of the seven "Men Who Made It Possible" saluted in Beth El's commemorative book, two were American born, one was born in Scotland, and four others had immigrated from Lithuania two

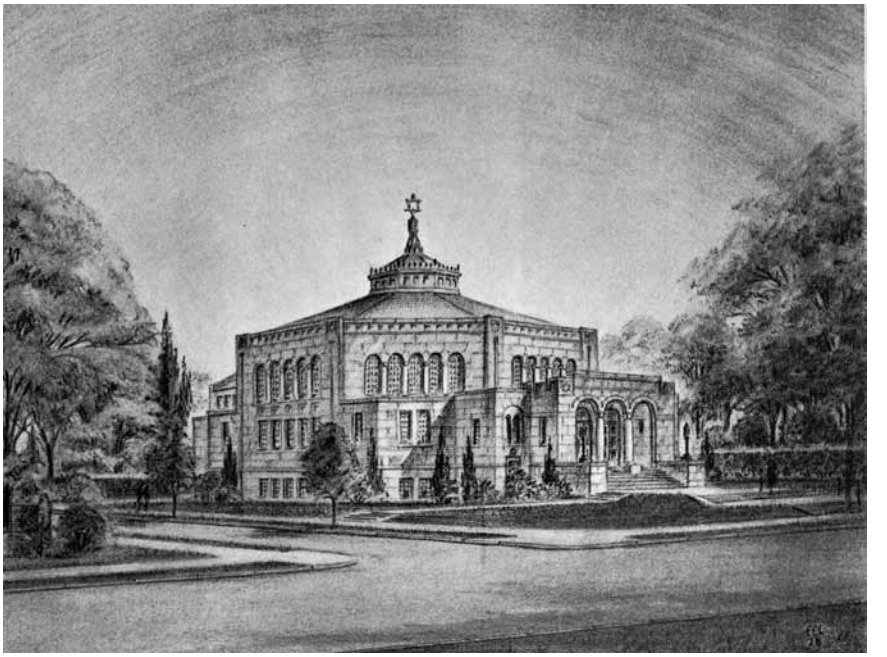

FIGURE 4. Period rendering in three-quarter-view of Temple Beth El, showing the full width and depth of the synagogue, along with its expansive landscaped corner lot, as it appeared ca. 1928–30. From *Temple Beth El: Dedication* (1930), 7.

decades earlier. Two had college degrees and all were self-employed or held senior-most management positions such as: jewelry-store owner, wholesalers in tobacco and notions, president of a hotel, owners of a clothing store and laundry, and insurance salesman. Notably, they ranged in age from only thirty to thirty-eight in 1930 and all but one was married with at least two children. While not "old stock" or "old money" Americans, Beth El's founders were prospering business and family men. They were invested, financially and as fathers of young children, in the continued growth, vitality, and beauty of Harrisburg and in an appealing, made-in-America Judaism.

A remarkable book commemorating the 1928 completion and dedication of Beth El Temple connects the congregation and its synagogue with the aesthetics, values, and goals of the City Beautiful movement. The book itself is lavish with its engraved illustrations and distinctly sober and sophisticated in its discussion of the temple's architecture, plans for its use, and the congregation's mission and ideology. Notably, Mount Pleasant Press, owned by J. Horace McFarland, printed Beth El's commemorative book with strikingly high

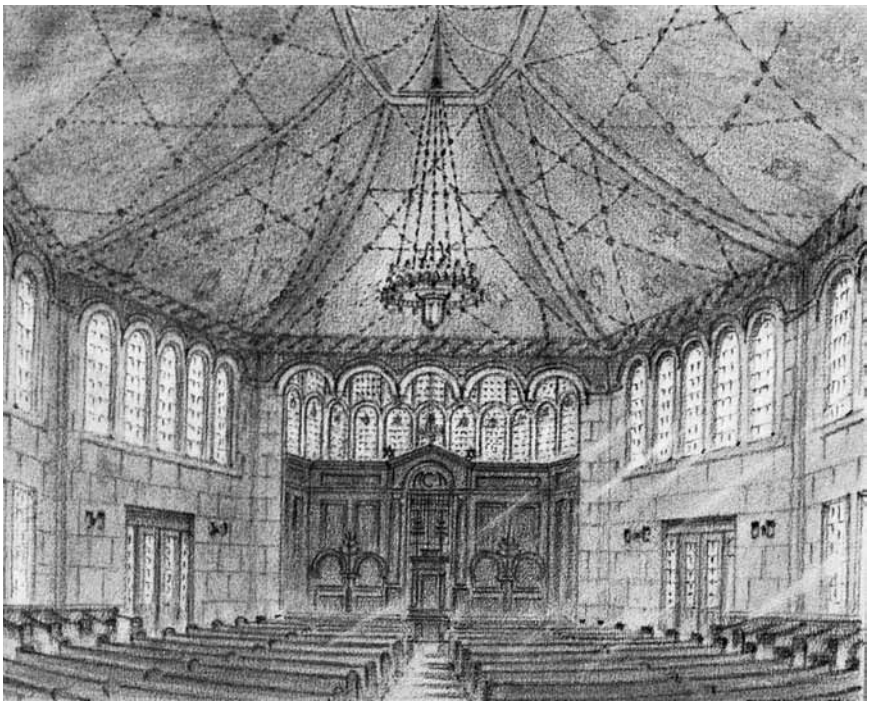

FIGURE 5. Period rendering of the octagonal sanctuary of Temple Beth El. The ceiling was originally covered by a colorful canvas displaying, among others, the Tribes of Israel, Patriarchs, and Psalmists. From *Temple Beth El: Dedication* (1930), 16.

production values, and McFarland, in a tribute-page/advertisement within the book, declared it "one of the finest souvenir volumes published in America this year." The book's cover, embossed with a metallic-gold round decal containing an elegant rendering of the temple, ensures that the book looks as handsome and "built to endure" as the temple it celebrates and commemorates.[9]

The commemorative book evokes values of City Beautiful, especially seeing cities as interconnected wholes, the link between aesthetics and form, and "the meliorative power of beauty."[10] Rabbi Alexander J. Burnstein, Beth El's spiritual leader at the time of the temple's dedication, noted in the commemorative book:

> This beautiful temple will stimulate the imagination and further the moral and spiritual growth of the hundreds and thousands of people who will be privileged to enter its portals. Those who pass by

> it daily will be inspired by its perfect proportions, by the vision that prompted its erection, and by a contemplation of the purposes for which it has been dedicated. They will know that the God of Israel still lives, and that the Jew has not lost the faith and sense of religious consecration that were so characteristic and are so manifest on every page of his long, sad, but triumphant history.[11]

Indeed, the front-cover illustration shows the temple and its grounds as the successful outcome of a comprehensive and unified plan, fully occupying and activating a spacious corner lot at one with the broad, picturesque, and placid river it overlooks.

This recognition of the relationship between form, beauty, faith, and community calls to mind the "religious" undertone of the City Beautiful movement, which "found secular salvation for humans in their belief in a flexible, organic city" and promoted "'social religion,' the idealized, transcendental bond among members of a community."[12] Judaism was the religion central to Beth El's founding—followed closely, it seems reasonable to posit, by the American "social religion" mentioned above. Beth El member Sidney Barson wrote in the 1930 commemorative book, "The purpose of our Temple is to develop good American Jewish citizens" and "the real aim of the manifold program of our Congregation is to influence our young and old to practice the highest ideals of Judaism and Americanism."[13]

Those within and outside the Jewish community recognized this progressive nature of the Conservative movement and Beth El, its newborn congregation. A tribute page placed by the City Beautiful–advocating *Harrisburg Telegraph* newspaper congratulated "that group of earnest, progressive citizens who have erected beautiful Beth El Temple." A full-page tribute within the dedication book, written by Beth El's building committee chair Philip H. Caplan, likewise connected the building to the love of beauty: "The shimmering Susquehanna, as it pursues its course, flows past no building as beautiful as Temple Beth El. A wonderful gem set in the midst of Harrisburg. A token of Harrisburg's love for beautiful things, and a symbol of the eminence of God" (see fig. 6).[14]

In its classically derived exterior architecture, the quality and grace of its construction, and its location, the congregation built Temple Beth El in a manner reflecting in full the aesthetics of America's City Beautiful movement as manifested in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in the early twentieth century. "Harmony" was a defining byword of the City Beautiful sensibility.[15] The

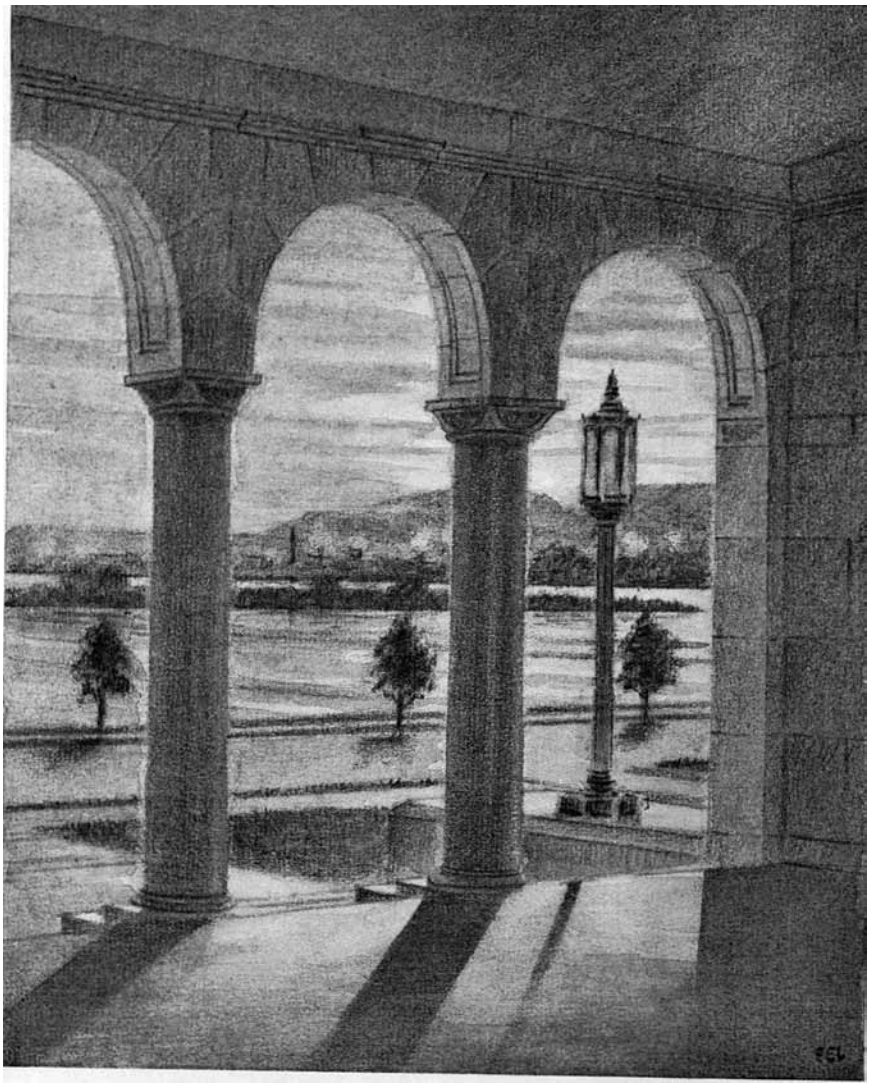

FIGURE 6. Period rendering of the entry portico of Temple Beth El with its "modernized Romanesque" arched colonnade. The caption for this illustration includes verses from Psalm 121.1: "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my strength." From *Temple Beth El: Dedication* (1930), 20.

words of its founding members and spiritual leaders, as recorded for posterity in the remarkably handsome book celebrating the 1928 dedication of Temple Beth El, ring with a fervent desire to shape and share a sustainable

new Judaism that would thrive in the United States by achieving harmony with modern American life.

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NOTES

1. Alexander J. Burnstein, Henry H. Brenner, Joel Sylvan Geffen, and Sidney Barson. *Temple Beth El: Dedication* (Harrisburg, PA: Mount Pleasant Press, 1930), 11.
2. Concerning the community's success in income and education levels, Simon Bronner writes: "Harrisburg's Jews have acquired, on average, more affluence than those in comparable cities and used it to support external Jewish causes and construct a local institutional infrastructure that appears created for a larger community." Simon Bronner, *Greater Harrisburg's Jewish Community* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2010), 8. See also Bruce Bazelon's essay, "The Trek Uptown: The Migration of Harrisburg's Jewish Community in the Early Twentieth Century" (this issue) for the Jewish community's northward migration in Harrisburg.
3. Ohev Sholom is Harrisburg's oldest Jewish congregation, established in 1853 by twenty-four Jewish households that emigrated from Germany, and in 1867 affiliated with America's nascent, boldly liberalizing Reform movement.
4. Burstein et al., *Temple Beth El*, 15; Michael B. Coleman, *The Jews of Harrisburg: An Informal History by a Native Son* (Harrisburg, PA: Cohen Bros., Printers, 1978), 80.
5. See William H. Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 87, 89. In his dedication-book essay (in Burstein et al., *Temple Beth El*, 15), Rabbi Joel Geffen identifies "a modernized Romanesque" as the style "most suitable for producing the desired atmosphere."
6. Wilson, *City Beautiful*, 82.
7. Burstein et al., *Temple Beth El*, 58.
8. Bronner, *Harrisburg's Jewish Community*, 8. Beth El was a Conservative congregation founded in 1926 by younger, English-speaking, and upwardly mobile

dissidents from the then-Orthodox and Yiddish-speaking Chisuk Emuna Congregation, formerly in the Eighth Ward.

9. Burstein et al., *Temple Beth El*, 66–67.
10. Wilson, *City Beautiful*, 78–80.
11. Burstein et al., *Temple Beth El*, 9.
12. Wilson, *City Beautiful*, 80–81.
13. Burstein et al., *Temple Beth El*, 51.
14. *Ibid.*, 79, 104.
15. Wilson, *City Beautiful*, 79.