

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name TEMPLE BETH ZION

other names/site number _____

name of related multiple property listing N/A

2. Location

street & number 805 Delaware Avenue [] not for publication

city or town Buffalo [] vicinity

state New York code NY county Erie code 029 zip code 14209

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination [] request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements as set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets [] does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant [] nationally [] statewide locally. ([] see continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title	Date
State or Federal agency and bureau	

In my opinion, the property [] meets [] does not meet the National Register criteria. ([] see continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title	Date
State or Federal agency and bureau	

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:	Signature of the Keeper
[] entered in the National Register	date of action
[] see continuation sheet	_____
[] determined eligible for the National Register	_____
[] see continuation sheet	_____
[] determined not eligible for the National Register	_____
[] removed from the National Register	_____
[] other (explain) _____	

TEMPLE BETH ZION

Erie County, New York

Name of Property

County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u> 1 </u>	<u> </u>	buildings
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	sites
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	structures
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	objects
<u> 1 </u>	<u> 0 </u>	TOTAL

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

 N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

 N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(enter categories from instructions)

 RELIGION/religious facility (synagogue)

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

 RELIGION/religious facility (synagogue)

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

 MODERN MOVEMENT/Neo-Expressionism

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation concrete

walls concrete, Alabama limestone, brick

roof asphalt

other

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets)

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or that represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all boxes that apply.)

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location
- C** a birthplace or grave
- D** a cemetery
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure
- F** a commemorative property
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by historic American Building Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other repository: _____

Areas of Significance:

(Enter categories from instructions)

- Architecture _____
- Art _____

Period of Significance:

1964-1967 _____

Significant Dates:

1964, 1967 _____

Significant Person:

N/A _____

Cultural Affiliation:

N/A _____

Architect/Builder:

Max Abramovitz/Harrison & Abramovitz _____

Ben Shahn (stained glass, interior artwork) _____

Siegfried Construction Co, contractors _____

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TEMPLE BETH ZION

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Location and Setting

Temple Beth Zion is located on a four-acre site at 805 Delaware Avenue, on the east side of Delaware Avenue at the intersection with Barker Street in the Delaware district of Buffalo, Erie County, New York. It was designed by Max Abramovitz of the New York firm Harrison & Abramovitz and designed and built between 1964 and 1967. The short portion of the L-shaped property is oriented to Linwood Avenue, which is a thoroughfare of historic residential buildings that parallels Delaware Avenue on the east. Once known as "Millionaire's Row" for its collection of impressive residential mansions (most of which are now converted to multi-unit dwellings or offices), Delaware Avenue is a primary north-south artery connecting downtown Buffalo with its suburban neighborhoods and beyond. Directly to the south of the property, at 787 Delaware, is the Jewish Community Center of Greater Buffalo, a health and educational facility that predates the temple by a few years and has no formal affiliation with Temple Beth Zion; it is not included in this nomination. The Jewish Community is separated from the nominated property by a driveway running east and west from Delaware Avenue to Linwood Avenue. This section of Delaware Avenue preserves much of its historic character as a street of many expensive historic dwellings and apartment buildings. Directly across the street from Temple Beth Zion, at 786 Delaware, is the former Clement House, a Tudor revival mansion designed by Edward B. Green in 1910 and now the American National Red Cross building. A short distance to the south, on the west side of Delaware, is Westminster Presbyterian Church, at 724 Delaware Avenue. At 800 Delaware is the Baroque revival Grace Millard Knox House (1915, by New York architect Charles Pierrepont H. Gilbert; now the headquarters of Computer Task Group). Adjacent to it at 824 Delaware is the Neo-Classical George Forman house (1893 by Green & Wicks; the present Connors Children Center). All of these buildings on the west side of Delaware Avenue are within the Delaware Avenue Local Preservation District, which is bounded on the south by North Street on the north and by Bryant Street. Temple Beth Zion is included in the Linwood Local Preservation District, which is bounded on the west by the east side of Delaware Avenue, on the east by Linwood Avenue, on the south by North Street, and on the north by Ferry Street.

The synagogue is one building composed of four component parts. The dominant structure is the oval synagogue, alternately described in the congregation's literature as the sanctuary, near the north end of the property. The synagogue, a sculptural form, is taller than the other elements of the structure and is set back from the public sidewalk behind a concrete terrace that is raised a few steps above the sidewalk level. Behind the sanctuary on the east is the long, two-story religious school building, which now also houses administrative offices and rental space. The synagogue is connected on its eastern, or rear, side to the religious school building by a glass-enclosed hyphen. The large, all-purpose, windowless rectangular block of the Joseph L. Fink Auditorium extends eastward from the southern portion of school building. The fourth element of the plan is the sisterhood chapel. It is a single-story rectangular structure with curved end walls that extend beyond the building and constitute two arcs of an implied circle. The chapel is connected by a glass-enclosed hyphen to the religious school building on the east; the western end faces Delaware Avenue. Between the chapel and the

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TEMPLE BETH ZION

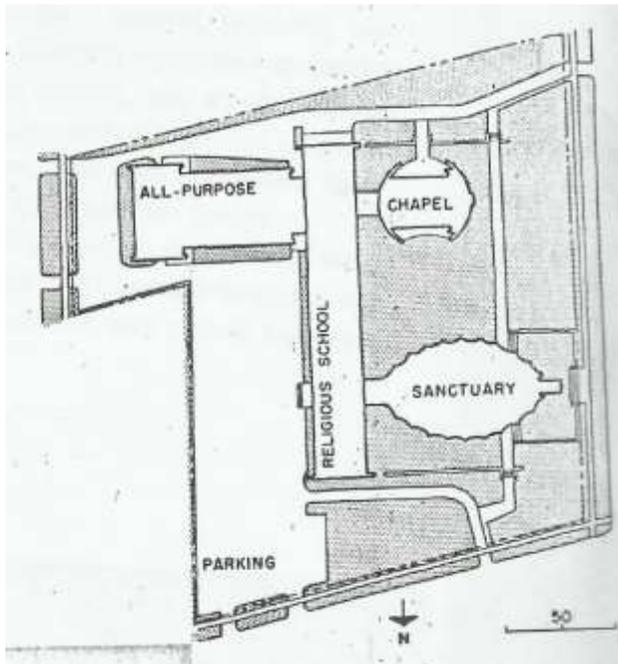
Name of Property

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sanctuary is a large area of lawn that is screened from the street by a row of pollarded deciduous trees. A concrete path leads from the chapel to the synagogue along the eastern edge of this lawn area. Steps at the south end of the pathway give access to the drive separating the Temple Beth Zion property from that of the Jewish Community Center of Greater Buffalo.

Delaware Avenue at this point is lined with mature trees, a public sidewalk and grass strips. A paved surface parking area occupies the northwest corner of the property, with an entrance from Barker Street. It extends from Barker Street on the north to the northern wall of the Fink auditorium on the south. From this parking area, one can enter the school building from a door on the north end of the building. Another larger rectangular parking area is located along the rear side of the school building. One enters the building from this parking lot through a large doorway in the center of the south elevation. This entranceway is sheltered beneath a large, simple metal and glass canopy, which is a later addition to the building. The area on the north and south flanks of the Fink auditorium is also paved with asphalt. There is a drive entrance/exit access drive on Linwood.



Temple Beth Zion Site Plan
Source: Architectural Record,
March 1968

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Sanctuary

From the exterior, the sanctuary building appears as a large oval bowl with scalloped sides that cant upward from the level of the ground. Its reinforced concrete walls (the many tons of bars required were manifested at the Bethlehem Steel plant in nearby Lackawanna), three-feet thick at the base, taper to eleven inches at the top and lean outward at a fifteen-degree angle from the vertical. At the front of the building, they rise to forty feet; at the sanctuary end, they reach sixty feet. High up, steel brackets were embedded into the concrete as workers poured it. These brackets support steel frame trusses from which the flat roof is hung above the oval auditorium. This arrangement allowed for the skylight space at the edge of the ceiling. These ten-part segments symbolize the Ten Commandments and, abstractly, hands raised in prayer. These segments reach 45 feet on the western, Delaware Avenue, side and rise to 60 feet on the eastern or sanctuary side. Anchored securely to an underground concrete base, they flare outward at a 15-degree angle. The concrete walls, which lack ornamentation, are clad with Alabama limestone cut into long rectangular blocks that are laid vertically. This material, which had been used earlier on the Federal Reserve building on Delaware Avenue at Huron Street, was touted as self-cleaning and growing more white with age. Mortar joints are white to minimize contrast with the fine-grained light-colored ashlar blocks. A large, tapering trapezoidal shaped, concave stained-glass window interrupts the sequence of scalloped walls to form the dominant façade element. Known as the balcony window, it measures 28 by 24 feet. It is bridged by a long concrete lintel and fills the entire space between the concrete scallop sections. The subject of the window is Psalm 150.

The larger flat western window is 32 by 40 feet in size and represents the story of Creation as told in the Book of Job. The metal pieces that hold the glass of both windows in place echo the long vertical lines of the limestone sheathing. During the day, when the windows are not lit from within, the stained glass appears as a dark mass. Both windows are held in place by means of stressed steel cables stretched across the openings on the interior that are not present on the exterior of the building. Both of the non-representational designs of these impressive windows were the work of the noted American painter, Ben Shahn (1898-1969). The main entrance to the building is on the west end of the oval, facing Delaware Avenue. A large concrete pad serves as a gathering space in the front of the building. It is wider than the building and in depth reaches to the end of the second scallop. One enters the building passing under a projecting, flat concrete canopy that is held up by two flanking concrete pillars that taper toward the bottom.

Visitors reach the interior of the sanctuary through a pair of low wooden doors that lead to a small vestibule beneath the large western stained-glass window. This space is rather cramped and is divided by a stairway to the balcony that embraces three sides of the auditorium. (Such galleries were common in hall-plan synagogues where, in the past, they were usually reserved for women worshippers.) Exposed concrete surfaces surround the area and a dark wooden wall separates the vestibule from the auditorium beyond. "The pillars in the vestibule,"

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it was reported when the building was new, “are so intricate that cabinet makers rather than journeymen carpenters had to create the forms to pour the concrete.”¹

From the vestibule, one proceeds through a pair of low wooden doors into the auditorium. where the ceiling rises dramatically from a height of forty feet to a height of sixty-two feet. Internally, the sanctuary follows the hall plan that was traditional for many Reform Movement synagogues. (Orthodox synagogues often used a centralized plan with the bimah in the center.) It consists of a single large, oval space unobstructed by internal supports. From the western, short end of the oval, one proceeds in a direct line down the center of the aisle separating two groups of dark wooden pews toward the bimah, ark and Ten Commandments, the traditional elements of a synagogue. This west to east orientation is traditional in synagogue planning. The flat ceiling, which is 40 feet above the entrance and rises to 62 feet at the eastern end, seems to hover unsupported above an oval worship space that can accommodate 1,000 people. Hidden peripheral skylights border the ceiling and run all along the length of each side. Light from these skylights washes the bare concrete surfaces of the canted walls with a soft, gray light that creates a tranquil, contemplative mood. A U-shaped balcony faced with dark wood embraces the rear and two sides of the auditorium. The rear of the balcony houses a large pipe organ manufactured by Casavant Freres of St. Hyacinth, Quebec.

The bimah, the raised platform from which the Torah is read, rises several steps above the level of the auditorium and spans the narrow end of the building. It is dominated by an eight-foot-long moveable lectern, designed by Abramovitz to resemble an open book. This is where the Torah is placed for reading. On the north side of the bimah stands the large gilded metal menorah that was designed by Ben Shahn. Behind the bimah, three steps rise framed by two, 30-foot concrete pylons displaying inlaid gold and blue mosaics representing the Ten Commandments in Hebrew. The mosaic designs were the creation of artist Ben Shahn. Between the pylons, resting on a low wall a few feet above the floor, is the gilded wooden Ark where the Torah scrolls are stored. “If the Ark is seen in its profounder symbolic meaning as representing the centrality of the Law, the written tradition,” writes Eugene Mihaly, “and the Bimah as the symbolic representation of the importance of the congregation in study, in its role as interpreter and in prayer, we may glimpse the essential polarity to which the very arrangement of the synagogue interior was witness.”² Hanging above the Ark is the *ner tamid*, the eternal light that stands for the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. Several feet in front of the Ark, an oculus in the ceiling spotlights the reading table. This arrangement also had roots in earlier Reform Movement practices.

The eastern end wall of the sanctuary, behind the Ark, is dominated by a large stained glass window. It is considerably larger than the balcony window, measuring 32 by 40 feet. The design evokes in abstract terms the event of Creation as referred to in the Book of Job (38: 4-7). The text casts god in the role of the architect of the universe. Both of Shahn’s windows, which come to life during daylight hours for people on the inside of the

¹ Anne McIlhenney Matthews, “Clergy to Tour New Temple,” *Buffalo Courier-Express*, November 28, 1966.

² Eugene Mihaly quoted in Richard Meier (ed.), *Recent America Synagogue Architecture* (New York: Jewish Museum, 1963), 10.

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temple, evoke Biblical imagery in abstract visual language. Both share “the blues, the lavenders, the rosy tints of dawn and sunset,” wrote an early viewer who had interviewed the artist. Across the bottom area of both windows, the artist inscribed the appropriate Biblical text in large Hebrew letters. Floating above the text of Psalm 150 on the western window (somewhat difficult to view from the auditorium because of the organ) are a series of oblong blue, lavender and pale rose shapes evocative of the joyful words of King David’s famous him of praise. The same critic described the great eastern window as showing “a hand evidently holding mankind in its palm with swirling lines representing the Voice out of the Whirlwind that spoke to Job telling him that man cannot know why such things happen to him.”³ Deep blue dominates the color scheme over the lavenders and pinks.

Color is otherwise present in the auditorium in the dark blue pew cushions, which complement the predominately blueish tonality of Ben Shahn’s great eastern window, in the gold and blue lettering of the Ten Commandments on the bimah pylons, in the golden doors of the ark, the dark wooden surfaces of the balcony side walls, and in the cream-colored polished travertine flooring of the sanctuary. The original cream-shaded chandeliers (which incorporate a speaker system) are clusters of vertical tubes with recessed bulbs that hang from the ceiling on single metal rods to direct light downward.

The sanctuary was also planned to be entered from behind, through a passage that connects it to the administration building and parking lot. Indeed, most congregants come to services through this entranceway rather than through the main western entrance on Delaware Avenue. The architect anticipated this in his design. The sequence of spaces here consists of a narrow passage that gives access to a confined vestibule-like area squeezed between two segments of the massive concrete walls and suffused with colored light from the great stained glass window wall above. Passageways from left and right lead from this compressed space to corridors running beneath the ends of the balcony. Dark wood paneling beneath the balcony conceals these corridors on either side of the sanctuary. From these rather confined areas, congregants emerge into the expanded space of the auditorium at either end of the bimah stairs. One’s progress through this sequence of spaces has been described as calculated to suggest passage from the profane world into the sacred world.

Sisterhood Chapel

The sisterhood chapel is a single story building, rectangular in shape, with rounded ends. This component, located at the southern edge of the property, mimics in shape and form the larger and more spectacular, sculptural main sanctuary. It is connected to the administrative and religious school building by a glass hyphen. There are also entrances in the center of the south and north sides. On the south side of the chapel, a low stone wall separates the chapel from the driveway that runs between the Temple Beth Zion property and the

³ Anne McIhenney Matthews, “New Temple Amazing Edifice,” *Buffalo Courier-Express*, November 27, 1966.

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neighboring Jewish Community Center of Greater Buffalo. There is a break in the center of this wall to allow access to the entrance in the center of the south chapel wall. A small garden occupies the area between the chapel and religious school.

Built of beige brick, the chapel has a slightly curved concrete slab roof, the west and east ends of which turn upward slightly. Both west and east ends of the chapel terminate in curved walls of brick that extend beyond the side walls as partial arcs of an implied outer circle. In the center of the west elevation is a slender, floor-to-ceiling window. The north and south elevations are filled with opaque glass held in place by floor-to-ceiling metal mullions.

The interior is virtually a rectangular light box covered by a flat, white plaster ceiling. The long, northern and southern walls consist of opaque glass held in place by floor-to-ceiling metal mullions. At the western end of the space is an elevated bimah on which two wide, dark wooden leaves resting on a concrete pedestal form a central lectern to hold the Torah scrolls. Behind this, another two steps provide access to the Ark, which occupies a central place in a recessed area flanked by two unadorned concrete walls. Behind the Ark, in the center of the western wall, a full-height opaque glass window sheds light into the room. To the left and right of the recess are walls of dark wood vertical screened paneling. Two large rectangular screens suspended at the top of each of these paneled areas allow for audiovisual presentations. An oculus above the center of the bimah lights the podium. The chapel was designed to seat 150 people in wooden pews. This permanent seating has been removed, revealing the handsome dark slate floor more fully. Current audiences for the weddings, funerals, and cultural events held here sit on moveable chairs.

Religious School Building

The religious school building is the largest component of the building and serves as a backdrop to the sanctuary and chapel when viewed from Delaware Avenue. It is connected to both of these ceremonial structures by means of plate glass hyphens that join the corridor of the school building to the rear of the synagogue and chapel. The two-story, steel framed and concrete building is 300 by 46 feet and is clad in beige brick with exposed concrete horizontal slabs above the first floor and at the roofline. It is located directly to the rear or east end of the sanctuary to which it is connected by a short enclosed passage. A large auditorium extends from the west side with the rear fly area backing onto Linwood Avenue. The building is normally entered from the east parking lot through a plate glass lobby sheltered beneath a large glass and metal canopy (which was added after the period of significance). A continuous ribbon of square clerestory windows lights ground floor rooms. (These windows have frosted glass lighting the restrooms that are located to the north and south of the main entrance.) The concrete slab supporting the second level rests immediately above these windows and cantilevers beyond the north wall of the ground floor to shelter an entrance at the northern end of an internal corridor. This arrangement is repeated at the southern end of the building where another entrance is sheltered

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beneath the cantilevered second floor. On the upper level, rooms receive daylight through narrow, floor-to-ceiling windows spaced equidistant between panels of brick sandwiched between concrete slabs.

Internally, rooms in both levels are arranged on either side of a long central double-loaded corridor. It is entered from the outside through large glass doors which lead to a spacious lobby area, the walls of which are paneled in dark wood. The Benjamin and Dr. Edgar Cofeld Judaic Museum, is located off of this lobby, in a room entered through a door in the north wall, just beyond the central corridor that runs through the length of the building from north to south. Additional entrances are at either end of this corridor. On the ground floor are the small boardroom (which has display cases that form part of the museum collection), meeting rooms, and offices. Midway between the main entrance and the south entrance along the corridor, an open lobby area, partially created by removal (in 2005) of sections of wall that enclosed former small offices, serves as a meeting and display space. The northern part of this area is partitioned behind floor-to-ceiling glass panels. It is used as an enclosed meeting space with a meeting table. On the north side of this area, a plate glass wall overlooks the lawn between the Sanctuary and chapel. A pair of glass doors opens to this outdoor space. Immediately beyond the meeting area on the southeast side of the corridor, a door opens into a second entrance to the building and a stairway to the second floor. This stair hall retains its original cinderblock walls and metal stairs.

The second floor, which contained former classrooms, is rented to a non-profit organization, Jewish Family Services of Greater Buffalo. The southern half of this floor retains its original cinderblock walls and drop ceiling of the double-loaded corridor off which opened classrooms. These, however, are now used as offices. The northern half of the second floor has had the corridor width reduced and the classrooms reconfigured into office. This corridor is painted off-white.

Rabbi Joseph L. Fink Auditorium

A windowless wing of beige brick extends off the east side of the south end of the building. It contains a large, 140-by-80-foot rectangular auditorium and all-purpose space dedicated to the memory of Rabbi Joseph L. Fink who died in 1964 after serving the congregation for thirty-five years. The steel-frame auditorium is capable of seating 1,000 people on stackable chairs. At the east end, oak panels flank the elevated stage. The sidewalls of the auditorium consist of panels of tan brick alternating with areas of sand-colored plaster. A projection room above the entrance to the auditorium on the west allows for the showing of films. The white plaster ceiling consists of a series of undulating segments, with concealed indirect lights that run laterally across the space. The floor of the auditorium is polished hardwood. The green velvet stage curtain is the only touch of color in the room. Adjacent to the auditorium on the north side is a large kitchen used for the preparation of food for banquets, which the congregation holds here from time to time. The auditorium was completed in April 1966, a year before the congregation dedicated the sanctuary.

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Summary

Temple Beth Zion is significant as an outstanding example of mid-twentieth century Neo-Expressionist religious architecture designed by renowned Modern architect Max Abramovitz, of the firm Harrison & Abramovitz. Located on Delaware Avenue, in Buffalo, Erie County, Temple Beth Zion was built between 1964 and 1967. The synagogue is a unified attached complex of component spaces, including a sculptural oval-shaped synagogue, a long rectilinear religious school building, a smaller rectangular sisterhood chapel, and a spacious auditorium. As an outstanding example of a Neo-Expressionist synagogue, Temple Beth Zion is eligible under criterion C in the area of Architecture. Neo-Expressionist architecture emerged after World War II in response to rationalism of the International Style, emphasizing the emotional content expressed by means of curvilinear forms, eccentric shapes, and plastic materials. The primary worship space at Temple Beth Zion is an excellent example of the type, with its sculptural exterior form which holds a vast, open interior space that evokes a sense of quietude and awe.

Temple Beth Zion is also significant as a masterpiece of modern religious architecture designed by prominent New York architect Max Abramovitz (1908-2004), whose professional career consisted primarily of commissions for commercial and institutional buildings, including the United Nations headquarters (1953) and Lincoln Center's Philharmonic Hall (1962). The congregation chose Abramovitz after conducting extensive interviews with many nationally known architects. Although the architect designed only a few synagogues during his long career, religious architecture was a subject of great personal interest to him and this is his most accomplished work in the genre. Jewish himself, Abramovitz had written a major article about the history of synagogue design. "There is a growing trend away from the styles of yesterday," Abramovitz wrote in a 1952 essay entitled "Synagogue." "Along with the knowledge of science and technology, there has come to the people of today a new confidence in their own strength and power. Today we can create an architecture to fit our age and need not ape the past." He went on to state that "today's structural methods offer many ways of covering large central areas. A few small temples, such as Tifereth Israel at Dallas and Beth-El at Tyler, both in Texas, have shown that dignity and simplicity can be produced without resorting to stylistic throw-backs to fit into the architectural locale of the congregation; yet the arrival of a truly noteworthy, distinctive architecture—one representative of the synagogue or temple—is still distant."⁴ Here in Buffalo he had the opportunity to translate his concepts of spiritual space and symbolic expression into bricks and mortar. The building is also outstanding among a number of major synagogues that were built in the United States during the postwar period, including Erich Mendelsohn's Park Synagogue (1950) in Cleveland, OH, Percival Goodman's B'nai Israel Synagogue (1952) in Milburn, NJ, and Sidney Eisenshtat's Temple Emmanuel (1953) in Los Angeles, CA. The principal historian of American Jewish religious architecture, Samuel Gruber, regards Abramovitz's

⁴ Max Abramovitz, "Synagogue," in *Forms and Functions of Twentieth Century Architecture*. Hamlin (ed), New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), vol. 3, 384; 389.

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Temple Beth Zion, as “an expressive masterpiece, one of the few fully uplifting emotional responses to architectural modernism in the United States.”⁵

Temple Beth Zion is additionally significant under criterion C in the area of Art for its exceptional art glass windows and interior embellishments designed by renowned American artist Ben Shahn. Temple Beth Zion possesses the only example of stained glass windows designed by this important American painter. Shahn worked closely with the architect and a structural engineer to achieve their shared design goals. The large-scale glass window walls flood the interior with tranquil blue colors, shimmering off the grey concrete walls, giving the effect almost of water, emphasizing the emotional effect of the Neo-Expressionist movement. This collaboration between a major American architect and major American painter underscores the image of the building as an expressive, immersive work of art.

The period of significance for Temple Beth Zion begins with the initial construction of the building beginning in 1964 and closes with its completion in 1967. This era encompasses all major architectural and artistic work on the building, including the creation of the Ben Shahn stained glass windows.

Temple Beth Zion Congregation in Buffalo 1850-1961

Temple Beth Zion has deep roots in the Buffalo community. Tracing its origin to the late 1840s in the Orthodox Temple Beth El founded by Polish Jews who worshipped in their native tongue, the congregation of Temple Beth Zion is one of the oldest religious organizations in the city. During the Civil War, certain members of the parent body sought to establish a Reform Movement congregation. In so doing, they were following a national trend toward a more secularized form of Judaism. Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, the “father of the Jewish Reform Societies in America,” came from the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, which he had founded to promote the Reform cause, to give his blessing to the nascent Buffalo congregation.⁶ Temple Beth Zion was, in fact, the fourth Reform congregation in America. The congregation chose as its first religious leader a reform-minded German immigrant, Rabbi Samson Falk. Rabbi Falk deemphasized the emphatic ritualism of Conservative Judaism. The leader of the new Buffalo Jewish community, remarked historian Selig Adler, believed “in linear human progress and was therefore typical of the early American reform Jews who were prime optimists because they found prosperity and tolerance in nineteenth-century America.”⁷

Many Jews, like progressive Roman Catholics, saw Americanization as the path to greater acceptance in their predominantly Protestant country. “The Reform movement,” observed architectural historian Charles Davis,

⁵ Samuel D. Gruber, *American Synagogues, A Century of Architecture and Jewish Community* (New York: Rizzoli, 2003), 151.

⁶ “A Vision of Beauty,” *Buffalo Express*, September 12, 1890.

⁷ Selig Adler, *From Ararat to Suburbia: the History of the Jewish Community of Buffalo* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1960), 139.

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“expanded in the United States as part of a broad search for appropriate forms of worship within American culture.”⁸ At the time of Rabbi Falk’s investiture, a local newspaper reported that he “proclaimed the broadest principles of humanity and the implicit belief in the One God. Sectarian ideas were not to be inculcated and an important aim was to instruct the children of the congregation to be good men and women and good citizens of the United States.”⁹

The new Temple Beth Zion quickly attracted members, especially among the more prosperous merchant class (Abraham Altman was an early adherent) of the city who were pleased to participate in “a modern service enhanced in interest by choir singing and edifying preaching of the word of God in a known tongue.”¹⁰ (Early services were performed in German and English.) By 1865, the year after joining the secularized Reform Movement, the congregation purchased a former Methodist Episcopal church on Niagara Street. Within twenty years, the expanding congregation sold the Romanesque Revival structure and purchased land at 599 Delaware Avenue with the intention of erecting a new synagogue.

For the new house of worship, the congregation chose Buffalo architect Edward Austin Kent. His large Medina sandstone building embodied Romanesque and Byzantine elements, a style Kent’s contemporaries usually referred to as Moorish. In the late nineteenth century, many synagogues in the United States and in Europe gloried in such displays of Middle Eastern exoticism. Gottfried Semper’s Dresden synagogue of 1838, which drew upon Byzantine, Arab, and Oriental motifs, had been the fountainhead of this international Jewish architectural phenomenon. Henry Fernbach, America’s first prominent Jewish architect, adhered to this style when he designed New York’s Central Synagogue in 1872 (NR listed). Likewise, Adler & Sullivan, architects to Chicago’s Reform Jewish community, created designs in an overtly Moorish style for Zion Temple (1884) and Sinai Temple (1892) in that city.

The most direct inspiration for Kent’s Temple Beth Zion were surely Henry Hobson Richardson’s renowned Trinity Episcopal Church (NR listed) of 1872 in Boston and Adler & Sullivan’s 1889 Richardsonian Romanesque design for Kehilath Anshe Ma’ariv Synagogue (NR listed) in Chicago. The latter building emulated Trinity Church and, in the words of architectural historian Charles L. Davis, powerfully “expressed the volumetric massing of the main worship space” and Richardson’s “constrained massing for urban civic space.”¹¹ Davis also remarked that “Sullivan’s 1889 scheme for Ma’ariv Synagogue altered the religious association of the Reform synagogue by purposefully omitting the overt display of key religious emblems and Moorish ornamentation from the building’s exterior. Kent’s Buffalo synagogue shared this secular treatment of

⁸Charles L. Davis II, “Louis Sullivan and the Physiognomic Translation of American Character,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 76(March 2017), 71.

⁹ “A Vision,” *loc. cit.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.* The name derived from a former Society Beth Zion that agreed to join with the new congregation if the name were retained.

¹¹ Davis, 70.

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the austere exterior with the Chicago religious structure. By downplaying overt religious emblems and exotic ornamentation from the exterior of his building, Kent and the congregation were presenting the more secularized view of religion that the Reform Movement favored. A similar non-religious appearance would also characterize the mid-twentieth-century replacement Temple Beth Zion that Max Abramovitz would design. Kent's centrally planned building was designed to seat 850 people and featured an immense copper-clad wooden dome 80 feet in diameter resting on four brick piers. "The building is the only one of its kind of such large roof span in the country," speculated the editors of the national *Engineering News*.¹² Inside, the worship space appeared richly decorated with frescoed ornament in the Byzantine-Arab style. The predominant color was a deep reddish yellow tone. Colored light filtered into the auditorium through a variety of fenestration, including the cupola at the apex of the dome, a row of twenty-four yellow-glass windows around the drum, and several stained glass windows shaded by carved marble screens. At night, the octagonal auditorium became radiant with light cast from a series of gas lamps ringing the base of the dome. "How glorious it is," remarked a local clergyman at the time of its dedication. "It is an Oriental dream, noble form outside and the interior rising like the sky in soft tints, deepening into a glue vault. It lights up magnificently. It is the most beautiful building in Buffalo." His companion agreed; "The congregation of the Temple are to be envied," he confessed. Nevertheless, he lamented, "What a pity they are not Christians."¹³ Kent's Temple Beth Zion quickly became one of the landmarks of Delaware Avenue, a street which, by 1890, when the synagogue was dedicated, had become one of America's premier addresses. It had become a major fixture in the life of the city.

Over the next decades, like many reform congregations around the country, Temple Beth Zion had developed educational and social programs that benefited its members and the wider community. "Reform Judaism," observed historian Dana Kaplan, "has historically emphasized what it interpreted as the central message of the prophets: the need for social justice."¹⁴ These non-liturgical social and educational initiatives required that the congregation fund additional facilities adjacent to the synagogue. By the 1920s, Temple Beth Zion maintained a complex of facilities for various related activities. Architect Eric Mendelsohn, a major figure in the twentieth-century evolution of Jewish architecture, stated that "today's religious centers should comprise three units: the House of Worship—the House of God, the Assembly Hall for adult members—the House of the People, the School for the education and recreation of their children—the House of the Torah." It was, therefore, said Mendelsohn, the duty of the modern architect to bring these different functions into "organic plan-relationship, to express this material and mental unification in his structure."¹⁵

Beginning in the late 1920s, Temple Beth Zion became known beyond the city due to the career of its dynamic leader, Rabbi Joseph L. Fink. A confidant to Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman, Rabbi Fink

¹² "A Large Wooden Dome," *Engineering News*, 23(June 28, 1890), 609-610.

¹³ "A Vision of Beauty," *Buffalo Express*, September 12, 1890.

¹⁴ Dana Evan Kaplan, *American Reform Judaism: An Introduction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 15.

¹⁵ Eric Mendelsohn quoted in Richard Meier (ed), *Recent American Synagogue Architecture* (New York: Jewish Museum, 1963), 22.

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enjoyed a reputation around the country as a fervent advocate for progressive ideals. He voiced these convictions to a wide audience on the Humanitarian Hour, a national radio program he produced for over twenty-five years. By the time of Rabbi Fink's retirement in 1958, Temple Beth Zion had grown considerably in prestige and membership. In 1954, in response to the growth of the congregation in the suburbs, Temple Beth Zion opened a second location in Amherst, New York.

On the night of October 1, 1961, a tragic fire destroyed Edward Kent's magnificent 1890 tabernacle and the attached ancillary facilities. Among them was a 1924 annex that contained Rabbi Fink's large collection of rare religious books. The rabbi stood by along with hundreds of others watching helplessly as the fire raged. Kent's great dome gave up the ghost in a burst of glory. Buffalo architect John Laping, a member of the congregation, remembered, "when the great copper clad dome collapsed into the surrounding walls it sent a huge burst of sparks into the October night sky. It was, like the whirlwind in Job, a clear signal that our history was about to change."¹⁶ Happily, the Torah survived for future generations to read from at holy day services.

The New Location

Rather than attempt to rebuild the severely fire-damaged building or to erect a replacement on its 1.5-acre site, the congregation decided to purchase property for a new home further north on Delaware Avenue. This came after a serious debate over whether the new home should be in the suburbs. In February 1962, the chair of the Site Committee, Edward Kavinoky, announced that they had voted to remain in the city, where a majority of the congregation still lived. The new location would be a four-acre site just north of the Jewish Center on Delaware Avenue at Barker Street. (The latter institution is not and has never been formally associated with Temple Beth Zion.) The land would be purchased from three owners for \$640,000. The Town Club, a three-story brick building, stood on the site and would need to be demolished.¹⁷ The choice of such a prominent location along Buffalo's avenue of attainment presented more than just a matter of convenience for most of the temple's congregants. "It seems to me," remarked Kavinoky, a prominent lawyer and civic leader, "this temple represents more than just a building where religious services are held. It represents the Jewish community."¹⁸

For the next six years, until the nominated temple opened, the congregation worshipped in several friendly churches (notably the Westminster Presbyterian Church), in Kleinhans Music Hall, and in other temporary locations. In a gesture of ecumenicalism, the Catholic owners of the Schwab Brothers construction company in nearby Tonawanda agreed to demolish the ruins of the synagogue free of charge.

¹⁶ John Laping, "Temple Beth Zion: From 599 to 805 Delaware Avenue: Remarks on the Occasion of the 40th Anniversary of the Temple Dedication, April 20, 2007." Buffalo as an Architectural Museum website, www.buffaloah.com, retrieved May 2017.

¹⁷ Benderson Development owned the other two properties. See "Delaware Location Picked for Temple," *Buffalo Courier-Express*, February 8, 1962.

¹⁸ "New Beth Zion Delaware Site," *Buffalo Evening News*, February 8, 1962.

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**The Architectural Committee Searches the Country for an Architect to Design the New Building,
October 1961-April 1962**

Once the congregation had secured a site for its new building, members determined that a new structure should accommodate 1,600 families and include both worship spaces and facilities for social and secular activities. These had been part of the temple's mission since the 1890s. The committee estimated the cost in the range of \$2,900,000. (Nearly half of this would come from insurance claims on the fire-damaged old synagogue and sale of the property on which it had stood). The next step was to secure the services of an architect. This became the charge of a specially constituted architecture committee.

The energetic chair of the architecture committee, Paul P. Cohen, was a prominent Buffalo attorney with a keen interest in architecture. Cohen pushed for hiring an architect with a nationwide reputation. As a result, the committee contacted some of the leading lights of the postwar architectural profession in America. The list included Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, Minoru Yamasaki, Marcel Breuer, Sidney Eisenshtat, Percival Goodman, Bloch & Hess, Bertram Bassuk, Edward Durrell Stone, Pietro Belluschi, William Lescase, Ely Jacques Kahn, Percival Goodman, Albert Alschuler, Daniel Schwartzman, Albert Alschuler, and Max Abramovitz.¹⁹

Some of these architects had designed religious buildings, including modernist structures for Jewish congregations. In 1959, Italian-born Pietro Belluschi, who felt that "there is no architectural tradition to match the Jewish faith," had been commissioned to design Temple B'rith Kodesh in nearby Rochester.²⁰ The complex of buildings grouped around a court featured a spectacular steel-framed domed space with twelve sides to symbolize the original twelve tribes of Israel. Marcel Breuer, who felt "a place of worship seems to demand dignity and serenity as its birthright," had recently received an important commission to design Temple B'nai Jeshrum in Short Hills, New Jersey.²¹ Yamasaki, who believed "Judaism appears to offer a beautiful combination of tradition, thought and equality," had designed two Reform synagogues in New York and, in 1959, was commissioned by the North Shore Congregation Israel in Glencoe, Illinois, to plan its new house of worship.²² One critic described his remarkable cathedral plan as "one of the most striking designs of the postwar years—daring in its technical and structural innovations, triumphant in its spatial configuration and breathtakingly beautiful in its landscape setting."²³ Los Angeles modernist architect Sidney Eisenshtat had made his name in 1953 with his plan for Temple Emmanuel in Los Angeles. It was one of the first postwar attempts by a modernist architect to reinterpret the traditional synagogue. In El Paso, Texas, Eisenshtat's

¹⁹ The committee also contacted two Buffalo architects, R. Maxwell James and Milton Milstein (a member of the congregation), and Rochester architects Charles V. Northrup and Michael J. DeAngelis.

²⁰ Belluschi, quoted in Meier, 19.

²¹ Breuer, quoted in Meier, 19.

²² Yamasaki, quoted in Meier, 25.

²³ Gruber, 122.

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Temple Sinai complex had just been completed in 1962. It featured a spacious sanctuary space sheltered beneath a thin parabolic concrete ceiling that many observers likened to a tent. The bimah shone in light that flowed down from a tall monitor of the type Le Corbusier had designed for his postwar chapel of Notre-Dame-du-Haut at Ronchamp, France. Percival Goodman's Temple Beth El in Providence, Rhode Island, of 1954, was another one of the pioneering modernist synagogues. Goodman broke with tradition to introduce an innovative structural system. The congregation prayed beneath a striking curved wooden vault rising from the bimah end to span the entire auditorium in a series of diamond-shaped coffers formed by crisscrossing beams. A few years earlier, Goodman had pioneered the combination of modern art with modern architecture in his B'nai Israel synagogue (1952) in Milburn, New Jersey. Art historian Janay Wong observed that Goodman, along with Erich Mendelsohn, was one of the first modern architects "who adopted a new attitude toward synagogue art, viewing it not as a separate entity but as an integral part of the architecture that must be taken into account at the preliminary stages of the building's design."²⁴ Mendelsohn, who died in 1953, had built the Park Synagogue, Cleveland, for which he was justly famous. Undoubtedly, had he been alive, Mendelsohn would have been included on the committee's list of architects.

Buffalo native Gordon Bunshaft was a natural first choice. In fact, Cohen and others spoke with him even before the architecture committee was officially established. The occasion was the January 19, 1962, dedication of Bunshaft's addition to the Albright-Knox Art Gallery. The elegant new International Style wing of the Albright-Knox had opened to rave reviews. In the opinion of Japanese architect Kenze Tange, Bunshaft had created "the most beautiful building in the world for an art museum."²⁵ This recent hometown triumph notwithstanding, Bunshaft, whose family had been congregants of Temple Beth El, failed to follow up on the Cohen interview by ignoring the committee's request for additional information. Others to whom the architecture committee had turned also fell off the list. Yamasaki and Stone appeared to have had too much work in hand to take on the project.²⁶ Belluschi and Lescase were eliminated for unknown reasons. Breuer's demand for hefty pre-commission consulting fees and his suggestion that the congregation acquire a different location for the temple disqualified him.

Max Abramovitz, who thought the new site was excellent, responded warmly to the committee's inquiry. He came to Buffalo for interviews with the committee at least twice from his office at 630 Fifth Avenue in New York. During these meetings, he highlighted the prominent projects that he and his partner, William Harrison, had been involved with, notably Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, Rockefeller Center, and the United Nations headquarters, all in New York City. Abramovitz must surely have spoken of his Jewish heritage and his personal interest in synagogue architecture. In the late 1940s, Abramovitz had planned Jewish Hillel centers on

²⁴ Janay J. Wong, "Synagogue Art of the 1950s: A New Context for Abstraction. *Art Journal*, 53(Winter 1994), 37.

²⁵ "Albright-Knox Addition is 'Perfect' For Museum, Japanese Architect says," *Buffalo Evening News*, January 19, 1962.

²⁶ Yamasaki and Stone would later design two prominent buildings in Buffalo. In 1964, Yamasaki planned the present One M&T Plaza, and, in 1971, Stone became architect for the *Buffalo News* headquarters.

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university campuses, in Evanston, IL (demolished) and Champaign, IL. In 1952, he had written an extensive article on the history of synagogue design for Talbot Hamlin's definitive *Forms and Functions of Twentieth Century Architecture*. He had not had, however, had the opportunity to design a synagogue, something he strongly desired to do. This must have contributed substantially to his enthusiasm for Temple Beth Zion undertaking.

If chosen to design Buffalo's Temple Beth Zion, he told the committee, he would take personal responsibility for the commission. It would not fall prey to shopwork. Impressed with Abramovitz's strong credentials, Jewish background, and promised commitment, the committee voted unanimously on April 15, 1962, to hire him. The process Paul Cohen had initiated amounted to a virtual national competition for the design of the Temple Beth Zion's new building. The committee had every reason to believe that it would be an outstanding example of modern architecture.

Max Abramovitz (1908-2004), Architect of the New Synagogue

When he signed on to design Temple Beth Zion in 1962, Max Abramovitz had earned a major place for himself in American commercial and institutional architecture as the partner of Wallace K. Harrison in the firm of Harrison & Abramovitz. The son of Jewish immigrant parents who came to America from Romania, Abramovitz, who was born in 1908, grew up Chicago. After graduating from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1929 with an undergraduate degree in architecture, he went on to obtain a master's degree in architecture at Columbia University in New York. After graduating from that venerable program in 1931, he obtained a fellowship that allowed him to study for two years in Paris at the École des Beaux-Arts. Back in New York, he joined Wallace K. Harrison (1895-1981) as a designer in the firm of Harrison & Fouilhoux. (J. Andre Fouilhoux was a French engineer.) In 1941, Abramovitz's name was added to the partnership, and four years later, upon the death of Fouilhoux, the firm became Harrison & Abramovitz. The fruitful association lasted until Harrison retired in 1979, after which the firm was known as Abramovitz, Harris & Kingsland. (Abramovitz interrupted his professional career between 1942 and 1946 to serve in the military, two years of which were spent in China.) The Harrison and Abramovitz partnership grew to become one of the most successful corporate architectural firms in the United States. At the height of the national building boom of the mid-1960s, the firm employed over 200 people.

The firm's extensive portfolio included many of the major examples of the International Style architecture in America. As Harrison's partner, Abramovitz was often the principal designer on significant projects. "He is best known," stated his biographers John Harwood and Janet Parks, "for his association with some of New York's most significant postwar building projects notably as the deputy director of planning for the United Nations Headquarters and as the architect of Philharmonic Hall at Lincoln Center." The list of the firm's projects includes the Alcoa Building in Pittsburgh (1953), the United Nations Headquarters in New York (with

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others, 1953), the Corning Glass Center in Corning, New York (1953), the Socony-Mobil building in New York (1956), the Time-Life Building in Rockefeller Center (1959), the Loeb Student Center at New York University (1959), the Corning Glass Center, New York (1959), the Phoenix Mutual Life Insurance building, Hartford, CT (1961), Columbia University's East Campus and Law Center (1962), the Assembly Hall at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (1962), Hilles Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, MA (1964), the Fiberglass Tower, Toledo, OH (1969), the Krannert Art Center at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (1969), the Erie County Savings Bank, Buffalo, NY (1969), the Nationwide Insurance building, Columbus, OH (1977), the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, (1979), and the Swiss Bank Tower, New York, NY (1989). Many of the firm's commissions received national attention in the pages of important trade journals, as the *Architectural Record* and *Progressive Architecture*. A notable departure from the firm's adherence to the International Style, the Neo-Expressionist Temple Beth Zion (1962), was the most significant synagogue that Abramovitz, a practicing member of the Jewish faith, had the opportunity to design.

Many honors flowed to Max Abramowitz during his long and successful career. In 1952, he was elected Fellow of the American Institute of Architects; in 1961 he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Pittsburgh; in 1970 he received an honorary doctorate from his alma mater, the University of Illinois; in 1975, the National Academy of Design presented him with its Gold Medal award; and in 1987 the New York Society of Architects bestowed upon him the prestigious Special Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Architectural Profession.

Abramowitz expressed a simple design philosophy, once telling a reporter that when people asked why he planned a building in a certain way he felt that "it's the only way it should have been done." He also noted that a building "should be one of the visual joys of society. The man in the street should get a kick out of it."²⁷ A quiet man who was described as a workaholic, Abramovitz most enjoyed intimate social gatherings at his home in New York, where he had amassed a collection of paintings and sculptures.

Physically, Abramovitz was described as "a thoughtful, rather finely wrought man with clear blue eyes under heavy brows and long, delicate lashes. He has strong fingers, the nails square-tipped. He was born left-handed, but taught himself (under some pressure) to use his right hand. As a result, he is substantially ambidextrous—a quality that has served him both on the hand ball court and at the drafting table."²⁸

Evolution of the Design and Construction, April 1962-April 1967

²⁷ Randy Kennedy, "Max Abramowitz, 96, Architect of Avery Fisher Hall, Dies," *New York Times*, September 15, 2004.

²⁸ "Designer for Listening, Max Abramovitz," *New York Times*, December 2, 1959.

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Once the architecture committee had done its work and Abramovitz had signed the contract, he became responsible to the building committee. The architect immediately got to work on plans for the new complex. In May, 1962, the local press reported that he expected to be finished within six months. In October, when asked again to reveal details of his preliminary plans, Abramovitz declined to be more specific other than to state "at present the complete complex will include a temple, chapel, auditorium, classrooms and offices." He indicated that he was in close contact with the building committee, which was headed by Milton Friedman. "Something like this," he said, "evolves out of discussions and we work very closely with the board."²⁹ He promised that preliminary plans would be ready by the end of 1962. Abramovitz met this deadline, and in February 1963, the building committee approved his preliminary plans.³⁰ Although later modified in details, the program that Abramovitz laid out for the buildings and site, which he illustrated in a perspective drawing dated February 1963, would guide construction in the coming years. Thoughtfully meeting the congregation's functional requirements, Abramovitz introduced a powerful new image of spiritual expression into the city's religious architecture. In addition, as Edward Kent's earlier synagogue had done, the new complex contributed a notable specimen of architecture to the streetscape of the city's most prominent thoroughfare.

After the building committee signed construction contracts with Siegfried Construction Company of Buffalo in May 1964, the new facility moved steadily toward completion. Groundbreaking ceremonies, attended by the architect, took place on June 24, 1964. In fall of that year, the public got a good idea of how the new building, which was well underway, would look. In November, Abramovitz displayed a large model (now lost) of the project at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery. The gallery director, Gordon Smith, said that he was happy to bring before the public such a fine example of modern architecture.³¹ The architect's model revealed that the walls of the oval sanctuary, which appeared in the earlier perspective drawing as thin, slightly convex vertical slivers of concrete (resembling a series of "lady fingers") were now to be built as larger, fluted or scalloped segments, ten to a side. (Some have nicknamed this the "cupcake" design.) While the exterior was covered with limestone panels, the concrete was left exposed on the interior walls. At the time, workers already had poured one-third of the concrete walls of the sanctuary.

The design of the Sisterhood Chapel had also undergone revision from the image shown in the architect's first perspective drawing. In fact, even the model misled the public about its appearance. In its final plan, a convex western wall (with a central floor-to-ceiling window lighting the end containing the bimah and ark), curved outer wing walls, and an ovoid roofline better relate the chapel to the elliptical shapes of the sanctuary than did

²⁹ "Final Synagogue Plans Promised by the End of the Year," *Buffalo Evening News*, October 8, 1962.

³⁰ See "Beth Zion Temple, Buffalo, New York, job no. N-303" in the Abramovitz manuscript collection at the Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University, for 39 blueprints and 21 structural and mechanical sepia prints for Temple Beth Zion dated March 20, 1964.

³¹ "Gallery to Display Model of New Temple Beth Zion," *Buffalo Courier-Express*, November 14, 1964.

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the shoebox form displayed in the model. In reality, by November 1965, Abramovitz had already modified the building to this final drum-shaped ground plan.³² A contemporary newspaper report indicated that excavations had begun for the chapel foundations and that it would be a “rectangular building with circular ends.”³³ Construction photographs from May 1965 confirm this statement.

The layout of the Temple Beth Zion complex adheres to an established pattern in postwar synagogue design. It consisted of grouping the predominate temple with a smaller chapel and school and offices adjacent to an open court-like space. Eric Mendelsohn’s Park Synagogue in Cleveland of 1922 is generally credited with pioneering the synagogue plan that Abramovitz followed, utilizing a courtyard as a unifying landscape element. The particular arrangement of the Buffalo building, however, may well have had a secular precedent. The U-shaped arrangement of the synagogue, school, and chapel around a central space facing a major thoroughfare recalls the plan of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts on Broadway in New York. As the designer of Philharmonic Hall there and a member of the general design team for Lincoln Center, Abramovitz would have been thoroughly familiar with that great undertaking. Such a layout was also expressive of the more open nature of Judaism that Rabbi Fink and his Reform Temple Beth Zion congregation would have wished to present to the world. As a tribute to the sanctuary’s ecumenical expression, dedication ceremonies included participants from a number of Protestant and Catholic communities. These groups had also aided the congregation after fire had destroyed its earlier home.

³² In 1965, a local newspaper reported that Abramovitz had designed the chapel in “a round form” in order to provide “a feeling of unity” by relating it “to the sweeping arc shapes of the sanctuary.” The “drum-shaped” chapel, the anonymous but apparently well-informed reporter said, was to be sixty feet in diameter and would serve “as an intermediary between the piquant appeal of the ellipsoidal sanctuary and the routine rectangularity of the . . . two-story religious school building.” No record of this design has survived. See “Exciting Architect Accent Temple Here,” *South Buffalo-West Seneca News*, November 18, 1965.

³³ Ibid.

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Building Construction; Sisterhood Chapel (May 25, 1965)

In order to erect the sanctuary, the architect employed reinforced concrete poured into scalloped-shaped wooden forms that were raised as each layer set. The *Architectural Record* described for its professional readers the method of construction employed in the following terms:

Constructed in two sections (right and left) by horizontal layers, the walls, in their apparent tilted state, remained standing without supports until the roof was applied. Because of the contour, the center of gravity lies not outside nor in the wall, but within the arc. The scalloped shape was developed because it is essentially stronger than a comparable smooth arc.

A simple steel-truss roof rests on the walls, leaving enough space around the edge for the peripheral skylight. Heating elements were installed on the outer surface of the roof to melt abundant Buffalo snows.

The concrete was left exposed on the interior (on the exterior they are faced with Alabama limestone) where the unfilled form-bolt holes that held the wooden forms in place during construction were left exposed. These small but deep holes form a pattern that relieves the bareness of the concrete surfaces.

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Heating in the winter comes from warm-air blowers located along the base of the walls that send air up between the wall and balcony.³⁴

The first part of the building to be put into service was the auditorium. The building committee had approved plans for this multi-functional structure in August 1964. On the evening of April 21, 1966, Abramovitz came from New York to speak at its dedication to the memory of Rabbi Joseph L. Fink.

During his talk at the dedication of the Fink auditorium, the architect told his audience that the religious school was about a month away from completion and the Sisterhood Chapel would be ready in May. Abramovitz also mentioned that in June or July Ben Shahn's great windows would be installed in the sanctuary, which, he predicted, would be in use for High Holy Days in September.³⁵ His predictions proved optimistic. The entire complex was eventually dedicated a year after Abramovitz's speech, on April 21, 1967.

Ben Shahn (1898-1969) and the Stained Glass Windows and Ten Commandments

From the earliest days of the design of the sanctuary, the architect planned to have large works of art over the entrance and behind the bimah. These would eventually become large areas of stained glass. For their Chicago Loop Synagogue, which opened in 1958, architects Loeb, Schlossman & Bennett had signed the American expressionist artist Abraham Ratner (1895-1978) to design a colorful, abstract stained-glass window to fill the entire eastern wall. Ratner's great window on the theme "And God Said Let There Be Light" inaugurated a vogue for large abstract walls of glass in synagogues. Well-known American painter, lithographer and photographer Ben Shahn (1898-1969) was the artist selected to participate in the creation of the Temple Beth Zion sanctuary with Abramovitz. In addition to the stained glass windows, Shahn also designed interior furniture and art, including the wooden Ark, a large gilded metal menorah, and two monumental concrete pylons that proclaim the Ten Commandments in brilliant gold and blue expressionistic Hebrew characters.

Born in Lithuania, Ben Shahn came to New York as child in 1906, when his parents immigrated to America. After studying art in high school in Brooklyn, Shahn attended the Arts Student League in New York, and, in 1923, he became a member of the National Academy of Design. During the 1920s, he traveled in Europe and North Africa, where he developed his intention to devote himself to themes drawn from modern life. By the 1930s, Shahn was a committed social realist painter whose highly stylized version of realism was at times controversial, as when, in a series of paintings, he portrayed the anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti in a positive light. During the later 1930s and 1940s, Shahn painted figurative murals for the Works Progress Administration and created lithographs chronicling the plight of the American farmer during the Great Depression. In 1956, Harvard University confirmed his stature as a leading American artist by appointing him to the Charles Elliott

³⁴ "Temple's Slanting Walls Create an Upwardly Directed Symbolic Form," *Architectural Record*, 143(March 1968), 135.

³⁵ "Auditorium Dedicated to Dr. Fink," *Buffalo Courier-Express*, April 16, 1966.

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Norton Chair of Poetics. During his tenure there, Shahn articulated his philosophy of social realism in a series of lectures that were published as *The Shape of Content* (1957). His defense of realism ran counter to the rising age of passionate abstraction that the New York School was pioneering at the time. This makes his non-representational windows at Temple Beth Zion all the more remarkable.

Shahn designed tall abstract walls of colorful glass for over the western entrance and for behind the sanctuary on the east. Willet Hauser, Architectural Glass, Inc. of New York, made the windows. Several processes were utilized, notably acid etched flashed glass, hand painted fired glass, silver staining, and lead and mouth blown antique glasses. When the windows, which are described below, were finished, Shahn explained in interviews how he went about creating the stained-glass windows, which are unique to his art. Asked how he had arrived at the imagery, Shahn stated that he “took the space and the setting offered him and developed about half a dozen sketches before selecting the final decision.”³⁶ On viewing the complete stained glass in place, Shahn remarked: “If you get goose bumps on your skin when you view something then you know it is good. If you get those goose bumps on your goose bumps then you know it is great.” Apparently, he felt the latter sensation.³⁷ In terms of the artist’s stylistic development, the windows represent his late style. Beginning after World War II, Shahn’s paintings and graphics evolved more and more toward melancholy, fantasy, somber tonalities, sometimes even an Edward Hopper-like mood of loneliness. In his Temple Beth Zion windows, these elements are fused into transcendent, messianic visions.

After mid-century, Shahn turned more and more to subjects drawn from his Jewish heritage. “It seemed to me,” wrote his wife, Bernarda, “since he had rather emphatically cast off his religious ties and traditions during his youth, he could now return to them freely with a fresh eye, and without the sense of moral burden and entrapment that they had once held for him.”³⁸ In particular, he held a great reverence for the Psalms and above all, the 150th. “He was deeply affected by its running cadences, its majesty, its vivid imagery,” stated Bernarda.³⁹ At Temple Beth Zion, he had the opportunity to express his love for the poetry of the psalm in the 28-foot-by-24-foot, slightly concave stained glass window over the entrance, the so-called balcony window. In abstract visual language, Shahn suggested the words of the 150th Psalm, which a choir sang at the dedication of the first Temple Beth Zion in 1865.

Praise God in his holy place!
Praise him in the heavenly dome of his power!
Praise him for his mighty deeds!
Praise him for his surpassing greatness!

³⁶Anne McIlhenney Matthews, “New Temple Amazing Edifice,” *Buffalo Courier-Express*, November 27, 1966.

³⁷“Temple Window Pleases Shahn,” *Buffalo Courier-Express*, December 8, 1966.

³⁸John D. Morse (ed.), *Ben Shahn* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972), 217.

³⁹Ibid.

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Praise him with a blast on the *shofar*!
Praise him with lute and lyre!
Praise him with tambourines and dancing!
Praise him with flutes and strings!
Praise him with clanging cymbals!
Praise him with loud crashing cymbals!
Let everything that has breath praise

The larger eastern window (figure 8), which measures 32 feet by 40 feet, evokes the story of creation as recounted in the Book of Job, verses 38:4-7, wherein God is depicted as the architect of the universe:

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?
Speak if you have understanding.
Do you know who fixed its dimensions?
Or who measured it with a line?
Onto what were its bases sunk?
Who set its cornerstone?
When the morning stars stand together
And all the divine beings shouted for joy?

Installing these windows called for almost as much ingenuity as did the building of the temple's reinforced concrete walls. Not only did the virtual walls of glass need to withstand the buffeting of the winds, but they also had to meet the artist's demand that his designs be done as single compositions rather than a series of small segments, as window manufacturers first proposed. Abramovitz agreed with the artist and told him to "create one unit, we will resolve the problem."⁴⁰ To solve the problem, Abramovitz turned to Lev Zetlin, a well-known Israeli-born New York construction engineer whom Abramovitz and other modern architects relied on to solve difficult structural problems. The system that Zetlin devised holds both windows in place by means of one-quarter-inch high strength steel wires stretched across the openings and anchored into the concrete walls. Small metal rods join the window mullions to the cables. This system, compared to a cat's cradle and the principle of the wire wheel, supported the great weight of the glass and secured the vast surfaces against the wind pressures while minimizing the need for supports that would otherwise have obstructed one's view of the windows. "This acts as a thin net and the perspective and height make the wires practically invisible, creating a fabulous ethereal effect," observed a contemporary commentator.⁴¹

For the sanctuary, the artist also created the simple wooden Ark, a large gilded metal menorah, and two monumental concrete pylons displaying the Decalogue. The latter 30-foot-tall elements proclaim the Ten Commandments in brilliant gold and blue Hebrew characters whose elastic shapes echo the words in the Creation

⁴⁰ "Temple Window Pleases Shahn," *Courier Express*, December 8, 1966.

⁴¹ Anne McIlhenney Matthews, "'Cradle' for Stained-Glass used Here for First Time," *Courier-Express*, August 2, 1965.

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and Psalm 150 windows. Shahn often included expressionistic lettering like this in his paintings, one of which may have formed the inspiration for the great bimah end window.⁴² The pylons and the windows also served in the artist's mind as a powerful contribution to the meaning of the synagogue as a place of coming together. "The public function of art," he wrote, "has always been one of creating a community. There is not necessarily its intention, but it is its result. . . It is the image we hold in common, the character of novels and plays, the great buildings, the complex meanings, and the symbolized concepts, principles, and great ideas of philosophy and religion that have created human community."⁴³

"An appropriate and unhampered expression": The Neo-Expressionist Design of Temple Beth Zion

Neo-Expressionism is a phenomenon in modern architecture that arose after World War II. In the words of architectural historian Boyd Whyte, "the movement has usually been defined in terms of what it is not (rationalist, functional, and so on) rather than what it is."⁴⁴ Architects who practiced in this mode turned away from the metal and glass "purism" and "rationalism" of the International Style as exemplified in the works of Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye (1929) in Poissy, France, in favor of building designs that were "sculptural" in appearance, often had symbolic allusions, and reached for an emotional effect on the user. The favored material for buildings of this style was reinforced concrete because it allowed the architect to mold space and create unusual, curvilinear "plastic" forms. These often had a lyrical or organic expression. This expressive ground had been explored earlier in the twentieth century by such European designers as the German architects Bruno Taut (Glass Pavilion at the Deutscher Werkbund Exhibition, 1914), Erich Mendelsohn (Einstein Tower, Potsdam, 1919) and the Spanish architect Antonio Gaudi (Casa Mila, Barcelona, 1905). The early masterpieces of Neo-Expressionism were Le Corbusier's Chapel of Notre-Dame du Haut (1950) and Eric Sharoun's Philharmonic Hall (1956) in Berlin. Of the former, the architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock wrote:

In an exaggerated phrase Le Corbusier described his early houses as machines for living; but Notre-Dame-du-Haut is more like an enormous piece of sculpture than a 'machine for praying in.' He who once drove architecture towards the mechanistic, the precise, and the volumetric, now provides the exemplar of a new mode so plastic as almost to be naturalistic in the way Gaudi's blocks of flats of fifty years earlier. The walls and roof are rough, indeed almost brutal, in finish, and so massive and solid that the interior of the church at certain times of the day seems positively ill-lit by the tiny deep-sunk windows that irregularly penetrate the wide walls. In place of an aesthetic expression emulating the

⁴² According to the Willet Hauser web site, "The congregation had purchased a painting of Shahn's at a New York gallery. This painting became the inspiration and design for the bema window. The painting was translated into stained glass cartoon by Benoit Gilsoul, who also did the detailed an acid etching of the flashed glass." See <http://www.willethauser.com/temple-beth-zion-buffalo-ny>. Retrieved May 2017.

⁴³ Ben Shahn, *The Shape of Content* (New York: Vintage Books, 1957), 150.

⁴⁴ Quoted by Alan Colquhoun in *Modern Architecture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 21.

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impersonal results of the engineers' calculations, there is here a freehand quality comparable to the spontaneity of the sculptor.⁴⁵

In the United States, the style is identified with the work of, among others, Eero Saarinen (TWA Terminal at JFK Airport, 1956), Bruce Goff (Bavinger House, Norman, OK, 1950), and Paolo Soleri (Arcosanti, near Phoenix, AR, 1960).

Members of the congregation who remembered the massive dome and brilliantly ornamented walls of Edward Kent's former synagogue must have been surprised by the cool, abstract nature of Abramovitz's new synagogue. Believing that synagogues need not conform to any particular shape or style, Abramovitz chose an oval shape with a flat roof for the sanctuary. Abramovitz chose to have his building express to the passerby ecumenical sentiments of hands upraised in prayer and the ancient Judeo-Christian heritage of the Ten Commandments. Given the terrible events of the recent Holocaust years, Abramovitz's portrayal of the new Temple Beth Zion as a place of reflection and affirmation expressed the spirit of the times. In this regard, Temple Beth Zion shared more with Le Corbusier's chapel at Ronchamp, which replaced a medieval church destroyed during wartime fighting with a modernist design that conveyed a mood of peace and spiritual pilgrimage, than it did with the earlier synagogue's colorful celebration of Judaism's historic roots.

On the interior, Abramovitz's building evokes a mood of quiet contemplation that is enhanced by the simple monumental shapes of the bare concrete walls and the soft light that bathes them from unseen peripheral skylights (figure 24). These skylights shed a graded light along the hammer-dressed surfaces. Because the balcony does not extend to the walls but is supported on side brackets, the descending light filters down to the lower level (figure 25). By the time Abramovitz came to design Temple Beth Zion, architects had established natural light as the major expressive element in modern synagogue architecture. Notably, Eric Mendelsohn's B'nai Amoona (1950) in St. Louis, Park Synagogue, and Frank Lloyd Wight's Beth Sholom Synagogue (1954) in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, had celebrated the introduction of natural light to the ceremonial interior. The Philadelphia architect Louis Kahn is referred to as the master of the use of natural light to evoke a contemplative mood in modern religious architecture. Writing in relation to his 1961 design for Mikveh Synagogue in Philadelphia, Kahn proclaimed, "a space can never reach its place in architecture without natural light. . . . The structure is a design in light. The vault, the dome, the arch, the column are structures related to the character of light. Natural light gives mood by space, by the nuances of light in the time of day and the seasons of the year as it enters and modifies the space."⁴⁶ Kahn's synagogue was never built, but Abramovitz could have seen the architect's First Unitarian Church (NR listed), recently completed in nearby Rochester, NY. There, Kahn achieved his goal of a making light a powerfully expressive element of architectural design.

⁴⁵ Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Architecture Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1967), 387.

⁴⁶ Louis Kahn quoted in Richard Meier (ed.), *Recent American Synagogue Architecture* (New York: Jewish Museum, 1963), 8.

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Whether intended or not, the lighting effect inside the Temple Beth Zion Sanctuary is evocative of Baroque churches, a similarity that was noted at the time of the building's completion.⁴⁷ Such buildings as Borromini's San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane (1630s) in Rome introduced light from above and from hidden sources to great effect. Moreover, like Baroque designers, Abramovitz incorporated visual drama into his design for the interior. As visitors enter the auditorium from the vestibule, their attention is drawn upward toward the climatic elements at the bimah end by the rising height of the walls, the glowing oculus, the freestanding pylons with the Decalogue, and the great eastern *Creation* window.

To the inspirational elements of light, stained glass, and monumental sculpture, the power of music is added. The rear of the balcony houses a large pipe organ installed at the time of construction. Choir singing and music are an integral part of Reform ceremonies, whereas Conservative services may or may not include music, and Orthodox congregations shun music altogether. As architect of Philharmonic Hall in New York, Abramovitz would have paid particular attention to the acoustical properties of the synagogue. (They are excellent.) It is likely that together with the organ master, Hans Vigeland, he had consulted on the design and manufacture of the organ itself, which was built by the firm of Casavant Freres of St. Hyacinth, Quebec. Controversy had developed around the poor sound quality in Philharmonic Hall. Perhaps, the architect saw a chance to redeem his reputation with Temple Beth Zion. Acoustically, the scalloped shapes of the interior walls were thought to work well to diffuse sound.⁴⁸

After the completion of the Buffalo building, the congregation formed a landscape committee and engaged local landscape architect Katherine Wilson Rahn to create a garden planting scheme for the courtyard. Although she prepared detailed plans that are now preserved in the Temple Beth Zion archives at the University at Buffalo, the congregation failed to implement them, other than planting the row of trees that screens the courtyard space from the view of passersby. No such element appeared in either Abramovitz's perspective drawing or model of the complex.

Architecturally, the sanctuary represents a bold departure from earlier Modernism; forsaking the style of earlier metal and glass constructions, the architect embraced the expressive sculptural concept of form recently pioneered by Le Corbusier (1887-1965) in his design for the concrete and stone Chapel of Notre-Dame-du-Haut (1955) at Ronchamp, France. There Le Corbusier had set aside the International Style in favor of raw concrete cast in massive, sculptural shapes.

Temple Beth Zion ranks as a significant national example of the mid-twentieth century architect's exploration of concrete to create beautiful and dramatic architectural forms. At the time as he was designing Temple Beth Zion, Abramovitz and other architects were exploring the expressive and structural potential of reinforced

⁴⁷ "Temple's Slanting Walls Create an Upwardly Directed Symbolic Form," *Architectural Record*, 143(March 1968), 133.

⁴⁸ "Temple's Slanting Walls Create an Upwardly Directed Symbolic Form," *Architectural Record*, 143(March 1968), 135.

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concrete. In 1962-1963, Abramovitz designed one of the largest concrete domes in the world for the Assembly Hall at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. "The intrinsic expression" of pre-stressed concrete, he observed, "deserves to be found and has a right to exist" alongside more traditional methods of construction."⁴⁹ Likewise, Pier Luigi Nervi's Palazzo dello Sporto (1960) in Rome and Eero Saarinen's TWA Flight Center (1962) at Kennedy Airport and Dulles Airport Terminal (1962) employed concrete in new ways. Abramovitz was surely aware of Frank Lloyd Wright's recently completed Guggenheim Museum (1959) (National Historic Landmark). His building shares with Wright's a profile that is wider at the top than at the base and a truncated roofline. Internally, the temple, like the museum, steers the visitor through a low entrance area to a lofty, skylighted main space. The sanctuary most likely exerted influence on the design of the Egg (Lewis A. Sweyer Theatre and the Kitty Carlisle Hart Theatre) that his partner, Wallace K. Harrison, designed in the 1966 for the Empire State Plaza in Albany, NY. In addition, the curved form of the wall segments and the layered method of construction, which had the building rise in a series of stages as the concrete set (see above for an explanation of the construction of Abramowitz's sanctuary), recalls the cylindrical shapes and method of construction that early-twentieth-century engineers employed to erect Buffalo's mammoth concrete grain elevators.

Unlike the more traditionally built chapel, school and auditorium (post and lintel construction consisting of brick load bearing walls, metal and glass curtain walls, flat slab roof), the sanctuary presented formidable challenges in its construction (figures 29 and 30). Attuned to the "intrinsic expression" of concrete, Abramovitz had the interior walls hammered to create a uniformly rough texture but left unfilled the form-bolt holes that held wooden forms in place during construction and allowed the lines of transition marking the various stages of casting to remain visible.

The design and construction of the Rabbi Joseph L. Fink auditorium was more traditional than that of the sanctuary. This large rectangular hall is reminiscent of Eliel and Eero Saarinen's Mary Seaton Room auditorium at nearby Kleinhans Music Hall (1939). The all-purpose auditorium that Abramovitz designed recalls the Seaton Room in several particulars, including the adjacent kitchen facilities to service banquets, the white plaster ceiling composed of curved segments, the trapezoidal stage area with wooden side panels, and the design of the walls as a series of vertical panels. The all-purpose auditorium that Abramovitz designed shares adjacent kitchen facilities with the Seaton Room to service banquets, a corrugated white plaster ceiling, a trapezoidal stage area with wooden side panels, and vertical paneling design alongside walls. The resemblance may have been intentional, for after the fire the congregation occasionally met in Kleinhans. Abramovitz himself had attended at least one of these services.⁵⁰ It is entirely possible that Max Abramovitz meant to tip his hat to Eero Saarinen, who died in 1961 and with whom he worked on the design of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts.

⁴⁹ Harwood and Parks, 123.

⁵⁰ Marshall Brown, "Jews Continue to Observe Yom Kippur Rites Today," *Buffalo Courier-Express*, Oct 8, 1962.

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From its opening days in 1967, Temple Beth Zion received high marks from the local and national architectural community. "It immediately became a landmark in Buffalo, drawing more than two thousand visitors," wrote John Harwood and Janet Parks in the catalogue that accompanied the Columbia University exhibition of the architect's work.⁵¹ In 1971, the New York State Council on the Arts presented the temple with its annual award for architectural excellence. The council also praised the building for its stained glass windows by Ben Shahn.

Religious architecture, specifically Jewish architecture, was clearly a topic of interest to Abramovitz. In 1952 Abramovitz wrote an article titled "Synagogues," in which he traced a history of Jewish religious architecture through various countries. Here he argued that synagogues always showed an adaptation to local architectural styles and context, rather than forging their own individual architectural identity. He noted that synagogues were created as a "meeting house for prayer," rather than a Tabernacle or Temple, which was designed as the symbolic "House of God," the term itself deriving for the Greek word meaning "assembling together."⁵² Speaking in reference to Temple Beth Zion, Abramovitz professed that he had "a feeling for many years about what a temple should be." Since the diaspora, he said, Jewish houses of worship adhered to no distinctive form. In his building, he stated that the aim of the curved concrete walls erected around the Sanctuary was to create an enclosure "that was intimately related to the things of our past. Because the walls curve outward toward the ceiling they will create a feeling of uplift, rather than oppression."⁵³ Although Abramovitz never stated it in writing, it appears that the sanctuary embodies his fully evolved notion of Jewish worship. Its expressionistic, almost sculptural character, stands in stark contrast to the metal and glass commercial and institutional buildings with which he and his firm were identified, such as the International Style Main Place Tower (1965; former Erie County Savings Bank) that Harrison & Abramovitz designed in downtown Buffalo contemporary with the Delaware Avenue synagogue. And, as noted, it shares a certain affinity with the egg-shaped reinforced concrete Lewis A. Sweyer Theatre and the Kitty Carlisle Hart Theatre (commonly known as "The Egg" and usually attributed to Harrison) on the Empire State Plaza in Albany, a major work by the firm dating from 1966.

While Temple Beth Zion is perhaps the largest and most expressive example of the religious architectural works by Max Abramovitz, the architect did design several other buildings, some of which bear similarities to Temple Beth Zion. Abramovitz's first example of his concepts for Jewish worship space can be found among the group of three chapels at Brandeis University in Massachusetts, completed in 1955. The trio consists of three separate but stylistically similar buildings for Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish worship. The Jewish Berlin Chapel shares many similar features to Temple Beth Zion. Like Temple Beth Zion, the Berlin Chapel consists of two curved solid walls which frame a narrower wall of glass at both ends, one serving as an entrance and one

⁵¹ Harwood and Parks, 140.

⁵² Max Abramovitz, "Synagogue," in *Forms and Functions of Twentieth Century Architecture*, vol. 3, Talbot Hamlin (ed.). New York: Columbia University Press, 1952, 368.

⁵³ "Auditorium Dedicated to Dr. Fink," *Buffalo Courier-Express*, April 22, 1966. See also "Architect to talk on new Temple," *Buffalo Courier-Express*, April 21, 1966.

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which serves as a focus point for worship services. At the Berlin Chapel, the walls do not have the full dramatic cant of Temple Beth Zion; however, they do have a similar sort of undulating scallop on the interior, which is similar to that at the larger temple building. While the bimah end is marked by a large stained glass window at Temple Beth Zion, at the Berlin Chapel a simpler clear glass wall is used. The ceiling in both building also has a reveal from the surface of the walls, rendered more dramatic at Temple Beth Zion by the use of skylights, emphasizing the separation of the two planes. Interestingly, the Ark in both buildings appears nearly identical with its simplified, gold-hued, lozenge-shaped form, set so that it appears to hover above the floor. While simpler in its form, expression and materials, the Berlin Chapel of 1955, when viewed alongside Temple Beth Zion of 1964-67, appears to be a precursor for the larger building. At nearly the same time as his work at the Berlin Chapel, Abramovitz also designed two Hillel centers, at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign and at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois (both demolished), which were completed in 1954. These two buildings also shared some similarities with Temple Beth Zion, including simplified forms and an emphasis on a curved, cylindrical worship space.⁵⁴ Through the Berlin Chapel and two Hillel centers, it appears evident that Abramovitz was attempting to find an architectural expression for Jewish religious architecture. Later in his career, Abramovitz would go on to design at least one other major synagogue, the Jewish chapel at the United States Military Academy at West Point, completed in 1984. A design departure from the more sculptural forms of the Berlin Chapel and Temple Beth Zion, the West Point chapel reflects Abramovitz's contention that there was no one universal form for Jewish religious architecture; the West Point chapel is a stark, late-Brutalist style rectilinear building with imposing solid planes of rusticated stone. However, it did employ a feature found at Temple Beth Zion and the Berlin Chapel, utilizing a large panel of glass to mark the bimah.

In 2004, the year of the architect's death, his long career was the subject of a major exhibition at Columbia University, the institution from which he had graduated in 1931. Entitled "The Troubled Search, The Work of Max Abramovitz," the exhibition was on view at Columbia University's Miriam and Ira Wallach Art Gallery.¹ This gallery was founded in 1986 specifically to highlight Columbia University's tradition of excellence in the visual arts. Temple Beth Zion figured significantly in that comprehensive retrospective. The Temple Beth Zion contributed an important element in the exhibition's goal, which critic Alexandra Lange, writing in the prestigious *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, recognized as "to give him a history separate from his partnership" with Wallace K. Harrison.¹ On view in the exhibition were photographs of Temple Beth Zion and two sheets of drawings. "On these two sheets," remarked the exhibition text, "he has already found the prayer like form of the sanctuary and is trying out specific shapes and their relation to the community and administrative buildings at the temple."¹ The exhibition also sought to secure Abramovitz's place in the broad history of modern architecture. "Both the exhibition and the catalogue have been planned to coincide with the biannual conference of DOCOMOMO (Documentation and Conservation of the Modern Movement) conference to be held at Columbia University in September 2004," stated the organizers. "As the landmarks of

⁵⁴ Allison Roff, "Focus On: University of Illinois Hillel Foundation," *Preservation Matters* 26, no. 3 (May/June 2006): 1-2.

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International Modernism age, questions of maintenance, renovation, obsolescence, and preservation emerge. The international organization DOCOMOMO is dedicated to the preservation of modern buildings, sites and neighborhoods, attempting to define preservation and conservation standards for buildings that still look new to our eyes.”¹

As a modernist, Abramovitz held the view that synagogues need not conform to any particular style or form, as long as they met certain traditional requirements and usage. The 62-foot high exposed concrete interior of Temple Beth Zion is one of the most impressive and affecting spaces in the city of Buffalo. To the daytime visitor taking a seat in the synagogue, the flat ceiling seems to hover unsupported above the oval space that is pervaded by a soft illumination. People of all persuasions seem to sense that the architect’s quest for pure light implies a spiritual journey beyond the spatial limits of the building. “I wanted a feeling inside of not being confined by walls,” said Max Abramovitz, “so that a person can look toward the Ark and the Tablets and the building doesn’t impose itself upon you and you can relate yourself to the intangibles or find your own personal relationship.”⁵⁵ This statement expresses the essence of modern expressionist architecture.

After the Period of Significance

Over the years, the Temple Beth Zion building has undergone relatively few changes to its exterior and interior. In 2004, the Buffalo architectural firm of HHL prepared a plan to remodel the ground floor of the religious school, which was completed in 2005. The overall plan and layout of this area remained intact, but the corridor running the length of the building was transformed into an art gallery for the display of a collection of paintings, drawings, reliefs, and photographs. These include eight color lithographs of the *Dreyfus Affair* by Ben Shahn and small plaster reliefs replicating prophets from John Singer Sargent’s *Triumph of Religion* murals in the Boston Public Library. (These were apparently retrieved from the fire that destroyed the former synagogue.) In its new iteration, the appearance of the corridor was considerably upgraded: smooth, off-white plaster panels covered the former utilitarian cinderblock walls; a shallow vaulted ceiling replaced the earlier prosaic flat drop ceiling; and lighting appropriate to the display of artwork was introduced.

The most significant change was the creation of a secondary lobby about mid-way along the corridor between the sanctuary and chapel by removing earlier office walls and adding tall plate glass windows (and a door) on the north side overlooking the lawn between the sanctuary and chapel. For this new lobby space, the architects designed four tall glass cabinets for the display of objects from the Cofield Collection. “Located in this new lobby space,” runs a contemporary description, “and in clear view along the newly vaulted corridor, these elegantly detailed cabinets are light, transparent, and virtually free-standing units within the space. . . . In addition, the cabinets are set at different angles and create distinct objects that not only house a beautiful

⁵⁵ Matthews, “Cradle.”

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collection but are themselves beautiful objects within the lobby.”⁵⁶ This new lobby also contains seating and a glass-enclosed area for informal meetings. Also at this time, two former offices that occupied the rooms at either side of the southern end of the corridor were transformed into restrooms. The repurposing, however, preserved the rooms’ original wood wainscoting.

The 2005 remodeling of the religious school portion of Temple Beth Zion left the second floor less changed than the ground floor. Here, the southern section of the corridor is virtually unchanged from 1967, with the cinderblock walls still visible. The former classrooms, however, have been transformed into offices. The corridor on the northern portion was reduced in size and the configuration of the classrooms changed to accommodate more office space. This floor is rented to a non-profit organization and is no longer used for its original educational purpose.

In 2005, the renewal of the sanctuary was undertaken under the supervision of HHL Architects, with the well-known restoration architect Theodore Lownie in charge. Under Lownie’s guidance, the renewal proceeded with great respect for the original interior. Work included refinishing the wooden pews, changing the heating system, and introducing a new sound system. (The original speakers still exist in the lights suspended from the ceiling, but they are no longer used.)

In 2011, the original wooden pews were removed from the Sisterhood Chapel and replaced by moveable seating. Projection screens were also added at that time to either side of the bimah area, and inconspicuous light fixtures were installed on the mullions of the north and south walls. In 2014, the Golden Friendship Garden was created in the southeast area of the chapel, between the chapel and the religious school building. It is entered from a doorway in the south side of the hyphen joining these two spaces. The garden, which commemorates Nancy Golden (1925-2014), a former member of the congregation, houses a colorful mixed media sculpture by Pam Golden entitled *Tree of Life*.

Despite these alterations, the Temple Beth Zion remains highly intact to Abramovitz’s design and concept. The key public spaces of the sanctuary, chapel and auditorium remain largely intact. These small updates are reflective of the continued use of the synagogue by the congregation.

Summary

Temple Beth Zion in Buffalo is an outstanding example of mid-twentieth century modern architecture designed by the nationally prominent architect Max Abramovitz (1908-2004) at the peak of his career. The temple was one of several important synagogues designed by well-known architects in the postwar period. The

⁵⁶ Brian Carter, “A Late-Modern Temple Gallery,” *Faith & Form: The Interfaith Journal on Religion, Art and Architecture*, 2(November 2011), 18-19.

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congregation interviewed the architects of many of these buildings before they decided to award the commission to Abramovitz. Buffalo's Temple Beth Zion was the architect's most important example of this building type, the history and design of which had been field of special inquiry for him. Other important works with which Abramovitz was associated, notably the United Nations Headquarters (1953) and Philharmonic Hall (1962; the present David Geffen Hall), both in New York City, were landmark statements of the International Style. For Temple Beth Zion, he turned to the antirational aesthetic of Neo-Expressionism, pioneered by Le Corbusier with his 1955 chapel of Notre-Dame-du Haut at Ronchamp, France. Temple Beth Zion is also distinguished by its exceptional artwork by famous American painter Ben Shahn (1898-1969), including Shahn's only example of stained glass design. The large scale and vibrant abstract motifs of the two dominant windows, together with the artist's Ten Commandments pylons, which dominate the sanctuary, add special drama to the stunning oval interior that the architect surrounded with undulating walls of exposed concrete and lit with concealed skylights. Temple Beth Zion represents one of the significant architect-artist collaborations in American architecture of the recent past. When opened it in 1967, it added an outstanding example of Modernism to Buffalo's heritage of notable architecture.

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TEMPLE BETH ZION

Name of Property

Erie County, New York

County and State

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TEMPLE BETH ZION

Name of Property

Erie County, New York

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TEMPLE BETH ZION

Name of Property

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TEMPLE BETH ZION

Name of Property

Erie County, New York

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Verbal Boundary Description

The boundary is indicated with a heavy line on the attached maps with scale.

Boundary Justification

The boundary encompasses the current property associated with Temple Beth Zion, which corresponds to the historic parcel at this location.

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TEMPLE BETH ZION

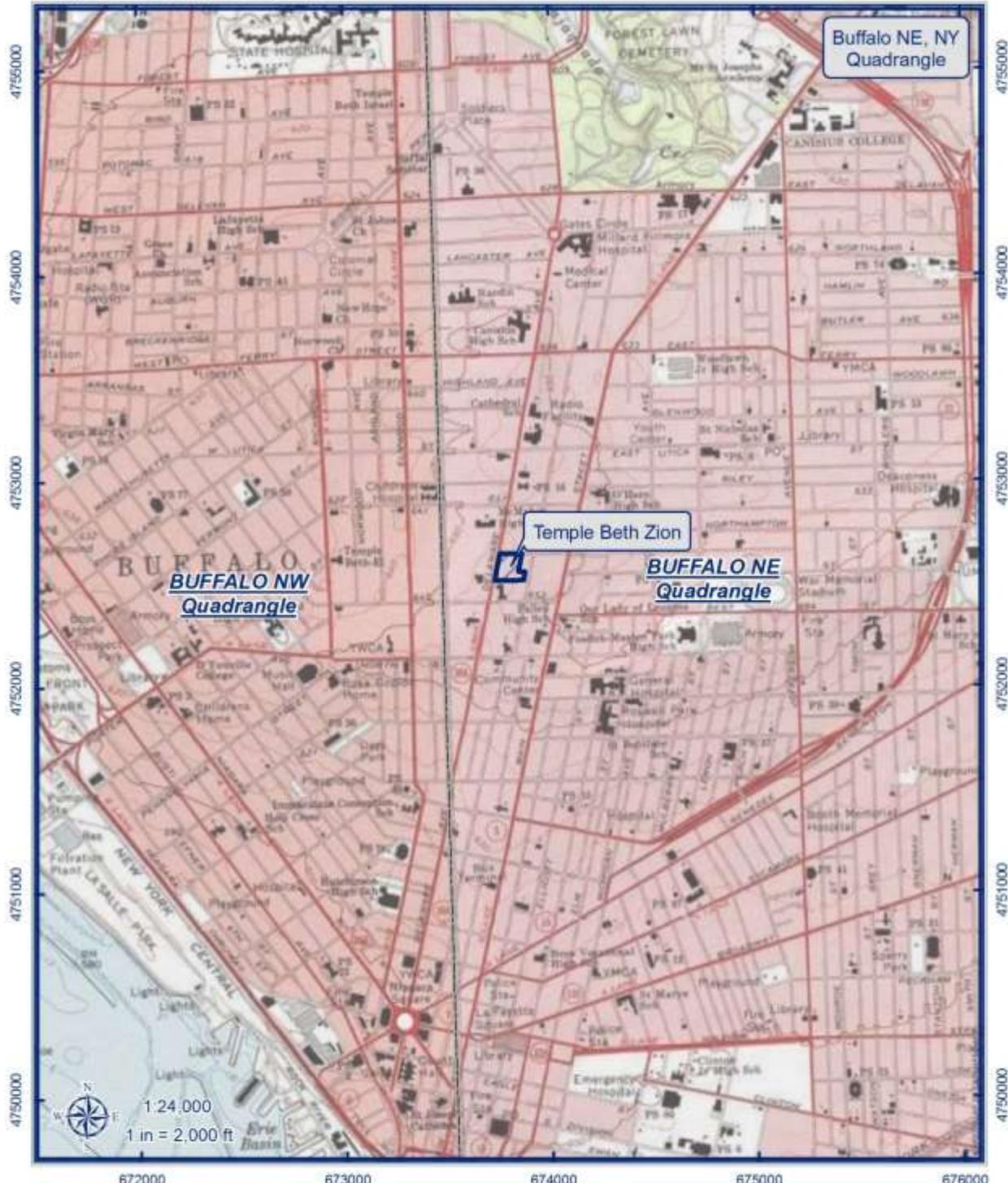
Name of Property

Erie County, New York

County and State

Temple Beth Zion
City of Buffalo, Erie Co., NY

805 Delaware Avenue
Buffalo, NY 14209



Coordinate System: NAD 1983 UTM Zone 17N
Projection: Transverse Mercator
Datum: North American 1983
Units: Meter



 Temple Beth Zion

 Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
Division for Historic Preservation

United States Department of the Interior
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TEMPLE BETH ZION

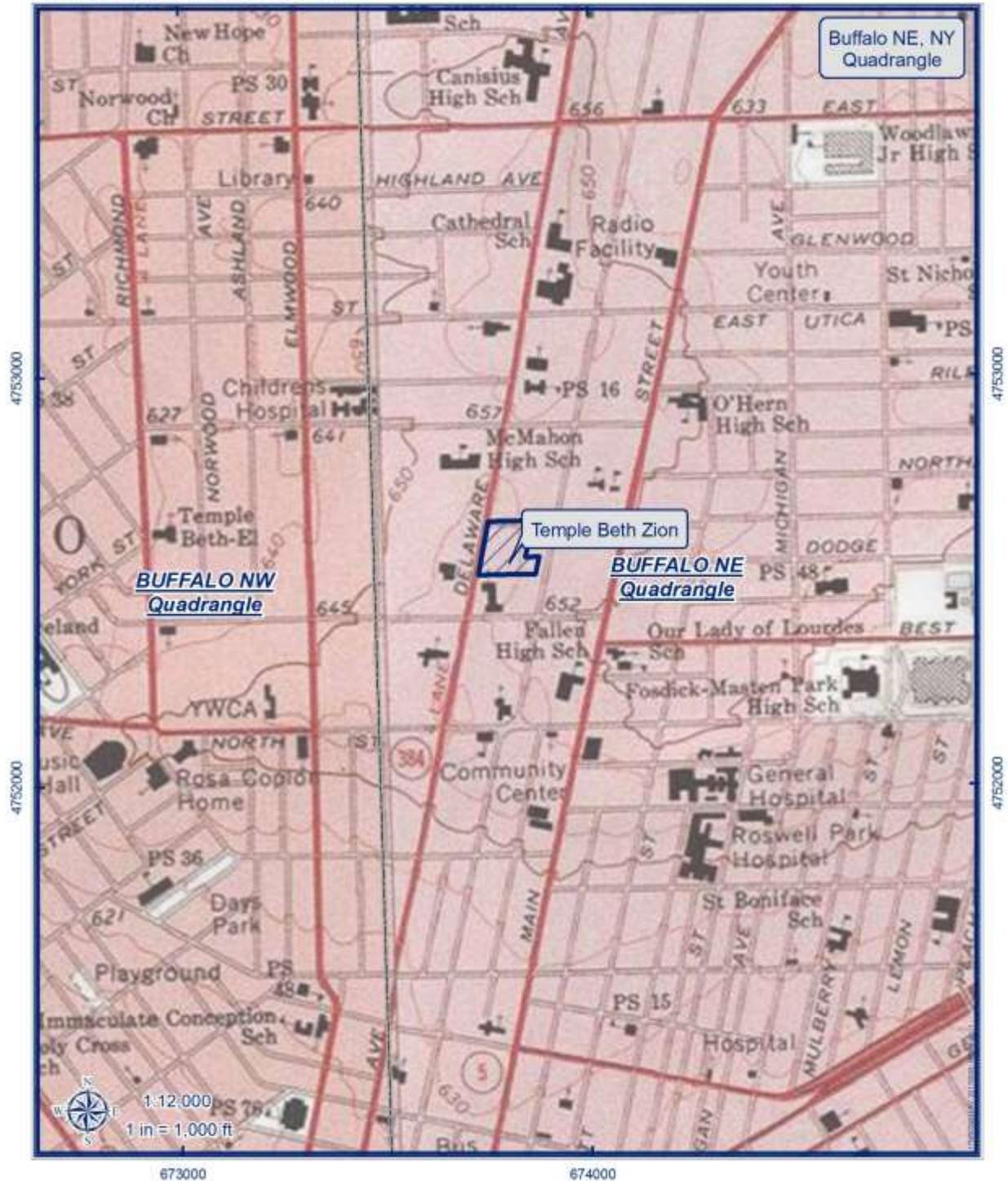
Name of Property

Erie County, New York

County and State

Temple Beth Zion
City of Buffalo, Erie Co., NY

805 Delaware Avenue
Buffalo, NY 14209



Coordinate System: NAD 1983 UTM Zone 17N
Projection: Transverse Mercator
Datum: North American 1983
Units: Meter



 Temple Beth Zion

 Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
Division for Historic Preservation

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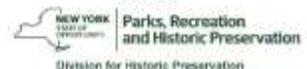
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Name of Property
Erie County, New York
County and State

Temple Beth Zion
City of Buffalo, Erie Co., NY

805 Delaware Avenue
Buffalo, NY 14209



Coordinate System: NAD 1983 UTM Zone 17N
Projection: Transverse Mercator
Datum: North American 1983
Units: Meter



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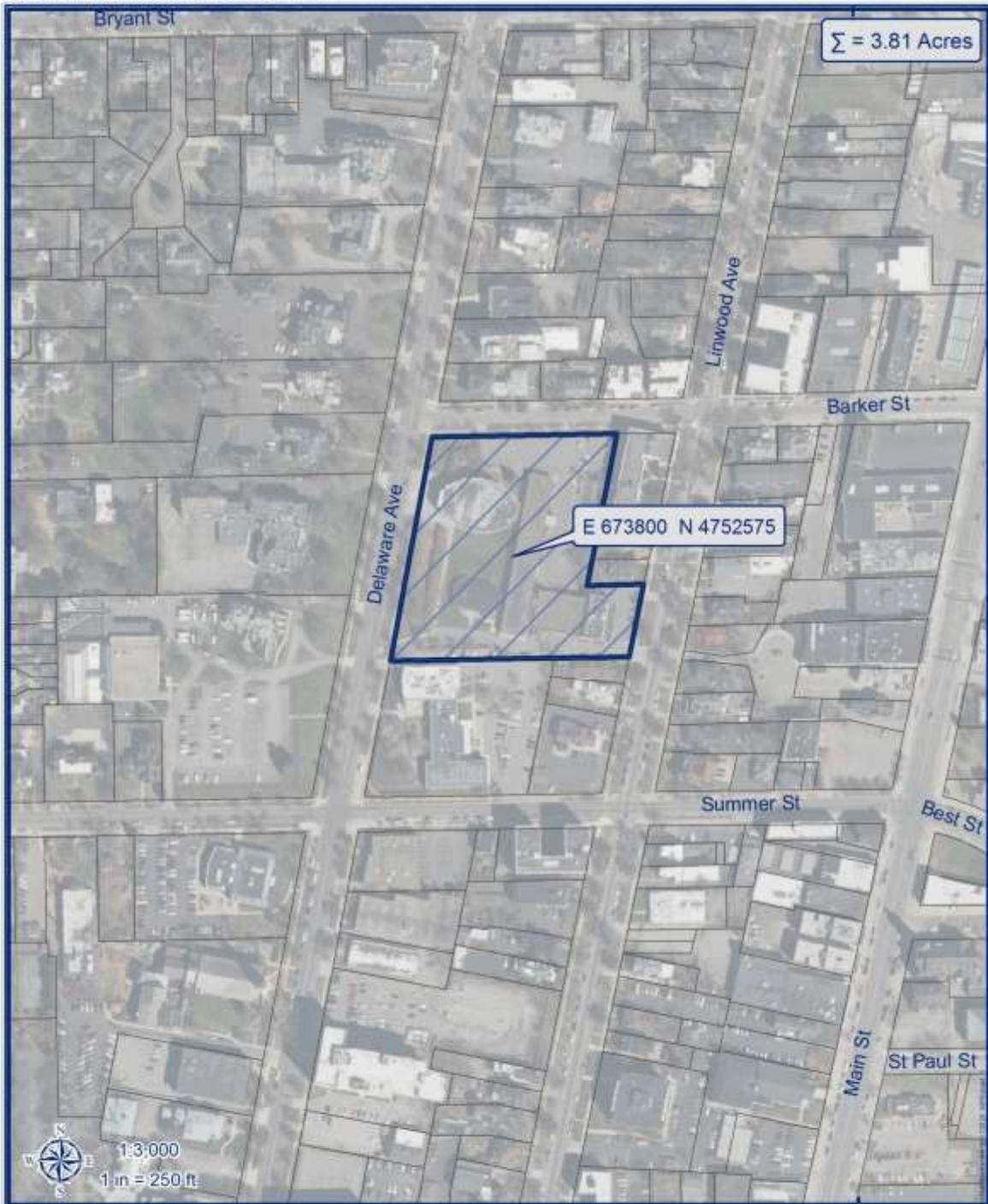
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TEMPLE BETH ZION
Name of Property
Erie County, New York
County and State

Temple Beth Zion
City of Buffalo, Erie Co., NY

805 Delaware Avenue
Buffalo, NY 14209



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TEMPLE BETH ZION

Name of Property

Erie County, New York

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Additional Information

Photo Log

Name of Property:	Temple Beth Zion
City or Vicinity:	Buffalo
County:	Erie County
State:	NY
Name of Photographer:	Jennifer Walkowski
Date of Photographs:	March, September 2017
Total Number of Photos:	13

NY_Erie County_Temple Beth Zion_0001
Exterior view, main entrance, looking east

NY_Erie County_Temple Beth Zion_0002
Exterior view, showing main entrance

NY_Erie County_Temple Beth Zion_0003
Looking southeast, closeup of front entry

NY_Erie County_Temple Beth Zion_0004
Looking east into area between sanctuary, administrative wing and Sisterhood chapel

NY_Erie County_Temple Beth Zion_0005
Looking north at south wall of Sisterhood chapel

NY_Erie County_Temple Beth Zion_0006
Looking northeast, showing relationship between chapel and administrative wing

NY_Erie County_Temple Beth Zion_0007
Looking southwest from parking area at east elevation of administrative wing with sanctuary beyond

NY_Erie County_Temple Beth Zion_0008
Interior of main sanctuary space, looking east toward bimah and Ark

NY_Erie County_Temple Beth Zion_0009
Interior, detail view looking east toward pylons and Ark

NY_Erie County_Temple Beth Zion_0010
Interior, looking west, showing balcony

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NY_Erie County_Temple Beth Zion_0011

Interior, looking east, showing detail view of Ben Shahin stained glass window

NY_Erie County_Temple Beth Zion_0012

Interior, looking west in Sisterhood chapel

NY_Erie County_Temple Beth Zion_0013

Interior, looking east in auditorium, note folded ceiling detail

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TEMPLE BETH ZION

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Construction Timeline

Oct 1961: Fire destroys former temple
February 7, 1962: Site at Delaware and Barker purchased
April 15, 1962: Abramovitz selected as architect
December 1962: Initial design presentation
Feb 27, 1963: Plans unveiled; early perspective drawing; no chapel shown in perspective drawing;
Materials not yet chosen
May 23, 1963: Construction contract signed
June 24, 1964: Groundbreaking ceremonies
August 1964: Organ purchased
November 1964: Model displayed at Albright-Knox; a third of walls and foundation poured
Nov. 1964: Construction began on Sisterhood Chapel
January 1965: Ben Shahn chosen for stained glass
May 1965: South wall of sanctuary being poured
Nov. 1965: Walls of sanctuary reaching completion
Fall 1965: School and admin building finished
Early 1966: Chapel finished
April 1966: Fink Auditorium dedicated
April 1966: Activities center, offices, educational facilities nearly ready
September 1966: Target date announced for completion of Sanctuary
December 1966: Shahn windows installation completed
January 1967: Temple nearing completion; organ installed
April 15, 1967: Construction completed
April 20, 1967: Dedication

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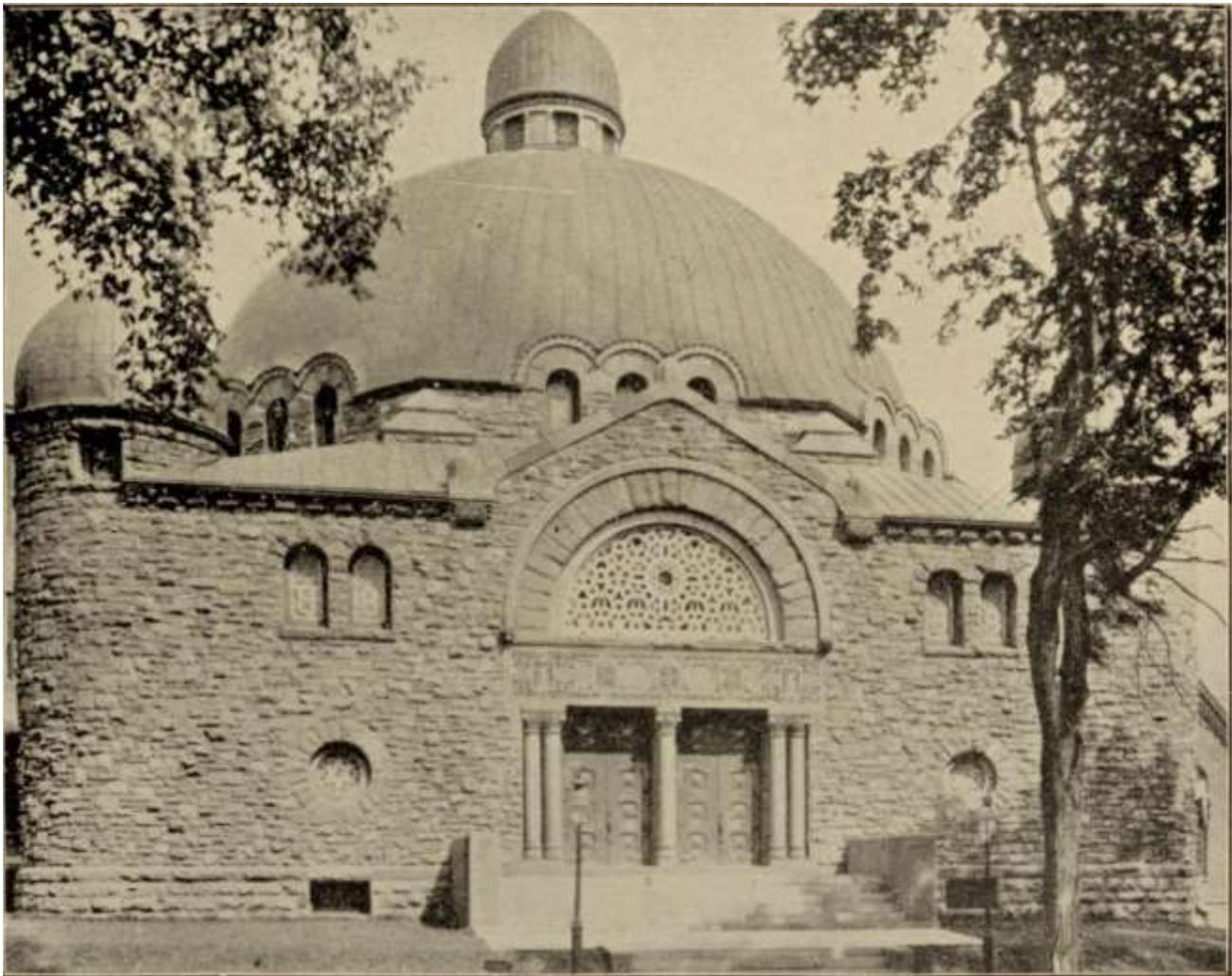
TEMPLE BETH ZION

Name of Property

Erie County, New York

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Additional Information



Edward Austin Kent, architect: Temple Beth Zion (1890).
Source : <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=43659131>

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Max Abramovitz's perspective drawing of Temple Beth Zion Complex (February 1963)

Source: University at Buffalo Archives, Amherst, NY

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TEMPLE BETH ZION

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Model of Temple Beth Zion complex on view at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in November 1964. Rabbi Martin Goldberg (left) of the congregation and Gordon Smith, gallery director, (right), are shown in the picture that appeared in the Buffalo Courier-Express, November 8, 1964.

Source: University at Buffalo Archives, Amherst, NY

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TEMPLE BETH ZION

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Temple Beth Zion – Building Construction; Joseph L. Fink Auditorium (April 22, 1966)

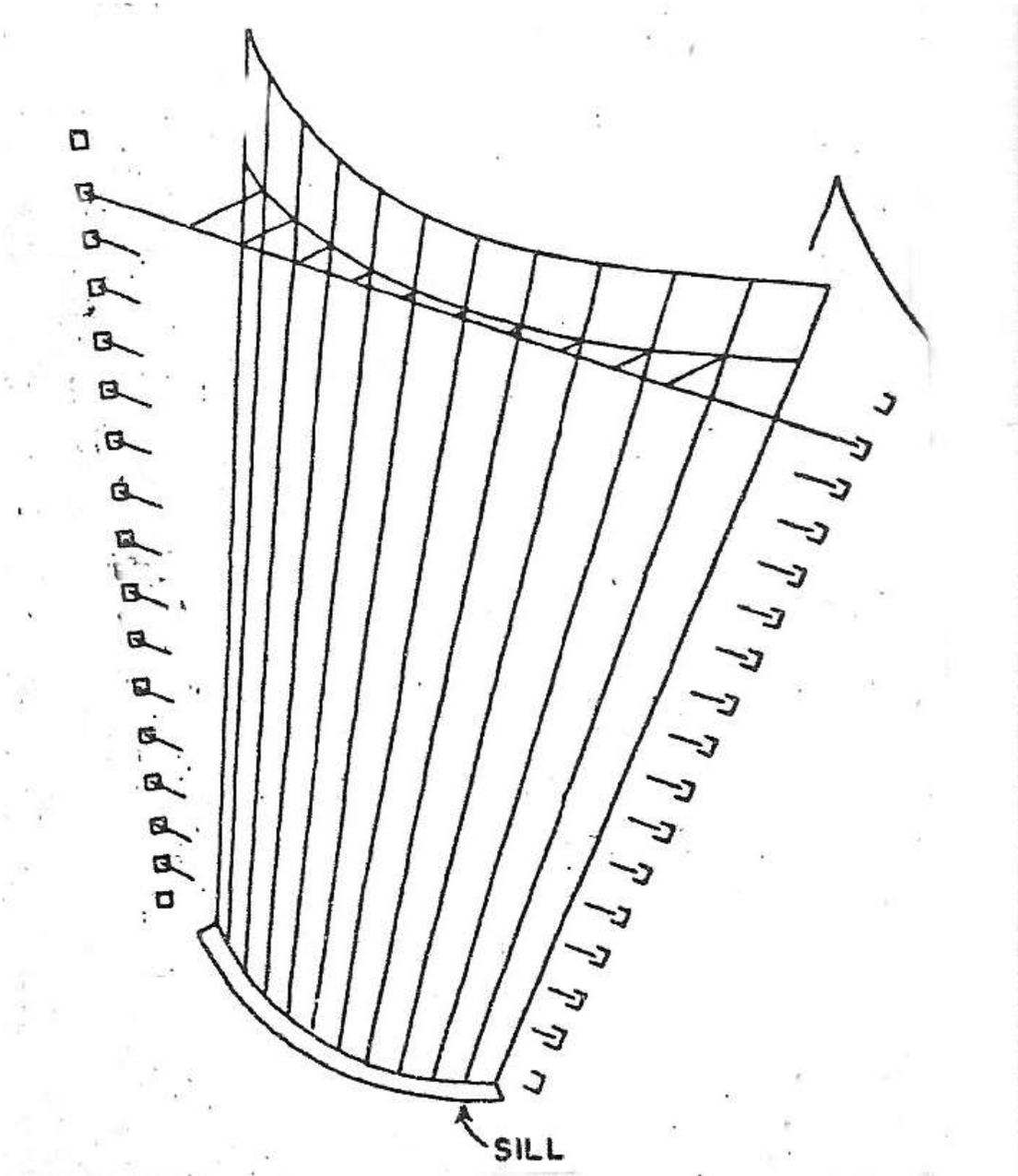
Source: University at Buffalo Archives, Amherst, NY

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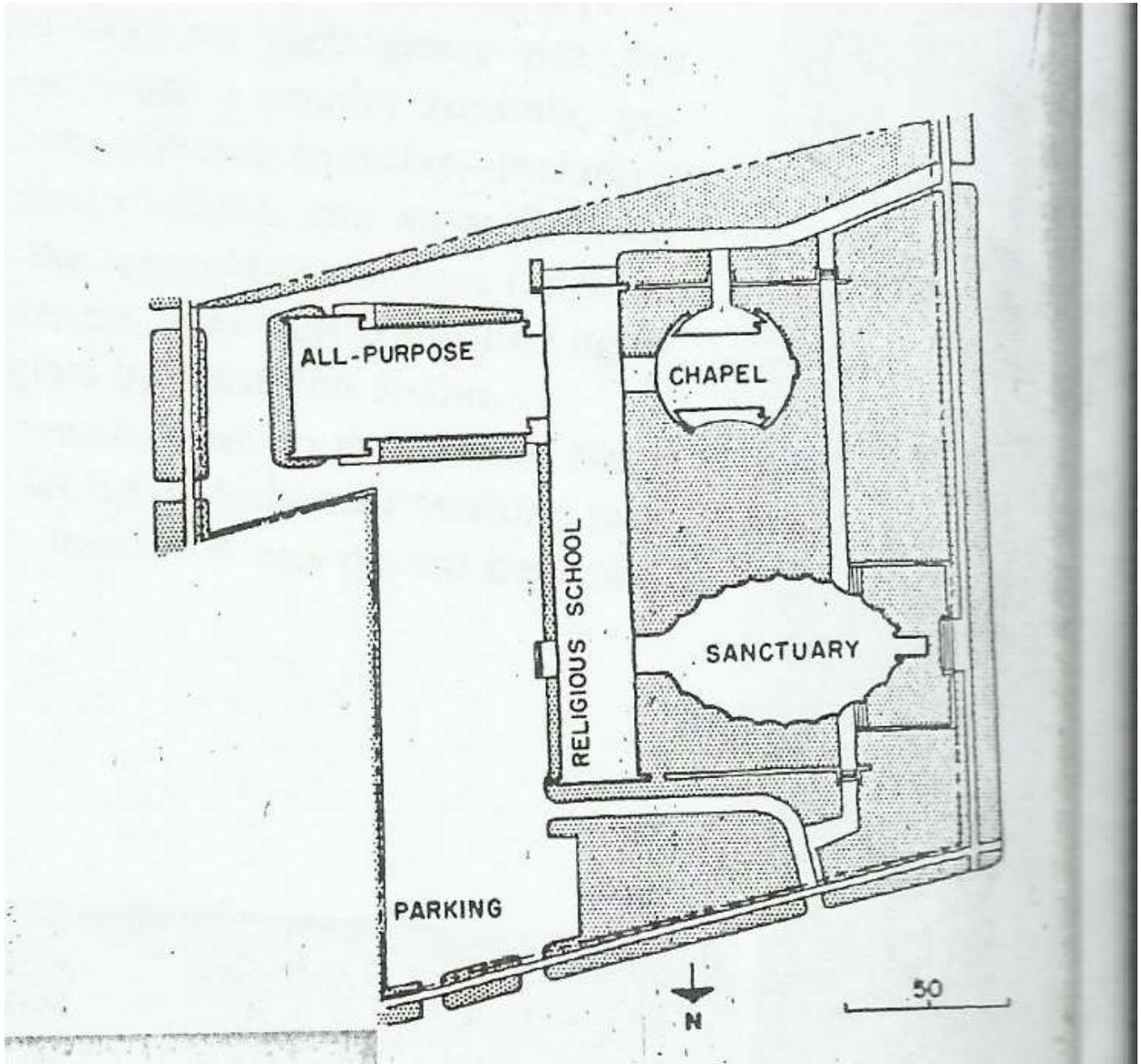
Lev Zetlin's stained glass window structure, balcony window
Source: Architectural Record, March 1968.

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TEMPLE BETH ZION
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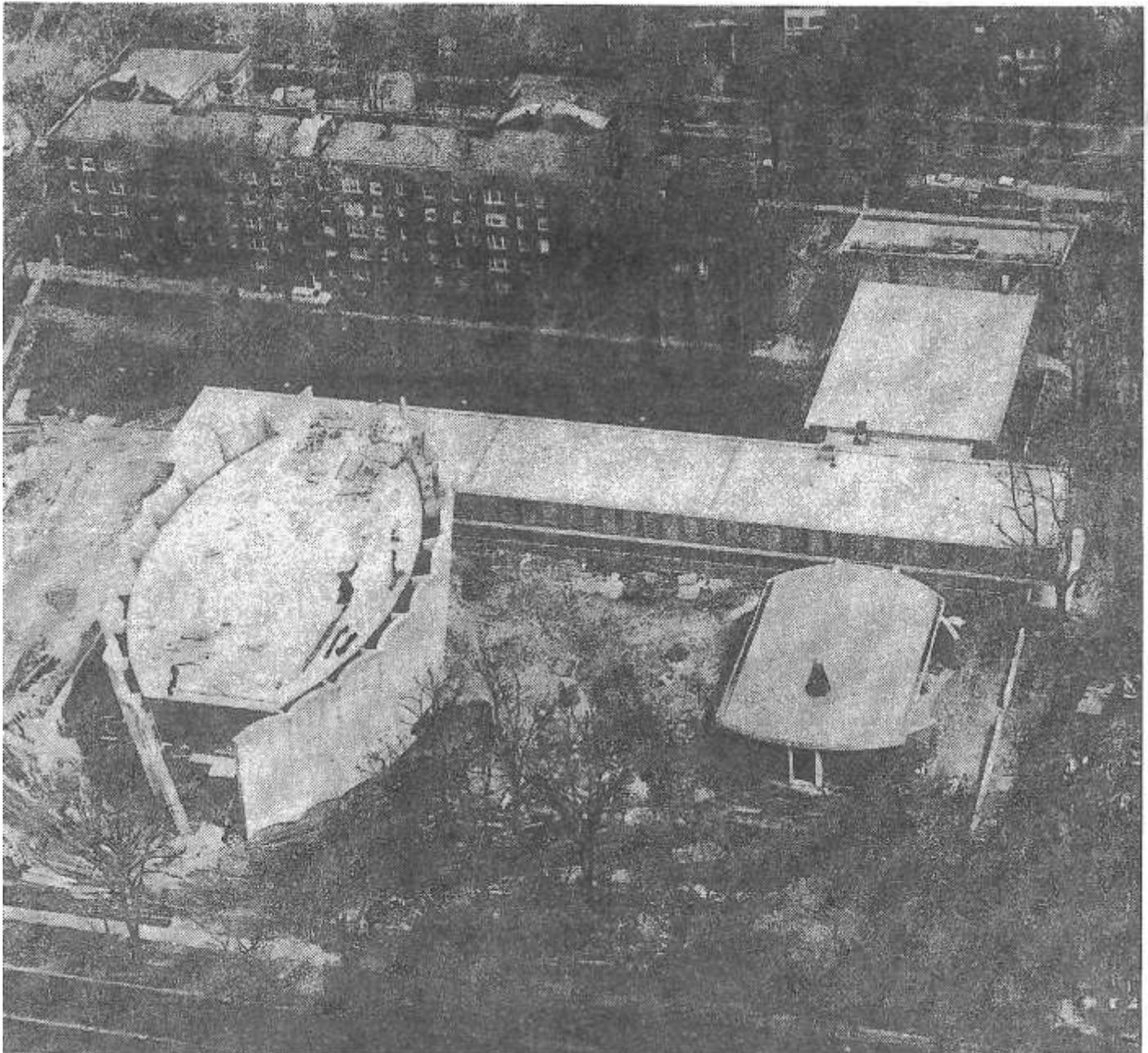
Temple Beth Zion Site Plan
Source: Architectural Record, March 1968

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Temple Beth Zion – Building Construction (May 24, 1966)
Source: Courier-Express Archives, Buffalo State College

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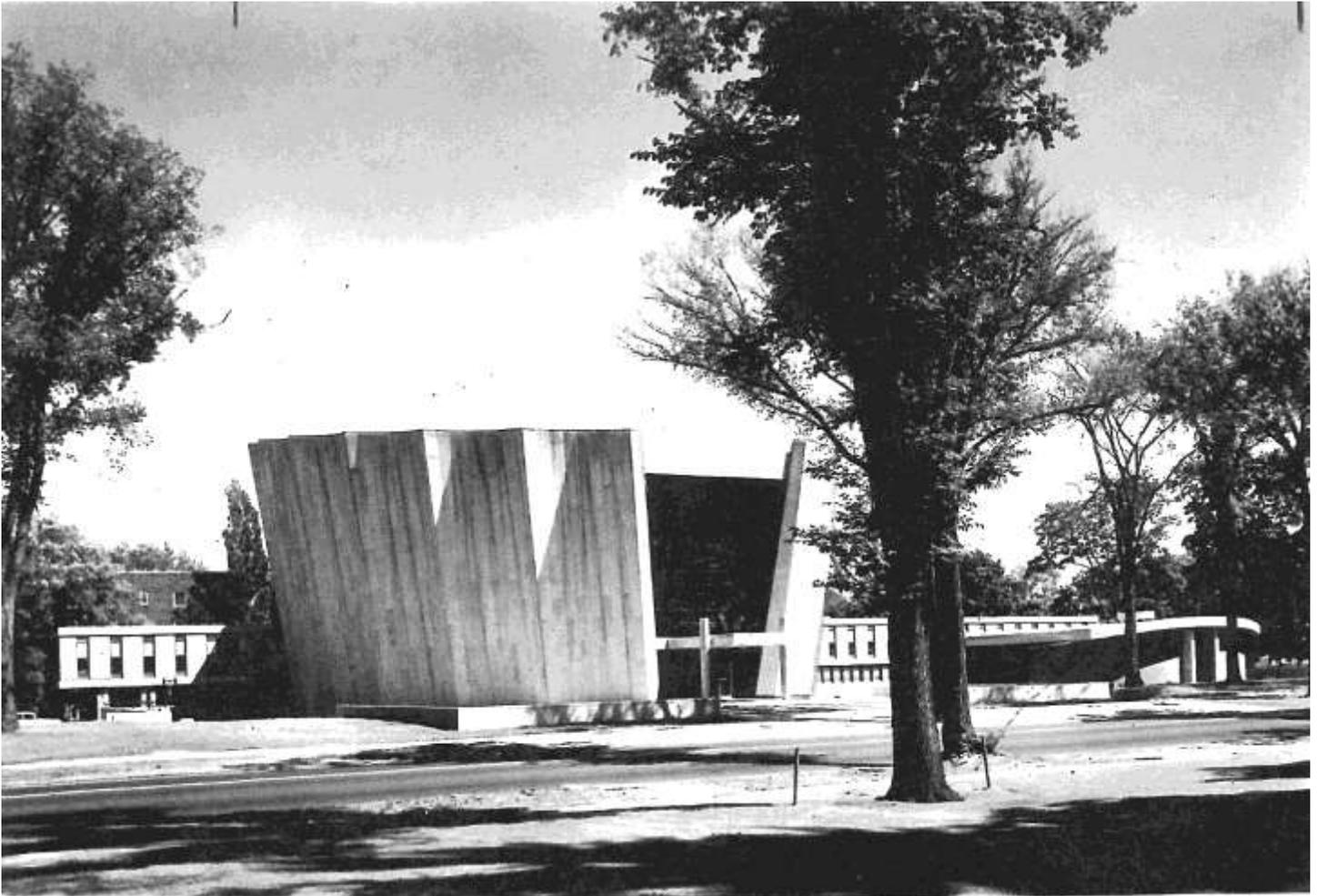
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Temple Beth Zion – New completed complex, May 8, 1971

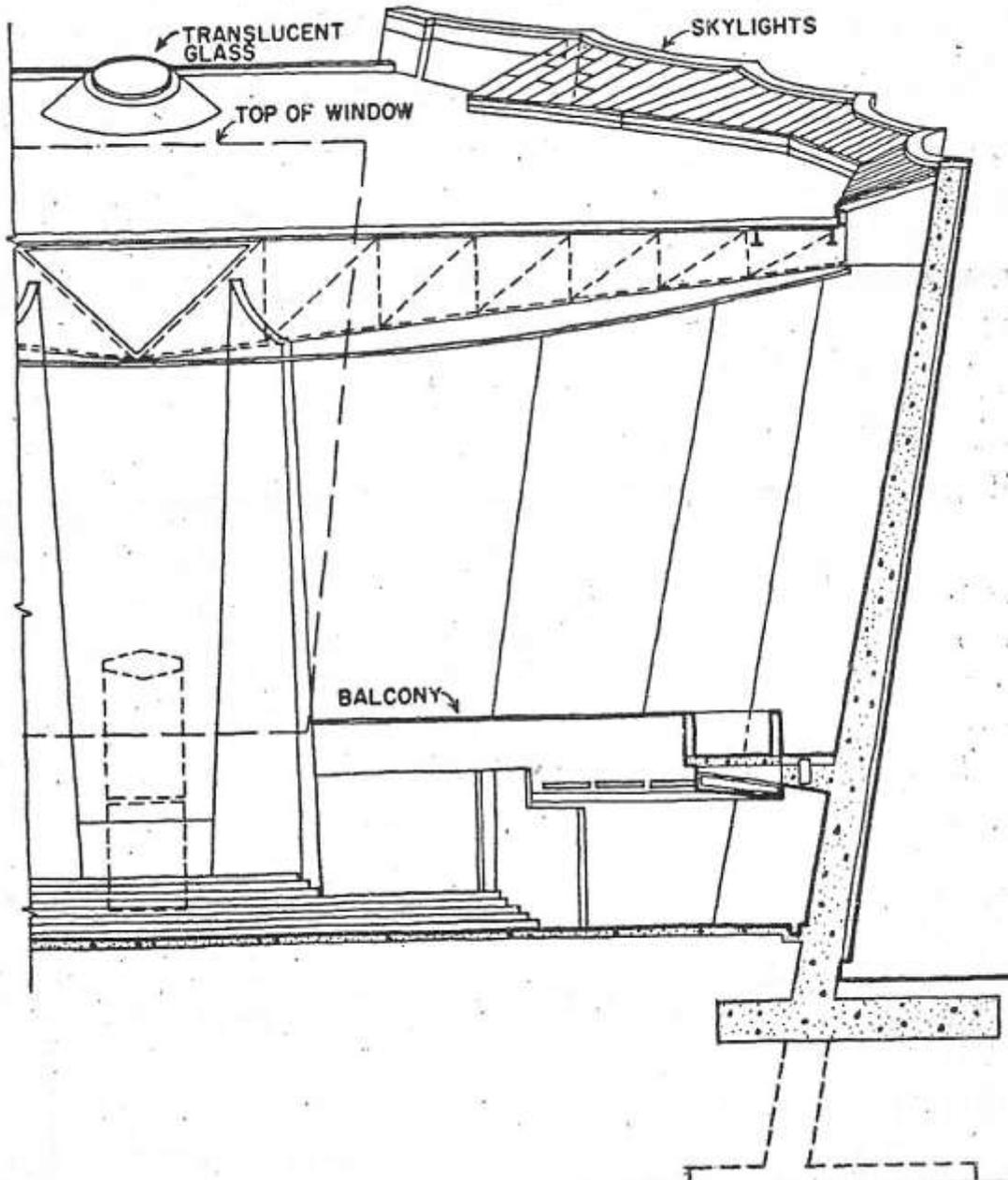
Source: University at Buffalo Archives, Amherst, NY

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TEMPLE BETH ZION
Name of Property
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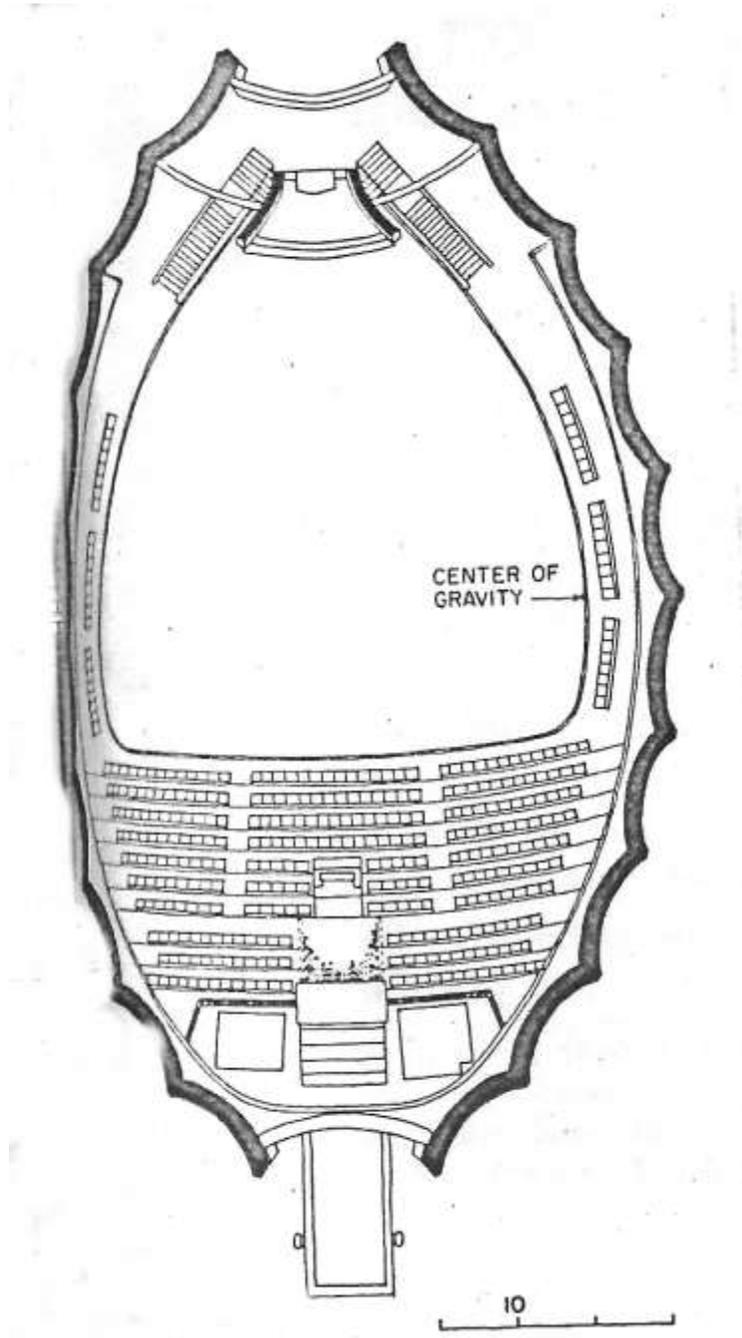
Cross-section of Sanctuary
Source: Architectural Record, March 1968

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Plan of Sanctuary
Source: Architectural Record, March 1968

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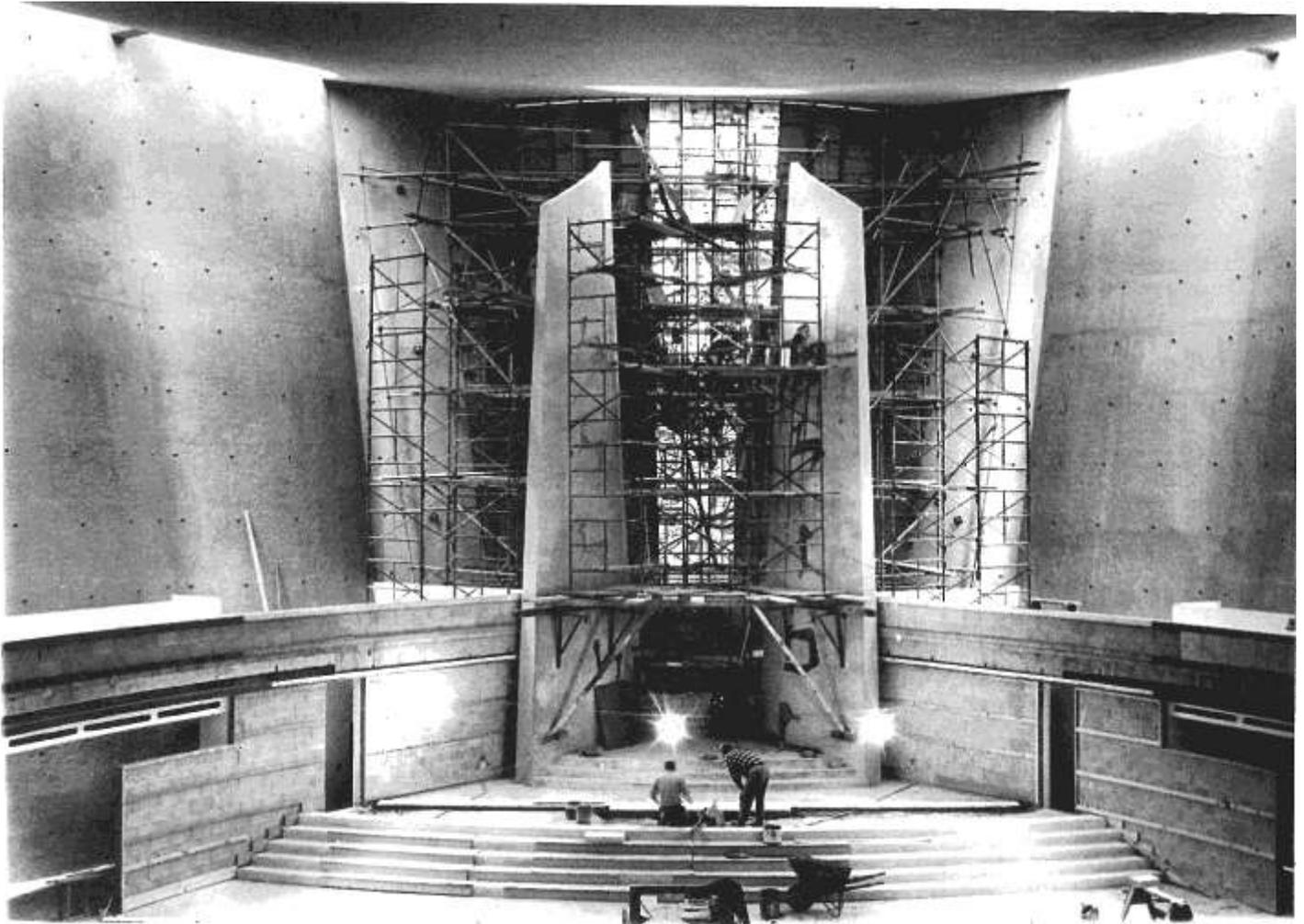
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TEMPLE BETH ZION

Name of Property

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Temple Beth Zion – Building Construction; workman finishing bimah and Decalogue pylons (November 4, 1966)

Source: University at Buffalo Archives, Amherst, NY

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Figure 32: Temple Beth Zion – Building Construction; Sanctuary (May 24, 1965)
Source: University at Buffalo Archives, Amherst, NY

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Figure 33: Temple Beth Zion – Building Construction; Sanctuary (November 4, 1965)

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**Figure 34: Temple Beth Zion – Building Construction; workman finishing interior concrete walls
(November 4, 1966)**

Source: University at Buffalo Archives, Amherst, NY

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Figure 35: Temple Beth Zion – Building Construction; Sisterhood Chapel (May 25, 1965)
Source: University at Buffalo Archives, Amherst, NY