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The Decorated Synagogue: Architectural Appropriation and Assimilation at Atlanta’s Temple

Atlanta’s oldest Jewish congregation, The Temple, occupies a classically modelled building completed in 1931. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the edifice was designed by local architect Philip Trammell Shutze, a Rome Prize recipient and prolific classicist. Today the building stands not only as a place of worship, but as a proud monument of the robust Jewish community of Atlanta, despite few outward clues to its identity. In fact, the Temple’s restrained classicism and limited exterior religious iconography gives little indication of the actual purpose of the building; it could easily be mistaken for a neo-classical church or school.

In this paper, the Temple is examined as a response to the social and religious tensions present in early twentieth-century Atlanta, and as an embodiment of a broader move towards Jewish assimilation due to the rise of anti-Semitic sentiment in the inter-war years. As such, the Temple is demonstrative not only of this desire to be inconspicuous, but of the flexibility of the institution itself. Indeed, the Temple’s appliqué of borrowed classical motifs is not the first time synagogue architecture has adopted the architectural language of another time, place or religion. Rather, similar strategies can be seen throughout much of the history of synagogue design, and most prominently, in a large number of nineteenth-century synagogues across Europe and the United States, which consciously used the language of Moorish Spain. By tracing such historical precedents, the paper will therefore argue that the decorated Temple built by Atlanta’s Jewish community does not so much turn its back on Jewish tradition and culture but, instead, highlights a pattern of appropriated symbolic forms and iconography, as well as a broader willingness to embrace institutional change.
Nestled between oaks on a small hill overlooking Peachtree Street, the main thoroughfare through Atlanta, sits a grand house of worship known simply as “the Temple”: the third purpose-built home of the city’s oldest Jewish congregation. Described as “one of the city’s most beautiful edifices,” the neo-classical style building incorporates a synagogue and education facilities on a prominent site just a few kilometres north of the heart of the city. The building, formally the Temple of the Hebrew Benevolent Congregation, was designed in 1929 by architect Philip Trammell Shutze of Atlanta firm Hentz, Adler & Shutze, and completed in 1931 – a time of great growth and change in Atlanta’s Jewish community.

Established in 1860 as the Hebrew Benevolent Society in the Reconstructionist southeastern United States, Atlanta’s storied reform Jewish congregation, also known simply as “The Temple,” has remained committed to social needs of its constituents and the city since inception. Indeed, it played a central role in the city’s civil rights movement, and prides itself today as offering an inclusive and supportive space for social justice, education and worship. This progressive attitude of The Temple – its willingness and openness to ongoing institutional reform – is also evident in its architecture. This is demonstrated by Shutze’s design for the building, which coincided with a strong reformist agenda of the congregation’s leadership and the inter-war period of tumultuous global Jewish-gentile relations.

The building was commissioned and built under the leadership of Rabbi David Marx, a well-known reformer, whose 51-year tenure was marked by the liberalisation of the congregation, fostering a “delicate balance between Atlanta’s Jewish and gentile communities.” As this paper will argue, Shutze’s design captured Marx’s reformist ambitions, using eclectic references to both Italian classicism and American architecture to subdue the synagogue’s recognisable Jewish characteristics, in favour of a more discrete and integrated identity for its community.

However, this is not an isolated instance in which a synagogue has adopted the style of another culture, time or place. As this paper will show, the Temple follows a pattern of stylistic borrowings already evident in the design of the first two Atlanta Temple buildings,
in Islamic and Greek idioms respectively. Moreover, this seemingly ambivalent approach to architectural style can be seen throughout the history of Jewish religious architecture, and especially in the nineteenth-century synagogues across Europe and the United States. As such, Shutze’s design for Atlanta’s Temple will be argued to be not only a consciously styled response to its local socio-political context of institutional reform and social integration, but also as a key demonstration of a longer historical practice of borrowed architectural tropes, both locally and internationally.

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First is to document the history of the Temple and its strategic use of Italian neo-classical motifs and American symbolism as a tangible expression of institutional change and the social assimilation of Atlanta’s Jewish community in the inter-war years. It includes original visual research concerning Shutze’s built and unbuilt designs for the Temple to speculate upon the eclectic range of sources he brought together to achieve his ambitious integration of Italian and American identities. The second ambition of the paper is to locate this research within the context of the two earlier Temple buildings, as well as the broader international history of synagogue architecture, to better understand the conscious appropriated style evident in Shutze’s design. These twin aspects of the Temple’s history have received little attention, and provide new insights and a broader cultural perspective on the conspicuously inconspicuous design of Atlanta’s most important synagogue.6

Nineteenth-century synagogues in Europe and the United States

The seemingly uncritical adoption of foreign architectural tropes seen in each of Atlanta’s three Temple designs follows a pattern found throughout the history of Jewish religious architecture. In fact, there are few rules governing the design of a synagogue: often, where construction was permitted, a synagogue would simply take on the outward appearance of the prevailing style of the day.7 As a result, synagogues from around the world can be found in almost every style imaginable. But in many cases, local restrictions limited the exterior expression of Jewish identity, or forbade the construction of synagogues altogether.8 It wasn’t until the nineteenth century that large, purpose-built synagogues came to be constructed in Europe, thrusting questions of style to the forefront. Of course, the nineteenth century in Europe was a time in which the wealth of historical architectural idioms were being mined for new purposes. Revivals of a wide range of styles – Gothic, Byzantine, Romanesque, Egyptian, Moorish, Islamic and Indo-Saracenic to name some of the most popular – were frequently put into use for new and unfamiliar building types and programmes.

In many instances, the European recovery of past styles paralleled the growth in nationalist spirit,9 which became manifest in architecture through a revival of “national medieval vocabularies.”10 But for European Jews, a more complex set of circumstances resulted in the frequent deployment of what is often described as a “Moorish” revival style, on synagogues across central Europe and the United States. While other styles were used,11 it is generally said of this stylistic preference that in the absence of their own language for monumental construction, the Jews of central Europe adopted that of Muslim Spain, connecting their
architectural identity to a period of tolerance and coexistence with Christian and Islamic cultures on the Iberian Peninsula between the eighth and fifteenth centuries. In reality, however, this “Moorish” revival was a fictional style, combining onion domes, horse-shoe arches, banded polychromy and other details drawn from various Islamic, Indian and Byzantine sources. Its origins in Spain are also disputed. Some suggest that the European Jews were actually more intent on expressing their “oriental” heritage, through the use of a conspicuous architectural language which connected them to the East and to the architecture of their Arab neighbours. More pragmatically, Rudolf Klein notes that the so-called Moorish style was the only available architectural idiom not already in use. But Klein also points out that the Jewish adoption of the Moorish style may not have been entirely by choice, but was instead thrust upon them to reinforce cultural segregation. It was, after all, a “second rate” style used for less serious architecture: pavilions for amusement and for zoos. But whatever the reason for the widespread adoption of the Moorish trope, what appears certain is that its use was not incidental, but rather, highly strategic.

Significant nineteenth-century examples of such Moorish-inspired synagogues include the Dohány Street Synagogue designed by Ludwig Förster, and the Rumbach Street Synagogue by Otto Wagner, both in Budapest (completed in 1859 and 1872 respectively); Berlin’s Neue Synagoge by Eduard Knoblauch (1859-66); the Florence Synagogue by Falconi, Treves and Michele (1874-82); and the Turin Synagogue by Enrico Peliti (1880-85). One of the earliest extant Moorish-style synagogues in the United States is the Isaac M. Wise Temple (also known as the Plum Street Temple) in Cincinnati, designed by James Keys Wilson (1865). Also notable is the Frank Fernbach designed Central Synagogue (1872), and the Emery Roth designed First Warsaw Congregation Synagogue (1903), both in New York. The latter abandons much of the typical Moorish adornment, allowing the polychrome stripes alone to designate the building’s function and cultural identity.

**Atlanta’s early synagogues**

It was in this architectural context that the first of Atlanta’s temples was built. However, other local influences, including the demographics of the growing Hebrew Benevolent Congregation, must also be taken into consideration: the congregation at that time comprised a large number of immigrants from the Germanic states of central Europe. While related to the grand Moorish-style synagogues which had risen in Europe, Atlanta’s first Temple was substantially more humble – befitting the scale of the city – and built in red brick. Opened by 57 members in 1877, it featured a “tower topped by a bulbous onion dome – quite the fashion of the day – with numerous smaller domes adorning the remainder of the roof.” Representative of the eastern and central European origins of the congregants, and a display of the impact of the Jewish community on the greater Atlanta community, the distinctive building was an impressive addition to the early streetscape of Atlanta.

Following the completion of the first Temple, the Jewish population in Atlanta experienced tremendous growth. From 57 congregants in 1877, by 1895 there were 169 members, and plans commenced for a new synagogue. By that time, however, the popularity of the
original’s Moorish style had waned. For some in the United States, it began to be seen as too “un-American.” Accordingly, the second temple abandoned the “exotic” styling of the first, and, instead, took on the form of a classical Greek temple with grand portico. Consecrated in 1902 by the young Rabbi David Marx, it was described in the Atlanta Constitution as “one of the handsomest church buildings in the city.” Opened by 227 congregants, it reflected the changing landscape of the city and the desires of the Jewish population. Many congregants, a generation or so removed from their immigrant origins, sought to demonstrate their congregation’s importance in the city while conforming to the style adopted by proximate, contemporary prominent buildings. By packaging the temple in a classical structure, the congregation achieved that goal, adopting the architectural language of grand civic buildings of Atlanta including the nearby State Capitol building, completed 1889 and the central Carnegie Library, also completed 1902. It was therefore a much more “American” building as well.

It is interesting to note that following the construction of the second temple, the proliferation of the classical Greek form in Atlanta took hold, not only in civic building, but in other religious institutions. The First Church of Christ, Scientist, constructed in 1914, is a Greek revival structure closely resembling the second temple. It is not surprising that when The Temple outgrew the second building, it was sold to the Greek Orthodox Church and, with little change, was repurposed to fit their needs.

**Atlanta’s classical firm**

In a letter to the congregation in 1926, Rabbi Marx addressed the long-delayed need for a new, larger synagogue, not solely for the purpose of worship, but for the provision of education and a “social center” for the community. The intervening years had seen great growth in the Jewish community and Atlanta, with development spreading northward along
Peachtree Street from the original downtown area. In mid-1928, the Temple Board permitted the purchase of a lot approximately five kilometres north of the centre of the city; the hill-capped site on Peachtree Street was a prominent location. To match the grandeur of the site, the Temple selected the prominent local architectural firm of Hentz, Adler & Shutze, known for their work for many of Atlanta’s wealthy and aspirational citizens.

The lead architect on the project was Philip Trammell Shutze, who had interned at the firm, then Hentz, Reid, and Adler, during his architectural education; upon Reid’s death in 1926, Shutze, who had just returned from New York, became a partner. Educated in the Beaux-Arts tradition at both the Georgia School of Technology (now the Georgia Institute of Technology) and the Columbia University School of Architecture, Shutze’s embrace of the Beaux-Art pedagogy throughout his practice yielded him the title of “the greatest living classical architect.” His proficiency in the production of classically rendered projects was highlighted during his study at the American Academy in Rome, where he spent five years as a Rome Prize recipient. His culminating project, “A Villa for the American Ambassador in Rome,” has been described as “one of the finest examples of the creative eclecticism tolerated, even encouraged, by the Academy.” A conglomeration of no less than four discernible sources, the project demonstrated Shutze’s adeptness at combining quoted classical elements into a single project. But Shutze understood not just the aesthetics of classical design; while living in Rome he travelled extensively in Italy and Greece, not only viewing the great works, but measuring them, learning of the precise scale and logic of their designs.

Grand intentions

In 1929 the design process commenced, with Rabbi Marx, by that time leader of the congregation for more than three decades, working closely with Shutze to exert “immeasurable influence and inspiration” in the design of the building. Rabbi Marx envisioned a grand but nevertheless inconspicuous visage with a design heavily influenced by his non-sectarian views of the institution. Accordingly, the programme featured not just a space for worship, but areas for education and fellowship, marking a transition from the former two synagogues. While a great sanctuary was the focal point, the majority of the

Fig. 3 Shutze’s original proposal for The Temple, 1928. Image with permission from the Kenan Research Center of the Atlanta History Center.
building’s space was to be devoted to non-religious activities. The first proposal made by Shutze was an extravagant baroque structure, with the main sanctuary volume and dome referencing Baldassare Longhena’s Santa Maria della Salute in Venice (1631-87). Most notable is the upper dome, surrounded by scroll-capped buttresses and surmounted by obelisks. Elizabeth Meredith Dowling suggests that, like many of Shutze’s other works, this unrealised design incorporated components from a number of other classical structures in an “operatic composition of predominately Venetian ecclesiastical references.” While Dowling identifies no further specific precedents, parallels can be drawn between Shutze’s proposal and certain Palladian precedents. Tracing these design precedents back to Italy establishes a case for Shutze’s appropriation of classical forms, and demonstrates his adeptness of repackaging the imported style to fulfill the needs of the institution.

Among the likenesses, the central portion of the façade, comprised of three unequal bays, is cadenced like Palladio’s San Giorgio Maggiore (1566-1610), with wide-spaced Corinthian columns on the central axis and two smaller flanking bays. However, the scale of the central portion of the Temple façade more closely resembles another of Palladio’s Venetian church proposals, San Pietro di Castello (1558), with the temple front broken into two lower flanking components coinciding with entrances along the side aisles. But this was merely an exercise in applique: the corresponding interior plan shows a singular entrance foyer before the main nave.

However, certain characteristics of the first proposal are not traceable to churches of Venice, indicating that Shutze may have also drawn inspiration from churches in Rome and northern Italy. For example, the octagonal shape of the main sanctuary is reconciled by half-domes surmounting apsidal transepts, like those of Santa Maria della Consolazione in Todi, Italy. Some 130 kilometres from Rome, it is not unimaginable that Shutze would have seen the building in his travels. The façade also incorporates flourishes akin to Alberti’s spiralling volutes seen on Santa Maria Novella of Florence (1448-70), which would later proliferate on church facades by other architects. In fact, one such example, the scroll work seen on Giacomo di Pietrasanta’s Sant’Agostino (1483) is located just three kilometres from the

![Fig. 4 Santa Maria della Salute, Baldassare Longghena, Venice, 1631-87 (l). San Giorgio Maggiore, Andrea Palladio, Venice, 1566-1610 (r). Photographs by Ashley Paine, 2012.](image-url)
American Academy in Rome, where Shutze studied.

There was no one reason why the design was never realised, although austerity following the stock market crash in late 1929 certainly contributed to a scaling back of the plans. Shutze historian Elizabeth Meredith Dowling also proposes that “congregation members familiar with Venice may have found the architectural references too overtly Catholic.” It is likely that the Great Depression, coupled with the building committee’s desire for the new structure to be less conspicuous resulted in the downfall of the lavish design. It was not that the congregation did not wish the edifice to have a prominent place on the thoroughfare, rather it was desirable for it to have a more restrained appearance than the artful opulence of Shutze’s first design proposal.

The realised design

While stripped of the many flourishes of the initial proposal, the realised design is still representative of Shutze’s eclectic stylistic borrowings and instantiates the open appropriation of style by Jewish institutions. This more humble incarnation consists of a primary square form in red brick, adorned with a white stone Ionic Roman temple front pressed against the masonry wall, and capped in a copper dome atop a colonnaded lantern. While undeniably an imposing and prominent structure, the formal presence of the building offers little suggestion of the function; Hebrew carvings and reliefs on the entablature of the protruding portico offer some of the only exterior indication of the building’s affiliation. Inscribed in the frieze above a semi-circular portico covering the central door is the simple text “THE TEMPLE” – one of the few indications of the Temple’s Jewish affiliations, and easily missed from the street, some 50 metres away. The central entrance is emphasised by the portico, which shares similarities with Bernini’s Sant’ Andrea al Quirinale (1658-70) in Rome. Comprised of Doric columns decorated with symbolic pomegranates and roses, the columns are surmounted by an entablature which contains a frieze with Jewish imagery supporting a tablet displaying the Ten Commandments.

Not unlike the first proposal, Shutze elaborated and combined components from other Italian churches to create the façade. While Sant’ Andrea al Quirinale incorporates a single
bay, the Temple façade maintains the scale of the first proposal, though it includes the three entrances under a singular pediment. Also, unlike Sant’ Andrea, Shutze left the ionic columns expressed as half-columns, rather than melding them into the wall as squared-off pilasters, departing from the precedent of the churches of Rome and Venice. Also of note is the drum atop the dome, surrounded by a circular colonnade, resembling the lower portion of Donalto Bramante’s Tempietto in the courtyard of San Pietro in Montorio. While the form and ornament are clearly imported, the extensive use of red face brick is undeniably American. The result is a classicism tempered with regional vernacular through the usage of local materials which the building committee ultimately found more in keeping with the vision of an Americanised institution. Shutze himself wrote of re-establishing a long lineage of a classical national and regional vernacular, asking “why should we not turn to our traditions” going so far as to say the Temple “seems a good place to … use Classic Revival as a foundation.”

The siting of the building at the crest of a hill, some three metres above street level, presented another opportunity for Shutze to at once fulfil the desire of the Temple to be a place for the greater community and borrow from his experiences in Rome. While never realised, the earliest plans as well as a short note by Shutze in the archives of the Kenan Research Center demonstrates his intention to create a grand ceremonial space to connect the street to the front of the synagogue. Shutze envisioned a layout comprising a wide balustrade ramp from the street to the front façade – similar to the “Spanish Steps” in Rome. A very gradual and easy rise. At the top, two large urns with handles and a fountain. At the bottom a space provided for flower sellers as in the Piazza di Spagna in Rome.

Beyond the creation of a non-religious space as a public amenity, fulfilling the larger social and civic ambitions of the Temple, the steps would have resulted in a perspective foreshortening which would have created a dramatic vista and made the building appear larger.

Shutze continued the restrained ornamentation on the interior. The main sanctuary, square in plan, is for the most part a blank white space, accommodating 1000 worshipers in simple white pews. Current Executive Director of The Temple, Mark Jacobson likens this to a Christian church, with the design executed “to show the non-Jewish community that we’re not different.” Though the form of the space may conceal the religious affiliation, the ceiling and frieze – also painted white – are decorated with intricate plaster work containing symbols of Judaica. The applique reinforces the premise of the synagogue as a space made Jewish not by the architectural composition itself, but through applied decoration.

The focus of the interior composition rests on the sanctuary, and the raised bima (pulpit) on which the Ark, containing the Torah scrolls is located. Presiding over the bima and ark is the traditional eternal light. Brought from the first sanctuary of the congregation, the light connects the Temple to the past and to tradition, while the building itself strives to conform to
the contemporary and future needs of the assembly, adopting new and appropriated forms. Importantly, the eternal light hangs from the eagle and stars in the Great Seal of the United States, reinforcing the nationalistic spirit of the design; the sanctuary thereby becomes a backdrop for the playing out of religion beneath the protection of American liberty.52

Conclusion

As this paper has shown, the architecture of the Jewish synagogue – perhaps to a greater extent than many other building types – has traditionally embraced an open and fluid attitude towards the use of style; a practice that has continued in the United States, where synagogues have continued to be adapted to American expectations and needs. Indeed, the three buildings occupied by Atlanta’s Hebrew Benevolent Congregation since the 1870s have been shown to demonstrate this stylistic fluidity, fusing local demands and global trends to transcend time and culture. But of particular interest to this study is the way in which this pattern of stylistic borrowings and architectural appropriation plays out in the design of the third Temple. More precisely, it has shown that the first proposal for the building demonstrates the adeptness of its classically trained architect, Phillip Trammell Shutze, at assembling a building using the language of built works throughout Italy. Shutze’s final built design, however, shows something different: a clear manifestation of the ideals of the Jewish community at that time, combining classical references and local materials to create a new, assimilated American identity for the growing congregation.

By examining the progression of the congregation’s worship spaces from one which borrowed heavily from eastern European architectural style to one which embodied Italian classicism, it is possible to place the Temple within the larger context of transformations in synagogue architecture globally, and the broader willingness of the Jewish community to embrace institutional change. Through the fusion of appropriated Roman forms, regional materials and a discrete appliqué of Hebrew identity, the Temple became a decorated box, representing the combined ambitions of the congregation and experiences of the architect to form a grand house of worship standing proudly over Atlanta’s main street.

Fig. 6 The interior of the sanctuary, showing the emphasis placed on the bima and Ark. Photograph by Michael Kahn, 2014.
1 “Atlanta Jews to Celebrate 75th Year of Congregation,” Atlanta Journal, January 7, 1942.
2 The usage here, and throughout the rest of the paper, of “the Temple” refers to the building, whereas a capitalised “The Temple” signifies the congregation itself.
3 The organisation was founded as a Benevolent Society in 1860, and as a religious congregation in 1867, following the end of the American Civil War. Janice Rothschild, “The Temple’s 100 Years,” Atlanta Journal and Constitution Magazine, April 23, 1967.
6 Just one major publication on Shutze’s work exists: Elizabeth Meredith Dowling, American Classicist: The Architecture of Philip Trammell Shutze (New York: Rizzoli, 1989).
11 Krinski notes Egyptian, Romanesque and Rundbogenstil, Byzantine, Moorish-Islamic and Gothic. Krinski, Synagogues of Europe.
17 In a curious parallel to the Moorish synagogues, a number of early Shriner Temples in the United States also adopted a fantastical hybrid of Moorish, Islamic, Egyptian and Indo-Saracenic Revival styles. This includes the Fox Theatre in Atlanta (1927-29), which was originally designed by architects Marye, Alger and Vinour as a Shiner Temple, but was ultimately opened as a movie theatre.
20 Blumberg, “The Temple’s First 120 Years.”
21 Rothschild, “The Temple’s 100 Years.”
22 Rothschild, “The Temple’s 100 Years.”
25 Marx had joined the congregation in 1895 at the age of 23, brought in to adhere to a hardline reformist approach to the congregation which had been Orthodox at its founding.
26 Blumberg, “The Temple’s First 120 Years.”
31 Blumberg, “The Temple’s First 120 Years.”
37 Rabbi Marx, who preferred to go by Dr. Marx, was known not just as a leader in the Jewish community, but as “one of the most public-spirited citizens in the South,” a leader in the gentile community as well. “The Temple out on Peachtree” (Cuba Archives, Breman Museum, n.d.). [Newspaper clipping].
42 The inscription above the door reads “MY HOUSE SHALL BE A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL PEOPLE.”
44 American Institute of Architects, “AIA Tour.” [Tour pamphlet].
45 The pilasters of Sant’ Andrea al Quirinale are Corinthian while the columns of the portico are Ionic. Shutze utilised lower orders for both instances.
48 Philip Trammell Shutze (Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center, n.d). [Handwritten note signed P. T. S.].
50 American Institute of Architects, “AIA Tour.”