Architecture: Designs for American Synagogues: Philadelphia Project ...
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Architecture: Designs for American Synagogues

Recent Building Models at Jewish Museum

Philadelphia Project by Louis Kahn Is Shown

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE Jewish Museum's opening show of the season, "Recent American Synagogue Architecture," runs through its old galleries in the converted Felix Warburg mansion at Fifth Avenue and 92d Street, into its new wing, completed early this year.

It unites two buildings that have been joined in a kind of shotgun structural marriage, but will never speak to each other architecturally. The exhibition will run from tomorrow through Dec. 8. The buildings will be on display a good deal longer.

The Warburg house, a richly detailed and beautifully executed chateau (c.1908) in the elaborate French Renaissance style favored by turn-of-the-century bankers, was not a design breakthrough in its day. The breakthrough had been made in the 15th century. But it had what is inelegently called "class."

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The new building, which ostensibly looks forward rather than backward, is the last word in contemporary facade clichés—an art form of terrifying possibilities as new developments in structure and materials invite mushrooming parodies of progressive trends. Its class quotient lies somewhere between resort modern and the avenue's jazzier apartment house entrances.

The problem that it poses, with its dubious decorative arches and patterned panels of concrete aggregate, is the legitimate or not-so-legitimate ways in which the enlarged vocabulary of today's energetic, exciting and genuinely experimental architecture can be used. The exhibition points up the problem in its clearest terms.

Religious building is one of the most difficult assignments of modern architecture. It is fraught with traps, the prime one being its greater freedom for creative flights of fancy. Given this freedom, many able architects not only fail to soar; they fall flat on their faces.

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In the 17 examples that the museum shows in photographs, models, and reproductions of drawings, the striving is almost audible. They have been well selected and sympathetically installed by Richard Meier, with a judicious eye to quality; the exhibition samples the best work in the country. Labels are thoughtfully written, explaining the functional program of the synagogue with commendable clarity.

Among the respected architects present are Pietro Belluschi, Marcel Breuer, Philip Johnson, Louis Kahn, Eric Mendelsohn, Minoru Yamasaki and Frank Lloyd Wright. The resources available to them, in terms of the effects that can be wrung out of new ways of building, are formidable. But the failures outnumber the successes, and the solutions, too often, are no more than a cataloguing of the possibilities.

If architecutre is defined as the making of spaces—and this is the current view, against the facadism of the past—then religious architecture is the expressive making of spaces. In addition to filling functional needs, it must produce results of emotive and spiritual power. It does so only rarely, as in Le Corbusier's chapel at Ronchamps. More frequently, as here, it produces a refined bag of tricks.

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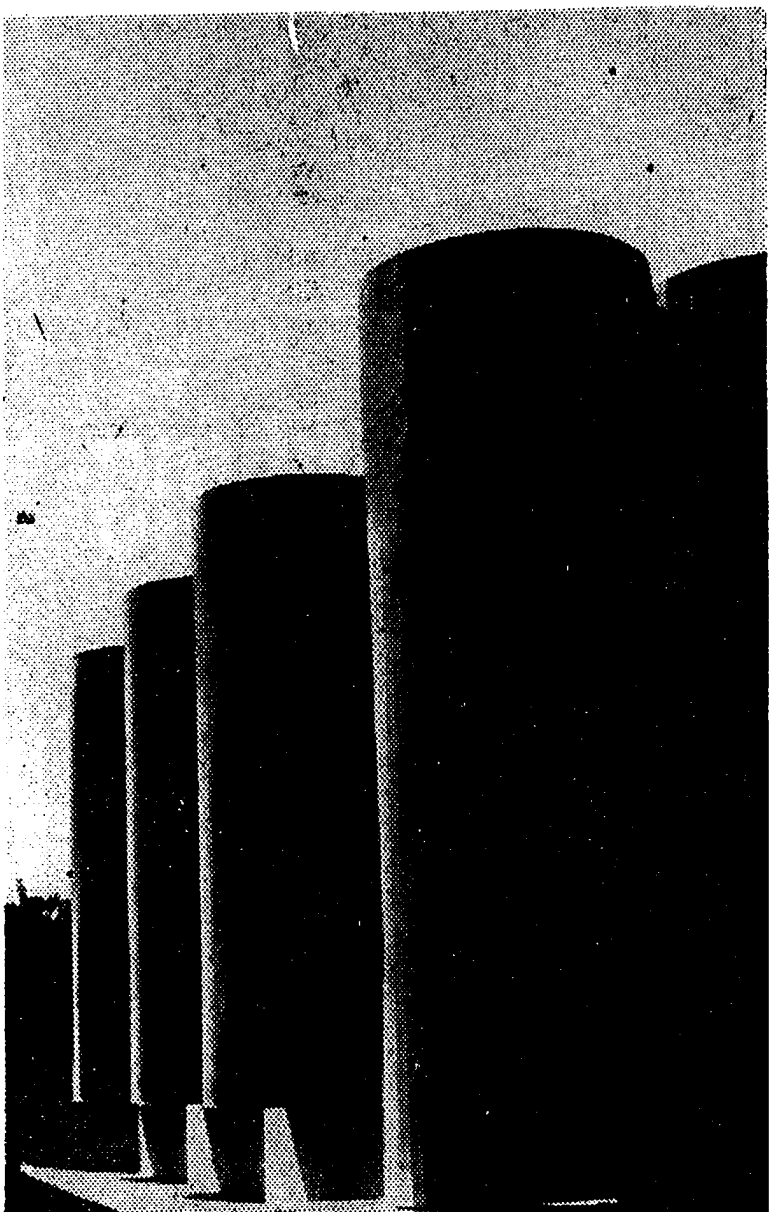
One design stands out: Louis Kahn's Mikveh Israel Synagogue, projected for Philadelphia. Kahn's buildings move the spectator tremendously, even when they work less than well, which is not uncommon. They have a powerful magic; an archaism of forms and masses that seems to exist from the beginning of time, expressive in the highest architectural sense.

Next to this building, the rest seem like exercises in tasteful, decorative, pragmatism, or free-wheeling eclecticism, like the museum itself. Even Wright's Beth Sholom Congregation, in Elkins Park, Pa., in the vein of his late work, is gaudy theatricalism. And the others are more convincing intellectually than emotionally, a fault that may be less in the architect than in our own times.



Model of Louis Kahn's design for Mikveh Israel Synagogue