

Beth Shalom Synagogue

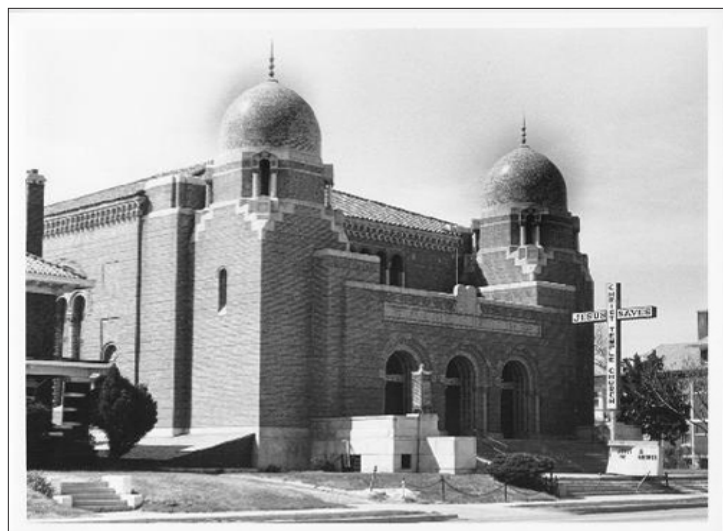
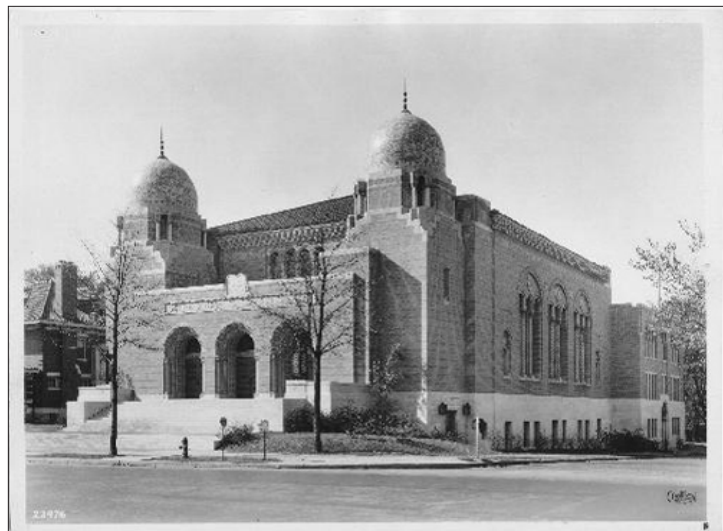
Later Christ Temple Pentecostal Church
3400 The Paseo, completed 1927

by Susan Jezak Ford

The twin terra cotta towers of the former Beth Shalom synagogue serve as a distinctive landmark for the neighborhood at 3400 the Paseo. The striking building is the only example of Byzantine architecture in Kansas City, a style that was popular for Jewish houses of worship in the 1920s. Completed in 1927, the building has won accolades from the architectural community and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The first Orthodox synagogue in Kansas City was built in 1902 by the Keneseth Israel congregation at 15th and Oak streets. A group of 16 families left Keneseth Israel in 1915 to form the Beth Shalom (House of Peace) congregation, worshipping in a large house at Linwood Boulevard and Highland Avenue. Keneseth Israel members prospered economically and purchased a tract of land at 3400 The Paseo for a new synagogue. Plans for a Grecian temple design by Selby Kurfiss were chosen, but by the time the basement was built, the congregation realized that it did not have the financial resources to complete construction. The two groups rejoined in 1924, forming the Keneseth Israel-Beth Shalom congregation. The architectural firm of Greenebaum, Hardy and Schumacher created a Byzanto-Romanesque design that would fit the completed foundation.

The synagogue's cornerstone was laid in September 1926 and, during construction, the congregation worshipped in the basement. One year later, a celebratory week of dedication for the completed building began on September 11, 1927. The \$400,000 construction debt was assumed primarily by the 500 families within the group, but almost half of them withdrew their support during the Depression. Valiant, but successful, efforts were called for to liquidate the debt by 1941 and to increase membership.



Samuel Greenebaum, the synagogue's designer, was born in Topeka in 1886. He studied architecture in Chicago at the Armour Institute of Technology and the Chicago Art Institute. After studying for two years in Paris, he came to Kansas City in 1914 to open an architectural firm with Arthur Hardy. The firm was expanded after World War I to include Ramon Schumacher.

No specific architectural tradition is associated with Jewish houses of worship. Synagogues have been built in a variety of styles in this country, usually reflecting the eras and communities they served. "Moorish" styles were nostalgically associated the Judaic culture in Muslim Spain, giving rise to the practice of modeling synagogues after mosques. The Neo-Romanesque style, replete with arches and columns, was frequently used for European and American synagogues in the late nineteenth century. Early twentieth Century archeological excavations revealed remains of Palestinian synagogues with Byzantine ornamentation, promoting the use of the motifs as historically authentic. The minarets, domes, towers, arched doorways, and multi-colored façades of the earlier "Moorish" and later Byzanto-Romanesque styles influenced American synagogue architecture until the late 1920s. Samuel Greenebaum described the new synagogue's style as an amalgamation: "We have unhesitatingly borrowed from the Saracenic, Italian Romanesque, and other styles contemporaneous wherewith, so that the building as a whole cannot be classified as of any one defined style, but a creation modified by current influences and coordinated with the proper spirit and functioning of the modern Jewish Synagogue."

The distinctive entrance of the Beth Shalom Synagogue soars over The Paseo. The pair of polychromed terra cotta domes, featuring stylized floral and geometric designs in hues of blues, green, and beige on a yellow background, are placed on octagonal drums atop square stair towers. Stylized menorahs decorate the bases and copper finials, each seven-feet tall, top the unique domes, for which no equivalents are known to exist in this country. The towers surround a set of three central arched doorways ornamented with polychromed terra cotta tiles. The building's exterior is accented with cut limestone, a red tile roof and six shades of buff brick. A decorative frieze that stretches across the front façade contains two stone tablets incised with the Ten Commandments and the missive, "Return O Israel to the Lord Thy God." Intricately tiled and columned arches frame the stained glass windows on the north and south walls.

Extensive walnut woodwork, wall medallions, numerous arches, wood beams stenciled with biblical symbols and detailed stained glass windows all highlighted the original focus of the interior auditorium, an elaborate Ark in walnut, gold and polychrome. The soaring stained glass windows on the north and south walls of the sanctuary were created by the Jacoby Art Glass Company of St. Louis in dominant shades of royal blue and scarlet accented by gold, violet, green, turquoise, pink, and yellow. The windows feature symbolic representations of Jewish history and life, emphasized by curvilinear geometric shapes. In addition to the 1200-seat auditorium, the original building also had meeting space in the basement and three stories of offices and classrooms. In 1928, the impressive design earned the firm of Greenebaum, Hardy and Shumacher the Kansas City Architectural League's gold medal for "the most beautiful building, best suited to its purpose" constructed in the city in 1927.

Kansas City's core suffered from a general population migration after World War II and the renamed Beth Shalom congregation followed suit. In 1955, the group purchased a 48-acre tract of land ten miles south and west of its 1926 location, where a new facility was built at Wornall and Bannister roads. The old synagogue was vacated in 1969 and the complex was sold to Christ Temple Pentecostal Church.

The conversion from synagogue to Christian church required few changes to the building. Beth Shalom transported small stained glass windows that were not part of the auditorium and the Ark cabinet to the new synagogue. The iconography left behind illustrated themes from the Old Testament, compatible with the new congregation. The interior decorations and large stained glass windows fit well with the new use.

The two congregations of Beth Shalom and Christ Temple Pentecostal Church came together in 1999 to save the building's most distinctive feature, the ornate domes facing The Paseo. The domes began leaking and causing interior damage in 1970. The church considered removing them and updating the building's exterior. Extensive research was undertaken to preserve and protect the landmark by Friends of Sacred Structures, a nonprofit group that works to preserve historic religious buildings. Together, the old and new members sought support from the community and raised enough funds to stabilize and waterproof the unique domes, preserving them and their site for years to come.

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