

# An Architect Asks For Forgiveness: Philip Johnson's Port Chester Synagogue

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*"To forgive, one must remember the past, put it into perspective, and move beyond it. Without remembrance, no wound can be transcended"* (Flanigan 1992: 5)

This paper raises the question whether architectural design can serve or be considered as a vehicle of forgiveness. The first part of the paper describes two dominant models of forgiveness that emerged in social science (Canzoneri et al 1999). The second part of the study applies these models to a specific case study: Philip Johnson's design of *Kneses Tifereth Israel* Synagogue in Port Chester, NY (1956).

## Contingent Model of Forgiveness

This model focuses on the activities of genuine repentance by the *offender*, which lead to the process of forgiveness. "The process of forgiveness could not/would not begin without the offender playing a leading role" (Canzoneri et al 1999, 31). From the psychological viewpoint acknowledgment of the wrongdoing by the offender is the first step to start the interactive healing process (Henderson 1996; Canzoneri et al 1999). Others stated that in addition, the offender must repent or/and compensate the victim for the loss (Robert 1995).

Thus, can architecture serve as an act of compensation in the process of forgiveness?

This question illustrates two modes of architectural intervention. The first relates to architecture as an act of rebuilding the destroyed city/neighborhood/building(s) that are attributed to the offender. This act serves as an acknowledgment and compensation by the offender. A review of history suggests that most of these post-war reconstructions entailed monetary compensation and were driven by political considerations. The funds help the victims to rebuild their place, but the offender leaves the design and construction to the locals. A famous example is the rebuilding of Hiroshima, Japan after the destruction of the city by the atomic bomb. America rebuilt and stabilized the Japanese economy following WWII, but was not involved in the physical design and reconstruction of the destroyed city.

The second mode of architectural intervention represents the offender's use of architecture as a symbolic act to demonstrate remorse. These symbols can be in the form of special museums, parks, memorials, and markers. They acknowledge the offending events and offer a respect to the victims and their culture. A recent example of such an approach is the Jewish Museum in Warsaw that was initiated and funded by the City of Warsaw and the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage in collaboration with the Jewish Historical Institute of Poland (2013). The Museum stands in what was once the heart of Jewish Warsaw – an area, which the Nazis turned into the Warsaw Ghetto during WWII, and it faces the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes<sup>1</sup>.

Another example is the Indian Memorial at Little Bighorn Battlefield, which was built by the US government (2003). America recognized the Custer Battlefield in southeastern Montana as a the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.jewishmuseum.org.pl/en/about-museum>

Little Bighorn National Battlefield, changed its name and ordered the construction of an Indian National Memorial in memory of all the tribes who defended their way of life at the battle<sup>2</sup>.

The shortcoming of this Contingent Model of Forgiveness is that it ignores the reaction of the victims. How does the symbolic act is interpreted by the victims? Is it enough for forgiveness?

### **Self-Image Model of Forgiveness**

In the book of *Mishneh Torah*<sup>3</sup> from the 12<sup>th</sup> century Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon suggested, "when asked by an offender for forgiveness, one should forgive with a sincere mind and a willing spirit..." (*Teshuvah* 2:10). However, the model of self-image claims that the pre-requisite in the process of forgiveness is the perception of the victim(s), and their self-respect/image (Calhoun 1992; Holmgren 1993; Canzoneri et al 1999). The questions that emerge in this context are: do the victims perceive themselves as victims? And if so, do they see the architecture erected by the offender as a genuine expression of remorse? Or do the memorials serve as a reminder to 'never forget' and to perpetuate anger and even justify retaliation?

The example of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima, shows how the notion of 'never forget' can become a place dedicated to forgiveness and peace rather than a 'trap' of unhealthy emotions (Forward 1989). This memorial park for the victims was built on an open field created by the atomic bomb explosion. The A-Bomb Dome, which was the only building left standing, became an architectural symbol of 'never forget' nuclear horrors.

Summarizing these two models we can conclude that "the forgiveness process requires both certain compensatory behaviors by the offender and these may have a conciliatory effect only when the victim's self-image is bolstered" (Canzoneri et al 1999, 33).

### **Philip Johnson's Port Chester Synagogue (1956)**

Philip Johnson's biography reveals Johnson's pro-fascist political ideology and activities during the 1930s (Schulze 1994). Johnson worked closely with US extreme right-wing politicians authoring Nazi propaganda in support of Hitler and promoting anti-Semitism (Varnelis, 1994). He also tried to help and start a fascist party in the US. The Nazi party invited Johnson to Germany and provided him the opportunity to visit the front in Poland. He admitted that the bombarding of Warsaw was a striking spectacle and that the burning ruins became an inspiration for his design.

Schulze's book triggered publication of additional articles and essays about Johnson's past with titles such as "We cannot know history", "Form Follows Fascism", "Johnson and the Jews". Others attempted to attenuate this revelation. They highlighted Johnson's claim that it was "youthful indiscretions" influenced by his love of German art. Some tried to explain it under the pretext that Johnson "unsavory political alliances of the 1930s" were essentially harmless. And then, there were those who continued to ignore this past of the architect. However, all critics agree that his design of the Port Chester Synagogue can be considered as his attempt to ask for forgiveness.

Applying the first model of forgiveness raises the question of whether Johnson can be considered as the *offender*, at least by association with Nazi ideology, and the design of the synagogue became his symbolic act of atonement. In an interview he claimed, "The synagogue I was doing out of guilt, partially...." (Stern 2008, 125). However, in the same interview he also admitted that he followed his advisor Mr. Wiley, who said "...you have never built a big building. What does it cost you? What's that to start a career? You do it for nothing. It will help with your past - it will help you do other things" (Stern 2008, 129). Indeed, the synagogue project launched Johnson's career to become one of the leading architects in America. Still, since he never formally/publicly apologized to the congregation the question remains: Was the free commission enough to be considered as a genuine attempt of remorse? And then, was he forgiven?

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nps.gov/libi/winning-design-entry.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Mishneh Torah means Repetition of the Torah

Applying the second model directs another question. Did the congregation perceived themselves as the *victim*? While, the congregation was not direct victims of Fascism/ Nazism, they represented by association the Jewish victims of Nazism. Therefore, it can be assumed that maybe Johnson attempted to speak with his design to the Jewish people in general and not just to the particular congregation<sup>4</sup>.

The issue of his atonement and of forgiveness by the victims (the congregation) remains still a speculation. Only one reference mentions, "later in his life he admitted personal guilt citing that he paid a visit to the NY office of Anti Defamation League of B'nai B'rith delivering an apology" (Schulze 1994, 238). Still, Schulze claims that it was done "out of practicality not so much by shame following an investigation of his political activities." However, as Johnson stated in an interview, and as all the archival documents attest, there was never a discussion between him and the congregation/building committee about his past and forgiveness. From these documents it seems likely that either the congregation did not know about Johnson's political background at the time. Though Johnson stated, "They knew about my background of course... How much they understood, we never discussed it" (Stern 2008, 126); alternatively, it is plausible that the congregation trusted Mr. List, an industrialist and influential Jewish philanthropist, who was instrumental in bringing Johnson aboard and asked him to remove his taint of anti-Semitism before getting the commission (Bernstein 2007).

In summary, applying the second model demonstrates that the congregation did not consider Johnson as an *offender* and neither themselves as the *victim*. However, following the first model and the situation where Johnson considered himself as the offender raises additional questions: does the synagogue's design manifest Johnson's attempt to ask for forgiveness? Does his design expresses spiritual symbols of Judaism and welcome Jews to their house of God? Or was it a mere reflection of monumentality as a good public value?

### **The Synagogue**

Johnson's functional design of the synagogue followed the rational concepts where "The best synagogues are the purest architecture, the most straightforward expressions of what a synagogue should be" (Meier 1963, 8). It is a simple rectangular building (140' long and 37' high), with an elliptical domed lobby/entrance situated in the middle of the length of the sanctuary (Fig. 1). A steel framed building with infill of washed white concrete slabs at the outside and wooden planks in the inside. Vertical painted glass slit windows punctuate the walls in five tiers of alternating rhythms (Figs 1, 2). The one-hall sanctuary that can be divided by a flexible partition designed by Johnson catered to the functional multiple needs of the congregation. Johnson stated that "once this hurdle is crossed, the design of a synagogue is the finest problem in architecture. A space where awe and reverence are the prime considerations, an inspiring challenge to the artist... the Jewish temple merely has to be beautiful. As simple as that" (Meier 1963, 22). Indeed, Johnson designed "a monumental jewel box" (Kampf 1966, 37) (Figs. 1, 2). However, it seems that he perceived symbolism as part of the synagogue's functional program, leaving the interpretations to the congregation.

Johnson: "in order to introduce the more spiritual feeling into what has been rather cold style of architecture which we call modern, I have designed 'sails' of plaster that give a sense of containment to the space, and act as light buffers" (Blake 1995, 65). The congregation interpreted the seven sections of the canopy as the tent of Israel wandering in the desert, and the number seven as the symbol of Creation (Figs. 2).

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that several years earlier Johnson praised Goodman's proposal for a memorial to the six million Jews killed by the Nazis and exhibited the model at the Museum of Modern Art (Schulze 1994, 239).



**Figure 1:** Philip Johnson's *Kneses Tifereth Israel* Synagogue in Port Chester, NY (1956)

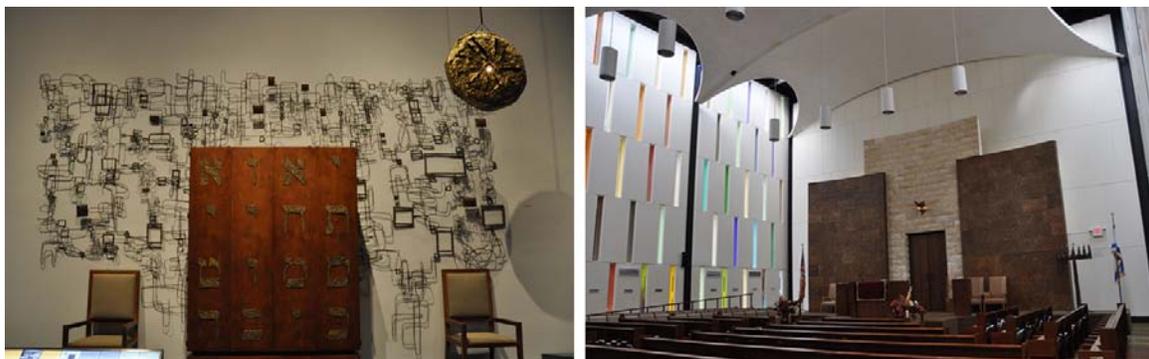


**Figure 2:** The Sanctuary, its seven section canopy ceiling, two skylights, and painted vertical slit windows

Light is the beautifier of the synagogue. It penetrates the building from two skylights on each side of the length of the sanctuary and from the many colored slit windows<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 2). This balance of light "succeeds in providing a relief from the aggressive purism of the architecture itself" (Jacobus 1962, 34). For the congregation, the ever-changing light lifts their spirit and brings them closer to the Divine (Figs. 3).



**Figure 3:** The Balance of Light in the Sanctuary



**Figure 4:** The Original Bimah: Johnson's Ark and Lassaw's Abstract Sculptor and Hanging Eternal Light (L)  
The Renovated Bimah: Traditional Jerusalem Stone Plates Framing and Hosting the Ark (R)

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<sup>5</sup> Johnson left the selection of colors to Kaufman and John Johansen since he believed that color is too important to leave to the architect (Stern 2008)

Recently, the congregation renovated and modified the interior along changes in liturgical rituals and building codes (Fig. 4). But why did they replace the abstract artwork of Ibram Lassaw behind the Bimah<sup>6</sup> and Johnson's Ark? Was it because the art didn't speak to the congregation? Or was it because "some congregants saw barbed wire, which reminded them of Nazis [concentration camps], which in turn made them wonder about Mr. Johnson's intentions" (Bernstein 2007). Thus, after so many years we are left with a beautiful volume and superb quality of light but with clouded history that is more pronounced in the last 20 years than at the time of the construction of the synagogue<sup>7</sup>. This, leaves us with the question, can architecture remain an act of atonement through time?

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<sup>6</sup> Mr. Lassaw called the sculpture "Creation" and described it as "a symphony structured in space rather than sound" (Bernstein 2007)

<sup>7</sup> Following Mr. Johnson death, all obituaries mentioned his past and his attempt for atonement in designing the synagogue free of charge.