

The Micro Scale

The following section deals with the selected site , its history and its current state. The objective is to give an overview of the factors that have influenced decision-making with regard to the functions and activities to be introduced.



Pretoria's first Synagogue

Simon Feinberg and Herman Manneschewitz bought the site, then registered as no 74 Market Street, on 11 December 1895 from Thomas Patterson for the purposes of erecting a synagogue to serve the growing Jewish community in Pretoria. Previously, the Jewish community that was established in the late 1800s had held its services in various homes, hotels and halls. At a meeting held at the Fountain Hotel in August 1897, it was decided that a synagogue should be built to serve the needs of the growing Jewish community. The synagogue was designed to seat 359 men and 150 women. Ibler & Beardwood were appointed as architects, while Mr Köckel was appointed as the contractor. Construction commenced on 1 October 1897. The Jewish entrepreneur, industrialist and philanthropist, Sammy Marks was instrumental in ensuring the completion of the project due to his substantial monetary and material contributions over an extended period.¹

According to the South African Jewish Board of Deputies,² the double-storey Basilica-type structure was built with an evident Byzantine and Moorish influence. Due to a lack of funds, the western façade (front) of the building has a distinctly different character to that of both the north and south façades. The western façade originally consisted of beautifully alternating bands of different coloured face brick, while both the northern and southern façades consist of plastered and painted brickwork.³ The intricately detailed western façade is symmetrical about the main entrance to the building. At that time, it was the fourth synagogue to be built in the Transvaal.⁴

1. SAJBOD ([S.a.]:41)

2. SAJBOD ([S.a.]:44)

3. Remmers & Schütte (2005:7)

4. SAJBOD ([S.a.]:48)

5. Tzonis (2004:24)

6. Tiempo Isrealitico, Florence (1882); The Great Synagogue, Stockholm, (1870) & the Oranienburgerstrasse Synagogue, Berlin (1866) (Wigoder 1986:166-175)

7. refer to Appendix B for drainage plan

8. SAJBOD ([S.a.]:49)

9. SAJBOD (1930:48-51)

Jewish Architecture

According to Tzonis,⁵ Jewish architecture of the nineteenth century was commissioned to be in an "orientalist" or "Eastern Mediterranean style". This style is said to have originated from the eighteenth century when German philosophers classified Jewish culture as primarily auditory as opposed to the more visual approach of Christianity. As Judaism forbids the depiction of human form in its religious houses, "the geometrically derived style must have seemed appropriate". This international trend is evident in the stylistic elements of the Old Synagogue.

This style was widely adopted in Europe at the time. Examples⁶ of such synagogues include the Tiempo Isrealitico, Florence; the Great Synagogue, Stockholm and the Oranienburgerstrasse Synagogue in Berlin.

Later additions

It was only in 1913 that the plans for a minister's house on the same site were approved by the city council.⁷ Simultaneously, the erection of a toilet block on the southern boundary of the site was approved as the original building had no sanitary infrastructure.

Ministers at the Synagogue

The first minister for the Pretoria Jewish community was Reverend E. Jaffe, to whom the earliest references date back to 1898. He resigned in 1901 and in 1902, Mr. Mordechai Rosenberg from Liverpool was appointed as "minister, mohel, preacher, reader and teacher".⁸ In 1903, Reverend Rosenberg resigned, but was persuaded to remain active at the synagogue with the promise of a free house. Eventually, he left to join the Miriam Marks School, built by Sammy Marks in memory of his mother, where he later acted as headmaster. He served until 1911, when Rev. Lewis Phillips succeeded him.⁹



Figure 7.01 The minister's house



Figure 7.02 Oranienburgerstrasse Synagogue, Berlin



The 'special' Supreme Court

The Minister's House

Whether or not Reverend Rosenberg ever lived in the promised free house on the site, is unknown, as the records of the City Council of Pretoria¹⁰ show building plans for the house only being approved on 7 June 1913. In 1913, Reverend L. Phillips is registered as living at no 56 Market Street, and by 1943, there is only a record of the synagogue. The date the minister's house was demolished remains unknown. On 2 January 1947, plans for the proposed garage for the Hebrew congregation were approved.¹¹ By 1965, the Annexe Rusoord Hotel was registered at the above-mentioned address.

With the rise of Apartheid, in 1952, the Department of Public Works expropriated the entire block for the purposes of erecting a new Supreme Court.¹² During this period, the Pretoria architect, Gordon McIntosh was appointed to design the new court.¹³ In the meantime, between 1958 and 1977, the synagogue functioned as a 'special' Supreme Court in order to deal with the rising black opposition movements. In preparation for its new function, the rose window above the main entrance was removed and the entire building was painted white. Several other additions, such as holding cells and toilets, were made to the synagogue.¹⁴ The plans for the new Supreme Court were withdrawn due to their discriminatory design, as ruled by the presiding judge, Mr Justice Rumpff. He stated his reason for the withdrawal being that all people were equal before the law.

A new Synagogue on Pretorius Street

In the same year, the Jewish community relocated to the new and bigger Great Synagogue in Pretorius Street. While the Old Synagogue had met its requirements as a place of learning and spiritual worship, the building had lacked the space for activities of a more social character. By then, due to the changing urban environment, most of the Jewish community had moved out of the inner city, which was originally a residential area.

10. Lochhead's Guide & Handbook & Directory of Pretoria 1913

11. refer to Appendix C

12. Vos & Associates (1995:6)

13. Vos & Associates (1995:10-12)

14. Vos & Associates (1995:10)



Figure 7.03 'Synagogue before Jakarandas' (Panagos:2007)



Four High Profile Trials

The first Treason Trials

On 19 December 1956, the Treason Trial of 156 Congress Alliance leaders,¹⁵ including Nelson Mandela, was opened at the Drill Hall in Johannesburg. In 1958, the state moved the case to the synagogue in Pretoria in order to deter the rising number of supporters.¹⁶

"For the next five years, the state vainly attempted to prove in court that a communist-inspired conspiracy to violently overthrow it had been prepared by the Congress Alliance".¹⁷

"Shortly before the case resumed, the state played another unpleasant trick on us. They announced that the venue for the trial was to be shifted from Johannesburg to Pretoria. The trial would be held in an ornate former synagogue that had been converted into a court of law." *Mandela 1994:261*

Finally, on 29 March 1961, the trial ended¹⁸ and all 156 accused were acquitted. The sight in front of the synagogue when the verdict was at last given has been described as a "scene of wild euphoria". At that point in time, it had been the longest political trial in South African history.

15. Mandela (1994:235)

16. Mandela (1994:261)

17. Lodge (1990:76)

18. Lodge (1990:76)

19. Mandela (1994:384) "The synagogue was like a second home to me after four years of the Treason Trial".¹⁹

20. A separate organisation leading the sabotage campaign formed in 1961; translation meaning Spear of the Nation

21. Lodge (1990:237)

22. Barbara Buntman, honorary research associate at the Wits School of Arts, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (Buntman 2006:2)

23. De Jong (1998:48)

24. Le Roux (1993:33)

25. Pyke 2007: personal interview

The second Treason Trials

On 5 August 1962, on his return to South Africa, Nelson Mandela was re-arrested. After the arrests made at Liliesleaf Farm in Rivonia, Mandela and others were tried due to their activities associated with *Umkhonto we Sizwe*.²⁰ On 7 November 1962,²¹ Mandela was sentenced and he was eventually relocated to Robben Island in 1963, where he spent most of his years of captivity.

The Trial of the Anglican Dean of Johannesburg

According to Buntman,²² in 1971, the trial of the Anglican Dean of Johannesburg, Gonville ffrench-Beytach took place at the synagogue, in which

he was accused of alleged involvement in activities of treason and terrorism. His sentence was later overturned on appeal. Several years later, in 1977, the inquest into Steve Biko's death, the leader of the Black Consciousness movement, began at the Old Synagogue.²³

The Synagogue after 1977

Subsequently, the synagogue was used as a warehouse for the National Cultural History Museum,²⁴ and today, the building is empty. However, there are various parties currently interested in the future use of the Old Synagogue.²⁵

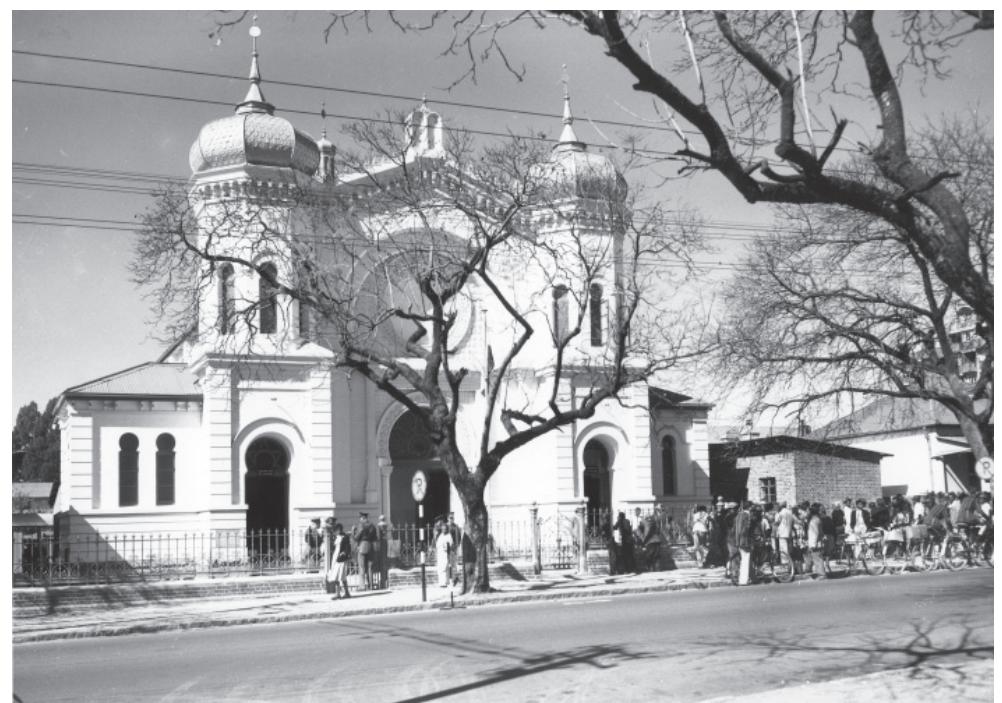


Figure 7.04 Supporters in front of the Synagogue during the Treason Trials



The irony of the conversion



Figure 7.05 Gathering in front of the Synagogue during the Treason Trials

The building, having been deconsecrated in 1952 and replaced by a 'special' Supreme Court from 1958 onwards, as well as other functions since then, continues to be referred to as the Old Synagogue. According to Buntman,²⁶ this term originated from the time of the relocation of the Jewish community from the Old Synagogue to the new Great Synagogue on Pretorius Street. The identification of the building at the time, by its original function, points to the neutral connotation of the name and an unsuccessful conversion to a court of law. Overall, little objection was raised by the Jewish community to the interchangeable usage of court and Old Synagogue, but in 1958, Rabbi Louis Rabonowitz did point out his concern that the Jewish community was being associated with the proceedings that were taking place at the synagogue.

The irony of the conversion of the Old Synagogue's function from a sacred religious purpose to the fundamentally opposed purpose of an Apartheid court furthering the discriminatory nature of the Apartheid Regime, lies in the fact that "Judaism is very much a faith and culture centred on law".²⁷ Additionally, the irony is accentuated in the close association of this 'special' court, a symbolic icon of the government with its early anti-Semitic sentiments, to a historically discriminated against people. Furthermore, while the Jewish community adopted an apolitical stance toward Apartheid,²⁸ many Jewish individuals actively joined the struggle for democracy. Buntman points out the noteworthy presence of Jewish defendants such as Sydney Kentridge, amongst others, during the Treason Trials.²⁹

The difficulty of proposing a new function

When one looks back on the ironic sequence of events that took place in the Old Synagogue, one begins to understand the difficulty of proposing a new function for the ever-deteriorating synagogue and its surrounding sites. Furthermore, the contradictory nature of the various past functions of the building pose a challenge when attempting to preserve the diverse memories associated with the place.

26. Buntman (2006:2)

27. Buntman (2006:2)

28. Buntman points out that this stance may have been the result of a mixture of fear (with WW II still fresh in many people's minds) and an attempt to avoid mixing religion with politics. It was only in 1988 that Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris "emphasised Jewish values as antithetical to Apartheid" (Buntman 2006:8)

29. Buntman (2006:6)



Physical Assessment of the Building

According to Pyke,³⁰ the Department of Public Works is prepared to undertake initial restorative work to prevent further decay of the Old Synagogue. Several assessments of the building have been made:

- In 1995: Nigel Vos and Associates Architects: Department of Public Works: Restoration of Old Jewish Synagogue, an assessment for the DPW
- In 2005: Remmers & Schütte Architects: Old Jewish Synagogue: Assessment of Physical Condition Interim Report, an assessment for the DPW
- In 2006: Remmers & Schütte Architects: Pretoria - Old Jewish Synagogue: Halting Decay and Deterioration and Stabilizing the Building: Schedule of Essential Works, an assessment for the DPW

The initial assessment, as documented by Remmers & Schütte,³¹ suggests that, even though the building is in a “state of disrepair”, the basic structure of the building remains in a good and stable condition. The roof is in a bad state and interior finishes have been removed or damaged. Most of the damage is due to a lack of maintenance, vandalism and exposure to the elements. According to Remmers & Schütte, elementary restorative work is estimated at R 3 648 000.

Proposal

Over the last decade, several proposals for the building have been made.³² In line with the group framework for the northern portion of the Paul Kruger Street spine, it is proposed that the Old Synagogue should function as a public venue for hire – a place for public debate and community awareness events. It will also be used by the proposed child/family court, south of the synagogue, as a tribunal court. The objective of the proposal is to allow public access to this historic building. Rather than symbolising the past, the building is to be actively integrated into contemporary public life establishing its significance for future generations.

In addition, it is important that the synagogue contributes to activating the space around it. Thus it is proposed that the northern facade is partially removed allowing, when necessary, for events within the synagogue to spill out onto the proposed public space.

30. Pyke 2007: personal interview

31. Remmers and Schütte (2005:4-11)

32. refer to Appendix D