

Virtual Restoration of Small-Town Synagogues in Texas

The Binding of Memory: What It's Really All About

Robert P. Davis, Architect
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1. Introduction

All that remains of the Moses Montefiore Temple in Marshall, TEXAS is the Jerusalem pine planted by the congregation just before construction began in 1898. The building was pulled down in 1972. What evidence remained of what it looked like and just where it stood on the site were insufficient to construct the kind of computer model I was making for other small-town synagogues around Texas. I posted what I had, however, on the Internet site devoted to the project. A few months later I received an e-mail message from a woman in California whose father had been the rabbi in Marshall in 1939. Just before leaving he had taken a roll of snapshots which she had just found—and would I like to see them? From those I was able to put the building back together—inside and out—for everyone to visit as it must have been during **the best of times**.

What impresses me about this story is not the recovery of this building from the grave, but the chain of memory that made it possible. We are tempted to over-value the artifact, the synagogue building, and overlook the invisible and elusive accumulation of memories of the Jewish community that are bound to it.

The original purpose of the **project**, “Virtual Restoration of Small-Town Synagogues in Texas,” sponsored by the Texas Jewish Historical Society, was to document the many synagogues throughout rural TEXAS whose congregations have evaporated or nearly so, before the buildings disappeared entirely. As an architect I was to prepare architectural drawings—in modern practice computer models—of these buildings. I asked and the TJHS agreed if I might also record some of the memories that people might recall about the synagogue or the Jewish community. As a result of my experience, I believe we vastly underestimate the importance of those memories and overestimate

the real value of the buildings. Frankly the buildings aren't much, but the memories are a treasure. The synagogues, as the focus of communal energy and activity, are natural safe deposit boxes for memories, from which they can be retrieved and reconstituted as fragments in the larger story of a place. My subject tonight is not the synagogue buildings as such, but the memories they contain. Taking the theme from the Torah portion we read this week, *Vayera*, which includes the *Akeidah*, the story of the binding of Isaac. I have called it "The Binding of Memory".

Memories are invisible. Every room, every building, every street in every town is overlaid with memories. A dent in a wall, a crack in a window, a particular chair, a street corner, a person's face—all bear silent witness to some, possibly memorable, event. We have a hole in the wall near the bottom of the stairwell in our house, the result of a temperamental kick by one of our otherwise adorable children. I covered the hole with something I had around, a little tin plate with the Hebrew word "yeladim" (children) embossed on it. It looks OK—after all the children all sleep upstairs. But a sharp-eyed observer asks, What's that doing there—and we tell the story.

Architectural history, I'm afraid, will consign the small-town synagogue to a footnote of some regional vernacular. Some, especially those built before WWII, are lovely, simple, pleasant, and comfortable—but hardly worth a prize, then or now. Walk in most any one of them and you won't see much elaborate decoration—until people begin to talk, conjuring up the memories of the place, and then you see their true adornment. These buildings will always be special to those who grew up in them. When properly restored and revived as the core of common Jewish memory, they will become special to all of us.

I want you to understand **what I mean by memory and history**: Memory is personalized history. The Yahrzeit plaque with your father's name on it is not just any roster of names on the wall. Memory is what happened to us—history is what happened to them. Memory is whatever we hold in our heads as a nucleus from which we reconstitute the essence of an event, a person, a place, a lifetime. It may be congruent with history or skewed in some personal way by rage, jealousy, disappointment, or some other equally potent emotion. History, even if lifeless and impersonal, at least contains the facts in the case; without it we have no substance. But history without memory has no *taam*, no feeling, and is not much of a story. History charged with memory, however, can enchant, compel, and bind us to a place or event, though we've never been there.

A good example is **Holocaust History** whose memorial and spiritual content is so overwhelming, the historic fact becomes nearly irrelevant. The voices of

individual survivors speaking memory bind us to their experience. Every Jew feels a visceral connection to the events of the Holocaust, though localized in time and place, that has become universal. It is our capacity to elevate local Jewish history to the universal that makes the memory of a small Texas Jewish community significant. That transformation, from the local to the universal, is a spiritual process.

I was personally moved by what I saw and heard as I traveled from town to town. In just the same way that I was moved by a scene near the end of the movie, *Schindler's List*: you know the scene in the factory just after the guards have fled, its dark and quiet and the inmate-workers, still in their places, know something horrible has come to an end—a lone voice begins to recite the *Kaddish*. (*Yiskadal, vyiskadash, shmey rabah...*). Until that moment I had not thought the movie very credible, but in an instant, I was bound to memories of times and persons gone and I wept.

Not all memories are memorable. Most are the stuff of ordinary life which fade and are constantly being replaced. But some events do not fade. Some things we don't forget. Some of those memories are definitive—they define a time or a place or an idea with a short, hard punch. The trick is to recognize the real thing when you see or hear it, bring it back alive, keep it fresh till served.

2. Because, It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing

There are plenty of Texas towns that had sufficient numbers and resources to establish synagogues but didn't. Everyone who has been associated with establishing and nurturing community institutions knows that it often falls to one person or a small group whose enthusiasm and energy boost the rest into orbit. If you weren't there, the names and dates don't mean a thing. It is rare to find some evidence, some artifact that conveys that sense of personal commitment and energy that can be felt even by strangers. But I found one.

The old reform temple in Corsicana, Texas, is by any measure an unusual building. Its elaborate carpentered wood trimmed clapboard exterior is capped by two distinctive onion domes. The graceful interior is lit by beautiful Tiffany glass windows and shaped by a gently vaulted ceiling. The congregation folded in 1976 and the building was acquired by the city as a conference center. They have faithfully preserved it much as it was when it functioned as a temple.

The city manager had given me the key and while snooping around, I found up in the balcony now used for the air conditioning equipment in a pile of

stuff no one had known what to do with and had been unwilling to throw away a framed, hand-lettered and illustrated, now heavily stained testimonial to one of the former congregants...



“Testimonial for Sydney Marks. Who among us here today deserves the honor that we pay? Who among this crowd tho small has always been at our beck and call? This friend of ours of whom I speak has kept us here week after week thru the years when we could easily falter. He always took his place at the altar. He's been our rabbi, teacher, president, teacher, president, advisor, and leader. He was heaven sent. How many times we would have locked the doors, his Temple would have been no more, he has begged and pleaded and even cussed. Stay active together that we must we loved him and wanted to comply with his wishes even when it came to washing those darn dishes. We could sing his praises so much longer and pledge our support so much stronger and thank the Lord for such a friend. But this little story must come to an end. You've heard enough - so I'll end these remarks by saying Thanks and God Bless Mr. Sydney Marks.

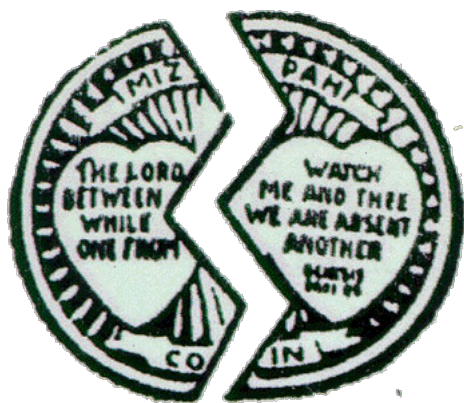
much longer and pledge our support so much stronger and thank the Lord for such a friend. But this little story must come to an end. You've heard enough so I'll end these remarks by saying Thanks and God bless Mr. Sydney Marks. March 22, 1959.”

This bit of stuff, this charged particle of memory, bound me to this little town. I could easily feel the emotion of the occasion for which this placard was made. Because Sydney Marks, the essence of communal spirit, is not unlike special people I have known. Much more than that, I recognized that we are all implicated in a process which included my finding this testimonial and presenting it to you. A dormant memory is now hitched up again to the continuum of Jewish history.

I asked people, usually in twos and threes, to give me a guided tour of their town and talk about the **best of times**. My guides usually began intending to provide me with a neat historic chronicle of Jewish life in the town (who came first, who lived where, who did what and when), but almost immediately they would be diverted by some memory invisible to me. Most tours quickly devolved into a walk down memory lane. Every town has a visible component of streets and buildings and an invisible one of memories clinging to them. No one sees all of them, but everyone who lives there sees some. As a stranger, you see nothing. One is, upon arrival, interrupting a stream of consciousness without knowing till much later where you came in.

We have no idea what is important. Every family tells stories which are cued by odd items: a funny hat, the crack in the dining room wall, that covered hole in our stairwell. There is no obvious way to know; significant memories may be embedded in the most ordinary things. Most here have important memories peculiar to themselves and concealed in plain wrappers.

Just as the Corsicana testimonial connected us to one of the community's sources of energy, the following is an example of a *memento* that in a flash defines the feeling of the times.



The little temple in Abilene was built right in the middle of WWII in 1942 when building materials for non-war related efforts were nearly unobtainable. But the army was building a 30,000-man training camp which included a medical-records detachment, many of whose personnel would be Jewish. The army asked the Jewish community to build the temple and the building materials were found. I asked Mr. Cohen, who was showing me around the

place, why it was named "Temple Mizpah" (Mitzpah, not mitzva) but he didn't answer—either because he thought it obvious or just not worthy of comment. All but 2 synagogues I visited were named B'nai Israel, Beth Israel, Beth Shalom, or some other common Biblical coinage which we all recognize as typical synagogue names. Mizpah means watchtower in Hebrew but that is also the name of a Jehovah's Witness' magazine. But I kept asking and he finally took out his wallet and fished out what looked like a silver half-disk which had been divided from its other half by a zig-zag cut. This is a "Mizpah" coin..., he said, They were a kind of charm, popular during WWII, sold in pairs on which was engraved, half on each, this phrase from the Bible: *The Lord watch between me and thee, while we are absent one from another.*"

Whether for married couples or sweethearts, the man took one half and the woman the other. It spoke eloquently of its time when the most important personal events during wartime were painful goodbyes and joyous homecomings, over which hovered the terrifying probability of the War Dept. telegram. No better, more meaningful name could have been found for a synagogue which sometimes hosted as many as 4 marriage ceremonies a day during the war.

ובינך היום על-כן קרא-שמו גלעד: 49 והמצפה אשר אמר יצף י-זה ביני
ובינך כי נסתר איש מרעהו: 50 אם-תענה את-בנתי ואם-תקח נשים על-בנתי

I was galvanized by the story that accompanied the coin, as if I'd stumbled on some buried treasure. But it's not enough to toss it on the table and hear the ring of truth. The memories need to be made coherent, assembled into well-crafted stories, injected into the bloodstream as it were. The following are examples of delivery vehicles which have traditionally been able to find the quickest route to the heart.

Two contemporary plays by a Texas playwright, Mark Harelik (whose mother is treasurer of the TJHS), demonstrate how effectively the lessons of history can be transmitted through good drama. In the play *The Immigrant*, he tells the story of his grandfather, Yehezkel Harelik, who settled in the small central TEXAS town of Hamilton and raised a good Jewish family where there were no other Jews. The dramatic moment comes when he splits with his friend and benefactor, the local banker, over the "America First" issue just before WWII. Here is a modern Abraham maintaining his Jewish identity and integrity. A more recent play, *The Legacy*, explores the darker side of Jewish isolation. The father insists his son, preparing for his Bar Mitzvah, learn to chant his Haftorah in the "old world" accents of his grandfather...while the mother, dying of cancer, turns to Christian Science just before the end.

Another especially effective mechanism is **Yizkor, or yahrzeit**: Congregations momentarily swell 4 times a year for a 5- or 10-minute Yizkor service during Yom Kippur, Shemini Atzeret, Pesach, and Shavuot. There is the familiar ritual, where tradition is observed, of the filing out of all whose both mother and father are still alive, leaving behind a quiet group, each of whom concentrates on their own personal loss. It is a powerful time, both for those inside as well as those outside. Very few among those saying Kaddish remain dry-eyed. Most are profoundly moved, dwelling on their own mortality, the fragility of life in general, and the conduit of love that connects each of us to the past and carries us into the future.

Food is an especially potent delivery system: I particularly sought out recipes which somehow figured in the stories of towns and found one for hot tamales

in Marshall. The woman of the congregation made and sold them to finance the construction of the Annex, the social hall, in 1931. In San Angelo people remember the delicious aromas of food wafting up from the basement late in the day on Yom Kippur as the community break-fast was being prepared in the kitchen below.

In Memory's Kitchen: A Legacy of the Women of Terezin is a recipe book compiled by concentration camp inmates...desperate for food and on the brink of starvation. These women conjured up memories of wonderful meals and recipes as kind of spiritual substitute for their physical lack.

Neil Folberg's "*And I shall Dwell Among Them: Historic Synagogues of the World*" is an example of art used to convey an unseen spiritual presence. Sometimes bizarre lighting and digital processing tricks are employed to render his own special, and for us illuminating, vision of these unusual synagogue buildings. Artists sometimes have the ability to see or sense the presence of something special in a place, like those invisible memories, without being told, and then express it substantively in a way the rest of us can understand and feel.

There were at least two times when I needed this kind of technique to fully render a multi-sensory experience of place: (1) Temple Freda in Bryan, Texas, sits within yards of the radius of a local switch track. My guide told me that when the train passed by (which was often), all the kids would hang out of the window and cheer it on. Each time I was there a train came by and I wanted to take the nearly impossible picture of this tiny Greek revival building in the embrace of the Union Pacific Railroad. (2) The Beth Israel sanctuary in San Angelo sits atop a partially submerged basement, has stained glass windows composed of beautiful, uncharacteristically clear and vivid primary colors, and is situated with a long, uncluttered western vista. Barbara Rosenberg told me that as the sun was setting at the time of the high holidays it would shine up through the windows and cast sparkling, color gems all over the ceiling.

I want to praise (faintly and indirectly) the idea of **political correctness and sanitized history**: I collected lots of local histories which daintily skirted or ignored sensitive issues, white-washed embarrassing events, and protected the reputations of those who have not deserved it. Most local histories have been thoroughly disinfected and sanitized for someone's protection. People talk, however, with less circumspection than they write. It was sometimes hard, even comical to observe the difference between a written and spoken version of the same event. Yet all of these with the Disney World-type versions of history and the prettily tarted up restorations (Dachau) have their place. Every artifact, every recollection, recreation, and facsimile—honest,

dishonest, fraudulent, or fanciful—taken altogether allow us to triangulate on the true nature of things.

I've spoken of memories or *momentos* that by themselves practically tell the story of the place, and of those methods that effectively deliver the goods. Now I'd like to talk about doing the job, or at least how I did mine.

3. *Doing the job*

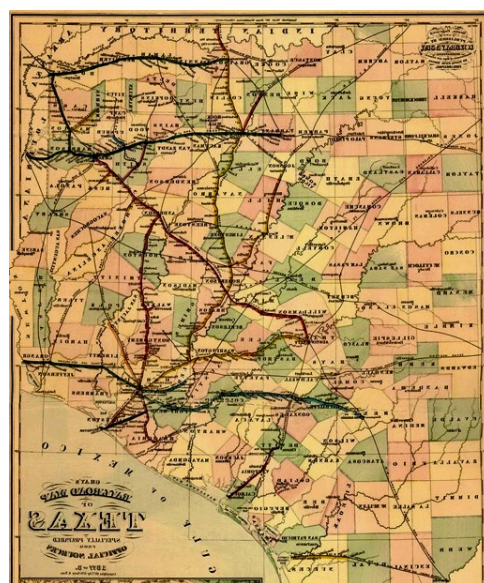
My own work: During this project I had several insights that led to particularly effective methods of information encouragement and collection and the virtual restoration of the synagogue buildings themselves:

Getting people to talk freely was easier than I would have guessed: As noted, memories are invisible, and strangers cannot pick them up loose on the ground. They are, however, easily coaxed out of hiding. People want to place their best memories in the public domain—it's how they stay alive—and the darker ones usually find their way there on their own. People want to talk, want to remember, want to share—sometimes they need only the opportunity to be heard—other times they need to hear the magic word or be given some visual cue—like one of the computer model virtual restorations, made for this project. Simply stated, most people are delighted if someone just shows up to listen.

I used an ordinary highway map and the 1908–28 editions of the American Jewish yearbook to plot the communities with synagogues throughout Texas. In the beginning I looked for but could find no discernible pattern of settlement.

I called an historian, Suzanne Campbell, in San Angelo who listened to my problem then said one word, "**railroad**" and with the proper railroad map I was back on track.

There were plenty of gaps in my knowledge of places that I attempted to fill in from unusual sources. A Jewelry salesman who traveled the region (eastern Louisiana to west Texas, Mexico to Oklahoma) from the early '50's to the late '70's, seemed to know every town and every Jewish family in it and had an opinion about each of them. We spent several hours with a large-scale map rolled out on the



kitchen table talking about the communities, the personalities, who was a proud Jew and who was trying to sneak away, and whether he was able to make a dollar on their trade.

It's time to explain just what **virtual restoration** is. It is a process of computer simulation whereby the visual and aural aspects of a building are reproduced in the artificial viewing environment of the computer screen. It is a model which can, with the right equipment, be turned in any direction, split apart, flown over, under, around, and through. The model can be quite simple or so detailed that every lump, scratch, and broken window shade can be rendered with convincing photorealism. The sun can be made to shine through the windows at any angle appropriate to the time of day or season of the year and moving parts can be made to move. With enough money we can even put old Mr. Susnitsky with his long white beard back in his accustomed seat at B'nai Abraham in Brenham, Texas, in 1930.

What's the point of this technical exercise? I have already said the artifacts, the buildings are far less important than the memories which overlay them. But that is the point and their function: to provide those who can't travel back to the source, the thing itself, a point of reference, a spur to memory. Sometimes it is enough to see a reasonable facsimile and say, "I remember sitting in that corner over by the stove, etc." It helps to reconstruct it as they remember it when it was the best of times. That might mean turning the present-day church back into a synagogue, tearing down later accretions, and rebuilding the mikvah as it stood in 1936.

The Brenham Mikvah was a few strips of concrete foundation wall almost completely concealed in the grass. It has been torn down in the early '50's. From a variety of recollections of those who had seen it or used it I was able to reconstruct it and it to the present model of the synagogue.

Most architects work with a small inventory of readily available materials, crafts, and methods of construction. Today it's sheetrock on metal studs, acoustical ceiling tile and carpet; 100 years ago it was plaster on lath, pressed tin ceilings, and plank floors. Although buildings of a particular period may differ markedly from each other, they will usually be assembled from the same kit of parts. This process is common to every period in architecture from ancient to modern times.

I found while routinely measuring the old synagogue buildings and noting the materials and methods of construction, I began to recognize and understand how to use the kit of parts of that period. Then, while constructing the computer model using a kind of software that simulates the building process itself, I instinctively applied the patterns of that era with the same facility as

my own. In other words, I could anticipate the original architect's next likely move and proceed to virtually construct the building only referring to my field dimensions. I developed a natural sense of how the building was originally constructed and sometimes why—this led to an increased awareness of just when something departed from the expected. At that point I instinctively looked for a story...

In a town not too far from Houston, there was a nice little synagogue built in the late '20's. As I was measuring the interior and observing the carpentry details, It was clear the Bimah had been constructed originally with access from either side. At some point the sides had been closed and a single set of front steps built— but when and why. Sometime later I heard the story connected to that construction anomaly. A young woman was planning her marriage in the synagogue. She wanted to march straight up the aisle rather make the series of undramatic and unbecoming right-angle turns. Her father gained permission from the Rabbi to alter the bimah just for the wedding and then reconstruct it afterwards at his expense. Just before the wedding, the young woman went up to visit her fiancée in Waco and there was a terrible auto accident. The wedding never took place, and the altered construction remains as a silent memorial to that tragedy.

Those stories hidden in quirks of construction and odd conjunctions become apparent when one can somehow enter the flow of the building and feel the assembly of its parts in just the way the original architect and builders did. Every building, every community has its unique rhythm which if you are quiet and observant and attentive you can discover. That is how the stories can be made to live again.

4. Conclusion

Each of those empty synagogues, out on the Texas plain or anywhere else, is a packed valise, full of memories and ready for pickup. Its little name-tag reads **"If found, return to the Jewish people."**