

Jewish presence at Expo 67

By SARA FERDMAN TAUBEN

The six months between April 27 and Oct. 28, 1967 were a period that transformed Montreal forever. Unlike the '76 Olympics, with their legacy of massive overspending and a widely criticized architectural landmark, Expo 67 is fondly remembered as one of this city's proudest moments. However, the significance to the Jewish community is less well-known. Expo 67 featured not one but two Jewish pavilions: the Israel Pavilion and, for the first and only time in the history of world fairs, a Pavilion of Judaism.

"The Pavilion of Judaism was one of the great efforts of Jewish outreach, certainly since the Emancipation." Thus Rabbi Wilfred Shuchat summarized what he considered the most important project of his lifetime outside his work as the rabbi of the Shaar Hashomayim. "One morning, I opened the paper and saw a design for the Christian Pavilion that would be erected at Expo 67. I was tremendously impressed by the creativity and the foresight that allowed its creators to see ahead to what Expo could do and how it could reach out. The whole idea of a Christian presence at Expo made me very jealous."

At Rabbi Shuchat's initiative, a delegation of rabbis and communal leaders approached the planners of the Israel Pavilion with the request to construct a small synagogue nearby. The rabbis were refused on the grounds that Israel is a modern nation-state of many religions. The refusal prompted them to organize an independent project. The Pavilion of Judaism and the Israel Pavilion would play out on the world stage two distinct views of Jewish



The sketch by architect Harry Stillman of the exterior of the Judaism Pavilion. [Courtesy of CJC archives]

being: the religious and the national.

Rabbi Shuchat evoked the Emancipation as a historic point of reference, thus implying that the creation of the Pavilion of Judaism was of significant historic importance. Beginning in 1791 with the granting of equal rights to the Jews of France, the process known as the Emancipation resulted in the acceptance of the Jews as equal citizens of most of the nations of western, central and northern Europe.

The era of the Emancipation was physically marked by the rise of large and architecturally significant synagogues, symbols of the new status of the Jews as equal citizens, monuments to their emerging national identities and signifiers of their presence within the cityscape.

The choice of architectural style for the building of monumental synagogues in Europe reflected divergent perspectives on the nature of Jewish identity. The development of a Jewish public image through this enterprise of synagogue building engaged both Jews and non-Jews – Jewish religious and lay leaders, Jewish and Christian architects, and Christian government authorities. What emerged from the debate, often termed "the battle of the styles," was a choice of essentially two conceptual options: those styles which served to distinguish the particularity of the Jewish nation and those that linked the Jews with the architectural heritage of the European nations.

The presence of two Jewish pavilions at Expo 67 presented a similar polarity of Jewish identities. In one of the early planning meetings for what would become the Pavilion of Judaism, Rabbi Shuchat stressed the need for projecting "an image of the Jewish community as a faith community and as distinct from the Israeli Pavilion, which will represent Jewish national aspirations."

The initial plans were modest and focused on the building of a small synagogue chapel with some exhibit space. The preliminary design for the synagogue, as envisioned by architect Harry Stillman, featured a prominent central dome topping a projected plan of a six-sided star. While the design was modern, it was reminiscent nevertheless of the synagogue designs of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Stillman's comments, in explaining his design concept, echoed those of the architects of 19th-century Europe: "A form close to that of the Spanish-Moorish architecture was chosen as being a more suitable expression than the western Gothic style."

It was under the leadership of Sam Steinberg that the scope of the project was expanded to include a fully developed exhibit and auxiliary program space. Stillman's final design was a four-sided building formed by sweeping white planes. Like pages of an open book, these curved planes provided surfaces for inscriptions. The verses forming the theme of the exhibit were inscribed on the façade while two other quotations in Hebrew and one in Yiddish decorated the other sides. Thus, the Hebrew letters themselves formed a component of the architectural design.

The entrance was flanked by a bronze sculpture by Elbert Weinberg, *Procession*, depicting a group of figures carrying the Torah scrolls. While the design as a whole was thoroughly modern, a small dome recalling traditional synagogue architecture was retained to articulate the space over the synagogue chapel.

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