The monumental synagogues of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Europe were planned, executed, and commonly viewed as “visible signs” of the exodus from the ghettos. In Italy, where the term “ghetto” has a concrete as well as a figurative meaning, one signifier of Judaism substituted for another. Nowhere was this phenomenon more apparent than in Rome, where the 300-year-old ghetto on the Tiber was razed and a “New Temple” erected in its stead. Today, the Roman ghetto is still indicated on popular maps, but visitors will find few vestiges of it in the historic quarter that bears its name. Rather, they will be confronted with a monumental synagogue topped by an enormous aluminum cupola towering 150 feet above ground. (See Figure 1.) In Turin and Florence, new synagogues took the place of the ghettos less directly, but the effective substitution of signifiers of Jewish presence within the cities and on the urban landscape proved just as evident. Elsewhere in Europe, hundreds of monumental synagogues similarly heralded the transition from the old to the new, even in the absence of a physical ghetto.

Contemporaries looked upon these buildings with pride, inaugurated them with pomp, and invested them with an explicitly communicative function. The buildings were the bearers of the message of the new Judaism of modern times in free and equal societies. The reign of eclecticism facilitated this mission. Based on a process of recomposition of elements taken from monuments erected in distant civilizations, eclecticism “brought forth the idea of a narrating architecture.”

Echoing this spirit, Dante Lattes, one of the most influential Italian Jewish intellectuals of the twentieth century, called the temple “the
Fig. 1. The area of the Roman ghetto after its demolition and the New Temple (1905–6).
(Courtesy of Fototeca Unione)
only visible monument that expresses in the eyes of the world the vitality of the people and idea of Israel. Through their architectural language, along with the inauguration speeches they occasioned, the new synagogues served as story-telling signifiers. They constituted a key event in revised narratives of the histories of Jewish communities, publicly redefining Jewishness in the new socio-political context.

The monumental temples, particularly those of the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, also coincided with a sharp decline in Jewish religious life and intellectual culture. Consequently, combatants for Jewish renewal seized upon them as signifiers of the decline that accompanied liberation and of the poor direction provided by Jewish leaders responsible for the buildings and for the Judaism they represented.

Finally, the synagogues exercised a signifying function that was not explicitly identified by contemporaries and was wholly absent in later critiques. Especially in Italy, in the context of real ghettos and in the shadow of the Catholic Church, they produced a rival narrative to a foundation-story of the Church that had served as the cornerstone of Christian apologetics for nearly two millennia: of the Jews as a people punished by God for having murdered Christ. The refutation of this tale told and retold in countless ways in Christian culture constituted one of the highest priorities of emancipated Jewry in Europe. The synagogues that served as speaking monuments of the new Judaism provided a vehicle for the revision of this traditional Christian narrative in a way that refrained from disrupting the public discourse of equality and fraternity between Catholics and Jews.

Speaking Monuments

With few exceptions, the synagogues of the ghettos had been visible almost exclusively from the inside. Both in order to comply with restrictions imposed by external authorities and in order to avoid provoking acts of persecution, pre-emancipation Jewish communities took pains to ensure that synagogue exteriors did not attract attention. As a result, ghetto-era synagogues like those of Venice, Casale Monferrato, and Siena were as beautiful (even lavish) within as they were (and remain) difficult to identify from without. In contrast, the new temples were designed to arrest the gaze of passersby. They were extremely large, exotic-looking, and as striking as their predecessors had been discreet. In the era of eclecticism, which already lent itself to the reading of buildings as texts, they indicated a newly acquired
freedom, a feeling of gratitude toward the government that had liberated them and, thanks to this new freedom, an otherness with respect to the dominant culture. The chief rabbi of Rome, Vittorio Castiglioni, referred to his city’s new monumental temple as the “visible sign” of the community’s “complete readiness to forget the injuries of the past and to let bygones be bygones.” Implicit within this visibility was the view from the outside, of the entire citizenry. In France, Chief Rabbi Zadoc Kahn declared: “[If] Judaism benefits today from full and complete freedom, then for these same reasons, like all religious and philosophical doctrines that demand respect and admiration, it has, I will not say the right, but the duty to recognize and show itself.”

Those who spoke publicly for the new temples, including community presidents and architects as well as rabbis, emphasized this visibility. They also attributed to the buildings a communicative capability. At the inauguration of a new synagogue in Belfort in the early 1860s, Salomon Klein encouraged onlookers to gaze upon the building and hark its message: “You see, this temple tells you, ‘My doors are open to all. I embrace you all. I give to all men, without distinction, the right to come near God.’” In 1882, Salomone Jonà declared that the new temple of Florence spoke in the “eloquent and magical language of its artistic spires,” proclaiming that “the unhappy days of persecution because of religious difference have now passed.” “This temple will stand henceforth for you as an eloquent master,” affirmed Kahn in 1891. “It lifts itself into the skies like a talking symbol.” (See Figure 2.)

The signifying power of the monumental temple derived in large part from its role in a larger story. In inauguration speeches, toasts, reports, and correspondence, observations about the new temples presumed a certain history of the Jews. In the speeches of community presidents and patriotic rabbis, the story is often of Progress or Civilization in which emancipation constitutes the key event, the proof of the gradual improvement of the lot of humankind. For an advocate of renewal like Lattes, however, the story tells how “[t]he people of the Book became the people of empty works and foreign desires.” Despite their diversity, the observations and the stories behind them had this in common: the displacement of the Jewish space (even if it is not identified in such terms) was treated as one of the most significant events of the day. An essential part of the story was told in space, inscribed in the urban landscape as the change of the Jewish point of reference. In the emblematic case of Rome, where the new synagogue arose as if from the rubble of the demolished ghetto, the event could not have been more directly visible.
Fig. 2. The Synagogue of Florence, 1874–82.
(Courtesy of Alinari/Art Resource, N.Y.)
It was not so much the synagogue of the ghetto that the new temple displaced as the ghetto itself. The debate concerning the location of the Temple of Florence typified such concerns. Some members of the 1860 planning commission wanted the synagogue to be placed far from the city center, so that Jewish families would be “scattered and the general population spared watching them flock to the Temple.” Others opposed such a location, arguing that “another Jewish quarter, in the proximity of the new Temple, would be formed, and it would strongly resemble the old Ghetto.”11 Divided solely “over the means to be used,” the members agreed on the ultimate objective: “the effacement of all traces of particularity and difference between Jews, whatever their rank in society, and all other fellow citizens.”12 They agreed on the necessity of preventing the reproduction, on the part of their pious coreligionists, of patterns of behavior reminiscent of the old ghetto. The new space had to ensure that the image of the Jews associated with the old ghetto be completely erased. That such sentiments remained prevalent in 1882, when the synagogue was finally inaugurated, is indicated by reaction in the Jewish community to a second renaming of the streets of the old ghetto. When Tuscan Jews were emancipated in 1847, the government of the Grand Duke had renamed the streets “Via of the Arches,” “Via of the Fountain,” and “Via of Fraternity.” Now the city decided to refer to them collectively as “Via of the Ghetto.” For a contributor to Il vessillo israelitico (The Jewish Banner), this latter renaming constituted “a revival of the memory of ancient intolerance.”13 The preservation of the trace, even as historical marker, was unthinkable.

The displacement of the ghetto by the monumental synagogue was possible because Jewish space had such a pronounced social and symbolic dimension. Michel Foucault has emphasized the importance of considering not only what a discourse may signify but also the “conditions of possibility” of the discourse itself.14 Within this optic, the substitution of the monumental temple for the ghetto, to the extent that it constituted a transformation of the Jewish space, appeared as a key event thanks to the nonequivalence of the two terms. In the ghetto, the concrete dimension of the urban place had been inseparable from the social dimension of the Jews who lived there. As a Jewish space, it was formed of the unity of these two dimensions.15 The monumental temple, in contrast, was far more exclusively a house of prayer. It was a social space but clearly a much more restricted one than the ghetto synagogue or the ghetto as a whole. It was to be the seat of collective activity of the community but could no longer encompass the range of social experiences of individual members. If, with the ghetto, the
symbol of the Jewish space in the city was also the space of all Jewish life, then in the period of the monumental temples this equation of symbol and service ceased to exist. The space of the temple signified more broadly than it served. It served as a house of prayer, but it symbolized a new Jewish life and even a new Jew: the Italian of the Mosaic Confession.

The speaking monument was, then, the popular and simplified translation of the premise of eclecticism that conceived communicative capability in style. In the case of the new temples, however, only the architects concentrated on the question of a specifically Jewish style, and only they considered the signifying power of the architectonic aspects of the buildings. The rabbis, presidents, and journalists tended to mention at most a few very general qualities, such as monumentality, majesty, and dignity, while still claiming for the buildings the capacity to communicate precise messages. This discrepancy can be explained by the fact that, quite often, what the building was supposed to affirm was already clear in the minds of speakers before they laid eyes on the new constructions. In some instances, community figures who had contributed substantial influence and resources wanted the buildings to affirm their own ideas. Such individuals, however, tended to leave style to the experts, intervening only at the end, during the public inaugural ceremonies, which almost always provided them with an opportunity to tell through the medium of other people’s work a story they themselves had developed. Consequently, significant contradictions exist between the messages the buildings were supposed to express, according to contemporary claims, and what they seem to say to us today.

Style and Narrative

At the inauguration of the Israelite Consistorial Temple in Paris (rue Notre Dame de Nazareth, 1852), Chief Rabbi of Paris Lazare Isidor made explicit several of the messages that monumental synagogues were intended to communicate. He proclaimed that French Jews were “proud to fight for the defense of the homeland, as our fathers once fought for the defense of Jerusalem.” He also described how fellow Jews had “fervently embraced the cause of the new homeland, while remaining loyal to our belief.” Finally, referring to what Emmanuel Lévinas later dubbed the “pact of emancipation,” Isidor declared that the Jews had fulfilled their part of the agreement: “We have shown that we were worthy of liberty, worthy of the title of citizen, and that it was possible
to be at once a Jew and Frenchman. The Jewish people is dead, its
national form is dead; but what is not dead and will never die is the
spirit of Judaism." The monumental temple was thus presented as a
monument to emancipation, as a public expression of this "spirit of
Judaism" in the new homeland that had displaced Jerusalem. One of
the best examples of this patriotic spirit is the Mole Antonelliana—origin-
ally commissioned as a synagogue and eventually designated as a
museum of the Risorgimento. (It has long been one of Europe's most
familiar monuments; see Figure 3.) All examples of emancipation
architecture originally expressed a patriotic message, but such mes-
sages were not without their ambiguities.

In the words of Angelo Sereni, president of the Jewish community of
Rome at the turn of the nineteenth century, "The erection of this
Temple is not only the manifestation of the religious feelings of one
part of the citizenry who alone may take pleasure in it; it is also an
affirmation, a solemn observation that gives cause for rejoicing to all
those, with no distinction whatsoever, who harbor high and noble
ideals of Freedom, Equality, and Love." By saying "with no distinction
whatsoever," Sereni no doubt meant "equally" or "everyone to the same
extent." The precise formulation he chose and would repeat, however,
said much more. It is representative of the rhetoric that has led some
scholars to denounce the discourse of emancipation, most notably in
the work of the Abbé Grégoire, as eradicating Jewish particularism in
the name of post-revolutionary universalism. Such was certainly not
Sereni's intent. With the same enthusiasm of those who inaugurated
monuments to Garibaldi, Mazzini, and the kings of a united Italy,
Sereni created a rhetorical opposition between the political liberties of
the new age and the preservation of Jewish particularism.

In a word, the monumental temples were to bear witness to the Jews'
permanent and absolute belonging to the new nation as well as a
certain "spirit of Judaism" without Jerusalem. They were also to make
clear that, under the reign of Liberty, Equality, and Love, distinctions
among men no longer existed. How well did they succeed?

One thing is certain: the monumentality of the new buildings
affirmed the permanent settlement in Italy, France, and elsewhere of
the ancient nation in exile. As modern Israelites, the Jews were no
longer wandering. The proportions of the monumental temples, their
richness, and their imposing presence on the urban landscape
announced that the place of the Jews was here. The style of the
buildings, however, said something rather different.

In this period of architectural historicism, the search for a style that
could give form to a "Jewish architecture" was a constant preoccupa-
Fig. 3. The Mole Antonelliana, Turin, 1862-89. (Courtesy of Alinari/Art Resource, N.Y.)
tion of the planners of the new temples throughout Western Europe. Egyptian, Romanesque, Byzantine, Moorish, and Assyrian-Babylonian designs were introduced, usually in hybrid forms. Contemporaries made explicit their search for exoticism, and almost all the monumental temples of Europe were considered exotic in their day. Yet it was never a matter of exoticism for exoticism’s sake. The choice of an exotic style was always justified as an appropriate means of defining a Jewish space. Implicit in the justification was the idea that the only way to create a new Jewish space was to import it from the essential sources of the ancient culture, religion, and nation.

It has occasionally been observed that Turin’s Mole Antonelliana might have become the model for the new Italian synagogue if “it had been born more easily from its original project” or if, simply, the construction had created fewer problems of all kinds. The difference would have been significant, because the Mole, in its Italian Renaissance style, gave the impression of a synagogue that had arisen from Italian soil. Other styles might also have been used as models of a synagogue that distinguished itself from those of the ghettos, but the orientalizing tendency, already popular in France and Germany, prevailed in Italy. The more “exotic” temples were the Moorish ones—of Vercelli (1878), Florence (1882), and Turin (1884).

In Florence, the first design for the temple was rejected by the Academy of Design Arts because “the classical touches, especially in the facade, spoil the overall effect.” The final design “distances itself from the character of Greco-Roman monuments,” thus creating “an even more exotic quality.” The architects justified their choices by pointing out that “not even the Arab style, from Asia Minor, or even the Byzantine, were able to ensure the idea of a Jewish monument; inasmuch as Jewish architecture, properly speaking, does not exist; that such an architecture has never existed and that wherever it was necessary to erect a Jewish temple, artists freely adopted the architecture that most appealed to them, often using a mixed style drawn from the local one in combination with other eastern styles, and at other times relying purely and simply on the dominant style of the land.”

The overall effect, according to Alberto Boralevi, was of “something new, which tries to be neither church, nor mosque.”

The Temple of Florence was indeed novel in comparison to the eclectic buildings of its day as well as the synagogues that had preceded it. “In past centuries,” observed Augusto Bachi:

... when the Jews of Florence were minimally tolerated in the city and obliged to consider themselves as foreigners, they built synagogues whose
interiors and exteriors alike were in the Florentine style. Now the “Israelites” of Florence . . . were inaugurating . . . a Moorish edifice—a foreign style never before seen in Tuscany—and were even claiming to celebrate by this act their status as free Italian citizens. 29

For Bachi, the orators “declared themselves proud to embellish [Florence] with a majestic and worthy building” while in truth they “were striking a discordant note in the architectonic harmony of the city.” The contrast in style between the new synagogue and local architecture sent a strong message usually absent from official speeches: equality was compatible with difference.

The “Moorish” synagogues of Italy—along with other eclectic synagogues in Europe—not only boldly clashed with the indigenous style of their newly adopted homeland but also spoke of another land of Jewish life. How did this message relate to the emancipation ideology of the inauguration speeches, with its emphasis on the adoption of the new national homeland? What did it say about the real place of Judaism, one might even say the authentic Jewish homeland? Was it elsewhere?

In the case of the new temple of Turin—which replaced the Mole Antonelliana—Giuseppe Guastalla justified the Moorish style on the grounds that the Jews, lacking freedom and independence, had always assimilated significant elements of the cultures of peoples among whom they lived. (See Figure 4.) Aware that they could enjoy relative peace and tolerance, Jews from many places converged in Spain, “where Arab domination . . . diffused . . . a fascinating splendor of civility,” allowing them to contribute significantly to learning and civil life:

There, the most famous rabbis grafted onto their ancestral erudition the learning brought by the Arabs, preserving intact their heritage for the raw civilization that was emerging from the Middle Ages. They erected for their own faith temples designed in the same style as the celebrated civil and religious buildings of Cordova, Seville, and Granada . . . . The style was in harmony with their artistic genius and with their nature, just like the one that evoked images from the Orient, where their stock originated. 30

If the Jews had always imitated the architectural styles of the countries in which they lived, why in the post-emancipation era did they so often prefer styles that recalled other lands? Why Spain rather than Italy? It might be argued that such an allusion to another country of civility and tolerance, which had contributed to the preservation of Jewish life, culture, and heritage, constituted a positive gesture toward
Fig. 4. The Synagogue of Turin, 1880-84.
(Courtesy of Carol Herselle Krinsky)
contemporary Italy. Yet the reference to another land, one that had made possible a period of prosperity, may also have undermined the idea of a new Jewish homeland in Italy. After all, on what basis could Italy claim to be the homeland of the Jews? Certainly not for historical or religious reasons. Only social and political ideas could support such a claim of progress and a new age, when civilization was developed as never before, when civil rights were provided to all according to modern principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Progress meant that the present was better than the past not only materially but also morally.

Guastalla’s discussion of Jews in Moorish Spain, and the Moorish-inspired temples that expressed similar ideas, suggested that a land already existed in which the Jews had grafted their own ideas onto those of Arabs and in which they had “enjoyed a relative peace and tolerance.” The idea of a Judaism without return to Jerusalem demanded a valorization of Diaspora life in general. Once Diaspora existence could be seen as meaningful and valuable in its own right, it was a short step to the notion of a gradually improving life outside of the Land of Israel. In this light, tolerance in medieval Spain represented an intermediary stage along the way to equality in post-revolutionary France or unified Italy.

In Rome (1904) and Trieste (1912), where “Eastern” and “exotic” styles also predominated in design competitions, Moorish plans were rejected. In both cities, winning designs instead made reference to another Jewish land still more fully in contradiction with the idea of a Jewish homeland in Italy: biblical Palestine. Lacking a “sure guide to establish the true nature of the architectonic art flourishing in Palestine in the remotest age,” architects Vincenzo Costa and Osvaldo Armanni in Rome wished to adopt a style that brought to mind “the historical period in which the religious system to which the building was to be consecrated had its origin.” Similarly, Ruggero and Arduino Berlam in Trieste sought a style that “corresponded to the nature of the religion of Israel and respected historical-artistic traditions and material conditions of Palestine so that the building’s intended use would stand out clearly at first glance.” In both cases, the declared style of the new temple—Greek-inspired with Assyrian elements in Rome, and predominantly central Syrian (fourth century C.E.) in Trieste—was supposed to evoke the original and traditional space of the Hebrew nation. Once again, the language of the architectural style contradicted the speeches with their message of a homeland in Italy. In these instances, the Diaspora argument could no longer be invoked.
Dialogue on the Urban Landscape

Some of the new temples “spoke” with other landmarks on the urban landscape. In Turin, the Mole Antonelliana engaged the old ghetto. In the ghetto period, space limitations combined with the expanding needs of a growing population had forced the Jews to construct residential buildings with a greater number of more concentrated stories than neighboring dwellings. Ghetto buildings could easily be spotted because of their smaller, more numerous rows of windows. In the older ghetto grande the difference was visible only in the upper stories, but in the ghetto nuovo windows and balconies of reduced dimensions appeared with the lower stories. Such buildings gave the impression of having been crushed by a great weight from above. From this perspective, the story told by the ghetto was clear: the Jews were collapsing under the weight of an external (op)pressione ("pressure"/"oppression"). Turning slightly to the right, the nineteenth-century onlooker would have received a shock. The force of oppression had been transformed and now surged in the opposite direction, from below, to launch the Mole Antonelliana like a missile. The staggering force of oppression had become the propelling force of emancipation. The people who had been held back, even crushed by the city, were now the builders of one of its proudest monuments. These contrasts remain visible today. From the corner of via Des Ambois and via San Massimo, the Mole and the ghetto nuovo can both be seen.

Unable to engage in dialogue with the ghetto because it had physically taken its place, the Temple of Rome spoke with other monuments of the capital city. According to Rabbi Castiglioni, the new temple constituted a reply to imperial Rome. In his inauguration speech, the rabbi situated the new temple in a Jewish history that began with the destruction of the Temple of Solomon. He then described how the new building spoke directly to the Arch of Titus, whose prominent frieze had for centuries recounted the Roman victory over the Jews. “For the Arch of Titus,” the rabbi declared, “defying the wrath of centuries there, in the Roman Forum, a far more glorious emulator was created here, over the ruins of the ancient ghetto of Rome.” He emphasized: “If the one personifies slavery and oppression, the other represents for us redemption and liberty; if the one recalls blood and merciless wars, the other speaks to us of brotherhood and love; if the one is no longer a sign of times now gone by never to return, the other will see its significance continue to grow.”

Community President Sereni, on the other hand, placed the Jews in the “most sublime epic” of the Italian Republic. “Between the Campidoglio and the Gianicolo, between the
two hills of Rome, sacred to the world’s greatest, most sublime epic, between the monument to Victor Emmanuel II and the monument to Garibaldi, this Temple stands today, majestically free and surrounded by the free and pure sun.36

Both the rabbi and the president recounted the tale of the liberation of Italian Jews. Yet the rabbi emphasized the emancipation of Roman Jews in the context of the entire religious and political history of the Jewish people. He spoke of temples destroyed and rebuilt. The president’s focus was more restricted. He began not in the days of the Temple of Jerusalem but rather after its destruction, when Jews already lived in Rome. His story began “[here] in Rome—where the ancient conquerors of the world barely tolerated us and considered us *peregrini sine civitate* [travelers without a country].”37 When locating the temple on the cityscape, however, Sereni chose to remember the monument to the liberator-king at the Campidoglio instead of the arch built by the vanquisher of the Jews in ancient times.

Most of all, the new temple spoke to another monument mentioned neither by the rabbi nor by the president: the *other* cupola visible from the Tiber. A century ago, as today, the cupola of the Jewish temple stared proudly and defiantly at Saint Peter’s Basilica. The dome over the former ghetto symbolized victory in a war not between Romans and Jews but between Pope and King, Church and Republic, for political control of the city. Although he did not specifically mention Michelangelo’s cupola, Sereni brought it to mind in a reference to the power of the popes: “Here, . . . a government boasted of basing its acts on principles of charity and love, [yet] humiliated us a hundred times over, oppressed us in a hundred ways, restricted us to a squalid quarter, forcing us to carry out the rites and customs of our religion in narrow and unsuitable rooms.”38 He later offered the community’s “first respectful salutation” to Victor Emmanuel III, “the young king who so felicitously incarnates the free institutions that govern us.” No one in the audience could fail to realize that the son was being honored for the role his father had played in liberating the Jews from enslavement by the papacy. The young sovereign’s well-publicized visit to the new temple further reinforced this image of the monarchy as liberator and protector of the Jews. Along with the president’s speech and the building’s self-inscription on the urban landscape, the visit contributed to a Jewish liberation narrative written in Rome.39
The authors of the inauguration speeches claimed for the new temples a spiritual space of great dimensions. These spaces dedicated solely to spirituality were constructed, however, in a period of rapidly diminishing religious observance. How ironic this enthusiastic declaration by Salomone Jonà sounds today: “Perhaps I am fooling myself, but I firmly believe that in future and distant ages, when our descendants . . . have the stupendous monument before them . . . they will exclaim, filled with enthusiasm: ‘eminently religious our fathers were.’” The problem was that the space dedicated to collective spiritual activity was almost the only space that remained of a Jewish life that had been larger than prayers alone. “The interiority in which the destiny of Israel was supposed to inscribe itself was reduced to the interiority of a house of prayers,” Lévinas has observed. This house of prayers constituted a reduction not only of Jewish space in general but also of the traditional synagogue. “The synagogue was not a religious institution only, in the narrow meaning given the word today,” wrote Lattes. “Rather, it was an institution that embraced the whole of moral and intellectual life.” Moreover, Lattes explained, “the tasks of educating and enriching were incorporated into the school, the Academy, and the Jewish home; but it is certain that the synagogue was never—at least until these recent times of adaptation—a place dedicated solely or mostly to liturgy accompanied by more or less religious singing and more or less sacred music.”

The monumentality of the buildings became, in turn, a sign for all of the empty space within. Where there should have been sacred books and studious activity, there was now nothing but a huge void, a space so large it could never be filled. In some cases, the emptiness was even anticipated. The new temple of Vercelli—and probably that of Florence as well—was known in advance to be much too large for the community it would serve. In a letter written to the rabbi of Vercelli in August 1873, Marco Treves, one of the architects of the Temple of Florence, critiqued the project by Locarni: “Foremost among its drawbacks is the excessively large size planned for the building in relation to your needs.” As a result, Treves predicted that “even for the most important occasions you will have a half-empty building.” This emptiness was too evident and too significant to escape the notice of those who concerned themselves with such matters. Had it not been sold to the City of Turin, the Mole Antonelliana would have produced a similar effect, greatly exceeding the dimensions necessary to accommodate worshippers. Primo Levi imagined the “melancholy spectacle” of
today’s Turinese Jews rendered “almost invisible in the enormous space enclosed by Antonelli’s cupola.”

The void would be taken up as the image of what resulted from the abuse of the new freedom. As early as 1876, in a speech entitled “Religion and Liberty,” the chief rabbi of Mantua denounced a kind of Jewish freedom that was not free at all: “Italy knows what regard it must have for its sons who profess the Mosaic faith,” Marco Mortara declared. “Italy knows what religious faith we profess in her regard.”

The first of these statements celebrated the place that the sons of the Jewish families had filled alongside other sons of the city in the fight for the independence of the homeland. It also subtly suggested, however, that the nation already knew this role and that the relation to the new nation did not need to represent the sole preoccupation of modern Jews. Referring to a “religious faith” professed to Italy, Mortara honored Jewish patriotism at the same time that he no doubt brought discomfort to listeners by forcing them to realize how they were misdirecting their faith. The rightful object of their devotion, the religion of Israel, Mortara gently suggested, was proving the victim of a “freedom” of thought that masked disregard for religion and ignorance of its laws and customs: “In the life we lead we so thirst for liberty that we can never drink our fill; we now run the risk of misusing that liberty. In order to make rational use of freedom, should our necessary first principal not be the awareness of how much we abandon and how much we embrace?”

Once again it was Lattes, nearly 40 years later, who would fully draw out the implications of the relationship between the new freedom and the empty space:

[O]nce they became free, Jews began denying any substantial difference between themselves and others. They made a single distinction, and it was a small one. They said: “We go to Temple and they go to Church.” And that was all. And then we began to devote all the striving of our conscience, of our love, of our religion, and of our generosity to the construction of beautiful temples far from the ghettos and to make monuments of them worthy of admiration by others—worthy of citation in the Baedeker among artistic marvels that foreigners flock to between breakfast and a jaunt in the country.

This observation was seemingly confirmed by a visitor to Florence some years earlier: “The tempio grande is little frequented in general because it is quite a distance from the major streets of Florence. However, there is not a foreigner, of whatever religion, who does not
wish to visit the stupendous monument.” Just seven years after the inauguration of the Temple of Rome, when President Sereni repeated the phrase “with no distinction whatsoever,” came this new reading by Lattes: “The people of the Book have thus exhausted all of their possibilities; in these artistic forms, they have represented their new history: beautiful on the outside, but empty of Jewish content.” Lattes thus proved the first to identify the limits of the exotic temples as expressions of real and substantive difference. And where was authentic Judaism? In the ghettos, “where we Jews, who believe it still worthy of life, have left it . . . out of fear of carrying it out into the light.” In the same spirit, Lévinas would exclaim: “The Synagogue without foundation cannot support itself. It is necessary to search again for the conditions of its possibility. For one thing is sure: reduced to itself, under the tempests of modern times, the Synagogue has emptied the synagogues.”

Some interpreters have gone so far as to suggest that the monumentality of the temples—here understood in the sense of a proper monument—constituted a sign of death. “With temples and with charity we can preserve old Jews, not prepare new ones; the future forces of Judaism must be made fertile by schools and educated by schools, as in the case of Italians, Germans, Slavs, and all peoples who do not wish to die,” wrote Lattes. “Monuments are cold and silent signs of dead things and dead generations; we must entrust to living souls the protection and existence of living ideas.” More recently, David Cassuto has described a “[Jewish] existence which, according to the winds that were blowing at the time, seemed to have to limit itself to representation in a monument and in a culture that was already thought to be dead—a sort of commemorative tombstone for Judaism.”

The will to renew Jewish life led some thinkers to suggest an enlargement of the spaces. Rabbi Mortara saw learning as the answer to the “error” of misused freedom. “The School, the Academy, the Library, the Newspaper, conference halls and meeting places . . . must grow and flourish,” declared Lattes. Finally, Lévinas proposed a renewal of Jewish life beginning with a “search for space” in traditional texts: “The return to the texts places us on the level of our true essence, which the concept of a ‘Mosaic Confession’ impoverished and falsified. The great books of Judaism finally bring back to us the foundations that disappeared when everything was being reduced to an incomprehensible liturgy.” Then, inspired by the monumental temples, in dialogue with them without ever mentioning them, Lévinas introduced this key image: “The texts restore the equivalent of the perspectives and dimensions that the builders of the cathedrals had opened in Christian space.
It is indeed time to bring forth, into the bright light of modern intelligence, the cathedrals engulfed in the texts.” So the cycle completed itself; the paradox was reversed. Without ever directly criticizing the buildings themselves—never, or almost never, the aim of critics—Lévinas inverted their symbolic power. The truly monumental space was located not in the Jewish equivalent of cathedral architecture but rather in the truly Jewish architecture of the sacred and traditional texts.

Narrative Counter-Truth

The transformation of the status of Jews in West European countries was accomplished far more completely, and much earlier despite a sometimes rocky road, in the sphere of law than in that of social attitude. In the realm of ideas, John Locke, Moses Mendelssohn, Abbé Grégoire, and others had achieved great influence. On the level of legislation, Jews benefited, albeit in fits and starts, from the Declaration of the Rights of Man, extended to them as a matter of general principle rather than initial design. They continued, however, to be widely perceived as members of the *popolo punito* (punished people). This stigma had seeped far too deeply into the foundation of Christian society to be eradicated by intellectual current or sweeping legislation.

When nineteenth-century Jews in Italy, France, and elsewhere fought tenaciously for the rights of Jews throughout the world and insisted energetically on their own status as equal members of their societies, they were fortifying their ramparts against reactionary forces bolstered by the modern contributions of racial theory. Their critics have been quick to fault them for concentrating on external freedoms to the detriment of internal growth. The frustrations of nineteenth-century figures like the Parisian editor Simon Bloch, who had had enough of emancipation and sought more Judaism, are easy to understand. They have since been echoed by Lattes, Shmuel Trigano, and many others in between.56

Steeped in Jewish learning, such critics distanced themselves from the relation of the Jews to the broader society. Most of their modern coreligionists, however, living in communities no longer enclosed by ghetto walls, have struggled to define their identity within the context of the Christian communities among whom they lived. Those who knew only the indignities of the old ways were eager, like the correspondent who complained about the Via del Ghetto, to declare them dead and buried. It was perhaps only natural that many who tried to stamp

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*Narrating Architecture*

L. Scott Lerner
out the lingering signs of “medieval” persecution also blamed the victim. They could not rid themselves of the perception of Judaism—if not of modern Jews—as degraded.

This perception, of course, had exceptionally deep roots. Ever since the Jews of Jesus’s day refused to recognize him as the Messiah, their continued existence had challenged the legitimacy of Christianity. By maintaining fidelity to their own Covenant rather than folding themselves into the people of the new one, Jews threatened to invalidate the Christian idea of a single, shared history. Christianity eventually responded by casting Jews as miscreants and, following the destruction of the Temple by Titus, as a popolo punito. The destitution of Jewish communities within Christendom was depicted as a providential sign of Christian truth and of Jewish blindness and culpability.

In recent years, the Catholic Church has officially revised its traditional narrative regarding the Jews. The first major step was taken by Vatican II in 1965 with its declaration that, “Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as repudiated or cursed by God, as if such views followed from the holy Scriptures.” The Church subsequently re-examined and rejected key components of its theological position regarding Jews, including the idea that the Jewish people then and later were responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. Freeing itself from the ahistorical bias that dominated centuries of teaching and exegesis, it has also acknowledged the origins and misuses of typology and has begun to emphasize the historical context of the foundation texts of the religion, from the Gospels to Paul to the work of the Church Fathers. From his reference in 1980 to Jews as “the people of the God of the Old Covenant, which has never been revoked” to the “Apology” of Easter Mass 2000, John Paul II has played a key role in this process.

These changes have radically influenced the ways in which the Church conceives Christian and Jewish identity alike. Affirming the continuing “truth” of the Covenant between God and Israel, John Paul II has described Christianity and Judaism as “linked together at the very level of their identity.” The Vatican has also explicitly acknowledged a 2,000-year misreading of the providential sign constituted by the continuing existence of the Jews since the time of Christ: “The permanence of Israel (while so many ancient peoples have disappeared without a trace) is a historic fact and a sign to be interpreted within God’s design. We must . . . rid ourselves of the traditional idea of a people punished, preserved as a living argument for Christian apologetic.” According to Giuseppe Sorani, a spokesperson for this contemporary Catholic perspective, “the identity of the Christian Church
used to be forged in opposition to Judaism; today it is learning to define its own identity with liberty, without necessarily resorting to a hostile, enemy interlocutor who serves as a chiaroscuro.\(^{63}\)

In the age of the monumental synagogues, the traditional Christian practice of forging and sustaining its identity by opposition to the Jews had not yet been challenged or invalidated. The age-old Christian narrative regarding the Jews had yet to undergo revision by the Church and continued to maintain a formidable hold on popular thinking within Catholic societies at large, on both sides of the Risorgimento conflict with the Vatican. A century before Vatican II, the monumental synagogues anticipated the revisions it would introduce and, by promoting a change in attitude and understanding on so broad a cultural plane, even helped to make them possible. Enveloped in a discourse of fraternity and good will, circumscribed by the reluctance of Jewish leaders to assume a polemical stance when political and social reform had been advancing strongly in their favor, the synagogues emerged as signs for all to see of the “historic fact” of the “permanence of Israel.” They discredited the old sign, of Jewish fallenness, imposed by Christians within a narrative over which Jews had no control. In its place they introduced a truly Jewish sign of Jewishness.

A hundred years before Church proprietors officially dismantled the traditional Christian narrative regarding the Jews, the monumental synagogues gave it the lie. They proclaimed that it was not God’s design that the Jewish people be downtrodden. They radically reinterpreted the causes of past oppression. And they demonstrated the compatibility of Jewish faith and dignity with modern times and the new social harmony. The synagogues were not the first to introduce such ideas—Enlightenment-era apologists for the Jews had already done so—but they succeeded in disseminating this perspective as never before. In time, the monumental synagogues fully displaced the ghettos and the Wandering Jew as signifiers of Jewishness within the foundation narratives central to the dominant culture.

The synagogues spoke openly and publicly not only to Christians but also to Jews, and specifically to the feelings of shame and humiliation to which the generation once removed from the ghetto was so susceptible. Strongly condemned by self-affirming Jews, such feelings were perhaps unavoidable in a social atmosphere still permeated by the old narrative of Jewish debasement and God’s design. Both visually and verbally, the monumental synagogues combated the Jews’ internalized perception of their own inferiority.
“They are ridiculous, those who feel ashamed to be Jews,” declared Rabbi Moses Ehrenreich as he admired a restored synagogue in Casale Monferrato in 1866. “It is not birth that bestows fame or dishonor on man but his actions that raise him up or bring him down.”

In 1873, Kahn echoed this sentiment while celebrating the visibility of the new synagogue at Boulogne-sur-Mer: “I do not understand and will never approve a self-effacement on the part [of Judaism] wholly unworthy of its past and great destiny. The role it has filled in history prohibits such exaggerated humility.” In an article entitled “Against Jewish Fear and Shame,” Lattes drove the point home:

Finally [Judaism] is free and has nothing else to do but touch up its suit, summon its courage, and enter the city in order to make its audacity and its value known and to have its triumph glorified. Finally it is free! . . . Here is today’s Judaism: after 40 centuries of struggle, now that it is finally free and has nothing else to do but recount its glories, it is taken with a fearsome suicidal mania. The illness is serious and must be cured.

Although surely not able to bear alone the full weight of Jewish culture, the synagogues participated in this cure. Of the Temple of Florence just after its inauguration, a Jewish visitor to the city wrote his coreligionists: “It is certainly no lesser a monument than the other hundred that adorn this famous city. I was profoundly moved by the majesty of this sacred place and deeply proud to be a Jew.”

The monumental synagogues thus waged a new battle in this prolonged war of narratives. The conflict was not so much between competing narratives as for a single narrative whose beginning—until Jesus—both sides claimed. For the first time in nearly two millennia, Jewish tellers fought anew for propriety of the tale.

**Conclusion: The Battle of the Plot**

How does one or the other side control the story? By determining the plot.

In English, “plot” occupies an area of incongruous, uncannily interrelated semantic fields. In the first instance, a “plot” is a secret plan or scheme, a hostile, unlawful, or evil purpose. It is also a storyline, a small piece of area or ground, or a measured piece of land. It is a plan, map, or diagram, as of land or a building. In verb form, “to plot” means to plan secretly, especially something hostile or evil. It also means to draw a plan or map, as of a tract of land or a building, and to divide land into
plots. Finally, it means to devise or develop a literary or dramatic plot. These improbably joined meanings result from the fact that “plot” meaning “piece of ground” comes from Middle and Old English, whereas “plot” as “secret plan” entered the language by association with the French “complot” in its pejorative sense.

With the monumental synagogues, the meanings of “plot” seep one into another: the parcel of land and the building plan produce a storyline. To design a building is to order the events of a story. To regain control of the plot is to undo a hostile narrative scheme. The synagogues introduced new events into the popular story of the Jewish people in history: they proclaimed the end of Jewish wandering; they “reconstructed” the Temple of Jerusalem; and they announced a degree of freedom and prosperity that belied the notion of a providential sentence of eternal suffering. In so doing, they dismantled and re-plotted the old, Church-inspired narrative.

Why had Jewish tellers waited so long before participating in the narrative of Judeo-Christian history? In a context of Christian hegemony, clearly they lacked what might be called the means of narration. They also had scant internal motivation. In fact, they had good reason to refrain from participating in a narrative that included Christianity. Almost from the outset, Judaism had steered clear of a potentially problematic “Christian Question” by excising from its early record any trace of the life and teaching of Jesus the Jew. Since Jewish foundation narratives were not dependent on Jesus in the way that Christian foundation narratives were dependent on the Jews, rabbinic Judaism had the option of dismissing Jesus without suffering narrative consequences, and this is precisely what it did. It treated Jesus and consequently Christianity as a non-event with respect to Jewish plot. In this way Judaism shielded itself against internal threat, yet it also exposed itself externally by leaving the principal narration of Judeo-Christian history to Christians.

Through the narrating architecture of the monumental synagogues, Jewish tellers openly veered from their age-old indifference to the narrative prison-house imposed upon them by Christian culture. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the public narrative concerning Jews experienced a shift in narrators and a revamping of plot. When, with Vatican II and in its wake, the Church itself reconstituted and reordered the events of this story, it followed a course—a plot—charted a century earlier by the monumental synagogues. Who knows to what extent the self-evidence of the “historic fact” of the “permanence of Israel” may have emerged on the heels of the monumental synagogues?
In the heyday of eclecticism, the builders and proprietors of these buildings were able to take advantage of the communicative potential of a narrating architecture just when they needed it most, as West European Jews came slowly out of the ghetto. As Boralevi has pointed out, the monumental temples would eventually resume the function of the bet Knesset. They would come nearly full circle from what Roberto Bonfil has dubbed “nothing other than a Sanctuary” partially to recreate traditional places of gathering and praying. In the interim, and perhaps ever since, they would function as visible signs, communicated through style and operating at the strange crossroads of plot.

Whether one shares with Todd Endelman the view that the Jewish leaders of post-emancipation Europe between the French Revolution and World War II were the unwitting agents of “radical assimilation,” or underscores with Phyllis Cohen Albert the “collective right to be different” in the legacy of emancipation, it is not difficult to see in the monumental synagogues the visible sign of the phenomenon that is being defended or condemned. Erected by contemporaries bent on producing public monuments “worthy” of their cities, the buildings that have disparagingly been called “cathedral synagogues” soon enough came under attack as signs of pretension—as empty within as they were ostentatious without. Yet they served another crucial purpose. They emerged as their own narrative presence, reassuming and rewriting the public story of Jewish identity in predominantly Christian countries.

Notes

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1 Andreina Griseri and Roberto Gabetti, Architettura dell’eclettismo, un saggio su G.B. Schellino (Torino, 1973), 98.
Dante Lattes trained under one of modern Italy’s most famous rabbis, Elia Benamozegh, and made his name as an opponent of extreme assimilation and as an early advocate of Zionism. Over the course of many decades, he edited and contributed to the most important Italian Jewish periodicals of his day, Il corriere israelitico, Israel, and La rassegna mensile di Israel. See Augusto Segre, “Prefazione” and “Alcune note biografiche,” in [Segre, ed.,] Nel primo centenario della nascita di Dante Lattes, vol. 42, no. 9–2 of La rassegna mensile di Israel (3rd series, 1976), 9–13, 15–21.


Alberto Boralevi rightly refers to a phenomenon of assimilation—“if not to the religion, then to the architecture of the majority religion”—and to what he calls “Jewish identification”: “in the search for an appropriate architectonic style and for a new typology that were ‘different’ from those of churches” (Boralevi, “Il ‘tempio israelitico’ di Trieste,” 7).


Zadoc Kahn, “Sermon prononcé à l’inauguration de la synagogue de la Ferté-sous-

10 Dante Lattes, “‘Ed il libro?’ Discorso tenuto all’Accademia di studi ebraici a Trieste,” Il corriere israeleitico 50, no. 8 (1911), reprinted in [Segre, ed.,] Nel primo centenario, 195.

11 Raffaello Gallico, Sulla convenienza e sui vantaggi che si otterrebbero edificando il nuovo tempio israeleitico di Firenze nel centro della città [ . . . ] (Firenze, 1861), 15–16.


13 Il vessillo israeleitico 30 (1882): 60.

The historian of Italian Jewry Attilio Milano attributes such “physical disgust” provoked by the idea of the ghetto to the fact that the generation that emerged in the last decades of the century had had no personal recollections of those “houses of bondage” and consequently had never known “how much a healthy spirit had been able to circulate within the walls of the ghetto, in the private homes and collective entities it sheltered” (Milano, Storia degli Ebrei in Italia [Torino, 1963], 370.


15 Kenneth R. Stow goes so far as to describe it as a sacred space in its own right; see his “Sanctity and the Construction of Space: The Roman Ghetto as Sacred Space,” in Menachem Mor, ed., Jewish Assimilation, Acculturation and Accommodation: Past Traditions, Current Issues and Future Prospects (Lanham, Md., 1992), 54–76.


18 The story is famous in Italy. Not even the sky was the limit to the ambition of architect Alessandro Antonelli. With no regard to cost, and without authorization, Antonelli continually—and surreptitiously—expanded the project approved by the Jewish community, making it reach ever farther toward the heavens. With little choice, the community raised additional funds to support the first such modifications but eventually admitted defeat and managed to sell the unfinished building to the City of Turin. Primo Levi described the Mole as “that enormous exclamation point right in the center of our city” and had this to say about it: “Obviously as Turinese we too have a certain affection for the Mole, but it is an ironic and polemical affection that does not blind us. We love it as one loves the walls of one’s home, but we know that it is ugly, presumptuous, and not very functional; that it involved an
extremely bad use of public money; and that after the 1953 cyclone and the 1961 restoration, it was kept erect by metal prosthesis. In short, it is quite some time now that it no longer deserved even a mention in the Guinness Book of Records, it is no longer, as they taught us in school, ‘the tallest brick construction in Europe.’ We therefore offer our posthumous gratitude to the municipal assessor Malvano, our coreligionist, who in 1875 had the cleverness to resell the commissioned and unfinished money-devouring edifice to the city. Primo Levi, “Preface,” trans. Raymond Rosenthal, in Vivian Mann, ed., Gardens and Ghettos: The Art of Jewish Life in Italy (Berkeley, 1988), xv; see also Alberto Maria Racheli, “Il nuovo tempio israelitico di Torino e l’architettura sinagogale italiana dopo la seconda metà del XIX secolo,” in Ebrei a Torino. Ricerche per il centenario della sinagoga 1884–1994, (Torino, [1984]), 15–22.

19 A dozen years later, editor Simon Bloch had this to say about the repetition of such patriotic sentiments in the sermons of French rabbis: “Most of all, it is our political and civil emancipation that unfortunately plays a great and tiresome role. . . . as though this emancipation had taken place yesterday and not in 1789!” (Bloch, “De quelques discours rabbiniques,” L’Univers Israélite 22 [1864]: 173).


24 Boralevi mentions the “grandiose synagogues of the ‘free’ cities of Amsterdam or Leghorn” and, for the stylistic aspects only, the “synagogue-fortresses of many cities and villages of Eastern Europe” (Boralevi, “La costruzione della sinagoga di Firenze,” 51).

25 On the Mole, see Racheli, “Il nuovo tempio israelitico”;


30 Giuseppe Guastalla, *Brevi cenni illustrativi del nuovo oratorio israelitico di Torino* (Torino, 1884), 6. As Krinsky points out, and despite this affirmation, the temples in the Moorish style did not derive from the Spanish synagogues (Krinsky, *Synagogues of Europe*, 84–85).


34 The contemporary observer Edmondo De Amicis related a somewhat similar experience: “As one makes his way along the road, he will find on his right the Valdesian Church, and then suddenly, as it were, just a few feet away, the new Catholic Church lifting to the skies the point of its Lombardesque bell tower. It is a curious juxtaposition, and when the new Jewish synagogue is erected just behind it, only a cupola and a mosque will be lacking to demonstrate that in a city of the present day, despite the intolerant still among us, everyone can worship God in his own way and in holy peace, without being disturbed and without any thunderbolt taking the trouble to fall from the pale blue face of the firmament” (cited in Novello Massai, “Indizi di contraddizioni eclettiche nei disegni di Enrico Petiti,” 406).


37 Ibid., 13.

38 Ibid.
41 Lévinas, "Comment le judaïsme est-il possible?" 342.
42 Lattes, "Il significato del tempio," 38.
46 Ibid., 308.
47 Lattes, "Ed il libro?" 197.
49 Lattes, "Ed il libro?" 197.
51 Lévinas, "Comment le judaïsme est-il possible?" 343.
54 Lattes, "Ed il libro?" 205.
55 Lévinas, "Comment le judaïsme est-il possible?" 348.
56 See note 19.
58 Two official Vatican documents clarify these positions: *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate* (1975, no. 4), and *Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church* (June 24, 1985).


66 Lattes, “Contro la paura e la vergogna giudaica,” 125.

67 Il vessillo israelitico 30 (1882): 60.


70 Boralevi, “La costruzione della sinagoga di Firenze,” 68.
