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Jessie Clark

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The spatial representations of community-building in contemporary English synagogues

Jessie Clark

Department of Architecture & Civil Engineering, University of Bath, Bath, UK

ABSTRACT

Synagogues as buildings take on many roles. They are places of worship as well as sites of Jewish cultural heritage and representations of how congregations understand this Jewishness within non-Jewish society. Synagogues therefore symbolise many different identities. This article will explore how Jewish congregations in England today navigate these identities within their synagogue buildings through an exploration of four case studies. It argues that congregations use their synagogues as sites to create both Jewish communities and to forge connections with their neighbours.

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Introduction

Synagogues in England are sites of multi-layered identities. They are the Jewish place of worship, but they are also the buildings where Jews come to engage with the Jewish community. There are fewer national secular Jewish organisations such as those found in the USA and Germany.[1] English Jews who want to experience a specifically Jewish community often have to do this within a synagogue environment even if they themselves do not have a religious background.[2] The synagogue therefore takes on an important function of community building as well as religious practice.

A synagogue therefore encompasses both Jewishness and English Jewishness. Englishness and Jewishness have sometimes been seen as opposing aspects of identity.[3] As synagogues are synonymous with Jewish practices, they also become important sites relationships with the wider non-Jewish society. A synagogue building becomes the representation of how congregations want to be seen by non-Jewish society. Jewish congregations therefore make design choices for their synagogues based on how they wish to be understood within wider society. This has been well studied in older synagogue buildings.[4] This paper will consider how contemporary congregations use their synagogues within this framework. It will consider how the idea of the synagogue as a community centre interacts with the ways in which contemporary congregations choose to engage with these dual aspects of their identity within modern society. It

CONTACT Jessie Clark jrc78@bath.ac.uk Department of Architecture & Civil Engineering, University of Bath, Claverton Down, Bath BA2 7AY, UK

seeks to show how a synagogue building is explicitly used by congregations as a site of both identity creation and presentation through a discussion of four synagogue buildings.

Synagogues and the spatial turn

Synagogues are not necessary for a Jewish community to function. Jewish prayer can take place anywhere and indeed many important rituals take place at the home or other more specific sites such as mikvehs. The synagogue therefore occupies an interesting place within the Jewish community. The three Hebrew words for synagogue Beit Ha Knesset, Beit Ha Midrash and Beit Ha Tefilla – house of meeting, house of study and house of prayer – reflects the many uses of a synagogue. However, as a building they are not, in and of themselves, sacred. It is the actions and rituals undertaken within them that make the space sacred.[5] Moreover, because of the need to have a minyan (ten adult men, although some congregations now include women in minyans) to undertake many of the sacred rituals, as Hultman notes, the sacredness of the materiality of the synagogue is intrinsically linked to the notion of the community.[6]

In recent years, the topographical and spatial turn in Jewish studies has sought to consider how sacred and secular spaces can be explored to examine the lives and experiences of Jewish communities.[7] As key centres of the community, synagogues have featured heavily in this discourse. Although there are no religious requirements that must be followed, certain traditions in Western European synagogues can be identified such as the Aron Kodesh (ark), bimah (platform for the service leader and torah reading) and the geographical focus towards Jerusalem.[8] Whilst these features are common in synagogues, scholars such as Saskia Coenen Lynder, Sharman Kadish and Cai Parry-Jones have also argued that across Europe, local influences affect the design of purpose-built synagogues.[9] As a community building, synagogues therefore reflect a 'local' and a 'global' Jewish expression of identity. Through them, the values and aspirations of individual congregations can be considered.

Faith and the urban environment

The intangible values attached to places and buildings of significance have been explored across many disciplines in recent years including heritage studies, cultural geography, and architecture.[10] These wide-ranging studies have considered how the built environment can both reflect and help create identity. Many have discussed how for minority faith groups, one aspect of religious engagement can include the continued expression of their identity and history as a minority group. This is achieved through designing buildings which recreate traditional ritual spaces which allow a connection to the past to be represented.[11] Jordan has argued that the term infrasecular, as used by Veronica Della Dora, could be a useful framework to understand the many layers of meaning religious buildings now hold.[12] Religious buildings navigate a dynamic between the secular and sacred. This creates a 'third space' where the sacred rituals of religion occupy only one aspect of places of worship and social and community needs are recognised as integral aspects of a religious building.[13] As Lung-Amam and Gale argue, rituals transform spaces into sacred sites which then, as Kong shows, creates familiarity and attachment to the

space.[14] Indeed, Watson and Zanetti argue that it is the act of building communal religious spaces that reinforce spiritual connections and foster a sense of community.[15]

Minority faith groups in modern Britain, however, face the paradoxical problem that overt religious practice is often seen as the antithesis to integrated communities due to fears that religions preach intolerance.[16] Indeed, English Jews have a complex history with expressing their Jewishness in public. In the nineteenth century, in an attempt to assuage rising antisemitism, Jewish elites encourage acculturalisation, private Jewishness and public conformity to Victorian sensibilities.[17] This practice was known as Minhag Anglia and extended to synagogue buildings. Larger, grander buildings whose exteriors reflected the English townscape were built. Prominent reading desks where English sermons to preach English values were included in the interiors.[18] Synagogues became sites of integration and a symbol of Anglo-Jewry.

Indeed, many minority faith communities utilise public space for religious worship whilst aiming to legitimise their presence in their new society.[19] The building of overt religious spaces is often seen as a reflection of increased confidence and an expression of right to reside. Dwyer, Gilbert and Shah show how this is especially true in the suburbs which are often imagined as spaces reserved for white secular nuclear families.[20] Yet, they argue that this environment provides the perfect landscape for minority communities to convert old spaces for religious worship, thus juxtaposing traditional ideals of Britishness and lived realities.

From reinforcing minority cultures to invoking heritage traditions or providing religious identities, how a building is designed and used reflects the aims of the creators and moulds the views of the users. It also provides a way in which minority communities can communicate who they are to external parties. Active engagement with wider society as a religious minority reflects the confidence of a community and the desire to create a space which allows the expression of the multi-faceted identities of congregations. There is a need to consider contemporary synagogues within this discourse to allow for a deeper discussion of the values of these buildings beyond their sacred ones. It could help deepen understandings of the wider experiences of Jewish communities and shed light on the intersection between secular Judaism and religious practice.

Methodology

This discussion is based on work with four English provincial synagogues. These congregations have all engaged in interactions with non-Jewish groups in recent years and have all undertaken work to promote their congregation beyond the Jewish community. They are all of a similar size (between 50 and 199 families) and are all outside of the major areas of Jewish population density. This means that whilst none of the congregations discussed here are the only synagogue community in their city, they are physically distant from the large and established centres of Jewish institutional support. They also have restricted access to resources such as kosher shops, restaurants and Jewish schools. They will also be much more aware that their external expression of Jewishness is almost exclusively observed by non-Jews.

The first congregation is Leicester Hebrew Congregation (LHC), whose synagogue was built in 1898 and is now a Grade II listed building.[21] This independent central orthodox

community has recently built a heritage centre as part of their National Lottery Heritage fund grant. This heritage centre builds on their outreach educational work which includes hosting school visits, enabling university students to visit and undertake research and working with the police to better understand community security needs. The congregation is a part of the Leicester Council of Faiths which brings together the city's many different religious communities.[22]

Leicester Progressive Jewish Congregation (LPJC) is a much younger congregation. Founded in 1949, the community only acquired their building in 1995.[23] This is a converted nineteenth century school and has recently had a modern extension. They are also a member of the Leicester Council of Faiths; this community has hosted interfaith social events and has provided food and used their hall as accommodation for refugees and the homeless.

Founded in 1960, Bristol and West Progressive Jewish Congregation (BWPJC) is of similar age to LPJC. They acquired the first part of their building in 1975. A former potato store, the congregation has since acquired two further adjoining terrace houses as they have expanded (see Figure 2).[24] Their community is situated in a particularly diverse area of Bristol and they work with their immediate neighbours for good inter-community relations.

Finally, St Albans Masorti Synagogue (SAMS, see Figure 1 above) is the youngest of these congregations, founded in 1990. Their synagogue is a converted modern industrial warehouse.[25] From the outside there are no obvious signs that the building is a synagogue. As part of their '*tracing roots*' project, this community created an exhibition tracing the ancestry of some members of their congregation for the local museum and which is now displayed in their synagogue. Alongside this, refugees were welcomed to events at the museum and synagogue, and they now also use the synagogue as a community space reflecting and connecting the refugee stories of the congregation to the present day.

Figure 1 and 2. (left) St Albans Masorti Synagogue and (right) Bristol and West progressive congregation, author's own.

This research has been undertaken using interpretative phenomenology approach. This method evolved from grounded theory of data analysis. One such example is Sinclair and Milner's study of young Jewish adults' identity. They argue that, unlike grounded theory or statistical quantitative research, their data was more focused on participant experience rather than creating wider theories about the group as a whole.[26] Phenomenology focuses in one particular phenomenon to study and draws conclusions from that work. These conclusions are recognised as situational, as with ethnography, but may apply to a wider group. For example, in Sinclair and Milner's study, their research aim was to explore in depth what being Jewish meant to young adults and how this had developed from childhood and adolescence. Their conclusions are based on analysing, through coding and creating memos for 18 semi-structured interviews. They argue that their findings – which suggest that the younger a person is the more fluid their beliefs and practices are likely to be – are grounded in their specific participants but could be considered suggestive of wider attitudes found in young Jewish adults in England.[27] Whilst considering the specific voices of participants, there was still an element of aiming for scientific validity in this method which would seem to be contradictory to the goals of qualitative research. Due to the interpretative nature of analysing qualitative data, validity in such a study must be recognised as complex. Instead, researchers have to consider how their own research methods and conclusions have been influenced by their backgrounds and biases.

Based on this method, this research undertook 15 semi-structured interviews with members of the congregation were undertaken away from the synagogue – almost all over the phone or digitally. These covered a range of topics and the semi-structured nature encouraged participants to add their thoughts. However, in all cases all participants were asked at least one question on the subject of the wider Jewish community, one question on the nature of their specific congregational community, and one question on the subject of relations with the non-Jewish community. Appendix 1 details a breakdown of participants. These have then been supplemented with visits to the building to observe how the congregation uses the space. This combination of qualitative approach has allowed a rounded view of how participants perceived their synagogue to emerge. By undertaking the interviews first, themes that arose in each case were able to be tested within the later observational data collection stage.

It is also important to note at this point that the conversations for this research all took place between June 2021 and March 2022. Since then, the international political situation in Israel has changed Jewish communities' relationships with their buildings and their congregations. This paper cannot address the changed that this may have caused. Rather, it is a discussion of the role of synagogue buildings prior to this time.

Synagogues as places of community

One of the most common reactions I have encountered when speaking with congregation members across these communities is the notion that a synagogue is not necessarily the most important aspect of Jewish life and is certainly not necessary to practice Judaism. Instead, the single most common theme is that Jewishness means being part of – in some way – a Jewish community.[28] This reflects the work undertaken by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR) who have found over several research reports undertaken across

European Jewry, that Jewish identity is connected to a notion of Jewish peoplehood.[29] However, if the majority of Jews feel that to be connected to Jewishness there is a need to be connected to the Jewish community, then to be connected a community in Britain there is a need to be connected to a synagogue congregation. There are fewer national Jewish organisations in Britain than on the continent or in the USA.[30] Even if a person has no particular religious Jewish affiliation, if they wish to maintain a cultural communal Jewish identity, association with a congregation is often necessary.[31] As the majority of congregations have a synagogue building, these become the place of Jewish identity and community building.[32] These opinions reinforce the arguments that it is a community and the actions which make the building sacred.[33]

In this way, the synagogue becomes the home of the community. This terminology was often employed by participants from across all four congregations. Whilst Jewishness is often considered to be very focussed on family and home worship, if the synagogue is the 'home' of the congregation, its importance for active Jewish engagement becomes evident. The synagogue as a *building* does create the sense of community and in doing so becomes a 'safe place' for Jews where the community is 'its own little club'.[34] Many congregations talk of finding a home for their community within a synagogue building. It is where a congregation can be Jewish.

Synagogues are not simply places to be Jewish, however. They are a place where a specific Jewish identity can be expressed. Several participants in Progressive congregations spoke of finding a home within their current congregation because their spouse was not Jewish, and they felt able to be involved in Jewish life in ways that were not able to be in Orthodox congregations.[35] One participant from an Ashkenazi background but who had experienced several synagogues, noted that 'Ashkenazi [synagogue styles] is home and what is familiar . . . [I can] understand the space'.[36] It reinforces the idea that a home needs to follow a particular tradition in order to be understood. It is the heritage of the congregation that creates the sense of safety, not just the fact that it is a synagogue. A synagogue building needs to reflect the specific aspects of their Jewishness that they can easily comprehend. Whilst this participant described 'Sephardi shuls [as] . . . often more beautiful [than Ashkenazi synagogues . . . with a] feminine energy and spiritual' they would still not choose to attend a Sephardi congregation as their own congregation.[37] For them, their own synagogue would need the building to feature Ashkenazi traditions in order to feel like that home. This suggests that in any other synagogue they would feel more like a visitor, however welcome or beautiful they find the building. In essence, not all synagogues are the same and cannot always comprehended by all Jews. Synagogue buildings are designed to fit the needs of the community. They are thus made in the image of a specific Jewish identity.

Nevertheless, despite being a private place for the Jewish community, a synagogue is also the public face of Judaism. It is one of the most easily identifiable Jewish buildings. However, with two thirds of the Jewish population living in Greater London and nearly another quarter living in Greater Manchester, cities outside of these areas rarely have more than one or two synagogues.[38] When interactions with non-Jewish society take place in provincial congregations, the synagogue takes on another level of identity that extends beyond the congregation and encompasses wider reaching themes of Judaism in secular society. It reflects how a congregation understands its own position in society and how they want to be understood.

Synagogues as representations of community building

The desire to build the relationship between their specific Jewish community and non-Jewish society is a recurring theme arising from this research. Specifically, ensuring engagement as a Jewish congregation rather than meeting as 'neutral' or 'secular' members of British society. These congregations are located outside of the major areas of Jewish populations of London and Manchester.[39] It is perhaps not surprising that an important message from all these communities is the desire to be open, welcoming and ensure a peaceful co-existence with their neighbours. There is a widespread feeling, whether true or not, that Jewishness and Judaism is not widely known about or fully understood in secular society. Indeed, in the three younger communities, I was told that it was not uncommon for their neighbours to say that they were not aware their building was a synagogue.[40] In recent years, all of these congregations have opened up their doors to the local community showing their desire to engage with the society as a Jewish congregation. This opening up of synagogue buildings has influenced the ways in which the community have changed their space to facilitate these interactions.

In Leicester, the Hebrew Congregation has created a purpose-built space from a National Lottery Heritage Fund grant in the renovations of their former classrooms. This space meets the condition of the grant to create a public output allowing visitors to access this space as part of an educational tour. It builds on and improves the existing work that the congregation undertook in facilitating education on the Jewish community. Inside the room, there are panels detailing the congregation's history which situates their story within the wider history of the city and tells of their continued engagement with other organisations in Leicester. The space itself is not used by the congregation. It is separate from the sanctuary and the congregation also has separate meeting rooms and kitchens. The improved public education room provide space for the congregation to welcome interfaith dialogues into their building and allows for the comfort of all visitors. As one person told me, previously the congregation had to use an old garage opposite for such visits which was separate from the main building and had no facilities at all.[41] They were finding it increasingly difficult to welcome larger groups and accessibility was becoming an issue.

It is also in many ways a little more 'neutral'. Whilst still within the synagogue building and showcases Jewish faith and customs, the removal from the formality of the sanctuary and the clear religious importance of the main area of worship creates a more relaxed atmosphere and gives the room a sense of familiarity akin to other museum spaces. Although visitors are welcomed into the main sanctuary, the newer spaces provide a secondary area that is distinct from the 'sacred'. Whilst the congregation very explicitly do not want the synagogue to be treated like a museum and have continued concerns about security if it were to be treated as such, the differing styles of the religious and the educational represent the two different interactions that take place there.

In contrast, Leicester Progressive Congregation and St Albans Masorti which are both smaller, rent out their space. This means that the groups that come into the synagogue temporarily occupy the building for their own use. Activities range from book groups, parent and toddler events and exercise classes. It does mean that the congregations do not have full control over these groups' use of the building. Congregants from both communities have stated that being able to welcome people

into the building in this way is important for their own sense of Jewishness within the community.[42] It is reflection that they want to share their synagogue. However, it does mean that the rooms which outside groups access are altered to fit this shared use. For example, one participant from St Albans' synagogue explained that there are fewer 'Jewish images' in certain rooms to make them suitable. This is similar to the way Leicester Hebrew Congregation has set up their space. However, because St Albans' synagogue is smaller than LHC, the congregation also need to make use of these rooms themselves. The deliberate removal of overtly religious themes reflects this interfaith nature of the space even when only the Jewish congregation is making using of them. In contrast whilst at the Leicester Progressive Synagogue, the congregation have a moveable Ark so that many of these interfaith activities take place in the sanctuary itself once the Torah scrolls and Ark have been covered and put away. For both these younger congregations there is a clearer mixing of their space with other faith groups. Being smaller and younger, these two congregations do not have the option of creating separate spaces for interfaith activities. The fact that they choose to do so in the meeting rooms and classrooms they also utilise shows the importance of interfaith dialogues for them. Members of both communities commented that this allowed the congregation to be part of their wider local community. At LPJC the congregation carried out a questionnaire of the groups who came into their synagogue and had positive responses, with people commenting on the welcome and suitability.[43] For these congregations, allowing their building to become community centres cemented their congregations within their local community. Thus, the Jewish community, already represented through the very existence of a synagogue, becomes part of wider society in its own right.

Bristol and West Progressive Jewish Congregation sits somewhere between the two. They do not have a specially designed area for the public to access, but neither are they able to rent out their synagogue as it is too small and, in their own words, too inaccessible. It is the amalgamation of three former terraced houses and shops, each one acquired separately. The building quite literally grew with the community, although this has meant that it has a somewhat clunky layout with limited disabled access and no disabled access upstairs to their main classrooms and meeting spaces. The community does use the downstairs area as a multi-functional space: a sanctuary which can also be turned into an area for eating and socialising as needed. This space would not, they feel, provide what is necessary for outside groups to rent. Instead, they welcome visitors during the multi-faith open doors events for places of worship in the city. This allows anyone to enter and explore any participating faith space to engage and learn about the building and the faith. In a similar vein to Leicester Hebrew Congregation, the community therefore has slightly more control of the interactions, although unlike at Leicester they have less control over the security access of who enters. However, the members I have spoken to wished that there was more they could do open the synagogue further.[44] For the Leicester community their new heritage centre provided what they needed to engage meaningfully with wider society. For the Bristol community, they do not yet have this. Several people spoke of the ways in which other faith groups were able to offer their spaces as community centres for activities such as for inter-community youth groups, vaccination centres or polling stations. These activities are something that the community would want their synagogue to also be able to offer.

These attitudes seem to reveal the impact of Minhag Anglia on relations with non-Jewish society. It would appear that, even though Jewish communities are now much more open to showing their Jewishness, it is done within the safety of accepted societal norms. Congregations want to be part of civic society. This means using their building for secular needs. Jewish communities still want to emphasise their Englishness.

The synagogue would embody a Jewish place situated within the wider society. This is something that LPJC and SAMS have in some ways been able to offer. The synagogue has been described by so many as the place that 'you come to be Jewish' in a society where congregants are not often able to easily express that identity. The synagogue is a physical representation of being 'other' and the place where that otherness can be expressed fully. Therefore, by welcoming non-Jews and utilising their Jewish space within civic societal norms. The congregations encompass these actions as an integral part of their Jewish identity; Jewishness is once again equated with Englishness. The sense of a community is still at the heart of the synagogue, but the community it serves becomes wider, allowing the Jewish congregation to be actively Jewish within the wider community.

It is also through these interactions that the community building takes place and shapes the idea of what might be called the extended the synagogue. That is the synagogue community that goes beyond the Jewish family. This is reflected in the connections that were made in the experiences of minority groups. An important one was the consideration of security. This was manifested in two ways. Firstly, the security risks of opening up the synagogue doors initially. This was, as someone described to me, a mitigated risk: one that was important to take in order to become part of the community and be seen by others.[45] However, an awareness of security concerns also created links between minority faith groups. Other minority faith groups also had their own security concerns and there was one anecdote relayed to me over the understanding gained between Jewish and Muslim congregations when, at an interfaith meeting discussing security, a local Anglican church expressed their concern that they may have to add a lock to the church's front door. The Jewish and Muslim congregations forged a connection through the almost dark humour of this particular Anglican congregation's lack of knowledge over the security measures minority faiths need to take.[46] Similarly, when inviting outside communities to their synagogues, there was a general understanding amongst communities across the country at the need for the security and therefore there was no offence given at these measures. In fact, the welcoming in despite of these concerns helped build community ties, reflecting the community building within the space.

Conclusion

Through increased dialogues with non-Jews as specific Jewish communities these congregations are working to put their communities on the map. The synagogue therefore becomes a Jewish space within a wider community and not a Jewish space that is situated outside of it. By looking at synagogue buildings in this framework rather than just a religious building, this paper has aimed to show the potential of exploring the ways in which Jewish communities engage with wider as society as Jews. This could build and expand upon existing work on contemporary Jewish identity.

Synagogues have always been a place of community building and creation. Through the expression of Jewishness in non-Jewish societies via synagogues, this has created the

added dimension of being sites of interfaith community building. This has allowed Jewish congregations to forge relationships with wider society as specifically Jewish community on their own terms. For many this has enhanced the feeling of 'specialness' and 'spirituality' to their synagogue. Jewish communities adapt their synagogues to allow for these interactions, to the benefit of their congregation and their neighbours. Interfaith dialogues allow Jewish communities to showcase their Jewishness within wider society, overtly express their Jewish identity and open up and welcome others into their synagogues.

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46. Pers.comm 10.

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Notes on contributor

Jessie Clark is a PhD candidate at the University of Bath working on a thesis entitled 'Twentieth Century English Synagogues and the construction of contemporary Anglo-Jewish identity and heritage'. This research is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in conjunction with Historic England. She completed her MA in Cultural Heritage Management at the University of York.

Appendix 1

Summary of Interviews

Synagogue				
	Gender≠	Age^	Date	Reference
BWPJC	Male	Over 60	August 2021	Pers.comm 1
BWPJC	Female	30-60	April 2022	Pers.comm 2
BWPJC	Female	Over 60	April 2022	Pers.comm 3
BWPJC	Female	Over 60	April 2022	Pers.comm 4
BWPJC	Male	30-60	April 2022	Pers.comm 5
BWPJC	Female	30-60	May 2022	Pers.comm 6
LHC	Male	Over 60	June 2021	Pers.comm 7
LPJC	Female	30-60	November 2021	Pers.comm 8
LPJC	Female	Over 60	February 2022	Pers.comm 9
St Albans	Male	Under 30	February 2022	Pers.comm 10
St Albans	Female	Over 60	February 2022	Pers.comm 11
St Albans	Female	30-60	February 2022	Pers.comm 12
St Albans	Male	Over 60	February 2022	Pers.comm 13
St Albans	Female	Over 60	February 2022	Pers.comm 14
St Albans	Male	30-60	March 2022	Pers.comm 15

ǂ based on pronoun preference.

Interviewees were not asked their specific age and therefore have been grouped into three broad categories based on loose life cycle expectations.