

CT Trust Resource ID: 2635

HISTORIC RESOURCE INVENTORY – BUILDING AND STRUCTURES

State Historic Preservation Office, DECD, One Constitution Plaza, 2nd Floor, Hartford, CT 06103

*Note: Please attach any additional or expanded information on a separate sheet.

Inventory form modified for the Creative Places - Arts & Letters Project

GENERAL INFORMATION

Building Name (Common): Beth El Temple of West HartfordOther Name(s) (Historic): Beth El Temple of West HartfordStreet Address or Location: 2626 Albany Avenue, West HartfordTown/City: West Hartford

Village:

County: Hartford

Designation(s):

Owner(s): Beth El TemplePublic/Private: Non-ProfitLatitude: 41.7875 Longitude: -72.7572

PROPERTY INFORMATION

Present Use: RELIGION: synagogue; RECREATION & CULTURE: work of artHistoric Use: RELIGION: synagogue; RECREATION & CULTURE: work of artAccessibility to public: No Exterior visible from public road? YesInterior accessible? If yes, explain: By appointmentStyle of building: MODERN MOVEMENT: New formalism Date of Construction: 1953-1963Material(s) (Indicate use or location when appropriate) Concrete, BrickStructural Systems(s): Load bearing masonry, Laminated woodRoof (Type): Round (Material): MembraneNumber of Stories: 1 and 2 Approximate Dimensions: 55' x 200', 100' x 50', 100' diam.Structural Condition: ExcellentExterior Condition: ExcellentLocational Integrity: On original site Moved, When: NAAlterations?: Yes If yes, explain: Additions

Related outbuildings or landscape features:

Surrounding Environment: Residential

Interrelationship of building and surroundings:

The site is on the north side of Albany Avenue (Route US 44) and half a mile west of the intersection with North Main Street in West Hartford. The site is a deep trapezoid-shaped parcel of 15 acres extending northward from Albany Avenue. An entrance drive loops clockwise around the site, entering diagonally toward the northwest, passing a 150-foot deep landscaped lawn area and the sanctuary, then arriving at an entry plaza on the west side of the building.

Other notable features of building or site:

The building includes the 1963 main sanctuary closest to Albany Avenue; the lobby and a series of later additions wrapping around the north and east sides of the sanctuary; a block of activity spaces and an activity wing extending north. The 55' x 200' north wing is the earliest portion, built in 1955. The lobby, a flat-roofed 100- x 50-foot block, wraps around the main sanctuary. The 1963 sanctuary is a high-ceilinged twelve-sided polygonal space approximately 100 feet in diameter. The roof is formed of twelve barrel segments radiating from the center to form a clear-span dome-like space. The concrete piers have a white exposed aggregate surface on the exterior. The exterior envelope of the sanctuary is a series of arched bays. Each has a curtain wall infill. An upper glazed clerestory of colored glass has an abstract pattern of rectangular panes in predominantly blue tones. Below are brick panels rising to the spring line of the arches, with slit windows adjacent to the structural piers, emphasizing the non-structural character of the curtain wall.

The monumental bronze sculpture group, Procession #2, by Elbert Weinberg, occupies a prominent location on the front lawn of Beth El Temple. The piece consists of figures extending to a maximum height of approximately twelve feet. At the right a pair of men blow shofars, which they extend above their heads. The central figure holds a Torah high above his head, a scroll in each hand. To the left a figure reads from a book, his robed shoulders echoing the arched form of the temple roof behind him. The procession represents the carrying of the Torah out from the Ark and walking it around the congregation, in preparation for reading.

Architect: Kane and Fairchild; Kane, Joseph E. Builder/Maker: Konover Construction

Historical or Architectural importance:

Procession # 2 was a major commission of the sculptor Elbert Weinberg, a Hartford native and nationally known sculptor. The monumental work is one of Weinberg's largest and most complex projects.

Elbert Weinberg (1928-1991), born in Hartford, was valedictorian of his class at Weaver High School. He studied at the Rhode Island School of Design. In 1951, Weinberg, then 23, became the youngest recipient of the Prix de Rome, entitling him to study in Italy for two years. When Weinberg returned to Connecticut, he was invited by Joseph Albers to attend the Yale School of Art. He was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship in 1959 to return to Rome and the Sculpture Award from the American Institute of Arts and Letters in 1968. After eleven years in Rome, Weinberg returned to America and taught at Dartmouth College, and at Boston University. In the mid-1950s, Weinberg created a group, The Procession, which includes three parts – a figure carrying a Torah; a pair of reading figures with a prayer book; and a figure carrying a menorah. In the 1970s Weinberg developed Procession #2. He created a smaller version first, followed by the full-size group. The owners made Procession #2 available on long-term loan to Beth El Temple (Weinberg Archives).

The Beth El Temple sanctuary is highly significant as a modernist building design of the early 1960s. It represents a dramatic use of new technology, including concrete piers and laminated timber arches in a New Formalist style of modernism. The design also recalls the timeless imagery of domed places of worship of earlier periods.

The site for Beth El was purchased in 1953 when 39 members made a down payment. The congregation grew quickly and had 100 members within two months of purchasing the site (Rosen 2015, interview). The original building of 1955 was added to and modified as the congregation grew, with the twelve-sided sanctuary constructed in 1963. The building was designed by Architect Joseph E. Kane (1907-1993) of West Hartford, a senior partner in the firm of Kane and Fairchild. Kane designed both the original building (1955) and the sanctuary (1963). He had studied at Brown University and the Rhode Island School of Design and was a founding member of the congregation. Through the years, construction projects were handled by the Konover Construction Company, prominent congregation members.

Sources:

Interview by Elizabeth Pratt Fox with Rabbi Jim Rosen, 2/25/2015, at the site.

West Hartford Assessor's Records & GIS Viewer <http://host.appgeo.com/westhartfordct/> Parcel ID: Map E4/ 0031/ 2626.

Historical aerial photography and maps accessed at UConn MAGIC: http://magic.lib.uconn.edu/historical_maps_connecticut_towns.html .

Antonio, Mindy A. 12/29/1991. Sculptor's Work Reflected Themes in Life. Hartford Courant. Accessed 8/21/2015 at

http://articles.courant.com/1991-12-29/news/0000207717_1_mr-weinberg-elbert-weinberg-holocaust-memorial/2 .

Editorial: A Fitting Tribute to the Rabbi. 6/04/1992. Hartford Courant, B12. Accessed through ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

Elbert Weinberg, Sculptor: Virtual Gallery. Accessed at <http://www.elbertweinberg.com/> .

Elbert Weinberg, 63, A Hartford Sculptor, obituary. 12/29/1991. The New York Times. <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/12/29/obituaries/elbert-weinberg-63-a-hartford-sculptor.html> on 2/15/2015.

Finlay, Nancy. 2015. Breaking the Mold: Tradition and Innovation in the Work of Elbert Weinberg. ConnecticutHistory.org. Accessed at:

<http://connecticuthistory.org/breaking-the-mold-tradition-and-innovation-in-the-work-of-elbert-weinberg/> .

Gane, John F. 1962, 1970. A.I.A. American Architects Directory. New York: Bowker, R.R. for American Institute of Architects. Accessed at: <http://public.aia.org/sites/hdoaa/wiki/Wiki%20Pages/Find%20Names.aspx> .

Weinberg Archives. Hartford History Center. Hartford Public Library, Hartford, Connecticut.

Photographer: Charlotte Hitchcock, Elizabeth Pratt Fox **Date:** 2/25/2015

View: South view

Form completed by: Charlotte Hitchcock **Printed On:** June 2, 2016

Organization: Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation

Address: 940 Whitney Avenue, Hamden CT 06517-4002

Threats: None known

Subsequent field evaluations:



Beth El Temple, 2626 Albany Ave., West Hartford

FOR OFFICE USE:

Town # _____ Site# _____ UTM _____

District ☐ S ☐ NR If NR, specify: ☐ Actual ☐ Potential