

Jackson-Beckett, Michelle

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Reconsidering Jewish Cultural Identity in Modern Central European Architecture and Design

A Review of: Elana Shapira, ed. *Designing Transformation: Jews and Cultural Identity in Central European Modernism*. London: Bloomsbury, 2021. 344 pp. ISBN: 9781350172272

Michelle Jackson-Beckett (mj3134@columbia.edu)

Curator, Drawings & Archives, Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University

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What is Jewish space and how can we understand the nature of a specifically Jewish practice in modern architecture and design in Central Europe? Elana Shapira and the contributing authors to *Designing Transformation: Jews and Cultural Identity in Central European Modernism* set out to answer these questions through case studies largely set during the interwar years, with a coda section devoted to the Jewish diaspora and émigré designers and architects. The question of identifying and defining a specific Jewish identity (whether self-identified or not) in the context of the modern built environment can be difficult to untangle from specific religious contexts. As several of the authors point out, the notion of ‘Jewishness’ in art, architecture, and design was, and continues to be, a contested topic at the center of often politically charged debates. In 2015, the Jerusalem-based architect and urban planner Gerard Heumann published a reactionary opinion piece for the right-leaning *Jerusalem Post* that ‘there is no such thing as “Jewish” architecture.’¹ Heumann, who is not trained as an architectural historian, went on to argue that: ‘Judaism has always been mainly a literary culture in which the height of achievement was to be a scholar of the Torah. Moreover, in Judaism, the emphasis is placed not on the physical but on the spiritual. Lacking a body of historical precedents, a Jewish architecture could not possibly have flowered.’² *Designing Transformation* and its impressive group of contributing authors debunks Heumann’s incendiary polemic, which flattens Jewish identity and culture. Shapira and the contributing authors offer a window into the vibrant and complex world of interwar Jews active in modern Central European design and architecture, as practitioners, patrons, and entrepreneurs—arguing in tandem that neither architecture and design, nor Jews as a group, are monolithic.

1) Gerard Heumann, ‘No Such Thing as “Jewish” Architecture,’ *The Jerusalem Post*, 5 May 2015 (URL: <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/no-such-thing-as-jewish-architecture-402192>) (Accessed 1 August 2023). It might be noted that Reuters reported in 2020 that the *Jerusalem Post* had published op-ed pieces by non-existent writers. At the time of writing, Gerard Heumann, however, does appear to be a real person based on a LinkedIn profile and other professional websites.

2) Ibid.

Wider discourses on Jewish identity, modernism, and the built environment

In this volume, Shapira returns to the question of Central European Jewish identity and cultures of design, this time expanding beyond Vienna from her edited volume of 2018, *Design Dialogue: Jews, Culture and Viennese Modernism*.³ Like that publication, *Designing Transformation* arose out of an international symposium hosted by the University of the Applied Arts Vienna in conjunction with the MAK - Museum of Applied Arts Vienna, the Brighton Design Archives, and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 2018.

The book is organized into three parts: (1) ‘Designing Their Homes in Central Europe’; (2) ‘Outsiders/Insiders—Cultural Authorship and Strategies of Inclusion’; and (3) ‘Survival through Design—Projecting Transformative Designs onto the Future’. Each section offers several case study chapters authored by experts in the field. Although the title of Part 1 is slightly awkward in its word choice (the unqualified ‘Their’ suggests a monolithic flattening of a diverse group), the chapters are successful in illustrating the rich and complex strata of various Jewish social classes, political, and aesthetic approaches to design across Jewish, Christian, and secular spaces in Central Europe. Those familiar with Shapira’s past work will find similar threads woven into *Designing Transformation*, including the importance of Jewish acculturation, or the process by which individuals or groups adapt to a dominant culture through social, psychological, or cultural means. One theme among the chapters, Shapira suggests, is the importance of chosen networks and artistic or design languages as modes for Jewish architects, designers, and patrons to navigate the paradoxes of modern Jewish identity. They also made it possible for Jews to become reconciled to their liminal status as both insiders and outsiders in modern society, a sociological reading that has been popularized by Peter Gay, Lisa Silverman, Simone Lässig, Miriam Rürup, and others.⁴

The main theme of Jewish cultural identity in *Designing Transformation* is part of a broader discourse focused on identity politics in architecture and design history, a discourse that expands beyond Central European studies, including the Jewish diaspora in Anglophone architecture and design communities into the twentieth century and today. Some twenty years ago the architect and architectural historian David Gissen referred to a turn in the 1990s, when architecture critics and scholars embraced social construction as a point of departure for critical studies of Jewish space.⁵ Moving away from an essentialist model in histories of Jewish architecture and design, Gissen examined how postmodern and contemporary examples in architecture illustrated the shift. Examples included the architect Peter Eisenman’s engagement with Jewishness and self-identification (notably in interviews with Leon Krier and Charles Jencks), as well as the multimedia artist Rachel Schreiber’s critical approach to constructions of Jewish spaces. While *Designing Transformation* differs in period and geography from these examples, Shapira’s work generally takes this social constructionist approach.

3) Elana Shapira, ed., *Design Dialogue: Jews, Culture and Viennese Modernism*, Vienna: Böhlau, 2018.

4) Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider*, New York: Norton, 2001; Lisa Silverman, *Becoming Austrians: Jews and Culture Between the Wars*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012; Simone Lässig and Miriam Rürup, eds, *Space and Spatiality in Modern German-Jewish History*, New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2017.

5) David Gissen, ‘Is There a Jewish Space? Jewish Identity Beyond the Neo-Avant-Garde’, *Thresholds*, 23 2001, 90–95.

Case studies and cultural biographies

Fourteen case-study chapters in *Designing Transformation* examine at times the impact, and at times, the erasure, of Jewish practitioners of design and architecture, entrepreneurs and, clients in modern Central Europe. In the language of archival description, the term ‘creator’ lends itself well to the figures in this book who often engaged in a wide range of activities that spanned architecture, design, and art. Archival practice comes into play literally in Part Three, when Sue Breakell offers a compelling analysis of how émigré designers engaged with the archive, focusing on figures such as German-British graphic designer Hans Arnold Rothholz and the Viennese born graphic designer Willy De Majo.

Part One, ‘Designing Their Homes in Central Europe’, is the longest section, with six authors contributing case studies from a variety of cities: Budapest, Bratislava, Berlin, Brno, Kraków, and Zagreb. Rudolf Klein’s analysis of New Leopold Town (Újlipótváros) in Budapest is a cultural biography of a neighborhood and takes a longer view of history. Klein explores social and spatial relations, conceiving of this Jewish neighborhood as a modern shtetl that was influenced by voluntary segregation as much as modernist urban planning and construction, and today is notable for a diverse population of Jewish and non-Jewish backgrounds. Henrieta Moravčíková’s chapter focuses on the Jewish architect Friedrich Weinwurm and his work designing residences for a cohort of Jewish entrepreneurs, doctors, and lawyers who commissioned his work in Bratislava. Weinwurm’s work extended as well to a Jewish hospital, department store, and a housing block for ‘Unitas,’ the shortened name of the Cooperative for the Construction of Small Apartments (*Stavebné družstvo pre výstavbu malých bytov*). While Weinwurm’s clientele was predominantly Jewish, Moravčíková ultimately argues that he should be viewed in the broader context of modern Bratislava’s urban development in the 1930s and 1930s and that his architecture was ‘removed from ethnic and any provincial concerns.’⁶

Celina Kress’s chapter revisits a renowned modernist home, the Sommerfeld House in Berlin (1920-1922) by Walter Gropius and Adolf Meyer, and reconsiders the role of Adolf Sommerfeld as both a client and a collaborator with Gropius and Meyer. Kress offers a reappraisal of Sommerfeld as an influential agent in Berlin’s network of modern urban planners, politicians, and architects. Her argument is ultimately focused on the intertwining of patronage and collaboration in modern architecture in Berlin, rather than a reading of Jewish cultural identity or theories of Jewish space. Jasna Galjer’s chapter addresses a gap in the historiography of modern design and architecture by focusing on Croatia, and Zagreb in particular, in order to examine residential projects. Working with sources limited due to historical erasure and destruction, Galjer’s essay corrects a gap in the literature on modern interiors and design in Central Europe, which has historically favored examples from Germany, Austria, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia during the interwar years. Stjepan Gomboš and Mladen Kauzlarčić’s Villa Spitzer (1931), Mathias Feller’s Villa Feller (1930), and Robert Deutsch Macelj’ski’s apartment (1927), all constructed in Zagreb during the interwar years, are apt illustrations of a new culture of domesticity.

6) Henrieta Moravčíková, ‘Shaping Modern Bratislava. The Role of Architect Friedrich Weinwurm and His Jewish Clients in Designing the Slovak Capital’, 69.

The section concludes with two chapters that take a broader approach and are not primarily focused on housing or the domestic sphere. Zuzana Güllendi-Cimprichová examines a synagogue designed by Otto Eisler in Brno (1934), while Kamila Twardowska's chapter focuses on resuscitating two biographies of prominent Jewish architects in Kraków in the interwar period: Fryderyk Tadanier and Diana Reiter. The discussion of Reiter's career is a particular highlight. Twardowska's comparison between the two architects illustrates differences in social class, gender, and professional success – particularly their desire for assimilation or acculturation as Jews to better fit into a mainstream professional practice in interwar Poland.

Part Two of the book, 'Outsiders/Insiders – Cultural Authorship and Strategies of Inclusion', includes a shorter selection of chapters with a cohort of established scholars revisiting and rereading some familiar figures, often taking the approach of cultural biography. Juliet Kinchin revisits previous work on Lajos Kozma, the historiographical marginalization of Kozma's neo-Baroque formal language, and his early involvement in the group of young artists known as the *Fiatalok* (The Young Ones), in a reconsideration of the vibrant Jewish community in interwar Budapest. Christopher Long returns to Haus & Garten, this time homing in on the understudied figure of Oskar Wlach in collaboration with Josef Frank, to consider the nature of modern Jewish 'Wohnkultur' in interwar Vienna. Rebecca Houze considers Anna Lesznai's engagement with traditional folk art in Hungary; and Megan Brandow-Faller returns to the topic of children's art and creativity with a focus on Friedl Dicker-Brandeis at the Theresienstadt Ghetto.

Houze's essay effectively engages with the popular topic of cultural appropriation, analyzing the relationship between Lesznai's upper class status and her work inspired by traditional Hungarian folk art as a response to experiences of exclusion as a Jewish woman in interwar Hungary. Each chapter in this section is tied together effectively with themes of marginalization and historical erasure from different angles: gender, professional practice, religious, ethnic, social, and cultural identities. More broadly, the authors also redress the issue of marginalization in the historiography of modern architecture and design history established largely by Western European and North American discourses.

The third and final section of the book, 'Survival Through Design – Projecting Transformative Designs onto the Future', expands the view beyond Central Europe to consider select case studies of Jewish émigré designers and architects in Great Britain, the United States, and British Palestine of the 1930s. Readers familiar with Shapira's collaboration with Alison Clarke on the book, *Émigré Cultures in Design and Architecture* will encounter familiar themes in this final section – social transformation through design, Jewish assimilation / acculturation to the mainstream, and the social construct of Jews as outsiders and insiders.⁷ Two chapters, by Lesley Whitworth and Sue Breakell, cover émigré graphic designers in Great Britain, both related to the Brighton Design Archives. Tanja Poppelreuter's analysis of Marie Frommer considers her architectural networks in Berlin and New York. Or Aleksandrowicz's study of climatic architectural design and hygiene in the work of Jewish émigré architects in British Palestine shows how collaborations between scientists and architects in the 1930s and 1940s shaped an approach to modern architecture that resonated with the region into the 1970s.

7) Elana Shapira and Alison Clark, eds, *Émigré Cultures in Design and Architecture*, London: Bloomsbury, 2017.

Breakell's chapter on the archives of three émigré designers held at the Brighton Design Archives focuses on Arnold Rothholz, Willy De Majo, and FHK (Frederick Henri Kay) Henrion, another German-British graphic designer. Breakell's approach reveals snippets of personal narratives through poetic readings of various archival records: annotated photographs, a manuscript reflecting on a childhood in interwar Vienna, and the organization, control, and choices made for self-presentation of various promotional materials, photographs, and intellectual property. While Breakell is correct to point out that design archives are acquired primarily for their research value and thus reflect a focus on professional records, personal records do appear in architecture and design archives of Central European Jewish émigré outside of the Brighton context. (The collections of Central European émigré architects held in the Avery Drawings & Archives at Columbia University are one such example where personal records were indeed included in the acquisitions of professional archives, although such records are, of course, incomplete.) Nevertheless, Breakell's chapter is a valuable exploration and excavation of these figures through a close reading of archival theory and migration.

Conclusions

There is much to learn from *Designing Transformation*, which is densely packed with new and original research. While each of the individual chapters is a valuable, scholarly contribution to the field that could stand alone, the overarching connections and transitions between each section are not always as strong. Part Two is perhaps the strongest section in this regard. The variable number of chapters in each section also reinforces the book as a reincarnation of the original symposium. Each of the three sections could have benefitted from a brief editorial note underscoring the editor's vision for curation of the chapters, as well as the shared themes across sections beyond what is provided in the main introduction. Nevertheless, *Designing Transformation* successfully contributes to scholarly discourses about Jewish influences on modern design and architecture. Complementary reading includes, for example, Ursula Prokop's *On the Jewish Legacy in Viennese Architecture* (2016); Alexandra Chiriac's *Performing Modernism: A Jewish Avant-Garde in Bucharest* (2022); and *Jewish Architects, Jewish Architecture?* edited by Andreas Brämer, Katrin Kessler, Ulrich Knufinke and Mirko Przystawik (2021).⁸ The latter, in contrast to *Designing Transformation*, takes a wider look at the history of Jewish architects, designers, professionals and their influence from a range of eras and geographies. Ulrich Knufinke's introduction to this book complements Shapira's in *Designing Transformation*, noting that:

A controversy has existed ever since the nineteenth century, as to whether and how architecture should express a Jewish self-image, depict the Jewish function of a building, or even describe a Jewish style of architecture. These discussions, which were by no means exclusively Jewish or

8) Ursula Prokop, *On the Jewish Legacy in Viennese Architecture. The contribution of Jewish architects to building in Vienna 1868–1938*, Vienna: Böhlau, 2016; Alexandra Chiriac, *Performing Modernism: A Jewish Avant-Garde in Bucharest*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022; Andreas Brämer, Katrin Kessler, Ulrich Knufinke and Mirko Przystawik, eds, *Jewish Architects, Jewish Architecture?* Petersberg: Michael Imhof, 2021.

involved architects-only, always reflected the contemporary position of Jewish communities in the respective countries and in an international context.⁹

With its extensive index, bibliography, illustrations, and available formats as both a print and e-book, *Designing Transformation* will be a worthwhile teaching resource across Central European history, architecture and design history, cultural history, and Jewish studies. Lecturers could easily work with a selection of chapters to support studies of Jewish cultural identity and historical erasure, or Jewish cultural approaches to interwar design and architecture. *Designing Transformation* is hopefully one of many projects to come in a continued scholarly dialogue to revisit and excavate the lost, erased, or ignored histories of Jewish architects, designers, and patrons in the history of Central European modernism.

9) Ulrich Knufinke, “Biographical Studies and Architectural History as an Interdisciplinary and International Field of Research,” in *Jewish Architects—Jewish Architecture?* Petersberg: Michael Imhof Verlag, 2021, 18.



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