



HISTORIC RESOURCES INVENTORY - BUILDING AND STRUCTURES

Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism, One Constitution Plaza, 2nd Floor, Hartford, CT 06103

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

GENERAL INFORMATION

Building Name (Common) Beth El Keser Israel Synagogue
 Building Name (Historic) Beth El Keser Israel Synagogue
 Street Address or Location 85 Harrison Street & 957-967 Whalley Avenue
 Town/City New Haven Village Westville County New Haven
 Owner(s) Congregation Beth El Keser Israel of New Haven Public Private

PROPERTY INFORMATION

Present Use: Religious - Synagogue
 Historic Use: Religious - Synagogue
 Accessibility to public: Exterior visible from public road? Yes No
 Interior accessible? Yes No If yes, explain During limited hours
 Style of building Modernist - Formalist Date of Construction 1960

Material(s) (Indicate use or location when appropriate):

- | | | | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Clapboard | <input type="checkbox"/> Asbestos Siding | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Brick | <input type="checkbox"/> Wood Shingle | <input type="checkbox"/> Asphalt Siding |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fieldstone | <input type="checkbox"/> Board & Batten | <input type="checkbox"/> Stucco | <input type="checkbox"/> Cobblestone | <input type="checkbox"/> Aluminum Siding |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Concrete (Type <u>Block Masonry - Interior</u>) | <input type="checkbox"/> Cut Stone (Type _____) | <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____ | | |

Structural System

- Wood Frame Post & Beam Balloon Load bearing masonry Structural iron or steel
 Other _____

Roof (Type)

- Gable Flat Mansard Monitor Sawtooth
 Gambrel Shed Hip Round Other _____

(Material)

- Wood Shingle Roll Asphalt Tin Slate Asphalt Shingle
 Built up Tile Other Rubber Membrane

Number of Stories: 1 & Basemnt Approximate Dimensions 60' x 100', 55' x 42', & 60' 130'

Structural Condition: Excellent Good Fair Deteriorated

Exterior Condition: Excellent Good Fair Deteriorated

Location Integrity: On original site Moved When? _____

Alterations? Yes No If yes, explain: School wing 1963-4; East entry 2004 (David Thompson, Architect)

FOR OFFICE USE: Town # _____ Site # _____ UTM _____

District: S NR If NR, Specify: Actual Potential

PROPERTY INFORMATION (CONT'D)

Related outbuildings or landscape features:

Barn Shed Garage Carriage House Shop Garden

Other landscape features or buildings: Landscaped yards along street fronts, paved parking areas and driveways.

Surrounding Environment:

Open land Woodland Residential Commercial Industrial Rural

High building density Scattered buildings visible from site

• Interrelationship of building and surroundings:

The site is a prominent hill-top location along a major street leading from the Westville Village commercial area to western residential suburbs, and is across Whalley Avenue from a public library. There are dramatic views to adjacent to West Rock Ridge. The neighborhood is a mix of 19th- and 20th-century houses and apartment buildings.

• Other notable features of building or site (*Interior and/or Exterior*)

See continuation sheet.

Architect Jacob Weinstein Builder Jack A. Halprin, Inc.

• Historical or Architectural importance:

See continuation sheet.

• Sources:

Brown, Elizabeth Mills; *New Haven: A Guide to Architecture & Urban Design*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1976, p. 58.
Carley, Rachel D., *Tomorrow is Here: New Haven and the Modern Movement* (Privately printed by the New Haven Preservation Trust, New Haven CT) June, 2008.
New Haven Tax Assessor's Record: Map/Block/Parcel: 388/ 1167/ 005, Building Department permit files.
See continuation sheet.

Photographer Charlotte Hitchcock Date 11/03/2009

View Multiple Views Negative on File NHPT

Name Charlotte Hitchcock Date 3/19/2010

Organization The New Haven Preservation Trust

Address 934 State Street, P.O. Box 1671, New Haven, CT 06507

• Subsequent field evaluations:

Threats to the building or site:

None known Highways Vandalism Developers Renewal Private

Deterioration Zoning Other _____ Explanation _____

- Other notable features of building or site (*Interior and exterior*):

The building is constructed of steel framing covered with whitish brick, and has a flat roof. The largest volume is the sanctuary, a rectangular element that sits at the top of a hill, set back from the sidewalk across a wide formal lawn. The sanctuary consists of three parts: a section with solid masonry walls at the west end and extending approximately 20 feet along both the north and south walls, enclosing the Ark and Bima on a low stage; this section terminates in a parapet, forming the appearance of a simple cubic mass. To the east, the seating area is enclosed by a series of vertical brick piers alternately projecting or flat, with narrow vertical glazing strips the full height of the building. The roof here projects beyond the walls in an overhanging cornice, edged with a simple fascia. The eastern half of the sanctuary is a similar series of piers and windows but with a lower roof line, allowing a clerestory to light the interior space.

The interior walls are of exposed concrete masonry in a custom beveled ribbed shape, with natural birch woodwork and pews. The interior of the sanctuary is divided at the line of the clerestory by a moveable room divider, allowing the space to be full size or half as big, depending on need. The east end wall is solid brick, echoing the west side.

The remaining areas of the building form a U-shaped one-story layout with office and entry space at the base of the U connecting to the sanctuary at its north wall. To the north is a school wing with a basement level below. The original building entrance was from Harrison Street on the west. Later a chapel was moved and a rear entrance vestibule was created when an additional lot to the east was acquired for parking. Windows throughout are aluminum framed, fixed glazing and awning units at the top and bottom.

- Historical or Architectural importance:

Prior to the urban renewal period of the late 1950s, most of New Haven's Jewish population was clustered in an area known as the Oak Street neighborhood, south and east of the New Haven Green. There were more than a dozen synagogues located within walking distance of the members' homes (see Inventory form for 232 Orchard Street).

When plans were made to demolish the Oak Street neighborhood and rebuild Route 34 as a highway, most of the synagogues were purchased through eminent domain and demolished. The eviction of the Jewish community from the area accelerated a movement that was already occurring. Families were moving out of downtown into more suburban settings such as the Edgewood, Beaver Hills, and Westville neighborhoods of New Haven and nearby suburban towns. Using payments from the Redevelopment Agency's purchases, the congregations built new facilities in other areas of the city (see 292 Norton Street and 74 West Prospect Street) and suburban towns.

This congregation began as the Rose Street Shul, Congregation Beth Hamedrosh Hagadol B'nai Israel, on Rose Street. When the Redevelopment Agency negotiated to purchase the building, the congregation was divided, some wishing to remain on Howard Avenue as Orthodox while others wished to move to Westville and join the Conservative movement. The Westville group adopted the new name of Beth El and constructed their building at 85 Harrison Street on the site of a public school that was being de-accessioned. Within a few years they merged with Congregation Keser Israel.

The synagogue building memorializes the eviction of the Jewish population of New Haven from their previous community in the Oak Street neighborhood in order to realize the Redevelopment Plan for that area. At the same time its Modernist style epitomizes the new middle class lifestyle of the post-World War II period; a choice was made to participate in a fashionable contemporary style rather than evoking traditional building practices.

Architect: Jacob Weinstein immigrated to New Haven from Russia as a child. He attended New Haven public schools, then Yale's Sheffield Scientific School where he studied engineering. He later studied architecture at Columbia University, and practiced in New Haven during the 1920s. He designed work in the popular revival styles into the early 1930s (Brown F 34), including the Beth Israel Synagogue (Orchard Street Shul) at 232 Orchard Street in 1924 (see Inventory form). By 1960 Weinstein had adopted the new design vocabulary and designed the Beth El building in a spare Scandinavian-inspired Modernist style with severely abstracted columns and lintels, strip windows filling voids in the structure, and minimalist detailing.

• Sources (*continuation*):

Beth El-Keser Israel (BEKI) web site: <http://www.beki.org/history.html>

Cultural Heritage Artists Project of the Orchard Street Shul, Canacola, North Haven, 2009.

Herman, Dr. Barry E., Jews in New Haven Volume I, Jewish Historical Society of New Haven, Inc., 1979, New Haven, pp. 21-22.

Hill, Everett Gleason, A Modern History of New Haven and Eastern New Haven County, Vol. II, The S. J Clarke Publishing Company, New York, 1918 (Google books, New York Public Library), pp 443-4

Jewish Historical Society of New Haven, Inc., archival materials including:

“Atmosphere for Worship,” Connecticut Architect, January-February 1966 pp. 7-9.

Plot Plan for north wing addition, stamped by Jacob Weinstein, R.A, #105 (Registered Architect).

Program of dedication of the school wing, april 11, 1965.

Ransom, David, “1843-1943: One Hundred Years of Jewish Congregations in Connecticut: an Architectural Survey,” Connecticut Jewish History, Volume 2, Number 1, Fall 1991, Jewish Historical Society of Greater Hartford.

Westville Village: Historic Walking Tour – Explore Past, Present and Future, October 5, 2003, Caplan, Colin, New Haven Preservation Trust and Westville Village Renaissance Alliance.



1. South view from Whalley Avenue, camera facing northeast.



2. Southwest view from Whalley Avenue, camera facing northwest.



3. Northwest view from Harrison Street, camera facing southeast.



4. Northeast (rear) view, camera facing southeast.



5. Aerial view from Google Maps <http://maps.google.com/>, accessed 3/19/2010.



6. Site Plan – detail from City of New Haven Tax Map 388/ 1167/ 005, not to scale, North ↑