Ori Z. Soltes, Georgetown University

The Emotive Power of an Evolving Symbol: The Idea of the Dome from Kurgan Graves to the Florentine Tempio Israelitico

Preliminaries: Complementarity and Contradiction

It is a truism within the history of art and architecture that a given visual form may symbolize more than one idea simultaneously - even ideas that contradict each other, although there is usually a logic to the apparent contradiction. Thus in abstract Islamic art, for example, the relationship between God and humanity might be symbolized by a monumental structure - such as a domed building or the mihrab form on a prayer rug - overrun with minutely detailed decoration. In that case, the decoration, in being minute, symbolizes humanity, while its monumental framework symbolizes God. But simultaneously, the framework, in being, as a frame, finitizing, symbolizes humanity, while the infinitizing pattern truncated by the frame symbolizes the God who is infinite.

Thus ‘monumental’ versus ‘minute’ and ‘infinite’ versus ‘finite’ are visually presented in an interwoven array of apparent contradictions that nonetheless offer a logic to their interweave. For God is by definition utterly other than humanity, yet, according to the Muslim - and Jewish and Christian - tradition, God breathes the soul into us that makes us more than a clod of earth (Bible) or a bloodclot (Qur'an), which means that, in some sense, we are like God. And therefore in some sense God must be like us. So the simultaneous similitude and absolute alterity of that relationship is effectively conveyed by the relationship among these abstract visual elements.

We may see this art historical principle well articulated by the dome form. From the beginning of our existence, humans have looked up at the heavens and observed the changing patterns of night and day, winter and summer. Men have watched points of light moving slowly across the skies and those that race across them, suddenly disappearing into the darkness - and the infinite pattern of lights that shifts gradually from one horizon to the next without apparent change of its order. We have wondered, as we have recorded the shifting shapes: what underlies them? What forces move the heavens and how might those forces affect what happens to us, here on the earth. Myriad religious traditions assume that the dome of heaven contains secrets that, because it is the inhabitation of gods, can improve or upset our lives - if we can unravel them. Virtually every tradition of which we have a coherent record looks to the soaring space above us to guide us, both in the world through which we move while alive and that to which we might accede when we are dead. The patterns of the stars and planets and the very shape of the vast dome above our heads is a mystery which, if we might penetrate it, can assure well-being in both realities, the here and now and the endless beyond.

One means of unraveling and penetrating is replication and imitation- emulation on a scale commensurate with limited human capabilities. To make a dome makes us, in part, like the gods we seek to understand; it satisfies a strong emotional need and has the potential to empower us by associating us with them. The creative process itself offers a dangerous adventure - because in seeking to understand the gods by imitating them we tread perilously close to the sacrilege of presuming to be like them. But humans are intrepid. Knowing the dome can only come about by making the dome; to experience heaven is to emulate its architecture.
Not surprisingly, the form of the dome moves in two parallel directions of purpose. The earliest, underground, supported by the earth itself, are passageways into the realm of death or resting places for the dead. Underground dome forms appear in a number of different places across Europe throughout the pre-Christian millennia. The kurgan graves in prehistoric Ukraine, as early as 3,000 BCE; the much larger, so-called beehive or tholos tombs of the Mycenaean warriors of Homeric renown, (ca 1300 BCE); and the necropolis of myriad, smaller earth-bound Etruscan domed graves (ca 675-275 BCE) at Cerveteri, Italy - the ultimate city of the dead of the ultimate people of mystery - may all be argued to have served a dual symbolic purpose, consistent with the principle of simultaneous complementary or even mutually contradictory messages [Fig. 1 and Fig. 2].

Such structures, offering a dramatic setting for the transition to the Underworld for kings and for clans, connote the pregnant female belly, embedded as they are within the womb of mother earth herself, with implications evidenced by their décor and/or their surviving archaeological contents for beliefs regarding post-mortem rebirth.1 But these terrestrial domes - particularly larger ones, as at Mycenae - also suggest the dome of heaven. They are thus reminders of the close relationship between the realms of death and divinity - both aspects of what lies beyond our everyday, living, awake, human-mortal realm of knowledge and experience. This second idea, of the dome's relationship not to the earth but to the sky, becomes more obvious and even emphatic when the domed form is moved from within the earth out into the air above its surface.

From Earth's Belly to the Arc of Heaven

The Romans, by way of their command of the free-standing arch, were able to raise the dome above the earth as a free-standing structure, released from the earth. In the later republican and early imperial periods they experimented with free-standing conical and domed forms, from the small aedicule that surmounted the Sanctuary of Fortuna Primigenia at Praeneste, (second century BCE) to the so-called ‘Temple of Mercury’ at the baths in Baiae (mid-first century BCE), to the so-called ‘Round Temples’ at Tivoli and Rome itself (both from the first century BCE), to the domed structure that was part of Rome’s first public baths, built by Agrippa (ca 19 BCE) - son-in-law and general of Augustus, Rome’s first emperor.

The enormous Temple to All the Gods - the Pantheon - dwarfed all of these earlier efforts in both size and spherical purity. It was built as a dome under the Emperor Hadrian’s patronage in ca 125 CE, on the site of an earlier, non-domed, temple built by Agrippa, well over a century earlier - and was the center of the city which was the center of the ultimate empire. The Romans saw their success through the lens of divine imprimatur, and understood their law-and-order Imperium to be the microcosm of the law-and-order universe. Their temple articulated that sensibility; it symbolized both Roman power across much of the known world and the source of that power: the approving gods [Fig. 3].

It was not just the general form - a perfect sphere - that accorded with an idealized vision of the dome of heaven, but specific details. The large opening at the top of the dome is an oculus - an eye, echoing the “eye (Latin: oculus) of heaven”, which is the sun. And as the sun moves across the arc of the

---

1 I am referring on the one hand to objects found in Ukrainian Kurgan graves and at Etruscan Cerveteri; and on the other hand, to relief carvings at Cerveteri that reinforce the idea that these chambers were intended both to reflect life as it had been lived by the deceased and to anticipate life as it would hopefully continue in the next world.
sky it yields a circle of light that moves across the interior of the temple dome, emulating its heavenly source. A series of seven rows of niches and coffers - perhaps originally vetted in bronze, or possibly decorated with bronze stars or rosettes, so that the ceiling must have been resplendent - define the wall/ceiling that leads from the floor to the oculus.

These rows symbolize the seven 'planets': the seven wanderers (derived from the Greek verb planeo, meaning “to wander”) across the heavens against the backdrop of the sphere of ‘fixed’ stars. These in turn correspond to seven deities. We still call most of them by god-names: Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn (all visible with the naked eye)² - the remaining two are the sun and the moon. So, too, niches along the lower registers offered spaces in which the images of Olympian and other gods could be placed.

The fact that the sun is both the eye of heaven and one of the planetes—and that is travels across the sky by day whereas the others move by night - or that some of the planetes have acquired names of some of the Olympians (in other words that there is overlap between the group of seven planetary deities and those Olympians) is consistent with the principle of internal inconsistency and even contradiction that defines religious sensibility and the processes of addressing, exploring and explaining that realm of the Other. But the point is to be connected to that Other - bound to the gods - in order to assure ongoing Roman success at maintaining order over the political world around them.

The connection between the eye of heaven and the eye of the dome thus includes the symbolic notion of an umbilical tie between the two realms - that of the divine-maintained macrocosmos (“great order”) with that of the human-maintained microcosmos (“small order”) - thus also reinforcing the conceptual identity of the structure as the very womb of the earth-bound empire that was born and continues to be nurtured through divine agency, even as it emulates the god-dominated sky. The structure represents the emotive power inherent in the interweave of religious and political sensibilities.

One might note an important parallel to the development of the free-standing dome out of the free-standing arch that Roman engineers perfected, a parallel that reinforces this god-focused sensibility from a different perspective. Amphitheaters such as the Roman Colosseum (built by the Emperors Vespasian, Titus and Domitian, ca. 72-82 CE) pulled the half-moon theater structures of the Greeks out of the mountainside and doubled them as free-standing structures by piling one series of elliptically extended arcades upon another.³ The Colosseum (so-named for the colossal statue of Emperor Nero that once stood near it) itself offers a series of orders - Doric, Ionic and Corinthian pilasters and their capitals - in an ascending pattern that flanks the arches from ground to roof line, underscoring the idea of this structure as a microcosmos.

Within this consummately ordered structure, and protected from chaotic weather elements by sailcloth extending from poles over the seating area, some 50,000 spectators could sit comfortably above the action. God-like, they could see what the human and animal contestants could not, within the landscaped arena below: the life and death possibilities posed by other contestants lurking behind shrubbery or hillocks. God-like, the audience - most of whom lived all-too-ordinary human existences the rest of the time—could anticipate or even, at times, pass judgment on the survival or demise of those contestants.

---

² Subsequent planets - Uranus, Neptune, Pluto, and Tyche (I am ignoring the recent debates regarding the last two of these as “planets” or not) - only became visible with the development of the telescope.

³ “Amphitheater” means “both - ‘amphi’ - theater” in Greek; “theater” comes from the Greek verb, theao, meaning “to look at”.
Thus the extended free-standing arch form like its free-standing dome counterpart would help articulate a connection between human and divine realms, helping to articulate a temporary sense of power to everyday Romans and an emotionally satisfying situation that helped to turn the people away from revolutionary thoughts.

Later Christian tradition would falsely assert that scores of martyrs were devoured by lions in such settings during the time when Christianity was persecuted as politically subversive by the pagan Roman authorities. Another tradition maintained that scores of martyrs were buried within the Pantheon floor. This situation would in any case change as Christianity became legal under Constantine in 313 CE and the state religion under Theodosius, around 380-381 CE. Eventually the Pantheon - given in 609 CE as a gift by the Byzantine Emperor Phocas to Pope Boniface V - would be rededicated to the memory of Christian martyrs and to the Virgin Mother and Queen of Heaven, Mary, whose Son’s spiritual acolytes would come to rule substantial parts of the world.

Well before this redirection of the building’s spiritual purpose, the Pantheon had inspired and become a model for a structure - the third built on the same site in the Byzantine capital of Constantinople - named in honor of the Christian Holy Spirit, the Logos, the third member of the Trinity, associated with consummate wisdom. Thus the Byzantine Emperor Justinian’s Christian Hagia Sophia - the Temple to Holy Wisdom - built between 532 and 537, re-articulated both architectural and spiritual principles first expressed by the Pantheon, but from a Christian perspective.

The Hagia Sophia (Aya Sofia in Turkish) was designed for the Emperor by Isidore of Miletus, a physicist, and Anthemius of Tralles, a mathematician. Their dome offers a flatter, more umbrella-like structure than does the Pantheon, resting on four enormous pendentives that absorb the outward-pushing pressure from above and are in turn visually absorbed into the walls. Put otherwise, they enable a rather graceful transition from the circular dome form to the square form of the walls. The dome-on-square shape underscores the role of the structure: to intermediate between God (like the dome’s circular, heaven-emulating form, without beginning or end) and humans (like the base’s squared shape: four-sided and thus four-directioned, and with its corners - stop-start, stop-start, stop-start, stop-start - offering a finitizing configuration). But what is perhaps most visually arresting is the series of forty windows that separate the dome from and yet connect it to its base, in lieu of a single oculus at the peak. Thus the relationship between the heavenly world outside and above the church - God’s world - and the human world below, between which two realms the edifice mediates, is underscored by the blaze of light that fills the interior [Fig. 4].

Light as the ordering principle (God’s first act in shaping the universe was to say “Let there be light,” in Gen 1:3) and as a symbol of the divine presence, offers a transformation of an important concept with a history several thousand years old by the sixth century. The eyes have long been recognized as windows to the soul - and thus sculpted and painted images of individuals with a divine connection offer enlarged, intensely focused eyes, from Sumer to Byzantium - and within and beneath the dome of the Hagia Sophia, forty windows are eyes (oculi) that connect the souls of those within to the ultimate One who filled the first human, Adam, with a soul that transformed him from an earth (Hebrew: adamah) clod or a blood-clot into a breathing, sentient, thinking being. As the God-given soul looks out from the human body through the eyes, so the light of heaven brings God’s pure Soul presence into the church interior through those forty oculi.
Moreover, forty resonates as a biblical number from the period of the flood (forty days and nights) to that of the Israelite wandering in the wilderness (forty years) to the time spent by John the Baptist and Jesus respectively in the wilderness (forty days). “Forty” also symbolizes non-specific “many” (be it days or years) within the biblically-focused Byzantine Greek tradition, so the apertures that connect finite humans to the Infinite are themselves, as it were, infinite. The importance of dome and light in combination as an expression of the divine-human connection is clear - and the political importance of that connection concretized by a structure shaped by imperial decree.

As the Pantheon eventually became a church, the Church of Holy Wisdom was eventually transformed into a mosque some time after the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II conquered Constantinople in 1453. But by then, the Muslim world of which the Ottomans had become part - whose key prophetic figure, Muhammad, began to experience revelation at the age of forty years - had centuries earlier absorbed the dome form into its architectural and symbolic vocabulary. Caliph Abdul Malik continued the history of the free-standing dome in 691CE with his Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. He offered Islam’s first major effort along these architectural lines - while establishing Jerusalem as an important political as well as spiritual focus for the ‘Umayyad Imperium. This edifice was intended to elevate Jerusalem as a Muslim sacred site and to reinforce his role as Caliph, whose political position interwove his responsibility for religious sites.

The structure re-articulates the principle of earth-heaven contact, for it marks an essential umbilical point of Muslim significance. The spiritual inspiration for the Dome of the Rock is the story of Muhammad’s miraculous ‘isra (night ride) - from Makka to Jerusalem and back - alluded to in Qur’an 17:1. That story, together with the account of the Prophet’s mir’aj (ascent) to the Throne of God, during which he surpassed other, prior prophets, who all encouraged him - is discussed in a series of hadiths that appear within the first generations after the Prophet’s death in 632. The Rock over which the edifice stands is understood to be the precise point from which Muhammad ascended and to which he returned to earth with important divine instructions - such as how many times a day (five) Muslims must pray [Fig. 5].

As one of Islam’s ultimate points of divine-human contact (together with Makka and Madina), the site of the rock of Muhammad’s ascent and return was encompassed within a structure that leads from a square base to octagonal walls to a dome - that is, from a base that connotes our four-directional realm to a dome that emulates the without-beginning-and-end structure of God’s heavenly realm. The intermediating octagon is, formally speaking, the interior of an eight-pointed star; the eight-pointed star is the result of rotating one square 45 degrees over a second square. This bespeaks the complex and paradoxic nature of the divine-human relationship: God is utterly Other than we, yet God made us and instilled within us a soul, which means that an essential part of all of us is somehow like God - and therefore in some sense God must be like us. So if a square can represent our reality in symbolic terms, then a second square can represent God’s reality, but rotated, so that it is not the “same” as the first square - even as it is the same.

This sensibility is reinforced by the décor of the Dome of the Rock, in which the monumental (like God) structure is overrun in its lower parts with minute (like humans) details - geometric and vegetal, in diverse colors (contrastive, as humans and God are contrastive) - but the details are also infinitizing (like the infinite God) in their patterns, and those patterns, overrunning blind arches along the octagon (that echo the form of the dome itself), are truncated by finitizing (like finite humans) frames, that are themselves overrun with minute, infinitizing (like God) patterns. Thus the structure and its details
simultaneously express human, God-like power and underscore human powerlessness compared with God.

From Jerusalem to London to Washington, DC

The Dome of the Rock, in both overall structure and decorative details, further transforms the visual-conceptual pattern of the heaven-earth, divine-human interrelationship begun at the beginning of antiquity. Coming chronologically on the cusp between the ancient and medieval worlds, it not only draws from the past but it also looks toward the future. It would be emulated in mosques, tombs and monuments across the Muslim world over the centuries that follow, from the Blue Mosque in Istanbul to the Taj Mahal in Agra. Moreover, the domination of the Jerusalem skyline by this monument over the centuries also led to an interesting development within Christian (and eventually, Jewish) art and architecture: when the Temple in Jerusalem was pictured, it was imagined as domed, or quasi-domed. Thus famous moments within biblical and post-biblical lore - from the Marriage of Mary and Joseph (eg, in Raphael’s 1504 panel painting in Milan); to the presentation of the Christ Child to the High Priest in the Temple (eg, in Melchior Broederlam’s Champmol Altarpiece, 1394); to Jesus’ Handing of the Keys to Peter (eg, in Perugino’s 1481 fresco in the Sixtine Chapel) - are frequently depicted as taking place within or before such a structure [Fig. 6].

Moreover, as Rome became more emphatically conceived as the New Jerusalem, and as a new St Peter’s basilica was being shaped from the late fifteenth century onward4 - particularly as that process spilled into the time of the Protestant Reformation’s threat to Rome’s spiritual hegemony and to the time of the Catholic Counter-Reformation - the symbolism of the dome as the crown for the new edifice was importantly re-articulated by the structure begun by Bramante (and Sangallo) and reconceived by Michelangelo (and Giacomo della Porta and Carlo Fontana) (1506-1590).

The center of the New Jerusalem (Rome) was emphatically presented as the New Temple (St Peter’s Church), marking the burial site of St. Peter, ultimate apostolic intermediary between God and humanity. Thus divine-human and living-dead concepts interweave each other in a manner that carries all the way back to the conceptual interweave between kurgan graves and Etruscan tombs on the one hand and the Pantheon and Hagia Sophia on the other. And the interweave between religion and politics marking earlier edifices resonates from the dome of St Peter’s Church. Spiritual “correctness” and authority (and their relationship to human ego as an instrument of emotional and psychological power) is asserted [Fig. 7].

The implications of this constantly evolving symbolic language follow variously into the next centuries. It is felt in key Protestant structures such as Christopher Wren’s St Paul’s Cathedral (1677-1710), strongly rooted in the design of Michelangelo’s St Peter’s, and built in London. That city had begun the process, for a century and a half, by then, of being conceived as a counter-New Jerusalem to that offered by Rome. Indeed, the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell (1653-1658) that preceded Wren’s first designs for St Paul’s by less than a generation had received an important part of its support from the “Fifth Monarchy Men.” This group saw the England being shaped by Cromwell since 1649 as the last

4 Pope Nicholas V (1447-55) appears to have initiated the idea of radically renovating or completely replacing the old St Peter’s church, engaging Alberti and Rossellino to effect extensive renovations and the latter even to prepare designs for a potential new structure, but actual new construction did not begin until 1506 during the pontificate of Julius II.
earth-bound kingdom - after Babylon, Persia, Macedonian Greece and Rome - during which time the Messiah would return to earth, as predicted in Daniel 2. Partially with this in mind, in 1657 Cromwell rescinded the 1290 edict that had expelled the Jews from England, in order to effect an “ingathering of the exiles” to a “New Israel.” The aftermath of such sensibilities would help point to the domed design of St Paul’s by Wren, the fifth structure on the same site since 604 CE [Fig. 8].

The Jerusalemic symbolism of the dome would extend geographically outward and chronologically forward to be recombined with symbolic references to pagan Rome in the US Capitol Dome a century after the formation of St Paul’s Cathedral, and shortly after the successful revolution that detached the American colonies from England. That Jerusalemic symbolism would interweave both architectural and political allusions to Rome for the new United States asserting its own incipient political power.

The structure that would begin to rise in 1792 on the Capitoline-by-the-Potomac-River - as the capital city of the new Republic, constructed on territory belonging to none of the thirteen original states within the new nation, and connected to the White House, home of the non-monarchic president of the Republic, by a small river, named the Tiber (that currently flows under Pennsylvania Avenue) - offered two assertions. One is that the new republic would operate in a benevolent manner symbolized by the Jerusalemic of David and Jesus, echoing the motto that would repeat across American coinage, announcing that “in God We Trust”. The other is that the new state would be a republic - “the people’s (publica) thing (res)” - modeled on Rome in the middle part of its mytho-history (509-527 BCE). There is some unintended irony here: the dome-as-Jerusalem-Temple began its evolution, as we have seen, with the dome of the Pantheon, built (in its pre-dome beginnings) to honor all the pagan gods at the time when the republic had culminated a century of being subverted and transformed into an empire, under Augustus - and subsequently rebuilt (as a dome) when the empire was at its greatest geopolitical extent, under Hadrian [Fig. 9].

There are other ironies, perhaps, that pertain to the construction process as much as to the conceptual underpinnings of the structure. The original architect, William Thornton, never got the chance to build according to his dome design of 1792. Neither did his successor, Benjamin Latrobe. The third Architect of the Capitol, Charles Bullfinch, did manage to complete a green copper dome - complete with a Pantheon-emulating oculus - by 1823. But by the 1850s, the expansion of the United States - largely at the expense of the Native American population that kept being pushed aside in a relentless land-rush spurred by the notion of divinely-sanctioned Manifest Destiny - and the consequent inclusion of many more members of congress, necessitated the expansion of the congressional buildings and therefore, in the interests of aesthetic proportions, of the capitol dome. The fifth Architect of the Capitol, Thomas U. Walter, undertook that project in 1855, inspired by the more vertical - heaven-scraping - proportions of edifices like St Peter’s in Rome and St Paul’s in London (among others), than by the shape of the Pantheon.

Work proceeded through the American Civil War that threatened the survival of the republic - in 1863, a bronze Statue of Freedom was hoisted atop the small aedicule that surmounts the dome - and the project was completed by 1866. This took place under Edward Clark, who succeeded Walter as Architect of the Capitol the previous year, the year in which the Civil War ended. In that year, 1865, President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated by the actor, John Wilkes Booth, who, after firing the fatal shot, leapt onto the stage at Ford’s Theatre and yelled out a Latin phrase. The words are popularly attributed to
Marcus Brutus at the moment when he stabbed Julius Caesar, leading to the dissolution of the Roman republic and the advent of the empire: sic semper tyrannis (“thus always to tyrants”).

The Tempio Israelitico, Emancipation and the Bindings of History

The Jerusalemic symbolism of the dome, though, may be said to have come full circle within a few years of the completion of the US Capitol building. It would begin to be expressed in synagogues in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries both in Europe and eventually in the United States. Among the first of these was Florence’s Tempio Israelitico built between 1874 and 1882 according to the designs of the architects Mariano Falcino, Vincenzo Miceli and Marco Torres (the last of whom was Jewish). The shaping of a soaring dome reflected the expanded acceptance into the larger Italian community of its Jewish minority between 1848 (when the Florentine ghetto gates were opened up) and 1871 (the year of Italian unification).

The Italian Jewish community and its leaders who funded the project were making a statement: that they no longer considered themselves a community in exile—a fragment of a diaspora of eighteen centuries awaiting a messianically orchestrated return to the Holy Land. The synagogue structure and decor offer an expression of psychological and emotional well-being for a community arriving at a state of empowerment after the Italian Risorgimento and the state that emerged from that movement [Fig. 10].

Thus the domed association with the Israelite and Judaean temples in Jerusalem effected by the long-term presence of the Dome of the Rock on the Jerusalem skyline inspired a bold architectural statement to reflect a conceptual-spiritual conviction. That conviction, evident in labeling the synagogue a tempio (“temple”), and not a synagoga (“synagogue”) - the term “temple” having been reserved for 18 centuries for the long-destroyed edifice in Jerusalem—was, simply put, that “we are here to stay; our synagogue here and the Jewish life we lead in its environs is as valid in our time as the Temple in Jerusalem and the life led in its environs were in antiquity”. Otherwise put: every synagogue plays an equally valid role - as valid as the Temple alone once did - in umbilically connecting the community that prays within it to the God found everywhere. Thus like the term “tempio”, the dome form is ideological and not merely architectural.

The lower part of the Via Farini Tempio dome is pierced by multiple windows, reminiscent of the Hagia Sophia. Moreover, the decorative schema of the Tempio diversely emulates Arabo-Islamic style, from the poly-lobed keyhole arches on the exterior to the elaborate, minutely detailed abstract wall designs contrived by Giovanni Panti on the interior [Fig. 11]. These details are intended to tie the structure to the décor of the Middle East and therefore to reinforce the Jerusalem connection and thus the Jerusalemic validity of the synagogue. That connection is further reinforced by a schema that combines these elements with Temple-specific allusions that were reflected in ancient Judaean and Galilean synagogues, such as Capernaum and Cfar Bar’Am, with their three doorways to connote the three courtyards and threefold

---

5 There are only 16 of these, not the 40 in the earlier structure. But the number 16 functions well as a symbolic statement, since it multiplies 4 - the number of Hebrew letters in the tetragrammaton, primary version of God’s ineffable name (YHVH) - times 4, the number of directions to human reality (or put another way: four each in each of the four directions), thus underscoring the role of the dome and the structure upon which it sits as intermediating between God and the congregation praying within
interior division of the Jerusalem Temple (which motif had also been adopted in early churches as an allusion to the Trinity).

The schema further includes visual elements endemic to central Italy, most obviously the alternating bands of dark and light stones on the exterior. The inclusion of such a feature, found in Florence’s own cathedral - with its Brunelleschi-designed dome (1419-1436)—as well as in other cathedrals, such as those in Siena and Orvieto, emphasizes the sense of being a part of and not apart from the Italian community at large. The New Jerusalem for Jews is here - in Florence or wherever else a community with deep roots has emerged into the post-Emancipation light. The sense of power derived from Emancipation and the emotional sense of being part of the large community were profound.

This sensibility would be architecturally expressed widely. Over the next half century, Jewish congregations from Rome and Essen, Germany to Cleveland, Ohio and Los Angeles, California would build temples dominated by rounded or faceted domes. Each of these diasporic communities was confident that, in the post-Emancipation world, it was spiritually complete centered on its synagogue as had been its ancestors in Jerusalem and its Temple.

The enormous synagogue built in Essen by Edmund Koerner in 1913 adapts the dome form and places it over a structure the entirety of which is intended to echo the form of Jerusalem in the time of King Solomon. Thus it “contains” a Temple-like structure (the Essen sanctuary, crowned by the dome) and also a “palace complex” (the Essen synagogue offices and Sunday school classrooms). So, too, its fronton, crowned by the carved relief image of the Tablets of the Decalogue and its overall burly mountainous form was also intended to suggest the Tabernacle in the wilderness where the Tablets were originally kept - and Mount Sinai itself [Fig. 12].

Given the twentieth-century European Jewish experience, there is some irony in this, too, particularly with regard to the community of Essen. Not only would that sense of self-confidence prove falsely grounded, from France’s Affaire Dreyfus (1894-1906) to the rise of German Nazism, but the Nazis would point to large synagogues as proof of the sort of material Jewish power that they needed to crush. The temple domes became a focus of secular-Christian emotional negativity toward their Jewish neighbors. The 1913 Essen edifice would be severely damaged on Kristallnacht (November 9-10, 1938), which marks one of the beginning points of the Holocaust.

But a fragment of the Essen Jewish community would survive, return and build a new, albeit smaller synagogue, in 1959. The design - defiantly, one might say - features a dome, extending virtually from floor to ceiling; the interior décor, toward the Holy Ark, connotes the Tabernacle as it had been expressed by the fronton of the earlier synagogue. The structure was therefore tied in conception to the 1913 building being renovated in 1959 as a museum, and also to the history of the modern synagogue dome with its own chain of associations - as if the Nazi segment of the community’s recent past had almost been forgotten, or perhaps overcome.

---

6 On the other hand, all of these edifices used darker stone; the Via Farini Tempio alternates white travertine with a lighter, pinkish stone more reminiscent of the rose granite of Verona and its structures. The Florentine duomo, moreover, offers a more complex, both horizontal and vertical, handling of the dark and light stone than do the cathedrals in Orvieto and Siena, where the contrast is limited, as it is in the Via Farini Tempio, to horizontal alternating bands.

7 The architecture of the 1892 Eutaw Place Temple in Baltimore, MD, was specifically inspired by the Via Farini Tempio.
Thus the original symbolic intentions of the dome form, as a connector between heaven and earth, have remained present over the course of the millennia, but the specifics of those intentions have shifted, both subtly and dramatically. The varied connotations of connectedness - between life and death and humanity and divinity - have evolved over time to include the interweave between religion and politics and to encompass a sense of binding to Jerusalem understood from parallel and criss-crossing perspectives. The most recent of these perspectives offers a statement of release from Jerusalem in a particular way that is consistent both with the history of the symbolism of the dome and the history of art.

For the release intersects an ongoing sense of connection; being bound and liberated therefore co-exist as spiritual phenomena in a logical pattern of simultaneous complementarity and contradiction. The emotional power of this architectural form has carried from antiquity to the rebirth of ancient visual and literary ideas in the renaissance - and from that dynamic era into the ongoing struggle to shape modernity in the present day.

References:


**Ori Z. Soltes: Dome Essay Figures:**

- Fig. 1. Mycenaean Tholos tomb (‘Treasury of Atreus’) seen from *dromos* (ca. 1300 BCE).
- Fig. 2. Cerveteri: typical Etruscan domed grave (ca. 700 BCE).
- Fig. 3. *Pantheon, Interior*, Rome (ca. 120-125 CE).
- Fig. 4. Isidore of Miletus and Anthemius of Tralles (ca. 535), *Hagia Sophia interior*, Istanbul.
- Fig. 5. Dome of the Rock (ca. 591).
- Fig. 6. Pietro Perugino, *Handing of the Keys to St Peter*, Sistine Chapel (1481-1482).
- Fig. 7. Michelangelo Buonarotti, *St Peter’s Basilica dome*, Vatican City (1547).
- Fig. 8. Christopher Wren, *St Paul’s Cathedral dome*, London (1677-1710).
- Fig. 9. Thomas U. Walter, *Capitol dome*, Washington, DC (1855-1866).
- Fig. 10. Mariano Falcino, Vincenzo Miceli, Marco Torres, *Tempio Israelitico*, Via Farini, Florence, Italy (1874-1882).
- Fig. 11. Giovanni Panti, *Tempio Israelitico, Interior* (1880-1882).
- Fig. 12. Edmund Koerner, *Synagogue*, Essen, Germany (1913).

Fig. 1. Mycenaean Tholos tomb (‘Treasury of Atreus’) seen from *dromos* (ca. 1300 BCE).
Fig. 2. Cerveteri: typical Etruscan domed grave (ca. 700 BCE).

Fig. 3. *Pantheon, Interior*, Rome (ca. 120-125 CE).

Fig. 4. Isidore of Miletus and Anthemius of Tralles (ca. 535), *Hagia Sophia interior*, Istanbul.
Fig. 5. Dome of the Rock (ca. 591).

Fig. 6. Pietro Perugino, *Handing of the Keys to St Peter*, Sistine Chapel (1481-1482).

Fig. 7. Michelangelo Buonarotti, *St Peter's Basilica dome*, Vatican City (1547).
Fig. 8. Christopher Wren, *St Paul's Cathedral dome*, London (1677-1710).

Fig. 9. Thomas U. Walter, *Capitol dome*, Washington, DC (1855-1866).

Fig. 10. Mariano Falcino, Vincenzo Miceli, Marco Torres, *Tempio Israelitico*, Via Farini, Florence, Italy (1874-1882).
Fig. 11. Giovanni Panti, *Tempio Israelitico, Interior* (1880-1882).

Fig. 12. Edmund Koerner, *Synagogue*, Essen, Germany (1913).