This online database was created as the culmination of my Spring 2022 ARTH 250 independent study, “Jewish Architecture & Iconography,” advised by Professor Cassibry. I structured the independent study as a survey course on the history of Jewish religious architecture and iconography across various chronological and geographical areas. As a student and tutor of Art History, I have witnessed a dearth of Jewish art and architecture in art-historical survey courses, with other religions and cultures more adequately represented. I was interested in learning about this omitted history, both in the interest of polemicizing the art-historical canon and learning about my own history.

The first part of the semester was spent building a syllabus to follow over the course of the independent study. I was certain that I didn’t want to follow a traditional chronological model in my chosen content areas, given this model’s tendency to prioritize a Western approach to organizing history. Furthermore, because of the breadth of the Jewish diaspora that has formed over thousands of years of exile, Jewish populations with disparate religious and cultural practices exist all over the world. While they are united under a common ancestral heritage, approaches to Jewish worship are extremely wide-ranging. I decided to combine chronological, geographical, and stylistic approaches, with some content areas covering specific eras of Jewish history and others addressing individual Jewish cultures.

I identified the content areas through an assessment of topics commonly taught in art-historical survey courses, while prioritizing the representation of the diversity of Jewish sects: Overview of Synagogue Architecture & Iconography [ancient Jewish synagogues and iconographical practices], Diaspora Synagogues of the Roman Empire, Sephardic Synagogues of Africa & Asia, Multicultural Synagogues of Europe, and Twentieth-Century Modernist Synagogues of North America. I researched examples of synagogues from each content area through an analysis of sources discussing synagogal architecture as well as histories of different Jewish settlements around the world. For the purpose of scholarly research into these synagogues, I had to locate examples that had been previously academically examined; there were, unfortunately, many culturally significant worship sites that hadn’t been researched enough to be included. Each content area includes more than one synagogue from the diverse cultures located within each category. To form the eventual database, only those synagogues that I believed could be readily inserted into an introductory course syllabus—due to their immense iconographic or cultural significance, or their proximity to something commonly studied in survey courses—were selected to represent each content area. The case study synagogues were as follows: the Beth-Alpha Synagogue, Diaspora Synagogues (the Dura-Europos Synagogue and the Sardis Synagogue), the El-Ghriba Synagogue, the Córdoba Synagogue, and Frank Lloyd Wright’s Temple Beth Sholom.

The database serves as a resource for art-historical educators to consult in the formation of syllabi for introductory courses to ensure that examples of Jewish synagogal architecture are adequately represented. The syllabus that I created to guide my independent study was used as a blueprint for the development of a hypothetical survey course on the development of Jewish religious architecture, with each case study linked to specific informative readings. I identified these sources by researching each content area in Wellesley’s library catalog, as well as following the work of individual Jewish architectural historians, primarily Steven Fine of Yeshiva University and Anat Geva of Texas A&M School of Architecture. I was
able to access many texts through ILL, and found more through communication with Dr. Geva, who also advised on some of the content areas. Three aspects of each specific case study synagogue are addressed on the database: Historical Significance, Formal Qualities, and Reason for Inclusion. Lastly, because Jewish religious terms vary so greatly across different cultures, a master term list is included.

Although my research attempted to address large gaps in art-historical pedagogy, I had to contend with the fact that any content area I created would omit aspects of a culture, especially those that have historically been excluded from academic research. I do not believe entire cultures can be reduced down to one historical example, but such a reduction is necessary in order to have these cultures included at all in wide-reaching survey syllabi. I learned so much from this independent study, including the discretion needed to structure a syllabus—learning goals, content areas, and readings—and how to distill massive amounts of information down into a teachable model. It is my hope that art-historical educators at Wellesley (on whose server this database is located) and beyond use this database to expand their curricula to include examples of vibrant and beautiful Jewish cultures.