

Historic Building Appraisal
Ohel Leah Synagogue
No. 70 Robinson Road, Mid-levels, Hong Kong

The **Ohel Leah Synagogue** (猶太教莉亞堂 / 猶太廟) was built in 1901, and is the only surviving Jewish prayer house still in active use in China. The Synagogue is also the only one of this type of religious buildings so far to exist in Hong Kong. The **Sassoon** brothers, Iraq-born Jews who were prominent merchants, donated the site and bore the construction cost of the Synagogue in dedication to their mother, **Mrs. Leah Elias Sassoon**. *Historical Interest*

In addition to the Sassoon family, the highlight of the Jewish community in the early twentieth century was the appointment of **Sir Matthew Nathan**, Hong Kong's only Jewish Governor, as Honorary President of the Ohel Leah Synagogue during the period of his service from 1904 to 1907.

The Jewish Recreation Club was later built in 1907. During the Japanese Occupation (1941-45), the synagogue building suffered no serious damage whereas the Jewish Recreation Club was completely destroyed. After its reconstruction in 1949, the Club was demolished in 1994 to make way for high-rise development.

Ohel Leah Synagogue is an elegant mix of **Classical**, **Baroque** and **Italianate Renaissance** architectural features externally, with a lavish and grandiose interior with Jewish secular features and decorations. Craftsmanship is of a high order. Externally, Classical architectural features are predominant particularly at the entrance porch with its **Serliana** or **Palladian** openings and **Baroque** style towers on either side of the Vestibule. *Architectural Merit*

There is an opinion that Ohel Leah Synagogue is in a nineteenth-century “international style” used for synagogues across the Western world which clearly shows Classical influences but which should not be labelled as “Renaissance”, either Italian or English. Synagogues in a similar style (many of them much more lavish) may be found throughout Europe, Britain, Australia and the USA. It is often the fine detailing of the buildings which gives away their particular religious purpose but this is not the case with Ohel Leah Synagogue because it has virtually no fine detailing of any religious significance on the outside. A pertinent question would be why the designers of Ohel Leah Synagogue shied away from Jewish symbolism in the external decoration when elsewhere in the British Empire in the 19th century they used it freely. Another opinion was that the influence was more colonial English and is called “Edwardian free-baroque”. Leigh & Orange were the architects – same as the University of Hong Kong. Original synagogue was in red bricks with

bands of white stucco.

For rarity, built heritage value and authenticity it rates very highly and won the **Unesco Asia Pacific Heritage Award** for Cultural Heritage Conservation in the year 2000. Not only did the Synagogue preserve its integrity and use as a Jewish communal place, it also partook a very positive contribution to architectural conservation in Hong Kong and Asia.

***Rarity, Built
Heritage
Value &
Authenticity***

The social and historical values of Ohel Leah Synagogue lie not only in its ties with prominent merchant families closely involved in the commercial development of Hong Kong, but also in the growth of an originally small but important ethnic minority - the Jewish community. Although it has lost its vantage point on the slopes of Victoria Peak and is now encircled by high-rise development, it is enclaved in a recessed site enjoying a quiet and peaceful environment. Together with the nearby **Jewish Community Centre** and **Carmel School**, the Synagogue has high social value to the Jewish community. Its role is therefore unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

***Social Value
& Local
Interest***

Other historic items graded by the Antiquities Advisory Board physically close to the building include, but are not limited to, the London Mission Society (倫敦傳道會大樓), Hop Yat Church (合一堂), Kom Tong Hall (甘棠第) and Jamia Mosque (清真寺). No.15 Robinson Road is a recorded item of the Antiquities and Monuments Office.

Group Value