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A Tale of Two Cities' Jewish Architects:
Emile Weil of New Orleans
and B. Marcus Priteca of Seattle

by

Eugene Normand*

During the early twentieth century, two Jewish architects—B. Marcus “Benny” Priteca of Seattle, Washington, and Emile Weil of New Orleans, Louisiana—established reputations at about the same time within the cities in which they lived and left indelible impressions in the geographical areas where their buildings were constructed. Their careers followed very similar patterns. They designed synagogues and other Jewish buildings in their home cities, although each built his reputation and financial success primarily as an architect of movie theaters and of other major buildings. Many of their buildings are still standing and functioning, some of them almost a hundred years after construction, although not all are used for their original purposes.

The phenomenon of an architect first successfully designing a synagogue and then capitalizing on that reputation to get into the design of movie theaters is relatively unusual. Numerous prominent Jewish architects designed synagogues in the United States and Europe, but few of these moved on to design movie theaters. Some world-renowned Jewish architects, from Dankmar Adler in the second half of the nineteenth century in Chicago to the mid-twentieth century Philadelphia-based architect Louis Kahn, achieved recognition for their synagogue and theater buildings.¹ However, they did not follow the pattern of Weil and Priteca, who

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started with establishing stellar reputations for their first synagogues, then parlayed that success into long-term careers designing movie and performance venues for theater chains. For this latter path, timing proved to be crucial. An architect had to establish a successful firm by about 1910 to be able to compete for a synagogue design project and then be ready to join with a theater owner when the explosive increase in the number of movie theaters began in the 1915–1925 era.²

Beginnings

Emile Weil was born in New Orleans on January 20, 1878, to Max Weil and Mina Levy, who were descended from German Jews. He studied architecture at Tulane University, where the artist William Woodward influenced him. He began as a draftsman for several local architects and then opened his own office in 1899.³ Weil married Marie Rose Newman of New Orleans in 1909, and they had one child, Isabel Minette Weil, who married Herman Stanford Kohlmeyer of New Orleans.⁴ Weil's architectural career began in earnest when in 1907 he won a contest to design the Touro Synagogue on St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans.⁵ More than a hundred years later, Touro Synagogue still uses Weil's building for services and communal events.

Emile Weil.

(Courtesy of Irwin Lachoff and Catherine C. Kahn, The Jewish Community of New Orleans and the Tulane Architectural Archives.)

Benny Priteca was born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1889, as Benjamin Marcus Dombrowizky but later adopted the last name of his stepfather, Charles Priteca. His parents and stepfather were Russian Jews who immigrated to Scotland, and Priteca grew up in both Glasgow and Edinburgh. In the latter city, he studied for his future profession at the Edinburgh College of Art and apprenticed under the architect Robert Macfarlane Cameron.

In 1909 Priteca arrived in Seattle attracted by the prospects of the Alaska Pacific-Yukon Exhibition (APYE).⁶ This world's fair was held on the largely forested campus of the University of Washington, which had contained only three buildings a few years earlier. Thus, the APYE entailed substantial new construction and landscaping that must have enticed the young Priteca.

B. Marcus Priteca, c. 1916.

*(Courtesy of MOHAI, the Museum of History & Industry,
Seattle, Washington – Neg. SHS 19.111.)*

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His experience in Scotland helped him secure a draftsman job in a Seattle architectural firm, although he switched to another firm the following year. In 1911, a chance meeting with theater magnate Alexander Pantages changed his life and began a professional relationship that would continue for two decades. He started working directly for Pantages as a twenty-one-year-old, first on the Pantages Theater in San Francisco and then on an Oakland theater, also called the Pantages.⁷ Priteca returned to Seattle from the San Francisco area and opened his own architectural firm. Shortly thereafter, in 1914, he won a competition to design his first synagogue, for Seattle's Chevra Bikur Cholim, the congregation to which he belonged.⁸

Weil and Priteca had artistic talent, but in addition they started their architectural careers at just the right time, the first decade of the twentieth century. Their abilities enabled them to win competitions for designing synagogues at a time when urban Jewish populations were significantly increasing. This allowed them to capitalize on the favorable reputations they acquired for those synagogue buildings to obtain design commissions for movie theaters at the very time that the number of such venues was exploding across the country. Their timing provided the opportunity, and their talent and hard work led to their success. Few Jewish architects began during that era and progressed from acclaimed synagogue buildings to celebrated movie theaters. It was a rare combination of timing and opportunity.

Their First Synagogues

The Touro Synagogue in New Orleans resulted from the 1881 merger of two older, originally traditional congregations, the German-Jewish Shanarai-Chasset and the Portuguese/Sephardic Nefutzoth Yehudah, and joined the Reform movement ten years later.⁹ Weil's Touro design was highly regarded and was illustrated and discussed in the October 1909 issue of *American Architect and Building News* that appeared shortly after Priteca's arrival in Seattle.¹⁰

Priteca probably saw this article and was greatly influenced by Weil's design features, especially the synagogue's exterior.¹¹

Thus, when Priteca received the commission to design the new building for Chevra Bikur Cholim in Seattle a few years later, he apparently borrowed heavily from Weil's synagogue thousands of miles away, (see pictures on pages 6 and 7.) Priteca added, however, unique interior elements not found in Touro.

Bikur Cholim was organized in 1891 as the first Orthodox congregation in Seattle, and eastern European Jews comprised its membership. The congregation's first sanctuary, built in 1898 at Thirteenth Avenue and Washington Street, was of modest size and character, with a seating capacity of 120 men and 80 women. The building failed to meet the needs of a growing congregation, and larger facilities had to be rented for the High Holidays.¹² Within fifteen years the congregation decided to build a much larger and more imposing structure that would serve its members for generations.

The exteriors of both buildings exhibit a very clean and appealing Romanesque look, combining columns and wide stairs at the main entrance along with other neoclassical elements such as a compact silhouette and shallow dome. The exteriors of the two buildings are so strikingly similar that it is almost as if they were designed by the same architect. However, they also resemble two synagogues that were built in Germany at the same time, the Westend Synagogue in Frankfurt (1910, F. Roeckle, architect) and the Fasanenstrasse Synagogue in Berlin (1912, E. Hessel, architect), although the domes on the German buildings are less shallow.¹³ Thus, both men were working within a transatlantic design mode.

Neither Priteca nor Weil was an observant Jew. Each celebrated his Jewish identity, but their commitment to kashrut and the recognition of Shabbat and other Jewish holy days varied according to their personal preferences. Priteca had been raised in a relatively traditional Jewish home and was familiar with the details and workings of an Orthodox shul. All of the synagogues in Scotland at the time he lived there were Orthodox. Weil, although raised as a Reform Jew, designed mostly Orthodox synagogues, so he too understood the ritual requirements that had to be incorporated into the design of such a building. Priteca knew intimately of the *Aron Kodesh* and of the bimah. He artfully developed his

*Touro Synagogue, New Orleans, designed by Emile Weil.
(Courtesy of Special Collections,
College of Charleston Libraries, Charleston, SC.)*

own unique design of these two main features, as well as other appurtenances such as lighting, which had to be consistent with the designs of the ark and bimah, (see page 11.)

Weil grew up in New Orleans where Reform congregations had existed for decades. He was familiar with the designs of both Orthodox and Reform synagogues and could base his interior designs on elements from the more diverse examples that he had seen in synagogue and church buildings he had experienced firsthand. His personal artistic sense guided him, but the requirements of the building and the services conducted within it also inspired his choices about which elements he wanted to incorporate into the interior design.

Touro Synagogue already owned a beautiful wooden *Aron Kodesh* that had been donated by Judah Touro in 1847 to Nefutzoth Yehudah, one of Touro Synagogue's predecessor con-

gregations. Touro, a Sephardi, had lived in New Orleans since 1801. Born in Rhode Island in 1775, he was raised in Boston by his uncle following the premature deaths of his parents, Isaac, who had been the hazan of the Sephardic congregation in Newport, and Reyna. Judah Touro was a great benefactor to many civic causes in New Orleans such as the Touro Infirmary and the Touro Home for the Aged, which he founded.¹⁴ Touro had insisted that the ark be made of cedars from Lebanon, and he transported these special timbers across the Mediterranean and Atlantic on one of his own vessels.¹⁵ Weil's synagogue design made elegant use of this treasured artifact.

*Chevrá Bikur Cholim synagogue, Seattle, as shown in 2007.
The Priteca designed building now houses the
Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute.
(Photo by Joe Mabel, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.)*

For the Bikur Cholim synagogue, Priteca designed his ark using an intricate mosaic pattern with thousands of small brown colored tiles. He made the bimah of wood and the magnificent

chandelier hanging over the bimah of an intricate multi-colored glass that blended perfectly with the mosaic of the ark.¹⁶

In 1969, when Bikur Cholim found a site for a new synagogue in the Seward Park neighborhood, Priteca was still living. (He died in 1971). Since he had designed the first building in 1914, he was asked if he would be interested in designing the new edifice. When the synagogue president, Israel Volotin, took Priteca to see the new property, the architect was dismayed because the parcel of land was in the middle of the block. Priteca insisted that synagogues, like movie theaters, deserved a dignified location, and this could only be at the corner of a block and no other spot. Priteca told the Bikur Cholim leadership that unless they obtained such a lot, he was not interested in the job.¹⁷

Consequently the congregation hired another Jewish architect, I. Mervin "Sonny" Gorasht, a member of the congregation. Gorasht also won the job of renovating the interior of the old synagogue for the Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute (LHPAI), which now manages the property as a performance space.¹⁸ In a sense, Gorasht, who knew Priteca personally, took on the job of "completing" Priteca's magnificent synagogue building of fifty-five years earlier, both in renovating the old structure to serve the needs of the LHPAI and in designing the new synagogue to replace it.

When the old building was sold, the three uniquely Jewish interior structures that Priteca had designed, the *Aron Kodesh*, the bimah, and the chandelier, were transported to the new location, where Bikur Cholim was reborn. The thousands of mosaic tiles on the ark were removed and individually numbered, then methodically reassembled in the new building to replicate the original. The contractor, however, thought he was being helpful by washing the thousands of tiles before reassembling them. Unfortunately, this removed the original patina that had been painted on the tiles in 1914, so in the reassembled form, to the discerning eye, the coloring was slightly off from the original.¹⁹ The wooden bimah and the large chandelier were also carefully removed from the original building, stored, and then reassembled in the new sanctuary.

*The Aron Kodesh of
Touro Synagogue, left, and a
wide view of the
sanctuary, below.
The cedarwood Aron Kodesh
dates back to 1847 when
Judah Touro donated it
to the congregation.
(Courtesy of Touro Synagogue,
New Orleans.)*

Later Jewish Buildings

For Weil and Priteca, the Touro and Bikur Cholim synagogues, respectively, were the first such buildings they had designed, but later synagogue commissions followed for both. Weil would wait fifteen years, Priteca about forty-five. Congregation Beth Israel in New Orleans, Weil's next synagogue commission, was established in 1904 as a united Orthodox congregation. Two years later, it chose as its first building the mansion that previously had been owned by former New Orleans Mayor Joseph Shakespeare. In 1924 the old building was demolished and replaced with a new sanctuary designed by Weil.²⁰

Weil's design differed dramatically from his earlier Touro synagogue. He eliminated the large dome, and his new building projected a more modern look. Its façade incorporated art deco elements, with three adjacent doorways, each surrounded by a pair of large columns. Inside, the building incorporated beautiful stained glass windows and a chandelier imported from Europe.²¹

In 1896, mostly Hasidic Jews from Russia, Poland, and Lithuania established Agudath Achim Anshe Sfarad as an Orthodox congregation. In 1900 they purchased a building in New Orleans on Rampart Street, which they soon outgrew. About twenty-five years later, the leaders of the congregation, now known as Anshe Sfarad Synagogue, purchased land on Carondelet Street and hired Weil to design a new building.²²

Weil created an elaborate, imposing structure with a seating capacity of twelve hundred. The façade is brick and features a large set of stairs leading up to the three rounded arch-doorway entrances. The doorways are reminiscent of the Beth Israel design, although the Anshe Sfarad entranceways are more impressive. The internal design elements include a large imported chandelier, stained glass windows, and hand-carved Stars of David similar to features inside Beth Israel. The barrel-vaulted ceiling is supported by structural beams embedded with a series of light bulbs that provide a beautiful effect while illuminating the sanctuary.²³

Temple Sinai, founded in 1870, was the first Reform synagogue in New Orleans. It is the congregation to which Weil

*Bikur Cholim choir before the ark that Priteca designed, shown in 1947.
(Courtesy of the University of Washington Libraries,
Special Collections, JEW0520.)*

*Bikur Cholim chandelier, today.
The current chandelier is an exact
replica of the original, which was
destroyed in 1988 when a roof fire
caused it to fall from the ceiling.
(Photo by Eugene Normand.)*

belonged and in which he was married. The original building was an elaborate structure dominated by two Gothic-style domed towers. When the congregation moved to its present location on St. Charles Avenue in 1928, the membership had to decide on which architectural firm to use because there were three well-established Jewish firms in New Orleans: Weil, Moise Goldstein, and Weiss, Dreyfous, and Seiferth. All three were connected to the synagogue, so the congregation offered each firm various roles in the overall design work.²⁴ Among Weil's assignments was the front entrance, possibly because of his impressive entranceways for Beth Israel and Anshe Sfard.²⁵ The Temple Sinai entranceway also incorporates three doorways, but it appears more utilitarian and less stylized compared to the entranceways for his other two synagogue designs.

*Anshe Sfard synagogue,
New Orleans,
designed by Emile Weil.
(Photo by John and Kathleen
DeMajo, Chesterfield, Va.)*

Today there are four synagogues in New Orleans and four in suburban Metairie. Discounting two Chabad centers, which use smaller buildings, this leaves six synagogues. Of these, Weil was involved with four, although his Beth Israel structure was abandoned by the congregation when they moved to a new location in 1971. His influence and relationship with so many of these synagogues is impressive. Over the past century, as the Jewish population of New Orleans has fluctuated between approximately seven thousand and thirteen thousand, three of the buildings that Weil helped design continue to serve the needs of their congregations.²⁶

Benny Priteca's wait for another synagogue commission was much longer than Weil's. His architectural career spanned almost six decades and so provided him later opportunities to design synagogues. Unsurprisingly, then, he employed drastically different designs than Weil.

In the late 1950s, Priteca was asked to design a new sanctuary in Seattle for the large Reform congregation, Temple De Hirsch, adjacent to its old building. About five years later, Sephardic Bikur Holim Congregation (SBH) moved almost ten miles south to a new neighborhood, and Priteca won the job of designing the new building, incorporating some very modern elements into it.

*Temple De Hirsch, Seattle,
designed by Benny Priteca.
(Courtesy of Vladimir
Menkov, Wikimedia Commons.)*

Priteca's Temple De Hirsch presents a highly distinctive look: "Mount Sinai with the top cut off," as local Jews used to quip. Its shape is that of a frustum, a pyramid with the pointed top removed. The external concrete structure is divided into separate faces, each decorated with a series of vertical parallel concrete ribs. The internal design provides an impressive sanctuary with seating for a thousand, dominated by a very tall and imposing metal, modern *Aron Kodesh*. Priteca fully utilized his renowned acoustical expertise to allow temple members to enjoy the congregation's wide array of music programs, organized by musical director Samuel Goldfarb, regardless of where they were seated.

SBH serves half of the relatively large Sephardic community in the Seattle area. This congregation is completely independent of

the aforementioned Bikur Cholim, Priteca's first synagogue client, which was Ashkenazic. Both congregations take their name from the Hebrew term *bikur cholim*. The ancestors of most of the Jews of SBH came from Turkey, specifically the town of Tekirdag about ninety miles west of Istanbul. The name of their congregation in Tekirdag had been Bikur Holim, so these immigrants transported the name of their synagogue across the ocean to Seattle.

The ancestors of these Turkish Jews had been expelled from Spain four hundred years earlier. In Jewish custom, the land of Sepharad in the biblical book of Obadiah is identified with Spain. Priteca was inspired by Spanish and broadly Mediterranean themes to incorporate arches and red brick in both the interior and exterior of the building. Again distinctive from his previous designs, the *Aron Kodesh* used a large slab of white marble offset by mahogany arches.

Today there are more than twenty synagogues in the greater Seattle area. Again, discounting the smaller Chabad centers, this leaves at least fifteen congregations with major synagogue buildings. When Priteca designed the new Sephardic Bikur Holim in 1964, only seven synagogues existed, two of which were relatively small, so in reality there were five major synagogues. Priteca had been involved in the design of three of these five, two Orthodox and one Reform, all substantial buildings. He earned the respect of all segments of the Jewish community for his architectural talent. Today, no single Jewish architect could exert such a degree of influence on the city's Jewish communal buildings. The Jewish population of Seattle has almost quadrupled to nearly forty thousand in the last fifty years.²⁷ Today, one can only marvel at the kind of monopoly on synagogue architecture that Priteca had in the city.

This large impact on synagogue design within their host cities is a rare quality shared by Weil and Priteca. Other Jewish architects designed several synagogues in a single city. Leopold Eidlitz, for example, arrived in New York in 1843 to become the first Jewish architect in the United States. Even though Eidlitz designed all three of the imposing buildings Reform Temple Emanuel constructed during the nineteenth century, as well as several

smaller synagogues on New York's Lower East Side, his designs did not dominate the city's scores of synagogues.²⁸ The Lower East Side had hundreds of congregations and close to a hundred dedicated synagogue buildings designed by numerous other architects.²⁹

In between Bikur Cholim in 1914 and Temple De Hirsch in 1959, Priteca designed several additional Jewish buildings, including the Seattle Talmud Torah and the chapel for Herzl Congregation, both during the 1930s.³⁰ More modest in size than his synagogue buildings, they incorporated features he had used in the Bikur Cholim synagogue such as rounded arches and pillars for the entranceway (Talmud Torah) and a dome (Herzl chapel).

Designing Movie Theaters

Although designing synagogues and other Jewish buildings was important to both Benny Priteca and Emile Weil for a variety of reasons including community obligation, prestige, and career enhancement, these did not provide a pathway to financial success. Few new opportunities appeared in this genre, and communal organization money was uncertain. To be financially successful and gain added renown, they had to find a different kind of building to design. For this purpose, they chose (or, more aptly, obtained the opportunity) to design movie theaters. In many respects, this was not a great departure from synagogue architecture. Theater buildings, like synagogues, had to seat a large number of people in comfort as they watched and listened to the program. Effective designs had to include good sight lines from every seat and effective acoustics to allow those seated to hear the performers or speakers.

Weil and Priteca began their architectural careers at a pivotal moment. Each found within his city an owner of an entertainment organization who wanted to build and expand his movie-theater empire. This began in the 1910s and 1920s, when silent movies were the main fare, and expanded further with the era of the "talking pictures" that began in 1927, although the Great Depression limited movie theater growth during the 1930s.

Weil found his path through the Saenger theater chain headquartered in New Orleans. In 1890, Abraham and Julian Saenger moved to Shreveport, Louisiana, with their father, Rabbi Israel Saenger. The brothers had graduated from Johns Hopkins University with degrees in pharmacology, and they opened the Saenger Drug Store at Milam and Louisiana Streets in Shreveport in 1895.³¹

The Saengers built their first Saenger Theater in 1911 next door to their drug store. It operated as a vaudeville house for one year, but Julian had become fascinated with moving pictures and foresaw their future. Thus, the brothers and a partner, L. Ash, formed the Saenger Amusement Company on August 14, 1913.³²

The company grew rapidly, especially during the 1920s, and eventually their empire consisted of over three hundred theaters located throughout the American South, Central America, and the Caribbean. Weil was one of several individuals whom the Saengers used as theater architects. He designed nine theaters for them, as well as two more for different sponsors (*see* Table 1). Of Weil's Saenger theaters, the smallest, in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, seated one thousand, and the largest, in New Orleans, had a capacity of 3,400.

The Strand Theatre in Shreveport, a magnificent building designed by Weil, was also distinguished because it was owned by two sets of Jewish brothers. Harry and Simon Ehrlich were born in St. Louis, moved to Texarkana, Texas, and then to Shreveport. In 1922 the Ehrlichs formed a partnership with the Saenger brothers in New Orleans called Saenger-Ehrlich Enterprises, Inc., which hired Weil to design the Strand.³³

Weil's theater designs, especially those in the larger cities, were highly regarded for their beauty. More than half of those he designed still operate today, and most have been placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Some of these operated for many years, were closed down, and then were restored through major renovation projects to allow them to operate into the twenty-first century. Examples include the Jefferson Theatre in Beaumont, Texas, the Strand Theatre in Shreveport, the Perot The-

atre in Texarkana, the Temple Theatre in Meridian, Mississippi, the Saenger Theatre in New Orleans (two restorations), and the Saenger Theatre in Pensacola, Florida (two restorations).³⁴

*Abraham and Julian Saenger's Drug Store, Shreveport, Louisiana.
The brothers built their first theater next door where they soon
began to show motion pictures, thus beginning
their long association with movie theaters.
(Courtesy of LSU-Shreveport Archives/Eric Brock Collection.)*

For his theater exteriors, Weil generally used brick, stone, cast aggregate concrete, and tile, which were combined to create the large-scale embellishments. The theaters often included a cast-concrete dome, and gold-painted ornamentation surrounded the interior. The auditorium, designed to seat between one thousand and two thousand people, consisted of the orchestra, loge, lower balcony, and upper balcony sections. The walls of the auditorium often included paintings by accomplished artists on a mural-like scale that paid homage either to the muses (inspiring artistic and literary creations) or to pathos, the most moving human emotions (life, love, passion). Ceilings were also highly stylized through painting and sculpted elements that represented plants and animals, putti (cupids), and elaborate designs, all conveying the idea of a princely European palace.

TABLE 1. Theaters designed by Emile Weil³⁵

Date	Name	Location
1923	Hamasa Shrine Temple (Temple Theater)	Meridian, MS
1924	Saenger (Perot) Theatre	Texarkana, TX
1924	Saenger Theatre	Pine Bluff, AR
1925	Saenger Theatre	Pensacola, FL
1925	Strand Theatre	Shreveport, LA
1927	Jefferson Theatre	Beaumont, TX
1927	Saenger Theater	Mobile, AL
1927	Saenger Theatre	New Orleans, LA
1927	Arabian Theatre	Laurel, MS
1927	Tivoli Theatre	New Orleans, LA
1929	Saenger Theatre	Hattiesburg, MS

In Seattle, Benny Priteca met Pericles “Alexander” Pantages, a colorful and even notorious character. Pantages was a Greek-born vaudeville and early motion-picture producer who created a large and influential circuit of theaters across the western United States and Canada. Pantages theaters appeared as far north as Anchorage, Alaska, and as far south as San Diego, California, and Priteca designed all of them. This required the architect to move during the 1920s to southern California, since Pantages was building many theaters there. Occasionally, Pantages found opportunities in other parts of the country, mainly in the Midwest, to expand his theater empire.³⁶

Pantages liked Priteca as a theater architect because Priteca could make a building look rich and opulent while spending less than might have been expected. Pantages reportedly said of Priteca that “any fool can make a place look like a million dollars by spending a million dollars, but it’s not everybody who can do the same thing with half a million.”³⁷

Priteca designed more than thirty theaters, although not all for Pantages, and some were for the presentation of performing arts rather than movies. (For a selection of Priteca’s theater designs, see Table 2.) With so many commissions, Priteca became nationally known for his expertise in this specialized design that emphasized acoustics and good sightlines.

Similar to Weil's theaters, the majesty of Priteca's theater designs, especially those in the larger cities, was highly esteemed. Nearly half of those he designed remain in operation today as one type of theater or another, and many have been placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Also similar to Weil, some of Priteca's theaters operated for many years, closed, and then were restored through major renovations. Examples of these include the Tacoma Pantages Theater, three theaters in Seattle (Admiral, Paramount, and Coliseum), the Capitol Theatre in Yakima, Washington, and the Pantages Theater in Fresno, California.³⁸

*Ceiling, Pantages Theatre,
Hollywood, California, 2012.
(Photo by John O'Neill,
courtesy of Wikimedia
Commons.)*

Priteca utilized a similar design approach in most of his theaters. The exteriors of the buildings usually were made of brick or terra cotta, the latter a building material he was fond of because it could be sculpted into various types of ornamentation. The interior details of the theaters were quite elaborate, fulfilling Pantages's desire to draw audiences out of their everyday lives and into a place of wealth and splendor. Priteca accomplished this through the use of Roman columns on the sides of the proscenium arch, incorporating ivory and gold color schemes (Pantages's favorite colors), heavy drapes, and an ornamental drop curtain, the latter textiles useful for sound absorption. The size of the theaters varied, but generally they accommodated twelve hundred to sixteen hundred seats, including side boxes and loge seating toward the front of the theater. Priteca oversaw the construction details of each new Pantages theater and often worked with the same contractors on each project. A. B. Heinsbergen of Seattle, for example,

was the interior decorator and muralist for most of the Pantages theater houses.

TABLE 2. Selected theaters designed by Benny Priteca³⁹

Date	Name	Location
1911	Pantages (New Pantages) Theatre	San Francisco, CA
1913	Pantages (Strand) Theatre	Edmonton, AB, Canada
1914	Pantages Theatre (Pantages Playhouse)	Winnipeg, MB, Canada
1915	Coliseum Theater (Banana Republic Bldg.)	Seattle, WA
1918	Pantages Theater	Tacoma, WA
1920	Los Angeles Pantages Theatre #2 (Warrens)	Los Angeles, CA
1920	Mercy (Capitol) Theatre	Yakima, WA
1921	Pantages (Tower) Theater	Kansas City, MO
1924	Pantages Theatre	San Diego, CA
1924	B & M Theater	Seattle, WA
1927	Orpheum Theater	Vancouver, BC, Canada
1928	Pantages (Warnors) Theater	Fresno, CA
1929	Pantages Theatre Hollywood	Hollywood, CA
1930	Warner Theatre	Huntington Park, CA
1938	Admiral Theater, renovation	Seattle, WA
1940	Tower Theatre	Bend, OR
1948	State (Evergreen State) Theater	Olympia, WA

Designing Sports Venues

Both Weil and Priteca designed a variety of other buildings in their respective cities. In particular, each man was involved with one major sports venue. Weil designed a baseball stadium and Priteca a racetrack. Although these are distinctly different facilities, they share two primary requirements with both theaters and synagogues: the buildings had to accommodate a relatively large number of spectators and provide them with a good view of the action.

In 1915 Weil designed Heinemann Park Pelican Stadium in New Orleans (renamed Pelican Stadium in 1938). The stadium served as the home of the New Orleans Pelicans minor league baseball team for the stadium's entire lifetime, until it was demolished in 1957. In addition, it served as the home baseball stadium for the St. Louis/New Orleans Stars of the Negro American League for a few years and as the site for spring training for the Cleveland Indians for about a decade.⁴⁰ Based on the seating capacity of comparable minor league stadiums, the capacity of Pelican Stadium was about ten thousand, which would have been five to ten times the capacity of Weil's later theaters.⁴¹

In 1933 Priteca designed the Longacres Racetrack in Renton, Washington, for his close friend, Joe Gottstein. The track provided the first home of thoroughbred racing in western Washington, and, at its closing in 1992, it was the longest continually operated racetrack on the West Coast.⁴² The facility consisted of the racing strip, grandstand, clubhouse, several barns, a judges' stand, and pari-mutuel windows. Priteca designed all of these elements, but the grandstand, which had a capacity of approximately twenty-four thousand, is the portion which best utilized his theater design experience.

Priteca was involved with two other Seattle projects connected to sports, but they were far removed from a true sports venue for spectators like a racetrack or baseball stadium. The first project was the decorative Crystal Pool swimming facility, and the second was the remodeling of Union Stables, which had once housed horses, into a furniture store.⁴³ These projects demonstrated Priteca's versatility as an architect.

Other Buildings

Weil and Priteca also designed a variety of other buildings in their respective cities and, in the case of Priteca, occasionally in cities where he was also building theaters. (For a sampling of Weil's other commissions, *see* Table 3.)⁴⁴ Weil's first residences were for Jewish families, and, in fact, his first home design was executed for Fannie Kiefer Newman, widow of Charles Newman, who was an uncle of Weil's wife Marie. Weil went from mainly

designing homes, to the Touro Synagogue, to commercial buildings, to theaters, and, near the end of his career, to a college music building and the three later synagogues described earlier.

TABLE 3. Selected New Orleans buildings designed by Emile Weil⁴⁵

Date	Name	Address	Building Type	Description/Style
1905	Home for Fannie Kiefer Newman	3804 St. Charles Ave.	House	Romanesque
1907	Canal Bank & Trust Company Bldg.	Corner of Patterson and Vallette Sts.	Branch bank	2 stories
1908	Home for Joseph Levy	1630 Palmer St.	House	Classical Revival
1911	Whitney National Bank Bldg.	229 St. Charles Ave.	Office building	14 stories
1911	Leon Fellman Bldg.	810 Canal St.	Office building	4 stories
1913	Home for Emanuel Benjamin	5531 St. Charles Ave.	House	Beaux-Arts
1920	Bohn Ford Motor Bldg.	2700 S. Broad St.	Automobile dealership	2 stories
1920	Touro Infirmary, addition	1401 Foucher St.	Hospital addition	4 stories
1923	Home for Simon Shwartz	14 Audubon Blvd.	House	Mediterranean
1927	Canal Bank & Trust Company Bldg.	210 Baronne St.	Office building	19 stories
1928	Dixon Hall	Campus of Newcomb College (Tulane University)	Academic building, Music	Neo-Georgian
1912–1913	Kress Building (Ritz-Carlton Hotel)	923 Canal St.	Office building	5 stories

Since Priteca designed many more movie and performing arts theaters than Weil, it is not surprising that Weil actually undertook more projects than Priteca involving diverse types of buildings (see Table 4). Nonetheless, each developed local, national, and, in Priteca's case, international reputations. They were involved with diverse building projects, often several simultaneously. Building owners wanted to utilize architects of proven ability, vision, and artistry, and they did not hesitate to interview those whom they knew would perform well for them.

TABLE 4. Selected buildings designed by Benny Priteca⁴⁶

Date	Name	Location	Building Type
1926	Marshall Square Office Building (Orpheum Theater)	San Francisco, CA	Office complex
1927	Central Hotel	Tacoma, WA	Hotel
1931	Canadian Bank of Commerce	Los Angeles, CA	Office building
1946–1950	Seattle Public Safety Building	Seattle, WA	Municipal building

Internal and External Influences

New Orleans and Seattle were quite different cities, with New Orleans being substantially older and more established. The first Jew came to New Orleans in 1757, while the first arrived in the state of Washington almost a hundred years later. The first congregation in New Orleans was founded in 1827, while Seattle's first dates to 1889.⁴⁷

There is no record of any Jewish architect in the city of Seattle when Priteca arrived, so he had none with whom to compete. In contrast, two other firms led by Jewish architects started in New Orleans at about the same time that Weil began his practice, but these two firms later undertook far larger projects than Weil. Moise Goldstein, the head of one of these firms, was about four years younger than Weil. Like Weil, he was born in New Orleans and attended Tulane University, but he also graduated from MIT.⁴⁸

Goldstein was a partner in two separate firms before he opened his own architectural practice in 1914. He executed some very ambitious and highly regarded buildings, establishing a stellar reputation. These projects include several buildings on the campuses of Tulane and Dillard Universities and the luxurious Pine Hills Hotel, on the northern shore of the Bay of St. Louis north of Pass Christian, Mississippi.⁴⁹

The second New Orleans Jewish architectural firm, Weiss, Dreyfous, and Seiferth, was comprised of three Jewish architects. Leon C. Weiss, the driving force, combined first with F. Julius Dreyfous in 1920, then added Solis Seiferth seven years later. Weiss, the same age as Goldstein, was politically well-connected. This enabled his firm to obtain the commissions to design most major buildings undertaken by the administration of Governor Huey Long in Baton Rouge, including the Capitol Building, the governor's mansion, and many of the buildings on the Louisiana State University campus.⁵⁰

The Goldstein and Weiss firms attained national reputations for buildings on a grand scale. In contrast, Weil's reputation, as notable as it was, remained strongest within the state of Louisiana, and his building designs were admired for their artistry and technical details. Weil was able to extend his reputation throughout the Southeast through his execution of the majestic Saenger movie theaters, and his work was often featured in national architecture magazines such as *Architectural Record* and in regional magazines including *Southern Architect* and *Western Architect*. He was able to develop his own niche—movie theaters and synagogues—along with a few commercial buildings of note.

Weil and Priteca both followed a three-step career progression: a) they developed a successful design for their first synagogue; b) this served as entrée to working on the design of movie and performance theaters; and c) after a period of years, their theater reputations led to commissions to design later synagogues. Jewish connections facilitated this progression. The theater chain owners for whom Weil worked, the Saenger brothers, were Jewish and likely knew of Weil's professional reputation based on his Touro Synagogue and commercial buildings and

may have met him through Jewish acquaintances. Priteca met his theater chain operator, Alexander Pantages, through a chance meeting that gave him his opportunity to show Pantages what he could do as an architect. However, in addition, Priteca's Jewish friend, Joseph Gottstein, for whom he would build the Longacres Racetrack, was also a business associate of Pantages, so discussions between the businessmen may have reinforced the idea of giving Priteca his chance to participate in the design of theaters for Pantages. Both Weil and Priteca took advantage of artistic/engineering talent and training and opportunity.

Our focus has been on the most common aspects of these architects' design work, in particular synagogues and theaters. Although on the surface these seem to be disparate types of buildings, they actually have much in common. Both are intended to seat large numbers of people comfortably, with capacities ranging from approximately five hundred to one thousand (larger synagogues) to almost two thousand (large theaters). The audiences in each are expected to be seated for long periods of time, approximately two to three hours, so both good acoustics and good sight lines are vital for every seat in the house.

One other crucial factor is significant: the timing of when both Weil and Priteca began their independent architectural firms. Weil was eleven years older than Priteca, but they essentially began their architectural careers within a period of about five to eight years. In his book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell examines in detail people whom he calls "outliers," those who have achieved far more than other members of their groups. Gladwell carefully analyzes the reasons for their success, elaborating, "What truly distinguishes their histories is not their extraordinary talent, but their extraordinary opportunities."⁵¹

Gladwell provides another example of the "hidden opportunities that outliers benefit from." He compiles a list of the seventy-five richest people in human history. Of those, fourteen were born in America between 1831 and 1840. They were young but sufficiently experienced to be able to take advantage of the huge opportunities that arose between 1865 and 1880 when the American economy went through a tremendous transformation and

growth spurt. Industrial manufacturing came into its own during this period, and the rules governing the way private business succeeded in America were totally redefined. As Gladwell puts it, “this list says that it really matters how old you were when that transformation happened.”⁵²

On a smaller scale, Gladwell’s model can be applied to the success of Weil and Priteca. With respect to designing synagogues, the great influx of Jews into the United States occurred between 1881 and 1924, when more than 2.3 million, mainly from eastern Europe, immigrated to America, primarily settling in New York City but also in other urban areas. The Jewish population of all major U.S. cities and states grew significantly during this period. For example, from 1877 to 1918 the Jewish population of Louisiana grew from 7,500 to 12,700 and that of Washington State from 145 to 9,117.⁵³ Furthermore, many of the Jews who had arrived earlier and their descendants had risen economically to be able to afford greater and more expensive edifices. The construction of grandiose synagogues reflected their status in society. As urban Jewish populations expanded, so too did the need for larger synagogues to accommodate the new congregants, and, as these Jews became more prosperous, they wanted their houses of worship to reflect their success.

Opportunities were available for architects who were expanding their businesses at this time and were interested in the challenge of Jewish communal buildings. Good connections within the Jewish community eased the way for commissions for new synagogue design projects. Finally, the completed synagogues served as dramatic testament to their architectural skills.

*Expansion of the Movie Industry –
Opportunity for Theater Architects*

The timing of the great expansion of the movie industry and thus of movie theaters was similarly fortuitous. The industry began about 1905 with the advent of nickelodeons, small theaters with capacities of fifty to two hundred people. A five-cent charge bought a patron entry to watch five- to fifteen-minute films. With-

in ten years the industry was transformed as feature films much greater in length, such as the ground-breaking *Birth of a Nation*, were introduced. Theaters initially called "movie palaces" replaced nickelodeons.⁵⁴

The movie business grew rapidly after the successful internal struggle to wrest control of the industry from Thomas Edison and his Motion Pictures Patent Company, popularly known as "the Trust." The Trust had collected almost all motion picture equipment patents under the ownership of a single corporation.⁵⁵ Opposition by suppliers of the nickelodeons, combined with a federal antitrust suit, led to the dismantling of the Trust by the federal courts. This opened the door for a large group of independent filmmakers and distributors to establish production companies. Many of the men who succeeded with these companies, including Samuel Goldwyn, William Fox, Carl Laemmle, Adolph Zukor, Louis B. Mayer, and the Warner (Wonskolaser) Brothers, were European-born Jews.⁵⁶ Many started out with nickelodeons but switched over to the production end of the business, creating what evolved into the movie studios. The movie business was so new that it did not have the restrictions limiting access of minority groups, such as the Jews, that prevailed in older industries during the early twentieth century.

As the movie industry expanded, opportunities were also created on the exhibition side of the business through the establishment of companies owning chains of movie theaters. The movie palace became a unique architectural genre that incorporated luxurious design, a giant screen, and a large enough interior to seat hundreds to thousands of patrons. The motion picture business expanded into a multi-million dollar industry.⁵⁷ "Between 1914 and 1922, 4,000 new theaters opened in the U.S.," and "the picture palaces [became an overwhelming] commercial success."⁵⁸

Two elements fostered the dramatic growth of the exhibition industry: theater owners, especially of movie chains, and theater builders/designers. For the theater owners, the industry followed the lead that had been set by department and grocery stores in creating regional and even national chains. The three

largest cities provided models: New York had Loew's, Inc. (founded by Marcus Loew); Chicago had Balaban & Katz (Barney and A. J. Balaban and Samuel Katz); and Philadelphia had the Stanley Company of America (Jules and Stanley Mastbaum). All grew into large theater chains, and all were Jewish-owned.⁵⁹ Their success influenced other regional chains including Saenger brothers in the Southeast, Skouras brothers in St. Louis, Pantages along the Pacific Coast, the Interstate Amusement Company (Karl Hoblitzelle) in Texas, the Saxe Brothers in Milwaukee, the Fox Film Corporation in New York and later around the country, Finkelstein and Rubin in Minneapolis, and John Kunsky in Detroit.⁶⁰ With such notable exceptions as the Skouros brothers and Pantages, who were Greek, a substantial number of these owners were Jewish.

Many other theater chains were created around the country including in the South, where some, like the chain Louis Rosenbaum established in Alabama, were Jewish-owned.⁶¹ In larger cities, the demand was so high that multiple theater companies could compete and prosper alongside one another. In New York City, William Fox and his Fox Film Corporation competed with Loew's, and in Chicago, the Lubliner & Trinz theater chain operated alongside Balaban & Katz.⁶²

Fox Film Corporation used Samuel Lionel "Roxy" Rothafel, the most flamboyant of all the theater impresarios, as its theater manager. Roxy, a Jew born in Germany, emigrated at the age of two and grew up in Stillwater, Minnesota. Over time he molded the position of manager into one of great importance for the success of the movie palaces. After moving to New York City, some of the early theaters that he managed, including the Regent and the Strand, were designed by Charles Lamb. His eponymous Roxy Theater in New York City, designed by well-known Chicago architect Walter W. Ahlschlager in 1927, seated close to six thousand people. Only in New York, with its enormous population of potential theatergoers, could the position of managing director of a chain of theaters become so dominant.⁶³

The Stanley Theater Company in Philadelphia used the Hoffman-Henon Company, the prominent Philadelphia architect-

tural firm, for the design of most of its theaters. W. H. Hoffman and Paul J. Henon led the company that designed forty-six theaters in that city, nearly all of them for the Stanley Company.⁶⁴

To succeed, the theater owners had to provide captivating theater buildings for moviegoers, and a new breed of architect, the theater architect, accomplished the task. Similar to the architectural firms that had designed live theaters in previous decades, this specialty developed rapidly in the early twentieth century in response to the public demand to build hundreds of movie theaters per year. Three architectural firms, Thomas Lamb, John Ebersson, and Rapp and Rapp (the brothers George and Cornelius), dominated the field.

Thomas Lamb had a beginning similar to Priteca's. Lamb was born in Scotland in 1871, about twenty years earlier than Priteca, and he emigrated when he was twelve and studied architecture at Cooper Union in New York. Initially, he worked for both Fox Theaters and Loew's Theaters in New York. These assignments led him to the early development of both design and construction techniques for large and lavish movie palaces. His first theater, the City Theater in New York (for William Fox in 1909), was followed by hundreds of others. His designs and techniques influenced and were copied by many other architects.⁶⁵

John Ebersson was born in 1875 into a Jewish family living in Czernowitz, Austria-Hungary. He went to high school in Germany and studied electrical engineering in Vienna. Ebersson arrived in the United States in 1901, first settling in St. Louis where he designed his first theater, the Jewel, in Hamilton, Ohio, in 1913. Gradually he moved away from the design concepts that were in vogue, and he pioneered a new style, the so-called "atmospheric" auditorium. He replaced the ornate ceiling dome with a dark blue smooth plaster shell into which he embedded hundreds of twinkling lights. By means of a hidden projector, clouds slowly drifted across the blue-sky ceiling, creating the "stars and clouds" effect he sought. In addition, the interior walls were designed to remind the audience of European gardens.⁶⁶

The brothers George and Cornelius Rapp were born in Carbondale, Illinois. They started their architectural firm in Chicago in 1899 and developed their approach to theater design over the next decade. The Majestic, their first theater, opened as a vaudeville house in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in 1908. They designed movie palaces, primarily in the Midwest but also on the East Coast, and began a long-term relationship with the Chicago-based movie theater chain Balaban & Katz, designing most of the chain's theaters.⁶⁷

An appreciation for the diversity of the architects who pioneered the design of movie theaters during the boom times from 1915 to 1930 can be gleaned from a tabulation of the most prominent theaters built during that era provided by David Naylor in his book, *American Picture Palaces*. For the period 1911 to 1930, a total of 234 theaters are tabulated and, of these, about 90 percent (215) specify the architect of record. This tabulation shows that the big three architectural firms, Lamb, Ebersson, and Rapp and Rapp, account for 43 percent of all of the theaters, with Lamb and Rapp and Rapp being the leaders with about 16 percent of the total each. Priteca is the next highest with 6 percent, C. Howard Crane had 5 percent, and Weil gleaned 1 percent.⁶⁸

Naylor's compilation includes at least seven architectural firms with Jewish partners: Weil, Priteca, and Ebersson, as well as Walter Ahlschlager, Gustave A. Lansburgh, Levy & Klein, and Krokyn, Browne and Rosenstein.⁶⁹

Walter Ahlschlager was born in Chicago in 1887 and practiced as an architect mainly in Chicago and later in Dallas.⁷⁰ Gustave A. Lansburgh was born to Jewish parents in Panama in 1876 but grew up in San Francisco and studied architecture at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris.⁷¹ Alexander L. Levy, born in 1872, and William J. Klein, born in 1889, were two Chicago-born architects who practiced in their home city.⁷² Jacob F. Krokyn was born in Boston in 1881 to Jewish parents and studied architecture at Harvard. His Jewish junior partner, Arthur Rosenstein, was born in Boston in 1890 and trained as an engineer at Harvard.⁷³ The other partner, Ambrose A. Browne, was also from Boston.

How do Weil's and Priteca's careers compare with the principal architects in these five firms? Of the five, the one whose career most resembles that of Weil and Priteca is Gustave Lansburgh. Lansburgh had been raised under the guardianship of Rabbi Jacob Voorsanger of Temple Emanu-El in San Francisco. He returned from Paris in 1906 as a certified architect a few months after San Francisco's catastrophic earthquake and fire, which destroyed the temple building. Lansburgh designed the plans for the new synagogue, but his design was not executed because the congregation decided to seek a new location. Lansburgh came under the patronage of Morris Meyerfield, Jr., president of the Orpheum Theater and Realty Company. Consequently, he designed numerous Orpheum theaters around the country for that chain. In 1914, Lansburgh designed the new Temple Sinai building in Oakland. This edifice bears some resemblance to the Touro and Bikur Cholim synagogue buildings of Weil and Priteca. Lansburgh also designed large auditorium-like structures in San Francisco such as the War Memorial Opera House and the War Memorial Veterans Building.⁷⁴

What differentiates Lansburgh from Priteca and Weil is that the one synagogue that Lansburgh built did not help launch his career as a theater architect; that career came about through his connections with the head of the Orpheum theater chain. When Temple Emanu-El erected its new building, Lansburgh served only as an adviser. Thus, in the cases of Weil and Priteca, their synagogue and theater designs were interconnected. With Lansburgh, the architectural work on theaters and other buildings took precedence, and synagogue-related work played a lesser role. Nevertheless, the architectural careers of the three men do illustrate similarities.

The other Jewish architectural firms also displayed resemblances and differences from Weil's and Priteca's experiences. John Eberson was a giant in the field of theater design, but he did not build synagogues or other Jewish buildings. Walter Ahlschlager designed a number of theaters, including the incomparable Roxy, but his forte was large commercial buildings such as hotels and banks. Like Eberson, he did not design synagogues.

Alexander L. Levy and William J. Klein provide a further comparative framework. Their firm designed five movie theaters in Chicago during the 1920s, all of which were executed by the architect Edward Eichenbaum, their principal designer.⁷⁵ Earlier, Levy had been involved in the design of two Chicago synagogues, the classically inspired Congregation Anshe Sholom (1910) on the south side and the Beth Hamedrash Hagodol Synagogue (1916) on the west side, and the firm of Levy & Klein had designed the Washington Boulevard Temple (B'nai Abraham Zion) on the city's west side. The firm was also involved with a hotel and several commercial buildings in Chicago.⁷⁶

Like Weil and Priteca, Alexander Levy designed synagogues, two in his case and one with his partner William J. Klein, and later his firm won the commissions for five movie theaters. However, Levy himself did not design the movie theaters; Eichenbaum did, whereas Weil and Priteca designed both types of buildings. Moreover, Levy and Klein's movie theater work lasted only a few years, and the firm never became the favored architects for a movie theater chain. Perhaps a critical difference is that neither Weil nor Priteca had substantial competition in their home bases for the direction they took. Levy and Klein operated in the shadows of Chicago's Rapp and Rapp, a nationally renowned firm for movie theater architecture. Again, Weil and Priteca were in the right place at the right time.

Jacob F. Krokyn and his Jewish partner, Arthur Rosenstein, received commissions for several synagogue projects in New England during the early 1920s. Krokyn's synagogue architectural work may have led to his first movie theater assignment in Boston in 1929. The firm ultimately designed two other theaters, as well as a variety of other buildings. Thus, this firm's progression from synagogues to movie theaters paralleled that of Weil and Priteca. The latter, however, developed long-term relationships with theater chain owners that enabled them to design numerous theaters for more than a decade, unlike Krokyn and Rosenstein.⁷⁷

Weil and Priteca had the right experience in synagogue design to take advantage of the opportunities afforded a few years later by the boom in movie theater construction. Further reinforc-

ing the importance of timing, the ten theater architects discussed here were all born within twenty years, from 1871 to 1890. It paid to be a young and well-educated architect beginning in the early decades of the twentieth century. Weil and Priteca also benefited from their locations in burgeoning cities that, fortuitously, lacked undue competition in their niche. Key ethnic contacts with fellow Jews facilitated their rise.

Later Years and Conclusions

During the 1920s, Weil's architectural business took off. A talented architect, Albert Bendernagel, joined him as an associate in 1925. The number of projects increased to the point that Weil needed to hire additional draftsmen. Later, he appointed one of these, Hebert Benson, as office manager. By 1926, with this trend continuing, Weil incorporated his architectural firm, and Benson became the executive vice president. As the Depression set in, architectural commissions were much more difficult to obtain. Weil's firm was able to win commissions to build a number of Roman Catholic churches for rural Louisiana parishes. However, by 1933, Weil determined that it was too difficult to continue in that business environment, and he retired, closing down his firm. According to Weil's grandson, Herman Kohlmeyer, there was another reason why the architect retired at that time: "Our grandfather closed his office when Huey Long became governor, since there was no work during the depression days except with the state, and he declined that relationship." He even considered relocating "his office . . . to Germany until the Long regime blew over."⁷⁸ Emile Weil's career as an architect spanned about thirty-five years.

Weil had been involved with his colleagues professionally for many years. In 1910 he joined twenty other architects in establishing the Louisiana chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA). Besides having his work featured in prominent architecture magazines, this provided an effective way to expand his reputation and remain cognizant of his colleagues' latest work. It seems fitting that the 1909 article on Weil's Touro Synagogue design in *American Architect* was the first link between Weil and Priteca.

The majority of Weil's work documents were donated to the Southeastern Architectural Archive at the Tulane University Libraries. Early in his career he began subscribing to architectural journals, thereby beginning a solid architectural library that enabled him to carefully follow the latest trends in his chosen profession.⁷⁹

Benny Priteca's architectural career, at nearly sixty years, was almost twice as long as Weil's. Priteca usually had a draftsman and an assistant architect working with him. Among his assistants were Gregory Ain, Sam Halfon, Bernie Stertzler, and Richard McCann, all of whom went on to successful careers.⁸⁰

In 1938 Priteca served as president of the Washington chapter of AIA, much as Weil had done in his home state. In 1951 Priteca was inducted into the AIA College of Fellows. Eleven years later, he received an honor award from AIA Seattle for his design of the Temple de Hirsch synagogue building.⁸¹

Priteca was aware of Weil, starting with the Touro Synagogue design. Since some of Weil's work appeared in other architectural journals such as *Western Architect*, Priteca probably also saw drawings and photos of some of Weil's later work. Yet Weil and Priteca likely never met in person.

While there is a great deal of similarity between the careers of these two outstanding architects, there are also some distinct differences. The strong similarities lie in the design of synagogues (at least three each) and of numerous movie theaters. In addition, Weil designed a number of residences, impressive southern mansions, employing specialized styles for different homes. He also designed a substantial number of attractive office, bank, and commercial buildings, mostly in the heart of downtown New Orleans. He received city-wide acclaim for the beauty of his works. In contrast, Priteca did not do residences, and the number of office buildings that he worked on was minimal, some of these often being adjacent to some of his movie theaters.

However, the key element linking these two Jewish architects is the combination of synagogue and theater design work that was such a natural fit and which reinvigorated each phase of their careers. The work on their first synagogues brought prestige and

recognition and led them to the thriving theater business that brought financial success. The men lived and worked in different parts of the country, widely separated from one another, but nonetheless, they are linked historically by the odysseys on which their careers took them.

NOTES

I would like to thank Lisa Kranseler, Executive Director, Washington State Jewish Historical Society (WSJHS) for prompting my initial interest in the extraordinary architect, Benny Priteca. I assisted Lisa with parts of the WSJHS exhibit that she organized in May 2006, *From Synagogues to Cinemas, B. Marcus Priteca, Seattle's Renowned Architect*.

¹ See Charles E. Gregersen, *Dankmar Adler: His Theatres and Auditoriums* (Athens, OH, 1990) and Heinz Ronner and Sharad Jhavan, eds., *Louis I. Kahn: Complete Work 1935–1974* (Zurich, Switz., 1977).

² Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison, WI, 1992), 37.

³ Karen Kingsley, "Emile Weil," KnowLA Encyclopedia of Louisiana, accessed June 25, 2013, <http://www.knowla.org/entry.php?rec=795>.

⁴ Herman Kohlmeyer and Marie K. Wolf (grandchildren of Emile Weil) e-mails to Rachel Heimovics Braun, July 20, 2013.

⁵ Before Weil received the commission for the Touro synagogue, he had served as one of the architects for the rebuilding of the new Athenaeum, the headquarters for the Young Men's Hebrew Association of New Orleans. The original Athenaeum building had burned down in 1905 and was rebuilt the following year. "Emile Weil Office Records," Southeastern Architectural Archive Collection 82 (hereafter cited as Weil Office Records), accessed July 20, 2013, http://seaa.tulane.edu/sites/all/themes/Howard_Tilton/docs/finding_aids/Emile%20Weil.pdf.

⁶ Eric L. Flom, "Priteca, B. Marcus," HistoryLink.org: The Free Online Encyclopedia of Washington State History (hereafter cited as HistoryLink.org), accessed July 20, 2013, http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&file_id=8815.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Chevra Bikur Cholim, or Bikur Cholim, merged with Congregation Machzikay Hadath in 1971 and has been known since then as Bikur Cholim Machzikay Hadath, or BCMH.

Miriam Sutermeister, "B. Marcus Priteca," in *Shaping Seattle Architecture, A Historical Guide to the Architects*, ed. J. K. Ochsner (Seattle, WA, 1994), 185. "About BCMH," Bikur Cholim Machzikay Hadath, accessed August 6, 2013, <http://bcmhseattle.org/about/about-bcmh/>.

⁹ "Touro Synagogue History," Touro Synagogue, accessed July 20, 2013, <http://www.tourosynagogue.com/about/our-history/>.

¹⁰ Sutermeister, "B. Marcus Priteca," 184.

¹¹ Ibid.; Grant Hildebrand, Introductory Remarks, "From Synagogues to Cinemas, B. Marcus Priteca, Seattle's Renowned Architect," Washington State Jewish Historical Society Conference, 2007.

¹² Molly Cone, Howard Droker, and Jacqueline Williams, *Family of Strangers, Building a Jewish Community in Washington State* (Seattle, 2003), 112.

¹³ Rachel Wischnitzer, *The Architecture of the European Synagogue* (Philadelphia, 1964), 226.

¹⁴ Touro also bequeathed funds to his father's former synagogue in Newport for a new sanctuary that was designed by Peter Harrison and is now a National Historic Site. "Judah Touro," Touro Synagogue, accessed June 12, 2013, <http://tourosynagogue.org/>.

¹⁵ Irwin Lachoff and Catherine C. Kahn, *The Jewish Community of New Orleans* (Charleston, SC, 2005), 69–70.

¹⁶ In 1969 the Model Cities Urban Renewal program purchased the synagogue building, listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The city transformed the structure into the Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute (LHPAI), a cultural arts mecca for the entire community, comprised of a diverse population including African Americans, Asians, and Latinos. Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute, accessed July 20, 2013, <http://www.langstoninstitute.org/>.

¹⁷ Bernard Stertzler to Eugene Normand, April 29, 2006.

¹⁸ I. Mervin Gorasht to Eugene Normand, February 22, 2013.

¹⁹ Gorasht to Normand.

²⁰ Lachoff and Kahn, *Jewish Community of New Orleans*, 67.

²¹ About twenty-five years later the neighborhood started to deteriorate and members began moving farther away from the synagogue. In 1964, seeking a new site, the congregation purchased property for a new synagogue on Canal Boulevard in the Lakeview neighborhood, and, in 1971, the congregation completed and dedicated its new sanctuary. On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck, and when New Orleans's Seventeenth Street Canal was breached, the resulting surge of water demolished the Beth Israel synagogue along with other neighboring buildings. Shortly thereafter, Gates of Prayer, a Reform temple in suburban Metairie, opened its doors to Beth Israel. By 2009 Beth Israel signed a formal agreement to purchase part of Congregation Gates of Prayer's land for the site of a future Beth Israel synagogue. When completed, the playground of Gates of Prayer will stand at the center of the two synagogues, one Orthodox, the other Reform. It will be a fitting reminder that Emile Weil, a Reform Jew, had so ably assisted the Orthodox Beth

Israel synagogue in designing its 1924 spiritual home. "Our Past," Beth Israel: A Community Synagogue in New Orleans, accessed May 21, 2013, <http://bethisraelnola.com/our-past/>; "Beth Israel and Hurricane Katrina," Beth Israel: A Community Synagogue in New Orleans, accessed February 25, 2013, <http://bethisraelnola.com/beth-israel-and-hurricane-katrina/>; "Our Renewal," Beth Israel: A Community Synagogue in New Orleans, accessed February 25, 2013, <http://bethisraelnola.com/our-renewal/>.

²² Lachoff and Kahn, *Jewish Community of New Orleans*, 73.

²³ Over time that neighborhood also deteriorated, although the congregation remained. The building was damaged during Hurricane Katrina but not destroyed. The Anshe Sfard synagogue was repaired and reopened in 2006. "Anshe Sfard," Wikipedia, accessed July 20, 2013, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anshe_Sfard. For photographs of both the exterior and interior, see Anshe Sfard Synagogue, accessed July 20, 2013, <http://www.anshesfard.org/>.

²⁴ For Temple Sinai Synagogue project specifications, see "Moise Goldstein Office Records," Southeastern Architectural Archive Collection 4, accessed July 20, 2013, http://seaa.tulane.edu/sites/all/themes/Howard_Tilton/docs/finding_aids/Moise%20Goldstein.pdf.

²⁵ Marie K. Wolf indicates that Emile Weil also was responsible for much of Temple Sinai's interior. Marie K. Wolf, e-mail to Rachel Heimovics Braun, July 27, 2013; Lachoff and Kahn, *Jewish Community of New Orleans*, 82.

²⁶ Cone, Droker, and Williams, *Family of Strangers*, 280, 284–285.

²⁷ "Jewish Population in the United States," *American Jewish Year Book* (New York, 1964, 2011).

²⁸ Rachel Wischnitzer, *Synagogue Architecture in the United States* (Philadelphia, 1955), 5, 42–43, 48–50.

²⁹ Gerald Wolfe and Jo R. Fine, *The Synagogues of New York's Lower East Side* (New York, 1978), 19–20, 31.

³⁰ Priteca also designed a Seattle building called the Settlement House, in 1916, which was renamed the Education Center, Council of Jewish Women the next year. It strongly resembles the Seattle Talmud Torah he designed almost twenty years later. Cone, Droker, and Williams, *Family of Strangers*, 94, 184–185, 284–285.

³¹ "Strand Theatre," National Register, accessed July 20, 2013, <http://www.crt.state.la.us/hp/nationalregister/nhl/parish09/scans/09042001.pdf>.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Bryan Krefft, "Jefferson Theater," Cinema Treasures, accessed July 20, 2013, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/3407>; "Strand Theater," Cinema Treasures, accessed July 20, 2013, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/73>; "Perot Theater," Cinema Treasures, accessed July 20, 2013, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/690>; "Temple Theater," Cinema Treasures, accessed July 20, 2013, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/3416>; "Saenger Theater, New Orleans," Cinema Treasures, accessed July 20, 2013, <http://cinem>

atreasures.org/theaters/3184; "Saenger Theater, Pensacola," Cinema Treasures, accessed July 20, 2013, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/746>.

³⁵ All except two of the buildings in Table 1 were commissioned and managed by the Saenger Amusement Co. The exceptions were the Hamasa Shrine Temple and the Tivoli. The Hamasa Shrine Temple, which Weil designed for the Shriners as a meeting hall, included a ballroom and performance space that the Saengers later modified into a cinema. Weil designed the Tivoli Theater for the United Theatres chain; since 1969 a remodeled Tivoli has been a funeral home. Temple Theater for the Performing Arts, accessed June 24, 2013, <http://www.meridiantempletheater.com/>; Rhodes Funeral, a Family of Businesses, accessed June 24, 2013, <http://www.rhodesfuneral.com/about-us/history-and-staff>.

³⁶ Flom, "Priteca, B. Marcus," accessed July 20, 2013.

³⁷ "Priteca, B. Marcus (1889-1971)," HistoryLink.org, accessed July 20, 2013, http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&file_id=8815.

³⁸ "Tacoma Pantages," Cinema Treasures, accessed July 21, 2013, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/245>; "Paramount Theater," Seattle Theatre Group, accessed July 21, 2013, <http://stgpresents.org/paramount>; "Coliseum Theater," Cinema Treasures, accessed July 21, 2013, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/1272>; "Capitol Theater," Cinema Treasures, accessed July 21, 2013, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/3831>; "Pantages Theater, Fresno," Cinema Treasures, accessed July 21, 2013, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/3176>.

³⁹ The theaters in Table 2 were commissioned and managed by the Pantages Circuit with the following exceptions. The Coliseum was designed for Priteca's friend Joseph Gottstein. The Mercy was built in 1920 as a vaudeville theater for Frederick Mercy, Sr., who operated a small theatrical chain; its name was changed to the Capitol Theatre the next year. The B&M Theater was built in 1924 for E. J. Myrick, who operated a small chain of theaters in Seattle and Portland. The Orpheum was built in 1927 for the Orpheum vaudeville circuit and was used mainly for movies. The Warner Theatre was the first of three theatre designs that Priteca executed for the Warner Bros. theater chain. The Tower Theater was built by local owners. The State was operated by Evergreen Theaters. Cinema Treasures, accessed June 24, 2013, <http://cinematreasures.org/>; "Architects: Priteca, Benjamin," Pacific Coast Architecture Database (hereafter cited as PCAD), accessed June 24, 2013, <https://digital.lib.washington.edu/architect/architects/268/>; "The History of Tower Theatre," Tower Theatre, accessed June 24, 2013, <http://www.towertheatre.org/about/tower-theatre-history/>.

⁴⁰ "Pelican Stadium," Wikipedia, accessed July 21 2013, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pelican_Stadium.

⁴¹ According to Herman Kohlmeyer, Emile Weil also designed the north stands of the Tulane football stadium and major renovations of the Fair Grounds Race Course, after the New Orleans racetrack suffered a major fire. Kohlmeyer e-mails to Rachel Heimovics Braun, July 28, 2013.

⁴² Longacres was one of the first, if not the first, racetracks on the West Coast with pari-mutuel betting on horseraces. During World War II, the U.S. Army placed anti-aircraft guns at the track to protect the neighboring Boeing Company factory. In 1990 Longacres was sold to the Boeing Company. The track closed to racing two years later. Eventually Boeing used the site for its new headquarters for the Boeing Commercial Airplanes Division. "Longacres Racetrack," HistoryLink, accessed July 21, 2013, http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&file_id=7349.

⁴³ "Crystal Swimming Pool," PCAD, accessed July 21, 2013, <https://digital.lib.washington.edu/architect/structures/3107/>; "Union Stables," PCAD, accessed July 21, 2013, <https://digital.lib.washington.edu/architect/structures/18162/>.

⁴⁴ Kingsley, "Emil Weil."

⁴⁵ All of Weil's nontheatrical designs were in New Orleans or its environs. It appears, furthermore, that he executed at least two of the commissions in Table 3 for family members. Besides the residence for Fannie Kiefer Newman, the aunt of Weil's wife, Marie, there was the home for Simon Shwartz, Marie Weil's first cousin. Marie K. Wolf confirmed addresses and ownership of family-related sites, referencing *New Orleans Architecture Volume VII: Jefferson City* (Gretna, LA, 1989) and *New Orleans Architecture Volume VIII: The University Section* (Gretna, LA, 1997). Marie K. Wolf, telephone conversation with and e-mails to Rachel Heimovics Braun, July 19, 2013. See also Kingsley, "Emile Weil"; "Emile Weil: Early 20th Century Architect," Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans, accessed June 25, 2013, <http://www.prcno.org/programs/preservationinprint/piparchives/1979%20PIP/December%201979/4.html>; Weil Office Records.

⁴⁶ Flom, "Priteca, B. Marcus (1889–1971)"; "Architects: Priteca, Benjamin."

⁴⁷ Lachoff and Kahn, *Jewish Community of New Orleans*, 7; Cone, Droker, and Williams, *Family of Strangers*, 4, 103.

⁴⁸ Milton G. Scheuermann, Jr., "Moises H. Goldstein," KnowLA Encyclopedia of Louisiana, accessed July 20, 2013, <http://www.knowla.org/entry.php?rec=874>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Lachoff and Kahn, *Jewish Community of New Orleans*, 83; Thomas Rosell, "Architect Pics: Leon C. Weiss," Preservation in Mississippi, accessed July 21, 2013, <http://misspreservation.com/2013/07/17/architect-pics-leon-c-weiss/>.

⁵¹ Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (New York, 2008), 62.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 15 (Jerusalem, 1972), 1606, 1614.

⁵⁴ For a history of the evolution from nickelodeons, or cinemagraphic showings, to theaters, see C. W. Ceram, *Archaeology of the Cinema* (New York, 1965), 245–254.

⁵⁵ Joseph Valerio and Daniel Friedman, *Movie Palaces, Renaissance and Reuse* (New York, 1982), 17.

⁵⁶ "Marcus Loew Facts," Your Dictionary, accessed June 10, 2013, <http://biography.yourdictionary.com/marcus-loew>.

⁵⁷ Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 37.

⁵⁸ "From Nickelodeon to Picture Palaces," Some Enchanted Evenings: American Picture Palaces, accessed July 21, 2013, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~cap/palace/early.html>.

⁵⁹ Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 36–44.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 38, 65, 63–64, 38; Sarah Biandich, "A Cinema Landmark Milwaukee's Oriental Theatre," Express Milwaukee.com, accessed June 2, 2013, <http://expressmilwaukee.com/article-7452-a-cinema-landmark-milwaukee%E2%80%99s-oriental-theatre.html>.

⁶¹ "Florence/Sheffield, Alabama," Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities, accessed June 22, 2013, http://www.isjl.org/history/archive/al/florence_sheffield.html; see also Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Moving Places: A Life at the Movies* (New York, 1980).

⁶² "Lubliner & Trinz theater chain," Rogers Park/West Ridge Historical Society's HistoryWiki, accessed June 10, 2013, http://rpwrhs.org/w/index.php?title=Lubliner_%26_Trinz_theater_chain.

⁶³ Ross Melnick, *American Showman: Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel and the Birth of the Entertainment Industry, 1908–1935* (New York, 2012), 1.

⁶⁴ Valerio and Friedman, *Movie Palaces*, 35.

⁶⁵ "Thomas W. Lamb," Wikipedia, accessed June 10, 2013, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_W._Lamb.

⁶⁶ "John Ebersson," Wikipedia, accessed June 10, 2013, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Ebersson.

⁶⁷ Valerio and Friedman, *Movie Palaces*, 31.

⁶⁸ David Naylor, *American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy* (New York, 1981), 216–219. A tabulation by Dennis Sharp including only twenty-nine theaters leads to similar results. In this list the big three architects account for 66 percent of all the theaters tabulated. No theaters by Priteca or Weil are listed. However, this is not surprising since the total number of theaters is much smaller than Naylor's compilation. Sharp's findings do reinforce the key role played by the top three architectural firms. Dennis Sharp, *The Picture Palace and Other Buildings for the Movies* (New York, 1969), 218–219.

⁶⁹ Roy Benjamin offers a prime example of a prominent Jewish architect in the South who did similar work as Weil and Priteca. Benjamin's commissions included at least one synagogue, the Jacksonville Jewish Center (1927), while he achieved greatest recognition for his numerous theaters from Florida to Georgia to Mississippi. Born in Atlanta in 1887, nine years after Weil and two years before Priteca, Benjamin grew up in Ocala, Florida, and moved to Jacksonville, Florida, in 1901 where he established his architectural practice. Although Benjamin is not among the architects mentioned in David Naylor's book, *American Picture Palaces*, three of his theaters are featured in Naylor's *Great American Movie Theaters* (Washington, DC, 1987). Hopefully further research will elaborate on other such individuals working in the region. Jill Benjamin (the architect's granddaughter) e-mail to Rachel Heimovics Braun, June 13, 2013; Jacksonville's Architectural Heritage, accessed July 2, 2013, <http://jaxhistory.com/architects.htm>.

⁷⁰ "Walter W. Ahlschlager," Wikipedia, accessed June 10 2013, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_W._Ahlschlager.

⁷¹ David Parry, "Gustave A. Lansburgh," Encyclopedia of San Francisco, accessed June 10, 2013, <http://www.sfhistoryencyclopedia.com/articles/1/lansburgGustave.html>.

⁷² "Alexander L. Levy," ZoomInfo, accessed June 10, 2013, <http://www.zoominfo.com/p/Alexander-Levy/303335267>.

⁷³ Brookline Preservation Commission Demolition Application Report, accessed July 21, 2013, https://www.brooklinema.gov/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_download&gid=6827.

⁷⁴ Parry, "Gustave A. Lansburgh."

⁷⁵ Paul Gapp, "A Gesture To Throw New Light On The Granada," *Chicago Tribune*, July 20, 1987, accessed July 21, 2013, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1987-07-20/features/8702230356_1_theater-historical-society-palaces-epstein-sons.

⁷⁶ "Alexander L. Levy;" Arthur M. Feldman, *Faith and Form: Synagogue Architecture in Illinois: An Exhibition Organized by the Spertus Museum* (Chicago, 1976), 89.

⁷⁷ Brookline Preservation Commission Demolition Application Report.

⁷⁸ Herman Kohlmeyer attributes the anecdote concerning Weil's retirement because of his refusal to work for Long to Jack Stewart, a New Orleans building contractor, and that concerning Weil's consideration of a temporary move to Germany to Edmond L. Bendor-nagel, Jr., grandson of Albert Bendor-nagel. Kohlmeyer e-mails to Rachel Heimovics Braun, July 20, 21, and 28, 2013.

⁷⁹ Kingsley, "Emil Weil."

⁸⁰ Stertzler to Normand.

⁸¹ Flom, "Priteca, B. Marcus."