The Pittsburgh Labor Lyceum: Remnant of a Radical Society

On a quiet side street in the Hill District, there is a vacant building that once reverberated with radical political activism and debate. Its ordinary architecture belies its distinctive history. Only a stone tablet—now partially worn way—hints at its dynamic past, bearing the slogan, “WORKERS OF THE WORLD, UNITE.”

This is the Pittsburgh Labor Lyceum, constructed in 1916 by a local branch of the Arbiter Ring, or Workingman’s Circle, a nationwide Jewish socialist organization. The Lyceum functioned as a Jewish union hall, a cultural and community center, and locus of much of the secular work of the first generation of Jewish immigrants in Pittsburgh. Its architecture, plain by design, has been altered only by the elements in over 100 years.

Jews began to arrive in Pittsburgh in large numbers between 1870 and 1890, mostly from Russia and eastern Europe, seeking to escape religious persecution and pursue economic opportunity. Many settled in the Hill District alongside African Americans and immigrants from Ireland, Italy, Greece, and Syria. By 1910, there were 11 synagogues in the Hill District—two of them on the same street as the Labor Lyceum—which became known as “The Ghetto” for its predominantly Jewish population.

Employed in factory industries such as cigar-making or tailoring but prevented by discrimination from joining mainstream unions, Jewish workers formed their own local, fraternal, and relief organizations. These groups raised money for 10 years to build the Labor Lyceum as a headquarters for their activities. In early spring of 1916, Pittsburgh architect W. Ward Williams was awarded the contract for a 40 x 100-foot pressed-brick building of semi-fireproof construction at a cost of $20,000. In keeping with the egalitarian ethos of socialism, and in contrast to the elaborate design of the nearby Irene Kaufmann Settlement, the Labor Lyceum building was deliberately unpretentious and unadorned. Its primary distinction was the relief tablet inscribed with the famous words of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels from the Communist Manifesto.

Within the Labor Lyceum’s nondescript walls were offices, meeting rooms, and a public library. A large auditorium with a stage accommodated lectures by labor leaders and other speakers, performances by traveling bands, and Yiddish theater troupes. For a short time, the Labor Lyceum housed a Yiddish-language day school. The Lyceum’s organizers demonstrated their commitment to solidarity...
and equality by hosting meetings in English for non-Jewish socialists and dances for African Americans.

For almost a decade and a half, the Labor Lyceum was a hub for radical Jewish cultural, political, and social activities. But between the world wars, the Jewish population of the Hill District—and its activism—declined as members gained access to better jobs, moved into the middle class, and relocated to suburban-style neighborhoods farther east of downtown such as Squirrel Hill and East Liberty. The Labor Lyceum closed in 1930 amid falling membership and revenues, and political conflict among its remaining occupants, who split into communist and socialist factions. The building was sold to a church, then to the Pittsburgh Public School District and it has been vacant for decades.

The Labor Lyceum’s egalitarian architecture and radical purpose anchor it to a historical period when marginalized immigrant groups, of necessity, formed their own structures—architectural and social—to sustain themselves. Once the Hill District’s Jewish community gained a foothold and moved on to other neighborhoods, the Labor Lyceum was abandoned and its building faded into the background of Hill District history.

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