Until the modern period, there have been few detailed references to the architecture of the synagogue in Jewish literature. Most scholars who have investigated the history and development of the synagogue have lamented this lack of textual references to its design and construction.¹ There are a group of verses and quotations from Biblical and Talmudic sources which have frequently been employed to interpret the synagogue, such as Ps. 130, "Out of the depths I cry to Thee Lord," and Dan. 6: 11, about the relationship of windows and prayer. Yet, it is important to emphasize that many of these references were influenced by, or related to the Zohar's analysis of the synagogue.

¹ The scarcity of synagogue documentation in scriptures is frequently noted, "One of the remarkable aspects of Rabbinical teaching concerning prayer is the paucity of laws dealing with the architecture appropriate to the house of worship," Joseph M. Baumgarten, "Art in the Synagogue, Some Talmudic Views," in The Synagogue: Studies in Origins, Archaeology, and Architecture, Harry M. Orlinsky, ed. (New York, 1975), p. 79; "Halakha governs only very specific components of synagogue design and makes no stipulation for the building's general external appearance," "Synagogues," Encyclopedia Judaica, p. 591. A significant exception is Joseph Caro, Shulhan Arukh, OH 90: 4, 150: 1–5, containing detailed synagogue analysis, some of which was influenced by, or related to the Zohar's analysis of the synagogue.
not originally or specifically intended to guide synagogue planning or construction, but were only later interpreted to apply to the synagogue. The same is true for the most frequently cited sources for the synagogue in Jewish literature, the Tabernacle and the Temple. Both structures have posed special problems for synagogue interpretation because it is not clear to what degree, if at all, the synagogue should be modeled after the Tabernacle and the Temple(s).2

It is, therefore, quite surprising when a detailed reference from a major source such as the Zohar outlines a wide-ranging program for the organization of the synagogue:

The place which Thou hast made for Thy dwelling-place, Lord, for the sanctuary, Lord, which Thy hands prepared. This implies the necessity of building a sanctuary below, corresponding to the Sanctuary above, wherein the Holy One is daily served and worshipped [with prayer]. A synagogue should be a handsome structure, beautifully decorated, for it is an earthly copy of a heavenly prototype. The Temple below had its counterpart in the Temple above, and everything there, holy vessels and holy ministers, corresponded to something above. The same was true of the Tabernacle which Moses erected in the desert. And a synagogue must have the same objective: it must be a true house of prayer. A sanctuary must have windows, as Daniel had in his upper chamber where he prayed (Dan. 6:11), corresponding to the "windows" in heaven, as it is written: "My beloved... he looketh forth at the windows, showing himself through the lattice" (S.S. 2:9). We might think that it is more proper to pray in the open air in order to allow the spirit a free ascent. This, however, is not so! There must be a house to correspond to the "House" above. Besides, prayer and the spirit must issue forth from a narrow, limited space, in a straight line towards Jerusalem, without deviating right or left. This is symbolized by the sound of the Shophar, which is thrust forth in a straight line from a narrow opening and breaks through the firmaments in order to stir up the Spirit above. It is true, we are told, that "Isaac did meditate in the field" (Gen. 24:63); but there are special reasons for this; and besides, the field where he prayed was not an ordinary field.3


3 Zohar, Vol. II-59b-60a. Subsequent quotations from the Zohar will be indicated by volume and page number in the text. Except where noted, English quotations from the Zohar are based upon Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon, The Zohar, 5 volumes (London, 1984), and Lachower and Tishby, The Wisdom of the Zohar. English translations have been compared and evaluated with the Aramaic original.