

Ada Karmi-Melamede Architects brings delicate detailing to a new university synagogue on a campus in Israel.

By Daniel Azerrad

MAY, 2006 Photograph by Ardon Bar-Hama

Judaism is a religion of ceremonies, a belief system that finds expression in everyday rituals. So when architects have an opportunity to design a synagogue, they find new interpretations of Jewish law and ceremony in order to simultaneously express a sense of community and create an unmediated and individual dialogue with God.

Since ancient times, the synagogue has been an integral part of community life, both sacred and secular. Typically situated near a yeshiva and the local ritual bathing facilities (mikve), the synagogue has historically fit seamlessly within the urban fabric, and is rarely separated out as a monolithic icon on a town square, as is often the vernacular in other religions.

These precedents informed Israeli architect Ada Karmi-Melamede's process when designing a small synagogue for The Open University campus in the Tel Aviv suburb of Raanana. The university has a new urban campus, also designed by Karmi-Melamede, which encloses an internal courtyard with an exposed concrete portico emphasizing the public realm. By implanting the synagogue at the heart of the campus, Karmi-Melamede created an intimate connection between the realms of the sacred and that of knowledge (the adjacent library). This was achieved by running the outer skin of the library, a stone wall, beyond that building's footprint to also envelop the wedge-shaped concrete synagogue. A small patio was created between both structures, constituting a meeting point between those who come to pray and to learn.

On entering the synagogue lobby, one is greeted by an exposed concrete wall leading to the main sanctuary, while a beautifully detailed staircase rises to the mezzanine, where women sit. Circular movement characterizes many Jewish ceremonies, such as the Torah procession around the synagogue. In a passage from the profane to the sacred, Karmi-Melamede introduces a space that invites men and women to perform a ceremonial entrance that completes a circle

around the Holy Ark at its center. The prayer temple is a closed spaced illuminated by a skylight, giving the impression that the atmosphere inside is governed by heaven.

Configured as a large fan, the Ark stands as the synagogue's focal point. It begins as a series of beechwood slats that form a column. These slats continue to the top of the double-height sanctuary, where they fan out to form the ceiling over the auditorium, and finally envelop the rear wall. Far from the outside world, light streams in, creating a continuously changing mood. During summertime, the sun touches the fan's wood slats, marking the white walls with dramatic patterns. On winter days, the sun hits the skylight wall, bathing the space in soft light. Delicate woodwork completes the fan's presence, and defines the desk where the Torah is read, the furniture on the ground level, and the women's gallery above.

Karmi-Melamede's work recalls the great masters of modern architecture, with allusions to the work of Alvar Aalto in particular. She exhibits, on the one hand, the talent to deal philosophically with a complex university project in a context with no preexisting identity, and on the other hand, a great sensitivity to physical details such as where the worshipper will sit, put down the prayer book, and prepare himself for a spiritual event.

