

The Spiritual Union of Architecture and Art

Integrating art, ornament, and architecture to serve evolving congregations.

By Mary Burnham, FAIA, and Amy Reichert
Photography by Frank Oudeman
Volume 52, Issue 2



The new Eli center is located in a turn-of-the-century townhouse several blocks from the Park Avenue Synagogue.

As designers for various works including Park Avenue Synagogue in New York, New York, MBB Architects has entered into a fruitful collaboration with Amy Reichert Architecture + Design—a likeminded group focused on Judaic art and design. Our shared goal has been to explore the seamless integration of art and architec-

ture. We've found that our work with the Park Avenue Synagogue to create the Eli M. Black Lifelong Learning Center illustrates some of the potent ways that carefully integrated art and architecture can help religious institutions fulfill and expand their missions.

Looking Back, Looking Ahead

One of the challenges of designing this new learning center, adapted from a historic townhouse on Manhattan's Upper East Side, was to forge a connection with the synagogue's main building two blocks away. Art installations helped the project team accomplish this in two major ways: strategic reuse and evocative repetition.

This project (as did the second phase, an ongoing gut-renovation of the Park Avenue Synagogue's 87th Street main structure) offered the chance to reuse and rethink some of the artistic elements that had languished in the multipurpose facility. Spectacular stained-glass windows, for example, created by the renowned American abstract expressionist Adolph Gottlieb (1903-1974), were originally installed in 1954 on the façade of the Milton Steinberg House, adjacent to the congregation's original 1927 synagogue building. At that time, the Steinberg House was celebrated as the first building in the world to have a façade consisting entirely of stained glass. In the subsequent additions and renovations of 1980, the façade came down and the windows were installed in a rather haphazard way throughout the new addition, losing not only their original visual impact but their original significance as well. Research on the windows revealed that although done in an abstract style, the themes depicted were of Jewish holidays, events, and life cycle—a rich symbolic language that had been lost through their random installation.

At the Eli M. Black center, the art and design team conceived an installation as a major feature of the building's central grand stair, showcasing a selection of those windows now glowing night and day on custom LED lightboxes. This reinstallation is organized thematically, with each landing containing a window representing a different holiday. Rabbi Elliot J. Cosgrove chose passages from traditional texts that explain the meaning of the windows' symbols, which had never been explained to the congregation. The installations, organized from basement to rooftop in the order of the calendar, transport congregants through the Jewish year each time they travel through the stair. A continuous architectural niche locks the windows into the space, emphasizing the vertical connection up to the skylight at the top of the stairs.

Along with redeploing this major yet under-appreciated element in the synagogue's architectural legacy, we also searched for other ways to connect this new education center with the nearby original synagogue building that congregants knew and loved. The original 1927 sanctuary, a beautiful example of the Moorish-inspired architectural style that was quite popular for synagogues in the first part of the 20th century, has a rich program of ornament. As an architect and an artist, we saw the potential in drawing from this stylistic language and updating it to serve the experience of the newly built, airy architecture.



View of the lobby from the entry, with view of the building's central grand stair beyond.



Refurbished 1954-era stained glass windows by Adolph Gottlieb are displayed throughout the central stair.

Embodied Narratives

It was very important that as one passes through the building a story unfolds. This story begins in the lobby, which welcomes visitors not only with comfortable seating and information about programs but also with a full-wall architectural mural. This layered installation uses text and symbols to prime visitors for the experiences ahead: large letters carved through the resin panels are Hebrew lines from Ahava Rabah, a blessing that speaks of study and prepares one for prayer. The material of the panels is embedded with translucent fabric that recalls a tallis, or prayer shawl.

The abstract beauty of the large letters overlays a composition of 12 core values of the congregation, including kindness, giving justly, and peoplehood. The use of Hebrew as well as English throughout the building reflects a mandate from the synagogue leadership. Even the wayfinding signage is dual-language, to reinforce a connection to the land of Israel and to engage current students.

The glass wall at the back of the lobby offers a view to the Gottlieb stained glass windows within a continuous niche in the skylit stair, tempting visitors to make this journey rather than use the elevator.

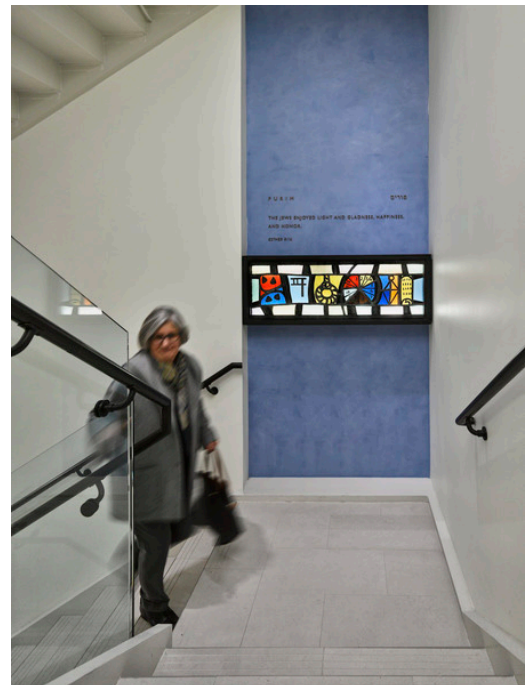
Chapel as Crown Jewel

The crown jewel of the new Eli M. Black center is the second-floor chapel—a prayer space that serves the religious school and the congregation. Here, the design of the liturgical furnishings—ark, reading table, lectern—incorporates decorative grilles whose pattern is derived from motifs in the original sanctuary. While the furnish-

ings have elements that evoke a connection to the past, the modern language of the elements is integral to the design of the chapel itself. It is deliberately located on the second floor, the piano nobile of the original Beaux-Arts townhouse. Its large arched windows and a generous ceiling height offer a natural location for the spiritual heart of the building. In the lobby below, a new wood ceiling wraps the underside of the chapel and folds up and into the stair, leading visitors into the wood-lined prayer space. A glass slot to the stair and the plaster and tile finishes link the chapel to the lobby, emphasizing the connection between welcoming and communal prayer.

Since the chapel room also accommodates a variety of public programs, the furnishings necessary for prayer had to be movable and discreet. The ark (the focal point of any Jewish worship space) had to center the room when open, yet also be able to “disappear” for non-sacred activities.

Each piece of liturgical furniture in the chapel has been created both to harmonize with the space and to express symbolic significance. The ark, for example, features handles in the form of an abstract letter lamed, the first letter of the Hebrew words meaning “to learn” and “to teach.” The letter’s presence here symbolizes that, by opening the ark, one opens oneself to study and understanding. The ark’s gold-leaf interior is to remind worshippers of the gold cladding of the original Ark of the Covenant tabernacle, while its rich blue represents the sky and the sea. The exterior of the ark, finished with the same Venetian plaster as the walls of the chapel space, allows it to blend with the architecture when closed.



Each window, displayed with a textual interpretation, is arranged chronologically according to the Jewish calendar.



The chapel on the second floor is dominated by an ark at its center.

A blue window in the ark door reveals the ner tamid, a glowing lamp inspired by the legend that describes the eternal light as made from the same sapphire that formed the window in Noah's ark. It is an important symbol, suggesting the eternal and immanent presence of the divine in our communities and in our lives.

In these furnishings and elsewhere in the building, the integrated design approach attempts to upend expectations about traditional symbols; there are no menorahs, trees of life, nor any crowns in the building. In order to speak to a new generation we are excavating the deeper meaning of these objects, to bring a richness that comes from text-based history, without the traditional design response.

Curating Sacred History

Since the footprint of the education center is small, the architecture and art strive to make every square inch an opportunity to engage with Jewish content. Each of the five classroom floors has a long hallway, used by students of all ages. The design team determined that an artwork in the form of a frieze would be appropriate for these spaces, and, in collaboration with Rabbinic staff, we developed the idea of using the five books of the Torah—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy—one for each of the halls.

As opposed to the rich tradition of textual interpretation,

the visual interpretation of events in the Old Testament is rarely explored or emphasized in Jewish institutions. These friezes offered a valuable opportunity to spark debate and reawaken interest in the stories present in the weekly portions of the Torah. To create these linear compositions, which measure about 40 feet by 18 inches (recalling an unfurled Torah scroll), the art-and-architecture team curated works of art ranging from ancient mosaics to recent feminist critiques. The criteria for choosing artworks were that they be of the highest aesthetic quality and convey a strong message about the events depicted. The final compositions, containing reproductions of a range of work, include representational, highly abstract, multimedia, serious, humorous, colorful, or stark imagery. Their sheer diversity ensures that the works both speak to congregants with different backgrounds and interests as they also parallel the diversity of approaches present in the textual tradition.

Creating such an installation was not without challenges. The task of identifying these works, tracking down artists, and obtaining reproduction rights was enormous. But the rewards are enormous as well: The design team was able to engage with many contemporary artists who were thrilled to have their work included, as well as many institutions—from the Vatican, to the British Library, to obscure archives—that were enthusiastic participants in this installation. As far as the team knows, it's also the only one of its kind.

Walls that Speak

The art and architecture collaborators have found real delight in the responses to the various artworks knitted into the fabric of this building, which have exceeded our expectations. Reactions have included a renewed appreciation of the historic Gottlieb windows (most congregants really didn't notice them before or realize their content) as well as curiosity and conversation around our rethinking of tried-and-true symbolic systems in the chapel. There's a new feeling, a kind of ownership, over the stories of sacred texts through constant engagement with the hallway friezes.

During a project meeting with the clergy early in the design process, the congregation's leaders shared their vision for this new structure: a building whose "very walls speak of Jewish values." Embedding artwork that carries the messages central to the institution, the very act of climbing a stairway, walking down a hallway, or waiting in a lobby allows this building to speak in myriad ways that stimulate the entire community.



Detail of the open ark, which has decorative motifs derived from the nearby 1927 synagogue.



Five hallways on the building's upper floors display art reproductions keyed to each of the five books of the torah.

Mary Burnham, FAIA, is a founding partner of MBB (Murphy Burnham & Buttrick Architects), an award-winning architecture, design, and planning firm based in New York, New York. Amy Reichert is an award-winning architect, exhibition designer, designer of Judaica, and teaches at the School of the Art Institute, Chicago.