

Architecture and Judaism

The Synagogue as an Egalitarian Space

A Synagogue design entered for an Architecture competition

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Project Context:

This design was displayed in an exhibition curated by architect Moriya Rozenfeld, presenting 12 works by architects and architectural students who participated in a conceptual competition for the planning of a new breed of synagogue: Synagogues that allocate a "place of respect and equality" for women, giving them space equal to that of the men - while at the same time addressing the requirements of Orthodox Jewish law (halakha).

The competition and exhibition was held by an Israeli organization called *Kolech*. According to the exhibition catalogue, the initiative to launch the competition was intended to "realize the dream of many women who want to feel that they belong, that they are partners and entirely part of what is happening within the synagogue space."

I entered this competition as a challenge to plan a synagogue that will enable women to hear, see and experience the prayer process and Torah reading from up close and with full audio-visual possibilities. In addition, I saw this project as a challenge to examine the dialogue between the world of Judaism and the world of creativity and art.

While thinking about the design, in addition to the reorganization of the inner synagogue space, I dealt with an internal conflict, searching for an "iconic" visual image for the synagogue structure, which traditionally has no typical architectural image, asking myself whether the prayer requires the definition of territory. In the absence of a clear-cut architectural type, I decided to adopt building types and styles used in public spaces, which strengthened the concept as will be described later on.

The projects in this exhibition were conceptual only and not intended for construction. My design won third prize.

The Concept:

In our daily lives, we pass upon several spaces that implement an essence of equality. Streets, parks, squares, open urban spaces and more, all fulfill situations of egalitarianism.

Would it be possible to create a new space, a space that would be part of the synagogue in all aspects, but create situations of equality like the spaces mentioned above? And would it be possible to create that new space, while considering no interference with the feeling of communion and holiness found in the synagogue?

A "place" should not only be defined by its own self, but also in the way it interacts and relates to its surroundings; in the way the structure allows intermediate situations to occur. A doorstep, a path or a garden in front of an entrance - all define a new type of place, a new type of behavior, a place which is not the public street, nor is it the private house. A similar situation is created in synagogues. The entrance hall or court defines a new language in which its words are drawn partly from the street and partly from the synagogue. These intermediate spaces allow the entrance process to the holy place, while creating a process of transformation from the day to day life to the place of holiness, unlike an immediate entrance to the praying hall.

This project actually deals with assembling junctions, symbolically and widthwise, between the city and the synagogue. This is done by using midway spaces as founder spaces in the synagogue. The entrance hall, the yard and the staircase are stretched to be stand-alone main places, which contain all the activities besides praying, and surround the praying room.

I chose to focus on situations of equality that take place in two types of spaces: the street and the garden. The transition from the street into the synagogue space is defined via intermediate architectural states: between built bricks and space, between light and dark, and between buildings and nature.

Designing this form of passageway is achieved in a few means: a staircase separates the synagogue range from the street level; the street becomes wider in order to include richer functions; and a wide arcade covers the space while creating an in-between location that links the structure to the road.

Structure Description:

The main arcade and its connection to the street:

In the same manner as the synagogue (metaphorically) is influenced by the street that leads to it, the street is influenced by the synagogue. A midway structure, that does not have a religious function, defines where the road ends and the synagogue space continues. This structure is half revealed, a few meters long, and serves as a type of open, yet roofed gallery, displaying artifacts related to the synagogue and the community. For instance, objects representing a certain holiday or a community event would be demonstrated there. This space is served as an entrance to the synagogue; but also offers some exposure of the community and of Judaism, to passers by the street.

Upon entering the synagogue's space, there is a two meters ascent, which separates the defined area from the road, enabling the openness of the other structures and the garden.

Apart from the praying hall, the various functions (study rooms, library and offices) are placed on the length of the circumferential arcade, analogical to the street. In this way, the design enables maximum accessibility to the different structures and creates a complex exterior space.

A garden is located between the peripheral arcade and the praying hall. The garden's role is in creating an equal space in the synagogue; but it also has a functional role, creating an internal landscape for the praying hall, a place for the crowd to gather, and a green space for children to play in.

The type of connection between the arcade and the praying hall simulates an urban connection between streets (traffic spaces) that flow to a main square (gathering space).

Design of the main hall:

The separation between men and women in the main hall is based upon facing perpendicular positions; in a way that the stage is served as a centerpiece and bonfire to all wings (see model picture below). The dissection between men and women comes to fruition in separated seating as well as in separated entrances. By completing the praying hall structurally and metaphorically, the garden functions as an equal gathering space when entering and exiting the main hall.

Eye contact towards the ladies section is blocked in two ways, eliminating the need for a partition:

1. By using a 90 degrees angle between the sections in a way that hides most of the women.
2. In the first rows, where the perpendicular walls do not hide the women, the stage itself creates the division by being as high as a person's height, and by that allows observation towards the rabbi only, from both sections.

The Holy Ark is located on the floor level, elevated from the ground by two meters. This setting allows a clear view of it from every location in the synagogue.

In contrast to the permanent seating dug in a terraced surface, there is a wide lot (gateway) at the entrance to each wing, which can be used for seating at holidays or events, times when more people than usual approach the

synagogue. Aside from the option to widen the space intended for praying, this gateway is also used as a middle space between the outside and the praying hall; as the main light source; and in summer and spring as a half open space that integrates the garden and the praying hall together.

