

# Pittsburgh City Paper

JULY 28, 2005

## Ark-itecture

By Charles Rosenblum

Maybe because we used to be the smoky city and didn't always have the opportunity, our new generation of green buildings in Pittsburgh, such as the David L. Lawrence Convention Center and PNC Firstside Center, take great pleasure in using extensive day lighting. Architects now tout natural light over the electric kind as an important appeal to aesthetic improvement and energy savings in commercial and office buildings. But the longest-standing use of natural light for symbolic purposes is in religious buildings, where across cultures, the sun connects worshippers to the divine.

In his addition to Temple Emanuel in the South Hills, architect Dan Rothschild of Rothschild Doyno Architects saw a chance to take greatest advantage of literal and metaphorical illumination in a religious structure, supported by numerous biblical references.

The original building from the 1950s is actually a two-phase structure by prolific and highly regarded synagogue architect Percival Goodman. Its butterfly roof and vertical stained-glass windows add appropriate religious gravity to its 1950's functionalism, but the congregation wanted, in addition to a new library and community-room spaces, an "alternate prayer experience." Why? The architect understood from interviews and his own observations that despite its distinctive period architecture, the original sanctuary is still too dark. A mandate to build an addition of two wings for a library and community room that also



enclosed a courtyard for outdoor prayer provided a chance to supplement rather than change the original spaces.

The agreeable Rothschild is definitely not one of those architects who thinks he is God, but he still said, "Let there be light." He worked closely with Rabbi Mark Mahler to infuse the structure with appropriate symbolism, reflecting, as they wrote in a descriptive statement, "God's role in illuminating the world through the Torah."

Two curving walls define the new sanctuary. The eastern wall, which represents God, is a simple masonry curve that rises gradually from the ground to enclose the space, support the roof and enclose the Ark, where the Torah scrolls are kept. Seven narrow slits in this wall become windows representing the days of creation. Instead of stained glass, though, they have abstract

clear-glass sculptures by artist Robin Stanaway, each with an oil lamp and a refracting prism below. The oil lamps together become a large menorah, and the refracting prisms create moving rainbows on the ceiling, a recollection of the story of Noah that also indicates the sun's motion through the day and the seasons.

The western wall is a glass enclosure with a changing-radius curve, representing the multifariousness of the congregation. Facing west, it looks over a dramatic, hilly perspective and admits beautiful orange light at sunset. This underscores the bright tone and reverent yet comfortable feeling of Rothschild's new sanctuary, where chairs, rather than pews, and a low rather than dominating bimah, or pulpit, contrast with the old space.

Rothschild delights in the

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pervasive interpretive program. Infused into the exterior walls are lozenge-like glass bits he calls marbles. Exactly 613 of these, precisely disposed, represent the individual laws of the Hebrew bible. The sun catches each one of these at a different time of day, making a little eruption of colored light. Rothschild says that these exemplify the Jewish belief in personal improvement over time through observing God's law. Judaism, he says, "allows you to use free will to improve your life."

And yet no symbol is one-dimensional. The curving walls, which unite God and humanity in the Torah, have a formal echo in the helical strands of DNA, an area of study that Rabbi Mahler emphasizes. They also evoke the swirling pillars of clouds and fire that were the visual manifestation of God to the Israelites, a motif that Rothschild has picked up in the Ark and the Torah's decorative which have parallels to the decorative program of the original building.

Mies van der Rohe is famous for saying, "God is in the details." Rothschild's work, however, suggests -- largely through the use of light -- that God can pervade the architecture in its entirety.