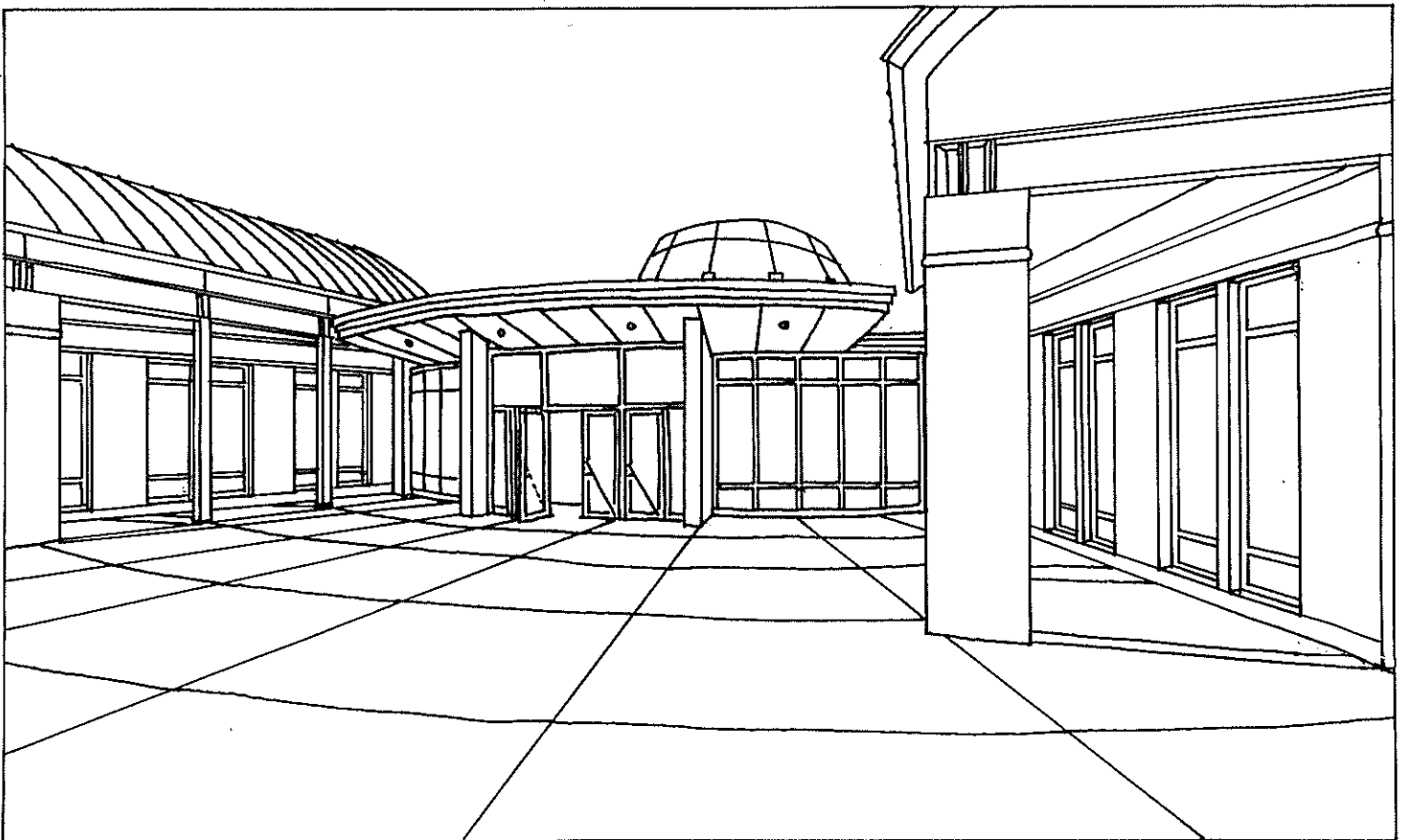


Architectural Symbolism
At The
South Hills
Jewish Community Center



Daniel Rothschild, AIA
Rothschild Architects PC

In 1854, the first Jewish Community Center was established in Baltimore to help Jewish immigrants adapt to their new surroundings and assist in their adjustment to new ways of life. Today's centers are established to ensure continuity of Jewish life and are open to people of all faiths. The new South Hills Jewish Community Center, located in the suburbs of Pittsburgh, will be a center for social, educational and recreational activities for people of all ages. The architectural symbolism of the building will make it a center of Jewish identity as well. Woven throughout the building are symbols that refer to Jewish history, culture, and religion. This paper describes the ideas that generated the building's architectural design.

Central to Judaism is the study of Torah, the history of the Jewish people as expressed in the five Books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Torah chronicles the story from the beginning of creation through the death of Moses, and establishes God's covenant with the Jewish people. The front wall of the building, approximately three hundred feet in length, is symbolic of an unrolled Torah scroll, presenting the richness of Torah to all who visit the building (Figure 1). The left and right ends of the front wall extend past the corners of the building, curve gently outward in a welcoming gesture, and is reminiscent of the curvature of the scroll. There are dark, recessed, horizontal stripes of textured brick on the front wall that represent the horizontal lines of Hebrew letters inscribed on the scroll. These stripes are separated on the wall at even intervals to form giant rectangular patterns, resembling the rectangular format of Hebrew text on the Torah scroll (Figure 2). At the right end of

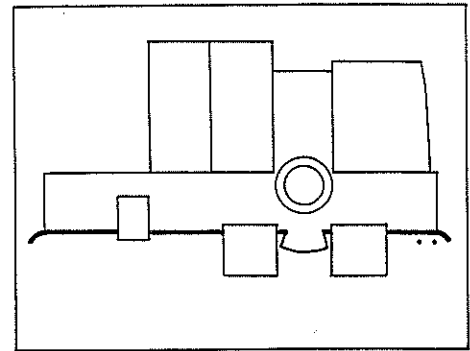


Figure 1 Floor Plan diagram highlighting front wall

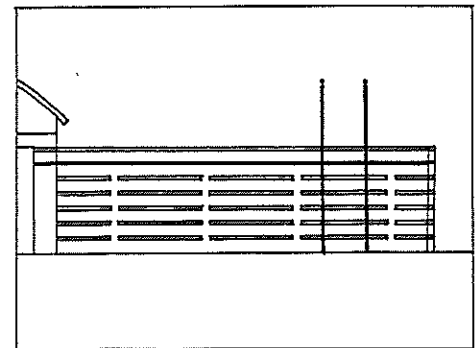


Figure 2 Elevation detail of front wall

the front wall are two flagpoles. These flagpoles represent the Torah staves, or rollers, that are used to carry and wind the Torah scroll.

In the Book of Numbers, God instructed the Jewish people to wear fringes on their garments with a "thread of blue" in order to remind them to keep His commandments. There are two wings that project outward from the front wall of the building and have blue-glazed bricks that sit atop perimeter piers. These blue brick lines start and stop, like the stitches of a woven garment, and refer to this covenant (Figure 3). The blue brick line continues onto the front scroll wall and extends in either direction the full three hundred foot length. Paralleling the blue bricks on the front wall is the blue metal edge of the coping at the top of the wall. These two lines reference the horizontal blue lines of the Israeli flag.

The two wings that project forward at the center of the building are each crowned with a curved, barrel-vaulted roof. When seen from the side approach of the entry drive, the front walls of the projecting wings resemble the two arched, stone tablet forms of the Ten Commandments that were given to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai, and described in the Book of Exodus (Figure 4). The contrasting dark brick stripes are repeated on these tablet forms. In the middle of the right "tablet", a single brick is extended outward from the recessed line to signify the First Commandment. Two bricks are extended in the line below. This pattern is repeated five times on each projecting wing to signify each of the Ten Commandments (Figure 5). Sunlight falling on these recesses will cast shadows, draw attention

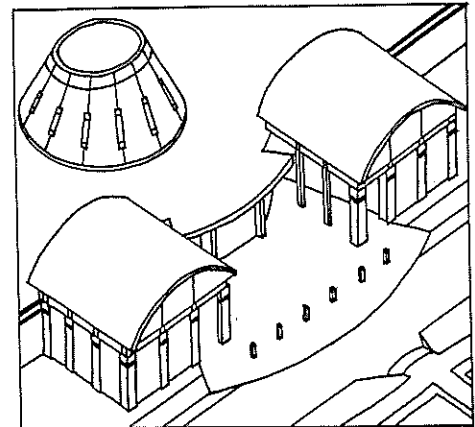


Figure 3 Aerial view highlighting blue-glazed brick "stitches"

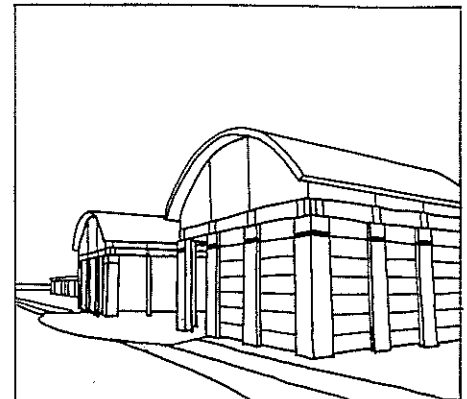


Figure 4 View from entry drive

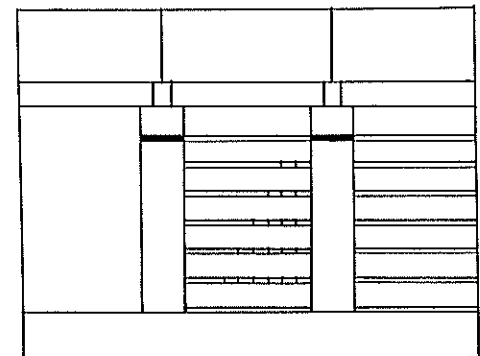


Figure 5 Elevation at projecting wing showing brick detail

to this area, and emphasize the importance of these Commandments to Judaism.

At the center of the building, between the projecting wings, the front wall parts, and rotates outward to create an embracing entrance. This movement allows the visitor to walk alongside the front wall, feel the presence of the scroll, and pass through to the Lobby, the central feature of the building both physically and symbolically.

The Lobby is circular in plan and is the heart of the facility. From this space, all the major functions can be seen: Gymnasium, Pool, Fitness Rooms, Banquet Room, Community Room, Offices, and School. This panorama of activity reinforces the sense of community in the building (Figure 6). The form of the Lobby is tent-like, and rises through the main roof to over thirty feet. The tent is formed by twelve exposed structural steel columns that encircle the Lobby and lean inward at the top. Twelve windows surround the upper part of the Lobby's volume to admit natural light (Figure 7).

The tent is a recurring image that occurs throughout Judaism. It was the primary dwelling used by the ancient Jewish people and is a setting for many stories of the Torah. The tent is also the central theme of the prayer that is recited at the beginning of morning services throughout the Jewish world, and was first described in the Book of Numbers: "How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob,

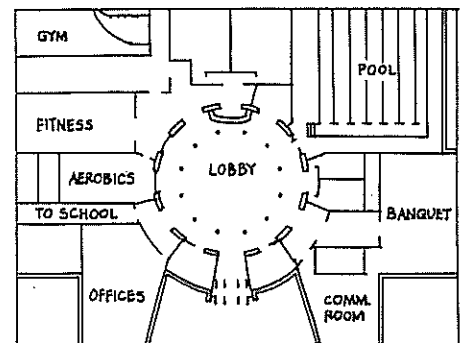


Figure 6 Floor Plan detail of Lobby and surrounding spaces

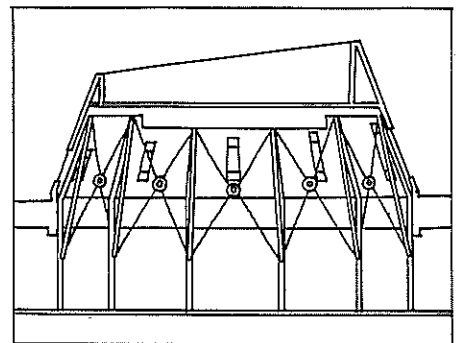


Figure 7 Section through Lobby

thy dwellings, O Israel." Throughout history, the tent, and the encampments they formed, indicated the strength of community in Jewish culture.

The most powerful image of tent is that of the Tabernacle, or "Tent of Meeting," that is described in the Book of Exodus. After the Jewish people were released from Egypt, and after God established His covenant with them at Mount Sinai, God commanded Moses to erect a Tabernacle. The Torah describes the blueprint for this sanctuary in great detail. It was to be a visual symbol that God dwelt among them. The Tabernacle was a portable tent-like structure that accompanied the Jewish people during their journey, and when erected, was surrounded by a rectangular perimeter of wooden columns and fabric. The perimeter rectangle was bisected at the midpoint forming an inner and outer court (Figure 8). The focal point of the inner court was the Tent of Meeting. The Tent of Meeting housed the Ark of the Covenant which contained the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments. The tent-like form of the building's Lobby is a physical link to the spirituality of the inner court. The open entry plaza of the building is symbolic of the outer court (Figure 9). Linking the plaza to the building at the main entrance is a wide curving overhang that lifts upward like a tent flap.

Inscribed in the ceiling of the circular Lobby, and projecting downward, is a triangular volume. The orientation of the triangle is rotated off-center of the building in an eastward direction like a

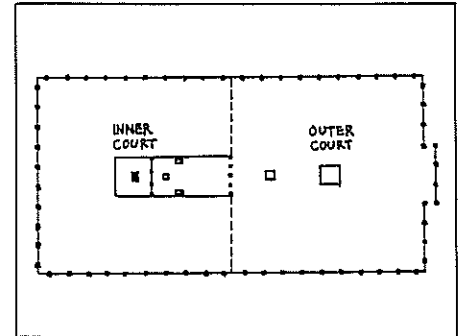


Figure 8 Site Plan of Tabernacle

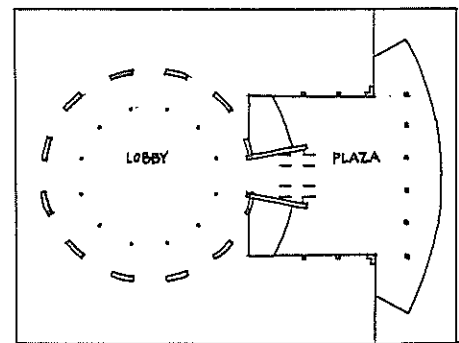


Figure 9 Site Plan detail

compass, to point in the direction of Jerusalem. The triangular ceiling will be inscribed with a triangular grid of recessed lines that suggests the geometry of the Star of David (Figure 10). The exterior roof line of the circular Lobby is angled downward in an easterly direction so this directionality is seen from the outside as well (Figure 7). This physical connection to Jerusalem links with the spiritual connection to the Tent of Meeting, and enjoins history with the present.

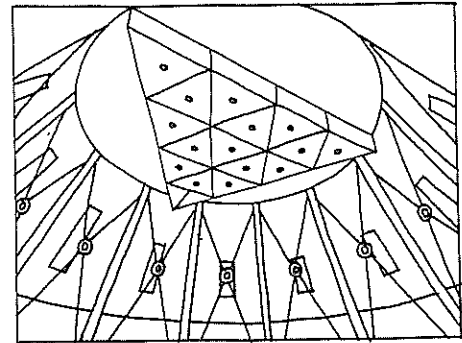


Figure 10 Interior perspective of Lobby

After describing the blueprint for building the Tabernacle, the Book of Exodus continues to describe the clothing that should be worn by the priests that perform rituals in the Tent of Meeting. Overlaid on top of the clothing was a metallic breastplate. The breastplate was fashioned from gold and was inlaid with twelve gemstones: sardius, topaz, carbuncle, emerald, sapphire, diamond, jacinth, agate, amethyst, beryl, onyx, and jasper. Each gemstone symbolized one of the twelve tribes of Israel. The breastplate and gemstones were intentionally placed over the heart to link the priests and their actions to the emotions of the Jewish people.

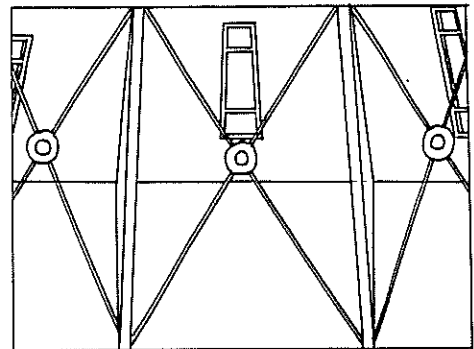


Figure 11 Detail of X-shaped bracing

The twelve columns in the Lobby are reinforced by X-shaped bracing of exposed steel rods in the upper volume (Figure 11). At the crossing point of the steel rods are twelve circular steel plates each inlaid with a round medallion of colored glass. Each colored glass medallion will represent one of the twelve historic gemstones. Natural light from the twelve windows will pass through each of these medallions and wash a kaleidoscope of color over the inside of the Lobby and its occupants (Figure 12). These jewel-like colors will flow

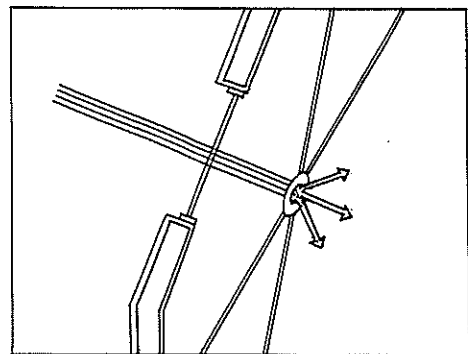


Figure 12 Diagram of natural light through colored glass medallion

through the interior design, from bright multi-colored carpeting to walls highlighted with deeply saturated color.

The building's symbolic forms and details will relate to people consciously and subconsciously on many different levels. For the non-Jew, the building's architectural symbolism can be educational, and celebrate diversity in the community. For the unaffiliated Jew, the symbolism may awaken latent religious feelings. And for the Jew with a strong sense of identity, the building should have a comforting presence. For all, the architectural symbolism that is woven throughout the building will offer a strong sense of place, wonder, and engagement.