SYMBOLISM AND IDENTITY IN THE SYNAGOGUE; TOWARD THE DESIGN OF A CONTEMPORARY SYNAGOGUE IN AN URBAN CONTEXT

by

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ABSTRACT

Identifying the difficulties of the synagogue as a built form necessitates an initial analysis of its development throughout its long and varied history. The project focusses on the cultural significance of a synagogue, its function and its representation as a place of religious, educational and social assembly. Examining the history of the synagogue and the development of its three main functions serves to assist in leading toward the development of a design for a contemporary synagogue placed well within the public view.

The site of the project is situated on the fringe of the historic area of Yaletown in Vancouver and adjacent to recent developments along Pacific Boulevard and the Downtown South area. The intent of the building's design is to express the function and identity of the building to the general population as well as the Jewish community. The synagogue has a variety of functions and the design approach attempts to express the overlapping of the educational, religious and social relationships.

The synagogue as a building type is problematic. The conscious avoidance of overt Jewish symbols such as the Menorah, the Star of David, or the tablets of Moses increases the level of difficulty with regards to the building's ability to be identified as a synagogue. The design approach isolates the significance of the Ark of the Covenant which holds the sacred Torah scrolls. The religious sanctuary envelops the Ark and the library, in turn envelops the sanctuary. The social hall is situated off of street level while the classrooms and meeting rooms overlook a courtyard above the sanctuary. While being conscious of how volumes can complement and contrast each other, spaces are created by overlapping them with one another allowing symbiotic relationships to occur within the synagogue itself. The external expression is realized through a series of planes which serve to provide the synagogue with a form of protection; an armature which breaks open and reveals the variety of functions inside. Overall, the intent of the design is to provide both the Jewish and non-Jewish public with an appreciation of the complexities involved in the formation and expression of a Jewish institution serving as a centre to the broad range of functions and interests within the community.
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