

Creative Living

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Postmodern meets honored tradition

By Benita Bornstein
special writer

LIKE THE FABLED phoenix, Congregation Beth Abraham Hillel Moses has risen from the ashes with renewed meaning, vitality and beauty.

Just two years after the fire of Jan. 18, 1983 that destroyed the main structure and left a pile of smoldering rubble, the newly-affiliated conservative synagogue in West Maple has been rebuilt and restored in a style commensurate with its rich and aged heritage.

An amalgamation of three synagogues (shuls) the congregation had just burned its mortgage when the tragic event left the congregation emotionally pained and financially hurting.

Because the classrooms and administrative portion of the building hadn't been destroyed, members turned the library into a chapel and creatively worked and worshipped in the cramped space.

THE SANCTUARY and social hall had to be rebuilt to accommodate the 625-family congregation.

Aaron Schreier, a former vice-president of Minoru Yamasaki and Associates and long-time member of the original Beth Abraham, had a working background in designing Jewish houses of worship.

As part of the Yamasaki team, he designed Temple Beth El of Bloomfield Township and North Shore Congregation Israel in Gleno, Ill.

In early 1980, he and four Yamasaki colleagues along with Kenneth Carruthers an associate of I.M. Pei for 14 years, formed the architectural firm, Prevost Treacy & Partners Inc. in Troy.

The five partners with parallel careers and a background in modernism turned their talents in the direction of the more avant-garde postmodernism.

LOOKING BACKWARD as well as forward, their design makes allusions to the formalities of the past, but with the pragmatism of contemporary styling. Classical forms are no longer discarded but re-adapted with a humanistic approach to accommodate late 20th century needs.

For example, columns may be used to indicate an entrance to a high-rise office building that faces the requisite parking lot. The anonymity of the multiple doorways disappears and people know where to enter. Unlike colonial styling, these columns are streamlined and perhaps painted red. The traditional element is thereby translated into a striking, new, and appropriate form.

In addition to the creative direction of postmodernism, the firm is committed to "cost-conscious" architecture. This means that budgets, schedules, building costs, etc. often determine design.

THE USE of natural materials such



Rabbi A. Irving Schnipper (second from left) talks with the architects, Al Prevost (left), Aaron Schreier and Ken Carruthers (right).

as stone, rock, brick or marble may be financially prohibitive while the more economical painted surface with the enrichment of color may be an attractive more economic alternate. For a stunned congregation attempting to brush away the ash and rebuild, "cost-consciousness" was mandatory. Enter, Prevost Treacy & Partners Inc.

Carruthers, director of design, Schreier, director of projects and Alvin Prevost, developer of construction put their creative and scholarly heads together. Their research revealed that historically there is, indeed, a Jewish style of architecture.

Excited by the challenge to design a synagogue inherently Jewish and essentially Sephardic or middle-eastern in spatial feeling, they consulted the congregation.

Rabbi A. Irving Schnipper, Bernhard Lichtenstein, and Dr. Robert Schaff chaired the building committee that at times included almost one-third of the membership.

THE CONSENSUS was unanimous. The design of the new sanctuary would be tied to traditional liturgy. The key or generating idea to the entire design would place the bimah or reader's platform in the center of the space, in the midst of the people and separate from the ark (repository of sacred scrolls) on the eastern wall.

Having arrived at that major decision, remaining architectural elements fell into place and according to Carruthers, "something magical happened."

Schreier said, "We began with a promise — two interlinked octagons that remained from the original foundation. From this formal impetus arose the inception of the circle and the sanctuary or holy space."

Carruthers added, "I wanted to cre-

ate an architecture of space, not great monumental buildings but buildings that have real spaces inside because that's where we live."

THUS, THE design would not be monumental in scope but humanistically determined.

The skylighted pitched roof of the eastern entrance is the first doorway in a processional sequence of portals that ultimately lead to the doorway of the ark.

Once inside the spacious foyer, there is a sense of color, expansiveness and joy as deep rich red carpeting connects the spaces.

But the eye turns to the east and the abstracted red columns that announce the doorway to the holy space of the sanctuary. Here, the sense of the middle east and the liturgical design is immediate.

Within the larger circular space is yet another form — a structural canopy or chupa (bridal canopy). This essentially Ashkenazic plan, derived from a 17th century Eastern European synagogue, not only creates an intimate space for weekly Sabbath services and rituals, but the square within the circle recalls the original octagon — a melding of the old and the new.

THE SEATS, placed on a flat floor and upholstered in a majestic purple, form a horseshoe around the raised reader's platform. Since the reader or Cantor faces east toward the ark, the platform itself is a reverse horseshoe. The reader as participant and not spectator removes the theatrical aura in favor of the more traditionally correct form of worship, basically a theater in the round.

Within the perimeters of the circle are divans which not only add emphasis to the form, but allow for comfort-



Gradations of color and architectural lines focus on the doorway of the Ark. This is looking east where the morning sun fills the sanctuary. The colors, light peach to red and purple, are historical as well as beautiful.

able seating and a place for latecomers.

The red sliding doors at the back of the circle open to the social hall or "everyday" space. Distinguished by its shape from the "holy" space, this area also affords extra seating necessary for the high holidays.

Skylights (some reflector and some natural) and clerestory lunettes (high windows) allow light to penetrate and illuminate, flooding the sanctuary with daylight and eliminating the use of artificial light. Because there is a morning and evening Sabbath service, windows at the east and west radiate the morning light as well as the last rays of the setting sun.

AS THE light filters in and around

the circular arches, vaults and dormers, shadows are cast upon the warmly-shaded peach walls while brass chandeliers and rails add to the luster and glow.

Although the color gradation from a neutral peach to the strong red evokes a sense of the middle east and the past, color consultant, Kathleen Derby Carruthers, has brought a decidedly dramatic fashionable look to this traditionally inspired place of worship.

Thus, allusions to the past, motifs, color and the general massing of the building not only reflect the architectural design of postmodernism, but place the congruent within the timeless spectrum of traditional Jewish worship.

Staff photos by Jerry Zolynsky

Prevost Treacy & Partners Inc. designs include the laboratory building for American Natural Resources in Dearborn, the 500 North Woodward Building in Bloomfield Hills and the 12-story Macabene building in Southfield, under construction.

Recent commissions are the renovation of the J.L. Hudson building in Detroit and the Silver Triangle Office structure in Southfield. Kenneth Carruthers received the A.I.A. design award for East Side Clinic, East Outer Drive.

Broader scope
People, flowers combineBy Corinne Abatt
staff writer

For many years Marjorie Hecht Simon drew much of her inspiration for her watercolors from her own garden. She has the reputation of being one of the outstanding gardeners of this metropolitan area.

But, now happily married to an enthusiastic traveler, her approach to her subjects has changed.

Oh, not radically nor earth-shakingly, no these still have the Marjorie Hecht Simon identity. The wonderful sense of color and design is still there as is the handling of watercolor. But now, more things are happening.

Simon's paintings are on display at Rubiner Gallery of West Bloomfield through May 24. The opening reception is Friday 7-9 p.m.

The artist, an enthusiastic photographer, reacts to life around her and documents her interest with film. She works on her art while vacationing.

Several of the paintings in the current show were done at Giverny, the home of the great French Impressionist, Claude Monet, northwest of Paris.

SHE RECREATES the idyllic scene with people seated and walking in the gardens. For this and a number of other paintings in the current show,

she uses the largest single sheets of watercolor paper available, 40 by 60 inches.

Remembering the visit to Giverny with her husband reading in the garden while she painted, she said, "I'll never forget that day as long as I live. It was a beautiful day. It was very meaningful for me to be there. The house isn't to be believed."

The paintings done there reflect those feelings showing the serenity, color and beauty of the gardens. Other paintings in the show were inspired by trips to Mexico and China. She said while they were in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, there was a once a year procession taking flowering plants to the church.

For a gardener and flower lover, this was a bonanza.

"I photographed for 2 1/2 hours," she said. And with these to refresh her memory, she did a painting which represents what she saw and experienced that day — people getting plants for the procession.

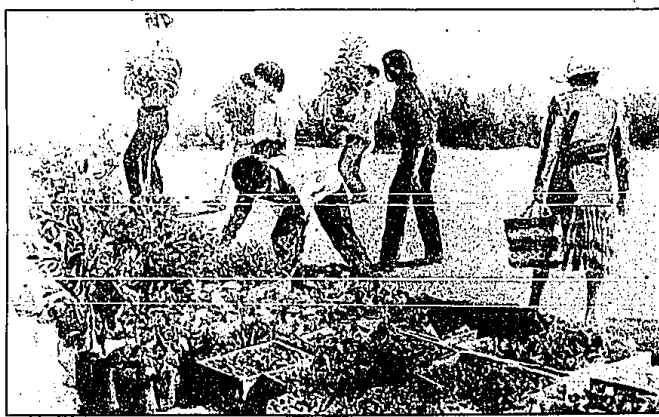
"The paintings," she said, "are compositions. They represent all your experience and the sitting of judgments and choices that I have the kind of interest that some situation suggests a painting and another situation will suggest another painting."



JERRY ZOLYNSKY/staff photographer
Marjorie Hecht Simon, always a talented colorist, has added more elements to her new paintings.

AMONG the things she did early in her art career was fashion illustration. It was this stylized approach to the human figure that, in a way, kept her from putting people in her paintings.

"I have a lot of experience with clothes, folds and fabric hanging on a body," she said. But, she wanted the



The flower procession in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico caught Simon's attention. This painting was inspired by the preparations for the procession.

figures in her watercolors to have the same feel as the flowers and landscapes, with soft rather than hard edges.

In a show at Rubiner Gallery several years ago, she had one large watercolor with a group of American students gathered on the steps of a university building in Rome.

Now, in this show, at least half the paintings have figures in them. Simon is leaving more open white areas in the background which suggest a broader expanse, giving the landscape a wide-open fresh look.

Simon paid her dues a long time ago, she's a solid artist, but she seems freer and more expansive. These

paintings produce a sense of well-being. There's somebody out there enjoying life, savoring the beauty and bringing generous samples of it into the gallery.

Hours are 11 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, until 5 p.m. Saturday, 7001 Orchard Lake, West Bloomfield.