

# The Washington Post

## Arts

## Holiness Is in the Details

*Bethesda Firm Shows Reverence Can Come in Different Forms*

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**G**ood things come in small packages. In big ones, too.

On the corner of Seven Locks and Gainsborough roads in Potomac stands the Chabad Center of Greater Washington, a new worship hall added onto a postwar Colonial house occupied for the past decade by an Orthodox Jewish congregation. It's a little building with quite an elevated architectural reach.

Down the way a piece, on a northerly knoll a quarter-mile or so off South Glen Road -- 10621 South Glen, to be exact -- stands Congregation B'nai Tzedek. This was a fairly large building when it first went up in 1997, and it was made significantly larger -- and better -- by a more recent addition that sweeps out into its back yard.

In both cases the architectural merits of the older sections are modest at best. A big plus for the new architecture -- in both instances by the Bethesda firm of Shinberg Levinas -- is the sensible way it connects to the older portions but keeps its own identity intact.

This is particularly true at the Chabad Center. Architects Milton Shinberg and Salo Levinas didn't exactly ignore the old house. Indeed, they improved it a bit by reorganizing part of the ground floor and making the space between the two sections an intermediary zone, very useful for post-worship gatherings.

But with the new piece, they adamantly went their own way -- it is a modernist box, pure and simple. Modernist boxes, of course, often end up being boring and banal -- but they need not be. These architects subtly manipulated materials and the basic geometry to give spiritual focus to this box.

The basic concept was as follows: Build two solid walls for the long sides of the rectangle, out of brick and plastic siding for cost reasons and in deference to the materials of the existing house. For the short sides,



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With their new sanctuaries, the Chabad Center of Greater Washington, top, and Congregation B'nai Tzedek, bottom, took dramatically different approaches toward focusing attention on the ark.

facing west and east, make two walls of glass, Give each of the four walls a strong, asymmetrical composition. Tilt the roof, so that it veers gently upward toward the east, in the direction of Jerusalem. And then make that Jerusalem-facing wall as concise as it can be, for this is the location of the ark -- the container holding the Torah scrolls -- and this is the direction of Jewish prayer.

See, **HOLINESS**

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Top Left, Exterior of the Chabad Center of Greater Washington; Bottom Left, Exterior detail of Chabad Center; Top Right, Congregation B'nai Tzedek Exterior; Bottom Left, B'nai Tzedek Stair Detail



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for the ark are still to come), is a masterful, Mondrianesque essay in dynamic stability. The ark, a dark wooden rectangle, appears almost to float amid the trees and sky.

In the sanctuary at Congregation B'nai Tzedek, by contrast, there are almost no right angles. Here, Shinberg and Levinas used three curved walls to shape the big room -- it'll hold nearly 1,200 for tomorrow's Yom Kippur rites -- and to focus attention on the ark.

Each of the walls carries a specific symbolism, Levinas says -- one made of Jerusalem stone to reference that city's Western Wall, a second with seven entrances symbolizing the seven gates of the Old City, and a third made of polished mahogany to showcase gilded letters of the Hebrew alphabet, the language of the Torah. The symbolism works the way it should -- it doesn't shout or struggle to instruct. Rather, it infuses and enriches the place.

The walls are arranged as a sequence of overlapping arcs, allowing natural light to filter in beautifully at different times of the day. Though not so intensely focused as the smaller sanctuary a few miles away, this too is a wonderfully contemplative chamber.

Back in the early years of modern art and architecture, great battles were fought over preferences for the straight line or the curve. It was one or the other. But as Robert Venturi pointed out years ago, we no longer live in the age of either-or. In these two Montgomery County synagogues we have a remarkable demonstration of the change -- the same architects using such different expressive vocabularies to attain the same fundamental end: to make holy spaces feel holy. □

### HOLINESS, Continued

That was the idea, and it worked out. From the outside the building projects a certain protective composure (even though the west facade, facing Seven Locks Road, still lacks the strong sun-screening elements that are integral to its design). Elements of each facade are sensitively counterbalanced -- they feel just right.

And then on the inside -- the key to any spiritual space -- that tilt of the ceiling leads both mind and eye in the right direction. The glass eastern wall, even though incomplete (stained-glass panels and ornamentation