

Sacred Simplicity: Park East Synagogue by Centerbrook Architects and Planners

Pepper Pike, Ohio: Age-old materials and a straightforward design fulfill a growing congregation's vision of a sacred place

By **ArchNewsNow**
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The Park Synagogue congregation made several moves since its founding in 1869 in downtown Cleveland before settling in Cleveland Heights in 1950 with a landmark synagogue designed by Eric Mendelsohn. The expanding congregation is now also served by the new, 63,500-square-foot Park East Synagogue in Pepper Pike, designed by Connecticut-based Centerbrook Architects and Planners, which incorporates a sanctuary, school, library, and, like its older sibling, a community center.

The building is a simple steel frame box clad in a stick-and-panel mosaic of copper. Three large organic shapes burst from the box – a Jerusalem stone sanctuary and two great copper canopies leading to a two-story lobby. These two entrances of equal importance – one for the school, the other for the sanctuary, library, and offices – bend towards each other in a gesture of welcome and blessing. The lobby is the central spine of the building with the community center and sanctuary as the center hub; the school wing is to the east, and the library and offices are to the west.

The sanctuary is surrounded inside and out by gently curving, monumental stone walls at the entrance from the lobby and behind the bimah. The stone is coursed in large horizontal bands reminiscent of primordial construction. The sanctuary is divided into three flexible spaces. At the center is a chapel that holds 190 people in fixed seats. A large meeting room and a community hall open to the chapel from either side for large gatherings. Both spaces have arched wood ceilings facing the chapel.

Daylight streams into the chapel indirectly from four edges, giving

(click on pictures to enlarge)



(Scott Frances)
Park East Synagogue



(Scott Frances)
The main entrance elevation faces south, taking advantage of winter sun to mitigate Cleveland's snowy climate; the roughly symmetrical copper canopies – one for the sanctuary and one for the school – “lean” towards each other in a gesture of welcoming and blessing.



it a soft glow. Rising from the back of the bimah is the ark from which rises a large curving canopy of interwoven wood beams. This reflects voices and music and also offers a sense of shelter to the congregation. Above the ark's canopy is a higher arcing canopy of wood slats which "drips" glowing vertical lamps like stars at night. The sanctuary's wood canopies and ceilings recall both the original tented tabernacle and the framed structures of wooden Eastern European synagogues. All of this is intentionally ambiguous to stimulate the congregation's imagination, feelings, and visions.

While this building is straightforward for the sake of economy, its age-old materials and extraordinary light make it a sacred place.

DETAILS

Ark doors enclosing the Torah

The doors are clad in hand-peened silver sheets created by Israeli silversmiths Boaz and Margie Yemeni, who also crafted the other silver ornament for the ark. There are more than one million peens on the door. The crowns on the top of the handles and above the doors are symbols of the congregation.

The design team asked the rabbi for his thoughts on the detailing of the doors. He suggested the eight words in the Bible on how to treat the Torah. Each word is inscribed in Hebrew; in the background is inscribed "to Love" which is most important. The other are: to Discern; to Learn; to Observe; to Fulfill; to Understand; to Hear; to Teach; to Do.

Bimah canopy and furniture

The bimah canopy evokes the balance of life's formalities and irregularity. The canopy is a "shelter," a place of refuge – and a sounding board that projects voices naturally. The details around the ark show seven herbs and grains surrounding the crown of leaves as an affirmation of life.

The bimah chairs, lectern, and table, designed and fabricated by Centerbrook architects as a gift to the client, are constructed of maple veneer plywood with V-cut solid maple edge banding.

Eternal light

The eternal light, designed by the architects in collaboration with Warfel Schrage Architectural Lighting, is made of frosted glass and mirror facets that reflect light in all directions.

Operable walls in the sanctuary

Five large (9'-30" wide by 14' high) vertical lift doors allow the sanctuary, meeting room, and social hall to expand for high

(Scott Frances)

Openings in entrance canopies bring light to front doors while maintaining cover for inclement weather; stone seats provide amenity and unobtrusive security from errant vehicles.



(Scott Frances)

Reminiscent of age old ruins, Jerusalem stone piers of different heights support the copper canopies; light bounces off of the piers and leaks in, around, and through the canopies.



(Scott Frances)

Entrance detail with stick-and-panel mosaic of copper on the main body of the building; sticks are permanent recollections of Eastern European wood synagogues.



(Scott Frances)

View from northwest: Jerusalem stone sanctuary (center) glows in the evening; a low wall cloisters a memorial garden with the school wing to left, library and offices to right.

holidays. They are acoustically paneled with silver cloth and look like permanent walls when closed, and arches when open.

Centerbrook Architects and Planners was established in 1975, and currently has five partners, one principal, and an overall staff of 90. The firm has received numerous national and regional awards for a variety of projects that range from private residences and furniture to institutional complexes and fully implemented city plans. In 1998, Centerbrook received the national AIA Firm Award, the highest honor that the American Institute of Architects confers on a firm. Located in a renovated 19th-century factory on the Falls River in the Village of Centerbrook, Connecticut, the firm uses the building as a laboratory for green architecture, which includes a green roof and uses clean energy, such as a hydro power turbine and photovoltaic panels, to make approximately 30% of its annual electrical needs.

Credits

Client: Park Synagogue

Architect: Mark Simon, FAIA, with Edward J. Keagle, AIA, Centerbrook Architects and Planners, Centerbrook, CT

Project Team: M. Scott Bowen, AIA, Jennifer K. Morgenthau, AIA, Mark A. Thompson, RA, Matthew L. Stewart, AIA, Stephen G. Fennell, AIA, Reno J. Migani, Jr., AIA, Sheryl A. Milardo, Susan J. Pinckney, ASID, Uzma Mirza, AIA, John W. Stoddard, Emily Mammen, Hyeon Ju Son, Hue Nguyen, Nathaniel A. Moore, William Rutan, Michael Hart, Emmet Truxes, William Bickford

Landscape Architect: Stephen Stimson Associates, Falmouth, MA

Structural Engineer: Gilsanz Murray Steficek, New York, NY

Mechanical, Electrical, Plumbing Engineer: Karpinski Engineering, Cleveland, OH

Lighting Consultant: Warfel Schragger Architectural Lighting, Ridgefield, CT

Specifications Consultant: Robert Schwartz & Associates, New York, NY

Code Consultant: P. R. Sherman, Incorporated, New London, NH

Acoustic Consultant: Acentech Incorporated, Cambridge, MA

Silversmith: Yemini Silversmiths, Jerusalem, Israel

Altar Chairs Design: Mark Simon, FAIA/Centerbrook Architects

Altar Chairs Fabrication: William Rutan/Centerbrook Architects

Cost Consultant: Project and Construction Services, Cleveland, OH

Environmental Consultant: HzW Environmental, Mentor, OH

Kitchen Consultant: Cini-Little International, Inc., Chagrin Falls, OH

Civil Engineer/Surveyor: Donald G. Bohning & Associates, Inc., Valley View, OH

Millwork: Ailes Millwork, Inc., Kent, OH

General Contractor: Marous Brothers Construction, Willoughby, OH

Photographer: [Scott Frances](#) / 212-227-2722



(Scott Frances)

The sanctuary is entered from two-story lobby through thick walls, reminiscent of historic temples that provide a sense of shelter and security.



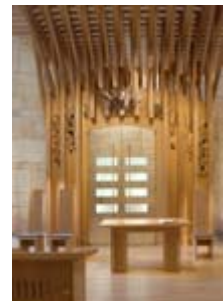
(Scott Frances)

Sanctuary from community hall; separating acoustic doors slide upwards into thick walls.



(Scott Frances)

Sanctuary seating wraps around ark and bimah to offer intimacy for both small and large gatherings.



(Scott Frances)

Detail of bimah and ark; ark doors and ornament

are hammered silver;
furniture designed by
architects.



(Scott Frances)

The community hall is lined in paneled maple, with windows at corners to maximize reflected light. Wood ceilings enhance acoustics.



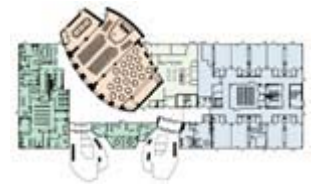
(Centerbrook Architects)

Site plan



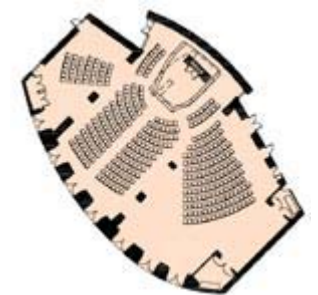
(Centerbrook Architects)

Northeast section looking at chapel, lobby, and entry



(Centerbrook Architects)

First floor plan: library and offices (left); sanctuary, meeting room, and social hall (center); school (right)



(Centerbrook Architects)

Plan shows vertical lift doors open to combine sanctuary, meeting room, and social hall for large

services.



(Centerbrook Architects)
Second floor plan

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