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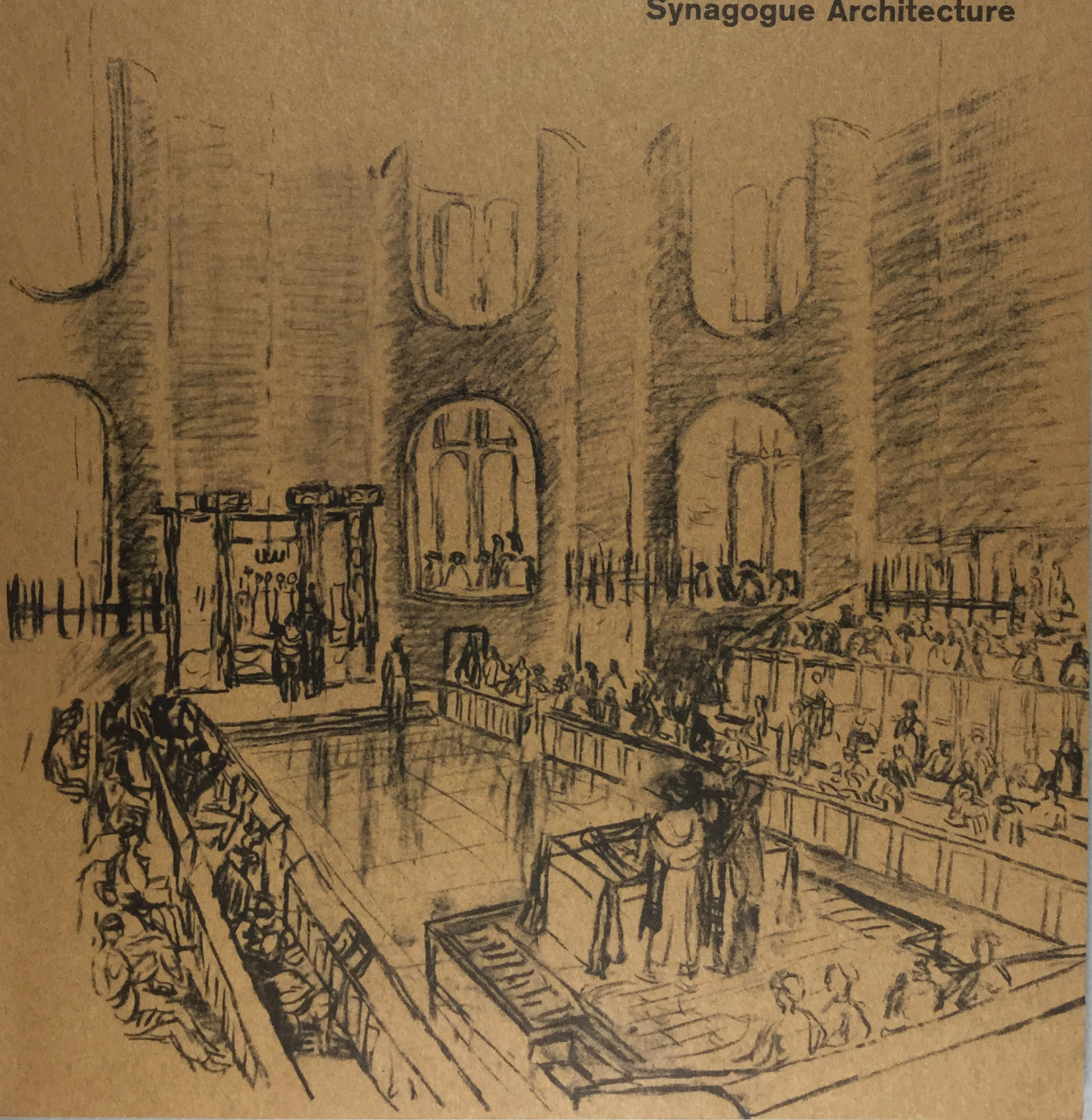
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Recent American Synagogue Architecture



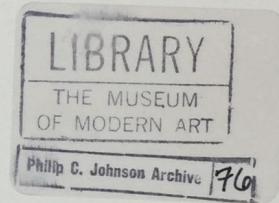
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**Recent American
Synagogue Architecture**

organized by Richard Meier

The Jewish Museum



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but a little time and we know that the watchman watches since he must come to tend the lamp and, hanging as it does over the Torah cabinet, he has found the Torah safe and undisturbed. The ner tamid is an oil lamp and I ask my congregation to give its guardianship to the youth. The classes preparing for Bar Mitzvah take down the lamp once a week, clean the bowl and wick, and relight it with a little prayer.

Now just a word on why, especially at this time, every architect should lend his hand to God's work.

At this time, we of the human condition are in danger of annihilation. Our statesmen have turned out to be politicians, our scientists have invented a demon in a little bottle and don't know how to keep the cork in. To whom shall we turn for guidance? Does Isaiah not give the answer? "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Bid Jerusalem take heart and proclaim unto her that her time of service is accomplished, that her guilt is paid off that she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins."

Philip Johnson

The problem of designing the contemporary synagogue is a nearly impossible one. It would not be so if only the sanctuary were the problem. Religious space has always in history been the most exacting and pleasurable to build. The Parthenon and Chartres Cathedral, perhaps the greatest architectural temples of the West, are religious buildings. A Jewish temple is as great a problem. The difficulty comes from the habits of the High Holy Days, when the attendance, shall we say, swells.

Now a space is either great small or great large, but it can hardly act like an accordion and be great small and large. How to design a room that will be great both ways? Our solution at Port Chester was a great room, with a small screen divider, because it seemed to us that most of the congregation comes only on High Holy Days and we wanted the community to enjoy the temple.

Once this hurdle is crossed, the design of a synagogue is the finest problem in architecture, a space where awe and reverence are the prime considerations, an inspiring challenge to the artist. The shoulds and shouldn'ts of design from this point in are the architects' business. The temple as a problem, unlike many Christian churches, is open to talent. The Southern Baptist Church, for example, must have a Colonial steeple. The Jewish temple merely has to be beautiful. As simple as that.

Eric Mendelsohn, 1946

In this time of troubles, all religious denominations are aware that Divine Service on Sabbaths and Holy Days cannot suffice to base our total life on the great moral principles as consummated in every religious edifice; that a church or a temple must remain a mere symbol unless faith is supported by ever-present spiritual guidance and permanent education of the entire congregation.

That is why today's religious centers should comprise three units: the House of Worship—the House of God, the Assembly Hall for adult members—the House of the People, the School for the education and recreation of their children—the House of the Torah.

To shelter these three divisions, to bring their different functions into organic plan-relationship, to express this material and mental unification in his structure must be the final aim of the architect.

A task of great complexity which demands a bold approach—the courage of artistic vision and the ingenious employment of all facilities we have developed in other fields of human endeavor.

To build a temple for the maximum seating-capacity expected, for instance on the Day of Atonement (i.e., at least twice as large as needed for normal services), is inadvisable for many reasons: the Rabbi cannot be at his best in front of empty seats; the adult member of the congregation, after a hectic business week, cannot turn his mind toward a higher plane unless he is carried (at least visually) by the religious intensity of a full house—the palpable sign of collective devotion. His economic conscience has no sympathy for "state-rooms" (that formal Victorian relic) to be used for a few occasions only, quite contrary to the informal pioneer spirit that made this country what it is; the young generation, now fully aware of the bare facts of life, rightly abhors any pomposity as entirely out of date. Mere size will not for all times inspire their inner nature—the prime source of any vital act and thought. Liv-

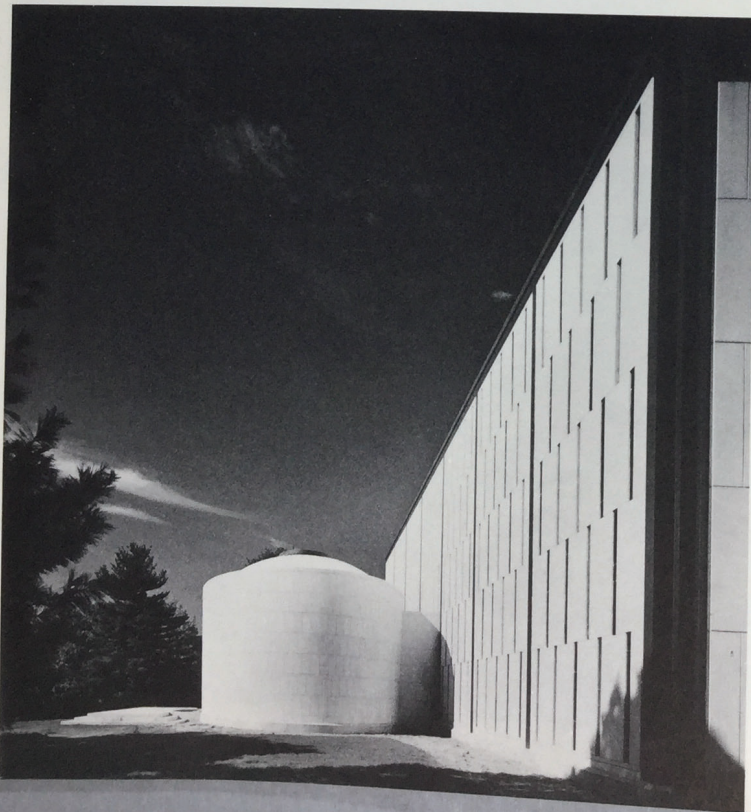
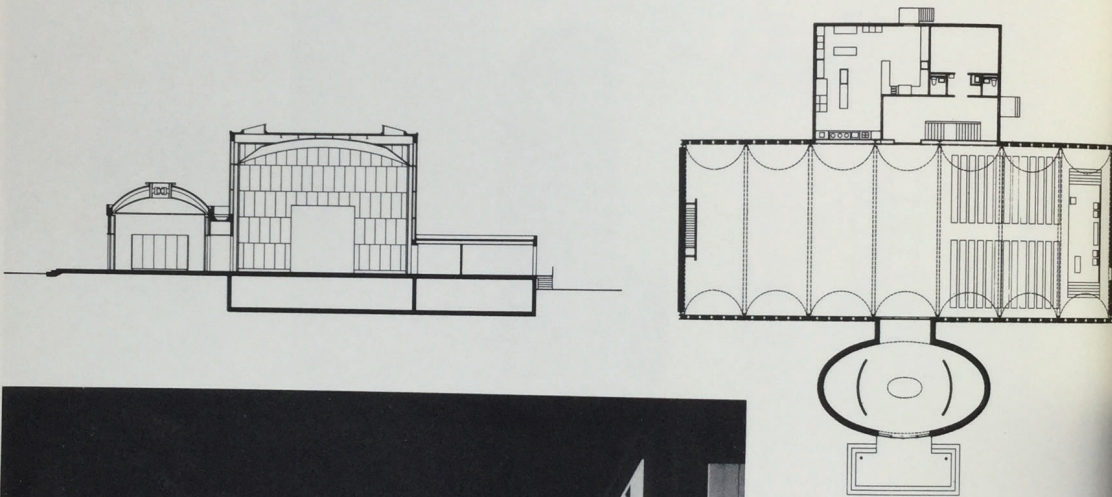
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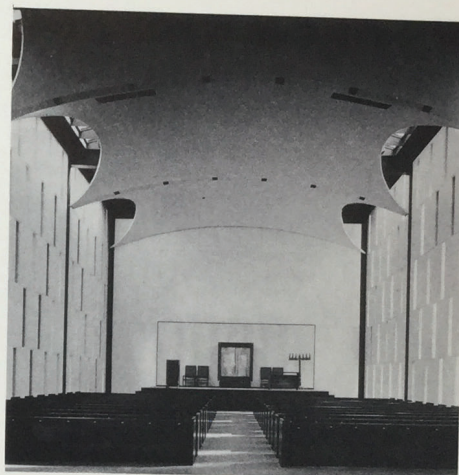
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Kneses Tifereth Israel Synagogue
Port Chester, New York
Architect: Philip Johnson



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