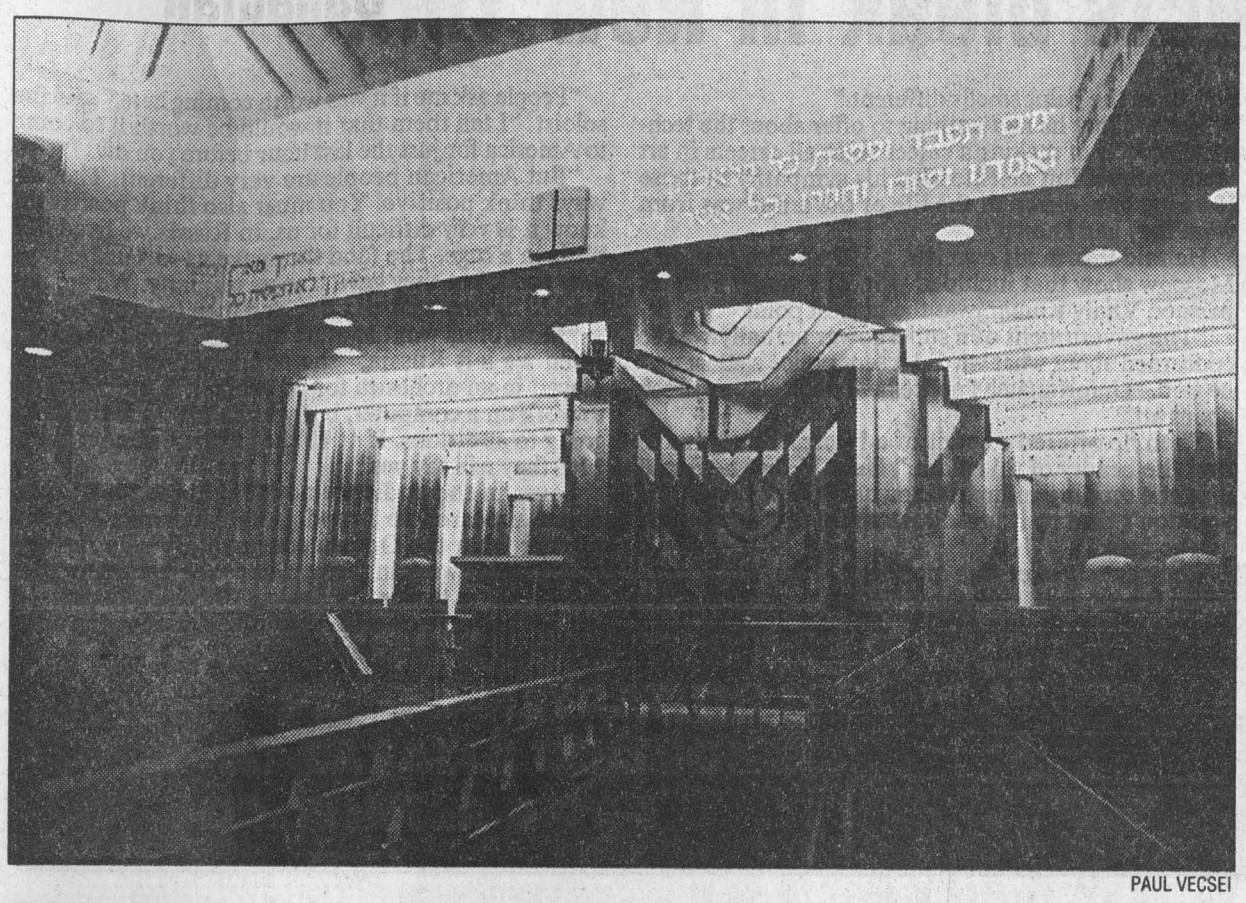
ARCHITECTURE



PAUL VECSEI

Adath Israel Poale Zedek's new ark is in harmony with the rest of the synagogue.

Ark is fitting symbol of renewal

Architects competed to design synagogue's centrepiece

Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit
– Zechariah 4.6

ANNMARIE ADAMS and LINDA COHEN
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Architecture figures prominently in the story of Hanukkah, which chronicles the Jewish people's triumph over religious intolerance in 165 BC. Indeed, the celebration of Hanukkah focuses not on an ancient battle, but rather on the purification and rededication of the Second Temple of Jerusalem that followed. The renewal of the building was marked by the rekindling of the temple's great lamp, a small yet powerful gesture symbolizing the beginning of national rehabilitation.

These same themes of light, symbolism and renewal served as points of departure for the recent redesign of the Adath Israel Poale Zedek Synagogue's ark. Despite its small physical presence, the ark, which houses a congregation's precious scrolls, is a major feature in synagogues because of its function and orientation. Opened during the religious service to retrieve and later replace the torah, the ark is also the focal point during certain prayers, as the members of the congregation turn to face it.

Adath Israel's new ark opened in September, in time for the Jewish New Year. It is the result of a one-stage invited competition launched in October 1992 by the congregation. The winner was Vecsei Architects, whose diverse design experience includes the Côte St. Luc city hall and library (1985) and the retirement home Manoir Montefiore (1988), as well as a new ark for the Beth Zion Synagogue, added to that building in 1989.

One of the challenges set out in the competition brief was that the new ark should harmonize with the sanctuary's existing architecture. The modest, brick, two-storey structure, designed in 1982 by Mayerovitch Bernstein Mincoff, echoes the domestic scale of the surrounding houses on Harrow Cres. in Hampstead.

Harry Mayerovitch explained that the plan of this orthodox synagogue was intended to create a sense of community and warmth among the congregation. These qualities are expressed in the hexagonal sanctuary, in which the centralized prayer platform, or bimah, is accentuated by a dome and framed by tiered seating for 340 (the men and women sit on opposite sides of the room). Mayerovitch's concept of "warmth" is further reinforced by his choice of materials – oak was used for the wall panels and benches – and by the introduction of natural daylight through clerestory windows in the dome and in the exterior walls.

A more prominent ark

Because the ark was a secondary element in the Mayerovitch plan, its form was unassuming: a simple glass enclosure draped with metallic cloth and illuminated by a skylight. Times have changed. The recent competition reflects the congregation's desire for a more prominent ark.

The challenge of the recent design competition was twofold: to resolve the ambiguous position of the ark as a secondary element in the synagogue's original design and to highlight the new relationship between the entrance and the ark, without compromising the presence of the bimah. This is a tall order, considering the small scale of the intervention within the sanctuary.

The winning entry emphasizes the ark by integrating a new, larger structure into the hexagonal geometry of the sanctuary. The rear wall is articulated by several projecting panels which form a "V" around the ark and draw attention toward it. The sculpted, gyproc ceiling, with wing-like panels rising toward the light shaft, serves a similar function.

The architects further accentuated the ark by extending it to the full height of the sanctuary and by specifying solid materials for its panels: metal studs, covered with gyproc and sheathed with anodized aluminum. An abstract "tree of life," made of hammered brass and copper plates by metal artist Louis Barrette, adorns the front doors of the new structure. Eva Vecsei, principal designer of the project, interpreted the ark as a "symbolic hollow sculpture, radiating energy and light into the surrounding space."

Scale and cost were relatively modest

According to the building committee, the Vecsei scheme achieved a subtle harmony with the existing synagogue, relative to the schemes submitted by other competitors. Its highly articulated design evokes the wood lattice-work and the angles of the seating arrangement. Furthermore, its finish recalls the facetted metallic ceiling of the sanctuary's dome, which was based on the interlocking triangles of the Star of David. By making direct visual links to the dome, the new ark reinforces the building's original centralizing quality.

Unfortunately, the synagogue's system of natural lighting is not used to its full advantage. While natural light is introduced through the vertical elements of the layered suspended ceiling, its effect is overpowered by the horizontal fluorescent lighting. This detracts from the "warmth" of the original synagogue and draws considerable attention away from the dynamic, sculptural qualities of the ark.

By industry standards, the scale and cost of the Adath Israel ark competition are very small. Its benefits, however, are enormous. Four local architectural firms – three with experience designing synagogues – were invited to submit their ideas for the new ark to a committee representing the congregation. Each firm was paid a participation fee in exchange for their presentation. The client, for an additional 7 per cent of the total budget, gained four ideas, rather than one.

The architects, too, gained the opportunity to present their ideas to prospective clients. A wide range of design solutions is reflected in the other three entries. Cohen Rubin Architects submitted a light-filled wood-and-glass scheme; the Stendel Reich Lussier Partnership presented a monumental structure of limestone and bronze; and Atelier Big City suggested an innovative, asymmetrical ark, shaped like a giant cylinder.

Regardless of size, competitions fulfil an extremely important function. They are an efficient mechanism for clients to draw on the talents of many firms in order to obtain a range of design alternatives. They also encourage healthy competition and debate within the architectural community, which can result in improved architectural solutions. In Europe, competitions tend to be the principal means by which offices gain commissions. Unfortunately this is not true in North America, where traditional commissions are still the rule.

It is particularly fitting that this new ark is in full operation for Hanukkah. Its own story, in keeping with the celebration of the holiday, underlines both the role of architecture in spiritual renewal and the importance of cherishing small things.

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More than a bridge lost at Mostar

Shattering blow to cultural heritage of region

JAMES YUENGER
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

CHICAGO – Why lament the destruction of a bridge? A bridge is, after all, not an organic being but a thing of height and distance and stress resistance, the product of someone at a table scratching out physical calculations, figuring the angles.

Yet a well-conceived bridge is majesty wrought by civil engineering and can consume the eye, not only for its graceful arch across water or a mountain pass but also because of something deeper.

A bridge is a connection, firmly rooted, a dependable passage from here to there. To gauge the power of the image, consider its reverse: Whose nightmares have not included the bridge that fails when one is halfway across?

Lovers and dreamers the world over have their favorites, from some creaky, warped, old covered bridge to the world's best-known: the Brooklyn Bridge, the Golden Gate Bridge, bridges in Avignon and Paris and London and Prague. Because they make such a convenient metaphor, they are staples of books and cinema (The Bridge of San Luis Rey, The Bridge on the River Kwai).

Violation of memory

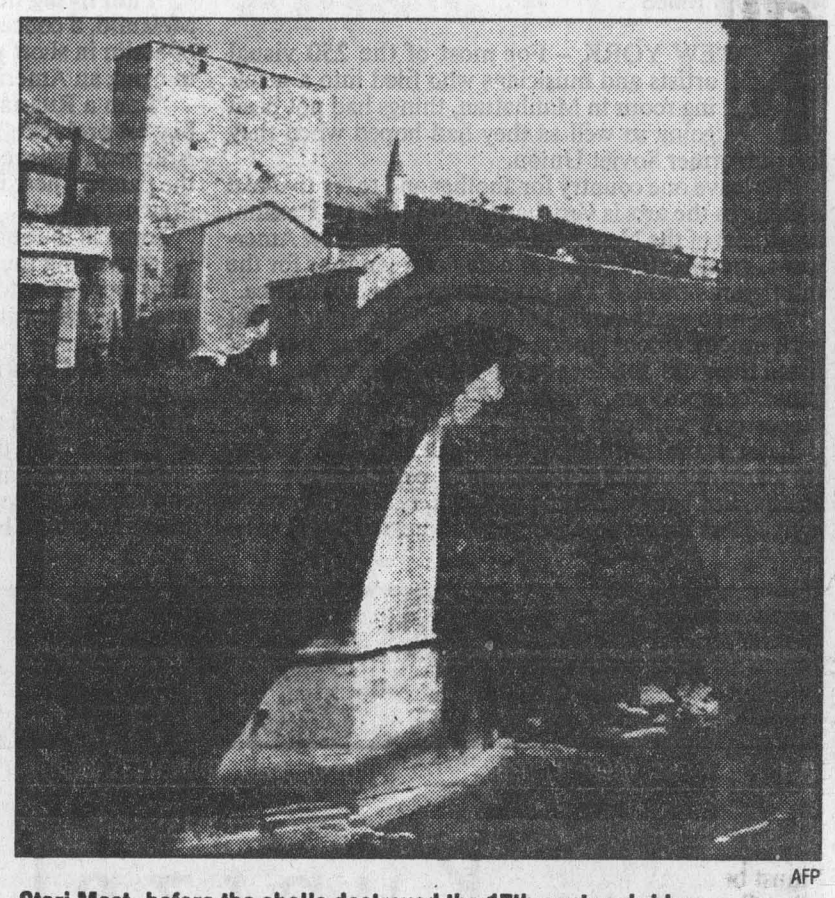
For men of war, a bridge is either friend or foe. Virtually every war finds generals exulting over a bridge brought down. It's part and parcel of military victory.

But sometimes the destruction is a terrible thing, for to pulverize a bridge, to force it to falter and fall, can constitute a grievous violation of centuries of memory.

Such was the obliteration, by Croatian cannon on Nov. 9, of the 427-year-old bridge at Mostar, Herzegovina.

The Slavic word for bridge is most; the "Stari Most" (old bridge) gave its name to Mostar, the principal town in Herzegovina and a magnet for generations of tourists to the lush Adriatic coast, one of the loveliest stretches in the Balkans, or anywhere.

Most drove inland over a bad road to marvel at the noble limestone footbridge, a 200-foot span – "a crescent moon in stone," as one Muslim poet described it – soaring high above the Neretva River as it tumbles south and west the final 50 kilometres or so out to the Adriatic Sea.



AFP

Stari Most, before the shells destroyed the 17th-century bridge.

The Neretva historically has been a border between East and West and the bridge a dramatic link between the Islamic Ottoman Empire and the Christian Roman Empire.

To see it was to be enchanted by it. Built in 1566 by order of Suleyman the Magnificent, it endured as a symbol of one of the longest-lasting empires of all time.

If you stood at the bridge, you saw these two worlds. The western bank is Croatian, with modern apartment blocks, hospitals, hotels and office buildings. The eastern bank is the Muslim quarter, a similarly lively but more gracious place of richly textured mosques and minarets and tile-roofed bazaars.

That was before the ancient, acrid flames of Balkan animosity flared again 31 months ago with the breakup of Yugoslavia, a country that was never really a country so much as a region of tribes that needed only a nudge to revert to bloodlust.

Before the war poisoned it, Mostar was a place where Serb, Croat and Muslim intermingled harmoniously enough. The bridge was essential; if you were a Muslim and your lover was not, it was the place where you met, a kind of sanctuary from strife and hard-nosed parents.

As the war progressed, turning neighbor against neighbor, the bridge stood as a symbol that hope was not all lost. The first few shells weakened it in mid-1991, but it held. Seven months ago, the shelling became much worse.

The targeting was deliberate. Said a Bosnian Croat spokesman: "Since the bridge is in a place that is strategically important and the Muslim positions are very near, 70 to 100 metres, the bridge has constantly been shelled."

After the bridge was destroyed, everyone realized the stupidity of what had been done. Croatian and Serbian media, taking a rare breather from bellicose propaganda, described the loss of the bridge as a tragedy.

Symbol of hope lost

Federico Mayor, director-general of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, which had been working to add the bridge to its roster of protected historic treasures, was outraged.

"The destruction of the Stari Most bridge," he said, "has robbed all the communities of Bosnia and Herzegovina of a symbol of hope, ruptured their links with a time of peace and struck at the very roots of their cultural heritage."

In time, if peace or a semblance of it ever comes to war-wounded Herzegovina, the bridge will probably be replaced. Perhaps someone will start a fund. But it will be too late for a 70-year-old Croatian whose memory goes back a long way.

"I enjoyed my first kiss on that bridge," he told a reporter. "I remember even now the stars and the moon shining down. I remember how we dropped stones into the clear water. Now all this has been wiped out."