

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ARCHITECTURE VIEW; A Public Work That Ennobles As It Serves

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JERUSALEM— HOW TO MAKE A COURT IN Israel? It is not as easy an architectural problem as you might think. In the United States, architects have usually fallen back on classical architecture as the easiest way to project the air of dignity, moral authority, permanence and grandeur that courthouses are expected to have. But there is no such refuge here, where there is no real classical architectural tradition. It is a paradox, given the Roman presence in the history of this land, that classicism is more legitimately a part of the architectural heritage of America than of this country, but so be it. In Israel, Corinthian columns do not a convincing courthouse make.

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The foundations of architecture here are threefold: a fondness for simple geometries, a reliance on the traditional vernacular of the Middle East and a tendency toward pragmatic, no-nonsense directness. Architecture is not fluff in Israel; for too long, this country was too poor and too beleaguered to think of buildings as doing much more than providing cover from the rain. But in the last decade, as Israel has become more certain of its continued existence, the notion of a permanent architecture has begun to take root -- and nowhere to better result than in the new Supreme Court building, which marks a critical point in the architectural maturation of this country.

The belief that public buildings can be ennobling presences, not just containers for bureaucratic functions, is clearly what underscores this structure. The product of an international architectural competition held in 1986, the court is a work of considerable subtlety and complexity, so much so that my first thought upon seeing it is not how good it is for Israel, but how sad it is that public architecture in the United States is rarely as thoughtful, and rarely as skillful in combining a sense of monumentality with a sense of easy, inviting accessibility.

The architects are the team of Ram Karmi and Ada Karmi-Melamede, an Israeli brother and sister who have generally practiced architecture separately but were invited to enter this architectural competition together. Their design triumphed over those of such better-known entrants as James Freed of Pei Cobb Freed in New York, Richard Meier of New York and Moshe Safdie of Cambridge, Mass., and Jerusalem.

Both the competition and the building itself were paid for by the Rothschild family as a gift to the Government and people of Israel. It is a remarkable act of philanthropy, not in small part because of the commitment to quality that remained through nearly a decade of planning and construction. This is one of those unusual tales in which bureaucracy did not manage to destroy good intentions.

To say that this is Israel's finest public building is to offer faint praise, given what most public buildings in this country are like. Even the Knesset, the Israeli parliament, a Rothschild gift of 1966, is a ponderous columned box (though a handsome new Jerusalem municipal complex by A. J. Diamond of Toronto suggests that maybe the overall level of public architecture here has finally begun to rise). Yet the Supreme Court building sets a standard of its own, and in doing so manages to achieve a remarkable and exhilarating balance between the concerns of daily life and the symbolism of the

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ages. The building appears of its place and time, but all the same is just enough removed from the daily hubbub to project a sense of formal order and even majesty.

Curiously, for a building that is as inviting as this one, the design is fairly complex: there is no clear front door and no simple pattern to the organization. The building cannot be described solely as long, or solely as rounded or as being arranged around a series of courtyards, though from certain angles, like the elephant described by the blind man, it could be thought to be any one of these. The structure, in fact, consists of three main sections: a square library wing within which is set a round courtyard containing a copper-clad pyramid, a rectangular administrative wing containing judges' chambers arrayed around a cloistered courtyard and a wing containing five courtrooms, all of which extend like fingers from a great main hall.

It doesn't look the same from one side to the other, and were it not for the rich Jerusalem stone that by law covers this and every building here with a warm, sensuous, even texture, the Supreme Court might well seem like a disjointed mix of elements.

IN REALITY, IT IS ANYTHING BUT. It has a serene sense of coherence; one makes one's way through it without any confusion. The geometric parts all seem to fit, and each has a particular purpose. The overall esthetic is clearly modernist -- crisp, clean lines dominate -- but the sensibility reaches toward a broader use of history, embracing a wide range of references to the architecture of Jerusalem, from ancient tombs, temples, gates and archways to the 20th-century buildings of the International Style that exist in surprising quantity in Israel.

The Supreme Court thus manages to be rich both in pure abstract form and in historical allusion. Unlike their counterparts in the United States and Europe, the Karmis, as the architects are called here, seem comfortable speaking these two architectural languages simultaneously. So the cloistered courtyard, for example, in the midst of the administrative wing surrounded by judges' chambers, bears a clear relationship to the courtyard in the Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem's archeological museum from the 1930's, which is itself a deft synthesis of Islamic and Western architectural traditions. At the same time, the pyramid in the center of the library court serves as a purer abstraction, as a stark form indicating permanence and solidity. On the north elevation, a stone facade with a half-round projecting bay window is an obvious homage to one of Jerusalem's finest modernist structures, Erich Mendelsohn's Schocken Library of 1936.

The five courtrooms themselves are all relatively small -- they seat from 40 to 150 people -- and are all variations on a theme, a kind of architectural fugue. Each has a vaulted ceiling, a side aisle with a colonnade, indirect natural light washing white walls and furniture of richly finished wood. Yet the shapes of the vaults, the pattern of the colonnade, the way in which the natural light is handled is different in each room. What they share is a sense both of crispness and of calmness, two qualities rarely felt simultaneously in architecture; the sharpness of the Mediterranean architectural tradition and the dignity of the law are here married with remarkable grace.

Each of the courtrooms is reached through a magnificent thick portal carved into a curving wall of rough-hewn Jerusalem stone that defines the building's largest interior space, the so-called Grand Foyer. On the other side of the foyer, opposite the stone wall, is a series of curving niches cut into a white wall. Each niche contains a carved wooden bench and serves as a semiprivate alcove to give members of the public attending or participating in trials a place for quiet, confidential conversation.

The thoughtfulness of this element is typical of the building, which has been designed with consistent attention to the needs of all of its users: the lawyers and judges and employees who work in the court every day, the participants in trials who come here in circumstances of great stress and the general public, for whom the court is a symbol not only of the law, but of their entire government. It is not easy to satisfy all of these constituencies, but Ram Karmi and Ada Karmi-Melamede have done so.

In the end, this is less a piece of knock-your-eye-out razzle-dazzle architecture than a

series of wise and knowing gestures pulled off with consummate sensitivity and intelligence. But that stance is itself a kind of moral lesson in what public architecture can be. With the completion of the Supreme Court, Israel, a nation that has shown little architectural leadership, has produced a building that can stand as an example to the world of the potential of public works to reflect a culture's highest aspirations.

Photo: The new Supreme Court building of Israel in Jerusalem and, at right, one of its courtrooms--Crisp, clean and calm. (Photographs by Rina Castelnovo for The New York Times)

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