

FATHS FORM

THE INTERFAITH JOURNAL ON
RELIGION, ART AND ARCHITECTURE
VOL. XXXIX • NO. 2, 2006 • ISSN 00147001





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Faith & Form: The Interfaith Journal on Religion, Art and Architecture is independently published four times per year by Faith and Form. Copyright © 2006 by Faith and Form, 1737 Kenyon St. NW, Washington, DC 20010. Third Class Postage paid at Washington, DC. Opinions expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of Faith and Form.

Manuscript Submission: The editor is pleased to review manuscripts for possible publication. Any subject material relevant to religious art and architecture is welcome. Good visual material is emphasized. Articles may be submitted on disk along with hard copy or emailed to: mcrosbie@faithandform.com. Manuscripts, disks and photos will not be returned unless specifically requested and a return envelope with sufficient postage is included.

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NEXT ISSUE:

"Faith and the Feminine" will explore the expression of female-gendered sacred space and the expression of the feminine in religious art and architecture.

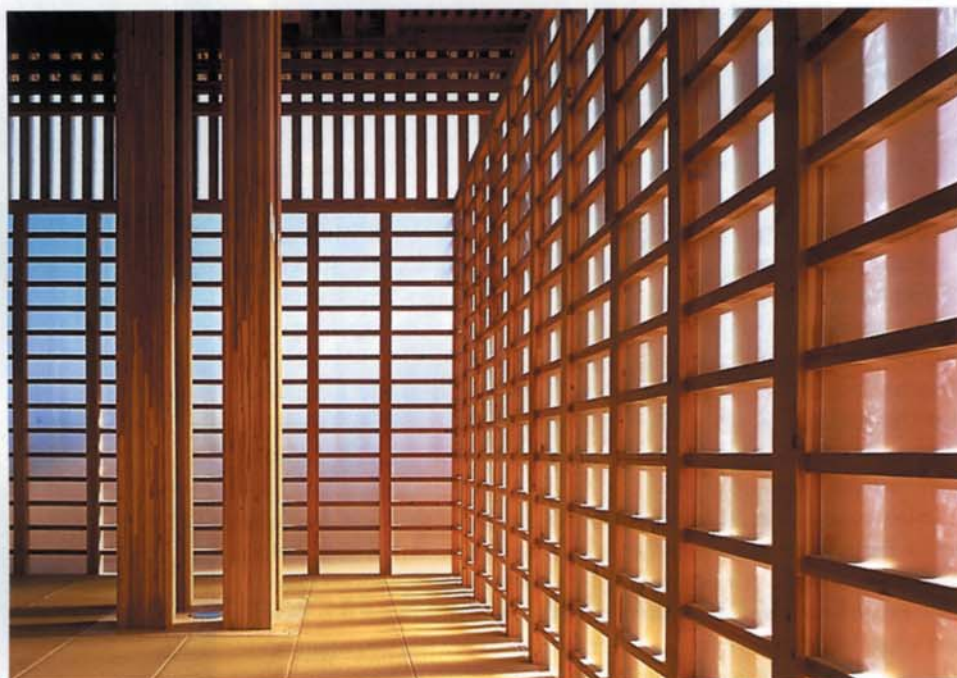
CONTENTS

FEATURES

A Temple Reborn <i>By Tadao Ando</i>	6
Orthodox Architecture in the New Century <i>By Inga Leonova</i>	10
Chambers of History <i>By Jeremy Langford</i>	14
The Case of the Disappearing Dome <i>By Joanna Corman</i>	20
Designing for Islam <i>By Bob Apel</i>	22

DEPARTMENTS

Editor's Page	4
Notes & Comments	24
Artist/Artisan Directory	26
Architects Directory	29
Just One More Thing	31



ON THE COVER:

Inside the Komyo-ji Temple in Saijo, Japan, designed by Tadao Ando (story begins on page 6).

Photo: Mitsuo Matsuoka

INDEX OF ADVERTISERS

Assoc. of Consultants for Liturgical Space	30	Kirkegaard Associates	4
Bendheim	5	Meyer-Vogelpohl	31
Botti Studio of Architectural Arts, Inc.	12	R. Geissler, Inc.	31
Church Restoration Group	9	Rambusch Lighting	9
CM Almy	25	Rohlf's Studio	4
Eickhof Columbaria, LLP	13	Stonecarpet	8
Faith & Form/IFRAA Awards Program	12	Verdin Company	13
J. Sussman, Inc.	32	Willet Studios	2



Entry to the Western Wall visitors' center is to the left of the pilasters.



Chambers of History

By JEREMY LANGFORD

In 2001, the Western Wall Heritage Foundation and its architect, Eliav Nachleli, commissioned me to create a series of monumental glass sculptures for the new visitors' center at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. My work was to be part of Judaism's holiest site, adjacent to the Al Aqsa Mosque (Islam's third holiest shrine after Mecca and Medina) and close to many of the sites sacred to Christianity. This was Mount Moriah, considered the literal and figurative bedrock of the great monotheistic faiths. Here Isaac was bound by Abraham, Jacob dreamed of a ladder joining heaven and earth, Solomon built the First Temple, the returning Jewish exiles from Babylon began the Second Temple completed by Herod. Here Jesus walked, and here Muslims believe Mohammed ascended to heaven. Virtually no other location on Earth holds such palpable religious, historical, and cultural significance for so many people.

My charge was to create eight glass sculptures portraying the history of the Jewish people, from its inception with the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob until the present-day return to Israel. The awesome responsibility of depicting this saga on this site at this time was, for me,

both the ultimate dream and the ultimate challenge. At a site where so much converges, the potential for discord is never far from the surface. I had to find an artistic language that would cut across boundaries, and to which a wide range of cultures could relate. I needed to exercise great sensitivity and discretion in order to avoid offending religious sensibilities, especially the Biblical prohibition against graven images. It was decided, therefore, to use an abstract form in order to symbolize figures from the Biblical narrative. Non-figurative sculpture, something very close to my heart, is a language that can be read on many levels. While not disturbing someone's internal image of, say, an Abraham or another Biblical figure, the lack of definitive form can still convey profound meaning.

I wanted to create my own artistic statement and imprint on this project, while respecting the power of more than three millennia of art, architecture, and life on the site. The place pulsates with the energy of all that has gone on there. The archeologist Abraham Solomon, who carried out the excavations, told me that when he returned home after a day excavating a Roman latrine his wife would complain to him of his odor. "Two-thousand-year-old 'organic matter'" was his explanation. From the sacred to the profane, the place is alive.

Site and sculpture had to work together. As the artist, I was simply adding another layer on the canvas of this site. The whole structure of

THE AUTHOR IS A SCULPTOR AND HEAD OF THE LANGFORD ART GLASS STUDIO BASED IN BNEI BRAK, ISRAEL.



'Destruction,' one of eight chambers in the sculpture ensemble. Photo: Max Richardson

the site is an organic work of art being formed over thousands of years. The result of my encounter is an incredible juxtaposition of ancient architecture and 21st-century art. I have worked all over the world, but this was the first time I had worked with architects from two millennia ago. King Herod was truly an amazing builder. It was an overwhelming experience to create sculptures in these ancient catacombs.

THE COLUMN

The project was to be situated in a series of subterranean chambers, the most recent from the 12th century, and the oldest a remnant of 3,000-year-old structures. In these eight chambers I was to place each of the eight sculptures. I felt that the sculptures must make their own statement and express the purpose for which they were created, yet render a feeling of belonging to the site. In order to achieve this harmony of ancient architecture and modern art, I regarded the chambers on the site as a "canvas" on which I would "paint" the sculptures. My medium was the glass column, a basic, simple form used throughout the exhibit.

The column was to be the symbol of the figures from the Biblical narrative and the Jewish people. I chose a column with straight, strong boundaries, yet at the same time, undefined; square, not round or triangular. Four sides, four lines united in form. A column for me is the development of line. Just as the line begins from a point and lengthens and thickens, so too the column in these sculptures is a basic building block of form and function.

The names of individuals from each historic period, from early Biblical times up to the present day, are carved using Hebrew lettering. Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism, assigns great significance to the Hebrew

alphabet. Each letter has its own intrinsic structure, a sacred geometry representing complex energy patterns and manifestations of spiritual dimensions.

GLASS

I used glass as a medium that could make its own statement, while complementing the architecture and archeology of the site. Glass transmits and reflects light and, in this case, accentuates the essence of the site while endowing these sculptures with deep meaning. I find glass to be a spiritual medium particularly befitting the theme of these sculptures. The production of glass requires a process of heat and pressure. Sand, basically a lifeless substance, is transformed into one of the most beautiful, versatile, and animated materials known to man. Strong yet elastic, transparent but with clear boundaries, glass glows and transmits light. The message expressed in glass is that of these sculptures: they portray the basic history of the Jewish people and can also be seen as a metaphor for transformation and hope. Glass allows a powerful expression of the ideas of the sculptures while blending into the ancient architecture and not overpowering it.

I used mainly the cold-glass method of sculpting and stacking glass. I chose this technique from many possibilities because of its potent aesthetic articulation and its inherent symbolism: layer upon layer of glass representing the layers of the long history of the Jewish people. This layering likewise speaks to the different civilizations, cultures, and history which have consecutively converged upon the site.

The sculptures are constructed from tens of thousands of pieces of specially treated glass that range in size from 160 centimeters to a huge free-form sculpted column of more than (Text continues on page 18)



*The column theme is seen in
'Jerusalem Kings and Prophets.'*

Photo: Ilya Malmikov



*Detail of Moses, Aaron,
and Miriam sculpture.*

Photo: Rona Varter



*'Patriarchs' takes the form
of a row of columns.*

Photo: Max Richardson



*'Destruction' symbolized
by broken columns.*

Photo: Ilya Malnikov



Photo: Ilya Melnikov

'Remembrance Wall,' expresses the material's layered quality.

9 meters in height and weighing more than 15 metric tons. The overall combined weight of glass used to create the artwork is almost 150 tons.

SCULPTURES OF BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

The sculptures are designed to represent different scenes from the Biblical narrative, from the early period of the patriarchs through to the return of the Jews to Israel today. The first room sets the tone, with carved glass columns. The columns then go through a process of building, destruction, and rebuilding, to a final long sculpted glass wall that leads out to the Western Wall itself.

The first sculpture sets up the language of the entire series – a straight glass column carved with the Hebrew lettering for "Jerusalem." In the background are etched verses from the Biblical Book of Chronicles, enumerating the generations from the beginning of mankind. From here begins a process of building, development, destruction, and suffering, and the process of returning to self, restoration. The sculptures start with the appearance of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the 12 tribes, the building of Jerusalem and the nine-meter column symbolizing the yearning to return to a spiritual state of fulfillment – the symbolic return to the land of Israel.

'Holocaust' is portrayed as a cracked glass block.

CHALLENGES AND 'NIGHTMARES'

I worked on the project for more than four years through many stages of design and redesign, coupled with arguments and highly sensitive coordination with archeologists, religious authorities, architects, and engineers. As in every artist's dream, a few small nightmares were thrown in too.

Working in a 3,000-year-old site, I had to take into account many engineering problems. The buildings from the Roman period were

very strong and sturdy but there were some later structures that caused major headaches. The main obstacles were logistics. The cold-work glass studio by the Western Wall was in operation for eight months, with 25 workers, both artisans and manual laborers. Some of the artisans worked on drilling, others on grinding and polishing, others on preparations for carving. Meanwhile there were still other artisans installing different sculptures in the tunnels, which were very narrow. Cranes or mechanical lifting devices could not be used. Laborers transported tons of glass into the chambers by hand. And there was I, in the middle of it all, running back and forth making sure everything was executed as I had originally envisioned it.

One of the most powerful sculptures, "Yearling," is a nine-meter-high sculpted glass column weighing more than 15 tons. It was to be placed in a 17-meter-high room that had originally been a Roman latrine. While excavating to lay concrete foundations to support the sculpture, archeologists discovered a complete, fully preserved ritual bath from the Second Temple. It was immediately decided that the sculpture should be suspended on steel girders in order to preserve this 2,200-year-old Herodian-era ritual bath. As work continued an extremely rare find was unearthed: a wall from the period of King Solomon's Temple. The result was a chamber spanning 3,000 years. One first views a 21st-century sculpture, then looks above at a ceiling from the time of the Crusades and walls from the Mameluke period. Below the sculpture sits the intact purification bath, while next to that is situated one of the only preserved walls from the time of King Solomon's Temple. ¹⁸

Photo: Ilya Melnikov





'Yearling' sculpture is suspended in a 27-meter-tall chamber.