

# UC Berkeley

## Places

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Solomon, Daniel

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# Beth Israel

## Memorial Chapel



On our first tour around Houston, Joyce Chesnick could not understand why I wanted to photograph those huge, amazing spaces along the freeways that are made from rows of little plastic pennants. Sometimes they sell cars in these places, sometimes boats, sometimes motor homes or other things.

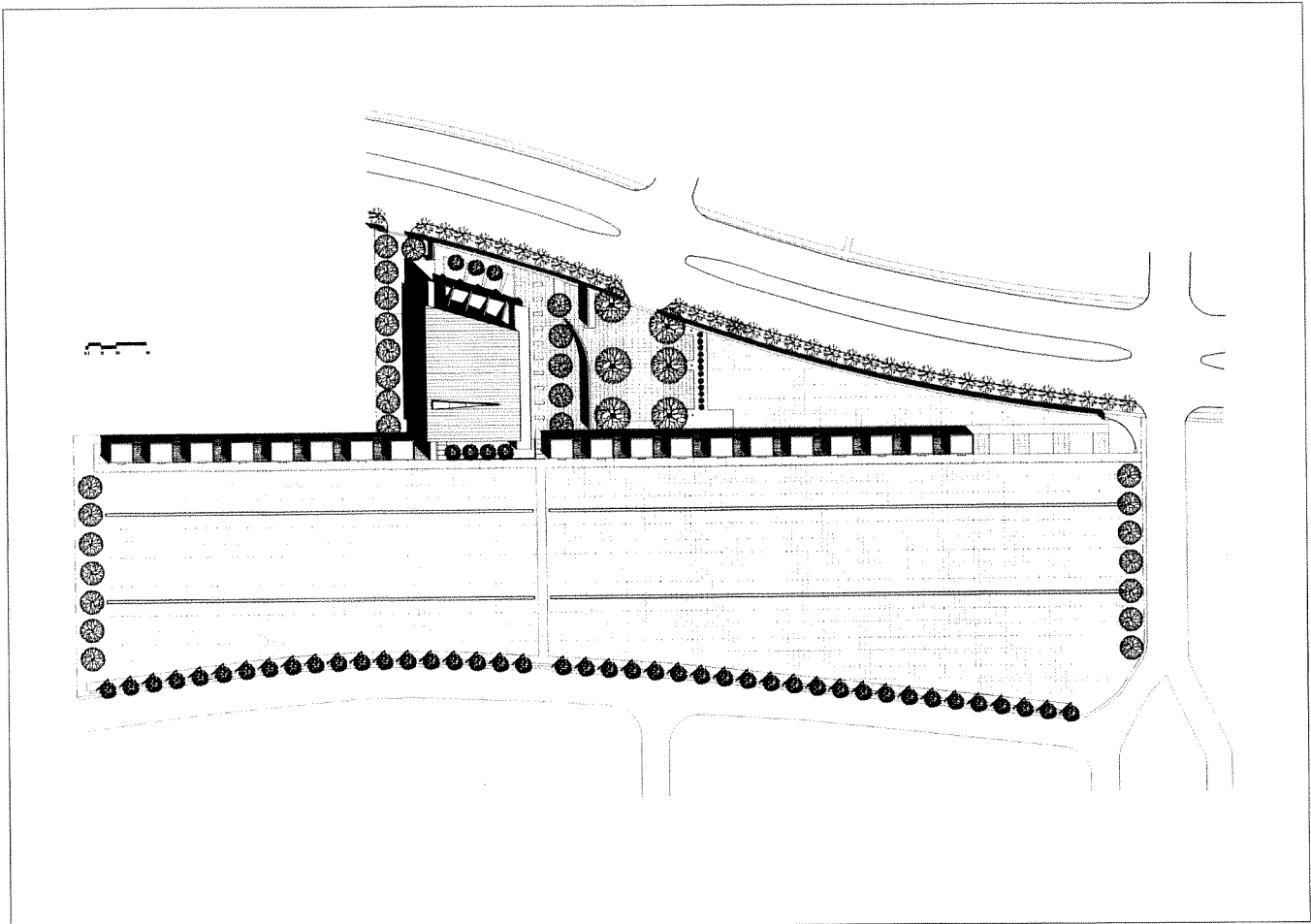
Joyce Chesnick was the chairperson of the building committee for the Beth Israel Memorial Chapel and became president of the congregation during its construction. She was the primary fund raiser and the chapel is very much her project. Our first tour around Houston was to visit places we thought would be relevant to our work — the Rothko Chapel, the Menil Museums, the Mies addition to the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, Ulrich Franzen's Alley Theater, the Rice campus, a quick trip to Forth Worth to see the Kimbell. This astonishing collection of modern monuments is a part of the culture of Texas. Plastic pennants are another part. This is the odd condition of Houston — a vast contingent landscape, flimsy, junky, spread to the horizon with these solid, serious, expensive modern buildings embedded like nuggets in mud.

And in Houston you drive. You drive and drive and drive everywhere for everything. And there is the weather. Hot, oppressive, sticky, god-awful heat, punctuated by stupendous rainfall. Even in Los Angeles it is not inconceivable to be on foot and outdoors occasionally, but not for most Houstonians. Sealed air-conditioned house to sealed mirror glass office, or school or gym or mall via air-conditioned car with tinted windows. You never even hear the out-of-doors, let alone feel it or smell it. When Joyce and her husband moved to a condo with operable windows, their doctor advised them to keep the windows sealed because their immune systems were so unused to outside air that they wouldn't be able to handle it.

Grand, modern monuments, plastic pennants, heat, driving and air-conditioning. How utterly different from my own life in benign little San Francisco, where the monuments are mostly retro and not so good, where the town fabric is precious and dearly loved, where one walks and exercises outdoors all year and where neither my house nor my office even have air conditioning. Clearly, the Beth Israel chapel was a task unlike any that I had ever done.

*facing page:* **Exterior view of Beth Israel chapel.**  
*Photo:* **Timothy Hursley.**

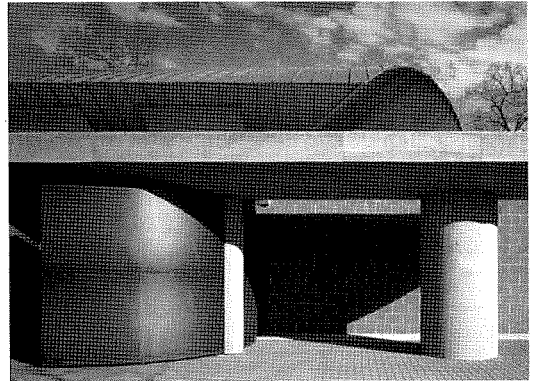
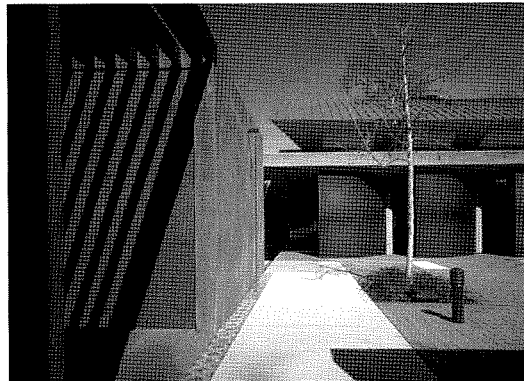
*this page:* **Site plan of chapel, row of mausolea and memorial garden.**  
*Graphic:* **Solomon, Inc.**



*top:* The idea of pluralism is expressed in the movable, permeable screens that act as filters through which people can enter the chapel.

*bottom:* Two exterior views of the funerary chapel exemplify the idea of abstraction.

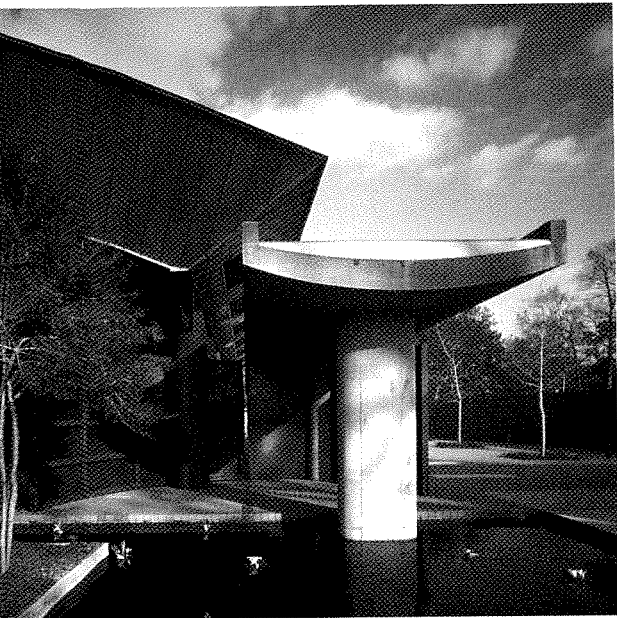
*Photos:* Timothy Hursley.



The initial idea for what the chapel might be came from Beth Israel's great rabbi, Samuel Karff. His genius, very much that of a Reform rabbi, is to grace the lives of his assimilated, and frequently affluent congregates with a dimension of spirituality. He sensed that there was something missing at Beth Israel and that the funerary Chapel could fill a void. He thought it appropriate for people who are always under glass to gather in the outdoors on the occasion of a funeral, to hear the birds and to touch the world that Houston in its technological wizardry has obliterated. His instinct for what was appropriate became the idea of the place. An outdoor chapel erasing the boundary between architecture and landscape resonated so clearly with the intention behind all the work that Gary Strang and I had done collaboratively for years and with Gary's own works.

The design was nurtured by a series of conversations with Rabbi Karff and by readings he recommended. Reflection on these conversations and readings gave shape to ideas or clusters of ideas that underlie the design. They are as follows:

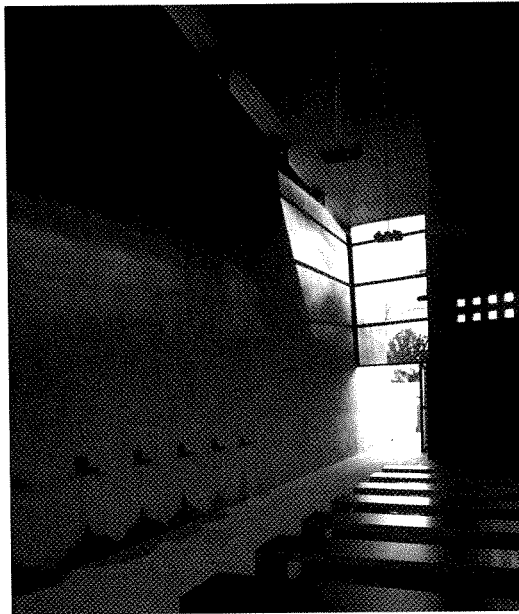
*The Idea of Boundary.* The boundary of the cemetery stands for the boundary of the congregation. It represents Beth Israel's role in the community and, by extension, Reform Judaism's relationship to secular society. Reform Jews are a distinct community, but a worldly and assimilated community, not a hermetic one. It is appropriate therefore that the edge between Beth Israel Cemetery and Woodlawn Cemetery be distinct but permeable, transparent but not absent. The tethered tree walk at the western edge of the cemetery gives expression to this idea of boundary.



*The Idea of Community.* In Jewish tradition one finds God best with others, not in isolation. Communal prayer, not personal meditation, is at the heart of Jewish worship. This idea shapes the chapel. Its seating plan is “L- shaped so that the people of the congregation are turned toward one another’s faces and voices. The entry is a courtyard for gathering and conversation.

*The Idea of Abstraction.* One of the most fundamental precepts that rings through Judaism is the commandment “Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image, nor any manner or likeness of any thing....” This most basic of Jewish texts aligns Judaism with the underpinnings of the modern movement in art and architecture and clearly against the great traditions of western religious architecture. Judaism rejects adornment and symbols. The absence of physical symbolism in the diaspora was theological, political and also practical because Jewish worship had to be portable. Historically, therefore, Jews have reverence not for things but for the qualities of things; not for the statue or what it represents, but for the solidity of the stone, its coolness. But mostly, Jews revere the word. It is appropriate that the only art in a Jewish place of worship should be the art of the calligrapher.

Since assimilated and sometimes affluent Reform Jews started making permanent buildings for worship in the nineteenth century there has been a quest for an architecture that looks Jewish. There have been few successes and many failures — mostly Islamic sources adorned with kitsch Mogen Davids or menorahs. Our attempt is to reflect more deeply on Jewish roots and to make an architecture of qualities: tactility, light, coolness, silence.



*left:* An overscaled gutter and a reflection pool introduce water to the outdoor experience.

*right:* Inside, the simplicity of the room is complemented by fountains along a wall, which are integrated with the reflection pool outside.

*Photos:* Timothy Hursley.

*Confrontation with Death.* Jewish observances of death stress acceptance and not denial. Acceptance of loss and finality is healing for the bereaved. The cosmetology and Muzak common in the American funeral industry are offensive to a Jewish sensibility. In our chapel’s design it is the casket itself, and the cart which bears it, that are the sole focus of attention in a room of complete simplicity.

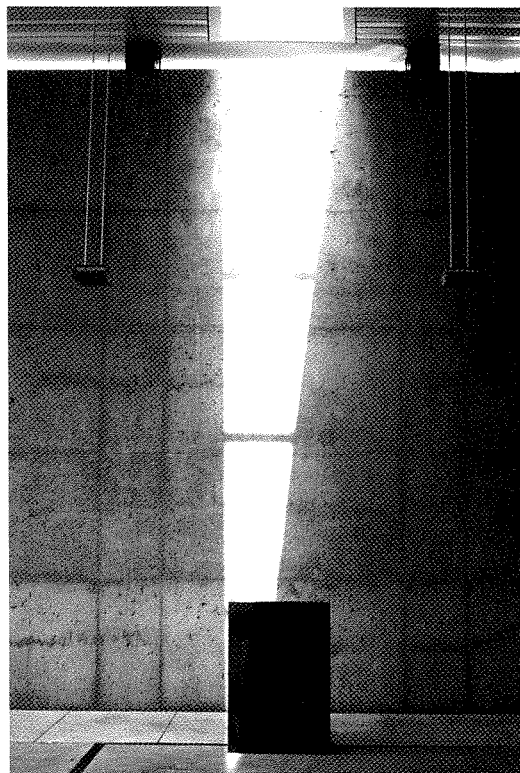
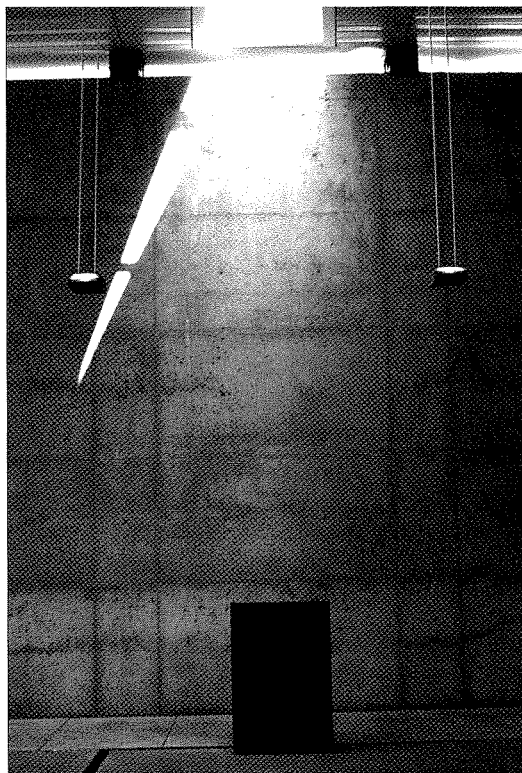
For Jews death is absolutely democratic and without hierarchy. All dead are equal and their number is infinite. The repetitive wall of crypts in our site design gives form to these concepts.

*The Idea of Pluralism.* Reform Judaism is remarkably non-authoritarian and non-dogmatic. It not only permits personal interpretation of tradition and ancient texts, it encourages it. Every Jew must find his or her own way to Jewishness. The authoritarian axial arrangements of many kinds of architecture are inexpressive of Reform Judaism’s pluralism and liberalism. The ways of entering our sanctuary are not axial, but permeable like a filter. There are many ways and people are at liberty to find them.

*Mourning as Accompaniment.* All parts of the funeral ceremony, from arrival, entry into the chapel, the service, the walk to graveside, interment and departure are all a part of the ritual. But caskets are unwieldy and there are many points at which the awareness of moving this heavy object could intrude upon the solemnity of the ritual. Our design includes a simple ceremonial cart bearing the casket from the hearse nearby to graveside and functioning as a pedestal for the casket during the service. Most importantly, the cart denotes the

Light enters the chapel  
and marks the passing  
of time.

Photo: Phil Rossington



ephemerality of the service compared to the duration of death. Mourning consists of taking the first steps with the departed on a journey that is infinite.

*Inmanence of God, Finding God in the World.* Judaism is not pantheism, and that monotheism is not monism. Jews do not worship stones like transcendentalists in the mountains or Zen monks in their garden. This is an important fact that doesn't make the architect's job easier because architects of all people, are inclined to worship stones. But even though in Judaism we acknowledge that stones are not God, they are his work.

This idea — gaining access to God through an intensified experience of the physical has particular poignancy in Houston at the end of the twentieth century. A reasserting of tradition within Judaism and a general longing for spirituality in our times have come about through the collapse of our faith in enlightenment rationalism and the idea of progress. Curiously, Houston is perhaps the world's most spectacular symbol of modernist optimism. From the Port of Houston, to the freeways, the Medical Center and the Museums, Houston is a city built with incredible vigor and real belief in the messianic age of the technocrat — life made better by the car, the air-conditioner, the elevator and reflective glass.

Our aspirations for the chapel are twofold and paradoxical: to be a part of what Houston is and to be what Houston is not — to have made a small addition to Houston's great collection of modern architecture, and at the same time to have created a respite from that very triumph of modernism. Coolness made by shade and breezes; the time of day, the rain, the seasons memorialized by architecture and landscape; berries planted so the cardinals will come.

The Lurianic mystics talk of "divine sparks" that remain in nature after creation. Religious experience is the elevation of these "divine sparks" to their redemptive unity with God. They write also about "the rumor of angels." Our hope for the chapel and cemetery is that it contains within it divine sparks and the rumor of angels.