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Architecture

## A Redesign Brings a Congregation Closer Together

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Port Chester

FOR 50 years, the members of Congregation Kneses Tifereth Israel debated the merits of their building, which looked beautiful in architecture books yet did not always meet the congregation's needs.

But as long as the architect [Philip Johnson](#), who designed the building, was alive, debate was all the members could do. The congregation had agreed not to alter the building without the architect's permission.

That also meant they could not tamper with a large work by Ibram Lassaw, the abstract expressionist sculptor, that dominated the bimah, the stage at the front of the sanctuary.

But after the two died — Mr. Johnson in 2005, at 98, and Mr. Lassaw in 2003, at 90 — the congregation was finally free to make changes, which, according to Rabbi Jaymee Alpert, were required to meet the needs of a modern congregation.

Mr. Johnson's synagogue, a single room about 140 feet long and 50 feet wide, did not lend itself to intimate religious and educational gatherings. The walls of the rectangular building are made of concrete blocks; gaps between the blocks contain 286 pieces of colored glass, which light up in succession as the sun moves through the sky. A canopy appears to float over the sanctuary, giving the illusion that the roof has disappeared. The effect is like being in a tent — perhaps a reminder of 40 years' wandering in the desert.

But for all the building's beauty, its history was clouded. Mr. Johnson had designed it, by all accounts, to atone for supporting Nazi sympathizers in the 1930s. According to Robert Walker, a third-generation member of the congregation, Albert A. List, an industrialist and influential Jewish philanthropist, was interested in working with Mr. Johnson in the early 1950s, but not until the architect removed the taint of anti-Semitism.

Mr. Johnson had a design for a church in Greenwich that had not been built, and Kneses Tifereth Israel needed a building, so a match was made. The synagogue opened in 1956.

Now apparently in Mr. List's good graces, Mr. Johnson went on to design the Albert and Vera List Art Building at [Brown University](#), which was completed in 1971.

Because the synagogue's interior is a large single room, it did not always function as congregants had hoped. It could accommodate large crowds on the major Jewish holidays, but the rest of the year, the smaller groups felt dwarfed by the 40-foot-high space. And there was no way to divide the room so that separate functions — say a service and a class — could be held simultaneously.

The nature of worship at Kneses Tifereth Israel and other congregations was changing. According to Michael Berkowicz, an architect and expert on synagogue design, people half a century ago expected the rabbi to lead

prayers “from on high.” These days, he said, “congregants prefer to see the rabbi as being on their level and the process of prayer as unifying.”

But the Johnson-designed synagogue had a high bimah that made it impossible for the rabbi to be just one worshiper among many.

Behind the bimah was Mr. Lassaw’s large sculpture, consisting of hundreds of interlocking pieces of metal. Though Mr. Lassaw called the sculpture “Creation” and described it as “a symphony structured in space rather than sound,” some congregants saw barbed wire, which reminded them of Nazis, which in turn made them wonder about Mr. Johnson’s intentions, Mr. Berkowicz said.

During lengthy discussions about ways to change the building, some congregants proposed subdividing the space, either by building permanent walls or adding a mezzanine. But those proposals were rejected, because of cost and out of respect for Mr. Johnson’s original conception. “Whatever you think of the building, it’s an important piece of architecture,” said Mr. Berkowicz, who was hired by the congregation to oversee the changes. “You had to respect the volume of the space and the quality of the light.”

The forward-facing pews were replaced with U-shaped seating, so that “you’re not just looking at a performance,” Mr. Berkowicz said. The bimah was also lowered, so that the rabbi and the congregation could be closer to each other.

But to lower the bimah, the wall behind it had to be enlarged. After removing the Lassaw sculpture, the congregation installed large panels of Jerusalem stone where the sculpture had stood. “Many congregants said the Lassaw just didn’t speak to them,” Mr. Berkowicz said. “It was too vague in its message.”

The [Jewish Museum](#), on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, agreed to buy the Lassaw sculpture, and several other Lassaw and Johnson items on the Bimah, for \$60,000. Fred Wasserman, a curator at the museum, said the pieces would be displayed along with older examples of synagogue art from Europe and the Middle East, helping to tell the story of synagogue design over the ages.

In Port Chester, that story is still being written.