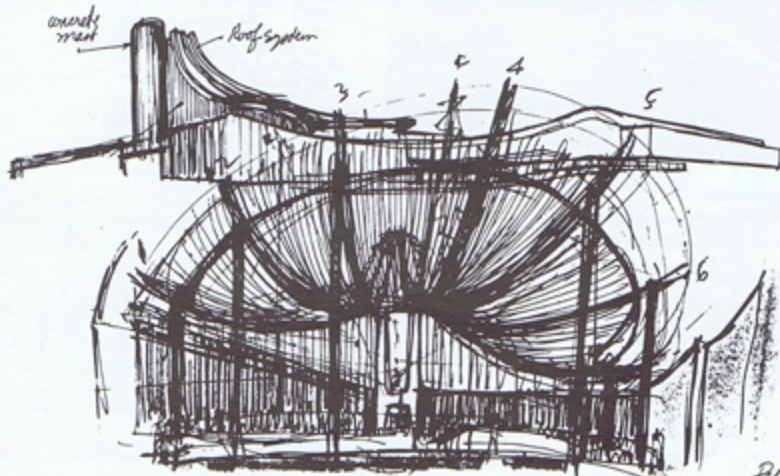


# FAITH & FORM

JOURNAL OF THE INTERFAITH FORUM ON RELIGION, ART AND ARCHITECTURE  
A PROFESSIONAL INTEREST AREA OF THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS VOL. XXVII WINTER 1993-94



*Beth El/Maimonides Sanctuary as Tabernacle*

FAB



# THE THREE IN ONE

By Bassel Samaha

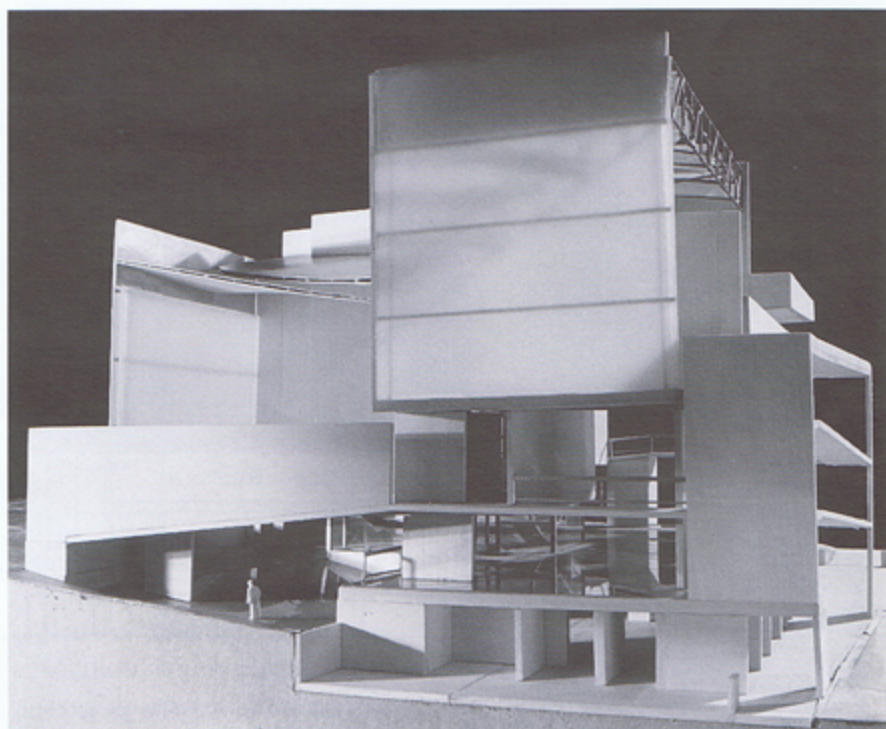


The church was one of the few institutions of the original culture capable of re-establishment in the new land. Also, since the ethnic church is the counterpart of non-ethnic institutions of the same order, it would automatically receive identical formal recognition, although of course its status position may not be on the same level. Furthermore, while ethnic separatism is not very highly valued in our culture, religious distinctiveness is allowable—even esteemed in a way because it is “American.”<sup>1</sup>

Minority religious groups have historically experienced difficulty sustaining independent places of worship in the United States. If such groups are able to organize a congregation at all, worship is oftentimes held in the spaces of other faiths: in the sanctuary, when not in use, or the basement, parish hall, etc., or in spaces leased to the groups by secular institutions: a Masonic Lodge, for example.

The importance of organized religion among minorities in the United States is considerable. The church, the temple and the mosque serve not only as places of religious importance, but also as the soul of communities organized around common ethnicity and language.

The power of the religious institution, as a source of community identity, is evidenced by the phenomenon of *cross-de-*



The “three in one” model.

*nomination*. This practice is exhibited when the members of a faith without a church attend the services of another faith because a common ethnicity, language and/or culture are shared with that congregation.<sup>2</sup>

A similar phenomenon can be observed at religious conventions. Members of the same ethnicity, but of different faiths, will oftentimes outnumber the religious for whom the convention was intended. Drawn by a desire to socialize among people with similar backgrounds, the religiously unaffiliated group transforms the convention into a cultural event.<sup>3</sup>

Given the experiences described

above, a project is proposed to serve the needs of three such religious minority groups: the Maronites, Melkites (both of whom are affiliated with the Catholic Church), and Greek Orthodox. Although each group identifies with a particular Eastern Christian faith, they all identify ethnically as Arab, share the Arabic language and the culture of the Levant.

The site is that of an existing Arab Greek Orthodox church in the suburban town of Orinda, near San Francisco. The congregation has outgrown the existing nondescript building serving as its church but, as of yet, has been unable to replace it with a more suitable structure. The nearest Maronite church is over one

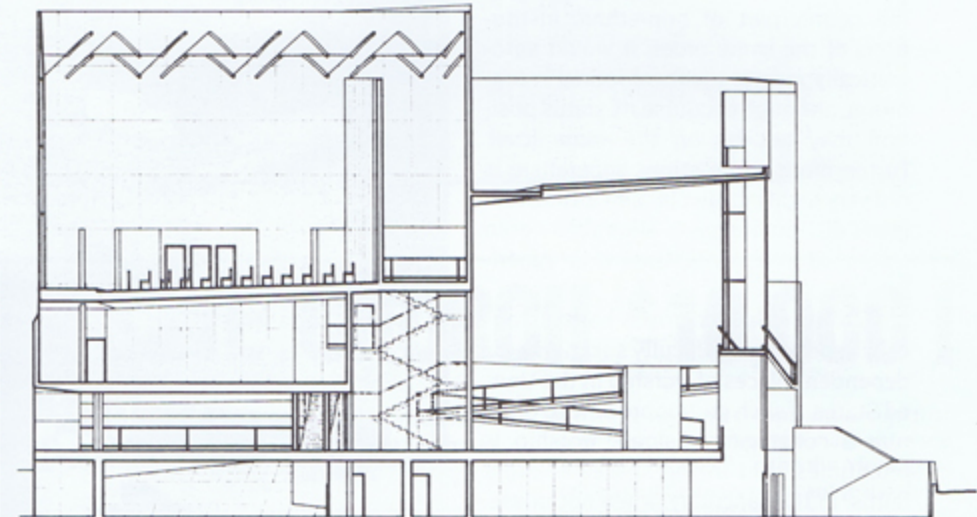
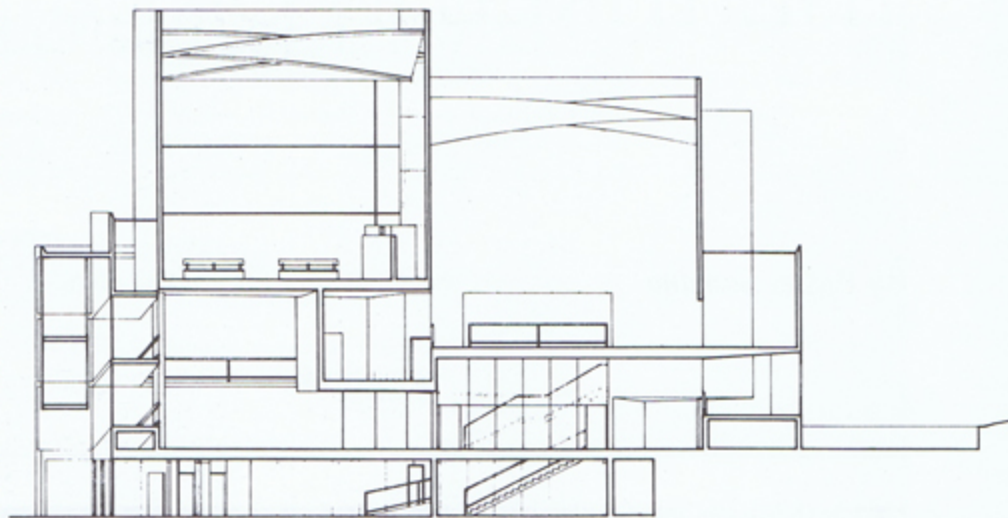
BASSEL SAMAHA received his B.A. in Architecture from U.C. Berkeley and his Master's from The Graduate School of Design, Harvard University. This article is an edited part of his Master's thesis, “The Sacred and the Secular,” which was awarded the James Templeton Kelly (Thesis) Prize by Harvard in June 1993. He currently practices architecture in San Francisco.



hour's drive away in the city of Milbrae. Equally distant, in the city of Fremont, a Melkite congregation has recently established a church after many years without regular organized services in the Bay Area. Instances of cross-denomination by Melkites are common at the Orthodox church, and at least one Maronite family regularly attends services there.<sup>4</sup>

By pooling the resources of the three groups, the project proposes the removal of the existing building and replacing it with a structure which provides for three independent sanctuaries. In addition to the private sanctuaries, a series of spaces is shared among the three Faiths: a baptistery, Sunday school classrooms/day-care center, a kitchen and a parish hall. The project is conceived as a complex which would serve the needs of the Christian Arab community of the San Francisco Bay Area.

The project is conceptually motivated by the act of placing three sanctuaries in the same building and the understanding that such an act transcends perception of the project as simply a religious structure. The fact that no one faith can



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lay exclusive claim to the project suggests that the building can not be understood as a religious building per se, but rather, as a building within which three groups practice their faith. It can be said; therefore, that the building has dual natures: one that is *sacred*, which dwells within the sanctuaries and one that is *secular*, which governs the building as an entity. The use of the term *secular* is linked to the phenomenon of cross-denomination described earlier: religious interaction among differing faiths motivated by secular factors: ethnicity, culture, and language. The building serves both, as a place of worship and as the spiritual and physical center of a community.

The project's focus is the *sanctuaries*: three identical rectangular volumes that seem to hover above the complex. The liturgical requirements and the traditional

spatial qualities within the particular sanctuaries are achieved through the mutation of the original "ideal" rectangular volumes, as the sanctuaries engage and fuse with one another. The articulation of the glass and steel ceilings varies for each sanctuary and can only be experienced when one is actually inside the sacred spaces. The intention is to produce three distinct spaces that reserve the experience of their spatial quality for the private gathering of their respective faiths.

From the exterior; however, the sanctuaries are indistinguishable from one another, their religious identity hidden behind identical screens of sand-blasted glass. The exterior of the building defers to its secular nature and from that vantage point the sanctuaries read as identical, hierarchically "equal," spaces. To the



unfamiliar and/or casual observer, the sanctuaries maintain a level of incomprehensibility.

The approach to the building is inspired by the pilgrim quality of the parishioners' journey: most of whom travel a considerable distance to spend just an hour or two at the site. Rather than pave or level any significant portion of the site, automobiles park directly on the sloping earth along side either of two pedestrian walkways, which begin at a small plaza in front of the building and project deep into the site. The walkways maintain the plaza as their horizontal plane of reference; consequently, the slope of the site forces one walkway into the earth as a *channel* and the other above ground level as a *pier*. The forced axis from the automobile to the building gathers the congregations in a random but mutual religious procession towards the building. The building, as a framed object in the distance, heightens the parishioners' sense of journey and of destination.

From the plaza one can enter the building directly at the ground level, where the classrooms, offices, and kitchen are located, or by an exterior stair up to the secular hall (*piano nobile*). From within the building, the parishioners are led from the relative darkness and compression of the ground level up to the light filled secular hall via a broad ramped depression in the hall. More than just a vast space for social occasions, the secular hall is the focal point at which those entering the sanctuaries, those exiting and those socializing simultaneously encounter one another.

Access to the sanctuaries is up a series of ramps which originates at two corners of the hall. The baptistery is located at a node along the ramp overlooking the secular hall. The procession that leads the just-baptized, from the baptistery to his/her sanctuary, is celebrated in full view of the hall. Co-religionists and others alike are invited, if only visually, to participate in the event.

Exiting the sanctuaries is down either of the two staircases which ultimately land at the center of the secular hall. In a gesture of subtle voyeurism, a landing overlooks a nave and in return the nave looks up and across a staircase to that of another sanctuary. Just prior to entering and upon exiting the sanctuaries, the three faiths are confronted with one another. In no other part of the building is the line between sacred "private" space and secular "communal" space so

blurred. Surprise is replaced by intrigue as the parishioners realize their proximity to the sacred space of another faith. The opaqueness of the sanctuaries proper, however, is maintained at all times. Casual glances exchanged among the faiths are intended to heighten their consciousness of one another and to celebrate the uniqueness of their assembly but never to threaten the privacy of the sanctuary. □

## REFERENCES

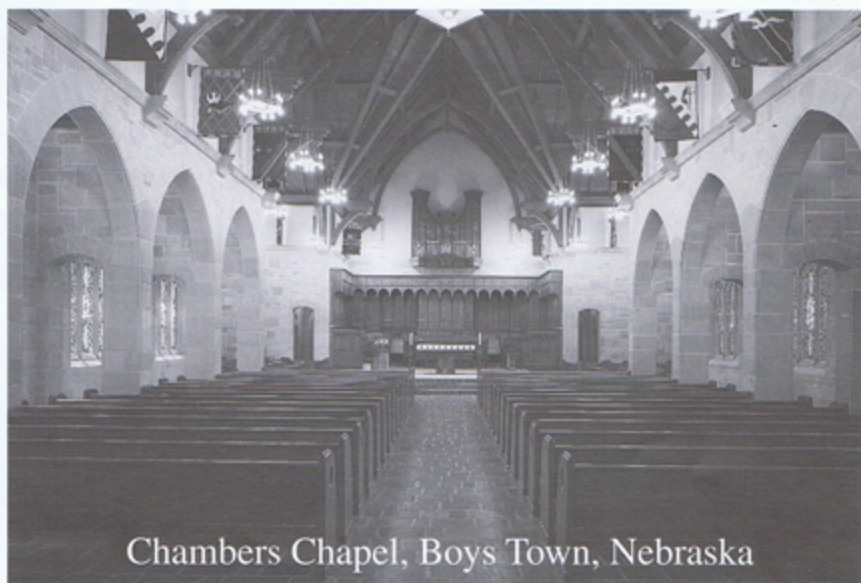
<sup>1</sup> Marshal Sklare, "The Function of Ethnic Churches: Judaism in the United States," In J.M. Yinger, *Religion, Society and the Individual* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), p. 451.

<sup>2</sup> Philip M. Kayal and Joseph M. Kayal, *The Syrian-Lebanese in America* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1975), p. 173.

<sup>3</sup> Kayal, p. 174

<sup>4</sup> Information obtained in the interview with Father Anthony Hughes, Pastor, St. John Orthodox Church, Orinda, CA, May 1992.

Photo: Len Allington



Chambers Chapel, Boys Town, Nebraska

Keeler/Raynor/Hinz, Architects P.C. – Bellevue, NE  
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