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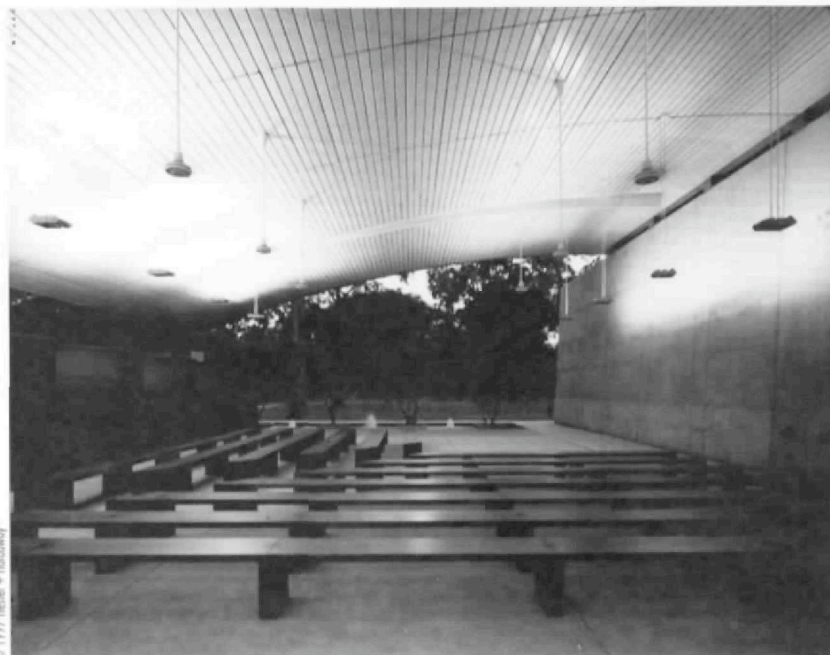
P R O L E R C H A P E L a t W o o d l a w n C e m e t e r y



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Proler Chapel, Solomon Inc., architects, 1997.

B r u c e W e b b

“Only a small part of architecture belongs to art: the tomb and the monument.”

Adolf Loos

This has been the year of the chapel in Houston. Architects Daniel Solomon and Gary Strang of Solomon Inc. have created the environmentally attentive Proler Chapel in the newly partitioned Beth Israel section of Woodlawn Cemetery. And two distinctive chapels dedicated earlier in the charmed St. Thomas–Menil district — Philip Johnson's St. Basil's Chapel at the University of St. Thomas and François de Menil's sophisticated encapsulation of a Byzantine fresco — both received significant critical notice. The *Houston Press* even created a special chapel category for its annual "Best of Houston" issue and named the Proler Chapel the popular favorite. Each of Houston's three new chapels pursues a different muse with determination bordering on the paradigmatic. None does so more unabashedly than Johnson's, which fills the empty north end of the meticulous, Miesian academic mall at St. Thomas (Philip Johnson, 1958) with a wildly figurative building that seems to question the timelessness and universality of the architect's earlier work for the university, at least when it comes to expressing the spiritual dimension in contemporary terms. The other two chapels go about their business in a quieter manner, less concerned with formalistic transformations and post-rational geometries than with the Zen of construction.

In the Judaic rejection of representation given in the second commandment: "Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image nor any manner of likeness of any thing. . . ." (Exodus 20:4) Daniel Solomon found the invocation for a building that is starkly abstract and representative of an intuitive spirituality. The centerpiece of the three-acre Jewish cemetery garden in Woodlawn Cemetery, the Proler Chapel, assembles a concept of place as a gathering of sensuous phenomena that emphasizes the thermal properties of materials and site. Indeed, the entire structure can be thought of as an instrument of perception, enhancing and making visible a philosopher's cosmology consisting of air (breezes), fire (the sun), earth (the masonry construction), and water (the pools, water taps, and oversized gutter structure). The massive, battered north wall evokes a feeling of coolness that is enhanced by water trickling from thin finger pipes tapped into the body of the wall, recalling how spring water issues from a rocky hillside. On the south side of the gathering space, a series of curved aluminum screens forms an

entry arcade that both admits the breezes and represents them in undulating, perforating forms that seem to billow and dance.

A large, shallow, arching roof, the most prominent feature of the chapel, makes an iconic response to climate conditions at the site. The north-south section portrays a textbook example of a wind scoop, designed to pull southern breezes in under the canopy and out through the slit where the roof crosses the north wall. A thin slit in the hollow roof canopy admits a narrow shaft of sunlight that strikes the concrete wall behind the place where the casket is placed during services, emphasizing the sheltering function of the roof and distilling the sunlight into a symbolic contributor to the interior sensorium. Solomon also dramatizes the rain-sheltering aspect of the roof with the oversized gutter, which also serves as canopy for the entry arcade. Rainwater cascades from the roof into the gutter, then pours into a pool, where it animates the reflected light entering the chapel.

Solomon and Strang's design emphasizes the importance of comfort as a part of place-making in the oppressively hot Gulf Coast summers, but the low-tech environmental tempering may prove to be more psychologically than physically satisfying. Provisions for evaporative cooling, a phenomenon that occurs when warm breezes pass over water, may not, finally, be well suited to Houston's humidity-laden climate. And the efficacy of the breeze-scooping roof has yet to be proven. Equally problematic may be the orientation of the concrete wall on the north side of the pavilion, which leaves the west open to prevailing winter winds. Still, overhead paddle fans suspended from the ceiling should keep the air moving, and the vented-cavity roof structure, a device that should be more widely emulated, will ameliorate the heat load from the relentless summer sun.

There is a connection between the material composition of the chapel and the way architecture students, particularly in their early years of study, are often taught to consider the material elements of construction in abstract terms as having essential properties such as thickness and thinness, heaviness and lightness, static and dynamics, ephemerality and permanence. Students learn to represent these properties in paper or wooden models, which depend less on material representation than on material behaviors. The translation of these pedagogical

techniques into the verities of real construction is a step few architects master, since real construction doesn't behave with the relative pliability or ease of technical and aesthetic joining of studio materials. Often the differences between a thin wall or a thick wall becomes a matter of greater or lesser hollowness between thin sheets of a constructed diaphragm in which a homogeneity of surface appearance neutralizes materiality so that the actual building resembles the studio model.

The architects' approach establishes a direct correlation between abstract qualities of roof and wall and real construction expressed as a kind of architectonic lexicon, where materials are used as the equivalent of morphemes in a poem. The Proler Chapel represents a special case of architectural construction, where enclosure and boundary are metaphorically defined in distinct elements of walls, screens, and roof gathered rather than joined. The heavy, battered concrete wall belongs to the earth and embodies constancy and stasis; the canopy hovers like a puffy air foil; and the curved, perforated screens contribute an active, lyrical presence. Wooden benches and the wooden screen that hides the utility core fill the enclosure with a warmer, organic character. Like the elements in a constructivist composition, these separate components retain their essential properties rather than surrendering them through material joining.

The Beth Israel Cemetery site, outside the Loop and a few blocks north of the Ikea superstore, is inauspicious. Behind the lining of freeway buildings, in the midst of a low-density suburban residential area, the large Woodlawn Cemetery tract is a contrasting respite of orderly premises under a canopy of mature oak trees. The other major building on the grounds, a neocolonial mortuary, resembles a house that has escaped from the surrounding subdivisions. The Beth Israel portion of the property is encumbered by a large water tank and slough located on the edge of the building site and by noisy traffic on four-lane Antoine Drive just behind to the east. The elements of the chapel are positioned to screen out views of the utility structure and the sights and sounds of the adjacent highway.

In defining Beth Israel Cemetery within the larger Woodlawn precinct, Solomon created a figural landscape of tightly organized elements that extend the chapel into the site through a series of monolithic, Neoplatonic mausolea con-

structed of concrete with overlaid metal trellises arranged in a measured north-south progression parallel to the cemetery's internal road. The stasis of these weighty objects, true houses of the dead, contrasts with the vigorous tactility of the chapel, a place for the living. In front of the walk along the internal road, a stand of new trees is tethered by cables to tensioned poles. The garden's composition is a figure of precise and coherent order, as simple as a parti diagram. Strong formal order is a response to the need to give clarity to Beth Israel's small but distinct place within and apart from the larger cemetery grounds.

But there is a larger mission — to create a sanctum as a polemical act of withdrawal and contemplation within the modern world. Solomon cites Rabbi Eugene Borowitz's book, *Renewing the Covenant*, which describes "how the longings for spirituality in our times have come about through the collapse of faith in enlightenment, rationalism, and progress." "Houston," Solomon continues, "is perhaps the world's most spectacular symbol of modernist optimism, . . . 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."¹ For Solomon, the chapel is a clearing not only in the forest but also in a technologically saturated world. In his book *Rebuilding*, Solomon writes about how the making of things and the making of places are often two different and contradictory endeavors: "The critical object may be a treasure, even a necessity, but critical objects do not address, inherently cannot address, the ravages of placelessness."²

In the Proler Chapel and cemetery gardens the architect has managed to resolve this dilemma by first reducing the object to fundamental elements and then using them to embody the poetics of place making as both constructed reality and transcendent metaphor. As the Beth Israel Cemetery grows with an expanding matrix of mausolea and maturing greenery, the Proler Chapel will become embedded in its own precise landscape — a place that embodies a sense of what it means to dwell in nature. ■

1. Eugene B. Borowitz, *Renewing the Covenant: A Theology for the Postmodern Jews*. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991).

2. Daniel Solomon, *Rebuilding* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992).