

Feature

Israel, depicted as a nation among nations

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The Israel Pavilion, on the other hand, evoked no reference to European antecedents. Designed by Israeli architects A. Sharon, D. Reznick and E. Sharon, in association with the Montreal firm of Rosen, Caruso and Vecsei, the exterior surface was formed by masses of stacked cubes. This design is curiously reminiscent of Moshe Safdie's Habitat, his premiere project built for Expo, which was formed with stacked boxes of apartment units. Safdie has said that his work is very much inspired by place. His early years were spent in Israel, where homes in Arab villages stacked on hillsides, bathed in the Mediterranean light, formed an enduring image in his memory. The cubist surface of the Israel Pavilion would have allowed for a strong play of light and shadow, even in the more subdued northern light of Montreal.

The planners of the Pavilion of Judaism were far more concerned with content than with form. They sought to develop a theme that would explore the essence of Judaism while expressing universal values. Two verses from *Pirkei Avot* (*The Ethics of our Fathers*) provided the thematic and organizational matrix. The Judaic tenets of Torah, avodah and gemilut chasadim – learning, worship and good deeds – were paired with the universal concepts of emet, din and shalom – truth, justice and peace. These three major topics were to underscore an overarching “message to the world” of “unity of purpose and diversity of thought.”

Promotional material heralded the mission of the Pavilion of Judaism. “Modest in size, it bears the eternal radiance of an ancient and universal heritage whose ethical principles have advanced the moral evolution of mankind.”

The exhibit components included works of art, ceremonial objects, books, illustrative texts, photographs and films. Other sections provided space for changing exhibits of Jewish Canadian artists, and a 125-seat amphitheatre featured continuous programming on Jewish contributions to the arts, science, letters and music, all planned by program director, Igor Kushinsky.

The city's various congregations co-operated to provide daily evening services. The glassed partitions of the synagogue perimeter allowed non-Jews, including Catholic clergy, to observe Jewish services. Most prominent among the Catholic visitors was Paul-Émile Cardinal Léger. As Rabbi Shuchat summarized it, the continuous presence, participation and conversations with non-Jews “justified the whole effort.”

While the architecture of the Israel Pavilion could perhaps be interpreted as having portrayed an abstract sense of place by capturing the brilliant quality of Mediterranean light, the exhibit contents were an explicit depiction of the rebirth of the ancient Jewish homeland and the accomplishments of the brief span of this modern nation.

The Israeli Consulate released a description of the exhibit; the first section provides the clearest statement of purpose and intent: “The visitor will enter the pavilion through a hall dedicated to Ancient Israel. Archeological exhibits, centred around one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, will express the fact that this country was the cradle of the Jewish nation... From the entrance hall, a ramp will lead to the upper level; on its walls, monumental figures will express the longing for the return to Zion of the Jews in the lands of the Dispersal and their unshakable belief that it will come to pass. The last figures of this frieze will be shown already embarking for the Promised Land. Facing them will be a large vista of the country as they found it: no longer a land flowing with milk and honey, but a bleak expanse of eroded hills and malarial swamps.”

The exhibit proceeded to illustrate the sacrifices of the early chalutzim (Israeli pioneers), the destruction of European Jewry, and the emergence from darkness “into the bright light of the next hall, expressing the establishment of the State of Israel.” The challenges of nation building and integrating the multitudes of new immigrants were presented against depictions of considerable achievements in agriculture, industry, technology and culture. Finally, Israel was depicted as a nation among nations dedicated to assisting countries in the developing world. The closing statement was a message from Isaiah “stressing Israel's fervent desire for peace.” Another level portrayed the young nation as a destination for tourism and the source of quality modern products.

Did the presence of two Jewish pavilions at Expo 67 contribute to or lend confusion to an understanding of Jews and Judaism? An interesting source of critique came from the Reconstructionist movement. An editorial in its bi-weekly journal asked the question, “Why two pavilions?” It said: “The Israel Pavilion, obviously, will repre-

sent the State of Israel, which belongs in the family of nations. The Pavilion of Judaism will represent the Jewish religion; it will ‘complement the exhibit of the Christian churches of Canada.’ The non-Jew is hence likely to arrive at the conclusion that the State of Israel has nothing to do with the Jewish religion, and the Jewish religion is unrelated to the State of Israel.”

The article quotes Montreal journalist Charles Lazarus who feared that “the Pavilion of Judaism... may well run into argument over the decision to emphasize the spiritual and non-secular, rather than dealing with Jewish life, history and culture in its broadest aspects along basically secular lines.”

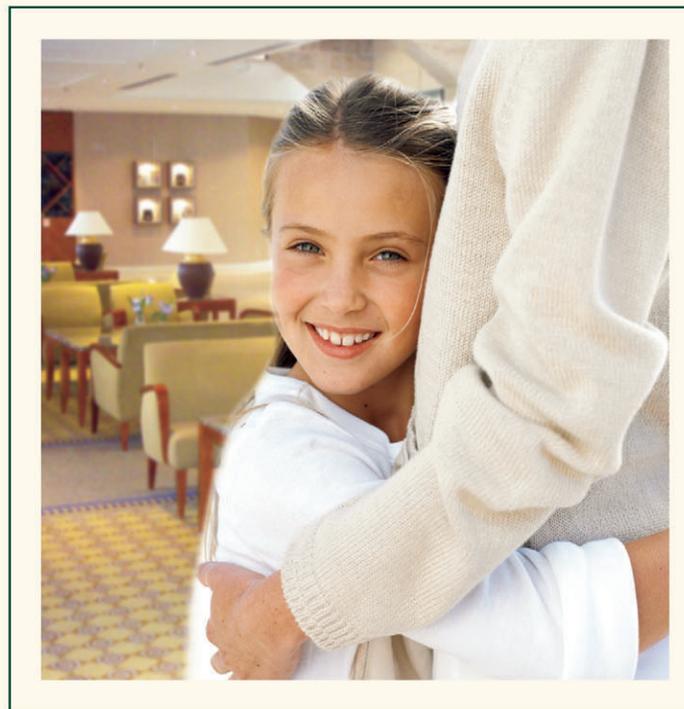
The abstract values of Torah, avodah, and gemilut chasadim would be better illustrated, the writer contends, through a “display of the activities of Jewish federations, of the United Jewish appeal, [and] of the Jewish involvement in social action...”

“From present indications, the two pavilions seem to us dramat-

ic evidence of the tragic quandary in which all Jews find themselves. They do not yet know what they are. They have not yet thought through the role of the Israeli nation in the total context of Jewish existence. They have not pondered sufficiently the place of religion in Jewish civilization. Tossed from one crisis to another, they have not achieved a consensus regarding their status in the world. And when an Expo comes along, they must content themselves with accepting the categories of the non-Jewish world, and fit themselves into those: that of the church, that of nation, like all the other nations.”

Nevertheless the article ends on a congratulatory note to “Canadian Jewry on a valiant effort” and urges “all our readers to visit the pavilions – both of them.”

Sara Ferdman Tauben has an MA in Judaic studies at Concordia University, with thesis study on the social and architectural history of Montreal's early synagogues.

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