



Finegold Alexander Architects completes Temple Beth Tzedek; New “Sanctuary in the Woods” unites two Congregations

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Amherst, NY Finegold Alexander Architects (FA) celebrates the completion of Temple Beth Tzedek. Inspired by the metaphorical connection to the wooden synagogues of Poland and the congregation’s wish to worship in the woods, the design conceived an all wood structure, the sanctuary having an exposure to the East and the wooded site.

The project represents the merger of two conservative congregations, Congregation B’nai Shalom (CBS) and Temple Beth Tzedek (TBT), and the new 10,210 s/f addition, including a 300-seat sanctuary, community court, and administration space links to the existing CBS building, whose spaces were repurposed for assembly.

“Though modest in size, their vision for their new home was not, and we aspired to achieve that in the openness of their worship space and the connection to the outdoors which is boundless,” said Tony Hsiao, principal and director of design, at FA. “We took to heart their mission to foster a nurturing, inclusive and caring community in the design of this synagogue.”

The wooden building is inherently sustainable—wood has the lowest embodied carbon of major structural materials. Large arches shape the Sanctuary and make direct reference to the post and beam interiors of the Polish synagogues and were constructed by Unalam of Unadilla, NY—a sixth-generation family business. The exterior torrefied wood cladding came from Canada, and the torrefication treatment – a careful drying and reinjection of controlled moisture into the wood, provides a decades long warranty – the beauty of the cladding is the wood itself. The interior

surfaces and liturgical furniture are made of white ash, supporting the luminosity of the eastern wall and surrounding clerestory windows. The Ark is designed to admit natural light through translucent glass.

“12 glass panels from the original TBT synagogue were relocated to this East wall above the Ark, an interpretation of the polychromatic interiors of the synagogues’ historic antecedents,” said Rebecca Berry, AIA, LEED AP, president and sustainability director at FA, noting that a connection to TBT’s former space was important. “The glazed wall brings the congregation into the woods—both visually and metaphorically. Now they can feel connected to the natural world while focused on worship and study.”

“The eastern European, and particularly Polish, synagogues were almost entirely destroyed in the Holocaust,” said Moe Finegold, FAIA, senior principal. “Mostly square in plan, their wooden exteriors quietly blended into their surroundings; their interiors, however, were a riot of color and text. We wanted to create a contemporary synagogue that honored those traditions—hence a synagogue constructed of and clad in—wood.”

“While the congregation desired to worship in the woods,” said Berry, “wetlands, tree conservation and site restraints rendered locating the synagogue within the trees impossible.

The community court, a space conceived of by FA and integrated into all our synagogue designs, is as a gathering space before or after services, and in this instance, due to space restrictions, combines the library, gift shop, Judaic collection, and memorial plaques together with space for study , creating a vibrant, meaningful arrival. The books and memorial walls face each other surrounding the congregants with a special texture of memory and celebration. The whole structure is surrounded by a garden wall establishing a sacred precinct and featuring plantings that reference the seven species of ancient Israel.

“We are thrilled to have the privilege of designing a sanctuary that honors the past, respects TBT’s values, and will inspire the congregation for many generations,” said Finegold.

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