

Instruments of Faith - Toronto's First Synagogues
Photographs by Robert Burley
February 3 - May 21, 2005
The Eric Arthur Gallery

This exhibition by photographer Robert Burley explores six downtown Toronto synagogues that were established in the early part of the 20th century and remain active today. Four of the six are in the Kensington Market area and surrounding neighborhood; the other two are at the east and west ends of the city in the Beaches and Junction respectively. Constructed by immigrant communities in uncertain social/political times, these modest buildings played an important role in Toronto's development as a major urban centre, by creating a focus for a Jewish community that grew exponentially in the first part of the twentieth century.

Burley was drawn to this project by the beauty of these buildings and their connection to the City's history, as well as a curiosity about why so few of them are left. Of some 30 active synagogues that were established in downtown Toronto by 1930, only the six in the exhibition remain today. Built using the limited financial resources raised by the newly formed communities, many of these structures borrowed heavily from the architectural styles of synagogues in the towns and cities in Eastern Europe; some consequently bear the names of the cities in question. The sanctuaries are intimate one-room designs steeped in the history of the communities which created them. Memories of founders and members are incorporated into furniture, light fixtures, wall tablets and built-ins. As well, there is a wonderful play of incandescent light in these rooms that focuses attention on the ark, the Torah and the areas of the sanctuary dedicated to the use of the Torah in weekly services. Like the buildings themselves, the sanctuaries are confined by the limited footprint of the structure, which accentuates height over elbow room—encouraging the congregations to crowd together for services. These buildings are distinctly urban in character; their exteriors, which share limited space with the adjacent businesses and residences, embrace the street. The resulting spaces, created as "instruments of faith" to encourage spiritual life and community bonds, have a uniquely timeless quality.

Robert Burley, who teaches at the School of Image Arts, Ryerson University, has been photographing the built environment for over twenty years. His work has been collected by museums around the world, including the National Gallery of Canada, the Musée d'art Contemporaine, the Musée de L'Éysee and the Canadian Centre for Architecture. His work has also been published extensively in books and periodicals, among them: *Viewing Olmsted: Photographs by Robert Burley, Lee Friedlander and Geoffrey James*, and *Viewpoints: 100 Years of Architecture in Ontario*.

Opening Reception:
Thursday February 3, 6-8 PM

Exhibition continues to 21 May 2005

The Eric Arthur Gallery
Faculty of Architecture, Landscape,
and Design
University of Toronto
230 College Street

Parking: off Huron Street, behind
230 College Street

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