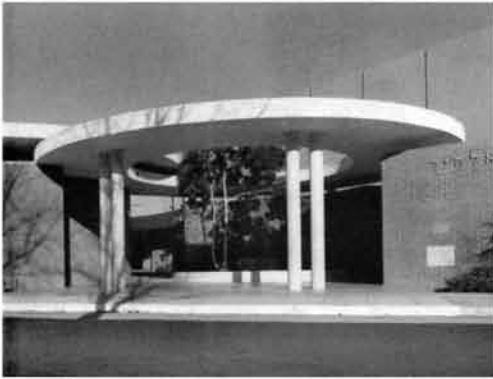


BACK TO SHUL

RIOS CLEMENTI HALE STUDIOS' renovation of Temple Emanuel brings a modernist landmark up to speed with the spirit and practices of 21st-century Reform Judaism *by* MAYER RUS







Vintage photographs show the essentially unaltered exterior architecture, original bronze sculptures by Bernard Rosenthal and the erstwhile forward-facing seating configuration and elevated prayer platform.



Commenting on the recent renovation of Temple Emanuel in Beverly Hills, Senior Rabbi Laura Geller points to a passage from the Book of Exodus in which God instructs Moses, “Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them.” The wording is meaningful, she says, because it draws a distinction between the temple and the people who gather there: “God does not say, ‘Make me a sacred space, and I will dwell *in* it.’ God says he will dwell among them. The importance here is people coming together. Community is central to the Jewish tradition.”

Indeed, more than any architectural emendations, the redo of Temple Emanuel was spurred by profound shifts in the ways its congregation has chosen to come together in the six decades since the synagogue was built. “We wanted to break down the barriers between clergy and laypeople,” says Rabbi Jonathan Aaron. “We do not see God as over and above the congregation or believe the rabbi is somehow closer to God than anyone else. Our vision of divinity is more embracing. The Hebrew word *Emanuel* means ‘God is among us.’”

For Mark Rios of Rios Clementi Hale Studios, the hydra-headed project demanded an adroit resolution of complex imperatives, some seemingly contradictory. The revamped synagogue needed to feel at once familiar and new to longtime members of the Reform congregation. To achieve that balance, Rios and his team needed a design vocabulary that married a joyous, contemporary spirit with a religious tradition encompassing both the ancient and the eternal. “This building, laden with incredible artworks and symbols, had fallen out of the daily life of the congregation,” says Rios. “Our job was to revitalize the sacred space and reengage it with the community.”

That engagement dates back to 1953, the year Temple Emanuel opened on Burton Way. It was the first of many synagogues and Jewish academic institutions designed by Sidney Eisenshtat, a prolific midcentury architect known for orchestrating basic concrete and brick into exceptionally expressive forms. Eisenshtat’s other landmark structures in Los Angeles include Sinai Temple on Wilshire in Westwood and the recently demolished Friars Club on Santa Monica in Beverly Hills.

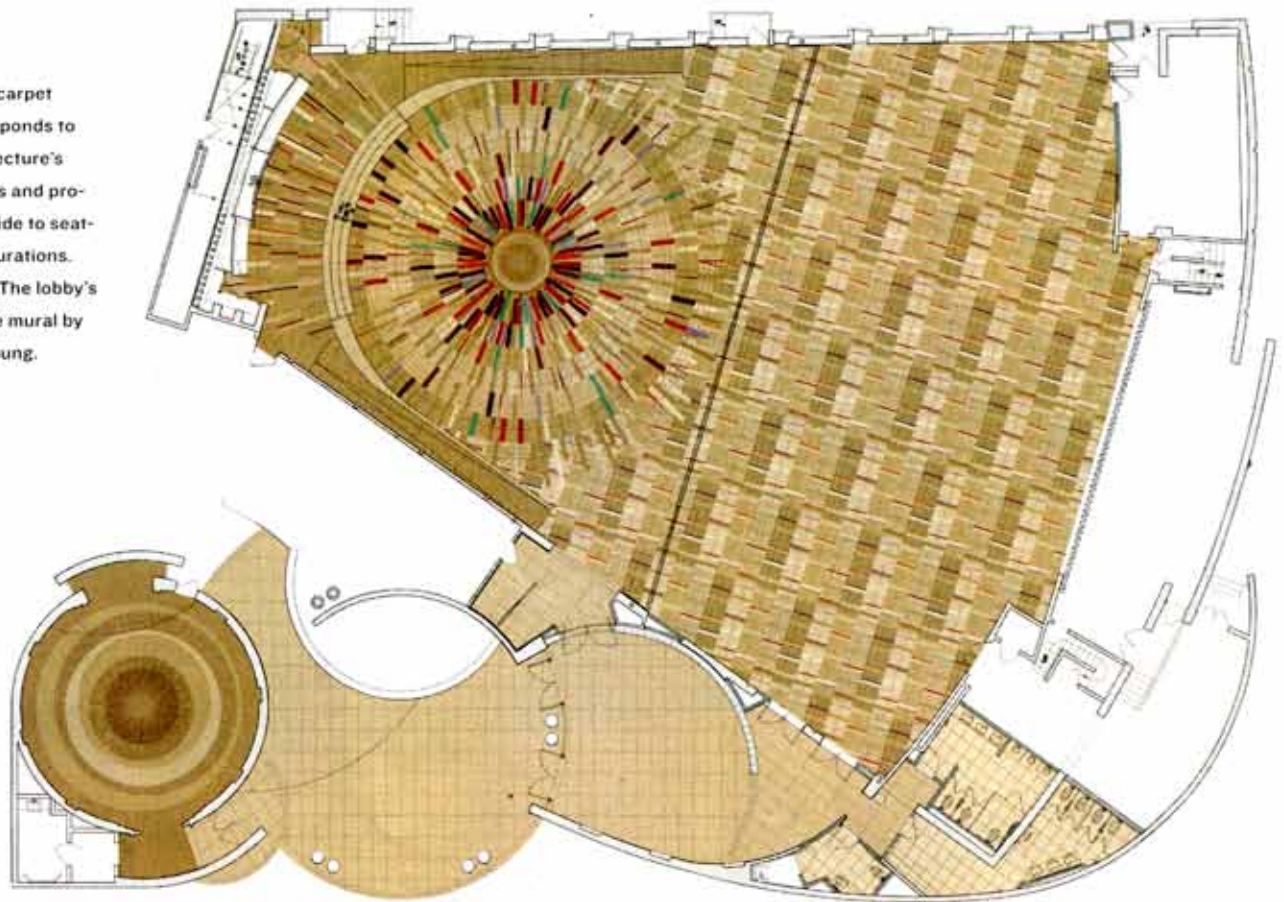
At Temple Emanuel, Rios lowered the *bimah*—the raised platform from which the Torah is read—in order to connect it more intimately with the worshippers. He also replaced traditional rows of fixed seating with a flexible chair system that can





Festive lighting and a new ceiling design distinguish the revamped social hall from the sanctuary, separated by a movable wall.

A custom carpet design responds to the architecture's geometries and provides a guide to seating configurations. Opposite: The lobby's mosaic tile mural by Joseph Young.



be reconfigured for different types of services, even allowing them to be conducted in the round. A new ocular skylight generously illuminates the space, underscoring Eisenshtat's subtle architectural nod to the *mishkan*, the portable, tented sanctuary in which Jews carried the Ark of the Covenant after the exodus from Egypt.

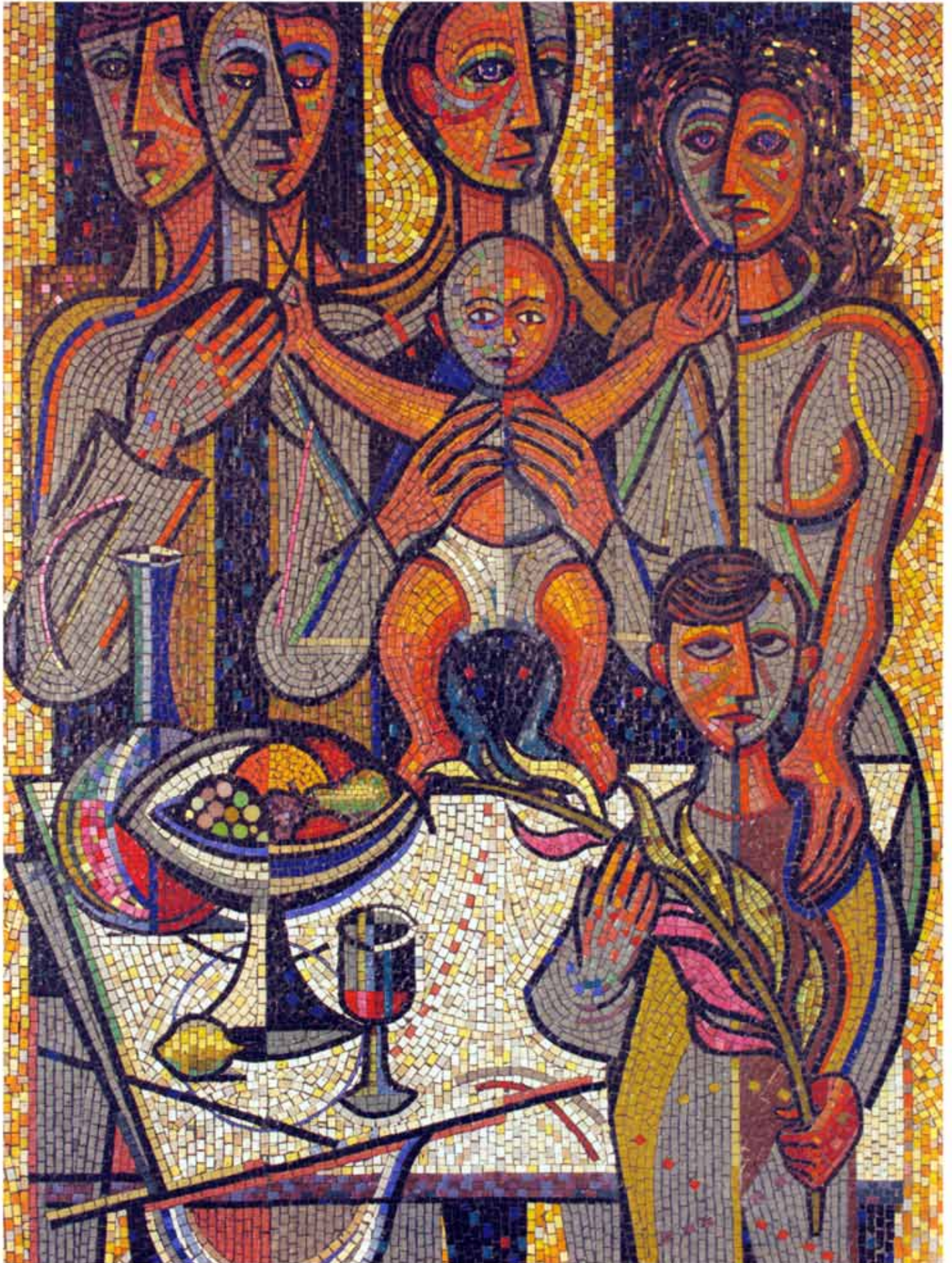
"The original plan was fundamentally designed for a High Mass approach with clergy and sacred scrolls kept aloft, at a distance from the community," says project architect Michael Sweeney. Today, there are monthly services like Shabbat Unplugged and the rock-and-roll Shabbat B'Yachad, with a full band. "The new sanctuary supports that contemporary spirit, but it's also appropriate for the high holidays."

Aside from the temple's brickwork, all surfaces and finishes were replaced, including the addition of Jerusalem limestone flooring that extends to the entry court. In the process of stripping away decades of ad-hoc architectural modifications, the designers shined a fresh light on important artworks essential to Eisenshtat's original vision: a striking mosaic tile mural by Joseph Young in the lobby, enameled copper panels by Jean and Arthur Ames on the entry doors, stained-glass windows by Perli Pelzig and a series of Bernard Rosenthal bronze sculptures representing the lions of Judah, the menorah, the *Ner Tamid* (eternal flame) and Jacob's Ladder.

"After the reopening, we heard compliments on the wonderful 'new' artworks from members of the congregation," Rabbi Geller says. "The fact is that Mark Rios awakened us to treasures that had gone unnoticed and unappreciated for years."

Ultimately, that sense of awakening and rebirth applies as much to the entire project as to any individual artworks. "Our idea of what community and prayer can mean was deepened by this process," she adds. "Our ancestors are in these walls. We needed to feel their presence joining us as we move into the future." ♦





The restored circular entry court remains faithful to Eisenshtat's design. Continuous flooring of Jerusalem limestone connects indoors and out.

