

Nili Portugali

***Spiritual Exaltation in Timeless Places of Worship:  
Insights from the New Maimonides Central  
Sephardic Synagogue, Hadera, Israel***

***Exaltación espiritual en lugares de culto  
atemporales: Reflexiones sobre la nueva Sinagoga  
Central Sefardí de Maimónides en Hadera, Israel***

***A exaltação espiritual em locais de culto  
intemporais: Reflexões sobre a nova Sinagoga  
Central Sefardita Maimônides, Hadera, Israel***

**Abstract | Resumen | Resumo**

The deep emotion we feel when entering any timeless place of worship—a synagogue, a church, or a Buddhist temple—stems from the patterns of space that generated them. These are patterns that reflect the innate patterns printed in our minds from the outset and that are thus common to us all as human beings of any culture or religion. In designing the Maimonides Central Sephardic Synagogue I endeavored to capture the timeless spiritual exaltation one experiences in the places of worship where Maimonides prayed, such as the Iben Denan Synagogue in Fez, Morocco or the Ben-Ezra Synagogue in Cairo, Egypt, and to revive the traditional patterns based on Maimonides' halachic rulings—the laws he set down in his book *Hayad Hahazaka*, as passed on to me in the synagogues of Tzfat, the holy Kabbalah city of Galilee, birthplace of Judaism's mystical strand, and hometown of my family since the early nineteenth century.

La profunda emoción que se siente al entrar en cualquier lugar de culto intemporal –una sinagoga, una iglesia o un templo budista– se debe a los patrones espaciales que los generaron. Estos patrones reflejan las formas innatas cuya impronta está grabada en nuestras mentes desde el inicio y que, por lo tanto, son comunes a todos nosotros como seres humanos de cualquier cultura. Al proyectar la Sinagoga Central Sefardí de Maimónides, intenté captar la exaltación espiritual atemporal que se experimenta en los lugares de culto donde Maimónides oraba, como la Sinagoga Iben Denan en Fez (Marruecos) o la Sinagoga Ben-Ezra en El Cairo (Egipto), y recuperar los modelos tradicionales basados en la Halajá de Maimónides, las leyes que recogió en su libro *Hayad Hahazaka*, tal como me fueron transmitidos en las sinagogas de Safed, ciudad santa de la cábala en Galilea, cuna de la corriente mística del judaísmo y ciudad natal de mi familia desde principios del siglo XIX.

A profunda emoção que sentimos quando entramos em qualquer local de culto intemporal - uma sinagoga, uma igreja ou um templo budista - tem origem nos padrões espaciais que os geraram. Padrões que refletem as formas inatas impressas nas nossas mentes e que são, por isso, comuns a todos nós enquanto seres humanos pertencentes a qualquer cultura. Ao desenhar a Sinagoga Central Sefardita Maimônides, procurei captar a exaltação espiritual intemporal que se sente nos locais de culto onde Maimônides rezava, como a Sinagoga Iben Denan em Fez, Marrocos, ou a Sinagoga Ben-Ezra no Cairo, Egito, e para reavivar os padrões tradicionais baseados nas regras halácicas de Maimonides - as leis que ele estabeleceu no seu livro *Hayad Hahazaka*, tal como me foram transmitidas nas sinagogas de Tzfat, a sagrada cidade cabalística da Galileia, local de nascimento da vertente mística do Judaísmo e cidade natal da minha família desde o início do século XIX.

## Introduction

Ever since I studied architecture, I have asked myself: what is at the base of the timeless buildings in which we feel at home? That we want to return to again and again and that in places of worship evokes in all of us a feeling of spiritual exaltation, whether in a Buddhist temple, a church, a mosque, or a synagogue. Although this timeless quality exists in buildings rooted in different cultures and traditions (Figs. 3, 4, and 5), the emotional experience they generate is common to us all, no matter where we come from or to what culture or religion we belong. Christopher Alexander assumed that behind humane architecture that takes you “beyond words”—interpreted as a “diagram of the inner universe”—there are universal objective patterns of space inherent in its structure. These patterns also reflect the “innate patterns” (a term used by the linguist Noam Chomsky in reference to spoken language) structured in our minds from the outset—a “picture of our inner human soul”, common to all human beings.

The great works of architecture and art have arisen through history in societies that draw their strength from religion, culture, and tradition, with a creative process that brings enlightenment. Here the boundaries between art, philosophy, and the creator’s “religious mission” are blurred.

What might have been expected to separate cultures and peoples introduces harmony between them. The same *tree* that symbolizes *life* in the Kabbalah appears as a symbol of wholeness in the art of Tantra. The *red thread* that Tibetans wear on their arm for *good luck* appears on babies’ prams in the Jewish tradition. The *light blue color* which according to the Kabbalah is the color that “connects us to the heavenly” and purifies us is the color that lights up alleys in Mediterranean villages to repel evil spirits.

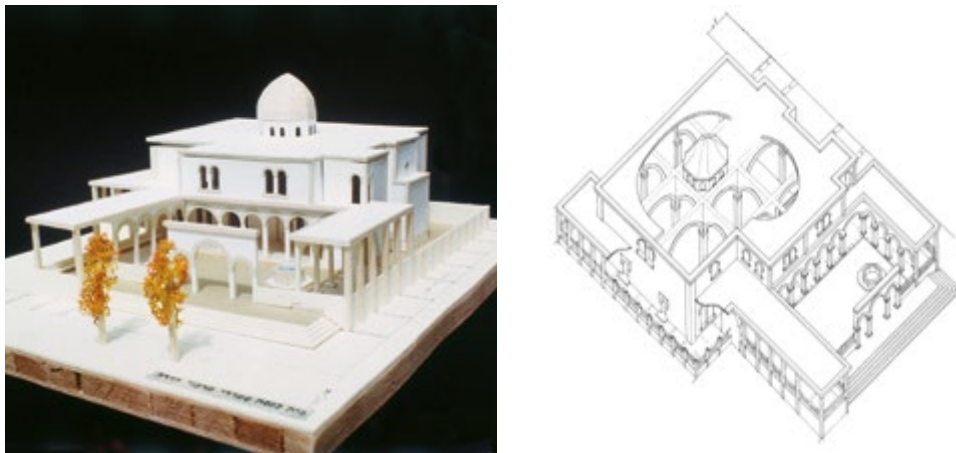


Figure 1: Model and axonometric view of the Maimonides Synagogue



Figure 2: Location of the Maimonides Synagogue



Figure 3: Tholos (4th century),  
Delphi, Greece (Wikipedia)



Figure 4: Great Gander Pagoda  
(7th–8th century), Xi'an, China  
(*Oriental architecture in color*)



Figure 5: Yosef Karo Synagogue  
(16th century), Tzfat, Israel

Applying Christopher Alexander's assumptions, the idea behind the design of the Central Maimonides Sephardic Synagogue was an attempt to revive traditional spatial design patterns based on *Hayad Hahazaka* (the code of Rabbinic law set down by Maimonides), which gave rise to the synagogues where Maimonides prayed, such as the Iben Denan Synagogue in Fez, Morocco, or the Ben-Ezra Synagogue in Cairo, Egypt, and patterns based on Talmudic literature as passed on to me in the Sephardic synagogues of Tzfat<sup>1</sup>—the birthplace of Judaism's mystical Kabbalah teachings and my family's hometown since the early nineteenth century.

The mystic doctrine of the Kabbalah, including interpretations as to the nature of divinity and the work of creation, mysticism, reincarnation, and so on, has undoubtedly influenced the physical structure of synagogues.

Thousands of Jewish scholars, mystics, masters of religious law, liturgical poets, and kabbalists who were expelled from Spain and Portugal in the 1490s found refuge in Tzfat, making the town the chief spiritual center of the Jewish community in Israel.

### The Planning Process—Holistic Phenomenological Approach

As opposed to the mechanistic worldview evident in contemporary architecture, where there is a structured disconnection between building and street, street and neighborhood, neighborhood and city, the holistic-organic approach as advocated for years in scientific discourse (and applied by Christopher Alexander at the Center for Environmental Structure in Berkeley) regards the socio-physical environment at all levels as a system—a dynamic whole whose nature depends on ever-changing interrelations between its parts. As in any organic system, each element has its uniqueness and function but always acts as part of a larger entity to which it belongs and which it complements (Fig. 6).

Through this concept, I regard urban design, architecture, interior design, and landscaping not as independent disciplines but as a continuous organic system, with one hierarchical language in which the street, a building, and its interior are one continuous whole. The overall feeling of inner wholeness and unity whether in a building, a street, a neighborhood, or a city evolves from the proper interrelations between its parts. H.H. the Dalai Lama says that understanding these expressions of dependent arising—cause and condition, and cause and effect—is a fundamental insight of Buddhist philosophy.





Figure 6: Organic System, interrelations between the parts and the whole (*Tantra Asana*)

The planning process proposed here is fundamentally different from common planning processes. Unlike the latter, in which planning takes place first in the office and is later transferred to a site, here drawings are merely records of planning decisions taken on site with an awareness of the visible and hidden forces acting upon it.

In his book *The Joy of Living and Dying in Peace*, the Dalai Lama writes: “Things have a natural and innate mode of existence... Reality is not something that the mind has fabricated anew. Therefore, when we search for the meaning of truth, we are searching for reality, for the way things exist...” So once I had determined the list of patterns for the project, all planning decisions concerning the physical building structure were literally taken in situ.

Unlike the common planning process in which the form of a building is predetermined without relation to the site and later superimposed on any location, here a dynamic process took place by which the plan of the building that was finally created pursued a balance between the abstract pattern language chosen for the project and the living reality of the site.

The unforeseeable conditions continuously arising on an actual site create openings for new things. The order by which planning decisions were taken on the site was determined by the hierarchical order in which the patterns appeared on my list. Thus, decisions are made first on issues affecting the larger scale, followed by other decisions generated as a consequence. Planning is conceived not as an additive process but rather as one of differentiation. Each new element of the plan is gradually differentiated from the previous ones. Each decision taken on site and marked on the ground changes the site's configuration, forming the basis of the next decision toward the final realization.

### Selected Patterns that Generated the Synagogue's Structure

The first step in the planning process was to determine the relevant pattern language for this synagogue: patterns of space that grew out of both the specific location and the traditional patterns that gave rise to the Sephardic synagogues mentioned above.

The first decisions made here involved applying the patterns “Wide entry steps” and “Portal,” namely the threshold connecting the site with the street and that must be immediately visible as one approaches.

Their location is a critical decision and not an obvious one, as evidenced by ordinary contemporary architecture in which one spends a lot of time looking for the main entrance, and literally gets lost. Experience has taught me that placing an entrance with a deviation of even 10 cm can spoil all that it is meant to achieve, and thus its placement can be determined only in situ.

Wide Entry Steps: "To Exalt the House of the Lord"

The stairs leading to the site were located in between two existing ancient Eucalyptus trees.

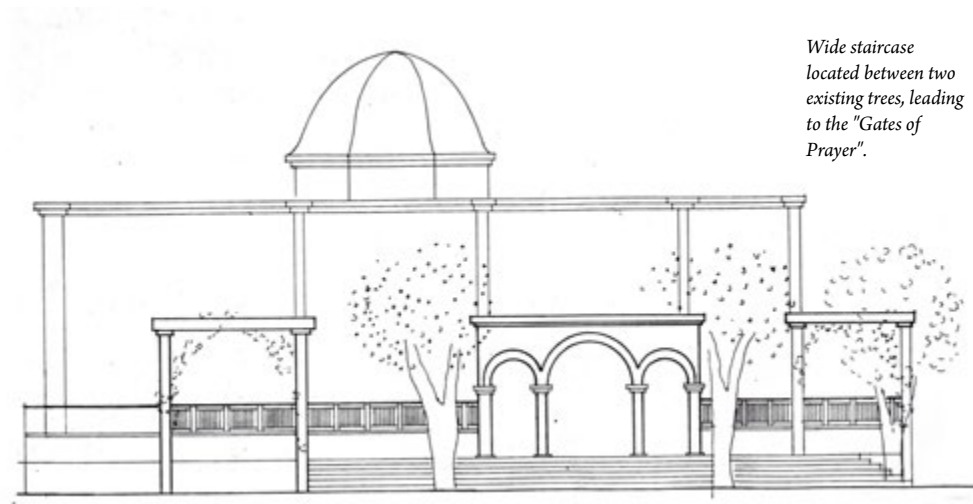


Figure 7: Portal to the Maimonides Synagogue



Figures 8 and 9: Portal to the Maimonides Synagogue

Figure 10: Portal in Tzfat, Israel

Figure 11: Portal in Tibet

Figure 12: Portal in Japan

### Portal: The “Gates of Prayer”

The portal is a universal pattern, a threshold that both separates the public space and connects it to the private courtyard—the secular to the holy.

### Courtyard

The outdoor space is not a leftover around a building but an area that also separates and connects the public and private domains. At the courtyard’s center of gravity is a fountain—a symbol of life found in all places of worship.

### Arcade

An archetypal structure relating to the transition between a building and the open space around it. Although the arcade in this synagogue I designed is different in form from the one in the Sehzade Mosque at Istanbul or in the old cloister at Assisi, there is an underlying structure common to them all, a superstructure defining the recurring connection between the building and its surroundings (Figs. 7, 8, and 9).

### Step Leading down into the Synagogue

At the main entrance into the synagogue there is a step on which it is written: “From the depths I call to thee, Oh Lord.”



Figure 13: Courtyard of the Maimonides Synagogue



14



15

Figure 14: Arcade, Tiled Kiosk, Istanbul, Turkey (Wikipedia)

Figure 15: Cloister of the Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi, Italy





Figure 16: Arcade of the Maimonides Synagogue

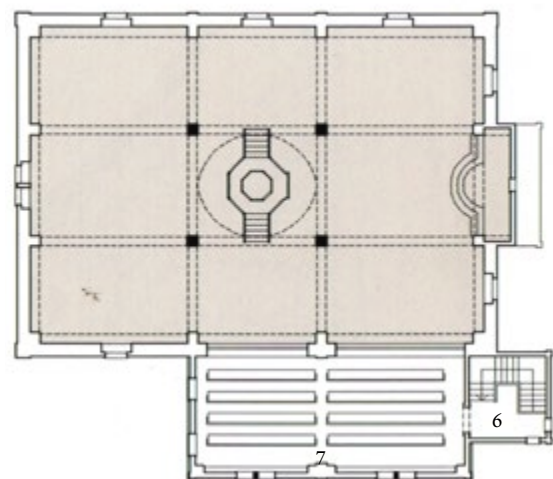
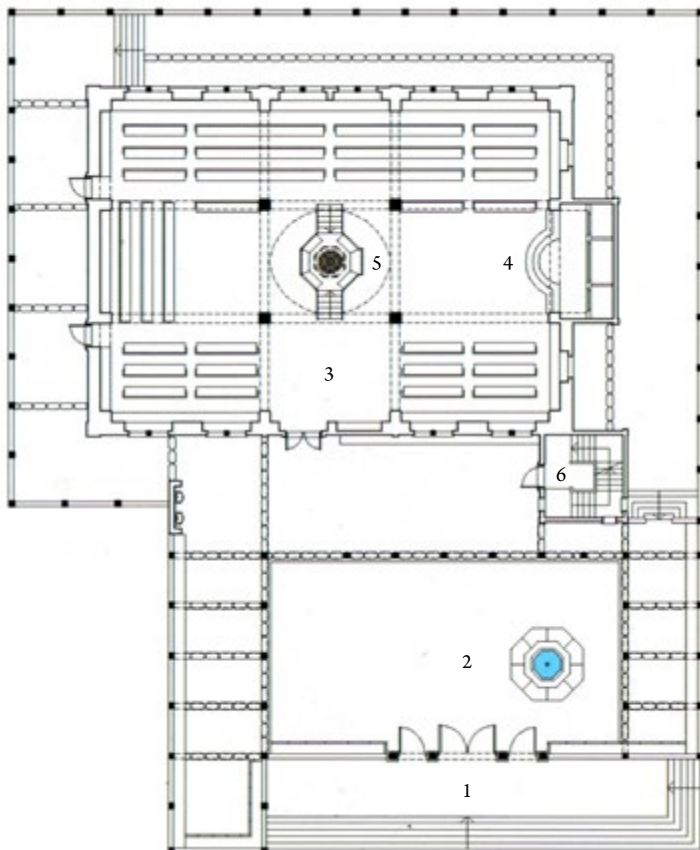
### Wall of the Holy Ark Facing Jerusalem

The Holy Ark holds the Torah scrolls and has three doors; each is opened once a year.

### Bimah (dais)

The bimah, where the reader of the Torah stands, is supported by eight pillars, equal to the eight days of Hanukkah.

Figure 17: Ground floor and first floor plans



#### Ground floor:

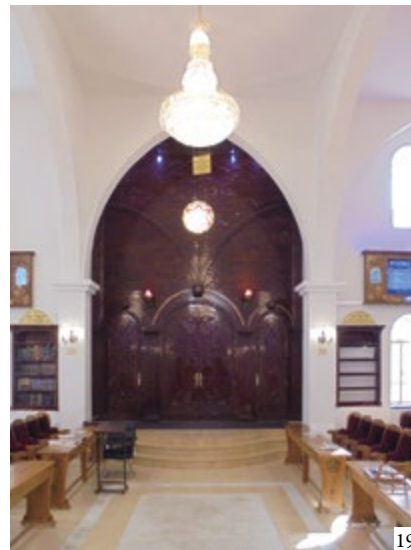
- 1 Main entrance gate
- 2 Entrance courtyard
- 3 Main hall
- 4 Holy Ark
- 5 The bimah

#### First floor:

- 6 Stairs leading to women's wing
- 7 women's wing



18



19



20

#### Four Pillars at the Center of the Hall

Corresponding to the number of the Matriarchs, structurally dividing the hall into nine sections, for the nine months of pregnancy.

#### Seating

The Sephardic synagogue has its roots in the Eastern culture of Islamic countries and thus is influenced by the structure of the mosque. As in mosques, the seats are arranged along the walls, perpendicular to and at an equal distance from the axis linking the Holy Ark and the bimah.

#### Dome with Twelve Windows

Over the bimah is a dome with twelve windows, corresponding to the twelve tribes.

Figure 18: Main Hall with seating for 300 men and women's gallery with seating for 150

Figure 19: The Holy Ark at the Maimonides Synagogue

Figure 20: Ibn Danan Synagogue, Fez (Alamy)

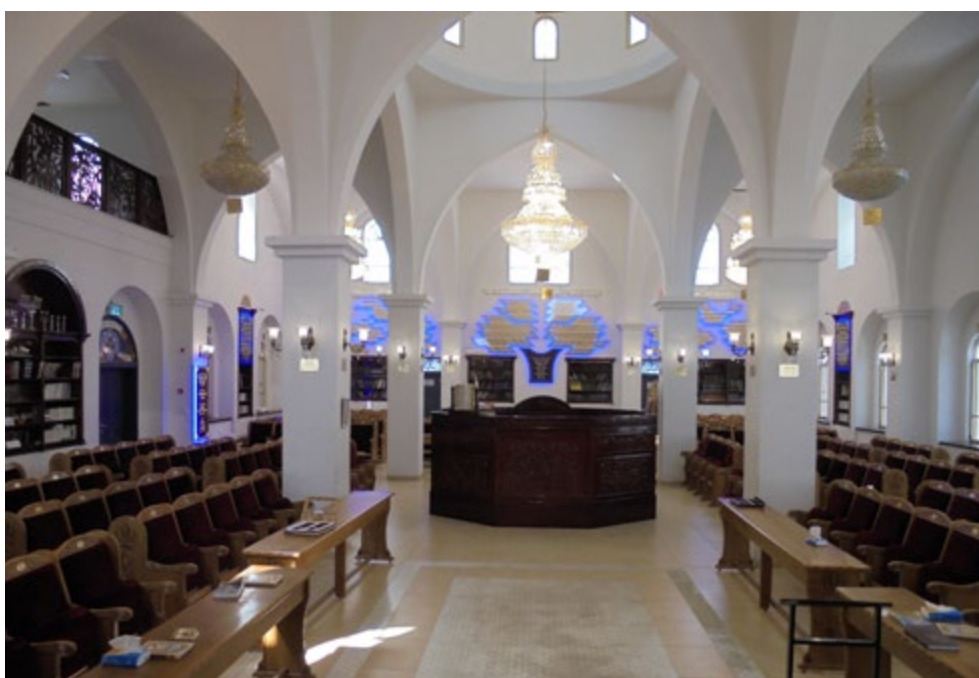


Figure 21: Seating by the walls, Maimonides Synagogue





Figure 22: Dome and windows of Abuhav Synagogue, Tzfat, Israel



Figure 23: Dome and windows of Maimonides Synagogue

### Window alcove

A pair of windows with a window seat.

## **The Link Between the New Synagogue and Tradition**

One question that arises regarding this new synagogue (as well as with other buildings I have designed) is whether it is a reconstruction or a renovation of an existing building. This must be because most of the contemporary buildings we see around us are iconic-conceptual architecture which explicitly rejects tradition as well as dissociating itself from its environment. Consequently, people assume that a building that is associated with traditional architecture and integrated in a natural way with its surroundings cannot possibly be wholly new.

So let me say clearly that I do not aim to reconstruct the past or to nostalgically reproduce its styles. The similarity between this new synagogue and those we know from the past results from my use of the same fundamental patterns of space and a planning process revived from former times.

An architectural approach which aspires to timeless values is by no means a reaction against the contemporary movement, as one might think. On the contrary, it is an attempt to fully use the inherited potential of modern technological society, only not as a goal or value but rather as a tool for creating a humane environment imbued with spirit that will satisfy basic emotional needs common to all of us.

## **Conclusion**

Contemporary architecture and art have often sought to dissociate themselves from the world of emotion and to connect the design process to the world of ideas, creating a rational (intellectual) link between building and humanity, devoid of feeling. My basic argument is that to change the feel of an environment and to create places and buildings in which we feel “at home,” what is needed is not a change of style or fashion but a shift from the mechanistic worldview underlying current approaches toward a holistic one.

It is my hope that a holistic worldview will prevail and lead us collectively to create humane buildings, streets, neighborhoods, cities, villages, and places of worship where we really want to be in, in any culture, place, or time.

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<sup>1</sup> Tzfat has been one of the four holy cities of Israel since the time of the Second Temple.



Figure 24: Window alcove, Maimonides Synagogue

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## Biography | Biografia | Biografia

### Nili Portugali

Nili is a practicing architect, senior lecturer, researcher, author, and film director. Her multidisciplinary work, both in practice and theory, is closely aligned with the holistic-phenomenological school. She graduated from the A.A. School of Architecture in London and pursued postgraduate studies in Architecture and Buddhism at U.C. Berkeley. She also conducted research with Christopher Alexander at the Center for Environmental Structure in Berkeley. Nili has held senior lecturer positions at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem and the Faculty of Architecture and Town Planning at the Technion Institute of Technology in Haifa. She has published three books: *The Act of Creation and the Spirit of Place: A Holistic-Phenomenological Approach to Architecture*, which was listed as one of the books of the year by the R.I.B.A.; *A Holistic Approach to Architecture: "The Felicia Blumenthal Music Center and Library" Tel Aviv*; and *And the Alley She Whitewashed in Light Blue - The Secret of All Those Timeless Places Where One Feels "At Home"*. Nili is also the director of the film *And the Alley She Whitewashed in Light Blue*.