

# Religion and Art in the Heart of Modern Manhattan

St. Peter's Church and the  
Louise Nevelson Chapel

EDITED BY

AARON ROSEN

## RELIGION AND ART IN THE HEART OF MODERN MANHATTAN

"When you're in New York," the sculptor Louise Nevelson once said, "you're in perpetual resurrection." She might have said the same thing about St. Peter's Lutheran Church, set in the heart of midtown Manhattan. In the 1970s the church made a radical move, scrapping its neo-Gothic building for a sleek modern structure in the shadow of a skyscraper. The transformation was not just architectural. Inside, Nevelson created a shimmering chapel, while over the years artists and designers such as Willem de Kooning, Kiki Smith, and Massimo and Lella Vignelli produced works for the sanctuary. This fusion of modern art, architecture, and design was complemented by an innovative jazz ministry, including funerals for Billy Strayhorn and John Coltrane, and performances by Duke Ellington and other jazz legends. For the first time, this volume examines the astounding cultural output of this single church. Just as importantly, the story of St. Peter's serves as a springboard for wider reflections on the challenges and possibilities which arise when religion and art intersect in the modern city. Working from a wide range of disciplines, including art history, theology, musicology, and cultural studies, a distinguished group of scholars demonstrate that this church at the center of New York City deserves an equally central place in contemporary scholarship.

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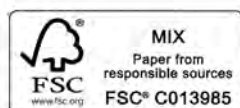
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work of Sister Angelica Ballan, member of the Sisters Disciples of the Divine Master, a congregation based in Rome that specializes in creating religious art. More conventional images of Mary and Jesus appear inside and outside other churches of the years surrounding the redevelopment of St. Peter's. St. Helen's, a low-rise brick church and rectory with curved and rectilinear forms in a scale that suits its low-rise residential neighborhood, enhances its entrance courtyard with a bronze representation of St. Francis of Assisi, who is also represented outside Epiphany and many other buildings.

#### SYNAGOGUES

The strongest parallels to St. Peter's can be found in synagogues, which often—especially in Orthodox congregations—are averse to figurative imagery. Orthodox communities tend to avoid art that could violate a strict interpretation of the Second Commandment, and some avoid any kind of figurative image. But even they, along with Conservative and Reform congregations, engage artists to design curtains for the ark that holds the Torah scrolls, embellishments for the sides of the ark, seven-branched candlesticks that bring to mind the destroyed Temple in Jerusalem, symbols of the holidays (often in colored glass), and ornamental metalwork. Occasionally among non-Orthodox congregations, there may be a figurative relief, such as that of Moses receiving the Law that Luise Kaish produced for Pietro Belluschi's B'rith Kodesh in Rochester, New York. Much of the imagery is abstract or symbolic, with depictions of Moses and other biblical figures allowed sometimes in progressive Judaism, if they are two-dimensional or in relief, and thus unlikely to infringe on the commandment not to craft figurative images which might serve as idols.

Many new synagogues were erected in Queens and in sections of Brooklyn where previous settlement had been sparse owing to a lack of subway service. These newly developed, automobile-centered "in-town suburbs" attracted people of all religions following the Second World War, after fifteen years of Depression and military conflict during which virtually no housing was constructed and much was poorly maintained. Attractive older areas, too, were renewed by people leaving Brooklyn and the Bronx, and by immigrants such as the Iranian Jews who fled after the ousting of the Shah.<sup>31</sup> Synagogues built to meet the religious needs of the newcomers include several in Kew Gardens and Forest Hills alone, as well as in Whitestone, Howard Beach, and many other neighborhoods. Donald J. Steingisser designed the Forest Park Jewish Center at 90–45 Myrtle Avenue that nestles into its landscaping in the Glendale section of Queens. It opened in 1962 and had to be expanded eight years later. The building's exterior shows boxlike forms of brick, characteristic of its time, surmounted by a cornice of paler brick. Richard Foster, at one time the architectural partner of Philip Johnson, designed the Congregation Shaare Tova synagogue at 82–33 Lefferts Boulevard for a Sephardic congregation of recent Iranian immigrants. The design is entirely

different from his Congregation Beth Torah at 1061 Ocean Parkway in the Midwood section of Brooklyn (1969), which is a tan box with rounded corners and a central grouping of five thin windows; a façade that harks back to designs of the 1930s. Shaare Tova, more progressive, is a dark red brick rectangular prism with a ground floor set back behind a shallow portico. Tall, thin rectangular windows have round windows above them at a level indicating the women's gallery. The combination of tall and round windows is known from historic synagogues, but in different arrangements, so Foster was probably not thinking postmodern thoughts. He simply provided a distinctive design and adequate interior lighting while restricting the exterior glass to deter vandals. The interior has a comfortably-scaled lobby with a skylight intelligently placed over a circular stairway to the social hall at a basement level. Precisely cut square forms adorn the ceiling. His emphasis on crisp geometry continues into the sanctuary, a square entered at one corner. This allows the seats to occupy broad triangular areas that almost surround the freestanding ark (Fig. 3.13). The rectangular and circular windows rival the large, imposing ark for attention. The windows designed by the illustrator Jeremy Tankard relate to Jewish symbols—Jacob's ladder, Solomon's temple—making them useful for teaching history lessons to adults and children.

3.13 Shaare Tova Synagogue (interior view toward ark), 1983. Richard Foster  
Source: Carole Herselle Krinsky, 2013.

