



Sacred sights: Robert Burley straddles the line between documentary and art with his collection of photographs of Toronto synagogues 'that were - and still are - so important to the Jewish community'

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INSTRUMENTS OF FAITH: TORONTO'S FIRST SYNAGOGUES

Robert Burley

The Eric Arthur Gallery to May 21

In 2002, while Robert Burley's eldest son was studying the Torah and readying himself for his bar mitzvah, his father was embarking on his own mitzvah of sorts. Burley wanted to connect with his son's coming-of-age ceremony, so he started photographing downtown synagogues in an effort to learn even more about Judaism and the history of Toronto's Jewish community. (His interest in the faith and culture began in 1989, after he fell in love with his wife and converted to the religion.)

Burley has since turned his scholarship into an exhibition made up of more than 20 images of the First Narayever, the Kiever, Knesseth Israel, Anshei Minsk, the Shaarei Tzedec and the Beaches Hebrew Institute; all are synagogues built by immigrant communities before 1940, and all still function today as sites of worship. "They were built with limited funds during fairly uncertain social and political times," says Burley. "They are small, intimate buildings that were -- and still are -- so important to the Jewish community."

Using a panoramic camera borrowed from his friend and fellow photographer Geoffrey James as well as his own four by five, Burley fit himself into the small, holy spaces, capturing the sanctity of the bimah (reading platform), arks (or Aron Kodesh) and the Stars of David (Magen David) in both stark black and white and deep,

brilliant colour. "There wasn't a lot of decoration and frill in these interiors. One of the things that I was really interested in is the very basic, utilitarian quality of the foyers and the seating areas. In contrast, the ark and surrounding walls can be very elaborate."

One image of Kneseth Israel, for example, shows the elaborate bimah, its dark-red carpeting brilliant against the pale blue and green mural of a lion, an elk, a river and various musical instruments entwined in blue ribbon. "Because there was no central authority overseeing synagogue design, it was up to the community to decide on what their shul would be like," says Burley. "The results are murals that are like no others in the country or even the world. Each one is unique."

Burley was personally interested in the history, but he was also drawn to the documentary aspects of the project for the good of history. As a photographer, straddling the line between documentarian and artist is what keeps him taking pictures.

Working closely with the Ontario Jewish Archives, Burley assisted in launching a virtual exhibition outlining the various histories of Toronto synagogues (<http://collections.ic.gc.ca/torontosynagogues/index.html>). Of the nearly 30 active synagogues that were once in downtown Toronto, only the six in the exhibition remain today. And some, like the Anshei Minsk, the synagogue in the heart of Kensington market that was set on fire in March, 2002, are suddenly incomplete vestiges of the past. A haunting image of the burned interior of the Minsk is included in the exhibit, its charred walls and ghostly upper balcony a reminder of the importance of sites of worship to a community and city.

"The thing about Toronto is that it changes so quickly," says Burley. "There aren't many historical buildings left, and they seem to be continuously disappearing." For each synagogue, Burley took at least one exterior panoramic shot documenting the building within its context, the adjacent businesses and residences serving as markers of the ever-changing neighbourhood.

As director of Ryerson's newly formed master's program in Photographic Preservation & Collections Management, Burley has an even further vested interest in project. He is fascinated by the ways in which new technology can safeguard history and build lasting collections. For him, digital photography is key to preserving our pasts. "Digitization becomes interesting not in how it affects picture-taking -- we still photograph the same way -- but in the huge range of visual information that is available." With *Instruments of Faith*, Burley is combining his love for his family and faith with his interest in archiving, history and his affection for the built environment. The results are still and iridescent images that are almost as sacred as the spaces themselves.

"A photograph puts you in a particular time and place," says Burley. "It can be both informative and expressive at the same time. That's what I love about the medium."