

ועשו לי מקדש

MAKE FOR ME A HOLY PLACE

EXODUS 25:8





For twenty-five years Congregation Beit Simchat Torah (CBST) was housed in a dark loft space, hidden from public view, on Bethune Street in the far West Village. For more than fifteen years, a group of synagogue volunteers, originally called the *Mishkan* (sacred space) Committee, searched for a more suitable and proudly visible space. In 2006 the dream seemed within reach when the committee, close to a deal with a developer, received significant financial pledges and began its search for an architect. Although the deal eventually fell through, Stephen Cassell of Architecture Research Office (ARO), was retained to work with the rabbis, staff, and congregants to define the ingredients of CBST's ideal home: proximity to subways and buses, street level visibility, and adequate space to accommodate its new sanctuary, growing membership, staff, and programming. Using these criteria, the committee visited more than forty sites, ultimately selecting two adjacent retail stores—one for handbags and one for furs—at 130 West 30th Street, in midtown Manhattan.



130 WEST 30TH STREET

CASS GILBERT, NOTED ARCHITECT OF THE WOOLWORTH BUILDING, DESIGNED THIS EIGHTEEN-STORY LOFT BUILDING IN 1927-28. TERRA-COTTA RELIEFS OF WINGED GUARDIAN FIGURES, HORSE-DRAWN CHARIOTS, AND THREE-DIMENSIONAL LIONS WERE INSPIRED BY ANCIENT ASSYRIAN CARVINGS. THESE EXOTIC MOTIFS ARE RARE IN NEW YORK CITY AND WERE FABRICATED BY THE ATLANTIC TERRA COTTA COMPANY. THE BUILDING WAS CONVERTED TO RESIDENTIAL USE IN 2003.

NEW YORK LANDMARKS PRESERVATION FOUNDATION
2004

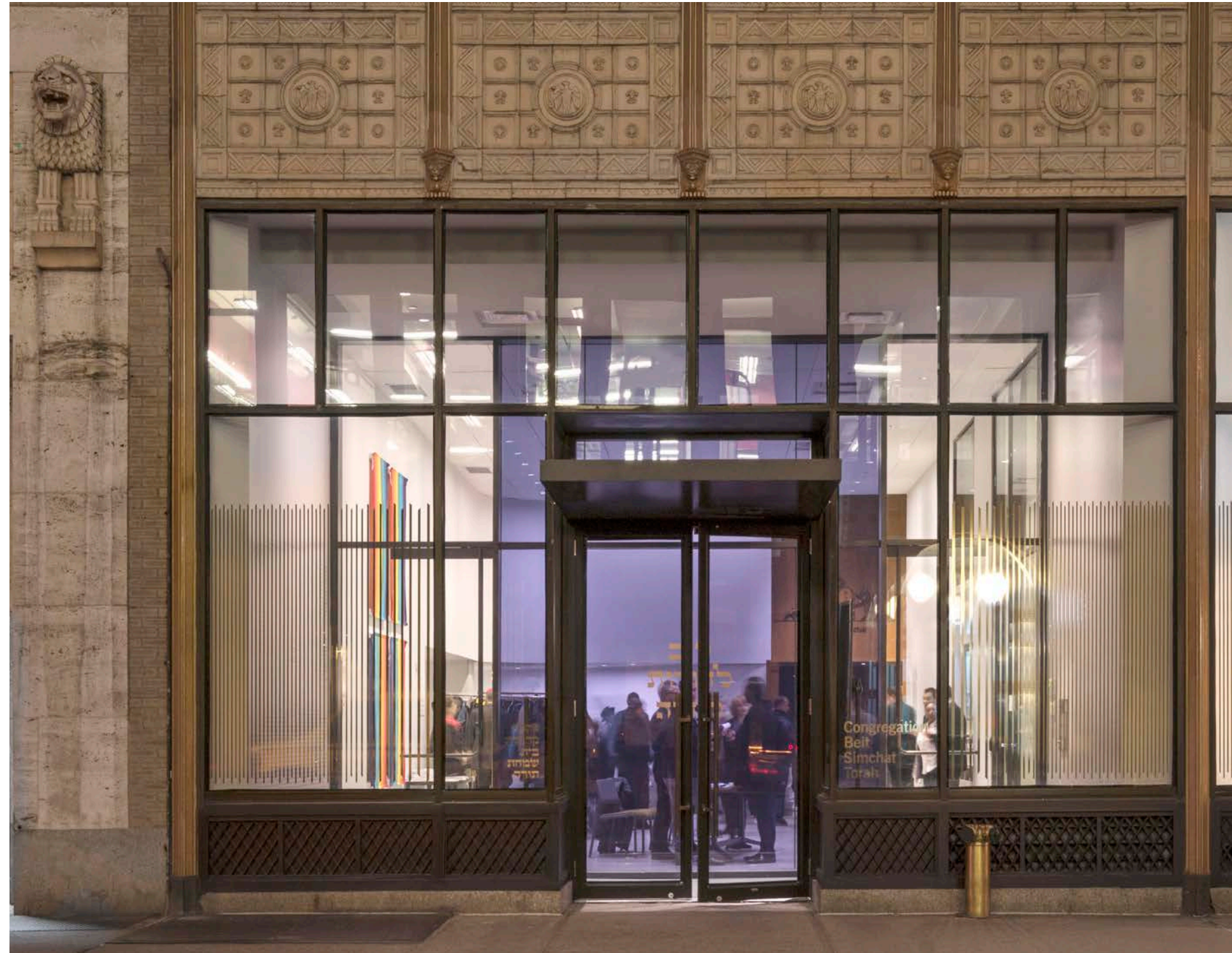
In 2011 on the eve of Pride Shabbat, CBST closed on these two commercial units, located on the street level of the landmarked Cass Gilbert building, designed in 1927-28 by the American architect renowned for New York City's

Woolworth Building and the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington, D.C., among others. CBST received approval from the Landmark's Preservation Committee to close off one of the two original retail entrances and add a bronze awning over the remaining entry. Although no signage could be installed directly on the façade, both sides of the awning proudly feature the synagogue's name in lights. The bolder, larger illuminated name of the congregation is set back 18 inches from the building's façade, and readily visible from the street without violating landmark code. Video monitors flanking the entry doors proclaim CBST's spirit to all who walk by. Gold stripes on the windows create continuity across the two storefronts, while harkening back to the gold-painted signage that adorned these storefronts through most of their history.

ועשו לי מקדש
ושכנתי בתוכם

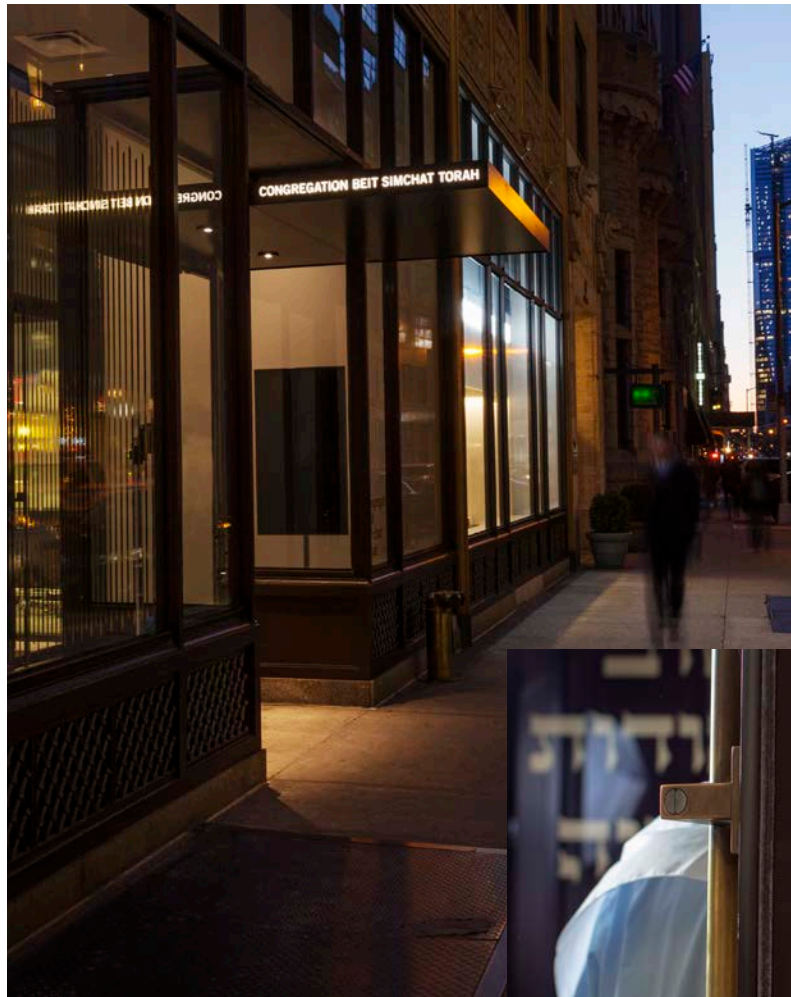
MAKE FOR ME A HOLY PLACE
SO THAT MY PRESENCE MAY DWELL AMONG YOU

EXODUS 25:8



Welcome to CBST

Grab hold of the bronze front door handles and the guiding principle of CBST is pressed into your palm: *tov l'hodot l'adonai*, from Psalm 92 means, "It is good to give thanks to the Creator." As you enter the vestibule, you encounter these same words in gold on the massive purple glass wall that shields the lobby from the street. Although indoors, this wall is an important part of CBST's street presence, inviting you to enter its open doors.



אבן מאסו הבונים היתה לראש פנה

THE STONE THAT THE BUILDERS REJECTED HAS BECOME THE CORNERSTONE

PSALM 118:22

On your left is the Builders' Wall, an egalitarian acknowledgment in alphabetical order of every donor who contributed \$1,800 and above before the dedication ceremony on April 3, 2016. During the course of fundraising, more than 1,200 people contributed gifts ranging from \$18 to more than \$6 million. The overall project took eight years of planning, design, and construction, with a total cost of \$24.5 million.

Opposite the Builders' Wall is a passage from Psalm 118:22: "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." These words have long been a significant source of inspiration and meaning for CBST members. Just below the psalm is the story of CBST's beginnings: "In 1973 a minyan came together in defiance of the prevailing belief that it was impossible to be both deeply Jewish and proudly gay. The community that grew from that inspiration has become Congregation Beit Simchat Torah."



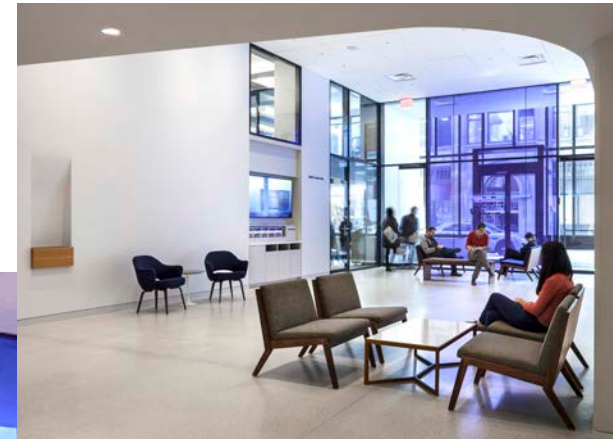
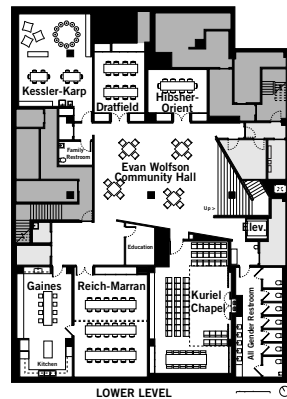
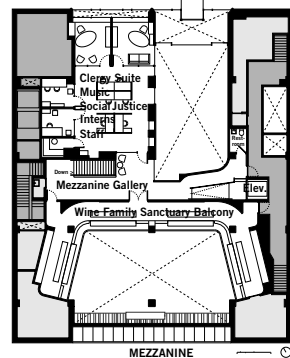
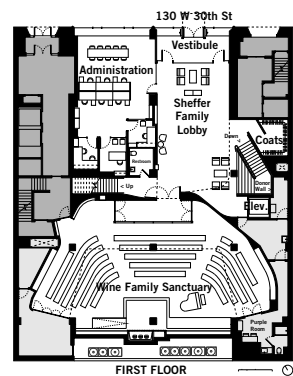
Sheffer Family Lobby

The generous and bright lobby welcomes everyone to CBST, regardless of membership or background. The administrative suite, on the right, is visible through a glass wall and door, connecting members and visitors to the staff. Above these offices, windows to the clergy team suite on the mezzanine level further enhance the synagogue's open, welcoming design.

On the left wall, hang four rainbow flags hand-dyed, hand-sewn, and signed by the artist, Gilbert Baker, z"l (1951-2017). Commissioned by Senior Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum for CBST, these flags follow Baker's original design, unfurled at the San Francisco gay pride march in 1978. Baker's flag, the iconic symbol of the LGBT movement, is now in the design collection of the Museum of Modern Art.

On the right wall, a box full of *kippot* (yarmulkes) is provided for easy access, as many members wear a *kippah* when attending services, classes, and meetings.

Before you leave the lobby, via staircases on your right and left that lead to the mezzanine and lower level respectively, proceed straight ahead to the Wine Family Sanctuary—the heart and soul of the synagogue.



Wine Family Sanctuary

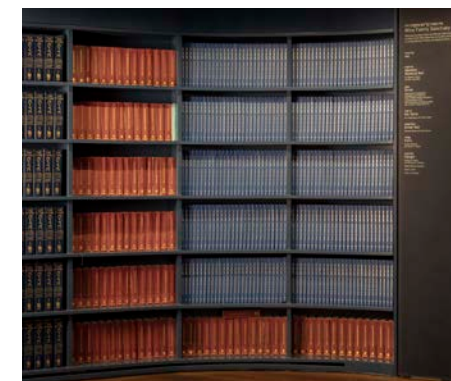
Hanging above the entry doors to the sanctuary are four bronze Lions of Judah—a male pair and a female pair—framing the Ten Commandments. Congregant Walter Schwartz, z"l, adapted a traditional design to suit an LGBTQ synagogue by creating same-sex lion pairs. His artwork adorned the ark in CBST's home on Bethune Street for thirty years. It is fitting that this central piece of CBST history provides welcome to the sanctuary. Before you enter the sanctuary foyer, notice the bronze door handles, smaller versions of the exterior entry door handles, bearing the inscription of gratitude, *tov l'hodot l'adonai*.



The sanctuary is designed as a curved, embracing space with every one of the 299 seats located no farther than 30 feet from the service leaders. The curved oak benches—designed by the pew-maker to Her Majesty's Government—mirror the shape of the sanctuary, and can be stacked and rolled away to clear the space for multiple uses. Several prime seat locations are intentionally left open for wheelchairs in CBST's commitment to equal access.

A curved bookcase housing CBST's Siddur, *B'chol L'vav'cha* and other prayer books, and a rack for *tallitot* (prayer shawls) are on the right as you enter the sanctuary.

"Space was allocated," Cassell says, "according to the way CBST likes to do things." Services at CBST take different forms and are led by varying numbers of clergy and lay leaders. A suite of *shtenders* (lecterns) and tables can be grouped together, used singly, or shifted to accommodate their needs. The space also allows for a large volunteer chorus and grand piano, reflecting the importance of music to CBST's services.





The striking wall of fiberglass-reinforced concrete behind the *bimah* cants back 10 degrees, creating space for a series of eight skylights. As prescribed in the Talmud, daylight entering a sanctuary helps focus prayer outward to transcend physical space. The wall's pattern—based in part on Jewish numerology—was developed in concert with acoustical consultants so that its texture and heft bounce sound waves brightly back into the room, enlarging the room acoustically and ensuring that no one misses a word. Acoustic speakers located below and above the balcony subtly amplify the speech of the service leaders without drowning out the natural sound. Beneath the oak floor a hearing loop beams services to congregants' hearing aids, providing the same crisp audio.

Emerging from the *bimah* wall is the *aron hakodesh* (holy ark), its form reminding us of the acacia wood ark described in the book of Exodus. Outer panels of steam-bent oak, a modern "tree of life," slide to the side, revealing a textile of silver- and gold-plated



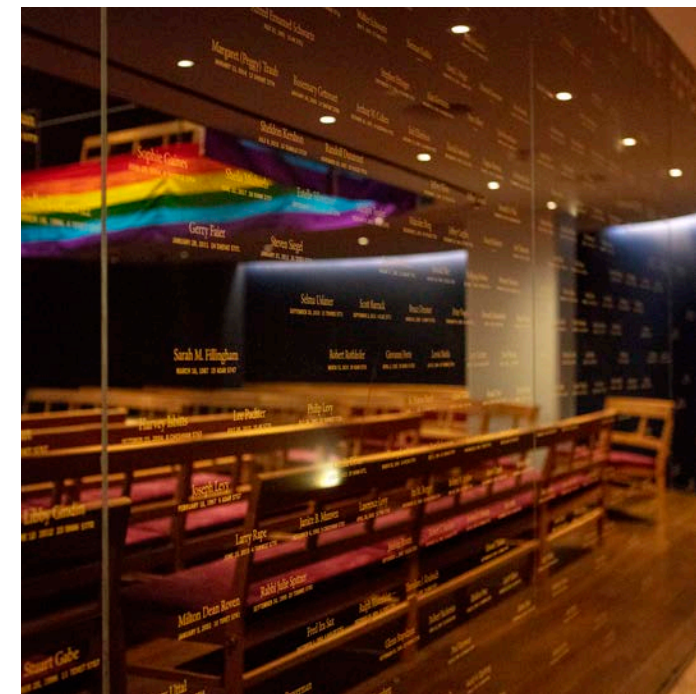
bronze wires woven through a weft of natural fiber, echoing the Torah's call to plate the ark in gold and hang woven linen curtains. Here again, the words *tov l'hodot* appear—it is good to give thanks.

The *parochet* (curtain) is the next layer within the ark that shields CBST's five Torahs. The curtain's laser-cut pattern utilizes a decorative motif from a 14th-century Sephardic synagogue, fabricated in wine and gold colors traditionally found in Ashkenazi synagogues. The design is inspired by historic Jewish papercuts incorporating a menorah, the oldest Jewish symbol. "The choices we made aren't just architectural—the elements reflect the values of the synagogue," maintains Rabbi Kleinbaum. "The architects actually channeled the heart and soul of CBST."

The sanctuary's *ner tamid* (eternal light), embedded in the structural column in front of the ark, transforms a utilitarian element into a holy object. Flickering light emerges from the bronze bowl and reflects off the gold leaf; the ancient tradition of eternally burning oil is evoked by artfully programmed LEDs.

At the back of the sanctuary, a floor-to-ceiling memorial wall in deep-blue glass bears the names of CBST members who have died. LED lights behind the glass are programmed to illuminate members' names on the anniversary date of their passing.

Those who died of AIDS are memorialized by words from Isaiah 56:5, "I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name. I will give them an everlasting name which shall not perish." Those who died in the Holocaust are remembered by Psalm 23:4, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no harm, for You are with me." Both passages are continuously lit on the memorial wall.

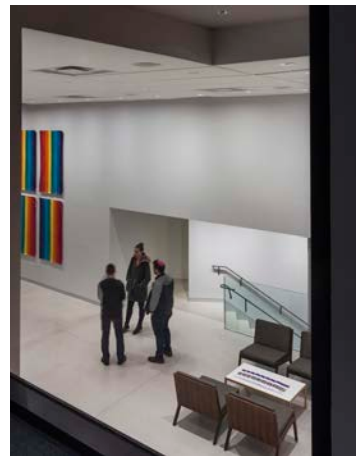


Mezzanine Level, Lower Level, and Evan Wolfson Community Hall

After exiting the Wine Family Sanctuary, head up the stairs on your left to the mezzanine gallery. Embedded in one of the terrazzo steps, here and on the main stairway, is a line from Walt Whitman's "Ode to Myself," which appears in full in CBST's *siddur* and on the wallcovering inside the elevator that links all three levels. "How many clients ask you to incorporate a Walt Whitman poem?" marvels Cassell. At the top of the stairs, doors lead to the sanctuary's balcony, where an oiled-rubbed bronze railing is designed with twenty-two openings, one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

The glass door on the mezzanine leads to the clergy team suite. Glass-enclosed offices for the rabbis, cantor and music director, and director of social justice programming surround support staff and intern workstations. These light-filled offices, with visual access to the lobby and the street, are a far cry from the windowless offices at Bethune Street.

As you return to the Sheffer Family Lobby, head down the open stairway. Pause at the landing to observe the names of the major donors to the Capital Campaign. For many donors, their contribution represented the largest charitable gift of their lives.



From this landing, the stairway widens dramatically to become bleachers overlooking the Evan Wolfson Community Hall. Thanks to its 13-foot ceilings, "You don't feel like you've wound up in a cramped cellar," says Cassell. This well-lit community hall is the core open space for social activities. It also serves as an interior plaza surrounded by the Hibsher-Orient Room, Dratfield Room, and Reich-Marran Room for meetings and classes, the Kessler-Karp Room for early childhood education, and the Gaines Room, a kitchen for staff, congregants, and caterers, as well as for classes.



Kuriel Chapel

Near the main staircase, enter the Kuriel Chapel through the handsome wood door. The chapel seats up to seventy-five people for services, *simchas*, classes, and meetings. The *bimah* is framed by a canopy and wall panels of steam-bent oak. The ark doors were donated to CBST when the Reform Bronx Tremont Temple, Gates of Mercy closed. For decades these doors were the decorative centerpiece of CBST's memorial wall at Bethune Street. Using them as the ark doors here, paired with the *ner tamid*, also from Bethune Street, establishes a particularly meaningful reference to the synagogue's history. Note too that the doors feature a lyre and *tov l'hodot l'adonai*, once again echoing the centrality of music and gratitude.

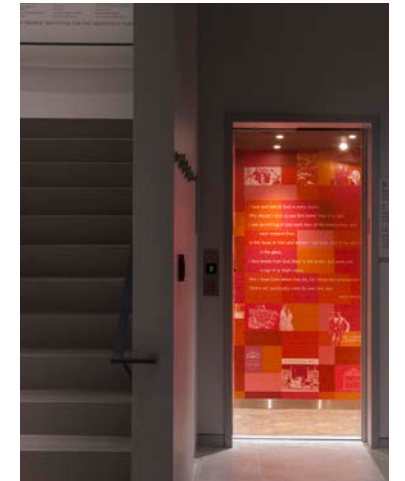


One wall in the chapel is dedicated to memorializing family and friends of members. The reference library and tables provide a quiet place to study. The tables can be folded and stored in a built-in cabinet in order to maximize the flexibility of the room.

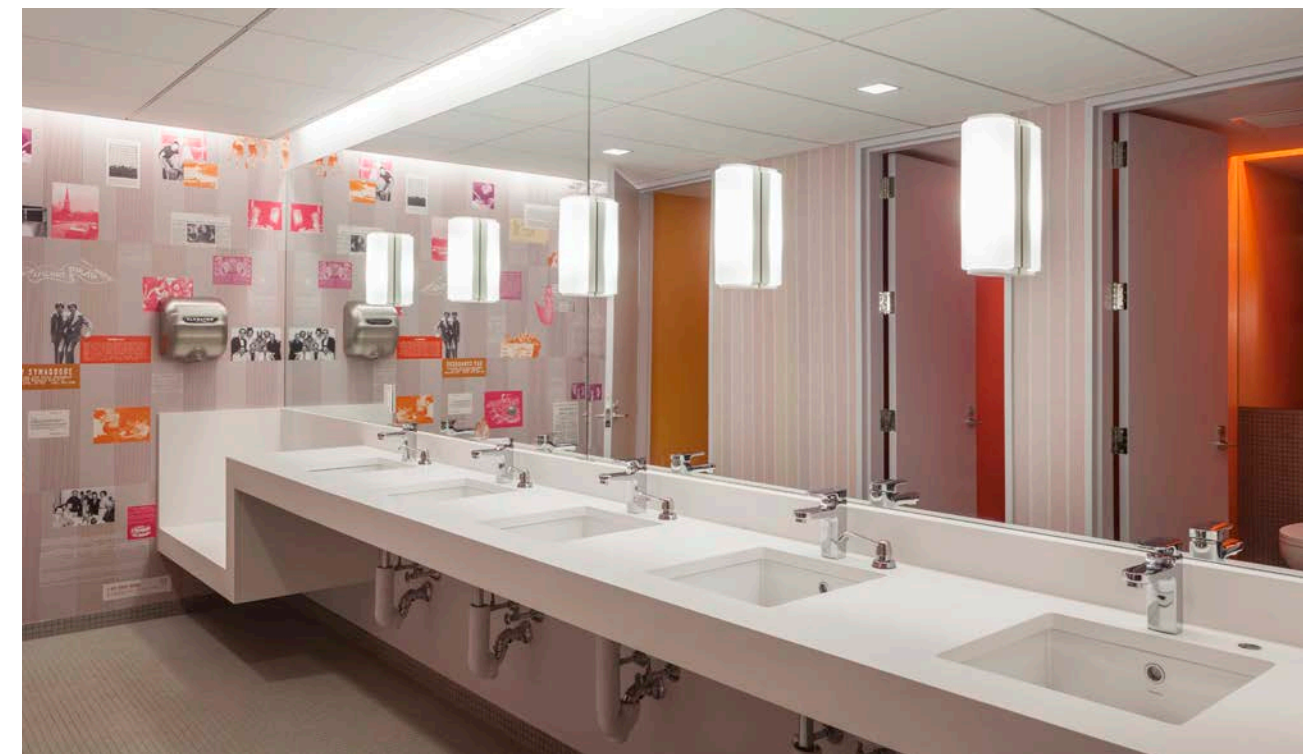


All-Gender Restroom

The hall just to the right of the stairway leads to the main all-gender restroom where brightly colored toilet stalls with full-height doors and mirrors provide privacy. To create this shared restroom, CBST applied for a variance from the Department of Buildings, which required separately identified male and female restrooms. Rabbi Kleinbaum wrote city officials: "CBST seeks to provide, in its new construction, restroom accommodations that are safe, welcoming, and inclusive of the gender identity of all of its employees, congregants, and visitors, including both transgender and cisgender persons. This is a deeply Jewish act to build *shalom bayit*, a peaceful, safe and inclusive home for all who come through our doors, and reflects the values of *b'tselem elohim*, that we, as Jews of all genders are made in the image of G-d." CBST received the first approval for an all-gender restroom in New York City. Additional individual all-gender restrooms are located on each level.



The custom wallcovering here and in bold colors in the elevator reproduces historic flyers, articles, letters, and photos published in CBST's anniversary book, *Changing Lives, Making History: The First Forty Years*, by Rabbi Ayelet Cohen.



Of Special Note

Thirty-six bronze *mezuzot* throughout the synagogue were created by the Polish artists who founded Mi Polin. They combed their country for traces of *mezuzot* that once hung on the doorways of Jewish homes and synagogues. They cast what was left behind and inscribed the city of origin on each. This historic collection, assembled in one building for the first time, reflects traces of Jewish life in Poland.



The *mezuzot* are mounted at a height prescribed by *halacha* (Jewish law), and additional ones are mounted within reach of children or those in wheelchairs. As a religious institution, CBST is exempt from the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act, but CBST has chosen to meet and sometimes exceed those standards, including multiple ADA approved restrooms, accessible coat racks, and a sanctuary induction hearing loop. In addition, CBST's designers met with The Jewish Guild for the Blind to better understand how light levels and contrast affect people with sight limitations.

Honoring Torah's commandment to be good stewards of the earth, CBST chose to construct its new home in ways that would minimize its environmental impact: appliances, plumbing fixtures, lighting, and HVAC systems are among the most energy efficient available. Forest Stewardship Council Certified wood makes up the sanctuary floor. An Energy Recovery Ventilator (ERV) transfers heat from outgoing to incoming air with a higher than usual turnover of fresh air without waste. Many tons of demolition debris, including steel, concrete, glass, and organic materials were sorted and recycled. Through all these efforts, CBST's home received a Gold Rating from the U.S. Green Building Council for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED).

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טוב להודות ליהוה

IT IS GOOD TO GIVE THANKS TO THE ONE ABOVE

PSALM 92

Beit CONGREGATION
Simchat
Torah

קהל קדושה בית שמחת תורה

An LGBT Synagogue for People of All
Sexual Orientations and Gender Identities

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