



Westminister Synagogue, Kensington

Architect Barbara Weiss Architects

Client Westminister Synagogue

Religion Progressive, independent, Jewish

Cost £3.3m

Funding Fundraising, application for HLF grant

Size 450m²

Capacity 300 in sanctuary, 100 in parallel service

Finishing date End of 2004

Accommodation Whole building including scrolls museum, rabbi residence, prayer rooms, Saturday school, basement conversion to teaching space/nursery, four-storey escape tower, demountable ark

Brief Make Victorian palazzo into attractive conference venue and fit out for running expanding community

Architect Barbara Weiss 'They just desperately needed to generate extra income.'



The client's view

Renee Salamon
Westminister Synagogue

"The project was on paper for 10 years"

It seemed uncertain whether the refurbishment would ever come off paper. The synagogue is run by a volunteer executive committee. It takes an enormous amount of time. My husband is the rabbi of the community and my background was marketing and advertising. I felt the need to devote myself to this and concentrate on ensuring that the refurbishment happened.

The building was lying fallow. Without refurbishment it couldn't be used to the best of its potential. We want to allow the community to benefit from it. Otherwise what's it all about?

On paper it was a £3.3m project. It is difficult for the synagogue to entertain that amount of money. So we phased it, starting by making the basement, ground and first floor wind and watertight. Now we are opening up new escape routes that will allow us to expand a little.

Fundraising is mainly through private donations. We've had things like an auction of promises with the offer of free dental sessions or other professional services. Even preparing to raise money is a major feat. Most people won't give without knowing what they are getting, so we have prepared a massive amount of documents on phasing, the business plan and so on.

We also applied to the Heritage Lottery Fund. The application totally exhausted us, and it was unsuccessful. But the HLF told us not to go away – we were the first organisation awarded a planning grant of £46,000 to help us make three or four separate applications which address different areas of need such as access.

Weiss was not selected because she is Jewish, she came highly recommended through members of the community. She had also bid for another synagogue job I was familiar with. The community was certainly more comfortable – she felt a lot of sympathy with the brief. Being of the Jewish faith makes it a meaningful project.

Have faith

Treating religious buildings like any other, where building regulations and revenue streams come first, is not the way to approach them. Every religion has its own rituals and idea of spirituality. Do architects need to share this? The answer seems to be yes. Architects don't have to be practising members of a particular faith but they need to be sympathetic.

Burns is an Orthodox Jew and the Hale Synagogue is part of that community. When the job came into the office he naturally took it on. 'It definitely helped being Jewish,' he says. 'There are all sorts of strange practices and idiosyncracies that someone would otherwise have to sit and explain, even just the lights which have to be controlled by a timer switch on the Sabbath.' Burns still had to make sure he got every detail right. 'People may not be very religious,' he says. 'But the architecture has to conform.'

Barbara Weiss has a Jewish father but comes from a lay family. She took lessons from her children's Jewish tutor when working on Westminister Synagogue. Her client Renee Salamon says Weiss' empathy was important: 'There is a certain comfort zone.'

Parry's St Martin's team has a broadly Anglican background. 'It is different to being an outsider the faith,' says Parry. 'But the question has never been asked. As a designer you immerse yourself in rituals; there is no reason not belonging should preclude you from spiritual understanding, after all material and light embody this.' His client, vicar Nicholas Holtam agrees. 'I don't think Eric is a practising Christian,' he says. 'But he has a profound understanding of the spirituality of the space.' ■