

# FINDING MEANING IN THE PROFANE

How libraries can evoke spiritual experiences



# Louvor

a hum sujeito Sabio & Estudioso  
 que  
 largando as delicias Mundanas  
 Se applica a o Estudo das Sciencias

E debaixo de seu retrato estas com-  
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 Conceito

Traduzido assim em Hebrayco  
 Como no Espanhol  
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## Traducao



H. E. H. 47 B. II

לכל יחד	וְאֵם אֲשָׁאֵל
לְחַכְמָתִי	דְּבַר חֲכָמָה
וְגַם מִלֵּב	כִּלְפֵי הוּא
שֵׁאֲלֶתִי	לְרַבִּין לִי
אֵלֶּה מִהֶם	וְאֵם לֹא אֲשֶׁ-
בְּסִבְתִּי	דְּחִמָּה בָּם
בְּסִפְרֵיהֶם	נֶאֱזַן דְּפִי
חִפְּשֵׁתִי	וְרִק אֶדְוֶה עַת

אֵלֶּיךָ לֵךְ	לֵךְ חֶבֶל
בְּשִׁלְיֹתִי	וְהַנַּח לִי
אֲתָעִיר	וְנִפְשֵׁי עֵוֹן
וְתִדְוֶרְתִּי	בְּגֵן גִּילְגֵל
אֵלֶּי אֲתַחַנֵּן	וְהִדְוֶעַת
אֲשֶׁן אֵלֶּיךָ	עַל פִּי רַב
וְכִנְיֹתֶיךָ	וְהַטּוֹבוֹת
רִנְיֹתֶיךָ	כִּי תִקְחֶנּוּ לִי

תם

## הלומד בבית למודו



אֲנִי יוֹשֵׁב בְּתוֹךְ בֵּיתִי	א
מִקוּם מוֹשֵׁב מְנוּחָתִי	
אֲנִי רוֹאֶה בְּעוֹלָמִי	
הַכּוֹזֵן עִם רַב וְנִבְדָּלֶתִי	
וּמְדַתִּי וְכִיָּה חַיִּי	
אֲנִי כֹלֵב בְּמִתְשַׁבְּהִי	
וְכִיָּה שֶׁכְּלִי בְּרַעְיוֹנֵי	
אֲנִי בְּנִתִּי יִדְעֵתִי	

## El estudioso en su Retrete

1  
 Aqui en un Retrete estoy metido  
 Del concurso de Gente retirado  
 Aqui mi Ser conosco, y Estado  
 Aqui reparo yo, lo que he sabido.

2  
 De aqui Tierra, y Cielo yo camino  
 De aqui penetro, todo lo Movible  
 De Gente, Animales, y Sencible  
 y no mover un passo determino.

3  
 Aqui estan Prophetas bien conmigo  
 Philosophos, Doctas, con recreos  
 Aqui estan los Griegos y Hebreos,  
 Y aun solo me veo, sin Amigo.

*The academic in his room*

*Here I sit confined in the small  
Cast away from the commotion of all  
Here I question what I am  
Here I assess what I know*

*Through this I travel heaven and earth  
Here I fathom all the world  
Of men, plant and animal  
And do not move at all*

*Here with me stand the prophets  
Philosophers and poets  
Here are the Greeks and Hebrews known  
Yet here I sit alone*

*Ask any of these men  
Each is able to teach me then  
when I do not ask, they are quiet  
No one speaks but when I desire it*

*Away from the world, let me rest  
Here my soul is deeply blessed  
Wisdom is the finest treasure  
World's good, the greatest pleasure*

*- translated from Isaac Cohen Belinfante*



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How libraries can evoke spiritual experiences

Anouk Hagen | History thesis | Sabina Tanović



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## ABSTRACT

Religion is in decline and more people identify themselves as spiritual instead. Although there are abundant religious spaces, this shift did not cause a development in architecture yet. Libraries have similar qualities to religious spaces, like the sense of community and the feeling of retreat, so it is interesting to research how this typology can support spirituality. The Ets Haim library is the oldest Jewish library in the world and was founded to rediscover the Jewish identity of converted Jews who fled Spain and Portugal. This study aims to dissect the palimpsest of this library for a better understanding of the physical representation of spirituality by answering the question: How does Ets Haim Library support the notion of spirituality? There has been ample of research that addresses the impact of architecture on a transcending experience. Elements like urban context, light, geometry, materials and symbolism stand out as main influences, but it must be mentioned that spirituality is a subjective concept and it cannot be confined to a list of elements or a design manual. After a comprehensive analysis, it became clear that the Ets Haim supports spirituality by immaterial values like history, community and knowledge and material elements like geometry, light, colour and the book as a symbol.





## INTRODUCTION

Religion is in decline, and it seems that spirituality starts to take on a more prominent role instead (Houtman & Aupers, 2007). This means that less people are part of a religious organisation like a church, synagogue or mosque. However, religious architecture creates a sense of community, and church attendance has a positive impact on wellbeing (Macaraan, 2022). Especially now, with the rise of mental health problems, spiritual spaces become more important (Daelemans, 2020). But religious buildings are not the only type of architecture that can have a spiritual impact (Bermudez, 2015). Secular architecture like dwellings, memorials or libraries, has the possibility to offer a meaningful experience as well, but it is unclear which design elements can create this.

Libraries have something mystical about them, the silence, sense of retreat and the endless rows of books full of knowledge and devotion from the writers all add to the experience of spirituality. People visit libraries to open up to new ideas and perspectives and to develop their mental abilities. At the same time, libraries, like religious buildings, offer a sense of community, since different groups come together. At the centre of the library is the practice of reading, which is a spiritual experience: 'Many everyday activities can become opportunities for experiencing the transcendent. Reading is one such experience' (Waters, 1992, p. 2.).

There are many libraries in the Netherlands, some private, some public, some big, some small, some are vibrant and others calm. Some libraries feel spiritual the moment you step in, but others only appear meaningful after a while or after frequent visits. The library I visit most is the library of the architecture faculty. This space is special because it feels like a retreat from the busy and interactive surroundings of other areas in the building. It feels more communal and connected compared to the more individual focus elsewhere. The library is treated with respect and the visitors share a goal and fascination. Besides, it is inspiring to be in a place where there is so much knowledge about the object of your interest. When entering the library, you are overwhelmed with a deep connection to the greatest architects in history. The space is rather compressed and has dark colours and places to sit between shelves stacked with books. In other university libraries, like the central library, you feel less related to the books and the open spaces make you feel more vulnerable. Another university library outside of Delft is the Neude in Utrecht, this is a historic building and used to be a post office (Erfgoed bekeken, 2019). The traces of its original function are still visible in the artworks from this Gesamtkunstwerk. Although this library does not have a religious background, the history adds to the spiritual experience of this place.

For this research, the Ets Haim library in Amsterdam is analysed. This is the oldest Jewish library in the world and was founded to rediscover the identity of the Sephardic Jews after they were forced to convert during the Inquisition. The library is a testimony of the social developments and intellectual interests of the Sephardic community and shows how immaterial values reflect in a physical environment. The architecture of the library might not be as impressive or intentional as the libraries like the central library in delft or the Library the Neude, but Ets Haim has a more spiritual background and is thus more relevant for this research. This study aims to dissect the palimpsest of the Ets Haim to get a better understanding of spiritual architecture to eventually find out how contemporary spiritual spaces could take shape, and answer the question: *How does Ets Haim Library support the notion of spirituality?*

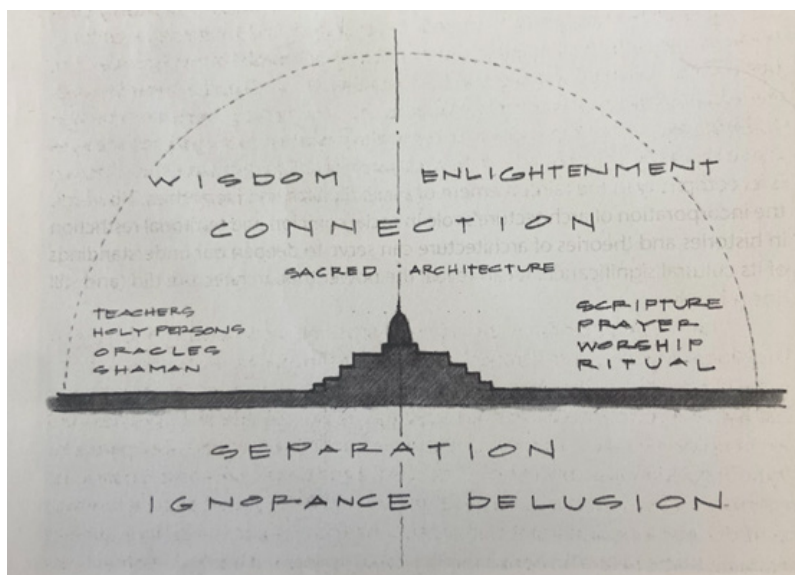
There is abundant literature that gives insight in architectural qualities that stimulate spirituality in sacred spaces. It stands out that there is a focus on elements like urban context (Stegers, 2008), light (Matracchi & Habibabad, 2021), geometry (Poor & Javid, 2021), colours (Ghouchani, 2022), symbolism, mystery, and genius loci (Coomans et al., 2012). However other scholars, like Phillip James Tabb, Julio Bermudez and Thomas Barrie (2015) argue that spirituality can't be defined by a certain typology or list of elements - it's a personal experience that can't be reduced to a design guide that tells you how to make something spiritual. These studies have a focus on the separate elements that make and influence a spiritual experience, but do not give a clear overview or design guide. Although there has been some research into the spirituality of libraries (Turner, 2012; Jackson & Hahn, 2011) in relation to the architecture of libraries. Some architectural journals and books refer to the spiritual aspect of libraries (Bermudez, 2015, Coomans et al., 2012), but solely as part of a list of secular architectural types that can evoke spirituality. Because I feel that this is an important but underexplored topic, I want to investigate how non-religious architecture supports spiritual concepts - namely libraries. Libraries already are spaces for community and retreat, but they are also spiritual spaces. Hypothetically, if we understand how libraries can be spiritual places and space, we can stimulate a new era in the everchanging meaning of a library and offer a more inclusive space for spiritual development.

To answer the research question, this paper is structured in the following way: the first chapter will focus on defining spirituality and its relation to architecture and libraries. second chapter aims to highlight my own experience of the library space as to connect the subjective and intangible aspects of the experience with the history of Ets Haim, its rituals and the symbolism of the space; this is followed by the material representation of the immaterial values. How does the spiritual practice translate into space?

# 1. THE MEANING OF SPIRITUALITY

The wide range of definitions of spirituality show the ambiguity of the concept. Where the Cambridge dictionary (Cambridge University Press, n.d.) describes spirituality as “the quality that involves deep feelings and beliefs of religious nature, rather than the physical parts of life”, the Collins dictionary (HarperCollins, n.d.) defines spirituality as “spiritual means relating to people’s thoughts and beliefs, rather than their bodies and physical surroundings.” And Oxford dictionary (Oxford University Press, n.d.) as: “relating to or affecting the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things.”. Although these definitions may differ in detail, the overall message focusses on mental and immaterial values, rather than physical and material things. Since architecture is inherently physical and material, how does it relate to spirituality?

Architecture can be seen as the intermediate between the sacred and the physical. Thomas Barrie (2010) wrote multiple books about this concept. His first book spiritual path, sacred place, describes the physical representation of the spiritual path



or ritual in architecture. He describes this by a sequence of an entrance, a path and the place. The architecture of this sequence connects people with their surroundings when it stimulates the senses and activates a bodily experience. Stimulation of the senses and movement constantly change the perception of the architecture and intentional design can influence that significantly. In Encounters (2005), Juhani Pallasmaa also emphasizes the bodily experience in architecture. Through the senses, architecture shapes our

fig. 1  
Architecture and the Sacred  
Barrie, 1998

perception of reality. According to this concept, meaningful architecture is an act rather than an object. As Pallasmaa said: “Architecture directs, scales and frames actions, perceptions and thoughts” (p.32).

The articulation of the spiritual path can reveal convictions associated with human existence, and represent a spiritual journey of preparation, separation and return (Barrie, 2010). The sequence of spaces in a path acts as a trial for people seeking for the sacred. The ‘test’ makes visiting the sacred place intentional and

raises awareness of the body and spirit. It also creates an incentive since it becomes increasingly more sacred. The sacred place is secluded and has defined boundaries that separate the visitor from the profane world. According to Barrie, the ritual needs the physical, sacred environment, to access its meaning. Sacred architecture can stimulate a deeper understanding of the individual, our relation to others and to our place in the cosmos and thus connect us to the larger whole that we are an intrinsic part of. Symbols are an important aspect for this connection, they are the bridge between the immaterial and material world and mediate the past with the present, the known with the unknown and the one with the many. Symbols are between the sacred and the profane. Since they represent the eternal, symbols are a key to permanence.

Barrie's concept of the spiritual path and place is similar to the way Sabina Tanović (2019) describes spaces of transition to explain the relation between rituals and architecture. According to Tanović, spaces for rituals and their manifestation into the physical world can be structured in three: an entrance, a room and a path. The entrance marks the transition into the new environment and forms the conscious start of the ritual practice. It is the passage where the sacred and the profane world communicate and the first stage in the ritual procession. The entrance flows into the path, which determines how a person will interact with their surroundings. An ascend can for instance evoke the feeling of initiation, where a descend can create a feeling of immersion into a new world. An ascend also symbolises a metaphor of life and death, due to the association with movements towards light with dead or hope. Stairs, for example, play an important role in the manifestation of a path. They can symbolise a path towards a better place or suggest a nihilistic purpose by the repetitive motion of climbing steps that lead to nowhere. For others, stairs can refer to the essence of human existence, because it invites engagement. Action is always a necessary gesture, even if it doesn't result in something. Pallasmaa (2012) also recognised the influence of the stairs. He describes how a lazy staircase can make the body feel heavy and clumsy, whereas other stairs can make one feel gracious and subtle. Besides this, a stair can represent cosmological and spiritual values. Stairs going up symbolise the ascent to a higher spiritual development while descending stairs symbolise the path towards the Underworld. Eventually the path ends in a room. In relation to death the room captures feelings of loss and offers conciliation for grief (Tanović, 2019). The room can have a dual meaning as a permanent house for the departed and as a temporary space for mourners.

fig. 2  
Stairways of the mind  
Pallasmaa, 2005



Spiritual architecture is closely related to religious or sacred architecture. But can a secular building also be spiritual and or sacred? And can profane become sacred? The question is whether elements and symbolism in religious architecture can be seen as spiritual design elements. What came first, spirituality or religion and does it matter? A space with the same physical characteristics as a religious building, is associated with something religious and thus spiritual since we relate it to the practices and rituals that cohere with spaces with a similar appearance. So, if we would design a space with religious characteristics, but without the attached meaning, we would still experience it as spiritual, but it wouldn't be sacred. In Judaism, a profane object can become sacred, but never return to profanity (Pareira et al. 2013). Likewise, Kenneth Pargament (1999) argues that people have the ability to sanctify secular objects, space and time.

Libraries are associated with knowledge, and reading can be seen as a practice in the spiritual path to enlightenment. But can libraries be sacred? In the book *The Library: A World History*, Campbell (2014) elaborates on the origin and stories of libraries from all over the world. This overview shows that libraries can be much more than the storage of books. The meaning lies in the reading and the requiring of knowledge. The design of libraries reflects a culture, individuals or even complete countries. It is a testimony of the time it was built in. Libraries show the relationship between people and the written word and symbolise the spirit of society. Often, libraries are designed with a socio-political intention. They for example show the scientific ambitions of the clients or are a symbol of generosity from the government. An example of a library with a political intention is the Lenin state library. This library reflects the communist ideals of the state, by giving the impression of surveillance with statues of leaders that 'keep an eye on you'. Another example, rococo libraries, show a desired attitude towards knowledge and civilisation with sophisticated detailing and images. Nowadays libraries are shifting towards digitalisation, as the focus is more on libraries as data banks instead of the storage of physical books. But the physical experience of wandering through shelves stacked with books should not be neglected. Ralph Lamar Turner (2012) expressed his concerns about this issue and emphasized the spiritual value of physical libraries. He explained that libraries have a critical role as a 'civic temple' and knowledge centre. People visit libraries to meditate, refuge from the increasingly distracting world, think deeply and profoundly, personal development and to spark creativity. The digital library does not encourage this behaviour and is not engaging. Nothing compares to exploring the physical library space and accidentally stumbling across interesting ideas and meeting other people. In historical libraries, the visitor is surrounded by books and nothing else, but modern libraries have turned into distracting environments themselves. As a countermovement to the digitalisation of books, the design of libraries is now focused on libraries as a place (Jackson & Hahn, 2011). This means that libraries have increased space for group study, instructional facilities,

wireless access, cafés, lectures, places to hangout and computers. Although this new format might be stimulating in a new way, the loss of the traditional library should be acknowledged.

Turner (2012) recognizes books as a key element for the spiritual experience of a library. Books and the way they are presented influence the experience of the library deeply. Books are the interactive experience of the library and stimulate the senses through their smell, texture and the sound of turning pages. Books are the manifestation or symbol of the thoughts and ideas of writers. As well as library design, books reflect the spirit of the time they were written and eternalize the struggles and dreams of societies. Whenever you step into a library, you are in conversation with the eternal. You could see each book as a door, and to walk through a library is to pass the countless doors to new worlds and thoughts by opening the cover. Turner goes on to show that many people have acknowledged the library as a sacred space and highlights the parallels between libraries and religious architecture. Both provide place for community for diverse yet like-minded people, and both offer stimulative environment that promotes private contemplation. The library embodies the search for transcendent enlightenment, as expressed beautifully in the poem on the first page of this thesis. Similarly, Steven Foote (1995) writes: “Libraries are a space for social and intellectual growth, stimulation and fascination of curiosity and the expansion of personal limitations” (p. 356)

Heather Lea Jackson and Trudi Bellardo Hahn (2011) also recognize the spiritual value of libraries and the role of the physical sensation. They argue that visiting a library makes you feel part of a larger community, create a greater sense of self and a stimulate a higher purpose. In the later nineteenth and early twentieth century, traditional library design was similar to Christian architecture, as libraries had a



fig. 3  
Libraries can evoke spiritual feelings - Library Stockholm  
Serio, 2020

spiritual function and were meant as institutions of public culture. This might explain why the students prefer traditional images of exteriors and interiors of libraries and associate spirituality more with the traditional libraries than modern libraries. Turner (2012) also addressed the value of historical associations with libraries and noted that books cannot be reduced to a symbol as a part of a digital library. Likewise, Gorichanaz (2020) sees the library as a sanctuary for people and information and like Turner compares libraries with churches. However, he believes that the ideal library combines calm and vibrant and that both of these characteristics must exist to complement each other. He also adds that a library should be free to all and although the preservation of historic books is important, access and proximity to these scriptures is crucial. Pyati (2019) advocates for the active merging of the library with spiritual practices. He perceives a growing interest in mindfulness in Library Information Science and sees possibilities for libraries to be places for introspection, sanctuaries for the soul and spirit. Libraries can stimulate spirituality in a secular setting. So, the potential crises of libraries can be a new incentive to rediscover the spiritual qualities traditional libraries entail.





## 2. ETS HAIM LIBRARY

The Ets Haim library has played a special role in the life of Jews in Amsterdam. The library is founded in 1616 and is located at the Mr Vissersplein since 1675 (Pareira et al., 2012). This makes it the oldest functioning Jewish library in the world. It is part of the complex of the Portuguese-Israeli, or Sephardic synagogue. The Sephardi community has its roots in Portugal and Spain, where they were forced to leave or convert to Christianity in the end of the fifteenth century (Schrijver & Warncke, 2016). The converted Jews became known as conversos, but some still practiced their religion in private. Some Jews eventually fled to other countries in Europe, and later to Amsterdam as well. The first Jews arrived here around 1600. In Amsterdam, the Sephardic Jews had the opportunity to rediscover the tradition and customs of their faith. To accommodate this, the Sephardi started a school along with the library Ets Haim, which means Tree of Life. The library was built to house the collection of books and manuscripts that were used for study in this school. They started with Torahs, commentaries, books in Hebrew and more, but later started to study other, more secular subjects as well. The

collection had multiple peaks of purchases (Sclar, 2019), but ended on an impressive number of 600 handwritten and 23000 printed books.

In the first years after arriving in Amsterdam, the Sephardi were divided over multiple buildings in the city (Pareira et al, 2012). They came together in hidden small sitting-room synagogues, since they weren't allowed to practice their religion publicly. In 1639, three Sephardi communities merged into the 'Talmud Torah' and started to gather in one of the synagogues (fig. 4). This building still resembled the appearance of a private home. Later, the regulations regarding religion changed and the Jews could design their synagogues to their

preference. This freedom was unique in Europe and is presumably related to the economic importance of the Sephardic community. The first group to take this opportunity were the Ashkenazi. The Ashkenazi are Jews that have their origin in the east of Europe. There was a bit of a rivalry between the Ashkenazi and the Sephardic Jews in Amsterdam and the Sephardi saw the Ashkenazi as the 'poor ones'. The Sephardi themselves were more involved with the elite of Amsterdam, had more money and would view themselves as more distinguished (H. Warncke,



fig. 4  
The first Synagogue of  
the Talmud Torah on  
the Houtgracht  
de Hooghe, 1695

personal communication, March 13, 2023). The Ashkenazi synagogue faces the location of where the Sephardic synagogue would later be built (fig.5). Around 1670 the Sephardic Jews also started plans for a synagogue.

To find the best design, the community started a competition where multiple models were displayed, after which the mason Elias Bouman was selected. Elias was the son of a mason with a strong connection to the city's elite. In contrast to his father's social skills, Elias focused on his intellectual development. He was a surveyor, which means he was educated at universities, private schools or received other training. He eventually replaced his father as the head of the masons' guild and was appointed Amsterdam's master mason in 1681. With this title, he received important assignments like work for the Oosterkerk and the Ashkenazi synagogue. In 1671 Bouman was selected as the architect for the Portuguese synagogue. He was known for his classical style and work with brick, as can be recognized in the design for the synagogue complex (Pareira et al., 2013).

For many centuries, synagogues did not have a recognizable architectural style (Pareira et al., 2013). The designs followed the national style and local traditions rather than a creating a new distinct style. The most distinctive characteristic of synagogues might even be the invisibility of the buildings since they couldn't practice their religion publicly for years. Only in the nineteenth century some characteristic Jewish ornamentation appeared, like the star of David and tablets of the law. Instead, the Jewish faith has always been more focused on literature. The focus was not on the physical, but on the spiritual (Heumann, 2015). Although the exterior architecture never had a recognizable style, the interior of Jewish buildings reflects the Jewish culture more visibly. The design of decoration, furniture and ceremonial artefacts separated them from Christian places of worship. This furniture is still preserved in the Portuguese synagogue. The layout



fig. 5  
The two synagogues  
facing each other  
Berckheyde, 1675

of synagogues was not particularly special, and is mainly made of one hall, except for the separate galleries where woman could attend the services.

The parnasim, which is the board of the Portuguese community, didn't only have functional requirements for the design of the synagogue, but also some wishes related to the Jewish law, the Halachah. This is for example regarding the shape of the synagogue, which should be rectangular according to Sephardic traditions. The religious requirements were mostly focused on the interior of the synagogue, like the placement of the Tebah and Heichal, from which the scriptures are read. Besides the religious demands, the parnasim wanted the appearance of the synagogue to outdo the Ashkenazi synagogue. Although these laws were important, the religious value of the building was not derived from the design, but rather of the people of the community and their rituals.

To give the synagogue a certain grandeur, Elias Bouman followed the classicistic style. The building is symmetrical and the contrast between the synagogue and the surrounding lower annexes gives the building an impressive character. The architect followed the rules of Vincenzo Scamozzi's book 'L'idea della architettura Universale' for the design of the building. From this book he used orders of

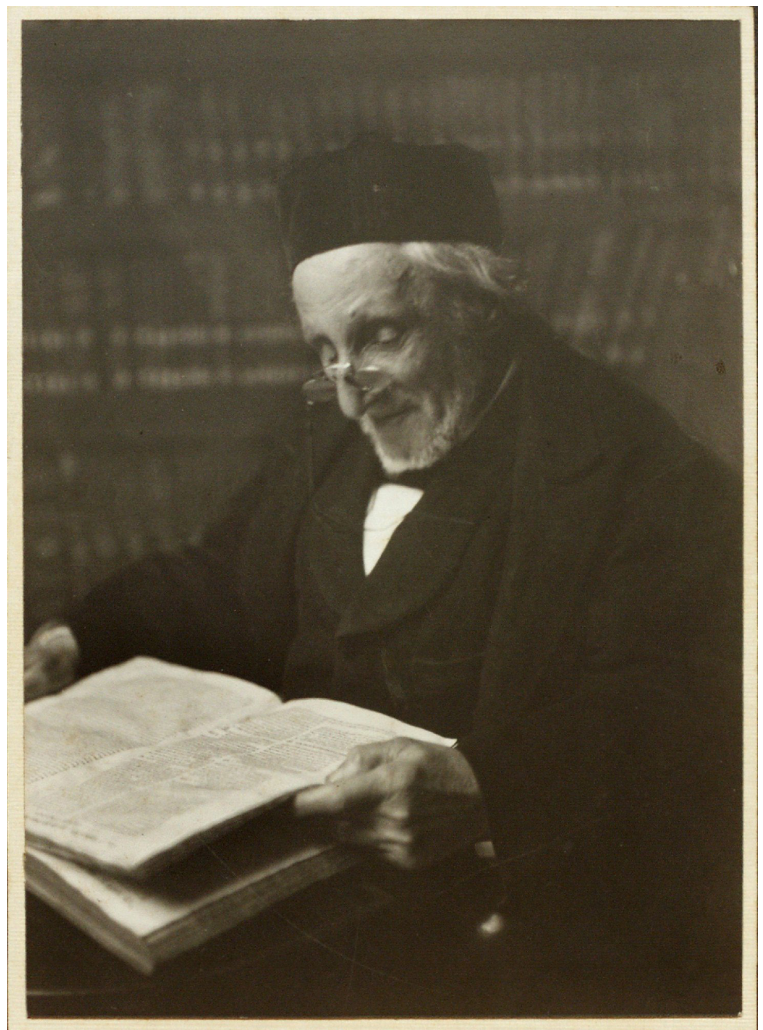


fig. 6  
David Montezinos in  
the library  
n.d.

columns to indicate hierarchy of the different functions within the complex. Besides the rules of Scamozzi, he was inspired by the Oosterkerk, although not all elements were fitted for a synagogue. His main source was the temple of Salomon. During the time of the design for the synagogue, there was a great interest in this temple and there were many documentations about it. Within the Portuguese community, Jacob Jehuha Leon did extensive research about this temple. This temple was special, because people believe that God handed down the ideal rules for the building. For the synagogue, the arched windows, plain exterior and curved buttresses were taken over from this temple. However, in the Portuguese synagogue, Vlaardingerbroek (2013), argues that it is doubtful that Bouman comprehended the religious implications of his design.

The development of the library is closely related to the development of the adjacent academy. The students of the academy were divided in in the medrasim, which were the lower classes, and the 'Grand Medras', which was the top class. Other members of the community visited the library to seek greater textual fluency. The scholars of Grand Medras used the library most intensely, as they were working on their own publications. At first the library attended the educational needs of the yeshiva, by providing textual and ritual supplies, but the space came to represent the religious ideals of the Portuguese society. For the intellectuals of the community, the library linked scholars to the larger Jewish world texturally and spiritually (Sclar, 2019). The library was involved in broad European developments in authorship, publishing and reading, since it purchased and published books that were recognized internationally. The books tell more than just the contents, since they reflect the thought and interests of the community and are more than simply objects, but rather have a religious essence (Warncke, Personal communication, March 13, 2023). The Ets Haim is a testament for the articulation of the Jewishness of the converted Jews.

The seminary and the library were part of the design from the beginning, but their location and layout changed over the course of time. At first the library was just one room, which was connected with the seminary through an indoor door (Warncke, personal communication, March 13, 2023). In 1889, the librarian David Montezinos (fig.6) donated his own collection to the Ets Haim, after which the name was officially changed to Ets Haim Livraria Montezinos and the library was expanded. His donation now forms the main part of the collection. Montezinos was a dedicated librarian and would call the books his 'paper children'. When people would ask his wife about his whereabouts, she would almost always respond with 'in the vault', which refers to the small room the library was at the time. Later, when Montezinos passed away, his body was laid out in the centre of the library (Warncke, personal communication, March 13, 2023). Probably, no other library has a similar story and this indicates immaterial value of the Ets Haim. To house the addition of the collection by Montezinos, another floor was added with a gallery that overlooked the first floor. This is

now the most distinct architectural element, but the most important part of the collection and of the space is still the original room or ‘vault’ that housed the collection that was curated by the teachers and members of the seminary. The curator appreciates that Montezinos wanted to keep the two collections separate, since you can distinguish the books that shaped the identity of the Portuguese community (Warncke, 2023). These books are a window into the thoughts and ideas of the community.

The most impactful moment in the history of the library is the second world war. In this period, the community, the complex and the collection were in danger. The Sephardic Jews did everything to keep themselves in safety and tried to show they were not of Jewish descent. There are documents that show that members of the Sephardic community tried to prove they were Mediterranean instead of Jewish (Warncke, 2023). This was painful, since the Ets Haim had been a place to rediscover their Jewish identity, but they had to give this up once again. Unfortunately, these efforts didn’t have any effect. From the 4.300 Portuguese Jews, only 600 survived (Esnoga, n.d.). From the librarians, only one survived (Warncke, 2023). Fortunately, the synagogue and its annexes, including the library, weren’t damaged during the war. The books were carefully transported to Germany and were only slightly damaged. Despite the unimaginable pain from the war, the first service was already held on the 9th of May, only four days after the liberation (Esnoga, n.d.). This shows the impressive resilience of the community.



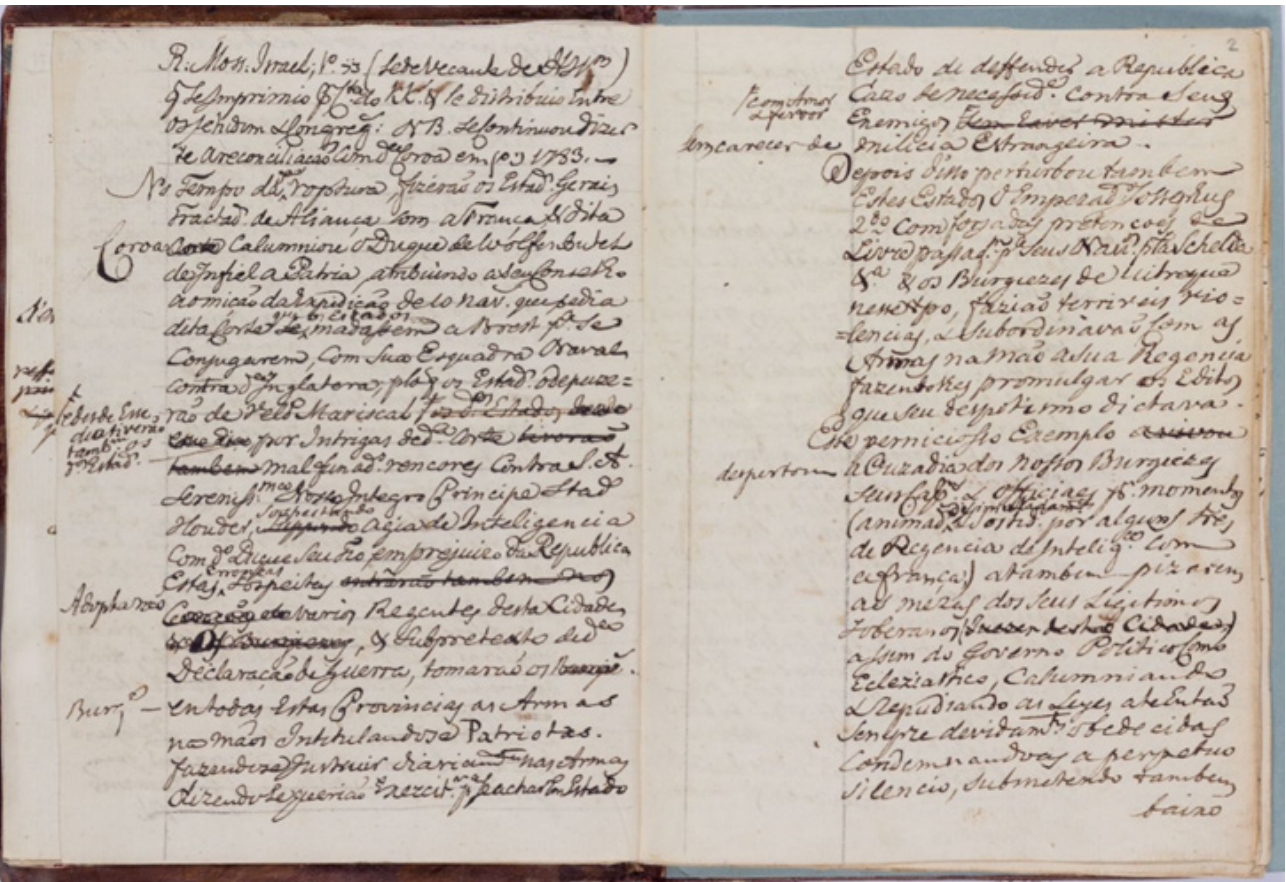
**fig. 7**  
annual dusting of  
the books  
Ets Haim, 2022

After the war, the community and the library never again flourished as it once did. There were not enough people to maintain the building, not enough financial support and not enough members for the academy. Although the community did revive after a while, the academy didn’t proceed and the collection of the library didn’t grow anymore (Warncke, 2023). As a result, the Medras, which was the lecture hall of the seminary, was transformed into a winter synagogue. The donators of the academy are still on the walls of this synagogue and remind the visitor of its past function. Until 1955, there was no money to renovate the complex and the condition of the building didn’t have the right circumstances to preserve the precious and vulnerable books until the renovation was finished in 1979. To preserve the collection, the main part of the books (the handwritten scriptures and 2800 printed pieces) were transported once again, to the National University library in Jerusalem (JCK, n.d.). Later, when the library got assigned as a monument by UNESCO in the 90s, plans were made to restore it to its original state and to make it accessible for international public (Pareira et al., 2012). During this renovation, the building was insulated, the roof was repaired and the floor was redone with old material. There was utter care for the restauration to



fig. 8  
Burying of the Torah  
at Beth Haim cemetry  
1946

fig. 9  
Picture of a manuscript  
with corrections  
Ets Haim, 2012



keep it as close as possible to its original state while still maintaining the demands for the best preservation of the books. Only in 2000 the books returned to their home. In 2012, the library started to categorise the printed books and digitalize the handwritten pieces. Now people from all over the world can appreciate the books and use it for research. But as stated in the first chapter, an online database never replicated the feeling of visiting the library in person.

Nowadays the people of the Sephardic community have their own books or use the internet to find information. This means that the original meaning of the Ets Haim has changed. The library is no longer a place to acquire knowledge but has become a sacred place. The books are relics. Although the complex of the synagogue and the library were not open for people outside the community, the library is now open for visit by applying for an appointment or a tour. The appointment is reviewed by the curator. The only person who visits the library regularly is the curator. The library is always open for people of the Sephardic community and the curator has even asked people to enter the library, but most of them decline. But when they do enter, they are often overwhelmed with emotion and search for example original editions of books they use daily.

The books have a big influence on the experience of spirituality in the library. In eighteen highlights from the Ets Haim (Schrijver & Warncke, 2016), the most important works and their impact on the community are shown. There are many special books in the collection. Some are enormous other are miniscule, there is a large variety in shape and content. The books are written in Portuguese, Yiddish, Hebrew, German, Dutch or else. The books used intensively and often have handwritten commentaries on the margin of the page (fig. 9). This makes the books unique and shows the thoughts of the scholars of the academy. Other books have entire passages or certain words that are censored. This shows a memory from the experience of the Jewish society at the time. Most of the censorship is done by Christian priests, for example the observation that Jesus was not the Messiah of the Jews (Warncke, 2023).

Books have always played an important role in the life of Jewish people. This is tied to their close relation scriptures like Torah, Talmud, and the Jewish law (Rosenbaum, 2020). Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks (2021) described this appreciation: “the holiest object in Judaism is a book, the Scroll of the Law. The reverence we pay it is astonishing. We stand in its presence as if it were a king, dance with it as if it were a bride, and if, God forbid, it is desecrated or ruined beyond repair we bury it as if it were a relative who had died.” (p.114). The Torah is seen as a precious artefact and gets treated with utter care and made under strict rules. It is an important part of rituals and it is an honour to have assigned a task related to this scripture. Since the Torah is even too precious to touch, a *ponteiro*, a stick with a small hand on the end, allows Rabbis to switch pages without touching the scroll. The Torah is always wrapped in special cloths with decorations that indicate the donors or occasions for with the scroll was made. (Paraira et al., 2013)



This links people of the community to the scriptures. Besides the burying of the Torah, the members of the Portuguese synagogue have other rituals. Beside the burial of the Torah (fig. 8), a special ritual for the library is the annual dusting of the books. Every year, before Pesach, librarian Jacob da Silva Rosa dusted every book in the library. In honour of this tradition, the library staff continued this tradition last year. The curator and her colleagues dusted every of the 230.000 printed books and cleaned the shelves (fig. 7). Since it is such an intense process, they decided to create a new tradition, one day of dusting per month. The staff loves this process and describes it as meditation (Ets Haim Jewish library Amsterdam, 2023). Another ritual is the counting to Pesach, the library has a beautiful Omar-counter, which shows the days until Pesach. The parchment is covered with Portuguese letters and decorations. Nowadays, the library posts pictures of the counting on Facebook. Other rituals regard the use of the books, every time the people of the community put a book back on the shelve, they make sure to kiss it and never put it back upside down. And holy scriptures can never be stacked. This shows the mystical value the Sephardi have for books and shows their appreciation for the library.



fig. 10  
An employee working in the library  
Martin, 1991

### 3. PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Looking back at my visit to the Ets Haim, I recognize the spiritual feelings that this place evoked in me. Before I went, I was curious to experience such a historic library, for which I already did quite some research. I had a vague image what it would look like, but I knew the experience would be different in person. I travelled by train and metro and walked into a neighbourhood in Amsterdam I hadn't been before. During my walk from the station to the synagogue, I approached some impressive historical buildings along with more modern buildings and quite a hectic traffic intersection. I could recognize the synagogue from afar but had to face multiple crossovers and wait for traffic lights (fig. 11). When I looked at the building, I knew somewhere would be the Ets Haim, although I didn't know where exactly. Before I arrived at the Portuguese synagogue, I passed another, quite similar, building, which I presumed would be a synagogue as well. Along these building were multiple flags that showed that this was all part of the Jewish Cultural Centre. This gave me a sense of place and some context.

The urban context has an impact on the spiritual experience of a building. In the Netherlands, most religious buildings are churches and since Christianity was at the heart of the Dutch society, churches were at the centre of almost every



fig. 11  
The Portuguese  
synagogue in its  
urban context

city (Stegers, 2008). This is also the case for Amsterdam, where the Oude Kerk is the oldest building in the city and is located at the heart of the old centre (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2021). The first synagogue of the Sephardi was located at the Houtgracht, which is now the Waterlooplein. And later built their synagogue close by at the Jonas Daniel Meijerplein. (Pareira et al., 2012) This is at the centre of the Jewish quarter in Amsterdam (Saygi, 2021), facing the Ashkenazi synagogue. This plot was chosen by the parnasim, since it had the right measurements, but more importantly, the synagogue would face Jerusalem (Pareira et al., 2012). The synagogue was the most monumental building in this part of the city and stood out from all directions until late in the 19th century (fig. 12). Although many fortunate Jews moved to newer parts of the city, the area around the synagogues remained the heart of Jewish Amsterdam for many years. Not primarily because the synagogues were located here, as other institutions also remained concentrated in this area. This area changed noticeably between 1900 and 1930, when many buildings were demolished and residents were forced to move out. This transformation is remembered by six stone tablets in the façade of the entrance gate of the synagogue. When I arrived before the portal, I faced the impressive entrance of the synagogue (fig. 13). Above the synagogue are Hebrew letters, which I couldn't understand, but turned out to be from Psalm 5:8: 'But as for me, I will come into Thy house in the multitude of Thy mercy.' The Hebrew word for 'Thy house' has a numerological value of 432, which corresponds to the Jewish year 5432, 1672, when the synagogue was supposed to be finished (Pareira et al., 2012). You can only see the entrance if you stand straight in front of it, otherwise the annexes cover it. The entrance portal creates a compressed and dark space with a view to the light and open courtyard. This creates a conscious transition from the profane to the sacred, like Barrie (1996) and Tanovic (2019) described. When I continued and told the cashier I had an appointment to visit the Ets Haim, another, older man came to help me and called the curator of the library, Heide Warncke. While I was waiting, I looked around and was impressed with the atmosphere of the complex. It was quite empty that day, only a school class and two or three couples were there to visit, although they weren't allowed into the library. They could only have a look at it through the small window which faces the courtyard. This made it feel special to be allowed into the library and gave it a secluded and protected atmosphere.



fig. 12  
The Portuguese  
synagogue seen  
from the Amstel  
Ruisdael, 1681

fig. 13  
View from the  
entrance portal



I followed Heide through the courtyard, where she already pointed me to the library. But we had to go through the basement, where the treasure chambers are (fig. 14). This space shows the handwritten collection of Ets Haim among other things like precious Torah scrolls and the model of the winning design for the Synagogue. Without a guide I wouldn't have known how to find the library and wouldn't have access to it. We passed two signs with the name of the library and the academy and numbers I believed to be Jewish year counting. Finally, we arrived at the library and in contrast with the white walls we passed in the hallways (fig. 15), we were suddenly emerged in the warmth of colourful books, green and warm wood. I was overwhelmed with the space and immediately felt part of it.

This green is the original colour of the library (Pareira et al., 2013) and is similar to the colours of other parts of the complex. It is not clear if this colour was requested by the board or if it has any symbolic meaning. Green was often associated with historical buildings and it was in fashion to paint libraries in that colour at the time (Vlaardingerbroek, personal communication, March 24, 2023). However, it is clear that the parnasim decided to maintain the original colour when the architect proposed to update the colour to a more modern scheme. In every design choice, from keeping the synagogue unheated to repairing the floors with old wood, it comes forward that the community wanted to keep everything as authentic as possible. This makes the experience feel historical and unique. But even though the colour might not have an intentional spiritual meaning, it can



fig. 14  
Route through the Treasure Chambers



fig. 15  
The stairway to the entrance of the Ets Haim



fig. 16  
View when entering the Ets Haim  
Joods Cultureel  
Kwartier, 2021

be experienced as one. In a study into colours in Mosques, Mahya Ghouhani (2022) found that turquoise green and blue stimulate the spiritual sense most. This is in line with my own experience. The monotonous green colour made me feel calm and immersed in the space. Besides, I associate green with nature and in turn with spirituality. The fact that everything was green in combination with the skylights and the brownish books and wooden floor made the space feel like a forest, where the leaves filter the sunlight and you feel protected by the surrounding trunks of the trees, which block most of the view. Also, the similarity in colour to the other religious functions made it feel part of the whole and connected to the religious implications and the community.

When entering the space, the smell of ancient books is the first thing that stands out. It immediately tells you of the history of the library. It also reminded me of old books I had read and had been read to at my grandparents' house, and memories started flooding back. When you open a book or enter a space with this smell, the smell enters and stimulates your body and mind and makes you conscious and connected with the surroundings. Heide led me to the table on the other end of the space, which adjoined the courtyard and faced the synagogue (fig. 17). In the middle of this room, beneath the skylight, a beautiful table with four heavy chairs seemed nailed to the ground. I didn't think I would be allowed to sit there, but she invited me to sit on the other side of the table. On the table, one of the handwritten books was laid down on a black velvet pillow. The pages showed drawings of the synagogue and the opening of the synagogue. I felt like I

wasn't allowed to touch it, but I didn't ask. The book for me felt sacred. Although I didn't touch the book, I could imagine what it would be like. The pages were old and turned a bit yellow and seemed to be made of heavy paper.

After I introduced my research, we talked about the library and the history of



fig. 17  
The space that  
used to be the  
single room of the  
library

the Sephardic community and her own experience of the library. At first, she was a bit surprised by my research and didn't understand how the library would be spiritual, but the longer we talked about it the more spiritual elements she came up with. The first thing she noted was the sensual experience of the library. She mentioned other visitors also notice the pungent smell the moment they step into the library. Besides the smell, the material of the books and

the sound of silence and the gentle the turning of pages trigger the senses and stimulate a notion of spirituality. As mentioned in the first chapter, there has been extensive research into sensual experience of architecture, and its relation to a spiritual experience. Although senses like hearing might seem more relevant to a library, taste also influences the experience. According to Juhani Pallasmaa (2005) materials, textures and geometry can evoke a sense of taste. Elements like polished and coloured stone or detailed wood can stimulate the awareness of the tongue. In Ets Haim I recognized this in the wooden detailing and the smooth wooden railing of the stairs (fig. 18 & 19).

The longer I was seated at the library, the more I felt immersed and connected with this space. I was and still am curious about the books and would love to spend days turning pages and getting intrigued. However, I wouldn't understand the language and probably very little of the religious writings, but that also adds to the mystery of the space. Besides that, I believe the contents of the books might be religious, but if you would read it without context, it could also pass as spiritual.

After our conversation, I took some time to explore the library by myself. Now the sound of our voices was gone, I experienced the library in a different way. I realised that the sounds had an influence on the experience of my visit. Especially the transition from outside to inside emphasized the differences between the profane and sacred. When entering the complex of the synagogue, you arrive

from the vibrant noisy Mr Vissersplein with many cars, traffic lights and people. But after passing the portal into the courtyard, these sounds are muted and the annexes shield you from the outside world. The remaining sounds are just some quiet voices in the courtyard. Nowadays these voices are mostly from visitors or employees, but in the past people of the community would meet each other in this courtyard and hear familiar voices when approaching the building. If you continue to the library, you quickly pass the treasure chambers, where you hear a video about the synagogue and might catch some phrases about the history. After that you pass a hallway that leads to the library. This sequence becomes increasingly muted until you enter the completely silent library. This sequence softens the transition from profane to sacred, as Barrie (1997) also mentioned. Similarly, Louis Kahn spoke about silence along with light as the deepest experiential qualities in architecture (Bermudez, 2015). Silence in architecture focuses our attention on our own existence. Great architecture is silence turned into matter, each building with a unique voice of tranquillity. “Through these specific silences we experience the lifestyles and temporal rhythms of past cultures and the entire depth of time resides in these silences constructed in stone” (p.30). Whereas silence creates a desire to be and express, light gives presence. Silence and light are inherent to libraries, as you need light and silence for reading. In my experience, the Ets Haim had an interesting lighting. Although the lighting from the windows was quite harsh that day, the warmth of the books, the green paint and the old wooden floors and furniture reflected it in a warm way. The windows are not modern and make you feel protected, because of the fence and the cast iron window frame with small window planes. Before



fig. 18  
View from the  
galleries with  
the symmetrical  
skylights



fig. 19  
The spiral staircase leading to the galleries



the renovation they were even more protected (fig. 10). What also stands out is the electric lighting, the most impressive piece is the brass chandelier (fig. 20). This chandelier is similar to the Ner Tamid, the Eternal Light chandelier in the synagogue, which represents the infinite presence of God (Pareira et al., 2012). Almost every light source imitates candles, which refers to the traditional lighting and evokes a sense of history. The skylights also have a spiritual character because they are associated with heaven. The movement of the stairs towards this light has a repetitive and therapeutic quality (fig. 19). A sequence of light and dark while moving through a series of spaces can emphasize feelings of passage and progress towards the goal (Barrie, 1997).

Light can take on mysticism and sanctity (Matracchi & Sadeghi, 2020) and can raise the human mind beyond material limitations. Besides, it plays an important role in explaining the evolution and sequence of space. The effect of light in spiritual architecture has been given much attention. Light is the symbol of divine intellect and existence and in religious buildings it's an interpretation of the glory of God. Natural light can perfect the geometry and colour of a space and can make a room feel immaterial by the implementation of a light stream at the centre of a room. Light that enters the space vertically emphasizes the relation between heaven and earth. The touch of light on skin feels warm and invigorating and affect human perception and mood. Despite its immaterial and spiritual nature, it is inseparable from architecture. Because architecture, with its physical and functional characteristics, can create atmospheres and evoke emotions with the use of light.

While we were seated at the table, I started to notice more details of the space and I started to imagine the symbolic meanings of design choices. I was intrigued by the skylights and the octagonal shape. Since I wasn't familiar with the Jewish religion I didn't know if it could be a symbol, I asked the curator, who told me she had never heard about it. When I returned from the visit and I dived into the possible explanations of the octagonal shape. I discovered the mythical meaning of the number eight, which symbolises salvation, rebirth and regeneration (Weiss, 2021), which would be in line with the intention of the library. I also came across the kabbalistic movement within Judaism, where an octagonal shape is part of the visualisation of tree of life (fig. x). Another explanation can be traced back to the Iberian origin of the Sephardic community. In Spain and Portugal, the architecture is influenced by Moorish and Islamic architecture, which entail many geometric shapes. However, when I spoke with



fig. 20  
view from the galleries onto the room adjacent to the courtyard

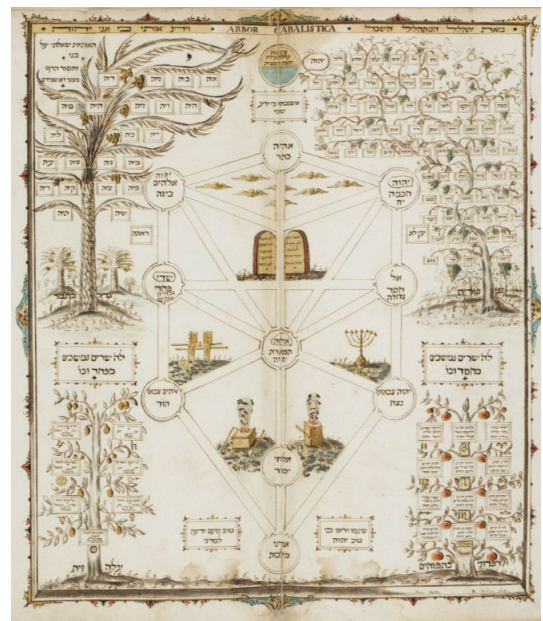


fig. 21  
The Kabbalistic Tree of Life  
Herrera, 1675

Pieter Vlaardingerbroek (personal communication, March 24, 2023), who was part of the research group for the restoration of the synagogue, he explained this shape probably doesn't have any intentional meaning. He believes the octagonal shape was just a choice which followed from the fact that the library needed a wide and was a purely aesthetic choice to go with octagonal. Besides, it is practical to add a wide after the addition of another floor, since it connects the two floors and provides social control and more daylight for reading. In his design for the Exeter library, Louis Kahn also designed an open space which gradually unfolds and creates a sense of anticipation (Mattern, 2020). This space resembles large central spaces from 17,18 and 19th century libraries that “impress upon the reader



fig. 22  
View from the  
stairs onto the first  
floor

the accumulated knowledge of centuries available for study... it is a place to pause, reflect upon the knowledge, history and tradition embedded in the books.” With the design of this space, he wanted to entice the reader to take the books and go to the light. In this library, the views from the galleries are restricted and stimulate curiosity. Kahn saw knowledge as a journey, where light calls forward. After the visit I notice my mind wondering back to the library. I imagine myself reading a book there and feeling at peace and in awe. It has taken on a special place in my memory and I am still humbled I was allowed to visit. For me, the Ets Haim is a spiritual and sacred place and I can imagine it would be similar for others. The visit changed my experience of Amsterdam, as now I will always be aware that it is there, hidden and protected in the maze of the city and synagogue. My visit and research also changed my perception of history since I felt a deep connection with the community and their experience of the world war afterwards. The sign which shows the librarians before the war touched me deeply. The Ets Haim also inspired me, as I respect the affection of the Sephardi towards their heritage and their efforts to rediscover this with the Jewish academy and library. It would be valuable if people were more involved with their identity nowadays. It feels like we easily get detached from our spiritual self and disappear into easier options for entertainment and reading books as many people read digital books (Altena, 2023). Of course, it is easier to not have to carry books around and to find what you are looking for with a simple CTRL+ F, but it is things like this that make a difference for your daily life.



## CONCLUSION

While religion is in decline, more people identify themselves as spiritual instead. Although there are ample of religious buildings, the rise of spirituality has not resulted in a concurrent development in architecture. In support of this development, it is valuable to research how secular architecture can evoke spiritual experiences. Libraries have similarities to religious buildings, as they both provide space for community and are places of peace and of celebration of the spirit and the intellect. This research analyses the Ets Haim to get a better understanding of spiritual architecture to eventually find out how contemporary spiritual spaces could take shape.

Spirituality is an ambiguous concept that relates to the mental and immaterial world and thus inherently subjective. In contrast, architecture is a material and physical discipline. However, by stimulating the senses and the mind, meaningful architecture can connect these two worlds and evoke an existential experience. By following the sequence of an entrance, room and a path, architecture is the physical manifestation of ritual processions. Throughout the ages, libraries have played an important role as a centre for information but also as a 'civic temple'. Due to digitalisation, libraries face a potential crisis and as a result become distracting environments instead of providing retreat. However, the spiritual value of traditional libraries should be acknowledged.

The Sephardic Jews founded their home in Amsterdam with the building of the Portuguese synagogue. Here, the Sephardi could reconnect with their Jewish heritage and rediscover and shape their customs and rituals. The Ets Haim library has played an important role in this process. Although its meaning shifted through its long and rich history, it was and remains a physical manifestation of the identity of the Sephardi in Amsterdam.

The Ets Haim library is the oldest active Jewish library in the world. It has a rich history and reflects the aspirations and painful memories of the Sephardic Jews in Amsterdam. The library was founded by Sephardic Jews who wanted to rediscover their Jewish roots after the enforced conversion during the Inquisition. The library is part of the Ets Haim seminary, where members of the community could improve their textual fluency, learn or work on their publications.

My visit to the library made it clear that the Ets Haim evokes the notion of spirituality. When you enter the complex of the synagogue, you are consciously entering a new world and a journey toward the sacred room. The portal is the threshold for this journey and separates you from the profane world. Via the segmented path, through spaces with distinct characters, you start to detach

increasingly from the outside world and immerse into the sacred. The library, or the room, is the end of the journey and materialises memories, thoughts and aspirations. The moment I stepped in the room I felt like I was in a different world. The presence of the books was immediately clear through their strong, ancient smell and through the skylight, warm colours and textures were highlighted. Through stimulation of the senses, you connect with the space and feel part of something greater. The books play an important role in this process, since they interact with the visitor and are doors into other, intangible worlds. I could visualise all the scholars and teachers who scoured these shelves looking for enlightenment. The traditional architecture and the countless books symbolised the history and identity of the Sephardic community. In this space, you feel deeply connected with moments and persons passed and a strong curiosity for knowledge and times yet to come.

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## De Geleerde in zyn Kamer

Hier sit <sup>ik</sup> in t' Klyn bewlooten  
Van t' gewoel gantsch afgeschooten  
Hier bepyns ik wat ik ben  
Hier beproef ik wat ik ken.

Hier door reys ik aard en hemel  
Hier door-grond ik al t' gewemel  
Van den menschen en het vee  
En verset niet eenen tree.

Hier staan <sup>3</sup> by myn de Propheten  
Philosophen, en Poëten  
Hier zyn Grieken en Hebreen  
Nochtans sit ik hier alleen

4  
Si preguntó a alguno destes Señores  
Cada qual está pronto a enseñarme  
Ellos callan, si yo quiero callarme  
En mi querer está, ver habladores.

5  
Vete pues mundo, dexame en reposo  
Aqui todo delcibe tiene el Alma  
A riqueza, Saber, lleva la Palma  
Y los bienes anadie harto gusto

Finis

ומהלכי  
ואדמתי  
בדמיוני  
במרתיתי  
בהמות עוף  
למדתי  
ולא אמות  
מכון שבתתי

חכמים שם  
בתבתי  
יננים הם  
בבית און  
בחכמותם  
דרישה  
ועם כל זה  
שיבת



4  
Vraegh een van deeze Heeren  
Elk is vaerdig myn te leeren  
Vraegh ik niet, zy swygen stil  
Niemant spreekt dan als ik vil.

5  
Wech dan werelt, laat mij rusten  
Hier kan zich myn Ziel verlusten  
Wysheyt is de beste Schat  
Werelts goet, maakt niemant sat.

Eynde