

EMBODIED LIGHT



HARIRI PONTARINI ARCHITECTS



EMBODIED LIGHT

THE BAHÁ'Í TEMPLE OF SOUTH AMERICA

BIRKHÄUSER  
BASEL







"A servant is drawn unto Me in prayer until I answer him: and when I have answered him, I become the ear where-with he heareth..." For thus the Master of the house hath appeared within His home, and all the pillars of the dwelling are ashine with His light.

Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*





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## PREFACE

*Embodied Light* evolved from a fateful meeting I had with editor Andreas Müller years ago at a steel conference in Hannover at which I was keynote speaker. Andreas suggested we put together this book, and I am grateful to him and the Birkhäuser team for their assistance and encouragement throughout the process.

Comprised of drawings, models, renderings, and full-colour panoramic photographs, this book showcases the technological innovation and architectural excellence of the Bahá'í Temple of South America. Douglas Martin, former member of the Universal House of Justice, contributed a foreword; writer and architectural critic Lisa Rochon penned an essay, William Thorsell, senior fellow at the Munk School of Global Affairs of the University of Toronto, led an interview with me; and visual artist Sky Glabush and scholar Robert Weinberg shared essays in honour of the project.

*Embodied Light* is intended to share the 14-year journey culminating in the opening of the last of the eight continental temples to be completed as part of a remarkable portfolio of sacred architecture commissioned by the Bahá'í Community. My hope is that readers will gain insights into our creative process, as well as the vision. This book is for architects, engineers, and designers, and for anyone interested in this journey. As with the Temple itself, it is an invitation to architectural and spiritual pilgrimage.

The sense of fairness, openness, and collaboration that pervaded the construction of this particular House of Worship has been incredible. Many people have been instrumental in completing the Temple in Chile, so we put together a separate Acknowledgements section at the back of this book. Here, I need to mention that I would not have submitted a design proposal were it not for the gentle nudging of my wife Sasha. As well, David Pontarini, my partner at Hariri Pontarini Architects, never wavered in his support, allowing our team the time and space to fully commit to the work.

Of course, all this was made possible with the guidance and unfailing support of The Universal House of Justice, including former members Hooper Dunbar, Douglas Martin, and Dr. Farzam Arbab, and current member Gustavo Correa, all of whom were influential in carrying out the House's vision. It's impossible to communicate the privilege and bounty my team and I felt working directly with the House of Justice, and as a Bahá'í, it was a very special experience for me.

Siamak Hariri  
Toronto, September 2017



## FOREWORD

One of the major undertakings pursued on a global level by the Bahá'í community has been the construction of centres of worship. The program began with establishing central 'Houses of Worship' to serve each continent. Building national and local Temples of this sort is now also underway.

The final structure in the continental series is that of South America, the site chosen being Santiago, Chile. For several years I had the privilege of serving on the international governing body of the Bahá'í community, the Universal House of Justice. By happy coincidence, I was appointed, with two of my colleagues, to a committee to review a design for the Chile House of Worship. We had received some 180 submissions of proposals, of a wide range of appropriateness, from all over the world. My colleagues and I widdled the applicants down to four, whose creators were then asked to submit fully detailed designs. In the process, Siamak Hariri's submission stood alone as a brilliant piece of work, a submission that required only one brief session to win a unanimous decision of the Faith's governing institution.

The Bahá'í Faith is, at its heart, a religion of unity in diversity, based on recognition that the human race has reached the stage of its maturity. In the words of the Faith's founder, Bahá'u'lláh, "the earth is but one country and mankind its citizens." The mission of the Bahá'í community is to give active meaning to this profound truth, in all aspects of its work.

Services in places of Bahá'í worship have no sermons, no man-made hymns, no instrumental music. Programs consist of readings from all of the world's religions and the nine-sided Temple design requirement itself is a mirror on this conception. Rather than reflecting some mystical symbolism, the number nine, highest of the single digits, reminds visitors not only of the unity but also the equality of all of the revealed Faiths that have brought humanity to this stage in its evolution.

Magnificent gardens likewise reflect the limitless possibilities to which unity can give birth. In time, each House of Worship will serve as a spiritual centre for the fulfilment of these possibilities: auxiliary buildings designed to provide such services to the community as a clinic, a school, a library, and a residence for the elderly.

A metaphor that appears with particular frequency in the Bahá'í writings is 'light,' drawing attention always to the transforming power of unity. Inspired by unity, all things become both possible and appealing. It is not surprising,

therefore, that every effort is made by the community to give expression to this spiritual principle in Bahá'í structures of many kinds and most particularly in the design of Houses of Worship.

Siamak's original idea was to use alabaster, splendid as it is luminous. However, after extensive initial testing, it became obvious that a structure created from it would not hold up to the demands of the Temple. Happily, Siamak discovered the genius of another highly original Torontonion, Jeff Goodman; working together they conceived a system of straight and curved glass panels, ideal for the needs of the House of Worship. Not only, therefore, is the Santiago Temple luminous and beautiful, but it realizes the possibilities of an essentially new building material.

In all that has been said here, I have neglected a related achievement of Siamak's that was not architectural but that succeeded in brilliantly serving architecture's goal. To my knowledge, none of the other magnificent buildings of the Bahá'í world required their architects to first search, identify, and negotiate acquisition of the properties involved. After months of effort and repeated setbacks in these respects, setbacks that would have severely undermined the confidence of outstanding professionals in his field, Siamak was able to secure for his architectural triumph the stage it required. The broad hill on which the Temple has been erected overlooks central Santiago stretched out below, and is itself dramatically presented against the towering curtain of the Andes spread out behind.

I am confident (and not alone in this view) that Siamak will, in time, come to be acknowledged as one of Canada's history-making architects. From a Canadian Bahá'í point of view, he has encouraging predecessors. In the early years of the twentieth century, William Sutherland Maxwell, a Montreal architect who, working as the designer in partnership with his brother Edward, could boast a series of some of Canada's most important buildings. Included among these are the central tower of the Château Frontenac in Quebec City, the Palliser Hotel in Calgary, Saskatchewan's parliamentary building, and the Montreal Museum of Fine Art. Toward the end of Sutherland's life he had the internationally hailed achievement of designing and supervising the erection of the Shrine of the Báb, towering above the city of Haifa in Israel. Yet another Canadian Bahá'í architect, Louis Bourgeois, was of similar renown in designing and supervising the erection of the continental Bahá'í House of Worship for North America. In the beauty of its design, its pioneering of new building material, and above all, the clarity of its spiritual message, it has achieved a unique architectural authority in the Chicago area.

With similar gifts, with similar originality, and similar courage, Siamak is following in the path.

Douglas Martin

## MOVEMENT. LIGHT. ECSTASY.

LISA ROCHON



Original wing detail sketch by Siamak Hariri depicting the idea of capturing light between two layers — embodied light.

Ecstasy in architecture comes from depth of memory and personal conviction. *Ek-stasis*, from the Ancient Greek, means “to put out of place.” As with any great work of architecture, there are many ways to consider and interpret the Bahá’í Temple of South America: a Temple of light expressing a faith of inclusion; a place for spiritual contemplation and architectural pilgrimage; also, transporting, out of place — ecstatic.

Nearly 14 years in the making, the Chilean Temple by Canadian architect Siamak Hariri represents the last of the eight continental Temples to be completed as part of a global portfolio of landmark sacred architecture commissioned by the Bahá’í community.

Surrounded by reflecting pools and a landscape of native grasses, the Bahá’í Temple of South America is a domed, luminous structure that echoes the rolling topography of the Andes, while appearing to float some 30 metres above the earth. Its nine monumental glass veils frame an open and accessible worship space where up to 600 visitors can be accommodated on curved walnut and leather seating. Looking up to the central oculus at the apex of the dome, visitors will experience a mesmerizing transfer of light from the exterior of cast glass to an interior of translucent Portuguese marble.

Both spiritual and temporal realms are acknowledged and embraced. In his design quest for an ecstatic place of worship, Siamak has achieved a heroic kind of architecture that rejects conventional practice to favour pure vision. Honouring the curve, honouring the complexity of nature, rejecting the Cartesian grid. Here, there is a privileging of a disordered order from a light-infused skin collaged together with irregular shapes. More Helen Frankenthaler diaphanous paintings or Man Ray photo collage than De Stijl. None of the cladding parts repeat, the only repetition being nine identically shaped veils.

Le Corbusier is said to have “forged an immediate bond with the landscape”<sup>1</sup> when he first visited the top of a steep hill in the hardscrabble mining village of Ronchamp in northeastern France. There, he designed the Chapel of Notre-Dame-du-Haut (1954), which I consider to be one of the most powerful works of the twentieth century. Just as Le Corbusier did decades earlier, Siamak Hariri bonded with his site and listened to the acoustic of its landscape.

For years, the architect and his client conducted an exhaustive search for a site near Santiago that would offer an exhilarating and generous landscape in which visitors could be enveloped and transported by nature. Several sites were



considered, and rejected. Finally, about 14 kilometres outside of Santiago, at a former golf course beyond a gated housing estate, Siamak walked alone across the foothills to stop, intuitively, it seemed, at a plateau framed by the monumental Andes. The sprawl of the city lay below. This site became the final destination for the Temple. Its transformation has been the product of a remarkable collaboration. The acclaimed Chilean landscape architect, Juan Grimm, has masterminded the reinvention of a barren golf course that, over time, will blossom into a lush, colourful landscape planted with native, drought-resistant varieties.

The design represents a template of painful and triumphant experimentation. When I first wrote about the Bahá'í Temple of South America in 2003 in *The Globe and Mail*, the competition-winning design featured an exterior of alabaster. I wrote about it again in my book, *Up North: Where Canada's Architecture Meets the Land* (2005) when the design was imagined for a different site near Colina, north of Santiago. Through years of experimentation, working with Jeff Goodman at his glass-making studio in Toronto, a new kind of material created by baking cast glass was innovated for the exterior skin. Luminous and white is what Siamak Hariri had in mind; seen up close, the Temple cladding evokes streams of milk or snowflakes frozen in place.

Significantly, the exterior cast-glass panels are stronger than stone, according to tests, to satisfy a Bahá'í requirement that the building endure for 400 years, and to survive one of the most active earthquake zones in the world.

Though the materials had changed, the fundamental vision for the Temple remained the same: that it should capture and channel light to honour a place of deep spiritual pilgrimage.

At its most sublime, spiritual architecture has always attempted to capture and liberate the light. Seen through the bluish-mauve stained glass of the north rose window of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, I have written previously, light appears to us like intelligence. At the chapel by Eero Saarinen at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, light appears from a single, benevolent source at the top of the conical roof.

The transformative power, the *ek-stasis* of the design, occurs within the interior. Stepping inside for my first time, I became instantly convinced that the Chilean Temple will stand in the world as a place of deep spiritual experience. The Temple contains a rare spatial force, its exhilarating and monumental single room defined by nine seemingly spinning veils. Looking up to the apex of the dome with its countless faceted panels, it appears that the veils are actually feathers and they are knotted — in marble — at the top. The whole is suffused with a mediated light, in tones that range from silver to grey to cream, and that shift to gold and ochre as the sun prepares to set in the evening.

In 2016, when Siamak and I flew to Santiago to visit the Temple, I experienced for the first time the epic sweep of the Andes, and, in contrast, the modesty of the Temple gesture. In this scenario, architecture cannot compete with this scale of nature — a humbleness suggested by Siamak's earliest watercolours of his Temple design. Just as the Andes rise and fall according to their trajectory or fade



Light 'kissing' a piece of alabaster.



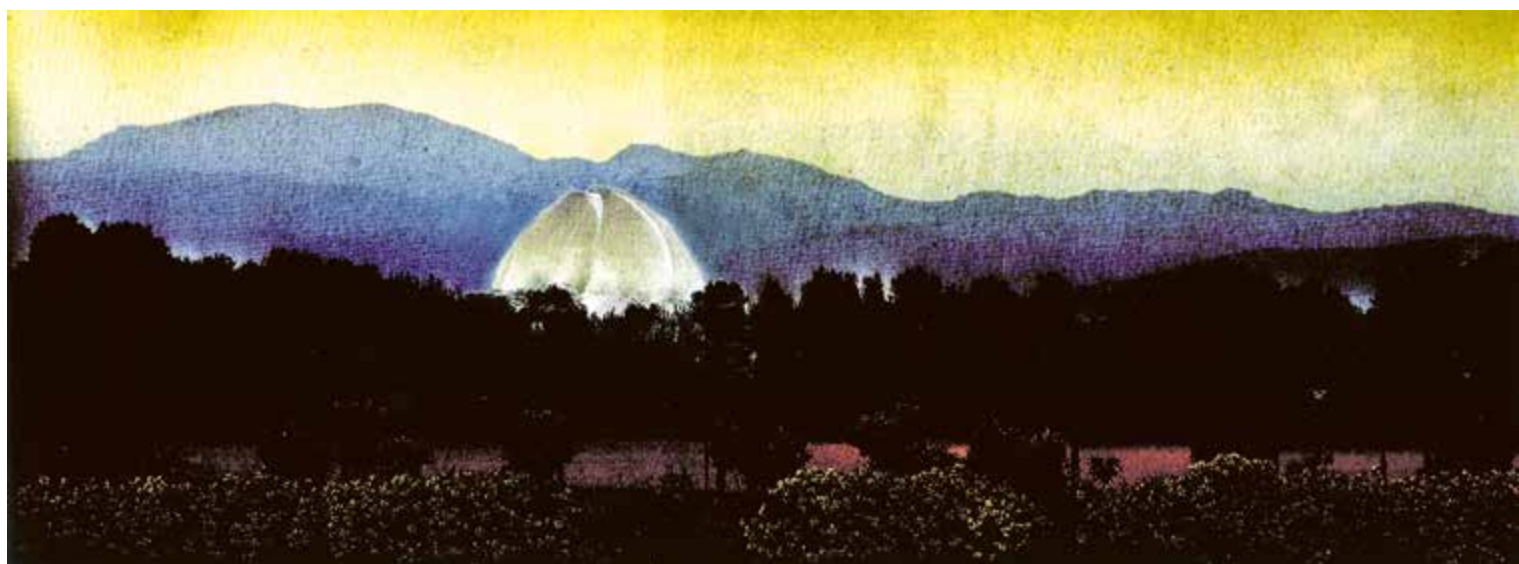
away during heavy mist, the Temple, too, can recede from the eye. When I first climbed the hill toward the Temple, walking up the stairs with the bronze handrail and along the sweep of a curved path, a landscaped berm hid the structure from my view. Instead, I was surrounded by the sweep of the newly planted native shrubs and trees and, in the distance, the magnificence of the Andes. Only when the path turned a corner was I re-introduced to the Temple, its volume shimmering in a long reflecting pool.

As is the case with all of the continental Temples around the world, a dome was an integral requirement handed to Siamak's team. The dome is a part of nature, and the human form. The dome defines the igloo of the Canadian north and the stupas of India. They are the shape of African huts and the Roman Pantheon commissioned by the emperor Hadrian. The dome has defined the architectural magnificence of the sixteenth-century Duomo cathedral by Filippo Brunelleschi in Florence; and, the Hagia Sophia — some 1,400 years old — in Istanbul. For the Bahá'í House of Worship, the dome has been interpreted as a complex curved structure enlivened by movement and accessibility to all peoples.

Openness and transparency are fundamental to both the structure and its site. It is critical to emphasize that all faiths are welcome within this House of Worship for prayer and meditation. Without ritual or clergy, without icons or images, Bahá'í Temples are conceived to reflect an ideal of universal worship where women, men, and children can gather together as equals. Many thousands lined up for the opening of the Temple in October 2016. For those lucky enough to visit in the future, an experience of *ek-stasis* awaits them.

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1 Ezra Stoller, *The Chapel at Ronchamp* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), p. 3.



## EMBODIED LIGHT: AN INTERVIEW WITH SIAMAK HARIRI

### WILLIAM THORSELL



Original sketch by Siamak Hariri exploring the idea of movement around a centre.

In the spring of 2016, William Thorsell met with Siamak Hariri in the Toronto office of Hariri Pontarini Architects to discuss the genesis of The Bahá'í Temple of South America; the challenges of creating a new form of sacred space with no patterns or models to draw from; and the abundance of cooperation that pervaded the work, at every stage of its realization.

#### **William Thorsell: What is the core precept of the Bahá'í Faith? Who are the Bahá'ís?**

Siamak Hariri: In the Bahá'í Faith, worship is not isolated; it is embedded in one's daily life. Worship goes hand-in-hand with daily service, daily work, and daily practice. It is the inhale and your daily life becomes the exhale. Bahá'u'lláh<sup>1</sup> has proclaimed all religions are one. I like to use the analogy of nesting dolls. Imagine a set of nesting dolls: each religion nests on the previous one. Only man has separated these things. Fundamentally, the Bahá'í Faith is about the unity of all religions and the unity of all mankind.

#### **How do you characterize a Bahá'í House of Worship, or a Mashriqu'l-Adhkár?**

As an architect, to try to design a *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* in the early days of the Faith is not easy. It was exciting, but also frightening, because this was such a new type of building. The program was deceptively simple — a sacred, circular structure, with nine sides, welcoming and embracing people from all walks of life, all backgrounds, all religions, or no religion at all. This is a single room — a place of worship — where there is no pulpit and no clergy. In these divisive times, when the world is putting up walls, the design needed to express, in form, the very opposite. It needed to be inclusive, and welcoming to all. A new type of sacred space in the annals of religion. One without recipe or precedent. And, of course, we are in the early days of the Faith, so it was like designing a church at the advent of Christianity.

#### **Can you talk about how you and your client found each other and the critical birth-moment of the project?**

Put simply, it was a call for designs — a competition to create a Bahá'í House of Worship in South America. Two weeks before the deadline, my wife Sasha nudged me into submitting. The Universal House of Justice received 180 submissions from over 80 countries. It was a two-staged process, so they reduced it to four

teams, and then gave us four months to button-down our design. They had a very clear budget, so we had to reduce ours by 15 per cent. Just before the final decision, they asked if there was something we'd like to change. I did not realize this, but once they announced the design, there would be no re-visiting of that aspect. We had this mandate to then execute it and get it built. So, I said, "Yes, actually, we had designed it 15 per cent larger for very specific reasons." We wanted it to be exactly the same height as the Shrine of the Báb in Haifa, which has a majestic scale but also this extraordinary intimacy. If any building can hold the mountain, *that* building can hold a mountain. At the same time, you feel like you can nestle into it. That's a very difficult combination. So they agreed.



Sketch by Siamak Hariri.

### **How did you face the challenge of creating a form that would be universally welcoming and attractive?**

It did not come quickly. We had four months, and the first two months were a series of experiments. We felt like we were in a deep dark place. I reflect back on our design process, and it reminds me of the story of Majnun, the crazy lover, who is crawling on his hands and knees digging around in the dirt. Someone asks him what he's doing, and he says, "I'm looking for Layli, I'm looking for my beloved." Then Majnun hits the wall, and has to climb it. This was our process. It was a fervent search, and we had to experiment, to go through a kind of controlled abandon. I liken it to falling backwards, and you hope that the process catches you.

Then, accidents started to happen as we evolved the form, and eventually, because we were combining the latest technology with these handcrafted models, the idea sprang from an intuition, a feeling. It wasn't form. I call it 'embodied light' because of this wonderful passage in the Bahá'í writings describing prayer: "A servant is drawn unto Me in prayer until I answer him ..." It's a fascinating relationship. Not every prayer is answered. If his prayer is answered, his very being becomes embodied light.<sup>2</sup> Your very being becomes "ashine" with His light.

So, I drew this sketch of something with two translucent and light layers, with a structure in between. It was a pure form — dome-like — but it ended up looking too much like an egg.

We continued to explore the idea of light being captured — embodied — somehow catalyzed within the material structure of the Temple. To create a building alive with light, we invented this new material utilizing cast glass, which takes light and absorbs it. The structure also has translucent stone on the inside. When it receives just a kiss of light, a prayer is answered, and the whole piece of stone comes alive. The light does not go through it, but becomes captured within the membrane.

I remember watching this beautiful video made by a five-year-old, about what plants do when you move the light. This is an apt metaphor for what prayer can do. It's so simple, but it has the magic of what a great temple will do. Somehow the architecture should express this idea of reach and movement towards the light, and, in the case of a temple, towards the heavens and the Divine. We wanted to express movement, as well as soft forms, in the way that a structure can embrace you.



Early Maya model showing the soft ethereal lines of the Temple.

**Your vision for the Temple sprang from an intuition, a feeling. Intuition means that you are swimming in the values and aspirations of a particular group for a long enough time. And intuition starts to lead you towards expression.**

From the beginning, I believe we felt we were guided. Maybe you can call that intuition. It was a struggle, not an immediate thunderbolt, for sure.

You have to swim and you have to make many ugly, bad mistakes. However, you know the difference between something that's interesting or promising, and something that is not. So, at each moment your intuition has to choose. You have to make the right decision.

That process does not stop the moment the design is chosen, because the extension of finding the right material and executing the design, live in conformity with the original design. The crafting of the building, the tectonics, the finding of the right site — all of that belongs to the same process that began with that earliest model.

### **As a Bahá'í, how have legacy and tradition informed your design process for this South America Temple?**

In our family, we like to tell the story about my great great grandfather Qasim. He and his wife could not have a child, but they prayed to God for one, and their wish was granted. When my great grandmother Khanum Agha was born, her father put her on a scale, and then did the same with the equivalent of gold. Qasim was a builder, a great builder, and he went on horseback through Iraq to be with Bahá'u'lláh. He wanted to be with his soul's desire, but he was also there to give thanks for the child, with that offering of gold. Qasim offered to build something with his own hands, and that ended up being the summer room in the Ridván Garden, which is where pilgrims come to pray. This piece of family history stuck with me as I imagined a way to honour all that came before.

On both my mother's side and my father's side, many such stories exist. That's five generations' worth of stories of struggle and sacrifice. My father, the engineer, and my mother, the aesthete, made a beautiful pair. And having been born and raised in Germany and Switzerland, I developed a love of craft, which was complemented by a Persian sense of refinement.

Our design for the South American Temple should also honour the North American Mother Temple — the first Temple of Light, which is in Chicago. It's a masterpiece, so we had to aim high.

We didn't want to copy the old forms. It couldn't just look like a mosque or a synagogue or a cathedral, or an opera hall or an art gallery. It had to be pure unanticipated inspiration. We relied on the furthest reaches of what we knew, maybe to the realm of our dreams, aspiring for the ineffable qualities of sensuousness, and emotion. This takes me back to thirty years earlier, when I was studying architecture across the street from the art gallery designed by the great architect Louis Kahn. One day at the gallery, I saw the security guard run his hand across the concrete wall in appreciation. I could see, from the expression on his face, that he was moved by the building and that architecture could move the

spirit, eliciting an emotional response. There was no prescription, and there were almost no restrictions in designing this new structure. In search of a 'feeling,' we looked outside of architecture, to organic forms and to art for inspiration and universality: a cheekbone; the veins of a leaf; the curve of a woven Japanese basket; the flow of a skirt of a whirling dervish; the calligraphic matrix of a Mark Tobey painting. We explored the idea of soft lines that would merge, like drapery, perhaps as nine translucent veils, folding and torquing towards an apex. This was reminiscent of what we saw in the plant video.

**So, you were intent on capturing this feeling of embodied light, but when did the definitive 'a-ha' moment occur?**

The turning point was looking at the drawings of Louis Bourgeois, the architect of the Chicago Temple. Those drawing were 150 feet long! He started on one corner of the page and he would draw and draw for weeks. The commitment, the dedication, the love — this touched me. And it absolutely informed our vision for the Temple in Chile.

I also recall the story of the beloved Master, 'Abdu'l-Bahá,<sup>3</sup> when He laid the cornerstone for the Chicago Temple in 1912. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said to the friends gathered on that occasion, "The Temple is already built." It took 50 years for the community to build it; the architect, Bourgeois, died before it was completed.

The Bourgeois drawings put us in a certain mindset of how high the aspiration really was, helping us form a commitment that was 14 years in the making, for a Temple that would last 400 years.

**Does the Temple really need to last 400 years?**

Yes, the Universal House of Justice set up a design mandate for 400 years for the engineering of the building — a difficult and astounding design constraint, given that most institutions look no further than five years ahead. The Temple is located in a very active seismic zone. We had three universities working together, one in California, one in Chile, and one in Toronto. They devised a pendulum isolation system that would allow for 600 millimetres of movement, so that, in the event of an earthquake, the building would rock and return to the centre.

**As you said, the nature of the whole vision required the invention of materials, as well as new engineering and structural approaches. Almost everything about this required something to be created.**

It was an extraordinarily rich team effort. Every aspect of this, the people on our own team here, the project manager down in Chile, everybody played a very important role. It was like a well-functioning orchestra.

**So, your team is working together and you are feeling the presence of something bigger propelling you forward. How much time did you spend with your client during this process?**

The thing that was exceptional, in this case, was the client and the absolute,







The Bahá'í Temple of Light in Wilmette, Illinois — the oldest Bahá'í House of Worship in the world.

unwavering commitment, the sense of confidence that they gave everyone on the project. In 14 years, there was never a disruptive moment. Additionally, they gave the project the right time. There was always this sense that, “Oh, well this is obviously going to take a little longer than we thought, but, it will ultimately reach its goal.” When that confidence comes from your client in a very calm manner, you really do everything you can to succeed.

**A clear idea, one voice, one single point of contact, and decisive. It sounds like that's that kind of client that you had.**

Yes. The spirit has been extraordinary, with both Gartner Steel and Glass and our own team. Not one heated moment. I've never had that in 30 years. Secondly, it was done with a sense of fairness and openness, knowing it was a team effort. That spirit has pervaded throughout the various stages.

**Usually there are surprises with complex projects. What were some of those?**

We had very few surprises, but there were several obstacles. We were told it would be impossible to build, impossible to stay on budget, and impossible to get a site. We managed to stay within three per cent of our budget, but it took nine years to find the site. During those years of searching, we got the drawings, engineering, and the materials selection just right. In that period, we also fabricated all the cast glass, which was very time-consuming. Each piece was in a kiln for three days and there were thousands of these pieces, so, we had six or seven kilns going over a period of two and a half years. Imagine the commitment of the client. You don't have a site and you're making the cast glass!

**You mention site, because now that you see it in situ, you think, it has to be up there on its own overlooking the city and seen from afar. Was that a difficult process?**

Finding the right site was one of the most difficult processes. We went through five sites before we found this one. There is this other aspect, which is much more difficult to speak to — this project felt like it had a helping hand all the way through. It wasn't going to just let you do whatever you wanted.

**It had its own mind.**

It had its own mind, its own agenda. It wasn't going to sit just anywhere; it had to have the right site. And it couldn't be built any old way.

I know that the higher our aim, the more challenging our task. There were forces at work, all along the way, guiding us.

I would be remiss if I did not praise the House of Justice for guiding this project every step of the way and if I did not acknowledge a greater hand, which we all feel has in every way steered us through this process.

**So, how did the site finally appear?**

That was one of the magic moments of this project. One of the sites offered to us

Interior decoration drawing for the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, Wilmette, Illinois; Louis Bourgeois; dated July 27, 1928.

by the Government was in what they call the Twin Hills; it's the Central Park of Santiago. It took a year of conversation and an act of Parliament for this project to receive 17 or 18 hectares of land on the mountain. We thought this project would become iconic for the country. But, when it was accepted, various religions started to oppose it, and it became a hot bed of debate in the newspapers.

### **It became divisive.**

Yes, and the House of Justice thought, "Well, that goes against the purpose."

So the decision was to withdraw, and we asked to search for another site. By then, the project had won nationwide attention. In fact, somebody was with me in a taxi, and said, "Do you know who this is?" Just as a joke. "This is the architect of the Bahá'í Temple." The taxi driver turned around and said, "So, where is it going to go?"

At that time, we were working with the Canadian Government, as well as the Ambassador and his group, and they asked if I could host a group of Chilean architects. I said we would be happy to. Two of them came up to me and said, "Really, you cannot go back out to our original site," which was about 40 kilometres outside of Santiago. "It's a beautiful area but no one will go." So, I said to one of them, Pablo Larrain, "How am I going to find a piece of land in Santiago? If this land is going to be found, it will come from a Chilean." He called me shortly thereafter with a tip. Pablo had found this land that belonged to a private school in Santiago. It took almost four years to negotiate the deal, but that's how it started.

One of the most mysterious moments of the project for me was when we were being shown the land and they took us to the pond. For some reason, I started to walk about half a kilometre. I walked to the place where the Temple now stands. We put a stake down in the very spot. I had felt the Temple there.

It was a memorable journey, led by Robert Cook, with Julian MacQueen and Douglas Henck, as well as Tiago Masrour and Adriana Balen. We had truly amazing project management by both Doron Meinhard and Justin Ford in our



Sketch by Siamak Hariri  
of the Temple set against  
the Andes.





Toronto office. In Chile, Claudio Orrego, currently the intendant of the Santiago Metropolitan Region, and Marisol Rojas, architect and consultant to the project, were invaluable to us.

All the energy of that Temple coalesced in that one place. You could feel why the arc of the mountain behind it works so beautifully with the whole city, like a tapestry, sitting there and the combination of the mountain and the city right at that elevation was absolutely perfect. From that point, we began our drawing of the site plan, and it has not moved from that spot.

### **Was landscaping integral to this project?**

Yes. At the beginning we could not figure out how to have straight paths to this curved building, so we took the geometry of the building and just extended it out.

### **There is a journey between the street and the destination. It slows you down.**

Exactly. Even the cars are held back. The buildings with amenities are buried into the hill. You have to go up a long stair to arrive at a terrace with the most extraordinary view of the city. We put this long and thin reflecting pool at the base, and then everything spins around. This is all a series of prayer gardens. The brilliant landscape architect Juan Grimm used indigenous plants with beautiful trees only found in that region. And Juan is a very special soul. He is not a Bahá'í, but he told me he had a strange dream about these curved paths, and that there were hairs in the water, with fish nibbling at the hairs.<sup>4</sup>

### **When a visitor comes up the hill to the building, do you have a hope for how they will respond? Do they become quiet? Introspective?**

It should be a place where you feel connected to your inner self, as well as to the Divine. So this idea that it has an oculus that becomes an eye, through which the sun moves, and as a star pattern moves all day long and measures time and measures movement but is absolutely still, is a time honoured concept. It goes back to the most ancient philosophies of pantheistic thinking. But, we wanted it to be a universal place.

### **Once that visitor reaches the inside of this space, this volume, it has a certain warm, simple, austere feeling.**

It's just wood floor and wood benches. No pulpit, and no clergy. The theory is that everyone should feel moved in this space of quiet reflection. Everybody's experience is their own. The architecture cannot be exclusive-feeling. It should be welcoming to all people of different strata.

It doesn't matter whether you're the poorest of the poor or the richest of the rich. It doesn't matter whether you're the most powerful or the least powerful. Here, everyone has a rightful place and a connection. It's a really interesting challenge architecturally — to make a space that is noble for everyone. You realize your own humanity and your own position within the scheme of things. You're not that important.

**There's no test to pass, no confirmation hearing, to find out whether you're a member or not. There are no members here.**

Everyone has this relationship with the Divine. It binds us all. The Temple should feel like that. This was an important design constraint — if it's too pretentious, or too referential to a single religion, iconography or form, it won't work. My hope is that a child of fourteen will want to go there. Not so easy. Or someone who absolutely has no faith will feel comfortable going there. It is meant to bridge all of that, and say, "This is everyone's Temple."

I think I would be happiest if people feel like this is their Temple. Someone from Paraguay or Uruguay or Bolivia could come and say, "That's my Temple," and have a connection to it.

**What has been the reaction from the broader Chilean community to the project?**

Very positive. It's captured a lot of their imaginations. You know, we wanted the Bahá'ís to love it and feel like its speaking up rather than down to their own hopes and dreams. But also, this has to be an important project for South America. We want people to really feel like it is their Temple.

**In a way, the Bahá'í Faith is putting forth an alternate way of thinking about spirituality that is not based on traditional structures and rules and so forth. It's very new — the person with the Divine. It doesn't seem to be mediated, like so many other things.**

In the Bahá'í Faith the notion of mediation is no longer necessary; everyone can investigate faith themselves now. Everyone has responsibility. You can't say, "Well, that's what my rabbi or my clergy told me to do and that's why I did it." No, the onus is on you; there's nothing between you and your relationship to God. That's new.

**I think that's core. This structure is universally available to people from every possible background, but, at the same time, it's one on one.**

It's one on one even though it's a singular space. There are all kinds of alcoves, where people can be in their own space within this space. In that sense, you have unity, but you also have diversity. The same goes for the pattern of the geometry on the outside — you can't take a single piece out, but yet, every piece is different.

It really stopped being architecture when they raised the Bahá'í symbol, which is called "the greatest name." It stopped being the Temple that was architecture, and became something else.

**What does it say?**

"O Thou Glory of the Most Glorious." Simple in location, centred in the oculus, it belongs in the middle, and is the only piece of iconography.