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Life in the **FINGER LAKES**

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The Magic of Winter

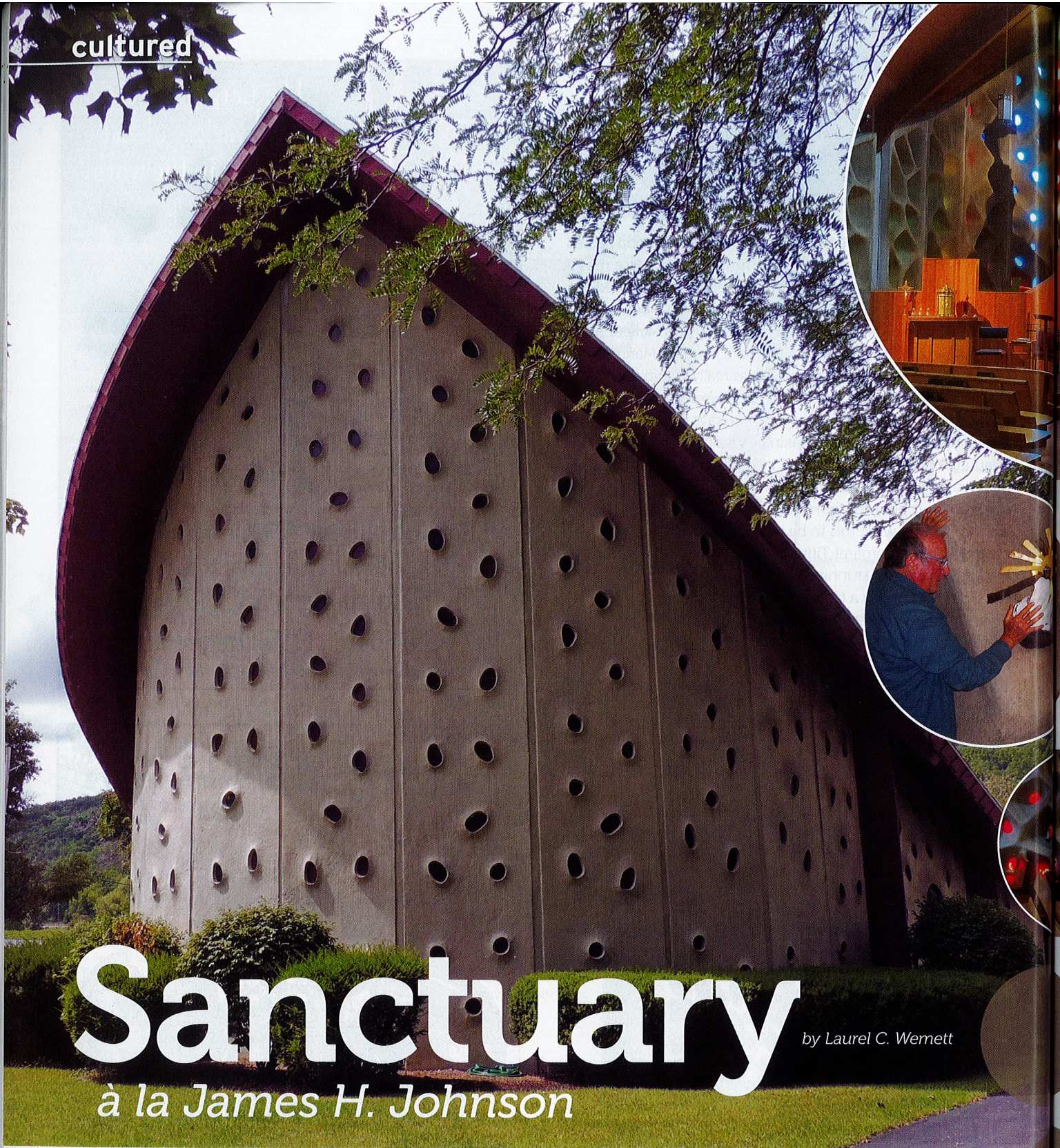
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Sanctuary

by Laurel C. Wemett

à la James H. Johnson

Rochester area architect James H. Johnson (1932-2016) became well-known for his strikingly original buildings, including the Antell-Whitman House in Perinton (1969-70) – also known as the “Mushroom House.” In the mid-to-late 1960s, his innovative concrete construction techniques produced several places of worship, including St. Januarius, a Roman Catholic Church in Naples; and Temple Sanai, a Jewish synagogue in Brighton. Viewed from the outside, their

organic modernism is memorable and impressive, and his daring, otherworldly design continues within.

St. Januarius

Today, St. Januarius is part of the Our Lady of the Lakes Catholic Community along with St. Michael’s Church in Penn Yan and St. Patrick’s Church in Prattsburgh. The Naples church was named to honor the martyred fourth-century saint who is patron saint of Naples, Italy. The parish was

Far Left: St. Januarius Church 180 N Main Street in Naples Completed in 1966 Photo by Lisa C. Wemett

Circles, top to bottom: The multicolored stained glass windows illuminate the sanctuary of St. Januarius on a sunny day; Artist Darryl Abraham demonstrates how he sculpted metal Stations of the Cross. Along the honeycombed walls light enters through multicolored windows.

incorporated in 1876, after Bishop McQuaid was petitioned by Naples families to form a congregation.

According to church records, by 1965 the congregation had outgrown the original wood-frame church constructed in 1878, a building with a capacity of 125 worshippers. A new church and parish hall was proposed to accommodate 300. James Johnson, working with architect Peter Romeo and structural engineer Ray DiPasquale, replaced the old church's rectangular floor plan with a wide curving footprint. Rather than employing traditional materials like timber, brick and stone, cement was chosen for its flexibility.

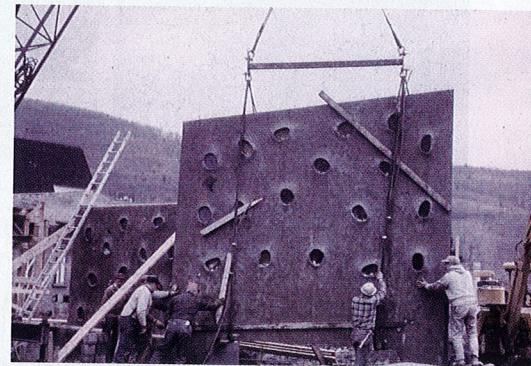
Growing up in Missouri, Johnson was influenced by family members in the construction business. One uncle owned a concrete plant; another was an architect. At St. Januarius and several of Johnson's building locations,

ceramic artists James and Philip Secrest helped with the molds.

"These buildings were constructed by pouring concrete directly into molds created in the earth on the construction site; after the concrete cured it was hoisted or tipped into place to form the exterior walls," wrote Katie Eggers Comeau, architectural historian, and Christopher Brandt, historic preservation architect in the Winter 2019 issue of *Landmarks*, published by the Landmark Society of Western New York. The pair completed an in-depth survey and wrote a book about Johnson's architecture. The project was spurred by the loss in 2013 of Our Lady of Mercy Rectory in Greece, New York, identified as Johnson's first molded-concrete structure.

Today, Neapolitans may refer to St. Januarius as "St. Jan" or "St. J." Sources also refer to it as the "Grape Church" reflecting its grape-leaf shape inspired by Naples' long association with grape growing. Its paneled walls are filled not by narrow pointed-arch windows, but by small, deep-set, round glassed openings. These windows transform the interior walls into a honeycomb surface prompting the nickname, "Swiss Cheese Church."

Yet another name, "Jelly Bean Church," is derived from how the round windows illuminate the sanctuary with multicolored light.



St. Januarius Church (1965-66) Earth-formed panels set in place

Photo from Johnson Slide Collection; Courtesy Johnson Family

"When the sun shines through those windows, you know there is a God," says longtime parishioner Jeanne Schenk.

A Few Memories of St. Januarius

Many Naples residents have links to the construction of St. Januarius. Edward Rectenwald, the local dairy farmer and head of the Building Committee during construction, is remembered for helping to figure out how to lift and set up the heavy concrete and glass sections when attaching crane cables to them proved difficult.

As a youth, Naples native and artist Darryl Abraham watched the removal of the old St. Januarius church and the construction of its replacement. He often helped his father, George "Doc" Abraham,



THE ARCHITECTURE OF JAMES H. JOHNSON



Katie Eggers Comeau & Christopher Brandt

To learn more about these and other James H. Johnson buildings, read *The Architecture*

of James H. Johnson by Katie Eggers Comeau and Christopher Brandt, published by the Greece Historical Society (2020). Watch the archived talks by the authors (May 2019) and James H. Johnson (May 2012) at greecehistoricalsociety.org (click: Archives/GHS Program Archives).

Left: James working on the Mushroom House addition in 2002. Photo by Betsy Johnson

the well-known horticulturalist, with landscape work on the adjacent property owned by Widmer's Winery. "I saw the Secrest brothers pouring the concrete for the stained-glass windows," recalls Abraham.

In 1989, Abraham contributed striking pictorial features to St. Januarius by designing flat metal sculptures depicting the Stations of the Cross. Once Abraham received the green light from the Parish council and then-priest, Father Emo, he laid out 14 individual scenes on cardboard which youngsters from the Sunday school colored. These were transferred to metal secured by Richard Reisenberger from Widmer's. Oxy acetylene torches then wielded by Evan Rischpater's steady hand cut out the shapes. Once painted these were affixed to window openings in the sanctuary.

"It was quite an undertaking," recalls Abraham.

Temple Sinai

While St. Januarius Church is easily visible to all who drive through the village of Naples, Temple Sinai, on Penfield Road in the Town of Brighton, is surrounded by mature trees and well-tended new plantings. The quiet forest-like setting is occasionally interrupted by a passing nearby train.

When Johnson undertook the synagogue in 1966, its congregation was seven years old, having been formed in 1959 by families that had been members of Temple B'rith Kodesh, the first Jewish congregation in Rochester.

The design suggests a tent symbolic of the nomadic theme in Jewish history. Each 60-foot-tall wall is made up of five rib-like panels, representing the 10 lost tribes that, under King Jeroboam, once made up the Northern Kingdom of Israel. These 10 concrete panels tilt inward, but do not meet.

The sanctuary's roof and rear wall is formed from glass panels. Natural light fills the sanctuary, and the seasonal changes are in full view. Plants grow on, around and inside the building. At the base of the walls, long planters contain vines that climb up interior walls. Mary Mansfield, Temple Sinai's executive director, recalls how architecture students commented that seeing photographs were far different than "standing in the space."

Outside the window-wall, two tall concrete pillars or pylons are in full view. They are said to represent the tablets of Moses or the Ten Commandments. Covered with Virginia creeper ivy, they soar above the synagogue's roof.

Raising the pillars into place was a herculean effort and one was accidentally chipped. As Brandt and Eggers Comeau explained in their book, there was no way to repair the damage. "Johnson relied on what he learned in his research that in traditional temple construction, some small detail is left out or is imperfect, as a way to symbolize the imperfection of humanity as compared to the perfection of God."

Left: Temple Sinai, 363 Penfield Road, Rochester, built in 1967 Photo by Lisa C. Wemett. **Inset:** The sanctuary, with hand carved furniture. Looking beyond through the window-wall the two pillars symbolizing the 10 Commandants can be seen. **Inset circle:** Holy Ark, the cabinet holding the Torah scrolls, was handcrafted by Wendell Castle.

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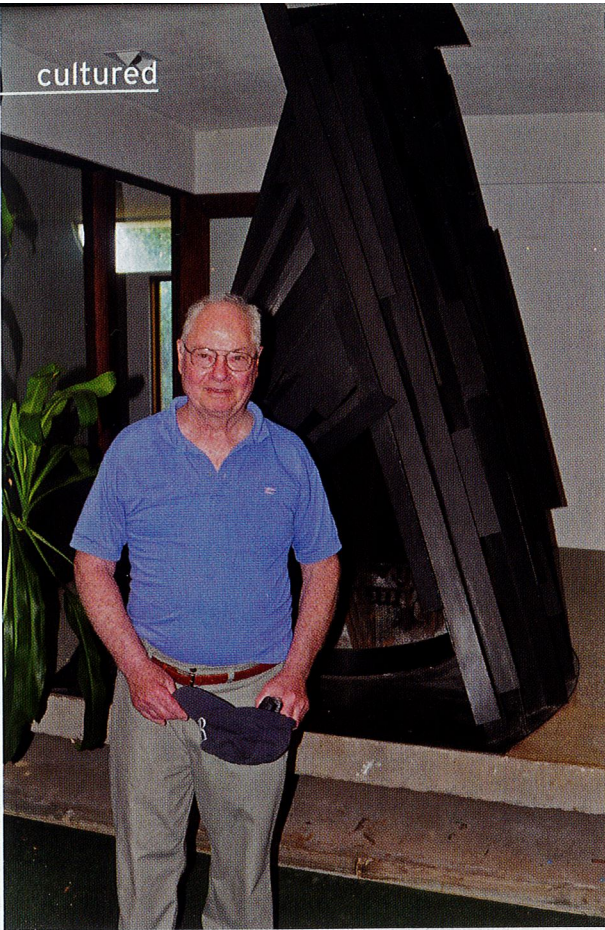
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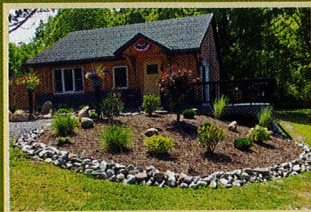


*James Johnson is inside Our Lady of Mercy Rectory before its demolition.
Photo by William Sauers, Greece Historical Society*

In the sanctuary, the bima or platform features modern hand-carved furniture, including the Holy Ark, a cabinet holding the Torah scrolls and a seven-branched Menorah. The Ark and Rabbi's lectern were made by Wendell Castle (1932–2018), early in the craftsman's illustrious career.

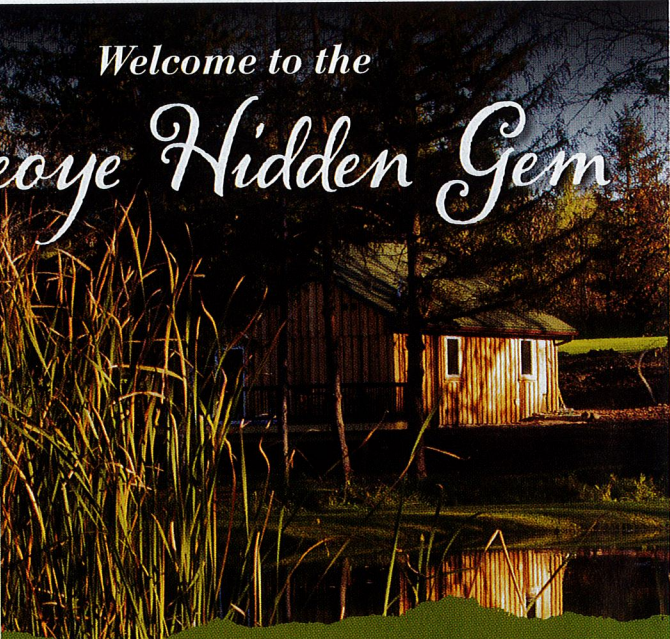
St. Januarius and Temple Sinai have been modified and expanded over the past half-century. Each has been recognized by the Landmark Society of Western New York. In 2014, the congregation of St. Januarius received a Special Citation Award for the care of their historic church, including "a sensitive rehabilitation" of the church in 2011 by LaBella Associates. The preservation group also honored the congregation of Temple Sinai with its Stewardship Award in 2003 for "the tender loving care of its historic synagogue."

An architect's vision is reinforced by how its occupants feel and react to the spaces he or she designs. The colored light playing across the floor and pews in Naples or the blend of nature with the manmade in Temple Sinai enhances the sacred worship services. Standing in the temple's sanctuary and viewing the stars on a dark, clear winter night through the glass wall and ceiling is remarkable, says Flo Drexler of the Temple Sinai Garden Team. It connects the worshiper to the heavens beyond. 📷

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