

KITCHEN & BATH



A modest mikvah by Vladimir Radutny Architects refreshes an ancient typology.

TRADITIONALLY, religious architecture embraces monumentality and grandeur: soaring cathedral ceilings, intricately detailed mosque domes, ornate temple facades. But the Jewish mikvah, a ritual bath central to the religion for millennia, stands apart in its fundamental intimacy. Marking the transition between states of *tumah* (spiritual impurity) and *taharah* (spiritual purity), the mikvah is particularly central in the Orthodox community, where it is used primarily following

menstruation, and also at other times, as before the marriage ceremony and, for both sexes, as the final step in the conversion process. Rather than aiming for scale or spectacle, a mikvah's design is guided by a strict set of regulations and the intricacies of the ceremonial process.

The City Mikvah in Chicago represents a sophisticated and contemporary interpretation of this ancient typology. Nestled within the lower level of Bucktown Wicker Park Chabad's former warehouse building on North

Milwaukee Avenue, the 1,100-square-foot sanctuary, designed by Vladimir Radutny Architects, reimagines the traditional design by sensitively responding to both religious requirements and architectural context. "There's quite a bit of infrastructure and complexity that goes into mikvah design, and the framework is very particular," says Radutny, a 2020 Design Vanguard. For instance, Jewish law dictates that the immersion pool's water must be collected *bidei shamayim*

A muted palette creates a sense of continuity between zones (opposite, right), with custom-milled wood elements (opposite, left) and mosaic tiles (this page) adding warmth and texture.

(by the hands of heaven) and flow naturally from its source. A reservoir, located behind City Mikvah's northwest wall, collects rain-water from the roof, which passes through rubber-lined piping (mikvah water cannot touch metal) and then flows into a chamber at the bottom of the immersion bath via an inclined concrete trough. Another challenge was the rawness of the subterranean space, which has low ceilings, reinforced beams, and protruding footings. The firm decided to embrace these, integrating and exposing elements to bring the building's original industrial character into the experience.

The result is a carefully choreographed progression of spaces that gently guides visitors through the sequence. The design incorporates these steps—reception, preparation, immersion, and washing—into a spatial narrative of "compression and release," with curved earth-tone plaster walls matched to matte wide-format floor tiles of the same color, creating fluid transitions between zones. This restrained material and chromatic palette contributes to an overall sense of continuity, with the azure-blue of the immersion pool's water the sole source of color. The black-and-white mosaic tiles lining the pool are repeated in the preparation area, adding geometric texture and visual interest without disrupting the overall contemplative atmosphere.

Meticulously detailed wood elements—including doors, floating shelves, benches, clothing hooks, and cabinetry—add further dimension to the otherwise minimal interior. A stand-alone white ceramic pedestal sink sits in a subtly defined alcove by the entryway, which marks both the end and beginning of the ritual.

Radutny, who came to Chicago as a Russian-Jewish refugee in 1989, has designed several spaces for Chabad chapters throughout the city. He has worked with Bucktown Wicker Park Chabad since 2014, creating a series of spaces within the four-story brick building, including a multipurpose room on the ground floor with a "floating" timber Torah ark. The architect says the firm brought its own sensitivities to City Mikvah—namely, simple materials crafted to perfection—eschewing the opulence he says is typical in contemporary mikvahs. The lighting design also balances technical requirements with atmospheric intention. In the windowless space, recessed ceiling fixtures

are arranged like a constellation, supporting practical requirements while enhancing spiritual ambience.

By embracing existing structural conditions and respecting tradition, Radutny has created a space that feels both timeless and distinctly modern—a sanctuary where the sacred emerges, appropriately, through architectural modesty rather than decorative excess. ■ *Pansy Schulman*

CREDITS

ARCHITECT: Vladimir Radutny Architects — Vladimir Radutny, principal; Ryan Sarros, project architect

GENERAL CONTRACTOR: Hi-Teq Construction

CLIENT: Bucktown Wicker Park Chabad Jewish Center Chicago

SIZE: 1,100 square feet

COST: withheld

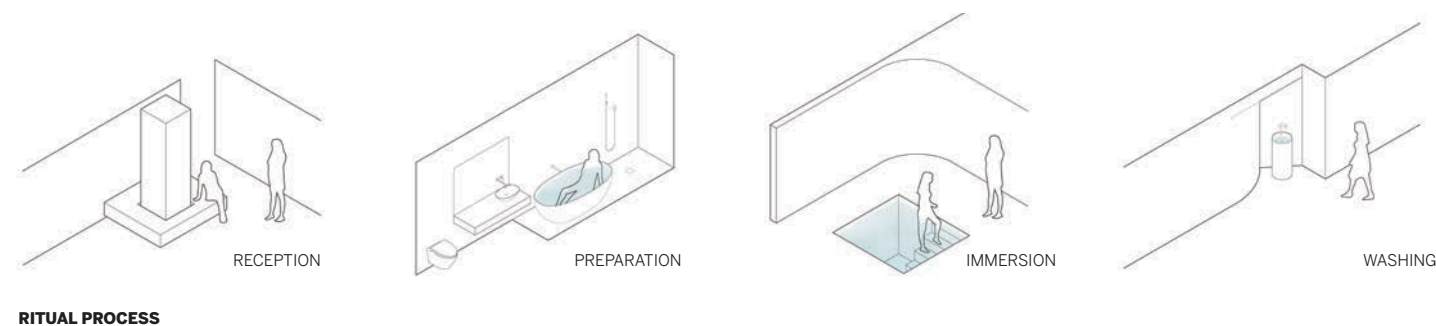
COMPLETION DATE: December 2023

SOURCES

HARDWARE: Inox (locksets); Krownlab Kor (glass door pulls)

INTERIOR FINISHES: Virginia Tile (floor and wall tile); Daltile (pool and shower wall tile); Wood Harmony (custom-milled cabinetry and millwork)

LIGHTING: Lighthouse Lighting (downlights)



RITUAL PROCESS

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