



Out & About

The Secular and the Sacred

A breakdown of “Sukkah City STL” at Wash. U., where architectural design, religion, and politics publicly intersect. **BY ROSALIND EARLY**

I was always told as an architecture student that we do our best work when the constraints are really very tight,” explains Brian Newman, adjunct lecturer at the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts and an organizer of Sukkah City STL, an architectural design competition. “I found as a practicing architect that in most ways that really is true.”

The sukkah is a traditional temporary dwelling built during the Jewish festival of Sukkot.

The structures must conform to Jewish law (see sidebar), which specifies when and how they can be built.

Sukkah City STL challenges architects to push the boundaries of design while staying kosher. “What really appealed to me was the act of beginning with a structure that is so traditional—and as far as I’m aware, really has very little variation—and to totally reinvent what it can be,” says Newman.

There will be 10 sukkahs erected on the

campus of Washington University, chosen from entries submitted from all over the country. The organizers were inspired by Sukkah City NYC 2010, a similar competition whose winning designs were displayed in Union Square.

“The design part, that idea came from the New York City exhibit,” explains Naomi Fishman, curator of the Museum of ImaJew-nation, which she created to engage people in conversations about Jewish culture. “The concept part comes from St. Louis.” Fishman and St. Louis Hillel Rabbi Andy Kastner, another Sukkah City STL organizer, saw it as a way to talk about boundaries.

“The conceptual twist is that every shelter, every structure, and indeed the sukkah deals with a juxtaposition of boundaries—private and public, homeless and sheltered, prospect and refuge,” says Kastner. “We wanted to highlight that as a springboard for a broader conversation.”

The plan is to have the sukkah be a canvas “to share a narrative of boundaries,” he says. “The hope is that some will use it as an opportunity to discuss relationship boundaries between parents and children, or security boundaries between nations.”

The exhibit and discussion don’t stop at Wash. U. As Fishman notes, an indoor exhibit of single sukkah walls will provide more space for artists to explore the topic. The walls will be on display at Congregation Shaare Emeth from October 6 through 20, with an encore at Art Saint Louis in January.

While Fishman and Kastner hope that the project touches upon political and social issues, its religious aspects are less prominent. Sukkot commemorates the Israelites’ wanderings in the desert and the custom of “dwelling in booths” established at that time, but it’s also a harvest festival during which many observant Jews eat and sleep in the sukkah. (While Kastner hopes the sukkahs will be used for religious observance and that people will eat lunch in them, no one will be permitted to actually dwell in them due to Wash. U. restrictions.)

Sukkah City STL, which runs October 18 through 22, itself blurs the boundaries between the sacred and the secular by turning religious law into rules for a design competition and making a holy festival a catalyst for a discussion about politics and social mores. Clearly the boundaries between art, religion, and politics are ones this competition isn’t afraid to cross.