

The New OJC Ark

It was decided: the old ark would be replaced. Its external cladding that looked like beaten metal but was in fact Formica was disintegrating. It had lasted since the mid 1970s but the dedicated volunteer who hammered in pins to hold the laminate in place was losing the battle. In addition, the sliding door mechanism and curtain track were both showing signs of wear.

Two ark committees were set up, one for fund raising and another to manage the project. A brief was prepared. It called for additional interior height to accommodate the *rimonim* (bells), the same front opening size so that the existing embroidered curtains could continue to be used, lots of storage for mantles and other accessories and a degree of protection from theft, fire and flood. Above all the brief called for “an outstanding visual centrepiece which inspires the community ...”

NMA architects were appointed for the project. The firm had a reputation for university buildings in Oxford and for ecclesiastical projects. It soon became clear that the physical surroundings were also in need of an upgrade if the new ark were to look its best. The project was extended to include both the platforms, the reading desk and the platform seating. Fund raising produced great generosity, with large and small donations from many OJC members, from those with past connections to the community, from university alumni and from local Christian and Buddhist communities.

When Niall McLaughlin of NMA stood in front of an OJC meeting and began by asking “What does the Word mean in Judaism?” we knew we were in for an approach to design which would deal with essential matters and go well beyond the nuts and bolts of construction. Of course, from a Christian background, he was thinking of “In the beginning was the Word...” and not the gift at Mount Sinai of the Ten Commandments as well as the whole of the Tenach and all its future commentaries and arguments about meaning.

NMA returned with drawings which a second OJC meeting clearly felt did not capture the required Jewishness of the space. What would make a space feel Jewish and more particularly, what would make a space right for OJC? The answer had to do with lighting, colour, warmth, natural wood finishes, as well as avoidance of any cruciform design features. There was also a desire for the platforms to appear open to all parts of the congregation.

There were some discussions with NMA, but the trail went cold and the project committee decided to continue without their help. NMA left us with the proportions of the ark itself, ideas for lighting and the recommendation that the ark is shown off against a background of plain white walls.

Another NMA legacy was the splendid idea that the pattern on the front of the ark could be generated somehow from the sound of the congregation at prayer. There was no understanding of how that could be realised until it was discovered that Prof Jim Woodhouse of Cambridge University was kindly prepared to help with this aspect. He is a specialist in vibrations of all types including sound, with an additional personal interest in music.

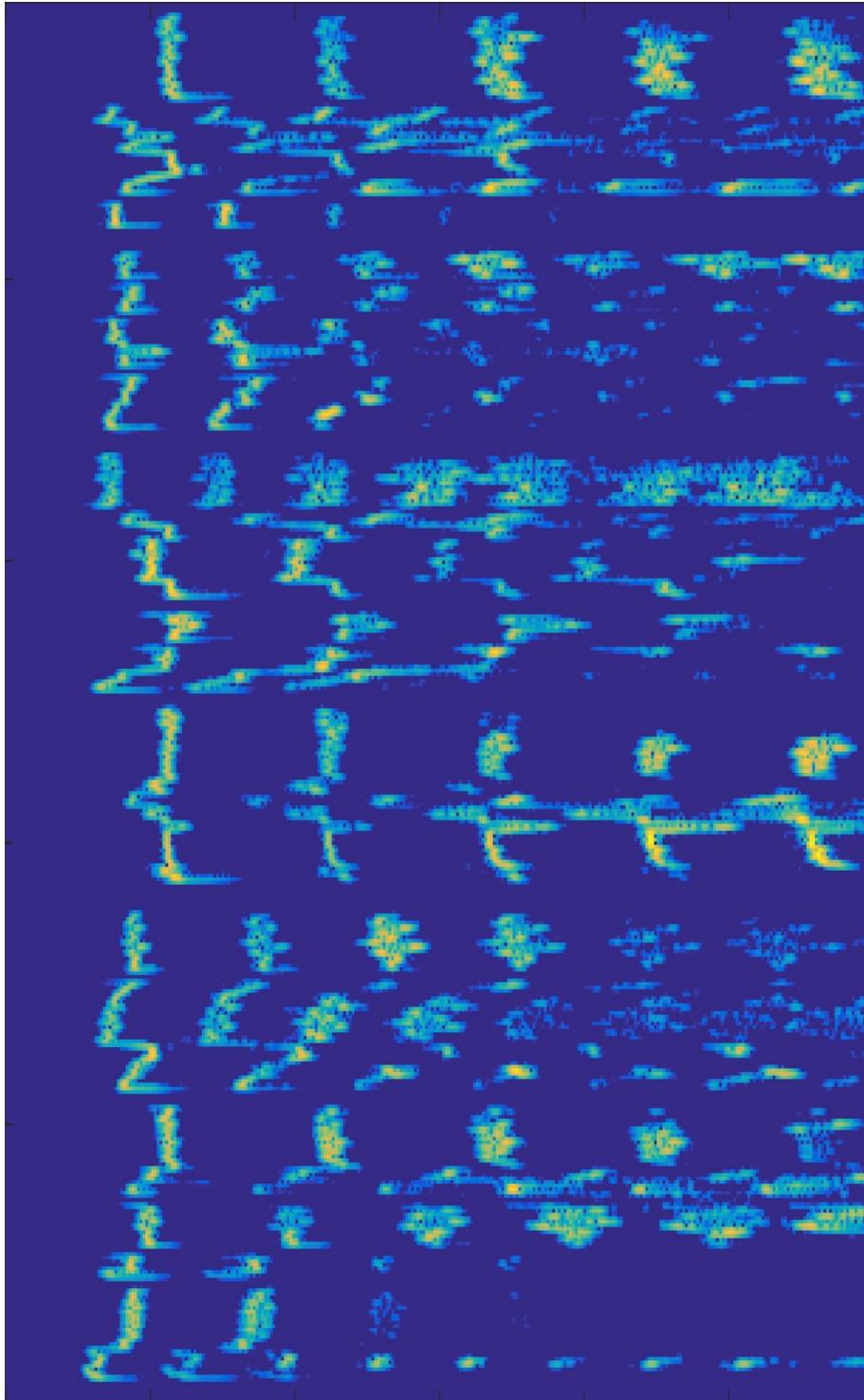
By this time Robin Furlong had been recommended as an excellent local craftsman cabinet-maker who could build the ark and coordinate the associated work. He was commissioned to develop shop drawings for the ark and produce samples of possible timbers and finishes.

Members of the ark committee visited Prof Woodhouse in Cambridge. He put a number of OJC voice and shofar recordings through Spectrogram software on his computer and rather wonderful abstract patterns came up. The pattern selected to decorate the ark doors was produced from a voice recording of '*Vaihi binsoa ha'aron vayomer Moshe*', sung when the doors of the ark are opened. The pattern produced from '*Chadesh yamenu kekedem*', sung when the doors are closed again, was used to decorate the outer panels.

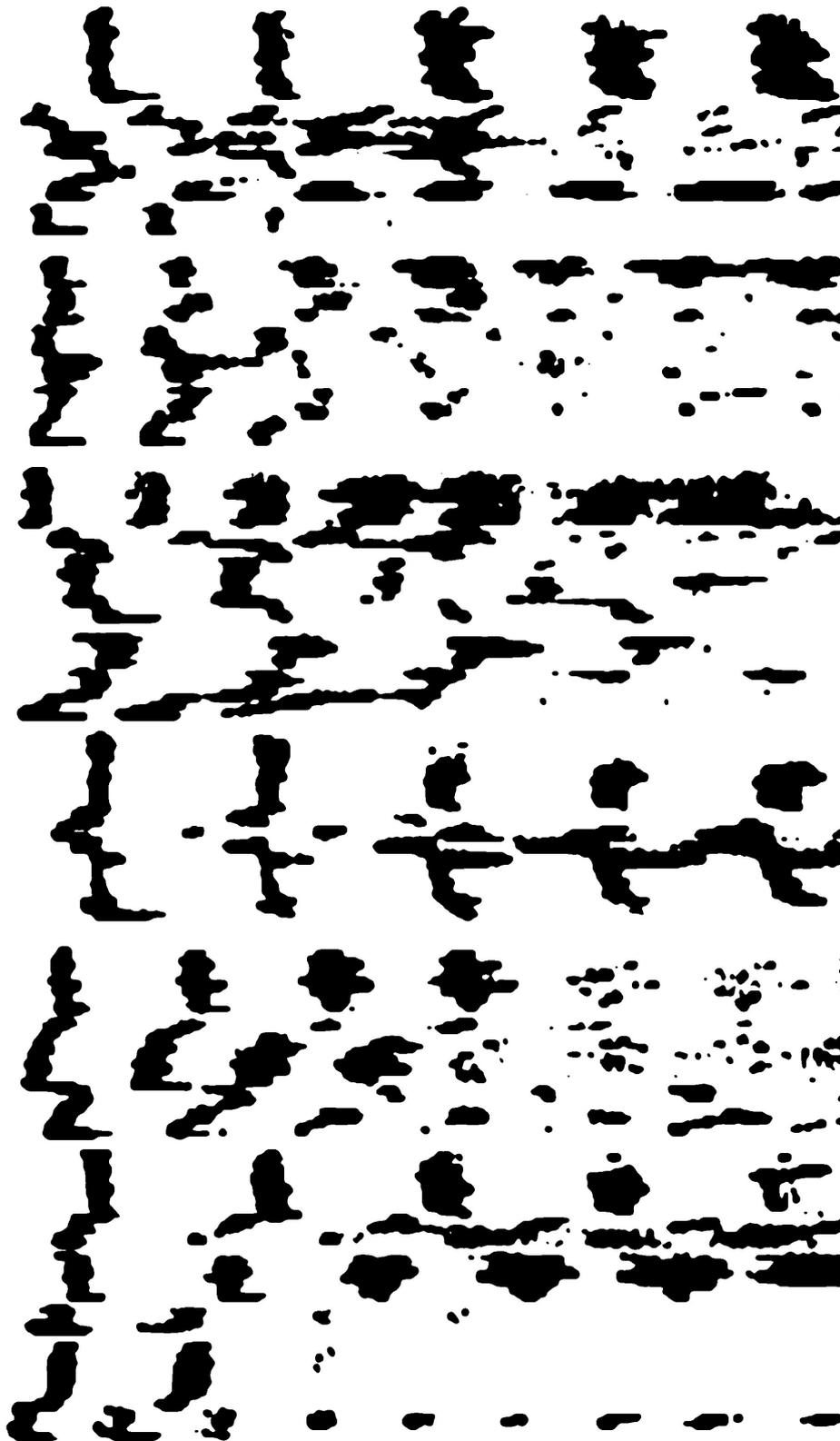
When Prof Woodhouse visited the installed ark he was able to follow with his finger the routed pattern as a phrase was sung. The main melody runs vertically representing time, with variations in pitch creating its lateral pattern. Further shapes spread horizontally, created by harmonics. On a monitor, colours represented volume, but these were lost when routed into wood. There was a degree of editing for visual effect, before the final images were scanned into the computerised router.

Robin Furlong has done an excellent job of assembling the ark that his team had pre-fabricated in his workshop. There are still some details under discussion before the project is completely finished. Relative to the size of the project, there is a small funding gap to be closed. The project was considered sufficiently complete for a rather magnificent Service of Dedication to be held for the ark on 25th February 2018.

Eyn Kamocho Spectrogram



Eyn Kamocho Spectrogram black and white



Prof Jim Woodhouse with the installed Ark



The new ark installed



