

GOOD GRIEF

At first glance, the Mourning House almost blends in. The basic granite block is just slightly more ornate than the modest housing that surrounds it. Its entry door, a nine-metre-high wooden triangle, slices into the stone box from top to bottom and swings open to admit grieving visitors into a narrow passageway. They pass an inward-slanting wall, then a recessed sink intended for the ritual washing of hands after the Jewish mourning ceremonies the space was built to host. And just like that, the bereaved enter a double-height sanctuary that more strongly recalls the temples of the ancient Mayan city of Palenque than the small houses on the outskirts of Mexico City, where the solemn building stands.

Pascal Arquitectos, the two brothers behind the project, encourages introspection at the Mourning House by creating a numinous space whose design is a radical departure from other Jewish sanctuaries in the area. "All of those places are depressing," says Gerard Pascal, referring to their darkness, poor taste and tired accoutrements. The Pascals aimed for just the opposite.

The inclined walls and gently sloped ceiling create drama in the 100-square-metre main hall. Not a single object, be it a light fixture or a piece of religious paraphernalia, breaks its clean lines. There is no furniture except a curved bench that runs along three walls, concealing the lighting and air-conditioning ducts. On the fourth wall, floor-to-ceiling windows overlook a 25-square-metre outdoor courtyard adorned with a lone tree and an abstract sculpture by artist Saul Kaminer. During the day, when most rituals are performed, natural light streams in from the courtyard and a skylight hidden behind the floating ceiling panels; at night, light emanates from beneath the bench.

Creating the space, says Carlos Pascal, was an uplifting experience: "To us, it was a form of prayer."

JULIA COOKE

Designed by Pascal Arquitectos, the Mourning House represents a solemn departure from other Jewish sanctuaries. With its brick and steel skeleton clad in sheets of flamed Grissal granite from Spain, the light-filled cube – whose inclined walls reach double height – invites reflection. A wall-hugging bench, the sole piece of furniture, conceals lights and ductwork.