The link between the spiritual and the physical has always been central to the design of religious spaces. This purposeful design certainly also pertains to a site’s landscape and the visual and spiritual connections between an interior and its exterior.

Buddhist temples are famous for their peaceful environs that foster quiet reflection and meditation, and nature is often central to worship. The four sacred mountains of China, for instance, are considered by Buddhists to be the home of bodhisattvas, enlightened beings who have delayed Nirvana to help those on Earth find enlightenment. Even prehistoric sites such as Stonehenge were designed into and as part of the landscape, reflecting the importance of the relationship between the spirit and the environment.

“Do Not Destroy”

In the Jewish faith in particular, respecting and paying homage to the environment is increasingly becoming integral to the design of new synagogues and their landscapes. In perhaps one of the most striking examples, the Holocaust History Museum at Yad Vashem, designed by architect Moshe Safdie, is quite literally built into and out of the land.

Opened in 2005, the triangular structure cuts right through the Mount of Remembrance in Jerusalem. The integration with the mountain helps tell the story of the Jews through the Holocaust. Visitors enter on one side of the mountain, where a slim skylight provides the only ray of sunlight as they pass through. After moving through the various galleries, visitors exit the museum on the other side of the mountain, where they are greeted by a massive window and a balcony overlooking the Judean hills. For this facility, the landscape helps symbolize the journey and the struggle and is sacred in and of itself.

The idea of the sacred landscape in Judaism is often tied to two central principles: tikun olam and bal taschhit. Tikun olam, or “fixing what is broken,” is interpreted in many ways, typically focusing on humanitarian efforts. But at its core, this seminal value teaches that Jews should be examples for the world, and that the spiritual realm has very real ties to the physical one. Taking that physical connection even further, bal taschhit, translated as “do not destroy,” stems directly from Deuteronomy (20:19-20), in which God commands that those in war should not cut down the trees of their enemies, as that is wasteful. This idea has ushered in a wave of more environmentally conservative design—especially as “going green” has become mainstream—and many Jewish synagogues and community centers have taken it to heart.

Temple Beth Avoda in Newton, Massachusetts, designed by CBT Architects, is known as the “temple in the woods,” and includes a large outdoor amphitheater used for special services and activities. Inside, the walls are angled to allow light to enter through the windows without distracting from what is happening within. The windows are also high on the walls so that those inside look out at the sky and trees enveloping the temple rather than the cars and the parking lot. In keeping with the principle of bal taschhit and the synagogues’ focus on the landscape, all of the vegetation destroyed during its construction was replanted once construction was complete.

Engaging with Nature

In another example, Temple Beth Elohim in Wellesley, Massachusetts, has been constructing a new synagogue, and creating a spiritual connection between interior and exterior is a central component of the overall site design. The idea was to create a sense that visitors have
entered the synagogue as soon as they arrive on the grounds; in other words, the entire site is a place of worship, and the landscape simply provides additional venues for and connections to that spirituality.

"We wanted to convey values of warmth and intimacy, relationship, and a concern for God's creatures, which includes the natural world and a real engagement with it," says Rabbi Joel Sisenwine. The new temple, designed by William Rawn Associates, is being constructed on the existing synagogue's former parking lot, making the natural beauty of that location something of a surprise to the congregation. "We saw it as a parking lot, and no one recognized that we were in such a beautiful spot," says Sisenwine. "Having a new set of eyes through this project recaptured that landscape for us."

Much like Temple Beth Avoda, the new Elohim is nestled in a wooded area, allowing the trees to form an enclosure around nearly three sides of the site. Deliberate way-finding via pathways and vegetation leads visitors naturally through the site, and granite pavers were selected to blend into the ground and maintain the same cool, quiet atmosphere. Pathways lead to outdoor gathering spaces, gardens, and playgrounds, all meant to weave in elements of religion, sustainability, spirituality, and aesthetics.

The focus on surroundings was largely inspired by a trip Sisenwine and other temple members took to Israel. "We saw several outdoor courtyards at temples where people could gather and greet before or after worship," he says. "Very often temple sanctuaries don't open to outside, but we took that idea from the beauty of Israel."

With the courtyard a central focus in the new synagogue's design, the building itself features unconventional floor-to-ceiling windows on two sides of the sanctuary, allowing natural light to fill the space and those inside to see the courtyard. From inside, the synagogue looks out onto the courtyard space enclosed with an outer wall lined with tall Hornbeam trees. Other walls in the sanctuary face the forest, creating a sense of being completely surrounded by nature. This exterior vegetation wall also serves to screen the parking area and was designed using computer animations to ensure that approaching vehicle headlights would not reflect and distract from what is happening within.

Those diversions, however, are also part of the mission of the space, says Sisenwine. "Some see the outside world as filled with distractions. Our hope is to bring some of that in to heighten our sense of God's presence in the world." Similarly, seeing themselves in God's eyes as protectors of the soil, Sisenwine and his congregation considered sustainability a crucial component of the site's design. The site features low-impact development practices such as native vegetation, rain gardens, and various other storm-water management techniques to maintain as natural a landscape as possible. In addition, 26,000 square feet of new parking area is being constructed using porous asphalt.

This responsibility and respect for the environment, via the landscape, will be included in the temple's worship throughout the year.

(text continues on page 16)
From within the sanctuary of Temple Beth Elahim, visitors look out at a tree-lined wall, creating a sense of being enveloped by nature.
The tree-lined wall outside the sanctuary, illuminated softly at night, serves as a screen to the parking lot.
especially for rituals and rites related to holidays such as Sukkot. Held in the fall, Sukkot celebrates the harvest and a time when Jews wandered the desert and were forced to live in temporary outdoor shelters. In celebrating Sukkot, congregations build such structures and fill them with fruits and vegetables. "We’ll be able to build ours right in our courtyard now," says Sisenwine. "We hope to worship outside and live in nature as best we can."

**Reflections of God**

Outside of Judaism, a number of other faiths are also embracing sustainability and the importance of the synergy between the interior and the exterior of a place of worship. In the United Kingdom, the Living Churchyards program seeks specifically to help churches protect and preserve the churchyard—"God’s acre"—as a natural landscape. The nearly 20-year-old program draws inspiration from Christian teachings that God is the creator of all, and His work must be respected and honored.

To date, more than 6,000 churches throughout Great Britain are purposefully managed as sacred native landscapes, with no pesticides and mowed only once a year to provide a habitat for local butterflies, birds, turtles, and other creatures. Many of the participating churches use the churchyards for
St. Martin's Church in Somerset, England, leaves part of the churchyard wild, and uses no pesticides to maintain the lawn.

In the Chicago area, the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Hindu Mandir complex, designed by Papadopoulos & Pradhan Architects, Inc., also placed a huge emphasis on the landscape surrounding the temple, echoing the sentiment of Temple Beth Elohim that visitors should feel as if they have entered a place of worship as soon as they reach the grounds. As the home of God, a mandir is meant to be beautiful and to give due respect to its visitors. As such, from the moment visitors approach the temple, they are greeted with elaborate fountains (which also serve as storm-water retention basins), lush gardens of native plants maintained by volunteers, and a striking, massive structure that houses an activity center and the temple itself.

The idea behind this sacred landscape, says temple spokesperson Harish Patel, is to create a place of beauty that helps visitors temporarily forget the outside world and prepares them to engage in the spiritual world, hence setting the tone for worship.

"It's not required, according to the scriptures, to have these things," he says. "But, where possible, we see it as an opportunity to render devotion to offer something like this to God and to create an environment that is more conducive to worship." In addition to the various individual features of the temple's grounds, the comprehensive view of the landscape from the temple steps is integral to its design. The tiered staircase at the front of the mandir represents mankind's journey through life, and the view one sees from each level of the staircase complements that stage of the experience. For example, at the bottom of the staircase, one sees what is immediately in front of him or her: a flower, some bushes, the pathway underfoot. But as one walks up the stairs, the view becomes more focused, transporting visitors away from everything else and guiding them towards God, symbolizing the "bigger picture" and broader view we have of life as we progress spiritually. As Patel describes it, once you reach the doors of the temple, "You have a bird's eye view of the landscape. You can look back on the gardens and everything around you and see how wonderful is God's creation."

A "Green" God

Respect for the land and humankind's role as fellow inhabitants or protectors of it is central to most religions. However, as environmental stewardship becomes even more ingrained in contemporary culture, this sacred connection
Once visitors reach the top of the tiered staircase of the temple at the Shri Swaminarayan Hindu Mandir complex, they have a bird's-eye view of the amazing grounds and surrounding land, symbolizing a more mature, comprehensive view of life.

to the landscape and its natural, sustained preservation will become even more prevalent in churches, temples, and other places of worship. For a congregation considering embarking on a new design project, considering the long-term benefits of a managed, sustainable approach is essential. While the upfront costs of a lower-impact design can seem high, the longer-term benefits and advantages almost always make up for it. With lower maintenance needs, water bills, and energy costs, a sustainable approach makes sense and can be—and often is—tied directly to a religious body's values and philosophies. And that's what makes the most difference, says Rabbi Sisenwine. "The most important thing is to be clear about your values and the mission of your institution," he says. "Without that, you won't have a building and site that reflect your purposes." 

**Sacred Landscape Resources**
Here are a few resources to learn more about examples of the link between landscape design and spirituality:

- Holocaust History Museum at Yad Vashem: [www.yadvashem.org](http://www.yadvashem.org)
- Alliance of Religions and Conservation: [www.arcworld.org](http://www.arcworld.org)
- Caring for God's Acre: [www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk](http://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk)
- A Rocha: Christians in Conservation: [www.arocha.org](http://www.arocha.org)