During the summer of 1855, future General Philip Sheridan commented, "If I owned Texas and Hell, I would rent out Texas and live in Hell." A hundred and forty years later newcomers undoubtedly appreciate Sheridan's sentiments as the Texan climate remains oppressively hot. In our time, Houston's citizens invoke mechanical remedy at a grand scale. In the fifty years since air conditioning arrived they have sealed and chilled virtually every inhabited space: home, vehicles, offices, gyms, convenience stores.

Houston's extensive cooling is costly, however, and not just in terms of energy and capital. Air conditioned spaces are, by practice and design, disinclined from nature: dark glass extinguishes daylight, a flush facade the sounds of nature. This is Le Corbusier's manifesto read out—the house is cooled fast and deep within vestigial memories of time, season, and weather falls in the monotony of a steady state.

When Dan Solomon described to me the Sixth Israel chapel project and Rabbi Koff's desire to avoid mechanical conditioning, I envisioned between appreciation and fear, it was easy to embrace their desire for an architecture of physical qualities. Here was the rare assertion that a building, if clever, could adapt to Houston's natural setting and, in doing so, be closer to God. Willis Carrier be gone. We can exist for a moment without artifice, exposed and connected like the generations before us. My fears arose from years spent in the studio of an overheated art school, a place filled with indubitable impressions of a vicious, clinging atmosphere and spontaneous perspiration. Engaging the physical world without a mechanical safety net can get out of hand in these conditions. The design should provide a path to the God, not cause a heat stroke.

Dan and I maintained a running discussion during the soft pencil stage of the chapel's design. Each sketch presented possibilities and cautions. Hot humid climates such as Houston practice the opportunity to reject unwanted heat. The traditional heat sinks for passive cooling—earth, air, and sky—are already warm. Without the evaporation and mechanical intervention, the chapel design must painstakingly avoid heat gain. In our design meetings I found myself sounding like Barry Goldwater, "Extremism in roof insulation is no vice."

And... moderation in shading is no virtue. At least some aspects of this program worked in our favor: the chapel had a treasitary and infrequent occupancy; there were no internal sources of heat, and the site was favored by shade trees.

The building that emerged from the sketches is completely open toward the cemetery. The south wall is porous thanks to an ingenious baffling scheme tuned by acoustical consultant Charles Satter. The baffles provide a sculptural entry while shedding and reducing sound from an adjoining roadway. The chapel's porous nature and tall calling allow free air movement and thus convective cooling of occupants.

Much attention was paid to the building's parapet roof, a large surface bearing the brunt of the summer sun. Here we used a ventilated ice house roof section with carefully chosen finish properties and insulated connectors to avoid thermal bridging. Hollandia studies at the Pacific Energy Center helped size and place a cladding in the roof. With its deep overhang, the opening provides the desired daylighting effect without allowing excessive heat gain. The building's opaque walls have reflective finishes and are shaded. A large concrete thermal mass on the shaded north side dampens peak afternoon temperatures.

The chapel faces a brief but distinct heating season. Our scheme does not attempt to heat the building during cold snaps but instead warms occupants directly with a heated bench. Though designed, this feature will not be installed unless the congregation deems it necessary.

In the end it seems to have worked. The chapel has weathered its first cycle of seasons without calamity. It stands in Houston as an oasis of calm, buffering the national world without avoiding it and without mechanical distraction. Doing so seems particularly poignant in our day.