

Architect Michael McKinnell, Who Designed Buildings in Boston and Jerusalem, Died of Corona

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McKinnell succumbed to the disease at age 85. Boston City Hall, which he designed, is one of the most famous brutalist structures in the world. He was also involved in the design of buildings at elite American universities. In Jerusalem, which fascinated him, he designed the Mandel School on Mt. Scopus.



Boston City Hall: an inverted floating pyramid. *Daniel Schwen*

The American architect Michael McKinnell died over the weekend from complications of COVID-19, one day after his 85th birthday. McKinnell was best known as the co-designer of Boston City Hall. McKinnell joins two other famous architects who have recently died of the coronavirus: the Italian architect Vittorio Gregotti and the American architect and critic Michael Sorkin.

McKinnell was born in Manchester [England] in 1935 and attended the University of Manchester. Later he moved to the United States, where he completed his degree in architecture at Columbia University. In 1962 he and his teacher, the German Jewish architect Gerhard Kallmann, won the competition to design the new Boston City Hall,

which was inaugurated in 1968. Edward Knowles subsequently joined their firm and contributed to the design of the building.



Michael McKinnell. *Fern Mallis*

Boston City Hall is one of the best-known brutalist structures in the world. It seems to hover above massive pillars that support an inverted pyramid, which each floor protruding beyond that below it. There is a specious internal courtyard. “The characteristic of concrete that we enjoyed most was that one material could do so much, and could be seen to do so much,” Mr. McKinnell said in an interview for the book *Heroic* in 2009. “It could be the structure. It could be the cladding. It could be the floors, it could be the walls. There’s a kind of all-through-ness about it. I think if we could have done it, we would have used concrete to make the light switches.”

The building has been controversial over the years. Some Bostonians hated it; architects revered it. Incidentally, it has a strong resemblance to the Bank of Israel building designed by Arie and Eldar Sharon.

The firm of McKinnell, Kallmann, and Knowles operated for decades and designed many public buildings, including the Hynes Convention Center in Boston, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in Cambridge, and the visitor center in Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia. They also designed embassies, courthouses, libraries, and academic buildings for institutions including Yale, Harvard, and Princeton. During the last decade McKinnell worked chiefly with his wife, the architect Stephanie Mallis, whom he married in 2003.

As a result of his friendship with the American Jewish philanthropist Morton (Mort) Mandel, McKinnell came to Israel, where he designed the Mandel School for Advanced Studies in the Humanities on Mt. Scopus. The 4,600-sq. m. structure, its U-shape open to the adjacent neighborhood of Issawiya, was dedicated in 2015, and designed in collaboration with the Israeli architects Asaf Lerman and Tammy Yaniv.

In an interview to mark the building's dedication (published on the Xnet website), McKinnell told me that the planning for the building began with conversations with those who would use it: "The professors, the graduates, the students—we asked all of them what they required, until the plan was worked out to a T." In addition, he insisted that the upper floors of the building be transparent, so that its complex location would stand out from inside as well: "This was a marvelous opportunity to carry out this floor," he said then, "so that everyone who comes to the building would be aware of this area—the park, the Judean Desert, the Arab village, and the context of the university environment. The earlier buildings were designed shortly after the Six Day War and there was a sense of a desire to protect yourself. Now the desire is to open up to the world.

Good Neighbors with Issawiya

In a letter to McKinnell's widow and the researchers of the Mandel School, Prof. Israel Yuval, the former director of the Mandel School, remarked that it was McKinnell who selected the building's location. The original idea was to erect it on the western slope of Mt. Scopus, overlooking the Old City. But "McKinnell argued that the east reflects hope for a better future. He had a clear understanding of the significance of a structure set on the watershed between Jewish West Jerusalem and Palestinian East Jerusalem."

Unlike foreign architects who have worked in Jerusalem, McKinnell did not try to create an icon. "I think the word 'icon' is overused. Today everything becomes an icon, and that's nonsense," he explained. "If you try to create an icon, you miss the boat. Buildings and places turn into icons as time passes."

According to Professor Yuval, the building has realized McKinnell's dream, including by means of the Good Neighbors project that brings pupils from Issawiya to the building, where they meet advanced-degree students. In addition, friendly relations have been forged between researchers who work in the Mandel building and residents of the neighborhood. "Michael was a dear man. It is symbolic that the two friends and partners, Morton Mandel and Michael McKinnell, passed away so close together: 'Beloved and cherished, Never parted in life or in death!'"



The Mandel Building, adjacent to the Botanical Garden in Jerusalem, which was to have been dedicated in the coming weeks. It has the largest green roof in Israel. *Amir Balaban / Yehidat*

Another McKinnell-designed structure in Jerusalem, the Mandel Foundation building adjacent to the Botanical Garden, is nearing completion. The dedication ceremony was to have taken place in a few weeks. McKinnell designed the building in collaboration with the Israeli firm Kolker Kolker Epstein and landscape architect Leor Levinger. It surrounds an interior courtyard and has a façade that somewhat resembles the Knesset. The 2,300 sq.m. roof, the largest green roof in Israel, is meant to integrate with the green streambeds all around it.

Mallis told *Ha'aretz* this evening: “He was enchanted by the complexity and the historic sites in Jerusalem. Architecture was a means to unite people and to share the positive force of architecture—in a humanist way, not through coercion but by developing life itself.” She added that during their dozens of visits to the city, “our walks were always accompanied by reverence for the long period the city has existed and its profound influence on everyone.”