

FEATURE



Construction zone

Restoration of Phoenix's first synagogue is under way

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Special to Jewish News

Now that the scaffolding is down and the roof is finished, you can catch a glimpse of what the exterior of Temple Beth Israel, Phoenix's first synagogue, must have looked like when it was completed in 1922.

"It looks really nice now, but there was actually a lot of work that went into it," says Lawrence Bell, executive director of the Arizona Jewish Historical Society.

During a tour of the construction site, Bell displays the first phase of the project, which includes the restoration of the sanctuary and classroom annex. AJHS is spearheading the \$2.6 million campaign to transform the site at 122 E. Culver St. into the Cutler Plotkin Jewish Heritage Center, which will serve as a museum, educational center and community hall. So far, about \$2.1 million has been raised.

"On the exterior walls, there was this awful faux spray-on stucco finish, which was also made with asbestos, and that was blasted off," Bell says. "These guys did a bang-up job in restuccoing and painting over the walls. Also, the windows have all been either rebuilt or replaced. Whenever possible, they have used the existing frames."

He says that G&G Specialty Contractors, the general contractor for the site, tore through several roofs on the building and discovered that the original roof was covered with an inexpensive red roll roofing material.

"It's amazing that with all of those roofs, it still leaked. We didn't want to put on the same material but we wanted it to be the same color, so we put on a very good roof with red shingles. The workers changed all of the wood decking under the roof so there was actually a night where there was nothing and the building was open to the stars."

Stepping inside what was once TBI's sanctuary, Bell points to an inset in the back wall of the rebuilt stage that was uncovered by the construction crew. He says that the inset was the temple's ark, which was covered up by the Chinese Baptist church after that congregation bought the property in 1949. Later, the building was home to a Spanish-speaking Baptist church. AJHS bought the site in 2002.

"We don't have a picture of the ark because there's always been a curtain over it in any of the photos we've seen. We've been digging



Top photo: In restoring the exterior of Temple Beth Israel's main entrance, the construction crew on the Cutler Plotkin Jewish Heritage Center project uncovered the original turquoise-colored tiles that dot the top of the front wall.

Bottom photos, left to right: Refurbished and newly constructed windows wait to be installed; one of the temple's original window frames that will be restored; original brass hardware like these hinges and keyhole plates will be included in the restoration.

Photos by Beth Shapiro

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through the archives to see if there's something we've missed. We do know that there were drawers on the bottom of the ark, which are being rebuilt."

Choosing paint colors has been an interesting challenge for the historical site.

"One of the problems that we have is that the photos from the early era were in black and white, so one of the hardest decisions we've had to make is color. A lot of discussion and debate goes into that."

When the crew scraped down to the bottom layer of paint on the interior walls, they encountered what Bell describes as a "strange orange-brown color everywhere, on the balcony, in the rabbi's office. So we're not sure if that is what it was originally because it's been on there for 86 years, so it could have been lighter or darker."

He says that AJHS is trying to keep the historic line of color in mind as they proceed with decorating by incorporating that orange-brown tone into a three-tone color scheme, covering up the ubiquitous blue palette added by the Chinese church. "I think it will look very sharp when it's done."

In peeling back the layers of time inside the building, the crew found evidence of a fire that took place in November 1935. The fire is mentioned in the temple's history but there is no discussion of the fire's extent or how it might have started.

"Everywhere we excavate back far enough, the walls are charred black in places. You can't see it anymore because it's covered up. I spoke with Rabbi (Albert) Plotkin (TBI's rabbi emeritus and one of the namesakes of the center), who told me that Rabbi Phillip Jaffa, who was the rabbi here (in 1935), told him that he lost his whole library in the fire."

Bell says that the fire must have been very destructive, because when one compares photos taken before 1935 with photos taken after the fire, the sanctuary looks very different. It was also after the fire that the building's classroom annex was added.

"So when restoring it, it's kind of complicated, because there were actually two eras, before and after the fire. And one of the problems ... is that there is nobody alive who can tell me what this looked like before the fire."

AJHS is planning a public cornerstone ceremony and open house for the center, one of Phoenix's 33 Points of Pride, in the fall.



A view from the stage shows the temple's nearly completed sanctuary and choir balcony. The ceiling, which exposes the building's original rafters, will be completed after the ductwork is installed. Shown in the photo are AJHS executive director Lawrence Bell, left, and Johnny Woodlee, project foreman.

"This is a site that is not just for the Jewish community. It's a historic site for the entire city, and we in the Jewish community are really taking a leadership role in this aspect of preserving the city's history," Bell says.

"I think it's something the Jewish community can be proud of. This is really an effort to teach people about who we are, what we believe and the ways that we have contributed to the state and the country. I think that's something that's going to get people of all faiths very excited."

Beth Shapiro is a freelance writer based in Scottsdale.



Above, left to right: Lawrence Bell points out the temple's ark, which had been covered over when the building was owned by the Chinese Baptist church. The black marks indicate the damage caused by a fire at the temple in 1935; Johnny Woodlee finishes the drawers that will be installed below the ark. Far right, top and bottom: This room was once the temple's kitchen and will become the center's new library and interactive learning center; a chart shows the color palette for the center's interior walls.