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Restoring a building, preserving a neighborhood

Isaiah Kuperstein never paid much attention to the decades-old stone building that sits a block from one of his Double 8 Foods grocery stores. The businessman noticed that the building, with its ornate beige trim and grand presence in a Near-Northside neighborhood full of modest single-family homes, seemed out of place and time, but that was about it.

It was just a building. Until it wasn't.

"In all the years I've been here, I've never set foot in that place. Somebody once told me: 'Oh, that was a synagogue once.' But I never paid attention," said Kuperstein, who is Jewish. "When I went inside, I was thunderstruck with what I saw. All the remains of what used to be a synagogue were there. And I said to myself, 'We can't possibly let this go.'"

To Kuperstein, the building at the corner of East 34th and Buckle streets is more than just a synagogue, more than just a beautiful building that started life as Beth-El Temple before becoming a series of churches.

The building, he insists, is a chance to reclaim a long-forgotten part of Jewish heritage in Indianapolis. Even more than that, it's a chance to infuse a new type of community spirit into a neighborhood in the midst of a rapid change in demographics.

That's a tall order for one building, even one designed by the architecture firm founded by author Kurt Vonnegut's grandfather. But Kuperstein has a good reason for his high expectations. Before he was the proprietor of the Double 8 chain, he helped to create the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

"Communities need to engage each other, talk to each other, learn about each other, celebrate together," he said. "I think a lot of this can happen in this building. It holds that promise for us."

What will that look like? Kuperstein isn't sure. He and the board of a relatively new nonprofit, the Temple Heritage Center, are just starting to figure that out. (Indiana Landmarks owns it, but the nonprofit is directing the building's future.)

Beth-El Temple could end up being a community center with an emphasis on exploring issues of diversity and cultural heritage.

The first order of business, though, has been to repair the building, which is a shadow of what it was when it was built in the mid-1920s.

At that time, the surrounding neighborhood of Mapleton-Fall Creek was a Jewish enclave. Over time, Jews moved out, and blacks moved in. The neighborhood got poorer, and blight set in. The area became known more for crime than anything else, although some institutions, such as Tabernacle Presbyterian Church, chose to stick around to be stabilizing forces for good.

Today, Mapleton-Fall Creek is undergoing another major change in demographics. With its location along a major waterway, proximity to Downtown and amenities that include trails and bikeways, the neighborhood is ripe for redevelopment.

People with higher incomes are moving in. And concerns about gentrification are running high among longtime residents.

If Beth-El Temple ends up being what Kuperstein envisions, it could help diffuse some of the conflict that comes with change. Imagine if there were an institution to honor the oldest roots of Mapleton-Fall Creek along with those who are putting down new ones.

In the end, creating that kind of community spirit will have more to do with people than buildings.

But Beth-El Temple is an asset. It's a beautiful building with a decades-long record of bringing people together. That's something worth hanging onto.

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The former Beth-El Temple at 34th and Buckle streets was built in the 1920s.

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