

Holy buildings wholly repurposed, Spirit of historic synagogues lives on in new uses

By Bill Motchan, Special to the Jewish Light | Posted: Wednesday, October 14, 2015 12:00 pm

Danny Gonzales was hired as a researcher at the Missouri History Museum Library in 2009. It was his first day on the job, and he was eager to get started. But he couldn't concentrate. The problem was not the stifling August heat.

"I sat down to work, and they brought out my research material, but I kept looking at the beautiful architecture and the beautiful dome," Gonzales said. "It was incredibly distracting, but in the best possible way."

That 40-foot-high copper-clad dome is also carved in the memory banks of the thousands of bar and bat mitzvahs who faced the majestic interior of United Hebrew Congregation's sanctuary on their special day.

Since a 1991 restoration and renovation, the former UH building at 225 S. Skinker Boulevard has been a library and research center. It's also a perfect example of adaptive reuse, which turns an architecturally significant building into something far different than its original purpose.

A number of historic buildings were synagogues in their early years and continue to function and thrive thanks to adaptive reuse. It's a fitting legacy, local architect Andy Trivers says.

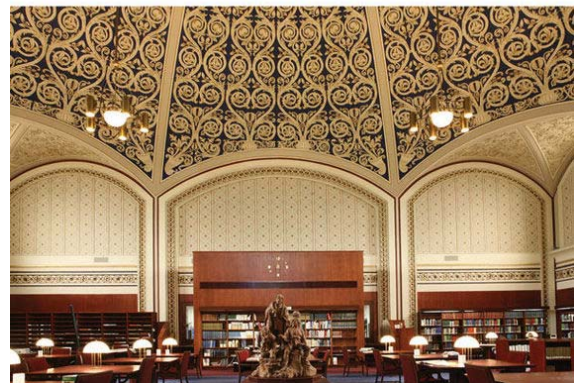
"In St. Louis, there are a lot of historic buildings waiting to be saved, and there's no better way to do that than through adaptive reuse," Trivers said.

Trivers knows a bit about modifying old buildings into new functions. He oversaw conversion of the historic Congregation B'nai Amoona building in the University City Loop to the Center of Contemporary Arts (COCA). It was tricky to make structural changes to a building listed on the Registry of Historic Places. Some modifications were not permitted.

"We had to put in a box office and a projection area for the theater," Trivers said. "The biggest change was the addition of a dance studio and green room. You don't want to obscure the original location – that would be against the historic preservation rule – so we extended the building into the parking lot."

The process began in the early 1990s, with a follow-up addition in 2005 when COCA added an elevator to connect all levels and achieve compliance under the federal Americans with Disabilities Act.

B'nai Amoona, at its dedication in 1950, represented a key architectural accomplishment with an important pedigree. Erich Mendelsohn was an accomplished architect in his native Germany, famous for designing the



United Hebrew building

Views of the interior of the United Hebrew building on Skinker Boulevard, in 1927 and repurposed as the Missouri History Museum's Library and Research Center in 2011. Photos courtesy Missouri History Museum photos and prints collection

German expressionist Einstein Tower. His escape from Nazi Germany ushered in changes for American architecture in general, and his first U.S. work was in St. Louis.

“Mendelsohn didn’t believe in doing what was fashionable at the time, which was Moorish and Byzantine architecture,” Trivers said. “That was the historical style, which people thought was appropriate for a sacred place. He thought that was anachronistic, looking backward instead of looking forward. He was designing for our own time and place. He was part of a movement, the modernist-futurist way of thinking differently.”

Mendelsohn, like his contemporaries, took full advantage of technological advances, including the elasticity of stainless steel and concrete. The huge cantilever ceiling in the B’nai Amoona sanctuary was meant to mimic the loftiness and spirituality of the building. Mendelsohn deliberately opened up the western wall so that when the sun set on Yom Kippur, you could see the sun gradually shifting down in the sky.

“He was a very innovative thinker,” Trivers said. “He developed a sanctuary of great spiritual value, but also very functional in the sense that it had community space and all the things that went into making a synagogue what it is.”

Mendelsohn also created form to follow function.

“The sanctuary itself, which was designed for 600 people, could be expanded to 1,500 for the high holy days,” Trivers said.

The former B’nai Amoona synagogue is tucked away just south of Delmar Boulevard on Trinity Avenue. Students of architecture history regularly visit the building, said to Richard Baron, founder and developer of COCA.

“We see architectural students and others who are interested in adaptive reuse and seeing what was done there,” he said. “They have a regular stream of visitors.”

Clearly, former synagogues make great performance spaces. Just around the corner from COCA, the former Shaare Emeth, built in 1930, is home to the Washington University 560 Music Center. The most recent conversion is the former Congregation Kol Am building, built in 2006 on Chesterfield Parkway East, which is now rehearsal and office space for Stages St. Louis.

Age is clearly not the only significant aspect of architectural importance. The COCA building is a relatively new structure compared with another former synagogue that also shares landmark status: the original home of B’nai El at 3666 Flad Avenue, built in 1905. That building holds the distinction of being the oldest existing structure for a Jewish congregation in St. Louis.

Danny Gonzales, now historian and preservationist for the St. Louis County Parks Department, suggests that architectural significance is just one important reason to save old synagogues.

“The thing that gets me excited about the United Hebrew building is the connection to civil rights history,” he said. “Former Rabbi Jerome Grollman marched with Martin Luther King in Selma, Alabama, and King gave a speech at UH on the future of integration – which, I imagine, some of the contents of that speech still ring true.”

Gonzales says that as a preservationist, he appreciates that some synagogues and other historic buildings remain intact. But many don’t survive.

“Recently we looked at a 20-year-old survey of historic structures in St. Louis County, and we found that a lot

of the buildings are now gone,” he said.

Rehabbing an old synagogue isn't just a matter of a few plaster patches and a fresh coat of paint. Generally, these buildings fall into the category of extreme fixer-uppers. The plumbing and electrical systems may need to be replaced. If heating came courtesy of an ancient boiler, it could require a complete HVAC overhaul, all of which carries a hefty price tag.

Teardowns are common in the suburbs for just this reason. United Hebrew leadership had considered selling the Skinker Boulevard property to a real estate developer. The likely outcome would have been a shiny new residential development, with the historic sanctuary only a memory. That was definitely not the congregation's preference, said Paul Flotken, who headed the building committee for a new synagogue and was the temple's president in 1989.

“We had interest from real estate developers to tear down the building and put up housing,” Flotken said. “The History Museum had the necessary funding to rehab the building. They spent \$9 million or \$10 million, which was about what we estimated it would need.”

Why is it so important to save old buildings, whether or not they can serve a new purpose? Styles change over time, but buildings serve as a living reminder of the era in which they were erected.

The modernist Kol Rinah (formerly Shaare Zedek) at 829 North Hanley Road has a distinctive art-deco look and feel. It's no accident that it looks similar in design to the old Famous-Barr in Clayton (now part of Washington University). The two structures were built within a couple of years of each other, in 1950 and 1948, respectively.

No discussion of groundbreaking architects and St. Louis synagogues would be complete without mentioning Will Levy. The prolific Levy designed dozens of significant area buildings, primarily private residences. He also worked on the original Temple Israel (in the vicinity of Wells-Fargo downtown) and an addition for the former Shaare Zedek building on Page Boulevard near Taylor Avenue.

Levy also created a design in 1923 for a never-built United Hebrew Congregation building at Delmar and Union boulevards.

And he was responsible for a key part of another structure that some might argue was a spiritual gathering place: the iconic clock and scoreboard at Sportsman's Park, the Cardinals former home field at Grand Boulevard and Dodier Street.

Will Levy's work is currently on display at the Carolyn Hewes Toft Gallery at Architecture St. Louis, 911 Washington Avenue, open weekdays from 9:30 a.m. until 4 p.m. The exhibit runs through Nov. 25.