



THE LAURA & ALVIN SIEGAL
LIFELONG LEARNING
PROGRAM

Jewish Explorations

Lectures • Programs • Views

A Synagogue On Wheels

By Alanna E. Cooper | January 23, 2019

We generally think of buildings as immovable, connected to the land upon which they were built. On occasion, though, architectural structures can be lifted up from their foundations, and moved to another locale. That's what happened last week with Washington DC's oldest synagogue. All 273 tons were wheeled down Third Street on a massive dolly. You can see photos and a video of the spectacle [here](#).

This was actually the third time the building has been moved. Constructed in 1876, the building housed Adas Israel until the congregation outgrew it just a few years later, and moved into a new, larger space. The little brick building they left behind was converted successively into a church, offices and retail space. But in the late 1960s – decades after the structure had last been in Jewish hands – when the city announced plans to raze it to make way for urban development, local Jewish community-members would not accept its end. They reclaimed it, arranged to lift it off its foundation, moved it, and turned it into a museum that tells the story of Washington DC's Jewish history.



In 2016 again, a large-scale urban construction project threatened the building's destruction. And again, rather than accept its demise, the local Jewish Historical Society arranged for its move. Since then, the structure has been sitting on stilts in a temporary spot. I visited it in 2017, when I took this photo (above right). Now, with the latest move – which happened earlier this month - and the planned expansion of the museum, the building will finally rest from all its wandering.

While it's highly unusual to move an entire building, it is not uncommon for a synagogue to be turned into a museum once its congregation no longer inhabits the space. This past summer, I visited one such building in Brookhaven, Mississippi, (right) where the modest synagogue now serves as a museum to the history of the town. And in Phoenix, Arizona, the city's first synagogue (built in 1920) now serves as a Jewish history



museum. Perhaps most well known is the Museum at Eldridge Street (right) in New York's Lower East Side, which is housed in the structure built in 1887 as a grand house of worship to serve the area's Eastern European Jewish immigrants.



Old synagogue buildings can wind up morphing to serve many other functions as well. Most common, perhaps, is the conversion of synagogue buildings to serve church communities. But that is hardly the only solution. Artist Hillel Smith has created a fantastic new website called, "[Jewish Traces](https://jewishtraces.tumblr.com)," which is devoted to documenting what has happened to buildings that were once homes to Jewish congregations. Today, the collection on his website includes: a squash club, an apartment building, a multi-cultural arts center, and a stunning furniture showroom. Have a look. The site is interactive and growing. You can add information to it too!

<https://jewishtraces.tumblr.com>

Want to read more of my columns? Previous Jewish Explorations editions can be found [here](#)