

Preserving the past at what cost? Restoring L.A.'s Wilshire Boulevard Temple

Alanna Cooper | March 14, 2019

When a community's aging building crumbles, should they renovate? When the people who once built and used a structure move elsewhere, should they preserve that structure? Under what circumstances? And at what cost? I wondered about these very issues as I prepared for a visit to the Wilshire Boulevard Temple in Los Angeles. This grand 1929 Byzantine-Moorish style building, home to one of country's largest Reform congregations, recently went through one of the costliest synagogue restoration projects in United States history.



Wilshire Boulevard Temple

Before my visit, I Googled photos and studied the congregation's Hollywood history. Still, I could not have anticipated the experience of being in such a large and dramatic space, surrounded by its luminescent stain-glassed windows, multi-tiered lighting fixtures, massive columns with gold-filigree capitals, 1,850 seats, and most impressive of all; its dome and wall murals.

I'll dwell on the dome for a moment: All the photos (like the one I took here) flatten it. Only an in-person experience reveals its full drama. I felt it. Literally. I became dizzy looking up 130 feet to the top of the dome. Numbers are hard to process, so think about it this way: While the sanctuary was recently undergoing renovations, the construction crew removed all the pews to build thirteen flights of scaffolding for workers to access the top. That's a long way up. And spanning 100 feet across, the dimensions are astounding.



Wilshire Blvd Temple Dome

The other major feature that took me by surprise were the wall murals, designed by Hollywood artist, Hugo Ballin. His paintings - at seven feet high - are literally larger than life. The figures' vibrant colors, set against blazing gold backgrounds, seem to pop off the wall. Beginning with scenes of Abraham, moving to the prophets, the rabbinic sages, then through the Middle Ages, and finally ending with voyages to America, the murals illustrate 3,000 years of Jewish history. If these grand paintings - wrapped around the base of the dome - were to be stretched out, they would take up almost the entire length of a football field.

Ninety years ago, when the Wilshire Boulevard Temple was built, it cost \$1.5 million (\$22 million in today's dollars), funded primarily by the Warner Brothers, Louis B. Mayer, and other

Jewish Hollywood moguls. At the time, Wilshire Boulevard – situated at the edge of city – was in the midst of transitioning from unpaved farm roads, to become a prominent thoroughfare. The Temple was one among four other major houses of worship built on the “Miracle Mile,” which was lined with large scale department stores, banks and grand office buildings.



Wilshire Blvd. Temple Sanctuary

But by 2000, the urban-scape had changed dramatically, and so had the interior of the Temple. Hugo Ballin’s murals were cracking, and blackened by soot. The dome was crumbling, and its colors muted by grime. In many ways the interior of the Temple had come to resemble the neighborhood that surrounded it; old and neglected, its former glory faded. When pieces of plaster began falling from the ceiling, a protective tent was installed in the sanctuary, and the Temple leadership began serious conversations about what to do.

Of course there was no easy fix. So much more was needed to be done than a quick clean-up and simple patching. The infrastructure of the building had long been neglected. There was no heating system, the bathrooms needed an overhaul, the electricity and plumbing required updating, and the space was not handicap accessible. All this meant that if the sanctuary were to be restored and remain usable the whole building would have to undergo massive renovations.

Then there was the larger issue of the building’s location. Like in Cleveland (and many other cities), the Jews had mostly left the downtown area where the community had originally established itself. In Los Angeles, most of the Wilshire Boulevard Temple members had moved west, where in 1998, a second facility was built.

In the meantime, the urban area surrounding the 1929 structure had become depressed, and the Temple was out of place, smack in the middle of what is now known as “Koreatown.” So, what to do with the building? Keep it in congregational hands? Or let it go? While debate surely ensued (only hints of which are revealed in the public record) the ultimate response was resounding: Hold onto it. Restore it. Renovate it. And even build more! The cost for the ambitious project has come in at upwards of \$150 million dollars.

In seeking to understand why the congregation ultimately chose to keep and tend to the building, rather than sell it, I’ve found three sorts of answers. The first focuses on the past that the building preserves. It tells an important story of American Jewish history, and the congregation has a responsibility to uphold the legacy of the builders. Second, the sheer beauty and grandeur of the unique space warrants preservation. And finally, care for the building represents the congregation’s commitment to fostering a healthy, vibrant multi-ethnic society in L.A.’s urban core. Along these lines, the Temple’s leader, Rabbi Leder, declared, “Not under my watch are we going to abandon that building and that community.”

And thus, the mission of caring for the building, and caring for the people in the surrounding urban neighborhood, became fully intertwined. So, the congregation did not stop at renovating the existing building. They also built an addition, which now serves as a social service center

offering dental and vision services to neighbors in need, as well as citizenship-workshops, nonprofit legal services and other forms of aid.

Whether the investment in restoring the building was a wise one, is yet to be seen. In the meantime - remember the dizziness I felt while looking up to the top of 130-foot dome? That feeling rushes back as I try to wrap my mind around the logic: Pour massive philanthropic dollars into rehabilitating the Temple's opulent, dazzling, gilded sanctuary, as part of a project designed to help the city's neediest. That's a mind bender, which leaves my head spinning.

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