



The Centennial of a Synagogue

by Susan Edelstein

For anything to survive a century takes care, devotion and love. Nowhere is that more evident than in the gleaming jewel box of a synagogue located at 3rd Avenue and Laurel Street that was established, designed, built, outgrown, sold, bought, restored and honored over the last 100 years. It began in 1925-1926 when noted architect William H. Wheeler designed the Byzantine-Moorish style complex that covered a full city block and included a sanctuary, a school and a social hall. To accommodate its growing membership, Congregation Beth Israel moved from their original location at 2nd and Beech to 3rd and Laurel in 1926. Beth Israel occupied the site for 75 years before relocating again in 2001.

Ohr Shalom Synagogue became a kind of co-owner of the complex in 2002 following a complicated process involving lots of people and organizations. At that time, Ohr Shalom was exactly one year old, having been formed by the merger of two Conservative congregations, Beth Tefilah and Adat Ami, and was housed in a rented office suite on Morena Boulevard. Lynn Mendelsohn, Immediate Past President and Chairperson of the Centennial Rededication Celebration, says “We are beyond proud—and quite amazed—that we have been able to acquire the 3rd and Laurel building, to restore it closely to its original beauty, and to maintain it as a strong Jewish presence in Bankers Hill, central

San Diego. The fact that Ohr Shalom owns the building at all is a miracle to us.”

Beth Israel put the entire 1.4-acre property up for bid with the proviso that the sanctuary building could not be torn down. Ohr Shalom members decided to help ensure the building’s preservation and in early 2000, they asked the Save Our Heritage Organisation (SOHO) to petition the State of California’s Office of Historical Preservation to declare the building eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. Their petition was successful and the state declared the building eligible for the National Register in October 2000 which helped support opposition to the destruction or significant alteration of the complex.



Photos courtesy Ohr Shalom.

At the outset, there were several bidders including Ohr Shalom, but the highest bidder was J. Peter Block Companies who planned for a high-rise, multi-story apartment complex with the sanctuary building to be used as a theater or event space, but the school, social hall and administrative buildings would be razed. The City of San Diego’s Planning Commission rejected Block’s plan, mostly due to height restrictions caused by the proximity to the airport. After much negotiation and complicated real estate and legal maneuvers, Ohr Shalom took full ownership of the property in 2005.

In 2009-2010, Ohr Shalom invested \$4.2 million and four years in a complete restoration of the sanctuary and social hall and major improvements to the school building, culminating in its rededication in June 2011. Lynn states, “We are humbled by the fact that Ohr Shalom has managed to accomplish so much with the building, restoring it to its rightful glory...and honored to have in our custody such an outstanding marker of the Jewish presence in San Diego.”

With respect for the historical importance of the original design of William Wheeler, Ohr Shalom was motivated to preserve as much as possible of the original structure, especially the sanctuary with its wonderful domed ceiling five stories high with the beautiful blue Star of David skylight, and the huge, brilliant stained-glass window on the south side. Lynn declares, “The sanctuary is a perfect

place to think and pray.” And in fact, “The window is so striking that Beth Israel installed a copy in the chapel on its new campus.” Unfortunately, the artist’s name has been lost to history.

In addition to being recognized by SOHO as architecturally and historically significant, Ohr Shalom received SOHO’s award for Restoration of a Sacred Place in 2011. “Our achievement at 3rd and Laurel is a victory for SOHO and the City of San Diego as well,” says Lynn. “With determination, an old historic building can pull through and have a new life. Ohr Shalom is a thriving Jewish community, so our 100-year-old building still has children running through its halls, adults mounting the bima for aliyot, and people of all ages attending events, events, events in its social hall!”

This glorious synagogue will be rededicated on May 3, 2026. Mazel tov, Ohr Shalom, and here’s to the next 100 years. ✨

Top, from left:
3rd & Laurel in 1927,
3rd & Laurel today,
inside the five-story
sanctuary.

At right:
Star of David skylight in
the domed ceiling.

