

Indy's oldest temple is historic but empty. So now what?

Will Higgins



The old Beth-El Temple at 3359 Ruckle St. Indiana Landmarks is renovating the site and exploring how to re-use the building. Kelly Wilkinson / The Star

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(Photo: Kelly Wilkinson / The Star)

It is the oldest synagogue in the city, a historic, neoclassical structure designed by renowned architects.

And its future is uncertain.

Beth-El Temple, tucked into the 3400 block of Ruckle Street in the Mapleton-Fall Creek neighborhood, has been vacant for most of a decade. Its original congregation, Beth-El Zedeck, sold the building during the Eisenhower administration and moved to the suburbs, and subsequent owners over the years deferred maintenance.



The neglect is now evident. The temple reeks of mold. Its old paint doesn't just peel but hangs down like tattered curtains. Rain cascaded through holes in the roof until the synagogue, claimed by Marion County a few years ago for back taxes, caught the eye of Indiana Landmarks.

In January 2014 the preservation group bought the temple and quickly raised \$200,000 for a new roof to stabilize

the structure and buy some time. So there's hope for it.

Now comes the hard part: what to do with the 90-year-old building.

Finding a new use for an old church is a widespread predicament as suburbs have drawn people away from older parts of town and as attendance at religious services declines. The population near Beth-El Temple dropped in half since the 1980s to about 6,600. Eight years ago 16 percent of Americans didn't identify with a religion, the Pew Research Center reported; this year 23 percent don't.

"No one knows how many vacant churches there are right now," said Bob Jaeger, president of Partners for Sacred Places, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit that assists with conversions. "We're trying to find ways to extrapolate. In Philadelphia, there are about 750 churches that are more than 50 years old, and about 10 percent are empty. If that's any indication, there are thousands of empty or transitioning sacred places in the country."

In Indianapolis this year alone a 100-year-old church in Ransom Place, the original home of the Light of the World Christian Church, was converted to a single family home (the young couple that did the rehabbing resisted friends' suggestion to turn the baptismal into a hot tub). A Catholic church built in 1879 at 540 N. College Ave. is the city's latest brewpub. Other churches in recent years have been divided into condos or used as party spaces. Last spring a 114-year-old synagogue in South Bend was refitted as the gift shop for the city's minor league baseball team.

Sometimes when a congregation vacates its building a new congregation is ready to move in and the building stays a place of worship. When Beth-El Zedeck left in 1958, another Jewish congregation filled the gap. Ten years later when that congregation left, a Christian group moved in. Later that group left and another Christian group moved in. The last occupant's sign still hangs above the temple's front door: International Life Church.

But it seems the building no longer stirs interest among religious groups. Indiana Landmarks says the place needs about \$2 million in repairs, a daunting task for any congregation. Just last week the 100-year-old Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church at 414 W. Vermont St. announced that amid tight finances and the high cost of maintaining the historic building [it may sell](#).

When the Ruckle Street temple was built in 1925 following the merger of two congregations to form Beth-El Zedeck, the neighborhood was Jewish. Many temple members walked to services, which explains the building's lack of a parking lot. In the late 1950s the temple's members built a new synagogue further north in Meridian Hills.

Today, much of the neighborhood is struggling. Indiana Landmarks bought the temple for \$5,000 down and the promise of \$45,000 later.

The temple, designed by the noted early 20th century Indianapolis architecture firm of Vonnegut, Bohn and Mueller, looks solid from the outside. Inside, however, it is a study in post-apocalyptic chaos, its decay so advanced it's like a movie set of a Mad Max film. When Indiana Landmarks took ownership, the ground floor was under an inch or two of standing water. It's dry now, but a strong, dank stench lingers.

Even so, the sanctuary is breath-taking. Looking down, if you brush aside a decade of dust and debris, you see the original terrazzo floors. And if you look up at the high vaulted ceiling, as the soft afternoon light filters in through the many large windows, the effect is as its designers intended nearly a century ago: sacred.

Alan Goldstein had his bar mitzvah there. A few months ago he did a walk-through. The last time he was in the building he was 14.

"Things from your childhood," Goldstein, 71, said, "those things are quickly recognized. The beautiful chandeliers were still there, the bimah, where the rabbis were, and some of the leaded glass. It was a bit nostalgic. I enjoyed it.

"In some senses it's still a very beautiful building."

A handful of preservationists and members of the ad hoc Temple Heritage Center Inc., a nonprofit working with Indiana Landmarks, have mulled the temple's future for a year and a half. They've brainstormed at length. They've come up with some ideas, but so far no concrete plans.

One idea is to turn the temple into an educational center for vocational training. Only a fourth of the surrounding population has a college degree, according to the U.S. census, and 15 percent lack high school diplomas. Nearly half the households have incomes under \$25,000.

Another idea is to make the temple an event space or restaurant.

"We've talked to some caterers," said Mark Dollase, the Indiana Landmarks staffer coordinating the project. He noted that an industrial kitchen would fit neatly downstairs in the community room while the sanctuary might make a striking banquet area. There are hardly any restaurants serving the area, and the neighborhood's one grocery store recently went out of business.

Fundraising has been slow-going, said 76-year-old Joe Alpert, who attended the temple as a child and today, along with Goldstein, is among the directors of Temple Heritage. "I have to be realistic," Alpert said, "this is not something that appeals to everybody."

In his efforts he has been turned down by fellow Jews who have lost confidence in the area and are heartbroken by the temple's decay. "I have people saying, 'I spent years there and want to put it behind me,'" he said.

But once a new mission for the building is defined, Alpert expects the money might flow more easily.

In the 1980s, a historic, gothic revival Episcopalian church in New York City was sold and converted into a disco called the Limelight. The opening party, hosted by celebrity artist Andy Warhol and featuring the church's stone cross decorated with a necklace and feathers, "sickened" the city's Episcopalian bishop, Paul Moore Jr. "The coarsest pornography," Moore wrote in a letter to the editor of The New York Times, "has never made me as upset as this sick, pathological use of symbols sacred to millions of New Yorkers."

Jaeger of Partners for Sacred Places said the Limelight "was not a good reuse" of the church.

Dollase said he didn't have a problem with it, but added about the Indianapolis synagogue: "We need to be sensitive, and the Jewish community wants us to be mindful of what this space was."

"I only say there are uses and there are better uses," Alpert said. "I have to be realistic."

"You would not want it to be some sort of dive," Goldstein said. "But that's better than tearing it down and turning it into a parking lot."

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The future of Beth-El Temple

Temple Heritage Center Inc., a nonprofit working with the preservation group Indiana Landmarks to save the 90-year-old Beth-El Temple in the Mapleton-Fall Creek neighborhood, is hosting a public brainstorming session Thursday night. A public walk-through of the temple is scheduled 5 p.m. to 7 p.m., and the discussion will follow at the nearby home of Jackie Nytes, a Temple Heritage board member.

The event is free, but RSVP at <http://www.templelook.eventbrite.com> or by calling Indiana Landmarks at 639-4534.