

Vilna Shul Closes for Renovations

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The Vilna Shul, historic immigrant synagogue on Beacon Hill which is now used as a museum and cultural center, is undergoing renovations.

The building, no longer used as a synagogue and located at 18 Philips Street in Boston, closed May 11 and will reopen in July. The renovations involve restoration of the front plaza and deck, and the repair of the ornamental wrought iron fence and gate.

Jewish immigrants from present day Vilnius, Lithuania built the Vilna Shul building in 1919. The congregation began as a minyan, with members gathering in each others' homes on north Beacon Hill. Eventually, the community grew large enough for a synagogue. The only Jewish architect in the city at the time, Max Kalman, designed the structure, while young men in the community helped with the construction. At the turn of the century the neighborhood, known at the West End, was home to a large and vibrant Jewish community. The congregation that prayed at the Vilna Shul building called itself Anshei Vilner or "the People of Vilnius."

In 1950, the City of Boston began an urban renewal project that resulted in tearing down of the neighborhood. The Vilna Shul was one of the few synagogues that remained in this part of Boston, as many of the residents moved to the suburbs. The building was vacant for about 10 years until the 1990s, when the Jewish community reclaimed it and museum and meeting place. Today, the Vilna Shul has become a center for Jewish culture and is visited annually by about 5,500 to 8,000 people, including tourists, students, and program participants.

The current renovations are part of a series of updates to the Vilna Shul. Executive Director Barnet Kessel said that his goal is to fully restore the building and make it universally accessible. An expert metal smith is working on the wrought iron fence, restoring the missing parts, repairing the damage, and painting it. The concrete of the front plaza is being completely removed, and replaced with modern materials.

After it is finished, the plaza will look historically accurate, as the new concrete will resemble the original. "After the fence is reinstalled, the front of the building is going to look exactly the way it did when it was designed 95 years ago," said Kessel. There have been some very minor repairs done to the plaza in the past, but essentially this is the first time that the fence and plaza are being renovated in almost 100 years. "We have a responsibility to honor the historic nature of the building and preserve that where possible," Kessel said. "But we also want to make the building inviting and usable for today." During construction, Kessel and other Vilna Shul staff will work in offices offsite due to safety precautions.

The Massachusetts Historical Commission helped fund the renovation project, together with contribution from the George P. Henderson Foundation. The Vilna Shul also has an internal donor fund, the Richard Mintz Restoration Fund, started in the memory of one of the individuals who had saved the building. Some of the work that had already been done on the building includes restoration of the decorative murals painted on the walls by the congregants in 1919. Although the murals were later painted over, three distinct sets of murals were discovered when the building was reclaimed. Painting the walls of the synagogue was a longstanding tradition of Eastern European Jews. Today, these murals are some of the only prewar Jewish murals in the country.

Once the current project is complete, Kessel said his next focus is to make the building universally accessible for people with disabilities. Upon reopening, the Vilna Shul will hold a rededication ceremony, which is not yet scheduled.

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