

Cultural Treasure

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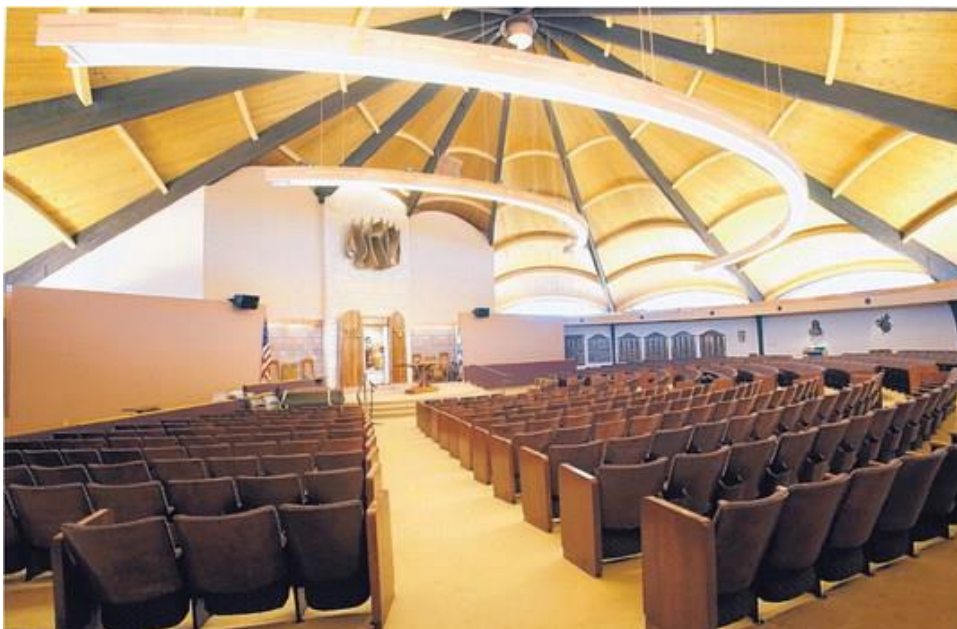
What began as an “academic exercise” for a University of New Mexico architectural history class has resulted in the only synagogue in New Mexico to be listed on the state and national Registers of Historic Places.

Congregation B’nai Israel last week celebrated the occasion with an open house, greeting members of their congregation and the community, as well as those who worked to make the historic listings possible.

Even people who have never been inside the building at Indian School and Washington NE immediately recognize it from its distinctive ribbed, umbrella-shaped roof that some have said conjures up visions of the desert tents of the biblical Israelites.

Historian Steven Moffson, the State and National Register coordinator for the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs, was teaching the architectural history class in 2017 when he gave his students “an academic exercise to write a national register nomination,” he told those gathered at B’nai Israel. “The students did such an exceptional job that we were able to take their work and present it to the synagogue for their approval to see if they wanted it to go from a student project to possibly a listing in the State and National Registers of Historic Places.”

The synagogue’s board of trustees was excited about the prospect and quickly agreed. Moffson said he subsequently made a presentation to the Cultural Properties Review Committee, a group of experts



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in architecture and related specialties, who are appointed by the governor and who evaluate nominated properties to determine if they are eligible for the state or national registers.

The committee agreed that the history and design of B'nai Israel synagogue made the building eligible. "They listed it in the state register and recommended moving it on to the keeper of the national register in Washington, D.C., which is under the National Parks Service." Moffson said.

Historians on May 2nd officially added the synagogue to the National Register of Historic Places.

Being listed on the register does not restrict the rights of private property owners or dictate how the property should be maintained, repaired or restored, Moffson said. It does, however, make owners eligible to apply for federal grants for historic preservation projects, as well as eligible for federal and state tax benefits to rehabilitate properties according to preservation standards.

Just as important, he said "is the idea that understanding the history and significance of a property can allow people to be better stewards."

The three main guidelines for inclusion of a building on the national register is that it should be no less than about 50 years old, must have historic integrity in that it can't have changed much from when it was built, and it has to be associated with an important theme in American history — in this case art and architecture.

Architect Tobias Flatow, a member of the B'nai Israel Board of Trustees, said "most architects will never have one of their designs qualify for such an award, and most architects who are awarded this honor will not live long enough to know their accomplishment."

That was the case for Edward George Wynn, the prominent local architect who designed B'nai Israel synagogue. Wynn retired to Colorado where he died in 2014 at the age of 90.

Wynn was selected to design the house of worship in 1969, and construction was completed in 1971, making the building not quite 50 years old. The congregation, founded in 1920, is about to mark its centennial.

Wynn was among the experimental architects of the late 1960s and early '70s, whose visionary work led to such structures as the TWA terminal at La Guardia

Airport and the Guggenheim Museum, both in New York, and the Sydney Opera House in Australia. "Our sanctuary structure is one of those," Flatow said.

The 500-seat sanctuary is 100 feet in diameter and 43 feet in height, with a roof shaped like a ribbed tent that is supported by 12 laminated fir beams, each weighing over 5,000 pounds. The space between the beams is lined with unpainted tongue-and-groove spruce.

"The original design of the sanctuary incorporated sculptures by the Taos artist Ted Egri," Flatow said. "They include the eight wall-mounted sculptures that depict important holidays and historical events, the eternal light and the large cast work above the bima," or podium.

Flatow praised Wynn for the execution of his vision and providing "a unique example of mid-20th-century modern architecture."

B'nai Israel synagogue joins about 2,050 other sites in New Mexico that are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. These include a host of individual homes, dinosaur quarries, the Palace of the Governors, Chaco Canyon cultural site, Taos Pueblo, UNM's Zimmerman Library and the Cathedral Church of St. John's, the latter two designed by famed architect John Gaw Meem.

