

JEWISH MUSEUM OF FLORIDA ABOUT THE MUSEUM BUILDINGS

The Jewish Museum of Florida is housed in two historic buildings that were formerly synagogues for the first Jewish congregation on Miami Beach. Our organization purchased the buildings and the adjacent parking lot and has spent \$4 million to restore, furnish and equip the buildings for use as a state-of-the-art museum.

Background Summary:

Jews began to settle in Miami Beach as early as 1913. Due to restrictive covenants or clauses in land deeds, they could not live north of Fifth Street. The area became a Jewish ghetto, therefore the earliest synagogues were built in this neighborhood.

The addresses are 301 and 311 Washington Avenue; we refer to the buildings as 301 and 311.

Congregation Beth Jacob (founded 1927) was the first Jewish congregation in Miami Beach to erect a synagogue in 1929 at 311 Washington Avenue. As the congregation expanded in the 1930s, a new, larger building was built (1936), next door at 301 Washington, designed by congregation member and noted Art Deco architect Henry Hohausser. We think that the synagogue was Hohausser's first project on Miami Beach. Hohausser was responsible for the design of more than 100 Streamline Moderne-styled hotels, apartments, and other structures on Miami Beach in the 1930s and 40s.

When 301 was completed as the "grand" sanctuary, 311 was used as a social hall. The original buildings served as the religious and cultural center for the South Beach Jewish community for many decades through the heyday of Jewish life here. In 1986, when the Jewish population declined, the congregation abandoned 301 and returned to its original building next door (311) for religious services. Due to vandalism and the effects of the elements, the 301 building deteriorated and was destined for demolition.

Primary space, 301:

The Museum's primary building (301) was erected in 1936 as the second sanctuary for Miami Beach's first Jewish congregation (Orthodox).

This structure boasts 77 colorful stained glass windows, eight Art Deco chandeliers, marble bimah, decorative exterior concrete relief panels and a copper Moorish dome. In its original configuration, the building held 850 people in theater-style seating with a women's balcony. The floor was sloped to allow worshippers to see and hear the religious services.

The structure was built at a cost of \$40,000 with the same elements and materials as the adjacent original synagogue that was built seven years earlier. The front elevations of both buildings have the same gable and two-story rectangular plans. The central double door of 301 Washington Avenue has inset panels, highlighting the Star of David. The main entrance is elevated by ten steps surfaced in tile and is approached from three sides. Above the door is a large arched stained glass window that represents the giving of the Ten Commandments to the Jews on Mount Sinai with the rays of the Divine presence streaming down from the clouds. The entrance is flanked by coupled fluted pilasters of cast stone, topped by composite capitals with the fluting continuing in the arch. The original light fixtures and stair railings remain. Multi-color Art Deco friezes with the Star of David are located between the first and second floor windows on all four sides of the building.

A copper dome mounted in an octagonal drum crowns the outside of the building. Each side of the drum has an octagonal stained glass window with a central Star of David. The rear elevation is a symmetrical composition with windows flanking the central projecting beam. Above, a stained glass window depicts the Menorah.

The interior ceiling is a shallow barrel vault with seven Deco chandeliers and another larger chandelier suspended from the top of the copper dome. Six arches in the ceiling connect twelve columns on the northern and southern walls. The columns contain the Star of David and Menorah-like sconces.

When the structure was built, it had no air conditioning. The transparent glass windows had to be opened during services, letting in the street noises and the beach's blowing sand and dust. When Rabbi Moses Mescheloff (spiritual leader 1937-1955) addressed the congregation with the windows and doors open, he had to speak so loudly that he could be heard a block away. The sun shone so brightly that it was impossible for the worshippers to read their prayer books.

The solution was determined as installing stained glass windows that were designed by Rabbi Mescheloff with graphic symbols to proclaim the messages of the foundations of Judaism. They create an environment beautifully enriched with the aspirations of the principles of the Jewish faith. The stained glass windows, installed in 1940, were fabricated in Hialeah.

The edifice at 301 Washington Avenue served as the religious and cultural center of the South Beach Jewish community through the heyday of Jewish life there from 1936-1986. In 1980, the structure was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Then the neighborhood rapidly declined. The congregation dwindled as the Jewish community moved away from the South Beach neighborhood. While some other nearby synagogues were converted to nightclubs, this building was abandoned and fell into disrepair. Hurricane Andrew decimated the roof in August 1992. The resulting torrents of water destroyed the ceilings, walls, foundation, decorative plaster moldings and oak floors. The stained glass windows became the target of vandalism.

The building was slated for demolition to allow construction of an apartment building on the site. At that same time, MOSAIC, the organization that created a traveling exhibition on Florida Jewish history, was looking for a permanent home to continue to expand, preserve and display MOSAIC's significant collection.

In 1993 a wonderful marriage was made between a vacant synagogue with an important cultural history and an organization with a mission to preserve the rich heritage of contributions by Jews to the development of the State for nearly 250 years.

Architect and contractor Ira D. Giller sought to create juxtaposition between the old and the new. He responded to both the need to restore original architectural elements and transform an abandoned, deteriorated building into a functional museum.

Two major challenges were overcome during the process -

- substantial structural damage was repaired; and
- the integrity of the building was preserved;

The following are many of the steps included in the restoration of the 301 building.

- **foundations** reinforced with new concrete;
- **building climatized**, 40 tons of air conditioning installed;
- **electrical wiring** system replaced;
- **fire sprinkler** system installed;
- **fumigated** to remove insect infestation;
- **exterior paint steamed** to remove 27 layers of old paint; new paint replicates the original 1936 colors;
- **77 stained glass windows** repaired and protected with hurricane-proof glass;
- window sashes restored;
- new concrete sprayed (guniting) on interior walls;
- interior decorative plaster trim molded and restored;
- ceiling insulated;
- new roof installed;
- copper Moorish dome repaired;
- original Art Deco chandeliers removed, refurbished and re-hung, the largest is suspended 40 feet from the top of the dome;
- Appalachian oak sloping floor replicated and installed;
- women's section in the balcony transformed into administrative offices; separated with glass partitions
- east side exterior ramp and handicapped restroom added to meet codes regarding accessibility for handicapped.

The two-year restoration process was completed in 1995 at a cost of nearly \$2,000,000. The balcony where women sat during worship services was converted to office space with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the Museum floor. The restored structure was topped off by the restoration of its original copper dome as a neighborhood landmark – one that has beckoned and welcomed waves of refugees to the area.

In 1997, the Museum was honored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation for its outstanding contributions to the regentrification of the neighborhood and for restoration of the building.

311 Building:

Miami Beach's first synagogue, the original home of Congregation Beth Jacob, was designed by architect H. Frasser Rose and built in 1928-29 at 311 Washington Avenue for \$25,000. The site was chosen because at the time the synagogue was built, Jews were not permitted to live north of Fifth Street.

Its construction satisfied an urgent need of the small Jewish community of residents and winter visitors who had first settled on Miami Beach in 1913. It established that Jews were accepted and a permanent part of the resident population of the City.

Prior to this, Jews had been denied permission to construct a synagogue. They had to ferry across Biscayne Bay (and later the County Causeway, now the MacArthur Causeway, built in 1920) to attend religious services at B'nai Zion Congregation in Miami. When Orthodox Jews, who do not travel on the Sabbath and high holidays, joined the congregation, they and the winter visitors from Canada and Miami Beach residents held services in the Royal Apartments at 221 Collins Avenue.

In 1924 Malvina Weiss Leibman organized and taught Sunday School classes in a vacant lot on the west side of Washington Avenue north of Third Street.

Beginning in 1926 and during construction of Beth Jacob, services were held on the roof of the David Court Apartments at 56 Washington Avenue, owned by the Granat family. The first rabbi was reportedly Rabbi David Yallow followed by Rabbis Hurowitz, Axelrod and David I. Rosenbloom. Rabbi Moses Mescheloff served the congregation from 1937 to 1955. Subsequent spiritual leaders were Rabbis Akiva Chill, Tibor Stern (1955-65), Shmaryahu T. Swirsky (1965-92) and Moshe Berenholz.

Almost every Jew who was a permanent resident of Miami Beach between 1927 and 1932 was a member and financial contributor to the synagogue. The initial role of the Synagogue as the religious and social center of the Jewish community soon developed into being the Jewish cultural center as well. A Hebrew school was established, scholars, rabbis and cantors were invited and a mikvah (ritual bath for women) was built in 1944 for \$35,000 at 151 Michigan Avenue.

The original building was dedicated on February 17, 1929. The founding officers were Lazarus Abramowitz, President; Jekuthiel Kaplan, Vice President; Morris Abraham, Treasurer; Samuel Guttman, Secretary; and Joseph Tilzer and Harry Levitt, building committee members.

Faced in stucco, the two-story building has a rectangular plan and a gable roof. The central entrance consists of three double doors of simple, vertical panels and large iron hinges of Spanish style. The top of the building façade has a plaque reading “Beth Jacob Congregation, 5689-1929.” The façade is crowned by tablets with the Ten Commandments. Inside, the main hall is two stories in height with an area of 2,453 square feet. The original dark wood bimah was the focal point of the sanctuary.

Being Orthodox, the women sat separately upstairs, with only two sets of windows through which to “peek” down to the main sanctuary. There are two wood staircases to ascend to the women’s section.

By 1936, the congregation outgrew its original facility and constructed the second larger adjacent building for the synagogue at 301 Washington Avenue. Used as a synagogue for 50 years and then abandoned, this was restored and opened as the JMOF in 1995. Both buildings were placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980.

After 1936, the original building was used as the religious school and social hall. A two-story addition of concrete block was built to the east in 1946, containing offices, meeting rooms and classrooms. On the east side of the original structure there were two arched windows that became buried in the walls of this addition.

Towards the end of the 20th century, Beth Jacob Congregation began to dwindle and moved all of its functions back to this original building. Many of its older members died. There were hardly enough members remaining to have a minyan (the ten men required for many parts of the religious services) and in 2005, the congregation went out of business.

That year (2005), the Jewish Museum of Florida purchased the original synagogue (311), their primary space (301), which had been leased, and the parking lot for future expansion. The Museum needed room to enlarge its facilities beyond the confines of the adjacent building it had occupied since 1995. This purchase ensured that the buildings so rich in Jewish history would continue to be preserved and become a repository for the chronology of Florida’s Jews.

The 311 structure underwent a one-year, \$ one million+ restoration by architect and contractor Ira D. Giller and with support from individuals, Miami-Dade County, and the City of Miami Beach.

The former sanctuary on the main level of the building is now a multi-purpose room that houses a second exhibit venue for the Museum and is also used for public programs and special events. Additional Museum staff offices are located upstairs in the former women’s balcony on the west side. The area on the east side of the second floor, which was formerly the synagogue’s classrooms, has become the Collections and Research Center.

The entire building was tented for termites and asbestos was removed. It was wired for new electric service and fire alarm, security and computer systems, ducts installed for the new air-conditioning system, fire sprinkler system and new plumbing provided. Five new restrooms were installed and the two restrooms off the lobby were upgraded, as was the kitchen to accommodate kosher catering for events, school groups and the center court café, which is coming in the next phase.

In the main multipurpose hall that was formerly the sanctuary, three layers of termite-eaten wood floors were replaced with a new oak floor, new hurricane-resistant windows were installed and new lighting and audio-visual systems were put in. The wood bimah was stripped of more than a dozen coats of paint and refinished. New tables, chairs, stage risers and partitions expand the use of the space that at times will host school groups working on art projects and then an organizational luncheon event or public program in the evening. The centerpiece of the hall is a group of four brass/glass antique chandeliers of the period.

In the former women's balcony, the partitions and old air-conditioning ducts were removed and new windows and lighting installed. The original wood staircases and floor were stripped, repaired and refinished. This provides a very functional space for additional staff offices.

For the Collections & Research Center upstairs, new flooring, lighting and walls were put in place and shelving and storage systems were provided to move the archives to their new home that is environmentally controlled and secure. There is space to design exhibits and a small production area.

All new doors were installed throughout the building and all interior and exterior walls got fresh paint; 311 was painted to match 301 and new awnings were installed. A new HVAC 100-ton air-conditioning was installed to service both 301, 311 and the bistro (see next section). The water-cooling tower is the large structure on the roof of 311.

Bessie's Bistro

In 2008, the two buildings were connected by a glass-domed **Bessie's Bistro** in the center court.

ABOUT THE NAME OF THE BISTRO: BESSIE'S:

In 1945, as World War II came to an end, **Bess Myerson** uplifted the mood in the Jewish community when she was crowned Miss America. Never before, and not since, has a Jewish girl received this recognition. Bess, known as the "brainy" Miss America, also won the talent competition. Facing much discrimination during and after the pageant, Bess Myerson became an activist for civil rights. During the 1950s and '60s, she was on several TV shows, then for the next two decades served as a consumer rights and cultural advocate for the City of New York. In 2002 she moved to Florida; she currently resides in California, near her family. In memory of the happy years her parents lived in the neighborhood around the Museum, Bess Myerson donated funds to build the Bistro, and

also gave her archives to the Museum's Collections. Some of this archival material is on display in the Bistro.

This connection phase included removing the existing air-conditioning system that rested between the two buildings and placing a new system on the roof of the newly restored original shul. Then the former exterior walls were cleaned and painted. We installed a new wood floor and glass ceiling to provide the roof. Period fixtures, tables and chairs provide a comfortable social ambiance.

Walls were opened in both buildings to create a walkway so that visitors can go from one to the other, through Bessie's Bistro. The MOSAIC core exhibit was reconfigured to accommodate the opening on the north side of 301 into the bistro. Also there was built an enclosed connection of the east doors of both buildings.

Included in this phase of the project was the expansion of the **Museum Store**, which tripled in size and has even more assorted merchandise.

This entire transformation grew the Museum from 7,200 square feet to nearly 15,000 square feet.

This Museum expansion reflects the need for more space that is a result of the successful growth of the Jewish Museum of Florida. **For Jews**, the Museum instills a **sense of pride** in relating how Jews maintained their heritage and helped contribute to the state's development. This helps ensure Jewish continuity. **For non-Jews**, the Museum traces one ethnic group's immigrant experience as an example of the acculturation process, which helps **diminish bigotry** and prejudice and **enhances understanding and tolerance of living in a diverse ethnic community**.

WE MAKE A POSITIVE DIFFERENCE IN PEOPLES' LIVES BY PRESENTING DIVERSITY AS ENRICHMENT AND BY INSPIRING PEOPLE TO THINK – AND NOW WE HAVE MORE SPACE TO EXPAND THE THINKING!