

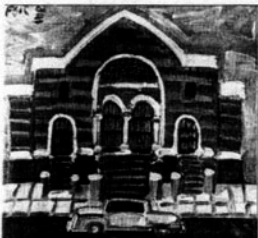
Southern California
LIVING

Jewish Historical Society president Stephen J. Sass, left, and Lucy Delgado, of a Boyle Heights neighborhood group, think the old synagogue can be both a symbol of multicultural harmony and a community center.



ANNE WELLS / Los Angeles Times

A Jewish-Latino alliance hopes to reopen a Boyle Heights temple as a guardian of the area's polyglot past.



Courtesy of Frank Romero



AL SEIB / Los Angeles Times

The Afterlife of an East L.A. Shul

By REED JOHNSON TIMES STAFF WRITER

Neil Diamond prayed here. So did Al Jolson, or at least that's what the old-timers claim. Now, there is mostly just darkness and decay and the indignant ruffling of pigeons, the sole remaining tenants of the Bred Street Shul. As Robert Chatel picks his way through the crumbling Boyle Heights synagogue, flashlight in hand, the scene has the uncanny aura of an archeological dig. Briefly, he illuminates a row of dusty pews engraved with the Star of David. Overhead, a yawning hole spills light onto water-damaged frescoes of zodiac signs, rendered in a whimsical folk-art style. A scattering of wooden tablets inscribed with Hebrew letters suggests the previous owners left this place in a hurry.

It's been barely a half-dozen years since the 1923 building's elderly congregation shut its doors for the last time, surrendering its sanctuary to the El Niño rains and graffiti taggers. But an effort to resurrect the Orthodox synagogue—one of a handful of surviving temples in an area that once boasted dozens of them—already has begun, in a struggle pitting patience and memory against time and indifference.

Seeking to honor a spiritual monument while revitalizing the community around it, an unusual alliance of Jewish and Latino groups is preparing to raise funds for a massive restoration-makeover of the shul. With an eye on posterity, the leading plan is to convert the historic structure into a museum dedicated to the neighborhood's rich, polyglot history. Melding the building's past with its present, the shul also would be retrofitted as a neighborhood cultural center, serving heavily Latino Boyle Heights.

Among those involved in reviving the Bred Street synagogue, or shul—an affectionate, vernacular term meaning a place of prayer and learning—are the Boyle Heights Neighbors Organization, the East Los Angeles Community Corp. and the building's owner, the Jewish Historical Society of Southern California. All joined forces in the late 1990s, shortly after the congregation that had occupied the building for decades disbanded.

"I think the shul really can become the cultural center of the community," says East L.A. native and Boyle Heights activist Elsa Castillas-Cambon, echoing a growing sentiment. "I call it a little jewel that's going to be fixed up and repaired," says Mary Mendoza, a Boyle Heights Neighbors Organization member who has



ANNE WELLS / Los Angeles Times

lived in the area since the 1930s.

For its Jewish sponsors, the challenge is to preserve the shul's historical legacy and architectural integrity while creating a multi-purpose facility that responds to the area's changing demographics. "I think most people know of this Jewish history, the folklore of the community," says Chatel, a preservation architect and board member of the Jewish Historical Society, which secured the title to the synagogue from the city of Los Angeles last July. "The Bred Street Shul is a remnant of that community, and maybe the seed of something that could be there in the future."

At present, that seed is trying to take root in tenuous soil. Located in the heart of East Los Angeles, a few steps from Cesar E. Chavez Boulevard, the shul is a sentimental relic in a neighborhood where incomes are low and crime rates are high. Over the

Photos see SHUL, E3

The Bred Street Shul in splendor days, top left; a painting for a Los Angeles Conservancy banner, featuring the temple; First Lady Hillary Clinton addressing a crowd in front of the 1923

building in a visit two years ago, publicizing its current plight. "I think the shul really can become the cultural center of the community," says Boyle Heights activist Elsa Castillas-Cambon.