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Vol. XXXI, No. 19

May 16, 2008 • 11 Iyar 5768

www.jewishchronicle.org

\$1.25 Per Issue

Emanu-El additions will model 'a synagogue of the future'

By Leon Cohen

of The Chronicle staff

Herzl Spiro, M.D., is a well-known Milwaukee psychiatrist who has been a long-time Jewish activist locally, nationally and internationally.

And he told The Chronicle in a telephone interview Tuesday that the construction of the new additions to Congregation Emanu-El B'ne Jeshurun is "the most exciting Jewish project I've worked on since I worked on [immigrant] absorption in Israel."

Spiro is the current president of the Milwaukee area's oldest congregation, located at 2020 W. Brown Deer Rd., and which now has about 500 member families. He said the building, which is scheduled to be finished by August 2009, will "not just carry on the tradition of building a great space."

"We stand on the shoulders of those who went before us, and no place do you see it more than in the intergenerational life of a synagogue," he said. "Right now, people of all generations are working to create a Jewish community congregational life that will have the quality of that which preceded us since 1856."

Part of the excitement of this building — whose groundbreaking will take place on Sunday, June 1, 10:30 a.m. — involves the innovative features it will have, said Spiro and architect Phillip Katz.

"We conceptualized an American Jewish synagogue of the future," said Spiro. "It will have every traditional feature of a synagogue and features unique to our situation as American Jews."

Friendly to the environment

As Katz described the project in a



Drawing of the planned interior of the new sanctuary of Congregation Emanu-El B'ne Jeshurun. Drawing made and furnished by architect Phillip Katz.

telephone interview, the additions will include a new sanctuary with a mezzanine-balcony; a social hall that will be where the present sanctuary is; a "cardo-style interior street" that "links the new with the existing building"; plus renovated offices and classrooms.

The sanctuary was designed in collaboration with Tobi Kahn, a New York City-based painter and sculptor. He won the Foundation for Jewish Culture's Jewish Cultural Achievement Award in 2004 and in 2007 received an honorary degree from the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Kahn has created individual pieces for synagogues in the past but Emanu-El's project will be the first time he has worked with an architect on a sanctuary, said Spiro.

The sanctuary will include a round window above the ark, in which the *ner tamid* (eternal light) will be perched on a dish atop a Kahn sculpture of a stylized pomegranate, Spiro said.

Moreover, the building will

include eight Kahn paintings set into the sanctuary's walls, said Katz.

Spiro said he has already received "comments from museum directors all over the country about what Kahn is doing" for Emanu-El, saying that Emanu-El "has gone a step beyond where anyone has gone with the form of an American synagogue."

But Kahn's won't be the only creative Jewish works displayed. Plans call for Emanu-El to relocate to the new structure the synagogue's Judaica and art collection, much of which has been in storage for many years; and to display it in cases fit into nooks throughout the building, Katz said.

In addition, the new structure will be constructed to be environmentally friendly and self-sustainable, Katz said. For example, the roof of the interior street will have a garden on it that will reduce storm water runoff and help insulate the area, he said.

The heating-ventilating-air conditioning system will use environmentally friendly technology, he said. For

example, the windows will not only be able to be opened, but will be automated to open and close themselves in response to conditions, Katz said.

Perhaps most distinctive, though, will be the inclusion of a *beit midrash* combined study hall and chapel. As Spiro said, such a space "is not a traditional feature of a Reform synagogue," but to use such a space to "enhance bringing people together to study and apply Torah to Milwaukee Jewish life" is an idea that "all denominations stand as one on."

The construction will cost the synagogue "in the neighborhood of \$10 million," Spiro said. He added that "built into the capital campaign" is fundraising for an endowment for maintenance of the building and funds for new programs.

According to Sara Cherny, chair of the groundbreaking event, the ceremony will include brief speeches by Spiro, spiritual leader Rabbi Marc Berkson, Katz, building committee chair Stacey Kohl, and past-president and co-chair of the building committee (with Spiro) Sandra Kohler Stern.

Spiro also mentioned in the interview that the honorary overall chairs of the campaign steering committee for the project are Sue and Bud Selig.

The event's theme is "Building Community Together," Cherny said. Children from the religious school will be involved in the event, which will include a luncheon.

For more information about the event, the project and the synagogue, call the synagogue's office, 414-228-7545.