New Year, New Look

Beth Ahm’s renovated sanctuary achieves a calming, contemplative place for worship.

Barbara Lewis
Contributing Writer

Members of Congregation Beth Ahm in West Bloomfield will celebrate the New Year in a completely renovated sanctuary.

The sanctuary was built after a fire in January of 1983 destroyed a large part of the synagogue building on Maple Road, west of Inkster. The construction generated interest at the time because Beth Ahm became the only non-Orthodox synagogue in the Detroit area to have its bimah in the center of the congregation rather than at the front of the room.

The sanctuary hadn’t been refurbished since then. The recent effort was the final part of an overall building remodeling process that took nearly 15 years.

Planning for the sanctuary renovation started more than a year ago. The actual work began May 18 and was completed in time for Shabbat services July 25. The sanctuary was formally dedicated on Aug. 22.

Dina Kawer, a photographer and artist from Huntington Woods and a third-generation Beth Ahm member, did the interior design for the sanctuary, as she had for several other congregational spaces, including the chapel, memorial room, social hall and foyer.

Kawer says she approaches any new project by heeding the words of photographer Minor White: “Be still with yourself until the object of your attention affirms your presence.”

“I asked the room what it needed and it told me,” she said, adding that she considers the work “a huge art installation project.”

Jeff Silver, the congregation’s president, said the sanctuary was showing a lot of wear and tear and the color scheme was dated, with peach-colored walls and dark red carpeting that was faded and shabby.

The layout of the room has been preserved, except for the removal of several seats to create new two new aisles on either side of the bimah, said the congregation’s rabbi, Steven Rubenstein. But almost every surface has been changed.

Kawer said the color scheme was partly dictated by the purple metal of the seats, which was not replaced; she also wanted to coordinate with the color of the adjacent social hall, which had been refurbished earlier. The seats were reupholstered in a medium-purple fabric that matches the new carpeting.

Design With Meaning

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She used copper in the door leading to the ark and copper-colored metallic paint elsewhere in the room to recall the copper used in the Temple in Jerusalem.

The walls are painted stone gray but the 60-foot-high cove in the center of the ceiling is an iridescent cobalt blue.

“It’s not only the color of the sky, it represents the heavens, and blue has the psychological effect of allowing for creative and intellectual thought, fitting for this space,” Kawer said, adding that the blue makes the two stained glass windows in the ceiling, because they never looked up, she said.

“As the light changes throughout the day, it changes the feeling in the sanctuary,” she added.

In designing the ark area at the front of the sanctuary, Kawer sought to draw the eye.

“I was very particular about the stone around the ark,” she said. She chose granite quartz, a mineral said to create synchronicity between individuals and the heavens. “It increases spiritual connection,” she said.

Quartz is also connected to the Temple because it was one of the 12 stones in the breastplate of the high priest.

The carved wooden ark doors by Arthur Schneider of Franklin were created after the 1983 fire. Kawer made a new wooden arch to surround them, to recall the “wooden chamber” where the Temple high priest stored his vestments and lived for the week before Yom Kippur.

The $325,000 renovation project was covered by the congregation’s Our Home, Our Future campaign, which has so far raised more than $2.6 million. David Goodman, executive director of the 360 family member congregation, is coordinating the campaign, which includes an endowment component.

“The reaction from the congregation has been very gratifying,” Kawer said. “People are saying that they not only enjoy the aesthetics, but also feel the sanctuary calms them down. That’s pretty cool because that’s what we were hoping for.”

According to Jewish tradition, since the destruction of the Temple, which was regarded as the House of God, the Shechinah (God’s holy presence) goes from synagogue to synagogue, Rubenstein said.

“Where Jews are, God goes,” he said.

“We created a space that’s appropriate for God.”

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Beth Ahm’s newly appointed sanctuary

In front of the ark in Beth Ahm’s sanctuary: Executive Director David Goodman, Rabbi Steven Rubenstein, artist/photographer Dina Kawer and Jeff Silver, Beth Ahm president.

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