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Years After Deadly Shooting, Tree of Life Synagogue Plans a New Beginning

Daniel Libeskind, an architect known for memorializing historical trauma, will turn the site of 11 deaths back into a home for worship as well as a place to learn about confronting hatred.

By Campbell Robertson

PITTSBURGH — For more than two years the Tree of Life — Or L'Simcha synagogue, on a hilltop corner in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh, has sat heavy with memory but empty of worshippers.

Since the morning in October 2018 when a gunman showed up at Shabbat services and killed 11 worshippers, the somber building complex has been by turns a crime scene, a place of mourning and the subject of long, emotional discussions about its future. Slowly, over months of deliberation, the Tree of Life congregation came to decide that the building would be both its home for worship again as well as a commemorative site, a center for communal events and a place for people from all over the world to learn about confronting hatred.

By Tuesday morning, the leadership of the congregation was ready to announce the person chosen to help turn that vision into structure: Daniel Libeskind, the architect known for memorializing historical trauma



photo by Tree of Life

and a son of Holocaust survivors.

“To me, in the end, the most critical thing is not that people stand there with their jaws literally hanging on the ground as they look at it,” Rabbi Hazzan Jeffrey Myers of Tree of Life said. “But

that they can be able to say, ‘Well look what the Tree of Life has accomplished. In the wake of what happened to them, that they could be at this incredible moment.’ And we think Daniel Libeskind’s the one to be able to deliver that.”

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There has been no shortage in recent years of places that once snugly fit into the patchwork of local communities — schools, churches, synagogues, grocery stores — but suddenly became internationally recognized sites of gun violence.

As the acute trauma receded in those places and life in the community mostly resumed, charged conversations have followed about how or even whether to mark what had happened there. Sanctuaries and classrooms have been replaced, but questions linger about how to do justice to memory.

These questions can take years to answer, if they are answered at all. In Newtown, Conn., where 20 first graders and six educators were killed in a mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012, residents voted by a narrow margin to build a memorial only last week.

At some places, like Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C., where nine Black worshipers were killed in 2015, the planned commemorations have tied individual tragedy to a greater struggle against violence and hatred.

The vision at Tree of Life is similar, recognizing there are many overlapping circles of people who feel a stake in the

site: the families of those who were killed, the members of the three congregations that worshiped at the synagogue, the Pittsburgh Jewish community, the city at large, the country as a whole and people, Jewish and non-Jewish, all over the world.

Mr. Libeskind, who in 2003 won the competition to design the World Trade Center site after the Sept. 11 attacks, said strong but often conflicting motivations were familiar in undertakings like these.

“The same range, spectrum of emotions, ran through that project,” he said of the World Trade Center design process. “Many groups, competing groups with different emotions. You know, ‘Raze everything.’ ‘Rebuild even bigger, even taller.’ ‘Rebuild exactly the Twin Towers.’ ‘Don’t build anything for the next 30 years.’”

“That is the range that you get,” he continued. “There are different aspects that people want to remember and to delay and also to confront.”

Mr. Libeskind had been in New York when the attack at Tree of Life occurred. He has designed museums and memorials that commemorate the evils of the Holocaust, but it rattled him deeply, he said, that such an eruption of violent anti-Semitism could take place in America — the country his family had come

to seeking freedom as Jews.

He would soon learn that the suspect had apparently chosen Tree of Life because one of the three congregations that worshiped there, Dor Hadash, had participated in a program for refugees with HIAS. Under its original name as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, the same group had given Mr. Libeskind’s family members financial assistance and helped them rent a home in Bronx public housing when they arrived as immigrants in 1959.

“That struck in my heart,” he said.

In Pittsburgh, the months that followed the attack were filled with grief, condolence and recitations of the mourner’s Kaddish. The wounded began to recover and some worshipers poured their anguish into activism. The gears of the judicial process began to turn, if slowly; the man charged with attacking the synagogue has yet to go to trial. But in those first few weeks were also the beginnings of a delicate conversation about the building itself.

In December 2018, a Pittsburgh urban design firm, Rothschild Doyno Collaborative, began holding a series of listening sessions with members of the three congregations at the synagogue, which had

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been gathering for worship in the smaller chapels of other synagogues in Pittsburgh. Opinions about the future of the Tree of Life building ranged widely, from demolishing it to rebuilding it exactly as it had been to creating something new.

Two of the congregations, Dor Hadash and New Light, decided not to return. But, Rabbi Myers said, a consensus began to form among members of Tree of Life that they wanted to come back.

“As time went on, it became clearer through all of these conversations,” he said, “that the predominance was: We must return. If we don’t, we give the message that evil won, because it chased us out of our building.”

They would refurbish the 58-year-old sanctuary, keeping the tall stained-glass windows that are the synagogue’s most striking feature. But they would rebuild the rest of the campus, creating classrooms, a communal space, a Hall of Memories dedicated to the attack itself and a home for exhibitions

and public programs of the Holocaust Center of Pittsburgh.

The process of selecting an architect began this past winter, with requests sent to nearly a dozen firms. What followed were letters and interviews and conversations with various architectural firms, but Paula Garret, who led the selection committee, said it was quickly drawn to Mr. Libeskind, who wrote of his identity as a European Jew and his belief in American freedom.

“Daniel Libeskind wants to design the Tree of Life building in Pittsburgh?” she said of the committee’s initial reaction.

“We were blown away. But we were also so impressed with his deliberate and sensitive answers. He really, really got the understanding of this vision.”

Mr. Libeskind, who will collaborate on the remodeling with Rothschild Doyno Collaborative, said he planned to visit the site, for the first time, this month. The project will undoubtedly take time, but the congregation is eager

for a permanent home, having been exiled from their building by the shooting and then kept from any physical gatherings at all by the coronavirus.

In an emailed statement, Andrea Wedner, who was shot in the arm that October morning and whose mother, 97-year-old Rose Mallinger, was killed, described the news about Mr. Libeskind as “an exciting next step in this long process of rebuilding.”

“I am looking forward to entering a new Tree of Life building,” Ms. Wedner wrote, “without fear or hesitation.”

Michele Rosenthal’s brothers Cecil, 59, and David, 54, both men with developmental disabilities, met worshippers at the door before services every week.

“They welcomed everyone who came through their doors to share their beloved building,” she said in a statement on Monday. “We are hopeful that this new chapter for the building will be an opportunity to remember those who were taken and welcome more people in.”