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Tree of Life moves toward a fresh start, taps world-renowned architect to oversee redesign

By Katherine Rohloff

Tree of Life / Or L'Simcha Congregation — working with an architect experienced with scenes of historic trauma — plans to preserve and renovate part of its synagogue campus while replacing other sections at the scene of America's deadliest antisemitic attack.

The congregation Tuesday announced the selection of New York-based architect Daniel Libeskind to serve as lead architect on the project and to work in collaboration with Rothschild Doyno Collaborative of Pittsburgh.

Mr. Libeskind, the son of Holocaust survivors, has designed a range of urban projects, including the Jewish Museum in Berlin, and was chosen as the master planner for the post-9/11 World Trade Center site.

"It is with a great sense of urgency and meaning that I join the Tree of Life to create a new center in Pittsburgh," Mr. Libeskind said in a statement. "Our team is committed to creating a powerful and memorable space that addresses the worst antisemitic attack in United States history."

The task includes creating that



photo by Tree of Life

memorial space while also serving as a setting for the congregation's worship along with educational and civic events. Plans are for the space to provide a home for the Holocaust Center of Pittsburgh's exhibits and public programs.

Eleven worshippers were killed when a gunman invaded

the Squirrel Hill synagogue on the Shabbat morning of Oct. 27, 2018. Three congregations sharing the building — Tree of Life, Dor Hadash and New Light — lost members in the attack. Two other worshippers and four police officers were wounded by the attacker, who had spouted

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antisemitic rhetoric online and at the scene and is awaiting trial on numerous charges including violations of hate-crimes laws.

Since the attack, all three of the displaced congregations have been worshipping in space provided by nearby synagogues. Dor Hadash and New Light officials have said their congregations plan to remain at their current sites for the foreseeable future.

Tree of Life's plans include preserving and modernizing its main sanctuary space, which was vacant on the day of the attack. Other parts of the campus, including a smaller chapel and other rooms where the attack took place, are planned for demolition. The historic stained-glass windows from both the chapel and the sanctuary, which depict biblical and historical Jewish themes, are being preserved.

"Core goals for the new Tree of Life campus are to preserve our beloved historic spaces, including the stained-glass windows and iconic structure at the corner of Shady and Wilkins, and to modernize and right-size our sanctuary to serve as a flexible space for worship, celebrations, educational programming and communal events," said Barb Feige, executive director of the congregation. "Mr. Libeskind will also help us create a welcoming,

commemorative space to reflect and remember the horrific events and lives lost on Oct. 27, 2018."

The partnership with the Holocaust Center of Pittsburgh will feature "an innovative and interactive Holocaust exhibit to amplify the historic lessons of the Holocaust and contemporary parallels with antisemitism and hate in our society," she said. "There will also be flexible and modular classrooms, state-of-the-art collaborative and communal space for symposia and conferences and other educational spaces that serve the needs of Tree of Life and our partners."

The Tree of Life congregation last year launched a capital campaign for the project, whose honorary cabinet included actor Tom Hanks, Gov. Tom Wolf and the late Joanne Rogers.

Mr. Libeskind, who was born in Poland, said the Tree of Life project resonates with him personally.

"When my parents, survivors of the Holocaust, and I came as immigrants to America, we felt an air of freedom as Jews in this country," he said. "That is why this project is not simply about 'Never Again.' It is a project that must address the persistence of antisemitism and the intolerance of our time and affirm the democratic values of our country."

Tree of Life Rabbi Jeffrey Myers, a survivor of the 2018 attack, said the collaboration with Mr. Libeskind will mark "the beginning of our efforts to create a *Makom Kodesh*," a Hebrew term for holy place. He envisioned "a safe and sacred space for all who wish to be a part of our community. Our new and reimagined space will not only serve the needs of our congregation but will offer an open space to our neighbors and the broader community — here in Pittsburgh, across the country and around the world."

The announcement of the architectural team is "an exciting next step in this long process of rebuilding," said Andrea Wedner, who was injured in the attack while attending worship with her mother, Rose Mallinger, who was among those killed. "I am looking forward to entering a new Tree of Life building without fear or hesitation."

Daniel Rothschild, senior principal of Rothschild Doyno Collaborative, added: "It is humbling to be trusted and have the opportunity to support this courageous community for which today's announcement is an important step in the healing process. Daniel Libeskind brings a unique perspective to creating meaningful architecture."