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Connecting Jewish Pittsburgh

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Tree of Life building plans presented to public

The new building will be a center for light and a place to fight the scourge of hate-fueled violence, according to Michael Bernstein

By David Rullo



The new Tree of Light building as seen from above with the Path of Light.

Photo provided by West End Strategy

For the first time since last year's announcement that Studio Libeskind would be the lead architect for a reimagined Tree of Life building, community members saw design renderings and were giving the opportunity to ask questions about the project.

The two-hour public meeting held Sept. 22 over Zoom — in advance of a meeting before the city's zoning board at an undetermined future date — featured Squirrel Hill Urban Coalition Executive Director Maria

Cohen; Tree of Life Congregation Rabbi Hazzan Jeffrey Myers; Interim Chair of the recently created Tree of Life nonprofit Michael Bernstein; Rothschild Doyno Collaborative principal Dan Rothschild; and Carla Swickerath, a partner at Studio Libeskind. The meeting was facilitated by the Department of City Planning and hosted by the Squirrel Hill Urban Coalition.

Myers opened the meeting, explaining "the why" of the project. "The mission," he said, "is

to turn the evil of that day into something good. It's not merely an obligation. That's how we see ourselves at the Tree of Life — we have an obligation to build upon the horror of that day."

The aspirations for the new building, he said, are to create something beautiful in the city that will be a point of pride and serve as a place to fight antisemitism and hate.

Bernstein, who, in addition to his work with Tree of Life is also

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on the steering committee for the Eradicate Hate Global Summit held in Pittsburgh earlier this week, said the mission of the new nonprofit is to inspire, engage and enable people to act against antisemitism.

“We’re going to do that first and foremost,” he said, “by ensuring the continuity of Jewish life on this site.”

To achieve that goal, he said, the core of the building will include a sanctuary and a place for Jewish worship.

Bernstein said the new Tree of Life organization, the memorial group representing the victims’ families and the three congregations, and the Holocaust Center of Pittsburgh all have an aligned vision of the project. He noted the new building will be a center for light and a place to fight the scourge of hate-fueled violence.

Sketches of the building, renderings of its footprint in the neighborhood and a floor plan were all presented by Swickerath and Rothschild.

The reimagined space will raze all but the original Tree of Life building that houses the Pervin Chapel.

In addition to the sanctuary, the design features several multipurposes spaces, a social hall, screening room, classrooms, permanent exhibition space, offices and a café.



The new Tree of Light building as seen from above with the Path of Light.
Photo provided by West End Strategy

Swickerath said that “bringing lightness to the dark” and “let there be light” were important themes for the building. To that end, one of the main design elements is a “Path of Light.”

“We’ve created a single entry that will be at the opening of the path welcoming everyone to the building,” Swickerath said. The path will connect all of the various elements of the building, announcing itself on the front of the sanctuary and showing

that the essence of the site has changed.

The original stained-glass windows will be included in the design, whose footprint is smaller than the current building: 41,000 square feet compared to 53,000 square feet.

Outside, a garden and memorial are planned, as are 36 parking spaces, the same number that existed at Tree of Life previously. Negotiations are taking place between Tree of Life and the

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Children's Institute to secure the use of the Institute's parking for heavily attended events on evenings and weekends.

A question-and-answer period followed the initial presentation.

The meeting generated one new piece of information when Rothschild, in response to a question, said that the Holocaust Center of Pittsburgh will not be housed in the new building; rather, its staff will be located at Chatham University on Murray Hill Avenue.

"The way to think about this is that the Holocaust Center isn't a tenant of the building, rather the Holocaust Center is providing programming for the building," Bernstein said. "In terms of programming, education, traveling exhibits, if that's what it takes,

whatever it is, there's the space within the building that will be used."

Shifting from the holy to the mundane, residents expressed concern about parking, street congestion and the size of the building.

Rothschild reiterated the smaller square footage and that the available parking at the new building and at the Children's Institute "will take care of most of that burden."

In response to a question about when the design was expected to be presented to the zoning board, Rothschild expressed hope that it would be before year's end and that, per zoning board requirements, public notices would go out in advance of the

meeting.

The expectation, Rothschild said, is that demolition will begin in the spring of 2023, meaning that construction could start shortly after.

"Boy, that's going to be a day to celebrate," he said.

Asked about the height of the building, Rothschild said that the maximum height allowed in the district is 40 feet. The new building is exactly 40 feet high, with much of the building lower than that. Permitting does allow a building to exceed 40 feet with an ornamental tower. "The path of light, which at its apex sits approximately 12 feet above the building will sit well below the maximum height and will decrease along the length of the building."