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City of Johannesburg
Arts, Culture and Heritage Services

IMMOVABLE HERITAGE INVENTORY FORM

Name of Site: Temple Israel

Other Names (if any):

Stand numbers: Hillbrow 4083, 4084, 4085, 5008

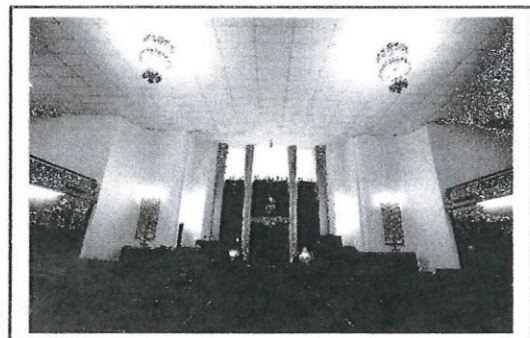
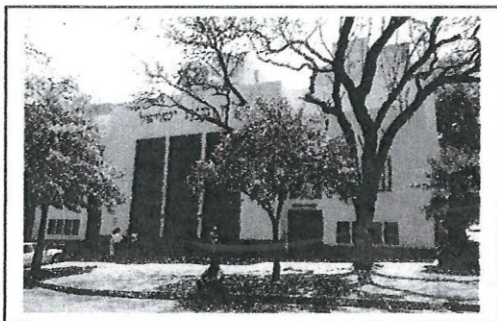
Street Address: Cnr. Paul Nel & Claim Streets, Hillbrow.

District/Province/Region: Johannesburg, Gauteng

Ownership: Temple Israel (Management Committee)

Site Type: Synagogue

Photos



State of Conservation:

Excellent, the site is immaculately maintained.

The building was restored for the 70th anniversary in 2006, when it was re-painted to the original colours, and parquet flooring and wooden paneling in the foyer was fixed and rejuvenated.

Description:

The synagogue is designed in the Art Deco style which was popular in the 1930s. The temple area follows reform tradition by having an elevated or raised bimah with a choir loft above and behind the ark. It has a gallery - but unlike traditional synagogues the gallery was not in order to separate women from men but to provide additional accommodation.

The main building was kept to one side of the land on the prominent eastern corner, to allow as much of the remainder to house hall, school, parking, etc.

The complex houses a library of Judaica including archives of the history of progressive Judaism in South Africa. Being the first Reform synagogue in South Africa, it had to cater for further communities throughout the country by housing a library, archives and other facilities not normally associated with temple design.

History:

South Africa's Progressive movement of Judaism (also known as Progressive Reform Judaism) began in 1930s. Rabbi Moses Cyrus Weiler was the first progressive Jewish Rabbi to arrive in South Africa, sent to Johannesburg in 1933 by the World Union for Progressive Judaism to the movement in Southern Africa. Weiler became the founding Rabbi of Temple Israel, where he served for almost 25 years, and more broadly of the Progressive movement of Judaism in South Africa.

The site in Hillbrow was purchased in 1933 by the Jewish Reform Congregation for the erection of a "Liberal Jewish Synagogue" in Johannesburg, the first in South Africa. The building was designed by the prominent architectural practice of Kallenbach, Kennedy and Furner, and officially opened in 1936.

From its inception, Temple Israel placed strong emphasis on equality between men and women and in 1936 the synagogue established its own temple sisterhood. The women of the Temple Israel sisterhood founded the MC Weiler School in Alexandra as an important outreach programme for assisting disadvantaged children.

The school was officially opened in 1949, and named in honour of Rabbi Weiler. In his book Long Walk to Freedom, Nelson Mandela remarks on the commitment of the United Reform Jewish Congregation to countering the inferior 'Bantu' education offered by the Nationalist government of the day. By 1954 there were 266 pupils, rising to 800 in 1963. The school has continued to grow as part of Temple Israel's ongoing legacy, accommodating over 1 000 learners in 2004. The school exists to this day, supervised by the Sisterhood of the Reform (Progressive) Judaism in South Africa

In 1983 a unit of the ANC's armed wing Umkhonto weSizwe (MK) detonated a bomb outside the synagogue in an attempt to prevent the then State President Marais Viljoen from attending the Temple's anniversary. The attack was carried out at night so that nobody would be injured, but caused extensive damage to the building. Years after the incident, while testifying before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, former MK Special Operations Director Abubaker Ismail apologized to the Jewish community for the attack.

During its heyday, services at Temple Israel attracted large crowds. As there was barely enough space to accommodate all the congregants, services were at times extended to the Skyline Hotel. Since the 1980s, faced by the decline of the area and an exodus of Jews, Temple Israel experienced sharply dwindling numbers. The shul has nevertheless stayed open for Jews remaining in Hillbrow and surrounding areas.

Statement of Significance:

Temple Israel holds an important place in the history of the Jewish community as the first Reform Synagogue in South Africa. The founding of the shul in 1936 marked the beginning of Progressive movement within Judaism. The construction of Temple Israel paved the way for the expansion of the movement in South Africa. Currently there are nine such congregations active in South Africa which trace their roots to the Mother Synagogue of Reform Judaism established in Hillbrow. The site is strongly associated with the founder of progressive Judaism in South Africa, Rabbi M.C. Weiler. Under Section 3 (7) of the National Heritage Resources Act, 1999, Temple Israel is a site of cultural significance by virtue of:

- i). its strong or special association with the a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons;
- ii). its strong or special association with the life or work of a person, group or organization of importance in the history of South Africa;
- iii). its possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of South Africa's cultural heritage; and
- iv). its potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of South Africa's cultural heritage.

Legal Status (Decree/Act):

General Protection: Section 34 (1) Structures under the National Heritage Resources Act, 1999.

Authority Responsible:

Temple Israel, Management Committee

Use:

Place of Worship.

A pre-school for children from the surrounding area operates on the property.

Previous

Current

Documentation/Research

Photos ☒ Maps ☐ Site Plans ☐ Others.....

Source(s) of Information:

1. Christina Gallagher. Standing Testament to Time: the Temple Israel in Hillbrow is a Haven to its Last Few Congregants. The Star, 19 August 2006.
2. Tribute to Temple Israel, Mother Synagogue of the South African Progressive Movement: Celebrating 70 Years. Johannesburg: South African Union for Progressive Judaism, 2006.
3. 21st Anniversary: United Jewish Reform Congregation of Johannesburg: 1933 – 1934 Souvenir Brochure.

Name & Address of Recorder:

Eric Itzkin. City of Johannesburg Dept. of Arts, Culture and Heritage, no. 2 President Street, Joburg Newtown Building, Newtown. P.O. Box 517, Newtown, 2113.

Position:

Deputy Director: Immovable Heritage

Signature

Date

2 February 2007