

A new home for Palo Alto's Jewish Community Center

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Posted: 08/17/2009 12:00:00 AM PDT

Updated: 08/17/2009 04:51:50 AM PDT

For nearly 50 years, Palo Alto's Jewish Community Center has been wandering. It opened in a church in 1960, then moved to a series of vacant school buildings before it found a permanent home in the new, \$300 million Taube Koret Campus for Jewish Life, which opens next month on the city's eastern edge.

At last, a space of its own. And oh, what a space it is.

Sunny courtyards, palm and pomegranate trees, gleaming rows of the latest in fitness machines.

There will also be a teen center, a preschool, a performing arts center and a swimming pool/water park that will become a kind of birthday-party heaven.

And sprinkled throughout the campus, above the hubbub, 193 apartments for seniors, who will be able to join in the activities. Or, if they prefer, they can sit on their balconies and watch the kids playing, or a wedding in the courtyard below or the sun setting over the distant Santa Cruz Mountains.

"The goal was to create a village, an intergenerational campus," said Alan Sataloff, CEO of the JCC. "Folks can walk outside and say, 'Gee, I'm part of something here.' "

A long time coming

The campus was still deserted when I toured Friday, so I had to imagine the crowds. Like a lot of Palo Altans, I had been dying to see the place. For two years, we watched it being built on 8.5 acres that once housed Sun Microsystems, near the San Antonio ramp to Highway 101.

The project has been in the works since 2001. The JCC was kicked out of its most recent home a couple of years before that, when the school district decided to reopen Terman Middle School. After considering other places to rent, its leaders decided enough with the nomadic life. Joining forces with the San Francisco-based Jewish Home, the JCC bought the Sun property, a contaminated brownfield, for a new community center and senior housing.

After years of planning, environmental cleanup and fundraising, it broke ground in 2007. As it took shape, we were all taken aback by the size of it. That's because all we could see from the corner of San Antonio and Charleston roads was a looming box that became the project's performing arts center.

Opinionated locals were quick to call it ugly, a fortress, a monstrosity, an affront to the community. I asked Randy Popp of Steinberg Architects if his feelings were hurt.

"Architecture is meant to evoke an emotional response," he answered gamely. "Good buildings cause people to react."

In that case, this is one good building.

A big-city feel

Popp insists that in time, folks will come to love the

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theater building, once the landscaping grows up to soften it. I actually like its dramatic, big-city feel, but architecture is a matter of taste. It's not like the neighborhood was so gorgeous before. It's surrounded by gas stations and tacky commercial.

"San Antonio Road is really just a freeway off ramp," Popp said. "We have created a parkway, with rows of trees. The cultural hall is the crescendo at the end of the parkway."

I agree with Popp. Once people go inside the campus, I think they will appreciate the design. Constrained by the city's 50-foot height limit and the location in a flood plain, which means no underground garages, the architects managed to squeeze 450,000 square feet of energy-efficient buildings onto the site. Yet the place has an open, airy feel with a stunning view of the hills from the terrace on top of the theater.

Sataloff stressed that the campus will serve the whole community, not just the Jewish community. The current JCC membership is about 50 percent Jewish. The preschool, fitness center, apartments and other facilities will be open to everyone.

The official grand opening is Oct. 18, but the JCC plans to be open for business Sept. 1. On Friday, as electricians and carpenters were putting finishing touches on the buildings, and moving crews were delivering furniture, anticipation was in the air.

"We're all so excited, after all this time," Sataloff said, "to feel the place coming alive."

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