



ARCHITECTURE

EHLINGER & ASSOCIATES

FIRST QUARTER 2008



Tránsito Sinagoga

This issue's limited edition print is of a sketch of what is now called the Transito Synagogue, Toledo, Spain or in Spanish: Tránsito Sinagoga, Toledo, España. This synagogue was originally built as a private Sephardic rite synagogue by Samuel Halevi Abulafia, ca. 1350-60, as it was originally attached to Abulafia's house (which has since been destroyed) and there are inscriptions on the walls which also indicate that originally it was private. As such, it probably didn't have a name as a synagogue then. Abulafia was the treasurer to King Pedro the Cruel of Castile, who had him killed shortly after the synagogue was completed, some say out of the King's envy and anger at Abulafia for the lavishness of this synagogue.

King Pedro ruled until 1369, and was succeeded by King Ferdinand, who was married to Queen Isabella. King Ferdinand gave the building to the Order of Calatrava, a monastic group of Spanish knights similar to the English and French Knights Templar. The knights named it San Benito (see discussion below). By the late 18th century, it was no longer used as a church, but as an oratory dedicated to Nuestra Señora del Tránsito (Our Lady of the Assumption). The Transito name has been somehow retained, even though the building has

been re-converted into a synagogue and a museum by the government of Spain (one of only a few in the entire country).

As you recall, Ferdinand and Isabella financed Columbus' voyages of discovery of the new world, and also defeated and kicked out the

Moors from the Iberian peninsula, after which they also then decided to get rid of the Jews. The Jews were told to convert, leave or die in a proclamation by the Crown in 1492. At that time Spain was 1/3 Jewish, with a total population of about 6 million. Many Jews left for Portugal (where they were subsequently also told to leave), Africa, Istanbul, Greece and the middle east. Many were converted, and became "new Christians" or "Conversos". Derisively they were also known as "marranos" (Spanish / Castillian for pigs, and Hebrew for bitter). In Catalan they were called "Chuetas", a play on words as it means pork chop, which the Jews now ate to prove conversion, and the Catalan name "Jueta", pronounced almost the same, meaning "little Jew".

The Inquisition, which started in France, spread to Spain because many Jews continued the practice of the Jewish religion in secret (Catholics by day and in public, Jews at night and in secret), having been forced to convert. People were encouraged to inform on them — assets were seized, trials were held, people

were tortured and put to death. If innocent, one didn't get one's property back. While being accused, the Judaizers were forced to wear "The San Benito", which was a crude scratchy cloth - a hair shirt propounded by the Order of the Calatrava, and also the name of the converted church building. Some irony for this synagogue!

The Sephardic synagogues of Iberia were similar in concept and in plan in many respects. The exteriors were very simple stone and or brick with tile roofs and small high windows. The belfry over the entry was added when the building was converted to a church. The interior consisted usually of one large, lavishly decorated room for worship, with an Ark, here a niche in the east wall, probably covered with wooden doors, and a bimah in the center. There was a separate upper gallery for the women, here on top of the vestibule type entry. To the north is an enclosed courtyard.

The lavish decoration of the walls consisted of Mudéjar (pronounced 'moo-DAY-har) plaster, a type of formed or carved plaster with very intricate geometric patterns that was developed by craftsmen/artists in Spain during the time of the Moorish occupation. Mudéjar ornament was



used in Islamic, Jewish and Catholic places of worship throughout this period of time.

Most of the Christian items that were placed in the Transito, were removed by the government when it was first converted to a museum in the 1960s, and completely so by the 1990s when it was rededicated as a synagogue. It has no regular congregation, but does in fact look like the monument to Judaism that it is.

Ladd P. Ehlinger, AIA

Magic Foam: Extreme Conditions

A while back, I had written about the



closed-cell polyurethane insulating foam that I'd sprayed in my attic. I'd chosen to use this material because the roof deck of the attic in the main house was tongue and groove planking, with most of them missing the tongue and groove. During hard rains, water could blow in under the shingles and leak into the house. The closed-cell insulation is waterproof, and filled all of the cracks, preventing leaks as well as insulating the house. After two years, it had paid for itself in reduced power bills, allowed the attic to be used during any season, and prevented any number of spot leaks around the house. I was quite pleased with it.

Unfortunately, about 6 weeks ago, there was a fire in my house. It started in the kitchen, which was in an enclosed garage, attached to the side of the house. I hadn't used the foaming insulation in this part of the house, as it wasn't easily accessible without tearing out the ceiling. The fire started at the stove (the dog turned it on somehow), and quickly spread through the ceiling of the entire

addition.

Now, the attic from the addition was open to the attic of the main house. Where it was attached, from the floor of the attic to about 2 feet up where the addition's roof attached, was open to the main attic, so flames were entering the attic of the main house directly without having to burn through anything.

Above this connection, the gable wall of the main attic was only partially sprayed



with the foam, as I'd planned to remove the vent and replace it with a window. This area was completely charred to a crisp.

Where the foam was sprayed,

though, was very surprising. I would have expected the foam itself to catch fire and act as a fuel source, but that's not what happened. While the flames clearly entered the attic to a depth of about 10 feet, none of the roof caught fire. Instead, the foam appears to have bubbled away - literally evaporated, rather than catch fire. This evaporation kept the wood joists and decking from catching fire, protecting it and the rest of the house. The foam had evaporated to a depth of about 3 feet from the outside wall, and some of the rafters were charred on the edges that the foam didn't cover, but clearly hadn't burned through.

Even though the fire and smoke damage were bad enough to call the house a total loss afterwards, the damage could have been far worse. Most of the contents in the main house were recoverable, but everything in the addition was destroyed. Fire fighters arrived within 5 minutes of being called, and the fire could only have been going for a 1/2 hour at the most, but I'm convinced if it weren't for the foam, it would have spread

through the entire house before they arrived.

Even though I may never have a personal use for the closed-cell foam again, it's now even higher up on my list of recommend

products. I will be using the open-cell version of the foam in my new house; not just for insulation value, but now also for safety.

R. Perrin Ehlinger, AIA