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Where checked in on the restoration of Historic Ebenezer Baptist Church, where Martin Luther “Daddy” King and his son, Martin Luther King Jr., both pastored.

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK



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non-hazardous replacement tiles were special ordered and manufactured. “Custom-made is fairly typical in projects like this,” says Turner.


All of the church’s stained-glass windows were removed in October 2008 and transported to Lynchburg, Va., where specialists at Lynchburg Stained Glass cleaned, re-leaded and waterproofed the windows, extending their lifespan by an estimated 100 years.

How to best protect the windows was “an interesting discussion,” says Turner. “What’s typically done is to put a protective glass over the windows—you’ll often see a layer of plexiglass put on. But we knew that when Martin Luther King Jr. preached those windows were operable: We found a picture of him preaching where the bottom of the windows were open to let air and daylight in. We thought it would be important to be able to do that, to ensure the space had the same look and feel as it did when he was there.”

The restoration team debated the pros and cons, and ultimately made a decision its members considered best for historic accuracy as well as future preservation. “What we found after studying it and discussing it was that protective glazing can really trap moisture and that the window would be healthier without a piece of plexiglass,” says Turner. Security will guard against vandalism, which has thankfully not traditionally been a problem at this valued historic site.

When it’s once again open to the public, visitors to Ebenezer Baptist Church may notice the fresh-painted walls, not often an attention-grabber. “The wall color in the church sanctuary is a fairly intense shade of pink, which is not what you would expect at all,” says Turner. “But the National Park Service conducted paint analysis and that was the color when Martin Luther King Jr. was there, and so it’s been returned to that color. I saw it for the first time a couple of weeks ago and thought it was lovely, but it’s certainly not what you’d expect.” In more recent years, the walls had been white.

The restoration brings treats to the ears as well as the eyes. The organ has been completely restored. “It’s back to working order,” says Turner, “and will be used at special ceremonies.” That’s something to look forward to hearing next Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.

For more information, visit www.nps.gov/malu/index.htm. 

Ebenezer Baptist Church played a major role in Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s life: It’s where he was baptized, delivered his first sermon, co-pastored during the 1960s, and was eulogized during his April 9, 1968, funeral service. Though the church was originally founded in 1886 during the Reconstruction Era in the South, it is because of its significance in Dr. King’s life and its long association with the King family that the Auburn Avenue building is now a National Historic Site maintained by the National Park Service that ranks among Atlanta’s most popular heritage tourism attractions.

In 2001, funded by a Save America’s Treasures grant and other contributions, the National Park Service began a two-phase, multi-million dollar restoration of Ebenezer Baptist Church. “The building is being restored back to the 1960-1968 period when Martin Luther King, Jr. preached in the church,” says Susan Turner, principal at Lord, Aeck & Sargent Architecture, who is doing the renovation.

During the \$1.9 million Phase I of the project, the building’s major systems—including mechanical, electrical, plumbing, fire protection, heating and air conditioning—were replaced. The appearance of the sanctuary and fellowship hall is the focus of the approximately \$4.4 million Phase II. Work is expected to be complete in the spring of this year.

“The last thing we’re preparing is the installation of elevators and ramps in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act,” said David Ates, National Park Service project manager.

Four different locations have housed the Ebenezer congregation since it was initially founded. Constructed over a seven-year period, the Late Gothic Revival-designed building on Auburn Avenue was completed in 1922. By the time the current project is complete, all of the building surfaces will have been restored including the exterior masonry, stained-glass windows, sidewalk, balcony, walls, baptismal pool, pews, altar and organ.

Historic restoration presents special challenges. “I think one of the biggest challenges is the fact that we are restoring a building that was built in 1914 back to its 1960 appearance,” says Turner. “Because of that, a lot of things that had been done to the building over the first half of the 20th century were in fact important features to retain—types of things that we might normally look at as too modern and remove. For instance, there were vinyl asbestos, 9- by 9-inch floor tiles. They had to be removed, since they’re hazardous, but in this instance we had to come back and replicate them. It’s a challenge to find materials that are obsolete!” Since there was no product readily available on the market,