

Renovated Nariman House opens after 6 yrs, with its 26/11 scars intact

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Mumbai : Nariman House, the centre for the Jewish Chabad-Lubavitch movement in Mumbai, which was one of the main targets during the 26/11 terror attacks, is a far more fortified place today. The building, which houses the Chabad House that re-opened after six years Tuesday, has been restored using interwoven fabric of kevlar and glass.

Known for its strength, the technology is extensively used for manufacturing defence equipment such as bullet-proof jackets, helmets and bunkers. "It will not let the building fragment and fall in case of an attack similar to 26/11," says Shailesh Mahimtura of Mahimtura Consultants, the Mumbai-based architecture firm that restored the building.

Parts of Nariman House had suffered severe structural damage during the 2008 attacks, especially the columns on the ground floor and the fifth and sixth floors where the blasts occurred. Carbon kevlar, along with concrete and steel, has helped upgrade the beam strength by 50 per cent. The other option would have been to pull down the structure, but the leaders of the Jewish community were keen on restoring the place for its symbolic importance," Shailesh says.

Shailesh's team first visited Nariman House two months after the attacks. A few months were spent making the structural drawings since none were available. It took another two months to obtain permissions from the BMC, which, says Shailesh, was keen to help restore the structure. Following the repairs, his wife Shahnaz, also an architect, took over the interiors.

Tucked in a narrow lane lined by general stores, a temple and a few residential buildings, the six-storey structure wore a festive look Tuesday afternoon. However, beneath the layers of flowers and satin was visible the damage suffered by the gunfire and blasts exchanged between the terrorists and the armed forces. Amidst sections of the freshly-painted walls are portions of exposed brick and ripped plaster.

Parts of the ground-floor entrance, the narrow staircase that leads up to the terrace, and the first, second and third floor have been refurbished. The first floor has been made into a kitchen and dining area where kosher meals will be served, the second accommodates a place for worship and the third floor has been converted into a hall that can be used for religious and community events. A mikveh, a pool for ritual bathing, is being planned on the ground floor. The centre, committed to the service of Jews in India and abroad, will also house a museum dedicated to Rabbi Gavriel Holtzberg and wife Rivka who lost their lives in the terror attack. The remaining three floors of Nariman House have been designated to this museum. The walls on the fifth and sixth floors will retain the the damage that was wrought, keeping the numerous bullet holes intact. On the second floor, too, amidst the freshly-coated walls, the spot where the Rabbi was shot dead by the terrorists, stands untouched.

"We do not want to whitewash history. We want to keep certain parts the way the terrorists had left it. Our aim is to provide the world a perspective that there is hope and that a candle can light up a dark room," says Rabbi Israel Kozlovsky, who is continuing Rabbi Holtzberg's work in Mumbai with wife Chaya.

Apart from the museum, the Chabad international team is also working on building a memorial in remembrance of all the lives that were lost during the terror attacks across Mumbai.

According to Nick Appelbaum, of Ralph Appelbaum Associates, New York, which is also working on the museum and memorial project alongside the Mahimturas. "The memorial will be the first-of-its-kind in India, wherein the names of every individual who perished in the attacks will be inscribed on it." The memorial will be built on the terrace.

Rabbi Moshe Gourarie, who is also working on the museum and memorial project, said the museum will provide an insight into Jewish life, culture and living through an audio-visual. The fifth floor will be recreated as the house of the late Rabbi and will be a walk-in experience on Jewish culture and tradition. Chabad International is responsible to raise funds for both the museum and memorial, which is said to be approximately \$2.5 million.

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