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**STAGE 2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL
INVESTIGATION**

**CONGREGATION MOSHCISKER
CHEVRAH GUR ARYE MIKVAH**

**308 East Third Street (Block 372, Lot 27)
Borough of Manhattan
New York County, New York**

Prepared For:

UJA Federation of New York
130 East 59th Street
New York, New York 10022

Prepared By:

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December 2003

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CONGREGATION MOSHCISKER CHEVRAH GUR ARYE MIKVAH

308 East Third Street (Block 372, Lot 27)
Borough of Manhattan
New York County, New York

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INTRODUCTION

On November 25, 2003 CITY/SCAPE: Cultural Resource Consultants completed a Stage 2 Archaeological Data Recovery Excavation of an early 20th century mikvah feature located on the Block 372, Lot 27 site, located at 306-312 East 3rd Street, Borough of Manhattan, New York County, New York. (Map 1)

In the absence of Stephanie Roberg-Lopez, Principal Investigator, Dr. Celia Bergoffen, RPA, supervised the archaeological fieldwork. On-site investigators included Gail Guillet and James Kennedy. Surveying and computer generation of maps and diagrams was completed by James Kennedy. The final report was completed by Stephanie Roberg-Lopez. Photographs were completed by Gail Guillet and James Kennedy.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

In May of 2003, a Stage 1B Archaeological Field Reconnaissance Survey of the Block 372, Lot 27 site located and identified a tiled bath feature on the southeastern boundary of Lot 27 approximately 60 feet from the East 3rd Street boundary. This locus had been tested as part of an overall trenching pattern used to locate and identify features over a four lot expanse on Block 372. The bath feature locus was identified on the 1903 Sanborn Map as a small 1-story surface structure, however it's nature and use was unknown. (Map 2) Once the backhoe opened this locus, a tiled wall emerged and the crew proceeded to hand excavate the feature. As work progress, a 7' by 10' bath with a set of marble steps was exposed. At this time, the feature was identified as a possible ritual bath (a mikvah). (See Photos & Photo Disc)

The excavation team was greatly aided during the Stage 1B investigation by the presence of Dr. Celia Bergoffen, who has excavated the only mikva bath feature in New York City to date. With the aid of Dr. Bergoffen, the crew examined the three exposed sides of the bath feature for a smaller, simple water basin or cistern. The dirt pile excavated from the bath feature by the backhoe hampered the exploration of the west side of the feature, but it was the impression of the field investigators that no such feature was present. This basin or cistern and the pipe connecting it to the bath are common associated features, and its presence would have greatly aided in making a firm identification of the tile bath as a mikva. Since the small basin and connecting pipe were not found, identification of the feature remained inconclusive.

Based on the results of the Stage 1B Archaeological Field Reconnaissance Survey, the Landmarks Commission of New York requested that further investigations be undertaken on the level of a Stage 2 Data Recovery Excavation. In preparation for the Stage 2 excavation, CITY/SCAPE: Cultural Resource Consultants undertook further

research on the history, form and usage of mikvahs in North America. The specific history of Lot 27 was examined beyond the level of the assessment data, with the result that it was learned that there had been a synagogue at 308 East 3rd Street, increasing the probability that the feature was, in fact, a mikva.

The building located at 308 East 3rd Street was described in public documents as a three-story brick structure with a basement and a passage into the rear yard located at the west side of the building. In the 1854 *Doggett's New York City Street Directory* lists Richard Evans, surgeon, Richard Gordon, William Forse, and James Ross as the occupants of the building. The assessment records indicate that between 1839 and 1892 Tigh Davy or the Estate of Tigh Davy was the owner of 308 East 3rd Street.

The 1903 Sanborn insurance map indicates that a second dwelling had been built at the rear of the lot and a 1-story structure mid-lot that hugged the eastern property line. (See Map 2) One-story structures of this type have been associated with school sinks, communal toilet facilities shared by the occupants of the house, or houses located on the lot. By 1911 the Bromley map of Block 372 indicated that the building at the front of the lot remained as it had in 1903, but changes had been made in the rear lot that suggest that the building (now shown as a 1-story brick structure) had been enlarged, incorporating the footprint of the 1-story structure seen on the 1903 map. The 1914 Bromley map of the project area, which is included in this report, shows the same configuration. (Map 3) This configuration for the lot appears to have remained until the demolition of the structures within the project area.

RESEARCH CONCERNING THE TILED BATH FEATURE

The research undertaken for the Stage 1A Literature Review and Sensitivity Analysis did not reveal the presence of a synagogue on Lot 27, but upon examining Oscar Israelowitz's *Lower East Side Tourbook* it was learned that in 1921 there were more than 500 synagogues in the Lower East Side, including Congregation Moshcisker Chevrah Gur Arye which was located at 308 East 3rd Street. According to Israelowitz "Sometimes five or more small congregations were housed in one tenement building" (Israelowitz 1998:80). Although we were aware from the map research that a synagogue was located on the north side of East 3rd Street to the west of the project area, the presence of a synagogue at 308 East 3rd Street was unexpected.

To examine the issue of whether the tile feature uncovered on 308 East 3rd Street was a mikvah, CITY/SCAPE: Cultural Resource Consultants contacted the Eldridge Street Synagogue in Manhattan, which had undertaken an excavation on Allen Street of a possible mikvah associated with its congregation, and the Jewish Historical Society of Maryland in Baltimore, Maryland. We had learned that the Jewish Historic Society of Maryland had excavated a series of historic mikvahs in the basement of their building on Lloyd Street. Avi Decter, Directory of the Jewish Historical Society of Maryland, was

particularly helpful, providing an article describing ritual baths from *Encyclopedia Judaica*, and the names of other persons to be contacted, one of whom was Garry Stone, Ph.D., a historical archaeologist, who had acted as a consultant to the Lloyd Street Synagogue project. Dr. Stone provided his Field Notes for the Lloyd Street Synagogue excavation (Stone 2001), which will be referred to below. The initial Stage 1A report on the Allen Street mikvah, written by Dr. Celia Bergoffen, was also consulted. That report and the article in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* have been relied on in the preparation of the material below.

It is not clear when the earliest mikvahs were constructed, but it is clear that one existed by the time of the first Temple in Jerusalem. In this case the mikvah, referred to as the Sea of Solomon, was for the purification of the Temple priest and those entering the Temple. According to the *Encyclopedia Judaica* there were special supervisors, who were responsible for the "... construction, validity, the measurements, and the cleanliness of the mikva'ot. (*Encyclopedia Judaica* 1971:1542). It is reported that there were many mikvahs on the Temple Mount and the Mount of Olives and that, even in times of great stress, the laws of ritual cleanliness were scrupulously adhered to by all (*Encyclopedia Judaica* 1971:1544). The excavations of mikvahs in places such as Masada has led to the conclusion that the Jewish people have remained faithful to the prototype established in the time of the Second Temple, which was then carried into Italy, Germany, Bohemia, Lithuania, Poland and other places (*Encyclopedia Judaica* 1971:1544). In the Middle Ages there were mikvahs that have been described as subterranean buildings, reached by a series of steps leading down to the level of the mikvah itself, which was then entered by a set of steps. The important issue was that the mikvah was to contain sufficient water for a person to immerse himself or herself. Men, as well as women, were expected to regularly immerse themselves in the mikvah; in the case of men to purify themselves before Sabbath or an important Holy Day, such as Yom Kippur, or after coming into contact with the dead or someone who was impure; in the case of women, the primary occasion for immersion in a mikvah was at the end of their menstrual cycle, when they had to be cleansed of the impurity of the menstrual blood. Immersion in the mikvah would be typical for an Orthodox bride and also for the convert. It is important to understand that the immersion in the mikvah is not a process of physical cleaning, but rather a spiritual one.

Despite the sense from the material presented above that the construction of the mikvah and its operation were closely regulated, the *Encyclopedia Judaica* notes:

The views of the halakhic authorities in all generations differed with reference to many details of the mikvah. From this stemmed the great difference in the ways of buildings and in the systems of installation. Modern technology demands solutions of many problems, such as the permissibility of the use of reinforced concrete, porous concrete for the trough of validation, floor tiles to prevent leaking of the water. In every generation the authorities of each generation have delved deeply into the sources of the halakhah and its reasons, and from them have come to clear decisions for the planner and

builder, leaving extensive scope for his imagination and his ability to coordinate halakhjah with technology. (Encyclopedia Judaica 1971:1544)

From this we can see that, even in an Orthodox community such as the Lower East Side in the late 19th and early 20th century, there would have been variation in the construction and operation of the many mikvahs that must have been present.

Although the presence of a mikvah is an indispensable part of any Orthodox community, little documentation of the number and location of these features have been undertaken. The excavation of the mikvah on Allen Street was an event of great moment to the Eldridge Street Synagogue community just because so little is known. Recently a turn-of-the-century mikvah at 311 East Broadway has been refurbished by Rabbi Beryl Feinstein, but with the dispersion of the Orthodox Jewish community from the Lower East Side and the closing of the many Russian and Turkish style baths, many mikvahs have disappeared or fallen into disuse. Dr. Bergoffen reported in 1997 that, although she knew that such things had existed, she was unaware of any surviving tenement basement mikvahs or Russian-Turkish baths containing mikvahs (Bergoffen 1997:2). It is not our purpose here to describe in detail the work of Dr. Bergoffen, which is on file at the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, but rather to briefly outline the ritual requirements for a mikvah and to compare them with the feature found at 308 East 3rd Street.

According to the *Encyclopedia Judaica* a properly constituted mikvah must meet a number of criteria, but principally it must contain sufficient water for a person to immerse themselves, the purpose of the immersion being, as noted above, not physical, but spiritual cleanliness. The mikvah pool may not have the character of a container, but must be constructed so that it is in direct contact with the ground or be an integral part of a building that is attached to the ground (Bergoffen 1997:49). The water that fills the mikvah must also be pure. Ideally, the water would be spring water, but in New York City it would most likely have been either rain water or snow collected in a specially constructed cistern or reservoir. The cistern or reservoir, located adjacent or close to the pool, provided a place for the pure water to be stored before it was let into the mikvah. Having been collected and stored, the water must enter the mikvah from this container (reservoir/cistern) through a clay pipe or a metal pipe that is laid in the earth. It was not necessary for the entire mikvah to be filled with the pure water, but only a portion. After a certain percentage of pure water had been added to the mikvah, it could then be filled with any kind of water, which was rendered ritually clean by the presence of the pure water. According to the law, the mikvah should not have a drain (which would make it into a container), so to clean the mikvah the water was to be siphoned out and then replaced by new pure water.

The drawing of the mikvah included in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* shows a tiled structure, similar in terms of dimensions and general arrangements with that found at 308 East 3rd Street, that was entered by a several steps located on one side of the pool. (Fig. 1) The pool at East 3rd Street was 7' by 10', but according to Avi Decter and a person at the

Jewish Theological Seminary, there are no ritually prescribed dimensions for a mikvah; however, the size may have been dictated by common usage. The total dimensions of the mikvah can be assumed; but in the course of demolishing the building at 308 East 3rd Street the top of the pool was ripped off, one part of it being found several feet to the southwest. As noted above, despite our best efforts, no evidence of the cistern or reservoir adjacent to the pool was found. The extent of the destruction of the walls, particularly on the west side of the tiled feature, may be the reason that the field investigators were unable to locate either the cistern or the pipe that carried the water from the cistern into the mikvah.

While we did not find the cistern or the pipe, the field investigators did locate a drain in the bottom of the pool. Ideally the pool should have been drained by siphoning rather than by a drain, but keeping in mind the fact that there was quite a bit of leeway in how the laws were interpreted, it was Dr. Bergoffen's opinion that in the early 20th century, the presumed date of construction for this mikvah, drains would have been the usual practice. The presence along the edge of the bottom of the pool of some type of mastic may indicate that the pool had some leakage problems. The edge of the pool was patterned, and in the center of the floor was a Star of David. The presence of the Star of David was considered by the field investigators as a definitive indication, despite some apparent "ritual" irregularities (i.e., the drain and lack of cistern and connecting pipe), that this feature was a ritual bath, or mikvah.

The mikvah, presumably associated with the synagogue located at 308 East 3rd Street, it is one of two such features that have been excavated in the City of New York. For this reason, CITY/SCAPE: Cultural Resource Consultants painstakingly measured and photographed the feature and its decorative elements in an effort to preserve a complete record of our excavation and our findings.

PROJECT AREA DESCRIPTION

The project area is located in Block 372, Lot 27 in the Lower East Side, Borough of Manhattan, New York County, New York. (See Map 1) The block is bounded on the west by Avenue C, on the north by East 4th Street, on the east by Avenue D, and on the south by East 2nd Street. Lot 27 is identified as 308 East 3rd Street, but before the consolidation of the lots it was identified as 306-312 East 3rd Street (Lots 26-29). The lot is currently vacant.

The project proposes to construct affordable housing and associated open space on the lot. At this time the site is an asphalt-covered rectangle bisected by chain link fence and surrounded by buildings and more chain link fence.

SITE GEOLOGY AND HISTORY

In a larger context the site is located within the New England Upland, a geophysical zone which includes the Manhattan Prong. The Manhattan Prong is a geological formation consisting largely of schists and gneisses that forms the underlying foundation of New York City. The project area is a level expanse located in an urban setting that is now primarily commercial and residential structures. The site elevation above sea level varies from 13 feet at the northeast corner (Avenue D intersection) to 16 feet at the northwest corner (Avenue C intersection). As of 1874, Viele's *Topographical Atlas* indicates that the eastern end of Block 372 was salt marsh with the western end identified as meadow. A low hill stood mid-block. As indicated in the Stage 1A Literature Review, several water courses formerly ran through this area, with one stream cutting diagonally across former Lot 29 (312 East 3rd Street). This stream marked the boundary between several parcels of farm land, including the east Delancy Farm in which the project area is located. Drainage would have been to the east into the East River.

The specific soil profile of sediments underlying the site is undocumented, but can be assumed to be salt marsh sediments. Substantial filling would have been required to create suitable fixed land for construction. The current classification of soils on the site categorizes them as urban soils. This class of soils is created by disturbance resulting from the construction and demolition of 19th century buildings on the lot. At the time the Stage 2 was undertaken, the urban soils were covered by a thin layer of asphalt except in areas already disrupted by the Stage 1B Field Reconnaissance Survey.

TESTING STRATEGY

Testing strategy on the site was dictated by the fact that the feature had already been located and identified, and that its dimensions, construction materials and construction methods were known. The primary research question to be answered by the Stage 2 excavation was whether or not the bath was in fact, a mikva. The features that would make a firm case for this identification were the presence of the smaller basin on the single side of the feature that had not been exposed, and the presence of a drain pipe entering the bath that conformed to ritual law. Therefore, the testing strategy was to reopen the feature, empty it completely, examine it for drain features and any other features that might expand our knowledge of its function and reopen and examine the exterior of the feature to look for the associated basin and drain.

FIELD METHODOLOGY

Field methodology for the Block 372, Lot 27 site consisted of several stages of investigation. These included:

1. Reopening three sides of the feature with a combination of mechanical and hand excavation (the fourth side is attached to a concrete wall built along the east property line on Lot 27).
2. Excavating around the three sides of the feature to confirm or rule out the presence of an associated smaller basin (the cistern/reservoir).
3. Removal of all soils and debris inside the feature.
4. Exposing and cleaning all tiled surfaces
5. Measuring, photographing and drawing all surfaces exposed through the combination of mechanical and hand excavation employed in testing.
6. Photographic documentation of the overall site.

FIELD RESULTS

Once the bath feature was completely exposed and cleaned, a number of details emerged which provided compelling evidence that the bath is, indeed a mikva. The small size was an initial indicator that this might be so. Once the floor was cleared and cleaned, a tiled Star of David emerged in the center (See Photos and Diagrams).

The bath contains a drain in the southwestern corner. The steps that remain intact reveal the original form – 6" deep and 26" wide treads capped with white marble. The walls are tiled in a very typical brick motif of white tile. An elaborate mosaic border, predominantly in shades of blue, runs along the outer edge of the hexagon tile floor.

The bath is built against the concrete wall that separates 308 East 3rd Street from 310 East 3rd Street. That edge of the feature was visually inspected, but no attempt was made to excavate the eastern edge of the feature, since it was evident that it could not be the location of the cistern. The three other exterior walls were examined for evidence of a smaller basin or cistern, a feature that would normally be expected in association with the larger bath. None was encountered. Although the soils were disturbed, and it is possible that the cistern was destroyed when the building was demolished, a careful examination of the area around the feature suggests that the cistern was not present.

Another feature of particular interest to the investigators was a possible exterior pipe into the bath, a ritual water conduit that would bring pure unadulterated water to the mikva. No evidence for this pipe was found. The reason for this may be because the upper portions of the bath wall had been removed during the destruction episode.

The mikva was extensively photographed, measured and diagrammed. Based on our examination of the mikvah it appears to date to the early years of the 20th century, the

precise date has not been determined, but, based on the fact that there was a synagogue in the building on the site in 1921, it is suggested that the mikvah was built before that date. It is likely that the 1-story building seen on the 1903 Sanborn map was, indeed, a school sink, and that the mikvah was constructed at the time that the rear building was rebuilt or remodeled, which would be after 1903 and before 1914. (See Map 3) Map research indicates that the change on Lot 27 had, in fact, taken place before 1911, but it is clearly indicated on the 1914 Bromley *Atlas of Manhattan*.

A complete digital photo record and computer generated scale drawings are amended to this report in CD form. These images may be manipulated to reveal extremely fine detail as an aid to future research.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CITY/SCAPE: Cultural Resource Consultants completed a Stage 2 Data Recovery Excavation on a mikva feature located at 308 East 3rd Street (Block 372, Lot 27), Borough of Manhattan, New York. Using a combination of mechanical and hand excavation, the investigating team opened and cleared the tile lined rectangular bath. Once the bath was cleared, the team measured and diagrammed the feature and made an extensive digital record. A Star of David made from colored hexagonal tiles was uncovered in the center of the bath floor as well as a complex mosaic border pattern around the interior of the bath floor. As noted above, the field investigators considered the presence of the Star of David a definitive indication that this feature was a ritual bath, or mikvah. The team also carefully examined the bath and its surroundings for two additional features typical of a mikvah, an associated smaller basin or cistern, and a pipe to carry water from the cistern into the bath. Neither of these features was encountered. Despite the lack of these two features, Dr. Celia Bergoffen, confirmed her impression that the feature had a high probability to be a mikva. The mikvah feature was uncovered, cleaned, carefully examined and extensively documented. The photos and diagrams are available digitally and in hard copy for further study.

The Congregation Moshcisker Chevrah Gur Arye mikvah is the second mikvah excavated on the Lower East Side, home to an extensive Orthodox community in the late 19th and early 20th century. This fact makes it important to the history of the Orthodox Jewish community in New York City. The fact that the mikvah, an integral feature of any Orthodox community, was associated with a tenement synagogue, rather than a free-standing structure, makes it of additional interest.

Discussions with the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission indicated that the Commission believed that the Congregation Moshcisker Chevrah Gur Arye mikvah was historically significant. Based on this determination, it has been agreed by the Landmarks Commission and the UJA that a mitigation plan for the mikvah will be developed and submitted to the Landmarks Preservation Commission for approval.

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APPENDICES

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix A: Historic Maps & Field Reconnaissance Maps

Appendix B: Photographs & Photo CD (in sleeve)

APPENDIX A

**HISTORIC MAPS &
FIELD RECONNAISSANCE MAPS**

APPENDIX A

MAP LIST

MAPS

- Map 1 Location Map. USGS Topo. Brooklyn Quadrangle. Taken 1967. Revised 1979. Scale: 1:24,000.
- Map 2 Sanborn 1903 Insurance Map showing portion of Block 372. Scale: 1" = 60'.
- Map 3 Bromley's 1914 Atlas of Manhattan. (Israelowitz's *Lower East Side Tourbook* 1998:131). Scale: none shown.

FIELD RECONNAISSANCE MAPS

Stage 1B Field Reconnaissance Map for Block 372, Lots 26, 27, 28 & 29. 306-312 East 3rd Street. Borough of Manhattan. New York County, New York. Scale: 1 Inch = 20 Feet. (Provided to locate Tiled Bath Feature within Project Area)

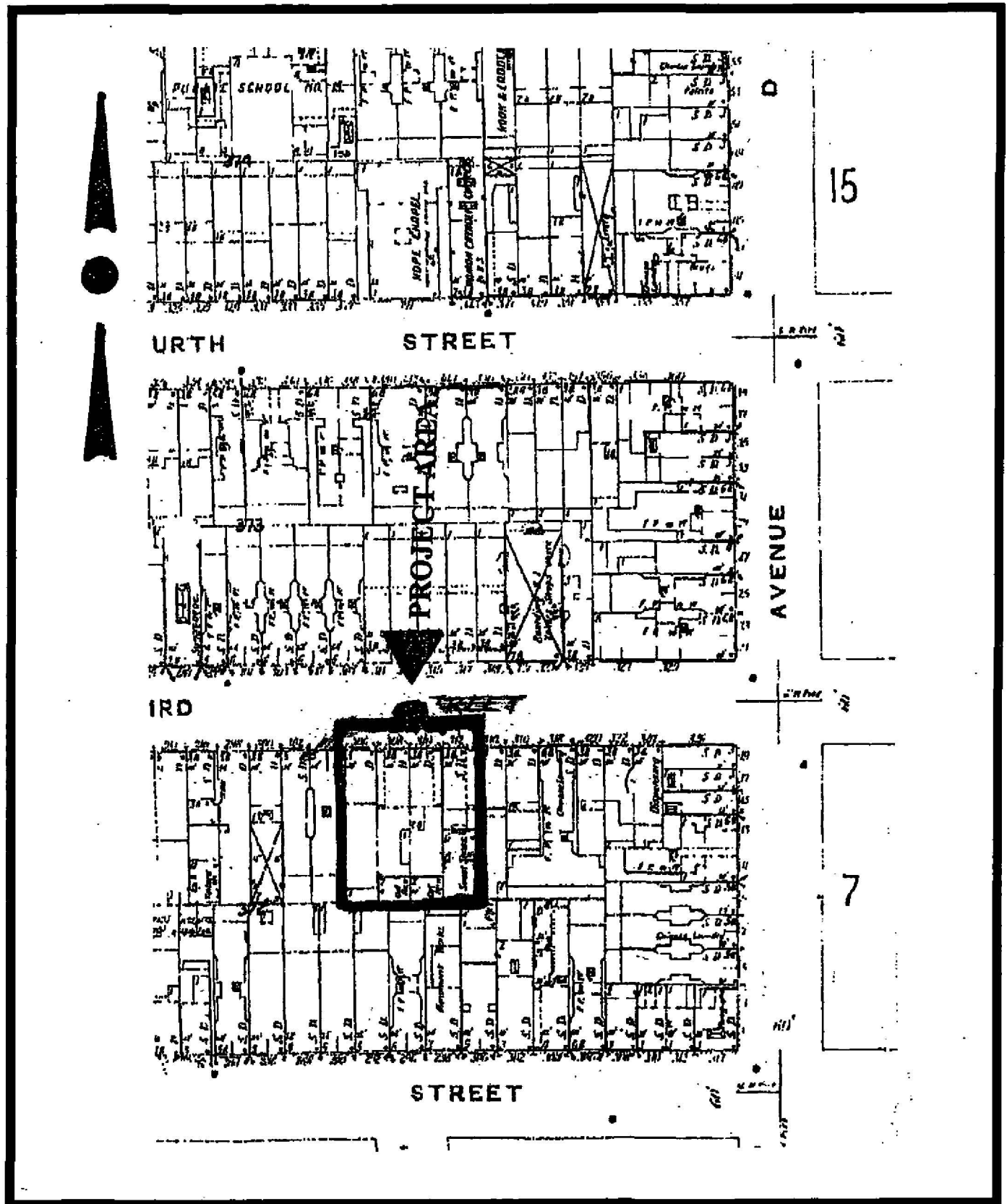
Stage 2 Field Reconnaissance Map of Mikvah Feature. Scale: 1 Inch = 2 Feet.

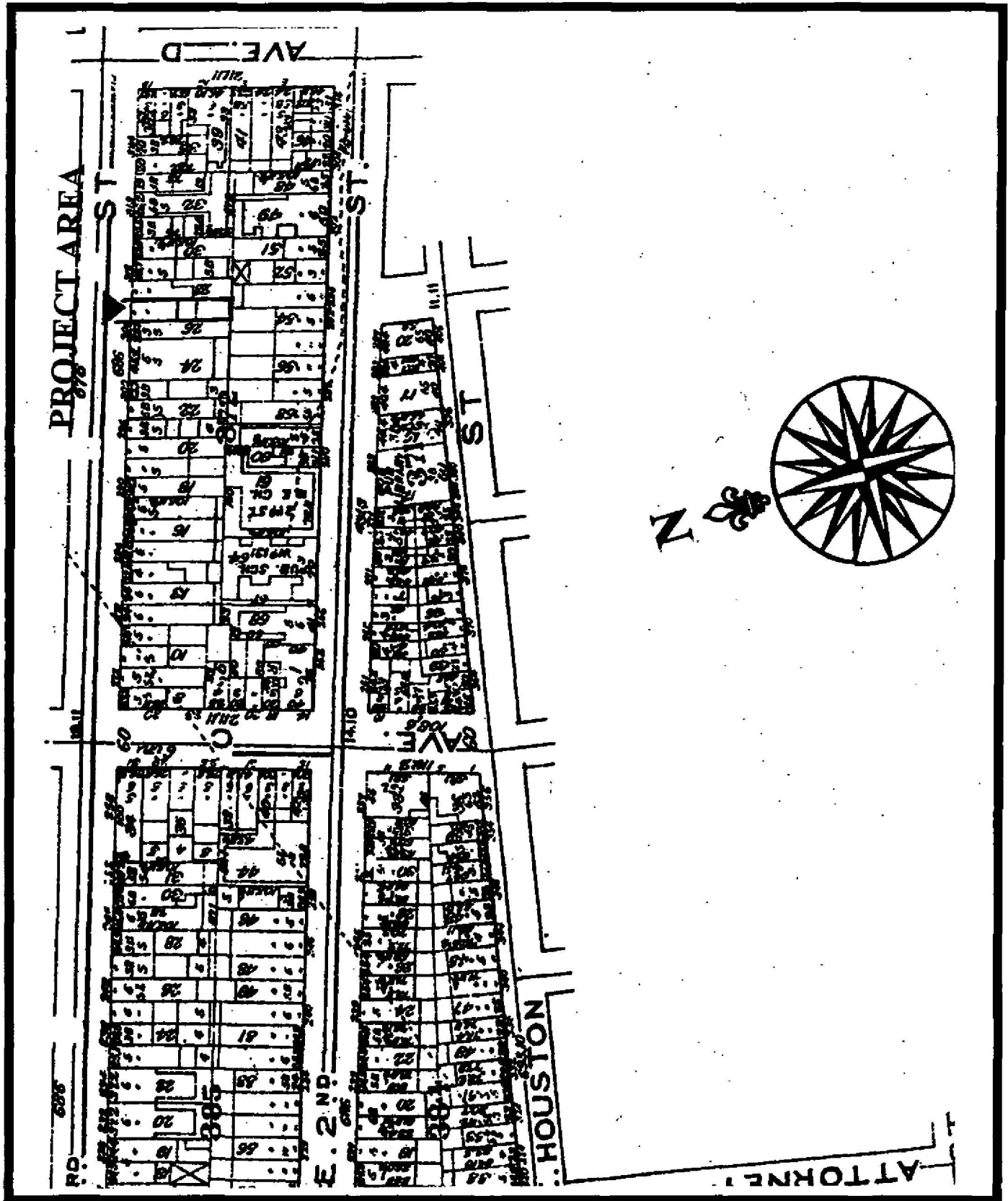
Diagram of Star of David Design on Bottom of Mikvah. Scale: 1 Inch = 2 Feet.

Appendix B: Photographs

Map 1: Location Map showing Project Area. USGS Topo. 7.5 Minute Series. Brooklyn Quad. Scale: 1:24,000







N

EAST 3RD STREET

315°
NW

SIDEWALK

Lot # 26
(306)

Lot # 27
(308)

Lot # 28
(310)

Lot # 29
(312)

Trench Depth
4 feet - 5 feet

Trench Depth
4 feet - 5 feet

24'-0"

41'-0"

TRENCH

TRENCH

Tiled Bath

Stairs

BATH DEPTH
4' 10"

5'-0"

10'-0"

Trench Depth
4 feet - 5 feet

Trench Depth
4 feet - 5 feet

24'-0"

41'-0"

TRENCH

TRENCH

22'-6"

22'-6"

22'-6"

22'-6"

2'-0"

225°
SW

BLOCK 372, LOTS 26, 27, 28, & 29

306-312 East Third Street
Borough of Manhattan, New York County, New York

Stage 1B

Site Map

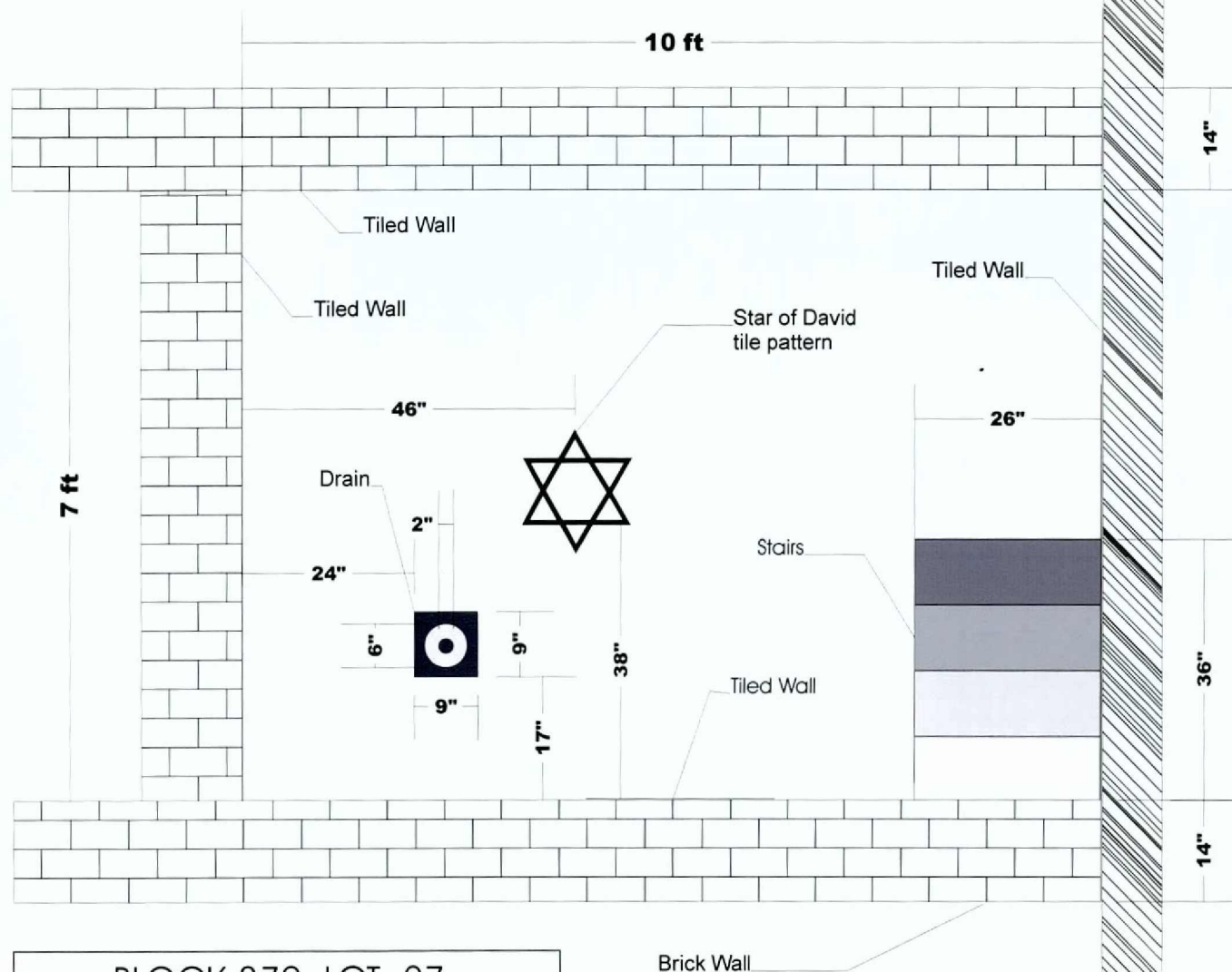
Scale: 1 Inch = 20 Feet

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May 2003



BLOCK 372, LOT 27

308 East Third Street
Borough of Manhattan, New York County, New York

Stage 2

Mikva Feature Map

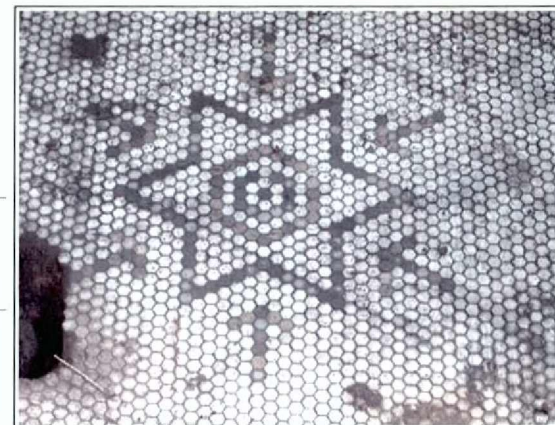
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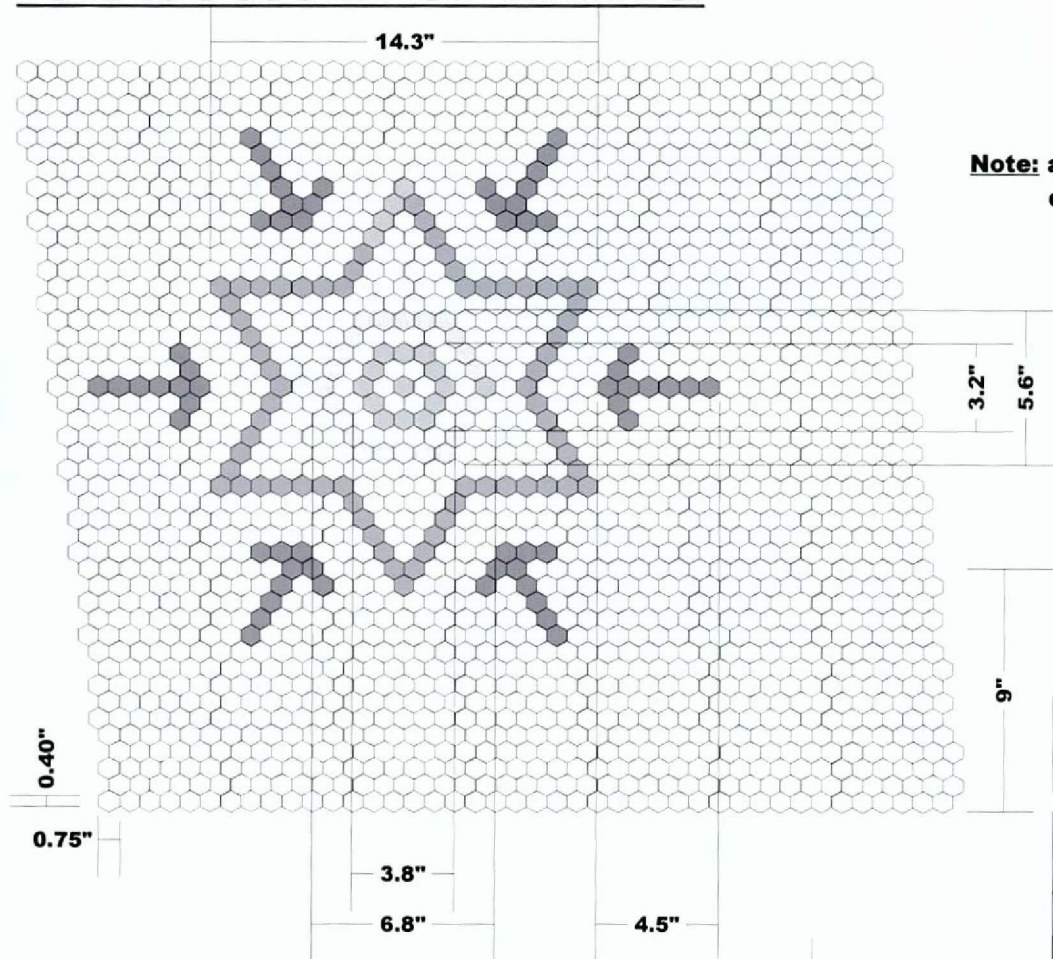
726 Carroll Street, Brooklyn, New York 11215

November 2003



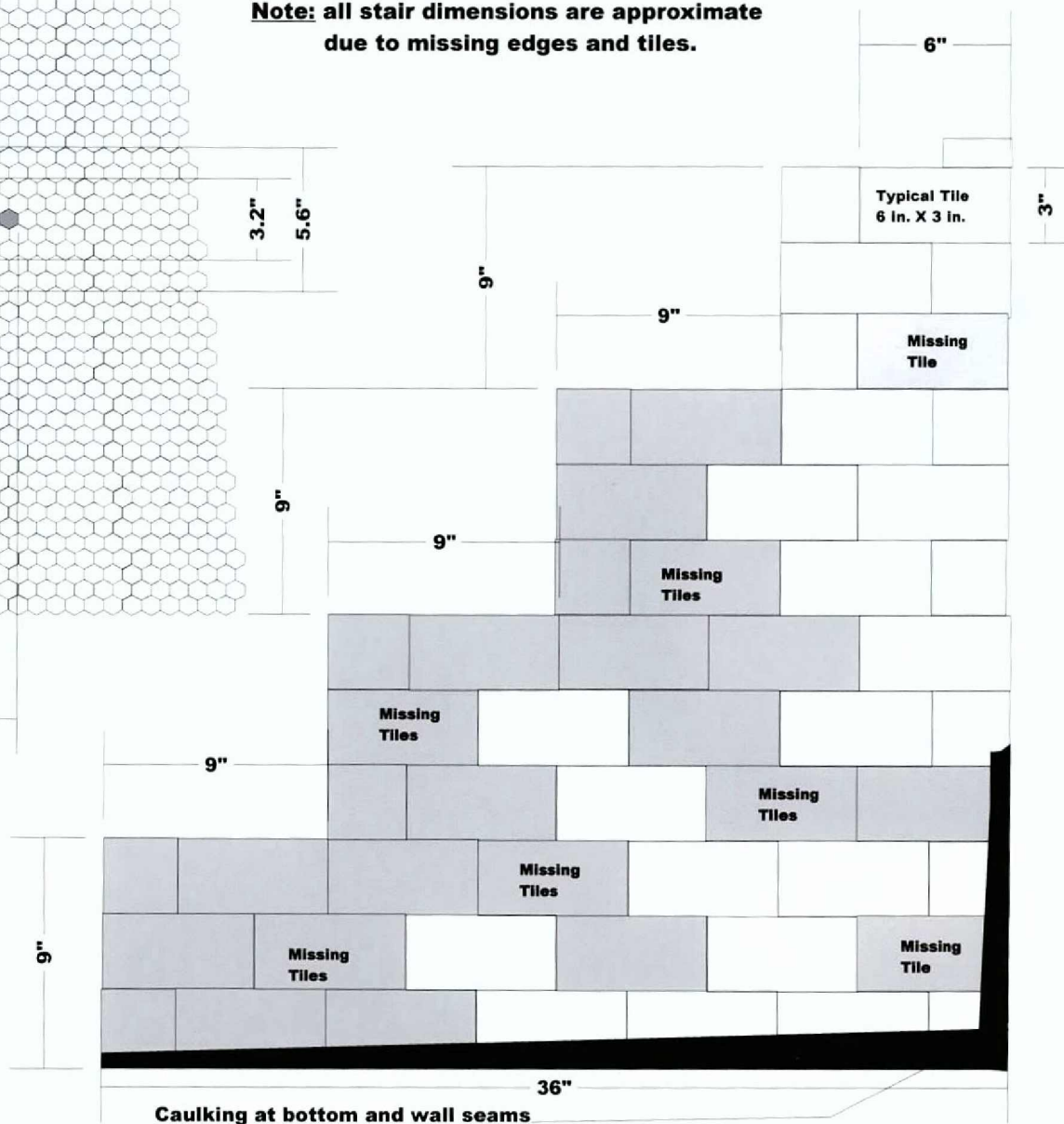
STAR OF DAVID design

on bottom of Mikva



Vertical View of Stairs

Note: all stair dimensions are approximate due to missing edges and tiles.



BLOCK 372, LOT 27

308 East Third Street
Borough of Manhattan, New York County, New York

Stage 2

Mikva Feature Map

Scale: 1 Inch = 2 Feet

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APPENDIX B

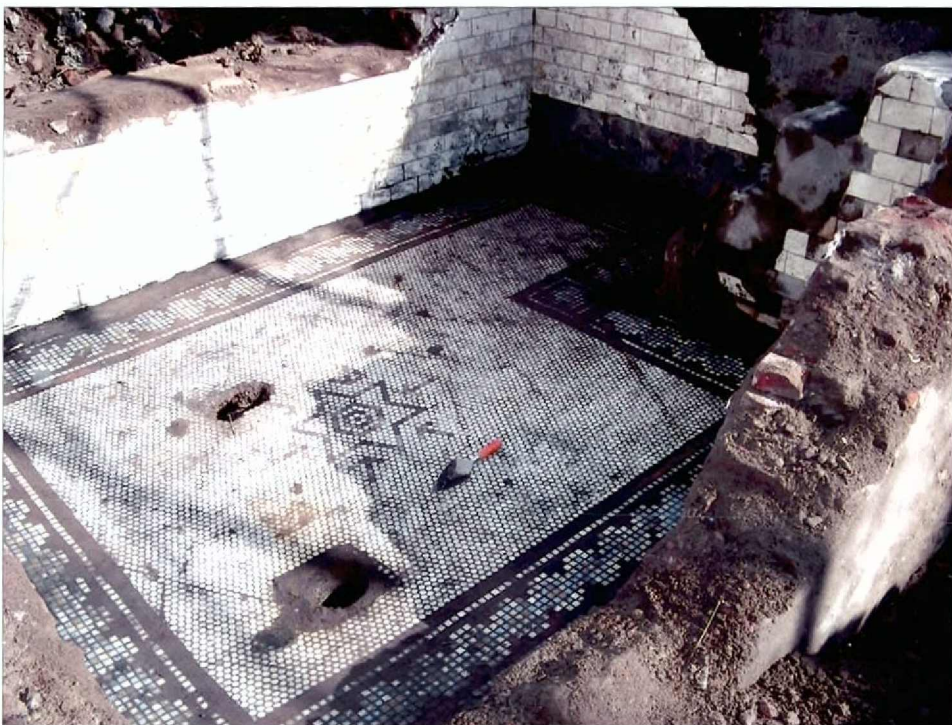
**PHOTOGRAPHS &
PHOTO CD (IN SLEEVE)**



VIEW BEARING E, HPIM0832.JPG



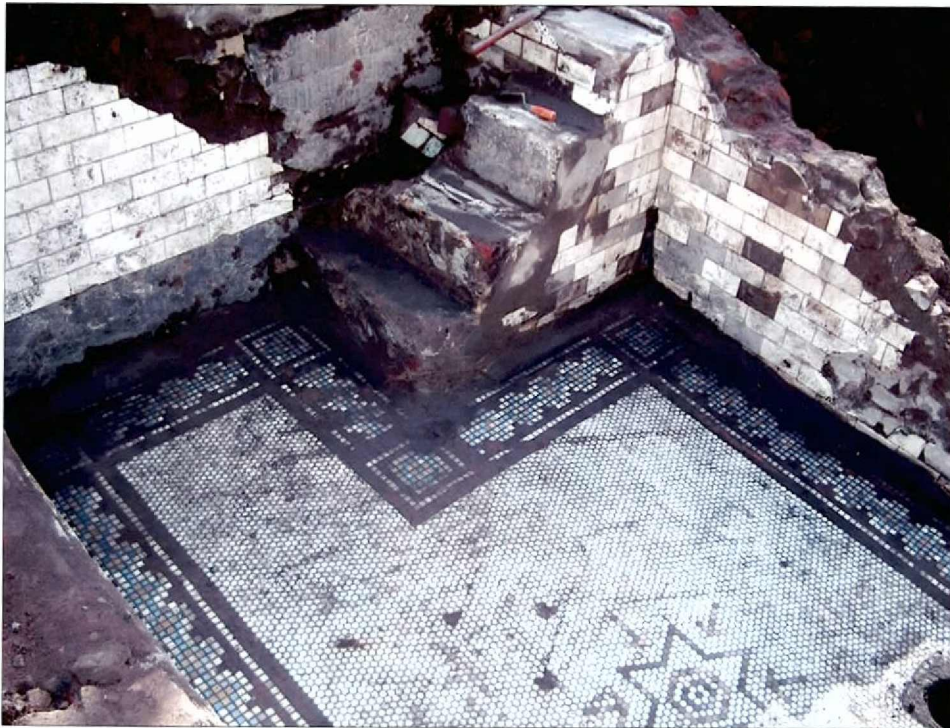
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VIEW BEARING E, HPIM0834.JPG



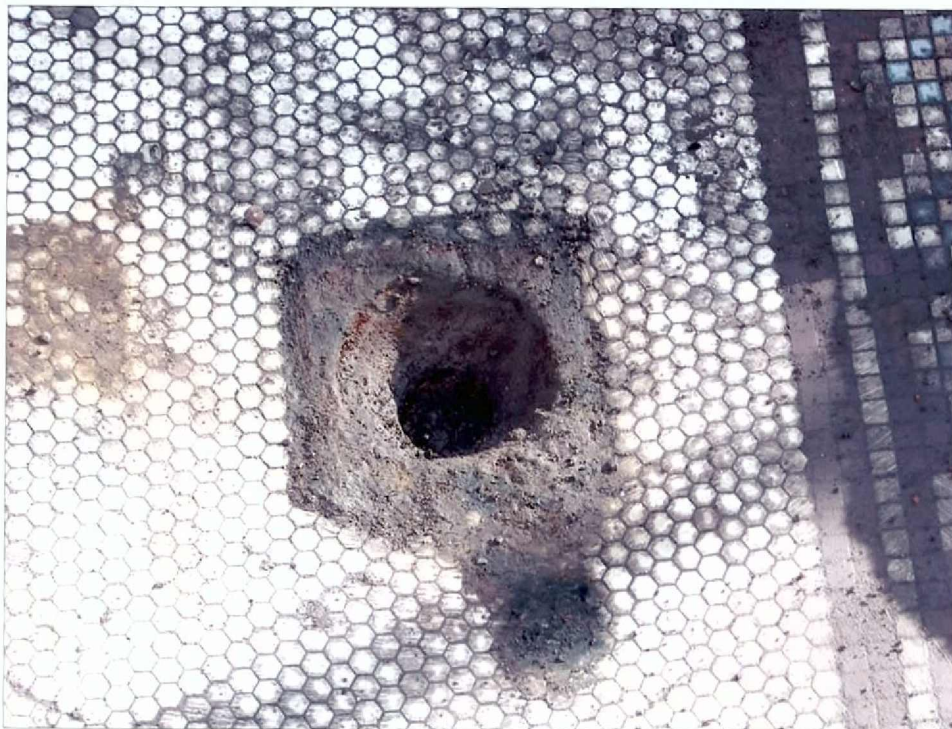
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VIEW BEARING S, HPIM0819.JPG



VIEW BEARING SW, HPIM0803.JPG

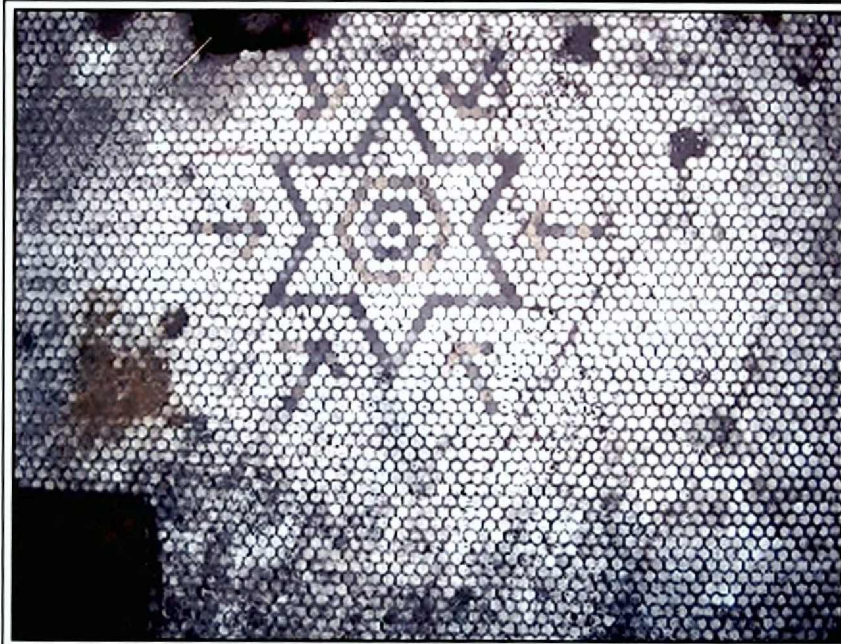


VIEW BEARING SE, HPIM0815.JPG



VIEW BEARING S, HPIM0828.JPG

MIKVA FEATURE, 308 EAST THIRD STREET, AVENUE D, NEW YORK, NY



VIEW BEARING NE, HPIM0791.JPG



VIEW BEARING NW, HPIM0794.JPG



VIEW BEARING S, HPIM0798.JPG

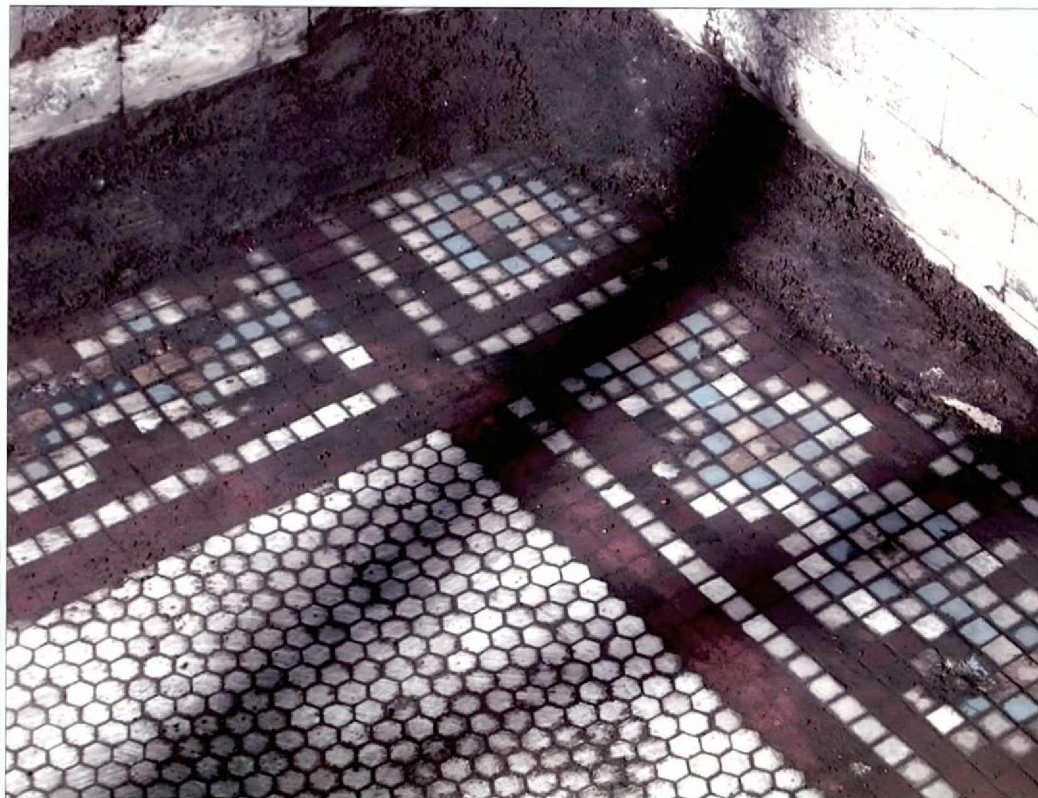


VIEW BEARING SE, HPIM0800.JPG



VIEW BEARING E

VIEW BEARING N



VIEW BEARING S

BLOCK 372, LOT 27

308 East Third Street
Borough of Manhattan, New York County, New York

Stage 2
Mikva Feature

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