

Landmarks Preservation Commission
January 29, 1980, Designation List 131
LP-1056

PARK EAST SYNAGOGUE, 163 East 67th Street, Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1889-90; architects Schneider & Herter

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1402, Lot 30.

On June 19, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Park East Synagogue and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 6). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. There were no speakers on this item, but the Synagogue has expressed its approval of this designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Erected in 1889-90 from the designs of the architects Schneider and Herter, the Park East Synagogue (Congregation Zichron Ephraim), with its richly-decorated and imaginatively composed Moorish Revival facade, is an unexpected delight in the picturesque streetscape of East 67th Street between Lexington and Third Avenues. Its combination of Moorish and Byzantine architectural detail marks it as a late manifestation of the attempt to find an appropriate expression for synagogue architecture which accompanied the proliferation of new Jewish congregations after the Civil War.

Until 1845 the Jewish population of New York, still concentrated largely on the Lower East Side, was served by only two synagogue buildings in the entire city. As the Jewish population grew, few new congregations had sufficient funds to erect new buildings and relied instead on converting the church buildings abandoned by expanding or relocating Christian congregations, the legacy of population shifts on the Lower East Side. With growing wealth and social standing many German Jews began to move uptown to Yorkville, which has been a German community since the late 18th Century, and to Harlem. The movement of German Jews to the upper East Side was accelerated by the waves of poorer Eastern Europeans who settled on the East Side in the 1870's and 1880's. At the same time many well-to-do German Jews who were emigrating from Germany to escape repression, settled immediately on the Upper East Side. Many of them arrived committed to the ideas of a Reformed Judaism which had developed in German Jewish intellectual circles in the 1830's. In addition, congregations founded on the lower East Side moved uptown with their constituents. Many of the large impressive new synagogues built from the 1860's through 1880's on the East Side had their roots in downtown congregations. Moving uptown they were affected by the new reform ideology of recent immigrants and the desire for greater assimilation that often accompanied prosperity. In 1868 Temple Emanu-El moved from its third Lower East Side location to an impressive new synagogue at Fifth Avenue and 43rd Street, the largest synagogue building in the world upon its completion. This synagogue, which was designed in a Moorish Revival style, is now demolished, but for many years it represented the prestige of the Reform movement and served to firmly establish that style for synagogue architecture. By 1874 when the Temple Beth-El

(now merged with Temple Emanu-El) was founded at Lexington Avenue and 63rd Street, the East Side had become the stronghold of Reform Judaism. It was in response to this dominance on the East Side that Congregation Zichron Ephraim was organized.

Unlike most congregations which were founded by groups of Jews of similar national origin, Zichron Ephraim was founded because of the personal convictions of Rabbi Bernard Drachman (1861-1945), and his father-in-law, Jonas Weil (1837-1917). Drachman was convinced of the importance of adapting Orthodox practice to American lifestyles without making the sacrifice of tradition that he saw as characteristic of Reform practice. He saw himself as a crusader for the protection of "the content of the Jewish heritage from the well-nigh overwhelming forces of disintegration with which it was surrounded."²

American born, Drachman was educated at Columbia College, but received his theological training in Germany at the moderate Orthodox Jüdisch-Theologisches Seminar at Breslau and at the University of Heidelberg. Upon his return to the United States he was appointed Rabbi at Congregation Oheb Sholom in Newark, New Jersey, a position he held for a year. Early in 1887 he was elected Rabbi of Beth Israel Bikkur Cholem, a congregation with a newly-opened synagogue at Lexington Avenue and 72nd Street. The congregation, founded originally by Polish Jews in 1847 on the Lower East Side, was Orthodox, but soon some of its members began to agitate for changes, most particularly the seating of men and women together in the synagogue. Drachman was adamantly opposed to this change and stood firmly against it. When the congregation voted to adopt the change he painfully resigned his position rather than compromise his convictions. THIS dramatic gesture caused quite a stir throughout the Jewish community. Drachman was supported in his action by Jonas Weil, whose daughter he had married earlier that year. Weil had immigrated to New York from his native Baden in 1860 and amassed a fortune in the real estate business in partnership with his brother-in-law Bernard Mayer. He was already prominent as a philanthropist to Jewish causes, and was later to found the Lebaenen Hospital in the Bronx. Drachman had met the Weil family at Congregation Adeth Israel on East 57th Street where they both worshipped, and found Weil sympathetic to his concern for protecting Orthodox tradition. They were both founding members of the Orthodox-sponsored Jewish Theological Seminary in 1886. Drachman was for many years a member of its faculty and a spokesman for the principles of an American Orthodoxy, distinguished from its European counterpart principally by its use of English in the service and its emphasis on religious instruction for the young. In both of these respects, Congregation Zichron Ephraim was to be a pioneer in American Judaism.

Drachman in his memoirs credits Weil with the initiative for founding the new congregation.³ Weil suggested to Drachman after his resignation that he organize a congregation where he could realize what he later described as a "harmonious combination of Orthodox Judaism and Americanism."⁴ Confident that an Orthodox synagogue could easily attract a sympathetic congregation from the Jewish population of the Reform-dominated Upper East Side and Yorkville, Weil offered his financial backing for the new synagogue building. Drachman organized the congregation in 1888 and early 1889 by replying to the letters he had received in support of his resignation from Beth Israel Bikkur Cholem. In 1889 a constitution, setting

out Drachman's aims in the preamble, was adopted, and a board of trustees - "all substantial householders and loyal Jews"-was elected with Weil as president and Drachman as rabbi for life. The original congregation was largely German but included also a significant number of Russian, Polish and Hungarian Jews. In recognition of the gift of land and funds for the new building from Jonas Weil and his brother Samuel, the congregation selected the name Zichron Ephraim (Memorial of Ephraim) in memory of the Weils' father Ephraim who had never left his native Baden. The congregation from the start took an especially active role in education. Its Talmud Torah, which today is housed in a new building on East 68th Street, counted Harry Houdini among its first class of pupils.

Work on the new synagogue began in September of 1889, the cornerstone was laid on Thanksgiving Day of that year, and the new building was dedicated just before the Jewish New Year in September 1890. No doubt the German origins of the architects Ernst Schneider and Henry Herter appealed to the congregation and to Drachman, who characterized them as "masters of their profession".⁵ The Park East Synagogue was one of the early commissions of these architects about whom little is known.⁶ Schneider and Herter were principally employed designing tenements, many of which still stand on the Lower East Side and in Clinton. Several of their residential designs of the 1890's in a Romanesque Revival style are in the Greenwich Village Historic District.

Considering the fact that Zichron Ephraim was organized to offer an alternative to the Reform practices of Temples Beth-El and Emmanu-El, it is curious that the Moorish Revival style was adopted for the new synagogue building. This style had been firmly established as the style for Reform Jewish architecture by the lavish buildings of these wealthy uptown congregations.

The problem of finding an appropriate stylistic expression for Jewish worship plagued synagogue architects into the present century. In the late 18th and in the 19th centuries, strong associational and moralistic arguments asserting the unique appropriateness of Gothic architecture to Christian worship made the need for an independent style in synagogue architecture all the more compelling. Certainly Gothic Revival synagogues were built, but Jewish architects tended to favor a Romanesque Revival style, especially in Europe. This style was particularly popular in Germany where the Rundbogenstil, a combination of round-arched styles of the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, commanded a hegemony over Gothic even in ecclesiastical design from the early 1830's. The Rundbogenstil, like the later High Victorian Gothic in England and America, was a flexible style which permitted great latitude for invention and could absorb elements from a wide range of sympathetic historical styles. Perhaps Gottfried Semper's great synagogue at Dresden of 1839-40, in which Byzantine elements are mixed with the Lombard Romanesque common in Rundbogenstil, is the earliest attempt to evolve a Jewish style by drawing upon the architectural vocabulary of the Near East. This stylistic mixture, rich in polychromy and ornamental detail, was especially developed in Austria-Hungary, notably in the elaborate Arsenal at Vienna and in two prominent synagogues by Ludwig von Förster at Vienna (1853-58) and Budapest (1854-59). The style was given greater currency still in the new synagogues erected at Berlin

and Leipzig in the 1850's, the latter designed by a pupil of Semper. All of these attempts to graft Moorish Revival elements onto the Rundbogenstil compositional frame common in German architecture sought to establish the association between Judaism and the heritage of the Jews in the Middle East, the homeland of their faith.⁷ While the Byzantine elements of the developing architectural synthesis drew upon associations with the Holy Land, the strong Moorish preference was meant to evoke "the wonderful flowering of Judaic culture under the the Moslem caliphate in Spain in the Middle Ages."⁸ Publications of archaeological expeditions in the Eastern Mediterranean, especially those conducted by the French, appeared throughout the 1850's and 1860's, providing a wealth of authentic motifs for architects to borrow from in Byzantine and Moorish Revival design. Nonetheless the new synagogue style was very rarely archaeological in spirit. The Byzantine basilica and the Moorish mosque were no more suitable than the Gothic cathedral to the needs and meaning of Judaism. From the start synagogue architects exercised a great deal of freedom in combining these elements, attempting, like most architects in the 1850's and 1860's, to achieve a new synthesis and a relevant modern architectural expression.

Most of the architects of American synagogues in the 19th century were of German origin and served the new Ashkenazic congregations of New York with Moorish-Byzantine designs rooted in the earlier theory of this style in Central Europe. The Moorish Revival Temple Emmanu-El of 1866-68 at Fifth Avenue and 43rd Street was designed by Leopold Eidlitz (1823-1908) and Henry Fernbach (1828-1883), both of whom were from Central Europe and well acquainted with the style there. Eidlitz, the first recorded Jewish architect practicing in America, was born in Prague and trained in Vienna. Fernbach was from Breslau but trained in BERLIN. As early as 1847 Eidlitz was experimenting with Romanesque and Byzantine elements in the Wooster Street Synagogue and a remodeling of a Methodist Church on Chrystie Street for Temple Emmanu-El. The "oriental" mode received its first full-blown expression in synagogues in Philadelphia (1864) and Cincinnati (1866) but Temple Emmanu El's combination of a Romanesque twin-towered west front and Moorish and Byzantine arcading and decorative elements, established the style in New York. It was a style which would dominate synagogue architecture until the late 1880's, culminating in the vast Italian synagogues at Florence and Turin.⁹ One of the finest examples of the style is Fernbach's Central Synagogue on Lexington Avenue at 55th Street of 1872, a designated New York City Landmark. The style continued to dominate new East Side synagogues in Jardine and Kent's Anshe Chesed of 1873 (Lexington and 63rd Street) and Rafael Guastavino's B'nai Jeshurun of 1885 (Madison and 65th Street), both demolished.

The Park East Synagogue is an especially imaginative reworking of this well-established theme. Its twin-towers flanking a central gable pierced by a rose window echoes the standard configuration ultimately derived from the Romanesque. The rich ornamentation and eclectic detail of the orange brick and ruddy red terra-cotta facade is characteristic of the eclectic taste of the 1880's. It is enhanced by the play between symmetry and asymmetry in composition and between levels of depth and surface in the elevation. The flanking towers and arcuated narthex are joined together as a complexly organized screen set before the building. The towers are asymmetrical, that on the right being taller, a significant departure from the symmetrical model of the Reform synagogues. This asymmetry was originally even more pronounced when each tower was topped by an additional stage and a bulbous dome. A small ciborium was originally placed over the

Star of David which crowns the truncated triangular gable. The additional height of the eastern tower originally gave it an almost minaret-like appearance which suggested a stylistic name to the popular guide book author Moses King. He described Zichron Ephraim as " a handsome piece of Saracenic architecture, with a North African sentiment in the tall and unique tower..."¹⁰

The orange brick facade is set above a tall basement of gray granite with a central entrance to the assembly room below the main auditorium. Wide flights of stairs with handsome iron railings at either end of the facade lead up to the narthex, which takes the form of a porch, where the entrance to the synagogue is located. The facade is articulated by seven bays arranged symmetrically around a broad central bay. The bays increase in width moving from the center towards the towers. Vertically the facade is clearly divided by pronounced string courses and engaged arcades of strikingly inventive composition. All the elements are richly decorated with carving, terra-cotta panels, handsome moldings, and polychromatic highlights. The narthex porch is fronted by a screen of alternating horseshoe arches and pierced cusped rondels, arranged in a rhythmic pattern of A-A-B-A-A-B-A-A, with a central pair of horseshoe arches supported on an eccentrically fluted column and compressed into the central bay. This provides a break in the rhythm which gives emphasis to the center, an emphasis which is continued in the scalloped arch with checkered terra-cotta spandrels which breaks into and above the story over the narthex arcade. This story has terra-cotta plaques and inscribed polished granite plaques over the arches and blind arcades of diminutive arches set on balusters above the roundels. The granite plaques are inscribed in Hebrew with the name of the synagogue and a verse from Psalm 100: "Enter into His gates with Thanksgiving and into His courts with praise." Above this level the towers are gradually set back to reveal the truncated central triangular gable. This gable is outlined by dentilled and arcuated terra-cotta moldings and features a handsome rose window in the center with radiating tracery. This window is filled with stained glass from a German manufacturer, and it is further highlighted in the facade by its red molded surround.

Flanking the gable the towers occupy two bays and are then recessed to one bay. Although symmetrical in silhouette, they are detailed differently. On the left an arcade with baluster-like supports and handsome terra-cotta carving-- a Palladian motif rendered in a Moorish vocabulary-- and a scalloped horseshoe arch give a rich sense of overlaid ornament. By comparison the right tower contrasts an open section with an unadorned wall surface. The opening rises through two stories and is capped by a lintel with rinceau patterns in terra-cotta supported by a square post superimposed on a swell baluster. Two carved brackets set under the lintel form an ogee-arch at the top of this opening, altogether a startling and unique composition. The sections of the tower rise above the strong horizontal entablatures of this lower section. On the right two open sections -- one with horseshoe arches and one with oval-shaped openings capped by keystones -- are set between pilaster strips defining the corners of the square belfry sections. These sections are light and open in contrast to the heavier trabeated construction of the final section of the left-hand tower. Terra-cotta panels ornament the corner pilasters of these upper stories, further adding to the luxurious display of details on the towers.

A detailed description of this complicated facade cannot recreate the liveliness and imagination with which the elements are composed. A multitude of readings is possible and each element is used in an original and sometimes surprising context. Elements that have structural roles are used ornamentally and in conjunction with other elements in a unique manner, such as the frequent use of balusters in place of columns or piers in arcades. This inventiveness adds a playful, almost whimsical, note to the profusely ornamented facade which is reminiscent of the character, if not the detail, of Northern Renaissance architecture. In adopting the Moorish-Byzantine stylistic vocabulary of the great Reform synagogues, Schneider and Herter sought to identify their building as a house of Jewish worship, but in their highly individual variation on its elements they successfully asserted the unique position of Zichron Ephraim within an evolving Jewish tradition. The building continues to house an active congregation, and it remains a vibrant element of the East 67th Street streetscape with its four notable late 19th -century institutional buildings.

Report prepared by Barry Bergdoll
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FOOTNOTES

1. Gerard R. Wolfe, The Synagogues of New York's Lower East Side, (New York: Washington News Books, 1978), p. 16.
2. Bernard Drachman, The Unfailing Light, (New York: Rabbinical Council Of America, 1948), p. 203.
3. Drachman, p. 206.
4. Drachman, p. 205.
5. Drachman, p. 209.
6. Schneider & Herter should not be confused with either the furniture makers and interior firm Herter Bros., or with the architectural firm, Herter & Herter who began practice in the mid 1880's and specialized in tenements.
7. According to Brian de Breffny, in The Synagogue (New York: McMillan Publishing Co., 1978), p. 165, the theoretical position was developed and "promulgated by the advocates of the positive-historical school who gravitated around the publication of the Monatschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judenthums" (Journal of Judaic History and Science).
8. De Breffny, p. 165.
9. Carroll Meeks, Italian Architecture, 1750-1914, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), pp 265-272.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Park East Synagogue has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Park East Synagogue is a richly decorated and imaginatively composed Moorish Revival building; that it was designed by the Jewish architects Ernst Schneider and Henry Herter; that in the Moorish Revival design of the synagogue they sought to identify it as a Jewish house of worship but in their use of various architectural elements they successfully asserted the unique position of Zichron Emphraim within an evolving Jewish tradition; that Congregation Zichron Emphraim was founded by Rabbi Bernard Drachman to combine the principles of Orthodox Judaism with American lifestyles, in contrast to the more liberal traditions of Reform Judaism; that among the important features of the brick and terra-cotta building are the central rose window, the asymmetrically-designed flanking towers, and the rich ornamental detail; and that it is one of four notable late 19th-century institutional buildings which make up the vibrant East 67th Street Streetscape.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (Formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Park East Synagogue, 163 East 67th Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1402, Lot 30, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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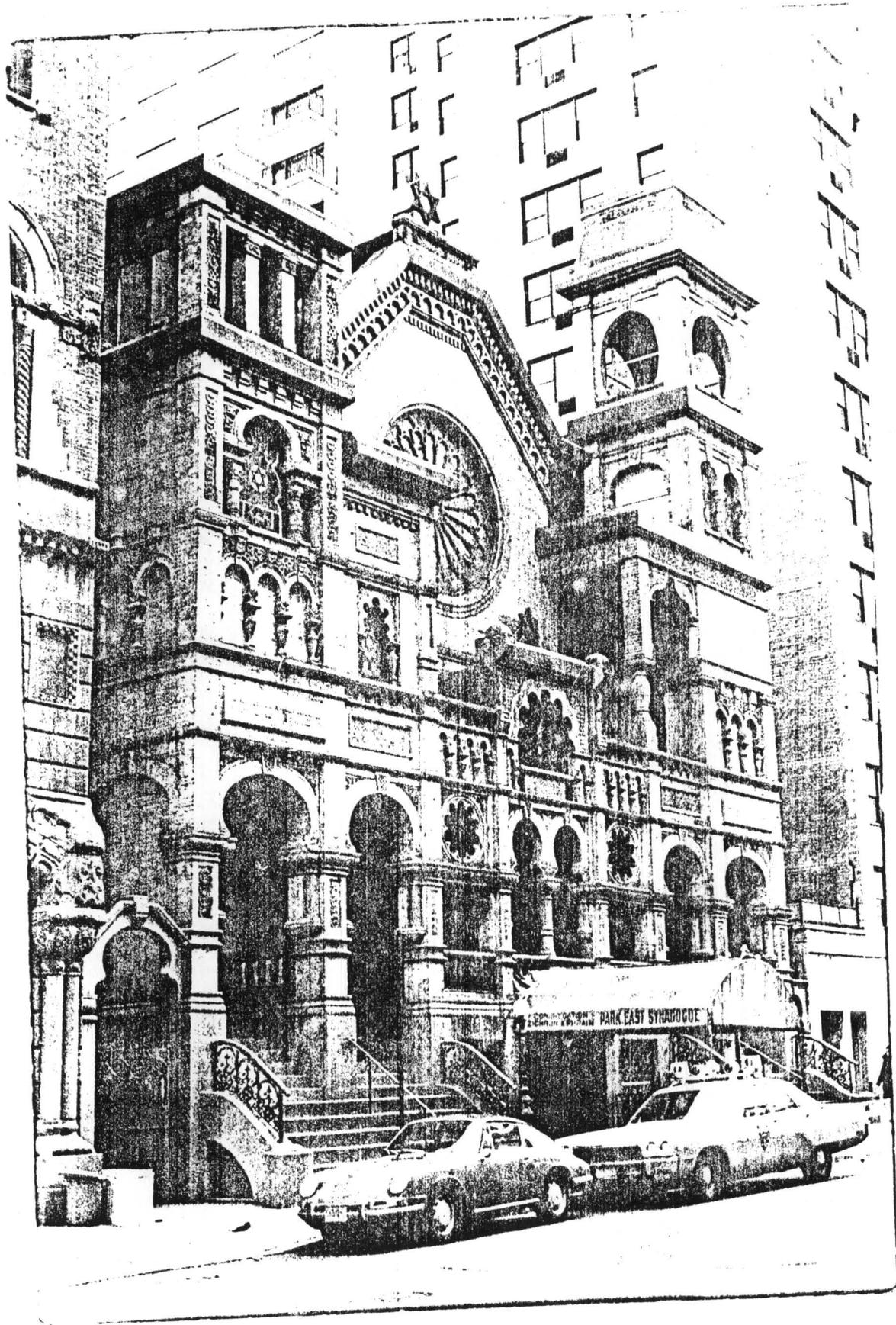
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PARK EAST SYNAGOGUE
163 East 67th Street
Built 1889-90

Photo Credit:
Benita Abrams Hack

Architects:
Schneider & Herter