American Jewish History 84.1 (1996) 11-27

Rediscovering Jewish Infrastructure: Update on United States Nineteenth Century Synagogues

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Figures

This article first appeared in *American Jewish History* in March 1986. It identified for the first time in a single place **fifty-two** extant nineteenth-century synagogue buildings. Most of these structures had been located by searching downtown districts throughout the country armed with articles from the three English-language Jewish encyclopedias. Touring former Jewish neighborhoods sometimes leads to the sudden and exciting discovery of a former synagogue. Architectural styles, along with remnants of Judaic ornamentation (Stars of David, tablets, Hebrew cornerstones, etc.), assist in identifying and dating the building.

After the article appeared, I received letters indicating that five other surviving synagogues had inadvertently been omitted. A small network of historic synagogue mavens also assisted in locating more extant structures. These experts include Samuel Gruber from the Jewish Heritage Council (subsidiary of World Monuments Fund), Julian Preisler, Allen Meyers, Rochelle Elstein, Leonard Williams, and Rabbi William Rosenthall. Their contributions along with my continued urban exploring led to the discovery to date of a total of **ninety-six** extant U.S. nineteenth-century synagogue structures.

The attached table provides a compilation of all known pre-1900 buildings which were originally erected as synagogues and which still stand. Each entry includes the address of the structure, its architectural style, the name of the original congregation, whether the original congregation still uses its building, and if not, the current use.

Some of the congregations listed--such as those in Newport, Charleston, Savannah, and Shearith Israel in New York--are among the oldest Jewish congregations in the country. Many of the congregations were the oldest in their respective cities; they started out as Orthodox and, in some instances, evolved into Conservative or Reform in the middle to late nineteenth century.

The three oldest buildings in the attached table remain under Jewish ownership. Newport's Touro Synagogue is home to the successor of the original Sephardic congregation which constructed it. Beth Elohim in Charleston is the oldest U.S. synagogue in continual use and one of the birthplaces of Reform Judaism in America. The third oldest is the first building of Baltimore Hebrew Congregation. **[End Page 11]**

Architectural Styles

The Touro Synagogue was designed in the Georgian style by noted architect Peter Harrison. Both Beth Elohim and the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation were constructed in the Greek Revival style, popular for houses of worship in the 1840s. After the Colonial and Greek Revival periods, synagogue structures generally continued to follow the trends in American secular and ecclesiastical architecture. Romanesque synagogues with round arched windows prevailed in the 1850s, with Gothic and Victorian styles more common in the 1870s and 1880s.

The Moorish style, however, was used heavily for synagogues but not in secular architecture from the 1860s to 1890s. Moorish synagogues often contained onion-shaped domes or minarets, horseshoe arches, and polychromatic decoration. Congregations built Moorish buildings in part to differentiate them from Victorian-style churches. Another theory for their popularity is the nineteenth-century revival of Jewish scholarly interest in the history of the Sephardic Diaspora, including their Golden Age in Spain and Northern Africa. **[End Page 12]**

At the turn of the century, synagogue architecture returned to the American architectural mainstream with a heavy emphasis on Classical Revival styles. This change is attributable in part to the interest in classical design at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago and also to archeological discoveries of Galilean synagogues built during Roman times.

Worship and Adaptive Reuse

While many of the buildings originally constructed as synagogues are now used for other purposes, some remain as synagogues and provide special places for Jewish worship. In twenty-one states, nineteenth-century buildings are still utilized for Jewish services, as the attached table indicates.

Adaptive reuse of a historic building is defined as implementing a new and/or additional use for a building originally designed for another purpose. Structures such as fire houses, train stations, courthouses, and religious edifices often find new uses when their initial uses are no longer viable. Nineteenth-century synagogues are no exception. The most **[End Page 13]** popular reuse is as a house of worship for another religion. Other successful adaptive reuses of synagogue buildings include museums, community/cultural centers, schools, and offices. An 1894 synagogue in Charleston, West Virginia, now houses the WCHS radio station. As a building's use is changed, the new owner can remodel in such a way to preserve the structure's major architectural features. Reuse of a historic synagogue no longer needed by its original congregation is much preferable to demolition.

Over the years synagogues in Madison, Wisconsin; Washington, D.C.; Charlottesville, Virginia; San Leandro, California; and San Diego, California, have been physically moved in order to save them from the wrecking ball.

Preservation Movement

An exciting development intensifying during the past ten years has been various grassroots efforts to save synagogues threatened with demolition. Recent campaigns involving nineteenth-century synagogues include the following: **[End Page 14]**

- **Port Gibson, Mississippi:** Temple Gemiluth Chassed, which held its last service in 1978, was scheduled to be demolished to create a parking lot for the adjacent gas station in 1987. However, Bill and Martha Lum, a Methodist and a Catholic, purchased it and began to restore it. Bill Lum told *The New York Times* in 1991, "It's part of the heritage of this town, and we just couldn't stand to see it destroyed. The Jewish heritage is deep rooted here, and that's where we all come from, after all, back to Abraham."

- **Corsicana, Texas:** In 1987, after a five-year preservation effort, the synagogue of Temple Beth-El was rededicated as a community center. Audrey Daniels Kariel, a former congregant and town resident, worked with non-Jewish townspeople such as Baptist Nelwyn Reagan to save this building. She told *Texas Highways* in 1990, "Corsicanans lost the train depot, the hotel, and the old newspaper office. But when it came to this temple, they dug in their heels and said, 'We're not going to let it go.' It was a show of beautiful community spirit." **[End Page 15] [Begin Page 17]**

- **Denver:** In the early 1980s the Lovingway Church offered for sale the former synagogue of Temple Emanuel built in 1899. Adjacent to numerous skyscrapers, it was to be razed to create another downtown parking lot. However, the Pearl Street Temple Emanuel Foundation, Inc. was formed in 1983 to save the building. By 1988 it had raised $180,000 and convinced the City to purchase the synagogue and lease it to the foundation, which would then buy back the structure over a forty year period. The building has become the Temple Center, a performance, conference, and multipurpose community center.

- **Hartford:** The Charter Oak Temple Restoration Association purchased Temple Beth Israel's 1876 synagogue, totally abandoned by a successor owner in 1972, and transformed it into an arts and cultural center including a museum of Connecticut Jewish history.

- **Baltimore:** The Jewish Historical Society of Maryland had earlier saved the 1845 Baltimore Hebrew Congregation from demolition. Its **[End Page 17]** new challenge involved an 1876 deteriorating synagogue only one block away. B'nai Israel's dwindling and aging congregation could not support renovation of the building. The historical society decided to move its headquarters into a newly designed museum midway between the two structures and spearheaded a fund drive both to build the headquarters and to rehabilitate the B'nai Israel synagogue (built by Chizuk Amuno Congregation).

- **New York City:** The Eldridge Street Synagogue was one of the first great synagogues built by Eastern European Jews in the U.S. As its congregation contracted from 800 down to twenty active members, the Moorish building deteriorated, and the sanctuary was closed. Led by preservationist Roberta Gratz, emergency repairs were conducted in 1984 to stabilize parts of the structure. Full-scale restoration was begun in 1989 and continues to the present, with a total cost to exceed $5 million.

- **Newark:** In 1990 Oheb Shalom's former Prince Street Synagogue, built in 1884, was located squarely in the path of Newark's Society Hill housing development. I invited the congregation's rabbi and several local and national preservationists to testify before the New Jersey Historic Sites Council in an attempt to save this building from certain demolition. After the Council mandated additional efforts toward adaptive reuse, an ad hoc committee, including the City of Newark, Oheb Shalom, the developer, and several preservationists, hired an architect to assess the structure. The City of Newark gradually changed its attitude toward the building and offered it for sale assisted by preservationists from the committee. This Moorish-style synagogue was purchased for a nominal amount by the Greater Newark Conservancy in 1995 and will become the home of New Jersey's first Urban Environmental Center in 1996.

These successful grassroots efforts to save nineteenth-century synagogues will hopefully spur other communities to mount similar efforts when historic Jewish infrastructure is threatened. Many of the buildings reflect architectural beauty and craftsmanship that would never be created today. Some of them provide a special historical continuity to city/town central cores.

The small number of these remaining structures underscores the criticality for congregations to attempt to stay in their historic buildings **[End Page 18]** or, failing that, to set in motion a process whereby the structures can be reborn into a new use. Likewise, buildings which are no longer owned by Jewish congregations require broader community support for their continued preservation.

The following table of **ninety-six** current and former synagogues is a unique compilation of surviving religious buildings and should serve as a reference document to help preserve the architectural legacy of American Jewish life.

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