

CENTRAL
SYNAGOGUE
IN ITS
CHANGING
NEIGHBORHOOD

ANDREW S. DOLKART









Congregation Ahawath Chesed, now Central Synagogue, 1872.





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BY
ANDREW S. DOLKART

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Acknowledgments

Central Synagogue has done an extraordinary job preserving and organizing its archives, translating German records into English and making archival material available. This work was guided by the synagogue's volunteer archivist, Anne Mininberg, who suggested that I prepare the inaugural work in the archives project, and who, along with Nancy Polevoy, Chair of the Archives Committee, assisted in every aspect of this project. Archival research was also undertaken at Stephen Wise Free Synagogue, where archivist Ruth Grant graciously assisted in my effort to understand the unsuccessful merger plans between Central Synagogue and the Free Synagogue. Additional research was undertaken at the New York Public Library, Columbia University's Avery Library, and at the Municipal Archives. I am grateful to their staffs. My colleagues Christopher Gray and Carol Krinsky generously aided my search for illustrations.



Foreword

Central Synagogue has its roots in the formative years of our country and our city. From the 1830's on, it has been giving spiritual leadership and comfort to its membership, and it has also been a landmark institution in the overall functioning of the community. What decisions were made in determining the place of Central Synagogue in both the religious and secular community, and how these decisions were arrived at, can teach us a great deal about how our community and our people functioned and developed. Every generation stands on the shoulders of previous generations. The more we learn from our history, the better able we are to cope with the present and plan for the future. For these reasons, and at the urging of our brother, Rabbi Peter Rubinstein, we have chosen to endow the Rubinstein Family Archival Fund. The purpose of this fund is to provide research in the Central Synagogue Archives by appropriate scholars resulting in lectures and papers on the congregation's history. This monograph is a result of that fund.

Robin and Larry Rubinstein



Introduction

On April 19, 1872, Congregation Ahawath Chesed's new synagogue on the southwest corner of Lexington Avenue and East 55th Street was consecrated in an impressive ceremony attended by nearly three thousand people. Although reports in the Jewish press and in New York City's secular newspapers bemoaned the length of the proceedings, which "taxed the patience of the audience," there was no criticism of the striking building that the congregation had erected in the rapidly developing Midtown neighborhood.¹ Ahawath Chesed's move from a small building on the Lower East Side to a grand sanctuary in a prosperous neighborhood uptown was not a singular event in New York's Jewish community during the late 1860s and early 1870s. Many congregations moved north from the Lower East Side: Temple Emanu-El dedicated an elaborate synagogue on Fifth Avenue and East 43rd Street in 1868, Shaaray Tefila consecrated a domed sanctuary on West 44th Street in 1869, and Anshe Chesed moved into an impressive building on Lexington Avenue and East 62nd Street in 1873. These synagogues, and those erected in the nineteenth century by other congregations in the Midtown area, were among the most impressive ecclesiastical buildings in New York City. Yet, only that of Ahawath Chesed, now known as Central Synagogue, survives. Why did this congregation abandon the Lower East Side to erect a synagogue in a new uptown neighborhood? How does its synagogue relate to the development and redevelopment of its Midtown neighborhood? Why, among all the Reform temples of the nineteenth century and all the synagogues built in Midtown, does Central Synagogue's building alone survive? These are the questions that will be explored in this essay.



Early History of Ahawath Chesed

The founding of Congregation Ahawath Chesed (Love of Mercy) in 1846 is directly linked to the settlement of large numbers of German-speaking immigrants in New York City beginning in the 1840s.² Crop failures and political unrest drove hundreds of thousands of people from the German-speaking states of Central Europe, many of whom chose to settle in New York. By 1880, New York's German community numbered more than 370,000, about one-third of the city's total population. They clustered in the tenth and seventeenth wards on the Lower East Side, an area that later became famous as the center of Eastern European Jewish settlement. Indeed, so many Germans moved to the Lower East Side, it was dubbed "Kleindeutschland," (Little Germany). This new immigrant group included a substantial number of Jews, living alongside their more numerous Roman Catholic and Lutheran compatriots.

The social and economic life of this nineteenth-century German-speaking immigrant community, which included the founders of Central Synagogue, provides an interesting study in both assimilation and separatism. As a group, the German immigrants were highly successful in America. They became citizens, voted, fought in the Civil War, prospered in business and other pursuits, and participated in American life. Yet, even later American-born generations continued to use the German language (something that was not true of all immigrant groups to America), segregating themselves from native-born, primarily Protestant society by attending religious institutions, such as Ahawath Chesed, where German was spoken, establishing their own social clubs (including the German-Jewish Harmonie Club), investing their money at German banks, purchasing insurance from the Germania Life Insurance Company, etc.



German-speaking Jews who arrived in the 1840s and wished to join a synagogue had only limited options in New York. As late as the 1820s, the city's only synagogue was Shearith Israel (the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue), an Orthodox Sephardic congregation with a ritual that was foreign to most Ashkenazic Jews from Europe. In 1825, a group of Jews from various European countries established B'nai Jeshurun, which held services in Hebrew and English. This was followed in 1828 by the founding of two congregations, Anshe Chesed and Adas Jeshurun (the first congregation in New York to hold services in German), which merged in 1874 and formed Congregation Beth-El.³

As the German-speaking Jewish migration increased, new congregations were established, including Shaar Hashomayim in 1839 (which joined with Ahawath Chesed in 1898), Rodeph Sholom in 1842, and Temple Emanu-El, the city's first Reform congregation, in 1845, founded by Jews primarily from Prussia. These new congregations usually rented rooms for their services until they could afford to buy a building. Only a few congregations erected their own building, most notably Anshe Chesed, whose Gothic style synagogue on Norfolk Street between East Houston and Stanton Streets, erected in 1849-50, survives as the oldest synagogue structure in New York City (it is now a cultural center). Many other congregations purchased Protestant church buildings that were being abandoned as affluent native-born households fled the Lower East Side for newer and more prestigious sections of Manhattan Island, located away from the poor, foreign-speaking immigrants. Emanu-El, for example, acquired a Methodist church structure on Chrystie Street in 1848, and then in 1854 moved into the former 12th Street Baptist Church.⁴

In 1846, a small group of German-speaking Jews from Bohemia, now part of the Czech Republic, began to meet for prayer together and soon identified themselves as Congregation Ahawath Chesed. They



received a charter from the New York State Legislature in 1848 and the congregation was formally incorporated the following year.⁵ The early history of this new congregation was typical of the synagogues established by German immigrants on the Lower East Side. Modest rooms were initially rented in several neighborhood buildings. As the congregation's size increased, a larger sanctuary was required. Thus, in 1863 they purchased the Eleventh Presbyterian Church, which had been erected in 1842 on the northeast corner of Avenue C and East 4th Street. German-immigrant architect Henry Fernbach converted the church for synagogue use.⁶ Services, inaugurated in the new building in 1864, followed Orthodox tradition.

A year after moving to Avenue C, the synagogue placed advertisements in American and European Jewish publications seeking a rabbi and noting that the congregation was a progressive one that would consider reforming the Orthodox service. In 1866, Dr. Adolph Huebsch arrived from Bohemia to take over the rabbinate. His interest in a moderate reform of traditional religious practices coincided with the views of many members of the synagogue.

Reform Judaism had its birth in the late eighteenth-century period of Enlightenment in central and western Europe, and took form as some Jews became more integrated into European society and began to reject the traditional practices of Orthodoxy. The Reform movement modernized the liturgy, substituted European languages for Hebrew in prayers, introduced sermons, used organs and choirs, and eliminated the separation of men and women during services. Since these reforms had all been instituted in German-speaking areas of Europe, it was inevitable that some of the German immigrants would introduce these reforms in the new synagogues established in American cities. German immigrant Isaac Mayer Wise is generally credited as the first leader of



Reform Judaism in America. Rabbi Wise settled in Cincinnati, a city with a thriving German-Jewish community, in 1854 and became an active proponent of reform. Among his significant projects that assisted in the dissemination of reform ideas were the publication of the *Israelite*, an English-language newspaper, and *Die Deborah*, a similar German-language paper; sponsorship of a modern prayer book (1857); the organization of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (1873), a consortium of liberal synagogues, and the founding of Hebrew Union College (1875), for the training of Reform rabbis. Wise was a national figure, and in 1870 he was the guest speaker at the ceremony for Ahawath Chesed's cornerstone laying.

As at many other German-speaking congregations, Ahawath Chesed's move from orthodoxy to reform was gradual. Rabbi Huebsch advocated moderate reform, and in 1878 the synagogue became an early member of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. However, his successor, Alexander Kohut, who served as rabbi from 1885 until his death in 1894, was far more traditional and championed what became Conservative Judaism. It was only with Dr. Kohut's successors, David Davidson and, most importantly, Isaac S. Moses, that Ahawath Chesed was transformed into a leader in New York City's Reform community.

Ahawath Chesed occupied its Avenue C sanctuary for only eight years before moving uptown to a new building on Lexington Avenue in 1872. During those eight years, the congregation was comprised of a diverse group of people: new and old immigrants; poor and middle-class members; peddlers, tailors, beer and liquor importers and distillers, garment manufacturers, dry goods dealers, "segar" makers, real estate brokers, several successful merchants, and others.⁷ The majority of members were no longer solely from Bohemia. Rather, they included immigrants from Bohemia, Prussia, Bavaria, Baden, Austria, and other German-speaking states of Central Europe. Members ranged



from David Rosenzweig, a peddler who came from Bavaria and lived in a small tenement apartment on Avenue C with his wife and son; to Israel Bloch, a hat and cap manufacturer from Prussia who lived on Third Avenue and 51st Street with his wife and four children; to Marcus Klinger, a Bohemian fancy goods dealer who supported his wife and six American-born children; to retired merchant David Dinkelspiel, an immigrant from Baden who owned real estate valued at \$125,000 and lived in a new house at 7 West 53rd Street with his wife, five children, and three servants – two from Germany and one from Ireland; to Bohemian-born Ignatz Stein, a founder of the congregation, who began business as a “segar” maker, before moving into the garment trade and who, as president of Ahawath Chesed, led the synagogue to its new home on East 55th Street. Conspicuously absent from the membership in 1870 and in later years were the wealthy bankers and merchants who became the mainstay of Temple Emanu-El. Ahawath Chesed became an important middle-class congregation. As the *Israelite* noted in a discussion of the laying of the cornerstone for the new synagogue building in December 1870, the congregation had “one hundred and forty members, few of whom are rich.”⁸

A New Uptown Synagogue

In June 1867, the trustees of Ahawath Chesed broached the idea of selling the temple on Avenue C and acquiring a new building, preferably an old church, farther uptown. What prompted the trustees to consider abandoning the Lower East Side only three years after purchasing the Presbyterian Church? By the late 1860s, the Lower East Side was becoming an increasingly poor community with a rapidly growing population. In order to house this population, older two and three story houses were replaced by tenements each with twenty or more families.⁹ As a result, more affluent German immigrants were leaving the area and



moving uptown. The trustees of Ahawath Chesed may have decided to follow its more affluent members as they moved away from the Lower East Side. It was these wealthy members who also comprised the Board of Trustees, since they largely funded the synagogue and had the time to take part in synagogue governance. They undoubtedly sought a sanctuary that was more convenient to the new uptown neighborhoods where many of them now lived.¹⁰

The trustees of Ahawath Chesed were not alone in seeking a new home uptown. Other synagogue congregations were also beginning to move north. Congregation Shaaray Tefila had hired architect Henry Fernbach in 1865 to design a new synagogue on West 44th Street, while Temple Emanu-El employed Leopold Eidlitz and Fernbach in 1866 to design its spectacular new home on Fifth Avenue and East 43rd Street. The trustees of Ahawath Chesed placed advertisements in church newspapers and spoke with real estate agents about buying a church south of 42nd Street, but could find no available building that was suitable, probably because the church buildings in this area were relatively new and, unlike those on the Lower East Side, still had large congregations. By November 1867 the idea of purchasing an old church was abandoned as the search for an appropriate site was extended north into what was then a relatively undeveloped section of Manhattan. Several sites suitable for new construction were considered south of 50th Street, including one on the corner of Madison Avenue and 45th Street, almost purchased for \$70,000, that was virtually in sight of Temple Emanu-El's new building. The congregation was fortunate in not buying this site at that time because prices for land and construction soon declined as post-Civil War inflation ebbed. Thus, in 1870, the synagogue was able to purchase a plot measuring 100 by 140 feet on the southwest corner of Lexington Avenue and East 55th Street for only \$63,250.

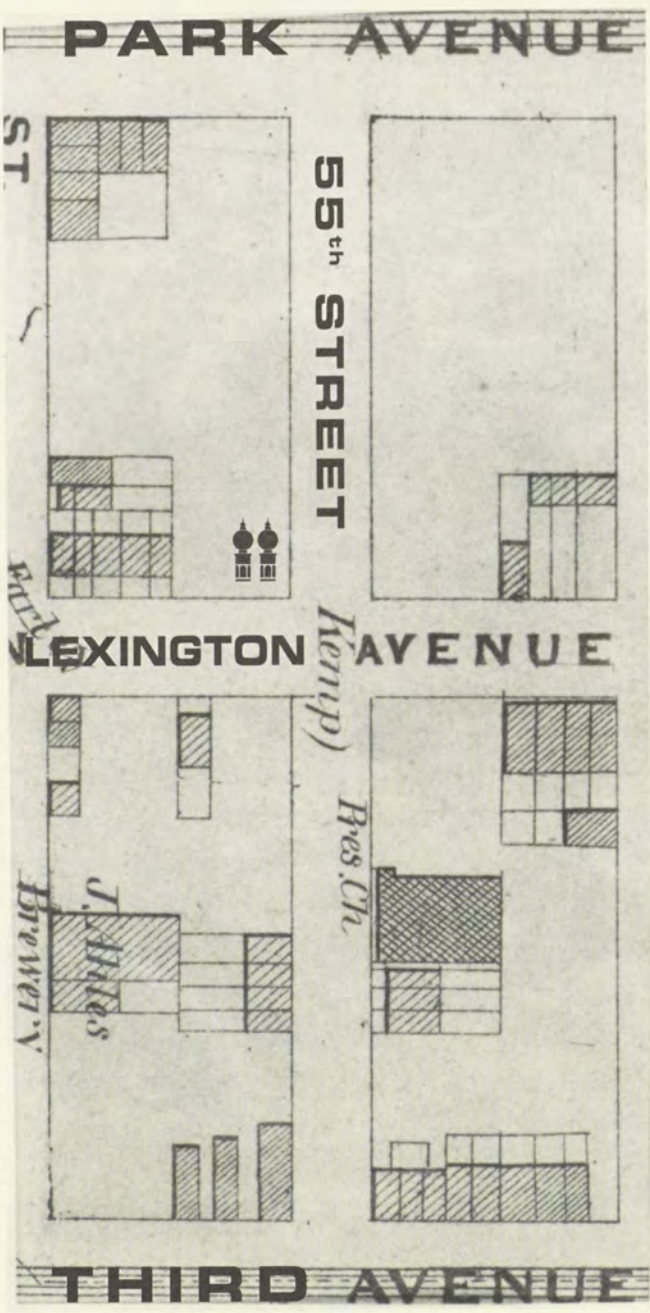


Figure 1. Map of East 55th Street between Park, Lexington, and Third Avenues, 1867; the future site of Ahawath Chesed's new synagogue is indicated just below and to the left of the word Kemp with the Central Synagogue logo superimposed on this map.



Ahawath Chesed now owned a prominent corner site in a rapidly developing middle- and upper-middle-class residential neighborhood close to the homes of the most active members of its congregation (figure 1). Unfortunately, at just this time, the congregation's finances went into the red and there was concern that the impending construction would result in higher expenses. The trustees feared that old members might resign and potential new members might hesitate to join the congregation. The board's Finance Committee reported that "the fear of extraordinary demands on our members, that may be caused by a possible move to a new sanctuary may impel some, due to fear, to some rash action similar to those who during a fire alarm jump from the roof of a house without first trying to find out whether they could save themselves without damage or whether the alarm was not altogether groundless."¹¹ The committee tried to reassure members. Some members nevertheless resigned from the congregation, a few undoubtedly because of concern over expenses, but others who still lived on the Lower East Side because they would be unable to conveniently reach a synagogue on 55th Street. The Finance Committee also recommended that the new synagogue building eschew ostentation: "Inner strength and external modesty will gain us more respect and friends; ... we need neither towers nor architectural scrolls on the outside nor interior ornaments that are overloaded with gold and multi-colored splendor. Let us avoid this... and we will build at a reasonable price, suitable for our purpose."¹²

Henry Fernbach was the architect chosen to design the new synagogue building. Only a few years earlier, Fernbach had redesigned the church on Avenue C for Ahawath Chesed. Since that time, he had also designed new synagogue buildings for congregations B'nai Jeshurun and Shaaray Tefila and had assisted with the design of Temple Emanu-El. Fernbach was born in Silesia, a part of Prussia. He immigrated to America in the 1840s, at the age of twenty, and may have been the first practicing



Figure 2. Henry Fernbach's watercolor drawing of Ahawath Chesed, c. 1870.



Jewish architect in the United States.¹³ Fernbach designed not only synagogues and Jewish institutional buildings, such as the Hebrew Orphan Asylum and the Harmonie Club, but also structures for non-Jewish Germans, including the German Savings Bank on Union Square and the offices of the country's largest German-language newspaper, the *Staats-Zeitung*. Although not as impressive as his synagogue designs, the largest part of Fernbach's practice was the design of commercial buildings, most for Jewish clients. While almost all of Fernbach's religious and institutional buildings have been demolished, many of his cast-iron and stone commercial loft buildings are extant in the Tribeca, SoHo, and Ladies Mile neighborhoods of New York. Ahawath Chesed is his only surviving synagogue.

Although the massing and plan of the new synagogue resemble that of contemporary Protestant churches — with a high nave lit by a clerestory, clearly delineated side aisles, and pointed-arch windows with banded stonework — the ornament was in the romantic Moorish style, referred to by the *Israelite* in 1870 as “Moorish Byzantic” (figure 2).¹⁴ In America, the use of Moorish forms was distinctive to post-Civil War synagogue design and was especially popular for the synagogues erected by congregations influenced by the Reform movement. Moorish and other Islamic features were among the many romantic styles that appeared occasionally on buildings erected in the first half of the nineteenth century. Such features are most prominently displayed on the Brighton Pavilion in England and on a few pre-Civil War buildings in America, notably P. T. Barnum's house in Bridgeport, Connecticut, which was modeled after the Royal Pavilion.¹⁵ The most significant use of Moorish motifs in America, however, was on the synagogues of the 1860s and early 1870s.

The use of the Moorish style for synagogues sets these buildings apart from the Gothic and Romanesque churches of the era. The



construction of these elaborate structures also marks the first time that Jews in America erected easily identifiable synagogue structures. Earlier American synagogues had been designed in the popular architectural styles of their day, without specifically Jewish decorative forms. The Touro Synagogue in Newport, America's oldest synagogue building, erected in 1759-63, is an elegant Georgian style structure, while both Charleston's Beth Elohim Synagogue (1841) and Baltimore's Lloyd Street Synagogue (1845) are fine examples of the popular Greek Revival style and are indistinguishable from contemporaneous church design. In New York, Shaaray Tefila erected a Romanesque building on Wooster Street that resembles a Christian basilica; Anshe Chesed's Gothic Revival style synagogue, built in 1849-50, was compared to Cologne Cathedral. Even as late as 1860, Shearith Israel, the country's oldest Jewish congregation, commissioned a new synagogue on West 19th Street with fashionable Italian Renaissance ornament and dynamic baroque massing.¹⁶

"Moorish" features first appeared on synagogues in Germany — on architect Friedrich von Gärtner's synagogue in Ingenheim (1832) and, most significantly, on the interior of the Dresden Synagogue of 1838-40, designed by Gottfried Semper, one of the most progressive architects of his day. In the following decades, large and prominently sited Moorish synagogues rose in central Europe, culminating with the construction in 1859-66 of the enormous Oranienburgerstrasse synagogue in Berlin. The facades of these buildings often mix Moorish ornamental features with more general Islamic motifs and forms borrowed from Gothic and other styles of architecture. The use of Moorish forms appealed to architects and patrons during a period of romanticism, but it also had specifically Jewish connotations, relating to the roots of Judaism in the Middle East and to the flourishing of Jewish culture in Moorish Spain.



PLUM STREET SYNAGOGUE

Figure 3. Congregation B'nai Yeshurun (Plum Street Temple), Cincinnati, Ohio, c. 1885.



Moorish design is evident on several American synagogues designed in the early 1860s, notably at Temple Emanu-El in San Francisco (1864-66). However, the building that established the style for American congregations, especially for German-speaking congregations moving towards Reform, was that erected by Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise's Congregation B'nai Yeshurun (now known as the Plum Street Temple) in Cincinnati (1865-66; figure 3). It was because of Rabbi Wise's influential place in American Judaism that the design of his Cincinnati building became so influential.

The influence of B'nai Yeshurun was evident soon after the synagogue's completion when, in 1867, New York's Temple Emanu-El erected the country's largest synagogue building in the Moorish style. Emanu-El was New York's wealthiest Jewish congregation. Thus, when its trustees decided to relocate from East 12th Street, they purchased a site on prestigious Fifth Avenue at the corner of East 43rd Street and erected a magnificent building designed by Leopold Eidlitz and Henry Fernbach.¹⁷ This was also the first building in New York that was clearly identifiable as a Jewish house of worship. Temple Emanu-El was dedicated in 1868, just as Congregation Ahawath Chesed was searching for a new uptown site for the relocation of its synagogue. The prominence of Emanu-El's synagogue may have prompted the trustees of Ahawath Chesed to buy the corner plot on Lexington Avenue on which to build the city's second largest synagogue. The lavish Moorish ornament of Emanu-El may also have inspired Ahawath Chesed to erect a building with similarly eye-catching, albeit somewhat less expensive and less elaborate, Moorish features.

The cornerstone of the new Ahawath Chesed sanctuary was laid in December 1870 with Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise officiating. The building was constructed with an exterior of Belleville, New Jersey brownstone and yellow Ohio sandstone trim. The *Israelite* commented on the



Figure 4. Dohány Street Synagogue, Budapest.

building's resemblance to Wise's Plum Street synagogue, but Fernbach's design can also be related to European synagogues, notably the synagogue on Dohány Street in Budapest, completed in 1859, with its large rose window, octagonal towers capped by onion domes, diminutive corner domes, and crenellated roofline (figure 4).¹⁸ Contrary to the Finance Committee's recommendations the building not only had towers on the outside, but a lavish interior that, *Harper's Weekly* reported, was "profusely decorated in polychrome in geometrical patterns."¹⁹ The interior is supported by cast-iron columns, used only a few years after cast-iron had first been employed for religious interiors in America (figure 5).²⁰

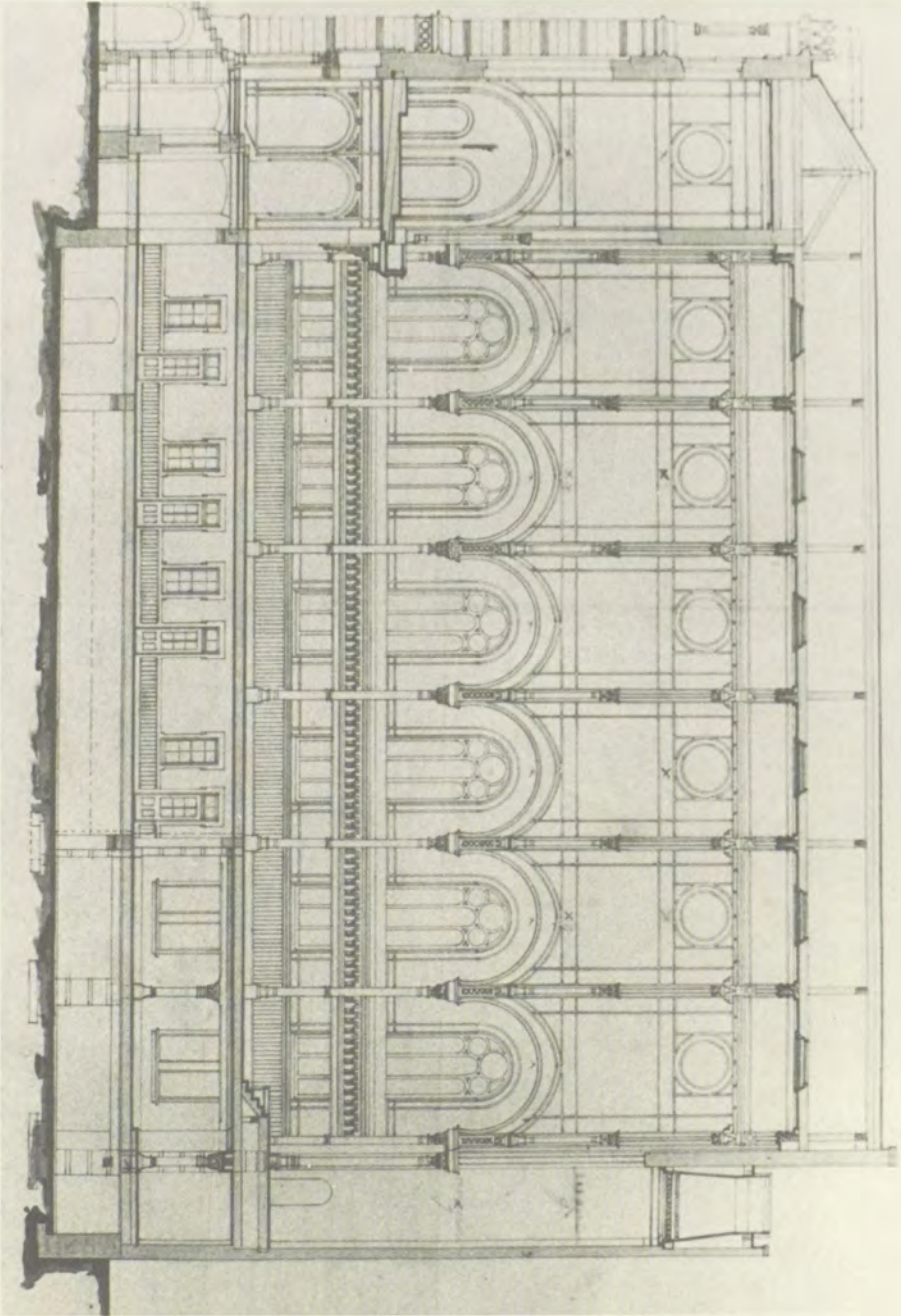


Figure 5. Henry Fernbach's longitudinal section of Ahawath Chessed, with its cast-iron columns, c. 1870.



Construction was completed in April 1872 at a total cost of \$272,575.19, which was paid for by selling the old synagogue on Avenue C for \$40,000, a fund-raising campaign that raised over \$68,000, and taking out loans from members.²¹ Building and maintaining such an impressive edifice was a challenge for a middle-class congregation with fewer than 150 members, but the trustees hoped that by locating this splendid structure in a rapidly developing neighborhood with a large German-speaking population, more and more new members would be attracted to join the congregation and buy or rent pews. There were originally eight different prices for pews, four on the main floor and four in the gallery, and the income from the sale and rental of these seats was the major source of funds for the congregation. Filling the seats was not a problem at the new synagogue's consecration in April 1872 when the building was officially dedicated and Rabbi Heusch extolled the congregation for building "not only a house of worship, but an American-Jewish house of worship. . . . [a] house of worship in evidence of the high degree of development only possible under a condition of freedom."²²

Ahawath Chesed's New Neighborhood

In April 1872, as Ahawath Chesed was holding its first services uptown, the surrounding neighborhood was rapidly becoming a new residential community (frontispiece). Settlement in Manhattan began in the seventeenth century at the southern tip of the island and, as late as the end of the eighteenth century, most people lived and worked in Lower Manhattan. However, as commerce expanded in New York and as more and more buildings were erected specifically for commercial use, residents moved, either because their homes were demolished or because they chose to escape the increasingly commercial environment. New residential neighborhoods, including what we now call Tribeca and



the Lower East Side, were created north of the commercial district in the first years of the nineteenth century.

As New York City became America's leading business and financial center in the early nineteenth century, the number of commercial enterprises continued to expand. Soon, office buildings, warehouses, factories, department stores, and other commercial structures were migrating north, displacing the earlier residential communities. Thus, by 1850, commercial buildings were rapidly replacing the early nineteenth-century rowhouses of Tribeca. As the wealthy moved farther northward into new and more prestigious areas, such as Gramercy Park, Murray Hill, and Midtown, the poor were left behind in deteriorating fringe neighborhoods such as the Lower East Side. By the 1860s and early 1870s, when Ahawath Chesed purchased its property on 55th Street, the open land north of 42nd Street, now known as Midtown, had become a prime location for residential construction.

The immediate area where the synagogue would be erected had been part of the city's common lands, with the city retaining ownership until the 1850s. Although the property was sold in the 1850s, primarily to land speculators, development did not occur immediately since the East 50s was still too far north. Rather, residential construction during that decade centered in Murray Hill, in the East 30s. In fact, Lexington Avenue north of 42nd Street was not even cut through and opened to traffic until 1851.²³ As late as 1867, development remained extremely limited in the East 50s. However, with commerce expanding downtown and the population growing rapidly, development soon surged through East Midtown. Thus, in the late 1860s and 1870s, the East 50s was transformed into a residential neighborhood (figure 6).

The residential development in the East 50s evinces a social hierarchy from Fifth Avenue to the East River. The wealthiest households lived in



GALT & HOY MAP OF NEW YORK, 1879 NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

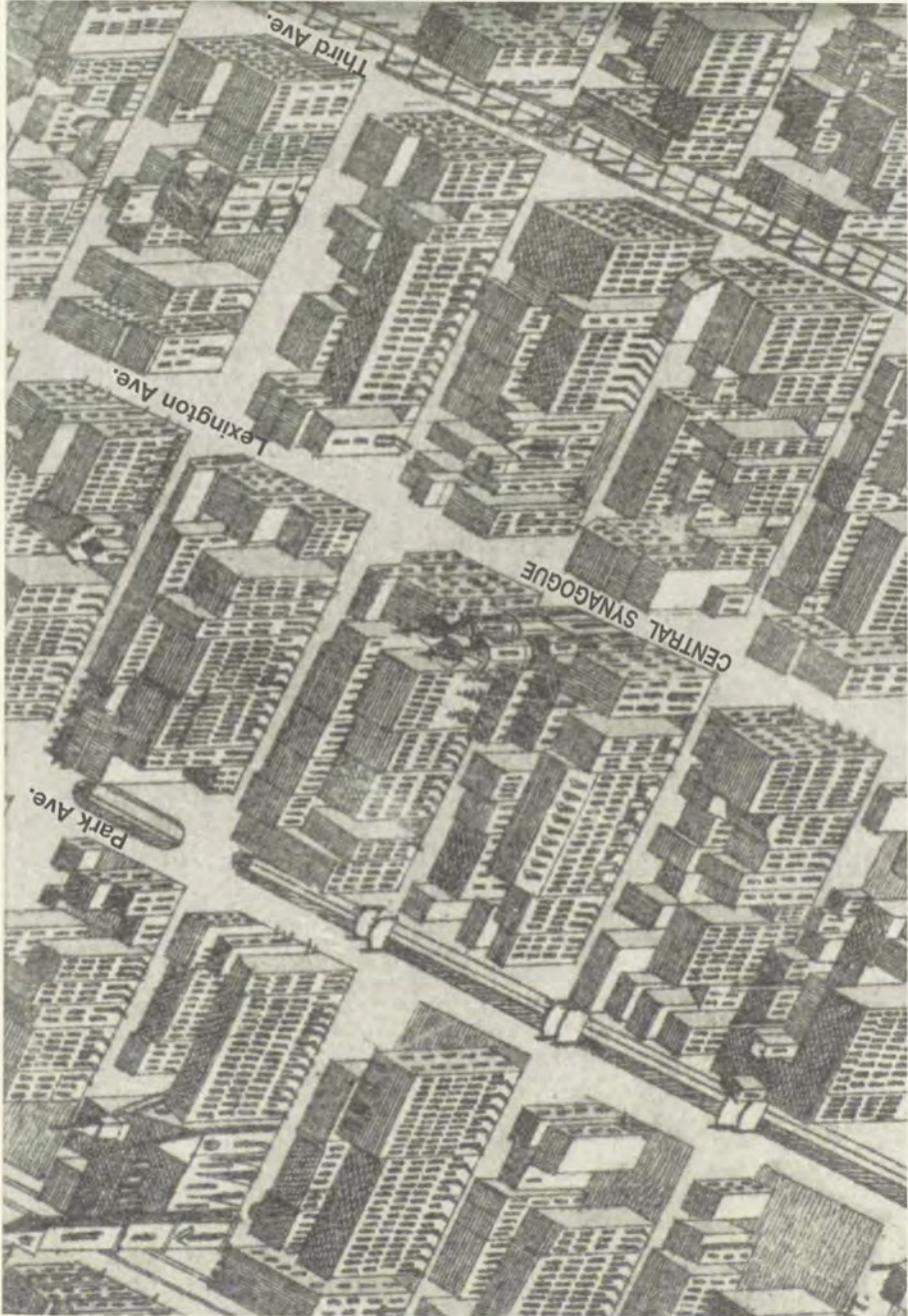


Figure 6. Central Synagogue (center) in its urban neighborhood, 1879. Madison Avenue is at the far left and Third Avenue with its elevated railroad at the right. The open railroad cut is evident on Park Avenue.



Figure 7. Entrance to the Park Avenue railroad tunnel, looking north from 55th Street, early 1870s



mansions and impressive rowhouses and townhouses on Fifth and Madison Avenues and on adjoining side streets. This development culminated in the construction of the William K. Vanderbilt House on Fifth Avenue and West 52nd Street (demolished) in 1878-82, and the Villard Houses on Madison Avenue between 50th and 51st Streets in 1882-85. In addition, institutions that catered to these wealthy families also appeared on Fifth Avenue, notably the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, dedicated in 1875, and St. Thomas Episcopal Church, completed in 1870 (burned and replaced by the present church in 1906-13).

Park Avenue presented a barrier to the eastward spread of prestigious development since the New York Central Railroad tracks on Park Avenue from 44th Street to 56th Street ran in an open cut, crossed only by pedestrian bridges (figures 6 and 7). Thus, Park Avenue in Midtown was lined with wooden shanties and modest tenements, apartment buildings, and rowhouses, as well as stables, factories (the Schaeffer



CENTRAL SYNAGOGUE ARCHIVES

Figure 8. Rowhouses at 638-644 Lexington Avenue, just south of the synagogue, c. 1872.



Brewery between 50th and 51st Streets and the Steinway & Sons piano factory between 52nd and 53rd Streets), and several large institutions (Columbia College, Woman's Hospital, and the woman's department of the Roman Catholic Orphan Asylum). East of Park Avenue, stretching to Third Avenue on some blocks and to First or Second Avenue on other blocks, middle-class rowhouses, most with brownstone fronts, rose in large numbers (figure 8). Farther east, five-story brick tenements were joined by breweries, foundries, and other factories.

The post-Civil War building boom, beginning in the late 1860s and lasting until investment was cut off by the financial panic of 1873, brought the construction of thousands of new single-family rowhouses to the East 50s. On the synagogue's own block, East 55th Street between Park and Lexington Avenues, the north side was entirely built up in 1867-69, with development on the south side of the street occurring after the building market rebounded in the late 1870s. The design of these early rowhouses is still evident if one looks closely. For example, No. 113, a three-story and raised basement, Italianate style, brownstone-fronted house, one of a row of eight designed in 1868 by architect James W. Pirsson for the speculative developer George Hamilton, is intact with the exception of its original entrance stoop. Across the street, at No. 122, the upper three floors of a larger brownstone-fronted Neo-Grec style house, designed in 1877 by Thom & Wilson, survives with its sculptural window enframements and cornice supported by stylized brackets (figure 9). Similarly, the blocks of Lexington Avenue north and south of the synagogue were also entirely residential; remnants of rowhouses are visible on the northwest corner of Lexington Avenue and East 56th Street above later storefronts.

The residents of these new rowhouses east of Park Avenue were mostly business and professional people with large, often extended

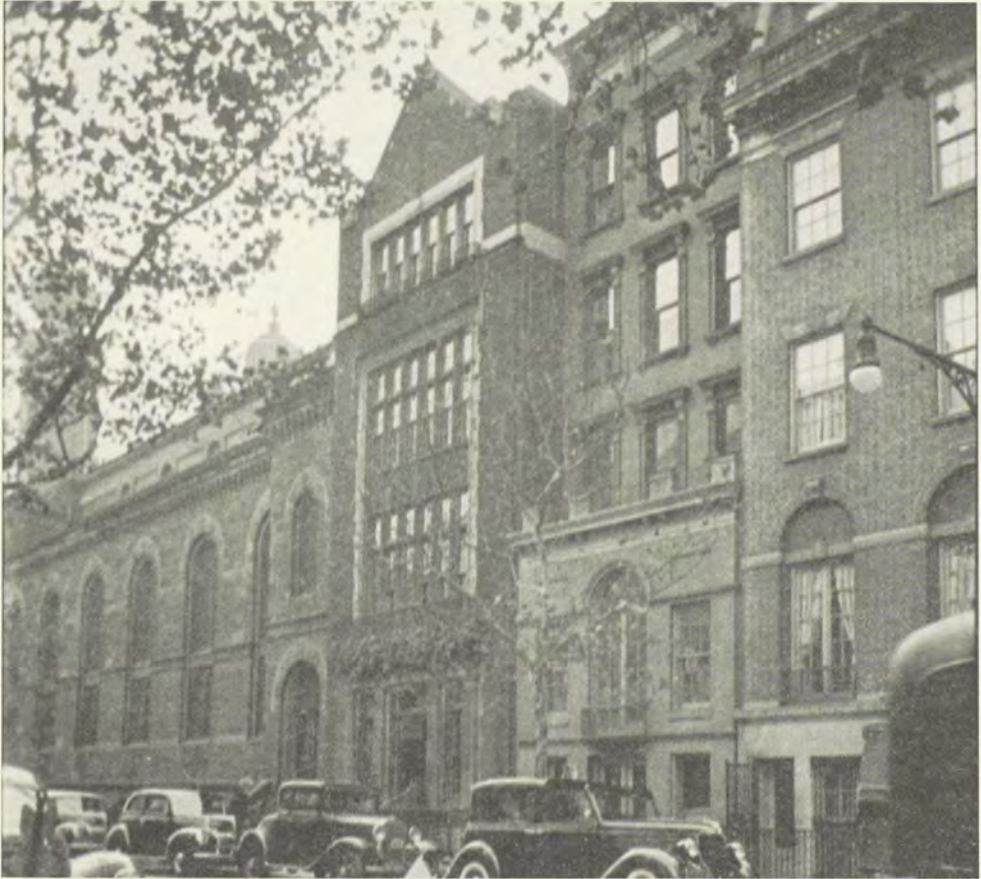


Figure 9. 122 East 55th Street (center), and to the left, the Mary Cunningham House, 1939.

families, and several servants. Many of the residents were born in Germany, some undoubtedly Jewish, reflecting the success of the German immigrant community in New York. As German families prospered they could afford to purchase single-family rowhouses. Initially, the residents of the rowhouses on 55th Street must have had some difficulty commuting to jobs, shopping, and entertainment facilities which were all located downtown since streetcar lines ran



only as far north as 55th Street. However, by 1880 elevated rail lines on Second and Third Avenues made commuting to and from downtown more convenient.

The Changing Neighborhood

In the last years of the nineteenth century, major changes began at Ahawath Chesed and in the surrounding neighborhood. At the synagogue, it was becoming increasingly apparent that the policy of holding services in German, rather than in English, was inhibiting third-generation Americans, many of whom were the children or grandchildren of members, from joining the congregation. Thus, in 1890 the congregation's cultural committee recommended that confirmations be held in English; a few years later the synagogue also inaugurated Friday night sermons in English in hopes of attracting the sons and daughters of members. By the turn of the twentieth century, as English became more and more the first language of congregants, the trustees started keeping records in English (1899) and, in 1900, sought a rabbi who could preach in both German and English. In addition, in 1898, the congregation increased its membership by merging with Shaar Hashomayim, another early German congregation, which had been holding services on East 15th Street; the congregation's official name became Ahawath Chesed Shaar Hashomayim.

By 1900, the tide of urban development in New York City had swept past Lexington Avenue and 55th Street. The new century brought rapid changes to the neighborhood surrounding Ahawath Chesed Shaar Hashomayim, placing the future of the congregation's Moorish synagogue in jeopardy (figure 10). During the final decades of the nineteenth century, neighborhoods such as the Upper East Side, the Upper West Side, and Harlem, had been heavily built up with rowhouses and some apartment buildings. These new residential communities



Figure 10. Central Synagogue in 1939.

attracted much of the city's middle-and upper-middle-class Jewish population. Synagogues naturally followed this northward population movement. Shaaray Tefila abandoned its 44th Street building in 1894 and moved to West 82nd Street, where it became known as the West End Synagogue; Shearith Israel left West 19th Street for an imposing Classical Revival building on Central Park West and 70th Street in



1897. Several other congregations had moved into impressive buildings on the Upper East Side by 1900 – Rodeph Sholom, at Lexington Avenue and 63rd Street; B'nai Jeshurun, at Madison Avenue and 65th Street; Zichron Ephraim, on East 67th Street between Lexington and Third Avenues (a late Moorish style building, erected in 1889-90, that is the only nineteenth century Upper East Side synagogue building still standing); Beth Israel Bikur Cholim (later renamed the Park Avenue Synagogue), at Madison Avenue and 75th Street; and Beth-El, at Fifth Avenue and 76th Street. Harlem's Jews could worship at several distinguished synagogue buildings, including those of Temple Israel of Harlem, a Classical Revival building, erected in 1906-07 on Lenox Avenue and West 122nd Street and Anshe Chesed, a Colonial Revival style building erected in 1907-08 on Seventh Avenue and West 114th Street. As Ahawath Chesed Shaar Hashomayim's members moved farther north, the trustees considered merging with a congregation that had already settled into one of the newly popular neighborhoods, opening discussions in 1898 with Beth-El, B'nai Jeshurun, and Temple Israel of Harlem.

Although Ahawath Chesed had a loyal membership, increased in size by its union with Congregation Shaar Hashomayim, the congregation was still not large. Thus, a merger with one of the congregations that had recently moved north would have provided both more members and a modern synagogue building. By 1898, the congregation's Moorish synagogue was out of fashion since its exotic design, so popular in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, had been replaced by an interest in more austere classical designs, as represented by Shearith Israel and Temple Israel of Harlem's new sanctuaries. Fortunately for the survival of the Moorish building, the trustees concluded that a union with another congregation would be inopportune at that time. However, this would not be the last time that the trustees considered leaving



Lexington Avenue and 55th Street, either to erect a new building or to unite with another congregation.

The migration of New York's Jewish population north into the Upper East Side and, especially into the Upper West Side, increased dramatically in the second and third decades of the twentieth century, as impressive apartment buildings appeared on the wide streets and avenues of these neighborhoods. Not only were new congregations founded to serve these new residents, but many of the city's older congregations relocated to these affluent neighborhoods as their members moved north, commissioning lavish building complexes, often including an enormous sanctuary, as well as generous space for social and educational activities. B'nai Jeshurun was the first to relocate to the West Side, erecting a sanctuary on West 88th Street in 1917-18 and a community house on 89th Street in 1926-28. Rodeph Sholom transferred its services to a similarly commodious complex on West 83rd Street in 1929. This uptown movement of synagogue congregations culminated in 1927 when the trustees of Temple Emanu-El decided to abandon their Moorish building on Fifth Avenue and 43rd Street, which by the early twentieth century was surrounded by office buildings and shops, for a site on Fifth Avenue and 65th Street in the heart of New York's wealthiest residential neighborhood.

As the prime residential neighborhoods moved north of 59th Street, the character of the area surrounding Lexington Avenue and 55th Street changed. By the late nineteenth century many of the rowhouses on the surrounding streets had become boarding houses and the area to the east, closer to the elevated rail lines on Second and Third Avenues, had deteriorated into a slum. Dramatic changes would occur in the area during the early twentieth century as a result of developments in the city's transit systems. In 1900 steam trains still ran in an open cut in Park Avenue south of 56th Street. Above 56th Street the tracks were



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Figure 11. Lexington Avenue, north from 53rd Street, photographed in preparation for construction of the IRT subway, 1912

partially covered, with steam vented through openings in the platform above the tracks. Steam, nevertheless, often built up in this tunnel, decreasing visibility along the tracks. Early in the morning of January 8, 1902, fifteen people died when the engineer of a White Plains local, probably blinded by smoke, missed red signals and plowed his train into the rear of a New Haven Line train that was stopped at 56th Street.²⁴ As a result, the New York State Legislature required the electrification of the rails by 1908. The railroad undertook a monumental project that not only electrified the tracks, but also entailed the construction of a new Grand Central Terminal and the placement of a deck over Park Avenue. In 1912, just as work was being completed on the new



terminal and on Park Avenue, the city announced that the Interborough Rapid Transit Company (IRT) would extend its original subway line north from Grand Central, up Lexington Avenue, with stations at 51st and 59th Streets, running underground adjacent to the synagogue site on 55th Street (figure 11). This new subway line opened in 1918.

These transportation projects profoundly changed Midtown. Electrified trains now rapidly transported business executives and other affluent workers to and from the expanding suburbs north of the city, while the subway transformed the Grand Central area into a transportation hub, with lines extending north and south on Manhattan Island and to the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens as well. As a result, office buildings and hotels soon rose on the streets surrounding Grand Central. A few such buildings were erected in the second decade of the twentieth century, but it was during the 1920s that construction reached a fever pitch. On Lexington Avenue, south of the synagogue, enormous skyscrapers and hotels rose, including the Graybar, Chanin, Chrysler, and General Electric buildings, and the Commodore, Lexington, Beverly, Shelton, and Waldorf-Astoria hotels (figure 12). Even on sites that were not immediately redeveloped, stores invaded the lower floors of the old rowhouses (figure 13).

The completion of the deck over Park Avenue at last removed the barrier to high-class residential development that had inhibited construction in the nineteenth century. Park Avenue itself suddenly became one of the city's best addresses, as luxurious apartment buildings were erected during the second and third decades of the twentieth century from 47th Street all the way to 96th Street. The fact that Park Avenue south of 59th Street was, for a brief time, a prestigious residential boulevard is largely forgotten today, but the former character of this section of Park Avenue remains evident near the synagogue, on the southeast corner of 55th Street, where one apartment building still



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Figure 12. Lexington Avenue looking north from 46th Street with the Lexington, Shelton, Montclair, and Beverly Hotels, 1932.



Figure 13. 638-644 Lexington Avenue, just south of Central Synagogue, 1939.

stands (figure 14). Designed in 1916 by the prominent apartment-house architect Emery Roth, 417 Park Avenue is a study in understated elegance, clad entirely in limestone with subtle, but carefully delineated ornament and a dramatic copper cornice. Similarly, St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church was erected in 1914-19, on the site of the Schaeffer Brewery at Park Avenue between 50th and 51st Streets, so it would be convenient to its wealthy congregants.

By the early twentieth century, the residential blocks in the East 40s, 50s, and low 60s, that had been virtually abandoned by affluent fami-



Figure 14. Park Avenue south from 56th Street, with 417 Park Avenue at left, 1927



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lies, were suddenly among the most convenient locations in the city, an easy walk from New York's newest business center (figure 15). Individuals and developers started reclaiming the rundown houses, converting them into up-to-date new dwellings. Some projects entailed the reclamation of groups of old houses, as at Turtle Bay Gardens, a project on East 48th and 49th Streets that resulted in the conversion of twenty old rowhouses into a unified group of artistically-designed modern homes. More common, however, was the transformation of individual rowhouses into new dwellings. The major objective of these projects was the removal of the awkward stoops and old-fashioned brownstone facades. The popular press and professional architecture magazines were filled with comments condemning brownstone, none perhaps quite as virulent as that of a critic in the magazine *Architecture*:

Years back New York City was infested with a blight now known as the "brownstone era." This blight has been handed down to the present generation of architects as an heirloom. It has existed as a nightmare to the profession who have had to face these monstrous rows of brownstone buildings.²⁵

As a result of this distaste for brownstone, wealthy homeowners and their architects removed the old facades and replaced them with more stylish fronts or, in some cases, demolished the earlier rowhouses entirely and built elegant new homes. This redesign of old rowhouses is especially evident on East 55th Street between Park and Lexington Avenues, where six of the eight extant houses were either redesigned or rebuilt by prominent local architects. The redevelopment of the residences on 55th Street began in 1905 when Arthur Bourne, a Singer Sewing Machine Company heir, purchased the brownstone at No. 117 and added a new Colonial Revival style brick facade (figure 16). The two finest projects on the block are the large townhouse built by William and Helen Ziegler in 1926-27 at No. 116-118 in a style



Figure 15. East 55th Street, looking west from Lexington Avenue, 1912. Several of the brownstone rowhouses already have new façades.

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Figure 16. Arthur Bourne House (center), 117 East 55th Street, 1939.

resembling that of an eighteenth-century Virginia plantation (figure 17); Ziegler, heir to the Royal Baking Powder fortune, raised race horses, which explains the presence of a small horse head on one of the window keystones), and Mary Cunningham's unusual early-sixteenth-century English Jacobean-inspired brick facade of 1909 at No. 124 with its multiple windows separated by thin limestone bars and ornamented with diamond-patterned bands of terra-cotta (figure 9).²⁶

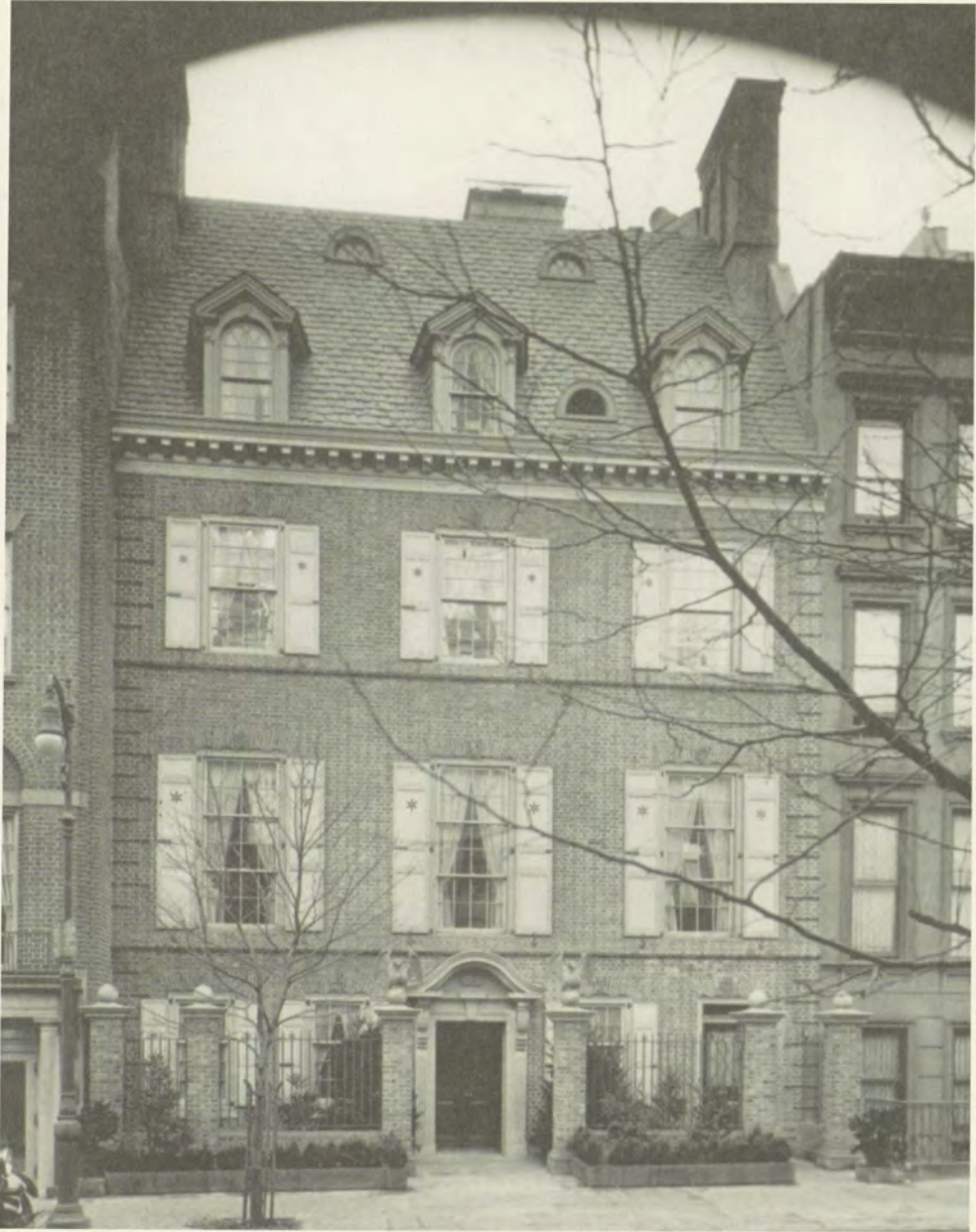


Figure 17. William and Helen Ziegler House, 116-118 East 55th Street, c. 1927.



A Future For Central Synagogue in the Evolving Neighborhood

Despite all this residential and commercial development occurring around the synagogue, the composition of the membership remained surprisingly stable over the decades. In 1920, it was still largely middle- and upper-middle-class families, most in business or manufacturing, with, as one might expect in the Jewish community of 1920, a large number of people involved in the garment trade (figure 18). However, fewer and fewer members lived in the immediate vicinity of the synagogue. The migration of synagogue members north to the Upper East and Upper West Sides prompted the trustees to establish a Committee on Site in 1909 to once again “investigate the question as to the advisability of finding another location for the place of worship of our Congregation.” In 1911, the committee specifically investigated the notion of exchanging the Lexington Avenue property for a site on the northwest corner of Central Park West and 91st Street and the following year they considered purchasing a large site on the southwest

J.A. STEIN
D.H. EIGNER
G.A. McLAURY



TELEPHONE:
MURRAY HILL 387

J.A. STEIN
7 EAST 37TH STREET
NEW YORK

April 26th, 1921

Figure 18. Business letterhead of synagogue member J. A. Stein with ostrich feather logo.



corner of Central Park West and 95th Street.²⁷ This would have been an opportune time to move to the Upper West Side. The Jewish population of this neighborhood was increasing rapidly as new apartment houses were erected, yet there were only two major synagogues in the area — Shearith Israel on Central Park West at 70th Street and the West End Synagogue on West 82nd Street.

In 1913, after the Committee on Site examined the issues involved with moving the congregation and erecting a new synagogue building, the members voted to defer any move and to maintain the synagogue on Lexington Avenue, arguing that no suitable site could be found at a reasonable cost. In addition, the committee believed that the completion of the IRT subway would “render the present location of our Temple more central and desirable as a place of worship for our Congregation composed of members residing in diverse sections of the city.”²⁸ The fact that members lived in various neighborhoods made the issue of relocating the synagogue especially complex. The majority of members were split between those who lived on the Upper East Side and those on the Upper West Side. If the Committee on Site had chosen a new location in one of these areas, members who lived in the other neighborhood might have left the congregation.

The most interesting argument made by the Committee on Site for keeping the congregation on Lexington Avenue is a recognition that many members felt nostalgic about the historic building. The committee’s report refers to “the architecturally unexcelled Temple” and “the sentimental hold . . . [of] the beautiful Temple in which they [the members of the congregation] and their parents have worshiped for years.”²⁹ This awareness that the Moorish Temple, while no longer a fashionable building, was worthy of the congregation’s love and attention and could not easily be abandoned, was an unprecedented statement of concern for the cultural and architectural heritage of the



institution. The 1913 decision not to relocate did not put an end to discussions of moving or consolidating with another congregation; indeed, two years later the trustees briefly considered uniting with either Temple Beth-El or the West End Synagogue. Nevertheless, the committee's decision not to relocate is noteworthy because it occurred at the same time that so many other congregations were abandoning their historic sanctuaries.

Instead of moving to a new neighborhood, the trustees decided that, at least temporarily, they would seek to exploit their newly convenient location. As a result of this decision to remain on Lexington Avenue and 55th Street, in 1918 the trustees changed the congregation's name to Central Synagogue. Replacing the original Hebrew name with a more secular English name both expressed the increasing Reform leanings of the congregation and advertised, to members and nonmembers alike, that the synagogue was located on a corner that was easy to reach from all parts of the city.

Although Central Synagogue had a large sanctuary and smaller rooms in the basement for educational and social activities, by the early twentieth century the building no longer adequately served all of the needs of the congregation. In addition, it could not compete with the facilities offered at newer synagogues that often incorporated community centers with classrooms, theaters, meeting rooms, gymnasiums, and even swimming pools. The idea of building community centers as adjuncts to churches and synagogues flourished in the early decades of the twentieth century as secular culture drew people away from religion. Instead of attending services, people, especially young people, went to the movies, or a baseball game, or a dance hall. As a result, the trustees decided that it was imperative for the survival of a thriving congregation that they acquire a community center that could offer such amenities.³⁰



Figure 19. Central Synagogue's community center, 35 East 62nd Street, 1920s.



Daniel Kops, a successful corset manufacturer and synagogue trustee, spearheaded the movement to erect a community center. In 1922, he wrote a report that speaks to many of the social issues affecting synagogues in the 1920s. He noted that a community center was needed because “the alluring influences of a large city like New York are so strong and many-sided, on the younger generation, that they are apt to destroy the soundest and most sacred traditions of home life.”³¹ Preserving traditions was not, however, Kops’ only concern in arguing for a community center. Kops was afraid that if Central Synagogue did not acquire a community center, members would be lured away by newer temples that had constructed such buildings. Kops wrote that:

The same principle of competition holds good between congregations as in other business enterprises. The effect of competition is the same. No organization can afford to stand still. Either they go ahead or they go back. Consequently, the advantage of having a Community Centre is unquestionable from a purely competitive point of view.

Since there was no place on East 55th Street available for building a community center, in 1926 the congregation purchased the building on 35 East 62nd Street between Madison and Park Avenues that had been erected in 1904-05 as Miss Keller’s Day School (figure 19). Since this was one of the first buildings in New York City with a reinforced-concrete frame, it provided large, unencumbered spaces that the synagogue could adapt for many community uses.³²

In 1923, shortly after the idea of acquiring a community center was first broached, Central Synagogue was faced with a serious crisis when Rabbi Nathan Krass was lured away by Temple Emanu-El. Louis Marshall, one of Emanu-El’s most prominent members, defended his congregation’s offer to Rabbi Krass, informing Central Synagogue that



he would be "serving a larger Congregation and appealing not only to those who attend our house of worship, but to the Jews of the entire country." An obviously irritated Samuel Hamburger, president of Central Synagogue, replied that "It is our opinion that the work our Congregation has done and can do for Judaism is of equal importance to the work done by your Congregation."³³ However, without a rabbi, at a time when new synagogues were being erected on the Upper East and West Sides, Central faced an uncertain future.

In response to the loss of its rabbi, Central Synagogue's trustees announced, in May 1923, that the congregation would create a federation with Rabbi Stephen S. Wise's Free Synagogue, a radical Reform congregation with a "free" pulpit, from which anyone could speak uncensored. Rabbi Wise was among the most dynamic and influential figures in the history of Reform Judaism in New York. Although his congregation owned a new synagogue house with a small sanctuary on West 68th Street, Rabbi Wise preached every week to large crowds at Carnegie Hall. The federated congregation, known as the Central and Free Synagogues, hoped to build what Rabbi Wise referred to as a "noble and ample synagogue" at a location to be selected.³⁴ Once this building was completed, the congregations would formally merge. Such a union would, Rabbi Wise believed, "embody the loyalty of the members of both synagogues to the ideals of liberal historical Judaism which can be served through a free pulpit and a democratic organization, including unassigned pews and voluntary support."³⁵ These latter requirements would have entailed a major change for Central Synagogue, which relied on fees from the rental of seats to support the congregation. The proposed merger seemed to move along smoothly through 1924, but by early 1925 the arrangement had collapsed. With no immediate likelihood of building a new sanctuary, the trustees of the Free Synagogue felt that Rabbi Wise was overburdened with



the responsibility of preaching to two congregations with activities in three locations and they voted to discontinue discussions of a congregational merger.³⁶

Despite the fact that Central Synagogue's trustees received many offers to buy its increasingly valuable Lexington Avenue site, they resisted. Its congregation's nostalgia for the historic building, indecision about where the synagogue might move, and the question of whether or not the congregation could afford the cost of constructing a major new synagogue center assured the survival of Central Synagogue's historic home. Of all the Reform synagogues in New York City, Central is the only one still housed in its historic nineteenth-century home and it is the only nineteenth-century synagogue building remaining in Midtown. The building has come to be revered by the congregation and by the community at large. In 1966, the synagogue was one of the first buildings designated as a New York City landmark and in 1975 it became a National Historic Landmark, placing it among the top one or two percent of historic sites in America. Despite the neighborhood changes that have swirled around the synagogue since it was completed in 1872 and a serious fire in 1998, (figure 20, 21) which was followed by a spectacular restoration and the rededication of the building on September 9, 2001, (figure 22, 23) Central Synagogue stands as one of the greatest synagogue buildings in America and one of the most beautiful buildings in New York City.



A.W. MININBERG, ARCHIVES CENTRAL SYNAGOGUE

Figure 20. View of destroyed roof of Central Synagogue shortly after August 1998 fire.



A. W. MININBERG, ARCHIVES CENTRAL SYNAGOGUE

Figure 21. Interior southwest view of Central Synagogue shortly after August 1998 fire.



ESTO PHOTOS/PHOTO BY PETER MAUSS

Figure 22. Dedication ceremony with the clergy and dignitaries on the platform built over the central front steps. Congregants and friends fill the street. September 9, 2001.



Figure 23. Clergy, dignitaries, congregants and friends joyously enter the restored sanctuary continuing the dedication and celebration. September 9, 2001.



Endnotes

¹ *Jewish Messenger*, May 3, 1872, p. 2. Also see, "Consecration of a New Synagogue," *Jewish Times*, April 26, 1872, p. 165; "Consecration of the Jewish Temple of Ahawath Chesed," *New York Times*, April 20, 1872, p. 5; "Metropolitan Notes," *New York Evening Post*, April 20, 1872, p. 1.

² For the history of the congregation, see Herbert Schwarz, *Your Temple: A Unique Story of Devotion, Faith and Service* (New York: Central Synagogue, 1958); *Central Synagogue 140 Years* (New York: Central Synagogue, 1979); Malcolm H. Stern, "The Story of Central Synagogue," (unpublished typescript in Central Synagogue Archives, c. 1991); Daniel Soyer, compiler, "History of Central Synagogue," in *Guide to the Archives Central Synagogue* (1994); Christopher Gray, "A \$500,000 Restoration of an 1872 Masterwork," *New York Times*, April 2, 1995, section 9, p. 7. For a detailed history of the German community in New York City, see Stanley Nadel, *Little Germany: Ethnicity, Religion, and Class in New York City, 1845-80* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

³ Temple Beth-El became a part of Temple Emanu-El in 1927 and is remembered in Emanu-El's Beth-El Chapel. The present Congregation Anshe Chesed, a Conservative congregation located on West End Avenue and 99th Street, has no historic relationship to the congregation of the same name established in 1828.

⁴ For early Jewish congregations of New York and their locations, see Hyman B. Grinstein, *The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York 1654-1860* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publishing Society of America, 1947), pp. 53-57, 472-74. Temple Emanu-El's East 12th Street building is now St. Ann's Shrine Armenian Catholic Cathedral.

⁵ The traditional history of the congregation states that eighteen Bohemian Jews first met at Coblenzer's Hotel on Ludlow Street in 1846 (although the date may have been 1847); see Soyer, "History of Central Synagogue," p. 1.

⁶ The Eleventh Presbyterian Church moved several times and is now the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church on Madison Avenue and East 73rd Street. Information about Fernbach's conversion of the church into a synagogue was uncovered by Joy Kestenbaum, see note 13.

⁷ In order to better understand the makeup of the congregation, names were compiled from handwritten (and often hard to read) membership lists, trustees minutes, and other sources. These were cross-referenced to city directories and listings in the 1870 United States Census. Since German-speaking states did not unite until 1871, place of birth is listed in the 1870 census by state, such as Baden or Prussia. Others are listed by province within the Austro-Hungarian empire, such as Austria or Bohemia.

⁸ "On New York," *The Israelite*, December 23, 1870, p. 8.



- ⁹ The building at 97 Orchard Street, erected in 1863-64, now the Tenement Museum, is a typical example of new tenement construction. This building initially housed twenty-two families and two shops. Most of the residents were German.
- ¹⁰ When the search for an uptown site began, congregation president Ignatz Stein lived on East 10th Street, but by 1872, when the new synagogue on Lexington Avenue and East 55th Street opened, he had moved his large family to 111 East 85th Street.
- ¹¹ "Report of the Finance Committee to the Directors and Members of the Congregation Ahawath Chesed," April 24, 1870, in Central Synagogue, *Minutes of the Board of Trustees* (Central Synagogue Archives).
- ¹² "Report of the Finance Committee," note 11.
- ¹³ Extensive research on Fernbach has been undertaken by architectural historian Joy Kestenbaum, art and architecture librarian and assistant professor at Pratt Institute; see her "Henry Fernbach: Architect of Distinction," in Jewish Historical Society of New York, *News of the Society*, June-August, 1979, p. 4, and "Henry Fernbach," in Adolf K. Placzek, ed., *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects* vol. 2 (New York: Free Press, 1982), p. 52. She has also lectured widely on Fernbach; her lecture, "From Silesia to Central Synagogue: Henry Fernbach, New York City's First Prominent Jewish Architect," presented at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, April 5, 2000, is a source for some of the material included here. Also see obituaries, *New York Times*, November 13, 1883, p. 2; *American Architect and Building News* 14 (November 24, 1883), p. 241; and "The Late Henry Fernbach," *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide* 32 (December 8, 1883), p. 974.
- ¹⁴ "On New York," *The Israelite*, December 23, 1870, p. 8.
- ¹⁵ Barnum's house, "Iranistan," was designed by Leopold Eidlitz, who would later design Temple Emanu-El's Moorish synagogue.
- ¹⁶ These and other early American synagogues are discussed and illustrated in Rachel Wischnitzer, *Synagogue Architecture in the United States* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1955), to date, the most comprehensive history of the American synagogue.
- ¹⁷ For the Moorish synagogue in America, see Wischnitzer, *Synagogue Architecture*, pp. 67-84. Temple Emanu-El is also discussed in Montgomery Schuyler, "A Great American Architect: Leopold Eidlitz," *Architectural Record* 24 (November 1908), pp. 376-79, and in Robert A. M. Stern, Thomas Mellins, and David Fishman, *New York 1880: Architecture and Urbanism in the Gilded Age* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1999), pp. 323-29. Eidlitz was apparently a Jewish immigrant (from Prague) who converted to the Episcopal faith soon after arriving in the United States.



¹⁸“On New York,” *The Israelite*, December 23, 1870, p. 8. The Moorish style is discussed in Carol Herselle Krinsky, *Synagogues of Europe: Architecture, History, Meaning* (New York: Architectural History Foundation, 1985), pp. 81-85; for the Dresden synagogue, see pp. 276-79; for Oranienburgerstrasse, see pp. 265-70; for Dohány Street, see pp. 157-59. Fernbach may have known of the Budapest synagogue from engravings or photographs.

¹⁹“The New Synagogue,” *Harper’s Weekly* 16 (July 6, 1872), p. 532.

²⁰James Renwick, Jr. and Edward Potter were the first American architects to employ cast-iron in church interiors, notably at Renwick’s St. Ann’s Episcopal Church on the corner of Clinton Avenue and Livingston Street in Brooklyn Heights, designed c. 1866, and at Potter’s Trinity Cathedral, Davenport, Iowa and Church of the Good Shepard, Hartford, Connecticut, both begun in 1867; see Sarah Bradford Landau, *Edward T. and William A. Potter: American Victorian Architects* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1979), p. 147.

²¹The new owner demolished the Avenue C synagogue and replaced it with tenements.

²²“Consecration of a New Synagogue,” *Jewish Times*, April 26, 1872, p. 165.

²³I. N. Phelps Stokes, *Iconography of Manhattan Island: 1498-1909* vol. 5 (New York: Robert H. Dodd, 1926), p. 1832.

²⁴Christopher Gray, “How a Deadly Train Accident Created an Elite Street,” *New York Times*, January 14, 2001, section 9, p. 9.

²⁵Wesley Sherwood Bessell, “Altered Brownstone,” *Architecture* 43 (June 1921), p. 190.

²⁶The Cunningham house is actually a new facade on the street’s only early apartment house, a brownstone-fronted building designed by Thom & Wilson in 1880-81. Besides the Bourne, Ziegler and Cunningham projects, the other extant houses on East 55th Street that were altered in the early decades of the twentieth century are: No. 120, a Colonial Revival façade commissioned by banker and lawyer Arthur W. Robinson and his wife Anne, from Lord & Hewlett (1907-08); No. 155, an austere Renaissance-inspired facade by F. B. & A. Ware (1919); and No. 119, real estate broker Charles F. Noyes’ Colonial Revival house design by Aymar Embury II (1934).

²⁷“Report of Committee on Site,” *Board Minutes*, April 19, 1909, January 19, 1911; and *Board Minutes*, May 12, 1912.

²⁸“Report of Committee on Site,” *Board Minutes*, April 2, 1913.

²⁹“Report of Committee on Site,” note 28.



³⁰For the community center movement, see David Kaufman, *Shul with a Pool: The 'Synagogue Center' in American Jewish History* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999) and "A Trail-Breaking Institution," *The American Hebrew* 123 (August 31, 1928), pp 454-58, 466.

³¹"Report of the Committee of Arrangements for the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of Central Synagogue," Daniel Kops, chairman, in *Board Minutes*, October, 1922.

³²In 1990, this building was restored and converted into the headquarters for Revlon, Inc. The congregation sold the community house building after completing the Jonah B. Wise Memorial, generally referred to as the Community House, at 123 East 55th Street in 1967. This building replaced two earlier rowhouses, including one that had been altered in 1911 by architect Grosvenor Atterbury for interior decorator Elsie de Wolfe and her partner, the literary agent Elizabeth Marbury.

³³Louis Marshall to Samuel B. Hamburger (president of Central Synagogue), quoted in *Board Minutes*, March 7, 1923, and Hamburger to Marshall, quoted in *Board Minutes*, April 4, 1923.

³⁴"Statement of Rabbi Wise" presented at the annual meeting of the Free Synagogue, 1923 (Stephen Wise Free Synagogue Archives).

³⁵"Statement of Rabbi Wise," note 34.

³⁶Stephen Wise Free Synagogue, *Minutes of the Board of Trustees*, February 2, 1925; also Frederick L. Guggenheimer to Max Schallek (Secretary of Central Synagogue), *Board Minutes*, February 4, 1925.



About the Author

Andrew S. Dolkart is an architectural historian who teaches at Columbia University and has written extensively about the architecture and development of New York City, including The Landmarks Preservation Commission's *Guide to New York City Landmarks* and the award-winning *Morningside Heights: A History of Its Architecture and Development*. He has also written walking tour guides to the Upper East Side, Harlem and Lower Manhattan, published by the New York Landmarks Conservancy.







Central Synagogue

100 Park Street East, New York, N.Y. 10022-7265

212 694 7500 • Fax: 212 694 7501 • www.centralny.org



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