

The Former Temple Israel

Xiyu Li

x13131@columbia.edu

Studio I Final Project - Building Study: Assessing Significance

Columbia University GSAPP Historic Preservation Program

Basic Building Information

As shown in figure 1, the former Temple Israel is a symmetrical building that stands at the intersection of West 120th Street and Lenox Avenue (or Malcolm X Boulevard). In terms of its setting, it is mainly surrounded by residential buildings with storefronts at the street level. Also, the building is within the boundaries of Mt. Morris Park Historic District.

According to the property card found at the New York City Municipal Archives, it is stated that the building was constructed in 1906. Three entities are found on the conveyance records, Temple Israel of Harlem (1906-1920), Greater New York Corporation of Seventh-day Adventists (1920-1925), and Mt. Olivet Baptist Church (1925-now), respectively.¹ Given that, the building served the different congregations as a religious building throughout history. This paper uses the term “synagogue” because the building significance is mainly contributed by its architectural value associated with the era when it served Temple Israel of Harlem as a synagogue.

Looking at its architectural features, the synagogue is a three-story high, symmetrical building. From figure 2, it can be observed that limestone was used as the primary material for the facade. Three window bays are divided by four Ionic columns, and it is worth noticing that a Jewish symbol, the Star of David, is found on each capital. Limestone staircases lead to entrances of the synagogue. In addition, recesses cut into the limestone to create the impression of wide joints. Above the frieze, the cornice is decorated with dentils, and there are egg and dart ornaments at the center of the building, which also can be found on the decorations on the parapet. Between the columns, a projecting spandrel

1. *Property Card (Block 1905 Lot 29)*, New York City Municipal Archives.

panel separates the first and second floor also serves as the sill for the second-floor windows. If one observes closely, it can be found that those are stained-glass windows, with the glazing installed over those glasses, which visually creates a color homogeneity with other materials on the facade.

Significance

In terms of the significance identification, the architectural value is proposed in the paper from two aspects: the synagogue was built by a notable architect named Arnold Brunner, and the synagogue was regarded as an outstanding example of a Neo-Classical style synagogue in Manhattan, and probably rank as the single best Neo-Classical synagogue in Manhattan, as remarked by New York Times columnist David W. Dunlap in his book, *From Abyssinian to Zion*.²

Arnold Brunner, a Jewish American architect, was the designer of the synagogue. Born in New York, Brunner received a top-class architectural education and training from two architects, William R. Ware when Brunner studied under him at MIT and George B. Post, whom he spent his early career working for.³ It is believed that these two exceptional architects influenced Brunner in developing his own architectural design language. Later, he started a partnership with Thomas Tryon in 1894 for a short time, and some notable buildings erected were co-designed with Tryon. Brunner was widely recognized for his

2. David Dunlap, *From Abyssinian to Zion: A Guide to Manhattan's Houses of Worship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), page 270.

3. *Arnold W. Brunner Grant*, American Institute of Architects, accessed December 16, 2021, <https://www.aiany.org/architecture/competitions-grants/arnold-w-brunner-grant/>.

outstanding performance in the field of the built structure; he held professional memberships in many architectural institutions and organizations, including the American Institute of Architects (AIA) and the National Academy of Design. The latter is regarded as an honorary association with limited members of 450 people in recognition of their extraordinary contributions to art and architecture in America, and Brunner was peer-elected as a member.⁴ In the book, *Arnold W. Brunner and his work*, his peer architects spoke highly about him not limited to his excellent architectural works, and his personality was described as energetic, confident, hardworking, and humorous.⁵

Some of his architectural works across the country are recognized by the National Register of Historic Places, such as the Old Federal Building and Post Office in Cleveland, Ohio (Howard M. Metzenbaum U.S. Courthouse)⁶. His work at the Pennsylvania State Capitol Complex demonstrates that he was also an outstanding city planner.⁷

As stated in the previous paragraph, the synagogue is regarded as an outstanding example of a Neo-Classical synagogue in Manhattan. Brunner gave the synagogue a Neo-Classical skeleton among many alternative architectural styles. Two aspects contribute to

4. *National Academicians*, National Academy of Design eMuseum, accessed December 16, 2021, <https://nationalacademy.emuseum.com/people/images?filter=currentNA%3Atrue>.

5. Robert Ingersoll Aitken and Edwin Howland Blashfield, *Arnold W. Brunner and his work* (New York: Press of the American Institute of Architects, 1926), page 7-10.

6. *Old Federal Building and Post Office - National Register of Historic Places*, National Parks Service, accessed December 16, 2021, <https://npgallery.nps.gov/AssetDetail/NRIS/74001448>.

7. *The Pennsylvania Capitol*, The PA Capitol Complex - PA Capitol, accessed December 16, 2021, <http://www.pacapitol.com/plan-a-visit/capitol-complex.cfm>.

the reasons for Brunner to choose this particular style. The first one is his synagogue style preference. He had designed a Moorish-style synagogue in New York, the former Shaaray Tefila in 1896, before moving away from the more exotic Romanesque, Venetian and Moorish influences in the mid-1890s. By the late 1890s, the Classical style became his preferred style.⁸ Another consideration is that the choice of architectural styles should base on difference among Jewish congregations. It must be pointed out that Brunner's idea did not happen in the early stages of architectural style transformation.⁹ Instead, it is believed that he gradually developed his idea of designing a synagogue that should root at the different congregations, which is embodied in his article, *Synagogue Architecture*.

Orthodox congregations are traditional and value ritual ceremonies significantly. In contrast, the Reformed congregation will use local language to worship and more actively integrate into the local community, they value more ethical aspects than ceremonial ones, so they have less elaborate religious ceremonies. In addition, the Reformed congregations deemed that a synagogue that exemplified American ideals and Jewish ones was progressive and up to date.¹⁰ Brunner, a Jewish architect, who was also a part of the community that he often designed for, criticized some architects, who though capable, rigidly imposed the synagogue style, especially the Moorish style, without familiarizing

8. Samuel Gruber, *USA: Arnold Brunner's 'Forgotten' Synagogue, the Former Cong. Shaaray Tefila*, accessed December 16, 2021, <http://samgrubersjewishartmonuments.blogspot.com/2017/07/usa-arnold-brunners-forgotten-synagogue.html>.

9. Samuel Gruber, "Arnold W. Brunner and the New Classical Synagogue in America," *Jewish History* 25, no. 1 (2011): 69-102, page 70, accessed December 16, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/41478218.pdf>.

10. Gruber, *Arnold W. Brunner and the New Classical Synagogue in America*, page 92.

themselves with the different Jewish groups and their ways of worship, and he thought it was inappropriate.¹¹

Temple Israel transformed from a traditional German Jewish congregation into a progressive (Reformed) congregation at every level of its many activities under the leadership of both its first permanent Rabbi, Dr. Harris and President of the Youth Men's Hebrew Association (YMHA), Daniel P. Hey in the 1880s.¹² In his article, *Synagogue Architecture*, Brunner realized that the very simplicity of the service of the Reformed congregation indicates that simplicity combined with dignity should be the dominant note in the design of the building.¹³ Thus, it is believed that a Neo-Classical synagogue was proposed for Temple Israel as a Reformed congregation.

Although it is stated that the Neo-Classical synagogue, due to its simplicity compared to other styles, matched the nature of a Reformed congregation, a Neo-Classical style was applied for an Orthodox congregation by Brunner in 1897, the Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue (shown in figure 6). It seems like a paradox existed within Brunner's design philosophy; nevertheless, Brunner's superb architectural language refuted that idea. In line with the solemnity of the Frank Memorial Synagogue in Philadelphia (built in 1901), which was another Neo-Classical design by Brunner, Temple

11. Arnold Brunner, "Synagogue Architecture," *The Brickbuilder* 16, No.3 (1907): 37-44, page 37, accessed December 16, 2021, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015055422912&view=1up&seq=174&skin=2021&q1=brunner>.

12. Our History, Temple Israel of the City of New York, May 8, 2020, <https://tinyc.org/history/#1882>.

13. Brunner, *Synagogue Architecture*, page 38.

Israel avoided the celebratory and dynamic effect of the Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue by its stolid and static design, playing down the ceremonial aspects as a Reformed congregation.¹⁴

Heritage Management Plan

As for the heritage management plan, documentation is deemed the first step after proposing the architectural significance, and it consists of materials and the conditions identification and listing character-defining features of the synagogue.

From Figures 2 and 3, it can be observed that the facade used a variety of materials, such as limestone as the primary material of the facade, stained-glass panels fixed by the wooden window frame. At the bottom of the entire window, a copper alloy can be found as the material for the lower panel. The overall condition of the synagogue appears to be good, and it is structurally sound, except for two areas where plaster/paint are peeling. One is on the surface of the interior ceiling, and the color paint fades away. The other is on the lower window panels, where copper alloy metal is exposed due to the peeling of the paint, as shown in Figures 3 & 4.

In terms of character-defining features, apart from the classical architectural features on the facade as mentioned in the previous part, one feature worth noticing is the Star of David for visually reminding the history of the place that used to be a synagogue, which can be founded both on the column capitals and aesthetically pleasing fanlights.

14. See note 10 above.

Entering the synagogue, the golden ark, marble columns, chandeliers, and other decorative features are also important to the building's character.

Getting into the research, it is impressive that the interior of the synagogue was described as “severely simple, being entirely in white” by a newspaper article that introduced the place in 1907.¹⁵ The color described apparently contradicts the interior color nowadays. Having doubts about the reason why the color of gold, pink and dark blue appear here, a historical black & white photo of the interior in 1907 was picked and colorized with the help of A.I.,¹⁶ it appears the interiors were left mostly white and off-white, and this makes sense because it would be in keeping with the Neo-Classical style from the exterior facade. As discussed previously, Brunner thought that simplicity combined with dignity should be the dominant note in the design of the building. In one of his articles, he said that the “Secret of great art is great repose.”¹⁷ Based on all discussions above, an educated guess will be that simplicity also includes the choice of color, and the interiors were left mostly white and off-white.

15. *Jam at dedication of temple Israel*, New York Times, May 18, 1907, <http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/jam-at-dedication-temple-israel/docview/96787796/se-2?accountid=10226>.

16. There are some deep learning colorizers trained with a great amount of black and white photos available, and some codebases are open-sourced. The colorization generates an image with colors that are plausible, not guarantees the colorization perfectly revealed the actual scene. But it can serve as a supplement to view or verify the color in the historical context. An article about a colorizer developed by Singaporean government with detailed explanation. Webpage: <https://blog.data.gov.sg/bringing-black-and-white-photos-to-life-using-colourise-sg-435ae5cc5036>.

17. Brunner, *Synagogue Architecture*, page 40.

As an outstanding example of a Neo-Classical synagogue in Manhattan, the philosophy behind Brunner's design is worth being preserved. Regarding the specific heritage conservation plan, since the synagogue appears to be in good condition, no urgent structural intervention is needed. However, the window frames can be repainted to have a sense of visual integrity with other areas covered by black paint. For the interior, it is important to determine if the failing paint on the interior is related to active water leaks and address the issue if it is existed. Restoring the original white and off-white color is not only seen as an extension of Neo-Classical style from the exterior to the interior but also protecting Brunner's idea of how the design of synagogues should be based on the understanding of different congregations and their religious practices. Both tangible and intangible aspects contribute to the need for this heritage conservation plan.

However, it is acknowledged that there may have some counterarguments. For instance, the synagogue is currently a private property of Mt. Olivet Baptist Church, and it is impossible to conduct the conservation project without the agreement of the Baptist Church. Since the place serves a different religion today, the choice of color that reflects Brunner's idea may be irrelevant to them. Moreover, it is possible that the current Baptist congregation have chosen those colors because they represent their understanding of the building's architecture and the congregation feel those color better expresses their beliefs. Also, restoring the original color may require some financial resources. Therefore, it is not easy to articulate the possible benefits to the Baptist congregation by implementing the plan, following ICOMOS's charter, *Principles for the Analysis, Conservation and*

Structural Restoration of Architectural Heritage (2003), a minimum level of intervention may be suggested, such as repaint the peeling ceiling paint in the current color.¹⁸

Limitations and Conclusion

The limitation of the study comes from two aspects. First, the author failed to understand the social value of the place that it means to the community nowadays through previously planned semi-structured interviews with the current congregation. The request to schedule a conversation with them was not replied and was finally rejected. However, the issues made the author realize another potential drawback of the studies: a feasibility study of the proposed conservation plan fails to be conducted in advance, including the financial cost and the property owner's willingness.

The former Temple Israel is a synagogue with architectural significance. It embodied from two aspects: a. its association with a notable architect b. an outstanding example of the Neo-Classical synagogue in Manhattan that also demonstrates the design idea of the architect. Thus, the synagogue is worth protecting. Within the toolboxes of heritage management, materials and their condition, together with character-defining features, are documented. In addition, the heritage management plan also suggests undertaking a conservation intervention project that helps restore both tangible and intangible aspects that contribute to the cultural significance of the place.

18. ICOMOS, *Principles for the Analysis, Conservation and Structural Restoration of Architectural Heritage* 2003, article 3.8., https://www.icomos.org/charters/structures_e.pdf.

Reference

- Aitken, Robert Ingersoll, and Edwin Howland Blashfield. 1926. *Arnold W. Brunner and his work*. New York: Press of the American Institute of Architects.
- Arnold W. Brunner Grant*. American Institute of Architects. Accessed December 16, 2021. <https://www.aiany.org/architecture/competitions-grants/arnold-w-brunner-grant/>.
- Brunner, Arnold. "Synagogue Architecture." *The Brickbuilder* 16. No.3 (1907): 37-44. Accessed December 16, 2021. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015055422912&view=1up&seq=174&skin=2021&q1=brunner>.
- Dunlap, David. *From Abyssinian to Zion: A Guide to Manhattan's Houses of Worship*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.
- Gruber, Samuel. "Arnold W. Brunner and the New Classical Synagogue in America." *Jewish History* 25. No. 1 (2011): 69-102. Accessed December 16, 2021. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/41478218.pdf>
- Gruber, Samuel. *USA: Arnold Brunner's 'Forgotten' Synagogue, the Former Cong. Shaaray Tefila*. Accessed December 16, 2021. <http://samgrubersjewishartmonuments.blogspot.com/2017/07/usa-arnold-brunners-forgotten-synagogue.html>.
- ICOMOS. *Principles for the Analysis, Conservation and Structural Restoration of Architectural Heritage*. 2003. https://www.icomos.org/charters/structures_e.pdf.
- Jam at dedication of temple Israel*. New York Times. May 18, 1907. <http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/jam-at-dedication-temple-israel/docview/96787796/se-2?accountid=10226>.
- National Academicians*. National Academy of Design eMuseum. Accessed December 16, 2021. <https://nationalacademy.emuseum.com/people/images?filter=currentNA%3Atrue>.
- Old Federal Building and Post Office - National Register of Historic Places*. National Parks Service. Accessed December 16, 2021. <https://npgallery.nps.gov/AssetDetail/NRIS/74001448>.
- Our History*. Temple Israel of the City of New York. May 8, 2020. <https://tinyc.org/history/#1882>.
- Property card (Block 1905 Lot 29)*. New York City Municipal Archives. n.d.

The Pennsylvania Capitol. The PA Capitol Complex - PA Capitol. Accessed December 16, 2021. <http://www.pacapitol.com/plan-a-visit/capitol-complex.cfm>.

Figure



Figure 1: Physical Setting of the Synagogue. Courtesy of TomTom Map.



Figure 2: East Elevation. Source: Author.



Figure 3: The Synagogue's Window. Source: Author.



Figure 4: The Peeling Ceiling Paint. Source: Author.

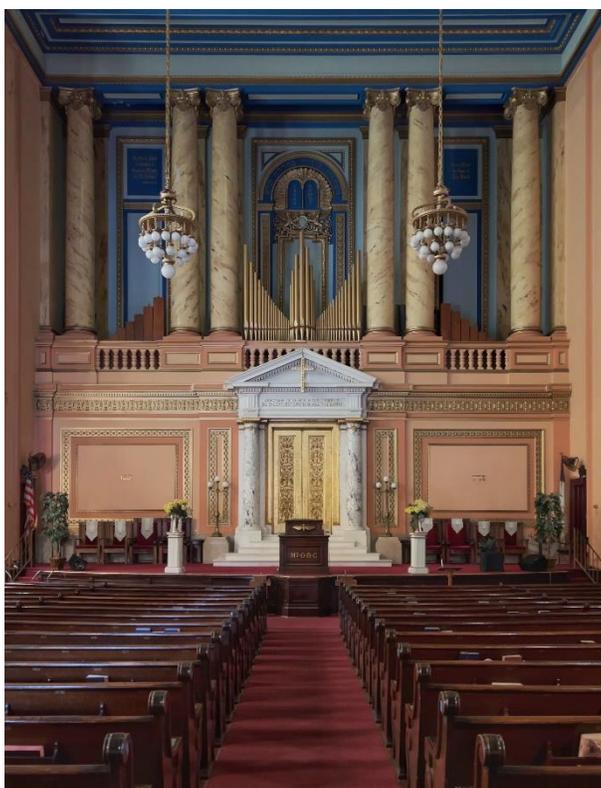


Figure 5: Interior. Source: Author.



Figure 6: The Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue (Shearith Israel). Source: Author.



Figure 7: Star of David on the Capital. Source: Author.

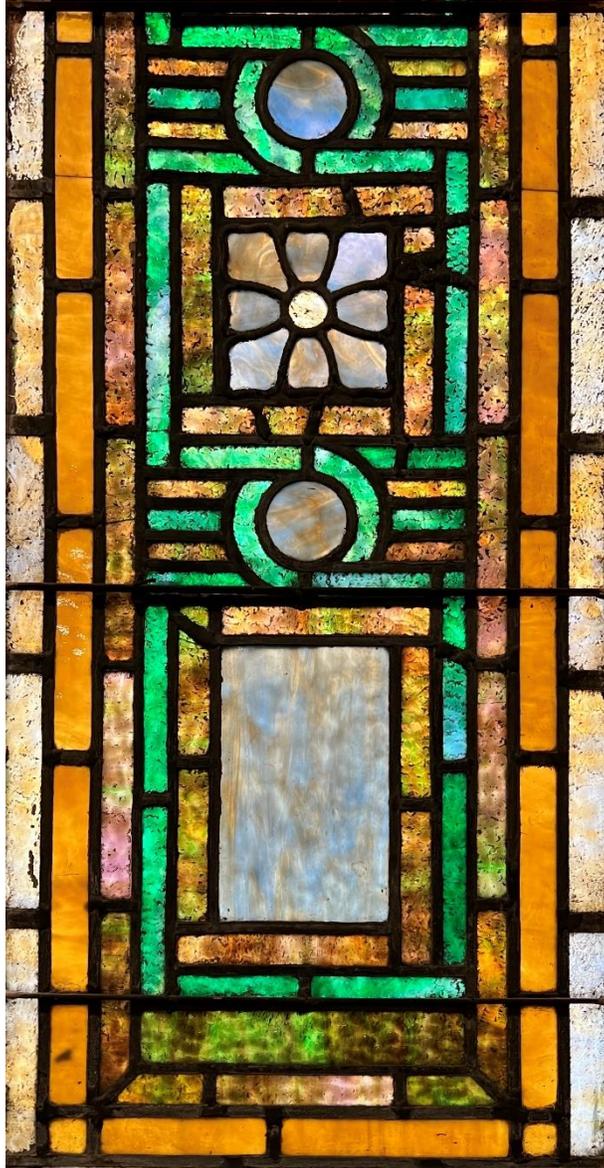


Figure 8: Stained-Glass Window. Source: Author.



Figure 9: Interior (ca. 1907). Courtesy of MCNY.



Figure 10: Interior after A.I. Colorization. Original Image Source: MCNY.