

Columbia University GSAPP

Historic Preservation Studio Fall 2021

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### South Harlem Case Study: 225 Lenox Avenue

#### **Introduction**

For Studio I, I studied the history and significance of 225 Lenox Avenue on the northwest corner of Lenox and West 121st street in South Harlem, New York. The most significant factor about the history of 225 Lenox Avenue is that though it has always acted as a religious building, it has changed in terms of its congregation over time, and the changes in occupancy have always reflected the demographic and cultural changes in the South Harlem neighborhood. Throughout each of its phases in South Harlem's history, the cultural shifts have also manifested in the congregation's physical expression on the building itself.

In order to accurately discuss this building's significance, it would need to be analyzed within its three major time periods, first as a Unitarian church, then as a synagogue, then as its current use as a Baptist church. Each occupant has performed their own version of cultural expression and has had its own relationship with the preservation of the building over time. The significance and legacy of the building is being preserved by the current congregation in their insistence to both adapt the structure to the needs of the congregation while maintaining remnants of the cultural history of previous religious groups that have occupied the space. In order to continue this mode of thinking, the current congregation will need to utilize all resources of "formal" and "informal" preservation methods to maintain the building for future generations.

## Lenox Avenue Unitarian Church

The church was initially built as the Lenox Avenue Unitarian Church in 1886 to 1891 for the West Side Unitarian Congregation. In New York City at the time, there was a larger Unitarian population further downtown, as this church was built for one of the few Unitarian congregations above 34th Street.<sup>1</sup> The small Unitarian community in Harlem gathered under Reverend Merle St. Croix Wright and the construction and opening of the church was widely anticipated in the neighborhood and covered in local newspapers (see figure 1).<sup>2</sup>

The church was designed by architect Charles Bowler Atwood, who was born in Charleston, Massachusetts in 1849.<sup>3</sup> Atwood studied at Harvard University and established himself as a draftsman in Boston while working for Ware and Van Brunt. During Atwood's career, he rose to fame primarily for being one of the main architects of the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, designing structures such as the Palace of Fine Arts. In the context of New York City, he designed the now-demolished W. H. Vanderbilt mansions on Fifth Avenue in 1882 (see figure 3) and designed a winning, but unbuilt, concept for the city's municipal buildings.<sup>4</sup> Most of Atwood's remaining work was in Chicago, such as the Fisher Building in 1895, where he primarily worked for the remainder of his career.<sup>5</sup>

Religious buildings were not typical for Atwood, but his work appeared to be very focused on the architectural trends at the time, as displayed in the Lenox Avenue Unitarian Church's Gothic Revival style (see figure 2). The building is a 50 foot by 80 foot structure primarily consisting of two main sections for its massing. The first massing includes the front entrance on the Lenox Ave east facade and is three stories high. The first story has ten stairs

<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Johnson, *Harlem Travel Guide* (United States: Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011), 69.

<sup>2</sup> "A New Unitarian Church in Harlem: The Handsome Building of the Lenox Avenue Society to be Dedicated Tomorrow." *New York Tribune (1866-1899)*, Nov 9 1891.

<sup>3</sup> Massachusetts State Census, 1865; Census Place: Millbury, Worcester, Massachusetts; Page 16.

<sup>4</sup> "Death of a Famous Architect: Charles B. Atwood Carried Off by a Complication of Diseases." *San Francisco Chronicle (1869-1922)*, Dec 20, 1895.

<sup>5</sup> "Obituary: Charles Atwood." *Chicago Daily Tribune (1877-1922)*, Aug 26 1880.

leading up to a pointed, recessed arched entrance and round-arch one over one double-hung windows at either side of the entryway. The entry has a solid wood, panelled double-door and an arched stained-glass transom window above. The second story has three one over one fixed windows with an arched window above at the center of the facade and a one over one fixed window at either side. The third story has a round stained-glass window at the center below the gable roof peak. The southeast corner also features two towers. On the other massing, the first story has five bays of round-arch one over one stained-glass windows along the south facade on West 121st street. On the second story, there are five bays of dormer windows along the gable roof. On the exterior, the primary materials are the four courses of rusticated stone on the ground level followed by dark red brick for the remainder of the facades. In addition, the facades feature terra-cotta trim around the door, windows, and tower, copper at the dormer windows, and slate roofing. On the interior, the first massing includes the entry and staircases at either end leading to offices on the second floor. In the second massing, the lower level includes the pews organized in a main aisle and side aisles and the altar at the west end. The upper level has an open space featuring balconies along the north, east, and south, with the pipe organ located on the north balcony. Lastly, the building features a basement level that has been significantly changed over time from the original design. In local newspapers, the church was described as having a very simple interior, with “no attempt at mural decoration, the nave and aisles being finished in plain white...the ceiling in the shape of a barrel vault, and galleries on either side of the church”.<sup>6</sup> The interior design was very fitting for the Unitarian congregation, described in the same article as being “comfortable, commodious and admirably adapted to the wants of the congregation”.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the building construction and the life of the Unitarian congregation in this space, the Reverend Merle St. Croix Wright seemed to be the driving force, known for having

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<sup>6</sup> “Dedicating A New Church.” *New York Tribune (1866-1899)*, Nov 11 1891.

<sup>7</sup> “Dedicating A New Church.” *New York Tribune (1866-1899)*, Nov 11 1891.

some sensationalist sermons. The church was also intended to serve as a social space for the community, described as featuring “reading-rooms, parlors, and a kitchen” to be the “centre of varied activities, religious, social and educational”.<sup>8</sup> The church also hosted guest speakers, local groups such as the Unitarian Women's League, and local events such as the Unitarian Conference, during its time.<sup>9</sup> When Reverend Merle St. Croix resigned by 1914, the dwindling congregation and changing Harlem neighborhood prompted the West Side Unitarian congregation to sell the church, gather at Columbia University's Earl Hall for a few months, then build a new church at 244 Cathedral Parkway where they gathered in 1922.<sup>10</sup>

### **Chebra Ukadisha B'nai Israel Mikalwarie**

In 1919, the building was sold to the Holy Sons of Israel to be used as a synagogue, for the Chebra Ukadisha B'nai Israel Mikalwarie.<sup>11</sup> The shift in building occupant directly represented the growing Jewish population in Harlem. The Holy Sons of Israel, established in 1871, immigrated from Kalwarie, Lithuania, and were described as likely originally being of lower income and living in nearby tenements.<sup>12</sup>

The Holy Sons of Israel made modifications to the building for it to function as a synagogue and to represent their religion. At the current altar, the Torah ark installed by the Holy Sons of Israel to hold Torah scrolls still remains (see figure 4). In addition, they installed stained-glass behind the Torah ark that depicted two Lions of Judah holding the Ten Commandments, with Star of David symbols below.<sup>13</sup> On the exterior, the stained-glass windows

<sup>8</sup> “A Growing Unitarian Church.” *New York Tribune (1866-1899)*, Nov 24 1888.

<sup>9</sup> “Armenians the Subject: Able Speeches at the Meeting of the New York League of Unitarian Women.” *New York Tribune (1866-1899)*, Mar 6 1897.

<sup>10</sup> “Unitarians Buy Site: New Church to be Erected on Cathedral Parkway.” *New York Times (1857-1922)*, May 15 1921.

<sup>11</sup> Carolyn Johnson, *Harlem Travel Guide* (United States: Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011), 69.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew S. Dolkart and Gretchen S. Sorin, *Touring Historic Harlem: Four Walks in Northern Manhattan*, (New York: New York Landmarks Conservancy, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Springer (church member and historian) in discussion with the author, December 2021.

on both the East and south facades of the building featured the Star of David, some of which are no longer remaining. The same Holy Sons of Israel from Kalwarie group was also associated with another synagogue at 13-15 Pike Street in Lower Manhattan. The Pike Street synagogue was landmarked in 1997 but also had an extensive history with preservation and congregation ownership prior to its designation. The Pike Street synagogue underwent several renovations, including the removal of the original stained-glass windows, and was also involved in an ownership dispute that led to the building being converted to a Buddhist temple in 1979.<sup>14</sup>

### **Ebenezer Gospel Tabernacle**

In 1942, due to the changing demographic in South Harlem, now towards a largely African-American and Afro-Caribbean population, the building was sold to the Christian Mission of the USA, a predominantly Black congregation that still gathers there today. Now named the Ebenezer Gospel Tabernacle, one of the first leaders at the Baptist congregation was Reverend Luther Benjamin Allman, an immigrant from Barbados, who led the church for 25 years starting in 1950. Allman's heritage still accurately represents the largely Afro-Caribbean demographic of the church congregation today.<sup>15</sup> As the congregation grew in the mid-20th century, services were very well-attended and the church was thriving. The congregation made modifications to the building to represent the new identity, including removing some of the Jewish symbolism on the stained-glass to depict crosses at the windows of both facades and at the altar (see figure 5).

Over time, the aging building required some attention in terms of preservation. In 2000, the Ebenezer Gospel Tabernacle was one of the first recipients of the New York Landmarks

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<sup>14</sup> Kroth v. Congregation Chebra Ukadisha B'nai Israel Mikalwarie case correspondence and court documents, 1979-1980, Box: 357, Folder: 20. American Jewish Historical Society.

<sup>15</sup> Mario Maffi, *New York City: An Outsider's Inside View* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2004), 56.

Conservancy's Upper Manhattan Historic Preservation Fund (see figure 6). Through this Fund, the conducted work including selective repointing of mortar joints, rebuilding of masonry, stabilization of stained-glass windows and wood frames at the east facade, restoration of the stained-glass dormer windows and wood framing at the south facade, removal of the terra-cotta finial at the east gable peak, replacement of damaged terra-cotta tiles at the tower roof, new copper cladding, and slate roof repair.<sup>16</sup>

### **Future Preservation**

Over time since this project, Pastor Jabez Springer, building conservator Ed Kamper, and New York Landmarks Conservancy's Ann Friedman have all noted the need for this church's ongoing preservation through maintenance.<sup>17</sup> Upon visiting the Ebenezer Gospel Tabernacle, I assessed the current significant physical conditions through the lens of potential large-scale and urgent projects that could be addressed through modes of "formal" preservation, such as grants, and "informal" preservation projects, such as congregation members performing small-scale maintenance. This binary of "formal" and "informal" preservation methods is a concept borrowed from African-American preservationist Brent Leggs. In *Preserving African American Historic Places*, Leggs describes "formal" modes of preservation as designation, intervention, and assistance from sources such as municipal agencies and "informal" preservation as acts such as a church raising money to repair their roof or local members volunteering to paint or maintain a space.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *New York Landmarks Conservancy Annual Report 2002*. New York, New York: New York Landmarks Conservancy, 2002.

<sup>17</sup> Ann Friedman (New York Landmarks Conservancy) and Ed Kamper (building conservator), email message to author, December 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Brent Leggs, Kerri Rubman, and Byrd Wood, *Preserving African American Historic Places* (Washington DC: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 2012), 2.

When assessing Ebenezer Gospel Tabernacle, I identified areas along the upper floors of the east facade that showed signs of water infiltration, missing mortar, continuous masonry cracks, and loose or shifted masonry (see figure 8). In addition, both on the east and south facades, I noted damage at the stained-glass windows (see figure 7) and rotted wood at the window framing (see figure 9). To address these concerns, I would recommend repointing open joints, addressing water infiltration sources, replacement of damaged masonry, reconstruction of rotted window framing, and restoration of the stained-glass windows. A more thorough inspection would be required to identify the extent and proper action to address these preliminary recommendations. On the interior, I only noted minor work to be done on the entry level, such as repainting of walls, floors, columns, and ceilings, as well as possible refinishing of the church pews. On the basement level, the church has had continuous issues with flooding, which they have partially addressed by replacing the plumbing along West 121st and completing a partial renovation from the flood damage (see figure 10).<sup>19</sup> In order to fully mitigate the problem, they would need to complete the plumbing replacement along Lenox Avenue.

Since the congregation has significantly dwindled since the mid-20th century, raising money for building maintenance and renovation has been an ongoing issue for the Ebenezer Gospel Tabernacle. The congregation has hosted some building fundraising efforts in the past years and have taken advantage of ongoing film shoots in the Harlem area by renting out space.<sup>20</sup> However, for long term preservation, the congregation would need to assess what projects would be of priority, such as higher priority for safety concerns and lower priority for aesthetic changes that may not be urgent. By assessing the urgency, the scale of a project, as well as the cost and feasibility of these projects, the church would be able to determine a timeline and mode of addressing the potential issues, especially with a smaller congregation now.

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<sup>19</sup> Pastor Jabez Springer (church pastor), in discussion with the author, December 2021.

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When speaking with the congregation, one church member mentioned that multiple people have offered to buy the church, but the congregation would unanimously prefer to remain in the building and preserve its history. Another member pointed out that the current Christian congregation have made an effort to preserve some features of the building's past as a synagogue, such as the light above the Torah ark, the Ner Tamid, that they keep on at all times because it was a part of Jewish tradition to always stay on.<sup>21</sup> It is clear that the current congregation is passionate about the preservation of this building in a way that respects the building's many lives over time and the way it mirrors the cultural change of South Harlem in the past 135 years.

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<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Springer (church member and historian) in discussion with the author, December 2021.



**LENOX AVENUE UNITARIAN CHURCH.**

Figure 1. A drawing celebrating the new church (Photographer Unknown. In *New York Tribune*. New York, 1891, 7)



Figure 2. View from Lenox Avenue (Photograph by Perry Sperr. Irma and Paul Milstein Division of United States History, Local History and Genealogy. New York: The New York Public Library, 1932.)



Figure 3. W.H. Vanderbilt house on Fifth Avenue (Postcard by Detroit Photographic Company. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, 1906.)

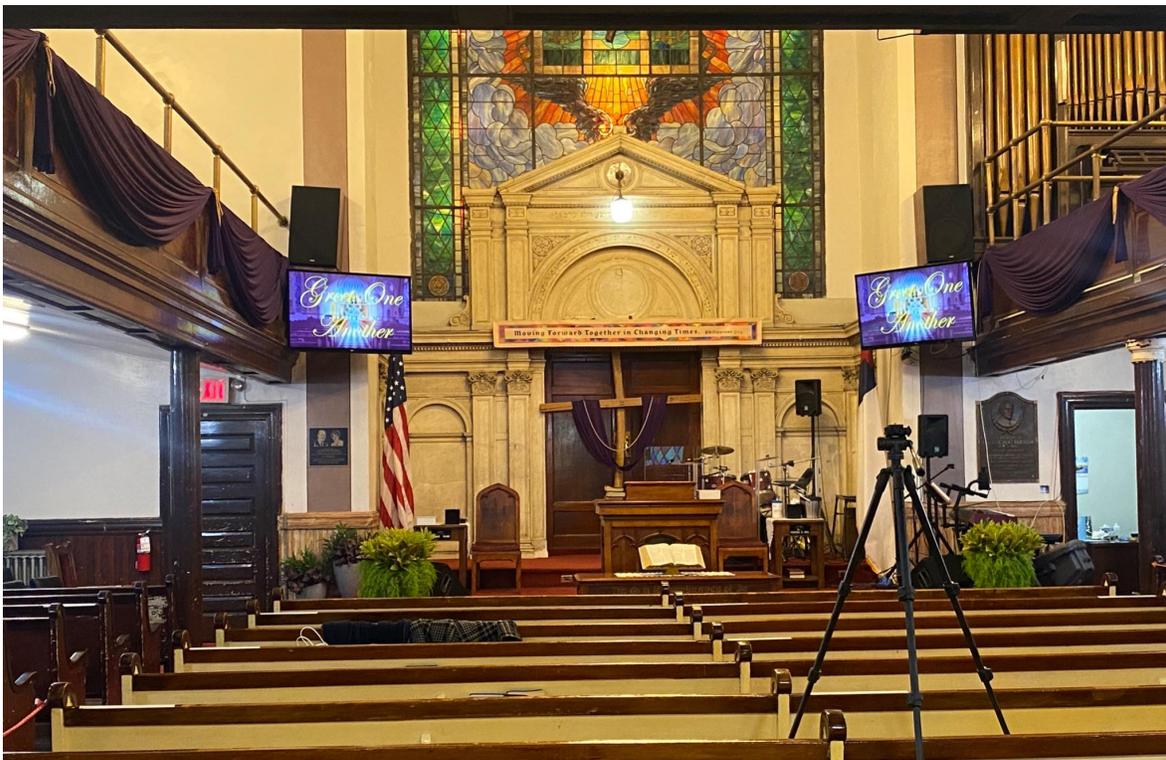


Figure 4. Building interior featuring the Torah ark and the present-day altar (Photograph by author, 2021.)



Figure 5. Entry transom window featuring stained-glass depicting cross (Photograph by author, 2021.)



Figure 6. Construction during the New York Landmarks Conservancy's Upper Manhattan Historic Preservation Fund project (Photograph by Ed Kamper, 2001.)



Figure 7. Damage to current windows on east facade (Photograph by author, 2021.)



Figure 8. Damage to masonry on east facade (Photograph by author, 2021.)



Figure 9. Damage to window on south facade (Photograph by author, 2021.)



Figure 10. Current partial renovation of the basement level (Photograph by author, 2021.)

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