

December 1, 2007

MUSEUM REVIEW

Return of a Long-Dormant Island of Grace

By [EDWARD ROTHSTEIN](#)

Stand at the center of the 1887 Eldridge Street Synagogue, whose main sanctuary reopens tomorrow after a restoration that took 20 years and cost \$20 million, and gaze upward, past the chandeliers with their curled vintage glass, toward the 70-foot-high vaulted ceiling, painted with gilded stars.

Even now — as this space’s religious function has faded and been folded into the newly named Museum at Eldridge Street, and as Irving Howe’s “world of our fathers” on the Lower East Side in New York becomes more like the “world of our great-grandfathers” — it is possible to be awestruck by the exotic splendor of this meticulously restored sanctuary. It is elaborately ornamented with mock-Turkish motifs, Moorish arches and fantastical trompe l’oeil painting that turns plaster into marble, pine into mahogany and molded decoration into ornate stone. Imagine, then, the impact it must have had on its worshipers when this synagogue flourished, amid its neighborhood’s raucous, grinding poverty and slum tenements, and its residents’ intoxicating American ambitions and devout Old World beliefs.

At the close of the 19th century, it must have seemed otherworldly. The Lower East Side had become the way station for the United States’ most recent immigrations of Italians and Eastern European Jews. Between 1880 and 1890 alone — as the synagogue was constructed, dedicated and began its intense, all-too-brief life — 60,000 immigrant Jews settled there.

By 1910, according to the historian Hasia R. Diner, the neighborhood contained half a million Jews; by contrast, Vienna, one of the largest Jewish centers in Europe, had a Jewish population of 175,000, and Chicago, about 100,000. This neighborhood had one of the largest Jewish populations of any city in the world — and surely one of the poorest. Most of the area’s 60-some synagogues were humble gathering places named after the Eastern European towns and shtetls from which their worshipers had fled, resembling the social clubs that develop among many immigrant communities.

Go to the Lower East Side Tenement Museum a few blocks away on Orchard Street if you want to see how most of those worshipers really lived, crowding generations and occupations into three small, ill-lit rooms without plumbing, and then walk into this ethereal vault, with its expanse of space and skylights and stained glass. Who among those tenement dwellers would not have been amazed?

Now the synagogue seems otherworldly in a different way, framed by the shops and bustling sidewalks of a newer immigrant community. Just as the nearby Garden Cafeteria, once frequented by [Isaac Bashevis Singer](#), became a Chinese restaurant, and as the building of the great Yiddish newspaper The Jewish Daily Forward came at one time to house a Chinese church, no doubt something similar would have happened to this synagogue.

Indeed, by the mid-1950s, without funds or a substantial congregation, the main sanctuary was sealed shut; only a remnant of the original congregation continued to use the smaller ground-floor study hall. Then, in 1971, the water-damaged main sanctuary was surveyed with astonishment by Gerald R. Wolfe, a [New York University](#) professor, who founded the Friends of the Eldridge Street Synagogue. Fifteen years later, the preservationist and journalist Roberta Brandes Gratz was so taken by its latent promise that she started the Eldridge Street Project, helped obtain its landmark status and began a fund-raising drive that gradually brought the sanctuary back to life.

But what purpose could such a place serve if its religious function and community were gone? Rather than leave it a monument to an earlier faith, the Eldridge Street Project turned the building into a symbol of a contemporary, secular faith. In the 1990s, the synagogue, its renovation unfinished, became a museum, a center, in the words of the Project, “for historical reflection, aesthetic inspiration and spiritual renewal.”

The Project welcomed 15,000 to 20,000 visitors yearly, offering a glimpse of 19th-century Jewish religious life along with insights into the broader immigrant experience. Lectures and events, some involving the local Chinese community, anchored the building in its altered neighborhood.

Now, with the stunning restoration, overseen by the architects Walter Sedovic and Jill H. Gotthelf, almost four times the number of annual visitors are expected at the renamed building. This spring, public programs will include an introduction to oral history in a Family History Center, which will offer genealogical information; a concert featuring immigrant music of the vaudeville era; and lectures on Jewish fiction and Yiddish movies.

Next summer, under the guidance of the education director, Annie Polland, a five-day teacher workshop on “Immigration, Religion and Culture of New York’s Lower East Side” will take place, financed by the [National Endowment for the Humanities](#).

The newly reconstructed study hall — which includes the wooden ark that served the congregation before 1887 — will still function as a sanctuary on Friday nights and Saturdays. At other times, it will be where guided tours begin. In an adjacent space, monitors and projected images of two high-tech “history tables” will respond to touch, showing neighborhood highlights, explaining the synagogue’s structure and exploring the once-thriving Yiddish newspapers.

But it is in the sanctuary that the museum’s themes will come into full play, particularly if the guides are as knowledgeable as Ms. Polland, who is completing a book on the synagogue for Yale University Press. This Orthodox Jewish synagogue, she points out, for all its adherence to traditional religious law (women sat in balconies as men ran the service), was shaping a new form of American Judaism.

The synagogue was built with the support of successful Eastern European immigrants who could afford major contributions to its initial \$92,000 cost. In its ambitious opening years, Ms. Polland points out, the synagogue even paid for the distinguished Russian cantor Pinhas Minkowsky to move to New York and lead the congregation. But lay leadership, rather than rabbinical leadership, was central, and it overlapped with the boards of other groups helping new immigrants.

The synagogue’s architects were two little-known German brothers named Herter, who also built tenements and lofts in the neighborhood. But the leadership approved a design for this Eastern European synagogue

that deliberately echoed the Moorish style of uptown Reform synagogues built by German Jews, staking a claim as their legitimate rivals.

With its painted stars and radiant skylights, the Eldridge Street Synagogue was surely meant to evoke spiritual yearning, but it was also forming something more distinctly American, promising worshipers a comforting home under their adopted heavens. The synagogue was even decorated in honor of the centennial of George Washington's inauguration, in 1889. In 1892, one journalist, noting the congregation's mix of occupations and origins, wrote, "E pluribus Unum receives a new meaning here."

This was all done without slighting Old World Orthodoxy. The influence of American life is evident only in subtle ways, like the use of Yiddish characters to sound out English words on the wall's stone plaques. But there was also an openness to possibility. Events included a lecture by someone who must have seemed heretical: the former Reform rabbi Felix Adler, the founder of the Ethical Culture Society.

This synagogue reflected, then, not the socialist "world of our fathers" that Howe was preoccupied with, nor the impulses toward assimilation and renunciation that became a hallmark of later Jewish generations, but an attempt to shape a rigorous religious life that would help usher immigrants into their new realm. If the sanctuary had been made of marble, mahogany and slabs of stone, it would have seemed as if the task were done, as if prosperity and solidity could be taken for granted. That is one reason why it is so moving to see the grandeur evoked using the most modest resources and the craft of dexterously applied paint.

That is also why it is so stirring to see the deliberate traces the renovators left of the congregation's less glorious history — the broken plaster of an old wall interrupting the restored "stonework," a large window of glass bricks that was put in when the congregation could no longer afford to repair the stained glass — remnants of rough passage alongside an inspired and reconstituted life.

The Museum at Eldridge Street opens tomorrow at 12 Eldridge Street, between Canal and Division Streets, Lower East Side; (212) 219-0903.

[Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
