

THE CHOICES WE MAKE: ELDRIDGE STREET SYNAGOGUE AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

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*Men from your midst shall rebuild ancient ruins,
You shall restore foundations laid long ago.
And you shall be called
“repairer of fallen walls,
Restorer of lands for habitation.” (Isaiah 58:12)*

In December 2007, the sanctuary of Eldridge Street Synagogue reopened to the public after a long period of decline and abandonment, and then, since the early-1980s, of documentation, conservation and restoration. The history of the Eldridge Street Project is well known. It was—and is - a pioneering project, and its process confronted, over three decades, myriad technical, historical, architectural, religious, financial, cultural, interpretive, ethical and philosophical problems and issues.

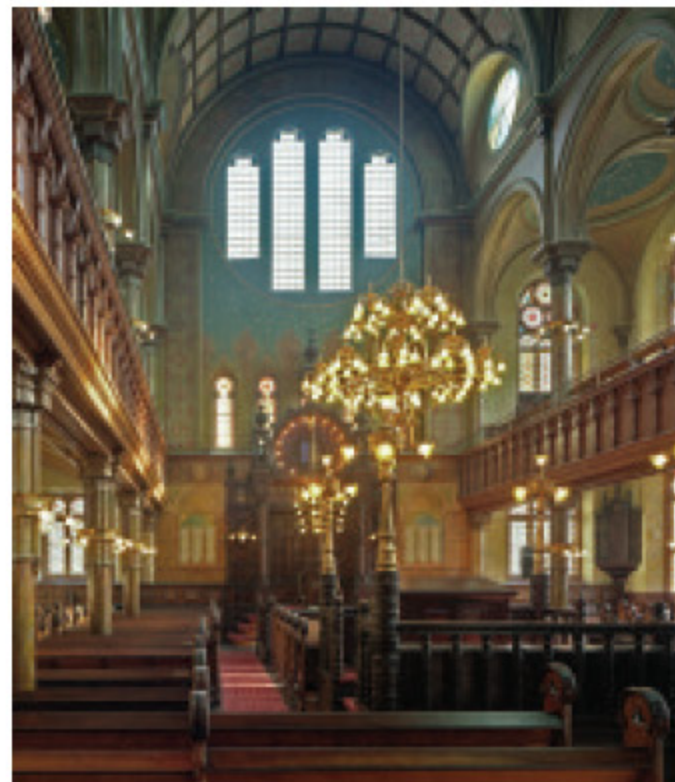
Throughout the restoration people came to love Eldridge as it was, essentially as a rediscovered ruin. Walking into Eldridge with the pigeons flying, paint falling, and the light shining through the dust motes was a revelation for those secular Jews who had little contact with the life of their parents and grandparents gone by, and no conception of what Judaism and their Jewishness must have meant to them during their first years in a new land.

The rediscovered Eldridge Street Synagogue was an evocative, even romantic place, but its appeal perhaps said more about the people who found it than the people who had used it for a few generations. Preservationists could read into the building what meanings they chose—literal or metaphoric. The crowds of worshippers who once filled the prayer hall, however, had never known the building like this, with its crumbling ceiling and broken windows. They had mostly left the Lower East Side by the time the building slid into its sorry state. They and their children had helped build new synagogues and new neighborhoods, first in Brooklyn and the Bronx, and later in the suburbs. Their choice was to move and to build, not to stay and restore.

Significantly, none of the first preservationists who worked to save the building had any specific ties to it. Their desire to perpetuate the history of the Jewish immigrant



The Eldridge Street Synagogue's sanctuary, pre-restoration and post-restoration.



experience on the Lower East Side was not specific to Eldridge (though the architecture and decoration of Eldridge did seem special, even in its ruined state). They wanted to protect and pass on something glorious of the past, a past that hitherto was mostly represented and remembered through dark photographs and dark accounts of an impoverished ghetto. The now-documented rich history of Eldridge was then hardly known. Despite its proximity in space and time to its first “contemporary” explorers, its revealed splendor was as exotic to them as a pharaoh’s tomb, and as unknown as the then-lost synagogues of Eastern Europe.

Why do preservationists—or any of us—choose to save what is old and ruined, and give it new meaning and life? It begins with a love of buildings, recognizing that buildings are practically and symbolically important in our lives. It results from realizing that buildings encapsulate the history of those who made and used them. Every building has its own history and stories, sometimes prestigious, sometimes humble. Sometimes these stories are specific, centered on famous or infamous individuals; sometimes they are collective, recounting a community’s life. Historic preservation must select those buildings and stories we want to save. These might include buildings designed to last, posturing toward history; or might include accidental monuments, survivors against all odds. Not every building can be saved, so those that are must balance their own singular qualities, while also serving as surrogates for what is lost.

Humans individually and even more so collectively have a strong sense of place. Buildings represent the human interaction—for good or ill—with places. Even in New York City, buildings are rarely ephemeral. Good architecture, when valued over the generations, can seem eternal. Architecture is one way that the present can talk to the past (and vice versa). Sharing a place with another generation connects us inextricably to an historical continuum. In Judaism, especially, that continuum is a defining aspect of who and what the Jewish people are. If a picture is worth a thousand words, a surviving building speaks a million. The experience of an old building is a means of establishing a connection with ancestors long gone, strangers perhaps so different in their perceptions, but yet most likely what we ourselves would have been had we lived in that earlier age. The continuity of Jewish traditions, rituals and devotion to community cements our ties to the past and links the

generations. The style and details chosen for a building can tell us, too, about the cultural references and recollections, and the aspirations, of a synagogue builder, or of a community.

Historic preservation is hardly a new endeavor—ancient Greeks and Romans restored and rebuilt venerated structures as ties to their past. Jews, too, have a long history of protection and restoration of cherished buildings—when allowed to do so. The very longing for the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple has created a paradox for settled Jews. On the one hand everything may be a temporary replacement until the coming of the Messiah; on the other hand, the urge to rebuild is constant. Historically, Jews did revere their synagogues and repaired and restored them when they could. In nineteenth century America, Jews often took the lead in the first American preservation projects. In 1822 Abraham Touro made a bequest of \$10,000 to the Rhode Island legislature “supporting the Jewish Synagogue in the State [in Newport].” The following year, in the General Assembly there is mention of “An Act to Secure and Appropriate the Touro Jewish Synagogue Fund.” Endowing the building, even when not in use, protected it. It was, in today’s terminology “mothballed,” until it would come into regular use again when Eastern European immigrants reconstituted the Newport Jewish community. Thus began a nearly two-century tradition of conserving the historic synagogue, which remains today the oldest standing synagogue building in North America. Continuing that tradition, a new visitors’ center will open in 2009. At about the same time Uriah Levy, Jewish Commodore of the United States Navy, set out to save Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello.

In modern times, where society and topography have undergone rapid change, the urge to hold on to things from the past has been especially strong, and often desperate. The destruction of Pennsylvania Station in the 1960s was a wake-up call to rally to save the past—or at least parts of it. New York Jews, too, saw the neglect and destruction of meaningful buildings. Leopold Eidlitz’s Temple Emanuel was demolished in 1927. Arnold Brunner’s Temple Beth El was torn down in 1946. What would be next? Despite the experience of Touro Synagogue (of which most were ignorant), and perhaps inured to a long history of expulsion, migration and destruction, Jews were relatively slow to act to protect this heritage.

In 1975, Gerard Wolfe first opened the door on Eldridge, but it was the publication of *The Synagogues of Lower Side*



Eldridge Street Synagogue balcony, pre-restoration

(with Jo Renee Fine) that allowed New Yorkers to face the extent of the neglect downtown. When the Eldridge Street Synagogue was inaugurated in 1887 there were many synagogues in Manhattan. When the Association of Friends of Eldridge Street began their daunting project to save the synagogue, only three older synagogue buildings—Rodeph Shalom, the Norfolk Street Synagogue, and Central Synagogue—survived in the city. Most synagogues built between 1887 and 1900 had also been demolished.

With the exception of the Association of Friends, the first response to Wolfe's Lower East Side revelations was more an *ad hoc* salvage operation than a coordinated sustained effort. Uptown, meanwhile, the first serious attempt to save a threatened synagogue did not occur until 1984, when preservationists failed to stop the demolition of Mount Neboh Synagogue on 57th Street. By that time, the Eldridge Street Project was struggling, but even so it provided a model and inspiration for similar grass roots preservation efforts in New York and across the country. The synagogue was listed as a City Landmark in 1979, paving the way for the recognition of hundreds of Jewish sites nationwide as local, state and national landmarks. It was soon clear that such recognition of synagogue architecture and history was (and remains) essential for protecting and saving important sites, and for raising funds. "Landmarking," coupled with intensive local history programs was an effective way to do this. Beginning in the 1980s, historic designation and preservation efforts for older synagogues were underway from Texas to Michigan, and Connecticut to California.

But as the Mount Neboh demolition demonstrated, it was easier to save a synagogue in a real estate backwater (as the Lower East Side then was) than to stop the juggernaut of Midtown development. And still today, preservationists choose where to invest time, money and political capital considering practical considerations of what can really be achieved, and at what cost. Grass roots organizers can fight City Hall, but usually cannot overcome big money. For this very reason there are far more projects today underway to salvage underused small town synagogues, even when it is hard to find a use for them, than to protect and preserve larger synagogue buildings and complexes on valuable urban or inner suburban real estate. A congregation can usually sell a synagogue parcel to a developer for far more than they can realize by selling to another religious congregation, or other buyers who would preserve the basic form of the building. On the bright side, changing demographics have encouraged more urban congregations to stay put—and not move, and this has led to more restorations of still-extant synagogues, including multi-million dollar projects by major congregations in New York City.

Preservationists learned too, that it is easier to rally public sympathy (if not always dollars) for projects that would not threaten the missions of more active congregations and institutions, than to save a synagogue that might still compete. Thus, support for Eldridge Street has always come more from uptown and suburban Jews than downtown Orthodox, who still maintain their own synagogues in the neighborhood (but some of those congregations, perhaps inspired by the popularity of Eldridge, have undertaken their own renovation work).

Across the country Jewish federations and other communal institutions were initially very slow to recognize the appeal and importance of historic preservation of even a few representative buildings. Only in a few cities like Baltimore and Hartford did they grudgingly give consent for such projects to move forward—but with restrictions on use and funding. More often, synagogue preservation projects went forward despite official apathy and outright opposition. Thus, from an early date the historic preservation movement in the United States was one of dissent within the Jewish community, part of the vanguard movement which has over the past two decades shifted Jewish institutional priorities more toward local concerns than international ones, and included a broader social and environment agenda.

Restored old synagogues are now cherished community assets. But it has taken two decades for Jewish preservationists to attain this level of acceptance for their work, and even now successful projects usually require a substantial portion of restoration and operating funds to come from non-Jewish sources. Government cultural, environmental and economic development grants are an important source of start-up funding for many projects, and offer needed validation, but government support of still-active synagogues remains rare for legal and other reasons.

At Eldridge Street, the first preservationists had to stop the deterioration, and to justify their choice, to make the building safe for others. Thus, they chose (for some, grudgingly) to make the building evocative in a different way and to restore some semblance of its former appearance, if not fully to its former use. By necessity, the process of restoration had to change much of the beauty that first roused preservationist awe, or the building would have been lost altogether. The goal of restoration was recognized early—in a vague sort of way—but the route to get there was uncharted. The struggle between modest conservation and total restoration mirrored an international debate amongst preservationists.

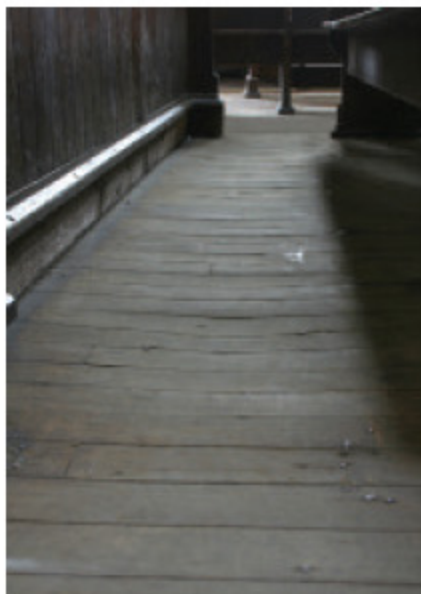
But preservationists, even more than historians, have to make choices about where time, money and political prestige should be invested. To invest in Eldridge and not make it beautiful, not functional, and not like a synagogue clearly would have been a big mistake. The achievement at Eldridge Street was that the path to those goals was

taken slowly and deliberately. Each decision—to conserve, to restore, to replace or to ignore—was made as part of a process in which integration of history, art, craft, material, function and effect was carefully considered. The result is a building that looks both old and new. The synagogue glistens with its original form and beauty, but it also wears its history well.

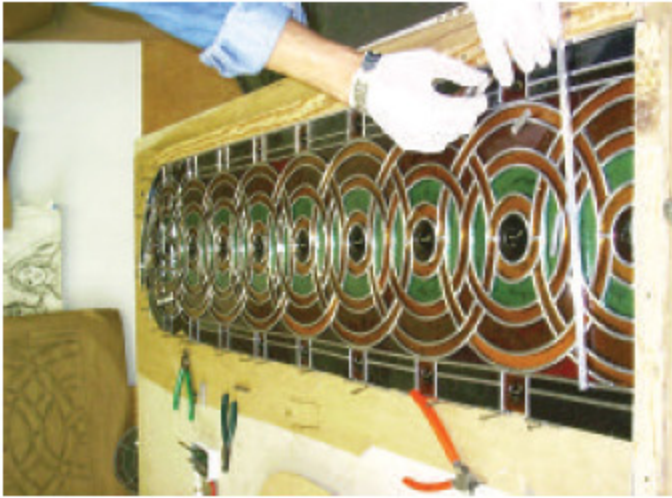
The thirty-year history of the restoration of the Eldridge Street Synagogue is testimony to the enormous difficulty in saving just one building (albeit a very big one). But as it has neared completion the Eldridge example has inspired new efforts at restoration at several other Lower East Side synagogues—Kehilah Kadasha Janina on Broome Street, the Stanton Street Shul, and for the past few years the great Beth Hamidrash Hagadol, a project embraced by the Lower East Side Jewish Conservancy, an organization that has taken the philosophy of Eldridge Street and begun to apply it on a neighborhood scale.

Ultimately, in most cases, the decision is made that allows full access and use of a building, and engenders a “practical preservation” approach that balances authenticity, aesthetics and functionality. This might involve conservation of original elements, restoration—and even some adaptation—of original structural and spatial form, and replacement of mechanical systems. In the end, we shouldn’t talk about a restored building, but a building renewed and transformed. In the end, every restored building is a new creation, a hybrid of past and present; something new, with a new purpose, a new context and a new audience that is rooted in the past, but functions in the presence. The next step is to point it to the future, too. What will the role of the Eldridge Street synagogue (or any historic building, for that matter?) be in the twenty-first century?

At Eldridge, over the course of many years, a methodology was established and an understanding evolved to tell the story of the building, its people and the restoration through the actual process of discovery, reinterpretation and implementation. For almost two decades the narrative history of the Eldridge Street Synagogue was intertwined with the narrative of the restoration itself. Today there is a different challenge. The restoration is finally complete, the building is beautiful, and yet we want to hold on to all of those stories and all of those lessons that were learned over that 30-year period. It is a big challenge, and one that the staff and membership and the larger community continues to play a part in and will play in a part in for many years.



The grooves on the sanctuary floor, created from the movement of immigrant feet in prayer, have been preserved, an example of how the building “wears its history well.”



The Museum at Eldridge Street prepared this exhibit of photos and artifacts to document the restoration process for today's visitors.



The restored Eldridge Street Synagogue. The restoration process involved fabricating finials for the roofline. The original finials had been removed in 1960.

