

Spiritual Renewal

Historic Eldridge Street Synagogue being restored

By Paul Zakrzewski

While some of the city's cultural centers appeal to unaffiliated Jews with studies in kosher sex and kabbalah, others are using their historical Jewish settings to explore issues of tradition and spirituality.

One such space is housed within the Eldridge Street Synagogue. Built in 1887, the synagogue's main sanctuary was abandoned for decades. Fortunately, the building has been the focus of a \$10 million ongoing restoration, becoming a remarkable cultural center in the process.

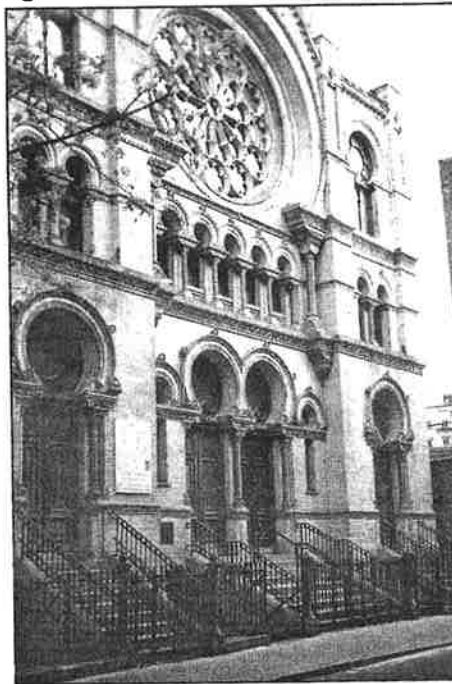
"We're here to preserve an important Jewish landmark and, secondly, to preserve a beautiful building," said Amy Waterman, executive director of the Eldridge Street Project. The non-profit organization has spent \$3.5 million securing the building's foundation and exterior since 1986. This past year its original slate roof was replaced and its

skylight system was restored.

But the project is more than simply a museum or a cultural center. "One way that the project distinguishes itself from other cultural centers is our synergy between the cultural and the religious," said Waterman. The K'hal Adath Jeshurun congregation continues to pray downstairs in the beth hamedrash (house of study) and hasn't missed a service since 1887.

In its heyday at the turn of the last century, more than 1,000 congregants gathered during the high holidays to hear some of the most famous cantors in the land. But rising costs and dwindling memberships forced the aging congregation to board up the main sanctuary by the 1950s. When preservationists rediscovered it three decades later, a leaky roof and general neglect had exten-

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sively damaged its interior.

While the project renovates the building, it continues to stage artistic and educational exhibits, such as the upcoming show, "Common Denominator." This site-specific installation, opening Oct. 17, will encourage viewers to imagine the sanctuary from the point of view of its 19th-century builders.

Waterman and others say they aren't interested in exhibiting artists simply because of their Jewish heritage. Rather, they sponsor exhibits relating to issues such as architectural preservation, or else themes about memory, family, Jewish continuity and urban change. Many exhibits like "Common Denominator" make use of the sanctuary's evocative interior to render meaning.

In fact, if the project is the site of both cultural and religious impulses, the sanctuary's physical condition also suggests a third possibility — its half-restored condition is a direct connection to the time when the Lower East Side was the gateway for America's Jews.

Today, visitors can see a completed trompe l'oeil on one side of the walnut ark, while a tattered one peels on the other side. And while the newly opened skylights let in a flood of light 70 feet above their heads, below their feet visitors walk across the same worn floorboards on which thousands once prayed.

"Whether or not your own relatives came from here, this neighborhood is understood as the gateway we came through. It's how we're all connected," said Waterman. "The tie is literal sometimes. But often people are inspired simply by its history or the aesthetics of the building. Part of our nostalgia is very real — it has to do with the aesthetic experience this place induces."



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