

History and Significance of Eldridge Street Synagogue

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"The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, ... The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?" - Mark Twain, 1899

At the end of the nineteenth century, New York City became the main destination for the hundreds of thousands of Jewish immigrants from Europe. During this time, the biggest Jewish community was Ashkenazi (Jews from Eastern and Central Europe) Jews, there were around 7 millions of Jews, all separated by borders of different countries, such as Germany, Austria-Hungary, but the most significant was community in Russian Empire (mostly territories of modern Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, and Belarus). Due to the poor economic situation, lack of opportunities, constant discrimination on legal levels, and antisemitism among the people, many Jews decided to immigrate to the United States, especially with the rise of pogroms, massacres and assaults in Jewish towns. For many Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, the journey to the United States was long, uncertain, and often difficult. Traveling first by rail or carriage across Europe, they eventually reached major ports such as Hamburg or Odessa, where they boarded crowded steamships bound to New York. The Atlantic crossing typically lasted between one and two weeks in steerage, which is the cheapest class of travel, where conditions were

uncomfortable and basic. Despite these hardships, the journey represented hope and possibility. Upon arrival at Ellis Island in New York City, immigrants underwent medical and legal inspections before being allowed to enter the country. For most Jewish migrants, passing through Ellis Island marked the beginning of a new life in America and the first step toward building communities such as those that would emerge on the Lower East Side.

By 1900 there were around 1 million Jews in the US, by 1910, almost 2 million, by 1920, around 3 million (Sheskin and Dashefsky, p. 4). The majority of new immigrants would stay in New York City, making them around a quarter of the city's population at that time (Berger). They did not have much choice where to settle, the majority of Jewish immigrants settling in the crowded streets of Manhattan's Lower East Side, making this neighborhood one of the most dense in the city. Soon, the Lower East side became more than just a neighborhood, it became a birthplace of a new identity forged between tradition and modernity. On these streets, different religious and regional Jewish communities, such as Russian Jews, German Jews, Polish Jews, Sephardic (Jews exiled from Spain and North Africa) Jews, all became something new, they became American Jews, with unique culture and tradition.

However, at that time the Lower East side was associated with its conditions. Historian Hasia Diner writes, "The name 'Lower East Side' contains meaning that is automatically understood by all as distinctive, replete with a set of icons associated with it, and usually with it alone. Tenements, pushcarts, sweatshops, and synagogues inhabited by old men are the images that come instantly to mind with the evocation of the Lower East Side, along with pungent smells, loud noises, crowded spaces, and good, rich food" (Diner, p. 31). Jewish immigrants were poor, often they would send to the US one or two members of the family who would be able to work, earn money and send them back for the rest of the family to come, which meant

that they had to have a lot of effort to send anyone, and they would come almost without anything. They would live in tenements, overcrowded buildings with small apartments, because they couldn't afford anything else. They would work in the sweatshops in factories, or for themselves. Some were tailors, sewing machine operators, pressers, others own their shops selling groceries, bakeries, showmaking. Later they would go into industries, primarily garment and food industries. With the growth of the community and the growth of their wealth, they start trying to make first houses of worship. Historians say, "... these newcomers too adapted storefronts and tenements into houses of prayer" (Polland and Soyer, p. 89). This was a change in the mindset, as they felt that now they can move their attention from how to come to the United States to how to live in the United States.

Although protected, Jews were a religious minority in the United States and in New York. Also, they were not the only immigrant community in the city. Just blocks away from the Lower East side was Little Italy and Chinatown with their own cultural traditions and groups of people with their own interests in the city and goals of success. Although cultural and linguistic differences often kept communities socially distinct, the crowded streets, markets, and workplaces of lower Manhattan created everyday communication. At the same time, it led to the conflicts and appearance of ethnic organized crime groups, and to the friendship and collaboration between immigrant groups. All of them were trying to become much more than they were, and the way to success was through cooperation and conflicts between different groups. So, the conditions of making their future possible were also about how to protect the community from other groups around, from possible religious discrimination, and from politics of the United States.

Moreover, Eastern European Jews were not the first Jews in the United States, nor were they building the first synagogue in New York, but the ones who came earlier, Sephardic Jews and German Jews were not ready to accept newcomers. Sephardic Jewish community of New York is old, was there from colonial times, they have their own religious tradition and were a very small community trying to protect their ways. German Jews came around the 1850s, they were Ashkenazi, but Reform, meaning they have a less literal interpretation of the holy texts with a lot of changes from traditional belief. Also, coming from Germany, they were Jews of Enlightenment, religion was less significant for them, and they easily Americanized, becoming part of New York middle class life. When Jews of Eastern Europe came, they became the biggest Jewish group in the city, they were poor, they strongly identified themselves with Orthodox Judaism and Yiddish folk culture that they brought to the US. Going to the synagogues of German or Sephardic Jews would not be acceptable for them due to religious difference, nor were they much accepted there with their traditional view on religion. By the late nineteenth century, hundreds of small congregations appeared throughout the Lower East Side. Many were organized by immigrants from the same towns in Eastern Europe, forming *landsmanshaft*, which are associations of people from the same hometown who provided aid and religious services. These congregations often began in rented rooms or converted apartments, but as we said earlier, the conditions were poor. All of this made Eastern European Jews to think about what they can do to take their part of the city, show their presence and support the emerging community in the early and vulnerable days of their life in the United States. That is when they decide to make a move and leave a landmark on the city, make their presence visible for others, and create a proper space of worship and place of congregation for their community.

Eldridge History

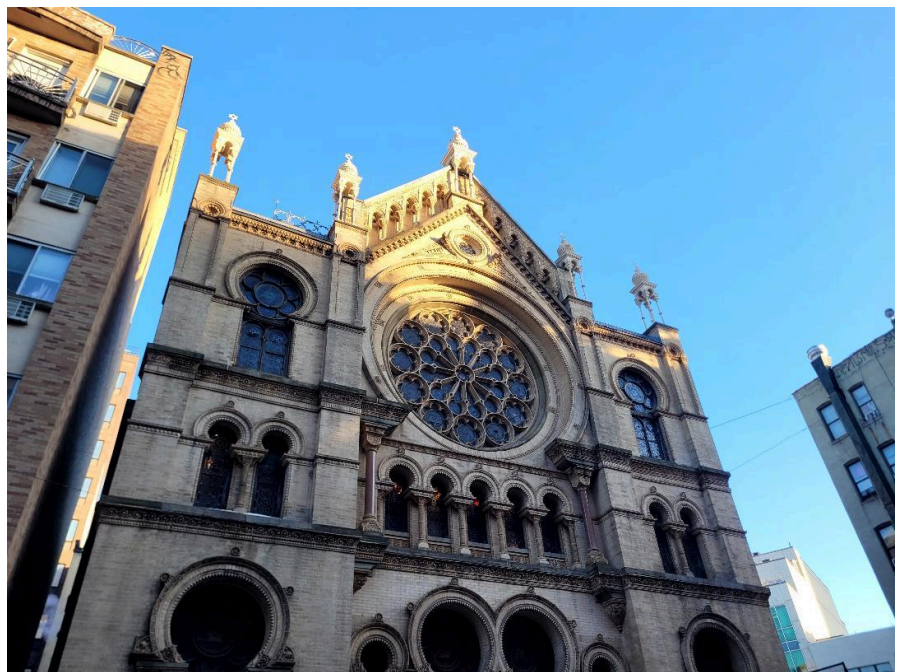
One of the most significant results of these aspirations was the construction of the Eldridge Street Synagogue in 1887. Before that the congregation Kahal Adath Jeshurun Anshe Lubtz was at the synagogue at Allen Street which was located in the old church building, but soon after, the train line was built next to it, making the religious service impossible, which only supported the idea of building the synagogue. Unlike the improvised prayer spaces scattered throughout the neighborhood, this synagogue was designed to be a monumental structure that would represent the stability and permanence of the immigrant Jewish community in New York. However, the project required significant financial investment. The synagogue ultimately cost approximately \$92,000 to build, which is an enormous sum for a community of working-class immigrants. Funding for the project came from loans and several relatively wealthy members of the congregation who had managed to achieve success in New York, by being merchants or entrepreneurs who had established businesses in the growing economy of the Lower East Side. Their willingness to finance the construction of a synagogue reflected both religious commitment and a desire to strengthen the public presence of Jewish community.

Beyond its architectural splendor, the congregation of Kahal Adath Jeshurun functioned as much more than a religious assembly, it was an essential survival network. In the late nineteenth century, before the existence of modern social welfare, immigrant communities relied heavily on the landsmanshaft. While Kahal Adath Jeshurun grew to include a broader cross-section of immigrants, it operated with the same communal ethos. The synagogue served as an informal insurance agency, a credit union, and a social anchor all at once. Members paid regular, modest dues, and in return, the congregation provided sick benefits, interest-free loans to help peddlers buy inventory, and, most importantly, guaranteed burial plots in a Jewish cemetery.

For an immigrant arriving with nothing, the congregation offered a crucial safety net against the fear of dying destitute in a foreign land.

The physical space of the synagogue also provided a profound psychological boundary between the grueling secular workweek and the sacred respite of the weekend. For six days a week, the immigrants of the Lower East Side endured the punishing reality of their new American lives, confined to airless sweatshops for fourteen hours a day, or maneuvering heavy pushcarts through the streets. But as Friday evening approaches, dramatically, soot and grime of the factories is scrubbed away, and the immigrants donned their finest clothing to welcome the Sabbath. Stepping off the chaotic pavement and into the luminous, soaring sanctuary of the Eldridge Street Synagogue was an act of elevation. Inside, beneath the glow of the massive chandeliers and the painted starry ceilings, the exhausted worker was no longer a marginalized immigrant at the bottom of American society.

The leaders of the Eldridge Street congregation envisioned a synagogue that would represent the appearance of a significant Jewish community. To accomplish this goal, they hired the architectural firm of Peter and Francis Herter, who designed the building in the Moorish Revival style, a popular



architectural style for synagogues during the nineteenth century. The resulting structure featured

decorative brickwork, large arched windows, and an impressive rose window that made the synagogue stand out among the surrounding tenement buildings. However, the architects did not have experience of building synagogues, but had experience of building churches so they brought a lot of elements of gothic architecture into the design. By building a synagogue in the center of the Lower East Side, the congregation demonstrated that Eastern European Jews were not temporary residents but an established and organized community capable of building lasting institutions. The synagogue quickly became an important center of religious and social life for the neighborhood. Thousands of worshippers attended services there during major holidays, and the building served as a gathering place for community events and celebrations. At the same time, the synagogue symbolized the transformation taking place within the immigrant community. Many of the people who would attend this synagogue had arrived in the United States only a few years earlier with little money and uncertain prospects. Yet within a short period of time, they had built one of the most impressive synagogues in the city. Therefore, the Eldridge Street Synagogue stood as a visible sign of the determination and aspirations of the Eastern European Jewish immigrants who were reshaping both the Lower East Side and New York City.

Inside Eldridge

To understand the profound ambition of the Eldridge Street Synagogue, one must first understand the architectural invisibility of the Jewish community that preceded it. For the average Eastern European immigrant in the 1880s, communal prayer was often a hidden, underground affair, both literally and figuratively. The vast majority of immigrants on the Lower East Side worshiped in shtieblach (Yiddish for "little rooms"). These were improvised, one-room

storefronts or cramped basement spaces carved out of the dense tenement blocks . Often poorly ventilated, dimly lit, and echoing with the noise of the bustling streets and sweatshops above, these spaces were born of sheer economic necessity. The immigrants were poor, and their primary focus was survival.

When a congregation did manage to save enough money to leave a shtiebel, their next step was typically not to build, but to adapt. As older, wealthier Christian populations moved northward, they left behind church buildings that Jewish immigrants would purchase at a discount. However, this required a psychological and religious compromise. Immigrants would retro-fit these Protestant and Catholic spaces, doing their best to mask the overt Christian symbolism. Yet, the physical bones of the buildings remained undeniably Christian. Pointed Gothic arches, cruciform floor plans, and towering spires were constant, looming reminders that the Jewish community was merely "borrowing" the architectural hand-me-downs of the dominant Christian society. In fact, the Kahal Adath Jeshurun congregation itself had to go through all these steps before creating their own building. The construction of the Eldridge Street Synagogue represented a radical break from this tradition of adaptation and invisibility. They were no longer content to hide in humid basements or pray in the shadows of converted churches. Instead, this distinct and intentional design allowed them to claim a proud and historically grounded Jewish identity, proving to New York City that they were not temporary refugees, but permanent architects of the American landscape.

“Walk down Eldridge Street now and you see the synagogue, almost hallucinatory in its luminosity, wedged in among the workaday tenements and Chinese storefronts like a bright and happy dollhouse” (Gopnik). This striking image captures the visual and symbolic contrast between the Eldridge Street Synagogue and the surrounding Lower East Side, a neighborhood

then dominated by overcrowded tenements and a temporal continuity of bustling immigrant commerce. The synagogue's luminous presence was no accident: it was designed to stand out among the urban density, signaling both permanence and cultural distinction for a community of newly arrived Eastern European Jews.

The congregation's architectural choice reinforces this purpose. The synagogue was built in the Moorish Revival style. It purposefully rejected the Gothic styles so heavily associated with European Christianity, a religion from which many of these immigrants had fled due to violent persecution. Instead, the Moorish Revival style evokes a Golden Age of Jewish culture in Muslim-controlled Spain, a period known for relative prosperity, intellectual flourishing, and inter-religious peace before the Inquisition. For the Eastern European Orthodox immigrants who attended Eldridge Street, this architectural reference created a direct historical link with their roots in the Middle East. Unlike the German Reform Jews who had occupied the city for centuries and had largely been Americanized, these Eastern European immigrants sought a style that reflected orthodox tradition and created a visible Jewish presence in the city. The Moorish motifs, with their arches, ornate brickwork and geometric embellishments, symbolized a Jewish identity both separate from and responsive to the surrounding Christian-dominated environment.

One of Eldridge's most prominent features are its stained glass windows. While stained glass windows have been historically associated with Christian churches, used to convey biblical narratives to a largely illiterate population, by the turn of the twentieth century it had become a prevalent decorative element. In Jewish theology, the making of "graven images" of heavenly figures is strictly prohibited, making figurative storytelling inappropriate. Instead Eldridge's stained glass windows draw, again, upon Islamic art's frequent usage of stars, tessellations, and geometric patterns.

The eastern rose window (Fig. 1) relies upon a geometric construction derived from the rotation and intersection of equilateral triangles arranged at sixty-degree intervals. Rather than depicting figures or narrative scenes, the window is built from a compass-and-straightedge system of circles and star polygons. Figure 1 reveals how these constructions generate nested hexagonal symmetries and overlapping circular petals that radiate from the center of the window. This method of producing complex radial patterns from simple geometric rules closely parallels techniques found in Islamic architectural ornament, where repeated star polygons and interlocking circles are used to create intricate non-figurative decoration.

It is important to note that this specific window is a modern renovation. These replaced glass bricks that were used to seal up a different shattered stained glass window. Despite this, the analysis still remains relevant and the “Rose window” is just the grandest display of geometric artisanship.

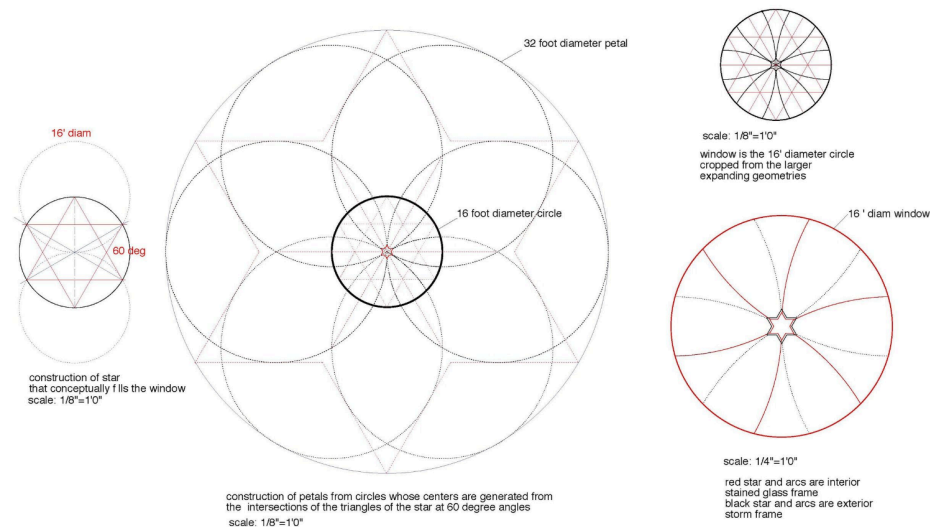
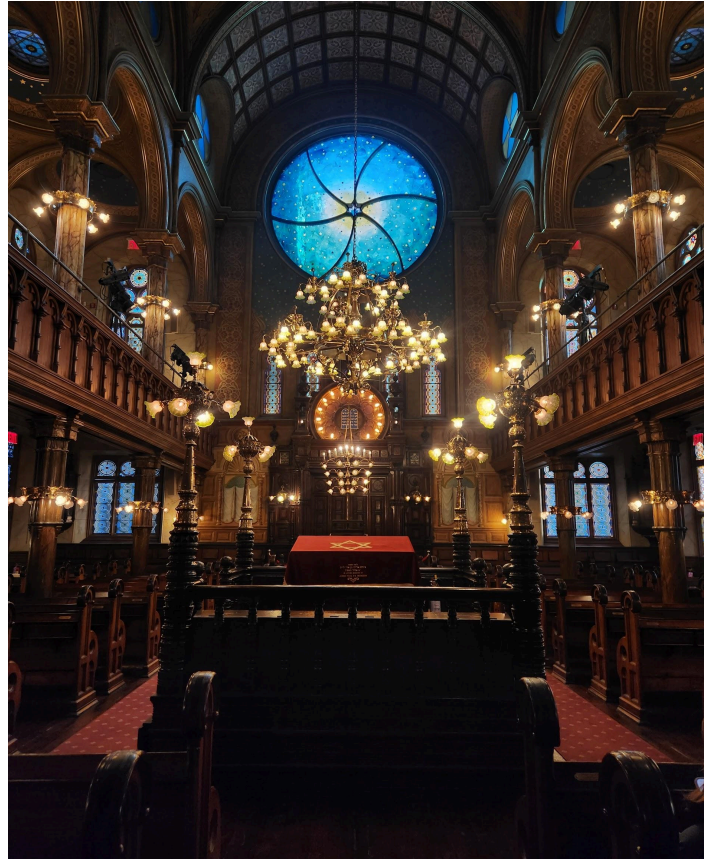


Figure 1. A geometric drawing of the new Rose window, featuring the Star of David and other geometric features (Gans Studio).

Interestingly, five-pointed stars are also prominently featured throughout the synagogue, not only on the rose window but also featured heavily in ceiling paintings. In Jewish mysticism, numbers like 3, 4, 5, 7, and 12, are associated with important religious concepts and sacred symbolism. This symbolism is abundant in Eldridge Synagogue, specifically, the Gothic rose window, can be interpreted as symbolizing the Twelve Tribes of Israel through its twelve surrounding rondelles. The five horseshoe windows beneath it correspond to the Five Books of Moses, the three bays of the building represent the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the four doors symbolize the Matriarchs, Sarah, Leah, Rebecca, and Rachel (Polland 24). However, in this context and time period, the five-pointed star would be exclusively used as a symbol of American patriotism. The owner of the firm that constructed the modern “Rose window” aptly puts, “There are five-point stars because that’s the star of the American flag and this is as much an American monument as it is a temple.” (Xu).



Another example of numerology is the flourish on the benches of the synagogues. There are, specifically, three circular cutouts on the sides of the benches, which according to Jewish mysticism would correspond to the three Patriarchs. According to the docent, these benches were derived from a Christian benchmaker. Thus, these circular cutouts are not representative of the

Three Patriarchs but rather the Christian Holy Trinity. These divergent readings illustrate the fickle and interpretive nature of symbolic analysis in historic architecture, where the same physical feature can be read through multiple, often contradictory, religious or cultural frameworks.

The symbolic program of Eldridge Street Synagogue reflects the layered history of Jewish visual traditions. Among the motifs present are representations of the zodiac, a feature that may initially appear surprising within an Orthodox religious setting. However, zodiac imagery has appeared in Jewish art for centuries, including in ancient synagogue mosaics. Rather than representing astrology in the modern sense, these symbols traditionally signified the cosmic order established by God and the cyclical passage of sacred time. Their presence in synagogue decoration emphasized divine control over the universe and the rhythm of the liturgical calendar, demonstrating how Jewish artistic traditions often incorporated broader cosmological imagery into religious space.



For much of Jewish history, the most widely recognized symbol of Judaism was not the Star of David but the menorah. Originating in the Temple in Jerusalem, the eight-branched menorah became one of the earliest and most enduring symbols of Jewish religious identity. It appeared frequently in ancient Jewish art, including synagogue decorations, manuscripts, and communal objects. Because of its association with the Temple and its biblical origins, the menorah served for centuries as a broadly recognizable emblem of Judaism across different Jewish communities. By contrast, the Star of David only became widely standardized as a Jewish symbol during the nineteenth century. As Jewish communities in Europe increasingly encountered modern nationalism and sought recognizable markers of collective identity, the six-pointed star emerged as a unifying emblem of Judaism, functioning in many ways as a counterpart to the Christian cross and the Muslim crescent. Its growing popularity reflected a broader effort to articulate a cohesive Jewish identity in the modern world. Accordingly, the Star of David appears prominently throughout Eldridge Street Synagogue's decorative program, reflecting this newer symbolic language while coexisting alongside older traditions.

While the Eldridge Street Synagogue was designed to signal permanence, its builders were largely working-class immigrants with limited financial resources. To achieve the appearance of grandeur without the prohibitive costs of marble and gilded ornament, artisans relied on faux finishes, stenciled decorations, and painted woodwork. Columns that appear to be solid marble are actually plaster painted in veined patterns. This use of illusion was not merely a budgetary compromise; it also reflected a deeper aspiration to claim legitimacy and permanence in a city that often marginalized immigrants. The synagogue's "fake luxury" projected stability and sophistication, contrasting sharply with the cramped tenements that dominated the Lower East Side streets.

Decline of Eldridge and Judaism in the Lower East Side

Beyond religious life, cultural expression flourished through newspapers, theater, literature, and political organizations. Yiddish-language newspapers such as the *Forverts* became major sources of news, advice, and political debate for the immigrant community. Theater also played an important role, with Yiddish performances addressing themes of migration, family conflict, and adaptation to American society. Education and mutual aid societies further strengthened the community. Immigrant organizations provided assistance to newcomers, organized social events, and helped families navigate life in America. Organizations, like Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, American Jewish Committee, Hebrew Free Loan Society, Anti-Defamation League, International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union appear at this time. Through these institutions, Jewish immigrants were able to preserve important aspects of their cultural heritage while gradually adapting to their new environment in New York City, as well as support newcomers and promote prosperity in the community.

Ironically, the success of the Jewish community in the Lower East Side led to the decline of Eldridge Synagogue. In order to conduct communal praying, a quorum of ten men is required. However, as people were able to afford to leave the tenements of the Lower East Side and spread out to outer boroughs of New York City, upper Manhattan, and New Jersey, fewer and fewer people were able to attend congregations. "An Orthodox synagogue follows the congregation," Justice Bookson said, "or the congregation follows the synagogue, because we can't ride on the Sabbath." (Dunlap) In this case, as new Jewish communities outside of the Lower East Side formed the "Orthodox synagogue follow[ed] the congregation." With no wealthy donors backing the congregation, the building began to fall into disrepair. By 1971, the doors were boarded shut and electricity had been cut off to the building (Wolfe 14).

Professor Gerard R. Wolfe, an architectural historian at New York History, was conducting research on synagogues on the Lower East Side when he came across Khal Adas Jeshurun. "When I walked into the sanctuary," he recalled, "my hair stood on end. It was like walking into the twilight zone." (Rosen) Pigeons had roosted in the balconies, leaving droppings across the intricately carved wooden pews. Rainwater from a leaking roof had heavily damaged the plaster and warped the floors, while broken stained glass windows left the sanctuary exposed to the harsh New York winters. Rescuing the building from the brink of collapse required what preservationists later described as a "miracle." The founding of the Eldridge Street Project launched an exhaustive, twenty-year, \$20 million restoration effort. Ironically, just as the original construction required the wealth of successful merchants, this modern preservation required the backing of civic institutions, wealthy philanthropists, and historical grants. Budgetary constraints even forced them to abandon the restoration of a related historical site, a nearby mikvah (ritual bath). (Wolfe 18)

The preservationists responsible for restoring the Eldridge Street Synagogue aimed to recreate an "authentic" representation of its original splendor. They restored the sanctuary to its historic appearance but repurposed the building, transforming it from an active religious space into a non-sectarian museum. Despite this change, an Orthodox congregation continues to hold weekly services in the restored synagogue.

Eldridge Street Today

Today, the character of the Lower East Side is vastly different from the dense, Yiddish-speaking enclave of the 1890s. Urban historians often describe New York City as a palimpsest, a manuscript where the original writing has been erased to make room for new text,

yet the outlines of the past remain visible beneath the surface. (Kroessler) Walking down Eldridge Street in the twenty-first century vividly illustrates this concept. The pushcarts selling herring and pickles have long been replaced by bustling markets offering dragon fruit and live seafood. The signs adorning the historic tenement buildings are no longer painted in Hebrew or Yiddish, but in Mandarin and Fuzhounese. The Eldridge Street Synagogue now stands in the very heart of Manhattan's Chinatown . Against this modern backdrop, the imposing Moorish Revival facade appears almost anachronistic, an architectural anchor holding fast to a bygone era while a completely new immigrant diaspora thrives around it.

This dramatic demographic shift forces a reevaluation of the synagogue's contemporary purpose. Its objectives have fundamentally changed. When its doors opened in 1887, it was an insular sanctuary designed to protect and elevate a vulnerable, marginalized religious community. Today, operating primarily as the Museum at Eldridge Street, its value is outward-facing and universal. It no longer functions solely as a house of worship for Eastern European Jews, but rather as a civic monument to the broader American immigrant experience. The synagogue asks modern visitors to reflect on the cyclical nature of the city: the Chinese immigrants currently working in the surrounding neighborhood are chasing the exact same promises of security and prosperity that the synagogue's founders sought over a century ago. Its spiritual value now lies in its capacity to foster empathy and historical continuity across different cultures and generations.

More broadly, the history of the synagogue invites reflection on the role of immigrant communities in shaping urban culture and identity. The Jewish immigrants who built and sustained institutions like Eldridge Street were not simply adapting to life in America, but they were actively creating new forms of cultural, social, and religious life that blended traditions

from Europe with the opportunities of the United States. In this sense, the synagogue stands as a powerful symbol of the immigrant experience. However, it was abandoned, as American Jews got more integrated and improved their economic situation, allowing them to move. The return to the synagogue, on the other hand, shows another shift, where many communities that were immigrants but adapted to their way of living in the United States, decided to reconnect with their immigrant past, to remember that they also came here at some point just like people after them and before them. The appearance of the museum also demonstrates the shifts in the modern American society, and the change of the people's perspective on their past, present and therefore, on their future.

Ultimately, the preservation of the Eldridge Street Synagogue serves as a necessary counterweight to the relentless, forward-marching development of New York City. As journalist Bill Moyers noted on the opening of Eldridge Street Synagogue, the restored site is a “landmark of the spirit of an ancient people on a new exodus, and the spirit of a new nation committed to the old idea of liberty” (Wolfe 25). In a city defined by constant destruction and renewal, maintaining this physical space is an act of defiance against collective amnesia.

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Appendix

Ilya: When beginning this project, my main goal was to better understand how immigrant communities shaped New York City and how buildings tell us these stories. I was particularly interested in the history of Jewish immigration due to personal reflection on the differences of Jewish immigrant experience then and now. Through this project, I hoped to explore how a single building can represent broader historical processes like immigration and assimilation. One of the most interesting parts of the project was discovering how the Eldridge Street Synagogue functioned not only as a place of worship but also as a symbol of belonging. For many Jewish immigrants, this synagogue represented their determination to establish a permanent place in the United States, but as soon as they actually established themselves in the US they started to leave the neighborhood, and left the synagogue till the time they decided to remember where they were coming from.

Jonathan: Going into this project I wanted to see how Eldridge Synagogue and the experience of the congregation differed from my own experiences and observations with Judaism. It is an understatement to say that when I walked into Eldridge synagogue, the environment was simply ethereal. From my experience, modern synagogues have now adopted a gilded aesthetic, with high quality woods, chandeliers, and embroidery. The overall result, however, is merely a gilded facade, a monument to the vanity of wealthy patrons rather than a sanctuary built from a genuine, humble appreciation of the divine. Eldridge, too, suffers from some of these elements of a faux vanity, such as wood painted as marble and the usage of different quality woods on the floor and altar. While we now settle for an abundance of convenient prayer spaces, the people who built Eldridge wanted just one, a singular, towering beacon where even their 'fake' marble was a desperate attempt to reach a grandeur they couldn't afford but felt God deserved.