

## ABROAD IN NEW YORK

By FRANCIS MORRONE

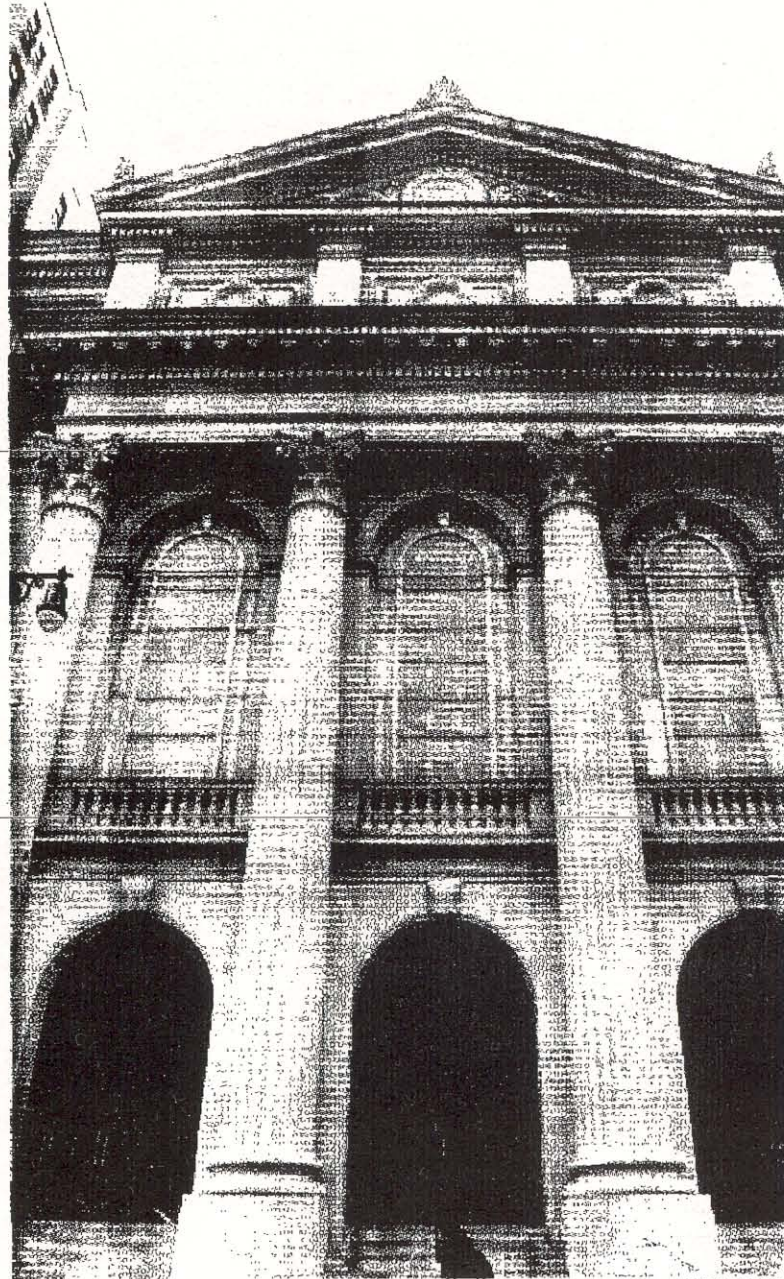
In the late 19th century and early 20th century, architects often adapted Moorish forms to create buildings that identified themselves as synagogues. Examples of these include Congregation Ahavath Chesed (1871-72) on Lexington and 55th, and Khal Adath Jeshurun (1886-87) on Eldridge Street.

For a brief time, however, some congregations chose to highlight the essential continuity of Jewish tradition with the mainstream of Western civilization, and built their homes in the classical manner descended from the ancient Greeks and Romans and the Italians of the Renaissance. One example is Park Slope's Congregation Beth Elohim. Even better is Congregation Shearith Israel, on Central Park West and 70th Street, home of North America's oldest Jewish congregation.

In 1654, 23 Sephardic Jews fled to New Amsterdam from Brazil, where, until the Portuguese took over, they had lived peacefully under Dutch dominion. When the director-general of New Amsterdam, the strict Calvinist Peter Stuyvesant, objected to allowing Asser Levy and his flock to settle, the board of the Dutch West India Company, which included Jews, censured Stuyvesant. The new settlers stayed, and flourished.

Their first permanent home was on Mill Street (now William Street) in lower Manhattan. In the 1890s, the congregation relocated to the Upper West Side. Brunner & Tryon designed the new building, built in 1896-97.

The 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago had promoted the civic ideals of a generation of American architects trained at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. We see this influence not least in ecclesiastical architecture. For the city's oldest Jewish congregation, Brunner & Tryon creat-



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ed one of the city's most sophisticated classical buildings.

The synagogue is a finely proportioned and finely detailed work, executed in Indiana limestone, then coming into its own as New York's defining stone. The façade is richly composed, with a quartet of beautifully modeled Corinthian columns. These are the first of the building's elements to register in the eye of the passerby, and set a luxurious tone carried through to the smallest details.

Of note is the triangular pediment. In its center is an oculus, encircled by a fine wreath. On either side we find the fantastically lush, flowing floral forms we call rinceaux. These are among the finest rinceaux in New York. Sculptural pediments come from the ancient Greeks. Yet the Greeks featured figure sculpture in such pediments. (As we did in, for example, the pediment of the New York Stock Exchange.) Synagogue architecture disallows figuration, and this use of rinceaux is both unusual and a brilliant adaptation of classical forms to the exigencies of Jewish architecture.

Arnold Brunner was a native New Yorker, among the first of our notable Jewish architects. He came up through the informal, Beaux-Arts-like training system that New York created for itself: He trained under George Post, who had trained under Richard Morris Hunt, who had been America's first architect to attend the Ecole. It is a measure both of New York's growing sophistication, as well as of the place Jews found for themselves in this great city, that by the 1890s a Jewish architect, trained in the city, should produce a masterpiece on Central Park West.

*If you have questions about New York City's buildings, please e-mail them to [fmorrone@nysun.com](mailto:fmorrone@nysun.com).*

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