

Landmarks Preservation Commission
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LP-0832

CONGREGATION SHEARITH ISRAEL (the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue), 99 Central Park West, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1896-97; architects Brunner & Tryon.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1122, Lot 36 in part, consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

On November 27, 1973, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of Congregation Shearith Israel (the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue) and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 4). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. One witness spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. Congregation Shearith Israel has indicated its support of the proposed designation of its main building. It opposed the designation of its Parsonage building next to the main building, and the Commission has decided not to consider the Parsonage for designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The synagogue of the Congregation Shearith Israel was built in 1896-97 from plans by the architectural firm of Brunner & Tryon. This masonry building, referred to as the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, is the fourth synagogue erected by the Congregation since 1729. The first building, located on what is today South William Street, provided a permanent house of worship for the Jewish settlers who had been meeting together for nearly a hundred years. Prior to the erection of the present building, the Congregation had built two other synagogues; one at 56 Crosby Street in 1833-34 and another at 5 West 19th Street in 1859-60.

The synagogue architects, Arnold W. Brunner and Thomas Tryon, had also designed the Chemistry Building of New York City College, among other important projects. This synagogue is a striking example of the monumental neo-Classical style, popular at the turn of the century for public and ecclesiastical architecture. The imposing front facade facing Central Park West is composed of four large, engaged Composite columns that embrace three round-arched openings, enclosed by elaborate bronze gates, and three round-arched windows with balustrades. The openings, which produce the effect of a loggia, lead into a porch containing the two primary entrances which are located at either side. The front columns are surmounted by an entablature with a modillioned cornice, which is also found above the two smooth ashlar surfaces flanking this central area.

Above the entablature is a high attic with smooth-faced pilasters, positioned to correspond with the columns. They enframe panels with classical wreath motifs and support a handsome low pediment with foliate detail in the tympanum, crowned by the conventional anthemion-shaped acroteria.

The 70th Street facade has end pavilions, the easternmost of which forms a part of the main massing of the front, further unified by the continuation of the front entablature along this side and the paneled attic treatment above the two pavilions. The recessed central portion has three large arched windows separated by Composite pilasters and is crowned by a handsome balustrade. The end pavilion nearest Central Park West is pierced by two windows; a square-headed window with projecting cornice and a window above it of similar proportion surmounted by swags and a pediment. An identical window with pedimented enframing appears above the side entrance at the rear pavilion. This 70th Street entrance is composed of large double doors and a transom with a handsome grille surmounted by a full entablature with foliate consoles.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Congregation Shearith Israel has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the synagogue of the Congregation Shearith Israel is a handsome example of the monumental neo-Classical style of architecture popular at the turn of the century, that it is a distinguishing feature of the Central Park West streetscape and that it symbolizes the three centuries of religious activity of the Congregation.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 63 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Congregation Shearith Israel, 99 Central Park West, Borough of Manhattan and designates as its related Landmark Site that part of Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1122, Lot 36 which contains the land on which the described building is situated.