

Landmarks Preservation Commission
February 9, 1982, Designation List 152
LP-1272

MT. NEBOH SYNAGOGUE (originally Unity Synagogue), 130 West 79th Street, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1927-28; Architect Walter S. Schneider.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan. Tax Map Block 1150, Lot 45.

On January 12, 1982 the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Mt. Neboh Synagogue and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 1). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Thirty-six witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were eight speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Mt. Neboh Synagogue, built as Unity Synagogue, is one of the important synagogue buildings on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Standing as a symbol of the contributions of the Jewish community to that area in the twentieth century, the synagogue was constructed in 1927-28. Designed by architect Walter S. Schneider, Mt. Neboh's distinctive cast-stone facade features elements influenced by Gothic, Moorish and Byzantine design, interpreted in a manner which evokes traditional associations while standing firmly within the contemporary urban context.

The history of the Mt. Neboh congregation and the construction of this building is the interconnected histories of three Jewish congregations established in Harlem that relocated to the Upper West Side as the character of Harlem changed. This pattern is firmly rooted in the history of Jewish migration within New York: "the desire for improvement, for better living conditions, which urged older settlers to move away from areas crowded by an influx of new immigrants. Synagogues as well as churches were constantly on the move, following their membership."

After the completion of the IRT subway in 1904, Harlem, as well as the Upper West Side, had become easily accessible. Neighborhoods in Harlem were settled by Jews who established synagogues in the area. The Congregation Peni-El, incorporated in 1906, built a structure at 527 West 147th Street. Congregation Mt. Zion, organized in 1888 by German and Hungarian Jews who moved from Yorkville, became one of the more prestigious Reform congregations in Harlem. Its synagogue was located at 37 West 119th Street (now in the Mt. Morris Park Historic District). The Mt. Neboh Congregation had its origins in a Jewish religious school in Hamilton Heights, founded in 1907. Reform services were held in a series of buildings in the neighborhood from 1909 until the completion of a synagogue at 564 West 150th Street in 1917, although the congregation had incorporated in 1912.

All three congregations prospered until they found that their members were moving to the Upper West Side, due largely to the changing character of Harlem. In 1926, the year of its twentieth anniversary, Congregation Peni-El

voted to build a new synagogue on the Upper West Side. Property on West 79th Street was acquired in May, 1927, and architect Walter S. Schneider filed building plans in June. Mt. Zion Congregation signed an agreement of consolidation with Congregation Peni-El in July; the merged congregation was to be known as Unity Synagogue. The construction contract was given to the firm of Charles Newmark, President of the Board of Trustees of the new Unity Synagogue. The firm of Newmark, Jacobs & Newmark was responsible for the construction of many New York apartment buildings and hotels. Major construction on Unity Synagogue lasted until May, 1928, when the cornerstone was dedicated -- the fully completed building was dedicated in September, 1928. It was reported to have cost \$750,000.² Prior to the completion of the new building, Peni-El and Mt. Zion, which had sold their former buildings, had temporarily held services in the new building of the United Order of True Sisters, at 150 West 85th Street. The existence of the Unity Synagogue Congregation was extremely brief due to the devastating effects of the stock market crash a year after its completion. The congregation found itself in financial difficulty, its property was foreclosed on, and was then put up for auction. It was purchased by the Mt. Neboh Congregation in September, 1930, and the synagogue was re-dedicated as Mt. Neboh Synagogue in October. Mt. Neboh sold its former building on West 150th Street to a Seventh Day Adventist church.

Little is known about the life and career of architect Walter S. Schneider, except for the fact that he collaborated on the design of two other Manhattan synagogues: B'nai Jeshurun Synagogue, 257 West 88th Street, designed in conjunction with Henry Beaumont Herts in 1918, and the Park Avenue Synagogue, 50 East 87th Street, designed by Deutsch and Schneider and constructed in 1926-27.

Schneider's design for Mt. Neboh was quite successful in two major respects, first as it reflected the architectural expression for synagogue design in the 1920s, and second, as it met the difficult conditions of its urban site.

The history of synagogue design in the United States, from the eighteenth century until the Depression of the 1930s was one of continuous search for appropriate architectural expression. This was due to the fact that there was no clear historic stylistic tradition for synagogue architecture. Earlier American synagogues were generally constructed in the dominant styles of the time, which included the Greek Revival and Gothic Revival. By 1850, a number of recurring synagogue motifs (later employed in Mt. Neboh) had appeared: the traceried rose window, twin towers, pointed arch, and Star of David. In the period after the Civil War there was a trend toward adopting "oriental" influences such as Moorish, which was characteristic of the search for architectural forms that were different than those of Christian churches. Some of the major New York synagogues of this period which incorporated both Moorish influence and motifs which had been earlier employed were the now demolished Temple Emanu-El (1866-88, Eidlitz and Fernbach), Central (1871-72, Henry Fernbach), Eldridge Street (1886-87, Herter Brothers), and Zichron Ephraim

(1890, E.E.W. Schneider and Henry Herter). The latter three are designated New York City Landmarks. Later synagogues, around the turn of the century, explored the symbolism of the dome, and also turned to classical sources.

The period of prosperity lasting from World War I until the Depression was the time of the greatest amount of synagogue construction in U.S. Jewish history. Characteristic of Mt. Neboh and other similar synagogues was the combination of both traditional and modern details and references. On the one hand, the 1920s was a period of historicism and eclecticism, reflected in the design of some synagogues by the conscious adaptation of forms recalling the Eastern origin and traditions of Jews. With archaeological excavations in Palestine and a renewed interest in the Near East, many synagogue architects became interested in the "near Eastern" or "oriental" styles (Moorish, Byzantine, Persian, Saracenic, Mohammedan) for synagogue design. What was usually referred to as "Byzantine" became the favored style for synagogues. Mt. Neboh, built at the culmination of this period and a major example of its type, was then called "a striking combination of Persian, Byzantine and Coptic architectural forms and ornamentation."³ On the other hand, the tendency of the 1920s was toward increased simplification of architectural forms. A more generally streamlined form and a contrast between blank wall surface and flat decoration was seen in various contemporary styles including the Art Deco, as used in commercial and residential buildings, and the neo-Gothic, as used in church design. The "Byzantine" style well suited this modern tendency, with its large amount of blank wall and concentrated ornament.

The difficulties inherent in New York's mid-block sites, particularly for religious architecture, were also addressed by the architect of Mt. Neboh. By the twentieth century in Manhattan the prominent corner sites were becoming too costly for institutions. Religious buildings on the mid-block sites thus lost the opportunity to express symbolic associations with domes and steeples, and were forced to rely instead on other architectural qualities. Arnold Brunner, a synagogue architect in the Classical Revival style (his Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue is a designated New York City Landmark) stated the problem in 1907:

The setting of the synagogue is of paramount importance. Like any other building it needs an appropriate position, and if crowded in the middle of the block it loses its dignity and importance... In New York the high value of desirable lots has cramped the design of the majority of the synagogues... Many of the best exteriors indicate the lack of ground, and facades are flattened, approaches are dwarfed, entrances too small and steps too steep. The beauty and impressiveness of a synagogue depend largely upon proper approaches, and the fitness of the building for its position is a most important consideration.⁴

The architectural response to these site problems for synagogues was the development of a new prototype - a low and massive design, dominated by a monumental entrance portal that contrasted with the large areas of flat wall surface. Schneider's design for other synagogues were variations on this theme. B'nai Jeshurun presents a flat facade in which all elements are reduced to emphasize the huge recessed portal. The Park Avenue Synagogue employs a large pointed arch portal and Romanesque motifs. Mt. Nebo is considered a more successful design because of the way it dramatically expresses its religious presence and responds firmly to the taller adjacent apartment buildings.

Mt. Nebo Synagogue was constructed of cast stone over a steel frame structure. The Benedict Stone Company worked the material in a manner resembling sandstone to produce a variety both of texture and of warm buff-colored tones, evoking associations with the Near East. The facade contains a sophisticated balance of blank wall surface, window, and ornamental elements. The dominant motif is a large pointed arch that rises from the low triple paired entry doors and surrounds a cast-stone geometrically-traceried rose window with a Star of David at the center. The use of the pointed arch and the rose window derive from Gothic sources and had been popular motifs in synagogue architecture from the mid-nineteenth century. Marble colonnettes flanking the doors rise into cast-stone colonnettes and mouldings that support and encircle the rose window. Mullions further divide the leaded glass windows found below the rose window. The arch is surrounded by a band of ornamental cast-stone block moulding. This ornament and the capitals of the colonnettes were taken directly from the fourteenth-century Alhambra in Granada. Stair towers with narrow slit windows frame the facade and add a third dimension by bowing outward. The towers are capped by arched octagonal cupolas and are ornamented by bartizans. The pedimented cornice, supported by corbels, is composed of similar ornamental cast-stone block moulding bearing interlacing and stylized floral motifs and shields. Another band of geometric ornament defines the base by running across the facade above the entrance, which is flanked by lanterns and four small windows. The building's base is of granite and bears the inscription of the Jewish year 5688 and the date 1927.

Schneider's design manipulates the building's sense of scale. The creation and definition of a low base tends to visually increase the effect of height of the central arch and towers. Despite the large amount of wall surface, the overall design effect is one of verticality and lightness.

The Mt. Nebo congregation prospered in its synagogue, particularly in the years 1939 to 1961 when it was led by Rabbi Samuel M. Segal. By the 1970s, however, as the congregation aged and the membership dwindled, financial problems developed. The building was sold in 1979 to The Corporation of Seventh Day Adventists, which in turn sold it in 1981.

Though it no longer continues in its original function, Mt. Neboh Synagogue stands as a reminder of the contributions of the Jewish community to Manhattan's Upper West Side and of the architect's goal of symbolically expressing that presence in this building.

Report prepared by R. Jay Shockley,
Landmarks Preservationist

FOOTNOTES

1. Rachel Wischnitzer, Synagogue Architecture in the United States (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1955), p.61.
2. New York Times, May 14, 1928.
3. New York Times, May 14, 1928.
4. Arnold Brunner, "Synagogue Architecture", The Brickbuilder, 16, (March, 1907), 43-44.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

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 Mt. Neboh Synagogue 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 Mt. Neboh Synagogue is an important example of twentieth-century synagogue architecture in New York and particularly the Upper West Side; that its architectural expression represents a successful resolution of the search during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for an appropriate style for American synagogues which differed from European Christian prototypes; that it is an effective solution to the problem of designing an urban mid-block facade for a religious institution; that its distinctive cast-stone facade is a sophisticated blend of motifs employed in earlier American synagogues with Byzantine and Moorish ornamental influences, worked within the framework of the 1920s desire for increased architectural simplicity; that the history of the building and its congregation documents the migration of Jews from Harlem to Manhattan's Upper West Side; and that its presence represents the social and cultural contributions of the Jewish people to the Upper West Side.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly 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 Mt. Neboh Synagogue, 130 West 79th Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1150, Lot 45, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

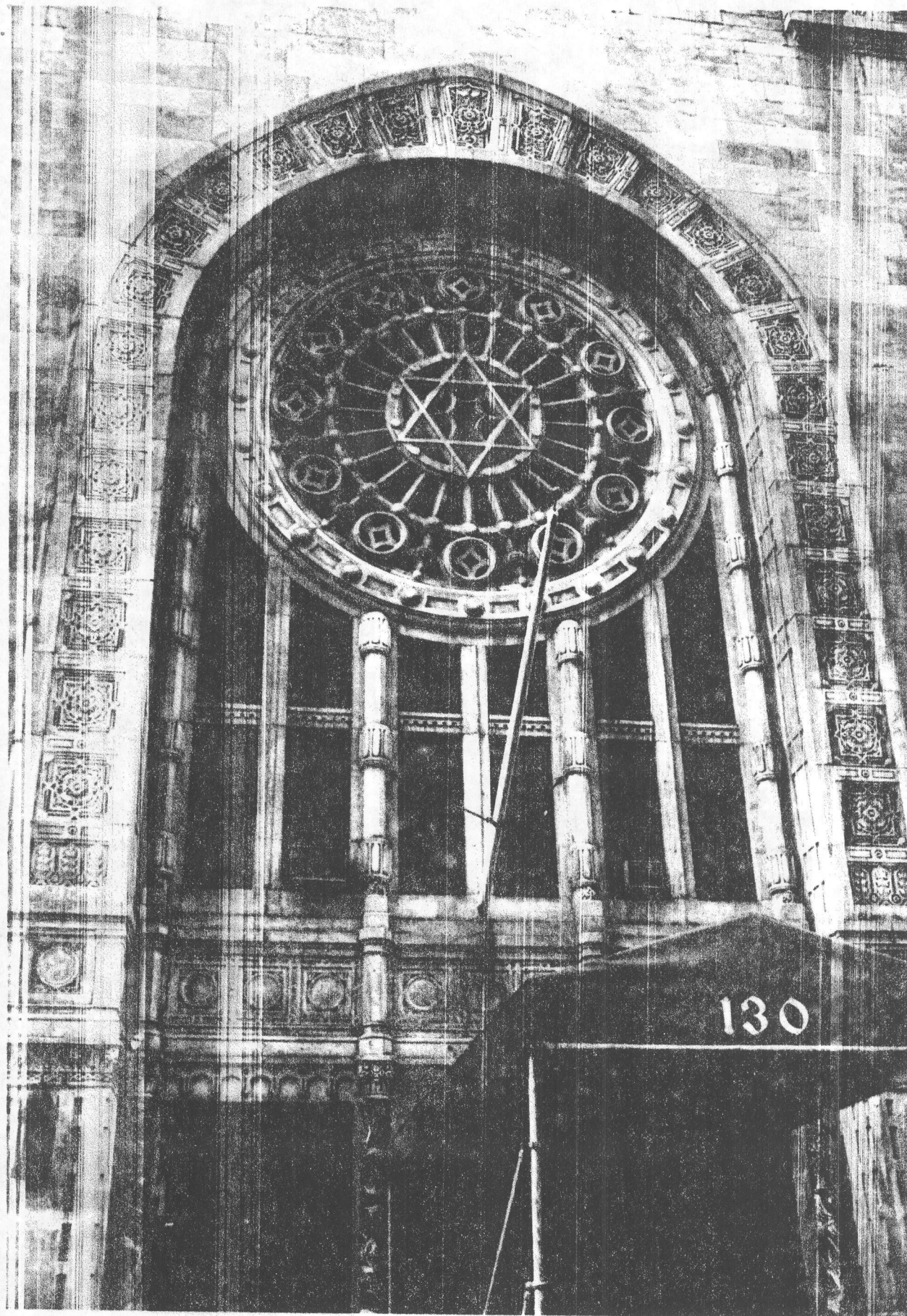
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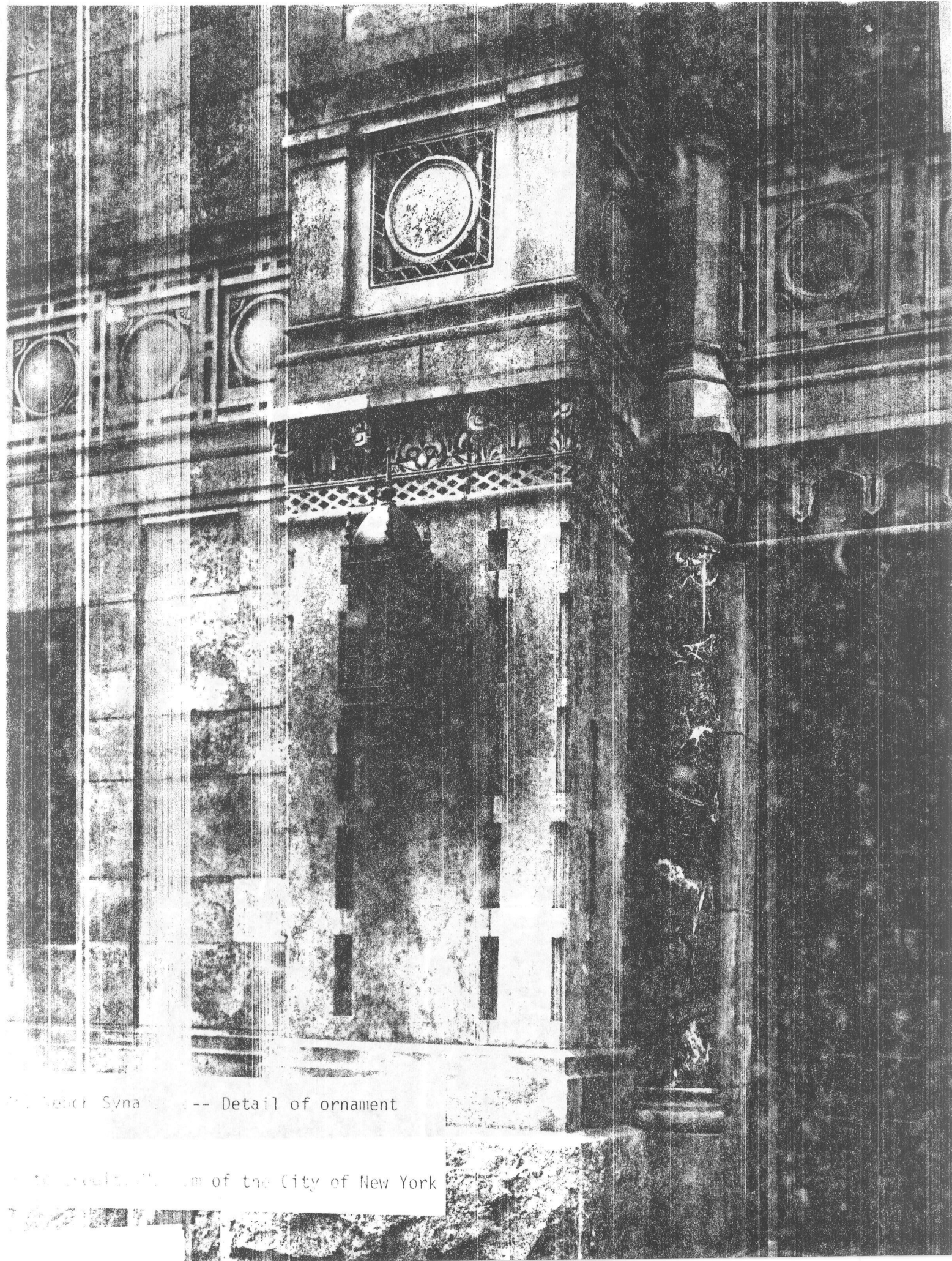
Mt. Zion Synagogue

Photo Credit: Vito J. Tricarico



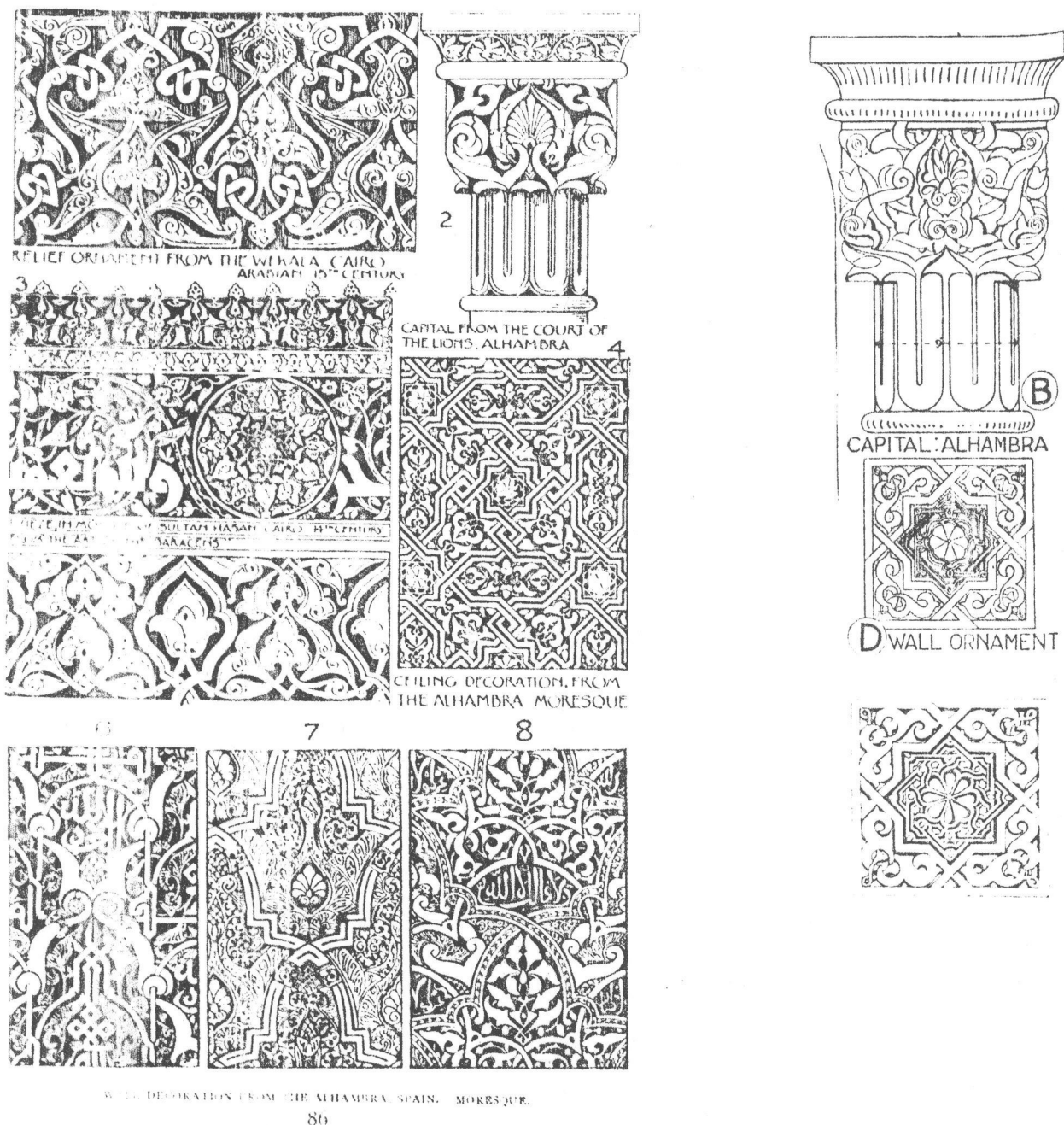
Mt. Nebo Synagogue-- Detail of central arch

Photo Credit: Committee to Save Mt. Nebo



Knesset Synagogue -- Detail of ornament

Photo credit: © The City of New York



Ornamental sources and influences

Illustrations from: A History of Architecture, Banister Fletcher
An Illustrated Dictionary of Ornament, Maureen Stafford and Dora Ware
A Manual of Historic Ornament, Richard Glazier

