

faith & FORM

By Temple Administrator Mark Heutlinger

Since its founding in 1845, Congregation Emanu-El has moved five times. Its first home was on the second floor of a private dwelling located at the corner of Grand and Clinton Streets on the Lower East Side. Later, it occupied in succession two churches that were rededicated as temples. The fourth move was to Fifth Avenue and 43rd Street.

In September 1868, three years after the conclusion of the Civil War and only 23 years following the initial organizing meeting of the congregation, the 43rd Street Sanctuary was built by and for Emanu-El's members—a first. The day following the new temple's dedication, the *New York Daily Tribune* reported, "This is beyond doubt the most elegant Jewish house of worship in America and is among the largest religious edifices in the city." The temple was built in the then very popular Moorish Revivalist style.

In just a little more than 50 years, the congregation once again decided to move, not only to expand its seating capacity from 1,600 to 2,500 but, more important, to escape the tumult of Fifth Avenue and 43rd Street, which



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had become part of an increasingly commercial district. In the mid 1920s, under the leadership of the congregation's president, Louis Marshall, the decision was made to move northward and to intentionally remain on Fifth Avenue. Temple Emanu-El ultimately acquired the land that had been the site of the John Jacob Astor mansion. Construction at 65th Street and Fifth Avenue began in

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Temple Emanu-El: From Grand & Clinton to Fifth & 65th



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1 The congregation's first location: A rented second-floor loft at Grand & Clinton Streets on the Lower East Side.

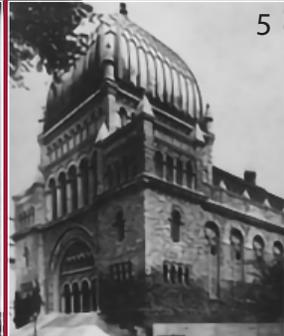
2 In 1847, Temple Emanu-El moved north to a church on Chrystie Street, which was then rededicated.

3 In 1854, the temple moved farther uptown to another former church on 12th Street.

In 1868, the temple built their first permanent house of worship at Fifth Avenue and 43rd Street. 4



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Temple Emanu-El consolidated with fellow Reform temple, Beth-El, in 1927. 5

The current historic sanctuary at Fifth Avenue and 65th Street was completed in 1929 and has been our home for over 90 years. 6



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1927 and was completed by the autumn of 1929. At the same time, Emanu-El consolidated with Temple Beth-El, located at Fifth Avenue and 76th Street. Both congregations had distinguished histories and leadership, and both required additional seating capacity. The question was, what should the new Emanu-El look like?

It was felt that Jewish architects would have the most sensitivity to the needs of a temple and therefore be best suited to design the Sanctuary. The architectural firm headed by Robert D. Kohn, Charles Butler and Clarence Stein won the commission.

Do you remember an exhibition mounted by Elka Deitsch, curator of the Herbert & Eileen Bernard Museum, that depicted drawings of what Emanu-El could have looked like?

Among the proposals were original drawings appearing in *The Architectural Forum's* February 1930 issue. These most closely resemble Temple Emanu-El today. The drawings were captioned "Three perspective studies for the new Temple in a free, bold and Modern Romanesque manner." Modern Romanesque? I had heard of the Modern and Romanesque but not the two styles joined as one.

Temple Emanu-El does indeed have aspects of the Romanesque. Note our lancet windows on the north and south sides of the Sanctuary, for example, or the great arches echoed within and without the structure. Have you ever noticed the bronze plaque affixed to the temple at the northeast corner of 65th and Fifth, just below and to the left of the bulletin board? It was placed there by the New York Community Trust in 1966 under the heading "Landmarks of New York." The text mentions that the architecture of the temple was "an adaptation of Moorish Romanesque styles, symbolic of the Eastern and Western cultures."

And that indeed is also true. Moorish influences are everywhere. Just notice the bimah's brilliant mosaics by Hildreth Meière, best known in New York City for the roundels that adorn Radio City Music Hall. Or the eight-pointed star that decorates the Cassell Community House from the ceilings to the floors. This same Moorish design also is found within Meière's mosaics.

So now we have Moorish and Romanesque. What about the Byzantine style? Isn't the double-domed ceiling of the Beth-El Chapel a prime example of this architectural form? Furthermore, the tendril-like pulpit carvings in the sanctuary are predominantly Art Nouveau and, if you look carefully at the hand-painted ceiling, you will find Egyptian and Aztec motifs as well.

The point is that Emanu-El is a blending of styles, an eclectic mixture of shapes and patterns that are held together in the vastness of this sacred space and filtered through the late 1920s contemporary Style Moderne, which came to be known as Art Deco.

When I return to the caption of the drawings by Kohn, Butler and Stein, I find that the word "modern" resonates and suggests a broader interpretation of the congregation itself. I suggest that we as Jews do not have an architectural style that is inherent in our synagogues. We tend to adopt the styles of the time and place in which we live. A prime example of this is the synagogue in Córdoba. You might think you were in a mosque judging by the intricate carvings on the sanctuary walls.

It is important to remember that our temple was built in the years between the two world wars. Style Moderne, in which artistic patterns and themes of the past were "modernized," was the predominant mode not only in architecture but the fine and applied arts as well. As such, it makes sense that the architectural plans for Emanu-El would incorporate this style.

What is striking to me is that the modernism of this time was related directly to the modernism of American Reform Jewry. Our temple was built in a manner that was indicative of the progressive mode of our faith. Reform was, at its founding, a reflection of the modern world. Reason, science and enlightenment constituted the foundation of the Reform Movement, taking hold first in what would become Germany and becoming firmly rooted in America with Emanu-El at its core.

The building of our 65th Street Temple thus enabled the congregation to celebrate the modernity of Reform Judaism while paying homage to our ancient past. In so doing, the Emanu-El Sanctuary brought faith and form into harmony.

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"Faith and Form" first appeared in a March 2010 Temple Bulletin for Temple Emanu-El's 165th anniversary.

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