

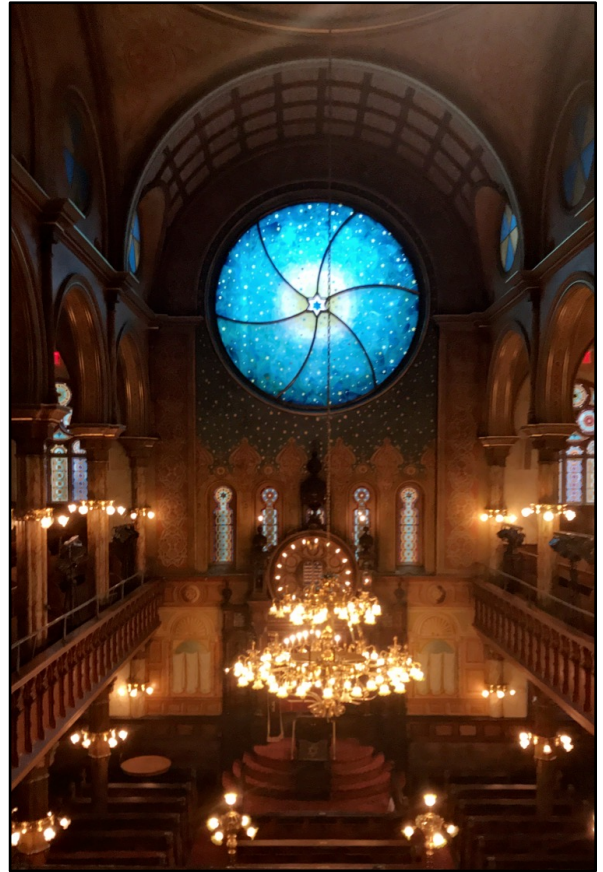
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Emily R. Kahn

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Questions of Authenticity: The Restoration & Museification of the Eldridge Street Synagogue  
12 Eldridge Street, New York, NY 10002



*Photos taken by Emily Kahn, December 2019*

When historian Gerard Wolfe “rediscovered” the main sanctuary at the Eldridge Street Synagogue on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, the *ner tamid*, or “eternal light,” still hung above the ark. Its light, however, had not burned in decades. In Judaism, the *ner tamid* is a physical manifestation of the principle that G-d’s presence is everlasting and all-encompassing.<sup>1</sup> G-d’s presence had not left the Eldridge Street Synagogue, but the extinguishment of the *ner tamid* symbolized four decades of neglect and absence in this sanctuary. A restoration of the sanctuary re-illuminated the *ner tamid*, hopefully in perpetuity.

Yet, did the *ner tamid* shine light on the same values, function, or community that it did in the late-nineteenth century when Eastern European immigrants founded the Eldridge Street Synagogue? Or had the re-illuminated sanctuary become an altogether different space? The preservationists entrusted with restoring the Eldridge Street Synagogue vowed to create an “authentic” depiction of this synagogue’s former glory.<sup>2</sup> They chose to restore the sanctuary to its original appearance but decided to change the primary function of the synagogue from a religious space to a non-sectarian museum.<sup>3</sup> An Orthodox congregation has held weekly services at the restored Eldridge Street Synagogue, but only if they could obtain a *minyan*- a quorum of ten male Jews necessary to recite communal prayers. This *minyan* oftentimes has not been reached.<sup>4</sup>

This paper explores questions of authenticity regarding the museification of the Eldridge Street Synagogue through a theoretical lens. It argues that the restoration of the Eldridge Street Synagogue fundamentally was inauthentic due to changes in the surrounding urban fabric and altered primary usage and occupants of the space. “Inauthentic” should not imply that the decisions restorers made at the Eldridge Street Synagogue were incorrect. These decisions accurately reflected Jewish theology, history, and the evolving role of Judaism in contemporary America. Reassessing the stated intent and current presentation of this restoration can provide insight into how an inauthentic restoration actually shed lights on authentic Jewish experiences.

### History of the Eldridge Street Synagogue:

The Eldridge Street Synagogue is home to Congregation Khal Adath Jeshurun and Anshe Lubz which translates to the “Congregation of the Community of the People of Jerusalem and the People of Lubz.”<sup>5</sup> Over time, three separate congregations merged to form this united congregation.<sup>6</sup> The founding members were part of the wave of Eastern European immigrants that arrived in New York City (NYC) in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Many of these immigrants fled from Russia as a result of the pogroms, starting in 1881. Specifically, the congregants of the Eldridge Street Synagogue left the Pale of Settlement, the western region of Imperial Russia where Jews could settle permanently prior to the pogroms. Of the 2.5 million Ashkenazi Jews who arrived from the Pale of Settlement, over half a million settled in the Lower East Side.<sup>7</sup> The Eldridge Street Synagogue was the first and grandest Orthodox synagogue to serve what was then the largest Jewish community in the world.<sup>8</sup>

The architecture of this synagogue reflected the immigrant status of its congregants. The founding members opted to build in a Moorish style with Romanesque and Gothic influences. This style differentiated the Eldridge Street Synagogue from existing German synagogues and Christian churches in

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<sup>1</sup> Gerard R. Wolfe, *The Synagogues of New York’s Lower East Side: A Retrospective and Contemporary View*, Second Edition, (New York: Empire State Editions, 2013): 17.

<sup>2</sup> Larry Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade: A Synagogue, A Restoration, A Legacy*, (London: Scala Publishers, 2011): 97.

<sup>3</sup> Wolfe, *The Synagogues of New York’s Lower East Side*, 18.

<sup>4</sup> Wolfe, *The Synagogues of New York’s Lower East Side*, 30.

<sup>5</sup> Wolfe, *The Synagogues of New York’s Lower East Side*, 15.

<sup>6</sup> Wolfe, *The Synagogues of New York’s Lower East Side*, 22.

<sup>7</sup> Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade*, 22.

<sup>8</sup> Lower East Side Historic Conservancy, “The Eldridge Street Synagogue: Congregation Khal Adath Jeshurun and Anshe Lubz Brochure,” 1986, Avery Classics at Columbia University in the City of New York, F128.68.L63 1986g; Wolfe, *The Synagogues of New York’s Lower East Side*, 4.

the area.<sup>9</sup> Moorish architecture recalled the “Golden Age” in Spain prior to the Inquisition in the fifteenth century. Although the Eldridge Street Synagogue served Ashkenazi rather than Sephardi Jews, this connection to Spain invoked a time when Muslims, Jews, and Christians peacefully lived side by side.<sup>10</sup> This religious freedom and ethnic diversity was a goal of the Eldridge Street Synagogue’s congregants who had experienced religious discrimination in Russia.<sup>11</sup>

A representative of the Eldridge Street Synagogue described its architecture as “proudly Jewish.”<sup>12</sup> There are Stars of David carved into the wooden doors, atop the finials, and on stained-glass windows. Even so, questions of authenticity surrounding the Eldridge Street Synagogue have existed since its opening ceremony in 1887. A reporter questioned the intricacy of the building: “Is this the orthodoxy which we should strive to bequeath our children? A Judaism composed of carved wood and of ornamental bricks covered by a handsome mortgage is all that will be left of them to liquidate...”<sup>13</sup> Surprisingly, given the building’s Jewish ornamentation, non-Jewish architects designed this building. NYC commissioned the Herter Brothers to build the Eldridge Street Synagogue.<sup>14</sup> It was their first and only synagogue.<sup>15</sup> Despite their inexperience in synagogue building, the Herter Brothers were quite familiar with the Jewish immigrant population in the Lower East Side. In the years prior to the construction of the Eldridge Street Synagogue, the Herter Brothers had been commissioned to build four tenement buildings. They ultimately built fifty tenements in the Lower East Side between 1887 and 1893. Although their tenements are known for their elaborate style and intricate ornamentation, the Eldridge Street Synagogue widely is considered their finest work.<sup>16</sup>

The Eldridge Street Synagogue quickly became an active and vibrant Jewish community. At the peak of immigration in the Lower East Side from 1900 to 1910, the congregation had 4,000 members. They held services three times a day, and this sacred site attracted over 1,000 worshippers for High Holiday services. According to the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC), “on the holidays the crowds were so great that it was necessary to station a guard at the entrance.”<sup>17</sup> Wealthy Jews founded the congregation but, once opened, the synagogue invited Jews of all socio-economic statuses. In the Jewish tradition G-d is present in all living beings, and the Eldridge Street Synagogue saw peddlers, bankers, sweatshop workers, restaurant owners, and more worshipping side by side.<sup>18</sup>

Unfortunately, the vibrancy of this community declined after fifty years. In 1924, Congress passed the joint Immigration Act and National Origins Quota. These acts set quotas on the numbers of immigrants allowed to enter the United States. It harshly targeted Eastern European groups, causing an abrupt decline in the arrival of Eastern European immigrants which formed the heart of the Eldridge Street Synagogue.<sup>19</sup> Synagogue attendance quickly declined. Even if immigrants could come to America, they likely would not stay in the Lower East Side. Also at this time, Eastern European immigrants were moving uptown and to Brooklyn in a search of higher social status and better living conditions.<sup>20</sup> The reduction in immigrants

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<sup>9</sup> Mark W. Gordon, “Photo Essay: Rediscovering Jewish Infrastructure: Showcasing Surviving Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Synagogues,” *American Jewish Infrastructure* 102, no. 4 (October 2018): 563-573.

<sup>10</sup> Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade*, 34.

<sup>11</sup> Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade*, 22.

<sup>12</sup> Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Landmarks Preservation Commission, Eldridge Street Synagogue (Congregation Khal Adath Jeshurun with Anshe Lubz) Designation Report, July 8, 1980: 5.

<sup>14</sup> Wolfe, *The Synagogues of New York's Lower East Side*, 8.

<sup>15</sup> Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade*, 24.

<sup>16</sup> LPC, Eldridge Street Synagogue Designation Report, 3.

<sup>17</sup> LPC, Eldridge Street Synagogue Designation Report, 6.

<sup>18</sup> Wolfe, *The Synagogues of New York's Lower East Side*, 22.

<sup>19</sup> Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade*, 22.

<sup>20</sup> LPC, Eldridge Street Synagogue Designation Report, 2.

coupled with the Great Depression left the Eldridge Street Synagogue in a financial crisis.<sup>21</sup> The congregation moved services into a more manageable sanctuary in the basement of the Eldridge Street Synagogue.<sup>22</sup> They continued to use the main sanctuary for special events such as weddings and bar mitzvahs until the 1950s.<sup>23</sup> However, numbers eventually declined so greatly that they had to pay two young Jewish men a stipend to attend services in order to obtain the necessary *minyan*.<sup>24</sup> The congregation ultimately sealed the sanctuary in 1950s. No one but an elderly sexton and pigeons would enter the main sanctuary of the Eldridge Street Synagogue for another four decades.<sup>25</sup>

### Restoration of the Eldridge Street Synagogue:

While completing his book *The Synagogues of New York's Lower East Side: A Retrospective and Contemporary View*, Gerard Wolfe, a historian and New York University professor, walked around the Lower East Side block-by-block in search of remnants of its Jewish past. He “rediscovered” the main sanctuary of the Eldridge Street Sanctuary as if it were an archaeological site. Wolfe convinced the sexton to pry open the sanctuary doors. Both the beauty and condition of this sanctuary shocked him despite his years of experience working on Jewish sacred sites.<sup>26</sup>

He entered a “prayer-filled time capsule.”<sup>27</sup> Nothing had been altered in forty years, but the decay of the sanctuary greatly had changed its appearance (Figure 1). Miraculously the ark remained in good condition, but the sanctuary was a ruin.<sup>28</sup> Vibrant polychromatic paint had dulled and peeled off the walls.<sup>29</sup> The wooden pews partially rotted away due to the influx of water coming in through the failing roof. The lath and plaster had collapsed, and the building was structurally unstable (Figure 2).<sup>30</sup> In 1982, structural engineers assessed the site, expressing shock that the grand Victorian chandelier still hung from the weakened structure. Roberta Brandes Gratz, a historic preservationist and leader of the Eldridge Street Project, believed this “building was being held up by a string from heaven” (Figure 3).<sup>31</sup>

Very little maintenance had been completed since the sealing of the sanctuary, and there was no formal maintenance program. A volunteer sexton, aged seventy-five, completed minor repairs where he could. Electricity and fuel costs were paid for by dues from the remaining congregation members and, after Wolfe became involved with the synagogue in the mid-1970s, by occasional sanctuary tours.<sup>32</sup> It quickly became evident that a more organized maintenance or restoration program was necessary in order to make the synagogue safe for ongoing congregants or visitors.<sup>33</sup>

Wolfe, along with some of his students, founded the Synagogue Restoration Project to complete emergency repairs and seek Landmark status. This status would protect the Eldridge Street Synagogue from demolition without review.<sup>34</sup> At the time, there were eighteen LPC New York City Landmarks on the

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<sup>21</sup> Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade*, 26.

<sup>22</sup> John Donald Stewart, “A Programme for the Preservation of Synagogue Kahal Adath Jeshurun with Anshe Lubz 12-16 Eldridge Street, New York City,” (M.S. Historic Preservation Thesis: Columbia University, 1979): iv.

<sup>23</sup> Wolfe, *The Synagogues of New York's Lower East Side*, 15.

<sup>24</sup> Stewart, “A Programme for the Preservation of Synagogue Kahal Adath Jeshurun,” 19.

<sup>25</sup> Stewart, “A Programme for the Preservation of Synagogue Kahal Adath Jeshurun,” 18; “A Restoration Revived for Prayer and Posterity,” *New York Times*, February 13, 1994, accessed December 10, 2019, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1994/02/13/156540.html?pageNumber=121>.

<sup>26</sup> Wolfe, *The Synagogues of New York's Lower East Side*, 15.

<sup>27</sup> Christopher Gray, “A Prayer-Filled Time Capsule from the 1880's,” *New York Times*, May 19, 1996, accessed December 10, 2019, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1996/05/19/057380.html?pageNumber=268>

<sup>28</sup> Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade*, 10.

<sup>29</sup> LPC, Eldridge Street Synagogue Designation Report, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Stewart, “A Programme for the Preservation of Synagogue Kahal Adath Jeshurun,” 17.

<sup>31</sup> Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade*, 10.

<sup>32</sup> Stewart, “A Programme for the Preservation of Synagogue Kahal Adath Jeshurun,” 18.

<sup>33</sup> Wolfe, *The Synagogues of New York's Lower East Side*, 23.

<sup>34</sup> Wolfe, *The Synagogues of New York's Lower East Side*, 23.

Lower East Side, including two synagogues: Congregation Beth Hamerash Hagodol and Congregation Bialystoker.<sup>35</sup> The Synagogue Restoration Project was a success and, in 1980, the Eldridge Street Synagogue unanimously became a NYC Landmark. Wolfe knew that the Synagogue Restoration Project could not save the Eldridge Street Synagogue in the long-run.<sup>36</sup> The LPC agreed, stating that “only a massive effort by this group and other concerned citizens will be able to save this great synagogue.”<sup>37</sup>

Congregants formed a Preservation Committee and, in 1986, a group of preservationists, architects, and real estate professionals created the Eldridge Street Project. This group led the twenty-year, twenty-million-dollar restoration.<sup>38</sup> It is unclear how the Eldridge Street Project decided to restore the sanctuary to its original appearance and museify the building; however, it appears there was some debate. Amy Waterman, the Executive Director of the Eldridge Street Project, expressed concern in 1996 that restoring the sanctuary would eliminate the gasp-worthy quality that Wolfe experienced when entering the ruin for the first time.<sup>39</sup> In his discussion of the restoration, historian Samuel Gruber stated that some “grudgingly” agreed to the restoration and that there was a debate between modern conservation and total restoration.<sup>40</sup> He believed that “to invest in Eldridge and not make it beautiful, not functional, and not like a synagogue clearly would have been a mistake.”<sup>41</sup> Regardless of the process, total restoration was the ultimate outcome.

The restoration occurred in three phases. First, they stabilized the building. Then, they installed modern plumbing, heating, and mechanical systems which required digging a cellar below the existing foundation to accommodate modern restrooms. Finally, and most significantly, they revitalized the sanctuary (Figure 4).<sup>42</sup> Two main principles guided the restoration of the sanctuary: historic authenticity and ecological sustainability.<sup>43</sup> These principles often were at odds. For example, when reconstructing the rooftop finials, restorers did not utilize historic materials. They used more sustainable materials that did not exist in the late-nineteenth century, such as stainless steel and fiberglass (Figures 5 & 6).<sup>44</sup>

A team of over fifty stained glass artisans, architects, paint preservationists, lighting specialists, and contractors meticulously restored the sanctuary.<sup>45</sup> They attempted to preserve as much of the original material as possible and to use traditional techniques. They completed paint analysis, discovering paint schemes from 1887, 1894, 1918, and the 1940s. They restored the sanctuary to the 1918 paint scheme because it required removing fewer layers of material than older schemes and had a brighter color palate that was better suited for electrical lighting (Figure 7).<sup>46</sup> They injected consolidations to stabilize the original paint and recreated stenciling and painting techniques by hand.<sup>47</sup> Paint artisans intentionally aged the paint interventions to make the sanctuary appear as if it had been used continually. Restorers refinished the wood pews and floors, leaving the boards depressed from davening worshippers intact.<sup>48</sup> They replaced

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<sup>35</sup> There was a fire at Congregation Beth Hamerash Hagodol in 2017 that destroyed the majority of this Landmark. Conversations existed about incorporating salvaged pieces of this synagogue into a new development, but the Landmarks Preservation Commission declared in 2019 that the remainder of the synagogue needed to be destroyed due to structural instability; Stewart, “A Programme for the Preservation of Synagogue Kahal Adath Jeshurun,” 24.

<sup>36</sup> Wolfe, *The Synagogues of New York's Lower East Side*, 23.

<sup>37</sup> LPC, Eldridge Street Synagogue Designation Report, 7.

<sup>38</sup> Wolfe, *The Synagogues of New York's Lower East Side*, 22.

<sup>39</sup> Gray, “A Prayer-Filled Time Capsule from the 1880's.”

<sup>40</sup> Samuel D. Gruber, “The Choices We Make: Eldridge Street Synagogue and Historic Preservation,” *Museum at Eldridge Street, Academic Angles*, accessed December 10, 2019, <https://www.eldridgestreet.org/wp-content/uploads/choices-we-make.pdf>: 38.

<sup>41</sup> Gruber, “The Choices We Make: Eldridge Street Synagogue and Historic Preservation,” 38.

<sup>42</sup> “A Restoration Revived for Prayer and Posterity.”

<sup>43</sup> Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade*, 97.

<sup>44</sup> Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade*, 106.

<sup>45</sup> Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade*, 98.

<sup>46</sup> Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade*, 106.

<sup>47</sup> Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade*, 113.

<sup>48</sup> Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade*, 10.

the decayed lead frame on sixty-seven stained glass windows.<sup>49</sup> Ultimately, they conserved eighty-five percent of the original glass and ninety-five percent of the original wood.<sup>50</sup> Two small areas in the women's gallery on the balcony illuminate the former decayed appearance of the sanctuary: a patch of exposed 1894 paint and an unrestored wall showing the original lath, plaster, and horsehair binding (Figure 8).<sup>51</sup>

The Eldridge Street Project claims that their “only departure from historical accuracy is, of course, the east window.”<sup>52</sup> The Gothic rose window above the ark blew out from a hurricane in 1938, and glass blocks were installed in the shape of tablets in its place in 1944 (Figure 9).<sup>53</sup> Given that there is no record of the original window, the Eldridge Street Project commissioned a new window to mark a new era in its history. Artist Kiki Smith and architect Deborah Gans fabricated the new window by combining traditional stained glass techniques with modern materials (e.g. silicone technology instead of lead). The synagogue's history inspired the blue window with a central Star of David and etched five-pointed stars (Figure 10). According to Smith, “as people coming from East Europe, retaining their identity as Jewish immigrants, they used the Star of David on all the windows. But they used the five-pointed star to say, ‘We are new people here and we are part of the fabric of the United States.’”<sup>54</sup> The window highlighted the changing identity of the congregants and synagogue.

The restored Eldridge Street Synagogue reopened in December 2007 as the non-sectarian Museum at Eldridge Street (Figure 11).<sup>55</sup> The museum's name notably omits any reference to the Jewish religion. This choice is surprising given that the restoration allowed for the ongoing usage of the sanctuary by Congregation Khal Adath Jeshurun and Anshe Lubz in perpetuity. Congregants even held services during the restoration, covering their heads with hard hats in addition to yarmulkes.<sup>56</sup> Yet, upon the museum's opening, a journalist commented on the lack of religion, “But what purpose could such a place serve if its religious function and community were gone? Rather than leave it a monument to an earlier faith, the Eldridge Street Project turned the building into a symbol of a contemporary, secular faith.” Gratz commented on the need for revitalizing the space: “If we don't save this building, we would have to reinvent it one day. The full story of Jews in America can't be told without this building.”<sup>57</sup> Yet, in truth, the restoration already reinvented the space in a society where the full story of Jews in America was long lost.

### Theorizing the Restoration of the Eldridge Street Synagogue:

Ideas on restoration are well-documented within the historiography of historic preservation. The attempt for authenticity during the restoration of Eldridge Street Synagogue makes it an ideal case study to consider the theoretical implications of restorations. Ideas on restoration also are subjective. The opinions of esteemed restoration theorists vary on this topic, suggesting that there was no one right or wrong restoration solution at the Eldridge Street Synagogue.

The most notorious opponent to restoration is John Ruskin. He famously said in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, “Do not let us talk then of restoration. The thing is a Lie from beginning to end” and ““Restoration... it means the total destruction which a building can suffer.””<sup>58</sup> He believed that demolishing a

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<sup>49</sup> Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade*, 17.

<sup>50</sup> Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade*, 98.

<sup>51</sup> Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade*, 115.

<sup>52</sup> Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade*, 138.

<sup>53</sup> Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade*, 92.

<sup>54</sup> Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade*, 92.

<sup>55</sup> Edward Rothstein, “Return of a Long-Dormant Island of Grace,” December 1, 2007, accessed December 11, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/01/arts/design/01eldr.html>.

<sup>56</sup> Wolfe, *The Synagogues of New York's Lower East Side*, 27.

<sup>57</sup> Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade*, 8.

<sup>58</sup> John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1849): 162-182.

building was preferable to restoring it, as the spirit of new times replaces the original spirit of a space after a restoration. Ruskin was an advocate for preserving signs of age: “the greatest glory of a building is not in its stones, nor in its gold. Its glory is in its Age.”<sup>59</sup> He would have criticized the Eldridge Street Project for going beyond stabilizing the existing structure. Removing layers of paint, in his mind, was an erasure of history, and the recreation of an appearance from another time was a form of deceit.

A century later, Cesare Brandi also presented ruin as a valid restoration option. He defined a ruin as “anything that bears witness to human history but has changed so much from its former appearance as to be almost unrecognizable.”<sup>60</sup> In these situations, he urged “restoration of consolidation” and “preservation of the status quo”—an option the restorers of the Eldridge Street Synagogue clearly did not choose.<sup>61</sup> Yet, unlike Ruskin, he may not have been against the restoration decisions of the Eldridge Street Project. He had a more well-rounded view of restoration and listed a variety of options. One of these options was “restoration by reperfecting,” or “returning the work to its original state and erasing the elapsed time.”<sup>62</sup> In this scenario, he urged restorers to “make provision for the saving of sample areas that show the work of art’s condition before restoration” and to provide for the “differentiation of newly integrated areas.”<sup>63</sup> Therefore, in regards to the completed restoration of the Eldridge Street Synagogue, he would have praised the decision to retain patches of unrestored paint and plaster but questioned decisions to age the new paint additions.

Italian theorist Gustavo Giovannoni also suggested multiple restoration options that could have applied to the Eldridge Street Synagogue. Like Brandi, he believed in “restoration of consolidation,” although he never discussed ruins.<sup>64</sup> Yet Giovannoni would have considered the actual restoration of the Eldridge Street Synagogue a “restoration of innovation.”<sup>65</sup> This type of restoration extended beyond Brandi’s “restoration by reperfecting,” adding in completely new major elements to a historic structure to complete missing or undocumented parts.<sup>66</sup> This is exactly what happened with the commission of Smith’s modern window in lieu of constructing a replacement in the style of a more traditional Gothic rose window. Both Brandi and Giovannoni, unlike Ruskin, believed that new and old features could be combined to create a harmonious experience.

Alois Riegl and Martin Heidegger discussed issues of authenticity—a key decision-making factor in the restoration of the Eldridge Street Synagogue. Riegl would have defined the Eldridge Street Synagogue as an unintentional, contemporary monument. It was built as an active site that has turned into a memorial solely as a result of present-day values. He would have attributed “use-value” and “present-day values” more than “age value” to this site (whereas Ruskin would have argued that “age value” inherently was the most important value).<sup>67</sup> For Riegl, old, and especially religious, buildings should be maintained to accommodate and to not endanger users. The Eldridge Street Synagogue certainly posed a threat to human life prior to its stabilization. He thought that if religious buildings were “retired from use, in most cases new ones would have to be created.”<sup>68</sup> Considering the changing population of Orthodox Jews in America, the Eldridge Street Synagogue likely would not need to be re-erected if it were lost. However, Riegl may have believed

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<sup>59</sup> Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, 162-182.

<sup>60</sup> Cesare Brandi, *The Theory of Restoration*, Giuseppe Basile, ed., (Italy: Nardini Editore, 2005): 65.

<sup>61</sup> Brandi, *The Theory of Restoration*, 66.

<sup>62</sup> Brandi, *The Theory of Restoration*, 64.

<sup>63</sup> Brandi, *The Theory of Restoration*, 64.

<sup>64</sup> Steven Semes, “New Design in Old Cities: Gustavo Giovannoni on Architecture and Conservation,” *Change Over Time* 7 (2), Fall 2017: 214.

<sup>65</sup> Semes, “New Design in Old Cities: Gustavo Giovannoni on Architecture and Conservation,” 214.

<sup>66</sup> Semes, “New Design in Old Cities: Gustavo Giovannoni on Architecture and Conservation,” 214.

<sup>67</sup> Alois Riegl, “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin.” Translated by Kurt W. Forster and Diane Ghirardo, (1903): 639; John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1849): 162-182.

<sup>68</sup> Riegl, “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin,” 639.

that the “present-day value” of this historic synagogue as a museum could contribute to the intellectual needs of contemporary visitors.<sup>69</sup>

Heidegger would have questioned the authenticity of the current usage of the Eldridge Street Synagogue. The current usage of this site would not reflect “the general essence of things.”<sup>70</sup> In “The Origins of the Work of Art,” Heidegger discussed the essence of a Greek temple: “A building, a Greek temple, portrays nothing... The building encloses the figure of a god... Through the temple, the god is present in the temple.”<sup>71</sup> Now replace a Greek temple with the Eldridge Street Synagogue. The essence of the building is not in the physical synagogue, especially since Judaism is a religion that does not require a sacred space for religious worship. The presence of G-d is the essence of a sacred space. Making the observance of G-d a secondary function to the museum at the Eldridge Street System creates an experience that does not reflect the site’s original essence.

### Issues of Authenticity:

The restoration of the Eldridge Street Synagogue won nearly every award possible: the National Trust for Historic Preservation 2007 Preservation Honor Award, Michelle Obama’s 2009 Preserve America Stewards Designation, the Municipal Art Society’s Masterwork Award for New York City’s Best Restoration Award, the Preservation League of New York’s Restoration Award, etc.<sup>72</sup> These awards proudly hang in the museum next to a video on the restoration, perpendicular to a wall comprised of the glass blocks that once infilled the east window (Figure 12).<sup>73</sup> A decade before the restoration even finished, the site was designated a National Historic Landmark.<sup>74</sup> Yet, even those supporting the idea that the Eldridge Street Project was an authentic restoration recognized potential issues. Gruber, in an article easily-accessible on the Museum at Eldridge Street’s website, commented that “in the end, every restored building is a new creation.”<sup>75</sup> The Museum at Eldridge Street is not an exception.

Before 2005, the United Nation Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) World Heritage *Operational Guidelines* listed four tests for authenticity: design, material, workmanship, and setting. They extended these guidelines in 2005 to include intangible heritage factors such as if a property has “a role in affirming the cultural identity of the communities concerned,” or is a “unique testimony of a living cultural tradition.”<sup>76</sup> The Eldridge Street Synagogue is not a UNESCO World Heritage Site, but these guidelines still can be applied to its restoration.

It is possible, with the exception of Smith’s east window, to see authenticity in design in the restored Eldridge Street Synagogue. The restorers completed years of scientific analysis, historical research, and investigative techniques to ensure the appearance of the restored sanctuary closely aligned with that of the original sanctuary. Workmanship was also similar, as craftspeople used traditional paint and stained glass techniques during the restoration.<sup>77</sup> However, there is little authenticity in material or setting. As aforementioned, issues of sustainability often took precedence over issues of authenticity when selecting materials.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, the setting of the synagogue—the Lower East Side—has changed entirely since Eastern European immigrants founded the Eldridge Street Synagogue.

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<sup>69</sup> Riegl, “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin,” 642.

<sup>70</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Origins of the Work of Art,” in *Off the Beaten Track*, translated by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 16.

<sup>71</sup> Heidegger, “The Origins of the Work of Art,” 20.

<sup>72</sup> Wolfe, *The Synagogues of New York’s Lower East Side*, 31.

<sup>73</sup> Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade*, 92.

<sup>74</sup> Wolfe, *The Synagogues of New York’s Lower East Side*, 27.

<sup>75</sup> Gruber, “The Choices We Make: Eldridge Street Synagogue and Historic Preservation,” 38.

<sup>76</sup> Jukka Jokilehto, “Considerations in Authenticity and Integrity in World Heritage Context,” *City & Time* 2, no. 1 (2006): 6 & 8.

<sup>77</sup> Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade*, 106.

<sup>78</sup> Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade*, 97.

Today, the Eldridge Street Synagogue is *ex situ*. It is no longer located in the world's most populous Jewish community; it is in the heart of Chinatown (Figure 13). Among the 400 Jewish houses of worship once on the Lower East Side, there were originally fourteen Jewish congregations on Eldridge Street.<sup>79</sup> Congregation Khal Adath Jeshurun and Anshe Lubz is the last one standing on this street. The Herter Brothers' tenements across the street at 43-45 Eldridge Street were demolished for a basketball court.<sup>80</sup> Mandarin has replaced Yiddish on the streets and on signs. Jewish delis, clothing stores, and offices are now Chinese restaurants and businesses.<sup>81</sup>

The neighborhood also is rapidly gentrifying, pushing out both Chinese and the remaining Jewish immigrants to make space for luxury hotels and condominiums.<sup>82</sup> Longtime Jewish residents are selling their apartments for a profit, and new members of the Orthodox community cannot afford to move in. The National Trust for Historic Preservation listed the Lower East Side as "one of the eleven most endangered places in America" due to development pressures.<sup>83</sup> Although the Lower East Side is a National Historic District, it currently has no protection from development because it is not a NYC Landmarks District. The Eldridge Street Synagogue is considered a "true symbol of the Lower East Side, reflecting Jewish fraternity, material aspiration and spiritual ideals."<sup>84</sup> Yet part of its value and authenticity has been lost through decontextualization. Neither the Eldridge Street Synagogue nor other cultural sites such as the Tenement Museum can recreate the story of the entire neighborhood.

As its mission statement shows, the Museum at Eldridge Street attempts to cater to the diverse immigrant populations in the neighborhood as well as the influx of tourists and wealthier New Yorkers:

The Museum at Eldridge Street, a non-sectarian cultural organization in Lower Manhattan, was founded with a mission to restore and interpret its home, the historic 1887 Eldridge Street Synagogue, and serve people of all backgrounds with educational and cultural programs inspired by the landmark building and its gateway Lower East Side neighborhood.<sup>85</sup>

It is a Jewish museum, but it is not just a museum for Jews. According to a museum guide of seven years, 40,000 people visit the Museum at Eldridge Street per annum. She asked visitors on her tour if they had ever been in a synagogue before. Some said no.<sup>86</sup> Cultural diversity is critical to heritage according to the UNESCO *Operational Guidelines*.<sup>87</sup> However, the essence of the setting has changed if it no longer primarily serves or hosts its intended population.

The mission statement shows the true flaw in authenticity of the Museum at Eldridge Street: the lack of emphasis on religious Judaism. It mentions that the museum's "home" is the 1887 Eldridge Street Synagogue. Yet there is no direct reference to living Judaism or religion. As aforementioned, applying Heidegger's theory, the essence of the Eldridge Street Synagogue is not the physical synagogue. It is spirituality and the embodiment of G-d.<sup>88</sup> From reading the mission statement, a visitor would have no idea that a small Orthodox congregation still can practice at the Eldridge Street Synagogue. Unless visitors ask a guide, complete research in advance, see the small sign near the entrance advertising weekend services, or understand that the museum is closed on late Friday afternoon and Saturday due to the observance of the

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<sup>79</sup> Wolfe, *The Synagogues of New York's Lower East Side*, xi; "The Synagogues of New York City," The Museum of Family History Education and Research Center, accessed December 11, 2019, <http://museumoffamilyhistory.com/erc-syn-manhattan-les.htm>.

<sup>80</sup> LPC, Eldridge Street Synagogue Designation Report, 3.

<sup>81</sup> Wolfe, *The Synagogues of New York's Lower East Side*, xi; "The Synagogues of New York City," The Museum of Family History Education and Research Center, accessed December 11, 2019, <http://museumoffamilyhistory.com/erc-syn-manhattan-les.htm>.

<sup>82</sup> Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade*, 12.

<sup>83</sup> Wolfe, *The Synagogues of New York's Lower East Side*, 13.

<sup>84</sup> Stewart, "A Programme for the Preservation of Synagogue Kahal Adath Jeshurun," 1.

<sup>85</sup> "Mission and Value Statement," The Museum at Eldridge Street, accessed November 2019, <https://www.eldridgestreet.org/about/>.

<sup>86</sup> Visit to Museum at Eldridge Street, December 14, 2019.

<sup>87</sup> Jokilehto, "Considerations in Authenticity and Integrity in World Heritage Context," 2.

<sup>88</sup> Heidegger, "The Origins of the Work of Art," 20.

Sabbath, they would have no idea that they are stepping into an active sacred space (Figure 14).<sup>89</sup> The museum thus does not succeed in serving as a “unique testimony of a living cultural tradition.”<sup>90</sup>

Fundamentally, the Museum at Eldridge Street is a synagogue within a museum rather than a museum within a synagogue. This primary function goes against the historic by-laws of Congregation Khal Adath Jeshurun and Anshe Lubz which state that “the Synagogue shall be open for the divine service and for such other purposes consistent with the purpose of an Orthodox Jewish Synagogue.”<sup>91</sup> In contrast to today’s usage, the by-laws led with the “divine service” rather than “other purposes.” The language of “other purposes” is non-descript, so the museum usage is not necessarily incorrect. Yet historical and theoretical documents suggest that the primary function of this building should always be religious.

In his 1979 thesis for a Master of Science in Historic Preservation at Columbia University, John Donald Stewart eloquently expressed the significance of the Eldridge Street Synagogue:

As the size of the Jewish Orthodox community has steadily diminished throughout the century, the role of the synagogue has correspondingly grown in importance. Unlike their more Americanized and secularized brethren, orthodox Jews of the Lower East Side maintain a strict and introspective community. Thus, the synagogue has become the centre for the preservation of Orthodox Judaism, and bastion of religious sentiment.<sup>92</sup>

The Museum at Eldridge Street does not place the preservation of Orthodox Judaism at its center. He suggested that the Eldridge Street Synagogue could be used as a joint educational and religious center; however, he strongly was against the idea of museification. Stewart felt that a museum would be inauthentic and “would deny the active religious basis of the synagogue and strict tradition it embodies.” He felt that the Tenement Museum and similar cultural properties already provided cultural and recreational space to explore Judaism on the Lower East Side.<sup>93</sup>

Yet, thirty years after the completion of this thesis and a decade after the opening of the Museum at Eldridge Street, the Orthodox community of the Lower East Side still is struggling. According to a museum guide, the revenue from the Museum at Eldridge Street allows Congregation Khal Adath Jeshurun and Anshe Lubz to remain operational in its original sanctuary. But finances are not the only factor necessary to uphold Orthodox Judaism. This year, the rabbi of Congregation Khal Adath Jeshurun and Anshe Lubz unexpectedly left. Although lay leaders can lead services in Judaism, services have halted altogether. For the first time since 1887, Congregation Khal Adath Jeshurun and Anshe Lubz did not hold either Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur Services. The truth is that this congregation cannot occupy or maintain the Eldridge Street Synagogue on its own.<sup>94</sup> Since Wolfe’s “rediscovery” of the Eldridge Street Synagogue, the fundamental question has been whether the preservation of authentic religious function should take precedence over the preservation of the physical structure. It is a question of intangible versus tangible heritage.

### **Embracing Jewish Theology and Culture:**

Restoration theory primarily exists in an ecclesiastical canon. Ruskin, Riegl, Giovannoni, and Brandi all used Christian churches as their case studies or focus of their discourse. Their theories can be applied to synagogues, but it is important to remember that all religious structures do not merit the same restoration approach. Different religions have different beliefs about how to understand and interpret their sacred heritage.

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<sup>89</sup> Visit to Museum at Eldridge Street, December 14, 2019.

<sup>90</sup> Jukka Jokilehto, “Considerations in Authenticity and Integrity in World Heritage Context,” *City & Time* 2, no. 1 (2006): 6 & 8.

<sup>91</sup> Stewart, “A Programme for the Preservation of Synagogue Kahal Adath Jeshurun,” 37.

<sup>92</sup> Stewart, “A Programme for the Preservation of Synagogue Kahal Adath Jeshurun,” 28.

<sup>93</sup> Stewart, “A Programme for the Preservation of Synagogue Kahal Adath Jeshurun,” 31.

<sup>94</sup> Visit to Museum at Eldridge Street, December 14, 2019.

Ideas about restoration are present in the Hebrew Bible, although the theological roots of Jewish heritage preservation has not been explored in depth. Proverbs 22:28 declares:

אל תסיג גבול עולם אשר עשו אבותיך.  
Remove not the ancient landmarks that thy ancestors set up.<sup>95</sup>

Isaiah 58:12 furthers the declaration in Proverbs 22:28:

יב ובני ממך תרבות עולם מוסדי דור–ודור תקומם וקרא גדר פרץ משבב נתיבות לשבת.  
Men from your midst shall rebuild ancient ruins, You shall restore foundations laid long ago.  
And you shall be called “Repairer of fallen walls, Restorer of lanes for habitation.”<sup>96</sup>

In contrast to Riegl who believed that “use-value may also require the destruction of a monument” and Ruskin who deemed it acceptable to “pull the [decaying] building down, throw its stones into neglected corners,” the Hebrew Bible explicitly states that Jews should not remove their cultural heritage and instead should repair and restore it.<sup>97</sup> Even if the restoration of the Eldridge Street Synagogue would not be authentic in the eyes of major restoration theorists or UNESCO, it was in line with religious Jewish principles.

Theology has not prevented congregations from demolishing their synagogues. Development and financial pressures can leave congregations with little choice but to sell their historic space for a profit. However, the choice is not always clear. In 2006, a few streets away from the nearly-restored Eldridge Street Synagogue, the First Roumanian American Congregation was demolished. As with the Eldridge Street Synagogue, the First Roumanian American Congregation could have become a Landmark and a museum. Yet this congregation refused donations totaling nearly \$300,000 from the National Trust for Historic Preservation and New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation. The rabbi claimed that, even with the donations, the congregation still would not have enough money to complete repairs. They also feared that becoming a Landmark or museum could compromise the religious integrity of the site. Once the roof collapsed, the degree of structural damage left no other choice but demolition. Preservationists have accused the First Roumanian American Congregation of demolition by neglect, as the congregation was aware of the structural issues.<sup>98</sup> The loss of the First Roumanian American Congregation furthered the Eldridge Street Synagogue’s significance and showed how adapting to contemporary situations, sometimes at the expense of religious practice, was necessary for survival.

In addition to theology, the restoration of the Eldridge Street Synagogue reflects Jewish history and American Jewish culture. The history of Judaism is a history of adversity and adaptation. The restoration of the Eldridge Street Synagogue is no different—years of adversity led to adaptive reuse. It is also a history of assimilation. Following the fatal shooting at L’Simcha Congregation in Pittsburgh, journalist Gal Beckerman stated that “anti-Semitism is not what defines the experience of Jews in America today: assimilation is.”<sup>99</sup>

A traditional Orthodox community still exists in the Lower East Side and beyond, but it is very much a minority. The majority of Jews in America today are more secular than religious. This is not a new phenomenon. Many Jews began adopting a more reform Judaism in the nineteenth century.<sup>100</sup> According to

<sup>95</sup> Wolfe, *The Synagogues of New York’s Lower East Side*, 2.

<sup>96</sup> Gruber, “The Choices We Make: Eldridge Street Synagogue and Historic Preservation,” 35.

<sup>97</sup> Riegl, “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin,” 639; Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, 162-182.

<sup>98</sup> “Questions Rise from the Dust of an Old Synagogue,” *New York Times*, March 7, 2006.

<sup>99</sup> Gal Beckerman, “American Jews Face a Choice: Create Meaning or Fade Away,” *New York Times*, November 12, 2018, accessed December 10, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/12/books/review/steven-weisman-chosen-wars.html>.

<sup>100</sup> Mark W. Gordon, “Rediscovering Jewish Infrastructure: Update on the United States Nineteenth Century Synagogues,” *American Jewish History* 84, no. 1 (1996): 11.

the 2013 Pew survey, only ten percent of American Jews surveyed identify as Orthodox. Today, seventy-two percent of non-Orthodox Jews marry outside of the faith, creating a more diverse community. In this survey, humor and intellectual curiosity were ranked higher than community and religion as indicators of Jewishness.<sup>101</sup> With exhibits on comics by Jewish authors, menorahs, the Torah, and Jewish community sports, the Museum at Eldridge Street successfully encompasses all of these indicators.<sup>102</sup> However, this inclusivity required sacrificing the authentic Orthodox experience in order to show a more representative American Jewish experience.

Beckerman believes “to be a Jew is to join the A.C.L.U., to travel to the border and act as a pro bono lawyer for immigrants, to join in the Women’s March.”<sup>103</sup> For many, to be a Jew is to support other marginalized groups. It is not to pray for hours in a service where men and women are separated. Both of these experiences are authentic. They are both Jewish. A strength of contemporary Judaism is that observers of the religion and/or the culture can decide what practices work best for them. In its current configuration, the Museum at Eldridge Street has managed to integrate both liberal and Orthodox Jewish practice. Those who want to experience reciprocal cultural learning can attend the annual Egg Creams and Egg Rolls block party, allowing Jewish and Chinese community members to share their language, food, culture, and religion.<sup>104</sup> Others, at least until this year, could come daven in a sanctuary where the prayers of their grandparents and great grandparents “resound within these walls.”<sup>105</sup> The Museum at Eldridge Street provides a choice. It lets people, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, choose their own authentic experience.

## Conclusion:

The demographics, density, and scale of the Lower East Side is changing rapidly, but the restored Eldridge Street Synagogue remains an “artifact of architectural history” of what once was the largest Jewish community in the world.<sup>106</sup> Without this restoration, the Eldridge Street Synagogue likely would have joined the list of Jewish properties that succumbed to the pressures of development and changing populations in the Lower East Side.<sup>107</sup>

The restoration of the Eldridge Street Synagogue spanned twenty years, ultimately restoring the main sanctuary to its original late-nineteenth century appearance. Under the guiding principles of sustainability and authenticity, the Eldridge Street Project used historic techniques and sustainable materials to refabricate and restore damaged paint, wood, stained glass, and metal. When the Eldridge Street Synagogue reopened as the Museum at Eldridge Street in 2007, the appearance of the synagogue echoed the years when Eastern European immigrants gathered *en masse* for daily prayers. The function had changed drastically. A small Orthodox community still tries to worship in the main sanctuary, but the majority of visitors come to see exhibits on American Jewish society.

The changed setting and function of the Eldridge Street Synagogue created issues of authenticity according to the principles of popularized restoration theories and standards. Religion is no longer the primary function of the synagogue, altering its essence. However, according to Jewish theology, history, and culture, the Museum at Eldridge Street has created an accurate representation of Jewish life in America. Jewish theology explicitly promotes the restoration rather than the demolition of historic sites, and Jewish history is about adversity, adaptation, and assimilation. The ability of the Museum at Eldridge

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<sup>101</sup> Beckerman, “American Jews Face a Choice: Create Meaning or Fade Away.”

<sup>102</sup> Visit to Museum at Eldridge Street, December 14, 2019.

<sup>103</sup> Beckerman, “American Jews Face a Choice: Create Meaning or Fade Away.”

<sup>104</sup> Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade*, 168.

<sup>105</sup> Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade*, 54.

<sup>106</sup> Bortniker, *Beyond the Façade*, 9.

<sup>107</sup> Rothstein, “Return of a Long-Dormant Island of Grace.”

Street to engage not only with Orthodox Jews but also with Jews of all backgrounds and people of other cultures encapsulates the changing role of Judaism in American society. It shows that Judaism, like authenticity, cannot be understood in a singular way.

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**Figures:**



*Figure 1 Sanctuary in ruin pre-restoration*

Source: Museum at Eldridge Street, <https://www.eldridgestreet.org/about/restoration/>.



*Figure 2 Decayed paint, lath, and plaster in dome above Women's Gallery*

Source: Museum at Eldridge Street, <https://www.eldridgestreet.org/about/restoration/>.



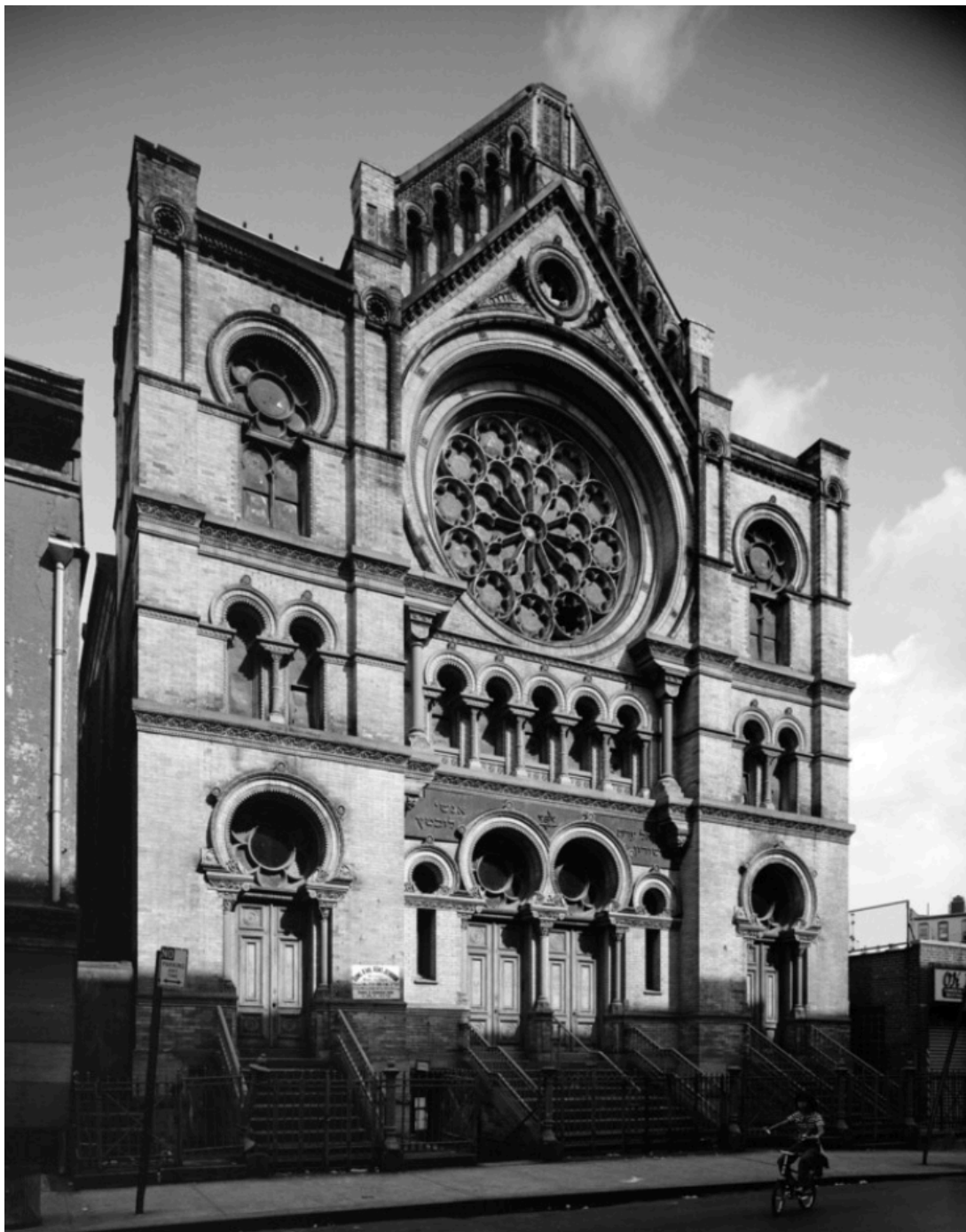
*Figure 3 Structurally unstable chandelier in sanctuary before restoration*

Source: Museum at Eldridge Street, <https://www.eldridgestreet.org/about/restoration/>.



*Figure 4 Sanctuary during early stage of restoration*

Source: Museum at Eldridge Street, <https://www.eldridgestreet.org/educator-resources/eldridge-street-synagogue-restoration/>



*Figure 5 1978 photo of Eldridge Street Synagogue pre-restoration of rooftop finials*

Source: Urban Archive



*Figure 6 Eldridge Street Synagogue post-restoration of rooftop finials*

Source: Path Towards History



*Figure 7 Paint restoration in progress*

Source: Museum at Eldridge Street, <https://www.eldridgestreet.org/art-architecture/interview-amy-stein-milford/attachment/eldridge-street-synagogue-restoration-process/>



*Figure 8 Exposed lath and plaster in restored synagogue*

Source: Museum at Eldridge Street, <https://www.eldridgestreet.org/educator-resources/eldridge-street-synagogue-restoration/>



*Figure 9 Glass blocks in the shape of tablets infill east window pre-restoration*

Source: Museum at Eldridge Street, <https://www.eldridgestreet.org/about/restoration/>



*Figure 10 Kiki Smith's east window post-restoration*

Source: Museum at Eldridge Street, <https://www.eldridgestreet.org/about/restoration/>



*Figure 11 Sanctuary of Eldridge Street Synagogue post-restoration*

Source: Evergreene Architectural Arts, <https://evergreene.com/projects/eldridge-street-synagogue/>



Figure 12 Museum wall constructed of glass blocks from east window  
Source: Emily Kahn, December 2019



*Figure 13 Museum at Eldridge Street and Chinatown Sign*

Source: Rothstein, Edward. "Return of a Long-Dormant Island of Grace." December 1, 2007. Accessed December 11, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/01/arts/design/01eldr.html>.



*Figure 14 Small sign at museum entrance advertising services*

Source: Emily Kahn, December 2019