

SINGING THE LORD'S SONG IN A STRANGE LAND

The Great Synagogue, Sydney

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Abstract. The Jewish community in Sydney transported their Anglo-Jewish tradition to the other side of the world. In 1878 they built The Great Synagogue, a house of worship that reflected their origins and aspirations, the background of their architect, and prevailing attitudes to synagogue design in the 19th century. This paper describes how the design of the Great Synagogue derived from all of its sources, and how the building has changed in the last 130 years and continues to change in responses to the sometimes competing requirements of function, liturgy and community attitudes. It also demonstrates how the tangible qualities of the building and intangible qualities, such as the music of the service and the dress of the clergy and congregation, contribute to how the traditional and historic character of the Great Synagogue is perceived in its present community.

1. The building of the Great Synagogue

There were 16 Jews among the convicts that arrived in Sydney with the First Fleet in 1788 to establish a British colony in Australia (Apple, 2008). Regular communal Jewish worship in Sydney began around 1828, in the house of Mr. Phillip Joseph Cohen, and in 1844 the first purpose-built synagogue in Australia was completed in York Street, Sydney, for a community now numbering more than 600 (Phillips, 2007). It was designed by James Hume in an Egyptian style (Figure 1).

Within twenty years the Jewish population of Sydney increased to over 1,000 people, more than the York Street Synagogue could accommodate. A block of land in Elizabeth Street was acquired in

1871, and a meeting of the Jewish community was held in the Masonic Hall in York Street to elect a Building Committee for a new synagogue. The Committee's first action was to distribute a circular seeking donations for the new building, which was accompanied by a postcard photograph (Figure 2) of the New Central Synagogue in London, "as the style in which it is proposed to erect the New Synagogue".



Figure 1. The first Sydney Synagogue, photographed in 1872 (Pickering 1872)



Figure 2. Interior of New Central Synagogue, London (Phillips papers)

In October 1872, the Building Committee invited three prominent Sydney architects (George Allen Mansfield, Thomas Rowe and

Benjamin Backhouse) to enter a limited design competition for the new building, with the following simple brief:

- The front is to be of stone facing Elizabeth Street.
- It is proposed to accommodate from 500 to 600 sittings on the ground floor.
- A vestry room and Ladies' and Gentlemen's retiring rooms are required in the Building.
- A separate building is required for a messenger containing 6 rooms and kitchen.
- The cost is not to exceed £10,000 inclusive of internal decorations and fittings.

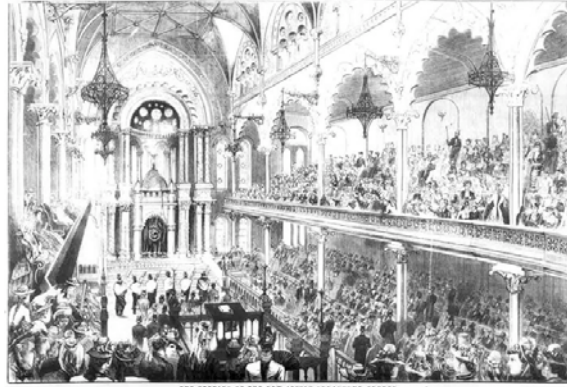
In March 1873, after much discussion and disagreement, Thomas Rowe of Vickery's Chambers was selected by the Building Committee as the architect. He had designed some twenty churches, several for the Methodist Church, and also many houses, stores, schools, factories and public buildings. His designs (Figure 3) were typically Victorian, drawn from an eclectic range of past styles, with a fondness for the Romanesque and the double arch.



Figure 3. Vickery's Chambers, designed by Thomas Rowe (Pickering 1872)

Rowe's competition designs for the Synagogue have not survived, but were presumably similar to his contract drawings which still exist. The design of the interior was altered from these drawings to some extent during the building works, mainly with a view to reducing the cost, which eventually amounted to a little over £23,000, more than twice the limit set at the competition stage. Construction commenced on site in January 1874, and a year later the foundation stone was laid. Despite some delays and cost problems in the later stages, the new Synagogue was completed and

consecrated in 1878 (Figure 4), with considerable ceremony and publicity.



*Figure 4. The Opening of the New Jewish Synagogue, Sydney
(Illustrated Sydney News, 1878)*

2. The origins of the design

The Egyptian style of the first Sydney Synagogue was evidently supposed by the community to be appropriate for a synagogue at the time (the Hobart Synagogue, constructed in 1845 and now Australia's oldest existing synagogue, was built in the same style). In view of the historical relationship between the ancient Egyptians and the Hebrews, such a choice seems decidedly odd, and there are very few other examples elsewhere in the world. However, by the 1870s there was clearly a different perception of the appropriate architectural character for a synagogue. The Building Committee insisted that their new synagogue should closely resemble the New Central Synagogue in Great Portland Street in London. This synagogue was designed by N. S. Joseph and completed in 1870. Its description indicates a close similarity to the Great Synagogue: it had a traditional layout with central *bimah*, was Moorish in detail, Gothic in feeling (with a soaring vaulted nave), and employed cast iron columns, a form of industrialised construction, to carry the galleries and roof (Jamilly, 1970). One of the main differences between the two was Rowe's use of raked floors, which would have helped to reduce problems of sound and vision that were experienced by congregants in the London building.

However, the New London Synagogue was not a unique example of its kind. Numerous parallels for both the exterior and the interior designs of the Great Synagogue may be found in the architecture of

synagogues in England, France, Germany and America. Examples which show a marked similarity include the Prince's Road Synagogue in Liverpool; the Rue de la Victoire Synagogue in Paris, built in 1874; the Oranienburgerstrasse Synagogue in Berlin, completed in 1866; and the Plum Street Temple in Cincinnati, Ohio, also of 1866. Each of these buildings had features which can also be seen in the architecture of the Great Synagogue.

It is highly unlikely that Thomas Rowe could have visited any of these buildings, but it seems probable that members of the Building Committee would have seen them or others like them. In any case it is evident that the design of the Synagogue was not a Rowe inspiration, but followed the stylistic traditions of its antecedents in Europe and America. The synagogue architecture there at that time reflected the general architecture of the latter half of the nineteenth century, which lacked any single coherent style of its own and tended towards a variety of styles loosely based on one or more styles of previous centuries. Gothic revival, although instantly evocative of religion, never really found favour with the Jews because of its almost exclusive associations with Christianity, and the Moorish style (perhaps because of its affinity to the golden age of Spanish Jewry) was preferred. However, Gothic and particularly Romanesque influences were still to be found. In architecture, as in most other things, the Jewish community of Sydney carried on the practices of its parent communities overseas.

However, certain aspects of the Synagogue design may also be seen in the earlier work of Thomas Rowe, particularly the Goulburn Wesleyan Church which was completed around 1870. This was a departure from traditional church design and featured a raked floor, an amphitheatre arrangement of pews, and an unusual entrance porch with Romanesque style arches. It is perhaps natural that when Rowe was asked three years later to design a building with similar requirements, he would have adapted and improved on his earlier design. Some of his other buildings show decorative details which can be seen repeated in the Great Synagogue.

3. Changing times and congregants

The majority of the original Great Synagogue congregation, especially its leading members were first or second generation immigrants, mainly from England, who had become wealthy and prominent in colonial society, business and politics. Sir Saul Samuel,

who laid the foundation stone in 1873, was at that time Postmaster-General of NSW.

By the turn of the 19th century, Jewish immigrants were arriving in Australia from other countries, including Germany, Eastern Europe and Russia. The Anglo-Jewish traditions of the Great Synagogue began to be affected by traditions from other places, although it appears that many congregants were reluctant to change. Even in the 1950s, after further periods of immigration both before and after the Second World War, there were some religious or social practices that certain members of the congregation felt “wouldn’t do for the Great”. However, the last fifty years have seen considerable change; while aspects of the liturgy and religious practice have become more orthodox (for example, instituting an all-male choir in 1974), in other aspects there have been breaks with traditional practice, such as the election of the first female President of the Board of Management in 2005.

Interestingly, some social traditions seem to have persisted more tenaciously than many of the religious ones. One in particular that has survived is the practice of the male Honorary Officers of the Board of Management (the President, Vice-Presidents and Treasurer, who occupy boxed pews either side of the Ark steps) to wear morning dress and top hats to Sabbath and Festival services, just as their great-grandfathers can be seen doing in 1878 (Figure 4).

4. Changes to the building

In the early 20th century, the Board of Management decided to increase the accommodation within the Sanctuary by moving the *bimah* (reading desk) to the Ark steps, building a new central block of Men’s pews, and providing additional Women’s seating by relocating the choir from the east end to the west in an enlarged area under the semi-dome above the Ark.

In 1944, the centenary of the founding of the first Sydney Synagogue, the Board began planning for a further expansion of the Great Synagogue’s communal and educational facilities. A new communal hall and library were constructed beneath the Sanctuary by deepening the original open basement. The new facilities were designed in the style of their time, rather than attempting to reproduce the original Victorian style. Further expansion occurred in the 1980s, with the demolition of the original three-storey Beadle’s residence at the western end (except for the façade) and the construction of a new five-storey building behind the old façade. The

new building was an uneasy mixture of old and new, with otherwise plain modern walls decorated with stencilled borders, and the 1950s hall redecorated using traditional mouldings and other elements, including parts of the original cedar doors and stair balustrades recovered from the demolition of the Beadle's residence (Figure 5).

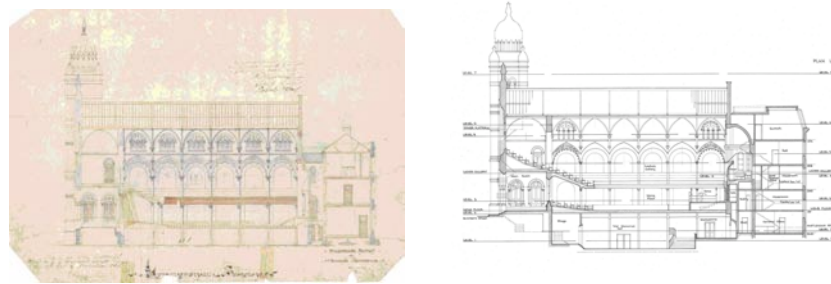


Figure 5. Comparison of the long sections through the Synagogue building as originally designed (Thomas Rowe, left) and today (Orwell & Peter Phillips, right)

5. Words and music

As well as the physical changes to the Synagogue building that reflect the social changes in its congregation, there have been many intangible changes. One example is the way in which the Hebrew language is pronounced. The Anglo-Jewish tradition was based on the Ashkenazi rites that had developed in Germany and Eastern Europe, and over the centuries these communities had developed a distinctive way of pronouncing Hebrew. The minority Sephardic communities in Spain and Portugal had through separation developed different practices and traditions, including their Hebrew pronunciation. The foundation of the State of Israel in 1948, and the restoration of Hebrew as a national living language, brought together Hebrew speakers from many communities, and the way of pronouncing Hebrew adopted in Israel (which leaned more to the Sephardic than the Ashkenazi tradition) gradually took over as the accepted Hebrew pronunciation in the Great Synagogue.

Changes in the sound of the service can also be heard in the music. The Great has a rich musical tradition, dating from the consecration ceremony at which much of the music was composed by the first Choirmaster, Sydney Moss LCM. Later musical leaders included the Australian composer Alfred Hill, a foundation member of the teaching staff of the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. Among

the most important figures was the Rev Francis L Cohen, who became Rabbi at the Great Synagogue in 1905. Rabbi Cohen had previously lived in London, where he had collected and edited (with B L Moseley) *A Handbook of Synagogue Music for Congregational Singing*, first published in 1889. This was followed ten years later by *The Voice of Prayer and Praise*, edited by Francis L Cohen and David M Davis.

The music collected and in many instances arranged by Rabbi Cohen and his collaborators included pieces by Sulzer, Naumbourg and Lewandowski, 19th century European Jewish composers who were greatly influenced by their contemporaries in Germany, Austria and France. Rabbi Cohen also introduced arrangements of pieces by Mozart, Mendelssohn and Beethoven into the Synagogue services.

Because the words of the Synagogue service are usually fixed for each occasions (the psalms sung on certain days are the same, not varied in the way that hymns in church services are), much of the variety of the service derives from the use of different tunes for the same words. In the early years the different tunes all derived from 19th century European musical tradition. However, later choirmasters and *Chazanim* introduced other music into the services, influenced by the Sephardic and Chassidic traditions, and the music of Eastern Europe and more recently Israel. One example is the hymn *Adon Olam* (Lord of the World) that concludes every Sabbath and Festival morning service. Figure 6 gives the opening bars of two versions of this hymn, the first (by Mombach) firmly in 19th century European harmonic tradition, and the second (by Secunda) much more in the modern Israeli tradition. The Anglicisation of the words also shows the changes in Hebrew pronunciation between the two versions.

Adon Olam

J. I. Mombach

Adon Olam

Secunda

Figure 6. The opening bars of two versions of *Adon Olam*

6. The tradition of the future

The Great Synagogue is again passing through interesting times. Its congregation is aging, as the children of congregants have become more observant and seek to belong to a synagogue within walking distance of their suburban homes. There is however the possibility that the congregation may become repopulated from residents of the greatly increased housing constructed within the City of Sydney over the last decade. Other alternatives being considered by the current Board of Management include a merger with a considerably more Orthodox suburban congregation, which has not surprisingly caused some disquiet among congregants. It remains likely that the Great Synagogue will continue to reflect an intriguing mixture of traditions from many different times, places and communities.

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