

Traditions, Modernities and the Semiosis of Style: A Reading of Diversity in the Synagogue Architecture of the Moorish Revival

Introduction

When thinking about significant events in the history of design, Europe in the 19th Century has much to recommend it as a field of study. It was a period which saw the emergence of major social, economic and political factors that, in combination, were to influence the world at every level. Consequently, it is a period worthy of deep study and investigation which will constantly surprise and enlighten students of design history in the revelation of the cultural foundations of our own society in the 21st Century. The period is often seen as synonymous with a revivalist and distinctly eclectic material culture, and this is no more evident than in the built environment and the diversity of styles that European architecture represents. It is from an awareness of this notion that the ideas in this paper first began to emerge and have subsequently been explored.

Of all the period styles that were fashionable at the time the Moorish Revival, often termed the Neo-Moorish to distinguish it from original Medieval Moorish architecture, is perhaps one of the most distinct and easily recognisable forms. It continued to appear throughout much of the 19th century and shaped exterior *and* interior spaces in both urban and rural settings across much of Europe. One of the most important sub-genres of the Moorish Revival for much of the century can be found in Moorish synagogue architecture and when approached from a modern mind-set this mixture of Arab, and therefore Islamic styling, appears to be particularly incongruous in the context of a Jewish place of worship. Why was it that for many decades' synagogues were built, to the eye of the uninformed, in an apparent Islamic style? This is the question to be addressed in this paper and is the question that initially instigated this particular piece of research.

The Historic Context

Moorish-styled synagogues first emerged in the Iberian Peninsula of Spain and Portugal after the medieval Islamic Umayyad Caliphate was established there in AD 711 and the oldest example still standing is in Toledo and dates from the late 12th century. After the dissolution of the Moorish state of Al Andalus, which signalled the

end of Islamic rule in Spain, they continued as a distinct synagogue type for the Mizrahi community (those Jews residing in North Africa) but suddenly reappeared once again, and after several centuries, in a post-Napoleonic Northern Europe. The first Moorish Revival synagogue was built, then, at Ingenheim in the German speaking Rhineland Palatinate and this time, served a community of Ashkenazi Jews instead (the Jewish tradition of Central and Eastern Europe and Russia). The synagogue was built to a design by the architect Friedrich von Gartner in 1830 and was commissioned by Bernhard Roos, the town's first and only Jewish mayor. It was a hybrid of local German Gothic and Moorish 'orientalised' styling with its steeply pitched and stepped roofline and typical Moorish horse-shoe arched vestibule which were juxtaposed against a plain and rendered façade. This early prototype characterised the eclecticism of the Moorish synagogue in all its phases and was to be repeated across all of Southern Germany and beyond ([see figure 1](#))

As the fashion for synagogues such as these spread across Europe and then America, so the Moorish Revival in architecture generally, spread across much of Europe from the mid 19th Century to the early 20th Century also. The style became more ornate as academic studies and popular literary works disseminated the Arab architecture of Southern Spain, and stylised versions of the Alhambra Palace in Granada, with its elaborate arabesque motifs, began to be incorporated into synagogue architecture such as the Moorish-Romanesque ([figure 2](#)) and Moorish-Byzantine examples in Dresden (1838) and Florence (1870). ([figure 3](#))

Many of these synagogues are, at first glance, superficially similar in appearance to Islamic mosques as they often possess [minaret](#)-like towers, central domes and [minbar](#)-like pulpits within. Latterly, and in common with the generic expression of Moorish Revival architecture in a secular context, which also ran concurrently, these synagogues begin to appear as an amalgam of all the Arab building styles from Iberia, North Africa and the Levant with distinctive [ajimez](#) windows, [ablaq](#) coursing and variegated [voussoirs](#) to their exteriors and became increasingly exotic and at times theatrical; in response, perhaps, to the genre also becoming the signature style of exhibitions and entertainment in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. After the building of the first example at Ingenheim, synagogues in a Neo-Moorish style proliferated for a hundred years and only declined in the face of growing Nazi oppression and the build-up to war in Europe in the 1930's; when many synagogues

in Germany such as the one at Ingenheim were destroyed overnight in the Nazi purge of Kristallnacht.

In recent decades then, those interested in the intersection of faith and design history have recorded and accounted for the great variety of synagogue architecture and the diversity of its congregations, prior to the widespread if intermittent, destruction, post-war decay and subsequent rediscovery and renovation. Synagogue architecture that was built in Renaissance, Baroque, Neoclassical *and* Neo-Moorish styles, reflected the changing fortunes of Jewish communities that lived alongside their non-Jewish neighbours in a divergent geographic and socio-political landscape.

Where it was distinct and not subsumed by other cultures, synagogues invariably followed the fashions for historic revivals of society at large and reflected the changes in style of the countries in which it emerged. The Moorish type however, after its re-introduction as a genre of the picturesque in the mid-18th century and later expression of orientalist exoticism was, in contrast to preceding styles, perceived as being a uniquely appropriate form of Judaic architecture for much of Europe. The hybrid 'Islamic' styling of the Moorish synagogue was, never the less, paradoxical and symbolised a particular period of emancipation in places where a Jewish middle class thrived and where new money brought new aspirations; whilst the Moorish genre as a whole remained an idealised representation of 'the exotic' for non-Jewish society. This stratum of orientalism, seen in the inventiveness of both the religious and secular Revival, provides us with evidence which communicates both cultural difference *and* similarity in the appropriation and functioning of the style and came at a time when Neo-Moorish synagogues, in all their eclectic variation, demonstrated an ongoing process of cyclic social change in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

To understand how such synagogues emerged as they did, we can consider the process of the architectural commission and the contested ground in the negotiation between those providing the commission and the architect's own plan and recommendation of what might be deemed suitable. 'To act in service of the client, or to guide society towards a better end' (Cupers and Doucet 2009:2) is one possible dilemma arising from this and results in the architecture itself possessing an artificial 'agency' quite literally 'written in stone' but reflecting the negotiation of personal agency of self-determination and the social agency of communal self-expression. Depending where the weight of this power-relation lies, it expresses clearly or in

compromise, the client's hopes, aspirations and ideals or the designer's pragmatism, ideology and authority and will inevitably shape the outcome of the built environment in turn. Thus, synagogues were commissioned and the Neo-Moorish style was deemed appropriate, and the style was viewed as both acceptable and desirable by both architects and synagogue congregations alike; and it is assumed that architects began increasingly to recommend the style and clients began increasingly to request the style because Moorish synagogues proliferated as a result.

Architecture and Hybridity

Ultimately, the Jewish adoption of Moorish-Islamic styling is rooted in universal patterns of interaction between different cultures and depends on the way such cultures permeate and circulate across national boundaries and from region to region. Historically, Moorish architecture spread throughout the Mediterranean region, from East to West and from North to South, via the traditional seafaring and overland trade routes, and for centuries Jewish individuals and communities, as 'Court', 'Port' and 'Portmanteau' Jews, were well placed to receive and disseminate old-world ideas, which in turn could inform newer norms and values.

Architectural antecedents of the Moorish Revival are traced to the Iberian culture of Spain, via its earlier origins in the East and also to the desert Berbers where Moroccan and Algerian Mizrahi Jews had flourished for centuries. Situated between two continents, Moorish design expresses both authenticity and reinvention and this contrast of opposites is reflected in what Bourdieu describes, spatially, as two internal and external universes in inverse relation, when speaking of the form and use of a Berber house, for example (Bourdieu, 1979). This contrast of opposites is observable in historic examples of the Moorish style when comparing the horseshoe-arched threshold of an enclosed and private courtyard in the Moroccan Berber village of Ksar Tissergate (c.1500) ([figure. 4](#)), contrasted with an exposed and public façade of the Moorish-Neoclassical Cathedral of the Holy Trinity in Gibraltar (c.1825); ([figure. 5](#)) a Christian place of worship and predating the first Revival synagogue at Ingenheim. Geographically and symbolically, this church stands between two worlds and is at the threshold of both the European Occident and the Arab Orient. This dual identity sets a precedent for interpreting and adapting the Revival as a hybrid form that, almost inexplicably, reached Germany at a time just when style debates and the question of Hubsch, 'In what style shall we build', directly affected architecture in a

Central and Northern Europe and where style itself had political consequences (Mallgrave, 2006).

The synagogue at Ingenheim confirmed the positive status of some Jews after Napoleonic reforms in central Europe. In its Gothic detail, it proclaimed both Jewish indigeneity in the region (from c.1300) and a growing sense of citizenship in a newly-coalescing Germany. In the Moorish styling, it communicated a sense of Oriental heritage and 'a dual cultural alliance, a dual cultural allegiance' (Gur-Ze'ev, 2010). This was possible because of growing integration with a wider non-Jewish community at Ingenheim, and the actions of its highly proactive mayor and a visionary architect out to make his name. However, synagogues were not always so universally tolerated and this is evidenced in the Dresden examples Neo-Romanesque exterior which concealed the highly oriental and polychromatic surfaces of its interior.

This sense of shifting Jewish identity had roots in the *Haskalah* or Jewish Enlightenment which imbued in its writing and ethos, a rediscovery of the Sephardic heritage of Jewish Spain, and drove reform movements amongst the Jewish Ashkenazim of Germany and Eastern Europe. It is pertinent to note that whilst the Moorish style is associated with the Sephardic Jews because they were the original Jewish population of Iberia and the congregations of the original medieval synagogues of Al Andalus, most Neo-Moorish examples were built for Reform or Ashkenazi Jewish communities in the Revival phase. It is also significant to note that Moorish Revival synagogues were absent in Sephardic Amsterdam and Gibraltar, that had long ago extended rights and freedoms to Jews, and that the scarce Sephardi example at Florence is built in cruciform shape and echoes the Byzantine and Christian Hagia Sophia of Istanbul in scale and is a 'cathedral synagogue' of the first order (Kadish, 2002). This surviving example is a mixture of styles but with typical bifurcated windows, present in all variations from the Moorish to the Romanesque and *ablaq* coursing which was adopted in Italian Renaissance architecture and reinterpreted in the later Neoclassical, together with striped stone *voussoirs* which became *de rigueur* for Neo-Gothic reinterpretations across all of Europe - it remains a supreme example of Moorish eclecticism.

This hybridity of Revival and eclectic architecture of the period in general, reflects the common heritage of Christians, Jews and Muslims as 'People of the Book' and the

debt owed by all to pagan classicism and the mythic template of Solomon's Biblical Temple. Whilst heterogeneous distinctions between competing genres communicated clearly the diversity of belief-systems and social and cultural mores across Europe, the fact that these different visual vocabularies were used in such combinations and succeeded in achieving an aesthetic integrity is a testament to the homogeneous origins of these various branches of architecture; the common factor being the applied presence of Vitruvian classical proportions and imagined Mesopotamian prototypes that underscored all their surface expression.

Jewish Identity in Context

Jewish identity, in common with the rest of humanity, consists of an enquiry into the existential nature of self and belonging. This is observable in the self-analysis of its internal discourse and retrospective exercise of looking back into the past and fundamental to forming its identity in the 19th century. It was, arguably, a 'sense-making' of circumstances, where internal self-perception was subject to the external consensus that others imposed upon it and in a period of increasing change but growing integration, this focus was vital for Jews and non-Jews in what it implied about their present and their possible future.

To be Jewish therefore has personal and social consequences where Jewishness implied not just a faith or ethnicity but aligned individuals to aspirations, beliefs, and popular cultural values that were distinct from the aspirations, beliefs and values around them. This distinction was the very strength of Jewish cohesion. Its adherence *to* and identification *with* a set of values had personal and social consequences but provided an anchorage within it. In the Jewish context at the time there appeared to be a dichotomy between a coherence of tradition in the moulding of identity - to proscription, and the unpredictability of breaking from tradition and exploring new alignments.

The phenomenon of Moorish synagogues had a real relevance for how Jews conceived their own self-hood, and in the way they helped decode for their communities, 'the ethnography of ordinary Jewish life' (Bryceson et al, 2007:75). The suburban district of Bonn-Poppelsdorf in Germany is a case in point with its small but highly exotic synagogue (1902) ([figure.6](#)) and is remarkable for the normality of the suburban Jewish community it served. While its congregation may not have had

anything ostensibly to prove, its architecture said otherwise and conveyed them to be 'ideologically in exile but existentially at home' as Webber (1952) observes about these ordinary instances. The importance of the Moorish synagogue phase is in the way it speaks not so much of a narrative of a collective identity in crisis, but one that is smooth in its operation for the duration of the period of confidence that the building style conveys.

Processes of Culturation

Lester Grabbe framed the erratic pattern of Jewish culture-making by conceiving Judaism's ancient history in terms of the movement and interplay of currents (or *cross-currents*) both watery and electric. This holds good as a description of much later episodes of Jewish life, characterised by 'diversity, interaction and movement' and can be understood in terms of trends and counter-trends, resistance, attraction and repulsion. Grabbe describes direction towards outcome in the Jewish narrative in the need to define dynamism, where cultures transmit from parent to child, from one generation to unrelated individuals of another generation and between individuals of the same generation. These proportions vary in their combination and describe a culture that was not static but 'made up of a set of many moving parts, each following its own path but influenced by the paths of other movements contemporary with it' (Grabbe, 2010:146). This has also been observed in the modern period of synagogue building and framed as a process of both 'acculturation and particularism' (Snyder 2008). The development and evolution of Jewish communities, conceived then, in terms of movement or rather *relationship*, is complex in its operation and serves as a template to describe the formative events of its more recent history, especially as it relates to their pan-European diaspora and settlement. The cultural clash, collaboration and interplay that characterises how people have formed these 'current' patterns and are shaped by the correlation and convergence of context, may therefore help explain the emergence of Moorish Revival synagogues as symbols of Jewish integration in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Traditions and Modernities

Synagogue architecture is situated in a broad historic context pertaining to the wider issues of Jewish and non-Jewish relations in the Middle East, Europe and the Greater Mediterranean and Moorish synagogues when they did occur, depended on

the convergence of multiple contexts. They can be understood in light of a theoretical perspective and interdisciplinary approach that interprets the correlation of specific contexts one with another. In so doing, the importance of the built environment in the shaping of Jewish identity is emphasised, and principally explored through theories of transnationalism and transculturation.

Although it does not exclude its occurrence, especially from the Early Modern era onwards, this hypothesis of contextual alignment and cultural communication is not reliant on the often-cited politics of Edward Said's colonial discourse (Said 1978). The issue in the Oriental and Occidental debate is not exclusively one of binary opposition as a reading of Said's work would suggest, but is arguably a narrative of competition and negotiation for self-worth in a world intent on passing the torch of classical learning at its centre; claiming it, or at least a share of it, for its own in classical and neoclassical reinterpretation. This notion posits a circulatory formation to Oriental and Occidental relations played out since the fall of Rome where the Oriental 'Peoples of the Book', apart from, yet part of Christian and secular society, viewed their world through the lens of classical civilisation in a preoccupation borne out by Muslims (and by association Jews in a Muslim world). In all the Islamic countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea to the east and south-west and disseminated along maritime trade routes Muslims assimilated the 'truths' of the classical world; or at least that which was considered most a virtue or most useful, into their own system. This requires a different meaning for Orientalism, and when considering notions of custodianship, heritage and inheritance, the moments of cultural coincidence and divergence have consequences for the interplay of its participant identity, its moments of crisis, and its resolution.

'In what style shall we build' was the thought that preoccupied German architects and historians in the 19th century and whilst this was predominantly a concern of the non-Jewish educated classes, the fact that Jews also asked 'In what style shall we build' is a testament to them no longer being a dispossessed class but engaged with choices and making decisions. Increasingly confident and optimistic, Judaism experienced release from Ghettos and had fuller integration in the socio-cultural and socio-political milieu that hitherto had been denied them. Jews in the modern period, loosened from a culture of relative isolation, established new ties and were defined more within a cultural mainstream. Politics and its activism, economic expansionism,

educational opportunities and the expressions of 'high-culture' were all features of an aspirant industrial society and became legitimate interests and preoccupations for European Jewry also. This process of modernisation was often momentous and 'a process, a sequence of occurrences that transform a traditional way of life, stable and self-contained, into a venturesome one, adaptive and continuously changing' (Geertz, 1995:137).

The Semiosis of Style

Although Moorish synagogues may require an approach that is essentially semiotic to explore the causal relationships between 'myth and ritual' and 'archetype and agency', Lukken and Searle express caution when they maintain that a definitive reading may also be unrealistic and inappropriate. They say instead that the purpose is to 'explore the structures of signification that make any reading possible' and to remember that the 'text' remains more than the sum of its interpretations (Lukken and Searle, 1992). Semiotics is in this sense, a study of the visual 'etymology' and of the architectural 'text', richly textured in its own right and a field within a field as it were.

Whilst the connection between the sign, the signified should ideally operate in a seamless, reflexive way, and reflect truth understood as meaning, and that has a personal value. These truths can be mediated or communicated by the personal agency of the individual in an interpersonal context. As Jones says of the 'double mediation' of decoration working with transformative effect in architecture 'that it not only must reaffirm the viewers taste in what they see, but by variation, originality or novelty, can force viewers to readjust their tastes' (Jones 2000 a: 63). This can only operate in the synagogue, an overt manifestation of Judaism's cultural particularity (Snyder 2008), via the triple relationship of the animate agency of the individual (the architect or designer), the inanimate agency of the building (an abstraction of intent) and the individual or collective agency of the congregation (often working in tandem). As Jones implies, this is not fixed but in a flux of encounter and the readjustment of perception, where interpretations of cultural agency-in-action, as Foucault suggests, operate through processes of 'selection' and 'exclusion' and bring meaning to future actions (Foucault et al 2005).

These moments of decision, as *agents* of agency in a sense, work until transformative intervention in the present is felt. They are foremost accounts of self-determination or its deprivation in social or anti-social contexts where slowly, sense is made of circumstance and that which we make or unmake together, is realised. Cultural action and expression is for good or ill a compromise of this condition and Judaism, characterised by the diversity of its encounters, whether in conflict or cooperation may be understood in general terms of 'exchange, dominance, exploitation and transculturation' on the permeable scale of 'cultural appropriation' that underpins much of its relations (Rogers, 2006). Agency is worked out in the individual or communal *idea* mutating into form, and *decisions* into actions and of all humanity, the history of the Jews is one of transforming experiences that when magnified, are both stern in their warnings and generous in their bequests, and which dichotomy is typical of the human condition and is ultimately rendered observable in its individual and collective narratives.

In conclusion then, we may read the built environment as a meta-narrative open for our interpretation, and consider the Moorish type as both a condensed narrative within it and case-study of cultural communication. The utility and value of religious architecture, and specifically that of the synagogue, is found in this ritual space being a place to experience the continuity of tradition (in context) and it being part of a chain of learning and teaching of its culture, *ad infinitum*. Reflective and reflexive engagement by its participants 'concerned with images and representations (and) the fluid and constructed nature of meaning' (Ross 2004 cited in Nazaruk 2011:76) is the *modus operandi* and continuation of such tradition. In these sensory engagements, design vocabularies communicate transient aspirations that vary in degrees of uniformity and diversity within wider cultural environments, but invariably elicit by our analysis and evaluation, an enacted emotional synthesis from both participants and readers of such narratives. Ultimately, when we encounter Neo-Moorish synagogues we encounter a determined narrative of both tradition and of modernity, and the agency of the architect and of the congregations that still speak in the study of the form.

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