Moorish Revival Synagogue Architecture: Community and Style, Past and Present

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Cover Page Footnote
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Moorish Revival Synagogue Architecture: Community and Style, Past and Present

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Abstract
The Moorish architectural style, originating in medieval Spain, was revived in the mid-nineteenth century. It became strongly linked with synagogues, first in Germany and then throughout the Western world. My research analyzes why the architects and Jewish communities were so attracted to the Moorish Revival style. During this period, European Jewish communities were tasked with constructing synagogues that could showcase their newfound freedoms as well as their history, culture and aspirations. Many argue that this style was chosen to demonstrate the connection between the communities and their ancient Middle Eastern history.

Historical Background
As a result of the political changes throughout Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, Jews were granted more freedoms and rights. They were allowed to leave their ghettos, apply for jobs previously unattainable, and build large communal structures, such as synagogues. This period also marked the birth of the Reform movement, which claimed that many Jewish laws were archaic and that the modern Jew should fully embrace the newfound opportunities in the secular world. Many of the Moorish Revival synagogues were built by the Reform communities as they worked to carve out their place as Jews in society.

“...the Moorish style seems to me the most characteristic. Jewry hangs on with indestructible piety to its history, customs, and usages. The organization of its religious practice and, in short, its entire existence lives in reminiscences on its motherland, the Orient.”

- Otto Simonsen, “Der Neue Tempel in Leipzig,” 1858

Church Model
Many of the Moorish Revival synagogues bear a striking resemblance to churches. Traditionally, Jewish synagogues had a bimah, reading table, in the center of the room, with seating organized around it. However, during this period, we start to see many synagogues with a long aisle down the center (similar to a nave), bimah moved to the front (like an altar), rose windows in the facade, and even an organ. This stylistic shift may have stemmed from a desire to “fit in” with the outside community, by altering the Jewish religious structure to look like that of the Christian neighbors.

Who Decided?
According to David Cassuto, a leading architect and architectural historian in Israel, the community delegates would commission the structure, but it was up to the architect to choose the style. Cassuto argues that the style therefore represented the architect’s opinion of ‘Judaism’ and of the Jewish community. However, there were instances, such as in the city of Kassel, where the community chose to reject the plans of a synagogue in the Egyptian Revival style (similar to Moorish Revival) in favor of a more European design.

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References
5. Cassuto, David. Interview by author. Stamford, Connecticut & Israel, July 31, 2018 & March 27, 2019. I am grateful to Professor Cassuto for taking the time to discuss his ideas with me.

‘Oriental’ Architecture
As travel and contact between Europe and Asia increased in the nineteenth century, ‘Orientalism’ (a Western interpretation of Middle Eastern styles), including the Moorish Revival style, became a popular approach to European art and architecture. It was, however, considered inferior to the European styles. While some claim that the Jews may have been trying to assert their ‘Oriental,’ or Middle Eastern, roots, others question whether they would have deliberately chosen a style that would make them appear uncivilized. It may instead have been the non-Jewish architects who chose this style to present their view of the Jewish people as un-European or primitive.

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