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# COMMON BOND

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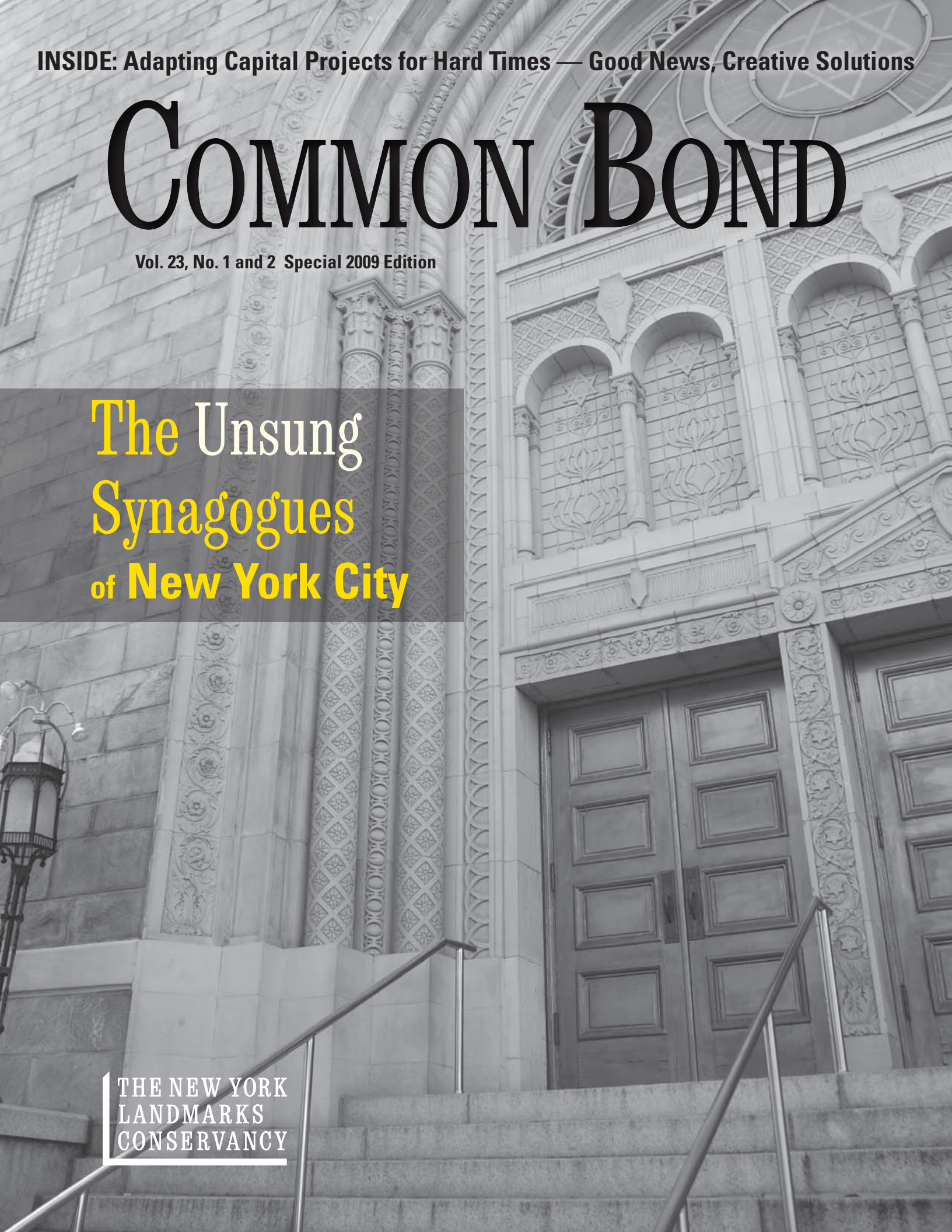

## The Unsung Synagogues of New York City

THE NEW YORK LANDMARKS CONSERVANCY

The New York Landmarks Conservancy's Sacred Sites Program offers congregations throughout New York State financial and technical assistance to maintain, repair, and restore their buildings. In addition to providing hundreds of thousands of dollars in matching grants each year, the Conservancy offers technical help, workshops for building caretakers, and publications.

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Editor: Ann-Isabel Friedman
Managing Editor and Designer: Eirik J. Omlie

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For additional information about the Sacred Sites Program or *Common Bond*, please contact:

The New York Landmarks Conservancy
One Whitehall Street
New York, NY 10004

212.995.5260
nylandmarks.org

## The New York Landmarks Conservancy



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## Contributors

**Jane Cowan** is a historic preservation consultant whose work includes research, writing, and built-environment education.

**Ian Dull** is a 2009 graduate of Yale and a Conservancy staff intern.

**Anthony W. Robins** is a writer and historian whose work over 25 years has focused both on historic preservation and on interpreting New York history and architecture for a wide, general audience. His articles have appeared in *The New York Times* and *The Forward*, as well as *Gourmet*, *Connoisseur*, *Architectural Record*, *Progressive Architecture*, and *New York Magazine*. He has taught at Williams College and New York University, and leads a popular annual seminar at the Municipal Art Society teaching New Yorkers how to research the city's buildings.

## Photography

All photos by Conservancy staff except: Temple Beth-El of Borough Park (Cover and page 4), Shaari Zedek Synagogue (page 5), Kol Israel (page 5), Young Israel of Flatbush (page 7), The Free Synagogue of Flushing top photo (page 7), The Free Synagogue of Flushing (page 8), Astoria Center of Israel (page 8), Ocean Parkway Jewish Center (page 9), The Jewish Center of Kings Highway (page 10), The Rego Park Jewish Center window and exterior close-up (page 10), Kingsway Jewish Center (page 11) by Anthony W. Robins. Temple Emmanu-El (page 15) by Barnett Shepherd. German Evangelical Lutheran Church of St. Paul (pages 16-17) photos and illustrations by Kaitsen Woo Architect, PC.

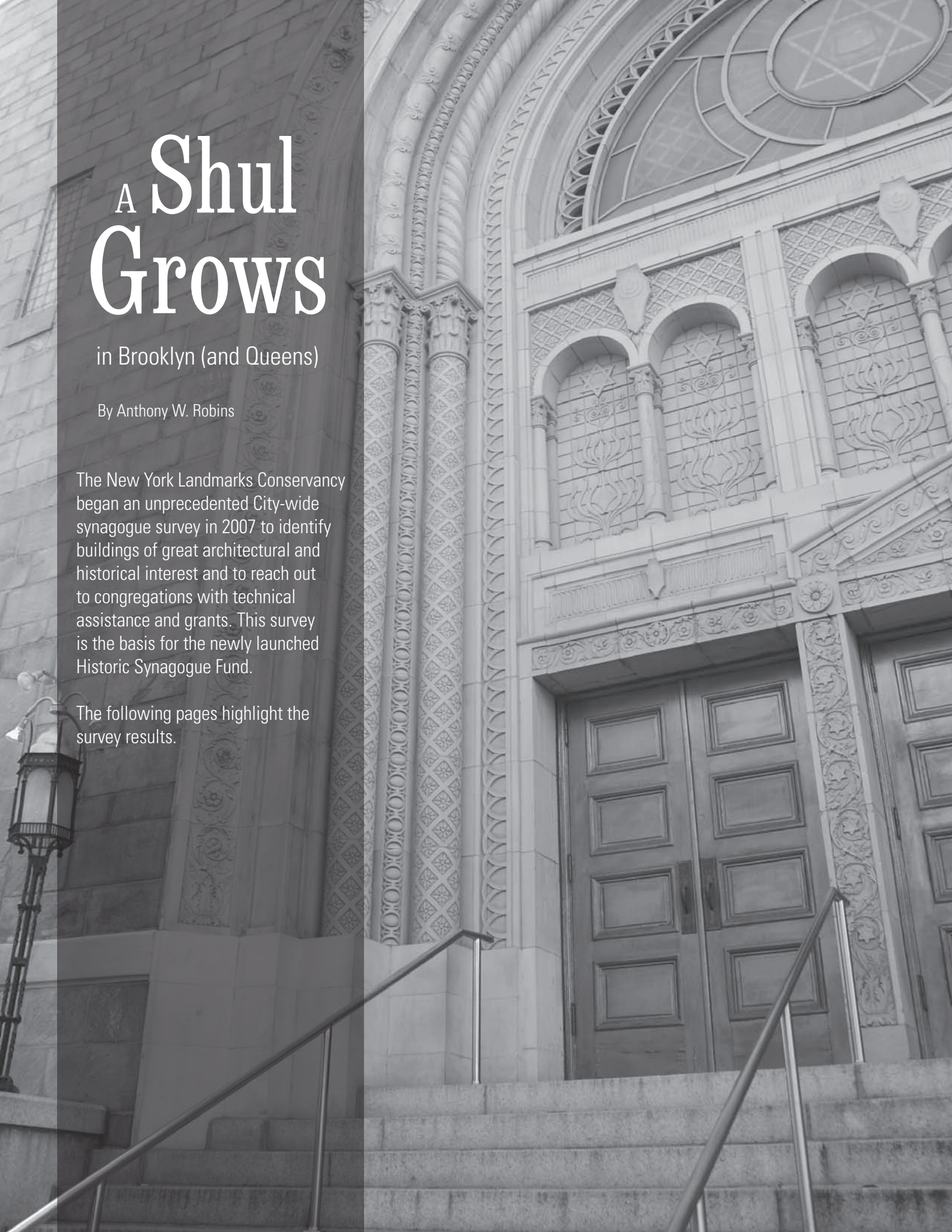
# A Shul Grows

## in Brooklyn (and Queens)

By Anthony W. Robins

The New York Landmarks Conservancy began an unprecedented City-wide synagogue survey in 2007 to identify buildings of great architectural and historical interest and to reach out to congregations with technical assistance and grants. This survey is the basis for the newly launched Historic Synagogue Fund.

The following pages highlight the survey results.





Above left: The former Shaari Zedek Synagogue, now St. Leonard's Church, was designed by Eugene Schoen. Above right: Kol Israel features a grand entrance with layers of spiral colonnettes. Opposite page: The similarly decorated, monumental entrance at Temple Beth-El of Borough Park.

New York is one of the world's great Jewish cities – for much of the 20th century, no other city had so large a Jewish population, some two million people. Consequently New York is home to an enormous number of current and former synagogues.

Some have always been well-known in the wider world – Fifth Avenue's Temple Emanu-El (Hebrew for God is With Us), for instance, the city's largest – while others have gained fame through major, well-publicized restoration campaigns, most notably the extraordinary rescue of the Eldridge Street Synagogue on the Lower East Side.

But New York's Jewish world extends well beyond the shores of Manhattan. Brooklyn and Queens both have Jewish populations that over time have numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Those communities are younger than Manhattan's, which was founded in the mid-17th century. Brooklyn's Jewish population and earliest synagogues date to just before the Civil War, while those of Queens developed in the early to mid-20th century. But both boroughs have been home to hundreds of synagogues, and the Conservancy's survey has uncovered dozens of such buildings of great architectural and historical interest.

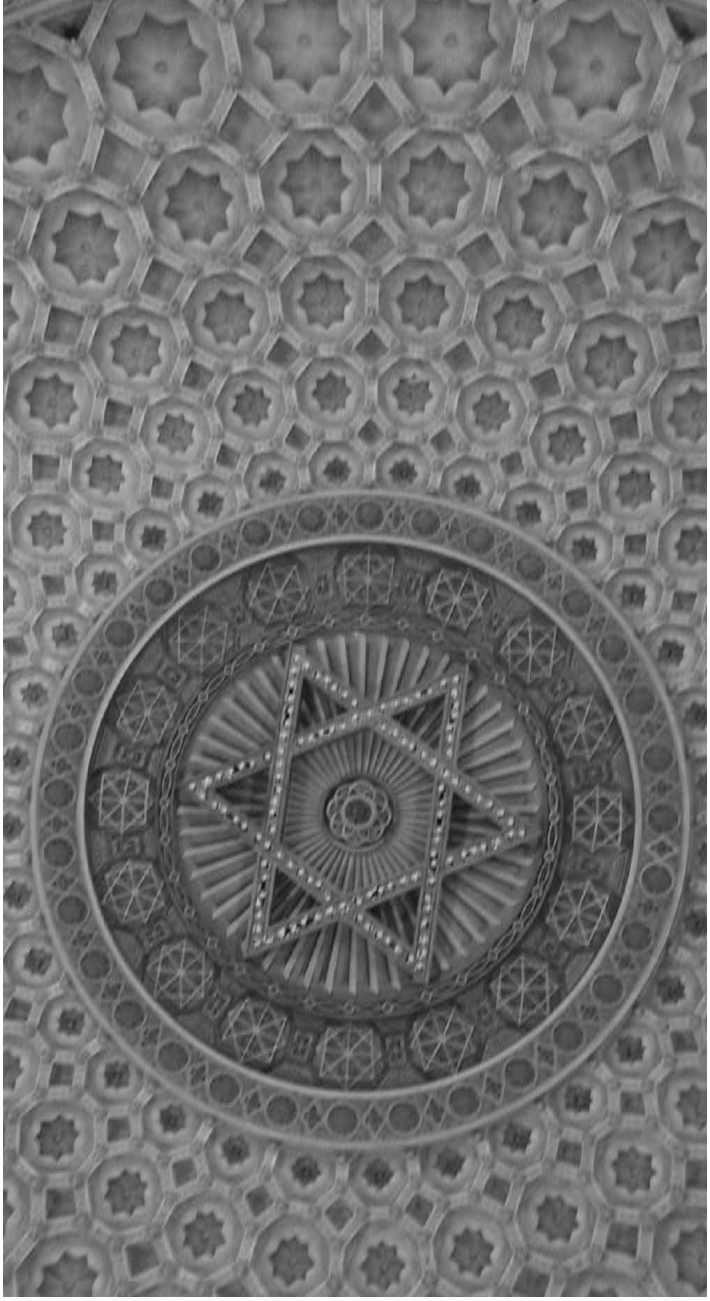
Through the Conservancy's ongoing efforts, and with funding from the Preserve New York Grant Program of the Preservation League of New York State and the New York State Council on the Arts, ten such synagogues are now newly listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Built during a 50-year period – 1909 for the earliest, 1951-57 for the latest – they were all designed by Jewish architects, some of whom specialized in synagogue design, others of whom generally worked on different building types. These synagogues vary in size and shape, and reflect differing populations and differing ideas – not just about the appropriate architectural style for a synagogue but also about the appropriate function of such buildings. Together, they offer an overview of Jewish life in New York City during the first half of the 20th century.

**Shaari Zedek**
**(765 Putnam Street, Brooklyn)**

The earliest of the ten is the Shaari Zedek Synagogue (Eugene Schoen, 1909-10), later known as Achavat Achim (Hebrew for Brotherly Love), and today as St. Leonard's Church. It dates from a period when Bedford-Stuyvesant had a significant Jewish population. The congregation considered itself "Conservative," eschewing the traditional gender-separate seating, with services including an organ and choir, and English-language sermons.

Eugene Schoen – though today better known as a furniture designer – was a prominent early-20th-century architect interested in progressive design trends. At the beginning of his career he traveled to Vienna to meet such modern architectural luminaries as Otto Wagner and Josef Hoffmann, the latter a founder of the Vienna Sezession. One of Schoen's earliest works, Shaari Zedek (Hebrew for Gates of Righteousness) combines classical vocabulary with a modern flavor. The building's façade is faced in brick with cast-stone ornament, with a prominent dentilled cornice (partly removed); its ornament, while based on classical forms, includes geometrically patterned brickwork that suggests the influence of the modern work that Schoen would have seen in Vienna.

The congregation grew rapidly, and moved to larger quarters in the early 1920s (its new home in Crown Heights, now the First Church of God in Christ, see page 13, was inaugurated in a ceremony that included the participation, from the capital, of President Coolidge). Shaari Zedek sold the building to another, older Brooklyn congregation,



Temple Beth-El of Borough Park's 81-foot-diameter octagonal Guastavino ceiling dome with intricate Moorish style plaster work.

Achavat Achim. By 1944, however, the Jewish population of Bedford-Stuyvesant had shrunk significantly, and the building was purchased by St. Leonard's Church, part of a new Afro-American Orthodox denomination with Caribbean roots. After 65 years, St. Leonard's has maintained the building twice as long as the two synagogue congregations combined.

**Kol Israel (603 St. Johns Place, Brooklyn)**

The smallest of the ten is Congregation Kol Israel (Tobias Goldstone, 1928) in Crown Heights. A so-called "tenement synagogue," it occupies a long, narrow tenement-sized building lot of the kind common to many older small synagogues on the Lower East Side. Built for a group of Eastern European immigrants striving to preserve traditional Jewish practice, Kol Israel (Hebrew for All Israel) was an Orthodox synagogue in a sea of modern Reform congregations. Its architectural style is simple – this was a congregation of modest means – but the plain stone-faced building includes a grand entrance with layers of spiral colonnettes in ornate patterns, supporting a series of round arches.

Louis Allen Abramson designed Young Israel of Flatbush in 1923. Abramson's Moorish-inspired design includes ogival arches, horseshoe arches, slender minarets, and polychromatic tiles.

That design reflects the 1920s phenomenon of the so-called "Semitic" style, combining Moorish ornament with Judaic motifs, a phenomenon that can be traced back to mid-19th century Europe and a belief that the Moorish represented a more "Eastern," and therefore more culturally appropriate style for Jewish buildings, as opposed to styles based on church architecture.

**Temple Beth-El of Borough Park**
**(4802 15th Avenue, Brooklyn)**

A grander example of the "Semitic" style is Temple Beth-El of Borough Park (now Young Israel-Beth El; Shampan & Shampan, 1920-23). Its Orthodox congregation – Central and Eastern European immigrants who had become prosperous bankers, merchants and professionals – commissioned a synagogue that the *New York Times* described as "a new house of worship of unusual beauty."

Shampan & Shampan were well known for their apartment houses and garment-district loft buildings, but they also designed several synagogues. Beth-El's (Hebrew for House of God) principal façade includes a grander version of the colonnettes-and-arch entrance at Kol Israel. The two main colonnettes are decorated with an ornate diaper (diamond shaped) pattern often seen in Moorish design. The triple entrance within the arch is framed in cast-stone adorned with Arabesque designs, into which are mixed Judaic symbols, notably a shield with a ceremonial *menorah* (candelabra) in the triangular pediment above the central doorway.

The building's glory, however, is its sumptuously ornamental sanctu-

The ark in the sanctuary of Young Israel of Flatbush is a classically-inspired design with twin columns supporting an arch. Above the ark is a representation of the two Tablets of the Law.

ary, including an enormous, 81-foot-diameter octagonal Guastavino ceiling dome – said to be the third largest such dome in the country at the time of its construction. The sanctuary is covered in arabesques, with Judaic symbols mixed in. The coffered ceiling is dripping with *muqarnas* – stalactite forms borrowed from the most famous Moorish monument in Spain, the Alhambra. This sanctuary provided a fitting backdrop for the world-renowned cantors who helped win the synagogue fame as "Brooklyn's Carnegie Hall."

**Young Israel of Flatbush (1012 Avenue I, Brooklyn)**

Yet another take on the Moorish-influenced "Semitic" style can be found at Young Israel of Flatbush (Louis Allen Abramson, 1923). Abramson's design includes such typically Moorish features as ogival (pointed) arches, horseshoe arches, slender minarets, and polychromatic tiles in an intricate Moorish-inspired design. The Avenue I façade is faced in polychromatic patterned brick – purple red and brown – laid in irregular geometrical patterns, and focuses on three enormous ogival arches with stained glass windows, the arches defined by a combination of patterned brickwork and tiles. The synagogue's main entrance is set within a typically Moorish horseshoe arch supported on slender octagonal stone columns with ornamental columns. The various tiles are set in abstract and floral patterns, but also with six-sided forms suggesting a *magen david* (shield or "star" of David). A band of tile and patterned brick above the arch includes a frieze with a Hebrew inscription set between two *magen david* forms: "B'neureinu v'vzekeineinu neileikh" – "With our young and our old we shall go" – words spoken by Moses to Pharaoh in the Book of Exodus.

Inside, the sanctuary continues the building's Moorish design, notably in the polychromatic tiling that frames sections of the walls and surrounds each window opening. Throughout the sanctuary, typically Moorish ornament intermingles with such Judaic symbols as a *magen david*. At the front, the ark is more of a classically-inspired design, with twin columns supporting an arch; above the ark itself is a representation of the two Tablets of the Law. The sanctuary is lit by enormous windows of polychromatic leaded glass, for the most part adorned with geometric patterns, but also including symbols inscribed with the names of the Twelve Tribes.


Above: The Free Synagogue of Flushing has a grand, neo-Georgian temple front, approached by a sweeping flight of stone steps. The building is also adorned with ornamental Judaic motifs, notably a seven-branched *menorah* in the pediment above each of the side doors, and the two Tablets of the Law, inscribed with Hebrew letters representing each of the Ten Commandments.

**Free Synagogue of Flushing (136-23 Sanford Avenue, Queens)**

The mid-1920s alternative to the Moorish was one of several variants of the neo-Classical – including the neo-Renaissance and the neo-Georgian. The Free Synagogue of Flushing (Maurice Courland, 1927),

Above: The Free Synagogue of Flushing's sanctuary is lit by enormous leaded-glass windows of Jewish themes while the crowning shallow dome rises to a leaded-glass skylight with a *magen david* in its center.

one of the earliest synagogues surviving in Queens, was built to house an offshoot of the Free Synagogue movement founded in Manhattan by the Reform rabbi Stephen Wise. Architect Courland – born in Palestine and trained at the Paris École des Beaux-Arts – came to New York after first working in Buenos Aires, and became a specialist in synagogue design. He designed the Flushing synagogue with a grand, neo-Georgian temple front, approached by a sweeping flight of stone steps. The building is adorned with ornamental Judaic motifs, notably a seven-branched *menorah* – a reference to the seven-branched light that burned in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem – in the pediment above each of the side doors, and the two Tablets of the Law, inscribed with Hebrew letters representing each of the Ten Commandments, in the lunette above the main entrance, as well as a *magen david* in the leaded glass transom above the main entrance.

Inside, the sanctuary is a single large domed space, with no separate gallery to serve as a women's section – an arrangement reflecting the egalitarian theological position of the Reform movement. The sanctuary's detailing continues the melding of classical ornament and Jewish themes in, for instance, the ark – the receptacle for the Torah scrolls – which is set between two classical columns supporting a broken pediment, within which is another representation of the Tablets of the Law, while metal grilles in the walls above the ark combine classical swags with the menorah. The sanctuary is lit by enormous leaded-glass windows on Jewish themes – among its most impressive features – while the crowning shallow dome rises to a leaded-glass skylight with a *magen david* in its center.

**Astoria Center of Israel**
**(27-35 Crescent Street, Queens)**

At the other end of Queens, the Astoria Center of Israel – another of the borough's few surviving early-20th-century synagogues – was built 1925-26 to designs by the same Louis Allen Abramson who had used Moorish to great effect at Young Israel of Flatbush. Abramson deeply admired the work of McKim, Mead & White, ascribing his taste for Italian Renaissance designs directly to "Stanford White's

Right: The Astoria Center façade and interior Louis Pierre Rigal mural. The French artist added the mural a few years after the synagogue's construction.


The Ocean Parkway Jewish Center in Brooklyn.

Italian." The synagogue's two-story tall, five-bay wide façade, in brick with cast-stone trim, is defined by double-height Ionic piers, flanking round-arched windows, supporting an entablature and topped by a balustrade. Its round-arched entrance is topped with a cartouche (shield-like ornament, with inscription or sculptural decoration, usually surrounded with carved ornamental scrollwork) – a classical detail – within which is inscribed a *magen david*. Renaissance-inspired details in the main sanctuary include double-height round-arched windows set between fluted pilasters, and the faux marble ark of piers supporting an architrave (classically decorated beam) topped by an elaborate broken pediment with a representation of the Tablets of the Law.

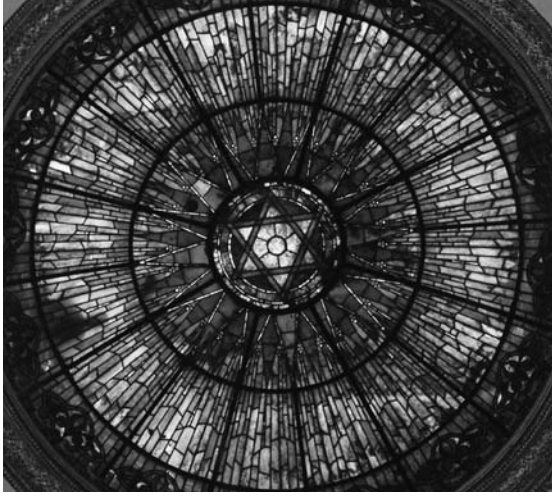
The Astoria Center is particularly interesting for a set of murals, added a few years after its construction, by French artist Louis Pierre Rigal (1889-1985). Rigal studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and later in Rome, and in 1925 exhibited at the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes – the famed exposition that eventually gave rise to the name "Art Deco." In New York, Rigal designed work at the Waldorf-Astoria – and also at the Astoria Center.

Figurative painting in synagogues is relatively rare – because a common reading of the second of the Ten Commandments suggests that it forbids such representation – but it is not unknown. Rigal's subject matter was selected by the congregation's rabbi, who chose one Biblical source and one Talmudic source: The dove and the olive branch from the Noah story in Genesis, and a well-known aphorism from the Talmud's tractate *Pirkei Avot* ("Chapters of the Fathers"), a collection of sayings and moral instruction from the early rabbis: "Be bold as a leopard, light as an eagle, swift as a deer, and strong as a lion, to carry out the will of your Father in Heaven."

**Ocean Parkway Jewish Center**
**(550 Ocean Parkway, Brooklyn)**

The name "Astoria Center" refers to a new, and particularly American, synagogue innovation: the Jewish Center – which served not only as a place of worship, but also as a center of community life. Besides a sanctuary, a Jewish center would include classrooms and social halls and, in larger synagogues, even gymnasiums and swimming pools (giving rise to the expression "*shul* [synagogue] with a pool"). Louis Allen Abramson designed the very first official Jewish Center in Manhattan, as well as many others of the type. Abramson's work at Young Israel of Flatbush was also of the Jewish Center type – even without that phrase in its name – including classrooms and a gymnasium.

A young architect in Abramson's office, Samuel Malkind, went into independent practice and, together with his partner Martyn Weinstein, designed the Ocean Parkway Jewish Center (1924-26) in Brooklyn's Kensington neighborhood. At five stories tall, the Center is quite as large as the flanking apartment houses – and at the time of its construction it towered over what were then neighboring two-story houses. A typical *shul* with a pool, the Center followed Abramson's example combining neo-Classical ornament with Judaic symbols. For the principal façade, an elegant double staircase and porch lead to a triple arcade level that serves as a basement to the double-height temple front rising above. In the pediment at the top – where the Parthenon, for instance, had sculpted Greek deities – there are two sculpted lions supporting the two Tablets of the Law, complete with the Hebrew inscriptions traditionally included in such representations. The Renaissance inspiration shows up in the neo-Georgian entrance rotunda, described in the press as having "an ornamental plaster-

Above: The Jewish Center of Kings Highway was designed in 1928-30 by Maurice Courland, and features stained glass similar to that at Courland's 1927 Free Synagogue of Flushing.

coffered ceiling and walls of Italian travertine stone and Botticino marble." Throughout the sanctuary, such typically classical ornament as wreaths and swags intermingle with such Judaic symbols as a *magen david* or a *menorah*. Among its most impressive architectural features is its glass work: ten stained-glass arched windows, 18 feet tall, with Biblical imagery, and a remarkable stained-glass skylight dome in the center of the sanctuary's ceiling. What marks this synagogue as a true Jewish Center, however, are all the other spaces: class rooms, social halls, library, club rooms, gymnasium, and swimming pool.

**Jewish Center of Kings Highway**
**(1202-1218 Avenue P, Brooklyn)**

Yet another Jewish Center in Brooklyn, the Jewish Center of Kings Highway, was designed 1928-30 by Maurice Courland, architect of the Free Synagogue of Flushing. The Kings Highway synagogue originally complemented the congregation's first home, which was then converted to use as classrooms, gymnasium and the other community functions, so that the two buildings together constituted a true Jewish Center.

Courland's design for Kings Highway is a smaller version of his earlier work in Flushing – a temple front adorned with Judaic motifs mixed in with classical ornament. The sanctuary is a single space with a large coved ceiling rising to a small dome – there is no separate gallery to serve as a women's section. The detailing continues the neo-Georgian classicism of the exterior, with a similar cross between classical ornament and Jewish themes. Leaded-glass windows on Jewish themes light the space – organized in the same arrangement as at Flushing. The remarkable, wide central windows on either side of the sanctuary each include an image of two lions holding a Torah scroll, and a *magen david* at the top of the arch. Other windows include roundels with specific Jewish images: one shows a *menorah*; another shows a pair of hands making the priestly blessing (*birkat hakohanim*); still another appears to represent the bush that burnt but was not consumed, in which God first appeared to Moses. As at Flushing, the ceiling rises to a leaded-glass skylight with a *magen david* in its center.

**Rego Park Jewish Center**
**(97-30 Queens Boulevard, Queens)**

The last two synagogues in the group – both built in the decade following World War II – are also Jewish Centers, enormous complexes designed in the newly fashionable modernism of the day. The Rego Park Jewish Center (Frank Grad, 1948) appears to be modeled on Bauhaus-influenced European synagogues of the 1930s, in particular the Oberstrasse synagogue built for a Reform congregation in Hamburg in 1931, with which it shares a severe stone façade relieved only by a central blind roundel – the Hamburg example inscribed with a *menorah*, the Rego Park façade with a *magen david*. The Jewish Center's main sanctuary is a spare Modern design, with modest geometric patterning.

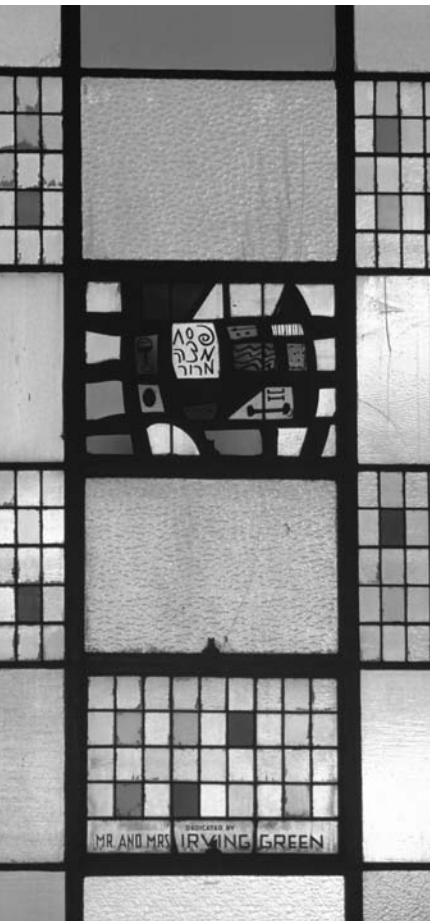
In contrast to the severity of the architectural design is the remarkable ornamental treatment by the Hungarian-born A. Raymond Katz, perhaps the most prominent artist associated with 20th-century synagogue design in the United States. Katz became known for his adaptation of Hebrew calligraphy into a semi-abstract decorative medium acceptable to traditional congregations wary of representative art. On the Center's façade, just above the entrances, Katz designed a long mosaic, using color and geometric patterning in a Modern approach, but incorporating Jewish religious objects including a Torah scroll, the tablets of the Ten



Commandments, and the ritual symbols of several Jewish holidays. In the center is one of Katz's characteristic elaborations of a Hebrew letter, in this case the letter "*shin*" (often used as an abbreviation for the Hebrew word "*shaddai*," a Biblical name for God) sitting atop a *menorah* and including within its lines the bread, wine and candles of a traditional Sabbath evening meal. Inside the main sanctuary, Katz designed six tall windows, three of which include his use of calligraphy. Named for the three daily prayer services (and the Biblical patriarchs with which each service is traditionally associated), they each have a complex design interwoven with letters, symbols and abstract shapes and colors.

**Kingsway Jewish Center (1485 East 29th Street, Brooklyn)**

The latest of the synagogues – the Kingsway Jewish Center in Brooklyn (Martyn Weston and Herman Sohn, 1951-57) – bears some resemblance to the Rego Park Jewish Center, showing the influence of that same Hamburg model. A modernist building which can be imagined either as late Moderne or early Modern, with blocky massing and narrow vertically-oriented windows, it is a huge complex of a Jewish Center, complete with school building, gymnasium, swimming pool, and catering hall. Its main sanctuary is a modern version of a traditional Orthodox synagogue design, with a handsome ark at the east end, and a reader's platform facing it in the center closer to the west end. Instead of pews facing the ark, it has rows of seats on the north and south sides, facing each other, as well as a small balcony on the west end, all in blond wood. The entire space is lit by sunlight pouring in through tall glass windows on either side, and smaller windows above and behind the ark. The modernism of Kingsway Jewish Center seems light years away from the neo-Georgian classicism of, say, the Ocean Parkway Jewish Center – but the two buildings have an architect in common: Martyn Weinstein (Ocean Parkway) and Martyn Weston (Kingsway) are one and the same person – a charter member and later president of the Brooklyn Society of Architects (and still later, president of the Brooklyn chapter of the AIA).




The tall glass windows in the sanctuary may be Kingsway's most extraordinary feature. They were commissioned by the synagogue in 1955 from one of the 20th century's major exponents of Abstract Expressionism, Adolph Gottlieb, known for his own particular contribution to that movement, the "pictograph." In 1954, Gottlieb

Above and left: The tall glass windows in the Kingsway Jewish Center sanctuary were commissioned by the synagogue in 1955 from Adolph Gottlieb.

Opposite page: Rego Park Jewish Center was designed by Frank Grad in 1948, with windows and mosaic by A. Raymond Katz.

designed the Milton Steinberg House, a five-story extension to the Park Avenue synagogue in Manhattan, with a façade consisting entirely of 91 stained-glass windows. Extensive press coverage brought the Steinberg House to the attention of Kingsway, which commissioned ten major windows representing ten Jewish holidays, and eight smaller windows with simple geometric designs. With the disassembly of the Steinberg House in 1980, the Kingsway windows are now the only surviving intact architectural stained-glass work by Gottlieb anywhere in the world.

Ten synagogues represent a small fraction of the total built in New York over the past couple of centuries. But this group of ten in Brooklyn and Queens – from a tiny *shul* to enormous Jewish Centers, from Sezession to Georgian to Moorish to Modern, from the calligraphy of A. Raymond Katz to the murals of Pierre Rigal to windows by Adolph Gottlieb – captures something of the historic and architectural range of the Jewish experience in New York.

## Further reading

For the history of Jewish Brooklyn, there is the 1937 classic, *History of Brooklyn Jewry*, by Samuel P. Abelow, and the more recent Jews of Brooklyn by Ilana Abramovitch and Seán Galvin (2001).

The classic work on American synagogue architecture is Rachel Wischnitzer, *Synagogue Architecture in the United States* (1955). A more recent survey, with beautiful photos, is *Synagogue Architecture In America* by Henry Stolzman (2006). Sam Gruber's scholarly *American Synagogues: A Century of Architecture and Jewish Community* (2003), also beautifully illustrated, focuses on American synagogues of the 20th century.

Oscar Israelowitz has published many guides to the synagogues of New York – among them, *Synagogues of New York City: A Pictorial Survey in 123 Photographs*.

The indispensable work on the Jewish Center phenomenon is David Kaufman's *Shul with a Pool: The "Synagogue-Center" in American Jewish History*.

Finally, the National Register nominations of each of the ten newly-listed synagogues will eventually be posted online at the New York SHPO Web site http://www.oprhp.state.ny.us/hpimaging/.