

**STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:** Stanton Street Shul, 180 Stanton Street, New York, NY

**Executive Summary**

The Jewish population of the Lower East Side, immigrating during the historic period from 1880-1920, had an indelible impact on the neighborhood. Central to its community life were religious



*Stanton Street Shul, 180 Stanton Street. Built 1913. Architect-Louis A. Sheinart (Photo-D. Wye)*

congregations, eventually numbering more than 400, with some 14 across the length of Stanton Street alone. These congregations were often organized among fellow townspeople from the Old Country, and worship took place in spaces as different as rented apartments, storefronts and halls, former churches, and grand purpose-built synagogues. In some cases, several congregations occupied the same tenement; only 60-70 congregations owned separate buildings for the purpose of worship.

The Stanton Street Shul, built in 1913 and designed by Louis A. Sheinart, is among those that were purpose-built, and it represents the once ubiquitous type known as the “tenement synagogue.” These small buildings occupied standard 20-25-foot-wide lots and were crowded in among tenement housing. Many have been demolished, while others are now occupied by commercial or residential tenants. The Stanton Street Shul is among the last in the neighborhood functioning as a congregation.

Even with its diminutive scale in relation to neighboring buildings, the Stanton Street Shul has a singular effect on the streetscape. Displaying a distinctive Classically-inspired façade embellished with Stars of David, the active Stanton Street Shul serves as a vivid reminder of the area’s rich Jewish history. As architectural historian and synagogue specialist Gerald R. Wolfe has stated, the Stanton Street Shul “has a history, tradition, and even an architectural

presence that ranks it among the outstanding synagogues of the Lower East Side.” Although it was named to the National Register of Historic Places in 2002, it lacks the protection that would come with New York City Individual Landmark status.

**Cultural History**

Incorporated as the Congregation Bnai Jacob Anschei Brzezan [Sons of Jacob, People of Brzezan] in 1893, this synagogue was organized to serve a *landslayt*—a group of residents from the town of Brzezany in Galicia, now Ukraine. To feel “at home” and to carry on traditions from their places of origin, Jewish immigrants—as well as immigrants in other ethnic communities—tended to settle together on particular

blocks of the Lower East Side. To support each other, they formed mutual aid societies that helped with medical care, employment advice, burial plots and other services; in the Jewish community these organizations were known as *landsmanshaften*. Similarly, religious congregations based on places of origin often included such social services and have been referred to as “*landsmanshaft* congregations.” But as these synagogues evolved over time, links to their towns of origin diminished and membership broadened. Today Stanton Street Shul is identified by its location—a practice found among other religious buildings in the neighborhood.



*Jewish Lower East Side (Photo-LES Jewish Conservancy)*

Some estimates say that about a half a million Jews called the Lower East Side home during the peak period of immigration and, as such, it was considered the largest Jewish community in the world. But many residents eventually left for the outer boroughs, or elsewhere, and the immigration law of 1924 severely limited the number of new

arrivals. Yet religious activities at the Stanton Street Shul continued. It is noteworthy that even in the 1970s, when New York suffered economically and many synagogues were abandoned or sold, it survived. It is now among the few still serving its original purpose.

An unusual study from 2011, undertaken by anthropologist Jonathan Boyarin and titled *Mornings at the Stanton Street Shul: A Summer on the Lower East Side*, offers a personalized view of life in this congregation, with the aim of encouraging the reader to imagine himself or herself a participant. This diary-like account of the past, present and future of the broader Jewish community on the Lower East Side adds further dimension to one's appreciation of the Shul's building. Paul Cowan's memoir, entitled *An Orphan History: One Man's Triumphant Search for His Jewish Roots*, from 1982, references the Stanton Street Shul through the author's portrayal of his relationship to former Rabbi Joseph Singer, who served the congregation from 1964-2002.

A 1979 Hollywood movie, *Last Embrace*, starring Roy Scheider, includes the Shul in its plot. Here, the interior with wall paintings of zodiac signs (*mazoles*) stands in for a typical Lower East Side synagogue. That interior, again with its *mazoles* clearly in view, is seen in a music video called *Minyan Man* (1989-2015) by The Maccabeats and Shlock Rock. Both the movie and music video are available for viewing online.

### **Architecture—Synagogues**

Remnants of the Lower East Side's Jewish history are still found within the neighborhood's streetscapes. Extant synagogue buildings are prominent such reminders. Small meeting rooms hold services on East Broadway's Shtiebel Row; a converted Federal-style church now houses the active Bialystoker

Synagogue on Willet Street and is a New York City landmark; the grand purpose-built Eldridge Street Synagogue, presently hosts a museum and is also landmarked. The ornate former Anshe Chesad synagogue on Norfolk Street, is an artist's foundation. The impressive former Forsyth Street Synagogue began as a church, transitioned to a synagogue, and is now a church again, reflecting the ethnic succession that has come to define the area. Finally, a walk down the streets of the Lower East Side reveals evidence of its tenement shuls, many now readapted for new uses.

Synagogue buildings employ differing architectural vocabularies. While converted churches exhibit their original designs with some alterations, purpose-built synagogues can be Moorish, Romanesque Revival, Gothic Revival, Classical Revival, or eclectic combinations of styles. Yet within such differences, there are often commonalities, such as a tri-partite division of the façade with a central entrance and two side entrances leading up to the women's gallery, and symbolic ornamentation, including representations of the Star of David, scrolls, tablets, and Hebrew inscriptions.

### Architecture—Stanton Street Shul



*Stanton Street Shul within the block between Clinton and Attorney Streets. (Photo-D.Wye)*

The Stanton Street Shul—built out to the property line, adjacent to the sidewalk—occupies a 20-foot-wide x 99.5-foot-deep lot at 180 Stanton Street, between Attorney and Clinton Streets. With no central staircase rising up to the sanctuary, the effect of the building’s scale is intimate and its connection to the street and neighborhood is immediate. Its construction incorporated walls from front and back buildings formerly on the site. The three-story façade is made of buff brick and cast stone, with an iron gate across the entrance.



*Recessed brownstone panels, either side of pediment form. (Photo-Lisa Vogl)*

Tenement shuls have been characterized as “vernacular” architecture, no matter the visual sophistication of their facades. They are portrayed as “maintaining a quiet, unsung presence in their neighborhoods,” with their small lot size as their defining feature. Yet, tenement shuls often exhibit distinctive styles and ornamentation, created by recognized architects—in this case, Louis A. Sheinart. While their size certainly integrates them seamlessly into the streetscape, their varying designs set them apart.

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The distinguishing temple-front and pronounced symmetry of the Stanton Street Shul facade, as well as such elements as pilasters, dentils and egg-and-dart molding, identify its design as derived from the Classical Revival, a style that became widespread in response to the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893. While this is an example of Classicism in a simplified form, the design succeeds in providing the building a dignified presence, even without the more elaborate detailing found on the two other extant Classical Revival tenement synagogues on the Lower East Side—the former Congregation Beth Hamedrash Hagadol Anshe Ungarn (1908) on East 7<sup>th</sup> Street, and the former Congregation of Adas Yisroel Anshe Mezeritz (1910) on East 6<sup>th</sup> Street. While those buildings are protected—the former as an Individual Landmark and the latter as part of a Historic District—the Stanton Street Shul is not.

Stanton Street’s façade features the typical tripartite division from the ground level to the third story. It is topped by a parapet with three incised plaque forms. The building has a double-door entrance flanked by single doors on each side. Above the main door, a cast stone cornice includes the inscription, “Erected 1913.” Hebrew lettering in the pediment of the temple-front indicates the congregation’s name and date of construction.

*Three Stars of David on façade, and one topping entrance gate (in shadow), lined up vertically. (Photo-D. Wye)*

The Shul's most distinctive religious ornamentation is the placement of three Stars of David on the façade, with another topping the entrance gate. These Stars, in various sizes and materials, line up vertically to assert the identity of the building. An unusual façade element is the inclusion of two recessed panels in contrasting brownstone on either side of the pediment form, depicting fragments of arcades.

Repairs to the upper rose window in 2012 give an example of restoration work undertaken on the Shul. Later, in 2019, a further restoration was completed on both the exterior and interior.



Façade and close-up of top rose window before 2012 restoration and after. (Photo-Stanton Street Shul website)

### Architect

Architect Louis A. Sheinart, born in New York in 1888, designed stores, housing, and theaters, mostly for immigrant communities on the Lower East Side. He had established an architectural practice by 1910 and continued to design buildings through the 1930s. He is credited with six theaters in New York City and was among the first to create a theater with a pitched floor for improved viewing of the screen, and fixed seats. In addition to the Stanton Street Shul, he was the architect of two other culturally significant buildings on the Lower East Side. In 1914 he designed a theater at 144 Second Avenue on the corner of 9<sup>th</sup> Street that was converted to retail and offices in 1928, and then became the Veselka Ukrainian Restaurant in 1954. Also in 1914, he built Variety Photo Plays, a virtual institution at 110 Third Avenue between 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Streets, which met much protest when it was demolished in 2005. Sheinart died in 1942.

### Conclusion

The Lower East Side is the most celebrated historic immigrant neighborhood in New York, and arguably the nation. Yet its built environment, linking the past to the present, is clearly in danger as real estate values trump the importance of collective memory. The situation is particularly dire below Houston Street where there is no historic district protection. Under the circumstances, the Lower East Side Preservation Initiative (LESPI) has undertaken to identify significant buildings in this area that merit Individual Landmark status. The Stanton Street Shul—highly significant both culturally and architecturally—is one such building. In a neighborhood where synagogues were such a defining feature, it exemplifies the supportive role of religious institutions within the immigrant community, as new arrivals sought familiarity amidst the upheaval they endured. As a tenement shul, Stanton Street makes that point emphatically, providing a tangible record of the way in which the immigrants' religious and

everyday lives were seamlessly meshed on the neighborhood's blocks, while also displaying an architectural distinction that underscores its vital presence there.

## Timeline



- 1893: Congregation Bnai Jacob Anschei Brzezan incorporated
- 1913: Congregation builds the synagogue now known as the Stanton Street Shul
- 1930s: Mazoles (Jewish zodiac signs) are thought to have been painted on the interior walls in this decade
- 1964-2002: Tenure of Rabbi Joseph Singer
- 2002: Building was almost sold, but community outcries prevented that
- 2006-2007: Roof and fire escape renovated by Li/Saltzman Architects
- 2007: Interior renovations by Ilan Ohayon, Architect
- 2012: Restoration work on façade's rose window overseen by preservationist and congregant, Elissa Sampson.
- 2017-2019: Exterior and interior restoration by Alta Indelman, Architect
- 2024: Remains an active congregation

*Stanton Street Shul in the 1970s. Photo-NYPL*

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