7. Narrative Description of the Historic & Current Condition of the Property

The East Midwood Jewish Center (EMJC),a combination synagogue and community center, was built between 1926 and 1929 in the Renaissance Revival style, which was typical of synagogues designed in the early decades of the twentieth century. The building 155 feet wide and is located in Brooklyn at 1625 Ocean Avenue between Avenues K and L, on the east side of a major thoroughfare in the Midwood section. It has four floors, plus two penthouse apartments for caretakers.

It was built as a multi-purpose facility to serve all aspects of Jewish life, namely, worship, study, charitable activities, social events, and sports for all ages. The combination of synagogue and community center was an early twentieth century American innovation in the conception and architecture of synagogues. EMJC was not the first such facility in New York City or in the borough of Brooklyn, but it is one of the few still standing in the twenty-first century, unchanged either in its architecture or its purposes. Other centers have been converted to churches or schools (Jewish and non-Jewish) and/or have been completely redesigned, so that their original features have been lost.

The EMJC building contains not only a two story sanctuary and a small chapel for daily use, but numerous large and small meeting or reception rooms, two ballrooms, one with a stage, a full size gym, a swimming pool and lockers. It is the only synagogue in Brooklyn which still has a functioning pool. The property is listed in New York City records as Block 7620, Lot 25.

The original architectural features and decorative embellishments of the East Midwood Jewish Center building have been preserved unchanged since 1926-29. Some additions have been made, among them, the addition of a full kitchen and air conditioning throughout the building, including the sanctuary. Also, a three story school building, the Harry Halpern Day School, and a two story bridge link were added in 1950. Polished granite panels were added to the monumental stairs leading to the second floor main entrance in 1958-59. Selective masonry repairs have been performed to the stonework on the front face, to lintels on the east façade and to the interior side of the roof parapets and the roof level penthouses. The front façade is well maintained.

The East Midwood Jewish Center, but not the Harry Halpern Day School, is architecturally significant under National Register Criterion C as a representative of early twentieth century synagogue design in New York City. It is not a designated New York City landmark.

The Renaissance Revival style of architecture, a branch of neo-classicism,very popular in the early decades of the twentieth century, is identified with Richard Morris Hunt and the Chicago Exposition of 1893. This style was influenced by the palaces, chateaux, and fortresses of the Italian and French Renaissance and became the preferred style of civic monuments in all areas of the United States. Two well known examples in New York City are Carnegie Hall and the J. P. Morgan Library.

The original building plans for East Midwood have not been found, and neither synagogue records nor the building's dedicatory plaque list an architect. Official credit for the design is given to the construction superintendent, Irving Warshaw, and to the synagogue's Building Committee. However, there is strong visual and one piece of written evidence that the plans for East Midwood were drawn by Louis Allen Abramson,"a leading architect of the synagogue-center building boom." (1) Mr. Abramson was the architect of the Manhattan Jewish Center of West 86th Street, which was the model synagogue center for hundreds of others throughout the country, and of the Brooklyn Jewish Center, erected in 1920, the Flatbush Jewish Center (1921), and the Ocean Parkway Jewish Center (1924). All bear his unmistakable signature. Unfortunately, the Flatbush Jewish Center has been completely redesigned for use as a religious school. Photographs of Brooklyn's other two Abramson buildings, to be found in the attachments, show their similarity to East Midwood Jewish Center.

According to Oscar Israelowitz, author of *Synagogues of New York City,* "The construction of the Brooklyn Jewish Center sparked the growth of Jewish Centers throughout Brooklyn." (2) And its layout is exactly the same as that of East Midwood. There is "a swimming pool and gym in the basement, an auditorium on the main floor, and a huge, two-story synagogue, reached by a marble staircase, above." (3) This description fits exactly the design of the East Midwood Jewish Center.

The one piece of written evidence regarding Louis Allen Abramson's role in East Midwood is a statement in the *Twentieth Anniversary of the Jewish Communal Center of Flatbush 1916-1936 Souvenir Journal that* Abramson drew the plans for

East Midwood. (4) This synagogue is also known as the Flatbush Jewish Center.

Louis Allen Abramson was an active architect for seventy years. As mentioned above, he designed the prototype of the American Jewish synagogue-community Center, known as the Jewish Center of the West Side (1917-18), based on the ideas of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, one of the leading creators of the "synagogue center" movement. While Abramson specialized in synagogues during the early stages of his career, he is best remembered in the architectural world for designing hospitals, nursing homes, large office buildings and restaurants. He was the major architect for Beth Israel Hospital (1927), the Home Insurance Company (1931) and numerous other prestigious Manhattan office and apartment buildings and for the restaurants at the 1939 World's Fair, held in New York. He was at that time affiliated with the firm of Voorhees, Gmelin and Walker. (5) It is quite possible that he agreed to draw the basic plans for EMJC, but that the Building Committee decided to complete the work on its own, in order to save money. This speculation would explain why his name is not listed in the official histories.

The design chosen by Abramson and the East Midwood Building Committee was copied, not only from Abramson's existing Manhattan and Brooklyn synagogues, but from many other earlier examples, among them the West End Synagogue or *Sharay Tefila* on West 88th Street (designed by Arnold Brunner in 1894) and the *Kehilath Jeshurun* on East 85th Street, (designed by George Pelham in 1902), and Congregation Sons of Israel Kalwarie on the Lower East Side in 1905 (which was an exact copy of George Pelham's work). The architects of early twentieth century synagogues in New York chose to treat each façade as "a palatial rather than an ecclesiastical building." (6)

One of the characteristics of early twentieth century Jewish centers is their architectural similarity. "More than mere flattery, architectural imitation was the physical expression of social aspiration, religious loyalty, and educational progress—all ideas of the community synagogue. The same architectural design …could stand for traditional as well as for modern values….In the course of a few years, therefore, the synagogue design of a single Reform temple (*Sharay Tefila*) was chosen by orthodox *shules* from new York City to Worcester, Massachusetts (and it would reach Boston, as well)." (7)

In the 1920s as the Jewish population spread out from the early immigrant enclaves to newly developed sections of cities (such as the Midwood section of Brooklyn), the resulting housing boom "was accompanied by a synagogue

construction boom and the architectural styles incorporated during this period ranged from the classical to the eclectic, an amalgam of every conceivable architectural idiom" (8)

Since there has never been any one form of architecture mandated for or characteristic of synagogues in any period or in any region, various styles, changes in styles and combinations of styles were and are perfectly acceptable. The synagogue "has always tended to reflect the community, the era, and the society in which it developed." (9) While statues of human figures are prohibited, the religious requirements are few and simple, and can be accommodated in any building style. They are: windows to see the heavens and achieve a suitable frame of mind for prayer, an ark to hold the holy scrolls (if possible placed in the wall facing Jerusalem), a platform for reading the hold scrolls aloud, and a continuously burning lamp, symbolic of the eternal light which burned in the Temple in Jerusalem. (10)

East Midwood Jewish Center is not only an outstanding representative of early twentieth century synagogue design, but its interior is an exuberant encyclopedia of numerous architectural styles and decorations. It is possible that the EMJC construction superintendent and the building committee made use of the many available architectural patterns books which were written to serve as models for those who did not chose to or could not afford to hire skilled architects. (11)

The Exterior

East Midwood is set back from the property line on Ocean Avenue and from the street walls of the adjacent apartment buildings on its northern and southern sides. The building is of steel-frame with masonry exterior wall structure. The Ocean Avenue side features textured buff brick and limestone; smooth buff brick is used at the side yard facades; and common red brick at the rear façade.

At the ground floor, entrance to the building is through four wooden doors, each of which has three panels of decorative carvings, which are symbolic representations of the twelve tribes of Israel. The doors are set in brass frames with brass kick plates at the base.

Formal Renaissance style right and left limestone stairways, with balustrades rails and piers, lead to the second floor main entrance to the Center and the sanctuary. Polished granite panels were installed to the western face of the monumental stair in 1958-59.

At the base of the stairways are four concrete pedestals, holding four white globe lights. On the second floor are two ten foot tall brass candelabra, the traditional seven branched menorah.

The bronze finished second floor doors have rounded arches and applied decorative elements set in panels. Above the arches are ornamental limestone cornices. The doors have semi-circular transoms with brass mullions and clear glass.

The facades of the third and floor floors are completely filled by nine monumental, leaded, stained glass windows, which have rounded arches, topped with ornamental cornices, and are framed by narrow Corinthian columns. In front of the three center stained glass windows is a row of four larger Corinthian columns topped with an unadorned lintel. Nine more stained glass windows, not visible from the street (Ocean Avenue) are on the eastern side of the building, facing East 21st Street.

On the roof are two copper domes, now weathered to green, in the Moorish or Oriental revival style. This is a remnant or reminder of the fact that this style had been very popular with German-American Jewish congregations in the 19t century. In front of each dome is a blind arcade with four arched openings.

On the south façade are a three story choir loft and a two story egress stair, above a one story base. The rear elevation of the Center has a one story kitchen addition and a two story bridge link to the school building, already mentioned.

The Interior

The main sanctuary is on the third floor. Its basic design comes “from the same source as the Christian Church,” that is from the Roman basilica. Basilicas were used throughout the Roman Empire for law courts and merchants’

exchanges. “Here was an arrangement already at hand, quite suited to the needs

of religious services, which served as a model for the synagogue, as it did later for the Christian Church. . . . The plan was uniform, consisting of a parallelogram, divided into three parts longitudinally. . . . At the end was the tribune of judges, arranged in a semicircle. This general plan for the synagogue . . . . has persisted until the present day.” (12)

The EMJC sanctuary fits the above pattern. It is a parallelogram with three aisles. Its wooden pews, seating 800 people, flare out as they move from the front to the rear. A balcony holds 150 more seats.

At the front of the sanctuary is a semi-circular raised apse or platform (called a *bimah* in Hebrew), supported by four black columns decorated with brass or bronzed composite capitols. This platform holds the *Ark,* containing ten Torah scrolls, which is set into the wall and covered with brass doors. Above the ark is a broken pediment, from which is suspended the “eternal light.” Also above the ark is a marble carving of the Ten Commandments and above that is a golden sun, surrounded by beams, a symbol with associations in many religions and cultures, but of no specific meaning in Judaism. (13) The *bimah* is reached by six steps on each side, which may represent ascent to God and entering a higher plane. (14)

On either side of the *bimah* is a seven branched candelabra or menorah, which is described in detail and commanded by the Bible in the Book of Exodus 15:31-36 Such a menorah stood in the temple in Jerusalem.

When one faces the *bimah,* one sees that it is flanked by two stained glass panels, approximately 4 feet by 30 feet, one on each side. The east and west sides of the sanctuary are enclosed and illuminated by five of the nine arched stained glass windows which face both Ocean Avenue and East 21st Street, respectively). The other four windows are visible not from the sanctuary but from adjoining rooms. These windows are approximately 5 feet wide and 40 feet high. Around the edges of each window are abstract Tiffany style flower designs in red, yellow and green, while the centers are in shades of blue, imitating the sky. These windows provide a subtle and delicate light during daytime and early evening services. The light is particularly beautiful just before sunset near the end of the Yom Kippur fast, when the entire sanctuary is

aglow.

The room is lit also by a large chandelier on the ceiling, about forty feet in diameter, which hangs from a domed Tiffany style stained glass skylight in shades of yellow and green. Light is contributed, also, by two smaller crystal chandeliers, suspended from the ceiling anchored at the top by Jewish stars, and by the many three-light sconces which are affixed to the supporting columns between the stained glass windows. The stained glass dome is not visible from the street and the two copper domes are not visible from inside the building.

When entering the building on the ground floor, one first steps into a small vestibule, containing plaques listing the names of the founders and builders of East Midwood and the names of the various rabbis who have led it since 1926. One then enters the lobby with its travertine faced walls. Here one sees three memorials: a Holocaust memorial, a tree of life honoring past members and donors, and a stained glass memorial to the victims of 9/11, one of whom was an East Midwood member.

At the left side of the lobby is a small chapel, which is open every day of the year for morning and evening prayers and for classes. This chapel has wooden pews for about 75 people, and has its own Ark, on either side of which are stained glass windows, similar to those in the sanctuary, but smaller in size.

The second floor, reached by a sweeping bronzed wrought iron staircase, contains the two ballrooms and the kitchen. The walls of each the ballrooms and the lobby between them are decorated with architectural moldings and medallions in the Renaissance style.

The three story school building, fronting on East 21st Street, is connected to the Center through a courtyard, a basement corridor and a third floor bridge. In addition to classrooms, it has a science lab, a library, rooms dedicated to music, art and computers, plus an auditorium/ballroom with a stage and a kitchen.

As previously indicated, none of the main architectural features of East Midwood has been altered. Unfortunately, one of the most beautiful features, the stained glass windows, are in only “fair condition,” and the wooden frames

and sash are in poor condition. (15) According to a detailed conditions report prepared by the architectural firm of Li-Saltzman Architects, P.C., the building envelope has been damaged by a long history of deferred maintenance. EMJC is now gearing up for a capital campaign to handle all the identified problems. The goal is to raise $5 million over ten years.

East Midwood Jewish Center is one of the few examples of early twentieth century synagogue design, which is architecturally unchanged and still performing the same functions for which it was created. For example, Abramson's Brooklyn Jewish Center is now a school and its stained glass dome (like East Midwood's) was sold to a synagogue in Closter, New Jersey. And his Flatbush Jewish Center has been completely redesigned, front, back, sides and rear to serve as a school. The once famous and widely copied Congregation Sons of Israel Kalvarier at 15 Pike Street on the Lower East Side was abandoned and vandalized for many years, but was recently salvaged for use as a Buddhist temple and commercial building. Oscar Israelowitz's comprehensive *Synagogues in New York City: History of a Community* lists over 50 synagogues each in Brooklyn, Bronx, Queens and Manhattan which no longer exist.

East Midwood, on the other hand, has withstood numerous demographic and economic changes in the neighborhood, has made adjustments to new ideas, such as equal participation of women in all aspects of ritual and synagogue management, but it has remained true to original mission, to be a Conservative Jewish synagogue and an education/social/recreational community center for its own affiliated members and for community residents of all ages.

We hope that recognition of the historic importance of this building by the National Register of Historic Places will help us raise sufficient funds to preserve this wonderful representative of early twentieth century synagogue design in New York City and of the synagogue-community center movement.

FOOTNOTES to SECTION 7

1. David Kaufman, *The Shul with a Pool: The Synagogue Center in American Jewish History,* Hanover & London: Brandeis University Press, 1999, p.80

2.Oscar Israelowitz, *Synagogues in New York City: History of a Jewish Community,* Brooklyn: Israelowitz Publishing, 2000, p. 94

3. Debra Dash Moore, *At Home in America,* New York: Columbia University Press, 1981, p. 135

4. *ibid., p. 135 and* Deborah Dash Moore, *The Emergence of Ethnicity: New York's Jews 1920-1949,* Xerox University Microfilms: Columbia University Doctoral Thesis, 1975, p. 175

5. *New York Times,* January 20, 1985

6. Rachel Wischnitzer, *Synagogue Architecture in the United States: History & Interpretation,* Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1955, p. 120

7. Kaufman, *op. cit*. pp.189-190.

8. Oscar Israelowitz, *Synagogues in the United States: A Photographic & Architectural Survey,* Brooklyn: Israelowitz Publishing, 1992, p. 8

9. *ibid.,* p. 8

10. William G. Tachau, *The Architecture of the Synagogue,* New York: American Jewish Yearbook, Vol. XXVII, 1926, p.160

11. Robert Chitham, *The Classical Orders of Architecture,* Oxford: Elsevier, 2005, 2nd edition, p. 10

12. ibid., pp. 167-168

13. Hans Biedermann, *Dictionary of Symbolism: Cultural Icons & the Meaning Behind Them,* translated by James Hulbert, New York: Meridian Books, 1994, p. 326

14. *ibid., p. 330*

15. Li-Saltzman, Architects, P.C. "Existing Condition Report of East Midwood Jewish Center & Rabbi Halpern Day School," May 16, 2005, p. 6

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