Ephemeral New York

Chronicling an ever-changing city through faded and forgotten artifacts

Posts Tagged 'Synagogues on the Lower East Side'

Broken remains of a Norfolk Street synagogue

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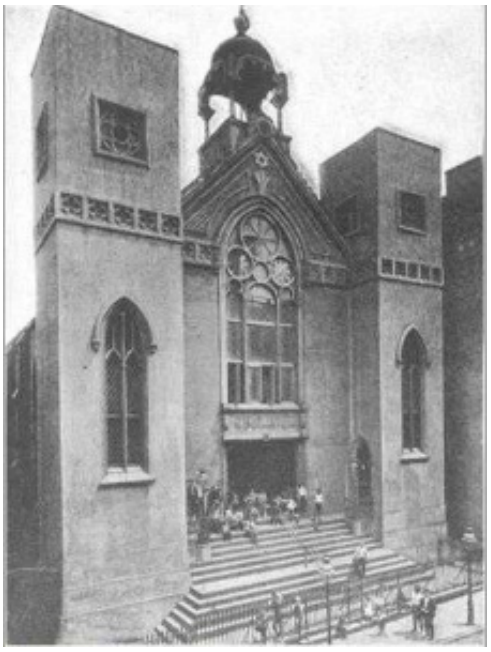
(http://ephemeralnewyork.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/norfolkstreetsynagogue.jpg)The once-spectatular, now rundown building at 60 Norfolk Street started out in 1848 as the Norfolk Street Baptist Church.

It still has all the wonderful Gothic Revival touches of a mid-19th century church: arched windows, four-leaf tracery, and a high, vaulted nave inside.

Ten years later the church moved out, following its well-to-do members uptown as the neighborhood became an enclave of poorer immigrants.

(http://ephemeralnewyork.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/norfolkstreetsynagogue1900s.jpg)A Methodist church took it over until 1885, when Orthodox Jewish congregation Beth Hamedrash Hagadol bought it for $45,000—and stayed for 122 years.



Founded by immigrants (http://www.nysun.com/new-york/lower-east-side-is-at-a-crossroads/82072/), Beth Hamedrash Hagadol was "the oldest Orthodox congregation of Russian Jews in the United States," states nycjewishtours.org (http://www.nycjewishtours.org/site_hamedrash.htm).

The congregation made some cosmetic changes so the place looked more like a synagogue.

"The new owners added a Jewish star to the roof and reconfigured the altar area to become a *bima*, but otherwise left the plain Gothic church intact," says Inside the Apple (http://blog.insidetheapple.net/2013/01/the-fate-of-beth-hamedrash-hagadol.html).

In its day, thousands of Lower East Side residents worshipped here. But you know the story: the neighborhood changed, residents moved or died, and the congregation dwindled.

(http://ephemeralnewyork.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/bethhamedrashhagodolinside2005.jpg)

Designated a city landmark in 1967, Beth Hamedrash Hagadol leaders closed the synagogue in 2007.

Since then, time and harsh weather have taken their toll. Windows are blown out, moldings have chipped, plaster falls, and overgrown brush block the entrance and give an eerie, abandoned feel.

(http://ephemeralnewyork.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/norfolkstreetsynagogue2.jpg)

Last year, the congregation asked the landmarks commission for permission to tear down the synagogue and sell the land to developers.

That request is on hold (http://www.thelodownny.com/leslog/tag/beth-hamedrash-hagadol). In a city that loves its past, it's surprising money can't be found to turn around this historic bit of the Lower East Side.

[Second photo, about 1900: Wikipedia; Third photo, Wikipedia]

Tags:60 Norfolk Street, Abandoned Churches NYC, Beth Hamedrash Hagadol, Gothic churches New York City, Jews on the Lower East Side, LES history, Lower East Side Jewish history, New York Synagogues, Norfolk Street Baptist Church, Norfolk Street synagogue, Synagogues on the Lower East Side

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