

**Letter to the Editors of the Australian Journal of Jewish Studies: Regarding Creese, J. & Arnold, J. "The Architectural Provenance of the Margaret Street Synagogue, Brisbane", Australian Journal of Jewish Studies XXXIV (2021): 157-187**

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Dear Editors,

We read with interest the article on the Brisbane Synagogue. The art history of Jewish architecture in Australia has been a largely overlooked subject and the few scholarly studies that have been published in the last 50 years or so focused primarily on the architecture of Jewish Sydney. It was therefore welcome that a study on Queensland synagogue architecture was recently added to Australian Jewish scholarship. We would like to make a few comments based on our research of synagogue architecture in Australia and Britain. This may also shed some light on the identity of the principal architect of the Brisbane Synagogue which the authors set out as the primary purpose of their study.

Unlike in Sydney, where the names of architects of the two oldest synagogues have been well documented in the community archives, the attribution of the Brisbane Synagogue design has been surrounded by conflicting information and deeper congregational and societal issues. The research question can be narrowed down to two names: Morry or Stombuco? Or both? (158). According to Creese and Arnold, official government records identified architect Arthur Morry (1854-1938), who was born in England and had worked in Manchester, as the author of the synagogue design completed in 1885. In contrast, some community historians attributed the design to the older architect and sculptor Andrea Stombuco (1820-1907), an immigrant from Florence. The authors concluded that 'the true history of the Brisbane Synagogue's design and construction may be impossible to tell' ... and while they have 'offered a hypothesis that the synagogue's design may have been created by Andrea Stombuco, rather than Arthur Morry, there is no definite proof beyond architectural speculative analysis to support this' (170). Our aim is to contribute additional views and support the welcome research discourse instigated by Creese and Arnold's article.

To investigate the attribution, Creese and Arnold employed a range of research methods. While they admit that a considerable part of primary archival materials — originally cited by earlier Brisbane historians — is now 'lost or inaccessible' (158), they turned to the historical newspaper reports and visual records of architecture of both architects. Indeed, it is the analysis of the synagogue's architectural design (although marked by various

refurbishments) and its comparison to other preserved designed works that is at the core of the study (163-165).

The authors write that the Brisbane Synagogue is ‘quite different to many other Australian synagogues of the same period — Sydney, Hobart, Launceston, Adelaide ... Most other designs from the late nineteenth century synagogues elsewhere in Australia and the diaspora are built in a very different Egyptian revival style’ (164). This is a conclusion that needs to be examined carefully.

The distinctive Egyptian style of the first purpose-designed synagogue in the colony appeared first in 1842 on the pages of the early Jewish press. The author was architect James Hume (c. 1804-68) and the synagogue, known as the York Street Synagogue, was consecrated in 1844. Between 1845 and 1850, it provided an inspiration for three other synagogues in quick succession, built in a similar historicising Egyptian style in Hobart, Launceston and Adelaide. Australian synagogue architecture of this period represents a rare architectural phenomenon in the Jewish diaspora and was related to the community’s striving for a new visual identity (Vytrhlik, forthcoming).

Australian synagogue architecture changed radically in the 1870s and 1880s, a period including the designing and building of the Brisbane Synagogue. Architecturally, the period is best represented by the high Victorian eclectic design of The Great Synagogue in Sydney which reflected the changes in the Jewish community’s social aspirations — the same trend as was pointed out by Creese and Arnold in the case of the Brisbane congregation (168). Designed and built in 1874-78, a decade ahead of the Brisbane Synagogue, The Great Synagogue’s front façade’s distinct features — a large neo-Gothic wheel window, a tripartite façade with domed two-tower design over a triangular pediment — could have been a source of inspiration for the architects in Queensland (Elton 2019).

Although the façade of the Brisbane Synagogue (Figure 1) bears resemblance to the exterior of The Great Synagogue (Figure 2), with two towers flanking a large portal, above which is a wheel window and triangular pediment, there are even greater similarities to two British synagogues. The synagogue of the Liverpool Old Hebrew Congregation, designed by W&G Audsley, opened in 1874 (Figure 3), and their similar project for the New West End Synagogue in London of 1877-79 (Figure 4). Both feature a large central entrance, a wheel window above it, a triangular pediment above that, a minaret on either side and bays to each side of the minarets. It is especially difficult to overlook the likeness of the c. 1885 Brisbane Synagogue’s front elevation design (Figure 5a) to the 1877 elevation of the New West End Synagogue, Bayswater, London (Figure 5b). While the London exterior decoration is more elaborate, and eclectic indeed — featuring lobed arches and lobed circular windows, Gothicising window arches and a massive Moorish design portico entrance — the overall proportioning, composition

and decoration of the Brisbane Synagogue seems to be drawing inspiration from this London structure.

Turning to the interior, the similarities between the Brisbane and Sydney synagogues are so evident that the Brisbane Synagogue could be described as a smaller and simplified version of Sydney's Great Synagogue. If we compare a photograph of the Brisbane Synagogue (Figure 6) with a photograph of The Great Synagogue shortly after its opening (Figure 7), this becomes apparent. When we look at Thomas Rowe's original (1874) design for The Great Synagogue (Figure 8) the match is even more exact, including the flat front of the Ark, the Ten Commandments on either side of the Ark and the round window above it.

The Brisbane Synagogue takes the essential Romanesque structure of The Great Synagogue and removes the Gothic and Moorish decoration. As in The Great Synagogue (before later alterations), the arches below the ceiling are semi-circular (rather than horseshoe). The seating for men is below the women's gallery looking into the centre, which is occupied by a cedar *bimah* — a feature lost in Sydney but preserved in Brisbane — and which could also point to the architect's familiarity with the original design of The Great Synagogue. (On the *bimah* positioning in The Great Synagogue, see Elton 2017). There are also special seats facing the congregation on either side of the Ark, and straight steps leading up to the Ark with a low marble baluster on either side. Finally, a pair of lampstands flanking the bottom of those balusters replicate those in The Great Synagogue in Sydney.

Before concluding, we would like to comment on certain terminology used by Creese and Arnold vis-à-vis the images they selected to illustrate contemporaneous developments in architecture. It is well known that the term Byzantine was frequently used in the colonial press of the 1870s and 1880s, and, as the authors point out, it was not uncommon to see the term confused with Romanesque when describing simple semicircular arches curved above windows, porticos or arks (164). However, to see these arches as a horseshoe form and term them Moorish, as Creese and Arnold do to describe the Brisbane synagogue exterior windows (165, 178) is not entirely accurate.

On the other hand, there is an instance of Moorish design inside the Brisbane Synagogue that seems to be left unnoticed, and which appears on the lower row of a couple of blind arches on both sides of the Ark (Figure 9). We can also pay attention to the unique barrel-vault panelled ceiling which is reminiscent of a Byzantine basilica form and was simultaneously used by the architect of the former Princes Street Synagogue across the Tasman, in Auckland in 1885 (Figures 10 and 11), as well as the Central Synagogue in London of 1870 (Figure 12).

Where do these comparisons leave the question of the principal architect? The two candidates are Arthur Morry and Andrea Stombuco. In other designs from Stombuco, presented by Creese and Arnold, we see nothing that is Romanesque. His projects appear to be Italianate for secular buildings and

Neo-Gothic for churches. It is possible that he has never visited England and therefore his opportunity to see either the Liverpool or the New West End synagogues were limited. Morry, on the other hand, was an architect based in Manchester in the late 1870s, just 50 kilometres away from Liverpool, when the synagogue there was a new and exciting appearance on the cityscape. He was still in England in the late 1870s when the illustrated architectural magazines, such as the *Building News*, became popular, and in 1879 when the New West End opened in London. Morry therefore could have been aware or have seen those two synagogues before submitting his winning design to the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation.

It therefore seems to us that the models for the Brisbane Synagogue were The Great Synagogue in Sydney for the interior, using both the 1874 design and the synagogue as actually completed in 1878, and for the exterior the Liverpool Old Hebrew Congregation and the New West End Synagogue. Either Stombuco or Morry could have worked from these models, although Morry is more likely to have been aware of, or even seen personally, the British models.

Investigating these visual links would, perhaps, bring more light in the future on the architects engaged for the design and construction not only of the Brisbane Synagogue, but other overlooked yet important historical and cultural Jewish monuments in the Australian colonies. It is to the credit of Creese and Arnold that they focus on until now unexplored Jewish ecclesiastical architecture in Queensland, and inspire a discussion in Australian Jewish art history studies that until now has been lacking.

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Sydney, 17 June 2022



Figure 1: Front façade of Brisbane Synagogue, consecrated 1886. Photo 2020s. Source: Brisbane Hebrew Congregation.

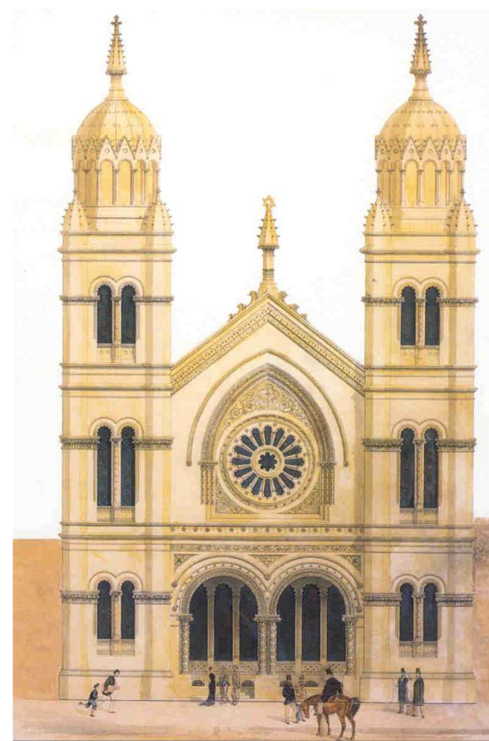


Figure 2: Front façade elevation of The Great Synagogue Sydney, as designed by Thomas Rowe in 1874.. Source: The Great Synagogue Sydney.

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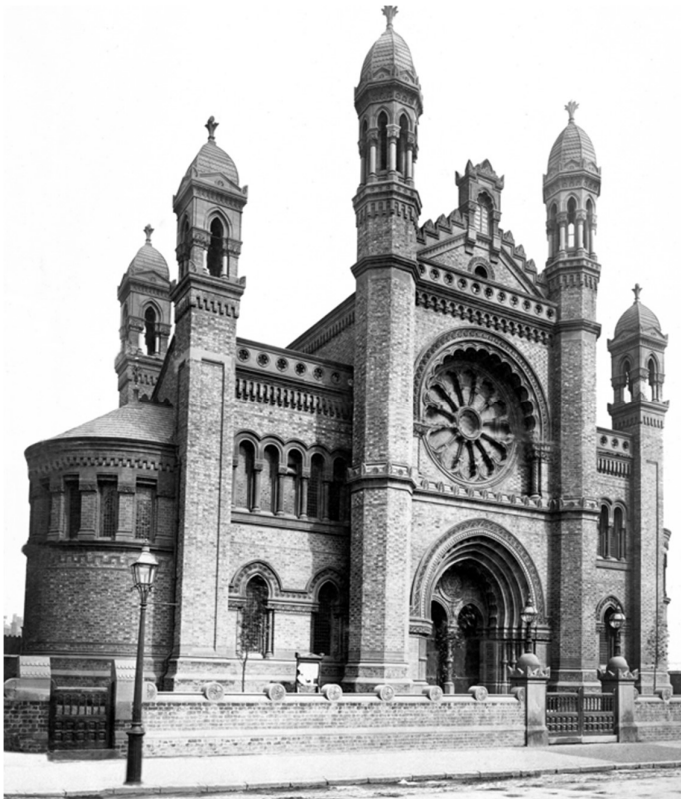


Figure 3: Front façade, Old Hebrew Congregation, Liverpool, consecrated 1874. Source: ©The Francis Frith Collection.



Figure 4: Front façade, New West End Synagogue, London, consecrated 1879. Photo 2020s. Source: Authors.

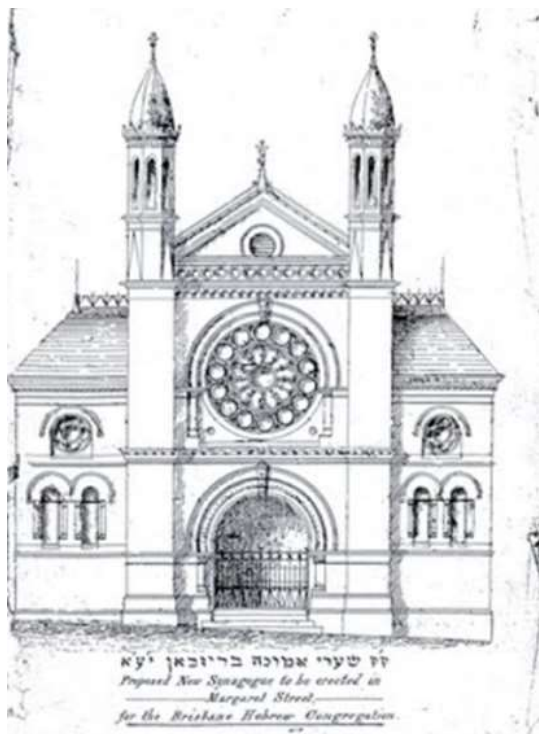


Figure 5a: Sketch of the front façade elevation, Brisbane Synagogue, drawn c. 1885. Source: Jewish Queensland, [www.jewishqld.com](http://www.jewishqld.com)

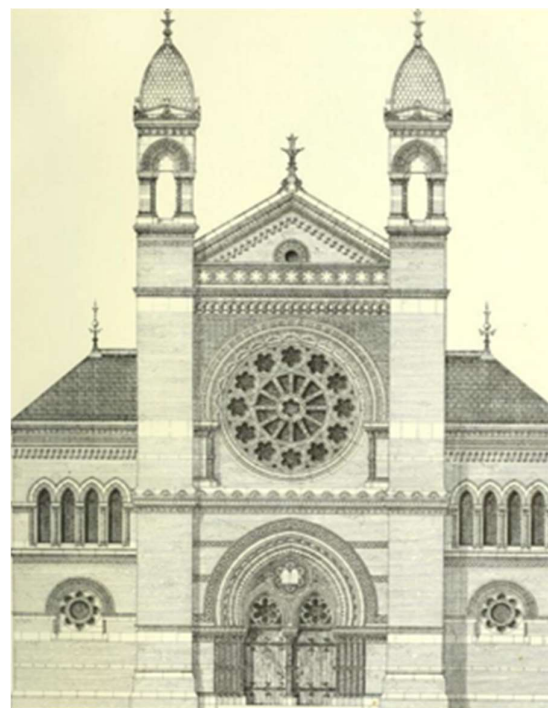


Figure 5b: Front façade elevation, New West End Synagogue, London, architectural drawing 1877. Magazine illustration. Source: *Building News*, July 1877.



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Figure 6: Interior, Brisbane Synagogue, consecrated 1886.  
Photo 2020s. Source: Brisbane Hebrew Congregation.

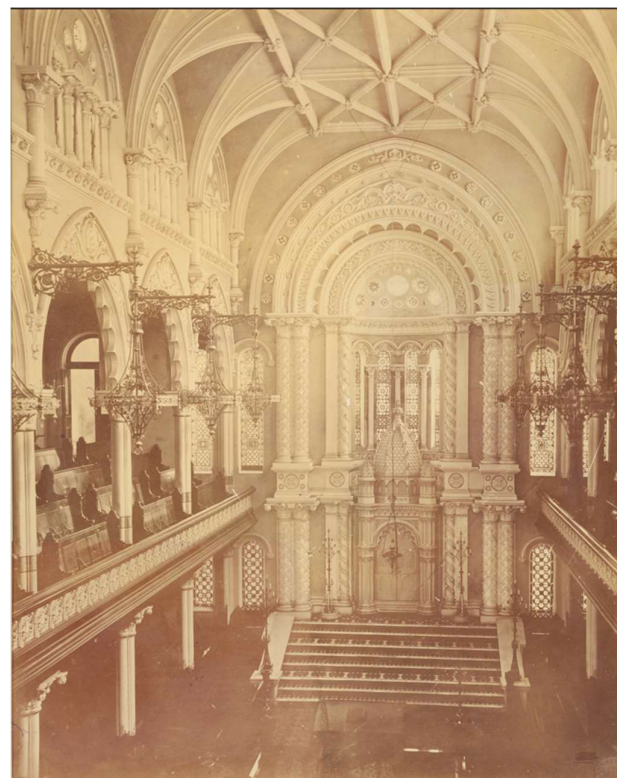


Figure 7: Interior, The Great Synagogue Sydney, consecrated 1878, Photo c. 1880. Source: State Library NSW.





Figure 8: Planned interior, western end, The Great Synagogue Sydney, architect Thomas Rowe, sketched 1874. Source: State Library NSW.



Figure 9: Pairs of blind arches featured low on each side of the Ark in Brisbane Synagogue resemble Moorish design. Photo 2020s. Source: Brisbane Hebrew Congregation.



Figure 10: Barrel-vault ceiling in Brisbane Synagogue, consecrated 1886, later renovations. Photo 2020s. Source: Brisbane Hebrew Congregation.



Figure 11: Decorated wooden barrel-vault ceiling in Auckland Synagogue, consecrated 1885. Photo 2018. Source: Authors.



Figure 12: Decorated and finely constructed version of a lunette-vault ceiling in the Central Synagogue in London, consecrated 1870. Source: Private collection,

## References

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