

The Great Synagogue, Sydney

Relocation of the Bimah



Introduction

The Great Synagogue in Elizabeth Street is a major work of Victorian design, construction and decoration as well as a principal centre of Jewish worship since its consecration in 1878.

The building represents one of the most elaborately decorated Free Gothic style buildings in Sydney, both internally and externally. Designed by the prominent architect Thomas Rowe, it is seen as an example of his finest surviving works. It is the only synagogue of its style and age within Australia and is one of a few exemplary international synagogues designed in a similar style. It contains excellent examples of the best quality work of moulded plaster, carved stone, decorative tiling, and stained glass from Australia, United Kingdom, and America.

The interior was originally built according to traditional Ashkenazi design with a central bimah or reading desk. In the early 20th century, the bimah was relocated to the steps in front of the Ark to the west of the synagogue to allow for more seating. In the late 20th century, the opportunity arose to restore the bimah to its original central location.

Following the preparation of initial designs by Philip Abram, Orwell & Peter Phillips were commissioned to develop and document the designs, and International Conservation Services was engaged to manage the work, under the leadership of Chief Minister Rabbi Benjamin Elton.



Interior of the Great Synagogue prior to the relocation of the bimah, probably early 20th century.

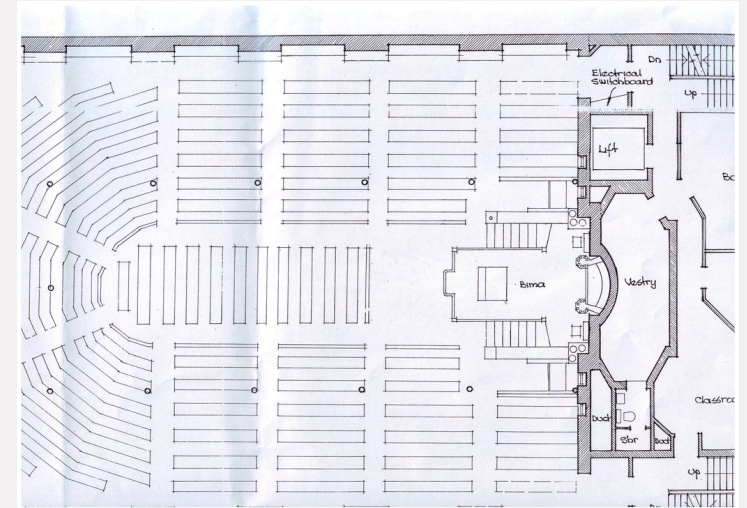
Source: Great Synagogue archives.

The Challenges

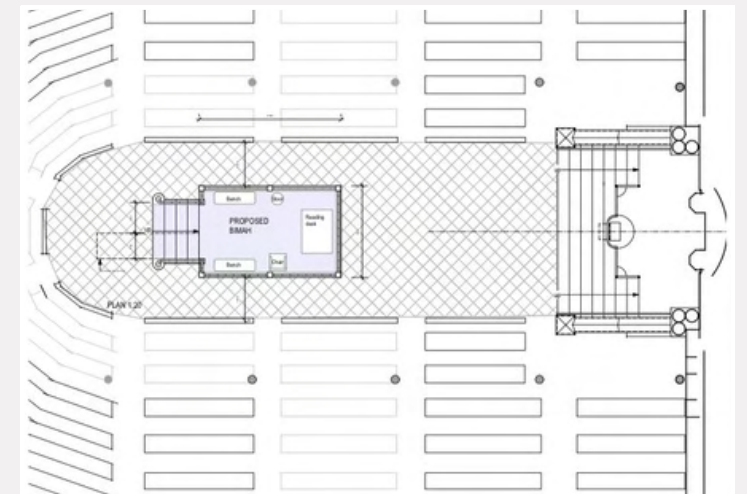
- The pews in the centre of the sanctuary were removed, and the new bimah was constructed in the space.
- The bimah, located before the ark, was deconstructed, with elements of the bimah, including the posts and lamps used in the construction of the new bimah.
- The stairs leading to the Ark were returned to their original height. This involved drilling to remove later addition concrete steps and tiles.
- The ornately tiled flooring on both the stairs and the centre of the sanctuary was restored to the original designs.
- During all stages of conservation, the synagogue was in use by the community, so needed to stay attractive and functional throughout the project.



The bimah in front of the Ark before relocation. The steps to either side were not the original design and had been altered in the early 20th century to a uniform height.



Placement of the bimah near the Ark before relocation. The extra pews can be seen on the design.



The placement of the bimah in the centre of the sanctuary

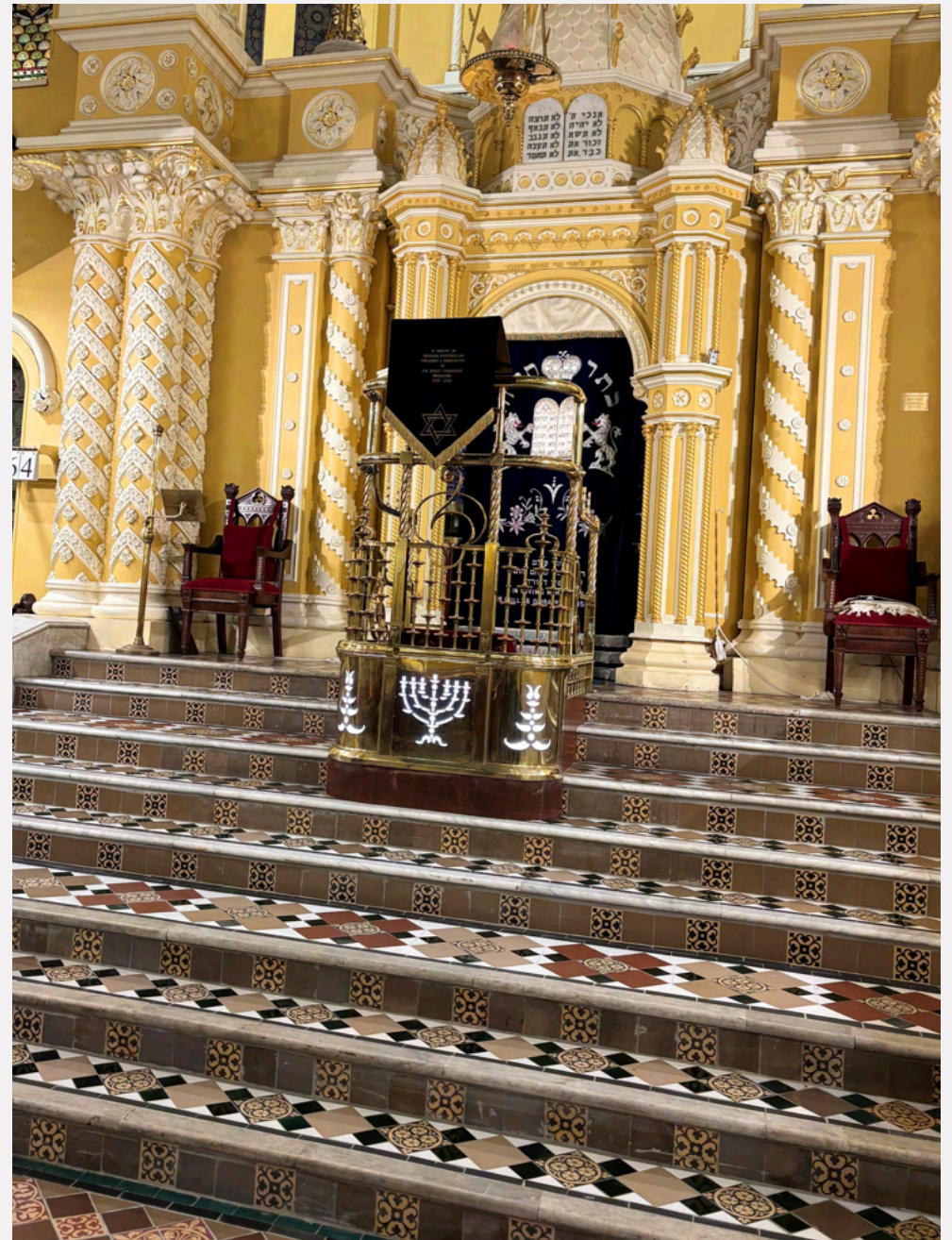
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The Outcome



The bimah in its new central position



The steps to the Ark restored to their 19th century design



The relocation of the bimah to its original location in the centre of the sanctuary is beneficial by every criterion. It restores the vision of the architect Thomas Rowe and recovers the integrity of the building. This is palpable as the room is being used for its primary, ritual, function. The service is now led from the middle of the congregation, which is not only the traditional Jewish arrangement but also reflects a contemporary and attractive ethos of egalitarianism and engagement. It has been very gratifying to see original materials returned to their original locations and serving their original function again. This project has been a win for heritage, architecture, community and spirituality and has been a true transformation.

Rabbi Dr Benjamin Elton, Chief Minister, the Great Synagogue - March 2025

**Special thanks to: The Great Synagogue, Project X Fitouts, Orwell and Peter Phillips
ICS Team: Julian Bickersteth, Shrief Eissa, Oliver Hull, Richard Isaacs**