

The Architectural Provenance of the Margaret Street Synagogue, Brisbane

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Abstract

The Brisbane Hebrew Congregation's synagogue, known locally as the Brisbane Synagogue or the Margaret Street *shul*, was constructed on Margaret Street in Brisbane City in 1886. The building, which is built in a Neo-Moorish (called 'Byzantine') style, is officially attributed to architect Arthur Morry. However, a popular narrative among historians of the community attributes the design of the synagogue building to a different architect, Andrea Stombuco. In this paper, we analyse the synagogue structure's architectural design and compare it with the broader design portfolios of both Morry and Stombuco in an attempt to establish its architectural provenance. We offer the hypothesis that, based on the synagogue's design elements and the body of work of both architects, the Margaret Street Synagogue is more likely to have been designed initially by Stombuco, and then potentially reworked by other architects, headed and represented by Morry. However, we theorise that due to either practical eventualities or philosophical reasons affecting the congregation's desire for belonging in the late 19th century state and society, Morry oversaw the final construction, and his designation as its architect has become popularised within the Brisbane Jewish Community's mythology of the synagogue's provenance.

Introduction

Throughout history, "Jewish religious tradition has been expressed in brick and mortar and wood, in stone and word and spirit"¹ – all over the Jewish world, synagogues stand (and have stood in the past) as the proud and visible symbol of Jewish life and community in the social landscape. The synagogue building of the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation, in the capital of the Australian state of Queensland, is arguably the centrepiece of the Jewish community's presence in the state, and the longest-standing architectural artefact of Jewish life in Queensland. Built in 1886, the synagogue – known colloquially as 'The Brisbane Synagogue' despite being only one of multiple local congregations – is the face of local Jewish life, history and identity for thousands of school students, dignitaries, government representatives and tourists alike each year. In the year 2021, the Synagogue made news locally and nationally as an ambitious architectural project on the land behind the synagogue brought the promise of a vibrant new communal facility to be developed to support the congregation, built around the original 19th century

structure.² Officially, according to the Queensland Government's heritage register and associated documentation³, the synagogue design was completed by architect Arthur Morry and built by building contractor Arthur Midson in 1885. However, some historians of the community attribute the design of the synagogue not to Morry, but to Italian immigrant architect Andrea Stombuco, who designed several other prominent Brisbane public buildings of the same period. This gives rise to several questions: how did these two different narratives of the synagogue's architectural provenance arise? Which is true? And if the official narrative is not correct, why did this come to be the accepted narrative?

In this paper, we attempt to address these questions by looking at the early historical development of the congregation and its journey towards its own synagogue. We then analyse the synagogue's architectural design and compare it to other existing designed works by both Morry and Stombuco, to draw out similarities and differences between styles. Finally, we look more broadly at the community's place in Australian society at the time of the synagogue's construction, and explore how the architectural artefact of the synagogue, and its story, speak to ideas of the period of what the Jewish place in Anglo-Australian society was and wished to be. Our goal is not to criticize the official narrative of the congregation's history or expose it as falsehood, nor to present our analysis of the synagogue design as definitive proof of its designer. We aim instead to offer additional support to the theories presented by other historians writing on the community's history, and bring additional interest within scholarly circles to an overlooked jewel in the crown of Australian synagogue architecture.

A Brief History of the Synagogue's Establishment

Queensland's Jewish history is a largely untold story in the published scholarship on Australian Jewish history; most prominent authors have concentrated on New South Wales and Victoria as the country's largest Jewish communities. Morris Ochert (the one-time heritage officer and historian of the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation) and David Bolot (a founding member of the Australian Jewish Historical Society) are the only authors of any substantial works on the early Brisbane Jewish community, and base their work on archival materials held by the synagogue itself at the time of their writing which are now lost or inaccessible. A substantial history of Queensland's Jewish communities and congregations, including the Brisbane Synagogue, released for the community's 150th anniversary in 2015 (Creese 2016), draws on these early works and historical newspaper reports and releases from the community to sketch out the story of the synagogue, though the historical record often raises more questions than answers.

Jewish presence in Brisbane dates back to the city's convict days in the 1820s (Creese 2016); Jews made up approximately 1% of the hardened convicts and criminals sent to the penal colony of Moreton Bay, which stood

on the spot where Brisbane city is now located. No Jewish religious provision was made for them, however, and communal life proper began in 1865 when the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation was first officially established. When the state of Queensland opened up for settlement in 1859, Jewish families were among the migrants from other states and overseas who came to settle in the new city of Brisbane (Rutland 2005); census records from the time list only 15 Brisbane residents proclaiming a Jewish religion (Bolot 1925). Particular pockets of the city began to see Jewish homes and families congregating, and the earliest records of Jewish families coming together to worship in private homes date back to 1864, when services and Hebrew School were run out of the home of a Mr Jewell in Tank Street, near the northern quay of the Brisbane River (Ochert 1984). The congregation was officially formed by public meeting on March 19th, 1865, and the first order of business was establishment of a committee to secure a place of worship, with services beginning the following sabbath at rented rooms in the Bulcock's Building on Queen Street (Bolot 1925; Ochert 1984).

The following two decades saw the congregation worship in a range of temporary accommodations: initially rooms above the shops of several prominent members, and then as the congregation grew, arrangements were made to rent larger premises.⁴ In 1876 the congregation secured a long-term rental of the lower portion of the Masonic Hall on Albert Street for services, which was consecrated as a temporary synagogue and set up with a *Sepher Torah* cabinet for storing Torah scrolls, a *bimah* for services and a separate ladies' platform in lieu of a gallery.⁵ This was to be the congregation's temporary home for some nine years, until their dream of a permanent synagogue could be realised.

While the enthusiasm for a permanent synagogue was strong, the financial realities were less promising: one congregational board member complained that "no building committee is necessary, there being no building funds."⁶ The synagogue building alone was costed at upwards of £5000, and while the small local community were able to raise some £2000 from among its own members, their efforts fell far short of the requirements.⁷ Several promising land deals were made but each fell through: initially a Tank Street location, near to the homes of several prominent families of the congregation, was sought, with plans drawn up for a building, donations sought and an offer of £200 pounds made at auction on land in 1866. However, the international financial downturn of the same year caused a depression, with British and colonial economies hit particularly hard, causing this scheme to fall through (Bolot 1925; Ochert 1984). Subsequent pieces of land on Adelaide Street in 1870 and Ann Street in 1876 were also purchased with an eye to building, but the desires and needs of the growing community saw each in turn deemed unsuitable and sold on (Bolot 1925; Ochert 2001). The profits from these sales were carefully tended by the congregation's treasurers, until Behr Raphael Lewin, one of the congregation's board members, offered to sell to

the congregation a large site he owned at Margaret Street, not far from the newly-constructed state Parliament House.⁸ From here, the congregation would “raise a permanent testimony of the existence of Judaism in the city” (Ochert 1984:460).

From the initial purchase of this land, work moved swiftly to raise funds for the building. The congregation’s board set up two separate committees – one to coordinate a public contest for designs to be submitted for the synagogue by architects, and a second to research existing designs and designers of synagogues already built in Australia, Europe and England (Ochert 2001). It is at this point that narratives of the design of the synagogue differ; the official record of note states that Arthur Morry won the design competition and work proceeded on his design, but Ochert (2001), in his capacity as official heritage officer of the congregation, suggests Andrea Stombuco instead won the competition to design the synagogue building. In order to unpack these competing narratives, we must examine both architects, their professional histories and their portfolios of existing work.

Competing Narratives of Architectural Design

In one of the most substantial reports of the construction written at the time of the ceremonial laying of the foundation stone, it is noted that the building “is being constructed from the designs of Mr Arthur Morry, of Brisbane, which were selected in open competition rather more than twelve months ago. Some modifications have, however, been made from the original in order to bring it within the prescribed limit of cost.”⁹ However, Ochert (2001:231), who was the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation’s communal archivist and historian for over three decades, tells a different story: namely, that “a competition had been held, and the winning design was that of Italian-born architect Andrea Stombuco whose works did much to beautify Brisbane.” Other commentators, perhaps based on Ochert’s argument, have also attributed the design to Stombuco.¹⁰ Thus, while the contemporary published narrative of the synagogue’s design names Morry as architect, 115 years later, the synagogue’s own archivist and historian was attributing the building to Stombuco, though the official state heritage records and plaques for the building remain unchanged in Morry’s favour.

The Congregation’s own historical minute books¹¹ state that when they met on 4th June 1884, the Synagogue Building Committee had a plan submitted by Stombuco in hand at this time, but resolved to also advertise in local newspapers for additional design submissions “subject to certain conditions and particulars”, suggesting that Stombuco’s design was deemed unsuitable for some undisclosed reason. By 3rd July 1884 they had selected another design; the minute books do not mention the designer, but give the design the cryptic name “Advance”; in September 1884, Morry first attended the Committee’s meeting, reportedly having taken over from the submitting designer, a Mr Russell¹², as architect on the project. Stombuco appears again

in these committee minutes in March 1885, claiming that the congregation still had his design and needed to pay him for it, a claim which some board members themselves considered he “could maintain...at law” and he might successfully sue for, though it appears they decided not to pay him after all.

So which narrative is correct? Did Morry (or indeed, Russell) win the synagogue design competition with a completely new design after Stombuco’s design was rejected? Was “Advance” an advanced version of Stombuco’s original design, with modifications made by Morry and Russell to suit the congregation’s needs? Certainly, design reworking in this manner was often done in the Victorian period, though usually when a prominent architect made a design and then their junior colleagues or collaborators revised to make it more practically buildable.¹³ Other works by Stombuco have a similar story; his design of the Theatre Royal in Queen Street, Brisbane, in 1885 was originally selected but not given approval by the Colonial Architect, and subsequently given over to another architect, James Cowlishaw, for the approval and construction process.¹⁴ It is almost impossible to confirm whether this was what took place at the Brisbane Synagogue; the majority of Queensland architectural records dating before World War I were never kept in adequate archival conditions and have been lost. The State Library of Queensland holds a small collection of the blueprints of only a half-dozen of Stombuco’s work, and Morry’s files are neither at the State Library or the Queensland Archives. The plans for the synagogue itself languished in obscurity for many years, and turned up later in the holdings of Russell Hall, a local Brisbane architect who undertook the heritage survey of the Brisbane Synagogue around the time of its 1986 centenary. Hall donated the plans, along with much of his own architectural collection, to the Fryer Library at The University of Queensland, and from here they were eventually returned to the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation, and to heritage officer Ochert himself, in 1995¹⁵.

In order to delve further into this question, it is important to first understand more about both architects – their personal and professional histories, their broader portfolios of architectural work, and their places within the civic history of Brisbane at the time of the synagogue’s design. With an understanding of both architects and their architectural histories and styles, a better understanding of how these fit with the architecture of the synagogue itself will be possible.

Stombuco

Andrea Giovanni Stombuco was born in Florence, Italy, in 1820 or 1821. After leaving Italy on a grand tour of Europe, Russia and South America, he settled in the Cape Colony in South Africa in the late 1840s. Here he married his wife, Jean, in Cape Town in 1849; Jean, who was fourteen years his junior, was originally Anglican, but converted to Catholicism when she married Stombuco. and eventually made his way to the Australian colonies in 1851,

when he settled in Bendigo, Victoria to take part in the gold rush. Setting himself up as a sculptor, he became a building contractor and architect in 1857, working mainly as a contractor for the Catholic church. He relocated to Goulbourn, New South Wales, in 1869 and was the official Catholic diocesan architect, designing multiple Catholic churches around regional New South Wales, as well as some Church of England constructions. In 1875 he moved to Brisbane, continuing his architectural practice and keeping his hand in sculpture. He advertised himself as an architect-builder, sculptor and monumental mason. While in Queensland he was Brisbane Catholic diocesan architect “in word, if not in deed” (Taylor 2014), designing churches, schools and convents all over Brisbane and surrounding areas. He was prolific as an architect, with reportedly 54 works in Australia, of which 20 still remain in Queensland. He also designed for the Church of England and many non-religious buildings, especially commercial premises. Stombuco stayed in practice as an architect well into his old age, creating a partnership with his son Giovanni in 1886, and then going into practice with colleague Thomas Coutts in 1890 when Giovanni retired due to ill health. In 1886 he built his family an extravagant home, *San Souci*, on the riverfront at Hamilton.¹⁶ While contemporary reports suggest Stombuco was “volatile”, “eccentric” and “extravagant, and he reportedly suffered dementia before his death, Giorgi (1998) dismisses much of this reputation as anti-immigrant stereotyping. His business collapsed with the crash of the boom economy of Queensland in 1890, and Stombuco left his wife and family behind to travel to Western Australia, reportedly in search of gold. Although he continued to tender designs to architectural calls in Perth, he is recorded to have died in penury in a psychiatric institution in 1907 (Watson and McKay 1984:183-4; Taylor 2014; Giorgi 1998).

Stombuco has a prolific architectural legacy across South-East Queensland; of the 54 buildings across Australia that are attributed to him, at least 20 survive in Queensland alone (Taylor 2014). He billed himself as an expert designer of “pulpits, alters [sic], church fittings... prepared in Gothic, Renaissance, Classical or other styles” (Watson and McKay 1984:184). One of his earliest commissions in Brisbane was for the main building of St Joseph’s College at Gregory Terrace, built in 1875. He worked extensively on Catholic and Anglican churches around Brisbane and Ipswich, including St Patrick’s Church in Fortitude Valley (1880), St Mary’s Presbytery in Ipswich (1876), and St Andrew’s Anglican Church at South Brisbane (1882). Among Stombuco’s prominent other works in Brisbane are the main building of All Hallows School (1879), Her Majesty’s Theatre on Queen Street (1898), the Allan & Stark Stores on Queen Street (1881), and several private homes including his own aforementioned *San Souci*.

Morry

Arthur Morry was born in Shropshire, England, in 1854. He ran his own architectural practice in Manchester from 1876, and was heavily involved in local politics and the temperance reform movement, and a well-known member of the Primitive Methodist religious community, serving as lay preacher in a local congregation. He migrated to Australia in 1884, and on his arrival was employed as a draughtsman for the Queensland Government's Department of Public Works and Mines buildings division, where he worked under William Miles, then Secretary of Public Works for the Griffith Liberal government. He first exhibited his architectural designs at the Queensland National Association, the state's annual architectural exhibition, in 1885, but appears not to have been active in public works design in his own capacity then. After a few years as a public servant, Morry pursued a political career: he served as a member of the Woolloongabba Divisional Board in 1887, and was Alderman for South Brisbane in the Brisbane City Council from 1890-1891. He stood for the state legislature in 1890 and served as the Member for South Brisbane 1890-1896. After stepping down from politics, he returned to the Department of Public Works architectural branch from 1898-1903. He continued his heavy involvement in the Methodist religious community, serving as lay preacher of the congregation at West End in Brisbane city. He retired from the architectural profession in 1919 to join the Water Supply and Sewage Board, and died in 1938 in Brisbane (Darlington 2021).

His earliest noted works in Brisbane are private residences dating to the years after his arrival, when he designed his own home in West End in 1885, and another on the same street for timber merchant William Wilson. Until the construction of the Brisbane Hebrew Synagogue, he had designed no other large public works in Brisbane; his first such design, two years after the Brisbane Synagogue was complete, was a church in West End built for the Methodist congregation where he himself was lay preacher, similar in style to several other Primitive Methodist churches he had previously designed in England¹⁷. He also designed another timber Methodist church, the Paddington Methodist Church, in Brisbane in 1906, and industrial works erecting sheds and incinerating works in South Brisbane in the early 1890s. He also designed a filtration system for the Enoggera Dam some time prior to 1919, when he was elected to the state Water Supply and Sewage Board, apparently on the back of his successful water engineering efforts.¹⁸

An Architectural Analysis of the Synagogue Structure

While the Brisbane Synagogue's location today, in the 21st century, is crowded out by high-rise buildings all around, in the 1880s this part of the city was all but undeveloped, and the building would dominate the landscape visually in the surrounding area. Descriptions of the design at the time of construction describe the synagogue as following "general arrangement of the plan is that usually adopted for the best modern synagogues, and is specially [sic] suited to the requirements of Hebrew worship"¹⁹ However, the structure

of the Brisbane Synagogue is quite different to many other Australian synagogues of the same period – Sydney, Hobart, Launceston, Adelaide, and the no-longer-existent Toowoomba synagogue²⁰ – and other designs from late 19th-century synagogues elsewhere in the diaspora. Most other designs from late 19th-century synagogues elsewhere in Australia and the diaspora are built in a very different Egyptian revival style (Appelbaum 2012; Kalmar 2001; Vyrhlik 2019; Wischnitzer 1951)²¹. In contrast, the Brisbane Synagogue is an eclectic blend of style elements; it was described stylistically as “Byzantine” in both contemporary and later sources, though identified varyingly as “Romanesque” by Brisbane architectural historian John East in his analysis of prominent Brisbane public buildings²², but also incorporates some elements of Gothic architecture seen in Catholic Church architecture.

The term “Byzantine” in architectural styling is popularly used to describe a style derived from 13th-14th century Islamic design elements, particularly the “Moorish” styles seen in the Alhambra in Spain, and popular in the design of Ashkenazi synagogues across Europe in the mid-19th century. Synagogues following this design style tend to generally follow the patterns of Catholic Cathedral architecture with an Islamic-influenced styling (Kalmar 2001). The term “Romanesque”, in contrast, is an architectural styling based on the 8th-12th century pre-Gothic medieval styles, and rediscovered and repopularised in Europe in the mid-19th century (East 2016). In reality, there is significant overlap between the Romanesque and “Byzantine”, or Moorish Revival style (Olson 2019) and Medieval Romanesque architecture was closely related to Byzantine architecture (2016). Synagogue building in the late 19th-century was also influenced by a rich wealth of many different architectural stylings, as well as the desires of congregation leaders, building committees donors and state planning officials. “[Many] synagogue buildings of the era were so eclectic in their use of historical styles that they defy simple categorisation” (Olson 2019: 297), and the Brisbane Synagogue shares this description; it was common in the later part of the 19th century to vary between Romanesque and Moorish features between the exterior and interior of synagogues, as can be seen in the design of the Brisbane Synagogue.

The exterior of the synagogue (see Image 1a and 1b) is constructed of stuccoed brick on a base of stone. There are twin 70ft-high turrets at the front, with rounded column bases which grow upwards into octagonal shapes and are topped with octagonal cupolas. These towers flank a 10ft-across central stained-glass window, known as a ‘tracery window’, made of Oamaru stone imported from New Zealand and glass leadlighting sent up from Sydney. Both the turrets and the central window are features which Ivan Kalmar (2001) states are typical in Byzantine style as a replication of the symmetry of Catholic cathedral steeples but using the Islamic minaret design instead of the steeple. East (2016) and Olson (2019), in contrast, point to tracery windows and axial cupolas as classically Romanesque in style. The left and right thirds of the building’s façade are set back slightly, and have smaller tracery

windows at the second-floor level, and horseshoe-shaped windows on the lower floor. These windows, and the horseshoe-shaped main door, are in keeping with both traditional Moorish/Byzantine and Romanesque architectural styles (Kalmar 2001; Olson 2019). Further elements of Romanesque style can be seen in the triangular gable, which supports the pitched roof, the colonettes flanking the arched doorway, and the cornice above the central door, where there is an ornamental row of dentils and two geometrical rosettes, and the words “The Brisbane Synagogue” carved in the stone around the top curve of the doorway.²³

Inside the synagogue (see Image 2), the interior layout is quite similar to that of a Gothic cathedral, with a central nave and side aisles for seating below an upper-level Ladies’ Gallery, which extends out over the entrance to the synagogue and down both sides to the building’s rear, allowing for gender-separated worship²⁴. Contemporary reports on the plans state that the architect also specially designed “the ark...and the almemar,²⁵ ...made from polished cedar”²⁶, which are still in place today, and are placed on the eastern wall of the synagogue (at the back of the building) in accordance with Jewish tradition. Horseshoe-shaped curving buttresses extend from the octagonal columns with “moulded and enriched caps and bases”²⁷, again plastered cement, bearing up the Ladies’ Gallery and supporting the ceiling vault. These horseshoe-shaped buttresses, and the octagonal columns, are also a quintessential feature of Byzantine or Neo-Moorish styling (Kalmar, 2001). Another tracery window, similar to those on the front façade, is at the back of the building, above an arched recess approached by small stone steps. Romanesque elements are also seen inside the synagogue, like the blind arch (a filled archway built directly onto a wall for the purposes of decoration, rather than a functional entry) that frames the back wall of the synagogue. However, like many synagogues in Britain and its colonies at the time, Romanesque features are more prominent on the outside while more elaborate Byzantine features mark the interior (Kaddish 2006). While the interior walls of the contemporary synagogue are white plaster, evidence from a photograph taken of the interior in the 1930s (see Image 2b below) indicates that these were plainer stonework earlier in its history, and one of many refurbishments to the interior over the years.²⁸

The synagogue, therefore, follows a blend of Byzantine, Gothic and Romanesque architectural style features, both inside and outside. The question, however, remains – who was responsible for this design? Having considered both the physical design elements of the structure itself and the existing portfolios of the candidate architects themselves, we the authors present the case for which architect we believe likely designed the synagogue both inside and out. We propose this hypothesis on the basis of both architects’ records of previously completed work, pre-existing connections to the community, and several distinct architectural features of the synagogue structure which link specifically to one candidate’s unique style.

Making the Case for the Architect

When one compares the designs of the other buildings of Stombuco with those of Morry, the Brisbane Synagogue clearly bears the former's signature flamboyancy over the latter's austerity. Stombuco is noted to have travelled extensively throughout Europe and Russia during the mid-19th century (Watson and McKay 1984), and would have readily seen the neo-Byzantine, Romanesque and Moorish influences in the predominantly Ashkenazi synagogue architecture across the continent before he came to Australia. Perhaps notably, he also designed the stores and warehouse for Maurice D. Benjamin & Co in 1883 on Creek Street (Taylor 2014) – that same Maurice D. Benjamin whose name can be found among the founding members of the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation and prominently in its early history.²⁹ This gives Stombuco a clear connection to the synagogue to have been able to be involved in the synagogue design a few years later.

Several particular features of the Brisbane Synagogue structure offer clues that link with Stombuco's broader portfolio of work and suggest there may be truth to the suggestion that he designed the synagogue. Firstly, the building is constructed not with wood, but with stuccoed brick on a stone base, which East (2019) notes was common of Stombuco's style in other buildings such as the Benjamin & Co and Allan & Stark (see Image 3a and 3b). Taylor (2014) notes in Stombuco's other work a taste towards "Venetian palazzos with enriched stucco decoration", which features prominently on the Brisbane Synagogue's façade, including the circular window set into the pediment underneath a centrepiece triangular gable. In his existing designs for All Hallows, which was a close contemporary to the Brisbane Synagogue, the same Moorish-style towers on the corners and large feature tower in the centre of the building front can be seen, along with horseshoe-shaped Byzantine windows and a circle-windowed triangle pediment (See Image 4). Likewise, his home *San Souci* features the triangle pediment, central Moorish-style tower and stucco exterior (See Image 5, viewed here from the rear of the property). On the interior, the octagonal columns bearing the Ladies' Gallery are identical in design to those in use in Stombuco's other designs, such as the Saints Peter and Paul Cathedral in Goulburn, and the St Patricks' Church in Fortitude Valley, Brisbane (see Image 6a and 6b). The ornate design of the carved wood interior fittings of the Ark and *almemar* described earlier may also be Stombuco's stylings, as popular congregational rumour also holds him responsible for similar intricate carved woodwork on the organ casework in St Patrick's Church.³⁰

Morry, who came directly from England to Queensland, seems to have had far less exposure to European synagogue architectural stylings. While a trainee architect in Manchester he would have seen the 1874 construction of the Manchester Sephardic synagogue, which was designed in a Moorish Revivalist style; however, that structure was built in brick, not stone or stucco, and while it incorporates Moorish design elements it bears little resemblance

to the Brisbane Synagogue. He also would have seen the Manchester Great Synagogue, built in 1858; however, this synagogue (which was demolished in 1986) followed the Italianate architectural stylings, and had two Byzantine rounded domes on its roof rather than the minaret columns seen in Brisbane. The Manchester New Synagogue, built next door to the Great Synagogue, has more features in common with the Brisbane Synagogue, but by the time of its 1889 construction, Morry was already in Queensland (Kadish 2006). His Methodist church architectural designs, both in England and in Australia, are all built following the characteristic Primitive Methodist design: which is relatively plain, and has little in common with the Byzantine and Romanesque design of the Brisbane Synagogue (Darlington 2021; see also Image 7 and 8). Calder (2016:197) states that the defining principle of Methodist design, particularly for stauncher followers like the Primitive Methodists, was “vernacular...a conscientious rejection of ‘popish’ idolatry” and all about “trying not to look monumental”. Morry used wooden slats in an early Queensland design, with either slate or corrugated iron roofs, and while he built in stone in England, his designs follow the same simple triangular-roofed design.

It would seem to be quite a stretch for Morry, experienced in the design of small, stark and plain houses of worship, to turn his hand so quickly to the opulent styling seen in the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation, for seemingly this one design only. Stombuco was a well-established public architect with a strong track record in religious buildings in Brisbane and around the Australian colonies, and highly favoured by the city’s business elites (Jews among them) for his commercial designs. Morry was a newly-immigrated young public servant with no large public buildings to his name, whose portfolio of works largely consisted of wooden Methodist chapels³¹ and who was employed merely as a draughtsman at the time of the synagogue’s design (Watson and McKay 1984). He had no public career as a practicing architect until 1886, when he commenced a partnership with William Dart, and the pair were unsuccessful in every public tender they bid for. Going into practice on his own account in 1888 appears to be the start of his career in earnest, and by 1890 he had given up architecture for politics, becoming Mayor of South Brisbane and later a member of the Queensland State Legislature (Darlington, 2014). It is also unlikely that, if Stombuco’s design was not used, Morry drew the alternative up himself, given that Russell is named as having drawn the “Advance” design chosen by the Building Committee, who then appears to have nominated Morry to deal with the practicalities of constructing it.

So, if Stombuco really did design the synagogue, not Morry, why is the latter named in the official government records of the time, and subsequent heritage records from the late 20th century, as the architect of note? The reasons could be, as previously quoted, practical. Indeed, Stombuco was notorious for creating designs that ran far over budget,³² and

is reported to have had designs for buildings repeatedly rejected by the Colonial Architect's Office after having won the initial design tenders.³³ There is also the possibility that, at the time of construction, Stombuco's own financial trouble may have been known; it was public knowledge that the development of *San Souci* was set to be exceptionally expensive, and there is evidence in the Brisbane Synagogue Building Committee minutes that Stombuco wrote to the congregation repeatedly asking to be paid for his design, which the committee declined to do. He may have sought a full contract to build the structure, using his own masonry skills and suppliers, which he had done his other works, rather than just to provide the design. His tendency to overextend on material costs may have made the building committee cause for concern; on the other hand, Arthur Midson, a builder who tendered and was eventually selected to construct the designed synagogue, owned a quarry in Samford where the stone for the synagogue construction could be cheaply sourced. Midson was well-connected politically and close friends with Arthur Morry, through his brother Charles who was also a builder and member of the South Brisbane legislature where Morry had strong ties.³⁴ Another reason may have also been reputational: his existing good existing relationships with the congregation through the likes of his former clients and contacts Benjamin brothers notwithstanding, Stombuco had, on occasion, had drawn-out arguments in the press with contractors and commentators over complaints about his work³⁵. However, another answer to this question may lie not in the analysis of the building's design, but in an understanding of how Jewish communities in the late 19th century fit into mainstream society.

The Brisbane Synagogue in an Anglo-Australian Society

In the 1880s, when the Brisbane Synagogue was being planned and constructed, was a time of middle-class migration, growing wealth and a staunch Victorian model of respectability, formality and materialism in the Australian colonies, reflected in the architecture of the time (Freeland 1972). Since the 1840s, Jews in Australia had worked hard for success and connection with settler society, and the most successful among the community had forged strong networks, particularly through commerce and business, with mainstream society (Rutland 2008); when these families came to Brisbane, they could take the opportunity not only to build and expand these connections, but to become high-profile members of the growing new society. Emulating these values of wealth, class mobility and respectability was the way to fit in: in the Australian colonies, the success of a Jewish individual was measured when "their outward manner was hardly distinguishable from [non-Jewish Australians]"³⁶. The Jewish community's sense of 'belonging' within the moral framework of Australian society meant also emulating and performing these values through the visible medium of their communal buildings. However, this did not mean being

indistinguishable; spectacular, ornate synagogue buildings, whatever architectural style they were built in, “were assertions of cultured, affluent arrival in non-Jewish society” by the congregations who built them (Olson 2019:205). The use of Byzantine and Neo-Moorish features in particular stated a certain narrative about the Jewish community’s identity and place in the world, as Kalmar (2001:72) further explains:

During the period when Moorish-style synagogues were built, the Jews were considered by others and by themselves as the Orientals of the West. They hoped to make Orientalist idealizations of themselves prevail over the Orientalist vituperations. Rather than rejecting the East-West dichotomy, and the rhetoric of race, they bought into it. They hoped that they could convince the public of the nobility of their Oriental blood—and sometimes they did. The Moorish-style synagogue was an expression of their quest.

The architectural stylings of the synagogue, then, speak to a desire by the early Brisbane Hebrew Congregation to perform the best, most noble and most historically-grand image of their faith. It invokes the opulence and splendour of a community with wealth for material trappings and ancient, upper-class respectability. The synagogue’s stylings are also aligned well with architectural and artistic trends common in late 19th century Freemasonry (Kalmar 2001), which many gentlemen of the early Brisbane Hebrew Congregation were heavily involved in locally (Creese 2016). At the same time, Jewish communities in British colonies like Australia in the late 19th century were dominated philosophically by an Anglo-Jewish mentality, typified by “pride in being Jewish, anglicization, self-help and upward mobility” (Stansky 1995:163). The community therefore needed to balance Jewish pride (as visible in the synagogue) with mainstream social belonging and social mobility; they needed to be connected to, and approved by, the key gatekeepers of the state and of society, much as their British counterparts did.

The consecration of the Brisbane Synagogue in July 1886 was a grand affair: “Never in the history of Jewry in the State of Queensland was there a more brilliant function than the historic occasion of the opening of the new Synagogue in Margaret-Street” (Bolot 1925, part 6:2). A contemporary report states that “there was not a vacant seat upstairs or down, all the leading Christians of Brisbane showing by their presence an interest”³⁷. The guest list included not only the members of the congregation itself, but also state representatives like the Chief Justice Sir Charles Lilley, State Attorney General Sir Arthur Rutledge, the Mayor of Brisbane James Hipwood, Colonial Secretary Berkeley Morton and other members of the Queensland Legislative Assembly (along with the wives and children of many of these honoured political guests).³⁸ Such pomp and ceremony before the eyes of the

elite members of wider society was common for 19th century Jewish communities; Coenen Snyder (2013:1) reports on the opening of the New West End Synagogue in London, around ten years before the opening of the Brisbane Synagogue, where members of the congregation and elite invited guests were each given a gift of photograph print of the lavish interior of the synagogue, for display in living rooms, newspapers and architectural journals as proof of “freedom, refinement and luxury...a place of worship for the well-to-do.” This perhaps speaks to what was arguably one of the most important philosophies of the Board of the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation, as it was for all Australian Jewish community leaders of this period: being seen as belonging and having a prominent, unassailable place in local society; what Coenen Snyder (2013) identifies with the French term “*embourgeoisement*”. As Rutland (2005:35) states, “Jews [at this time] were more concerned with being Australian, and thus fully accepted within the general society, than with being Jewish”. Belonging meant being seen as devoted and upwardly-mobile British subjects, who happened to practice Judaism as a religion in a private capacity, well-connected with the powerful and the “chosen” in political circles.

It may be that Stombuco, who was (perhaps unfairly and stereotypically) noted for his volatile temperament and eccentricity, represented anti-Italian racialised stereotypes which were the opposite of the white, upper-class respectability the community was seeking to invoke.³⁹ Stombuco’s close connection with the Catholic church, as diocesan architect, may also have given the congregation pause, given the church’s slightly frosty relationship with the Queensland government and society (Upham 1993), and a link to Catholicism may have been seen as a poor strategy for the congregation’s social reputation. The respectable, sombre, Protestant and well-connected young Morry may have provided the Building Committee and the congregation with an added veneer of respectability, as well as *bona fides* with the Colonial Architects’ office (who had a less positive relationship with Stombuco). Particularly given Morry’s later successful political career, the Synagogue’s association with him would have been socially and politically very fruitful for the congregation to have in its history. This may go some way towards explaining why the narrative of Morry’s design of the synagogue, regardless of whether it was completely true or not, was fostered and maintained by community leaders over the years.

Conclusion

The true history of the Brisbane Synagogue’s design and construction may be impossible to tell, with the congregation’s Building Committee notes telling the outline of a story which the building itself would seem to contradict. While we have offered a hypothesis that the synagogue’s design may have been created by Andrea Stombuco, rather than Arthur Morry, there is no definitive proof beyond architectural speculative analysis to support this.

Likewise, although the Building Committee minutes detail and discuss Morry and Midson's construction of the synagogue, there are significant gaps and twists in the narrative to give a pause for thought. Notes from the synagogue building committee's minute book suggest the group was constantly in disagreement and debate over many elements of the synagogue's design and construction, with resignations and protests commonplace, though sanitised so thoroughly by the minute-taker that it is often hard to follow the narrative of the synagogue's construction within their pages, including what might have transpired to move from accepting Stombuco's design to appointing Morry as constructing architect of a competing plan.

In the end, it may be that parts of both narratives have some truth. The architectural clues which point to Stombuco's design may, in fact, stretch only as far as the design, which was submitted to the congregation but not actioned at the time. Russell may then have made amendments to this to suit the call for designs and Morry liaised with the Building Committee and oversaw the rest of the construction progress. While this alternative narrative cannot be proven, it would speak strongly to the story of a congregation trying to forge its place in the growing society of the city of Brisbane, while keeping close to the styles, traditions and memories deeply embedded in the Jewishness of the largely Anglo-Jewish congregation. Regardless of the true origins of its design, the incontestable fact remains that the beautiful structure – with its soaring turrets, striking facade and elegant interior – can be considered an excellent example of the rich and varied Byzantine themes within late Victorian public architecture, worthy of heritage protection and maintenance as a vital part of the history of Jewish life in Australia.

Endnotes

1. Steven Fine, "Introduction", in *Jewish Religious Architecture: From Biblical Israel to Modern Judaism*, ed. S. Fine (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 5
2. Henry Benjamin, "A new hall and apartments for the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation", *J-Wire*, 22 January 2021, <https://www.jwire.com.au/a-new-hall-and-apartments-for-the-brisbane-hebrew-congregation/>
3. Department of Environment and Science, "The Brisbane Synagogue" *Queensland Heritage Register*, 2016, <https://apps.des.qld.gov.au/heritage-register/detail/?id=600127>. Note that entries for the register are drafted by the submitting party, not the Department, and the building history described in the register would have been written and approved by members of the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation, and likely the Queensland Jewish Board of Deputies, at the time that heritage listing for the building was sought.
4. "New Hebrew Synagogue", *Brisbane Courier*, 8 July 1885, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/3444006>
5. "Temporary Hebrew Synagogue", *Brisbane Courier*, 18 September 1877, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/1390399>.

6. Quoted in Morris S Ochert, "History of the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation, part one." *Australian Jewish Historical Society Journal* 9, no. 6 (1984):460
7. P. Millingen, and L.D Benjamin, "Brisbane Hebrew Congregation, *Jewish Herald* (Vic), 22 August 1884, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/149435724>. In this piece, an open letter in Melbourne's *Jewish Herald*, Millingen and Benjamin, joint treasurers of the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation, "earnestly appeal for kind and substantial aid and interest in this cause", calling on their Melbourne co-religionists to donate to their funding appeal.
8. The current Queensland Parliament House, called "New Parliament House" as it replaced a (reportedly ghastly) older parliamentary building in Queen Street. Construction started in 1864 and by 1868 the parliament were already using the building to meet, although it was not completed until 1889, three years after the Brisbane Synagogue was. See Parliament of Queensland, "History of Parliament House", 2011, <https://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/explore/history/parliament-house>.
9. "New Hebrew Synagogue"
10. Creese, 2016. In 1991, controversial Liberal Party of Australia politician Santo Santoro, then member for the seat of Merthyr in the Queensland Legislative Assembly, noted Stombuco as designer of the Brisbane Synagogue in a speech regarding the heritage conservation of the historic home *Palma Rosa*, Stombuco's own home, in his electorate. See Queensland Legislative Assembly, *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard)*, 30th October 1991, 2380 (Mr Santoro, Member for Merthyr). Bolot, the only other author on the early history of the Brisbane Jewish community, makes no mention of any architect of the synagogue by name at all.
11. The Building Committee minute book 1884-1886 is available digitally via the State Library of Queensland, John Oxley Library, #32167.
12. Edward Wells Russell, Morry's brother-in-law. (See Neil Darlington, "Arthur Morry", *A Biographical Sketch of the Architects of Greater Manchester 1800-1940*, The Victorian Society, 2021). See also John W East, *A checklist of Romanesque-inspired architecture in Australia*, unpublished work, 2016; East attributes the original design to Russell also. It is unclear why Russell would have passed the execution and completion of the construction contract over to Morry.
13. See, for example, the way prominent Victorian church architect A.W.N. Pugin worked with his junior collaborators in Rosemary Hill's *God's Architect: Pugin and the Building of Romantic Britain* (Penguin, 2007). In Perth, Stombuco himself did indeed work in this way with a junior partner and collaborator, architect Charles Moran; the Perth Sunday Times in 1905 joked that Stombuco "used to draw his plans in Italian, and Charlie used to translate 'em." See "Notes and Comments", Sunday Times (Perth), 20th August 1905, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/57204825>.

14. “The Proposed New Theatre”, *Brisbane Courier*, 28th August 1885, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/3447243>.
15. Personal correspondence, K. Klumpp, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland. The Brisbane Hebrew Congregation has not subsequently made the plans publicly available, or granted access to researchers, and it is not possible to ascertain their current whereabouts or condition.
16. In Italian, *San Souci* means “without care”; possibly ironic given that its construction contributed significantly to Stombuco’s bankruptcy. Renamed *Palma Rosa* in 1891 when Stombuco left for Perth, it was rented out to a Mr Lewis Flegeltaub – a prominent member of the self-same Brisbane Hebrew Congregation who had purchased Stombuco’s synagogue design. After use as a US military personnel house in World War II, a convalescent hospital in the 1950s, and the club headquarters of the English-Speaking Union in the 1970s, *Palma Rosa* last sold in 2010 for just over \$3 million AUD, and is once again a private residence. See Dorothy Wickham, *Palma Rosa* (Ballarat Heritage Services,)
17. A full list is available in Darlington (2021). His first Brisbane church was a Primitive Methodist chapel in 1888, which is now the Stoliarsky School of Music on Dornoch Street, West End. His second, the Paddington Methodist Church built in 1906, burned down in 1996.
18. The Morry filter, “after its designer, Mr C.A. Morry, an official of the Department of Public Works in Brisbane”, was tested for use in the Enoggera Reservoir by Hardolph Wasteneys, a Professor of Biochemistry who served as official Chemist and Biologist of the Brisbane Board of Waterworks from 1903-1909. See Hardolph Wasteneys, “A Short Account of Some Purification Experiments with a Surface Water in Queensland, Australia.”, *Journal of the New England Waterworks Association* 25, no.4 (1911):422-439
19. “New Hebrew Synagogue”. East (2016) and Kadish (2006) both state that synagogues in Britain and Australia often looked towards Romanesque and Byzantine architectural forms in preference to the Gothic, which was considered too overtly Christian.
20. A photograph of the Toowoomba synagogue as it looked before being demolished is reproduced in Creese (2016).
21. However, the Brisbane Synagogue does share many architectural similarities with the East Melbourne Hebrew Congregation’s synagogue, constructed in 1887. See Suzanne Rutland, *Jews in Australia*, (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 24.
22. “New Hebrew Synagogue”, Ochert (2001), Department of Environment and Science, (2016), East (2016).
23. Dentils, from the Latin word for “teeth”, are small block-shapes arranged along the moulding of a cornice, like a row of teeth. Originally of Classical Greek origin, they are used extensively in 19th-century synagogue architecture in Europe; see Alina Popescu “Architectural Survey of the Bucharest synagogues.” *Studia Hebraica* 9-10 (2009).

24. In recent years, a clear plexiglass mehitza (barrier) was erected around a small area of seating near the entrance door on the main synagogue floor, to allow women with mobility issues to sit in accordance with the Orthodox minhag (custom) of gender separation without having to climb the staircase to the Ladies' Gallery
25. Another name for the bimah, the raised platform from which the torah is read, deriving from the Arabic *al-minbar* or "platform" (See "Almemar", in the *Jewish Encyclopaedia* (ed. Isidore Singer, Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1906). Steinmetz (2005) reports that almemar is "a chiefly Anglo-Jewish term" used in place of the usual Ashkenazi bimah, which aligns with the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation's ethno-religious identity at the time.
26. "New Hebrew Synagogue"
27. *ibid*
28. The interior of the synagogue, as it appears today, has been refurbished and renovated on at least two occasions; the 1965 centenary of the community (noted as "considerable renovations"; see Department of Environment and Science, "The Brisbane Synagogue"), the late 1960s (see "Brisbane round-up" *The Australian Jewish News*, 23rd February 1968, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/263011844>) and the synagogue's 1986 centenary (see "Brisbane shule's 100 years", *The Australian Jewish Times*, 26th June 1986, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/263226229>).
29. "An Octogenarian Celebration: Historical References to Queensland Jewry, Presentation to Mr Jonas M Myers", *The Hebrew Standard of Australasia*, 17 January 1908
30. For more on St Patrick's Church, and the ornate organ casing which the church attributes to Stombuco, see Geoffrey Cox, *St Patrick's Catholic Church*, Organ Historical Trust Australia, 2018.
31. Darlington (2021) attributes the Land Administration Building, built on George Street in the centre of Brisbane in 1903, to Morry, though the Queensland Heritage Register attributes this design instead to architect Thomas Pye.
32. See, for example, the delays to construction of his designed St Peter and Paul Cathedral in Goulbourn, NSW: "Proposed Completion of SS Peter and Paul's Cathedral, Goulbourn Herald, 24 June 1886, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/99905115>.
33. See, for example, "The Proposed New Theatre".
34. Charles Midson was an alderman of the South Brisbane city council, and was Member for South Brisbane in the Queensland Legislative Assembly 1893-1896; his predecessor was none other than Arthur Morry himself.
35. For example, see a series of correspondence to the editor of *The Brisbane Courier* in July 1881, where several commentators complain publicly about the construction of the Dress Circle in the Theatre Royal (designed by Stombuco that year), and Stombuco retorts: James B. Hickie "Theatre Royal

- Dress Circle”, The Brisbane Courier, 6 July 1881, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/910850>; Alex Thomson “The Theatre”, The Brisbane Courier, 18 July 1881, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/917382>; A. Stombuco “Theatre Royal”, The Brisbane Courier, 21 July 1881, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/915222>.
36. Joseph Riedle, “Hundred Years of Judaism in N.S. Wales”, Sunday Times (Sydney), 24 December 1922, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/128217542>.
37. “At the Synagogue”, Queensland Figaro and Punch, 24 July 1886, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/84118478>.
38. “Opening of the New Synagogue”, The Brisbane Courier, 19 July 1886, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/4489228>. Among those dignitaries named is a Mr J. Horwitz: Jacob Horwitz, then Member for Warwick in the Queensland Legislative Assembly, was himself a member of the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation and also part of the Brisbane Synagogue’s building committee. Neither Stombuco nor Morry, however, appear on any of the published guest lists.
39. For more on the racialised position of Italian migrants in 19th and early 20th century Australia, and the racist stereotyping in public rhetoric around all things Italian, see Francesco Ricatti, *Italians in Australia: History, Memory, Identity* (Springer, 2018).

The Architectural Provenance of the Margaret Street Synagogue, Brisbane

Images



Image 1a: The Brisbane Synagogue, photographed c.1906. Source: State Library of Queensland



Image 1b : The Brisbane Synagogue, photographed in the 2000s. Note the two flanking turrets and upper triangular pediment with window, the large central rose stained glass and smaller horseshoe-shaped windows, and the dentils and decorations in the stucco on the outer face of the synagogue. Source: State Library of Queensland (a), Brisbane Hebrew Congregation (b)

The Architectural Provenance of the Margaret Street Synagogue, Brisbane

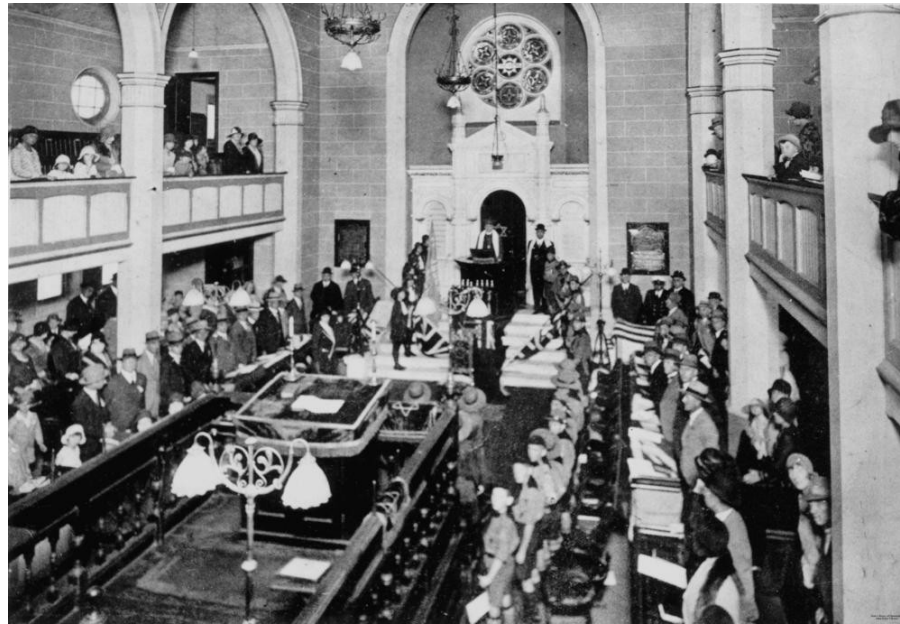


Image 2a: The Brisbane Synagogue interior, photographed 1930s. Note the octagonal columns holding up the Ladies Gallery, the horseshoe-shaped buttresses, and the rear blind arch. Source: State Library of Queensland.



Image 2b: The Brisbane Synagogue interior, photographed 2000s. As can be seen, the bare brickwork visible in the earlier image has been plastered over in the intervening period; most likely in the substantial renovations done either in the 1950s or in the 1980s. Note the octagonal columns holding up the Ladies Gallery, the horseshoe-shaped buttresses, and the rear blind arch. Source: Brisbane Hebrew Congregation

The Architectural Provenance of the Margaret Street Synagogue, Brisbane

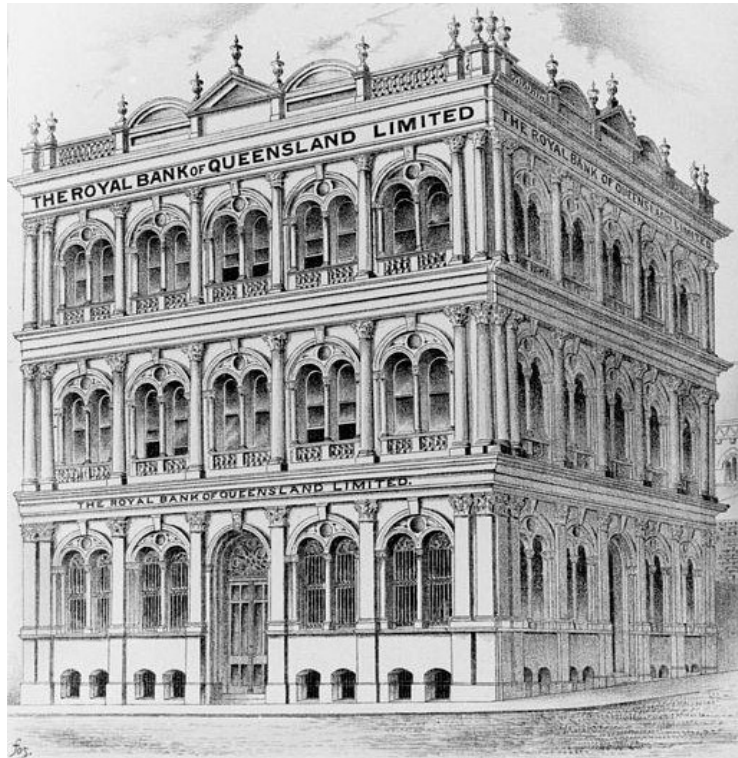


Image 3a (left): The Royal Bank of Queensland, sketched 1887, formerly the Maurice D. Benjamin & Co. stores and warehouse, designed in 1883 by Stombuco; and 3b(right): The Allan & Stark Stores, Queen Street, designed in 1881 by Stombuco. Note the use of intricate design work on the stucco, the multiple horseshoe-arched windows and triangular central pediment, features also of the Brisbane Synagogue. Source: State Library of Queensland.



Image 4 : All Hallows' School and convent, designed in 1879 by Stombuco. Note the turrets at the edges flanking a larger centrepiece feature tower, horseshoe-arched windows, and the triangular pediment with circular window, similar to the Brisbane Synagogue. Source: State Library of Queensland.

The Architectural Provenance of the Margaret Street Synagogue, Brisbane



Image 5: San Souci, later Palma Rosa, designed by Stombuco in 1886 as his own home. Note the central arch-windowed turret and triangular pediment, and the way the structure extends out in octagonal sections to the left. Source: State Library of Queensland.



Image 6a (left) and 6b (right) Octagonal interior columns in churches designed by Stombuco bear striking similarity to those inside the Brisbane Synagogue; Saints Peter and Paul Cathedral, Goulburn, NSW, designed 1871 (a), St Patrick's Church, Fortitude Valley, designed in 1880 (b), Source: Rambling Wombat on Wordpress (a), St Stephens' Cathedral (b).

The Architectural Provenance of the Margaret Street Synagogue, Brisbane



Image 7 (left): The Primitive Methodist church designed in 1888 by Morry in West End, Brisbane, photographed.1938. Source: State Library of Queensland.



Image 8 (right): Sunnyside Primitive Methodist Sunday School, Crawshawbooth, Lancashire, design attributed to Morry in 1877 before he migrated to Australia. Source: Robert Wade, Flickr.com

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