



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
OFFICE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
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MAYOR

HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

ALTERATION TO A HISTORIC PROPERTY STAFF REPORT

Site: 201 Central Street 1919-1925 Temple B'nai Brith
Case: HPC 2015.090 City of Somerville Preservation Restriction

Applicant Name: Congregation B'nai Brith, Owner
Applicant Address: 201 Central Street, Somerville, MA 02145

Date of Application: December 21, 2015
Legal Notice: *Block two windows for installation of new elevator and replace one window with a door for new ADA entrance.*

Staff Recommendation: *Conditional* Certificate of Adherence to Preservation Restriction

Date of Public Hearing: January 19, 2016

I. BUILDING DESCRIPTION

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION: From the Form B

Built in 1919-1925, the B'nai Brith Synagogue is the finest example of a Byzantine Revival ecclesiastical building in Somerville. The synagogue is constructed of buff brick with limestone facings and cast stone trim. Preserved within the interior of the building is much original woodwork and lighting fixtures, as well as the large Ark secured from Boston's B'nai Israel Synagogue just prior to its 1915 demolition.



Possessing a distinctive, compact rectangular form, the synagogue measures three-bay's by-five-bays. Rising four-stories from a cast stone basement to flat-roofed structural components, the tripartite main facade features a trio of arched entrances set off by cast stone enframements. Access to the entrances is provided by a broad flight of concrete steps. The steps are flanked by high shouldered masonry components. Rising from atop these flanking components are original lighting fixtures in the form of tall cast stone columns supported by milk glass globes.

The center pavilion is characterized by a shallow three-bay projection from the main body of the building. Cast stone piers define the edges of the broad entrance bay. Flanking the entrance bay are narrow walls pierced by a single narrow window at each of their three stories. Above the arched entrances are three recessed panels that rise to the curving line of an arch. Set off by cast stone wall surfaces, the buff brick

panels are pierced by a center, circular stained glass window depicting the Star of David. The circular window is flanked by narrow arched windows. The center pavilion culminates in a broad, low arch. At the apex of the arch are two round-arched cast stone panels depicting an open prayer book. Set back behind the center pavilion and rising from the center of the segmental arched pediment

The center, three-story component is flanked by crenellation in evidence atop the narrow flanking bays. Ranged across the five bay side walls piers are corner pier-like structural components providing the structure vertical accents as well visually separating the tripartite windows at the first and second stories; these windows surmount rectangular brickwork panels. The tripartite windows of the side walls culminate in arches.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT/EVOLUTION OF STRUCTURE OR PARCEL: From the Form B

Built between 1919 and 1925, the origins of Winter Hill's B'nai Brith Synagogue lie in the organization of Somerville's Hebrew Educational Society in 1903. Somerville's Jews constituted one of the smaller early twentieth century Boston area Jewish communities with less than 4,000 members around 1900. Boston neighborhoods such as the North End, West End and South End became host to Jewish immigrants whose combined population approached 65,000 by 1910. Between the 1920s and the 1950s, the B'nai Brith Synagogue was the major focus of activity for Jews living in Somerville and Medford.

The basement of the synagogue was designed by W. L. Minor, while the main body of the building was designed by S. S. Eisenberg. During the first half of the twentieth century, Eisenberg, designed a number of apartment buildings in Brookline as well as the Fenway and Allston-Brighton neighborhoods of Boston. B'nai Brith Synagogue also has significant historical associations with Rabbi Isadore Singer, an important Jewish theologian long associated with Beth El Synagogue in Manhattan Beach, New York who began his career at Temple B'nai Brith in Somerville during the mid-1920s.

According to late nineteenth century Somerville and Middlesex County Atlases, the synagogue's lot was part of the J. Frank Brown house lot Brown was a clerk employed by the Market National Bank of Boston. His house still stands to the west of the synagogue at 177 Central Street By 1900, Brown's parcel had been subdivided with the synagogue's future site encompassing 19,299 square feet During the fall of 1915, the congregation of B'nai Brith purchased a lot atop Winter Hill on Central Street near Broadway for the purpose of building a synagogue. The synagogue's parcel contained approximately 20,000 square feet. The synagogue's location was chosen so it would be convenient for both the Jews of Somerville and Medford. Between 1917 and 1919, the congregation worshipped in the Knights of Columbus building. Previous to that they occupied Citizen Hall at Gilman Square. In July, 1919, plans were announced in the local press for imminent work on the forty-by-sixty foot foundation of the synagogue. Reportedly, the basement was completed in only a matter of weeks by "a large force of men." Even before the entire synagogue was completed, worship services were held in the basement. Using a roofed-over foundation, before the completion of the upper sanctuary, was standard practice at Somerville houses of worship. This approach to holding worship services on a construction site as soon as possible dates back to at least the early 1870s at St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church at Union Square. In September of 1919 Rabbi H. Solomon of Atlanta, Georgia officiated at the first services held in B'nai Brith's basement.

The estimated cost of the B'nai Brith synagogue in 1919 was \$50,000. Of that figure, \$10,000 was earmarked for the construction of the basement In 1919, the president of the synagogue was I. Lappin, while the building committee members included Ex-Alderman Joseph Hillson, Nason J. Levinson, David Menser, M. J. Barron, Max Glassman and Joseph Cohen. A Somerville Journal article written in December, 1921, noted that the building's first floor would contain classrooms, clubrooms, a banquet hall and kitchen, while the second floor would be occupied by an assembly and ballroom. The third floor was slated to be "the synagogue proper."

The temple's building committee hired Samuel S. Eisenberg of Chelsea to design the B'nai Brith Synagogue. Eisenberg was just beginning a career that stretched into the mid-1960s. Evidently the Somerville temple's building committee recognized the young architect's design talents. Eisenberg, as a newcomer intent on making a name for himself, may have intentionally submitted a low bid for the B'nai Brith project.

S. S. Eisenberg was a partner in the firm of Eisenberg and Feer between c. 1926 and 1945. An early Eisenberg and Feer project was the Mattapan Hebrew Community Center on Morton Street between Norfolk Street and Blue Hill Avenue. One of Eisenberg's most successful projects from a siting and design perspective was the Reservoir Garden Apartments at 1982-1992 Commonwealth Avenue in Brighton. Built between 1920 and 1925 on still-developing western Commonwealth Avenue, Eisenberg ranged four identical apartment buildings around a courtyard that complements and extends the park bordering the Chestnut Hill Reservoir on the south side of the apartments

II. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

1. Proposal of Alteration:

An elevator is required for access to the Temple by the disabled. This would be constructed entirely within the envelope of the current building. Windows would be altered to accommodate a new entry from the parking area and to enclose the elevator shaft. Only one of these alterations is visible from the public right of way near the rear northeastern corner of the building. See photo and plans below.

II. FINDINGS

1. Prior Certificates Issued/Proposed:

None, the Temple is under a Preservation Restriction held by the City and administered by the Historic Preservation Commission as result of the use of Community Preservation Act Funds.

1. Precedence:

- *Are there similar properties / proposals?*

Alterations for ADA Access:

Alterations to meet ADA requirements are rare but are becoming increasingly common on buildings open to the public. Two Certificates of Appropriateness have been issued as noted below and one other building, the Somerville Museum on Westwood Road is under consideration at this meeting. An addition was constructed at 55 Columbus Avenue (2005) for an enclosed elevator. The pitch of entry ramp was revised at the Armory at 191 Highland Avenue (2011) and the sidewalk height was modified to act as an extension of the ramp.

3. Considerations:

- *What is the visibility of the proposal?*

The rear northeastern corner of the Temple is visible from Central Street. Most of the proposed alterations would not be visible, being located on the rear of the building parallel to Central Street

- *What are the Existing Conditions of the building / parcel?*

The Temple is not currently ADA compliant. There are multiple stairs on the front of the building and a small entry from the parking area in the rear.

- *Is the proposal more appropriate than the existing conditions?*

Most of the alterations would not be visible from the Street. The proposal would alter the appearance of the rear corner of the building making a flatter plane. The infill will match the existing masonry in color and texture

- *Does the proposal coincide with the General Approach set forth in the Design Guidelines?*

GENERAL APPROACH

The primary purpose of Somerville's Preservation Ordinance is to encourage preservation and high design standards in Somerville's Historic Districts, in order to safeguard the City's architectural heritage. The following guidelines ensure that rehabilitation efforts, alterations, and new construction all respect the design fabric of the districts and do not adversely effect their present architectural integrity.

- A. *The design approach to each property should begin with the premise that the features of historic and architectural significance described in the Study Committee report must be preserved. In general, this tends to minimize the exterior alterations that will be allowed.*
- C. *Whenever possible, deteriorated material or architectural features should be repaired rather than replaced or removed.*
- D. *When replacement of architectural features is necessary, it should be based on physical or documentary evidence of the original or later important features.*
- E. *Whenever possible, new materials should match the material being replaced with respect to their physical properties, design, color, texture and other visual qualities. The use of imitation replacement materials is discouraged.*
- F. *The Commission will give design review priority to those portions of the property which are visible from public ways or those portions which it can be reasonably inferred may be visible in the future.*

The sides of the building were not discussed in the Form B. While not discussed in the Form B, it is likely that the opening is not original to the building and indicated by its off-center location. No material will be removed from the portion of the building visible from the street only the rear addition where it would not be visible. A lower level window will be infilled with material to match the existing with shadow lines retained to show that there had been an opening at the rear northeast corner of the building.

C. Windows and Doors

1. *Retain original and later important door and window openings where they exist. Do not enlarge or reduce door and window openings for the purpose of fitting stock window sash or doors, or air conditioners.*
2. *Whenever possible, repair and retain original or later important window elements such as sash, lintels, sill, architraves, glass, shutters and other decorative elements and hardware. When replacement of materials or elements is necessary, it should be based on physical or documentary evidence. If aluminum windows must be installed, select a baked finish that matches as closely as possible the color of the existing trim. Investigate weather-stripping and storm windows with a baked enamel finish as an alternative to the replacement of historic sash.*

Infilling the window opening completely with material to match the masonry wall does not meet the guideline to retain openings nor the guideline to retain the original window elements. The distance from the street and angle of view renders any window details moot. The window infill will be inset to retain the shadow of the opening and indicate its original location.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Staff recommendation is based on a complete application and supporting materials, as submitted by the Applicant, and an analysis of the historic and architectural value and significance of the site, building or structure, the general design, arrangement, texture, material and color of the features involved, and the relation of such features of buildings and structures in the area, in accordance with the required findings that are considered by the Somerville Historic District Ordinance for a Historic District Certificate. This report may be revised or updated with new a recommendation or findings based upon additional information provided to Staff or through more in depth research conducted during the public hearing process.

Staff determines that the alteration for which an application for a Historic Certificate has been filed is appropriate for and compatible with the preservation restrictions agreed upon by the Community; therefore **Staff recommends that the Historic Preservation Commission grant the Congregation Temple B'nai Brith a Certificate of Adherence to Preservation Restrictions** for alterations to **201 Central Street** based upon the following conditions:

1. All appropriate building permits shall be obtained prior to the start of any work.
2. If the approval differs from the plans, new plans shall be submitted to Historic Staff prior to commencing the work;
3. The window at the northeast corner of the building abutting the driveway shall be infilled to match the masonry above in size, color, texture, mortar and pointing details.
4. The infill will be set to sufficient depth to retain the character of an opening as seen from Central Street.
5. Historic Staff shall issue a sign-off upon completion of the project that this was done in accordance with the Certificate and approved plans and prior to the Somerville Historical Society receiving Inspectional Service Division sign off.





