



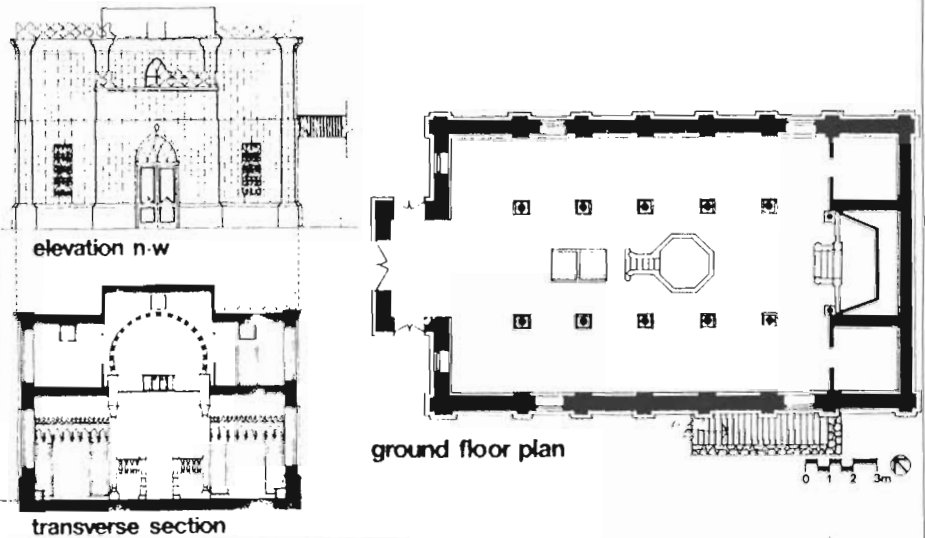
RESTORATION OF THE BEN EZRA SYNAGOGUE, CAIRO

BACKGROUND

The idea to restore Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo was first contemplated in early 1980, and is based on an idea expressed by the then president of Egypt, Anouar El Sadat. At that time, the Camp David Peace Accords had been signed, and a subsequent meeting between the President of the World Jewish Congress and the Egyptian Minister of External Affairs resulted in an agreement that would see the World Jewish Congress undertaking and financing a project in Egypt which would further the spirit of the Camp David Accords.

Upon returning to America, the president of the World Jewish Congress asked Montreal architect Phyllis Lambert if she would be interested in organising and directing such a project in Egypt. Ms. Lambert accepted, and invited restoration architect Jacques Dalibard, then treasurer-general of ICOMOS and President of ICOMOS Canada, to accompany her to Egypt in search of a suitable project. Ms. Lambert and Mr. Dalibard toured numerous buildings, mosques, churches and synagogues in Cairo, finally focussing their attention on the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Old Cairo.

The Ben Ezra Synagogue (which at that time was in a poor state of repair) was an important place of worship in the Jewish World and is thought to go back to the period of Moses. Within a radius of only a few hundred meters of the Synagogue is the Amr Mosque, built by General Amr in 642 AD, and several old Coptic Churches: Abou Sarga, El-Mo'allaga, Sitt Barbara, El-Adra and Mari Girgis - all dating back to the early period of Christianity. The Mosque and the Coptic Churches were still in use and in relatively good states of



Plans, elevations and sections

maintenance. Old Cairo itself also offered an interesting and unique context within which to work; outstanding buildings and sites illustrating three of the world's foremost religions (Christian, Islamic and Jewish) with their communities living within a few hundred meters of each other for several thousand years. In a XXth Century marked by religious fanaticism and intolerance (Ireland, Nazi Germany, Iran, etc.), Old Cairo offered an incredible lesson of tolerance, harmony and peace.

HISTORIC IMPORTANCE

The history of the site of the Ben Ezra Synagogue goes back to 1392 BC; to the reign of the Egyptian King Menepthah (19th Dynasty). It is said that Moses, before he left Egypt, would have prayed here for the last time and it is believed that several synagogues could have been built on the site.

"In 868 AD, Ahmed Ibn Tulun became the ruler of Egypt and he taxed the Copts 20,000 dinars in gold annually. In the year 1115 AD the great Rabbi Abraham Ben Ezra came to Egypt from Jerusalem and visited the Holy Palace where Moses and Jeremiah had worshipped: he then

went to nobilities and told them what he knew about the Synagogue and why this land should be their own. He interviewed His Eminence the Patriarch Alexander the 56th and asked that the Synagogue be returned to the Jews. The Patriarch told Rabbi Ibn Ezra that the Arabic ruler would insist on the annual tax of 20,000 dinars in gold. After some bargaining, it was agreed that so long as they paid the tax, the Synagogue should be returned to the Jews. Ben Ezra rebuilt the Synagogue which is still called after his name."

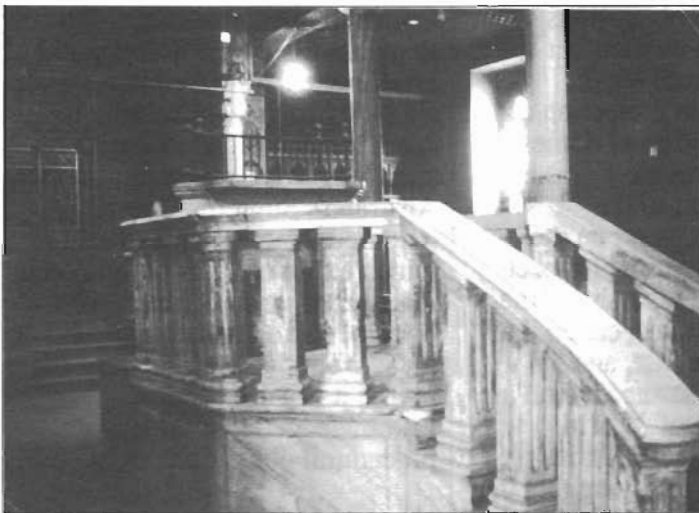
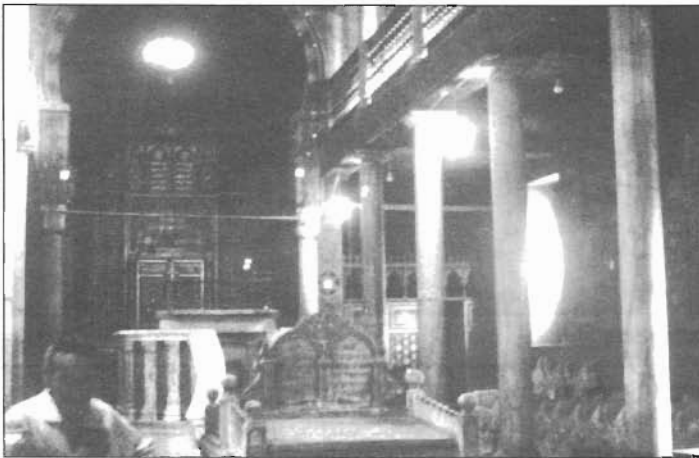
(The Israeli Community in Cairo - Imp. Wabha, Cairo, 1973)

The present Synagogue was built in 1893-94 on the remains of the previous synagogue. Incorporated into the synagogue is a Guenizeh where ancient documents are stored. The documents are considered to be a major source of information on the medieval period in this part of the world.

Ms. Lambert and Mr. Dalibard initially prepared a project feasibility study which was approved by the Cairo Israeli Community and the World Jewish Congress.

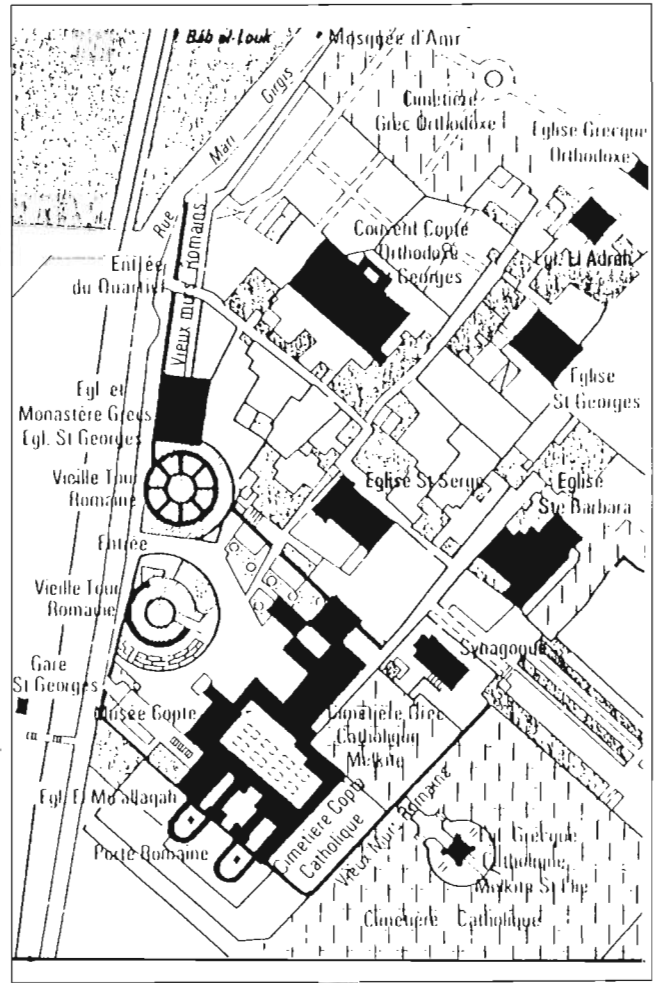
The Project is divided into three phases:

Phase I- Emergency Repairs
* recording, cataloguing, cleaning



Interior views

(photos: R.Raycraft)



Map of Old Cairo showing the mix of religious buildings

- and storage of artifacts , books
- * replacement of roof
- * refastening, replastering and repainting of the ceilings
- * new electrical services
- * removal of the exterior decorative elements and stucco
- * rehabilitation of the Guardian's building for site office
- * site survey
- * trimming of trees

Phase II- Research, Studies and Proposals

- * recording and analysis of the building
- * documentary research
- * archaeological research and excavation
- * engineering study
- * architectural proposal
- * landscaping proposal

Phase III-Restoration of the Synagogue

- * stabilisation and interpretation of archaeological remains
- * consolidation of walls and damp proofing course
- * repairing and installation of new exterior decoration
- * restoration of mikveh
- * repairs to walls and furnishings inside
- * repairs to the entrance porch
- * reinstallation of artifacts
- * rehabilitation of small building next to the Synagogue
- * cleaning of site and landscaping

Being a non-governmental organisation of professionals in the field of the conservation of monuments and sites, and having

its headquarters in Paris (only a few hours by plane from Cairo), ICOMOS was in an ideal position to co-ordinate the restoration of the Ben Ezra Synagogue. Logically then, ICOMOS became involved in the project with several Canadians participating in the development of the project's restoration concepts. To date, the project is being carried out under the direction of Phyllis Lambert. However, local professionals in Cairo and the Egyptian Antiquities Organisation are now playing a more active role in the restoration of the synagogue.

Francois Leblanc