

# From the Great Synagogue of Algiers to Jamma Lihoud, Architectural Monography of a Centuries-Old Building

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**Abstract** This article proposes a monographic study of the great synagogue of Algiers. An important architectural and symbolic construction, which is not only representative of the changes experienced by the Jewish community and their places of worship after 1830, but also of the contradictions of the colonial administration toward them. The monumental character, the use of many elements of the local architecture, and the Moorish style, have made of it a singular building in this middle of the Algerian nineteenth century imbued with the Parisian inspiration on architecture. Designed in an Arabian style, on a plan close to the plan of the traditional North African synagogues, the building was converted into a mosque after independence, without major consequences on its formal appearance. The communication proposes a detailed analysis of the spatial context, of this conversion.

## Introduction

The Grand Synagogue of Algiers has symbolic significance for several reasons. It is very representative of the changes experienced by the Jewish community and their places of worship after 1830, but also of the contradictions of the colonial administration vis-à-vis them. Its construction was planned in 1837 to compensate for the demolished buildings, but the project was materialized many years after. The location of its was a longstanding issue, as were funding issues. Apart from the architectural analysis of the building, the article focuses on the historical context and social influences that surrounded the design of the project. It is based on the analysis of its shape, its spatial organization and its aesthetics. Our objective is to explain, the connections that have been made between innovation displayed by the authorities and traditional pattern of pre-colonial North African synagogues. The aim is not only to shed light on the architectural history of the colonial period, but also after independence. In fact, the question of conversion and the changes brought to the building by becoming a mosque is the second part of this article.

## History of Construction of the Great Synagogue

Despite the renewed interest observed in recent years in the architecture of the colonial era in Algeria, the great synagogue is absent from scientific productions. Indeed, except for the work of Dominique Jarrassé, no research is conducted on this building. Based on the meticulous research in archives and architectural analyses, this first part retraces the history of implantation and the first architectural proposals.

## Establishment of the Great Synagogue.

The first proposition was a piece of land near the Place de Chartres in 1840; it was subsequently transferred to the land occupied by the lions' barracks. This change is explained by the refusal of local representatives to see a building intended for the natives on a newly created main square and artery. Opposition was quickly expressed even for the new site of the lions' barracks, one of the council members felt it was regrettable that such a beautiful site was destined to host a synagogue. The proximity to Bab Azzoun Street made the prospect of building such a visible synagogue unthinkable. The construction project was then temporarily abandoned. In 1844, another piece of land was proposed, it is that of the old Moorish house located on the street of the

revolution. The house was used as a temporary barracks. But the minister proposed a new location because the military could not get the site back. Land occupied by vacant federal buildings, is then proposed near the impasse Orali . The smallness of this land quickly eliminated it. The same year a commission composed of the notables of the Jewish community of Algiers is constituted to find the ideal ground, “*four hypothesis are envisaged including that of transforming the mosque of La Pecherie*.” The option of reconverting a mosque that corresponded to churches at that time, is mentioned for the first time for synagogues. However, to alienate the Muslim community once again, by converting the largest mosque in the city, and providing such a visible location for a synagogue was not feasible for the authorities. The choice finally came across the site of an outdated mosque, located near the new Place Randon. This piece of land, proposed by the military, was quickly agreed upon for several reasons; both in the Jewish quarter, far from the main axes and sufficiently visible in the urban fabric by constituting the wall of a public square, something that was unthinkable until then. The choice to build a synagogue on the site of a mosque symbolically materializes the change of status of Jews vis-à-vis Muslims. The slowness of the choice of land of the Great synagogue tells us perfectly about the difficulty of the Jews to make admit the construction of their temples. However, it was supposed to be a compensation for all the submitted expropriations and demolitions.



*Figure 1: Main façade of the synagogue of Algiers*

### **Early Architectural Proposals**

Giauchain designed four projects not accepted in 1838. The first proposal, with a total area of 441 m<sup>2</sup>, could hold up to 1300 people, consisted of a prayer room for men, a platform for women and swimming pools. The second project in an area of 351 m<sup>2</sup>, can accommodate 1000 people. The third project, covering almost 472 m<sup>2</sup>, is designed for more than 1 400 people. Finally, the fourth and final project is more in line with the architect’s expectations. Designed for more than 1100 people, it spreads over 371 m<sup>2</sup>, occupying almost the same area as the second project. These projects were quickly abandoned in 1839, because this site was not retained. The architect, who had designed these projects in a neoclassical style, had proposed another not accepted, on the site of the old barracks in a rather neo-Gothic style. In 1844, Giauchain drew another project on the Rue de la Révolution in the marine district. The project was designed in an Egyptian Revival style with papyriform columns with open corolla, and winged sculptures under the law tables. This project is certainly the first to send Jews of Middle Eastern origin. The project fell far short of the expectations of the Jewish community and its aspirations to have a building worthy of all its losses. Algerian liberal architects very probably mandated by the newly installed consistory proposed new projects around 1847. Léon and Rochet had drawn up a sketch for nearly 1,600 people, 1,000 men and 600 women, on the plot located at the Orali impasse. The authorities had not accepted their project.

In 1848, Ravoisié had in turn drawn a proposal on the same ground. The inclination towards an Arabian style for the synagogue is expressed for the first time in this project. The project takes up the characteristic features of the North African synagogues with a plan centered around the Tevah and in the back the wardrobe of the Torah. It still adds a space for women in gallery upstairs. This

project will undoubtedly have an influence on the final project of the great synagogue and on the architectural choices of the final project, designed towards the end of 1840.

### The final project of the synagogue

The architect of the civil buildings Viala du Sorbier designed the final project of the great synagogue, by the end of 1840. The shape was a square overhanging a central octagonal dome and four small domes in the corners, could contain 900 men and 200 women. The influence of Ravoisié's project and the architect's familiarity with Islamic architecture after the rehabilitation of the mosques of Tlemcen, according to Jarrassé<sup>1</sup>, may justify this choice. As for the doors and windows, the architect had opted for horseshoe arches resting on twisted columns and bordered by green and white ceramic. Under the dome and its cornices, openings reminiscent of the shape of the tables of laws were lined with stained-glass windows to sift the light inside.

### The interior of the synagogue

The building is a square with an irregular octagon in the center with four long sides opened by poly-lobed arches. The entrance is oriented towards the East and not the Holy Ark, which faces it directly. It must be emphasized that the orientation towards Jerusalem is only a recommendation and not an obligation that would invalidate the edifice. No doubt, the desire to open it on the square had taken precedence in the mind of the designer. Moreover, during the 19th century many synagogues built in France were not oriented to the East. The Great Synagogue of Victory is oriented towards the North and the Sacred Heart church according to Dominique Jarrassé. The internal spatial distribution is inspired by that of the traditional North African synagogues centered around the *Tevah*. The most remarkable element in this synagogue is the refinement of its interior



Figure 2. View of the Holy Ark  
Source: IAU Archive

decoration, which is steeped in Moorish references. A stalactite arch surmounted the holy arch; the eight ribs of the vault and the windows that illuminate it were adorned with stucco embroidery and chiseled plaster. The stone carvings were the work of Jean-Émile Latour. The same artist was in charge of harmonizing the decorations of Saint-Philippe Cathedral. There are also similarities in the interior decorative elements, particularly in the domes, edges and borders. It seems rather logical that the two most important religious buildings built in the same period, have a reciprocal influence in terms of decorative elements. Paul Alfred Magdonel made carvings on wood<sup>2</sup>. In another register, the synagogue contained important objects and relics, among which there are "sepharim", one of which dates back to the 15th century, objects belonging to rabbis Barchichat and Duran, were also kept in the tabernacle. Marble and steel commemorative plaques were hung around the pulpit. They bore the names of the Jewish soldiers who died for France, just opposite were those of all the benefactors of the community who worked for the building of the temple<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Dominique, Jarassé, *Orientalism, Colonialism, and Jewish Identity in the Synagogues of North Africa under French domination*, *Art Judaica*. 2011. P. 1-22.

<sup>2</sup> Claudine Piaton; Juliette, Hueber Boussad, Aiche, and Thierry, Lochard, *Algiers - City and Architecture 1830-1940*. Algiers. 2016. P. 98

<sup>3</sup> Paviot Marcel, October 24th 1951, a brief history of our shrines "the Jewish temple Grand Rabbi Bloch", in the echo of Algiers Archives of the Diocesan Studies Centre – glycines Algiers. 270-96, AAJ. 01 (4).





**Figure 3:** The deterioration of the Great Synagogue in 1961

Source : <https://www.morial.fr/communautes-et-traditions-3/synagogues/949-la-profanation-de-la-grande-synagogue-d-alger.html> consulté en décembre 2021



Although many similarities are remarkable with the traditional synagogues of North Africa, the beginning of the process of francisation of Jewish places and their places of worship is also evident. The complexity of this project, combined with administrative and especially financial barriers, delayed it for nearly two decades. It was inaugurated on September 19, 1865. The synagogue was, but its capacity remained lower than all the demolished ones. To compensate and offer decent places of worship, many other projects for the construction or developments of synagogues were begun.

The Great synagogue of Algiers, by its monumental character, is one of the most important built in Algeria. It is also, unique by the re-appropriation of certain elements of



**Figure 4:** Interior Ornament

Source: Author

traditional North African synagogues in particular, the centered aspect of the plan. Generally, on facades, the Moorish language continued to be widely used. The windows often had a shape reminiscent the forms of tables of law. They were often paired. The predominance of the twisted columns in particular to mark the Holy Ark is also a constant element that probably refers to the temple of Jerusalem. Although it remained an external dressing, the choice of orientalism for the Algerian synagogues, according to Dominique Jarrassé, is the continuous mental projection of the Jews on the side of the colonized. Semitism through Orientalism works in the same way in the mentality of administrators and architects as in metropolitan France. As simple as it was, there was confusion of indigenous culture; the synagogue that represents them was assimilated by its architecture to the mosque.... However, vis-à-vis the Arabs, they are francized and their synagogues usurp forms that do not belong to them<sup>4</sup>. This use of elements of Orientalist architectural language has remained superficial, an exterior dressing that contrasts with the radical changes made to the interior. The latter is deeply marked by metropolitan influences. The monumentality, the basilical plan, the arrangement of the benches, the introduction of the organ as well as other musical instruments, and the stands for women are all elements borrowed from other architectures

### **The Great Synagogue as a mosque**

The only synagogue converted to a mosque is the old Randon Square, which became the Ibn Fares Mosque just after independence. Located on Arbadji Abed Street, the building gave its name to the whole neighborhood which became Djamaa Lihoud or Jewish mosque. After independence, the legal manuscripts and various silver religious objects belonging to this synagogue were classified as national heritage and the synagogue converted into a mosque.

### **Pre independence deterioration**

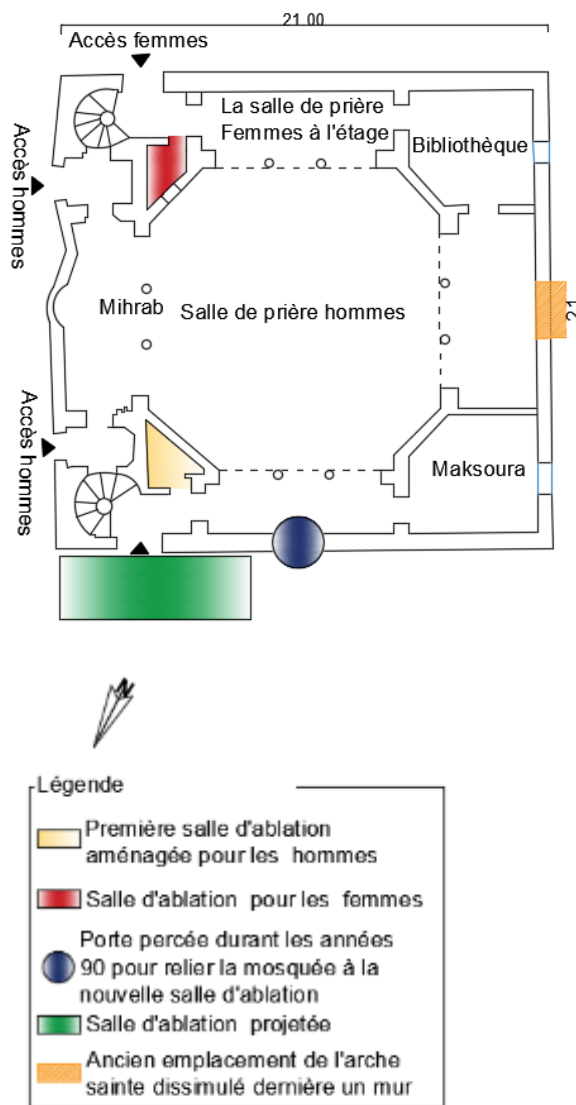
The first chapter of this process began before independence when it suffered a sacking attributed to the FLN in the wake of the demonstrations of December 11, 1960, but which is probably the work of supporters of French Algeria. The deterioration was substantial on both the furniture and the building itself. A symbolic ceremony was organized the next day to bury the destroyed objects near the Rabbis of Algiers in the cemetery of Saint-Eugene. The building probably did not regain its previous influence until its reconversion in 1962.

### **Conversion into a mosque**

Originally built on the site of a mosque, the synagogue was quickly claimed and recovered. In this conversion, the building has not undergone any significant modification except the addition of an octagonal minaret. The configuration of the synagogue and its Moorish architecture greatly facilitated its conversion. The women's prayer space has retained this function; this one is located at the height of 5.05 m. An intermediate wooden floor, at the height of 2.94 m, is added below to increase the capacity of the prayer room for men of about 240 m<sup>2</sup>. The height under the dome of the building is about 18 m. A library and a Maksoura or imam's office are located on the western façade; these spaces are 25 m<sup>2</sup> each. The mihrab, meanwhile, is leaned against the old main gate of the synagogue. The old rabbinical school, underlying the building on the South-West side, which had long been abandoned, was recently converted into a Koranic school. During the 70s and 90s, the mosque had undergone renovations to seal the domes with bituminous felt. Other fit-up and maintenance work was carried out during the same period. A new restoration operation is planned shortly, especially since the recent closures due to the pandemic have accelerated its degradation.

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<sup>4</sup> Jarrassé Dominique, 1997, *une histoire des synagogues françaises entre orient et occident*, éditions actes sud. Paris. P. 254.



**Figure 5:** Schematic reconstruction of the mosque plan Source: author

### Current Building Condition

Today cracks are visible, the coatings are detached inside and outside, and traces of moisture are visible even at the level of the dome... On another register, since the 1990s, it was recommended to carry out a historical study and more in-depth surveys to restore the missing elements of the history of the building and for a better architectural knowledge of it. It should be emphasized that during our investigations we learned that traces of its former synagogal function could remain behind the South-West wall, which initially housed the niche of the holy arch. We have no way of verifying the veracity of that information. The completion of surveys and the search for these traces and their preservation can only enhance the architectural and heritage value of this building.

### Conclusion

The Great synagogue built during the nineteenth century in a style combining a desire to break with pre-colonial synagogue. But the dichotomy of visibility/discretion has governed all its construction process. This situation was hardly different in architectural terms. The external aspect of the synagogue was heavily influenced by Moorish influences. The Spanish origins in particular, of the organizers of the Jewish community of Algiers, can explain in part, the option of the architects for this Moorish dress. They remain, however, very characteristic by their monumentality and by the many changes brought about inside; introduction of the organ, adoption of the basilical plan and especially creation of a space for women. Beyond ideological questions, this building halfway

between mosque and church is very representative of the situation of Jews at the time, in search of European modernity, but attached to their cultural and social origins. Today, synagogues and our entire architectural and urban heritage are in a state of perilous disrepair.

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