FROM ANSHE CHESED TO ANGEL ORENSANZ

156 Years at 172 Norfolk Street

by AL ORENSANZ, Ph.D. Soc.
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The building at 172 Norfolk Street, between Houston and Stanton streets in Lower Manhattan, has been witness to 156 years of the history of New York and to much contemporary history as well, both in America and in Europe. As humble as it looks, this building has experienced important moments in American, Jewish and German history and architecture.

We are going to visit this wide panorama in four chronological stages: **1840s to 1880s: The Years of the Reform Movement; 1880s to 1960s: The Years of the Yiddish; 1960s to 1980s: The Years of Devastation; and 1986 to the present: The Orensanz Years.**
1840s to 1880s: The Years of the Reform Movement

The middle of the 19th century saw massive transformations in Germany. In 1850, after the Council of Frankfort, it became one unified country out of several territories. It was the time of Hegel and Schiller, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, Heine and Marx; the time of Schinkel; Beethoven, Schubert, Wagner and Schumann. The socialist revolution had failed, and Berlin became the cultural capital of Europe, the Jews had been recently liberated from their medieval ghettos, and massive numbers immigrate to America. In the Cathedral of Cologne, Germany found a powerful emblem of unity and inspiration and its towers were finished after several centuries. When Anshe Chesed opened on Norfolk Street, many compositions of those composers will get their American premiere.

The Lower East Side of Manhattan receives large contingents of German workers, intellectuals, social activists, entrepreneurs and adventurers. They open factories, theatres and cafes, publish newspapers and books, and advocate for public education. They build houses of worship—including Anshe Chesed (The People of Loving Kindness), right on Norfolk Street. German Jews soon carried into practice in several parts of America the idea of the Reform movement that had originated in Germany. They made Judaism simpler, inclusive to all, and relevant to civic, political and cultural affairs. The Henry Street Settlement, the University Settlement, the Grand Street Settlement, the Educational Alliance, etc. were all started by German Jews, oftentimes by women. Those are the years of the Civil War. While some congregations opted for the status quo in certain states, Anshe Chesed launched a strong activist drive of letter writing and lobbying to Congress. The concept
of the Reform movement flourished simultaneously in Savannah, Cincinnati, Buffalo, and New York, among other places. And Anshe Chesed was the first synagogue built in the U.S. that embodied the tenets of Reform: the pulpit facing the congregation; the prominent use of organ and other instrumental music; and the use of German. The congregation at Norfolk Street hired an architect from Berlin, Alexander Saeltzer, who delivered in one year to a large congregation of proud German Jews a building reminiscent of the beloved Cathedral of Cologne and of the Friedrichwerdesche Kirche in Berlin. That church is still in the Mitte as the symbol of the German Lutheran vision of religion, and is now a museum to dedicated to its builder, Schinkel. The façade on Norfolk Street reproduces the

glorious windows of Cologne and of the temple in the Mitte, and a perfectly dimensioned main space or sanctuary was designed to replicate the Sistine Chapel in Rome. The ceilings are deep blue, with gold stars found in so many buildings in Berlin, the Italian Renaissance and even Byzantium. A balcony surrounds the main space; there are two spires in the front. Temple Emmanuel still has a copy of the booklet printed for the May 14, 1885, opening of the temple on Norfolk Street. The governor of New York and the mayor of the city attended; German was used for most of the service, and was accompanied by a splendid organ and other instrumental music.
5. Angel Orensanz performs with his conceptual sphere in front of the Church Savior of the Spilled Blood the site of the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1881, in St. Petersburg, Russia, 2003.
1880s to 1950s: The Years of the Yiddish

Unexpectedly to the people on Norfolk Street, a group of radicals in St. Petersburg, Russia, assassinated Czar Alexander II, on March 1, 1881, by exploding a bomb on his carriage. Today, right on the spot where today is the Church Savior of the Spilled Blood, a magnificent temple that commemorates that tragedy. The assassins were narodniki (or populists), many of them Jews. During the reign of Czar Alexander III, pogroms erupted in Russia and Eastern Europe. This bloody persecution was the initial spark that preceded the historic emigration of tens of thousands of Jews to America. The successful Germans from the Lower East Side had by then moved uptown to the Upper East and West Side, and then into the Bronx and other far reaches of the metropolitan area. In their wake arrived tens of thousands of Eastern European Jews, the Yiddish. The Yiddish did not accept the concept of the Reform movement. Those who practiced were often Orthodox, and non-practicing Jews tended to be atheists and radical in their political views, like Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. Alexander Berkman had heard the exploding bomb from his classroom in St. Petersburg. It was the arrival of the Yiddish that ushered in the American labor movement, with a strength and consistency unparalleled and with its epicenter always in the Lower East Side.

From the 1880s to the end of the First World War, the synagogue on Norfolk Street did not fare too well. It passed hands from one congregation to another, with large spans of closed time. In the meantime, its old German splendor faded away. The gold stars in the ceilings disappeared, the Ark and the wall surrounding it lost their blue-and-gold patterns, only to be substituted by folksy floral
and ornamental themes. The pulpit changed positions, now looking East. Women were relegated to the balconies, and the organ was removed to a summer camp upstate. The towers in the front were removed, ending an important iconic link to Cologne. Services were returned to their traditional length and order, with Hebrew as the only language. Most congregants were poor and struggling to survive in a world of brutal living and working conditions. On the other hand, the synagogue on Norfolk gained for the first time a remarkable degree of acceptance among the Orthodox faithful. It changed its name from Anshe Chessed to Anshe Slonin (The people of Slonin, a city in Belarussia). It was precisely in Slonin where the Wermacht, and not just the SS, committed one of their first atrocities. The same day of the carnage in Slonin, a cable sent from Slonin to Berlin was intercepted by Scotland Yard in London detailing the massacre. Then, after World War I, Norfolk Street ascended to the pinnacle of the world cantorial recognition. The streetcars carried large signs announcing the name of the cantors for the High Holidays. There were several monument shops on Norfolk Street. A big kosher catering hall right across from our temple, another one on Houston Street and a couple more on Rivington made our space a privileged venue for weddings, bar mitzvahs, musical performances, and other social and cultural events. In the meantime, the neighborhood was teeming with industrial manufacturing life, and with vibrant theatrical and musical culture emanating from two dozen Yiddish theatres. Twenty daily papers in Yiddish, a string of halls where lectures and courses were imparted every single night made the Lower East Side the capital of the Yiddish culture. Hundreds of restaurants big and small, of all political, cultural and artistic persuasion brought brilliance and excitement to a very waspish New York. It was during the 1930s when the seeds of American theatre were sown right down Norfolk and Rivington Streets. Harold Clurman, with direct influence from Constantin Stanislavsky and the Moscow Arts Theatre, assembled actors and directors like Elia Kazan, Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Sanford
Meisner, as well as playrights like Eugene O’Neill and Arthur Miller into the cradle of modern American theatre. Their influence, abruptly silenced by Joseph McCarthy’s anticommunist crusade, reached people like Orson Welles, Marlon Brando and James Dean. Clurman’s artistic incubator was the Group Theatre that operated on strict communal lines.

The Yiddish Lower East Side from long before World War I to well after the Second World War was home to the Syndicate, a powerful criminal organization under the grip of Meyer Lansky, Bugsy Siegel, Lepke Buchalter and many other associates as the heads of other syndicates such as Lucky Luciano and Frank Costello. They built an empire of crime that stretched from Havana to Las Vegas. Soon after his arrival to our neighborhood, Meyer Lansky (born in Grodno, Lithuania, as Meyer Suchowlinsky), was charged by his mother to bring each Friday evening the Shabbas food to the bakery around the corner, for one nickel, to be picked well cooked the next day. One of those Fridays, he spotted a craps game on the corner of Delancey and Suffolk, and decided to try his luck. Years later, he would run the Syndicate empire from a back room at Ratner’s, the all-kosher restaurant on Delancey and Norfolk. Before Ratner’s closed for good in 2003, it opened a nightclub, Lansky’s, with access from Norfolk Street, served by a Norwegian chef. Pictures of Lansky and enlarged copies of his arrest warrants were hanging from the walls. Angel Orensanz was a regular customer, taking there his friends from Europe and Japan. When the owner of Ratner’s got married, before moving to the Midwest, in the very Lansky’s establishment, Orensanz was a formal witness.

From the mid-1930s until April of 1945, Berlin embarked on a war of supremacy over all of Europe and of the systematic extermination of the European Jewish communities to a level and depth never seen before. News of the Shoah in Germany and in Eastern Europe reached the Lower East Side, as it reached the rest of America, from
very early on. From the vantage point of the present, the silence of America (and of the Lower East Side) about this colossal genocide is incomprehensible.

Some of the poets on the Lower East Side wrote poetry of stunned, muted rebellion or stoic desperation. Aaron Zeitlin, Itzik Menger, Kadía Molodowsky and many other Yiddish poets wrote introspective, tormented poetry. This is a short poem of Kadía Molodowsky:

O God of Mercy,
For the time being
Choose another people.
We are tired of death, tired of corpses,
We have no more prayers
For the time being
Choose another people.

Little has been said of the devastating blow that Russia and the Allied forces inflicted upon Berlin and the rest of Germany, from Dresden to Cologne, from Munich to Hamburg. And in many instances, local populations also turned against tens of thousands of German civilians throughout Eastern Europe, immediately after the collapse of the Nazi regime. Seas of blood fire burned and soaked the twilight of Germany and of the German communities throughout Eastern Europe. Several millions died, victims of a foolish leadership. To the large German Jewish and Yiddish communities and throughout New York in our neighborhood, the first 50 years of the 20th century brought consternation and confusion alternatively from Germany and from Russia. Nazism and Marxism were both born in Germany and they both ended up bringing that country to blood and ashes, creating one of the most dreadful pages of history.

The culture of the Yiddish is best represented, characterized and embodied by Abraham Cahan (1860–1951). Born in Lithuania,
he spent most of his life in the Lower East Side as a writer, socialist thinker, and editor of the Daily Jewish Forward. The Forward and the Forward Building reigned supreme for half a century of Yiddish, intellectually well grounded, very secular, politically and socially involved. By 1925, the Forward was printing 250,000 copies daily. The social policies of New York (through Governor Alfred E. Smith) and the social policies of the entire country (through Franklin D. Roosevelt) were directly influenced by Abraham Cahan’s vision.
8. The interior of 172-176 Norfolk Street, circa 1975.
1960s to 1984: The Years of Devastation

After World War II, conditions in New York changed drastically. Long Island, Upstate New York, Florida and California received tens of thousands of Lower East Side residents that had labored for decades on those mean streets. Mostly the Yiddish but also the Irish, Italians, Ukrainians and many other ethnic groups moved away. The Jewish exodus resulted in the closing of hundreds of synagogues, theatres, newspapers, publishing concerns, restaurants, entertainment centers, the collapse of labor unions, and of the entire Yiddish culture. If the Lower East Side made possible the consolidation of Yiddish as a contemporary language fit for literature, theatre, politics, journalism and research, by the 1960s Yiddish was basically dead.

The neighborhood declined under the mayoral administrations of Abraham Beame, Edward Koch and David Dinkins, in a growing spiral of fires, boarding up of buildings, criminality and drug traffic. Abandoned synagogues were easy targets for vandals who destroyed the structures, stole the ornaments and furniture, and pilfered the brass, copper and other reusable materials. Antique dealers used to park their trucks in front of shuls while vagrants would load up them with pews, chandeliers, bookshelves and Aaron Kodesh. Jules Dassin, in his 1948 movie, The Naked City, movingly captures Norfolk Street and the exterior of our building. It is the grit of the neighborhood, but Dassin weighs in premonition and an ominous scent of the city’s imminent downturn. Our building on Norfolk Street ceased religious services in the spring of 1974 and was purchased by a string of developers who were expecting a revival of the neighborhood. One of the owners was
an investor architect who planned to use the historic structure as a grand entrance, like a Marriott Marquis foyer, to a luxury building that would occupy the entire block. (His project went nowhere at the time, but in the first days of 2005, his vision was realized in a sleek, 26-story hotel on Rivington and Essex.) The windows in the front were first stoned and then boarded up by the city, and the three doors in the front were cinderblocked by the city to prevent further crime. The gates were stolen, the books, Torahs, ornaments, pews, brass, the grand chandelier in the center of the space, above the bimah, the steps of the stairways, everything was vandalized, broken and destroyed. The Norfolk Street temple provided access to a web of passages and tunnels in a maze of abandoned buildings in the block that were open stages for crime day and night. The temple, once empty and desolate, was taken care of by an elderly woman named Klara, who lived in the lower part of the building with some hundred cats. She used to come out at midday with her cats to sit and feed them in rows on the broken steps. One day, her cats surfaced as usual at noontime, without Klara. She was found dead in a corner of the Assembly Room.

Photographs of the time show the façade and interior of the Friedericheverdesche Kirche in a disturbing similar state. Broken windows, collapsed beams, cinderblocked front doors, gaped ceilings through which the American and British bombs brought to ashes the devilish arrogance of Hitler, and in hindsight, the glory of Schinkel. Similar of worse Countence showed the Koln Dom. The Allied Forces left to Russia and its socialist satellites to deal with East Berlin and all its classical heritage. The regime of the German Socialist Republic did not touch those buildings and structures that embodied German splendor. They were all left to rot.

In the meantime, dozens of artists and social visionaries gravitated to the Lower East Side. They came to reclaim abandoned schools, synagogues, apartment buildings, empty lots and all kinds of structures. It was a reclamation of former private spaces to make
them public enclaves of creativity. That situation made possible a contradictory growth of urban misery and personal and collective crusades in education, the arts and social experimentation.

By 1983, the City of New York was intending to demolish the building that was born of the glory of Berlin and inhabited by the energy of St. Petersburg in the years before and after the Russian Revolution.

A significant part in the actual process that led to this period of devastation was triggered by the massive dislocations engineered and carried out by the urban policies of Robert Moses (1988–1981). Stuyvesant Town, the housing projects all along
the FDR Drive, the Meltzer Houses, the Village View, the Grand Street Developments... Robert Moses enthusiastically favored private over public transportation and massive dislocations. His urban development philosophy brought irreparable transformations to the landscape where the Germans and the Eastern European communities had developed such rich heritage. The irony is that Robert Moses comes, in some way, from the Lower East Side. His grandmother was an active member of Temple Emanuel during its early years on Chrystie Street and a main supporter of the Felix Adler Ethical Cultural Society movement. His mother was an active member of the settlement movement in the neighborhood and enrolled her son in the Ethical Culture Society School on the Upper West Side. Both his mother and grandmother were opposed to any religious education in their family.

The American playwright Ira Levin read a long article by David Dunlap in the February 18, 1987, New York Times. It was about how Angel Orensanz purchased the old temple on Norfolk Street and his plans to develop it into a studio and arts center. That report fired up Levin’s mind and began writing “Cantorial.” The play captures the time, the 80s, in which these young artists settle an old shul. Little by little hearing the intonation of an old cantor that from times past comes to the present to rekindle memories in the new inhabitants. Orensanz, in a video from 1989, describes the space, “as a cloud, a rock and a cave.” This space saved him from an alienating environment. The Berlin and gothic associations allow him to reconnect with the sacred green of Holderlin. The space allows him to come to terms with the etymological roots and legacy of his own name. The departure of his ancestors from Spain at the end of the 15th century, their settlement in southern France and their return to Spain at the end of the nineteenth century, were wandering people.
1986 to the Present: The Orensanz Years

On one evening in February 1986, Angel Orensanz, recently arrived from Atlanta, Georgia, took a stroll around the Lower East Side looking for a building where he could establish his sculpture studio. He walked from Delancey past the corner of Rivington and Norfolk and up to Houston, finally stumbling upon the former Anshe Slonin on Norfolk Street. Grim, silent and abused, the building looked grounded and frightened. Thomas McEvilley imagined the building sitting “like an ancient spirit with folded wings.” Orensanz moved up the steps and peeped through a crack in the cinderblocks covering the doorspaces. The sun was setting, spanning an arch of light over the ark and the eastern wall. Beams were leaning from the balconies into the main space, strewn with debris, broken glass, decaying books and dark stairways. Orensanz later located the owner, a developer with numerous holdings in the neighborhood, who eventually sold him the building.

Angel Orensanz had arrived in New York after doing a lot of sculpture in Atlanta, Boca Raton, Los Angeles, and other parts of the country. After his return to France, he discovered the Lower East Side and was charmed by its European colors and flavor. Soon after purchasing the property, he opened its doors and windows, sealing them off from pigeons and the wind and snow. Then he secured the floors and brought in electric light. By the late spring of 1986, he opened an exhibition of his new work, for a museum of John Portman at Sea Island. People were enchanted by the space when the doors opened. Since that day, close to a million people have come to hear concerts, attend services, see exhibitions, participate in weddings, bar and bat mitzvahs and all kinds of lectures,
community events and holidays. Lou Reed, Philip Glass, Whitney Houston, Jerry Adams, Elie Wiesel, Spike Lee, Alexander McQueen, Sidney Lumet, Neil Shikoff, Mandy Patinkin, Maya Angelou, Erica Jong, Lars Lubovitch, Jacques Derrida, Norman Mailer, Arthur Miller, the Kronos Quartet, Frank and Malachy McCourt, P.S. 1, the Whitney Museum, The Goethe Institute, The Italian Cultural Institute, The British Council, and hundreds of other well known people and institutions have addressed large assemblies of people or presented their creations for audiences from around the world.

In 1989 Angel Orensanz left the day to day affairs of running the center and traveled to Lithuania, St. Petersburg and Moscow to exhibit his work. He was well familiar with Berlin and the influence of Schinkel. In 1992 he developed a conceptual tribute to Schinkel and Heinrich Heine in locations significant to both of them in Berlin, Cologne and Munich. Ever since, he has combined the practice of his work with the public use of this building. He has designed his work for Japan, Germany, Italy and Argentina from the second balcony, facing downtown Manhattan.
In the fall of 1992, we celebrated the reunification of Germany with a weeklong program of art, music and poetry. We heard poems by Heine in their original version, and later we premiered an opera devoted to memorializing his poems of Jewish, Christian and socialist bent.

Orensanz spent long periods of time in Japan, both in Tokyo and to a greater degree, in the northern rural areas with small villages amid forests of sakuras and low pine trees, natural waterfalls and dirt roads signaled with toriis. He created projects in deserted valleys and country river banks in Sagadaira, Sapporo and Akita. Over the years he has come regularly to show his art, play his quasi ritual performances in the sands mostly burned by short summers. Shugo Nakanishi has always been at hand to connect and redirect the attention of over regulated local folks. But that periodic exposure to and absorption of the Japanese system of values happens to be a reconnection with ancestral values of other distant, unexposed people and earth. These include the Spanish Pyrenées right after the end of World War I, when Walter Benjamin was trying to flee the German terror; when the Spanish Maquis were trying to mobilize the masses against the regime of Franco. That environment is where Angel Orensanz was born. The region, like most of the countryside of Spain, was returned to the former decades of at end of the 19th century. The values carried over from the distant past or forced on the population by harsh conditions and living standards of pure survival. Those two sets of circumstances helped Orensanz model his understanding about how to deal with a task as complex and consuming as the reconstruction of the building at Norfolk Street. Orensanz’s methodology could be reduced to a handful of principles, such as: build on the existing condition of construction; recycle elements left from earlier periods or from similar uses; continue the preceding use into new uses; reconfigure elements left over from temporary or occasional uses into permanent, new services; take a
long view of the process of rehabilitation, encompassing decades, not just years; and allow for the adaptation to organic needs that derive from uses that prove to be most conducive and congenial. Although Orensanz relinquished his day to day involvement with Norfolk Street, he has always maintained a close and defining sight on every detail of the maintenance and use of the historic site.

A regular participant in the life of this building has been for the last few years a Reform congregation, the Shul of New York, that meets regularly for Sabbath services. Very early on, Annie Hamburger came to see the building, attracted by her interest in theatre on special locations. She always dreamt of a “Merchant of Venice,” but settled for a splendid “Mystery School” by Tyne Daly, right at the time when she left New York. Annie Hamburger passed on to Orensanz, very, very early on, some of her best experience in addressing issues of fire regulations, certificate of occupancy, crowd security, and other code regulations of the City of New York. She referred Orensanz to William Daily, a senior zoning consultant and preservationist. An architect/engineer has always been retained to make sure that the use and adaptability were properly addressed. In June 2001, Orensanz was invited by a group of friends to bring one of his performances to Tokyo for a commemoration of the end of World War II, in which the U.S. Air Force destroyed most of Tokyo. Orensanz’ intervention took place on June 22nd in front of the Senso-ji Temple, a reconstructed building in concrete that replaces the former Senso-ji, originally built all in wood in the medieval times in what it used to be in the heart of Tokyo.

Orensanz not only uses the building for his designs and to plan his interventions in several parts of the world, but to set up elaborate stagings that for a few days occupy the entire space. These intricate conceptual stagings consist of flying mannequins, water cascades, and floating light bodies in distant galaxies. The sculptures were videotaped and later exhibited in galleries and
museums. “Spheroid Memories,” “Kunstluft,” “Earthface,” “In NASA’s Lab,” “The Steppes of Mars” and many others are now regularly screened in various countries.

On September 11, 2001, while a team was filming his work in the main floor, Angel and Al Orenszan, joined by Maria Neri, director of operations and events in the building, saw the Twin Towers falling in ashes. Our building came through the dust and acrid smell of months of tears splendid and alive. Last spring, the Alexander Pushkin museum in Moscow exhibited a retrospective of Orenszan’ art work and the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg carried the show during the month of May. The title of this show was “Earth, Death/Birth.”

On September 12, 2001, a young man rang our door bell to enquire about getting married in our space. He had just crossed the police barricades that were blocking every corner from Houston Street down to Ground Zero. After showing his passport, he got to our building. He and his fiancee, both young Jewish architects, were working on a new hotel at Rivington and Ludlow. Somehow, the building on Norfolk Street has proven to be a magnet for sensitive, self-aware young New Yorkers who want to reconcile the past, present, and future; beauty, history and spirit, a true experience, or as the Marxist German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey would call it, “an Erlebnis.”
Bibliography for Anshe Chesed


Bibliography for Angel Orensanz


Photo/Illustration Credits


17. Photo of Angel Orensanz, standing on stage, below light installation entitled, “Galaxy” by Michael Chybowski in 1999 for a play entitled, “Mystery School.”