

Abstract

“From The Heights Of Emotion To The Depths Of Investigation”

by Nigel Cox, Head of Exhibitions and Visitor Communication, Jewish Museum Berlin.

Daniel Libeskind’s famous building aroused strong emotions in the more than 350,000 visitors who visited it when it was empty. Now that the museum is open, the architecture of the Jewish Museum Berlin continues to be a key factor in attracting over half of its visitors, and the building continues to elicit an emotional response. But do visitors learn anything from those emotions? The Jewish Museum strives to shift the focus of its visitors from the emotional to the narrative of German Jewish history, through its exhibitions, and then deeper to the facts and documents which underlie this history. The museum’s archives are presented to ordinary visitors through workshops, school publications featuring archival material, a dedicated Learning Centre and, where possible, on-line.

From The Heights Of Emotion To the Depths Of Investigation

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The museum where I work exists because of the particular nature of Germany's past. The subject that the museum addresses is, Two thousand years of German Jewish history. Standing at the center of that history is the Holocaust, and without the Holocaust our museum would not exist. We are not a Holocaust institution – we say this every chance we get. But we are defined by the Holocaust and there is nothing we can do about that.

We are also defined by a single object, our largest and most well-known artifact, which is our building – the zig-zag zinc building designed by architect Daniel Libeskind. Our visitor research shows that for over half of our visitors, our building is one of the main reasons for their visit. It's a bit humiliating this, if you're a museum maker and want your visitors to be attracted to your museum by the deeply profound things your exhibitions have to say. But you can't fight reality. That building is our Coke bottle, our most recognizable part – if it is true, as we susceptible to thinking, that we are world famous, then this is entirely because of that building.

The nature of the building generates particular problems. I don't know whether you're aware of this but it was opened to the public as an empty building for two years – this was before the museum opened as a museum. Over 350,000 visitors paid eight Deutsche Mark to visit its concrete towers and white-walled corridors. They were profoundly moved by what they experienced during their visit – and it is this emotion raised by the empty building which is the lens through which I am going to address our subject today.

The building is a Holocaust building. Its narrowing walls and cold concrete floors, its stark lighting, its fractured angles all evoke the Holocaust. It has massive empty spaces named Voids, which according to Daniel Libeskind represent the absence of Jews from European history. It has a Holocaust Tower, a Garden of Exile, a Stairs of Continuity – again, these features were all named by the architect. So, when visitors came to this cold, echoing, empty place, their emotions were strongly stirred. Most of those visitors were German and the history that the building addressed was their history. That empty building was a blank canvas for them to project their emotions on. They were strongly affected. A visit to the empty building was something like seeing a fantastic movie, bringing them face to face with the deepest, most troubled parts of themselves.

But did they learn anything?

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The debate about what kind of exhibition should be put in this building was an intense one. Germans love to discuss things and this was something which could be discussed endlessly. Now, I don't plan here to rehearse the history of the development of the museum's program – let it suffice to say that, like all museums, it was long, hugely conflicted and very difficult.

But one specific difficulty should be noted. As I said, we are not a Holocaust institution. Our brief is to show the interaction of two peoples over a two thousand year period. The Holocaust was to be addressed specifically by two other Berlin institutions – a new museum called the Topography of Terror, which will present the bureaucratic apparatus with which the Nazis managed the Holocaust, and, The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, which will open in May. We knew these other institutions were in development and were charged with complementing them in a responsible manner. Our task was to show Jewish life – not just death – and also to show the historical processes and stages through which their history in Germany passed.

Many people said that Daniel Libeskind’s building should be left empty. They were comfortable with it that way. Empty, they were able to make it mean whatever they wanted – I don’t mean that that is what they said. What they said was, It’s a great work of art, of sculpture. It’s full of meaning. It’s very profound. Leave it empty.

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Before we embarked on making the permanent exhibition which fills the museum we did a number of in-depth audience surveys. What we found was: that potential visitors thought they already knew everything that they needed to know about German Jewish history, thank you very much, and, That in fact they didn’t know anything like as much as they thought they did. They also told us that they didn’t want the museum to be what they called “finger pointing” – they didn’t want it to make them feel personally guilty.

This then was our task: to take those visitors attracted by the emotion raised by the building, and, without prompting guilt feelings, but without white-washing, pass on factual information about German Jewish history.

And this is what I have been asked to talk about: how the three modes of communication – architecture, exhibition and archive (I am yet to mention our archival holdings, but I am coming to it) work together to give our visitors access.

Access to what, exactly?

Well, there is our archive. Before we were the Jewish Museum, we were the Museum of the City of Berlin, which in one form or another had existed right through the post-war period. In the late nineteen-sixties one of the City Museum’s curators said, “There used to be Jews in Berlin – we should have a Jewish collection.” She began collecting material and, some fifteen years later had sufficient that a dedicated storage facility was called for. A design competition was announced to build “an annex to the Museum of the City of Berlin to hold its Jewish collection” and that is how Libeskind’s building came about – in the end the “annex” was so spectacular that it subsumed the museum which had called for it.

This is not to suggest however that our archive is huge. The Nazis did everything they could to ensure that there is nothing to collect. Then what did survive went in the main to Israel or the United States. It has been suggested that at the time of the architectural competition, the City Museum of Berlin had maybe enough archival material to fill two small rooms. Since then a succession of curators and archivists have worked diligently to expand upon that base. These days we have donations from over 800

individuals, plus the results of our ongoing purchase and collection activities. We also carry some two thousand microfilms from the Leo Baeck Institute in New York, which includes 1,300 memoirs from 1790 to the present. We have an expanding library which holds in particular a large collection of Jewish periodicals from roughly the same period. By arrangement with the Shoah Foundation we have over a thousand interviews on video with Holocaust survivors.

But what does all that mean to our visitors?

The museum has about three-quarters of a million visitors per year. As I said, over half of these come at least in part to see the building. Many come as part of a booked tour. We run over six thousand three hundred booked tours every year. More than half of these are for school children – teenagers. You see these teenagers when you pass through the museum, hundreds of them, lounging against the walls, holding hands, with high-fashion tee-shirts and haircuts, gazing vaguely about as though wondering what they are doing there. Our Guides try their very best to get them involved with the exhibition.

But you can see from their faces that it's a big ask. The building is daunting, frightening even. And so are the history and the emotions that lie behind it.

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The permanent exhibition of the Jewish Museum was designed to provide a narrative that opens up the history behind the emotions that the building provokes. The way it works is like this. First the visitors go to the underground part of the museum, where they visit what Daniel Libeskind called the Axes – the Axes of Holocaust, Exile and Continuity. We, making the museum, had no choice about whether they visited this part first – it was the way Libeskind designed the building. And what they experience there is mostly architecturally driven. There was, we decided, nothing we could do about this – the space was impossible to dress. So the nature of the spaces here is memorial. The visitors get what they came for, which is an emotional encounter with the most painful part of German Jewish history.

When they go upstairs to the permanent exhibition, the experience changes. We signal this change by presenting them first with a tree – a large pomegranate tree. The pomegranate is a Jewish symbol of life and we want to symbolize that here you will encounter life rather than death, that the memorial mood is broken.

Now the narrative of the exhibition moves, stage by stage, through two thousand years of history. It's not an exhibition that is classical in style. The Jewish Museum does not have a great collection of objects to draw on. Thus we use props, role-play computer interactives, reproductions – anything – that will make the exhibition engaging. That is our key word: we set out to engage our visitors. Where possible we do this through the use of personal stories; for artifacts, the number one requirement is that they have a story. Now: none of this is revolutionary. In fact the exhibition uses what have for many years been the standard techniques of “the new museology” to connect with its visitors. That was one of the decisions we took. We were more concerned about engaging our visitors, who are ordinary people, than about making a “radical” exhibition, a cutting edge piece of fancy presentation to go to with our cutting edge building. This I think was one of our key decisions.

It was not popular with “the cultural elite”, who expected something more austere and profound. Nor did it find favour with those who wanted the building empty so they could continue to project their emotions onto it.

But if popularity can be a yardstick – and I do acknowledge that there are others – then the Jewish Museum, which in Berlin is second only to the mighty Pergamon in annual visitation, is very successful indeed.

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But, how is it possible to make a connection between the huge, emotional, perhaps frightening things that the architecture presents visitors with and the specific objects and the facts that lie in our archive? Especially when most of these teenagers do not know that our archive even exists?

At the Jewish Museum, this is the way it works. The architecture attracts the visitors and stirs their emotions. The exhibition is designed to engage them with the history that lies behind those emotions. Then we set about trying to get them to dig deeper.

There are a variety of methods. One method is through the use of high-quality reproductions of archival material which are incorporated into “teacher’s kits”, together with guidance in how this material might be used in classrooms in conjunction with the German curriculum. Thus the archive is “taken out of the museum”. The kits are sold by mail. We found a corporate sponsor and so they are very cheap – 14.95 Euro. The teachers use them before a visit, so that the children have some idea of what it is they are coming to see and why.

Another method is through archive workshops. We run roughly forty a year, which is about all we can manage – thus they are always booked up in advance. Each workshop has 20-odd students, usually grades 10 to 13, which means the students are 15-to-19-year-olds. The workshops are preceded by a period of time spent in one segment of the permanent exhibition. Pupils are introduced to a subject through that exhibition segment. Then the students spend three hours in the archive. They are shown things – documents, photographs, 3-D objects – that relate to the segment they have just seen. Then they break into smaller teams of 3 or 4 and use these objects, under archival supervision, to piece together specific stories and biographies. They then present their findings to the entire group. Often one of the subjects they are asked to consider is which object they would exhibit to tell a story and why. This prompts them think about how museums work, what role archives play and so forth.

These workshops are also sometimes done with university students, when the level of discourse is of course more elevated. But the goals are the same – to engage the students with the material evidence of history. The tangible, measurable, evidence on which the development of ideas must be based.

Of course we also present our archives so that they can be accessed by scholarly researchers. We have a dedicated reading room, work stations, microfilm readers, staff, reproduction equipment – all the facilities that scholarly researchers might require. About 300 researchers use these facilities every year, and rising. We offer what we think is a high-quality research opportunity. But I don’t intend to say anything more about this as I don’t think these facilities are unique in any way – beyond noting that our reading room is open to all and even those who arrive from the floor of the

museum without an appointment will, if it is at all possible, be offered our full range of services.

We also present the material in our archives and collections through our Learning Centre. This large multi-media database is presented in its own facility, where via seventeen group and individual stations, visitors can navigate their way through narrative-based stories which use moving image, archival photographs, sound and text to present topics such as “Images of Jews” or “Exile in Shanghai” – which present in greater detail topics that have been opened up by the permanent exhibition. More than forty percent of our visitors visit this facility and use the stations.

The Learning Centre also informs visitors about the existence of our archive – as does this leaflet; or else they might explore via our website. The Leo Baeck holdings are presently searchable on-line and at present the museum’s major development initiative to expand its on-line access so that, within the next decade (and hopefully sooner) our entire archive will be available in digital form.

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This then is how the Jewish Museum sees its component parts working. Our mission states that we are to make “German-Jewish experience relevant for the present and future populations of Germany.” Our target audience is “the entire German population” including “tourists to Germany.” The purpose of the museum is “to emphasize the benefits of harmonious interaction between various ethnic, cultural, religious or linguistic groups; and to call attention to the high cost to all of intolerance.” This will only be possible if the history we present is both stirring to the emotions and is backed by the chance to explore the facts behind those emotions.

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