

Not what we expected: the Jewish Museum Berlin in practice

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Abstract

An extensive existing literature studies Daniel Libeskind's deconstructivist design for the Jewish Museum Berlin (JMB). This article focuses instead on the museum's exhibits from 2001 to today, their evolution in response to visitor criticisms, and their discursive setting, all of which exhibit museum and marketing professionals' attempts to deal with, and to an extent to overcome, the theory-driven and Holocaust-laden architectural programme. The JMB, in practice, while including the Holocaust as one component of visitors' experiences, instead *emphasizes* Jews and things Jewish as a positive component of a 'postnational' version of the German national narrative.

Key words: Germany, Berlin, Jewish, Libeskind, national, postnational, narrative.

Introduction: not a Holocaust museum or memorial

In June of 2005 The Jewish Museum Berlin (JMB) launched the third round in an advertising campaign first introduced in 2002. Conceived by the Berlin office of the international advertising agency, Scholz & Friends, this phase placed billboards bearing nine quasi-surreal photographs in 2,500 locations in eight German cities. The signature image featured a scallop shell staged to appear to sit on the ocean floor, yawning open to reveal, instead of raw mollusk organs, a well-cooked fried egg (fig. 1). The slogan for the campaign reflected on this and all the images' juxtapositions: '*Nicht das, was Sie erwarten*'. Not what you are expecting.

The JMB's long, complex, and controversial period of development and design - from temporary exhibitions in the 1960s, to concepts for a permanent display as a Jewish department in the Berlin History Museum, or the integration of Jewish history throughout that collection, to that for a self-sufficient museum of Jewish Berlin, and finally, Jewish Germany - has been well-chronicled elsewhere (Offe 2000: 147-151 & 183-199, Pieper 2006: 196-236, Young 2000: 154-173). Likewise, the museum building (fig. 2), designed by Daniel Libeskind and opened to the public without displays in 1999 and with them installed in 2001, has also received

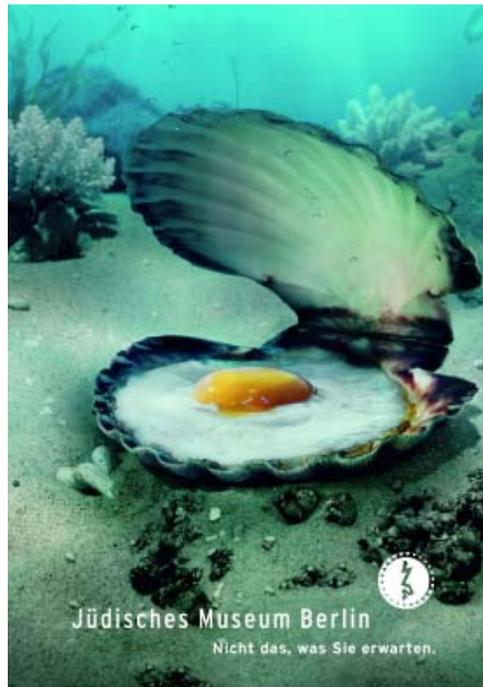


Fig. 1. Scholz & Friends, 'Jewish Museum Berlin. Not What You Are Expecting,' Advertisement, 2002, © Jewish Museum Berlin



Fig. 2. Daniel Libeskind, Jewish Museum Berlin, City View, foreground center, E.T.A. Hoffmann 'Garden of Exile,' foreground left, 'Holocaust Tower', photo © Bitter+Bred

much study, praise, and some criticism from sources both scholarly and popular (e.g.: Vidler 1996, Huyssen 1997, Offe 2000: 147-199, Sachs 1999: 100-107, Young 2000, Chametzky 2001, Broder 2001, Reid 2001, Fischer 2003-4; Pieper 2006, includes a thorough bibliography). This article focuses instead on the museum's current displays and the discursive setting for them in publicity and exhibition materials, both of which exhibit museum and marketing professionals' attempts to deal with, and to an extent to overcome, the Libeskind-building experience. The JMB has developed into a site of some tension between the visionary and the pragmatic, the morbid and the lively; between Germany's past and present and between architecture in theory (and prior to completing the JMB, his first realized project, Libeskind was known for purely theoretical architecture) and museums in practice. This paper argues that the JMB's exhibits, publications, and publicity - such as the remarkable 'Not What' campaign - as they have evolved since the museum's opening in September 2001, rather than emphasizing the singularity of German-Jewish experience, seek to 'normalize' German Jews and integrate their story into a broader German national narrative culminating in a more ethnically diverse and tolerant present.

Germany, like much of contemporary Europe, is increasingly diverse ethnically and religiously. In 2006, of some 84 million German inhabitants, about 2.4%, or about two million, were of Turkish ethnicity and another 6.1% ethnicities other than German. About 3.7% were practicing Muslims (CIA 2006). The percentages of non-traditional Germans run higher in large cities such as Berlin, which has about 200,000 Muslim residents, just under 6% of the city's total population, and about a half-million residents who are foreign-nationals (Berlin, 2007). Germany's Jews number approximately 120,000, about 10% of whom live in Berlin. Still only

about one-fifth what it was in 1933, the German Jewish community, Europe's fastest-growing, has tripled since unification, largely due to the influx of tens of thousands of immigrants from the former Soviet Union.



Fig. 3. Interior, Jewish Museum Berlin, prior to installation of exhibits, 1999, photo Susan Felleman

Scholz & Friends and its clients clearly believe that to sell in an increasingly if somewhat reluctantly multicultural society, one needs also to sell multiculturalism (Rectanus 2004: 142). Another Scholz & Friends campaign featured on one poster a frontal headshot of a black man, on another a silhouetted view of the Berlin Reichstag building, each labelled, 'A Saxon'. This identified both the iconic seat of the German parliament, made of limestone quarried in the German state of Saxony, and this African-German police officer, with the conservative, *echt* German province around Dresden (Rectanus 2002: 83-86 & 2004: 148-155). The ad confounded the prevalent identification of the Reichstag with the Federal Government, and, especially, cosmopolitan Berlin, and, more pointedly, of Saxons (and Germans generally) as white. Scholz and Friend's website declares, "Surprise! Persuade!" is our motto, because the benchmark for the effectiveness of a campaign is its impact. Is it creative enough to surprise the audience? Is it strategic enough to be persuasive?"¹

The 'Not What' advertising campaign was part of a broader strategic project on the part of the JMB's administration to dispel the widespread notion that visitors' experiences will centre on Holocaust remembrance. It assumes that many potential visitors expect a frightful and potentially sickening encounter with shocking *Shoah* details, images, and stories, and/or a churning slog through the long preparatory prehistory of German-Christian anti-Semitism. The surprising experience - but not shockingly traumatic *Schreck* that Freud associated in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* with a sudden, unexpected, and, most importantly, *unpleasant* experience - the grotesque Scholz & Friends advertising image suggests, is something other: while the conventional contents of a scallop shell would be decidedly unkosher, the museum advertises an unexpectedly more palatable history, and not only for Jews, but for the gentiles who form the majority of visitors here and at other Jewish museums in Germany (Kugelman 2001: 173). The



Fig. 4. Exhibitless 'void', 2006, photo author



Fig. 5. Jewish Museum Berlin with glass covered 'Sukkah' courtyard of Old Building, 2007, photo Guenther Schneider, © Jewish Museum Berlin

museum's press release announcing the ad campaign made this intention explicit: 'Someone who might be prepared for, say, a Holocaust memorial site, is going to come across something other than what he expected'.²

The expectation that the museum is either a Holocaust memorial site, or a Holocaust museum, was raised by Libeskind's famously disconcerting, deconstructivist JMB building design, featuring parsimoniously and irregularly pierced walls, skewed floors, and zigzag circulation. The effect of circumnavigating its empty interior, when it was open for tours prior to the installation of exhibits, was to disorient and destabilize visitors, somatically inducing feelings of displacement, emptiness, loss (fig. 3). Most famously, the path through the exhibition circuit, which also evokes a fractured Star of David, incorporates dark, unoccupied 'voids' at various points along the exhibition route, intending to structure the Holocaust as actual and metaphoric absence - of objects and through their absence, of people - into any and all aspects of a visit (figs. 4-5). This design has generated volumes of media and scholarly attention, vaulting the Berlin-based, Polish-American Jewish architect Libeskind to star status, and the building to 'cult status among critics and the public' (Fischer 2003-4, 2).

The JMB's collection and its integration into the Libeskind building remain two works in progress, given both the loss and destruction of so much of German Jewish material culture, and the building's programmatic commitment to highlighting human loss and material absence. If anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, and loss (of objects and people) form the always-already-knowns of German Jewish history and of the JMB building, the JMB in practice strives to counter Bennett's characterization of museums' missions in general, as 'repositories of the *already known*' (Bennett 1995: 147).

As the 'Not What' advertising campaign declared, the actual visitor experience of the museum has often confounded expectations raised by the 'already known' building and the best known dimension of German Jewish history. This article takes such visitor experiences as its subject. Its description and interpretation - the 'research model' - is based in the first instance on the author's direct observation and study of the building, the exhibits in it, and visitors to it over the course of seven years, having first toured the empty building in 1999 (and publishing an article in part based on that experience, Chametzky 2001a), and revisited it and its permanent and temporary exhibits at least a dozen times from 2002 to 2007. As an art historian specializing in twentieth-century German art and culture, the author takes such first-hand experience of the building, its contents, and their observed effects on visitors as primary source material for analysis. Having written on the varieties of German-Jewish identity, the JMB presents the author with a crucial resource and challenge (e.g. Chametzky 2001b). In addition to direct observation and general contextualizing of the German-Jewish problematic, this paper also relies on extensive study of the specific literature (academic and popular) on the JMB (which I will refrain from summarizing, but refer to where appropriate throughout the article); reading through visitor responses to the museum as they have been compiled by the museum through exit interviews; and interviewing a member of the staff - one of the museum cadre of friendly and knowledgeable 'hosts,' a largely youthful staff whose job it is to help visitors to appreciate the building and its exhibits. The 'hosts' form the most direct and immediate conduit of the museum's programme to its public, and of public responses to the museum, mediating between the two.

Like the museum itself, this article may confound the expectations of some readers. It describes and analyzes the JMB experience as it exists and as it has been constructed by the museum, its staff and publicists. This experience *includes* the Holocaust, and the Libeskind building, but is neither limited nor centred on either. The pre-Holocaust history of Jews in Germany is not presented as a teleological trajectory ending in genocide or finding its final metaphor in the 'void'. Extensive comparison to the related experience of a designated Holocaust memorial or museum is a topic that has received rather thorough attention elsewhere, and will only be commented upon briefly here, primarily at the article's end.³

Genesis of today's JMB: national, civic, and museal contexts and questions

Constituted as a privately-managed but Federally-funded foundation (and also supported by a variety of corporate and private patrons), the JMB presents a story of Jews throughout the

region now known as Germany. It was one of four Berlin cultural institutions brought under the Federal umbrella by former cultural minister Michael Naumann (appointed by Social Democratic chancellor Gerhard Schroeder in 1998), along with the city's contemporary theatre and film festivals, the 'House of World Cultures,' and the Martin-Gropius-Bau exhibition hall.

These institutions and events occupy a particular niche within Berlin's extensive 'exhibitionary complex' and the Berlin Republic's cultural politics. Berlin's municipal website declares:

Berlin has more than 170 museums and collections. They offer everything from the ancient to the ultra-modern - the Egyptian Nefertiti, the Greek Pergamon Altar, the painters of the 'Brücke' and the 'Bauhaus' and works by Baselitz and Beuys. The works found in the city's museums and collections and private galleries are as exciting as they are diverse.⁴

Within this densely-populated museum landscape the Pergamon Museum or various branches of the National Gallery correspond in origin and function to Bennett's 1988 concept of an 'exhibitionary complex': 'a set of civic institutions', developing in nineteenth-century cities, whose goal was 'to encourage new forms of civic self-fashioning', which might help conceptually to convert Berliners into Germans and Germany's self-conception into that of colonial world power (Kirshenblatt-Gimblet, 2006, 35). The more recent JMB, though, belongs among the 'diverse' and 'exciting' institutions which correlate more to Hall's concept of the contemporary 'experiential [rather than exhibitionary] complex'. These institutions and events promise temporary and contemporary 'experiences' for the visitors, often themed festivals or installations evoking a global, multicultural community, without asserting colonialist hegemony over them. Their successful financing and production provide evidence of the city's solvency, sophistication and contemporaneity as part of a global cultural and economic community (Kirshenblatt-Gimblet 2006: 35-36, Hall 2006). Visitors realize that their experience is simulation, but appreciate the techniques employed and take pleasure precisely in noticing the clefs between local and international forms of cultural tourism. They contrast, or provide an adjunct, to the more staid Louvre-like temples of culture on Berlin's 'Museum Island,' at the heart of the city's 'exhibitionary complex', located in the *Mitte* District, the former government and ceremonial centre of the Prussian imperial capital and of the GDR. This sector is itself undergoing extensive renovation and restoration. The results to date, such as the 2006 reopening of the Bode Museum as an elegant and spacious sculpture museum, adhere to rather traditional museological principles: they modernize displays, climatize environments, and provide more spacious and rational installations to render long-valued and already familiar *objects*, such as Tilman Riemenschneider's carved wooden figures, more accessible to visitors' 'attentive looking.' Such presentation assumes that these objects' 'visual distinction' requires little cultural justification or explanation (Alpers 1991: 27-30).

Not dedicated to the permanent display of treasured objects, the experiential sector of Berlin's cultural complex that includes the JMB has been identified as part of the Berlin Republic's 'cultural foreign policy', providing assurance to visitors and to the representatives of foreign governments that Germany no longer harbors the imperial ambitions or intellectually jingoistic pretensions used to justify carting to Brandenburg the Pergamon Altar or Ishtar Gate (Sartorius 2002: 74-6). Still, though, editors of a volume devoted to cultural policy in the 'Berlin Republic' suggest that Federal support for cultural projects in Berlin such as the JMB may also serve a tacitly nationalistic, domestic political agenda. They ask whether it responds to a continued 'yearning among Germans for unity, for a centre, and for a metropolis' - three characteristics of the modern nation state that have traditionally eluded Germany, and that now coalesce in postmodern, postnational, polyglot form in the 'Berlin Republic' and its institutions (Hoffmann and Schneider 2002: 9).⁵

Urban historian and Berlin-specialist Brian Ladd has written: 'Germany has been called the first postmodern nation and the first postnational society. Those labels refer to a tendency of German intellectuals to reject any unselfconscious German identity and to insist on questioning its nature and genesis' (Ladd 1997: 234). While German intellectuals still question their nation's genesis - born of defeat rather than triumph, created and sustained by occupying

powers and Cold War ideologies - after 1989 they have increasingly searched for unifying themes undergirding a contemporary understanding of what it means to be German. Harvard historian Charles Maier has detected that since the opening of the Berlin Wall and subsequent absorption of East into West Germany there has been revived interest in and a lifting of the taboo against attempts to explicate a national narrative, especially among liberal German historians and social scientists. In acknowledging and examining their and their nation's 'Germanness'. Maier claims, liberals have returned to the study of 'the significance of national identity, much as secular intellectuals might return to religious roots' (Maier 1997: 335-6). Museums such as the JMB, proposing a pluralistic German identity predating Nazism and the Cold War, provide a historical precedent for circumspect, liberal, postnational national narratives in the present.

How does the JMB - or German Jewish museums in general - instantiate this narrative? As institutions contributing to 'a version of the past that constitutes a part of collective memory' (Zolberg 1994: 70), Jewish museums in Germany spatialize and institutionalize the most negative story-line in the German national narrative. Some, such as the *Centrum Judaicum* housed in the restored *Orienburger Synagogue* in Berlin's *Mitte* district, unlike the JMB, preserve remnants of an earlier German Jewish community for contemplation at sites of significance to it. These cannot avoid serving also as memorials to a lost past and admonishments in the present.⁶ Neither they nor less site-specific museums such as the JMB can avoid evoking the Nazi's intention to house the material remains of an exterminated culture in the so-called Central Jewish Museum in Prague, established in 1942. This legacy has become the starting point for some of the most sophisticated considerations of the function of Jewish museums in Germany (Offe 1997: 77-78, 2000: 11-15). The contemplation of the remains of the Prague collection also formed the starting point of the literary theorist Stephen Greenblatt's conceptualization of the category of museal objects as objects of 'resonance'. A 'resonant' object, for Greenblatt, evokes a vast network of 'complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged', casting the viewer into a mental programme of historical, sociological, aesthetic, and/or anthropological association (analogous to Barthes's conception of a photograph's *studium*). This response contrasts to the 'wonder' of those objects that 'stop the viewer in his or her tracks' by conveying its own 'arresting sense of uniqueness', an essentially affective rather than intellectual response (analogous to Barthes's photographic *punctum*, Greenblatt 1991: 42). That the resonance of objects in German Jewish museums is especially connected to genocide and to the perpetrators' desire to document the process and display its results, can lead a scholar deeply involved with such displays to conclude that it 'is perhaps the ultimate absurdity that the remains of the history of a people that hardly ever enjoyed a secure place, sheltered against persecution and assault, are housed in the protected rooms of a museum - accessible only at certain times, safe-guarded against trespassing and human touch' (Offe 1997: 88). As state-supported institutions German Jewish museums struggle with their own 'absurdity' and futility, even as they fulfill their social 'duty to inform' and to enact the remittance of a 'debt to be paid at the creditor's domicile' - the dual meanings of *Bringschuld*, the current JMB programme director's analysis of the general conception of Jewish Museums in Germany since the 1980s (Kugelmann 2000: 185). Federal spending on Jewish-themed institutions is thus a form of restitution intended to inform the German populace as to *their own* Jewish heritage as *Germans*.

National in scope, ambition, and funding, by location and name the JMB is most intimately linked to Berlin - the specific site at which it dispenses *Bringschuld*. Cilly Kugelmann points out that the Libeskind design was developed to be an extension to the Berlin history museum, and therefore its conceptual zigzags and voids were actually 'planned not as a symbol of Jewish history, but as a metaphor for Berlin's civic history' (Kugelmann 2003: 290), which itself has been characterized by rupture, fragmentation, and abrupt changes of direction. Berlin only grew to prominence in the modern period, and therefore lacks a distinct and long-rooted regional, ethnic, or religious identity, in contrast to Munich, Hamburg, or Cologne. As a centre of Prussian power around which to unify disparate German states, as diverse and dynamic Weimar metropolis, as Nazi capital city, divided and occupied Cold War flashpoint and GDR capital, and as current polyglot international destination, Berlin's status in relation to German national identity has never been fixed and has always been problematic. After unification, Bismarck and Second Empire emperors decreed Berlin to be the all-German capital city, though

not without resistance and resentment. Hitler planned to transform bumptious, cosmopolitan Berlin into his grandiose, Jewless capital of the world, '*Welthauptstadt Germania*'. In both cases, extensive building programmes were to represent and embody imperial designs, from the Reichstag (1884-94) to the huge rotunda planned by Hitler and Speer to dwarf it.

Today's Berlin strives most stringently to repudiate and overcome the megalomaniacal, murderous dimensions of the Nazi legacy - which defined Germanness in terms of that which it excluded - if not the ambition to be a world-city or the all-German capital, now of the 'Berlin Republic' rather than a German empire. One means to repudiate the former and achieve the latter appears to be inclusion and public recognition, even celebration, of precisely those cosmopolitan minorities the Nazis persecuted, especially Jews. In the absence of a substantial Jewish community, though, it is again buildings and public spaces that would symbolically fill Berlin's historic void. Monuments, memorials, street and school names and, of course, museums all reconstitute the built environment of today's Berlin as, in-part, 'Jewish', in name at least.

As Pieper has argued (2006: 253-5), the JMB's status as a national museum, playing a role in the constitution of a new national (or postnational) narrative, was scripted in the early 1990s, just after unification and at a moment of increasing and increasingly visible attacks on minority groups, particularly in cities and towns of the former GDR, such as Rostock and Hoyerswerda. It was during the period of the Museum's construction that Berlin returned to its capital status and the intellectual armature for conceptions of a 'Berlin Republic' began to be constructed. Given Berlin's own history, the Berlin Republic tends more towards a hetero- than homogenous identity. The JMB's programme thus expanded to include not only civic metaphor but also a new and more inclusive national narrative.

One could alternatively imagine that a Jewish Museum Berlin could present a thoroughgoing questioning of any distinctly 'German' national narrative centred in Berlin, let alone one in which Jews, whose diasporic existence has historically challenged the centrality of national allegiances, play a leading role. Libeskind's design, which causes the visitor to wander along a very circuitous route with no definite destination in sight, certainly led to interpretations that expected such to be the case. In practice, though, *the JMB* presents a German national narrative, one in which German-Jews/Jewish-Germans assume positive, constituent roles in the project of German nationhood, which as Macdonald has argued, has long been a function of more traditionally designed and themed museums (Macdonald 2003: 3). Given German history, this is certainly a notable and even laudable new version of the national story - provided one accepts the legitimacy of the project of national narrative, with the present as concluding chapter. In post-Auschwitz, post-unification Germany (Fulbrook 1999) this chapter, as recounted by institutions with an essentially liberal and democratic self-conception and mission, most often promotes Habermasian 'post-traditional identity', based on commitment to constitutional democracy rather than to essentialist notions of Germanness as rooted in blood, soil, language, or a stable set of cultural traits and customs derived from the *Heimat* (not to mention the defunct GDR myth of 'Real Existing Socialism' - which also devalued the ethnic dimensions of history and identity, except perhaps in the case of the Slavic-German Sorbs). The JMB provides a model for a museum devoted to such post-traditional identity. In Germany's postnational present it represents a postmodern equivalent of the modernizing programmes of late nineteenth and early-twentieth century *Heimat* museums. As historian Alon Confino has shown, the proliferation of these throughout the empire, rather than presenting the rustically authentic artefacts of their local cultures as evidence of a fundamentally heterogeneous populace, 'emphasized local uniqueness only to reinstate this uniqueness into a larger national whole' (Confino 1997: 144), and so contributed to the overall project of German unification. Like those Wilhelmine displays, and conforming to Macdonald's analysis of 'national' museums - though here in an arguably 'postnational' context - the JMB displays objects (over and against 'the void') as property or possessions, primarily of individuals, to confirm identity not only as Jews or as Germans, but as 'both at once' - models for a postnational national identity that can be plural rather than singular.

Most writers prior to the September 2001 opening, and some since then, have concentrated on Libeskind's design and particularly on the architect's stipulation of zones within the structure that would remain empty, spaces where a straight, conceptual axis line crosses

the actual zigzag of the structure that would be left without exhibits of any kind, with their interior zones sealed to access and their concrete outer walls painted black and presenting darker, displayless areas within the museum (figs. 4-5). Physically confronting, intellectually challenging, and viscerally disconcerting the visitor, by means of absence, the voids were to render omnipresent the Nazi destruction of Germany's Jewish community and the unhealable, open wound in German national culture, identity, conscience and unconscious. Some commentators advocated that the structure remain empty, making it a permanent monument to the Holocaust, and to Libeskind's architectural vision (Lawson 1999, see fig. 3). Libeskind himself opposed this proposition.

Numerous commentators have teased out the theoretical implications of the museum's design. Huyssen (1997) called the creation of permanently absent zones surrounded by historical evidence of the causes of at least one of those absences, 'the only project in the current Berlin building boom that explicitly articulates issues of national and local history in ways pertinent to postunification Germany,' and to the historical fissures and still-gaping physical 'voids of Berlin', that it seemed too many builders were rushing to fill with less historically nuanced structures. Architectural theorist Anthony Vidler used it as a prime example of the postmodern return of modernity's and modern architecture's repressed latent anxiety about space and its potential not to free but to disorient and threaten:

confronted by the withdrawn exteriors and disturbing interiors the Jewish Museum or the Victoria and Albert extensions, we find ourselves in a phenomenological world in which both Heidegger and Sartre would find themselves, if not exactly 'at home' (for that was not their preferred place), certainly in bodily and mental crisis, with any trite classical homologies between the body and the building upset by unstable axes, walls and skins torn, ripped and dangerously slashed, rooms empty of content and with uncertain or no exits or entrances (Vidler 1999: 238).



Fig. 6. Old Building (Kollegienhaus, 1735, restored 1963) and Libeskind Building ('Between the Lines', 1998) viewed from the street, photo Bitter+Bredt, Berlin, © Jewis

Drawing on Vidler's earlier work, *The Architectural Uncanny* (Vidler 1996), James Young claimed that by juxtaposing objects with the facticity of their own or their maker's or owner's annihilations, Libeskind's architecture, would render 'all meanings, however contradictory and paradoxical palpable' (Young 2000: 179).

My own reading of the JMB-building, published in September 2001 which was based like that of others on touring the empty building and studying the architecture and its theoretical claims was, however, emboldened by Derrida's dissent from the very prescriptive design (Libeskind 1997: 110-112). I took the origins of the project as an extension to the existing Berlin History Museum as a central metaphor, and interpreted Libeskind's 'Between the Lines' - the project's conceptual and official name - as a kind of prosthesis, a functional, mechanical, 'added-on' device that also functions as the visible sign of bodily damage, attached to the still intact, proportional, 1735 classical German Baroque Kollegienhaus (fig. 6). Given that nausea was one intended and actual effect that the empty museum had on visitors, and especially in traversing the tilted field of pillars in the E.T.A. Hoffmann Garden of Exile (figs. 1, 7), I fretted that visitors would consciously or unconsciously associate a 'Jewish' experience with infirmity and sickness - a traditional anti-Semitic trope inscribed into the JMB design and somatically into the visitor experience, which I contrasted to the metaphor of 'health' inscribed into Norman Foster's renovation of the Reichstag building.

In the anthology, *A New History of German Literature*, Edward Dimendberg's entry for 1989 discusses the texts informing Libeskind's design and provides an excellent summary of its relationship to the once nearby and now departed Berlin Wall and to 'the voids of Berlin' left in the wake of the wall's dismantling (Dimendberg 2004). Interpreting the museum as a literary text and Libeskind as author, the referents Dimendberg identifies are those provided by Libeskind's design brief: Schoenberg's opera *Moses and Aaron* and its Judaic silence in the face of the impossibility of representing God; Benjamin's 'apocalyptic vision of Berlin in *Einbahnstrasse*' with the building's 'abrupt transitions in sharp angles' more akin to Benjamin's *flaneurie* and essayistic style than to architectural tradition and experiences based on hierarchical space and rational circulation; and finally to the *Gedenkbuch*, the massive black memorial tome of names, addresses, and dates documenting the deportation and murder of Berlin's Jews, an alphabetically ordered archival text, void of further commentary (on the JMB as text, see also Offe 2000: 164-83).

Exodus through the JMB: time-travel to the present

Now that the museum has been guiding visitors through its displays for more than five years, the literary genre to which this experience belongs seems, however, to be none of those ascribed to it, in theory, by Dimendberg. The visitor-experience designed and written by the management and presented by the staff of the museum is neither the void, nor memorial silence, nor bodily sickness, not a one-way street or twelve-tone opera, but a form of edifying, perhaps surprising but not shocking or sickening, travel literature. With the opening of the permanent exhibition in September 2001, the museum posed the question: 'How does one travel through

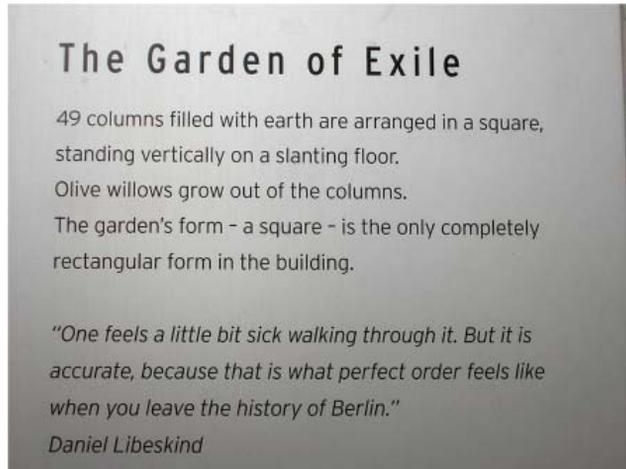


Fig. 7. Sign for E.T.A. Hoffmann Garden of Exile, 2006, photo author

time? How to traverse two millennia of German-Jewish history?' And answered: 'The best way is at the Jewish Museum Berlin... time-travel through German-Jewish history'.⁷ While the tourist, particularly in the post-9/11 world, will suffer some discomfort and uncertainty, the ultimate goal is to arrive safely once more at home, having 'tolerated' and then assimilated any otherness experienced along the way to one's own experience within a dominant national culture, in which acceptance of the very idea of a national *Kultur*, or civilization, is the *sine qua non* for successful assimilation and participation.



Fig. 8. Interior Public Entrance, 2006, photo author

The JMB opened to the general public on September 11, 2001. From its first day, then, security has been a major concern. Security concerns increased in July 2003 when a 26 year old Pakistani residing in Krefeld was apprehended, and later tried and convicted, for planning a bombing that may have had the museum as a target.⁸ Visitors enter the Museum only through the Kollegienhaus entrance, where the some 2,000 per day all pass through a single metal detector (fig. 8). Security is out-sourced to a private firm. The Museum employs no guards, and there is no uniformed security within the exhibits. Rather, one is greeted at the entrance, at the information booth, at the stairway leading down and into the Libeskind extension and its exhibits, and helped along the journey by 'hosts' (so-called in both German and English): young, well-educated, multi-lingual docents sporting prominent red neckerchiefs (fig. 9). Their bright identifying neckwear associates them with travel, as it rather closely resembles that worn by conductors and hospitality staff on the German national railroad, the *Deutsche Bahn*, or by boy or girl scouts.

The JMB's permanent exhibition, 'Two Millennia of German Jewish History' occupies some 4,500 square meters organized axially through the long, narrow, circuitous corridors of the museum's two upper floors. It is subdivided into fourteen sections: 'Beginnings', quickly deals with the movement of Jews into Central Europe with the Roman Legions; 'The Medieval World of Ashkenaz,' centres on the Rhineland communities of Speyer, Worms, and Mainz; 'Gliki bas Juda Leib,' focuses on the memoirs of the Jewish woman Glückel of Hameln (1646-1719); 'Rural and Court Jews,' presents differing eighteenth-century Jewish class affiliations;

'Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment,' celebrates the German-Jewish contribution to that intellectual awakening; 'Tradition and Change' highlights some consequences of Enlightenment, while 'In the Bosom of the Family' showcases domestic continuity; 'German and Jewish at the Same Time,' deals with the mid-nineteenth assimilation of liberated Jews to the developing German national identity, in the period of unification; 'The Emergence of Modern Judaism,' 'Modernism and Urban Life,' 'East and West,' and 'German Jews – Jewish Germans,' bring the story up to the eras of the First World War and the Weimar Republic, while 'Persecution – Resistance – Extermination,' documents Nazi policies and Jewish fates. Finally, 'The Present,' very sketchily presents the post-War, post-Holocaust German-Jewish experience, a patchwork topic for obvious historical reasons.

The emphasis throughout these exhibits falls, first, on family histories, the narratives of which transcend national borders and identities, while also assimilating Jewish experience to the familiar bourgeois familial sphere. Second, the exhibits stress Jewish integration into the general fabric of German society.

The German Jewish community from the Enlightenment up to the Nazi reaction had indeed achieved remarkable, if qualified, assimilation to German social life and values. The JMB's ultimate goal is to preserve and celebrate this history of assimilation and cooperation and to use it to promote a qualified tolerance of cultural diversity in contemporary Germany - to define the German national narrative as one that can be inclusive of some degree of religious and ethnic difference. By *qualified*, I mean a tolerance that accepts differences that still comply with normative, modern, western social practices, privileging particularly a national identity that transcends religion and ethnicity. Such tolerance invites industrious individuals, rooted in strong families, to encourage their subgroup's participation in, and contribution to, the progress of the national society,



Fig. 9. Exterior Public Entrance, 2006, photo author

economy, and culture as a whole. Focus on domesticity and on broad cultural commonalities, rather than stressing uniquely Jewish institutions, habits and needs - and, especially, points of intractable conflict with normative, and often stridently anti-Semitic, Christianity - marks the anodyne, if not uncontroversial, path through German Jewish history and into present day Germany that the JMB has chosen to follow.

At the JMB, once it's clear that we have tickets for our *Entdeckungsreise* (journey of discovery), as the museum calls the visit, the hosts' role is to help us have as pleasant and informative a journey as possible. One host with whom I spoke at some length in May 2006 stated that at a recent meeting the Museum management delivered an unambiguous message that hosts were to emphasize less the potentially oppressive aspects of the architecture, as in

stating, 'you are entering the Holocaust Tower', and allow visitors a potentially more playful, positive, self-guided experience. Management is thus working to overcome an aspect of the architecture that I criticized in 2001, and others also noted: its extremely didactic, prescriptive quality, which I compared to Etienne-Louis Boullée's eighteenth-century dream of an *architecture parlant*, buildings whose forms would clearly and even stridently assert their functions and meanings (Chametzky 2001a: 249).⁹

My host-informant also offered insight into the way some particular visitors' expectations are confounded, as the Scholz & Friends poster predicted. As Israeli visitors exit, they often comment, 'where was the Holocaust?'; while Americans ponder, 'what happened to anti-Semitism?' In that these two topics are surely present in the museum - the single, subterranean entrance and exit assures that the Holocaust is present at the start and conclusion of all journeys - these responses (admittedly impressionistic and unscientifically gathered) do attest to the fact that for some segments of the audience, the museum is 'not what they expected'. But, the vast majority of visitors, about 75%, are German, and the exhibition is largely geared towards them and their expectations. According to the JMB's director, W. Michael Blumenthal - an American economist born near Berlin in 1926, who served as Secretary of Treasury in the Carter administration and is credited as the individual most responsible for the museum achieving autonomy from the Berlin History Museum (Pieper 2006: 283) - a major goal of the JMB is to prevent Germans, when they think of Jews, from thinking only of Auschwitz (Broder 2001). JMB programme manager Cilly Kugelmann reiterated this point recently in the leading German-Jewish newspaper (Benz 2007). Both confirm Sabine Offe's 2001 supposition, that the JMB's programme has less to do with the Jews of the past than the non-Jews of the present (Pieper 2006:196). This observation builds on her assertion, backed up by Kugelmann (writing prior to her move from the Jewish Museum Frankfurt to the JMB) that 'Jewish museums in Germany....have been established for a largely non-Jewish public' (Offe 1997:78 & 2001: 96-98, Kugelmann 2001: 173).

The JMB turned to New Zealander Ken Gorbey to coordinate its first permanent exhibition. Known for theme park like historical recreations, such as the very popular Museum of New Zealand, *Te Papa Tongarewa* (see Williams 2005), the Gorbey appointment aroused fears that he would create a 'Disneyland' atmosphere. To design the inaugural exhibits, Gorbey hired the Munich firm of Würth & Winderoll, already credited with designing the '*Haus der Geschichte*' (History House) in Bonn, which has been described as 'a multi-media slalom through German history' (Fischer 2004). Blumenthal defended these populist choices just before the September 2001 JMB opening, on the grounds that the museum did not want an exhibition 'for hyper-cultivated intellectuals' or 'nit-picking know-it-alls'.¹⁰ The JMB consulted on its exhibits from October of 1999 with an international team of advisors, including Israeli museum director Ori Abramson, James Volkert of the Museum of the American Indian, eminent historians Wolfgang Benz, Dan Diner, Fritz Stern, Saul Friedlaender, and others (Harprecht 2001). Most commentators deemed the work successful and their journey through the exhibition serious and thought provoking, though there was some dissent that the exhibition represented a 'feel-good triumph,' that 'overran the Libeskind design' (Posener and Stein 2001).

Like other mass media, museums respond to their audiences. They depend for continuing support on favourable ratings and healthy attendance figures. They are thus increasingly interactive not only within their exhibits, but also in response to visitors' criticisms of these, of their facilities, and of their level of customer service. The current permanent JMB exhibition actively responds to concerns and problems expressed by visitors, especially those voiced about the initial installation. Exit interviews showed that many found the first installation of the exhibition too demanding and the number of objects on display too great. They complained then, as they still do, and as travellers often do, about the overrun coat-check areas, about becoming disoriented, about too few places to sit, and about a lack of refreshments along the way. Many viewers felt that the permanent exhibition presented an orientation and endurance challenge. One visitor commented that navigating it required a Boy Scout's trail blazing skills.¹¹ In response the museum introduced a red line guiding guests through the exhibition (fig. 10) and, somewhat later, an espresso bar at the bottom of the stairs connecting the second to the first floor. But the fact that the exhibition was not particularly accusatory was appreciated: 'It's good to see an exhibition about Jewish beliefs (sic)...without being stamped



Fig. 10. Path to 'Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment, 1740-1800' section of Permanent Exhibition, 2006, photo author

right away as a German perpetrator'.¹² Nowhere in visitors' comments have I come across mention of the void or of sickness as central to their experience of the museum. The red line (and refreshments!) reduces the analogy to diasporic wandering, and lessens the likelihood of encountering absence. It follows Kugelmann's conception, that the museum needed to be 'a place of display (*Schauort*) and instruction (*Lernort*) for a public largely not well versed or informed' [about German Jewish history], necessitating a 'traditional exhibition structure incorporating recent museological conceptions....so the visitor can understand the history as the result of continuously developing processes' (Kugelmann 2003: 290, 292). The abrupt turns, ruptures, and voids of history and the museum building design are thus presented as challenges but not barriers to continuity.

In addition to computer-based animations and other electronic interactive displays, the JMB also depends on many low-tech techniques that appeal to both the tactile sense - demanding that you touch, in the museum - and to a primal desire to play with and so to affirm the materiality and mobility of actual objects, like children's toys (Kugelmann 2003: 293). Examples of this genre include a giant plastic garlic bulb that can be opened up by hand into sections representing the medieval Rhineland Jewish communities of Speyer, Worms, and Mainz, collectively known as '*Shum*' (Hebrew for garlic), and panels that one can spin about to see on one side a book's cover and on the other a photograph and biography of the author (fig. 11). The visitor's physical, scopic, and tactile journey through the Libeskind building and its interactive exhibitions intends to stimulate not only intellectual, but also somatic and emotional awareness of German Jewish history, which is key in the absence of the sorts of famous, monumental, or singular objects that typically reward museum visitors' 'attentive looking'.

In August 2002 Ken Gorbey returned to New Zealand and was replaced by Cilly Kugelmann, educated in history and art history at the Hebrew University, who has described her personal relationship to Judaism as that of 'a non-believing ritualist'.¹³ She could also be described as a consummate museum professional, committed to museum spectatorship (and

sponsorship), as one of contemporary culture's most important secular rituals. A lecture she delivered at the Leo Baeck Institute in London in March 2004 described the JMB as 'Like a Bridge over Troubled Water - The Jewish Museum Berlin between Traditional and Commercial Challenges'. She is also all for interactive exhibits, including touch and sound, 'surprising contextualizations' and a degree of 'self-irony', in order for the museum's content to appeal to 'a public diverse in levels of education and age' (Kugelmann 2003: 293).

For both the permanent and temporary JMB exhibits, Kugelmann stresses three essential elements: the presentation of objects, their staging through installation, and texts interpreting them. The visual comes first: '[t]hemes for which strong visual material exists are a better basis for an exhibition than those that rest on conceptual constructs'. So, while the story of German Jewish emancipation from the founding of the Second Empire through the First World War is very important historically, it is 'not very visual' and so not conducive to exhibition. 'In conceiving of the JMB's exhibition programme our first consideration is which themes in Jewish history and culture are interesting enough and lend themselves to a visual experience'¹⁴ (see also Kugelmann 2003: 291). This consideration implicitly points to a central problem with which the museum has had to grapple: how to present German Jewish history visually and materially in the absence of so many of the 'interesting' visible objects that Kugelmann says are necessary for an engaging exhibition? Unlike the site of a former synagogue or other Jewish institution or home, the Jewish Museum itself has no material connection to the history of Jews in Germany - except through those objects displayed in it. Instead of being a site of memory memorializing a past lived and destroyed at this location (semiotically speaking, it has no 'indexical' relationship to Jewish history, but rather a metaphorical one) it might be thought to institutionalize 'fictitious commemorative relationships' acting as a site at which 'to deal with guilt in a highly ritualized way' (Offe 1997: 85). This would certainly be the case with the 'Holocaust Tower' into which visitors are ushered - not an actual cell, railcar, or crematorium chimney - but an architectural construct simulating such an environment, as well as a chapel tower, for those visitors who are receptive to the experiential complex's attractions.

The JMB, though, has received a flood of donations of objects - from paintings and musical instruments and decorative arts to household items, gadgets, and especially letters and documents. The Museum's task has been, often, to integrate such objects into narratives, documenting where they have been, how they survived, and how they found their ways into the collection. Lacking objects of 'wonder,' this museum relies on adding 'resonance' to objects to appeal to visitors. Like 'Antiques Roadshow' object-stories, these narratives appeal to 'a popular interest in the associations between family, heritage, place and artefact' (Fyfe and Ross 1996: 128). The object-stories told at the JMB, though, are largely disconnected from the 'surprise' discovery of monetary value.

Under Kugelmann - also the acting director of the museum, since W. Michael Blumenthal resides for most of the year in Princeton - the JMB began its programme of temporary exhibitions in 2003. That year, it very aptly brought to light the Loevy Foundry, the Jewish-owned and later 'aryanized' Berlin metals firm responsible for casting the bronze-lettered inscription '*Dem Deutschen Volk*' (To the German People) above the Reichstag entrance. This historical irony - the very people who created the inscription *to the Volk* would soon be excluded *from the Volk*



Fig. 11. Display of rotating panels with book covers and authors, 2006, photo author

- is now noted at the entrance to the Reichstag. In 2004 an exhibition surveyed Libeskind's architecture, featuring his model for the 1776 foot tall 'Freedom Tower' at New York's 'Ground Zero', and another exhibition, '10 + 5 = God. The Power of Numbers,' like many at the JMB, stressed the interaction of Jewish and Christian traditions in Germany. This interaction was vividly showcased in the popular 2005 'Weihnukka' exhibition – 'Stories of Christmas and Hanukkah' - which highlighted ritual overlap between Christian, Jewish, and Pagan winter celebrations. Populist in conception, the show opened with Bing Crosby singing Irving Berlin's canonical Christian holiday song, 'White Christmas', and ended with Adam Sandler performing his irreverent 'Hanukkah Song.' This exhibition drew criticism from Stephan J. Kramer, General Secretary of the Central Council of German Jews, who claimed it stressed assimilation and commonality at the expense of 'authentic' Jewish identity:

It answers the non-Jewish desire to dissolve all the differences and contradictions



Fig. 12. 'Hanukkah Market,' courtyard of Old Building, December 2005, photo author

between Judaism and Christianity...the majority of German society still, or once again, views Jews as foreigners. In this milieu authentic Jewish identity is only conditionally accepted.¹⁵

The museum's head of marketing, Klaus Siebenhaar, conceived of the 'Weihnukkamarkt' ('Chrismukka Market') in the Kollegienhaus courtyard, patterned on the ubiquitous German outdoor Christmas Markets where one can buy crafts and snacks. This has become a yearly tradition at the JMB, which seems to have created a new holiday market sector: wooden Stars of David and latkes in place of the traditional Christmas crèche and *Lebkuchen* (fig. 12).¹⁶

At the end of September 2007 the JMB inaugurated the new glass enclosure over the Kollegienhaus courtyard, designed by Libeskind and titled 'Sukkah' (Tabernacle, figs. 13 & 5). According to the JMB, it 'will provide the Museum with a room in which to hold events such as educational workshops, concerts, theatrical performances, and receptions for up to 500 people



Fig. 13. Glass 'Sukkah' Courtyard, opened September 2007, © Jewish Museum Berlin, photo Bitter+Bredt, Berlin



Fig. 14. The Subterranean Axes, photo Jens Ziehe, © Jewish Museum Berlin

year round'.¹⁷ The 'Sukkah' courtyard sits opposite the staircase leading down to the Libeskind building, and down to the areas of the museum most concertedly dedicated to the visceral experience of Jewish persecution and annihilation. To access the museum's permanent collection, visitors must descend and traverse this lowest, subterranean level. It consists of three axes, the Axis of Continuity, the longest leading to the stairs to the permanent exhibition (and so also the route of exit from the museum), The Axis of Exile and Emigration, leading to the E.T.A. Hoffmann Garden, and the Axis of the Holocaust, leading to the dead end of the Holocaust Tower (fig. 14). The Raphael Roth Learning Center, a museum education facility featuring interactive exhibits, is also annexed to these axes. Along the axes objects and images accompanied by expository texts are exhibited rather discretely in vitrines recessed into the walls (fig. 15). One encounters, for instance, a Singer sewing machine that once belonged to the Berlin tailor and Auschwitz victim Paul Gutermann. Emphasis falls on family histories, and



Fig. 15. Axis of Exile, photo Hans Grunert, © Jewish Museum Berlin

many of the objects on display have been donated by survivors of those families.¹⁸ Resonant objects and their stories are asked to, and in many cases do, move visitors to more intimate identification with these subjects of history.

After ascending the long staircase at the end of the Axis of Continuity and beginning to traverse the journey through two thousand years of German-Jewish history, visitors are immediately offered a variety of interactive experiences, both high- (or mid-high) and low tech (fig. 16). Video monitors offer four stories, 'Diaspora', 'Settlements', 'Traders', or 'Persecution' to view. One may write on a slip of paper and hang it from the artificial pomegranate 'wish tree' (fig. 17). Jewish life and, especially, Jewish-Christian co-existence in 'Shum' provides the focus of the medieval installation.

The lack of guards in the museum accounts for a rather disconcerting 'vitrinization' of the entire collection. This effect is particularly pronounced when one views not particularly remarkable, unusual, valuable, or historically fraught examples of everyday objects, such as the rather routine setting for a modern sabbath table, in the second-floor permanent exhibition,



Fig. 16. Ascending Stairs from Subterranean Axes to Permanent Exhibition, photo © Michele Nastasi



Fig. 17. 'The Beginnings', with pomegranate 'Wish Tree', photo Thomas Bruns, © Jewish Museum Berlin



Fig. 18. Shabbat table in the section of the permanent exhibition entitled 'Tradition and Change', photo Thomas Bruns, © Jewish Museum Berlin

encased in plexiglass (fig 18). A pragmatic result of the guardless environment - which must intend to avoid associations with human control, surveillance, and imprisonment - this display of objects of everyday Jewish existence as 'objects of ethnography' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1991) also evokes the Nazi's Central Jewish Museum, in which artefacts mundane and magnificent would provide anthropological evidence of extinction. Resonating amidst this history, such objects in fact achieve something of the dialectic of presence and absence, moderate aesthetic nourishment tempered by immoderate moral revulsion that commentators such as James Young predicted for the museum as a whole.

Later in the circuit one is introduced to a contemporary pair of Levi blue jeans, and photographs of Löb (Levi) Strauss's family home in Buttenheim, Franconia, and KaDeWe department store founder Adolf Jandorf's birth house in Hengsfeld, Württemberg (fig. 19), establishing that historical German Jews still play a role in how Germans dress and where they shop. Moses Mendelssohn's eyeglasses materialize and visualize Enlightenment, and Jews' contributions to German arts, sciences and mass culture are highlighted.

Intermittently, one comes to a darker area without objects, abutting one of the sealed, interior voids (fig. 4). On many visits to the Museum I have observed that visitors pay them little heed, notice them only as passageways to be traversed, or empty areas to be avoided, and not as metaphysical



Fig. 19. Levi Strauss Display, 2006, photo author

or existential challenges. The Museum has also filled the void, with matter and with sound where that has been permitted. In the so-called 'Memory Void,' a towering internal courtyard, visitors



Fig. 20. Menashe Kadishman installation *Shalechet (Fallen Leaves)*, 'Memory Void,' 2007, photo author

clatter on the over 10,000 metal plates of cut iron formed into screaming, Munch-like open mouths of Israeli artist Menashe Kadishman's installation, *Shalechet (Fallen Leaves)*, fig. 20).

The JMB's display of traditional art works departs from traditional art historical categorizations of style, movement, prestige, and value. For an art historian, such as myself, there is a rather refreshing levelling of traditional hierarchies. In one triangular confrontation, a 1913 painting by the major German Realist and Impressionist Max Liebermann, portraying the important neo-Kantian philosopher Herman Cohen, is given slightly less prominent display than the 1926 *Sabbath* by Jankel Adler, a well known (but not so well known as Liebermann), Polish member of both Düsseldorf's *Junge Rheinland* (Young Rhineland) and Lodz's *Junge Jiddisch* (Young Yiddish) groups. *Jüdische Pfadfinder* (Jewish Boy Scouts) a 1932 painting of social historical interest by the absolutely unknown Berlin art teacher, Erwin Singer, hangs on a par with the Liebermann portrait. The three works are united only by the fact that each artist and subject is Jewish - with Adler's *Sabbath* given pride of place, displayed alone in the centre of the room rather than hanging with the other paintings on the wall.

Several commentators, most prominently the Jewish *Spiegel* columnist Henryk Broder - well-known for his pessimism regarding the possibility of reconciliation between Jews and Germany and criticism of upbeat narratives of German-Jewish relations in the past and in the present - pointedly criticized the omission of Karl Marx from the JMB's initial installation (as did Fischer 2003-4, 3). He has since been added, along with Ferdinand Lassalle, in the form of two 'Marseillaise' playing music box busts from around 1900, a photographic portrait and a contemporary wine bottle which, bearing his picture, alludes to his birth in Trier in the wine-rich Mosel valley, and documents the father of communism's transformation into a fashionably ironic contemporary commercial logo. These objects correspond to Kugelmann's call for a degree of 'self-irony,' demonstrating the museum's willingness to not present itself or its subjects too solemnly. The next vitrine includes a copy of the *Communist Manifesto* and a picture of Rosa Luxemburg delivering a speech. The murdered Spartacist leader Luxemburg is another left-wing political figure and icon whose absence from the original display was criticized, and defended by Blumenthal on the grounds that 'she didn't make an issue of her Jewishness' (Broder 2001: 266), which could also be said of Levi Strauss (who emigrated to the United States in his teens) and many other assimilated Jews featured in the exhibits. Thus Kramer's criticism of the Christmas/Hanukkah conflation, calling for an 'authentic' Jewishness that would preserve distinctions and especially base Jewish identity on adherence to traditional religious practices, could be applied to much of the JMB's exhibits. Too strict an adherence to such distinctions, and especially a belief-based presentation, though, would risk distorting German-Jewish history and experience, and German history and experience along with it. The question of what constitutes 'authentic' German-Jewish identity has long been a fraught one. Harry (Heinrich) Heine, whose poetic achievement is rightly celebrated and prominently displayed at the JMB,

converted to Christianity, but famously placed his conversion in an international, European and political context, as having nothing to do with belief: 'a baptismal certificate is a ticket of admission to European culture' (see Chametzky 2001b: 28). Like Kugelmann's, the JMB's 'answer' to the questions of 'who is a Jew' and 'what constitutes Jewish identity' could be characterized as secular and ritualistic, with the hope that the secular ritual of museum attendance might encourage sensitivity towards the varieties and potential pluralism of German-Jewish, Jewish-German, and German-in-general, experience.

Certainly, National Socialist persecution and mass murder plays a role in the permanent exhibition. One can sample anti-Semitic decrees in interactive displays reminiscent of Renata Stih's and Frieder Schnock's Berlin 1992 street sign installation, *Places of Remembrance in the Bavarian Quarter*. One can see how yellow stars were mass produced from bolts of fabric (fig. 21). One can leaf through the black *Gedenkbuch*. And some of the visible objects are literal *memento mori*, such as a tin can lid punctured by a concentration camp victim and used to grate tree bark to eat. Like contemporary conceptual artists Stih and Schnock's site-specific project, interactive kiosks seek to raise visitors' awareness of the potential for anti-Semitism all-around them in the present, asking among other questions, whether they think any of their friends are anti-Semitic, and displaying the cumulative results. During my most recent visits, in summer 2007, answers to these questions indicated that the majority did not. In response to two further parting questions, a majority affirmed that anyone born in Germany should be granted German citizenship, while a minority felt that Turkey should be admitted to the European Union.



Fig. 21. Roll of fabric yellow stars, 2006, photo author

Just as it offered choice (a defining and cherished principle of liberal, capitalist democracies) at the beginning, so too does the exhibition's conclusion, through the visitor polls and by means of a general question asking them to comment on their experiences. This seems, perhaps, to reflect the museum's search for direction in and into the present, for an appropriate final destination for the journey through time. The historical survey rather peters out at the end, with the last permanent display a presentation of the 1987 controversy over the Frankfurt staging of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's play, *Garbage, The City, and Death*. The play which features a rapacious Jewish landlord had energized and, for the first time in the postwar period, emboldened the German Jewish community to vocal collective action. Since Autumn 2002, the JMB has dealt with contemporary Germany in a series of art installations called 'Interventions – Looking Back at the Present', the first of which was artist Horst Hoheisel's proposal for a central Holocaust memorial, 'Berlin Torlos', and the most recent of which has been the Museum's own creation: 'It was as simple as that. Growing up Jewish in Germany, Austria and Switzerland after 1945'.

Leaving the museum by way of the Kollegienhaus exit, proceeding straight across the street and down the E.T.A. Hoffmann Promenade, aligned with the museum's entrance, one comes to Friedrich Strasse and to the Al-Arabi grocery (figs. 22-23). No doubt realizing its physical location in a neighborhood and city with a large Muslim population, and functional site as the most prominent museum dedicated to a single, specific minority group within a rapidly changing and especially Islamicising contemporary Germany, the museum introduced a new



Fig. 22. E.T.A. Hoffmann Promenade, view towards museum, 2006, photo author



Fig. 23. Al-Arabi Grocery, facing museum at end of E.T.A. Hoffmann Promenade, 2006, photo author

tour in the Spring of 2005 - '*Ist das im Islam nicht auch so?*' (Isn't that the way it is in Islam, too?) - which similarly to the *Weihnukkah* exhibition's presentation of Jewish and Christian holiday celebrations, points out commonalities between Jewish and Islamic customs.¹⁹ This tour represents another step on the journey towards the central destination - the present - plotted for this or any museum that seeks to contribute to an understanding of minority group history, identity, and role in Germany, or anywhere, today. The JMB has chosen to emphasize commonalities between various cultures, religions, and ethnicities while encouraging common commitment to the contemporary German national project. Alternatively, it might have proceeded along a thornier path, by emphasizing a history of differences, some perhaps intractable, and the inevitability of conflicts arising from clashing cultural customs, world views, from anti-Semitism and xenophobia, from trans-national allegiances, and from ground-level competition over economic and political power.

Conclusion: numbers

The JMB has been a fabulous success in attracting visitors and commentary. Its often overrun entrance and coat check (both located in the Kollegienhaus) indicate that the volume of visitors was unanticipated. From February 1999 to Autumn 2000, when the JMB was open for tours without objects, it attracted some 340,000 visitors. In the first five years it presented exhibitions (2001-2005), the JMB drew over three million visitors, with an annual high of 700,000 in 2005. While Berlin would be an attraction without the JMB, and Libeskind is far from being the only prominent contemporary architect represented in the city, the museum has clearly established itself as part of Berlin's basic touristic itinerary, a 'can't miss' sight, along with the Reichstag and Brandenburg Gate, the Pergamon Museum, fragments of the Wall, and, since 2005, American architect Peter Eisenman's *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, which resembles a mammoth version of the JMB's E.T.A. Hoffmann Garden of Exile. But, the JMB has neither the accrued historical significance of the Reichstag, Brandenburg Gate, or Berlin Wall fragment, nor the unique and treasured objects of the Pergamon Museum or Antiquities Collection, nor the nationally and historically significant location of the Eisenman memorial (adjacent to the Brandenburg Gate and Reichstag, near the site of Hitler's Bunker and over Goebbel's). As I have argued here, the JMB also seeks to avoid being singularly associated solely with the Holocaust. This programmatic breadth of focus has received a positive response from the majority of visitors - with that majority largely composed of non-Jewish Germans.

Visitor assessments collected by the Museum have been overwhelmingly positive. Figures compiled at the end of 2002 for the first 15 months of exhibits sampled 1492 visitors. Twenty-four percent were from Berlin, 50% from elsewhere in Germany, 26% from outside Germany (including 18% non-German Europeans, and 4% Americans). Fifty-one-percent had already heard much about the museum and 52% indicated that the architecture was a major reason for their visit. The museum has since 'branded' the Libeskind design, as the building's jagged contour adorns all printed matter it produces. By December 2004, 83% of visitors polled saw the museum architecture as '*eine Art "Markenzeichen"*', a form of trademark. Forty-six per cent marked that they came 'to learn something about German-Jewish history', and 32% to learn about Jewish traditions. Eighty per cent spent more than two hours in the museum. About 98% responded positively to the experience, describing their experience as either 'very good' or 'good'. The figures were similar for the period January 2003 to December 2004 - and reflect the experiences of different individuals, as 87% said this was their first visit. By that time, the architecture as attraction had slipped a bit, to 48%; German-Jewish history rose five points, to 51%, and Jewish tradition dipped to 28%. When asked how they liked the experience, 64% responded 'very well', 30% 'well', 5% 'partly yes/partly no', and only 4% 'less well' and 3%, 'not at all'. While visitors to the museum would of course be a self-selected sample of people, favourably disposed to the museum's programme to begin with, and further skewed by being limited to those willing to take extra time to fill out the survey after their visits, such results are still impressive. Impressive, too, has been the response to the museum in the popular press. In 2004, for instance, the JMB was subject of 2,800 press reports (this includes radio, television and on-line articles, in addition to newspapers and magazines), an average of 235 per month, or eight per day. Reading through the press compilations in the Museum's library is thus a

daunting task. Having read through much of the press for the years 2001 to 2005, my conclusion is that it has also been resoundingly positive. Criticisms, such as those aired by Henryk Broder, have often been addressed subsequently in the exhibits.

With the completion of the Eisenman memorial, Germany now has a central Holocaust memorial - at least to the Jewish *Shoah*, if not to all victims murdered by the Nazis. Unlike Israel's Yad Vashem, or the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, or the *Centrum Judaicum*, or the JMB, Germany's central memorial is not also a research centre, but a maximum-sized minimalist sculpture dedicated to transforming profound individual affective aesthetic experience into silent contemplation of massive crimes against humanity. Beneath the field of monoliths lies a modestly scaled, though effective, didactic informational exhibit. Unlike the United States, Germany has no national or central Holocaust museum. Scholars such as Kugelmann, Pieper, and Young have studied the ways different nations historicize and memorialize the Holocaust. Whereas Israel, especially at Yad Vashem, claims 'ownership' of the Holocaust and takes the destruction of Europe's Jews as the starting point for the narrative of the Jewish state, America 'universalizes' the Holocaust, making it a metaphor for many instances of persecution, especially those most pertinent to pluralistic American society (e.g., African enslavement), and personalizes its presentation by emphasising individual victims (or survivors), turning the visitor experience into something akin to the viewer of an historically-themed film, presenting central characters for empathetic identification (Kugelmann 2000, Young 1993). As with much in the German museal world, by contrast, the exhibitionary presentation of the Holocaust is decentralized, and regionally and locally specific. Concentration camps, most notably Dachau, as Harold Marcuse has shown, have evolved (not without resistance) into impressive sites documenting these locales' specific roles and their place in the broader structure of oppression and annihilation, while also preserving and recreating such facilities as memorials to victims (Marcuse 2001). The resonance of a visit to them has much to do with one's bodily and psychic presence at such an emotionally charged site. In Cologne, as in other cities, one can take walking tours of the Nazi past, and visit the former Gestapo headquarters, now transformed into a memorial/museum, the 'NS- Documentationszentrum' (aka EL-DE-Haus). One can enter into a dank cell in the basement, and, for as long as one can endure the experience, read the graffiti scratched into the walls by prisoners while imagining the helpless horror that must have attended each moment spent there in the uncertain darkness of actual incarceration. In Berlin one can visit an elegant lake district villa at 56-58 Am Grossen Wannsee, look out through large windows over landscaped grounds and see sailboats plying the blue water beyond, while viewing an exhibition dealing with the individuals involved, the policy enacted, and the results achieved by the 'Wannsee Conference' held in those rooms on 20 January 1942 - where the 'Final Solution' was planned in luxury. The JMB's eschewal of the role of 'Central Holocaust Museum' endorses the primacy of such local and specific sites, each endowed with its own ineluctable horror - indexically as opposed to metaphorically connected to the crimes they represent - over an attempt at nationalizing the musealization of the Holocaust on German soil. The JMB's role, instead, is to present a German national narrative in postnational form, whereby it can contain things Jewish as a positive and continuing presence, even in their apparent absence.

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Notes

- 1 <http://www.s-f.com/Services/Cases/tabid/95/Default.aspx> (accessed November 17, 2007).
- 2 'Wer zum Beispiel auf eine Holocaust-Gedenkstätte eingestellt war, wird etwas anderes vorfinden, als er erwartet hat.' 'Jüdisches Museum Berlin wirbt mit neuem Motiv. "Nicht das, was Sie erwarten" startet in bislang größten Umfang,' Press Release, JMB, 3 June 2005. Parts of this essay were first presented on a panel organized by Kerstin Barndt at the 2007 German Studies Association conference. My thanks to Dr. Barndt, to the session moderator, Mark Rectanus, and to Andreas Huyssen for his very helpful response (including noting the unkosher shellfish). I thank also this journal's two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful

comments; Ulrike Sonneman and the staff of the JMB library for research assistance, and Melanie von Plocki of the JMB and Jennifer Butrymowicz of Studio Daniel Libeskind for providing photographs.

- 3 While documenting many differences that can be ascribed to their particular programs and, especially, the national cultures and narratives they serve, Pieper sees a broad similarity to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum—characterizing both as ‘Memory Museums’ that by recalling past intolerance of difference seek to promote greater present-day tolerance (Pieper 2006: 327).
- 4 <http://www.berlin.de/museumsfuehrer.en/>, accessed May 30, 2008.
- 5 ‘Spiegelt sich in deren Bundesförderung und in der Bündelung von bundespolitischen Kulturoptionen das Sehnsucht der Deutschen nach Einheit, nach Mitte und Metropole?’ Hilmar Hoffmann and Wolfgang Schneider, ‘Kultur, Kulturpolitik und die Berliner Republik,’ Hoffmann and Schneider, 9.
- 6 The *Centrum Judaicum* also maintains a temporary exhibition program embracing contemporary art and historical displays with a broader focus than the site’s own history and resonances, such as the illuminating ‘Relatively Jewish’ exhibition on Einstein and a contemporary art installation with a relativity theme by Christian Boltsonsky, both in connection with the ‘Einstein Year’ of 2005.
- 7 ‘Wie reist man durch die Zeit? Wie durch zwei Jahrtausende deutsch-jüdische Geschichte?’ ‘Am besten im Jüdischen Museum Berlin,’ ‘eine Zeitreise durch die deutsch-jüdische Geschichte.’ JMB, *Jahresbericht 2001/2002*, Stiftung Jüdisches Museum Berlin, 2003, 27.
- 8 Hans-Jörg Heim., ‘Angeklagte gesteht Plan für Anschlag in Berlin,’ *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 5 July 2003; Jan Rubel, ‘Angeklagter gesteht Terrorpläne in Deutschland,’ *Die Welt*, 5 July 2003. 56. It was never entirely clear that the JMB was actually a target. Shadi Moh’d Mustafa Abdallah testified to seeing a menorah in a window while walking in Berlin, and identifying that unspecified building as a site to bomb. He was sentenced to four years prison in November 2003. *USA Today*, 26 November 2003.
- 9 For specific comparison to Boullée’s own museum design, which included a void as shrine at its centre, see Offe 2000: 156-64.
- 10 *Tagesspiegel*, 28 August 2001, 22, quoted in Fischer 2004.
- 11 ‘Die Ausstellungsordnung ist etwas für Pfadfinder.’ The Pfadfinder (pathfinders) are the German equivalent of the Boy Scouts. JMB, *Jahresbericht 2001/2002*, 41, 47.
- 12 ‘Es tut gut,’ commented one, ‘eine Ausstellung über den jüdischen Glauben zu betrachten, ohne gleich zu Beginn den Stempel des deutschen Täters zu bekommen.’ The exhibition’s focus is not Jewish beliefs or practices, though that plays a role in its journey through German-Jewish history. JMB, *Jahresbericht 2001/2002*, 43.
- 13 ‘...ein nichtgläubiger Ritualist,’ *Berliner Zeitung*, 2 August 2002.
- 14 ‘Themen, für die es visuelle starkes Material gibt, sind eine bessere Grundlage für Ausstellungen als solche, die auf gedanklichen Konstruktionen basieren.’ ‘Bei der Konzeption des Ausstellungsprogramms des Jüdischen Museums Berlin überlegen wir uns zuerst, welche Themen der jüdischen Geschichte und Kultur interessant genug und geeignet sind, um sie als visuelle Erfahrung umzusetzen.’ JMB, *Jahresbericht 2003/4*, Stiftung Jüdisches Museum Berlin, Juni 2005, 16.

- ¹⁵ 'Sie kommt der nichtjüdische Sehnsucht entgegen, alle Widersprüche und differenzen zwischen Judentum und Christentum aufzulösen....die Mehrheit der deutschen Gesellschaft sieht Juden auch heute noch – oder schon wieder? – als Fremde. Die eigene jüdische Identität wird von der Umwelt nur bedingt akzeptiert.' Stephan J. Kramer, 'Die Mehrheit sieht uns als Fremde,' *Die Tageszeitung* 24./25.26. December 2005, 5.
- ¹⁶ Press Release, JMB, 14 Nov. 2005. *Berlinermorgenpost.de*, 28 November 2005.
- ¹⁷ <http://www.juedisches-museum-berlin.de/site/EN/05-About-The-Museum/01-News/news.php>, accessed 2 December 2007
- ¹⁸ This point has also been made by the actress and director Jody Foster, who spends considerable time in Berlin. With her theatrical background, she is also sensitive to the Libeskind building's staging of spatial experience as metaphor: 'At the Jewish Museum, you have the feeling of being put on a train and being shipped away to a camp. So the way the building is designed, you have these long, long, long, long corridors that are almost like a train station. Then you see these stories of the families. Then you get to the end of this corridor, and you walk into a room [the 'Holocaust Tower'], and they only let in five people at a time. This room is completely dark, and at the top, there are two slits, and you can hear Berlin beyond, but you can't see it. It's sort of like being in a train. You'll hear fire engines going by and things happening, but you're completely blocked out of it.' Very attuned to the theatrical staging of space, Foster's description of her experience, while based on a four hour visit, follows much more the architecture's than the exhibition's blocking, in describing a journey of no return terminating in the 'Holocaust Tower,' an increasingly atypical visitor response. Mark Seal, 'For Better N Wurst: Jody Foster's Berlin,' *American Way*, September 15, 2005: 51-56.
- ¹⁹ 'Neue Führung im Jüdischen Museum: Ist das im Islam nicht auch so?' *Berliner Abendblatt*, 19 May 2005.

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