

[Back to index](#)**'Taming Memory': Themeing America's East Coast Holocaust Memorials****by Nathan Abrams<sup>(1)</sup> & David Oettinger<sup>(2)</sup>**

After a period of relative silence (1945-1961), and a period of stirrings (1961-1979), the late 1980s and 1990s witnessed a proliferation of materials dedicated to the Holocaust. From a trickle in the late forties, Holocaust literature has developed into a rush of articles, monographs, books, documentaries, and films to such an extent that they form both popular and academic genres of their own. Similarly, in the field of material culture the postmodern period of American culture has produced a multiplicity of museums and memorials designed to preserve the memory of the Holocaust.<sup>[i]</sup> It has been noted that some 113 organizations in the United States are currently devoted to rendering the message of 'never forget' message into a material form and that 'Holocaust memorials and museums have become something of an eerie cottage industry in this country.'<sup>[ii]</sup> The prevalence of these literary and material signs signifies the anamnesia – 'the failure or refusal to forget'— of the American Jewish community.<sup>[iii]</sup>

**Introduction**

Holocaust memorials have been erected in every major city in the United States. Many exist in correspondence with the urban and suburban concentration of Jewish communities throughout the continent. To date, monuments (either in the form of museums or memorials) are located in Washington DC, Houston, Tampa Bay, Los Angeles, El Paso, Detroit, Miami Beach, Jersey City, Atlanta, Baltimore, Toledo, Philadelphia, Long Island, New Haven, Denver, Dallas, Tucson, Boston, and New York. This list does not even include the number of libraries and educational centers devoted to the subject. Indeed, the mapping of these sites would form a sub-genre of the Holocaust genre itself. These sites not only indicate the reproduction and commodification of the Holocaust for mass public consumption across the United States, but have also become 'sites of both Holocaust tourism and Holocaust pilgrimage.'<sup>[iv]</sup>

Memorialization is a vital process in the construction of any nation's identity. As Jonathan Boyarin has written, 'Memory erupts into and shapes "public space" in various and often ambiguous ways, as in monumental public art. The erection of monuments is a central means of shaping memory.'<sup>[v]</sup> Such memorials represent what Lisa Yoneyama has referred to as the 'taming of memory' and the 'clean[ing] of surfaces.'<sup>[vi]</sup> In this article, we shall focus on the culture of American Holocaust memorialization to show how the Holocaust has been incorporated into the larger American experience. The *sites* or locations of these memorials will be the locus of our inquiry for where they are physically placed is vitally important, as Andrew Charlesworth has demonstrated in the case of Auschwitz.<sup>[vii]</sup> It is the ambiguity of the sites of Holocaust memorials in America that we hope to draw out, that their actual locations and their material appearance represent certain meanings that exemplify the American 'taming' of the Holocaust. In doing so we shall concentrate on examining how the 'touristic consumption' of monuments is manifested in three key sites in East Coast America, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the New England Holocaust Memorial, and The Museum of Jewish Heritage: A Living Memorial to the Holocaust, and allude to others in order to 'read' their locations and actual physical form as having as much to say as what is actually inside them.

**Themeing**

A key element in this process of taming of the Holocaust has been the adoption of the growing consumer trend of themed landscapes or themeing by Holocaust institutions.

In this way, they have adopted effective strategies that have dominated the postwar American landscape. The United States has witnessed a remarkable proliferation of themed landscapes in the postwar era. These range from early icons such as Disneyland, Disneyworld, and Las Vegas, to the 'planned' communities of Disney's Celebration, Times Square, and a 'Tuscan Village' mall.<sup>[viii]</sup> Since the 1960s, and particularly in the 1990s, themeing has come to dominate our lives as a means for business to encourage mass consumption.<sup>[ix]</sup> In addition to commercial interests, institutions with an educational purpose have also adopted themeing. Disney's union of educational and cultural activities with the commerce and technology of the entertainment world – 'edutainment' – has begun to be copied by museum directors and curators following the success of the Disney theme parks in the 1970s and 1980s. This winning formula is seen to enhance marketability and as a consequence, themeing has become particularly prevalent in the area of museums.<sup>[x]</sup>

Themeing occurs for several related reasons. First, it attempts to reconstruct 'authentically' an earlier landscape in order to legitimize itself by a historical grounding that will naturalize and submerge its contingent design and conception. Second, themeing also creates and fulfills an instantaneous nostalgia and has consequently proven to be immensely popular. Third, themeing aims to package a site as appealing and attractive to its consumers. In an American setting this will entail translating and localizing foreign or historical experiences into something recognizable, understandable, and sympathetic. An unforeseen by-product of this will be endless reproduction of the original image. Fourth, planners of museums and other cultural institutions, many of whom who may rely solely on nongovernmental support, recognize the attractive power of themeing as a method for raising the profile of the institution and increasing patronage even if many of them consider the notion distasteful. This distaste may be mediated by overt submergence of themeing or its incorporation in the guise of education. Hiding behind the argument that a more experiential narrative can be more of a helpful learning tool, outright themeing is moderated while its intentions are served.

Like other museums American Holocaust institutions rely on themeing to attract tourists as well as to commemorate and educate.<sup>[xi]</sup> Young summarizes the motivations underlying this impulse:

most are built simultaneously to remember and to attract remembrance. The touristic consumption of monuments may not be as lofty, or as praiseworthy, as other aspects of the memorial process. But it is a dimension that cannot be ignored in coming to understand the combination of thought, work, and motives now sustaining Holocaust memory in any land.<sup>[xii]</sup>

This touristic aspect may not only be due to the need to attract visitors. Sybil Milton observes in her study of Holocaust memorialization that many Americans are already familiar with the Holocaust from visiting such sites as the Anne Frank house, the Dachau concentration camp memorial, and the remains of Auschwitz-Birkenau, but as a *European* tourist attraction.<sup>[xiii]</sup> Themeing may also be used to translate and localize foreign experiences into something recognizably American.

### **The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

<http://www.ushmm.org/>

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) is located in the nation's capital, Washington DC, on 1.9 acres of land donated by the federal government. It is situated adjacent to the National Mall between 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Streets, just south of Independence Avenue, SW. Since the Museum was the product of a Presidential Commission established in 1978 by President Carter, it represents a public-private enterprise (what Vivian Patraka has called 'its quasi governmental status'<sup>[xiv]</sup>) and the result of a long process of negotiation and compromise. This process of negotiation between private individuals (albeit appointed by the President) and official governmental agencies determined the building's final appearance. It was this process, we believe,

that led to the *Americanization* of the Museum and its wholesale appropriation by the United States as an inextricable part of its own history.<sup>[xv]</sup> Indeed, the subtitle of Edward Linenthal's account of this process says much: 'The Struggle to Create *America's Holocaust Museum*' (emphasis added). This was further aided by the nature of the Museum's financial backing. The USHMM building was constructed entirely with funds (some \$200m) accrued through private donation. In accordance with its legislative mandate (Public Law 96-388, passed October 1980), however, federal funds were made available for the aim of Holocaust education and commemoration. In the fiscal year 1994 its operating budget was \$34m of which sixty-four percent (\$21.6m) was derived from federal funds.<sup>[xvi]</sup> And, above all, as Patraha has noted, the museum is located on a 'federal grant of extremely scarce land.'<sup>[xvii]</sup>

The Museum's location on the Mall reflects the national, federal, and American nature of the project. Not only is it situated within the symbolic heart of the capital, but also it is nearer to its heart than other key sites in American history. As the museum's architect, James Ingo Freed put it, 'the site is, in fact, sandwiched between the Washington Memorial and the Jefferson Memorial.'<sup>[xviii]</sup> Indeed, the Museum is located only 400 yards from the Washington Monument, a significantly shorter distance than both the Jefferson and FDR memorials. It was not the only site under consideration for some twelve other places were studied but its siting on the Mall reflected the feelings of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council. Hyman Bookbinder, a council member, spoke for them all when he said: 'If we had been told to "select a place"... I think we would have chosen that very spot. It is part of what all the tourists go to...'<sup>[xix]</sup> Furthermore, Irving Bernstein, executive vice-chairman of the United Jewish Appeal, felt that 'a Washington site would give this institution a unique character and a special opportunity to contribute to national life. It would make clear that the commemoration of the Holocaust is a central concern of the entire American population.'<sup>[xx]</sup> As Linenthal has observed: 'Not only would there be a national museum to the Holocaust in the nation's capital, but, by virtue of its location just off the Mall, the museum would gain the prestige of a *central* national memorial.'<sup>[xxi]</sup> These sentiments rather tellingly indicate how much the Museum's planners desired to place it within the center of America's national memory. In this way, it was hoped that the Holocaust would be transformed from being a purely particularistic, ethnic European concern to one of universal proportions. However, this wish was counter-productive: the desire for the universalization of the lessons of the Holocaust to a wider world produced a Museum devoted to particularism, but rather than being purely Jewish or European, it has become American.

The Americanization of the building was the result of a combination of factors. Externally, the Museum was designed to resemble the architecture of Washington, DC. Its principal architect, James Freed, had determined that his building would be not only 'a good neighbor' to its companions on 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Streets, but would also 'make a bridge urbanistically.'<sup>[xxii]</sup> To this end, the 14<sup>th</sup> Street facade was constructed from limestone to resemble the Bureau of Printing and Engraving whereas the 15<sup>th</sup> Street facade was built from the red brick of the Auditor's Building which houses the US Forest Service's Headquarters. In this way, the Museum was structurally incorporated into Washington, DC. Its outer shell aligned the building with the architectural iconography of the capital's dual functions: bureaucracy and memorialization.

Although Freed intended to close the visitor off from the outside world of Washington DC and the USA the building's internal architecture undermines his scheme. The hexagonal Hall of Remembrance, conceived of as a non-aligned space for contemplation and public commemoration, echoes the obelisk shape of the nearby Washington Monument. What is more, it had been decided by the building's original architect, Maurice Finegold, that the Hall of Remembrance should face the Mall to which Freed added the recommendation that it should be of a modest size so as 'not to compromise the other institutions or monuments.'<sup>[xxiii]</sup> Although Freed tried to restrict the view of the Mall and the other memorials from within the Hall, glimpses of them are possible through thin slit windows. Catherine Slessor has described these views as 'strategic glimpses ... evoking other national commemorations of the undiminished

human spirit.'[xxiv] Freed explained his plan thus: 'Because these are the things that save you.' As Linenthal noted, 'even as Freed's building seeks to take visitors out of American space, they are reminded that during this symbolic journey their purpose is to remain firmly rooted in American ideals.'[xxv]

The Museum could now count itself as one of those ideals. The west face of the building overlooks the nearby Jefferson Memorial, the FDR memorial, the Washington Monument, and in the distance, the Lincoln Memorial. As a consequence, the Museum has been incorporated into the tourist's agenda as one of *the* sites to visit. Freed failed in his attempt not to compromise other institutions or monuments. Since the Museum has now become a key tourist target (emphasized and exaggerated by its strict limitation on the number of daily visitors) it vies with other places for the tourist's attention. In turn, this has led to a more scrupulous selection among competing sites. As the average tourist can only visit a limited number of places in any single visit to the capital, a process of prioritization has occurred. The publicity surrounding the Museum and its relative proximity to the Mall, as well as to a subway station, has ensured its higher placing up the agenda than any other site on the Mall with the exception of the US Air and Space Museum.[xxvi] Furthermore, the lack of an entrance fee serves to promote the illusion that it is a federal museum, part of the Smithsonian Institution, paid for and provided by taxpayer's money.

Elements of the museum's permanent exhibition were also shaped to 'engage' its visitors directly with an Americanized narrative.[xxvii] Statements from Presidents Carter, Reagan, and Bush, as well as General Eisenhower adorn the building's 15<sup>th</sup> Street entrance thus inscribing their names (and hence memories) onto both the museum itself and its narrative. Slessor has observed that, 'The starting point of the route through the museum is marked by the quadrant shaped Hall of Flags housing the colors of liberating American army divisions.'[xxviii] Then, on entering the elevators the visitor is confronted with images of the American liberation of Buchenwald concentration camp on 11 April 1945 rather than the liberation of Auschwitz, the camp that has become the dominant signifier of the Holocaust, since the Red Army liberated the latter. When leaving the elevators, the visitor is again confronted with enlarged photographs of generals Dwight D. Eisenhower and George Patton taken at Dachau on 15 April 1945. These same images form the final section of the exhibit bringing the narrative to a comfortable closure heavily inscribed with American values.

In order not to downplay the United States' role as liberator and savior, representations of resistance are dislocated from the permanent exhibit. Rather they form a tiny exhibit almost divorced from the main one. Indeed, their liminal location between the permanent exhibit and the Hall of Remembrance renders resistance ambiguous, marginalized, and unimportant in comparison to the emphasis placed on America's role in ending the Final Solution. Again, the significance of the Red Army here is displaced. This need to represent the US as *the* liberator of the camps has led to a rewriting of the Holocaust in which acts of resistance by Jews and others were insignificant and negligible. Furthermore, as Rochelle Saidel has observed the museum also ignores the US government's poor immigration policy during the war and its recruitment of Nazi war criminals during the Cold War. Although negative aspects of US policy during World War II are mentioned such as the Evian Conference of 1939 and the Allied refusal to bomb Auschwitz, this is done in order to focus upon events that connect America to the Holocaust. Saidel concludes the 'museum therefore presents a re-creation of history that accentuates America's positive role in the Holocaust and downplays the negative one.'[xxix] Finally, the exhibit ends on an unintentionally themed note. In order to acknowledge federal government support for the museum, as visitors leave the exhibit they face the seal of the United States. Just as Disney terminated the views at the ends of all the major streets of Disneyland with vertical icons so the visitor would always know exactly where s/he was, the USHMM reminds its visitors of their location in



contemporary America. The USHMM clearly aligns itself to the 'leader of the free world' and the supporter of democratic ideals thus the Holocaust has been localized for its domestic audience.

What is more, the USHMM's interior incorporates elements for increased touristic attraction. The building was constructed using what Linenthal has called 'evocative architecture.'<sup>[xxx]</sup> The design of the USHMM echoes that of Disneyland, as both were 'designed to stimulate emotion through architecture.'<sup>[xxxi]</sup> Disney's 'imagineers' achieved this effect by 'an increasing emphasis on more convincing simulations of the remote and fantastic by precise architecture and detailing.'<sup>[xxxii]</sup> Similarly, the USHMM aims to simulate convincingly the remote and fantastic by precise architecture and detailing derived from the iconography of the Holocaust. Internally, many of the museum's structural features are modeled upon the 'tectonics' of the extermination camps: crematoria doors, lights, barbed wire, gates, and watchtowers. Externally, the profile of a section of the building resembles watchtowers.

Other iconographic symbols within the interior of the museum are also experiential in a themed manner. When entering the building visitors are faced with a choice of directions – left or right – simulating the camp selection process. Later on in the permanent exhibit they are confronted with the option of crossing through the cattle car. Combined these elements attempt to translate what may appear distant and grotesque to an American audience. By authentically simulating the Holocaust, it is hoped to ensure and sustain tourist interest in what may be unfamiliar subject matter.

The abstract expressions of the Holocaust experience that are found within the museum's architectonics such as the use of shadow, shade, and enclosure are generally submerged by the more dominating iconography and themeing. Both inside and outside of the museum replicas of the lighting fixtures, which 'illuminated' the death camps, are prominent. Other devices used in the recollection of the Holocaust are handrails that resemble camp fencing and the elevator doors (whereby visitors begin their 'journey') that clearly simulate those of the gas chambers. Subtlety is destroyed as the imagination is led by themeing. These images are supplemented by the actual stuff of the permanent exhibit. In order to promote its 'realism' the museum boasts some ten thousand artifacts from around the world. Not only does this serve a themeing purpose, but it also increases the museum's 'authenticity,' authority, and legitimization. Such 'authentic' items include a cattle-car used to transport Jews, a barrack from Birkenau, children's shoes from Auschwitz, and cobblestones from the Warsaw Ghetto. Where the original items were unobtainable convincing simulations were introduced instead.<sup>[xxxiii]</sup> The inclusion of some of these items was considered so essential that the building actually had to be reshaped in parts to incorporate them, as was the case for the cattle car and the towering photographic exhibit. And beneath the whole building soil from the concentration camps and American military cemeteries was buried.<sup>[xxxiv]</sup> Overall, the extent to which themeing was incorporated into the USHMM has led Omer Bartov to describe it as a 'plastic representation' and Yad Vashem's Director of Education, Shalmi Bar-Mor, called it 'just a collection of gimmicks.'<sup>[xxxv]</sup>

Taken together all of these devices advance the notion that the Holocaust is an inextricable part of American history. As Michael Berenbaum, former project director and now head of research for the USHMM stated:

The Museum will take what could have been the painful and parochial memories of a bereaved ethnic community and apply them to the most basic of American values. Located adjacent to the National Mall – surrounded by the Smithsonian Institution and the monuments to Lincoln, Jefferson, and Washington – the building and its contents are being designed with the neighbors in mind so that the Holocaust Museum will emerge as an American institution and will speak to the national saga.<sup>[xxxvi]</sup>

The USHMM is now firmly located within an American historical continuum stretching from Washington and Jefferson through to Lincoln and FDR. Through its very location, the Museum has grounded itself in the national memory and acquired for itself an

American historicity that it radically lacks. The effect of this is its total naturalization and Americanization.

**The New England Holocaust Memorial**  
<http://www.boston.citysearch.com/E/V/BOSMA/0018/05/95/>

In metropolitan Boston, the New England Holocaust memorial is located on a traffic island on the celebrated Freedom Trail. Its proximity to this tourist attraction primarily ensures and increases its potential consumption many times since the Trail attracts approximately 16 million visitors per year. It fills what has been described as 'a median strip next to the city's biggest tourist destination.' Heidi Landecker has noted that, 'A travel ad for Boston might now announce: "See Faneuil Hall. Experience the Holocaust. Shop at Quincy Marketplace.' Landecker criticized the site for its inappropriateness since it 'discourage[s] somber reflection' and 'trivializes its serious purpose.' Instead, it 'would have been more powerful in the empty plaza surrounding city hall or the meadow of Boston Common.'<sup>[xxxvii]</sup> While Landecker's assessment may be accurate, we believe that its location manifests many latent and hidden meanings that have dictated its location in that particular place.

This location signifies unconscious meanings hidden to its viewers. Effectively, it becomes another station on the Freedom Trail between Faneuil Hall and the Paul Revere House. The Holocaust is now inscribed as a part of freedom. This freedom is not defined as Jewish, European, or global, but as American since the Freedom Trail signifies the historic American struggle to liberate itself from the oppressive colonial power of Britain. Now, the Holocaust is transformed into an integral stage in that particularistic and specific struggle. This invites implicit and unfair comparisons between Britain's treatment of the American settlers and the Nazi genocide. In this way, the Holocaust is made relevant to the American viewer. It is interpreted as a key part of national America's history and struggle for freedom, and thus forms a vital element of the national memory and identity. The memorial, as Young has pointed out, is now 'located both spatially and metaphysically in the continuum of American Revolutionary history ... Boston will integrate the Holocaust into the very myth of American origins.'<sup>[xxxviii]</sup> Thus this act of retrofitting a traffic island to house a memorial on the Freedom Trail indicates a determination to place the events of the Holocaust within the context of the American experience rather than the Jewish European experience.

The memorial's material form poses an interesting relationship with its environment. Unlike the symbiosis of the USHMM and its Washington neighbors, its six 56-foot-tall glass and steel towers simultaneously reject the colonial architecture of Faneuil Hall while reflecting the glass and steel of the skyscrapers of modern Boston. This simultaneity renders the site a mediating function as a connecting link between revolutionary America and modern America. By its very physical form, therefore, the memorial has inscribed for itself a key role in American identity. These glass towers also serve another purpose. Their incongruity in terms of the colonial architecture signifies an attempt to elevate the memorial as the primary focus of the Freedom Trail. The attempt to highlight the memorial's place on the Trail is extended at night when the glass towers glow in a similar fashion to spotlights; according to Young this 'can be expected to attract curious passersby.'<sup>[xxxix]</sup> Hence the memorial is purposely spotlighted to attract attention in order to heighten its place on the Trail and to increase its significance in the competition for the tourist's patronage.

The New England Memorial has been constructed to sustain the tourist's attention rather than simply fulfilling a passive function. It has incorporated several features (what Landecker calls 'gimickry')<sup>[xl]</sup> that allow the visitor to interact with the memorial and thus to 'witness' the Holocaust. Beneath the towers a floor grate covers a granite pit in which fiber optics and steam create the illusion of glowing embers which symbolize both the smoke of the crematoria and the breath of the victims. Hence, the experience is rendered more 'real' to its participants. Although it is a memorial for the Jewish victims of the Holocaust its significance has been universalized beyond the Jewish experience. Each of the six towers is engraved with a million prisoners' identification numbers, which reflect and project 'tattoolike shadows' on those who pass

between them.<sup>[xli]</sup> This represents the tattooing of numbers on the arms of Jewish victims during the Holocaust. The particularism of the six towers is thus compromised by the ambiguity of the non-selective reflection onto its visitors. Since these numbers can tattoo any visitor to the memorial, the Holocaust is universalized constructing a collective yet malleable group identity or a universal understanding of suffering. Since its primary setting is on the Freedom Trail this identity is injected from the outset with a heavy dose of Americanism. Furthermore, the abstraction of such meaning, coupled with the location of this memorial, suggests to its visitors a more universal meaning; anyone passing through the memorial – Jew or Gentile, foreigner or American – can be subjected to such humiliation if freedom is not maintained. The memorial emphasizes American visions of universal freedom rather than simply memorializing those who died during the Holocaust.

### **The Museum of Jewish Heritage: A Living Memorial to the Holocaust** <http://www.mjhnyc.org/>

The Museum of Jewish Heritage: A Living Memorial to the Holocaust (MJH) is located within the city with the highest concentration of Jews in the world. New York City is also the largest center of Jewish culture outside of Israel and home to more survivors than any other city in the United States. Undoubtedly, this formed a part of its original conception, but leads to questions of why the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum wasn't located there. Former mayor Edward I. Koch emphasized his city's importance as the site of a major Holocaust memorial because 'New York City is regarded by all as the cultural and spiritual nucleus of American Jewry and is home to the largest number of Holocaust survivors.'<sup>[xlii]</sup> When arguing for the USHMM to be located in New York, the historian Lucy Dawidowicz felt that it should be placed at the 'center of the Jewish population in the United States and the cultural crossroads of the modern world.'<sup>[xliii]</sup> Holocaust survivor, Yaffa Eliach, spoke for New York as 'a harbor of safety and a cradle of liberty to all coming to America.' She added that: 'It was the place where most of the survivors came when they left the Displaced Persons camps.'<sup>[xliv]</sup> The desire to locate a Holocaust memorial in New York City has been so great that it has taken 47 years for one to come to fruition, but has been delayed by political wrangling.<sup>[xlv]</sup>

Since the *national* Holocaust museum was located in Washington, the need to distinguish itself from the USHMM has marked the MJH's development. As a consequence, there has been a measure of competition between the two institutions, exacerbated by the amount of money that has been poured into each. In particular, Washington and New York were engaged in a bitter rivalry for funds and attention during their planning stages. Thus, in an attempt to distance itself from the USHMM, the New York Holocaust Memorial Commission announced in 1985 that it was expanding the scope of its exhibition to cover areas that were ignored by the museum in Washington. According to its own publicity literature, the museum is 'dedicated to transmitting a deepened appreciation of Jewish heritage, a stronger awareness of the Holocaust, a heightened commitment to cultural and religious pluralism and a keener sense of sanctity and fragility of human life.'<sup>[xlv]</sup> It further describes itself as 'a museum about a people. Created as a living memorial to the Holocaust, it honors those who died by celebrating their lives, cherishing the civilization that they built, their achievements as a faith, their joys and hopes, and the vibrant Jewish community that is their legacy today.'<sup>[xlvii]</sup> In contrast to the Washington museum, the MJH was 'planned as primarily a story about the extermination of the Jewish people and the richness of their life before and afterward...'<sup>[xlviii]</sup> As Koch put it, 'This is the Jewish Holocaust. The Museum in Washington is not.'<sup>[xlix]</sup> Thus while the USHMM stresses the universalism of the Holocaust, the MJH attempts to emphasize its particularism. This is reflected in the design of the museum itself. The layout of the museum is hexagonal resembling a Star of David shorn of its points. This motif is reiterated throughout thus emphasizing the *Jewish* nature of the Holocaust. The permanent exhibit is structured around a central 'rotunda,' which is composed of a concentric series of hexagonal strips of wood emanating from a central point. Again, the tiered roof structure possesses six tiers thus marking the six million Jews murdered during the Holocaust. Taken together with the building proper the six tiers recall the seven rays of the crown of the Statue of

Liberty thus once again relocating it within an American context. Nonetheless, this attempt was not wholly successful and we shall argue that, like the museum in Washington, the New York museum wholly incorporates the Holocaust into American history.<sup>[ii]</sup>

The New York museum was developed under the auspices of the New York Holocaust Memorial Commission and built with the support of the Battery Park City Authority. Although most of its \$50 million costs originated from private donations, it was primarily a joint 'city-state project.'<sup>[iii]</sup> Saidel has observed that: 'The composition of the coalition behind the project, as well as its location in New York City, give it a slant that is different from that of other American Holocaust museums...'<sup>[iii]</sup> Like the USHMM, the public-private partnership behind the development of the MJH has inscribed itself upon the museum's meaning. Since it was created by a political alliance made up of interested private Jewish citizens and City and State officials, the MJH could never be a purely Jewish affair as was hoped by its name. Indeed, as we shall argue, like the USHMM, the location, the physical structure, and the permanent exhibit of the MJH all combine to place the Holocaust within an American historical narrative.

Located on the southern tip of Manhattan in Battery Park City the MJH does not stand on 'historic' land since it is the product of landfill. Nonetheless the intentions behind this memorial were similar to those that created the ones in Washington and Boston, as the MJH stands on a direct sight line to the Statue of Liberty on Liberty Island and the immigration museum on Ellis Island. In this way, it constructs what Young has called 'a geographical triad commemorating liberty, immigration, and tolerance.'<sup>[iii]</sup> This connection is reinforced when visitors enter the building for they then form a part of the triadic axis. This triad reinforces the notion that America played the role of savior during the Holocaust by providing a haven for the displaced persons and Holocaust survivors. This is extended by Nathan Rappaport's monument, *Liberation*, which stands just across the river from the MJH in Liberty State Park, New Jersey, also within sight of Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty. Rappaport's larger-than-life bronze statue of an American soldier rescuing a helpless concentration camp survivor 'emblemizes America's self-idealization as rescuer and refuge for the world's "huddled masses" and unfortunately buttresses the notion of Jews as victims.'<sup>[iv]</sup> As a consequence, the MJH disseminates a clear message reaffirming America as the savior of the Jews and the land of refuge and liberty.<sup>[iv]</sup>

Furthermore, like its Boston and Washington counterparts, the MJH places itself at the center of American history, memories, and narratives. The museum is located within walking distance to memorials of the American past including those to the Korean War, World War II, New York's first Jewish immigrants, and the tercentenary of Jewish settlement in America. The museum's proximity to these monuments reinforces its Americanness. In addition, the city of New York was born in the region of Battery Park and it soon became the nation's first capitol. Furthermore, where the USHMM stands near to the memorials of America's past, the MJH is located next to the financial heart of America: Wall Street, the Federal Reserve Bank, the World Trade Center, and the New York Stock Exchange. It has been noted that the site of the museum at 'the edge of the financial district, close to major tourist attractions and with a sweeping view of the Statue of Liberty, is reputed to be one of the most valuable properties in the US.'<sup>[vi]</sup> Perhaps it is for this reason that Elie Wiesel wrote 'the Museum [of Jewish Heritage], I believe, will be *the nation's* most important center of memory, and of remembrance, for both the Jewish and the American people.'<sup>[vii]</sup> In praising the museum, Wiesel (whether intentionally or not) located it within an American framework, as it will become a center of memory for the nation. Again, like the USHMM and the Boston Memorial, the MJH is located firmly within American history and traditions of freedom. The New York museum's own literature describes it as 'a vital part of lower Manhattan,' thus imparting to it the importance of Castle Clinton, Trinity Church, and Federal Hall.

Since the museum is located nearer to the viewer than either of the islands in the distance it is privileged as the primary sight of interest over both the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. This privileging is extended further by other elements of its location. Whereas the MJH is accessible by foot, both Liberty and Ellis Islands must be reached



by ferry. The museum lies between two separate parks, both of which express maritime narratives and themes and are harmonious with the surrounding Hudson River environment. Unlike the USHMM, the imposing ziggurat form of the museum makes no attempt to accommodate itself with its immediate surroundings. Rather, its bulky structure awkwardly dominates the skyline of the southern tip of Battery Park City and draws attention to itself not only by its incongruous structure, but also by its loneliness having no close neighboring buildings. The museum's incongruity is reinforced by its location in what is primarily a residential district. Rochelle Saidel has written of the MJH that, 'The location of the proposed museum in New York City thus influences its planned content, giving it a decidedly Jewish viewpoint or slant.'<sup>[lviii]</sup> However, its location rather than giving it a Jewish slant, seems to again wholly incorporate the Holocaust into the American historical narrative.

In contrast to the USHMM where the visitor descends through the museum, in the MJH one ascends through the exhibit via a series of escalators. Thus where the USHMM suggested a descent from the world of American democracy, the overall effect of the New York museum is to project redemption and renewal within contemporary America. This is extended by the layout of the permanent exhibit. The visitor begins on the ground floor entitled, 'Jewish Life a Century Ago' and ascends higher to the second and final floor, 'Jewish Renewal, which tells the visitor about the modern Jewish communities in America and Israel.' The notion of ascending heavenwards towards redemption is reinforced by the selective use of light and darkness within the building. The first two floors of the building are shrouded in darkness due to a complete absence of natural light as all of the windows on the lower tier of the building are blacked out. Indeed, it is only until one leaves the buildings that it becomes apparent that these floors even possess windows. In contrast, the second and final floor is bathed in natural light from a series of windows and a skylight. The effect creates the impression that the world of European Jewish Culture is dead while that of America is alive and vibrant. On the third floor, however, natural light floods in creating a heavenly almost halo-like effect. As the visitor leaves the exhibit, a wall of windows that occupy one whole side of the building confronts him/her. The light is almost blinding, marking the culmination of the exhibit and reinforcing the binary opposition between European Jewish culture/darkness and American Jewish culture/light.

This sensation is compounded by the heavy-handedness displayed in the layout of the final rotunda. The exhibition on this floor signals the emergence of the American Jewish community and is a tribute to its 'unparalleled freedom.' The concluding rotunda exactly replicates the entry rotunda in shape, but where the latter is shrouded in darkness possessing no natural light, the concluding rotunda is bathed in light shining from a skylight thereby strengthening the contrast. The focus of the whole room is upwards and the building tapers off in an imaginary point somewhere in the heavens. Majestic music plays in the background adding to the overall tone of redemption that the building projects. The cumulative effect of this themeing is the shift from the dark ages of European Jewish culture via the Holocaust to the golden age of American Jewish culture. In this way, the MJH mirrors the USHMM. Slessor observed of the latter memorial that 'Arriving at the head of the monumental stairs, the white marble wall at the east end of the Hall of Witness (the polar opposite of the sheer black cliff face that loomed over visitors on arrival), signifies departure. The gesture is fittingly optimistic in its affirmation of the auspicious half of the universal duality between light and dark, positive and negative.'<sup>[lix]</sup>

As mentioned above, when the visitor leaves the exhibit s/he is confronted by a series of windows that looks out onto the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. The exhibit ends literally on a high point as the Holocaust gives way to contemporary America. In this way, the museum features what has been called the 'architecture of reassurance,' that type of architecture designed such that the individual 'would never feel lost. Instead, the built environment constantly reassure[s] the pedestrian about the character of the space and his or her location within it.'<sup>[lx]</sup> As mentioned above, Disneyland terminated the views at the ends of all of its major streets with vertical icons so the visitor would always know exactly where s/he was. In a similar fashion to both Disneyland and the USHMM,

the exhibit at the MJH terminates with the view of the Statue of Liberty thus reminding the visitor of his/her location in America.

These structural elements are reinforced by the text of the permanent exhibit. Saidel pointed out how the original plans for the exhibit were changed to incorporate the idea of Jewish immigration to New York City. This, she concludes, 'may have been an attempt to define reality in a way that would "Americanize" the image of the museum for the GSA [General Services Administration] and the federal government.'<sup>[ixi]</sup> On the Third Floor, the exhibit looks to the future and concentrates on the American and Israeli Jewish communities. Although both are accorded equal space, several factors serve to emphasize the past and current contributions of the former over the latter. The text of the exhibit states:

The pre-war Jewish population of the United States, nearly 500 000 in 1939, was large and vigorous. Yet many American Jews still looked to Europe as the heart and home of Jewish heritage and institutions.

All that changed after the Holocaust. Just as America emerged from the war a leader of the free world, so were America's Jews thrust into leadership of the Jewish world. At the end of World War II, the United States was home to nearly half of all remaining Jews as the single largest Jewish population of any nation. The Jewish community in America continues to enjoy unprecedented freedom and opportunity, and has taken its place alongside Israel at the center of Jewish life, Jewish learning, and Jewish culture.

The immigration quotas imposed on Jews during the earlier part of the century by the United States are not mentioned here, which by its absence bolsters our contention that the narrative of this museum has been compromised and tamed through politics. Nor does this museum provide the visitor with a gloomy picture of life for many of these immigrants *after* arriving on American shores.

The notion that the American Jewish community enjoys unprecedented freedom and opportunity is reiterated in other parts of the third floor exhibit. In the subsection entitled, 'Jewish Culture on the World Stage,' the majority of the performers mentioned are American. Indeed, there is no mention of the Jewish communities that exist outside of America and Israel, as if they have no further contemporary relevance or worth. The overwhelmingly secular emphasis of this exhibit favors America as the community that has made the largest single impact on contemporary cultural life. In some senses, therefore, this contradicts the assertion that America is at the center of that Jewish learning for very little space is given to America's contributions to Jewish religious life and culture. What is more, there is no space like the USHMM's Hall of Memory given to quiet reflection or commemoration; there is nowhere to say *kaddish* or to light a candle. Ultimately, therefore, the museum in its ziggurat form becomes a temple to American Jewish Heritage.

## **Conclusion**

By the end of the twentieth century Holocaust architecture has indeed become a themed industry. The museum in New York is the third multi-million dollar Holocaust project to open in the United States recently.<sup>[xii]</sup> The result has been the incorporation of themeing in order to maximize the audiences for the respective museums. This use of themeing has furthered their Americanization for it could be argued that themeing is now viewed as a particularly American phenomenon. Thus if themeing has become globally recognized as 'American,' the act of themeing a museum or memorial aligns it with an American ethos. So while the memorials in New England and New York may link themselves to their respective states nominally, like that in Washington they all attempt to inscribe themselves into the nation as a whole, by locating themselves within an American historical continuum.

We are grateful to Andrew Charlesworth, Emma Lambert, and the staff and students of the Department of American and Canadian Studies, University of Nottingham for providing useful comments and suggestions on various drafts of this paper.

## Notes

[i] See Anson Rabinach, 'From Explosion to Erosion: Holocaust Memorialization in America Since Bitburg,' *History & Memory* 9:1-2 (Fall 1997): 226-255.

[ii] Heidi Landecker, 'New England Holocaust Memorial Opens,' *Architecture* (December 1995), 23.

[iii] Jonathan Boyarin, 'Introduction' in *Remapping Memory: The Politics of Timespace*, ed. Jonathan Boyarin (Minneapolis and London: The University of Minnesota Press, 1994), xiv.

[iv] Tim Cole, *Images of the Holocaust: The Myth of the 'Shoah Business'* (London: Duckworth, 1999), p. 168.

[v] Jonathan Boyarin, 'Space, Time, and the Politics of Memory' in *Remapping Memory*, ed. Boyarin, 20.

[vi] Lisa Yoneyama, 'Taming the Memoryscape: Hiroshima's Urban Renewal' in *ibid.*, 99-135.

[vii] Andrew Charlesworth, 'Contesting Places of Memory: The Case of Aushwitz,' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 12 (1994), 579-593.

[viii] Several years ago the Disney Company also attempted to create a Civil War themed landscape alongside the Gettysburg National Battlefield. Critics of the plan contended that no amount of historical Disneyfication of that bloody war could accurately depict its horrific nature leading to its eventual scrapping.

[ix] See for example Mark Gottdiener, *The Themeing of America* (1997).

[x] John Hannigan, *Fantasy City* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 98-99.

[xi] Outside the United States, there are strong indications of this. In Poland, for example, a cottage industry has developed around Holocaust sites whereby local Poles attract hundreds of Jewish tourists a year by so-called Holocaust tours.

[xii] James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 207.

[xiii] Sybil Milton, *In Fitting Memory: The Art and Politics of Holocaust Memorials* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), p. 7.

[xiv] See Vivian M. Patraka, 'Spectacles of Suffering: Performing Presence, Absence, and Historical Memory at U.S. Holocaust Museums' in *Performance and Cultural Politics*, ed. Elin Diamond (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 95.

[xv] For a full detailed, and lengthy account of this process of negotiation see Edward T. Linenthal's excellent *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum* (New York: Penguin, 1995). We argue this point in contrast to Patraka's claim that the 'unstated mission of this museum' was 'the consolidation of a Jewish American identity that can include the Jewish genocide in Europe within the frame of Jewish identity in the United States.' See also Patraka 'Spectacles of Suffering,' 104.

[xvi] This information is freely available on the UHSM's website: [http://www.ushmm.org/misc-bin/add\\_goback/backg.htm](http://www.ushmm.org/misc-bin/add_goback/backg.htm).

[xvii] Patraka, 'Spectacles of Suffering,' 95.

[xviii] James Ingo Freed, 'The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum' in *The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History*, ed. James E. Young (Munich and New York, Prestel, 1994), 89.

[xix] Quoted in Linenthal, *Preserving Memory*, p. 61.

[xx] Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 58.

[xxi] *Ibid.*, p. 61.

[xxii] Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 99; Freed, 'The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum,' 90.

[xxiii] Linenthal, *Preserving Memory*, pp. 294n, 99.

[xxiv] Catherine Slessor, 'Visceral Memorial,' *The Architectural Review* (February 1994), 62.

[xxv] Linenthal, *Preserving Memory*, p. 89.

[xxvi] Two million people visit the USHMM annually at a rate of approximately 5000 per day. Only the US Air and Space Museum receives more visitors, but those who visit the USHMM spend three times longer there than at the Air and Space Museum. An interesting survey would ask why. These statistics are from Cole, *Images of the Holocaust*, pp. 146-147.

[xxvii] Patraha, 'Spectacles of Suffering,' 93.

[xxviii] Slessor, 'Visceral Memorial,' 58.

[xxix] Rochelle Saidel, *Never Too Late to Remember: The Politics Behind New York City's Holocaust Museum* (New York and London: Homes & Meier, 1996), p. 220.

[xxx] *Ibid.*, p. 89.

[xxxi] 'The Architecture of Reassurance: Designing the Disney Theme Parks', an exhibition at Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution, NY (6 October 1988 – 10 January 1999).

[xxxii] *Ibid.*

[xxxiii] Some of these simulations included a casting of a crematorium, a dissecting table, and a remnant of the Warsaw Ghetto Wall. See Linenthal, *Preserving Memory*, pp. 152-153.

[xxxiv] Themeing, however, had its limits: some of what may be considered as the more outrageous proposals were dropped such as the inclusion of real hair from Auschwitz.

[xxxv] Omer Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst: The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 178; Sgalmi Bar-Mor, quoted in Cole, *Images of the Holocaust*, p. 147.

[xxxvi] Michael Berenbaum, *After Tragedy and Triumph: Modern Jewish Thought and the American Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 163.

[xxxvii] Landecker, 'New England Holocaust Memorial Opens,' 23.

[xxxviii] Young, *The Texture of Memory*, p. 324.

[xxxix] *Ibid.*, p. 332.

[xl] Landecker, 'New England Holocaust Memorial Opens,' 23.

[xli] *Ibid.*

[xlii] Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 128.

[xliii] Quoted in Linenthal, *Preserving Memory*, p. 57.

[xliv] Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 58.



[xlv] In October 1947 a ceremony was held that was supposed to mark the construction of a Holocaust museum in New York City. In October 1994 ground was finally broken for the Museum of Jewish Heritage. The conflicts which led to this 47 year delay are outlined in Saidel *Never Too Late to Remember*.

[xlv] Museum of Jewish Heritage, 'Tribute Giving,' pamphlet, no pp, no date.

[xlvii] Museum of Jewish Heritage, 'Museum Guide,' pamphlet, no pp., no date.

[xlviii] Saidel, *Never Too Late to Remember*, p. 221.

[xlix] Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 224.

[i] Also the museum failed in its attempt to distance itself from the USHMM. The entry rotunda of the MJH is composed of natural materials such as wood, stone, and marble mirroring Freed's emphasis on the use of such elements in the USHMM and the shape of the entry and concluding rotunda recalls that of Washington's Hall of Memory.

[ii] Saidel, *Never Too Late to Remember*, p. 11.

[iii] *Ibid.*, p. 215.

[iii] James E. Young, 'The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History,' in *The Art of Memory*, ed. Young, 33.

[liv] *Ibid.*, 34, 158.

[lv] On the cover of one of its pamphlets, 'School and Teacher Programs,' the museum has reprinted a picture of newly-arrived immigrants in New York harbor looking and pointing at the Statue of Liberty.

[lvi] J.J. Goldberg, 'New York gets Holocaust Museum after 16-Year Wait,' *Jewish Chronicle*, 12 September 1997.

[lvii] Museum of Jewish Heritage, 'Tribute Giving,' pamphlet, no pp. no date, emphasis added.

[lviii] Saidel, *Never Too Late to Remember*, p. 10.

[lix] Slessor, 'Visceral Memorial,' 62.

[lx] 'The Architecture of Reassurance: Designing the Disney Theme Parks.'

[lxi] Saidel, *Never Too Late to Remember*, p. 216.

[lxii] Goldberg, 'New York gets Holocaust Museum after 16-Year Wait.'

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