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Exhibit Reviews

National Museum of American Jewish History: Core Exhibition.

Curators: Josh Perelman, Ann Meyerson, Nina Spiegel. 101 South Independence Mall East, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. November 12, 2010–continuing. Catalog: Jonathan Sarna, Beth Wenger, Michael Berenbaum, Pamela Nadell, and Josh Perelman. *Dreams of Freedom-National Museum of American Jewish History Catalog*, Philadelphia: NMAJH, 2011 (225 pages). Website: <http://www.nmajh.org/>

Since its founding in 1976, the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia (NMAJH) has grown to become the largest collection of American Jewish artifacts—holding over 25,000 historically significant pieces. The museum showcases eye-popping displays like a menu and an oyster fork from the 1883 Trefa Banquet. To accommodate this impressive assortment, including interactive exhibits and numerous iconic documents, NMAJH opened a new building in November 2010. Nestled on Independence Mall among the most recognizable symbols of American freedom, the structure is a four-story tribute to the confluence of American and Jewish identities in shaping American history. Each floor of the three-and-a-half story core exhibition narrates Jewish agency in American history chronologically, from the top floor downward. The first floor contains the *Only in America*® Gallery/Hall of Fame, a “who’s who” of exceptional American Jewish luminaries.

The mission of NMAJH “is to present educational programs and experiences that preserve, explore, and celebrate the history of Jews in America.” The consulting historians committee was headed by Jonathan Sarna and included Beth Wenger, Michael Berenbaum, and Pamela Nadell. Each member has written enduring, widely respected and deep contributions to the field of American Jewish History. Josh Perelman earned his Ph.D. from NYU both in American Jewish history and in Hebrew and Judaic Studies, and has many years of museum experience. Together,

*Façade of the National Museum of American Jewish History
dedicated November 2010, with the nineteenth century
monument to Religious Liberty in front.
(Courtesy of the National Museum of
American Jewish History, Philadelphia.)*

Interactive map, surrounded by various cities with their own artifacts and multimedia, shows the transformation of the nation's borders, economy, and populations in the nineteenth century. Charleston, New Orleans, and Houston are among the featured cities. (Courtesy of the National Museum of American Jewish History, Philadelphia.)

these scholars undertook the gargantuan task of creating what NMAJH boasts to be “the only museum anywhere dedicated to chronicling the American Jewish experience.” The panel also authored the NMAJH catalogue, *Dreams of Freedom*, which smoothly summarizes the museum’s themes with a diversity of voices and glossy exhibit photographs.

The galleries at NMAJH document the national story of how Jews fleeing European persecution to find freedom settled in America and prospered despite their neighbors’ prejudices and differences. Jewish citizenship in the United States eased the nation toward pluralism while American Judaism became more democratic by gaining recognition in American civic life. Each gallery attaches this coda to focal points in American history with original documents and poignant material examples. Interwoven with this grand narrative, however, are exhibits recounting distinctively American Jewish cultural experiences such as peddling and store-owning, philanthropic ef-

forts, new Jewish denominations and community centers, tenement life, success in the entertainment and garment industries, vacationing in the Catskills, youth summer camps, hopeful reactions to the founding of Israel, and solidarity with Soviet Jews.

NMAJH also shows many pieces of interest to historians of the southern Jewish experience. The top floor covers the mainstays of antebellum history including exhibits on the thriving Jewish communities in Savannah and Charleston. The Moroccan Torah, believed to have been the first brought into the colonies at Savannah in 1737, is on display, along with a choir book from Charleston's first Reform temple. A Civil War exhibit includes the voices of Union and Confederate Jews with their uniforms, a profile of Judah P. Benjamin's achievements, along with divisions among American Jews over slavery. Because NMAJH is telling a national story, however, the later period exhibitions lose focus of place and local narratives and tend to blunt regional distinctiveness. The Leo Frank video exhibit in the *Dreams of Freedom* gallery, for instance, frames his murder within a growing wave of national antisemitism by displaying a Ku Klux Klan robe with copies of *The International Jew* and *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. The result is provocative, but Steve Oney's opus on the Frank case has pointed more toward local demagoguery and cultural anxieties specific to Marietta, Georgia, as having fomented Frank's lynching. The civil rights exhibit on the second floor highlights liberal Jewish involvement as Freedom Riders and vanguard feminists, but only includes a postcard from Leb's Restaurant in Atlanta that was targeted by anti-segregationist protestors in 1964, along with the iconic January 1969 "Black vs. Jew" cover of *Time* as counter-examples to the freedom narrative. Southern Jews who wanted to preserve the racial status quo are mentioned in exhibition texts, but not represented with much material culture. The point of this museum, however, is to underscore American Jewish achievement rather than failures.

Overall, NMAJH is well worth the afternoon and the small admission fee. Its historians have told a familiar and inspiring national story and chosen an evocative array of artifacts.

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Down Home: Jewish Life in North Carolina. Curator: Leonard Rogoff. Raleigh installation: exhibit designer, Jennifer McRae; exhibit consultant, Benjamin Filene; cinematographer, Warren Gentry; fabricator: Mike Cindric/Design Dimension, Inc. Greensboro installation: Shane Carrico, curator of exhibits, Greensboro Historical Museum. Presented by Jewish Heritage Foundation of North Carolina, with presenting sponsors: Leon Levine Foundation, Sandra and Leon Levine, and the State of North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources. Raleigh: June 2010–March 2011; Greensboro: April–September 2011; Wilmington (opening October 2011); Charlotte (opening January 2012); and Asheville (to be determined). Additional resources include accompanying book: Leonard Rogoff, *Down Home: Jewish Life in North Carolina*, 2010 (432 pages.) Website: <http://www.jhfn.org>.

The exhibition, *Down Home: Jewish Life in North Carolina*, represents a significant coming together of material culture, ideas, and interest in the life of Jews in North Carolina from the 1870s to the present. The traveling exhibition originated at the North Carolina Museum of History and has planned stops in Greensboro, Wilmington, Charlotte, and Asheville through 2012. Part of a larger multimedia project, the exhibit stands alongside a 432-page book (Leonard Rogoff), a 60-minute documentary film (Steve Channing), educational DVDs and teachers' guides, and collateral local programming and celebrations at each of the exhibition sites. This reviewer considers a visit to the Greensboro exhibition in May 2011, in the context of this larger project, by looking at both the content and design of the exhibition as interrelated aspects of the visitor experience.

For traveling exhibits, design professionals and content specialists must exercise care in how much information to include within design elements, text panels, and visual materials—and in the transmission of information through both the design and in the particulars of the various components within the experience as a whole. Particularly given the constraints of the various galleries

in which the exhibitions will be mounted and the kinds of artifacts that can be loaned for relatively long periods of time, exhibit organizers may often experience constraints in what they can share with the public. Nonetheless, museum staffs have an obligation to balance those constraints with the benefits visitors receive from accessing important stories and historical concepts, as well as the careful curation of artifacts, visuals, and texts to support rather than detract from the central message of the installations.

First and foremost, the premise of documenting stories and exploring the presence of Jews in the Tar Heel State indicates an important effort by the Jewish Heritage Foundation of North Carolina and the North Carolina Museum of History. As a partner institution, the Greensboro Historical Museum (GHM), among others, shares in the storytelling about and with Jews in the everyday history of the state, and this indicates perhaps the greatest success of the traveling exhibition, both at its origin and then in the satellite of communities where visitors can view it. Without question, the base stories within the exhibition (and in the larger multimedia project) provide rich source material for the curators and designers to manipulate and share with visitors. These creative individuals and scholars, however, fall short, collectively, in their construction of key narratives and command of exhibit elements to communicate the story of Jews in North Carolina in a clear and meaningful way. While Rogoff addresses some of the contextual and content issues raised in this review in the more comprehensive work in book form, the limited scope of the exhibition content and particularly its physical form make easy comprehension by visitors deeply problematic.

Four key areas of exploration—faith, family, business, and learning—provide the frame for the visitor experience within the installation, materialized in a keystone design element in the hall, each with limited explanation. Preceded by five kiosks (and ideas) on the way to the exhibition and, at Greensboro, two additional concepts within the exhibition space itself, the tapestry of thinking presented underscores the presence of Jews in all walks of North Carolina life from a wide perspective. The keystone design elements, unfortunately, do not contain sufficient

information to help viewers understand the importance of the themes, and thus the intellectual framing for each area, or how they relate together. Curators and designers provide an additional dozen questions on waist-high standards clustered at the entrance to explore some myths and assumptions about Jews and Jewish life. Unfortunately, no single organizing principle or text panel aids the visitor in understanding the material within the experience or, interestingly enough, understanding the Jewish experience among the material, both in terms of the larger context of North Carolina life and within mainstream culture. All of the design elements within these various well-made exhibit components follow a similar scale and form (keystones, kiosks, standards) and contain both images and texts of a consistent size and hierarchy. The visitor thus encounters the content and form of the exhibit unsure of the hierarchy of main ideas and subsidiary ones and, at Greensboro, because of the layout, this confusion consistently dissuades the visitor from sorting it all out.

What makes the exhibit stimulating visually counters the educational aims of the effort. As the visitor wades into the material, the cogency of any single message dissolves in the bright colors, number of moving visual images, in the visitor interactives, and the texts in the exhibit's landscape. Nowhere does the curatorial team provide a visual or textual orientation to the story. The intellectual and design confusion that result cloud the importance and long-lasting legacy of the exhibit: the stories of Jews and their everyday lives as *part of* the South. These individual stories chronicle the rich experiences and varied lives of Jews in North Carolina, largely from the latter half of the nineteenth century and the opening decades of the twentieth century. This reviewer left the experience thinking: where's the map?

The particulars of the individual stories stand in bold relief as interesting and often poignant recollections in visual, aural, material, and textual form. However, significant questions remain. How many Jews settled in North Carolina in the time period covered by the exhibit? Where did Jews reside? How did they contribute explicitly and meaningfully to the various communities of North Carolina? How representative are the Jews selected for

inclusion in the four exhibit areas of Jews throughout the state? What of the Jews who settled in the antebellum South, for example, who seem to be invisible in the framework for the exhibit? And what of the embedded nature of Jewish culture and customs in the latter twentieth century or the twenty-first? These areas of explanation and exploration remain untapped as possible explorations for the exhibit organizers due to the lack of carefully framed overviews that move beyond the provocative and toward a concrete position centered in the Jewish experience. They stand as evidence that further overall explication would aid the visitor to the exhibit who brings no prior knowledge of Jewish life to the exhibit hall.

In terms of the interactives, the exhibit contained three kinds: physical models, moving images, and manipulated material culture. The first two, in principle, aid in the explanation of complex spaces, rituals, and practices. Models of a synagogue and design elements within religious spaces, as well as a pseudo compilation of store shelves and store front windows provided a kind of entourage around which exhibit organizers placed other elements. The mercantile section, nearly immersive, offered a change of pace from the frontal orientation and encounter in the remainder of the exhibit. Moving contemporary images of Jewish religious practices in the home and temple took form on large monitors placed in the space. The celebration of a Sabbath meal included the fabrication and installation of a table in which an additional digital monitor had been placed. Though popular, this latter design element occupied valuable real estate within the physical exhibit without delivering any additional insight for the visitor. The more successful movie "books" mounted on a library reading table in the education section provided an easy interface, cleverly linked with the subject matter. The least successful design/content interface, though, involved the use of a modified period refrigerator and stove which, when opened by the visitor, offered visual and aural explanation of a kosher kitchen (refrigerator) and the particulars of a recipe (stove). It seemed quite odd, actually, that such important messages could be so easily missed, notwithstanding

the cultural connections one could make with the placement of disembodied Jewish voices in an oven interior.

In terms of treatment for the room itself, GHM installers did not address the architectural envelope into which they inserted this traveling exhibition. While this reviewer recognizes the challenges inherent in adapting prefabricated exhibition elements in an odd-shaped gallery with relatively low ceilings, greater care could have been made to use the quirky angles of the space to greater advantage in clarifying exhibit content, hierarchy, and central message. In this room, the noisy hum of a pair of dehumidifiers compromised the aural elements of the exhibit, further muddying the message carried by Jews from the past and projected into the space. Given these challenges, a more studied approach for the exhibit installation (even with its pre-designed elements) surely would have resulted in a more clear vision shared with visitors in both sight and sound as they contemplated the intellectual content of the ideas presented.

When this reviewer visited the gallery, one of the volunteer docents characterized that the exhibit carried messages that Jews represent a peculiar kind of southerner intertwined within the predominantly non-Jewish South. Such a story reinforces the stereotypes of difference in faith, family, business, and learning, without recognizing and celebrating the commonalities that Jews share with other southerners with whom they have interacted over a couple of centuries. Even if the essential message of the docent represents a valid interpretation of the central theme of the exhibit, the content and form of the exhibit components do not help sharpen and deliver that single, clear idea—leaving visitors to make the connections about difference and similarity unaided by the wise insights of the curatorial and design team.

In the lobby downstairs from the main exhibit space at the GHM, museum staff pulled together artifacts from local collections and fashioned a small display, perhaps twenty feet square, populated by a series of vitrines, text panels in banner form, and a visually stimulating, though confusing, timeline of Jewish events particular to Greensboro. In contrast to the exhibit above, this smaller installation did not suffer from the same design and idea

confusion, save the timeline. Certainly the scale of this smaller effort contrasted with the larger endeavor upstairs and, stripped of color and moving images, this smaller setting seemed more successful in delivering a message of intertwined southern and Jewish lives. Without the visual stimuli of the larger installation, this local perspective, offered in the lobby, actually achieved the intention of explaining an important aspect of southern life in a more lucid manner.

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¹ *The author gratefully acknowledges the keen eye and sharp thinking of Natalie Lentz Wall who walked through the exhibit and reviewed several drafts of this review.*