

## Will Jewish Museums Replace America's Synagogues?

Alanna Cooper | March 7, 2019

I am a museum-junkie. More specifically, a Jewish-museum junkie. And I'm not alone. Jewish museums – and their visitors - have proliferated in this country at an astounding rate over the past few decades.

In 1950, there were only two professionally-run Jewish museums in the United States. By 1977, the number had reached seven. And today, there are more than 70, in addition to an uncountable number of collections cared for by volunteers, and housed in synagogues and Jewish community centers (like one I visited a few months ago in Greenville, Mississippi. There, the synagogue maintains a multi-room exhibit, with a dizzying array of artifacts that tell the history of the Jewish life in the town).



*Benjy Nelken, Curator  
Hebrew Union Temple History Museum  
Greenville, MS*



*Skirball Cultural Center*

American Jews love their museums. But why? What is the draw? These questions were front and center at the conference I attended this past week, organized by the Council of American Jewish Museums. The events were held in Los Angeles, in a variety of fantastic state-of-the-art museums (some Jewish and some not); The Getty, the Broad, the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust, and the Skirball Cultural Center.

Speaking in airy rooms with large windows overlooking gardens, presenters addressed the role of museums in today's Jewish landscape. In doing so, many framed their remarks by quoting the 2013 Pew Study of Jewish Americans, which pointed to swelling numbers of those who identify as "Jews of no religion."

Museums – some posited – hold the potential to attract precisely these Jews who are disaffected from traditional Jewish religious institutions.

Lou Cove, who serves as Senior Advisor to the Harold Grinspoon Foundation, described his own Jewish journey to conference attendees. “I grew up in a hyper assimilated household,” he told the audience, “I did not set foot in shul and...had no sense of Jewish commitment, connection, or care.” His narrative then pivoted to a visit, which he took as a young man, to the Yiddish Book Center. He went reluctantly, expecting to find a “dusty closet.” Instead, he encountered a fresh, forward-looking institution filled with bright young volunteers. And thus, explained Cove, “began my deep dive into a literary canon I knew nothing about.”

For people like Cove, museums can serve as alluring entry-points for connecting to Jewish history, heritage, identity and even – for some – to the Transcendent. Museums have a benefit that most synagogues do not have. Without mandates or strictures to follow, and with few rules and redlines, museums are able to design, plan and curate in ways that are adaptable, creative and playful.

Indeed, today’s successful museums have moved beyond the classical technique of exhibiting silent objects, displayed behind imposing vitrines that keep the viewer at a distance. Now, exhibits are designed to delight the visitor, and engage in surprising ways like this Roy Lichtenstein show, “Pop for the People” that I visited with my father at the Skirball Center in June 2016 (pictured right.)



The allure of this new interactive approach is so strong that one speaker suggested that museums might one day replace synagogues altogether. I don’t buy it. But towards the end of a long afternoon session, when my mind was beginning to wander, and I was no longer able to concentrate on what was happening on the small stage at the front of the room, I looked up at the dramatic vaulted ceilings of the Spertus hall, and out the massive windows onto the lush landscape, and I felt a sense of awe – not unlike the feeling I sometimes have while sitting in a sacred synagogue space.

Then the session ended, and I exited the sanctuary – or, rather, the conference hall – to grab a snack. At the pastry table, I met with someone who was an old

acquaintance, and we chatted while eating our brownies. And something about the interchange felt comforting, like schmoozing with a friend at Kiddush after a long *shabbos* morning service. And that is always a good thing.

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