

Considering the Holocaust: Where can civic debate take place?

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In 1998, the board of directors of the American Museum Association proposed the *Museums and Community Initiative*, calling upon museums in the United States to involve their communities in civic dialogue. In 1999, Americans for the Arts published a report commissioned by the Ford Foundation entitled *Animating Democracy: The Artistic Imagination as a Force in Civic Dialogue*.¹ *Animating Democracy* outlines the main goals of civic engagement for museums and emphasizes the importance of civic dialogue, calling it a requisite for the realization of democracy. The authors, Barbara Schaffer Bacon, Cheryl Yuen, and Pam Korza, argue that, "Revitalization of democracy is a concern at all levels of society, and in the renewal of civic dialogue, the arts can play a pivotal role ...[for they]... have long demonstrated a unique capacity to create public space for discussion of important civic issues where such does not exist."² The means for implementing this mission have since become an issue for institutions, directors and curators who struggle with creating programming that fits.

Animating Democracy suggests that civic dialogue requires a neutral and 'safe' space in order to take place. Bacon, Yuen and Korza define such a space as one "in which people feel comfortable enough to engage in difficult discussion."³ Although museums today are arguably some of the safest public places, due to the presence in many of state-of-the-art alarm systems, metal detectors and security guards, they are not necessarily neutral places. The space of a museum is colored by, among other factors, politics, location, history, and institutional policies.

Bacon, Yuen and Korza's proposal that a safe and neutral space will foster debate may at first appear sensible, but I believe that civic discussion is also possible in what I will call a 'charged space.' Furthermore, effectively charged environments often encourage dialogue, possibly more so than neutral spaces. I will consider specifically two museums built to memorialize the Holocaust and celebrate Jewish heritage. The particular geographic location of the Jewish Museum in Berlin and its architecture present an important dynamic for bringing about civic dialogue. And the Jewish Museum of New York's recent exhibition *Mirroring Evil* exemplifies why the Jewish Museum, of all places, is such an important site for presenting controversial Jewish art. How these non-neutral museum spaces have helped facilitate important dialogue about the Holocaust and current issues demonstrates that *Animating Democracy's* finding, in regards to neutral space, was perhaps a hasty assumption that does not take into account how a charged space can be a positive dynamic in encouraging civic dialogue.

In 1989, the Association for a Jewish Museum in Berlin held an architectural design competition for a building to house a permanent exhibit detailing the history of European Jews. The winner of this competition, Daniel Libeskind, designed a space that expressed the Jewish experience during the Nazi era and recognized the institution's location in Berlin, Germany's former Nazi capital. The resulting architecture of the Jewish Museum references the geographic locations of sites in Berlin that are historically relevant to the Holocaust. Libeskind's says of this work,

I felt that there was an invisible matrix of connections – a set of relations between German and Jewish figures ... Certain people, ordinary workers, writers, composers, artists, scientists, and poets formed the link between Jewish traditions and German culture. I found this connection, and from their Berlin addresses I plotted an irrational

matrix that would yield a reference to the emblematics of a compressed and distorted star: the yellow star so frequently worn on this very site.⁴

What Libeskind recognizes in his architecture and makes apparent to visitors, is the connection this museum has with its geographic location. The resulting expressive atmosphere is electrified by the history the museum represents, and in fact creates a space that allows for and perhaps demands a discussion about this history.

When the Jewish Museum Berlin opened in 1999, it contained no exhibit; yet the museum was filled with visitors who came to understand the Holocaust through the expressive nature of the space alone. The tours that were given, entitled "Between the Lines," discussed the significance of the architecture, but for the most part allowed visitors to interpret the meaning of the space through their own understanding of the Holocaust.⁵ When I visited the museum, I listened as some visitors argued about whether the light cut into the space known as the chimney signified hope or despair; this debate resulted in a group discussion about how people view the Holocaust from today's perspective. Libeskind's expressive space became a place where discussions about the Holocaust could have a presence, despite the fact that Berlin is one of the least neutral places imaginable for the encouragement of such dialogue.

The Jewish Museum in Berlin now displays a permanent exhibit about the history of Jewish people in Europe, and has in fact become less effective in the eyes of many. Yet it remains a place for discussions about the Holocaust in Germany and continues to reference the physical environment. A recent program entitled "Along the Cobblestone Trail in Search of . . ." led visitors through the vicinity of the Museum on "a tour of discovery that unveils a rich picture of this quarter of Berlin, both before and after the time of dispossession, war and destruction. Among other sites, the newspaper district and the memorial to the synagogue on Lindenstrasse suggest connections between past and present."⁶

The physical existence of the Jewish Museum in Berlin provides these dialogues about the Holocaust with a greater presence in Berlin. And, the overwhelming popularity of the museum makes it clear that this dialogue was in need of such an environment.

At the Jewish Museum in New York City a recent exhibition presented art that contributed to the establishment of a charged environment, and the presence of this art in fact encouraged debate. In March of 2002, Norman L. Kleblatt, the Susan and Elihu Rose Curator of Fine Arts at the Jewish Museum, created *Mirroring Evil*. The exhibition points to the changing face of Holocaust art, in particular a group of works that incorporate Nazi imagery and focus attention for the first time on the perpetrators rather than the victims. The exhibit caused a controversy even before it opened when the catalogue was released prior to the exhibition. One of the most controversial art works included the "Lego Concentration Camp Set," consisting of "seven empty Lego-like boxes whose covers show pictures of model death camps that the artist Zbigniew Libera made with Lego blocks."⁷ Another, by Alan Schechner's, "It's the Real Thing – Self-Portrait at Buchenwald," shows a doctored "photograph of Mr. Schechner hoisting a can of Diet Coke while concentration camp inmates look on."⁸ Alerting visitors to the non-neutral atmosphere, and likely adding to it, was a sign warning of the provocative content of the exhibit, and a supplementary exit prior to the display containing the most controversial works, and discussions about the show and its significance held every afternoon.

The discussions, warning signs and additional exit were all added in response to the outcry from many in the community who were offended by ideas presented by the art. The

opening of the exhibit brought about a protest, though not a large one, and the museum did lose some membership. Yet this charged atmosphere allowed for the discussion of a disturbing trend in artworks that incorporate Holocaust and Nazi imagery. When the Museum was questioned about its motives for displaying such offensive works, particularly in a Jewish museum, the institution's response was expressed through Reesa Greenberg, a Canadian art historian and consultant for the Jewish Museum on this exhibition. Greenberg stated that in fact a Jewish institution is the best place for such art, as "Visitors may feel deeply threatened, outraged or betrayed, but it is safer to explore the important implications of the continuing fascination with the Nazi era within the confines of a Jewish museum [rather] than outside it."⁹ The Museum thus became an environment for important civic dialogues because the atmosphere was effectively engaged by this art.

Many factors can create a charged museum environment, including geographic location, architecture, and exhibits. If carefully considered and applied appropriately, each of these factors can facilitate important discussions. Neutral space does not always exist, particularly in museums whose mission is not neutral. But as we have seen, a charged atmosphere can in fact create an environment that encourages civic dialogue, and thus facilitate democracy in our nation.

¹ Barbara Schaffer Bacon, Cheryl Yuen, and Pam Korza, *Animating Democracy: The Artistic Imagination as a Force in Civic Dialogue*, Washington, DC: Americans for the Arts, 1999.

² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

³ *Animating Democracy*, "Study's Findings," p. 4.

⁴ Daniel Libeskind, preface to Bernhard Schneider, *Jewish Museum Berlin: Between the Lines*, New York/Munich: Prestel, 1999.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ From the Jüdisches Museum Berlin website: www.jmberlin.de. A description of the current tour entitled *Along the Cobblestone Trail in Search of...* Accessed 12/03.

⁷ Sarah Boxer, "Man Behind a Museum Tempest A Curator Defends His Show Exploring Nazi Imagery," *The New York Times*, February 6, 2002, Wednesday, Late Edition – Final, Section E, p. 1, Col. 1, Arts/Cultural Desk.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Yigal Schleifer, "Who Owns the Show?" *The Jerusalem Report*, February 25, 2002, p. 40.