



School of Design
Graduate Program in Historic Preservation
115 Meyerson Hall
210 South 34th Street
Philadelphia, PA 19104-6311
Tel 215.898.3169 Fax 215.573.6326
rfmason@design.upenn.edu

Randall F. Mason
Associate Professor
Chair

February 23, 2010

Dear AASLH Awards Committee—

It is my distinct pleasure to provide the following critical exhibit review to support Eastern State Penitentiary's application for an AASLH award for their Synagogue. This exhibit, telling the story of the creation, use and restoration of the Penitentiary's synagogue, is excellent. It adds a meaningful experience to a site that is already brimming with compelling spaces, narratives, and exhibits. Eastern State (ESP) is one of the most progressively and carefully managed historic sites I know, and the synagogue exhibit continues the management team's habit of commemorating a broad range of stories attached to the remarkable architectural remains of the prison.

The scholarship underpinning the exhibit is detailed, rigorous and multi-layered. Archival research and architectural fabric investigations carried out by scholars, professionals and historic site staff forms the base. Years of research documented the existence, extent and meaning of the synagogue, as a space in itself and as part of ESP. Investigations took place in archives, in oral history of surviving Jewish inmates, and in the remaining architectural fabric of the Synagogue (which was in ruins). Laura Mass and others effectively contextualized the synagogue—as a physical space and as a space for social praxis—and this scholarship is clearly and tellingly rendered in the exhibit text. The text and images are notably augmented by the simple display of a few artifacts and explanation of the architectural restoration strategy.

The exhibit doesn't merely describe and interpret the presence of Jews in ESP. It brings to light a surprising, and touchingly human story: the careful creation and stewardship of a Jewish worship space—a welcoming space—behind the forbidding walls of the prison. The exhibit is not confined to the Synagogue itself; it relates the religious intentions of ESP to the particular religious experiences of Jewish inmates, and conveys appreciation for the (positive) impact the sacred space of the synagogue had on the difficult everyday conditions and spiritual lives of the Jewish inmates. ESP takes advantage of great stories—understood via archival research as well as oral history—of volunteers whose service to the inmates made the Synagogue a vibrant, real part of inmates' lives. These stories and photographs of holidays can't fail to touch the heart of any visitor.

Interpretation of the considerable architectural conservation work on the room adds a crucial dimension to the exhibit. Through the detailed understanding of a few elements of architectural fabric (principally the original door and one Star of David), the interpretation connects the restoration of this one space to the preservation of the entire remarkable 11-acre prison amidst a Philadelphia neighborhood. The Synagogue is carefully restored, whereas the rest of ESP is stabilized as a ruin; this distinction is carefully noted and interpreted for visitors; so this takes some explaining, and it is well done.

The design of the exhibit is also first-rate. Artifacts, labels, images, and room design/interior architecture work very well together. The images are well chosen and plentiful (though really balanced with the available text). The exhibit text itself is engaging and clear.

ESP's Synagogue exhibit is thoroughly researched and documents, quite well-executed and a model of successful exhibit development in the context of an already robust historic site. The tens (hundreds!) of thousands of visitors to ESP now have another, unexpected, extraordinary story on exhibit for them—a reason to return.

As a coda, a brief word about my own background: As a professor and practitioner, I've been involved in studying and consulting on the management and interpretation of many historic sites, and been directly involved in the creation of exhibits and other interpretive programs. A lengthier bio is available at http://www.design.upenn.edu/people/mason_randall-f?destination=people%3Ffilter1%3D22.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Randall F. Mason".

February 25, 2010

Dear Members of the Awards Committee:

I have been asked to review and critique from a design perspective the Eastern State Penitentiary's (ESP) new *The Alfred W. Fleisher Memorial Synagogue Restoration* and companion *William Portner Exhibit on Jewish Life at Eastern State*, and I do so without hesitation. The curator was Sean Kelley, Program Director at ESP; the graphics were designed by Macilino Marketing; fabrication by Emily Blaskovich Saich, USA Models in Darby; Andrew Fearon of Milner + Carr lead preservation efforts; and Sam Harris and Associates were the engineering firm.

For the design/experience specifically, I decided to utilize the objective criteria established by Beverly Serrell and her team from *Judging Exhibitions: A Framework for Assessing Excellence*.¹ Ms. Serrell and her team outline four criteria for judging exhibitions:

- Comfort
- Engaging
- Reinforcing
- Meaningful

When instructing my students how to use these four, I typically add a fifth criterion: *Expectations*. I find this addition truly rounds out the other important considerations.

The second resource that I will be using, other than my own visitations and observations, is that of the Visitor Evaluation Report findings conducted by a team of University of the Arts Museum Studies students during the fall of 2010. The students collected data from more than 150 visitors over a four-week period.²

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¹ Surrell, Beverly, *Judging Exhibitions: A Framework for Assessing Excellence*, Left Coast Press, Inc. Walnut Creek CA, 2006

² Gnafakis, Alex, Victoria Jones, Graham O'Neill, and Elizabeth Stricker, *Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site Final Evaluation Report*, The University of the Arts, December, 2009.!

Overview and Expectations – What are the visitors' expectations and is this satisfied and/or surpassed.

Visitors can witness the transformation of the space from a place of worship to “interpretive” exhibition by flipping down the wainscoting of the back portion of the benches to reveal a long reader rail of graphics. This is a magical moment. The timeline graphics are nicely organized and readable, presenting the archaeological story of this space over an eight-year span. But the best part of all is the view revealed of the original 19th Century cell doors and doorways with iron padlocks in tact. This decaying material culture is a dramatic contrast to the beautiful renovation of the room yet reflects the cellblocks we have passed through earlier. The juxtaposition of new interpretation and restoration is extremely thought provoking and not in conflict with each other. These doors would have been covered when the Synagogue was originally constructed. But it suggests the deep layers of history contained at ESP.

The Visitor Evaluation reports that visitors with no prior expectation of visiting the Synagogue and exhibit had scored their overall experience slightly lower than visitors with expectation, however they rated on average 4.1 out of 5 for most positive.²

Gnafakis, Alex, Victoria Jones, Graham O'Neill, and Elizabeth Stricker, Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site Final Evaluation Report, The University of the Arts, December, 2009.!

Both the Exhibition and the Synagogue spaces are in many ways more physically comfortable than the rest of ESP. These spaces feel “real,” like ones that we normally inhabit, and give a much better sense of what everyday life would have been like at ESP in its past. The Synagogue is a quiet and reflective space with seating on both sides. Visitors here can take respite from the more cold, hard, echoing spaces of the rest of the site that has little to no seating. The video area of the synagogue is a very serene and focused space. The video gives an overview of the different people involved in the creation and restoration of the synagogue.

Just over half of the visitors (56%) were more comfortable on their own self-guided tour, indicating there was enough in the exhibition's text and graphics for them to find information they were seeking in a comfortable way.²

As stated above, the content is very captivating. The Synagogue is a beautiful, spiritual space. The stories on the exhibition side sometimes present horrible circumstances, but at the same time present the humanity of these prisoners that society wanted to forget. For contemporary audiences in these two spaces, questions begin to arise about current correctional practices, more so than the rest of the site most likely due to the direct interpretation provided. There is a revelation for visitors to truly think about these prisoners as everyday people needing their own place of worship.

Reinforcing – Exhibition provides abundant opportunities to be successful and intellectually competent.

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Meaningful – Visitors themselves change, cognitively and affectively, in immediate and long lasting ways.

The combination of the two spaces and the new approach has created a new way of experiencing Eastern State and it appears to be a very powerful one. Though not overt in these spaces, nonetheless contemporary corrections issues begin to be questioned by the visitors. The existing intellectual buffer between the visitor and the spaces created by the “ruins” quality of the ESP environment is now removed. Visitors must squarely place themselves in these spaces and with these individuals and this experience touches a new chord. Traditionally visitors have had very meaningful experiences with ESP on many levels; whether scared by the Halloween events, awed by the decaying beauty of the ruins, cognitively engaged by an audio tour or inspired in new ways by contemporary art installations. But this exhibition approach has added yet another totally new dimension. The “fourth wall” has been broken allowing a bridge for visitors to more directly place themselves into everyday prison life.

When visitors were asked if ESP should fully restore other areas of the penitentiary, 56% of the respondents (109) said yes, 19% of the respondents (37) said they would like to see only certain areas restored. The 73% total that has responded positively to some additional level of restoration³ is notable. The full conclusion of this response requires further assessment, however I believe visitors want to have a closer connection to what the place was really like when it was occupied.²

Some Specific Design Issues

Organizational clarity of exhibition concepts:

The curator laid out the exhibition in a thoughtful way, despite dealing with some spatial constraints. The restoration of the synagogue and interpretation of the archeology work well in the sacred space. As mentioned above the space is free of interpretation until the wainscot is flipped down. The video presentation is tucked into its own niche as not to disturb the serenity of the predominant space.

The exhibition is a somewhat traditional plan, with graphics running along either side of the room. This is an effective and straightforward approach. The graphics are well integrated within a traditional space, and do not appear ‘tacked on’.

Color, Material, and Finish Choices:

The synagogue restoration is beautifully crafted, detailed and accurate. The workmanship is impeccable, which also creates a clear understanding of the care that originally went into creating this space by the prisoners themselves. It is important that this space demonstrates the crispness that would have been true throughout the entire prison. This was a state-of-the-art facility that was well kept until the middle of the 20th century. Most visitors are unaware of the level of quality and craft to which this facility had been maintained.

The exhibition materials and finishes are handsome and appropriate for the space and the story. They do not compete with the envelope but at the same time do not try to blend into the background either. They are contemporary structures and they fit properly into the space.

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Gnafakis, Alex, Victoria Jones, Graham O’Neill, and Elizabeth Stricker, Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site Final Evaluation Report, The University of the Arts, December, 2009. !

Quality of production and graphics:

The overall quality of the “fabricated or built” exhibition components is appropriate to the space. The graphics are clean, concise and understated when they need to be. The structures that support the graphics are very well crafted. The video production is not top shelf and has a homemade quality about it, but that actually works well in this context. If the producers delivered a Hollywood quality video, one might question if money were spent in smartest ways. The quality aligns with the space and environment of ESP.

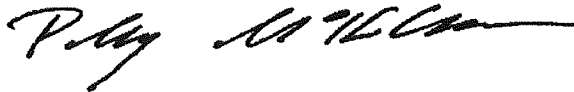
Conclusion

Based on personal observation and supported by evaluation results, I believe that the conjoined experiences of the Synagogue and exhibition not only are successful experiences in their own right but also go much further in supporting the museum’s mission to introduce thoughts and impression on contemporary corrections issues. With this new methodology ESP visitors can more accurately sense what it would have been like to live at ESP, yet also extrapolate from that the modern day issues that prisons face in terms of the housing, needs and care of imprisoned persons who spend their entire lives in similar institutions.

These exhibitions are powerful and meaningful for visitors and moves ESP forward from being thought of only as a “haunted house” or a historic architectural curiosity to a place in which the reality of troubled lives was lived out. The experience penetrates more deeply below the surface story and helps visitors’ find true resonance and personal meaning.

Thank you for your time. Please let me know if there are any questions or a need for clarification.

Sincerely,



Polly McKenna-Cress
Associate Professor
Chair, Museum Studies
Director, Museum Exhibition Planning + Design
The University of the Arts
320 South Broad Street
Philadelphia, PA 19106
(215) 717-6328
pmckennacress@uarts.edu