

## THE ESSAY

# We must find a cure for our awful 'edifice complex'

MUSEUMS  
SHARMAN  
KADISH

UNLIKE POLITICIANS and communal leaders, but in common with Jonathan Freedland's BBC Radio 4 Programme, people in the heritage business take "The Long View".

So when I read Lord Young's opinion in the *JC* (Nov 6, 2015) that the London Jewish Museum was in the wrong place, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. After more than 20 years in Camden Town and an expansion and capital redevelopment project to the tune of £10 million, of which £4.2 million was provided by the Heritage Lottery Fund, the new chairman of trustees has reached the same conclusion that I did way back in the early 1990s – before the museum even moved there. I have great difficulty in resisting the knee-jerk: "I told you so!"

Like so much in Anglo-Jewry, the move to Camden was, as far as I can ascertain, more accidental than planned. The late and generous benefactor Raymond Burton owned a couple of listed Georgian town-houses a few minutes' walk from Camden Town Underground Station. The property bubble had burst (1988) and he offered them to the Jewish Museum. Since 1932, the museum had been crammed into an upper floor of what was then nicknamed "Wobegone House".

The collective London headquarters of Anglo-Jewry and the popular Adler Hall at Woburn House in Tavistock Square, WCI, had been the big building project of an earlier generation of communal funding fathers. In the 1990s, it was sold for a reported £1.4 million, well below the £4 million reputedly offered to the United Synagogue for this prime, city-centre location. The University of London got a real *M'tsiah* (bargain)! There followed the dispersal of Britain's Jewish community institutions and, for most of them, exile from a prestigious address in the West End of London befitting a national organisation.

Recently, David Herman weighed in with an excellent piece entitled *What's wrong with our museums and how to fix it*, (*JC*, Feb 5). He made the point that the success of Jewish museums around the world

depends largely upon their location. They need to be at the centre of great cities where they can attract sufficient visitor footfall.

Back in 1996, I wrote the same thing: you only have to think of Amsterdam, Venice and Prague. But I took my argument beyond Herman's and stand by it today: the key to a successful Jewish museum is not only its situation in a central location but also its location inside or beside a building of outstanding architectural and historical interest: in short, a landmark, historic synagogue. Moreover, I agree with him that tourists need a cluster of historic sites in order to be lured into a "must-see" neighbourhood.

Conceptually, Manchester got it right way ahead of the capital. Over 100 years after its opening in 1874, in 1984 the Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue became the home of the Manchester Jewish Museum (MJM). MJM is situated in the middle of the Mancunian equivalent of the Jewish East End: Cheetham. Every summer, the museum runs regular heritage trails around the other surviving sites of Jewish interest in the neighbourhood, all of which, it must be said, are now Sites At Risk.

Manchester's Jewish Museum is a model conservation project. After three attempts, last year it finally landed a big HLF capital development grant potentially worth over £3 million. This is well deserved. MJM has attracted 20,000 visitors annually, the majority being young people on school trips. The restored synagogue itself has been and will remain its chief exhibit.

It was not as if the opportunity did not exist back in the 1990s to move London's Jewish museum to a historic synagogue. On the contrary, at that time, several large Victorian synagogues, including



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the likes of New West End (now Grade I) and Hampstead (now Grade II\*), were facing closure due to perceived "redundancy", while East London Synagogue (Grade II) in Stepney Green had already been sold off. That building was shockingly vandalised, arsoned and flooded before finally turning in a profit for the lucky developers who eventually acquired it and converted it into flats in 1997. Indeed, each of the 25 flats carved out of the main building was marketed for over £260,000 – roughly the same sum for which the United Synagogue had sold the whole site 10 years earlier, in 1987.

East London was the reason that I first became engaged in Jewish heritage conservation all those years ago. My first letter to the *JC* on the subject of heritage (Dec 18, 1987) was headed: *Time for some imagination in the East End*. When I suggested the Jewish Museum could easily relocate to East London Synagogue, so convenient for the then developing "Old Jewish East End" heritage trails that now dominate the cultural tourism market, the response was: How could we move to such an insalubrious, dangerous and drug-infested neighbourhood as the East End. The museum moved to Camden instead!

It has taken more than a generation for the tide of opinion to come around to my way of thinking. Camden did not develop into the Jewish "hub" that some had predicted in the 1990s. On the contrary, since then, JFS has suburbanised further out to Kenton. Moreover, an extravagant (£50 million) new-build Jewish community centre has gone up in the Finchley Road.

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Insight: Sharman Kadish's original letter in the *JC* (below) outlining a new museum proposal

## CAPITAL LETTERS

### Time for some imagination in the East End

Does anyone care what is happening to the East London Synagogue?  
The East London must be the oldest existing building of the United Synagogue in London. It was erected 110 years ago, in 1877, only seven years after the Act of Parliament which created the United Synagogue itself.  
The East London Synagogue is not only an irreplaceable part of Anglo-Jewish history, it is also a fine example of high Victorian architectural style.  
Immediate steps should be

taken to ensure that this synagogue is made a listed building and protected from the grasp of property developers. It may already be too late.  
The East London was used as a venue during last summer's Jewish East End Festival. It is therefore ironic that, at the same time, the building should be allowed to deteriorate, left to the mercy of vandals and finally, it appears, sold to property developers and an unknown fate.  
What London Jew hasn't parents or grandparents, under

or cousins who were burnt alive or married there? But aesthetics and nostalgia aside, the East London may well be a "deficit" synagogue – which is a United Synagogue synonym for the death sentence, but it still has 600 paying members. If I may be permitted to declare a personal interest, I was hoping to be married there myself next summer. Sadly, it seems, this will no longer be possible.  
Where is the imagination of Lionel Louis Cohen and his United Synagogue executive of

the 1870s, who raised £2,000 from the Anglo-Jewish community at large, to pay for the freesthold and build the synagogue in Rectory Square, to serve the spiritual needs of the poor immigrants in the East End? Has creeping philistinism so taken hold of Anglo-Jewry in general, and the United Synagogue in particular, that they can stand by and let yet one more part of our cultural heritage be lost?  
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ity for the privileged residents of London NW3. At least there are a lot more Jews populating Hampstead, Golders Green, St John's Wood and Swiss Cottage than are to be found around to my way of thinking. Camden did not develop into the Jewish "hub" that some had predicted in the 1990s. On the contrary, since then, JFS has suburbanised further out to Kenton. Moreover, an extravagant (£50 million) new-build Jewish community centre has gone up in the Finchley Road.

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number of precedents abroad may be cited, including Venice (again) and Florence.

The unhealthy obsession with dead Jews has run its course. Prime Minister David Cameron's pledge of £50 million last year to build a National Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre in central London is generous but misdirected. Britain already has an excellent National Holocaust Centre and Museum. It was built from scratch by dedicated "righteous gentiles" James and Stephen Smith in the village of Laxton outside Nottingham in 1995. Holocaust Memorial Day, as even one of its "architects", the late Professor David Cesarani, conceded, has become a focus for ethnicities competing for public space to out-do one another in genocides.

Thus, a modest Holocaust gallery that tells the stories of refugees and survivors who made it to London or Manchester, a display that sets their experiences within the local context, is all that is needed inside well-funded Jewish museums housed in historic synagogues.

An outstanding historic synagogue is enough to get the punters in. There is no need to "rebrand" our Jewish museums, certainly not as Holocaust memorials, nor as "Centres of Tolerance", "Museums of Immigration" or "Museums of

Identity". Jews should be proud of their identity and Jewish museums should exude self-confidence. They should be staffed both by Jewishly educated Jews and informed gentiles.

If not, we will end up with watered-down Jewish museums stuffed with Chanukah bushes, pitted in competition against other institutions that do it so much better. Like the Imperial War Museum. Britain's senior ethnic minority will lose out to newer-comers on the block, especially to the Muslims. After all, their numbers are at least 10 times greater than ours.

Just how many Jewish museums do we actually need? I will answer my own rhetorical question in a moment. Remember that setting up a museum is one thing; capital development is another. Since the 1990s, public funding has been generous in large part thanks to the National Lottery. However, the economic climate is now very bleak. The heritage sector has suffered 40 per cent cuts over the past couple of years. We Jews have always prided ourselves on our self-help philanthropy. So the demeaning urge to "get as much as we can" out of the state needs to be resisted more than ever before.

In any case, once government or the lottery have made the capital

outlay, the perpetual challenge of finding revenue funding for the boring stuff like staff salaries and paying the bills remains. Public funders, private foundations and individual high-worth philanthropists usually want to fund a "Project", not the people (myself included) who have to do the donkey-work.

So back to the question of how many Jewish museums do we actually need? How many are viable and financially sustainable? My answer is: three fully fledged national Jewish museums, combined with smaller "Heritage Centre" type interpretative displays in historic synagogues around the country.

Manchester provides the model. Glasgow has the potential to create The Jewish Museum of Scotland centred on the historic Garnethill Synagogue (1879). The core already exists in the Scottish Jewish Archives Centre that has occupied the basement since 1987. Rising Scottish nationalism provides the climate, while the synagogue enjoys an excellent location around the corner from Charles Rennie Mackintosh's world famous Glasgow School of Art.

It is London that needs the biggest rethink. Here is the essence of my proposal, an amalgam in a new permutation of ideas that have

SPITALFIELDS →

### A NEW 'MAP'

INSTEAD OF spreading Jewish centres of cultural interest throughout London, Dr Kadish suggest a new strategy that capitalises on the strong bonds the community has in the East End. Both Sandys Row and Bevis Marks synagogues carry great historical importance (the latter even used to have a fine restaurant). By moving the Jewish Museum and Ben Uri closer to that East/Central London location, Dr Kadish believes there will be greater desire from tourists and British Jews to pay a visit

→ WHITECHAPEL

Perhaps people can be given the chance to go on heritage trails

been floated over the years but have come to nothing.

The Jewish Museum should move to where it belongs: to the edge of the City of London, the historic heartland of modern Anglo-Jewry. When tourists in search of Jewish heritage visit the capital, they make for two destinations: Britain's oldest synagogue, Bevis Marks, and the Jewish Museum. But these two sites are at opposite ends of town.

I propose the Jewish Museum split its site between Bevis Marks and Sandys Row Synagogue, five minutes' walk away in Bishopsgate. Bevis Marks has a capacious attic that could be used to display the Jewish Museum's high art Judaica.

Sandys Row has a large, empty basement, perfect for social history displays about life in the East End. In this way, both "ends" of British Jewry, the East End and the West End, the Ashkenazim and the Sephardim, would be represented, physically embodied in these two contrasting historic synagogues.

Moreover, the Dutch Synagogue at Sandys Row started life in the 18th century as a French Protestant church and thus speaks of the migration and refugee experience within its very fabric. Visitors would easily be able to walk from one building to the other and, if they have the time, take in a heritage trail of the East End. They could stop for a meal in the Bevis Marks Restaurant (if it could be got going again). They could even catch a minyan if they were so inclined.

Adaptation of under-used or disused historic buildings to house museums is the best option to keep them alive. Using two historic synagogues as the core of the new Jewish Museum wouldn't cost "the tens of millions" Herman fears.

Maybe there is a creative Jewish developer out there in the City who gets it: that heritage can make a profit, if it is tied to tourism and regeneration. And while he is about it (and he probably is a he), he may like to buy or donate an extra property or two in the vicinity to provide the museum "campus" with some extra space. Room could be found for a Ben Uri gallery of Jewish and contemporary art. Embedding Ben Uri within the new Jewish Museum while retaining its separate identity would be most appropriate, given the Zionist aspirations of the founders of the original Art Society 100 years ago.

Badly needed storage space for artefacts could be provided. So, too, could a subsidised office hub (there seems to be an over-supply of these in anonymous office blocks in North West London) specifically for Jewish cultural institutions (including ourselves) that have much to gain materially and psychologically by sharing facilities with other like-minded people in these difficult times.

At Jewish Heritage we await your call, to commission the feasibility study for the new, improved Jewish Museum of London fit for the rest of the 21st century and beyond.

Dr Sharman Kadish is Founder-Director of Jewish Heritage UK. The new edition of her guidebook *Jewish Heritage in Britain and Ireland* was published by Historic England last year. [www.jewish-heritage-uk.org](http://www.jewish-heritage-uk.org)