

THE FUTURE OF MUSEUMS OF CITIES

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The Future of Museums of Cities

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DEVELOPMENT TOWNS – FROM POVERTY TO PROGRESS, FROM DEPRIVATION TO CULTIVATION: ESTABLISHING NEW CITY MUSEUMS IN ISRAEL

ABSTRACT

Following the establishment of the State of Israel, in 1948, the Arab-Israeli War broke out, the Israeli forces conquered vast areas, and many Palestinians left the country. The Jewish population was scattered across Israel to such extent that the young country experienced difficulties in sustaining itself and developing properly. Most of the population was concentrated in the large coastal cities or in central Israel, and very few citizens occupied the peripheral countryside.

Shortly thereafter, Israel welcomed a great number of immigrants – Jewish Holocaust survivors from Europe’s displaced persons camps, as well as Jewish refugees who fled from persecution in Arab states. About thirty new towns were swiftly founded, most of them far removed from the centre. The immigrants’ arrival suited the State’s leaders and architects as it answered the need to disperse the population, and immigrants were routed toward desolate towns, sometimes under pretences.

Additionally, the government used an official “melting pot” policy which aimed to assimilate all immigrants, from dozens of different places, into one new culture – secular Israeli. These processes have completely transformed the Israeli state, both geographically and culturally. Development towns became one of the country’s most significant urban phenomena, but they have yet to find their rightful place within the national narrative or to own their historical museums. Over the past few years, Israel has undergone a “cultural revolution”, which involves plans towards the establishment of development towns museums.

Historical museums deal with many issues of narrative, representation and collective memory. As part of these museums’ planning process, we have faced dilemmas such as: how to combine Israel’s national narrative with the microhistory and personal stories of development town residents? How can we deal with topics which, to this day, are still considered painful and controversial? What values should these museums highlight?

This article illustrates the development of such narrative and the selection process of the content to be displayed in development towns museums and their guiding concept, as they must not only retell the past but also, and especially, raise questions and invite their public to answer them, both from within and without the museum.

Key words: Development towns, heritage sites, historical museums, Israeli urbanism, Israeli culture

Local museums in Israel – a turning point

Museums that recount local histories face many questions of narrative, representation and collective memory. Which citizens' stories should be told? How should they be presented? What is the museum's target public? What will visitors experience? What sensations, emotions and values will this experience awaken? When it comes to city museums, these are not questions of a philosophical or theoretical nature, but rather acutely pragmatic dilemmas. And their answers may change over time.

Over the past few years, Israel has witnessed a true cultural revolution that led not only to far-reaching changes in the narratives presented thus far in local museums but also to the opening and planning of new museums in cities which, to that moment, had none, namely, in *development towns*. These comprise about thirty small towns quickly founded to accommodate the massive wave of immigration that arrived in Israel upon its establishment, and which have spent decades on the margins of the hegemonic Israeli-Zionist ethos.

Dozens of museums and local heritage sites dedicated to settlements and issues that preceded the state's foundation are scattered throughout Israel. Many are located in the agricultural settlements, colonies and *kibbutzim* (collective communities) founded in the late 19th and the first third of the 20th century. On the one hand, these sites usually tell stories of European immigrant pioneers and, for the most part, represent Zionist-Socialist perceptions and define Zionist pioneering accordingly. Some scholars believe that these sites acted as "secular pilgrimage" hubs, for certain sectors of Israeli society (Ashkenazi, Jews of European descent), who sought out cultural roots and a sense of belonging in the belief that their identities were connected to the stories of these first pioneers. On the other hand, until the 2000s, no museum had been founded in development towns.

"We hereby declare" – historical background to the establishment of the State of Israel

The State of Israel was founded in May 1948, after the British Mandate in the area came to an end. About six months prior, the General Assembly of the United Nations decided to divide the Land of Israel between the Jews and Arabs who inhabited it. The war that broke out immediately thereafter was named the "Israeli War of Independence" by the Jewish population, or the *Nakba* by the Palestinian population, meaning "disaster" or "blow". During the war, the Jews conquered extensive lands, and about 70,000 Arabs moved either to the surrounding Arab states or to the Gaza Strip. Did they flee? Leave willingly? Were they banished? That all depends on whom you ask, it is all a matter of narrative, of course.

The young State of Israel ended up with plenty of uninhabited areas and, not long after, a vast number of new immigrants – Jews from displaced persons camps in post-WWII Europe, and Jewish refugees who fled Arab states as the latter began persecuting their Jewish citizens following the foundation of the Jewish State.

This stream of refugees led to a massive rise in the population: the Jewish population doubled within a mere three and a half years, from 650,000 to 1,300,000. Meaning that it welcomed about 700,000 immigrants. After a decade, that number reached one million.

For an immigration country, this growth rate was unprecedented, especially considering that Israel had been newly founded and some of its infrastructure and state establishments were still in their infancy.

Although most immigrants were refugees, Zionist terminology dubbed them *Olim* (from the verb "to rise", "to ascend"), a word that has a far more positive connotation than mere "immigrants" who fled one place or another. The term implies an ideological or religious choice to immigrate to the State of Israel based

on nationalistic reasons. Another aspect of this ideological perception, which emphasizes the desire to create a “New Jew” who returns to his biblical fatherland after two thousand years of exile: the Israeli government introduced an official “melting pot” policy, also nicknamed *Kibbutz Galuyot* (ingathering of exiles / the return of Jews to Israel). Their aim was to assimilate all immigrants – who came from dozens of different places – into one new culture: Israeli-secular. The means to achieve that goal were diverse, for instance, the encouragement – and sometimes coercion – of immigrants to replace their names with Hebrew ones. In the early days of the state, and even before, Zionism aspired to achieve the ideal image of the “New Jew”: a strong independent pioneer who either worked the land or defended it, and aided in settling the country, thus devoting their mind and body to the task. In reality, the immigrants were often old or religious or arrived with their families. In short, quite different from this “desirable image”.

Shaping the map of Israel: historical background to the foundation of development towns

Upon its foundation, Israel’s population was scattered in a way that threatened the young state’s ability to sustain itself and develop properly. Most of the population was concentrated in the large coastal cities, or in central Israel, while very few people occupied the peripheral countryside, areas that maintained their economic connection via land transport.

Two thirds of the state’s water sources were located in the north.

Two thirds of the population inhabited its central third.

Two thirds of the lands were located its southern third, in the desert.

Therefore, the country’s leaders concluded that the population ought to be dispersed for political, financial and security reasons. Policy-makers attributed a great deal of importance to their plan to scatter the population around the country, especially to inhabiting the frontier zones along the borders. Between 1948 and 1963, about thirty towns were quickly established in an attempt to assimilate a “hierarchical” planning model between the preexisting rural settlements in Israel and the small to medium city centres of the three biggest cities – Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa. Development towns were meant to complete the missing links in the former settlement layout.

In reality, Development Towns, and especially those founded in remote desert areas (like the Negev), became the most impoverished zones among the Jewish population in just a few years, comprising about 18% of the population. They could not constitute a link between the smaller rural settlements and the big cities, nor could they provide the agricultural settlements with high-end services. The tension and alienation that brewed between Development Town residents and some of the surrounding settlements (the cooperative and communal settlements – *kibbutzim* and *moshavim*, respectively – founded before the establishment of Israel) remained part of Israeli society for many years. Over time, more waves of immigration were directed to Development Towns. For example, Ethiopian Jews who made the *Aliyah* during the 1980s and 90s, as well as the tens of thousands of immigrants who arrived in Israel during the 1990s in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The arrival of these new immigrants suited state leaders and architects, as it answered the need that arose with its establishment: to disperse the population. The foundation and population of dozens of new settlements was stipulated upon the willingness of many residents to move into these new areas. However, without the financial appeal that would draw in wealthy investors, entrepreneurs and the professionals required to develop these new settlements, most veteran citizens refused to move to locations whose future remained unclear. The pioneering settlement movements, which toiled on settling the frontier in the years that preceded the state, and viewed settlement and pioneering as a fundamental value, could not rise to the occasion, as they had no member reserves that could populate the large number of settlements planned. Moreover, such values were often foreign

to the people who arrived in the great immigration waves of the 1950s and 1960s, who sometimes even lacked sufficient knowledge and orientation concerning their settlement options, and were thus routed to those new towns, sometimes under pretences, in order to successfully bring them to those desolate areas of the periphery.

Will the sins of the fathers be visited upon the sons?

The ramifications of Israeli society's formative years in the 21st century

These processes of “population dispersal” and *Kibbutz Galuyot* have completely transformed the State of Israel, both geographically and culturally. Before the “Mass Migration”, most of the Jewish population in Israel was of European origin, while most of the immigrants who arrived in this massive wave of immigration came from Muslim countries. Nevertheless, for decades, hegemonic culture in Israel remained Western-secular.

Moreover, despite businesses and industries there being eligible for favourable tax treatment and other subsidies, most of the towns (particularly those in the south) have fared poorly in the economic sense, they have suffered from unemployment problems and often feature amongst the poorest Jewish areas in Israel. Furthermore, despite a rise in diploma-eligibility percentages and university graduates, they remain below the national average in the field of education.

Nowadays, some “Mass Migration” descendants, who originated in Islamic countries and whose parents were sent to settle development towns, believe their cultural identity has been marginalised, that they have been placed on an educational and professional manual labour track, and even been excluded from the state's cultural, communication and economic institutions. Many of the challenges and struggles the Israeli society has faced to this day are the results of the events and processes that took place during the first decade after the State's inception. The government's hopes to turn Israel into a “melting pot” have only been marginally successful, at the cost of a polarised society with a frail common ground, comprised of groups who do not always communicate with one another.

Over the past few years, Israel, like other places, has undergone a cultural transformation: from “melting pot” to “multiculturalism” and, sometimes, even to “culture war” – identity politics. The Jews who came to Israel from Muslim countries would also like to be considered among the pioneers that built the country and to be awarded the social prestige thus far almost solely reserved for Jews of European origin – as the latter comprised most of the immigrants who arrived before the State was established and preceded them in the construction of its settlements and institutional infrastructures. Development towns' residents want to redefine themselves and shake off the way they have been perceived. After having been sidelined, they now wish to take their place at centre stage.

This identity-ethnic awakening has been taking place in Israel across various cultural fields, as well as in the world of museums. A substantial number of museums in Israel, much like their worldwide counterparts, are no longer perceived as national “temples”, but rather as spaces which express the viewpoints of smaller communities, such as ethnic minorities, immigrants and other underprivileged social groups. For the past years, it seems that each self-respecting ethnic group has either opened or plans to open a museum dedicated to its heritage. Some examples of this are The Babylonian Jewry Heritage Center, the Nahon Museum of Italian Jewish Art, The Universal Karaite Judaism Center, The Museum of Yemenite Jewish Heritage, The World Heritage Center of North African Jews in Jerusalem, among others.

What's next? Settlement museums in Israel – looking to the future

The government and especially Miri Regev, the Minister of Culture, have adopted the new narrative and initiated a large-scale project which entails the construction of a network of city museums – “founders' houses in development towns”. This

initiative puts wind in the sails of pre-existing local initiatives: about seven smaller heritage sites have already been founded by development town “enthusiasts”, which enables building museums in additional towns.

The Council for Conservation of Heritage Sites in Israel, chosen as the project’s executive body, has been dealing with the aforementioned questions of representation. Since its inception, the Council, which aims to promote the preservation of historical buildings and sites in Israel, has worked towards promoting heritage, alongside the act of preservation. In the past decade, the Council has exponentially broadened its activity in the heritage field, and, in addition, has acted as an “umbrella organisation”, which provides professional guidance to dozens of heritage sites and historical museums in Israel, in areas related to their daily operation. For example, with manager training, guide training and the construction of new exhibitions.

For anyone who plans historical exhibitions, matters of memory and forgetfulness are not merely theoretical but very practical, and must be closely examined in order to make executive decisions from a place of utmost awareness and sensitivity. Such conflicts are tightly linked to our perception of the vision and goals of a museum: is it meant to preserve a materialistic culture and document nothing but history? Does it aim to present a historical narrative – and if so, which? – or must it also deal with the future and educate – and if so, what values should it teach? Is it meant to entertain, or to provide an experience-based leisurely outing? Or should it arouse a discussion and raise painful questions, or maybe encourage dialogue and make peace between the different sectors of a torn society? Is it supposed to make one feel nostalgic? Should it be an agent of change?

As a first step toward answering these questions, the Council for Conservation of Heritage Sites in Israel has founded steering committees. Both local committees, in every settlement where a museum is to be built, as well as a national steering committee, which comprises resident representatives and academic scholars – historians and sociologists, who specialise in development towns.

The aims that were drafted are as follows:

- Overall goal: presenting the pioneering contribution of development towns to the development of the State of Israel;
- Presenting the towns’ heritage from their inception to the present: the challenges and difficulties they have faced and their achievements;
- Improving the residents’ sense of belonging to their town and creating local camaraderie and identification.

The established leading principles are:

1. The inclusion of the community in the museum creation process: the use of materials that come from the townspeople themselves, as much as possible, in order to tell the story from the residents’ point of view, with an emphasis on those personal stories which fit the illustration;
2. Pioneering: the reference point is that, although the town’s first inhabitants did not choose to live there and were often brought there unwillingly and through governmental manipulation, in practice, they were still “pioneers” – by virtue of staying and developing the town despite the difficulties;
3. Presenting the story and its complexities: the exhibition will present to visitors the hardship the town had to endure (for example, relationships with neighbouring settlements, ethnic tensions in town, unemployment issues), and, of course, its achievements (their developed culture, outstanding education, the melding of different cultures and a communal atmosphere, urban development, among others), and the nationally significant personages who were raised or worked there;
4. Access and accessibility: museums will be welcoming and will be accessible to a myriad of target publics. The exhibition will be accessible – structure

and content-wise – to population groups with various disabilities. In addition, texts in museums will be written in three languages: Hebrew, English and an additional language of the site's choosing;

5. Historically significant structure: the museum will preferably be built in a place which holds historical importance to the town;
6. Dialogue with the audience: organised groups who visit the museums will receive guided tours in order to enable a discussion on sensitive topics, and encourage debate on controversial issues.

The main topics the museums will deal with are:

1. Regional and periodical orientation: the town's geographic location, the background that led to the foundation of development towns and its timeline;
2. Employment;
3. Education;
4. Culture;
5. Communal and day-to-day life;
6. Important individuals in the fields of leadership, culture, politics, sports, etc.;
7. Population diversity (from around the world) in the cultural stories of the origin countries.

Our remaining conflicts

How do we combine Israel's national narrative with its "micro-history"/ personal stories? What values should museums stress? How do we produce a "network of founders' houses in development towns" on the one hand, while creating a separation based on each town's local distinction, on the other?

Even today, in the age of digital mass media, when we sometimes think museums are outmoded institutions that seek out new ways to justify their existence and draw in visitors, they can still have a significant educational influence. Therefore, the process of selecting what content to display in the museum, which sometimes conceals more than it reveals, should be done judiciously and with an understanding of the great responsibility that we shoulder. Dilemmas are in abundance, and stories innumerable, but the physical space and the visitor's time both dictate moderation and require utmost precision and strenuous thought. We believe that a museum must do more than present a picture, object, or story; it must also constitute a starting point for a process that would continue beyond its walls. We believe museums must not merely recount the past but also, and especially, raise questions and invite the audience to take part in designing the answers, both within and without.

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BIOGRAPHIES

Orit Engelberg-Baram is an independent curator who works with many museums and heritage sites on subjects related to the history of the Land of Israel and the Jewish people. Among the exhibitions she has curated are: *Light and Shadows: The Story of Iran and the Jews* and *Threads of Silk – The Story of Bukharan Jewry* at Beit Hatfutsot, and *Reap in Joy – The Harvest Festivals in the Kibbutz* at Beit Avi Chai. Lately, she has been the chief curator of the “Network of Founders’ Houses in Development Towns” – an initiative by the Ministry of Culture and Sport, executed by the Council for Conservation of Heritage Sites in Israel. In addition, Engelberg-Baram specialises in pedagogy and education in museums, and trains museum facilitators. Engelberg-Baram is a doctoral candidate at The Department of Israel Studies at the University of Haifa. Her doctoral thesis deals with the environmental history of the Dead Sea. For her MA dissertation, she compared exhibitions at Yad Vashem World Holocaust Remembrance Center with those at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Elad Betzaleli is the head of the Development and Education Department at the Council for Conservation of Heritage Sites in Israel. Under his guidance, the Council has become an “umbrella organisation” for 180 heritage sites and provides them with professional guidance towards the daily operation of museums and heritage sites. For example: facilitator course, manager training, and the development of educational content. In addition, the Council placed him in charge of exhibition planning and new museums, and presently he heads a national project that aims to establish the “Network of Founders’ Houses in Development Towns”. In the past, he was a member of the Dror Movement, where he managed projects in the field of informal education in the Jewish and Arab sectors and coordinated a teacher-training program. Betzaleli holds a Master’s degree in Israel Studies.