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Randall F. Mason  
*Associate Professor*  
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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](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".



Review:

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

*The Alfred W. Fleisher Memorial Synagogue Restoration* (the Synagogue) and the *William Portner Exhibit on Jewish Life at Eastern State* (Exhibition) are both contained and contextualized within the walls of the Eastern State Penitentiary historic site (ESP). Visitors come to ESP for many different reasons and have many expectations. The site is well known for its stabilization or suspended ruin vs. renovation approach and that sets a critical context and set of expectations for the visitors to these new spaces. The Synagogue is in fact the first true restoration project at the site and upon first entering is somewhat startling for visitors who have just wandered the seductively crumbling cellblocks or previously been part of the fun Halloween events. As visitors begin to understand why this sacred space would be the appropriate location for restoration and focus on some of the lovely detailing of the original creation and the care that now has gone into the restoration of this space, they easily move from intellectually separating themselves from the space to a fascination with “what it may have been like to live here.”

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 19<sup>th</sup> 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.

As visitors enter the exhibition portion, the same sensation of anachronistic quality of space is felt in that one does not expect “museum exhibition” in the middle of the prison. If visitors have experienced the Synagogue first there is precedent for this sensation; if not for this, the transition would be more startling.

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.<sup>2</sup>

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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. !

**Comfort** – Physically and psychologically

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.

In the exhibition space there are some areas where the text can be overwhelming and is less comfortable to engage, mainly because there is a lot of text in a small area with some of it lower on panels causing visitors to have to bend or squat. However, because the content has been developed, written and delivered in a clear and concise way, visitors are willing to approach this inconvenience and read more than they might normally because the content is so captivating.

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.<sup>2</sup>

**Engaging** – Visitors are interested and want find out more.

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.

The Visitor Evaluation reports visitors rated their overall experience in these two spaces as an average of 4.4 on a scale of 1-5, 5 being the most positive.<sup>2</sup>

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

As mentioned above, the stories of the prisoners share an everyday humanity that is very accessible to a broad audience. Though ESP is typically for kids seven or older there are plenty of opportunities in the exhibition in which the whole family can relate and engage. There are stories of more sensitive content that are appropriately placed higher on the panels so younger eyes would not necessarily engage them directly, and so parents can determine how to reinforce the message with their children.

Whether one grew up in a Jewish tradition or not, the material presented through the exhibition and the audio guide is very relatable and speaks of one’s place in a larger community.

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**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.

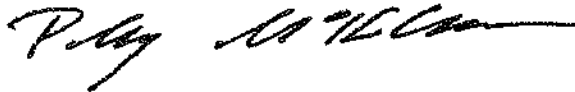
**Conclusion**

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,



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