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The Jewish Museum **Design Notes: November 2009**

The following notes are extracted from previous design reports.

History and Context of the Project

The current project has involved uniting two branches of the Jewish Museum by connecting two buildings in Camden Town.

The Jewish Museum was established in 1932.

In 1995, it opened its doors at its current location in Camden Town, where its Designated Collection of religious objects was housed in a newly constructed gallery to the rear of the Listed 1840s terraced houses at 129-131 Albert Street. In the same year it amalgamated with the former London Museum of Jewish Life, based at the Sternberg Centre in Finchley.

In 2002, the Museum purchased a 19th century piano factory abutting the rear boundary of their property in Camden Town, and embarked on the present project which brings together both branches of the Museum and improves their ability to attract visitors and carry out their educational programme.

The Two Buildings

The Albert Street frontage is part of a pleasing 1840's terrace Listed Grade II. It is well proportioned, with a ground floor of rusticated render and London stock brick above. The right hand terrace once provided a passage to the rear of the property where small scale manufacture was still operating when the Jewish Museum bought the property.

When the Jewish Museum added their two storey gallery space to the rear, the old passage was divided into two parallel routes; one serving as the public entrance and the other as the emergency escape route from the rear.

The 19th century factory (no 79 Parkway) was used for the manufacture of pianos, an important Camden Town industry at that time. It belonged to the Ajello family (father and six sons) who made prize winning pianos and were "maker to the King of Italy". It is a pleasing typical example of the industrial loft of that period, with steel columns and beams, regular and generous steel industrial windows, London stock brick exterior, and slate roof.

Contents

The Museum's exhibition and back of house space was to be significantly expanded, both to combine the two branches of the collections, and to create a generous gallery for temporary exhibitions. In addition, the public space was expanded to meet modern standards for revenue generating activities like café, shop, and lecture/ event space.

The Design

The design challenges were:

the linking of two buildings (with very different floor levels) into an accessible and coherent whole,

the creation of an inviting and extensive (free) public realm at Ground Floor level,

the development of a design strategy that would enable the visitor to enjoy the architectural character of the two buildings but also understand the nature of the united museum experience.

The first decision was inevitably to locate a new stair and lift at the junction of the two buildings, linking all of the levels in both buildings. This new circulation core then formed the heart of the geography of the combined buildings, and the place on each floor where visitors could understand their position in relation to the rest of the Museum.

This circulation "heart" was inevitably at some distance from the Albert Street entrance, and the design of the sequence of ground level public spaces is intended to choreograph the experience from the entrance into the heart of the Museum.

The old entrance was quite claustrophobic, because as previously described, it was constrained by the need for parallel entrance and escape routes. With the opening up of a new escape route at the far end of the site, the entrance hall has been made much more generous, and this leads directly into the introductory "Welcome" Gallery. From this point, the visitor gets a clear view of the shop, the new lift and stair, the lobby to the auditorium, and the café, all of which are available to the visitor without paying an entrance charge.

At the end of that axial view is the important medieval mikveh, which has been let into the fabric of the building, and over which a series of faceted mirrors give the approaching visitor a taste of its presence and its importance.

The two buildings are quite different in their architectural character, and these differences have been carefully preserved in their new treatment.

In Albert Street, the finish details of the Listed terraces have been preserved, and new finishes tend to be smooth and urbane, following the plaster, timber, and stone detailing of the original 1995 Religion Gallery whose character has been preserved.

In the piano factory, the character of the finishes is very different, with exposed steel columns and beams, heavy timber floors, white painted brick walls, and industrial steel windows. That character, which is entirely appropriate for use as exhibition space, has been preserved. The new stair in that area is structured in exposed steel, and new partitions take the form of v jointed vertical boarding, doors are ledge and brace; all consistent with the direct and simple detailing of the original building. Because of the need for close environmental control, airconditioning equipment had to be added to these areas, and this again has been done as directly as possible; the ducts are visible, but screened by a simple perforated metal sheet, leaving the steel beams visible overhead, and the spatial continuity of the rooms still clear and understood.

We hope that the distinct scale and detail of the two buildings will be retained and enjoyed, but that they will nevertheless be united into a whole by the consistent use of colour and material; grey painted steel, white painted walls, and natural timber will predominate.

The lighting system has been designed again to establish the differences between areas, but to work with a family of fittings which support the idea that this is a single, new museum environment.