Negotiating the Past, Present, and Future: The Luxembourg Jewish Museum Project as a Process of Contested Memory and Imagined Futures

Anastasia Badder

University of Luxembourg

There is currently a project underway to establish a Jewish museum in Luxembourg in a restored synagogue just outside the main city center. As this project unfolds, it provides a clear view into the contestations and negotiations over meaning, representation, Jewishness, and the past, present, and future visions of community that arise in the development of a museum.

Ongoing debates over which objects will be included in the museum, how they will be defined, how they will link to other sites of Jewish heritage around the city (through tours, performances, reference, etc.), as well as a hesitancy by many to donate family objects all point to issues around the construction of collective memory, communal cultural heritage, and multiple narratives of the past and how these are erased in the process of producing heritage as a series of museum objects. These debates also highlight concerns about how the contemporary community – which is multilingual, multinational, and multi-denominational – will be represented; in other words, who will be included in representations of the community and how will the contemporary community be defined, if at all? Finally, ongoing discussions around what will be emphasized or downplayed indicate the contested nature, not only of the past, but also of collective visions of the future as constituted through representations of heritage. In particular, negotiations over how to represent the Holocaust reflect a desire by some to fit the museum into developing narratives of cosmopolitanism, interfaith, and intercultural relations and a drive by others to represent family narratives and engage in a project ‘against forgetting’ in order to ensure a particular kind of future.

And so, using this project as a case study, I seek to draw attention to the ways in which the construction of a heritage regime is at once a negotiation over narratives of the past, shared present identities, and collective visions of the future and the discourses and social processes at work within these debates.

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