Courtesy of the Museum of Jewish Montreal

I arrived on the corner of St-Laurent and Duluth on an overcast Wednesday afternoon to meet my tour guide, Lara, at what was formerly the location of the Museum of Jewish Montreal (MJM). We were both respectively carrying things that marked us as tour guide and tour taker – her with her binder and me with my notebook. But we were both also wearing indicators of something else – she was behind a transparent face shield and I behind a pale blue medical mask. It was a bleak reminder that even as arts and cultural institutions are coming back to life, they are nevertheless contending with unprecedented challenges brought on by COVID-19.

View of Mont Royal from Jeanne Mance Park, photograph by Tanvi Rajvanshi

The tour I was taking that day is called *In the Shadow of the Mountain*, one of three tours currently being offered by the Museum this summer. Beginning with a small quiz on the first Jewish people to arrive in Montreal, over the course of the tour, I learned about how the Jewish community quickly grew in the early 1900s and built a thriving working-class environment in the Plateau. Despite the commanding presence of the Cross on Mont Royal, the Jewish community staked their claim to home in the Plateau by establishing a Yiddish Newspaper, libraries, and synagogues. Today, these buildings house upscale restaurants, boutiques, and renovated apartments.

Pictured, Alyssa Stokvis-Hauer (center) and Zev Moses (left), Courtesy of Museum of Jewish Montreal, photograph by Gabriela Opas

A new building to be added to this list of former Jewish institutions is the physical space of the Museum of Jewish Montreal, which the institution unfortunately lost this May. After the tour, I interviewed Alyssa Stokvis-Hauer, the Artistic Director at the Museum, to discover more about the ways in which cultural institutions are adapting to our new Global reality. But first, she introduced me to the inspiration behind the Museum, saying "there was a sense for [founder and Executive Director, Zev Moses] that Montreal's Jewish life was losing its own place-based history, as well as not offering much that spoke directly to younger generation's interests or needs."

Speaking specifically about the tours, which began in 2012, Alyssa added, "in the early days, we didn't know there would be a huge shift in tourism and a spike in desire for 'hidden history' or local neighbourhood tours right around the time we launched our tours. There was also a shift in what was popular in museology and how people wanted to approach learning about history and culture. Instead of a 'monuments' or 'greatest hits' focused approach, more and more people were interested in what I call 'history from the ground-up' ".

Former Jewish Synagogue, today it is the office of the Portuguese Association of Canada, photograph by Tanvi Rajvanshi

This interest coincides with the rapid gentrification many neighborhoods with working class histories have faced, especially in Montreal. Indeed, as Alyssa calls it, 'history from the ground-up' incorporates "the use of oral histories, personal stories, and a focus on the neighborhood's everyday life whether historical or present".

Bringing the Museum to the Streets: The Impact of COVID-19

The walking tours are especially significant for the Museum this summer, given the precarious condition in which the pandemic has placed many arts and cultural institutions around the world. For the Museum, this precarity came in the form of losing their physical space, and as Alyssa told me, "The Move (as it became known amongst our staff) became the largest project on our plates for most of May and all of June. Six weeks to move an entire organization is definitely a tight timeline without taking into account further constraints and hurdles due to the Pandemic!" giving special mention to the Museum's Exhibition Manager, Pippa Bartlett, for her "nerves of steel and unparalleled organization".

"I would say the three most significant impacts COVID-19 has had on the Museum would be the loss of our space on St-Laurent, the transition to programming online (and also working from home!), and the loss of the tourism industry this summer," Alyssa further explained.

"Montreal's tourism is down 90% – a loss which we have keenly felt. It's by no means an over-statement to say the industry has been gutted, and it has had wide-reaching impacts beyond the Museum. For us, as a small non-profit, 30% of our earned revenue came from our summer tours and visitors to our café Fletchers, which has completely disappeared for the moment due to COVID-19. That revenue was what helped, in part, fund our contemporary art projects, provide youth leadership opportunities, pay our staff, and employ our guides. But now, one-third of that budget has effectively disappeared, and has meant reimagining what is possible not only due to space and safety constraints, but fiscal ones in the coming year. Like many other cultural organizations, we have had to reassess our budget and make significant cuts to ensure we can get through this time while keeping our staff and maintaining the activities central to our mission that serve our community."

Exhibition View of Snapshots from the Garden of Eden, the last exhibition to happen in the physical space before the pandemic. Courtesy of Museum of Jewish Montreal, photograph by Gabriela Opas.

Even though the team behind the Museum is taking the loss of its space in their stride, focusing their attention on walking tours and online programming, it is *still* necessary to point out just how crucial these organizations are in keeping cultural history alive whilst simultaneously making space for cultural contemporaneity. "The Museum of Jewish Montreal was started by our current Executive Director Zev Moses in 2009. In the beginning, the Museum was a digital project that sought to collect, map, and share Montreal's Jewish history and experiences online. [...] With the storefront [which opened in 2016], the Museum has really blossomed into a unique place to share Montreal's Jewish heritage, connect with Jewish life, and create new cultural experiences. We do this through a myriad of ways like events, exhibitions, fellowships," Alyssa shared with me. Since its opening in 2016, the physical space of the Museum was home to several exhibitions by contemporary Jewish artists. The last one I went to before the Pandemic was entitled *Snapshots from the Garden of Eden* – an exhibition of photography by Dina Goldstein, who looks at Jewish folklore from the perspective of contemporary themes and issues.

The Museum thus operates as a place to share Jewish culture as it is being forged today, whilst keeping a grasp on the long history this community has had in Montreal. Over the fourteen or so stops Lara and I made along the tour, one of which included a visit to Leonard Cohen's home, I learned how instrumental the Jewish community was in the formation of literature, music, and art that Montrealers proudly claim as their own today. Despite having walked down St-Laurent numerous times, on the tour the Boulevard itself transformed into a museum of Jewish history embedded within the edifices. All this is thanks to the hard work done by the research fellows at the Museum, who compile interviews and archival information, much of which goes into the planning of the tours.

Leonard Cohen's home, overlooking Parc du Portugal. Photograph by Tanvi Rajvanshi

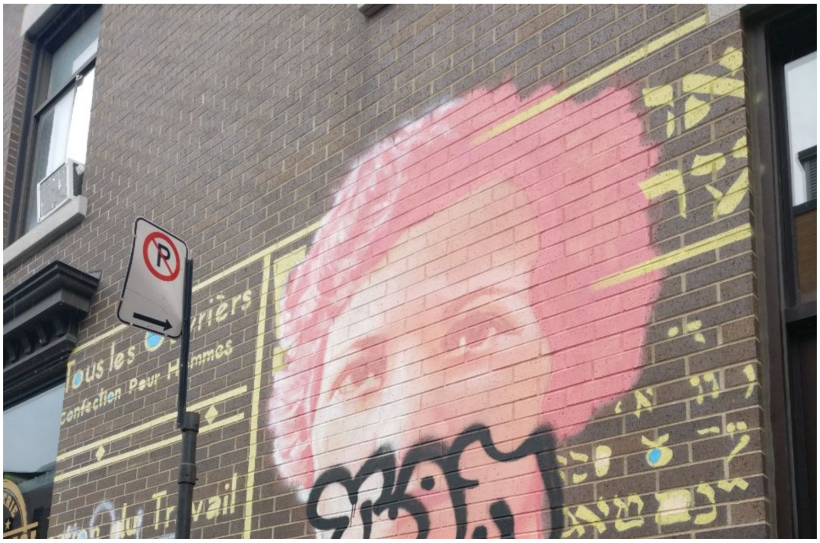
Adapting to Change: Helping the Community with the Help of the Community

COVID-19 has brought to the fore unprecedented challenges to the arts community, and going on this tour was a reminder of the repercussions we will face if institutions like the Museum of Jewish Montreal were to disappear. Thankfully, Alyssa assured me, saying "even though the loss of our space was upsetting and unforeseen, it does mean we're not having to manage a physical location during a pandemic. Operating digitally also lowers our costs while we look for a new space, and allows us to be even more innovative and experiment with ways to serve our audiences in new exciting ways – necessity is, after all, the mother of invention!".

Perhaps the transition has been somewhat intuitive, given the roots of the Museum as a digital mapping project. In fact, Alyssa informed me that ever since the Museum closed its physical space on March 13th, they have hosted 17 digital events "that range from arts workshops to cooking classes to trivia nights, and have welcomed over 550 people!"

I also learned that the Museum has been fortunate to receive support from the Canadian Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS), allowing them to keep their full-time staff employed. "CEWS has played an important role in keeping us afloat, along with some key donors and supporting foundations who have stepped up to help us through the turbulence and difficulties brought on by the pandemic," Alyssa explained when I asked if there were responses from the Government or other institutions to help keep the Museum running during this time. Nevertheless, Alyssa added the Museum is not out of the woods yet. As much as public funding and private donors are crucial right now, the Museum equally relies on the community to help pull them through.

More importantly, to my mind, the relationship between institutions and community is reciprocal. By purchasing tickets, participating in free online activities, and through donations, we provide cultural institutions the reason and means to continue fighting for survival. The institution in return, Alyssa believes, "provides a sense of hope and connection, to mark out a space amidst the turbulence for curiosity, creativity, fun, and/or togetherness in a way that is as accessible as possible. Namely – the things that as people bring us a sense of meaning and belonging."



Vandalized mural of Léa Roback, social activist and the pioneer of feminism in Quebec. Photograph by Tanvi Rajvanshi

Beyond the idea of cultural attachment, Alyssa also explained how the Museum is deeply committed to providing opportunities for community engagement. "We are going to be putting more resources towards our microgrants for innovative project ideas, with an emphasis on creative or cultural exploration of intersectional Jewish stories or underrepresented Jewish experiences, as well as leadership development opportunities for young people interested in exploring Jewish life through art and other cultural outlets. Before the pandemic, this was an area of programming our team felt really strongly about, and now it seems even more relevant and needed as a result of the pandemic's impact."

Hearing this, it struck me how far public and private funding can actually go. It does not simply end at keeping the Museum open for innovative curatorial and programming strategies, but in fact, stretches beyond to reach artists, curators, and researchers whom the Museum are thus enabled to support.

Looking Ahead: New Programming Strategies and Creative Solutions

These incredibly challenging times have asked of the Museum to implement innovative shifts in curatorial strategies to both keep the operational costs down and continue celebrating Jewish culture of past and present. But these strategies are not going to be straightforward. Alyssa divided the new programming logic into three branches, "1) In Real Life but Socially Distant, such as vitrine displays or public art installations, like our recent vitrine exhibition with Artists 4 Long-Term Care; 2) Digital ephemeral experiences, such as online artist talks, workshops, live streams, and other time-bound digital events (like our ongoing Digital Diasporas series); and 3) Digital durable events, which can be accessed and revisited at any time such as Instagram exhibitions and YouTube video series."

What excited me personally was the upcoming exhibition theme, which Alyssa said was chosen pre-pandemic: *Permanence*. She adds, "we were already very excited with the myriad approaches possible for this theme, but there is perhaps even more nuance, meaning, and new relevance now that I think *Permanence* will inspire in the coming months."

A fitting theme indeed given that our very ideas of permanence have been shaken to the core as we have had to adjust to what everyone is calling a "new normal", but what I think is perhaps a "no normal". Exploring this theme digitally in the aftermath of losing a physical space, something often associated with permanence, would undoubtedly give these ideas a renewed driving force.

As I was walking back home from my tour, I felt as though I had travelled to a distant time and I must now return to my bleak reality. This simultaneity of curios, hopeful, but nevertheless anxious feelings characterize the ethos of our days. The optimistic side of me, and perhaps of Alyssa too, looks at the creativity and the ways in which new forms of exhibition and curation are being made possible despite the challenges presented by the pandemic. However, it is too naïve to think that implementing new digital and/or socially distant strategies alone are enough for us to rest assured that the arts are safe. To put it simply, our local arts and cultural institutions need us now more than ever.

In fact, they also have our best interests at heart. Alyssa concluded our interview by saying, "we want to be able to give folks who might not be tied as strongly to traditional forms of community ways to stay creative, curious, and connected that fall in line with their own interests and on their own terms. This grassroots approach to preserving Jewish heritage, creating new cultural experiences, and sharing Jewish life is something that we're really excited to explore and to build based on the ideas and needs of

the community."

All we need to do is show up, by whichever means possible.

Alongside their online programming, The Museum of Jewish Montreal is currently offering walking tours with a maximum of 8 participants. They are also offering private Bubble Tours if you wish to book a tour for a larger group. Please note that walk-ins are not accepted. All tours must be booked in advance, and all participants must follow COVID-19 related safety protocols at all times. For more information, visit Musée du Montréal juif – Museum of Jewish Montreal.

TANVI RAJVANSHI

FACEBOOK

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