

EthnoScripts

CONTEMPORARY
ANTHROPOLOGY

Jewish Cultural Heritage, Minority Agency, and the State

Volume 27 | 2025

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DOI: 10.15460/ethnoscripts.2025.27.1.2412

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Peer-reviewed article

Submitted: 11 June 2025

Accepted: 1 September 2025

Published: 2 December 2025

Recommended citation:

Egorova, Yulia (2025) Ambient Landscapes and Minority Heritage: Representing Jewish Histories in the United Kingdom. Ethnoscripts 27: pp. 78-96.

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Hamburg University Press
Verlag der Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek
Hamburg Carl von Ossietzky

Published by Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Hamburg, Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1, D-20146 Hamburg

Ambient Landscapes and Minority Heritage: Representing Jewish Histories in the United Kingdom

Yulia Egorova

Abstract:

Stemming from a larger study aimed at considering emic views of heritage at the grassroots level of British Jewish communities, this article explores the topic of minority agency through a discussion of the different ways in which Jewish British citizens would like to see Jewish history and culture represented in the cities of the United Kingdom. Drawing upon anthropological literature on the agency of landscapes and material objects and on the notion of ambience understood as the background cultural/material environment, I focus on my interlocutors' views about visual representations of this heritage and put forward two interrelated sets of arguments. First, I suggest that my conversation partners imbue spaces pertaining to Jewish heritage with agency to inform the wider community about Jewish history. Second, I propose that their sense of belonging to British society and the overall sense of well-being are in turn affected by the agentive capacities of these sites, some of which are visually prominent whilst others are hidden from sight or unmarked.

Key words: Jewish heritage, United Kingdom, agency, ambience

I met Claire at a workshop on British Jewish heritage. I was at the beginning of a study exploring the way Jewish history is presented in different curatorial spaces in the United Kingdom (UK) and had organised a workshop at the Manchester Jewish Museum with the volunteers of the museum and other Jewish residents of Manchester interested in the topic. During the discussion, the participants were invited to reflect on what they experienced as examples of good or deficient practice of local tourist boards and general museums in engaging with the histories of Jewish communities. After the workshop, several participants granted me a follow-up interview and Claire was amongst them. She was born and grew up in Manchester and in our conversation reflected on what in her view would be the best way of representing Jewish history in the city and particularly in the neighbourhood of Cheetham Hill, where the museum was located:

My grandparents lived here. My mum was brought up here. I remember my grandparents' house till I was about ten. And I remember the area really well. There was a number of synagogues there. They're all now warehouses, food places [...] Some of them are takeaways and stuff like that, which is quite sad [...] There used to be a regular tour of Jewish history here. It was

very interesting, and it went around Cheetham Hill, which is where Jewish families lived. The boundary was four main roads around the area [...] I think it would be great to bring that back [...] And not just for the benefit of Jewish people.

Claire explained that Cheetham Hill was once home to Jewish residents, many of whom were first- and second-generation migrants,¹ and in the twenty-first century the area still had a significant migrant population stemming from communities who arrived in the UK in the second half of the twentieth century. Indeed, Cheetham Hill is now home to a plethora of communities tracing their origins to the Caribbean, South Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. Claire said that the Manchester Jewish Museum, which opened in a building of a former synagogue, was an example of a very good way to honour the heritage of Jewish Mancunians – to turn an abandoned house of worship into a cultural site rather than a shop or a warehouse, as had happened with some other buildings that had formerly housed synagogues. And such buildings did not need to serve only the Jewish community, she said. They could be cultural centres that would support the local migrant population of Cheetham Hill, as long as the Jewish history of these buildings was acknowledged.

Stemming from a larger study aimed to consider the diversity of emic views of heritage at the grassroots level of British Jewish communities, this article explores the topic of minority agency through a discussion of the different ways in which Claire and my other conversation partners would like to see Jewish history and culture represented in UK cities. It focuses on their views about visual representations of this heritage and argues that what transpires in the reflections of my interlocutors is an understanding of the sites of Jewish material culture that imbues them with agency to educate broader publics about Jewish history, to enhance the well-being of Jewish residents of the city, and to serve local communities. As the earlier quote from Claire suggests, these reflections also convey a desire to reclaim the agentive capacities of sites that have lost the visibility of their Jewish history and to make them a more prominent feature of the visual built environment of British cities.

The ethnographic part of the article builds on two sources. One of them comprises the material from a focus group convened at the Manchester Jewish Museum and ten interviews conducted with the participants of the focus group and other respondents whom I met during the course of my project. My research participants had an interest in Jewish heritage, identified as persons of Jewish ancestry, and lived in or had a family connection to Manchester or Newcastle-Gateshead. The choice of the geographic location for the study was based on my long-term research in Manchester, my collaborative work with the Manchester Jewish Museum, and my personal con-

1 For a discussion of Jewish migration into Cheetham Hill and Manchester more broadly, see Kasstan (2019: 49–71).

nection to North East England (I am an anthropologist based in Durham). This allowed me to acquire a familiarity with initiatives in preserving and representing Jewish heritage in the region and to meet participants who volunteered to take part in my study. My interviewees were not professionally involved in Jewish heritage projects or museums (though some of them worked professionally in the broader heritage sector) but, at different points in their lives, had had voluntary roles at organisations associated with Jewish heritage, history, and culture. In the article I particularly focus on the interviews conducted with Alex, Alice, Claire, Daniel, and Erica, whom I had an opportunity to interview extensively and four of whom were my long-term conversation partners.²

My analysis was also informed by my experience of following Jewish heritage walking maps and tours developed in the past several years in the UK. In doing so, I particularly drew on the project titled 'Unlocking North East Jewish Heritage' led by the Tyne and Wear Archives in Newcastle Upon Tyne in collaboration with local Jewish communities. I chose this project for its geographic location and because it was illustrative of possible pathways for reclaiming those parts of the material and aesthetic landscape of British cities which are associated with the less known or visible dimensions of British Jewish history.

In exploring the agentic capacities of spaces of Jewish heritage, I draw on different bodies of anthropological literature that have engaged the topics of agency, heritage, and curated sensory environments. Anthropologists have for a long time argued that the agency of non-human entities deserves analytical attention and that people tend to attribute agentic action to objects in a variety of ways (Gell 1998; Küchler and Carroll 2020; Layton 2003). Germane for this article, ethnographic interventions have been made into the study of the effect that the aesthetics and materiality of landscapes and built environments can have on our well-being (Bender 2006; Laviolette 2011; Tilley 2006; Tilley and Cameron-Daum 2017) and the study of landscapes as sites of contestation. Paying analytical attention to differences in how built environments and sites of historical heritage are perceived, particularly by minoritised groups, features strongly in a growing scholarship focused on memorialisation and heritage conservation practices that stem from colonial, postcolonial, and post-conflict contexts (Basu 2009; Bryant 2014; Hicks 2020; Macdonald 2009; Mookherjee 2022; Navaro-Yashin 2009; Slyomovics 2024; Von Oswald and Tinius 2020) including contexts pertaining to Jewish history (Berlinger and Von Bernuth 2024; Crowds 2017; Everett 2024; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2016; Lehrer 2013, 2020).

With this article I contribute to these bodies of literature by making two sets of arguments. First, I suggest that my interlocutors imbue spaces as-

2 For the purposes of protecting my interlocutors' anonymity, I changed their names and some of the details of their interview accounts.

sociated with Jewish heritage with agency to inform the wider community about Jewish history. Second, I propose that their sense of belonging to British society and their overall sense of well-being are affected by the agentic capacities of these sites, some of which are visually prominent whilst others are hidden from sight, unmarked, or long gone. In this respect, my analysis also builds upon anthropological interventions into the notion of *ambience*, understood as part of the visible but also of the cultural/material background environment. In the following sections I draw on Matthew Engelke's (2012, 2013) work on ambient faith, thematised as a sensorially perceptible part of public religion, and Sami Everett's (2020) theorisation of *ambience diaspora*, which highlights the sensorial dimension (amongst others) specifically of the minority experience. I argue that what my interlocutors understand as potentially conducive for their sense of belonging in the UK is seeing Jewish heritage represented not just in a visible way but also in one that positions it as part and parcel of its surroundings, allowing it to be conspicuous and part of the background urban environment at the same time.

In the group discussion and the interviews, I invited my research participants to share their experiences of encountering representations of Jewish history in museums, galleries, open air displays, and historical heritage sites. As I demonstrate below, evident in their responses is a wish to ensure that these spaces comprise, where appropriate, visible elements of the aesthetics and materiality stemming from British Jewish histories. In the following two sections, I discuss their reflections on encounters with representations of Jewish history and culture and the impact these had made on them. I then focus on the way they see the relationship between Jewish heritage and that of other minoritised groups in the UK.

Silent spaces

My question about examples of best practice in representations of Jewish heritage would often be followed by silence, as most of my conversation partners needed time to recall their experiences of seeing artifacts related to Jewish history in British venues other than the Manchester Jewish Museum, the only Jewish museum that was open in the UK at the time of writing.³ Some would note experiences from temporary exhibitions in museums and galleries they had occasionally attended. Several participants talked about experiences that they thought were disappointing. For instance, Alice told me how, on holiday in a city which had a medieval history, she had gone on a tour of the cathedral where she saw a painting that made her think about the medieval history of the Jewish community of that city. Yet the guide could not give

3 At the time of writing, the Jewish Museum London was in the process of working towards finding a new permanent home. In the meantime it was operating online and by exhibiting items from its collections in other venues (Jewish Museum London 2025).

a satisfactory answer to her question on the history of Jewish presence there. This is how she described her overall impression of the visit:

I thought the cathedral was great. You know, full of medieval Christian wealth and importance. [...] So, there was a guide who was taking us around the Cathedral. It was a small party of us. There were some paintings on the wall, I can't remember exactly what it was [...] which prompted me to think about the Jewish history of the city in the Middle Ages. I am not sure if it was a picture of a Jewish person, maybe not. But it was something about moneylending. And I asked the guide about the Jewish history of the city, prompted by the picture. And he sort of said, 'Oh, it's not a very good history.' He did not know a lot, and I didn't either [...] But clearly there was a history of medieval anti-Semitism in the city, but none of that was memorialised. It made me feel a bit awkward for asking the question [...] Like, why would I be interested.

Alice then told me that she had a very different experience when she recently went on holiday to a town in central Europe. On a tour of the town, she was pleasantly surprised to see that it involved a trip to the Jewish quarter of the city:

The tour guide just stopped by the Jewish quarter and said, 'I am going to take you on a tour of this neighbourhood. This is the history of the local Jewish community.' And it was all named as it was. Somehow it made me feel included. Actually somebody acknowledging, 'You were part of that story.' And during that other visit [in England], there was a lot of awkwardness in that encounter. The guide was not expecting my question, he was embarrassed and under-informed. I was under-informed and feeling disturbed about feeling on the margins, wanting to know more. But there was definitely a sense that this was something people did not want to dwell on giving you the history of the cathedral. But this was important for me because I am a Jew.

Later in the conversation Alice provided an example of some of the better practice in acknowledging and memorialising the anti-Jewish violence in medieval England: the recent efforts at the refurbished Clifford Tower in York, where the town's Jewish community had been massacred in 1190, to include visual signposting referencing Jewish history: 'I used to live in the area and I would sometimes come to York before the Clifford Tower was redeveloped and think about what had happened. I think there was a plaque there at the time, but it was very, very small,' Alice said.

Daniel, a young professional in his twenties, also noted that he felt a personal connection to the way Jewish history was represented in museums and at heritage sites:

If you ask me specifically about the UK, to be honest, the first examples that come to mind are not very positive. There is so much focus on the Holocaust, but other dimensions of Jewish heritage are not very well represented. For instance, I have been to general museums and seen collections dedicated to medieval history of England, and you would think that they would mention Jewish history, but they don't [...] And I want to see it because it is my culture [...] I guess it is all about the context and it is important to make sure that other groups are represented too [...] Maybe I am unfairly placing an expectation on something where there is not a relevant link to the display. I try to moderate this expectation, but sometimes you encounter parts of English history shown in a museum where you would think Jewish history was relevant, and it is a shame that it is not there.

Like Alice, Daniel told me that my question made him think about a visit to a Jewish heritage site he made during a trip to a European city, though in his case the encounter with the site and its reception of the local public was not unproblematic:

They showed us this beautiful old synagogue, which is now a museum. It used to be within the limits of the old city, and it was all built over [by newer buildings]. It was so lovely, and the guides there were really knowledgeable about it. But then I remember talking to somebody literally down the road from this little museum, and they had no idea that it used to be a synagogue. And I thought, how can you not know it, your business is right next to this synagogue, and you are here all the time [...] So, the visibility of Jewish heritage is an issue and the knowledge of it is an issue too.

In considering the relationship between persons and objects, anthropologists have made a call to focus on the sensorial dimension of human life, to reconceptualise perception away from a notion of subjective experience and instead to thematise it as a relationship between a perceiving subject and a world of material objects (Hirschkind 2006: 2832). As Tilley and Cameron-Daum (2017: 10) have observed in a study of the anthropological significance of landscapes, our surroundings offer different possibilities and potentialities for different groups: they act as 'structures of feeling, outcomes of social practice, products of colonial and postcolonial identities and western gaze, bound up with class divisions, property and ownership, outcomes of

the contemplative sublime or places of terror, exile and slavery'. Indeed, in the accounts of Alice and Daniel, representations of Jewish heritage have the capacity to affect their sense of belonging to European societies and therefore their sense of overall personal well-being. The splendour of the medieval cathedral, which Alice noted during her tour with admiration and respect and which was an important and initially positive part of her visit to the city, was affected by a painting that reminded her of the history of anti-Semitism, even if in her view it did not register explicit anti-Semitic content. This effect would not have incontrovertibly tainted her experience of the cathedral if the guide had given a more satisfactory answer to her question or if the Jewish history of the city had been visually acknowledged through appropriately informed signposting. Indeed, for her the Clifford Tower initiative was a meaningful step forward and an improvement over the previous attempt at memorialisation through a barely visible plaque. At the cathedral, Alice's discomfort at the sight of the painting was exacerbated when the guide's short and awkward answer made her feel embarrassed about having raised a question about Jewish history and feeling a connection to this history in the first place.

Daniel's story of a trip to the synagogue museum at first blush could have offered a counterpoint to Alice's experience but fell short of doing so. For him, the positive effect of the visit and of his interactions with knowledgeable guides at the museum was undone when he realised that the 'built over' structure of the old synagogue was only 'visible' as a site of Jewish history for those who already knew about it; it was entirely invisible to everyone else, even those working in nearby buildings and walking past it every day. A tour that for Daniel started as an exciting and positive encounter with a heritage space left him with a sense of disappointment so acute that he shared this experience with me as an example of unfortunate rather than exemplary practice in representing Jewish culture.

The question of the visibility of Jewish heritage came up also in my conversation with Erica, who pointed both to the importance of making sure that it was unmissable for the wider community and of paying particularly careful attention to how it was presented for non-Jewish audiences. Erica said she was wary of seeing Jewish artifacts in general museums:

It is one thing when you go to a Jewish museum, but when Jewish history is on general display and non-Jewish people are more likely to see it, it is different. I remember once a colleague telling me, 'You know there is a Jewish exhibition in the cinema round the corner!' It made me feel strange. It does not feel right seeing Jewish culture at a random exhibition, as if it was not a living thing.

Congruently with Miranda Crowdus's analysis in this special issue, which takes an emic Jewish perspective to question top-down practices of turning elements of Jewish cultural legacy into authorised heritage (see also Crowdus forthcoming; Kagan and Crowdus forthcoming), Erica did not find it empowering to see the Jewish tradition represented in what in her view was a random curatorial space not connected to Jewish history. She rather felt that sites with a connection to the Jewish history of British cities needed to be visually acknowledged, and seeing such acknowledgment was personally important for her.

During our conversation, Erica and I looked at an online map of Jewish heritage sites of the neighbourhood where she lived. I had made a lot of use of the map to explore the buildings that had housed former synagogues in the region and appreciated the way it indexed spaces associated with Jewish history that had been demolished or completely redeveloped. Erica clicked on a dot on the map that pointed to a well-known industrial area. A brief description of its early history that popped up explained that the business it had developed from had been established by a Jewish family. 'I know about this,' Erica said. 'I live close to this place, and it makes me feel good to know that it has Jewish history. There aren't any historical signs acknowledging it on the real site, though.' Erica said the map I was showing to her was a good idea, but it would only work for people like her who were already interested in Jewish history.

Wherever I travel, I go and check out Jewish heritage sites. But this map would not make these sites more visible for the general public. This is a shame. Our region is a melting pot of different migrant groups. This has been the case for quite a long time, and this needs to be acknowledged.

Erica's words signal a desire to draw attention to the historical diversity of the north of England that she felt could be brought out in visible ways through a more appropriate signposting of the built environment of her neighbourhood. Whilst she saw online maps as good tools, she felt that they did not have the capacity to reach and inform those publics who did not have an initial awareness of the history of Jewish communities in the region. Jewish heritage sites that were only signposted as such on an online map but that did not correspond to the observable materiality of the built environment were not part of the ambient landscape of the city. In her view, they therefore did not have full agency to educate the wider community, and their capacity to enhance the well-being of the Jewish residents and visitors to the city, whilst not entirely non-existent, was nevertheless limited. The Jewish histories of these spaces remained hidden and silent. As I discuss later, it may be argued that, to have the power to affirm an alternative cultural ambience, these sites would need to have the visibility that is hard to miss.

‘Unmistakably a synagogue’

‘Unmissable’ is the first word that comes to mind when one drives up to the Ryhope Road Synagogue in Sunderland. The synagogue was built in 1928, designed by the Newcastle-based Jewish architect Marcus Kenneth Glass. Born Yekusiel Glaz in Riga, Latvia, in 1887, he was a young child when his family moved to Newcastle in the 1890s. He later went on to have a successful career in architecture (Kadish 2015: 223). This is how Glass described the style and location of the Sunderland synagogue, which is considered to be one of the most notable examples of his work:

The site is a fine one situated in the best part of Sunderland and has frontages to Ryhope Road, a wide tree-lined thoroughfare [...] The dressings would be of artificial stone and the Hebrew inscription over the main entrance would be of gilt and coloured mosaic. The front elevation would be surmounted by stone ‘Ten Commandment’ tablets [...] Generally, the building has been designed in a free Byzantine style, with an endeavour to give it character, that it should be unmistakably a Synagogue, and be worthy of the Congregation it would represent. (quoted in Levy 1956: 147)

Described in architectural literature as ‘vigorous and decorative’ (Pevsner, cited in Kadish 2015), the building has become a ‘Heritage at Risk’ site following the closure of the synagogue in 2006 after the Jewish community had largely moved out of Sunderland. The building now stands empty, but its status as a Grade II listed site prevents it from being demolished (Gillan 2021).⁴ Another prominent site designed by Glass in North East England and built in a similar style is the former Jesmond Synagogue in Newcastle, which was initially converted into a school and later into a block of flats. Its sister synagogue, the Clapton Federation Synagogue in London, also designed by Glass in a similar style, was demolished in 2006, the year when the Ryhope Road Synagogue was closed (Kadish 2015: 221).

Ivan Kalmar observes in his work on synagogues built in the Moorish style⁵ that houses of worship constructed by minoritised communities reflect not only their religion but also their struggle to define their status in respect of the majority faith and the secular polity where majority and minority populations live together. Synagogues built in the striking Moorish style could, therefore, be seen to be a result of Jewish communities’ endeavour to state through an architectural landmark their rights and achievements, as well as

4 Grade II listed buildings are properties in England that have been designated as being of special historical or architectural interest.

5 Moorish style is an architectural innovation which emerged in Germany in the 1830s and continued to be popular in Jewish communities throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century.

success at integrating into the mainstream society, coupled with a desire not to lose their specificity (Kalmar 2013: 171; see also Kalmar 2001).

Arguably, Glass's synagogues are a good illustration of Kalmar's observation. Sharman Kadish describes Glass's three main synagogues in her guide to Jewish heritage in Britain and Ireland as having 'a striking cinematic art deco style' featuring large stained glass Magen David roundels at both ends of the buildings (Kadish 2015: 223).⁶ Designed in a fashion that combines art deco, Byzantine, and Moorish styles, Glass's synagogues were meant to be, as he put it when writing about the Ryhope Road building, 'unmistakably' Jewish houses of worship, projecting a sense of community agency and altering the visual ambience of the neighbourhoods where they were built – with the Sunderland synagogue situated on the thoroughfare in the best part of the town.

In addition to the Ryhope Road Synagogue, I visited ten other former synagogue buildings and sites where synagogues had been demolished or redeveloped, using the online map produced by the 'Unlocking North East Jewish Heritage' project. The buildings now housed a wide range of venues including offices, flats, churches, shops, and other commercial enterprises. Some still had recognisable signs of their original purpose, such as Magen David symbols on the outside walls – a particularly visible one found on a synagogue in Newcastle, a Victorian terrace that Marcus Glass had converted into a synagogue, imparting his own style onto it (Kadish 2015: 227). The former synagogue in South Shields – which, though built after Glass's death, counts as his legacy as it was built with the use of his designs (Kadish 2015: 230) – now houses several studios. As if in tribute to his wish to make Jewish community architecture recognisable, the building's official name is 'The Old Synagogue'.

Visiting these sites brought back home to me another example of shortcomings in representations of Jewish heritage that Daniel noted in our conversation:

Every now and then you see old synagogues or other old buildings that have Hebrew on them. But the buildings have been repurposed and are not community spaces anymore. Actually, this is really the closest that I can think of in terms of how Jewish heritage is represented in public spaces. These are spaces that have associations with Jewish communities, but they are not embodying that because they are being used differently [...] I remember as a child I used to sometime pass by this beautiful building that used to be a synagogue and then it was converted

6 Kadish (2015: 223) notes that Glass had an unusually successful career for a first-generation migrant of the time but died prematurely at the age of 45, which might explain why his legacy had not received the appreciation it deserved.

to something else. And there was no indication that this is what this building was, at least not at the time. And the only way I knew what it was, was because there was Hebrew at the front. So, sometimes the Jewish history is still there in the building, but it is not explicit.

Of all the sites of former synagogues I visited, only the one in Jesmond, now an apartment block called 'Byzantine House', bore a plaque saying that it was originally a synagogue. The building came up in my conversation with Erica, and I asked her whether she had a view about whether former synagogues should have clear signs with an explanation of their history. At first, she was not sure whether it would be appropriate:

Erica: I don't know what I think about plaques.

Egorova (YE): Do you think there was no need to put a plaque on the former synagogue in Jesmond?

Erica: I would be too scared to put one for fear that the building will be vandalised. It is fine for me to talk about my Jewish identity, and I am very open about it. But I would not do this to a public building. I know how Jewish cemeteries get vandalised, and how my father sometimes calls me and asks to check on my grandmother's grave [...] Though if it was a building of a former synagogue, a plaque and a historical notice maybe would be a good idea [...]

YE: Would you say then that, but for fear of vandalism, it would be all right to put signs like this on buildings?

Erica: Yes, but for prejudice and vandalism, there would be signs everywhere. When you go to places where there is a large Jewish community, everything is much better signposted.

In a study of the role that cassette sermons in the Middle East played in the development of Islamic ethical traditions, Charles Hirschkind (2006: 29) has suggested that perception is not merely a passive motion but an act that connects the sensory experiences of the past to the actions of the present and that 'objects are endowed with histories of sensory experience, stratified with a plurality of perceptual possibilities'. For Erica, seeing a sign bearing an acknowledgement of the Jewish history of a site simultaneously evokes a positive sense connected to the history of the region and a sense of apprehension regarding the risk of vandalism, linked to her own experience of caring for her grandmother's grave. Putting concerns about vandalism aside, Erica wanted spaces of Jewish heritage to have the agency to tell the story of the Jewish community in her neighbourhood and, in doing so, to highlight the agency of this community in shaping the history of the region and the coun-

try. At the same time, as I discuss in the following section, Erica, as well as my other interview partners, also felt that places representing Jewish heritage needed to reflect the diversity of British Jewish populations and highlight both their connection to other minoritised groups in the city and their embeddedness in the wider community.

Ambient heritage

When describing her encounters with public representations of Jewish culture, Erica pointed out that she would like them to go beyond offering images of one particular modality of Jewish religiosity:

You sometimes see in museums a display of a Seder or something like that, with a note that this is what Jewish people do on Sabbath. And it makes me think [...] this is not what Seder looks like in my home [...] It makes me feel awkward, particularly if the display is at a general museum where non-Jewish visitors are more likely to see it [...] And I would want them to have a fuller picture about Jews and Judaism. Maybe it's an impossible task, though. I don't know what I would put on such a display [...] maybe a video of my friends talking about what they do on Saturday or of their son going to play football.

Similarly to Erica, Claire felt that the task of representing Jewish history at a register that would capture the diversity of Jewish experience was both complex and important. In her view, spaces associated with Jewish history also needed to have the agency to support the wider community and, particularly, the community of other migrant populations, as transpires in her answer to my question about what sites she would like to see included on a tour of the Jewish history of Manchester:

Actually, I am not big on [...] saying we must have this and we must have that. I think we must be doing things that are a little bit more subtle and maybe a little bit more interesting. And something that will show that Jews come in all shapes and sizes [...] That not every Jewish person is, I don't know, either Orthodox religious or a communist [...] Does it make sense? Maybe it could be part of a larger project which involves all religions [...] We could take buildings of old synagogues and other former Jewish community spaces and do something for local communities there. This is what they do at the [Manchester Jewish] Museum, showing how Jewish people came to Manchester and what their lives were like in Cheetham Hill in the nineteenth century. So, if there were other old synagogue buildings available

it would be good to use them to do something about both Jewish and wider migrant experience.

Celebrating the broader diversity of the region was also important for Erica, and in her view having minority heritage visibly acknowledged was likely to improve the lived experience of minoritised groups. This is how she continued answering my question about putting historical signs on buildings associated with Jewish history:

I really appreciate it that we live in a diverse part of Europe and of the UK. It makes me feel safer [...] So, if we are talking about acknowledging Jewish history, I would want to have the heritage of all migrant communities to be acknowledged too. We are here now in a historical building. Say, if somebody told me that it used to be a house of worship of, for instance, a Hindu community, I would say, this needs to be known [...] We want to change attitudes and show how diverse British cities have been for a very long time. So, yes, visible plaques with a proper historical explanation would work well for this.

Erica would like the built environment of cities like Manchester and Newcastle to have the agency to remind every passer-by that the north of England is a diverse part of the UK and that migrant experience is an important dimension of its history. Whilst, as we saw in the previous section, seeing signs explicitly acknowledging the Jewish history of former synagogues would make Erica feel worried about anti-Semitic vandalism, being part of a diverse community makes her feel safer. Arguably, having visible, material expressions of minoritised heritage would change the aesthetics of her surroundings in ways that would enhance feelings of security and perhaps allow more room for safely indexing an explicit acknowledgment of the history of Jewish spaces as well. Similarly, for Claire, it was important that Cheetham Hill, where her mother grew up and her grandparents used to live, had a cultural landscape friendly to migrant communities.

I suggest Claire's testimony could be understood through what Engelke has called ambient faith in his study of a Christian charity, the Bible Society of England and Wales. Through exploring the efforts of his interlocutors to make religion more visible in the public sphere, Engelke highlights the significance of what he describes as a sense of ambience. In anthropological terms this notion is akin to context or culture, he argues, but it differs from them in that it conveys a more distinct understanding of what is in the background in sensorial terms. Building on Hirschkind (2006), Engelke (2012: 56) calls on anthropologists to recognise the importance of the material and sensory dimensions of community imaginings and suggests that ambience is a useful concept to think with in the study of the relationship between religion,

community, and the state. He demonstrates that for his interlocutors from the Bible Society, making religious symbols and activities a more visible part of the background environment of British cities was key to augmenting their sense of belonging to the wider society, which they experienced as overly secularised.

I propose that when Claire suggested that ‘we should do something more subtle’ when presenting the Jewish heritage of the area, this ‘more subtle’ did not mean making Jewish heritage less visible. Rather, it meant making it more ambient, in two ways: turning it into a more prominent part both of the background environment, following Engelke, and of the social and informational landscape of the neighbourhood, in a broader sense. It is important for Claire to ensure that the Jewish history of Cheetham Hill is visible through a renewed Jewish heritage tour of the neighbourhood. But what in her view would give this heritage more agency is allowing the architectural landmarks that were brought into existence by their Jewish founders to engage with the experiences of the current residents of the area, many of whom also have migrant background.

My interview partners’ vision of the ideal way in which the built environment can honour British Jewish histories is also illustrative of Everett’s (2020) concept of ‘ambiance diaspora’, understood as a sense of shared intercultural competencies and convergent references based on relational practices. Focusing on the way in France Jews and Muslims of North African descent negotiate differences and build local solidarities whilst working together in a commercial company, Everett demonstrates how these practices, which involved shared language, elements of cuisine, forms of religiosity, and work ethic, created for his interlocutors a particular background environment that engaged their sense of belonging to Maghrebi culture. Moreover, in Everett’s analysis, such examples highlight that what it means to be Jewish, or Muslim, or Maghrebi cannot always be reduced to a set of sedimented imageries.

Similarly, for Claire and Erica, putting the heritage of Jewish communities in conversation with cultural specificities of other diaspora populations and allowing this heritage to have the agency to serve contemporary migrant groups would not only enhance Jewish British citizens’ sense of well-being. This redevelopment would also make for a productive way of indexing the deep embeddedness of Jewish populations in their local communities and convey a fuller diversity of Jewish experience in the UK, promoting understandings of Jewish culture that go beyond the images of Jewish orthodoxies (or secularities) that circulate in the popular discourse.

At the same time, and importantly for all my interlocutors, the aesthetics and materiality associated specifically with Jewish heritage would need to be visible, durable, and explicit in these ideal urban diasporic environments.

Conclusion

The very first interview I conducted for this study was with Alex, my long-term conversation partner, who worked in the education sector and from whom I have been learning about the history of Jewish Mancunians for the past ten years. I told Alex I was starting a project on Jewish heritage and that I thought I would begin by focusing on representations of medieval Jewish history in England. I asked him whether he was familiar with any heritage sites connected with this. One episode immediately came to his mind. Back in the 1980s, he was on a trip to York with his children and went to see a memorial plaque that had been installed earlier that year on the site of a medieval Jewish cemetery. The cemetery had been discovered by archaeologists in the early 1980s at the site of what is now a multistorey car park of a Sainsbury's supermarket. 'When they cleared the car park, they found that there was this medieval Jewish cemetery underneath it,' Alex explained. 'On one of its entrances, the car park has a brick wall. And if you go through the entrance, on the right you will see a marble plaque. I think I went to see it after I learnt that it has been unveiled [...] When I later took my cousin there to see it, it was already all covered in ivy. But if you looked for it, you could find it.'⁷

The accounts of my interlocutors suggest that they would prefer for Jewish heritage to be represented in such a way that it would be visible; that it would be part of the ambient aesthetic and built environment of British cities; that one would not have to look hard for signs indexing Jewish heritage to be able to find them; and that they would not be forgotten by local authorities, left excluded from vegetation clearings on public properties. As the discussion showed, if my interviewees had any reservations about whether it would be appropriate to make Jewish heritage more visible in the UK, it was only because of their concern about vandalism.

Building on anthropological research into the agentive capacity of objects and the notion of an ambient environment, I argue that in the view of my conversation partners more visible representations of Jewish history would have a stronger agency in enhancing the well-being of Jewish residents, informing the wider community, and supporting other groups of migrant background. Visible representations would also be projecting a story about Jewish communities being part and parcel of a diverse Britain. They would signal that being Jewish means being a migrant and a local at the same time and in equal measures and thus unsettle the host versus migrant dichotomy. Finally, the material that I presented here creates room for a discussion not only about the agential capacity of material representations of Jewish heritage but also about the historical agency of Jewish communities in the UK, a discussion which would go beyond conventional reasonings about the

7 The cemetery was granted protected status in May 2025 (Hadaway-Weller 2025).

contribution that minoritised groups can (are expected to) make to the perceived host society. However, this topic would merit a separate consideration.

Acknowledgements

This article stems from a project conducted in collaboration with the Manchester Jewish Museum, funded by an Impact Acceleration Award of the Economic and Social Research Council (DU internal call). I gratefully acknowledge the funding source and the support of the museum. The part of the study which focused on Jewish heritage in North East England was conducted in collaboration with my colleagues at Durham University Sophie Bellamy, Rebecca Clifford, David Petts, and Gillian Rennie, and I am grateful for the opportunity to work with them. I would also like to thank my co-editors for this special issue, Miranda Crowds and Sami Everett, the *EthnoScripts* editors, and an anonymous reviewer for their invaluable comments and suggestions.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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