

# When a Boxcar Isn't a Boxcar:

## Designing for Human Rights Learning

by Stacey Mann and Danny M. Cohen, PhD

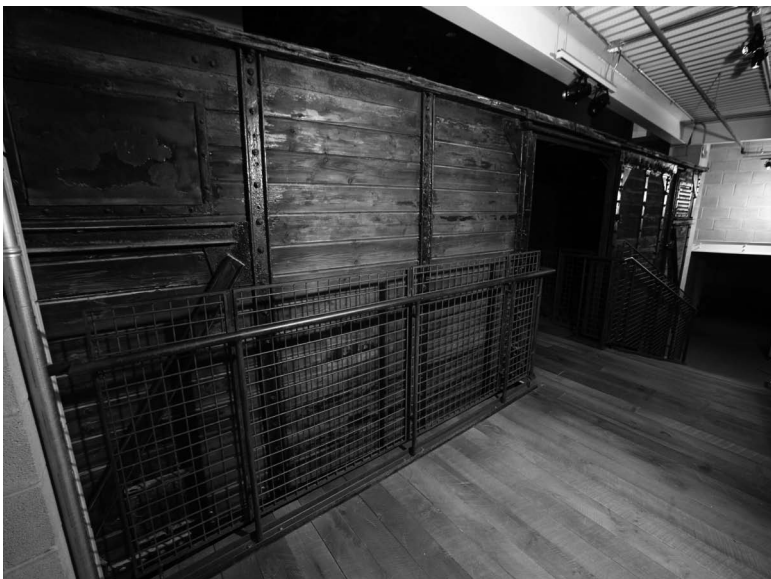
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When visitors enter a boxcar, as they can at a number of Holocaust museums across the U.S., we are encouraging them to confront historical realities and put themselves in the shoes of the Nazis' victims. But if the psychological risks of our designs outweigh their pedagogical benefits, should we simply place the boxcar out of reach? Our collaboration on research at the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center (ILHMEC) kick-started our conversations about the relationship between exhibition design and learners' emotional and intellectual responses. Mann had already headed the development team for Lied Discovery

of refugee children. Cohen had designed and facilitated the pedagogical track of ILHMEC's inaugural docent training program, teaching docents how to interpret exhibitions for group tours. Our combined experiences working with museums that address the often violent content of human rights history led us to examine the constraints that designers and educators must navigate to minimize emotional harm to learners while maximizing their potential for critical thinking. Here we draw on our experiences to discuss the design of exhibitions that use immersion, guided facilitation, abstraction, and other approaches to help visitors learn about human suffering.



The Nazi-era boxcar installation at the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center (ILHMEC) permits visitors to walk inside the artifact. Courtesy of Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center.

### Emotional Safety

While emotion and trauma play important biological roles in the formation of memory (Reisberg, 2007), less studied are the roles they play in the learning process. Through our work we have observed how violent images, unpreparedness, and poor facilitation can stifle visitors' critical thinking: visitors, when confronted with images of Nazi atrocities, have become so withdrawn or overwhelmed with sadness that they are unable to engage in critical discussions about the significance of these events; teenagers have laughed out loud at photographs of naked Jewish women and children about to be shot, a reaction that likely signifies shock and exposes educators' failure to prepare learners for what they will see; parents have become visibly upset by even intentionally softened content when exploring a children's exhibition about refugees. Even without designers' and educators' intentional—or unintentional—provocation, learners

Children's Museum's (LDCM) *Torn From Home: My Life as a Refugee*, a traveling exhibition on the experiences

are likely to personalize the narratives of genocide survivors, refugees, soldiers, or victims of terrorism, and experience “paralysis, empathy, identification, outrage, and even withdrawal from extremely disturbing, painful material” (Brodzki, 2004, p. 133). Still, many educators and designers make the mistake of trying to induce sadness or shock, which can lead learners to suspect they are being manipulated, rather than challenged intellectually.

Human rights content is inherently powerful and so, rather than prescribe particular emotions, educators and exhibition designers must collaborate to provide safe environments in which learners have control over how and when they respond emotionally, if at all. Such environments must validate all emotional responses while helping learners to focus on principled historical analysis and critical self-reflection.

### **Immersion and Simulation**

As designers and educators, we aspire to engage and sustain visitors’ attention. Two often-used techniques are immersion and simulation, both of which can be effective but also problematic (Schweber, 2004). Immersion entails enveloping visitors in a physical environment designed to capture the authentic aesthetic of a place and time. Simulation focuses on action and cognition—asking visitors to participate in the reproduction of an experience. While these techniques can be powerful and even fun (e.g., piloting a space-shuttle), utilizing these methods to educate about and memorialize human suffering can oversimplify and sensationalize historic realities (Totten, 2000; Wiesel, 1995).



*The walls and floor of ILHMEC’s Einsatzgruppen film installation were treated to match the film footage. Courtesy of Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center.*

In some cases, immersion is unavoidable. At sites of atrocity (e.g., Auschwitz), visitors’ experiences are authentically immersive because each site provides a context that conveys unique historical lessons (Young, 1993). But where evidence of atrocity is now absent, or for museums and memorials built elsewhere, we must question to what extent environments need to be reconstructed and experiences simulated.

Halfway through ILHMEC’s permanent exhibition, a sign warns visitors about disturbing material in the next section. To proceed, visitors must enter a passageway where a video installation plays film of the Einsatzgruppen (the Nazis’ mobile killing squads) shooting people into an open pit. The video monitor hangs at eye-level on a wall that exhibit designers have treated to match the black and white footage. The floor and surrounding walls depict the same image, thereby immersing visitors within a simulated mass grave and—whether the exhibits’ designers intended this or not—effectively asking visitors to imagine themselves as the Einsatzgruppen’s victims.

While research protocols prevent us from discussing visitors’ specific responses to this particular space, this exhibit

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illustrates critical design tensions. Although signage warns visitors of forthcoming disturbing material, the exhibition does not offer an alternate pathway around the exhibit. In contrast, ILHMEC's installation of a Nazi-era boxcar later in the exhibition—similar to the boxcar in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM)—allows visitors a choice of how intimately to engage with the exhibit. One could argue that, if visitors were able to avoid the film footage, they would miss opportunities to think critically about the significance of the victims' deaths and murderers' actions. On the other hand, the act of watching a film that depicts precise moments of murder may be too shocking and upsetting for visitors. At USHMM, similarly graphic film footage depicting the Nazis' pseudo-medical experiments is visible only over a barrier that shields it from view by younger visitors and those who choose to look away.

Ultimately, the violent Einsatzgruppen footage and its immersive treatment highlight the need to distinguish between evoking empathy with genocide victims and understanding the unfolding events and abstracted lessons of history (Weissman, 2004). Supporting learners' deep understanding of subject matter must be a primary goal of all learning environments (Wiggins & McTighe, 2000; Barron, et al., 1998). Yet, writer and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel argues that we cannot come close to understanding the experiences of the Nazis' victims: "Let us, therefore, not make an effort to understand, but rather to lower our eyes and not understand" (1995, p. 150). Instead of asking visitors to understand victims' experiences, we

should help visitors consider what leads individuals to participate in genocide. Although we cannot prevent learners from attempting to imagine victims' experiences (Wineburg, 2001), when we ask learners to imagine themselves as participants in violent episodes of history, we risk manipulating their emotional responses in ways that may stifle their engagement in historical analysis.

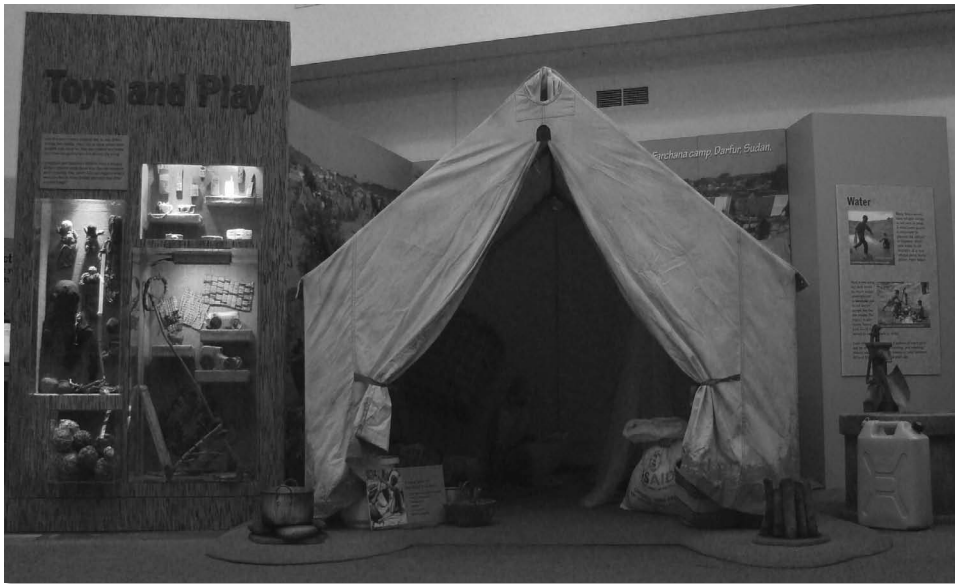
#### Conversation and Reflection

Designers and educators must allow learners time and space to process and organize what they have learned (Brown & Campione, 1996; Anderson, Krathwohl, & Bloom, 2001)—particularly when content is likely to provoke strong emotional responses--and help them reflect intellectually on the contemporary relevance of human rights history (Rothberg, 2004). We can achieve this by encouraging conversation (Falk & Dierking, 1992, 2000; Leinhardt & Crowley, 2002; Leinhardt & Knutson, 2004), either through docent-led facilitation or targeted prompts within exhibitions.

Cohen (2010) worked with ILHMEC to train its docents to lead interpretive discussions. Using a wall-mounted photograph of lush forests surrounding a town at the center of which stands a building with a billowing chimney, he trained docents to ask open-ended questions to focus learners on deep analysis. Such a conversation might develop as follows:

Docent: "What do you see?"

Visitor 1: "Trees... smoke... a town... a chimney..."



Torn From Home: My Life as a Refugee introduces young audiences to issues faced by refugees like water, shelter, and play. Courtesy of Stacey Mann.

Docent: “What time of year is this and how do we know?”

Visitor 2: “It’s winter, because someone’s burning a fire.”

Visitor 3: “No, it’s summer. The trees are in bloom.”

The photograph shows the town of Hadamar in 1941; smoke billows from the crematorium of a psychiatric hospital where the Nazis murdered people they identified as disabled. Without such docent facilitation, visitors could miss the significance of the photograph and its lessons. Docents can lead visitors to consider how people living in Hadamar likely noticed the unusual sight of smoke during summertime, but turned a blind eye. Docents can then encourage learners to reflect on their own actions and indifference, by asking questions like, “What will you do when you witness or hear about injustice today?” Importantly, not all questions lead to principled analysis. Docents should avoid questions like, “How does this photograph make you feel?” as such questions could lead visitors to become caught up in their emotions. Questions like, “What would you have done had you lived in Hadamar?” are impossible to answer and may lead visitors to make inaccurate assumptions about history (Lassner & Cohen, 2009).

Just as ILHMEC’s docents encourage conversations, the inclusion of interpretive prompts within signage and ancillary materials can support visitors’ intellectual reflection. In the case of *Torn From Home*, Mann developed a family exhibition guide to support conversations about refugees’ experiences. The guide asks foundational questions such as “What does home mean to you?” and “How would your family live in a simple shelter?” (LDCM, 2008). Feedback from visitors suggests that parents appreciate the opportunity to introduce these complex topics to their children within a safe, structured environment. Similarly, ILHMEC’s *Legacy of Absence* exhibition—featuring artworks representing genocides and cases of oppression across time and place—utilizes labels, interpretive panels, and gallery titles (e.g., “So Many Gone, Who Were They?”) to support learners’ reflection on thematic connections among artworks that aid transfer between atrocities.

### Age-Appropriate Design and Interpretation

Designing environments to introduce content about human suffering, particularly to children, often necessitates the softening of violent realities. Led by Mann (2011), the design team of *Torn From Home* settled on a target audience of children aged 8 to 12, an audience developmentally ready to

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"So Many Gone," the third of six galleries that make up ILHMEC's Legacy of Absence art exhibition on genocide and human rights atrocities. Courtesy of Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center.

identify differences and commonalities between refugees' experiences and their own lives. Yet, the realities that refugee children must confront—rape, genocide, child soldiers—are, understandably and ironically, too extreme and complex for young learners.

The *Torn From Home* team intentionally simplified and softened content about the plight of refugees in order to introduce children to foundational concepts—human rights, resilience, and social responsibility. While the design team's interpretative solution includes film footage of families fleeing war-torn homes, the exhibition uses content about food, water, shelter, health, school, and play as appropriate entry points into the refugee narrative. The resulting design incorporates an immersive refugee camp environment in which children and their parents can build a shelter, walk into a tent, and learn about a typical camp's nutritional, medical, and educational resources.

Exhibition designers have approached the issue of age-appropriateness in distinct ways. *Torn From Home* softens the refugee narrative; ILHMEC discourages parents from bringing children under

12 into its permanent exhibition; and London's *Imperial War Museum* (IWM) bars children under 11 from its Holocaust exhibition altogether (IWM, 2011). Such approaches raise questions about the best ways to introduce children to this content (Totten, 1999): By delaying the introduction of violent content do we risk misrepresenting history and discrediting an exhibition's intellectual honesty (Bruner, 1960)? Are such omissions ethical? What lessons are lost? Does softening content to support the introduction of key foundational concepts to young learners set them up for confusion and shock later?

#### Distance and Abstraction

Stripping away violent content and applying age restrictions are not the only ways to minimize trauma to visitors. While ILHMEC and USHMM allow visitors to enter their boxcars, Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust memorial, displays a Nazi era boxcar that stands outside on a severed track and out of reach. Visitors can read survivor testimony engraved on a wall beneath the track that describes conditions inside a boxcar bound for a Nazi camp. Visitors' physical distance from the boxcar

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symbolizes passage of time, deterioration of memory, and that the past cannot be re-experienced (Leigh, 1999), while the testimony ensures that visitors' analyses do not stray too far from the horrors of history. In comparison, ILHMEC's *Legacy of Absence* displays abstract artworks that shield visitors from images of overt violence, rape, and mass-murder. The abstracted aesthetics (Kaplan, 2007) may help minimize learners' extreme and distracting emotional responses. We observed these artworks used to great effect in supporting learners to consider universal lessons of history (Wineburg, 2001)—prejudice, dehumanization, and loss.

Although abstraction of content may lessen designers' need for providing visitors the choice to avoid artifacts, other exhibitions attempt to make explicit the tension between protecting visitors and allowing them to confront the realities of human suffering. Within the Holocaust exhibition at IWM, visitors must walk the length of a boxcar's floor and beneath its roof. With three walls removed and the remaining wall flipped around, visitors are inside and outside of the boxcar at the

same time. IWM's deconstructed boxcar may lead visitors away from dwelling on the concrete experiences of the Nazis' victims and toward thinking critically about the representation of history and its lessons.

### Conclusion

We are left asking: At what point do environments for human rights learning become so authentic (immersion, simulation) that they traumatize learners, or so inauthentic (abstracted, softened) that they trivialize content, and thereby impede learning? Designers and educators must work together to employ interpretive methods cautiously, to avoid manipulating learners' emotions and encourage principled analysis. We must acknowledge that a boxcar—or other artifact—is evidence of atrocity, imbued with historical significance, and, however authentic its installation, can never replicate victims' suffering.

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