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**Spaces of the Jewish Public Library:
A Photographic Essay**

Why dedicate an issue of *Canadian Jewish Studies* (CJS), a scholarly journal, to the 100th anniversary of the Jewish Public Library (JPL)? When the JPL's Director of Archives Shannon Hodge approached co-editor of CJS David Koffman and me about a possible collaboration, we were immediately intrigued. An analysis of the Library is an opportunity to reflect on the cultural dynamism and development of Jewish life in 20th and 21st century Montreal. I was surprised, however, to learn of a tension that exists at the very heart of the institution's identity: on the one hand, its long-time mission to provide and promote literature to the people. On the other hand, the JPL later acquired and now holds an important archival collection and acts as a scholarly research centre. Is the institution "folk" or "elite"? Should it be both? Can it be both? Ira Robinson points to an example of this in this volume: the 1951 JPL Annual Meeting report decries "the Library should not be transformed into a research and archive library" lest it abandon its accessibility to and usability by the folk. This tension concerning which goal the JPL serves is alive and well today. It even lurks in this very volume: is a peer-reviewed book of academic scholarship an appropriate way to commemorate the Library's centennial? Perhaps the tension might be thought of as the source of the Library's vitality, its relevance, not a problem. For it seems to me that the Library is an entity in motion, a place that evolves through the poetry of its everyday uses.

Though both my parents were born in Montreal, I did not grow up there. My first exposure to the Library was as an undergraduate student at McGill University. I remember coming to the JPL to conduct research on the history of Zionism. It was often easier to access the books I needed there, than at the university libraries where the specific materials I required were more in demand by my fellow students. I remember the calm and communal basement study space where I spent many hours. More recently through my work as research director of the Museum of Jewish Montreal, I have discovered both the treasure trove of the JPL archives and the magnanimity of its custodians and curators: Shannon Hodge, Eiran Harris, and Daniela Ansovini. My interactions with the archives, (both its people and its artifacts) while mapping the historic locations of the JPL for the Museum of Jewish Montreal, inspired me to consider the *space* occupied by the library and archives beyond its enclosing walls, and its "library" label.

In this photo essay, I reflect on the places of the Jewish Public Library (several of its physical locations in the built environment) and its spaces – as a lending institution, an invaluable archive, a cultural institution, and something more. As Alberto Manguel puts it, a library is always "an incomplete creation," "a work-in-progress," because it is constantly negotiating the limits of its physical space with a mission that is larger than what any four walls can contain'. My guiding question for what follows is: what new insights can we garner about the JPL by analyzing its *spatiality* through its photo archive? I will offer some tactics and reflections for readers, so that they might embark on their own explorations of the concept of "Jewish" space. As we

read words on the page of a book, we can read photographs, a different kind of text, through the form of a photographic essay.

Space, a Concept to Think With

Though time and history have been the central analytical concepts of understanding Jewish experiences, space and place continue to emerge as important tools for critique. In their introduction to *Jewish Topographies* (2008) Brauch, Lipphardt and Nocke define the following concepts:

Jewish places are, in our understanding, sites that are geographically located, bound to a specific location, such as the Jewish quarter in Fez, Morocco, or the gravesite of Baba Sali in Netivot, Israel. *Jewish spaces* are understood as spatial environments in which Jewish things happen, where Jewish activities are performed and which in turn are shaped and defined by those activities, such as a sukkah or a Bundist summer camp for children. Therefore our understanding of *Jewish place* is defined by location, *Jewish space* by performance. Both can be congruent or overlap, and the difference between them is not so much defined by *where* one can find them, but lies in their function, or as Steve Harrison and Paul Dourish² have put it, in the different roles they play: “space is the opportunity; place is the (understood) reality.”³

This definition is a useful starting point for our discussion because it introduces two different levels of Jewish spatiality – geography and performance. Despite the different roles that place and space come to play in everyday Jewish life, both are required to pass through a process to attain their “Jewishness,” that is, both concepts are socially constructed. The *mellah* (Jewish quarter) in Fez came into being because of the displacement of Moroccan Jews into the area in the 15th century, and became part of the religious/cultural geography of the city, though few Jewish inhabitants (if any at all) remain today. A library becomes Jewish space through the collection choices, signage and promotions and practices of its staff, board and users. Both place and space require deliberate efforts to maintain their Jewish status over time, and changing social relations.

Urban theorist Edward Soja offers another way of thinking through the production of space, inspired by the writings of French philosopher Henri Lefebvre. Lefebvre used *une dialectique de triplicité* (triple dialectic) as an interpretive thread to contemplate the complexities of the modern world particularly with respect to the study of everyday life (Soja 6–7)⁴. Human life could best be analyzed through the interworking of the production of space (space), the making of history (time), and the composition of social relations in society (social being). According to Lefebvre and Soja, the spatial aspect had too often been ignored in the study of human life.

Interpreting Lefebvre, Soja describes three levels of thinking about space. Firstspace is akin to “place” described above, physical buildings or material geography we “perceive” with our senses to be real. Secondspace is the symbolic, a set of meanings that we attach to a location, what we “conceive” or imagine a location to be or do. Soja theorizes Thirdspace as the combination of First and Second space that includes and moves beyond the binaries of real–imagined, and perceived–conceived, to make way for “fully lived space.” The concept of Thirdspace differs from First or Second space in that it is “radically open,” and always flexible, a result of the unpredictable interactions that occur when bodies move through physical and symbolic space.

The concept of Thirdspace allows us to explore the messy and chaotic lived experiences of Montreal Jews in and around the Jewish Public Library, itself a dynamic entity, in a changing urban environment. When we analyze the spatiality of the JPL through its photo archive, we see more than a linear chronology of historical achievements and building changes. Rather, this method exposes the mechanisms of the library as a work-in-progress, bringing to light the everyday negotiating that defines the institution and its users; an exchange between the variety of practices within (that may or may not have been consistent with its stated mission) the ideas that challenge its material limits and the *other* ideas, products and practices that patrons and scholars may never before have considered. Using a spatial analysis, the following four cases examine Jewish life in and around the JPL as a complex work-in-progress. The tension between the folk and elite functions of the Library are reflected in the trialectics of space as we proceed.

Case One: Reading Spatiality in a Single Photograph

Spatial analysis enables us to interpret Jewish life in Montreal beyond what history or sociology can do in isolation. Examine the following artifact:



Certificate of the purchase of 1131 St-Urbain to house the Jewish Public Library, ca. 1920s. Jewish Public Library Fonds (Historic), File 00186.

This certificate depicts the location of the *Yidische folks-biblyotek* (Jewish People's Library, as the JPL was called at the time) and *Folks-universitet* (People's University) between the years 1921 and 1929 on St-Urbain just north of Duluth. What do you notice about the physical location of the library? It is a humble row house built right up to the sidewalk, typical of Montreal residential buildings of its era. There are no architectural features that designate this as a library *per se*. The use of converted domiciles for public Jewish spaces is well documented in Sara Tauben's *Traces of the Past* (2011)⁵. Many of Montreal's early *shulelach* (small synagogues) were likewise repurposed from pre-built structures. Tauben notes that this particular location of the JPL would itself be converted into the Stepener *shul* in the 1950s.

Beyond the photograph of the JPL's physical structure in the 1920s, this archival document also reveals the symbolic space that the library occupied in the minds of its promoters. The text that accompanies the image reads: "The library has purchased a house for \$1.00. For the most worthy institution in the city... the Address of our own home..." . House refers to the physical structure that has been purchased. The word "home" triggers a range of symbolic meanings: notions of refuge or warmth that might derive from living amongst a family in a stable location, a resting place for

a diaspora most recently displaced from Eastern Europe, people literally uprooted from their homes in living memory, but also attuned to collective ideological and/or religious yearnings for a home for the Jewish people. The symbolic home is much larger and more auspicious than its house. A Thirdspace analysis of this document asks: what occurs between the mission of the fundraisers and the limits of the material location? How was this building actually used? What other practices emerged from the particularity of this location, in the historic period of the largest Jewish immigration to Montreal, and its newly arrived Eastern European, working class demographic? Why is the library, a place of books and learning, deemed the “the most worthy institution” over and above other places in the city? Case two delves into a Thirdspace analysis.

Case Two: Comparing Photographs

Evidence of physical, symbolic and Thirdspaces of the JPL becomes more apparent when we examine the following set of photographs in relation. The new location of the JPL from 1930 to 1951 is a linked house with a majestic exterior staircase, balcony, beautiful tree and small, gated courtyard out front. These details signify the library’s relocation



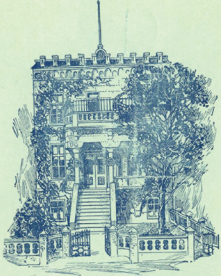
Exterior of Jewish Public Library, 4099 Esplanade, ca. 1950s.
Jewish Public Library Archives, Photograph Collection, pr001054.

to a wealthier street in the neighbourhood (today called the Plateau), from the busy St-Urbain corridor to 4099 avenue de l’Esplanade just one street to the west. Behind the photographer’s back would be Fletcher’s Field (today Parc Jeanne-Mance) situated at the base of Mount Royal. Esplanade was the centre of the mid-century “downtownner”⁶ Jewish community of Montreal. Within three blocks along Esplanade between Mont-Royal and Duluth were Herzliah High School, the Jewish Immigrant Aid Society, a seniors’ residence and the homes of many of the library’s supporters including the poet Ida Maze.

Now compare the physical location with its symbolic space. This 1932 fundraising pamphlet describes the tangible – how many books, details of the operating budget, who was involved – but also gives a sense of the (intangible) aspirations of the organization. This is ambitiously declared in the quote below the heading “Facts”: “valuable books should in a civilized country, be within the reach of everyone.” On a symbolic level, the JPL represented an ideal that would serve a working-class, Yiddish speaking community: a place where the Jewish population could theoretically raise themselves up through “good reading,” lectures, discussions and courses.

1. **What is the aim of the Library?**
To collect books concerning Jewish people (Judaica) particularly in Yiddish, Hebrew and English; to disseminate culture by encouraging good reading by means of lectures, literary discussions, courses, etc.
2. **How long is the Library functioning?**
18 years; it was founded in 1914.
3. **How many books has the Library?**
7,393 volumes chiefly in 3 languages: 55% Yiddish, 30% English, 15% Hebrew.
4. **How many books were in circulation during last 12 months?**
16,037 books among 811 readers, an increase of 1024 over 1931.
5. **What was the number of readers and visitors at the Library during the last 12 months?**
Adults 21,604, children 2,566.
6. **What is the number of periodicals in the Library?**
64 Periodicals in 5 languages:
23 dailies, 23 weeklies and 18 monthlies.
7. **How many new books were bought or donated during the last 12 months?**
815 volumes in 6 languages:
Yiddish 283, English 403, Hebrew 69, German 34, French 20, Russian 6.

HOME



Jewish Public Library Campaign
1932

FACTS

“Valuable books should in a civilized country, be within the reach of everyone.”
—JOHN RUSKIN.

8. **What is the budget for the current year?**
Administration — \$4,000.
House up-keep — 3,000.
Deficit — 5,800.
9. **What is the objective of the Campaign?**
\$10,000.
10. **How is the objective of the Campaign arrived at?**
The Board of Directors prepared the budget for the forthcoming year. Our objective is the minimum total to cover urgent payments in connection with mortgages, immediate repairs, necessity to rebuild, acquire more books and periodicals and maintain staff, etc.
11. **What is the duration of the Campaign?**
From Sunday, December 18th to Sunday, December 25th.
12. **Who are the Officers of the Library?**
President - - N. MYERSON
Vice-President - M. BERCOVITCH
Chairman - - A. KATZMAN
Vice-Chairman - G. GERSHONOVITCH
Treasurer - - P. LIPSHITZ
Rec. Sec. - - M. ALLEN
Fin. Sec. - - D. LOVE

Executive Committee

S. BERCOVITCH	I. SHAFFRAN
M. L. BROWN	I. STERLIN
H. DECKELBAUM	S. TEMKIN
H. RABIN	L. ZUKER
I. RABINOVITCH	

Pamphlet: “Home” 1932 JPL Campaign Facts, 4099 Esplanade. Jewish Public Library Fonds (Historic), File 00015.

Pierre Anctil points out in his essay in this volume that the Yiddish-speaking Jews who arrived from Russia before 1914, brought a range of (sometimes) radical ideologies with them to Montreal in which secular education, and national literatures, figured prominently. But education and literature didn’t necessarily translate into instilling class-consciousness, as some socialists might have desired. The 1932 fundraising campaign was carried out in the seriously reduced financial climate and heightened labour politics of the Great Depression, when over a third of the Jewish working population in Montreal were employed in the harsh conditions of the garment trade⁷. In this climate, how did patrons actually use the library? Did the people choose “good reading” and Jewish education? What else occurred here that wasn’t recorded in the history books? A Thirdspace analysis suggests answers to some of these questions. The next photograph depicts a meeting of the *Yidische folks-universitat* in the front yard of the JPL.



Exterior, unidentified event, Jewish Public Library, 4099 av de l'Esplanade, ca. 1940s. Jewish Public Library Archives, Photograph Collection, pr001068.

What do you notice about the people? It seems an apparently mundane scene, but if you look carefully more and more elements begin to pop out. Like the children looking on from the adjacent staircase, a neighbour watching two houses over. The JPL was right in the heart of the densely populated immigrant neighbourhood, with minimal separation between the courtyards and houses. It demonstrates the proximity of neighbours in the working-class downtown quarter of this time period. It also shows the somewhat messiness of the gathering: imagine taking out all of those wooden chairs into the courtyard. Could the crowd prevent the sounds of the children next door from interfering with the event? It is not clear where the focal point of the audience is, or what the table next to the stairs is being used for. How does this motley arrangement compare to the professional programs held in the modern JPL? Thirdspace makes evident the everyday movement of bodies through particular physical and symbolic locations. From this photograph alone it is impossible to know what program is being held, but we can observe the spatial arrangement, how people organized themselves within this setting, extending the boundaries of the physical JPL into courtyard and down the street.

Case Three: The *Punctum*, What Else the Photograph Allows

Photographs are a particularly enlightening entry point for analyzing the spatiality of the JPL. In his book *Camera Lucida* French theorist Roland Barthes contemplates the uniqueness of photography from the perspective of a spectator.⁸ Why was he attracted to some photographs more than others? To make sense of his experience, the emotional effects of viewing photographs, he developed two conceptual terms. The *studium* refers to the general engagement with a photo, the first level of perception where we interpret it based on cultural or contextual interest. It might be informative, mildly interesting, or we might like it or dismiss it. This one level of spectatorship is enhanced by a second, a *punctum*. The *punctum* is the thing that triggers an emotional effect on the viewer that the author didn't intentionally place there. To better understand these two aspects of viewing a photograph, look at this image of the famous Yiddish poets J. I. Segal and Ida Maze with an unidentified man. At the level of the *studium*, this is a lovely black and white photo that shows the poets in their cultural milieu, the north-east corner of Fletcher's Field/Parc Jeanne-Mance.



Group portrait of (l to r) J. I. Segal, Ida Maze, and unidentified man, in park on Esplanade and Mont-Royal, Montreal, ca. 1950. Jewish Public Library Archives, Photograph Collection, pr005444.

I've examined this photograph countless times in my research, but only recently noticed that the first purpose-built edifice of the JPL had not yet been constructed in the background, making the date of this photo around 1950⁹. In my subjective experience of viewing this photograph, the *punctum* is this: the shock of a different

reality of place that contradicts the street corner I am today intimately familiar with (I live nearby, and the Museum of Jewish Montreal often begins walking tours in this location). The shock is corroborated by impossibility that this photograph could ever be replicated. Not only because its subjects have passed away and a massive building now stands at the South-east corner of this intersection (the JPL has come and gone from this location – see the next photograph), but also because the tennis courts where my parents had their first date would have obstructed the photographer's perspective of this park bench (had they existed in that time period).

Another photograph enhances the *punctum*, the jolt a single viewer might experience looking at photograph and seeing something that the photographer never intended. What do you see in this picture?



Full shot of street crowd and laying of cornerstone, Dedication Ceremony for New Library Building at 4499 Esplanade, Jewish Public Library, October 4, 1953. Jewish Public Library Archives, Photograph Collection, pr000179.

This photograph depicts the dedication ceremonies that Zachary Baker discusses in his essay in this volume. Note the prominent Israeli flag, and this hint of the Quebec and the British flags (the Maple Leaf flag had not yet been invented in 1953). The mass of bodies standing on this empty city block actually creates the space for the JPL

before the foundation is laid. And as Baker argues, this moment captures the civic engagement of the Jewish community and a claiming of a space for their community. Compare the messiness of bodies rubbing shoulders in the city streets with the stoic and stately modern building that would soon occupy this “empty” space.



Exterior of the Jewish Public library, 4099 Esplanade, ca. 1950s. Jewish Public Library Archives, Photograph Collection, pr001786.

The *punctum* for me is the shock of seeing a “Jewish” place I thought I knew, once inhabited so differently. History, spatiality, and social relations all interact in one photograph to show me what the JPL was before its current manifestation, and beyond a series of old buildings, or lists of achievement. The anticipation and excitement of what is coming (the new building, the fulfilled ambitions of the community) leaps out of this black and white document. What else can the *punctum* illuminate for you about the JPL?

Case Four: The Presence of Children

Through its 100 years of existence, the JPL has occupied the heart of Yiddish Montreal, but where else has it had an impact? Who else has it touched and influenced? How can the concept of Thirdspace help us think about the “excess” products

of the library: meanings, practices, products that occurred beyond its stated mission or that have been taken for granted as being mundane, unworthy of mention?

This picture may come as a surprise in documenting the space of the JPL. It is a music program being run by Linda Kravitz at the JPL in 2014.



Entertainer Linda Kravitz animates a Rhythm and Rhyme Storytime for children at the Norman Berman Children's Library, 2014. Photographer: Jason Hughes.

Nothing about this photo indicates that we are inside a library. It could equally be a school or a community centre. A woman performs for a group, sitting on a child-sized chair, playing a funky, colourful guitar. Parents participate in the program with the kids whose attention is not just on the guitar player but also on the toys they hold. But the photograph's uniqueness becomes apparent when we compare it with this photograph from the 1950s:



Interior, reading room filled with patrons, 4099 Esplanade, ca. 1953. Jewish Public Library Archives, Photograph Collection, pr001787.

On first glance, this is very obviously a reading room, filled mostly with men in suits reading newspapers. The windows along the wall allow natural light to fill the room and the long tables maximize the working space for the adult readers. But look carefully. Suddenly children start to pop out: a girl to the far right in a white dress. Three boys gather around two men in the middle table, presumably their fathers teaching them or reading to them. Another little girl appears, standing behind the boys possibly disengaged or almost ignored, like the other girl in the picture.

Now examine the first photo again. What do you notice? In the first photo, parents are sitting on the floor with the children, fully engaged, with parents or grandparents. The comparison very quickly demonstrates an entirely different social context in how parents and program animators engage with children in the space of the library, and the different place of men and boys, and women and girls within the space. While not intended as part of the original vision of the JPL, as Eva Roskies Raby demonstrates in her article in this volume, the Children's Library has evolved to become one of its most prominent features. Through its citywide programming and partnerships inside and outside the Jewish community, it has extended far beyond its physical location. This photograph also illustrates the importance of moving the Children's Library up from the basement to ground level of Cummings House, making it visible to anyone walking through the Federation CJA building. The practices of the library are explicitly made visible from outside of its material boundaries.

Productive Tension

My starting question in this photo essay was: what new insights become accessible when we examine the spatiality of the Jewish Public Library through its photograph archive? I introduced Soja's concept of Thirdspace, which sees space – beyond its physical or symbolic limits – as radically open and constantly being made and remade. The concept applied to the JPL helps us contemplate the ways “real” and “imagined” environments interact with, structure and respond to the messy, everyday realities of Jewish life. I also introduced Barthes' concept of the *punctum* to draw attention to the particular revelations viewing photography can provide to the study of the spatiality of the JPL. This helped us to recognize the multiple effects and affects of the Library that emerge as its space–time–social being nexus fluctuates, is negotiated and actively created.

Through a spatial analysis of the photo archive of the Jewish Public Library we can learn the following:

- That physical and symbolic space are not equal, and that the movement of bodies within Thirdspace also play a role in shaping the institution, as the institutions shapes the geography of Jewish life.
- That there is more to history and geography than what we plan, construct and celebrate. There can be an unpredictability to human relations in space and history that is itself worthy of study.
- That photographs of the space of the Jewish Public Library, particularly when a *punctum*, or shocking, unintended detail occurs to the individual viewer about what they are looking at, can teach us much.
- That there is so much more to learn about the Jewish Public Library through the analysis of its everyday activities, which may have been previously been taken for granted.
- That, to reiterate Ira Robinson's prescient and simple observation in his article in this volume, “The JPL has been made things to many people.” Rather than hold the JPL up to a single set of missions or functions, we can appreciate the range of programs, features, community outreach, experimentation and everyday practices that continue to make the Library a “most worth institution.” In fact, the active tension between the JPL's dual missions to serve the public and elite researchers helps ensure that the institution remains committed in the long term, to both.

I hope that this essay has offered readers a new visual perspective on the JPL, and encouragement to embark on other adventures in contemplating Jewish space.

1

Manguel, Alberto. *The Library at Night*. (Toronto: A.A. Knopf Canada, 2006).

2

For more recent work see Dourish, Paul. "Re-Space-ing Place: 'Place' and 'Space' Ten Years On" (*CSCW'06*, November 4-8, 2006, Banff, Alberta, Canada).

3

Brauch, Julia, Anna Lipphardt and Alexandra Nocke, ed. *Jewish Topographies, Traditions of Place* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2008), 4. Bold is my emphasis, italics are authors'.

4

Soja, Edward W. *Thirdspace: Journey to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1996).

5

Tauben, Sara Ferdman. *Traces of the Past: Montreal's Early Synagogues*. (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 2011).

6

Downtowner refers to the Eastern European Jewish immigrants who lived in the neighbourhoods along Boulevard St-Laurent, as opposed to the "uptowners" who moved west across the city, and tended to be wealthier and Anglo-centric.

7

See "Work Upon Arrival," *Museum of Jewish Montreal*, 2014. <http://imjm.ca/work>.

8

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida—Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

9

I make this comment because part of my work at the Museum involved writing captions for images. We try to find the exact year of photo was taken, or if not, at least indicate the decade. This revelation helped me get closer to the exact year the photo was taken.