

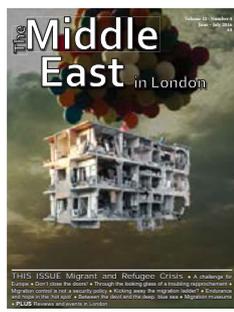
# The Middle East in London

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June - July 2016  
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**THIS ISSUE:** Migrant and Refugee Crisis • A challenge for Europe  
• Don't close the doors! • Through the looking glass of a troubling rapprochement • Migration control is not a security policy • Kicking away the migration ladder? • Endurance and hope in the 'hot spot' • Between the devil and the deep, blue sea • Migration museums • **PLUS** Reviews and events in London



Tammam Azzam, 'Damascus from Bon Voyage Series', 2013. Courtesy of Ayyam Gallery and the artist

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# The Middle East in London

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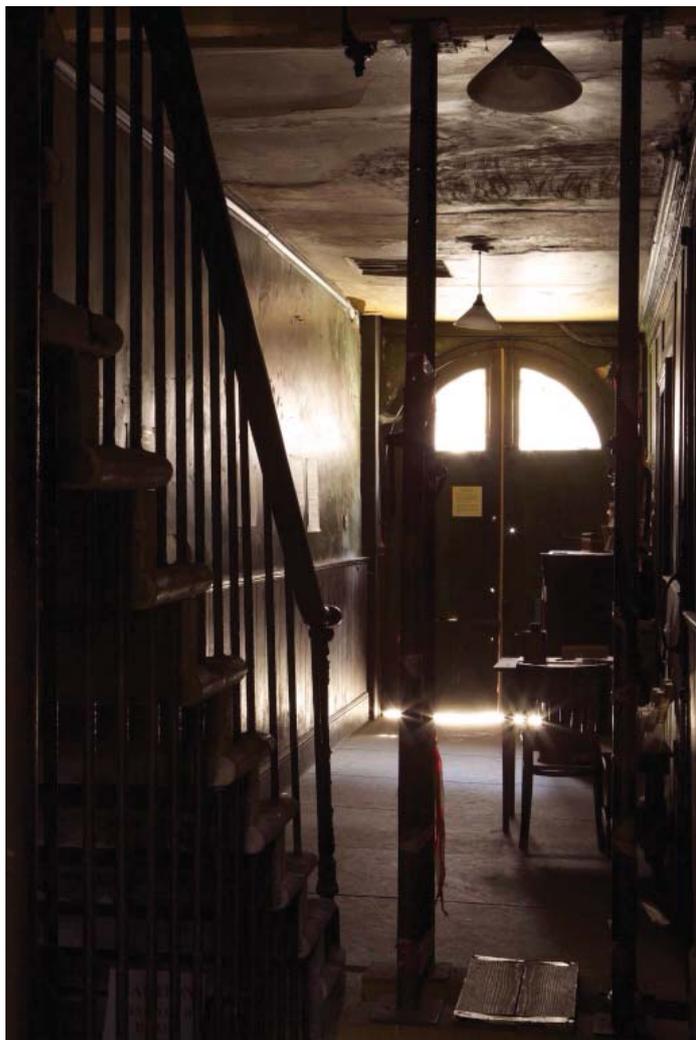
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*Sarah Searight* discusses those museums dedicated to documenting the movement of people and their experiences

## Migration museums

Doorway from the past to the present. A rare glimpse inside the historic site at 19 Princelet Street. Photograph by Matthew Andrews/19Princelet Street



© Matthew Andrews/19Princelet Street

Immigration, emigration and migration: these are not new issues, but nowadays the unprecedented scale is. This article examines how some destinations, particularly the United Kingdom, have handled the cultural impact of such movements of people. Of the three words above I prefer 'migration' with the implication of movement in all directions, but not everyone agrees on a definition of 'migrant'. A special report in the 9 April issue of *New Scientist* used 'migration' as its principal topic and points out how such a definition of the movement of peoples varies from country to country and even more so in public opinion.

A reaction to such movement in several countries has been to establish 'museums' of migration to record the influx of diverse peoples. In Britain, while there is nothing

new in the immigration of people of diverse cultures, there has been a dearth of national museums on the subject. There are several local museums that tell part of the story, such as Rochester's Huguenot Museum, and Liverpool has plans for a national museum of migration. London's contribution has been the small but inventive Museum of Immigration and Diversity – best known by its address, 19 Princelet Street – established in 1983 in the heart of London's historic district of Spitalfields and, more recently, the Migration Museum Project (MMP) that organises 'floating' exhibitions on the subject that move from city to city, traceable on a sophisticated website.

A prominent supporter of the latter Project, Eithne Nightingale, describes in a blog her whistle-stop tour of migration museums established all over the world,

each addressing problems unique to the host country, with all sorts of time lines. Australia has several immigration museums – in Sydney (taking immigration back to the arrival of native Australians c. 50,000 years ago), in Adelaide (in a former destitute asylum) and in Melbourne. The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in Wellington has two exhibitions – *Passports* and *The Mixing Room: Stories from young refugees in New Zealand* – which represent major attempts to capture the implications of migration. In the United States there is an Immigration Museum on Ellis Island, entry point for so many 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century migrants ('The Immigrant Experience Come Alive') that is, significantly, just across the water from the Statue of Liberty. In Europe – Belgium, Italy and Germany – there are museums of *emigration*. France has the Musée de l'histoire de l'immigration, first proposed in 1992 and opened to the public in 2007 (for political reasons, the museum only officially opened – by President Francois Hollande – in 2012).

*In Britain there is no Museum of British History which might be expected to accommodate the story of both emigration and immigration*

## *There is an urgent need in Britain as elsewhere in Europe for both the history of immigration and its contribution to be demonstrated*

It is housed, somewhat paradoxically and controversially, in the Palais de la Porte Dorée built in 1931 for an international colonial exhibition.

In Britain there is no Museum of British History which might be expected to accommodate the story of both emigration and immigration. Fortunately though there are currently two museum projects being developed to demonstrate the importance of immigration to Britain. The older of these is the aforementioned Museum of Immigration and Diversity at 19 Princelet Street. This may not be a registered national museum, but it is respected internationally for the way it tells a local, London and indeed global story. The house was built in 1719 as a family residence, first occupied by a wealthy French Huguenot silk merchant and refugee. The garden was later built over by Polish Jews as a synagogue, and, more recently, a group of refugees and scholars of Huguenot, Jewish and Bengali heritage established it as a museum and place of education and dialogue. As a museum of immigration it is often compared to New York's Tenement Museum, which highlights the conditions in which some immigrants lived. Both are members of the International Historic Sites of Conscience, places using historic spaces to encourage dialogue on contemporary issues such as identity, immigration and asylum. Given the fragility of the Grade II\* listed heritage building – £3-4 million is needed to open the entire site – the Trustees' chair, economist Susie Symes, aptly describes No.19 as 'a museum of ideas'; it opens occasionally to the general public and is visited by many North American and European universities and schools, as well as schoolchildren reflecting the ethnic diversity of London's population. And as I realised – exploring it with a group of ten-year olds from an international school, themselves of very diverse origins – the 'ideas' are most imaginative. 'Listen to the walls!' exhorts a notice on the walls and they did. A striking part of the exhibition space is the old synagogue, which was built over the original garden by the Poles in the 1890s. A little old-style television plays a video on immigration from Ireland made by children from a primary school in Cable Street, scene of a notorious confrontation between fascists

and anti-fascists in 1936. 'Suitcases and Sanctuary' is the all-too-appropriate title for a deceptively simple and touching display that invites visitors to imagine themselves as members of earlier waves of arrivals, from the Huguenots through more recent arrivals from Bangladesh or Bosnia, reflecting the ongoing and multiple stories of migration to Spitalfields and London.

A rather different concept is the Migration Museum Project (MMP) being developed by Barbara Roche, herself an 'East Ender', former MP for Hornsey and Wood Green and ex-Minister for Asylum and Immigration. To some extent this has been inspired by Robert Winder's excellent history of immigration into Britain, *Bloody Foreigners* (first published in 2004, reissued 2013). Winder (a trustee of MMP) has pointed out how the movement of Britons out of Britain has often obscured the long history of movement of people into this country and suggested in a footnote how this might be remedied by the establishment of a national museum on the subject. To rectify this the MMP envisages a series of exhibitions that move from place to place, sometimes taking advantage of local festivals (such as London's South Bank events), and developing particular themes in different ways depending on the locality.

On the South Bank, as part of the 'Changing Britain' festival, the MMP had a temporary exhibition of 'Keepsakes', a display of individual personal items that keep memories of migration and identity alive. The exhibition has already been displayed in Whitechapel, Southwark and elsewhere in the country. A travelling exhibition of '100 Photographs' was also included in the South Bank occasion and has been travelling around the country. Another has focussed on the history of German immigration to the UK, from doctors and musicians to clockmakers and sailors; this moved from Manchester to Cambridge and on to Edinburgh. As the MMP newsletter says, 'People want to engage [with the subject] in subtle and complicated ways': the MMP certainly seems to be developing this with their travelling shows – migrating exhibitions on the topic of migration.

Clearly, as this issue of *The Middle East in London* and these museums demonstrate, there is an urgent need in Britain as elsewhere in Europe for both the history of immigration and its contribution to British culture and way of life to be demonstrated as widely and swiftly as possible.

*Sarah Searight is a member of the Editorial Board*

**A suitcase of silk threads evokes how the fabric of London is woven from the entwined lives of many strangers who have settled here over centuries, from the Ogiers to today's new arrivals.**  
Photograph by Joel Pike/19 Princelet Street



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