

Film depicts Sukkot traditions, buildings



Director of the Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life Yael Zerubavel, left, discusses questions from the audience with Joshua Foer, middle, founder of ‘Sukkah City’ and Jason Hutt, right, director of the showcased film.

Posted: Monday, October 28, 2013 12:00 am

By Erin Petenko / The Daily Targum

Corrugated cardboard signs held by the homeless do not typically form the structure of buildings.

But in New York City’s Union Square, 2010’s “Sukkah City,” and its accompanying documentary featured such a design and others from the minds of architects recreating the traditions of the Jewish holiday Sukkot.

The Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life hosted the “Rutgers Jewish Film Festival,” now in its 14th year, at the Regal Cinemas in North Brunswick.

The Center showcased the film “Sukkah City” yesterday and invited Jason Hutt, the director, and Joshua Foer, the founder of the event, to speak with the audience and answer questions.

Foer, bestselling author of “Moonwalking with Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything,” said in the film he had become fascinated with the ancient Jewish tradition of building temporary housing during the September holiday of Sukkot.

The small structures, often little more than wood and cloth, are meant to symbolize the temporary homes Jewish people built during their 40-year journey to Israel.

Hutt said if Sukkot had been placed at any other time, it would be much more popular.

“We’re always taught about Sukkot when the synagogue puts up one giant Sukkah with dusty, plastic fruit,” he said.

Foer conceived an event where architects, Jewish and non-Jewish, would design a modern interpretation of the simply constructed traditional design, he said.

“We wanted to not compromise on religious traditions while also creating a contemporary interpretation of the holiday,” Foer said.

The team, which included Foer and producers of the event, received 600 entries from 40 countries, which he attributed to an excellent selection of jury members.

In the film, the jury narrowed down the entrants to 12 finalists, who were each given a grant and just a few days to bring their designs to life.

The finalists in the film ranged from an arrangement of wire to a structure with three fiberglass walls and a log balanced on top.

Ronald Rael, one of the designers of the “Sukkah of the Signs,” said he and his colleagues purchased cardboard signs from the homeless they found in cities from Los Angeles to Denver.

He said in the film the “Sukkah of the Signs” contributed to the homeless directly by giving them money, but indirectly by bringing attention to the issue of homelessness.

“A lot of the people we paid for the signs told us, ‘I’m going to go eat with this money,’” he said.

Some of the designs were fraught with challenges, including one titled “P.YGROS.C.” The design collapsed the night before installation.

Marc Fornes, another designer, said he knew the material of the Sukkah structure was delicate before it failed.

“In a project like this, there’s a risk you have to take,” he said.

More than 200,000 people went to view the structures during the two-day display period, Foer said.

Foer said he was satisfied with New York’s accommodation of the project.

“We came up with this idea in Sukkot 2009, and had it happen by Sukkot 2010,” he said.

But the city also imposed certain restrictions on the organizers. Foer said Union Square rules forced someone to be with the Sukkahs for 24 hours every day.

“I had to perform the mitzvah of sleeping in the ‘Sukkah of Signs’ overnight,” he said. “When I woke up I saw 12 Arab men kneeling and after a moment I realized they were there for prayer.”

Hutt said he spent time filming inside the Sukkahs during their creation to emphasize the experience of sleeping and eating inside the structures.

“Once they were up, [the city] wouldn’t let us inside the structures, and that’s the most common criticism of the film,” he said.

Judy Roller, an audience member, said she grew up in Eastern Europe, where Sukkot was a highly celebrated holiday. No one in her town had ever built a Sukkah, because they simply did not have enough money to do so.

“I visited my grandfather one year, and he had as plain a Sukkah as there could possibly be,” she said. “In the Sukkah there was a list, and apparently it was of everyone that had come and eaten in the building.”

She said the list showed the dedication of people in her country where they could not just go to Home Depot to buy the materials.

“It says a lot about being in a modern, wealthy country versus people who have the will to show their faith,” she said