At first it seems like an anomaly. You walk up to the campus entrance from the enormous parking lot that defines Queensborough Community College as a commuting institution, and the first structure that greets you, just before the administration building, is the new Harriet and Kenneth Kupferberg Holocaust Research Center and Archives. The $5.5 million building, which was dedicated in a public ceremony this week, is clad in glass, steel and the distinctive sand-colored limestone quarried near Jerusalem. And inside its new permanent exhibition space is bathed in daylight from the windows and translucent walls, creating a deliberate contrast to the dark subject of mass murder.

The effect is unexpected. It causes you to pay attention, this anomalous light, even if the glare dims the ghosts of photographs projected on the walls, and even if it makes the videos of Queens Holocaust survivors appear less vivid in image if not in personal detail. The light almost allows you to miss the room’s somber allusion: the way the rectangular geometry of a glass wall suddenly
gives way to skewed lines and irregular shapes, invoking the shattered windows of Kristallnacht, the night in 1938 when Jewish shops and synagogues were smashed and burned all over Germany and Austria.

It seems that Charles Thanhauser of Tek Architects, who designed the building, means this natural light to cast an inverse shadow over the narrative. The light shows where this exhibition is meant to lead, and why the center itself has been given pride of place at the gateway to the college, in Bayside. But understanding this requires some exploration of the center’s ambitions.

Though I have some qualifications, its modest 2,000-square-foot permanent exhibition gives an impressive capsule history of the fate of Jews during the Nazi period, recounting events without distortion, sentimentality and (for the most part) homily. The gallery serves as a prelude to the rest of the center, which includes two smaller changing exhibitions: currently, one is about other genocides of the last century; the other displays artworks by Samuel Bak. There is also a 5,000-book circulating library and archives storing videos, photographs, artifacts and other materials.

The center has been at Queensborough for about 24 years, growing out of a class about the Holocaust taught by William Shulman, who was the history department’s chairman. But until now the center had been housed in the basement of the college’s library and displayed its exhibitions at the Student Union Building. Under the direction of Arthur Flug for the last four years, the center has presented public lectures, along with shows on subjects like American cartoonists’ treatment of Nazi Germany, or the Christian clergy members who saved Jews; each exhibition’s materials are preserved in shipping trunks for loan to colleges and other Holocaust centers.

This new structure heightens the center’s visibility. It was built under the guidance of the college’s president, Eduardo J. Martí, and received financial support from the city and New York State, along with private donations,
including a $1 million gift from Harriet Kupferberg, a longtime supporter of the college. The center is halfway toward raising a $5 million endowment.

The curators of the new main exhibition are Mr. Flug and the center’s assistant director, Ayala Tamir. KPC Design conceived the displays, dividing the Nazi era into five chronological sections, each portrayed on a four-sided, freestanding column. You walk around them, assisted by a timeline that also becomes a multimedia screen. Each column displays photographs and facts, quotations from some of the survivors we meet in the videos, and artifacts, ranging from a Jewish teenager’s prewar diary to a Hitler Youth dagger.

“Full and Rich Lives; 1919” one is labeled, giving a portrait of Jewish life before the Nazi era; “Ghettos Formed; 1938; Kristallnacht” reads another, on which we read about the “forced isolation and control” of the ghettos. “Extermination; 1943; Germany Declares Itself ‘Judenrein’ ” reminds us that 18,000 people were killed in just one day in 1943 in the camp at Majdanek, Poland.

The survivors in the videos may provide some of the most indelible images. Steve Berger, who was forced by the Nazis into work as a machinist, recalls being taken to replace his broken glasses. He had to choose from thousands piled in one room; they had been shipped from Auschwitz. Rabbi Fabian Schonfeld remembers a rare train conductor in the midst of the relocations of the Jews, who fished Mr. Schonfeld’s phylacteries out of the trash where an SS officer had tossed them and returned them to the young man.

Unfortunately, we are not given enough biographical material about these people to understand who they are or how their excerpted stories fit together. And while their accounts are powerful, it is frustrating that we are missing other specifics and have to guess so much, particularly because it is in the details that the full scale of the Holocaust can be felt.

But these survivors provide one reason for the center’s refusal to shroud itself in darkness. The exhibition opens with a slide show of European Jews before the Holocaust engaged in the most mundane activities: going on a picnic, shopping in a street, gathering for celebrations. All that was destroyed, but another set of photographs appears at the exhibition’s end labeled “Life After
the Holocaust,” showing similar normality in the lives of survivors. This is an
account of restoration, of emergence into light.

This is a little too glibly bright of course, and, unfortunately, to a certain
extent, that is also true of the center’s larger vision, which is not that different
from those of other institutions and educational treatments of the Holocaust,
even at the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam. In his dedication speech Mr.
Martí said that the building was “not a museum.”

“It is not a memorial,” he continued. “It is a laboratory.” It provides the tools
to help the 15,000 students at the college learn the “lessons of the Holocaust.”

Those lessons teach tolerance, the importance of combating prejudice, the
need to speak out when any group is mistreated. In videos here, students who
served as interns and interviewed survivors describe how those talks have
made them more enlightened, more aware of prejudice and hatred. One of the
other exhibitions at the center shows just how difficult these lessons are,
describing other genocides of the past century: in Armenia, Ukraine, China,
Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, Darfur.

The broad lesson of tolerance also provides one impetus behind the growth of
Holocaust centers; it is partly why this one was placed at the forefront of the
Queensborough campus, where students represent more than 140
nationalities. Mr. Flug explained in an interview how the center also helped
develop a “hate crimes” curriculum now being introduced into New York City
schools.

But this approach is worth examining. Similar lessons, after all, can be drawn
from many kinds of injustice; here they seem inadequate to the scope of the
evil. They also strip away the Holocaust’s particularity and may even
encourage the proliferation of Nazi analogies. It isn’t only the Holocaust that
becomes diffuse this way; a museum about black slavery I have seen ends with
broad homilies about justice and prejudice.

Why, though, is it necessary to generalize so sweepingly? Does an art
exhibition have to justify its attention to a painter with lessons about beauty?
Isn’t there something in the particular that should be attended to because it is
not general? Does it make sense to say that lack of tolerance is a major cause of the Holocaust? While tolerance might help prevent mass killing, intolerance does not necessarily lead to it.

Bland humanitarian lessons also make the scale of the events seem manageable, as if it were possible to eliminate hatred and prejudice with appropriate teaching. The idea of a “hate crime” fits with this view. It asserts that hatred itself is criminal and deserving of punishment, that it is something that can be eradicated as society takes on work once left for religion.

But the concept is misguided. Hatred does not make murder or assault worse; it only provides a motive. Hatred itself is not criminal. It is acting on the basis of hatred that is criminal. In other contexts, society punishes the act rather than the thought, attacking discrimination in deed, not prejudice in belief. That is how it should be here as well. Anti-Semitism helped cause the Holocaust, but it is in the workings of law and deed, in turning belief into practice, that the Holocaust turned exceptional.

Queensborough’s new center shouldn’t bear the burden of this criticism, since it doesn’t slight the Holocaust or its particularity. But as that history recedes and lessons become broadened and amplified, the risk is worth keeping in mind.

*The Harriet and Kenneth Kupferberg Holocaust Research Center and Archives is at the Queensborough Community College, 222-05 56th Avenue, Bayside, Queens; (718) 281-5770.*