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Daniel Libeskind
Jewish Museum
Berlin, 1989 - 1999

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In Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin, a particularly noteworthy phenomenon can be observed that has grown more prevalent in the last few decades: the form, above all, determines the museum more so than its contents. So it's not particularly surprising that the building - as an embodiment of the memories of the Jewish history of Berlin - was already open in 1999, well before becoming an actual museum in the year 2000 with its own concept for a collection and an exhibition.

The form is built up on an extraordinarily complex matrix of meanings that is connected in manifold ways with the Jewish tradition of Berlin. In bestowing the first prize upon Daniel Libeskind in 1989, the competition jury's review had already honored the project's conceptual idea how it makes the invisible visible, and connects Berlin's history with Jewish history. This connection was translated into spatial sequences and movements, while the form of the building reflects an "analogue expression of the inner conception" in a design exemplary in its innovative quality.¹ At the onset of the project there were, however, quite different parameters for its contents. The project was titled *The Expansion of the Berlin Museum with the Jewish Museum Department* and was thought of as an integrative model. A Jewish Museum was to be tied into the existing city-historical museum in the original Kollegienhaus, which was to be preserved in its original substance. Parallel to the history of the city, the history of Jewish Berlin and the Jewish religion as of 1871 were to be presented. After much debate, the decision was reached in 1998 that the new edifice would be used solely as a Jewish Museum. But back to the beginning: the radicalness of Libeskind's competition design, with its increasingly eastward-pitched walls, exceeded the expectations of the competition brief. With regard to its contents and its architecture, no other design linked the history of Berlin with its Jewish history so clearly. And in its concept, no one else succeeded in integrating the "visible" of Jewish culture with the "invisible," the absence of fellow Jewish citizens and the extermination, during the time of National Socialism, of a world so meaningful to Berlin.

Libeskind named this concept *Between the Lines*, meaning not just between the visual lines, but between the written lines as well. The ground plan of the museum is based upon a dialogue between two double lines. One line, which can be seen as the backbone of the building, is straight though fragmented in many pieces; the other line runs in a repeated zigzag form across the first straight line, like a streak of lightning. The building's multiple angular form arises out of this line. The intersection with the straight line generates a total of five empty spaces, so-called voids, which run through the museum in an irregular sequence. According to Libeskind, "the non-visible manifests itself as emptiness, as the invisible." Simultaneously he connects his project with its urban context and with the history of Berlin.

The museum lies in Kreuzberg, more precisely in South Friedrichstadt, a part of the city expansion of 1732-38 that was heavily destroyed during the Second World War. During postwar reconstruction, the few extant historical traces were almost fully eliminated by housing projects (some very large-scale) while old traffic routes were changed. One of the few remaining historical buildings in this area, the Kollegienhaus, built by Philipp Gerlach in 1734-35, accommodated the Berlin Museum after its restoration in the years from 1963 until 1969. At the same time, the neighboring parcel was reserved for future expansion. The edifice was isolated within an urban context of building gaps left by the war, while confronted with large housing projects nearby. From 1979 until 1988 the International Building Exhibition (IBA) took on this area for a "critical reconstruction" of the historic structures with the aid of contemporary architecture. Hence, in the competition a stronger connection of the Kollegienhaus with its urban surrounding was required, as well as a balance between the block structure to the north and the solitary buildings to the south. At the same time, as much of the greenery on the parcel was to be retained as possible. Libeskind's design reacted to this heterogeneous context with an autonomous and radical architectonic statement on the one hand while connecting the building on the other hand with its urban context through its manifold contextualization.

The architect supplemented this urban context by means of a second layer, the context of Berlin's intellectual history, and developed an "invisible matrix or a prehistory of connections." He used the earlier addresses of personalities in science and art, such as Heinrich von Kleist, Heinrich Heine, and Rahel Levin Varnhagen; or personalities of the twentieth century, such as Arnold Schönberg, Paul Celan, and Walter Benjamin. Libeskind viewed them as "connecting links between Jewish tradition and German culture." Based upon these connections, he designed an "irrational matrix in the form of a system of right-angled triangles, which would allow a recognizable similarity with the emblem of the compromised and distorted star," the Star of David. This was not only a symbol of Jewish identity but also a symbol of separation during the period of National Socialism. A further intellectual basis for the design of the Jewish museum was Arnold Schönberg's uncompleted opera *Moses und Aron* from 1930-32. Here, the relationship between image and word, between the visible and the invisible - which only takes on form in the imagination - plays an important role. In the museum the invisible manifests itself in the voids. In addition, he uses a register of Jews from Berlin who were deported from the city during the Holocaust as a basis, as well as Walter Benjamin's *Einbahnstraße*, which appeared in 1928. Under the heading of the street, the book was a collection of philosophical texts ordered in image like fragments,² which - as part of a revolutionary history of philosophy - views the unfolding of history not as a continuous development, but as something within the context of a dialectical dynamic. This intellectual context is more or less explicitly represented in the museum.

The competition design for the Jewish Museum, which had a gross floor area of 15,500 square meters and a net area of 12,500 square meters (of which 9,500 square meters are planned to be exhibition area), had to be reworked to meet the budget of 120 million German marks set by the Berlin Senate. Here, the slanted walls as well as three of the four planned exterior towers that were to mirror the interior voids in the outdoor space fell victim to the budget. The floor plan of the lower level and the transition between the existing building and the new building were simplified. The existing building received a void that completes the underground transition to the new building.

Above ground, the new edifice - four stories in height and multi-angular - comes close to the existing building at three places. Inside, two courtyards are formed, one of which is dedicated to the Jewish poet Paul Celan. The floor relief refers to a graphic work from Gisèle Lestrangé-Celan, Paul Celan's widow. The narrow side of the new building jumps out slightly toward the Lindenstraße, somewhat shielding the existing building from the high-rise structures on the Mehringplatz as well

as from the multilane road. Of particular note in the outdoor facilities are the E.T.A. Hoffmann Garden, also known as the Garden of Exile and Emigration, and the free-standing concrete structure called the Holocaust Tower.

The façade of the Jewish Museum is clad with zinc. Libeskind substantiates this choice of materials with references to Berlin, especially to Schinkel. With time the façade will not reflect the light so strongly, taking on a dull gray patina instead. This will cause a more reserved effect for the Jewish Museum while perhaps rebalancing the relationship between the new building and the existing building. The zinc façade is incised with various openings and window bands that seem to cross each other arbitrarily. They follow neither vertical divisions nor floor divisions, allowing the façade to become an independent of the inner structure of the building. The increased number of openings in the upper area of the building reflects the location of offices, workshops, and the library on the third floor - all rooms that require more daylight than the exhibition floors.

As already mentioned, access to the Jewish Museum is through the main entrance of the existing building, where the common foyer and other facilities for both museums, such as the bookstore and café, are to be found. A void has been placed to the right of the entrance by means of a stair that leads to the lower level. On this exhibition level, the original concept foresaw housing the history of the Jewish community of Berlin and the presentation of its religion. While the form of this level partially follows the outline of the new building, it also takes on its own form in connection with additional space beyond the building's floor plan. Besides the exhibition spaces, a large part of the area is reserved for storage and technical facilities. Shortly after the stair ends, the path forks into two corridors that are soon crossed by a third one, while skylights strengthen the circulation effect. The right axis - defined as the axis of exile - leads to the Garden of Exile and Emigration, while the corridor climbs slowly upward until it reaches the main stair to the upper floors. As the axis of the Holocaust, the cross-axis leads to the Holocaust Tower, reflecting the first inner void, just as the second void at the entrance of the Berlin Museum is referenced once again.

While certainly one of the museum's most impressive elements, the Holocaust Tower is a memorial in a museum that itself is almost a memorial. The high, unheated tower in exposed concrete, which has only a vertical light slit on one side, possesses something sacred and extraordinarily dramatic. On the one hand total silence prevails, while on the other hand the sounds from the exterior are heightened. The visitor to the concrete sculpture is exposed to these impressions while being forced to reflect upon them. The other axis leads to the Garden of Exile and Emigration. It is composed of 49 columns that lean at a 12-degree angle and a rest closely together within a square. They are enclosed within a concrete wall that is lower in height toward the street. The columns contain earth and are planted with bushes that remind one of olive trees. Associations of the olive branch, of hope and peace are awakened, while the garden becomes a symbol of the tabernacle and a sign for the trek of Israel's people through the desert and the disquietude of a homeless existence. Parallels to the design from Peter Eisenman and (originally) Richard Serra, too, for the central memorial of the Federal Republic of Germany are undeniable. Traversing the Garden of Exile and Emigration gives rise to a strong physical as well as psychical experience, for one has the impression of having lost the ground under one's feet within the field of leaning columns.

At the end of the primary axis in the lower level is the main stair that leads to the uppermost of the three exhibition levels in the new building. The stair, which is bisected by various sloping concrete cross-braces, rises up spaciouly while simultaneously remaining narrow. Its impressive natural lighting is attained by means of a long horizontal window band and openings in the ceiling. Natural light entering through these openings, which is strengthened by spotlights, forms vertical stripes on the walls that lend the space a rhythm.

The unusual floor plan of the museum creates impressive but confusing room sequences with

unconventional exhibition spaces of varying quality-spaces that may prove difficult to animate. The spaces are done in white plaster, to the regret of many who have seen the interior of the building in exposed concrete, since so much of the radicalness of the architectonic statement is revoked. Here especially, the accumulation of particularly significant elements is noticeable. One example is the cross-like cuts in the walls, which - besides the irregularly cut window bands that run mostly in the diagonal - act as markings in the landscape of meaning designed by Libeskind. This is similar to the way in which the openings for light and ventilation grilles, which run in all directions, contribute to an impression of overloadedness in their manifestation as symbols. The overloadedness leads to a situation where the distraction is lifted by virtue of a bulk of intrusive details, weakening the entire statement. This is true not just for the impressively manifested idea of the voids, which intersect every level of the museum and are lit from above. They are marked from the exterior by having been painted black. The bridges that lead across a part of the voids are black, too, while the interior here has been left in exposed concrete. One can set foot in the last of the five voids, the only interior empty space. Once again, it is possible to experience the emptiness here that resulted from the extermination of the Jews of Berlin and their culture during the time of National Socialism.

Not only are singular elements of the Jewish Museum sculptural, such as the voids or the Garden of Exile and Emigration; the entire edifice evokes a sculptural effect, which is particularly impressive when one walks about the building. But, despite its impressive and solitary appearance, Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum obviously did not arise without model references and influences. At the same time, the form raises questions as to its own meaning. First, the form of the Jewish Museum is based upon earlier works by Libeskind himself, such as the Line of Fire, which he installed in 1988 in the Centre d'Art Contemporain in Geneva. The project itself was a reaction to his own 1985 project *Drei Lektionen in Architektur [Three Lessons in Architecture]* in Palmanova, which was destroyed. For Libeskind the Line of Fire is an "architecture 'ON line': the furrow line cut by dragging a plowshare along the ground, and the line that defines the boundaries between things that one does not want to cross over."³ In this project as well, the fundamental line is defined by incisions. The term boundary refers to setting boundaries, and, if for no other reason, the association with fortifications is obvious. Elke Dorner has assembled a series of historical examples that show surprising similarities to the floor plan of the museum. They stretch from the fortification plan of Palmanova from the early eighteenth century and the fortifications by Vauban up to a drawing by Michelangelo of the Fortification of the Porta al Prato in Florence (?) from 1528. Furthermore, the architecture possesses references to buildings in Berlin such as the Nationalgalerie by Mies van der Rohe and the Trade-Union Building by Erich Mendelsohn. The stairway could well have been inspired by Konstantin Melnikov's 1925 Soviet Pavilion at the Exposition des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels in Paris. And with regard to the design methodology, a reference to the New York Five is appropriate, above all to Libeskind's teachers at the Cooper Union in New York, John Hejduk and Peter Eisenman. The overlaid grids, the references to topographic points and the building's lack of a center were undoubtedly quite influential,⁴ just as Libeskind's relationship to deconstructivism and his own intellectual concept, which has references to French structuralism and post-structuralism, such as that of Jacques Derrida. Kurt W. Forster has compared the form of the museum to various works by Paul Klee that deal with menace and destruction, such as the 1922 work *Betroffener Ort*. He made reference to the theme of lightning,⁵ to which the form of the Jewish Museum corresponds. The flash of lightning can be read as a metaphor of remembering while simultaneously marking a boundary in time. As with most of these metaphors, it appears ambivalent, while standing for destruction and oblivion. On the other hand, that which has passed and which has disappeared, manifested here in the voids, can be recalled once more through a flash of illumination. Hence, a connection of various times is made possible, which corresponds to one of the fundamental

intentions of this place of remembrance.

For this reason, voices were repeatedly heard claiming that the Jewish Museum, still empty yet full of meaning, would be suitable as a central Holocaust memorial. The construction of a long talked-about central place of remembrance would therefore no longer be necessary. In the meantime the decision has been made that both will be built and that there is a definite need for a place where Jewish history and culture can be presented and experienced parallel to remembering the Holocaust. This is particularly appropriate in Berlin, which, then as now, is home to the most significant Jewish community in Germany while simultaneously being the place where the National Socialists planned the Holocaust. In Jewish belief, remembering is of central importance. Remembering the history of the Jewish people is a living aspect of Jewish identity, a view of things that should also hold true for how Germany deals with its own so very tainted history. At the same time, the act of remembering manifests hope for a future without suppression, banishment, and annihilation. For this reason Libeskind views the Jewish Museum in Berlin - like his other museum designs for the Felix Nussbaum House in Osnabrück (built from 1996 to 1998, parallel to the Jewish Museum) or the expansion of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London - as an example of a new and innovative museum type for the future. For Libeskind, it is no longer an issue of the museum as a neutral container for a collection; rather, it is an issue of new experiences in the reception of art and history, "[an issue] of new programs for the museum of the 21st century, [and] of a new relationship between the museum and the general public."⁶

¹ Compare: *Museen, Kulturzentren, Bibliotheken, aw - architektur + wettbewerbe*, no. 143 (1990), pp. 54-57.

² Compare: Kristin Feireiss, ed., *Daniel Libeskind: Between the Lines*, from a lecture at the University of Hanover on December 5, 1989, in *Daniel Libeskind. Erweiterung des Berlin Museums mit Abteilung Jüdisches Museum*, exhibition catalog (Berlin, 1992).

³ Compare: Alois Martin Müller, ed., *Line of Fire. Daniel Libeskind. Radix-Matrix. Architekturen und Schriften*, exhibition catalog (Museum für Gestaltung Zürich, Zurich, Munich, New York, 1994).

⁴ Compare: Elke Dörner, *Zwischen Geometrie und Sprache. Zwei Gespräche mit Daniel Libeskind, Berlin, Juni, 1998. Daniel Libeskind Jüdisches Museum Berlin* (Berlin, 1999), pp. 23, 39-59.

⁵ Compare: Kurt W Forster, Monstrum Mirabile et Audax. *Daniel Libeskind. Erweiterung des Berlin Museums mit Abteilung Jüdisches Museum*. Kristin Feireiss, ed., exhibition catalog (Berlin, 1992), pp. 17-23. See also: Elke Dörner, *Daniel Libeskind, Jüdisches Museum Berlin* (Berlin, 1999). pp. 48-49.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.