



Daniel Libeskind

Daniel Libeskind, architect of the new Imperial War Museum in Manchester, talks about Berlin's Jewish Museum and the Spiral he has designed for the V&A.

The architect Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum is a building that confronts history head on. In amongst the unloved tower blocks and vacant lots of Berlin's Lindenstrasse, it stands like a great jagged metallic scar on the landscape. The day I visit, its zinc skin has turned the colour of the leaden March sky, deepening the building's already angry angularities. Even at three hundred yards, it is clear that this new arrival never intended to be a mannerly neighbour.

If the Museum does not sit politely in its surroundings, this can in part be ascribed to the fact that Libeskind's architectural vision is underpinned by a distrust of order. He is a child of Holocaust survivors, and his work speaks of heterogeneity and difference, precisely those elements which the Nazis tried to eliminate in their drive to create a terminally homogeneous society. For Libeskind, embracing the dissimilar is more than an idle matter of aesthetic preference.

Jason Oddy

A Spatial Art

It is, rather, an act of political necessity, and even a question of cultural survival.

Although, like others of his projects, the Jewish Museum espouses radical new forms, it remains a structure that is fundamentally inflected by the histories which are its theme. To access it you must first pass through an eighteenth-century baroque mansion that was once the home of a Jewish financier, before proceeding underground through the suppressed layers of the past to the entrance proper. Here a solemnly lit corridor, all tilting walls and sloping floors, greets you. Once inside this disorienting subterranean fissure you are faced with the choice of three journeys.

The first leads to the Holocaust Tower, an unheated concrete chamber lit by a solitary slit of daylight 40 feet above your head. Through this gap pass the sounds of a faraway Berlin that, like a distant memory, seems to be forever out of reach. Libeskind describes the Tower as the 'the end of the Museum, the end of all museums [since] the Holocaust represents the extermination of all values', and here, more than anywhere else, he succeeds in transforming architectural space into aesthetic encounter.

The second takes you to a confined, steeply inclined outdoor area containing a tightly packed grid of 49 concrete pillars each topped off with a willow oak tree. Evoking the desolation felt by those forced to flee Hitler's Europe, this, the

Garden of Exile, is a withering interpretation of the natural world. The third journey is upwards, along a vast sweep of a staircase, the Stair of Continuity. At the top is a series of asymmetric exhibition galleries each traversed by one or more Voids. Running through the entire museum, these bare black spaces serve as a reminder that no system of representation can ever adequately describe the object of its attentions – especially when that object is as unrepresentable as the Holocaust.

For the time being the building stands empty, and it is perhaps in this vacant state that you can best appreciate what a profound, emotional response to the tragic story of German Jewry Libeskind's creation is. By refusing to attempt to heal unhealable wounds through simply memorialising events, the Museum succeeds in its task of keeping the memory of what must not be forgotten alive. Such an architectural dramatisation of history leaves the meaning of the Holocaust open as a question that impacts not just on the past, but on the present and the future as well. Visiting it is a sobering and humbling experience.

Extraordinarily, until work began on the Jewish Museum, Daniel Libeskind was probably the most celebrated architect in the world never to have built a building. When he won the competition set by the German government over a decade ago, he was best known as a radical theorist whose ideas had acquired an international following.

But now that the concrete realisation of his theories on Lindenstrasse has ensured his place in the architectural firmament, he and his team of 30 assistants are being kept busy with a steady stream of commissions.

In Osnabrück, Germany, he recently finished a museum dedicated to the memory of Felix Nussbaum, the Jewish artist murdered by the Nazis. Nine time zones away the city of San Francisco has asked him to build it a Jewish Museum, while back in Europe the ribbon is due to be cut this summer on his bold design for Manchester's Imperial War Museum North, a striking aluminium structure made up of three shards of a shattered globe. With luck, work will soon be under way too on another still more prestigious project, The Spiral, the Victoria and Albert Museum's controversial extension that promises to do for South Kensington what Gehry's Guggenheim has done for Bilbao.

If such a schedule seems unmanageably global, then Libeskind has never been one to sit still. Born in Poland in 1946, he spent the most part of a peripatetic childhood in Israel and New York, where he won a music scholarship at the age of twelve. Later he went on to study mathematics and philosophy before finally plumping for architecture, an activity he considers to be the central cultural discipline.

Today he works out of offices in Charlottenburg, a fashionable district deep in the old West of Germany's new capital, and it is here on another lowering spring day that I go to meet him. Nina, his wife and business partner, greets me, before promptly setting off down a corridor full of white architectural maquettes to find her husband. 'No more than an hour', she makes me promise. A few minutes later Daniel Libeskind appears, clad in regulation architects' black and wearing a cherubic smile that quite belies his 54 years. In conversation he is engaging, unaffected and speaks with the restless energy of a polymath, the ideas tumbling out helter-skelter a little in the manner of one of his buildings. I begin by asking him why he moved to Berlin.

Daniel Libeskind For a very simple reason. We moved in order to try to realise the Jewish Museum. It was summer and we just stopped here to pick up the prize for the competition. I was here with my wife and our three kids, and as we were walking across the street Nina turned to me and said, 'What are you going to do now?' And of course it occurred to me that if we wanted to make this thing happen we could not go anywhere, we would have to stay. However we didn't know anybody, so we just moved into a hotel. All our belongings and all the kids' clothes were on the Panama Canal in a container going to LA. It was crazy, but it was the right thing to do. We never planned to move to Berlin, and when

I arrived I was the only foreign architect here.

Jason Oddy Was coming here therefore a political statement?

DL It was a huge political statement, they didn't know what to do with me. Of course there was no contract, there was no money, there was no will to build such a project. Little did I know all this. I only discovered later on that winning a competition and building a building are two different things. So coming here was quite a risk, all we had was an idea. People kept saying to me, 'It's silly moving to Berlin, because nothing's ever going to happen there.'

JO And this was just before the Wall came down?

DL That's right. We moved here on July 4th 1989, really at the point when things did begin to happen.

JO Is it difficult being Jewish in Germany today?

DL Well, it's not very easy being Jewish and moving to this city. I was almost disowned by my family. And I have to say that previously when I lived in Europe I never came to Germany. Nor, as I've already said, did I ever plan to move here. But I'm glad I did because one sees that times have changed and that one can't just generalise. You have to be involved and see what's happening. It's very interesting to live here, but it's not an easy city for me.

JO To what extent was your design for the

Jewish Museum motivated by your response to Berlin?

DL A great deal. I know Berlin better than most Berliners, since I had two uncles who lived here and I grew up in Lodz in Poland which is basically on the ring road of Berlin. When I was working on the Jewish Museum, I went to a pre-war telephone book and looked up the addresses of hundreds of anonymous people. I chose names like Berlin and Berliner because they were quintessentially Jewish names, adopted by Polish Jews who had immigrated here. I took these names and investigated who they were, where they had lived and what they had done. Of course they were just so-called 'normal' people, working in the textile industry or whatever, but I was interested in them, rather than in those emblematic Berliners such as Paul Celan, Mies van der Rohe or Rachel Van Hagen around whom there is this illusory aura of history, since the proletariat were the real reason why the city was so successful. I then drew lines connecting pairs of addresses, and used these lines as a basis for the Museum's design. It was a very moving exercise which gives you a topography of Berlin that is very different from the topography described in maps or in dead data or statistics. It is a configuration which disrupts the normal order, and which also casts a new light on the city. And you know the whole building turns around a broken star, the apocalyptic Star of



Jewish Museum, Berlin. Photo: Jason Oddy



David described in Walter Benjamin's text *One Way Street*.

JO I was interested to see that in *One Way Street* Benjamin states that 'Gifts should affect the receiver to the point of shock', particularly when you consider this remark in the light of Jacques Derrida's description of the Jewish Museum as a 'ghostly gift to the people of Berlin'. If the Museum is such a gift, was it your intention for it to shock?

DL No. My intention was not to shock. My intention was to design a museum that would show a fantastic story, a story which has incredible high points as well as low points. I wanted to express the cataclysm, the destruction, and also the future, which is still open-ended. I wanted to ask, 'What does it mean for a city to have done what it did, and what does it mean for its future, which is a very hopeful future, once it takes account of the significance of this event?' I didn't just design the building for today's Berliners, because it does have to deal with ghosts as well, with the ghosts of those Berliners who happened to be Jewish and who were exterminated or exiled, and who, even in their non-presence, are still eternally connected to this city. Often when I thought of exile, I didn't just think of the exile of Jews, I also thought of the exile of Berlin from itself, because Berlin is also elsewhere. Berlin exiled itself. So my intention was not to shock but to address the complex dimensions of this history.

JO In your opinion is architecture always a political act?

DL Absolutely. *Politaire*. That means the city. That means everybody. All the citizens are involved in it. Architecture is not for some small interest group. It is for everybody. This project was discussed for 25 years even before the competition was held. All the major politicians – Willi Brandt included – and of course survivors took part. Questions such as 'What should such a museum be?', 'What should it show?' and 'How should it be built?' were raised. Because all my projects are in the middle of cities, the public is always involved. And the way this building addressed the city, with its Void and all its fractured geometries, did not make everyone happy. There was even a move to have the Jewish Museum housed in an old baroque building, the home of an eighteenth-century Jewish financier. And I said, 'No, it's not about a nice old baroque building, it's about how the baroque was also disconnected from the events that happened subsequently'. That's why the entrance is underground.

JO You mentioned the Void, which is a central motif in the Museum. Can you explain its significance?

DL Well, it's the key to the building, because the whole Museum is organised around this disrupted straight line which moves through it but to which you can't really have access, except in an imagi-

native way. It is a space that is a physical cut through the building, which disconnects and reconnects the building. When you come across these tunnels or short bridges, they do not feel like classical museum spaces. *The Void* is a physical space which is part of the city, and it is also a reminder that however many objects you bring to the Museum, however many stories you tell in the Museum, essentially the only way to connect with Berlin is across the Void. It's like a cut through the visitor's experience. Because you may be looking at whatever, and suddenly there is a cut and the cut faces elsewhere. It's not a cut that starts with the Holocaust. It's a cut that goes through the building backwards into the Baroque and beyond. If you go back, you see the pogroms and the lack of acceptance of Jewish success, right from the start.

JO In *A Berlin Chronicle*, Walter Benjamin mentions places where you encounter the void, on the other side of which there is nothingness. Do you feel that in Berlin there are places where the void is present because of either something that happened in the past or something that could happen in the future?

DL Well, certainly I think that Berlin has this historical dimension which everyone responds to. As I said, it's something physical, not just intellectual. It's physically present. And it's even there where older, empty sites have been filled up by buildings. You can't hide it. Even if you put buildings back into these sites, as they have done in Potsdamerplatz, it doesn't mean that you will have foreclosed the void. You've simply opened it in a different way, unexpectedly, through all this rebuilding. What also fascinates me are those things that are anything but monumental. If you look down at the ground you'll see that Berlin's streets are divided into incredible articulations of stripes. From one wall of a building to the other side of the road, see how many changes of material there are. In a normal city there is a wall, then the sidewalk, then a gutter, a street, then another gutter, a sidewalk and another building. But here I've counted 30 different layers of effort from one side of the street to the other. It's very strange, and very interesting and symptomatic of the fact that the history of this place cannot really be layered in any logical kind of way.

JO You have also visited the Jewish cemetery in Berlin where many of the gravestones still remain blank.

DL Yes. It's very interesting, Weissensee Cemetery is one of the biggest cemeteries in Europe, and there's not an iota of Jewishness there. There's no Star of David and no Hebrew text, because they thought of themselves as Germans, which they were. It was Hitler who created the idea of a German Jew. They thought of themselves as Germans who happened to be Jewish – deeply. In any case, much of that cemetery was built for

Photomontage of V&A Spiral in situ.
Image:
Miller Hare.
Model:
Millennium Models.
Photo:
Peter Mackinven



future generations, therefore it is empty, full of marble slabs waiting to be inscribed with names – kind of like the Void. What is interesting is that there is no one to see the emptiness, because no one returns to the cemetery.

JO Now that you are about to build the Spiral at the Victoria and Albert Museum, how do you respond to London as opposed to Berlin?

DL Well, it's a very different city. I mean London has such an incredible history, and it is confronted by a very different set of issues. I was always very interested in the history of London, and in particular in the history of the V&A's buildings and what their architects set out to do. In their time they were very controversial and even technologically experimental. There's always this lag between history as an event and history as a retrospective, illusory formulae. It is a lag that I think is overcome more readily in the fine arts, in film-making and in theatre than it is in architecture, because architecture is a public art and has difficulty overcoming history. That's why there is always this inertia to it and why, even if people are always looking forward, it doesn't really respond to them. It takes 50 years to catch up with them, and by then they are already old. It's hard to change architecture and I've often wondered why. Why is it easy to change an economic theory? Nobody works on the same economic idea of the market as they did a hundred years ago. No one in the sciences believes in ether, or that they should know everything, because they can't know everything – there are structures of indeterminacy which are part of today's scientific world view. But what about architecture? Why is it still deluding itself? Why do the public expect such a limited discourse from it?

JO Personally, I'm pleased that the V&A is going to be reinvigorated because I find it a

difficult place to visit as it is so object-heavy. You have described the V&A as 'the interpretation of the museum as a mirror of the human mind'. To me it looks like the mirror of a very materialistic, nineteenth-century, Victorian mind.

DL Well, of course it has to change and the Spiral will make it change, because it's not just about a building, it's about the whole complex – how to enter it, and how to disrupt its outmoded sense of continuity. So I agree with you. I think that the Spiral will impact on the notion that the V&A is governed by some masterplan, and that it is a monolithic building. It will reveal that it consists of many different buildings which accrued in history. I think that the public wants to see something of the mission of the V&A, which, if you look at Henry Cole's writings, is meant to be a very avant-garde museum. Now the trustees realise that they have to compete in the marketplace and make these treasures available to the public in a new way. They can't expect people to come to the museum just because it is there. They have to modernise and make themselves relevant.

JO It struck me that the Spiral embodies a deliberate movement away from materialism. It seems to be the manifestation of a spiritual ascension, or even of a resolution of material values.

DL The movement in the Spiral is deliberate, but it is not an ascension towards a central point. It is not an old-fashioned spiral that moves you towards one focal point, since it also radically opens itself to the galleries around it, which, along with the V&A's inside and outside walls, you will see in a totally new way. To see material reality for what it is, you have to be in a space that is very different from the collection of materials and objects that you are looking at. The Spiral is a new form based on an organic logic that will have an unprecedented spatiality.



Top left and above: Jewish Museum, Berlin. Photos: Jason Oddy

JO How do you think such a forward-looking structure will work in London, which, with a few notable recent exceptions, has a reputation for being backward-looking as far as architecture is concerned?

DL It does, but it's not true. Because change is sudden, not incremental. It's like a kaleidoscope – you shake it and suddenly everything is different. I think that London is a very powerful spiritual centre. It always has been and will continue to be. I was never sceptical like many of the architects who took part in this competition. I had the advantage of not really worrying about it. You do something that you think is right. Sometimes not knowing too much about the local politics is a good thing, because otherwise you begin to be totally prejudiced, you begin to think about things in the wrong way.

JO Does that make the buildings you design less 'architectural' and more specifically like works of art?

DL I think architecture is a work of art. Mostly I have to apologise for it because people think it's just a technical piece of work. You know, get the staircase in the right position, put in the win-

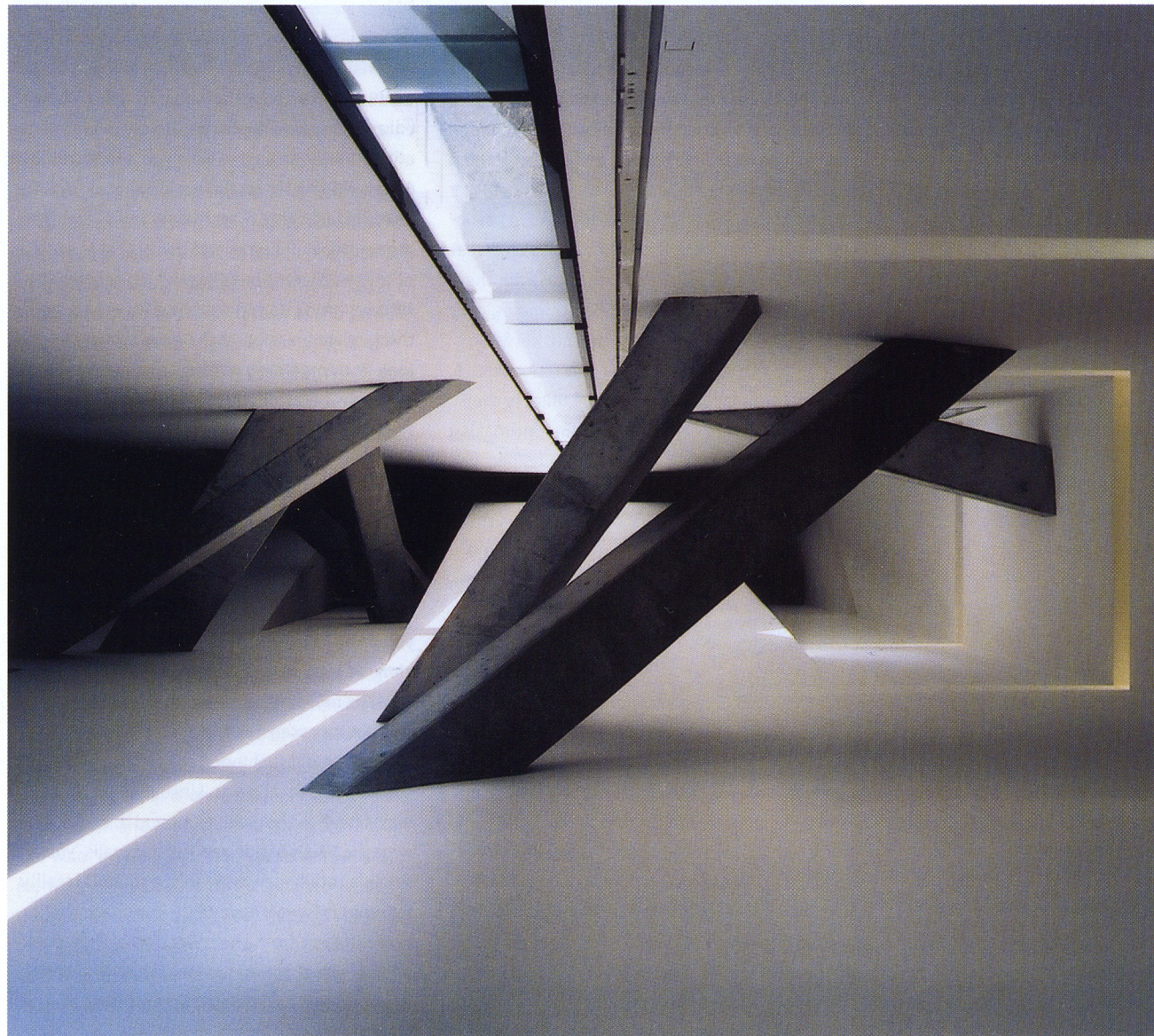


Jewish Museum, Berlin. © Hélène Binet, from 'Cornerstone', 17 April – 1 June, Shine Gallery, London

dows, put in the plumbing. It was Duchamp who said, 'Architecture is sculpture with plumbing'. It's a funny Duchampian idea, that all architecture, even if it is banal, is sculpture. But I think architecture is absolutely a spatial art. And traditionally architects have seen it that way. They didn't just see it as a technical matter.

JO When I went to the Jewish Museum, I had the impression of walking into a building that had been conceived as a sculpture.

DL Classically 'sculpture' was used as a pejorative term in architecture. The criticism levelled against one of Michelangelo's architectural works, the dome at St Peter's, was that it was a sculpture. It was a way other architects – who didn't have his ability – derided and dismissed his work. So it has been used as a critical term, but I think that things are changing. New media, and new technology in particular, mean that people no longer see themselves as being locked into a Cartesian grid. The Cartesian attempt to encourage a more abstract type of communication was essentially a negative development, since part of this idea was that the body was disconnected from the mind, and that people are simply minds that think



Jewish Museum, Berlin. Photo: Jason Oddy



clearly with automatons for bodies. It's a horrible kind of thinking which dates from 300 years ago. Why do we need it today? We don't see the separation between the mind and the body. We see the disasters that this kind of thinking has wrought on architecture and urban space, and also on history in general. The whole history of alienation is founded in the separation of the mind and the body, and in the separation of space from human encounter. For Descartes the human sciences didn't exist because they couldn't be quantified. The only thing that was real was that which could be made co-ordinate, into a point, something that was completely clear and distinct in itself. But being human is not just about clarity and distinctness, it's about emotions, it's about the psyche, it's about walking, it's about having a body.

JO Which I suppose accounts for the place of music in your work?

DL Yes. I studied music, so it's part of my background. But from Pythagorean times onwards, proportions and music have been considered the echoes of space. They're connected because both of them are related to mathematics and both of them are related to vibration and possess a cosmic element. This is why the idea of harmony also exists in an architectural sense, although it is a musical idea.

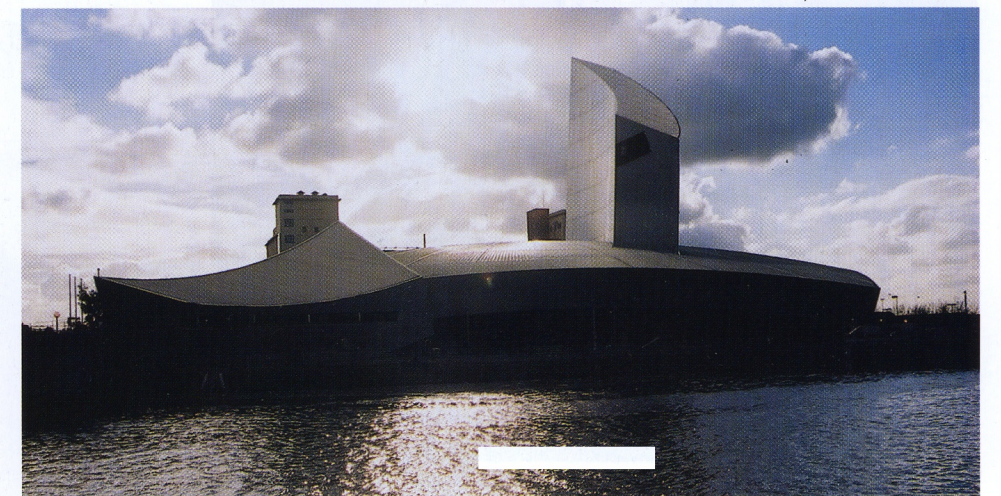
JO So music in your work is linked to the remembrance of the body?

DL It is, and of course all architecture has a sound. You walk across a street and you have a sound experience. I remember testing the Jewish Museum for its resonance. If you walk through it, you follow the sound and the sound is disrupted, fractured and distanced from itself. It becomes dissonant at some point and comes back again across space.

JO One critic said of the Jewish Museum that it is the first poetic response to the Holocaust, a comment which made me think of Adorno's famous remark, 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'.

DL Well you can see that I disagree with Adorno. I don't think it's true. I think Adorno is wrong in his assertion that certain experiences should not be incorporated into human understanding. I didn't set out to poeticise the Holocaust. But I think one has to give a view of events to people. After all that's what any form of art really is, a form of communication of some sort. So I don't think the answer is silence, it's not just to do nothing. This is also a point on which I never agreed with Wittgenstein who said that when there's nothing to be said one must be silent. I always thought it was the other way round – when there's nothing to be said you have to try to say something, because that's the boundary, that's the edge of communication.

The Imperial War Museum North will open 5 July 2002.



Top and above: Imperial War Museum North, Manchester. Photos: Jason Oddy