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Altering the Meaning of Remembrance: The Influence of Resurgent Nazi Perpetrators on the Jewish Museum Berlin

Zamara Tomko

The destruction left behind by World War II in Germany created disarray in daily life as people began to process the new world ahead of them, along with the old world destroyed by chaos and betrayal. As people began to discern the concept of the “Nazi perpetrator” in the wake of the fallen Reich, questions emerged about not only who these perpetrators were, but also how art influenced the reception of the Nazi perpetrator by the general public (Jaskot 8). A Nazi perpetrator can be defined as a person who knowingly played a role in the formulation or implementation of anti-Jewish measures (Jaskot 3). The answers to who the Nazi perpetrators were in the aftermath of the war changed as the decades passed and Germany evolved as a nation. The objective and ideological differences in identifying who was an active member of the Nazi party and the constantly changing definitions of the term were used to the advantage of former members to escape persecution and to maintain political power in the new government (Adaire 44). What cannot be denied, however, was that the policies of the Third Reich and the ideological goals of key Nazi members continued to resonate in reunified Germany. This led to the long-term influence of the Nazis on German art and architecture in the twentieth century, an understudied relationship (Jaskot 3). In this paper, in the form of a visual exhibit, I will consider the following question using art and architectural historian Paul Jaskot’s 2012 *The Nazi Perpetrator: Postwar German Art and the Politics of the Right* as a key source: How does this changing idea of the Nazi perpetrator affect German art as it is being created, and how does the influence from the political far right affect how people artistically memorialized the victims of precisely those fascist ideas? Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum in the Berlin Municipal Museum is a concrete example of how political debates surrounding the *resurgent* (partaking in anti-Jewish measures after reunification) Nazi perpetrator influenced cultural and artistic decisions in reunified Berlin, and I will focus on the history and design of this structure, following Jaskot’s lead (Jaskot 128).

Remarkably not often discussed, the debates about reunification and the rise of racist attacks by the resurgent “Nazi perpetrator” affected the artistic outcome of the Jewish Museum (Jaskot 129). Before reunification, the museum was the apotheosis of Cold War politics and meant to be integrated into its surrounding urban and architectural environment using the International Building Exhibition (IBA) Integrative Model, as I will explain. In this context, Cold War politics was about conflicting dualities; more specifically, it was about the conflicting duality of West and East Germany and how to move forward after the war. There were propaganda wars between the East and the West, as both continually tried to prove themselves better (Leffler 398). It was a contest of cultures; two different world views, two ways to organize cultural life, and two possibilities of defining modernity fought— not physically—but rather politically and culturally (Rook-Koepsel 16). However, most significantly, this war was about how to preserve cultural tradition in the face of extensive social change, which significantly impacted the role of the IBA (Jaskot 133). The IBA’s goals were to preserve cultural tradition in the face of social change, stimulate economic growth, provide housing, restore usable turn-of-the-century buildings, and represent Berlin and Berlin Jewish history distinctly and integrally simultaneously. The last goal,

in particular, would have an obvious impact on the architecture of the Jewish Museum (Jaskot 132).

However, after reunification the building became tied to larger ideological and policy goals of the state; people thought the museum's existence and design was an antidote to any resurgence of violent Nazi perpetrators (Young 4). This evolution of meaning and design of the Jewish Museum was not an accident; its altered interpretation was ultimately due to the rise of right-wing violence towards German Jews at this time (Jaskot 152). The design of the building was always intentionally ambiguous, and the benefits and drawbacks of that fact meant that members of the public took away different interpretations of the design. Allowing members of the public to take away different meanings from its design than intended allowed for the creation of needless criticism. However, in post-war German memorials, ambiguity is often an essential trait that represents the complex relationship with past events of Germany's history (Rook-Koepsel 8). Now, it is important to remember that Libeskind's design was chosen before reunification. Its design contained everything that the IBA wanted for this project, and Libeskind executed it well. It integrated nicely with the existing wing of the museum designed by Philipp Gerlach, but at the same time, it was not a copy of the architecture of the past; therefore, it distinguished itself from any East Berlin attempts to memorialize the Jewish community (Jaskot 145). The conditions of honoring past architecture but competing with the East under Cold War terms were satisfied.

After the Berlin Wall fell, previous plans that took into account the Cold War and economic conditions of West Berlin changed drastically for the Jewish Museum. Economic difficulties and debates surrounding public building policy were the focus of politicians (Rook-Koepsel 26). Real estate changed significantly, and there was a broad shift towards privatized business over public, as this was more profitable at this time (Adaire 49). Public funding was severely limited, and the Jewish Museum became the only publicly funded building project in Germany; this, in turn, increased its symbolic value (Jaskot 148). This isolation made it a target for ideological debates on the economic importance of cultural and political construction, increased debates about its many interpretations, and brought into question which ethnicities could be alienated from German society and made into the other (Jaskot 151). These two aspects pushed the museum away from its original purpose as well as connected it to the political debates about the "Nazi perpetrator" (Jaskot 145). Due to these factors, the city of Berlin felt the need to alter the building's goals from the conditions of the IBA and the Cold War (Jaskot 145).

The political power gained by the right-wing parties also fueled all these different debates, especially as there was a change in local and national interests and needs due to reunification. This change also modified the political reception of the "Nazi perpetrators" and who they were (Bierman). Many asked, was this museum necessary at this point? The right-wing politicians saw reunification as a relief of their past guilt, and some deemed it unnecessary to continue their admission of guilt and apology that happened during the Cold War (Adaire 50).

Likewise, xenophobia changed the meaning of the museum. Right-wing violence towards Jewish people escalated as the rise in foreign workers and political tensions about asylum policies increased simultaneously with right-wing electoral success (Adaire 43). Xenophobia and antisemitism blurring together along with economic difficulties strengthened racist conceptions of a core German culture and anti-foreigner attacks (Bierman). There was once again a push to

prevent the project from going forward or to significantly alter the project from its original intention because of right-wing influence and constant attacks perpetrated on its supporters. Due to this climate, the museum evolved into a project more focused on the ethnic characteristics of Jewish Germans (Jaskot 152). Museum project leaders compromised in design and budget but also gained support from the general public as the meaning of the museum became symbolic of confronting contemporary Nazi ideologies and less about simply integrating Jewish history into Berlin, especially as the Cold War between West and East Germany ended (Jaskot 149).

The following images will showcase Libeskind's design, its artistic style, and the cultural politics behind the location of the building. Though not as obvious visually, the original plans changed from the primary ideas of the IBA towards a building that showcased the continual and persistent victimization of the Jewish people (Jaskot 158).



Figure 1. Philipp Gerlach, Kollegienhaus (Berlin Municipal Museum), Berlin, 1735. Photograph by Yair Haklai, distributed under a CC BY-SA 4.0 license.

Philipp Gerlach built the Baroque Kollegienhaus in 1735. Since it originally operated as the Supreme Court building under Friedrich Wilhelm I, its architectural design is reminiscent of a time in German history of prosperity, power, and enlightenment. Before reunification, it was important to the IBA to honor this style of architecture by acknowledging its history and aesthetic in the new buildings constructed in the area (Jaskot 135). Its obvious grand Baroque features speak to the prestige of the building, such as references to sacred themes, elaborate motifs and decorations, and a mansard roof.

From far away, one would also be able to see the geometric plazas and straight streets designed by Gerlach (Jaskot 133). This area was home to the headquarters of the Gestapo and the *Schutzstaffel* (SS), so it was bombed heavily in the war. The Kollegienhaus is one of the only remaining eighteenth-century buildings in the area, but planners in West Berlin made sure to preserve some of the earlier streets and views (Jaskot 135). The older eighteenth-century street patterns then turned from straight to diagonal relative to the blocks of buildings in the 1960s as

IBA projects started appearing (Jaskot 142). The architecture and surroundings of this building are therefore heavily reminiscent of the horrors from World War II; by deciding to attach the new Jewish Museum to this building specifically, the IBA tried not only to preserve past culture but also distinctly represent a new future with the museum.



Figure 2. Peter Eisenman, Haus am Checkpoint Charlie, Berlin, 2012. Photograph by Jörg Zägel, distributed under a CC BY-SA 3.0 license.

This building is unrelated to the Jewish Museum, but it is a good example of the goals of the IBA in the 1960s. The design of this structure by Peter Eisenman blended with the old structures through the ideas of “critical reconstruction” promoted by the IBA. The IBA advocated for this design in Cold War terms, just as with the Jewish Museum. This project integrates with both the modern and historical streets surrounding it, which allows for an expressive interruption into the intersection below it and connects its form to the size of the older buildings (Jaskot 132). The resulting architecture showed the rest of the world the glamour and success of Cold War West Berlin using formal innovation. As a non-controversial type of building, this project never underwent the evolution the Jewish Museum underwent as a result of resurgent Nazi ideals and reunification politics.



Figure 3. Daniel Libeskind, Star of David concept related to the Jewish Museum in the Berlin Municipal Museum, 1989. Courtesy of Studio Libeskind.

One reason Libeskind's integrative model was so successful with the members of the IBA was his ability to find meaning related to the museum within the local geography and history of the area. The Star of David outline seen in the photograph is derived from the actual map of the city; with each point lying on the past homes of Jews who were somehow influential in Germany, Libeskind shows how Berlin is made up of the lives of the people that the Nazis sought to drive out (Young 2). He then took this shape and triangulated the lines to create the zigzag design of the museum floors (Figure 4). The Star of David is whole, after all, but the Jewish people of Europe were forever broken apart and blighted in the war, just as Libeskind's design of the Star of David and its connections with its past notable Jewish residences were. The zigzag line feels harrowing, but it is continuous just the same. There is an intrinsic disruption to the design that parallels the disruption caused by the recent genocide and all other genocides committed against the Jewish people. All this suggests a duality within Libeskind's design. There is continuity where there is rupture, stability where there is movement, structure, and absence, and all of these can represent the horrors of the past, the revitalizing present, and the healing properties of the future.

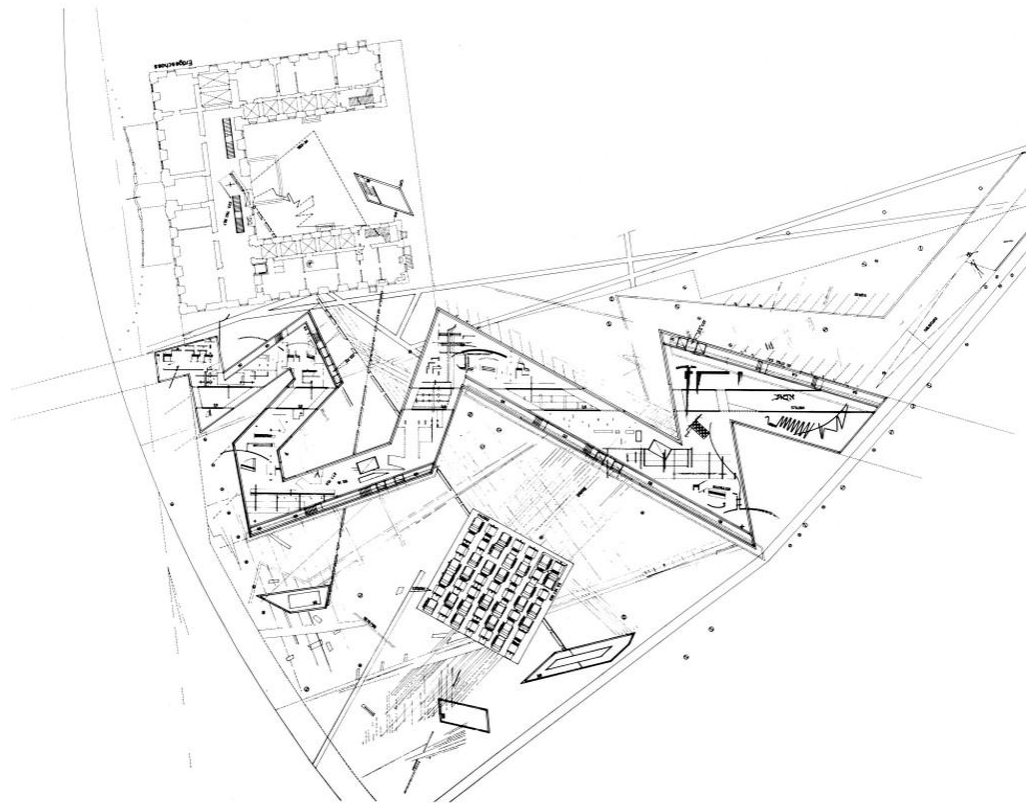


Figure 4. Daniel Libeskind, Jewish Museum in the Berlin Municipal Museum, first-floor plan, competition entry, 1989. Courtesy of Studio Libeskind.

The broken and jagged lines of the Star of David are more closely seen here in the design of the museum's first floor. While there is a continuous flow to the floor, the zigzag pattern breaks up the smooth flow of what would otherwise be a direct line throughout the exhibition space (Young 17). This is another way that Libeskind shows the disjointed history of the Jewish people; they too were not granted a straight trajectory throughout history; instead, they blindly navigated their way through prejudice, diaspora, and violence. The zigzag path is as much a scar on Germany as it is the timeline of its Jewish people. This design also contrasts greatly with the construction of the Kollegienhaus (upper left of Figure 4). Intentionally created by the architect, this contrast shows that while the IBA and Libeskind wanted to integrate this new wing of the building into existing adjacent structures, they are also acknowledging the fact that the war had changed the nation permanently and they cannot simply forget what happened during World War II. This contrasting but complementary form is also seen in the other IBA projects; this gives a new value and perspective to the historical space in which the buildings were built.



Figure 5. Contrast of Libeskind’s Jewish Museum with Gerlach’s Kollegienhaus, Berlin, 2001. Photograph by Manfred Śliwecki, distributed under a CC BY-SA 4.0 license.

The final design of the Jewish Museum is shown here in juxtaposition with the original Kollegienhaus that it was meant to complement and contrast with. Its similarities are not obvious at first glance. Its facade is not reminiscent of the original plans set out by the IBA integrative model, as in the case of the Haus am Checkpoint Charlie. Its differences from the original Cold War design tell a story of Nazi ideals still prevalent and resurgent after 1989. The original design was, overall, simplified, and the interior spaces were more combined together than before as a result of the previously mentioned economic changes (Jaskot 150). Libeskind also had to raise the building to a higher level, remove plans for towers on the border, and compress certain areas of the building (Jaskot 149). These changes lessened emphasis on the concept of fragmentation, as the budget required the spaces to be more cohesive. The lack of stark differences between floors and the less-disjointed zigzag floors took away from the symbolic representation of the Jewish people’s timeline, as described earlier (Young 17). Some connections between the buildings include the zinc material used in both, the blue cast of the Jewish Museum, which complements the orange and yellow tones of Gerlach’s design, and the zigzags that contrast with the straight lines of the older building’s construction (Jaskot 142). Perhaps it was never meant to feel like a simple continuity of the Kollegienhaus because this would not acknowledge the alteration that a war makes to a nation. The contrast of the buildings speaks to Germany’s unique history and its ability to persevere in the face of fascism and hatred. Surely this design shows not that Germany just rebuilt itself after the war, but that it grew from the experience.

The changing interpretations of the Jewish Museum due to the difficulties of reunified Germany pushed this building away from its original intentions and context and altered its material relationship to its environment from the IBA’s original plan. This evolution of meaning due to the influence and changing definition of the “Nazi perpetrator” explains many artistic choices in post-war German society. The politics and cultural climate after reunification distinguished this project from others, and as a result made it even more important as a memorial, reminder, and teaching tool of the affliction caused by Nazis of every era.

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