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Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin: The Uncanny Arts of Memorial Architecture

We want ... architecture that bleeds, that exhausts, that whirls and even breaks.

Coop Himmelblau

The uncanny [is] something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light.

Sigmund Freud

Berlin's Uncanny Quandary

Just how does a city „house" the memory of a people no longer at „home" there? How does a city like Berlin invite a people like the Jews back into its official past after having driven them so murderously from it? In fact, such questions may suggest their own, uncanny answers: A „Jewish Museum" in a nation that not so long ago voided itself of Jews, making them alien strangers in a land they had considered „home," will not by definition be *heimlich* but must be regarded as *unheimlich* – or as our translation would have it, uncanny. The dilemma facing the designer of such a museum thus becomes: How then to embody this sense of *unheimlichkeit*, or uncanniness, in a medium like architecture, which has its own long tradition of *heimlichkeit*, or homeliness?

In their initial conception of what they then regarded as a Jewish „extension" to the Berlin Museum, city planners hoped to recognize both the role Jews had once played as co-creators of Berlin's history and culture and that the city was fundamentally haunted by its Jewish absence. At the same time, the very notion of an „autonomous" Jewish Museum struck them as problematic: the museum wanted to show the importance and far-reaching effect of Jewish culture on the city's history, to give it the prominence

it deserved. But many also feared dividing German from Jewish history, inadvertently recapitulating the Nazis' own segregation of Jewish culture from German. This would have been to re-impose a distinct line between the history and cultures of two people – German and Jews – whose fates had been inextricably mingled for centuries in Berlin. From the beginning planners thus realized that this would be no mere re-introduction of Jewish memory into Berlin's civic landscape but an excavation of memory already there, but long suppressed.

Freud may have described such a phenomenon best: „This uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression... The uncanny [is] something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light."[1] Thus might a memorial installation like Berlin's new Jewish Museum generate its own sense of a disquieting return, the sudden revelation of something concealed or buried. The uncanniness of such a project comes when one expects that at any moment something will burst forth, even when it never does, thus leaving one always ill-at-ease, even a little frightened with anticipation – hence, the constant, free-floating anxiety that seems to accompany all the uncanny arts of memory in Germany.

For the reimposition of Jewish memory in Berlin is at once seemingly alien to its present surroundings, yet at the same time all too familiar to those who remember a time now past. It is memory redolent with images of the formerly familiar, but which now seems to defamiliarize and estrange the present moment and the site of its former home. Indeed, if the „uncanny is uncanny only because it is secretly all too familiar, which is why it is repressed," as Freud himself would have it,[2] then perhaps no better term describes the condition of a contemporary German culture coming to terms with the self-inflicted void at its center – a terrible void that is at once all too secretly familiar and unrecognizable, a void that at once defines a national identity, even as it threatens to cause such identity to implode.

In designing a museum for such memory, the architect is charged with housing memory that is neither at home with itself or necessarily housable at all. It is memory so suffused with death, so reeking of decay, that it may now be uninhabitable. Indeed, if the very idea of the uncanny arises, as Freud suggests, from the transformation of something that once seemed familiar and homely into something strange and „unhomely,“ then how better to describe the larger plight of Jewish memory in Germany today? Moreover, if „unhomeliness“ for Freud was „the fundamental propensity of the familiar to turn on its owners, suddenly to become defamiliarized, derealized, as if in a dream,“ then how better to describe contemporary Germany's relationship with its own Jewish past?[3]

For the next few minutes, I would like to reflect on architect Daniel Libeskind's extraordinary response to the nearly paralysing dilemma Berlin faces in trying to reintegrate its lost Jewish past. The aim here will not be merely to explain Libeskind's difficult, even outrageous design, but to show how as a process, it articulates the dilemma Germany faces whenever it attempts to formalize the self-inflicted void at its center – the void of its lost and murdered Jews.

According to planners, the „Jewish Museum Extension to the Berlin Museum“ would be both autonomous and integrative, the difficulty being to link a museum of civic history with the altogether uncivil treatment of that city's Jews. The questions such a museum raises are as daunting as they are potentially paralysing: How to do this in a form that would not suggest reconciliation and continuity? How to re-unite Berlin and its Jewish part without suggesting a seamless rapprochement? How to show Jewish history and culture as part of German history without subsuming it altogether? How to show Jewish culture as part of and separate from German culture without recirculating all the old canards of „a people apart?“

Rather than skirting these impossible questions, the planners confronted them unflinchingly in an extraordinary conceptual brief for the competition that put such questions at the heart of the design process. According to the text by Rolf Bothe (then Director

of the Berlin Museum) and Vera Bendt (then Director of the Jewish Department of the Berlin Museum), a Jewish museum in Berlin would have to comprise three primary areas of consideration: 1) the Jewish religion, customs, and ritual objects; 2) history of the Jewish community in Germany, its rise and terrible destruction at the hands of the Nazis; and 3) the lives and works of Jews who left their mark on the face and the history of Berlin over the centuries.[4] But in elaborating these areas, the authors of the conceptual brief also challenged potential designers to acknowledge the terrible void that made this museum necessary. If part of the aim here had been the reinscription of Jewish memory and the memory of the Jews' murder into Berlin's otherwise indifferent civic culture, another part would be to reveal the absence in post-war German culture demanding this reinscription.

Most notably, in describing the history of Berlin's Jewish community, the authors made clear that not only were the city's history and Jews' history inseparable from each other, but that nothing (not even this museum) could redeem the expulsion and murder of Berlin's Jews – „a fate whose terrible significance should not be lost through any form of atonement or even through the otherwise effective healing power of time. *Nothing in Berlin's history ever changed the city more than the persecution, expulsion, and murder of its own Jewish citizens. This change worked inwards, affecting the very heart of the city.*"[5] In thus suggesting that the murder of Berlin's Jews was the single greatest influence on the shape of this city, the planners also seem to imply that the new Jewish extension of the Berlin Museum may even constitute the hidden center of Berlin's own civic culture, a focal point for Berlin's own historical self-understanding.

Libeskind's Uncanny Design

Guided by this conceptual brief, city planners issued an open invitation to all architects of the Federal Republic of Germany in December 1988. In addition, they invited another 12 architects from outside Germany, among them the American architect, Da-

niel Libeskind, then living in Milan. Born in Lodz in 1946 to the sole survivors of a Polish-Jewish family wiped out in the Holocaust, Libeskind had long wrestled with many of the brief's questions, finding them nearly insoluble at the architectural level. Trained first as a virtuoso violinist who came to the United States with Yitzchak Perlman in 1960 on an American-Israeli Cultural Foundation Fellowship to study at Juilliard, Libeskind says he gave up music when, in his words, there was no more technique to learn. From here, he turned to architecture and its seemingly inexhaustible reserve of technique. He studied at Cooper Union in New York under the direct influence and inspiration of Peter Eisenman and John Hejduk, two of the founders and practitioners of „deconstructivist architecture." Thus, in his design for a Jewish Museum in Berlin, Libeskind proposed not so much a solution to the planners' conceptual conundrum as he did its architectural articulation. The series of drawings he submitted to the committee in mid-1989 have come to be regarded as masterpieces of process art as well as architectural design.

Of the 165 designs submitted from around the world for the museum competition that closed in June 1989, Daniel Libeskind's struck the jury as the most brilliant and complex, possibly as unbuildable. It was awarded first prize and thereby became the first work of Libeskind's ever to be commissioned.[6] Where the other finalists in this competition had concerned themselves primarily with the technical feat of reconciling this building to its surroundings in a way that met the IBA's criteria, and to establishing a separate but equal parity between the Berlin Museum and its Jewish extension, Libeskind had devoted himself to the spatial enactment of a philosophical problem. As Kurt Forster had once described another design in this vein, this would be „all process rather than product..."[7] As an example of process-architecture, according to Libeskind, this building „is always on the verge of becoming – no longer suggestive of a final solution."[8] In its series of complex trajectories, irregular linear structures, fragments, and displacements, this building is also on the verge of unbecoming – a breaking down of architectural assumptions, conventions, and expectations.

His drawings for the museum thus look more like the sketches of the museum's ruins, a house whose wings have been scrambled and reshaped by the jolt of genocide. It is a devastated site that would now enshrine its broken forms. In this work, Libeskind asks, if architecture can be representative of historical meaning, can it also represent unmeaning and the search for meaning? The result is an extended building broken in several places. The straight void-line running through the plan violates every space through which it passes, turning otherwise uniform rooms and halls into misshapen anomalies, some too small to hold anything, others so oblique as to estrange anything housed within them. The original design also included inclining walls, at angles too sharp for hanging exhibitions.

From Libeskind's earliest conceptual brief onward, the essential drama of mutually exclusive aims and irreconcilable means was given full, unapologetic play. For him, it was the impossible questions that mattered most: how to give voice to an absent Jewish culture without presuming to speak for it? How to bridge an open wound without mending it? How to house under a single roof a panoply of essential oppositions and contradictions? (166) He thus allows his drawings to work through the essential paradoxes at the heart of his project: how to give a void form without filling it in? How to give architectural form to the formless and to challenge the very attempt to house such memory?

Before beginning, Libeskind even replaced the very name of the project – „Extension of the Berlin Museum with the Jewish Museum Department" – with his own more poetic rendition, „Between the Lines." „I call it [Between the Lines] because it is a project about two lines of thinking, organization, and relationship," Libeskind says. „One is a straight line, but broken into many fragments; the other is a tortuous line, but continuing indefinitely. These two lines develop architecturally and programmatically through a limited but definite dialogue. They also fall apart, become disengaged, and are seen as separated. In this way, they expose a void that runs through this museum and through architecture, a discontinuous void."[9] Through a twisting and jag-

ged lightening bolt of a building, Libeskind has run a straight-cut void, slicing through it and even extending outside of it: an empty, un-used space bisecting the entire museum. According to Libeskind, „The new extension is conceived as an emblem where the not visible has made itself apparent as a void, an invisible... The idea is very simple: to build the museum around a void that runs through it, a void that is to be experienced by the public."[10] As he makes clear, this void is indeed the building's structural rib, its main axis, a central bearing wall that bears only its own absence.

Indeed, for Libeskind, it is not the building itself that constitutes his architecture but the spaces inside the building, the voids and absence embodied by empty spaces: that which is constituted not by the lines of his drawings but those spaces between the lines. By building voids into the heart of his desgin, Libeskind thus highlights the spaces between walls as the primary element of his architecture. The walls themselves are important only insofar as they lend shape to these spaces and define their borders. It is the void „between the lines" that Libeskind seeks to capture here, a void so real, so palpable, and so elemental to Jewish history in Berlin as to be its focal point after the Holocaust – a negative center of gravity around which Jewish memory now assembles.

Before designing the physical building itself, Libeskind began by situating the museum in what might be called his own metaphysical map of Berlin, constituted not so much by urban topography as it was by the former residences of its Jewish composers, writers, and poets – i.e., the cultural matrix of their lives in Berlin. In Libeskind's words, „Great figures in the drama of Berlin who have acted as bearers of a great hope and anguish are traced into the lineaments of this museum... Tragic premonition (Kleist), sublimated assimilation (Varnhagen), inadequate ideology (Benjamin), mad science (Hoffmann), displaced understanding (Schleiermacher), inaudible music (Schoenberg), last words (Celan): these constitute the critical dimensions which this work as discourse seeks to transgress."[11] All were

transgressors of the received order, and out of these transgressions, culture was born. In Libeskind's view, the only true extension of the culture these Jews helped to generate would also have to transgress it.

The spaces inside the museum are to be construed as „open narratives," Libeskind says, „which in their architecture seek to provide the museum-goer with new insights into the collection, and in particular, the relation and significance of the Jewish Department to the Museum as a whole."[12] Instead of merely housing the collection, in other words, this building seeks to estrange it from the viewers' own preconceptions. Such walls and oblique angles, he hopes, will defamiliarize the all-too-familiar ritual objects and historical chronologies, and cause museum-goers to see into these relations between the Jewish and German departments as if for the first time.

Moreover, curators of both permanent and temporary exhibitions will be reminded not to use these voids as „natural" boundaries or walls in their exhibition, as markers within their exhibition narratives. Instead, they are to design exhibitions oblivious to these voids, so that when mounted, the exhibition narrative is cut arbitrarily wherever a void happens to intersect it. The walls of the voids facing the exhibition walls will thus remain untouched, unusable, outside healing and suturing narrative.

Implied in any museum's collection is that what you see is all there is to see, all that there ever was. By placing architectural „voids" throughout the museum, Libeskind has tried to puncture this museological illusion. What you see here, he seems to say, is actually only a mask for all that is missing, for the great absence of life that now makes a presentation of these artifacts a necessity. The voids make palpable a sense of that much more is missing here than can ever be shown. As Vera Bendt has aptly noted, it was the destruction itself which caused the collection here shown to come into being. Otherwise, these objects would all be part of living, breathing homes – unavailable as museum objects. This is then an aggressively anti-redemptory

design, built literally around an absence of meaning in history, an absence of the people who would have given meaning to their history, an absence of the love that might have saved them.

Conclusion

Freud has ascribed „the central factor in the production of the feeling of uncanniness to intellectual uncertainty; so that the uncanny would always, as it were, be something one does not know one's way about in. The better oriented in his environment a person is, the less readily will he get the impression of something uncanny in regard to the objects and event in it.“[13] How does a building accomplish this disorientation? In Libeskind's case, he has simply built into it any number of voided spaces, so that the visitor is never where he thinks he is. Are these merely ornamentation, an architectural bauble meant only to please the senses? No. Precisely because it is there to disrupt, even perhaps to displease the senses, not an addition or fulfillment of balanced composition but as an imbalance and disorientation. Are they then wholly didactic? Again, no. They are not meant to instruct, per se, but to throw previously received instruction into question. Their aim is not to reassure or console but to haunt visitors with the unpleasant – uncanny – sensation of calling into consciousness that which has been previously – even happily – repressed. The voids are reminders of the abyss into which this culture once sank and from which it never really emerges.

If modern architecture has embodied the attempt to erase the traces of history from its forms, postmodern architecture like Libeskind's would make the traces of history its infrastructure, the voids of lost civilizations literally part of the building's foundation, now haunted by history, even emblematic of it. The architecture of what Libeskind calls „decomposition“ derives its power not from a sense of unity but from what Anthony Vidler has called the „intimation of the fragmentary, the morselated, the broken.“[14] Indeed, as Vidler constantly reminds us, such architecture is meant to challenge the very notion of architecture

as the measure of progress itself, a kind of „autocritique of a modernism that posited a quasi-scientific ...role of architecture" (79).

„Beautiful architecture without Beauty" is how Daniel Libeskind ends an essay called „Countersigns," his coda to a collection of drawings, essays, and models.[15] Beautiful architecture without Beauty: is it beautiful in in its hideousness? Or is it beautiful, as they say of some people, on the inside? Both perhaps, the point being that beauty itself, like meaning and form, may have outlasted itself as a useful category when discussing architecture. Here we must ask nevertheless, to what extent does such an architecture inevitably monumentalize the very idea of the anti-monument itself? After all, once constructed, even deconstructivist designs seem negated by their own existence.

Neither is the paradox at the heart of Libeskind's project hidden from view: is it possible to challenge monumentality in monuments? Is it possible to make something permanently impermanent? Or must it always disappear? Can – should – such architecture unmake as much meaning as it makes? As counter-monuments are a kind of monument, after all, so is anti-architecture a kind of architecture: but instead of passively affirming and enshrining architecture's conventional premises, it challenges them – thereby enshrining the challenge itself.

From the beginning, this project seemed to be defined as that which would be nearly impossible to complete. To my mind, the city planners of Berlin have demonstrated a wisdom and courage of convictions exceeding that of my own country's greatest cities. They have initiated a nearly impossible project, selected a nearly unbuildable design and have now succeeded in building a public edifice that embodies the paralysing questions of contemporary German culture: how to integrate the memory of an absence into the heart of civic architecture? The result leaves all questions intact, all doubts and difficulties in place. This museum extension is an architectural interrogation of the culture and civilization that built it, an almost unheard of achievement.

As the city planners of Berlin are to be congratulated on their foresight and courage, the Humboldt University in Berlin must also be recognized for its own wisdom in awarding Daniel Libeskind this honorary doctorate. In so doing, the university highlights the unique contribution to our culture of an aesthetics that remarks its own limitations, its inability to provide eternal answers and stable meaning. Works in this vein acknowledge both the moral need to ask such difficult questions and the impossibility of answering them in a single space. The university that chooses to honor a man who has devoted his life to asking the impossible questions and then attempting to give them form brings, in turn, great honor to itself.

Notes

1. *Sigmund Freud*, The Uncanny, in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 64.
2. *Theodor Adorno,* Aesthetic Theory, trans. C. Lenhardt (New York and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 262.
3. *Anthony Vidler,* The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), 7.
4. See *Rolf Bothe and Vera Bendt,* Ein eigenständiges Jüdisches Museum als Abteilung des Berlin Museums, in „Realisierungswettbewerb: Erweiterung Berlin Museum mit Abteilung Jüdisches Museum" (Berlin: Senatsverwaltung für Bau- und Wohnungswesen, 1990): 12.
5. Nichts in Berlins Geschichte hat die Stadt jemals mehr verändert als die Verfolgung, Vertreibung und Ermordung ihrer jüdischen Bürger – dies war eine Veränderung nach Innen, die ins Herz der Stadt traf, from „Realisierung", 12.
6. Though this was Libeskind's first full commission, it was not his first building. Other projects subsequently commissioned have been built in Wiesbaden and Osnabrück, among other places.
7. As cited by *Anthony Vidler,* The Architectural Uncanny, 135.
8. Realisierungswettbewerb, 169.
9. *Daniel Libeskind,* Between the Lines: Extension to the Berlin Museum with the Jewish Museum (Amsterdam: Joods Historisch Museum, 1991): 3.
10. *Daniel Libeskind,* Between the Lines, in *Kristin Feireiss,* ed. D*aniel Libeskind:* Erweiterung des Berlin Museums mit Abteilung Jüdisches Museum (Berlin: Ernst & Sohn, 1992), 63.
11. Realisierungswettbewerb, 169.
12. Realisierungswettbewerb, 169.
13. *Sigmund Freud,* The Uncanny, 341.
14. *Anthony Vidler,* The Architectural Uncanny, 70.
15. *Daniel Libeskind,* Countersign, in *Daniel Libeskind:* Countersign, 135.