

Chapter 25

“LET THE DEAD BURY THE LIVING”

Daniel Libeskind’s Monumental Counterhistory

Ewa Domanska



As a theoretician of history looking for avant-garde, unconventional, and non- or ahistorical approaches to and representations of the past, I was intrigued by Naomi Stead’s comment on the Jewish Museum in Berlin designed by Daniel Libeskind [photo I]:



Photo I

The Jewish Museum provides a model of the contemporary history museum as a critical institution, engaged not only in the commemoration and aesthetic representation of history, but in a critique of the historiographical apparatus itself.¹

This remark led me to pose the question of whether Libeskind's museum really offers a critique of the historiographical apparatus, and if so, what kind of critique it is. Following Susan Sontag's statement that "each work of art gives us a form or paradigm or model of *knowing* something, an epistemology,"² I also address the question of whether Libeskind's Jewish Museum as a work of art, often considered an example of the so-called deconstructionist architecture, creates a model of knowing that can be useful to the historian. Does the epistemology inscribed in this building propose new and interesting categories of research, uncovering some repressed, forgotten, or unknown aspects of the past? Does it suggest any interesting mode of representing the past in a more persuasive and effective way? Finally, what story does this building tell, and does representing the past through an "architectural narrative" challenge the traditional idea of history as written text or is it only a mutation of this traditional idea of history? Does the "architectural narrative" undermine the oft-criticized representation of the past in the form of history, understood as a specific product of Western culture? Let me stress that, unlike many historians, I am not interested in the work of art as a historical source but as an object whose analysis can provide the historian with theoretical inspiration and a research paradigm.

The Berlin Museum was founded in 1962 after the construction of the wall, which separated West Berliners from the Märkische Museum, situated in the eastern part of the city. The seat of the Berlin Museum was the Kollegienhaus (1735), a baroque building rebuilt after World War II, formerly the seat of the Prussian Supreme Court designed by Heinrich von Gerlach, architect in ordinary to King Friedrich Wilhelm I. Owing to the shortage of space, part of the Jewish collection was soon transferred to the Martin Gropius Bau, which began to be called the Jewish Museum, though it was still administered by the Berlin Museum. In the 1980s Berlin authorities decided to allot to the Jewish collection a separate wing of the Kollegienhaus. In December 1988 they announced a competition for a building that would be both an extension of the Berlin Museum and its separate department exhibiting Judaica. The idea was to show that Jewish history forms at the same time a part of German history and a separate chapter. Projects were submitted by 163 architects. The results were announced in June 1989. The winner was Daniel Libeskind, born in Łódź in 1946, a descended from Polish Jews, most of whom did not survive the Holocaust.

Libeskind was known as "a theoretical architect," for although his projects had been recognized at international exhibitions, before the Jewish Museum none of them had been realized. Libeskind's winning project both challenged the principles of modernist architecture and offered a unique representation of the repressed history of Berlin Jews and their physical absence. Libeskind called his

project *Between the Lines* and described its idea in an essay under the same title. He explained that he wanted to create a "spiritual site" that would exist for the past, present, and future inhabitants of Berlin and would confirm their common heritage. The museum should express the invisible but continuous presence of the murdered Jews; it should combine the known history of Berlin with its erased history, which must not be forgotten. The Jewish Museum was to express the "philosophy of exile" or "philosophy of deprivation." As Libeskind writes,

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. Physically, very little remains of the Jewish presence in Berlin—small things, documents, archive materials, evocative of an absence rather than a presence. I thought therefore that the "void" that runs centrally through the contemporary culture of Berlin should be made visible, accessible. It should become the structural feature that is crystallized in this particular space of the city.³

The building—still without the collection—was opened in February 1999, and the opening of the whole to the public was planned for 11 September, 2001. Because of the attack on the World Trade Center, however, it was postponed by two days. On the day of the official opening (9 September) *Der Tagesspiegel* wrote: "The Jewish Museum will become a top tourist attraction just like the Reichstag, because the capital of the Germans is also a capital of reflection. In Germany there is now a somewhat adapted saying from the Talmud: 'Remembrance is the secret of power.'"⁴ The Jewish Museum has become not only a museum of the history of Berlin Jews or German Jews but, as commentators point out, "a national Jewish museum." Significantly, it is not a Holocaust museum.

On the outside the new building resembles a bunker whose walls are covered with tin plates [photo 2]. It could also be compared to a shipwreck or a phantom ship that unexpectedly appears in the cityscape [photo 3]. The outside surface looks a skin that has been cut with a sharp razor, leaving deep scars. This effect of wounds or cuts is produced by the 1,005 windows of uniquely irregular shapes. Their function is not only to let light into the building; they have profound symbolic meaning. In the course of his research Libeskind found lists of about 200 thousand names and surnames, dates of birth, and deportation records of Berlin Jews who were removed from the city. The windows symbolize the density of the Jewish population in the part of the city where the museum stands. The edifice is thus a kind of address book of absent Berliners, while the hundreds of windows resemble a "tattoo" on the body corresponding to the irremovable memory of murdered Jews.

The new wing does not have a visible entrance apart from the door for the personnel. The public enter the Jewish Museum through the baroque Kollegienhaus. This solid Prussian court building brings up associations with the rich and glorious eighteenth-century history of Germany, German order and tradition. Once in the

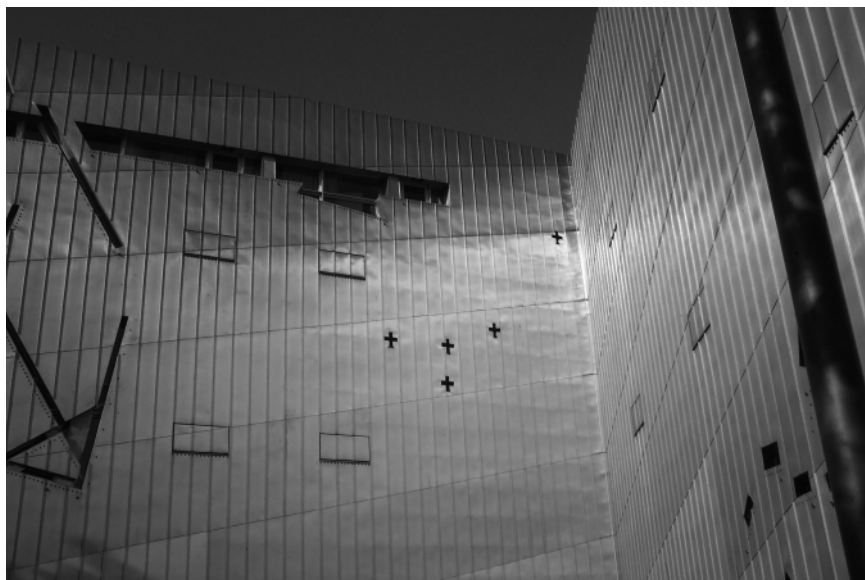


Photo 2

Kollegienhaus, visitors must go down the stairs and through an underground corridor leading to Libeskind's building. Because it is situated beneath the ground, the connecting passage cannot be seen from the outside.

Libeskind's building has four stories, each with similar labyrinthine structure. Their shape is determined by the zigzag on which the plan of the building is based. Each story is of a different height and has a different arrangement of windows. The lowest level consists of three underground passages, paths, or axes, each symbolizing a different part of Jewish history. The entrance leads to the longest one, "the Axis of Continuity" [photo 4], which points to the continuous history of Berlin and leads to the exhibition rooms on the upper floors. Unseen from the outside, this axis connects the old building and the new building, the old and new history of Berlin. In order to reach the gallery one must climb the stairs, which begin in the basement. Called by Libeskind "the Stair of Continuity," they are reminiscent of Jacob's biblical ladder. Looking up from the foot of the stairs lends an impression of unending steps that lead nowhere; looking down from their top, the stairs cannot be seen, and it seems that there is no way back.

The shorter but wider "Axis of Exile" [photo 5] diverges from the "Axis of Continuity." Symbolic of the exile and wanderings of twentieth-century Jewish emigrants, it ends with a glass door leading to the "Garden of Exile," also called the "E.T.A. Hoffmann Garden." In the garden stand forty-nine columns (seven rows of seven columns each), forty-eight of which are filled with earth from Berlin and symbolize the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. The forty-ninth column, filled with earth from Jerusalem, symbolizes Berlin. The tops of the columns, on



Photo 3

which willows have been planted, protrude above the wall surrounding the garden. The columns incline at the angle of 49 degrees and resemble tombstones from Jewish graves. The visitor is supposed to feel the insecurity of the exiles who, after their wandering, found themselves in a strange land. Entering the garden may elicit a sense of disembarking from a ship in a foreign country: the columns block the sight of the horizon and cause disorientation, while their inclination disturbs one's sense of balance. The garden is not a "promised land" but a strange place that, like

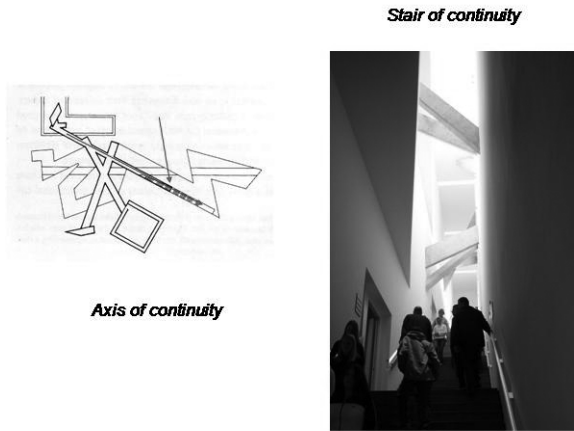


Photo 4

Hoffmann's tales, produces the effect of the *unheimlich*. The only exit from the new museum building is through the "Garden of Exile."

The widest passage, called "the Axis of the Holocaust" [photo 6], also diverges from the Axis of Continuity. The Axis of the Holocaust is the path of annihilation and leads to a void called the Holocaust Tower or the Holocaust Void, referred to by Libeskind as a "voided void." It is separated from the building—one reaches it via an underground corridor—because in fact it does not form part of the museum space but part of Berlin. Based on the plan of a trapezoid, the Holocaust Tower is 27 meters tall. It is unheated and rather damp; it has no windows except for an aperture at the very top that lets in some light whose intensity depends on the weather. The aperture also lets in the sounds of the street, which, however, seem distant and unaffected by the depressing closed interior. This is symbolic of the world's indifference to the Holocaust crimes.

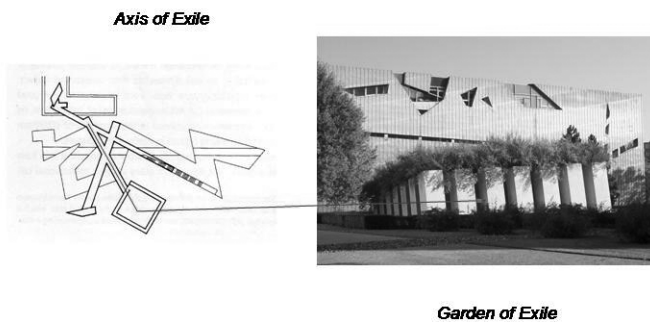


Photo 5

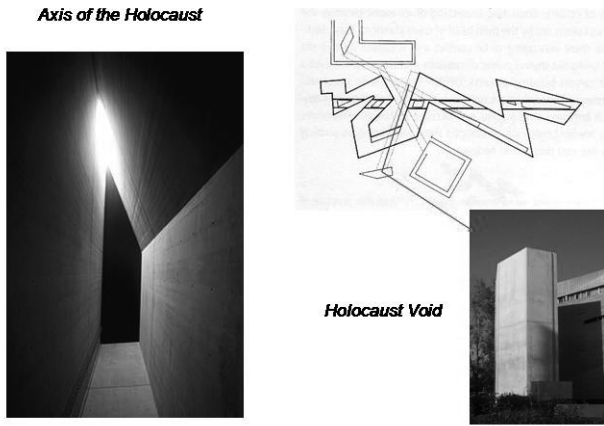


Photo 6

Libeskind also stresses the analogy between this tower and the railroad cars in which Jews were taken to concentration camps. He wants to materially embrace the void that the disappearance of the Jews left in Berlin. He often describes the void space as "the embodiment of absence."⁵ The whole museum is organized around that space. Experiencing and understanding this void is necessary for understanding the meaning of the whole building.

The first floor is based on the plan of a broken Star of David. On the street map of Berlin Libeskind drew lines connecting sites where famous German Jews lived or stayed, such as Heinrich von Kleist, Heinrich Heine, Walter Benjamin, Mies van der Rohe, and Paul Celan. Libeskind marked their addresses on the map and then connected them with lines, thus creating what he calls "an irrational matrix" resembling a broken star, which became the basis of the building's design.⁶ It can be seen, however, only in the architectural blueprints or from a bird's eye view. From that perspective the building looks like the zigzag, that has become the symbol and logo of the museum, or like a bolt of lightning flashing over the cityscape.

The central part of the new museum is a space, 27 meters high, 4.5 meters wide, and 150 meters long, called "die Leere," or "the emptiness."⁷ It forms the backbone of the building, but it is accessible to the public only in parts and cannot even be seen in its entirety. It divides the whole building and cuts across the exhibitions. The emptiness is actually a line of voids consisting of five separate spaces. The first two voids, located at the front of the building, are the deepest. The two in the middle are closed to visitors but can be seen through the windows located by the bridges that connect the galleries. At the end of the building there is the so-called "Memory Void," where art objects are exhibited (e.g., Menashe Kadishman's installation "Shakchelet") [photo 7].

The upper floors are taken up by the exhibition. The complexity and disjointedness of the interior are almost invisible there. However, the curators have been instructed to arrange temporary exhibitions in such a way as to always take the

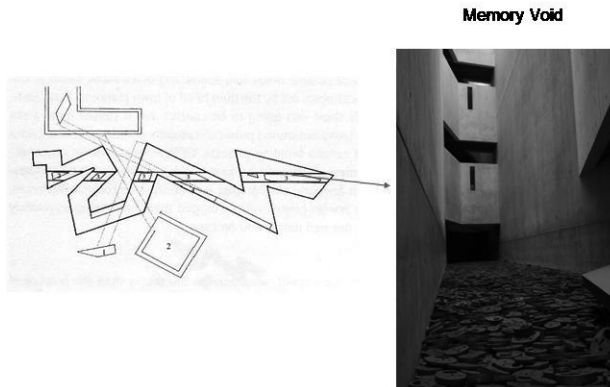


Photo 7

voids into account; the part of history told by the voids must remain inviolate, unspeakable, outside of the soothing narrative.⁸ The museum offices are situated on the top floor.

The above description might suggest that the Berlin “decon,” as deconstructivist buildings are sometimes rather contemptuously referred to, should be a rich source of inspiration and innovative ideas because, in contrast to conservative historiography, Derrida’s deconstruction finds its material realization there. Besides, Libeskind himself—a man of great intelligence, erudition, and imagination who is well versed in contemporary philosophy and has authored many theoretical texts on architecture, might seem a potential “founding father” of some “new” epistemology of history when he describes the history expressed or told by his works as “the history of absence and the history of the void.”⁹ But are we not in for a disappointment? Knowing both Libeskind’s interesting texts about his own projects and the interpretations of his works by art critics and cultural studies scholars, I want to argue against their analysis. My sense is that the view of history underlying those ideas and interpretations is still rather traditional. To begin with, I am going to deal with the aspect of this building that can be the most intriguing for the theoretician of history, namely its status as an architectonic embodiment of deconstruction.

In June 1988 the New York Museum of Modern Art held an exhibition titled “Deconstructivist Architecture,” whose participants included Bernard Tschumi, Frank Gehry, Peter Eisenman, Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid, Coop Himmelb(l)au, and Daniel Libeskind. The curators of the exhibition, Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley, point out in the catalog that deconstructivist architecture is not a style. The curators looked for inspiration in Russian constructivism, which rebelled against rationalist modernism and postmodern pastiche. Clearly, however, the architects mentioned above did not present a homogeneous program. Libeskind has often distanced himself from the exhibition, saying that “it was like a ship with

a variety of passengers. I don't derive my works from those tendencies." Nonetheless, again along with Eisenman, Hadid, Tschumi, and others, Libeskind took part in a lecture series organized by the Österreichisches Museum für angewandte Kunst (Austrian Museum of Applied Arts) that was to demonstrate the potential of deconstructivism as a new trend in architecture. His article about the project of the Jewish Museum, "Between the Lines," was published in a volume of essays based on those lectures.¹⁰ Further, Libeskind studied at the Cooper Union in New York under John Hejduk and Peter Eisenman, who are considered the "founding fathers" of deconstructive architecture. It comes as no surprise, then, that he is often described as a deconstructionist.¹¹

Eisenman, whose concepts and projects appear similar to those of Libeskind himself, was invited by Bernard Tschumi to collaborate with Jacques Derrida on the project of the Parc de la Villette in Paris. However, Eisenman stresses the fact that he does not apply Derrida's ideas to architecture. As he says, "my work has nothing to do with deconstruction *per se*. Your [Derrida's] work is like stimulus for me, but not a doctrine for application."¹² Arguably, the same may be said of Libeskind.

Although Libeskind distances himself from deconstruction, certain features that critics point out as characteristic of most "decons" can also be observed in his architectonic projects. For example, these buildings look as if they were unfinished, always in the state of becoming; they resemble fragments or ruins; they are discontinuous, fragmented, atomized; they display a clash between form and function. The content of "decon," as we can see in Libeskind's Jewish Museum, is its form. Looking at the project, many people doubted whether it could be constructed at all. The architect works here like a psychoanalyst, trying to disclose the repressed trauma on the basis of fragments of the patient's story and to help the patient in working it through. What must be revealed is the repressed and invisible; the gaps in memory that are not really "voids" but deeply repressed memories, extremely painful and intense. Both Eisenman and Libeskind focus on the spectrality of the building. This feature is derived from Derrida's works and his idea of "spirit," specter, "spectrality," and the uncanny. Indeed, according to James Young the Jewish Museum is an example of "uncanny memorial architecture," that is, architecture that has certain features of the uncanny. Such architecture, Young argues, is antiredemptive: it does not free the viewers from guilt but, on the contrary, makes visible the memory of events that cannot be "domesticated," forgotten, or redeemed.¹³ The key event in the case of the Jewish Museum is of course the Holocaust, while the architectonic experience the Museum is intended to produce is the experience of absence and void after the murder of the Jews.

Peter Eisenman said that "[w]hat I am searching for is a way to turn deconstruction from a mode of analysis into one of synthesis."¹⁴ This comment is relevant to Libeskind's project as the architect used deconstructivist inspiration to design an object that is in fact a synthesis, albeit certainly a nontraditional one. I would thus claim that the inspiration that Libeskind's building may offer consists in a historical synthesis whose structure is loosely analogous with Deleuze's

rhizome: a synthesis whose narratives diverge in different directions but that also has a certain core.

Pointing to the indebtedness of Libeskind's building to deconstruction and post-structuralism, many interpreters say that the building has no beginning or center and that the fragmented and labyrinthine interior makes it impossible to experience any narrative continuity, offering instead spatial gaps that represent Jewish history. True enough, as I mentioned above, the new wing has no visible entrance apart from the personnel door. It does, however, have a beginning, the public entrance leading through the baroque main building. Visitors must enter the latter building in order to get into the new wing via an underground corridor that cannot be seen on the outside. In this way the architect suggests that what seems unconnected in history, or what is represented as unconnected—like the desire to eradicate the Jews from German history—actually proves to be closely related, or connected by the invisible line of the continuum. The building also has a “back-bone” in the form of an “emptiness” providing history with a “plot.” Thus the emptiness, the line of voids embodying absence, forms the core of Libeskind's history of the Jews.

The building has passages that lead nowhere. Unable to find the familiar signs for emergency exits, toilets, the cafeteria or the giftshop, the visitor feels confused and uneasy. Disintegration, fragmentation, and diffusion constitute basic motifs of Libeskind's architecture. It is thus to be expected that the story offered by his architectonic narrative will not be a linear, chronological tale with a telos, plot, and causal logic. Libeskind writes: “The ahistorical dimension of the void has always puzzled me. Of course the void has a historical trajectory, a trajectory of fatality of Western culture. At the same time there is something about the void, astonishingly not coincidental with positivist history.”¹⁵

So, what kind of history does he agree with? Actually, the architectonic experience of history that Libeskind provides us with forms a chronologically ordered story leading from the “good old times” (the eighteenth century, which the Kollegienhaus dates from) through a sharp descent into the underground (the Nazi period), then it diverges in three possible directions (survival, exile, or death) and, for those who survived, ends in an exit through the Garden of Exile.

Libeskind's Jewish Museum is an architectonic sculpture, a monument, and as such it expresses monumental history rather than the critical history it might first seem to espouse. The building tells a story with a distinct beginning, middle, and end; a story that has a telos and develops according to an encoded plot, that is, the biblical history of the Jews. It may be said that the Jewish Museum belongs to “narrative architecture of a higher order.”¹⁶ However, it is primarily an example of “monumental counterhistory.”

According to Nietzsche, the appeal of monumental history is that it expresses the desire for a triumphal procession of greatness and the belief that if this greatness was possible in the past, it can also be possible in the future. The German philosopher writes: “Monumental history is the masquerade costume in

which hatred of the great and powerful of [one's] own age is disguised as satiated admiration for the great and powerful of past ages, and muffled in which they invert the real meaning of the mode of regarding history into its opposite; whether they are aware of it or not, they act as though their motto were: let the dead bury the living."¹⁷

Of course, the monumental history I discuss here is not the kind of history Nietzsche wrote about. It is rather, as I argued above, "monumental counterhistory," centered not upon the heroes-victors, but upon their victims. Thus the history that we can read in Libeskind's building is not "deconstructivist history," which in accordance with Jacques Derrida's ideas would offer a critique of the foundations, limits, and axioms of disciplinary history; undermining the concepts of foundation, genesis, structure, system, hierarchy, mode of representation—a history that would deconstruct the building of history as a specific approach to the past produced by Western culture and, by deconstructing it, reveal its foundations. The Berlin museum represents the kind of history that Foucault described as a historical discourse in a biblical style, "counterhistory."¹⁸ It tells the mythical and religious history of the Jews and refers to the "biblical form of prophecy and promise," thus opposing the unjust law. It is the biblical history of captivity and exile a history focused on repossession and insurrection and told from the vantage point of the victims. This way of representing history has long been present in historiography, particularly in postcolonial history, women's history, and, generally, the history of "others" (children, sexual minorities, disabled people, etc.). The aim of this history is to reveal what is concealed not because it has been forgotten, but because it has deliberately been distorted. Such a history requires different terms of inquiry, hence frequent use of such terms as emptiness, silence, absence, invisibility, inexpressibility, repression, or trauma. Nonetheless, as Libeskind's project demonstrates, this kind of history does not deconstruct history as such but, on the contrary, seems to strengthen it.

Therefore, I disagree with Naomi Stead's view, quoted at the beginning of this essay, that the Jewish Museum "provides a model of the contemporary history museum as a critical institution, engaged not only in the commemoration and aesthetic representation of history, but in a critique of the historiographical apparatus itself." I do not see in Libeskind's project any critique that might be interesting for a contemporary historian. Of course, the project might be said to oppose positivistic history, but in my opinion the latter is not the dominant way of writing about the past. Rather, what seems to prevail today is Foucauldian "counterhistory." This counterhistory, of which the Jewish Museum is an indexical sign or, to use Young's term, "counter-monument," is becoming a paradigm for writing about and representing the past in a postcolonial and global world that rewrites its history from the point of view of the victims. With time this kind of history will lose its critical and insurrectional character, its status as "the history of absence and the history of the void," and will turn into monumental, official history, created in the interest of a certain group and constructing a view of the past desirable for that group. As counterhistory, the project is oriented toward the

future even though it is strongly connected with the past. According to Libeskind's declarations, its monumentality and sublimity are supposed to give hope and communicate the future of that history. It is, as he says, optimistic architecture, because the act of creation and construction is oriented toward the future. The building should give hope because it addresses a new audience. Libeskind points out that his building and his work in general are addressed to those yet unborn.

Today monumental history is created in the context of the ubiquitous culture of "postmemory,"¹⁹ developed by the generations that did not experience the Holocaust and with the awareness that the surviving victims (as well as their torturers) are passing away. In these circumstances it is not enough to write about history; memory always has to be recreated. Making possible the sensory experience of a space embodying absence, the building also embodies memory itself, but in the case of the Jewish Museum it is only secondary memory, which tends to monumentalize and fetishize history. The terrifying experience of the void that the visitor is intended to undergo in the Holocaust Tower evokes memories of confinement in a cell or a stock car only in survivors, while the younger generations associate it with calmness, suspension, and contemplation.²⁰ Libeskind's "decon" builds and supports "postmemory": the void becomes an unreal and sublimated material trauma;²¹ a fetish inscribed in biblical and mythical thinking rather than historical thinking in a disciplinary sense.

In the case of the Jewish Museum the aesthetic strategy of representation seems particularly dangerous.²² Critics emphasize the aesthetics of Libeskind's works, pointing especially to the "void," that is the basic element of his architecture.²³ Negative categories, such as absence, the void, or the labyrinth, which form the core of the project, acquire a positive dimension as aesthetic categories.²⁴ The aesthetic sublimates genocide, and the extremely suggestive representation of absence makes representation of the past by means of aesthetic experience more dangerous than representation of the past in historiography, where the aestheticization of trauma takes place on a more intellectual level, or in literature, as for example in Tadeusz Borowski's short stories. Affirming negativity through aestheticization becomes even more disturbing in that many scholars believe that the generations who do not have first-hand experience of the war find this representation of the past more appealing. This would mean that their identity, built upon knowledge about the past acquired through such an aesthetic experience of evil, leads directly to neutralizing the observed evil. Evil becomes an attractive aesthetic experience incorporated in the aesthetics of horror and thus becomes unreal.²⁵

For this reason we must be careful about the temptation to use such categories as "the void" or "absence," in historical research, or to create, after Libeskind, "an epistemology of absence and the void."²⁶ Such ideas are part of the process that Wolfgang Iser describes as "the aestheticization of our categories of knowledge" or "epistemological aestheticization."²⁷ Epistemological categories become aestheticized, which results in the aestheticization of the theory of cognition and in the end leads to the aestheticization of perception as such, the formation of an

"aesthetic consciousness" and aesthetics as a way of living. It hardly needs to be observed that such aestheticization is implied in the project of modernity, and its persistence demonstrates how deeply our thinking is rooted in modernity. Thus, if we speak of Libeskind's aesthetic architectonic project, and if we agree that the Jewish Museum is an example of aestheticization, we also have to observe that despite its claim to abandoning the traditional approach to history and its deconstructionist inspiration, Libeskind's project is firmly grounded in modernity.

The void is associated with silence, which also plays an important role in Libeskind's project. For centuries silence as an expression of resistance or punishment has been an important aesthetic category and a persuasive means of expression. However, as Susan Sontag argues, silence as such does not exist, nor does empty space. There is always something we see and hear; in order to notice emptiness we must see other spaces as full. Thus, writes Sontag, "the notions of silence, emptiness, and reduction sketch out new prescriptions for looking, hearing, etc.—which either promote a more immediate, sensuous experience of art or confront the artwork in a more conscious, conceptual way."²⁸

Significantly, as Sontag points out, silence as a strategy of representation opens up many interpretive possibilities. My sense is that the silence that is present in Libeskind's "decon" is not a silence that overwhelms us and deprives us of the power of speech. On the contrary, it creates the desire to speak and break the silence. I would go as far as to say that rather than inviting contemplation, it causes violence (except for the Holocaust Tower). The building itself, which many people associate with a military object, a bunker, and thus with defensiveness, harmonizes with the silence and the void in an interesting way. It is a bunker whose interior has been burnt out and is therefore invitingly empty; it is as if the bunker became at the same time a zinc mausoleum and a chapel. Silence seems here an expression of punishment, hence of violence and hierarchy, rather than of humility before the ineffable. The silence and the void release the dead victims and force the living into the position of those guilty and frightened. The building oppresses the living. The silence and the void is the locus of the "uncanniness" and "monstrosity" in Libeskind's building.

Speaking of silence, Derrida distinguishes between mutism and taciturnity. Mutism is the silence of someone who cannot speak, whereas taciturnity is the silence of someone who can speak. Thus, taciturnity is a choice, while mutism is given. Confronted with a mute work of art, words come up against their limitations. Again, a superficial look at Libeskind's museum seems to reveal such mutism, which arises in response to the inexpressible trauma of the Holocaust. On the other hand, however, as Derrida points out, such works of art can be very "talkative" and become the source of authoritative discourse. Thus, Derrida says, "the greatest logocentric power resides in a work's silence."²⁹

Joanna Tokarska-Bakir has said that in post-traumatic culture trauma becomes a fetish, a mask of something else, a mystery culture is unable to communicate.³⁰ However, the Jewish Museum, which is a quintessence of "postmemory," does

communicate. I think that its message has an element of irony: in a city that is being rebuilt as a capital of great united Germany there is a building that embodies and re-presents the great history of the Jews and symbolizes their posthumous arrival in the Promised Land, which turns out to be a bunker-like object, a ship-fortress, a high-tech quasi-Jerusalem complete with its temple, cemetery, park, and bridges. Indeed, the building encloses space, preserving it in the way a museum preserves artifacts. A ghetto has been founded again; a ghetto that is clearly separated from the outside world, that protects its interior and lets in only those who will pay 5 euros for entrance. This ghetto becomes the site of the “eternal rest” of the repressed aspect of “old” German subjectivity; or, to use Kristeva’s term, “the abject,” which, ironically, becomes the core of new subjectivity.

Young points out that the building expresses the ultimate irony of history. “The Jewish wing of the Berlin Museum will now be the prism through which the rest of the world will come to know Berlin’s past.”³¹ The long repressed void can become the basis of the emerging subjectivity of post-unification Germany. This again demonstrates that the “vomit” and “abject” of identity can form the basis of a new identity.

Libeskind’s purpose was to deconstruct the traditional model of museum. Actually, the building itself is a museum and, by virtue of its multidimensional symbolism, seems more suggestive than the exhibition it contains. One of its goals was to break with the visitors’ passive reception of a museum building: the visitors should be made to give up their distance and objectivity, surrender to the space and become part of it. The museum should also provide “architectural experience”; it should itself be an artifact rather than merely an area where historical artifacts are exhibited. The category of experience is of utmost importance because it was the turn to experience in the mid1990s that signaled the change in historical theory, its turn away from questions of language and narrative. The experience of the past acquired primary importance and involved a subjective approach to the past.

If we agree that Libeskind’s museum not only houses a collection but is a historical artifact itself, we can think of it in terms of Theodor Adorno’s argument about the destructive role of the museum.³² Possibly, despite its goal to protect the memory of the dead, the building participates in the destruction of the past; owing to its persuasive symbolism, it tears the incomprehensible out of the context of nonrepresentable trauma and tames death, absence, and even the uncanny by domesticating them. Perhaps as a “return of the repressed” it is like a phantom and causes the necrosis of what is still alive. And what if the museum is a mausoleum, not of those absent, invisible, and murdered, but “of the unborn, ‘new’ Germans”? What if, described as “a metaphor of historical catastrophe” of the Holocaust, it has *become* a catastrophe from the point of view of building the identity of post-unification Germany? Is it not then a place where, to quote Nietzsche, “the dead bury the living?”³³

In conclusion, let us return to the questions posed at the beginning of this essay, beginning with the approach to history that Libeskind’s Jewish Museum proposes.

From the viewpoint of a theoretician of history, the project illustrates the process, manifest in historiography, of incorporating avant-garde elements into traditional models. The latter assimilate the new elements, thus neutralizing the critical force of history written from the vantage of the victims, that is, "counterhistory." This process clearly shows the great power and vitality of history as a specific view of the past. A thorough reading of Libeskind's building reveals, beneath a very suggestive, unconventional representation, the features typical of monumental history: essentiality (the trauma of the Jewish people is essentialized); universality (the building is intended to express Jewish history in general); the presence of a *telos* (the Holocaust as the doom of Western history and the return to the "lost land" as a solution); a certain linearity broken by the *kairos*, a catastrophic event that breaks up history (the Holocaust). Presenting "a very Biblical view of architecture," as Jonathan Glancey put it,³⁴ Libeskind's project not only shows biblical history but also offers its continuation. It is a history which has a distinct moral message and a didactic dimension: as one critic said, "the building is as powerfully didactic as any medieval cathedral."³⁵ Yet the Berlin "decon" is not a cathedral but rather a synagogue that has been built by generations, fragment after fragment. It is a symbol, "a visible image of invisible things."³⁶

As far as research categories are concerned, Libeskind very skillfully uses such terms as absence, the void, emptiness, labyrinth, trauma, or "the uncanny," but these terms have been used in historical writing for years, especially by those scholars who deal with memory. It is worth noting that despite its promising beginnings, when the discourse of memory was defined in opposition to historical discourse and was a useful instrument for the critique of official history (Pierre Nora), some years later the discourse of memory shared the fate of other counter-, anti-, or a-historical discourses—that is, it was domesticated and neutralized, becoming only one of many trends in contemporary historiography.

Libeskind's museum successfully meets the challenge of reincorporating the Jewish past into the history of Berlin. Based on the idea of empty spaces, discontinuities, and labyrinth, it is a representation of Jewish history that in my opinion appeals most to the contemporary generation of postmemory. However, if Libeskind's architecture is an example of contesting and critical discourse that expresses protest against dominant discourse (in the sense of critique of modernist architecture, the traditional view of the museum, and conventional representation of the past), it should be approached as both a theoretical and political project. In the theoretical sense it is of an interventional character; in the political sense it is an emancipatory discourse. Thus, on the one hand, its goal is to conduct a critique of the dominant discourse from without so as to show its limitations and biases; on the other hand, emancipatory (liberationist) discourse is typical of the project of modernity. Hence "deconstructive architecture" is *a priori* situated within that project, and its critical discourse is absorbed by the dominant discourse. In this way critical discourse is pacified and neutralized, and serves to strengthen the system instead of destroying it. Critical discourse is effective only as long as it remains an outsider, foreign to the system.³⁷

Written historical narrative has its limitations. Historians may try to go beyond the standard form of realistic narrative and adopt the style of modernist prose, as Kafka and Joyce did. They may also include in their narrative their own poems (like the anthropologists James Clifford or Renato Rosaldo), and autobiographical elements (like the representatives of the French *ego histoire*), or deploy the poetics of the literary essay, but they still remain within the dominant paradigm, although they may be perceived as avant-garde. Their experiments will at most be directed against the limitations of realistic, scientific, objectivist style.³⁸

Perhaps writing about history is becoming obsolete and the crisis of narration is actually a crisis of representing the past in the form of written narrative. Thus we should look for embodiments of avant-garde projects of representing the past outside of historiography. For this reason I became interested in Libeskind's architectural project, which not only represents the past in an interesting way but also presentifies it and makes possible its experience, which is a major subject of historical theory today.³⁹

The above interpretation of Libeskind's Jewish Museum demonstrates that despite its avant-garde form of representing the past (deconstruction), the view of history it expresses is rather traditional (monumental counterhistory). This shows the flexibility of historical discourse, which is strengthened rather than undermined by such unconventional ways of representing the past. The latter certainly do not propose a model or belong to a critical trend that the dominant system would be unable to absorb. As for now, I do not see any such model or trend in contemporary culture.

Translated by Magdalena Zapędowska

Notes

1. N. Stead, "The Ruins of History: Allegories of Destruction in Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum," *Open Museum Journal* 2 (August 2000) <http://amol.org.au/craft/omjournal/volume2/stead.pdf>
2. S. Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence," in Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will* (New York, 1969), 31–32.
3. D. Libeskind, "Between the Lines," in *Architecture in Transition. Between Deconstruction and New Modernism*, ed. P. Noever (Munich, 1997), 68.
4. "Jüdisches Museum. Der Bau der Wiedergutwerdung. Von Malte Lehming," *Der Tagesspiegel*, 9 September 2001, <http://archiv.tagesspiegel.de/archiv/08.09.2001/ak-mn-5512255.html>
5. D. Libeskind, "Between the Lines" (Jewish Museum, Berlin), in Libeskind, *The Space of Encounter* (New York, 2000), 28.
6. *Ibid.*, 26.
7. Describing the line of the voids as the emptiness (*die Leere*) is important because of its interpretative reference to Heidegger. See also note 26.

8. See J.E. Young, "Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin," in Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven and London, 2000), 178.
9. See D. Libeskind, "Trauma," in *Image and Remembrance: Representation and the Holocaust*, ed. S. Hornstein and F. Jacobowitz (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2003), 52.
10. See Libeskind, *Architecture in Transition*.
11. In an interview, Rafał Geremek asked Daniel Libeskind about his affinities with architectural schools, pointing out that Libeskind is often described as a deconstructionist. The architect replied: "this is what people say, but I really dislike this term. Architecture is constructing, not deconstruction. My buildings do not demolish anything. It has been written that my project presents the view of a divided world which is made up of different pieces. Everyone has the right to their own interpretation, but I think it is an edifice integrated with the city." R. Geremek, "Wieża wolności. Rozmowa z Danielem Libeskindem," *Wprost*, 6 lipca 2003, 67.
12. Peter Eisenman in a panel discussion including Jacques Derrida, Peter Eisenman, Jeffrey Kipnis, Thomas Leiser, Renato Rizzi (New York, 10 January, 1987) in *Choral Work: Jacques Derrida and Peter Eisenman*, ed. J. Kipnis and T. Leiser (New York, 1997), 92.
13. Young, "Daniel Libeskind's," 154–55. Cf. A. Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, MA, 1992).
14. Peter Eisenman in a panel discussion including Jacques Derrida, Peter Eisenman, Jeffrey Kipnis, Thomas Leiser, Renato Rizzi (New York, 17 September, 1985), in Kipnis and Leiser, *Choral Work*, 8.
15. D. Libeskind, "Traces of the Unborn" (Lecture, Berlin 1997), in his *The Space of Encounter*, 197–98.
16. "Daniel Libeskind Interview," *Sunday Times Magazine*, 29 April 2001 (fragments available at <http://www.hughpearman.com/articles2/libeskind.html>)
17. F. Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in Nietzsche *Untimely Meditations*, ed. D. Breazeale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge, 1997), 72. (This is a play on Jesus's words, "Follow me; and let the dead bury their dead" [Matthew 8:22]. See also Luke 9:60.)
18. M. Foucault, "Seminar: 28 January 1976," in Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, trans. D. Macey (New York, 2003), 72–74.
19. The term "postmemory" was coined by Marianne Hirsch in her *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge MA, 1997).
20. Those different impressions are described by Libeskind's colleague and wife Nina. See L. Gullbring, "Daniel Libeskind and the Jüdisches Museum," *Calimero: journalistik och fotografi*, 2001 (available at: <http://home.swipnet.se/~w-35482/libeeng.html>).
21. Libeskind says that his projects are built around emptiness and trauma; however, he understands trauma in the material rather than the psychoanalytical sense. See D. Libeskind, "Trauma" (Lecture, Berlin 1997), in *The Space of Encounter*, 205.
22. The process of aestheticization has some positive aspects too. As Welsch points out, it enhances sensitivity, which in turn leads to greater tolerance and thus has an indirect impact on political culture. Welsch argues that aestheticization does not lead to hyperaestheticization of culture but to the development of "blind-spot culture," which is particularly sensitive to exclusion, rejection, otherness, repression, the sphere of emptiness, and interspaces. It is governed by the cult of the invisible, absence, and emptiness. This characteristic sensitivity of culture to difference and exclusion is not only related to aesthetics but concerns everyday life as well. W. Welsch, "On the Way to an Auditive Culture?" in Welsch, *Undoing Aesthetics*, trans. A. Inkpin (London, 1997), 25–27, 74.
23. See: A. Huyse, "The Void of Berlin," in Huyse, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, 2003), 69.
24. Paradoxically, this is an argument against the objections voiced by Derrida, who is skeptical about "a discourse of negativity that is very facile," which, as he says, can be found in both Eisenman's and Libeskind's works. Derrida states that "he [Eisenman] speaks of the architecture of absence, the architecture of nothing [*du rien*], and I am skeptical about discourses of absence and negativity. This also applies to certain other architects like Libeskind. . . . In speaking of their own work they

- are too easily inclined to speak about the void, negativity, absence, with theological overtones also, and sometimes Judeo-theological overtones. No architecture can be called Judaic of course, but they resort to a kind of Judaic discourse, a negative theology on the subject of architecture." P. Brunette and D. Wills, "The Spatial Arts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts: Art, Media, Architecture*, ed. P. Brunette and D. Wills (Cambridge, 1994), 27.
25. For a critique of aestheticizing the Holocaust see: Z. Braiterman, "Against Holocaust-Sublime. Naive Reference and the Generation of Memory," *History and Memory* 12, no. 2 (2000).
 26. However, another interpretation is also possible: following Heidegger, we could talk about spatialization (*Räume*) or the event of space, liberating places where "the appearance of the divine is long delayed"; about Libeskind's building-sculpture as embodying a place and preserving space, as it is often approached. In this context Libeskind's void also acquires a different meaning and, read in the Heideggerian vein, "is closely allied to the special character of place, and therefore no failure, but a bringing-forth." In this way emptiness, in accordance with Derrida's postulate, would be read positively. It is not a nothing, it is not a lack; it is an emptying-out that is involved in becoming free, and thus it is a potentiality. Such an interpretation would be in keeping with Libeskind's own idea: talking about his projects (especially the project of remodeling the Alexanderplatz in Berlin), the architect often speaks of "traces of the unborn" that define "the need to resist the erasure of history . . . the need to open the future." M. Heidegger, "Art and Space," trans. by Ch.H. Seibert, in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. N. Leach (London and New York, 1997), 123. This issue has been addressed by J. Lubiak, "O nowy kształt pamięci. Muzeum Żydowskie w Berlinie," *Artium Questiones* 16 (Poznan, 2006) (forthcoming).
 27. See Welsch, *Undoing Aesthetics*, 19 ff.
 28. Sontag, "Aesthetics of Silence," 13.
 29. Brunette and Wills, "The Spatial Arts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," 13.
 30. J. Tokarska-Bakir, "Historia jako fetysz" [History as Fetish], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 15–16 lutego 2003, 20.
 31. Young, "Daniel Libeskind's," 183.
 32. See: T. W. Adorno, "Valéry Proust Museum," in Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. S. Weber (Cambridge, MA, 1981).
 33. Libeskind asks: "What does it mean to be German today, after all? The monument is part of the process of finding out. The monument should emphatically transform the work into a remnant, residue, or that which remains when the process is over." In the context of this statement it is symptomatic that on reaching the end of the exhibition visitors are asked to answer several questions in writing. One of them is, "Is it conceivable that a German Jew could become president in the near future?" D. Libeskind, "Proof of Things Invisible" (Lecture, Humboldt Universität, 1997), in his *The Space of Encounter*, 150.
 34. J. Glancey, "Star man," *The Guardian*, 22 January 2001. (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/story/0,3604,426117,00.html>).
 35. G. Worsley, "A Challenge to Berlin," *Telegraph*, 27 June 1998. (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/1998/06/27/bajews27.xml>).
 36. This expression was used by Aron Gurevich to describe the symbolic view of the world in the Middle Ages and the symbolism of the cathedral. See A. Gurevich, *Categories of Medieval Culture*, trans. G. L. Campbell (London, 1985) (chapter "Macrocosm and Microcosm"). See also the Pauline definition of faith: "faith is . . . the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1).
 37. For a discussion of this issue in the context of feminist criticism, see G. Pollock, "The Politics of Theory: Generations and Geographies: Feminist Theory and the Histories of Art Histories," *Genders* 17 (1993): 97–120.
 38. See *History and Theory*, Theme Issue no. 41 "Unconventional History," (December 2002).
 39. On historical experience see F. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford, 2005); on presentification see: H. U. Gumbrecht, "Epiphany/Presentification/Deixis: Futures for the Humanities and Arts," in Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford, 2004), 91–132.