

Daniel Libeskind and the Jewish Museum, 1999



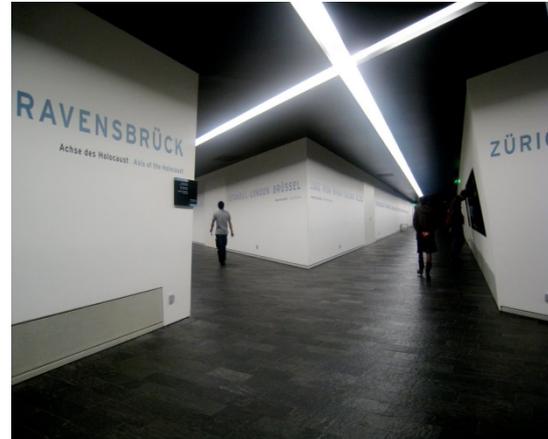
In the year that the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, sixty five architects submitted proposals for an extension to the Berlin Museum that would house the Jewish Museum. It would stand in the Kreuzberg district of Berlin and replace a building destroyed by the Gestapo fifty years earlier. A little known architect, Daniel Libeskind won the competition with a proposal called 'Between the Lines'. It was drawn over the staves of a musical score as a testament to the Schoenberg opera which had inspired it. The opera was left unfinished and sound gave way to silence; absence or void are an essential component of Libeskind's plan.

There are three main elements that give his building its character: the irregular floor plan and facade, the empty shafts that extend all through all the floors and the labyrinth-like basement composed of three corridors, which we will look at first.

To gain access to the museum, the visitor walks into a grand Baroque building. Built in 1733-35 it is the last surviving Baroque palace in what was an area of inner Berlin that was filled with

spectacular noble city palaces. For many years it was the Court of Appeal. The juxtaposition of the old building and the new structure not only has aesthetic appeal, it is also a convincing metaphor for the German-Jewish relationship. Libeskind's building is only accessed through the palace, and the two are joined by an underground passage, making it clear to visitors that they must "go far back into the city's history".

The underground passage is accessed down an angular staircase constructed out of rough cast concrete. This unexpected entrance leads to a series of underground corridors or 'axes' (i.e. more than one axis). Libeskind explains that the black-slate lined corridors symbolise three major experiences of German Jews: continuity, exile and death. Their tilted and slightly inclining floors intensify the feeling of being on precarious terrain.



The axis of continuity is the longest, and leads up a steep narrow staircase to the upper floors of the museum. The stairs are steep and there are 90 of them, so one could be out of breath after 82 steps when you can access the second floor and the museum collections. The remaining steps end in a blank wall.

The axis of exile leads into an open air labyrinth, 'The Garden of Exile'. Trees grow out of 49



concrete pillars on a slanted surface, and all vistas are blocked. There is no other way out of the labyrinth except back into the museum. Libeskind wanted to illustrate that even the Jews who escaped into exile seldom found freedom. They were strangers in a strange land, 'washed up' on the "wreck of the history of the German Jews". The intention is for visitors to lose a sense

of balance and to become disorientated because of the slope, causing a slight dizziness to set in. Another message is concealed within the 48 pillars which are filled with soil from Berlin and symbolise the year 1948, when Israel was founded. The tree in the centre pillar is planted with soil from Jerusalem.

The third corridor is the **axis of the Holocaust**: it leads to a large heavy black door behind which rises an empty 24m tower with a dark interior. This stark, unheated undecorated space has only one high narrow window. The bare concrete shaft conveys the feeling of being at the mercy of hopelessness. This, and the five other towers that penetrate the building, are spaces of absence: silent testimonies to a horror that cannot be articulated. These towers

rupture the logic of the building and prevent it from resolving into a traditional museum environment. Because the structure is located outside the museum, diffused light and muffled sounds from the city penetrate the vent in the shaft. People in the Holocaust Tower have the feeling of being "cut off from daily life" just as Jewish Berliners were during the Nazi dictatorship – this is how Libeskind explained the intended perceptions. The tower is the museum's memorial.

The conspicuously jagged floor plan emerged when Libeskind drew lines on a Berlin map that connected historically important personalities and former Jewish neighbourhoods. What interested him were the people who represented "connections between Jewish tradition and German culture". There are almost no right angles in the whole building. Some see it as a lightning bolt while others see a shattered Star of David. Whatever it is, it can be read as a metaphor for the tension that exists in German-Jewish history.

The building is clad in zinc sheeting, like that used on roofs, so it is relatively inexpensive. It also oxidizes gradually, the silver shine disappearing over time, and the surface becomes dull and turns a greenish blue. It is dominated by lines and irregular openings which look like gashes or scars. Their composition is not arbitrary but based on the same system of lines on a Berlin map.

The Jewish Museum is a complex symbolic building, at times disturbing and irrational. This is architecture designed to induce strong emotion, and interestingly many people say it was more powerful before exhibits were installed in 2001. Now the museum is home to more than four thousand objects which tell the story of two thousand years Jewish history in Germany.

