Daniel Libeskind

The Jewish Museum in Berlin: Jewish History Communicated Through Metaphor and Fragmentation

Maggie Cassady
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Introduction

Thesis Statement

Daniel Libeskind, through his use of metaphor in the Jewish Museum in Berlin, communicates the history of the Jewish people, principally in Germany, through the metaphor of a distorted Star of David, voids, and fragmentation.

Background

Born in 1946, Daniel Libeskind is an American architect that has founded his own firms, Studio Daniel Libeskind in Berlin of 1989, and Architect Daniel Libeskind AG in Bern, Switzerland of 2003. His designs have been created into buildings around the world and his Polish Jewish ancestry is a great influence in his work.
Introduction

Philosophical Belief

Daniel Libeskind, when referring to his designing philosophy said that it “...is based in my view that architecture itself is communicative. Each of my buildings tells a unique and particular story reflecting both the programmatic content and the singularity of the site. Fundamental to my thinking and motivation is that buildings and urban projects are crafted with perceptible human energy and that they speak to the larger cultural community in which they are built.”

He is a deconstructionist who believes in using metaphors and fragmentation in his designs to show a deeper meaning to a building. Also his Polish Jewish ancestry greatly influences the way he communicates his designs.
Case Study

Overview

The Jewish Museum was begun in 1992 and opened to the public in 2001. “The museum explicitly presents and integrates, for the first time in post-war Germany, the repercussions of the Holocaust” (daniel-libeskind.com).

Daniel Libeskind wanted to communicate the historical struggle of the Jewish people through his design of the Jewish Museum in Berlin. From the exterior to the interior, every detail has a purpose of connecting the building with Judaism. The historian William J.R. Curtis commented, “Like a bolt of lightning, it cut through societal complacency to repressed but disturbing memories beneath the surface” (Curtis 667).

Libeskind communicated this struggle through three ways, deconstructivism, metaphor, and voids. The movement this architect falls under, deconstruction, communicates Jewish history through fragmentation and distortion that represents the obliteration of the Jewish people. Libeskind’s goal of representing the Jewish people would not be achieved without the metaphors that encompass the entire building. Also the voids in the walls create symbolism of the disconnection of the Jewish body from other people. Finally, the materials used in the building’s creation leave the viewer cold and dismantled, achieving the overall feelings Libeskind wanted to achieve.
Case Study

Deconstructivism

The deconstruction movement is part of postmodern architecture that can be characterized by fragmentation, abstract shapes, manipulation and distortion of structure and elements of buildings. This type of architecture can be easily seen in Libeskind’s Jewish Museum in Berlin.

The overall exterior shape of the building is a distorted Star of David and smaller, fragmented structures are located nearby. The Jewish Museum is completely independent from the original museum. The use of deconstruction techniques for the building is a great choice because it communicates the fragmented and distorted Jewish people’s history because of the brutal treatment they have endured. Also the segments of windows on the walls of the exterior play into the deconstruction of the building as a whole.

The interior is very similar to the exterior in relation to distortion and fragmentation. The walls are made up of non-rectilinear shapes with shards moving through the walls and ceilings in irregular ways. When one examines the interior, it looks like pieces have been broken apart and some taken out to leave distorted and incomplete forms.
Case Study

Metaphor

The splinter of windows on the exterior facade are a metaphor for the pattern of prominent Jewish residence areas in Berlin. “The façade... barely enables conclusions to be drawn as to the building’s interior, the division of neither levels nor rooms being apparent to the observer. Nevertheless, the positioning of the windows – primarily narrow slits – follows a precise matrix. During the design process, [he] plotted the addresses of prominent Jewish and German citizens on a map of pre-war Berlin and joined the points to form an “irrational and invisible matrix” on which he based the language of form, the geometry and shape of the building.” (jmberlin.de)

The windows from the interior follows the same type of metaphor; a map of Jewish residences to embody the people as a whole. The way the rooms and pathways are set up are to be taken as metaphor also. They are to symbolize the broken path of Jewish history throughout time. Going through the museum is like walking through a time line. Curtis stated, “several routes were overlaid in the complex geometry of both plan and section, each of them referring to different departures and transitions in Jewish history.”
Case Study

Voids

“Five cavernous Voids run vertically through the New Building. They have walls of bare concrete, are not heated or air-conditioned and are largely without artificial light, quite separate from the rest of the building. On the upper levels of the exhibition, the Voids are clearly visible with black exterior walls. The Israeli artist Menashe Kadishman’s steel sculpture “Shalechet” (Fallen Leaves) covers the entire floor of one of the five Voids.” (jmberlin.de)

The voids of the museum symbolize the disconnection of the Jewish people because of all that has happened to them over time. Each void contains bare concrete walls, no artificial light, and no heat or air-conditioning. Ultimately, all this should leave the viewer in a somber state. Libeskind wanted the building to make people understand and appreciate all that the Jewish people have gone through in time.

“The Holocaust Void cuts through the zigzagging plan of the new building and creates a space that embodies absence. It is a straight line whose impenetrability becomes the central focus around which exhibitions are organized. In order to move from one side of the museum to the other, visitors must cross one of the 60 bridges that open onto this void.’ (Daniel-libeskind.com)
Conclusion

Summary

“With his remarkable design for the Jewish Museum, he created a new type of communicative architecture. This and his other international projects attest to his ability to convey, through architecture, complex interpretations of history, messages and visions of the future. The Jewish Museum Berlin is Libeskind’s first completed building.” (jmberlin.de)

Daniel Libeskind was successfully able to communicate the oppressive history of the Jewish people in the Jewish Museum in Berlin, through the use of metaphor and fragmentation. This building is a masterpiece that brings to light the horrors and pains of the Jewish people, especially during the time of the Holocaust.

When discussing the Jewish Museum in Berlin he stated, “[f]ar from being an exercise in neo-modernist formalism, this was a work of chilling authenticity, drawing together in its lines of thought both grave, apocalyptic themes, and radical reassessments of the meaning of human destiny.”
Resources


All photos taken from the Studio Daniel Libeskind website and the Jewish Museum Berlin website.