ADDITION TO THE
JEWISH MUSEUM BERLIN
JEWISH HISTORY
THROUGH METAPHOR

DANIEL LIBESKIND

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ARCHITECTURAL THEORIES + CONCEPTS
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INTRODUCTION

THESIS

In his addition to the Jewish Museum Berlin, completed in 1999, Daniel Libeskind communicates the displacement and disassociation of the Jewish people in Germany through his use of metaphor, fragmentation, void, and disorientation.

BACKGROUND

Daniel Libeskind is a Polish-American architect who has been practicing since completing his education in the 1970s. His works are most concentrated in Europe and more recently the United States, and many are related to Jewish culture and history ("Daniel Libeskind" 2014).
INTRODUCTION

PHILOSOPHY

Libeskind believes in architecture as a form of communication:

“For me, a building is a medium to tell a story. It’s not only about itself” (Quoted in Libeskind & Goldberger, 2008).

“Architectural space, as I see it, has to be part of the story it’s trying to communicate. It’s not just a container to be filled; it’s part of the symbolism of the building. And the symbol transports you beyond the material reality and, in architecture, toward that which language itself cannot fully articulate” (Quoted in Libeskind & Goldberger, 2008).

As a deconstructivist, Libeskind often uses explicit metaphors of fragmentation in his works, especially in regards to historical events like wars and the Holocaust.
CASE STUDY

OVERVIEW

The addition to the Jewish Museum Berlin, completed in 1999, “exhibits the social, political and cultural history of the Jews in Germany from the 4th century to the present” (“The Libeskind Building”). Libeskind himself states the three main idea which formed the foundation of the museum:

“First, the impossibility of understanding the history of Berlin without understanding the enormous intellectual, economic, and cultural contribution made by its Jewish citizens; second the necessity to integrate the meaning of the Holocaust, both physically and spiritually, into the consciousness and memory of the city of Berlin; third, that only though acknowledging and incorporating this erasure and void of Berlin’s Jewish life can the history of Berlin and Europe have a human future”

(Quoted in Libeskind & Goldberger, 2008).

“During the design process, the architect Daniel Libeskind 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” (The Libeskind Building).
CASE STUDY

CONCEPT

The building’s overall composition is that of a distorted Star of David, with a straight “void” running through the length of the building. Heavy with symbolism and metaphor, the building uses fragmentation, void, and disorientation to reflect the three aforementioned aspects of Jewish history.
CASE STUDY

EXTERIOR

The most obvious element of the building’s exterior is the fragmented Star of David from which the plan is derived. This is combined with the contrast of the straight line of the void, which can be seen from above in the form of roof elements. Libeskind states, “One is a straight line, but broken into many fragments, the other is a tortuous line, but continuing indefinitely” (Quoted in “The Libeskind Building”).

The theme of fragmentation can be seen in the overall “tortuous” lines of the plan, but also in the window placement. Libeskind plotted the addresses of Jewish citizens on a pre-war map of Berlin and used the matrices to determine the form of the windows—a less obvious but no less powerful metaphor. The theme can also be seen in the lack of right angles or symmetry in almost any part of the building.
While the voids of the interior cannot be seen as clearly from the exterior, the fragmented form still creates voids within its own form. Additionally, there is an extra void building which serves as a Holocaust memorial and stands completely empty, which Libeskind describes as a “voided void” (Quoted in Libeskind & Goldberger, 2008).

The theme of disorientation is also less clear at the exterior level, but the general lack of hierarchical structures or a clear path to or from the addition adds to the theme. The contrast between the old baroque structure and the newer addition may also leave visitors confused.
The main metaphor of the interior of the museum is the void metaphor. Libeskind states that the straight line void cutting through the museum “is the space of Berlin, because it refers to that which can never be exhibited when it comes to Jewish Berlin history. Humanity reduced to ashes” (Quoted in Libeskind 1999). The space is organized in such an unavoidable way that “visitors must cross one of the 60 bridges that open onto this void” (“The Libeskind Building”).

In addition to the void, the fragmentation of the building is clear in the jagged windows and beams crisscrossing above the display spaces.
The other main metaphor of the building’s interior is the split entry route, where visitors are faced with choices mirroring the choices of Jews during the Holocaust:

“The descent leads to three underground axial routes, each of which tells a different story. The first, and longest, traces a path leading to the Stair of Continuity, then up to and through the exhibition spaces of the museum, emphasizing the continuum of history. The second leads out of the building and into the Garden of Exile and Emigration, remembering those who were forced to leave Berlin. The third leads to a dead end — the Holocaust Void.” (“The Libeskind Building”)
First and foremost, the garden, which visitors move through as they exit the museum, “represents an attempt to completely disorient the visitor. It represents a shipwreck of history” (Libeskind 1999). Libeskind achieves this disorientation by tilting the floor. This is especially effective considering the garden appears to be the only structure in the museum to be composed on a grid system of right angles.

Additionally, the vegetation is placed on top of the structural elements, leaving the earth “remote inside concrete columns, roots above, hard ground below, and vegetation intertwined above – out of reach” (Libeskind 1999). This will also serve to disorient a visitor, whose usual conception of a garden features plants rooted in the ground.
Daniel Libeskind uses metaphor, fragmentation, void, and disorientation in ways described in the table below to communicate the suffering of the Jewish people in and out of Berlin.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>METAPHOR</th>
<th>EXTERIOR</th>
<th>INTERIOR</th>
<th>GARDEN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Star of David</td>
<td>• Star of David</td>
<td>• 3 paths of Jews</td>
<td>• “Shipwreck of history”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idea of void</td>
<td>• Idea of void</td>
<td>• Dead ends</td>
<td>• Earth “out of reach”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Window forms from map lines</td>
<td>• Window forms from map lines</td>
<td>• Unavoidability of void</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fragmentation</td>
<td>• Star of David, distorted</td>
<td>• No straight paths</td>
<td>• Lack of fragmentation (only orthogonal grid in building)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Irregular window forms</td>
<td>• Chaotic beam placement</td>
<td>• Garden pushed to top of columns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Lack of right angles</td>
<td>• Void literally cuts through interior</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Void</td>
<td>• Holocaust Tower, “voided void”</td>
<td>• Not heated or air-conditioned</td>
<td>• Empty space between columns</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Lack of displays</td>
<td>• “Tombstones” are anonymous</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Span all floors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disorientation</td>
<td>• Irregular form</td>
<td>• 3 paths at museum entrance cause confusion</td>
<td>• Illusion of regularity, structure</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Lack of hierarchy</td>
<td>• Dead ends</td>
<td>• Tilted floor and sculptural forms</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Contrast between old museum and addition</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Plants out of reach, sight</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONCLUSION

Daniel Libeskind’s addition to the Jewish Museum Berlin utilizes symbolism and metaphor, including fragmentation, void, and disorientation, in order to create a more substantial museum experience for the visitor. Rather than presenting information as museums often do, Libeskind’s Jewish Museum Berlin uses these effects to communicate the aspects of Jewish history, especially the Holocaust, which cannot be expressed in only words.
“Architecture is not a limited field, even though many practice it as such. It affects everyone; it is centrally positioned, so consequently it is part of film, language, the visual and not visual world. The visible art of architecture makes us aware of that which is not visible.”

Daniel Libeskind (Quoted in Libeskind 1999).
9. Bitter Bredt. Holocaust Tower (left) and Garden of Exile (c) [Photograph], Retrieved November 9, 2014 from: http://daniel-libeskind.com/projects