Daniel Libeskind, Jewish Museum in Berlin, 1988-98. View of zinc clad façade. Photo: Stephan Freid.

1988-98. Aerial view showing the museum's abstracted Star of David plan and the adjoining Kollegienhaus. Photo: Stephan Freid.

View of one of the voids.
Photo: Stephan Freid.

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THE VOID:
DANIEL LIBESKIND'S JEWISH MUSEUM AS A COUNTER MONUMENT

In 1938, Lewis Mumford pronounced "the death of the monument in its hopeless incompatibility with a sense of modern architectural forms." This critique of the traditional architecture of memory could be used to describe the current struggle in Germany over symbols for the most painful event in the country's modern history. In spite of the industry that has grown up around Holocaust memorials and the accompanying struggle for turf and for the nature and number of memorials in Berlin, the Jewish Museum of that city has emerged as the most important Holocaust monument or in the term introduced by James E. Young, counter-monument in Germany. Yet, two years after the building's completion, the institution is fraught with ideological and bureaucratic problems and remains closed to the public. In 1988, the Berlin Senate chose Daniel Libeskind to create a new Jewish Museum in Berlin, replacing one destroyed by the Nazis during Kristallnacht. Libeskind was born in Poland in 1946. Soon afterward his family fled to Israel and then to the United States, where he was educated, studying piano at Juilliard and architecture under John Hejduk at Cooper Union. In Berlin's Jewish Museum, Libeskind's second realized project, he replays the relationship between the history of that city and its Jewish population in an architectural form incorporating three voids that metaphorically serve to illustrate the forces at play around the issues of a lost population, the nature of Holocaust monuments in Germany, and the function of the museum.

An internationally recognized Israeli curator, Amnon Barzel, was chosen as the first director of this new Jewish Museum; his vision of the future role of the museum challenged the German Senate's original concept for the institution. One of his wishes, that the Jewish Museum be independent of Berlin's bureaucratic museum structure, has since been granted. But his idea that this institution celebrates the presence of a living Jewish culture, not an extinct one, was misunderstood and rejected. After Barzel's tenure ended, his perspective on the Museum's future role still informed the dialogue under his replacements, two Americans both born in Germany before World War II Michael Blumenthal as director and Tom Freudenheim as deputy director. They were charged to open a museum dedicated both to the history of Jewish life in Germany and, according to Freudenheim, to the "integration of the meaning of the Holocaust." The opening has been postponed: more than once and is now scheduled for September 2001. In April 2000, a new project director was hired, New Zealander Ken Gorbey whose background is in interactive museums, a medium he refers to as "object theater." Gorbey has often been accused of imposing a "Disneyland aesthetic." At the moment, the museum can be viewed only by appointment.

Designed as a splayed and abstracted Star of David, the Jewish Museum sits in strong contrast to its neighbor, a 19th-century Baroque courthouse that is now the Berlin Museum. The reflective zinc-clad facade of Libeskind's museum is broken only by streaks and crosses of thin windows set in an irregular pattern and seems to recede infinitely next to its imposing neighbor. These totally unmatched structures never visibly touch but are linked by an underground passage. From above, in plan, a straight but fragmented linear path opens through the zig-zag layout and continues throughout to create 60 segments, metaphorical references to the severed but enduring history of the Jewish people. Libeskind's architectural representation of the violent excision of the Jews from German history is extended in the convergence of interior and exterior organization and especially in his use of negative space as an expression of absence or void. Of his structure's three voids, he says, "Only through acknowledging and incorporating this erasure and void of Berlin's Jewish life can the history of Berlin and Europe have a human future.

View through main staircase.
Photo: Stephan Freid.

View into the Garden of Exile.
Photo: Stephan Freid.

Philosophy, music and literature inspired Libeskind's architecture and make manifest the disintegration of Jewish/German relations. He introduces the metaphysics of space as in Walter Benjamin's, One Way Street (or the Jorge Luis Borges story, "Death and the Compass"). The exterior shape, the abstracted six-point star, schematically plots an invisible matrix: connecting the former homes of Berlin scientists, composers, writers, and artists who are, for Libeskind, the medium binding Jewish and German cultures. According to the architect, the homes are those of Heinrich von Kleist, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Rahel Varnhagen, Heinrich Heine, Arnold Schonberg, Paul Celan, Mies van der Rohe, and Walter Benjamin.

The Jewish Museum has no exterior entrance or egress; it can only be accessed by moving through the Berlin Museum's main entrance, down a staircase, and into a vertical cylindrical structure, the so-called "voided void." The base of this cylinder cuts through all three levels of the building and presents three underground paths. One leads out to the E.T.A. Hoffmann Garden of Exile and Emigration; another up a stairway to exhibition halls; and the third ends at the Holocaust Tower. The E.T.A. Hoffmann Garden of Exile was named for the 19th-century poet' musician, and lawyer who once worked in the courthouse that is now the Berlin Museum. The garden, paved with cobblestones and tilted at a 17-degree angle, sets the viewer and the 49 monolithic concrete planters, off balance.

Many aspects of the museum's structure, both inside and out, are sensory provocations designed to alter one's ordinary experience of space and everyday life, to say nothing of the ordinary museum experience. The main stairs (made of slate, with gridded steel landings) provide a sense of stability but are unbalanced by the ceiling beams that jut like buttresses gone awry. Windows incised into the concrete walls expose fragmented views of the city, while the cables stretched along window sills, meant to keep pigeons off, suggest an interior cut off from the larger world.

Both the materials as metaphor and the bodily experience of the building create a sense of a foreboding and claustrophobia particularly in the cylindrical Holocaust Tower. Upon entering, a large heavy door slams behind the viewer, and the steel-grated floor turns to rough concrete transforming the sound of footsteps into menacing footfalls. Light filtering through a window slit suggests the limited visibility behind the wooden slats of a railroad boxcar or a prison cell, and only small ventilation holes warm the space.

The exhibition halls, with their fragmented central pathway, also express an emptiness that symbolizes the internalization of historical disaster for a society whose residual lack is its exterminated population. Names engraved along the internal wall are those of Berlin's extinguished Jews. They are taken from a Nazi "ledger of death," the Gedenbuch, two volumes provided by the Presse und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung in Bonn. The fragmented line of the pathway refers to Walter Benjamin's One Way Street and divides into sections along the zigzag of the building, each representing one of the "Stations of the Star" described in Benjamin's text.

What shape can emptiness take? Libeskind says, "The past fatality of the German Jewish cultural relation in Berlin is enacted now in the realm of the invisible. The new extensions are conceived as an emblem where the "not visible" has made itself apparent as a void. The idea was to build the museum around this concept of a void that runs through it, a void that is to be experienced by the public." The artifacts originally planned to be displayed were records, objects, and documents belonging to the Jewish religion and Jewish tradition and would have included the destiny of the Berlin Jewish community and the recognition of the work and lives of the Jewish people who had a formative effect on the history of Berlin.

However important this documentation, Libeskind's bold, complex, and emotional design imposes its dominance over any exhibitions one can imagine. In its articulation of three primary voids, Libeskind's architecture contributes to a dialogue among German sculptors whose counter-monuments articulate absence. Their discussion involves the basic problem of memorializing an event such as the Holocaust while questioning the traditional monument form. As James E. Young says, "German national memory remains so torn and convoluted: it is that of a nation tortured by its conflicted desire to build a new and just state on the bedrock memory, its horrendous crimes."

The building of Holocaust monuments has been an obsession in Germany since World War II and has led to the re-evaluation of the classical monument, which has come to symbolize the

authoritarian style exploited by the Nazis. The new counter-monumentalists also claim that, generally, commemorative markers spring from a desire to forget. German historian Martin Broszat says: "Classic or traditional monuments are often authoritarian or grandiose in scale and may not remember events so much as bury them beneath layers of national myths and explanations." He argues that memory is an internalized picture, that invisibility makes one remember, and that a void best symbolizes the absence of an extinguished population.

Artists employing the void seek to signify the absence of those who were annihilated. Donald Kuspit has said that in the work of contemporary German artists such as Rebecca Horn, Wolfgang Laib, Martin Kippenberger, and Reinhard Mucha "the body is present by reason of its tragic absence... [their] works deal with uninhabited space, space with something missing but implied, a space of human presence which seems to fit no particular human being, and as such a space that is more haunting than any human being and body that might move through it." Such a use of space is echoed in Libeskind's work and in that of sculptors Norbert Radermacher, Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz, Horst Hoheisel, and Melissa Gould, who are among those who have built counter-monuments in Germany based on a void or a vanished presence.

The Harburg Monument Against Fascism, by Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz, was unveiled in 1986 in Harburg, a gritty blue-collar suburb of Hamburg. A hollow aluminum pillar, 212 meters high and one meter square, was plated with a thin layer of dark lead. Near the base, a temporary inscription in many languages described the objective of the project: although no direct call to memory of a specific event was invoked, the text charged each viewer/participant with responsibility to fight fascism. Steel-pointed styluses were attached at each corner of the base, inviting all to incise their names into its lead surface. Little by little, as the face of the column became covered with names and graffiti, it was lowered into a chamber of its exact dimensions in the earth and is now completely entombed. It is no surprise that the column became a controversial magnet for graffiti, including the inevitable swastikas and vulgar language. The artists calmly responded that "the inclusion of graffiti removes the hierarchical relationship between the artist (maker), the object (memorialized), and the public (viewer) and symbolizes the destruction of fascism in both art and politics Conceptually emerging from the self-destroying machine of Jean Tinguely, the vanishing monument challenges the very idea of monumentality and its implied permanence.

Like its Harburg cousin, Norbert Radermacher's memorial integrates written text that disappears. Unlike the column, the text reappears, activated by each passerby. It is located on the site of a former forced labor camp, KZ-Aussenlager, one of Sachsenhausen's satellite camps in the Neukolln district of Berlin. The site is now a sports field surrounded by trees, houses, and fences, with no outward signs of its former function.

People walking by the field trip a light beam that triggers a high intensity slide projection of a text describing the history of the site. The projection moves from the trees surrounding the field across the houses and pavement like a spotlight, in accusation or search, and changes visually with the atmosphere or the time of day. This narrative becomes part of each viewers memory and reverberates even as the projection fades and the field returns to apparent innocence. Highlighting a void in this ephemeral way, Radermacher's work renews memory with each passerby.

A third counter-monument cited by Young, the new Aschrott Fountain in Kassel's City Hall Square (designed by Horst Hoheisel), also reunites memory and site. It is a negative mirror of the original neo-Gothic pyramidal fountain with reflecting pool, designed by Karl Roth in 1908 and donated by the Jewish entrepreneur Sigmund Aschrott. The Nazis destroyed this fountain, calling it a "Jews' fountain." After the war, it was turned back into a generic fountain with no sign of its original shape or significance.

In l984, in response to this kind of amnesia, the Society for the Rescue of Historical Monuments proposed that some form of the fountain and its history be resuscitated to recall all the founders of the city, and especially, Aschrott. Horst Hoheisel, challenged by the project, took Roth's original design and turned the obelisk upside down like a black funnel. It connects now as a black hole and as a reminder of both the history of Aschrott's original gift and the fate of the annihilated Jews of Kassel. An example of a counter-monument in another medium is the 1991 transient work by artist Melissa Gould in collaboration with the composer Alvin Curran. Gould embedded 110 fluorescent light tubes slightly below ground, tracing the ghostly floor plan of a Berlin synagogue (the Reformgemeinde at Johannasstrasse 16) that was

destroyed in Kristallnacht's arson. The physical re-experience of that disappeared temple is accompanied by Curran's sound piece Notes from Underground, inspired by the late American composer Morton Feldman's comment about Germany: ``The dead are screaming out from under the sidewalks." Curran employs human and animal voices, as well as industrial noises on a tape played over hidden loudspeakers buried around the periphery of the installation. The work was first exhibited at the Ars Electronica Festival in Linz, Austria, in 1991, then again in 1997 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Gould has proposed it for permanent siting in Berlin.

All of these artists avoid the problem of the inability of the reified object to embody a meaning that is essentially unrepresentable; their objective instead is to give physical meaning to absence. Yet the Jewish Museum's significance as the architectural counterpart to this dialogue of the void is complicated by the fact that it is supposed to be a museum of Jewish history in Germany as well. In that capacity, it was intended to house collections taken over from the city museum, the library, and the Berlin archive (and may contain the interactive installations apparently planned by Ken Gorbey).

In 1999, Tom Freudenheim (who has since left the museum) told me that, "as soon as Libeskind was chosen as the architect it became, de facto, a monument of sorts. It is a very strong statement and has a lot of character. It is not another neutral museum building, we have plenty of those. In addition, it has the Holocaust Tower and The Exile Garden, and these have monument characteristics... Libeskind's museum is also about memory, but one is moved on a subtle sensory level through the materials and especially the voids".

Libeskind's design states its meaning and purpose precisely through its architectural form; it speaks of the history of the Berlin Jews, of their expulsion, their destruction, and their historical fractures. However, designated as it is as a museum of the history and culture of Jewish life and its contribution to the culture of Germany and Europe, the building may become problematic. Not only will its significance as counter-monument be diluted, but the intrusion of exhibitions (even if not Disneyesque and no matter how educationally enlightening) may be confusing. The detritus of everyday life could suggest the remains of an extinct population, as do collections of ethnographic museums like the Musee de l'Homme in Paris, or the Museum of the American Indian in New York. Unlike the Jewish Museum in New York, which is housed in a mansion once owned by the Warburgs, a successful Jewish family in a city with a large and vibrant population of Jews, the Berlin Museum's Jewish annex, as a "place for learning," could be construed as a salve to the collective guilt of the German people, or worse, as an ossification of an extinct European Jewish culture.

But, if not in this museum, in this city, where else can the weight of the Jewish contribution to German culture and the enormous void left by the crimes of the war and pre-war years be properly memorialized? It is inevitable that the museum will have to function as an educational facility, but one hopes that the architecture will be allowed its own clarity and its own message.

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