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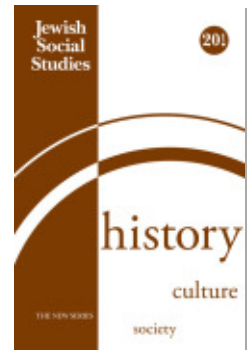
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## Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin: The Uncanny Arts of Memorial Architecture

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## Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin: The Uncanny Arts of Memorial Architecture

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[According to Schelling], the uncanny  
[is] something which ought to have re-  
mained hidden but has come to light.

—Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny”

**H**ow does a city “house” the memory of a people no longer at “home” there? How does a city like Berlin invite a people like the Jews back into its official past after having driven them so murderously from it? Such questions may suggest their own, uncanny answers: a “Jewish Museum” in the capital city of a nation that not so long ago voided itself of Jews, making them alien strangers in a land they had considered “home,” will not by definition be *heimlich* but must be regarded as *unheimlich*—or, as our translation would have it, uncanny. The dilemma facing the designer of such a museum thus becomes how to embody this sense of *unheimlichkeit*, or uncanniness, in a medium like architecture, which has its own long tradition of *heimlichkeit*, or homeliness. Moreover, can the construction of a contemporary architecture remain entirely distinct from, even oblivious to, the history it shelters? Is its spatial existence ever really independent of its contents?

In their initial conception of what they then regarded as a Jewish Museum “extension” to the Berlin Museum, city planners hoped to recognize both the role Jews had once played as co-creators of Berlin’s history and culture and that the city was fundamentally haunted by its

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Jewish absence. Yet the very notion of an “autonomous” Jewish Museum struck them as problematic: the museum wanted to show the importance and far-reaching effect of Jewish culture on the city’s history, to give it the prominence it deserved. But many also feared dividing German from Jewish history, inadvertently recapitulating the Nazis’ own segregation of Jewish culture from German. This would have been to reimpose a distinct line between the history and cultures of two people—Germans and Jews—whose fates had been inextricably mingled for centuries in Berlin. From the beginning, planners realized that this would be no mere reintroduction of Jewish memory into Berlin’s civic landscape but an excavation of memory already there, though long suppressed.

Freud may have described such a phenomenon best: “This uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression. . . . The uncanny [is] something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light.”<sup>1</sup> Thus would Berlin’s Jewish Museum generate its own sense of a disquieting return, the sudden revelation of a previously buried past. Indeed, if the very idea of the uncanny arises, as Freud suggests, from the transformation of something that once seemed familiar and homely into something strange and “unhomely,” then how better to describe the larger plight of Jewish memory in Germany today? Moreover, if “unhomeliness” for Freud was, as Anthony Vidler suggests, “the fundamental propensity of the familiar to turn on its owners, suddenly to become defamiliarized, derealized, as if in a dream,”<sup>2</sup> then how better to describe contemporary Germany’s relationship with its own Jewish past? At least part of the uncanniness in such a project stems from the sense that at any moment the “familiar alien” will burst forth, even when it never does, thus leaving one always ill at ease, even a little frightened with anticipation—hence, the constant, free-floating anxiety that seems to accompany every act of Jewish memorialization in Germany today.

After Vidler’s magnificent reading of the “architectural uncanny,” I would also approach what I am calling an “uncanny memorial architecture” as “a metaphor for a fundamentally unlivable modern condition.”<sup>3</sup> But rather than looking for uncanny memory per se, or uncanny memorials or architecture, we might (after Vidler) look only for those uncanny qualities in memorial architecture. In fact, what Robin Lydenberg aptly sees in “uncanny narrative” might be applied here to a particular kind of uncanny memorial architecture, as well: the stabilizing function of architecture, by which the familiar is made to appear part of a naturally ordered landscape, will be subverted by the antithetical

effects of the unfamiliar.<sup>4</sup> It is a memorial architecture that invites us into its seemingly hospitable environs only to estrange itself from us immediately on entering.

By extension, the memorial uncanny might be regarded as that which is necessarily anti-redemptive. It is that memory of historical events which never domesticates such events, never makes us at home with them, never brings them into the reassuring house of redemptory meaning. It is to leave such events unredeemable yet still memorable, unjustifiable yet still graspable in their causes and effects.

In designing a museum for such memory, the architect is charged with housing memory that is neither at home with itself nor necessarily housable at all. It is memory redolent with images of the formerly familiar but that now seems to defamiliarize and estrange the present moment and the site of its former home. Whether found in Shimon Attie's estrangement of contemporary sites with the images of their past, or in Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock's reintroduction of anti-Jewish laws into formerly Jewish neighborhoods emptied of Jews by these very laws, such memory marks the fraught relationship between present-day Germany and its Jewish past.

In the pages that follow, I would like to tell the story of architect Daniel Libeskind's extraordinary response to the dilemma Berlin faces in trying to reintegrate its lost Jewish past. Because this story is necessarily part of a larger history of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, I begin with a brief history of this museum's own genesis in pre-war Berlin in order to contextualize the museum's place in the mind of Libeskind himself. I then follow with the city planners' more contemporary conceptualization of the museum, its impossible questions, and I conclude with Libeskind's nearly impossible-to-build architectural response. The aim here will not be merely to explain Libeskind's startling design but to show how, as a process, it articulates the dilemma Germany faces whenever it attempts to formalize the self-inflicted void at its center: the void of its lost and murdered Jews.

### **The Jewish Museum and the Berlin Museum**

It was with catastrophic timing that Berlin's first Jewish Museum opened in January 1933, one week before Adolph Hitler was installed as chancellor. Housed in a refurbished series of exhibition halls at the Oranienburger Strasse complex already home to the spectacular synagogue there as well as to the Jewish community center and library, Berlin's first Jewish Museum opened quite deliberately in the face of the Nazi rise to

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power with an exhibition of work by artists of the Berlin Secessionists, led by the German Jewish artist Max Liebermann.<sup>5</sup> It is almost as if the museum had hoped to establish the institutional fact of an inextricably linked German Jewish culture, each a permutation of the other, as a kind of challenge to the Nazis' assumption of an essential hostility between German and Jewish cultures.

But even here, the very notion of what constituted a "Jewish Museum" was a matter of contention for the community itself: would the museum show art on Jewish religious themes by both Jewish and non-Jewish artists? Or would it show anything by Jewish artists? The question of what constituted "Jewish art" had now been broached. Indeed, from its origins onward, questions of "Jewishness," "Germanness," and even "Europeanness" in art exhibited by the museum began to undercut the case for something called a "Jewish Museum" in Berlin. So when the museum opened with a show of Liebermann's work in 1933, the very idea of a taxonomy of religious communities and their art seemed an affront to the most assimilated of Berlin's Jews. The Jewish art historian and director of the Berlin Library of Arts, Curt Glaser, attacked both the idea of a "Jewish Museum" in Berlin and the presumption that Liebermann's work was, by dint of his Jewish birth only, somehow essentially Jewish—even though there was nothing thematically Jewish in the work itself. Such a show, Glaser wrote at the time,

leads to a split, which is totally undesirable and from an academic point of view in no way justifiable. Liebermann, for example, is a European. He is a German, a Berlin artist. The fact that he belongs to a Jewish family is totally irrelevant with regards to the form and essence of his art.<sup>6</sup>

Thus was an integrationist model for the Jewish Museum in Berlin first proposed and first challenged within days of the museum's official opening.<sup>7</sup>

Despite constant pressure by the Nazis over the next five years, the Jewish Museum went on to mount several more exhibitions of German Jewish artists and their milieu. But with the advent of the Nuremberg laws defining "the Jew" as essentially "un-German," the Nazis suddenly forbade all but Jews to visit the museum and all but Jewish artists to exhibit there. With this sleight of legislative hand, the Nazis thus transformed the institutional "fact" of an inextricably linked German Jewish culture into a segregated ghetto of art and culture by Jews for Jews. Moreover, as "Jewish art," all that was shown there was officially classified as "*entartete*," or decadent. Just as the Nazis would eventually collect Jewish artifacts to exhibit in a planned museum "to the extinct Jewish

race,” they turned the Jewish Museum into a de jure museum for *entartete Kunst*.

Whether assimilated to Nazi law or not, like the other Jewish institutions in its complex on Oranienburger Strasse and across the Reich, the Jewish Museum was first damaged and then plundered during the pogrom on Kristallnacht, November 10, 1938. Its new director, Franz Landsberger, was arrested and sent to Sachsenhausen before eventually emigrating to England and the United States. The museum itself was dismantled, and its entire collection of art and artifacts was confiscated by Nazi authorities. Some 400 paintings from the collection were eventually found in the cellars of the former Ministry for Culture of the Reich on Schlüterstrasse after the war. According to Martina Weinland and Kurt Winkler, the entire cache of paintings was seized by the Jewish Relief Organization and handed over to the Bezalel National Museum in Jerusalem, which would later become the Israel Museum.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, Berlin’s Märkische Museum, which had been established in 1876 to tell the story of the city’s rise from a provincial hub to the capital of a reunified German Reich, continued to thrive. Like the exhibitions of any official institution, those at the Märkische Museum reflected the kinds of self-understanding dominant in any given era—from the Weimar period to the Nazi Reich, from postwar Berlin to the communist takeover of the East. But when the Berlin Wall was erected in August 1961, West Berliners suddenly found themselves cut off from the Märkische Museum, now located behind the wall in the east. Hoping to preserve the memory of single, unified Berlin as bulwark against its permanent division and unwilling to cede control of the city’s “official history” to the party apparatchiks of the east, a citizens’ committee proposed a Berlin Museum for the western sector, which the Berlin Senate approved and founded in 1962.

Thus founded in direct response to the rending of the city by the Berlin Wall, the Berlin Museum moved from one improvised home to another in the western sector of the city. Only in 1969 did it finally find a permanent home under the roof of what had been the “Colliegenhaus”—a Baroque administrative building designed and built by Philipp Gerlach for the “Soldier King” Friedrich Wilhelm I in 1735—located on Lindenstrasse in what had once been the center of Southern Friedrichstadt. Gutted and nearly destroyed during Allied bombing raids during World War II, the Colliegenhaus had been carefully restored during the 1960s and would now provide some 2,500 square meters of exhibition space for the new Berlin Museum. The aim of the museum would be to represent and document both the cultural and historical legacies of the city—through an ever-growing collection of art, maps, artifacts, plans,

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models, and urban designs—all to show the long evolution of Berlin from a regional Prussian outpost to capital of the German Reich between 1876 and 1945. But because of a chronic lack of space, a large part of its holdings—including its departments of Theatrical History and Judaica, among others—had been more or less permanently consigned to the museological purgatory of storage and scattered in depots throughout the city.

Even as the Berlin Museum searched for a permanent home during the 1960s, Heinz Galinski, then head of West Berlin's Jewish community, publicly declared that the city was also obligated to build a Jewish Museum to replace the one destroyed by the Nazis in 1938. All but the main building of the Oranienburger Strasse Synagogue complex had been damaged beyond repair during the war and demolished in 1958, so the museum (which had been located inside the building) could not be rebuilt on its original site. Moreover, because it was located in the eastern sector of the city, it would be as inaccessible to the west as the Märkische Museum itself. According to social historian Robin Ostow, Galinski told the Berlin city council that he did not want a mere replication of the ghetto at the higher level of a cultural institution. Rather, he wanted the history of Berlin's Jews to be exhibited in the Berlin Museum as part of the city's own history.<sup>9</sup> Here the laudable (if nearly impossible to execute) "integrationist model" of Jewish and Berlin history once again found its voice.

With this mandate added to its own, the Berlin Museum began to collect materials and artifacts on Jewish history for what it hoped would be an autonomous Jewish department within the museum. In 1971, two years after opening in the Colliegenhaus on Lindenstrasse, the Berlin Museum mounted its first exhibition devoted to Jewish life in Berlin, a gigantic show entitled "Contribution and Fate: 300 Years of the Jewish Community in Berlin, 1671–1971." Although it focused primarily on famous Jewish Berliners from the 1920s and seemed to embody an intense nostalgia for the "*heile Welt*" (holy world) of pre-Nazi Germany, according to Ostow, this exhibit also inspired further public discussion around the need for an autonomous Jewish Museum within the Berlin Museum.

In 1975, the Berlin Senate established a Jewish "department" within the Berlin Museum. In consultation with Galinski, the Senate announced that "close association with the Berlin Museum in the shape of one of its departments protects the Jewish Museum from isolation and conveys an interwoven relationship with the whole [of] Berlin cultural history."<sup>10</sup> The "Society for a Jewish Museum" was also established, with Galinski as its chair; its express mandate was to promote the Jewish

Museum “as a department of the Berlin Museum.” But by this time, Frankfurt had already built an independent Jewish Museum, and a Berlin citizens’ group calling itself “Friends of the Jewish Museum” continued to agitate for a separate building for the Jewish Museum in Berlin. And once again, the debate revolved around an irresolvable paradox, articulated in a 1985 op-ed article in *Die Welt*: “Nowhere else was the image of the successful German Jewish symbiosis regarded with more conviction than in pre-1933 Berlin; yet Berlin was also the chief starting point for the years of terror, 1933 to 1945. The history of Berlin will always be interwoven with the history of the Berlin Jews.”<sup>11</sup> The writer concludes that, because an autonomous Jewish Museum could never compensate for the terrible loss of Berlin’s Jewish community, the “establishment of a Jewish museum in the Berlin of today is neither meaningful nor necessary.”<sup>12</sup> His solution, like the Senate’s and Galinski’s, would be to locate the remaining Jewish collections in the Berlin Museum proper, to reintegrate them into Berlin’s own story of itself.

Between 1982 and 1987, the debate around the Jewish Museum assumed two parallel tracks: one over whether or not to locate it outside of the Berlin Museum; the other over where it would be sited if located outside the Berlin Museum. A number of venues were proposed by various groups and opposed by others, including the Moritzplatz and Hollmannstrasse; others, like the Ephraim Palais, became politically and logistically untenable. In 1986, while various sites for the Jewish Museum were still being debated, the Prinz-Albrecht Palais was even suggested to the Society for the Jewish Museum, to which the society responded indignantly: “Should this of all palaces become a symbol of Berlin Judaism? The culture of the murdered in the house of the murderers? No more needs to be said.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, no more was said on locating the Jewish Museum in the former Berlin home of the Nazi party.

In November 1986, the Jewish Museum department of the Berlin Museum was moved temporarily to the Martin Gropius Bau, where it could exhibit a portion of its holdings. The status of its new home was best described by Volker Hassemer, senator for culture, at its opening:

The new display rooms [at the Gropius Bau] are a milestone in the gradual process to reconstruct and extend the Jewish department of the Berlin Museum. . . . They remain, nonetheless—and this must be stated quite frankly to the public—a temporary solution on the path to the ideal solution desired by us all. That is, a Jewish department as a recognizable component of the Berlin Museum. . . . We must make it quite clear that the creators and the products of this culture were not something “exotic,” not something alienated from this city and its cultural life, but that they were and still are a part of its history. . . . In view of this obligation . . . , I am convinced it is

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[8] both correct and justified not to develop the Jewish department of the Berlin Museum as the core of an independent Jewish Museum in Berlin, but as an independent department within the Berlin Museum.<sup>14</sup>

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This view was corroborated by Hanns-Peter Herz, chair of the Society for a Jewish Museum, who also stated plainly, “We do not want a special museum for the Berlin Jews, but a Jewish department within the Berlin Museum.”<sup>15</sup>

In 1988, the Senate agreed to approve financing for a “Jewish Museum Department” that would remain administratively under the roof of the Berlin Museum but that would have its own, autonomous building. A prestigious international competition was called in December 1988 for a building design that would both “extend” the Berlin Museum and give the “Jewish Museum Department” its own space. But because this was also a time when city planners were extremely sensitive to the destructive divisiveness of the Berlin Wall itself, which the Berlin Museum had been founded to overcome, they remained wary of any kind of spatial demarcation between the museum and its “Jewish Museum Department”—hence, the unwieldy name with which they hoped to finesse the connection between the two: “Extension of the Berlin Museum with the Jewish Museum Department.”

According to planners, the Jewish wing would be both autonomous and integrative, the difficulty being to link a museum of civic history with the altogether uncivil treatment of that city’s Jews. The questions such a museum raises are as daunting as they are potentially paralyzing: How to do this in a form that would not suggest reconciliation and continuity? How to reunite Berlin and its Jewish part without suggesting a seamless rapprochement? How to show Jewish history and culture as part of German history without subsuming it altogether? How to show Jewish culture as part of and separate from German culture without recirculating all the old canards of “a people apart”?

Rather than skirting these questions, the planners confronted them unflinchingly in an extraordinary conceptual brief for the competition that put such questions at the heart of the design process. According to the text by Rolf Bothe (then director of the Berlin Museum) and Vera Bendt (then director of the Jewish Museum Department of the Berlin Museum), a Jewish museum in Berlin would have to comprise three primary areas of consideration: (1) the Jewish religion, customs, and ritual objects; (2) the history of the Jewish community in Germany, its rise and terrible destruction at the hands of the Nazis; and (3) the lives and works of Jews who left their mark on the face and the history of Berlin over the centuries.<sup>16</sup> But in elaborating these areas, the authors of

the conceptual brief also challenged potential designers to acknowledge the terrible void that made this museum necessary. If part of the aim here had been the reinscription of Jewish memory and the memory of the Jews' murder into Berlin's otherwise indifferent civic culture, then another part would be to reveal the absence in postwar German culture demanding this reinscription.

Most notably, in describing the history of Berlin's Jewish community, the authors made clear that not only were the city's history and Jews' history inseparable from each other, but that nothing (certainly not a museum) could redeem the expulsion and murder of Berlin's Jews,

a fate whose terrible significance should not be lost through any form of atonement or even through the otherwise effective healing power of time. *Nothing in Berlin's history ever changed the city more than the persecution, expulsion, and murder of its own Jewish citizens. This change worked inwardly, affecting the very heart of the city.*<sup>17</sup>

In thus suggesting that the murder of Berlin's Jews was the single greatest influence on the shape of this city, the planners also seem to imply that the new Jewish extension of the Berlin Museum may even constitute the hidden center of Berlin's own civic culture, a focal point for Berlin's historical self-understanding.

### **Daniel Libeskind's Uncanny Design**

Guided by this conceptual brief, city planners issued an open invitation to all architects of the Federal Republic of Germany in December 1988. In addition, they invited another 12 architects from outside Germany, among them the American architect Daniel Libeskind, then living in Milan. Born in Lodz in 1946 to the survivors of a Polish Jewish family almost decimated in the Holocaust, Libeskind had long wrestled with many of the brief's questions, finding them nearly insoluble at the architectural level. Trained first as a virtuoso keyboardist who came to the United States with violinist Yitzchak Perlman in 1960 on an American-Israeli Cultural Foundation Fellowship, Libeskind says he gave up music when, in his words, there was no more technique to learn. He then turned to architecture and its seemingly inexhaustible reserve of technique. He studied at Cooper Union in New York under the tutelage of John Hejduk and Peter Eisenman, two of the founders and practitioners of "deconstructivist architecture." Thus, in his design for a Jewish Museum in Berlin, Libeskind proposed not so much a solution to the

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[10] planners' conceptual conundrum as he did its architectural articulation. The series of drawings he submitted to the committee in mid-1989 have come to be regarded as masterpieces of process art as well as architectural design.

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Of the 165 designs submitted from around the world for the competition that closed in June 1989, Libeskind's struck the jury as the most brilliant and complex, possibly as unbuildable. It was awarded first prize and thereby became the first work of Libeskind's ever to be commissioned.<sup>18</sup> Where the other finalists had concerned themselves primarily with the technical feat of reconciling this building to its surroundings in a way that met the building authority's criteria, and to establishing a separate but equal parity between the Berlin Museum and its Jewish Museum Department, Libeskind had devoted himself to the spatial enactment of a philosophical problem. As Kurt Forster had once described another design in this vein, this would be "all process rather than product."<sup>19</sup> And as an example of process-architecture, according to Libeskind, this building "is always on the verge of Becoming—no longer suggestive of a final solution."<sup>20</sup> In its series of complex trajectories, irregular linear structures, fragments, and displacements, this building is also on the verge of unbecoming—a breaking down of architectural assumptions, conventions, and expectations.

His drawings for the museum thus look more like the sketches of the museum's ruins, a house whose wings have been scrambled and reshaped by the jolt of genocide. It is a devastated site that would now enshrine its broken forms. In this work, Libeskind asks, if architecture can be representative of historical meaning, can it also represent unmeaning and the search for meaning? The result is an extended building broken in several places. The straight void-line running through the plan violates every space through which it passes, turning otherwise uniform rooms and halls into misshapen anomalies, some too small to hold anything, others so oblique as to estrange anything housed within them. The original design also included inclining walls, at angles too sharp for hanging exhibitions.

From Libeskind's earliest conceptual brief onward, the essential drama of mutually exclusive aims and irreconcilable means was given full, unapologetic play. For him, it was the impossible questions that mattered most: How to give voice to an absent Jewish culture without presuming to speak for it? How to bridge an open wound without mending it? How to house under a single roof a panoply of essential oppositions and contradictions?<sup>21</sup> He thus allowed his drawings to work through the essential paradoxes at the heart of his project: how to give

a void form without filling it in? How to give architectural form to the formless and to challenge the very attempt to house such memory?

Before beginning, Libeskind replaced the very name of the project—“Extension of the Berlin Museum with the Jewish Museum Department”—with his own more poetic rendition, “Between the Lines”:

I call it [Between the Lines] because it is a project about two lines of thinking, organization, and relationship. One is a straight line, but broken into many fragments; the other is a tortuous line, but continuing indefinitely. These two lines develop architecturally and programmatically through a limited but definite dialogue. They also fall apart, become disengaged, and are seen as separated. In this way, they expose a void that runs through this museum and through architecture, a discontinuous void.<sup>22</sup>

Through a twisting and jagged lightening bolt of a building, Libeskind has run a straight-cut void, slicing through it and even extending outside of it: an empty, unused space bisecting the entire building. According to Libeskind, “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.”<sup>23</sup> As he makes clear, this void is indeed the building’s structural rib, its main axis, a central bearing wall that bears only its own absence.

Indeed, it is not the building itself that constitutes his architecture but the spaces inside the building, the voids and absence embodied by empty spaces: that which is constituted not by the lines of his drawings but by those spaces between the lines. By building voids into the heart of his design, Libeskind thus highlights the spaces between walls as the primary element of his architecture. The walls themselves are important only insofar as they lend shape to these spaces and define their borders. It is the void “between the lines” that Libeskind seeks to capture here, a void so real, so palpable, and so elemental to Jewish history in Berlin as to be its focal point after the Holocaust—a negative center of gravity around which Jewish memory now assembles.<sup>24</sup>

In fact, as we see from a glance at his earlier series entitled “Micro-megas,” Libeskind’s preoccupation with absences, voids, and silences predates by several years his design for the Jewish Museum. In this series of drawings from 1978, Libeskind attempts to sever the connection altogether between form and function. If, until then, architecture had taught that form was function, he hoped to show that form could be much more than merely functional—by being much less. Here he has exploded geometrical shapes into their components, rearranging them

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in ways to show affinities and dissimilarities between their parts and other shapes.

[12] Unable to disregard the musical compositions of Weber, Schoenberg, and Cage already so deeply embedded in his consciousness, Libeskind added a series called “Chamber Works” in 1983, subtitled “Meditations on a Theme from Heraclitus.” Music, art, architecture, and history all formed the interstices of these compositions. In these drawings, a complex of lines gives way to empty space, which comes into view as the subject of these drawings, which are meant only to circumscribe spaces, to show spaces as contained by lines. In “Chamber Works,” the last in these experimental series, Eisenman finds that Libeskind leaves only traces of the journey of his process behind.<sup>25</sup> Though as traces, these too almost seem to evaporate, so that by the end this series, there is a gradual collapse of structure back into the elemental line, thin and drawn out, more space than ink, which is almost gone. In his 1988 work “Line of Fire,” Libeskind takes this single line, folds and breaks it—and thereby transforms it from not-architecture to the buildable.

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As Forster points out, Libeskind’s 1989 design for the Jewish Museum descends not only from “Line of Fire” but also from myriad sources poetic, artistic, musical, and architectural:<sup>26</sup> from Paul Klee’s enigmatic sketches of Berlin as site of “Destruction and Hope,” to Jakob G. Tscernikow’s studies of multiple fold and intercalated shapes in his *Foundations of Modern Architecture* (1930), to Paul Celan’s “Gesprach im Gerbirg” (1959). In its compressed and zigzagging folds, as Forster shows, Libeskind’s design echoes both exercises and disruptions of architecture and art from before the war. Forster thus highlights the striking parallels between Klee’s post–World War I sketches of Berlin as a site of “Destruction and Hope” and Libeskind’s own idiosyncratic site-location map of Berlin.

Before designing the physical building itself, Libeskind began by situating the museum in what might be called his own metaphysical map of Berlin, constituted not so much by urban topography as it was by the former residences of its composers, writers, and poets—that is, the cultural matrix of their lives in Berlin. In Libeskind’s words,

Great figures in the drama of Berlin who have acted as bearers of a great hope and anguish are traced into the lineaments of this museum. . . . Tragic premonition (Kleist), sublimated assimilation (Varnhagen), inadequate ideology (Benjamin), mad science (Hoffmann), displaced understanding (Schleiermacher), inaudible music (Schoenberg), last words (Celan): these constitute the critical dimensions which this work as discourse seeks to transgress.<sup>27</sup>

All were transgressors of the received order, and out of these transgressions, culture was born. In Libeskind's view, the only true extension of the culture that Berlin's Jews helped to generate would also have to transgress it.

Little of which, it must be said, was readily apparent to jurors on their first encounter with Libeskind's proposal. Indeed, as one juror admitted, this was not a case of "love at first sight." The entire group had to work hard to decipher Libeskind's complex series of multilayered drawings: a daunting maze of lines broken and reconnected, interpenetrations, self-enclosed wedges, superimposed overlaps. But, as they did, the difficulty of the project itself began to come into view along with its articulation in Libeskind's brief. On peeling away each layer from the one under it, jurors found that the project's deeper concept came into startling relief. It was almost as if the true dilemma at the heart of their project was not apparent to them until revealed in Libeskind's design. The further they probed, the richer and more complex the design's significance became until only it seemed to embody—in all of its difficulty—the essential challenge of the project itself.

Nevertheless, there was some concern among jurors that in the face of such a stupendously monumental piece of architecture, one that wears its significance and symbolic import openly and unashamedly, the contents of the museum itself would wither in comparison. As a work of art in its own right, worried the museum's director, Bothe, "The museum building might seem to make its contents subordinate and insignificant."<sup>28</sup> Indeed, given the early design, which included walls slanted at angles too oblique for mounting and corners too tight for installations, this museum seemed to forbid showing much else beside itself: it would be its own content. Others worried that such a radical design would in the end generate too much resistance among traditional preservationists and urban planners. Was it wise, they wondered, to choose a design that might not actually get built?

The mayor of Kreuzberg, the district of Berlin in which the museum would be built, also continued to resist the design. In his words, "A design was expected that would relate to the proportions of the existing building, fit in inconspicuously into the green ribbon, and leave space for the mundane needs of the local people for green spaces and playgrounds."<sup>29</sup> For both the mayor and the borough's official architect, Libeskind's provocative vision seemed to be at direct odds with their desire to preserve the green spaces and playgrounds there. This was a pleasant place for the people to come relax and it seems, to forget their troubles, both present and past. But in the end, even city-architect

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[14] Franziska Eichstadt-Böhlig agreed that perhaps it was time to “face up to the interpenetration of German and Jewish history after having repressed it for 40 years.”<sup>30</sup>

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Other doubts centered on Libeskind himself. Falkk Jaeger, an architectural critic and guest of the commission who sat in on deliberations, reminded the jurors that, to this point, Libeskind had never actually built anything, even though he had won several prestigious design competitions. In Jaeger’s eyes, Libeskind was not so much a practicing architect as he was an architectural philosopher and poet. His buildings, according to Jaeger, were extremely complex structures consisting equally of “beams, axes, fragments, imagination and fantasies, which can usually never be built.”<sup>31</sup> Yet, Jaeger continued, “this building-sculpture, which seems to lie beside the existing building like a petrified flash of lightening, cannot be called deconstructivist.” Which is to say, it was eminently buildable, even as it would retain signs of fragments and voids. It was a working through, a form of mourning that reaches its climax “in the experience of a melancholy which has been made material.” In this way, the critic believed it to be a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (complete art work) that need not fulfill any other function to justify its existence. Whatever was finally housed there, no matter what it was, Jaeger concluded, would thus never be conventional, never boring.

### **Inside the Museum: Voids and Broken Narrative**

After accepting Libeskind’s museum design in the summer of 1989, the Berlin Senate allotted some 87 million DM (nearly \$50 million U.S.) for its construction. In 1990, Libeskind submitted a cost analysis for his design (170 million DM) that nearly doubled the government’s allotted budget. But even his revised budget of 115 million DM was deemed politically unthinkable at a time when the breaching of the Berlin wall had forced everyone to begin focusing on the looming, unimaginable costs of reunification. All government building plans were put on hold as Berlin and Germany came to grips with its shocking new political topography—no dividing wall between east and west, but a country divided nevertheless between the prosperous and the desperate.

In fact, on July 4, 1991, the government summarily announced that planning for the Jewish Museum was being suspended altogether, only to have it reinstated by the Berlin Senate in September. Despite continuing calls for the museum’s suspension, the Berlin Senate voted unanimously in October to build the museum, however altered by the new realities on the ground—both economic and topographical. It is per-

haps significant that, in the minds of civic leaders, Berlin's reunification could not proceed until the city had begun to be reunited with its missing Jewish past.

To trim the museum's costs, city planners ordered the angles of its walls to be straightened, among dozens of other changes, which helped keep it within its newly allotted 117 million DM budget. In addition, a hall intended to be outside the main building was absorbed into the ground floor, several of the outer "voids" were themselves voided, and the complex plan for the lower floor was vastly simplified so that it would come into line with the main building. At first, Libeskind resisted those changes that seemed to neutralize the very difficulty of his design, especially those that removed the museum's estranging properties. Later, however, he offered a different, more philosophical explanation for the necessary changes. What was designed while the Berlin wall was standing would now be built in a newly reunified city. "As soon as Berlin was unified, I straightened all the walls," Libeskind has written. "My enemies told me I was no longer a deconstructivist, that I had chickened out, because I had straightened the walls. But I did it because I felt the project was no longer protected by the kind of schizophrenia developed out of the bilateral nature of the city."<sup>32</sup> "The museum has to stand and open itself in a different way in a united and wall-less city."<sup>33</sup>

In fact, as Bernhard Schneider forcefully reminds us, no one who enters the building will experience it as a zigzag, or as a jagged bolt of lightning. These are only its drawn resemblances as seen from above and will have virtually nothing to do with the volumes of space located inside.<sup>34</sup> The building's radical design is barely apparent as one approaches it from the street. Although its untempered zinc plating is startlingly bright in its metallic sheen, when viewed from the entrance of the Berlin Museum on Lindenstrasse, the new building also strikes one as a proportionately modest neighbor to the older Baroque facade next door. Indeed, over time, the plating will weather into the same sky-blue shade as the untempered zinc window frames on the Berlin Museum next door. The echo of materials and hue between these buildings is thus subtle but distinct, the only apparent link between them at first sight.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, Libeskind's museum is lower and narrower than the Berlin Museum, and its zinc-plated facade seems relatively self-effacing next to the ochre hues of its Baroque neighbor. Though outwardly untouched, the stolid Baroque facade of the Berlin Museum itself is now recontextualized in its new setting adjacent the Jewish Museum. For, as designed by Libeskind, the connection between the Berlin Museum and Jewish Museum Extension remains subterranean, a remembered nexus that is also no longer visible in the landscape but buried in memory. The Berlin

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Museum and Jewish Museum are thus “bound together in depth,” as Libeskind says:

The existing building is tied to the extension underground, preserving the contradictory autonomy of both on the surface, while binding the two together in depth. Under-Over-Ground Museum. Like Berlin and its Jews, the common burden—this insupportable, immeasurable, unshareable burden—is outlined in the exchanges between two architectures and forms which are not reciprocal: cannot be exchanged for each other.<sup>36</sup>

“The entrance to the new building is very deep, more than ten meters under the foundations of the Baroque building,” Libeskind tells us.

From the entrance, one is faced with three roads: the road leading to the Holocaust tower which . . . has no entrance except from the underground level; the road leading to the garden; and the road leading to the main circulation stair and the void. The entire plane of the museum is tilted toward the void of the superstructure. The building is as complex as the history of Berlin.<sup>37</sup>

As we enter the museum, in fact, the very plane of the ground on which we stand seems to slope slightly. It is an illusion created in part by the diagonal slant of narrow, turret-like windows, cut at 35-degree angles across the ground-line itself. For, on the “ground-floor,” we are actually standing just below ground-level, which is literally visible through the window at about eye-level. Only the earth line in the half-buried window establishes a stable horizon. Because the upper floor windows are similarly angled, our view of Berlin itself is skewed, its skyline broken into disorienting slices of sky and buildings.

The exhibition halls themselves are spacious but so irregular in their shapes, cut through by enclosed voids and concrete trusses, that one never gains a sense of continuous passage. “I have introduced the idea of the void as a physical interference with chronology,” Libeskind has said. “It is the one element of continuity throughout the complex form of the building. It is 27 meters high and runs the entire length of the building, over 150 meters. It is a straight line whose impenetrability forms the central axis. The void is traversed by bridges which connect the various parts of the museum to each other.”<sup>38</sup> In fact a total of six voids cut through the museum on both horizontal and vertical planes. Of these six voids, the first two are accessible to visitors entering from the sacred and religious exhibition spaces. According to the architect’s specifications, nothing is to be mounted on the walls of these first two voids, which may contain only free-standing vitrines or pedestals.

The third and fourth voids cut through the building at angles that traverse several floors, but these are otherwise inaccessible. Occasionally, a window opens into these voids, and they may be viewed from some 30 bridges cutting through them at different angles, but otherwise they are to remain sealed off and so completely “unusable space” jutting throughout the structure and outside it. The fifth and sixth voids run vertically the height of the building. Of these, the fifth void mirrors the geometry of the sixth void, an external space enclosed by a tower: this is the Holocaust void, an architectural model for absence. This concrete structure itself has no name, Libeskind says, because its subject is not its walls but the space enveloped by them, what is “between the lines.” Though connected to the museum by an underground passageway, it appears to rise autonomously outside the walls of the museum and has no doors leading into it from outside. It is lighted only indirectly by natural light that comes through an acutely slanted window up high in the structure, barely visible from inside.

The spaces inside the museum are to be construed as “open narratives,” Libeskind says, “which in their architecture seek to provide the museum-goer with new insights into the collection and, in particular, the relation and significance of the Jewish Department to the Museum as a whole.”<sup>39</sup> Instead of merely housing the collection, in other words, this building seeks to estrange it from the viewers’ own preconceptions. Such walls and oblique angles, he hopes, will defamiliarize the all-too-familiar ritual objects and historical chronologies, and will cause museum-goers to see into these relations between the Jewish and German departments as if for the first time.

The interior of the building is thus interrupted by smaller, individual structures, shells housing the voids running throughout the structure, each painted graphite-black. They completely alter any sense of continuity or narrative flow and suggest instead architectural, spatial, and thematic gaps in the presentation of Jewish history in Berlin. The absence of Berlin’s Jews, as embodied by these voids, is meant to haunt any retrospective presentation of their past here. Moreover, curators of both permanent and temporary exhibitions will be reminded not to use these voids as “natural” boundaries or walls in their exhibition, or as markers within their exhibition narratives. Instead, they are to design exhibitions that integrate these voids into any story being told, so that when mounted, the exhibition narrative is interrupted wherever a void happens to intersect it. The walls of the voids facing the exhibition walls will thus remain untouched, unusable, outside of healing and suturing narrative.

Implied in any museum’s collection is that what you see is all there is

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to see, all that there ever was. By placing architectural “voids” throughout the museum, Libeskind has tried to puncture this museological illusion. What you see here, he seems to say, is actually only a mask for all that is missing, for the great absence of life that now makes a presentation of these artifacts a necessity. The voids make palpable a sense that much more is missing here than can ever be shown. As Bendt has aptly noted, it was the destruction itself that caused the collection to come into being. Otherwise, these objects would all be part of living, breathing homes—unavailable as museum objects. This is, then, an aggressively anti-redemptory design, built literally around an absence of meaning in history, an absence of the people who would have given meaning to their history.

The only way out of the new building is through the Garden of Exile. “This road of exile and emigration leads to a very special garden which I call the E. T. A. Hoffmann Garden,” Libeskind has said. “Hoffmann was the romantic writer of incredible tales, and I dedicated this garden to him because he was a lawyer working in a building adjacent to the site.”<sup>40</sup> The Garden of Exile consists of 49 concrete columns filled with earth, each 7 meters high, 1.3 x 1.5 meters square, spaced a meter apart. Forty-eight of these columns are filled with earth from Berlin, their number referring to the year of Israel’s independence, 1948; the 49th column stands for Berlin and is filled with earth from Jerusalem. They are planted with willow oaks that will spread out over the entire garden of columns into a great, green canopy overhead. The columns stand at 90-degree angles to the ground plate, but the ground plate itself is tilted at two different angles, so that one stumbles about as if in the dark, at sea without sea legs. We are sheltered in exile, on the one hand, but still somehow thrown off balance by it and disoriented at the same time.

### Conclusion

At one point, before eventually rejecting it, Freud cites Jentsch’s contention that “the central factor in the production of the feeling of uncanniness [is] intellectual uncertainty; so that the uncanny would always, as it were, be something one does not know one’s way about in. The better oriented in his environment a person is, the less readily will he get the impression of something uncanny in regard to the objects and event in it.”<sup>41</sup> If we allow our sense of uncanniness to include this sense of uncertainty after all, we might then ask how a building accomplishes this disorientation. In Libeskind’s case, he has simply built into it any number of voided spaces, so that visitors are never where they think they

are. Neither are these voids wholly didactic. They are not meant to instruct, per se, but to throw previously received instruction into question. Their aim is not to reassure or console but to haunt visitors with the unpleasant—uncanny—sensation of calling into consciousness that which has been previously—even happily—repressed. The voids are reminders of the abyss into which this culture once sank and from which it never really emerges.

If modern architecture has embodied the attempt to erase the traces of history from its forms, postmodern architecture like Libeskind's would make the traces of history its infrastructure, the voids of lost civilizations literally part of the building's foundation, now haunted by history, even emblematic of it. The architecture of what Libeskind calls "decomposition" derives its power not from a sense of unity but from what Vidler has called the "intimation of the fragmentary, the morseled, the broken."<sup>42</sup> Rather than suggesting wholeness and mending, salvation or redemption, such forms represent the breach itself, the ongoing need for *tikun haolam* (mending the world) and its impossibility.

As Reinhart Koselleck has brilliantly intimated, even the notion of history as a "singular collective"—an overarching and singularly meaningful History—is a relatively modern concept.<sup>43</sup> Alois M. Müller has elaborated,

Until the 18th century the word had been a plural form in German, comprising the various histories which accounted for all that had happened in the world. History as a singular noun had a loftier intent. In future, not only individual minor historical episodes were to be told. History suddenly acquired the duty to comprehend reality as a continuous whole and to portray the entire history of humankind as a path to freedom and independence. History was no long to be "just" the embodiment of many histories. History as a unity sought to make them comprehensible.<sup>44</sup>

And as Müller also makes quite clear, this project of historical unification had distinctly redemptive, even salvational aims, the kind of history that its tellers hoped would lead to a "better world."

Libeskind's project, by contrast, promises no such relief. His is not, as Müller reminds us, a "revelatory monument to the 'good' in history, but to [an] open shaft for a historical crime perpetrated in the name of history."<sup>45</sup> By resisting continuous, homogeneous history-housing, Libeskind never allows memory of this time to congeal into singular, salvational meaning. His is partly integrationist and partly disintegrationist architecture. His is a project that allows for the attempt at integration as an ongoing, if impossible project, even as it formalizes disintegration as its architectural motif. Libeskind would de-unify such history, atomize it,

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allow its seams to show, plant doubt in any single version, even his own—all toward suggesting an anti-redemptory housing of history, one that expresses what Müller has called a systematic doubt, a lack of certainty in any attempt that makes it all process, never result.

From the beginning, this project seemed to be defined as one that would be nearly impossible to complete. Planners set a nearly unachievable goal, selected a nearly unbuildable design, and yet have now succeeded in building a public edifice that embodies the paralyzing questions of contemporary German culture. The result leaves all questions intact, all doubts and difficulties in place. This museum extension is an architectural interrogation of the culture and civilization that built it, an almost unheard-of achievement.

With its 30 connecting bridges, 7,000 square meters of permanent exhibition space, 450 square meters of temporary exhibition space, and 4,000 square meters of storage, office, and auditorium spaces, the Jewish Museum will have roughly three times the space of the Berlin Museum next door when it opens in 2001. Some have suggested that the Berlin Museum be allowed to spill into most of the newly available space, leaving the Jewish Museum Department on the bottom floor only; others have suggested that the building in itself be designated the national “memorial to Europe’s murdered Jews.”<sup>46</sup> In any case, all the attention this design has received, both laudatory and skeptical, will generate a final historical irony. Where the city planners had hoped to return Jewish memory to the house of Berlin history, it now seems certain that Berlin history will have to find its place in the larger haunted house of Jewish memory. 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 own past.

If “estrangement from the world is a moment of art,” as Theodor Adorno would have it, after Freud, then we might say that the uncanniness of a museum like Libeskind’s crystallizes this moment of art.<sup>47</sup> But if the “uncanny is uncanny only because it is secretly all too familiar, which is why it is repressed,” as Freud himself would have it, then perhaps no better term describes the condition of a contemporary German culture coming to terms with the self-inflicted void at its center—a terrible void that is at once all too secretly familiar and unrecognizable, a void that at once defines a national identity, even as it threatens to cause such identity to implode.

## Notes

- 1 Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 17 (London, 1955), 225, 241.
- 2 Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), 7.
- 3 *Ibid.*, x.
- 4 See Robin Lydenberg, "Freud's Uncanny Narratives," *PMLA* 112, no. 5 (Oct. 1997): 1076. Here she also shows how the *unheimlich* (alien and threatening) contains its own lexical opposite (*heimlich*—familiar and agreeable). That is, part of uncanny's power to affect us is just its familiarity, which is all the more disturbing when estranged.
- 5 See Vera Bendt, "Das Jüdische Museum," in *Wegweiser durch das jüdische Berlin: Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Berlin, 1987), 200–209.
- 6 Hermann Simon, *Das Berlin Jüdische Museum in der Oranienburger Strasse*, 34, quoted in Martina Weinland and Kurt Winkler, *Das Jüdische Museum im Stadtmuseum Berlin: Eine Dokumentation* (Berlin, 1997), 10.
- 7 The issue of what constitutes Jewish art remains as fraught as ever in contemporary discussions of national and ethnic art. Among others, see Joseph Gutmann, "Is There a Jewish Art?" in *The Visual Dimension: Aspects of Jewish Art*, Claire Moore, ed. (Boulder, Colo., 1993), 1–20.
- 8 Weinland and Winkler, *Das Jüdische Museum*, 10.
- 9 From an interview Robin Ostow did with Reiner Gunzer, the Museum adviser who negotiated with Galinski at the time. I am grateful to Robin Ostow for sharing with me her essay, "(Is It) a Jewish Museum: Six Models of Jewish Cultural Integration in Germany," in *Jewish Communities in Postwar Berlin and New York*, Jeffrey Peck and Claus Leggewie, eds. (forthcoming), where these details are cited.
- 10 From *Berlinische Notizen*, no. 1/2 (1975): 11, as cited in Weinland and Winkler, *Das Jüdische Museum*, 17.
- 11 "Palais auf dem Profstein. Braucht das jüdische Kulturgut Berlins ein Museum?" *Die Welt*, Oct. 19, 1985, quoted in Weinland and Winkler, *Das Jüdische Museum*, 28.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.*, 30.
- 14 *Berlinische Notizen*, no. 4 (1987): 120ff, as cited in Weinland and Winkler, *Das Jüdische Museum*, 32.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 See Rolf Bothe and Vera Bendt, "Ein eigenständiges Jüdisches Museum als Abteilung des Berlin Museums," in *Realisierungswettbewerb: Erweiterung Berlin Museum mit Abteilung Jüdisches Museum* (Berlin, 1990), 12.
- 17 *Ibid.* (my emphasis).
- 18 Although this was Libeskind's first full commission, it was not his first completed building,

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- which is the Felix Nussbaum Museum in Osnabrück.
- [22] 19 As cited in Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, 135.
- Jewish 20 Bothe and Bendt, *Realisierungswettbewerb*, 169.
- Social 21 Ibid., 166.
- Studies 22 Daniel Libeskind, *Between the Lines: Extension to the Berlin Museum with the Jewish Museum* (Amsterdam, 1991), 3.
- 23 Daniel Libeskind, "Between the Lines," in *Daniel Libeskind: Erweiterung des Berlin Museums mit Abteilung Jüdisches Museum*, Kristin Feireiss, ed. (Berlin, 1992), 63.
- 24 For further insightful reflection on the role these voids play in Berlin generally and in Libeskind's design in particular, see Andreas Huyssen, "The Voids of Berlin," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 1 (Fall 1997): 57–81.
- 25 Peter Eisenman, "Representation of the Limit: Writing a 'Not-Architecture,'" in *Daniel Libeskind: Countersign* (London, 1991), 120.
- 26 Kurt Forster, "Monstrum Mirabile et Audax," in Feireiss, ed., *Daniel Libeskind*, 19.
- 27 Bothe and Bendt, *Realisierungswettbewerb*, 169.
- 28 Ibid., 166.
- 29 Ibid., 168.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Daniel Libeskind, ed., *Radix-Matrix: Architecture and Writings* (Munich, 1997), 113.
- 33 Libeskind, "Between the Lines," 65.
- 34 Bernhard Schneider, "Daniel Libeskind's Architecture in the Context of Urban Space," in Libeskind, ed., *Radix-Matrix*, 120.
- 35 "I got the idea of using zinc from Schinkel," Libeskind has said. "Before his very early death, he recommended that any young architect in Berlin should use as much zinc as possible. . . . In Berlin, untreated zinc turns to a beautiful blue-gray. Many of Schinkel's Berlin buildings, particularly at the Kleinglienicke Park, are built of zinc which has been painted white. When you knock them, you can tell that they are just covers. That is very Berlin-like" (from Daniel Libeskind, "1995 Raoul Wallenberg Lecture" [University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, College of Architecture & Urban Planning, 1995], 40).
- 36 Bothe and Bendt, *Realisierungswettbewerb*, 169.
- 37 Libeskind, "1995 Raoul Wallenberg Lecture," 34.
- 38 Ibid., 35.
- 39 Bothe and Bendt, *Realisierungswettbewerb*, 169.
- 40 Libeskind, "1995 Raoul Wallenberg Lecture," 33.
- 41 Freud, "The Uncanny," 221.
- 42 Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, 70.
- 43 See Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), 92–93.
- 44 Alois M. Müller, "Daniel Libeskind's Muses," in Libeskind, ed., *Radix-Matrix*, 117.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 In my new book, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven, Conn., 2000), I tell the entire story of Germany's national "Memorial for the

Murdered Jews of Europe” proposed for Berlin, including Libeskind’s proposed design. In submitting a design for this memorial, the architect made clear that he did not want his

museum design for a Jewish Museum to be turned into a Holocaust memorial.

47 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (New York, 1984), 262.

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