Discussion

DANIEL LIBESKIND: I have to say that I have seldom had a response so moving, because the thought which followed was both critical and at the same time on the set of invisible zigzags that are my own concerns. I have to admit I do not know of the book you mentioned. At the same time, I must be very honest and say that it would be very difficult for me to answer these questions systematically or pedagogically, as you have requested. You have raised the most difficult questions, which risk going too far into a realm that is at once so close to architecture and yet made impossibly far—the political arena. And yet, in my view, this risk is the energetic or vital activity of someone who would dare to call themselves an architect today. I must say frankly that I did not say only rhetorically that I am not a "normal" architect—I do not fall into that category anyway, not simply by will, but through my project; it is not that I cannot do it or that I would like to be an architect, but I cannot think that way. And I think—to answer one of your questions—the only reason that the project is getting built is because of that attitude. If it had been a straightforward architectural project it would have been canceled long ago. So it is in that very fragile place that I am attempting to work—because I am also not a nonarchitect, it is not that I am somebody else.

You asked me how in the political realm the project was to proceed. In response, I have to tell a small anecdote. I was presenting the project at the Senate of Environment and Urban Planning. There were, as you might imagine, a lot of opponents to the project. A project like this is provocative not only because it has strange angles but also because it breaks many rules of building. Which is part of my intention. I started with my collaborators to break the rules of the competition with this project simply because, if this was going to get built in a city that transgressed all the way, then only transgression would serve as the exemplarity that would allow me to reconcile my own work with the project. So I presented the project to the Senate as I always do,

on the original musical notepaper. Before I could say a word, the Head of Administration said to me, "Mr. Libeskind, why is it that you write your text on musical notepaper? We have had a lot of architects in here presenting projects, but never have we had one presented on composition paper." Now, I do not think the subsequent conversation "drifted" so much as it engaged all the people in the room, who were lovers of nineteenth century German music. Discussion began on the relationship of the five straight lines of the staff, the notes, how one might play it, is it a statement of a motif, do I like music, etc. It drifted in such a way that none of the political questions that should have come up—such as why the building is sticking out on Lindenstrasse—ever came up.

I began to think that it was not a coincidence that the building eluded detection. It is pretty obvious that the government is spending a large amount of money on something you cannot show—the void—something you cannot photograph. But I think that, practically speaking, this characteristic somehow in some very inexplicable manner protected the project. Had it been a box or a conventional organizational piece along a promenade, showing off only the good design of the Berlin Museum, I am convinced that it would have been canceled.

I do not know what is really at work here, but I do suspect that it has something to do with what you said about Kafka. And it is interesting, by the way, that his real language was Yiddish, which he once described as a language that is not a language. He said he spoke it because it is immediately transferrable to all other things—because it is not itself. Of course, I speak Yiddish and that is one of the ways that I can understand what is going on in Berlin. But you reminded me, when you raised Kafka's presence here, that Kafka somewhere says that authors really begin their work when they are dead. While they are alive, they are not really at work—they are just preparing themselves. But when they die, then they begin to write, and that is how there are great writers—the good ones begin only when they die. I applied this logic to some of these couples as a sort of "wedding" of assimilation and dissimilation. For example, I connected Varnhagen to Schleiermacher, and not arbitrarily, because one could find many Jews and Protestants buried in this particular track of Berlin. But to find a Jew who would convert to Protestantism and renounce this conversion on her death bed and to connect her to a Protestant theologian, or to connect Celan to Mies Van der Rohe—here are some completely irreconcilable differences joined in a wedding.

I tried to deal with these couples by being aware that when one goes to the Jewish cemetery in Berlin, most of the cemetery is empty. It is a mass of marble. The names are carved only in the beginning, with preparations for future carvings. It is very disturbing—there is very little written in the

cemetery, very few names, and a lot of tombs that move into generations of the future. This struck me as incredible—because no one would ever return to the cemetery to see it like this. It is blank. And there is no one to do anything about this because everyone who was connected with it was exterminated. The notion of extermination is exemplary in Berlin. In the unerasable city, the impression one gets when looking at the photographs of a bombed Berlin—and I have looked at all of them—is that the one thing that was not erased in all the bombings—and almost everything was—were the streets: the markings of the streets, the curb, only a few centimeters high. Here again is the logic of Kafka, which says that the most dangerous line is the line only three centimeters above your foot. That is the line you stumble on, a line low to the ground. I take this as a technique. One has to develop some technique for a museum, and this perhaps touches on a very profound question you raise, one which I do not think I can answer: What is this museum for?

It is a museum for no museum. Its mission is to integrate the German and the Jewish histories of Berlin. Such integration is possible, so that this museum is an exemplary one for the future: a museum that has nothing to show, in which everything has already been shown, has already been brought to the end of any possible involvement in the apocalyptic experience and yet still has a future. I feel that history is likely to go on—it has gone on for 50,000 years and probably, empirically, will go on forever. But that does not matter because in the experience of this particular deed—in experiences such as those of Scholem or Benjamin or Schönberg—it has come to an end. Then, as you suggested, one has to explore the implications of going into the end with a practice of or for the end, not just the Socratic philosophical pronouncement that philosophy is the practice of dying. It is pretty easy for philosophy to practice dying, since it leaves such a distant and remote trace. But for architecture to practice it in light of the fullness of its resources of materials and technology—this is more difficult.

As to the connection between the literal and the universal, that is something I find very mysterious, frankly, because I am alive only by coincidence, by an accident, not of fate, but of history. Had I been born one year earlier, I would *not* have been born. I would never have thought three years ago that I would get stuck three hundred kilometers from where I was born—a place I have not been to since I left it. Now that Polish has become the second language of Berlin, I am also forced for practical reasons to use this language which I had never wanted to use again. I really do not know how to answer this question of the literal versus the universal reference. One only has to believe that if one is participating in something that one is responsible for, then one cannot opt out, even if one wants to. One must always take the full consequences, no matter what they entail.

It involves a complete repetition. I do not think it is a coincidence that the Wall came down just a couple of months after the competition was judged. Everybody said jokingly that it was strange that the Wall came down just at the same time. I did not find it strange because I anticipated it in the planning and because I attempted to build this kind of marriage across East and West Berlin into the practical everyday happiness of the work. So, I do think it has to do with angles. I do think the situation in Berlin has transformed the building totally. As soon as Berlin was unified, I straightened all the walls. 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. It had to stand and close itself off in a different way.

I do not know to what extent the building is emblematical, an exemplary structure. I think, if anything, it will act on the participants in the building, and it does call for some putting together again of one's "being in a museum." It impresses upon the participants the notion that you cannot avoid the apocalypse, impresses upon them the impossibility of saying, "I've already been there, already seen it." It makes every bit of Berlin's history both accessible and inaccessible, without running into the end, though there are a lot of ends in the museum. There is no space in the building to get away to, no chance for a synoptic or panoptic view of it. That is a difficult point you raise, the one you have already raised in your letter in response to Peter Eisenman, the issue of the void. I do not think I share with Peter his notion of the void, which is basically Platonic, which does deal with the Greek notion of the void. To me the void is much closer to the avant-garde, by which I really mean Moses. The avant-garde is a people under God without any mediating circumstances, no explanation as to why, and no possibility of relinquishing it. I think this is not a concept of the avant-garde but an experience of it—one either has it or one does not. And if one has it, it is too late, you cannot get rid of it, cannot convert. It appears to me that every one of these people I selected by chance—by chance, because there are others who had been around that area—every one of these people faced the duplicity, and themselves became duplicitous in both their conversions and in the impossibility of the conversion.

For example, Schönberg converted to Protestantism in order to become head of the music faculty—he renounced being a Jew. Walter Rathenau said, just before he was assassinated, that not an ounce of Jewish blood flowed in his veins. I chose and I learned about these things through the geometry and through the mystery of digging into apparently safe realms, but realms with trajectories that I have extended further in order to find out what lies along and beyond these seemingly completely arbitrary lines. I think every city is

based on these arbitrary lines when viewed from the political arena. Since in fact nothing lines up, since there is no axis, since nothing can be seen in perspective any longer, one has to find another way to detect the illegitimacy of drawing, planning, and the political discourse in which buildings get built.

So, this is an attempt at precisely that. Whether or not it is successful I do not know, but I hope so. I was successful in convincing the politicians to trade the straight walls for building empty space. It is a precarious equation.

Every week I had thirty people from the Berlin Museum, the Senate, and the engineers' offices in my office. They did not want to know these things, they were not interested in Varnhagen or Schönberg or Celan. The last composer they listened to was Wagner, and they have not gotten beyond him. So how do I explain all this to them? I think one has to find equivalents, and I found them.

This is the first building I have done. I have never done anything like a small building or an addition to a building. I think Peter Eisenman has done some fire stations and some small office buildings. I did nothing before. Young architects ask me how I get away with it, and I tell them, never get a license. I have no idea about these various bureaucratic things, and I feel that this gives me a slight advantage in the process to be a step ahead of the "professional."

I think that lay people—and I include among them administrators—have actually been brought closer to the project by my having used these symbols. Not everyone in Berlin is a Schönberg, because for every Schönberg there were, for example, 50,000 tailors. There are hundreds of thousands of names in the *Gedenkbuch*, and nobody can remember them except what is left of their families, if they are still alive. It has helped that these four dimensions are laid out on the table, and not in any sentimental manner. But as Stanley Tigerman said, with regard to the question of measurement: What is the measure of a work? I bring them in as others would use a ruler or a compass to the board room.

JEFF KIPNIS: In your discussion of the issue of the void, I am reminded of a line from *Finnegan's Wake*. It occurs when Joyce slips out of his Irish accent and into his Jewish accent. The line is, "In the beginning, there was the void." I wonder if with this one might think of, not the Platonic ontology of the void, but rather the void and the word that operate together in *Finnegan's Wake* as offering another kind of nonontological, nonsimple access to a thinking of the void that would perhaps answer your question.

JACQUES DERRIDA: Yes. Then you would have to distinguish this void from *chora*—the *chora* is not the void—and confront the ontological absence of the relation of the void. You have to change the language, not by changing

the words; you must write in an absolutely different manner, otherwise philosophy, which is our language, would very quickly reontologize the void. For me, that is what Daniel does: changing the code, writing differently in order to withhold or subtract this void from political dissemination. Then at some point you would have to drop even the word "void," because the void mentioned is not void the way we understand the void. There is some emptiness surrounded by a line which is indivisible, a circumscribed emptiness. So if the void is not this, then perhaps we have to give up the void, or give up the word "void." My question had to do, not so much with what he thinks or what he does, but with the discourse, the word, the logic, and the grammar he has to use in order to make his project understandable in a pedagogy or in texts, given the general philosophical and cultural context in which he has to convince us and the powers that be in Berlin. He has to compromise. It is a question of rhetoric, in the most serious sense, of the negotiation he has to organize in which he has to speak the language of the other in order to convince the other without betraying what he is trying to do. It is a negotiation in which every day he has to reevaluate every sentence, each step. It is not simply a matter of theory or rhetoric in an inferior sense. The stakes are immediately concrete. If you make a mistake, if they cannot be convinced practically, then you have to transform your project. It is not a matter simply of sentences on the page. I am sure that the most intelligent people you meet in Berlin are not in a situation in which they can understand the difference between Plato's definition of the void and the *chora* which is already a split in Plato. How could they understand all that? You have to speak to them in a way that their necessary and unavoidable misunderstanding, no matter how intelligent they are, does not affect your own project. That is politics in a metapolitical sense. It is the most serious responsibility.

That is what I have to say to your question, Jeff. But remember that I started with the question of response. Of course, Daniel, you are waiting or hoping for a response, but you are already responding by participating in something you yourself cannot really understand, as when you mentioned the coincidence of your birthday. However singularly irreplaceable they are, these things nevertheless call you to the avant-garde; it is a call to which you must respond. The strictest response—the most politically concrete and effective—is the one that involves the struggle with the ones you have to convince. It is the most necessary and contingent, the most singular and the most universal task at the same time. Here is where exemplarity occurs—at the crossing of the response.

CATHERINE INGRAHAM: Since there is a special realm for a project of this type, are you referring to a different kind of political negotiation for architects to participate in or any sort of political discourse? Does it change the status of

the void, depending on whether it is architecturally changed or transferred in the market place versus a purely philosophical discussion?

JACQUES DERRIDA: No. On the one hand, I would say that it is something more general than the experience of negotiating. We all experience this one way or another, always in a singular way. Negotiation is always singular. We all, every day, have our own problems. Not the same problems, but analogous ones. So this is a general condition. Now, I think, for me, who am even less an architect than Daniel—the way in which I have no license is not exactly the same as his—for me, as a nonarchitect, this is what I consider to be exemplary of the avant-garde in architecture today. The negotiation that you have to enter into is much more difficult—the stakes are higher—and much more immediately political than in my case. When I write something, I do not have to convince a state, to convince deciders in a city like Berlin—to do something as visible—for even your void has visibility. When I want to negotiate something in my university or with my publisher, it has something to do with the same visibility, but it remains invisible . . . almost. The stakes of my negotiations go through a number of mediations that are more unpredictable and more difficult to define than yours. You will know—for I hope your museum will, for centuries, be a theme of discussions—you will know that the thing will be built, that it will be done. My negotiations, which do not have the monumental visibility of your void, are not so immediately political. That is a why today, in terms of politics and history, this experiment of yours is for me exemplary, and I refer to it—out of my incompetence—as exemplary.

DANIEL LIBESKIND: I want to say that even when it is built, it is actually not unlike what you are doing. What one has to do as an architect in this case is to prevent the void from filling up. One of the characteristics of this particular void is that it is very easy to bridge it in order to complete the building. And of course the pressure from the Senate and the public money reminds us that if one is already building such a space, why not fill it? Why not use it? The project is to make it inaccessible. How would one prevent that particular part of the building from being changed while the rest of the collection would change? Part of the reason for having it articulated is that if the Jewish collection is to grow in Berlin, it will do so throughout this museum, and not in any one part of it. It is in a sense as though a particular piece of Berlin is obliterated.

JACQUES DERRIDA: Although there is an enormous difference of degree, I do understand that there is no essential difference. But, of course, this exposure of your work to an always possible deterioration or

misinterpretation is a chance, it is not a negative risk. If you were sure that your work would never be altered then it would not be a work. A work has to be left beyond your life, left exposed to manipulation or reinterpretation. That is why you build. The fragility itself is part of the possibility of the work.

CATHERINE INGRAHAM: The design of the void is exactly right, then, because the design of the void is about keeping the void invisible. The invisibility of the void is also the protection of the space.

DANIEL LIBESKIND: No, that is just an appearance in the model. It is actually the one part of the building that has not technically been designed. It is the one part of the building that is constituted by the intersection of everything that is known and appears in the central arena of the building. For somebody looking at the collection, it appears as something which is deferred. It is not something that is designed deliberately. It is already there.

JACQUES DERRIDA: Let me repeat the first intention of my question. There are two kinds of voids in your work. One is the general spacing of the structure in discontinuity. The other is this very determinedly sealed space which nobody can experience or enter into. These two voids are not of the same quality. One needs the other to be determined, in order to relate to history, to memory, to what is kept as a nameable or nameless secret. There is some sealed memory, kept as a crypt or as an unconscious, which is encrypted here. The sealed memory is not exactly the general void and the emptiness of the structure.