

Critical Response

I

Response to Saree Makdisi's "The Architecture of Erasure"

Frank Gehry

When I was eight years old I lived in a town in northern Ontario—Timmins—and there were only thirty Jewish families. It was a mining town of thirty thousand people. My family name is Goldberg. I was the only Jew at the elementary school I attended. I was beaten up regularly on the way home from school for killing Christ. This went on for a couple of years; I would come home bloody. There were unfair numbers against me. At some point I gathered up the strength to fight back and prevail. And for the next couple of years I did prevail by fighting back. At the end, the last year I was in Timmins, I became friends with my enemies. So this experience ingrained in me a model of how to deal with anti-Semitism at a very young age.

After the war I met three of my family members who came to Canada from Poland. Each of them had an Auschwitz tattoo, and we were informed that thirty-three of our relatives were killed at Auschwitz. So at this time I became acutely aware of the magnitude of hatred toward Jews and its results.

I studied the Talmud with my grandfather. He taught me the most important principle of the Talmud—the Golden Rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. He also waxed eloquently about the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. On my first trip to Jerusalem, many years later, after he was long gone from this earth, I visited the Wailing Wall at midnight and burst into tears. From my childhood Israel was held up as the safe haven for Jews.

Now many years later I have outgrown any religious involvement. I am married to a Catholic. My sons have been baptized, and I'm generally liberal about what people believe in and don't have a need for formal religious involvement. Of course, there are residual cultural gratifications like bagels and lox and matzo ball soup. My name was changed to Gehry to please my former wife, who was pregnant and worried about bringing a child into a world that showed its anti-Semitism even in my college days at the University of Southern California in the early 1950s, right after the McCarthy era. I found it difficult to deny her pleas to change the name. Now I usually tell people that I have changed my name, and you will find references to it in most of my interviews.

I was contacted by close friends about working with Rabbi Marvin Hier on the design of a museum and conference center in Jerusalem that would be a place where disparate voices could find facilities in which to air their differences and promote discussion. As part of this building there was to be a museum, which would have facilities like the Wiesenthal center in Los Angeles (which has been visited by nearly 5 million people) that includes multifaceted programs teaching tolerance; these programs have been very successful and are utilized by the New York City Police Department, the Los Angeles Police Department, and various other organizations that deal with issues of tolerance. The program seemed legitimate, and I was assured by everyone that there was to be full representation of all sides in developing the museum exhibits, and that complete freedom of expression would be accepted within the walls of the new building.

Several years ago I visited Israel to look at various sites; the first site was next to a jail and did not seem appropriate. The site that was shown to us by then-mayor Ehud Olmert was near Cat Square on Hillel Road, which had been the city's municipal car park since the 1960s. The fact that there was an existing parking garage, already built, seemed to validate the idea that this site did not have a sacred character. We designed the building for that

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site and respected all the boundaries of the adjacent Muslim cemetery and in fact designed the building as an overlook to the cemetery so that the relationship between the new building and the cemetery expressed respect for it. Construction began and bones were found on the site, which some argued were part of a former burial site. The subject was adjudicated by the Israeli Supreme Court, which ruled unanimously in favor of the museum. Obviously, since the project was delayed for three years while the court deliberated, we couldn't go forward. Although the court-imposed delays have now passed, for scheduling reasons I have withdrawn from the project and am no longer involved with it or with the project owner, the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

Why would I read in a so-called scholarly treatise on the Israeli-Palestinian issue a critical word about my hiding my Jewishness by changing my name? The Hitler period proved that it did not matter whether you were religious or had a Jewish name; as long as you were considered Jewish even marginally you were put in the ovens.

Anyway, what has that issue got to do with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? It certainly is an uncalled-for reference and somewhat demeans Makdisi's essay. This writer further undermines his credibility by choosing to enter the field of architectural criticism—a field in which he is obviously illiterate. He discusses the symbolism of walls from model pictures when he does not have any clue what they really are and how they look in real time and at real scale. He is just looking at pictures and making assumptions based on limited knowledge of what he is looking at and how it would be built and what it would look like as a finished building. The idea that he would presume to have the expertise to make those kinds of judgments is amazing to me. To cap it off, he picks as an expert a Princeton professor who, as scholarly and as brilliant as he may be, is not really considered an expert in the field of architecture. My advice is to stick to your topic. Your lack of credibility is showing.