Between the Lines: The Jewish Museum, Berlin

DANIEL LIBESKIND

It seems to me that there is no way to camouflage the inability to speak about architecture coherently or from the beginning. The notion of an original point of departure, which presupposes a past, is in itself doubtful, because the past has never been experienced as being present. So I would rather skip the beginnings altogether and go straight to the middle, which in my case is the Berlin Museum with the Jewish Museum. But first I want to try to explain something about time—not only historical time, time in architecture, but also the time we are now living in. I came to the conclusion a while ago that when one is looking at time, looking at history, nothing seems to have taken place. One realizes that when one is looking at time, time is not playing along, time is not visible, so to speak, because one is looking for it. But then the minute you do not look for time you are transformed by it: suddenly it just happens overnight, so to speak, or between the drawings, or in between the works, that one has been completely transformed.

Thus, to speak about architecture (or to speak about Berlin and about the contemporary situation) is to speak about the paradigm of the irrational. In my view, the best works of the contemporary spirit come from the irrational, while what prevails in the world, what dominates and often kills, does so always in the name of Reason. The irrational as a nonbeginning of this project was my starting point. Berlin is not only a physical place, but also something in the mind, something belonging to a past which never was present. A spiritual reality that makes itself immediately comprehensible to

everyone in the world. We all know John F. Kennedy's statement "I am a Berliner"; but it occurs to me that not only is everyone a Berliner, but after the tragic and disastrous consequences of the Holocaust and its impact on Modernity, everyone is also a survivor. Everyone who witnessed these ultimate events is also a survivor, so one cannot die the death of an offering anymore.

The rabbis and the commentaries on the Talmud sometimes say that God created the world out of nothing, a something out of nothing, and that it is the responsibility of the faithful to try to extract from this something the creative nothingness from which it came. Now this obviously involves one in something irrational from the very beginning because I cannot tell you how "nothing" started. But I can tell you the three elements that interested me about the project of the Berlin Museum with the Jewish Museum.

I started by trying to plot a hexagonal figure; I don't know why. In a way it sounds very kitschy, the star of David; it is such a cliché. Around the site on Lindenstrasse there lived so many famous Germans, and many famous Jews. Jews, Germans, all Berliners, people who formed the culture we know as "Berlin." I went about trying to find out the addresses of Berliners like Kleist, Heine, Rahel Varnhagen, E. T. A. Hoffmann, and Mies van der Rohe, but also of more contemporary Berliners like Schönberg, Paul Celan, Walter Benjamin. Of course, where they lived is not significant for the pattern of the city; it is not important where those anonymous addresses were; but nevertheless I found them. I then tried to make a connection between those who were the carriers of the spiritual entity of Berlin as an emblem, and I ended up with a kind of distorted hexagonal set of lines. It was a framework: I did not want to begin with a grid, or with a square or a module, but I had to start somewhere in the nowhere. This rather irrational set of lines forms a nexus that links up certain anonymous places in Berlin, both East and West. But it is also a series of connections between unreal places and real people. That is one dimension; let's call it the architectonic dimension, the irrational invisible matrix, of the project.

The second dimension of the project is a musical dimension. I have long been fascinated by Schönberg's unfinished opera *Moses and Aaron*. What now interested me about the work was not only that it had twelve letters in the title (*Moses and Aaron*) and all its other serial aspects, but also the fact that Schönberg started it in Berlin, but could not finish it. Only acts I and II were composed. It is not only that he had no inspiration, so to speak, to complete act III but also the whole musical structure had ground to a halt, erasing the possibility of continuing in the operatic mode. It intrigued me that such a genius, an incredible intellect, and a great composer, was unable to complete act III. So I got out my records and started reading the libretto. Then I became aware that the opera really deals with the Berlin Museum. It was

written a long time before, but, as I said, time does not work that way. It is a dialogue between Aaron and Moses, Aaron being the mouthpiece of the people of Israel, and Moses the one who understands that there is nothing to show the people. Aaron wants to communicate to the people, lead them into the promised land, and Moses is unable to convey the revelation of God through any image, including the musical image of Schönberg's case. The discussion between Aaron and Moses ends up with Aaron slowly exiting in the background, and then the chorus sings "Almighty, Thou art stronger than Egyptian gods are!" and then everybody leaves and Moses is left alone to sing the words: "Inconceivable God! Inexpressible, many-sided idea, will You let it be so explained? Shall Aaron, my mouth, fashion this image? Then I have fashioned an image too, false, as an image be. Thus am I defeated! Thus, all was but madness that I believed before, and can and must not be given voice. O word, thou word, that I lack!" All this is sung; but the last line, "O word, thou word, that I lack!" is not sung anymore; it is just spoken. At the end of the opera you can understand the word because there is no music: the word, so to speak, has been isolated and given a completely nonmusical expression. That is the end of the opera as Schönberg composed it.

So that is the second dimension of the project. The first is the nexus of lines connecting invisibles that are not patterned on the cityscape; the second is the unfinished act III of Schönberg's opera; and the third is a book, let's call it the textual dimension. For this I got myself two volumes. I wrote to the Federal Information Office in Bonn and asked if they had any book that contained the names of all the Jewish people who were deported from Berlin. They did indeed have such a list, and it came to me in the mail. It is an incredible two-volume set, like a giant, black telephone-book, with nothing in it but names in alphabetical order, an amazing publication. Just names, dates of birth, dates of deportation, and places in different parts of Europe where millions of Jews were exterminated by Germans. And I looked for the names of Berliners, of course, since this was a Berlin project, a Berlin museum. That was the third dimension.

I also thought that the museum for such a place as Berlin should not be only for the citizens of the present, but should be accessible, let's say imaginatively or metaphysically, to citizens of the past and of the future, a place for all citizens of Berlin to confirm their common heritage. Since they all are Berliners, were Berliners, and will be Berliners, they should also find in it a shared hope, which is something created in individual desire. To this end I saw that the museum form needed to be rethought, in order to discourage the passivity of the public in the museum. I thought that a museum should not simulate a culture, but should distance or involve the public, in order to make them decide how, where, and what to do in a museum whose particular function is the history of the city and of an

emblem. Thus, the extension to the Berlin Museum, with its special function of housing the Jewish Museum, is an attempt to give voice to a common fate, common to Jews and non-Jews, to Berliners and non-Berliners, to those who live abroad and those who live at home, those in exile, and those in the wilderness. And this fate is shared between being and what is completely other than being. So it is not only about space, not only an existential continuum, but also something completely other than text, completely other than construction, completely other than knowledge. It is not only about existence but also about inexistence. It seems to me that modern philosophy is really not an existential philosophy at all. Although it starts with existential philosophy and continues towards what seems to be modeled after a philosophy of something, it finally disappears and is reduced to a philosophy of exile, a philosophy of deprivation. You can say it is "inexistential" philosophy, and this perhaps is also one of the definitions of Modernism and Postmodernism.

In any case, the museum not only should serve to inspire poetry, music, and drama but also should give a home to the ordered—disordered, the welcome—unwelcome, the chosen—not chosen, the vocal which is silent. And so it should, at least in my program, go across these divisions. It should become a spiritual site, not just an architectural and urban piece of real estate. It should at least have in it the precariousness of Berlin's destiny, which it should mirror, fracture, and at the same time transgress. The past fatality of the German-Jewish cultural symbiosis is being reenacted now, but in the realm of that which cannot be seen. There is today no Jewish presence in Berlin as there was in the twenties and thirties. What should be brought to visibility is the German Jewish and German cultural tradition in order to give rise to a hope and to a sharing of an inner vision. The project seeks to reconnect this trace of history to Berlin and Berlin to its own eradicated history, which should not be camouflaged, disowned, or forgotten. I sought to reopen the meaning which seems to be only implicit in Berlin and to make it visible, to make it apparent, not to try to hide it or to disown it. So I took the great figures in the drama—or rather, the great figures in the drama of Berlin took me. Those who acted as the bearers of the once imminent hope and the bearers of a great anguish, of a great pathos: these I tried to graft into the building and the site.

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. Physically, very little remains of the Jewish presence in Berlin—small things, documents, archive materials, evocative of an absence rather than a presence. I thought therefore that this "void" that runs centrally through the contemporary culture of Berlin should be made

visible, accessible. It should become the structural feature that is crystallized in this particular space of the city and laid bare in an architecture in which the unnamed remains because the names keep still. The existing building, and it is actually one of the oldest Baroque buildings in the center of Berlin, should be tied in depth to this new building, but with no apparent connection on the outside. The extension has no apparent connection to the existing building of the Berlin Museum. It has an underground connection to it, in order to preserve the contradictory autonomy of the buildings on the surface, while binding them even more in depth. So the underground connection is the archival element of the Jewish Museum; when you come out of it you come into the void, which is an organizational and a structural element of the Berlin Museum as well as of the Jewish Museum. Under, above, and on the ground. Like Berlin and its Jews, it is a common burden, an insupportable burden. There is nothing to support it. It is immeasurable, unsharable. It is outlined in exchanges between two architectures and forms that are not reciprocal because they cannot be exchanged for each other.

The urban, architectural, and functional paradox of what has been closed and opened, what is stable and what is added, what is Baroque and what is Modern, what is a museum and what is amusement, is no longer reconcilable, in my view, through a theory, a theoretical construction, a theoretical utopia. It can no longer presuppose the fictitious stability of institutions such as museums, or indeed of the state, of power, of organization. Rather, the paradox between these dichotomies presupposes the unchanging.

I called this paper "Between the Lines," but it is really between two lines of thought: one is a straight line, but broken into fragments; the other is tortuous and complex, but continuing indefinitely. These are the two lines of contemporary dichotomy, the lines which create the rift between faith and action, between political belief and architectural response. These lines develop themselves, because they have a logic. They also fall apart: you cannot keep them together because they become completely disengaged; there is no way to keep them mutually intertwined. Therefore, the lines show themselves as separated, so that the void, which has been centrally running through what is continuous, materializes itself outside as what has been ruined, or rather as the remnant or residue of independent structure. I call this the "voided void," a void which has itself been voided, a deconstruction which has itself been deconstructed. Fragmentation and displacement mark the coherence of the ensemble in this type of operation, because the thing has come undone in order to become accessible, both functionally and intellectually.

I believe that the last words, the inaudible music, the inadequate ideology, the mad science have become undone in order to be understood by us, in order to become intellectually and spiritually comprehensible. These torn

pieces of history never preexisted as a whole, neither in the ideal Berlin nor in the real one. Nor do I believe that they can be put together again in some hypothetical future. First of all, it is not true that Berlin ever was the way one inherited it through the Goethe myth, the Schinkel myth, the myth of the twenties—it never was like that in the first place. That illusion is now the spacing or the distance brought about by history itself, which can only be experienced as an absence, or as the time-fulfillment of what was no longer there.

On the other hand, time is fulfilled for those things which are not here any more, both on the urban level and on the level of the collection and the program of the museum. The absolute event of history is the Holocaust and the incineration of the avant-garde of humanity in its own history. Should we not think of Nagasaki and Hiroshima in the light of this avant-gardeness in which humanity and history seem to be coincident? This event of history, with its concentration camps and annihilation, is, I believe, the burn-out of meaningful development of the city of Berlin and of humanity. It is not only on the physical level that I would like to demonstrate that there is a possibility but also on other levels; because absence shatters each place while bestowing a gift of that which no architecture can give—a gift given by no one, for no one; the preservation of the sacrifice, the offering, which guards over future meaning. That is what architecture, the arts, and the sciences are vested with: the responsibility of a nightwatch over meaning which is not there and over meaning which might have, nobody knows, been given. So out of the disaster, out of history, rises what is not historical. And out of what is terribly remote, there comes the intimate whisper.