

Encountering empty architecture: Libeskind's Jewish Museum Berlin

Henrik Reeh

Preamble

In *Art Is Not What You Think It Is*, Claire Farago and Donald Preziosi observe how the architecture of contemporary museums inspires active relationships between exhibitions and visitors.¹ Referring to the 2006 Denver Art Museum by Daniel Libeskind, they show the potentials germinating in a particular building. When artists and curators are invited to dialog with the spaces of this museum, situations of art-in-architecture may occur which go beyond the ordinary confrontation of exhibitions and spectatorship, works and visitors. Libeskind's museum is no neutral frame in the modernist tradition of the *white cube*, but a heterogeneous spatiality.

These considerations by Farago and Preziosi recall the encounter with earlier museums by Libeskind. Decisive experiences particularly date back to the year 1999 when his Jewish Museum Berlin was complete as a building, long before being inaugurated as an exhibition hall in 2001. Open to the public for guided tours in the meantime, the empty museum was visited by several hundred thousand people who turned a peripheral frame of future exhibitions into the center of their sensory and mental attention. Yet, the Libeskind building was less an object of contemplation than the occasion for an intense exploration of and in space. Confirming modernity's close connection between exhibition and architecture, Libeskind's Jewish Museum Berlin unfolds as a strangely dynamic and fragmented process, the moments of which call for elaboration and reflection.

I. Architecture/exhibition

Throughout modernity, exhibitions and architecture develop in a remarkably close relationship to one another. Observing the world exhibitions in London (1851) and Paris (1855, 1867, 1889, 1900), one realizes the degree to which a new kind of architectural space parallels new exhibition practices. The gigantic exhibition halls in glass and iron not only provide a physical framework around the mass of exhibits but also invite the cosmopolitan mix of spectators to experience themselves as part

¹ Claire Farago and Donald Preziosi, *Art Is Not What You Think It Is*, London: Routledge, 2012, 152-153.

of an overwhelming spectacle. In exhibition architectures, contemplative fetichization and multisensory distraction converge.²

Conceived for an ephemeral world exhibition, the Eiffel Tower remains present, capable of attracting the gazes and challenging the bodies of twenty-first century subjectivities. Despite more than 125 years of media development, this construction from 1889 becomes much more than a distant icon as soon as visitors climb the staircases floating in the air or take the elevators ascending backwards, as it were, along the oblique lines of the Tower's supporting pillars.

Theoretician of modern architecture and secretary general of CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne), Sigfried Giedion was indeed on an important track when he referred to the world exhibitions in general and to the Eiffel Tower in particular as the sources of innovative spatio-temporal principles, which might also be translated into residential architecture as he notes in *Building in France, Building in Iron, Building in Ferro-Concret*, his foundational book of 1928.³

On the other hand, in Giedion's own days, exhibitions of architecture as such were also proliferating, as illustrated by the *l'Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs* (the International Exhibition of Decorative Arts) in Paris 1925,⁴ the *Weissenhofsiedlung* (the Weissenhof residences) in Stuttgart 1927,⁵ or, in New York 1932, the *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA).⁶ Progressively recognized as a legitimate realm in art museums of the 1960s and '70s, architecture even gained a certain independence when a biennale devoted exclusively to architecture was organized in Venice from 1980. To be sure, this architecture biennale uses the same physical setting as the Venice art biennale, just as certain modes of exhibition and perception survive. And it is thanks to the institution of fine arts that the architects exhibiting at the Venice Architecture Biennale in the 1980s were able to maintain a distance vis-à-vis the constructional and socio-economic reality principles on which built architecture usually depends.

Yet, with the new technologies of design and construction developing in the 1990s, experimental architecture that had only generated utopian projects for exhibitions increasingly materialized in real buildings, some of which provide signs

² See Sigfried Giedion, *Building in France, Building in Iron, Building in Ferro-Concrete*, Santa Monica: The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1995 [1928]. On the architecture of world exhibitions, see Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture: the Growth of a New Tradition*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1946 [1941], 178-211; and Leonardo Benevolo, *History of Modern Architecture*, vol. 1, Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1977 [1960], 96-124.

³ Sigfried Giedion, *Building in France*, 86.

⁴ Arthur Rugg, 'Le pavillon de l'Esprit nouveau en tant que musée imaginaire' in Stanislaus von Moos, ed, *L'Esprit nouveau: Le Corbusier et l'industrie 1920-1925*, Berlin: Ernst & Sohn Verlag, 1987, 134-151.

⁵ Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses*, Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1995, 302-334.

⁶ *The Museum of Modern Art, The History and the Collection*, New York: Harry N. Abrams & The Museum of Modern Art, 15-17.

for the communication strategies of institutions and corporations. Similarly, the exhibition value of the built environment is reinforced. Since the late twentieth century, the institutions for architectural exhibitions have multiplied and attract mass audiences in which architects and planners are but a minority. Inviting its visitors to experience new spatial orders and vocabularies, exhibited architecture may at times allow people to reflect on socio-cultural structures in the world at large. At least, this conviction was shared by many of those who visited the empty Jewish Museum Berlin in the very last year of the 20th century.

II. Empty architecture—exhibited/explored

The entire story of Daniel Libeskind, the American architect born to Jewish parents in Poland 1946, illustrates the role of exhibitions in recent architecture. At present a *starchitect* whose new projects are the object of intense branding efforts, Libeskind has not always been an architect in charge of buildings. During the 1970s and '80s, Libeskind was among those experimental architects who made exhibitions of architecture the primary destination of their works. This was the case at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 1985 where Libeskind presented three huge constructions or 'machines' addressing the reading, writing, and memory of architectural space, respectively.⁷ At that time already, Libeskind participated in various architectural competitions which became occasions for him to publish and otherwise communicate his works in the public sphere. The summit was reached in 2003 when Libeskind won the competition for the masterplan of New York City's Ground Zero, after the 9/11 attacks in 2001. By then Libeskind had already moved from models toward buildings, from art toward construction; this is due, notably, to the competition of 1989, just before the fall of the Berlin Wall, for the extension of the Berlin Museum with a Jewish Department, a competition in which Libeskind won first prize. Throughout the 1990s, his entry titled *Between the Lines*⁸ became a spectacular construction site on Lindenstraße in Berlin.⁹ Here, and in the media, the translation of this project into a permanent building was followed with curiosity by observers worldwide, many of whom considered the idea of constructing a deconstructivist project (a label which had become famous after a 1988 exhibition at the MoMA of New York City) a contradiction in terms.¹⁰

⁷ Daniel Libeskind, 'Three Lessons in Architecture: The Machines', in *Daniel Libeskind, The Space of Encounter*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2001, 180-194, illustrations 211-214.

⁸ See Daniel Libeskind, 'Between the Lines – Erweiterung des Berlin Museums mit Abteilung Jüdisches Museum' (1989) in Daniel Libeskind, *Radix – Matrix*, Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1994, 100-102.

⁹ See photographs from the construction site in Hélène Binet, *A Passage through Silence and Light: Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum Berlin*, London: Black Dog Publishing, 1997.

¹⁰ Michael Sorkin, 'Decon Job' in Michael Sorkin, *Exquisite Corpse: Writings on Buildings*, New York & London: Verso, 1991, 301-306. One of the curators of the 'Deconstructivism'

Henrik Reeh Encountering empty architecture:
Libeskind's Jewish Museum Berlin

The Jewish Museum in Berlin finally opened its exhibition to the public in 2001. While this permanent exhibition fills Libeskind's architectural framework to the point of hiding some of its constitutive elements, the museum attracts 750,000 visitors a year,¹¹ and a large part of these visitors primarily come in order to discover the architecture of the museum.

During the period between the completion of the building and the inauguration of the museum, an unusually intense alliance between exhibition and architecture developed when the building was exhibited as an entity in itself.

When modern buildings are exhibited as pure architecture, they often refer back to the functions they once fulfilled. This is the case of the Villa La Roche – a Parisian masterpiece by Le Corbusier – which, between 1925 and 1965, had been the home of a banker and art collector, but is currently exhibited in a nearly empty state – devoid of its lived life and staged as an architectural monument.¹²

Contrary to this situation in which a work of architecture is exhibited after losing its usage, the interiors of Libeskind's Berlin project were exhibited at the very beginning of their life, several years before their functionality as a museum started. A simple mention of its physical completion in a French daily, *Le Monde*,¹³ made me add this building as a relevant destination during a Berlin excursion with my University of Copenhagen students of comparative literature in April 1999. The guided visit brought about a groundbreaking initiation into a complex cultural landscape, revealing many of the expectations which underlie the reception of architecture. This encounter allows us to single out some of the situations in which the perception of exhibited architecture turns into cultural reflexivity.

exhibition at the MoMA in 1988 was the architect Philip Johnson, who had already been in charge of the foundational exhibition 'Modern Architecture: International Exhibition' in 1932.

¹¹ This information is provided by *10 Jahre Jüdisches Museum Berlin*, a supplement of *Der Tagesspiegel*, October 19, 2011, 6, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Jewish Museum Berlin.

¹² In the apartment building on rue Nungesser-et-Coli (Paris 16^e), the private apartment which has served as both home and artist studio for Le Corbusier (who was also a painter) still contains some pieces of personal furniture, but most traces of his life (knickknacks, utilitarian objects, artworks, etc.) have only found refuge in some photographs hanging on the walls. The contrast is striking between the empty space of the present apartment and the photographs taken when the apartment was occupied by Le Corbusier.

¹³ Article by Frédéric Édeldmann in *Le Monde*, Octobre 2, 1998, 31. Édeldmann may not have imagined the crowds visiting this architectural work even before the opening of the exhibitions in the Jewish Museum Berlin: 'Le public n'est pas tendre pour un bâtiment qui ne l'est pas. Et l'agacement d'une partie de la communauté juive est manifeste' (The public doesn't have affection for a building devoid of affection. And irritation is apparent within a section of the Jewish community), Édeldmann wrote.

Outside the building

Perceived from the street, Libeskind's building barely imposes itself on the visitors. In vain, one looks for an entry. The grey zinc cladding and the zig zag building with multiple and irregular windows never inspire the idea of being in front of a façade. Instead the new construction withdraws from the sidewalk and makes the visitor's attention drift to the main unit of the museum: a yellow building from the beginning of the eighteenth century which is indeed facing the street.



Illustration 1: Waiting in front of the main entry into the Berlin Museum, April 1999. Photograph by Henrik Reeh

[JMBerlin3]

Arriving at the Jewish Museum Berlin for the first time in April 1999, one intuitively doubts that there will be any access to Libeskind's recently finished building. At best, there may be an exhibition of its basic principles using

representative signs such as images and scale models which give a partial and mediated experience of architectural space.

Yet this expectation is wrong; a genuine visit inside the built space of Libeskind's Jewish Museum Berlin is about to begin. Throughout a long guided walk through all sections of the building, Libeskind's architectural space is presented to the visitors. In the absence of a cultural-historical exhibition, the exhibit is space in an empty state, the built frame of a future cultural institution devoted to Jewish history.¹⁴

Enveloping space

The visit to Libeskind's architecture is limited to its interiors which are modelled in such a way that bodily sensations come to the fore. While exhibitions of architecture generally appeal to the eye and to analysis, the empty architecture of the Jewish Museum Berlin also privileges the non-visual senses and a number of cultural references. Although the sense of sight remains alert inside this space beyond norms, the visitors' sense of touch is activated at the very moment they move into the penombre of a staircase linking the baroque main building and the contemporary extension.

While the staircases of the Eiffel Tower climb towards the sky, this first staircase of the Berlin Jewish Museum takes the visitors into the underground, into the basement of the new building. Thus the link between the two buildings of the museum proves to be a subterranean one. Surrounded by walls in raw concrete, the visitors arrive on an oblique stone floor pervading a long hallway which provides a first serious challenge to the visitor's equilibrium: contemporary bodies are surprised by a tilting floor.

Moreover, this architectural interior is a dynamic landscape.¹⁵ After a few meters, the guide turns into a corridor where several degrees of inclination are at play. Barely registering the changing angle in the ground, the attentive visitor nonetheless feels destabilized when he or she finally arrives at a horizontal plateau.

A totalizing scale model

At this particular place, the audience is facing the only exhibit in the entire building: the very scale model that Libeskind submitted for the Berlin competition of 1989. A classic genre in architecture, the scale model allows the spectator to see the building as an object. Folded and twisted in a form recalling a lightning in the sky,

¹⁴ See the plan on the website of the Jewish Museum Berlin or, for exemple, in Daniel Libeskind, *Jewish Museum Berlin, Berlin*. Photographic essay by Jan Bitter, Barcelona: Polígrafa, 2011, 22-27.

¹⁵ This motif is explored in my essay, 'Second Growth: Libeskind's Copenhagen Aftermath', in *Scroope – Cambridge Journal of Architecture*, 17, 2005, 2-11.

this particular model looks like a reduced version of the building inside which one is standing. This representative function is not negligible. While most buildings reveal their volumes from the outside, this, however, is not the case here. Out in the street, one has no idea of the volume (let alone the interiors) of the structure added by Libeskind. Unless contemplating the building from a neighboring highrise, one only has a highly approximative image of its exterior form. And even then the interiors remain without representation.



Illustration 2: Observing Libeskind's winning model, 1999. Photo: Henrik Reeh

Upon closer inspection, the original scale model has several particularities.

First, it displays the form originally proposed by Libeskind; the external walls of the museum are oblique whereas in built reality they are vertical. In other words, the model represents a utopian vision of the project; on several points it contrasts with the reality one can observe when walking around on site.

Secondly, the exhibited *maquette* distinguishes itself from the neutral scale models that most architecture studios use for testing and presenting their projects. In comparison, Libeskind's competition entry stands out as a sculpture, constituting a complete and finished work, ready to be exhibited in an art gallery or to enter a museum.¹⁶

Thanks to its utopian and artistic qualities, this scale model allows the guide to present the conceptual ideas that Libeskind outlines in a series of programmatic

¹⁶ An example is provided in the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, December 2015, where Dani Karavan's bronze sculpture and landscape-architectural scale model (of the Memorial to the Negev Brigade) is on display amongst obvious works of art.

lectures from 1989-1990. His explanations appear evasive if one expects a clear explanation of the architectural forms to be built. Although a star of David results from the cartographic lines through which Libeskind links the addresses of Jewish intellectuals to those of non-Jews, there is no star to be seen in the form of the museum. Instead, Libeskind insists on the cultural embeddedness of the Museum into the cultural context of Berlin where intense exchanges between Jewish and German intellectuals have taken place.¹⁷

The same absence of spatial determinism characterizes Libeskind's reference to *Das Gedenkbuch (The Commemorative Book)*,¹⁸ gigantic volumes containing the official list enumerating the victims of the Nazi persecution during the period 1933-1945. Certainly, facsimile excerpts from the list of victims covers the ground of the model, but the names themselves are not materialized in the building as such.

Neither Libeskind's references to the intellectuals' addresses in Berlin nor the long list of victims are translated into the visible signifiers of built form. On the other hand, Libeskind's fragmentary narratives heighten the attention of the audience. Little by little, the visitors recognize that their bodies and minds are surrounded by a work of architecture which transgresses a functionalist paradigm without subscribing to a system of symbolic significations. The relation between the architectural signifier and the cultural signified is much more indirect. After all, this non-identity – evasive yet evocative – between form and content is essential to the sensory and rhetorical power of Libeskind's architecture as experienced during this initiatory visit.

A constitutive void

Architectural space also provides the basis of a programmatic commentary. Just a few meters from the scale model, one arrives in a space which is all concrete, five or six stories high. This space resembles an elevator shaft in which both the elevator and the doors at each floor are missing. At first, this rough space, continuing all the way to the roof where daylight shimmers through, may seem unfinished and incomplete. These impressions, however, do not fully translate Libeskind's programmatic intentions.

This space, through which most visitors would pass without paying attention, is pointed out as an essential narrative and structural element in Libeskind's project, *Between the Lines*. At those places of the plan where the abrupt and twisted line of the real building crosses a straight and ideal line, fields of superposition appear. Inside the museum, these particular fields – very tall and devoid of function – materialize as spaces in gray concrete.

According to Libeskind, these *voids* (a word which in English also means useless and invalid) echo the absence of Jewish culture, annihilated by the Shoah, in

¹⁷ Daniel Libeskind, 'Between the Lines,' 100.

¹⁸ Daniel Libeskind, 'Between the Lines,' 101.

the midst of the museum dedicated to the history of Judaism.¹⁹ In a certain way, the empty spaces seem to be there instead of a living culture. The void is not really a ruin, but a space, destroyed or wiped out, which manifests itself in those places where the two structural lines (or bands) of the architectural plan intersect and cover each other.



Illustration 3: In the void, 1999. Photo: Henrik Reeh

If necessary, the constitutive importance of the void evidences the degree to which the building has been conceived by Libeskind as much more than a functional space. One particularly notices the enigmatic blend of architectural form and cultural reflexivity in the basement. At the end of one of the three corridors, a door gives access to an exterior garden in which concrete columns on a tilting ground may provoke vertigo among the visitors.²⁰ A second corridor leads to a concrete tower, originally conceived as a void which, in turn, has been displaced as a voided void – before finally being designated by a very explicit name, 'Holocaust Tower.'²¹ Despite this symbolic designation, which may have been adopted for pedagogical or rhetorical purposes, the architecture of the museum cannot be

¹⁹ Daniel Libeskind, 'Between the Lines,' 102.

²⁰ The garden was originally named 'E. T. A. Hoffmann Garten' (E. T. A. Hoffmann Garden), but later became 'Garten des Exils' (Garden of Exiles).

²¹ In addition, the underground corridors are currently named 'Achse des Exils' (Axis of Exiles), 'Achse der Kontinuität' (Axis of Continuity), and 'Achse des Holocaust' (Axis of Holocaust), names which figure on the official map of the museum as well as on the walls of the corridors themselves.

considered as symbolic in the traditional sense of this word.²² In Libeskind's principal texts and lectures, the particular spaces of the museum do not correspond to precise significations. Even in the case of the void spaces, there is no one-to-one relationship between the architectural forms one perceives (audio-visually and tactilely) and the cultural meaning one senses in particular places or when confronted with Libeskind's narratives. At most, the architectural framework and the discourse added invite the visitors to note and to elaborate on the tension between the built spaces and the cultural references.

Interiors in passing

Both horizontal and continuous, the galleries for the permanent exhibition of the Jewish Museum Berlin occupy the upper floors. Illuminated by daylight, these exhibitional spaces differ from the dark and tilted corridors of the underground.

In comparison, the upper galleries may look more ordinary and neutral, as well as being capable of fulfilling a diversity of practical functions. If not for the name 'Jewish Museum Berlin,' which imposes a powerful interpretive horizon, nothing would prevent us from imagining that a bank or another administrative institution move into these floors. Yet, because of the name and the institutional particularity signalled by it, any other use than for a Jewish museum would seem ethically inappropriate.

In reality, the normality of these spaces is relative. The walls are white, as is the norm in the *white cube* of the art gallery or the modernist museum. But the zigzag plan implies turns that add a labyrinthine quality to the architectural ensemble and to the visitors' experience. Despite the fact that one continues to move forward, one doesn't know quite in which direction one is walking, nor where one has arrived compared to the point of departure.

This labyrinthine route is punctuated by stops or barriers – veritable solutions of continuity – provided by black concrete walls, which oblige the visitors to pass either on the left or the right side. These thresholds – necessary places of passage – indicate the outer surfaces of Libeskind's constitutive void. Once again, the guide has to attract the attention of the visitors to this spatial and conceptual trait which otherwise would pass unnoticed. When first introduced in the underground level, it is a reference by Libeskind to *Moses and Aron* by Arnold Schönberg which helps to circumscribe the paradoxical status of the void. In this unfinished opera, music ceases and leaves the stage to the spoken word and to silence.²³ Here, in the upper floors, the guide invokes Walter Benjamin's fragments

²² This interpretation differs from that of W. Michael Blumenthal, director of the Jewish Museum Berlin, who, in *10 Jahre Jüdisches Museum Berlin* considers Libeskind's architecture 'tief symbolisch' (3), 'deeply symbolic.' See also Roland Barthes, 'Semiology and Urbanism,' trans. Richard Howard in *The Semiotic Challenge*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1988, 191-201.

²³ Daniel Libeskind, 'Between the Lines,' 100.

in *One-Way Street* in order to underline the importance of the black stops which, according to Libeskind, signal a limit to the representation of history.²⁴

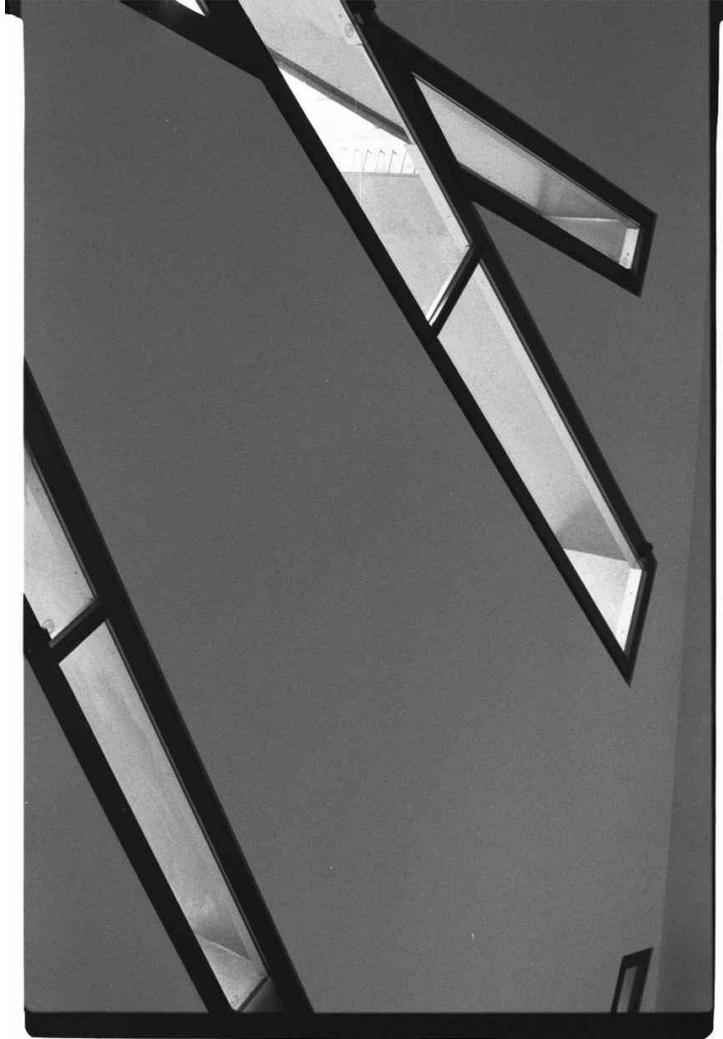


Illustration 4: Windows, 1999. Photo: Henrik Reeh

While the void places are highly charged, conceptually and discursively, this is much less the case of other spatial characteristics, which nonetheless stand out as distinctive elements during the visitor's experience of the museum. In this respect, it is striking that the numerous and multiform windows fragmenting the overground exterior walls are exempt from commentary in Libeskind's major programmatic texts. The tour guide herself also refrains from explaining the windows' formal

²⁴ Yet there is no reference to Benjamin in Daniel Libeskind, 'Between the Lines,' 100-102. See Daniel Libeskind: 'trauma / void' in Elisabeth Bronfen, Birgit R. Erdle & Sigrid Weigel, eds, *Trauma. Zwischen Psychoanalyse und kulturellem Deutungsmuster*, Cologne, Weimar, Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 1999, 17-18.

Henrik Reeh Encountering empty architecture:
Libeskind's Jewish Museum Berlin

vocabulary. Are they silenced in order to allow their cinetic and subliminal effects to unfold? These kaleidoscopic windows impose themselves throughout the walk in the museum.

Similarly, this ornamental universe, heterogeneous and elusive as it is, returns in the individual memory after the encounter with Libeskind's Jewish Museum Berlin, as it stood out in the early days when there was no other exhibition than its own architecture. One understands why certain visitors hoped that the museum would remain empty.

III. Architecture/experience



Illustration 5: Jewish Museum Berlin, framed by trees, 2009. Photo: Henrik Reeh [IMG_1998]

During the years 1999-2001, the empty architecture was the unique exhibit of the Jewish Museum Berlin. In those days, the frame had become the *œuvre*, the very center of attention. It was the long and slow journey through the building itself which provided food for thought to numerous visitors (350,000 in total).²⁵ Each time one returned, though, fewer interior spaces were accessible. And since the inauguration of the museum in 2001, a genuine reversal has taken place, insofar the exhibition often seems to repress the experience of the architecture, contradicting or dissimulating it behind a second skin of objects and scenography.

²⁵ Information given by a newspaper published at the inauguration of the Jewish Museum Berlin, *jüdisches museum berlin – eröffnungsausgabe*, June 2001, 20.

Throughout the 1990s, Libeskind had emphasised how the human and cultural destruction during the Shoah eroded the possibility of representing the history of Jewish culture. The historical signs of Jewish life in Berlin and Germany were rare, and the museum in Berlin hardly disposed of a collection to be exhibited. As a response to this situation, Libeskind argued that a minimalist and contrastive pedagogy was necessary.²⁶

Since then, an increasingly abundant exhibition has been established. At the inauguration of the museum in 2001, the use of technical simulations instead of originals was striking. At every consecutive visit, however, the permanent exhibition, organized chronologically, has grown more and more voluminous. Thousands of exhibits are now present in the exhibition. Their sheer number seems to prevent the ever important reflection on the limits of historical representation.

Libeskind's architecture only appears unaltered when seen from the outside. Surrounded by trees that continue to grow, the monumental aspect of the building now plays a more important role than in 1999 when the guided walks through the interiors informed an intense architectural experience.

Inside the museum, one has difficulties retrieving the sensory and textual dynamics inspired by the building when one encountered it in an empty state. The ways in which the exhibition of the architectural frame itself became the support of an intense reflection on perception, on space itself, and on the historical and cultural context, are no longer on the agenda. More traditional museographies have taken over.

Yet the basement of the Jewish Museum Berlin, remaining dark and a little secret, still invites reflection. Standing in front of a dark display window of limited visibility, the individual visitor may silently experience how minuscule historical traces dialogue with Libeskind's architectural space. Visitors who happen to have been there back in 1999-2001 already may recall the transitory period during which architecture itself made up the exhibition and allowed for an extraordinary encounter with built, sensory, and cultural space.²⁷

Postamble

In some early writings already, Donald Preziosi explores the links between architecture, movement, and semiosis.²⁸ Aesthetic codes represent social structures, which, in turn, are appropriated by way of human movement in space. Studying the ritual itinerary towards the Akropolis in ancient Athens, Preziosi highlights the role

²⁶ Daniel Libeskind, 'trauma / void,' 19-22.

²⁷ The present text is a reelaboration – with extensions – of an essay in French by Henrik Reeh, 'Exposer l'architecture vide: Le Musée Juif de Berlin par Daniel Libeskind', in *Phasis – European Journal of Philosophy*, 2012, 127-140.

²⁸ Donald Preziosi, 'Structure as Power: The Mechanisms of Urban Meaning' in *Espaces et Société*, 47, special issue, 1985, 45-55.

Henrik Reeh Encountering empty architecture:
Libeskind's Jewish Museum Berlin

of anamorphosis – particular moments in time and space where architecture and signification join.

In comparison, Libeskind's Jewish Museum Berlin derives from a modernity in which semiosis takes place in fragmentary and unpredictable ways. Accordingly, the building for the Jewish Museum in Berlin recalls a kaleidoscope which continues to change along the visitors' receptive process. Certain situations stand out, in which combinations of thoughts and sensations, optic and tactility make the encounter with – that is, *inside* – architectural space add up to an intense and enigmatic experience. These situations also call for interpretations which transgress a view of architecture focusing on function and style. Instead, visitors and users are invited to address a series of cultural spatialities that may contribute to a self-reflexive understanding of present times.

Henrik Reeh, Ph.D. in Comparative Literature, is Associate Professor of Humanistic Urban Studies and Modern Culture in the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, University of Copenhagen. He is a Danish director of 4Cities – Erasmus Mundus Master Course (4Cities.eu). Author of books on urbanity, art in public space, and cultural theory, Reeh's *Ornaments of the Metropolis: Siegfried Kracauer and Modern Urban Culture* was published by The MIT Press. Reeh is also a photographer.
reeh@hum.ku.dk



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)