

On the Work of Daniel Libeskind
About the Anti-Semitism of a Wall

This is an impossible story. It is the story of an architect who has to recognise his own failure at the point of transition from idea to building.

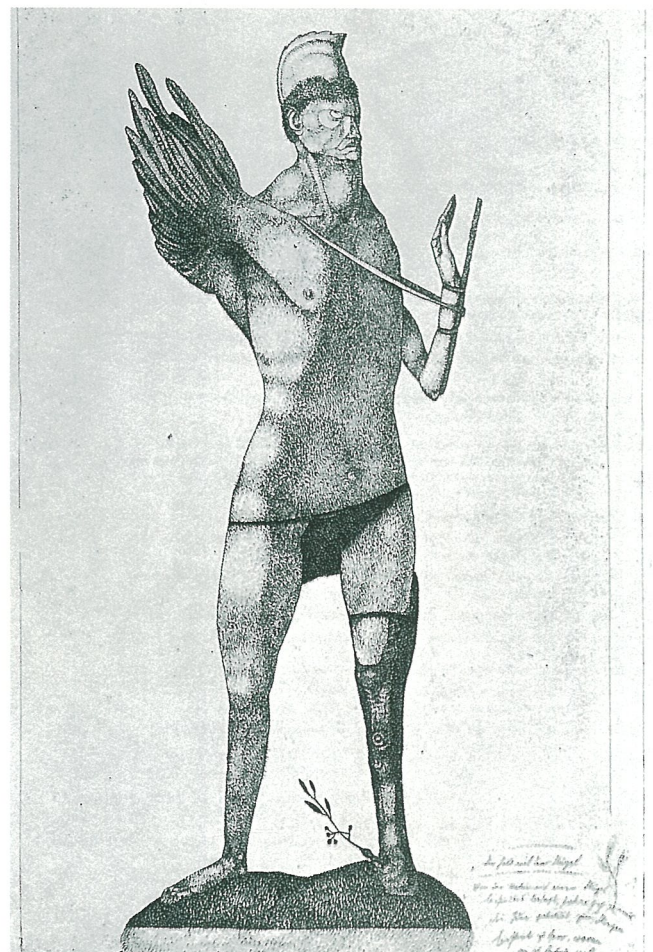
Elsewhere in this book, Herman Hertzberger explains that he finds architectural theorising practically worthless if its author has never seen anything of his own realised in bricks and mortar. This idea played a role for Hertzberger when he was on the competition jury for the extension of the Berlin Museum with a Jewish Museum, and he recommended Libeskind as the winner (1989). Libeskind had excelled only in building models and installations in which countless literary, historical and philosophical notions have been interwoven in exceedingly complex networks. Although he was seen in architectural circles and promoted himself as a designer with pretensions of realising his plans, Libeskind remained primarily a thinker. The laurels of the Berlin Museum competition gave him the chance to prove himself as a doer too. For Hertzberger it was in any case an excellent opportunity to put all Libeskind's fine words to the test against what he is so good at himself, namely architectural handicraft. Libeskind had to behave like a realist for once – then we would soon find out how well all those beautiful ideas stood up in practice.

The ideas remained beautiful; the design proved feasible and is being built, although with countless worrying delays. Hertzberger has at least had his way. But along with the building of Libeskind's first major work, it is very much the question whether the architect himself is at all happy about it. He is now doing justice to his qualification as an architect in practice, but it is becoming clearer and clearer that there is a strange tension between Libeskind's *Symbolbedürftigkeit*, his urge to metaphor, and the realisation of an architectural product. What is more, that tension is actually a paradox in which the architect becomes embroiled. Success looks like failure. Or worse still, it is failure masquerading as success. How did this come about?

348

Before success laid hands on him, Libeskind was a *Wunderkind* of Polish-Jewish ancestry, patently talented and versatile, who astonished the world with marvellous studies. Architecture looked like a suitable vehicle for ideas again. No other architect was as good as Libeskind at transforming philosophical reflections into exciting images. The material reversal of the philosophical concept of Presence was his speciality. He worked on projects such as the Pit of Babel for the Potsdamerplatz, and designed an 'Über den Linden'. Time and time again, he demonstrated that architecture could serve as a vehicle for the intellect and hence capture the historical moment in form and matter. Nowadays the *ex positivo* approach to philosophy is practically obsolete and in Libeskind's view we should seek a conceptual framework that is a match for the void into which the twentieth century, and in particular the Holocaust, has cast us.

With his probing of the relationship between the physical void of architecture and the moral void of historical experience, Libeskind emerged during the eighties as the intellectual conscience among architects – someone who did not himself build but who



Paul Klee, The hero with the wing, 1905-38

enriched the profession with a depth of insight rarely achieved in this self-enclosed discipline. For example, Libeskind asks whether it is still possible for the architect to play a public role in an age when, for a variety of reasons, such a self-confident posture has become questionable. But nobody can place himself outside the situation; and as a result the debate has become marked by a kind of automatism, with little content. With respect to architecture, he showed that this situation led to a heavy preoccupation with the architectural vocabulary, while the expressiveness of this language was non-existent. The public was hereby simply seduced by form and failed to notice the historic loss of content.★ It was in the light of this *Mene Tekel* that Libeskind won his biggest assignment.

★ Libeskind, Daniel, 'Personal Statement', *A+U* 8 (1988), p. 131.

Not in size but in symbolic value, it was an assignment considered by some to be the most demanding project of the century. Let's wait and see...

Post-Holocaust Architecture as QED

The Jewish Museum, notably enough merely an extension to the Berlin Historical Museum, is an architectural programme with a heavily loaded significance. The task is extremely complex and has become all the more difficult now that the Wall has fallen

I don't want to be understood like I was advocating retirement. My issue is postponement in order to act: *epoche* as Husserl puts it. One should postpone the influence of [certain] factors on ones awareness, such as to put their power and intensity at stake. That's the only way to criticise them. However, I am convinced that one should be involved in the action.

Daniel Libeskind

In our times one can only think in the emptiness of vanished man. This emptiness does not excavate a shortage, nor does it prescribe us to fill a hole. It is nothing more or less than the opening of a space in which it is finally possible to think again.

Michel Foucault

How does one bring back the urgency, the immediacy which must have existed at some point of time, that violence that has to do with breathlessness? Where is the breathlessness in architecture? Why is everybody so confident? Why are people not breathless? Or why are they so out of breath for the wrong reason, running from one office to another and coordinating imbecilic data?

Daniel Libeskind

The architect must have some idea of immortality to do his work. After all, history doesn't exist.

Daniel Libeskind

and Germany is faced with internal embarrassments. In the light of increasingly overt anti-semitism, Libeskind's museum will draw all the more attention. How do you design a building for a piece of history that was almost totally eradicated by the Nazis, in a city that was itself practically wiped off the map, and on a rubble-strewn plain that was subsequently artificially built up by grace of the cultural compensation policy of the *Internationale Bau Ausstellung (IBA)*? The character of such a building must be almost entirely determined by things that no longer exist. Libeskind once described the Berlin Jewish cemetery, which still contains blank gravestones of Jews who had already reserved their final resting place. They form a silent but macabre testimony to their deported owners, for whom the 'final resting place' will ever remain a forlorn expectation. The empty faces of those tombstones tell us more than any other memorial could. Here it is the absence of a name that articulates the history of Berlin.

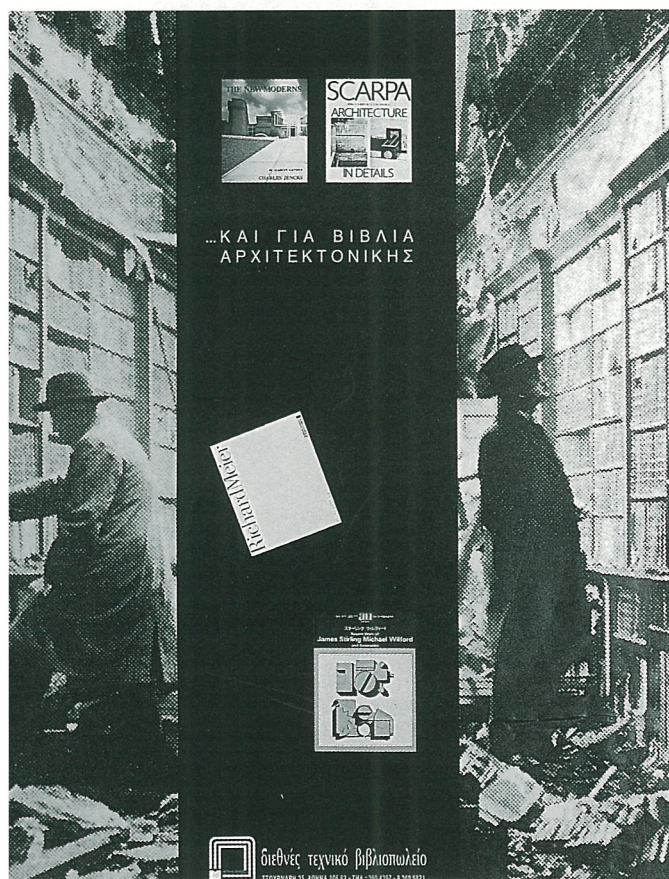
Over and above Herman Hertzberger's grounds, there was much more to be said for inviting Libeskind to take this commission, for of all architects Libeskind is the one who goes furthest in the building of nothingness. It is even his *Leitmotif*. The building is like a frozen bolt of lightning cast down alongside the old Classicist Berlin Museum. The new building can be accessed only via the old, so that the visitor is forced, as it were, to take cognisance of the radical break in the history of Berlin Jewry. This strategy of

interweaving (*Durchdringung*) aims to give the Jews back a place that was taken from them by their persecutors. One might also term it compulsory correction through education, but that way of thinking would be a profanity here.

Besides the elaborate ground plan which suggests a ripped-up Star of David, both the façade and the spatial arrangement are likely to disconcert the all too naive German visitor. In the design, the external walls lean slightly outwards, display surgical incisions and are clad with gleaming metal. These features are intended to deprive the building of its substantiality. The interior space is characterised by absolute 'voided void'. A straight visual path – a 'structural rib' – cuts right through the zigzagging plan, and is accentuated at every intersection by a void. It is noteworthy that these voids operate as a kind of obstruction in the museum visitor's route. They are separated from the rest of the museum by glass walls on which thousands of names from the *Totenbücher* are engraved. Nothingness is an obstacle here; thus these voids symbolise the vanished Jewish life of Berlin. In a historical sense, too, you encounter this absence over and over again. 'Through the special emphasis on the accommodation of the Jewish Museum', Libeskind explains, 'it is an attempt to give a voice to a collective fate'. The problem is that this Jewish collectivity was one that was forced on them by the exclusion strategies which the Nazis devised as a way of coping with their own projected anxiety. The iconography of the museum, although intended for exhibition of living Jewish culture, is shaped by the history of its destruction.

However, Libeskind takes his imagery a step further. This commentary in space is not only on Jewish culture at its most distressed hour, but on our common fate that is presumably prefigured by Jewish history. 'The idea of the Berlin Museum is a model for the contemporary psyche, the state of the soul.'★ Libeskind believes that the Holocaust has made every illusion of rootedness and the associated claim to *Raum* impossible to uphold. And, indeed, it is not for nothing that *Raum* is listed in the *Wörterbuch des Unmenschens*.★ The museum as monument, as Heideggerian 'thing in the world', with its collection (memory) and its historical narrative (interpretation), is a totally obsolete concept in a culture that was, in Libeskind's own words, 'cremated in its own history'. When asked about his own Jewish consciousness, Libeskind replied 'Naturally, as a Jew there is nowhere I really belong'. In as far as his building is a commentary on culture as a whole, he seems to be saying that nobody – and certainly not the inhabitants of Berlin – belongs anywhere any more. That just falls short of implying that figuratively we have all become Jews, but it does suggest that in a philosophical sense *goyim* no longer exist. And that, of all things, in relation to the accommodation of the Jewish Museum, which, whatever way you look at it, is an attempt to give Jewish culture houseroom in Berlin again. Libeskind's building writes a full stop into history at a point where there is no more history. It attempts to focus a Jewish culture in this period when the Diaspora has become a universal condition. The building topographises the impossibility of a topography.

★ Libeskind, Daniel, 'Daniel Libeskind, Daniel Libeskind, Daniel Libeskind etc.', in Gevers, Ine (ed.), *The Borderline*, Maastricht 1991, p. 76.
★ Sternberger, D., *Wörterbuch des Unmenschens* ['Dictionary of Unpeople'], Munich 1970.



Ruins of the Holland House Library, Kensington, London, 1940, used in advertisement

The city is a historical product which will also disappear into history, as it appeared in history. I am often perplexed when people get so obsessed with the notion of the city as if it was the final and ultimate development of architecture. I have the feeling that it is not the last development of architecture. One should think of other things, not only of cities. Of a world without cities for instance. A world where cities are no longer the controlling power centres of society and culture. Where culture is independent of place and of police or politics.

Daniel Libeskind

Architecture has got to become a political issue once again. (...) The issue is that we are not training architects in our schools to deal with the political, environmental, social, economic and technological issues.

Peter Eisenman

I think that architecture fundamentally is political. It is an political act. It concerns politics, the state at large.

Daniel Libeskind

Living in cities is an art, and we need the vocabulary of art, of style, to describe the peculiar relationships between man and material that exists in the continual creative play of urban living. The city as we imagine it, the soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration, nightmare, is as real, maybe more real, than the hard city one can locate on maps in statistics, in monographs on urban sociology and demography and architecture.

Jonathan Raban

I am not pleading for the abandonment and dissolution of the city, but to come back to more pragmatic experiences and not to drift into the ideological and seemingly powerful waves of simulacra.

Daniel Libeskind

The difficulty in the concept of Post-Modernity revolves around the fact that the end of modernity involves the end of the metaphysical justification of history for its legitimation - the end of the Modern forms of metaphysics: that is, of historicism in its enlightened, idealistic, positivistic and marxist forms.

Gianni Vattimo



Marking of the City Boundary, Groningen, 1990

Laying a Foundation Stone in a Moral Vacuum

Is it still really a matter of accommodation? Of a house for a fixed, coherent programme? Of bricks and mortar? When architecture becomes as intensely metaphorical as that of Libeskind, is it not likely that its metaphorical strength could overwhelm even the eternal meanings of structure, occupation and presence? The foundation, which is anchored in the ground, is in just as much trouble as is philosophical fundamentalism in its present state of deconstruction. Architecture may thus have reached the end of the line as the imagery of system builders, and might make a new start as semiosis without end. It would at least be appropriate close to the fallen Wall. Since 9 November 1989, inside and outside, the One and the Other, and good and evil have no longer been what they used to be.

The design of the Jewish Museum, with its zig-zag ground plan without logical termination, can also be understood as a reference to the Jewish tradition of endless analysis of the Talmud. The holy law must be forever interpreted and expounded. This cultural motif of endlessness recurs in countless later cultural expressions. An example is the never completed process of psychoanalysis, in which the ultimate core of the soul is never bared. Another is the process of deconstruction as propounded by Jacques Derrida, which centres specifically around the negation of the idea of an ultimate meaning. And the new incarnation of this old pattern, morbid though it may be, is the effect of the Holocaust. The latter has ensured the definitive unreachability of an ultimate dogma from which everything could be deduced and the failure of every interpretation. To round off this grisly line of thought, the *Endlösung* turns out to have produced a cultural universalisation of endless analysis. The result of the Holocaust was a tragic

perpetuation of the Jewish tradition. Architectural metaphors soon go out of date. But not this time. This is because the museum is, in a figurative sense, about a historic event which in a certain sense has ended history, the Holocaust. After the excesses of history, history in the guise of the course of civilisation cannot just carry on regardless. The *Endlösung* was a programme to relieve the history of Europe of the Jews. But with the modest distance of time that we now enjoy, we could say that the Jews were thereby relieved of the historic problem of Europe: the idea that mankind was capable of taking control of his own fate. Through those very excesses, we cannot go back to the world before Auschwitz. 'After the absolute zero-point', Libeskind said, 'after the Holocaust, everybody is a survivor. (...) Actually surviving means that you can't die. So those beyond the borderline, they died, they were murdered. But those who survived cannot die. They can pass away, they can have a heart attack, but they can not die.' ★

So how appropriate it is that Libeskind refers to failure as a sign of intellectual quality. 'I am not interested in those who succeed in stabilising the image and giving the final answer. I am interested precisely in those who teeter on the edge of failure or in those who actually fail. I believe that all great architects have failed. It is as failure that their work sets us an example.'

It is always the seeking, explaining and interpreting of things that excites Libeskind. That is probably what appeals to him so strongly in Paul Klee, whose work often provided themes for projects in Berlin. In his painting ★ See Gevers, Ine (ed.), op. cit. p. 81. *Hero with Wing*, Klee provided a parameter for twentieth-century historical awareness. His hero is no longer the demiurge who succeeds in forcing the world into submission,

Therefore, the moral responsibility of the architect, within the perverted society - as I call it - is the ultimate responsibility towards the other and towards the others.

Daniel Libeskind.

The notion of responsibility should be taken from the realm of *Sonderethik*, a free floating obligation, and must be returned to the domain of lived lives. Real responsibility only exists in the domain of real answers.

Martin Buber

Not a single research project, no discussions about 'relevance' at all, nor accumulated knowledge is capable of concealing that one undeniable fact: education in, and application of architecture today is grammatical fiction only.

Daniel Libeskind

There are thousands of years of empirical history, one doesn't need to be too impressed by what happened. What it shows is all the pathological departures and all the dead ends as well as demonstrating a certain normality and atmospheric mediocrity in what is possible for human beings. So this knowledge of the past is a good corrective to thinking about the future, but at the same time one also has a feeling that nothing much has really happened when you do look back in history. Not much progress has been made in the understanding of architecture.

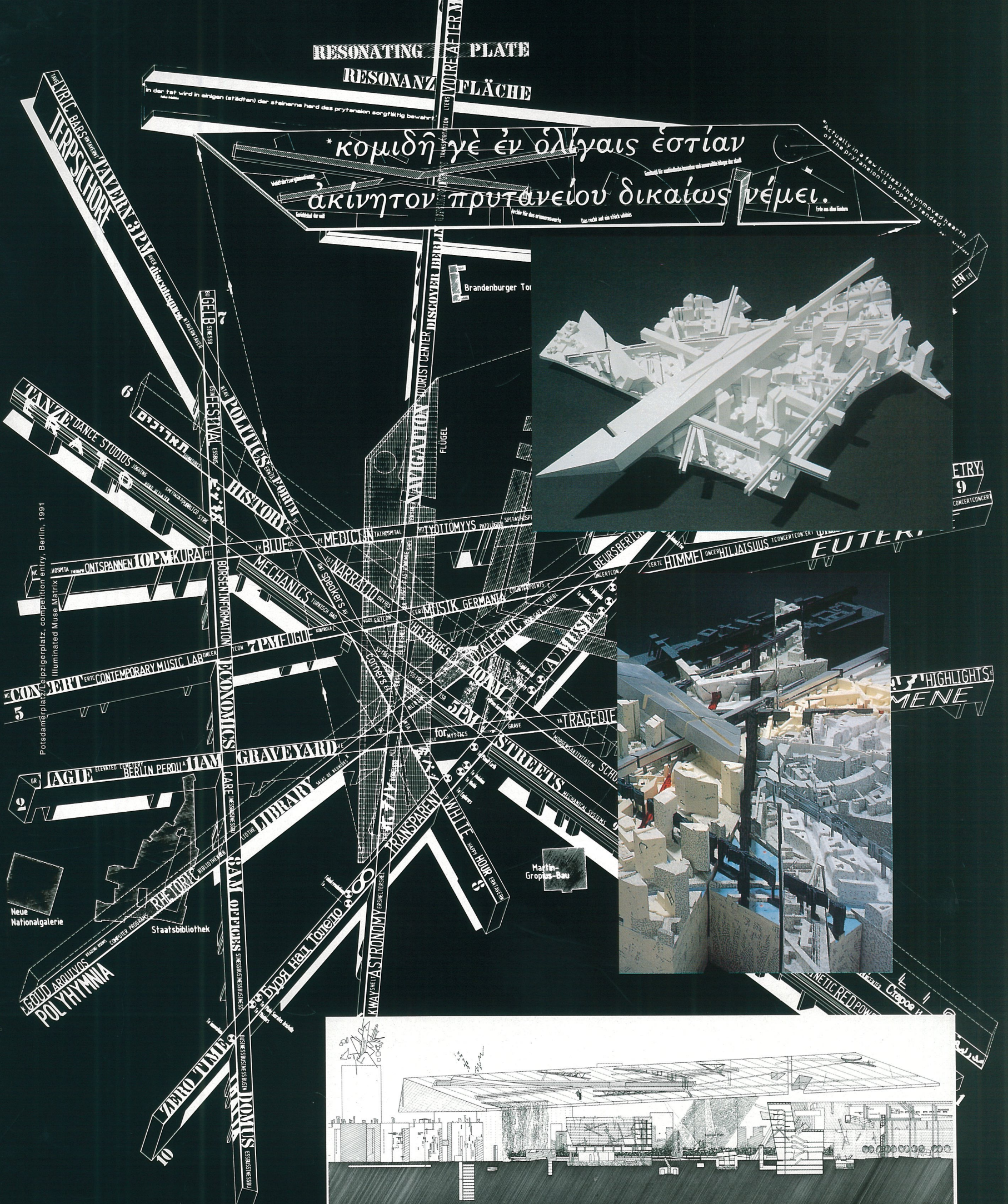
Daniel Libeskind

Architecture is a metabolic process. It is constantly changing in keeping with the lifestyles of the people who use it, and there may never be a time when it can be said to be complete.

Kiyonari Kikutake

So it is not so much the symbol that is eminent, but the process in which some meaning might emerge. And I would say that meaning is a quest, but the process is mysterious.

Daniel Libeskind



Section of Leipzigerplatz

but (in Hans Magnus Enzensberger's phrase) a 'hero of the retreat'. Pulling back before events take a tragic turn is what Libeskind admires most.

In the meantime, we have a nagging sense of doubt. The 9th November, now three years later, was the day of the museum's *Grundsteinlegung*. But how can we talk about foundation stones in connection with a philosophical manifesto of disintegrating foundations? Ground, stone... what are we worrying about? Time appears to trudge on in spite of all the philosophical speculations about the end of history, and the real seems to be winning ground; inevitably, the architect must strike while the iron is hot. Time actualises even Libeskind's ideas.

An Architectural Office as Shadow of the Promethean Process

Libeskind is showing no signs of retreating at present – on the contrary. In this respect he has failed once again, but in a different, much more literal sense. For it now looks as though he really is going to get a building built, in spite of countless setbacks. We are not referring to his adjustments to the plan. That kind of failure is usually the result of miserliness. In the present case the failure lies deeper. Libeskind has himself described his new career as a master builder as living in the shadow of the Promethean process. In that shadow, the feverish heat of the creative process is reduced to the clichés that lie within the potential of realisable architecture. This brings him back to the 'reality principle' that he was so anxious to avoid. The architectural object, the 'thing' in Heidegger's terms, must after all carry the cultural meaning, and that almost immediately brings us back into the phenomenology that underlies this 'work'. Libeskind turns out to be capable of piling up bricks – really, just like Hertzberger – and as a result he now gets some real recognition at last.

But there is yet more failure in this work, whether by choice or otherwise. By being elected winner of this competition, Daniel Libeskind has lost his Jewish identity in a philosophical sense. Now he is obliged to *represent* world (dis)order. Someone who aims to build as a way of expressing every existential, philosophical and ethnic uprooting, ultimately builds the transgression of his own (second) commandment and thereby his own repression. A coherent museum programme, with the pretence of telling us about the ways of the world, is also a prison; an architectural structure, on solid foundations, is like a barbed-wire fence; a wall, with the pretence of defining an identity, of separating here from there, the One from the Other, is thus anti-semitic.

On this point, the metaphor has gone too far. Has some Tom Thumb perhaps scattered pebbles on the serpentine lobes from which this absurd conclusion springs? Can we turn back? Or can we go forward? Where to, then? To questions like these, Libeskind's museum has no answer. Through the stress on the absolute 'zero point' of history as a universally dominant morality, every option, every perspective becomes futile. We can no longer die, let alone die for something. Life is over. We can only survive. Not in concrete (Alexander Mitscherlich) but in the metaphor of the slaughter of our forefathers. The organised introduction to Jewish culture on offer in Berlin can only take place in a funereal mood. But surely that wasn't the intention, was it?



Über den Linden, competition entry, Berlin, 1990

When everything is aggressively made to signify something, the whole cannot possibly mean anything.

Kurt Forster

I think architecture is a dialogue between the existing and contradictory forms, spaces, and functions, which immediately surround a building. The particular mission of building is to discover identity in the contradictions between decision and history.

Daniel Libeskind

Genius is the ability to conceive of imaginary objects as one would of real ones, and to treat them the same way.

Novallis

Since he let go of his love for divine *episteme* in favor of an opinion, the architect became a propagator of opinion: he lost his participation in 'Sophia' - that mysterious dimension of architecture called celestial by Alberti. Architecture becomes the territory of everybody (managers, renovation, interior designers, town planners - a 'fine profession') and of nobody at the same time.

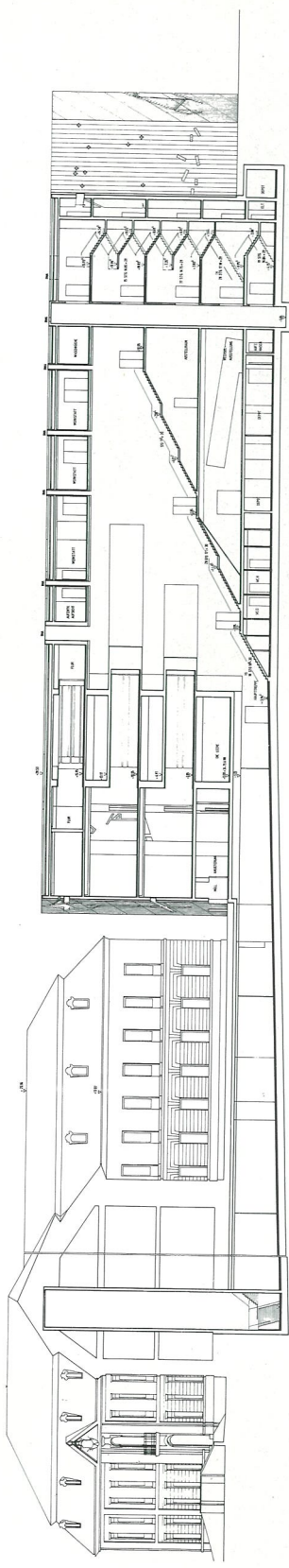
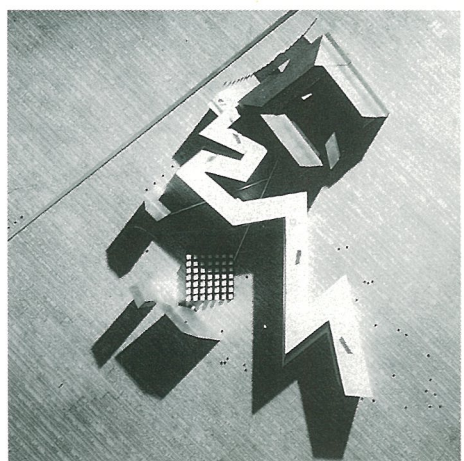
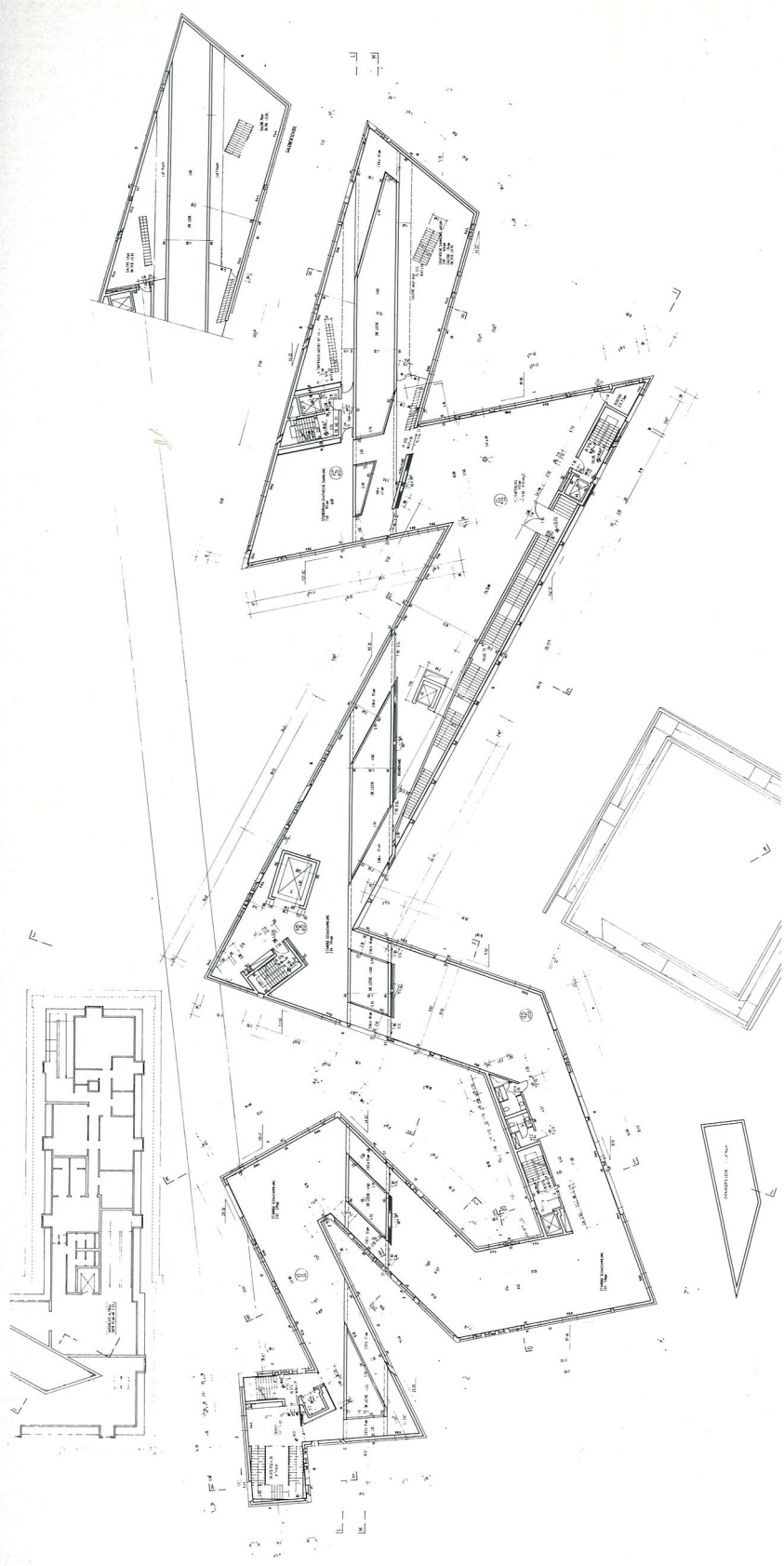
Daniel Libeskind

Architecture, that divine luxury of faith, that highest crystallisation of the material freedom of mankind, its imaginative and mental power, should never yield to the status of being the degenerate product of necessity, delivered by the specialist of educational and monetary utopias.

Daniel Libeskind

The ideological derailment that architecture can actually put an end to experience and provide a final resting place or solution to a human desire is the cliché of architecture. But as the mother of arts it is the most important metaphor we have for stabilising and thus subverting human existence, a place in the world, the city, the crossroads, the temple.

Daniel Libeskind



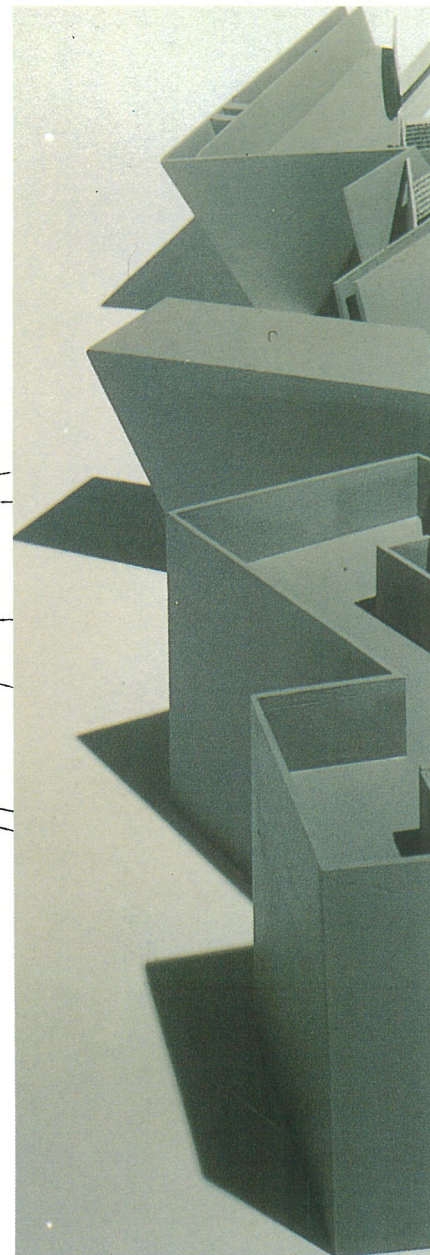
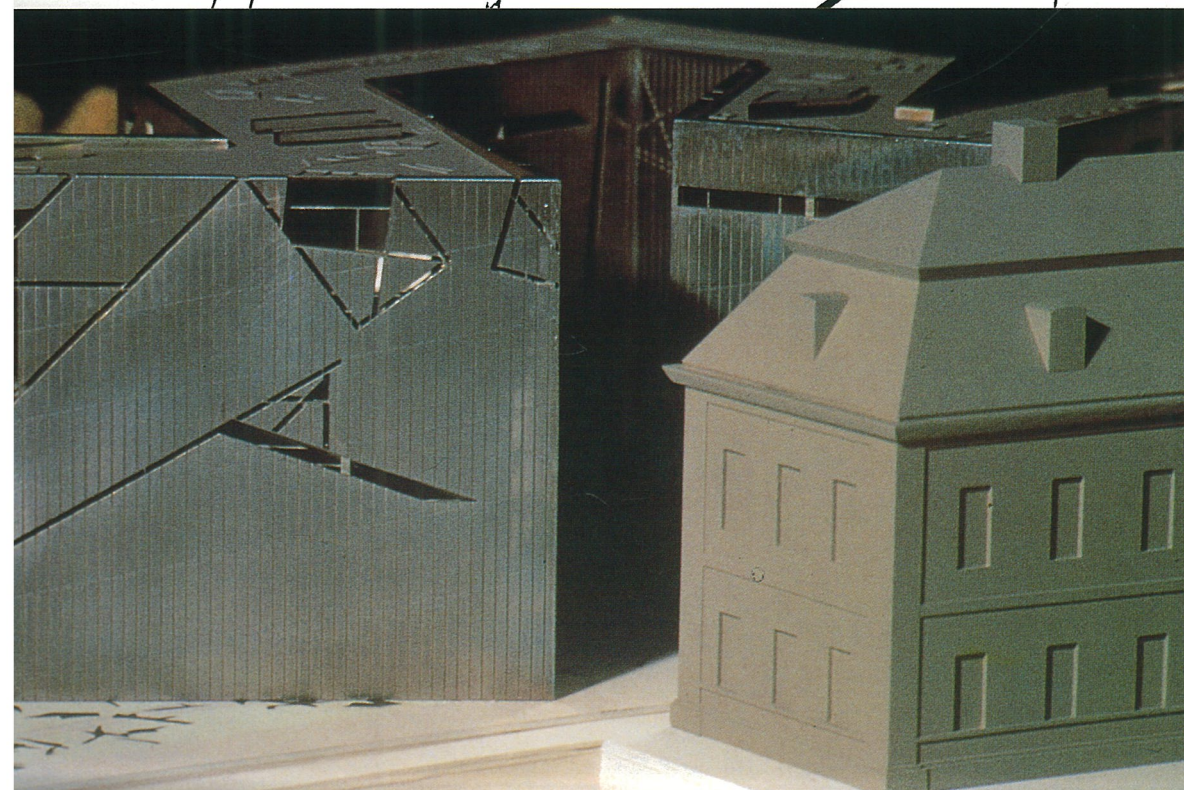
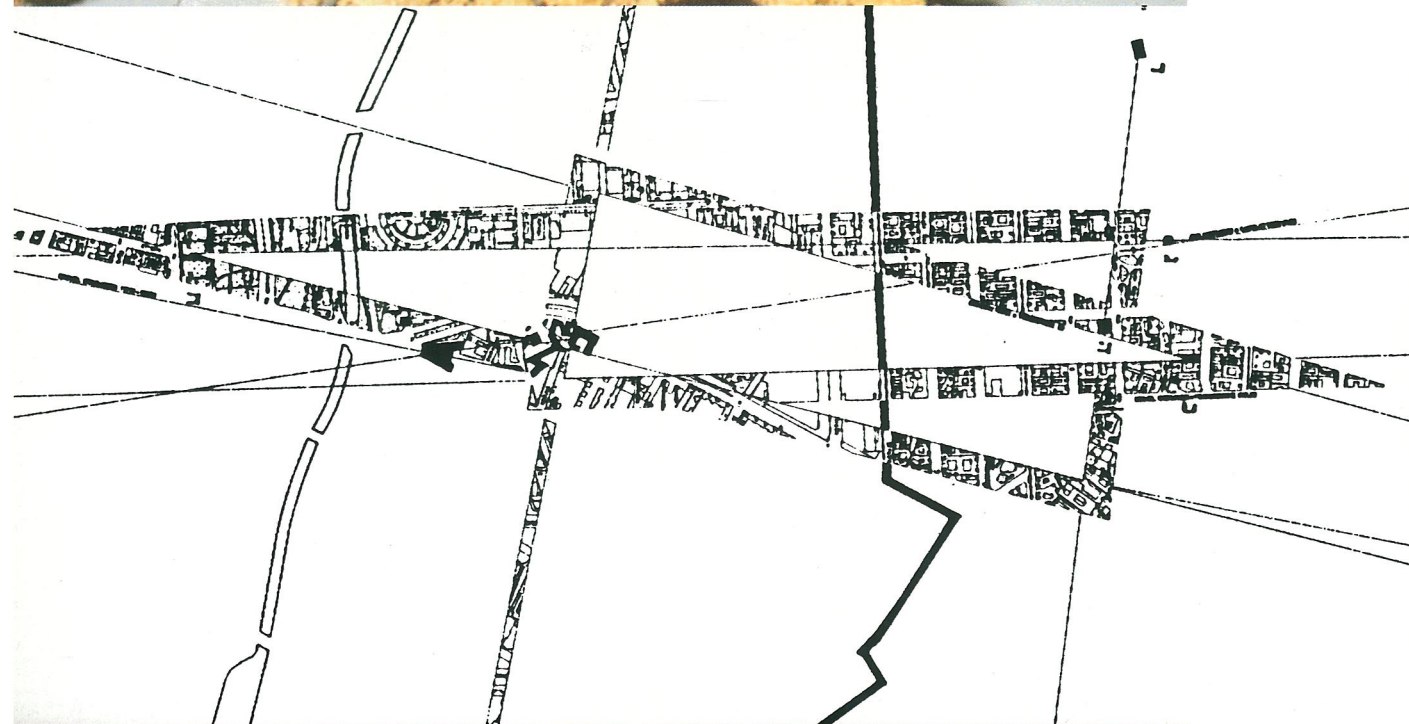
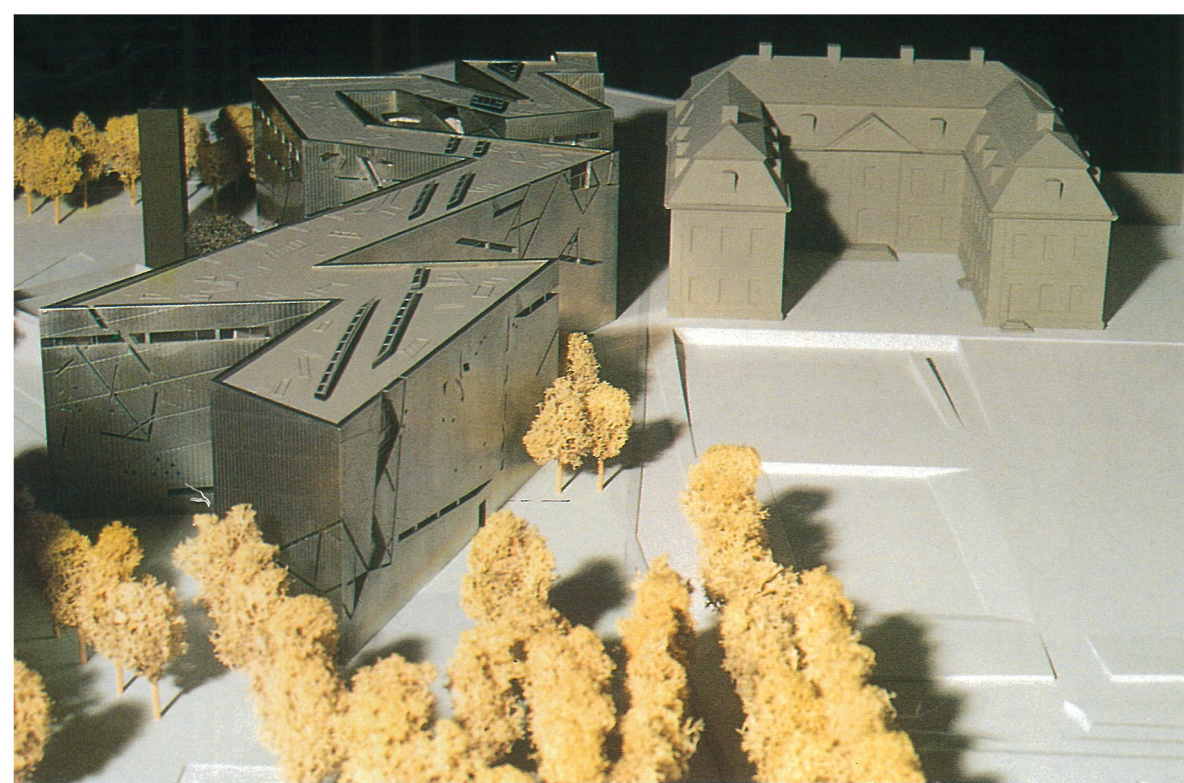
The extension of the Berlin Museum, with special emphasis on housing the Jewish Museum Department, is an attempt to give voice to a common fate: common both to what is *being* and to what is *other* than being. The past fatality of the German-Jewish cultural relation in Berlin is enacted now in the realm of the invisible. It is this invisibility which must be brought to visibility in order to give rise to a new hope and to a shared inner vision. Thus this project seeks to reconnect Berlin to its own history which must never be forgotten. The new extension is conceived as an emblem wherein the invisible has made itself apparent as the Void, as the Invisible.

Void/Invisible: these structural features have been gathered in this space of the city and laid bare in an architecture where the unnamed remains in the name which keeps still. Like Berlin and its Jews, the common burden – the insupportable, immeasurable, unshareable burden – is outlined in the exchanges between two architectures and forms which are not reciprocal, which cannot be exchanged for each other.

The urban, architectural and functional paradox of closed/open, stable/added, Classical/Modern, museum/a muse, is no longer reconcilable through some theoretical utopia and can no longer presuppose the fictitious stability of State, Power and Organisation. In contrast, the paradox presupposes the unchanging, i.e. change proceeding directly out of that which would exclude changing attitudes and unchanging opinions alike. What all

this amounts to is two lines: one straight but broken into fragments, the other tortuous but continuing into infinity. As the lines develop themselves through this limited-infinite 'dialectic', they also fall apart – become disengaged – and show themselves as separated so that the void, centrally running through what is continuous, materialises itself outside as ruined, or rather as the solid residue of the independent structure, i.e. as a voided-void. Fragmentation and splintering mark the coherence of the ensemble because it has come undone in order to become accessible (both functionally and intellectually). The torn shards both inside and out never pre-existed as a whole (neither in the ideal Berlin or in the real one) nor can they be put together again in some hypothetical future. The fragmentation is the spacing, the separation brought about by the history of Berlin which can only be experienced as the absence of time and as time fulfilment of what is no longer there.

The *absolute* event of history – the Holocaust, the burnout of meaningful development of Berlin and of humanity – shatters the place while at the same time bestowing a gift of that which cannot be given: the preservation of the sacrifice, the offering, the guardian night-watch over absent and future meaning. And out of the disaster of the too late there arises what is early; out of what is too far, the near. *Daniel Libeskind*



Hans Haacke, Die Freiheit wird jetzt einfach
gesponsert – aus der Postkasse, contribution
to site-specific art project 'Die Endlichkeit der
Freiheit', Berlin, 1990

„Kunst
bleibt
Kunst.“

