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The Museumification of Ground Zero:
*Comparing Libeskind's Jewish Museum
and his Proposal for Lower Manhattan*

Soon after the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation finally revealed its selection of Daniel Libeskind as the architect that would be awarded the enormous task of redesigning Ground Zero, many people began to wonder who, exactly, he was, and what would he bring to the project. To those outside of the world of architecture, Libeskind appeared an eccentric foreigner, a Jewish-Polish immigrant, with large plastic-rimmed glasses and a tendency to speak excitedly in accented English about new ways of experiencing memory. Some American's decried his foreign qualities, demanding that the project be 100% American, as other critics worried about his super-confident flair, yearning for a more conservative designer.

To those within the world of architecture, however, Daniel Libeskind is a well-known innovator, a man at the head of his field who has made a name for himself designing buildings that experiment with a modern sense of monumentality. He has designed museums around the world, and many projects dealing with incalculable loss. Libeskind's proponents directed an uninformed American public to his most famous project to date, the Jewish Museum in Berlin, as a reference to his architectural abilities. With its soaring geometrical shapes, minute respect for detail, and thoughtful incorporation of history, the project clearly proves that Libeskind is a master at creating memorable and emotional symbolic spaces. It was this same ability to incorporate large- and small-scale symbolism into his architecture that

distinguished Libeskind's design for Ground Zero from the other proposals, and no doubt will distinguish the project when it is completed as well.

However, there are drawbacks to Libeskind's extremely symbolic architecture. Functionality, accessibility, and adaptability are all compromised by his complicated style that calls for a very directed experience. Where these attributes can be easily compromised in a museum, they are more vital to the success of a 16-acre complex in the heart of a city. In fairness to Libeskind, he has not proposed to simply airlift the Jewish Museum to New York, spray-paint it red white and blue and change all of the six-pointed stars to five; the Ground Zero plan is a unique design, with his tradition of symbolism in museums adapted to better fit into the surroundings of New York City. Nevertheless, the worry remains that Libeskind's plan is over-designed, over-programmed, and too symbolic, too much of a large museum rather than an effective urban environment.

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Libeskind's complicated but engaging style appealed to both Berlin's efforts to memorialize the Holocaust and New York's efforts trying to memorialize September 11 because of their similar circumstances. Both the Jewish Museum and the Ground Zero redevelopment each sought to solve the unique problem of memorializing an enormous tragedy in a public space, in the spirit of a highly-visible and symbolic predecessor. Although Germans built the first Jewish Museum more than half a century earlier in 1933, lasting only five years until nazis destroyed it, designers of the new Jewish Museum had to contend with the old museum's persistent legacy (Isenberg 158). Similarly, planners in New York struggled to incorporate the spirit of the World Trade Center into their own work, particularly in trying to create similar amounts of office space to the enormous Twin Towers. Both

projects emerged amidst intense political struggle and public debate over who would control the memorial process, each requiring an architectural competition to select the architect. In each case Libeskind overwhelmed the selection committees with his new way of thinking ‘outside the box’ by designing one project that rethought the traditional form of a museum and other project that rethought the traditional form of an office complex, incorporating memory in an unconventional and exciting way.

For the most part, this style works in Berlin and it is understandable why the Jewish Museum was so frequently referenced in describing what Libeskind was proposing for Ground Zero. Libeskind boasted that he had created a new model for museums, arguing that “people want something which is no longer a dogmatic, didactic and artificial presentation, but an experience, a seamless excitement from the moment they enter until they leave. It has to be not just intellectual, but emotional, and it has to appeal to your senses” (Isenberg 168). This philosophy is successfully carried to its fullest extent in Libeskind’s Jewish Museum, where visitors are propelled along winding paths through a dramatic and symbolic matrix of zinc, steel, and concrete. His very detailed decisions about how to include subtle symbols into the project, based upon everything from addresses to music, have inspired a sort of worship to his personal understanding of the subject matter. Noah Isenberg describes, “Because of Libeskind’s emphasis on symbolic space—sometimes numerically encoded, other times geographic or philosophical—and the power of revelation, his work has been viewed as seemingly Kaballistic” (168).

However, where the complexity of his architecture is more acceptable in a museum in Berlin, it does not work as well in a large office complex in the middle of Lower Manhattan. Libeskind’s over-programmed “Memory Foundations” proposal of Ground Zero looks like it

will function as a large museum, suited more for tourists than residents and commuters. Where his design would elicit powerful emotions from visitors to the site, it also might trap them into a defined path, ushering them from one exhibit to another, much as a museum would. With only one distinct path into the proposed bathtub, walkways connecting only specific points in the site, lines drawn on the ground showing where emergency services arrived from on September 11th, and buildings carefully aligned to be shadowless every anniversary of the attacks, it seems as if there is an intended, 'correct,' way to interpret and experience the project. Libeskind's plan would force visitors of the site into being constrained museumgoers, each being directed towards the same path and meaning, rather than free pedestrians and wanderers. The area would attract only those with hours to dedicate to the site, neglecting the thousands of commuters who would stream by everyday and the growing population of local residents of Lower Manhattan who would not want to dedicate as much time to the theme-park-like experience of Libeskind's project.

Some argue that Liebeskind's complex and heavy-handed style has drawbacks that make it inappropriate even in a museum in Berlin, which would make it all the more worrisome were it to be applied to Ground Zero. Many argue that Libeskind's architecture is too personal, too directed, and also too inadapttable in the Jewish Museum. Museum directors have already expressed concerns that it is difficult to find exhibits that will maintain meaning in the context of the overwhelming symbolism of the building (Fischer). Art Critic Carolee Thea questions that "Libeskind's bold, complex, and emotional design imposes its dominance over any exhibitions one can imagine" (Thea). Others criticize the museum's focus upon the Holocaust, because of Libeskind's personal bias. As German Studies Professor Noah Isenberg describes, "the German side of this equation seems to be reduced to its Nazi past,

just as the Jewish side is to the Holocaust, and little more” (Isenberg 173). Libeskind himself seems to apologize for his heavy hand in directing how the visitor will interpret the subject matter. “The visitor to this museum has to keep in mind that it is not easy to put together continuity together across that which is forever gone” (Libeskind, “Trauma” 57). One can only hope that similar apologies will not be necessary upon the completion of the *Memory Foundations* project.

Libeskind boasts that his Jewish Museum created “a new Architecture for a time, which would reflect an understanding of history, a new understanding of Museums and a new realization of the relationship between program and architectural space,” adding his opinion that the Jewish Museum “is not only a response to a particular program, but an emblem of Hope” (Libeskind *The Jewish*). Although it has its quirks, the Jewish Museum appears to be a wonderful building, and we would be lucky to have such a marvelous structure in New York. It seems as if Libeskind has also pushed his innovations further in his Ground Zero project, and provided New York, and the world with a design for a beautiful space. However, Libeskind’s *Memory Foundations Project* must be toned down, as in its current form it would not make sense at Ground Zero. It is too much of a memorial to 9/11 and a center of mourning and loss, rather than a viable urban space.

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