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The Libeskind Jewish Museum in Berlin, the unpresentable and experience

This paper is an attempt to interpret the design or spatial modulation of an important work of architecture in Berlin, Germany, namely Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum. This is done by activating the heuristic potential of a number of relevant concepts from a variety of thinkers. After a brief introduction on modern architecture in Berlin, the focus shifts to this specific building, which is briefly described before interpretively introducing the notions of the 'real' in the work of Jacques Lacan – which denotes that which surpasses symbolisation, and is encountered in traumatic experiences – and correlatively, of 'earth' in that of Heidegger, which suggests something that only manifests itself in so far as it withdraws from scrutiny. The hermeneutic significance of these concepts for the Jewish Museum is explored, followed by a similar examination of the interpretive relevance of the notions of the 'unpresentable', 'unsayable' and sublime (Lyotard, Kant) for Libeskind's building. Given the enormity and unpresentable horror of the event (the Holocaust) indexed by the Jewish Museum, any analysis of the meaning of this building would be incomplete without focusing specifically on the experience(s) afforded to visitors. In this regard the work of Arleen

Ionescu on the Jewish Museum – on the significance of its 'voids', for example – and the (written) work of Libeskind himself (on the relevance of light, for instance) prove to be invaluable. Finally, Karsten Harries's insights concerning the 'ethical function of architecture', 'a sense of place' and 'community' are employed to draw together the strands of the present interpretive essay.

> A sense of place. It is an inviolable thing, whether you're talking
> about where a person belongs or what a building should reflect.
> (Daniel Libeskind, *Breaking Ground*, p. 42.)

Introduction

The city of Berlin, in Germany, is not generally touted as being as important a tourist destination as its French counterpart, Paris, and yet, to anyone who sets foot in it for the first time it holds many surprises, not least of which is its architecture. When one finds oneself on a busy street in modern Berlin — capital of a reunified Germany since June 20, 1991 — it is difficult to believe that it has grown into this city in the course of seven centuries, at least as far as its written history goes. One can easily verify that in the early 13th Century it was one of two fishing settlements on opposite banks of the Spree river, the other being Cölln. Through the centuries Berlin has seen almost 500 years of rule by the House of Hohenzollern, its chequered history witnessing impressive growth and achievements as well as devastations, such as the bubonic plague and the Thirty Years' War (of the 17th Century). But perhaps most devastating of all were the effects of the two world wars of the 20th Century on the city and the rest of Germany – particularly the rise of the Third Reich under Hitler and the Nazis, leading to World War II, when large parts of Berlin were destroyed during bombing raids (Sullivan and Omilanowska 2000: 54-59).

But Berlin has risen like a Phoenix from the ashes. When visiting the city one should not neglect to explore the city's rich architectural heritage, in addition to its other cultural attractions, not least of which are the beautiful *Weihnachtsmärkten* (Christmas markets), scattered throughout the city at that time of year. As for architecture and art, Berlin has been described as more like an open-air art gallery than a city. This impression is strengthened when one

savours the concentration of stunning modern and postmodern architecture comprising, and around, the Potsdamer Platz, to single out only one such area. (It is impossible to elaborate on all the significant architectural works in Berlin in a mere paper, after all). In the first category there are buildings by Renzo Piano and Helmut Jahn, and further away the deconstructive architecture of Frank Gehry and Daniel Libeskind simultaneously contrasts with and strengthens the impact of the modern architectural works (Sullivan and Omilanowska 2000: 28; 162- 165).

Potsdamer Platz is a good example of Berliner tradition and renewal. Back in 1831 it was a park, but when a railway station was constructed there it quickly developed into an important centre, from where Berlin's first ever train departed. During the Charleston-crazed 1920s it was a popular place for entertainment – in fact, the busiest plaza in Europe. Virtually reduced to rubble during World War II, it was only in the 1990s that its reconstruction began in earnest, quickly developing into the largest such reconstruction area in Europe. So, a century after its first major entertainment and commercial role in Berlin, Potsdamer Platz has again attained that stature. It consists, first, of the popular Sony Centre, designed by Helmut Jahn. It is a large, hyper-modern steel-and-glass complex, which reverberates with the feeling of power-through-technology – the life-blood (were it a living thing) of late modernity – it has been described (appropriately, considering its nominal link with Sony-Japan) as displaying a kind of 'urban corporate cyberpunk aesthetic' sensibility. Not surprisingly, it is very popular among Berliners and visitors alike, with its large pool and fountains under a towering roof and the piazza with its open-air feeling, juxtaposed by shops and restaurants. One of its most impressive features is its IMAX cinema, projecting science or nature films on to screens-in-the-round. Appropriately, the centre also houses the Museum of Film and Television – a rich resource for researchers on the history of these artistic-technical practices because it covers their entire history, with an emphasis on Germany's contribution to their development.

Potsdamer Platz also features the so-called Arkaden – a large shopping and eating complex covering three floors – as well as the Theatre Complex, designed by Renzo Piano and dedicated to the great German actress from Berlin, Marlene Dietrich. It is the venue for the famous annual 10-day 'Berlinale' film festival, where many world film premieres take place. The Daimler Quartier – designed by Renzo Piano and Christoph Kohlbecker – consisting of no fewer than 19 modern structures, has to be added to the above. One of its component buildings, the Kollhof Tower, must be singled out here – it boasts an observation platform almost 100 metres above ground – called the Panoramapunkt – reached by the quickest elevator in Europe, and affording spectacular views of the city (Sullivan and Omilanowska 2000: 164). However, it is impossible to do justice to all the

instances of modern architecture in Berlin in such a limited space as this – much less so when architecture of different epochs and styles is considered. Therefore, from a philosophical-architectural perspective, and anticipating the main focus of this paper, which has to do with human 'lack of power', although Potsdamer Platz is undeniably impressive as a complex spatial configuration of late modern technological hegemony, its failure to accommodate as much as a hint of human finitude and mortality means that it refuses to acknowledge humanity in its totality. Like much in American culture, it only really projects the spatial-architectural aspiration towards an impossible technological immortality – something accurately described by Gil Germain in his book, *Thinking about Technology* (2017). By contrast, I shall therefore concentrate here on one of the most unforgettable modernist buildings in Berlin ('modernist' in so far as it incorporates a critical stance towards the modern glorification of [technological] power) – Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin.

The Libeskind building: Language, the 'real', 'world' and 'earth'

From the perspective of acknowledging the multi-dimensionality of human existence in architectural terms, for me the most striking and memorable contemporary architectural work encountered in Berlin is Libeskind's *Jüdisches* (Jewish) Museum Berlin. The Libeskind Building has to be seen together with Peter Eisenman's Holocaust Memorial on Ebertstrasse, with its expanse of mute concrete slabs, gradually rising in height above visitors as they walk down a gentle slope along the narrow spaces separating them – testament to the ineffable horror of the Holocaust, which instantiates the near-genocide of a group of (approximately six million) human beings just because they bore the name of the Jewish nation. The latter comprises, after all, people and human beings just like the rest of us, as Shakespeare (1990-93: 1311) so eloquently reminded his contemporaries in *The Merchant of Venice* through Shylock's famous speech, affirming the common humanity of Jewish people with unforgettable pathos. This is, and should be, a powerful reminder of the effects of ineradicable, irrational hatred, particularly when such (xenophobic) hatred is conspicuously raising its ugly head again in many places around the world.

Like all truly deconstructive-poststructuralist buildings, this one by Libeskind has a highly intellectual aspect to it, although – as in any successful architectural work – this is embodied in its spatial qualities, which refuse the visitor any sense of visual-spatial security. Instead, its emphasis on a sense of emptiness, as well as disruptive, slanting surfaces marked by what strikes one as jagged cuts across them (inside and outside the building), claustrophobically narrow spaces and

unexpected twists and turns, is a fitting intellectual as well as affective reminder of the fraught history leading up to, and culminating in, the Holocaust. 'Affective' is here used in the DeleuzoGuattarian sense, not of human affects or feelings, but of artworks *embodying* certain affects, in this case an awareness of loss, of solitude, and grief (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 164). When experiencing such architecture that communicates, spatially, an event of this (negative) magnitude, one is reminded of its signifying power, despite the fact that architects, including Libeskind, always, architecturally speaking, *only* have the singular, variegated language of material space at their disposal – depth, height (up and down), form, weight, texture, light, surfaces, modulation, material density, and so on; what Harries (1997: 180-200) calls "the voices of space". In other words, in a visual-spatially mediated, concretely experienced manner one is confronted with an architecturally stark, austere building, added to which, the (to literate visitors) unavoidable knowledge of what it represents mediates the inexpressible loss of life and destruction of Jewish culture during the Holocaust (which, unbelievably, some people still deny to have taken place). Altogether, entering this building initiates what, for many people, turns out to be an indescribably moving experience – judging by, for instance, Jodie Foster's account of her experience of the Jewish Museum (Ionescu 2017: 106).

Upon setting foot in this building everything seems pretty 'normal' as far as museum spaces go. That is, until you descend a stairway, to what soon turns out to be a space with echoes of Dante's *Inferno,* but instead of the depiction of hell that one expects from traditional Christian-Western literature and art, this is a very different evocation of the realm of perpetual suffering. Who could guess that emptiness, suggesting a primordial ontological void, could work as effectively as this in making visitors aware of a nameless, ineffable suffering more terrifying than Rodin's *The Gates of Hell*? Perhaps this has to do with the act of naming someone in language: before one is given a name by one's mother and father (or other caregiver), one sojourns in a sort of nirvana of anonymity. It is through this act of naming that a place is bestowed upon one in what Jacques Lacan calls the *symbolic* register of language, which (according to him, and several other thinkers) comprises the distinctive medium of human existence (2006b: 371):

> Indeed, what Freud's discovery brings us back to is the enormity of the order into which we have entered – into which we are, as it were, born a second time, in leaving behind the state which is rightly known as the *infans* state, for it is without speech – namely, the symbolic order constituted by language, and the moment of the concrete universal discourse and of all the furrows opened up by it at this time, in which we had to find lodging.

While Lacan also recognises two other 'orders' or registers of human subjectivity – the *imaginary* order within which the subject as 'ego' or identifiable self is located, and the order of the *'real'* which surpasses the imaginary and language – it is the linguistic function of the symbolic register that constitutes the uniquely human (Lacan 2006a; Olivier 2004). Against this background it comes as no surprise that Libeskind's evocation of mute emptiness in his treatment of spaces in the Berlin Jewish Museum is counteracted – at least gesturally, if not completely effectively (my guess would be that it is not intended to be wholly effective) – by the insertion of 'pockets of symbolic identification' comprising various artefacts (such as photographs and biographies of German Jews from 1933-1945) into the passage (Axes) walls of the museum. Nameless terror is counteracted by naming. These documents therefore function precisely to impart a humanising assimilation of Jewish Holocaust victims to the sphere of the symbolic, establishing a linguistic bulwark of sorts against the anthropological-ontological terror of emptiness and the annihilating effects of the 'voids' (more about that later) that are so tangibly evoked around these islands of the symbolic.

It is also not surprising that what one witnesses here is the tension between the symbolic in the guise of language, and the imaginary as embodied in iconic personal items relating to the deceased. After all, the symbolic register represents the social realm, and the imaginary that of the self or ego. On the other hand, the mute materiality of the passages (or Axes), as well as the emptiness(es) suggested by the void(s) encountered by visitors, suggests what Lacan calls the 'real'. 'Suggests', because while not actually instantiating the ('impossible') 'real' – which can be understood as 'un-symbolisable', or alternatively as the 'internal limit of language' (Copjec 2002: 95-96), that is, where it comes up against the ineffable – the material density in question does allude to it in a paradoxical manner. It gestures towards that which cannot be said, and is hence what has been termed "effanineffable" by TS Eliot (1982: 2) – saying the unsayable – in his poem, "The naming of cats" which, no matter how inventive such naming might be, according to the poet, can never capture:

> His ineffable effable
>
> Effanineffable
>
> Deep and inscrutable singular Name.

Or one could employ Martin Heidegger's distinction between 'world' and 'earth' as constituents of artworks (including architecture) in his essay, *The origin of the work of art* (2001a), where 'world' denotes that aspect of artworks which marks their openness to interpretation, while 'earth', as countervailing aspect, alludes to that in artworks which resist interpretation because it merely

'is'. In other words, 'world' – whether in a poem, a painting, sculpture, a film or architecture – 'preserves' something interpretable that imparts meaning to the artwork, in contrast with which the 'earth'-element resists meaning and interpretation in the sense of only showing itself as 'withdrawing' from the world preserved in the work of art.

In passing I should note that, notwithstanding Heidegger's notorious association with the Nazis – because of what I understand as his initial, erroneous belief that they would restore a much-needed cultural pride and vigour to the German people after their humiliation in World War I – one would be blind to the pertinence of his philosophical thought if one refused to enlist its singular alethic qualities in the interpretation of something like architecture. I, for one, believe that Heidegger made a mistake in his initial judgement of the Nazis; in doing so, he merely confirmed his finitude and fallibility, shared with all other human beings (see Sosnowska 2019: vii-xiii, to gain an impression of the complexity of this matter in the context of Heidegger's personal and intellectual relationship with Hannah Arendt).

In a painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, for instance *Children's Games* (1560; Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), 'world' corresponds with the meaning of the figures depicted on the canvas – their ludic activities as historical source of information on children's games, their way of dressing as an index of historical custom, the historical-stylistic architectural context within which the games are played, and concomitantly, pranks that are performed in a revealingly, time-transcending, all-too-human manner (to mention only some of its interpretable components). 'Earth', on the other hand, corresponds to those elements comprising the painting that – while employed by the painter as vehicles of meaning in its 'world'-aspect – steadfastly refuse to render signification, such as the pigment of the oil paints. Paradoxically, although the elements constituting the earth-aspect of the painting do not, taken as 'earth', signify anything except mute being, they are the conditions of possibility of the painting's meaning in the realm of 'world', depending on how the artist has worked them into signifying images. Whatever purpose the painter had in mind with his use of reds, yellows, browns, blues and other colours – a mixture of the browns and yellows being a suitable medium for depicting the soil or ground on which all the activities play out – *as* coloured pigments, in their raw, language- and even sense-surpassing being, they simply *are*, withdrawing from signifying scrutiny even as they tantalisingly 'show' themselves. In this respect it appears as if they adumbrate the Lacanian 'real', while not completely coinciding with it, although some might argue that 'earth' in Heidegger's sense as employed here, is just another 'nickname' for Lacan's 'real', which is always 'encountered' in a "missed encounter", as in a traumatic event: one knows *that* one has come up against 'something', but not

what it is; it is 'something' that keeps slipping away, even as one tries to name it, but in the end it is an 'I know not what' (Lacan 1998: 55).

Where does one stand with Libeskind's Jewish Museum building in these terms? Clearly, given what the conceptual pairs of the symbolic/'real', on the one hand, and world/earth, on the other, instantiate, one is struck by the pertinence of especially the 'real' and its Heideggerian counterpart, 'earth', to be able to come to terms with its austerity – with the fact that, as a visible, tangible, negotiable, if not quite habitable building, it creates the impression of remaining obdurately impenetrable. It is as if one's always-active human tendency to make sense of one's surroundings on a linguistically communicable niveau is confronted with a kind of perceptual monolith, impervious to interpretation (except in the Parmenidean sense of simply 'being') – until, that is, one registers the insinuation of the symbolic, of 'world' as space of culturally decipherable construction, whether this is in spatial-architectural or in linguistic-cultural terms. Given its ineluctable situatedness in an urban landscape, this is the case with the exterior as much as the interior of the building. For example, when first setting eyes on this building by Libeskind from the outside as part of the cityscape – already an inscription of it within the fabric of the imaginary (that is, visible as image[s]) and the symbolic – its funereal, dark greyness, its angular, jagged features, seem to repel any attempt at gaining a semantic purchase on it. At the same time this first impression, which brushes shoulders with the language-surpassing 'real', remains tethered to the domain of 'world', or the symbolic. To be more precise: invariably, there are motor cars parked around it, inserting it into a time-bound cultural space, further foregrounded by narrow strips of window discernible at intervals on the sides of the building. Expanding its imbrication with other sites in the imaginary and symbolic registers, it seems to resonate, unsurprisingly, with buildings dating back to the Holocaust, like those at Dachau near Munich. In fact, it functions as an architectural metonymy of the Holocaust, both in appearance and nominally, insofar as its name ties it indelibly to that infamous event in human history.

This recalls what was said earlier about the symbolic act of 'naming', embodied in the instances of documents and photographs encountered in the passages or 'Axes' of the museum. It is here that the 'world'-aspect of Heidegger's schema for understanding art manifests itself decisively, although it is amplified by the names of the three Axes (of Exile, of the Holocaust, and of Continuity) that intersect in the museum, as well as by the fact that the shape of the building (seen from above) is that of a distorted or fragmented Star of David. The latter has the obvious symbolic significance of representing the state of Israel in multifaceted ways, such as politically, historically and narratively (as allusion to King David, the giant-slayer, in the Old Testament or Torah).

Poetry, art, architecture and the un-(re-)presentable

Having introduced both the notions of the inexpressible Lacanian 'real', and Heidegger's 'earth' into the discussion of Libeskind's Jewish Museum insofar as they bear upon that aspect of the building which steadfastly refuses to be penetrated by interpretive conceptual knowledge, one has to address the related question of (un-)representability. This, in turn, relates to both language and non-linguistic arts such as architecture, something that cannot fail to resurrect Theodor Adorno's well-known, if cryptic remark from 1949: "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (which appeared in 'Cultural Criticism and Society'), and to which Adorno felt compelled to return several times afterwards. As Arleen Ionescu (2017: 46), commenting on Adorno's pronouncement, indicates, the German philosopher returned to his original statement at least three times – first to reiterate it in his defence of 'autonomous art' against Jean-Paul Sartre's idea of 'committed literature', which he regarded as the 'positive' counterpart of 'barbaric' post-Auschwitz poetry, but which he qualified this time as 'lyric poetry'. Needless to stress, this already changed the implications of his original statement, leaving open the possibility of another kind of poetry. The other two occasions on which Adorno addressed this issue, listed by Ionescu (2017: 46) – in *Negative Dialectics* and in 'Is art lighthearted?' – both entail a diametrical turnaround on his part regarding the possibility of post-Auschwitz poetry. In the first he grants that he might have made a mistake in denying the possibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz, comparing the "expression" of "perennial suffering" to the "scream" of a "tortured man". The second of these, quoted by Ionescu (2017: 46), is more explicit and clear regarding its meaning:

> The statement that it is not possible to write poetry after Auschwitz does not hold absolutely, but it is certain that after Auschwitz, because Auschwitz was possible and remains possible for the foreseeable future, lighthearted art is no longer conceivable.

Translated into the idiom of architecture, one might say that 'frivolous' architecture 'is no longer conceivable', something that probably never crossed the minds of architects who design the temples of neoliberal capitalism, such as corporate headquarters or international hotels – the architecture of the contemporary elites (Castells 2010: 445-446). Not that there is anything frivolous about Libeskind's building; on the contrary. In his *Aesthetic Theory* (Adorno 2002: 322), referring to the poetry of Paul Celan, Adorno gives one a more affirmative clue concerning what is possible in poetry, in the face of the unspeakable horror of the Shoah (or of Hiroshima, for that matter). Adorno's words are valid for the Libeskind Museum too:

> His poetry is permeated by the shame of art in the face of suffering that escapes both experience and sublimation. Celan's poems want to speak of the most extreme horror through silence. Their truth content itself becomes negative. They imitate a language beneath the helpless language of human beings, indeed beneath all organic language: It is that of the dead speaking of stones and stars.

This resonates with that written above about the Jewish Museum with reference to the 'real' and 'earth': what one experiences in Libeskind's building is a kind of 'silence' evoked by its spatial counterpart, emptiness. Ionescu (2017: 47) also cites Elie Wiesel, who initially (like Adorno) denied the very possibility of a literature on the Holocaust, but later – at the insistence of an acquaintance – agreed to write on his own experience of this dreadful event. Ionescu's comment (p. 47) on this captures the paradoxical nature of the linguistic and artistic task faced by humanity when confronting the Shoah:

> Wiesel's change of heart over the years, from the desire to keep silent to the urge to speak in spite of language's inadequacy, brings to mind the double bind of the immemorial, between the imperative to remember and yet, in that faithful memory, the impossibility to know.

Not only does this characterisation fit Lacan's notion of the 'real' as a 'missed encounter' (referred to earlier), but it further accords with the psychoanalytic thinker's claim that this applies precisely to traumatic events (such as the Holocaust, on a massive scale). But the thinker who has perhaps supplied the most apposite terms for grasping the paradoxical logic at work here is Jean-Francois Lyotard, whose formulation of what he conceived of as the difference between the 'modern sublime' and the 'postmodern sublime' sets out a range of possibilities for making sense of the arts – from literature to painting and architecture – that rise to the challenge of responding to something as colossal, and as inscrutable, as the Holocaust. Here is his distinction (Lyotard 1984: 81; see also Olivier 1998: 207):

> Here, then, lies the difference: modern aesthetics is an aesthetic of the sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unpresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents …

> The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself …

It seems difficult to decide, on the basis of this distinction, where Libeskind's Jewish Museum stands – clearly, in the light of what has already been written

above, it is an architecture of the unpresentable, but does it *omit* certain contents to achieve this, or does it *present* what is unpresentable (the unspeakable horror of the Shoah) in the guise of novel presentations? At first sight it seems that it works with omission; after all, Libeskind's 'voids' or emptinesses omit all contents relating to the Shoah, on the ground that none could do justice to its nameless sufferings. (Admittedly, as noted above, the documentary artefacts in the passages, or Axes, could be seen as militating against these voids and what they cannot 'say'.) But qualifying this 'modern' mode of the sublime as 'nostalgic' seems to subvert this possibility, except if 'nostalgia' is taken in the etymological sense of referring to the pain of having lost the home where those who died were still present – in fact, where 'home' and 'deceased loved ones' become synonymous. Arleen Ionescu (2017: 100) discusses several critics who invoke nostalgia in relation to the Jewish Museum, but regrettably without taking the trouble to qualify what they mean by it; hence, it is difficult to decide whether one agrees with them or not, or whether their views could amplify what I wrote above about the etymological meaning of 'nostalgia'. Amy Sodaro, for instance, perceives a "politics of nostalgia" in Libeskind's building, which is highly ambiguous – judging by her 'definition' of it, she seems to be referring to nostalgic remembrance of the Jews who died during the Shoah, but adding 'politics' to this suggests that present and future power relations as presented by the museum ought to be somehow founded on such nostalgia. This is how she defines it (Ionescu 2017: 100-101):

> ...as 'a screen upon which present-day Germany can project an idealized image of its past in the hope that this image will redeem the present and shape the future'.

She finds this problematic, given the alleged possibility that Libeskind's ('idealising') "project", thus understood, might erase not merely the "difficult past" but also present strains concerning "German national identity and multiculturalism" (Ionescu 2017: 101). In my own assessment, however, Sodaro completely misunderstands the implications of Libeskind's building as far as its undeniable invocation of 'silence', 'nothing', 'the unsayable', 'unpresentable' and the 'ineffable' is concerned. Once one acknowledges that this is the case – obviously with interpretive substantiation (like that already provided, and more below) – an understanding of the building as embodying nostalgia as understood by Sodaro becomes untenable in so far as she paradoxically 'fills in' the 'unpresentable' with specific contents.

What about the second, 'postmodern' possibility, of presenting the unpresentable in the inventively produced presentations themselves? The zig-zag pattern of the exterior of the building, which has been interpreted by some people

as a "broken Star of David", while for others it represents "a bolt of lightning" (*Jüdisches* Museum Berlin; see also Ionescu 2017: 1), might be seen in this light, particularly insofar as it is well-nigh impossible to find an adequate 'presentation' of what the Star of David suggests, namely the Jewish nation – historically, geographically (think of the Jewish diaspora), quantitatively and qualitatively in terms of individual differences. After all, how does one (re-)present a nation, even in a unified image (such as the Star of David, or the German flag), let alone one that has been fractured? In the light of the work of Paul Crowther (1993: 173-174; see also Olivier 1998: 204-213) on the impossibility of imagining all the social inter-relations within a community in synchronic as well as diachronic terms, one might call this the 'social sublime', but when the unspeakable events of the Holocaust, subsumed under the name 'Auschwitz', are added to this, the phrase, 'terrible sublime' would seem more appropriate, as it exacerbates unbearably what is already a constituent of the experience of the sublime, namely pain – as Lyotard (1984: 81) reminds one:

> ...the real sublime sentiment...is in an intrinsic combination of pleasure and pain: the pleasure that reason should exceed all presentation, the pain that imagination or sensibility should not be equal to the concept.

Lyotard is here paraphrasing Immanuel Kant's (1969: 94) "mathematical[ly] sublime", according to which the painful awareness that one's perceptual-imaginative faculty is incapable of forming a unitary image of something, such as the interior of St Peter's Basilica in Vatican City, Rome (Kant's example; 1969: 99-100), is combined with the pleasurable realisation, that one can nevertheless grasp the dimensions of this church building conceptually through the understanding. That this equally applies to Libeskind's Jewish Museum building is evident to anyone who has set foot there: one may be able to grasp the building's zig-zag shape perceptually in an aerial photograph taken from above, but this is not possible from any position inside or even outside the building. What is at stake with this building is not the experience of the sublime as far as its physical dimensions are concerned, however, but its significance – its un-signifiable significance, to put it in appropriately aporetic terms – which Lyotard (1990: 47) touches on where he observes "What art can do is bear witness not to the sublime, but to this aporia of art and to its pain. It does not say the unsayable, but says that it cannot say it".

Experiencing the Void(s) in Libeskind's Jewish Museum

If one accepts that Libeskind's building does, indeed, 'say' that it 'cannot say the unsayable' (the Holocaust), the question raised by this is something like: 'So what? What does this mean for visitors to the Jewish Museum? Does this justify visiting

the building?' As might be expected, opinions vary on whether it is worthwhile visiting, in the sense of the building giving rise to a meaningful experience (whatever that may mean) on the part of visitors. (Interestingly, this is similarly the case with Peter Eisenman's Holocaust Memorial, not far from Libeskind's building; Ionescu 2017: 94-100.) As far as 'experience' is concerned, it is worth noting that contemporary museums seem to have shifted in the public eye regarding their expected function. Museums used to be seen as places to gather information about certain things on display, whether these are works of art, historical documents, or the skeletons of dinosaurs. Today, however, people appear to expect museums to furnish an 'experience' of a certain kind, and hence, they are thought of as "experiential museums", where visitors assume, and museums promote, a more active role than traditionally the case (Ionescu 2017: 102). As Silke Arnold-de Simine (quoted in Ionescu 2017: 102) points out, this amounts to museums (and this applies particularly to those offering representations of past injustice and suffering) encouraging visitors to empathise and finally identify affectively with those whose sufferings are represented in the museum's space(s). In the case of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, 'experiencing' by means of the representational material is given a narrative dimension, where visitors are provided the opportunity to re-live some of the things that inhabitants of a Polish (Jewish) ghetto and a prisoner at Auschwitz experienced (Ionescu 2017: 103). Particularly significant is Ionescu's reminder (p. 103) to her readers, that etymologically 'experience' denotes being "put to the test (Latin: *experiri*, from Greek *peras*: limit; related to *periculum*: danger) and made to cross a dangerous limit", and that this is central to a museum intended to instruct visitors about past brutalities and ordeals, so that they are 'transformed' in the process.

Turning to Libeskind's Jewish Museum against the backdrop of these reflections on the 'experiential museum', it is worth noting that, from the outset, Libeskind conceived of it as requiring the active participation of visitors. Moreover, in the words of Elke Heckner (quoted in Ionescu 2017: 106), Libeskind's "...interactive conception of space has a visceral impact on visitors, and it is thus inseparable from the ethical dimension of his aesthetics, which poses the question of how to relate to the absent other". Ionescu further observes (p. 106) that the museum "orchestrates" psychological "journeys" to another sphere of being, as well as feelings of "loss, confusion, horror and endurance" along its long corridors, or "Axes". The latter are the main passages through the museum, and their intersection – particularly of the Axis of Exile and the Axis of the Holocaust (see The Libeskind Building, under References) – represents a momentous symbolic crossroads in the history of the Jewish people (Ionescu 2017: 159). It is the void(s) in Libeskind's building, however, which – in my own understanding of it – imparts the most powerful and pervasive 'non-signifying significance' to it as distinctive

architectural work. What I mean by this oxymoron will already be apparent from what has been written above in terms of unpresentability, ineffability, 'saying the unsayable', the 'real', 'earth', and so on. But how does a visitor *experience* these voids? Arleen Ionescu (2017: 159) casts light on this matter where she writes:

> ...the void is meant to bring the invisible into visibility, or, to paraphrase the architect, to let the invisible be experienced by the public, and it translates the erasure of history into surrogate symbolic presence. It can therefore be interpreted as a 'funeral hologram' of the Jewish culture that the Nazis destroyed, the invisible made visible by inscribing lack in a physical location once populated by a strong Jewish presence.

The term, 'lack' in this excerpt is of particular importance, given its Lacanian meaning in relation to the human subject. In his second seminar Lacan (1991: 223) characterises 'lack' as follows: "Desire is a relation of being to lack. This lack is the lack of being properly speaking. It isn't the lack of this or that, but lack of being whereby the being exists." And significantly, he proceeds to specify that: "This lack is beyond anything which can represent it." What this means for the experience of Libeskind's voids is that, in so far as they can be comprehended as 'lack' – which is something constitutively human, for Lacan – they affirm the "lack of being" of the Jews as 'desiring beings', murdered by the Nazis, in a dual sense, as well as the utter impossibility of representing this lack. The dual meaning of 'lack' here pertains, firstly, to the characteristically human 'lack' on the part of these Jews when they were still alive – as indeed on the part of any desiring, living human being – and secondly to the more obvious 'lack of being' in the sense of no longer being alive. Neither of these two senses of 'lack' can be represented, the second sense being inseparable from the inexpressibly abject manner of their dying. And I would argue that, given the constitution of human subjects – including visitors to the Jewish Museum – as 'lacking' beings in Lacanian terms, being confronted by 'lack' in the experience of the voids resonates (at least at an intuitive level, if not explicitly) with their own 'lack' as desiring beings. This is because desire not only manifests itself 'positively' (that is, as desire for something one *wants*), but also *privatively* (that is, as *not* wanting, or being averse to something, in this case the inexpressible horror of the Holocaust). One might say, in philosophical language, that their own 'lack' as human subjects has a transcendental function in relation to experiencing Libeskind's voids: it is the 'condition of the possibility' of experiencing the lack that is, paradoxically, (dis-)embodied in the voids. Bettina Mathes (quoted in Ionescu 2017: 99-100) does not have an inkling of the significance of 'lack' in this sense; incongruously, she claims that the architect's "...representation of Jews as 'lack' shows Libeskind's own 'lack of experience of contemporary Germany' and ignorance that – to repeat her own reiterated

mantra –'the nostalgic fetishisation of Jews as "lost" and Jewish culture as ruin has been a defining characteristic of postwar Germany'". Needless to stress, this is a far cry from what 'lack' in the Lacanian sense implies – which chimes with the museum's voids.

Ionescu (2017: 160) also takes note of the pertinence of Lyotard's reflections on the sublime – discussed earlier – for Libeskind's Jewish Museum, where she (quoting Lyotard) writes:

> Designed to express the inexpressible, Libeskind's voids can be connected to Lyotard's sublime attempt to put forward the unpresentable in presentation itself...In 'Representation, Presentation, Unpresentable' Lyotard further defined the unpresentable as 'what is the object of an Idea, and for which one cannot show (present) an example, a case, even a symbol. The universe is unpresentable, so is humanity, the end of history, the instant, space, the good, etc.'.

And, one might add, so is the Holocaust, notwithstanding the force with which the voids in the Jewish Museum address the visitor or viewer. Again, Mathes seems to misunderstand completely what they suggest. I refrain from using the term 'signify', because of what has already been discussed earlier, namely the void as instantiation of the unpresentable, unsayable or ineffable. Evidently, Mathes does not understand this, judging by her comment (quoted in Ionescu 2017: 98):

> Libeskind's key structural element becomes, under her [Mathes's] pen, an 'architectural metaphor' that 'builds a defence against recollection', a symbol associated with 'the perverse fantasy of total elimination: in a world in which the dead do not leave a trace behind, the past ceases to exist; in a world where the past is conceived of as void the obligation to address its consequences does not make sense'.

Contrary to her interpretation, experiencing the void has the effect on visitors of being powerfully reminded of an event that, although it cannot be represented in its full, impenetrable and incomprehensible horror and terror, can and should be remembered precisely because of what this 'invisibility' suggests: that this monstrous occurrence should never happen again. Far from being a "defence against recollection", it instantiates an '*imperative to recollect*'.

Conclusion: Light in the Jewish Museum, and Harries's 'ethical function of architecture'

In his book, *Breaking Ground* (2004: 54), Daniel Libeskind writes:

> Maybe I think this way because I am an architect, but light becomes tangible only when it lands on something solid – a body or a building – when it crawls, darts, engraves its presence on a wall. A city reveals itself in the shadows that its buildings cast. What color is light? Whatever color it alights on.

Clearly, Libeskind is fascinated by light and light phenomena such as shadows, and by their architectural possibilities, as is evident from a number of other anecdotes he relates about his own experience of this in relation to buildings. It is therefore no surprise to find that light plays an important role in one's experience of the Berlin Jewish Museum – in the three Axes on the lower level of the museum various shades of light enable visitors to discern differently angled surfaces, and although ostensibly only minimally perceptible, it plays a crucial role in the austere Holocaust Tower, too, where there is no temperature regulation. Here light announces itself only as a sliver, a mere line – which may be surprising to some. After all, as Libeskind (2004: 55) admits:

> When I designed the Jewish Museum in Berlin, I was tempted to build a room that had no light. The museum chronicles two thousand years of German Jewish history. Could there be one unsparing, pitch-black, hopeless volume in it to represent everything that was lost during the Holocaust? After all, there was no light in the gas chambers.

But then he recounts the story (2004: 55-56; see also Ionescu 2017: 137-139) of a desperate woman (a Holocaust survivor), on the verge of abandoning all hope, who was being transported by rail to the Stutthof concentration camp in a boxcar. Through the slats she could just see the sky, and suddenly a white line inexplicably appeared there. To her this appeared as a sign that she would survive the ordeal that lay ahead – something that corresponds to Lacan's (2006: 30) observation, that "a letter always arrives at its destination", which means that, if one is in a position where a specific kind of communication would be meaningful to you, and something – however random or obliquely relevant – appears in 'symbolic space' (the linguistically comprehensible sphere), one is likely to see that as being addressed specifically to oneself. According to Libeskind (2004: 56) this woman, who clung to the hope the white line across the sky had given her for the duration of the two harrowing years she spent in the concentration camp, later realised that it had probably been something quite ordinary, like an aircraft's vapour trail, but *also* that what had mattered was the hope and confidence it had imparted to her. This story had an irresistible impact on him, as he explains (Libeskind 2004: 56):

> The significance of the woman's vision was obscure and enigmatic, and yet it had such a transforming power that I decided to incorporate it into the design of what I had come to call 'The Holocaust Void.' This is set apart from the rest of the museum, empty and forbidding, neither heated nor cooled. But it is not dark. High in the ceiling, and angled so acutely that you can't see it, is a slit that lets in a line of light, which is then reflected on the concrete walls and floor of the Void.

It is interesting to compare this with the importance he attaches to a "sense of place" – and note his use of the word "reflect", which connects "a sense of place" with the importance he attaches to (reflected) *light* – which he clearly considers indispensable for people and, correlatively, for buildings that are, after all, inhabited by people (Libeskind 2004: 42):

> A sense of place. It is an inviolable thing, whether you're talking about where a person belongs or what a building should reflect.

Would this also apply to the Berlin Jewish Museum? Or is it limited to buildings 'inhabited' by people for purposes of 'residing' there? Karsten Harries (1997: 152–154) casts light on this question where he discusses Martin Heidegger's analysis of a Black Forest farmhouse in the essay, "Building dwelling thinking" (Heidegger 2001; Olivier 1998; 2012). What is at stake for Harries, as for Heidegger before him, is the question of the relationship between 'building' and 'dwelling'. The Black Forest farmhouse, in which people live, or reside, is Heidegger's example of a building that grants a sense of dwelling. But Harries draws attention to the fact that there is no necessary synonymity between residing and dwelling involved here (Harries 1997: 154):

> ...such easy agreement would miss Heidegger's point: he is distinguishing genuine dwelling from mere residing, from merely inhabiting a structure or finding shelter. To dwell is to feel at home. Building allows for dwelling by granting a sense of place.

On this Heidegger seems to be in agreement with Libeskind, who claims that "a building should reflect" a sense of place (see above), without specifying that this should be a 'dwelling' in the sense of Heidegger's farmhouse, or any other domestic dwelling, for that matter. But is a 'sense of place' synonymous with, in the sense of being restricted to, this conception of dwelling? And is 'dwelling' necessarily restricted to the meaning of 'dwelling in one's home' (where 'home' denotes a house)? Libeskind's remark, above, indicates that it is not the case; while it is easy to grant that a 'dwelling' in the form of the farmhouse discussed by Heidegger is a dwelling or home in the sense of 'granting a sense of place', as Harries suggests, such a 'sense of place' is not exclusive to a dwelling which

is a home in the ordinary sense. This conclusion appears to be compatible with Harries's (1997) claim that architecture has an 'ethical function', and if this is the case it would further suggest that, in so far as Libeskind's Jewish Museum is architecture, it, too, grants a 'sense of place' (even if this is true in a privative sense, in the case of the Holocaust Tower), and fulfils an 'ethical function' in the sense Harries ascribes to it. What does Harries have in mind when he ascribes a distinctively 'ethical' function to architecture? For Harries, it is related to the notions of 'ethos' and 'community' (1997: 363; see also Olivier 2017):

> …we must acknowledge that to live a meaningful life, to dwell in this sense, we must recognize ourselves as parts of a larger ongoing community. Such community in turn depends on certain shared values; and the inevitably precarious and changing authority of such humanly established values must be supported by our evolving and often warring desires and affects, as mediated and structured by society and reason. This […] calls for an architecture responsive to our essential incompleteness, our need for others, for genuine, concrete community; it must be responsive also to a reason that demands the universal. Such architecture would present inevitably precarious interpretations of our ethos, of our place in a larger order.

This may seem problematical in the context of Libeskind's Jewish Museum: after all, were the excesses of the Nazis not predicated on the valorisation of a putative sense of (Aryan) 'community'? However, Harries (1997: 364) readily grants that attaching such fundamental importance to community will be met with doubt and criticism (if not outrage) from many quarters, not least because of what I have alluded to above, namely, that it summons the spectre of Nazi glorification of the community's precedence over that of individuals. This notwithstanding, he maintains that – even if a tension unavoidably persists between these two extremes – neither the indispensable function of community nor the individual's responsibilities and rights ought to be neglected when it comes to comprehending architecture's role in contemporary society. Here Harries offers an interpretation of the Biblical myth of the Fall (as one significant example among several) as a persuasive demonstration of human beings' primeval insecurity and vulnerability, as well as the undeniable need of one human being for another, which is here instantiated by the mythical Adam's need for Eve. With this elaboration of the importance of 'ethos' (which is related to 'ethical'), a 'sense of place', and 'community' in mind, one can return to the question of the sense (if any) in which Libeskind's Jewish Museum imparts a 'sense of place', and hence, displays or embodies an ethos with its connotations of 'community'. To be able to do so, though, another observation by Harries (1997: 365) should be considered:

> There is a continuing need for the creation of festal places on the ground of everyday dwellings, places where individuals come together and affirm themselves as members of the community, as they join in public re-enactments of the essential: celebrations of those central aspects of our life that maintain and give meaning to existence.

Clearly, this does not apply to the Jewish Museum in any obvious sense; some would argue that it is not relevant to this building at all, given the monstrous historical event which is inseparable from it. Recall, however, that earlier I mentioned the (minimal) function of light that Libeskind 'built into' the Holocaust Tower by means of the hope-inspiring 'line of light' commemorating the female survivor of the Holocaust, as well as my claim that even a building like the Jewish Museum should grant a 'sense of place', if this is true of all architecture (as both Libeskind and Harries argue), even if it does so 'privatively'. Hence, while this building does not celebrate a communal ethos in an obvious manner, I would strongly argue that precisely because it presents the unpresentable horror of the Holocaust, of the millions of human, Jewish, lives that were snuffed out in an incomprehensibly inhuman manner, it exhorts one to remember, and commemorate – even against the grain of what the voids in the museum instantiate – the community of Jews that once existed on European soil. Put differently, the building exhorts one to celebrate their undeniable humanity, which was so unforgivably denied by the Nazis.

In conclusion, one might wonder what connection there is between this Conclusion and the Introduction of this paper, which comprises a brief elaboration on some modern architecture in Berlin that instantiates the (modern) technological striving for power. Recall that the focus of this paper on an architectural work that elaborates, in a specific sense, and on the contrary, on the 'lack of power' on the part of humans and their creations, was adumbrated in the Introduction, before turning attention to the Libeskind Jewish Museum as complex spatial instantiation of human historicity, finitude and mortality, exemplified in the thanatic fate of millions of Jews during the Holocaust. But in retrospect not only the Jews were subject, and subjected to, the inescapable human law of mortality; like all human beings, the Nazis were, too, and more importantly perhaps – given their grandiose historical aspirations – so was the National-Socialist (Nazi) German Reich whose demise one witnessed in 1945. There, too, one observed the vanity of aspiring to power that would putatively 'last a thousand years'. Seen in this light, the Libeskind Jewish Museum functions as an architectural metonymy of human finitude as such, and not merely that of a specific cultural group.

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