

## **Daniel Libeskind and Aspects of Contemporary Jewish Architecture**

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### **Abstract**

*The paper presents matters of contemporary Jewish architecture in relation with the works of one of its most important creators – architect Daniel Libeskind. In times when identity, continuity of life and traditions, and community values are estranged due to globalization, cultural consumerism, and financial power and interests, people cherish significantly less the hidden significances and the sacred aspects of life, of the objects around them, and of the human milieu in which they live. In this context, sometimes, architecture has a role of purification – for the mind, for the soul, and even for the body – but only for those who understand and believe its message, and in this way, learn how to detach themselves from the profane in which they live, leaving behind the secular and entering the sacred: the fascinating, pure, and complex architectural space. This means in both literally, as well as metaphorically terms, passing through architecture, as an intermediary space between the profane and the sacred, in a place that sometimes exists out of the time. Analysing Libeskind’s buildings and their symbolic meanings we identify three models of creation, in Jewish contemporary architecture, using memory as an identity source and resource.*

### **Rezumat**

*Articolul propune o abordare a unor problematici ale arhitecturii contemporane, în legătură cu lucrările unuia dintre cei mai importanți creatori ai săi – arhitectul Daniel Libeskind. În vremuri în care identitatea, continuitatea vieții și a tradițiilor, dar și valorile comunitare se înstrăinează datorită globalizării, consumerismului cultural, intereselor și puterii financiare, oamenii prețuiesc mult mai puțin semnificațiile profunde sau aspectele sacre ale vieții, ale obiectelor din jurul lor, precum și ale mediului uman în care trăiesc. În acest context, uneori, arhitectura are un rol purificator – pentru minte, pentru suflet și chiar și pentru trup – dar numai pentru cei care îi înțeleg mesajul și cred în el, și care, urmând această cale, reușesc să deprindă modul în care pot să se detașeze de profanul în care trăiesc, lăsând deoparte tot ceea ce este lumesc, intrând în lumea sacrului: adică spațial arhitectural fascinant, pur și complex. Aceasta înseamnă atât literal, cât și metaforic, o trecere prin arhitectură, percepută ca un spațiu intermediar între profan și sacru, într-un loc, care, câteodată, există în afara timpului. Analizând clădirile lui Libeskind și înțelesurile lor simbolice, identificăm trei modele de creație în arhitectura evreiască contemporană, ce utilizează memoria, ca o sursă și resursă de identitate.*

**Keywords:** Libeskind, contemporary Jewish architecture, identity, memory, symbol, meaning, sacred, profane, memorial architecture, models of creation

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## 1. Introduction. The Search of Identity in Contemporary Jewish Architecture

The 1980s have indisputably and irreversibly marked the perspective on the need of asserting Jewish identity, and implicitly, the searches in this direction. Europe has witnessed a “boom” of specialized Jewish building types intended for the Jewish communities or their memory. The turning point was reached in 1990s, with the 1989 competition for The Jewish Museum in Berlin. The ranked first, winning project was that of the Polish-born (1946, Łódź, in a Jewish family of Holocaust survivors) American architect Daniel Libeskind [1]. The permanent exhibition was inaugurated only in 2001. It aroused the “appetite” for *a Jewish identitary architecture* – modern, sensible and symbolic. Since then, we witness *new tendencies in contemporary Jewish architecture*: the period between the last decade of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century marked the break with Modernism and Postmodernism, paving the way for an *avant-garde architecture*. This “new” architecture is evocative, full of personality, empathetic, with affective implications, emotional and artistic. Linked with the Deconstructivism, close to Minimalism, and using a great sensibility for the architectural metaphor, it is seeking unique and original ways of expressing the specific “identity” of the Jewish population.

Our aim is not an exhaustive approach of the complete contemporary specific “Jewish” architectural endeavour, therefore, we propose, a presentation of the “germs” that triggered this architectural “phenomenon” (the “explosion” of Jewish “identitary” architecture in the Diaspora). We limit to discussing some defining aspects of identity in contemporary architecture dedicated to the memory and / or to the Jewish communities.

Thus, we pursue *three instances of architecture as memory*, through *three leading contemporary “Jewish” architecture projects*, all signed by Daniel Libeskind. Libeskind is one of the most important and prolific representatives of Jewish contemporary architecture: generator of meaningful ideas in language; creator of architecture with constant value and consistency; philosopher of architectural space; artist with the vocation of expressing identity, trust, confidence and support; composer of overlapping times and revealing feelings, with a sensible sense of timeless *evoking that which is present, but not there, that which is absent but overwhelmingly present, or that which existed, passed away, but can be relived through architecture and using one’s affective memory*. His architecture is one of *significances*, with extensive cultural implications, anchored in profound historical issues and themes, philosophy, art, literature: “Fundamental to Libeskind’s philosophy is the notion that buildings are crafted with the perceptible human energy, and that they address the greater cultural context in which they are built” [2].

## 2. Libeskind Case Studies

The case studies show the ideas, architectural artifices / devices and methods, specific to Libeskind’s manner, as they were classified in the “highlights” of contemporary architecture, but seen as founders of *three individual models of creation* with meaningful language and an original expressiveness – “unique” and profoundly “Jewish”, anchored in tradition and projected into the future – from a theoretical and symbolical point of view. Thus, the problematic of identity in architecture is not just a matter of language, originality and complexity of expression, but has more profound implications, related to the soul, mind or body – namely *the purification through architecture*.

### 2.1 The Jewish Museum Berlin (1989-1998; 2001)

Awarded winner in the 1989 contest, Daniel Libeskind’s project, actually consisted of a “Jewish” “extension” of the exhibition dedicated to the history of Berlin, installed in the formal Royal Palace of

Justice – *Collegienhaus* – dating from 1735, and since the early 1960s, housing the Museum of Berlin. The organizing staff's initial concept did not envisage at all the aim of *architecture with specific*, but, subsequently, the issues of significances and secondary meanings occurred. At first, the idea of an “autonomous” Jewish museum had not been taken into account, due to some conceptual problems, rooted in a terrible tare, bequeathed by the Nazi regime and the Holocaust: such an exhibition was desired, that would reflect the importance and impact of the Jewish local community culture in the history and development of Berlin. Instead, a distinct museum, dedicated solely to Jewish culture, might have triggered a duality to avoid in nowadays society – that is, the “separation” of what is German and what is Jewish in the past and evolution of the city. This “dividing” perspective raised, of course, the issue of the line between the “Jewish specific” and the “German specific”, which had been pointed out since 1933, when the first Jewish museum in Berlin had been inaugurated – as part of the Jewish community complex in *Oranienburger Straße*. Those times exhibition reflects a clear manifestation of the idea of the two cultures’ mutual integration, as an “institutional” formula, reflecting, “an inextricably linked German-Jewish culture, each a permutation of the other”, while society was dominated by the Nazi idea that claimed the rupture between Jews and Germans, explained through an “essential hostility” between the two cultures [3, pp. 44-45].

Once everything had been looted and destroyed, in the pogrom night (*Kristallnacht*) of 9/10 November 1938, fifty years later, questions arose about how to reorganize a Jewish exhibition in Berlin. It was a historic moment and so, a historic decision needed to be taken. Finally, it was concluded that a “Jewish Museum Department” must be set up, having its own building, only administratively related to the Berlin Museum. Hence, the architectural issues began: how can a building whose expression would be “Jewish”, reflecting the Jewish past and culture, can also be “German”, as part of the German past and culture, without being “a form that would not suggest reconciliation and continuity”? Which would be the possibility to present separately these two cultures while not suggesting that Jews represent a culture “apart” and separated? What solution would “link a museum of civic history with the altogether uncivil treatment of the city’s Jews” [3, p.46]? Daniel Libeskind’s project found the answer to these difficulties, surpassing the other 164 projects submitted in the competition, until June 1989. For the architect, it meant, his first project ever to be commissioned, and, for the contemporary architecture, it became, a “manifesto”, marking *a guiding direction* for the searches and means of “expressing” a “Jewish identity”. In his architectural endeavour, “Libeskind had devoted himself to the spatial enactment of a philosophical problem” [3, p.46].

With the plans suggesting rather *ruins and scissions*, *the architecture proposed by Libeskind* is one of the *meanings, mystifying incomprehensibilities*, and *of the searches for meanings* – in an attempt to restore historical significances and profound symbols through architecture: “Libeskind’s architecture is an attempt not to explain the history of German-Jewish relations, but rather *to provide a device* that allows the visitor to interpret, witness, and remember the traumatic history left unseen within the fractured halls of the museum (our italics)” [4, p. 268]. The architect confessed that interior spaces should be interpreted as “open narrative” “which in their architecture seek to provide the museumgoer with new insights into the collection, and in particular, the relation and significance of the Jewish Department to the museum as a whole” [3, p. 48, *apud Realisierungswettbewerb (sic!)*, p. 169]. Thus, the purpose of the building would be not only to house a collection, but also to “seek to estrange it from the viewers’ own preconceptions”. Interrupted, broken, discontinuous, divided and penetrated by voids, altering “completely [...] any sense of continuity or narrative flow” [3, p. 48], the interior becomes, in this way, rich in meanings, which approach the problem of *memory* from the perspective of *non-forgetting* and of *presence through absence*, providing *a communication bridge between past and present*. The complete spatial effort and interior tension induced are meant to “suggest instead architectural, spatial, and thematic gaps, in the presentation of Jewish history in Berlin”: “The absence of Berlin’s Jews, as embodied by these voids, is meant to haunt any retrospective presentation of their past here” [3, p. 48].

The architectural “irrational and invisible matrix” (as named by Daniel Libeskind in 1995), that constitutes and defines Libeskind’s museum, is based on a network of connections between fixed points (related to addresses of Jewish artists, intellectuals, scholars, and events, such as deportation), on the interwar Berlin map. These imaginary, but non-fictional and real, very Jewish links become the basis for “the language of form, the geometry and shape of the building” [5].

The ensemble comprises *the Garden of Exile, the modern iconic building with façades covered in zinc panels, with the three Axes of German-Jewish Experience and the five Voids*. They are combined in a spatial composition with an expressive language, rich in symbols and meanings, closely related to historical events, giving visitors a bivalent experience. On one hand, probing the Jewish history in Berlin and Germany, and, at the same time, on the other, experimenting some unique, significant experiences, while visiting the exhibition, along with “crossing” the ineffable spaces which house, sustain, and define it: Eric Kligerman shows that the exhibits are seen as “surviving parts” – “traces” pointing back to their rightful owners with their homes, lives, and personalities – fulfilling “a metonymic function that attests not merely to the religious value of a menorah or the aesthetic import behind a painting [...] These remnants point to a lost community that once felt at home in Berlin. [...] an invisible and uncanny community that Libeskind wishes to display through this juxtaposition of voids and exhibition halls” [4, p. 268].

The robust building is founded on a “thin ground”, constituted of the names of those who were killed, and who at their turn, had their lives based on the ground of Berlin, the city which offered them the so much coveted freedom. The history was hostile and shattered that dream, which, however, could still be found in this ground: “the ground of Berlin is not just the solid opacity of space, but is both the air above and the ground below. A few centimetres upward or downward and you are lost in a sort of dream of what was there and what might still be” [6, p. 62]. Hence, the “Voids”, that cross the museum building, as a *presence of absence*.

In 1998, Libeskind explained that although the official name of the project is “Jewish museum”, however, he calls it “Between the Lines”, because, for him “it is about two lines of thinking, organization and relationship. One is a straight line, but broken into many fragments, the other is a tortuous line, but continuing indefinitely”. Thus, the building results, defined by “zigzags”, combining the two types of linear structures. The first is broken in several fragments, and the other penetrates the entire construction. The intersections between them, forming gaps, have been named “Voids”, actually developing from the first level, on the entire height of the building, to the roof, allowing natural light to penetrate inside spectacularly. Conceptually, Libeskind has imagined these lines across the entire Berlin and beyond [5]. The architect stated, in 2000, that the “Voids” “refer to ‘*that which can never be exhibited when it comes to Jewish Berlin history: Humanity reduced to ashes*’” [5]. In the Berlin Museum, *the void* was imagined and created, in such a way, as to be physically visible, “not as a hypothetical or metaphysical concept, but as something to be touched, seen and crossed”. Libeskind has produced a “completely empty space”, unsuitable for any kind of display or exhibit “because it is all about absence”. It is a space dedicated to “transition and thought” [6, p. 62]. Not having its own official access, Libeskind’s building can be accessed using an underground passage, which connects it to the Old Building, with the role of main entrance. Thus, literally speaking, the access is *through history*, and therefore resulted a “building with no entrance” [7, p. 172]. Through the “Great Void”, visitors enter into a system of “routes” (directions), composed of the “three axes symbolizing three realities in the history of German Jews”. The “Axis of Continuity” (the first and longest), “as a continuation of Berlin’s history”, liaises with the access from the Collegienhaus, with “a dramatic entry Void” [8], leading to the exhibition levels and allowing the approach of the other two axes. The “Axis of Emigration” is leading “to daylight” and to the “Garden of Exile”, and the “Axis of Holocaust” “is a dead end”, increasingly narrowing and getting darker, to suddenly ending at the “Holocaust Tower”. These three underground axes, which intersect each other,

symbolically point the links between the three realities of Germany's Jewish history. The architect designed the conceptual "Garden of Exile" in such a manner as "to completely disorient the visitor. It represents a shipwreck of history" [5]. "The garden is about trees that don't grow vertically. It is about exile, displacement" [6, p. 62], recalling the tormented life of the Jews under the Nazi terror, about runaway and escaping, about exile, uprooting from the past, the destruction of ties with native places, the separation from family and friends, the alienation, and disorientation of those who no longer had, "before them", a place called "home", but only the "Exile".

Outlining its individual spatial philosophy, "the contraction is the museum itself" [9, p. 107]: summarizing the main conceptual ideas, focusing on the pursued aims, following its tangible aspects and helping to understand the unattainable meanings. The museum becomes a way of achieving the significances impossible to achieve, reaching the divine in the sense of the sacred, opening a way to another world in a hierophanic manner – connecting the present (reality) with the past (history), through *architecture*, which becomes *a milieu of the incomprehensible*, where the absence is present and the present is absent. It is like a continuously process of changing energies, in a self-propelling floating mechanism. Here, the "matrix" represents the propelling forces, the self-sufficient building (building with no real entrance) represents the mechanism and the creative human mind admits the "floating" – highly promoter of exposing *the non-established*.

"Here the zigzag line represents the history of the Jews in Berlin. The zigzag structure enters into a relationship with the linear void which runs through the building. The perspective is constantly blocked by the wall of the next section. At every change of direction the visitor to the building is made aware of another aspect of the Museum. The trajectory through the Museum is thus the history of the Jews in Berlin. Here one repeatedly confronts the emptiness created during the Holocaust, an emptiness which makes tangible the absence of a part of the history of Berlin: archive material and archaeological finds, the absence of a vanished, murdered world" [9, pp. 107, 109]. Without any precedent, following no archetype, and proposing a world of its own, through an initiating journey (according with *the Eliadesque model*) overwhelmed by mysticism, unconventional twists, imaginary reflections of pattern mind memories, spiritual architectural forms, and open-closed perspectives, the museum represents an enlightening interfaith dialogue, addressed to people of any kind and of everywhere. It mirrors the reality in representations to be judged according to history and, astonishing, it functions even vice versa.

The "Holocaust Tower" represents the terrible "end" (*the final solution*) – the end of the "Axis of Holocaust", and somehow, the "end of the museum" (as mentioned by Libeskind himself). Calum Storrie notes that, if sometimes, during the museum "crossing", the language becomes abstract and distant in relation to the physical experience in the building; here, the narrative reaches a "horrifying clarity" – the climax of the drama. Then it is "nothing" (the tower is empty and lit only by a skylight slit, located somewhere very high), like following the echo of Theodor Adorno's phrase "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" [7, p. 174]. After the Holocaust, the sense of humanity life has not been the same.

As an "irony" made to history and to the organizers' initial "integrating" intention, from the desire to avoid any possible implied "separation" / "division" between the Jewish history in Berlin and the history of Berlin, such a situation was reached, that the Berlin Museum was to release its old location. Thus, an *entirely* Jewish museum resulted – "the haunted house of Jewish memory" [3, p. 49] – a unique place, depository of the "Jewish memory" of Berlin, symbol of the "Jewish past" of the city and guiding hope for the future. The building itself *replaces* the Berlin Jews' history, talking about their fate, through the void that pervades the museum as "the presence of absence", without actually having need of any object, any exhibit. "The building has, by definition, a physical presence but it looks unfixed and restless"; full of symbols and messages, more or less decodable, it seems somehow circumventing, as "to avoid detection and capture". The museum becomes "the

spectre of history” [7, p. 175] directed from Berlin inwards and reverse; a “spectre” of the architect’s own ideas and concepts, spread over the work of art, like a wellspring of living memories, on the “fertile” ground of Berlin: a metaphor of space, evoking in tormenting silence the ghostly presence of an entire “lost” community.

## 2.2 The Contemporary Jewish Museum San Francisco (1998, 2006-2008)

For carrying out the Jewish Museum in San Francisco, Libeskind proposed a *philosophy of overlapping*: the whole atmosphere created (combining the old and the new), the play of lights, the significant spaces, the concept itself leave room for multiple interpretations, through an overlap of meanings. The concept that underlies the project is closely linked to the memory of the place. Symbolically, the architect reiterates *the idea of the life giving energy*. There is a close link between historical events, present time and future. In this case, the memory is connected to the common past of the city, and not especially to that which is specific Jewish. In the same time, interpretations of its (present) role, in the future, would be to support the Jewish culture. Thus, the museum would be (literally and figuratively) an “energy” “generator”, guiding the city’s cultural life: a Jewish museum, memory of the past of a city, symbolically activating a role from that past, becoming significant for the present, while ensuring the “perpetuation” of contemporary Jewish culture, in the future.

After the 1906 devastating earthquake, one of the first buildings erected in San Francisco, was a gas and electric power station (namely, the *Jessie Street Pacific Gas & Electric “PG & E” Power Substation*), following architect Willis Polk’s plans. Its role was to provide the necessary energy for rebuilding the city – the turbines “infused it with new life”. Hence Libeskind’s concept for his contemporary project: “To Life”, expressed in Hebrew as “L’Chai’m” [10, p. 87]; i.e. the restoration, refunctionalization, reutilization, and extension of an early twentieth century industrial building, for a cultural program, which becomes *vital* in the contemporary world. Libeskind combines the architecture of a historic monument with the expressivity of a contemporary, modern language, defining a *hybrid type structure, but perfectly harmonized*, with a spatial dynamics, oscillating between tradition and novelty, between history and innovation, and constantly reflecting “the Museum’s mission to celebrate Jewish culture, history, art, and ideas within the context of 21<sup>st</sup>-century perspectives”[11].

As Heinrich Wefing noted, hence *the multiple interpretations* that can be made not only to the “title”, “program”, but also to the “metaphor” – “The project’s title, program, and metaphor in one, can be interpreted on various levels: it describes the intent to revitalize the defunct power plant by giving it a new function; it reflects the curators’ hope that the planned museum would invigorate the debate on the significance of Jewish tradition for the present and future; and it was part of the project to revive the power plant’s surroundings, the rundown area South of Market, by establishing cultural institutions such as Mario Botta’s San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Not least of all, L’Chai’m represented a further example of Libeskind’s art of providing his buildings with a superstructure of ideas” [10, p. 87]. This guiding principle has been literally applied in the way of organizing and modelling the plans, imagining the extension of the old building, and in the architectural expression of the resulting ensemble. Inspired by the phrase “L’Chaim”, Libeskind had underlain the concept of the extension on the forms of the Hebrew letters “chet (ח)” and “yud (י)”, which make up the word “Chai (חי)”, a Hebrew word and symbol meaning “life”. Thereby, an abstract composition was defined: the “rectangular shape” which longitudinally pervades the power plant represents the letter “chet”, and the other, more “cubical” in shape (overlooking the *Yerba Buena Lane*), represents the “yud” [11].

Not housing a permanent collection, the museum is only the location of various events with profound “Jewish” cultural character and significant for the twenty-first century experiences: “exhibitions that are both timely and relevant and represent the highest level of artistic achievement

and scholarship” [12]. Thus, its particular role would be to provide, in the contemporary world, “a lively center” [12] for the dissemination of Jewish culture. In addition, to “poetically” support this *image of changes and of life* (as a *generating impulse* and *creative energy*), and *of the multiple meanings*, too, metaphors were used in creating some interior spatial effects, and exterior “living” images, through the play with lights and shadows. For example, the “PaRDeS” wall, an architectural installation incorporating an abstract representation of the Hebrew acronym referring to the Kabbalistic practice of discovering in text four distinct levels of meaning: literal, allegorical, personal, and mystical” and the building envelope, constituting a spectacular “skin” composed of “over 3,000 luminous blue steel panels”, with everlasting colour, but appearing to change depending on the weather, time of day, and viewer’s position, suggesting the image of a “dynamic, living surface” [11]. Generically, one would feel that the museum represents a total feeling of life, the touch of life, the wish of continuity and the respect of values, “to life”. Cultural means and cultural values sometimes become one, in the search for identity, cherishing the Good and the Truth, emphasising the importance of the cultural act in human existence. Specific to this case would be highlighting the idea of the Jewish resistance through culture, i.e. the perpetuation of Jewish Law, identity and values (moral, material, and spiritual) through culture, the best means of outlining Judaism “as a civilization”. As art is one of the most important exponents of a civilization, the museum of contemporary art, dedicated, not by chance, “to life”, becomes a programmatic exponent of Jewish identity and continuity for the future.

### **2.3 The Felix Nussbaum Haus in Osnabrück (1998; 2010-2011)**

The museum dedicated to the German-Jewish surrealist painter Felix Nussbaum (1904-1944) is an institutional “extension” of the Cultural History Museum in Osnabrück and represents the first completed building, designed by Daniel Libeskind, inaugurated in 1998, one year before the Jewish Museum in Berlin. Libeskind conceived this building exclusively to display the great artist’s paintings, made until his cruel death, at Auschwitz, plus a “temporary exhibition space focusing on the themes of racism and intolerance” [13]. We are dealing with a strong evocative architecture, with a language, which reiterates aspects of Nussbaum’s life and spiritual struggles, emphasizing, for the visitors, very intense feelings, through spatial “tightness” or “constraints”, textures of materials, tour (“journey”) and plays of light. An entire “scenography” serves the understanding of the works of art and the context in which they were created: “the spatial metaphors associated with anxiety and melancholia, that is, the link between topophobia (anxiety of space) and the representation of melancholia in Nussbaum’s later paintings, are reconfigured architecturally within the very spaces that exhibit them” [4, p. 243].

Thus, the building comprises *three major parts*: the “central Nussbaum corridor” – a high and narrow volume –, then, “the long main section”, and “the bridge” – which liaises with the old wing of the museum. The visitors’ tour follows “pathways with their sudden breaks” (corridor-like rooms that suddenly interrupt), which open to unpredictable intersections or clog in dead ends, thus reflecting Nussbaum’s artist life struggle. The entrance is through one end of the Nussbaum corridor, which defines “a blank canvas in itself”, due to the exposed concrete wall. The narrow interior evokes the oppressive conditions, which dominated the artist’s short life and marked the development of his creation period, seen as a series of “incarcerations” of his own being. In other words, “a space without a horizon”, so necessary to understand his work and struggles: “As the corridor cuts through the building’s compressed geometry, backward and forward in time, the Nussbaum Corridor becomes a visual and kinetic embodiment of his life” [13].

The museum tour induces *an almost visceral experience*, which approaches the visitor to the experiences that relentlessly marked the artist’s life, pointing out what Libeskind “calls ‘the participatory experience’ of architecture” [4, p. 243]. This meant a new perspective on the museographic concept: the building should offer the opportunity of both the physical and,

especially, psychical experience. It is about a, psychologically, very active temperamental approach: to this effect, Libeskind created a “museum without an exit” [14, p. 3], as a total experience, extremely disturbing for the visitor. It is not a “circular route” museum, but rather could be perceived “as a text, as the voyage”, where the space turns you back in time and you enter “into a memory that is fragile and vulnerable”. Here, space or language metaphors are not used, but literally, “architectural devices”, “disturbing” and disorientating the visitors, inducing them a state of chaos, with direct references to the artist’s real feelings: “you come across spaces that do not lead anywhere, and yet they do lead into the walls and across the walls. Of course, we cannot physically go into a wall or through a wall, but we do anyway, through the paintings and through the works of Nussbaum”. Eventually, it is a way to explore through the architectural space, another world – to understand and to put one’s self into the artist’s skin: “devasted spaces which coincide, collide and are precisely allied around the vectors of his life: between his hometown of Osnabrück, his hopes for Berlin, his studies in Rome, his imprisonment in France, his escape to Brussels, his concealment in Antwerp and then the end station of deportation and death in Auschwitz” [6, p. 55].

Between the years 2010 and 2011, Studio Daniel Libeskind was entrusted to design *an extension of the Felix Nussbaum Museum*, for the possibility of housing related events, with an educational role and for conferences. The new wing was inaugurated in May 2011 [13]. The result is a “cohesive complex”, where the extension functions as the entrance “gateway”, related to the museum itself, through a “glazed bridge”. The architectural language preserves the same visceral struggle, Deconstructivist in style and manner, and the same poetry of the *pure*, ineffable space, as the unreachable soul of the artist [15].

Excited about the proposal to realize this expansion of the originally created museum, dedicated to Nussbaum’s oeuvre, Libeskind confessed: “it is a true celebration that the museum for Nussbaum (who was once a forgotten artist) is growing and expanding not only architecturally but also in our hearts and minds. The integration of the new extension with the present symbolizes that the memory of Nussbaum will have a vibrant and ongoing narration” [15]. Continuity is the most important factor in preserving the memory of the Jewish communities in Diaspora, as though it would represent an assurance of a Jewish future. Art and artists, due to the great visual impact of their work contribute essentially in this *process of unforgetting*, involved with identity. The vicissitudes and compromises of history, trying to erase the identity of a people, confront with the celebrations of the scarified ones’ lives, which combined, form a mechanism seen as a generator of *being through architecture*. In this way, Jewish existence as continuous life experience, could not and would not be forgotten.

“The unpainted paintings of Felix Nussbaum demand nothing else than to become visible to the contemplating eye” [14, p. 3]. Symbolically, the museum dedicated to the memory of Felix Nussbaum establishes a link between architecture and the artist’s biography. Here, architecture is neither context, nor metaphor, but means *a space that does not remain passive to the visitor*, who, in this way, experiences it emotionally and psychologically: Libeskind “assaults not only the spectator’s orientation through claustrophobic architecture, but also subverts her vision within the building. [...] One does not undergo a catharsis [...] but experiences a series of perceptual woundings” [4, p. 243]. Directly involved and receiving the vibration offered by the bare walls, the visitor has the great opportunity *to pass beyond them*, as though they would, through a blank canvas, remained to be painted (completed) later – i.e., “a profound place for the encounter of the future and the past and not only a testament to an impossible fate” [14, p. 3]. The architectural language is directly inspired by the life, work and tragic fate of the artist and is a result of the coordinates (“That matrix of connections, fixed and never changing, will always exist” [6, p. 55]) which they reflect in the imaginary world and in the architect-creator’s mind. Only he, then, transposes them in everyday life (the real world), for the visitors to “see” and “experience”. In fact, it is on their sensitivity and feelings that the “memorial” architecture, with evocative power

is founded – in accordance with the wishes of the deceased artist: “Even if I perish, do not let my pictures die, show them to the public” [16]. It is a question of *being*, of creating existence as memory, through architecture.

### 3. Three Models of Creating Architecture as Memory

Looking back, at the case studies presented above, and following a theoretic structure, we identify *three distinct hypostases of architecture as memory*. A short overview of the most relevant facts regarding the searches of identity in contemporary Jewish architecture would be: revitalizing communities through reasserting the true Jewish values; cherishing traditions; enhancing the heritage of the past but looking towards the future; remembering the disappeared ones, but educating and inspiring the young; developing ambitious projects preserving the inherited features and requirements, but accepting new cultural challenges, by virtue of identity, memory and self-confidence, achieving unique and specific Jewish accomplishments. This highlights the importance of the *Libeskind moment*. His Jewish works reflect a sense of sensitive approach not just to the subject, but also to the people, as a community, both for Jewish and non-Jewish cultures, following two different aspects. On one hand is *the memorial contribution* for those who were murdered, survived, or preserve the memory of the disappeared ones, and *expressing Jewish life as a continuous, uninterrupted experience*. On the other hand, is the need to express the *civil duty of the others, in a moral and spiritual repairing exercise*, meaning admitting the faults of the past, assuming the responsibilities of the present and guiding the thoughts for a bright future.

For the Diaspora life, the existence without expressing identity and memory was impossible. History has proved that even in the most restrictive conditions, Jews tried hard to carry on the perpetuation of their legal, moral, material, and spiritual values. Regarded through a pluralistic point of view, Judaism is to be understood as a continuous changing and evolving culture, which has a significant nucleus, traditionally tightly connected to religion, life, family, kinship, everyday duties, but maybe the most relevant (for the architecture) to the present. Nowadays Jewish architecture, evocative, and fully identity, reflects the evident relation between art and *a people*, a duty, a religion (faith), a fate, a place, and a purpose, developed through characteristic building types: museums, memorials, synagogues, community centres, cultural centres, educational institutions.

In our opinion, the three distinctive approaches offer *three models of creation*, in Jewish contemporary architecture, using memory, as an identity source and resource.

#### 3.1 The first model: an act of historic restitution

*Memorial architecture, as an act of historic restitution* (the Jewish Museum Berlin); metaphor evoking the collective memory of a perished Jewish community – *presence by absence; bringing the un-being into being*.

It is a kind of architecture, which *recovers or restores lost values of the Past* – be they spiritual, if not material – *rebuilding identity* and speaking about the Truth. It is the architecture of lived experiences, which connects the visitor with a lost or forgotten world (the world of the Berlin Jews) – the architecture of understanding the senses through feelings and thoughts.

Speaking about the Jewish Museum Berlin, Libeskind himself has asserted that he would “offer a design that would architecturally integrate Jewish history into Berlin’s rich, multi-textured history and enable people, even encourage them, *to feel what had happened* (our italics)”[17, p. 82]. Architecture should always work with the Truth, without “neutralizing”. Scarcely would someone be able to discuss architecture based just on “realities”. Ideas, numbers, images, values, traditions,

historical facts are inextricably bound and all merge creating the “matrix” of an architectural space that is hardly “new”, hardly “old”, but certainly original and different. Thus, this kind of architecture streams authenticity in all senses, although “playing” with the “footprints” of History: it reminds about the Past and shifts it into the Present, in spectacular forms, engaging the visitors in all possible and even impossible situations, sensations or spiritual experiences, operating with complicated metaphors, building a powerful discourse, based on significant gestures and subtle meanings. Being an *act of historic restitution*, this kind of memorial architecture celebrates the Truth in more than one way: it is sincere, but also insidious; it is “open”, but also “enclosed”; it is “simple”, but rather “abstruse”, pervading all apparent settings and permanently establishing new and original ones. “Things” that existed come to life again: those that were lost are being recovered, those that were forgotten are being reminded of, and thus, life with its experiences (that have existed), breathes again through architectural forms, spaces and devices. Moreover, is evoking great symbols or milestones of a civilization; and, sometimes, is even linking disparate relics that are witnesses of former lives and glory, crossroads of identity features.

Other examples of contemporary Jewish architecture that would fit this first model could be: *Jüdisches Zentrum Jakobsplatz in München* (architects Rena Wandel-Hoefer and Wolfgang Lorch, 2001-2007), *Gemeindezentrum der Neuen Synagoge in Dresden* (architects Wandel-Hoefer-Lorch, 1997-2001), *Juedisches Gemeindezentrum in Mainz* (architect Manuel Herz, 2010), *Museo Nazionale della Shoah in Rome* (architects Luca Zevi and Giorgio Tamburini, 2007-2008, in construction).

### **3.2 The second model: relying on culture**

*Memorial architecture that relies on culture.* It is the architecture of cultural act relating to the Past, to its values and traditions as to a source of identity, but *building it, evoking life, and experiences of being, as a source of energy for the Future* (the Jewish Museum San Francisco). It is the architecture of continuity, will, and fortunes, celebrating the accomplishments of present life and the becoming of humanity.

Sometimes, this kind of memorial architecture “reduces” (*viz.* takes over and processes) great Jewish cultural symbols to formal mnemonic elements, which are directly or indirectly integrated in or applied to the built form, helping the architectural endeavour to be easily “read” and “understood”: sometimes without too much effort, but other times, rather complicated. Due to many subtle meanings, which base themselves one on another, this approach establishes a sequential way of decoding, leading, in the end, to ample architectural gestures full of significances.

Thus, buildings become carriers of Jewish cultural quanta (including religion, language, traditions, consciousness, history, or art, which is “a rather arbitrary selection” [18, p. 320]), moreover, sometimes conveying Jewish “cultural products”, too. This happens through following the “at least two contradictory assumptions, sometimes held simultaneously, about the nature of Jewish culture. One is that it is ‘under construction’ (in the postmodern sense); the other is that it already exists, and it is merely the task of the individual or the community to serve it up, promote it, and develop it” [18, p. 320]. In addition, while establishing an architectural discourse, one should have in mind that “not everything that takes place in a cultural domain is necessarily relevant to identity formation” [18, p. 322]. In fact, most of the times, “Jewish culture” refers to a “process of negotiating and renegotiating the details of Jewish cultural distinctiveness in its non-Jewish Diaspora settings” [18, p. 322], i.e. configuring its identity. Therefore, architecture could be the perfect embodiment of the “real” (identity) values, when such a process is imminent.

Other examples of contemporary Jewish architecture that would fit this second model could be: *Jüdisches Gemeindezentrum in Duisburg* (architect Zvi Hecker, 1996-1999), *Heinz-Galinski School in Berlin* (architect Zvi Hecker, 1990-1995), *Neue Synagoge mit jüdischem Gemeindezentrum am*

Weinhof in Ulm (architect Susanne Gross, 2010-2012), *Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich in Warsaw* (*Museum of the History of Polish Jews*, architect Rainer Mahlamäki, 2005, 2009-2013).

### 3.3 The third model: transfiguring the present into the past

*Memorial architecture that transfigures the present into the past.* Directly or indirectly connected to history, the architecture evokes identity as a possibility to pass beyond the limits of reality, in the sense of *being through architecture* (the Nussbaum Haus). It opens the “gate” to another world, in the most tangible and maybe frightening way, in the key of the past, exceeding the present, transposing the visitor in the coordinates of past lives or events (life struggles, thoughts, spiritual and physical torments, fears, obsessions, despair). It is *the architecture of meaningful feelings and sensations, of lived lives that can be lived again.* (Speaking about the Felix Nussbaum Museum, Libeskind himself said that “every element of the spatial organization, geometry and programmatic content of the scheme refers to the paradigmatic destiny of Nussbaum...” [19, p. 315]).

This kind of architectural endeavour clearly seeks to induce to visitors extreme experiences. To this purpose, a series of devices, scenographies, and installations are being used. A wide range of stimuli act upon most human senses, thus inducing to each individual, on one hand, a state of high nervousness, excitability, sometimes fright, anxiety or panic, and other times even terror; and, on the other hand, a feeling of despair, grief or mourning. The target is *to live architecture directly and viscerally*: crossing beyond the space defined by walls one might not only understand the true reality of past events, through personal experience, but also regain their internal order, by accepting things that would not be accepted and facts which exceed the daily routine. The movement of visitors through the space becomes extremely difficult; confusion occurs; the mind cannot rationally follow anymore the predefined path assumed from the beginning, but instead, unexpectedly, it starts to orientate the body, to search for cues, following the stimuli, instinctively making its own way through the architectural space. Every element follows a purpose that eventually would coagulate into a psychologically tackling of architecture, closely related to space perception theories. After such a “journey”, it is not much to consider that a set of transformations occur – most of all related to a spiritual change of the human being. Thus, a psychological process of purification through architecture begins, while the other one has just ended.

An interesting example of Jewish architecture that would fit this third model could be the reconversion and refurbishment of *Fabryka Schindlera* from Krakow, into a special memorial museum – *Oscar Schindler's Factory Museum* (the permanent exhibition is entitled “Krakow under Nazi Occupation 1939-1945” and was inaugurated in 2010).

*These three models* generated and generate specific compositional and theoretical elements. We consider them the premises that opened the way of expressing Jewish identity in contemporary architecture. They represent the starting point or the challenge of designing with complete freedom, but using a matrix of defining elements that show, assert or contemplate the Jewish faces of Diaspora life and their meanings and profound significances, relevant to the process of creation. These models define the most important *role of architecture*: understanding the architecture and its message gives us the strength and wisdom for widening our cultural, physical and even metaphysical horizons, due to a process of *purification*.

## 4. Conclusions

*Memorial architecture* addresses to our sensibility, stimulating our ways of thinking, reasoning and believing. Usually, it exceeds the limits of the rational world, opening the way for our mind and soul

(and metaphorically, even for our body) to pass beyond reality, in the realm of shared knowledge, revealed meanings, and full senses. Dramatic, sober or simply glacial, memorial architecture bases on emotions and relies on empathetic feelings, about the world, about people, buildings, and objects that surround us and, in this way make us wiser, more sensible, and responsive in relation with truth, goodness, and appreciation. These experiences, associated with catharsis, induce to people who believe in *passing through architecture* the possibility to undertake introspection as a worthwhile self-insight examination of their mental state, soul, thoughts, and feelings, of history and becoming through history, in relation with the others and with the milieu in which they live, they are, they visit, they perform, they practice, they generate, or simply they inspire.

*Memorial architecture* exists as long as the contemplating eye sees, understands and absorbs its form, sense, meaning, and role. In this way, architecture identifies with the ritual, sacred, sensible, contextual, complex, and sometimes even illusionary, enactment of art, history, people and their values, thoughts and heritage. Consciously or unconsciously, memorial architecture transposes people (its visitors / viewers) to a world where both their own and others' ideas, real life, ideals and the unknown become one true happening, in their minds, souls, or actions; often exceeding the common sense, involving poetics of language and space, metaphors of reality and imaginary, even reverie, fighting against oblivion, surpassing the secular meanings of the world, opening the way to an imaginary, but extremely tangible reality (anchored in present, represented through real objects, materials, textures, etc.). Profound and symbolic, the identitary memorial architecture evokes the past that becomes present, but is not there, the absent that becomes present and can be perceived as reality, or the lost, which can be regained, using one's affective memory, feelings and thoughts – this kind of architecture has the power of rebirth: crossing it, one can relive both their own and others' lives, events, history and therefore, escape from fading into the darkness of the damnation of being useless, nameless and unknown. Not at least, architecture has a role of salvation.

The “Jewish issue” has been, for a very long time, a real problematic for the Diaspora community life. It is, maybe, high time to reconsider the Jewish identity matters, taking into account the lately numerous Jewish projects that show, for certain, that things have changed, and that the way opened, programmatically, by Daniel Libeskind, about twenty years ago, continues to bring into light new architectural proposals (re)building, reviving, enhancing or promoting Jewish memory, heritage, life, and thought in the Diaspora.

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