

## **The Ruins of History: Allegories of Destruction in Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum**

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It has been noted recently that Western culture is in the grip of an international museum-building boom which emerged in the early eighties and shows no sign of abating. Many of the most high-profile new museums are intended for the display of art, prompting numerous commentaries on the theme of the art museum as the secular temple of the postmodern age, and proving again and again the value of distinctive contemporary architecture as a marketing tool. But while the merits of expressionist buildings as a forum for the display of (usually modern) art could be debated endlessly, the question must be reframed to deal with the purpose-built history museum, and again in the case of museums which deal with contested or 'unsavoury' histories.

The act of constructing a new building to contain history provokes a range of architectural and historiographic implications which are different in number and kind from those of art museums, or of history museums which occupy historic, or even simply extant, buildings. In recasting architecture as a deliberate frame around the presentation of history, it abandons the fiction of the 'white box', the idea of architecture as a neutral ground, and represents the incursion of architecture into the realm of historiography. Of course, such an incursion is not without difficulties. Apart from having to fulfil a specific functional brief, architecture is an abstract, formalised art that is unsuited to figurative representation. Analogies between architecture and language are almost as old as the profession itself, but setting aside the problems inherent in such conceptions, architecture could never have the specificity of meaning of written or spoken language. The ways in which a building might thus express its newly anointed role in the framing of history seem limited, and fraught with pitfalls.

All of this makes Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum extension to the Berlin museum all the more significant, since the building itself manages to be figurative without being painfully literal, commemorative without being bombastic, and engaging without resorting to a clunky 'interactivity'. The fact that it is the *building* that manages all of this is itself remarkable, and demonstrates that the line at which the building stops and the museum apparatus begins becomes ever more occluded. In this paper the analysis of the Jewish Museum building provides a opening through which to explore the implications of unsavoury histories for the museum institution generally. To address this further it will be necessary to delve into some of the complexities of architectural history and context that condition the Jewish Museum project, particularly in terms of its redefinition of architectural monumentality. A description of the ways in which the museum addresses the particularly difficult and 'unpresentable' elements of German and Jewish history in Berlin leads to a discussion of the role of the

history museum in representing loss and absence, those elements of history which could be regarded as 'unpresentable'. The Jewish Museum will be found to manifest a primary characteristic of museums dealing with unsavoury histories - a complex and sophisticated overlap between the roles of museum, monument and memorial, and a meditation on the museum's role in both embodying and containing memory. This leads, finally, to a discussion of Walter Benjamin's concept of the ruin as an allegory of history, and thus to the Jewish Museum as a kind of constructed ruin, a monument which was always already 'ruined' by the events of history.

The Jewish Museum project has generated an enormous amount of publicity and criticism in architectural circles since its inception roughly twelve years ago. In all of this, though, there has been little comment from the point of view of its genre, that is, the building *as* a museum. This is almost certainly because the building was opened as an empty shell, naked of any museological objects or exhibits, and it will remain this way until its final installation and re-opening in September 2001, nearly three years after its practical completion. But rather than defeating a discussion of the building as a museum, this merely serves to underscore my starting point - that this museum, as with many museums dealing with 'unsavoury' histories, is much more than a simple receptacle for objects, or space for their display. The fact that since the museum was completed over 100 000 visitors have happily paid their five Deutschmarks each to be guided through an empty building can not be ignored. This effectively proves that the building is not only *the* museum object, it is also itself *a* museum object - it is not only the form, but also part of the content. With its vertiginous spatial effects, its punctured zinc planes and gashed slits for windows, it is also an austere beautiful object, which is nevertheless designed to hold both the memory and the evidence of some of the most unspeakable historical events ever recorded, events which are commonly felt to 'defeat' representation.

In 1988, the competition to design a new Jewish Museum wing as an extension to the Berlin Museum was announced. The site was on Lindenstrasse, at the southern end of then West Berlin, in an area adjacent to the still extant Berlin Wall. In 1989 the competition was judged and Daniel Libeskind's entry declared the winner. The program required that the new extension be entered through the original museum, housed next door in the Collegienhaus, a former Baroque palace reconstructed in 1735. Libeskind's entry, described by the jurors as 'an extraordinary, completely autonomous solution',<sup>1</sup> followed a precarious course over the next ten years, enduring design changes required to reduce the budget from an estimated construction cost of DM 178.5 million to the budgeted amount of DM 77 million, several occasions when the project was almost abandoned, dramatic political upheaval with the fall of the Wall and the decision to reunite Germany with Berlin as its capital, and controversy over the appointment of curatorial staff.<sup>2</sup> Construction continued slowly throughout the nineties, with the cornerstone being laid on November 9, 1992, and the project finally completed on 25 January 1999.

Libeskind calls the project 'Between the Lines', and it is from the between the inextricably entangled lines of German and Jewish history that it speaks. These two intersecting 'lines' are expressed in the plan form, quite literally representing German history as violently disjointed but continuous, and Jewish history embedded within it, straight but

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<sup>1</sup> *Jewish Museum Berlin Competition Report*, June 1989, quoted by Michael Spens, 'Berlin Phoenix', *Architectural Review* vol. 1226, April 1999, p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> For an abbreviated account of these trials, see James Russell, 'Project Diary: Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin', *Architectural Record*, v. 187, n. 1, January 1999, pp. 76-89.

catastrophically interrupted. Libeskind himself has described the building as an 'emblem', and on a very literal level he presents the Star of David in the building's plan, albeit in a broken and abstracted form, as a belated answer to the swastika and the Imperial eagle. The unbroken tradition of Jewish religion and culture may have been horribly scarred by the events of the Second World War, but it was far from destroyed, and there is a grim affirmation written into the very plan of the museum. Libeskind has described four starting points for his scheme, points which are themselves a series of unrelated fragments from outside the discipline of architecture.<sup>3</sup> The star was generated by plotting the addresses of prominent Jewish and German citizens on a map of pre-war Berlin, and joining these points into an 'irrational and invisible matrix'.<sup>4</sup> This irrationality is compounded by the diversity of Libeskind's three other 'texts': the libretto and score of Arnold Schönberg's unfinished opera, *Moses and Aaron*; the *Gedenkbuch*, the two books containing the names and addresses of Jews deported from Berlin to the camps, and finally the text of Walter Benjamin's first book, *One Way Street*. Libeskind has made the process of the design central to his presentation of the work, but he never offers a logical, linear progression from these points to the finished design. They are allowed to remain fragmentary, part of the process, without being subsumed seamlessly into a totalised product.

The finished building is a five storey, angular, zinc-clad volume, a zigzag in plan, with the shortest façade fronting, and indeed protruding into, Lindenstrasse. The fenestration is a series of gashed slits in the riveted zinc skin, their positions and trajectories appearing unrelated to the internal spatial organisation. The building's urban scale is humble, it works in context with the neighbouring Collegienhaus, and indeed is dwarfed by a number of neighbouring 12 to 15 storey postwar apartment blocks. The museum is surrounded by gardens carefully integrated with the architectural program, but it can not be entered directly from outside; the visitor must pass through the Collegienhaus and down into a choice of three tunnel-like corridors, one leading straight to the main stairway into the extension, another to the 'Holocaust void', and a third outside to the E.T.A Hoffman garden. On the ground the museum can never be understood as a whole, either from inside or out, and the 'zigzag plan', while it has been much touted in the architectural press and in fact provides the museum's logo, is not apparent in the building itself as a *gestalt*. Entering the building via the underground tunnel exacerbates this disorientating lack of visual coherence. The 'line' running through the centre of the building, which would have been the logical spine of circulation, is instead a series of deliberately empty spaces, bounded voids accessible only from the ground floor, and overlooked by a series of bridges.

The void spaces are paradoxically the most extravagant, but at the same time the most ambiguous, affective and expressive device employed by the museum. As a whole, the building reflects a fragmented, disorientating and uncomfortable subjectivity through its fractured vertical and horizontal planes and the vertiginous effects of its towering, cavernous spaces. This gallery of spatially and emotionally disturbing effects, including the 'incoherent' system of circulation, culminates in the void spaces, which are charged with the presentation of absolute absence. In these profoundly affecting spaces, harboured at the spatial and metaphorical centre of the museum, is represented the tragic failure of the Enlightenment project, simultaneously with the memory of its human victims. The space is devoted quite specifically to absence; 'the museum proposal is to evoke and particularise an absence more than a presence: the unnameable of the voice of God, but also absence as an accusing form of

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<sup>3</sup> Libeskind, 'Between the Lines: The Jewish Museum, Berlin', *Research in Phenomenology* 22, 1992, pp. 82-87.

<sup>4</sup> Libeskind, 'Between the Lines...', p. 83.

presence of an incinerated culture and community, in whose cremation modernism was burned as well.<sup>5</sup>

If the Jewish Museum represents a convergence of the discourses of historiography and museology represented through the aesthetic language of architecture, in the context of Germany this necessarily involves the unique problems of postwar historiography. These issues centre particularly around the Holocaust, debating 'the exceptionality of the event, its representability, its (un)speakability, ...[and] its very (in)comprehensibility'.<sup>6</sup> While the museum is not a Holocaust museum, and its original brief specifically required that Jewish history be displayed in the context of German history, the events of the Holocaust are nevertheless positioned at its philosophical centre. A large body of scholarship continues to question the ability of architecture or any expression of culture to adequately represent and thus memorialise the systematic murder of the Jews of Europe. The Jewish museum thus represents the state of social and cultural memory in contemporary Berlin, more than fifty years after the war's end. The complexity of this state continues to increase, rather than subsiding over time, since the initial trauma of the event has been gradually compounded by the impossibility of assimilating it in epistemological, historical, or theological terms.

Museums dealing with unsavoury histories are, by definition, engaged in a critique and reevaluation of a conventional retelling of history. Furthermore, through an awareness of their own 'construction' of history, such museums can enact a self-reflexive critique of the traditional museum apparatus itself. Unsavoury histories might be described as historical acts, attitudes, and policies which the shifting tide of political opinion has come to find unacceptable, embarrassing, or criminally culpable. Often such events have been suppressed or excluded from accepted historical narratives for just these reasons. Whether through an attempt to objectively acknowledge what actually occurred, or a more politicised retrospective analysis, the point of working through such a difficult history would be, in part, a simple matter of redressing inaccuracies and omissions in the historical record. Such histories are rarely broached without controversy, and those who attempt to address or redress them are routinely accused of relativism, revisionism, and political correctness gone mad. But the contested nature of such histories is in fact an indicator of the deeper meaning of contested histories, since they are an expression of history as itself unknowable. The reason that some versions of history will cause irreconcilable conflict is that history as written can never, no matter how much evidence and historical fact it musters in its cause, be absolutely proven.

The objective presentation of fact has always been the museum's ideal, but postmodern historiography, with its tendency towards relativism and subjectivity, raises the question of how historical truth - as law - is *ever* to be represented, and recasts history itself as the eternally absent 'lost object'. One could, therefore, argue that history is always unrepresentable to some extent: that the past is always irretrievable, that historical truth itself is an eternally unknowable thing, and that all history museums are faced with these issues whether they address them explicitly or not. In this conception history as a discourse is always, to a certain extent, engaged in the evocation of loss. If the *presentation* of the past is impossible,

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<sup>5</sup> José Luis González Cobelo, 'Architecture and its double: idea and reality in the work of Daniel Libeskind', *El Croquis* 80, 1996, p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Haidu, 'The Dialectics of Unspeakability: Language, Silence, and the Narratives of Desubjectification', in Saul Friedländer (ed), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 277.

however, its *representation* is made possible by metonymically substituting the enduring physical presence of historical objects for the intangibility of time passed, in the same way that a monument literally 'stands in' for the past. This is the strategy of the history museum: constructing history from the traces and objects that endure.

If the impossibility of *actually being there* provides the ever present but unspoken limit-condition of the museum, this too is precisely what the architectural monument commemorates. To the extent that all history museums re-present events past and people dead, they all have a monumental function, in calling attention to temporal distance, that is, the pastness of the past. One hardly needs to reprise Theodor Adorno's famous aphorism, that '[m]useum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association,'<sup>7</sup> and indeed, the most archetypal form of monument is the gravestone, designed to perpetuate the memory of some person or event in tangible and enduring form. Alongside its familiar signification of commemoration and remembrance, the monument marks not only the inevitability of death, but also of forgetting. It is in this context that Robert Musil wrote that 'there is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument'.<sup>8</sup> The monument is thus an admonition to the human subjects of present and future, exhorting them not to forget, but predicated on the assumption that they will. If the work of remembering was completed diligently and kept alive in living memory there would be no need for a massive and enduring object to act as redress and reminder, to point to absent events and people. Of course the role of the museum is precisely to undertake this task, to diligently uncover and re-present history in the present, but this work is underwritten by a dialectic of absence and presence, intangible loss and enduring monument, as the conceptual foundation upon which the history museum is built.

In museums that deal with unsavoury histories, the commemorative or memorial function is frequently made explicit. The traditional museum is powerless to represent the intangibility of loss and absence as such, and bald representations of historical fact are not always equal to the task of commemoration, especially in the case of tragic histories. The tension between museum, monument, and memorial thus resolves itself into three elements - the museum as archive, for the collection and display of historical objects, the museum as memorial, for the provocation of memory in its visitors, and the museum as monument, the physical embodiment of memory. The museum which attempts to re-present an 'unsavoury' history is thus a particularly exaggerated, emotive, and politically fraught working-through of the issues of monumentality and memory which underlie the very concept of the history museum.

In the Jewish Museum the memorial function borders on being a moral imperative, since Holocaust historiography demands that its events never be 'resolved', but kept present to each new generation. The fact that it is a museum, rather than a freestanding, monolithic commemorative object, already suggests an active and meaningful engagement with history, rather than the passive contemplation implied by the traditional monument. But a Jewish museum in Berlin is faced with many dilemmas. Some are pragmatic - since the Nazis destroyed many of the objects of Jewish history, and much of the evidence of their own crimes, few historical objects actually remain, only 'small things, documents, archive

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<sup>7</sup> Theodor Adorno, 'Valery Proust Museum', in *Prisms*, translated Samuel and Shierry Webber, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1967 (1990), p. 175.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Musil, 'Monuments', in *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, trans. Peter Wortsman, Colorado: Hygeine, 1987, p. 61, quoted by James Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993, p. 13

materials, evocative of an absence rather than a presence.<sup>9</sup> Another, more fundamental issue revolves around monumentality itself, and the Nazi's employment of classical architecture as their architectural style of choice. If the Jewish Museum is a 'delayed embrace of the victims by the culprits',<sup>10</sup> as it has been described in Germany, its political complexities stem from the residual presence of those culprits, in personal memory, official history, and the physical palimpsest of architecture. This is especially true in the city of Berlin, a primary example of the city as text, written and overwritten by successive waves of historical events.<sup>11</sup> In this historically charged context, it would have been entirely unacceptable for the Jewish Museum to resurrect any of the forms employed by National Socialism.<sup>12</sup> This automatically precluded classicism, the most widely employed, even conventional style for monumental buildings, and cast a pall over the very concept of architectural monumentality at a time when the massive death and destruction of the Second World War made the creation of edifices dedicated to preserving memory more urgent than ever.

Postwar architects were faced with the problem of refiguring monumentality itself after the abuses it suffered in the 'pseudomonumentality' of National Socialism, with its appropriation of classicism for its own, explicitly political, ends.<sup>13</sup> Of course, classical architecture is always already monumental, not only because it was and is so commonly employed for civic buildings, but because it refers to the ancient past while simultaneously aspiring to atemporality and eternal presence. What becomes more apparent in propagandist Nazi neo-classicism of architects like Paul Troost and Albert Speer is the inherently totalitarian relationship this entails between the state and the 'mass'.

Architectural history tends to relegate Speer's oeuvre to the position of a historical footnote on the megalomania of Nazi fascism, and Hitler and Speer's plans for the transformation of the city of Berlin into 'Germania', the bureaucratic and administrative capital of the Third Reich, are illustrative of this.<sup>14</sup> Germania was to be the new capital and seat of government of the world, its dominance expressed and reinforced by the gigantic, stripped classicism of its architecture. Such buildings were massive enough to endure into the future, or at least to appear capable of this, while subjugating the transient and contingent existence of the individual through a vision of the 'Fatherland' as an entity transcending time and history. Hitler saw the Thousand Year Reich as the natural continuation of the age of the Roman Emperors, and himself as the heir to the absolute power of Caesar and Augustus, and

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<sup>9</sup> Libeskind, 'Between the Lines...', p. 85.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Hoffmann, 'Death is a Master from Germany', *Daidalos* 38, December 1990, p. 103.

<sup>11</sup> See Andreas Huyssen, 'The Voids of Berlin', *Critical Inquiry* 24, Autumn 1997, pp. 57-81.

<sup>12</sup> I am not suggesting all Nazi architecture was Neoclassical: there was no single 'Nazi style', and the various other styles employed by the party in industrial building, infrastructural works, private houses, and public housing were also political. The fact that I wish to concentrate on those aspects of Nazi state architecture which did adopt the Neoclassical idiom is simply because these were, arguably, the most explicitly 'heroic' and political, and the most directly engaged in architectural affect. On the problems with this characterisation of Nazi Neo-classicism, see Wolfgang Schache, 'Nazi Architecture and its Approach to Antiquity' in *Architectural Design* 53, no. 11/12, 1983, pp. 81-88. On the eclecticism of the Nazi architectural program, see Kenneth Frampton, 'A Synoptic View of the Third Reich', *Oppositions* 12, Spring 1978, pp 54-87. And on the Nazi use of Neo-classicism for explicitly political purposes, see Robert R Taylor, *The Word in Stone*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974, esp. pp. 1-14, and Colin St John Wilson, 'Speer and the Fear of Freedom', *The Architectural Review* 173, no. 1036, June 1983, pp 22-25.

<sup>13</sup> The term is Siegfried Geidion's. See 'The Need for a New Monumentality', in *Architecture you and me*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958, p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> Vittorio Lampugnani, 'Architecture Under National Socialism', *Architecture and Urbanism* 268, January 1993, p. 13.

classical architecture was the means by which this vision was expressed. It fulfilled the simultaneous demands of political legitimation by association with the past, connection with the funereal origins of classical architecture, and subordination of the individual into the mass; 'Hitler and Speer were fascinated by monumental architecture - the architecture of death - because such architecture stresses the totality, the whole party, the whole people.'<sup>15</sup>

Classicism as an architectural style, apart from having borne the swastika and the Imperial eagle and thus been tainted by association, is also a manifestation of the idealist doctrine of the classical. This aspiration, which made classicism attractive to the Nazis in the first place, is a striving towards total unity, transcendence, and a timeless universality, and tends to marginalise the individuality of the subject in pursuit of a harmonious totality.<sup>16</sup> The Jewish Museum, with its concerted emphasis on the individual human subject, both as past victim of history and present perceiving subject, is opposed to such ideals in every way. It directs its opposition not simply to the stylistic attributes of classicism, but to its signification of this 'innate' monumentality. By privileging the individual experience - albeit fragmented and schizophrenic - of each museum visitor, it achieves an 'antimonumental monumentality', where 'spatial monumentality is undercut by the inevitably temporal apprehension of the building.'<sup>17</sup>

The Jewish Museum works by provoking an emotional and psychological disturbance in the visitor, a shattering of the ego mirrored in the formal fragmentation of the architecture, and reconstructing individual subjectivity through the tragic *experience* of the building. Thus in the Jewish Museum the memorial aspect of monumentality is preserved, precisely *through* its role as a museum, an institution which encourages engagement with history rather than the traditional monument's passive contemplation. It must be framed as an attempt to 'ruin' totalising effects in a calculated strategy of transgression, of the classical tradition, the modern tradition, and especially of each of these as they may have been expressed in the Nazi regime. I will argue that Libeskind enacts this subversion by employing the practical and metaphorical associations of the fragment and the ruin, and read the Jewish Museum as a kind of constructed ruin, a deliberately 'ruined' monument.

More than simply deriving a moral significance from the commemoration of the Holocaust, or using it to explicate a link between architecture and ethics, Libeskind reads its legacy as double-edged, an instrument of both destruction and redemption. This double movement is captured in every level of the museum through the technique and aesthetics of fragmentation. Both Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin wrote of the strategic value of the fragment as a means to deny totality, and Kurt Forster writes that 'the idea of the fragment arises not from the gesture of salvaging a piece of the whole, but from disregard or even denial of the value represented by integral works.'<sup>18</sup> Libeskind's fragmented building is made philosophically 'accessible' by freezing the detritus of the 'ruined' discourses of modernism, of history, and of the museum without attempting to reconstruct them into a new harmonious totality. In the words of Robin Evans, the 'psychotic ambivalence of the technique ... may either register a

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<sup>15</sup> Peter Blundell Jones, 'Architecture and Political Legitimation', *The Architectural Review* 200, no.1193, July 1996, p. 68.

<sup>16</sup> On the distinction between Classicism and the Classical, see Henri Zerner, 'Classicism as Power', *Art Journal* 47, Spring 1988, pp. 35-36. On the distinction between the Classical and the Neo-Classical, see Joseph Rykwert, 'Classic and Neo-Classical', *Oppositions* 7, Winter 1976, pp. 37-54.

<sup>17</sup> Andreas Huyssen, 'The Voids of Berlin', *Critical Inquiry* 24, (Autumn 1997): 80.

<sup>18</sup> Kurt Forster, 'Monument/Memory and the Mortality of Architecture', *Oppositions* 25, Fall 1982, p. 11.

delight in smashing things up or sadness in displaying the shattered scene',<sup>19</sup> and I contend that the elegiac and the celebratory are both present in the Jewish Museum. There is an important precedent for this approach in the work of Walter Benjamin. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin elucidates a theory of Baroque allegory in which the ruin, as the physical corollary and counterpart of allegory, takes a central role; 'Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things', he writes.<sup>20</sup> In the context of Benjamin's philosophy of history the ruin provides an emblem, not only of the melancholic worldview presented in Baroque tragic drama, but of allegory as a critical tool for historical materialism. Benjamin's concept of the ruin is valuable because it delves beyond the aesthetic of the ruin as an object, and reads it as a process, a means of demythifying and stripping away a falsely affirmative vision of reality, and of history.

Benjamin contends that allegory, with its emphasis on the individual and the contingent world of lived experience, provides a means to defeat the totalising aims of symbolism, and represent the frailty and finitude of human life. The tragic fate of the individual adrift in history finds allegorical expression in the emblem of the death's head, through which Baroque allegorists expressed the ultimate vanity and futility of human aspirations, forever grounded by the knowledge of the inevitability of death. If the death's head represents the eventual fate of all living things, the ruin provides an equivalent in the inorganic realm; in the Baroque conception not only architecture, but all cultural and social aspirations must eventually succumb to the violent effects of time and history; 'The word 'history' stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience... In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting.'<sup>21</sup> The ruin represents brokenness and transience, bearing as it does the physical traces of time on its surface as a kind of historical palimpsest or script. Benjamin's conception of history is not solely negative, however, and this is a vital connection with the process and practice of the Jewish Museum: he reads history as tragedy, a process of violence and destruction, but which also provides the opportunity for a fresh start.

For Benjamin, it is the rubble left in the aftermath of destruction that unmasks the present and provides a field of possibilities to the allegorist. It is only through an examination of these melancholy traces, the detritus left after the 'catastrophes' of history, that the allegorist or historian can critically approach the present. In his conception, the act of destruction places everything in new juxtapositions, shatters old relationships, and opens history up for examination. It is through the shock of destruction that the subject emerges from the 'dream' of tradition and into life in the present. The notion of the isolated image 'blasted out of the continuum of history' reoccurs throughout Benjamin's philosophy of history, reflecting a central tenet of historical materialism, that the past is constructed by the present, and must therefore be read in and through the present.<sup>22</sup> For the historical materialist, the sudden presence of the present provides a vital anchor point in the fluidity and indeterminacy of historical interpretation. The Jewish Museum, in turn, dates and places itself firmly in history. Its deliberately contemporary appearance is a sign of this - by taking up a critical

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<sup>19</sup> Robin Evans, 'In front of lines that leave nothing behind', *AA Files* 6, 1984, p. 92.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, New York and London: Verso, 1977, pp. 177-78.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, pp. 177-178.

<sup>22</sup> 'A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history. Historicism gives the "eternal" image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past.' Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *Illuminations*, ed Hannah Arendt, New York, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968, p. 264



position in the present, the museum acknowledges that it is a participant not only in the interpretation of history, but in history itself. If the museum is 'ruined', this is a result of the repercussions and aftereffects of catastrophic events carried into the present day; it is entirely engaged in the *now* of lived experience. Ruin, as both verb and noun, process and object, thus exemplifies a mode of working and a field of possibilities for historical materialism.

This concept of allegory contains significant correspondences both with Libeskind's process in designing the Jewish Museum, and the experience of the visitor reading it. Most importantly, allegory expresses its own constructedness - unlike the aesthetic symbol which attempts to disguise the processes of its origination, allegory offers a re-presentation of the practice of the allegorist, which is primarily one of assemblage. Following Susan Buck-Morris' assertion that allegory is a method of expression particularly suited to times of 'social disruption and protracted war, when human suffering and material ruin [are] the stuff and substance of historical experience', allegory can be seen as a critical strategy with particular resonance to a post-modern or deconstructivist position. In terms of its self-consciously avant garde presentation, aesthetically as well as theoretically, the Jewish Museum is very much aligned with these streams of contemporary theory.

The Jewish Museum works in both museological and architectural terms to foreground its own position in the wake of catastrophe - the work of destruction has already occurred, and what remains is mourning, the expression of brokenness, the gathering of the detritus, but not into a new whole. To speak of the Holocaust as a metahistorical event is not to say it lies outside history, on the contrary, one of the tenets of Holocaust historiography is the rigorous historicising of the event, including the interrogation of pre-Auschwitz history for precursors. It must be conceived as neither a freak historical accident nor a random outbreak of pure evil, since both of these approaches excerpt it from its historical and political context and thus exonerate the conditions that allowed it to occur. Such a historicisation of the very event which supposedly 'shatters' history itself also threatens to shatter the museum institution. Jean-Francois Lyotard has compared the Holocaust to an earthquake, which 'destroys not only lives, buildings, and objects, but also the instruments used to measure earthquakes, directly and indirectly'.<sup>23</sup> For him, the apparatus of recording history was not simply struck into silence but actively destroyed by the magnitude of an event that exceeded the scale of all previous human actions. Equally, if it is true that Hitler 'ruined' everything he touched, then not only classical architecture, but all architecture after Auschwitz is, metaphorically, 'in ruins'. Adorno's famous pronouncement that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric',<sup>24</sup> defined 'after Auschwitz' as a new temporal state in which every cultural discourse should have been somehow transformed.

Adorno's statement has been widely interpreted as a definition of the limits of representation, and a questioning of whether the 'humanities', including architecture, would or should still be possible in light of the death of humanism. Since architecture, and the museum institution, have both in fact endured, each must accept its compromised post-Auschwitz position, and continue in the knowledge of its own 'barbarity'. In this sense, a museum centred on the historiographic and commemorative complexities of the Holocaust was always already ruined, and the formal architectural fragmentation of the Jewish Museum is an expression of this, an allegorical representation of the ruinous effects of history.

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<sup>23</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988, p.55.

<sup>24</sup> Theodor Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society,' in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber, London: Neville Spearman, 1967, pg 34.

Visitors to the Jewish Museum are not asked to experientially re-enact the Holocaust, but only to identify empathically with aesthetic representations. The aim must be to bear witness to events that happened more than fifty years ago, and to scrupulously preserve that historical distance - since it would be impossible to actually present the past experience of the Holocaust, and inappropriate to attempt a theatrical representation. In the pursuit of a meaningful engagement between the contemporary museum visitor and the events, people, and victims of history, the Jewish Museum, like many contemporary history museums, is engaged in establishing a new balance between history and experience. In other museums this has led to an increasing reliance on interactive devices, new media and new technology, and spatial installations; techniques which are shared, significantly, with much contemporary art practice. In Libeskind's museum it is manifest in the deliberate manipulation of aesthetic affect, employed here as a kind of mediator between unknowable historical truth and contingent historical interpretation. The affective power of the museum's void spaces lies in their ability to provoke a crisis of subjectivity; the experience of each individual visitor, their sudden sharp awareness of presence, is juxtaposed chillingly with that which is missing, those others whose absence is also suddenly palpable. In the Jewish Museum the monolithic monumental object has been replaced with an empty volume, so the commemorative 'work' can not be deflected but must be internalised and enacted by each subject. The museum is thus able to function as a memorial without conventional monumentality, since each visitor 'performs' the commemoration as a function of his or her passage through the space. The museum is thus 'worked through' in a choreographed process analogous to Freud's 'work of mourning'.<sup>25</sup>

Through the evocation of absence, Libeskind is able to subvert 'metanarrative' history from *within* the museum. Such a history aims to locate human actions and events in a significant and progressive sequence, and accordingly, it demands a meaningful closure and conclusion. But there simply was no redemption for the victims of the Nazi regime, it was not martyrdom in the pure sense of voluntary sacrifice. The Holocaust unveiled no fundamental, metaphysical truth, in fact it can be seen to have revealed the absence of any such truth, as an 'apocalypse without revelation'. The Jewish Museum reflects the impossibility of closure in historiographic terms by repeating it architecturally, as a refusal of monumentality, completion, and unity. As a self reflexive museum, aware of its own processes and practices, its complicities and ideologies, the Jewish Museum provides a model of the contemporary history museum as a critical institution, engaged not only in the commemoration and aesthetic representation of history, but in a critique of the historiographic apparatus itself. Its formal architectural fragmentation signifies that the museum is perpetually 'open' to interpretation and meaningful engagement with the past, that it is never categorically 'finished'. Far from providing an overriding historical justification or 'meaning', it can provide only the secondary consolation of a vehicle for expressing the anguish of meaninglessness. Such an avoidance of a conventional 'retelling' of history, while not descending into the chaos of relativism, emphasises the fate of individual subjects. And herein lies the ultimate significance of its project: by affirming life in the present, it communicates the most important aspect of its critique of history - that the events it commemorates must never be allowed to happen again.

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<sup>25</sup> See Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Ed. James Strachey. Vol. 14. London: Hogarth Press, 1957. 243-258.

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