

The Act of Commemoration in Architecture

Researched Essay - Dissertation
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Fig. 1: German Soldier guarding the entrance of a German shop

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Introduction

This essay discusses the act of commemoration in architecture, more precisely the process of acknowledging, understanding and interpreting of a tragical event, all of these composing an architecture that revolves around of the symbolism of the event and its design process is guided by the ethnical background of the affected community and horrific experiences that had been recorded during the unprecedented event. The case study that has been chosen to exemplify the architectural transition from an event to a construction that represented the essence of historical massacre is The Jewish Museum in Berlin, an architectural landmark designed by Daniel Libeskind.

This piece of writing presents the context and the succession of moments that reshaped the Jewish community in Europe and how the essence of this tragical faith was preserved in time and collective memory by being embodied by a unique vision that was translated in an architectural experience. The essay aims to discuss the complexity of the European Jewish community in the context of the Holocaust in World War II and in its final part to show the importance of commemoration in architecture and how this art can represent an extremely powerful tool in experiencing, decades after, historical events and making the society more aware of its unrepairable mistakes.



Fig. 2: Collage of Jewish survivors as a sign of solidarity

The Jewish Community in Europe prewar

In 1933 the American Jewish Yearbook declared that in Europe comprised of more than 9.5 million Jews. This meant 60 percent of the world’s Jewish population was spread uneven from East to West in all corners of Europe. Poland and the Soviet Union were responsible for sheltering the most European Jews. Before World War II, most of the Jews were residents of Eastern Europe, more specifically of Poland (9.5%), of the European part of the Soviet Union (3.4%) and of Romania (4.2%). Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Austria were the Central Europe’s representants for sheltering large numbers of Jews.¹

Until 1933 the development and growth of the Jewish culture was increasing exponentially. Despite these facts, in almost two decades, the Nazi Germany was spreading rapidly around Europe conquering or occupying territories and murdering two out of three Jews.²

Anti-Jewish legislation in prewar Germany

In addition, due to the oppressing economic depression of the 1930s, the Jewish community was used as a tool by the Nazi Party to gain popularity and to lure more people on their side by being presented and made responsible for a series of political, ethical, social and economic issues that were affecting the German people in an alarming way. The legitimacy that nurtured the power and made The Nazi Party believable in their accusations was realized through a systematical and well-planned racist approach, sustained also by older social, economic and religious aspects of the Jews.

The persecutions upon the Jewish community during the time of the Third Reich are presented by the historical studies, and reflect the general view of the Jews not as human beings, but as objects, victims of the negative ideas and visions of both National Socialist party and regime. There was a lack of information and a poorly documented analysis of the remaining Jewish community in Germany during the War and its ways of combating severe discrimination and harassment in a constant fight and struggle to survive the harshness of the situation.³

At the same time, until 1938, the Jewish community was constantly misled and fed with false beliefs by the National Socialists and their disjoined Jewish policy together with an unpredictable and inconsistent anti-Jewish campaign that was manifested in alternations of “retreat”, “relative calm” and “soft-peddling” times. All these elements combined, creating a falsely plausible truth that the Jews believed that the possibility of living and pursuing their occupations without German interferences or hindrance.⁴

After the coming to power of Adolf Hitler, the Jewish community was extremely affected by his dictatorship. The power that his position conferred to him allowed more than 400 decrees and regulations to be written, the level of restriction being felt on all aspects of their lives. The purpose of this movement was to seize the Jewish community gradually and systematically of all their rights and property. Soon, they

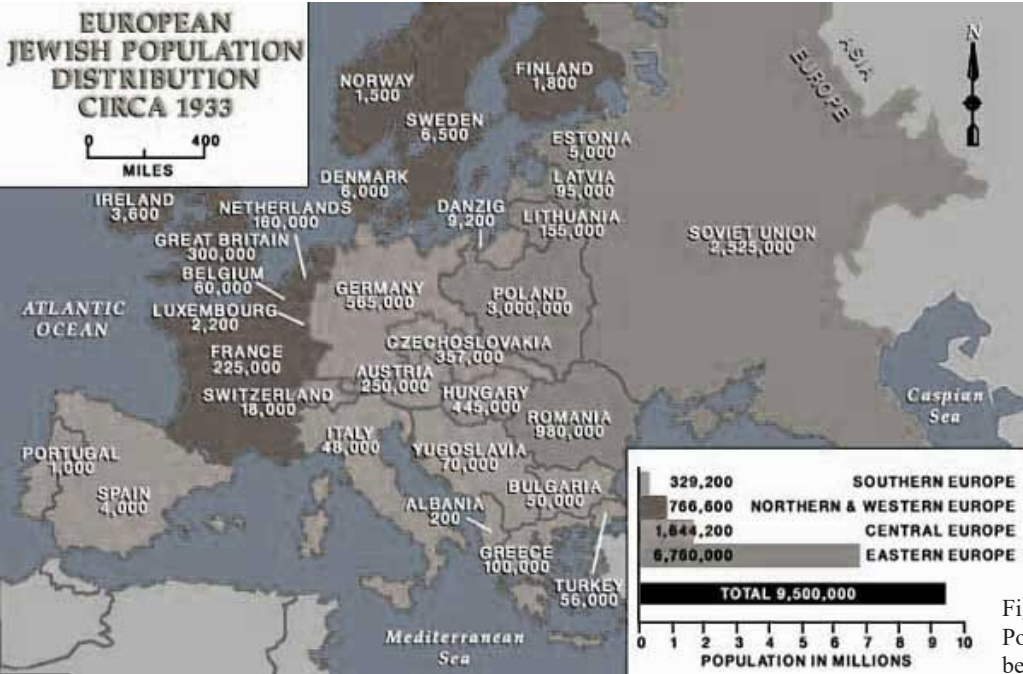


Fig. 3: European Jewish Population Distribution before 1933



Fig. 4: A newspaper informing the new laws dictated by the Hitler

¹United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, ‘Jewish Population of Europe in 1933: Population Data by Country’, *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/jewish-population-of-europe-in-1933-population-data-by-country>, (accessed 17 December 2020) .

²United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, ‘Jewish Population of Europe in 1933: Population Data by Country’, *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/jewish-population-of-europe-in-1933-population-data-by-country>, (accessed 17 December 2020) .

³M. Lamberti, ‘The Jewish Defence in Germany after the National-Socialist Seizure of Power’, *The Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, vol. 42, no. 1, 1997, p. 135

⁴M. Lamberti, ‘The Jewish Defence in Germany after the National-Socialist Seizure of Power’, *The Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, vol. 42, no. 1, 1997, p. 135



lost their identity as citizens of Germany and became outcasts from a new rising power that would persecute and punish them. All these measures were applied at a national level and were issued by the German admiration and represented the starting point of a more radical persecution of the European Jews.⁵

The transition from citizens to outcasts can be divided into 3 stages. Firstly, the restriction and removal of the Jewish community from German public life between 1933-34 and was supported by the appearance of the new leadership and its antisemitic legislation. Secondly, the “Nuremberg Laws” were enforced in 1935 and represented the institutionalization of most of the racial theories known in the Nazi ideology. Thirdly, the last stage which took place between 1937-38 imposed a clearer and permanent separation between the Jewish community and the German citizens through different approaches and legislations.⁶

The “Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service” of April 7th, 1933 represented the first major law that the German enforced upon the Jewish community and stated that they were completely banned from the state service. Furthermore, the newly written Civil Service Law was a tool to use against the Jews and to prevent them from participating in any organization, profession or any other aspect of the public life.⁷

Moreover, the Nuremberg Laws stated rules in identification and categorization of people as Jews depending on their family tree. With this new set of rules, a new wave of antisemitic legislation allowed for an immediate separation of different areas affecting and restraining even more of the Jewish community, taking from them any right until 1939. The constant movement and preparations of the Nazi leaders for the conquest that was planned to be unleashed upon Europe, along with the antisemitic wave in Germany and Austria, helped and allowed for a more profound persecution of the European Jewish community.

⁵States Holocaust Memorial Museum, ‘Anti-Jewish Legislation in Prewar Germany’, *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/anti-jewish-legislation-in-prewar-germany> , (accessed 18 December 2020).

⁶States Holocaust Memorial Museum, ‘Anti-Jewish Legislation in Prewar Germany’, *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/anti-jewish-legislation-in-prewar-germany> , (accessed 18 December 2020).

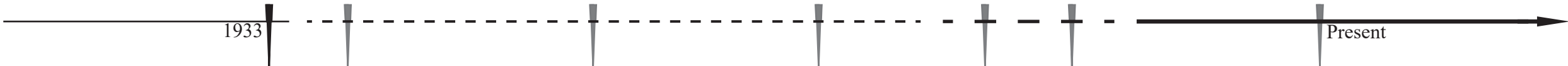
⁷States Holocaust Memorial Museum, ‘Anti-Jewish Legislation in Prewar Germany’, *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/anti-jewish-legislation-in-prewar-germany> , (accessed 18 December 2020).



Fig. 5: The new Jewish passport in Germany after the new wave of laws- 1938



Fig. 6: The Nurnberg Laws



The Jewish Community in Europe during war

The start of World War II in 1939 set in motion a more accelerated and violent plan of persecutions and deportations of the Jews that later became a mass murdering scheme involving all the Jews of Germany. In the following years until 1941 the constant waves of antisemitic legislations deprived the Jewish community of any intention or possibility to work and of any remaining properties. The restrictive laws created a harsh and brutal environment to live in for the Jews transforming them almost into the outcasts of Germany. After 1941, due to an even more sever Nazi anti-Jewish policy, the complete separation was succeeded, and the Jews were forced to present themselves at all times with a Star of David badge on their right sleeve which represented only the beginning of a unimaginable mass destruction plan.

The German Persecution

Once the wartime began, the Nazi government enforced a new wave of restrictions on the Jewish community that remained in Germany. The beginning of change started with the relocation of the remaining Jews in specific areas in most of the German cities in order to control them easily. Once this relocation was complete, the food rationing appeared and gradually and systematically these rations were reduced forcing the people to purchase supplies from limited stores. Soon the Jewish households or “Judenhauser” found themselves in shortage of the most common food and basic supplies. Personal belongings such as electrical appliances and other valuables were confiscated under the guise of “essential to the war effort”. Until the 1943 the German authorities organized large deportations to the concentration camps such as Theresienstadt or Auschwitz, the last major deportation taking place at the beginning of 1943. One of the most important people in this scheme of deportations was Adolf Eichmann, the German Reichssicherheitshauptamt or RSHA who organized and was responsible during the war to place people in the ghettos and killing centers. Due to a last effort of the German government, the last wave of laws and ordinances allowing without contestation permitted to a final seizure of the remaining properties which after that were distributed to the German population. By the end of the war, the Germans and all those who collaborated killed almost 6 million Jews.⁸

The Jewish Resistance

Despite the German systematical approach of enforcing a wide range of laws and restrictions, there was a resistance from the Jews that tried to prevent the annihilation. The targeted Jewish population faced under the German occupation a sever, gradual and brutal oppression which determined different responses such as submission, resistance and collaboration. Out of these three, the resistance is the most important one and the focus of this chapter. The Jewish resistance manifested under a series of activities that started from the strong desire to thwart, limit, undermine or end the oppression over the oppressed.⁹

An example of the attempts of the Jewish resistance was the 1942 New Year’s Manifesto where the phrase “like sheep to the slaughter” was published which represented an official proclamation which was created by a group of young leaders of several ghettos. The document aimed to boldly state that nothing was temporary, and the annihilation of the Jews was as actually a well-thought scheme that the Germans began to put it in the move. The focus of the publication was to highlight that the only way of preventing this massacre to oppose resistance against the Germans. The Manifesto was composed of two major ideas:

⁸States Holocaust Memorial Museum, ‘German Jews during the Holocaust’, *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/german-jews-during-the-holocaust> , (accessed 14 December 2020).
⁹N. Tec, *Resistance: Jews and Christians Who Defined the Nazi Terror*, New York, Oxford University Press., 2013, p.3



Fig. 7:“Selection” of Hungarian Jews on the ramp at the death camp Auschwitz-II (Birke-nau)1944.

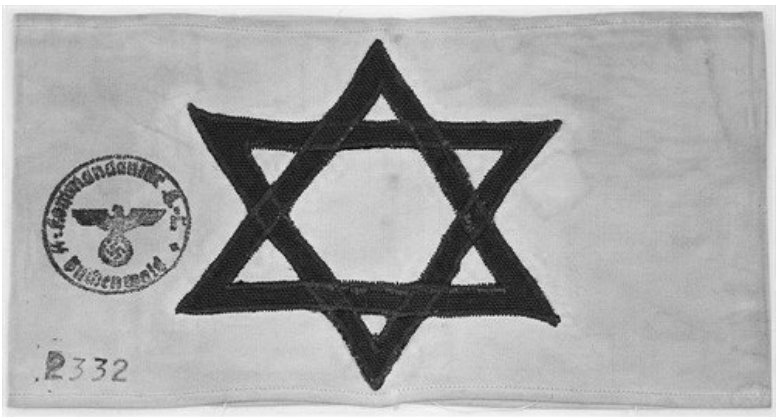


Fig. 8: The Jewish Arm band introduced as a identifier of the Jews



Fig. 9: A sign during the depor-tations next to a city



firstly, it was clearly stated that the scheme of annihilation was real and on the move and this idea could no longer be ignored and secondly, urging the Jewish communities to stop from following and obeying to the German orders. The author of the final version of the Manifesto was a 23-year-old poet, Aba Kovner who was making a call to all the remaining Jews to stand up, unite and resist against the German oppression.¹⁰ In my opinion, this initiative represented a favorable opportunity for the Jewish community to unite and oppose resistance to the German oppression, but because of the fast movement of the German actions and their strategic plan, the Jews faced a considerable disadvantage that stopped their attempt and allowed to the Germans to continue their persecutions.

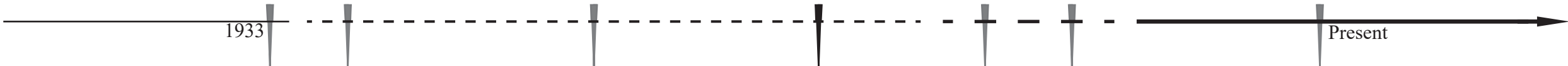


Fig. 10: 1944, Jewish partisan members of the FPO (United Partisan Organization), who escaped from the ghetto to the Rudniki forests, returning to Vilna after the liberation



Fig. 11: Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

¹⁰N. Tec, *Resistance: Jews and Christians Who Defined the Nazi Terror*, New York, Oxford University Press., 2013, p.6



The Jewish Community in Europe postwar

By the end of the war in 1945, the European Jewish community had tragically and significantly diminished, with over six million Jews being murdered in the Holocaust. The remaining survivors found themselves in desperate need of starting a new life and most of them emigrated to the United States or Israel. As a comparison, the American Jewish Yearbook counts the European Jews at almost 9.5 million in 1933 and by 1950 the number was reduced to 3.5 million Jews. As an example, provided directly from the core of the problem, in 1933 the Jewish population of Germany was around 525,000 and by the end of the war was reduced to 37,000 Jews in 1950.¹¹

Even though the war was over, and the survivors were set free, the fear of returning to their homes or cities was a concerning issue regarding the mental health of the victims. The postwar antisemitism was still present in some parts of Europe persisting in a violent and abusive manner. An example of such actions was the violent anti-Jewish riots in postwar Poland culminating in 1946 in Kielce when 42 Jews were killed in a large-scale manifestation. At the beginning the possibility of emigration was discussible and that forced the homeless Holocaust survivors to seek shelter in other cities or countries liberated by the Allies. The whole western Europe was full of displaced person camps or refugee centers that provided help and hope to the desperate survivors. This help was provided by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) and they were managed and administrated by the Allies’ armies.¹²

The displaced persons were helped and guided by a wide variety of Jewish agencies that offered their support. The food supplies and clothes were provided by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the vocational training was offered by the Organization for Rehabilitation through Training.¹³ The largest and most well-known organization for such a program was called Sh’erit ha Pletah (Hebrew for “surviving remnant”) which focused on providing greater emigration opportunities for the Jewish survivors. At the same time, the possibilities of emigration were still limited by restrictions of the that time. Due to these difficulties, the Brihah was created by the Jewish Brigade Group and former partisan fighters. The aim and purpose of this organization was to help and facilitate the large movement of survivors from Europe to Palestine. However, sadly most of the organization’s attempts to transport people to Palestine were declined, intercepted or stopped and sent back to Germany. Things started to look up in 1945 when U.S. restrictions were loosened and allowed to the refugees to apply for visas and immigrate. Three years later, the U.S. Congress approved the Displaced Persons Act. that represented a huge opportunity for the Jewish refugees to immigrate. More than 68,000 Jews entered the U.S. territory in the span of three years (between January 1st,1949 and December 31st,1952).¹⁴ Canada, Australia, New Zealand, western Europe were some of the places where the Jewish refugees chose to emigrate during that time.

¹¹States Holocaust Memorial Museum, ‘The Aftermath of the Holocaust: Effects on Survivors’, *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-aftermath-of-the-holocaust?parent=en%2F7294> , (accessed 14 December 2020).

¹²States Holocaust Memorial Museum, ‘The Aftermath of the Holocaust: Effects on Survivors’, *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-aftermath-of-the-holocaust?parent=en%2F7294> , (accessed 14 December 2020).

¹³States Holocaust Memorial Museum, ‘The Aftermath of the Holocaust: Effects on Survivors’, *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-aftermath-of-the-holocaust?parent=en%2F7294> , (accessed 14 December 2020).

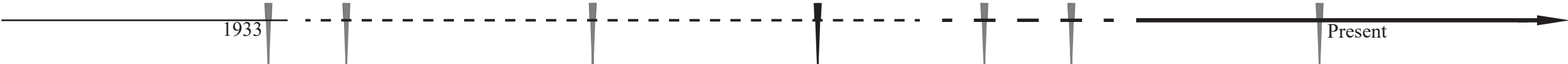
¹⁴States Holocaust Memorial Museum, ‘The Aftermath of the Holocaust: Effects on Survivors’, *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-aftermath-of-the-holocaust?parent=en%2F7294> , (accessed 14 December 2020).



Fig. 12: Jewish Survivors emigrating to Canada by boat



Fig. 13: The Exodus after British takeover, 1947



The appearance of memorials and museums

To support the discussion of this topic I chose to exemplify a relevant exhibition that provides a wide range of elements that compose the historical moment of Holocaust and present a series of monuments, installations and sculptures that commemorate the tragic event.

“The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History” curated by James E. Young, a well-known historian and the author of “The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning” and organized and produced by the Jewish Museum from New York in 1994 was an extremely resourceful and explicit exhibition that aimed in its six principal sections to examine the methods and reasons that shaped the public memory with the support of museums and monuments.¹⁵ The focus of this exhibition is on the process of memorialization itself and to highlight how the history of events are written differently depending on the national cultures, ideas and changes in politics, and more exactly the remembrance of the past defined by geographical location and its authors. In my discussion I intend to approach just some of the areas of the exhibition, specifically the sections that exhibit the “Memorials at the Sites of Destruction” and the “Memorials Removed from the Sites of Destruction” in order to discuss some of the monuments and memorials and their meanings and symbols.¹⁶

A first example displayed in the exhibition was a considerable presentation on the Warsaw Ghetto Monument. Designed by Nathan Rapoport when the war was still happening, the monument was discussed during the exhibition from two perspectives: firstly, the figurative characteristics of the representation and in support of this approach Rapoport stated: “ Could I have made a stone with a hole in it and said, Voila! the heroism of the Jews?” and secondly, due to its role as a gathering place dedicated to the dissident groups in Poland. In the same manner, the 26-foot stone obelisk at Treblinka surrounded by a cemetery of 17,000 granite shards displayed uneven and protruding in all directions was exemplified as an effective communicator of the aesthetics of the monument.¹⁷

Another example worth mentioning was the ruins of the crematorium camps at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The position of these ruins as argued on the wall text of the exhibition was aimed to create a feeling of acceptance of the reality of the site and its past. The method of inducing this feeling is by simply preserving all the site details as they were at the moment when the Russian army found the place. Such visual images have a massive emotional impact on the visitors and succeed in keeping alive the memory of the site. At the same time, the memorial provides proof and visual understanding of the horrific crimes that the Nazi Germany committed.

The U.S approach and vision on the memorials is directly connected to their distinctly American idiom: liberty, refuge, egalitarianism where the emphasis is upon the process that memorials incorporate the memories. Following this approach, the architect James Ingo Freed tried, when designing the U.S. Holocaust Museum, to answer the question of “how [can one] represent the Holocaust as an irreparable breach in the Western mind without violating the officially enforced architectural harmony of the nation’s capital?”¹⁸ As Freed R. Myers stated, a debated idea was whether the monuments “do not sustain memory,

¹⁵F.R. Myers, ‘The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History by James E. Young’, *American Anthropologists*, vol. 97, no. 2, 1995, p. 348

¹⁶F.R. Myers, ‘The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History by James E. Young’, *American Anthropologists*, vol. 97, no. 2, 1995, p. 348

¹⁷F.R. Myers, ‘The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History by James E. Young’, *American Anthropologists*, vol. 97, no. 2, 1995, p. 349

¹⁸F.R. Myers, ‘The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History by James E. Young’, *American Anthropologists*, vol. 97, no. 2, 1995, p. 350



Fig. 14: The Negative Form Monument for the Jewish Fountain in Kaseel

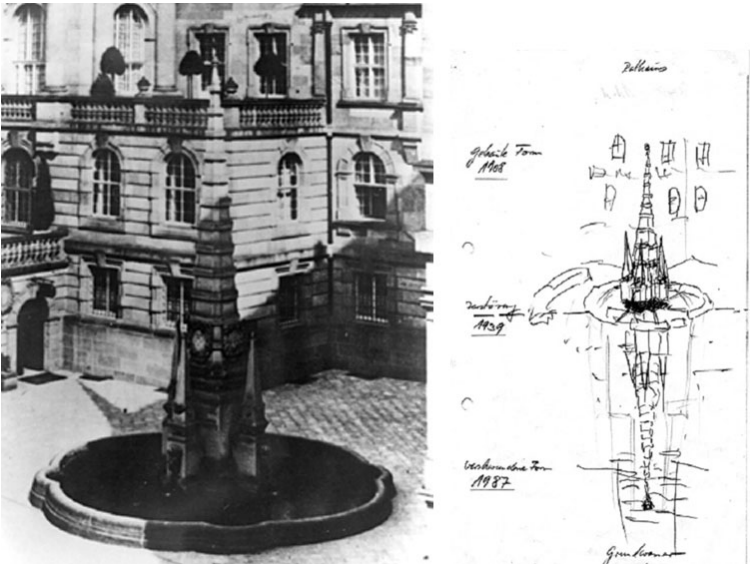


Fig. 15: The Negative Form Monument for the Jewish Fountain in Kaseel



Fig. 16: The Warsaw Ghetto Monument, Poland



but bury it or reify it by pushing it outside of lived practices. On the other hand, the curator of the exhibition, James E. Young argued against those who accused nations of “repressing memory”. Similarly, Jochen and Esther Gerz are two artists that started a debate in Hamburg with their Holocaust memorial. The interesting design of the memorial tried to engage the community of Hamburg that “didn’t want to remember” and to do that, they designed a column installation that invited the community to share their visions, ideas, concerns and comments related to fascism. The installation was designed to sink into the ground during eight stages that were scheduled over a period of time. Once the installation disappeared under the ground it symbolized the moment when the collective memory “returned to the people” (the 10th of November 1933, 55th anniversary of Kristallnacht). The purpose and aim of this installation was to directly challenge the concept as form defining the monument due to a strong correlation in Germany between the monumental form and the Nazi practices. Horst Hohesel’s installation entitled Negative Form Monument to the Jewish Fountain in Kassel discusses “the absence of both the city’s Jews and their civic contribution by reproducing it as a negative space”. This interpretation was suggested by the reconstruction of the original monument but this time positioning it upside down and emerged into the ground.¹⁹

One of the most interesting and relevant ideas that Freed R. Myers talks about is how memorials and the memories are “incomplete until visitors have grasped-and responded to-current sufferings in the world in light of a remembered past”. I completely agree with his statement and taking into consideration these examples of commemoration I tend to believe that the concept behind them was appropriate, but the architecture of the memorials did not delivered the message completely or impact on the visitors was not meaningful enough.²⁰



Fig. 17: The Treblinka Jewish Memorial



Fig. 18: The Auschwitz Museum



Fig. 19: The Hamburg Holocaust Memorial

¹⁹F.R. Myers, ‘The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History by James E. Young’, *American Anthropologists*, vol. 97, no. 2, 1995, p. 350
²⁰F.R. Myers, ‘The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History by James E. Young’, *American Anthropologists*, vol. 97, no. 2, 1995, p. 350



The Museum of Berlin and the Competition for the Jewish Museum

It is important to also discuss how memorials engage with the construction and emerge with it becoming a part of the history. In 1988, an architectural competition was announced by the West Berlin Senate where 157 architects were invited to design the new Jewish Museum. The competition was part of the International Building Exhibition (IBA) which at that time was responsible for an urban reconstruction and repair program in Kreuzberg. The jury of the competition was led by the IBA’s Neubau’s director, Josef Paul Kleihues.²¹

The project focused on designing the “Extension of the Berlin Museum with a Jewish Museum Department”. The aim was to extend the old baroque museum of Berlin and create a new construction that was entirely dedicated to the Jewish community as a commemoration of the Holocaust events. At the time of the competition Germany was still divided by the German Wall into two nations and after the closure in 1938 of the Jewish Museum in Oranienburger Strasse, no other museum of German Jewish history was built.²²

Daniel Libeskind: His personal experience and connection with the project

Among the 157 architects, Daniel Libeskind made himself remarked with his unique vision, his concept presenting an opposition to the dominant discourse of architectural memory and stylistic historicism.²³ The depth of his project, as the curators stated, “marked a different sensibility” in opposition to the ones that read and understood “architecture as a conservative discipline” that aims to protect the “harmony and unity” of the geometrical compositions and the stability of the structure. Libeskind’s proposal was seen as a reinterpretation of the familiar structures by distorting, destabilizing and dismantling them in an attempt of creating a shape that will manage successfully to shelter such a complex and meaningful historical event.²⁴

It is worth mentioning that Daniel Libeskind and his different vision of the architecture of the project may be shaped by his direct connection with the Jewish history, his parents being survivors of the Holocaust. Since he was a kid, he faced the brutality of the German persecutions and the final moments of the war. He moved with his family to Israel and then emigrated to the U.S. where he remained for a long time. He was an individual of two opposite worlds that shaped his character, mentality and understanding and allowed him to create a new architectural language that redefined the purpose of museums, he himself stated: “There are many worlds in my head, and I bring all of them to the projects I work on.”.



Fig. 20: The architect Daniel Libeskind

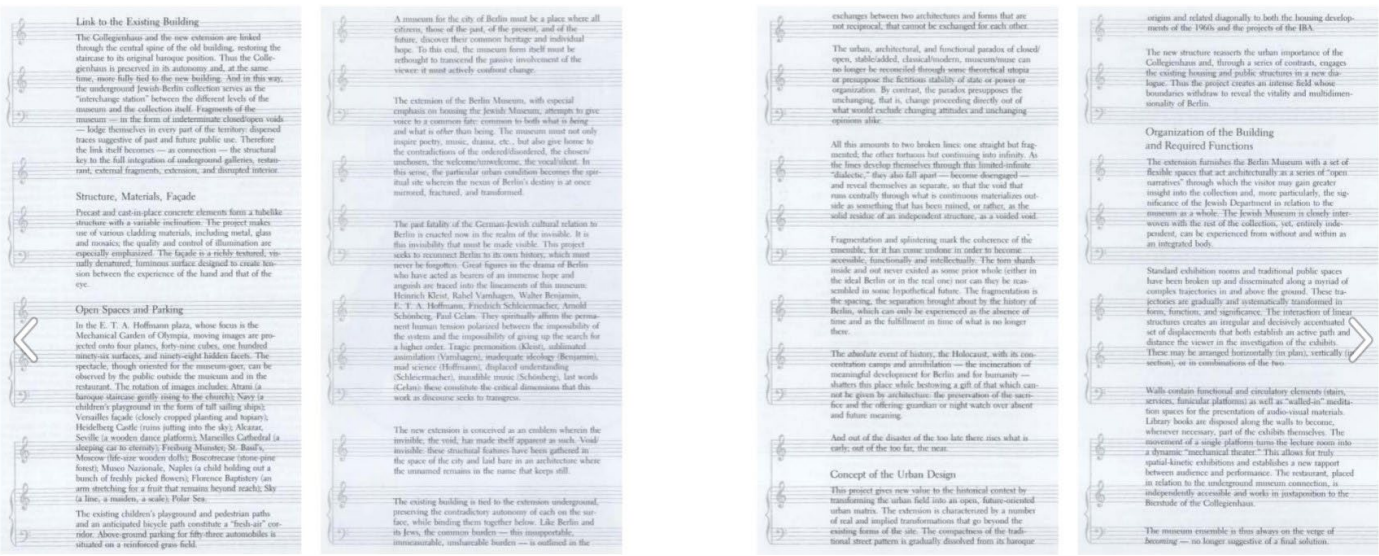
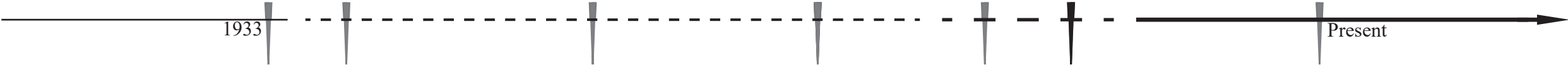


Fig. 21: The Competition Report of Daniel Libeskind, The proposal written on a music paper



The Jewish Museum – Description

“Between the lines” was the title of the proposal and was a suggestion for the great interest that Libeskind had upon the design’s geometric considerations. The concept was based on two main ideas represented by lines: “one straight, but broken into fragments, the other torturous but continuing into infinity.”²⁵ The zigzag shape that defines the building was inspired by a well-thought geometrical play of the Star of David. As a previous step to this one, Libeskind marked on the city map some of the Jewish Berliners’ addresses and as a result of his research the crossings between the addresses resulted in a shape close to a star. A second point of reference was the Arnold Schoenberg’s opera play of Moses and Aaron. The representation of absence was inspired by a play of Arnold Schoenberg after the story of Moses and Aaron, more precisely the composer’s decision of deliberately ending the play without a musical expression for the last word.²⁶ Another influence on the design process was Walter Benjamin’s book called “One Way Street” as guidance on the process of engraving the Jewish mythology on geometry: “ This aspect is incorporated into the continuous sequence of sixty sections along the zigzag, each of which represents one of the ‘Stations of the Star’ described in the text of Benjamin’s apocalypse of Berlin.”²⁷

This case study is focusing on three key components of the architecture that create the atmosphere and with the experiences of the visitors succeed in preserving and expressing the identity of the Jewish community and its suffering during the Holocaust. Firstly, an important design feature is represented by the “void” inside which disrupts the museum space signifying the absence of the Jewish population and culture in present Berlin. Secondly, the three underground axes symbolize three concepts that define the identity of the Jewish community before 1933 until present, a strong element in understanding the pain and suffering during the Holocaust and its repercussions. And thirdly, the outside garden called The Garden of Exile is composed by forty-eight columns symbolizing the birth of the State of Israel in 1948.²⁸

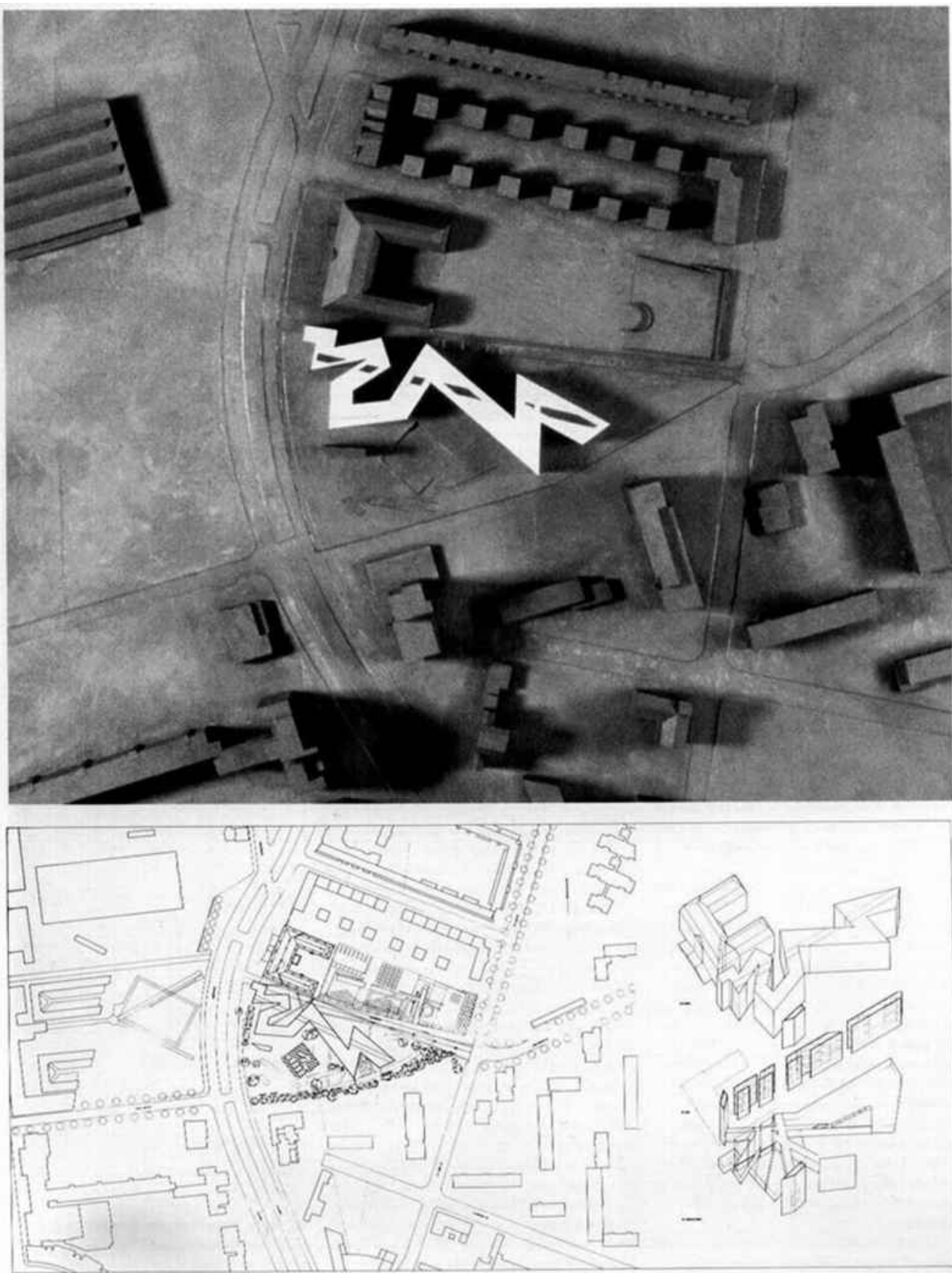
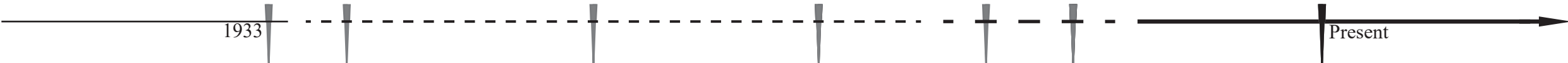


Fig. 22: The model and plan of the Museum proposal

²⁵D. Libeskind, ‘Between the Lines: The Jewish Museum, Berlin’, *Research in Phenomenology*, vol. 22, 1992, p. 86.
²⁶ E. Akcan, ‘Apology and Triumph: Memory Transference, Erasure, and a Rereading of the Berlin Jewish Museum’, *New German Critique*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2010, p. 160-161
²⁷E. Akcan, ‘Apology and Triumph: Memory Transference, Erasure, and a Rereading of the Berlin Jewish Museum’, *New German Critique*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2010, p. 161
²⁸ E. Akcan, ‘Apology and Triumph: Memory Transference, Erasure, and a Rereading of the Berlin Jewish Museum’, *New German Critique*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2010, p. 176



The Voids

The void is a critical architectural element of Libeskind’s design that was visible since the very early stages of the design. As it could be noticed from his drawings, a straight but disrupted line became a series of empty spaces called in his competition report as voids and their purpose and symbolism was to make visible the invisible Jewish heritage of Berlin. The two lines were at this stage the reference for understanding the logic and vision behind the appearance of the voids. Libeskind stated that: “As the lines develop themselves through this limited-infinite ‘dialectic,’ they also fall apart-become disengaged-and show themselves as separated so that the void centrally running through what is continuous materializes itself outside as ruined, or rather as the solid residue of independent structure, i.e. the voided void.”²⁹

Even though, the museum aims to display the history and culture of the European Jewish community, the voids together with the Holocaust Tower succeed in making the museum a Holocaust memorial. This deliberate trajectory of the design is later emphasized by the architect stating that: “No Jewish museum at this location would pass muster without memorial rooms of this kind. In the end, it is not just a matter of simply exhibiting a few beautiful, valuable exhibits here.”³⁰

One interpretation of the voids may be seen as a reflection of counter memory. These voids are experienced by the visitors at different stages of their walk along the museum but impossible to access physically, the only sense of the space and emotion can be sensed by peeping through the small windows. The beauty of these voids, as Professor of Architectural Theory and author of “Apology and Triumph: Memory Transference, Erasure, and a Rereading of the Berlin Jewish Museum”, Esra Akcan stated that even though the voids represent internal parts of the museum they are not heated, ventilated and accessible transforming these voids into outside spaces in an interior space. The voids are designed in a straight line which is not visible from inside, but it can be sensed by the visitors creating in their minds a single void that traverses the zigzag volume of the building as a whole. The materiality and spatial elaboration of these voids creates a link between them and the Holocaust Tower reminding the same alienating space that symbolizes throughout the museum, as the author describes them as, “metaphorical residues of the Holocaust in the museum itself”.³¹

The voids could be read as scars of memory; their emptiness symbolizing the absence of the Jewish community and history from the present Berlin. This profound absence of a culture is evoked by these voids raising the awareness of the actions and movements that aggravated fascist monumentality.

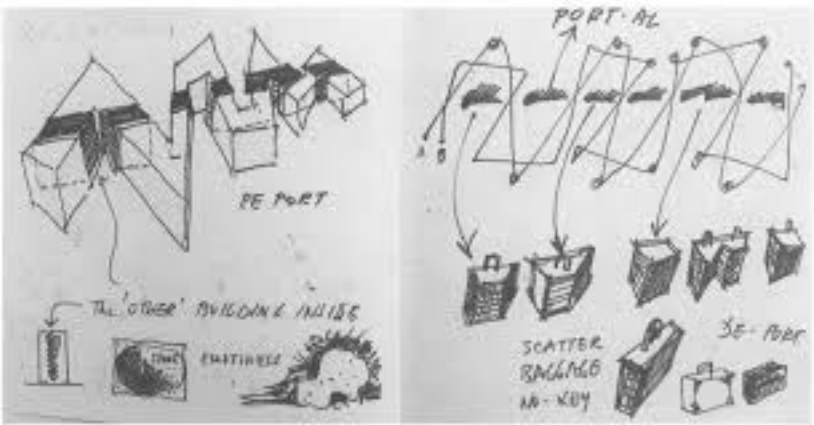


Fig. 23: Sketches of Daniel Libeskind during the competition - the voids



Fig. 24: One of the voids from the Jewish Museum, Berlin

²⁹E. Akcan, ‘Apology and Triumph: Memory Transference, Erasure, and a Rereading of the Berlin Jewish Museum’, *New German Critique*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2010, p. 161

³⁰E. Akcan, ‘Apology and Triumph: Memory Transference, Erasure, and a Rereading of the Berlin Jewish Museum’, *New German Critique*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2010, p. 159

³¹E. Akcan, ‘Apology and Triumph: Memory Transference, Erasure, and a Rereading of the Berlin Jewish Museum’, *New German Critique*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2010, p. 163



The Three Axes of Identity

The three paths that are located at the basement level and realize the connection with specific areas of the museum are the transition point from the baroque-style entrance to Libeskind’s museum. The axes were design to inspire funerary emotions through their black doors, bright white walls and fluorescent light above. Even with these characteristics, each one of the axes is a component of Libeskind’s hopeful story of continuity.³²

The Axis of the Holocaust and the Holocaust Tower

The Axis of the Holocaust has its end at the black door that separates the path to the Holocaust Tower, a tower that was read as ‘an empty vertical void’ designed to commemorate ‘the many millions of holocaust victims’.³³ The vision of the architect, as he stated, was to create an unsettling space where the focus was upon the comparison of the experience of imprisonment ‘before and during deportation and in the [concentration and death] camps themselves’ portrayed in the design of the tower by offering a sense of the outside world to the visitors without being capable of reaching out.³⁴ Architecture cannot duplicate in its artistic expression such feeling and emotions that the Jews experienced as being hunted, captured, transported, selected and murdered, but with the help of the survivors and their harmed memories such as the ones found in Primo Levi’s book entitled ‘Survival in Auschwitz’, architecture, I believe, can become a tool in an attempt of preserving and communicating such experiences.³⁵

The transfer between two spaces found in opposition, one a warm, well-lighted hall and the other one a cold dark shaft, raised questions from the author of the book called “Utopias and Architecture” (a Senior Lecturer in Architecture and Urban Design) asking whether the architect’s approach was justified and what the response of the visitors would be to such a space especially in a Jewish Museum located in Berlin. I believe the appropriate interpretation would be throughout a comparison between the life of a free individual that is aware of the sounds of the city at all time and a condemned that was deprived of all the banalities of a normal life and was left on the bottom of a shaft losing all the sense of feeling and responding to surrounding stimulus being overwhelmed by emptiness, outrage and fear. Experiencing the Tower of Exile for an extended period of time, all the outside voices and noises become more accentuated creating an unsettling atmosphere. At the same time, the ray of light that penetrates the tower becomes even brighter offering a moment of relief, a ray of hope of a better day that has yet to come, a promise of the returning to comforting ordinariness.³⁶

³²N. Coleman, *Utopias and Architecture: Into the present*, 1, New York, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2005, p. 261-262

³³N. Coleman, *Utopias and Architecture: Into the present*, 1, New York, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2005, p. 264

³⁴N. Coleman, *Utopias and Architecture: Into the present*, 1, New York, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2005, p. 264

³⁵N. Coleman, *Utopias and Architecture: Into the present*, 1, New York, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2005, p. 264

³⁶N. Coleman, *Utopias and Architecture: Into the present*, 1, New York, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2005, p. 264

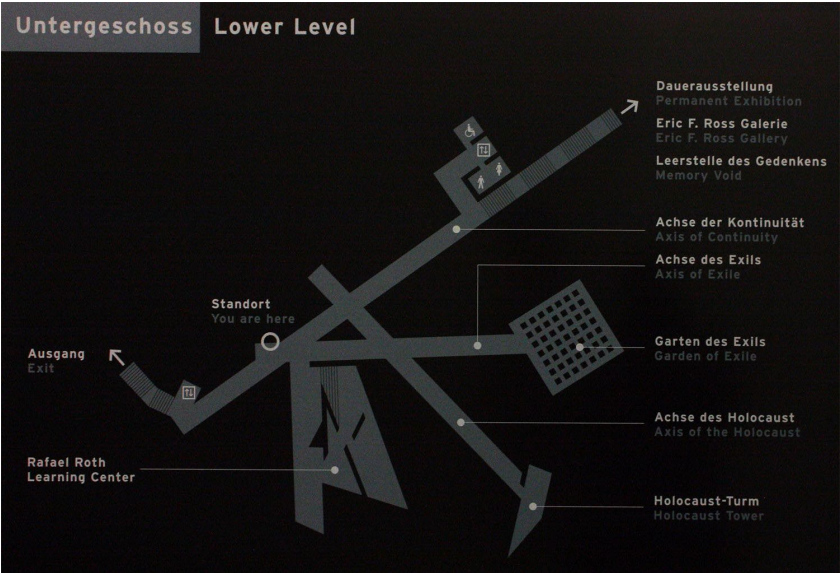


Fig. 25: Diagram of the Three Underground Axes and their connections with other spaces

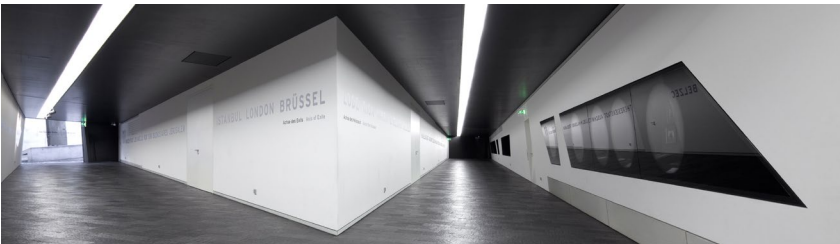
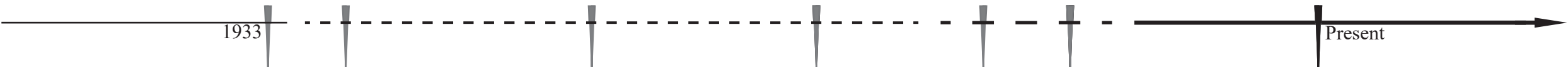


Fig. 26: Underground view from the intersection of The Three Axes



Fig. 27: Interior view of the Holocaust Tower from the Jewish Museum, Berlin



The Axis of Continuity and the steep stair

One of the most important elements in the architecture of the Jewish museum was the Continuity Stairway. As point of reference, the stairways were often used for accessing upper levels of temples, courthouses or museum and by its functional aspect, a symbolic one was implied symbolizing the act of climbing. The act of climbing also represents the struggle and effort in order to achieve the enlightenment of wisdom. At the end of the stairway the visitors face a blank wall that symbolizes the concept of infinity, a suggestion of the possibility that the stairway could go on forever but never having a dead end. As mentioned before, the act of climbing considering the angle and measurements of the steps in this case requires a sustained effort in the movement of ascension making the climbing more strenuous but also rewarding. Daniel Libeskind stated in an interview that the “staircase is a new orienting feature, giving a very strong emphasis to a new perspective and you’ll see it unfolding as we look through windows and ascend that stair, but it is the public recognition of how the baroque web continues into the future.”³⁷³⁸

The Axis of Continuity represents the longest path out of the three basement corridors of the Museum and is connected to the Continuity Stairway. The spatial proportions of the space, the increased measurements of the steps and the accentuated length of the run result in a demanding effort, the whole body feeling the pressure of the ascension. The study of light and acoustics of the space breaks up the climbing. As the author of the publication states, “it is difficult to imagine how any of them could remain unstirred by the drama of delayed entry they have been enacting”.³⁹

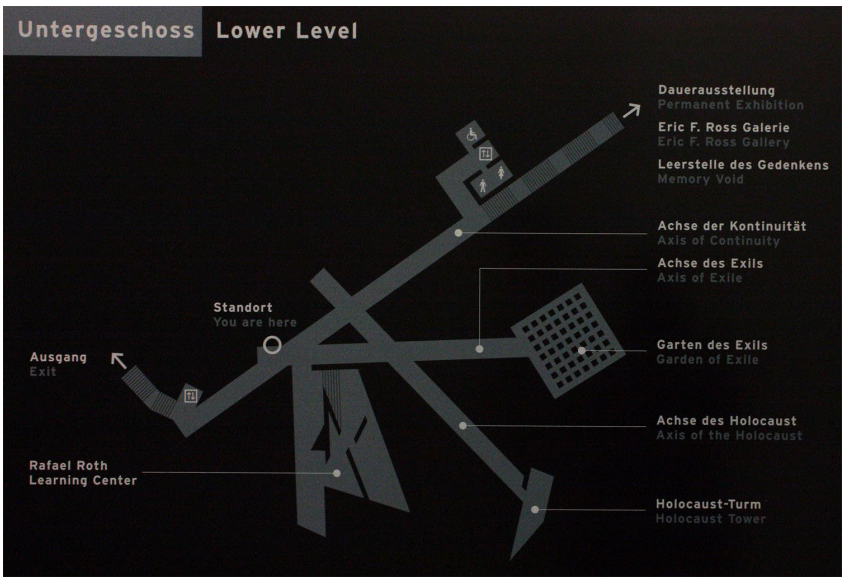


Fig. 28: Diagram of the Three Underground Axes and their connections with other spaces

³⁷N. Coleman, *Utopias and Architecture: Into the present*, 1, New York, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2005, p. 266

³⁸M. Blackwood, ‘Berlin’s Jewish Museum: A Personal Tour with Daniel Libeskind’, *Kanopy*, A Michael Blackwood Production, 2005, <https://westminster.kanopy.com/video/berlins-jewish-museum-personal-tour-daniel-libeskind>, (accessed 16 December 2020).

³⁹N. Coleman, *Utopias and Architecture: Into the present*, 1, New York, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2005, p. 267



Fig. 29: Interior view of the black door that separates the Axis of the Holocaust from the Holocaust Tower



Fig. 30: The interior view of the Stairs of Continuity



The Garden of Exile

The Garden of Exile creates a visual impact on the visitors by its slanting ground and the forty-nine tilted columns rising from the ground, each one of them being the vessel to a growing tree. The beauty and symbolism that lies in these columns is represented by the forty-eight columns that contain earth from Berlin in memory of the year of 1948 when Israel became an independent state and the forty-ninth column contains earth from Israel symbolizing the city of Berlin.⁴⁰

Libeskind aimed to express strangeness through disorientation and containment, a feeling that was directly articulated by the slanting trees that grow on the columns and create a forest that seal the space and accentuate the difficulty of walking on the slanting pavements. The awareness of impossibility to access the outside world from the garden even though the city can be heard, seen and smelled, arise in the consciousness of the visitors an unsettling feeling that amplifies the experience.⁴¹

The design of the garden induces to the visitors, due to its geometry, a strong feeling of unsteadiness and disorientation. These feelings are meant to create a parallel between present and past and recreate and suggest the lack of orientation and instability that was experienced by the Jewish survivors and emigres when leaving Germany.



Fig. 31: View from the Garden of Exile, Jewish Museum, Berlin



Fig. 32: View from the Garden of Exile, Jewish Museum, Berlin

⁴⁰N. Coleman, *Utopias and Architecture: Into the present*, 1, New York, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2005, p. 266
⁴¹N. Coleman, *Utopias and Architecture: Into the present*, 1, New York, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2005, p. 266



Conclusion

The Jewish Museum is based on three definitory concepts as the architect described them: “first, the impossibility of understanding the history of Berlin without understanding the enormous intellectual, economic and cultural contribution made by its Jewish citizens; second the necessity to integrate the meaning of the Holocaust, both physically and spiritually, into the consciousness and memory of the city of Berlin; third, that only through acknowledging and incorporating this erasure and void of Berlin’s Jewish life can the history of Berlin and Europe have a human future”.⁴²

Analyzing some of the significant and remarkable architectural elements that compose the museum and their relation and references to the historical context that were presented during the first half of the essay, the text aimed to discuss and emphasise the importance of architecture as a tool in the constant process of preserving history and exhibiting experiences that replicate the historical events. The Jewish Museum’s main purpose was to provide historical evidence but also to immerse the people into a journey that reflected the emotion, feeling, drama but also hope of a persecuted community that survived against all odds.



Fig. 33: The concept model of the Jewish Museum, Berlin

⁴²R. Bianchini, ‘The Jewish Museum Berlin by Daniel Libeskind’, *Inexhibit*, 2019, <https://www.inexhibit.com/case-studies/daniel-libeskind-jewish-museum-berlin/>, (accessed 10 December 2020).

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