

Landmark architecture serves museums – The example of the Jewish Museum Berlin

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When compiling this presentation my thoughts went frequently to Nigel Cox who died in July of last year. He had a young family to raise, many more novels to write and a great deal more to contribute to our profession. It is not to be. I pay a special tribute to Nigel.

This is part of a larger paper that looks at a number of museum buildings to examine the extent to which architecture can impinge on the achievement of mission and purpose. Today I limit myself to one European example with perhaps a short mention of two others if time allows.

The museums I example are housed in buildings that have a landmark quality, where courageous clients have chosen to reach for architecture that:

- seeks to project, does not defer, that is anything but neutral or mute;
- steps beyond museological function to evoke emotions (such as shock, tension, delight, even humour, etc) in their form and look;
- utilises and heightens strong associative values;
- embraces that which is striking and potent; and
- perhaps most importantly, gains acceptance as having landmark quality.

My suggestion is that landmark buildings, despite having received something of a bad press in professional circles recently, can:

- greatly enhance the ability of a museum to achieve the public good that gives to it societal purpose;

and:

- provide opportunity for the museum to mature, extend and redefine its public good; and even in some cases reorient its basic scope and purpose – become something quite different.

My example is the Jewish Museum Berlin. But first let us look at the society that grew this building.

- 62 years ago Germany was a defeated and ruined nation,
- a people scared and branded with the shame of having been the perpetrators of horrendous crimes;
- a people responding with efforts to confront and make some amends for this past (unlike some other nations) through reparation, education and in some case memorialisation – that is, seek to understand their ignominy, and make some form of redress, in symbolic architectural form.

[Slide of Memorial for the murdered Jews of Europe, Berlin]

So in living memory a nation has come from this

[Slide of Hitler's proposed Grand Hall, Berlin]:

- Hitler's ego-maniacal grand hall, planned to cover a defeated world; to this

[Slide of Jewish Museum Berlin]:

- Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum Berlin.

Jewish Museum Berlin offers an ideal example of a museum where architecture has not only assisted to mature, extend and redefine its public good but has been a potent catalyst in reorienting its basic scope and purpose, the second of my contentions.

Let us examine this claim further. For the great majority of general visitors the Jewish Museum Berlin is, and always has been, a holocaust museum (though it is not) redolent with architectural statements about the holocaust and the high cost of intolerance. Certainly the architectural language is a dramatic mix of symbols arising from Libeskind's personal history as the son of holocaust survivors. There is:

- the imagery of the disassembled Star of David [Slide of zig-zag roofline];
- the violent "wounds" that the building seems to bear – these strong intersecting lines (Libeskind called his design project "Between the Lines" – joining places and peoples through history) [Slide of window forms];
- the physical expression of "a culture voided from European society" and
- the holocaust tower. [Slides of void and holocaust tower]

Further this wonderfully dramatic building strikes across the open land it occupies like a bolt of lightning, ironically land cleared of tightly packed apartment buildings and offices by the bombing raids of early 1945 and then by the Soviet Army thrust into Berlin from the south in April and May 1945.

An aside – the Jewish Museum Berlin is often dismissed as an ugly building – I dispute that. To me it is a strikingly beautiful building housing a museum that tells an often ugly story. [Slide of main stairs, Celan Court, and axes]

But the short history of this building is much more complex, and the reality more nuanced, than this simple idea that the building has always been a Jewish (read holocaust) museum. For in 1989 Libeskind won a competition not for a museum of the history of the relationship between Jews and their German neighbours (which is what it is now), but for an extension to the existing small Berlin City Museum, one that had a Jewish department. But history intervened – a few months after the competition the Berlin Wall fell and the building became an active participant, rather than a passive observer, in the contemporary history of a reunified Germany with a capital destined to return to the old Nazi capital – Berlin. Reunification was expensive. Cost cutting was in the air and the extension was under threat.

Part of the response to this danger was for the proponents to “play the Jewish card” – talk up the Jewishness of the building/museum in the belief that this would save the project – as it did, but not in the way envisaged by the Berlin and state authorities.

The resulting controversy was finally resolved, at the invitation of the Berlin City Government, by Mike Blumenthal, child refugee from Hitler and successful American businessman and political figure. Blumenthal decreed that this could only be a Jewish museum and based his assessment on:

- the current position of German society particularly the continuing debate about the holocaust with the return of government to the old Nazi capital; and
- the architecture.

That is, in very large part Libeskind’s architecture had served as the tail that wagged the museological dog and there was a realisation that at the time of the competition, fully 10 years earlier, he had “captured the essence of the time and anticipated a mission that ... had yet to be stated for a museum yet to be created.” Eventually this mission was to be expressed in terms of the need for tolerance and the high cost of intolerance. Libeskind’s architecture created a new museum.

The next of my contentions is that landmark architecture can greatly enhance the ability of a museum to achieve its stated public good. Once again Libeskind’s architecture offers much more than containment and venue, reaching beyond basic function to greatly enhance the ability of the museum organisation to achieve its mission before its audience. First let us examine the marketing of this new Museum.

A very short time after completion the building became known worldwide as one of the great buildings of contemporary architecture. It struck a chord and was news. As we found out to our delight landmark architecture equals a potent marketing tool. “Reasons for visit” statistics demonstrate three primary motivations:

- interest in German-Jewish history (read the holocaust) – 50.1%
- the fact of such a museum existing in Berlin – 45.6%
- the architecture – 50.7% state the architecture to be one of the reason for their visit.

Much of the Museum’s marketing became predicated on the basis that many potential visitors are likely to know the Libeskind building. As a result most of the Museum’s marketing budget was devoted to allaying the message “a new museum with a strong social message is opening” with images of, and stories about, Libeskind’s building. This approach has created millions of Euros of advertising for the Museum.

Secondly, the architecture helps achieve the public good by offering new and unique programmatic opportunities, perhaps not available in other museums, by

the alliance of programme and architectural language and space. I will illustrate with two examples, design approach and the use of art in space to generate emotional impact.

Design approach – [Slide of empty gallery with strong window patterns] an early criticism was that, given its excentric form and slashing windows, it would never be a functioning museum. This was best summed up in the overheard comment “I pity the poor bugger who has to put exhibits into that building!” (that was Nigel Cox before he knew he was going to Berlin) However, although the building has its challenges it has also proved to be a treasure trove of new exhibition approach opportunities that constantly extend staff and demand new responses.

[Slide of exhibition *Passage*] For example, the first set of exhibits were achieved in around 16 months, a timeframe that did not allow for a great deal of experimentation. The exhibitions are effective but only occasionally did the exhibits and architecture dialogue in a manner that captured the tensions inherent in the sometimes fraught relationship of the German-Jews with their neighbours.

However, with time staff’s understanding of the building has matured, and an exhibition design style begins to emerge that refers to and launches, in part, off Libeskind’s design forms. [Slides of *Freud* and *Heimat und Exil* exhibitions showing great adventure in design]

Art – finally, Libeskind’s architecture was a major catalyst in leading the Museum toward exploring art as a vehicle to bring complex emotion to play in the exhibitry. [Slide of Kadishman sculpture *Fallen Leaves* and *Freud’s chair* both in Void]. His Museum provides not just space, but an altered perspective (what we took to calling “Libeskind moments”) that encourages new ways of looking and feeling. The building acts on the emotions and pleads for the introduction of existing and commissioned works that related to the scope of the Museum. Menasche Kadishman’s *Fallen Leaves* in the larger of the Voids – 15,000 cut steel death masks that the artist invites people to walk across to create sound in space (high refusal rate); and Freud’s chair projected in the Void; [Slide of Lewandowski’s *Gallery of the Missing*] Via Lewandowski’s commissioned *Gallery of the Missing* underlining the fact that what has been destroyed but remains in memory and as resilient value, is as important as what has survived physically, via this enigmatic sound sculpture.

An aside – Richard Aldrige’s paper yesterday exemplified the New National Gallery in Berlin and this raises interesting parallels in respect of the art/architecture relationship. Van der Rohe’s glass box is a copy of a distillery headquarters in South America – all the traditional galleries are in the podium underground. In the last couple of decades there has been no attempt to manipulate this space into some semblance of white cube. Rather, the approach has been turned on

its head with exhibition and art being a natural extension of this “anti-white cube” space resulting in:

- large and rather chaotic architectural exhibitions;
- Jenny Holzer’s words racing across the ceiling;
- riding your own bicycle around this hall late at night between mirrors that flash images back at the rider; and
- dancing.

All derive at least in part from the unique spatial circumstance that is van der Rohe’s building, in the same way that Libeskind’s JMB encourages and even demands new approaches and revelations.

In conclusion, a visit to this Museum is like no other – the architecture not only challenges comfortable notions of humanity, but also refreshes the spirit – it is confusing but likewise it is a grand exploration. Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum Berlin tells us much about the power of architecture to carry a bold idea, and to influence the future:

- as can older buildings, the almost 300 year old Belvedere in Vienna, built as a statement of emerging Austrian identity, for the last 100 years the home of the Austrian Gallery and currently a main player in conflicted identity discussions; and
- create a mind expanding experimental landscape for a young audience in Zaha Hadid’s wonderful, if flawed, Phæno in Wolfsburg.

But that is for another day.