

A Conversation with Daniel Libeskind

Stephen Yablon

Daniel Libeskind became a household name last year when he won the competition for the World Trade Center Design Study, but he was already a tremendously influential figure in architecture and urban design. Libeskind designed the Jewish Museum Berlin, which opened to wide acclaim in September, 2001, and has been celebrated and awarded for numerous other museum and commercial building designs, including the Jewish Museum in San Francisco, the Imperial War Museum in Manchester, England, and the Felix Nussbaum Haus in Osnabruck, Germany.



Photo by Luca Vignelli

His honors include the 2001 Hiroshima Art Prize (he was the first architect to receive it), given for work that promotes international understanding and peace; the 1999 Deutsche Architekturpreis (German Architecture Prize) for the Jewish Museum Berlin; the 2000 Goethe Medallion for cultural contribution; the 1996 American Academy of Arts and Letters Award for Architecture and, in the same year, the Berlin Cultural Prize; and honorary doctorates from several universities. He currently holds the Frank O. Gehry Chair at the University of Toronto.

Daniel Libeskind was born in Poland in 1946 and became a U.S. citizen in 1965. He studied music in Israel and in New York, becoming a virtuoso performer before pursuing architectural studies at Cooper Union. Jewish Currents' reporter Stephen Yablon, who owns and directs a New York architectural firm, spoke with Daniel Libeskind about the influence on his work of his Jewish upbringing and identity.

Jewish Currents: During your childhood, you lived in the Amalgamated Houses in the Bronx, one of the most important and largest projects built during the 1920s by Jewish labor, cultural or political organizations. Do you recall why your parents moved there?

Daniel Libeskind: Well, my parents moved there because they worked in sweatshops and my mother was a seamstress and a member of the AFL-CIO. So, by good luck we were able to get an apartment at the Amalgamated. We lived there many years and I met the entire spectrum of Jewish culture — Zionists, socialists, anarchists, you know, members of all the factions of the Jewish labor movement. I met people of all sorts, a fantastic array, even people who knew Emma Goldman. Good friends of my parents were among the founders of this union housing. They were about the same age as Emma Goldman would have been, if she had lived that long.



Daniel Libeskind's winning design for the World Trade Center site.
Photo by Archimation.

JC: What effect do you think this had on your life and on your architecture?

DL: Oh, a tremendous effect. I mean, to live in New York in a neighborhood that had, you know, a certain enlightened social and political outlook on reality and was actually a real community based on not just work but shared values . . . it had a tremendous effect.

Yiddish was widely spoken. The neighborhood certainly was one that I didn't have to adapt to! Though I didn't have English correct, I could speak Yiddish and use it on the street. And, of course, the whole ethical basis of a cooperative and its influence on everyday life, and the neighbors — it was wonderful.

JC: I believe you have said that an important part of your childhood was sitting on the steps.

DL: Oh, yes, definitely. Absolutely. We didn't have any air-conditioning, so we used to step out in the summer. Everybody would hang around the steps. You would then encounter and be part of a true shtetl, where you could find out stories about all sorts of things. You'd learn a lot. That was really an excellent introduction to life on the streets of New York.

JC: When this housing project was built in the 20s, the Bronx was really the periphery of New York. Yet the Amalgamated Houses were built using a very urban model and not a suburban model of detached houses and yards. Do you think this had an influence on your later architectural thinking?

DL: Oh, definitely, It was very urban. It was high density. It was not about living in the suburbs, but there was a great integration of park space and open spaces throughout the high-density houses, and they were kind of romantic in their shaping but very modern in the way they functioned as a sort of communal structure. Certainly they were, for their time, very advanced. And what could be more advanced than housing for working people at an affordable price?

JC: Did you have any formal Jewish education when you were young?

DL: I had the secular when I grew up with my parents, who were secular — although they came from various influences, such as Hasidic family on my mother's side. My first cousins are still in *Mea Shearim* [Jerusalem's ultra-Orthodox neighborhood], with the *payess* and the whole thing. So, of course, when I was in Israel, I studied the Torah and the Talmud, and that was part of my education as well. I had the spectrum of Jewish education, I think you can say, from the secular to the deeply kabbalistic.

JC: Do you presently have any Jewish affiliation?

DL: Well, of course. As a Jew, I'm very involved in all sorts of Jewish organizations and causes. In the same spectrum that I just outlined

JC: If you had to pick a particular Jewish intellectual or intellectual movement with whom you most identify, who would that be?

DL: That's an interesting question. It probably would be the spectrum. It wouldn't be like choosing between Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, but putting them in the same rainbow, because Jewish life really could not be represented without the diversity that it actually incorporates.

JC: Some of your earlier poetic writings frequently mention the Talmud, the Kabbalah, and other aspects of religious Judaism. How important is that to you, and how has it influenced your architectural thinking?

DL: I would say that part of Jewishness is to understand that all these traditions

are linked. Secular traditions are deeply marked by their profound religious roots, and vice versa. So what you consider very religious ideas are also shaped by historical movements. I would just say that all of this is part of my being — not as some sort of orthodoxy, but yes, the diversity.

JC: Your Berlin project for the combination of the extension of the Berlin Museum with the Jewish Museum is certainly a very profound and powerful design.

DL: The Jewish Museum Berlin. That's what it's now called.

JC: For the benefit of our readers: The main design concept is your running the Jewish Museum as a long, discontinuous, rectangular void through the zig-zag extension of the Berlin Museum. Is there any aspect of your Jewish background, education or identity that allowed you to think about this project in a unique way?

DL: I would first point out that it's not a project that I had to research in a library or study in the archives because it is part of my background, including my immediate background in every sense. My parents were Holocaust survivors, and my uncle Nathan was one of the heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. I myself grew up as a Jew in postwar Poland under quite anti-Semitic circumstances. And I've lived in Israel and New York. Certainly that museum is speaking, both backwards and forwards, to many issues that are part of my Jewish sensibility.

JC: You have said that the void or absence serves as a way of "binding people in depth" in a more powerful way than a detached memorial. Your design for the World Trade Center site also centers on a void. Can you comment on this concept of the "void" and its appropriateness to memorialize some of the worst tragedies of the 20th and 21st centuries?

DL: Well, they're very different. The Jewish Museum was certainly very different from what happened here at the World Trade Center site. But the state of absence is something very present in both places. We see the absence here as something very palpable in the topography of New York and in the life of New York. In that sense, it is not something you have to invent. It's something that already speaks through its own voice. And it's not by coincidence that millions of people have already come to the site even though there is nothing there, to be part of that, and to communicate with what that event really meant and what it can mean for the future of the resurgence of Manhattan. And the resurgence of democracy.

JC: Martin Buber wrote of the importance of not just going through the motions of life, but feeling the universality of creation in all that we do. Do you think that has any application to you as an architect?

DL: Oh, I say yes. I think Buber was right, because everything is linked to everything else, and everyone is linked to everyone else. Architecture is something that has to open itself to everyone because it's a civic art, not a private thing. Therefore, one has to be in touch, really, with everything, along all levels and all dimensions. That's the universal and eternal aspect of architecture. ■

Stephen Yablou is a New York architect who was recently included in an *Interior Design* issue on "Designers on the Rise." He is a member of the Jewish Cultural School and Society in West Orange, New Jersey. He thanks Abbott Gorin for helping to expedite and prepare this interview.