

Setting the Stage for a New Germany:

Architecture and the Scene of Berlin

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Introduction

Scene \sēn\ n [MF, stage, fr.L *scena*, *scaena* stage, *scēnē*, prob. fr. Etruscan, fr. Gk *skēnē* shelter, tent, building forming the backdrop for a dramatic performance, stage; akin to Greek *skia* shadow—more at SHINE] (Merriam-Webster 2000, 1040).

The origin of the noun ‘scene’ is rooted in Greek theatre, referring to a makeshift setting constructed to heighten the audience’s relation to a dramatic performance. However, if the representation of the scene finds its etymological origins in the background, this sense of scene has receded from view in the contemporary usage. Part of the expressiveness of scenes reflects this transformation from the background to the foreground, shifting its original meaning from the embellishment of a performance space to the theatrical encounter between actors. In pre-modern times, the scene provided the context for action, helping to induce the audience’s belief in the performance. Interestingly, the modern conception of a scene makes reference to the performance itself, parting with its traditional practice by relegating it to scenery. But, it is in the post-modern conception where this movement takes on a pressing concern in the reassertion of the architectonic as scene. Nowhere is this claim more apparent than in the dramaturgy of the newly rebuilt city of Berlin. The displacement of the architectonic from the background to the foreground, where architecture is made to amplify the subtlety of speech—to act as a character with gestures and features—changes the stakes of the scene, ultimately shaping a new form of urban performance.

The architectonic is more than architecture, it expresses the will to build and rebuild, that is, to engage and represent the world as a continuous opportunity for reconstruction. To say that the architectonic comes to the foreground is to suggest that this desire comes to the foreground as both an achievement and a spectacle in ways that show the city’s encounter with the question of its modernity as a problem it must solve. This implies that the present moment itself comes to the foreground as eventful, as an occasion in which change is dramatized as a difference that is spectacular. What comes to the foreground through the architectonic is the city’s use of building and rebuilding to dramatize the present



as the difference that it makes for the identity of the city. In the remainder of this paper I want to explore some of the implications of this proposition.

I.

Not since the Haussmannization of Paris or the building of Brasilia has architectonic willfulness figured so prominently in the redesign of a city's civic life. Unlike other cities, Berlin's large scale rebuilding has had to orient itself not just to revitalizing specific, individual areas (say in the way New York has made significant changes to Times Square), but to drastically reshaping the entire city in order to accommodate the rejoining of its former East and West precincts. Berlin has invested heavily in rebuilding the disparate regions that comprised the two Germanies in order to unify the city in a way that is commensurate with its 'new' status as the capital of the nation. Architectural feats have been turned out at a dizzying rate, each burdened with the responsibility of providing a legitimate passage from the past into an imagined future. As fields of transit, these sites bring into relief the fragility of Germany's self-understanding as a democratic society—a delicate threshold between those exemplary and atrocious actions in its history, which Berlin might want to escape, and the historical coherence invested in the spirit and identity of the city as values to restore, revitalize and renew.

This tension between building and rebuilding the city revives the question of the relation of the ideal to its limits, highlighting the duality of what Karatani refers to as "the will to architecture" (1997, 7), the attempt to incarnate the impossible in space knowing full well that those structures succeed former structures which were imagined as permanent. Berlin's integral character is tested and takes shape within the environment of an existential crisis—of its coming into existence and its perishability. Whatever choice made by the city to bring out its strength, even embracing globalism, could ultimately be its undoing. The rebuilding of Berlin brings out utopia's inherent promise and betrayal: the very desire to build a good city by reshaping those elements that helped to make it distinctive, the belief that the ideal space can make the good place, could ultimately render the city a 'no place.' The contemporary landscape of Berlin is saturated with this contradiction of using space to solve the problem of place, of embracing a universal architectural language as a way of estranging itself from a contaminated past in order to strengthen an allegiance to the city. Is Berlin's self-effacement a recipe for annulling the city, or is it in fact the necessary condition for strengthening place? I suggest that the desire to master the present is socially produced in the present through representations of the spectacle of a city that encounters and seeks to solve the problem of its own becoming.

II.

The careful attention given to projecting a more global vision for the city relies on an image of transparency, reflected by the choice of building projects and in the explicit creation of competitions and diverse jury members for architectural initiatives who, more often than not, select foreign architects as winners. A cross-influence of American and European architects, has brought radically different forms of architecture to the landscape of Berlin. Most notably this has included Norman Foster's renovation of the Reichstag, Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum and Chicago-based architect Helmut Jahn and his Sony Platz in the rebuilt Potsdamer Platz. These sites are worth a closer look for they make observable how innovation and erasure can co-exist. As departures from traditional forms of building, these sites bring a palpable, material relation to the new, structuring efforts to make the city whole again. But the new, as Hannah Arendt reminds us, is not necessarily the end of the old, "the legendary hiatus between a no-more and a not-yet is an illusion" (1978, 204). The present shape of the city, no matter how progressive is still connected to its past, and it is this temporal environment that lends significance to rebuilding. Surely the fact that Berlin, like other cities now has a Jewish museum, does not just make the city a place like any other; rather, the presence of a Jewish museum in Berlin—in a city that is authorized to speak for all of Germany—makes it necessary and inescapable that the issue of locality is enlivened as a focus of debate. If the typical account of globalism suggests that cities demonstrate progress by acquiring and being influenced by what other cities already possess, this still leaves unformulated why any city, even a city like Berlin, requires a Jewish museum to demonstrate its progress. Recall that the Greek sense of the scene included the understanding that whether it displayed a generic house or hut, it was displaying Athens, meant that the background could be taken for granted. It was this sense of the security of place that contrasts with the phenomenon of its criticalness in the global city. This is why we can say that while any city might have this problem, it remains for us to understand why this problem takes shape uniquely in Berlin.

III.

The movement of architecture to the central stage of Berlin reflects the attempt to locate the elusiveness of the city in the specificity of its being as Berlin, in bringing to view the irreducible singularity of that experience. In making stable what seems ambiguous, any architecture promises to bring to the foreground what was background, the tacit understanding of what it is to be a building in Berlin. In a recent paper, Brian Ladd argued that while most cities (at least cities like London, New York and Paris) can rely on a sense of what this means, Berlin's identity remains



ambiguous, forcing pragmatic decision-making based upon surviving the extreme options of restoring its past or hazarding “another grand experiment.” He contends that,

Paris... can build spectacular new buildings, confident in its visual identity because of the solid mass of nineteenth-century “background” buildings that make Paris unmistakable. Berlin by contrast has lost too much of that background, and must choose between restoring it or venturing yet another grand experiment (2000, 12).

Ladd further argues that the current practice of “critical reconstruction,” meant to mediate these extreme options tightens the stranglehold over any building initiative, which in turn enforces a rationalization of the city’s spaces that suppress more adventurous approaches to spatial planning. His is a critique of the master plan as a series of compromises that could easily lead Berlin to be mistaken for somewhere else. Thus the crisis Berlin faces, unlike London, New York and Paris, is the crisis the global city continuously labours under: the problem of mistaken identity. This means that as the city modernizes it always faces the problem of losing itself to the uniformity of modernization, that is, to be mistakenly identified with any place, anywhere. Ladd’s view of Berlin’s weak attempt to master what it plans is evocative in its very gloss of the city’s selectiveness towards its history as a source that empowers many decisions, including the commitment to critical reconstruction. The set of assumptions animating the choice of restoration not only involves legitimating parts of the city’s past that it would like to forget but also involves the risk of alienating a past that it has not resolved. In this sense, such a problem is revealed in the claims of former East Berliners’ assertions that the vestiges of GDR architecture are worth preserving since the elimination of such structures liquidate a part of their biography. On the other hand, any grand experiment revives the specter of Speer’s Nazi master plan to rebuild Berlin as the new Germania. Could we not suggest that a city such as Berlin works, through its very actions of rebuilding, to make its present appear as a difference by displaying its encounter with its past and its inheritance as the very quintessence of its flexibility? This would imply that the architectonic desire to represent the present moment is accomplished through its representation of Berlin as the center of an open society that it never fully was.

The selective building process is part of the drama of Berlin’s engagement with its identity in the present, as if such a question could be settled through initiatives built in steel and stone. How these contemporary initiatives in Berlin demonstrate the architectonic struggle to be more than scenery brings out the sociality of the scene and its risk, in Baudrillard’s

terms, of becoming obscene.¹ Somewhere between the fascination exercised by its scenic spectacle and the seduction envisioned by its communal dream, these architectural initiatives propose to bind those it gathers to its setting in a way that will perpetuate that space as central and decisive for the city itself. Each of these sites attempt to attract people, and also habituate use; moreover each proposes that what it offers as new will become a lasting and enduring orientation to the city. Thus, these sites require more than prompting tour buses to drop off hoards of visitors at its entrance. Even though the architect must operate under the principle of ‘if you build it they will come,’ such an expectation is guided by an anticipation of visitors who must calculate what it means to be at the site. Each site imagines a user who engages the space as a meaningful encounter and each in its way formulates a typical imaginative relationship to the re-settlement of space and time. What is interesting about these sites is that they attempt to emplace a unified, liberal citizenry through the re-placement of one structure with another. This process of restructuring the new Berliner by building values from the ‘ground up’ appears as a conflict between the original, its genius loci, and the image or simulation of the integrity of the city.

IV.

Any reproduction severs the new building from its original, yet what persists is a mimetic relation to the original, from which the new structure is detached. In this sense, the Reichstag is both new and old, it can only renew by imitating what it departs from and it can only depart by having in mind a standard which it needs to vary, revitalize, or reshape. Any such initiative stands as a dialectical occasion that joins the past and the present together, even in its negation. It is interesting to note that in Walter Benjamin’s essay, “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” architecture holds an established, privileged position in relation to the conflict between the original and the image. In a brief, but forceful passage, Benjamin argues that architecture forms the elementary environment of representation, from which the limitations and possibilities of spectatorship arise. He writes that:

the human need for shelter is lasting. Architecture has never been idle. Its history is more ancient than that of any art, and its claim to being a living force has significance in every attempt to comprehend the relationship of the masses to art. Buildings are appropriated in twofold manner: by use and by perception... Such appropriation cannot be understood in terms of the attentive concentration of a tourist before a famous building. On the tactile side there is no counterpoint to contemplation on the optical side. Tactile appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by



habit... the tasks which face the human apparatus at the turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means, that is, by contemplation alone. They are mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation (1968, 240).

It is through building and rebuilding that the city calls its subject to encounter the present, to begin to fall under its spell. The conventions of building marks the spectator as one who develops a relation to space over time, through a form of mastering, of appropriation. Since space cannot simply be inhabited by viewing alone, the tactile or active engagement displaces contemplation through its confrontation in space. Architecture dissolves the gaze by inviting appropriation that blurs the relation between art and participation. To put it simply, the architectonic doesn't just master the spectator, but needs the spectator to penetrate the form and habituate use. Architecture inherits the problem of the auratic character of place as a conflict over the image of the original and forms the incipient stage of inhabitation. Perhaps the anxiety that permeates Benjamin's text is not simply the notion of the seemingly uncontrollable replication of the image and the concomitant spell it excises as welcoming, yet inhospitable to true inhabitation, but is an anxiety that Baudrillard develops as the need to counter the inertia of fascination with seduction. The crisis of the disappearance of place, and the reemergence of the architectonic as scene threatens to blur the boundaries between fascination of *techne* and the seduction of building.

V.

We know how buildings become as thin as the people looking at them and so surface-like that the façade was born as a new aesthetic element of a reduced reality. I don't think it is the time of the façade anymore. It is a different time and while the word 'façade' might still be around, I don't think anyone is looking at them, even if the architects of Berlin are still constructing them.²

Question posed by audience member: "How deep is the void?"

Daniel Libeskind: "Nine feet" (Libeskind, 1998).

Libeskind's suggestion that the pretension of the façade is over proposes to invert the conventional relation of the outside to the inside by identifying the museum with the gravity of its inwardness. His museum affirms this view in his representation of the abysmal disposition of the interior. The building houses six voids—created spaces that can be glimpsed, but cannot be entered. There is, however, one exception: a Holocaust Tower

infused as a sacred space, a confined, dark room with a skylight permitting a sliver of light through the ceiling. Though the building is not a Holocaust museum, vestiges of the memory of this event are considered integral to the history of German Jews. The building was selected by a city jury to house the history of German Jews, with eventual plans to bring visitors into contact with a narrative that spans several hundred years. The lobbying was generated by a post-war collective, chiefly organized by a German woman named Vera Herdt, that sought to broaden a series of exhibitions already initiated in the Martin Gropius Bau. The original museum was launched in 1933 by Jewish artists in Berlin, only to be cruelly destroyed after Hitler came to power later that year. The plan for the rebuilding of an autonomous structure was designed to reinvigorate this first initiative.

The award of the contract to Libeskind was based on his ability to persuade the jury that his architectural model could lay the ground for a conceptual view of German Jewish history. What must have been especially appealing to the museum and the jury that made the selection was the architect's promise to do more than revive an exhibit, but to provide grounds for reconstituting the peculiar, particular and tension-fraught relation between Jews and Germans in Berlin, a relationship that seemed filled with promise at one time, a promise that was destroyed by the Holocaust and now rekindled sufficiently to bring Jews to Germans forty-five years after the Holocaust. The museum provided the space in which to forge a reconnection of Jews to Berlin through the mediation of architecture. Certainly the fact that Libeskind, the son of Holocaust survivors, decided to move to Berlin in order to set up his architectural practice, signaled a new beginning in 1988 and was also a portent of the new role architecture would come to play in Berlin only a year later when the wall came down. Curiously those architectonic elements that typically created boundaries, now became ideal interlocutors providing eloquent (if not loquacious) speakers to help usher in democracy for the newly reunified city.

Since construction of the Jewish museum finished in 1998, it had remained empty until September 2001, while curators and museum directors worked to develop the internal logic and mandate of its first exhibition entitled *Two Millennia of German Jewish History*. During this interim period visitors have been permitted to tour the building and its outside environment with an official guide. What seems unprecedented in the history of museums is that in the two years that the building has been open to the public, the spectacle of architecture alone has been enough to draw crowds. In the absence of any artifacts, the museum assumed a curious stance as a public building, suggesting that an abstract relation to space is sufficient. But it is the literalism of this abstraction, of a specific

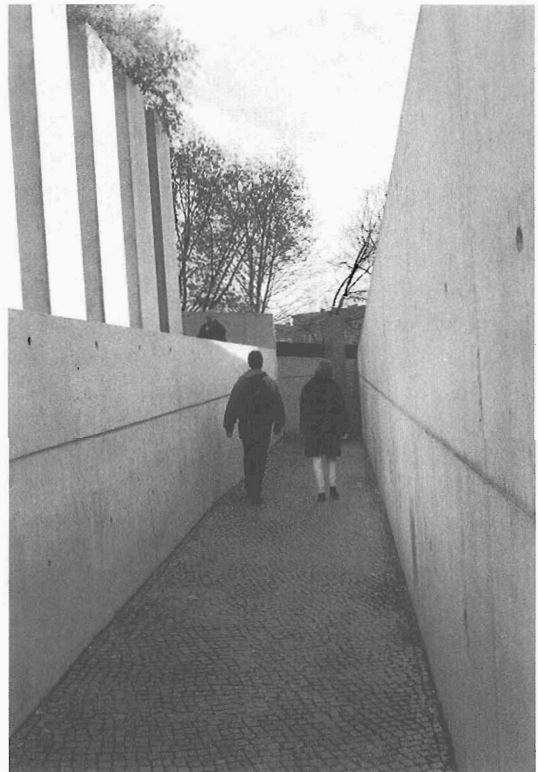
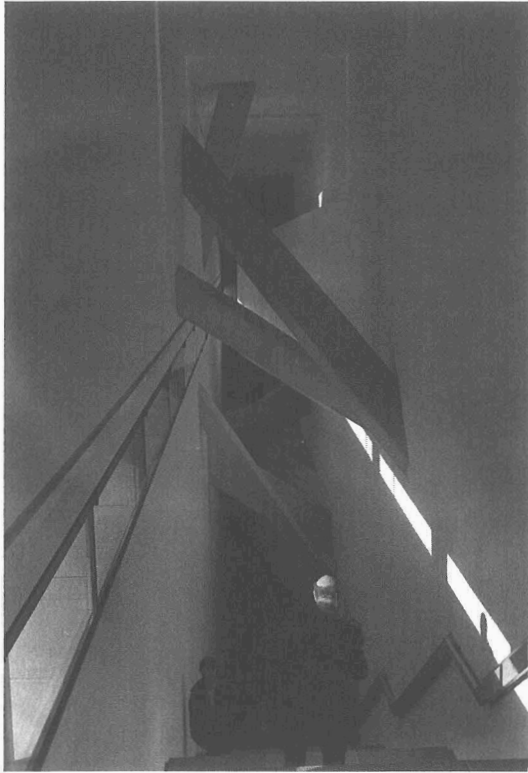
code of a German Jewish topography realized in such figures as Walter Benjamin, and specific addresses both of the famous and of the unknown incorporated into a design that seeks to push the form of building to another level; revitalizes the museum as an occasion to question space and geography as both a representation of the limits of memory and the possibility of architecture's ability to command remembrance.

When I interviewed Libeskind during the summer of 1999, it was just after official approval was finally given to the building of Peter Eisenmann's monumental Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe. Libeskind defended the fact that he had placed an architectural bid for the memorial by claiming that, although his participation in the competition was "ambivalent," he felt compelled to resist the many critics throughout the ten years of the memorial debate who called for dismissing the structure altogether in favour of converting the Jewish Museum into a memorial. Libeskind resisted this incursion with an emphatic insistence that the Jewish Museum "is not a place for the dead, it's for the living, the ongoing relationship between German and Jews" (1999). The clear demarcation between the memorial and the museum was an important distinction because it meant a form of remembering that could transcend mourning for those that perished in the Holocaust. A poetic remembering, channeled through the overarching structure of architecture provided flexibility to interrogate the relationship between memory and the city.

Although the Jewish museum alludes to a restructuring of the pre-modern, omniscient knowledge of Mnemosyne, the mother of the muses that had access to the truth of the past, present and future,³ Libeskind's architecture more closely re-embodies the melancholic Jewish moderns that lived in Berlin and came to prominence through their creative works. His intervention sought to translate architectonically the pathos of German-Jewish figures through a confrontation with the problem of representing a German-Jewish topography of Berlin after the Holocaust. Libeskind explains that,

[g]reat figures in the drama of Berlin who have acted as bearers of a great hope and anguish are traced into the lineaments of this museum... Tragic premonition (Kleist), sublimated assimilation (Varnhagen), inadequate ideology (Benjamin), mad science (Hoffmann), displaced understanding (Schleiermacher), inaudible music (Schoenberg), last words (Celan): *these constitute the critical dimensions which this work seeks to transgress.*⁴

Libeskind's claim to transgress those modernists who came to the limits of the mimesis at the height of their creativity violates the borders that surround the modernist's impotence in overcoming history through innovation. The suffering of the negation of the standard was a pathos that



The Jewish Museum. Clockwise from top left: 1) Stairwell; 2) Visitor peering onto The Garden of Exile; 3) ETA Hoffman Garden. The Garden of Exile where visitors are expelled at the end of the tour.; 4) Window onto The Garden of Exile.

resided in the overcoming of history as a coherent referent. Libeskind's post-structuralist reply stands in the face of what Gans calls a modernist understanding, "that nothing the imagination can create is extraneous to the esthetic scene of representation" (1993, 208).⁵ Thus the architectural vision of the museum was about more than building a container for the memory of German-Jewish history, rather it was imagined as a fantastic representation that was able to stand outside of the linear conception of time already disrupted by the modernists. The following is his explanation:

I think that the Jewish museum is unprecedented, and in some ways it's the last museum. Of course museums will be built for the next thousand years, but it's the last museum, it's a museum that shows the apocalypse of the museum itself—of visibility coming into its own frame and in a sense one sees the other side of that frame. One sees that framelessness from which the frame came. One sees also the blankness and that which can never enter the frame of which the visitor of course can find in the objects of the museum because that frame is the cultural sphere that is the connection across the walls of the museum and across the blackness, across the discordance of the museum—of that which remains to be shown of German Jewish culture here and of its future (1999).

How to represent a past that is no longer a point of departure, a past whose ground defies settling for depictions that are neither secure nor unstable? Only through the groundlessness of the present as "the other side of the frame" can the past and future be meaningfully divided; an absent present that seeks to recreate the origin as "birthlessness." In this sense, the discordance of the museum is mutually dependent upon a similar view of the rebuilding of Berlin: an apocalyptic end that imagines an essence untainted by having been brought into existence. Libeskind elaborated on this crisis of specificity in his iteration of a commitment to building the un-buildable, "the museum is not really a topology or a kind of building that could have been built for any other program. German-Jewish history and the idea of Jews in Berlin and the destruction of culture that took place in an unprecedented way beyond anyone's wildest imagination—it constitutes a problem which is completely new. It is not something which someone could address nostalgically going to something that is already available and therefore I did not create a building which has a precedent. This history has no precedent in its totality, in its future" (Libeskind 1999).

Yet, if as Libeskind suggests, "this building has no precedent," that it will never be relegated to the realm of the past as history, it raises the question of how the Jewish Museum manages to express spatially an architectural rhetoric that makes this view intelligible. The building is

both rhetorically and materially bound by a web of understandings and even in the various claims to endism (the end of the museum, the end of the façade) it still relies on a recognition of its disavowal of the façade, as a particular conception of the end. Clearly, Libeskind's anti-façade performs a violent break with the buildings around it. Its gleaming zinc surface pokes out towards the sidewalk, standing in contrast to the Baroque façade of the Berlin museum beside it—dramatizing the Berlin Museum as a dissociated, pretentious statement of the city's contents. The new announces itself as a departure from the old through the radical dissimilarity of the buildings' façades. Although the industrial materials that make up the modernist exterior of the Jewish museum seem to suggest the buildings are separate, it is still an open question as to how they are joined. The wide-awake spectator is invited to see the anthropomorphic character of the buildings, and ask how are Jews and Berliners together but apart? This question doesn't even require background knowledge, that Berlin was a uniquely German-Jewish city or even knowledge about the role of the city in producing the Holocaust, but it plays off of that kind of cursory knowledge. The unspoken background of the museum is the uneasiness of place that is made problematic through the tenuousness of Berlin's relation to its Jews in its negation of the city as a passage point.

The exhibition of the building is designed to instill in visitors the desire see the symbolic attempt to reinscribe the relation of Germans and Jews and to connect to the space as an incarnation of remembrance. The mastery of an abstract architectural code introduces the pleasure in pain of re-establishing a new relation to this historical relationship.

In order to enter the Jewish museum, the visitor must first pass through the doors of the Berlin Museum and descend to an underground passageway that leads to the Jewish Museum. Here the city is rejoined through a voyage beneath the two buildings. The passage from a seemingly consistent tradition (the Berlin Museum) temporarily forges a connection through movement towards its alter (the Jewish Museum), briefly bringing unity to the discontinuity of the facades aboveground. The movement between the two museums prepares the spectator for an introspective journey within the depths of the city after having left the pedestrian perspective of the surface. However, the enactment of movement through one space to another reaches a standstill in the basement's exhibition, the only exhibition provided in the museum. Here miniature three-dimensional models of the museum are encased next to reproductions of the pages of surviving German records of thousands of names of German-Jewish inhabitants, alphabetically listed, many with the last name "Berlin." The list represents a small portion of the 200,000 integrated Jews that were forced out of Berlin and murdered by Germans outside the city's gates. On the adjacent wall Libeskind's architectural sketches and

scribbles hover above, giving shape to the impossibility of any claim to restructure the city in a way that restores it to normalcy. The rationality of the lists of deportees, a record of the hunted, expelled and annihilated are given shelter in the imaginings of the architect, a place that is planned and thought out through experimentations with the lines and logic of building.

The sense of dislocation as a purposeful misplacement is reproduced throughout the museum's design in the way it attempts to re-map the history of German Jews along literal lines and motifs. In the ETA Hoffmann Garden of Exile, the figurative supplanting and replanting of the city is explored. Seven columns of seven towers tilt on a reclining ground outside the museum, exhibiting the opposing conditions of rootedness and a Jewish Diaspora. Encoded in the forty-nine towers is a secret numerology based on the year 1948, the year when Israel became a state, leaving a remainder of one tower that stands in for Berlin. It slants uniformly with the other towers, harbouring soil from Israel (the remaining towers are filled with Berlin's soil). The towers represent a foreboding version of the Promised Land, one that disorients and dwarfs visitors through sheer monumentality: a terrifying Baroque elaboration that threatens to takeover the spectators and leave them to wander in an architectonic labyrinth. The convolutions of the garden demonstrate the way in which the city defies systematizing a German-Jewish identity. The promise of land remains elusive: olive trees from Russia—the homeland of the majority of Jews living in Berlin today—sprout from the tops of the columns. These are all symbols that denote a pastoral homeland, far from the spectator in the city's reach.

Libeskind's architecture forces the new to converse with the not-now, not-ever, the inaccessibility of birthlessness, the impossibility of the origin or the arché as its modern-moment. The Jewish museum reinscribes the phenomenology of fragmentation as a challenge to conceptions of agency which threaten to overcome the subject, simultaneously inviting solutions or ways of surpassing its incipient dangers of inaccessibility and utopianism through making sense of the ideal that animates the architectural system.

The desire to master the present is achieved as the spectacle of reconciliation between the city and its most notorious minority which distinguished its past as unique. The museum presents the modern moment as a spectacle in which the discordance of the past can be mastered and put to rest in the present through the construction of this building as a site to use and inhabit. Though destined to provoke reflection upon the unique history of Jewish oppression in Berlin, the museum assures us in the present that through the use of the building the anxiety will be reached through its architectural representation as part of a modern discourse.

VI.

In its vision of public architecture that redresses the ecological balance, providing rather than consuming energy, lies one of the Reichstag's intrinsic expressions of optimism. It is optimistic in another sense: as night falls and the glass bubble of the cupola glows, the building becomes a beacon, signaling the strength and vigor of the German democratic process (Norman Foster qtd. in Schulz 2000, 14).

If Libeskind's Jewish museum uncovers the impossibility of architectural re-alignment, the Reichstag is the incarnation of the power invested in the prospect of architecture to settle the historic score. Norman Foster's winning design for restoring the Reichstag marks the reinstatement of Berlin as the capital of Germany. As a nation-building project, Foster's modifications echo the renunciation of Teutonic architecture that guided Schwippert in 1949 when he furnished the Bonn government with a legislative chamber. During this period, the official seat of the West German government was placed in a virtual fishbowl, with floor to ceiling windows and bleachers for the public to keep a watchful eye on the parliamentary proceedings. At the dawn of the post-war 'Stunde Null,' the new Bundestag was purposely forged in Bonn, successfully relocating the western government to a city that did not have any superficial appearances of National Socialism. Schwippert's design marshaled a new age of openness and transparency, providing the Allies with a fresh demonstration of the parliament's commitment to a new ethos of governance. The mimetic dimension of politics and architecture was famously extolled in a statement made by the Bundestag's architect, Schwippert: "politics is a dark affair, let's see if we can shed some light upon it" (qtd. in Wise 1998, 26).

Although Schwippert's design took its bearings from the International Style promoted by the Bauhaus, bereft of any quotations of traditional architecture, Foster had to confront the integral mixture of neo-Gothic and Baroque elements that made up the Reichstag built during the Wilhelminian period. Foster's task of restoring the Reichstag, involved modernizing the image of German continuity through the medium of, what was viewed by many, an outmoded architectural rhetoric. The challenge was to make-over the image of German governance that guided Wallot's initial design by updating its pomp with the benefit of understanding the circumstances of its history. Reforming the image of the capital involved a direct confrontation with the vestiges of Berlin's political past, from its most recent era as the capital of the GDR, but also those eras it was the capital of Prussia, the German Reich, the Weimar Republic and of Nazi Germany. The challenge posed by transporting the German government from Bonn back to Berlin as a sign of Germany's progress rather than its



regression, involved facing its failed attempts at political coherency in the ruins of its past. Reclaiming the Reichstag as a symbol of Germany meant enticing outsiders, Bonners, both Germans from the East and West provinces, to see themselves as finally unified and free of authoritarianism once and for all. The restoration of the Reichstag exemplifies a new hubris, one that offers the plasticity of architectural correctness as a source of pride and the basis for demonstrating democratic ideals.

If the Reichstag represents the head of the state, it is Foster that translates the authority of the building by arousing the concerted admiration of the people for themselves through the spectacle of architecture. The persuasiveness of building involves a relationship between what is built and the spectators it attempts to lure to its grounds. Admiration for the architectural feat (we built this!) forms the elementary exchange between the power of building and the spectator's capacity to recognize their own power in this relation. The Reichstag as a spectacle depends upon exacerbating this excitement as a way of intensifying the relation between the state and its constituents. This sense of national renewal through nation building is provided through the structural reimagining of the site as a living memorial, as a site of hospitality, and as a triumph over nature.

The official architectural guide of the Reichstag provides an opportunity for exploring how the refashioning of democracy is coeval with the interlocking discourses of politics and architecture. As a guide book, it offers an official code of history, one that deliberately walks a line between self-effacement and re-birth. As a form of governance it lays out the aims of the direction and shape of how to live with the building as a metaphor for the German nation, while prescribing a way of acting and living within a new and improved democracy. The declaration of the building as a 'memorial' forms the preliminary stage, as a way of allowing reverence and admiration to co-exist.

In the introduction to the guide, President Wolfgang Thierse gratefully acknowledges Foster's contribution towards easing former Bonn parliamentarians back to Berlin, into the heart of German reunification. After a "forty-six year long interruption" President Thierse exclaims, "both the interior and the exterior meet our expectations... [upon] entering one feels welcomed rather than overwhelmed" (qtd. in Schulz 2000, 8). Thierse goes on to affirm the Reichstag as the rightful home of democracy by accentuating the positive fits and starts of democracy as a legacy to build upon. He points out that it was there in Berlin that "Philipp Schneidermann proclaimed the first Republic from one of the windows of this building on 9 November, 1918" (7). If there is a tone of caution, it is directed towards the fearful observer that the building played any role in empowering the underbelly of German politics. Thierse is quick to remind us that the Kaiser had disabused the original architect Paul Wallot of any

pride in engendering the structure, directly condemning Wallot for building an “empire ape house.” More importantly though, the reader is informed that, “Adolf Hitler never spoke in this building as a parliamentarian” (8). This is further elaborated upon later on in the book, where Schulz dismisses the Red Army’s capture of the Reichstag as a photo-opportunity, staged by Stalin two days after the actual event. In fact, the capture of the Reichstag is redefined as an oversight by Stalin, “that the building was not used by the Nazi regime seems to have escaped his attention” (27).

Settling the historical score is used as a corrective measure, as a way of arresting the unruly images that are associated with the building, while allowing more benign images of “longing” and of endurance to predominate:

For many people in East Berlin, the Reichstag became a symbol for the unresolved issue of a divided German nation. It was the architectural symbol of the longing for a united Germany in which democracy, peace, personal liberty and social justice would be able to exist side by side (Schulz 2000, 8).

The reframing of the Reichstag (attributing it as a symbol of unity) in this way raises the question of false memory that haunts the building. The question as to whom and what did the Reichstag symbolize, is re-determined as a metaphysical architectural state, a state that builds its foundations upon a re-creation of the essence of German nationalism. As a method for re-connecting the capital back to the city of Berlin, the rebuilding of the Reichstag also involves reinventing the architecture of German nationalism. In the past, German nationalism was based on an ethic of ‘Blood and Soil,’ now we see the ‘greening’ of this view through the celebration of the building as ecologically sound.

Foster’s capacity to equate the virtuosity of the building with “the strength and vigor of the German democratic process,” is further refined through an image of liberal *Bildung* exemplified throughout the interior’s pedagogical displays and the way in which the public is invited to access the building as a source of political enlightenment. In its repackaging of an old ideal into a more up-to-date format, the architectonic method provides parliamentarians and its subjects with a grammar of re-birth. As a method for re-connecting the capital back to the city of Berlin, the building subjects those who enter it to an authoritative code that seeks to replace the fascist belief that equated the purity of nationalism with a heritage embedded in the soil of the Fatherland, with an inclusive discourse based upon environmental restoration and the natural sedimentation of German history.

The Reichstag intervenes in the landscape of Berlin by making a difference between the democracy of the present and the regime of the past. Similar to the museum, the Reichstag now announces that Berlin is not now what it was! The openness of the city contrasts to its closure in the past that makes a difference between what it was and what it is now and hopes to be. The Reichstag shows how rebuilding, remaking, and renewing are quintessential modern gestures, showing that openness to construction and reconstruction is not only the ‘mentality’ of any modern moment, but an opportunity for spectacle embodied in the concrete production of a building.

VII.

From the start Sony had rejected any attempt to “regain normality” and the German American Helmut-Jahn gave them exactly what a multinational concern considers prestige architecture (Rumpf 2000, 369).

The schizo is bereft of every scene, open to everything in spite of himself, living in the greatest confusion (Baudrillard 1983, 133).

During the postwar period up until reunification, Potsdamer Platz was a no-man’s land that stretched out from around the wall into a sprawling yard of emptied ruins, debris and landmines. Before that it was the paradigmatic modern heart of the city. It was in this place where the first traffic light was installed, providing a central node for traffic and pedestrian movement. The convergence of the underground subway, the train station, automobiles, cafés and shops made Potsdamer Platz the communicative heart of the city.

In 1991, when the city auctioned the land to multi-nationals at deep discounts, the architectural proposals put forward for rebuilding this site were flaunted as novel ways of restoring the pulse to the heart of Berlin. Sony defended its vision of a pointed, circular canopy, topping a post-modern piazza with surrounding multiplex movie theatres, electronic shops, offices and cafes, by claiming that, “this building will not attempt to regain normality.” The conversion of the space into a nexus of leisure, entertainment and consumption provides the city with a kind of metropolitan everyman’s land. The assembly of the new buildings attempts to surpass the past, by catapulting the spectator into a future that claims to have arrived. Sony’s use of technology as a method for conquering space re-creates the piazza as time travel, inviting its visitors to escape locality altogether and enter a virtual environment of play.

The ludic quality of the space is featured through the various theme restaurants throughout the two piazzas, allowing visitors to stroll through





Cinestar at The Sony Centre in the newly rebuilt Potsdamer Platz.

open concept eateries that offer Louisiana style ribs, McDonald's hamburgers and ersatz Vienna coffee houses. As a self-contained world, the image of travel is achieved through a virtual encounter, where people can visit different venues across an American-European spectrum. It offers a simulated culture, not in the sense of Disneyland's careful reproduction of Bourbon Street and its betrayal of experiencing the real New Orleans; rather, the process of reproduction seems to declare that the global market has finally penetrated Berlin, offering a pastiche of simulated urban encounters borrowed from an imaginary field of city life. That the global market has penetrated Berlin reciprocally means in some ways that Berlin has begun to penetrate the world. There is an internationalization or cosmopolitanism at work here that allows the vital city in each decisive modern period to compare itself favourably to other cities by affirming its worldliness in the universal appearances it achieves. However, the reinvention of Potsdamer Platz as an urban entertainment center places a particular accent on the ethos of 'the world class city,' giving a universal appearance to Berlin's center with spaces and images borrowed from here, there and everywhere. Critics such as Saskia Sassen note how the spectacularization of city spaces lead to an increasing commodification of the urban scene:

The same cities that produce entertainment also consume it, giving rise to a new form of urban tourism, one that is media related and uses the city itself, especially the global city, as an object for consumption—the city as theme park... Modern tourism is no longer centered on the historic monument, concert hall or museum, but on the urban scene or, more precisely, on some version of the urban scene fit for tourism, urban music and lifestyles (Sassen and Roost 1999, 143).

According to Sassen, the cities that produce entertainment easily morph into an "object of consumption," creating a crisis over the specificity of the scene in contradistinction to the scenic. It is the incarnation of the global scene that organizes the ambivalent status of the new city as both a producer and a consumer. Sassen locates the drama of this new form of urban exhibitionism in global conglomerates that opportunistically use the model of re-invention as a way of co-opting city spaces.

In the Sony Centre's press release, the self-congratulatory headline, "Sony sets new standards in the heart of Berlin," illustrates the branding that authorizes the new city centre:

When it bought the property at Potsdamer Platz in 1991, Sony had already decided to develop a modern entertainment concept. Under the motto "Sony in the city" the Sony corporation makes it possible for everyone to

experience interactively its fascinating world of entertainment in the center of the world's major cities. Urban entertainment centers are an ideal combination of shopping facilities, entertainment and gastronomy. At the Berlin Sony Center am Potsdamer Platz the consumer electronics company has created a unique mixture of a modern working and living environment combined with culture and entertainment which is world class. The public, covered Forum is surrounded by the CineStar Multiplex with its eight cinemas, the IMAX 3D, the Sony Style Store and the Filmhaus, which, among other things, houses the magnificent Marlene Dietrich Collection.⁶

Potsdamer Platz is marked by its rise and fall from the height of the golden age and the lows of the divided city. The rebuilding of the center is an attempt to resuscitate the city, in the words of Sony "to pump blood through the heart of the city." The recreation of the ideal, of the heart and the capacity to circulate blood through the center and to the other parts of Berlin appears as a travesty of the original body. If the center was for the Junkers and the elite bourgeoisie, it has now widened the class of people invited to the city's center. The breakdown of class from an exclusively upper middle class to a mass form of participation is exemplified in the diversity of obtainable/purchasable goods and services. Fast-food restaurants rub up against upscale restaurants specializing in lobster. The atrium, shopping center contains a food court where even cheaper food can be purchased. The transformation of Potsdamer Platz juxtaposes recognizable forms by freeing the visitor from quality packaging a safe center that discretely consumes itself in the city's heart.

The Sony Center Forum is a spectacular simulation of an Italian piazza, incorporating a variety of influences from different sources into its design. Included is the Hotel Esplanade, moved with great fanfare (and even an official blessing from Wim Wenders) from its original location on top of a device specifically designed to transport the building into Sony territory. The Hotel's façade has been restored to its original appearance, giving a surreal texture to the reflecting grey exterior of the Sony Centre. Above all, the glass, protective barrier around the building colonizes the old, bringing the nineteenth-century design into the fold of the twenty-first century. Placing the building behind glass takes the building out of use leaving us to marvel at the preservation of a bygone age.

Opposite: The reconstructed Kaisersaal, moved with great fanfare from its old location around the corner. The Emperor's room was the last vestige of the Esplanade Hotel, left to languish on the former "no-Man's land."



VIII.

“You talkin’ to me?”

Down the center of the first-run multiplex movie theatre in the Sony Centre is a 100-metre-long red carpet with the screenplay from *Taxi Driver* printed on it in large letters. It is interesting that the movie representative of American dysfunctional urbanity makes an appearance here. If Travis is the iconoclastic anti-hero of New York, he reflects a particular moment in time when the urban metropolis stood for a gritty mixture of attraction without promise and alienation that sustained an elusive connection to those forces which prowled the streets, forcing citizens, outlaws and the metropolitan man into a deep descent into misery. Like the Hotel Esplanade, it celebrates preserving a past as an ornament of the new.

The present not only supercedes the past in the sense that the ‘no-man’s land’ is now filled with an urban entertainment complex, but calls Berlin to its present as a beginning of a future that is yet to come. That the present site can incorporate the dream of a future Berlin makes it that much more compelling as the moment it is. The intensity of the present is dramatized through the representation of this space as a penultimate scene of modernity at least comparable, and possibly superior to the cities of the world. At the present moment Berlin produces itself as a ‘world class city’ through the gesture of its relentless architectonic desire to affirm its present as different from its past and as a promise of its future.

Conclusion

In one sense the background is the structure of intellectual presuppositions that any building initiative depends upon. But, if we refer to the specific Greek sense, we find that the background is the external environment of the performance that was meant to motivate the spectator’s engagement with the illusion of the action. Now this has changed, the environment has become the very topic of the initiative and its discursive terrain. In rebuilding Berlin it is taken for granted (or some might even say repressed) representations of nation, history and market, which the city had become estranged from and that now become central issues to be debated and contested.

The nation is the background of the building of the Reichstag because Berlin’s status as the capital of the new Germany presupposes that the city represents the whole and that the government building in this respect is the incarnation of the country. The background is then much like the structure of presuppositions in which the initiative is grounded. The background—nation—is now treated as the foreground. Jews are part of the background of the Jewish Museum because the creation of the structure

presupposes a history that includes not only German-Jewish relations, but the architectural genre of the museum as a work of art. The background—history—is now treated as the foreground. Finally, the rebuilding of Potsdamer Platz as a new city center presupposes the worldwide movement of people, influences, and capital we speak of as globalization, which, in its turn creates the idea of the place as an engagement with modernity and its pleasures that is in some senses treated as contemporary and effective. The background—market—is now treated as the foreground. In each case, nation, history, and market, come alive as prominent and apparent features of the rebuilding that were once ‘seen but unnoticed,’ now making the existence of rebuilding prominent in the foreground space. In this sense, the Reichstag becomes a place to address new German democracy; the museum a site to raise the question of German history; and Potsdamer Platz a space to question Berlin’s status as a global city.

The reversal of the background and the foreground is a strategy for putting this question into play in a ‘disenchanted age.’ The architectonic desire to master the present appears in the rebuilding of the city in ways that assert its modernity in relation to its place in the history, nation and world which marks its inheritance. Rebuilding announces that Berlin is open to worldly influences in a way that is unprecedented, empowering it to produce this very appearance through its spectacle of engineering. Just as architecture could represent a triumph of artifact over nature, the architectonic reflects the triumph of the city over its past.

This obscenity drags away whatever remained of an illusion of depth and the last question that could still be asked of a disenchanted world: is there a hidden meaning? (Baudrillard 1990, 60).

The so-called “hidden meaning” that Baudrillard affirms even for us today (if we are alive to its disappearance) is the trace of place—the original which in its apparent disappearing can only announce itself as a result whose source remains enigmatic. Baudrillard mocks the contemporary interpretive landscape absorbed by the relentless reversibility of the background and the foreground that can only itself be an image of place as a persistence whose absence is present.

We can appreciate now that the link of the original meaning of scene to scenery as the background of action, now comes to the center or foreground as the work of fashioning the city itself as a scene, as the scene of the modern moment and all that this implies.

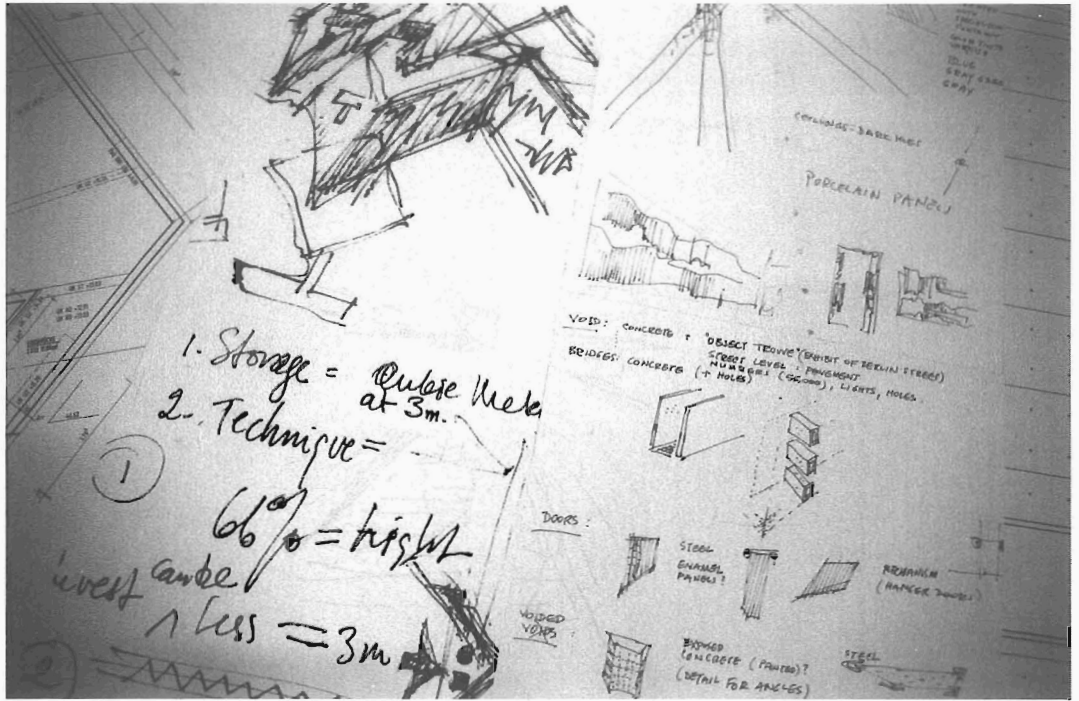
Notes

I would like to acknowledge research funding provided through the Centre for Jewish Studies, York University. I am grateful to the The Canadian Centre for German and European Studies at York University for providing a travel grant to Berlin. A portion of this paper was initially presented at the Culture of Cities Project Graduate Conference, York University in Nov. 2000. Special thanks to Pierre Ouellet and Alan Blum who shared in the ongoing revision.

- 1 For a critique of the death of scene, see Baudrillard (1983, 126–134).
- 2 *Jewish Museum Berlin, Architect Daniel Libeskind, With a Photo Essay by Hélène Binet*. Rucksaldruck, Germany: G+B Arts International, 2000.
- 3 This is a paraphrase of Edward S. Casey. *Remembering. A Phenomenological Study*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987, quoted in in Susanne Baackmann, “Configurations of Myth, Memory and Mourning in Grete Weil’s *Meine Schwester Antigone*.” *The German Quarterly*. Vol. 73 (3), Summer 2000, p. 271–272. This article came to my attention late in the writing of the paper. Baackmann’s analysis of the post-war German-Jewish writer Grete Weil, is provocative in its reading of the differentially gendered approaches to representations of memory.
- 4 “Ein eigenständiges Jüdisches Museum als Abteilung des Berlins Museums,” *Realisierungswettbewerb: Erweiterung Berlin Museum mit Abteilung Jüdisches Museum* (Berlin, 1990), 12. Cited in James E. Young, “Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum in Berlin: The Uncanny Arts of Memorial Architecture,” *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2, p.4. Emphasis mine.
- 5 Gans’ final chapter is worth reading for a detailed rationale for conceiving of the crucial differences and congealing of problems of the modernist and post-modernist esthetic.
- 6 http://www.scapp.com/sonycenter_eng/allgemein/presse/c_scapp.html
- 7 Robert De Niro’s Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*, directed by Martin Scorsese, 1976.

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Jewish Museum, Display of Daniel Libeskind's architectural drawings.