

## Research Article

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# Libeskind and the Holocaust Metanarrative; from Discourse to Architecture

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**Abstract:** The Holocaust today resides between memory and postmemory. Initially, children of survivors and their contemporaries inherited a mediated past and bore full responsibility for disseminating their ancestors' experiences. However, with the prevalence of the Holocaust metanarrative and its absolutist historicism, it was realised that when memory needs to cross generational boundaries, it needs to cross medial as well. The discourse was not enough; there was a need for broadening the narrative beyond the verbal using a powerful medium with the capacity to affect cognition and provoke emotions. This would be architecture, a storyteller by nature. In the 2000s, there was a noticeable boom in innovative Holocaust museums and memorials. Deconstructivist designs and symbolic forms constituted a new language that would meet the demands of local narratives, influence public opinion, and contribute to social change. This paper examines the potential of this transmediation and addresses critical issues—the importance of the experience, the role of empathy and intersubjectivity, the association of emotions with personal and symbolic experiences—and ethical challenges of the transmedia “migration” of a story. To accomplish this, it draws upon Daniel Libeskind, a Polish-born architect who has narrated different aspects of the Holocaust experience through his works.

**Keywords:** Holocaust postmemory, transmediation, intersubjectivity, Libeskind

## Introduction

Almost seventy years after its conclusion, the Holocaust resides between memory and postmemory. Gradually, the individual story became official; testimonies were institutionalised in museums so that nations would assert a desirable identity and a sense of common destiny. However, with the passing of the generation of survivors, the rise of far-right parties, terrorism, racism and xenophobia, it has been imperative to raise collective consciousness that this atrocity would never be repeated. It was then realised that when memory needs to cross generational boundaries, it needs to cross medial as well. The discourse was not enough; there was a need for broadening the narrative beyond the verbal using a powerful medium which would act as a witness itself and would re-enact experiences of the past; a medium with the capacity to affect cognition and provoke emotions. This would be architecture, a storyteller by nature. The architect now becomes a force of influence that affects public opinion, contributes to community empowerment and reinforces national identity.

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## Holocaust Metanarrative and Memory Construction

Metanarratives, or sometimes called grand narratives, attempt to present a comprehensive account of historical phenomena based on a consensus or a universal acceptance of truth. They are master narratives “that share a common rhetorical desire to resolve a conflict by establishing audience expectations, according to the known trajectories of their literary and rhetorical form” (Halverson, Goodall, and Corman 14). “Meta” is Greek for a comprehensive idea that is beyond, behind, and transcendent, something that exceeds usual limits. In epistemology and in art, the prefix *meta-* is used to characterise something that is self-referential (Childers and Hentzi 186). The postmodern distrust of those totalising narratives was expressed by Jean-François Lyotard who proposed that metanarratives should give way to *petits récits*, or more modest and localised narratives, which can “throw off” the grand narrative by bringing into focus the singular event (504). Lyotard’s advocacy of small narratives calls for attention to multiple perspectives and recognises the inability to make overgeneralisations. In specific, the metanarrative of the Second World War attempts to account for the atrocities of genocide and unethical scientific experimentation of human subjects by asserting that Nazis were exceptional forces of evil, while the Holocaust metanarrative has anti-Semitism at its very centre. In academic bibliography, we also encounter the “Holocaust etiquette” (Withorn 2); Des Pres maintains that Holocaust representations should be historically accurate and faithful to the facts and that the Holocaust should be approached as a solemn or even sacred event (216). However, Eaglestone, who writes extensively on the Holocaust and Postmodernism, and, like Lyotard, warns against an oversimplistic view of history that champions a single narrative, emphasises that “history is not the recreation of the past as it actually was but is the name for a sophisticated and highly developed genre of the narrative told about the past” (234).

Collective memory, as a socially derived and subjective form of knowledge, is not static, much less objectively accurate. It is sustained through the continuous articulation and reinforcement of the past among the members of a society, who then hand those memories down from one generation to the next. In the cultural contexts of social norms and values, particular narratives are reproduced, reconstituted, and revised by the influx of new information and changing circumstances (Schwartz 376). These socially constructed narratives “need a discourse to make them meaningful . . . without language there is no representation, no meaning” (Hall 13). Discourse undeniably forms opinions and creates a prism for the historical awareness of an event. However, the construction of collective memory is a shell which envelops both discursive and non-discursive practices and materialisations; by materialisation, we mean any material manifestation of an act of political or social discourse. Apropos, Henry Jenkins proposed that some narratives—such as the Holocaust—are “so large they cannot be covered in a single medium.” Jenkins is credited with recognising and categorising the emergent modes of cross-platform storytelling as “transmedia” (95), and characterising the public as “hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels” (21). Therefore, transmedia storytelling is a particular narrative structure that expands through different languages (verbal, iconic, symbolic) and media, which contribute to the construction of the transmedia narrative world. One of these media channels that act as a material manifestation of discourse by using its own language is architecture.

Architecture is a product of social needs, ideology, social organisation, and allocation of resources—all reliant on particular times and places. As a rule, architectural work is commissioned, and its completion is dependent on many participants. Therefore, it represents the social and cultural aura of its times and surroundings. Nonetheless, architecture is also an individual creation of an architect, who embodies his ideas and beliefs into a physical entity. An architect is selected to work on a project not only according to professional merit but also according to his personal values and the ability to reflect those of the group he is commissioned to represent (Rotem 19). With reference to museums, architects have not only provided aesthetic and spatial solutions but have also shared the responsibility for their contents (20). In the specific case of the Holocaust museums, this translates into the architects’ contribution to the construction of a collective memory of the Holocaust. As Charles Jencks puts it, “even architects who suggest that they do not send political messages through their buildings inevitably find their work inextricably linked to complex political discourses” (7). In this article, we will see how, by focusing on small narratives of the Holocaust,

architects intervene; they break stereotypes, they “mitigate” this grand narrative tension and disrupt the absolutist historicism. Giovagnoli comments: “telling stories that are distributed on multiple media is like creating a new geography of the tale” (16).

However, transmedia storytelling is not just an adaptation from one medium to another; therefore, we are not interested solely in the architect’s work. We have selected architecture as it may detach from “rules” dictated by the metanarrative due to the viewers’ more active participation in creating the narrative. As Dinehart (*Transmedial Play*) states, the user transforms the story via his or her own natural cognitive psychological abilities and enables the Artwork to surpass medium. Thus, the user becomes the true producer of the Artwork. Marie-Laure Ryan considers narrative not just as a formal discourse issue but also as “a cognitive construct, or mental image, built by the interpreter in response to the text” (9). In transmedia storytelling, more than in classic textualities, the role of the reader is strategic for narrative interpretation (Scolari 591). One could argue that if the visitor, say a history professor, already knows a context well, then the transmedial approach is not needed. However, knowing about something is not the same as having the chance to experience it with our own bodies (Tosca 6). And this is where the difference between the two media—discourse and architecture—lies. Architecture builds a whole scenography into which the body of the visitor and all his senses are incorporated into an *experience*. From a transmedial perspective, we could say that it lets us inhabit the worlds of the past. We are not only conjuring other worlds in our imagination; they have become three-dimensional, occupying the same space as us. We walk into them, become surrounded by them; we are even invited to manipulate them (Tosca 6). In particular, the architecture of Holocaust museums is in most cases unique and innovative, a potent actor in the museum’s narrative and often the focus of the visit (Rotem 15). Visitors, like pilgrims, adopt behavioural patterns that differ from their everyday conduct. Walking through a museum, they enter on a journey that recreates significant and meaningful events—the museum’s structure, circulation route, lighting, and architectural design constitute the theatrical setting, while the visitors are its active actors (Duncan 12). As Kidd would say, understanding a museum as a transmedia storyteller invokes an agentic and participatory practice; visitors are implicated in the construction of a text. Therefore, the transmedia “text” remains continuous and incomplete while the transmedia museum remains an unfinished work because of its ongoing nature of “history making” (20).

## The Case of Daniel Libeskind

One of the most famous cases of architects who chose to commemorate Holocaust using symbolic gestures and creating imageries according to localised stories is Daniel Libeskind, a descendant of Polish Holocaust survivors who immigrated to America. Libeskind completed his first building at the age of 52, with the opening of the *Felix Nussbaum Haus* in Osnabrück, Germany, in 1998 (Yu 34). The building houses the paintings of Nussbaum and consists of three intersecting components made of oak, concrete, and metal. The museum’s sides face three cities where Nussbaum studied art: Berlin, Rome, and Hamburg. The fourth side faces the concentration camp where he was killed—Auschwitz. The visitor enters laterally into the Nussbaum Pathway, which is cut open in order to record and define the importance of entering “The Museum Without Exit.” The Pathway leads the visitor through the compressed geometry of double cone of vision, which gives one the visual and kinetic embodiment of the Star of David—chosen by Nussbaum as his identifying birth and death mark. The visitor then moves towards an empty exterior which bequeaths a sense of openness and incompleteness necessary for the interpretation of Nussbaum’s oeuvre (Libeskind, *Nussbaum*).

The *Jewish Museum Berlin* officially opened in 2001. According to Libeskind, the whole project is between two main lines of thinking, organisation, and relationship. One is a straight line but broken into many fragments, the other is a tortuous line but continuing infinitely (Libeskind, *Encounter*). At the intersection points, voided spaces are created. They are inaccessible to visitors except for two; The Holocaust Tower and the Memory Void. The former is the only void outside the museum building, and the latter is accessible from the third floor and contains an art installation called “Fallen Leaves”; over

10,000 circular flat head sculptures cover the floor and are dedicated to all the innocent victims of war and violence (“Jewish Museum Berlin-Shalekhet”). Three divergent underground axes intersect expressing the connection between the different stories of the German Jews: The Axis of Continuity symbolises the continuum of history, the Axis of Exile leads both to daylight and to the Garden of Exile and Emigration, and the third axis leads to the Holocaust Tower (Bianchini). Completed in 2003 and located in one of the oldest parts of Copenhagen, the *Danish Jewish Museum* is housed in the Royal Boat House which was built at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Libeskind intertwined the historic vaulted brick structure with new exhibition spaces. He based his design on the unique circumstance of Danish-Jewish history that the majority of Jews were saved by their Danish compatriots during the Second World War. It is this human response that is manifested in the form, structure, and light of the museum. Its emblem is the Hebrew word *Mitzvah*, which can be translated as “obligation,” “deeply felt reaction,” “involvement,” or “good deed” (“The Danish Jewish Museum Architecture”).

Unveiled in 2005, San Francisco’s *Contemporary Jewish Museum* combines the history of an early twentieth-century landmark building—a historic electric power substation—with the dynamism of contemporary architecture. Libeskind was inspired by the Hebrew toast *L’Chaim* (To Life), because of its connection to the role the substation played in restoring energy to the city after the 1906 earthquake and the Museum’s mission to be a lively centre for engaging audiences with Jewish culture. From the outside, Libeskind’s extension is remarkable for its unique shape and skin: vibrant blue metallic steel, which is encased in the brick building like a crystal in rock and changes colors “reacting” to different light and weather conditions, as well as to the observer’s point of view (“The Contemporary Jewish Museum Building”). The *Ohio Statehouse Holocaust Memorial* (2014) was conceived to keep alive the memory of the victims and the American soldiers who liberated those in concentration camps. Approaching from the Statehouse, the visitor walks on a limestone walkway between inclined, graduated stone walls, upon one of which an honouring of the camp liberators is engraved: “If you save one life, it is as if you saved the world.” Embossed with a story told by an Auschwitz survivor, the panels are also irregularly angled at their inner edges. The planes meet in the centre, the jagged edges forming a cutout in the shape of a six-pointed star (Studio Libeskind). The *National Holocaust Monument in Ottawa*, which opened to the public on September 27, 2017, is designed as a large ceremony space enclosed by six triangular concrete segments to create the points of the yellow star deconstructed to create an “experiential environment” laced with symbolism throughout (Studio Libeskind). A visit to the monument constitutes a two-part experience. First is the descent into the Nazi hell of hate, destruction, and extermination. Then comes the ascent: a journey of hope for the future, including a symbolic view of the Peace Tower (Knelman).

The *Amsterdam Holocaust Memorial*, which is slated to break ground in 2018, will be built along the Weesperstraat, a boulevard which runs through the vanished Jodenbuurt neighbourhood, the pre-Holocaust home of most of the city’s Jews. The Memorial will list the full names of all 102,000 victims who were deported to concentration and death camps. As per architect’s plan, it will consist of several ascending and descending walls onto which the names will be etched, with maze-like paths to be lit from below at night (Lebovic). The walls will be shaped into the form of the Hebrew word “*Lizkor*,” which translates to “in memory of.” It will try to help people understand that the deaths had repercussions—for Jews and for Dutch society—that will continue for generations to come (Siegal).

## Libeskind’s Transmediation Tools

As initially mentioned, *experience* is the element that differentiates the two media in question. Experience for McCarty and Wright is about “felt-life” with an *emotional* quality (6), while for Dourish, it is always *embodied* and made by the subject even if triggered by an object (126). Therefore, one of Libeskind’s strategic tools is the *appeal to emotion*. But how may it be evoked through the architecture of a museum? Heinrich Wölfflin in his “Prolegomena to a Psychology of Architecture” asks: “How is it possible that architectural forms are able to express an emotion or a mood?” and answers (qtd. in Mallgrave and Ikonomidou 149):

Physical form possesses a character only because we ourselves possess a body. If we were purely visual beings we would always be denied an aesthetic judgment of the physical world, but as human beings with a body that teaches us the nature of gravity, contraction, strength, and so on, we gather the experience that enables us to identify with the conditions of other forms.

Accordingly, the search for new means of expression in architecture leads to interest in the *human body*. These two “ingredients” that compose the experience of the architecture’s user are also characteristics of *Einfühlung*, a German word—translated by Edward Titchener as *empathy*—which refers to the experience of *merging* with the object of one’s contemplation (21). Corcoran states that considering empathy as an emotional state allows one to realise that empathy is a body phenomenon since emotions are themselves body phenomena (668). Libeskind was actually based on the idea of *embodied cognition* which has been emphasised by many phenomenologists. The recognition that the perceiving body is not just a biological housing for our mental engines but it also shapes our very thinking—we are, as Edmund Husserl noted many years ago, “animate organisms” sensorially and emotionally attuned to our surroundings (qtd. in Mallgrave 29)—has been the *basis of his design*. In fact, many recent experiments claim to show how cognition can be influenced by states of the body or that abstract cognitive states are grounded in states of the body and using the former affects the latter. As Lutz puts it, the concept of emotion bears a somewhat paradoxical relationship to the physical (294). Feelings or perceived physiological state changes remain central to the definition of emotion (295). Oosterwijk and Barrett argue that a discrete emotional state emerges from the interplay between sensory information from the world (what you see, hear, smell, feel), internal information from the body (a racing heart, tense muscles) and making meaning of internal, and external sensations through the process of conceptualisation (250). Therefore, all emotional states are intrinsically embodied, because sensorimotor and interoceptive states are among the basic building blocks of emotion (251). Martin asserts that implicit within any movement is intentionality, a fundamental connection between movement and emotion that enables the viewer not only to apprehend an argument but also to be moved by it. “Since we respond muscularly to the strains in architectural masses . . . it is plain to be seen that we will respond even more vigorously to the action of a body exactly like our own” (qtd. in Foster 156).

Grynberg and Pollatos define empathy as a basic human ability with affective and cognitive facets, and high interindividual variability (54). While each component— affective and cognitive—has a different definition—the former constitutes an emotional response to the situation of another person, whereas the latter involves placing oneself imaginatively in the position of another person—the two are not usually mutually exclusive and take place concurrently, resulting in a “complex imaginative process” (Coplan 143). Hence, Libeskind did not base his design solely on the embodied experience per se, but, basically, he used this tool in order to achieve *intersubjectivity* between the victims and the visitors. In Duranti’s work, it is argued that for Husserl intersubjectivity is more than shared or mutual understanding and is closer to the notion of the possibility of being in the place where the Other is (5). Finlay describes three interpenetrating layers of reflexivity, each involving different but coexisting dimensions of embodied intersubjectivity. The first layer—*connecting-of*—demonstrates how people can tune into another’s bodily way of being through using their own embodied reactions. The second layer—*acting-into*—focuses on empathy as imaginative self-transposal and calls attention to the way existences are intertwined in a dynamic of doubling and mirroring. The third layer—*merging-with*—involves a “reciprocal insertion and intertwining” of others in oneself and of one in them (280). Immordino-Yang summarises a wealth of neurological investigation by claiming: “We use the feeling of our own body as a platform for knowing how to respond to other people’s social and psychological situations” (qtd. in Foster 127).

But how does one finally relate to the absent Other? The discussion firmly revolves around the question of how we get from body-perception to mind-perception. As Taipale puts it, “the whole problem of other minds is built on the basic insight that other people are physically separate entities whose mental states and lived experiences we could not grasp without external perception” (162). Besides, empathy is the bodily experience of feeling connected to the Other, while at the same time knowing that one was not experiencing directly the Other’s movements or feelings (Stein 11-19). Rather than a feeling of oneness with others, empathy affirmed difference and connectedness, offering the means of enriching one’s own experience (Foster 164). For D’Aloia, empathy is a factor that “fills the gap” between bodily presence of the “spectator”

and bodily absence of the “character” thanks to a mediation—in the double sense of keeping separate and putting in contact—between the two lived-bodies (98). According to phenomenologists, the Other’s body is experienced as a lived-body (*Leib*), not as a mere material thing (*Körper*). Contrary to Schlossberger’s and De Preester’s respective claims, in Husserl’s analysis, body-perception serves not as the medium but as the core of empathy; we “see” the Other and not only the lived-body of the Other; the Other is present to us, not merely in a bodily manner but also mentally, “in person” (Taipale 164). For Stein, empathy is an experienced feeling composed of different levels, namely perceptual, emotional, and cognitive, grounded in the lived-body. Distance, proximity, and distance again: empathy allows this psychological “round-trip” of approaching, fulfilling, and detaching. The distance moment corresponds respectively to a corporeal and a mental stage (emergence and interiorisation of the experience), whereas the core of the process is a “rupture” in which disbelief is temporarily suspended and the spectator is fully immersed in the events and has an impression of living an intimate relational experience (qtd. in D’ Aloia 100-101).

Marianne Hirsch’s theory of postmemory calls for a *reliving* of traumatic affect through an *encounter* with Holocaust, using a language of wounding and cutting, as Susan Sontag proposed. In fact, in the Jewish Museum Berlin, Libeskind conceives of architectural surfaces as skins that display marks of incision. The museum itself, then, reproduces the affect of having been wounded or cut, for the museum continues to wound and cut as it creates a space for critical engagement (Heckner 64). Libeskind’s “spaces of encounter” are created with an unsettling architectural vocabulary of jagged edges, sharp angles and tortured geometries which implies that viewers cannot remain in a distant, seemingly safe position of spectatorship. In the case of Nussbaum museum, we are dealing with a strong, evocative architecture, with a language which reiterates aspects of the artist’s life and spiritual struggles, emphasising for the visitors very intense feelings through spatial “tightness” or “constraints,” textures of materials, “journeys,” and plays of light.. An entire scenography and spatial metaphors serve the understanding of the works of art and the context in which they were created: “that is, topophobia (anxiety of space) and the representation of melancholia in Nussbaum’s later paintings are reconfigured architecturally within the very spaces that exhibit them” (Kligerman 243). The visitors’ tour follows corridor-like rooms that suddenly interrupt, which open to unpredictable intersections or clog in dead ends, thus reflecting Nussbaum’s life struggle. The narrow interior evokes the oppressive conditions, which dominated the artist’s short life and marked the development of his creation period, seen as a series of “incarcerations” of his own being. The museum tour induces an almost visceral experience, which approaches the visitor to the experiences that relentlessly marked the artist’s life, pointing out what Libeskind calls ‘the participatory experience’ of architecture (*Nussbaum*). This museum could be perceived “as a text, as the voyage,” where the space turns you back in time and you enter “into a memory that is fragile and vulnerable.” Here architectural devices become “disturbing” for visitors, inducing them a state of chaos, with direct references to the artist’s real feelings. Eventually, the architectural language evokes identity as a possibility to pass beyond the limits of reality, in the sense of being through architecture. Like in the Jewish Museum Berlin, it opens the “gate” to another world, in the most tangible and frightening way, exceeding the present, transposing the visitor in the coordinates of past events (Julean 160). It is the architecture of lived lives that can be lived again.

As well as being a conduit for sharing and renegotiating experience, the body can also be a cue for personal memory experiences. The involuntary activation of a particular memory by way of sensory triggers is most commonly associated with smells and tastes, as in Proust. But even Proust’s narrator is just as powerfully drawn back into explicit recollection by way of the body’s *familiarity with certain places*. The mnemonic significance of objects, places, and environments operates by way of interoceptive bodily sensations, as well as through encounters with specific remembered landmarks and locations. The pre-reflective sense of embodied intimacy with a setting may co-exist or merge both with culturally-anchored schemata that suggest what usually happens here according to the social frameworks of memory and with the more precise evocation of particular located personal experiences (Sutton and Williamson 317-18). In this sense, the architect invites the visitor to associate his feelings with specific spatial experiences. In fact, according to the writer’s visitor research at the Jewish Museum Berlin in 2016, the Holocaust Tower (Figure 1) reminds of a prison or revives the atmosphere of a gas chamber intensified by the “darkness” and “a sense of isolation” whereas the Memory Void with the “Fallen Leaves” installation (Figure 2) is reminiscent

of a mass grave. Therefore, one common physical reaction was claustrophobia, indicated by terms such as “suffocation,” “discomfort,” “trapped,” and “confinement.” This feeling was combined with symptoms such as “intense pulse,” “fast heartbeat,” “out of breath,” and “lack of oxygen.” Lenartowicz uses the term “laboratory” to describe this kind of museum architecture. According to him, a laboratory is a structure, which plays on archetypal reactions, such as the experience of darkness or cave. The structure is designed deliberately to interplay with the viewer’s emotions; it places the contemporary viewer in circumstances resembling the situation of a given historical event. A direct, visceral interaction between space and senses takes place, remaining outside of intellectual reflection. The viewer is to become a “surrogate witness” (211). This association of emotions with symbolic experiences evokes the concept of *ideaesthesia*. This is a semantic-sensory phenomenon in which the meaning of the stimulus induces perception-like experiences. The activations of concepts are called *inducers* and the perception-like experiences *concurrents*. Ideaesthesia presumes that the concurrent is of sensory nature while the inducer is semantic (Mroczko-Wąsowicz and Nikolić 509). The heart of this theory lies in the relationship between meaning (concept) and experience (sensation) as the two forces of ideaesthesia (Nikolić 3). Here, however, meaning is much wider than what can be verbalised; the meaning related to language, is only a small fraction of the total meaning machinery that our minds are equipped with. In a piece of architecture, the components that carry the most meaning are also those that induce the strongest sensations (4).

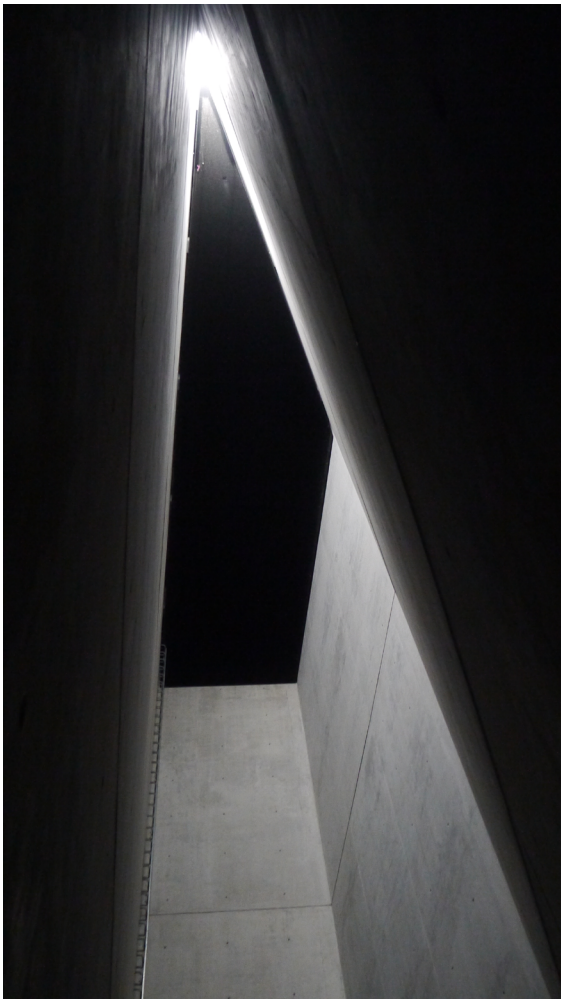


Figure 1. The interior of the Holocaust Tower

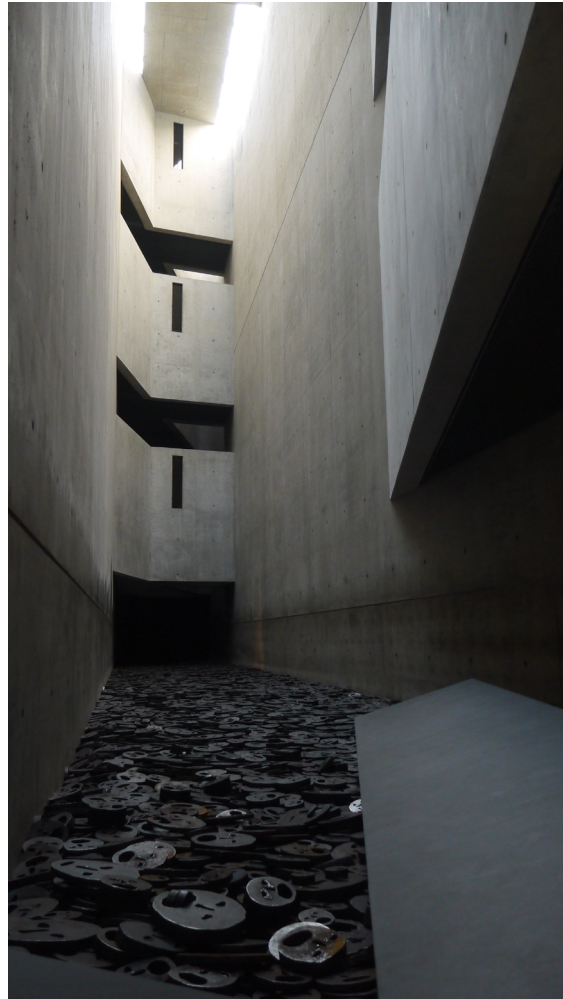


Figure 2. The interior of the Memory Void



Starting from a neurobiological standpoint, Gallese proposes that our capacity to understand others as intentional agents is also deeply grounded in the relational nature of our interactions with the world. According to this hypothesis, an implicit, pre-reflexive form of understanding of other individuals is based on the strong sense of identity binding us to them (177). This is the principle of *situated conceptualisation* which implies that instances of emotion cannot be understood separately from the context in which they occur. First, people may experience different emotions depending on the current state of their body or the auditory, visual or tactile information present in a situation. Second, different contexts evoke different representations of previous experiences, different situational predictions, different categorisations, and different regulation rules. Importantly, sensorimotor and interoceptive changes are related to the emotional experience by association and can contribute to emotion understanding as part of a situated conceptualisation, but these changes do not causally evoke discrete emotional meaning without conceptualisation. The situated conceptualisations that people share are also produced by learning and cultural transfer. Therefore, there is heterogeneity in emotional expression and experience among people from different cultural backgrounds (Oosterwijk and Barrett 259). For instance, in the Jewish Museum Berlin, Libeskind exposed visitors from countries of the Jewish Diaspora to how it feels to be in exile; eradicated, displaced, and uneasy. Therefore, a symptom frequently cited by them was “disorientation,” which caused major “confusion” and “destabilisation,” often combined with “nausea” and “dizziness.” Many have identified this sense with the beginning of their trajectory where they had to choose which axis to follow, while others attributed it to either the sudden turns, the steep angles, and the sharp corners, which gave the building the element of surprise and unpredictability or the labyrinthine structure and slanted grounds of the Garden of Exile (Figure 3), also encountered at the Amsterdam Memorial. In addition, the architect achieved the following graduation of intersubjectivity, according to visitors’ different backgrounds: From the “sympathy” of an older German, who remembered the stories of the families of his Jewish friends, the “compassion” of a young German of Jewish descent, and the feeling of “connection” with camp prisoners enunciated by a young Finnish visitor, to the sense of “bond” and “kinship”, and the absolute “identification” of two older American women, relatives of Jewish immigrants and victims.



Figure 3. The Garden of Exile



## Libeskind's Transmediation Challenges

As cited in Dean's book "The Fragility of Empathy after the Holocaust," the Israeli media had claimed that one of the artworks displayed at the Jewish Museum of New York in 2002 "turned the Holocaust into pornography." Thus, she discusses how the term "pornography" is being used to make cultural meaning out of increasing anxieties and wariness about our responses to representations of bodily suffering, specifically that of European Jewry during the Holocaust. A wide variety of critics frequently use the term to describe the reduction of human beings to commodities and the exposure of vulnerable people at the moment of their most profound suffering, hence re-victimising the victims. This traces new concerns about the failure of empathy now increasingly being articulated in many scholarly discourses. The concept of pornography traverses varied cultural terrains from museum exhibits to scholarly discussions on "Holocaust postmemory" (Dean 16-17). There are some who would deny any possibility of meaning in the *Shoah*. They look at the evil committed, the horrors of the crime, and angrily denounce any attempt to give meaning to such emptiness. They believe that it was a crime so devoid of any humanity, that to try to give it meaning is to mock the dead. A large body of scholarship questions the ability of architecture or any expression of culture to adequately represent bodily suffering and, thus, memorialise the systematic murder of Jews. Adorno, for instance, claims that no medium is strong enough to express the dimension of the atrocities and warns against the "consumption of terror" or the widely used sarcastic term "Shoah business" (17-34). Jackson (ii) comments that while storytelling may help us reconcile fields of experience that are, on the one hand, felt to belong to ourselves or our own kind and, on the other hand, felt to be shared or to belong to others, stories may just as trenchantly exaggerate differences, foment discord, and do violence to lived experience.

The imperative, though, of bearing witness, of passing on what happened, demanded a "language" that would represent trauma without horrific images. So, how did Libeskind deal with this issue? The answer is, by giving physical meaning to absence: At the Jewish Museum Berlin, the voids' negativity cannot be absorbed into the narratives told by objects or installations in the showrooms. Rewers states that the most ethically justified and aesthetically moving are the attempts at showing the void as a state of consciousness after the Shoah, i.e. presenting this void rather than representing it. Thus, she refers to the examples of Celan's poetry, Derrida's philosophy, and Libeskind's architecture which are an attempt at building a shelter for the void (134). Lenartowicz recognises a close resemblance between Libeskind and the attitude of the Polish poet Tadeusz Różewicz. And it is not merely the Holocaust that brings Libeskind and Różewicz together. The issue that both had to deal with was that being silent is different from speaking silence. Like Różewicz, Libeskind tries to express the inexpressible by using emptiness instead of solid materials. This emptiness can be understood as anti-space (214). Therefore, the creation of the voids is a way to avoid mystification of the Holocaust without losing its singularity. Libeskind withstands this challenge in Nussbaum Museum as well: "Expressive of permanent absence, "The Museum of the Unwitnessed and Unfulfilled" is a museum resonant of both the fatality as well as the significance of the unrepresentable abyss of the Holocaust. It acts as a transformer, transmitting the mysterious irreversibility of time and destiny" (*Nussbaum*). Moreover, the Berlin's voids express the obliteration of Jewish culture and confront this erasure by turning the visitor into a witness of absence and by acting as a method of restoring justice (Tsiftsi 109-110). With reference to Nussbaum Haus, Libeskind explains (*Nussbaum*):

The task of building a Museum to house the artistic remnants of Nussbaum's life raises issues which are not merely architectural but moral as well. The unpainted paintings of Felix Nussbaum demand nothing less than to become visible to the contemplating eye. I believe, therefore, that . . . the paintings of Nussbaum are more than paintings—they are everliving documents which, placed in a new context of participation and a new witnessing, elevate the narration of history as art into the emblem of the very survival of the Jewish people and of European civilisation.

As Jackson (67) affirms, for every story that sees the light of day, untold others remain in the shadows, censored or suppressed.

In contrast, there are some who derive ultimate meaning in the Holocaust. The contemporary philosopher Emil Fackenheim argued that the new commandment for the Jew is "not to hand Hitler yet another, posthumous Jewish victory" (23). If there is meaning in the *Shoah* it is not because of it, but in spite

of it. In the hell of the Holocaust also lies the seed of redemption. And it is demonstrated in the goodness of those who saved Jews, in the response of Jewish victims to the Holocaust itself, and in the maintenance of hope after the war was over. It is a willingness to laugh, a desire to have children, a willingness to fight for their own future and the future of others, which defeats the emptiness of the *Shoah* (Zeplowitz). Therefore, in many cases, Libeskind uses the Jewish philosophy and related Hebrew phrases to express hope and optimism. At the Contemporary Jewish Museum, the architect reiterates the idea of the life-giving energy; he underlies the concept of the extension on the forms of the Hebrew letters “chet” (ח) and “yud” (י) which make up the word *Chai* (חי), a Hebrew word meaning “life.” Thereby, an abstract composition was defined: the “rectangular shape” which longitudinally pervades the power plant represents the letter “chet,” and the “cubical” represents the “yud” (“The Contemporary Jewish Museum Building”). The organizing principle of The Danish Jewish Museum is the concept of *Mitzvah* itself in its deep ethical meaning. In this building, the corridor area is shaped in the form of the letters of *Mitzvah* (מצוה). However, this incarnation of discursive elements through his designs is not the only narrative tool of these hopeful stories. In the Danish Jewish Museum, the wood casing on the walls is a reference to the Nordic context—especially Sweden, which constituted a safe refuge for those who escaped—while the sloping floors remind one of high sea, and luminous glass windows are cut into the walls as a reference to *Mitzvah*. Through the synesthetic experience of the visitor, the richness of the Jewish experience in Denmark is given both a deeply memorable and ever-expanding horizon, a “microcosm of *Mitzvah*,” in Libeskind’s words (“The Danish Jewish Museum Architecture”). In other cases like the Monument in Ottawa, he manipulates light to convey his interpretation of events and their repercussions. As he states, this national monument is the expression of Canada’s fundamental democratic values of people regardless of race, class or creed, and apart from commemorating the millions of innocent victims, it is there to recognise those survivors who were able to eventually make Canada their home (Lynch).

Finally, another scepticism regarding empathy is whether it is important for social change or it remains inside the museum building. To start with, empathy is based on emotions and the *power of emotions* to influence judgment and social attitudes has been recognised since classical antiquity. Aristotle, in his treatise *Rhetoric*, described emotional arousal as critical to persuasion. He accordingly warned that emotions may give rise to beliefs where none existed, or change existing beliefs, and may enhance or decrease the strength with which a belief is held (qtd. in Frijda and Mesquita 45). Indeed, recent studies have confirmed that affect does play a general role in attitude change, whether due to persuasive communication or to cognitive dissonance processes (Forgas 145). Besides, an interesting element of Stein’s point of view is the notion that empathy is by no means confined to emotion and feelings but also incorporates *action*. The Other is experienced through the perception of a *similarity relation*, and Stein systematically refers to action as a way of establishing that similarity (19). Robinson notes that empathy expands the domain of the personal to encompass the felt experience of the other, enlarging, enriching, and informing the basis of our possible actions (44). As Gallese and Lakoff would add, we code or traduce environmental stimuli into action potentials (456). According to this assumption, we see clearly the reason why an architect aims at a level of empathy; if it is reached by visitors, it confirms his contribution to social change. As part of this discussion, visitors at the Jewish Museum Berlin utilised the words “lesson” and “example,” terms that constitute a direct reference to the *exemplary memory* introduced by Tzvetan Todorov. He discerned it from the literal memory which insists on the uniqueness of the event and denies any comparability while the exemplary memory seeks to make connections between the suffering in question and other events of horror, thus opening people’s memories to *analogy* and making it possible to extract lessons that can inform present and future practices aimed at combating injustices (258).

## Conclusion

To sum up, when a narrative is transmediated from discourse to architecture, the past is not simply unfolded in front of the “reader”; it is there to be lived directly and viscerally. The “reader” is no longer a passive recipient but he turns into an active agent. The power of sharing the experience through a bodily participation

and the realisation of an association encourages him to relate to the absent Other. This transmediation gives a new perspective not only to narratology but also to museography as it breaks down the distance between “subject” and “object” that has traditionally been the hallmark of museum spectatorship. This new perspective entails unpredictability as the visitors respond to architecture and participate in memory in idiosyncratic ways. Libeskind took specific stories about the Holocaust and created his own architectural vocabulary and his own discourse. From the verbal iteration, the narrative was now expressed through meaningful designs, hard materials ‘soaked’ with powerful symbolism, and light manipulations. With tools like the empathic concern, the situated conceptualisation, and the ideaesthesia, Libeskind managed to approach different aspects of the Holocaust story. By focusing on intersubjectivity and localised narrations, he succeeded in attenuating the stiff discourse of the Holocaust metanarrative. Moreover, his architecture accomplished something unachievable for discourse; to speak silence. In this way, Libeskind corresponded to the ethical challenge of trivialisation of the Holocaust induced by its transmedia “migration”; from the body of the sufferer to the body of the building and, finally, to the body of the visitor. In the end, as proved through visitors’ data, using the power of emotions and the exemplary memory, he connected young generations to the distant past with a thorough understanding of current social issues, such as racism, xenophobia, and intolerance. Therefore, his spaces do not offer an answer to the problem of postmemory but rather return the burden of memory to their visitors.

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