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Teutonic Shifts, Jewish Voids

Remembering the Holocaust in post-Wall Germany

Bettina Mathes

The past, indeed, is our very being, and it can stay alive and evolve; the present is the passage where the retranscription and recontextualization of our past continually occur.

Dominique Scarfone

There is a certain refusal of responsibility in the way Germany turns to foreigners (who are often Jewish) to build memorials to the crimes of National Socialism: Micha Ullman (the book-burning memorial at Bebelplatz), Daniel Libeskind (the Jewish Museum in Berlin), Richard Serra (the memorial to those murdered in the Nazi euthanasia programme), and of course Peter Eisenman, architect of Germany's national Holocaust Memorial in Berlin.

Do victims have a better memory?

'Innocent bystanders' to their own history, Germans delegate the task of giving expression to the memory of Nazism and the Holocaust to those who once were the targets of Germany's genocidal politics.

Berlin. My first visit to the *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* built by Peter Eisenman in Berlin takes place on a cool summer day in June 2005, three weeks after the memorial's official 'opening'. I do not go unprepared to meet the field of more than 2700 concrete pillars, conveniently located in the heart of the new Berlin between the Brandenburg Gate, the former Berlin Wall, and Hitler's Führerbunker. For years the media have supplied descriptions, explanations and critiques regarding the meaning, the political importance and the shortcomings of the memorial. From the very beginning Eisenman's design generated controversial debate between politicians, historians, cultural critics, and the architect himself. Was the vast field of concrete pillars the right choice? Could abstract architecture adequately represent the horrors of the Holocaust?



Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, designed by Peter Eisenman © Foundation Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, photo: Yara Lemke, September 2005

Did Germany really need a national Holocaust memorial given the numerous smaller memorials that already exist all over Germany?

When I enter the memorial, I feel over-prepared. My mind is filled with information about the history of the site, the meaning of Eisenman's design, its significance for Germany's national identity. The information I have gathered makes it hard for me to experience the memorial as it is, with fresh eyes and a fresh mind. My thoughts keep returning to a statement by the architect posted online:

The memory of the Holocaust can never be one of nostalgia... The Holocaust cannot be remembered in the nostalgic mode, as its horror forever ruptured the link between nostalgia and memory... The monument attempts to present a new idea of memory as distinct from nostalgia.¹

I could not agree more. But when I emerge from the memorial, I find it more difficult than before to distinguish between memory, sentimentality and nostalgia. Not because the field of pillars looks like a gigantic cemetery (which it does). Rather, because the further I walk into the memorial the more I am made to experience disorientation, loss and despair – 'Jewish' disorientation, loss and despair. As the dark grey pillars contain no reference to the specific crimes of the Nazi

1. Peter Eisenman, 'Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe', Berlin, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/germans/memorial/eisenman.html>, accessed 1 August 2009

perpetrators and their identity, it is almost impossible for a German visitor not to adopt a victimised position. There is a difference between empathy (a motivation towards the other person in which self and other remain separate) and identification (the self strives to become the other). Instead of feeling *for* the murdered Jews, the memorial invites me to feel as Jewish victim. According to the architect this is not a bad thing.

[Once you enter the memorial] there is no abstraction there. There is a lot of feeling... You will feel what it is like to be lost in space. When you walk in, it is not an abstraction.²

I do not like how the memorial affects me. I do not want to be made to identify with Jewish Holocaust victims. I find it presumptuous to put myself in the position of a Jewish woman about to be deported to Auschwitz. I do not agree that the appropriation of a victimised position is an adequate form for the nation of perpetrators to remember its crimes. To me the memorial justifies Germany's sentimental investment in Jews as 'lost', and Jewish culture as ruin. I remain unconvinced by Eisenman's design and leave the site somewhat frustrated.

On my way home I remind myself that my frustration is larger than Peter Eisenman's architecture. Most national monuments invite a certain degree of nostalgia as they fix memory, idealise history and transform the past into a lost home. Through monumentalisation we inhabit the past and thereby repossess it. Seen this way, Peter Eisenman's insistence on the anti-nostalgic character of his memorial seems like a defence against the nostalgic impulse inherent to all memorials. But also a somewhat belated attempt to fend off the ghosts of nostalgia.

Peter Eisenman is not the first architect or artist critical of nostalgia. There is Horst Hoheisel's radical proposal for the Holocaust memorial: blow up the Brandenburg Gate, grind the rubble to dust, spread it across Pariser Platz and cover the site with granite plates.

If I remain unconvinced by Eisenman's design, it is not because the architect 'failed'. It is certainly not Peter Eisenman's task to remedy Germany's memory problems. What concerns me is the place the memorial occupies in Germany's national imaginary: an invitation to forget about the perpetrators as well as an opportunity to reassemble the shards of our recent history.

On my second visit to the memorial, four years later, in the autumn of 2010, I am less preoccupied with myself. Instead, I try to observe as closely as possible what is going on at the site. And there is much going on.

It is a warm and sunny afternoon and the memorial is busy. Children play hide and seek; teenage boys jump from pillar to pillar; monitored by their teachers at least three different groups of high school students stroll through the memorial; fidgeting with their cell phones, they seem absent-minded. Adults (women and men, young and old, students and professionals, all of them white) are lounging on the smaller pillars at the margins. Some of them are reading, others are picnicking. Three bankers in grey summer suits are unpacking their lunch bags, deep in conversation about a new porn movie that has just been released on some internet file-sharing site. Two lovers kissing and hugging seem oblivious of what is happening around them. They are students at Humboldt University taking a break from classes, I imagine. A middle-aged woman is

2. Ibid

sunbathing in the mellow afternoon sun, her eyes closed, her body stretched out on the warm concrete of the pillar.

Are they all regulars? Or are they here for the first time? Nearby two little blonde girls with ponytails, not older than five, are baking sand cookies on a pillar. How did they manage to bring the sand to the memorial?

I am fascinated. Here I am at Germany's national Holocaust memorial and Germans are using it as if the memorial was a café, a backyard, an adventure playground, an apartment, a bedroom. Where are the guards? As I look up, I see Berlin's signature hot air balloon – colourfully striped like a beach ball – hovering over the memorial.

A group of five elderly women approaches. Their accents reveal they are from Southern Germany, perhaps from Austria. They sit down on a pillar to roost. Their faces are friendly and relaxed, but also serious, earnest and (in a way) empty, turned inwards. Their eyes are wandering across the memorial. Are they looking at the pillars or are the pillars looking at them? In their identical coats and with identical haircuts (albeit different colours) the women mirror the uniformity of the pillars. As if they wanted to be recognised by the monument as one body.

Is this their way of commemorating the Holocaust? Are they afraid they might be singled out? They talk about how much they like the memorial.

The pillars are beautiful, they say.

Theirs is not a conversation. Their words are addressed to themselves, not to one another. Perhaps because, if asked, they would not be able to explain what exactly constitutes the beauty of a memorial dedicated to the murdered Jews of Europe. Perhaps there really is nothing more to say than just that. What they see is what they see: an undulating field of concrete slabs, quiet in the mellow afternoon sun.

That day at the Holocaust Memorial I begin to understand what Peter Eisenman means when he insists that the memorial is not *about* the Holocaust:

I believe that when you walk into this place, it's not going to matter whether you are a Jew or a non-Jew, a German or a victim: you're going to feel something. And what I'm interested in is that experience of feeling something. Not necessarily anything to do with the Holocaust, but to feel something different from everyday experience. That was what I was trying to do. It's not about guilt, it's not about paying back, it's not about identification, it's not about any of those things; it's about being. And I'm interested, in a sense, in the question of being and how we open up being to very different experiences.³

If I translate Eisenman's statement into my own vocabulary, I would say there is no subtext to the Holocaust Memorial. No hidden meaning and no *Überbau*. What if it is true? What if the pillars are what they are: slabs of concrete, 2700 of them. A wall to be. A wall that could have been. A wall to love.

Here is a proposition: the Holocaust Memorial allows Germans to indulge in *now*, on the quiet, what they have not had a chance to enjoy since that cold November day in 1989 when the GDR opened its borders: the Berlin Wall. Not the real Wall, not the Wall as *Schandmauer* ('wall of shame', the West German term) or *antifaschistischer Schutzwall*

3. Peter Eisenman quoted in Mark Godfrey, *Abstraction and the Holocaust*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2007, p 249

(‘anti-fascist protective barrier’, the East German euphemism). No. The Wall as dream wall. A Wall that can be approached without guilt or fear for one’s life. A Wall that is not part of a dictatorial regime and a ‘Cold War’. A Wall as screen, a Wall that protects a dream. A Wall that promises peace of mind, security, relief from guilt, the innocence of childhood.

A wishful fantasy? Perhaps. But also a psychic reality.

Despite the suffering the Berlin Wall inflicted, on a collective level it helped both West Germany and East Germany to split off feelings of guilt for the Holocaust and to move on into a brighter future untarnished by mass murder and war – the Wall as ersatz therapy. For almost three decades, beginning on 13 August 1961, the two Germanys were united in the relief from guilt and shame offered by the Wall. A *Schlußstrich* (final line) turned stone, the Wall stood as an expression of Germany’s wish to distance itself from its past. As ‘anti-fascist protection barrier’ the Wall ‘protected’ East Germans from their own history of anti-Semitism and genocide, turning the West Germans into the perpetrators and those in the East into the Nazi’s former victims, the communists. As ‘Wall of Shame’ it enabled West Germans to deflect the shame caused by memories of the Shoah onto the ‘other’ German state, the one they referred to as a concentration camp, as then mayor of Berlin Willy Brandt put it in his initial reaction to the building of the Berlin Wall on the morning of 13 August 1961.

In the shadow of the Wall Germans on either side were able to dream dreams of innocence. Dreams of a Wall that does not separate families and tear apart lovers. Dreams of Wall jumpers who are not shot by border guards. Dreams of a life lived on the fence. Dreams of flying. Of crossing over the Wall in a hot air balloon and living to tell of it. (Once this dream comes true. In 1979, after years of preparation, two East German families escape the GDR in a hot air balloon. They reach West Germany unharmed, unlike the many who were murdered trying to cross the border into West Germany.)

In West Germany the dream became manifest in Peter Schneider’s novella *The Wall Jumper*. In this satiric tale, in which the Berlin Wall is featured as the main protagonist, jumping the Wall is among the favourite pastimes of Berliners from both Germanys. One of the regulars is Herr Kabe who, tired of having to circumvent the Wall when travelling across town, grows curious as to what the Eastern part of the city looks like. So he jumps. After his first jump into East Berlin Kabe is interrogated by the East German police who believe he has ‘several screws loose’, a euphemism for his ‘pathological desire to overcome the Wall’, which the authorities decide needs to be treated in a psychiatric clinic. Does Kabe not know how to distinguish between dream and reality?

Released from the clinic, Kabe went straight back to the Wall. Altogether he jumped fifteen times and put a serious strain on German–German relations. Questions about the motives of his jumping drew nothing more from Kabe than this: ‘Sometimes it’s so quiet in the apartment and so gray and cloudy outside and nothing’s happening and I think to myself: hey, let’s go jump the Wall again.’

In East Germany – where one was not allowed to approach, photograph or publicly make fun of the Wall – it was the state that sustained the

dream. The dream went like this: the Wall stands for peace, freedom and security. The Wall allows the East German homeland to flourish, undisturbed by National Socialism and the degenerate forces of capitalism; the Wall protects the young Socialist nation and its utopian aspiration of building a society where everyone is free, equal and taken care of.

The enduring hymn of the *Ernst Thälmann Pioniere* (Ernst Thälmann Pioneers), the GDR youth organisation to which virtually every child between 4th and 7th grade belonged, conveys the wishful fantasy of an East German state home to innocence and natural beauty, worthy of love, dedication and protection. A children's choir spread the fantasy on the radio and at Party functions.

*Unsre Heimat, das sind nicht nur die Städte und Dörfer,
Unsre Heimat sind auch all die Bäume im Wald.
Unsre Heimat ist das Gras auf der Wiese,
das Korn auf dem Feld, und die Vögel in der Luft
und die Tiere der Erde
und die Fische im Fluß sind die Heimat.
Und wir lieben die Heimat, die Schöne.
Und wir schützen sie,
weil sie dem Volke gehört,
weil sie unserem Volke gehört.
Unsere Heimat.*

[Our Homeland is not only the cities and towns;
Our Homeland is also all the trees in the forest.
Our Homeland is the grass in the meadow,
the grain in the field and the birds in the air.
The animals of the earth,
and the fish in the river are the Homeland.
We love the beautiful Homeland.
And we protect it
because it belongs to the People,
because it belongs to Our People.
Our Homeland.]

The concrete slabs of the Berlin Wall were ugly. They cannot compete with the cool elegance of Peter Eisenman's stelae.

The real Wall disappeared quickly. Within less than a year the Wall was gone, buried at a *Mauerfriedhof* (Wall cemetery) on the outskirts of Berlin. So thoroughly have its physical traces been erased that even Berliners find it hard to tell where the Wall used to be. A bewildering erasure of history, for sure. But also an understandable move. In a unified Germany the now useless Wall would have stood as a reminder of how thoroughly Germans on both sides have been in denial about the pain the Wall caused. At the inner-city Wall in Berlin at least 136 people were killed when trying to cross over. The total number of people who died along the German–German border between 1961 and 1989 is estimated to be more than a thousand. Its rapid dismantling seems like a desperate attempt to keep on dreaming.

There is a poetic recurring theme in Amie Siegel's feature film *DDR/DDR* (2008) in which East German actor Kurt Naumann – the lead in Peter Kahane's *Die Architekten* (*The Architects*), a film from the DEFA studio about East German society in decay incidentally shot during and after the opening of the Berlin Wall – follows the path of the disappeared wall as if on a tightrope.⁴ Naumann's balancing on the invisible crest of

4. Amie Siegel, *DDR/DDR*, 135 minutes, colour, USA, 2008

the Berlin Wall is not only a metaphor for the ghostly presence of the absent Wall. More than this it is a statement about the precarious psychological balance of both East and West Germans in post-Wall Germany. While it is certainly true that for West Germans reunification felt more like an expansion of the old Federal Republic than a change or reorientation, whereas the former citizens of the GDR were forced to (quite literally) abandon their ethical, moral, political and aesthetic values, it is equally true that with the opening of the Wall both Germanys lost the protective screen that had allowed the two nations of perpetrators to dream safely.

If Germany could have its Wall back, if not for real then – even better! – in symbolic form. Since the building of the Holocaust Memorial, where visitors may ‘enjoy’ the memory of Auschwitz, Germans can rest assured that there will always be a wall to prop up their dream and protect their innocence.

A line in Robert Frost’s poem ‘Mending Wall’ comes to my mind: ‘Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.’⁵

Not here, not in Germany. Not in this *Volk* of wall lovers.

What I object to about staging ‘wall loving’ on the site of the Holocaust memorial is not so much *that* it happens but *the way* it happens: the silent, unconscious routine with which the phantasmatic reification of the Wall is superimposed on the memory of the Holocaust. Unencumbered by any critical discourse Germany uses the memorial – mute and patient as it is – as an imaginary space to enjoy the psychic relief afforded by the Wall. It is neither a coincidence nor without significance that the name of the Holocaust survivor chosen to represent the forgiveness of the Jewish people at the opening of the Holocaust Memorial – Sabina van der Linden – recalls the nearby boulevard Unter den Linden, itself a monument to a certain perplexity regarding the fall of the Wall (linking, as it does, the demolished Communist Palace of the Republic and the newly renovated façades of Prussian grandeur). It is telling that German newspapers did not use her full name which is Sabina van der Linden-Wolanski. Did the name sound too Polish or too Jewish?

There *is* a subtext to the Holocaust Memorial: history. Underneath the memorial, in an underground exhibition space and archive, the German state has established the Ort der Information (Place of Information), dedicated to providing historical information about the reality of the Holocaust. The reality of the Holocaust as substratum. Is not that exactly what the Berlin Wall stood for? Now that the Wall is gone, the Holocaust Memorial picks up the pieces.

I leave the memorial and head for a street café on Unter den Linden boulevard. The image of the five elderly women in identical outfits lingers in my mind. One question remains. If the Holocaust memorial is not necessarily about the Holocaust, what does this say about the New Germany’s commitment to remembering Jewish-German history?

I decide to revisit the Jewish Museum. A monument in its own right, it used to attract as much attention a few years ago as the Holocaust Memorial does now. What draws visitors to the museum is not so much the objects displayed and the history they represent. Visitors come to see the spectacular building designed by architect Daniel Libeskind.

5. I owe the term ‘wall loving’ and the connection to Frost’s poem to Marilyn Reizbaum’s ‘Die Dividende der DEFA: Architektur des Film vor und nach der Wende’, in Bettina Mathes, ed, *Die imaginierte Nation: Identität, Körper und Geschlecht in DEFA-Filmen*, DEFA Stiftung, Berlin, 2007, pp 16–41.



Aerial view of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, designed by Daniel Libeskind © Jewish Museum Berlin, photo: Günter Schneider, 2008

According to Libeskind and architecture critic James Young the defining idea behind the design of the building is the need to address the self-inflicted 'void' the Holocaust left in the centre of German culture and the conundrum resulting from that 'void'. (Libeskind and Young are a well-rehearsed 'couple'. Young has explained and defended Libeskind's architecture on several occasions.) As Young observes, the architect (any architect) had to deal with the following challenge:

How to give voice to an absent Jewish culture without presuming to speak for it? How to bridge an open wound [in German culture] without mending it?... How to give a void a form without mending it?⁶

The building is a response to these questions. This is why the shape and façade of the museum are broken in several places. There is also a 'straight void-line running through the plan which violates every space through which it passes, turning otherwise uniform rooms and halls into misshapen anomalies'. The façade, as the architect explains, is meant to resemble a 'house whose wings have been scrambled and reshaped by the jolt of genocide'.⁷

6. James E Young, 'Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin: The Uncanny Arts of Memorial Architecture', *Jewish Social Studies*, vol 6, no 2, p 10

7. Daniel Libeskind, 'Between the Lines: Extension to the Berlin Museum, with the Jewish Museum', *Assemblage*, 12, 1990, p 35, p 48

Libeskind's approach is literal. He builds metaphors. What this style of memorial architecture achieves is as obvious as it is problematic.

With its 'voids', disrupted linear structures, broken walls, its many rooms 'too small to hold anything, others so oblique as to estrange anything housed within them',⁸ the Jewish Museum lends solidity to the notion that in Germany Jewish must equal absent. That this assumption is false should be obvious. Germany – its landscape, its towns and cities – is pervaded by visible and invisible remnants of a once vibrant presence of Jewish culture (not to mention the dynamic, if small, Jewish communities in cities like Berlin, Frankfurt, Munich, Dresden and Hamburg). Why build voids to represent the effects of the Holocaust when there is a multitude of traces from the past? Consider the apartment buildings and department stores in East Berlin that used to belong to Jewish owners; the Jewish cemeteries; the remnants of the Jewish ghetto in Frankfurt am Main; the writings of Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud and Hannah Arendt; the photography of Gisèle Freund – do they all fall under the category of 'the void'? Or is it the other way round, does the void allow Germans to ignore the repercussions of anti-Semitism, murder and the Holocaust in the present? The architectural metaphor of the void builds a defence against recollection. It nourishes the perverse fantasy of total elimination: in a world in which the dead do not leave a trace behind, the past ceases to exist; in a world where the past is conceived of as void the obligation to address its consequences does not make sense. As a metaphor for a present without a past, for 'a time without memory', the void encourages silence.⁹

Libeskind's notion of Jews as lack may perhaps be explained by his lack of experience of contemporary Germany. The architect, who had not spent much time in Germany before being invited to build the Jewish Museum, was uninformed about the life and politics of German Jews in unified Germany. Perhaps he did not know about the awkward silences that surround Jews and Jewish life in Germany. Perhaps he was unaware that the nostalgic fetishisation of Jews as 'lost' and Jewish culture as ruin has been a defining characteristic of postwar Germany.

Describing Jewish life in Germany as void is a careless use of metaphor and an act of abstraction that plays into the German preference for embracing the idea of Jewish culture as 'lost' rather than embracing the (few) Jews living among us and – more importantly – creating a more welcoming environment for Judaism in which Jewish Germans consider themselves ordinary citizens, in which Jewish traditions and lived Jewish culture are an accepted and normal part of German society.

Similar to the Holocaust Memorial, the Jewish Museum conceives of the memory of the Holocaust in abstract terms and as abstraction, liberating – as Irit Rogoff points out – the children and grandchildren of the perpetrators from having to 'deal with the effects of the histories. . . on the cultures that perpetrated these elisions and remained seemingly inviolate in their wake'.¹⁰ All of this may be obvious to a critical observer. However, insisting on the obvious is important because the building (and the rhetoric that supports it) has provided a powerful theoretical foundation for the culture of abstraction that concerns me. When a Jewish architect describes Jewish traditions in Germany as (beautified) void, then who are we Germans (who am I?) to contradict him? With this in mind let me revisit this architecture of voids.

8. Young, op cit, p 10

9. Dominique Scarfone, 'A Matter of Time: Actual Time and the Production of the Past', *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, vol 75, no 3, 2006, pp 807–834

10. Irit Rogoff, 'Hit and Run: Museums and Cultural Difference', *Art Journal*, vol 61, no 3, 2002, p 64

The building – not the museum – was opened in the summer of 1999 before it was closed again in late 2000 for installation, and then reopened as museum in 2001. During those first eighteen months trained tour guides ‘explained’ the meaning of the building (as prescribed by the architect) to its visitors. In the empty building thousands of visitors were instructed in applying the rhetoric of the void to all things Jewish.

What strikes me on my tour of the empty building is the obsession with walls. Walls everywhere – unexpected and non-functional, blocking the way, obstructing my vision, creating claustrophobic, prison-like spaces. Unconvinced by the literal translation of history into architectural form, to me the empty building bespeaks an obsession with blockage and barricade, a fetishisation of walls and screens. And then there is the building’s alluring glistening façade (authoritative and awe-inspiring, but also broken, opened up, punctured), its twisted, jagged shape echoing the zigzag contours (and contortions) of the Berlin Wall which used to stand in the immediate vicinity of the museum. The empty Jewish Museum, a beautiful ‘dressed up’ monument to the disappeared Berlin Wall, this other ‘void’ defining Berlin’s urban landscape.¹¹

11. The official, much less known, Wall Memorial at Bernauer Straße in Berlin is plagued by a similar self-satisfaction. It consists of a partly preserved and partly reconstituted stretch of the original Wall, complete with Hinterlandmauer (hinterland Wall), death strip and Vorderlandmauer (outer Wall, facing West). The ensemble is framed at either end by a giant ‘mirror’ eight metres high which creates the illusion of an infinite continuation of the Wall. Access to the memorial is restricted to a zone behind the Hinterlandmauer where visitors try to get a glimpse through a slit between the concrete segments of what is left of the original ‘death strip’. In 2003 a viewing platform was added, allowing visitors to scan the memorial from above. In its attempt to re-create an authentic encounter with the Wall as it stood during Germany’s division, the memorial satisfies the nostalgic desire for repetition but does not provoke critical reflection on the relationship between past and present, then and now. The cleanliness and immutability of the site precludes any questions as to how the meaning of the wall might have shifted over time, both before and after its fall.

I am getting ahead of myself. When the Jewish Museum reopened in 2001, I was not alone in complaining that the objects on display ruined the ‘aura’ of the building, interfered with its self-contained ‘message’ of absence and lack. The museum seems cluttered, stuffed with too many awkwardly placed items. Indoctrinated by the notion of Jewish culture as void, I can barely tolerate the material objects placed in this awesome kingdom of emptiness. Overwhelmed by the rhetoric of the void, I am unable to see how problematic it is that Germany chooses to build a museum dedicated to documenting the rich tradition of German-Jewish exchanges that would resist its very purpose. *Bitte nicht stören*. Do not disturb the voids.

Do we always have to follow orders? Why not take advantage of the voids? Instead of trying to turn the resisting building into a museum filled with objects that are bound to seem out of place, it might be more productive to challenge the voids. Why not fill them with items stolen from Jewish homes after their owners were rounded up and deported to concentration camps? Berlin’s thrift shops and antique stores are a treasure trove! So far the curatorial concept has been symptomatic of the awkwardness with which Jews and Jewish traditions are treated in Germany. I remember the display of a Shabbat dinner table set for eight people. The table was covered with a white embroidered tablecloth, plates, glasses, silverware, two candles, a goblet of wine, two loaves of challah, all the things that are needed to celebrate Shabbat. The ensemble was arranged on a pedestal and put under a large glass cage. Although not intended by the curators, the ensemble stood as perfect metaphor for the invisible wall that exists between Jewish and non-Jewish Germans in Germany.

There are voids. And there are *Über*-voids. Libeskind constructed so-called ‘voided voids’ – sealed empty spaces that stand as the building’s backbone – which he describes as ‘an emblem wherein the invisible, the void, has made itself apparent as such’. (In the same vein, Eisenman claimed the abstracted field of pillars represented the absence that the murder of European Jewry left in German culture.) For many visitors and historians these ‘voided voids’ are the most important feature of the whole building. But representing nothing still means to represent

something, as Derrida pointed out in his response to Libeskind and Eisenman's architecture.¹² Because they are meant to represent the 'loss' and 'absence' of Jewish life, the 'voided voids' are not void at all.

My question is: what does the preference for terms like 'absence', 'void' and 'loss' mean when used to describe the memory of the Holocaust? Do not misunderstand me: there can be no doubt that the mass murder of Jews destroyed a lively and vital part of German (and European) culture; there is also no doubt that the lives of millions of Jewish men, women and children were wiped out in the Holocaust. But they did not vanish without leaving a trace behind. What, then, does it mean that Germany is so much invested in representing nothing, when it comes to the memory of the Holocaust? Is it a testimony to the belief in the 'final solution'? An annihilation of the past? It is inadequate to conceive of the effects of the Holocaust as 'void'. Not only does it liberate the culture that perpetrated the genocide from dealing with the aftermath of this crime, but there are no consequences, the 'voids' seem to say. There is just NOTHING.

And then there is the Wall. In promoting an 'aesthetics of lack' the museum resembles the death strip at the now disappeared Berlin Wall: creating an untouchable space, an area beyond the reach of criticism, inaccessible to reason, precluding grief and mourning. And has the Jewish Museum not positioned itself in and as such a death strip? As a piece of architecture that eludes criticism and commands respect. A hermetic, bunker-like and perfectly self-satisfied building. *Berühren verboten*. Do not touch.

Down the line. In 1997, two years before the completion of the Jewish Museum, Daniel Libeskind was awarded an honorary doctorate from Humboldt University for his design of the Jewish Museum. Humboldt is the former East Berlin University, situated in the district of Mitte where East and West meet, and whose now East *and* West German faculty to this day are haunted by their inability to overcome the Wall in their heads. In his acceptance speech titled 'Beyond the Wall' Libeskind talked about the importance of transgressing the wall and the straight line in his architecture. Of course, he did not mention the Berlin Wall. The honoured architect knew better than to perturb his German audience. His language remained vague, more like a string of associations and metaphors than a lecture:

Lines of history and of events; lines of experience and of the look; lines of drawing and of construction. These vectors form a patterned course towards the 'unsubsided' which paradoxically grows more heavy as it becomes more light. I think of it as that which cannot be buried; that which cannot be extinguished: Call it Architecture if you want.¹³

12. Jacques Derrida, 'A Letter to Peter Eisenman', *Assemblage*, 12, 1990, pp 6–13

13. Daniel Libeskind, 'Beyond the Wall', in Der Präsident der Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, ed, *Vorträge anlässlich der Verleihung der Ehrendoktorwürde an Daniel Libeskind*, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Berlin, 1997, p 31

'Architecture', Libeskind said in Berlin, 'is and remains the ethical, the true, the good and the beautiful'. Beauty indeed. Unlike the real Wall, the museum's glistening façade may not be sprayed with graffiti. An immaculate reproduction of that psychic Wall that sustained Germany's dream of innocence. Call it architecture if you want. I call it denial.

For Amie Siegel and Nicola Burg