

# Inspiration through Memory

Committed to expanding the scope of architecture, Daniel Libeskind's designs reflect his profound interest and involvement in philosophy, art, literature and music. In conversation with IA&B, Daniel talks about his beginnings, his journey, his philosophy and his weakness for the value of human memory in architecture.

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International architect and designer, Daniel Libeskind was born in Poland in 1946. A virtuoso musician before becoming an architect, he has received numerous awards and designed world-renowned projects including: the Jewish Museum in Berlin, the Denver Art Museum, the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, the Military History Museum in Dresden, and the masterplan for Ground Zero among others. Fundamental to his philosophy is the notion that buildings are crafted with a perceptible human energy, and that they address the greater cultural context in which they are built. Daniel teaches and lectures at universities across the world. He resides in New York City with his wife and business partner, Nina Libeskind.

**IA&B: You have enjoyed a peculiarly mixed cultural background, spread across countries like Poland, Israel and the United States. Do you think this has had an influence on how you see architecture?**

**DL:** Most definitely. It was only because of the different circumstances that I encountered; because of the fact that I was an immigrant, because both my parents were immigrants; because I once lived under a totalitarian or communist dictatorship in Poland; because I found myself, each time, as a stranger in a new place, that I was able to realize how incredible the world really is. What this made me realise is that it is not just about being in one place; it is about the world itself, the variety, the challenges, the people, the beauty and so on; and that has definitely had an influence on my architecture, for it has given me a global experience, a cosmopolitan understanding. And I would say that it is because I have never been in a provincial setting, restricted to the same place with the same people and language or with the same values, that I have been able to learn and discover something more.

**IA&B: The Felix Nussbaum Haus in Osnabrück, your first building, displayed a sort of blatant symbolism. How did this idea emerge? Did that influence manifest itself in your subsequent designs?**

**DL:** The Felix Nussbaum Haus was a very small and humble building dedicated to a Jewish painter who's all perished in the holocaust. It was a building to tell a story. It was a very simple building which I called "a museum without an exit"; because there is no exit from that life. You have to get into that life to understand what it means to have lived in those dark times and I wanted to communicate an experience; but experience also with hope and not just the fatality, the destruction and the fact that it is irremediable. But the fact that we have to learn something, see something through this experience. Of course it was my first small building

which I actually built before the Jewish museum was realized. But it dealt with history, it dealt with expression, it dealt with 'how to have a story' rather than just 'how to build an abstract structure'; it dealt with very simple materials - wood, concrete, glass - bringing new life to this town, new understanding to people after the event and something to inspire further questioning and further hope. So, yes, that was certainly very important in my architecture.

**IA&B: You have previously stated: "Music speaks to us in a mysterious way. Architecture is very similar." Can you please elaborate?**

**DL:** I was a professional musician. But to answer more directly to this question, music speaks to you in mysterious ways because music is, in one way, a science, just like architecture. It is very precise; every vibration, every chord, the structure of music itself is so objective and incredible. Given all that, music is the means to communicate to the soul, it is about emotion. No one will ever say that 'music' is listening to this scientific, geometric aspect of the music; they are listening to the music itself. And this is true even with architecture. Even though architecture is very objective, technological and highly scientific, at the end, it is only a means to communicate something to the human soul; something which is ineffable, which is not about the object, but about the meaning of things, the meaning of life, the meaning of where you are, who you are and what you are looking at. So in a way music and architecture are very similar, both, very objective, very scientific, highly structured, very precise, perfect, but in the end only means to say something that can only be accessed emotionally. You can play a perfect concerto with every note correctly, not to any music and not communicate anything. And in a similar way you can have a perfect building, with perfect material and perfect technical solutions; but if there is no emotion there is nothing in it. So that is why I think these two field are very close to each other and very



connected in history, because of their proportions, their mystery, their history of communication and because both of them deal with the ineffable, with the human soul, the heart.

**IA&B: Your projects reflect tradition, on the one hand, but also extremity of form on the other. How do you negotiate these opposing forces in architecture?**

**DL:** Well, I don't think they are opposing, because tradition is very radical. Tradition, often, is the forgetting of tradition, forgetting of what it is - just a ritual, just a mythology, just an acquired habit. But the true tradition in every space and every place in history has the radical flame of something fantastic, something legitimate and something very wondrous. So, to me, using forms that might even be disturbing, that raise questions, that are not simply repetitions of that formula are the only way to really re-open that tradition to its true light, to its true flame which is always burning in every tradition. And I think that, to me, is not a contradiction but really the way tradition is transmitted.

**IA&B: "Memory is complete intellectual and emotional immersion in the event itself." You have designed Jewish museums in Berlin, San Francisco and Copenhagen. What was your personal memory that influenced your work there? Can you share that with us?**

**DL:** Of course. Well, first of all, it is the memory of people, not statistics; nobody can understand what six million murdered people are, nobody can understand any genocide, what it means. We have to understand individuals, we have to encounter individuals. You know, for this project I did not have to go the library to research it because my parents are holocaust survivors. I grew up with no family, and they grew up with no family. They were virtually the only survivors. I understood what it meant. I understood what it means to eradicate an entire community, to try to eradicate a culture. That is really what memory is. Memory is not just a general historical understanding of something. It is an individual encounter with each soul and of course this is an infinite task. How can we

go further, how can we know every one of the children, every one of the women, every one of the families? We cannot. But it is a task that is given in eternity and I think, in that sense that is the question of memory. Memory is not just something passing, but really a dimensional orientation which is beyond space, because it is orientation in time. And of course carrying that memory is something which is living; it is not a memory of the dead, it is the memory of the living and that is a part of how I developed the Jewish Museum or the buildings at Ground Zero. It is important to know that memory is not always negative; there is also a formation of life in memory, a foundation of continuity.

**IA&B: What would you say was the positive aspect in the conception of the Jewish Museums?**

**DL:** The positive aspect in Berlin was how to bring hope after such an event, because the event itself is over, there is nothing you can do about it; it is irreversible. We cannot bring the dead back, but what you can do is provide a hope through looking again, through an encounter which is experiential, spiritual, you can encounter your own sense of reality in history and that is, of course, what it is. In San Francisco, it is a celebration of Jewish culture, a communal culture. In America they are optimists, and they have great possibilities offered to immigrants. So each project has a different sense. In Copenhagen, it is more of a celebration of how this one country in the middle of the darkest period of history saved the Jews, by saving them, not handing them over to death camps but shipping them on boats to Sweden - a gesture of something so incredibly positive. So, each of these museums has a different phonology, a different story.

**IA&B: The Leuphana Universität Lüneburg, in Lower Saxony, is currently developing the new central building that you have designed with students. How did this project and collaboration initiate? How was it working with students?**

**DL:** It was perfectly fantastic. In fact, the entire project began with students. It is a university that has undergone transformation, from



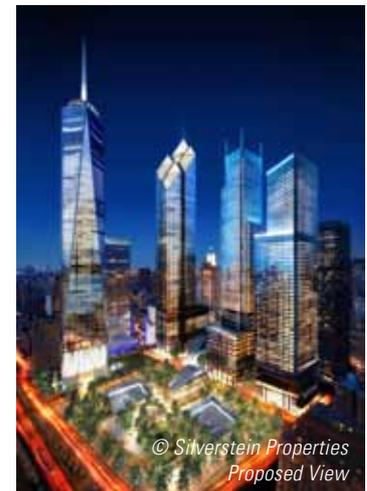
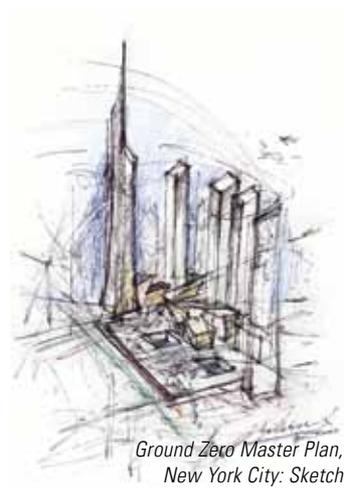
a mediocre university to one of the greatest universities of the world. One of my contributions here was to teach architecture not to architects - because there is no architecture school there; there are scientists, people that are educated in sociology, psychology, business, and so on. As I said, every creative individual should be empowered to not only talk about architecture, but to build it; and everybody can build it. I created a series of workshops for students who have never studied architecture. I empowered them with tools, pencils, papers, and computers; whatever they needed to be able to ask the right questions: do we need a building in this campus? How big should it be? How much money should we spend on it? Should it have windows? What kind of environment should it have? What should it look like? And I was very lucky to be able to put across my teaching, to work with students and to actually realise a physical project with this idea. So yes, it is a proof that architecture is not for architects only. Everyone is capable of doing architecture and everyone should, in a democracy, being able to intervene creatively in the city, the building, the houses and the streets. It was definitely a wonderful experience and as you say it is now under construction.

**IA&B: Both, art as well as political power, sometimes, tend to completely ignore the people. You define architecture as the 'art of construction' and have been involved in projects with political roots. How did your architecture evolve within such constraints?**

**DL:** First of all, architecture is a civic art, but it is an art. It is not a political tool but it is about the 'politaire', in Greek that means the city. The word 'idiote' in Greek means a private person. The city is really about its citizens, it is about a common space, a shared community space. And in that sense, of course, one has to fight for liberty in architecture, for liberty for people. We are living in an age where people are in danger of losing their individuality through mass-media, through all sorts of left and right politics. We have less and less respect for each and every individual. In a democracy, which I am a believer in, we should celebrate every difference, every individual. But of course, that is the tradition of architecture. How do you give expression to individuality and at the same time create a building has the uniqueness to communicate across time, and such that there is no contradiction between the 'politaire' which is the city, between art or something that is not just private and at the same time the individuality of each and every person which is to be respected. Every project that I have been involved in is not made with a committee, is not done as some sort of abstract exercise, it is not about statistics; it is a communication to an individual and I think that is what a work of art really is. It can be very large, it can even be a city plan or a large public building but it is for each individual. That is how I conceive it, and that is why I do not believe in formulas, I do not believe in the statistics only, I do not believe in the 'mass' idea. I believe it is about liberty and what is more fantastic than art which is an affirmation of human liberty.

**IA&B: What is your vision for the Ground Zero Master Plan? How do you think it will influence the people who visit it years from now, both, Americans and visitors from across the world?**

**DL:** Even though the building is not entirely ready, it already has



shown that people come and are very moved by the memory of what happened there. That was, in fact, my idea - to create a memory foundation, so no one should ever forget what this attack, this catastrophe, really meant to New York in a deep way; yet, rise out of this tragedy, to understand the heights of aspirations, the buildings organized to create a sense of liberty around that memorial employing vital streets and public spaces, cultural encounters with the museums, performing art centres, visitor's centre, to open a new horizon to the Thompson river. It aims to instil the building of memory, vitality and wonder of New York City and America in each and every person who comes to the site and that is what I think it will be. It will be an inspiring place, because the concentration is not only on the private buildings, but also on the public ones, spaces which people can share. I have mentioned that my parents are immigrants; they worked in sweatshops under harsh conditions. While working on Ground Zero, I wondered, what this project is to the people of New York. They are not going to be in the gleaming buildings; they are going to be at the ground level, on the streets. How do you make better streets? How do you make something really fantastic for the hard-working people of New York? And that is why I concentrated on the related aspects. How to make light? How to create the right symbols? How to create something that will inspire and never shift New York to a pessimistic register, but will inspire people with the fantastic notion of taking away their tired, their poor, their masses who have been oppressed, and in turn give them life, give them freedom, give them the possibility to be educated and successful.

**IA&B: You have written empathetically on your experiences and subsequent 'intuitive' relations they have with your architecture. Do you think your architecture borrows substantially from this?**

**DL:** Sure. If it is not based on experiences, it is nothing. If architecture is based on some abstract ideas of space or facades or typology, then to me it is nothing but a hollow exercise. I think it has to be based on some human experience. And I think that is an intuition of what the world is about, it is a revelation, it is knowledge, and it is not something that is step by step verified. There has to be an enquiring intuition into what the world is about. I think every individual, very child born opens its eyes and has this intuition about what the world is, and then they work their whole life to express it and do something with it. So yes, I do think that

intuition and experience are very critical to decipher the wonders of architecture.

**IA&B: Your career, in a way, appears to be in reverse when compared to how architects usually plan theirs. The first part spent in reflection and the second in fervent activity. Can you tell us how this different approach has helped your work?**

**DL:** It is a reversed approach? (laughs)... It is absolutely true. I did not start by apprenticing myself, by working with offices, and on small buildings, and doing the kind of routine. I took a different path and that has certainly had a very big impact on how I look at architecture. I do not look at it as just a practice. I look at it as a philosophy of life. I look at it as something connected to the humanistic art, to poetry, to literature, to music. I do not look at it, as many of my colleagues, as just a vocational profession. So maybe the way I entered this field and how it developed is part of how I see buildings and cities of the future as well.

**IA&B: In a recent retrospective, the MoMA revisited the iconic 'Deconstructivist Exhibition' of the 1988. How do you look back at this curation you were a part of?**

**DL:** 'How strange...', because when I was made a part of this exhibition, I did not have a single building. All I had were some drawings and models, and yet when I look back on it, that is what I think, where does architecture come from. It does not come from the media; it does not come from just looking around; it does not come from copying others. It comes from drawing; drawing something out of the tradition, drawing in a physical way, sitting and meditating; it is a spiritual epiphany. It is strange, it is very practical. But where does it come from? It comes from the ancient sources and, of course that is drawing, that is having the patience not to rush and simply build; but to follow the direction of the single line, to follow a single development of a drawing. And if you are lucky and connect with the path, you see a reverberation in reality. I look at the show now and how strange it was that I was in the show but did not have a single building; I had never built a building. Since then I have been so lucky to have so many buildings, so many important projects, be it in New York, in Berlin, in Singapore, Shanghai, Warsaw, Milan or Dublin. It shows that you have to take a risk in architecture. You cannot just follow the

truisms. You have to take a risk, which may for some appear to be a failure for a long time. A lot people then said that I had not built anything, that I was a failed architect. But you have to be bold because without that nothing would ever happen.

**IA&B: Do you think that the exhibition and the subsequent debate on 'Deconstructivism' as a style affected your work substantially?**

**DL:** The exhibition had many fine architects who also did not really build very much at that time. Maybe I was the only one who really did not build anything (laughs), but I think it gave a chance. It was an emblematic exhibition because it signified that the world has changed. It was the first show at the Museum of Modern Art that was on architecture and displayed on the ground floor. It was not at the Department of Architecture on the 5th floor; it was where the masses of public enter the museum and it was first time since the international exhibition of 1930 that architecture became a part of public discourse. And I think that was an important moment for architecture. It signified really the beginning of the 21st century - a new sense of space, a new sense of individual, a new sense of the issues and questions that are developing with the world. So it was a very important exhibition I think.

**IA&B: What are your hopes for the future of architecture? What do you think are the challenges?**

**DL:** My hope for architecture is that we are living in a time of renaissance, a re-discovery of the art of architecture; that it is about people, that it is about art; that it is not just a technological or economic imperative that drives the world. The world is about individuality; the world is about liberty, the world is about tradition. There is also a return to the understanding that cities are not made of concrete or bricks; they are made of citizens and that is something very positive today. Of course, there are many challenges with great density, with new developments of technology, with sustainability, with the obliteration of nature. We have to re-think how we are to give value to human beings, because nothing can replace a human being. Each person that is born, is a mystery, is an enigma. Why? Where? How? And we really have to recover that human tradition of architecture. And that, I think, is the biggest challenge of the 21st century. ■

