

JÜDISCHES MUSEUM BERLIN

Background Information: The Design of the New Core Exhibition in the Libeskind Building

The Architecture of Daniel Libeskind

Nearly 19 years ago, in September 2001, the Jewish Museum Berlin opened in the new building designed by the American architect Daniel Libeskind. The design "Between the Lines," for which Libeskind won the contest for the additional building in 1989, was his first to be constructed. The titanium-clad zigzag building drew a great deal of attention even before the museum opened: nearly 350,000 visitors came to view the building while it was still empty.

To this day, the Libeskind architecture remains a strong attraction for visitors. It invites many interpretations: some see in it a broken Star of David, others a lightning bolt; for many, the building imparts a feeling of uncertainty or disorientation.

Between the Lines

Daniel Libeskind developed the floor plan from two lines: the visible zigzag line of the building and an invisible straight line. According to Libeskind, both lines have a particular connection to Berlin's history.

Libeskind himself named four sources of inspiration for his design: The connection between Jewish tradition and German culture before the Holocaust; and Jewish and other Berlin figures such as Paul Celan, Max Liebermann, Heinrich von Kleist, Rahel Varnhagen, and Friedrich Hegel. Libeskind used a network of lines created from their addresses to develop the structure of the building and its windows.

At the intersections of these lines are the Voids, empty spaces that perforate the building vertically from its basement to the roof. Symbolically, they stand for the holes that the expulsion, destruction, and annihilation of the Jews left behind in the city, and which can still be felt in the present.

Designing the Exhibition "The Jewish Past and Present in Germany"

Libeskind's architecture, with its narrow corridors that come to a point, poses a challenge to any exhibition curator. The team chezweitz GmbH/ Hella Rolfes Architekten BDA won the competition to design the new core exhibition in 2016 with a concept that engages convincingly with the space.

In close cooperation with the Jewish Museum Berlin curatorial team, the scenography agency chezweitz, led by Detlef Weitz, cooperated with the architecture firm Hella Rolfes to develop a new exhibition design. They made it possible for the contents of the exhibition to interact with the Libeskind Building and their design highlights characteristic elements of Libeskind's architecture.

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Characteristics of the New Exhibition Architecture

One special aspect of the new exhibition architecture is that every time-period and topic has a distinct room design.

At the beginning of the exhibition, the Torah, the sacred core of Judaism, inspired the design of the entire room. The visitors are led through the room in concentric circles as they encounter topics such as learning Hebrew and the existence of Jewish languages in the diaspora.

In the "Ashkenazi" time-period room, gray glass cases are the only elements in the room, in reference to the early urban structures of the Middle Ages, when Jews began to settle and form communities in the area then known Ashkenaz, in modern-day Germany.

In the series of rooms titled "Jews Become Germans Too," colorful cabinets recall the picture galleries of the 19th century. A trail of around 40 oil portraits shows figures from the history of emancipation, telling of the birth of a new era of civil equality, which met its violent end when the Nazis took power.

The "Catastrophe" time-period room spatially dramatizes the bureaucratic violence against Jews: 962 anti-Jewish ordinances, provisions, and laws that were enacted between 1930 and 1945 are printed on flags hanging from the ceiling. They form the spatial backbone of the presentation of individual life stories, which tell of exclusion, expulsion, robbery, and humiliating violence.

The use of metal as a motif throughout the exhibition is another tribute to Daniel Libeskind's architecture. In various corners, solid offset walls hang from the ceiling and confront visitors with a shadowy reflection.

Visitors pass through the last time-period room, "After 1945," via a roughly 40-meter-long bridge. It leads through the post-war years that followed, to a depiction of the present, with highlights on the important events of the past 75 years.

What is Jewish music? Is there such a thing as a "Jewish sound" in music? Visitors to the Sound Room receive more than one answer to these questions. Various music genres can be heard there: from the music of the synagogue, to chansons that express a "Jewish" attitude toward life, to Yiddish songs and Hebrew hip hop from Israel.