Architectures of Memory and Counter-Memory: Berlin and Bucharest

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“As one approaches it [the Jewish Museum] from the north on Lindenstrasse, the building appears modest, even self-effacing; only gradually, as one walks past the two buildings, does the monstrously jagged form unfurl, its interior accessible only through window slits criss-crossing the matte sheen of zinc that covers its outside walls.”¹ I chose to begin with this passage, not because I agree with the description but because it foregrounds one of the difficulties of speaking about architectural expressions of emotion – the need for language and the impossibility of using value-free language. The building in this case is jagged, to be sure, but the decision to call it monstrous or, in contrast, to describe it as a broken six-pointed star, may have more to do with the viewer than the architect and the transparency or lack of transparency of meaning in a form which defies our expectations of what a building should be.

Language is only part of the difficulty of knowing how to speak about an architectural experience. Architecture raises numerous conflicting issues: should we respond to the building or memorial purely as a work of art, in aesthetic terms, or as a functional work of art? How much do we need to know of the architect’s intentions and philosophy when we respond? Responses to the works I include in this paper have ranged from the aesthetic to the symbolic and occasionally to the practical. In many cases, they are impossible to separate, as perhaps they should be. But my goal in this paper is precisely that separation – to speak of these works as models of success or failure in the expression of memories which are assuredly not lacking in emotion.

Memories themselves are not likely to be value-free and one of the difficulties in creating art about remembered events is the problem with remembering: is there a kind of memory which produces an experience of sensate truth, such that we feel what we remember, rather than a more conceptual or thinking truth?² And if there is, how will it unite the subjectivity of the immediate production of that sensorial memory with enough contingency to engage the common memory which language produces and which makes a memory accessible to the people who are experiencing it second-hand?

These questions were implicitly, if not specifically, raised by three recent competitions and completed projects: the “Bucuresti 2000” competition (Figures 1 and 2), the Berlin

¹This is still in draft form; please do not copy or circulate without my permission. Also please note that I have appended copies of the images to enable readers of this paper to see what I’m describing. I have photographed many of them myself but none of them should be reproduced or used for any purpose unrelated to this conference.
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The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe (designed by Peter Eisenman; see Figure 3), and in the same city, the Jewish Museum (designed by Daniel Libeskind, see Figure 4). James Young, writing about the failed outcome of the first competition for the Berlin memorial, recognized a potential problem with any attempt to use a memorial as a means of remembering when he observed that “if the aim is to remember for perpetuity that this great nation once murdered nearly six million human beings solely for having been Jews, then this monument must remain uncompleted and unbuilt, an unfinishable memorial process.” But later becoming a member of the revived competition commission and spokesperson for the winning project, he questioned his earlier position, a situation which, in its own way, suggests how responses to these works tend to be imbricated with the psychology of the respondent and can never be objectively neutral. That memorial competition was completed and the memorial was built, but the Romanian competition, which took place in 1996, has still not resulted in the actual implementation of its winning design. The competition for the Jewish Museum had the most direct route from beginning to end, taking essentially ten years from the decision to hold a competition to the completion of the building. Clearly, the scope and scale of all three projects are not equal, but underlying all three is the fact that each was conceptualized as part of a process of healing or remembering, and in each case what needed to be remembered was a trauma of unimaginable dimensions.

As already apparent, my questions and analysis are complicated by the fact that the three projects I discuss are not all for buildings, although all three can be called architectural. The Bucharest project involved the redesign of the area of the city where Ceausescu’s palace of the people, better known today as the House of Parliament (Figure 5), is located. Although new buildings were anticipated by this design, it was not a competition for a single building. Further distinguishing this project from the other two in my paper is the fact that this competition was designed to redress an event which was already seen as a traumatic wound, leading the competition brief to call for proposals to “heal the wound.” In other words, the language of a political and architectural trauma had been embedded in the landscape before the competition began. Nonetheless, not all of the entries interpreted the goal of healing the wound in the same way, and ultimately, this may be one case where the process did communicate more than the outcome. In Berlin, we deal with one work which was truly intended to be a memorial and one which is a museum extension, officially known as the “Jewish Museum extension to the Berlin Museum.” Not explicitly intended as a memorial, it has been understood and described as such, regardless of the architect’s intentions. In this case, the confusion of memorialization with the museum may contribute to a failure of
expectations despite the success of the building.⁴

Although there are some obvious differences between these, there are important commonalities. Not only did all three begin with a competition but in two cases, the competition was protracted and contested. All three deal on some level with events that challenge memory, and they do so because they challenge the historical narratives that people want to live with. They also challenge responsibility for those stories. In the case of Bucharest, the common mythology⁵ is one of a history which was done to the city and many of its inhabitants. Although widely accepted, the problem with this mythology is the origin of the city and subsequently, the nature of the real Bucharest. In the case of Berlin, the two works under consideration reflect a history in which the Berliners themselves were complicit with an act done to part of the population. The “real” history is not in question, but the place of that history in the present and the role of memory in that history is.

These are cities which share the presence of trauma in the public sphere.⁶ Without diminishing the impact experienced by individuals, we can note that when Alexander Beldiman, the president of the Romanian Union of Architects, described Bucharest as a wounded city, he was not using an inappropriate or exaggerated metaphor to refer to the destruction of buildings and their replacement by one which might truly be called a “monstrosity” in terms of its scale and its visual inconsistency with the rest of the city.⁷ Likewise, although the language of wounding has rarely been used to describe the Jewish Museum or the Holocaust memorial, each in its own way was conceptualized as an attempt to make the city whole again. If Berlin’s voids were social in nature, Bucharest’s voids were architectural. But in both, the void was induced by trauma.⁸

A Language of Trauma

Although today it goes without saying that we all know what trauma is, an exegesis of the meaning of trauma in psychological terms is necessary to my attempt to analyze these works as visual and non-verbal expressions of traumatic memories. I am not arguing that these memories or events are represented in the work and neither am I saying that the architect or artist who creates traumatic work has experienced the trauma him or herself. I argue instead that certain art works create experiences out of a language which resonates with the traumatic experience.⁹

I am hardly the first to raise the question of traumatic memories or the kinds of relationships which exist between trauma and art. Although not unusual, we encounter these questions more often in the context of literature and pictorial arts than in the context of
architecture. Unlike Dori Laub and Daniel Podell, and others who write about the art which may emerge from traumatic experience, I am more specifically interested in the possibility of a language of trauma. In the former, one attempts to tell the story of trauma to someone who will listen, whether the telling takes place in a psychotherapeutic encounter, poetry or painting; in the latter, one attempts to create the experience of trauma on a level which is not individualized or even explicit. This is not art from the “inside” and it is not concerned with bringing to language an experience which did not have words. This difference is important because it is largely recognized that part of the traumatic experience lies precisely in the loss of language.

In her influential and important work on traumatic narratives, Cathy Caruth lays out the groundwork for an understanding of trauma as the “missed experience” to know something the first time. Retelling a story used by Freud, *Gerusalemme Liberata*, she suggests that it is not only the fact that Tancred wounded his beloved Clorinda a second time, but the fact that he did not know he had wounded her either the first or the second time until she cried out that creates the traumatic experience. As Caruth observes, “just as Tancred does not hear the voice of Clorinda until the second wounding, so trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in the individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on.” One implication of this is that time is intrinsic to this experience of knowing. And although the first example might suggest that this is a perception of time as a linear experience, her subsequent analyses do not. The traumatic experience, in Caruth’s writing, is one which oscillates between memory of the first unbearable event and memory of the equally unbearable survival. Although someone has died, the survivor, the person who bears witness, is the person who suffers the trauma. In some respects, what this means is that in so far as memory is not equal to the real event, there can never be an accurate representation of the experience which induced the trauma.

Whether we turn to Freud himself, Ernst van Alphen, Caruth, or other writers on trauma, we find fairly consistent agreement that the traumatic experience is a failed experience for at least two reasons: first, because it involves a confrontation with the impossibility of either knowing or preventing trauma, and second, because it further involves the continued impossibility of being able to imagine life without trauma. As all of these writers make clear, trauma is something experienced by the survivor, who is rarely identical to the person who experienced physical pain. Freud, in fact, explicitly ruled out the physical wound as the cause of traumatic neurosis. In contrast, Elaine Scarry, in her writing about
torture, focuses on pain and the process of “unmaking” the world. Despite this difference between her model of torture and a model of trauma, there is an important intersection in the area of language.

In Scarry’s model, war, torture, and trauma (by which she generally means the physical pain, deprivations, and features of imprisonment and torture) silence the victim through pain and through the deliberate falsification, or fictionalization, of the pre-trauma truth. Focusing on the experience of extreme physical pain, she writes that it destroys language because such pain can only be expressed nonverbally. She does not, for the most part, deal with the experience of psychological pain, not, at least, outside of the experience of torture. Nevertheless, Scarry’s paradigm can be used to explain the response to psychological pain. If, as she suggests, torture and pain destroy language and symbolically, they also destroy the victim’s world (the goal of torture), then creation, or the act of remaking the world, is the act of making the invisible visible, of uniting absence with presence.

Because this act of bringing the invisible into the realm of the material or sensed resonates closely with the traumatic narrative and the goal of bringing something unspoken into language, the destruction of language does appear to be a link between trauma and torture. If physical pain resists language and if the experience of trauma is one in which language fails, then in both cases we are describing a failure of words, narrative and memory – unless memory is somatic, imagistic, and non-verbal. Not only does this mitigate against the re-enactment or re-presentation of trauma; it implicates spatial and bodily experience in any attempt to create a language of trauma.

If movement in space is intrinsic to this language, then it would follow that an architectural language of trauma exists. Yet, because architecture does give meaning to previously unmarked space, and given that architecture has long been associated with the creation of shelter, it may seem counter-intuitive to speak of an architecture of trauma. Indeed, the destruction of buildings and monuments is itself a traumatic act, precisely because so much more than the building is destroyed. If architecture signifies such things as shelter and power, and its destruction signifies the rise of a new power or contestation of an older one, it seems unlikely that there can be an architecture of trauma unless we can identify an architecture which denies shelter and power in its existence. Anthony Vidler’s notion of an “architectural uncanny” suggests that such an architecture might exist.

In his introductory discussion of the uncanny, tracing the development of estrangement and alienation in 19th century urban culture, Vidler, like Freud and Adorno, focuses on the moment or shock of estrangement from the familiar as the underlying drama of the uncanny. A
concept which can only be understood as part of a continuum – for something must have been familiar in order to become strange – the uncanny cannot be experienced in a discrete building unless that building has either been invested with an uncanny experience or is itself conceptualized as incomplete. Thus, where Young later elaborates Vidler’s idea to propose that a memorial “uncanny” must be anti-redemptive, in that it does not provide shelter, I would further suggest that this anti-redemptive quality must emerge out of the conjunction of time, form, and a spatial experience which can embody that moment of knowing without knowing which has been associated with trauma. In this respect, an architecture of trauma may be similar to Foucault’s description of a heterotopic space – a real space and a space of illusion which controverts the familiar rules of existing non-heterotopic spaces. An architecture of trauma, if it exists, does not represent the traumatic narrative. Instead, it creates that uncanny moment of knowing what one does not know or want to know. Neither symbolic nor hermetic, these will be spaces which evoke patterns of movement, thought and feeling without producing or relying on the visitor’s memory or direct, personal experience of trauma.

The Three Projects: Background, Process and Experience

Memorial to the Murdered Jews
The Berlin Holocaust memorial was the outcome of a process which extended over a period of 17 years, moving from a grass-roots initiative to a government resolution and eventually a multi-stage competition which initially seemed as likely to fail in its goal as to succeed. Although we might expect disagreement over the nature of a monument, in this case the process was complicated by the fact that there was considerable disagreement over who or what should be memorialized by this monument. This itself was undoubtedly connected to the originating set of circumstances which depended largely on the efforts and activity of one person (Lea Rosh) and a working group which she built up around herself. Without dwelling on this history, we might note that in addition to the goal of obtaining a commitment from the German parliament, the process involved debate over the issue of focusing exclusively on murdered Jews, an appropriate location for the memorial, and how precisely one might create a memorial to victims.

The last question may have been the most difficult question to answer and the most unique to this memorial. The German “memorial problem,” as Young described it, was the problem of creating a memorial which calls attention to the crimes of the nation. Not only would there be no precedent for the type of imagery that might do this; it was a problem which was deeply implicated in the country’s relationship to its own history. Writing about this
in 1992, Young described the creation of “disappearing” monuments in other parts of Germany. Such solutions could not, however, serve the new agenda for a memorial to six million murdered Jews. Nor could a more traditional memorial, not only because of the tendency in late 20th century art to include an abject human figure, when it is included at all, but because narrative art, as most memorials are, precludes the type of questioning and reassessment of the past which seemed to be called for in this case. To this problem we might add the “Lyotardian” question about the possibility of bearing witness to something which can only be believed by the people who experienced it (and did not survive).  

Rosh began her quest for a memorial in 1987. The first competition was held in 1994. From more than 500 entries, two were selected for first prize, with some unclearly stated expectation that they might be united in some way. For a combination of factors, including eventual dissatisfaction with both designs and the possibility that there wasn’t enough money to fund the construction of either project, the competition was ruled a failure and another one was scheduled, under the auspices of a different branch of the government. It was at this time that Young made his comment, included in the publication of the competition entries, in which he suggested that the goal of remembering the scale of the murders might be better served by an unfinished memorial process. A year later, a second competition was initiated with a total of 25 invited participants (including some of the top finalists from the first competition). The winners of this competition included Daniel Libeskind, with a design based on the idea of a wall rising to a single height but interrupted in places by space or voids; a proposal by Jochen Gerz, already known for his Hamburg counter-memorial, here calling for a field of steel pylons asking “why (warum)” in fiber-optic lights and 39 languages; Gesine Weinmiller’s proposal for a field of wall fragments arranged in a seemingly random pattern intended to evoke a memorial cairn, the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem, and the Hebrew word for life; and, compared to these, the potentially more laconic proposal by Peter Eisenman and Richard Serra, which eventually received the final approval of the board of judges. (See figures 6 - 9). Serra later withdrew, unwilling to make changes called for by members of the German government, leaving Eisenman to complete the project.  

Colloquially referred to as a “field of stelae,” the memorial consists of 2711 concrete stelae (95 cm x 2.37 m), with heights varying from less than a meter to 4 meters. Eisenman reduced the number of stelae from the originally planned 4300 for the reasons noted above. The stelae are separated by a space equal to the width of an individual stele, or enough room for a single individual to pass through. Although the exact number of stelae was not predetermined, their location was. In a manner which is not atypical for Eisenman, he created two
maps: a grid of pillars overlaid with a grid based on a topographical map of Berlin. The heights of the pillars were determined by the intersections between the two grids. To be sure, the fact that two maps were used is probably not perceived by the visitor; what can be realized is the quality of indeterminacy to the entire field, despite what appears to be a regularly spaced grid. Yet regularity is only perceived when standing on top of one of the lower pillars at the perimeter or in an aerial photograph. Upon approaching the site, one might assume that the stelae are evenly spaced but the undulating ground surface defeats the sense of a grid, as does the actual experience of walking through the relatively confined spaces and the existence of varying views framed and obstructed by the stelae. (See figure 10.)

Eisenman speaks more about his process than meaning but he does describe an underlying conflict of this work as that caused by the enormity of an experience which makes death banal and simultaneously defies rational belief. He goes on to describe Marcel Proust’s distinction between two types of memory: a nostalgic or sentimental memory which remembers things as we want to remember them, and a living memory which is experienced in the present, often without our intention, and without nostalgia for the past. The Holocaust, he says, cannot be remembered in the first, nostalgic mode, as its horror forever ruptured the link between nostalgia and memory. Remembering the Holocaust can, therefore, only be a living condition in which the past remains active in the present. Unlike the traditional monument, which can be understood or known in the instant of seeing it, and unlike traditional architecture, which yields knowledge as one moves through space, the experience of this memorial, noted Eisenman, was one which would not be predictable or knowable.24

His description is accurate. Although the space of the memorial is not overwhelming in scale, the instability of the ground and unpredictability of the heights of the stelae interact to frustrate understanding of the space. One is further confused or disoriented by the narrow alleys which are not truly perceived as straight lines, due to the varying heights of the concrete slabs and the uneven ground plane. The stelae, which look relatively uniform in photographs, impress one with their variability up close. Perhaps even more disorienting is the fact that there are no written cues or symbols of any sort. Immediately discounting the notion that one should “read” the pillars as tombstones is the absence of any language and any apparent “right” or “wrong” direction or ending point. Walking through the site, it is initially possible to respond on the level of the aesthetic, noting the repetition of non-identical forms and the often dramatic patterns of light and shadows cast on the leaning stones. It might have been at risk for remaining an aesthetic experience, given that there are no verbal cues or recognizable symbols. Yet it is precisely their absence, along with the absence of markers of any sort, that
forces the experience to move from a visual and cognitive realm to one of unspeakable emotion. The key to understanding how the memorial does this may come from the creation of uncanny and “warped” space.\textsuperscript{25}

Although warped space does not have to be uncanny, it is not a space of familiarity or shelter. Describing a resemblance between the phobias of contemporary life and those of modernity in the beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, Vidler notes that “in both, a sense of loss and mourning, informed by psychological and psychoanalytical theory, has led to an effort to construe an aesthetic equivalent; in both, the generation of this equivalent has forced the aesthetic into new and sometimes excessive modes of expression.” He goes on to note that his use of the phrase “warped space” serves as “a metaphor that includes all the varieties of such forcing, the attempt, however vain, to permeate the formal with the psychological.”\textsuperscript{26} The implosion of psychological phobias and experiences into the architectural form eventually resulted, says Vidler, in the abandonment of classical forms derived from rational spatial paradigms. More specifically, Vidler describes the creation of tension between Cartesian space and tensile or warped space as the dynamic of this architecture of loss.

Although he could not include Eisenman’s memorial in this discussion or in his earlier book on the uncanny, in the first book he did describe certain strategies of Eisenman’s as generative of uncanny space. Writing about the Wexner Center for the Visual Arts, Vidler describes a disorienting visual and spatial experience in which the building simultaneously communicates and disrupts communication of monumentality, conventional architectural form, and stability. A building which reads as a solid and as multiple fragments, it is not a building which, as in his earlier work, questions the roles and origins of architectural structure. Working in his recognizable pattern of juxtaposing grids which signify conflicting meanings and space, in this case the conflict neither reveals nor undermines the meaning of space: “Tied neither to instrumental reason nor to a transcendental other world, the Wexner grid stands as the merciless demonstration, as it were, of conflict in the mapping of the real, while it definitively rejects any essentialist message with regard to the structural or spatial nature of architecture.”\textsuperscript{27} He might well have said the same of the Berlin memorial.

For Eisenman, fundamental to architecture and sculpture of the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century is the increasing dissolution of boundaries between the two media – the displacement of architecture as a medium of enclosed space and of sculpture as a medium which occupies but does not contain space. Eisenman, always an architect of the “in-between,” relies less on theoretical argument in this case than on a design which, as in the Wexner Center, functions as the creation of unstable space, penetrating and denying the boundaries of person and place as
well as the boundaries of outside and inside. In the memorial, the ground plane, traditionally a reference point in both buildings and landscape, is doubled and controverted through inexact doubling. Because the tops and bases of the pillars create undulating planes with respect to the surrounding streets as well as the experience of the person, and because these planes do not consist of parallel or predictable undulations, there is no certain or unchanging ground line which can operate as a reference point. And likewise, because the site inconsistently envelopes and surrounds the visitor without ever completely confining her, another zone of instability exists. In Eisenman’s words, “the experience of being present in presence, of being without the conventional markers of experience, of being potentially lost in space, of an un-material materiality: that is the memorial’s uncertainty.”

To which we might add that as different as the Holocaust memorial is from a visual arts center, this experience of a double-mapping which dissolves and disintegrates the initial perception of an almost orderly field of concrete slabs into an unpredictable and almost unnavigable ocean of stone takes the uncanny out of the level of the aesthetic sublime and into the realm of trauma.

Although not initially planned by the architect, the underground archive and information center is integral to the memorial and in the final design, it became another extension of uncertain space. I’m not sure that Hanno Rauterberg is correct to note that “without this explanatory exhibition, the inexplicable above ground would be little more than a field of myth,” but he is correct in his observation that the two are interdependent. If the above-ground experience leaves one feeling unstable, rootless and unable to ponder that which cannot be remembered, it is below ground that one is able to put names, dates, and facts to those feelings. The space here contains its own type of formlessness – in this case, truly a contained physical space but nonetheless unfathomable. One might question whether Eisenman’s complete avoidance of iconography above ground is disrupted by the inclusion of archival data below ground. But the task of comprehending that data ultimately serves to corroborate the impossibility of putting words to either experience, above or below ground. Indeed, the presence of words, pictures and maps below ground underlines the impossibility of ever knowing it, further confirming Eisenman’s (and Proust’s) distinction between nostalgia and living memory: “In this monument there is no goal, no end, no working one’s way in or out. The duration of an individual’s experience of it grants no further understanding, since understanding is impossible….Here, we can only know the past through its manifestation in the present.”
"Between the Lines": Libeskind’s Extension to the Berlin Museum

At the outset we might note a difference which Eisenman himself observed: it is far more
difficult to speak of the Jewish Museum without making an attribution to Daniel Libeskind than
it is to ignore or overlook the fact that the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe is the
work of Peter Eisenman. Whereas Eisenman’s point was that memorials for the most part are
responded to as anonymous works in a public space and buildings are not, in the case of this
particular building I will argue that Libeskind’s philosophy of design, an eminently personal
one, has infused both the writing and reception of this building to a degree that makes it
almost impossible to separate the designer from the experience.

The Jewish Museum first came into existence not as an attempt to memorialize or
remember history but to fulfill a need which predated World War II and the Holocaust. In
Young’s recounting of the history, plans for a Jewish museum go back to 1929 and the
development of a society which set a goal of establishing a museum devoted to a private but
growing collection of Jewish art and objects. When this museum opened in the inauspicious
year of 1933, its first exhibition, the work of the German artist Max Lieberman, immediately
raised the question of how Jewish art should be defined – by its association with religious
themes and uses or by the birth of the artist. Lieberman, Jewish by birth, did not make art
which reflected Jewish beliefs. The question, however, was quickly mooted as Jews and the
work of Jewish artists were soon declared “decadent” and “un-German”; most of the
museum’s holdings were confiscated, and the director was arrested. Concurrent with the
development and early demise of this museum was the founding and flourishing of a museum
devoted to the history of Berlin, the Markische Museum. Its symbolic demise came with the
erection of the Berlin Wall, isolating and confining the museum to East Berlin and its residents.
In response to this inaccessibility, a new Berlin Museum opened in an 18th century baroque
building on a street in the western sector. The Berlin Museum had a collection of Judaica art,
primarily kept in storage along with other collections for which there was inadequate
exhibition space.

Beginning in the 1960s, members of the Berlin Jewish community began calling for a
new Jewish Museum to be connected to the Berlin Museum, and by the mid-1970s, there was
a department of Jewish culture within the Berlin Museum. At this time, the debate reprised the
earlier debate of the 1930s over the definition of Jewish art, but in this case it was conflated
with the question of whether there should be a truly autonomous museum of Jewish art or one
which remained affiliated with and located within the Berlin Museum as a department. In both
cases, the question of where the building should be located was central. By 1988, these
questions had largely been resolved and a competition was held for a “Jewish Museum” conceived as an extension or department of the Berlin Museum. The purpose of the museum, as described in the competition brief, would be the display and recognition of Jewish customs and observances, the history of the Jewish community in Berlin, and the contributions of Jewish culture to Berlin. As Young notes, the brief’s connection of the destruction of the Jewish community to the destruction of Berlin’s culture gave the museum a role which exceeded that of exhibition. Not only would the museum retrieve a lost part of the city’s history; although the competition preceded the dismantling of the Wall, the museum would contribute to the process of reunification which this event initiated. This revision, as it were, of the role of a museum is fundamental to understanding how this building might be seen as recognition of, if not an attempt to heal, the wounding of Berlin.

Unlike the competition for the memorial, the outcome of this competition was uncontested: first prize was unanimously awarded to Libeskind for an entry he called “Between the Lines.” Explaining the meaning of his project’s name, he described the existence of two lines of thinking, one which reflected organization of space and one which reflected the conflicted relationships of Jewish life to Berlin’s life. The void which is central to the iconography of this museum is therefore not simply a void created by the absence of Jews; it is also the space which exists between the two lines. We could, of course, add to this the idea of the void as that space which exists between knowing and not knowing, or the space of trauma, although Libeskind, himself, does not. He does, however, describe the void of the museum as the Holocaust void and as an “impenetrable” focus which cuts through the building’s form.

Libeskind weaves his complex story of the building and its actual shape from a variety of accessible and hermetic sources, ranging from his personal life history, as the peripatetic son of Polish Holocaust survivors, to his fascination with Arnold Schoenberg’s uncompleted opera, Moses and Aaron, Walter Benjamin’s One-Way Street and Paul Celan’s poetry. As this list of sources might suggest, the building is rich in symbolism and complex iconography, not only in its perceptible form but in its relation to exterior space, the landscaping, the absence of conventional windows, treacherous stairwells and spaces which can be seen but not entered (Figures 11 - 13). Yet, except for some of the more obvious symbolism (railroad tracks in the pavement outside the building, for one example, and a garden of stelae which can only evoke the Memorial although both were conceptualized independently, for another), the meaning of much of the symbolism is probably elusive to the person who does not know Libeskind’s narrative. If not elusive or even missed, it has certainly given rise to multiple interpretations. Indeed, the one writer I have found who does refer to the idea of a wound which underlies this
museum suggests that Libeskind’s project “sets out neither to close the wound nor to maintain it, but rather to live out of it.”

Stanley Allen, writing before the museum was built, related the dominant theme of the building – a void – to a refusal to admit that the events we think of as being unrepresentable and unspeakable are in fact unrepresentable and unspeakable. Not everyone describes it this way, and using the words of Libeskind, Wiedmer defines the void as a gulf, a gap, and a symbol of something which cannot be represented, while Leslie Morris, analyzing the museum as conceptual art, suggests that the void points to the unfeasibility of using art and a museum to reintegrate the cultural history of Berlin.

In my own case, on my first visit, I arrived from the more conventional direction which presents the visitor with a view of both the old and the new buildings. I entered the building from the only entrance possible – through the lower level of the older Berlin Museum. On this visit, I followed the indicated pathways past exhibitions of Holocaust artifacts, through an unsettling installation which led to the Memory void, into the Garden of Exile, eventually through the designed exhibition spaces which detailed the history of Jewish culture in Germany, and finally back into the main building. On this visit, the most disturbing part of my experience was the installation of *Fallen Leaves* (by the Israeli artist, Menashe Kadishman, 2001, Figure 14), a work which consisted of metal plates of faces covering the ground. Heard from a distance before actually seen, the clanging sounds did not prepare one for an encounter with faces meant to be crushed and walked upon. I was surprised to learn that the installation was not a permanent part of the museum and although the space had been designed by Libeskind, the installation cannot be said to have been planned from the start.

On my second visit, coming from a different direction and having trouble finding the building, I eventually reached it from the “wrong” side, discovered that I could walk almost entirely around the building before finding the entrance, and realized that the grounds were an important part of the experience. Perhaps I had read so much about the centrality of the void and the contrast between the old and new buildings before arriving that it held little surprise for me, whereas the sense of aliveness and the unexpected encounters I had on the outside gave me a much fuller sense of the building’s relationship to historical trauma than I had previously experienced. This is not to say that the interior space is devoid of the unexpected, or lacks the ability to disrupt one’s equanimity, but it is to say that the spatial experience which Libeskind designed into the building – one of interruption, disorientation, and the impossible confrontation with absence – is contradicted by the building’s role as a museum. There are two spaces in the museum: the voided space which can be seen but not entered and filled space. Neither can be experienced in a conventional manner but neither defies comprehension. This
was presumably Allen’s point when he described the project as one which embodies a type of optimism: the optimism of the belief that an architect can engage questions and events of tragic proportions without embracing the metaphysics of the romantic and heroic, or even the postmodern, creator. Yet this optimism, which is so fundamental to Libeskind’s work here and elsewhere, may defy the creation of a space which evokes the emotion of trauma.

The “București 2000”
If we turn now to Bucharest, we encounter a situation which has more in common with the experience surrounding the Holocaust memorial than that of the Jewish Museum. As I have already noted, the București competition began with a goal of “healing the wound.” In his introductory statement to the catalogue of the competition, Beldiman reiterated this goal as he described the competition as a “signal” to Romanian society and a “reminder that Bucharest is a sick town, which needs to be cured,” and would be, presumably, by the outcome of the competition. Other goals existed for the competition – some spoken and recorded in the competition brief, some unspoken and acknowledged with greater and lesser degrees of reluctance. The 1997 catalogue from the competition focused on a new set of goals, however: urban reintegration of the central area of the city in order to shape its identity and that of the city; an increase in the functional variety of the buildings in this region; the creation of a “flexible, open, and adjustable environment” which would restore coherence to the city center; and in general, an enhancement of the specificity of the site and the buildings in the city center. Because the goal of healing was only one in a constellation of goals which were both symbolic and practical in their orientation, the earlier attempt to write the competition narrative as having only that one goal became the creation of another mythology: the mythology of the wound. As a myth, it did represent the contemporary thinking of many residents of Bucharest but it did not represent everyone’s response to the site or the competition. Although the myth of a traumatic wound was able to provide a psychological and performance-based framework for understanding the success of the competition before any new construction had begun, it may have contributed to a different impossibility – that of recognizing and reconciling the existence of conflicted responses and truths which depart from this myth.

Without retracing the history of the competition, I will note that it was planned as a two-stage competition in which designers of projects receiving awards in the first stage were asked to respond to criticism and further develop their entries for the second stage. The expectation for the end of the competition was that one or more plans would be chosen as the
basis for further development and further competitions. As Liviu Ianasi (secretary of the competition commission) told me, this was not a competition for a project but a competition for ideas.\(^{39}\)

The competition, international in scope, was large, generated a wide range of varying responses and images for the future of Bucharest, and resulted in the selection of a project by the German architect Meinhard von Gerkan. The project was praised for its density, its creation of an urban fabric which incorporated the existing House of Parliament into a city center which ironically bore less resemblance to the city’s image before the imposition of the House of Parliament than it did to other plans for urban design already developed by von Gerkan. To the eyes of this observer, the winning project was the most conventional in form, the most amenable to modification and implementation on a gradual, piece by piece basis, and the least likely to evoke or challenge the experience of trauma which the competition had been designed to heal. But this was not, after all, a competition for a memorial or a visual representation of the unrepresentable. This was a competition for a process and conceptual framework which ultimately rejected the idea of trauma in favor of the idea of Bucharest as a postmodern city of the future. Had the judges wanted an expression of pain or trauma, they might have chosen a different entry.

But as someone who observed the competition as an outsider, seeing the entries, reading its history, and talking to people who lived with the before and after of Ceausescu’s “interventions,” I saw a process which, in this case, may have proven Young right. The dynamic of the competition forced many people to confront what they had not confronted but could not forget, but to do this in a context which made knowing possible. The competition projects, on public display for a period of time, visualized and restated arguments which converged on two positions: symbolic destruction of Ceausescu’s building (the competition required that the building be left in place) and a totalizing design through containment, versus juxtaposition and contrast. The winning project (and several others) chose the first path: subverting the power of the House through emulation. The alternative approach, which led to several fantastical visions of a futuristic city, was perhaps most convincingly embodied by a design which focused on landscaping and conveyed a memorializing, poetic sensibility which the judges found threatening and destabilizing in its commitment to open, uncontained and undulating space.

To some, the competition had always been intended to produce a conceptual guide; to others, the competition served as a catalyst for change. It cannot be said to have completely succeeded on either of those levels. But as a competition, it became a new generator of memories, some of which contributed to the erosion of boundaries between the politics of the
past and the future. In this respect, the competition had a life of its own. If I return to Scarry's discussion of pain and unmaking the world, later in her book she observes that remaking the world involves the substitution of a created object for the body, in part by projecting interior feeling states or sentience onto the external world. Her focus on the body and the way it changes place with the object relates to her focus on physical torture, but as a psychological strategy of projection and transference, it becomes a metaphor for an act of making the wound visible. If the competition succeeded in making the wound visible, then the space of the competition was not only sentient; it was the warped and uncanny space of trauma.

**Knowing the Unknowable in Architecture**

Although I have interwoven analysis, interpretation and description throughout, here I want to turn to a more specific attempt to analyze all three projects as expressions of emotion. As I already indicated, the translation of the traumatic memory into architectural and visual terms, without a goal of narrative representation, is not straightforward. Based on the literature of trauma, we can hypothesize that a space of trauma might be an uncanny space and that this architecture on some level will deny and contradict the possibility of containment. Yet it is difficult to predict how these psychological or somatic experiences will be produced. Extrapolating further from this literature, we might predict that an architectural language of trauma will comprise strategies that result in displacement, which evoke the unreality of a dream, and which conflate dualities in order to occlude or obscure boundaries. When Amy Anderson, the designer of the previously mentioned entry in the “Bucuresti 2000,” spoke to me of her project, she talked about her search for a form which juxtaposes without obliteration, and which engaged in “the delicate treachery of knowing the unknowable.” What she didn’t need to add is that it did this without words.

This is probably the biggest difference between all three experiences. Libeskind writes poetically about his work, and his vision is surely that of a poet. But the Jewish Museum has transformed the metaphor of absence and presence into a narrative which today is more likely to evoke the work of Daniel Libeskind than the history of ruptured connections which his narrative describes. The space is indeed uncanny but the repetitions of forms in more than one function and material, and the demands made by the exhibition work against absorption into the space. The absence of that absorption defeats the possibility of a sensorial experience as well as the felt shock of estrangement. The Jewish Museum has more in common with Foucault’s heterotopia than with the uncanny. As a space of illusion, the heterotopic museum is a dream space. But this particular heterotopia is also a particularized space of reality and the
conflict prevents the museum from becoming a space of trauma. Young writes that Libeskind made “the voids of lost civilizations literally part of the building’s foundation, haunted by history, even emblematic of it...” Because these voids are present, he believes that the museum suggests the impossibility of mending or redemption. In Young’s terms, the museum does communicate the trauma of the Holocaust; but if it communicates, it does so through narrative. The building succeeds as a museum and it succeeds as what might be perceived as a surreal representation of historical pain, surely one of the levels at which Libeskind hoped to succeed. To ask more of the building, to ask it to function as a repository of embodied emotion, is to ask it to be what it does not want to be. The truth of Libeskind’s narrative is not in question; but through the intense personalization of the imagery, indeed, through the imagery itself, it has been confined to a place and time – a type of specificity which comes with representation of a narrative.

The experience of the Memorial for Murdered Jews does not require a text. It offers one but only when the visitor proceeds to the underground archives. But the route to the “underground” is indirect, without markers or clues, and without any preparation for what one finds there. Eisenman speaks about his belief that the work should not be called a “denkmal,” the German for memorial, but “mahnmal,” the German for a warning, and as such, it should not be judged on aesthetics or meaning but on “the impossibility of success.” Without, I believe, intending to, he raises the issue of how we should judge any memorial and once again, Young gives us an answer. We should not, he says, ask “how are people moved by these memorials but rather, to what end have they been moved, to what historical conclusions, to what understanding and actions in their own lives? This is to suggest that we cannot separate the monument from its public life, that the social function of such art is its aesthetic performance.” From Young, I draw two conclusions: that a competition itself can be a performance which communicates meaning and feeling, and that in the case of the Berlin memorial, the realm of movement in space, a type of movement which ranges from the unsettling to the illuminating, is the most important and expressive part of the memorial.

The “Bucuresti 2000” produced movement of a more conceptual and ideological form. And this is, perhaps, its simultaneous failure and success in the expression and communication of emotions. Nonetheless, it may be the case that one must judge a competition which does not produce an outcome but does impact the city in terms which differ from how we judge a building and a memorial. Indeed, to make sense of three projects which on some level all relate to traumatic experience but do so differently may require a model which illuminates the issue of remembering and forgetting the traumatic experience. Focusing on other cities in east
Europe and drawing on the novels of Milan Kundera and George Konrad, Richard Esbenshade has tried to develop a model for explaining differences between responses which focus on concrete acts of reclaiming a lost past and more elusive acts which do not have a visible outcome. He names and describes the “Kundera paradigm” as one in which the state erases and suppresses memory but the individual attempts to preserve these erasures through such acts as reburials, non-sanctioned shrines, and other forms of reviving and resuscitating banned works and people. The “Konrad” paradigm, in contrast, does not allow for any individuals to remain innocent of the process of how memories of the past may have been manipulated by the government, and because they are not innocent, they are, to a degree, complicit with this manipulation. The memory which must be revived in this case is not a pure or idealized memory. 

In Dominick LaCapra’s terms, the difference might be described as the difference between historical and structural trauma. Historical trauma can be worked through, and unlike the absence created by structural trauma, the loss of a historical trauma can be regained and made present.

Both the “Bucuresti 2000” and the Jewish Museum, in their own ways, create representations of trauma, and as such, they operate within the “Kundera paradigm.” The Jewish Museum, in its goal of recognizing the contributions of an exterminated part of the population, tries to regain and reconnect to what was lost. This form of remembering a historical trauma is ultimately a remembering which seems to come from outside, not because the architects were outsiders but because the works did not include a realm of understanding which supersedes or even denies the need for words. The “Bucuresti 2000,” however, does not exist entirely on the level of representation. If the extended period of the competition and the debates over realization are understood as the complete work, it crosses over into the “Konrad paradigm” and the recognition of complicity. In so doing, it implicitly recognizes the impossibility of reconnecting with what is absent. Perhaps because it hasn’t been built, it is the most complex experience of the three and cannot be described as either a representation of trauma or the creation of a space of trauma – it is both. Finally, the Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, despite having been created by an outsider, is more truly a model of the “Konrad paradigm.” This work does not argue that what was lost can be regained and it does not offer the possibility of ever attaining a meaningful understanding of this absence. Instead, it creates an uncanny confrontation with something which can’t be put into words. It becomes a space of memory and absence without the consolation or promise of waking to life before the trauma. In Eisenman’s work, we all become Tancred.
Notes


4. It’s important to note that I lived in Bucharest for a year and returned two years later for a month. I had many informal contacts to supplement my research. My time in Berlin was much shorter, only three weeks. I visited both the memorial and the museum twice but I would be the first to admit that more time is needed in both places to understand them. All of my research was conducted after these visits and took the form of secondary research. Although I’m not fluent in either Romanian or German, my Romanian was serviceable while I was living there, so I could conduct research using primary sources when they were made available to me. Clearly, my experiences are skewed but I hope my writing is not.

5. I use this phrase as Svetlana Boym does to imply an accepted way of thinking and acting. In *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 4, Boym defines mythologies as “cultural common places, recurrent narratives that are perceived as natural in a given culture but in fact were naturalized and their historical, political, or literary origins forgotten or disguised.”

6. Mark Selzer, “Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere,” *October 80* (Spring, 1997), 3 - 26, is speaking more specifically of a break-down between public and private space, but I think there is value in speaking of trauma in the public sphere when we refer to architectural and urban manifestations of political and social trauma.


9. One might go on to argue that what I call a language of trauma could also be called the language of deconstruction, all the more so in light of the fact that both Eisenman and Libeskind are associated with deconstruction. I do not make this argument in large part because I do not think deconstruction theory can explain architectural practices but that is an argument for a different paper.


14. This is not to say that the re-enactment of trauma is impossible; indeed, I believe there have been successful, artistic representations of trauma, but primarily in cinema, where time is an essential component of the recreation.


16. Young, At Memory’s Edge, p. 155.


18. I rely primarily on the history included in: Foundation for the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, Material on the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe (Berlin: Nicolai Publishing Col, 2005); Young, “Germany’s Holocaust Memorial Problem,” Karen E. Till, “Aestheticizing the Rupture,” in The New Berlin: Memory, Politics, Place (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005, 161-188; and materials made available to the public at the memorial. Till notes that Rosh adopted a combative stance which had the effect of alienating potential supporters, p. 164 and 260 (note 6).


21. Young, At Memory’s Edge, 191.

22. I rely on Young’s descriptions and photos of the entries in “Germany’s Holocaust Problem,” 204-210. Till focuses more on the arguments for and against the memorial than on the nature of the individual designs.

23. Although Eisenman denies any symbolic value to the final number, in the Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture, he notes that a rabbinical student later told him that the modern Talmud has 2711 pages. “Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe,” The Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture #49 (New York and Berlin: Leo Baeck Institute, 2005), p. 13.

25. Vidler could not include the Berlin memorial in his book which was published before it was built.


29. Rauterberg, introduction to his photographic text in *Holocaust Berlin Memorial*. In contrast to Rauterberg, I would suggest that the experience below ground would be little more than an archival exploration without the prior experience above ground.


31. I rely on Young’s essay, “Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum in Berlin,” in *At Memory’s Edge*, 152-181, for this discussion of the museum’s history. It is recounted in other work about the museum, including Libeskind’s own writings on his work and it is somewhat more complicated than my synopsis may suggest. Wiedmer’s more detailed discussion focuses on some of the controversy around the call for a museum and the role it would play in the city – *The Claims of Memory*, 120-128.


38. Here I draw on my previously published article, “Contested Mythologies: The Architectural Deconstruction of a Totalitarian Culture,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 54 (May) 2001, 229-237. In that work I trace the conflicts over the origins of the city, the relationship of these conflicts to the competition, and discuss the outcome of the competition in terms of Scarry’s model of pain.

39. I interviewed Ianasi and other members of the commission in Bucharest in July 1999,

40. Email correspondence with the author in 1997.

41. Young, “Libeskind’s Jewish Museum,” 180; 182.

42. Eisenman, “The Silence of Excess.”


Figure 1: von Gerkan, J. Zais, and team: Bucuresti 2000 competition entry, first prize, 1966; author’s photograph of model; also reproduced in the Catalogue of the Competition, 1997, p. 38

Figure 2: Amy C. Anderson and team: Bucuresti 2000 competition entry, 1996, honorable mention; Author’s photograph of model; also reproduced in the Competition Catalogue, p. 62

Figure 3: Peter Eisenman: model prepared for the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, 2000
Figure 4: Daniel Libeskind: Jewish Museum in Berlin, completed in 1998; photographed in 2007, view from Lindenstrasse.

Figure 5: Photograph of the east façade of the House of Parliament as it looked in 1997, Bucharest, Romania.

Figure 6: Libeskind’s model, “Stone-Breath,” for the second competition for a Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe; reproduced in Young, At Memory’s Edge (Yale UP, 2000).
Figure 7: Jochen Gerz, “Warum?” model for the second Memorial competition (1997); reproduced in At Memory’s Edge

Figure 8: Gesine Weinmiller: “18 Scattered Sandstone Wall Segments,” model for the second Memorial competition, 1997, repro. In At Memory’s Edge

Figure 9: view of the Memorial from perimeter, photograph taken in 2007
Figure 10: view of path between stelae from within the Memorial, photo taken in 2007

Figure 11: view of an outdoor “indoor” space, south elevation, Jewish Museum;
Figure 12: interior view looking up three levels, one of five voids
Figure 13: Jewish Museum, outside view of the Garden of Exile (E.T.A. Hoffman Garden), 2007

Figure 14: Menashe Kadishman, “Falling Leaves,” close-up, looking down on installation in the Jewish Museum, work completed in 2001; photographed in 2007