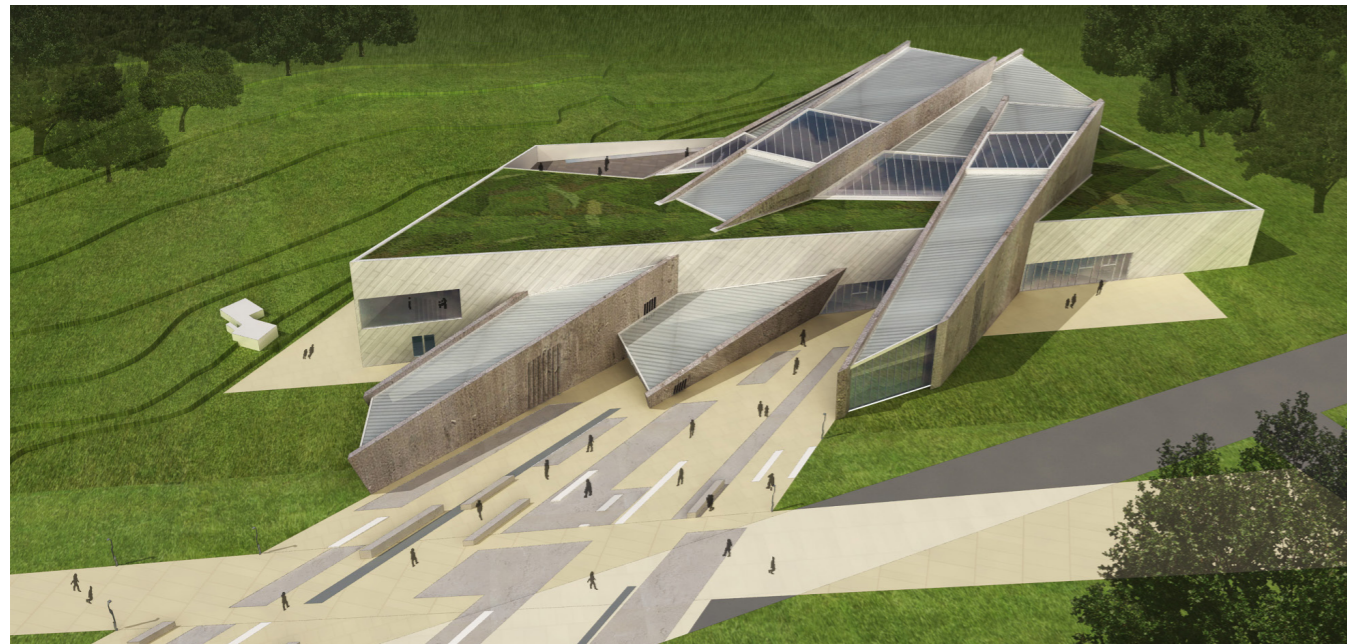


Grit And Reality

Daniel Libeskind visited Belfast in October to give the third Building Inspiration Lecture at the Whitla Hall. Architect Dr. Andrew Molloy caught up with him for Perspective.



Maze LongKesh (c)Studio Libeskind

Gazing across the Whitla Hall audience – brought together for the Third RSUA ‘Building Inspiration Lecture’ in October 2019 – Daniel Libeskind smiled, “I love Belfast... it has the grit and reality of a real city.”

These talks, focussed on inspiring local practitioners, promote the transformative nature of architecture among clients, policy makers and the public. It also marked the tenth anniversary



Daniel Libeskind in Belfast signing copies of his latest book ‘Edge of Order’

of Libeskind’s honorary doctorate from Ulster University, consolidating the architect’s long-standing relationship with Northern Ireland.

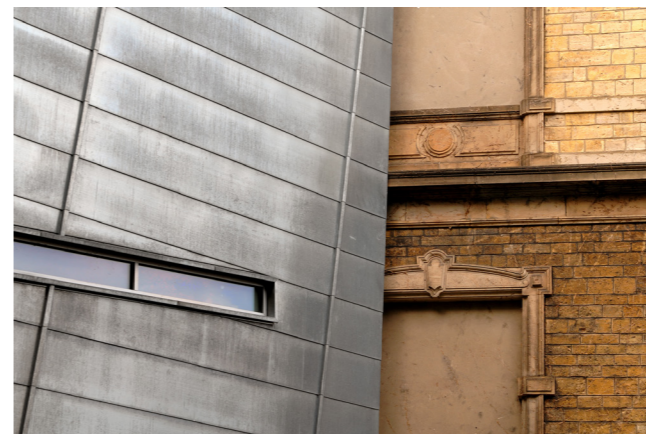
After the lecture, I followed up on his philosophies and his love of cities: “It’s really a city that I love being in. I am a true enthusiast of Belfast,” having visited here on many occasions. “You can see the city is moving forward. It’s got this spirit. You get the sense a city of wanting to accomplish something. There are new developments of course – not enough in my opinion – but despite the difficulties of national and international politics it is a city poised for success because of the people who live there.”

His lecture spotlighted thirty years of Studio Libeskind projects, offering insight into his approach to design, “Memory is the ground of architecture.” He underscored the relationship to the Nussbaum Haus, the practice’s first completed project (1998), “not real estate, not technology, but the deep memory of the site.”

On this I asked him about the devastating effect of the 2018 ‘Primark fire’, which occurred at the Bank Buildings at Castle Junction in the core of the city. “A tragedy. But the building will come back to life! The whole neighbourhood needs to come alive again with new buildings and new ideas. It’s so important to have these historical pieces connected back to public life so that people can enjoy the centre of Belfast. People love



Felix Nussbaum Museum Expansion (c)Bitterbredt



Felix Nussbaum Museum Expansion - The Old and the New (c)Michele Nastesi

good architecture, and particularly value the architecture of the past where there was so much care for building.” Places remember events.

Extending to contemporary issues that resonate, Libeskind’s words reverberate Greta Thunberg’s vision: “What we appreciate about historical buildings is that they are well-crafted and well-built, not fodder for demolition a few years after construction. Sustainability has always been part of good architecture. If it’s a good building, it will have a long life. Architects have a tremendous responsibility to create buildings that are not consumer items but have longevity as part of the fabric of the city. It’s an ethical and social question, not just a professional one. If a young woman from Sweden can do it, then everyone else should take responsibility!”

Survivor of parents of the Holocaust in Stalinist Poland, Libeskind applies his passion for social justice – and an intense belief in the democratic process – to an understanding of the role of architecture, “the basis of architecture is freedom, democracy and an open society.” His new monograph the Edge of Order is founded on the idea that architecture, like democracy, balances the threat of order and the threat of disorder. “Architecture should find a middle way.”

With this I asked Libeskind about the recent RIBA Stirling Prize social housing project winner in Norwich by Mikhail Riches and Cathy Hawley; whether this project is a harbinger heralding a shift in professional values. “I feel that the creation of affordable housing, housing for the 99%, is the key issue of our time. It’s about social justice. It’s about income and equality. I think architecture can do a lot to transform the stigma that social housing is lowest common denominator and raise it to



Felix Nussbaum Museum Expansion - Gang Interior Hallway (c)Bitterbredt



Military History Museum, Dresden, © Hufton+Crow Photography

something very attractive and beautiful, because architecture shouldn't depend on the height of your budget but rather the height of your aspirations."

Many of Studio Libeskind's projects - the Jewish Museum, Berlin; the Nussbaum Haus, Osnabrück; Dresden Military Museum; Żłota 44, Warsaw; Ground Zero, New York - grapple with cultural trauma shared by society, and the intricate set of spatial and social relationships it manifests. I was interested in how these ideas might apply to the proposed Maze/Long Kesh Peace Centre, Lisburn, a collaboration between Studio Libeskind and local practice McAdam Design, that received



Military History Museum, Dresden, © Hufton+Crow Photography

planning approval in 2013 but is stalled by the political impasse in government. "It's a very divisive set of histories. I don't believe that sectarianism is a given that will never go away. One has to work; not just towards reconciliation, but to create a place where people can actually see each other, talk to each other and develop a democratic society that is fair and just."

"That's why I believe in the Long Kesh Project. It was - or is, I'm still hopeful, a project that creates a common, shared space where people can accomplish something positive in a place with a divisive history. I think one has to move forward. One cannot live with the past. I think one of the ways to contribute to that positive development is to build something that is hopeful. It's not just an architectural idea, it's a social idea."

Reflecting with a knowing that can only come from building in post-war, post-trauma, post-conflict situations, what came across in lecture and conversation is a forthright, almost aggressive, form of hope: a belief that things will improve despite the horrors and injustices of the past. Not a passive faith. Rather, an acute drive that political process is participatory: "People themselves have to see that they have to act to make a civic society; that they can't just depend on the stuff coming from up high. Democracy is a system where people can participate and can make a change."

Not here to end an era but to mark an era of what-comes-next, Libeskind asserts, "cities cannot rest on achievements of the past." Looking to the future with his mantra, "one cannot hide from the traumas of past, they must be confronted," sets out a challenging, and profoundly hopeful, architectural philosophy. It offers a way for both cities, and the broader societal context in which they sit, to mature. It offers a way to not just move beyond trauma, but understand and accept it.

Since our conversation I'm not sure whether I share Libeskind's belief that Northern Ireland is ready for this vision, but I do find his optimism heartening. ○

Dr Andrew Molloy

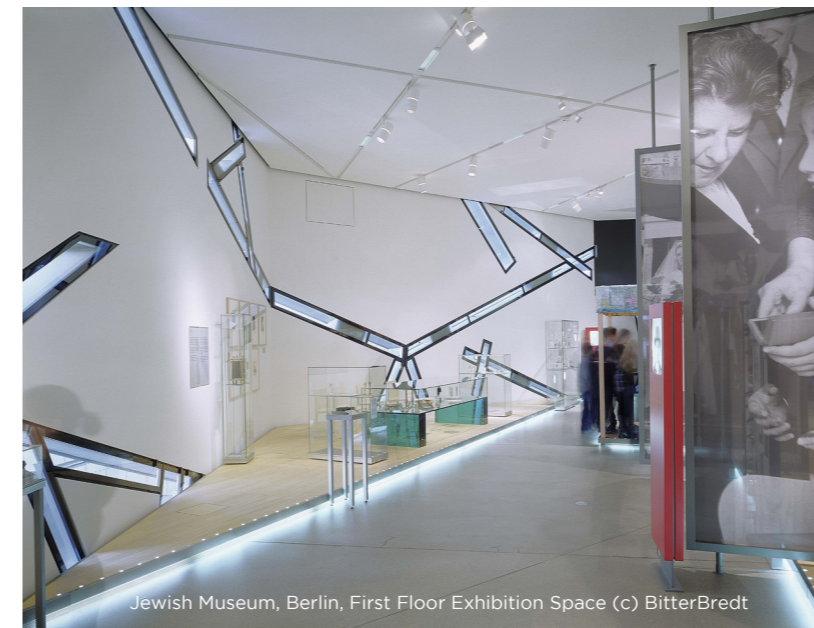
Daniel Libeskind's latest book 'Edge of Order' is published by Crown Publications and is available now.



SDL Jewish Museum © Hufton+Crow



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Jewish Museum, Berlin, First Floor Exhibition Space (c) BitterBredt



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