

# Roman NIECZYPOROWSKI

Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Gdańsku

## THE JEWISH MUSEUM IN BERLIN: ON ARTUR KAMCZYCKI'S BOOK *DANIEL LIBESKIND'S MUSEUM IN BERLIN: THE JEWISH CONTEXT OF ARCHITECTURE*

It is difficult to understand why a book published in 2015 by Artur Kamczycki, devoted to the analysis of the symbolic architectural concept of the Jewish Museum in Berlin,<sup>1</sup> has not been properly discussed until today. It is the more surprising because, despite the fact that the Libeskind museum's subject matter has already been the focus of substantial research, it would be difficult to find a similarly comprehensive anthropological and cultural spectrum analysis of the architectural foundation of the Berlin museum. In addition, the author has for many years - from the time of his studies at the History of Art Institute at Poznań University - researched such issues of Jewish art and culture.<sup>2</sup> In every work by Artur Kamczycki one can see evidence of great erudition, extensive knowledge of the subject matter and remarkable analytical skills, and this book is no exception.

*The Libeskind Museum in Berlin. The Jewish context of architecture* is an unusual book in many respects, particularly in its taking

a multifaceted, intertextual approach to the symbolism of the architecture of the Jewish Museum building. It is also very well informed with regard to Jewish cultural, philosophical, artistic, religious and Kabbalistic traditions. In his earlier studies the author has noted that, while for many Jewish artists and designers modern art was a tool of emancipation and detachment from their religious roots, for others, on the contrary, Jewish tradition was often an important, though hidden element of their artistic inspiration - an essential part of their creative concepts.<sup>3</sup> The architectural structure of the Berlin Jewish Museum, created in 1989-1999 on the basis of the Daniel Libeskind project, in which the tradition of Judaism plays a significant role, is, as the author so coherently explains, an example of the latter.

The book opens with an extensive introduction, in which the author presents the biography of the architect Daniel Libeskind and the history and circumstances of the museum's creation, also describing the numerous cultural

and socio-political issues that accompanied its construction. The basic framework of the book is the analysis of individual topics contained in four precisely-constructed chapters, each of which contains four sub-chapters. Each chapter concentrates on one theme, although the different subjects obviously overlap, and the chapters build a logical structure of connection with the leitmotif of *tikkun olam*.<sup>4</sup>

Libeskind first proposed an adaptation of the Kollegienhaus, a baroque palace from the time of Friedrich Wilhelm I (1713-1740), which still existed at Berlin Kreuzberg, and next to it the addition of a dazzling new building – with zinc panels claddings – housing the Jewish Museum;<sup>5</sup> this was to be connected to the Kollegienhaus by an underground tunnel. The new building was to be constructed on a 'zigzag' plan. The external form of the museum was to appear as a set of cubic solids, an irregular, angular structure with a flat roof. The four storey interior of this dynamic, expressive building was designed in a manner reminiscent of the structure of a labyrinth cut with a straight 4.5 m wide, 27 m high and 150 m long space of emptiness. Both the external architecture of the building and the organisation and layout of its interior encourages one to think about the architect's design ideas and concepts. Thus in the first chapter<sup>6</sup> Kamczycki takes us through the museum, discussing and giving his interpretation of the symbolic and meaningful connotations of the building's structure.<sup>7</sup> In the second chapter<sup>8</sup> the author focuses on the analysis of the space of *Emptiness*, analogous to both the *unheimlich* concept and also to the Kabbalistic motifs of *Ajin* and *Ein Sof*. In this way Kamczycki presents his own 'Kabbalistic' interpretation of the museum's space. These threads are developed in the third chapter,<sup>9</sup> in which he presents a semantic analysis of the 'zigzag' plan of the museum in connection with the structure of the Kabbalistic *Tree of Sefirot*, thereby taking up one of the dominant features of any interpretation of Libeskind's building, namely the problem of deconstruction in architecture. In the fourth chapter<sup>10</sup> Kamczycki's reflections focus on the key interpretation of the 'bent' architectural structure of the Libeskind Museum as a visual analogy to an overturned

tower. According to the researcher, this involves the mythical (in the architectural tradition) image of Jerusalem as a vertical axis. Kamczycki then continues to discuss the challenge that he faced with regard to the anti-monument, and takes up the symbolic aspect of the points placed by Libeskind on the map of Berlin, treated here in terms of the concept of *eruv*<sup>11</sup> and drawn as an attenuated Star of David. The book concludes with reflections on the glass dome of the Reichstag by Norman Foster, as an element related to both the idea of the tower and the concepts of *eruv* and *tikkun olam*.

Kamczycki's outstanding interpretation was derived from intertextual and interdisciplinary perspectives, and because of this we are given a multi-faceted (inter-picture and inter-text) reading of the Libeskind project, which shows the architectural work as a semantically capacious construction, filled with both a set of specific signs and symbols, as well as complex concepts and traditional Jewish ideas.

It is worth noting that, by presenting the original analysis of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, Kamczycki has made use of all the possible literature available to him. In addition, the breadth and variety of the cited works demonstrate both his thorough and his holistic approach, which are at the heart of the book. Because of this the book broadens the current state of research and avoids the trap of representing or duplicating already familiar material, as well as presenting the results of source research and hermeneutic reading of texts on Jewish thought.

Reading the book by Kamczycki encourages us to understand the process of architectural design as a culturally specific imaging system. Such an attitude implies the need to interpret the architectural forms used. In this work Kamczycki undertakes a critical, symbolic reading of the Berlin building of the Jewish Museum, pointing to Kabbalistic thought constituting the architectural work of Libeskind. In this case, for the author, texts such as those of Victoria Newhouse,<sup>12</sup> Mark C. Taylor,<sup>13</sup> Anthony Vidler,<sup>14</sup> Kurt W. Forster,<sup>15</sup> James E. Young,<sup>16</sup> Andrew Benjamin,<sup>17</sup> and Mark Wigley<sup>18</sup> are the starting point. In Kamczycki's approach this idea

reveals its complexity, consisting in the fact that it is never a simple "topographical adoption," while Judaic symbolism takes the form of a universalist interpretation incorporating cultural, political and social postulates. At the same time, while respecting the intention of the architect to treat his work as a fully open system, Kamczycki has already noted in the introduction that his goal was not "an attempt to read the architect's intentions, understood as a journey to a source."<sup>19</sup>

In discussing the views of Gershom Scholem, Kamczycki observes that, according to Scholem, all intentional human activity, in particular creative interpretation, is a work of restitution, of bringing man and deity closer together. In this way, the concept of *tikkun olam*<sup>20</sup> can be understood as a general social process encompassing historical, political or cultural issues; indeed, the concept of *tikkun olam* is, according to Kamczycki, "the main axis determining the interpretation criterion." It is understood in an intertextual perspective as a sign, interpreting a different sign. This interpretation is based on the theory of intertextuality, which locates the meaning of the work, not on the source side in the author's mind, but on the side of its reception, in its development no longer under the dictation of the author's will, dynamic and changeable, each time a different reading process, co-created by a system of characters that is put at the disposal of the recipient and his memory, enabling him to read these signs through reminiscence - in reference to signs already read elsewhere.

Thanks to the concept of *tikkun olam*, the architecture of the Berlin museum may become a tool in the process of repair, reconciliation and symbiosis in the complex area of Jewish-German relations. This makes Kamczycki's original thesis that the symbolic structure of the Libeskind museum evokes the "idea of Jewish-German restitution after the Holocaust," and using pictorial metaphors embodies the concepts of repair, restitution and renewal, reconciliation and symbiosis in the architectural work.<sup>21</sup>

The extraordinary value of this book lies in its interdisciplinary and intertextual character. Kamczycki builds his interpretation

of the architecture of the Jewish Museum in Berlin in a multidimensional way, applying an original approach combining the analysis of contemporary art culture with the context of Jewish tradition. His deep grasp of art history and architectural theory is complemented by knowledge and research in many other fields, including philosophy and literature, mysticism, religion, theology, and political and social issues. However, the most important element in his decoding of the symbolism of architecture seems to be Jewish Kabbalistic thought. The book discusses many earlier theories and interpretations, but expands them to include previously unmentioned elements, giving the reader a new, compact, coherent, and culturally and anthropologically attractive interpretation.

In conclusion, it can be stated that this book is testimony to the erudition and vastness of Kamczycki's interests and his methodological openness. A thorough knowledge of the subject, supported by anthropological and cultural research, creates a convincing reconstruction of the complex symbolism of Libeskind's architectural design. In addition, the analysis of the form, plan and shape of the museum building is consistently aimed at explaining the complex structure of meaning encoded in the architectural form of the symbolic system. And, above all, the author has the ability to identify cultural determinants, which are not necessarily obvious in the light of unified and universal modernity.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Artur Kamczycki, *Muzeum Libeskinda w Berlinie. Żydowski kontekst architektury* [Daniel Libeskind's Museum in Berlin. The Jewish Context of Architecture], *Seria Historii Sztuki*, nr 39 (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2015),.
- <sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that he devoted his master's thesis to a monument, museum and place (memory), while his doctoral thesis raised the problem of Theodor Herzl and Zionist iconography before 1933, see.: Artur Kamczycki, *Syjonizm i sztuka. Ikonografia Theodora Herzla*, *Gniezno European Studies*, vol. 20 (Poznań: Poznańskie Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Nauk, 2014).
- <sup>3</sup> Artur Kamczycki, "El Lissitzky, his Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge and their Jewish Inspirations," in *Russian Émigré Culture: Conservatism or Evolution?*, edited by Christoph Flamm, Henry Keazor, Roland Marti (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 89-104.
- <sup>4</sup> In the Jewish tradition it is a concept of repair, restitution and renewal.
- <sup>5</sup> At Lindenstrasse.
- <sup>6</sup> "Droga w muzeum" [The Path in the Museum] consisting of four sub-chapters: "Sapientia et Iustitia," "Szeol's Shadow," "Labyrinth: Germania," "Jacob's Ladder."
- <sup>7</sup> Starting from the gate in Kollegienhaus, through underground corridors, to the so-called continuation stairs. Both the structural or visual difference between the two buildings and the theme of the main entrance are discussed here, as well as the symbolic categories of the underground in relation to the concept of Sheol, and then the so-called the tower of the Holocaust, the Hoffmann's Garden and the axis of continuation as the "vision" of Jacob's Ladder.
- <sup>8</sup> "The structure of Emptiness."
- <sup>9</sup> "Sefirotic Tree."
- <sup>10</sup> "Upturned Tower."
- <sup>11</sup> Connections of municipalities.
- <sup>12</sup> Victoria Newhouse, *Towards a New Museum* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1973).
- <sup>13</sup> Mark C. Taylor, "Point of no return," in *Daniel Libeskind, Radix-Matrix: Architecture and Writings*, edited by Daniel Libeskind and Andrea P.A. Belloli (Münich-New York: Prestel, 1997), 128–135.
- <sup>14</sup> Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992); Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space. Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).
- <sup>15</sup> Kurt W. Forster, "Monstrum mirabile et audax," in *Daniel Libeskind: Erweiterung des Berlin Museum mit Abteilung Jüdisches Museum/Daniel Libeskind: Extension to the Berlin Museum with Jewish Museum Department*, edited by Kristin Feireiss (Berlin: Ernst & Sohn, 1992).
- <sup>16</sup> James E. Young, "The U.S. Holocaust Museum: memory and the politics of identity," in *The Jew in the Text. Modernity and the Construction of Identity*, edited by Linda Nochlin and Tamar Garb (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995), 292-304; James E. Young, "The arts of Jewish memory in a postmodern age," in *Modernity, Culture and the Jew*, edited by Brayan Chayette and Laura Marcus (Cambridge, MA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 211-225.
- <sup>17</sup> Andrew Benjamin, *Architectural Philosophy: Repetition, Function, Aletarity* (London: Atholone Press, 2000); Andrew Benjamin, *Art, Mimesis and the Avant-Garde. Aspects of Philosophy of Difference* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991); Andrew Benjamin, "Derrida, architecture and philosophy. Deconstruction in architecture," *An Architectural Design Profile* no. 72 (1988): 8-12.
- <sup>18</sup> Mark Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt* (Cambridge MA – London: MIT Press, 1995).
- <sup>19</sup> Kamczycki, *Muzeum Libeskinda*, 21.
- <sup>20</sup> Repair of the world.
- <sup>21</sup> Kamczycki, *Muzeum Libeskinda*, 41.

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