David A. Ellison

The Spoiler's Art:
Embarrassed Space as Memorialization

Over and over again, the other speakers—senators, art historians, and artists—bemoaned the abject failure of their competition. All of this was compounded by their acute embarrassment over the incivility of it all, the petty bickering, the name-calling, and the quagmire of politics into which the whole process seemed to be sinking. Bad enough that we murdered the Jews of Europe, one senator whispered to me, worse that we can't agree on how to commemorate them.

—James E. Young, "Germany's Holocaust Memorial Problem—and Mine"

My subject here is embarrassment. On the face of it, not a promising or likely location from which to begin a consideration of theory now. Embarrassment, unlike the graver, more intense, and more ethically charged emotions of guilt and shame, has attracted relatively little interest among theorists likely to be summoned for the purposes of defining any moment, much less our own. Which is not to say that embarrassment has escaped scholarly attention. As an experiential fault line dividing an abashed and excruciated self from the critical gaze of others, embarrassment occupies an enduring place within the social sciences. Such studies find their origins in Erving Goffman's 1956 account of the fraught lifeworld

of hapless corporate actors sweating bullets into their gray flannel suits.¹ For Goffman, embarrassment appeared as the result of a malfunction in the expression of social identity, effectively discrediting an individual's claims to a given competence or capacity. While this is a sobering experience for anyone thus caught out, this is not exactly the kind of embarrassment that occupies me here. I am concerned with what might be called *embarrassed space* opening within the otherwise tautly theorized domain of contemporary architecture. Rather than an emotion produced by the apprehension of critical scrutiny, embarrassed space is receptive and multidirectional, drawing architects, critics, observers, patrons, and so on within its uncertain ambit. Specifically, I'm interested here in the occurrence, or one might say the installation, of embarrassed space within structures solemnly tasked with memorialization—in this case, the mass murder of European Jewry.

I will look at three built responses to the problem of historical remembering. Two are officially sanctioned public interventions in the fabric of contemporary Berlin: Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum and Peter Eisenman's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. The third is a private home in London's Hampstead Heath that is now open as a museum administered by the British National Trust.

Before Libeskind's Jewish Museum, Germany's most famous and influential memorial to the Holocaust was arguably a site-specific performance by German chancellor Willy Brandt. During his 1970 visit to Warsaw's monument for the victims of the ghetto uprising against Nazi occupation, Brandt kneeled in silence for some minutes in an action widely interpreted as a confession of collective guilt to an international public acting as a third-party witness.² Importantly, this acknowledgment wasn't presented in prepared remarks but in an apparently spontaneous gesture that refused, or at least did not explicitly invite, further explication. In a history of Europe composed of symbolic actions, Brandt's solemn gesture ended the postwar period and signaled Germany's return to European politics. It also, I would suggest, situated the (notionally guilt-free) experiential body at the center of subsequent attempts to memorialize mass death precisely as a spectacle composed of the weight of history troubling the innocent body. To dedicate a space to memory inevitably creates a remainder composed of those excluded or otherwise unrecognizable as the subject of recollective sorrow. This is seen most clearly perhaps in the formation of the memorial state of Israel, which, as Hannah Arendt reminds us, solved the Jewish question by producing a new category of stateless refugees.³ The remainder is a problem.

Libeskind's Jewish Museum

Approached from the Lindenstrasse, Libeskind's building is fragmentary in outline and plan. Clad with zinc and intersected with narrow diagonal windows, the walls appear both defensive and torn. After clearing security, visitors descend a staircase to face a choice of three intersecting streets, or axes, each recording a particular Jewish fate. The Axis of Emigration minimally documents the fate of deported Jews by listing destination names on wall surfaces. It terminates in the relentlessly symbolic E. T. A. Hoffmann Garden of Exile, with its forty-nine raked columns filled with soil collected from Jerusalem, each column surmounted by an olive tree. Following the Axis of Continuity leads visitors up to the various exhibition spaces of the museum. The third street is the Axis of Holocaust, a relatively short passage leading to a tower entered through a massive concrete door, which, once opened, returns to a closed position. The space inside the tower is acoustically and climatically distinct from the rest of the building. The walls, rising to heights of about nine meters, are bare cast concrete punctured by a single light source.

Writing in a series of pamphlets documenting Berlin's new architecture, Rolf Schneider describes the tower as if it were exempt from the hollowing-out effects of representation: "The enclosed space makes no attempt to simulate anything. It is as it is: huge, narrow, cut off, final, bare. There is no aesthetic equivalent for holocaust. There is nothing aesthetic about this enclosed space. It is the holocaust itself."⁴ Here we might see Libeskind evading Theodor Adorno's prohibition on art in the wake of Auschwitz by producing a deaestheticized architecture that mysteriously remains both sublime and articulate. "It is as it is."

A more convincing account of Libeskind's struggle with Adorno is found in Terry Smith's *Architecture of Aftermath*. For Smith, Libeskind's embrace of Heideggerian becoming produces a building in a state of permanent incompleteness, rife with doubled voids and interpenetrative axes. As Libeskind puts it in the conclusion to his "Between the Lines" competition entry for the Jewish Museum, "A Museum ensemble is thus always on the verge of Becoming—no longer suggestive of a final solution."⁵ As much as I admire Smith's reading, his framing of Libeskind's intention statements is problematic:

Libeskind stunned the judges by submitting as his competition entry a philosophical program typed onto music paper. Titling the entire project "Between the Lines" he began by noting, "A Museum for the City of Berlin must be a

place where all citizens, those of the past, of the present and of the future, must find their common heritage and individual home." So far, so platitudinous. But then, this radical architectural challenge: "To this end, the museum form itself must be rethought in order to transcend the passive involvement of the viewer, actively confronting change."⁶

I'm struck by Smith's breezy dismissal of Libeskind's opening sentence—with its call for an individual home—as just so much rhetorical glad-handing, an embarrassing precursor to the real work of theory.⁷ Contra Smith, I think we should take seriously Libeskind's suggestion that Berliners might find an individual home of sorts in the museum or at least confront what domesticity offers to the task of "actively confronting change." Home, after all, is not an inconsequential idea in the history of Nazism, in its appeal to homely, nuclear virtues authorizing in turn the violation of other homes. There is also the domestic everydayness of the racial purity laws in action, their undoing of the habits of others to shop, to attend the cinema, to sit quietly at the kitchen table.

As noted above, Libeskind's building initially opened as an empty shell, as architecture devoid of exhibits. By September 8, 2001, the museum, at last properly brimming with display objects, reopened to some controversy. Dismayed critics lamented the inclusions as a distraction, a lesser experience than the building itself.⁸ Certainly the display practices cleave to a more conventional style at odds with the building's larger claims to auratic abstraction. The exhibits cumulatively document the history of the Jews in Berlin from the medieval era through to the Nazis' seizure of power and beyond. When critics and museumgoers objected to this kind of experience, they mourned the loss of Libeskind's stark and stirring psycho-spatial drama now cluttered with so much sentimental and commodified display. It is tempting to imagine that this was deliberate, a way for Libeskind to secure a measure of the sacred through this rigorous profanation. And yet that distinction is quite unstable. After all, there is much about the building that is unbecoming, if not kitsch, then at least awkward, and always threatening to puncture the immersive quality of the experience. In the Garden of Exile, for example, signs warn of imminent dread and nausea provoked by the converging and off-kilter columns—symptoms that might or might not emerge regardless of these crude prompts. Even more emphatic, and seemingly less in keeping with the supposed ethos of the building, is Menashe Kadishman's *Shalechet* (*Fallen Leaves*) (see figure 1), thousands of corroded iron faces that litter the floor of one of the voids. Visitors are even invited

Figure 1. Menashe Kadishman, *Shalechet* (*Fallen Leaves*). Copyright Jewish Museum, Berlin. Photo by Marion Roßner

to walk across its ostentatiously distressing surface. What kind of affect is demanded here?

These clumsy inclusions may be a sign of the museum's proper objectives—to instruct, to strike the conscience, to appease, to amuse—and are offered in a compensatory light by curators and donors lending interpretive shape to the museum's acquisition and display practices. I suspect that even without Libeskind's imprimatur, the building invites such outrages—how else are we to understand the purpose of all that resonant purity stockpiled during the years the museum lay empty and fallow? Libeskind has built a house for spoiling or at least an institution that, in spite of its metaled walls, is surprisingly underdefended in the face of embarrassment.

By way of example I offer this image (see figure 2) taken from a vantage point looking down the Axis of the Holocaust leading to the tower entrance. Along one side of the wall, dark asymmetrical portholes open onto display cases. These portals are, to use the architectural term, fritted. Their framing borders are defined by tiny ceramic dots fired directly onto the glass. The effect of this is simple: it is extremely difficult to view what these windows disclose unless you stand directly before them.

The objects revealed (Bibles, menorahs, letters) are flotsam bobbing up to the surface from years submerged in the secretive spaces of home—

Figure 2. The Axis of the Holocaust during the Long Museum Night 2010, Jewish Museum, Berlin. Photo by Ernest Feeler, Berlin

under floorboards, between walls, behind tiles—where they were uncovered by builders, plumbers, and home renovators in the decades following the war. They were concealed in the hope that they might be retrieved if and when Jewish domestic lives resumed. Their display may signal such resumption, although that inference is undercut by the gloomy interstitial mode of display that resists or defers the sense that these items have returned to the light. Relieving the otherwise undisturbed white of the axes' various planes, the modestly sized portals, borrowing their proportions from a cramped vitrine, invite as well as remind viewers to peer in. The desire to look at something, to fix the eye on an *anything*—even that which is clearly not museum grade—is, frankly, overwhelming, and yet the dimensions and disposition of the display dictate that at most one or two people can observe it at any given time. These domestic objects receive detailed labels narrating the circumstances of their discovery and subsequent return to the world of things. There is actually quite a lot to read, and one must linger. The image above is in the service of the auratic, sanctified minimalism of Libeskind's museum and as such fails to acknowledge just how crowded this space can become. The museum regularly teems with visitors, tourists, and school groups. Amid this press of bodies com-

peting to witness, frustrations emerge. Little flurries of aggression erupt; tiny, inappropriate, and embarrassing distortions in the social field produce hostility within the notionally protective sphere of the sacred, the mournful space of the memorial. The contemporary, theoretically informed museological defense of this mode of display would highlight the difficulty of possessing and thus recovering the past. Such a rationale wouldn't sit comfortably, though, with the grotesque lapse in taste of these moderately aggrieved bodies of varying size, ethnicity, and language group squaring off over the right to lay visual claim to these undistinguished, entirely domestic, and yet perversely talismanic Jewish goods. Worse still, this mode of display encodes both the suggestion of Jewish guile (they hide treasures!) and Gentile rapacity regardless of the identity of the viewer. The sheer embarrassment generated in this encounter—the dangerously unguarded behavior expressed—is latent in the design of the museum. Embarrassment works by intermittently revealing something private about the self to an audience that apprehends the exposure with its attendant loss of status/face. But what if the audience is also complicit? The mourning, solemnity, nausea—all the things the building expressly asks us to feel—are stripped away in this space devoted to remembering the horrors of the past. One moves from the cluttered, cheek-by-jowl space of the corridor (itself a better model of Holocaust spatiality in terms of the historic task of marshaling and channeling anxious bodies perfected in the cattle truck) into the noise-swallowing and occupant-limited space of the tower. The transition from the compromised and embarrassed space of the corridor to the tower as a mode of self-conscious architectural achievement is a move from socio-centrism to egocentrism, in which one is encouraged to contemplate mass death through a theatricalized threat to self.

The museum fails; the visitors fail. Everything is spoiled. That this potential transformation (“of the viewer, actively confronting change”) occurs at the entrance to the voided void of the Holocaust tower and its stripped-back, abyssal claims is one of the richer ironies on offer in Berlin.

Eisenman's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe

It strikes me that Peter Eisenman—Libeskind's teacher, as it happens—learns something along these lines from the Jewish Museum in his plan for the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. Like Libeskind's building, the memorial has a complicated and convoluted history filled with reversals that I won't review in their entirety here. Suffice to say that Eisenman's

proposal rose to the top in a second competition. The first competition was won by Christine Jacob-Marks with her planned gargantuan tombstone engraved with the known names of 4.5 million Jewish victims. Unsuccessful entries included Horst Hoheisel's plan to explode the Brandenburger Tor and a multitude of improvisations on the Star of David in various states of decomposition. In reference to the Jewish tradition of leaving stones at a grave site, the Jacob-Marks proposal incorporated eighteen boulders from Masada. The incoherence of this entry, tied to the finality seemingly implied, if not promised, by the gravestone (these are twentieth-century memories we can finally, mercifully, put to rest) derailed it from further consideration. Eisenman and Richard Serra won the second competition, although the latter withdrew from the project following an acrimonious meeting with then chancellor Helmut Kohl, who demanded the memorial be reduced in size. Eisenman's revised design reduced the number of *stellae* as well as lowered the height of the tallest slabs from seven to five meters. While the number and height may have changed, the apparent desire to unsettle remained. Each pillar veered three degrees off vertical, playing the same German expressionist games as Libeskind's encroaching walls and looming pillars. Curiously, Holocaust scholar James E. Young, who served on the Findungskommission, was struck by the finesse and power of the Eisenman proposal precisely in its semiotic openness, and yet he was also perturbed that no space was reserved for didactic instruction. Reluctantly, Eisenman added a subterranean Place of Information that, while echoing the *stellae* above, serves as articulate testimony. Names are recorded; processes are documented. The *stellae* may be mute, but the center is prolix.

Writing prior to its official opening, Young itemized the positive features of the pillars, including their "warm, sandy tone."⁹ In addition to its capacity to reflect the colors of sun and sky, the material was compatible with an antigraffiti treatment. As is well known, Degussa (now Evonik), the company that manufactured Protectisol, also produced Zyklon B for use in the Nazi death chambers.¹⁰ Eisenman, speaking to *Der Spiegel*, notes that he was always opposed to the use of any antigraffiti treatment:

If a swastika is painted on it, it is a reflection of how people feel. And if it remains there, it is a reflection of how the German government feels about people painting swastikas on the monument. That is something I have no control over. When you turn a project over to clients, they do with it what they want—it's theirs and they occupy your work. You can't tell them what to do with it. If they want to knock the stones over tomorrow, honestly, that's

fine. People are going to picnic in the field. Children will play tag in the field. There will be fashion models modelling there and films will be shot there. I can easily imagine some spy shoot 'em ups ending in the field. What can I say? It's not a sacred place.¹¹

Eisenman's explicit permission is consonant with his personal cool and the coolness of the new Berlin. And, of course his prediction has proved unerring. The memorial is a site of recurrent high jinks, larks, and the occasional painted swastika (although these are rare). I doubt this happened because Eisenman refused to claim the sacred; in fact, I suspect it is more a function of the lack of signage explaining the purpose of the site combined with its inherent playfulness. The 3,000-odd columns, separated from one another by just enough space for a single body to pass between, set the scene for, depending on one's tastes and range of historical reference, hide-and-seek or grim fantasies of harrowing loss. Like Libeskind's museum, the memorial slyly provokes dissonant behavior of a type that spoils the larger educative, moral, and political claims made on behalf of institutions that remember the Holocaust. The memorial distributes Libeskind's domestically charged space of embarrassment across the field of *stellae*, although without the same intensity or range of effects. Eisenman produces a space of narcissism, irony, and play. In order to properly gauge the potential of embarrassed space, one must turn to a work on a much smaller scale.

No. 2 Willow Road

No. 2 Willow Road, Hampstead Heath, England, is the work of the dauntingly named architect Ernő Goldfinger, and like any number of rational, principled, delicately proportioned, and generously glazed oblongs, it is perfectly adaptable to retelling the domestic and institutional histories of twentieth-century modernism. But it's odd, too, exceptional even, in ways that are worth pausing over in thinking about architecture's capacity to memorialize.

The Goldfingers were Budapest Jews of solid bourgeois stock who left that politically fragile city in the wake of the October Revolution for the apparent civilities offered by Vienna. Ernő moved on to Paris in 1920, by which point, courtesy of the territorial vagaries of the Treaty of Trianon, he was a Polish national. In Paris he studied with the pioneering modernist Auguste Perret and encountered Le Corbusier, Charlotte Perriand, and Adolf Loos, among others, while refining the elements of his style: a pref-

erence for space and light poised between pillar and concrete slab. In 1934, with his wife, painter Ursula Blackwell, Goldfinger moved to London and began work on Willow Road, drawing up plans for a series of three terraced houses, the largest of which was intended for his family's use. The plans provoked a storm of antimodernist (and anti-Semitic) feeling coordinated by Henry Brooke (later home secretary in the Harold Macmillan government) of the Heath and Old Hampstead Protection Society. Brooke objected to an invasive style disastrously out of keeping with the atmosphere of the neighborhood—the xenophobe's perpetual lament. Following Loos's advice, Goldfinger had made a careful study of Georgian architecture and was able to argue, convincingly, that the proposed houses expressed continuities with the earlier style, eventually securing approval from the relevant authorities.¹² The completed house clearly references the brick-and-glass facades of eighteenth-century London terraces. At the same time, it honors the sacraments of Continental modernism in the choice of internal materials (concrete, plywood) and in the commitment to angularity, flexibility, efficiency, built-ins, and light. The interiors glow, especially the dining room with its "photobolic screen," an *ex post facto* coinage for the external concrete shelf dividing a large window that unexpectedly bounced weak, intermittent English light up to the ceiling, down into the recesses of the room, and over Goldfinger's taut, uncompromising furniture.

The spare, composed geometries of the house look to Loos's, Le Corbusier's, and Perret's various purifying assaults on the congested, feminized, filigreed, and historically burdened interiors of previous generations. Modernism promised mental and physical health through design that consigned to oblivion insalubrious cellars, drafty attics, and dream-infested inglenooks. In their place it offered light, freely circulated air, stark walls (on which to contemplate art of corresponding modernity), and furnishings scoured of ornament.

But within Goldfinger's home—currently open as a museum—there is another collection expressing a markedly different curatorial and aesthetic sensibility that sits uneasily within the modern and modernist ensemble. It belongs to Regine Goldfinger, Ernő's mother, who came to live with the family following her husband's death in the mid-1950s. She brought with her a cache of heavy, spectacularly ornate Austro-Hungarian furniture, pieces of which are distributed throughout the house. The dissonant effect is nothing short of startling. Regine's belongings are lushly organic and baroquely Jewish. In fact, Goldfinger's children dubbed a hulking credenza "the Tabernacle"—at once both temporary dwelling and

housing for the Ark of the Covenant, an aptly diasporized tag for an object pushed far from an abandoned home.¹³

The appearance of these obsolete furnishings within the home suggests a dramatic weakening of Loos's formative influence on Goldfinger. Loos, described by Adorno as "the sworn enemy of Viennese kitsch,"¹⁴ wrote, somewhat archly, of the damaging effects of the anachronistic decorative regimes of the late nineteenth century on the struggle to achieve the modern present.¹⁵

Following Loos's uncompromising antiornamentalism, or for that matter the similarly ferocious purgative dictates of Le Corbusier or Perret, Regine Goldfinger's heavy furnishings are not just bad taste as they decidedly appear but pitiless regression and the provocative return of modernism's repressed. Consider the charged space between Goldfinger's designing hand and this mother stuff. Such contiguities summon a primal scene of sorts—the originary moment of modernism's eliminationist desire at once summoned *and* stayed. This is architecture made irresolute, its stronger dictates suspended in favor of hospitality, the sincerity and ethical content of which is measured by Goldfinger's decision to retain the furniture following his mother's death, a choice in turn honored by its continued display under the stewardship of the National Trust. Goldfinger lets his mother's Jewish tastes ruin (at least within the governing aesthetic laws) his own house—a space where modernism, embarrassingly, cannot triumph over the past; there is simply no clean slate allowed here. The history of European Jewry, of pogroms, exile, and flight, is etched into the texture of home as space of permanently vulnerable and perpetually spoiled dwelling. Modernism's project is perceptible and extant but placed in permanent jeopardy, where the remainder, perversely, remains.

As recently constructed Jewish sites, Libeskind's museum and Eisenman's memorial are linked within the intermittently remorseful topography of postwar Berlin. Both appear sensitive to the problems of Holocaust memorialization, not least of which is the specter of a triumphal postatrocity age heralded by their very institutional existence. Both set the scene, *are the scene*, of embarrassed space, where the insufficiency of official memory meets the variously plaintive, sacral, spectacle-hungry needs of the visitor. The oddly jarring permissiveness cultivated in these spaces is inimical to the imagined objectives of the visitor's memory work as it is to received notions of architectural integrity. Something is spoiled, rather like Goldfinger's beautiful and ruined house as an inhabitable model of the cost of remembering.

Notes

- 1 Erving Goffman, "Embarrassment and Social Organization," *American Journal of Sociology* 62.3 (1956): 264–71.
- 2 Bernhard Giesen, "The Trauma of Perpetrators: The Holocaust as the Traumatic Reference of German National Identity," in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 112–54.
- 3 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1951), 290.
- 4 Rolf Schneider, *The Jewish Museum Berlin*, no. 2 in *Die Neuen Architekturführer*, trans. Robert Bryce (Berlin: Stadtwandel Verlag, 1999).
- 5 Quoted in Terry Smith, *The Architecture of Aftermath* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 74.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 That the home is somehow extratheoretical in its homelier incarnations is, as Rachel Bowlby reminds us in her reading of the term *domestic*, both etymologically unwarranted and philosophically misguided. See Rachel Bowlby, "Domestication," in *Feminism beside Itself*, ed. Diane Elam and Robyn Wiegman (New York: Routledge, 1995), 71–91.
- 8 Smith, *Architecture of Aftermath*, 87.
- 9 James E. Young itemizes the pillars' positive features, including "their warm, sandy tone" that will "reflect the colours of the sun and sky on the one hand and remain suggestive of stone, even sandstone, on the other." James E. Young, "Germany's Holocaust Memorial Problem—and Mine," *Public Historian* 24.4 (Autumn 2002): 79.
- 10 "Nazi Row Hits Holocaust Memorial," *BBC News*, October 27, 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3219199.stm>.
- 11 Charles Hawley and Natalie Tenberg, "Spiegel Interview with Holocaust Monument Architect Peter Eisenman," *Spiegel Online International*, September, 5 2005, www.spiegel.de/international/o,1518,355252,00.html.
- 12 Nigel Warburton, *Ernő Goldfinger: The Life of an Architect* (London: Routledge, 2004), 38, 80–81.
- 13 Ibid., 137.
- 14 Adorno quoted in Miriam Gusevich, "Decoration and Decorum, Adolf Loos's Critique of Kitsch," *New German Critique*, no. 43 (Winter 1988): 97–123, 99.
- 15 Ibid., 99–100.