

Berlin's Kenotic Triad of Architecture

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It might seem as though there is little more to be said about three of Berlin's most attention-getting contemporary buildings: the Jewish Museum Berlin, by Daniel Libeskind; the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, by Peter Eisenman; and the renovated Reichstag, by Norman Foster. Viewed individually, that may well be true. Viewed collectively, however, their narratives can be amplified and opened-up to reveal insights that fail to emerge from any one account. Such a view necessarily turns to their shared grounding in the Holocaust, or *Shoah*—the memorial being directly connected; the museum being connected through the broader history of Jews in Berlin; and the parliament building inescapably reflecting the Holocaust's entangled connection with German governance, both before and after its manifestation. Rooted in the extremities of singularity and assertiveness—in the absolute closing-down of questions—this “saturated phenomenon” paradoxically bequeaths a profound void, emptiness, and absence,^[1] which makes it fitting, then, to ask how these three projects fare when measured against the very idea of “emptying” and “opening-up” or, more specifically, against the concept of *kenosis* (from the Greek *kenon*, meaning “void”) as found in philosophical and theological thinking from antiquity to the present.^[2] Each project warrants a brief examination of its own kenotic stance, but it is in their opening-up to one another, and thus to the larger situation of Berlin, that the three most effectively empty themselves.

It is the Jewish Museum Berlin that first stakes its claim to singularity in the supposed manifestation of a “void,” an emptiness made present. And it is this void that is credited with fostering an architecture of “uncanniness,” “hope,” and “laughter”—an architecture posited as having a unique capacity to respond to the events of the Holocaust. Given the horror of those events—an *imposed* emptying, utterly antithetical to *kenosis*—one might expect a building that understands itself as a counterpoint, perhaps even as an exemplary instantiation of *kenosis*, not in some futile attempt to reconcile history, but to sustain the very tension that attests to its

irreconcilability. Such, however, is not the case. The self-consciousness and self-assertiveness of the realised work stand as impediments to the building's receptivity and, so, to its propriety as a response to the history it presents. Although Libeskind's museum commendably opens up questions and draws attention to their profundity, it fails to sustain the opening and, instead, offers pre-emptive, definitive, silencing answers; in effect, countering violence with another form of violence.[3] Thus, while the idea of the museum and its subsequent effect may, in certain ways, be kenotic, the building is not.[4]

Conceived in similar circumstances and ultimately having similar effects, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe—with its 2,711 undulating concrete stelae—lies not far away from the Jewish Museum Berlin.[5] Both projects were immersed in protracted controversies that continue to be reflected in ambiguities of identity.[6] Libeskind's museum was and is seen by many (arguably, including its designer) as the first and now alternative memorial,[7] and Eisenman's eventual memorial came to include (over its designer's objection) what is essentially a museum (even if relatively small and underground). Moreover, several aspects of Eisenman's design approach align with those of his counterpart. He, for example, points to the “uncanniness,” irrationality, and arbitrariness of his project[8] (problematically advocating the excise of functionality and human values from architecture, even as such advocacy proves to be canny and value-laden, and leads to a deliberately-dysfunctional functionality[9]); he promotes disturbing spatial experiences[10]; and he lays claim to an “absence in the void.” It is, however, what appears to be another similarity—the claim to extraordinary interpretive openness—that, in fact, differentiates the memorial and evidences an important kenotic dimension. Stark and stern as it may be, the memorial's abstractness and absence of overt symbolism finds this project genuinely open to the other (the visitor), inviting the other to respond with reciprocal openness, and accepting the indeterminacy of the relationship that ensues. For some, the memorial is hallowed ground, for others a civic playground, for still others a tourist destination and photo-op, with many as ambivalent toward the memorial as it is toward itself. Nonetheless, this memorial challenges its visitors—as it does Berlin, Germany, and all of humanity. In opening-up difficult and therefore transformative questions—but resisting answers—it eschews the role of comforter, yet it is neither didactic or threatening, nor triumphal. According to Eisenman, it does not ask Germans to grovel, but to be “as they are,” because the memorial itself “just is.”[11] Such openness is evidence of kenosis.

Against the disturbances presented by Eisenman's neighbouring memorial and Libeskind's not-too-distant museum, Foster's renovation of the Reichstag could be described as friendly, approachable, and compliant. There is, however, a sense in which it, too, is “disturbing” and equivocally kenotic. A high-tech, steel and glass dome, gesturing to Paul Wallot's 1894 original, is patently foreign to its historical host, yet it is received with unexpected hospi-

tality and thus emblemises the way in which new and old “empty” and “open up” to one another throughout the project.[12] Nonetheless, it struggles with the ideology of its type: the manifestation of divinity and majesty. Although the original dome made some attempt to desacralise itself, symbolically shifting sacred power from a crowned head of state to a fledgling parliament, Foster attempts to secularise it more fully. The citizenry and general public are now invited to occupy the dome, to thus take a position superior to the government that sits beneath them, to ostensibly supervise the government’s actions through the glass plane that separates dome from plenary chamber below,[13] and to become “present-day flâneurs,”[14] promenading on the dome’s double helix ramps to view the city and world, even as likewise being viewed.[15] Exquisite as the architecture may be, these attempts to align transparency with democracy (always dubious[16]), and to open up the domical experience, speak more of gimmick and spectacle than of kenosis. Indeed, it is another, better moderated (though seldom discussed) instance of openness that realises greater kenotic effect. The entire rear expanse of the plenary chamber (under the domical observation deck) opens out, by way of glass, to the Reichstag’s also-transparent west entry and, beyond that, to the expansive Platz der Republik. This, of course, might be regarded as just another tokenistic symbol of inward-looking public oversight, but, more productively and kenotically, it could be seen as both a symbolic and practical means of *looking outward*, of emptying the chamber and letting it fill with the world—the place to which government is called to attend and respond—and thereby bringing “in here” those situations that, otherwise, are easily dismissed as being “over there.”

So it is that each of these projects presents inconsistent, if not contradictory, instantiations of kenosis. Each champions the “new,” or “avant-garde,” but ironically routinises much of what comprises its claim to exemplarity: Foster’s ramps routinise public movement, observation, and scrutiny; Eisenman’s repetitive stelaes routinise memorialisation; and Libeskind’s zigzags routinise the dis-ease of distortion. Although such routinisation might be seen as evidence of the ongoing kenosis that is secularisation, it does not necessarily reflect the kenotic self-understanding of any particular project. It might then be said that these projects are nothing especially new, avant-garde—or kenotic. Indeed, Jacques Derrida, in a response to Libeskind and his museum, challenges the very notions of singularity, universality, and exemplarity that might be claimed by the city of Berlin or its Jewish Museum[17]—to which one could, by extension, add the memorial and parliament building. Each of these projects is, in fact, merely part of the complex continuum of architecture—and of Berlin. But, through their relationality—that of shared origins, geographic proximity, and distinct architectural expressions—they participate in a unique triangulated exchange, one that transcends any individual claims and reckonings and, therefore, one that presents their most consequential kenotic offering.

Precisely in this exchange, and true to kenosis, each project opens up to its others—even if reluctantly—and each challenges the self-sufficiency of its others; yet each also maintains its identity. Eisenman’s project, as a memorial, challenges the memorial credentials of Libeskind’s museum, while the museum’s planned disorder challenges the memorial’s claim to arbitrariness. The disturbance and disruption of Libeskind’s museum challenges the relative domestication of Foster’s parliament, even as the parliament’s rational sophistication challenges Libeskind’s attempts at irrationality. And the seriousness of Foster’s parliament challenges the impulsiveness sanctioned by Eisenman’s memorial, just as Eisenman’s project, viewed as counter-memorial and civic playground, challenges the amusement credentials of Foster’s parliamentary “dome-climb.” Each project is transformed by its relationship with the others, and, in many ways, each has partially become its others. Together, more effectively than in their individuation, they come to terms with their grounding, they hold the corresponding tensions, and they leave the arising questions unanswered. In their unique convergence—*these* projects in *this* city—they do, indeed, offer exemplarity, not owing to claims of avant-garde architecture, but because they mark an emptying and receptive *place*: one that permanently holds pain, one that is open to the disturbances of its history, and one that responds with the responsibility, hospitality, and *caritas* of kenosis.^[18] Thus, it is in the emptying of this urban triad that kenosis shows as the truly avant-garde, and it is in the resulting relationality that one finds the sort of uncanniness, hope, and laughter that may be able to respond—though never fully—to horror and absence.

References

- [1] Jean-Luc Marion’s notion of “saturated phenomenon” is specifically explored in connection with the *Shoah* in M. L. Baird, “*Kenosis, Saturated Phenomenology, and Bearing Witness*,” in *Answering Auschwitz: Primo Levi’s Science and Humanism After the Fall*, ed. S. G. Pugliese (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011).
- [2] The understanding of *kenosis* and its potential to be instantiated in architecture is at the centre of my discussion in R. S. Lindstrom, *Kenosis Creativity Architecture: Appearance through Emptying*, Routledge Research in Architecture (London: Routledge, 2021). Chapter 2 presents a synoptic view of kenosis, and chaps. 3 to 6 examine its instantiation in specific projects, which include the Jewish Museum Berlin but neither of the other two projects discussed here.
- [3] Here, I allude to Gianni Vattimo’s view, that “the only possible philosophical definition of violence seems to be the silencing of all questioning by the authoritative peremptoriness

of the first principle,” in G. Vattimo, *Belief*, trans. L. D’Isanto and D. Webb (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 65n18.

[4] A detailed discussion of this project and its kenotic dimensions can be found in Lindstrom, *Kenosis Creativity Architecture: Appearance through Emptying*, chap. 6.

[5] The history of the memorial’s controversial development is well documented. See, as just two of many examples, J. E. Young, “Germany’s Holocaust Memorial Problem—and Mine,” *The Public Historian* 24, no. 4 (2002); and J. Schlör and J. Hohmuth, *Memorial to the Murdered Jews in Europe, Berlin*, 2nd ed., trans. P. Aston (Munich: Prestel, 2008). In short, the project’s official origins date to 1988, with two international design competitions ensuing. The first, in 1994-95, produced a controversial “winner” but no memorial. The second, in 1997, produced four finalists (including Daniel Libeskind), from which the entry by architect Peter Eisenman and artist Richard Serra emerged as that to be realised. Government imposed changes saw Serra withdraw in 1998, even as debate and controversy continued. Nonetheless, the memorial’s construction was legislated by the Bundestag in June 1999, the same year in which construction of Libeskind’s museum was completed. Eisenman’s memorial opened in May 2005, nearly four years after the Jewish Museum Berlin had been curated and officially opened.

[6] More about these controversies is found in Schlör and Hohmuth, *Memorial to the Murdered Jews in Europe, Berlin*, esp. 34.

[7] Libeskind’s museum unofficially opened—completely empty—in 1999, just as Eisenman’s memorial was being sanctioned. In the more than two years before it was curated and officially opened, the museum attracted over 350,000 visitors, with suggestions that it be left permanently empty as a “Holocaust memorial,” and thereby “perhaps even supplant the need for . . . other memorials.” See discussion in A. Sodaro, “Memory, History, and Nostalgia in Berlin’s Jewish Museum,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 26, no. 1 (2013): 85.

[8] See Young, “Germany’s Holocaust Memorial Problem—and Mine,” 76.

[9] P. Eisenman, “The End of the Classical: The End of the Beginning, the End of the End,” *Perspecta* 21 (1984): 155.

[10] See M. A. Branch, “Critique: Queasy in Columbus?,” *Progressive Architecture* 75, no. 2 (1994): 78, 80.

- [11] M. Blackwood, *Peter Eisenman: Building Germany's Holocaust Memorial* (USA, Germany: Michael Blackwood Productions, 2006), 60 min.
- [12] Such hospitality is particularly notable when compared, for example, to the intentionally inhospitable way in which Libeskind joins new and old at the Royal Ontario Museum, the Dresden Museum of Military History, and elsewhere.
- [13] In fact, security constraints and heavily darkened observation glass preclude any genuine view into the parliamentary chamber, and access to the dome is prohibited when parliament is sitting. Moreover, the dome can be found closed due to weather conditions, since access requires the visitor to traverse an uncovered outdoor walkway over the original building's roof.
- [14] See L. Koepnick, "Redeeming History? Foster's Dome and the Political Aesthetic of the Berlin Republic," *German Studies Review* 24, no. 2 (2001): 313.
- [15] This notion is thwarted by the relative narrowness of the ramps and the dome's popularity with visitors, which often renders the ramps crowded and impedes the intended sense of *flânerie*.
- [16] See D. A. Barnstone, *The Transparent State: Architecture and Politics in Postwar Germany* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 1-4.
- [17] J. Derrida, "Response to Daniel Libeskind," *Research in Phenomenology* 22, no. 1 (1992): 91-92.
- [18] Space, here, does not allow an extended discussion of these particular aspects of kenosis, as posited by Levinas, Derrida, and Vattimo, respectively. Nor does it allow what would be a relevant discussion of connections between *kenosis* and *tikkun olam*. Such discussion is, however, included in the more detailed examination of the Jewish Museum Berlin in Lindstrom, *Kenosis Creativity Architecture: Appearance through Emptying*.