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Program, Building and Rhetoric: Some Inclusive Thoughts on Daniel Libeskind's *Crystal*

Daniel Libeskind, *Crystal*, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto

Yam Lau

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PROGRAM, BUILDING AND RHETORIC: SOME INCLUSIVE THOUGHTS ON DANIEL LIBESKIND'S *CRYSTAL*

Daniel Libeskind, *Crystal*, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.

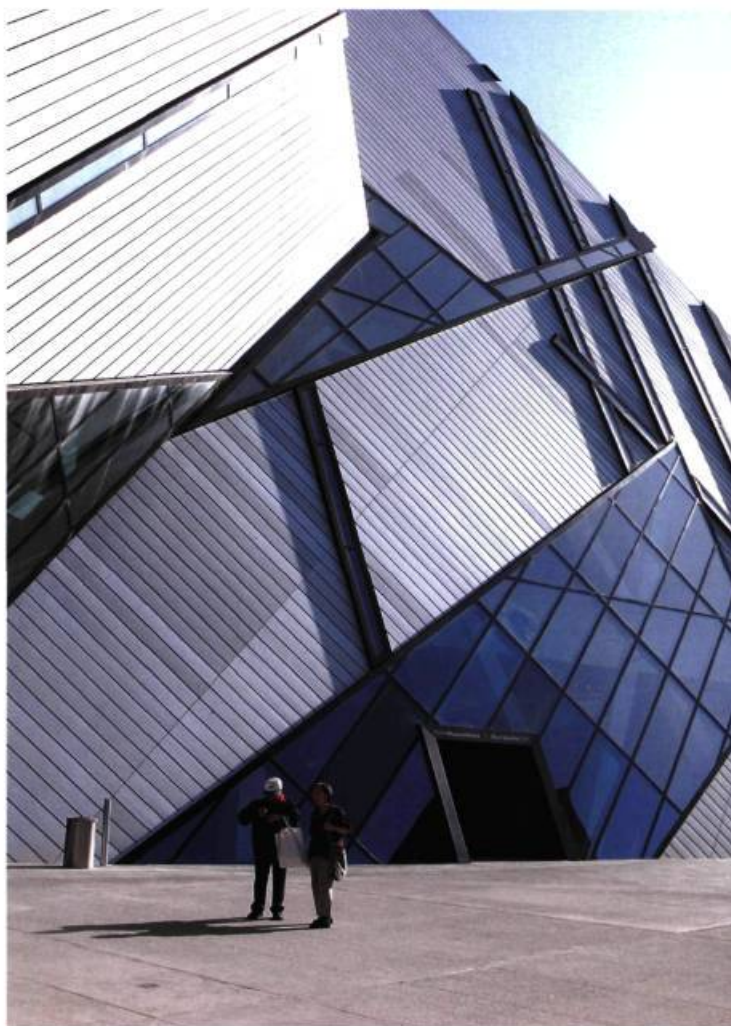
Today, architecture is an increasingly complex and fluid field. As a discipline, it strives to intersect with other forms of knowledge and procedure such as art, philosophy and the media. This fertile yet complex situation thus challenges the architect to be a shrewd navigator, someone who can manoeuvre strategically within the ever-shifting field of pressures and allegiances that outline his practice.

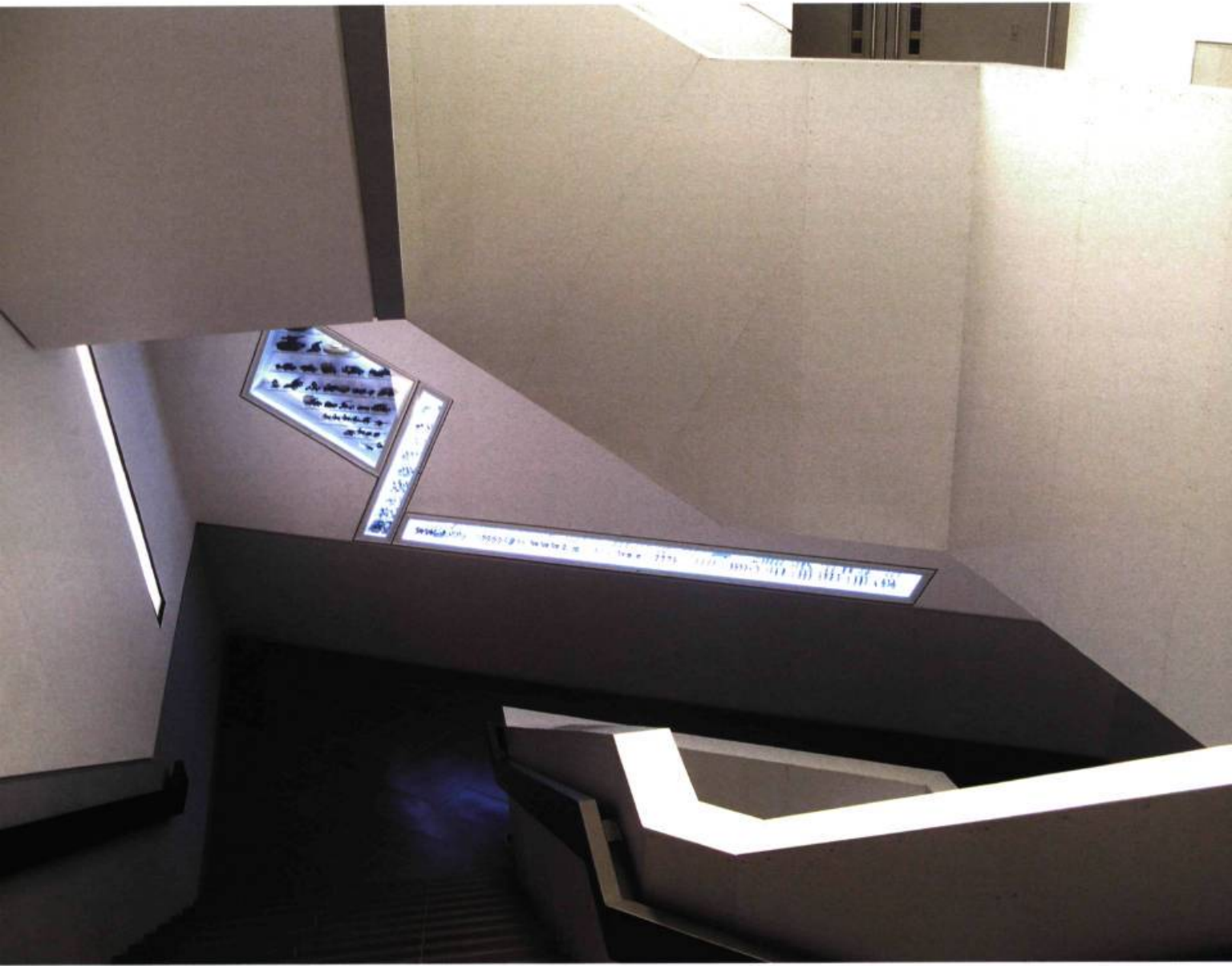
Recently, a visit to Daniel Libeskind's new extension to the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) leads me to ponder if, under the current ethos of architectural practice, the primary site of architecture is no longer secured in the material practice of building? In other words, the imperative to "build" in the sense of engaging with material has only a secondary, diminished importance in comparison to the other pressures and promises, especially those from the mass media and theoretical discourse.

I cite Libeskind because his extension, marketed as the "Crystal" and that is supposed to give expression to the museum's unique collection of natural and cultural artefacts, epitomizes the problematic cited above. Despite Libeskind's original architectural program, and his clever populist rhetoric, my experience of the ROM was ultimately disappointing. At a time when landmark buildings are expected to provide a unique experience, I found the Crystal "hasty" in its construction and came away with a vague foreboding that the Crystal is somewhat "unfinished". Sure, there is impact of the "wow effect" derived mostly from the building's iconic design—a design that is not entirely idiosyncratic but is in fact achieved through a conceptual program. However, the apparent boldness of the Crystal seems to be a superficial lure when measured against an encounter of the building in its material presence, when the affective body rather than the intellect takes the seat of judgement. The Crystal seems inconsiderate; in some sense a crude and even alienating host to the artefacts and visitors. Overall, my visceral reaction to the building convinces me that the Crystal is a sadly missed opportunity.

In spite of this, I do not dismiss Libeskind. I hope to offer a fair assessment of his accomplishment in this article through a viable interpretation of his philosophy. But ultimately, I hope to raise a point about the essential difference between a theoretical program and the material practice of building. I would say that the latter cannot be reduced to, or even be accounted for by the former, and that "building" is not Libeskind's forte. In the competitive environment of architectural practice, it is easy to forget the elemental mystery and the proper use of material to connect space and soul. It is unfortunate that the practice of some contemporary architecture is too accelerated to take note of this essential form of power that is specific to architecture.

It was around the early nineties that I discovered the work of Daniel Libeskind. Back then, his important Jewish extension to the Berlin Museum was still under construction and Libeskind's primarily theoretical practice was relatively unknown outside the architectural community. I remember very clearly being taken by his indefatigable optimism, adventurous drawings and philosophical approach to the discipline. Through his philosophically informed writings and drawings, I understood Libeskind had launched a new architectural paradigm that also resonated with visual artists. Particularly, it is in his drawings, his graphical exploration of space, time and site that I understand a different





Daniel Libeskind's *Crystal*. Inside View.



kind of “line” was invented. Lines which in their perpetual deviation from fixed spatial registers palpate new dimensionalities and compositional arrangements. His inconclusive compositions such as *Chamberworks* express virtual linkages between diverse social forces, memory, history, music and destinies. I believe this conception of line as virtual intensity informs a number of Libeskind’s architectural programs.

Essentially Libeskind regarded the site—the ground of architecture prior to any building—as already traversed, fissured and overlaid with both virtual and actual lines/intensities that are pregnant with potentialities. The task of an architectural program should seek to animate and provide material expression for these intensities. One might say a number of Libeskind’s architectural forms are composed on this kind of virtual geometry. A building then is an act of tectonic tracing of the intricate destinies that delineate its site. In that regard, the building’s physical volume actualizes the bundle of virtual intensities that inscribed the site’s memory, history and collective aspiration.

Consider the renowned Jewish extension to the Berlin Museum, Libeskind’s first “built” project. The narrow zigzag form of the structure is less of a building in the conventional sense than a kind of a margin, a singular line of passion and force that connects with many others, both virtual and actual, past and present. The building’s program was intended to reconcile the history and contributions of the Jewish population to the city of Berlin. But it is not only the history of Berlin, but also its topography that is involved here. The Extension, according to Libeskind, is a kind of distorted Star of David that aligns and intersects with many “erased” addresses of deported Berliners. Having no entrance of its own except through an underground connection with the Berlin Museum, it is constructed as a perpetual supplement that complicates its host structure. As a margin, a kind of supplement or non-site, the Extension is traversed by yet another more difficult and radical one—the void that recalls the Holocaust. In this sense the conceptual ground of the Extension is not defined by real estate. Instead, its form, erected on a series of erasures and complexities that resist reconciliation, delivers it from the grip of the spatial/temporal matrix of the present and the actual. This irresolution thus sustains the Extension as a symbol of promise and hope arising from a difficult past into an indeterminate future.

During the past decade, as more building commissions were secured, Libeskind began to clothe his practice with an increasingly populist tone. This resulted in a more figurative, imagistic self-presentation of the work that fulfils the demand for architecture as a cultural/tourist landmark. Indeed the figurative appellation of the “Crystal” serves the popular front well. But one should

return to Libeskind’s geometry of intensities as the underlying program. Libeskind’s extension to the existing museum is never simply an addition in the sense of adding new structures onto an original building. In the case

of the ROM, I believe his intervention is meant to release other forces and possibilities in the collection that were constricted by the older structure. I remember his off-hand remarks during his public presentation: “Believe me; the totem pole does not like the box.”

While everything seems to make perfect sense on paper, design, rhetoric, the experience of the actual building is a different matter altogether. I felt the actual experience of the extension a vacuous and alienating spectacle. This leads to my conclusion: if architecture is a pluralistic practice and its many sites are more or less valid, then an architect can choose to operate in any number of the areas in architecture, at any time and according to available opportunities. For example, he can be a teacher, theorist, or engage in artistic projects that are informed by architecture. But success in any one site does not warrant the same result across the various other sites and forms of knowledge. I agree with Donald Judd when he said something to the effect that it is not God but the architect of the cathedral that one should thank. Judd was privileging the primary site of architecture to be the building. It is the building, and not the supernatural, that produces the effect of a religious dimension of existence. If there is truth at all in architecture, it would need to be disclosed slowly to the body/soul through a sustained encounter. The body understands-architecture can sometimes be more than an envelope, or still worse a photogenic image. Architecture can enter the body when it is believable. It is required.

In 1930 Wittgenstein said “Today, the difference between a good and a poor architect is that the poor architect succumbs to every temptation and the good one resists it.” In 2008, the temptations of the architect issue from the complex practice of architecture itself. An architect may easily be seduced by many other, less concrete and resistant sites such as theory for example, in architecture. An architectural program should construct qualities that are not merely abstract but felt. Herein lies the flaw of the appellation “Crystal”. It is arbitrary. I believe it is no more than a gesture of convenience. I say this because the quality of naming, whatever that might be, is nowhere to be experienced beyond the superficial semblance of the building to that of a crystal-like form. This is an architecture that lacks interiority, although I believe its program aspires to achieve just the opposite.

YAM LAU

Yam Lau is an artist and writer based in Toronto. He teaches painting at York University and is represented by the Leo Kamen Gallery. His most recent exhibitions include *Room at Optica*, *Scapeland II* at YYY Artists’ Outlet and *Room: an Extension* at the Leo Kamen Gallery.