

2. Facing the Shadow

Daniel Libeskind, *The Holocaust Tower*,
Jewish Museum, Berlin, 2001

But Johnson states further that unhealthy societies might unconsciously accumulate a lot of shadow and manifest their unconsciously accumulated shadow layers in wars, violence, all sorts of neurotic behaviour, and man-made disasters. It is most necessary for societies and for individuals to confront the shadow layers in advance or at least afterwards. We need to pay off the shadows in an intelligent, symbolic way, which is, importantly, also through art, and thus become whole. A cognition is an absolute necessity, as claims Johnson, if the society or an individual wants to prosper in the future despite the tragic past. *The Holocaust Tower* in Berlin is an example of such a cognition.

The Jewish Museum has a staircase leading down to an underground level, and here three corridors await visitors. One leads to *The Holocaust Tower*. We walk along an underground corridor that is relatively light and airy, which makes the shock of entering through the black door into the tomb of humanity's greatest shadows all the greater. As we open the black door and enter the darkness, we become numb and breathless under the weight of the horror. I can think of no other architectural work which, with such a simple yet poetic architectural language as that used by Libeskind, shatters our very souls with such a force and then jolts us into cathartic reflection.

In 1993, Libeskind won the architectural competition for the Kreuzberg Museum in Berlin. The project is full of metaphor, infused into the dramatic nature of the building. As he explains in

the film *Le Musée Juif de Berlin – Entre les lignes*¹ in 2002, his point of departure was the historical layer hidden a few centimetres below the then existing soil, claiming: “I happened to believe that space has its own authentic capacity.”

The main entrance to the museum passes through the 18th-century Baroque building that once housed the Prussian Supreme Court. The friendly, soft Baroque architecture invites the visitor to enter in a deceptively innocent way. It stands on its own, separated from the new museum building, and they are only connected underground. The relationship between them is like a concealed monstrous violence. The façade of the Baroque building is like a mask of contemporary society, hiding terrible shadows in its depths. Just behind this mask, however, one must descend into the underworld. There we find *The Holocaust Tower*, one of the eight volumes that are like fragments of a straight line, which seemingly existed long ago in history. Now it is broken and transformed into disjointed line segments that are still trying to fit together.

These volumes are all empty, except for one, the *Void of Memory*, where flattened human skulls cut from iron plates are scattered on the floor and walking on them creates the eerie sound of chains on war prisoners.

The Holocaust Tower is “the voided void” and a relentless metaphor for all the genocides of the contemporary world. The architect managed to make the suffering of people visible and tangible through architecture. The tower is not part of the main titanium-zinc building of the museum, and its sole connection to it is underground. It stands alone next to the museum as a kind of splinter, a prehistoric unworked prismatic blade. Daylight enters the tower only through a narrow slit right next to the sharpest side of the blade, just below the tower’s ceiling. From the outside,

1 Neumann, Stan and Copans, Richard, *Le Musée Juif de Berlin – Entre les lignes*, production: Les film d’ici, ArtebFrance, Centre Pompidou, 2002.

this slit looks like one of the scratches, wounds, and abrasions that appear on the museum's façade.

Inside, it forms a patch of light trapped in darkness high up under the ceiling. The light is weak, and because of its weakness it has no power to manifest itself. However, it manages to let us know that it is mundane, but unreachable. It is so far from us down there in the underworld that any hope of the freedom of the day is lost. This light accentuates our entrapment in darkness. It is a light that does not have enough power to illuminate the darkness in this endless abyss, because it is trapped in itself on the opposite wall of the tower. It is only the unattainable opposite of darkness. A powerless light that cannot be relied upon because it is too distant. Its presence only exposes the dark emptiness of the void. One would be hard pressed to find a more depressing atmosphere in any form of architecture, and this is precisely why *The Holocaust Tower* is a terrifying warning against the evil created by the hidden shadows of humanity.

Although the museum is a constant reminder that thousands of Berlin's Jews were deported and taken to Nazi concentration camps such as Buchenwald, Auschwitz, and Kaiserwald, it is also a mirror that faces all the political and military leaders involved in the more than 50 contemporary wars that nowadays destroy countries, causing genocide, and triggering the migration of millions of people all over the world. While I am writing, we have two major wars very close to Europe, in Ukraine and Gaza! In front of our eyes, through all the electronic media we witness genocide! The neurotic acts of war criminals who destroy buildings and entire cities, intimidate, humiliate, and manipulate people, deprive them of their dignity, their freedom of speech, their right to education and to express their culture, and destroy their lives mentally and physically, all justified by their ideology, their bigotry, their beliefs, and prejudices of all kinds, permeated with the lust to invade foreign populated lands, are the worst shadows of humankind, the darkness that humanity unfortunately produces

over and over again. It blinds humanism, and is the opposite of the beauty of existence and the joy of life.

In the film,² Libeskind states that

... such a museum is necessary now [...] a story that will forever, eternally create a tension between the substance of the story what can be told and what can never be told, what can only be intuited and will always remain something that subverts any attempt to control and make the story fine.

Such an important mission of the museum goes beyond the horrors of the last world war and should be a firm and conscious warning against all contemporary wars. Aren't the goals of all wars very similar? Perhaps they differ only in the methods that try to achieve them.

With very simple architectural elements, Libeskind managed to show us what happens when metaphorical darkness prevails over light, when light is too weak or cut off in the relational interaction with darkness. Then it seems there is no cloud of possible results of the interaction. We get only one, finite and very determined solution: a succumbing to darkness in all its physical and metaphorical meaning, which is an act opposite to survival.

In his book, Johnson³ put it:

The tendency to see one's shadow "out there" in one's neighbour or in another race or culture is the most dangerous aspect of the modern psyche. It has created two devastating wars in this century and threatens the destruction of all the fine achievements of our modern world [...] Unless we do conscious work on it the shadow is almost always projected; that is, it is neatly laid on someone or something else so we do not have to take responsibility for it. This is the way things were done five hundred years ago, and most of us are still stuck in this

2 Neumann, Stan and Copans, Richard *ibid.*

3 Johnson, Robert A., *ibid.*, p. 27.

medieval consciousness [...] It is a dark page in human history when people make others bear their shadow for them.

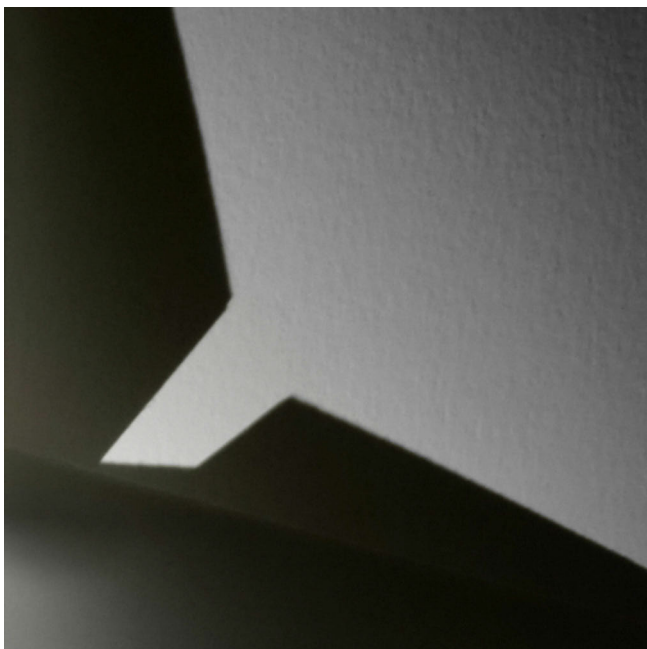
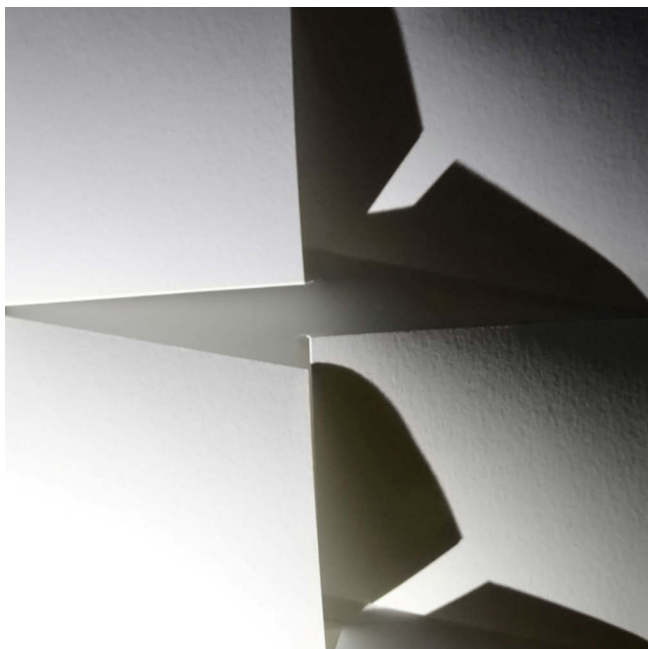


Fig. 3.1: paper model of micro natural structures and photo:

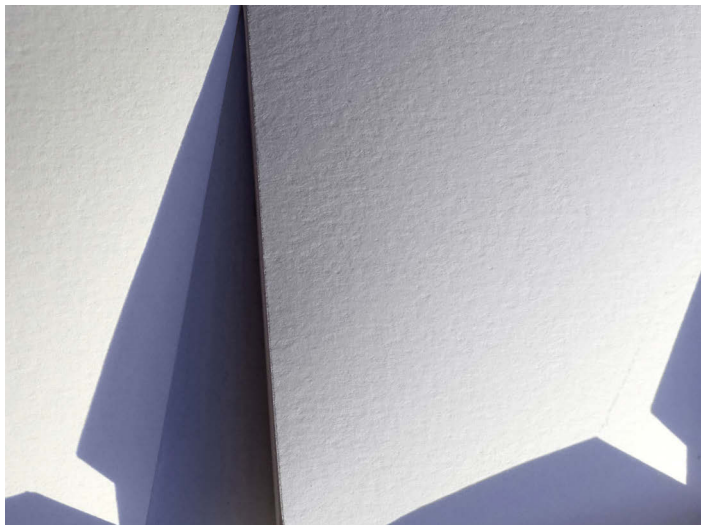
Tatjana Capuder Vidmar

From the exhibition SPACE = LIGHT + (SHADOW), DLUL, Ljubljana,
2024



*Fig. 3.2: paper model of micro natural structures and photo:
Tatjana Capuder Vidmar*

From the exhibition SPACE = LIGHT + (SHADOW), DLUL, Ljubljana,
2024



*Fig. 3.3: paper model of micro natural structures and photo:
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