

Libeskind's New Jewish Museum Breaks Ground in San Francisco

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Summary: Amid the fanfare surrounding the opening of Daniel Libeskind's Denver Art Museum on October 7, San Francisco has proudly begun construction on its own Libeskind building, the first on the West coast. The Contemporary Jewish Museum broke ground in mid-July in the Yerba Buena cultural district in the trendy SoMA (South of Market) neighborhood. With three floors and 63,000 square feet, the new building will allow the 20-year-old museum to expand its exhibits and educational programs. Charged with the mission of bringing contemporary Jewish perspectives on culture, history, art, and ideas to audiences of all ages and backgrounds, the museum promises an unprecedented celebration of Jewish life.



In 1990, the museum recognized that it soon needed a larger facility to accommodate its growing size and importance in the community. At the time, the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency was working on revitalizing the neglected neighborhood of



Yerba Buena and infusing it with a combination of housing, entertainment, business, and cultural institutions. The Redevelopment Agency contributed the historic Jessie Street Substation site to the Museum. Connie Wolf, executive director and CEO of the Museum says, "In the early '90s, we were in the process of looking for a place to expand. In a sense, the sequence was perfect because they were looking to [create] a home for cultural institutions, and we were looking for a new location, so this site became available, and we were granted this opportunity. Then we went searching for an architect."

"It was just at the post-Bilbao moment, when people were beginning to think about architects creating destination points," Wolf continues. "I think it was quite interesting that, in that era, the board opted for someone who was not well known, but they liked Daniel's sensibility. They liked his

approach. They obviously knew what he was doing in Berlin, but it hadn't opened yet."

"This design really is about the celebration of life," says Libeskind. "It's about the openness of America, of the Jewish culture, of a kinetic sense of the museum that speaks to everyone. The Jewish Museum of Berlin, of course, deals with a tragedy, with a catastrophe, and they communicate a very different story in a very different place. This is about celebration."

"Honoring the past"

Libeskind's design juxtaposes the historic brick and terra cotta Jessie Street Power Substation, originally constructed in 1881 and remodeled by architect Willis Polk after the 1906 fires, with a striking blue metallic structure. His adaptive reuse preserves the character of the landmark structure, including the southern brick façade, trusses, skylights, and open

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space, while also giving the neighborhood a “metal-clad jewel [that] beacons the future.” Designed as part of the City Beautiful movement, this is the first time the public will have access to the building.

“It was the building that really fueled the rebirth of San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake fire, so it has a lot of symbolism in this community,” says Wolf. “It was abandoned in the early '70s because it was no longer needed. It has a beautiful façade, but it was hidden, so no one knew it was there

transform the space for a contemporary Jewish museum and create not just adjacency, but true accessibility of the building [while] making it visible in a tight site. It was never really meant to be accessible to the public.

“I think it’s important also to say that we have saved all the trusses and all of the skylights. All of that will be part of a very dynamic view of the history. It’s not just nostalgia putting [the Museum] in an old building. We’re creating an encounter with an old building, which I think will be very in-

and the word ‘life.’”

According to the architect, “The Museum building is based in the Hebrew word *l’chaim*, which means ‘to life.’ The two Hebrew letters of *chai*, the *chet* and the *yud*, with all their symbolic, mathematical, and emblematic structure, are literally the life source and the form of the museum. In the Jewish tradition, letters are not mere signs but are substantial participants in the story they create.”

“It is a building created from the Jewish spirit in which language and symbol are intertwined with the story that they communicate,” notes Libeskind. “*L’chaim*, life, is the central theme of the architecture as well as of the program. Of course, using the *chet* and *yud*, which are not just letters, but which themselves are part of the story of life, and organizing the spaces, which are not just graphic representations of letters, but really embody the spirit and substance of a movement of the letter, is part of the story of the building. For example, the *yud*, the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet, it’s that explosive form right on the connector and then the *chet* is the fields within the power station. The dialogue between the two letters tells part of the story of life.”

“*L’chaim* is the symbol of the building,” adds Wolf. “He took that as his conceptual framework for the project. It’s not literal, but it is an organizing principle based on the Hebrew word. That’s been a really wonderful symbol for us.”

Libeskind says, “I want [visitors to the Museum] to experience life in its fullness, in its richness, with the events and the programs of the museum of course, but also to experience history and the memory of the city of San Francisco. Here we have the



until other buildings were torn down. So we look at this building as a piece of history and then make it relevant to contemporary life. Jewish life, history, art, and culture are just that. It’s honoring the past, embracing the present, and imagining the future. We feel that the building, because of its historical significance and contemporary life, are parallel to what we’re trying to do programmatically.”

“Of course, the challenge was how to reuse the power station,” says Libeskind. “Not just reuse it as a hollow building, but infuse it with a spirit of industrial architecture, and how to

teresting and very memorable. It’s not just about a standalone building, but one that really fits in and contributes to the neighborhood. We’ve created a lively place that is interesting to walk around to get different perspectives of the building, but also to learn something about the Contemporary Jewish Museum and its programs.”

Embracing the present

Characteristic of Libeskind’s designs for Jewish organizations, his addition is rife with allusions to Judaica. Wolf says, “When Daniel started thinking about our mission and the building site, he really focused on Jewish life

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power station that drove the electrical dimension of the city, and now it's really transformed to a creative power station where learning, education, and exhibitions are the new generation of events."

"Imagining the future"

Slated to open in the spring of 2008, the Museum will be in good company. Among their new neighbors are SF-MoMA, the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Yerba Buena Gardens, the Museum of African Diaspora, the California Historical Society, the Moscone Convention Center, and the forthcoming Museo Mexico.

Space-constrained for most of their existence, the new building will give the Museum a greatly enhanced capability to host original and traveling exhibits and collaborative exhibitions with other cultural institutions. The ground floor will feature a grand lobby in the historic building, a 2,500-square-foot exhibition gallery, an auditorium and meeting room, café, museum shop, catering kitchen, and an education center. Located at the core of the building, the 3,500-square-foot education center is a prominent

representation of the important role of education in Judaism.

The second floor will host a special events gallery, a 7,000-square-foot exhibition gallery, and administrative offices. The lower level will house a loading dock, art and exhibition storage facilities, building storage, HVAC, and maintenance and security offices.

"What I find most inspiring about the design is the constant dialogue between the old and the new," says Wolf. "The way you will move through this building is being reminded of the past, but understanding how that past informs the present and together moves us to a new place. It will be a built environment that is unlike anything anyone has ever experienced, with soaring ceilings and intimate spaces that really embrace you and make you think. It's not just a vessel to hold art or objects. It will be an active element in thinking about how you are in the world."