

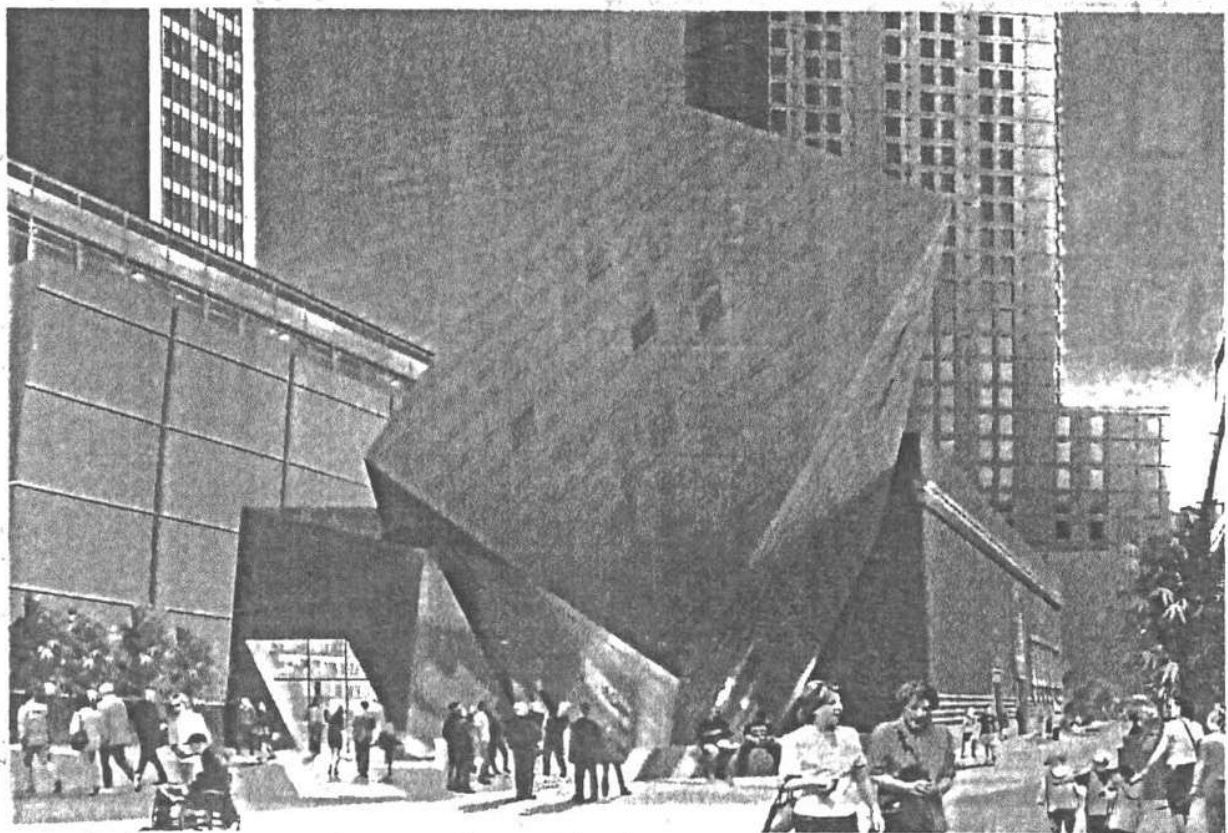
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CALENDAR



DANIEL LIBESKIND WITH WRNS STUDIO

DESIGN: A rendering of the 63,000-square-foot Contemporary Jewish Museum shows a 60-foot tilted steel cube rising from the old Pacific Gas & Electric building downtown. From the sky, the shapes form the Hebrew phrase "L'Chaim." The museum is expected to open in 2008.

A long time coming

Hired in 1998 to design — then downsize — the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco, architect Daniel Libeskind will finally see ground broken today.

By MICHAEL J. YBARRA
Special to The Times

SAN FRANCISCO — Daniel Libeskind knows a little about delayed gratification. Although he made a name for himself as an architectural theorist while teaching in universities (Yale, Harvard, UCLA) he didn't actually win his first building commission until 1989, when he was 43. And it took a dozen more years and numerous struggles before that acclaimed project — the Jewish Museum Berlin — opened.

Then there's the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco, which hired Libeskind to design its new home in 1998, and then, among other complications, had him redesign it on a much smaller scale when the institution couldn't raise the money to construct the original plan.

But the much-delayed groundbreaking is finally scheduled to take place today in Jessie Square, across the street from Yerba Buena Center, with the museum expected to open in 2008.

"Projects the most worthy of being built are often the hardest," Libeskind says. "I stuck by it, and I'm glad the board stuck by me. There were years when people said, 'This project will never happen.' I thought it was important because this project is about contemporary Jewish culture. You have to believe in it and have faith in it. There were moments when I had doubts. The person who never had doubts was my wife, Nina. Architecture is a marathon, not a sprint."

Born in Poland to Holocaust survivors, Libeskind immigrated to America with his family. He studied architecture at Cooper Union and then Essex University, from which he graduated in 1972.

Seventeen years later he won the job of designing the Jewish Museum Berlin and moved to Germany, where he opened a studio. While that project crawled along, Libeskind designed and built the Felix Nussbaum Haus museum in Osnabruck, which commemorated an artist who died in Auschwitz. That museum, which opened in 1998, was the architect's first design to be built.

"My wife calls me a late bloomer," Libeskind says. "I was in my 50s when I built my first project. Architecture isn't just for kids."

That same year Libeskind landed the job of designing a building for the Jewish Museum in San Francisco.

"It was only by coincidence that my first building was a Jewish museum," he says. "Each project should be unique, related to its history and place, and should have a need. No project should just be a formula, a style ... That particular area of San Francisco is an emblem of America — people coming to this place and creating one of the most beautiful cities of the world."

San Francisco's Jewish Museum, founded in 1984, has no permanent collection but shows temporary exhibitions out of a small space on Steuart Street in downtown.

"The museum's mission is to provide opportunities to look at art, culture and history from a Jewish perspective as well as an interfaith exchange," Executive Director Connie Wolf says. "We want to find ways to lead people to ask questions and look at the world in a deeper way. Daniel's building is really quite ideal. We think of our mission as making the past relevant to the present. We're creating a physical dialogue between the old and the new. The idea of life allows us to think about breathing life back into this building and the area."

The museum snagged a prime spot of real estate on Mission Street across from the Yerba Buena Center and around the corner from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The site was occupied by the shell of a 1907 Pacific Gas & Electric substation designed by Willis Polk, between the 1851 St. Patrick's church and the site for a proposed new Mexican Museum.

"The building was struggling to find an identity," Libeskind says. "That's a very Jewish thing."

He unveiled a design in 2000 for a 100,000-square-foot museum that featured geometric metal forms coated in a golden or amber color and bursting from the brick substation.

"I don't intellectualize," Libeskind says. "I start in a very traditional way with a sketch

It's not just another building. It's about San Francisco. I love that area, a vibrant area of the city. The idea comes to you as you sketch the existing building, walk around and meditate. It's a whole constellation of factors that congeals into an idea. I knew the site from many years before. You have to delve into the history of electricity in San Francisco. That power that once drove batteries is now transferred into driving creativity."

But the \$60-million project never got off the ground. The 2001 recession walloped the museum's fund-raising plans, and a 13-month merger with the Judah L. Magnes Museum in Berkeley unraveled. (The Mexican Museum has had greater fund-raising difficulties and is proceeding at an even slower pace.)

A reconstituted Contemporary Jewish Museum emerged from the ashes with a \$46-million construction budget.

"It's an ironic thing to say for an architect because they want bigger and bigger budgets," Libeskind says, "but when there are pressures and not enough money, you concentrate on what's important about this building, you pare it down. The building has gotten more powerful by the reduction. It's more vivid and emotional."

Libeskind's new design features a 60-foot tilted blue steel cube rising from the old PG&E building. From the sky, the shapes form the Hebrew phrase "l'chaim," "to life."

"The initial inspiration was the life, the continuity of things across time, joy and celebration," Libeskind says.

"There's a kind of sensitivity to history and joy. It's a museum that will deal with creativity and life. In Hebrew the letters are not just abstract — they are part of what they symbolize."

The 63,000-square-foot space will replace the museum's current 4,000-square-foot closet of a gallery.

Sam Nunes, a partner at WRNS Studio, the local design firm overseeing the building, says the scaled-back project is better than the original proposal.

"It's a much smaller project, but I think it will have a great impact and fit in well," he says. "Every building has its costs, and the will behind the costs is about programmatic ambition. The previous scheme was 100,000 square feet but it may have been hard to sustain that size of an institution. It's not like we only have this much money; it's a question of what do we really want to program. You have

to find the right size for the institution. The final outcome has been improved. It's just honed the purpose of the institution to a much higher level."

While the San Francisco project was dragging on, Libeskind's career flourished.

He has become one of the few go-to architects for museums around the world, such as the Danish Jewish Museum, which opened in Copenhagen in 2004, as well as ongoing additions to the Denver Art Museum and the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto.

In 2003 Libeskind was named to design the master plan for rebuilding at the World Trade Center site in Manhattan, a project that brought him almost instant celebrity and from which he was almost as quickly marginalized. Among his selling points was an intention of rebuilding the main tower a patriotic 1,776 feet high and of preserving the exposed slurry walls where the Twin Towers once stood. Despite his proposals' patriotic resonance, his role quickly shrank amid wrangling from the various stakeholders, including the site's landlord, politicians and victims' families. That master plan now exists mostly on paper and, to date, nothing has been built above ground.

Libeskind, however, appears undeterred and the commissions keep coming. His office, relocated to New York, is headquarters for a global practice that employs about 150 architects working on dozens of projects from Singapore to Warsaw.

"I can be involved in every building fully," Libeskind says. "I don't do a sketch and give it to an architect to put in a computer. I love architecture, down to the door handles. It's a handcrafted artwork. There is no building that I've not been fully involved in."

Current projects include a condo development in Sacramento and a pro bono Boys & Girls Club in hurricane-devastated Gulfport, Miss.

"I've never had a utopian streak," he says. "You need to know the social context. I never dream about buildings I'd like to build. I'm by my phone and someone calls and says, 'Can you design a shopping center?' Sure."

But for all Libeskind's worldly success, he still seems to see a moral imperative in his trade.

"Architecture is the chance to come to grips with important things," he says. "Architecture touches every part of life. We're lucky to live on this earth. We should make it beautiful and sustainable."



DAN MATERNA AP/WIDEWORLD IMAGES
"MORE VIVID": The new museum "has gotten more powerful by the reduction," says Daniel Libeskind, who scaled back the 100,000-square-foot design he unveiled in 2000.