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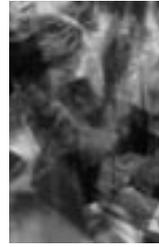
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# The Sociology of Architecture and the Politics of Building: The Discursive Construction of Ground Zero<sup>1</sup>

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## **ABSTRACT**

Because architecture provides a 'concrete' focus for many debates pertinent to collective identities, then the rebuilding of the Ground Zero site by architect Daniel Libeskind is hugely significant from the perspective of sociology. So-called 'starchitects' such as Libeskind are increasingly conscious of the complex identity discourses within which their work is situated, with competing identity claims evidenced not only in the actual form of buildings, but also in the abstract narratives architects use to situate their work in a way that avoids (symbolically) privileging one identity over another. The capacity of architects to position their buildings in this way provides the focus of this article, which argues that architects' discourses frequently reveal many tensions between culture, politics, power, and identity. The symbolic nationalization of the architecture at the Ground Zero site has, in part, been achieved by the narrative, highly symbolic links between the buildings there and an 'American' collective identity.

## **KEY WORDS**

architecture / collective identities / culture

## **Architecturing Identities**

**A**rchitecture's capacity to represent abstract values materially, and indeed often literally 'in concrete', provides a tangible focus for identity discourses of many kinds. Increasingly it is acknowledged that architecture has historically been an important way that political institutions have expressed

collective identities, such as, for example, the nation (see Heynen, 1999; Vale, 1992). Certainly the process of ascribing political meaning to the built environment has a long lineage and continues to be a concern for architects and politicians the world over (McNeill and Tewdwr-Jones, 2003; Vale, 1992) with many building projects in the European and American contexts inextricably bound up with a whole range of collective identity discourses. The tensions centring on architectural projects such as the Millennium Dome (McGuigan and Gilmore, 2002), Berlin's Reichstag (Wise, 1998), the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh, the new national stadium to replace Wembley, and the now abandoned 'Fourth Grace' project in Liverpool, all provide a focus for contestations associated with collective identities. Although there is the suggestion that landmark buildings are a way in which the social can be represented symbolically, here the focus turns to the related process of exactly *how* links between landmark buildings and collective identities are developed.

As landmark architectural projects act as a 'space' in which identities are discursively formulated and expressed, sociology should consider architecture as a field of cultural contestation. Ulrich Beck states that 'architecture is politics with bricks and mortar' (1998: 115), and doubtless architecture has had an important role to play in both shaping and symbolizing collective identities, but how do buildings become aligned with certain identity discourses? One aspect of this process that is of sociological interest, and is addressed in this article, is the extent to which high-profile architects attempt to align their buildings with an identity discourse.

Architecture has been a significant part of a repertoire of cultural symbols that political and cultural elites have used to 'flag' the nation (Billig, 1995), 'invent tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) and 'discursively construct' identities (Wodak et al., 1999). In short, architecture has been an important cultural expression of collective identities, with states often using landmark buildings to reflect 'their' national identity and to supplement the historical narrative of collective memory. Indeed, state-led landmark architecture has been a key way of expressing and developing the national code, with many of the discourses of modernity finding substantive reflection in landmark buildings. Many great European buildings of the period 1850 to 1914 give testimony to the self-confidence of nation-states and imperial powers that used buildings – alongside other important codifications such as art, flags, national anthems, and a nationalized discourse of history – to give tangible form to abstract 'national' values (Jones, 2002).

However, late modernity has seen cultural communities becoming increasingly fragmented and contested, with associated identities becoming more 'fluid' (Bauman, 2004). The state's ability to control and stabilize identities is challenged by such fragmentations and reappropriations of collective, especially national, identities. Attempts by governments to reinvent state-driven collective identities in an era of diverse cultures within the nation means that the maintenance of identities linked to the nation-state is dependent on its ability to represent and symbolize diverse cultures in an appropriate and significant way; by

granting symbolic recognition to certain groups in landmark cultural projects, states are inevitably involved in the politicization of certain identities (Kastoryano, 2002; Kymlicka and Norman, 2000). While states certainly have a continued interest in architecture, it is arguably with less control over the codes of cultural identities than they had in an earlier modernity. Accordingly, landmark architectural projects are increasingly sites of symbolic conflict and competition over identities, with buildings the world over providing a 'concrete' focus for such discussions: the Millennium Dome is particularly illustrative of such a struggle over the 'nation code' (Delanty and Jones, 2002).

Given this reflexivity surrounding how collective identities are constructed and maintained, the extent to which cultural elites hold the power to define legitimate symbols of cultural identities continues to be a concern for sociologists. Assessing architecture from this perspective reveals that the literal and symbolic construction of major buildings is located in wider cultural discourses that are not always easy for political agencies (such as states) and powerful cultural elites (such as architects) to manage. Pierre Bourdieu's approach to culture not only contributes to our understanding of how power operates in this sphere, but also clarifies the role institutions and agents have in constituting and reproducing cultural identities (for example see Bourdieu, 1989; Bourdieu and Johnson, 1993; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Bourdieu has argued that:

...[e]very power to exert symbolic violence, i.e. every power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force, adds its own specifically symbolic force to these power relations. (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 4)

For Bourdieu it is the very latency of symbolic constructions that disguises the operation of power and imbues them with legitimacy.

Developing this framework to take account of the relationship between architecture and identities, important questions centre on who has the power to attach dominant identity meanings to large-scale architectural projects. Crucially, it is often against a mistakenly assumed backdrop of political autonomy and neutrality that high-profile architects are engaged in the creation and reproduction of cultural identities. If, as I am arguing here, architecture is a field of symbolic conflicts over power and identity, then so architects must negotiate a complex cultural terrain when claiming that their buildings represent certain collective identities. Even architects who suggest that they do not send political messages through their buildings inevitably find their work inextricably linked to complex political discourses, as 'meaning in the [built] environment is inescapable, even for those who would deny it or deplore it' (Jencks, 1980: 7). But how is the communication of identities through architecture possible, especially to the majority of us who do not know how to interpret the complex symbolic references and signifiers employed by many architects? How are nationalized architectural discourses constructed and subsequently disseminated?

'Death of the author' discourses associated with postmodernism have impacted heavily on both architectural theory and practice. With the notion of

multiple truths renders the architect's reading of the symbolism in their building as just one of many. But while it is not possible for architects to 'manage' the broader context in which their buildings are interpreted, top architects are very active in disseminating their interpretations of their respective buildings. Of course, when designing iconic commissions, architects are under a huge amount of pressure to explain the representations in their designs. When accepting, or even entering, a design competition for a major building, architects are frequently engaged in a 'sociological' debate. The extent to which they manage to situate their buildings within an identity discourse often proves crucial for the success of the design. The competition is a key stage of the process through which buildings are 'discursively constructed', and gives architecture something of its distinction as a profession. As one of the mainstays of architects' practice, design competitions are also a way of projecting a vision of how society should be, and this process makes architecture an inherently normative endeavour with inextricable links to broader social questions. The design competition forces architects to 'sell' their vision beyond a functional solution, and crucially to situate it vis-a-vis competing identity claims (for more on architectural competitions see Larson, 1993, and Stevens, 1998). Landmark architectural projects are resultantly bound up with questions of nation, state, and culture, making them politicized statements articulating something of the wider state project of which they are a part. Given this backdrop, when an architect is designing a building to 'symbolize the aims of political leaders, his or her protestations of political disinterest sound either hollow or insincere' (Vale, 1992: 274).

The politicized meanings inherent in such architecture demand critical sociological inquiry into the capacity of architects to manage the interpretation of their buildings. In other words, '[a]rchitecture is also a language and ... politicians must ensure that this language, like the language of politics in general, does not become empty jargon that no one wants to see or hear' (Scheel, cited in Wise, 1998: 32). A brief survey of some state-funded, landmark architectural projects in Europe would seem to indicate that architects working on state commissions endeavour to make their 'language', both architecturally and politically, meaningful (Delanty and Jones, 2004). Instead of actually etching text on to buildings or loading them with ostentatious ornamentation to signify national victories, as was often the case in an earlier modernity, contemporary designers tend to use more symbolic narrative associations when attempting to insert their buildings into political discourses, such as, for example, democracy, transparency, or openness. It is to such discursive constructions that this article now turns.

## Architecture Representing Absence

Because sociologists should retain a critical stance in regard to the maintenance and development of symbols of collective identity it is necessary to interrogate

the role of architects in the process of linking their buildings to communities. To what extent are high-profile architects successful in attempting to situate their buildings in 'political' positions vis-a-vis collective identities? Here I assess the rebuilding of the Ground Zero site in Manhattan by Daniel Libeskind, a leading architect who on previous commissions has engaged fully with the politically-loaded context surrounding his architecture by offering pre-emptive, highly symbolic interpretations of the building's relation to a collective identity. Libeskind has previously suggested that how symbols of a collective develop, and indeed how we come to recognize ourselves as a 'we', is a deeply political concern, and one he has addressed in both his written work and buildings.<sup>2</sup>

Such reflexivity on the part of this architect can be understood, in part at least, as a consequence of the political context in which many of his buildings are situated. The Ground Zero site, the Jewish Museum in Berlin, and the Imperial War Museum in Manchester, have all necessitated the architect's actual design, as well as his interviews and writings, to address significant questions about how best to represent and symbolize huge, traumatic losses of human life. These projects have required the architect to adopt a highly reflexive approach to his architecture relative to the collective identities it purports to represent; Libeskind's writings and interviews are an attempt to control the symbolic identity discourses that surround his work and underline a key claim of this article, namely that architecture is an inherently political endeavour inextricably bound up with collective identity claims.

On many occasions Libeskind has argued that his architecture is *not* neutral or devoid of symbolic charge. By engaging directly with the meanings that are potentially attached to his architecture Libeskind provides an important reflection of many abstract debates related to identity formation. For example, a particularly significant question with regard to the aforementioned buildings is the appropriateness of the particularistic architectural devices of the nation code, including flags and other national symbols. Of course, to some extent such buildings are inextricably bound up with a historical narrative of the nation, but the nationalization or otherwise of such buildings reveals a key tension inherent in political representation in the built environment. Frequently, architects attempt to adopt a broadly post-national stance in this regard, seeking to avoid the ethnocentric, nationalist discourses that were integral to the development of national styles of architecture in the European nation-building period (Jones, 2002). The very fact that architects discursively situate their landmark buildings vis-a-vis collective identities necessitates such potentially contentious negotiations regarding the privileging of one collective identity over another.

Accordingly, new architectural discourses frequently reference multiculturalism, diversity, accessibility, and representation, with architects adopting a reflexive approach to the collective identities they claim to represent in their work. Of course, landmark buildings commissioned by governments still have political purposes, but contemporary architectural discourses and styles, cannot always be coded around national identity as readily as their historical

precedents. Architecture now frequently provides a cultural 'space' in which new identities can be both expressed and contested. Architecture still has a role to play in the commemoration of socially significant events, and, while the built form the architecture takes is significant, a key question remains as to how buildings as 'free-floating signifiers' become closely linked to certain identities. The suggestion here is that without architects' discourses to establish and 'translate' their buildings for us, it is impossible for the vast majority of people to link the highly symbolic and narrative architectural form of landmark buildings to equally abstract social meanings. Links between buildings and collective identities only exist to the extent that they are created by agency, and in this case by a politically astute, powerful elite of transnational architects.

Architects working on landmark national buildings in the past were arguably creating symbols for less fragmented communities, and celebrating more clearly defined nations (Delanty and Jones, 2002). Today, due to the contested character of many nations, such projects are more difficult to conceptualize, execute and, perhaps most interestingly sociologically, to legitimate, than they were for the main part in the mid-19th century. As the ability of the state to adequately represent the diversity inherent in the nation is often called into question, attempts to situate architecture in a post-national context are evident in a number of high-profile buildings that echo developments in the European – if not always the American (see later) – political sphere.

For example, it has been suggested that it may be favourable to construct a European cultural identity in such a way that takes account of conflict, crisis, and Europe's turbulent past; the notion that the Holocaust should be remembered as a European, rather than distinctly German, trauma emerged in the Intergovernmental Conference on the Holocaust in Stockholm in January 2000. The commemoration of the Holocaust as a European memory necessitates the disassociation of this genocide from the symbols of any one nation. This post-national approach is evident in the discourses surrounding Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin, with the architect's call for the 'non-identity' of Germany reflecting a desire to move away from the particularistic forms of national identity that architecture was bound up with in an earlier modernity, and towards a more universalized, cosmopolitan or post-national discourse.

Libeskind has also been explicit about the role of his Jewish Museum architecture in regard to the Holocaust: '[t]his experience is no longer an abstract one, having been incorporated in the space of architecture; something that cannot be described in words or texts ... now belongs to the city' (Libeskind, 2001: 24). Previously, Libeskind has argued that any kind of Jewish memorial in Berlin must reflect a paradoxical 'permanent presence of absence' – a 'presence in the city even though you don't see it in an obvious way but it is there, it's part of the void which the city also carries in its own absence' (quoted in Langer and Steglich, 1995). The building, he claims, emphasizes the 'necessity to integrate physically and spiritually the meaning of the Holocaust into the consciousness and memory of the city' (Libeskind, 2001: 23). Such bold claims about the representative capacity of architecture obfuscate the relationship between what is

built and the discourse surrounding the project. While the architect has suggested that the Jewish Museum 'speaks a visible language' (quoted in Spens, 1999: 42), this complex 'language' is directly understood to very few, and resultantly is in need of the architect's own translation. It is here that discourse overtakes what is built, and that these 'translations' situate a building in relation to a collective identity.

When we consider how much symbolism the architect has attached to the form of the Jewish Museum, it is perhaps disingenuous of him to suggest 'the interpretation [of the building] is open' (Spens, 1999): I would also disagree with the notion that 'Libeskind [has] left the viewer to weave meaning into the space' (*The Guardian*, 2002, June 29). In fact with this particular building the very opposite is quite often true, with Libeskind actively offering readings of what the museum architecture and the spaces within it mean. The design for the windows of the museum illustrates this point: Libeskind explained in the competition, in interviews, and in texts that the design is based on linkages of sites of Jewish cultural figures – such as Walter Benjamin and Mies Van der Rohe – on a pre-war map of Berlin. Provided with this explanation we understand the significance, but without Libeskind's narrative it is improbable that the viewer would be able to grasp this highly symbolic association. Without prior knowledge of Libeskind's *own* interpretation the windows do not locate the building into the history of the Jewish population of Berlin, but by offering a 'strong' interpretation the architect is able to locate it within this history.<sup>3</sup> Other crosses on the zinc façade of the building, according to the museum's official pamphlet, make one 'feel compelled to think about the links between the cross and destruction. You wonder about the connections between the church and the Holocaust'; one certainly does when prompted to do so.

Inside the museum there are numerous information points that tell of the representative voids around which the building is organized. One text tells the visitor that 'the building is cut through by a tall space that has little in it. His building invites us to ask what this means.' While the numerous design tricks such as the stairs that lead to a wall, the dead-ends, sloping floors, and clever plays of light and shade, *may* make us reflect on the Jewish experience of alienation, it is by framing his work explicitly in abstract identity discourses that the architect *ensures* we do so. A further discursive link between the building and identity is evident alongside the building at 'The Garden of Exile', which is accompanied by the following text, written not in Hebrew but in both German and English: 'Here architect Daniel Libeskind asks us to think about the disorientation that exile brings.' When this information is coupled with the fact that the 49 pillars represent the formation of the Israeli state (in 1949) and that the central pillar contains soil from Israel, we are *made* aware that the building has strong representative links with the Jewish experience. Filler supports this argument when suggesting '[n]one of Libeskind's allegorical references is readily apparent to the average viewer without prior knowledge of the architect's intentions' (2001). While this is true of much architectural

symbolism it is the 'hyper-cleverness' (Filler, 2001) of Libeskind's allusions that situate his work within an identity discourse.

The extent to which such a building is accepted by the public, politicians, and other architects as an appropriate symbol of a given collective identity is highly contingent on the architect successfully aligning their building with the abstract discourses that pertain to identities. The fact that architects attempt to position their buildings in such complex discourses illustrates that as architecture has become an increasingly significant expression of collective identity then so architects have had to reflexively situate their buildings in terms of identity projects. As very few people in the population would be minded to interpret the deconstructive aesthetics of a postmodern building, to equate a dome with progress, or glass with democracy, the architect's role in translating and disseminating meanings is key. This also advances the argument that architecture is a *discursive medium*, which relates to any given identity only to the extent that this link can be made through agency.

Of course, symbolism within architecture has long been a contentious issue. Meanings attached to architectural styles and motifs are always negotiated and heavily context dependent, or in other words socially constructed. The way a building elicits a response in the viewer or user is not only via a range of symbolic building techniques and references, but also vitally through linking an identity discourse to a building. As critical sociologists, how much we should invest in architects' interpretations of their own buildings is questionable.<sup>4</sup> Given that the symbolic values that become attached to a building are often detached from what is actually built, and that 'the meaning of architecture can be removed – and sometimes even dissociated – from what architecture actually is' (Bonta, 1979: 14), it is necessary to consider the process through which buildings become coupled to collective identities. The process of linking an identity discourse to a landmark architectural project should be of concern for sociologists, as it reveals many of the political tensions inherent in the cultural constructions of collective identities.

Architects working for states have long tried to manage architecture's meaning to fit political priorities and aims, and it is important to be aware of the degree to which interpretations of such symbols vary across time and space:

... political symbols [including buildings] may impress us as having 'always' had the same connotative signification and societal meaning – because their representational form (as signifiers) stays the same – it is nevertheless far from uncommon for the same symbolic material to change its functions and connotations over time, and even at the same temporal intersection to imply different meanings to different groups. (Hedetoft, 1995: 122)<sup>5</sup>

In architecture, for the main part at least, the physical appearance of buildings does not change, but interpretations of buildings certainly do. Juan Pablo Bonta uses Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe's Pavilion at the 1929 Barcelona Expo to illustrate this point, tracing architectural reviews of the pavilion over a period of about 50 years. The changing interpretations of this building and the

motifs it employs are illuminating, with Bonta showing how an 'architectural orthodoxy' of opinion develops through a process of what he calls 'collective plagiarism'. Bonta decides that Mies' architecture cannot, as some critics claim, speak for itself, but rather that 'value judgements originate and disappear with time' (Bonta, 1979: 138).<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, many architects still seem to overlook the fact that '[e]quilateral triangles do not necessarily make for equilateral politics' (Vale, 1992: 125) when they link their symbol-laden buildings to politicized identity discourses. While architecture is clearly not inherently 'nationalist', 'democratic' or otherwise – buildings do not have agency – the symbolism and discursive meanings attached to architecture by cultural and political elites engenders it with a political dimension. It is this capacity to articulate the many tensions within global and local identity projects that means that architecture continues to have a vital role in shaping the collective social imagination.

However, reading architecture in a textual way gives problems of interpretation common to any 'text'.<sup>7</sup> Regardless of whether or not there can ever be an authoritative 'reading' of a building or a style it is clear that architecture has an important symbolic role in representing the society in which it exists. Aside from architectural form, other aspects of a landmark building project – such as the choice of a foreign architect – can in itself make a hugely significant symbolic and political statement. With architecture on the whole such a white, male-dominated, middle-class profession (Fowler and Wilson, 2004), the choice of designer can send out a signal of a state's broader commitment to multiculturalism or cultural diversity. For example, the decision by the Bundestag to commission the British architect Sir Norman Foster to redesign the Reichstag was certainly highly politicized.<sup>8</sup> Wolfgang Thierse, the then President of the German Bundestag, claimed that 'the decision to choose Norman Foster demonstrates that Germany is serious in its attempts to unite Europe and its people, and sends out a signal against narrow-mindedness' (Thierse, 1999: 7). Rita Süßmuth, his predecessor, suggested the selection of a non-German architect was indicative of 'a world shaped less and less by national borders' (Süßmuth, 1999); at some level such discourses indicate a shift away from nationalism and towards post-nationality, as indeed do many other aspects of the discursive construction of the Reichstag project (Delanty and Jones, 2002).

## **Rebuilding Ground Zero: Architecture for the Nation?**

Nowhere are the tensions and ambiguities around architecture and identities more apparent than in the redesign of the Ground Zero site in New York City. These claims are evidenced by the fact that many disparate discussions over collective memory – 'American' national identity and the politicization of the attacks on the Twin Towers to mention but two – find a focus in Libeskind's rebuilding project. A tremendous pressure of expectation exists in relation to the rebuilding of the site at which almost 3000 people lost their lives, with the

following statement from a powerful citizen-led campaign typical of much of the expectation placed on the new architecture:

Ground Zero mandates an urban gesture of mega national significance. What eventually rises from Ground Zero must reflect the best of what we are as a people, exhibiting our aspirations, our creativity and our industry. This is the place where America's heart was broken and its spirit emboldened. (*Which Future for Ground Zero?*, signed by 'The American People', 2003)

Politicians have also echoed such calls, with New York's Governor Pataki describing the rebuilding as a 'new symbol of this country and of our resolve in the face of terror' (*The Guardian*, 2004, July 5), while in the same article Libeskind himself claimed his building will 'inspire New York, America and the entire world with the ideals of liberty and democracy'. Such hyperbole places huge demands on what is possible through architecture. How can architecture reflect, for example, what 'we' are as a people, and how should this 'we' even be understood? Can architecture ever represent liberty or democracy in a clear and uncontested way? A problematic issue in this regard, which is explored here, is the extent to which such an architectural response should be part of a nationalized discourse. Given the nature of the tragedy, calls for the nationalization of the site are inevitable, but the process through which this landmark building, the design of which bears no ostensible symbols of the nation, has become a part of a broader nationalized cultural discourse deserves further analysis. How has Libeskind's radical, highly abstract, architecture become part of a nationalized repertoire of symbols?

Initially it should be noted that Libeskind is very effective at balancing complex architectural theory with a degree of populism; appearances on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, CNN talk shows and many other television, radio and internet interviews have been vital in disseminating some of the symbolic references assessed below. In one such interview, the architect explained that when working on a project of such symbolic charge and magnitude 'you have a civic responsibility, you are not just an architect, you are also a member of the public' (*The Observer*, 2003, February 2). A populist approach, while ostensibly difficult to reconcile with abstract architectural symbolism, has allowed Libeskind not only to win architectural competitions, but also to further situate his building 'in' a place and 'for' a people.

Libeskind is the Master Planner of the Ground Zero site, and as well as being charged with commissioning a team of architects to rebuild the site, he has also personally designed the centrepiece Freedom Tower, a trademark silver-clad, angular building. The tallest of the towers stands 1776 feet, not only making it the tallest building in the world, but also containing an allusion to the date of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. In common with the other narrative symbolic architectural references discussed here, the role of the architect in disseminating this information is key. Without the architect informing us of the exact height of the tower it is highly unlikely that one would consider 541.1 metres of any 'national' significance at all, but when provided

with this narrative account then the building becomes symbolically incorporated into an 'Americanized' discourse. That the Freedom Tower suggests the form of the Statue of Liberty is perhaps not immediately evident to the casual viewer, but this piece of nationally self-referential symbolism has been expressed explicitly, with the effect of further linking the new building into an ongoing narrative construction of the nation.

Linking the Freedom Tower's architectural form to nationalized discourse is also in evidence on many other aspects of the building: '[t]he great slurry walls are an engineering wonder ... [t]hey withstood the unimaginable trauma of the destruction, and stand as eloquent as the constitution itself, asserting the durability of democracy, and the value of individual life' (Libeskind, cited in *The Observer*, 2003, February 2). This allusion to democratic values underlines exactly why discursive links between architecture and the event it purports to represent are so important. In fact the decision to retain these walls has proved hugely controversial, with Herbert Muschamp, the architecture critic of the *New York Times* suggesting this part of the design is 'astonishingly tasteless, emotionally manipulative and close to nostalgia and kitsch' (*The Observer*, 2003, June 22). Larry Silverstein, the site owner, has also expressed the opinion that the slurry wall is unsightly and would be off-putting to the commercial tenants he hopes to attract to the rebuilt site, which previously housed the USA's most profitable retail space (*The Observer*, 2003, June 22). In defence of this memorial aspect of his design, Libeskind argued in the same article that 'it is important to embrace the reality of the terrorist act, not bury it. You can't say nothing happened there. That day changed the world.'

Given the context of the rebuilding there is a strong argument to be made for a building more in keeping with post-national identity discourses and emptied of nationalized symbolism, but the highly emotive, politicized discourse into which the building is inserted means there is huge political and cultural pressure for the architecture to be incorporated into a repertoire of national symbols. Libeskind initially suggested that the architectural symbolism associated with the Ground Zero site is 'too powerful' to be appropriated by any one political group – 'I never thought anyone should appropriate the true images of America for one group's consumption as the right wing has done. Patriotism belongs to everyone' (*The Observer*, 2003, June 22).<sup>9</sup> However, considering both the broader political context and his attempts to nationalize the towers, this statement seems a little naïve on the part of the architect.

Such tensions certainly reveal a great deal about the political context in which the project has been conceived. While many European states find themselves engaged in broadly post-national identity projects (Kastoryano, 2002), since 9/11 the American government has been engaged in a nationalizing project comparable to those undertaken in an earlier modernity: cultural symbols such as flags, anthems, institutions, and in fact the very notion of 'community' itself, have all been re-evaluated and reinterpreted along national lines. Given this context, Libeskind's initial appeals that the building should represent post-nationality, emptied of symbolically nationalized charge, have been superseded

by appeals to the American people, with the universalized symbols of absence Libeskind employed in his post-national Jewish Museum inappropriate for a society who want 'ownership' of the tragedy. Against this desire there has even been suggested – given the subsequent war on Iraq and associated denials of human rights that followed the attack on the Twin Towers – that Freedom Tower is an inappropriate name for the building (*The Guardian*, 2004, July 7).

It is significant to note the substantial lobby to restore the Twin Towers as they were before 9/11. Team Twin Towers, a large organization with this restoration as their aim, have suggested that the Freedom Tower is 'replacing a symbol of world peace and human cooperation with a self-absorbed salute to America' (*The Guardian*, 2004, June 11). Their interpretation of the Twin Towers, home to the World Trade Center, as a symbol of peace and cooperation is surely only one reading of many, which further underlines the argument that landmark buildings have a whole range of possible associations and political discourses. The *New York Post's* columnist Nicole Gelinas also supports the rebuilding of the original towers, suggesting that Americans 'understood' the Twin Towers because '[t]hey were us: stark capitalism, power and beauty without explanation or apology' (*The Guardian*, 2004, June 11). Again, the exact constitution of this 'us' deserves further scrutiny, as does the celebration of an unapologetically powerful capitalist nation. In a related development, critic Herbert Muschamp has bemoaned the surfeit of symbolism in Libeskind's Ground Zero design site, complaining of 'symbolic manipulation', while James E. Young, one of the jurors to decide the memorial design (see below), said the panel had 'resisted the idea of the literal, that's why you don't get any Big Apples in the designs, or representations of airplanes, attacks, death, blood' (*New York Times*, 2004, January 19); given that the representations would understandably not be literal, this serves to increase the importance, and the contestation, of the symbolic element of the architecture.

The populist aspect of Libeskind's narratives suggest that representative architecture should 'speak directly' to the citizens it represents – '[i]t's not about prescribed things you should know about. People discover things on their own, discover architecture on more than one level' (*The Observer*, 2003, June 22). However, this is frequently at odds with the detailed and complex narrative of symbolic association the architect has designed for this site: for example, the Wedge of Light, a triangular piazza whose boundaries are delineated by the angles of sunlight on the ground between the times of 8.46am – the time when the first plane hit the first tower – and 10.28am, when the second tower collapsed; this will mean that no shadows will fall on the site between those times on 11 September. With Libeskind investing the project with so much symbolism, critics will invariably attempt to challenge him on these grounds. Make New York New York Again, another team advocating rebuilding of the Twin Towers, have suggested that while the 'average person' does not want to have to engage with complex architectural theory to understand a building, 'Libeskind's building is twisted. It seems to imply something bent out of shape, destroyed' (*The Guardian*, 2004, June 11). It is significant that this statement,

ostensibly populist and 'anti-symbolism', engages with the symbolism of the building, albeit bringing a very different interpretation to bear than the architect's. Such conflicting interpretations raise pertinent questions about the power of the architect's interpretation relative to those with less audible cultural 'voices'.

Another part of the Ground Zero site that has attracted a great deal of attention, not to mention controversy, is designer Michael Arad's memorial, which features two pools situated within the footprints of the fallen towers. This design gained qualified praise from Muschamp, who suggested that the monument has the 'greatest potential to be the least'. This critic's missive against over-embellishment is reminiscent of the postmodern architect Charles Jencks' (1980) argument that the most effective architecture for symbolizing diversity is that in which the meanings are left 'open' to better represent a plurality of identities and voices. However, even within this context the exact manner of the representation is problematic, as is illustrated by the controversy surrounding the listing of the names of people who died in the 9/11 attacks. Arad, who is designing the memorial with landscape architect Peter Walker, has suggested that '[a]ny arrangement that tries to impose meaning through physical adjacency will cause grief and anguish to people who might be excluded from that process' (*New York Times*, 2004, January 19). With symbolism already so prominent and highly politicized in the project in general, it is difficult to convince people that names with insignias next to them – as was suggested by the Governor Pataki and Mayor Bloomberg for victims who were police officers, fire fighters, workers from other emergency services, and court officials – are of equal symbolic 'worth' to those names that are unembellished. Some have interpreted this call as an attempt to impose an inappropriate hierarchy of victims, or an equally undesirable hierarchy of heroes, amongst those who lost their lives.

Libeskind asserts that 'neutral architecture is perhaps appropriate for non-events' (Libeskind, 2001: 28); many of the issues in this project reveal tensions between nationalized and post-national commemorations. The sociological significance of the contestation is due to debates that go far beyond what is actually built, and which frequently articulate abstract discourses pertinent to collective identity. It is the capacity of architecture to provide a focus for these discussions that explains something of its potential as a post-national symbol. Such architecture acts as a focus for a wide range of significant debates about the nation, with contested projects such as the one at Ground Zero reflecting something of the difficulty inherent in contemporary codifications of diverse, fragmented nations.

## Conclusion

Landmark architectural projects such as that at the Ground Zero site provide one significant way in which collective identities can be represented materially

in the cultural sphere, with such buildings resultantly situated in a complex web of highly charged discourses about identities. It is important that sociologists address such symbolic representations and investigate how certain buildings come to have politicized, albeit contested, meanings for identities. As architecture is an increasingly significant focus for debates around collective identity, then so architects must be highly reflexive when attempting to situate their work in relation to nations or other cultural communities. It is precisely this potential that situates architecture at the forefront of a post-national symbolic language harbouring potential as a space in which identities can be contested and reflexively constituted. As architecture is a communicative medium that provides a focus for identity discourses of many kinds, the tensions around landmark projects encourage reflection on sociological questions, such as how buildings come to represent collective identities at all. Perhaps the most an architect can realistically claim is that their work signals an *intent* to engage with the primarily discursive nature of the bonds of a given collective identity, and that their work will stimulate debate on otherwise abstract issues. Because architecture provides a focus for public discussion of identities in a way that other symbols more abstract and distant from 'everyday' concerns do not, sociologists should be encouraged to give thought to such projects.

If sociology is to attempt to understand architecture as a carrier of such meanings then we must look beyond merely buildings and their objectified histories, and question how and why architecture and architectural styles come to reflect, and construct, social meanings. The rebuilding of the Ground Zero site tells us something about the relative power of 'voices' in the construction of symbols of collective identity: while architects, politicians, the media, those representing capitalist interests, and others responsible for the governance of the city impose their interpretations of the cultural, economic, and social significance of this architecture, many voices are silent. The extent to which landmark architecture is truly representative depends upon its potential to include a range of positions and give voice to those whose identities such buildings symbolize. Architecture is a key discursive space in which collective identities are reflected and maintained and as such must express the tension and fluidity inherent in how identities are constructed.

A related contention here has been that the symbolic construction of the Ground Zero site, and indeed other major buildings, is part of a wider, communicative context that should be an opened discourse, and not one that is manipulated by political or cultural elites. Architecture is not only responsible for shaping collective memories, but also provides potential for the expression of new identities. One of the major strengths of architecture in this regard lies in its capacity to provide a focus for collective identity discourses in a way that reveals something of the conflicts and tensions inherent in their construction. It is perhaps unsurprising then, and indeed could even be considered a reflection of a healthy public sphere, that landmark architectural projects so frequently become embroiled in heated debates about the collective identities they purport to represent. Daniel Libeskind has suggested that '[d]iscussion is part of the

civic process. If people don't discuss a building, they don't care about it' (*The Observer*, 2003, June 22).

## Notes

- 1 The title is an allusion to Wodak et al.'s *The Discursive Construction of National Identity* (1999). While not employing a critical discourse analysis as their study does, I am interested in the ways in which collective identities are constructed and sustained through discourse.
- 2 Initially an architectural theorist rather than a practitioner, Libeskind, one of the most active architects in terms of written material on his own work, would seem to be being inconsistent when he suggests that '[w]hatever an architect says about his [sic] work may only seem a redundant commentary on what is obviously built' (Libeskind, 2001: 24).
- 3 In fact the whole building is designed around this imaginary map of Berlin, with Libeskind having 'built the museum on the basis of addressing points, for example of connections between Berliners and Jews who lived around the Lindenstrasse' (Libeskind, 2001: 28).
- 4 How far architectural 'taste' should be understood purely as an expression of an individual architect's aesthetic preferences is open to question; there is a great deal of potential to extend Bourdieu's work on 'distinction' to this question, as does Garry Stevens (1998).
- 5 Glass is one illustrative material that connotes very different meanings in different contexts. Because of its literal transparency, glass is often considered a symbol of openness, accessibility, and democracy, as Foster suggested was the case with his glass dome extension to the Reichstag. However, another reading of the same material is that glass symbolizes fascism, as it breaks down the distinction between public and private, making everything visible and nothing private: for example, this 'transparency' was central to Jeremy Bentham's plans for the Panopticon that so fascinated Foucault.
- 6 Kuhn's (1962) work on paradigms is an important, although unacknowledged, aspect of Bonta's framework. The 'scientific' (i.e. architectural) community is hugely significant for the development of 'canonical' interpretations, which are 'affected by interpretations of other works taking place within the same social or historical context' (Bonta, 1979: 65).
- 7 Gloag underestimates the heavily negotiated processes involved in the cultural and historical construction of meanings associated with architecture when he suggests that '[b]uildings cannot lie; they tell the truth directly or by implication about those who made and used them and provide veracious records of the character and quality of past and present civilisations' (Gloag, 1975: 1). It is highly problematic to assume architects work autonomously and that their work is readily associated with an objective truth or reality.
- 8 The European Council Directive 92/50/EEC requires public authorities to make a European-wide tender for architectural commissions worth more than 200,000 Euros. I am grateful to Karoline Brombach for explaining this legislation to me.
- 9 It is interesting to note that President Bush used footage of the Ground Zero site in his successful re-election campaign.

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