

# The veil of production : Daniel Libeskind and the translations of process

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Trans : Publikationsreihe des Fachvereins der Studierenden am Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich**

Band (Jahr): - **(2003)**

Heft 11

PDF erstellt am: **15.08.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-918854>

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"Molodor's Equation", from: Daniel Libeskind, *Micromegas*, Exhibition Catalogue, The Museum of Finnish Architecture, Helsinki

## The Veil of Production: Daniel Libeskind and the Translations of Process

*“A text is a machine conceived for eliciting interpretations.”*

Umberto Eco, *Experiences in Translation*

Translation, as Umberto Eco observes, is essentially a hermeneutic activity, exposing the ambiguous nature of language to the subjectivities of a viewer. Interpretation as the production and transmission of information occurs according to individual circumstance, joining a text with specific decoding capacities of the subject. Understood in this manner, reading a text engenders a mediation of meaning. Original sense is separated from the totalizing closure of original and exclusive narrative logic: unified meaning is infiltrated by both external conditions and by the subject.

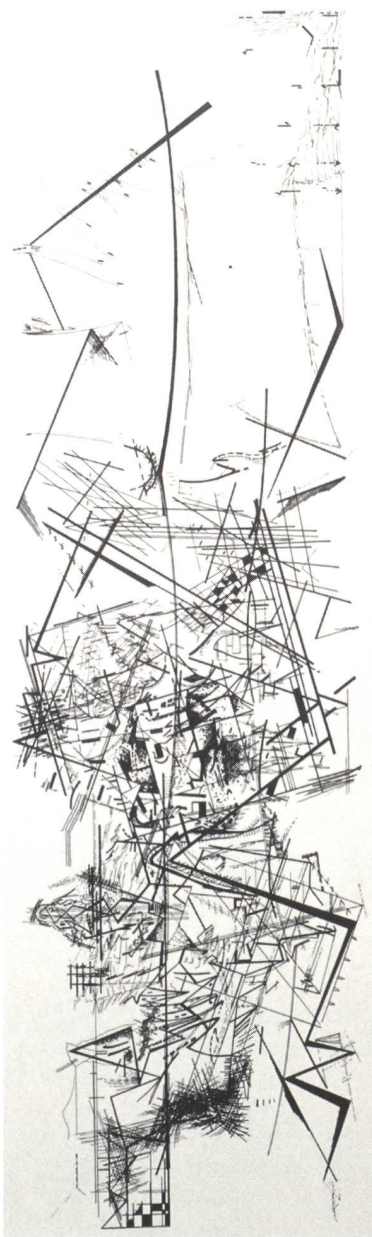
The language of architecture – historically bound to the exegesis of representational correspondences – exists increasingly in the hypermediated context of contemporary culture, one in which unified meaning exists only as imagery or within the conceits of self-referential syntax. In contrast, mediations to which architecture is unavoidably exposed establish new relationships between artifacts, the user, as well as narrative and physical context, suggesting possibilities for other modes of production.

Processes of translation between thinking and making, as well as the dissemination of form emerging through such translations underscore the potential complicities of a mediating or middle-ground. Deferrals of meaning occurring through the multiple readabilities of language might be said to reflect a contemporary condition in which architecture operates.

### Scape

Normatively understood as a view of a scene, the term *-scape* denotes a subject registering information from a specific position. Suggesting such a scene as an interstitial construction, trans-scape alludes to a view *between*, a mediating filter through which information may be thought, known, or perceived. As an instrument of mediation between languages, translation also describes a domain through which new content emerges. As such, processes of transferral become the site of production for new, unintended meanings. By implicating the reader in the construction of the text, the authority of original meaning is questioned.

The work of Daniel Libeskind investigates architecture’s potential as an apparatus for generating meaning through its delineation as a middle ground. Libeskind’s strategy is based on an understanding of architecture as a kind of language, as a text to be read. Rather than subscribing to a unified vocabulary and syntax understood in an equivalent manner by everyone, Libeskind’s constructions operate as translational machines, combining traces



Daniel Libeskind, *Chamber Works: Architectural Meditations on Themes from Heraclitus*, Architectural Association, London, 1983

of multiple languages which simultaneously suggest and defer meaning. Specific and recognizable iconographies reference disciplinary tradition, while heterogenous syntax and multiple language fragments call those references into question. Production is set into motion through a search for possible meanings, understood here as a process of interpretation.

More than as simply a bi-polar instrument of transfer, translation here might be understood as a domain of both interpretation and experimentation. In attempts to faithfully reconstruct meaning, interpretation confronts non-equivalences between languages. In the absence of such equivalences, unintended meanings emerge in the movement between systems. In this sense, Libeskind does not deploy a singular, representational grammar capable of communicating unequivocal meaning, but deploys ambiguous signs out of which a field, a trans-scape develops. As considered through the field of semiotic theory, these architectures might be understood as a series of notations that do not prescribe to the same system: interpretation must be activated to construct the coherences necessary for the communication of messages. In the bridgings of languages, new instruments are also spontaneously generated. Bound to no identifiable system of logic, such invention constructs relationships between signifiers, generating multiple fictions as provisional references.

In *Introduction to Semiotics*, Umberto Eco describes the mediating capacity of notation as a cultural process, depicting abstract sign systems as symbols operating between form and content and between subject and objects.<sup>1</sup> Classically predicated on an obedient support of formal correspondences, notation also operates in a trans-scape between objects and their referents. As such, it exposes itself to other possible readings, a condition Libeskind promotes in his design processes and which operates in the reception of his work.

This middle ground is organized around the deployment of two strategies, both of which approach architecture as an artifact to be read. Hermeneutics – understood here as a type of subject-dependent logic – addresses multiple narratives constructed by the reader when confronted with specific sign systems. In contrast, heuristics – processes of intuition and experimentation – promotes a looser relationship between a reader and a text, allowing the reader to exceed the dictates of content through a spontaneous transgression of the text precipitated by interpretative activity.<sup>2</sup> These instruments operate both sequentially and simultaneously, suggesting translation – the territory between unified languages – as a possible site of architectural production.

#### Constructions I: symbol and interpretation

*Micromegas*, a series of drawings Libeskind completed in 1979 combines different types of architectural representation and notational forms to create a dense field of spaces and signs perceivable more as a multi-dimensional textural weave than as ascertainable space. Overlapping projections suggest spatial trajectories while denying the possibility of their direct, three-dimensional realization. Heterogeneous vocabularies inhabit a structure which resists their automatic readability, instead creating a series of possible dialogues entwined



*Writing Machine*, Venice Biennale 1985;  
oblique view

between texts. Artificial limits of architectural drawing imprinted on it through orthodoxies of unified representation are questioned here through an overlap of multiple fragments, challenging the reader to search for *other* coherences. In this manner, drawings mediate between forms tangentially recognizable and imaginative possibilities interpreted by the reader. As “unknown instruments for which usage is yet to be found”, the Micromegas suggest a strategic *misuse* of language so as to allow readings marginalized by convention.<sup>3</sup> As Libeskind observes, *Drawing... is a state of experience in which the other is revealed through mechanisms which provoke and support... these drawings come to resemble an explication of a reading of a text – a text both generous and inexhaustible.*<sup>4</sup>

#### Constructions II: notational traces

According to the philosopher Paul Ricoeur, the multiple readability of texts is an inherent aspect of language. In *Freud and Philosophy*, he advances the notion that symbols reference both normatively prescribed meanings as well as others exposed through interpretation. Ricoeur delineates a strategy he calls a *hermeneutics of suspicion*, with the reader accepting two or more potentially conflicting propositions rather than attempting a restoration of original meaning. Ricoeur states, *The symbol invites us to think, calls for an interpretation, precisely because it says more than it says and because it never ceases to speak to us.*<sup>5</sup> The reader operates between established systems of meaning and inherent allusions to other possibilities.

Such a strategy is informative when examining *Chamber Works*, a series of twenty-eight drawings executed by Libeskind in 1983. Containing the traces of

- 1 Umberto Eco, *Einführung in die Semiotik*, translated by Jürgen Trabant, Fink Verlag, München, 1972; *La struttura assente: introduzione alla ricerca semiologica*, Bompiani, Milan, 1968
- 2 Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, translated by Richard Miller, Hill and Wang, New York, December 1975; *Le Plaisir du Texte*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1973
- 3 Daniel Libeskind, *Symbol and Interpretation*, Exhibition catalogue, The Museum of Finnish Architecture, Helsinki, 1980, p. 14
- 4 Daniel Libeskind, *Between Zero and Infinity*, Rizzoli, New York, 1981
- 5 Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1988, p. 27 - 28; *De l'interprétation: Essai sur Freud*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1965

multiple notational systems from music, religion and untraceable sources, the drawings suggest a multiplicity of possible references while denying primacy to any. Narratives constructed through interpretation reference no self-evident origin and suggest no final destination. Variation supercedes any declarative position. Nonetheless, the drawings – alone and in combination – are inhabited by heterogenous notations from which a multiplicity of provisional meaning might be constructed.

#### Constructions III: automations

As well as emerging through the interpretation of texts, production engenders processes which exceed parameters of rational logic. In *Heuristics: the Logic of Invention*, Gregory Ulmer describes engaging processes outside of consciousness to catalyze production. In transforming the site of the unknown into that of invention, heuristics resists the hermeneutic goal of transforming enigmas into truth. Employing experimental practices not aligned with institutionalized methods of investigation, strategies include the submission to desire, the promotion of arbitrary starting points, and the erasure of any distinctions between human and machinic processes.<sup>6</sup> Personal and disciplinary traces are grafted together, constructing provisional frameworks from which to proceed. Considered as a strategy within design for *the writing of intuition*, trial-and-error is foregrounded, enabling the production of material through which interpretation might occur. Such a trans-scape questions the authority of normative conceptions of analytical logic, yet its construction and the dispersion of its by-products is intimately bound to initial texts from which such strategies proceed.

Constructed for the 1985 Venice Biennale, the *Writing Machine* is a device which displaces production from the confines of reason to the automations of an apparatus which randomly “writes” fictional narratives by combining signs from four different notational systems each of which is itself a reading of a specific site. Insofar as its internal movements are obscured by its complexity, the exposure of different signs follows no ascertainable rationality or narrative rules. The displacement of textual production – text which requires a reading – from an author to an apparatus recalls Surrealist techniques of automatic writing, and suggests the activation of processes which negate origin as a questioning of exclusively knowledge-based procedures. Notions that interpretation and unconscious or machinic production are complicit in the acts of reading, writing and remembering – might be understood as a questioning of what Libeskind refers to as “the armature of the absolute”<sup>7</sup>, the privileging of specific types of reasoning or comprehensive frameworks of understanding.

#### Constructions IV: oscillation

Oscillating between hermeneutic and heuritic approaches, translations between form and content might occur both analytically – as a critical reading – and intuitively – as a spontaneous reaction – to multiple or *irrational* logics. Eco’s text machine alludes to automatic processes addressed by Ulmer, while at the same time saying that such texts require a critical reading. This circular process of reading and writing informs both the process of design as well as the relationship of architecture to its program and context. Form developed through spontaneous procedural invention is subject to multiple readings, generating new layers of meaning and transforming previous layers. In this

<sup>6</sup> Gregory L. Ulmer, *Heuristics: The Logic of Invention*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore; and to be extruded from the latent for subsequent manipulation. This theory is a tacit reference to Freud’s theory of analysis which it inverts, and which represents part of Libeskind’s attempt to exceed the authority of conventional teleological processes.

<sup>7</sup> Op. Cit., Libeskind (1980) p. 14

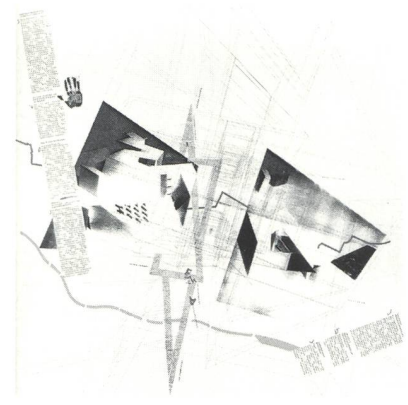
sense, organisations of form are never equivalent to meaning, but delineate an obliquely referential construct *through* which it may continually emerge.

Making no methodological distinction between drawn and built work – while simultaneously stressing differences between various forms of representation – Libeskind's Jewish Museum engages both a heuritic and a hermeneutic approach. Proceeding from four aspects of site and program seen as significant, Libeskind constructs a framework for intervening on the city through what might be described as mapping operations. These operations, involving both poetic procedures and their subsequent analysis are partly constituted out of distorted iconographies dispersed throughout the project. An interpretation of the site as read through specific aspects of the program serves as a construction within which the genesis of form occurs.

Speaking of the impossibility of beginnings or endings, Libeskind remarks, *I had to begin somewhere in the middle of nowhere, so why not with a rather irrational system of lines?*<sup>8</sup> Such approaches question symbolic reconstructions of history, allowing the interpretative potential of fragmented and highly referenced languages to become a basis for open configurations of meaning. Libeskind's work is heavily invested in non-logical procedures, ones which resist the totalizing forces of reason. *To speak of architecture, then, is to speak of a paradigm of the irrational.*<sup>9</sup> Fusing Ricoeur's and Ulmer's observations, the project engages normative formal associations – promoting the establishment of a cultural node around which the project might gravitate – while allowing new interpretations based on experimentally generated tracings of the program and site to emerge.

#### Re:source

Translations between form and content engender both interpretative readings and intuitive experiments as modes of production. These processes delineate the potential of an in-between space – a trans-scape – to exceed languages' institutionally codified correspondences. Rather than a reduction of linguistic performance to knowable quantities, architecture might be deployable as an instrument of exposure capable of denoting that which cannot be directly realised as form. Generative procedures which engage rational and non-rational thought liberate production from any pre-ordained calculus, opening up architecture to the perpetual construction of new narratives. Constituted out of notational fragments, procedural allegiance to totalizing systems of meaning becomes mobile, even volatile. Daniel Libeskind capitalizes on this mobility to construct frameworks through which interpretation and experimentation are activated. An architectural framework is established in which it is neither necessary nor possible to resolve competing interests within a single framework of understanding. As such, processes are not deployed as an instrument of reason, but for what Libeskind calls a temporal unfolding of reality.<sup>10</sup> Libeskind states, *In order to construct things on the basis of a few abstract indices or variables, this flattened and technicized thinking and making ignores the fundamental conditions, situations, and the site of its own manifestation.*<sup>11</sup> Residues of signification located within that site are the building material from which that scape is constructed.



Jewish Museum Berlin,  
Competition Phase – Star of David site plan

8 Daniel Libeskind, *Kein Ort an seiner Stelle. Schriften zur Architektur – Visionen für Berlin*, Verlag der Kunst, Dresden, 1995, p. 79

9 Ibid, p. 76. Quotes have been translated from the original German by the author.

10 Daniel Libeskind, *Radix-Matrix*, Prestel Verlag, Munich, 1997, p. 155

11 Op. Cit., *Symbol and Interpretation*, p. 15