



Daniel Libeskind cooks,  
writes out-there poems,  
directs plays  
– and builds very big,  
extraordinary buildings

# *High-Rise Dreams*

BY DONALD FRAZIER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY BLEACHER + EVERARD



**F**ROM BERLIN TO Hong Kong, from Denver to Switzerland, the world of big-time architecture owes a debt to a tiny kitchen table in Queens. The young Polish art student didn't have enough room to draw boxes, so he just shifted the tablet a few degrees and made acute angles instead. The result: one of the most distinctive building styles on the planet, gashed and bristling with the slanted edges, jagged outcroppings and cubic mash-ups that proclaim the presence of Daniel Libeskind.

What's ironic about his career, given his seeming ubiquity (more than 40 projects underway right now), is that it almost didn't happen. Libeskind spent almost his entire career as an academic, laboring in the thickets of high abstraction that have made university architecture an offshoot of post-structural philosophy. All of that came to an end in 1999 with the opening of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, a haunting and unsettling memorial to the thriving community that perished in the Holocaust.

Perhaps Libeskind wanted to pull back to the quiet life of an intellectual. It doesn't matter – the world didn't let him. Commissions flooded in, most of them freighted with some complex historic or urban grievance or agenda. The Libeskind approach might find symbols for an uncertain age, shake us up, and heal.

Born in 1946 in Poland to Holocaust survivors, Libeskind came to New York in 1959 aboard one of the last World War II refugee boats. He rampaged through a series of advanced degrees, worked oh-so-briefly as an apprentice to the architect Richard Meier, taught at a dozen universities ranging from Yale to Lunenburg, and has lived in Italy, Germany and several places in the US, learning and teaching with a restless passion. For their honeymoon, he and his bride made a tour of Frank Lloyd Wright buildings.

Along the way he designed several buildings that critics dismissed as "un-buildable" or "unduly assertive," and completed his first actual structure in 1998

at the age of 52. Since then he has designed museums, cultural institutions of all kinds, concert halls, convention centers and even hotels. His involvement in a project is so critical to its success that sometimes, as in the rebuilding of the World Trade Center, that's all it takes: he doesn't have to design a thing.

Not for him the grubby servicing of clients, Libeskind serves a far more demanding master: the muse of artistic creation, wherever he finds it. He designs opera sets and costumes, directed a play and has written a volume of free verse with lines such as "Our days steadily bevel Mt Zion into a figure resembling a tormented, destitute woman wrapping detonating charges around her forefathers before the gates were opened." He waxes rhapsodic about all of it, and once gave a complete interview on the aesthetic dimensions of cooking and eating.

More recently he has been dragged into politics, joining the parade of Western artists boycotting Chinese projects last year but

then, just as abruptly, recanting. Quicksilver judgment gives him a propulsive, almost frenetic manner in keeping with the mad pace of his practice. He's got a lot of ground to make up.

**Your first commission in Hong Kong, the Creative Media Centre – why did it become such a high-profile project?**

The Creative Media Centre expresses Hong Kong's new significance to all of Asia. Its facilities will enable the university [City University of Hong Kong] to offer very high levels of education and training in all related media fields. It will house a center for media and technology and a department of computer engineering – cutting edge institutions, whose facilities call for cutting edge design. The distinctive use of space creates an extraordinary range of responses to the programs of the university in terms of form, light, materials. This will be a very inspiring environment for education, creativity and of course for research. The building layout is designed to make for conversation, collaboration – a uniquely open and collective structure.

The Media Centre will also serve as a destination for visitors. They will be able to enjoy the facility, be part of an extensive outreach program. There will be exhibitions, social events. It's really an entire world of creativity that includes a

highly innovative multi-purpose theater, studio spaces for recording, laboratories, classrooms, exhibit space, cafes, restaurants and so on. It's really a unique place with its own secluded garden at the north part of the building where people from the city can create events.

**You must have learned a great deal about Hong Kong as you were designing this space. Do you have any upcoming projects here?**

I learned that Hong Kong is one of the most creative places in the whole world. It is really akin to Manhattan in terms of its tempo, its ambition, its can-do attitude. I fell in love with the people and with the spirit of Hong Kong. The attitude of the people gives Hong Kong a sense of life and spirit second to no other city I know. I learned how hard

*Below and bottom: Models of Libeskind's Creative Media Center in Hong Kong*



people work in Hong Kong and how much they expect of their environment.

It has historically been an office city and has always been of interest to me. But now its high density makes it a laboratory of creativity of all kinds, from the film industry down to the restaurants. It is a perfect match for us and has become a significant port and a thought leader for all of the people of China. I would love to work here again and I am looking at several possibilities.

**You are also active in many other places in Asia, such as South Korea, as a site planner as well as an architect. Why is it people all over the world are choosing architects – not just yourself, others such as Frank Gehry – as urban planners?**

People see how important design is to the larger urban fabric. It's no longer limited to just developing a piece of land and that's it. We know that issues of environmental coherence, sustainability and building intelligently with the newest technology are not only a luxury but something really needed as we enter the 21st century. I think people are turning more and more to architects because they see it as a value added, a plus for a development to do something that will really work in the future.

**A master plan is supposed to create a larger harmony within a site. How does that square**



with the use of signature iconic elements that are, in your case, so strikingly individual?

A great master plan offers the possibility of the best on all levels. It is not supposed to be a straitjacket. The whole 19th and 20th century rigid ideological model of closing off possibilities of the future is not what we want to do today. We see master plans today that are bold and allow for a dynamic harmony holding different factors in equilibrium, allowing individual elements to excel. I think this is what makes modern master planning harder than what was happening as recently as 10 years ago.

**Unlike many of your peers, you spent many years as a theoretician preceding your work as a practicing architect. Much of this demonstrates a deep grounding in Western culture and an internalization of many of the values. What did you have to do to understand Asian clients' needs in the context of your Western intellectual heritage?**

Very good question, but in my case these is not such a divide. I have always been a student of Chinese and other Asian traditions in architecture, in art, in literature, and in Korean sources and traditions. It's not as if I came to this just from the West, imposing some Western ideas, not at all. I really worked in a synergetic way with the local specific genius of places and their prolonged and enduring tradition. And of course we live in a world where we are being brought close together, here we can bring together the best ideas we have worldwide for building, for planning, and improving human lives. To create something that is inspiring, that is opening up new horizons. Really it's a poetic idea of architecture that all people around the world share.

**You must be learning a great deal about how people in Asia perceive and use space as an aspect of the urban fabric. Do you plan to use these findings in your Western projects?**

Absolutely. Each building has to respond to a unique complex of factors, no matter where it is. You have to study these things from the inside out. Knowing the local temperature, the local light, the local soil,

and the luminosity of the air. And of course even more: the less visible structures of culture that underpin how people interact with a building or a site. Of course these lessons can be brought elsewhere. I am also learning these lessons in large projects in Singapore, Korea and, I hope, Hong Kong, which have a different set of needs that can be illuminated by experiences in Asia.

For example, my interest in gardens. How can you make the landscape become an organic part of a building? This is really a great tradition going back to Zen gardening in Japan, and similar traditions elsewhere in Asia. It has to do with a different way of understanding nature. I am bringing this right now to projects in Europe and in New York, where I am putting Asian gardens in a high-rise residential building.

**Speaking of New York City, you were originally named as the architect to replace the World Trade Center but have now ended up as the master planner of the entire site. Are you happy with the evolution of your original plans and the involvement of SOM [Skidmore Owings & Merrill, the designer of the Freedom Tower] in that site?**

It's a very complex process. This is New York City and we must be responsive to many stakeholders: the city, the state, the victims' families, the Port Authority, the mayor, the governor, the various transit authorities. So it's a highly political process. A lot of politics in it, a lot of emotion. What I have attempted in my role as a master planner is to bring about a consensus so we can bring into being something positive, something meaningful. Something that is not just business as usual, but the creation of a site with a meaningful memory, and a new neighborhood that speaks to the needs of 21st century New York. And that's what I'm doing. Of course the process is difficult, as everybody knows. But the results will be very impressive. And it's underway right now. I'm not a quitter. And I believe you have to do your best even within this complex and highly political situation.

**It's hard to escape the observation that your**

**role in the World Trade Center sites is less as an actually designer and more as a catalyst of various energies, commercial, civic, emotional and even spiritual.**

Well more than that! I've been asked to determine where buildings stand, how much space is accorded to each, where the open space is, how much open space there is. I'm very proud of the fact that almost half the site – 16 acres [6.5 hectares] – is public space. And I've devoted it to the memorial, to streets to reconnect Manhattan again, to create a neighborhood that is a lively space 24 hours a day, seven days a week. I've positioned all the buildings, and their programs as well, so we have the great slurry wall that was a central part of my project as part of the memorial museum and the light plaza illuminated on the specific day of the attacks, September 11. The Freedom Tower, 1,776ft [541m] high, very symbolic. All of the buildings are to be set down in a spiral formation symbolizing the Torch of Liberty. So many of the symbolic practical and spatial elements are absolutely in the works. Of course there are many different hands, many architects, many investors. There's a division of labor. But there is a unity of an idea and a unity of what this project will be when it is concluded.

**I've heard it said that Larry Silverstein [the developer in charge of the World Trade Center site] is, in his hard-nosed focus on getting his project built, a figure you might find in Hong Kong.**

Developers are there to make money and maximize their profit. They have their own agenda. And there's no difference between them wherever you go.

**How did your interest in literature and your work as a poet give you something compelling to give your clients? Architecture is a collaborative, public expression, but your poetry is so reflective and personal.**

We often forget that architecture is actually a matrix that brings together all of the liberal arts, all the free arts. Architecture is poetry, is tragedy, is comedy, is astronomy, is music, is geography, is mathematics. Not only

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a technique but a speculative field. The global tradition of architecture whether it's in Rome, in China, in Jerusalem – this is what, in a larger sense, interests me. And of course buildings don't come out of technical know-how, they come from a spiritual source. Those sources are varied and you have different expressions of me. Making a poem, painting, drawing, sculpture, writing a play, directing a play or an opera performance as I did in Germany, making stage sets and directing. And I think it enriches architecture. Architecture is about people and about life, about a world of culture. People very often think it is a very technical enterprise. But there is something abstract about architecture, similar to music, which is very closer to me, my heart and my experience.

**Leaving aside the immediate issue of your statements regarding the Olympics and Chinese policies [Libeskind said he would not build in China], what in a general sense is the role of the architect in deciding to accept**

**project inside societies that are evolving past repression toward something more enlightened?**

It's a complex question. Architecture has to give people a sense of freedom. It has to provide a stage for discourse; it's something that is by its very definition democratic because it's for everyone. It is in the realm of the public space so it's very important that architecture plays that role. It has a mission to bring people together, to foster equality. To make physical space a kind of transparent resource for communication, for the future, for creativity. So I think that's an important role for every society, especially a society that's under development.

**Does that mean you'll be considering future projects in mainland China?**

We follow very closely many developments and the opening up of various possibilities for all the people of China. It's a personal decision for each architect to make about when and where they work. It must be a long and hard decision.

**At the time the Empire State Building was being built, there were lynchings taking place in America.**

No society is perfect and societies do evolve. Each of us must decide for himself where he wants to work and under what conditions. It's a very personal thing.

**Your role as a celebrity makes many things possible, but it must have limitations as well.**

**Would you cherish anonymity sometimes?**

Celebrity is a very interesting phenomenon. It has made me very fortunate to take part in various projects, to be asked to do interesting things and open up new possibilities. All over the world I've been able to meet incredible people and learn incredible things. I hope to contribute something of lasting value, not just a passing fashion.

**That's quite similar to the Dalai Lama's answer to the same question.**

Is it? Well, I admire the Dalai Lama but I am not the Dalai Lama. ■

