

Determinism, Essentialism, Social Construction: Uncovering the Jew's Space

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In the discourse on Jewish-American experience two equally problematic techniques have emerged to articulate a shared cultural and spatial history. One, evident in almost any museum on Jewish-American culture, provides a narrative that explains how Jews emerged from the "shtetls" of Eastern Europe; traveled to the ghettos of New York City; and ultimately migrated to the suburbs of major urban centers, such as New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. This "determinist" discourse, which reached its radical and humorous conclusion with Mel Brook's images of "Jews in Space," is incapable of articulating the complexity of class difference, anti-assimilation efforts and other counter-determinist movements within Jewish-American culture. Among the numerous problems with determinism, many Jews did not "make it" and many different types of homes and Jewish communities existed simultaneously in the United States. Determinist narratives are complimented by equally problematic "essentialist" discourses. The essentialist discourse, the other dominant narrative of Jewish experience, attempts to articulate a sense of "Jewish space" that has remained with Jewish culture for Judaism's multi-millennial history. Cutting through historical and geographic difference, essentialism (in this case) attempts to get at the heart of a Jew's spatial presence. While evident in Jewish-American history, these narrative systems exist in almost all aspects of cultural representation, especially when involving diasporic cultures. While determinist representations of cultural spaces are worthy of in-depth examination, in this essay I wish to examine the problems of essentialist narratives in cultural representation. This essay examines some of the problems in the representations of Jewish identity within the writings and works of architects who claimed ownership to its exploration. In particular, I would like to examine how beginning in the early 1980s, Peter Eisenman and his critics (and here we must also mention the related explorations by Daniel Libeskind and Stanley Tigerman), re-examined "Jewishness" in architectural discourse and how their discourse enhanced certain essentialist positions – introduced much earlier and outside the discourses of Jewish self-representation.¹

Identity discourse in the nineties, especially in architecture, was fueled by a replacement of essentialism with social construction. In an essentialist position, "objective" labels for groups are developed through presumably scientific means. Biology and, in part, psychology are seen as the determinants of – in the case of our analysis – a "Jewish mind-set," a "Jewish sense of spatial experience" that emerges from the physical and psychological state of "Jewishness." A social construction model, on the other hand, might examine the context under which such terms are presented and see them as relative to the way groups are portrayed in a particular time, place and culture. Social constructionists might examine the way groups portray themselves and the way groups are portrayed in the variety of arenas that make up culture-television, radio, film, journalism, design, etc. . . . The distinctions between essentialism and social construction are significant: the practitioners of various identity movements in architecture proved how different groups are framed by socially constructed spatial and material practices. The architects Mark Robbins, Joel Sanders, Mabel Wilson and historians such as Dolores Hayden, have examined the "social construction" of architectural spaces.²

Until quite recently, both the identification of groups from outside and within the group being identified was primarily based on the essentialist model. Essentialist descriptions of a Jewish architecture and a Jewish space (in what we know as architecture history) emerged *outside* of Jewish self-identification, often to the detriment of Jews. Margeret Olin describes the late-19th Century French architectural historian George Perrot and his discovery of the "rootless," and "empty" qualities of Jewish architectural production evident in Solomon's Temple.³ More notorious, is the writing of Paul Schultze-Naumburg and Paul Bonatz who attempted to align inter-war modernism – exemplified by the Weissenhof-Siedlung – as having its roots in Palestine: Bonatz claimed the project was like "the suburb of Jerusalem." In other works Schultze-Naumburg again resorted to the "rootlessness" and "Jewish" nature of Modernist space and form.

In the 1980s, Peter Eisenman engaged this early discourse to control it from within as a form of self-identification in architecture, in a way similar to co-existent identity movements in art and literature. In numerous works, writings and interviews, Eisenman attempted to align a state of “Jewishness” with the formal qualities of “deconstructivist” and “post-structuralist” architecture to create a quasi-identity architecture. As the critic and historian Richard Joncas, taking his cues from Eisenman’s own descriptions, sums up the project. “He speaks of ‘deconstruction,’ ‘repression,’ ‘texts,’ and ‘between,’ and his architecture epitomizes ‘fragmentation,’ ‘incompleteness,’ and, most disturbing, ‘loss of center.’ He draws on psychoanalysis and literary theory to explain his designs, and ascribes his own experience as a Jew living in New York to the ever-present sense of ‘dislocation’ in his work. Like many twentieth century architects, Eisenman has invented a language which captures the angst of contemporary societies.”⁴

The associations described by Joncas became the dominant construction of Jewish identity in architecture in the 1990’s, particularly in the practices of Eisenman, and in part Daniel Libeskind, Stanley Tigerman, and Frank Gehry. Both Eisenman and Libeskind, two of the most active explorers of the role of Jewish identity in creating a progressive architecture, relied on notions of Jewishness – chaos, absence, wandering, un-homely domestic lives – to fuel formal explorations that grappled with the historic stereotypes.

These architects were not alone in claiming the stereotype as a tool to examine their identities. The queer movement and “Grrl” movements claimed labels such as dyke, butch and sissy that made them deviant, as terms to rally around. Eisenman, Libeskind, and Tigerman may not have been directly invoking these movements, but as participants in journals such as *October*, which published the work of these groups, they would have been aware of the emerging discourse.

Eisenman’s “public” (sic. “published”) exploration of his Jewish identity began in the early 1980’s in interviews with Leon Krier and Charles Jencks respectively, where he began to introduce his architectural theories as emerging from his history as a Jew. In an interview with Krier, Eisenman claimed that his aversion to classicism emerged from the fact that “as a Jew and an outsider I have never felt part of the classical world . . .”⁵

While Eisenman had been exploring the theme of architectural otherness much earlier, claiming its presence in architectural space from Palladio to Terragni, suddenly he was making an organic claim as to its origins as it related to some essential aspect of his identity. In his interview, of which this section was sub-titled, “The Jew and Outsider in Us,” Jencks probed the limits of Eisenman’s thinking on the subject of his Jewishness and his formal explorations.

Charles Jencks: It seems to me that you’re trying all the time to reconcile people to alienation and to present being a Jewish outsider as a universal state. You’re trying to take the homeless Jewish intellectual as Kant’s imperative and say that everybody should be, or is, a homeless Jewish intellectual, either openly admitting it like yourself, or inadvertently.

Peter Eisenman: I do not think it is inadvertent, but rather subconscious. I do not think you have to be a Jewish intellectual to be desperately lonely, an island of the unconscious. Architecture has repressed the individual unconscious by dealing only with consciousness in the physical environment that is the supposedly happy home. I think it is exactly in the home where the unhomely is, where the terror is alive – in the repression of the unconscious. What I am trying to suggest is that the alienated house makes us realize that we cannot be only conscious of the physical world, but rather of our own unconscious. Psychoanalysis is talking about this. Psychoanalysis is partly a Jewish phenomenon, understandably for a people who need to be in touch with their own psychological being. I would argue that we all have a bit of Jew in us; that the Jew is our unconscious; that’s why there is anti-Semitism, because we do not want to face our unconscious; we do not want to face our shadow; the Jew stands for that shadow. We do not want to face the issue of rootlessness. I am from New York, but I do not necessarily feel more at home here than in many other places. . . . But this is not necessarily a Jewish problem, but rather one of modern man in general.

Charles Jencks: Well, I would agree that to be in New York is to feel alienated and alone, and at the same time to be a Jew in New York is to feel everybody is alienated and alone, so that it’s a kind of universal New York experience. I think a certain amount of irony should creep into your view of yourself in that light. I mean you get a lot of Woody Allen films made on precisely that subject.⁶

The comparison between Allen and Eisenman is a surprisingly powerful one for examining the problems of essentialist thinking. In his writings, Sander Gilman has often described how stereotypes are reinforced from within members of a “labeled” group as a way to understand their geographic and cultural situation. Yet, as Gilman points out, because the label itself is not critically examined – in this case, within Eisenman’s work, or for that matter Jencks – other problems quickly ensue.⁷

For many contemporary thinkers that explore Jewish identity the images of an “unhomely” Jewish domestic experience that permeates the films of Allen and Jewish family television dramas are deeply problematic.⁸ “Annie Hall,” “Manhattan” and other works present paradigms that many Jewish thinkers grapple with and overcome. Yes, some homes are alienated, but Allen, and in this case, Eisenman, describe this unhomeliness as a universal experience that gets at “the Jew in all of us.” In numerous works, Eisenman and Allen align their discourses of

alienation and otherness with images of a "Jewish" domesticity. We realize the failures and problems of this essentialist model of thinking. Eisenman makes homes that are uprooted and chaotic because he is a Jew; Woody Allen shows these spaces in similar ways for similarly autobiographical reasons. In the end, does Jewish identity benefit from this discourse?

The problems are more exaggerated in a review in the New York Times written ten years after the Jencks and Eisenman interview. In "Architecture of Light and Rememberance" the architecture critic Herbert Muschamp explored the nature of Jewish space in the buildings designed by several progressive Jewish-American architects. His article, examining such prominent Jewish-American architects as Moshe Safdie, Richard Meier, Peter Eisenman and Frank Gehry, praised the "blazing talent of 20th-Century Jews," while exploring, from Louis Kahn to a list of the most prominent Jewish architects of today (some nine more names), how Jewish architects "lead the field."⁹

Muschamp attempts to arrive at the essence of a Jewish space, by examining the work of Jewish-American architects. Muschamp speculates whether there is a Jewish style in architecture – "I asked Moshe Safdie if there was anything explicitly Jewish about [the Skirball Center's] design;" and whether there is some deeper quality within Jewish space. Muschamp, drawing on the work of Norris Kelly Smith, concludes that Jewish thought should be seen as "dynamic, vigorous, passionate," as opposed to "classical" thought which is "static, moderate and harmonious." In the end of this investigation, Muschamp claims that the "open floor plan," "pinwheeling house" and "the impulse to flee the city," evident in Frank Lloyd Wright's work, are the modern master's own explorations of the Jewish mind.¹⁰

Perhaps most troubling is that this article associates emerging technologies with Jewish experience, and in this way establishes new stereotypes. In reference to Eisenman's aborted Jewish Museum for San Francisco – and its electronic facade (a commission now being developed by Daniel Libeskind¹¹) Muschamp claims, "Layers of meaning overlap here. One is the juxtaposition of two kinds of power: the industrial model, represented by the power station, and its displacement by the information economy. Another reflects San Francisco's leadership in communications technology. Finally the screen reflects the degree to which members of the information society have become electronic nomads, not unlike "wandering Jews," surfing the net for fragments of meaning and place."¹²

Articles, such as the one by Herbert Muschamp, inhibit the critical aspects of identity politics while claiming to represent and support identity issues. It is the notion of the Jew as wanderer, as other, and as an alien in his own domestic surroundings – introduced in the earliest architectural history – that must be countered. Architects interested in exploring their spatial identities, or architects interested in complicating the

old stereotypes, must re-invest in the emerging identity practices of the last ten years that are based on the social constructionist model.

What is most missing from explorations into Jewish space by American architects are the actual experiences within spaces created by and for Jewish-Americans. And this may include examinations of synagogues, but also neighborhoods, and painful and complicated spaces where Jews experienced both feelings of oppression and cultural re-birth, such as the bathhouse that emerged in the 19th-century sanitation movement. What is missing is an examination of Jewish experience that exists in specific times, spaces, and ecologies. I would argue that if one were to look at the actual spaces of Jewish cultural production that continue to exist, one could see their relationship to a myriad of contemporary issues such as feminist explorations, ecological explorations and other forms of material activism.

I would not want to end this essay without pointing to some possible new systems for examining Jewish identity and identity in general in architecture. In recent years, promising work by Jewish artists and architects has emerged that challenges the spatial tropes and essentialism of earlier work. Emerging primarily from feminist and ecological critiques (drawn from the work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and other post-structural thinkers) several artists, architects, and historians have explored their identities in complex ways that question some of the old stereotypes.

Among those invested in this exploration – Allen Wexler, Alexander Gorlin, Amy Landesberg, among others – the work of an artist, Rachel Schreiber, has examined the production of Jewish meaning specifically in socially constructed Jewish spaces. While one project cannot sum-up new ideas, it is worth examining one of her works in depth, in order to demonstrate the potential for critical possibilities in architecture.

In her project, "Life Blood," exhibited in 1994 at the Judah L. Magnes Museum in Berkeley, California, Rachel Schreiber explores the numerous roles that the mikvah, or ceremonial bath, and the space of the tent (or sukkah) may take in a new era of Jewish-American representation. The project includes a series of videos and images in a red sukkah-like space. "Life Blood" explores the ritualistic purpose of the mikvah, with Schreiber's personal history – her sexuality, Judaism and her choice to have an abortion. The project plays off the original meaning of the mikvah, particularly its use as a place for washing after menstruation, with the meaning Schreiber needs to instill in the space, constructing a new social space with new significance.

Schreiber, critical of the orthodoxy that the space represents for many Jewish-Americans, recites the chapter in Leviticus from the torah that describes the mikvah. An image of a woman

swimming – it could be anywhere – fills another video screen as the biblical text is read. As Schreiber discusses the original text, which has an excruciatingly sexist quality, she begins to realize that this space is open to interpretation. Through her experience of the mikvah, she claims a new significance for the space that relates to her having control over her body in secular American culture.

Actual historical spaces such as the mikvah may be a place for architects to re-examine Jewish spatial identity. The mikvah is a fascinating spatial object in this era of ecological awareness. The mikvah is predicated on the use of pure ground water in order to “purify” the man and woman alike (contrary to most assumptions, mikvahs are also used by men). The mikvah is also a fascinating space for discussion in an age of feminist activism. It is simultaneously a space associated with freedom and oppression – women congregate in them, but some believe, women are also unduly pressured to use them to “purify” themselves after each menstrual cycle.

It is in such an imagined, historical and “live” place, that Jewish identity in architecture can be debated and re-ground itself. It is in such a space that identity as a subject in architecture may produce the debate and complexity that were its instigation. In such a space one may build an identity that enables debates about the future of Jewish and non-Jewish spatial experiences alike.

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NOTES

¹ I do not want to suggest in this critique of “Jewishness” in neo-avant-garde architecture that the formulations of Eisenman and his critics were completely flawed. Any discussion of Judaism and architecture in academic architecture culture in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s was extremely brave.

Architecture, as has been mentioned many times, is a profession that has been dominated by white elites, at times, to the point of great exclusivity. The writings and statement of architects such as Eisenman, Tigerman and Gehry, were important affirmations of American-Jewry. Through the efforts of Eisenman, we were a group coming out of our own, unique Jewish closet. Nevertheless, I believe that the development of Jewish identity in architecture has ceased to evolve, becoming incomplete and stifling.

² Books such as *Stud*, edited by Joel Sanders, and *The Architecture of the Everyday*, edited by Deborah Berke and Steven Harris, provide a good introduction to the role identity politics may play in architecture.

³ “[E]lement] Hardesh [Greenberg] and Company,” Margaret Olin in *Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities*, Norman Kleeblatt editor, The Jewish Museum, Rutgers University Press, 1996, pg. 42

⁴ “Fixing a Hole”: A Commentary on the Architecture of Peter Eisenman, Richard Joncas, Stanford University website newsletter, <http://prelectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/eisenman/joncas.html>

⁵ Leon Krier as quoted by Charles Jencks in “Peter Eisenman: An Architectural Design Interview by Charles Jencks” in *Deconstruction in Architecture Architectural Design*, 1988, Academy Editions, Andreas C. Papadakis, editor, pg. 52. The original Krier/Eisenman interview was published in *Skyline*, February, 1983, pgs. 12-16.

⁶ “Peter Eisenman: An Architectural Design Interview by Charles Jencks” in *Deconstruction in Architecture Architectural Design*, 1988, Academy Editions, Andreas C. Papadakis, editor, pgs 52-53

⁷ *Jewish Self-Hatred*, Sander Gilman, Duke University Press, 1986

⁸ See *Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities*, Norman Kleeblatt editor, The Jewish Museum, Rutgers University Press, 1996. In particular see “The Mouse that Never Roars: Jewish Masculinity in American Television” pgs. 93-107

⁹ “Architecture of Light and Remembrance” *The New York Times*, Arts and Leisure Section, Sunday, December 15th, 1996

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ With a series of projects beginning with his Jewish Museum extension in Berlin, Daniel Libeskind was in some ways, capable of moving a discussion of Jewishness away from the Jewish American clichés of Eisenman and his critics. Yet Libeskind’s ideology was still close to Eisenman’s as he claimed, in his Jewish Museum in Berlin, that it was the “void” that could best represent Jewish experience in Berlin.

¹² “Architecture of Light and Remembrance” *The New York Times*, Arts and Leisure Section, Sunday, December 15th, 1996

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