Shulamit Reinharz: Good afternoon everyone. My name is Shulamit Reinharz. I’m a professor here at Brandeis University and in 1997 I founded the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute which is located in a very anonymous looking building which Daniel Libeskind would never have created, but which we did our best to improve, right next to the railroad tracks. It’s called the Epstein building and I invite all of you to come visit the building and visit the studio and gallery that we have. There’s a little poster, or postcard actually, on the back table which tells you about an exhibit that is being created there. Not just put up, but created by an artist in residence about a feminist reinterpretation of the Dybbuk and the Golem stories. So that sounds pretty interesting, doesn’t it? I can’t even imagine how she’s going to be doing this, but she is doing it. The artist is Jessica Cooper. So within the HBI, Hadassah-Brandeis Institute we have many projects. One of the projects is called the Project on Children, Families and the Holocaust, and it is headed by Joanna Michlic. Joanna, could you please stand up and take a bow, because it is she who created the program today.

[Applause]

SR: What Joanna does as the director of the Project on Children, Families and the Holocaust is try to add another perspective to our understanding of the Holocaust, and that is to focus on specific populations. Specifically: how did people parent during the Holocaust? What did mothers do? What did fathers do? How did children fair? We know the terrible fact that 1.5 million children were killed, but some children survived. And where did they go? Those who were orphans and what kind of testimony do we have from them and how valuable is that testimony. Well, these are all topics that Joanna Michlic studies. She alternates. One year she has a conference. We had one last year. Out of the Ashes. And this year and the alternating year there is a very special lecture and this very special lecture is one in which Daniel Libeskind’s ideas about his reinterpretation of the Holocaust and reinterpretation of human history into the language of architecture is going to be discussed. Now I have something very special to say to you. I learned very recently that Daniel Libeskind is very sick and was not able to be here. However. Don’t groan please. Very good. We have the next best thing. And it may be his completely equal and that is his wife, Nina Libeskind who’s here with us today.

[Applause]

SR: Nina Libeskind knows more about Daniel Libeskind than he knows about himself.

[Laughter]

SR: And that is actually documented in his books, where he and literally says that. He says “I thought I should do this and Nina says no.” He says “She was right.” It’s repeated. In fact, I thought maybe we shouldn’t have invited him in the first place, just [vote for Daniel]. While we’re speaking about books, I wanted to just mention two wonderful books. He has many
books. You will love this book, *Breaking Ground*, Daniel Libeskind’s autobiography. It’s a wonderful sweeping story of his work and another book, *Counterpoint*, which is a book that is filled with illustrations of his wonderful work. I recommend it to you highly. Before we continue the program today, with our very special guest, Nina Libeskind, who drove all the way from New York and after dinner with us is going to drive all the way back just to be with us and to fulfill the commitment and I am so grateful to you for doing that. Before we do that, I just want to give you a couple of housekeeping points, so that you know.

We’re going to end at 6:45 no matter what’s going on. It could be the middle of a sentence. We’re finishing at 6:45 and the reason is we promised Nina Libeskind that we would enable her to go at 6:45 to have dinner with us and then at 8:00 she’s driving to New York. She also asks that even though you will probably find everything that she says very interesting and personally engaging, that you not personally engage her as she is trying to leave to go get dinner. If you— so, you know, respect her need to fulfill this plan that we worked out. However, Joanna Michlic stand up again, is—who’s e-mail address is j—for Joanna m-i-c-h-l-i-c—jmichlic will take all of your queries that you would like to ask the Libeskinds and try to get it to them. So it’s not that you have no access, it’s just that right now it’s not the best time to do that.

So that is enough housekeeping I think. The food will remain there I think, the drinks for sure. We have a policeman outside in case anyone drinks too much. I asked what is he doing here and he explained that to me.

[Laughter]

SR: This is maybe a raucous event. Okay. So here we go. This event is cosponsored by the Hadassah-Brandeis institute which I explained to you and also the wonderful new Mandel Center for the Humanities here on campus.

[Applause]

SR: Yes. It’s wonderful. And also for the Center for German and European Studies. We’re just happy to have that kind of connection with people and with the Boston Society of Architects. There was a brief moment in my life that I was just completely enthralled with architecture and wondered why I had become a sociologist. That was when I finished designing the building that the HBI is in and I was elected to be part of the Boston Society of Architects as their completely ignorant member who could just give feedback or something and I served my term and I was just reinvented to do it again. So I’m really—this is a very special moment for me.

[Applause]

SR: And the person who’s going to be introducing our distinguished speaker is Gretchen Schneider who is part of the Boston Society of Architects and we’re so happy to partner with you. I’d like to now introduce her to you. With a background in American studies from Smith College and a Masters in Architecture from the Harvard Graduate School of Design, Gretchen Schneider’s work focuses on the evolving American city at the intersection of architecture and urban design. In addition to a traditional design practice, she pursues public art and education projects that examine and celebrate the way neighborhoods change over time. Recent projects include “Making Time Visible,” “Our Garden,” and “Shallow Waters,” all large scale
installations involving active public participation. Her work was recognized as one of five emerging voices in the inaugural Design Boston Biennial 2010.

Gretchen Schneider has taught architecture studios at many institutions including the University of Kentucky, RISD, Mt. Holyoke, Hampshire, Wentworth Institute of Technology, Columbia University and Smith College where she directed the undergraduate architecture program. I wish Fred Lawrence were here, we could suggest that we could create one here. Undergraduate architecture program from 2000-2006. She has been a regular columnist for Architecture Boston since 1998 where she is presently Associate Editor. Gretchen Schneider.

[Applause]

Gretchen Schneider: Thank you. Thank you, Professor Reinharz and special thanks to the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute for hosting this event. It’s an honor to be here this evening representing the Boston Society of Architects. The BSA was established in 1867 and today has more than 4,000 members. There are thousands more who regularly contribute to and engage with the BSA through publications and public programs. Ours is a diverse community, to be sure, yet we are bound together by a few key elements of vision and common values that transcend our professional interests. As an architect, I know my colleagues to be constructive, creative and empathetic caring for and ultimately working for the well being of those who inhabit the structures we design. Sometimes we know our clients and the contemporary users of our buildings. But we are impermanent creatures. Our work generally survives us and so our empathy, our creativity and our constructiveness must somehow extend to the generations that come after us when we’re gone. This is but one of the reasons that the ideas clustered in the title of tonight’s program architecture, life and death belong together as concepts. Internationally renowned architect Daniel Libeskind whose work we will be discussing tonight has said “Architecture should embody the invisible, the hopes and dreams in something we live in, we die in, and we remember.” What we remember is profoundly important. Tonight, Mr. Libeskind, a second generation Holocaust survivor, born in post war Poland was scheduled to discuss how memory has influenced his life, his world view, and his work. He can’t be here, as you know and we wish him a speedy recovery. We are fortunate, however, to have Nina Libeskind with us instead who can present his work and life through her eyes.

Nina Libeskind is Chief Operating Officer and a full partner at Studio Daniel Libeskind. She is responsible for the overall management, financial, administrative and resource control of the study. Prior to working with her husband at Studio Daniel Libeskind, she worked in the United States, Canada and Great Britain in areas of management, labor negotiations, research and politics.

Maybe many of us here today know Daniel Libeskind best for creating the Master Plan for the World Trade Center in New York, or for the Jewish Museum in Berlin. But cities around the globe have been enriched by the presence of his work which includes museums, concert halls, convention centers, universities, housing, hotels and residences. Each of his projects emerges from a core belief that buildings are crafted with perceptible human energy and that they address the greater context in which they are built. A scholar, a teacher, a writer, a designer, a philosopher, and a virtuoso pianist, Mr. Libeskind’s achievements, awards, and publications are too numerous to mention tonight. His influence on his peers and on the people whose lives are affected by his designs has yet to be fully measured. But we already know that it is large. This evening, Nina Libeskind will read from Daniel’s memoir of Breaking Ground.
After the reading, she and professor Reinharz will engage in a dialog about life, death and architecture. At the end of the discussion, Mrs. Libeskind will answer a short series of questions presented by members of the Boston Society of Architects. It’s my honor to present Nina Libeskind.

[Applause]

Nina Libeskind: Well, I have to admit I’m not often on this side of a microphone, but I’m, of course, delighted to be here today and I am deeply sorry and apologetic that Daniel couldn’t make it. He has been suffering for one week now almost total laryngitis and sinusitis. Now sinusitis you could probably bear with, but laryngitis he could not speak a word, so I’m here to of course talk about what I—what Daniel and I talk about all the time. We have been married forty two years. We are working together for twenty one, so I think I come by this honestly.

[Laughter]

NL: I hope I do so tonight. And I thought that it might be interesting for you after this extraordinary kind introduction if I read from some small passages from the book that Daniel wrote which will give you, I hope, a more personal insight into some of the things that he has been thinking about, dealing with, where he came from, who he is, how he comes to some of the things he comes up with, and then of course through the conversation we have. I assume we’ll explore that in a more profound way. So bear with me, I’m going to take a few minutes of your time and I will read from some of the passages which discuss his early life, his later life, and his life in New York.

“How do I know what to design? People often ask me that and I’m never quite sure how to answer because my approach is less than orthodox, and even I don’t always understand this process. Sometimes my thoughts are triggered by a piece of music or a poem or simply by the way light falls on a wall. Sometimes an idea comes to me from the light deep in my heart. I don’t concentrate solely on what a building will look like, I focus also on what it will feel like and as I do, my mind becomes occupied by a kaleidoscope of images. The smashing of Joseph Stalin’s portrait during the Polish uprising of 1956. The whining of my mother’s singer sewing machine as it chewed up a clump of textiles. The achingly sweet scent of oranges growing in the Israeli desert. My neighbors out on their stoops on a hot summer night in the Bronx, red faced and sweaty, longing for a breeze and arguing over politics. My parents, Jews living under the regime of Nazi Germany had separately fled Poland when the war began. After reaching the border of the Soviet Union, both were arrested by the soviets. They met and married in 1943 while in exile from their native Poland. After the war, they returned to my father’s hometown Łódź to find that nearly every relative, 85 people in all had been killed during the Holocaust. My parents, so fundamentally different in personality. My father outgoing and optimistic. My mother very private and wary. Both were smart, idealistic, young Jews. My father was a socialist, a member of the Jewish labor bund. My mother was a Zionist and an anarchist in spirit if not always by political affiliation. When the Nazi’s invaded Poland in 1939, Dora and Nachman both recognized that they would soon be targeted so both fled to the Soviet Union. It would be three years before they met and were married. I was born in Łódź, Poland the year after World War II ended. My earliest memories are all gray. Not because of age and distance, rather gray is the color of the memory themselves. The angry gray of the cold Northern
European winter. The dusty gray of industrial Łódź, overlaid with the grayness of communism. That’s the ultimate grayness. The grayness of everybody’s being the same, doing the same thing, sharing similarly low horizons. If you trust my childhood memories, there was no bright light in Łódź. I remember the grim courtyard of the turn of the century building in which I grew up. To call it a courtyard is perhaps to give it too much credit. There is space. There was a broken wall. And there was a wrought iron pole that jutted out from it five feet above the ground. I always dreamed I’d see a man on horseback flying through the gates and magically leap over that pole. Instead the women of the building threw their carpets on it and beat them so hard it’s a wonder any dust survived.

“We immigrated to Israel when I was eleven. Arrived in New York when I was thirteen. My obsessive drawing worried my mother Dora. She worked in a sweat shop, dying fur collars and sewing them onto coats. When she came home at the end of the day, her sweaty skin would be covered with strands of fur. And she would stink of dye chemicals which would—we would later blame for the cancer that riddled her body. So disgusted was she with her own stench and appearance that she would refuse to talk to anyone until she was showered. Then she would emerge, anew, a Jewish mother once again. Sleeves pulled back; ready to cook the evening meal in our apartment in the amalgamated clothing workers union housing cooperative in the Bronx. Carp had been a luxury in land-locked Łódź, but was more readily available here. And like many Jewish immigrants my mother would buy the fish alive at the market, carry it home in a plastic bag full of water and let it swim around in the bathtub until it was time to cook it for dinner. I remember how she would drag the bucking carp from the tub, and tear out its inner organs, pickle the herring, bake my father’s honey cake for desert, all the while debating literature, history, and philosophy with me. She would offer her wisdom with a sharp wit, and quotations from Spinoza, Nietzsche, recited spontaneously in a mixture of Yiddish, Polish and even English, which was difficult for her, but which she delighted in practicing. One late night, she poured us each a glass of tea and sat down across from me at the kitchen table where I was compulsively drawing. So you want to be an artist, she asked, if about to make a joke. But she was serious this time? You want to end up hungry in a garret somewhere, not enough money even to buy a pencil? This is the life you want for yourself? But, ‘Ma,’ I said. ‘There are successful artists. Look at Andy Warhol.’ ‘Warhol? For every Warhol there are a thousand penniless waiters. Be an architect. Architecture is a trade and an art form.’ And then she said something that should gladden the heart of every architect. ‘You can always do art in architecture but you can’t do architecture in art. This way you get two fish with the same hook’.

“I was named a competitor for the design of the World Trade Center site in October, 2002. And I was touring the site for the first time. When the bulk of the debris had been cleared after 9/11, what remained was a pit unimaginably large and difficult to comprehend. It was sixteen acres and as deep as seventy five feet. They called it the bathtub. Nina and I asked to go down into it. Why? Asked the Port Authority guide. None of the other architects had wanted to go. We didn’t know how to articulate our response but we felt it was necessary.

[End of Part 1; Beginning of Part 2]

“And so holding up cheap umbrellas against the rain and wearing borrowed rubber boots we headed down. We were at the bottom of the island of Manhattan and we could touch its moisture and coolness and feel its vulnerability and its strength. Where else in the city can you go so low? The catacombs of Rome maybe. We felt the whole city down there. The ashes of
those who had died. And the hopes of those who had survived. We felt we were in the presence of the sacred, and then we were up against it. The gigantic concrete wall at the western end of the pit. Later we would see stalagmites of ice bursting from fissures cracking under the pressure of the indomitable Hudson River, seeking through form on the other side. ‘What is this?’ I asked our host. ‘The Slurry wall’ he said. Slurry wall. In all my years of talking with engineers, I had never heard of such a phrase. It’s a dam. A foundation that is also a dam. Something that should never have been revealed. ‘If it goes,’ our host said, ‘the subways will flood and the whole city will be under water. An apocalypse. Yes.’ It loomed over us, appearing bigger than any building we’d ever seen and as we stood in that vast pit it felt almost infinite, the embodiment of everything. What collapses, what is resilient, the power of architecture, the power of the human spirit it was many colors at once, a patchwork overlapping patchwork because over the years, the wall has often had to be reinforced so that it would not collapse. It was haptic, tactile, pulsing, a multi layer text written in every single conceivable language. Looking up I could see people standing along the edge of what seemed like cliffs above, craning their necks to peer down into the site. That’s when I understood that what I had to do was design as a scheme that would draw up out of the New York City bedrock a ray of sunlight cut through the clouds. How did it reach so far down? I needed to make sure that sunlight was a part of the design as well. I thought of the little American flag pin my father wore in his lapel, long, long before 9/11. I thought about my first sighting of the city skyline as the boat I was on streamed into New York Harbor in 1959. I could see myself as a thirteen year old in a crunch of immigrants, staring up slack jawed at the statue of liberty. Call the studio, I told Nina while we were still in the pit. It was late back in Berlin where we had our headquarters, but our staff there was still hard at work. Drop everything that you are doing, I told them. I have a new plan.

“The greater Argentinean writer Jorge Louise Borges had an idea that if you were to track all the steps that a human being took from birth to death, you would be able to know the life that person led. I don’t think Borges was right. You would never know what the person had beheld. Where his gaze had drifted. You would never know had he been surprised or delighted by unexpected sites. What spectacles brought light to his eyes? You need to know this in order to understand fully what kind of life a person has lived. It is as Dora used to tell me, people are pretty much the same all around the world. When we look back in time and then at ourselves, we don’t see a huge change in human development. Slightly for the better, perhaps. A little bit. You have to believe.”

Thank you.

[Applause]

SR: If you don’t mind sitting over here and I’ll sit over here. Here’s your microphone. While you’re doing that—I think that’s a good idea—we have to make sure they’re on. Can you hear me? I guess it’s on. You have to speak loudly or maybe you can help us, sir.

So we’ve heard Nina read from Breaking Ground which was published in 2004. And in that book, he mentions Nina continuously. And the first time, just so we get it straight who Nina is, he writes “My wife, Nina. My love. My inspiration. My confidant. My partner. The mother of our three children.” And I can just see Nina saying, enough already. This is enough. But throughout the book he refers to her in that way. When he published Counterpoint, the second book I showed you in 2008 he dedicated the book to her and also to the passionate architects who worked on these projects and to the one and only Nina. I would like to tell you a little story
about how Daniel’s life and architectural work always seemed to intersect and maybe you can tell another story about that if you would like. He says—he was talking about work that he was doing or thinking of doing and in 1989, Nina and Daniel moved with the kids, their three children, to Berlin to try to get the Jewish Museum built. Everyone understands that building a building is not just a question of the design, but of the politics and I think he tried to leave all of the politics to you. Would you say that’s true?

NL: Yes.

SR: So that’s this is true partnership. He does the wonderful things and you do the other things.

[Laughter]

SR: So twelve years later our family was still in Berlin and one of the things that Daniel wrote is that he never spoke German in Germany. He knew the language but he refused to speak it. This was one of the ways that he was protesting. So we had on one particular day, two celebrations. Our daughters Bat Mitzvah and at very long last the official opening of the Jewish Museum of Berlin. Can you imagine that? Bat Mitzvah in the morning and party to open the building that you’ve worked on for twelve years in the evening. On September 8, Rachael was called to the Torah under the golden Moorish domes of the great Oranienburger Strasse Synagogue in Berlin and that night the museum was fitted with a concert and a dinner attended by all of Germany’s leaders. They threw parties for the next two days. On September 9 and September 10. And the next day, after twelve years of fitful legal wrangling and painstaking construction the fully installed Jewish Museum Berlin opens its doors to the public but just for a few hours because like so much around the world it shut down the day it opened because it was September 11, 2001, as with the Berlin Wall, no one had foreseen it happening in one day. A terrible new era had begun. So do you remember that day?

NL: Of course. Of course.

SR: And how did all of you react to this news that the museum had to shut down because some horrific event had occurred in New York City.

NL: I think it goes to show you that history never stops still. And of course both of us remember that day very well. It was the first day that we could say we didn’t have to speak any longer in theoretical terms, we didn’t have to explain any longer in historical terms, the museum was open to the public, now the public would make their own judgment about it and would hopefully enjoy it. And I guess it was two, two thirty in the afternoon and a young Portuguese architect who was working with us, ran in—he had been at a bank and the bank had television on and he said in very broken English, the plane has hit one of the World Trade Center buildings. I said, oh, it must be a terrible accident. How dreadful, and then we turned on our computers and the television and we were all completely horrified. There were quite a number of American architects who were working in our office and we took them back with us to our home in Berlin and we watched as news unfolded. Now the personal part of this story is we had had every member of our family from Israel and America and Canada and friends from all around the world coming for Rachael’s Bat Mitzvah. Of course they’re all leaving the day after the party
for the Jewish Museum opening and of course none of them could leave. So we had thirty five to forty people sleeping in our apartment and people coming having traveled and being turned back when they wouldn’t allow any planes to land in America. I think at that point Daniel looked at me and we had lived in Berlin for so many years. We had lived in Germany for almost fourteen years with one year off for good behavior in Los Angeles. And I think at that moment, and I’m not an American. I’m originally a Canadian. But at that moment, Daniel felt that he wanted to return. At that moment he said, I think his belief that as an American he wanted to come back to America and to make a contribution in some way. Neither of us had ever heard of the competition for Ground Zero. Of course were we to participate in it for more than a year, but it was something that he expressed to me and said, well, let’s see where our life takes us and that’s where life takes us.

SR: That’s exactly where it took you.

NL: Yes.

SR: There’s another very interesting story that I wanted to tell you and that is that Nina and Daniel, this might have been before your children were born, were living in Milan. You lived in many different places depending on where the work is—you’re kind of itinerant.

NL: I would say that’s an optimistic view of how we moved.

SR: You couldn’t pay the rent so you went to a cheaper country?

NL: No. You know how people talk about the wandering Jew? I married him. And it was until we moved to Berlin which was to realize the Jewish Museum, we moved—moving back for Ground Zero was our eighteenth move. And never once—never once was that move paid for. When we moved to Berlin it was indeed for the work. When we moved from Berlin to New York it was because of Ground Zero. Every other time it was because Daniel had a non-paying or insufficient paying job in academia, which he felt compelled to go to.

SR: Non-paying or insufficient paying job in academia. Does that ring true to everybody?

NL: I think that should have a real resonance in this hall.

SR: Yes.

NL: At any rate, it was we did move a couple of times for actual positions and jobs, but most of the time, it was just because he was a wandering Jew and he wanted to pursue something.

SR: I just wanted to follow up on that. One of the surprising things that I read in the Breaking Ground autobiography was that Daniel was fifty two years old when his first building was built. It was not as if he was building buildings since right out of architecture school. Which is a whole other story. My question is, how did he maintain his belief in himself that he would be able to actually realize a building. I mean if you don’t do something until fifty-two—
NL: That’s—

SR: That’s wrong?

NL: It’s not wrong. He followed a completely different path. When he finished Cooper Union which is a very good school. Full scholarship school in New York City. He was simply uninterested in working in an office. He had decided that offices were not what he liked and he—

SR: You mean the physical space of an office?

NL: The physical—no. I would call it the mental space of an office.

SR: The mental space of an office.

NL: It was not his thing. And because the only two people in the world—the only person in the world that cares more about money than the rich is the poor, when you don’t have it, you don’t lose it. So when we began this trip through life, he never had any interest to work in an office. That didn’t mean that he wasn’t interested in architecture and when he began to teach, he taught architecture and then after teaching in many very interesting schools he left to go to Milan to actually set up his own institute to teach. All the time he was doing certain architectural drawings. Now to the uneducated eye, like mine, you would never have thought that these were drawings of architecture because he was not interested in doing architecture without a client. And so these drawings were speculations on space. They were explorations into a sensibility about how to put things together and how geometry etc. And then he always said to me one day if I’m lucky I’ll win a competition. And indeed, that’s what happened. The first competition that he won for a real building was the Jewish Museum in Berlin which of course was not called that when he won the competition. That took thirteen years to construct. Before that he built the Phillips Nussbaum House in Osnabrück which was, indeed, the first building that he built. But it was that was his path. His path was never to apprentice himself to another architect. Not to work—and he had wonderful mentors. It wasn’t that he hadn’t had a fantastic education. Richard Meyer, Peter Eisenman, John Hader. These were incredibly wonderful architects and wonderful minds, but Daniel just didn’t follow that path and his path was to be fortunate enough to win that first competition and that’s how his architectural life began.

SR: But it almost didn’t happen.

NL: Right.

SR: I’m going to tell you about that. It’s really remarkable. This guy either had good luck or bad luck. I don’t know. He had good luck in finding you, that’s for sure.

NL: Thank you.

SR: And that’s actually a story to. Because what I read was that the two of you met in a summer camp.
NL: Yes.


NL: No.

SR: So how did you get there?

NL: This was a very rare camp. This was a camp for children of Holocaust survivors who spoke Yiddish, so not only was I not a child of Holocaust survivor, my father did indeed come from Eastern Europe, Poland, Russia, my mother was a second generation Canadian, and my father’s first language was indeed Yiddish and taught my mother Yiddish, but I didn’t speak a word and I am totally hopeless in all languages. But my best friend was a child of Holocaust and to this day is a child of Holocaust survivors and she said to me and this is a quote, come with me to the summer camp. You’ve never been to a summer camp in your life. Come with me. You’ll be in a summer camp. And there’s this guy I want you to meet.

SR: Was it Daniel?

NL: Wait.

SR: Okay. I can’t wait.

NL: Here’s the description of the guy she wanted me to meet. All he does is draw all day. Does that sound familiar? All he does is draw all day under the tree near the swimming pool. I said, Sandy, you know the guy sounds like a total nerd. All right, it wasn’t a nerd, because you didn’t use that language, but trust me, that’s what it sounded like.

SR: A [Schlemiel]?

NL: So I went down with Sandy and went to the summer camp and it was love at first sight. Absolutely love at first sight and we got married some years later and forty two years later we’re still there.

SR: How do you like that? A girlfriend of hers says you’re not a Holocaust survivor’s child. You don’t speak Yiddish, but come with me to the camp. I just really like that. That’s the good luck and that you were willing to look at a nerd is very nice.

[Laughter]

SR: Then listen to this. So he’s in Milan. And a letter arrived inviting him to participate in the competition for what became the Jewish Museum Berlin. However, it arrived months after it was sent. Not because the Germans didn’t send it correctly, but the Italians didn’t deliver it well.
NL: Still the case today, by the way.

SR: And it had this little stamp on it that said late delivery. Months. Months. Months. Because the letter was delayed for so long, the cutoff for the competition had been weeks before. And the entrants, that’s the bad luck—here’s the good luck. The entrants for the competition were to report for a general briefing in Berlin the next day. Oh. The next day. At noon. He writes, “It was like a bad joke. It’s like Kafka. I called the organizers to beg for an extension, but they rebuked me for not following the rules. That’s the Germans. I sank morosely into a chair, stared into space. I don’t know how long I sat there before Nina came home. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘we’ll just have to get them to understand.’ ‘There’s no point.’ I answered miserably. ‘They’re intractable.’ Nina plucked”—I love that word. “Plucked the letter from my hand and headed for the phone. At 11:59 the next day, I stood at the Berlin Museum with the scores of other candidates for our initial briefing.” This is a project that might not have ever happened if it had not been for your plucking and your pluck I think, both of those. So you went on to work in New York and tell us a little bit about the politicos behind the World Trade Center design?

NL: You know and this is interesting and I think one of the things that I find most interesting about having lived in so many different cultures and we really did live everywhere from Finland to England to Germany to America, all over America is that you learn a lot about yourself when you’re put into situations where you don’t know either the language or the politics or the network. Daniel is a far more I would say easy going person in that sense that I am. I take things, perhaps more personally. When we were in Germany, it was hard to navigate. There is no doubt. I don’t speak a word of German. Thankfully our three children do and they were constantly our translators. That was a different sensibility all together. And it taught me a lot about myself, how to deal with a particularly difficult time in a certain way. When I came to New York, I had not a clue what we were getting into. You’re talking to a young woman who grew up and lived in New York when we were first married. I was exactly twenty years of age. Then we come back to New York in the midst of the most incredible whirlpool and maelstrom of publicity, newspapers, politics, mayor, governor, senators, it—port authority. Lower Manhattan Development Corporation. Families of the victims. It was an extraordinary experience. Some of which I can say with great sincerity we handled well. Some of which I don’t think I handled particularly well, but at the end it was all about, and that was the most important thing to focus on, it was all about an idea how to make sure that idea—

[End of Part 2; Beginning of Part 3]

NL: And the integrity of that idea was pursued, what I believe and hope, as an ethical way of pursuing it, which meant that you had to be open-minded. You had to listen to the various competing forces. You had to be willing to compromise. A word which unfortunately many people consider a bad word, but Daniel certainly never did. And you had to navigate through all of those different political interests; some of those poignant, some of them expedient, some of them crass, some of them meaningful, but all of them extremely powerful. You had to navigate through all of those competing forces to make the project something which you can be proud of.
at the end. Or why do it? There were many people who thought that Daniel should step aside and let others take over.

SR: Why?

NL: Well, because he wasn’t getting all his way. That’s what I love about Daniel. He grew up in the Bronx. He’s never going to walk away from anything. He’s a tough cookie. As always I think a very intelligent way of looking at what was happening. He always compares in his own mind, the World Trade Center to being the conductor of an orchestra. A conductor doesn’t write the music. We didn’t write the [inaudible]. A conductor can’t play every instrument, whether it’s the drums or the strings or the winds. A conductor has to take all of those members of an orchestra and make sure they all play together with passion and meaning and an idea about a direction. So we always thought about himself as that. Others thought that he should be somebody who would say it would have to be like this or it has to be like that. That’s not the way realpolitik works. But in the end you have to be confident and that’s what Daniel was very careful to follow and believes in today that you have to be proud of what is going to happen. You have to believe that what has been done is something which is meaningful which has stuck to the fundamental idea and which is going to be a powerful and malleable experience for those people who come not us, who know about this experience, but twenty five years from now, the children who do not know about this experience firsthand.

That I can say to you with absolute confidence is what he believes to be the case. We’ve been down in the site six weeks ago. We’re going down to the site again. It is a truly astonishing, astonishing site. All of us have been frustrated, me probably more than you, about how slow it was, how difficult it was, but you know once the insurance case was put aside, the lawyers stepped into all kinds of—the only people who won in this entire process who made tons of money were the lawyers. They made tons of money. At the end, I think everybody from the Port Authority to the LMDC, to Daniel as master planner, to the architects who were involved, to the museum, to the visitor center, to the Memorial itself. I think everybody has felt that this is been a very profound and meaningful process and I think and believe that when it opens in on September 2011, ten years after the event.

SR: It’s going to open?

NL: A lot of it is going to open. The Freedom Tower will be topped out. The Memorial will be set. The museum will be partially accessed. It will open some months later. The [PAT] terminal has been functioning and the underground of the path terminal. You’ll be able to see it—it’s an astonishing structure. Absolutely mind blowing. The park is there. So there will be an enormous amount—Everybody will now have accessibility to that site and that alone will be, even with not every piece in place, it will be a profoundly moving experience.

SR: I’d like to focus a little on the word meaningful, which you used many times. That’s one of the special characteristics of Daniel’s work.

NL: Thank you.
SR: It’s beautiful. It’s surprising. It’s interesting. But it’s also meaningful. For example, in the Jewish Museum Berlin, it’s not only a museum which has display areas and a building which creates a certain response in people, but it has roads in it. It has paths in it that have different meanings. Could you explain that a little bit? Do you remember?

NL: Of course.

SR: I don’t want to put you on the spot.

NL: When Daniel started this competition for the Jewish Museum in Berlin, which was not its name. It started off as the Berlin Museum with the Jewish Museum Department.

SR: Right.

NL: And Daniel rebelled and it was a very particular German word. Daniel rebelled completely about compartmentalizing the Jewish contribution to the world of Berlin into a department.

SR: Also that department was responsible for the final solution.

NL: Right, so the word department was not something that Daniel wanted to have to focus on. So it was not a matter of making a museum with a Jewish room, which could have a door closed and you could lock it with a key. It was about taking a building and expressing through the architecture of that building and through the circulation of that building the experience of what had been lost and hopefully the experience of the future and what one should look forward to. It was a dynamic that he believed in. And so the most obvious solution. There was a Berlin Museum which was a Baroque building which was existing and the most obvious solution would have been to take the new building and the old building and connect it by a bridge on the ground or above the ground. Daniel said no. There is no connection between what happened in the Holocaust to the Jews of Berlin and Germany and this Baroque building. One must go into the underground of Berlin’s soil and go through the ground and emerge into these three rooms in order to understand what happened after the Enlightenment of German culture.

SR: So you have to go down?

NL: Yes. You enter the Baroque building. You descend a staircase some twenty two meters down and you descend into an underground passage. That underground passage has three roads or three large exhibition spaces which cross corridors. One leads to the Garden of Exile which is the garden where many people of course were exiled from Berlin. They fled. They were exiled. They had to leave Berlin.

SR: One way out.

NL: One way out through exile. One road leads to the Holocaust Void or the Holocaust Tower. It is a building which is actually outside of the Berlin Jewish Museum itself. It is twenty two meters high. It is concrete. And it has at the top a very thin sliver of light which is a window. That building you get to, that Holocaust Void, that Holocaust Tower you get to by the same path
or roadway. When you enter, the door slams shut. And you’re in a completely sealed space which is not heated in the winter and it’s not cooled in the summer. So its freezing cold in the winter and it’s extremely hot in the summer. And all you can hear when you’re in that space is people walking by. Are the voices of children in the playground across the street, for example. There’s a school. And you know you can’t get to it. And Daniel wanted to create a space where you know that this is what it felt like to be completely separated from the rest of the city. To hear the sounds of normal life around you, but not to be able to get to it. And the only light that comes into this space is the light of the sun. So sometimes it’s highly illuminated. When the sky is blue, which you can’t see the sky. When the sky is blue, and the sun is out, the place is actually quite illuminated. When it’s dark and rainy where, Berlin, I tell you has many dark and rainy days, it’s an extremely dark and somber and shadow filled space. And it’s—I have been there many times of course. What you realize is that even when children come running into this space, they stop dead in their tracks. Nobody talks. Total silence.

SR: And it’s a dead end?

NL: It’s a dead end.

SR: There’s no way out.

NL: It’s a dead end. There’s no way out except to turn around and go back. And then there is a road that leads you to the Stair of Continuity which is the stair that brings you to the top of the museum and that begins the route of the exhibitions itself. And then there are all kinds of other, what Daniel would call para-architectural ideas. And I’ll share them with you because I think it’s an interesting—how he approaches projects and this one is perhaps the most powerful of all. He designed windows. The windows were like slashes in the skin of the building. Those windows were derived from marriages that Daniel did of Germans and Jews that lived in that neighborhood. So [Schleiermacher] was married to—can’t remember now—anyway. He took very famous Jews and very famous Germans. And he “married” them. People who lived and worked in that neighborhood. Paul [Salong]. Schleiermacher. [Van Hagen] who was the start—the person who began the Goethe salons. And he plotted those names and then he plotted his own name, Libeskind. And then he plotted the names of all kinds of other people until he had about a thousand and he married those names. With lines. And then he took that matrix of lines and he flipped it and pushed it through the building. So those windows when you look through are actually the addresses of those who lived and worked in that area before those tragic times. That had never been done before, to my knowledge. It has never been done again. Then he took the idea of the void. Now Germans are very pragmatic people. They’re very precise people and they’re very pragmatic people. To get a space built and it was not an empty space. It’s called the void. Very particular word in German. To have a void running through the zigzag of a museum, straight through twenty two meters high, six meters wide, to have it running straight through a building without any exhibitions in it is an extraordinary feat. The first things the Germans wanted to do was to put the building together. Why would you have a void in the middle of the building? Why wouldn’t you just put two parts of this building together? It was a big fight. Of course, Daniel won. It’s called an idea. Across the void are sixty four bridges. Those bridges traverse the void and it takes you from one side of the Jewish Museum to the other side of the Jewish Museum. On one side you would see what life was like before the Holocaust.
On the other side you would see what remained after the Holocaust and of course there was very little that remained. So the final void was a void called the Memory Void. That is a void where Daniel was attempting to complete the opera of Alfred—help me here—

SR: We’ll help you as you go along.

NL: The great Jewish German composer—not Mendelssohn.

SR: Mahler.

NL: No. I’ll think of it in a second. Moses and Aaron. He wrote Moses and Aaron.

SR: Schoenberg.

NL: Schoenberg. Da. And he had written Moses and Aaron and he never managed to finish the libretto of the third act. He had been driven from Germany, fled Germany, landed in Los Angeles and just never finished the last act. Daniel felt that somehow he should be able to finish that act within the museum. It was, after all, part of the idea of the void, and so he created a space which would resonate with the footsteps of those who traversed that space and it would indeed by the end of Moses and Aaron’s opera which was Moses asking God for the truth. ‘Where, oh Lord, is the truth?’ And of course there is no answer. He never answered that question. So that was another para-architectural part of the museum.

SR: Isn’t there also a Magen David a Jewish star?

NL: That was what—that was part of the window configuration which was right on the street. We’ve been very fortunate. We’ve done now a first addition to the museum which is in the Baroque courtyard of the Berlin Museum and now happily, there is so much demand for visitors in the museum that we’re building another building across the street which will house what they call the Jewish Berlin Academy which will be primarily used for research and study and lectures, etc. So it has been an extraordinary beginning.

SR: Isn’t it true, also that there’s no front door?

NL: There’s no front door.

SR: Why is there no front door?

NL: Well, I’ll tell you another story which was the scariest moment in my life besides the fact that the Parliament or the Senate of Berlin canceled the building, but we did get it back. When Daniel won the competition, we came to Berlin. And we decided to stay in Berlin. At that time, the parties had changed from what was the conservatives to the social democrats and greens. Every time a new senator of building came in. They were very powerful people. More powerful than the mayor, perhaps, they would always scrap the projects that had been done before. As architects, you all know what this means. You come in. You have a great building. Everything is fine. New administration. Tank the building. Two days before we got a letter from the
senator, Steven Holh. A very wonderful architect was sitting next to the senator from building. Senator from building invited him to a press conference. Steven Holh thought this was fantastic and building canceled the American Library in Berlin standing next to Steven Holh. I thought this was chutzpah beyond belief. We get the same letter—


NL: We got a letter from the same senator. Please come. I want to meet you and I want to see all 185 other entries for this competition.

Voices: Oh no.

NL: Daniel says great. This is fantastic. I said, “Daniel, this is not fantastic.”

[Laughter]

NL: He said, “Nina, what are you worried about? We won the competition.” I said, “Sit down.” We went to the [Cransler] Café. I promise you this is true. And I said, “Daniel, what are you going to say to the Senator?” “I’m going to tell him how happy I am to be here in Berlin.” I said, this is not what he’s going to hear. We had a little conversation. The senator walks in. He’s kind of a Napoleonic character and I’m not kidding. His name is Senator Nagle which by the way means senator Nail. And he was tough as a nail, really. Walks in. And we have 185 entries for the competition and Daniel was standing there and he comes up to Daniel and points his finger at Daniel and says, “Mr. Libeskind, what big building have you done before this building?” The world’s worst question.

SR: Did he know the answer?

NL: He had no answer.

SR: Did the senator--?

NL: I had no idea why he was asking, but you can probably be sure that he probably knew so Daniel said, uh, he asked again. Mr. Libeskind, what big building have you done to warrant that you can do this building in this city?

No answer. Third time, senator is really getting close and close, so he’s pointing the finger. Jabbing right here. Mr. Libeskind, what have you done before that would make you eligible to do this museum now? And Daniel looked at him and said, Senator, if Berlin’s history is based on what it’s done in its past, it will have no future. So he stopped.

SR: That’s Chutzpah.

NL: He was kind of interested. The guy—he wasn’t defensive. Never built anything before. Exactly. Never done a thing. So he said, okay, show me where’s the front door. Which is what I’m getting at. Where’s the front door of this building. Daniel looked at him and he said, for you, senator, there is no front door to this building. I thought, oh, my god, this is it. So the
senator looked at Daniel and now he was really intrigued. Because I don’t think he had met anyone who answered like that, and it’s hard to believe he answered like that. And the senator then said, to him, what do you mean? So he said, senator, for you, and for every other German in this city as well as the Jews who still remain, of which there are only 3,000 at that time, you have to enter the Baroque building. You have to go into your history from the Enlightenment into this new building and then you have to go down these roads, and then you will find the entrance to Jewish history. So he stopped and he turned around and took out his hand, he shook out his hand, he shook Daniels hand and said, welcome to Berlin, Mr. Libeskind.

[Applause]

NL: His story.

SR: I didn’t know the way it was going to end.

NL: Neither did we, but we had the Champagne ready. I’ll tell you.

SR: So I think we’ve really heard about what meaningful means, but meaningful is also a word you use to describe the World Trade Center Ground Zero master plan. I can think of three meaningful things and maybe you could add to that. Meaningful thing number one, the tower with the spirals or the swerve on top is 1776 feet high. And it was very interesting that some person challenged him and said, “What you are referring to the Declaration of Independence for? It’s not relevant.” Of course it’s very relevant. A second thing is perhaps that there is some light that falls which only allows light to get in at the exact moment at the World Trade Center was hit. That’s the second meaningful thing. That I picked up, and the third is that there’s a garden on top of some building which is supposed to be the growth in the future. Are there other meaningful aspects that you can share with us?

NL: Well—

SR: So we can understand the building as he intended it.

NL: The master plan. I think the slurry wall is probably one of the most important and it is incredible when I saw it recently. And the slurry wall is the only true remnant of what was there, although they have now brought back—there is a staircase which they have now installed in the museum from one of the World Trade Center Towers, but the slurry wall itself is an incredible—it’s exactly as it is. It is a wall that bleeds.


[End of Part 3; Beginning of Part 4]
NL: It’s the wall that holds back the waters of the Hudson and when it’s cold it bleeds and it freezes and it’s always dripping water. And so it’s a very—it stood. It stood that attack which was an incredible miracle. It was a miracle.

SR: If it had not—

NL: It would have flooded all the subways of New York.

SR: Many more people would have died.

NL: It was the apocalypse, really. That’s a really meaningful piece and people will be able to go there and see it and look at it.

SR: Could I just ask you. Is it vulnerable?

NL: It is now not. Obviously now—the amount of security in this site is incredible. I mean it’s—

SR: If this is such a point of vulnerability in Lower Manhattan—

NL: The whole site is has been with such redundant—engineering redundancy. I have learned more about security than I ever wanted to learn in my life, but one learns a lot about redundancy of engineering, redundancy of security so that’s one very meaningful thing. The buildings as you know, Manhattan is a grid. The buildings are in fact in a spire that go from the lowest building and it rises up to the 1776. That is part of what Daniel felt when he encircled and turned around the Statue of Liberty when he came by boat as an immigrant. What you are referring to is the wedge of light. That’s a public space which was never asked for in the competition but which Daniel believed to be very important and that’s a light that will fall between the time when the first plane hit which was 8:28 and the second tower fell which was 10:46 and those two times will be marked by the shadows that fall within that space. And I think that was probably one of the most achingly poignant moments of that day—what a beautiful, beautiful September day that was with blue sky and sunshine and that was just you know that’s of course makes it even harder. And that’s something that both of us remembered and Daniel wanted to bring down—even when the subway goes through during those hours there will be sunlight that strikes that platform.

SR: And we use the image on the invitation today.

NL: Then there is the Memorial itself, which I think Daniel’s greatest concern was that there, should be nothing built on the Memorial and that there, should be enough public space to enable people to really feel that it was there space. He often said to me, my mom and dad will never work in those office buildings. They will never have an opportunity unless my father is a cleaner and my mother is a cleaner. They were factory workers when they came from Poland. What would they do on this site? How do they see this site? How do they get a chance to access this site as working people? So that was something he thought about a lot. It was something that was always important. So half the site is public space, whether it’s the wedge of light, whether it’s
the Memorial itself. Half—eight of those sixteen acres. The density of that site is so enormous. Eight of the sixteen acres is in fact public space. The waterfalls which was very important. Which he felt that the water—this may sound banal but for him it wasn’t and I don’t think it is. The water was not only obviously a very always a very kind of enlivening but deep thing when you see waterfalls. It’s something which you like to see but it screens the noise of one of the most highly trafficked areas of Manhattan. So when you’re standing by the waterfalls which in fact are part of the footprints themselves, that’s very helpful in making the space something where people can have some thoughts to themselves, can meditate. Can see the names and understand how many people perished in that place. There are these different configurations which I think will have a really big impact on the site itself.

SR: Thank you so much. One of the activities that we engaged in before this conversation was to ask the architects if they had questions.

NL: Right.

SR: And give them the opportunity to ask—I have here twenty seven questions and we’ll start with number one.

NL: In six seconds or less.

SR: I will try to choose one that’s on a slightly different topic which is, this is what they wrote: Much has been written about your interest; Daniel’s interest in cultural sustainability which I think is a wonderful term. Cultural sustainability. Both in terms of New York and the events that occurred there and in Berlin and in the Felix Nussbaum Museum and on and on and on. But you have not said so much about environmental sustainability? That’s a whole new set of requirements that all architects have to deal with. How did you deal with environmental sustainability issues in the construction of either let’s say the World Trade Center Master Plan or the Jewish Museum Berlin?

NL: Those are two polls.

SR: I know.

NL: We have written and I do know something about this. We have written the highest level of sustainability guidelines ever for the city of New York or the state of New York for Ground Zero.

SR: You have written them?

NL: Yes. As master planner you have to write lots of things and one of the things we have written is the guidelines for sustainable development and sustainability for each of these buildings. And now personally, I’m not an architect. You have to be a complete idiot—excuse me for saying so—if you don’t know that this is the most and one of the most important things to be talking about now as an architect. But architecture is not only about the techniques of sustainability. It’s not only about the buzz word and it’s not only about voltaic cells and recycled
water and lead gold or lead silver or lead platinum. It’s not only about the energy you consume and it’s not only about all the things that as an architect or as an engineer one should or must address in every building and in every site that you work on. I think that what Daniel tries to do as well is to talk about doing buildings that people love. It’s a word not often used. If people love a building, they take care of it. They believe in it. It becomes a building which is part of their own life, their own belief, their own aspirations, and their own view of their city. And that’s also sustainable. That’s also the way sustainability has an impact on everybody’s life. So if you do something which is sustainable—I think the Jewish Museum is a very good example. I give you a very small example. We did the first green roof ever done in Berlin.

SR: Green roof?

NL: Green roof. This was back then. The Germans, once again, extremely pragmatic, said, don’t be ridiculous. It will leak. We said, no it won’t leak, yes it will leak. No it won’t leak. I said, okay let’s put four centimeters of water and leave it there for a year so it can freeze. So it can drip. And we did. It didn’t leak. They allowed us to do a green roof. But—

SR: Could you define green roof?

NL: It’s green. It’s got grass.

SR: So it’s dirt and soil—

NL: And grass and the whole thing. Now what is interesting is everyone was convinced that the building would have a lot of graffiti on it. And so they made us put a special coating, anti-graffiti coating on a certain height of the building on the zinc. Daniel built it on zinc. This is a building that I’m grateful to say is beloved. It’s a sustainable building. There has never been one piece of graffiti, ever, since we built that building. If people love a building and it becomes part of who they are then it’s also sustainable. And that’s what I think is equally important to the technical challenges and the technical answers that we have to sustainability today.

SR: That’s a wonderful idea. Love it and it will remain. So here’s another question. Do you ever work on retrofitting existing buildings? And what are the challenges and opportunities for working on structures that already exist?

NL: Well, we have done. That’s a very interesting question. Most people have an idea that architects love to have empty sites and build whatever they want. Sometimes we do that but a lot of the times Daniel has worked on what he would call the urban fabric, so the Jewish Museum, the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco is behind an old power station and the walls itself we had to preserve. We had—the—Daniel preserved the skylight. He preserved the old industrial ironwork and the old industrial architecture of the inside, but we implanted in that power station an absolutely 21st century museum. The most controversial—and it will be opening in October—building that we’re doing is the Military History Museum of Germany in Dresden. A project that you might find odd for us to do.

SR: Do we want to go there?
NL: Oh, yeah. It’s a very interesting project and it’s interesting because Daniel entered it and he did what nobody else did. It is a huge armory which is a U-shape. Every other competitor built behind the walls in the U-shape in the courtyard. Daniel said, no. This building used to be a Saxon Museum, of Military History. Then it used to be a Nazi Museum. Then it used to be a Soviet Museum. Then it used to be the East German Museum of Military History. And then the Germany’s combined and Daniel said there is nothing to be ashamed of a military in a united Germany. I will not build behind these old walls. We’re going to show the world that this is a new Germany with a democracy. With a military which should not be embarrassed by what it has done. So he literally made a wedge and cut straight through the walls of that armory. We are doing the entire refurbishment. It’s the largest museum in all of Germany. We’re doing the entire refurbishment of the old building to show the history of the armaments of Germany. It is a museum where every single solitary soldier has to go through to get educated. It’s kind of like a West Point. They have to go to this museum to be educated. It’s not a museum of war. It is a museum of history. In order to make clear that war is not just a happy and relaxed stroll through a museum of military history, Daniel cut straight through and the vector that emerges, and it’s a gigantic wedge that emerges in front of the walls of this museum is a triangulation of the points used by the British to bomb Dresden. You might remember that Dresden was bombed to smithereens. Nothing remained. So when you stand in that space, you are standing in a space looking out at the newly rebuilt Dresden but of course there will be the historical panel that will inform you as to what remained after the war. So it is—that’s the first thing that it becomes a place where you are yourself looking at the greatest panorama of history which is a city and what remained before and after the war.

That wedge disrupts very consciously the progress of the visitor as they go through the history of the army and the military of Germany and it disrupts it by a structure which is implanted straight through that military history and through that structure there will be exhibits that talk about why war? Children in war? Questions about war? What is Germany’s involvement in Afghanistan? Iraq? What does it really mean today? It’s a very conscious disruption. Now the jury were the generals. And when people said, why are you doing this—they said because he got it. He got the idea that we have a new responsibility in the democracy, in the democratic Germany and that’s a refurbishment of an old building that has a very distinct and I think powerful change within the sensibility of that building.

SR: That’s a fantastic story. I don’t think that Daniel Libeskind could be represented by anyone that is a better storyteller and better--

[End of Recording]