

ARTUR ZAGUŁA\*

## IMAGINATION OR REASON – RATIONAL AND INTUITIVE ISSUES IN THE WORK OF DANIEL LIBESKIND

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### WYOBRAŻNIA CZY ROZUM – WĄTKI RACJONALNE I INTUICYJNE W TWÓRCZOŚCI DANIELA LIBESKINDA

#### Abstract

The article presents, on the basis of the work of Daniel Libeskind, the interrelations of two thinking orders in architectural design – rational and intuitive. The architect recalled how he came up with the idea of expanding the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto: *I had one of those elusive intuitions that are born complete in a moment, and I quickly sketched a few lines and shapes on napkins at the restaurant where I was eating.* This one sentence indicates how much of a role he ascribes to the creative process of intuition. Expressive forms of buildings designed by Libeskind clearly indicate that the architect's intention was to appeal not only to the order of reason, but also to feelings, even metaphysical. On the basis of the Toronto Museum, the relationships between the rational and non-rational factor in the work of the architect was indicated.

*Keywords: deconstructivism, Libeskind, intuition, transgression*

#### Streszczenie

W tekście przedstawiono, na podstawie twórczości Daniela Libeskinda, przenikanie się dwóch porządków myślenia w projektowaniu architektonicznym – racjonalnego i intuicyjnego. Architekt wspominał, jak wpadł na pomysł rozbudowy Królewskiego Muzeum Ontario w Toronto: *Oświecenie twórcze nawiedziło mnie w restauracji podczas posiłku, więc szybko naszkicowałem kilka kształtów na serwetkach.* Już to jedno zdanie wskazuje, jak dużą rolę przypisuje on w procesie twórczym intuicji. Ekspresyjne formy budynków zaprojektowanych przez Libeskinda w sposób wyraźny pokazują, że zamierzeniem architekta było odwołanie się nie tylko do porządku rozumu, ale też do uczuć, nawet o charakterze metafizycznym. Na podstawie realizacji muzeum w Toronto wskazano relacje między czynnikiem racjonalnym a pozarozumowym w twórczości architekta.

*Słowa kluczowe: dekonstruktywizm, Libeskind, intuicja, transgresja*

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This article presents, the interrelation of two thinking orders in architectural design – rational and intuitive on the basis of the work of Daniel Libeskind. The expressive forms of buildings designed by Libeskind clearly indicate that the architect's intention was to appeal not only to the order of reason, but also to the feelings, even metaphysical. This opinion is confirmed by the architect himself, starting his professional autobiography in the following way: *But a great building, like a great work of literature or poetry or music can tell the story of the human soul. It can make us see the world in a wholly new way, change it forever. Buildings – contrary to popular thought – are not inanimate objects. They live, breathe, they, like humans, have outside and an inside, a body and a soul*<sup>1</sup>.

On many occasions the architect describes how his projects are created, linking the design process with a sudden flash, intuitive feelings and actions rather than a purely rational approach. In the aforementioned book he describes this kind of situation: *Several years ago I entered a competition for an extension to the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. I had one of those elusive intuitions that are born complete in a moment, and I quickly sketched a few lines and shapes on napkins at the restaurant where I was eating. (...) Yet despite my sketches' apparent roughness, compared with the other entries, the building under construction today bears a nearly exact resemblance to them, which indicates that sketches were as demonstrative of the design and intention of the building as any technical drawing could be*<sup>2</sup>. Similar relations refer to projects of the Denver Art Museum or the Imperial War Museum North in Manchester. It is clear, from these descriptions, that, for Libeskind, in the design process, the primary idea, inspiration, personal experience, subjective feeling about the place and its history is much more important than a rational analysis of e.g. the function of the building. This does not mean that the reason is irrelevant. After the first flash of the imagination, the reason organizes the design concept, keeps it in the architectural and constructional logic.

Daniel Libeskind is classified to a group of architects known as deconstructivists. The name of the group indicates their ambivalent attitude towards a rational approach to reality. On the one hand, it refers to constructivism, which was a "style" in the art of the twentieth century, for which the rational approach to art was the basis. On the other hand, it evokes the word deconstruction, which we associate with demolition, destruction. These concepts create a name indicating the intrinsically contradictory nature of activity of the deconstructivist architects. On the one hand, they refer to modernism as one of the important reference points. On the other, they deconstruct the concepts and values created by modernity. For example, they criticise the principle of pure functionality of modernist architecture and its so-called neutral nature, especially in terms of its impact on the user and viewer. Libeskind wrote: *Since modernism, buildings have been designed in order to show the world a neutral character, resistant to expression. The aim was to create objective constructions rather than subjective ones. But the truth is as follows: there is no such building, no matter how neutral it could be, which still remains neutral after being built. Le Corbusier might have insisted on the fact that "the building is a machine for living in", but even you live in a perfectly minimalist, perfectly white loft, it expresses the personality of the tenant, which means it is not a neutral space anymore. (...) indifference is not an advantage and neutrality is not a virtue.*

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<sup>1</sup> D. Libeskind, *Przełom: przygody w życiu i architekturze*, tr. M. Zawadka, Wydawnictwo Naukowo-Techniczne, Warszawa 2008, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 14.

*I cannot see any place for neutral, frigid, rectangular buildings in the world, because the world enriches itself by love, faith and passion, not indifference and neutrality*<sup>3</sup>.

Another modern myth that deconstructivists, Libeskind in particular, want to overthrow is that architecture can “solve human problems”. It was one of the main beliefs of the modernists, Le Corbusier among them, included in the book *Towards a New Architecture*. They believed that a rational approach to architecture would lead to solving social problems. They hold the view that architecture, like industry, could create tools for the mass “production” of buildings and thus avoid the revolution<sup>4</sup>. Deconstructivists, although fully aware of the entanglement of architecture in social and political contexts, believe that this kind of thinking is unauthorized<sup>5</sup>. Thus, also in this aspect, they question the claim that a rational approach can satisfy human needs.

They rather advocate the claim that the world is so complicated that it is virtually impossible to grasp. Its changeability and fluidity make the intellect insufficient as a tool of cognition. It seems that they are close to the attitude of Henri Bergson, who claimed that only intuition is able to help a man in cognition of reality. The world is undergoing constant change, and human life appears as a variable sequence of actions and experiences. Not without reason, Libeskind mentions Bergson’s book *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, as one of the most important for him<sup>6</sup>. In this complex and fluid world, architecture is not only an intellectual task to solve, but a complicated process in which reason and intuition participate together. *The magic of architecture – writes Libeskind – cannot be appropriated by any singular operation because it is always already floating, progressing, rising, flying, breathing. Whatever the problems – political, tectonic, linguistic – that architecture exposes, one thing I know is that engaging in architecture is exciting only because of the intensity and passion of its call*<sup>7</sup>.

This approach makes the architecture designed by Libeskind so expressive and subjective<sup>8</sup>, and in the process of its creation, intellect and intuition have to support each other. It is worth mentioning here the role of drawing, which he believes is important in design. It reveals some new possibilities, tests potential solutions and allows formal experiments. It is a creative act in which the intuition and imagination somehow precede the intellect, and the ultimate result is a material object. Referring to his own drawing cycle, Micromegas Libeskind wrote: *Drawing is not mere invention; its efficacy is not drawn from its own unlimited recourses of liberty. It is a state of experience in which the “other” is revealed through mechanisms that provoke and support objective accomplishments and the one who draws upon them. Being neither pure registration nor pure creation, these drawings come to resemble an explication or a reading of a pre-given text both generous and inexhaustible. I am interested in the profound relation that exists between the intuition of geometric structure as it manifests itself in a pre-objective sphere*

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 94, 96.

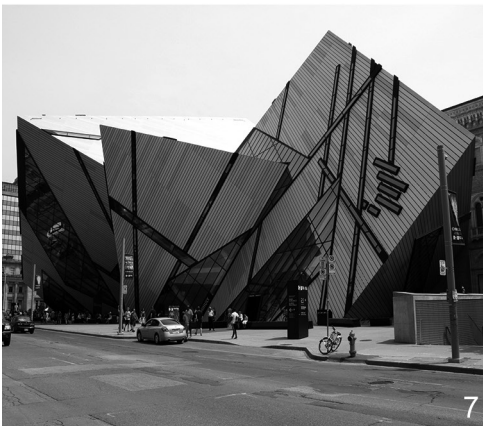
<sup>4</sup> Le Corbusier, *W stronę architektury*, Fundacja Centrum Architektury, Warszawa 2012, p. 307.

<sup>5</sup> D. Libeskind, *The Space of Encounter*, Universe Publishing, New York 2000, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 17. Libeskind writes: *In one of my favourite books, Two sources of Morality and Religion, Henri Bergson comes to the conclusion that the universe, to paraphrase loosely, is a machine for producing gods. It seems to me that architecture is, in fact, the machine that produces the universe that produces the gods.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> About emotional aspect of Libeskind output: Ewa Węclawowicz-Gyurkovich, *Architektura emocji*, Wiadomości Konserwatorskie, nr 34, Warszawa 2013, pp. 63–71.



*of experience and the possibility of formalization that tries to overtake it in the objective realm. In fact, these seemingly exclusive attitudes polarize the movement of imagination and give an impression of discontinuity, when in reality they are but different and reciprocal moments – alternative viewpoints – of the same fundamental, ontological necessity*<sup>9</sup>.

As can be concluded from the above quotations, interrelation and mutual support of intuition and reason is the basis of the design process in the work of Libeskind. These issues will be found by analyzing the extension of the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto.

Firstly, what will be analyzed are the ideas that inspired the project from the investor's point of view. This may explain why Daniel Libeskind's office was chosen for the project. The initiator of this project was the ROM director William Thorsell. His intention was not only to expand the exhibition and commercial space, but above all to create an unusual object that would show the new face of the city of Toronto. Among the Toronto elite, there was a growing awareness that the city needed new, architecturally significant buildings to overcome the image of the average American metropolis. The city, previously associated with nineteenth-century buildings and boring skyscrapers from the sixties, was to change into a modern, dynamic space, enriched with unusual buildings. That 's why Frank Gehry was employed to rebuild the Art Gallery of Ontario, and William Alsop was asked to design the new Ontario College of Art and Design headquarters. The extension of the Royal Ontario Museum was to fit in with this policy of transformation of Toronto's image<sup>10</sup>.

Financial benefits were supposed to be an additional investment stimulus. Despite the huge costs, director Thorsell expected a significant increase in the number of visitors and, at the same time, a similar effect to Bilbao after the construction of the Guggenheim Museum by Frank Gehry<sup>11</sup>. Interestingly, one of the reasons why Daniel Libeskind was chosen was his (and perhaps mainly his wife's) ability to raise funds for the implementation of the project. Don Gillmor wrote about these aspects: *Thorsell also wanted a design that would attract money (...) Part of the written criteria of the commission was the architect's willingness to participate in fundraising. When the field was winnowed to three finalists, the selection committee discussed the promotional verve and fund-raising qualities of each candidate. It was noted that the Italian architect, Bruno, has difficulties with English, a handicap for fundraising. Thom is a pleasant, low-key, West Coast architect. But Libeskind has kinetic language skills, a speed rap that routinely incorporates references as diverse as Greek etymology and the Marx brothers. His design was the most dramatic, and he had the political skills to work the room, to bring magic to that grey town*<sup>12</sup>.

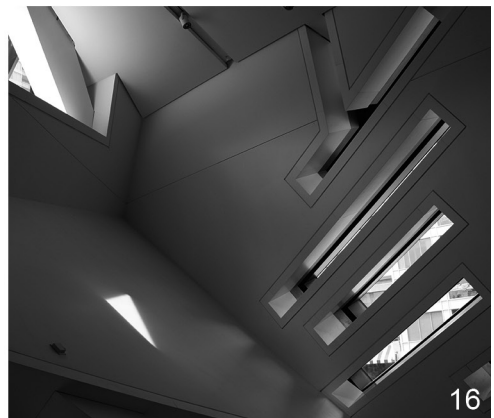
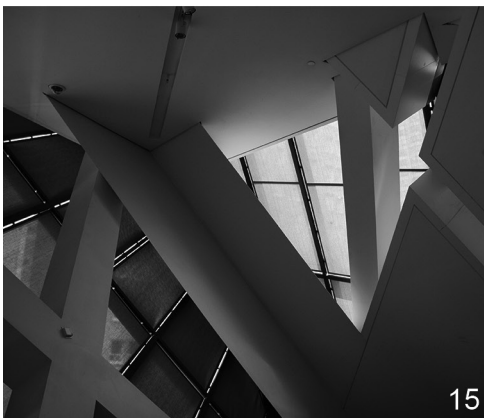
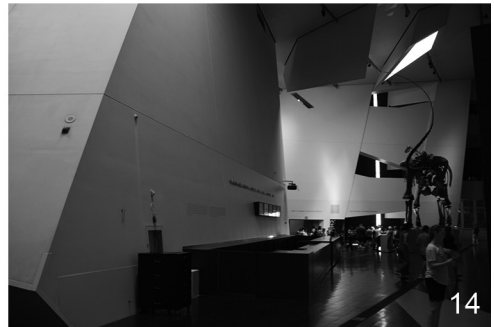
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<sup>9</sup> D. Libeskind, *The Space of Encounter*, *op.cit.*, p. 84.

<sup>10</sup> D. Gillmor, *The Crystal Method. Iconic architecture à la Daniel Libeskind has produced some extraordinary buildings. But what kinds of cities will it create?* The Walrus, 12.02.2004, <https://thewalrus.ca/the-crystal-method/> (26.06.2018).

<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, Toronto did not repeat the "Bilbao effect", many articles have been written about the financial problems of the museum, including G. McArthur, K. Taylor, J. Mc Nish, *Crystal Myths: Behind the ROM's philanthropic façade*, *The Globe and Mail*, 27.03.2015, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/toronto/crystal-myths-behind-the-roms-philanthropic-facade/article23653032/> (28.06.2018).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.



As a result, the extremely controversial building has been raised, dividing the inhabitants of Toronto into ardent supporters and opponents<sup>13</sup>. From the messages of Libeskind himself we know, that the form of the building was inspired by crystals – minerals from the museum’s collections. This is probably the only connection of the object with the surroundings, because as usual with deconstructivists and Libeskind, it remains without any relation to urban context. The museum building, which has been extended, dates from the beginning of the 20th century, and represented the style of 19th-century historicism. Rich in architectural detail and sculptural decoration, it has been violently “attacked” and partially absorbed by an aggressive architectural form. His “barbaric”<sup>14</sup> force declares war on the values represented by the traditional building. Symbolically, it also means a paradigm shift regarding not only the museum building, but also the entire concept of the museum. The previous static vision of the museum, in which the viewer is guided in an orderly manner by museum curators, goes into oblivion. The contemporary viewer is attacked, both by the form of the building and the arrangement of the exhibition, receiving a rather chaotic but visually appealing message. The rational approach of the previous era, in which order, chronology, understanding of the work and its context, striving for objective truth, is replaced by a subjective interpretation based on experiences and free feelings. The viewer is to be surprised, delighted, and paralysed. It is a concept that meets the society of the spectacle, in which form dominates the content, in which experiencing the world dominates its understanding.

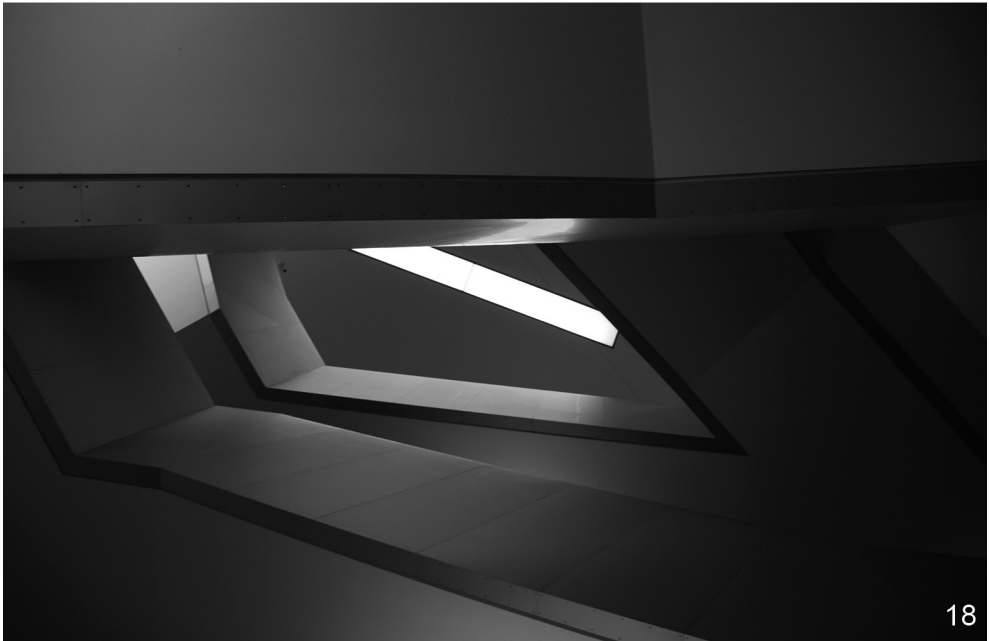
This kind of museum architecture represents the extension of the Royal Ontario Museum. As always with Libeskind, the outside form is an aggressive composition consist of sharp, angular masses, with walls as if denying gravity. All of it is accompanied by irregularly shaped windows that are freely embedded in the façades of the building. Perception of the building from the outside does not allow for its understanding, determining the number of storeys, prediction of internal communication. The form is completely arbitrary and is characterized by aesthetic transgression. This effect is strengthened by an act of absorption of the old building by a new one. It is visible from the street level, in places where new forms “fall” onto the walls of an earlier building. From a bird’s eye view, it can be seen that the extension does not take up only the previous courtyard, but stretches over the historical wings. This reveals the desire to dominate and conviction that the old must be exceeded by the new.

This sense of aesthetic transgression also accompanies the visitor inside the building. He is forced to deal with two extremely different expositions. An old, structured exhibition placed in the traditional interiors and a new space designed by Libeskind, in which the traditional divisions of the interior do not exist. Moving from room to room, linear in nature, is replaced by a freely placed arrangement in the space, in which the visiting path is determined by the visitors themselves. It is worth mentioning that while in the old part the architecture is almost invisible, making the viewer focus on the exhibited objects, the new building participates in the perception of objects, sometimes even in an overly aggressive manner. The sense

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<sup>13</sup> D. Viola, *Revisiting Canada’s Most Hated Building*, Azure, 2.06.2017, <https://www.azuremagazine.com/article/rom-crystal-10-years-later/> (access 28.06.2018)

<sup>14</sup> In that way responded to the similar form used in the extension of the Museum of Military History in Dresden Ewa Węclawowicz-Gyurkovich, *op.cit.*, p. 70.





of alienation of both realities, makes the visitors ask themselves whether these two visions are possible to reconcile.

It is also legitimate whether human reason, until now organizing human actions, may claim to explain reality. It seems that many buildings and concepts of deconstructivists, including Libeskind, undermine this belief. Peter Eisenman writes: "*Anxiety exists*", which is supposed to characterise by the mood created in a situation in which many established systems of values have been undermined, and above all the reason and its metaphysical foundations<sup>15</sup>. Cezary Waś, referring to this problem, states: *The crisis of reason and the suspension of belief in it becomes a new faith, attractive in the profession. The tension of consciousness creates a new symbolism, and it becomes the basis of thinking and acting. Demythologizing discoveries, lack of source and destiny become dogmas of the new faith*<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> P. Eisenman, *Misreading*, [in:] *idem, Houses of Cards*, New York 1987, p. 174, after: C. Waś, *Architektura a dekonstrukcja. Przypadek Petera Eisenmana i Bernarda Tschumiego*, Instytut Historii Sztuki Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław 2015, p. 47.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 41.