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**LONDON COLLEGE OF FASHION  
11TH JUNE 2009**

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After Libeskind  
A Museum for the 21st Century

Rootstein Hopkins Gallery, London College of Fashion  
Thursday 11th June 2009

**After Libeskind**

**A Museum for the 21st Century**

Professorial Platform Lecture, University of the Arts London

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Published in England June 2009

ISBN 978-1-906908-05-8

## After Libeskind – A Museum for the 21st Century

“There are days when no one should rely unduly on his competence. Strength lies in improvisation. All decisive blows are struck left-handed.”  
– from *One Way Street*, Walter Benjamin

What I want to explore in this lecture are three related themes that seem to me to be common to all museums that subscribe to the Western tradition of what ought to constitute such an institution. And then examine how just three institutions that I have found particularly interesting over several visits have interrogated these themes in order to represent themselves to their visitors and to adapt to changing cultural conditions in the widest sense of that vexed word. So socially, economically, artistically etc. My three themes are the idea of what the exterior of a museum tells us, then the way in which it negotiates its internal space and thirdly the particular purpose to which it puts the collections within that space. And the three institutions I want to talk about are The Wallace Collection here in London, the Hong Kong Museum of Art and the Jewish Museum in Berlin.

What curious choices you may say. What does the home of the Laughing Cavalier have in common with a chronological collection of Chinese ceramics with Daniel Libeskind's zinc clad masterpiece? If you will permit me to be flippant for a moment, one of the delights of Post-modernity is to be able to ignore the Forsterian injunction to 'only connect'. Walter Benjamin again, “The typical work of modern scholarship is intended to be read like a catalogue. But when shall we actually write books like catalogues?”<sup>1</sup> Now nearly seventy years after Benjamin's death in

that definitively post-modern locale, a frontier – in his case the frontier between France and Spain – the book that aspires to be a succession of independent sections like Benjamin's *One Way Street*, can at least be a lecture. So read my three chosen museums as separate entries in a catalogue.

Too often when we think about museums we are in through the front door and deep amongst the exhibits before we've taken our proper bearings on the institution itself. What about the outside? It's no accident that the British Museum adopts a Neoclassical Style and that the exterior what was once the South Kensington Museum, and which is now the inner enclosed courtyard of the V&A, was a polychrome riot of terracotta, brick and mosaic in the Victorian Italian manner. Nor for that matter that when Henry Cole's institution went respectable and became the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1899 Aston Webb produced a façade that is grandly classically Imperial in style with serried ranks of carved intellectuals and artistic worthies in their niches. This was the age of great men, and sometimes women too, recently memorialised in the founding of the National Portrait Gallery. The architectural styles of both great museums reflect their aspirations at particular moments within British culture. So at it's simplest the British Museum is essentially an Enlightenment project, a temple to knowledge and the Victoria and Albert in it's final form became the museum of an empire that collected everything from Tippoo's tiger to Raphael's great Cartoons to oil sketches by Constable to the plaster cast of Michelangelo's David. A permanent version of what had been on display at the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park in 1851. Examples of best design practice that would give an aesthetic and so hopefully a competitive edge to British manufactures for an empire that was literally big business.

## THE WALLACE COLLECTION

The story that the front of Hertford House facing south into Manchester Square tells us is that of a domestic house, however grand it may be with its pilasters reaching up to the balustraded roof. Thomas Ambler's Day and Night lodges may have been removed when Hertford House became the Wallace Collection but this is still unmistakably a grand private mansion with a short curved drive sweeping up to the portecochere. The brickwork above the stone face ground floor reinforces the idea of the domestic. We are invited to enter not so much as museum as a home. Indeed that has always been the particular charm of the Wallace collection. It is a little like visiting a favourite country house. Not Chatsworth or Holkham Hall or Blenheim or Castle Howard, but Montacute or Firle Place or Compton Wynates which are not really about power but a particular way of living. As with these houses when we walk up the short driveway from Manchester Square we are flattered into believing that we shall be at home here. We will be guests and not mere visitors. There may even be a visitors book for us to sign.



Once through the imposing front door, the collection is anything but like the contents of our own homes. As you walk up the main staircase you pass the only work of art singled out in Lady Wallace's bequest to the nation, a French iron and brass work balustrade dating from the second decade of the eighteenth century. It was made for the Hôtel de Nevers which was intended to be the new Banque Royale in Paris – hence the royal emblems of sunflowers and interlaced Ls (for Louis XV). The horns of plenty overflowing with coins and bank notes may hint at monetary



reform, but they also whisper conspicuous consumption. This is not home as we know it. Certainly not with that pair of paintings by Boucher on the landing, *The Rising* and *The Setting of the Sun*. Is that our host and his – well – companion? Louis XV as Apollo and Madame Pompadour as the nymph Tethys. Who would disagree with the Stephen Duffy and Jo Hedley in the introduction to the catalogue raisonnée of the Wallace Collection's pictures that the character of this collection is 'leisured opulence seasoned with exquisite sensuality'.<sup>2</sup>

On the West side of the house it all depends what you mean by 'exquisite sensuality' as you walk into the smaller rooms on the first floor that were once Sir Richard and Lady Wallace's own quarters, through what was one Lady Wallace's bedroom and boudoir and Wallace's dressing room and bathroom. Yet there's no doubting the 'leisured opulence' albeit on

a rather domestic scale of the rooms on the other side of the house, the east drawing room and two so-called state rooms which lead into the sumptuous oval drawing room. Walk through the Small Drawing Room and you come to the Large Drawing Room, gloriously restored, its walls hung with bottle green figured silk and home to eighteenth century furniture by André Charles Boulle and his followers. The grandest of furniture, so grand that it all but overwhelms the delicious French bronzes in the room and the Dutch paintings. No wonder that *The Toper* in Ferdinand Bols portrait stares at us so angrily. Paintings have been displaced by furniture, the gallery has become a room with furniture for living.



As Stephen Duffy and Jo Hedley have written, "The display in the Wallace Collection has always been a compromise between, on the one hand the need to give the visitor the opportunity to see each picture in the best possible light unhindered by any other object, and on the other, the equal responsibility to display the other works of art and to convey the domestic origins of the house and the family character of the Collection."<sup>3</sup>



That it seems to me is the fruitful tension that makes the Wallace Collection such a stimulating experience. It's not that furniture by some of the very greatest ébonistes to work for the late Bourbons sits alongside fine paintings, that a fifteenth century German saddle made of wood, stag horn, birch bark, leather and wax carved, incised, stained and polished is just a room away from Watteau's exquisite *The Halt during the Chase* so suggesting a continuing debate about the frontier between art and design. It's that other frontier, the place where the private intersects with the public that runs right through Hertford House, a site where one things becomes another.

This is the top lit gallery on the first floor at the back of Hertford House that Ambler designed for Sir Richard Wallace to show off his Old Master paintings as it was in about 1890 when the family still lived in the house. And here it is three years after the Collection was opened to the public. While the furniture has been rearranged and there are now ropes about it to keep the public at bay, the display philosophy is the same, to show

furniture and small bronzes alongside the pictures. A kind of public gallery that shows off privately collected works both before and after the Wallace Collection officially entered the public domain.

### THE HONG KONG MUSEUM OF MODERN ART



If the Wallace Collection invites us to reflect in quite complex ways on a current preoccupation with the frontiers between public and private – the domestic, or the internal and its antonym the external, my second museum begs another pressing contemporary cultural question ‘What do we mean by home’. Or in terms of a museum, how do it represent within its acquisitions and exhibition policies the place that it regards as its home. It’s the Hong Kong Museum of Art in Tsim Sha Tsui and part of a cultural complex at the bottom of Kowloon facing Hong Kong Island on the other side of Victoria Harbour and which includes two

theatres and a concert hall as well as the museum. And you may feel that the setting of the complex is somewhat more remarkable than the architecture. Indeed I have been unable to discover an architectural signature for any of the buildings in the complex. Officials in the museum will tell you that it must have been designed within the Public Works department of the former Urban Council for Hong Kong.



Notice that there are two ways of entering this museum. You can either walk the stairs, or ride an elevator. It’s considerate planning by a civic minded architect that allows access for the less mobile of course, although the plastic sheeted tunnel way over the elevator is less than pleasing aesthetically. But this double entry also seems to me emblematic of what we are going to find once we enter the building. It’s an institution that is trying to fulfil two quite separate ambitions, to be a museum of Chinese antiquities and to collect and exhibit contemporary art made in Hong Kong. And two separate identities are on display: Hong Kong as China and Hong Kong as Hong Kong.

Ascribing a specific cultural identity to Hong Kong is problematic. The preface to a recent report on future cultural provision in the city tries to square the Hong Kong/China cultural circle. First it sets out what makes the former British colony different. “The name Hong Kong (literally fragrant harbour) already suggests the importance of the sea and the harbour to the city: it was the sea that gave early residents their livelihood, and it was the harbour that sustained the city’s flourishing trade and business. In the realm of culture, Hong Kong should also be a harbour which embraces pluralism. Hence we believe ‘Diversity with Identity’ aptly depicts Hong Kong’s unique cultural position.”<sup>4</sup> Then some sixteen pages on we read “The [Culture and Heritage] commission believes that Hong Kong’s cultural identity should start from local culture, be grounded in Chinese cultural traditions, and possess a global vision.”<sup>5</sup>



The structure of this sentence suggests an onward and upwards progress: Hong Kong today and then the world, via China of course! But the three verbs hint at a different and a more confused story. How can a ‘cultural identity’ that starts ‘from a local culture’ be simultaneously grounded in other ‘cultural traditions’? And while no one can quarrel with a Hong Kong that raises its cultural eyes to the global horizon, does ‘possess’ also mean that it should seize that vision? Or is the implication that Hong Kong will own it in some way? And to be frank what is ‘a global vision’?

Within the Commission’s statement I detect a deep uncertainty about Hong Kong’s cultural identity. Is it something that is intrinsic to the place itself or should it be Chinese. Is it about home or abroad? Does it look west to Europe, East to the United States, South to the Southern Pacific or North to Beijing? And while Hong Kong is a Special Administrative Region, part of, but also different from China we should not be blind to the fact that since the Revolution of 1948 the Beijing Government have expected culture in its widest sense to march in step with the Party’s own ideological position. Dissent is permitted, in the visual arts, the cinema and literature, but it can seem like a licensed dissent.

What makes the Hong Kong Museum of Art so interesting is that its exhibitions and acquisitions policies seem to mirror these overlapping uncertainties. Indeed they are a thread that runs through the public thoughts of many of the Museum’s senior staff. Eve Tam, who has been a Curator at the museum since 2006 writes “A [museum] collection is not only a pool of accidentally gathered objects; it is cultural evidence of the community’s personality and its collective identity. In this regard, a museum collection is a crucial domain preserving a place’s tangible

and cultural traditions. It enables history to take shape by connection memories and knowledge – distilled in different times – for sustainable development. A museum curator, as custodian of this significant cultural province, acts as gatekeeper at the crossroads of the past and present.” And she continues. “Apart from accountability to a public institution’s traditions, a museum curator also shoulders public responsibilities and must answer to public liabilities.”<sup>6</sup> But what exactly are these ‘public responsibilities’ and ‘public liabilities’ and who is the ‘public’ that the curator is liable and responsible to?

Tang Hoi Chiu who is the Chief Curator provides a kind of an answer to these questions when he writes, “we would not forget that Hong Kong is part of China and to bring significant exhibition of Chinese painting calligraphy and cultural relics to showcase the myriad Chinese culture and enhance the public’s appreciation of these treasures is our mandatory mission and strategy.”<sup>7</sup> The museum has a responsibility to underpin the cultural links between China and Hong Kong. So is the public that it is liable to the ‘people’ who express their will through the Party?

All institutions develop or borrow an ideology. And museums are no different. Ideologies can, of course, be restricting and they can liberate, but they are never neutral. I am not for a moment suggesting that the Hong Kong Museum of Art is a latter day version of the Klement Gottwald Museum in Prague, which was designed to glorify one of the nastiest villains of to seize power in Stalin’s new Russian Empire. But its purpose would seem to be to present the common ‘cultural traditions’ shared by China and Hong Kong, to sinicise Hong Kong visitors. And that’s what you find on display in the Galleries on the four floors of the

East Wing or Cube of the Museum. Gold and gold artefacts on the first floor, in the gallery above a special exhibition devoted to the work of Ju Chao and Ju Lian, two nineteenth century Guangdong painters when I was there last December, then on the next floor ceramics and at the top what the Museum Plan calls Chinese Fine Art.

The ceramic display is modest in comparison to what you can see elsewhere, East and West, but I am less concerned with the quality of the work on show than the narrative it tells. We might begin with the opening sentence in the official brochure that you collect as you walk into the galleries. “Ceramics are the most enduring of all types of art in China ... Ceramics are not just one of China’s signature industries, but one of the vehicles by which the world first encountered China”.<sup>8</sup> The implication is clear, there is something essentially Chinese about ceramics. The introduction in English continues “... this exhibition intends to provide an overview of Chinese ceramics from ancient times to the recent past, where traditional techniques still endured, by showcasing priceless examples of the Museum’s ceramics collection as well as works from Guangdong artists of the twentieth century”.

So the display is chronological, privileging the idea of change and development, but standing somewhat aloof from the idea of progress, or at least matching it with the idea of a continuing dialogue between tradition and present practice. So when we reach the end of the exhibition we are invited to admire recent work as a version of what has gone before and as holding faith with the past and its masters. At one level it’s hard not to read this gallery as a lesson in Chinese civics. Respect for tradition, respect for the masters and their ways, seems properly Confucian. An impression that is reinforced by the guide to

gallery which pays tribute to those individuals like Dr. K. S. Lo who have donated their collections to the Museum and then continues, "we are also indebted to the National Museum of China, Beijing (formerly the National Museum of Chinese History) for their selection of sixty ceramics, dating from the Western Han to late Qing dynasty, which they donated in the Spring of 1991."<sup>9</sup> This donation was doubtless made in the spirit of comradely cooperation, sister institutions sharing their treasures, but was there an educational price exacted for the gift, maybe not explicit but understood by both parties, that these sixty ceramics would be a chapter in a larger narrative about Chineseness. Remember that the Museum is answerable to a branch of the Hong Kong Government, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department. Here's a twentieth century museum driven by a very particular ideological ambition.

### **THE JEWISH MUSEUM, BERLIN**

In a sense Berlin was where this lecture began ten years ago on a cold winter day. I was writing and presenting a documentary for BBC Radio 3 about the choreographer William Forsythe who was destabilising so many received ideas about classical dance in work he was making then for Ballett Frankfurt. In the course of an interview he mentioned that a recent work had taken its cue from an architectural drawing by the Polish-American architect Daniel Libeskind. My producer decided that we should try and talk to Libeskind, who was then working on the final stages of the new Jewish Museum he had designed for Berlin. The building had already been reported extensively in the press and not simply because of the design of the building. Ten years earlier there had been an international row when the Berlin Senate voted to abandon the project. It was only after international pressure from Europe, Israel and

the United States that Berlin's parliament overruled their upper house. I think that it's fair to say that there was a hush of expectation about this new building well beyond the architectural and the museum fraternities.

We finished our interview and Daniel Libeskind asked when our plane for London left. We had time, he said; and he drove us over to Friedrichstadt. The museum building was finished, but we could only walk around the outside. I remember just two things from the first visit.



Firstly, Daniel Libeskind explaining that the zigzag contours of the building and the lightning-flash windows took their architectural cue from a deconstructed Star of David and from a grid of imaginary lines that he had drawn on a map of the city which connected the site of



the museum to the streets where some of Berlin's most distinguished cultural figures had lived – Heinrich von Kleist, Heinrich Heine, Mies van der Rohe, Rahel Varnhagen, Walter Benjamin and Arnold Schoenberg. As Libeskind himself has written, "The windows are the physical manifestation of a matrix of connections pervading the site. These 'cuts' are the actual topographical lines joining addresses of Germans and Jews immediately around the site and radiating outwards. The windows are the 'writing of the addresses by the walls of the museum itself.'" <sup>10</sup>

Libeskind has also said that he regards the Museum as the final act of Schoenberg's uncompleted opera *Moses und Aron*. Other points of cultural reference constructed into the building include the memorial book which is housed in the Federal Archives in Koblenz and dedicated to those who were murdered in the Nazi concentration camps. And it was the sixty sections of Walter Benjamin's book *One Way Street* that decided the number of sections that comprise the museum's zigzag form. Indeed there's a passage in *One Way Street* that perhaps matches the conception of the building as well as any other. In the section called *Chinese Curios* Benjamin writes, "There are days when no one should rely unduly on his competence. Strength lies in improvisation. All decisive blows are struck left-handed."<sup>11</sup>

Later on that first visit walking on my own along the front of the museum I found railway lines embedded in the pavement and driveway that ended abruptly at what might have been a service entrance to the building. A simple but powerful evocation of the fate of millions of Jews during the Holocaust, it seemed to me. The railway that went East and stopped, at the death camps.



It was clear that this was a museum the meaning of which was rooted in the building itself, literally so when you reflect on the street grid of German and Jewish cultural figures and the fractured Star of David, which function 'like an invisible matrix'. And there are other less obvious meanings to be discerned in Libeskind's zinc clad structure and the areas he has designed around it.

If you know your history you will remember that the Jewish museum is built in a place that was once the border between East and West Berlin, that the infamous Wall that divided the city and indeed the world wasn't so far off. So this is literally *grenzenland*, the frontier that is neither one thing nor the other. A site of confusing and confused identities – appropriate then as a place to memorialise men and women and children who through a thousand years were Jewish, then Jewish and German, then German and Jewish and Jewish again when the Nazis demonised and then murdered those who were unable to escape.

Libeskind has said that the building itself is structured around "two lines of thinking, organization and relationship. One is a straight line, but broken into many fragments, the other is a tortuous line, but continuing indefinitely."<sup>12</sup> And a frontier is two lines on the ground with a no-mans land between them. Indeed the name that Libeskind gave this whole project was *Between the Lines*. As Ken Gorbey, a former Project Director for the museum, has said, "The museum talks of a relationship among neighbours, the cultural border between Jewish and non-Jewish citizens. It is a place that examines the way this border has opened and closed, disappeared and reappeared over time. The Museum looks at the movements and exchanges across this border and at the frictions in this relationship, which have been proven to be calamitous at times."<sup>13</sup>

## ENDNOTES

- 1 *One Way Street*, Walter Benjamin, Trans Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, Verso London and New York 2006
- 2 *The Wallace Collection's Pictures: A Complete Catalogue*, Stephen Duffy and Jo Hedley, Unicorn Press and Lindsay Fine Art 2004 ISBN 0 906290 38 4. P xvii
- 3 Ibid P xxxviii
- 4 *Diversity With Identity/Evolution With Innovation*, Culture and Heritage Commission Consultation Paper 2002, Culture and Heritage Commission Secretariat, Hong Kong November 2001 Preface Pii
- 5 Ibid, Para 2.11, P16
- 6 *Open Door Dialogue*, A Launching Publication for the *Hong Kong Art Open Dialogue* Exhibition Series 2008-2010 *Between Past And Present*, Eve Tam, Hong Kong Museum of Art, Hong Kong, 2008, P108
- 7 Ibid, *Hong Kong Museum Of Art: On The Crossroads Of Curatorship*, Tang Hoi Chiu, Hong Kong Museum of Art, Hong Kong, 2008, P97
- 8 *Gems Of Chinese Ceramics From The Hong Kong Museum Of Art*, Hong Museum of Art, Leisure and Cultural Services Dept., 2006 P6
- 9 Ibid, P6
- 10 *Daniel Libeskind, Jewish Museum Berlin*, Bernard Schneider, Prestel ISBN 978-3-7913-2075-5, 5th Ed 2007, Munich, Berlin, London and New York, P 27
- 11 *One Way Street*, Walter Benjamin, Trans Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, Verso London and New York 2006, P49
- 12 *Stories Of An Exhibition, Two Millennia Of German Jewish History*, Stiftung Jüdisches Museum Berlin, Third Edition 2005, P178
- 13 Ibid, P18



