

Libeskind's Second American Project Is a Sculpture that Sways, not a Shrine that Shocks

The Ascent transforms itself and the Ohio Riverfront

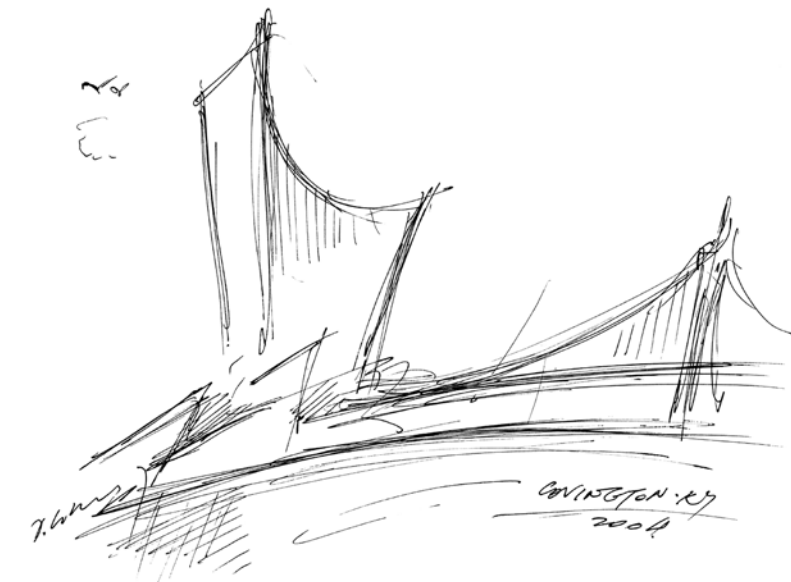
by Zach Mortice
Associate Editor

How do you . . . adapt design composition and conceptual motivations to a new building type?

Summary: The Ascent adopts a unified, sculptural language of broad symbols that has been previously undeveloped in Daniel Libeskind's work. It dramatically modulates its form from a horizontal experience to a vertical experience. This residential condo project continues the Cincinnati metropolitan region's investment in high-profile contemporary architecture with a high-rise that will definitively mark the city's skyline.

To get the best sense of how Daniel Libeskind's second completed American project fits in with the rest of his work, it's best to leave the building itself and walk a few blocks north, across the Ohio River on the Civil War-era Roebling's Bridge, towards the landfall of another acclaimed international architect: Zaha Hadid's Contemporary Arts Center. Inside Hadid's mass of free-floating volumes in downtown Cincinnati, an exhibit displays Libeskind's most recent work, including the residential condo tower outside of the city called the Ascent, just across the river in Covington, Ky. When one can stoop down, peer over, and interrogate these models, a fundamental shift in Libeskind's work reveals itself.

The projects on display here (and elsewhere in Libeskind's oeuvre) are defined by chaotic fusion and the welding of disparate forms through



volumetric virtuosity. Shard-like, angular masses merge and separate with each other and with older, historic structures. Their sense of raw formation is palpable, and it seems odd that these structures could ever grow old and worn, so potent are their riotous forms.

The Ascent suggests an entirely different compositional model. It's a sculptural, singular entity. Instead of creating drama from the juxtaposition of disparate elements, it's animated by the flowing transformation of curvilinear elements from a horizontal experience into a vertical experience. If the building has a precedent in Libeskind's work, it's in his original design for the Freedom Tower at Ground Zero. But that tower hasn't been built, and won't be according to Libeskind's original plan. The Ascent already stands tall.

Libeskind's condominiums are not just unique in terms of composition. It's also his first stand-alone residential project, and he worked closely with a private developer (Corporex's Bill Butler) to make it happen. It also relies less on the hyper-literal symbolism that informs much of his other work. And it's in Cincinnati, a midsize Midwestern city that has seized on progressive architecture with a fervor not seen on the coasts, with Libeskind's building, Hadid's building, and especially on the University of Cincinnati campus, where a world-class massing of starchitects have transformed the school. All these factors have led to what is Libeskind's most conservative building to date, yet perhaps the strongest evidence yet that he has broadened his aesthetic palette since the World Trade Center project.

DESIGN



A new tact?

After Daniel Libeskind, AIA, moved his practice from Berlin to an office a few blocks from Ground Zero in 2003 to work on the WTC commission he had just won, the *New York Times* called him a “voluble iconoclast,” full of strident design ideas and forceful personality. It’s doubtful that anyone who read these stories about Libeskind’s battle for creative control over the Ground Zero site might have predicted that in five years he’d be snipping opening ribbons in Cincinnati while Lower Manhattan slowly lurches to life. The tower and memorial are currently scheduled to open on the tenth anniversary of 9/11. But dilution of Libeskind’s plan for the memorial and towers has not diminished his worldwide presence at the forefront of architecture. To date, his firm has projects in at least seven countries.

At the Ascent’s opening ceremony in March, Libeskind brought up “market conditions” more times than you might expect from your average creative “iconoclast,” and it’s difficult not to connect this to his experiences with Ground Zero and his new role as a budget line on a commercial devel-

oper’s balance sheet. “I learned a lot,” he said of his experience with the Ascent. For example: “How do you create a building in a tough economic market place?”

Before introducing Butler, the Ascent’s developer, Libeskind struck a decidedly non-auteur pose. “A building is only as good as the developer who creates it,” he said.

Shape shifting

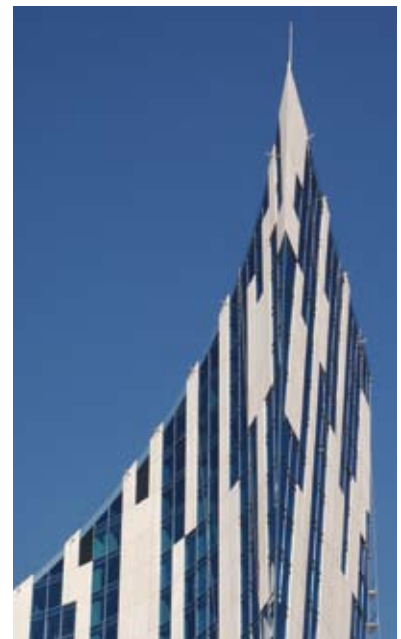
Libeskind is certainly in Butler’s territory. Corporex has developed much of the formerly blighted riverfront in Covington, including two copper-colored, Postmodern towers at the foot of Roebling’s Bridge. Libeskind’s design (executed in conjunction with the local architect of record GBBN) rises from a largely rectangular footprint; its longest axis running east to west. Its façade displays a graphic pattern of pre-cast concrete and blue-tinted glass that extends up one elevation, across the slanted, curving roof, and back down the opposite elevation; a bright counter melody to the venerably subdued blues and browns of the building’s primary reference text:

Roebling’s Bridge. Thin, cantilevered decks dot the north and northeast sides, looking over the river to Cincinnati.

From the tower’s shortest western elevation to its taller eastern face, the 310,000-square-foot building stretches its southeastern corner skyward, curving it inward and cantilevering slightly, around the southern elevation’s ground level entrance and pool plaza. The building contains two elevator cores, both for the privacy of the residents and as a practical design consideration for a building that is 14 stories at the west end and 22 stories at the east end. Most of the Ascent’s structural system is hidden behind its curtain wall, but truss-shaped flying beams at the top of the tower on the north and northeast sides are exposed, drawing on the inherited structural language of Roebling’s Bridge.

Horizontal to vertical

The building’s graceful reach for the horizon executes its most daring feat: a rapid, yet subtle change from a hori-



DESIGN



horizontal expression of mass to a purely vertical expression.

From the Ascent's western elevation, it appears squat and dense, shorter than its 14 stories. It's a decidedly horizontal experience, more concerned with establishing a strong footprint on the earth than in reaching for the stars. Move a few steps to the east along the southern façade to where the tower peaks at 22 stories in a soft cantilever, and suddenly the Ascent is a shape-shifter. It leaves the earth behind and embodies its name with a lithe, airy, and decidedly vertical grasp for the sky. At this corner, the long, vertical glass and concrete pattern works to compress this edge, pushing it higher into the clouds; something like the maxim that vertical lines will slim down any shopper in a department store mirror. Libeskind must have paid extraordinary attention to how each elevation modulated into the other for this change to happen so seamlessly.

The Ascent manages to express this dynamic motion without the sense of

collision and confrontation that colors much of Libeskind's work, and much of the Deconstructivist movement he's often grouped with. In Denver, where his first American project was an addition to the Denver Art Museum and a complex of attached residences, Libeskind's museum resembles nothing so much as shards of the Rocky Mountains tumbling together, fused but still angular in the extreme. His Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco (which will open in June) melds two dark, slanted rectilinear masses into a brick and terra cotta early 20th century power station. The Ascent, however, is a unified whole, more suggestive of a single brush stroke than a kit of parts.

Blending of views

Inside the Ascent's lobby, whites and cool blues predominate. The floor is finished with black slate tiles decorated with stainless steel Xs that are mirrored in the recessed fluorescent ceiling lights above. The Owners Club level looks down to the lobby and largely maintains its color scheme, though wood and splashes of red warm the design. Each of the building's 70 condo units has a unique floor plan,

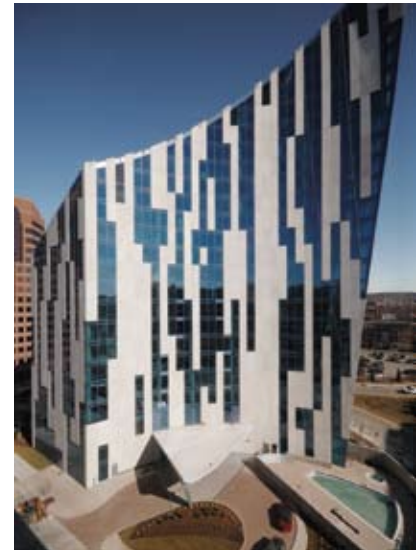
with sizes ranging from 950 square feet for a one-bedroom unit to a three-story, 7,800-square-foot spiral-staircased penthouse at the top of the building.

The views provided by the Ascent don't favor either side of the Ohio River. The largest units offer views that wrap nearly 360 degrees around, from the Cincinnati skyline to the hills of northern Kentucky... These two views, the vertical cluster of Cincinnati skyscrapers and the horizontal expanse of house-lined Kentucky hills, offer vastly different experiences, and their unification in the Ascent is an egalitarian consideration that respects both cities' role in the Cincinnati metropolitan area. By bringing these two fundamentally different views together, the Ascent again balances vertical and horizontal tensions. What are separate and diametrically opposed views outside of the building become hybridized by the gradual transition from horizontal condo block to vertically dexterous design statement within the building.

The scale of symbols

Libeskind has also changed the scale of symbolism he uses to interpret proj-





ects. His Berlin Jewish Museum, and later commissions like Manchester's Imperial War Museum, and the WTC project seem to have set Libeskind on a path of designing emotional, humanistic explorations of horrifying and tragic events that are sharply literal. The obvious sense of reaching, aspiring, striving one gets from the Ascent constitutes a broad symbol of Covington, Ky., a rust-belt town that very recently pulled itself up from the oblivion of endemic urban blight. Beyond this, there don't seem to be any more metaphorical flourishes or narrative suggestions in the parti, but Libeskind insists that his design approach has remained constant.

"I didn't change," he said from behind his trademark black eyeglasses, suit, pants, and boots. "I applied the same notion—that it's a cultural edifice. It has to resonate with the history of the place. It has to be symbolic in its own way, and it is. We judge cities not just by their civic buildings. We judge them by: How do people live in those cities? What is the quality of their urban fabric?"

A commitment to now

Conversations with local architects about their city's architecture comes with consistent reaffirmations of the city's design courage and acumen, and with sometime hints of cultural insecurity and fear of a coast-centric cultural bias. Cincinnati isn't yet nonchalant about its stock of contemporary world-class architectural gems, and a new building is something to take very seriously; an occasion to remember and (in the case of the Ascent) obligate future generations to remember.

At its opening ceremony, right before Covington Mayor Butch Callery told his town's rebirth story by calling Covington an "exciting and safe" city, he announced that a time capsule will be buried for 100 years that will contain pictures of the Ascent's construction, news stories, and letters from current owners and then declared March 26, 2008, to be "Daniel Libeskind Day." A rhyming comic book poster that praised Libeskind for his "elegant structure/The grand Ascent/Given to us by this noble gent/Some call him

Clark/And others Kent/This Superman of Polish Descent" made it into the package.

"Cincinnati aren't doing this so much for the rest of the world as they're doing it for themselves," says Sue Ann Painter, executive director of the Cincinnati Architectural Foundation, about her city's investment in contemporary architecture.

Perhaps so, but Libeskind's Ascent is destined to become the banner symbol to the world outside of Cincinnati of the area's commitment to the architecture of now. Its 300 feet, visible from the city's network of bridges that span the Ohio River and from downtown Cincinnati, informs the skyline in ways that Hadid's museum or the University of Cincinnati's buildings never will, and that makes its opening not an example of provincial boosterism, but the sharing of a remarkable secret.