

Resilience, Holocaust, and the Architecture of Life



Hank Willis Thomas

Amelia Falling, 2014

Installation view with visitors, in the exhibition *From Generation to Generation: Inherited Memory and Contemporary Art*, on view November 25, 2016–April 2, 2017 at The Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco.

Photo by Gary Sexton Photography.

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About the Program

Resilience, Holocaust, and the Architecture of Life

How do we move forward from the pain of the past while vowing to never forget? The architecture of The Contemporary Jewish Museum (The CJM) is a testament to resilience and a dialogue between past and present. It is a celebration of life and strength designed by architect Daniel Libeskind, a child of Holocaust survivors, with deeply embedded Jewish symbolism and meaning. In this discussion-based program, participants will explore the symbols of The CJM architecture; discuss the relationship between past and present; learn about architect Daniel Libeskind; hear from a Holocaust survivor; and create their symbolic structures.

About this Resource

This resource guide, intended for educators or anyone interested in exploring the themes and ideas of Resilience, Holocaust and the Architecture of Life, may be used before or after a visit to The CJM, or as a stand-alone resource for teaching. This guide provides ideas and resources for teaching about resilience, art, and history. This resource explores the impact of the past on the present, highlights examples of resilience, takes an in-depth look at architect Daniel Libeskind's life, and examines ways visual artists have expressed ideas about resilience.

Guiding Questions

- What is resilience? How might you define it? What makes someone resilient?
- How do events from the past impact us today? What examples can you give?
- How can art be a tool for commemorating or sharing stories from the past?
- How does art play a role in resilience?

Activities



Introduction

Defining Resilience

Resilience and the lessons of the past for the present day are key messages in the Resilience, Holocaust and the Architecture of Life program. Consider having students read some or all of the following resources to help center the conversation:

- [Unbreakable: Four Teens Who Prove the Power of Resilience](#)
- Jewish Family and Children Service's Holocaust Center's website provides multiple [survivor testimonies](#); consider this [testimony from liberator Floyd Dade](#)
- [Daniel Libeskind Interview: Childhood Bullies, Nazi Germany, and the Jewish Museum he Built](#)

Discuss these questions to gain a stronger understanding of resilience. This can be facilitated as a large group or in multiple small groups.

- What is resilience? What qualities does a resilient person have?
- How did the person/people you read about show resilience? What about them is resilient?
- Often people who are most resilient are those who have gone through and overcome significant challenges. Why do you think this might be the case?
- Some Holocaust survivors, or other survivors of trauma, choose not to describe themselves as resilient. Why do you think that might be?
- Consider these lyrics by singer/songwriter Leonard Cohen: "Ring the bells that can still ring/Forget your perfect offering/There is a crack in everything/That's how the light gets in." What does this mean? What's the relationship between the damage and the light?
- Why do you think art might be a tool for processing challenges?
- What examples of art about resilience can you think of?

Activity 1

Learning More About CJM Architect Daniel Libeskind

Description

In this short activity, participants learn about some of Daniel Libeskind's symbolic buildings, then will break into pairs or small groups and focus on a time period in Daniel Libeskind's life, discussing how Libeskind himself moved from oppression to creativity—creating buildings that link past to present. After reading the biographical information, each group will create one symbol and one word that summarizes the information and be asked to explain this to the group. Allow 5–10 minutes for discussion and 1 minute each for the groups to report out.

Materials Needed

- Posterboard/butcher paper
- Markers

Sources

- [Daniel Libeskind's Biography](#)
- [Libeskind Interview on Childhood Bullies, Nazi Germany, and Jewish Museums](#)
- [Daniel Libeskind on Architecture and Memorials](#)

Activity 1

Learning More About CJM Architect Daniel Libeskind (cont.)

Introduction and Resources

Introduce students to one or two of Daniel Libeskind's Jewish museum buildings, looking at structure, symbolism, and meaning for each.

- [Jewish Museum in Berlin](#)
- [Jewish Museum in Denmark](#)
- [The Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco](#)

Then, break class into small groups (depending on the group size—groups should be 5 or less, some may have duplicate information) to learn more about Libeskind's background.

Instructions for Small Groups

- Each group will get a piece of paper with biographical information about one part of architect Daniel Libeskind's life.
- Read the information and discuss the questions at the end with your group.
- As we'll see, Daniel Libeskind uses a lot of words and symbols in his architecture—so, on the paper provided, each group should draw one image and write one word that symbolizes the part of his life that you read about.
- Each group will report out and explain why they chose what they chose.

Activity 1

Learning More About CJM Architect Daniel Libeskind (cont.)

Parents and Early Childhood

- Before they met, Daniel's parents—his mother, Dorah, and father, Nachman—both fled from Poland when the Germans invaded in 1939.
- Dorah was captured and worked at a *gulag* (a forced labor camp) in Siberia, where she sewed shirts. “She had to sew white silk shirts for officers. The only way to protect against frostbite was to wrap newspapers around her feet.”
- Nachman was captured by the Red Army and was marched to a camp.
- Under a Poland-Russian treaty in 1942, they were both released and fled to the Tibetan border, where they met and got married.
- Pregnant with Daniel, their second child, they decided to return to Poland and the life they left behind in 1945 (the same year WWII ended).
- When they came back, they found that 85 of their relatives had been murdered.
- Daniel was born in Lodz, Poland on May 12, 1946.
- One of his early memories is going to Jewish cemeteries with his father. “I used to walk to school, or with my father to the Jewish cemetery—the biggest Jewish cemetery in Europe—trying to interview anyone who was Jewish and had survived. I held my father's hand as he went up to people and asked, like a code, ‘Are you of the people?’ and broke into Yiddish. But there was no one left.”

Activity 1

Learning More About CJM Architect Daniel Libeskind (cont.)

Questions

- What is special/unique about Daniel being born in Poland in 1946?
- Even though the times were scary and uncertain, Dorah and Nachman chose to have a baby and to come back to Poland. Why might they have made this choice? Why might having a baby in Poland have been significant to them?
- Draw one image and choose one word that represents this part of Daniel Libeskind's life. Share with the group: why did you draw/write what you did? How does it symbolize his experience?

Activity 1

Learning More About CJM Architect Daniel Libeskind (cont.)

Childhood

- WWII had just ended when Daniel was born in Poland.
- When asked what he remembers about Poland, Daniel says “The grimness. Coupled with a sense that the Holocaust was not over. At school, my name alone was enough. The other boys used to hit me. I'd run back home not to get hit. I was always in flight.”
- Libeskind became obsessed with music. He wanted to play the piano, but his parents thought it was too big and would annoy the neighbors. They bought him an accordion.
- Daniel proved to be a child prodigy (someone naturally very talented at something). He even played the accordion on the first-ever broadcast on Polish television. When Libeskind was eleven, he, his parents, and his older sister immigrated to Tel Aviv, Israel. Upon moving to Israel, he switched instruments and began playing piano.
- Two years later, in 1959, he won an America-Israel Cultural Foundation scholarship for the piano, which enabled the family to move to the United States. They settled in a one-bedroom apartment in the Bronx, a borough of New York City.
- “I arrived by ship to New York as a teenager, an immigrant, and like millions of others before me, my first sight was the Statue of Liberty and the amazing skyline of Manhattan. I have never forgotten that sight or what it stands for.”

Activity 1

Learning More About CJM Architect Daniel Libeskind (cont.)

Questions

- How might music and the arts have helped Daniel cope with the bullying he was facing?
- How did creativity/music help Daniel and his family to make new opportunities?
- Draw one image and choose one word that represents this part of Daniel Libeskind's life. Share with the group: why did you draw/write what you did? How does it symbolize his experience?

Activity 1

Learning More About CJM Architect Daniel Libeskind (cont.)

Adulthood

- Daniel was a celebrated musician, but decided that music was no longer interesting to him. He started drawing and became interested in architecture.
- He studied architecture and taught students for almost twenty years.
- Daniel was primarily an architectural theorist and his designs had never come in to fruition, but he was invited to enter a contest to design the Jewish part of the Berlin Museum in 1988. This museum was significant because it was to be the first major museum in Germany about the Jewish experience and the Holocaust. He submitted his design anonymously and won.
- Daniel recalls how a German senator did not want to work with him. "He comes over to me, puts a finger to my chest and says aggressively, determined to fire me, 'What buildings did you do in the past, Mr. Libeskind, to qualify you to do this?' I said: 'If you go by the past, Berlin is not going to have any future.'
- The government kept going back-and-forth about the museum. At one point, they voted to scrap the plans entirely. The mayor of Berlin offered Daniel the chance to design a skyscraper instead. Daniel recalls "I told him, 'I haven't come to Berlin to build office buildings. I came here to build the Jewish Museum,'" and I walked out, slamming the door."
- The Jewish Museum finally opened in 2001 and has won many awards for its architecture. Its symbolic architecture is filled with dark, disorienting corridors but also contains open, lighter spaces designed for contemplation. Daniel went on to design many museums, including the master plan for the World Trade Center memorial space in New York.

Activity 1

Learning More About CJM Architect Daniel Libeskind (cont.)

Questions

- Why might Daniel Libeskind—a Jewish man who was born the year after WWII ended—be compelled to make the Jewish Museum in Berlin? Why would this opportunity be significant to him?
- Why do you think the museum was controversial? What are some of the issues the German government might have been worried about?
- Draw one image and choose one word that represents this part of Daniel Libeskind's life.
- Share with the group: why did you draw/write what you did? How does it symbolize his experience?

Activity 2

Video and Discussion: Processing Trauma Through Art

Video

Just as Daniel Libeskind used architecture to process and communicate messages about the past to the present day, artists often use their art as a tool for processing traumatic events, or linking past, present, and future.

Watch this short (three minute) video [*Colours of Resilience: Street Art with Syrian and Jordanian Youth Across North Jordan*](#), which shows displaced people making a mural in a refugee camp. Then discuss the questions.



Discussion

- What message does this mural send?
- How does this mural show resilience visually? What symbols and imagery are used?
- With all the serious issues that these refugees have faced and the challenges that they continue to experience—why might they take the time and spend the energy on making a piece of art?
- How might it feel for the refugees to be involved in making this piece of art? Why might it be important to them?
- The video ends with this quote: “I do what I can where I am with what I have.” What is your response to this quote? How might it relate to the stories of resilience you read about in the introductory activity?

Activity 3

Discussion: Expressing Resilience Through Art

Introduction

Throughout time, artists and ordinary citizens have created art to protest, critique, or resist the dominant culture. This art has taken many forms—often painting and sculpture, but also graffiti art, murals, performances, and music. Protest art also marked a shift in who created art—from the domain of artist to also include social activists and ordinary citizens with a message to convey. Activist art seeks to reach a wide audience, and for this reason generally is created and displayed outside of a museum or gallery setting.

One of the best-known early examples of protest art is [Pablo Picasso's painting *Guernica*](#). Often called modern art's "most powerful anti-war statement," *Guernica* was created for the Spanish Pavilion at the 1937 World's Fair, and was Picasso's response to the bombing of Guernica, a small town in the Basque region of Spain, by Germany at the request of the Spanish nationalist government. During this attack, 1600 civilians were killed or wounded. The mural (originally displayed near a monument to Nazi Germany) depicts the suffering of humans and animals, but Picasso refused to interpret the symbols for his viewers, stating, "It isn't up to the painter to define the symbols. Otherwise it would be better if he wrote them out in so many words! The public who look at the picture must interpret the symbols as they understand them."

This activity invites students to look at and interpret the symbols in artwork related to resilience. Print and post the works of art on the following pages in different places around the classroom, providing the included contextual information. Divide the students into small groups and have them discuss each piece of art and then rotate until they've seen them all. Have a short discussion as a class to debrief the experience.

Activity 3

Discussion: Expressing Resilience Through Art (cont.)

Discussion Questions for Each Artwork

- What stands out to you about this artwork?
- How does the artwork connect the past to today?
- How does this art reflect the theme of resilience?
- What message do you think the artist is trying to send?
- What images, symbols, and/or colors did the artist choose? Why?
- In what way(s) does this art show or suggest that challenges have been overcome?
- What are some of the historical, religious, or other cultural references in the art?
- Name some of the symbols or references in the art that you don't understand. Who might those be for? Why include them?
- How does this art affect you? How might it impact others who see it?

Discussion Questions for Debrief

- Which was your favorite piece of art? Why? What about this spoke to you?
- What do these pieces of art have in common?
- What historical references did you notice in these artworks? Why were these in there? What does this have to do with resilience?

Activity 3

Discussion: Expressing Resilience Through Art (cont.)

Hank Willis Thomas

(b. 1976, Plainfield New Jersey;
based in New York)

***Amelia Falling*, 2014**

Digital c-print on silvered glass
Courtesy of the artist and Jack
Shainman Gallery, New York

Thomas' work focuses on the representation of race, gender, and ethnicity, notably incorporating elements from advertising, pop culture, and entertainment. Most of his installation and photography works deal with the struggles that African Americans have faced for decades, before and after the Civil Rights movement's peak in 1968. *Amelia Falling* is derived from a Spider Martin photograph of Amelia Boynton during the Selma March in 1965. Thomas is concerned with mental and visual aspects of concealment and revelation in relation to how the meaning of historical moments evolves over time. The work, a mirror created through a rare custom silvering process and printing, leaves certain sections transparent and reflective, freeing the viewers to see themselves within the image.



Installation shot of *Amelia Falling* with visitors, in *From Generation to Generation: Inherited Memory and Contemporary Art* on view November 25, 2016–April 2, 2017 at The Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco. Photo by Gary Sexton Photography.



Hank Willis Thomas, *Amelia Falling*, 2014. From *Generation to Generation: Inherited Memory and Contemporary Art*. On view November 25, 2016–April 2, 2017, The Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco. Photo by Gary Sexton Photography.

Activity 3

Discussion: Expressing Resilience Through Art (cont.)

Linda Ellia

(Born in Tunisia; based in Paris)

***Notre Combat*, 2007**

Yves El Bèze, from the project *Notre Combat* by Linda Ellia. Courtesy of The Contemporary Jewish Museum.

In 2005, French painter and photographer Linda Ellia's daughter showed her a book she had come across at the home of a family friend—a French translation of Hitler's notorious memoir and manifesto *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle). Ellia, who is Jewish, was stunned as she held the thick tome. It was as if she was holding Hitler in her hands, and the book's weight was the heaviness of the Holocaust. She felt immediately compelled to respond. She awoke one night with an idea—what if she detached one of the pages to express her anger and resist the book's horror? Grabbing a large red marker, she drew the head of a woman screaming on the loose page and named her Aile (the French word for 'wing').

Over the next three years, Ellia distributed the pages of *Mein Kampf* one by one to individuals from all walks of life—professional artists, youth, and ordinary citizens each invited to paint, draw, sculpt, collage, and blacken the page however they wished as a reaction to the text and its themes. Six hundred pages came back to her and she gathered the results into a collective artwork and book titled *Notre Combat* (Our Struggle) published in 2007 by Seuil Editions, a leading publisher of art books in France.

D'ailleurs, l'éducation, en ce qui concerne la race, trouvera son achèvement définitif dans le service militaire. Ce temps de service doit être considéré comme le dernier stade de l'éducation normale donnée à l'Allemand moyen.

Si important que soit dans l'Etat raciste le système d'éducation physique et intellectuelle, la formation d'une élite n'en joue pas moins dans cet Etat un rôle capital. Aujourd'hui, on en prend à son aise sur ce point. En général, ce sont les enfants de parents occupant un rang ou des situations élevés que l'on voit pour dignes de faire des études supérieures. La question des dispositions personnelles ne vient qu'après. Un petit paysan peut être beaucoup mieux doué que l'enfant né dans une famille jouissant, depuis plusieurs générations, d'une haute situation sociale, même si les connaissances générales du premier sont inférieures à celles du bourgeois. La supériorité de celui-ci, à ce point de vue, n'a rien à faire avec ses dispositions naturelles, elle provient de la somme plus considérable d'impressions qu'il reçoit d'une façon ininterrompue en raison d'une éducation plus développée et de la culture des personnes qui l'entourent. Si le petit paysan bien doué avait, dès ses premières années, grandi lui aussi dans un milieu semblable, ses facultés intellectuelles seraient tout autres. Il n'y a peut-être aujourd'hui qu'un seul domaine où l'origine compte vraiment moins que les dons innés : celui de l'art. Là, il ne s'agit pas seulement « d'apprendre » ; tout doit se trouver de naissance à l'état latent, et ne fait que se développer plus ou moins plus tard dans la mesure où les dispositions naturelles sont intelligemment cultivées ; l'argent et la situation des parents ne jouent presque aucun rôle. Ce fait prouve manifestement que le génie est indépendant de la situation sociale et même de la fortune. Il n'est pas rare que les plus grands artistes sortent des plus pauvres familles. Et plus d'un petit villageois est devenu un maître illustre.

Que de pareils exemples n'aient pas eu d'influence bienfaisante sur l'ensemble de la vie intellectuelle, c'est là une constatation qui ne parle pas en faveur de la puissance de raisonnement de notre époque. On prétend que ce qui est indéniable pour l'art n'est plus vrai pour les sciences

Comme un hommage aux forces de Vie
 Jus EE Beze
 le 19 Février 2007.

From the project *Notre Combat* by Linda Ellia; one of 600 works on paper; 8 ¼ x 5 ½ inches; Paris, France; 2007. Courtesy of The Contemporary Jewish Museum.

Activity 3

Discussion: Expressing Resilience Through Art (cont.)

Discussion

The following text was included by the creator of the image of a boy holding a Torah, and may be used to supplement the questions on page 16.

“...I long had a nauseous feeling that kept me from responding to the offer being made. A haunting mystery paralyzed me: how could a people at the height of its civilization be lead down the path of barbaric devastation simply by reading these terrible, yes, but mostly pathetic words?

At my son Nathan’s bar mitzvah, I finally saw the light and no longer felt paralyzed when I saw his beaming, joyful face. A face that would have purely been that of an angel had it not been for the fact that his grandfather survived Nazi hell. It is by measuring out my emotion as a father witnessing his son’s coming of age, an emotion I had felt from my own father, who must have also felt it from his father, that I figured that the best way to send these foul lines back to hell was to cover them with these sublime Hebrew texts and with the smile of a little Jew radiating life.

What a wonderful idea you’ve had to turn this message of hate into a message of love!”

—Yves El Bèze

Activity 3

Discussion: Expressing Resilience Through Art (cont.)

Miranda Bergman and O'Brien Thiele

(b. 1947, Oakland, CA and
b. 1941, Berkeley, CA)

This mural, painted in 1984 in San Francisco's Mission District, shares diverse images of Central American life, from violence and war to music and culture. Originally painted during wartime in Central America, it was designed to call attention to war, oppose US intervention, and to cultivate respect for and solidarity with Central American people.

The Culture Contains the Seed of Resistance

1984

Painted in Balmy Alley,
San Francisco Mission District

Photo by Cipster



Miranda Bergman and O'Brien Thiele, *The Culture Contains the Seed of Resistance*, 1984



Detail of *The Culture Contains the Seed of Resistance*, 1984

Conclusion

Questions and Exercise

Wrap up the discussion on resilience with these questions and then a short exercise. After the concluding thoughts or questions (if the group has visited or plans to visit The CJM), hand out post-its and ask students to write down a sentence about what they learned and/or the main message they think is important from this workshop. Have students do a pair-share with a classmate sitting near them. Post the answers up in front of the class and ask for a few people to share with the group.

Concluding thoughts for groups planning on attending The CJM program

- We'll be going to The CJM for a tour called Resilience, the Holocaust and the Architecture of Life.
- Just like the art we explored today, The CJM's architecture sends messages about resilience.
- At The Museum, let's look for how the theme of resilience is represented in the architecture and compare and contrast how this relates to the art we looked at today.
- We should also think about the Holocaust survivor's story and what his or her resilience has in common with the teens and other resilient people we read about.

Concluding questions for groups who already attended The CJM program

- How did the artworks showing resilience that we looked at today remind you of the architecture of The CJM? What was the same? What was different?
- How did the resilience of the teens relate to the resilience that the Holocaust survivor showed? What was the same? What was different?

Additional Resources

Resources

On architect Daniel Libeskind and his buildings:

- libeskind.com/

On resilience:

- [The Science of Resilience: How to Teach Students to Persevere](#)
- [How People Learn to Become Resilient](#)

On the Holocaust and survivor testimonies:

- Short article on [children during the Holocaust](#) and the kindertransport
- Multiple educational resources from the [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#) including videos, timelines, and maps

Contact

For more information about Resilience, Holocaust and the Architecture of Life, or to book a tour, please call us at **415.655.7857** or email tours@thecjm.org. Learn more at thecjm.org/tours.

The Contemporary Jewish Museum
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