



NINA LIBESKIND.

THE OTHER LIBESKIND

IT'S OFTEN SAID THAT SHE IS THE DRIVING FORCE BEHIND STUDIO DANIEL LIBESKIND. WHO IS NINA LIBESKIND, AND WHAT DOES SHE DO?

Text **Katya Tylevich** / Photos **Alexei Tylevich**



Nina Libeskind, full partner and chief operating officer of Studio Daniel Libeskind, has the reputation of being the Rahm Emanuel of architecture: in other words, an I-don't-take-no-for-an-answer political bulldog whose 'White House' is an architecture atelier 19 storeys above street level in Manhattan. That's where Nina and I meet, at Studio Libeskind, a few blocks south of the World Trade Center, where Daniel's famously compromised Ground Zero master plan is finally showing signs of a growth spurt. 'People don't realize how many years it was just litigation, *all* the time,' says Nina, as if she's been through hell and back. 'Now it's taking off.'

Nina Libeskind is not an architect, but her resonance in both the annals and tabloids of architecture is every bit as loud as Daniel's. She is a hugely recognized figure, thanks in no small part to her husband's frenzied

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praise of her in roughly every interview he's ever granted. In his 2004 memoir, *Breaking Ground*, Daniel references Nina so often and with such relish that I wonder whether Nina didn't ghostwrite the book herself. To wit: 'My wife is a genius.' Later in the book, Daniel recounts how, in 1991, Nina reacted to news that the Jewish Museum in Berlin had been canned: "'Libeskind,'" she said, "I think we can save this building [but] you have to promise to stay out of it completely. . . . Concentrate on the architecture, and leave the politics to me.'" Whoa.

Clearly, Daniel's into it – this image of PowerNina, Nina the Architecture Warrior. Others are not so taken, including those who rip into her online for 'flexing her biceps'. Still others, journalists among them, seem to trivialize Nina's role at SDL, often focusing on what

she wears, not what she does (which is not to say that Daniel 'Cowboy Boots' Libeskind hasn't been fashion-policed in the mags, too). But whereas I hear so often *about* this Nina, outspoken and fiery, I hear so very little *from* her. By the time I meet her face to face, I am melting with curiosity – it's a very hot day in New York. Does Nina Libeskind live up to her reputation? I wonder, impatiently. And what exactly does she do?

What is your role at Studio Libeskind?

In the beginning, my role was pretty undefined. When Daniel won the competition for the Jewish Museum in Berlin [in 1988] and we first began working together, I had absolutely no idea how an architectural office worked. Daniel claims he didn't either. [Laughs.] He was teaching then and had spent literally eight to ten days working in an architect's office, because he had never *wanted* to work in an architect's office. At that time it wasn't clear to me what I could contribute.

Of course now I am fully integrated into every aspect of the office, and even though I am not an architect, I have tried to learn as much as I can to really discuss our projects, in terms of both processes and ideas. In fact, my role in the office evolved from Daniel asking the question: 'Does Nina understand the ideas behind these drawings?' This was before the computer, when everything was done by hand. 'If Nina doesn't understand, then nobody else will.'

Today, 20 years and many advanced rendering technologies later, how has your role changed?

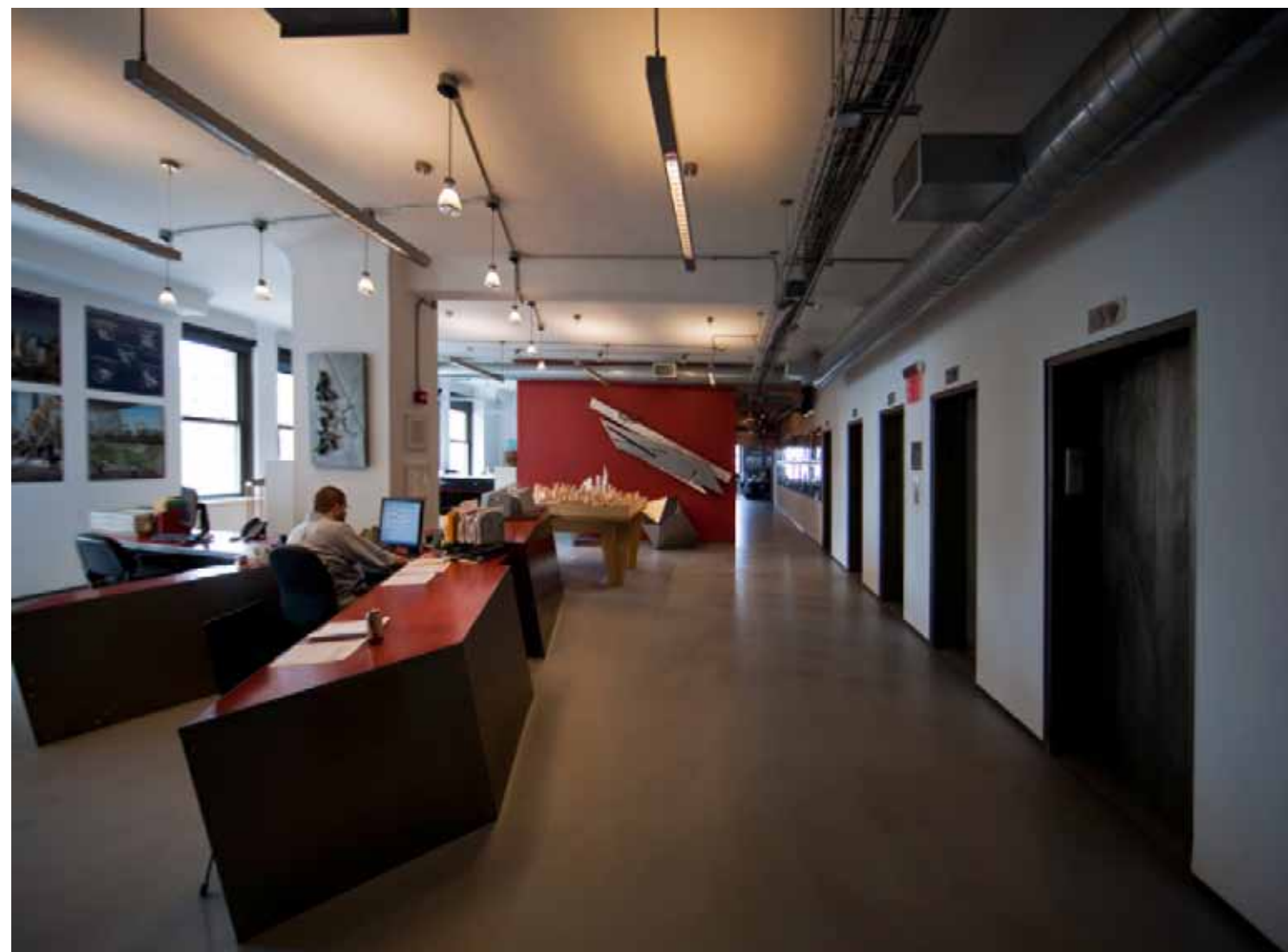
I suppose I do more of the administration now, because our firm is much bigger and has much more work. Perhaps I also offer the most global view of our three offices in New York, Milan and Switzerland. In the beginning, I made all the presentations with Daniel. I couldn't possibly do that now, nor should I, but I do still make presentations with him sometimes. And on the quote-unquote 'creative side', I contribute most with my reality checks, by talking with clients and chatting privately with Daniel about the ideas.

Does that mean you actually offer design advice?

[Smiles.] Yes, sometimes I'll hold my breath and make a critique. If I have a good idea or think a concept isn't strong enough, I'll go home and say, 'Daniel, perhaps.' He is very open-minded. I'm also very discreet. Even if I were an architect, I would be discreet.

What Daniel and I have is very unusual. Typically, when married couples work together in architecture, one is the designer and the other the business person. I help with management, but I do more than that. Though here in America, where everything is so compartmentalized, it's always 'Daniel is the architect and Nina is his manager.' But I certainly never say I'm his manager. »

THE VIEW OUTSIDE STUDIO DANIEL LIBESKIND CHANGED DRASTICALLY IN 2003, WHEN THE OFFICE RELOCATED FROM EUROPE TO NEW YORK CITY TO WORK ON THE GROUND ZERO MASTER PLAN.



STUDIO DANIEL LIBESKIND DOESN'T HAVE INTERCOMS, RESULTING IN NINA LIBESKIND SHOUTING FROM ONE END OF THE OFFICE TO THE OTHER REGULARLY.

'I THINK THE POLITICAL LANGUAGE OF ARCHITECTURE IS COMMONSENSICAL'

– Nina Libeskind –

What are you outside America?

In Europe, people see me as working *with* Daniel. You know the saying – behind every great man stands a woman. Well, my daughter said, 'Mama, it's no longer behind; it's beside.' And I don't feel 'behind' at all. I feel 'beside'.

Like I said, I have tried, over the course of the last 20 years, to really learn something about this field. During the construction of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, I began to learn the terms – beams, windows, concrete, tension. Before that, I just didn't know how walls were put together.

Considering you're always the one yelling, 'It's not over yet!' did you also have to learn a new political vocabulary for architecture?

I think the political language of architecture is, above all, commonsensical. One has to assume that, for the most part, the public actually *enjoys* architecture and that people need to be talked to in a way that is straightforward and very what-you-believe-in. People don't need the technical – they don't *want* the technical.

But how do you communicate these politics outside the public eye, behind closed doors? In

Breaking Ground, for example, Daniel credits you with refusing 'hush money' when the fate of the Jewish Museum in Berlin was in peril; later he quotes Berlin's then mayor telling an aide to 'get that Libeskind woman off my back'. Are you Studio Libeskind's 'bad cop'?

As you've read, I used to work in electoral politics before I left Canada, and I've learned to use that experience to contribute to our studio. [A native Canadian, Nina was born into politics and used to manage political campaigns before helping set up SDL. She comes from a long line of politicians, including a father who founded



the New Democratic Party in Canada and a brother who is a United Nations special envoy.] You see, Daniel is a very optimistic human being, in his work and also in the way he *proceeds* with his work. I am a realist – that doesn't mean I'm not optimistic, but projects do get stuck. If the design is the problem, that's Daniel. If it's political, that's where I have to step in. I'm the one to sit down with the client, see what's going on and try to proceed. Very often I'm the first person a prospective client wants to speak with.

The other thing is that we take on projects where the criterion is: do we like the people we're working with? That's a very unusual criterion. Are they nice people? If so, I'll negotiate; let's make this happen. I still maintain professionalism, but when there's a personal relationship with clients – when we become friends – it's easier for me to interact with them.

Surely not all clients see it your way.

Of course not. It's not just a matter of communication; you have to have good arguments. Sometimes you win and sometimes you lose, but I think the most important thing I have to do is create the mood that we're all going in the same direction; that doesn't mean we all want

to get there in the same way. Sometimes we have huge confrontations and huge disagreements, but okay; that's the way the world works.

What's going on with you guys and the Ground Zero master plan? Are you based in New York now because you're still fighting that fight?

We're based in New York because I'm no spring chicken, and after 18 moves I'm happy to call this great place home. I would also say that the master-plan debate ended three years ago. Daniel is still involved. Questions have come up. Should it be here? Should it be there? But fighting? No. It feels stable. Every single piece of the site is under construction. This *will* happen, even if it takes 13 years. The Jewish Museum in Berlin was good training for us – that was also 13 years. It isn't totally abnormal for us.

But what about the rest of the experience?

Coming to New York in 2003 was an eye-opener. [Studio Libeskind relocated from Europe to NYC to work on the Ground Zero master plan.] Europe is not nearly as invasive as the United States. It was unbelievably intense here. Everybody had publicists and press agents, and

Daniel and I had *not a clue*. I don't apologize for that – I think it was unprecedented, the amount of attention given to an architect and project then – but I would go back and do it differently. I should have simply asked for help. Some of the press was wonderful, but some was incredibly nasty, and we needed someone to field those questions and take those phone calls rather than having them go directly to my cellphone.

You couldn't be that someone?

I couldn't. It was an onslaught. We needed professional help. In America, things like that are very important. But okay; we survived. Daniel, of course, is a fairly recognized architect now. People often say hello to him on the street. I had to get used to that.

Used to it? Aren't you in the same limelight as Daniel?

I try very hard not to be. «

www.daniel-libeskind.com