

Daniel Libeskind, *The Imperial War Museum North*, 2002

The Imperial War Museum North (IWMN) in Trafford, Manchester was designed by Daniel Libeskind. Since opening in 2002, the Museum has offered a new type of museum experience where human stories of the causes, course and consequences of war and conflict since 1914 are told through a range of media, including architecture, art, authentic objects, photography, film and drama.



Digital image courtesy of Imperial War Museum. Photo: Jason Lawton

Architect

IWMN was the first building in the UK designed by the internationally acclaimed architect Daniel Libeskind, who designed the 1999 Jewish Museum in Berlin and was behind the 2003 blue print plan for the Ground Zero site in New York. Daniel Libeskind was born in Lodz, Poland in 1946, the second child of Polish Jewish parents who had survived the Holocaust. His insistence that the architecture of a museum should give richer meaning to its subject matter was just what the patrons The Imperial War Museum (IWM) wanted.

Location: Built on a Bomb Site

In the 1990s, IWM began looking for a location outside the south-east of England to build a new museum. The wartime history of Trafford Park helped it to stand out as the chosen location. It was here that vital munitions tanks and engines were built for the First and Second World Wars. The Manchester Blitz caused extensive damage to factories and warehouses in the area. IWMN stands where the Hovis Grain Silos once stood before they were bombed and burnt down in the Second World War. When the foundations were dug for the museum, shrapnel and an anti-aircraft cartridge shell were found. Libeskind's building has become a catalyst for the regeneration of the entire Quays area, with MediaCityUK on the other side of the Manchester Ship Canal.

The Patron's Design Challenge

In its brief to the architects competing to build the new museum, IWM made several points clear:

- IWM North was not to be a 'military' museum, but one about the impact of war on individuals.
- It was to be a place of story-telling – where visitors could find out *what it feels like* to be caught up in conflict.
- It was to be an exhibit in itself – a building that people would want to see and *experience* for themselves.



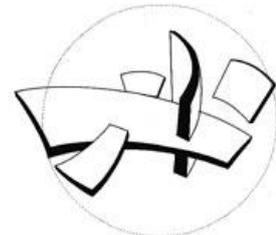
WORLD



CONFLICT



SHARDS OF THE GLOBE



MUSEUM

Libeskind's Design Concept. Digital image courtesy of Daniel Libeskind

From the [IWM North website](#)

Libeskind imagined a globe torn apart by war, shattered into fragments and then reassembled: meaning that although it's been put back together, it will never be the same again.

He sealed a round teapot in a plastic bag and dropped it out of the fourth floor window of his Berlin studio. He collected the fragments and used them as inspiration for the three Shards you can see at IWMN:

'Conflict has been a constant factor of the twentieth century as the world has repeatedly fragmented into warring factions. I have imagined the globe broken into fragments and taken the pieces to form the building – three shards. Together they represent conflict on land, in the air, and on water.' –

Daniel Libeskind

The Earth Shard forms the generous and flexible museum space, signifying the open, earthly realm of conflict and war. Its sloping floor and curving roof act like the surface of the globe itself.

The Air Shard serves as a dramatic entry into the museum, with its projected images, observatories and education spaces. Its 55m tower juts into the skyline giving the building a vertical monumentality and it acts as a landmark in its location.

The Water Shard undulates away from the rest of the museum. Its wavelike forms play host to the platform for viewing the canal, a restaurant, cafe, deck and performance space, with views over the Manchester Ship Canal.

Intended to unsettle, disorientate and confuse, the building comprises uneven wall and floor planes, hard, uncompromising materials and a structure which is counter to the usual museum layout.

Aluminium was used as the principal facade material in three different ways:

- The precision box-section extrusions provided the strength and elegance to ensure the dramatic effect of the Air Shard tower.
- The tapered standing-seam system allowed the expression of lines of latitude and longitude on the Earth Shard roof.
- And the flat 3mm plates created powerful fascias 4m deep, cutting sheer planes through the spherical Earth Shard roof.

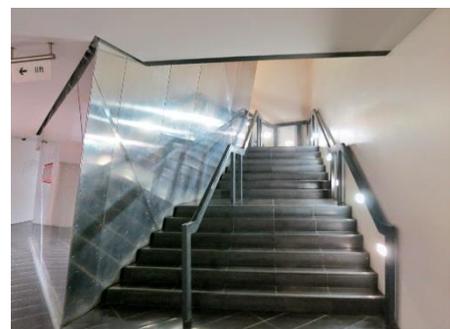
Architecture Addressing War

Libeskind wanted visitors to the museum to feel the unsettling nature of war. He used a variety of techniques within the architecture to achieve this.

The route into the museum itself is confusing, and the curves of the shattered globe that make up the outline of the building also continue inside, affecting how the visitor moves around the museum.

The Air Shard entrance

- Small and bunker-like, quite different from the grand entrances of traditional museums, creating a feeling of disorientation.
- When visitors enter they have to follow a pathway through the Air Shard that goes back on itself, adding to the sense of disorientation.
- To increase the feeling of confusion, the Air Shard is neither an outdoor nor an indoor space, and while it offers some shelter, it's also exposed to the elements.
- The Air Shard itself leans four degrees away from vertical. This makes the rest of the world look out of kilter, especially when you look out from the viewing platform. The concrete tower in the Air Shard looks like it is leaning but in fact it is straight – it's just a technique to disorientate the visitor.
- On entering you are still exposed to the elements in a space that isn't quite inside or outside. It's a deliberately strange environment.
- "Wind, rain and even snow can beat and whistle through hundreds of unglazed floor-to-roof slits in the walls of the museum's 180ft [55m] leaning tower that wraps around the lift, the walkway and the platform. This experience is magnificent, but it is not for the faint-hearted. The walk from the lift to the cage-like viewing platform is across a meshed steel floor: you can see down to the entrance far below. If the aim is to make visitors consider the aerial perspective of modern warfare and the precariousness of the life below that it seeks to destroy, it succeeds."¹
- Even the handrail on the staircase leading up to the exhibition spaces is not where you would expect it to be. It juts out at an odd angle to the wall and the walls themselves feel like they are collapsing inwards.



Images above Digital images courtesy of Studio Libeskind

¹ Glancey, Jonathan (22 April 2002) [The Guardian War and peace and quiet](#). Retrieved 22 May 2017.

The Earth Shard

- The floor of the Earth Shard is marked with the lines of latitude, linking it to the geographical reality of the globe itself. Like a globe **it curves away** in all directions from the entrance, creating a strangely disorientating effect. There is a remarkable drop of 8 feet (2.4m) from the entrance of the Main Exhibition Space (MES) to its far end.
- The recessed lighting in the MES has been deliberately positioned to cut across the path of the sun as it moves over the building. Visitors have likened the effect to tracer bullets and searchlights.
- The Museum uses an environmentally-friendly cooling system that makes the temperature fluctuate at different points, intensifying the visitors' experiences.
- There is a distinct lack of right angles in the MES and no natural light.
- There are six towering spaces called silos. They exhibit people's stories and key objects. The silos are not obvious – the polar opposite of the traditional museum arrangement (almost an inside out version) of the line of galleries.
- The Big Picture Show is a series of filmic installations which engulf the space for ten minutes every hour. The Big Picture Show purposefully interrupts visitors' independence, demanding that they stop moving and to have a focused physical and emotional response. It utilises scale and space to envelop visitors in a bodily, highly impactful experience and fragments the visit, and it can overwhelm and take control away from visitors.
- Visitors move around the internal spaces in no specific way, and visitors can have trouble finding what they are looking for, and knowing what is on offer.



Digital image courtesy of TripAdvisor

'A new kind of museum': the brilliant peculiarities of IWMN

Imperial War Museum North is a new kind of museum which challenges our perceptions of what a war museum might be and utilises a whole range of media from architecture to film and from objects to text, to implicate visitors in deeply affective stories of war and conflict.

IWMN can be understood as part of a particular Museum movement (in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's words, part of a 'new honesty'²) where glorifying or triumphant narratives of war have been replaced with people-centred stories which draw attention to individual experiences of war.

Like other museums and exhibitions identified as part of this 'new honesty', IWMN prioritises sensory experience and emotion. The intention here is to create the potential for a museum experience and a form of sensory knowledge which generates in visitors what is sometimes referred to as 'critical historical consciousness' – an ability to reflect on the past, draw parallels to the present, and consider other people's stories in relation to one's own.

The emotive and counter-intuitive architecture of the Museum is part of this approach. The architecture of the Museum is intended to disorientate, confuse and create the sense of disruption and lack of control. Interestingly, academic research has argued that emptiness, disorientation and the simultaneous multi-sensory stimulation of imagination alongside the communication of historical content is the route to more emotive forms of experience and a more active generation of historical consciousness.

Other features of the Museum also fragment experience and confuse visitors. The Big Picture Show purposefully interrupts visitors' abilities to engage cognitively with the content of the Main Exhibition Space, demanding from them, instead, a primarily physical and emotional response. The Big Picture Show is impressively large and spectacular, but it does overwhelm and, at present, disempower visitors.

² B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2000) 'The Museum as Catalyst,' Keynote Address, Museums 2000: Confirmation or Challenge, ICOM Sweden, the Swedish Museum Association and Swedish Travelling Exhibitions/Riksställningar, 29 September 2000, Vadstena, Sweden.