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# Architect adds emotion to Jewish veterans' site

North York memorial meaningful to Libeskind

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Daniel Libeskind calls it Flames of Memory.

Actually it's a sweeping, soaring and stirring \$5-million memorial to Jewish war veterans scheduled to be built in Earl Bales Park near Bathurst St. and Sheppard Ave. W.

Though the project is minuscule compared to the redevelopment of the World Trade Center in New York and his two Toronto makeovers — the Royal Ontario Museum and the Hummingbird Centre for the Arts — there are reasons why one of the world's most revered architects agreed to do it.

"It's very meaningful for me personally," Libeskind explained yesterday, speaking on a cellphone while travelling in Europe, "because of its profoundly Jewish subject, because there is nothing more important than honouring these people who must not be forgotten, and because it is in Toronto, which my wife, Nina, considers one of the greatest cities in the world."

In October, after years of discussions, the City of Toronto agreed to provide land in the park to the Jewish War Veterans. The goal: to keep alive the memory of Jewish war veterans all over the world who fought and often died for the cause of freedom, particularly Jewish Canadians who served not only in World War II but many other wars, including some before Confederation.

Lou VanDelman, executive director of the organization, approached Toronto architect Sid Bregman, who said: "I'll build it, but I can't create emotion." It was Bregman who brought Libeskind into the project.

"Libeskind leaped at the chance," says VanDelman. "He came up with a brilliant way to turn this into a spiritual space."

Bregman will help realize Libeskind's concept.

The memorial will be about 25 metres high with a sunken amphitheatre and a stage giving way on one side to a soaring, sharply angled wall topped by Hanukkah lights.

Slicing through the wall is a cannon-like object that symbolizes the shamash, which is the head Hanukkah candle used to light the others. The shamash Libeskind designed is a variation on the eternal flame of freedom.

"Hanukkah celebrates the fight for freedom from tyranny," says Libeskind, "and the eight flames serve as an emblem of what the people we are honouring were fighting for."

A Wall of Remembrance will be inscribed with names of Jewish war veterans around the world. The flags of 26 nations will fly, as well as insignias of armed service branches.

Toronto business leader Gerald Schwartz, who has opened the fundraising campaign with a \$100,000 donation, said yesterday: "There has been an alarming rise in anti-Semitism in Canada lately, and I would hope this will help people recognize what an important role Jews have played in fighting for Canada. This wonderful project offers an eloquent rebuttal to anti-Semitism."

Organizers are hoping that about 30 per cent of the cost will be covered by subsidies from Ottawa and Queen's Park. Beyond the \$5-million cost of building the memorial, they want to raise an additional \$2 million for an endowment fund that would take care of upkeep and security in perpetuity.

Libeskind's Flames of Memory will be situated 250 metres from the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial, ringed by its Wall of Remembrance.

The proximity of the two memorials makes a provocative statement. Yad Vashem calls attention to Jews as the principal victims of the most notorious atrocity and organized hate crime in human history. But Flames of Memory presents the flip side — paying tribute to Jews who refused to be victims, who became fighters, and who in some cases helped bring an end to the Holocaust.

VanDelman says construction will begin in the spring, with an opening either in November this year or the spring of 2006.

"Whenever the opening is scheduled, you can be sure I will be there," says Libeskind.

"One of the things that excites me about this project is that in addition to being about resistance to totalitarianism, it also speaks to the fight against terrorism. That is why it has a dramatic connection to our own times. And I feel lucky and very moved to have a chance to do this."

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