

The Museum of the Twenty-first Century

Of great art museums the world has just a handful, or maybe a couple of handfuls. Those most compliant with the current official characterization of a museum as a public institution dedicated to the preservation, study and display of 'material culture' are gigantic, warehouse-style museums that contain within their collections the most famous works of art and objects of all ages; museums like the Louvre, the Uffizi, or the British Museum. Great art museums traditionally are palaces; large and imposing. So large in fact that their lay-outs engender dizziness and fatigue in the spectator. The generalist museums at the top of the scale distinguish themselves by the highlights in their possession; their attraction to the public depends upon the presence of those top pieces and these provide the focus of the museum visit. Orientation and way-finding within the great art museum are based on searching for the highlights. Today, those exceptional, top pieces are all in place and rarely, if ever, shift.

Yet many of the new art museums that have been completed in recent years are still modelled on the concept of the great container museum. But why should this be so? There must already exist thousands of them in the world; art museums that were founded in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, partly based on long outdated crazes for French and German porcelain, silver, guns and the like, with just one or two real masterpieces in their possession, housed in portentous buildings unsuitable for a contemporary audience and hampered by back maintenance.

The strategy for the last ten years or so has been to build a new extension, a new wing or even a whole new museum building and in this way try to solve all the problems with one stroke. Air treatment systems are brought in. Larger rooms are installed for today's larger works and, especially, larger audiences, together with shops and cafeterias. The museum is presented with a new, contemporary face, which is transparent, glossy, open and inviting to the public, signalling the end of the museum as an elite institution designed for quiet contemplation. And, who knows, maybe the architect will even find a way to make the silver, which has been languishing in the attic for decades, look good again.

But what can architecture really do? Is it reasonable, fair or even logical to expect architecture to generate public interest in institutions that may not be remarkable enough to attract the large audiences they want and need by themselves? Or, to formulate the question in a different, slightly less polemic way: does architecture provide the *only*, or the best, approach to rethinking the museum?

Art museums have come to rely more and more on architecture to update them, raise their profile, increase attention and publicity, and generally 'put them on the map'. At the same time, contemporary art museums and exhibitions largely persist with the warehouse-style format of a linear sequence of oversized rooms that open into each other, and in which it is impossible to sustain concentration for longer than the first few rooms. The focus for the new art museum today thus is largely on the outside – at the express demand of those commissioning these museums, it should be stressed.

Staggering numbers of design competitions, often even for quite small extensions, are held requesting a landmark or icon building. Cities, like corporations, use architecture to compete with each other to further their economic development. Providing a good

social climate plays a role; cities aspire to provide all the facilities a discerning urban audience requires, but the new museums, theatre and conference centers that fulfill this societal need are also intended to present an image that the city hopes will make it a magnet for attention. In fulfilling this role, the content and meaning of the art museum has been downgraded to a public meeting centre; an all-purpose civic space for 'culture' visits. The new museum's audience is so broad, and the fear of elitism so widespread that visiting art museums today amounts to little more than an inoffensive experience that is very similar to how the Impressionists depicted the new outdoor leisure activities of their day: convivial excursions where all manner of people cross each other's paths. The relation between architecture and art is largely lost, however, as the now traditional light, neutral inside spaces are juxtaposed by iconic external images of the building. Internal content is overshadowed by outward appearance. Even as the art museum manifests itself on the outside as radical and provocative, it often remains unimaginative and conservative on the inside.

So what exactly do we, as visitors, museum directors, artists, architects and politicians expect to derive from all this iconic museum architecture? Only very few museums internally depart from the warehouse organization. In fact, the Bilbao Guggenheim Museum, revolutionary though it is in many respects, does not really challenge the normative museological lay-out. Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim in New York (1959) with its spiral is the best-known deviation from the norm, but this experimental typology has always remained controversial and has not found a great following – and for sure the curved walls and sloping floors provide great display problems. Perhaps the contemporary icon of museology that proposes the most radically alternative solution, was also its very first example: the pyramid in front of the Louvre by IM Pei. The pyramid extends and heightens the dimensions and view lines of the space, disrupting the linear, sequential build-up and perspective of the original palace rooms, but this effect is limited only to the entrance.

The architect of the pyramid did not anticipate the building to become such an icon, which immediately questions the ubiquitous desire to produce instant, emblematic landmark pieces of architecture. People may flock to see a new museal icon, but will they return again and again? And, perhaps the most important question of all: is the public's experience of the museum significantly affected by the architectural transformation? Does it encourage new interests, understandings, or perceptions?

The display of art and artifacts has its own history, its own traditions, and its own dogmas. It is the role of architects to challenge these conventions and come up with new inventions. Things that are new and different are appealing and provoke new ways of seeing. At the same time, it is extremely worrying if the interest in the architecture of museums begins to surpass the interest in the works that are inside them. Without a doubt some of the new museums of the last decade have been fantastically successful and have provided triumphs of contemporary architectural spectacle; good and celebrated museums in this category are the Kunsthal by Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid's Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati and several museums by Herzog & DeMeuron. These examples have also begun to broach deeper questions relating to the entire museum organization, its public role and the way it encases art and makes it accessible - the questions that really matter. What this shows is that it is possible as well as necessary to rethink the art museum at a profound level. It also demonstrates the ability of architects

to contribute to a new, expanded, possibly radically altered interpretation of the whole meaning of the art museum. Architecture as a discipline is concerned with the organization of material and immaterial components. Who is to say that when architects rethink the museum the answer should centre on building alone? Some of the ways in which architectural, that is to say organizational, thinking can contribute to the future of the museum could in effect be more closely associated with issues of management, public-private coalitions, business, or even publicity.

An instance of an architectural solution with radical managerial implications would be the suspension of the departmental organization. One of the problems of the generalist art museum is that it has many different departments which operate as distinct territories. They occupy their own spaces and rigidly protect their own interests. This arrangement makes the museum visit into a fragmented and confusing experience. At the end of it; what do you, as the visitor, really get out of it? The popularity of blockbuster shows demonstrate the public appreciation of specificity and clarity of purpose. You learn more from this than from random browsing. The art museum, exhibition or collection that communicates strongly what it is about thus stimulates culture far more than generalist collections without direction. For this reason, art museums should be free to handle their collections more vigorously than they are able to at present. To distinguish themselves they could learn to play chess with their pieces, let go of the stifling parade of self-protective departments and find a new, much more overall dynamic.

Related to this, many museums now follow the policy of representing art history and assemble and display their collections accordingly. This results in a deadening homogeneity with more or less even surveys of the march of history didactically being put up in numerous regional centres all over the world. Why, once you have dragged yourself through a number of those collections, would you want to have the same lesson drilled into you again and again? Rethinking the museological organization could and perhaps should result in proposals that abandon both territorial apartments and the obligatory historical line and replace them with more imaginative alternative arrangements that stimulate the public's visual and intellectual capacities – and do not underestimate the public.

Rethinking the museal organization could also draw on current situations of presenting art outside the museum context. One such situation is found in contemporary art fairs such as the Frieze or the Basel Miami Art Fair. The institutional, historicist and didactic attitude of the contemporary generalist museum is completely absent from these events, but they burst with excitement. Art fairs have no line at all, historical or otherwise. The strongest common factor is the audience, which is huge and diverse, but also intensely involved. The other aspect in which the fair is different from the museum is that, in theory, you can take all the art home with you. The art on show, even the top pieces, is alive; it still circulates, instead of being enshrined in one place for all time. People cut deals, celebrate, backstab and swindle each other – the whole event cultivates fantasy and greed, on which art thrives.

If it is not too late already, and the social momentum has not inexorably moved away from the cultural establishment, the new museum organization should learn from the global event structure of these fairs. They are private events, assembling collections from all over the world, and operating on self-selecting principles. As the many thematic shows surrounding the commercial events demonstrate, it is not naked business alone

which determines the tone. The fact also that the Frieze for instance has its origins in a magazine is insightful; it tells us something about the power of publicity. But it also indicates that initiatives develop from each other and that perhaps a museum also does not necessarily have to start out as a museum, but could find its beginning in something else which is strong and exciting enough to evolve. It could well be that is the transformative potential of an artistic enterprise that ensures its vitality and relevance. And where is the transformative potential of the average museum to be found? A more stagnant milieu is hard to imagine.

But why not cultivate real partnerships with private collectors? Collectors, those rich and solemn founders of our historic art museums, have little or no role in the current ones. At least not while alive. Yet contemporary collectors may provide the best opportunity to break through the stuffy institutional character of the art museum.

In its own, faintly mausoleum-like way, Herzog & Demeuron's Schaulager in Basel represents one of the most radical and inspiring interpretations of what a new space for art can be. It combines public exhibition spaces with the archives of one collection, which consist of perfectly acclimatized rooms, housing complete art works, which can be viewed by appointment. Could a new organizational model for the Museum of the Twenty-first Century be found in a cross between the Basel Miami Art Fair and the Schaulager? The resulting mix could generate a new generation of vibrant urban centres for collectors to show and store their collections, to meet each other and the public; to learn about their works and to convey their passion to others.

And what would a 'museum' (if we were still to call it that) like this look like? Picture this: the jarring discontinuities of the conventional museum with its departments are absent, resulting in an entirely different perception of the individual work in relation to the exhibition as a whole. The environment stimulates contemplation, but by other means than enforcing a restricted optical field. There are no abrupt transitions. The space (the time) you have left behind is undividedly part of the space you are in now, is part of your ecological field, is still perceptible, still surrounding you; the art contained in those spaces follows this principle. Formats, mediums, and times can be effortlessly arranged together and rearranged. There are never too many people; this museum and this art thrives on audiences, vernissages, and spectacle. There are no walls of unrelenting uniformity and blankness that absorb the art that hangs on them, rendering it equally uniform and blank. Public, event, art and business meet each other and feed on each other. The museum of the future can be anything on the outside, but on the inside reveals itself as an ever evolving temporary icon of exhibition design and public meeting space - contemplative, visual and enriching.

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