

RETHINKING MUSEUM ARCHITECTURE – ART MUSEUM AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 21 CENTURY

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Abstract

The beginning of this century will undeniably be remembered as the museum's golden era. Since the museum boom which started at the end of the eighties, the role of the museum in modern society has been ceaselessly questioned, and the museum's position reevaluated. New museum buildings act as important urban catalysts of postindustrial cities, and possess ambitious aesthetic mechanisms, which affect the way in which the architectonic form expresses itself in order to reconcile the increasing functional and representational complexity of the contemporary museum. Museums illustrate the evolution of architecture and an accelerated transformation of trends in architecture, which can run either in parallel or in counteractive directions, but most frequently, in complete opposition to each other.

With numerous examples of museum architecture, continually created from the end of the eighties to the present, one would imagine and even expect an enormous diversity in museum typology, but this is, in fact, only an illusion. A stunningly large number of museums find their retreat in a re-rendering of a few renowned museum archetypes (Durand's layout, Schinkel's Altes Museum scheme, Leo von Klenze's Alte Pinakothek stairs), but it seems that, in current mass production, only two characteristic typological trends can be recognized: the museum as a spectacular and "unrepeatable" architectonic form, and the museum as a neutral repetitive container or multifunctional box. In this paper, these two most proliferative and antipodal trends in contemporary museum architecture are analyzed, and their ability to satisfy the primary (though not necessarily the only) function of the museum – establishment of visual communication with objects of cultural and scientific significance exhibited within - is discussed.

Keywords: museum architecture, minimalism, white box, deconstructivism, art, visual communication

1 INTRODUCTION

The beginning of this century will be undeniably marked as the museum's golden era. The audience hailed the opening of new museums and the expansion of already existing institutions with excitement and glorification, without restraint. Since the beginning of the museum boom, at the end of 1980's, the role of the museum in modern society has been examined. Museums, like Stirling's museum in Stuttgart, represented the birth of a new architectural genealogy, spreading worldwide at the speed of light. One of the most important characteristics of the contemporary ("new") museum is the so called, "usable flexibility"[1]. Public areas, including vast entrance halls with versatile function, auditoriums, museum restaurants and shops, are becoming more and more important for urban scenery, while new buildings, aside from their role of being urban catalysts in postindustrial cities, are equipped with determined aesthetic mechanisms, enabling their authors to express their architectural skills, so that museums frequently become stunningly pure materializations of their authors' attitude toward architecture itself. Contemporary museum buildings are "seismographs of the architectural culture to which they belong"[1]. The way in which the architectural forms are expressed, in order to ensure the accommodation of the increasing functional and representative complexity of the contemporary museum, illustrates the development of architecture and accelerated changes in trends which can act either in parallel or counteractive states, but most frequently, in complete opposition to each other.

Each of these trends expresses certain formal mechanisms and strategies, whether there is an intervention on an already existing object, or construction of a new building in urban or natural surroundings. Every option has a different approach to the organization of interior space, and museological criteria considering collection presentation; or for conveying emblematic and symbolic values of museum; different ideas about the relation between museum and urban surroundings; ideas about materialization and technology. All these trends are results of different formal and conceptual museum models evolution. Here, we discuss two trends in museum architecture which are the most

characteristic, which have propagated the most, but which are completely opposed to each other: the museum as an organic, unique, monumental and specific form; and the museum treated as a container or multifunctional box, neutral, repetitive and improvable [2].

2 SPECTACULAR MUSEUM

The explosion of new art forms at the end of the 20th century demanded new responses from contemporary museum buildings. Several star architects (Peter Eisenman, Wolf Prix and Helmut Swiczinsky, Rem Koolhaas, Daniel Libeskind and Frank Gehry) have employed a new, specific architectonic vocabulary in an effort to meet these new requirements and to identify the museum architecture and art contained within as an aesthetic whole. Created objects are now called “new museums”, new not only by their age, but also by their program. These new museums are created for the exhibition of new art forms, sensitive not only to the space, but friendly to the existing art works. The new museums are so radically distant from modern structures, with removable walls, floating in open space, as they themselves were from the classical galleries with enfilades. The new museums are probably best described by the definition of environmental art, formulated by the Italian designer and critic Germano Celant: “When artist does not use the space as the postament for his work, but as an integral part” [3].



Figure 1-2. - Wexner Center for the Arts, on Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio, by Peter Eisenman; Vitra Design Museum in Weil on Rhein, Germany, by Frank Gehry

The term “new museum” was established in 1989, after the materialization of Peter Eisenman’s and Frank Gehry’s concepts. Wexner Center for the Arts, on Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio (1985-89) (Fig. 1), Vitra Design Museum in Weil on Rhein, Germany (1987-89) (Fig. 2), and Old Master Gallery, Groninger Museum, Groningen, (1988-94) (Fig. 3-4), although completely different in style, are examples of highly articulated architecture where the presentation of content is an integral part of the museum.



Figure 3-4. Old Master Gallery, Groninger Museum, Groningen, by CoopHimmelb(l)au

It is not by coincidence that some works of the above mentioned architects (most of them unrealized projects) have been shown together with the works of Zaha Hadid and Bernard Tschumi at the exhibition called „Deconstructivist Architecture” in MoMA in New York, 1988. Regardless of their different philosophies and aesthetic approaches, their contribution evokes the time when Russian deconstructivist architecture broke the rules of the classical composition back in 1920s and 1930s. Referring to the “self-established” non-historical vocabulary of Modernism, i.e. by usage of vocabulary

liberated from history, the new trend is pointed toward the expressiveness of rational functionalism. Similar to historical postmodernism, deconstructivism tends to create the iconic architecture and thereby gain again fictional character of work of art” [4]. A closed form is broken, torn, and instead of function, it follows deformation (Fig. 5-6). Deconstructivists have introduced themes they are occupied with; oblique, irregular geometric forms, absence of hierarchy within a whole, and replacement of structure” [5].

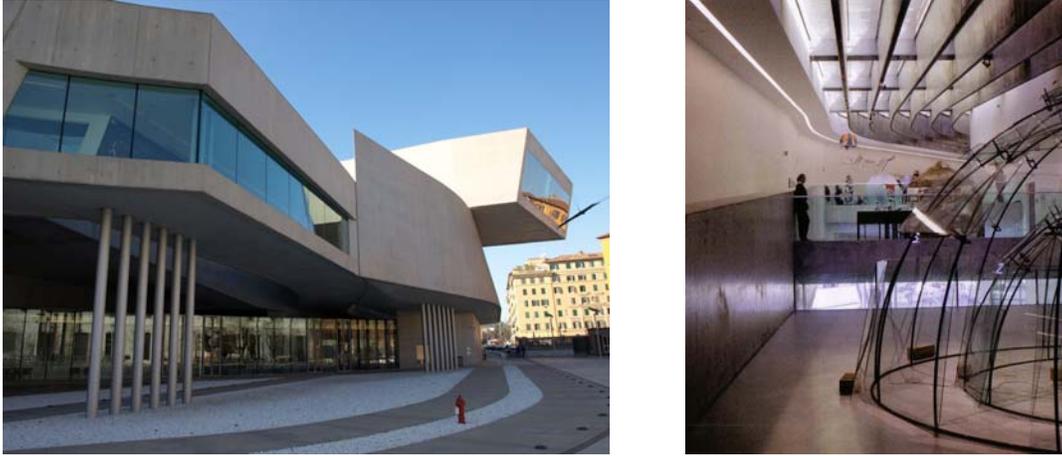


Figure 5-6. MAXXI Museum in Rome, Italy, by Zaha Hadid

Kurt W. Foster recognized new, unusually shaped museums as “spectacles in which the visitors are expected to enjoy the aesthetic experience of the architecture itself” [6]. Spectacular museums attracted audiences educated in art AND architecture, where the mere definition of aesthetics becomes more liberal, compared to the previous more restrained types, in which the aesthetic experience was expected only in the most educated visitors, and an exhibit had the didactic effect for other visitors. In probably the best review of this subject written recently, Victoria Newhouse categorized these new museums as “*museum as environmental art*” [7]. Similarly, while Stanislaus von Moos describes them in detail as objects which “redefine museum space in sense of organic and expressive spatial forms and which cannot be categorized in terms of traditional concepts”, he defines them as “*museum as architectural sculpture*” [5] (Fig. 7-9).

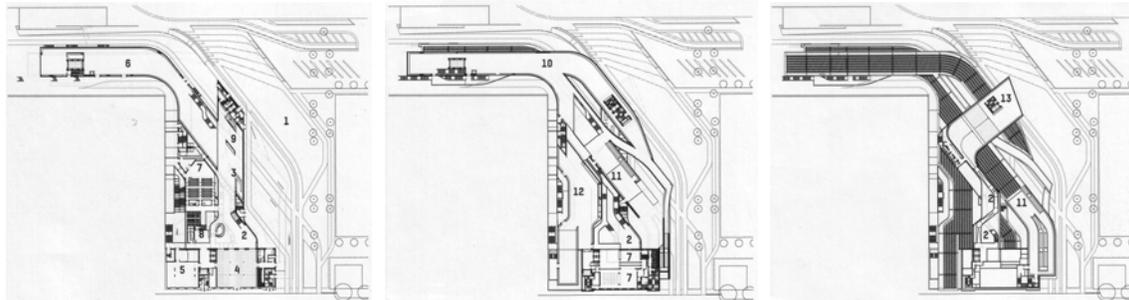


Figure 7-9. MAXXI Museum in Rome, Italy, by Zaha Hadid: ground floor, first floor, second floor plan

2.1 Art and architecture - the integrated aesthetic whole?

New museum buildings, created by the above mentioned architects, were hastily charged with having predominance over the art they contained. It is undeniable, that they possess powerful presence, and above all, they attract attention to themselves, while the works of art they contain have to combat against their domination [8]. It also seems that the authors of new museums often overlook the primary reason for the museum’s existence: to present works of art in a setting with ideal illumination, spatial and climate conditions. Even the idea of equal presence of architecture and art in the creation of an “integrated aesthetic whole”, has deviated to a great extent, and in many cases, the art is obliged to compete with the space in which it is exhibited, and degraded it to the mere rank of decoration. Instead of an “integrated aesthetic whole”, museums have frequently become a field of creative combat between architects and artists.

When Philip Johnson was asked whether the art will lose its central position because of the new Guggenheim Bilbao Museum's (Fig. 10-11) architecture, he answered: "When a building is as good as that one, f... the art!" [9]. Although there are many people who share his opinion, it is surprising that anybody would consider an object as outstanding, even before it was proven to serve its purpose. On the other hand, it is somehow expected, as existing tensions between art and architecture (which are especially expressed in recent museum projects) are not only representative of the battle between the egos of artists and architects, but are also a reflection of the historically complicated and unclear relation between art and architecture.



Figure 10-11. Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, by Frank Gehry

3 ATTEMPTED RE-DISCOVERY OF THE „NEUTRAL“SPACE

The creation and development of the new museum did not settle the long-standing dissatisfaction of artists and curators. On the contrary, discontent grew and often resulted in the employment of alternative spaces for art exhibitions: abandoned industrial complexes, unused factories, empty warehouses. People from artistic circles stated that all they needed was a clear, neutral space, space which was not going to compete with art, probably forgetting that this was exactly the kind of space they wanted to abolish during the sovereign predominance of international style.

With this developing architecture and accelerated sequence of trends (whose continuum can be followed through the nineties), an important change was growing. Along with the new historicism and postmodernism, high-tech expressionism and deconstructivism that was developing within the realm of international architecture, a new trend was evolving: minimalism. The arrival of this new trend to general architecture seemed to be especially important to museum architecture. Evidently, the restraint shown in minimalism is the best response to the art which has marked the best tradition of museum architecture, while the new generation museums seem to be predestined to »serve the art« again, which is the expression of the highest degree of victimization that architecture can show to the art.



Figure 12-14. Goetz collection, Munich, Germany, by Herzog and De Meuron

In the last decade of the 20th century, some museums have shown that Luepertz's »classical« model can be valid in contemporary conditions. In museum architecture, there are numerous examples of simple neo- or late modernism, as opposed to the postmodernism and deconstructivism, withstanding the attitudes which have been »arbitrary« for a long time. One small private museum in Munich, Goetz Collection (Fig.12-14) (1989-92, Jacques Herzog and Pierre De Meuron), is an emblem of this attitude. Architects Peter Zumthor (Kunsthhaus, Bregenz, 1991-97), Morger & Degelo (Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, Vaduz, 1997-2000) (Fig.15), Weber and Hofer (Lentos Kunstmuseum Linz, 2000-03) (Fig.16) have taken similar approaches, although in their own unique and individual manner. Box-like museums in Munich, Bregenz, Vaduz and Linz tend to represent a completely "democratic" starting point for the exhibited art. This kind of architecture is often considered as "neutral" in form, historical associations, and relation to the exhibited art. And so it seemed that this "neutrality" would fulfill the expectations of museum professionals.



Figure 15-16. Kunstmuseum, Vaduz, Liechtenstein, by Morger & Degelo; Lentos Kunstmuseum, Linz, Austria, by Weber and Hofer

3.1 Does minimalism really offer neutrality?

And yet, by 1976, when Brian O'Doherty's publication „Inside the White Cube“ [10] was released, the myth of the neutral white cube was already losing its mystical quality, because "the building always has *some* aspirations, even bigger if it seems not to have any" [8]. The exquisite designs of Alvaro Siza, Tadao Ando, Herzog and de Meuron, or the achievements of Eduardo Souto de Moura, Peter Zumthor, Anette Gigon, Mike Gueyer and Yoshio Taniguchi had become strictly controlled and yet artistically ambitious mechanisms with presentations rarely as prudent as they seemed. Their rigid aesthetic laws invariably led toward idiosyncratic, even invasive floor plans, which were sometimes in conflict with the demands they should have fulfilled. Minimalism itself did not bring "appropriate" or "natural" results, and "neutral" white space was often not satisfying. Generated from the aesthetic ideals of modernism, neutrality was once again proven to be an illusion.

Pure, white space functions perfectly well for modernist masterpieces, but it seems that most of the contemporary art looks naïve in it. These spaces do not create satisfactory context for this new art; their "purity" leads to alienation of "general" from "educated" audience.

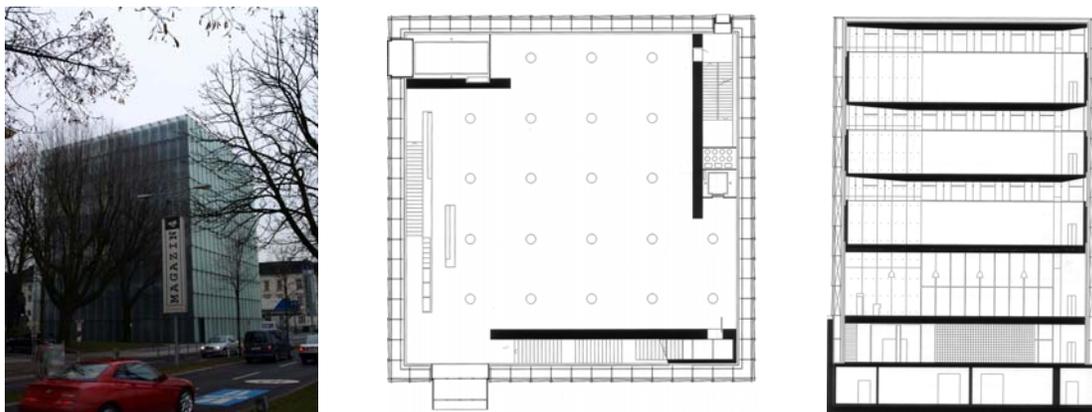


Figure 17-19. Goetz collection, Munich, Germany, by Herzog and De Meuron

Goetz Collection is everything but neutral. In Kunsthau Bregenz (Fig.17-19), extreme neutrality is criticized for “destruction” of exhibits in some group exhibitions. Should aesthetic standards of semantic “neutrality” in each and every case raise our attention and skepticism? Here should also be noted that “white” in architecture is hardly ever really white, and “minimal” is not always “simple” [5]. A “minimalistic” museum and exhibition space function, maybe even more than any other, in order to compensate the exclusion of historical connotation, and their aesthetic purism is often perceived as an autonomous artistic theme which is interposed between an object and its viewer.

4 WHAT IS ACTUALLY EXPECTED FROM A NEW ART MUSEUM?

The explosion of typologies and formal themes in museum architecture have culminated with Frank O. Gehry's museum in Bilbao. Gehry's Guggenheim has turned the public's perception of the museum upside-down. The enormous success of Guggenheim Bilbao has indicated that one building can breathe new energy into the whole institution and initiate the revitalization of the entire city and region [11]. In addition, many artists, museum professionals and architects, have initiated new debate about issues they consider “risky” in museum design, as well as about things they consider legitimate and desirable in the museum architecture.

Architects have their own attitude towards museums. “Museums satisfy... a deep natural want... as deep and as natural as sex or sleeping,” says Philip Johnson [12]. Peter Eisenman suggests a little “going back to basics. Perhaps one of the problems with museums is that we in architecture are in fact stuck with a tradition which I would call theoretical form... We are at the end of a dying line. That line is a line that has always thought that form took care of everything and that space really was what happened.” [13]

Then again, artists have traditionally had a problematic relationship with the institutions that collect, sell and exhibit their work. Back in 1979, long before Gehry's era, German artist Georg Baselitz denied the relation between artists and architects and attempts to integrate their work, indulging instead unobtrusive galleries. In his lecture “Four Walls and Light from Above or Else No Painting on the Wall” he claims the spaces with “high walls with light from above, with several doors, windowless, without panels, without any profiles, without glaring floor, and finally, colorless, too” [14].

Another German artist, Markus Luepertz, expressed his denial of these »interesting« new buildings: “All these new museums are often beautiful, noteworthy buildings but, like all art, hostile to the “other” type of art... Architecture should possess the greatness to present itself in such a way that art is possible within it, that art is not driven away by architecture's own claim to be art and without – even worse – art being exploited by architecture as „decoration“ [15].

Frank Gehry, an architect who has designed art spaces as diverse as the industrial conversion, Temporary Contemporary (now Geffen Contemporary) in Los Angeles (1983), and the Guggenheim Bilbao (1997), found himself in an intriguing reversal of position:

My discussions about museums with artists began in the late 1970s, when I was confronted by a group of artists. It was Michael Asher, John Knight, Benjamin Buchloh, and Daniel Buren. They asked, “Okay Mr. Gehry, you love the artist and the work, what kind of museum would you make for us?” And I said what architects have said for a long time and what architects keep saying, “Well the building is for art, so the art should stand out. The building should be very neutral and should not intrude; it should not in any way compete with the art or become visible. We should be that invisible puppeteer, like in the Japanese dances.” I said all of that, and when I finished my holier-than-thou statement I got attacked like I've never been attacked before. I was told, “Goddamnit, you're so stupid. Don't you understand that when we finally get our work to be shown in a museum, we want it to be an important place? If you give us a neutral damn thing it ain't gonna be very important. It's not going to be important in the city; it's not going to have any presence in the community”. [16]

It is obvious that there is no general agreement about this question among artists. A consensus among artists, architects and curators is even less likely. So what is actually expected from a new art museum? New inspirational shapes and spaces? 'Neutral' white cubes? “Unobtrusive” architecture? Or architecture that speaks out loud?

5 CONCLUSION

It seems that one reason for confusing, disorientating domination and supremacy radiating from the contemporary museum architecture is that it is more a product of 20th century abstract modernism than of 19th century rational historicism. It is, most of all, materialization of different architectural visions,

with often neglected practical usability. What really seems right in this architecture is architecture itself, not the relationship with the art within. The museums themselves are the works of art which contain the other works of art. Inevitable conflict is inadequately minimized by the architectural design. Generally speaking, works of art are guests inside museum walls, and often less important.

We can imagine that there is an alternative to the museum architecture which is "in service" and acts chiefly as a container, but also to the museum which glorifies itself, in the wide area between these two extremes. Museum architecture is closely related to the urban context, together with its functional spaces, and has to survive the dialogue with art, architecture and its users, museum visitors and museum staff. Finally, the individual experience of each museum visitor is important and even crucial in the sense of success or failure when the museum space is questioned. The future of museums is in affirmation of their multifaceted nature, not in evoking ephemeral, spectacular effects.

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