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***José Rafael Moneo***  
***The Museums of Modern Art and Architecture***  
***Stockholm, 1991 - 1998***

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Over time, Rafael Moneo's interest in northern architecture has been an essential part of his training. In 1961, a year spent apprenticing with Jørn Utzon, personal knowledge of Alvar Aalto's work, and proximity to the work of Gunnar Asplund all have strongly influenced the intellectual path of this architect from Navarre. In his professional activity, these interests seem to have been translated principally into an increasingly in-depth investigation of the use of natural light. And yet paradoxically, perhaps one of the most obvious signs of his Stockholm museum's integration into the urban landscape is provided by a night-time view of the artificial light from the lantern skylights scattered throughout the roof of the building. It is an easily recognizable lighting scheme, but it is homogeneous with that of the adjacent buildings and, more generally, of the city. Thus one can intuit the idea around which the design tenaciously revolves: the integration with the site, overcoming every temptation toward monumentality and self representation - a goal that is not easy, if one considers the characteristics of the site and the program.

In 1990 the city of Stockholm held a competition for the construction of a new complex to house the Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of Architecture on the island of Skeppsholmen. It was an open competition for Swedish designers, but an invitation to submit proposals was also extended to five international architects: Tadao Ando, Frank O. Gehry (who did not, in the end, participate), Kristian Gullichsen, Jørn Utzon, and Rafael Moneo, who was the winner. The program, while detailed, left the designers particular freedom with regard to the choice of site. Until the last century the island had been a logistical center for the Swedish navy; subsequently it was converted in to a cultural hub. The building fabric is fragmentary, made up of minor historic structures arranged over an irregular and varied terrain.

Rafael Moneo began with a realistic evaluation of this context and its specific dynamics of environmental equilibrium. He developed a solution based on a dialogue with the surrounding buildings and with the skyline of the city, rejecting a conspicuous architectural gesture. He then opted to use the central area of the island, precisely identifying the point where his museum could be sited horizontally along the north-south axis. On the one hand, he wanted it aligned behind the long, regular parallelepiped of a former rope factory, the Tyghuset. On the other hand, he wanted to open up the view toward the sea and the city above, beyond the canal. It is a piece of terrain that slopes down toward the water, offering a particularly varied and advantageous situation in terms of both landscape setting and function, since it allows two different levels of access to the building. But it is also an "interstitial" space, as the architect himself has described it, and as such it presents a challenge, offering well-defined surroundings, both natural and artificial.

Having established the coordinates of the layout, Moneo drew up the plans. He made two significant decisions with regard to pre-existing structures: to demolish the old Museum of Modern

Art building from the fifties, and to incorporate the old military gymnasium, a T-shaped structure dating back to 1850-1910. From this point on, he proceeded, keeping in mind both the site and the problems inherent in the construction of a modern museum space.

His respect for the local situation led him to orient the design toward the island's interior. Nothing is revealed to the visitor who arrives by way of the bridge that connects the island to the mainland and who then climbs the slope to its summit. Only there, at the top, the main entrance unexpectedly appears, discrete and on the second story compared to the adjacent structures, framed by a flat roof that welcomes exploration.

The view of the complex from the side facing the sea is entirely different and makes an immediate impression. The wing housing the Museum of Architecture (added at a later stage of the competition design) emerges from the south, running northward. It is modernist, white, with bands of windows and a flat roof. The former gymnasium is preserved in its original condition, with a double-pitched roof. The central building element corresponds to the reception hall, with a projecting, glassed-in area for a restaurant. Finally, the Museum of Art pavilions, almost entirely windowless, are covered in red brick, with lantern roofs.

Formally, the fragmentation of the context seems to have been reabsorbed "as is" into the design: a series of interrupted and linked volumes, receptive to the austerity of the nearby constructions and, at the same time, aware of their own identity. In reality, careful analysis reveals the "fragments" to be well consolidated and responsive to a desire for unity that controls the entire intervention, which is designed to reduce any impact on the site. This is a new application of the theme of unity, the result of an investigation of compositional form that Moneo has been working on for sometime, as seen in recent projects, from the Murcia Town Hall to the Don Benito Cultural Center in Badajoz, to the Houston Museum.

In Stockholm, the complexity of the compositional scheme is fully revealed in the experience of the interior spaces. The geometric design of the plan is the organizing element, without being constrictive. It allows freedom in the arrangement of the spaces and, consequently, flexibility of use. A great hall acts as a hinge between the two museum institutions. The Art Museum is developed northward, organized along a corridor-gallery that faces onto the rope factory and the garden that has been placed between, which introduces a visual perspective and resumes the sightlines of the Tyghuset. The museum itself has a spacious hall for changing exhibitions and three pavilion units for the permanent collection, which includes works of the international avant-garde from the fifties to the seventies and contemporary Swedish works.

The pavilions are organized in blocks, with square and rectangular rooms of different dimensions and proportions, slotted one into the other to form compact configurations. The basic module of the grid measures 6 meters by 6 meters. All hierarchies are annulled, but a rhythm is maintained, thanks to the small spatial intervals that detach one block from another. The neutrality of the geometry of the rooms is reinforced by the natural overhead light, obtained through skylights opened in the truncated-pyramid-shaped ceiling. This is a solution that guarantees an ideal relationship between the diffusion of light and the height of the spaces. From the beginning, Moneo's adoption of a horizontal scheme for the complex was firmly bound to a decision to use an overhead source of light. This is a logical duality, classical in tradition, supported by positive experiences in previous museum projects. Here the optimal relationship between the plan and section of the rooms, the correct slope of the roof and the best effect of light in the spaces have been established through a series of studies using models.

No external interference disturbs the abstract calm of the exhibition spaces, with the exception of one element that recurs once, or twice at most, in each pavilion a sort of small homage to the museum's panoramic position. A square window, telescoping outward, re-establishes an orientation

with the outside world, but also proposes a rediscovery of a very particularized view of the city. Throughout the complex, careful attention is paid to the relationship with nature. Museum offices, the art and architecture laboratories for children, and the restaurant have large windows looking out toward the sea, while the library and cafeteria of the architecture section open up toward the interim garden, where sculptures by Picasso have been installed.

The 6,300 square meters of the Museum of Architecture (compared to 19,300 for the Museum of Art) also are organized like a perfect machine, in accordance with the dictates of modern museography. A distinctive dimension characterizes them within the overall scale of the project. The generous space of the former gymnasium, set aside for permanent installations, the spaces to the side of this structure, earmarked for changing exhibitions, the research laboratories, the archive (on several floors), the small auditorium, the two story library, the offices, the storerooms: these are the spaces assigned to accommodate the various and important activities of an institution that contains a collection of two million pieces, including drawings and documents, over 1,000 models, and approximately 25,000 books. Here there is no trace of satisfaction in formal redundancy, but only the expression of a rigorous lucidity of thought.