

From: *Museums for a New Millennium. Concepts Projects Buildings*, curated by V. Magnago Lampugnani, A. Sachs, exhibition catalog (Rivoli-Torino, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 30 May - 26 August 2001), Prestel, Monaco-Londra-New York 2001, pp. 108-113.

Aldo Rossi
Bonnefanten Museum
Maastricht, 1990-1995

Herman Kerkdijk

The museum as a vital monument

There is no greater mystery in time, this endless network of yesterday, today, tomorrow, ever and never

Jorge Luis Borges

Convention, a type of memory, is the most severe impediment to the enjoyment of life and art.

Piet Mondrian

The Italian architect Aldo Rossi's Bonnefanten museum stands on the banks of the Maas, just across from the old center of Maastricht. From a distance its enclosed character makes it look like a red building built as a single unit, but as one approaches it becomes apparent that this is no more than an impression. The building is divided into three rectangular blocks set parallel to one another, each clad in red brick and red stone.

The blocks are reconnected to one another on the east but not on the west, leaving two courtyards between the blocks facing the Maas. Against the middle block stands a lofty, oddly-shaped tower, its high zinc dome resting on a low concrete plinth, the whole clad in slabs of off-white stone.

Spatially the two courtyards succeed in involving the building in the area dominated by the river and the towers of the old town on the other side of the Maas. By using these simple typologies, rectangular volumes and round towers, Rossi has succeeded in linking the Bonnefanten museum with the river and the town, so interweaving it into Maastricht's history.

Around the top of the tower's glistening dome is a panoramic terrace, from which a splendid view can be obtained over the river and the town. The tower is flanked by two much smaller round steel lift shafts, giving the building an uncompromising, almost nineteenth-century industrial character, making it more difficult to see at a glance that the building is in fact a museum. Rossi would not dream of designing a museum that looks like a museum. It is after all not its architecture that makes a building a museum, but the things that are put in it.

The building is, of course, reminiscent of Schinkel's Altes Museum, even of Von Klenze's Alte Pinakothek, but it would be too simple-minded to see this building as no more than two classic architectonic types combined to construct a completely new and unprecedented museum. Rossi had not the slightest intention of designing a typical museum, but he did want the building to provide a space in which it would be art, above all else, that would find a home. The architecture of the building is expressive of the town, not of art or indeed of anything else. It provides a space for art in the same way as a town provides space for architecture.

The Bonnefanten Museum stands on the Sphinx-C eramique site, so called because of the factory of

that name that formerly stood there. The Dutch architect Jo Coenen was responsible for preparing the town plan for the area as a whole. He argued that parts of the factory, in particular the Wiebenga halls,¹ could be left standing, renovated, and included in the new plan. In the end only a fragment of the building, the first industrial building in the Netherlands to be constructed entirely of reinforced concrete, was left standing. This striking edifice stands immediately beside the main entrance to the new museum and provides about 3,000 square meters of floor area spread over three floors. It is not air-conditioned. The attic floor, immediately under the magnificent vaulted roof, is used for temporary exhibitions. The three lower floors are used to house permanent installations by Sol LeWitt, Luciano Fabro, and Richard Serra. A restored building of this kind, containing what it does, creates a profound impression on its visitors and would be a luxury for any museum.

Rossi designed a new frontage for this historic fragment - in the tradition of Leon Battista Alberti, who did the same sort of thing for existing churches - in a style comparable to that of the entrance to the new museum. For some reason or other, probably financial, this scheme did not go through. This may perhaps seem a pity, but the effect has been that this fragment of the modern Wiebenga halls looks totally unlike the frontage of Rossi's building. The two pieces of architecture can be seen as two unequal quantities in an equation, an equation that solves no problem but that does create a particular critical effect. This does at least frustrate a completely straightforward identification with Rossi's architecture, for after all the tension between the two buildings arises precisely because of the autonomous force of the difference between the two architectural styles. It recalls the way in which architectonic fragments from different periods appear alongside one another in Rossi's concept of the analogue town, as if the recollection of a town, of this particular town, can exist only in an accumulation of different styles of architecture, gaining strength as its autonomous quality increases.

The entrance to the museum consists of a two-story-high steel frame in the elevation, topped by glass, lying wedged back between two totally blind brick wall surfaces, most closely resembling towers, which blend with the mass that stands behind them. This duality is in fact repeated in another, less hybrid, form on the other side of the building, in the way in which the great domed tower is flanked by two round lift shafts. In the entrance hall the visitor is greeted by a vertical shaft of light falling through the cone-shaped void from the roof to the ground floor, and by Marcel Broodthaers's work *L'Entrée de l'exposition*, exhibited there, which on a clear, sunny day is literally bathed in light. This piece consists of eight palm trees, erected in the middle of the cone-shaped void, surrounded by a series of photographs mounted on the wall. It is a truly fantastic experience to see all those palm trees standing there in that light, but in retrospect the experience also has a certain ambiguity, because this work of art is so wonderfully well suited to its location that it makes it seem as if its autonomous and critical character has almost evaporated in the heavenly light, reducing it to a secondary attribute of the museum's architecture.

In short, this is an entrance to give one pause, an entrance that seems to be designed to initiate the visitor into an artistic extreme. The initiation ritual is impressively continued by the grand stair case in the central block between the two courtyards. This staircase leads the visitor halfway up to the actual exhibition floors and ultimately to the most extraordinary room in the whole museum, the room under the dome. This room was conceived by Rossi as a kind of workshop in which temporary projects could be exhibited, providing a confrontation between the artist and the most "religious" room in the building. If there is anywhere in the building that can be seen as an interpretation of a museum, a place in which art and architecture blend, it has to be the cone-shaped void and the dome-shaped room, where the architecture is tailor-made to suit the art and, conversely, where the art is tailor-made to suit the building.

A natural comparison with the relationship between art and architecture is the relationship between

architecture and the town. After all, when one goes out onto the panoramic terrace that runs round the dome, the town itself looks like a museum, a gathering place for all those special buildings, a kind of work of art capable of breathing new life into the recollection of the town over and over again. Rossi is well aware that a town is preeminently a place of constant change, but also that ultimately the town is the place where each change is doomed to become petrified in the stone of its age.

The construction of the domed tower is remarkable because as compared with the classic triangular construction of the front ages of the other blocks, a central section is missing. The domed tower consists of a lower and an upper edge standing on one another without creating any central section, effortlessly suggesting a connection between earth and sky, a reference to a bridge between mortals and gods, between the finite and the infinite, between the café on the ground floor and the art that lies above it in the room under the dome. In this comparison the tower appears predominantly as a gathering place for the town, people, and art; in a word, as a sanctuary where these different domains can be thought of collectively, as a recollection of existence as a whole.

The sketch that Rossi made of the domed tower and the Onze Lieve Vrouwe church on the other side of the Maas can be taken as the latest in a long series of ways in which Rossi expressed his continuing research into the concept of the analogue town. In one of his articles Rossi wrote about theory and design, "The beginning of a theory is, I believe, the insistence on certain themes, ... in particular the ability to hit the center of a theme to follow, to operate a choice inside architecture and to always try to solve that problem."² The Bonnefanten museum is another product of the tenacity with which Rossi has for decades aimed to give his designs and buildings the character of timeless architecture and to meet the demand for something original, something specific in each design, met by Rossi over and over again by reference to an archetype, something that was once original.

Perhaps this is why at first sight topicality seems to play no part in Rossi's architecture; but the surprising paradox is that Rossi's architecture is topical because it is urban architecture, more precisely the architecture of an analogue town, whose silent character makes visible the daily vitality of the town and whose "slow motion" effect makes it an indicator of new developments in the town. Rossi's architecture, however autonomous it may be, can be effective only in a town, and can survive only by marking time.

The entire ground floor of the central section of the building can be thrown open, connecting this new part of the town to the historic center. Once inside the building, the visitor can walk on either side of the grand staircase through the museum café to the banks of the Maas, from which one can see and access the historic town on the other bank. Rossi has used these particular architectonic operations on the axis of the building to ritualize movement so that it literally becomes still. The visitor constantly finds himself in a different kind of daylight, whether on the grand staircase in the fantastic light court or in the room under the dome with its many small window openings high above.

It is a striking fact that there is hardly anywhere in the building from which it is possible to see out, not even on the side facing the River Maas. It is as if Rossi was constantly on the lookout for different ways of saying that this museum is meant to be introverted, a building that provides space for meditation and contemplation. The overpowering setting does not entirely avoid a certain pathos, as also emerges from Rossi's writings from time to time, as for example in his scholarly autobiography, in which he writes that "architecture was one of the means that humanity sought out to enable it to survive; it was a way of giving expression to the fundamental pursuit of happiness."³ But one might equally well say that this form of expression is itself the expression of the sublime rationalism for which Rossi was arguing. And on the subject of the staircase in the Bonnefanten

museum, Rossi writes, "... Pointless to repeat that this staircase, made in the old Dutch tradition, steep and awkward, is connected with the Gothic world of Shakespearean taverns or with Conrad's casual characters and all the shipwrecked sailors from the north, washed up on the shores of the southern seas." For Rossi, a staircase is not just a staircase but also an instrument to stimulate the memory, just as the telescopic space above the entrance is a *Lichtraum*, a reference to the light court of the university in Zurich. "I am unquestionably deformed by relationships with everything that surrounds me,"⁴ as Rossi quotes Walter Benjamin.

All this makes Rossi's architecture heavy and ambiguous, pregnant with the personal references which Rossi uses to anchor his architecture in general and this building in particular in the history of architecture. But here is something that Rossi wrote about the tower: "If you were to ask the most simple soul in our continent what he finds the most striking, there would be only one possible answer: the dome."⁵ That sounds almost reassuring.

Inside, the exhibition halls for archaeology are on the south side of the first floor; and for old art on the north side. All the rooms on the second floor are for modern art. The way the atmosphere changes from room to room is truly amazing, yet quite simply achieved. The rooms on first floor have a large number of small window openings in the longer elevations, while the rooms on the second floor are simply surrounded by solid walls so that the day light can come in only through the glass roof. The solid walls are 70 centimeters thick and contain the air conditioning system that combines with the treated wooden floors to keep such factors as temperature and humidity at the required level. The plain walls and the top lighting give the rooms a serene character and display the inexhaustible strength of a modest interior in which the different departments are marked by subtle spatial distinctions.

Just as Rossi collects architectonic fragments and goes beyond the conventional character of the type by bringing together those fragments in a type a posteriori, so also he collects architectonic details that always make a special composition when combined in an elevation. One need only consider the steel profiles in both the long elevations of the middle section of the building, which have no constructional function what so ever but are applied to concrete buttresses solely as cladding, or the way in which the rain water pipes are routed along the exterior of the elevation and disappear into the wall just above the basement, or the great door in the side elevation which is included in a composition extending over two floors but which functionally could have made do with half the height. These formal solutions are not to be seen merely as constructional or functional but as a sort of signature, a way of using specific detailing to give the building an autonomous character connecting it with the tradition of the town but also creating an individual identity. Rossi appropriates architectural discipline to him self by adding it in whatever way he thinks fit to a type a posteriori so that it can no longer be seen as a piece of radical nostalgia but as something whose topicality becomes apparent the moment that the design is realized in a town, in this case Maastricht. In the Bonnefanten museum, Rossi has produced a building that links the past with today in a ritual architectonic experience, a building in which a powerful combination of space and time has provided a new, vital monument in which the museum has found a new home.

¹ Marijke Martin and Ed Taverne, "Het Bonnefanten museum: van binnenstedelijke kloostertuin naar perifeer industriegebied," in *AKT* no. 52/53, December, 1991, p. 24.

² Aldo Rossi, "Architecture for Museums" [1966], in *Aldo Rossi Selected Writings and Projects* (Dublin, 1983), p. 16.

³ Aldo Rossi, *Een wetenschappelijke autobiografie*, (Nijmegen (SUN), 1994), p. 11.

⁴ Aldo Rossi, "An Analogical Architecture" [1966], in op. cit. (note 2), p. 60.

⁵ From Aldo Rossi's commentary on the Bonnefanten museum on the occasion of its opening in March 1995.