

From: *Museums for a New Millenium. 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. 188-192.

Juan Navarro Baldeweg
The Altamira Cave Museum
Santillana del Mar, since 1995

Juan José Lahuerta

The challenge that Juan Navarro Baldeweg faces in the Altamira Cave Museum project seemingly could not be more outlandish. Indeed, the project consists of constructing a facsimile reproduction of the cave and the paintings on its walls next to the very same venerable spot on which the prehistoric cave sits, all for the purpose of welcoming the thousands of tourists that flock in ever increasing numbers to the famous site where from henceforth they will no longer be able to see the original, only a copy.

A strange and even paradoxical subject this is, although, at closer inspection, perhaps it really isn't. Well thought out, the Altamira Cave Museum would be, on the contrary, a paradigmatic example of what museums are in this age, what they collect and shelter, what they exhibit, whom they attract, and how they do it: it would certainly be difficult to find another more immediate and more schematic example of the characteristic estrangement taking place in our times between a work and its exhibition or, more appropriately, between the work itself and the paths of consumerism that evolve from it. In this project we see clearly how - and to what extent - the masterpiece must be hidden in order to reap any benefit or profit from it. The more a work remains hidden by virtue of the impenetrable security measures that protect it, the less it can be seen and enjoyed, while at the same time, approaching the other extreme of the spectrum, the farther will the image, the infinite reproduction of the original, be spread: postcards, notebooks, pocket calendars, scarves, ties, pins, souvenirs of every ilk, ... The more the illustration or reproduced image is copied, the less the original is seen; the more the consumption of the imitation spreads, the less the original deteriorates; the more widespread the distribution of copies, the fewer are the possibilities of experiencing the original. The latter, of course, is hidden away in the darkness of its safe haven, where curators and technicians dutifully watch over it, a guarantee that protects all copies of the original; for the copies, the entombment of the original represents an open-ended security bond. Thus, we could say that the "democratization" of the original art work - that is, the arrival of busloads of tourists, an audience that pays to be entertained - automatically demands its sheltering, its seclusion far at the back of a vault, to provide the needed and appropriate conditions for its effectiveness.

The Altamira Cave Museum, in addition to serving as an example, also looks to the possible limits of the situation. The object is unique; there is only one thing - the cave - that tourists come to see. Not only will that one specific work be reproduced thousands of times in the form of souvenirs that will be bought and then put in their proper place, but from the very outset, by exhibiting only the duplicate, the museum will offer, in principle, at least, a means of preserving the original as the numbers of its visitors increase ad infinitum.

Obviously, Juan Navarro is aware of the problem, and once he accepts the conditions it imposes, all his efforts will aim to succeed in having the architecture of the museum perceived as independent of

"the situation," to prove that it can stand on its own merits and state its own eloquence. This, however, will not cause the architect to adopt an escapist attitude. Indeed, on the contrary, his project will give itself over to the "theme," and will metaphorically offer architecture the opportunity to conquer its intrinsic intractability. The architecture of Juan Navarro will not speak of the distance between the original and the copy, but only of the advantages of "a place" and "a museum" not of conflicts "in the cave," but of the virtues "pertaining to its history."

Herein lies the explanation of the most important decision: the partial underground placement of different sections of the building. Navarro justifies this action by the need to preserve the landscape, concealing any interference as much as possible, and that is also the reason why the sodded roof of the nave housing the reproduction of the cave will slope along the incline of the terrain, with the wings of the museum likewise spreading out slightly in the form of a fan so as to conform to the lie of the land. In reality, however, these are merely contingent issues. The partially buried museum speaks of other things, for example, hinting at a "notion" of excavation. The original cave is located underground, and the stories and legends linked to its discovery always emphasize the prodigious feat of descending beneath the surface of the earth within the folds of this dark wrinkle on its skin, where a great treasure had lain shrouded, forgotten for thousands of years. Juan Navarro's museum also rises from an excavation site stirred up by earthmovers, and it adapts to the shape of the land and its natural degree of incline as if it had "always" been there. A projecting roof marks the entrance to the museum, which leads into the large hall. Similarly, a slightly slanting, projecting roof indicates the position of the narrow opening into the cavern, with dressed side walls. These formal elements successfully enhance the significance of the two main openings into the structure. From there, the downward sloping way to the interior begins. The cut into the ground at the mouth of the cave - the frame, as Juan Navarro himself calls it - is so precise that the time-resistant building appears to be the result of a simple earth-removal clean-up. Rather than the land, the building itself gives the impression of being on a slant. This building plunges into the earth, perhaps awaiting new excavations on ground that for ever hides, but suddenly reveals, its great marvels.

So, what is the real shape that Juan Navarro has given to this building? The corpus that harbors the reproduction of the cave is, obviously, the only entirely "certain" motive within the whole of a program that includes other, more "vague," functions-museum, research center, public areas ... This feature determines the layout of the components of the project: a structure of considerable dimensions, grounded in the quadrangular form of its huge covering, is converted into a "decentered center" of a panoptical building, whose fragility is evident in the stratification of its roofs and in the upward thrust of its skylights, which take on an aura of open covers. In this way, a traditional theme of Juan Navarro - that of a "point" and a "fleeing" - is transformed into an allegory of the difficulties and the vices of "that" program; a perfect example, as we have seen, of the museum that, in gathering unto itself everything, really contains nothing. Juan Navarro's building, in essence, flees from the cenotaph and its ambiguity, driving itself into the ground, stirring it up, to save itself. But we cannot speak only of allusions; we need to touch also up on illusions. Navarro insists on presenting to us the replica of the caves as a "virtual environment" or, more specifically, as a "mirror image." To be sure, Narcissus has always been one of his favorite subjects. In fact, does not architecture strain in this museum to attain the impossible: to embrace its own reflection?