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The Architecture of Art:
The Museums of the 1990s

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At the beginning of this century, which is drawing to its close, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti declared in the first of many manifestoes he was to issue that museums were nothing but public dormitories. They had become superfluous, he claimed, in a world whose glory was enriched by the beauty of speed. A roaring racing car was more beautiful than the *Winged Victory of Samothrace;* there was no longer any need for a site to house and show this treasure. Marinetti wanted to free Italy of "the cancerous growth of academics, archaeologists, tourist guides and antiquarian booksellers... " and also "of the countless museums... which cover it like churchyards."
Predictions run the risk, however, of being proved wrong by subsequent events. And rarely has a prediction been so completely overturned. The futurists declared that the twentieth century would finally sweep out the old. Yet, with the exception of a brief burst of energy - embodied in the avant-garde, which was significant but really no more than an intermezzo - this century more than any other could justifiably be labeled *passatistic,* pet neologism and insult of the futurists. The shock of modernization and the terror wrought by two fully mechanized world wars were followed by a retreat into the values of the past. And art museums facilitated and symbolized this retreat.
Architects approached the task with growing enthusiasm. It echoed a need in society that could be endorsed or criticized, but certainly not denied. Thus the task of building new museums enjoyed an almost unprecedented level of political and financial support that directly benefited the architects. It also generated a latitude, or room for play (real or imagined, but more on that later) - in short, freedom to realize architectonic ambitions, no matter how audacious.
At first it seemed as if the twentieth century would rise to Marinetti's challenge and stop filling cities with obsolete "dormitories." Building new museums was simply not a priority in the public domain during the first half of the century. There were some exceptions: Rittmeyer and Furrer built the rational and elegant museum in Winterthur (1912-16) and John Russell Hope created the classicist National Gallery in Washington, D.C. (after 1936). Heir to Marinetti's futurist ideas to some degree, the modern movement's main thrust was to build houses for people and not for art. Mies van der Rohe's exquisite project for an art gallery for a small town (1942) was the exception rather than the rule, as was Henry van de Velde's Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller in Otterlo (1937-54).
Only after the Second World War did museum architecture regain prominence, and soon designs were translated into concrete projects and buildings. The Louisiana museum in Humlebaek, near Copenhagen, was a unique success in 1958-59. Jørgen Bo andVilhelm Wohlert's complex spatial arrangement, introverted in character and with very precise wall openings, combined the quietude of art contemplation with the serenity of looking out at nature in a manner that was astonishingly matter of course. In this building, postwar modernist architecture is subservient in a most natural manner to the humility and restraint that had reached their peak in nineteenth-century museum architecture.

Although a contemporary of the Louisiana, the Solomon R. Guggenhein museum designed by Frank Lloyd Wright for the city of NewYork in 1943 could not have been more different. The powerful, sculptural shape stands in deliberate contrast to the uniform grid that is Manhattan. This building *likes* being center stage. Inside, visitors follow an ascending, curving ramp that apodictically dictates their route through the collection, leaving them no other option. The wall surfaces on the interior do not favor the paintings mounted there, and the large, round foyer at the center, with daylight penetrating from above through a Plexiglas cupola, is visually invasive and distracting. Here, architecture is the real attraction, the incontestable protagonist. This architecture does not serve the artworks it surrounds.

With the Guggenheim, the leitmotif for museum architecture in the twentieth century was established. Most subsequent buildings were variations on the same theme with varying degrees of virtuosity. Even Mies van der Rohe's new National Gallery in Berlin (1962-68), a realization of his early dream for a fully transparent museum, was first and foremost a material or concrete translation of an architectural vision to which all practical requirements were ruthlessly subordinated. The large glass cube beneath a boldly projecting coffered steel roof is a difficult environment for exhibition purposes, while the actual gallery rooms in the basement appear more like a grudging after thought aimed at meeting the requirements for which the project was conceived in the first place.

The Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth by Louis Kahn (1967-72) is a different case altogether. While Kahn's addition to the Yale Art Gallery in New Haven, Connecticut (1951-53), was still very much indebted aesthetically to Mies van der Rohe, the Kimbell calls to mind the enlightened solutions of museum architecture in the nineteenth century. The interior and the room layout are designed with careful neutrality, and daylight is filtered with perfect balance through skylights for optimal natural lighting: this is an ideal model of modern museum architecture.

Unfortunately, it is also a model that has fewer followers than one might wish. The next large-scale project, chronologically speaking, was the Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, designed by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers (1971-77). The plan and the site, the Plateau Beaubourg in Paris, turned mandate into manifesto, proclaiming a new attitude in building, neither organic like the Guggenheim nor structurally classicist like the new National Gallery, but high-tech. The unmitigated, radical expression of the exposed steel framework, combined with supports, trussed girders, cantilevered corbels, and diagonal wind bracing, is not only structural in function but above all eminently symbolic: the aesthetics of Archigram, the utopian group of English architects in the sixties, expressed in drawings that were as innovative as they were impractical, had arrived in the heart of Paris. That this aesthetic owed much to Antonio Sant'Elia, who had been "converted" to futurism by Marinetti and was acknowledged by the latter as the futurist architect *par excellence,* verges on history avenging itself: seventy years later, here was that novel and irreverent architectonic, developed to express the beauty of speed, applied to a "public dormitory."

Admittedly, it was done with an intention that would have pleased the founder of the futurist movement: to represent a new and dynamic form of culture, reflected in a complex and innovative concept. Just how ideological the project's goal and its architectural realization were, was quickly evident. The six atria for exhibitions, one stacked atop another, were soon remodeled because they had been conceived to pay homage to a myth of complete flexibility rather than to the art in them. The impressive structural framework, too, required a complete overhaul a mere twenty years after the sensational *machina ex cultura* (or culture machine) had been completed.

The Centre Pompidou with its claim to being no more than an envelope, a stimulus for the masses where they would contemplate and experience art as never before, is another case where the architecture is a greater attraction than the artworks. Countless "visitors" are carried upward on Plexiglas-encased escalators, yet few actually step into the exhibition rooms. By simply being there,

they pay homage to this monument of modernism and continue onward to the rooftop, from which they enjoy a breathtaking panoramic view of historic Paris.

The high point of museum architecture as a play ground for artist/architects occurred in the late seventies and eighties. Postmodernism brought with it a return to historicism and hence a renewed central role for the museum as a building task. Riding on a wave of public support never witnessed before, museums symbolized a new kind of communal building: it is no coincidence that the new museum buildings were called the cathedrals of our time. Soon every city, even smaller towns, clamored for a "social catalyst" of its own. Countless museums were built and visitors were more numerous than ever before.

At the same time, postmodernism introduced a typology and an iconography that corresponded to a new public appreciation for an old building task. The ritual of visiting a museum and looking at art was virtually choreographed; discriminating cultural requirements found expression in monumental embodiments of dignity. Architecture was *in,* and the appetite for it was insatiable.

The Stuttgart Staatsgalerie addition, the new Kammertheater designed by James Stirling (1977-81), became an architectural emblem of the new historical culture. Conceptually, the design was based on the competition entries for the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf and for the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum in Cologne (both 1975). In a complex intellectual game, the building concept juggles elemental volumes, surrealistic wall openings and unabashedly open historic references (which, no sooner expressed, are immediately taken back again). While an enfilade of large rooms occupies the gallery floor, the ground floor offers a space for changing exhibitions, as well as a lecture hall, archives, and the building services, all arranged around a circular sculpture courtyard; in front, the lobby and the museum café curve gently outward. Stirling has achieved an extraordinary aesthetic, and the building immediately became a site of pilgrimage for architects and students of architecture from around the globe. Moreover, he has created an urban element that provides a confident and beautifully simple solution for a challenging urban situation.

The Stuttgart museum was the departure point for a new architectural genealogy that soon spread across Europe, the United States, and Japan. One of its main characteristics was "flexible uses." That is, the public areas such as restaurants and museum shops became increasingly important factors in setting the stage for urban ambitions. These new buildings were (urban) catalysts, ambitious aesthetic mechanisms that enabled their respective authors to showcase their expertise in architecture (and their erudition in history).

All too often the original goal seemed forgotten: to present works of art in an environment where space, light, and atmospheric conditions would be ideal. At the opening of his masterpiece in Stuttgart, Stirling is quoted as having quipped that the building would have been even better without the encumbrance of the paintings.

The *bon mot* should not be overrated. Looking at the museum architecture of the eighties, it becomes obvious that the requirement of creating space for exhibitions was often treated as the poor cousin next to the primary importance of architecture as an urban, typological, and form-giving experiment. Architects like Aldo Rossi, Giorgio Grassi, Oswald Mathias Ungers, and Josef Paul Kleihues excelled in urban planning and development; Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, but also Norman Foster, Jean Nouvel, Renzo Piano, and Rem Koolhaas, discovered coherent and rigorous solutions for new uses; Hans Hollein, Ieoh Ming Pei, Richard Meier, José Rafael Moneo, and Juan Navarro Baldeweg drafted exquisite formal solutions by looking to the past for inspiration, with increasing liberty drawing first from historic styles in the distant past and then from the classic modernism of the more recent past. In cities like Frankfurt am Main, concepts and plans for new museum buildings *were* turned into urban renewal projects, setting in motion more than urban renovation and completion: they gave cities a new face and new life. Little innovation and progress,

however, have occurred in the exhibition rooms, the very rooms for which the museum was built in the first place. They had become a pretext for other strategies and experiments, uppermost in the public's - and the critics' - mind.
It is as difficult to establish a common stylistic denominator for the museum architecture of the nineties as for that of the previous decades: increasingly, different attitudes coexisted and still coexist. Contemporary museum buildings tend to be astonishingly pure materializations of their authors' corresponding attitudes toward architecture: they are seismographs of the architectonic culture to which they belong. They illustrate the development in architecture and the accelerating change in trends which may run concurrently and parallel to one another, or, as is often the case, be diametrically opposed.
While the nineties have seen a continuation of this tendency, there has been one significant change. In addition to the new historicism and high-tech expressionism, next to postmodernism and deconstructivism, a new tension has entered into the international arena of architecture: minimalism. The diversity of twentieth-century pluralism has been augmented by yet another path.
It is a new path that seems particularly meaningful for museum architecture. For the restraint that is minimalism corresponds at first glance to the same reticence that has marked the highlights in the best tradition of museum architecture. The new generation of art museums seems predestined once again to *serve* art, which is an expression of the highest degree of reverence in architecture toward art.
First impressions are misleading. Upon closer inspection, even Alvaro Siza Vieira's masterpieces, the magnificent work of David Chipperfield, Jacques Herzog, and Pierre de Meuron, or the achievements of Annette Gigon and Mike Guyer, Eduardo Souto de Moura and Peter Zumthor emerge as rigorously restrained but nevertheless artistically ambitious mechanisms whose presentation is rarely as discreet as it may seem. Their self-imposed, unyielding aesthetic laws invariably lead to idiosyncratic, even invasive room arrangements that are at times in conflict with the requirements they are meant to fulfill. Minimalism does not necessarily deliver an "appropriate" or "natural" result.
One reason for the puzzling and overwhelming dominance that radiates from the museum architecture of the nineties is that it is less a product of nineteenth-century rational historicism than of twentieth-century abstract modernism. It is based on an intention where orthogonal spatial arrangements, unbroken walls, or structural details cannot be hidden. What truly matters in this architecture is not the art inside it, but the architecture itself. These museums are works of art that house other works of art. And the inevitable conflict is rarely mitigated by the design. Generally the artworks - guests within the walls of the architecture - come off second-best.
We are left with a paradox. Extreme reduction and extreme expression, and all that lies in between these poles, is ultimately driven by the same motivation: to establish the primacy of architecture over art. Museum architecture remains a playground for architects, as it has been since the middle of the twentieth century. It is but a platform for presenting a new, a different style, the same *amour de soi,* the same importunate manner, and above all the same indifference toward the true challenge that lies in this building task, merely couched in different terms.
But architects are responsible only to a certain degree. Their mandate is set by the client, the community, the patron, the curator. These, in turn, consult with the artists and their public, as indeed they should. The mandate, that is the "program," is therefore social in nature, provided it is fully developed. The weaknesses and the strengths of contemporary museum architecture are the direct product of the society to which it is accountable.
The strengths are indisputable. One such strength is that of all building categories, museum architecture personifies, more than any other, the art of building. It is the site where architectural

ideas are realized in their purest form and where all major contemporary trends can converge in their most original, their most radical incarnation because they are after all the "leaders of the pack." In the process, urban, typological, and, last but not least, formal experiments are carried out that enrich and promote the discipline as a whole.

The greatest weakness has its source in just this strength: be its voice loud or soft, architecture overpowers the art it houses. This is also the product of a society where art is equated with entertainment, as opposed to art as a mechanism for learning. The contrast is stark and can not be bridged. Compromises won't get us anywhere.

But alternate options will. Although contemporary society, and not a few artists, have adopted the idea of art as stimulating, sometimes touching, sometimes amusing, but always open to consumption, there still survives a small group which insists that art is for enlightenment and nothing else. There should be museum buildings for this group, too.

Perhaps the great challenge for museum buildings in the new millennium is this: to create architecture that is congenial to such a narrow interpretation of art. Perhaps the most powerful rejoinder to Marinetti's prophecy is this: to design and to build museums that are neither dormitories nor entertainment centers but laboratories for sensual perception and for critical thinking that is uncompromisingly rational.