Towards a new vision of the museum: the Kunsthaus of Bregenz

Mihail Moldoveanu

Museum architecture and museum collections are not always compatible, and new buildings may overshadow the works they were designed to enhance. A notable exception is described by Mihail Moldoveanu, a freelance photographer and writer based in Paris.

The idea of the 'museum,' as it took shape during the nineteenth century, has become obsolete. Initially modelled on the cabinet of curiosities, this institution now has to house just about everything that society produces, admires or wants to remember. Today, museums are often first-rank commercial success stories. They have much in common with theme parks – Disneyland in Florida is the most famous archetype – sharing with them not only a very large public but an increasing number of similar characteristics as well, beginning with the techniques to control visitor flow and ending with the installation of restaurants and shops selling a wide variety of 'homemade' products which can now often be bought on the Internet.

The objective of attracting a very large public for museums may be seen as both a logical consequence of the process of democratizing access to culture and as an attitude of political demagoguery. None the less, a few voices can still be heard, from time to time, saying that mass education weakens the primary function of the museum, which is to exhibit, collect and promote research work by specialists. In general, politicians consider this point of view as that of an intellectual élite group and attach little or no importance to it.

In the United States, which is experiencing a veritable boom in this field, more than 150 museums have been constructed or extended in the 1997–99 period alone. Edward Able, president of the American Association of Museums emphasized in a recent interview that 'Museums have not only become important educational institutions ... they have also become the new town halls which play a central role in the cultural, social and economic life of their communities.'[1]

An initial sign of this increased importance in relation to other public utilities is the quest for a 'representative architecture', a term that in this case signifies a recognizable 'stamp', or a building designed in a very particular way. The ideal solution is to have a well-known architect construct an extravagant building, museum administrators having become well aware of the effectiveness of the message that architecture transmits. To make sure of success when they envisage important architectural work, they organize restricted competitions to which they invite almost exclusively celebrities, or, to shorten the process, they simply give them the contract.

Examples of this evolution abound, and not only in the United States. None the less, the first major museum to make a radical departure from the 'historic' model is American and dates back to the 1950s, namely, the Guggenheim Museum in New York. This pioneering architectural masterpiece by Frank Lloyd Wright rejected all previous experience in the field (Beaux-Arts as well as Modernist). In a single space, a very long spiral ramp – the gallery – turns and turns around a well of light formed by a magnificent central skylight.

The next stage in the definition of a new type of museum, more adapted to the 'action' requirements of a society undergoing fundamental change, came in the shape of the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris constructed by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers in the 1970s. Here, the collections – their very large number notwithstanding – occupy only a fifth of the entire building, a kind of transparent box that also houses temporary exhibitions, libraries, cinemas, various activities and, most of all, a lot of visitors.

ISSN 1350-0775, *Museum International* (UNESCO, Paris), No. 207 (Vol. 52, No. 3, 2000)

Published by Blackwell Publishers, 108 Cowley Road, Oxford, OX4 1JF (UK) and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148 (USA)

'The two buildings mark out an urban space which has a surprising effect.'

The 'museum rush' became widespread starting from the 1980s. A prosperous town like Frankfurt-am-Main had to construct, in addition to its venerable Städel Museum, a constellation of new museums by Richard Meier, Oswald Mathias Ungers and Hans Hollein. At the beginning of the 1980s, Meier, Ungers and Hollein already enjoyed the status of 'internationally famous architects'.

During this period, France gave its Louvre the now world-famous pyramid constructed by I.M. Pei, designing an enormous car park in its basement at the same time. The National Gallery in London added a new wing by Robert Venturi, while the Metropolitan Museum in New York was enlarged in a manner lacking in grace: the new wing housing the Temple of Dendur seems to have been designed more for social functions – such as banquets and receptions – than for displaying art. Still in the 1980s, James Stirling built the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart, Arata Isozaki was invited to construct the MOCA in Los Angeles, and I.M. Pei finished the extension of the National Gallery in Washington, D.C.

During the 1990s, the race for museums bearing a 'stamp' gathered even greater speed. Much more often than before, the contents lost their pride of place in the general definition of the museum institution, and the 'place' became the main attraction. Three Spanish museums fully illustrate this new order: the Centro de Arte of Galicia, executed by Alvaro Siza in Santiago de Compostela, the Museu d'Art Contemporani in Barcelona, designed by Richard Meier, and the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, the work of Frank Gehry.

The 'stars' continue to be provided with plenty of work. Some of their museums opened recently, while others are still under construction. To cite a few of the most significant examples: Richard Meier and his enormous Getty Center in Los Angeles; Rafael Moneo and his Modern

Art Museum in Stockholm and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston; Santiago Calatrava, who is working to finish his strange Milwaukee Art Museum; Tadao Ando, who is designing a museum for Fort Worth, Texas; Daniel Liebeskind who has finished the Jewish Museum in Berlin; Steven Holl who has created the remarkable Contemporary Art Museum in Helsinki; and Mario Botta who is working on the Modern Art Museum in San Francisco. The expansion and modernization of major museums are also being carried out at an accelerated pace. After the extension of the Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Pompidou Centre has reopened after two years of renovation, Rafael Moneo is carrying out major extension work on the Prado in Madrid, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York will be redesigned and enlarged by Yoshio Taniguchi.

In regard to art museums, especially contemporary art, the risk is that many of these new buildings can complicate the viewing of their contents by their own overbearing architecture. In certain cases – for example, the Guggenheim in Bilbao and the Modern Art Museum in Frankfurt-am-Main – the internal architecture is adapted to the specific needs of a number of exhibited works. Nevertheless, a certain degree of ambiguity, which is sometimes recognized, persists. It is largely the logical result of the symbiosis between a

'The Kunsthaus is the choice meeting place between contemporary architecture and contemporary art.' Here, a gallery on the third floor.

© Mihail Moldoveanu

The Kunsthaus of Bregenz, situated on the esplanade of Lake Constance.

'plastic' art, which – led by the evolution of its own concepts and that of technology – is constantly extending its own limits, and an architecture that is undergoing similar artistic changes, and constantly renewing its vocabulary.

The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao now offers the clearest example of the difficulty of such a relationship. When Richard Serra, the sculptor, was invited to exhibit enormous objects made of steel, he said recently that the room that had been reserved for him – Room 104 which is used for temporary exhibitions – 'had always "swallowed up" all the works which had been exhibited in it ... now you enter into the space of the works and not that of the architect'.[2] But attention must be drawn to the price that has been paid: huge works which maintain a dialogue with Gehry's very particular architectural morphology, constructed with the assistance of one of Gehry's engineers and the backing of a technology that is comparable – in other words, extremely sophisticated – to the one used to construct this prodigious building. How many artists can repeat the same feat?

Today's architects often see the museum as providing the ideal opportunity for experimenting with new design forms, an approach that does not necessarily lead to the creation of spaces that improve the public's contact with the exhibited works. However, the experience gained over the past few years can be used to define the characteristics of a new art museum capable of showing a high level of compatibility between its works – which are extremely varied – and its architecture. Able to adapt to the various requirements of its contents without dominating them, such architecture must reflect the noble character of these works.

A 'stamp,' not a 'style'

This new ideal was brilliantly illustrated by the Kunsthaus in Bregenz, Austria, on the border with Switzerland. The story of this fascinating building, which was finished in 1997, is very special. If the municipal officials are today well satisfied with the overall result of the entire operation, it is only because the architect had to ignore most of the numerous pressures being applied on him during the project's design and construction. This building is 'signed' by the Swiss architect Peter Zumthor, who enjoys a surprising degree of fame despite a very scanty output. The great strength of his buildings lies in their coherence and their total adaptation to their given functions. In 1999, he was awarded the prestigious Mies van der Rohe Prize for the Kunsthaus in Bregenz. Winner of a competition, this project embodies a radical position with respect to its siting on the esplanade of Lake Constance, its function and its internal construction. The main volume of the building stands out with elegance and sobriety: an opaque glass prism, designed to represent a sanctuary of art, without making the least concession to the 'picturesque'. It continues the frontage line in this central area of the urban nucleus, but without entering into a more sustained dialogue with the neighbouring structures. The building creates its own environment and provides neither spectacular views of the lake nor a cafeteria on its terrace; visitors remain focused on the purpose of their visit, in close communion with art. The intransigence of this architectural approach is also witnessed in the functional separations: a large translucent section is designed to house only the works of art while the subsidiary functions – administration, archives, shop and cafeteria – are grouped together in an independent building situated behind the esplanade and painted in black with a few white touches here and there. The two buildings mark out an urban space which has a surprising effect on the town centre. The strange presence of the black building heightens the mysterious character of the big 'ice cube', whose continuity of surface is broken only by a modest entrance door and a barely distinguishable service access.

The main volume of the building is original in many respects. Light is treated with particular deference. Diffused, soft and omnipresent, it is homogeneous in a most uncommon way. All the interior spaces are 'enveloped' by very large technical chambers in order to be able to control – without disturbing the visual aspect of the rooms in any way – not only the diffusion of light but also the heating system, the various changes required by museum activity, air circulation and acoustics. All these 'workings' are hidden away between the external façade and the corners of the rooms, as well as behind ceilings and underneath floors. A system of mirrors is used to 'transport' daylight

The entry hall and exhibition space showing works by Danish artist Per Kirkeby.

over the entire surface of the translucent ceilings in such a way that all the floors benefit from a mysterious zenithal light. A sophisticated lighting system compensates the variations of natural light. The Kunsthaus – 'art house' to give it a literal translation – comprises four storeys that enjoy daylight and two basement floors. The skin is surprising at close view, being an endless succession of 'scales' made of translucent glass. Their disposition creates the optical effect of a vibrating surface, but in fact they are the same smooth panels that make up the inside ceilings. This material, which dissolves in daylight, glows in the evening when the building functions like an urban lamp.

The spartan elegance of the interior favours concentration, as does the very discreet contact with the outside world and the restricted number of 'visual accidents' that could catch the eye. The spiritual nature of the exhibited works is emphasized. Such rooms can enhance primitive art works as well as Renaissance paintings or constructivist sculptures. The building as a whole can enter into a dialogue with contemporary experimental art, a very rare quality.

The Kunsthaus is the choice meeting place between contemporary architecture and contemporary art. It possesses the capacity to heighten the effect of the works, which resonate with the space. In certain specific cases, architecture and art use a common vocabulary, each intensifying the other. They are then united in an experience that the visitor will find unforgettable. ■

Notes

1. *International Herald Tribune*, 23 October 1999, p. 10.

2. *Connaissance des Arts*, No. 564, September 1999, p. 113.