



The museum and the city: Towards a new architectural and museological model for the museum?



Kali Tzortzi

University of Patras, Greece

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 4 May 2015

Accepted 22 July 2015

Available online 20 August 2015

Keywords:

Museum

City

Space

Architecture

Curatorial

Episteme

ABSTRACT

Against the background of the growing role of museums in urban development, and the expanding urban concerns of city museums, this paper takes the point of view of the architectural, spatial and curatorial design of museums, and suggests that in recent years there have been changes in how museums, especially those involving innovative and experimental designs, relate to the city in these respects. The paper looks in turn at spatial and visual connections between the museum building and the surrounding urban landscape; at the creation, through the design of the museum, of social space and urbanity within or adjacent to it; and at the museum standing in some sense as a symbol for the surrounding city through its building and spatial design. It then shifts attention from the architectural to the curatorial perspective, to look at how museums reconsider the way they present their collections, ‘undermining’ well-established knowledge and interpretations, as a complementary expression of the way they address urban communities. On this basis, the paper asks whether the fact that all these changes point the same way, towards a more intense and open relation between museum and city than has existed in the past, indicates a new emerging model for the museum, the *urbanised museum*. Such a model, it is suggested, could be theoretically linked to Foucault’s concept of the modern *episteme*.

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1. Introduction

The second half of the twentieth century, especially since the 1970s, was marked by the ‘museum phenomenon’, ‘the extraordinary growth in the number of museums throughout the world’ (Fyfe, cited in Macdonald, 2006, p.4), while the twenty-first century is seen as ‘an urban era’ (Orloff, 2008, chap. 3; loc.307), with more than half of the world’s people living in cities. The interaction between the two, the museum and the city, is now a phenomenon the world over. Museums have become spectacular landmarks of cities, tools in their development, and assets in the world competition for investment and tourism. In parallel, the city has become the artifact of study itself in the growing number of city museums. Although as a museum type city museums are not new – they appeared towards the end of the nineteenth century – they have recently extended their mission ‘beyond their traditional role (to conserve and display the city’s history) towards a more active social involvement within the contemporary city and its communities’ (Lanz, 2013, p.411).

The question raised in this paper is: is this interaction between

the museum and ‘the contemporary city and its communities’ confined to specialized city museums and to urban regeneration policies? How, for example, does the museum in general address the city architecturally? How have museums developed their relation to the surrounding city in a spatial sense? Could we look for effects of the increasing role of museums in the urban context on the way they present their collections and communicate their messages? Guided by these questions, the paper seeks, through a series of case studies, to investigate in the next three parts how the relation between the museum and the city has been expressed architecturally and spatially, especially in innovative and experimental designs, in three senses: first, in the sense of spatial and visual connections created between the museum building and the surrounding urban landscape; second, in the sense of the creation, through the design of the museum, of social space and urbanity within or adjacent to it; and finally, in the sense of the museum standing in some way as a symbol for the surrounding city through its building and spatial design. The paper then shifts attention from the architectural to the curatorial perspective, to look at how museums reconsider the way they present their collections, “‘undermining” well-established knowledge and interpretations’ (Basso Peressut, 2014, p.156), as a complementary expression of the way they address urban communities, so that ‘meaning can be

E-mail address: ktzortzi@upatras.gr.

communicated and experience can be felt by audiences of every kind' (Morris, 2012, p.23). On this basis, the paper ends by asking if these transformations can be seen as suggesting the emergence of, in Dean, Donnellan and Pratt's terms, 'a new paradigm for the 21st century museum' (2010, p.87), pointing to a new, emergent architectural and museological model for museums, which is not confined to regeneration and city museums.

2. From an architectural point of view

2.1. Spatial and visual relations

It is in fact in the first autonomous and specifically designed museum building, the Altes Museum in Berlin (1823), that we find the idea of the significant location of the museum in the city and its major role 'in shaping the nineteenth-century metropolis' (Giebelhausen, 2005, p.47). The Altes Museum was built facing the royal residence, and was flanked by the cathedral, the arsenal and the university (2005, p.48). The aim was to create a 'temple of science and art' to embellish the city. Shinkel's design enhanced the museum's relation to the city, in that the visitor, before entering the exhibition spaces, was offered a panoramic view of the open space defined by the group of buildings through the columns of the portico from the upper floor terrace, a kind of collective space that linked the museum to the city (Basso Peressut, 1999, p.13).

More than a century later, the urban landscape of the metropolis as a whole was proposed as the background for the viewing of works of art by Mies van der Rohe in the New Nationalgalerie Berlin (1968), 'an interior that appears to be outside' (Neumeyer, cited in Jäger, 2011, p.17), while almost a decade later, in 1977, the creation of the Centre Pompidou marked a vast urban project, where 'the building occupied half of the Beaubourg Plateau: the other half being covered by a long plaza on a slightly lower level... a meeting place, a place of assembly,... a constant focus of life and movement' (cited in Castany, 2011, p.45). Georges Pompidou's vision was converging with Le Corbusier's argument that 'a museum to be really open to all, must be built in the heart of the city' (2011, p.15).

These indicative examples (for a further discussion, see Giebelhausen, 2003) remind us that the theme of spatial and visual links between the museum and the city is not new. But what is striking today is the way this link is evolving, taking a variety of forms and rendering the relation more complex and richer. At the most basic level, one response to the idea of a relation between the museum and the city has been the creation of a route traversing the museum complex, and making a link between two parts of the city, as in the Neue Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart (by James Stirling and Michael Wilford, 1984). The central rotunda, open to the sky and relatively hard to access from inside the galleries, is traversed by a public walkway, linking the two parallel streets that frame the museum, so integrating the rotunda into the surrounding urban grid rather than into the gallery structure. In a similar way, the Groninger Museum (by Alessandro Mendini, and a number of guest designers – Michele De Lucchi, Philippe Starck, Coop Himmelb(l)au), consisting of three building units, lies on the Verbindings Canal, and so functions as a bridge between the two shores of the canal, as well as forming part of a path to the central city, and acting as an entrance gate to the city centre from the train station (Groninger Museum, 2002).

Museums also construct positions from which the city can be seen and understood. The extension of the M–Museum Leuven (by Stephan Beel, 2009) is characterized by the architect as a 'city room, with furniture' (The architecture of M–Museum Leuven, 2009, p.1) – 'furniture' referring to the existing buildings that constitute the museum, a nineteenth century mansion and the former Municipal Library and Academy (Fig. 1). The key idea that defined the design



Fig. 1. M–Museum Leuven: the visual experience of the city from a gallery. Installation view Sol LeWitt, *Colours*, M Leuven, 2012 © SABAM | M– Museum Leuven. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

of the new building was the combination of old and new structures so as to maximize the possibilities of linking the museum to the city, for example, through the transparency of the new building, access to the museum from different urban locations, the alternation of open and closed spaces along the route and the integration of the visual experience of the city in the galleries.

More dramatically, in the Museum aan Stroom in Antwerp, better known as MAS (by Neutelings Riedijk Architects, 2011), movement from the entrance to the top 10th level is designed as a vertical exploration of the city (Fig. 2). The museum was created by unifying three museums (Maritime, Ethnographic and Folk), with the intention of expressing the different aspects of the history of the city in a synthetic way. The movement spaces are separated from the galleries and organized in a continuous route from the entrance of the building to the top floor, creating the rising spiral 'MAS boulevard'. The display is arranged in heterogeneous themes, but on each floor, as the visitor moves through the transparent circulation spaces, she/he perceives constantly changing views of the city surrounding the museum in a different direction (with each floor changing the visual field by 90°) and then, in all directions at once on the top floor, devoted only to a panoramic view of the whole city. Thus, the consistent narrative is not in the exhibition itself, but in the visual experience of the city through movement.

Another expression of the idea of the museum as part of the city has been the design of spatial links or visual connections between museums within a 'museum (or art) quarter'. For example, in the Brandhorst Museum (by Sauerbruch Hutton, 2009), which is part of the Art Quarter of Munich, the final gallery shows unexpected views to the Pinakothek der Moderne and the Alte Pinakothek, seeming to offer an invitation for the continuation of the visit. Similarly, in the Museum Quarter of Vienna, the otherwise introverted Leopold Museum (by Ortner & Ortner, 2001), offers from the top floor visual connections to the adjacent Kunsthalle and Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Wien (MUMOK).

But the opposite is also found with the museum constructing an impermeable box which denies all spatial relations to the city, and so stands in the city as something distinct and separate. The Kunsthau Bregenz (by Peter Zumthor, 2007) is a case in point. It gives the interior no visual relations at all to the outside, with the effect that the outside also offers no sense of the interior, a powerful aspect of the architectural impact of the building seen from the city. In a more obvious, but no less striking way, in both of the museums designed by Jean Nouvel in Paris – the Fondation Cartier (1994) and

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