



Housing and Building National Research Center

HBRC Journal

<http://ees.elsevier.com/hbrcj>

Toward a new vision to design a museum in historical places

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Received 22 July 2015; revised 4 December 2015; accepted 10 January 2016

KEYWORDS

Urban design;
Built environment;
Creative design;
Design strategy;
Contextual design

Abstract Some movements within modern architecture particularly emphasize the importance of matching buildings to their surroundings. However, practicing such “contextual architecture” is highly challenging and typically not something the future inhabitants of a building are well equipped for participating in. This paper attempts to be a new vision to design an important building in such sensitive places, for example, designing a museum in a historical context. The methodology of the study is a qualitative method based on a theoretical foundation. It sheds light on the concepts and definition of museums and contextualism, and answers the main question proposed in this paper: “How can we design a huge and important building such as a museum in historical context while respecting its importance and at the same time avoiding the deterioration of this historical place?” And based on answering the sub following questions too: What is the museum concept? What are the activities and functions of this prototype? What is the museum form and morphology? What are the types of contextual design? What are the strategies of contextual design? This part ends with electing some criteria that will be used as basis for the practical part. And thus it can be concluded the ideal strategy for designing a museum in historical context. Discussion of the findings is expected to enrich the talk in that domain.

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Introduction

The problematic of designing a building among a group of historical buildings is a complex architectural design process. And this issue is getting complicated while designing a building with special specifications, huge size, and having a great importance for the community and country such as a museum within a historical context that must be respected and preserved. The paradox in this case can be formulated in the following question, “How can we design a huge and important building such as a museum in historical context while respecting its importance and at the same time avoiding the deterioration of this

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Peer review under responsibility of Housing and Building National Research Center.



Production and hosting by Elsevier

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.hbrcj.2016.01.004>

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Please cite this article in press as: B.I. Farahat, K.A. Osman, Toward a new vision to design a museum in historical places, HBRC Journal (2016), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.hbrcj.2016.01.004>

historical place?” The complexity of the problem lies in designing the museum within this sensitive historical location, as it can result in suppressing the character of the context and negatively affecting the visual angles of the existing historical buildings, internally and externally.

The act of constructing a new building to contain history provokes a range of architectural and historiography implications that are different in number and kind from those of art museums, or of history museums which occupy historic, or even simply extant, buildings. Recasting architecture as a deliberate and self-reflexive frame around the presentation of history means abandoning the fiction of the ‘white box’, the idea of architecture as a neutral ground, and represents the incursion of architecture into the realm of historiography [1].

Contextual architecture, also called “Contextualism”, the term suggests an architecture that responds to its surroundings by respecting what is already there, unlike Constructivism or Deconstructivism that deliberately work against established geometries and fabric [2].

It is accepted that the effect of context on architectural object and hence its role on design, has emerged with the post-modern trend. Contextualism, as it is well known, came from the desire to resolve the problems regarding harmony with the historical environment and the placement of new buildings within historical surroundings that were apparent throughout the postmodern period. Therefore it became significant in the relations between the architectural object within the urban fabric and its proximal surroundings [3].

Theoretical foundation: Museum design problem

According to Mark Lilla (1985) the museum is an “empowering” institution, meant to incorporate all who would become part of our shared cultural experience. Any citizen can walk into a museum and appreciate the highest achievement of his culture. If he spends enough time, he may be transformed. This is precisely what the museum founders had in mind when they brought great collections to their own cities. For example, in Fig. 1, the British Museum in London is a museum in London dedicated to human history and culture. Its permanent collection, numbering some 8 million works, is among the largest and most comprehensive in existence and originates from all continents,

illustrating and documenting the story of human culture from its beginnings to the present [4].

The museum is a cultural project in which, as John Urry said, “Spaces, histories and social activities are being materially and symbolically remade.” The museum is a building housing cultural material to which the public had access. This public building addresses certain missions which gave birth for the several typologies. During the 20th century a number of social forces influenced the development of museums, especially of the national and regional museums. The years immediately following World War II were a period of remarkable achievement for museums. This was reflected both in international and national policy and in the individual museums as they responded to a rapidly changing, better educated society. Similarly over the previous decades, the museum concept had been elaborating toward new meanings as functionalities. The mentioned changes are due to several reasons. Among these reasons is the new view taken that the public museum is understood not just as a place of instruction, but as a reformatory of manners in which a wide range of regulated social routines and performances take place [5].

Museum definition

Museums started as the “past guardians” of ancient objects or treasures and are now generally known to be the locations or buildings where art and science artifacts are preserved. Museums could be described as the organizations with the mission of investigating the production of humanity along the ages from the viewpoint of science and art to enlighten them about the history in addition to being spaces that present and conserve the treasures of science and art [6].

The International Council of Museums in their meeting in 1955 defined museums as “permanent organizations in the service of society and its development, open to public, which acquire conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education study and enjoyment”. For example, in Fig. 2, the open museums “The Acropolis of Athens and The colonnaded stoa at Vavrona” are examples for the locations where art and science artifacts are preserved [7].



Fig. 1 The British Museum in London is dedicated to human history and culture.

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