

The Architecture of Museums I Paper

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The Centre Pompidou in Paris designed by Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano is a building loved by the public and is generally considered a radical design solution for a contemporary art museum. Almost everybody in the world can visualise the steel structure which has asserted itself as an agora of arts in the heart of the City. In ancient Greece the agora was the core of the city-state. The program for the Centre was paradoxical, a classical institution with a radical form.

The issue was how to centralise the culture when there was the tendency to decentralise it. The successful proposal was to build an unprecedented extrovert exhibition space where the square, or agora, is almost as important as the interior of the Centre. The Centre Georges Pompidou represents an achievement in connecting with larger civic life, one of the main requirements of a museum. It has been called a radical design and I would like to consider the contextual meaning of radical in architecture. The power, the work and the use of language help to designate things, reduce and abstract the nature of things and eventually radicalise the perception of things. The Platonic idea of a 'thing' always has a de-ontological dimension to it, designating what the thing should become in order to be fully what it is and so 'potentiality' becomes more powerful than actuality.

The concept for the Centre Georges Pompidou was experimental in the context of the city of Paris in the 70's with its on-going street protests. When the design team refers to the new museum as a 'live centre of information covering Paris and beyond', the team's members describe the way they intend the centre to be used in the future. When I, a common citizen, observe the world around me through the lense of language, I perceive its actuality through the lense of the potentialities latently present in it. What this means is that any potentiality becomes actual only through language. It is the designation (the naming) of a thing that brings to light its potential. I argue that the specific designation of the Centre Georges Pompidou, along with the use of it as an 'agora of arts' has accentuated the thing's inner potential. It is an example of the 'signifying reduction', a concept well explained by the thinker Slavoj Zizek in the book *The sublime object of ideology*.

The role of language is always fundamental in the process of appropriation of a new building, but the designation of 'radical design' requires, in my opinion, an additional consideration. Pierre Bourdieu in his best known book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* can be helpful. He argues that judgments of taste are related to social position and he extends the idea of capital to categories such as social capital, cultural capital, and symbolic capital. The parallel, I suggest, is that the Centre Georges Pompidou, with its social, cultural and symbolic capital, capitalized on the taste of a specific social class which was ready, in the 1970s, to accept, appreciate and spread a 'new form of museum' as a radical example of building.

Until quite recently, High-tech skins and flexible place were highly influential. In the 1970s they 'turned the architecture world upside down', 'revolutionized museums, transforming what had once been elite monuments into popular places of social and cultural exchange, woven into the heart of the city'. We can argue that the Centre has been quite promptly accepted by the society and became part of the habitus of important elites through a process of assimilation, which reconciled the influences of both external social structures and subjective experience on the individual.

Five years ago I showed a delegation from Eastern Africa around the exhibition 'Museums Next Generation' which was displayed in one of the Montello barracks in the Flaminio district in Rome in the run up to the opening of MAXXI by Zaha Hadid and Patrik Schumacher. 'Museums Next Generation' was about the possibility that the museum in the 21 Century would do more than display isolated art objects, it would connect with larger civic life. One delegate asked a very simple but unpredictable question – 'What does it mean – museum?.. In our culture it is an uncommon institution/concept and we are here to understand its purpose, what it is for, and if it could be beneficial to promote in our society'. Salvatore Settis reminds us that: 'the museum-institution is quite recent. It has existed for little more than two hundred years and its expansion all over the world for a lot less. Nothing ensures that museums will have to still exist in another century or two. They are a product of history, which, like others, may lose vitality'. (*The future of Museums in S. Petersburg 2006*).

Today, we can tackle the subject of the museum by introducing three main components: the institution, the so called 'container' or building; the exhibition, the so called 'contents' or the exhibited art pieces; the public, the so called 'users' or visitors. The museum, through a careful definition of its cultural core, is responsible for the degree of interaction and balance between those three elements. What will be exhibited? Will it be the 'container', the building with its architectural shape? Will it be the

'contents', by emphasising the art along with the idea of the neutrality of 'white cubes' and white walled galleries? And finally, how will the public, interact, change and sometimes challenging the allocated space of the museum?

Concerning the third and last category, the challenge is the public, the final user of the museums. Two examples are emblematic: the project of the EYEBEAM Museum of Art and Technology in New York by Diller Scofidio + Renfro and the Palais de Tokyo in Paris by Lacaton & Vassal. At EYEBEAM residents (students, artists, and staff) and the building's visitors (museum and the other activities) observe one another as they move fluidly through the spaces sometimes on parallel paths, sometimes crossing paths, sometimes merging paths and sharing programs. The floor becomes wall, turns into floor, turns into wall in a design program for a Zygmunt Bauman's 'liquid modernity', which is transient by definition. A completely different approach has been used by Lacaton & Vassal for the last metamorphosis of the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. The concept is to modify as little as possible of the existing structure and the attempt is to create a synthesis of the alternative character of the ateliers and a more complex institutional space. The public walks distractedly through a recycled space and is poised between the atmosphere of a gathering place for radical youth and that of a bistro.

All three of these factors lead to a change in thinking about the meaning of the museum in 21st century, about the real values of the institution: the cultural heritage and its identity content; the dynamics of the market (e.g. the words of curators and experts in cultural policies); the ability of an exhibition space to confer value on the objects it hosts; the art as decoration and the architecture as urban scenery; the museum itself as a social facility; the museum as a sequence of unfinished spaces or a possible enzyme of a new experience of art in the city. Are we dreaming of museums that would both add to the perception of what culture could do, be available to a huge audience, and speak multiple languages? Are architects dreaming of their innovative design solutions as radical next-generation museums...and if so, where are their theoretical writings?

Going back to the question posed by the delegation from Africa about the meaning of the institution museum in the 21st century, my answer was that the museum still represents an attempt to cultivate a sense of civitas, of rootedness to place and the particular. The etymology of the word 'civitas' comes from Indo-European root that means 'to settle', a gathering of people from different origins who decide to coexist under the same law. On the other hand, 'radical' comes from Latin radix "root" and from Late Latin radicalis "of roots".

On returning home the delegate sent me a publication by the Kenya Literature Bureau titled 'Lamu'. A study of the Swahili town by Usam Ghaidan. Initially I considered the book a strange present. After reading the book, I understood that Swahili towns still represent them as citizens. So I wonder, what is radical; our western visions of museum, our 'root' institution or their ruins of the Swahili towns?