Museums A La Carte
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Architecture

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By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Garth Huxtable

Dubrovnik's old palaces house the past in a city that defines urban art
Which buildings in this picture are the museums? Right and rear.

THERE'S nothing like a dame and there's nothing like a museum; both are calculated displays of beauty. Define your woman or define your museum — no two definitions will match. And no greater range of definitions could be offered than this recently returned traveler's experience of museums in Turkey, Israel, Greece, Yugoslavia and England.

Frankly, it is hard to get me into a museum. Cities are the best museums and until I have exhausted the life and art of their streets I am loath to leave that rich record and fabric of the real, living thing for the embalmed treasures of the galleries. But this time I did, and it was worth it. A report, herewith.

We opened in Istanbul with Topkapi, and if your interests extend no farther than emeralds the size of ostrich eggs, O.K. But there is a lot more to see. If your interests include how the kitchens of the palace buildings that make up the museum can be used to accommodate a remarkable collection of Chinese ceramics, breaking every current rule of selective installation, this is the place.

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Restored from partial ruin, this series of typically Turkish arched masonry rooms with their characteristic thick-walled, high-vaulted spaces — always taller than they are wide which seems to suit the spirit better than the reverse — now house grosses of dozens of plates on their handsome stone walls, in addition to jam-packed cases. A room papered, or rather plattered, floor-to-ceiling with Celadon is a pretty great thing. There is the nice touch of the smoke-blackened domes that have been left as the royal cooking fires darkened them. All wrong, of course. And all right.

On to Israel and the celebrated, four-year old Israel museum, which, like Gaul, consists of three parts. There is the main museum of art and archeology, designed by Alfred Mansfeld and Dora Gad, a series of connected but separate pavilions at stepped levels that sit without undue disturbance in the Jerusalem hills.

Connected to this is the Shrine of the Book, by Arnold Bartos and the late Frederick Kiesler, an architectural conceit of depressingly involved symbolism that contains the famous Dead Sea scrolls. The third part is the now almost equally famous Billy Rose sculpture garden, designed by Isamu Noguchi.

In the press coverage, the Shrine of the Book has gotten all the lines. It has the advantage of being an aggressively photogenic oddity, something that is often confused with great architecture. The sculpture garden has been acclaimed by more astute critics than I. The main museum has been largely passed over.

I would reverse that order. The museum building—a group of 35-foot square units topped by hyperbolic parabaloid shell roofs supported on a central column that holds all services — works remarkably well. The avowed purpose of the design, which won an international competition, was to respect the landscape at the same time that it makes a restrained monumental statement.

It works, because it is at once elegant and unpretentious. It works because it serves its purpose honorably. Its clustered volumes clearly demonstrate a proper alternative to the violence that would be wreaked by a conventional blockbuster on a landscape that is at once surprisingly strong and subtle and surpassingly beautiful in the almost oriental intricacies of its contours.

It also works for the museum visitor, because the pavilions break the fatigue of the traditional endless gallery or the rat's maze that directors like to make of their modern factory-style boxes. The quality of installation in both exhibits and equipment (by the architects) is kept admirably high.

The tastefulness of detail, in fact, counts more than the architecture itself. These roofs and columns never really take off with the esthetic skill and daring that the structure implies; they are an "uptight" version of some of today's more accomplished engineering acrobatics. But the museum achieves so much in suitability—for its setting, as an expandable tool for a growing collection and as installation that establishes high standards without self-advertisement — that it must get very good marks indeed.

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I wish that the same could be said for the Shrine of the Book. This building is explained elaborately by its architects and everyone else as a kind of concordance of symbols taken from the history and character of the scrolls — the underground caves in which they were found, the struggle of darkness and light that is their theme, even the idea of the "rebirth" of the State of Israel. In connection with the latter, the building is also interpreted as a series of sexual forms that are a pure embarrassment even in an age of pornography.

But what embarrasses most is the level of cheap theatrics and pretentious vulgarity that suggests a kind of Elizabeth Taylor-Richard Burton Dead Sea Scroll spectacular. There is not a genuinely sensitive passage anywhere. The building offers two lessons: the fallacy of design through symbolism and the dangers of overwrought installation.

As for the sculpture garden, it has its handsome parts. The only trouble is that for one observer, anyway, it loses hands down to the surrounding landscape.

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In Greece, museums are marvelously simple. They are uncomplicated treasurehouses that yield sublime experiences. At archeological sites, they are no more than light, spacious, serene, roofed-over extensions of the dig; a way of protecting the most precious finds from the elements. It would be pretentious indeed to attempt installation to match the drama of the greatest sculpture in history. (Yes, I'll stand on that after the Acropolis Museum, the Agora Museum and the National Museum in Athens, the Delphi Museum and the rest of the Parthenon marbles in the British Museum. What else can you call the kind of art that shatters responses—that strikes knife-straight to the heart?)

This time of year, the way to Delphi is solid with wild flowers and the smell of the ingredients of honey makes one drunk, while Mount Parnassus is still snow-capped. But if you can tear yourself away, we recommend Dubrovnik on the Yugoslav Adriatic coast for any museum tour.

History and art are alive and well in Dubrovnik, an intact, walled Renaissance town. No "historic restoration" can make this statement. There are medieval fortifications of strong, stony drama updated by Michelozzo Michelozzi in the 16th century, their moats now small parks and gardens, Renaissance palaces hidden in side streets and Baroque buildings touched by the Italian genius. They all serve the 20th century with ease and joy.

And there are museums. Everything from ethnographic displays to dissertations on the socialist state are scattered strategically and satisfyingly in old structures along the pedestrian routes where the art of urbanism may be learned.

The Dubrovnik maritime museum, which now presses my favorite in this field, the Peabody Museum in Salem, Mass., is installed literally within the old city walls. One comes upon it, casually and appropriately, while strolling the ramparts. There are views, through windows with eight-foot thick stone reveals, to the sea which brought the marauding Arabs and Venetians whose voyages are memorialized inside.

Here are the past, the present, the sea, the land; the best of nature and of man's constructive art and style. It's called civilization—something we try to lock up bits and pieces of in museums. All together, it's a hard combination to beat.