ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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The National Gallery in West Berlin—"establishing cultural identity" Garth Huxtable

The Legacy of Museum Design of the 1960's

There is a museum explosion in the 1980's that is beginning to make the museum building boom of the 60's look like a practice run. In some ways this new museum wave is producing much more interesting buildings; they are far more revealing about the arts, including architecture, than most of the earlier structures. Many of today's most prestigious commissions are going to the architects of what used to be called the avant-garde — a sure indication that new styles, and new ways of thinking about the arts, are being adopted by the establishment.

The trend is international. James Stirling's Staatsgalerie building is rising now in Stuttgart while he works on extensions for the Fogg Museum in Cambridge, Mass., and the Tate Gallery in London. Richard Meier has museums on the drawing board for Frankfurt and Atlanta. Arata Isozaki is designing the new Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, and Michael Graves has received the commission for the addition to the Whitney Museum in New York. All of these architects are redefining a "modern" building type that was born in classicism and the Beaux Arts in the 19th century.

The 20 years between these cultural building booms have made a tremendous difference. With a few notable exceptions, the museums of the 1960's leaned heavily toward windowless warehousing, or more correctly, their directors did. Frustrated by older, monumental structures with enormous architectural presence requiring constant installation battles, curators demanded total control of the presentation of their collections. They asked for, and got, anonymous, all-purpose spaces in blind, bland boxes. The vagaries of daylight were eliminated for sophisticated artificial lighting systems. In essence, nothing was supposed to interfere with the art itself — least of all the architect, who was often a troublesome fellow.

The results, which should have been ideal, were curiously disappointing. The buildings were not just neutral, they were dispiritingly characterless. The scientifically controlled lighting lacked life. The museum was reduced to containerized art. Most surprising of all, the works of art seemed diminished, rather than liberated, by their ordinary setting. Since then, the return to daylit galleries and specially designed spaces has been gradual, but steady, and the return of architecture as the supplier of context and measure for the other arts is quite overwhelmingly evident.

There were three particularly important exceptions to this 1960's trend — the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the East Wing of the National Gallery in Washington, and the National Gallery in West Berlin. All three are national museums, and each was meant to establish a national cultural image. All opted consciously for architecture.

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The Centre Pompidou, popularly known as the Beaubourg, was the product of an international competition won by the firm of Piano and Rogers. The design sought to create a distinctly new kind of building for a radically conceived museum function intended to restore leadership and vitality to Paris as an artistic world capital.

The East Wing of Washington's National Gallery, by I.M. Pei and Partners, had to meet special criteria of site, status and suitability. The National Gallery in West Berlin, which was the last major work of Mies van der Rohe, was the summation of that master's painstaking investigations of structure, space and style — a work of art in its own right that was to house the national collections.

How have these museums fared? The results are distinctly mixed. None has been problem-free. Each director has wrestled with his particular devil, or architect, a process complicated by changing exhibition ideas, styles and functions in the 1970's and 80's. These have ranged from the all-star supershows to increasingly didactic displays reinforced by historical and literary references.

The successes and failures of these buildings are instructive. The Beaubourg has turned out to be a winner, after a rocky and uncertain start. The National Gallery in

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'Using any building well means working with, not against, its visions and intentions.'

Legacy of 60's Museum Design

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West Berlin is currently a loser, for reasons that have less to do with design than with unsympathetic use. The National Gallery's East Wing in Washington is an uneasy draw, depending entirely on the nature and scale of what is on display.

How much of this can be attributed to the architecture? Saying that "a building doesn't work" covers a multitude of sins and sinners. No building is flawless; its uses are too complex. Even the most careful program can be out of date by the time the structure is finished. No all-purpose space works equally well for all purposes. "Flexibility" puts even more creative strain on the abilities of those who use the spaces than on the original designer. Using any building well means working with, not against, its visions and intentions. Some buildings present more obstacles than others — turning Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim spiral into a functioning museum was a formidable and exasperating job. But a Guggenheim exhibition seen from the changing perspectives of that ramp has extraordinary impact as a total esthetic experience.

There are clear cases of overt hostility to a building by a client or user, and the result is always a disaster. Whether the hostility is conscious or not, insensitivity to the architecture can lead to sabotage. This seems to be the case with Mies's National Gallery in West Berlin. The misunderstanding of its esthetic and the mishandling of its space, the unfeeling destruction of this handsome structure, visually and conceptually, can make one's heart ache.

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To begin with the ludicrous, this is probably the only building in West Berlin — or perhaps even in Germany, where cleanliness counts — with dirty windows. For a Mies building, that means dirty glass walls. The crystalline quality so essential to these transparent planes is smudged by a dull, nasty film.

Mies's typical, perfectly calibrated, steel-framed enclosure stands on a stone platform in a setting as amorphous and ill-scaled as any scene of American urban renewal. By dint of its sheer design strength, however, the building makes a serene, self-contained statement.

One enters a huge, open room from the street; the land slopes sharply to the rear so that the plaza becomes a podium, with galleries for the permanent collection and a sculpture garden at the lower levels. This single, superb, unified and unashamedly "univalent" space is the basis of the Miesian esthetic. The making of such a grand space is a historical architectural preoccupation; the adjustment of proportions and details, of structure to openness, of materials and finishes, was Mies's main concern in the last years of his life.

All of this care is canceled out by woeful misuse and poor maintenance. In the tradition begun by Mies's 1929 Barcelona Pavillion, this room is a singular, 20th-century setting for the selective display of the best 20th-century art. It brooks nothing second-rate. That, admittedly, is a sublime but restrictive purpose, but for anyone truly interested in the arts of our time, this unique integration of art and architecture represents an exceptional achievement.

> 'Museums of the 60's leaned toward windowless warehousing.'

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What the room contained when I saw it were some extremely unattractive and badly related paintings documenting trends of the last two decades, all better represented elsewhere. A clumsy installation amputated the green marble columns that should soar from floor to roof. The kind of sculpture that is made of old rags and boards was dropped, as if discarded, on the far-from-clean floor. The hallmarks of the Miesian esthetic — elegance, rigor, quality and perfection of placement and detail — were abysmally lacking. This structure is not without problems — it is clearly short on administrative and curatorial space. But every attempted solution, from signs to coffee shop, is jarringly unsuitable. This is more of a national disgrace than a national museum.

The success of the Beaubourg, on the other hand, shows how a talented and determined staff came to terms with equally demanding architecture. This structure promised the impossible: It made futuristic claims of multi-purpose space and multi-media arts. Faced with installing the same old modern art, the staff found that the stylish plumbing kept getting in the way. The building insisted on celebrating its own technology over everything else. With the Paris-New York and Paris-Moscow shows, the most serious of the installation problems were brought under control. These spectacular and scholarly exhibitions combined theme, contents and setting to stunning effect. They were landmark events. The irony, of course, is that this building is not working the way it was supposed to — as a laboratory of the arts — but it is now working very well.

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The East Wing of the National Gallery in Washington is still shaking down. Its monumental atrium does what the National Gallery in Berlin was meant to do — it creates an environmental experience of the arts of this century. Mies's building would have done it better, but that, alas, is moot. The trouble comes with the transition to the smaller galleries. When the scale of the exhibits is small — like miniature Impressionist paintings or royal European treasures, or when they make a discrete entity, as with the Matisse cutouts, these galleries are an intimate delight.

But the present show of Rodin sculpture is a powerhouse that writhes and twists through these rooms and can barely be contained, while the plunge down the small spiral stairs to Rodin's monumental "Gates of Hell," is an architectural absurdity. There is an incompatibility in this subject that the architecture cannot seem to handle. The problem is one that the National Gallery will continue to face.

When a museum and its contents come together as an integrated esthetic whole, something special happens. The art is enlarged and exalted, and so is the experience of the viewer. Creating that synthesis of art and setting is the challenge that still faces architects and directors. It is also the secret of a great museum. ■