

The Museum and the city

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It is beginning to be quite normal to go to a brand-new museum and not know if the building we are in is a container for objects and concepts or the star of the visit. Not long ago, a well-known artist was asked for his opinion on the Bilbao Guggenheim. His answer was that it seemed an excellent construction, but that in the Prado the works were inside.

But beyond the doubts raised by the lack of proportion which more than once has been established between interest in architecture and interest in the collections, it is obvious that museums have become one of the stars of contemporary architectural experiments. We have seen myriad proposals arise, blessed by current cultural policies.

If in the Middle Ages the cathedral dominated over the monastery and became a symbol of the urbs, today's touristic pilgrims have museums as their main attraction. In fact, these have become emblematic of new cities, as cathedrals were in their time. Temples to be considered as a phenomenon closely linked to city life. The Barcelona See is a good example. We need only observe the intense relationship its cloister has set up with the streets surrounding it, with the city's mediaeval spaces.

Current museums, besides their essential function of allowing a direct contact between cultural heritage and humanity, also achieve important urban functions. We need only stroll around any of the better-known European cities to confirm how museums have emphatically contributed to highlight the city's image, to confirm how they are implicated in the reconstruction and projection of the urbs, to confirm how importantly they have collaborated to heal the wounds caused by unchecked urbanism.

The spectacular glass pyramid (by Ieoh Ming Pei) in front of the Louvre solves the centre's current needs while respecting the older architecture. During the day, the old palace is reflected in it and, at night, it lights up and lights the surroundings. But even before the inauguration in 1989, it became one of the symbols of end-of-the-century Paris. If people said then that The Sphinx (François Mitterrand) now had his pyramid,

the no-less-spectacular new see of the Bibliothèque Nationale created by Dominique Perrault and opened in 1995, was christened by a journalist as Mitterrand's Escorial. Four giant towers rise like open books on a great platform next to the river Seine. A space that reminds us of the Champ de Mart, the Invalides, or the Tuilleries. Both Pyramid and National Library are examples of the use of cultural buildings on a monumental scale within a project of expansion and reaffirmation of the French metropolis at the end of the twentieth century, promoted by Mitterrand. In Berlin, the European city with most building cranes in use, the great project for re-establishing the urban web in the German metropolis has aroused more debate. Actually, the extension of the Neue Museum within the symbolic Museum Sinsel awoke a passionate discussion. This discussion was somewhere between Grassi's moderation of proposition and Gehry's exhibitionism.

In Frankfurt, museums have played a very important role in the reconstruction and projection process for the German economic capital. But, as Hilmar Hoffmann asserts in 'Frankfurt's New Museum Landscape', this city is unique because of its change in attitude in regard to the museum as cultural institution and as element in the urban landscape. Frankfurt has not opted for gigantic museum projects, but rather has preferred to promote unique, but not isolated, buildings and this has allowed a revaluation of the mediaeval fabric of the city.

In the 1980s, the Tate Foundation commissioned the extension of the Tate Gallery on the bank of the Thames from James Stirling and Michael Wilford. The architecture designed by them was very respectful towards the works exhibited (William Turner) but does not deprive the visitor of an enjoyment of the exceptional outside views. When this British foundation decided on a reconversion of Albert Dock into a space for showing its collections (once again, Stirling was responsible), the situation was different. Then they were talking about a new museum included within a project for development and regeneration of the city. After the closing in the 1960s of the important port structures, there were, besides great empty spaces, most of the population out of work. The opening of the Tate Gallery meant a new attraction for Liverpool. Once again, a degraded area of London, on the other bank of the Thames in this case, has received the Tate Foundation's attention. In the Spring of the year 2000, there will take place the inauguration of the Tate Gallery at Bankside,

at the old electrical center of the Bankside Power Station, renovated by the architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron. Of their contribution, the most outstanding is a glass structure which extends all along the terrace and adds two more storeys to the old building. It will allow unique views over London and will also contribute natural light to the lower galleries.

To cite a case nearer us, the Centro Galego de Arte Contemporáneo in the old part of Santiago de Compostela was also part of a programme for regenerating a historical neighbourhood. The main concern of Alvaro Siza Vieira when planning the new museum was a subtle insertion of the building (the hermetic granite-faced facade contrasts with the luminous interior) into the urban and topographical context of Santiago de Compostela. Nowadays, however, we all remember the recently-inaugurated Guggenheim Museum in the Basque Country. When we see this construction, it is impossible not to bring to mind films like Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. Frank O. Gehry's monumental and omni-present proposal is one of the main symbols of a post-industrial city in search of a new image. Next to the ruins of the factories on the banks of the river Nervión, this sort of great whale beached on the wharf has instantly become a new emblem of the new Bilbao. It is not in vain that it represents —along with the Metro, the Uribitarte pedestrian mall, the extension of the Sondika airport, or the music and conference Palace— an end-of-the-century aesthetics and technique. Once again, Frank Lloyd Wright's idea when he built the see of this American foundation on New York's Fifth Avenue is applied: the architectural work should become the first work in the collection. The avalanches of visitors which have suddenly turned Bilbao into a touristic city confirm the power of museums today. They confirm their capacity to contribute to overcoming a degraded urban environment. They also make us thoughtful when we see this sight. It is true that, at the Prado, the works are inside.

We could give more examples. The theme is extensive and close. The renewed Barcelona of the 1980s and beginnings of the 1990s promoted ambitious museum projects which are currently playing an important role in the city's monumental topography. The Raval offers very clear cases.

As a matter of fact, last Summer the classes of the Elisava Superior School of Design answered to this. During the Barcelona Summer Program in Design 1998, organised by this centre and the Carnegie Mellon

University (Pittsburgh, USA), Sergio Correa directed the course called *Discovering the City*. The intention was, while learning to read the city, to analyse how signs and elements of public information were integrated in urban settings. The setting was the old nucleus of Barcelona which gathers a large number of cultural institutions such as the Centre for Contemporary Culture of Barcelona, the Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art, or the Elisava School itself. The course practice was a proposal for information systems which could invite citizens and visitors to Barcelona to stroll around that area. The students, attentive readers of the city, very clearly perceived the dialogue between the museum and the street. In their projects, the strolls went beyond the cultural centres, by means of interventions on the pavements, use of the Raval's roofs, placement of objects in the streets, taking advantage of the characteristic light of the area of the city, etc. Proposals which could very well be considered as museographies —illumination, way-signs, colours, sign panels, routes— taken out of the MACBA or the CCCB and taken out into the streets.

The MACBA begins in Elisabets street. The great glass facade which joins its interior to the new Plaça dels Angels fuses with the idea of making the old city centre a pedestrian area. Urban routes which have a continuity by means of the inside ramps which lead to the galleries. The outer shape of the museum, its dimensions and colours, can be interpreted as a reflection of the image which the city wishes to imprint on that area. The only concession the architect has given the environment is the height of the building. The new construction does not pass the houses and monuments around it. In this way, the effect on the visitor on arrival at the Plaça dels Angels is the same produced by arriving at Santa Maria del Mar, Sants Just i Pastor, the facade of the Tinell, or the Palau de la Música Catalana. A series of partial views which are proper to architectural monuments in a mediaeval city. Everything else effects in contrast. The new white monumental architecture carries out a dialogue with the old buildings and the separating walls. *La ciutat de les paraules* (City of Words) project —23 April 1998, directed by Macarena G. de Vega and Xavier Mas— was, in a way, an extension of this idea. Artists from all disciplines turned the scars that the large-scale urban transformations are leaving in the Raval into supports for their creations.

After Albert Viaplana and Helio Piñón's remodeling of the Casa de la Caritat, the city —as in the case



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(fig.1) CCCB. Albert Vilaplana and Helio Piñón
(fig.2) MACBA. R. Meier
(fig.3) Centre d'Art Santa Mònica. Albert Vilaplana and Helio Piñón

of the Cathedral cloister— becomes an interior part of the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona. The well-known views of Barcelona are reflected in the inflection of the cornice of the new mass built of glass-wall in the Women's Patio. A subtle play of reflections and transparencies which somehow reminds us of Jean Nouvel's project for the Foundation Cartier d'Art Contemporaine in Paris. In this case, however, the operation was reverse. Where the foundation is now, there used to be a nineteenth century house with an inside garden measuring 400 sq. metres. The green space has been kept, and Jean Nouvel's building is within the same perimeter as the old palace. A new construction which establishes a fascinating relationship between the street and the tree-space, through a glass facade. Three successive glass surfaces between outside and inside play, as if it were with veils, with reality and reflection; they take the characteristics belonging to an inner garden out into the street.

Without leaving the Raval, in the Santa Mònica Art Centre Albert Viaplana and Helio Piñón decided to alter the inner route by turning the first-floor windows into the front door entrance. An entrance which one reaches by a ramp which is both street and terrace, with views on the Rambla.

The placement of the Tàpies Foundation in the Eixample of Barcelona brought up other kinds of problems. In the reforming of the old publishing-house of Muntaner i Simón, it was the artist Antoni Tàpies himself who added the last brush-stroke. His sculpture *Núvol i cadira* (*Cloud and Chair*), besides being an artistic proposal, is an urban solution. A poetic signpost which reduces the impact of the separating walls which straiten—or used to straiten—the building. Now, from the Eixample to a mountain within the city. To say that the Palau Nacional, site of the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, is no architectural marvel is quite obvious. But it is also true that it is now a reference-point for Barcelona; it is one of the largest public buildings it has ever had. The National Palace is visible from many points in the city, but before Gae Aulenti's intervention and the remodelling of Montjuïc as the Olympics mountain—pity the Metro finally didn't arrive at this area of the city—, it was a museum isolated in every sense of the word. With the new architectural project, the old, boring access staircases were replaced by a garden podium connected to the escalators which come up from Maria Cristina Avenue. Incorporating a pond in the middle of the podium was

also an outstanding effect. Visually, the MNAC is joined to Jujol's fountain by the successive fountains which begin at the cascade and continue on down. At the same time, the recovery of the Oval Salon as a great plaza has added new urban space to Barcelona.

It is now just over thirty years since Mies van der Rohe carried out the project for the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin. Open and easy to enter, it is clearly opposed to the closed nature of nineteenth century museums, only accessible by means of monumental staircases, and with great facades crowned by powerful pediments. But, as was also happening in painting collections and glyptic collections of the last century, Mies van der Rohe's gallery was an autonomous structure as regards its surroundings. In the 1970s, however, James Stirling designed the Neue Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart. The traditional architecture of a museum centre was joined to a concept of the museum as urban monument. In the nineteenth century, Karl Friederich Schinkel had used the rotunda in the Altes Museum in Berlin to turn it into the star of his project. A century later, Stirling used this element again in the Neue Staatsgalerie, but turned it into an uncovered rotunda, a sort of central plaza. An urban space within the museum, but also in the middle of the city. Starting from a series of routes, of pedestrian paths, it is possible to circle around the Staatsgalerie and go across it into the empty rotunda. A rotunda-plaza which, like the Uffizi's patio-street, helps the visitor find his way inside and outside the galleries. Stirling offered a monumental construction, as this had been the tradition of both public and popular buildings. It is accessible both for visitors and pedestrians, if they are not both the same person.

In a way, Stirling marked a beginning. Many examples have followed these objectives since then. Hans Höllein's proposition is both spectacular and intimate: he has buried the Salzburg Guggenheim Foundation building in a rocky area at the far end of the city. A suggestive idea when faced with the problems brought up by the construction of a new museum in a historical town. But counter-examples also abound. The North access of the Museo del Prado, the Goya door, is a confusing entrance, full of parked cars. A monumental staircase of very little architectural quality and a parking lot still define one of Madrid's most symbolic spaces. If during the Gothic period the cathedral was a reference of power in the urbs, nowadays the museum is a barometer—not just a cultural one— of the end-of-the-twentieth-century city.

Lost within the monumentalism, I have lost my desire to enter the salons, to see the museum as an extension of urban routes and, in this route, perceive more than examine the different ways of contemplation proposed by current architecture. Since the day that Duchamp presented his urinal, there has been no lack of experiment of new ways of showing contemporary art. At the same time, during the last few years we have seen the reopening of galleries in the Louvre or the Prado with museography inspired on the way Diego Velázquez and his followers presented the works of these great artists in the galleries of their palaces -paintings overlapping, green or violet colours to bring out the paintings of the sixteenth century. The museum must create the conditions needed so that the contact between us and the objects can be as meaningful as possible. If the city, as Barthes says, is a language, a series of signs in a dialogue with the citizens, the museum should be an extension of our strolls through streets and plazas.

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