

Preservation as Provocation: Re-thinking Saarinen's Cranbrook

Design & Precedents Essay

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The challenge of creating a new design for Saarinen's Museum and Art Gallery at Cranbrook, is that of respecting the existing building while also creating a new design which is "unimaginable without the existing structures." (ACSA) The design deals with the difficult task of unifying the past and present through architectural design to create a new museum and library, while also seeking to contrast the old and new. In dealing with the task, it is undeniable that precedence, type and context all play an important role in the new design. Saarinen's original work is a key component of the new design. His design, as well as that of many other museums and libraries, "... of the past influence us, whether or not we care to admit it, or to structure an understanding of how that influence occurs. The past is not just that which we know, it is that which we use, in a variety of ways, in the making of new work.... The typology argument today asserts that despite the diversity of our culture there are still roots of this kind, which allow us to speak of the idea of a library, a museum, a city hall or a house. The continuity of these ideas of type, such as they are, and the esteemed examples which have established their identity and assured their continued cultural resonance, constitute an established line of inquiry in which new work may be effectively grounded." (Hancock) The understanding of the time and the important role it plays in shaping the way in which we view architecture is integral to the library and museum design. Saarinen's design is rooted in another time one which is linear and stable. Today time and its relationship to architecture are extremely fragmented and things are no longer experienced linearly, but in a plurality of ways. The new museum and library looks to circulation and the arrangement of programme as aspects that change and respond to the current culture. By creating a new way in which the library and museum users move through the old and new spaces, a fresh understanding and appreciation of the building is created. However, while creating this new movement, design elements from traditional typologies as well as those from the existing building are also taken into consideration.



Fig1. - View of new designs atrium enclosing the former propylea

The new design aims to redefine the way one moves throughout the building. Saarinen's existing buildings are in no way irrelevant to our time, however, the way in which they are meant to be experienced is linked to a period in time where museums and libraries were experienced in a very different way from that of today. The new design radically changes the way in which visitors move throughout the space. The central propylea (Fig.

1) of Saarinen's original design is kept as a formal entry piece which both links and unifies the two buildings, while at the same time helping to define them as separate and unique. Whereas the propylea of the new design has been converted into a glass enclosed atrium space with a grand staircase that weaves between the two existing

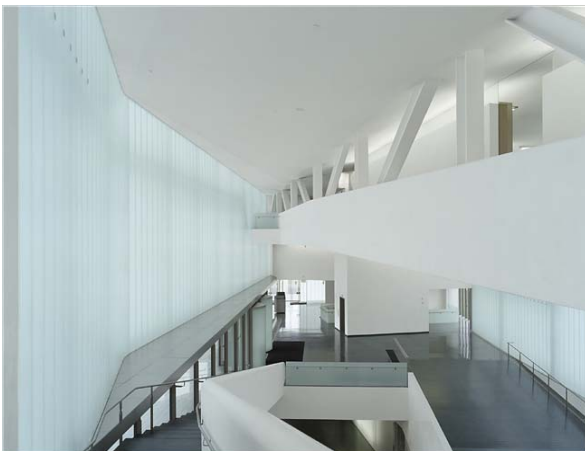


Fig. 2 - Nelson-Atkins Museum, Steven Holl.

structures. Design elements such as grand staircases and atriums are considered to be "standard programmatic features" (p.10, Zeiger) of museums; these elements were prominent in early museum designs such as Karl Friedrich Schinkel's temple fronted Altes Museum in Berlin. Steven Holl considers the large atrium (Fig. 2) and lobby spaces of the Nelson- Atkins Museum of Art to be "social

condensers" or spaces that aim to bring people together. The atrium "...collects various programs.. (attempting) to build a community." (p.15, Zeiger) and give a sense of place. The atrium staircase leads to the main entry platform, which links the new museum and library additions. The platform is the existing roof of the propylaea, this height allows for spectacular views over the campus giving the visitors time to pause and enjoy the connect between architecture and landscape. The importance of this connection is something that Saarinen tried to underlay through carefully

designing his building to work with the landscape. The central propylea is an entry point to a magnificent series of lush gardens and serene reflecting pools. The atrium's key role of linking the two buildings, yet allowing them to remain distinct, was critical to the success of Saarinen's design; this idea of linkage therefore became critical to the new design as well. The choice of an almost transparent glass and massive columns, with the same spacing as those of the propylea, help to remember the existing space while at the same time creating a strong design element, a vertical piece that marks the entry space, thus reverting back to classical museum design with imposing monumental entry pieces creating a sense of arrival. The entrance's location helps visitors experience the existing buildings in a different way than before. The visitors move up



Fig. 3 – View From Roof Garden of Atrium and main stair.

through both library and museum spaces and then move back down into the existing galleries and library. A clear contrast is made between old and new, through the use of materials and geometry. The new circulation piece (Fig. 3) protrudes into the existing

it the spaces through the grand bronze doors that were originally the entry points to both museum and library. The reuse of many of Saarinen's design elements and the reinterpretation of his design theories help underlie the importance of the existing building as shaping the new design and becoming part of it.

Museums and Libraries of today also act as an important precedent for the new museum and library design for Cranbrook. Both typologies have been radically redefined by today's culture. They are no longer classical temple like spaces but they continue to act as important cultural meeting spaces. The library and gallery at Cranbrook were meant to be the defining

pieces of architecture of the campus. Today, these large cultural institutions still act as defining



Fig. 4. - Seattle Public Library, Rem Koolhaas.

pieces of our culture. The library of today is a type that in many ways is dying. An institution, which houses books, a source of information, that some feel is becoming obsolete. Libraries of today try to integrate technology to help redefine the type, making it current in the culture of today. In

Koolhaus' Seattle Public Library (Fig. 4) he seeks to, "...redefine the library as an institution no longer exclusively dedicated to the book but as an information store where all potent forms of media - new and old - are presented equally and legibly." (p.150, Ramaus) Interestingly though, Koolhaus is clear that, "...new libraries don't reinvent or even modernize the traditional institution, they merely package it in a new way." The new library design for Cranbrook studies the importance of technology in the library and how it has changed the role of the user. The user can now act as their own librarian, guiding their own

experience in the library. Information kiosks are located on a landing of the great stair allowing users to plan their visit to the library before they even enter the space. Koolhaus also notes that the programme (Fig. 5) helps to define the new library, by identifying the specific needs of each programme element and designing them in a way to meet these needs they gain identify and help to define the library. Three main programmatic elements can be identified in the Cranbrook design: staff space, gathering/study



Fig. 5 - Programme Arrangement Diagram, Seattle Public Library.

space and book space. The book collection is still used as the core piece of the library. The new staff area has a central location at the new entrance. Gathering and study spaces are dispersed throughout the new library to help the user move easily throughout the space and feel

comfortable guiding themselves throughout it - they can be seen as interaction spaces where librarians and library users can interact. The form of the library is further defined through its materials (Fig. 6): the public gathering spaces' use a translucent glass, which provides views to the outside, and allow for an open feeling; the staff areas and book spaces have fewer glass areas, they are mainly walls. The exteriors of these spaces are clad with a dark composite panel material. Whereas the gathering/reading/studying areas, versus stable program, is clear on the exterior. Libraries such as the Seattle public library and its creation of a new typology for the library help to inform the design of the Cranbrook library addition in many ways.



Fig. 6 - View of New Design - Cladding Types

an “architectural context” (p.42, Newhouse) for the art. The Museum space at Cranbrook does just this; a series of internal atrium spaces create a dynamic section (Fig. 7). The gallery spaces vary in their size, shape and lighting. The main gallery is naturally lit by large expanses of specialty glass, used on many other libraries and museums because of its ability to provide a naturally diffuse light perfect for displaying artwork.

The museum type has drastically changed in recent years, it is now seen as less of a blank canvas and more of a space that should interact with the artwork, providing for a series of very unique spaces in which to display artwork. The new museum aims to provide



Fig. 7 – Section of Library & Gallery Spaces

Smaller galleries have lower ceiling heights and very little glass, giving a more enclosed and intimate feeling. Since a wide range of art is being displayed, the difference in the galleries is key to responding to the art. Thus trying to create a museum where the architecture “.. and its contents come together as an integrated ascetic whole...creating synthesis of art and setting.” (p.220, Newhouse) This concept of creating unique architecture to house art is common in many galleries of today including Ghery’s Guggenheim, Spain (Fig. 8), which can be seen as an art piece itself. The space also provides a performance or media space, since galleries are no longer used just to display works of art but are teaching venues and social gathering spots, this space can also act as seating and stage for lectures or performance. The new museum also focuses on changing the visitor’s circulation through out the building. Elements of the new design are exposed within the existing gallery space allowing the new building to showcase itself in the old and vice versa. The libraries of museums of today’s culture, focus on creating spaces that respond uniquely to their content and users. The design elements and ideas used in them are used in the design of the new Cranbrook museum and gallery thus allowing it to become a design that is current.



Fig. 8 - Guggenheim, Spain - Frank Gehry.

The new design of the Museum and Library at Cranbrook is undeniably rooted in the past. The design is one in

which the existing building is integral to the new design. The precedent of this design, such as key design elements and ideas about spatial organization, are taken and re-interpreted to create a design which remembers the past and uses this to create a new future for the space. Looking to current typologies of the museum and library it seems that the focus has shifted from those of the past, towards designing spaces that respond to the user and their personal experience of the space. Creating new sequencing of space and circulation, the way in which the users experience the new design, provides a new cultural perspective that neither the existing buildings nor the new design can provide independently.

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