

ARCH 384

Architectural Research

Essay

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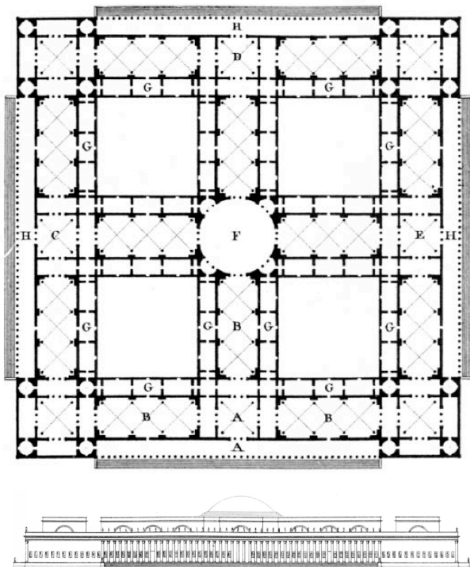
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“The works of the past always influence us, whether or not we care to admit it, or to structure an understanding of how that influence occurs. The past is not just that which we know, it is that which we use, in a variety of ways, in the making of 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.”

Whether or not we choose to look at the past when we are designing a building, it is impossible to deny that the type we are designing is not new and many people have worked on it before. Even if the type has evolved and modified as time goes by, it is still possible for us to recognize a building and name the type he belongs to. The reasons, which are at the root of the elaboration of a type, have remained the same, even as the use of a building and the vision of its design evolve. For every type, it is possible to find one or more main elements, which will unmistakably be the centerpieces of the design; other elements will typically exist to serve the primary ones. Thereby, when a library is designed, the functions of book storage and spaces to work are always present; for a museum, it was always a concern to find the best way to store the pieces and present them; in a house, there is always (at least) a space to live and a space to sleep. It is obvious that all the functions present in a building, even the minor ones, like facilities or complementary spaces, are necessary for the building to work, but their presence or absence in a building depends upon the function of the project and the program; they do not participate in defining the particular type. In order to illustrate that in a more detailed way, I will focus on an old and well-known type: the museum.

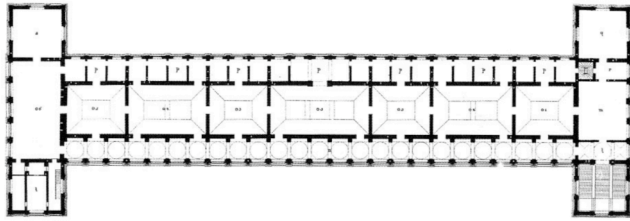
Etymologically, the word “museum” comes from the Greek “museion”, which was a temple where the nine muses, divinities of Art, were exhibited. One of the first museums was commissioned by Ptolémée 1 (367 BC - 283 BC) in Alexandria. At that time, the collections were composed of objects of the past, but also objects of the present society, in order to glorify it. Romans were the first to publicly exhibit artwork in public spaces, such as baths and forums, however there were no specific buildings to exhibit the work. During the middle age, the religious institutions kept the religious art. Contrary to what is generally believed, it is not during the Renaissance that the museum appeared, but it is during this period that they really began to develop. The word “museum” appeared the first time during the 16th century. At that time, it was only the princely families and a few other privileged people who had access to art and were exhibiting the pieces

they acquired in the galleries of the palaces. An excellent example is the Uffizi in Florence, commissioned in 1569 by the Duke Cosimo de' Medici to the architect Giorgio Vasari. This building was designed to shelter the administrative power of the city. Nevertheless, a few years later, both the architect and the backer died and it was Cosimo de' Medici's son who asked Buontalenti to continue the construction. At this point some changes in the plan were made in order to leave the second floor for the exclusive use of Francesco I de' Medici, who was a great admirer of art and science. Buontalenti was asked to include a new room, named Tribuna. This room, which is octagonal and receives a zenithal light, was designed to expose the most beautiful pieces of the collection. It is often considered the first museum in history. Thank to Francesco I de' Medici's successor, the collections of the Medici family continued to grow and other parts of the Uffizi were reorganized to receive them. It was not until 1770, however, that the first completely public museum opened, it was the Fridericianum Museum in Kassel. Indeed, before then, only the hosts of the place were invited to admire the works. This idea grew little by little and



the galleries of private collections started to open themselves to the public. Since the middle of the 18th century, as part of the Enlightenment spirit, the museum started to become an architectural type. It became a Prix of Rome theme and was then included in Durand's "Précis des Leçons d'architecture données à l'école polytechnique". Thanks to the French Revolution, art conserved by the nobility and the church would be given to the public. It is interesting to look at some museum examples to see that, even if the original characteristics can be found in every project, they have evolved substantially since the beginning. We have always been looking for, and we are still trying to discover, the best way to present and conserve the works. In 1779, the two projects that won the Prix de Rome

competition both had a shape of a quadrilateral composed of four courtyards delimited by the aisles shaping a Greek cross. In 1801, Jean-Louis-Nicolas Durand proposed in his "Recueil et parallèle des edifices de tout genre, anciens et modernes," a museum, which would serve as a reference for all 19th century museum builders. In a similar way as those constructed twenty years before, he also drew a quadrilateral with 4 aisles shaping a cross; one is reserved for architecture, one for sculpture, one for painting, and the last one for the temporary exhibitions. Contrary, however, to the two Prix de Rome winners, the facades have windows; at that time, the architects started talking about the importance of natural light. A new stage of development was achieved with the construction of the Old Pinakothek between 1826 and 1836 by Leo von Klenze in Munich. The partitioning of the exhibition rooms is completely new. They are no longer



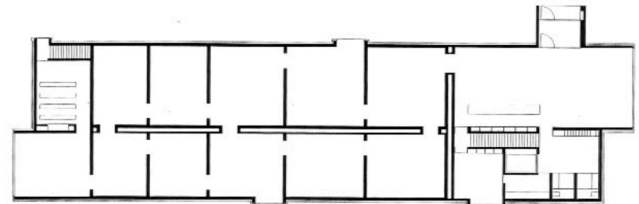
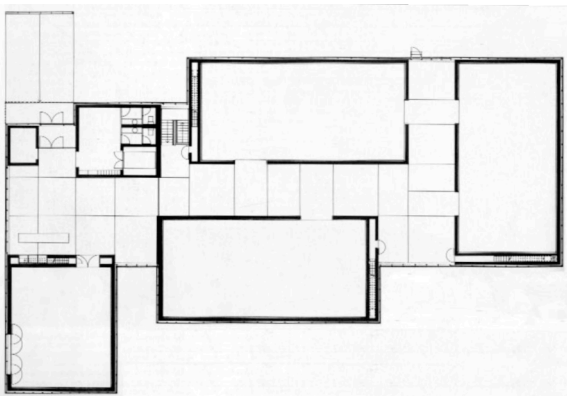
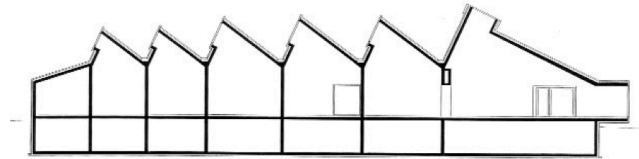
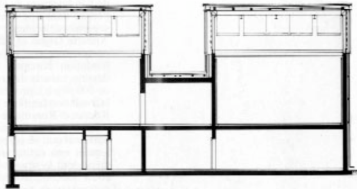
articulated around different patios; the building, in the shape of an “H”, has a well-developed central part, where the enfilade rooms are following each other. These big exhibition rooms are

located between a loggia to the south and smaller rooms for the small works to the north. The main change is that more liberty is now given to the visitors, who can choose how they travel through the exhibition. Another important step in the museum development was the creation of universal exhibitions. The first one happened in 1851 in London. These exhibitions require large hall and thus propose new manner of presenting the works. It is also during this period that the museum became more common and that they started to be built in cities.

Between the two world wars, people started to question the practices coming from the 19th century museums. The circulation space is discussed again. The architects searched for the most interesting way for the visitors to view the exhibition and always tended to give him more liberty in his journey. They also tried to give more space to the artwork, avoid the stacked objects in show windows, and also avoid walls being completely covered by paintings. Some people realized that if we wish to really enjoy the works, the architecture of the museum itself should be as discreet as possible in order to not disturb the visitor’s contemplation. The museum should be designed to expose the objects rather than itself. The discussion continued during the ‘50s, the two present kinds of museum were discussed: the museum designed to exhibit and the museum designed to be exhibited. The first trend is qualified by a silent architecture; the building is trying to stay as discrete as possible to give a place as important as possible to the artwork. An example of this category is the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth built by the Japanese architect Tadao Ando. In the second category, the building is considered a piece of art in itself. The works exhibited are not necessarily what is attracting us the most. For instance, the Guggenheim museums built respectively in New York by Frank Lloyd Wright and in Bilbao by Frank Gehry.

In the ‘80s, museums had a new intense development, but we can find the same fundamental concerns. The architects are still looking for a compromise between light, circulation space, organization, and presentation of the work, in general, the best conditions for the exhibition. An architect who is designing a museum has his own opinion of what the best conditions are. Thus, we can find very different visions of a museum, some better than others, but all of them are still recognizable as museums. In order to illustrate some of the differences we can find between museums, I will take the example of the Kirchner Museum in Davos, Switzerland and the Liner Museum in Appenzell, Switzerland, both by the architects Gigon and Guyer. The first difference we can observe is that the visitor’s journey will be very different in the two museums. The first museum has an organization of the rooms which allows the visitor to choose his way with more

liberty than in the second, where the exhibition rooms are organized in an enfilade, like the galleries of the old palaces. The second big difference concerns the lightening; both museums have a natural and zenithal lighting, but in the Kirchner Museum the light is filtered to be consistent regardless of the weather. In the second museum, the light is also coming from the ceiling but it is direct light coming from the North. This sort of lighting is the same as the painter's attics.



What we have said about the museum can also be applied to all the other types, whether they have been created a long time ago or recently. It seems important to have some knowledge about our past and to study some precedents before starting any design, even if the project we will design will probably be very different from those studied. Studying projects and buildings, even those that have fallen out of fashion, will help us in our design and bring us to consider some points that we might not have examined otherwise. Knowledge of history is important when we are talking about architecture but, in my opinion, it is more how it will be integrated into actual projects that is more important. Each project is related to the past or at least to our past experiences, even if the connection is made unconsciously. Some buildings, like those built by Frank Gehry, can be considered as completely reinventing their type, but are in reality paying homage to their predecessors far more than we might expect. A certain type cannot be radically transformed, but that does not mean that all the buildings of that type will look the same. Indeed, many adaptations of the program or condition that the architects wanted to provide to the inhabitants were made over time. Each building serves the function defined by its type; however, how it serves this function will depend on the constraints of the age and on the architect's personal perspectives.

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