Reshaping Museum Space

Architecture, Design, Exhibitions

Edited by

Suzanne MacLeod

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

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At no other point in their modern history have museums undergone such radical reshaping as in recent years. Challenges to create inclusive and accessible spaces open to appropriation and responsive to contemporary agendas have resulted in new architectural forms for museums, inside and out.

Reshaping Museum Space pulls together the views of an international group of museum professionals, architects, designers and academics, highlighting the complexity, significance and malleability of museum space, and provides reflections upon recent developments in museum architecture and exhibition design. The problems of navigating the often contradictory agendas and aspirations of the broad range of professionals and stakeholders involved in any new project are discussed in various chapters that concentrate on the process of architectural and spatial reshaping. Contributors review recent new build, expansion and exhibition projects, questioning the types of museum space required at the beginning of the twenty-first century and highlighting a range of possibilities for creative museum design.

Museum Meanings

Series editors

Eilean Hooper-Greenhill

Flora Kaplan

The museum has been constructed as a symbol in Western society since the Renaissance. This symbol is both complex and multi-layered, acting as a sign for domination and liberation, learning and leisure. As sites for exposition, through their collections, displays and buildings, museums mediate many of society's basic values. But these mediations are subject to contestation, and the museum can also be seen as a site for cultural politics. In post-colonial societies, museums have changed radically, reinventing themselves under pressure from many forces, which include new roles and functions for museums, economic rationalism and moves towards greater democratic access.

Museum Meanings analyses and explores the relationships between museums and their publics. 'Museums' are understood very broadly, to include art galleries, historic sites and historic houses. 'Relationships with publics' are also understood very broadly, including interactions with artefacts, exhibitions and architecture, which may be analysed from a range of theoretical perspectives. These include material culture studies, mass communication and media studies, learning theories and cultural studies. The analysis of the relationship of the museum to its publics shifts the emphasis from the museum as text, to studies grounded in the relationships of bodies and sites, identities and communities.

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First published 2005
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
MacLeod, Suzanne.
Reshaping museum space: architecture, design, exhibitions/
Suzanne MacLeod.
p. cm. – (Museum meanings)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Museum architecture. 2. Space (Architecture). 3. Museum buildings.
4. Museum exhibits. 5. Museums – Information technology.
6. Museums – Technological innovations. 7. Cultural property – Protection.
8. Museums – Philosophy. I. Title. II. Series.
NA6690.M37 2005
727′.6–dc22
2004026855

ISBN 0-203-48322-7 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0–415–34344–5 (hbk)
ISBN 0–415–34345–3 (pbk)

For Sue and Ronnie MacLeod

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Acknowledgements

This book emerged out of a conference held at the University of Leicester in April 2004 and would not have been possible without the support of the University of Leicester, Haley Sharpe Design and the staff of the Department of Museum Studies. I am grateful to Dr Simon Knell, who enthusiastically supported the idea for the conference and the book, and to Professor Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, who has taken a keen interest in the content of the book and provided much-needed direction and advice. I am grateful to Richard Sandell for his ongoing support and to Catherine Bousfield at Routledge, who has provided clear and helpful instructions throughout. Thanks should also go to the contributors to the book, all of whom worked to make the production process as simple as possible – something which I greatly appreciate – to Jim Roberts for his technical assistance, and to Jocelyn Dodd, Mark O'Neill, Richard Toon and Richard Sandell, who provided thoughtful feedback on chapters. Finally, I would especially like to thank my husband Lee Ridsdale, who continues to take an interest in my work and to act as a constant source of encouragement and humour.

Picture credits

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Introduction

Suzanne MacLeod

At no other point in their modern history have museums undergone such radical reshaping as in recent years. Challenges to create inclusive and accessible spaces open to appropriation and responsive to contemporary agendas have resulted in new architectural and spatial forms for museums. One result of this large-scale and varied remaking of museum space is that the space of the museum is increasingly recognized as an environment created through a complex of practices and systems of knowledge. Museum professionals are beginning to recognize the constitutive character and transformative possibilities of museum space as well as the ability of museum users and museum professionals to reshape museum spaces through practices of appropriation. Museum space is now recognized as a space with a history of its own, a space active in the making of meaning and, most importantly, a space open to change.

This recognition is undoubtedly linked to the substantial new building projects that can be identified internationally and that have begun to challenge traditional concepts of museum architecture and suggest new possibilities for display and experience. However, the rethinking of museum space relates to more than the physical structure and exhibition hardware of the museum. Many museums are working to reposition both collections and visitors in order to generate new spatial forms, without large-scale architectural developments. These shifts are variously characterized as creating spaces for lifelong learning, spaces of mutuality and inclusive spaces, where physical, intellectual and cultural barriers to access may be overcome.

Reshaping Museum Space: Architecture, Design, Exhibitions takes aspects of these recent museum developments as its focus. Pulling together the views of museum professionals, architects, designers and academics the book highlights the complexity, significance and malleability of museum space and provides an opportunity for some preliminary reflections upon recent developments in museum space and for the detailed analysis of specific case studies. In particular, the chapters concentrate on the processes and practices of museum building and exhibition design, focusing on the nature, character and possibilities for museum space through an understanding of the complex ways in which it is made.

A recurring issue across a good number of the chapters in *Reshaping Museum Space* is the tension between iconic architecture and the agendas of access and inclusion that form the central tenets of the modern museum. Often criticized as architectural indulgences, iconic buildings can compound the separation between the building, its contents and its context, ensuring the persistence of a rather limited and partial understanding of architecture as the aesthetic outcome and privileged activity of the architect – a view that ignores the complexity and difficulty of any architectural project. As Richard Toon notes in Chapter 2, architectural texts devoted to the museum tend to concentrate on images of specific architectural features such as staircases, entrances and lighting solutions, the assumption being that the architecture exists in its ideal form before the communities of use move in.[1] Similarly, architectural histories of the museum privilege the museum as an architectural object, celebrating some museums, ignoring others and obscuring from view the complex histories of practice through which the space of the museum has been continually recreated (Chapter 1).

The chapters in *Reshaping Museum Space* suggest a broader understanding of architecture based upon a recognition of the range of professionals and stakeholders involved in the architectural production process and the complexity of navigating these often-contradictory agendas and aspirations towards the building of a new museum. As Moira Stevenson suggests in Chapter 5, for many museum professionals directly involved in capital development projects, achieving the aims and vision of their institutions and turning development plans and ideals into a reality have demanded stringent planning, nerves of steel and a commitment to ongoing evaluation and change. With this in mind, a good number of the chapters in *Reshaping Museum Space* concentrate on the *process* of architectural and spatial reshaping in order to highlight the various 'negotiations' through which architecture gets built and the problems and inconsistencies that can creep into the architectural structure of the museum as a result of this complexity (see, for example, Chapters 5, 6, 7, 8 and 16).[2]

As museums have come to be consciously recognized as drivers for social and economic regeneration, the architecture of the museum has developed from its traditional forms into often-spectacular one-off statements and architectural visions. High-profile examples include Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Bilbao and Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin. While recognized as often drawing mass appeal and admiration, such buildings may also fight against the other agendas of the museum, confirming to a broad public that museums are not for them (see Chapters 2, 4, 8 and 15). For example, Helen Rees Leahy (Chapter 8) notes a tension between the spectacular space of distraction and disorientation in a number of recently built and renewed art museums, and the agendas of learning and inclusion to which the institutions are fully committed. Similarly, in Fabienne Galangau-Quérat's account of the creation of the Grande Galerie de l'Evolution at the National Museum of Natural History in Paris (Chapter 7), the language of spectacle and the successful incorporation of architectural scale and splendour into the exhibition experience would seem to have been achieved at the expense of a content-rich experience.

Iconic architecture can place a city or town on the cultural map. It can, as in the case of Bilbao, raise the profile of a place or region and work in an incredibly positive way to challenge preconceptions and encourage economic investment. It can add enormously to the pleasure of museum visiting, creating a visual feast and sense of occasion that is rarely experienced in other building types. The challenge, however, is to achieve this alongside the integration of site, architecture and exhibition. Fighting against the iconic tendencies in museum architecture, a number of the chapters describe ways of working that stem from the visions and agendas of the museum and may potentially result in three-dimensional design solutions that form a direct relationship between context, content and spatial experience (Chapters 9, 16 and 17). Within the approaches described here, visitor experience is privileged over the design of beautiful objects and narrative plays a key part in structuring space and anchoring content to context. Here, the architecture and other design features become part of a range of elements, macro and micro, arranged and orchestrated to create possibilities for interaction and experience. As Peter Higgins notes (Chapter 16), museums built in this way can also become an 'anchor attractor' when master-planned into the commercial activities of a given location.

Common to all of this is a repositioning of the museum as a flexible space, open to change, responsive to visitor needs and in touch with contemporary issues and agendas (see Chapters 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14). Lawrence Fitzgerald's description of the rationale behind the redisplay of Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery in Glasgow (Chapter 10) charts a shift in conceptions of museum space where permanency has given way to a system of changeable modules enabling 60 per cent of the display to be changed over a six-year period. And, in Chapter 12, Jon Wood describes the innovative and inspiring *Close Encounters: The Sculptor's Studio in the Age of the Camera* at the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds, which re-evoked the sculptor's studio in the gallery without recourse to 'mock-ups with turntables, tools, stone and sawdust'. These and the other examples offered in *Reshaping Museum Space* point to some of the sophisticated techniques being utilized in a range of exhibition formats at the present time. Such examples challenge the notion of 'dumbing down' in museum displays, pointing instead to a myriad of possibilities.

A common characteristic of many of the examples of museum space cited by the contributors is the recognition on the part of the exhibit designers of the need for didactic exhibition elements that ground the user and enable some level of engagement with the subject matter, while at the same time providing space to imagine, contemplate and reflect. In Chapter 13, on the cross-overs in spatial characteristics between the worlds of the museum and the gallery, Christopher Marshall differentiates between the essentially 'projective space' of the museum and the 'reflective space' of the gallery. Museums, he argues, are more 'projective' in the way that they pull together exhibitionary elements in order to convey a message. Galleries on the other hand offer, in the main, a more 'reflective' space based upon the contemplation of individual works. Marshall concentrates his attention on the ways in which museums have begun to utilize the reflective space of the gallery through the incorporation of aesthetic

elements in museum displays. Citing a range of examples, including the Grande Galerie de l'Evolution, where reflective space is considered to have overwhelmed the didactic content-rich projective space of the museum, Marshall identifies a general trend towards the incorporation of reflective space in museums. Here, art-inspired elements open the space of the museum up to a more evocative and experiential form of communication. For Marshall, this provision of what he terms the 'free space' of the gallery, the space of open-ended communication, in the traditionally more linear and didactic displays of the museum, is changing the character of museum space.

The shift in museum space that Marshall identifies seems to share a great deal in common with the characteristics of other museum and gallery spaces described in *Reshaping Museum Space*. For example, in Jon Wood's description of *Close Encounters: The Sculptor's Studio in the Age of the Camera* (Chapter 12), one senses a move towards Marshall's projective space within the confines of the gallery through the clever manipulation of space, photographs and sculpture. Similarly, in Stephen Greenberg's description of the *Holocaust exhibition* at the Imperial War Museum (Chapter 17), he refers to an additional layer of exhibition, planned in to respond to the gravity of the subject, as 'the space to imagine'.

Marshall's ideas also reverberate with Richard Sandell's consideration of the social agency of museum space and the social responsibility of those actively involved in the shaping of museum space (Chapter 14). Sandell cites the example of the *Out of Line* exhibition at the exit to the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam. In this multi-media presentation, visitors are faced with a series of real-life dilemmas and are asked to vote on each in favour of 'freedom of expression' or 'the right to protection against discrimination'. The choices are reflected in the gallery space as the results of the vote are displayed on the gallery ceiling.

All of these examples seem to effect some kind of balance, albeit through very different techniques, between an object and content-rich display and provision for user-led meaning-making, creation of content and content organization. Central to this is the role of new technologies and the possibilities offered for user-led experiences through the incorporation and use of new media (Chapters 3 and 9). *Reshaping Museum Space* highlights these changes, drawing attention to the malleability of museum space and the need for all those involved in the process of making museum space to shift their attention from object- to experience-making.

The chapters are ordered into four overlapping parts. Part I includes four chapters, all of which focus on the nature of museum space. In Part II, the chapters are broadly concerned with the architectural reshaping of museums and galleries, and in Part III a group of chapters discuss specific exhibition design solutions and approaches. Finally, Part IV includes three chapters that cut across the key themes of the book. Such structuring devices can tend to gloss over the detail and differences between individual chapters and *Reshaping Museum Space* is no exception to this. The real worth of the book lies in the

detail of individual contributions and the sometimes slight, and sometimes major, differences in approach and judgement that each chapter contains.

Notes

1 This has been usefully theorized by Jonathan Hill. J. Hill (ed.), *Occupying Architecture: Between the Architect and the User*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998.
2 I. Borden and J. Rendell (eds), *InterSections, Architectural Histories and Critical Theories*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 5.

Part I

On the nature of museum space

1

Rethinking museum architecture

Towards a site-specific history of production and use

Suzanne MacLeod

Introduction

> If you could distil the essence of pure modern architecture, and remove all traces of the usual compromises and cut corners and clumsy details and flash populist moves, then you would get a strange, unsettling, austere, but rather beautiful building. Such absolute purity is of course impossible to achieve. But the New Art Gallery in Walsall comes closer than any new cultural landmark built in Britain for years. It is both extraordinary and extraordinarily good. It repays attention: this is emphatically not a one-liner building.[1]
>
> A building for people in which to experience art? Not in my book. This is an architectural indulgence which allows enthusiasts to experience an impressive building but where nowhere near enough thought has been put into how a wider public will use that building. It is a traditional gallery in new clothes. It gets nowhere close to the essential 'feelgood' relaxing atmosphere needed to make people love it. Why are there no production facilities, no crafts, no film. There aren't even areas to sit.[2]

These two statements were both written about the New Art Gallery, Walsall, on its opening in 2000. They offer just two examples of the kinds of narrative that have circulated around the programme of new museum building and expansion that has taken place on an international scale over the last three decades. Where Hugh Pearman is relieved that, on this occasion, the usual 'dirtiness'[3] of architecture (compromise, populism and economy) has been avoided by the architects, John Stewart-Young speaks only of missed opportunities and partial responses to the making of a new museum. While Pearman sees an architectural masterpiece, Stewart-Young sees an architectural indulgence and castigates the architects of the building for omitting the most obvious of architectural elements necessary in a museum fit for the twenty-first century – places to sit.

Such statements point towards some of the perceived 'problems' of museum architecture that have become evident in the wake of the large-scale reshaping

of museums. A recurring criticism of many new and renewed museums is that the vision and desire of the architect to create a signature building have ridden roughshod over the needs and aims of the museum. Such buildings may work very well as icons and cultural landmarks without achieving the levels of accessibility, usability and relevance for both visitors and staff, promised during their conception.

These frustrations of museum architecture expose its complexity. Here, personal agendas and goals mix with institutional ambitions and visions, economic development plans, the expectations of funding bodies and the broader social ideals and expectations for the museum's role in society. Making architecture involves a large number of people from different fields and 'communities of practice' who speak different languages and hold different aspirations and priorities, values and beliefs, so much so that the varying judgements on architecture can seem difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile.[4] There seems to be little shared ground between them. Yet such diversity of perception and priority is not uncommon, often characterizing even the smallest of capital development project teams.

What seems to cloud the issue here, but does also perhaps offer some common ground, is an underlying understanding, or notion, of what architecture is – an assumption that architecture is the aesthetic outcome and activity of the architect. This dominant and powerful understanding, it is argued here, sits behind many of the debates surrounding museum architecture and is the cause of many of the problems associated with working with architects in museums: the seeming lack of control of the building process on the part of the museum, the inability of the client to communicate the institutional vision to the architects, the fear of interfering with the architectural process and hoisting too many compromises on to the architect, the fear of being perceived as a philistine by questioning a design concept, and so on . . .

Taking its lead from a body of architectural theory that has emerged in the gap opened up by Henri Lefebvre's work on the production of space,[5] this chapter sets out to oppose this underlying and dominant definition of architecture and to argue instead for a fuller reading of museum architecture[6] as a social and cultural product, continually reproduced through use. Such a broadening of our understanding of what architecture is would enable us to begin to consider the contexts within, and processes through which, museum architecture is continually reproduced. In this way, we might begin to explore the complexity of museum architecture and understand more about how it gets made.

While the key aim of this chapter is to challenge underlying and reductive notions of architecture, it is also concerned with architectural histories of the museum – the stories through which we learn about museum architecture. Architectural histories of the museum tend to be based upon and reinforce the dominant understanding of architecture as the aesthetic outcome or activity of the architect. Such histories can be recognized as legitimizing current practice and contributing to some of the problems associated with museum architecture. With this in mind, the chapter begins from existing architectural histories of the

museum and suggests the need for a new type of site-specific museum history – one based on architectural production and use. An understanding of architecture as set forward here begins to set an agenda for that research towards a greater understanding of the 'multifaceted negotiations'[7] of architecture.

The ideas set forward in the chapter are explored through my interest in England's regional museums and galleries. In the last decades of the nineteenth and first decades of the twentieth century, a phenomenal number of museums and galleries appeared across the towns and cities of England, particularly in the industrial north and midlands. At the present time, many of these same museums and galleries are undergoing significant architectural and spatial change. In the wake of over two decades of museum building and with the input of significant capital expenditure from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the significance of the large-scale reshaping of these museums and galleries has not gone unnoticed. The changes are hailed as dragging modernist museums based on outdated notions of knowledge and understanding into the twenty-first century, where transparency, collaboration and notions of visitor-centred learning are key. Of course, the specific histories of these sites are far more complex and interesting than such notions of large-scale epistemic change suggest.

Since it was founded in 1877 and a purpose-designed building was erected on Upper William Brown Street, the Walker Art Gallery[8] in Liverpool has undergone a series of architectural and spatial transformations. In the late nineteenth century, the 1930s, the 1950s, and again recently, the museum has been the subject of significant architectural rearrangement and expansion. Inside, the space of the museum has shifted continuously. Sometimes this change has been slow and imperceptible and, at other times, especially at times of architectural development, change has been dramatic. In this chapter, selected episodes from the Walker's past will be taken to illustrate the social and cultural character of museum architecture and to begin to explore what an architectural history of the museum based on production and use might include. This brief consideration of the Walker also suggests that important spatial (and hence social) changes are often made according to the beliefs and motives of those who control the space of the museum. The architecture of the museum was, in the final decades of the nineteenth century, and continues to be, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, a contested site, formed through the contradictory and often conflicting visions and agendas of those directly involved in the architectural and spatial reshaping. Thus, the chapter also touches upon the plays of power involved in the making of museum architecture.

Rethinking museum architecture

The Walker Art Gallery opened to the public in 1877 and, by 1901, the Curator, Charles Dyall, was able to list 43 art galleries, 'mostly under Municipal control', which had opened in the provinces and which had, according to Dyall, sought advice from, and precedents in, the Walker.[9] The dramatic rise in the number of museums and galleries across the towns and cities of England is well