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ICONICITY: THE IDEOLOGY OF NEW MUSEUM ARCHITECTURE

Abstract | The empirical analysis of contemporary museum architecture carried out in 2011 shows a structural similarity between different museum building projects around the world. The different stakeholders involved in these projects represent a variety of conflicting vested interests that are predominantly outside the museum. In many cases, an iconic architectural design is the only objective every stakeholder can agree upon. In the last two decades, this structure dominates the international museum architecture domain. It implies certain unpredictable side effects, though, that do not necessarily correspond with the interests of the stakeholders. Iconic museum architecture discloses a global cultural disposition that is – at least ostensibly – compatible with different interests and cultural contexts. Notwithstanding the compatibility with non-museological concerns, the empirical data shows that the architecture matches the institution it comprises.

Keywords | Museum, Globalization, Iconic Architecture

1. INTRODUCTION

Iconic buildings, as Charles Jencks remarks, have „many and often divergent likenesses to the most bizarre and contradictory things“ [2]. They provoke an abundant use of metaphorical descriptions. Characterized by an enigmatic design vocabulary, they can never be deciphered ultimately. Being open to numerous interpretations, iconic buildings become logos that are acknowledged by different social groups and people with different cultural backgrounds.

According to Anthony Giddens, space and architecture function as „*settings* of [social] interaction“ [3]. Consequently, there are various modes of use of iconic architecture since iconic buildings are open to various interpretations. The interactions taking place in an iconic architecture

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therefore do not necessarily have to refer to the ideas and beliefs of the initial stakeholders of the architecture in question (e.g. *Pyramids of Giza*, *World Trade Center*, *Museo Guggenheim Bilbao*).

This paper analyzes the structures and sociocultural implications of iconic architecture using the example of contemporary museum architecture, a domain, where most – if not all – of the drafts and erected buildings match the definition of iconicity. [4]

2. STUDYING ICONIC ARCHITECTURE

Until now, there are only few studies that spotlight the planning and building process of museum architecture. [15] The notions of architects themselves about their projects given in interviews or official project descriptions should be treated with caution. In several architectural surveys, the interviewed architects rather expressed „post-hoc rationalisations“ [6] of the completed building than mentioned all of the different influences their draft had to face during its development. How the initial design concept evolved and changed during the planning and building process is concealed [7].

Based on these findings, the present inquiry focuses on the work of international museum consultants and expatriate museum experts. This specialized group of museum professionals usually works together with all key stakeholders involved in the planning and building process of a museum project. They find themselves at the intersection of museum needs and architectural ambitions in different museum projects around the world. Possessing a broader portfolio of museum projects than most of the architecture offices do, they are capable of comparing a wider range of conditions and structures that lead to a new museum building.

In 24 interviews with international museum consultants and experts [8], nine of which have studied architecture, all of which have worked for at least two museum architecture projects in at least two different countries, it was possible to ascertain the structures that lead to the importance of iconicity in international museum architecture.

3. COMPLEXITY, AMBIGUITY, AND A PILE OF VESTED INTERESTS

The architectural brief of cultural buildings generally is more complex than of commercial or residential building types. One of the interviewees, who also consults commercial and industrial building projects, underlines the uniqueness of cultural buildings regarding their functional brief. In his view, technical equipment and space allocation plan of an office or hotel building is relatively facile since they tend to the generic. Cultural buildings, however, are highly customized, he outlines in the interview. A change in size during the planning process might affect the design on the whole, which is not necessarily the case when adding another floor to a hotel or office building.

3.1. Functionality vs. Iconicity

Within the group of cultural buildings the museum stands out regarding its architectural brief, though. Virtually every museum professional interviewed agreed on the fact that the brief of most of their museum projects lacks a precise description of the museum needs in terms of size, storage and administrative facilities, technical equipment, etc. One of the interviewees observes that in her concert hall projects – compared to her museum projects – the functional side is by far more emphasized. The acoustical concerns of a concert hall have a bigger influence on the design of the building than museological concerns have on museum architecture, she concludes.

Most of the interviewees describe a specific irresolution of the museum directors to express the edificial needs of their respective institution. This leads to a functional ambiguity, which is to be detected globally in museum architecture projects. In the day-to-day museum business, working with curators, artists, and exhibition designers this irresolution might be helpful and ensure artistic freedom. In the context of a building project a functional ambiguous brief weakens the voice of the museum in favor of other stakeholders' interests. Moreover, it produces irrevocable consequences that can harm the museum permanently.

For example, the iconic extension of the *Milwaukee Art Museum* by Santiago Calatrava

(Fig. 1) exceeded the financial strength of the museum. Albeit the construction with its two adjustable wings met the lighting requirements of an art museum, it was so expensive that there were hardly any funds left for ambitious exhibition programs. This was not only due to bad financial planning, but also because of the preponderance of non-museological concerns. As the respective museum professionals insinuate, the objective to receive an iconic structure that branded the city and drew tourists overshadowed certain aspects of strategic museum planning, which, paradoxically, brought forth constraints, that the extension was supposed to neutralize.



Fig. 1: Milwaukee Art Museum, Wisconsin (USA)

This example mirrors an overall tendency. New museum architecture often has to fulfill a list of various interests that might harm the mission of the museum. Reviewing the statements of all of the interviewed museum professionals, these interests are bound to the different roles of the stakeholders. The museum directors and curators in most cases care for adequate gallery spaces without having the know-how of managing a major construction project. The architects usually try to exhaust technical and creative possibilities while being short on experience in the museum domain. The involved local politicians attempt to raise the standing of the city, and the financiers try to consolidate their fame as patrons.

In some cases, the wish for a building that triggers international attention arises before the

decision to build a museum is made. For example, the client of the *Heydar Aliyev Cultural Center* in Baku (Fig. 2) wanted to edify a noncommercial and nonreligious architecture that boosted the reputation of Baku as a cosmopolitan business location. The client had already contracted Zaha Hadid to design it. Not till then it came to a decision about what the building should comprise. With the help of a museum consultant that was called in by the architectural team, they could refine the functional program to make it adaptable for the needs of a museum. There are many other examples around the world, where a new building is built first and only afterwards the museum it comprises is founded. In those cases the significance of the architecture seemingly overwhelms that of the museum.



Fig. 2: Heydar Aliyev Cultural Center, Baku (Azerbaijan)

3.2. Iconicity as common ground

The outcome of both examples quoted above was an iconic building designed by an international renowned architect. Still, the two museum projects are quite different. The Milwaukee Art Museum is an institution with a long history funded by a trust consisting of several patrons and collectors. The Cultural Center in Baku is located in a region with barely any tradition in building museums. It is funded by a single person and does not have to adhere to any given historical structure or urban planning strategy. Despite unequal preconditions these and many other contemporary museums are equal regarding their iconic qualities.

The iconicity is the result of a structural similarity between many different museum architecture projects in the world. The initial situation of most of these projects is a variety of different interests represented by the mentioned stakeholders. Due to the fact that museum buildings form an integral part in the negotiation of the cultural self-conception of a society, the emergence of new museum architecture is accompanied by controversies ever since its development as a single building type. [9] Taking place between the different stakeholders (and, sometimes, the public), these controversies are essential to every large-scale museum building project. [10]

New ways of communication and news coverage internationalized the museum architecture discourse. [11] The different stakeholders are well aware of the potential international attention a museum building can create. The dissimilarity of the stakeholders and the variety of their vested interests creates a situation where the only thing everyone can agree upon is an iconic design that, with its remarkable stylistic vocabulary and its multifaceted meaning, is supposed to find a broad international basis for discussion, appreciation, and critique. Furthermore, it shall generate international prestige for the stakeholders and the

institution itself. As indicated by the empirical data, this structural correlation dominates museum architecture universally in the last two decades.

As historicism was the ideology of museum architecture in the 19th century, iconicity thus is the ideology of present-day museum building projects. For Schinkel's *Altes Museum*, Klenze's *Glyptothek*, or Smirke's *British Museum* ancient Greece was the template. Ancient Greece was not only the predominant discourse in architecture theory at the time, but, at the same instance, was part of the liberal education program that formed a background for the birth of the museum. The outer appearance and the intentions on the inside matched.

With the iconicity of museum architecture this connection did not cease. Quite the contrary, the openness of the architectural design correlates with the current ICOM-definition of the museum as a non-profit, public institution, „which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.“ [12] This definition is open to countless interpretations since there is no specific educational ideal connected with the museum anymore. Above that, enjoyment is a category hardly definable. The museum enables various uses and attributions. A clearly defined functionality runs counter to the ICOM-definition. The architectural process of international museum projects – as analyzed above – mirrors the functional openness of the institution.

Consequently, the ideology of iconicity does not necessarily cause predominantly dysfunctional buildings erected by stakeholders thirsting for glory. It rather represents a layer apparently intrinsic to the institution: a semiotic and functional openness. Thus, contemporary

museum architecture is compatible with various urban and cultural contexts.

Apart from that, the iconicity of new museum architecture produces certain non-predictable side effects that, in some cases, undermine the intentions of the stakeholders.

4. SOCIOCULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF ICONIC MUSEUM BUILDINGS

On the one hand, the different stakeholders comparatively easily agree upon an iconic design. On the other hand, the iconicity leaves room for uses and interpretations of the building that may stand against the initial aims of the stakeholders. A closer look on museum building projects around the world – especially in regions with no museum tradition. – reveals the impact museum architecture can educe on social and cultural changes.

For example, the countries in the Arab Gulf initiated many ambitious museum projects to – amongst other reasons – change their image as one of the world's biggest oil fields and financial markets to a region that is aware of its cultural history and possesses an efficient education system.

The nomad history of the region is one of the reasons why there is no tradition in having museums and collections. Their mobility prevented the inhabitants of this region from carrying plenty material cultural heritage and from building edifices to store it. Several expat museum professionals therefore describe the museum as a foreign program. Despite its recency, it shows first successes regarding its collecting activities, programs, and visitors. But, since the first museums opened, it has also shown that an unscheduled issue arose: the public space.

The extreme climate conditions are a cause often cited to explain why there are hardly any

noncommercial public spaces in the Arab Gulf. It is supposed to be simply too hot to stay in parks or piazzas during the daytime, and sometimes also at night. However, as some of the interviewees indicate, public spaces are not politically desired. Looking at the urban development of cities like Abu Dhabi, Doha, and Manama, the modern grid planning, the prevalence of high-rise buildings, and the land reclamation [13] not only destroyed existing public spaces but also annihilated the few available natural cooling systems [14]. Museum buildings, though, and iconic museum architecture with its aspiration toward dramatic spaces in particular, entail public spaces.

Consequently, the museums in the Arab Gulf provide public spaces, too, and the locals start to use this offering. One of the interviewees describes the terrace of one of her museums as the only place in the whole country to sit by the sea without having to pay for it. On this terrace and at the café of the museum, people get together from different social classes and interact in a way that is not comparable to any other situation in the public life of the country, she observes.

The situation in the Arab Gulf shows similarities to countries in Central and Southeast Asia regarding the novelty of the institution on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the politically motivated striving for erecting museums. The public clients in these regions usually try to closely monitor the building process by separating the different stakeholders (i.e. architects, museum team, consultants). Nevertheless, the architectural process of iconic museum buildings leads to a design that obviously undermines the attempts to control it. It is open to numerous interpretations, and, consequently, different modes of use.

In conclusion, there are three interwoven factors to describe the current situation of international museum architecture: 1.) Iconicity is the new

ideology to which the different stakeholders are geared during the architectural process. It is one of the few intents that finds common acceptance and therefore is difficult to challenge. 2.) By definition, iconic museum buildings can be interpreted and used in a variety of (unpredictable) ways. The semiotic and practical openness reflects the functional openness of the institution itself. Despite the complexity of the building process and despite the critique against dysfunctional museum architecture, museum and architecture match on this level. 3.) The ideology of iconicity can act as counterpart to existing political ideologies, even though the (governmental) client might support the political ideology in question.

REFERENCES

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- [3] Giddens A. (1984) *The Constitution of Society. Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Cambridge, p. xxv. With his definition, Giddens refers to Goffman's *Frame Analysis* (Erving Goffman (1974) *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. London).
- [4] Looking at architectural reviews, museum buildings seemingly provoke a strong use of metaphorical expressions that allow multiple ascriptions rather than decipher one sole meaning. See Frankenberg P. v. (2012) *Zwischen Funktion und Wirkung. Zur aktuellen Situation der Museumsarchitektur in Deutschland*. In: *Museumskunde 2/2012 [Between Functionality and Impact. The Current Status of Museum Architecture in Germany]*.
- [5] Existing studies with a focus on museum architecture are e.g. Yaneva, A. (2009) *The Making of a Building. A Pragmatist Approach to Architecture*. Bern; Rybczynski, W. (2011) *The Biography of a Building. How Robert Sainsbury and Norman Foster Built a Great Museum*. London.
- [6] McNeill D. (2009) *The Global Architect. Firms, Fame and Urban Form*. New York, p. 132.
- [7] See also Lawson B. (1994) *Design in Mind*. Oxford, p. 2.
- [8] 17 of the 24 interviews were face-to-face interviews conducted in Europe, USA, China and the Arab Gulf; the other 7 interviews were conducted via telephone, skype and e-mail. Main subjects of the semi-standardized interviews were 1.) questions about specific museum projects; 2.) questions about the different stakeholders; 3.) comparison between different museum projects; 4.) comparison between different locations and regions; 5.) opinions and theories about museum architecture in general.
- [9] Indeed since the beginning of museum architecture in the 18th century, see v. Frankenberg P. (2012) *Museum Utopia. A Brief Architectural History of the Ideal Museum*. In: *Art History Supplement Vol. 2.3*, pp. 23-26.
- [10] Recent examples for public controversies regarding a museum building project are *Neues Museum* Berlin, *Liverpool Museum*, and *National Museum* Beijing.
- [11] The architecture news platform *World Architecture News* for example reported the opening of 107 new museum buildings (including major extension projects) from its founding in 2005 until end of 2011. These museums were erected in 29 different countries on five continents (source: www.worldarchitecturenews.com; own calculations).
- [12] The definition of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) is widely accepted in the museum world. See <http://icom.museum/who-we-are/the-vision/museum-definition.html> (05.06.2012).
- [13] The loss of the fishing huts in Manama caused by land reclamations in Bahrain was subject of the winning entry of the 12th *Biennale di Venezia* in 2010. These fisher huts, which were re-erected at the *Arsenale*, used to be gathering spaces frequented by the male locals.
- [14] See e.g. Ben Hamouche M. (2008) *Manama: The Metamorphosis of an Arab Gulf City*. In: Elsheshtawy, Y. (ed.) *The Evolving Arab City. Tradition, Modernity and Urban Development*. Abingdon/New York, pp. 184-217.