

Social Spaces & Art Galleries

Two new buildings, which exemplify quite distinct approaches to the design of public art galleries, are The Kunsthaus in Breganz by Peter Zumthor, and Caruso St John's Walsall Art gallery. At Breganz Peter Zumthor conceived the gallery as a singular vessel independent from its immediate surroundings, the adjacent bookshop and coffee shop. In contrast, The Gallery at Walsall gathers the city around it both spatially and socially. The penthouse café with views out over the city and intimate rooms below for art indicates how the presence of the city is part of this experience contingent with the view of art below, a sort of social condenser. We have great sympathy with the objectives of the gallery at Walsall embracing as it does, design and culture in the form of its high standard of graphics for fliers, and its educational initiatives and community involvement, together with the provision of well-designed furniture (1).

Whilst we acknowledge the relevance of Walsall, we recognize the particular situation at Oxford;

- The diversity of the likely visitors and historic fabric of the surrounding city
- MoMA is housed in an existing building
- There is no permanent collection
- The present budget allows only for modest initial improvements

These considerations colour the manner in which this project must be approached.

In conjunction with the directives of the museum we would like to instigate an approach at Oxford, which embraces art, design and architecture in an integrated manner. We would like to see an architecture for the comfort of the mind and the body, both the emotion and the intellect. We see this quality encompassing the inclusion of detail from the building proper, through to the design of furnishings and ironmongery as exemplified by the Danish architect Arne Jacobsen in his significant design at St. Catherine's college (2). The framework of these achievements could be pursued at MoMA thus by the introduction of a long term goal even small inclusions such as particular cups or glasses, or poster design might indicate the larger, strategic goals, outlining the role of a significant public building.

Intentions

The 1st phase of the work would signify the shift in MoMA's policy. Architecturally the buildings appearance and role would be adjusted and register this transformation. This 1st phase though perhaps not comprehensive in its execution, would be indicative of the larger intentions of the future remodeling of the gallery proper. By Stripping back the previous 30 years of superficial layers added to the building, the real fabric of the building would be exposed. An anti academic exercise – a sort of archaeological excavation- a stripping away as characterized by the work by the artist, Gordon Matta-Clark (3)

Working method / Process

What interests us particularly is the brick vaulting and material construction present in this vernacular building. By sand blasting and carefully removing applied surfaces, the building can be transformed and revealed. Due to the limited budgetary allowance these actions must be restricted to a number of areas but by inference can indicate larger, future ambitions and spatial organizations. The most important of these being the ceiling of the existing bookshop (4) which ideally would be completely removed to reveal the entire vaults behind. This soffit would then be continuous from the front of the building right through to the Back Gallery. Thereby creating a significant place appropriate to the spirit of the gallery.

The raised ground floor / Foyer

We posit a socially ambient space where different scenarios could be played-out. A place which entertains various possible groupings of people where;

a person might sit comfortably reading a newspaper, work on a laptop, or wait for a friend. Where in the evening 200 people might attend a reception, drink champagne and chat loudly. We like to think of places like those around Spring St. in NYC, large, generous, café like space arranged with salvaged Jacobsen chairs (5) serving good espresso and proper sandwiches. The placement of furniture here would distinguish territories of activity as in the placing of objects in a Morandi painting (6) precisely staged in a field of space.

Handicapped access

We would make more prominent and architectural a clear entry sequence where at present it is obscure and isolated and quite undignified (7). The two lifts up from street level and café to the new foyer would be more present as vertical structures linking the three levels. Diametrically positioned in plan they would be absorbed as architectural elements within the field of space of the foyer, all set beneath the giant-scaled, vaults above.

Administrative spaces - found conditions

From initial observations based upon a limited but informative visit, there's a sense of a series of dissimilar, disconnected spaces / rooms, with office furniture filling the spaces somewhat incoherently. We would endeavor to liberate this notion of clutter and make organized plan arrangements of furniture and lighting throughout the building wherever possible as an organization imperative. Although a gallery space it is interesting to note how the artificial light and day lighting have been integrated at the ancillary space at the Lisson gallery in London in similarly roof lit spaces (8).

Propositional arrangements: A, B, C, D, E.

A – Raised ground floor / Foyer space

B - Café identity / Circulation

C - Front façade/ Street Presence

D - Initial incisions / Stripping-out

E – New Staff room

A - Raised ground floor / Foyer space. We see the new foyer space on the raised ground floor as a distinct place. With large-scaled objects and furniture placed, like a still life, with activities played out around. This could operate much like an "Open Public House" for art and design, organized like an interior landscape – with arrangements of furniture grouped strategically in this space. A low, single volume book-stack archiving MoMA's catalogues would provide a condensed source of intellectual revenue displayed openly, accessible to all as an archival resource. In this way the work of the museum becomes familiar material. Similar initiatives, such as those pioneered by the NYC MOMA have given rise to historically seminal works such as Venturi's "Complexity and Contradiction", in their "Papers on Architecture no. 1", 1966.

B - Café identity / Circulation With the bookshop relocated, the secondary glazing dividing the raised ground floor and the lobby becomes redundant and can be removed (pending cost implications). Upon site investigations we would endeavor to bring light down through the up-stand of the raised ground floor to the café below. This gives important spatial continuity in section from street level down to the café floor and up to the soffit of the foyer above. As with Lewerentz' Church in Klippan, where the experience of this brick vaulted church is understood directly by its material construction. By the exclusive use of brick an intense experience is achieved through the reduced palette of materials. We do not believe that forms need to be complex to provide the viewer with a complex experience.

C - Front façade/ Street presence. Entered along a narrow - almost lane like – street, with a thin granite-set pavement, the street frontage is punctured to allow 3 entry points directly into the building - from street to interior. These apertures allow one to be seen and to see out, and allow glimpses of the life inside to passers by. By day the beauty of the plain brick façade elevation can be revealed by the removal of the current signage and replacement by a carefully scaled graphic treatment. By night, illumination transforms the presence of the building on the street in a strange but familiar manner. Peter Zumthor's Roman ruin Museum at Chur indicates the way illumination makes visible the materiality of its timbered interior.

D – Initial incisions / Stripping-out. The introduction of significant new constructional elements detailed appropriately and carefully would be distinct from the existing stripped-back vernacular construction of the old brewery, characterized by brick vaulting, cast iron columns, and a strong material presence. However this need not imply an historical approach predicated upon conservatism but rather the opposite, as in the juxtaposition of precise cuts contrasted with retained conditions as in the sculptural work of Gordon Matta-Clarke.

E- New Staff room. Within the new staff room located in the existing book archive, a new discretely placed window would offer distant views out beyond the room. A long gaze providing a moment to pause from ones screen and look up and stare into the distance; a chance to locate oneself beyond the envelope of the gallery. With the mass of books removed the generous space remaining would accommodate the 3 work stations with good furniture, above which the plain, metal roof trusses would be made more distinct and apparently float as a fine architectural element.