

On Why Architecture Matters: the Exhibition Experience

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Introduction

Despite artistic media having evolved and changed, our fruition of artworks has followed a similar scheme since public museums as they are known today developed between the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th century.¹ While the implementation of innovative technologies and the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic on a global scale have prompted new online-based forms of artistic appreciation, as we learned to co-habit with the health crisis museums, galleries, and foundations quickly returned to in-presence exhibitions held in multiple forms.

When reducing the broad exhibition experience to its most elementary components, I argue, the formula presents three indispensable elements: object, subject, and space, which correspond to artwork, audience, and context of fruition. However, most aesthetic theories throughout the history of philosophy have disregarded space and its impact on perception. While the relationship between subject and object in the aesthetic experience has been consistently addressed (approaches vary from enlightened rational mind-based aesthetic knowledge to the Romantic discourse on beauty, among many others), the importance of architecture and display has been tackled with more interest only in recent years. Nonetheless, the role they play is of great importance. As Sophia Psarra writes,

“[i]n terms of operational requirements museum design has two fundamental problems to solve: a route structure that facilitates the encounter

¹ V. Newhouse, *Art and the Power of Placement*, The Monacelli Press, New York, 2005.

between the displays and visitors, and spatial mechanisms that aid orientation and enable the building and the exhibitions to be seen as one whole.”²

Exhibition spaces have evolved in time and geographies to meet artistic, social, and didactic goals, in the same way museums have become complex spaces of representation rather than being simply containers for works of art. In this frame, my research aims at discussing the dynamic interaction between people, objects, displays, and the resulting experience, but also between intended meanings and our ability to make sense of them.

Embodied perception and the arts: towards a new aesthetics

Experiencing cultural objects and works of art in the context of museum and exhibition spaces is a widely shared activity. Such spaces are designed and subsist as places of fruition. However, experiences of this sort were often conceived as solely visual in the past. Considering elements including time, space, and memory in the experience of artistic objects is at the core of an epochal shift in the humanities that took place at the end of the 19th century. Since then, a more comprehensive understanding of the aesthetic experience put the body at the center for its situated role in phenomenological perception.

While broader systems were integrated in the analysis of objects alone under structuralism and post-structuralism, it is only with the phenomenological turn that discourse was affected by the situational element. The phenomenal world and human situatedness, but also the body itself were now taken into consideration, in opposition to a strictly cultural take on meaning. As semiotician Per Aage Brandt claims, “[t]he main principle was the idea that stable patterns of meaning could be found across occurrences of apparently unstable and context- and media-bound ‘significations’. Meaning could thus be seen as grounded in a structurally stable semiotic ‘competence’, efficient across variations in ‘performance.’”³

Research in semiotics and neurocognitive sciences showed that being physically present in a certain space and time frame impacts the understand-

² S. Psarra, *Spatial culture, way-finding and the educational message: the impact of layout in the spatial, social and educational experiences of visitors to museums and galleries*, in S. MacLeod (ed.), *Reshaping Museum Space: Architecture, Design, Exhibitions*, Routledge, London and New York, 2005, p. 81.

³ P. A. Brandt, *Space, Domains and Meanings – Essays in Cognitive Semiotics*, Peter Lang, Pieterlan, 2004, p. 258.

ing of the relation subjects have with their surroundings.⁴ In the same way, different environments can direct and affect in different ways the meaning-making process on an object. The conscious experience of such context is tied to the sphere of the unconscious and the preconscious in the same way cognition and mental activity are influenced by subjective emotions and feelings. Many affective experiences, as affect theorist Marta Figlerowicz claims, are tools that mediate many forms of self-awareness and empathy.⁵

The combination of a constructivist approach with a semiotic one, together with the emergence of phenomenology and the further development of cognitive sciences, expanded the studies of architecture and its experience according to a subject-based understanding. Architecture presents by its nature a strong embedded intentionality in its functions, which can be grasped in design, materials, location, and so on. Architecture started being addressed as a human-driven form of governing space, resulting from the combination of a work of conception (mental) and implementation (physical). For this reason, a discipline studying its semiotics, architecture theorist Nikolaos-Ion Terzoglou claims, “should focus on the process of the production of meaning through the articulation and organisation of space (and time).”⁶ Temporality is a constitutive element of this semiotics, since meaning changes according to use, appropriation, and change: the structural building code evolves as a discourse through time. Architecture ceases to be discussed as mere buildings, highlighting its complexity of signs, references, and their fruition and interpretation by users. Buildings exist in relation to one another, and in the same way plots organize actions, architecture entails multiple spatial narratives. Despite (but also in virtue of) the importance of design and style, architect and scholar Nathan Silver claims that it is people’s interpretation, according to needs and habits, that makes architecture. In fact, he continues, there could be architecture without architects and even architecture without buildings, but there cannot be architecture without people: users are the ones setting intentions in the use-situation relationship they develop with and within space.⁷

⁴ H. U. Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2004; J. Lindblom and T. Ziemke, Embodiment and social interaction: A cognitive science perspective, in T. Ziemke, J. Zlatev and R. M. Frank (eds.), *Body, Language and Mind. Vol 1. Embodiment*, Mouton, Berlin 2007.

⁵ M. Figlerowicz, *Affect Theory Dossier: An Introduction*, in *Qui Parle*, Vol. 20, No. 2, Spring Summer 2012.

⁶ N. Terzoglou, *Architecture as Meaningful Language: Space, Place and Narrativity*, in *Linguistics and Literature Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 2018, p. 120.

⁷ N. Silver, *Architecture without Buildings*, in C. Jencks and G. Baird (eds.), *Meaning in Architecture*, Barrie and Jenkins, London, 1969, p. 280.

In the point of encounter between these traditions and innovations, several scholars have started a discussion around the importance of bodily experience and spatial contexts when it comes to the experience of aesthetic objects. The significance attributed to what surrounds art in the physical world does not pertain only to the academic context: substantial investments have been allocated to the construction of new purpose-built spaces and the renovation, refurbishment, and redesign of pre-existing exhibition contexts. Greater importance in terms of research and budget has been given to temporary display design too.

The relationship between the aesthetic experience and the architecture of museums and exhibition spaces has become of central attention today. Museologist and exhibition design expert Kali Tzortzi addresses the idea that our experience of exhibitions is profoundly affected by the space they are framed within, both in terms of its built and physical form, but also considering the succession of rooms and design modules as a veritable system of spatial relations “through the way in which the building organizes space and constructs connections: between *galleries*, affecting the way in which we explore and use them; between *objects*, affecting the way we perceive and read them; and between *visitors*, creating possibilities of co-presence and encounter.”⁸ Adopting space syntax, which considers architecture as spatial configuration, in both theory and methodology, Tzortzi detects patterns and differences in spatial layouts in relation to their use, morphology, and fruition. At the end of her work, she outlines three key tensions to describe the experience of exhibitions: “between the *organization of spaces in a visitable sequence* to facilitate viewing and the *creation of spaces that bring visitors together*; between the *informational* and the *social* dimension of museum experience; and between the *architecture of space* and the *object display*.”⁹

Architecture, exhibition design, and the contemporary audience

As the interest in museums and exhibitions evolved from parameters strictly based on the historical and economic value of the works exhibited, increased importance has been given to architecture and audiences, and the experience of the exhibition has become as significant

⁸ K. Tzortzi, *Museum Space: Where Architecture Meets Museology*, Routledge, London and New York, 2016.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

as the exhibition itself. In particular, moving from a collection-centered approach, Suzanne MacLeod writes that exhibition space “is increasingly recognized as an environment created through a complex of practices and systems of knowledge.”¹⁰ This attention follows many other new concerns that understand exhibitions according to contemporary practices (didactic approaches and pedagogical activities, user-led meaning-making, and so on). For this reason, exhibitions’ architecture and display design have become a veritable social and cultural product, which functions through occupation, fruition, and use.¹¹

Following this audience-oriented attitude, the action undertaken by cultural, political, and economic bodies has laid specific emphasis, as German architect Anna Klingmann writes, not on what architecture is, has, or does, but on how its users feel and, ultimately, on who they are.¹² This approach contributed to a new focus that moved experts’ attention from content to experience, which “necessitates a dramatic shift of the aim of architectural design, from producing static and discrete objects to the generation of a consciousness of desire and a desire for consciousness through a deliberate construction of context.”¹³ In other words, architecture should be intended to stimulate in visitors a desire to experience in support of the artworks displayed.

Despite having been long overlooked, the organization of space has always played a dominant role in shaping the way we think about the physical and experiential structure of architecture dedicated to the exhibition of art. Today, space ceases to be understood as a container only, and architecture is understood as both a response to and outcome of different forms of social organization, needs, ideas, and beliefs. According to MacLeod, this shift resulted in a new approach in which “the architecture of the museum is no longer limited to a static physical building, but expanded to include the physical structure, the layout of functions in space, the layout of collections in space, the management, the programming and so on, in a constant state of (re)production through use.”¹⁴

¹⁰ S. MacLeod, *Reshaping Museum Space: Architecture, Design, Exhibitions*, Routledge, London and New York, 2005.

¹¹ Id., *Rethinking museum architecture: towards a site-specific history of production and use*, in S. MacLeod (eds.), *Reshaping Museum Space: Architecture, Design, Exhibitions*, Routledge, London and New York, 2005.

¹² A. Klingman, *Brandscapes: Architecture in the Experience Economy*, The M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2007, p. 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁴ S. MacLeod, *Rethinking museum architecture: towards a site-specific history of production*

With time, societies have changed their needs and ambitions, and so have museums. Strategical display devices have been adopted to reach different goals in terms of collection management and wider audiences through information and communication technologies.¹⁵ As Parry and Sawyer write, “equally significant within this process have been the changes in ways of seeing and ways of knowing that each society has built for itself [...]: a]s disciplines, discourses and taxonomies change so do museums” which “carry on being reoriented by the historiographies, art connoisseurship and paradigms of science that our societies continue to re-articulate and re-code.”¹⁶ While space has for a long time solely depended on the size of the collection, today display and related technologies have become the core elements that influence exhibition architecture, both permanent and temporary.

As semiotician Per Aage Brandt maintains, artistic value, whether intended as technique, beauty, or taste, is not sufficient to arouse and sustain attention in the observer.¹⁷ In fact, the experience of artistic objects has been part of collective habits since the origins of civilization(s), and it has been coded and framed in terms of different but specific environments and conditions. From religious rituals to the cleansed milieu of contemporary museums, framing plays a central role in the aesthetic experience to be successfully carried out. “Social ceremony as a preferred context of art, and technical mastery as a condition for the display of art, are thus the two mutually reinforcing factors of *aesthetics* in this sense,”¹⁸ he writes. Exhibition spaces and techniques have been changing over time, influencing and being influenced by human sensibility and interests, as well as affecting the evolution of artistic trends and movements.

Precisely because of its roots in biology, behavioral neuroscientist Dahlia W. Zaidel claims, artifacts are equally tied to their creators and observers, and artistic practices are dependent upon other people’s judgment.¹⁹ The skilled attention dedicated to artistic forms, details,

and use, in S. MacLeod (eds.), *Reshaping Museum Space: Architecture, Design, Exhibitions*, Routledge, London and New York, 2005, pp. 20-21.

¹⁵ R. Parry and A. Sawyer, *Space and the machine: adaptive museums, pervasive technology and the new gallery environment*, in S. MacLeod (eds.), *Reshaping Museum Space: Architecture, Design, Exhibitions*, Routledge, London and New York, 2005.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

¹⁷ P. A. Brandt, *Space, Domains and Meanings – Essays in Cognitive Semiotics*, Peter Lang, Pieterlan, 2004.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

¹⁹ D. Zaidel, *Neuropsychology of Art*, Psychology Press, London and New York, (2005) 2014.

and techniques is purposefully directed to stimulate perceptual reactions in subjects who are engaging in aesthetic observation. This particular form of observation is a complex, multisensorial experience, architect and author Michael Brawne maintains, and it “is intended to sharpen the encounter between object and observer, to make possible a communication between artefact and individual.”²⁰ Brandt concludes that it is in specific environments that aesthetic attention is enhanced and amplified. Artworks can be appreciated in any context, but attention intensifies when shared and collectively experienced. Not only can the attention artists put in their works generate attention in the observer, but also the one which is perceived in other people performing a similar process simultaneously. It is in, and thanks to, such spaces that attention generates attention.²¹ Especially after the progressive democratization of the arts, spectatorial fruition is an increasingly collective phenomenon.

As Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas claims, the experience of visiting a museum involves the entire body since artworks are “subsumed by motion, noise, smell and the physical presence of flesh.”²² When experiencing our surroundings, and artworks in this specific case, our body plays a constitutive and primary perceptive role. According to linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, embodiment contributes to the mental structuring of cognitive processes, as well as to the phenomenological classification of bodily translated schemes: the bodily is the primary level that feels and experiences all complex phenomena of the outer world.²³ The aesthetic experience (and even, it could be claimed, artistic practice itself) depends on a phenomenological level on spectatorship. Individual and collective positioning in relation to artworks affects perception and interpretation in psychophysical terms. And, when addressing artistic objects exhibited in designated spaces, this situated perspective is influenced, oriented, and directed by special techniques in terms of architecture, interior design, and display narratives.

²⁰ M. Brawne, *The New Museum: Architecture and Display*, Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, New York and Washington, 1965, p. 7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 203-204.

²² R. Koolhaas, *Content*, Taschen, New York, 2004, p. 255.

²³ G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*, Basic Books, New York.

Conclusion

The attention given to exhibition display and architecture has reached the point where, especially in the case of contemporary buildings erected in strategic locations,²⁴ the prevalence of content over context has been questioned. As former director of National Museums Liverpool David Fleming suggests, not without criticism, “[m]any museums were designed to overwhelm visitors”, while many “[m]useum architects do seem to think that the building is more important than what’s in it.”²⁵ The peculiarity of individual cases within the realm of exhibition architecture has made the category extremely heterogeneous and commonalities hard to discern. The evolution of museum architecture, former French Minister of Culture Jack Lang writes, “has made the task of designing the museum virtually ‘impossible’ [...] each museum is unpredictable, always formed on the basis of new expanding collections, exhibitions, and needs – needs defined by the public.”²⁶ For this reason, understanding the mechanisms involved in the experience of spaces so fragmented and diverse is a challenging task.

As claimed by Brawne, “[b]oth in biology and architecture there is a complex and important interaction between function and anatomy. Each influences and modifies the other. The architectural anatomy of a museum will be strongly influenced by two aspects of function: the general role assigned to that particular museum and the crucial relation within it of object and spectator. The first will affect the relative disposition of spaces, the second their nature.”²⁷ My current research extends the established theoretical framework. While exhibition spaces, their fruition, and aesthetic attention have individually garnered substantial attention, there remains a noticeable paucity in their integrated exploration. This research seeks to rectify this gap by reflecting on the reciprocal influence of these elements.

²⁴ The very famous case of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao (Spain) designed by Canadian architect Frank O. Gehry is a great example of a strategic operation to call attention to the city and attract new visitors.

²⁵ D. Fleming, *Creative Space*, in S. MacLeod (eds.), *Reshaping Museum Space: Architecture, Design, Exhibitions*, Routledge, London and New York, 2005, pp. 213-214.

²⁶ J. Lang, *Foreword*, in D. Davis (eds.), *The Museum Transformed: Design and Culture in the Post-Pompidou Age*, Abbeville Press, New York, 1990, p. 6.

²⁷ M. Brawne, *The New Museum: Architecture and Display*, Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, New York and Washington, 1965, p. 10.