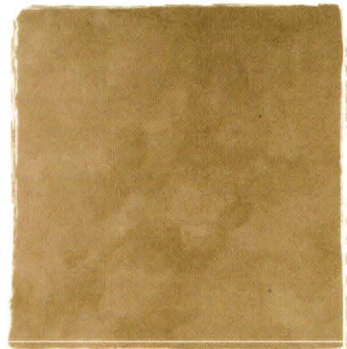
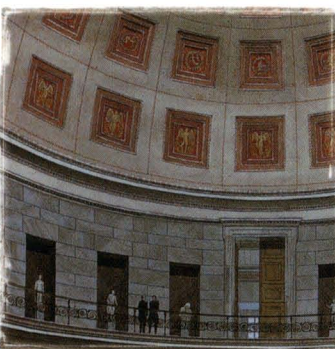
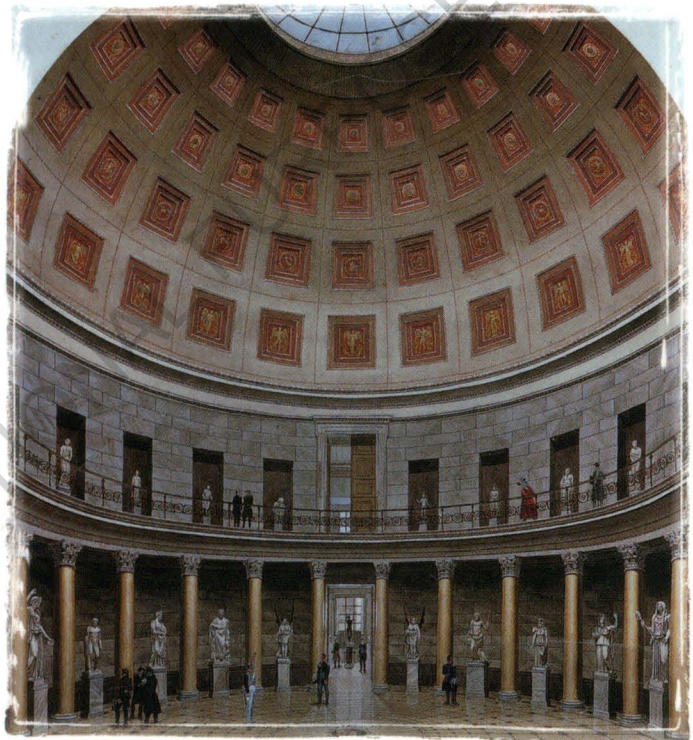
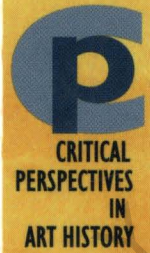


# The architecture of the museum

Symbolic structures, urban contexts

edited by Michaela Giebelhausen



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EDITED BY  
MICHAELA GIEBELHAUSEN



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# Introduction: the architecture of the museum – symbolic structures, urban contexts

Michaela Giebelhausen

Layer upon layer, past times preserve themselves in the city until life itself is finally threatened with suffocation: then, in sheer defense, modern man invents the museum. (Lewis Mumford)<sup>1</sup>

In *The Culture of Cities*, Lewis Mumford constructed an intrinsic relationship between the city and the museum: it became a reservoir for the city's overpowering accumulation of history. An invention of the Enlightenment, the museum as we know it was not only ideally equipped to deal with the surplus of history that it would order, store and display, it was also a relatively recent building type and a newcomer to the city. While the development of the building type has been a recurrent theme in the study of museums, its metropolitan connections and urban contexts have been less fully explored.<sup>2</sup> The present collection draws attention to the museum's complex relationship with the city. The essays are united in their endeavour to investigate the museum's symbolic functions and its role in the urban context. In Part I, the authors survey some of the ways in which the museum has been used to reimagine the city. They reveal very different and at times fictitious capital aspirations such as the new capital built on a *tabula rasa*, or forgotten and might-have-been capitals, or the marginalised capital of the arts. They further explore the museum's different yet related roles as emblem of a western cultural tradition, formative tool of modernity, a means to reconfigure colonial pasts, and accomplice to the touristic rediscovery and exploitation of place. The authors in Part II continue the investigation of the museum's relationship with the city. They analyse its potential as a didactic instrument and the possibilities of extending the notion of the museum to the city itself. Rooted in the genre of literary utopias, the museum is not only a perfect instrument for the fashioning of the ideal subject, but it also supplies a range of vital qualities to the whole urban environment. The museum invokes a classical tradition that resonates with an idealised past, both

remote and Arcadian. The essays explore the ways in which the museum helps to unlock urban memories and makes visible the city's hidden histories, raising questions about the notion of the city as text and about the logistics of legibility. They investigate various reconfigurations of the city as museum, ranging from the systematic insertion of museums and salvaged or reconstructed buildings into the urban fabric to the total exclusion of the museum from the modernist city.

Practically from the moment of its birth in the late eighteenth century, the museum has attracted critical attention: it has been praised and vilified in equal measure. Often repulsion and attraction were entwined in a critic's reaction to the museum. In a frequently cited passage from 'Le Problème des musées' of 1925, the French poet Paul Valéry criticised the 'cold confusion' of the displays in the Louvre where – in the words of Theodor Adorno – '[d]ead visions are entombed' and 'Venus becomes a document'.<sup>73</sup> However, the 'magnificent chaos of the museum' lingered on in Valéry's mind long after he had left the galleries. The museum's haunting quality has preoccupied cultural and architectural historians who have repeatedly attempted to define its special characteristics. It has been claimed that its cultural significance not only surpasses that of other building types but also possesses a genuine seismographic quality. For example, Michael Levin considered the museum an instrument that defines, represents and makes transparent changing cultural trends. In his opinion 'the museum, almost by definition, does more than express current social values and tastes; it also makes a cultural statement which goes beyond its own place in history'.<sup>74</sup> In *The Museum Transformed*, Douglas Davis not only reiterated that view – 'no building type can match the museum for symbolic or architectural importance' – but also highlighted the fact that the museum has repeatedly 'burst its categorical limits, nearly always redefining its capacity and expanding its audience'.<sup>75</sup> More recently, Charles Jencks has drawn attention to the diversified and increasingly conflicting cultural roles the museum has taken on during the 1990s, which have resulted in what he termed 'the museum of spectacular contradiction'.<sup>76</sup>

It seems that the diversification and proliferation of the museum has left the writers, scholars and critics, who are trying to analyse its increasingly schizophrenic nature, in a difficult position. In the preface to *Towards a New Museum*, Victoria Newhouse claims: 'I merely observe and assess what others have done and will be doing to report on the direction museum architecture is taking'.<sup>77</sup> The modesty of her claim reflects the difficulty of coping with the large number of new museums and their different conceptual roles. Since the 'museum of spectacular contradiction' poses a challenge for current scholarship, typological explorations have served as a means to chart the fragmentation of the building type. This is apparent in most of the recent literature which tends to opt for a panoramic view, presenting a wide range of different examples alongside each other.<sup>78</sup> Impressive developments such as the Bilbao Guggenheim or Tate Modern have generated an unprecedented degree of media attention and contributed to a new type of literature that is at once celebratory and concerned with design and building processes.<sup>79</sup>



The sustained interest in the museum has also spawned a growing market in souvenirs for the cultural pilgrim on sale in the indispensable museum shop. While the museum experience is undergoing total commodification, critical endeavours to explore the precise nature of the museum's cultural significance – often claimed and contested, rarely defined – continue unabated.

### Establishing the museum as architecture

The shifting quicksand of cultural signification provides an unstable ground for the architecture of the museum that resulted in a diversification of roles. However, charting fragmenting typologies can only be regarded as a first, albeit necessary, step towards a deeper understanding of the subject. In contrast to the broadly typological approach, therefore, the present collection of essays proposes a focused intervention, concentrating on the symbolic structures and urban contexts that define the museum as architecture. In doing so the authors extend the claim for a complex set of preconceptions underlying the discipline of architecture that Aldo Rossi made in the preface to the second Italian edition of *The Architecture of the City*. He argued that

to consider the city as architecture means to recognize the importance of architecture as a discipline that has a self-determined autonomy ..., constitutes the major urban artifact within the city, and ... links the past to the present. Architecture so seen is not diminished in terms of its own significance because of its urban architectural context or because a different scale introduces new meanings; on the contrary the meaning of the architecture of the city resides in a focus on the individual project and the way it is structured as an urban artifact.<sup>10</sup>

Rossi's observations on the city as architecture, which aimed to refute a simplified functionalist approach to urban design, are equally valid for the museum.

Admittedly such a claim is far from new; it has been made since the beginning of the nineteenth century when the museum finally graduated from the playground of architectural competitions such as the Prix de Rome to become a fully fledged building type. While the appropriation of the Louvre as Musée Français in 1793 demonstrated the museum's political potential, debates over the functionality of its architecture surfaced more clearly only in the design and execution of new buildings during the first third of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the lively controversy over the museum's significance was also partly premised on a conflicting understanding of its architectural form that accompanied the realisation of seminal early museums such as Karl Friedrich von Schinkel's Altes Museum in Berlin and Leo von Klenze's Glyptothek in Munich. The key issues rehearsed in both cases were surprisingly similar. While the scholarly advisors sought to replicate conditions for viewing traditionally associated with the academy and the studio, the architects persuasively argued for a different type of experience. Aiming to address a 'general' audience, they advocated an integrated approach that depended on a lavish decorative scheme

to frame the exhibits. Their desire to both entertain and educate represents the beginning of the modern museum; it joined the more traditional civic building types in a reconfigured geography of power that sought to shape and define a new bourgeois self. Consequently, the museum became 'a formidable model of civic membership, a ritual of social identification, in short, a technology of the subject.'<sup>11</sup> Karl Friedrich von Schinkel was adamant about the role architecture was to play in this process. The sight of the central rotunda, 'a beautiful and sublime space', he maintained, 'has to make one receptive for and attuned to the pleasures and understanding of that which the building really houses.'<sup>12</sup> It served as an emotive overture: a sophistication of function that transcended the utilitarian and economical thinking of scholars and academics.<sup>13</sup> The viewing of art was here complemented by a set of secondary functions that not only defined the museum as a civic building type where the 'civilising rituals' could be enacted but also established it as architecture, the one liberal art not otherwise represented.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, in the summer of 1829 the completed museum was shown to the public empty.<sup>15</sup> This emphasis on the architecture as autonomous has been revived in recent years: witness for example the opening of Peter Eisenman's Wexner Center for the Arts in 1989, where the building itself constituted the inaugural show, and more recently the extensive viewing period of Daniel Libeskind's symbolically charged building for the Jewish Museum in Berlin. Even Herzog and de Meuron's restrained transformation of Giles Gilbert Scott's power station into Tate Modern is characterised by a desire to 'show as much as possible of the structure.'<sup>16</sup> Schinkel's endeavour to foreground the symbolic functions also extended to the museum's urban role, so clearly expressed in his dictum that the museum was at once an object of innate beauty *and* an ornament to the city.<sup>17</sup>

### The 'most typical institution of the metropolis'

Lewis Mumford claimed that the museum represents 'the most typical institution of the metropolis, as characteristic of its ideal life as the gymnasium was of the Hellenic city or the hospital of the medieval city'.<sup>18</sup> Granting the museum such central importance depended on the ability to address a wider audience which vindicated Schinkel's endeavours. Mumford's claim also adds a quasi-utopian dimension to the urban geography. Both the Altes Museum and the Glyptothek invoked a golden age modelled on classical antiquity and perpetuated through the preservation and contemplation of art. They also represent the museum as monument – monuments to the idealised power of civilisation and the paternalistic concerns of the nation state. Both are situated in significant urban contexts deliberately chosen to emphasise their monumental status. Thus – according to Tony Bennett's Foucauldian reading of museums – 'they stood as embodiments, both material and symbolic, of a power to "show and tell" which, in being deployed in a newly constituted open and public space, sought rhetorically to incorporate the people within the processes of the state.'<sup>19</sup>

Fully developed as a building type only at the turn of the nineteenth century, the museum was a relative newcomer to the city, which was itself undergoing a gargantuan transformation to become the metropolis of the industrial age. The Altes Museum occupied a prominent place in Berlin's symbolic geography of power redrawn to accommodate the 'civilising rituals' of culture. Their enactment was not confined to the museum's interior spaces but firmly inscribed in the wider urban context. Located at the far end of the Lustgarten – where the Kupfergraben had been filled in to provide a suitable plot – it faces the royal palace and is in close proximity to the cathedral, the arsenal and the university.

By contrast, the Glyptothek was one of several museums that were built in Munich's newly laid-out suburban development. Striking solitaires in 'a sort of wilderness', the new museums helped to define a marginal urban wasteland designed to transform the Bavarian capital.<sup>20</sup> The Glyptothek formed the centre piece of the Königsplatz, a square that commemorated the formation of the Bavarian monarchy in 1806 and marked the new approach to the city. Leo von Klenze's design – symbolic, resonant and aiming to create 'a picture of pure Hellenism in our world' – was informed by contemporary architectural theory.<sup>21</sup> In his damning description of mid-eighteenth-century Paris first published in 1753, the Abbé Laugier had highlighted the importance of impressive approaches to the city to convey the capital's status to foreign visitors.<sup>22</sup> In his seminal *Précis des leçons* of 1802–5, Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand invoked antiquity as the blueprint on which to model interventions in the contemporary city. He reflected more broadly on the grandeur of the ancient city, drawing particular attention to the public square as a space for the symbolic representation of religion, the military and the state.<sup>23</sup> Yet, Klenze's proposed final triad of church, military and culture signalled an important departure.<sup>24</sup> He fully recognised the symbolic potential of the new building type and consequently cast it as the only constant in the square's protracted period of gestation. Since the museum shares – in the words of Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach – 'fundamental characteristics with traditional ceremonial monuments', it proved the perfect tool for reconfiguring the city and fostering the formation of the bourgeois subject.<sup>25</sup>

The new building type not only seemed to satisfy the city's need for symbolic signification but was also indicative of its metropolitan aspirations. According to Durand truly great cities have several museums, 'some to hold the rarest productions of nature, others to contain the masterpieces of the arts.'<sup>26</sup> If such a simple correlation defined metropolitan status, the proliferation of museums witnessed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries became a clear sign of metropolitan competition and rivalry. Among the most impressive examples are those that clustered museums into designated cultural precincts. Situated behind the Altes Museum, the Museumsinsel was conceived as a 'centre for the highest spiritual interests of the people that perhaps no other capital city possesse[d]'; it once again redefined Berlin's symbolic geography.<sup>27</sup> This 'sacred and tranquil sanctuary for the sciences and the arts' embodied the city's metropolitan ambitions but was also

set apart from its daily bustle: urban, ceremonial yet Arcadian and ideal. In August Stüler's evocative drawing of the early 1840s the scheme's lively outline seen from the river Spree was reminiscent of the Athenian Acropolis.

From the middle of the nineteenth century onward, similar developments were occurring all over Europe. Vienna's radical makeover may serve as a classic example: the razing of the fortifications and the layout of the Ringstrasse not only provided space for a whole range of civic buildings but was also symptomatic of large-scale metropolitan transformations. The Kaiserforum was conceived as part of this urban expansion. Located in proximity to the imperial residence, the impressive Kunsthistorisches Museum and the Naturhistorisches Museum face each other across a square. As in Berlin, the Kaiserforum expands the city's symbolic centre with its traditional geography of power to include the civilising rituals of culture. But the design's fearful symmetry seems to emphasise the representational qualities rather than aim to invoke picturesque historic resonances.

Although arguably among the most spectacular examples, Berlin, Munich and Vienna merely reflected a wider trend in the development of the nineteenth-century metropolis in which the museum as a recent building type came to play a prominent role. So prominent in fact, scholars have argued that the often-invoked metaphor of the museum as cathedral for the arts is not simply a facile comparison but reflects the fact 'that museums are, like cathedrals, fundamentally urban phenomena.'<sup>28</sup> While the museum has continued to be an important urban feature throughout the twentieth century, it also acquired several new roles. Increasingly the 'neutral' viewing of art that early academic advocates had demanded reasserted itself against the civic, commemorative and monumental functions. Philip L. Goodwin and Edward Durell Stone's building for the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York (1939) epitomised modern museum practices and inaugurated the flexible white box. Architecturally it also signalled a new departure: the museum no longer claimed an isolated and resonant place in the city; instead the modernist building was sitting alongside traditional New York brownstones. The opening of the Centre Pompidou in 1977 marked another important development. Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers conceived a multi-purpose cultural centre where the viewing of art became simply one of a range of activities for visitors to choose from. The building's massive scale and colourful exuberance indicated a total break not only with the urban syntax of Paris but also with the traditional museum. Its high-tech exterior embodied the concept of the 'cultural factory', emphasising processes of production and consumption rather than quiet contemplation as well as making visible the circulation of visitors along the transparent escalator tubes. The carnivalesque elements of the Centre Pompidou responded to a desire to enliven the city and reconfigure it as marketplace and spectacle. Although subjected to changes, the museum's relationship with the city has remained central. Charles Jencks has also suggested a similar metropolitan significance for the post-modern 'museum of splendid contradiction': 'If inventively combined', he argued, 'the disparate parts may provide just the kind of experience to cure museum fatigue