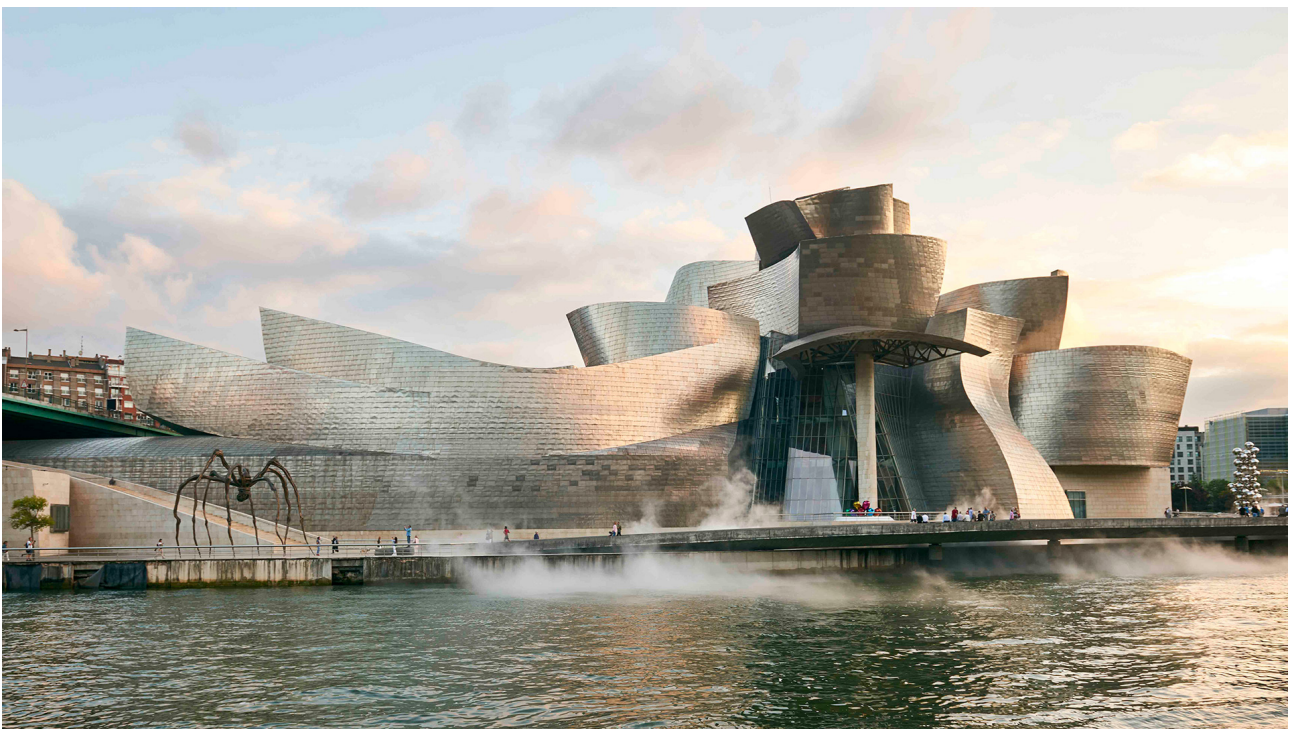


## HOUSING COLLECTIONS IN NEW MUSEUMS

*New museums often capture as much attention and interest as the collections they hold. Bold design and architecture provide important draw cards for huge audiences, but how well do they house those collections?*

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Museum architecture permits the permanence of the built environment, to crucially add meaning to objects of cultural significance.<sup>1</sup> It was in the mid-1970s, a ‘museum boom’ took the world stage. With the completion of Centre Pompidou in Paris, cities of the Global North consequently constructed multiple new museum buildings in the 1980s and 90s.<sup>2</sup> By the year 1997, Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum Bilbao solidified the growing trend of attaching a unique, expansive museum-quality collection to monumental architectonics.<sup>3</sup> Since then, an unbridled growth was seen in the grandeur of design associated with museum architecture.<sup>4</sup> The declining metro of Bilbao was reinvigorated, setting a precedent for authoritative bodies in governance.<sup>5</sup> The construction of prodigious structures proved to bring international attention and tourism; attracting visitors, residents and businesses.<sup>6</sup> Therefore prompting a significant shift in the national GDP numerics, as well as a switch in the very definition of the establishment and its potential. Museums have evolved through time, shedding their image as quasi-elitist didactical hubs, to being perceived as audience-



Guggenheim Museum Bilbao designed by Architect Frank Gehry

Source : guggenheim bilbao

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<sup>1</sup> Jones and MacLeod, 2017

<sup>2</sup> Van Aalst, 2002

<sup>3</sup> Key Considerations in Museum Design & Construction, 2011

<sup>4</sup> Key Considerations in Museum Design & Construction, 2011

<sup>5</sup> Key Considerations in Museum Design & Construction, 2011

<sup>6</sup> Van Aalst, 2002

focussed centres for edutainment. Moreover, the association of a new museum to a ‘Starchitect’, tends to generate delirium around institutions, attracting new and old visitors.<sup>7</sup> The architectural construct acts as a crucial aspect for ‘museum making’, whereby the spatial character of narrative orchestrates the experiences that unfold within the premise. In turn, mapping physical, emotional and imaginative societal episodes.<sup>8</sup> The built form equates to the identity of the institution while serving as an emblem for art aggregation and stakeholders involved. Albeit, this architectural pomposity tends to overshadow the motive held by new museums.<sup>9</sup> With Starchitects aiming at innovative design compositions, challenging the dimensions of engineering, there is an underlying question of which of the two — the building or its housed collection, is the *real* work of art?<sup>10</sup> Museum architecture may distract the audience from examining the collection on display. The phenomenon of a striking built form overwhelms the art. Its formal qualities such as dramatic curves, unconventional angles, exaggerated heights interfere with what is seen as the priority of the institution.<sup>11</sup> American art critic and historian, *Hal Foster*, in his book *Design and Crime*, states the “*iconic designs often inflate the art museum into a gigantic spectacle-space that can swallow any*



The Jewish Museum, Berlin designed by Architect Daniel Libeskind

Source : Deutsche Welle

<sup>7</sup> Key Considerations in Museum Design & Construction, 2011

<sup>8</sup> Van Aalst, 2002

<sup>9</sup> Shiner, n.d.

<sup>10</sup> Shiner, n.d.

<sup>11</sup> Shiner, n.d.

*art, let alone any viewer, whole*".<sup>12</sup> For instance, if one considers the dynamics of the Jewish Museum in Berlin designed by Studio Libeskind, in 1987.<sup>13</sup> Studio Libeskind is the brainchild of the Deconstructivist Architect, Daniel



The Jewish Museum (interior shot), Berlin designed by Architect Daniel Libeskind

Source : Studio Libeskind

deconstructivist architecture i.e abstracts and fragments, the Jewish Star of David around the site.<sup>14</sup> There are punctures imposed on volumes to create fantastical sunbeam inlets.<sup>15</sup> The reinforced concrete interior is theatrically lit with perforations dramatising empty spaces and dead ends.<sup>16</sup> The entrance to the Libeskind extension is the original Baroque museum, haunted by the ever-growing sense of losing direction before coming to a crossroads of three routes.<sup>17</sup> Libeskind intended to induce feelings of emptiness and macabre in the visitor.<sup>18</sup> One of the most striking features of the built space is a 66' tall enclosure that runs through the entire building.<sup>19</sup> It adds manifolds to the existing cold spirit to the museum.<sup>20</sup> Hence, the manifestation of the building is an act of using architecture as a means of experiential narrative, rather than a place for cultural objects to recount history. The Jewish Museum has an extensive collection of material culture, including ceremonial

<sup>12</sup> Foster, 2002

<sup>13</sup> MUSEUM ARCHITECTURE, n.d.

<sup>14</sup> Pavka, 2010

<sup>15</sup> Pavka, 2010

<sup>16</sup> Pavka, 2010

<sup>17</sup> Pavka, 2010

<sup>18</sup> Pavka, 2010

<sup>19</sup> Pavka, 2010

<sup>20</sup> Pavka, 2010



objects, works of fine art and photographic collection. However, the impact of most archival holdings is subdued as they sought refuge in the empirically dominating space.



the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art designed by Steven Holl

Source : Archdaily

Similarly, the recent extension added to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art designed by Steven Holl acts as the focal point to the institution.<sup>21</sup> The additional building is known as the Bloch building.<sup>22</sup> It is an elongated 165,000 square foot expansion with five levels of expansive galleries.<sup>23</sup> There is a constant interaction between its architectonics and surrounding landscape.<sup>24</sup> Wall apertures are integral to the built form, inviting snippets of the outdoors inside the museum.<sup>25</sup> The art on display constantly competes with vistas of nature infiltrating the building, detracting the attention of the visitors.<sup>26</sup> The interiors emanate a quintessential Holl character, as there are pronounced vaulted ceilings with the conspicuous performance of cathedrals.<sup>27</sup> There is an inherent spiritual quality that enhances the architectural quality of the space. But in turn, this qualitative elevation of character also prompts visitors to admire the container of art rather than the art itself. The museum holds 34,500 works of art, including Asian and European art, modern sculpture and the renowned Hallmark Photographic Collection.<sup>28</sup> There is an ongoing wrestle between the collection and the flamboyance of the Bloch Building. In both cases, the built construct reflect an autograph of the architect rather than the ideals of the collection.

<sup>21</sup> The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art / Steven Holl Architects, n.d.

<sup>22</sup> The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art / Steven Holl Architects, n.d.

<sup>23</sup> The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art / Steven Holl Architects, n.d.

<sup>24</sup> The Big Picture Opens April 28 at Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art | Nelson Atkins, 2018

<sup>25</sup> The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art / Steven Holl Architects, n.d.

<sup>26</sup> The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art / Steven Holl Architects, n.d.

<sup>27</sup> The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art / Steven Holl Architects, n.d.

<sup>28</sup> The Big Picture Opens April 28 at Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art | Nelson Atkins, 2018



the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art (interior shot ) designed by Steven Holl

Source : Steven Holl Architects

The avant-garde extravagance of museum architecture holds a strong tendency to overshadow the comprehensive collection. *“The body knows and remembers. Architectural meaning derives from archaic responses and reactions remembered by the body and the senses.”*, explains architectural critic and professor, Juhani Pallasmaa.<sup>29</sup> Rudimentary memory is used not only to create meaning before construction, even so but traces are also left behind when a visitor is welcomed into the built environment.<sup>30</sup> The question re-echoes — of the two, the experienced building or its housed collection, is carried forth by the museum visitor? The stated examples are not expounded to disregard the vision of architects but is an attempt to refine the stance taken. In an interview with Common Edge, Pallasmaa suggests the need to banish the idea of ‘signature architecture’ as it associates to a particular style of the architect, motivating the commodification of spaces.<sup>31</sup> It leads to a loss in the poetic, existential, and metaphysical dimensions of architectonics, neglecting the essence of its context or contents.<sup>32</sup> He encourages architectural identification to have its roots set in the history and continuity of culture.<sup>33</sup>

For instance, if one considers the work of architect David Adjaye. No two Adjaye structures have homogeneous corporeal features. He follows the principles of ‘critical regionalism’ to counter placelessness brought by the International Style.<sup>34</sup> Every building has its individualistic disposition comprising of distinct materiality and volume, roused from its milieu. The focal point deprecates

<sup>29</sup> Pallasmaa, 1996

<sup>30</sup> Pallasmaa, 1996

<sup>31</sup> Crosbie, 2021

<sup>32</sup> Crosbie, 2021

<sup>33</sup> Crosbie, 2021

<sup>34</sup> Szacka and Patteeuw, 2019

the ego of the architect while leaving room for self-expression. Adjaye's Ruby City Art Centre (San Antonio) with a matte, rose-red skin is divergent from the National Museum of African American History and Culture (Washington) which sports a facade of bronze plates.



Edo Museum of West African Art (Nigeria) designed by David Adjaye

Source : dezeen

His work takes inspiration from pre-existing cultural taxonomies of the occupied land, adding to the gross cultural value held by the institution. His architectural gestures, therefore do not overshadow exhibited objects. Consequently, they prepend on displayed material culture, aggrandising the narrative capabilities of the collection. Interestingly a recent proposal publicised by the Adjaye associates is one of the Edo Museum of West African Art (EMOWAA) in Benin (Nigeria).<sup>35</sup> It is an initiative by Legacy Restoration Trust (LRT), the British Museum and Adjaye Associates.<sup>36</sup> The parti adopted by EMOWAA is for it to perform as a 'reteaching tool'.<sup>37</sup> The goal is for the museum to be to recall lost collective memories, aiding the artefacts to decouple western constructs of storytelling as the built form is a homage to ruins of the city on which Benin presently rests on. Adjaye's design is motivated by the ancient city's traditional orthogonal walls and courtyard network, and resists the need to create a spectacle.<sup>38</sup> The collection is comprised of the most expansive display of Benin Bronzes (The Royal Collection) as well as works of African Contemporary Art. For its presentation, there is an incorporation of remains of archaic walls, moats and gates.<sup>39</sup> There is a careful excavation to reveal archeological entities below the ground. The artefacts are presented either in humble spaces following the modernist 'White Cube' methodology, consciously shedding

<sup>35</sup> Ravenscroft, 2020

<sup>36</sup> Ravenscroft, 2020

<sup>37</sup> Ravenscroft, 2020

<sup>38</sup> Ravenscroft, 2020

<sup>39</sup> Ravenscroft, 2020



light on the art, or as part of pavilions which anchor the sacred objects on display.<sup>40</sup> EMOWAA captures attention and interest by implementing bold architectural and exhibition design, without compromising the integrity of the collection.



Yusuhara Wooden Bridge Museum designed by Kengo Kuma

Source : archello

For architecture to successfully present collections while anchoring identity, there also needs to be a balance between form and function. Instead of primarily aiming for gigantesque assemblies, it serves to tailor the embodiment of the institution to its substance. While in process of design, an integral part of the strategic interventions must carry the intention of having the art as the focal point rather than the dynamics of the building. An exemplar proportion is administered by architect Kengo Kuma's Yusuhara Wooden Bridge Museum in Yusuhara (Japan). Its exterior makes a prominent statement, announcing the presence of marvellous, memorable architecture. The building is rooted in Japanese aesthetics. The construction technique has been forgotten, as a result, the building is a symbol for long lost tradition while being a mnemonic of impeccable local craftsmanship.<sup>41</sup> The new museum has two functions. Firstly, it is a cantilevered bridge connecting two public buildings.<sup>42</sup> Secondly, it is an exhibition space to display contemporary art, local arts and is used for education programmes for children.<sup>43</sup> Its elongated span makes it triumphant in serving both purposes. On one hand, the exterior is fantastical, referring to Arata Isozaki's Clusters in the Air metabolist fabrications; reminiscent of the 'dougong' brackets of ancient Asian architecture.<sup>44</sup> On the contrary, the interior is humble, commemorating local timber with simple geometric inclinations. There are no striking features in the interiors of the space, which may actively compete

<sup>40</sup> Ravenscroft, 2020

<sup>41</sup> Yusuhara Wooden Bridge Museum by Kengo Kuma & Associates, 2012

<sup>42</sup> Yusuhara Wooden Bridge Museum by Kengo Kuma & Associates, 2012

<sup>43</sup> Yusuhara Wooden Bridge Museum by Kengo Kuma & Associates, 2012

<sup>44</sup> Yusuhara Wooden Bridge Museum by Kengo Kuma & Associates, 2012

with the artworks.<sup>45</sup> The architecture is concisely aware of its content and context. There is an equilibrium between form and function.

Apart from the physical authority imposed by iconic architecture, there is a prominence of issues relating to the sustainability of the built structure. As the complexity of materiality and the built form increases, there is a convoluted interaction between objects, visitors, and their environments.<sup>46</sup> Environmental conditions present, both on the inside and outside, the museum facility affect the collection housed by an institution. Research Chemist Garry Thomson, while investigating the behaviour of museum exhibits, coins the term 'The Museum Environment' which refers to the immediate surroundings of the collection. Thompson through this epistemology encourages isolation of small spatial segments, making it easier to manipulate and control variables of the environment.<sup>47</sup> Fluctuations in temperature, light, humidity and levels of pollution may lead to deterioration of cultural material, some of which may be irreversible. In between the paradigms that may cause damage, there exist important synergies which are weighed to prioritise minimal debasement. For example, while handling woollen textiles, special care for the paradigm of relative humidity is prioritised.<sup>48</sup> Due to the elasticity of woollen fibres, excessive dryness may cause the textile to shrink and lose flexibility.<sup>49</sup> Hence, being susceptible to damage.<sup>50</sup> Although, all criteria must be kept steady and at par, at instances prioritising becomes essential, while being relative to the medium in focus and its existing condition.<sup>51</sup> Environmental management, a branch of preventive conservation, is then seen as key to reduce the rate of degradation while ensuring inclusive access to objects.<sup>52</sup>

Special considerations regarding managing the collection's immediate environment have to be implied while retrofitting new museums. If one considers the new extension of the Vasa Museum designed by the Swedish post-modern architects Marianne Dahlbäck and Göran Månsson, it is observed that the institution conserves its collection with voluntary international environmental standards.<sup>53</sup> They use Environmental Management Systems (EMS) for the monitoring, summarising, and reporting of internal environmental performance.<sup>54</sup> Vasa Museum ensures the due protection of heritage, runs on renewable electricity and draws additional energy from the hydroelectricity plant installed beneath the museum.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Yusuvara Wooden Bridge Museum by Kengo Kuma & Associates, 2012

<sup>46</sup> ASHLEY-SMITH, 2018

<sup>47</sup> ASHLEY-SMITH, 2018

<sup>48</sup> Deterioration | Development Services, 2021

<sup>49</sup> Deterioration | Development Services, 2021

<sup>50</sup> Deterioration | Development Services, 2021

<sup>51</sup> ASHLEY-SMITH, 2018

<sup>52</sup> ASHLEY-SMITH, 2018

<sup>53</sup> Environmental work at the Vasa Museum, n.d.

<sup>54</sup> Environmental work at the Vasa Museum, n.d.

<sup>55</sup> Environmental work at the Vasa Museum, n.d.





Vasa Museum designed Marianne Dahlbäck and Göran Månsson,

Source : Boardman

The authoritative body makes a conscious decision of meeting high environmental standards while ensuring the conservation regulations are followed.<sup>56</sup> Exhibition making adheres to stringent guidelines which require it to follow sustainable protocols.<sup>57</sup> There is a close check on the materials used while curating shows. Paints and other synthetical substances around artefacts are thoroughly examined before being employed. Old light fixtures are replaced with safer LED lights.<sup>58</sup> Chemicals used in and around the artefacts are toxin-free.

Although, there are ample positives concerning the measures taken to conserve collections in new museums such as the Vasa Museum.<sup>59</sup> One major drawback is the expenses incurred. The construction of the museum require hefty resources — monetary and technical. Additionally, larger floor space equates to an ever-growing collection. The maintenance of these extensive, accrescent collections has a charge, beyond commerce. Moreover, their constant preservation is not cheap to maintain. The charge is not confined solely to finances but also human capital. The constant surveillance of EMS, tracking the chemicals used and replacement of older mechanics, all require an expenditure in the time of the staff members, who are all enrolled on a salary cycle. Therefore,

<sup>56</sup> Environmental work at the Vasa Museum, n.d.

<sup>57</sup> Environmental work at the Vasa Museum, n.d.

<sup>58</sup> Environmental work at the Vasa Museum, n.d.

<sup>59</sup> Environmental work at the Vasa Museum, n.d.

the claim of retrofitted museums such as the Vasa Museum to be energy efficient is instantly challenged. The Jewish Museum in Berlin too, was susceptible to controversy. It was criticised of dealing with tragic history in an insensitive manner. The building's interpretation by Libeskind was seen as problematic, therefore culturally dissociating the building from its context. Furthermore, detracting back to the Guggenheim Bilbao, the aluminium facade proved to be a safety hazard for the pedestrians and vehicles passing by. The sun's glare hindered drivers, constantly leading to accidents before the surface was polished on government intervention. Sustainability is defined as, *'meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs'*.<sup>60</sup> With starchitects thrusting the limits of natural forces, attempting the manipulation of overwhelming masses, volumes and materials, and plunging surrounding context to clear the ground for colossal built structures; it is debatable for the conservation of collection to be a sustainable process. Collections in new museums require heavy funding, directly or indirectly for their routine preservation. Monumentality therefore proves to be high-priced.

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<sup>60</sup> Sustainability - What Is It? Definition, Principles and Examples, 2021

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