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## INFLUENCE OF CONTEMPORANEITY ON MUSEUM ARCHITECTURE

— SHRISTI SAINANI

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### ABSTRACT

In the year 2019, numerous private museums surged all over the world, defining a major shift in museum culture. This essay explores the architecture

of three, 2019-inaugurated, private museums — Ruby City by David Adjaye (Texas, United States of America), Twist Museum of Bjarke Ingles Group (Jevnaker, Norway) and Odunpazari Modern Art Museum designed by Kengo Kuma (Eskişehir, Turkey). Each have an architectural program that systematically focuses on the qualities of ‘museum context’. The term ‘context’ here, can be traced to the idea of architectural contextualism and is defined as the conditions which surround a particular site or project. These area conditions may be embedded in history, politics, topography, weather, micro-climate, economics and so on. The monumental architecture of the contemporary museum is found to be conceptually, vernacular.

For instance, Ruby City is a quintessential ‘Adjaye Architecture’ where the inception of the museum may have been the vision of collector Linda Pace, but its sense of architectural grandeur started from the segments of buried history of the indigenous communities of Texas, stemming from the issue of repatriation. Besides, the museum making phenomenon also revolves around delineating public and private space.

In the case of Bjarke Ingles’ where contemporary museum making was a product of typical Norwegian aesthetics fuelled by the issue of sustainability. Lastly, Kuma’s OMM which used Kuma philosophy of incorporating connections alongside the issue of demographics as a springboard, to form a major part of an art premise.

Although every architect may have chosen a different design trajectory, what they all have in common is need to follow the ‘brand theory’. The term ‘brand’ is directly correlated with “culturally-embedded meaning” created by society and is recognisable. Brand theory is further complimented by the context in which the museum sits, which sets the base for design development. Both these factors allow the architect to induce their own design aesthetics or philosophies as well as build an identity for the museum in the current ‘instant-newsjacking’ era where there is an overload of imagery. Consequently, the architecture has a growing need to adhere to specific programmatic requirements of a contemporary museum, including that of flexible spaces.

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## INTRODUCTION

The year of 2019 saw numerous unprecedented instances. Culture and business mogul, Rihanna was seen as the first woman of colour to head a fashion house (LVMH), a rare albino panda was found in China and Christie's sold a Jeff Koons for \$91.1 million at auction.<sup>1</sup> It was a year of surge and of plenty; in which the museum sector too, saw a peculiar rise.

In 2019, a sudden increase in the number of private museums was recorded all over the world. A growing number of wealthy collectors chose to depart from mainstream government-owned museum philanthropy, to build establishments of their own.<sup>2</sup> Hence, representing a shift in museum culture. Moreover, it was seen that the responsibility of designing these establishments are predominantly given to highly acclaimed architects, with a brazen reputation of having a unique trademark. Leading names of the architecture industry seem to be associated with art museums as if giving legitimacy to the museum as 'custodian of culture'. While these renowned architects are known to induce personal flair in these new-found institutes to cement personal identity, it is also seen that the concept of 'brand theory'<sup>3</sup> popular in contemporaneity, has cast a shadow on the built form of museums. The term 'brand' is directly correlated with recognisable "culturally-embedded meaning" created by society.<sup>4</sup>

Starchitects ensure each private museum has a larger than life, recognisable quality. In conjunction with its distinguishable nature, its architectural design simultaneously reflects on the socio-cultural and environmental qualities of the museum's *context*. The term 'context' here, can be traced to the idea of *architectural contextualism* and is defined as the conditions which surround a particular site or project.<sup>5</sup> These area conditions may be embedded in history, politics, topography, weather, micro-climate or economics. In addition to context, architects keep in mind present-day programmatic requirements of a museum, which is essential considering contemporary art and its making, tend to overrule previously set boundaries of technology, scale and medium of discourse to further, reconstruct the very definition of a museum.

Therefore with a variety of strategies in play, architects construct archetypal museums taking into account two important aspects i.e issues of contemporaneity along with elements and process of contemporary museum making.

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<sup>1</sup> Tisak, 202

<sup>2</sup> Walker, 2019

<sup>3</sup> Hee Lee and Woo Lee 2016

<sup>4</sup> Hee Lee and Woo Lee 2016

<sup>5</sup> Shalloway, 2004

## RUBY CITY, TEXAS

Born in Tanzania to Ghanaian parents, British architect David Adjaye OBE is regarded as one of the leading architects of recent times. Influenced by science, music, Contemporary and African art he brings to the table, a flair of visionary sensibilities using materiality and sculptural form. He has completed numerous museum projects in association with some of the biggest names in the fraternity, including The Smithsonian and MCA, Denver.<sup>6</sup>

In 2019, Adjaye completed yet another sought-after, arts centre project in San Antonio (Texas) called Ruby City. It was designed in collaboration with local architects, Alamo Architects to house Linda Pace's private collection.<sup>7</sup> Linda sketched out a skeletal image of her dream structure in 2009, after being inspired by Emerald City from the narrative of Wizard of Oz.<sup>8</sup> While previous-generation architects such as Gehry disregard client demands by saying, "I don't know why people hire architects and then tell them what to do?"<sup>9</sup> for Adjaye, an integral part of his practice is fulfilling client needs. The Pace sketch was realised by Adjaye to give rise to the crimson building.

Envisioned by Pace, the two-storey, architecture of Ruby City is clad in red-toned, precast concrete. It is quintessential 'Adjaye Architecture', with its sharp, angular projections complemented by a facade dressed in earthy tones. While the bottom half is smooth, the upper half has a textural rock-salt finish, legitimising its name, as it shimmers reflecting the sun.<sup>10</sup> The vibrancy of its exterior skin invites an audience. The crimson colour, a direct derivation from San Antonio's historical context, is a product of Adjaye's study on Spanish colonies which once resided in Texas.<sup>11</sup> This gesture of extracting shreds of historically obliterated, sheds light on an issue of contemporaneity Adjaye feels powerfully about, the issue of repatriation. Furthermore, the gesture reflects not just his constant source of inspiration i.e motifs of culture but also contemporaneity of museum architecture, which may not have a dominant style attached to it but is known to be nothing short of the avant-garde; challenging boundaries of scale and technology.

Popular in Adjaye's work is an inclusion of communal spaces, a feature often incorporated as a part of contemporary architecture, considering the lack of urban areas within metropolitans. The Free-for-All centre, fosters public spaces, enriching lives of communities in and around. The museum

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<sup>6</sup> Adjaye, 2020

<sup>7</sup> Adjaye, 2020

<sup>8</sup> Kenney, 2019

<sup>9</sup> Gehry, 2016

<sup>10</sup> Cogley, 2019

<sup>11</sup> Sitz, 2019

campus includes a one-acre public park called 'CHRISpark' built-in honour of Linda's son.<sup>12</sup> Public space around museums, nurtured by museums, is increasingly important since these institutions are no longer spaces reserved for the elite but instead, are treated as 'places of people' or forums. Moreover, exponentially increasing grandeur of museums, in terms of land-use and physical proportions, Adjaye's Ruby City sets out to compensate.

The exterior of Ruby City is seamlessly integrated with the interior, using matte grey concrete flooring,<sup>13</sup> allowing the insides to adhere to modernist the 'white cube' theory, a popular feature within museums. The interiors comprise of two floors, covering about 10,000 square metres. At the lower level, the more practical zones are planned; such as the reception, administrative offices and a conference room called 'jewel box'.<sup>14</sup> These spaces are comparatively private, not meant to be accessed by the museum audience. Regardless it is important to note, these administrative spaces face the sculpture garden. In fact, the jewel box has the best view of the Nancy Rubins' sculpture called Sonny's Airplane Parts, resting in the garden.<sup>15</sup> Usually, incredible views of public buildings are democratic; enhanced for visitors to enjoy. But in this case, spatial planning seems to respond to the idea of the museum holding a private collection. Like it wanted to reserve some wonder, solely for the conference room invitees. The circulation of the visitors within the building is like walking on an ouroboros. Adjaye hopes for it to be a 'natural loop',<sup>16</sup> allowing the audience to realise the wholesomeness of the museum experience.

The second level is divided into three large exhibition spaces. While two have high ceilings with skylights for the display of large-scale contemporary artworks, Adjaye terms the third gallery as the '20th-Century box'. Unlike the other two, the box may be blacked out if needed, accomodating more-immediate mediums of art; for instance works of moving image. The architecture of Ruby City alongside its component, the 20th-Century box, also add fuel to the raging flame of 'spectacle' in contemporary art and its museums. Guy Debord, a French Marxist theorist in his book 'Society of Spectacle' analysis society, tagging it image-obsessed.<sup>17</sup> Ruby City is an epitome of Debord's theory being relevant today. While his book was written to revolt against post-war consumerism; with the rise of the internet age, specifically social media there is a highly mediated documenting of extravagant architecture and over-the-top art, producing viral imagery. As a result, reinforcing a need for brand-building.

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<sup>12</sup> Ashaboglu, 2015

<sup>13</sup> Sitz, 2019

<sup>14</sup> Cogley, 2019

<sup>15</sup> Petty, 2019

<sup>16</sup> Sitz, 2019

<sup>17</sup> Debord, 1967

## THE TWIST MUSEUM , JEVNAKER

Contemporary art is known to push peripheries, stretching size to reach unbelievable scales. Big is good, BIG is also the Bjarke Ingels Group. Recently BIG led by Copenhagen based architect, Bjarke Ingles designed the Twist Museum in Norway (2019). The museum is located in Kistefos Sculpture Park, Jevnaker in the outskirts of Oslo. It was found by investor Christen Sveaas, sponsored by his company AS Kistefos with a little help of Jevnaker municipality. This 1000-square metre museum is seen spanning 60 metres across the forested bank of Randselva river, embracing horizontality rather than grappling with girth or verticality like most museums.<sup>18</sup> Visually, the museum has a typical Ingles quality of repetitiveness; a simple form interrupted by a single gesture. BIG buildings conventionally have a visual quality of a calculated glitch in real-time, stimulating ideas of sustainability. His motto is to approach sustainable architectonics by treating architecture, rightly, as a part of an ecosystem rather than stirring cliché moral or philanthropical revolution around the idea.

Sustainability, a rarely addressed issue during a discourse on museum architecture is pioneered by Ingles in the case of The Twist. The Twist is known to reflect its natural surrounding without overpowering it, its existence is aware of the implications of pomposity, as it sits in natural grounds, opposite to a heritage mill. In the case of contemporary museum architecture, this is a rare phenomenon. With Gehry's 'Bilbao effect' as a part of the lexicon of urban planning,<sup>19</sup> humble museums are turning into a rarity. The building envelope of the Twist Museum came about as a response to a need. There was a growing *sine qua non* for the site to house a higher quantity and quality of art under a roof of a built form, beyond what Kistefos Sculpture Park could accommodate. In addition, it was also essential for a novel bridge to allow the audience to move in a full circle around the park.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, Twist facilitating the *genius loci* of Kistefos Sculpture Park rather than being hegemonic. The museum turns 90 degrees at its centre to connect the south end of the river to its north, functioning dually. Describing the form, Ingles calls his design, "An expressive organic sculpture composed of rational repetitive elements".

The building mimics some of the pieces that form the collection. It's facade responding directly to Norwegian aesthetic. Materials used for construction are sheets of aluminium metal and boards of wood taken from the natural forest found in the vicinity. On examining, the visual qualities of art placed in the premise, the correlation can be easily spotted. For instance, Anish Kapoor's S-Curve (2008).<sup>21</sup> Kapoor's naturally rounded river stones hold a 10-metre polished mirror reflecting,

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<sup>18</sup> Pintos, 2019

<sup>19</sup> Dickson, 2017

<sup>20</sup> Crook, 2019

<sup>21</sup> Kistefos, 2020

literally and metaphorically, the architectural quality of the Twist museum. Identically, another curio of the collection is Jeppe Hein's *The Path to Silence* (2016). It is a 460-metre high sculpture of repetitive triangular polished mirror steles resting on a mosaic rock floor, aping articulately the architectural quality of the museum floating above the river.<sup>22</sup>

Icelandic media artist and designer, Katrín Svana Eypórsdóttir in her article, 'The Story Of Scandinavian Design: Combining Function and Aesthetics' also unfurls philosophies of Norwegian design, aiding to connect the museum built form to its roots. She mentions how severe climate dictates Norwegian aesthetics tending to light, bright and practical designs, conforming to timelessness. With elegant smooth lines, aesthetics heavily rely on achromatic white and wooden textures, while adopting organic shapes. She summarises Scandinavian design to be a sum of functionality, keeping in confidence eternal beauty and grace;<sup>23</sup> which is precisely what *The Twist* museum stands for. *Twist*, thus is a global contemporary museum reflecting the local, a feature of utmost importance to augment museum identity in a highly multi-dimensional, cross-cultural world of contemporary art museums.

*The Twist* comprises of three galleries: a wide gallery called the Panorama Gallery, which spans across the river, forming the main facade of the building. It is brightly lit and allows a spectacular panoramic view of the calm waters that flow beneath. The second gallery known as the Twist Gallery is a sculptural, interior space made by the warping of the architectural entity. It is naturally-lit just as the Panorama, but with the aid of a slim skylight. Lastly, the third gallery is a darker space to exhibit new-media pieces.<sup>24</sup> The program of the museum is similar to that of *Ruby City*. A ratio of 2:1 can be seen in both private art galleries, as bright spaces are put across dark ones. With the rise of multi-media forms of expression within contemporary museums, architects provide spaces that are flexible and can be easily closed off for the high-brow theatrics of performance, dance and works of moving image.

Every journey begins with a single step. That may be *the* reason why museums emphasise on the drama of a staircase. Contemporary museums such as *MONA* (Tasmania) designed by Fender Katsalidis Architects and Daniel Libeskind designed *Jewish Museum* (Berlin), popularly have unique staircases which are no less than art in their own right. They give character to the museum while elevating visitor experience. *The Twist* too has its proud, glass staircase which leads the audience to the lower level on the riverbank. Apart from the stair, another architectural feature admired by the world of contemporary art, is the toilet. Since Marcel Duchamp dropped his

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<sup>22</sup> Kistefos, 2020

<sup>23</sup> Eypórsdóttir, 2011

<sup>24</sup> Kistefos, 2020

porcelain urinal in the Grand Palace (New York), contemporary artists such as Maurizio Cattelan have had analogous art, giving toilets an important place in museums. In the case of Twist, the toilets are adorned with installations by American multimedia artist, Tony Oursler.<sup>25</sup> Hence, Twist proving to be an archetypal art museum taking into account both issues of contemporaneity along with elements and process of contemporary museum making.

## **ODUNPAZARI MODERN ART MUSEUM , ESKISEHIR**

Another architect known to delve into the museum sector, building his prolific portfolio with key projects such as Suntory Museum of Art in Tokyo and the Besançon Art Centre in France, took the world by storm in the year 2019, when he unveiled Odunpazari Modern Art Museum in the university town of Eskişehir, Turkey.<sup>26</sup> Kengo Kuma is a Japanese architect reputed to produce notable architecture and sublime philosophical reads grabbing attention and gaining the respect for his contemporaries. The Turkish museum by Kuma was an initiative by the OMM foundation, founded by Erol Tabanca, Rana Erkan Tabanca and Cem Siyahi with an aim to elevate the city's familiarisation with the arts.<sup>27</sup> Just like Ruby City and the Twist, Odunpazari Modern Art Museum is a private museum to display Tabanca's collection, now open to the public.

Statistics suggest contemporary museums attract audiences of 35-44 years of age, additionally managing to reel in families with one child, provided the household income of those families lies above the \$200K benchmark. Gen Z is missed out as museums see a growing decline in visitors of age, ranging from 18-24. Odunpazari Modern Art Museum situated in Eskişehir, a hub for youngsters, essentially due to three major universities —Anadolu University, Eskişehir Osmangazi University and Eskişehir Technical University has a probability to change the scenario, at least for Turkey. The newly developed location of Odunpazari has the museum is located in the midst of a larger, propositioned project involving multiple, mid-scale buildings functioning as subsidiary museums or workshops catering to mediums of glass and handicrafts.<sup>28</sup> Kuma, continually criticises the place architecture holds in contemporary society. In his piece 'Anti-Object: the Dis—olution and Disintegration of Architecture' he explains through Kantian philosophy, "a whole is greater than the sum of its parts".<sup>29</sup> These supplementary institutions along with the choice of site

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<sup>25</sup> Frearson, 2019

<sup>26</sup> Kuma, 2020

<sup>27</sup> OMM, 2020

<sup>28</sup> Harrouk, 2019

<sup>29</sup> Kuma, 2008



and Kuma's cultural landmark of OMM will be sure to draw in younger visitors as it enhances the experiential and interactive quality of museums.

The word Odunpazari literally means firewood market in Turkish; <sup>30</sup> the design of the Odunpazari Modern Art Museum (OMM) is taken from the traditional Ottoman wooden houses made from timber frames. These houses were a combination of spaces i.e open, semi-open and confined spaces.<sup>31</sup> Kuma pulls out the essence of traditional Turk architecture, plugs contemporaneity into it. He ensures the inspiration taken from traditional-kind planning of spaces, aptly fit the Tabanca collection. Therefore, taking back the idea of contemporary museum making, back to vernacular theories.

The architecture is structured by masses of diverse volumes resembling stacked boxes, to permit the exhibition of different scaled artworks. The ground level is reserved for colossal pieces which sweep the audience off their feet, right at the entrance; announcing the museum's calibre and serving as an encouragement to continue forward. The Tanabe Chikuunsai IV 6 x 8 metres installation, which is the largest ever made by the bamboo master artist sits still in the entrance foyer, performing the same.<sup>32</sup> Large scale installations, such as Chikuunsai's generally need a separate entry to the museum. Hence, the ground floor also has a loading dock for the freight, expected by the museum. Apart from the service dock, there is a separate audience entry and exit accompanied by a ticketing counter.<sup>33</sup> Ticketing audience may be frowned upon at instances, but it is a vital part of running independent institutions such as OMM. Kuma accommodates for this by providing a specific booth for organised functioning. Therefore responding also to the economics and social psychology of Eskişehir.

As visitors move up the building, the floors consequently reduce in volumetric proportions to exhibit more intimately scaled artworks.<sup>34</sup> The building is pierced with a central atrium, allowing each level to be filled with natural light. Kuma's projects are frequently attentive towards this concept of connecting spaces. The museum has three floors, intending to execute a divergent range of multi-media exhibits, complemented by public programs, seminars, talks and workshops.<sup>35</sup> Hence, there are multitudes of public foyers and break out spaces as a part of the architectural system.

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<sup>30</sup> Ravenscroft, 2019

<sup>31</sup> Hassanpour and Soltanzadeh, 2015

<sup>32</sup> Architonic, 2019

<sup>33</sup> Architonic, 2019

<sup>34</sup> Archello, 2019

<sup>35</sup> Harrouk, 2019

The museum has three public halls and a plaza including a cafe and museum shop.<sup>36</sup> Commercial spaces such as these are a growing sight within contemporary museums, as they are not just another mode for museums to be economically sustainable but also, facilitate new ways of social interaction. Moreover, merchandise and food are complimentary artistic endeavours laying beside high-art within a museum facility.

Kuma architecture believes in healing as it summons aspects of nature within urban formations. In the case of OMM, Kuma uses cutting-edge concepts of engineering to frame nature by using it as a dominant construction material and by involving multiple openings on the facade system. The spaces in the facility promote Kuma philosophy further by mirroring the Tabanca collection, for instance, the work of Art collective Marshmallow Laser Feast.<sup>37</sup> MLF showcased two of their projects, Treehugger and In the Eyes of the Animal at OMM.<sup>38</sup> In times where most digital art readily cuts the audience from the outdoors, their work uses technology to connect the audience to the natural environment through VR. These installations fit perfectly into the context of the Kuma museum; in turn causing an osmotic phenomenon, where there is porosity between what lies in the museum and what is outside it. Metaphorically turning the museum into a membrane. Hence, constructing an archetypal museum challenging the traditional understanding of contemporary museum making.

## CONCLUSION

It is seen that issues of contemporaneity, both within and beyond the boundaries of the museum and programmatic needs influence the approach taken by architects while designing. Although every architect may have chosen a different design trajectory, what they all have in common is need to follow 'Brand Theory' <sup>39</sup>. The Brand Theory is further complimented by the context in which the museum sits, which sets the base for design development. Both these factors allow the architect to induce their own design aesthetics or philosophies as well as build an identity for the museum in the current 'instant-newsjacking' era where there is an overload of imagery. Lastly, the monumental architecture of the contemporary museum is found to be conceptually vernacular. Especially in the case of the private museum, its architecture is just as much high-art as the objects it holds.

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<sup>36</sup> Ravenscroft, 2019

<sup>37</sup> Architonic, 2019

<sup>38</sup> Architonic, 2019

<sup>39</sup> Hee Lee and Woo Lee 2016

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