

Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)

Volume 5 *Volume 5 (2007)*

Article 9

2007

Architecture vs. Art: The Aesthetics of Art Museum Design[1]

Larry Shiner

University of Illinois Springfield, lshiner1@aol.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics



Part of the [Aesthetics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Shiner, Larry (2007) "Architecture vs. Art: The Aesthetics of Art Museum Design[1]," *Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)*: Vol. 5, Article 9.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics/vol5/iss1/9

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Liberal Arts Division at DigitalCommons@RISD. It has been accepted for inclusion in Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive) by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@RISD. For more information, please contact mpompeli@risd.edu.

[About CA](#)

[Journal](#)

[Contact CA](#)

[Links](#)

[Submissions](#)

[Search Journal](#)

[Editorial Board](#)

[Permission to Reprint](#)

[Privacy](#)

[Site Map](#)

[Publisher](#)

[Webmaster](#)

Architecture vs. Art: The Aesthetics of Art Museum Design¹

Larry Shiner

Abstract

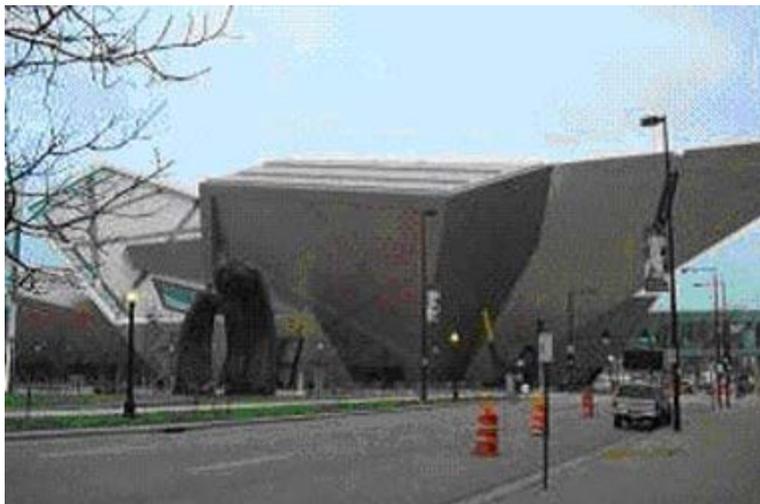
Many art critics have complained that the most dramatic art museum designs of the last decade have upstaged or interfered with the art within. This essay examines eight contemporary cases before drawing some lessons for art museum design, and ends by setting the architecture vs. art problem in the context of the philosophy of architecture, focusing on the issues of function and symbolism.

Key Words

architecture, architecture vs. art, architecture vs. building, art, art museum history, art museum typology, art museums, function, necessary conditions, philosophy of architecture, symbolism; Center for Contemporary Art (Cincinnati), Denver Art Museum, Guggenheim Museum (Bilbao), Institute of Contemporary Art (Boston), Milwaukee Art Museum, Museum of Modern Art (New York), Nelson-Atkins Museum (Kansas City), Pulitzer Foundation (St. Louis)

1. Introduction: Upstaging vs. Interfering

By now we have come to expect audacious designs for new art museums, such as Daniel Libeskind's kaleidoscopic new wing for the Denver Art Museum that opened in the Fall of 2006.



Photograph by author.^[2]

But such wild architectural fantasies have also given rise to complaints that museum architecture too often becomes the real art work overshadowing what is inside. There is little doubt that most of those who fly to Bilbao to visit the Guggenheim Museum (1997) are going primarily to see Frank Gehry's shimmering titanium sculpture. For almost a decade, people in the museum world have talked of the "Bilbao effect," referring to the marketing potential for a museum and its city when a famous architect creates an eye-catching design. The primary issue raised by recent art museum designs is how to resolve the tension between architects' desire for an artistic statement of their own and art lovers' desire for a building that shows the art to best advantage. Obviously, one would like to have both. But many critics have worried that too often the art ends up playing second fiddle to the architecture. A review of the new De Young Museum (2005) in San Francisco began with these

lines: "it seems that architects have become the big bad wolf of the museum world. Too often, flash and bravura win out over contemplation . . . and architecture triumphs over art."^[3] Hal Foster goes even farther in *Design and Crime*, saying that iconic museum designs often inflate the art museum into "a gigantic spectacle-space that can swallow any art, let alone any viewer, whole."^[4]

Complaints of this kind actually combine two objections that ought to be distinguished.^[5] One objection is that spectacular architecture will upstage or overwhelm the art. The other is that strange curves, odd angles, enormous heights, and brilliant light will directly interfere with our appreciation of the art. I think both these fears are often exaggerated, but the issue itself is an important one with larger implications for the aesthetics of architecture. To get a clearer view of the tension between architecture and art, I propose that we 1) briefly put the issue in historical context, 2) look at examples of the types of museums that are affected differently by radical designs, 3) draw some lessons concerning art museum design, and finally, 4) look at the issue of architecture vs. art in the wider perspective of the philosophy of architecture.

2. Architecture and the Aims of the Art Museum

Since many critics complain that flamboyant museum architecture distracts viewers from the contemplation of artworks, it is worth noting that disinterested contemplation was not the primary aim of those who first opened private collections to the public in the eighteenth century. The first museums had a variable mix of aims: royal or national prestige, the preservation of "heritage," providing models for artists and craftsmen, and the enlightenment of the public with an emphasis on art's moral and civic benefits.^[6] In terms of architectural form, most of the purpose-built art museums of the nineteenth century adopted some version of classicism, typically with a grand stairway up to an entry under a pediment and columns. Once inside there was usually a great hall, sometimes with a dome and rotunda or even a multi-story atrium.^[7] These entryways and reception halls are impressive architectural statements in their own right, and from that perspective, today's dramatic reception halls by Gehry or Calatrava are variations on an old theme. It may be that part of what makes many recent museums seem like a radical break with an architectural tradition more attentive to art is that we have become so accustomed to classical museums that we seldom pay much attention to their architecture.

Moreover, we may be too hasty in thinking that nineteenth century architects were keeping humbly in the background. Leo von Klenze's Glyptothek (1815) for King Ludwig of Bavaria, was a monumental building dominated by a high central portico lined with eight Ionic columns. We can see the conflict between architecture and art already beginning in the disagreement over the design of the interior, since the scholar-advisor for the project wanted a sparse interior to set off the statuary, but Klenze won out with his plan for a richly ornamented interior in which even the gallery floors and ceilings were heavily patterned in dark colors.^[8] Karl Friedrich Schinkel's Altes Museum in Berlin (1830), with its majestic colonnade running the full length of the front and its magnificent dome modeled on the Pantheon, was attacked by the connoisseur, Alois Hirt, on the grounds that "the art objects are not there for the museum; rather the museum is built for the objects," the very complaint we often hear today.^[9]

By the end of the nineteenth century, some of the original purposes of art museums were increasingly supplanted by the idea of the museum as a quiet refuge for contemplation. This shift was most dramatically manifested in American museums by two changes. First, the "battle of the casts" was won by those who argued that whatever the educational value of copies, a museum's primary purpose was the display of original works of the highest quality.^[10] During the same period, the older practice of hanging pictures close together, sometimes in rows reaching to the ceiling, was gradually supplanted by hanging single works at eye level with enough space between them to allow the viewer to focus on one work at a time. As for museum architecture, classicism continued to dominate up to 1914, and there was not much opportunity for new museum building between 1914 and 1945 with two

world wars and the Depression. One exception was the 1939 Museum of Modern Art in New York, with its spare façade and its "neutral" white galleries meant to maximize purely aesthetic contemplation undisturbed by architectural ornament. After the war, the architecture vs. art issue was most dramatically raised by Frank Lloyd Wright's iconic Guggenheim, New York (1959), whose striking sculptural form and enormous atrium not only upstaged the art within, but the museum's spiral ramp, with its curving walls and limited viewing depth, was felt by many to hamper appreciation of the art.^[11] Between Wright's Guggenheim and Gehry's Guggenheim, Rogers and Piano's Pompidou Center (1977) marked the most important development in museum design and function.



The Pompidou combined a museum of modern art with a film center, music archive, library, restaurant, bar, and store, and, as if that were not enough, by including a huge public plaza in front and a viewing platform on top, the Pompidou Center proclaimed the arrival of the museum as entertainment destination. The rest of the museum world would take a while to catch up, but eventually even the most staid institutions have adopted some of the Pompidou's strategies for attracting crowds. Although the Pompidou's exoskeleton and colorful pipes on the outside are its most striking aspect, Rogers and Piano left the inside a vast open space to be configured as needs determined and so the interior did not directly compete with the art.

Among the ostensible motives behind the multiple functions of the Pompidou were the integration of high and popular culture and a democratization of the museum audience.^[12] In Britain and the United States during the 1980s, similar concerns were powerfully reinforced by economic pressures leading to a constant quest for new members and increased ticket sales, for which a gaggle of varied attractions - films, concerts, children's centers, shops, and restaurants in addition to "blockbuster" exhibitions - have served to make the museum a competitive destination for leisure activity. Not only can spectacular architecture be an important part of this mix, but the architecture itself must now include attractive spaces for all the new activities. Obviously, the extent to which the museum as entertainment destination has overtaken the more traditional functions of the museum varies enormously from museum to museum, but clearly it is not just the architecture that vies with art for the visitor's attention.

This brief look at the history of the art museum shows that the tension between architecture and art goes back almost to the art museum's beginning and also shows that the purposes of art museums have varied enormously over the years and still vary from museum to museum. Once we realize that traditional museums were not inherently more respectful of art than more recent ones, and once we pay attention to the changed functional aims of museums, the iconic designs of a Gehry

or Hadid are less likely to seem merely the product of cheeky architects laying claim to being the real artists on the block.

3. Case Studies in the Architecture vs. Art Tension: Museum Types

The next step in assessing contemporary museum architecture is to look at some individual cases, but in selecting them we need to choose examples that illustrate the different types of museums that require different approaches to design. In her influential book, *Towards a New Museum*, Victoria Newhouse came up with a half-dozen categories, the most relevant of which for our purposes are "Museum as Sacred Space," embracing both traditional (Louvre) and modern (MoMA) museums that offer a sheltered precinct for contemplation, and her category, "Museum as Environmental Art," which includes museums like Gehry's Guggenheim that create interactive environments for newer kinds of art.^[13] Douglas Davis has also weighed in on museum typology, arguing that a new type of art museum is emerging which is "protean" and "de-centered," often occupying several sites and emphasizing new media and digital access. As for the buildings that go with the new type, Davis celebrates exciting exteriors ("baroque shells") that can serve as "an emblem of a singular identity divorced from the inner configuration."^[14] Although these typologies usefully foreground the way changes in art museum design have followed changes in function, I will use a simpler typology by sorting my examples using two intersecting contrasts: first, according to whether a building is an addition or a completely new structure, and second, cutting across this difference, according to whether the museum in question is dedicated to showing a substantial permanent collection, or whether it is primarily a venue for temporary exhibitions. (Obviously, traditional museums with permanent collections also put on temporary exhibitions, and many newer museums that are primarily exhibition venues may gradually develop small permanent collections, but the two types are usually different enough to place different demands on architects.) This scheme gives us three types: **New Museums with Permanent Collections** (Guggenheim Bilbao, Pulitzer Foundation, MoMA); **New Museums as Exhibition Venues** (Contemporary Arts Center, Institute of Contemporary Art); **Museum Additions** (Milwaukee Art Museum, Nelson-Atkins Museum, Denver Art Museum).

4. New Museums with Permanent Collections

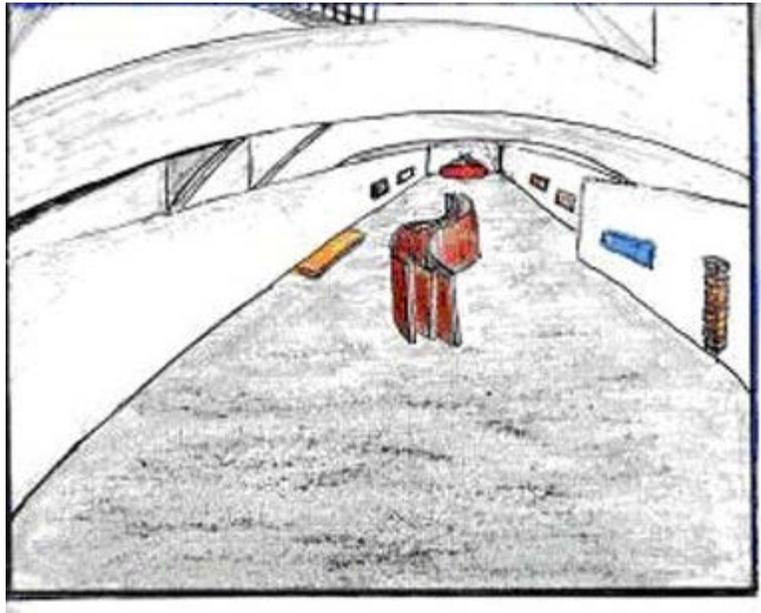
Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao (1997) Certainly, the most important new art museum built in the last decade to house part of a permanent collection is Gehry's Bilbao Guggenheim.



Photo Courtesy of Mary Ann Sullivan.^[15]

Although the glittering Baroque curves of its sculptural exterior are its best known feature, the Bilbao is equally notable for its unusual interior. The soaring, curvilinear atrium reaches a hundred and sixty feet, and many of the galleries that extend off of it are oddly shaped and outsized, one of them, early on baptized the "Boat" or "Fish"

gallery, is longer than a football field and even dwarfed a huge Serra piece installed there during the museum's early years.[\[16\]](#)



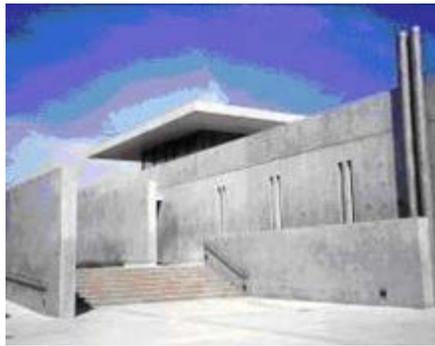
Yet these vast spaces were not simply a reach for gigantism on Gehry's part but reflected the conviction of Thomas Krens, the Guggenheim's director, that contemporary art demands exhibition spaces of huge scale and extraordinary character. Indeed, Krens (and the Bilbao government) were betting on a spectacular piece of architecture to revitalize the city (and help pull the Guggenheim enterprise out of debt). The performance artist, Andrea Fraser, has ingeniously called attention to the way the Bilbao museum's audio guide spends its first six minutes celebrating the building itself, with a soothing voice assuring us: "Isn't this a wonderful place? Its uplifting. It's like a Gothic cathedral. You can feel your soul rise up with the building around you. . . every surface in this space curves . . . these curves are gentle, but in their huge scale powerfully sensual. You'll see people going up to the walls and stroking them. You might feel the desire to do so yourself."[\[17\]](#) After that come on, the art will have to be a let down; especially since you can't touch it. (In her video performance, Fraser parodies the audio guide by going up to one of the curving stone walls and sensuously rubbing her body against it.)[\[18\]](#) From the start, the Bilbao museum was meant to be a major art attraction in itself. The question is whether the architecture just upstages the art it contains - art which is, after all, mostly the same kind thing one can see in any modern art museum - or whether the design of the galleries actually interferes with the viewer's attention to the works once they get to them.

Gehry himself has addressed the architecture vs. art issue, rejecting what he calls "the mythology . . . that a museum for art has to be deferential and . . . not compete with the art."[\[19\]](#) Most artists, Gehry claims, want see their work in a museum that is itself a strong work of art. Yet Gehry developed his Bilbao design in consultation with museum representatives, providing more conventional, rectangular galleries for older types of modernist painting, and reserving the high, asymmetrical galleries with their performance catwalks for late modernist works. Several artists have paid tribute to Gehry's design, and some critics believe it to have achieved a kind of synthesis of architecture and art.[\[20\]](#) Other critics, however, feel that some of the more dramatic galleries simply dwarf most of what is put in them. One of the more successful aspects of Gehry's plan is that the major galleries on each floor are connected only by the atrium, so that one needs to return to the central hall with its views to the outside before going on to the next art experience. This has the

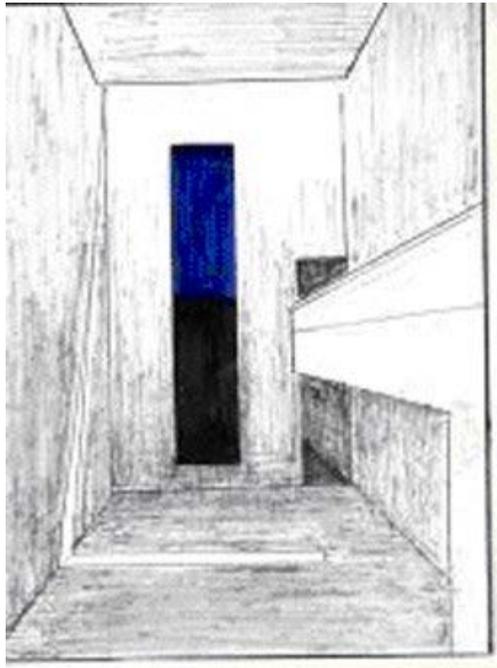
advantage that the visitor is less likely to experience visual overload of the kind that occurs in traditional museum layouts in which one gallery leads to another in a seemingly endless succession.

Pulitzer Foundation, St. Louis (2001) Tadao Ando, whose Pulitzer Foundation museum in St. Louis could almost fit inside one of Bilbao's galleries, has gone even farther than Gehry in an effort to reconcile architecture and art. Part of what makes the Pulitzer hold architecture and art together as well as it does is the fact that its patron, Emily Pulitzer, commissioned two large artworks in advance from Ellsworth Kelly and Richard Serra and asked Ando to work with the two artists *as* he designed the building. Ando has even commented on the difficulty of interacting with "such uncompromising artists" and the changes to his design that resulted. [\[21\]](#)

The Pulitzer's clean geometry combined with Ando's signature use of natural light and water invites a contemplative attitude.



The long main gallery opens at one end onto a descending stairway that leads to the lower level, thus creating a two story end wall, lighted naturally from above. The work you see on the end wall is the 28 foot high commission for the museum by Ellsworth Kelly, called *Blue Black*. The most striking aspect of this two-story space is the way the illumination varies with the time of day, sending a strip of light down the side wall and across the floor in front of Kelly's work.



For the viewer, the space is not just a neutral container but thanks to its dimensions and the effect of the changing length of the strip of light, it generates an unusually integrated experience, a combined work of art and architecture. A purist might be offended by this interplay, feeling that Ando has interfered with the integrity of Kelly's work. Yet, not only has Kelly praised Ando's design, he even got Ando to change the height of the doorways on the right side of the wall to more closely echo the proportions of his work. With the Pulitzer, Ando has succeeded in making a strong architectural statement that gracefully serves the art within.[\[22\]](#)

Museum of Modern Art, New York (2004) The Museum of Modern Art, by Yoshio Taniguchi is in one sense an addition and remodeling since it incorporates the Cesar Pelli tower, the restored façades of the 1939 Goodwin and Stone building and Philip Johnson's east wing, as well as an enlarged version of the much loved sculpture court. But despite these incorporations it is a totally new design that required relocating the entire collection during construction.



Taniguchi's daunting task was to design a building that not only related to the architecture that preceded it but, above all, would show the museum's unmatched but diverse collection to good advantage. Stylistically, the design looks back to modernism, a move appropriate to the museum's previous architecture and its core

collection, but it does so in a building that aims, in Taniguchi's words, "to disappear," so that one is conscious primarily of the art.^[23] Apart from the enormous atrium, the most important architectural features of the interior are the cut-outs and windows that connect different parts of the museum, and visually connect the museum to the surrounding buildings. In addition, the higher ceilings and larger room dimensions allow the works more space and give the new MoMA a much airier feeling. Yet, my impression is that the people who are going to New York to see the new MoMA, unlike most visitors to Bilbao or Milwaukee, are going to see its famed collection more than the building.



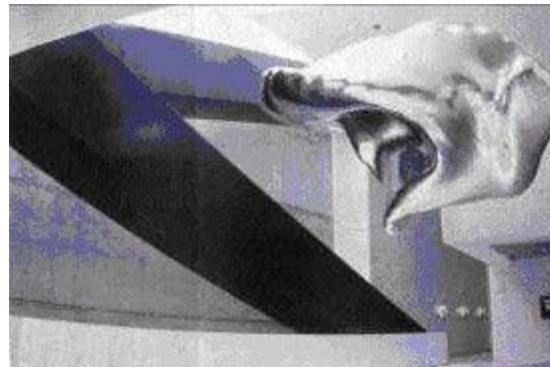
Taniguchi's willingness to pay tribute to his predecessors and to put the needs of the collection ahead of making a bold architectural statement of his own has not sat well with some architecture critics, who felt MoMA should have let a Koolhaas or a Libeskind put an adventurous piece of architecture in mid-town Manhattan. Whatever the virtues or faults of Taniguchi's design, the MoMA Board's selection of him underlined their confidence that a collection as powerful as MoMA's did not need a "Bilbao Effect."

5. New Museums as Exhibition Venues

Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati (2003) Although the site Zaha Hadid was handed for the Contemporary Arts Center is on a cramped corner in the heart of the city, Hadid has given Cincinnati a building that not only attracts the eye with its striking exterior, but draws the visitor up through its six floors via escalators set in an ingenious atrium.



The escalator/atrium opens directly onto the galleries at each floor, thereby eliminating doorways to many galleries and offering unusual viewing angles on the works. Since there is no permanent collection, Hadid designed flexible spaces of varied size, height, and lighting, specifically geared to contemporary installation and performance art. Curators not only "fill" these spaces with a choice of works, but invite artists to create site specific installations. Hadid's gallery rooms themselves are not wildly angled or curved and seldom call attention away from the works that fill them.



When I visited the museum during its first season, the spaces that open out from the escalator atrium generally seemed to work with the pieces that were installed there so that one was aware of the flow of the architectural space without feeling it was competing with the art.

Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (2006) The exterior of Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art makes a very different first impression from Hadid's Cincinnati building. The architects of the ICA, the firm of DS+R (Diller, Scofidio + Renfro), have not created a striking sculptural icon but what at first glance looks like a pair of stacked glass boxes, their primary drama being the heavily cantilevered fourth story that reaches out to the water's edge. Nor have the architects indulged in a grand multi-storey atrium but set the entrance modestly in a corner of the building.



Of course, the site at the edge of Boston harbor, with views over the water and parts of the city skyline, is dramatic in itself and they have taken excellent advantage of it. From the harbor side, under the third floor overhang, a kind of stadium seating rises up to the second level glass curtain wall, offering an outdoor venue for relaxing or watching performances, while inside the building, behind the glass wall and on a level with the top of the stadium seating, is a stage and beyond the stage, indoor seating that continues upward, thus creating a continuous line for the eye from outside to inside. The galleries are two very large column-less spaces that take up the top floor. In front of them, running the entire width of the building, is a wide corridor whose floor to ceiling glass wall overlooks the harbor and the city.



On the next level down is an ingenious mediateque, a canted, stair stepped room, filled with computer monitors, ending in a window twenty-one feet by ten feet that looks down into the water. From the outside this room looks like a giant projection booth or a piece of the building that has come loose at one end and fallen down.

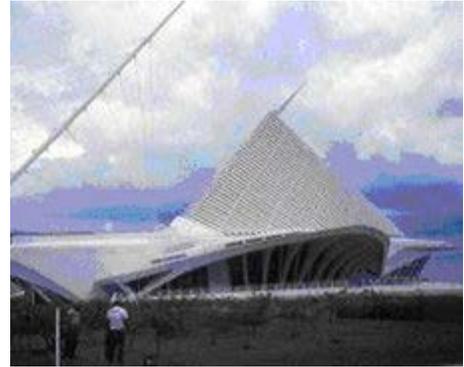
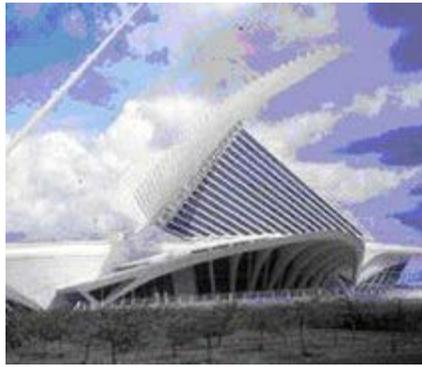


One architecture critic has called this room "a conceptual art piece in and of itself."^[24] This is not surprising since the DS+R firm had been primarily known for its conceptual and installation art works until it got the commission for the ICA. Perhaps it is because they have been successful as artists (they had a 2003 retrospective at the Whitney) that at the ICA they have been largely content to make a place for viewing and thinking about art. As one of the architects, Elizabeth Diller, remarked of their building, "Having spent our lives on the other side of the wall, making and feeling frustrated by spaces, we wanted the galleries to be neutral, reprogrammable, unscripted."^[25] But another partner in the firm, Richard Scofidio, put the architecture forward a good deal more, saying DS+R's intention was that the architecture neither compete nor "be a neutral backdrop . . . It had to be a creative partner."^[26] The third principal of the firm, Charles Renfro, has asserted the architecture's rights even more pointedly, claiming that DS+R imagined the museum as an active "optical instrument" that would disrupt the "touristic gaze."^[27] In fact, DS+R had originally intended to cover the vast expanse of the window wall overlooking the harbor with strips of lenticular film in order to create segmented and blurred views - the kind of thing they had done in some of their previous installation art. Had the architects had their way, they would have come close to turning the entire ICA into a giant piece of conceptual art, competing with the art it was to contain.^[28] Even so, Hal Foster asks:

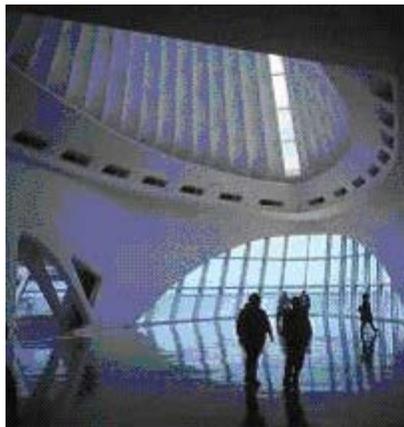
How will art fare in a museum that makes such an insistent claim on our visual interest? Although the galleries are given pride of place in the cantilevered pavilion, they might seem secondary to the other space-events of the building . . . Perhaps in this regard the ICA will represent a new moment in the art-architecture rapport: If it declines to compete with the art at the level of sculptural iconicity, as at the Guggenheim Bilbao . . ., it might vie with the art in the very register of the visual . . .^[29]

6. Museum Additions

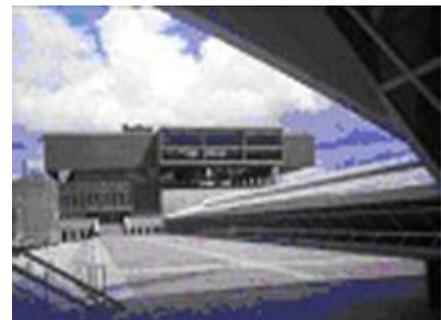
Milwaukee Art Museum (2001) Among the more dramatic additions that steal the show from an original building and its collection is Santiago Calatrava's brilliant entry wing to the Milwaukee Art Museum. Its outstanding external feature is a giant, wing-like brise-soleil made of metal louvers that open and close at regular intervals.



This great wing soars over a ninety-foot-high reception hall that is connected to the existing museum by a long promenade.



After all the excitement of the opening and closing wings, the soaring atrium, and the views out over Lake Michigan through curving glass, one needs something like an aesthetic decompression chamber in order to appreciate the paintings and sculptures in the galleries of the older modernist building by Eero Saarinen. One can at least say of Calatrava's addition that it is an entryway rather than a replacement for the Saarinen building. Moreover, the two galleries for temporary exhibitions that are part of the new building are standard, white-walled rectangular rooms. On the other hand, the very separation between Calatrava's great winged atrium and the rest of the museum means that it is possible to enjoy the most dramatic part of Calatrava's architecture without paying admission and walking the long corridor to the main museum.



Some might object that the trustees spent \$100 million dollars on a magnificent entry way that diverts attention from the collection by inviting people to visit the museum primarily as an architectural site.

Hamilton Building, Denver Art Museum (2006) The glowing titanium jumble of

angles that is Daniel Libeskind's new building at the Denver Art Museum has certainly lived up to its purpose of putting Denver on the cultural and architectural map.

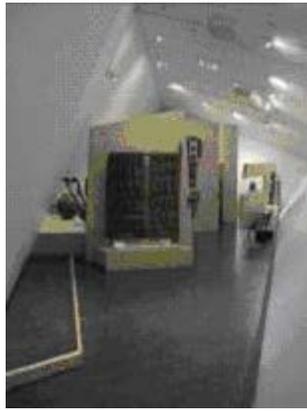


Technically an addition, the building is connected to the existing museum by a long second floor bridge that spans a busy street so that it is almost an independent entity. As an interesting piece of cubistic sculpture, Libeskind's work enlivens the south end of downtown Denver and plays well with its neighbors, Gina Ponti's castle like main building, and Michael Graves' colorful, postmodern Denver Public Library across the street. But what it does to the art within is another matter. Libeskind is proud of the fact that there are hardly any vertical or horizontal lines on the outside of his building, but he has unfortunately followed the same logic on the inside so that almost every wall leans - sometimes vertiginously - outward or inward with many rooms in odd, trapezoidal shapes, sometimes narrowing to a point in the corners. [\[30\]](#)



As a result, exhibition designers and curators have faced a tremendous challenge.

Occasionally, a funky piece of contemporary sculpture or a media installation seems to like this crazy quilt environment that never stops grabbing for attention, but more conventional works, especially paintings, are either overwhelmed or else one is distracted by the braces that are used to hold them vertical. Moreover, there are several areas where large expanses of wall slope so acutely that they have simply been left disconcertingly blank.

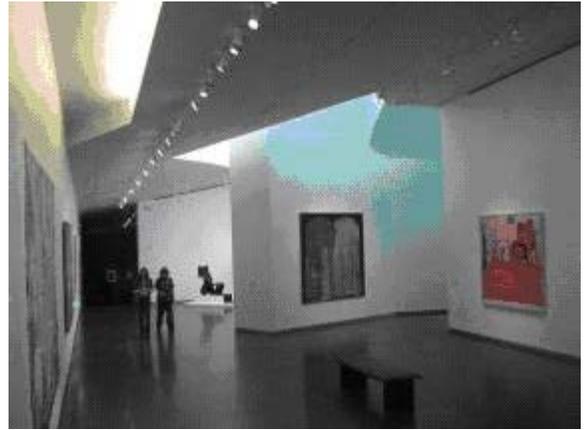
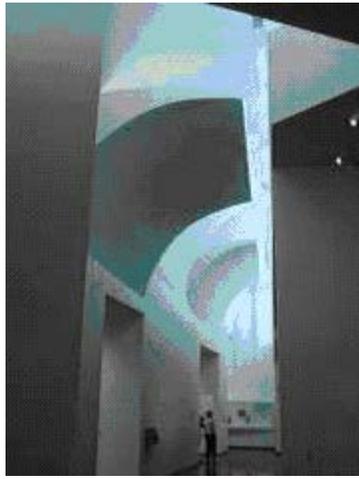


When one adds in the two-by-fours that have had to be installed on the floor around several of the more severely inward slanting walls to keep people from bumping their heads, one can't help feeling that this is a design that is too self-centered to consider the needs of either the art or the art public.

Bloch Building, Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City (2007) Steven Holl's addition to the classical Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City takes the opposite formal approach to Libeskind at Denver, offering five interconnected, flat roofed rectangular buildings, half buried in the hillside.



Their cladding of vertical etched-glass panels at first dismayed some local residents who complained that by day the buildings look like storage sheds or giant shipping containers, although some of the criticism quieted down once the museum opened and the hollow glass walls emitted a warm glow at night. The first and largest building has, by comparison with Milwaukee, a modest fifty-four foot high atrium, punctuated by angled walls and ramps. The bulk of the addition, and its most interesting part, is largely underground with the opaque glass boxes above providing diffused light that slips down hand troweled walls that curve up to draw it in.



This sequence of half-buried galleries forms what Le Corbusier called an "architectural promenade," but it is also an "art promenade" since each gallery has a different height, shape and size and provides spaces that complement the kinds of works the curators have chosen for them—photography, African art, and contemporary art.



The stroll through the galleries is broken at one point for the Noguchi Court where the visitor rises to ground level and a window wall looks out over the museum's twenty-two acre sculpture park. From this spot one may exit to the park or go on to the galleries devoted to temporary exhibitions. Holl has clearly given a great deal of thought to the sequential experience of the architecture, but at the same time found a way to make the gallery spaces friendly to the art they contain. He is critical of the tendency to make "a hybrid of art and architecture" by turning buildings into giant sculptures: "To the extent that architecture is connected to the city, to the landscape, to urban issues, it is a stronger art than if it becomes an . . . object . . . that sits in the city."[\[31\]](#)

7. Some Lessons from Recent Art Museum Designs

What can we conclude from these case studies of the tension between architecture and art? One lesson is that no matter how radical or even outlandish a museum design may appear on the outside, the real test is whether the spaces within are appropriate to the particular kinds of works the building will shelter. Here, a certain idea of "integrity" in architecture, the principle that the outside and inside of a building should faithfully reflect each other, may actually lead to worse results for art, as it has in the case of Denver, whereas at Bilbao, the dissimilarity in shape between Gehry's curving titanium panels on the outside and the several of the galleries within serves the art much better. A second lesson is that there is no reason to complain if a museum with a modest collection or exhibition schedule, like

Cincinnati's Center for Contemporary Art, decides to go for a dramatic building that is more memorable than its contents. Surely, the principle that museum architecture should be appropriate to the art it contains does not mean that a modest collection or exhibition schedule requires modest architecture. The third, and most important lesson, is that curators and visitors justifiably complain when galleries are so high, or their walls so oddly angled, or the natural light so intense, that it is difficult to attend to the art. Yet, in the words of the architect, Renzo Piano, whose Beyeler Foundation Museum (1997) has been praised for smoothly integrating architecture and art, "You can't just build neutral white spaces. They kill works of art just as much as hyperactive spaces that make the building a piece of self-indulgence."[\[32\]](#) Taking Piano's comment on the unsuitability of "neutral white spaces" a step farther, we can say that there is probably no such thing as a "neutral" space. The windowless rectangular rooms with twelve foot ceilings and white walls of many museums may only seem "neutral" because we are so familiar with them.[\[33\]](#) On the other hand, the search for ever more dramatically curved or angled spaces with expansive glazing, typical of some recent museum designs, may lead to what Piano called "self-indulgence."

When some architects claim that they are deliberately designing oddly shaped spaces to challenge artists, it may be that one "myth" (namely, that the architect must design a museum that adjusts to the art) is in danger of being replaced by another "myth" (that the artist must create works that adjust to the museum). It is easy to see why this new myth would appeal to architects who think of their buildings as large-scale sculptures or conceptual art pieces. Some architects speak of "partnership" with artists rather than "challenge," but in practice it may amount to the same thing. The architect wants to design impressive spaces that match her or his artistic vision and it is left to the artists or curators to figure out how to use the spaces. Genuine partnership would involve actually working together with artists and curators, and the architect's willingness to modify the design accordingly. The romantic idea of the sovereignty of the artist does not translate well into architecture.[\[34\]](#)

8. Architecture vs. Art and the Philosophy of Architecture: Function

I want to close by setting the architecture vs. art issue in the context of two topics in the philosophy of architecture. The first concerns the place of architecture within the fine arts. In recent philosophical discussions of architecture few have denied that architecture is an artform, although several philosophers have pointed out anomalies that arise when we apply to buildings notions like "work of art" or "aesthetic contemplation."[\[35\]](#) The primary source of these anomalies is the fact that whereas other artforms *may* occasionally involve practical aims or be employed for some purpose beyond aesthetic appreciation, most works of architecture are made to serve some function (with follies as perhaps a borderline case). It is significant that one of the first writers to articulate the modern system of the Fine Arts, the Abbé Batteux, placed architecture in a special category he called "mixed arts" that combine the pleasure of fine arts with the utility of the mechanical arts.[\[36\]](#) Subsequent theorists of the fine arts dropped Batteux's category of mixed arts, and although function has often been viewed as differentiating architecture from the other fine arts, both the role of function in architecture and architecture's relation to the other fine arts have remained problematic. [\[37\]](#)

The relationship between architecture and other arts has become especially complex over the last few decades thanks to an enormous amount of "crossover" activity between architecture and art. Many artists make quasi-architectural works (Richard Serra, Dan Graham) and some even seek architectural commissions, whereas many architects produce artworks for exhibition (Gehry, Calatrava, DS+R) or engage in joint ventures with artists (Steven Holl's and Vitto Acconci's 1993 *Storefront for Art and Architecture*).[\[38\]](#) But no matter which of the other fine arts is taken as a model for understanding architecture or whether one embraces the tradition that views architecture as the sum of all the visual arts and crafts, the issue that always keeps intruding itself is the role of function. Innumerable architectural theorists and

philosophers from Kant to Scruton and Sparshott have found function to be essential to defining architecture in contrast to the other fine arts. But there is an equally distinguished group of philosophers and theorists, among them Schopenhauer, Ruskin, and Langer who have viewed function as largely irrelevant to architecture as an artform.

Before pursuing the implications of this long-standing division over the place of function in architecture, we need to make some brief comments on the term 'function.' Although "function" has been a central concept in architectural writing since the early twentieth century, earlier writers, like Batteux, spoke of "utility" or "convenience" (Vitruvius). "Utility, "of course, not only has harsher, more "mechanical" connotation than "function," but in normal usage implies a narrower, means-end relationship, whereas "function" suggests a role something plays within a larger system, hence its use in mathematics, biology, and anthropology. In the nineteenth century, a biological notion of 'function' was used by architecture writers to express the way the parts of a building were organically related to each other, each structural member having a certain function within the whole. Adrian Forty has argued that another form of the biological metaphor, the romantic idea of "organic form," lay behind Louis Sullivan's "form follows function," so that his famous phrase did not mean that form is subordinate to utility but that form grows out of an inner necessity. These broader meanings of 'function' allow us to speak of a work of architecture's "symbolic function," "spiritual function," or even its "aesthetic function" or "artistic function."^[39] Of course, none of this has prevented people from also using 'function' as a synonym for 'utility,' or identifying a doctrinaire "functionalism" that would supposedly have architectural form totally determined by utilitarian purposes.^[40] I see little gain in trying to clear up these ambiguities by offering a stipulative definition, but will use 'function' with appropriate modifiers where necessary. For example, if we return to the division within both architectural theory and philosophy over the place of function, one could say that the difference between the two camps is not so much over whether function should be part of the definition of architecture as a fine art, but over the relative importance of two kinds of function: one side emphasizing practical function, the other side emphasizing symbolic or aesthetic function.

The disagreement over the importance of practical function in defining architecture has typically taken the form of an effort to distinguish between "architecture" proper and mere "building."^[41] Perhaps the most often cited formulation of this idea has been the declaration of the architecture historian, Nicholas Pevsner: "A bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is architecture. . . . The term architecture applies only to buildings designed with a view to aesthetic appeal."^[42] The typical bicycle shed, one might say, only serves a practical function; Lincoln Cathedral may serve a function, but thanks to its forms and handling of space it is a work of art and only as such deserving of the name architecture. No doubt, there are other criteria that could be invoked in making the comparison of building and architecture, such as monumentality or symbolism. But what is crucial for our purposes is that if one defines architecture in such a way that only formal (shape, space, light) and expressive (style, symbolism) considerations are essential, there would be no basis in principle to criticize art museum designs that interfere with our appreciation of art. On the contrary, the architects of such museum designs, like any other artists, should be commended for following their artistic vision wherever it leads.^[43]

A major problem with the architecture vs. building polarity is that architecture and building are parts of a continuum rather than mutually exclusive categories. Lincoln Cathedral may be considered architecture primarily because its artistic properties push it to the architecture end of the spectrum, but as a church it remains a functional building. Conversely, the lowliest bicycle shed constructed primarily to serve a utilitarian function usually possesses some minimal artistic properties. In other words, all buildings have both functional and aesthetic properties, and although some building may be classified as architecture when their aesthetic properties become sufficiently notable, they do not thereby cease to be functional buildings. Obviously, architecture critics will visit an art museum with the intention of

focusing on its architectural features, but to the extent such critics ignore the way the architecture serves the art, they miss an essential aspect of the architecture itself.

Batteux's instinct was correct in classifying architecture as a "mixed art," one whose appreciation requires us to consider how well it serves its practical purposes. Practical function and the possession of artistic properties are conjointly necessary conditions of something being a work of architecture.[44] And if function as well as artistry is a necessary condition of something being architecture, then at least two other things follow. First, the architect's freedom as an artist is indeed constrained so that "ideally form and function should *complement* each other."[\[45\]](#) Second, the question of how well function is served becomes a legitimate *aesthetic* issue so that our aesthetic appreciation of architecture involves among other things the "fit" between form and function.[\[46\]](#) Of course, given the multiple functions of today's art museums, enabling the thoughtful display of art works is only one of several uses an architect must address. Yet, if we are to call something an art museum, surely whatever proportion of a museum building is given over to the display of art, that part should be designed in a way that allows viewers to concentrate their attention on the works of art. Accordingly, however awe-inspiring the external form of an art museum, and however exciting its reception and other spaces, it will not be fully satisfying aesthetically if it does not offer a supportive environment for the engaged appreciation of art.

Obviously, to claim that practical function is relevant to our aesthetic response to architecture assumes a different account of aesthetic experience from the traditional idea of "disinterested contemplation," since the satisfaction of practical function is clearly an "interest." This is not the place to develop such an alternative view, but we do need to say something more about the particular place of practical function in our aesthetic response to architecture. One way to get a more specific idea of the aesthetic role of function in architecture is to look at the typical features of our experience of the architecture of an art museum. That experience has two major characteristics: it is multi-dimensional and it is temporal. Architecture's many dimensions include, at the least, our experience of shape, surface, space, light, ornament, relation to site, historical references, etc. The temporality of our experience of architecture comes from the fact that a building is typically located on a specific site and has an interior that we must move through in order to appreciate it.

Normally, we first see an art museum from the outside, noting its relation to its physical context, especially other buildings, and taking in its size, shape, and surface textures. At the same time we are likely to begin reflecting on its style and to develop a feeling for its character - sober, playful, looming, puzzling, etc. When we enter the building, our experience draws on all our senses, vision, sound, smell, tactility and a feeling for the building's atmosphere created by the interaction of space, light, surfaces, lines, colors. The museum's reception area, which is often a large atrium, sets the stage for a sequence of further bodily experiences of space, light, etc. as we move through halls, past areas for auxiliary activities (shops, restaurants, library, theater), and perhaps pause to look out on a courtyard or a vista across a street or lawn.[\[47\]](#) The galleries for art may have varied shapes, sizes, surfaces, lighting and sound qualities and be connected to each other in a variety of ways: sequentially or by corridors, or by a central atrium. Our experience of moving through them and stopping before works of art includes moments of greater and lesser awareness of the architecture itself. Sometimes we are so captivated by an artwork that we forget the architectural setting completely; at other times we are aware of the architecture as interacting supportively or intrusively with the artworks. After a time, we may begin to feel sensory overload or simply become tired or need to find a restroom, and so discover whether the building has been designed to let us easily take care of these needs. Finally, we must find an exit, often returning to the reception area by which we entered, and if the building is considerably designed, its expansive and resonant spaces will provide a needed moment of transition back to the outer world.

Four things stand out from this description of a typical experience of art museum architecture: 1) our experience of the artworks in their gallery setting is usually only one part of our art museum experience, 2) our experience of art works in the museum is a combined architecture + art experience, 3) the combined architecture + art experience comes as part of a temporal sequence, and 4) the architecture + art experience is typically the climactic ingredient in our total aesthetic experience of the museum's architecture. When I first approached Libeskind's new building for the Denver Art Museum, for example, I found its jumble of angles and titanium cladding truly exciting and my enthusiasm continued as I entered and began to ascend the stairs of its great atrium, enjoying the play of light and angles as I went, but my enthusiasm gradually drained away as I walked through gallery after gallery whose apparently arbitrary shapes and steeply angled walls constantly intruded on my attempt to focus on the art. Instead of an architecture + art experience, it was too often an architecture vs. art experience. By the time I left, my overall impression of the museum was one of disappointment and as I walked away and looked back, recalling my initial excitement and, still fascinated by the museum's striking shapes and glittering surfaces, I felt the kind of let down one feels on finishing a novel that starts off brilliantly but soon becomes self-conscious and overwrought.

To insist that one of an architectural work's aesthetic properties is serving its purposes well obviously does not mean that art museum designs cannot be exciting works of art in their own right.^[48] Glenn Lowery, the Director of New York's MoMA, offers a homey analogy: one can drink a great wine out of a plastic glass or a crystal goblet, but "it's going to taste infinitely better in the crystal goblet."^[49] But Lowery's analogy misses the crucial issue we have been addressing: whether the design of the galleries for art distracts us from the art. No one is arguing that art would be better served by the architectural equivalent of a plastic glass. A more exact analogy would be between drinking a fine wine from a normal crystal wine goblet and drinking wine from an art glass goblet with a twisted stem, a thick, multicolored body, and an undulating lip. Such works of art glass - I own a pair - are delightful pieces to look at and fun to drink out of for some special occasion. But I would not serve a fine wine in them that I wanted someone to savor - the color of the art glass would distort the wine's color, its shape would interfere with catching the aroma, and the wavy rim would intrude on the moment of tasting. If I really want to focus on a wine—on its color, its aroma, its taste—I don't want either a plastic glass or a piece of art glass but a clear crystal glass shaped to let the wine best reveal its qualities.

When Gehry rejects the idea that a museum design should be "deferential and . . . not compete with the art," I could agree if he is referring to the exterior or the atrium or the restaurants and shops, etc., but I cannot believe that the galleries for art should "compete" with the art rather than defer to it. This does not mean, as Piano has said, that galleries need to be traditional boxes or "white cubes," but it does mean that whatever the shape, height, amount of light, etc. these must be such that the viewer is given room for engagement with the art, something that architects like Holl and Ando have achieved.^[50] Here, another analogy may be useful, this time with a building type that serves a function similar to that of the art museum, the concert hall. There are some magnificent new ones, such as Gehry's own Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles. Like the Bilbao Guggenheim, the Disney Hall has an extravagantly curvaceous exterior and an equally stunning interior that was worked out with acoustical engineers to maximally support the sound of the orchestra. If the acoustics of Disney Hall were mediocre, we might still call the building beautiful, or an excellent piece of architectural sculpture, but not a good example of the architectural building type, concert hall.^[51] Similarly, Libeskind's Denver building could be called a good example of architectural sculpture, or even good architecture-as-urban-intervention, but not a good instance of the architectural building type, art museum.

9. Architecture vs. Art and the Philosophy of Architecture: Symbolism

Yet, no sooner have I started to follow this sensible train of thought, than I am given

pause by the reality of my responses to some of the more radical contemporary designs. Does the ideal of a perfect marriage of form and function, for example, mean that Ando's calm Pulitzer or Taniguchi's bland MoMA trump Calatrava's delightful Milwaukee entryway or Gehry's exhilarating Guggenheim Bilbao? Or to sharpen the issue with an example from another domain and era, consider the Pantheon in Rome, an architectural wonder down through the ages for anyone who has stood in its interior. Suppose we were to uncover a letter of protest from some ancient Board of the Roman Priesthood, complaining that the Pantheon ill served its cultic purpose? Could we really wish the architects had compromised their vision? Of course, one reason we appreciate the Pantheon in the way we do is that it long ago ceased to serve its original function and - its current use as a Christian church notwithstanding - we look at it today in purely aesthetic terms. Perhaps some architects who think of themselves as sculptors or conceptual artists are hoping for this kind of future for their works. If a design is good enough it may outlast any of its possible uses and remain only an iconic monument, a place of architectural pilgrimage, part of the great series of art works we preserve in our histories of architecture.

Our habit of admiring and preserving great architectural works for their artistry calls to mind a more general function served by architectural works in addition to the specific uses for which they were initially designed, a function that relates directly to the attempt of many contemporary architects to create spectacular icons: symbolism. The issue of symbolism brings us to the second topic in contemporary philosophy of architecture that I want to connect with the architecture vs. art issue, the question of meaning or expression in architecture. Obviously, this is not the place to tackle the general issue of how buildings "mean" or "express," but we cannot do justice to the architecture vs. art problem without a brief consideration of what sorts of messages a spectacular and costly art museum might be expressing.^[52]

But in turning to the topic of architectural symbolism and expression, we will not really be leaving behind the division of philosophical opinion over the role of function in architecture or even the architecture vs. building topos, but will engage these issues from a new angle. We can see this from the tantalizingly gnostic statements of Wittgenstein on architecture, who believed that it "immortalizes and glorifies" and that there can "be no architecture where there is nothing to glorify."^[53] Moreover, Wittgenstein himself designed a fine house in the modern style for his sister but was disappointed in it because he felt it lacked what he called "*primordial* life, wild life."^[54] For just as "every purposive movement of the human body" is not "*a gesture*," so "every functional building" is not "architecture."^[55] Here, Wittgenstein raises the architecture vs building topos to a higher level, moving beyond Pevsner's "aesthetic appeal" to a realm of transcendence and mystery akin to what Tom Leddy has spoken of as the ecstatic or Dionysian experience of architecture.^[56] Similarly, Andrew Ballantyne has translated the building vs architecture continuum into one between "ordinary" and "visionary" architecture, for which he uses the metaphors of the "nest" and the "pillar of fire."

At one end of the scale we have the nest, as a modest and comforting place to snuggle down and feel at home; at the other we have the extravagant pyre which consumes vast resources, and fills us with awe. This is inspirational architecture which does not sustain us, but consumes whatever we can feed it. We admire it and stand back in amazement . . . ^[57]

Ordinary buildings, "nests" of all kinds, are designed by ordinary architects, people who see themselves as problem-solving professionals working with their clients to achieve a common goal of integrating functional and aesthetic values. Visionary buildings are designed by architects who see themselves as free artists, immune to the complaints of people concerned about mere worldly needs. Today, Ballantyne points out, this kind of architect works for the super rich or for cultural institutions whose boards are made up of them and it is these cultural institutions that are offering the most spectacular displays of "avant-garde extravagance" in

architecture.[58]

If Ballantyne is right, we need to ask, What ideas and feelings are expressed by the stunning presence of an extravagant museum like the Guggenheim Bilbao? I am not thinking here of the sorts of resemblance it conjures - exploded flower, artichoke, boat, fish, etc. I am thinking rather of the meanings arising from the glittering contrast between this monumental building and the aging industrial city it is in part meant to revive. These meanings are suggestive rather than precise and, of course, depend on various sorts of knowledge, for example, that this is an art museum whose sculptural form announces the nature and value of what it contains, and that it was commissioned as part of a plan for urban renewal. It is perhaps no accident that the museum's audio guide compares the atrium to the great Gothic cathedrals. As they bore witness to the supreme value of religion in the Middle Ages (and people's willingness to spend huge sums of money and effort on religious architecture), so a spectacular piece of art museum architecture may express, among other things, the high value a community places on art, and a daring museum design may further suggest a community open to innovation and risk. (Of course, seen in the context of a general critique of the "society of spectacle" or of American cultural imperialism, the gleam of the Bilbao Guggenheim may seem to embody darker messages.)^[59] As for architectural "self-indulgence," if there is any at work in Gehry's design, it has paid off handsomely for Bilbao, and the museum's iconic potency could be seen as more than compensating for the functional shortcomings of a few of its galleries. For much of the outside world, the Guggenheim Bilbao has become identified with the city itself, representing the civic resurrection of a decaying industrial center once shunned by tourists because of Basque terrorism. Now the tourists come to see the great work of architectural art that is Gehry's museum and if they are able to tear their gaze away from its dramatic curves and soaring spaces long enough to encounter some art, so much the better.

If we accept the idea of a symbolic role for spectacular and extravagant art museums like the Guggenheim Bilbao, recognizing that their "wildness" may express any number of things—wealth, power, love of art, Dionysian creativity—what happens to our previous attempt to think through the place of function in museum architecture? Mundane as it sounds amid all the talk of a "primordial," "wild," "visionary," or "extravagant" architecture, we are still faced with a continuum between architecture and building rather than a pair of mutually exclusive categories. Of course, we all want a little wildness in our lives and our architecture—some want a lot—but then there are the bills to be paid, dinner to be cooked and, in the museum, art works to be cared for, displayed, and experienced. If Gehry's Bilbao extravaganza had no galleries that seemed appropriate to their art, if, like Libeskind's Denver addition, it constantly intruded on one's experience of the art, would that make a difference, and how much of a difference? Despite the Denver addition's wonderfully appealing "wild" exterior, whose iconic presence is unquestionably good for the city, the lack of "fit" between form and function is too great not to affect many people's overall aesthetic response.^[60] But perhaps the "wild" side of Libeskind's Denver design was simply not wild enough, i.e. its symbolic/spiritual expression is not strong enough to compensate for its functional weaknesses. If we look at public response to Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin, by contrast, where the jagged plan and angled windows are expressive of relationships and ideas connected to the Holocaust, the difficulties curators have had in installing exhibitions have not led to a negative reaction to the museum. In Berlin, Libeskind had a set of profound historical and spiritual concerns to embody and his Jewish Museum may be the kind of thing Wittgenstein had in mind in speaking of architecture as "*primordial* life, wild life." In Denver, on the other hand, the context has minimal historical and spiritual resonance, since the local demand was for a spectacular tourist draw through an iconic presence in the downtown.

Despite the attention given to spectacular museums like Gehry's Guggenheim, Libeskind's Denver addition, or Calatrava's Milwaukee entry, such dramatic works are hardly the norm for recent art museums. Most museums fall somewhere between the visionary and the ordinary, which is probably a good thing. Even the few

examples we have considered show that the relationship between contemporary museum architecture and the art it contains is remarkably varied. No doubt, those of us who still think of an art museum as primarily a place for encountering art are likely to prefer museums that offer a setting conducive to reflection and insight rather than astonishment and spectacle. But like Ando's Pulitzer Foundation or Hadid's Center for Contemporary Art, such museums can not only serve the art they contain but can also be outstanding examples of architectural art. And to the extent that they successfully combine architecture *as* art and architecture *for* art, such museums also have their expressive dimension, if a less spectacular one than Bilbao, Denver, or Milwaukee. By giving us exciting but non-intrusive spaces for art, they express the belief that art museum architecture is an art form that is at its best when it simultaneously supports reflective engagement with its own artistry and with the art it contains.

Endnotes

[1] This essay is an expanded version of papers given at the Pacific Division of the American Society for Aesthetics at Asilomar, California in 2005 and at the Annual meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics at Providence, Rhode Island in 2006. I am grateful for helpful comments by David Goldblatt at Asilomar and Gary Iseminger at Providence.

[2] Unless otherwise noted, all photos and drawings are by the author. Drawings of interiors were used in two cases where photography was not permitted. Captions have been omitted since images are located adjacent to relevant parts of the text.

[3] Nicolai Ouroussoff, *New York Times*, October 13, 2005. It should be noted that neither Ouroussoff nor I think the De Young design deserves the art it contains.

[4] Hal Foster, *Design and Crime: and Other Diatribes* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 37.

[5] I am grateful to David Goldblatt for first pointing out the importance of this distinction. Among the more thoughtful explorations besides that of Foster is Hans Belting's essay, "Place of Reflection or Place of Sensation?," in *The Discursive Museum*, ed. Peter Noever (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2001), pp. 72-82, and Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani, "Insight versus Entertainment: Untimely Meditations on the Architecture of Twentieth-century Art Museums," in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon Macdonald (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 245-262.

[6] See the essay by Donald Preziosi, "Art History and Museology: Rendering the Visible Legible," in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, pp. 51-63, and in the same volume the essays by Jeffrey Abt, "The Origins of the Public Museum," pp. 115-134, and Tony Bennett "Civic Seeing: Museums and the Organization of Vision," pp. 263-281. On the mixture of motives involved in the creation of a national art museum in the Louvre, see my *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 180-186 and Andrew McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre: Art, Politics, and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[7] Michaela Giebelhausen points to the grand stair and domed rotunda of the Museo Pio-Clementino (1773-80) as an early inspiration for this trend. "Museum Architecture: A Brief History," in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, pp. 224-25.

[8] Giebelhausen, "Museum Architecture," pp. 226-27.

[9] Schinkel refused to give ground, saying that his museum's architecture was completely appropriate to the art it would contain. Douglas Crimp has argued that Schinkel's concern was not to privilege either art or architecture, but to demonstrate "how the antithesis could be transcended in a higher unity." Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), p.300.

[10] Walter Muir Whitehall, *Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: A Centennial History, Vol. I*

(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 183, 201.

[11] For a spirited defense of the Guggenheim as Wright intended it, see Victoria Newhouse, *Towards a New Museum* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2006), pp. 162-168. Of course, there were other museum designs in this period that had innovative and striking architecture without overwhelming or interfering with their art, such as Louis Kahn's Yale Art Museum (1953) and his later Kimball Art Museum in Ft. Worth (1972).]

[12] Newhouse, *Towards a New Museum*, pp. 193-198.

[13] *Towards a New Museum*, pp.272-278.

[14] Douglas Davis, "The Museum of the Third Kind," *Art in America*, 93, 6, (2005), 75-83; ref. on 75-76.

[15] Sullivan's images of the Guggenheim are available at www.bluffton.edu/~sullivanm. Unfortunately, nearly all images of the Guggenheim Bilbao available on the internet are of the exterior.

[16] The drawing in the text shows the enormous "Boat" or "Fish" Gallery as it looked prior to 2005, when the Arcelor steel company bought the naming rights to it by funding a permanent exhibition of seven monumental Serra pieces that are now more of a match for the 430 foot long space.

[17] Andrea Fraser, "Isn't this a Wonderful Place?" in *Learning from the Bilbao Guggenheim*, ed. Anna Maria Guasch and Joseba Zulaika (Reno, NV: University of Reno, Nevada, 2005) p. 37.

[18] Andrea Fraser, *Little Frank and his Carp*, DVD rt:6min. (2001). Shown in various locations including its use as part of the Spotlight Series at the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum of Washington University in St. Louis, June 2007.

[19] Gerhard Mack, *Art Museums Into the 21st Century* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1999), p. 23.

[20] Mack, *Art Museums Into the 21st Century*, p. 23.

[21] Tadao Ando, "The Result of an Intense Dialogue," in *Abstractions in Space: Tadao Ando, Ellsworth Kelly, Richard Serra*, ed. Lauri A. Stein (St. Louis: The Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts, 2001), pp. 9-11; ref.on p.10.

[22] For a discussion of the interrelationship of Ando's design with the Kelly and Serra pieces see William Curtis, "The Space Between," in *Abstractions in Space*, pp. 13-45.

[23] Robert Campbell, "What's Wrong with MoMA: Disappearing Architecture and a Sense of the Unreal," *Architectural Record*, 193, 1 (2005), pp. 67-69; ref. on 67.

[24] Sarah Amelar, "ICA, Massachusetts," *Architectural Record*, 195, 3 (2007), 108-115; ref. on 114.

[25] *Ibid.*

[26] Cited in Hal Foster, "Architecture-Eye," *Artforum International*, 45, 6 (2007), pp. 246-253; ref. on

249.

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 248.

[28] Amelar, "ICA, Massachusetts," p. 114.

[29] Foster, "Architecture-Eye," p. 249.

[30] Exceptions are the galleries for temporary exhibitions at the south end of the

museum.

[31] Cited in Philip Jodidio, *Architecture: Art* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2005) p. 205.

[32] Cited in *Art Museums Into the 21st Century*, ed. Gerald Mack (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1999), p.88.

[33] The classic discussion of this issue is Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: the Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

[34] The notion of artistic sovereignty can easily lead to the idea that the architect's integrity would be violated if he or she were to modify a design in response to the suggestions of a client. For an example of artists trying to influence building design in a way favorable to art and running up against the power of a star architect see Jo-Anne Berelowitz, "The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles: An Account of the Collaboration between Artists, Trustees and an Architect," in *Grasping the World: the Idea of the Museum*, ed. Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp.718-735. In addition to challenging artists to adjust to the architect's vision, many architects also want to challenge viewers and shape their experience. This ranges from the contemplative (Ando) to the jolting (Hadid, DS+R). See Ann Wilson Lloyd, "If the Museum Itself is an Artwork, What About the Art Inside?" *New York Times*, Jan. 25, 2004.

[35] Stephen Davies has taken the most restrictive position on the issue in "Is Architecture Art?" in *Philosophy and Architecture*, ed. Michael Mitias (Amsterdam: Rodolphi, 1994), pp. 31-47. At the opposite end of the spectrum is Tom Leddy, who defines architecture as an art of spiritual expression, capable of moving us deeply. See Tom Leddy, "Architecture as Art," in *Architecture and Civilization*, ed. Michael Mitias (Amsterdam: Rodolphi, 1999), pp. 25-42. Among those taking an intermediate position which recognizes architecture as an artform but also recognizes the cogency of Davies objections and the peculiarities which result from applying some of the standard aesthetic categories to architecture are T. J. Diffey, "Architecture, Art, and Works of Art," and David E. W. Fenner, "Pure Architecture," both in *Architecture and Civilization*, pp.1-23 and pp. 43-57 respectively. Robert Stecker comes closest to resolving the conceptual issue by a useful distinction between architecture as *artform* and architecture as *medium*. "Reflections on Architecture: Buildings as Environments, as Aesthetic Objects and as Artworks" in *Architecture and Civilization*, pp. 81-93.

[36] Charles Batteux, *Les beaux arts réduits á un meme principe* (Paris: Aux Amateurs de Livres, 1989).

[37] Although sculpture may seem the most obvious model for architecture as an artform in the light of the great sculptors of the past who were also architects (Michelangelo, Bernini) or the contemporary architects who are also practicing sculptors, one could follow DS+R and conceive of architecture as a form of conceptual art, or one could go back to Semper and Schelling each of whom in different ways likened architecture to music. Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) pp. 163-180. For Semper see Kenneth Frampton, "Bötticher, Semper and the Tectonic: Core Form and Art Form," in *What is Architecture?* ed. Andrew Ballantyne, (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 148. See also Hanno-Walter Kruft, *A History of Architectural Theory: From Vitruvius to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994), pp. 301-316.

[38] A richly illustrated volume cataloguing some of the many kinds of "crossovers" and collaborations is Philip Jodidio, *Architecture: Art* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2005).

[39] For an excellent discussion of the concept of function in aesthetics see the chapter, "Aesthetic Function," in Arnold Berleant, *Living in the Landscape: Toward an Aesthetics of Environment* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1997), pp. 85-96. Nelson Goodman speaks of buildings' "effective functioning as works of art" in Nelson Goodman & Catherine Z. Elgin, *Reconceptions in Philosophy and Other Arts*

and Sciences (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1988), p. 48.

[40] As Forty points out, "functionalism" so conceived was not the actual position of Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, or Le Corbusier, but an invention of critics of modernism who could seldom find anyone who actually held such extreme views apart from a former director of the Bauhaus, Hannes Meyer. Adrian Forty, *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), p. 187.

[41] Schopenhauer contrasted fine art architecture destined for aesthetic contemplation with "practical architecture," concerned with human purposes. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation, Vol. I* (New York: Dover, 1969), pp. 214-17, and Ruskin opened *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* with the assertion that it was "very necessary, in the outset . . . to distinguish carefully between Architecture and Building," arguing that what makes something architecture and one of the fine arts is precisely those parts of it that are unnecessary or useless. John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (New York: Dover, 1989), pp. 8-9.

[42] Nicolas Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1963) p. 15.

[43] The persistence of function may seem an obvious fact, but some theorists appear to want to forget it. Even Pevsner admits utility only grudgingly, insisting that "functional soundness" has not always been considered "indispensable for aesthetic enjoyment." Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture*, p. 17. Schopenhauer wrote that "the great merit of the architect consists in his achieving and attaining purely aesthetic ends, in spite of . . . other ends foreign to them." Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, p. 217. A practical indication of how widespread the dismissal of function is in writing about architecture is the way architecture journals typically show photographs of new buildings without any furnishings or people in them, as if showing them in use would somehow sully the formal integrity of the work.

[44] I am not proposing a formal definition of sufficient conditions. Besides the two conditions mentioned, there may be other necessary conditions for something being architecture.

[45] Gordon Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts: An introduction to Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 150. Similarly, Roger Scruton makes utility or function the first feature distinguishing architecture from the other arts and remarks that "The functional qualities of a building are of its essence, and qualify every task to which the architect addresses himself." *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979) p. 6.

[46] Alan Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2000) pp. 206-213. See also Arnold Berleant's comments on practical function and the aesthetics of architecture in *Living in the Landscape*, pp. 90-93.

[47] Obviously, museums vary enormously in their layout, so that one will not always find all the auxiliary enterprises grouped at the beginning, but may find them scattered among the galleries for art.

[48] Stecker, "Reflections on Architecture," *Architecture and Civilization*, p. 86.

[49] Suzanne Stephens, "Are Museums Suffering from Architectural Overload?" *Architectural Record*, 192, 1 (2004), pp. 89-91; ref. on 91.

[50] Naturally, this is a place where designing a building for a museum that lacks a permanent collection allows greater freedom to the architect.

[51] I am grateful to Gary Iseminger for first suggesting the idea of the concert hall analogy.

[52] The classic discussion of the "how" issue is Nelson Goodman's essay, "How

Buildings Mean" in *Reconceptions in Philosophy*, pp. 31-48.

[53] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 69e.

[54] Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 38e. The mention of the house for his sister occurs in the context of comments on Mendelssohn. "Within all great art there is a WILD animal: *tamed*. Not with Mendelssohn, for example. All great art has man's primitive drives as its groundbass. . . . In this sense Mendelssohn can be called a '*reproductive*' artist. - In the same sense: the house I built for Gretl is the product of a decidedly sensitive ear and good manners, an expression of great *understanding* (of a culture, etc.). But *primordial* life, wild life striving to erupt into the open - that is lacking." *Culture and Value*, pp. 37e-38e. It is interesting to place Wittgenstein's romantic view of architecture beside Heidegger's very different but equally romantic notion of "dwelling." See Andrew Ballantyne's comparison of Wittgenstein's hut above the Norwegian fjords with Heidegger's hut in the Black Forest in *What is Architecture?* pp. 15-21. Karsten Harries draws on Heidegger for his idea that architecture "calls us out of the everyday to another place, one a bit closer to the ideal." *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), p. 282.

[55] Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 42e.

[56] Leddy, "Architecture as Art," pp. 27-28.

[57] Andrew Ballantyne, "Commentary: The Nest and the Pillar of Fire," in *What is Architecture?* ed. Andrew Ballantyne (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 5-49; ref. on p. 15.

[58] *Ibid.*, p. 41.

[59] For a discussion of the extravagant museum as an expression of the "society of spectacle" see Foster's *Design and Crime*, pp.14-40. For those who know something of Kren's machinations in dealing with the Bilbao government, or are aware that Basque artists were initially shunned and that the museum is programmed from New York, the Guggenheim Bilbao may indeed symbolize something more like cultural imperialism. But those meanings do not arise from Gehry's architecture. (See Andrew Friedman's less charitable comment on the way Gehry's architecture expresses the violent process of Bilbao's transformation from a working industrial city into a tourist destination. Cited in Mimi Zeiger, *New Museums: Contemporary Museum Architecture Around the World* (New York: Rizzoli International, 2005), p. 9. The many ramifications of Kren's "franchising" program for the Guggenheim as it has played out in Bilbao are traced in several of the essays in the Guasch and Zulaika collection *Learning from Bilbao* cited in note 23, and in Joseba Zulaika's earlier study *Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa: Museums, Architecture, and City Renewal* (Reno, NV: University of Nevada at Reno, 2003).

[60] Among those who share my reaction to the Denver addition are Nichalai Ouroussoff, "A Razor-Sharp Profile Cuts Into a Mile-High Cityscape," *New York Times*, October 12, 2006, and David Littlejohn, "It Works Despite Libeskind's Best Efforts," *The Wall Street Journal*, Thurs. Feb. 15, 2007. Ouroussoff remarks that in a building with "tortured geometries generated purely by formal considerations - it is virtually impossible to enjoy the art." Littlejohn praises the heroic efforts of the curators, but laments "the apparently brutal indifference of Daniel Libeskind to the work of any artist but himself."

Larry Shiner

University of Illinois

Springfield, IL

LShiner1@aol.com



Published October 1, 2007