

# UNDERSTANDING THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MUSEUM TYPOLOGY THROUGH EXAMINATION OF ITS EVOLUTION AS SOCIAL MEDIATOR.

The undertaking of the “RIBA bat-house competition” required the applicant to understand and execute effectively two instructions. The primary task is stated as simply a need to house and protect the increasingly endangered bat population in the U.K. The second task requires the proposed projects to address the absence of social consciousness of bats within the community. If the first task is to protect the bats by direct means, what purpose then does raising awareness serve in aiding the protection of bats? It is through looking at the evolution of the museum as an existing architectural typology, that we can begin to understand the significance of this modern approach to conservation. Starting with the birth of the museum effectively in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is revealed the changing relationship society has had with the museum and therefore with its-self as well.



If the entire history of museum thus far can be summarized into three distinct typologies, the first museums in the world fall into the first of these which can be described as museums as mausoleum<sup>1</sup>. For example,

museums such as the Louvre in Paris, or the British Museum in London, or any of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Gopnik, To Sit or To Talk, Toronto, 2007

great museums from Chicago to New York all started as public exhibits of often private collections. The Louvre showcased what the Grand Armee of France could plunder from foreign nations, while the British Museum first collections exhibited some 71000 objects including dried plants, natural history specimens, and manuscripts, collected by Sir Hans Sloane<sup>2</sup>. These museums effectively engaged the public with historic objects from as far away as Egypt, Greece, Rome, Ancient and Far East. These worlds would have been entirely unknown to common society, with the museum suddenly being able to mediate this past in an intimate air of mystery and excitement. Being able to enter the past through the vantage of the museum, offered the ability for a personal interrogation of the past. The museum as mausoleum was an education to society in this way. By the end of the 1930's however, this type of museum was beginning to end, and a new face was beginning to emerge; the second typology of museum.



This new generation of museum appearing where that of the like of the MOMA in New York, where what was being offered was not as much a learning experience of the past but rather a lesson on the present<sup>3</sup>. In effect it offered the visitor a place to learn to become “modern”, a place

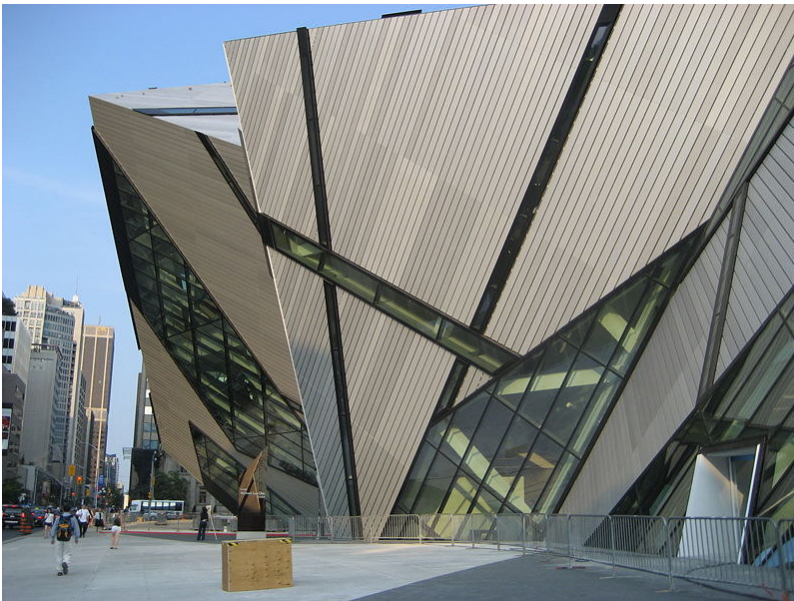
to be transformed, a place to re-fashion ones self. Adam Gopnik, an american cultural

---

<sup>2</sup> ^ [http://www.britishmuseum.org/the\\_museum/history/general\\_history.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/the_museum/history/general_history.aspx)

<sup>3</sup> Gopnik, To Sit or To Talk, Toronto, 2007

critic describes a memory he had working in a museum as a youth, that exemplifies this new museum as a tool to struggling with and understanding modern society. *A man used to come into the museum always in search of all of the Van Gogh painting and references, of which he was convinced that the greatest masterpiece was in fact never painted, that of the portrait of the central figure in Van Gogh's life, his brother Theo. And so he would absorb as much as he could about how this painting would be painted. He eventually painted it<sup>4</sup>.*



The last and most current type of museum is that of the likes of the new Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto or in fact many retro-fittings to historic museums. This new typology seems to present an image that is

no longer about the individual experience as in the first museum examined, or even the personal struggle, revealed in the second museum typology, instead it is considered a whole reflection of society itself. To the extent that Adam Gopnik describes its capacity to sustain itself as a metaphor of our greater self.<sup>5</sup> It is the beginning of the idea that the museum reflects the people as much as the people are influenced by the museum. But

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

instead of this notion of the museum as a higher form of education or enlightenment, often it seems and many fear, it is drained of its old functions and importance and instead replaced with what is no more intellectually stimulating than a mall. Instead of the illusion it presents as a metaphor of our larger life, it is the site of pleasures of the “gut or the pocket-book”<sup>6</sup>. We are folly to the whims of society.

In order to appreciate the significance of this new typology we must first look more intimately at the relationship with society offered by the museum. It can be said that the primary function of the museums of the first two centuries was to take ritual and social objects and place them in aesthetic contexts. This is to say, what was being done was removing objects that served a cultural purpose primarily and replaced in a setting such as a museum to be viewed in its singular and removed state (often as aesthetic object).<sup>7</sup> Inversely, now we are seeing that we are removing aesthetic objects out of their original context and placing them into new ritual and social contexts. This is exemplified by the movement known as minimalism, which began as a series of aesthetic experiments. Devoid of meaning or metaphor, it was an attempt to understand the relationship between the mute object and the observer.<sup>8</sup> What we see here is the development of meaning, where society provides the layering of meaning attached to the object. This is again exemplified by abstract-impressionist paintings which though often originally commissioned and painted for a specific client and given a certain meaning, as soon as the object has enter the public realm its meaning is no longer fixed and begins to chance.

---

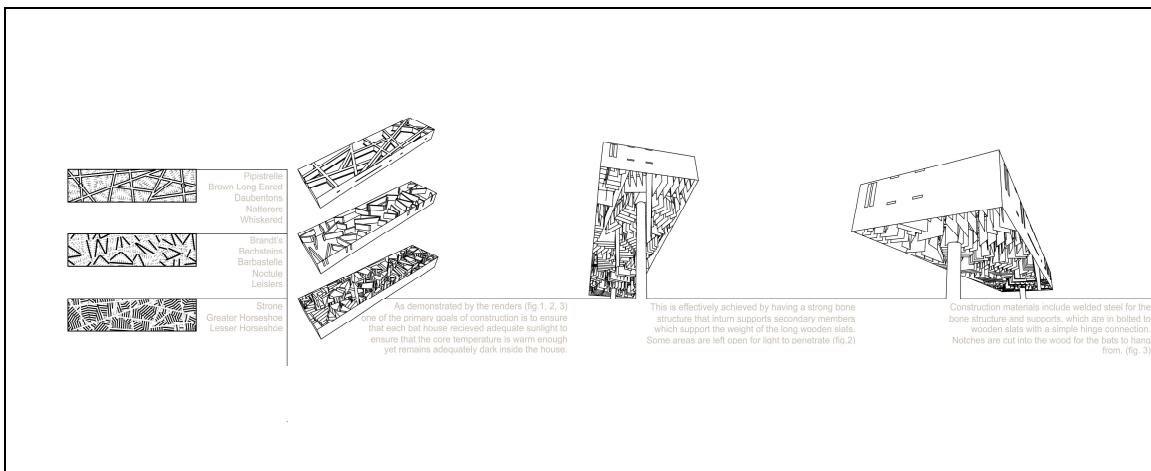
<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Danziger, Danny. Museum: Behind the Scenes at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York: Viking, 2007

Out of the aesthetic setting which it is born, we begin to put our own ritual and social context. These rituals can be seen everywhere from gallery openings through to the cafés and importantly gift-shops that seem often as the primary focus of museum goers. The layering of meaning enables society to re-appreciate art as that which belongs to us, opposed to art that we consider threatening and difficult.

Thus it can be argued, and is central to the RIBA bat house competition. If the first typology was concerned with the past, and the second with learning about the present, subtly this new typology of museum carries the weight of its culture. It is a way to form culture and to view culture. Metaphysically speaking, it is concerned with articulating human time. By viewing oneself in its context it enables the possibility to create a narrative.<sup>9</sup>



It follows thus that it is the role of the museum to make aware the place of the individual in its place and time. It is the goal of the bat house competition to follow this mode-of-conscience, by placing everyday objects that have no intrinsic human meaning unto

<sup>9</sup> Zimmerly, David. Contextual Studies of Material Culture. Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1978

themselves and introducing them to be absorbed into the everyday conscience of the community. Unlike the mausoleum museum typology that only shows the bat as a historic object that can be understood and controlled, or the museum as machine that only shows what we can learn, the modern museum typology puts engages the visitor with its culture. By understanding the fact we are directly connected and influencing that which is around us, the Bat House Competition attempts to direct this understanding to the bat species and the larger image of human relationship with the environment.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Danziger, Danny. Museum: Behind the Scenes at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York: Viking, 2007.

Gopnik, Adam. "To Sit or To Talk." *Eva Holtby Lecture*, Royal Ontario Museum. 13 July. 2007.

"The History of the British Museum."  
[http://www.britishmuseum.org/the\\_museum/history/general\\_history.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/the_museum/history/general_history.aspx)

Zimmerly, David. Contextual Studies of Material Culture. Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1978

## **IMAGE REFERENCE**

1. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Inside\\_MOMA\\_NY.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Inside_MOMA_NY.jpg)

2. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:BM%3B\\_RM7ANE%2C\\_Nimrud  
Palace\\_Reliefs\\_1\\_Northwest\\_Palace\\_of\\_Ashurnasirpal\\_II\\_%28883859\\_B.C%29\\_~\\_Full  
\\_Elevation\\_%26\\_Viewing\\_South.JPG](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:BM%3B_RM7ANE%2C_Nimrud_Palace_Reliefs_1_Northwest_Palace_of_Ashurnasirpal_II_%28883859_B.C%29_~_Full_Elevation_%26_Viewing_South.JPG)

3. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:ROM\\_Crystal.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:ROM_Crystal.jpg)

