

## the art museum of rémy zaugg

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perhaps all visual art needs to be seen in relation to space (where else can anything be seen?) but this relationship is integral to the reception of some art. such works of art require a specific kind of architectural context. this is true to the extent that an incidental part of their function as works of art is as indices of the success of that context. other kinds of works of art (music, films, books, applied art) are not necessarily made to be seen in relation to their architectural context, made to be seen in relation to space.

in the case of those works that should be seen in space, the experience of the work in the present is the primary experience. the experience of the work in the present; in situ, is the particular experience that these works can give that no other artwork (music, films, books, applied art) can.

a badly designed art museum will still suffice to show jewellery, costume, films and architectural models. of course there are some exceptions; a cinema that is open to the sun (for example) wouldn't work and would never be built. art museums however are often, even *usually* designed which are nearly as ill conceived for the exhibition of the objects they house. this is because the requirements of the work of art which needs to be seen in relation to space are not immediately obvious.

an interesting paradox of bad museum design is that it doesn't effect most art – it only effects art that needs to be seen in context. the art that can most particularly benefit from exhibition in the museum, and by the exhibition of which the museum and its audience can most benefit; that is the only art that enables the museum to do what it **alone** can do for a broad public, is most damaged by bad museum design. art that doesn't engage with its spatial context, isn't damaged by being exhibited in a badly designed space. what this often means in practice is that mediocre art looks mediocre, and good art looks mediocre.

if it is the case that a certain kind of art is made to be seen in relation to its architectural context then shouldn't this kind of work be able to function in all kinds of architectural settings? isn't it a weakness that it requires a certain kind of architecture to function? shouldn't (in fact) the art of the future, or at least the most 'advanced' art function best in the most 'advanced' architecture, the architecture of the future?

artists make art in relation to how things are now. the experience of art in the studio or dwelling is no less important than that of art in the museum. buildings are rectangular now. walls are mostly white now. art is made in relation to and as part of the real and what is real is real *now*.

so, the architecture of the museum must perform the special function of housing the art that is made to be perceived in it. further this architecture must relate to the architecture that the work is made in or conceived by the artist as being seen in. the architecture that exists now.

what architecture is best suited to this task ?

is the answer just architecture that's related to the industrial architecture (or domestic spaces) where most artists have their studios? or is it possible to derive general principles from the idea of the relationship, the encounter, between the upright standing, freely walking visitor to the museum and the works within it?

the swiss artist rémy zaugg has attempted this in his book *das kunstmuseum das ich mir erträume, oder der ort des werkes und des menschen*. (the art museum i dream of, or the place of the work and people). the remainder of this essay outlines his arguments.

according to zaugg the art museum is, as i have argued above, the site in which conditions for the encounter between perceiver and work are optimised.

this is a two sided encounter – the perceiver encounters the work, the experience of which then changes their perception of it. by this means the work also changes the perceiver and can be said to have encountered the perceiver as actively as the perceiver has encountered it.

however despite this (and despite the work's engagement with the architectural setting in which it finds itself) it is in principle autonomous. according to zaugg it seeks to express in its own name. the perceiver of the work must also be granted (in principle) this autonomy.

this autonomy is important for the work. in zaugg's examples the work should not be part of an altar before which the perceiver kneels. nor should it be a decorative extra amongst others in a baroque hall. this is self evident. i think that the in principle granting of an equivalent autonomy to the perceiver needs no justification here.

the museum should be the place that enables the work to fulfil unrestrictedly its expressive task. it should also allow the viewer to do their perceptual work. it is a tool designed to enable them to perform these complementary functions.

the first characteristic zaugg identifies as necessary for the place of the encounter of the work and people is that it be closed. it is delimited certain and separate. this enables the perceiver to concentrate on their perceptual task. it also carries or supports the expression of the work – or at least prevents it from losing itself in the immensity of the world.

the enclosed place where the perceptual encounter takes place is a real place. in his essay 'das kunstmuseum das ich mir erträume oder der ort des werkes und des menschen' zaugg builds the place as real architecture is built. he starts with the floor, proceeds to the walls and then the ceiling. in this essay which is based (mainly) on my translation of his text i will follow this schema.

the floor of the place is even and horizontal. it allows the perceiver to move easily and freely.

the wall is opaque. it bounds the architectural space which also comes from it.  
the wall is vertical. the vertical wall stands in maximum opposition to the horizontal floor.  
the vertical wall directly confronts the gaze of the perceiver, as they freely move around the space.  
the vertical wall supports the verticality of the painting and pushes it into space.

the wall is not contingent or temporary. it is permanent and credible. it stands at the beginning of the space in which the work is perceived and can be considered a given condition. it is not contingent, it is not caprice. a temporary wall is part of the work and is for the author of the work to construct, or not.

the wall is flat. any panelling or skirting on the wall interferes with and competes with the work.  
it also distracts the perceiver, much as an unevenness in the floor would.  
a flat wall strengthens the physical presence of the work.

the wall is monochromatic.

the wall cannot be completely smooth, complete smoothness conveys an impression of immateriality. it is disorienting.

the wall is white. white is a relatively inexpressive colour for walls.  
it limits the obscurity of dark corners. the wall is painted with matt paint. gloss paint tends to dematerialise it - makes it seem unreal. the white need not be pure white. in any case it is affected by the colour of the light which illuminates it. it can be moderately warm or cool – this is of no importance. the painted wall can also easily be maintained.  
the relationship of the floor and wall is crucial. they are two different things. they play off each other –make each other visible. the wall displays and situates the work (even if it is placed on the floor). it confronts the perceiver whilst they engage with the work. the floor positions and displays the perceiving subject and indirectly the work on the wall.

the floor and the wall must be of different appearance. the perceiving subject must know where they stand and know its limits. according to zaugg: "the place of the work and people is no place of illusion. it is no artificial paradise. it has, on the contrary, the function of grounding, bringing to form and enabling consciousness."

the floor clearly extends the wall at right angles. the floor and wall are simply constructed without decoration or supplement. there is no gap, no skirting to confuse and weaken this relationship which exemplifies joining and opposition simultaneously.

the ceiling is the counterpart of the floor. it is flat and horizontal. it intersects the walls clearly and at right angles. it protects and guides (as mirror of the floor) the viewer. it is inconspicuous and it is all the more superfluous to observe it because it is merely a repetition of the floor. the ceiling is made of the same materials as the wall because although the wall has different architectural requirements to the floor, the ceiling does not.

the walls are all vertical and flat. they intersect at right angles. the place is rectangular in plan. this respects the frontal nature of the gaze of the perceiver and the encounter with the work. this frontality determines what the architecture of the place must and must not be.

the room should be scaled and proportioned so as to make it the perceptual ecological niche for the encounter of the person and the work. it will refer to the likely scale of the work and the scale of the body and the nature of the sensory capabilities of the person. the room should not be excessively large. in a large room the work is inclined to disappear. in a small room paradoxically the same is true.

the room must be proportioned and scaled in accordance with the factors already mentioned in order to bring the sensorimotor faculties of the viewer into play. the bodily experience of the work is as important as the intellectual or emotional. the inhibition of the bodily experience of the work inhibits these other experiences. the bodily experience of the work is bound to that of the architecture.

it is difficult to determine exactly what the dimensions of the room should be. zaugg proposes a method that gives satisfactory results, but does so rather arbitrarily. i will not outline it here. suffice it to say that the scale of the body – the outstretched arms, rather than the metre is the unit measurement.

the place is scaled to hold works of art – not aircraft. it is scaled to enable the viewer to see the works in clear relationship to it, not as a demonstration of the power of an invisible creator (artist, architect, head of state, god). the space is not of the scale of a cathedral, palace or aircraft hangar.

the rooms should be an elongated square in order to facilitate the perceptual encounter. a long room (a double square for example) approximates the condition of a corridor. it is a place that one passes through. on entering such a room the extremities of at least one wall are invisible. one cannot see works on the walls of such a space immediately.

a square room presents the perceiver with a kind of indifferent space in which all the walls are of equal value. the perceiver is forced to the centre of the inscribed circle implicit in such a room. this constraint is counter to the implicit autonomy of the perceiver and is also boring. further any work on the floor of the square room is forced into its center or seems arbitrarily positioned. the perceiver and work both want to occupy the centre, the same physical space. they clearly cannot.

if we partially double the square shape (make the room from two overlapping squares) the centre of the room is not an insistent point. it becomes more an elliptical zone – in relation to which the perceiver is free to move around. the center of the room no longer imposes itself on the subject, they can move freely and works can be installed on the floor anywhere.

the doorway into such a room should be placed near - but not too near (or on) - the corner.

if the doorway is in the center of one of the short walls, the small walls flanking it on either side are unusable for exhibition. further the symmetry resulting from such an arrangement is sterile pompous and authoritarian. it is reminiscent of the symmetry of religious or state architecture. of nazi architecture. this is not only the result of a comparison of this room shape with the shape of the rooms of nazi architecture but because of the dead symmetry of the architecture of such a room.

this room shape will also inevitably give rise to a hierarchy in the works exhibited. a main work on the wall opposite the entrance and two subsidiary works flanking it

if the doorway is made through the middle of one of the longer walls similar problems arise.

placing the doorway on one of the corners will avoid the pompous static character of this room, but it divides the resulting room into two triangular halves. the room should be one rectangular space with clear walls, not two ambiguous awkwardly shaped triangular spaces.

the solution is to place the doorways somewhere in between the centres of the walls and the corners. it is important that they not be too close to the corners because then the perceiver can still see the works on the wall adjacent to the wall through which they enter.

the work is made for single individuals therefore the door is created for individuals, not a bustling crowd. it reflects human scale. there is no need for an impressive overwhelming portico like the entrance of a football stadium.

the entrance has no door. although a door would clearly demark the threshold of the place and make the perceiver conscious of the act of entering the place, they would be disturbed by the opening of the door into the space by others. the door moves, unlike other elements of the architecture. this movement is counter to the necessary stability of the architecture of the place.

the lighting of the room is uniform. it enables the work and the place to be seen without itself being visible. the work and the perceiver are both equally lit. if the work and the perceiver are not equally lit the reciprocity of the encounter between work and perceiver is thwarted. the work becomes a dramatic picture – a tv screen. the work expresses itself by mixing its body with the body of the perceiver. by mixing its body with the world. it can not do this if the world is invisible, or if the world is bracketed off from it by the edges of a pool of light. the work functions by mixing itself with and separating itself from the world as it wants to. this is the major part of the function of the work that needs to be perceived in space.

as there is more than one work in the place there will be more than one room.  
the arrangement of the rooms is important.

if the rooms in the place are arranged in a suite, if each leads to the next, then each becomes the vestibule of the one succeeding it. in addition part of each room functions as a passageway between the rooms before and after it. the rooms should not be arranged in this way. zaugg's suggestion is that the rooms of the museum should be arranged in small groups of between two and seven rooms inside the larger envelope of the museum architecture. this prevents the passageways between rooms becoming frustratingly numerous, separates the access paths from the rooms themselves and (most importantly for zaugg) prevents the catastrophe of the chronological presentation of the works in the suite of rooms.

for zaugg the chronological ordering and presentation of the works in a museum is in effect the hand of the dead interfering with us, the living. it is the product of a 19<sup>th</sup> century science and world view which at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century we have still not replaced. according to zaugg every work in such a display has the task of propelling the ones before it further away into the past. in his view every work is from today as the people who view it are from today. the people from the past are gone. dead at the discretion of nature. to see a holbein only through a caravaggio, el greco, delacroix, cezanne, malevich, and then barnett newman is absurd. it is like never being able to see a fish directly. always having to see it behind a reptile a bird a marsupial a dog and an ape.

for zaugg:

“every work is there for itself, as a stone is on the edge of a path, a yellow dandelion in the green grass or a red car by a greyish pavement. the work is in its own place like a pebble seen at the edge of the path by a person out walking.”

and:

“i demand today the right to see a barnett newman next to a holbein. it is shameful to think that i claim this right for the first time, now, when i am more than forty years old. my demand or wish is no more extraordinary than the desire to see a cat sleeping in the sun without being compelled to see it via an

ape a cow or i don't know what else; i.e. through the phylogenetic glasses of a zoologist of the 19th century. this desire is, after all, the true theme of these reflections.”

according to zaugg, the place should not mimic the appearance of a mausoleum a refinery or disneyland. the place is an instrument and should look like an object of everyday use – at the same time serious and light. there is no reason why the logic of the rectilinear perceptual relationship that determines the architecture of the inside of the place should not apply in the outside world. for this reason the external shape of the place is rectangular, not spherical or triangular.

and finally:

“the place of the work and of people is not located on the acropolis. equally it doesn't lie in an idyllic park. it is located in the city, where bakeries and butchers have their place, because going to the place of the work and of people is an act that is no more extraordinary or weighty than getting on a bus.”

in conclusion, the art that mobilises all the senses, binds them together and couples them with the intellect and emotions, that brings the person in their totality into play is best served by a very particular kind of architecture. it is not an expensive architecture or difficult to construct. it is probably even possible to adapt existing buildings in most cities cheaply to make such architecture, (or at least probably was until very recently). but do people want this kind of art?

this outline of zaugg's considerations on the museum space is not intended as a critique of existing institutions. zauggs book is intended as a handbook, offering positive solutions to the architectural problems of the art museum. these solutions are not theoretical. nor are they difficult. they are intended to be taken into account in the design of real art museums; as a basis for future museum architecture.

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melbourne 2003.

where i have not been directly quoting remy zaugg above i have been paraphrasing my translation of his text 'das kunstmuseum das ich mir erträume, oder der ort des werkes und des menschen'. zaugg originally wrote the essay in berlin in 1989. it was published by the verlag fuer moderne kunst in nuremberg in 1996.