

## **A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF MY IDEAL MUSEUM**

Michael Fehr

### **Preamble**

My ideal museum does not exist. I can only describe it as an interpolation of existing museums and various works of art, as a fictitious museum that comes to mind whenever I think about trying to improve upon the museum in which I work. I will begin by describing the museum's exterior, followed by its interior structure, including several of the rooms that I would establish, and conclude by saying a few words about how it would work. The whole thing should be regarded as a work in progress.

Before I begin describing the museum, I would just like to say something about its economic footing and potential public. The museum I envisage can only exist as an economically independent institution, with enough financial funding on hand from whatever source, to enable those who run it to concentrate on their tasks without having to worry about basic financial matters. I am not suggesting that there should be an unlimited availability of funds, but that the economic basis should be sound enough to ensure that the museum can function on a long-term basis and enable it to operate its economic matters successfully. This is not asking too much. It just takes account of the fact that, generally speaking, museums are never able to recoup their costs. Or, to put it another way: anyone wanting a museum must accept that, as with every form of infrastructure, a certain amount of money will have to be kept permanently on hand to maintain it. If this is not recognized at the outset or is not available, there is no point in building a museum in the first place.

I would like the position to be made equally clear with regard to the visiting public. It is not the number of visitors, but the intensity and quality of their visits that should constitute the parameters by which an institution's success is measured. For a visit to a museum will, in future, mean an opportunity to enjoy a special, individual and potentially unexpected experience. This absolutely precludes the possibility of the museum being a venue or an event for large crowds of people, as well as the idea that every museum should be there for everyone, as it were, an institution for the entire population. Apart from a few very big museums holding vast collections, such as the Louvre, the British or the Metropolitan Museum, museums will have to develop their own distinct characters in order to attract a specific section of the public. Herein lies a unique, if frequently overlooked, opportunity for museums, which unlike mass media are individual entities in themselves, completely exempt from the usual norms or any form of standardization. Developing an individual identity, as museums clearly can, does not spoil but, on the contrary, actually enhances their chances of reaching a wider public – for instance, as specialist institutions specializing in certain areas or issues, or as ones highlighting specific awareness's among certain sections of the population or interest groups.

Accordingly, I would like to characterize my intended public, for whom my fictitious museum is created and which I am now about to describe, as a public that is interested in the reflection and development of all forms of fabrication and presentation of discoveries and knowledge; that seeks alternatives to the media's style of political argumentation and to the functional, rational and lineal thought processes of science; that understands the power of images and is serious about accepting images as images; that is sensitive to locations: to moods and atmospheres and can and will form an opinion of its own. (I am referring in other words to the sort of people who feel at home both in flea markets as well as in specialist shops, who are not afraid to shop at Hertie's or Aldi's who frequent good but simple restaurants, who read the "Frankfurter Allgemeine" as well as the "Tageszeitung",

possess more books than CDs, do not consider their jobs purely as a means of earning money, and are aware that everything that is given can be taken away again.)

### **Exterior**

The museum I envisage is not distinguishable by its architecture. Since one cannot walk around it, no real idea of its dimensions can be gleaned from the outside. It is situated on the outskirts of the town's centre, consists of a complex of a number of interconnected buildings of different periods, which form part of a larger, partly residential urban development built on a small hill.

The museum has at least seven façades. One elevation (1) resembles an 1960s German apartment block. At the entrance door, one of the many bell pushes is inscribed with the word 'Museum'. Another elevation (2) resembles Gent's railway station – the open entrance leading into a large lobby. A third side (3) has all the charm of an ancient ruin, and there is a great deal of evidence that the museum was indeed built on the site of an ancient temple, which may once have been a palace. The partly ruined entrance leads into catacombs, which can only be accessed in the company of a guide. Viewed from another side (4), the museum has the appearance of an American 1930s warehouse with a ramp and large roller door the only visible features. Yet another side (5) features a broad flight of stairs of some hundred steps, the lowest of which ends in a steep rock-face; this staircase offers a panoramic view across the landscape. Its sixth side (6) resembles an early twentieth-century business-building including a restaurant on the ground floor. The final elevation (7) to be mentioned has all the characteristics of a large greenhouse.

The museum's various façades are arranged in such a way that only one of them can be seen at any given time, so that visitors consequently – at least on the first visit – assume that there is no other entrance to the museum than the one used. Whichever entrance you choose is entirely up to you and depends on your mood or the purpose of your visit to the museum.

### **Entrances**

The different entrances lead by various routes into various sections within the museum. Anyone approaching by way of the business façade is bound to find something interesting in the well-stocked museum shop and can enjoy an excellent meal in the museum restaurant. From here, however, you can only access one, albeit large, room, which will be described in more detail below. If you opt to use the entrance in the ruin façade, you will be treated to a comprehensive guided tour of its technical installations, ending up in the restaurant. Anyone using the warehouse entrance into the museum will only be admitted if delivering something. The hall behind the railway station entrance is freely accessible but the only exhibits on display here are temporary ones; and the outside flight of stairs can only be accessed from inside the museum. The only way to gain entry to all the rooms in the museum is by ringing the doorbell at the entrance to the apartment block. You will more than likely be greeted by a surly housekeeper, to whom you must explain what you want to see and experience within the building. Once he is satisfied with your reasons, you will be allowed free access to every room. The simplest way into the museum, however, is through the greenhouse, even though this is the entrance that visitors are least likely to choose spontaneously since they are on the look-out for artefacts and not interested in natural exhibits. The greenhouse's main role, however, is to function as the museum's natural climate control system, and one may walk through it even if one is not interested in the beauties of nature.

### **The museum interior**

At first glance, the interior of the museum may seem somewhat confusing to the visitor, simply because it has so many floors and mezzanines. Also, the central staircase does not provide much sense of direction. The individual floors and mezzanines are connected by short flights of stairs. On the different levels, large rooms alternate with smaller ones, followed by a similar haphazard sequence of rooms. Every room has solid walls. Some rooms have fanlights in the ceiling, while others have no daylight, some offer views over the town and across the countryside. No two rooms are alike.

It is not difficult to find one's way around, however, if one simply follows the series of rooms. You will soon realize that the museum is organized around the principle of a double helix of room layouts spiralling around the central core of the stairwell, which opens out at various points into smaller side rooms, linked by short flights of steps. It is possible, therefore, to experience the spiral structure without comprehending it, nor is there any compulsion to follow its entire course.

Due to their size and layout some rooms are very distinctive in character. They are placed horizontally to the spiral structure of the building and are virtually transversed by it. The three most important rooms are the library, the archive and the auditorium. Situated between and around them are exhibition rooms, study rooms and cabinets, rest rooms, offices, workshops and storage rooms, as well as a few other rooms, which I will describe later. The museum is constantly adding new rooms, but only when property becomes vacant in this part of town.

### **Atmosphere and working methods**

In my ideal museum, there are no guards, and all the rooms are freely accessible to visitors as a matter of principle, as long as their presence does not hinder any work in progress. Once a visitor has entered the museum, he should be able to move around as freely as his interests dictate, make full use of its facilities and, where possible and if so desired, play an active role in its development. In return, visitors are expected to respect other people's interests and show consideration in exercising their own.

The museum has its own select workforce, consisting of staff of both sexes and varying ages with a range of professional qualifications. It is the duty of all members of staff, regardless of their job description, to assist visitors, if so required, to answer any requests for information, as far as they are able, to guide them, if necessary, and, furthermore, to encourage them, by means of whatever personal contribution is required, to look at the museum's exhibits.

The museum has a relaxed, albeit focused working atmosphere, which involves the visitor, is built on individual contributions – ranging from simple viewing to hands-on help – and strives for cooperative achievements. In some aspects the museum resembles a workshop, in others a laboratory or a studio, while sometimes it would be reminiscent of a scientific academy, resemble classical gallery rooms or echo the atmosphere of a salon or a domestic dwelling.

The museum does not have a specific policy on hanging exhibits. On the contrary, the staff, giving due consideration to visitors' views, try to do justice to every exhibit, depending on its individual characteristics, by presenting it in a specially devised format. This leads to pictures being hung in a very varied, if somewhat confusing pattern. There is one principle, however, that is applied to every presentation: Individual exhibits should never be displayed in isolation, but always in conjunction with other items. In the interests of dealing with this problem satisfactorily, extensive research, theoretical simulations and practical

experimentation is carried out. Many of the solutions found by these means end up being discarded almost immediately, while others turn out to last for generations.

My imaginary museum does not operate as a closed shop – its resources are always available, whether in its storerooms or exhibition halls. The museum is relatively well-stocked. There are exhibits in every room. If any item on display is moved or hung elsewhere, room must be made accordingly, even if this means moving another item from the collection to a different place. Consequently, even small alterations in the presentation of a collection can cause a cascade effect in the redeployment of items, sweeping like waves through large sections of the museum. Since there is always some change taking place, the museum is in a constant state of internal flux, and appears as a dynamic spatial image. This process of change is not uniform, however, but dependent on different time horizons and rotation rates. Some exhibits are seldom disturbed, while others get swapped around to different locations in the museum after only a short time. Every move is meticulously documented, however, and replicated in a model so that every step in the history of how the museum has utilized its collections can be viewed without difficulty.

My imaginary museum has always had such a rich and varied collection of pieces from all areas of artistic endeavour that it could easily refrain entirely from augmenting its collections. It only accepts new objects, therefore, if they give a new slant to existing collections or cause a rethink in the way in which the exhibits are arranged or presented. Accordingly, the museum's collections do not aspire to being absolutely complete but are based instead on the abundant importance and diversity of individual pieces. It is irrelevant, as far as the museum is concerned, whether individual items in the collection are regarded as valuable in the conventional sense of the word or not. For the value of the individual pieces can only be seen assessed as part of the context that is created by themselves within the museum.

Most of the acquisitions have generally been bestowed in the form of gifts and are frequently brought along by visitors. The latter have the opportunity to decide by themselves whether the item they are prepared to contribute does indeed fit into and can remain a specific part of the museum. This process, which can be long-winded at times, often results in the exhibits in question being withdrawn. It also happens occasionally, however, that the museum wants to acquire a particular item for its collection, in which case it brings all its considerable financial resources to bear – and always gets what it wants.

### **The special rooms**

One might well ask how such a museum could ever come about and establish itself in the face of the numerous and contradictory interests within the art world, pressure on the part of the art dealers and collectors, criticism levied by art critics and art historians alike, the demands of curators, not to mention the noise of the art tourists and the demands of trade unions and politicians. To deal with these adversities, my ideal museum employs a simple device from its box of tricks: it devotes appropriate rooms to representing these different interests, desires, demands, pressures and requirements – thereby musealising them. It only remains for me to list these special museum rooms below:

- The cloakroom of art theories
- The lounge of art professors
- The lobby of the art trade
- The dome of stylistic arrangement systems
- The archive of museum theories
- The office of the director (the curator's cabinet)
- The restorers' studio

The school of curators  
The copyists' room  
The media room  
The art critics' writing room  
The Valhalla of the collectors  
The storage room of dead capital  
The project cellar of the installation artists  
The tea room for the unemployed supervisors  
The TV studio for cultural affairs politicians  
And, in a room which can only be accessed from the restaurant and the museum shop:  
The museum of museum signs

### Conclusion

In a talk delivered in Hagen in 2001, Donald Preziosi summed up my general ideas about such a museum, echoing my innermost feelings as it were, as follows:

'The museum (and its ancillary epistemological technologies such as history or art history) are heirs to an ancient European tradition of using things to think with; to reckon with; and of using them to fabricate and factualize the realities that in our modernity they so coyly and convincingly present themselves as simply re-presenting. Museums, in short, are modernity's pragmatic artifice, and the active, mediating, enabling instrument of all that we have learned to desire we might become. It is time to begin to understand exactly what we see when we see ourselves seeing museums imagining us.'<sup>1</sup>

Learning to understand what we see when we see ourselves seeing museums imagining us: that is the precious heart of the statement. It sounds complicated and is indeed a complex, new mode of thinking, but only with respect to museums. In terms of visual arts, on the other hand, it describes something that is virtually a standard experience. For no matter how one perceives a work of art: the viewing experience is inevitably bound up with confronting such a structure of sensory perception and experience, making you aware of one thing at least: that 'you cannot take through your eye without simultaneously giving.' This fundamental correlation, which Georg Simmel observed in his *Soziologie der Sinne* (Sociology of the Senses), as to how individuals perceive each other,<sup>2</sup> can be also be applied *cum grano salis* to how pictures and objects are perceived that are made to be viewed. For in order to be able to appreciate such a picture or object, I have to look at it and let it work on me, I have to open myself to it, surrender myself to it – I can only get to grips with it by letting its influence wash over me. It goes without saying that the relationship between an individual and a picture can never equal the active two-way relationship that makes eye-to-eye perception so characteristic and unique. It remains the ideal, albeit superficial model for visual interaction. Nevertheless, the lively relationship of awareness between individuals can be reconstructed and reflected in the relationship between an individual and a picture – and not only in pictures, like *Las Meninas* by Diego Velázquez, for example, which have human interaction as their subject. For the culminating moment of this interaction, the fundamental willingness of the observer to surrender to the observed during the observation, continues to be a *sine qua non* with regard to the debate surrounding non-representational art. In other words: to facilitate a genuine interaction between the observer and the observed, making this a museum's objective once more – that is what I expect of a museum, an expectation that I see seldom fulfilled in newer museums, which have been remodelled into pretentious art-stations or are specifically designed as such. Or, to put it yet another way: in order to begin to understand what we see, when we see ourselves seeing museums imagining us, we must endeavour to recapture and restore to the museum something that is currently regarded as thoroughly unfashionable – namely, the leisure factor, leisure being the fundamental prerequisite for appreciating an aesthetic experience.

1 Donald Preziosi, *Haunted by Things. Utopias and Their Consequences*, Lecture given on 3 March 2001, Hohenhof, Hagen.

2 Georg Simmel, *Soziologie der Sinne* (1907), in: *idem, Soziologische Ästhetik*, Klaus Lichtblau (ed.), Bodenheim 1998, p. 139.