

1. The history of museum development

1.1 Defining the museum

In order to design a museum one must first be able to define a museum. This is extremely difficult due to the morphing nature of the museum model. Thus this study of the museum starts with a look into the history of the museum in order to understand how and why its concept and model changed.

The passion of the collector and the acquisition of rare, unique, extraordinary and valuable objects have existed since ancient times, though museums date back only about two centuries.

During the enlightenment the phenomenon arose of the museum as public space and this included knowledge of the possession of a collection of objects.

The first museums were seen as temples to art. Later they became laboratories of classification and ordered taxonomies, retrospectives colored by the flow of time, or more simply cultural spectacle for the masses.

Two questions concerning the architecture of a museum arised:

1. In architecture, is the production of a suitable vehicle for the interpretation of art and the relationship between the wholly world of precious objects and its perception by society, specific to the museum and is it developing at the present time?
2. Within the contemporary urban culture, can museums be capable of creating the physical space and symbolic surroundings in which collective life develops? (Montaner J and Oliveras J. 1986:7-13)

1.2 Museum development

The museum concept is said to have started with the British Museum in 1759, which was primarily a semi-public reference collection of books and manuscripts. It was a place for learned gentlemen and was closed to the eyes of the general public by rules of the court protocol. After public access was granted, groups of visitors were led rapidly by staff on specific paths, thus controlling the information granted to the public. There were visitor complaints. (Schubert K. 2000:17)

Thus the museum was seen as an end in itself with its focus on the information inside, and not as a facility to serve visitors. (sketch 1.1)

Then there came the Louvre in Paris (Fig 1.1), a palace of the Kings of France, which held extensive royal collections. Changes to painting displays were made and artists worked at length to make exhibitions more acceptable and create an appropriate curatorial concept for the museum. The formal royal palace was turned into a public museum nine days after the fall of the monarchy on August 10, 1792. (Ibid:18)

The museum was seen as a symbol of revolutionary achievement and served many visitors rather than only aristocrats and learned gentlemen. (sketch 1.2)

“Past class and evolutionary barriers were swept aside”

- (Schubert K. 2000:18)

Jean-Jacques David argued that museums should not only house luxury objects on display to satisfy curiosity. Napoleon’s conquests led to the rapid growth of the Louvre exhibition. In January 1794, after the Conservatoire came to power, museum displays were brought more in line with revolutionary goals; this even included the removal of paintings that were considered by the revolution as ‘unsuitable’ and religious and ideological interpretations were replaced with aesthetic and art-historical readings. (Ibid:19-20)

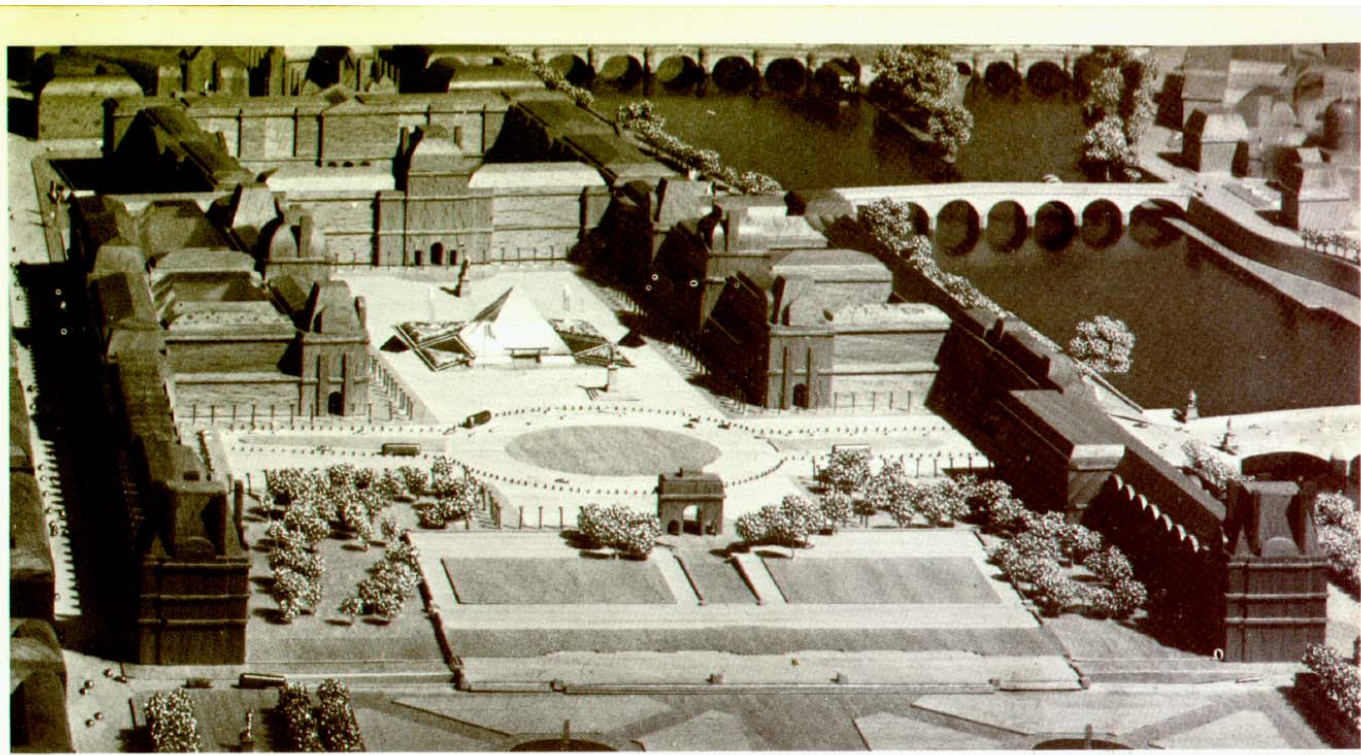


Fig 1.1 The Louvre - Paris. The first museum to have been opened to the public after the fall of the Monarchy on August 10, 1792 (Montaner J and Oliveras J. 1986)



Sketch 1.1
Firstly, the museum was a container primarily for the preservation of information sources, and secondly, for learned gentlemen to access these sources.



Sketch 1.2
The museum became firstly a container for the preservation of artefacts, and secondly for learned gentlemen and the general public to access its sources on equal grounds.



It is apparent that the museum concept continued switching between different subjective opinions.

Sir David Wilson, British Museum director in 1889, argued that the purpose of a museum is to hold its material in trust for humankind. In the same year it was said that the conquest brought to France everything to empower the imagination. The Raphael paintings Dominique-Vivant Denon installed in the Louvre were chosen to show at a glance the artist's genius. He created in a way a one-wall retrospective of Raphael's career from beginning to end. With Denon's exhibition pedagogic aims and art-historical methodology had for the first time played a central role in artwork displays. (Ibid:20-21)

The museum concept becomes one of conservation. This created a shift from a political-ideological to an historical-documentary agenda. The above also shows how the curator's subjective opinion can affect an artist's (In this case Raphael's) image as seen by the public.

The British Museum, which had developed at the same time as the Louvre, was not as 'royal' in its ecclesiastical or aristocratic collections, yet both came into existence as a result of changing social circumstances and to satisfy specific cultural needs. For the English, the idea of using an institution that came from their interpretation of the fresh catastrophe was hard to embrace, yet the museum concept caught their imagination. It tied in with the non-aristocratic elite and cultural aspirations of the Industrial Revolution. (Ibid:22)

The museum was thus depoliticized, emphasizing educational and scientific potential.

The museum's revolutionary origins were soon sidelined by the great potential museums had to play in the emerging rivalries between European nation states. Both the British Museum and the Louvre became symbols of imperialistic domination and global domination. Cultural sites were globally 'raided' for archeological objects, thus presenting their political masters as custodians of world culture. (Ibid:23)

The museum becomes a symbol of current cultural situations.

At this point the imperialization of the museum began. In 1826 and 1834 the mutual cycle of the Egyptian galleries was a celebration of French cultural superiority in the Louvre. It linked Egyptian history to the nouveau Bourbon dynasty to claim continuity and stability. Once again quite disconnected political and scholarly goals coexisted. The British Museum, with a 19th century curator, had a Darwinist approach which considered all art as just a stepping stone towards the pinnacle of Greek classicism, and ultimately considered the museum as a storage facility. (Ibid:24)

Aesthetic considerations no longer mattered. Art was only a way of measuring deviation. British museum displays were contained in dark and cluttered interiors and the museum had overcrowded, inadequate storerooms. There was no display-visitor interaction. As a result the 19th century museum focused on chronology and completeness of display pieces. These conditions continued escalating until the 1880s when exhibitions started to thin out and artworks were once again considered more than 'specimens' even though the emphasis was still on historical evidence rather than aesthetics. (Ibid:25-26)

From this point on the start of the global museum concept can be seen as art from different international locations were exhibited within the same location.

In 1914 the arrival and full emancipation of Asian art contributed to African, Indian and South American art



Sketch 1.3 The museum became a storage house and the art pieces contained within were considered as 'specimens.' Visitor orientated museum design was forgotten.

to finally be exhibited in the British Museum instead of at off-site galleries. Global art acceptance evolved. The cessation of the flow of world artifacts into European museums changed their function to scholarship and display rather than acquisition and expansion, but still little was done to create visitor-friendly displays. In 1882, John Russel Pope's design for the Duveen Gallery displayed the Parthenon sculptures for the first time not as 'specimens', but as works of art, and any comparative materials were removed and exhibited in side rooms. From this time onwards museums evolved from exclusive scholarly places to aesthetic-educational ones.

It was obvious that museum curators will always be subjective and was at this time still influenced by political and social factors. Only much later did self-analysis and critique become part of museum practice. (Ibid:26-28)

Political and socio-cultural creation and destruction of museums

A political and cultural aggrandizement took off in Germany with the proclamation of the German Empire in 1871. A new assistant curator, Wilhelm Bode, was appointed to the Prussian State Museums in Berlin. Bode managed to acquire a wealth of paintings and artifacts, and facilitated groundbreaking research on the image of Rembrandt. The arrival of important artifacts like the Pergamon Altar in 1878 became of national importance and excavation sites led to benchmarks in archeological standards and technologies. A major contribution Bode made to the Berlin museums was the wide scope of international civilizations that were represented within the German capital. More than this, Bode had designed a groundbreaking display method which grouped objects according to historical content instead of object type (paintings with paintings, sculptures with sculptures, etc.) (Ibid:29-31)

The museum concept became the cataloguing of information within its context. So far, throughout this museum development, most changes to museums were either because of the way information was exhibited, or the changes led to a new way of exhibiting.

In this way objects from different categories complemented each other instead of competing with each other, and this approach was copied by curators all over the world. New meaningful and informative displays were created that did not neglect the aesthetic qualities of the artefacts. The Victorian gloom and overcrowdedness in the British Museum gave way to Bauhaus-like clarity, simplicity and sparseness. Neutral space without decoration housed the galleries. (Ibid:31)

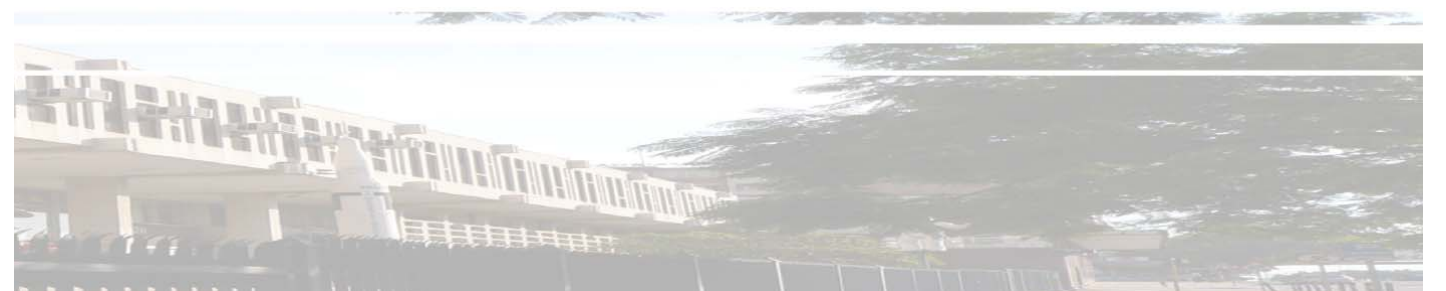




Fig 1.2 Metropolitan Museum of Art – New York
(<http://www.nyc-architecture.com/UES/UES074.htm>)

From the above can be seen that neutral display areas without decoration were created to house exhibitions. The artefacts were perhaps viewed more objectively even though the displays were still the product of a curator.

Directors appointed by Bode and the Berlin museum created an influential model for curators, and their methods and techniques spread worldwide. Their reputations became based on standard-setting scholarship grounded in logic and open-minded liberalism. Sadly, the rise of Nazism brought these advances to an abrupt end. (Ibid:33-34)

The museum is then crippled by social and cultural change, even though it had been the product of these changes.

Hitler and his acolytes removal of all Impressionist paintings to the Nationalgalerie and emphasis was placed entirely on Post-Impressionist, Cubist and Expressionist works. The museums cooperated in the task of shaping an amorphous mass of population. (Ibid:34)

Thus museum circumstances changed according to cultural changes in these times and was used as a tool to attempt to shape a new culture. This is an excellent example of the power of the museum to influence people's perceptions.

Art removal and control of display escalated and a great deal of art was even destroyed. Museums contained only Nazi-approved art. The Berlin Museum's Island became part of the Nazis' last line of defense in the war and suffered devastating destruction. The image emerged of the museum as vulnerable and requiring special protection. (Ibid:35-38)

These museums were so easily affected by politics primarily because they were born out of politics. Through this process the visitor perhaps remained immune to the manipulation.

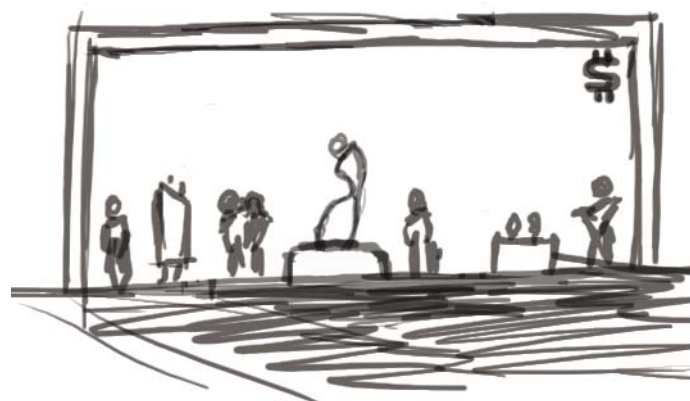
1.3 Museum of Modern Art (Fig 1.2)

American museums differed from European ones in that they were neither instruments of revolution or imperialism, nor had political or social agendas. They were more civically minded and nationalistic with the emphasis on education. They were also funded by private individuals and soon developed into art markets, though this raised questions of national heritage loss for England. (Ibid:39)

The museum was primarily seen as an educational and commercial facility. Private funding meant that the museum was also for the first time not under political influences. (sketch 1.5)

Valentiner, a former student of Bode, developed his master's ideas in New York by recreating entire period settings. These reconstructions blurred the lines between 'faithful representation' and 'invention'. Museums offered insight into display context. The museum's concept of power once again reared its head with the Duveen Gallery at the Tate in London, which by virtue of its scale totally overwhelmed the artworks. It was far too monumental in its scale and its space competed with the sculptures for attention. The architecture was meant to impress, seduce and overwhelm. (Ibid:39-42)

These American museums were too big, powerful and monumental by international standards, and was believed to be out of touch with American culture by the author. It is perhaps ironic that these privately funded museums became even more monumental than the political museums.



Sketch1.5 (above)
The museum became a commercial building where the visitor is considered as important as the artefacts displayed. Museums also promoted display and user interaction.

Fig 1.2 (left) Metropolitan Museum of Art Interior
(<http://www.nyc-architecture.com/UES/UES074.htm>)



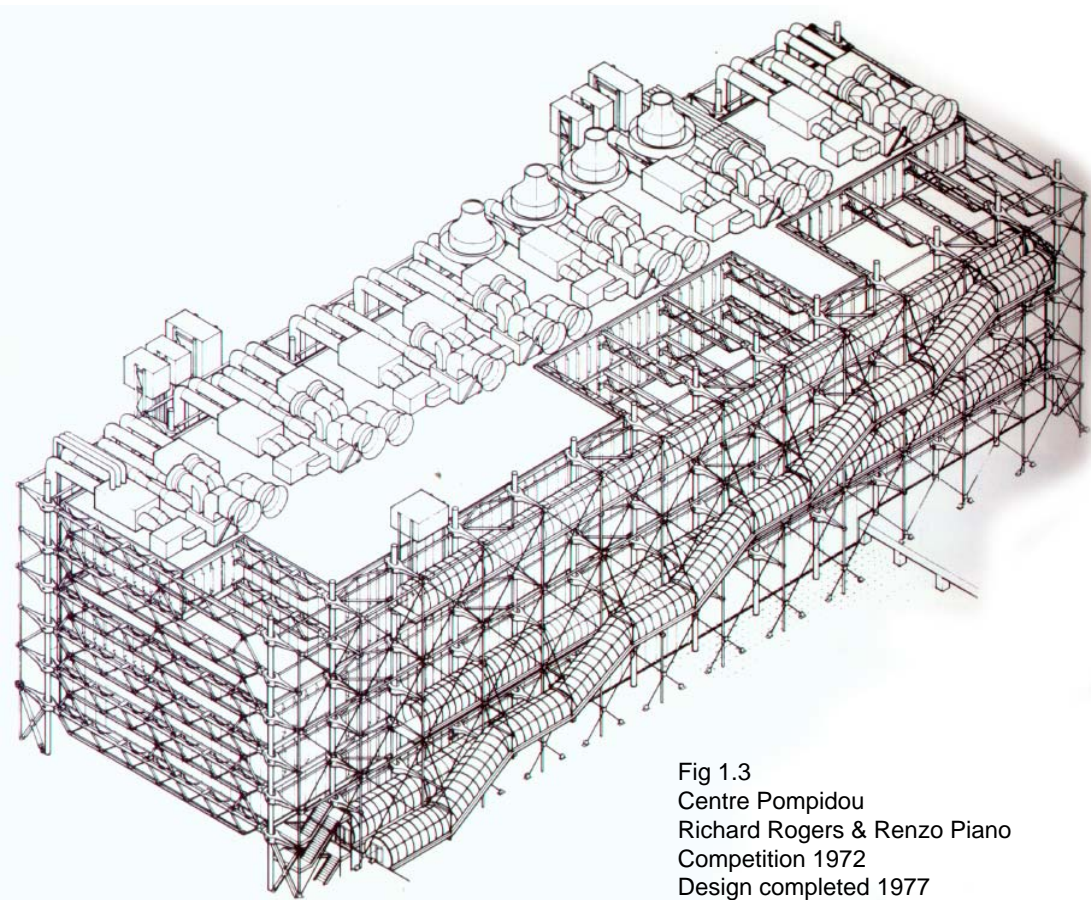
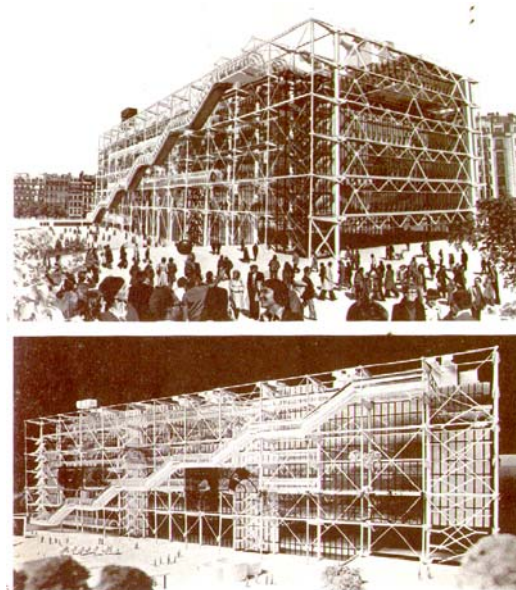
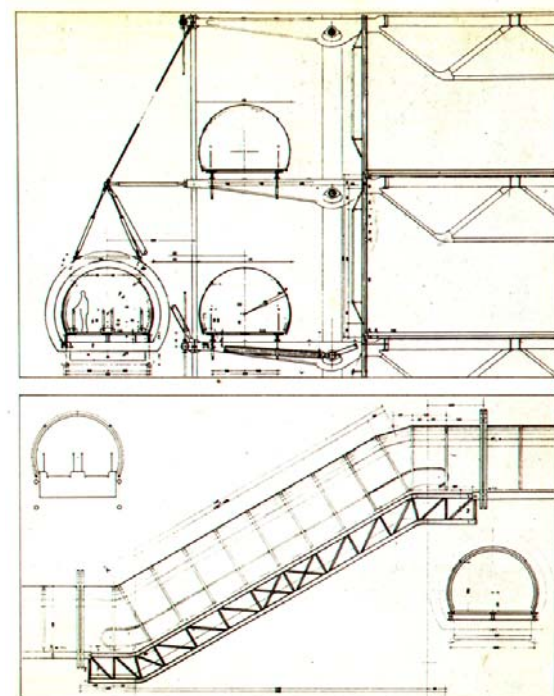


Fig 1.3
Centre Pompidou
Richard Rogers & Renzo Piano
Competition 1972
Design completed 1977
(Leupen B, 129)



America searched for a new architectural language that expressed its ideals and aspirations as dictated both by aesthetics and by politics, and found it in the International Style. Museums dedicated to modern art did not have to answer to European precedents and had to follow neither format nor history. Thus the American Museum for Modern Art (1930) was the New World's truly authentic contribution to the history of the museum. MoMA was located in an office building and later gained the addition of a Guggenheim museum. The museum as a laboratory appears for the first time to invite the audience to participate. MoMA incorporated the use of different visual media (photography, architecture, film, industrial design and all other aspects of contemporary visual culture). (Ibid:44-45)

"It was normative in its pronouncements, not to say dogmatic, and to this day inclusion in its collections is considered a great accolade"
– (Schubert K. 2000:45)

With the development of better wall labels, comprehensive catalogues, extensive lecture programs and guided tours the first movements towards visitor-orientated museum design could be seen. MoMA sent touring exhibitions across the country. In the beginning MoMA relied heavily on loans and had a program of constantly changing exhibitions. Only after 1934 did it focus increasingly on permanent exhibitions. Questions of collaboration with other museums were suppressed by pride of ownership and donors' wishes preventing change. By late 1950 the museum started to be bombarded by younger generation artists claiming that it was too conservative. (Ibid:46-50)

1.4 European Museums After the War

The war showed the vulnerability of museums to both physical and political destruction. European museums were seen as outmoded bastions that were politically opportunistic and fixated on the past. They were dusty, unloved, dowdy, worn out, underlit, cold, dirty, unimaginative and too often associated with the war. (Ibid:52-53)

The end of the war started a change in museum designs. From this point on it can be seen that the museum breaks from the past museum concepts and political manipulation.

This outdated image of the museum had to be broken and this was finally done by the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne (1958) which was un-monumental and self-effacing. Symbols of cultural superiority and political power were avoided at all costs. A glass façade signalled openness and freedom from hidden ideological or political agendas. Museums of the 1960s played a minor role in recording post-war society, thus they operated completely differently from the past now that their unquestioned supremacy was removed. Museums were of little importance to post-war society and were left out of cultural battles, while society focused on other institutions like universities. Art lost much of its importance after the war. It is thus ironic that only two decades later the museum's fortunes would change so dramatically. (Ibid:53-55)

1.5 The Pompidou Centre (Fig 1.3)

There were massive changes in European museums due to post-war reconstruction and economic recovery, which led to spare cash being made available for the long neglected museums. The arrival of mass tourism in the 1970s thanks to the development of the Boeing 747 which provided cheap mass travel was also a contributing factor. Another influence on museum changes was the 1960s cultural changes that put 'Power' in all its manifestations under intense scrutiny, questioning its motivations and intentions. It seemed that although the museum was a symbol of cultural and normative power it escaped post-war



reform. Definitions of museums about display and science which went unquestioned for so many years finally came under the spotlight, along with questions about museum accessibility and objectivity. Before this period curatorial practice was seldom questioned, but was now viewed with great suspicion. Museums no longer seemed to provide an end result to visitors, but rather exposed the process creating self-conscious awareness. Museums became aware of their greatest powers and weaknesses. They lost their past authority, but gained reflection on their own nature. (Ibid:56-61)

With the Pompidou Centre it can be seen that the museum definition finally changed and became democratic, transparent and accountable. Thus this museum can be seen to have succeeded in breaking totally from political monumentality.

What set the Pompidou Centre (the result of a 1970s architectural competition) apart from all the previous museum institutions was that it was privately funded and purposely avoided established political and institutional channels. It spoke a language similar to Barr's half-century-old phrase describing the museum as a laboratory with the visitors as participants in the experiment, and as a truly interdisciplinary institution. The new Pompidou Centre had free access instead of the normal forced special entrance. The visitor was thus allowed to go anywhere instead of being forced into a guided story. The new building was flexible and adaptable. All exhibitions were temporary and thus constantly renewed with an ever-changing interior. This ultimately invoked a more lucid definition of culture.

Another crucial difference between the Pompidou and its predecessors was that it was designed for the average man (an audience previously uninterested and dismissed). Individual institutions were allowed a wider range of readings on their collections and to develop their own styles, identities in their collection scopes, interpretations, and display techniques.

The flexibility of the museum was both its greatest success and greatest burden. The museum's great success resulted in a very noisy interior. Paintings and sculptures could not be displayed to their full effect with the interior dry-walling system. The Centre was also way too high-maintenance and soon had to incorporate static displays to overcome the problem. (Ibid:56-61)

"The Pompidou was an all-out attempt at coming to terms with the emerging post-modern culture by modernist means"

– (Schubert K. 2000:60)



Sketch 1.6

The audience has in the end become more important than the displayed artefacts. The museum, being a commercial building, primary caters for the visitor and secondly for the displayed artefacts. Ironically this is in contrast to what it started as (sketch 1.2).



Sketch 1.2

The museum became firstly a container for the preservation of artefacts, and secondly for learned gentlemen and the general public to access its sources on equal grounds.

Museum architectural typologies are subjected to an inevitable process of change and historical evolution. Museums containing only exhibition spaces have become less satisfying and have changed into places more involved with work, learning and study facilitating greater human interaction. Accommodation has changed from permanent exhibition spaces to temporary exhibitions with accessible storage for research and large open public work spaces. New museum functions include facilities to satisfy human needs (restaurants, cafeterias, reproduction sales and other retail functions), incorporating a commercial logic in the process.





1.6 South African Museums

Now that a study has been done of historic and current definitions of the museum, it is important to see how the museums of South Africa are defined. Since the project study is mainly focused on Pretoria the study of South African museums will be done through personal experience based upon visiting the museums in Pretoria. Personal experience is relevant because this study have identified in the first part of this section that the museums of the future should ultimately focus on South African Museums.

1.6.1 The Pretoria Art Museum

The first thing noticed concerning the Pretoria Art Museum -as on all other visits to the various museums- was the absence of an audience. During the entire trip to the art museum (which lasted four hours) the only other visitors in the museum were the people who accompanied me.

Inside, the museum consists of a series of exhibition spaces which was visited in a specific order to view the art displayed there, organized both by artist and style. One of the exhibitions contained artworks for sale. The souvenir shop was closed. The museum was filled with labels that order viewers not to touch the displays. Permission from museum security had to be granted before one could take pictures. Each artwork is accompanied by a name tag with the names of the artwork, artist, and some general information.

The aesthetics of the interior spaces were perceived to be mainly the result of a technical investigation to preserve the artworks displayed from heat and intense lighting, while allowing for enough lighting to make the artworks clearly visible. The display rooms contain no excessive decoration, and this puts all the focus on the displayed artworks. Inside the display areas the outside world and the other displays within the building are totally cut off from view. It happened at least twice while walking along the display that we struggled to figure out where we had wandered to.

The first troubling thing noticed with most of the South African Museums is that there are no visitors to these facilities. The museum seems to follow many of the concepts identified in section 1.1-1.5. These are however not seen as contemporary museum concepts by today's standards and many of the contemporary museum concepts were not present within the Pretoria Art Museum.

In the following chapter cases where museums exhibited ground breaking ideas that led to a change in the way the museum develops. These museums and pavilions all use commercial logic and are visitor orientated, because these two aspects are predicted by this study to dominate the future of museum design.



Fig 1.4 Pretoria Art Museum exterior and interior views

