

REFLECTION

Thea Jiang, 5480248

Studio: Bodies & Buildings Berlin

Topic: Redesign the museum typology



Complex Project
Graduation studio

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Bodies & Buildings Berlin

01 Project description

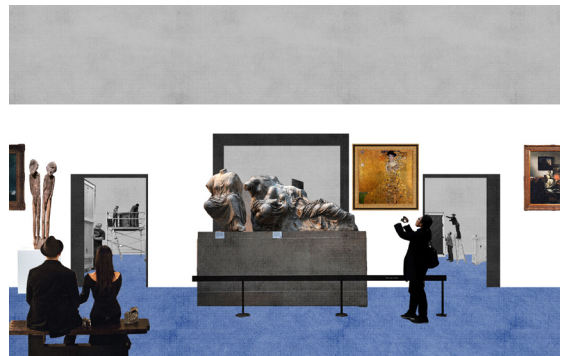
One of the most controversial topics surrounding museums in the twenty-first century is the questionable origin and accessioning of their collections. Museumsinsel Berlin, as one of the most significant museum clusters, has become home to numerous foreign collections due to its imperial and colonial history. Authorities have struggled to critically present their collections while recognizing and addressing how objects were acquired. At present, this topic brings out political and social debates, such as art restitution and decolonization for museum officials. More recently, museums in Berlin has expressed willingness to research and give back these collections in response to public pressure. Due to lack of return guidelines and dedicated space to implement possible changes like returning objects, It raised many speculative futures for museum typology.

Assuming a new museum would be able to disrupt current museum dilemmas for the institutions, a defined art return process were proposed as a basis of a future operational choice for museums. Based on the addressed topic, the thesis research were set to respond a design question “how to design a museum that engages the public and facilitates the return of colonial objects?”

Therefore, the thesis proposes a new open architecture on Museumsinsel. A new museum that enable these institutions to become a distribution and forum centre

through which past stories are told and art objects are returned, so that the art objects and its public become more engaged in open discussion and cultural production.

The design project is a museum that occupies a space of 17,000m² and is divided into five key programs: art handling, storage, conservation labs, exhibition halls and event halls. These programs are strategically organised to showcase the art return process, offering transparency and accessibility to visitors. Collaborating with the National Museums in Berlin and the World Heritage Convention, the project selects Fischerinsel as its site, leveraging its historical significance as one of Berlin’s earliest harbours. Design interventions were needed to plan an experiential visiting route that can actively show the 5 stages of return, while making sure of practical solutions to diverse user needs and indoor climate requirements.



02 Relationship between research and design

In thinking about the significance of research, it is helpful to consider the roles of architects in a design process. Architects gather various ideas and concepts, which are then visually translated into architectural designs. This process is often driven by research, which helps architects understand the objectives and potential design strategies, leading to better outcomes.

During P1, the focus of research was on understanding the historical evolution of museum design, considering its economic, societal, and historical context. In Parallel, collective research also helped in narrowing down specific interests within the topic of museum typology. As the research progressed, my exploration moved towards addressing contemporary issues such as decolonization and art restitution in museum practices.

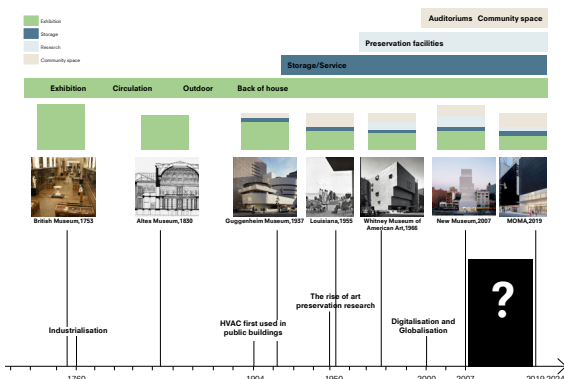
Research question were proposed to explore if a new museum in Berlin can help with the issues of decolonization and art restitution, so that the public become more engaged in discussion and cultural production.

So, what can we do about a problem like museums? Because there are rarely any architectural project that have already tried to provide a solution, I delved into exploring how museums are navigating decolonization within their institutional and exhibition frameworks. Research into the power dynamics, historical influences, and international policies shaping

the acquisition and portrayal of art objects provided crucial insights. This investigation highlighted the key players, including institutions, international organizations, individuals, and the architectural spaces themselves, which significantly influence museum practices. There were also other design concepts explored that are more towards the museum visiting experiences and spatial arrangements that affects accessibility and visibility.

Among the investigated topics, three theoretical concepts guided the design process: decolonization, meaningful museum experience, and permeable space. Working towards P2, a proposed system of art return process helped me to shape a specific user journey and a corresponding visiting route in the new museum. I imagined that the final design product would be a prototype of a future museum, and a continuation of the first half year of design research. Later I realised it was also a design attempt during my research phase. In doing so, the research became stronger by these design tests that reflects my research on past and current museum models.

Looking back, this approach to research and design accumulated a framework of knowledge on contemporary museum issues. This framework ensured that the graduation project could extend to various scales, offering opportunities for further design exploration and testing.



03 Relationship between graduation topic and studio topic

This graduation project falls under the Complex Projects Graduation Studio – Bodies & Buildings Berlin, which focused on a specific time and context within Berlin. The studio was driven by the fact that advanced in data science and building information modelling have led to increasingly integrated, dense, and layered building designs. Currently, the evolving needs of bodies now demand more from buildings.

The overarching theme of Bodies & Buildings Berlin revolved around the idea that each graduation project would propose a unique building complex that embodies a facet of Berlin, addressing specific societal needs. Given the dynamic nature of architectural requirements, tailored solutions must accommodate future social, political, and environmental contexts on multiple scales.

Aligned with the studio's focus, my thesis proposed a new museum complex within Museumsinsel Berlin. It speculated that German museums will face growing demands for art restitution, necessitating a new facility capable of managing the return and exchange of art objects with renowned institutions worldwide. The thesis proposed a museum designed to effectively handle a potentially endless list of collections through a structured process of return, exchange, and exhibition.

The different data including unexpected types and sizes of collections further required the buildings to provide specific spaces such as storage and labs that react to different materials and disciplines within these collections. These different functional space with tailored requirements for energy usage, lighting, moisture and various design considerations also correlated to ideas behind the studio's topic.

04 Research method and approach relation to the graduation studio

This thesis project follows a specific research methodology to the design processes defined by the graduation studio. Instead of being given a specific site, program and project brief, I was able to define and develop my own research topic related to Berlin's social and historical context, and museum typology.

Research later became expressed through an elaborated Design Brief that helped to develop a Design Proposal for my posed thesis topic, problem and question. The studio's method can be divided into two main research parts: building typology research and global relevance research. Students with same building typology built up a consistent visual and physical model analysis of museum precedents worldwide in a group seminar. In parallel to building research, collective research on topics that relate to global relevance were also conducted.

My individual research were based on personal interests of Berlin's rich art and cultural history. I was specifically interested in the colonial and empirical history of Berlin, which were crucial for cultural development within Germany and many other major cities in Europe. Looking at current museum institution and buildings, this particular aspect brought up many questions towards possible provisional needs of museum space.

This interest offered a basic direction of what kind of social and political topic that the graduation project will address, followed by a design solution. Reviewing some of the earlier research on individual interests of the thesis topic before P1, it is clear that through two parts of group research, my individual project extended to many other architectural focuses and became more specifically defined from various scales architecturally.

Looking into the evolution of museum typology I found my architectural interest. Behind the museum's exhibition walls and well-known chambers, there exists a hidden realm - a world of workshops, labs, corridors designated for manoeuvring delicate objects transported from other countries and regions. These scenes of the unknown have been witnessing the life of collections more than

written texts and labels.

Before P4, the design development remained closely intertwined with an ongoing cycle of research. By refining my preferred directions and methodologies during the initial stages, the research gradually informed architectural design decisions. Ultimately, the graduation design project reflects intensive research aimed at exploring how museums can actively engage the public by making the art return process more visible, while also addressing the global relevance of self-sufficient energy use in buildings.

05 Relationship between topic and the wider social, professional, and scientific relevance

The graduation research delves into the topic of museums' evolving roles to test architecture's ability to rewrite the underlying codes of such specific buildings. For instance, museums are moving away from simply constructing extensions and are instead collaborating to build depots, specifically designed to accommodate their expanding collections.

Similarly, this research focuses on the political and social dilemmas museums face when dealing with collections of questionable origins and accessions. Colonial influences in museums run deep, with museum spaces and curatorial practices long defined and designed under the effects of colonization and Eurocentric views from the past, which continue to impact the present. However, museums are increasingly recognizing their role in decolonizing curatorial practices. Curators are actively working to present exhibitions with a neutral narrative, aiming to encourage diverse communities to become more equal and inclusive.

The project views this situation as an opportunity to investigate the role architecture can play in this process. In consideration of various parameters that might influence both buildings and bodies, the design seeks to respond to Berlin's urban context, the global relevance of the chosen research topic, museum building concepts, functionalities, and critical details.

06 Ethical issues and dilemmas

The most evident ethical issue I've encountered during my graduation project is the debate over whether we need more museums. Museums require a strictly controlled environment for art objects, which impacts our limited energy resources. Meanwhile, the COVID-19 crisis has led to the temporary and permanent closure of museums worldwide. Additionally, recent political decisions by museum operators and government officials to return famous art objects due to public pressure hint at the possibility of future closures of public buildings like museums.

On the other hand, ownership of colonial art objects and how should institution and government officials handle them are controversial at all time. The design provides an opportunity to address the bureaucracy behind museum operations in the back-of-house spaces. Designing diverse visiting and observing experiences became crucial for shaping the project's narratives.

To conclude, Museums are typically understood as organizations, that collect artefacts, but less frequently known to include perspectives of artworks and their disputed ownership.

In this project, a new 'behind-the-scenes' space hoped to enable discussion on such topic. This is just as necessary in New York and Paris, as it is in Berlin, undoubtedly more so. This approach offers a unique, performative element in the museum experience for those who are facing similar dilemmas with their collection management.

The design also tried to addresses that future museums should deal with large demand of energy. With expected frequent movements of objects, museum will have to give additional focus on storage, research, and art distribution programs within a well-controlled climate.