

RESEARCH PLAN

INTERIORS, BUILDINGS , CITIES

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Introduction

Throughout the course of the seminars, we looked at various readings and podcasts that highlight the role of the museum in a contemporary society. Ranging from a broad scale of understanding the history and birth of not only art but also artists we also focused on the museum itself, as a space to preserve/protect/display and learn narratives and allied histories.

The texts flow through arguments that deal with the physical qualities of a museum space like the colours of the walls and materiality, as well as, immaterial forces of economics and politics that define its position in the city and shape its relation with the public.

The reflection combined in this document touch upon the intriguing controversies one deals with when trying to define the boundaries of the contemporary art museum. The topics go as follow:

Definition of Art in Contemporary Art Museums

Transition in Museum Interiors (*Elaborate showcase of wealth to white cube interiors*)

Transition in the Role of Museum in the city (*Elite audiences to public museums belonging to the city*)

Museum as a catalyst for Urban Development (*International vs. Local Art*)

Values of the Museum (*Inclusivity, Politics of Collection, Display and Storage*)

As a designer it is crucial to understand all these issues and the power a museum holds as an institution, which eventually will help us position ourselves while designing Contemporary Art Museum in Antwerp.

Definition of Art in Contemporary Art Museums

Over the years, multiple theorists, historians, curators, philosophers, artists have tried to define art. The definition of art has also been constantly broadened and elaborated, while some view art as an object, an entity some argue it is more than its physical embodiment and extends to become an experience.

On 22 October 2013, artist Grayson Perry, gave his second lecture of the Reith series at the St. Georges hall in Liverpool, called 'Beating the Bounds'. In this lecture Perry questions the contemporary conception that 'anything can be art' and sets out what according to him are the seven major boundary markers of art: is it in a gallery or an art context?(1), is it a boring version of something else?(2), is it made by an artist?(3), photography(4), the limited edition test(5), the rubbish dump test(6) and finally the computer art test(7). After Perry has set out his boundaries, one might wonder: why is it so important to define these boundaries? Because even though Perry points out that the boundaries are already existing and are not formed by what art can be, but where, who or why, is it not up to the viewer to define what the boundaries of art may be? When breaking down his first boundary 'is it in a gallery or an art context?', Perry notes how in Duchamp's Fountain in 1917, the urinal was brought into the gallery even though he could have left it plumbed in. Therefore Perry argues that the work is depending on its context to be considered art. Duchamp's Fountain, was not so much about adding more value to the urinal as object, but by placing the urinal in relation to the art context, the viewer is given the agency to have a closer look at the art context itself. So the art context becomes the subject matter. According to Frazer Ward, the work can be seen as 'a first strand of institutional critique that takes as its task the material analysis of the perceptual protocols the museum uses to disguise or naturalize what is in fact the historical bourgeois subject.'¹ In a 1957 lecture, Duchamp seems to suggest that the whole creative act is only completed with the engagement of the viewer, and the artist is merely the creator who sets the creative act in motion: 'All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone: the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his own contribution to the creative act.'²

¹ Ward, F. (1995).

² Marcel Duchamp, "The Creative Act," in *Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, 139–40.

Actually where the one the goals of the Dada movement was to bring more agency to the viewer, Perry also states he wishes to 'empower people' to decide what is their sort of art. Perry is aware of the problems of an elitist art context that dictates the boundaries of art, in which he stresses the exclusion of pottery for instance because of its connotation with a suburban hobby. However, he does stress the need for a clear context to exhibit art: 'That's why I like the art context definition of art. I want to put my art goggles on and say this thing - there's a clear, fairly clear place that I can go, a special church, and worship at the great temple of art. So I'm quite attracted to that idea'.³

³ Grayson Perry (2013)

⁴ even though critics also have regarded this anti institutional movement as failed, since it has been subsumed by elegantly appointed galleries

Artists in the during the 1960's-80's however, reacted as well against the elitist and (capitalist) 'nature' of the art context.⁴ By deciding to make site-specific work outside of the market and directly into the urban or rural landscape, they established an engagement with the immediate relations between subject and object, viewer and art work.⁵ Conceptual artists like Lawrence Weiner decided that to establish a better relation with the viewer, to dematerialize his work. Sculpture and painting were

⁵ E.g. Gordon Matta-Clark, Daniel Buren, Agnes Benes.

seen as a perfect commodities (because of its mobility, symbolic value and easy preservation) that represented bourgeois morals and a mode of art production that conceptual artists criticized. ⁶ Perry, however, stresses that he is more attracted to the 'old thing.' and states that despite Duchamp's declaration that 'everything can be art' , the image of art as sculpture and painting is still pertinent. Perry argues, 'Its USP is that there it is in front of me, the real thing that I can see and touch, and I think that is important for me. I can appreciate you know all the things I've talked about this evening, I can appreciate the intellectual bag that holds all that stuff, but I'm still looking for the thing in the bag.' ⁷

6 P. Fischli. (2021)

7 Grayson Perry (2013)

He explains that he can intellectually engage with the conceptual art but he misses an emotional experience. But it is not just the object which contains emotional strength that defines a piece as a work of art according to Perry. In his explanation of the third boundary, Perry questions if the aboriginal object exhibited in the Royal Academy qualifies as art, because 'it isn't made by an artist.' But that brings us to the question, when are you an artist? Do you need to have it written on your business card/resume? Do you need to be represented by a gallery? But what about artists like Vivian Maier? The American street photographer who worked all her life as a nanny and whose work was only discovered and exhibited after her death. Does that mean she only became an artist after her death? Perry questions if the aborigine objects can be considered to be art since they were made as spiritual maps and their relationship with the universe and the landscape and unaware of the art world. But that then also brings about the question what the real value of art is about, because if the value is considered to be about 'emotional experience', this should not be limited to objects within the art world made by 'established' or self-aware artists. If the work is also an intellectual/enlightened reflection and discussion on our environment, why should this then be limited to the 'traditional artform'?

Transition in Museum Interiors

Grayson Perry offered some reflections on the definition of a work of art, citing Duchamp's Fountain and other examples. It is clear that the definition of a work of art has diverged in many ways, depending on the time period and the way people perceive it, and museum architecture, which has encompassed such a wide range of works of art, has also diverged in many ways up to the present day.

The following text describes how the relationship between the museum, the works exhibited in it and the visitor has changed over the years, giving examples of several turning points. In the past, the relationship between visitors and art in museums was more intimate and personal. The predominant exhibition space was one in which people were interested in and came to appreciate a particular type of art itself, as symbolised by the projects of the post-war Italian architect Franco Albini. However, those intimate relationships changed after the Second World War, when the scale of what many art forms chose as their themes became larger, and many museums had to seek more visitors due to funding difficulties, etc.¹

For example, much of the minimal art that emerged in the 1960s, such as that of Donald Judd, sought exhibition spaces as installations that responded to the exhibition space. In addition, exhibition spaces were required to be neutral places, isolated from the outside world, so that the political and cultural ideas of various artworks could be conveyed to visitors as genuinely as possible.

Based on the above, the white cube, an exhibition space with a pure white interior and as little spatial character as possible, became the mainstream in modern art galleries.

However, white cube spaces, which should be neutral in nature, tend to give too much respect to the works exhibited in them, and visitors tend to perceive the authority of the works more than necessary. Museums and the curators surrounding them take advantage of this characteristic and try to enhance the value of museums and artworks by strengthening the authoritative aura created by the exhibition space and artworks as a whole, rather than conveying the original meaning and value of the artworks to visitors.

In a sense, this contradicts the background against which the original White Cube was designed.

Then what role should museums in the 21st century have other than to amplify the authoritative aura and turn the economic cycle around?

As was mentioned as an example in the text, there is a design approach, such as the Tate Modern in London, in which buildings originally built for a different use are converted into museums while utilising their characteristics. Some parts of the Tate Modern are conventional white cube museums, but there are also parts where the turbine hall from the old power station era has been converted directly into exhibition space. In such spaces, artists can create installations that utilise the local site and the characteristics of the space. Also, in museums such as the Towada Museum of Contemporary Art designed by SANAA, although the exhibition space appears at first glance to be neutral and close to a white cube, the architectural design and the selection and production of exhibition works are carried out in parallel, and the size and lighting of the exhibition space is determined according to the

¹ Pimlott, 2022

² Nishizawa, 2010

artist's productions. Art-specific museums have emerged in recent years.²

³ Isozaki, 1996

These spatial designs are similar to postmodern museums such as James Stirling's Staatsgalerie Stuttgart in that the exhibition space itself has some characteristics, but they differ significantly in that the artist can intervene in the exhibition space. It will be very different.³

Such a method, in which the artist can feel the inspiration for the production of the work and intervene from the design stage to create the space together, has the potential to convey the message and value inherent in the artwork to the visitors without being influenced by the authoritative aura of the space itself. The breakaway from authoritative exhibition spaces will be of great significance in exhibiting works by artists whose themes are universal, such as everyday life, and in bringing people closer to the art itself.

Transition in the role of the museum in the city

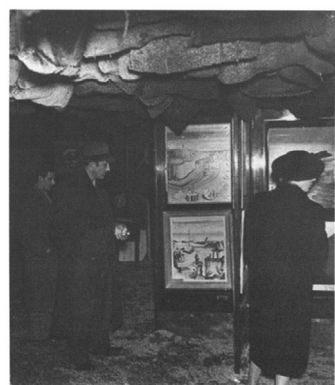
Exhibitions in museums across the globe have generally been displayed primarily as a visual projection of information. Visitors temporarily enter a world in which they intimately interact with the objects. Philosopher Maurice Merleau Ponty emphasises on this phenomenology of the experience of body which precedes the experience of the mind. He says, “What one perceives through the senses becomes input to the mind. Once the mind translates what the body perceives into thought, the process of meaning making begins.”¹ Thus over the years curators and artists have experimented with various display strategies that help to create their individual narratives through the exhibition depending on the position they want to convey to the wider audience.

1 Leach, 2007

In her book, *Spaces of Experience*, Charlotte Klonk, a German art historian talks about the evolution of art galleries from 1800 to 2000. In the chapter, *The Dilemma of the Modern Art Museum*, she writes about the origin of *The Documenta*, a series of exhibitions that take place every four to five years in the town of Kassel, Germany. *The Documenta* was particularly successful in developing a new model of spectatorship that was aided by the temporality of the entire event, thus creating a festival atmosphere around it. Started in the post Second World war years, *The Documenta* was used as a radical exploration to showcase contemporary art practices around the globe. It acted as a symbol of liberation and freedom of the new Germany. Given its short lived nature (museum of 100 days), curator (and designer) Arnold Bode explored this freedom by reinterpreting the interiors of the Gallery space and its correlation to artwork. Taking from the creative display strategies used by Bode, this section highlights certain examples where the exhibition experiments with their respective displays as a response to external factors. These factors range from ongoing politics to public nature of the museum or a response to the national context in which it is displayed.

Exhibitions as a Propaganda

In 1938, artist Marcel Duchamp designed an exhibition titled ‘Exposition internationale du Surréalisme’ in Paris. He suspended 1,200 empty coal bags from the ceiling of the main exhibition space above a single, electrically illuminated col brazier. Under the impact of the vibrations caused by loudspeakers blasting German military marches, the sacks slowly and steadily released coal dust upon the curious visitor. Cavernous displays were mounted on wooden panels in which spectators had to search out aesthetic experiences with a flashlight. Art historian Benjamin H.D. Buchloh argues that the exhibition was a response to the ‘uncanny present and a sinister future’ of a deteriorating French bourgeois culture eventually generating Fascist realities which were already established in Germany.² By completely darkening the space, the visitor interaction with the artwork solely depended on the artwork where space was charged exclusively with the exhibition value.³ Klonk talks about this reoccurrence of extreme scenography and juxtaposition in *The Documenta*, highlighting certain works in spotlights that made their movements appear mysterious, allure of the unknown and the mystique of the animated thing.¹² These were by themselves dramatic and immersive experiences. Though these exhibitions radically explores the limits of display, do they take away from the art pieces themselves? An article in *Widewalls* magazine quotes, that the flashlights were pointed at the faces of the people



Visitors with flashlights inspecting the paintings of the Exposition internationale du Surréalisme. 1938.

2 Buchloh, 2014

3 *ibid.*

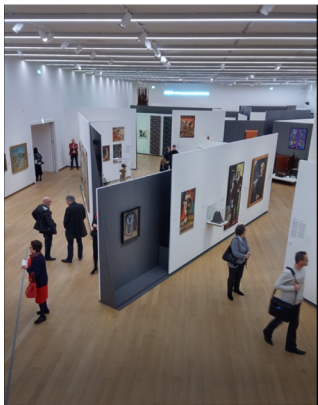
4 *Behind the Scenes of the Legendary International Surrealist Exhibition | Widewalls, n.d.*

rather than at the artworks themselves⁴, does this intense scenography prohibit the visitor (who also changed from bourgeois public sphere to an emerging proletarian public sphere) to engage with the artwork? Is this why one sees complete turn away from sensory environments in today's contemporary art spaces?

Exhibition as a response to the context it is displayed in

Exhibition in the age of myriad stimuli

In Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam architects Rem Koolhaas and Federico Martelli designed the extension in 2012 in the basement of the original museum. a freely divisible space with a network of steel walls of varying heights presented diagonally. One can see the work never hung centrally, nor in rows. Curators have experimented with hanging heights by hanging huge works on small walls or few small works on a wide wall. The Director of the museum, Beatrix Run called it the non-hierarchical presentation⁸ taking inspiration from the Internet where one can surf many side paths. Architect Koolhaas too acknowledged this ability of people of the 20th century to focus on multiple images at the same time and being stimulated by it almost as if one is walking through the city. He says, "The aim was to provide for an experience as if you are walking through a city, with sometimes exciting areas and now and again normal areas, some parts that you recognise and sometimes things that astonish you."⁹ While some described the exhibition as an insult to the visitors or impossible to enjoy the art or pure chaos, some argued in favour of it as it allows the visitor to move freely and associatively through a maze-like space. Serial arrangements offering alternative paths and discrete displays suited a pluralistic social history and encouraged interactive choices, but they also proved distracting and, for some visitors, disconcerting. While the theory of multiple stimuli maybe true, there is the risk of certain artworks getting overshadowed in the presence of bigger 'eye catching' artworks. Is there an extent to which one can explore the boundaries of these multiple stimuli without being overbearing?



8 Zoest, 2018

9 YouTube, "The making of."

10 Buergel, 2011

12 Klonk, 2009

Exhibition in an uprooted context

Lina Bo Bardi, an Italian born Brazilian architect was asked to create an exhibition for the Western Art. There was a mix of sculptures and paintings, ranging from the baroque to modernism, which was acquired from an impoverished post-War Europe by Assis Chateaubriand, a Brazilian entrepreneur. Her response was mounting the artwork on huge vertical glass panes that were fixed on cubic concrete bases. Each artwork was shown to be its own site, a display mode that attested both to the migratory destiny of the pieces, but also, and more importantly, to a lack of institutional framing. Bardi's careful choice of exhibiting the artwork was a response of showing a rich European collection without recreating a European model of representation just like Bode in 1955 played with whitewashed brick walls and milky white plastic curtains as a sign of rebirth from the wreckaged past.¹² Both of them used physical materiality of display boards as a reinforcement to the larger argument. Art's ontological status was no longer treated as a given - but as something individuals would have to make thus creating a 'rather personal set of affiliations between the artworks'.¹⁰ Just like Koolhaas's exhibitions, all artworks in São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP) were calling for viewer's attention simultaneously. Space assumed a flexible character, neutral and non-hierarchical, allowing an arrangement of works that elicited a less passive stance from the observer. In order to desacralise the arts she claimed in an article published in a São Paulo newspaper in the 1970s: "... I want to clarify that in designing the

Museum it was my intention to destroy the aura that always surrounds a museum, to present the work of art as work, as a prophecy of work at everyone's reach."¹¹

11 Lina Bo Bardi, 1970

A number of studies have reinstated international exhibitions, fairs, and department stores - once looped off the museum's family tree for their unseemly mix of commerce, culture and entertainment - as a major inspiration for the organization and display of museum material in the later nineteenth century. With museums updating themselves as cultural marketplaces, anchors of redevelopment projects, public service centres, and architectural showplaces these preoccupations are all the more intense. The question then raised are the limits of museum spaces to falling prey to the changing contexts it situates itself in. Should the museum become an inward looking mechanism just providing to be a blank canvas exhibiting work or should it open itself to the changing contexts the city has to offer.

Museum as a catalyst for Urban Development

As mentioned above museums and other public institutions play an important role in the city's fabric. Usually, those are the buildings that have the potential to become the icons of the city. The influence they have gives them an opportunity to become a catalyst for urban development, to improve the image of the city and attract tourists.

In the podcast, Seth O'Farrell discusses with Juan Ignacio Vidarte, the Guggenheim Bilbao director general, the city's transformation caused by the museum's creation. The Spanish city that was known for its shipyard and steelworks faced an economic decrease in the 1990s. The museum helped attract millions of tourists each year, boosting the whole region's economy. The "Bilbao effect" has become a world-known term describing this phenomenon. ¹

But what actually is the Bilbao effect? In his book, Dyckhof describes it as "bringing towns and cities in crisis back to life through the glorious redemptive power of architecture."² However, the Spanish city was not the first one to achieve it. Already in the 1970s the unprecedented building shapes of the Centre Pompidou in Paris and the Opera House in Sydney sparked curiosity and attracted a large number of tourists.⁴

Regardless of the uncertain beginnings of the whole process, it is clearly visible that, especially in the last decades, architecture started attracting a large number of tourists. The 'iconic buildings', like museums seem to be one of the most visited buildings in cities. Bilbao attracts over a million visitors yearly of which 85% are outside of the region¹. Even more impressive numbers are achieved by Tate Modern and MoMA each attracting over 5 million tourists ³. But why did modern art museums become so popular? Is art the main attraction point? Or is it rather the unusual shape and promise of an immersive experience?

The architecture of the Bilbao museum, its extraordinary form and shiny shell, allowed it to become the icon of the industrial city. However, for a museum to be successful, does it have to stand out in the city, creating a spectacle? Even its architect, Frank Gehry himself, seeing the shiny shell emerging on the horizon of the traditional Spanish city, said "what have I done to this city and its people."² The architects of Tate Modern in London took a different approach. By using the old factory they managed to blend the museum almost seamlessly into the historical city fabric. However, even here the spectacle exists, it is just moved to the interior of the museum.

Another aspect crucial in considering the Guggenheim Bilbao's success is its internationally recognized name. Thomas Krens, the head of the Guggenheim Foundation, planned for it to become a global brand. ²Over the years he created a series of satellite branches all over the world, circulating the art between them. It became like a corporation than a traditional art institution.

There are multiple aspects that contributed to Guggenheim Bilbao's success. Its iconic shape, the internationally recognized name, as well as, the bigger infrastructural investment in the city. Would

1 Dyckhoff, T. (2018)

4 Fairley, G. (2014)

2 Statista. (2021, September 29)

3 Statista. (2022, March 29)

it still be as successful if any of the ingredients changed? If it blended with the existing context rather than create a spectacle in the city, would it still attract millions of tourists each year? There is no certain answer to what the museum and other institutions should look like. However, what is certain is the power they have on the built environments, as well, as the larger urban context.

Values of the Museum

Last, but not least it is crucial to discuss the values represented by the museums. Museums are institutions collecting, archiving and exhibiting cultural heritage. Whatever they include in their permanent collection is becoming a part of the ‘canon’ and has a bigger chance of surviving and being remembered. It is a huge obligation and responsibility towards society. Even though some might try, the museum can never be neutral – especially as a public institution, it is a mirror of bigger societal context and changes. What is collected? In what context is it shown? Whom is it directed towards? And who is responsible for all that? Those are just some of the questions one should consider when thinking about the equality and inclusivity of the museum.

The book “Among Others: Blackness at MoMA” consists of two essays and an anthology of around 200 works from MoMA’s collection, through which it analyses MoMA’s historical relationship with black artists and their role in shaping cultural policy on race and the shortcomings of its collections, programmes and practices.

The first essay is by Darby English, who spent six years as a consulting curator at MoMA, and his co-author Charlotte Barat. It discusses MoMA’s curatorial practices, noting that MoMA has been stricter in its criteria for identifying the value of art by black artists than in other fields, and that it has prioritised aesthetics over the content and social context of these works. In the second essay, ‘White by Design’, architect and artist Mabel O. Wilson notes the architectural features of MoMA, while referring to the contradictions in the universality of ideas such as modernism and democratic architecture. And the anthology in the last chapter includes a wide range of 155 black artists, or artists who consider blackness in their work.

The authors notice that since 2010 the MoMA has purchased more works by black artists and there has been a significant increase in their exhibitions, however, they note that the museum “isn’t yet entitled to congratulate itself.”¹ Among other things, there has been no change in the racial diversity of the museum’s staff and authors continue to be sceptical about what the museum represents. Even though the book was a call for action no significant changes have been implemented and as a result English, who was a consulting curator at MoMA, quit the year after the book was published.

¹ English, 2019.

² The Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, 2018

³ Brook O, 2021

In the podcast, Laurie Taylor is talking with Orian Brook who is the co-author of the book “Culture is bad for you: Inequality in the cultural and creative industries” published in 2020. They are discussing a mechanism of exclusion from access to art and cultural institutions. Multiple papers claim the benefits of arts yet most of them don’t research the injustice and hostile behaviours towards people of colour that are filling the art environment.

Both the text and podcast are raising questions about deep social and spatial inequalities within the cultural sector. The very important and big sector that accounts for over 6% of the global economy², yet it is still “persistently saturated with the plethora of social and spatial inequalities.”³ To understand the rooted inequalities more fully it is essential to look at what is promoted in the cultural sector, who

is the promoter, as well as, the consumer.

All around the world what museums collect and display are predominantly white male artists' works. It results from the long history of those institutions. However, the world is changing, shouldn't the approach of museums progress as well? A survey carried out in 18 major US museums demonstrated that "85 per cent of the works were by white artists and 87 per cent were by men. Black artists had the lowest share of any racial group, with just 1.2 per cent of the works."⁴ It is becoming more probable to come across an exhibition of black artists or female artists, or other groups representing minorities in current collections. However, it seems like they are often just singular events following trends and trying to attract more people. Whether, as suggested in "Blackness at MoMA: A Legacy of Deficit", the goal should be to create a situation where black artists are not "a special occasion or subject, but just one artist among others."

⁴ Leung, G, 2020

⁵ *ibid.*

Creating a diverse representation is important not only among artists, but also among the people working in art institutions, the people who are actually responsible for choosing who and what is being shown and promoted. Even though there are tendencies to employ more women and people of colour "museum boards and leadership positions remain predominantly white."⁵ What is shocking is that the inequalities within the cultural sector go even deeper. According to Orian Brook even as graduates from university people from privileged class backgrounds still have twice the odds of getting a job in a cultural department compared to people from working-class backgrounds.

⁶ Brook O, 2021

The tendencies and visible inequalities within the cultural sector link back to the fact of who actually has the access to art. A very sparse percentage of the population makes use of the cultural sector. Only about 20% of the population attends the museum at least once a year.⁶ It has been reported that in the US it is almost twice more probable for kids from families in which at least one parent had graduated from college to visit an art museum or gallery, compared to families where parents' formal education concluded with a high school diploma.⁷

⁷ Art Museum Attendance, n.d.

The inequalities are visible within every level in cultural institutions: who is promoted, who is the promoter, as well as, the consumer. The role of the museum is to collect pieces of history and tell their stories. It is about time for them to be telling the whole story, not only a partial one. Without including people from different backgrounds museums will fail to truthfully represent the art of those forgotten for centuries. There is a need for museums and other cultural institutions to become more inclusive.

The museum is an institution that should represent the values of the current society. However, in the current world driven by money is it possible to achieve a space fair, safe and inclusive for all? Or is the museum yet another enterprise which first and foremost needs to bring profit, which means exhibiting what is 'trendy' and advertising it towards a certain group of people? Do you need public functions like shops or café to attract visitors? What role does a museum play and what values does it represent? As institutions responsible for our cultural heritage and being a representation of societal context museums should start answering those questions.

Conclusion

Through the write ups, we pondered over the questions that help us define contemporary art - what is art, who is an artist, the value of art, traditional vs. non-traditional art; change in the museum interiors - where does one draw the boundary between architecture and scenography, the scope of the architect and the scope of the artist ; role of the museum in the city - should it be an inward looking space or the one that interacts with the contexts it situates itself in; can it be a catalyst for urban development - what are the ingredients required for enabling this change ? is it the form or the institution itself that aids to its popularity ? ; what are the values of the museum - is it possible for a fair space that is safe and inclusive ?

As designers it feels like we have barely scratched the surface of the whole hidden world of museums that goes much beyond showcasing artwork. We hope these questions in turn will help us position ourselves while designing Contemporary Art Museum in Antwerp.

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