Research Plan
Interiors Buildings Cities

Group 8 - Nico Bueno, Misha Nesty, Julia Korpacka, Frank van Zelderen

The objective of this research is to understand the complexities of a contemporary museum beyond the practicalities of technical solutions, positioning the institution in a broader social, political, and economic context. In the process of ripping apart the layers of the organization, a set of dynamics arise, such as the politics of art curation, the power and influence of the director and the role of a museum both as a private and public institution. Consequently, in the process of understanding how these notions reflect and influence the creation of physical spaces, it is necessary to dwell on the specificities of the role of architecture within this context. Inevitably, we encounter ourselves debating the boundaries not only between what constitutes art and what does not but also in the matter of what constitutes architecture and what constitutes curation as a means to understand how an architect could take a position within that spectrum.

Within the realm of Interiors Building Cities graduation studio, we commence developing our own collective and individual positioning which this document is a record of. Through discussing the references introduced in the Research Seminar, we establish lines of inquiry that bind together the texts and podcasts included in the syllabus, other sources we have encountered or revisited in the process, and the first-hand experiences of visiting different museums. A shared method of looking at the background conditions characterizing the authors and the institutions from a historical perspective enables us to interrogate their position(s) within the context of our (design) inquiry.

From the collective, a parallel individual inquiry emerges as a practice of defining one's own position, not only towards art but also towards performing the architecture surrounding it. As each of us embarks on a personal investigation into the context of architecture for art (or Architecture for Art?), one might also reflect on their professional position at the end of an educational journey. How to make sense of the conditions, power relations and subjectivities embodied in the notions of the white cube, the institutional and curatorial responsibilities? What parallels are there between the circumstances in which art and architecture are being produced?

The Boundaries of a Museum

In his BBC Reith Lecture, Grayson Perry proposes where, in his view, the boundaries of what art is (and is not) lie. Treating the lecture as a piece of performance (art?) - one of whip, wit, and costume - he highlights some key moments that expanded or questioned the limits of art, from Duchamp's *Fountain*, through Piero Manzoni's *Merde d'Artiste* to photography and web art. By proposing a set of filters through which one can look at objects to define whether they constitute art or not, he takes the listeners around the perimeter of contemporary examples, testing his arguments. The respective boundary markers concern (1) *whether an object is found within an art gallery or art context,* (2) *whether it is a boring version of something else,* (3) *whether it is made by an artist,* and (4) *photography,* as well as a series of tests: (5) *the limited edition test,* (6) *the handbag and hipster test,* (7) *the rubbish dump test* and (8) *the computer art test*.

The first 'boundary marker' concerns the situation of the object *within an art context*, the default one being a gallery or a museum, which is something that was explored in more detail in Mark's text on the physical (and institutional) staging of art spaces. What remains undefined in this case, however, is the question of the art context *beyond* that of the establishment. Public space, nature, industrial sites, or found spaces have already been used as a context to exhibit art, and also as a response to being rejected from the confines of the institutions, the *Salon des Refusés* being just one of the historical examples.

Another boundary marker calls for the involvement of an artist. 'There is no such thing as art, only artists' - by quoting Ernst Gombrich, Perry releases art from its dependence on institutional validation, leaving space for the possibility of a critique of the politics of art through art itself. It is something we have indeed been discovering through examples and references brought up within the studio through texts or recounted by tutors - Joseph Beus' 'Organization for Direct Democracy through Referendum' at Documenta 5, Tom Sachs' 'Swiss Passport Office' or Michael Asher's 1974 exhibition at Claire S. Copley gallery. These examples constitute what political philosopher Chantal Mouffe calls *critical art*. To her, politics (also those of art) is 'the ensemble of discourses and practices, institutional or even artistic practices, that contribute to and reproduce a

certain order' (Mouffe, 2001, 99). While the performance or the installation itself may be a simple hoax or mystification, by being *instrumented* by an artist it becomes an act of artistic activism.

Considering Grayson Perry's context, Charles Saatchi being his patron, himself being part of the Royal Academy – he is very much within the accepted canon and in the centre of the contemporary British art scene. He is not much of another pioneer but rather an 'established controversy'. However, not many artists in his status also position themselves as observers of the conditions of the art world. Could we call Perry a 'reflective artist' then, building on the image of a reflective practitioner in architecture?

While Grayson Perry deals with the boundaries and the mere definition of what art can be, Mark Pimlott takes a look at the institutional motivation of a museum from a historical perspective and questions the organization of the entity and its role in defining the context of what art is simultaneously. Conceived 'very much like the palace (...) as a scaffolding for the projection of ideas, ideologies, and values' in order to articulate 'the authority of its possessor (Pimlott, 2022), the museum has always affirmed its role(s), according to the author, through the relations it curated between its content and its public. In other words, while the definition of what is considered art is related to the viewer's perspective and the object, the museum serves as an articulation, or even facilitator, for this relationship. Over the years, especially throughout the 20th century, it has been stripped of its perceived neutrality and positioned as a judge implicated in sociopolitical and economic biases. Through Pimlott's narrative, different layers emerge within the role of a museum.

The role of the filter. One must consider the institutional capacity of a museum to define what is considered art. We should acknowledge its role as an arbiter in which voices and stories are given a platform through the pieces displayed in gallery spaces, and, at the same time, which stories or narratives are being silenced. Contemporary museums have agency in dictating what later on becomes relevant (art) history.

The role as a public entity. While art is at the front stage of the institution, the backstage is embodied in a multiplicity of disciplines. The gallery spaces are reliant, to various degrees, on education programs, events, gift shops, and cafes. This might suggest that in recent years,

regardless of the nature of the museum's funding, the role it holds within a city is not only about art but also about leisure. In some ways, the boundaries of what the museum can be have been blurred just as much as the boundaries of what art can be.

The role of the stage. The concept of the modernist white box creates an illusion of simplicity and neutrality. It portrays a profession of clean walls and muted tones with a façade that almost makes you think the politics of art are as simple as walking in and hanging something on the wall. As we have seen in the De Pont museum (*figure 1*), this can even be evidenced in the floor plan of museums where you can see offices completely separated from galleries and a clear contrast in scale, these little spaces shoved to the back end. In the context of our studio, it would be especially interesting to see the backstage production of the art display. Sometimes it requires only a slightly heightened sensitivity to the surroundings, noticing the cleaning of toilets happening in the back of a group of mesmerized art enthusiasts (*figure 2*).

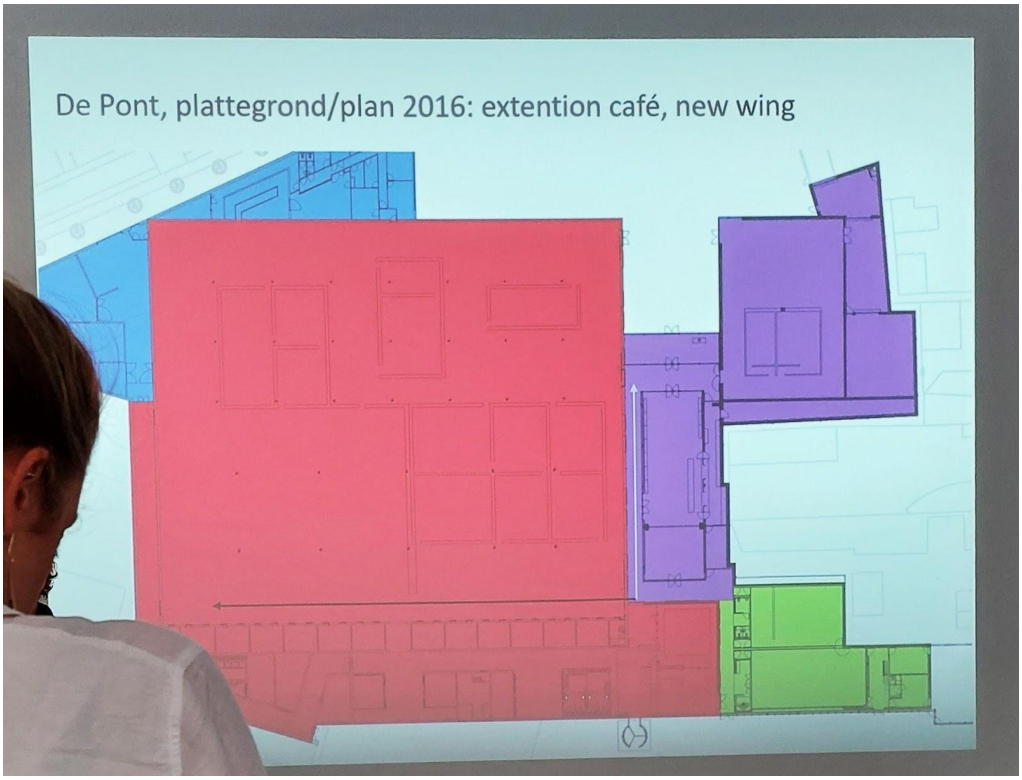

Figure 1. Schematic plan of De Pont museum in Tilburg. The gallery spaces are highlighted in red and the offices in blue. (source: authors)

Figure 2. Sometimes taking a step back allows catching a glimpse of the backstage of the museum, here during our trip to De Pont. (source: authors)

Curating the Experience

In 'The Dilemma of a Modern Art Museum' Charlotte Klonk reflects on the changes and challenges in the display of modern art in the post-war period. Through the case of Documenta in Kassel, she explores how curatorship and spaces of the display of art can also reflect larger changes in culture and society. The Documenta has functioned almost as a festival in its 'temporary permanence' in terms of not only the contemporary art it shows but also in the ever-changing curatorship and the display spaces themselves. As Klonk writes, it was able to "achieve an institutional quality by taking place at regular intervals in the same location" (Klonk, 2009, 173). Conceived as a *once-in-a-lifetime* experience for its visitors, it is comparable to the Venice Biennale in its format but curated independently of national issues as a political statement and an institution of art simultaneously.

Bringing curatorship to the foreground, the Documenta played an important role in the curator as hero approach to displaying art. The text outlines how, in the post-war context of West Germany, Documenta has established a name for itself as the reflection of the *Zeitgeist.* The politics of (Western) European reintegration embodied in the ambitions of the exhibition had a direct influence not only on the content of the exhibition but also on the spatial design of the display spaces, as well as the spirit in which Documenta was sold to its public. The perception of consumerism as democratic encouraged the adoption of Americanised trends and techniques in both art production and display, and reinforced the cultural and aesthetic separation from the Soviet Bloc. Through immersive installations designed by its curator and 'founding spirit' (Klonk, 2009, 176) Arnold Bode, often competing with the art exhibited within, the Documenta succeeded in both attracting a wide public and acting as a propaganda tool in conceiving a modern, Western, commodified future. Often compared to his retail projects, the spaces of the Documenta softened the borders between art and the ideas of modern living, creating this sense of familiarity and focus on user experience. In some ways, the evolution of the Documenta has preceded the trends of curating everything, which Hans Ulrich Obrist lists in 'Ways of Curating': from music festivals, clothing brands, and retail experience, influencers curating their lifestyle content, to interior designers curating hospitality decor.

Is the white box the culmination of the act of total (lifestyle) curation, where we, the public, are also on display? Following an unwritten code of conduct, or dressing in a particular way as per an Instagram trend to match one of the artworks in the museum? Richard Sennett reminds us that human feelings of exclusion and indifference are not only tied to the march of capitalism and its processes but to the *physical built forms* capitalism produces (Sennett, R. as cited in MacLeod et al., 2018, 2). The white cube, through the processes of commodification of contemporary art, its physical characteristics and the semiotics it embodies, is the ultimate exclusive experience. Dressing in a particular way, you could either stand out within that space or even become a part of it, all while looking at art.

Picture-perfect art and its display, as well as 'curated' visitor experience, are now powerful marketing tools that further blur the boundary between art and retail. Given that the traditional boundaries of the shopping experience are shifting as well, and our aesthetic taste is intrinsically linked to our material desires, the design of art and retail displays feed off each other like never before. We have already discussed the similarities between museums' efforts to keep the visitors in (and spending) for as long as possible by inserting cafés, gift shops (or now rather concept stores), and rooftop restaurants between its gallery spaces, and those of a shopping mall. Suppose an art gallery is not much different from a luxury retail boutique which everyone can enter and experience but only a selected few can actually own what is sold there. What is a museum's equivalent in retail terms?

A white box seems to be marketed as a type of space closest to those of art production, and therefore closest to the artists' intentions. While meaningful curatorship only appears to make sense in close collaboration between a curator and an artist, there is tension between the pure white box, the curator, and the artist. What began in the wake of all-encompassing installation art as a power struggle between curators and artists wanting to fill and transform museum spaces, now the focus has shifted towards the architecture of the museum (the shell) and the inside of the museum (the display and its content), as illustrated by the podcast on the Guggenheim Bilbao. If the architecture of a museum is flashy (especially compared to its urban setting), just like a 'celebrity artwork' it can attract multiple people. This experience, however, remains only superficial if the main attraction of a museum is its landmark statute;

people only need a picture with it from the outside without experiencing what is on the inside.

Within Documenta, there was this feeling of un-rootedness when it came to the artworks. When the first Documenta was held the museum was not fully renovated yet. The brick walls were whitewashed and the windows were covered with milky white plastic curtains, making it seem like the paintings were floating in the space. The whitewashing of the brick walls combined the old museum with new interior decoration materials, signalling a new birth of not only the museum but Germany as well. The Documenta was an escape from the outside world and entering a dreamlike experience, helping people forget about the Nazi past. Both Documenta and Guggenheim Bilbao represent efforts of revitalization after major processes negatively impacting the cities; Kassel was bombed during WWII and Bilbao lost its industry and thus its economical power. This meant that the design of the museums had to bear symbolic power, however in different ways, like the alienated shape of the Guggenheim and the recurring events of the Documenta. Neither Tate nor MoMA did have such a decline but instead shared the cultural and economical influence from the metropolitan status of their city; London and New York. Thus, unlike Documenta and the Guggenheim, they did not need to become iconic but rather had to fit into the status of the hosting city. Following these examples, contemporary museums can either be very iconic, trying to mark and boost their city, or they can be part of the larger picture of an existing (already popular) city as per a larger political agenda. In the context of our design research, it is interesting to question what are the alternatives in contemporary museum production.

Curating the urban development

The Bilbao effect is commonly used as an example of how a piece of *iconic* architecture can turn a forgotten city into a popular metropolis. However, this narrative can easily be misunderstood as if the sole insertion of the museum reshaped the urban condition of the city, when in fact, it serves as an example of how a city's urban conditions reframed the way a museum can be conceived. Juan Ignacio Vidarte, the current deputy director of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, summarizes the political agenda behind the introduction of the building in the 90s as an agent of economic development within a plan of urban renewal (2021). In other words, the museum was just one element, essential nonetheless, of a wide set of interventions to bring Bilbao back to life. As such, the undeniable success of the project goes beyond the intervention by Gehry and can be analyzed as the result of different layered socio-economic dynamics.

A symbiotic improvement. By the 1990s the absence of previous industrial production in the area had turned the city into a place of steelwork, shipyards, and violence. The revamping of the urban environment was then developed as a plan that involved, among others, elements like cleaning the river, a new metro line, and the introduction of the museum. As such, without the necessary improvements to the city, the museum would not have been able to catalyse such change as a stand-alone project. In the same way, it is doubtful that the urban improvements alone would have put Bilbao on the map. The Guggenheim was thought of as an investment that, in fact, was not a big monetary influx according to Vidarte when compared to the rest of the project. The economic origin of the museum is reflected simultaneously in the choice of Vidarte, who has a graduate degree in education in economics and business studies, as the managing director for the project.

The franchising of culture. The objective of catering to a global audience was reflected in the business model of establishing the museum as part of the Guggenheim foundation. Consequently, the decision reduced the difficulties that the government would otherwise have to tackle if they would have tried to set up a collection from scratch. The established name of the foundation serves as an unofficial seal of quality on the exhibitions in the museum and entices people to visit, while the subsidy for its annual

operations puts the American foundation in charge of organizing temporary exhibitions to rotate its permanent collection. The success of the strategy shows in the 85 per cent of foreign visitors that walk through the building. As a result, beyond being put on the map, the museum has become one of the biggest influxes of cash for the city.

The identity paradox. Due in great measure to the nature of its design, but arguably also due to the use of the permanent art collection of the foundation, the project has been criticized as not Basque or Spanish enough. However, when looking at the founding intentions and the urban revamping project as a whole, it's easy to understand the building was never meant to blend in, it was always intended to ruffle some feathers. The debated design by Gehry can also be understood as an appropriate response to the role this particular museum had in this particular city. While it fails to evoque or reference directly the vernacular architecture of Bilbao, it becomes a representative element of the previous decay of the city and the effort invested in the urban intervention. It’s representative of the identity of the area towards the future by responding to the issues of the past.

This particular case raises an interesting dynamic in the architecture of museums. The built object as a work of art in itself that almost positions the museum as an art installation when understood from an urban scale. Simultaneously it opens up the debate of how entangled is the collection of a museum to the architectural identity of its building. Is there a division between the exhibition spaces and the outer skin of the contemporary art museum?

A Culture of Privilege and the Rest

Orian Brook and Laurie Taylor discuss in a brief and synthesized manner the systematic inequalities embedded in the "culture" we produce and the disadvantages women, people of colour and working-class citizens face when attempting to join these institutions. Put simply, upper-middle-class men have four times the odds of having a cultural job compared to the working class. When someone from these groups makes it into the industry, the argument of positive discrimination and tokenism minimizes their achievements and questions their success. The unspoken expectation of what someone working in a cultural job must look like turns a system of alleged inclusion into passive segregation. **Inevitably, if cultural institutions are conformed by a selected few, the role of telling and recording stories through his narrow idiosyncrasy conceives an equally narrow narrative that seeps into the collective consciousness**. As a result, the feeling of exclusion can even reflect on who feels adequate to consume culture in the first place, leading to a restrictive idea that is only meant for the upper class. The question then arises of what is the actual value of this "culture" that reflects social and spatial inequalities and could potentially result in the materialization of hostile spaces.

In Britain alone, the people who work in art or culture jobs are predominantly white, with 95% working in television and another 91% in publishing. The statistics of people not absorbing or visiting cultural institutions are even worse, with only a fifth of the population going to an art gallery and a twelfth going to a classical music concert. Only seventeen percent make art, sixteen percent in crafts, and twelve percent in musical instruments.

From a social perspective, museums could take on a more diverse curatorial approach when taking on artists or addressing the communities they're surrounded with. The bourgeois notion that art is exclusive to the higher class prevents communities from relating to the content of exhibition halls and subsequently from having an easier time being interested in attending such spaces. In fact, if people can identify themselves, and their culture or relate to the artists' background, they could be enticed to feel welcome and visit these institutions, thus fostering spaces of inclusion rather than segregation.

'Among Others' deals with the issue of exclusion and misrepresentation by outlining the black history of the MoMA and situating it through a historical critique of the institution's approach to curating art. Written by Darby English who was an Adjunct Curator at MoMA between 2014 and 2020 and Charlotte Barat, MoMA's curatorial assistant, the volume puts forward a dense synthesis of meticulous analysis of newspaper articles, internal communications, and oral history, in large parts compiled for the first time. The position of the authors as part of the MoMA arises from the possible conflict of bias juxtaposed with inside access to information. However, Amy's comment about Darby English quitting MoMA as their curator because of this text, or rather the institution's (lack of) reaction to it speaks volumes. Moreover, the authors admitted that despite their 'insider' position they were unable to access many of the institution's records. The text seemed more like a tick-in-a-box for MoMA, not showing interest in systematic changes or how to improve. It is, in fact, a consistent reaction with the track record outlined in English and Barat's research.

The influence of modernist thought we know from architecture was also present in art and art institutions, such as MoMA. The belief in the neutrality and inclusion through the universality of a museum (and its 'international style' architecture) concealed, for a long time, that 'at the end of the day, regardless of the power and influence they claim or acquire, art museums are human systems: unstable, grounded in bias, habitual, and difficult to modify' (Barat & English, 2014, 15). The text points to a reactive approach of the museum to black art, fluctuating between total neglect and pioneering ideas, and a disjunction between the message being told and the actions being taken. A dynamic of two steps forward and then three steps back. Every showcase of black art was characterized by an apparent lack of drive toward a comprehensive and truthful interest in the artist's cultural background. For instance, the exhibition commemorating the assassination of Martin Luther King was approached initially with a disproportionate amount of white artists in comparison to coloured artists. Additionally, as the number of back artists grew the discussion of separating their art from the other white artists was raised which in principle does not align with the goal of inclusion and equality that MLK stood for. Such a tokenistic approach to social responsibility kept reappearing whenever race and inequality were a 'hot topic' and was reinforced by the lack of meaningful relationships with black artists in the co-curation of MoMA.

One of the questions the text raises in the context of our research is why it is important to write institutional history. *Museums are the archetypal malleable institution; they have come to speak of civilization, modernity, democracy, and economic prosperity (regardless of the realities), and any self-respecting international city must now be home to museums and galleries of international quality, ideally on a waterfront site* (MacLeod et al., 2018, 2). Museums are history writers; not only of *art* history but rather art as a reflection, commentary and interpretation of the social, political, economic, and cultural reality. As their task is to collect and preserve it, ultimately, the museum collections become a record of history for generations to come, embodied in art. Therefore, permanent collections have particular importance. The questions of buying and collecting vs loaning and displaying challenge the institutional responsibility to balance the diversity of art and artists held in museums' collections. When only portraying a fraction of art and art history constantly, there is little attention paid to other works that have been on display temporarily. Permanent collections have more of a hold in a museum, it is something that will always be present. By displaying the art made by people of colour predominantly temporarily, there is neglect in the whole part of that history and culture. Furthermore, besides their role as history makers, the increasingly social role of museums through outreach programs was exemplified in MoMA with programs like the children's art carnival and the physical art centre established by the museum. The success could be attributed to the collaboration of the institution with community leaders and the leading figure Blayton-Taylor. But despite the good efforts and the positive impact on the Harlem community, the principles of collaborative curation and racial inclusion stayed in Harlem and were not embedded in the museum's systems.

MoMA's response to race and intersectionality by claiming to be colourblind is not the solution. Recognizing bias must be embedded in cultural institutions as an effort to confront it and avoid the possibility of perpetuating a narrow and segregative narrative. If not, how can consumers demand space and a platform in a sphere in which they are supposedly included but do not even feel a part of?

Bibliography

Barat, C., English, D. (2019) *Among Others: Blackness at MoMA.* MoMA.

BBC (2021) *Thinking Allowed: Culture and Privilege.* BBC.

fDi (2021) *The Bilbao Effect #1: Bilbao, Spain Guggenheim Bilbao's director general discusses the city's world-renowned transformation.*

Klonk, C. (2009) *Spaces of Experience: Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to 2000.* Yale University Press.

MacLeod, S. et al. (ed.) (2018) *The Future of Museum and Gallery Design.* Routledge.

Mouffe, C. (2001) 'Every Form of Art Has a Political Dimension' *Grey Room 02.* Grey Room Inc. and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. pp.98-125.

Obrist, H. U. (2014) *Ways of Curating.* Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Perry, G. (2013) *Beating the Bounds.* BBC Reith Lecture Series Podcast.

Pimlott, M. (2022) 'Visibility, spectacle, theatricality'. *OASE 111: Staging the museum.*