Museum Utopia. A Brief Architectural History of the Ideal Museum

About one hundred years before the first purpose-built museum was opened, ideas and thoughts about creating an optimized surrounding for displaying collected objects already existed. These ideas were never put into practice. Instead, they remained 'ideal' museums. However, they had a great impact on the development of the museum as a public institution and as an independent building type. Telling this parallel history of the museum sheds light on the utopian aspects of an institution that, by its conservative nature, seems to avoid all unpredictable innovations. Expressed in the form of ideal museums, utopian museum thinking is traceable until today.

The Ideal Museum in the 18th Century and the Académie Royale

As a concept, the ideal museum evolved in the beginning of the 18th century, at a time when collections were housed almost exclusively in the palaces of the kings. The elites considered their conglomeration of artworks, naturalia, historical artifacts, gems and coins as a proof of their supremacy and taste. When the first 'ideal' museums evolved, it was a critique of the circumstances in which the existing courtly collections where maintained. The palaces often were humid and moldy, the light conditions were miserable and objects were neither cataloged nor protected from fire or other possible damages since their owners took them as ornaments for their *salons* and *boudoirs*.[128] Primarily, the 'ideal' museum criticized the lack of public access to the collections, though not by stating this explicitly, but by proposing an architectural structure detached from the palace.

The first known draft for an ideal museum was produced by the German polymath Christoph Leonhard Sturm in 1704. It consisted solely of a floor plan with no elevation. The plan shows a single building with a sequence of rooms where a typical princely or royal collection could have been displayed. Each room was intended to house a specific part of such a collection (objects of wonder, jewelry, antiquities, art). Sturm numbered the rooms according to their contents. In doing so, a round tour through the museum evolved. The idea of a tour and a dedication of each section to a specific room was new for a time when collections just started to be arranged according to specific classifications.[129] The draft does not say whether the museum should have had public access. It is clear, though, that the structure is not connected to a courtly dwelling. Consequently, it must have possessed an outer entrance that would have made it accessible for a broader audience. Sturm's ideal museum was visionary given the fact that there were no forerunners of purpose-built, single museum buildings at the time he published his draft.[130]

In the second half of the 18th century several 'ideal' museum plans evolved from two competitions of the *Académie Royale* in Paris. Whereas the first competition in 1754 asked for a small *salon des arts*, the second competition in 1779 explicitly invited participants to outline a *muséum des arts*. Grand structures were created for this second competition in which François Jacques Delannoy gained the first prize, the *prix de rome*.[131] Then, in 1884, Étienne-Louis Boullée entered the scene of the ideal museum. The most prominent exponent of french revolutionary architecture and teacher at the *Académie Royale*, he dwarfed with his „projet pour le muséum" all drafts of ideal museums that were produced before. The horizontal projection is based on a Greek cross. In the middle of his draft Boullée put a giant rotunda resembling the *Pantheon* in Rome, just bigger. The four sides were flanked with grand halls lined with columns. In contrary to Sturm, Boullée didn't care about what was supposed to be in his museum. He designed an empty space. It was rather the architectural possibilities linked with this new building type which attracted him. The museum offered him a way to think about a huge building whose purpose was not to satisfy and pamper any of the current leaders. By that he established a new form of representative architecture. It no longer represented a single person – the king – but the individual who stands in the middle of a grand edifice. This shift in architectural thinking had a significant influence on the self-perception of the public and at the same time reflected this change. Consequently, the architectural historian Paula Young Lee sees these first 'ideal' plans as the birth of the museum as a public institution – not the opening of the Louvre in 1793.[132]

Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand's design for an ideal museum, which he used in his lectures at the Royal Academy from 1802-1805 can be seen as a summary of the plans generated in the 18th century. It was published in his textbook *Preçis des leçons d'architecture* that had a great influence on museum architecture in the 19th century and was salable in France as well as abroad.[133] Like many of his predecessors he structured the building as a square, subdivided by a Greek cross with four patios so that there was enough light in the inside. In the center of the cross he placed a rotunda – a highly visible dome from the outside –, which could be thought of as a community gathering space. Long colonnades covered all four sides of the building. Durand avoided one main entrance in favor of a plurality of entrances in order to make all parts of the building easily accessible.[134]

The Ideal Museum in the 19th and 20th Century: A Critique against Existing Museums

As the first museum buildings were erected in the beginning of the 19th century (*Dulwich Picture Gallery* in London in 1817, *Altes Museum* in Berlin in 1830), ideal museums did not cease to be produced. In the beginning, the ideal museum was a critique against the elites and a dream of something that did not exist yet. It then becomes a way to think about different approaches to a more and more stable and crusted institution. Projects like the *Ideales Museum* by German architect Gottfried Semper in 1852 and the purely functional model by the museum reformer Alfred Lichtwark in 1924 are witnesses of this development.[135] Semper tried to shape an encyclopedic museum that offered space for a collection that should represent all objects categorized by groups of material.

[128] See James J. Sheehan (2000): *Museum in the German Art World. From the End of the Old Regime to the Rise of Modernism.* Oxford/New York, p. 21 and 51. See also Kristina Kratz-Kessemeier/Andrea Meyer/Bénédicte Savoy (2010): *Einleitung. Museumsgeschichte. Kommentierte Quellentexte 1750-1950.* Berlin, pp. 11-16, here: 14.

[129] Furthermore, the classification systems of the 18th century were those of the table, not of the series, like in Sturm's museum. (Tony Bennett (1995): *The Birth of the Museum. History, Theory, Politics.* Abingdon/New York, here: 77.)

[130] He published his draft in a compendium for noblemen („Der geöffnete Ritterplatz"), which indicates the localization of collections at the time of Sturm.For a more detailed description of Sturm's ideal museum see Nikolaus Pevsner (1976): *A History of Building Types.* Princeton: 114.

[131] For Delannoy's draft see the website of *L'école nationale supérieure des beaux-arts*: http://www.ensba.fr/ow2/catzarts/voir.xsp?id=00101-1769&qid=sdx_q1&n=2&sf=&e=.

[132] Paula Young Lee (1998): Standing on the Shoulders of Giants: Boullée's Atlas Facade for the Bibliothèque du Roi. In: *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 57 No. 4, pp. 404-431, here: 415.

[133] See Helmut Seling (1967): The Genesis of the Museum. In: *The Architectural Review* 141, pp. 103-114, here: 110. Because of his broad success the *Preçis* is also called „Le petit Durand".

[134] See Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand (1817): *Preçis des Leçons d'Architecture Données à l'École Royale Polytechnique.* Paris: 57.

[135] See Gottfried Semper (2010 [1852]): *Ideales Museum.* In: Kristina Kratz-Kessemeier/Andrea Meyer/Bénédicte Savoy (see note 1): pp. 36-43. See also Alfred Lichtwark (1924): *Briefe an die Kommission für die Verwaltung der Kunsthalle.* Edited by Gustav Pauli. Hamburg.

Lichtwark criticized contemporary museum architecture as being far too trendy to serve the museum's purpose. It would inevitably interfere with the objects on display. Lichtwark's plan was to eliminate all conventional ornamentation from the façade to achieve a more or less neutral container for the exhibits – 15 years before international-style MoMA opened its gate and 50 years before the *white cube* debate reached its peak.

Then, in 1931, in his „musée à croissance illimitée" [museum of infinite growth] Le Corbusier focused on a different challenge of this rising institution. He presented an ideal concept for an art museum that faces the problem of continuing artistic production and acquisition of art, and consequently, a lack of space. Le Corbusier's ideal museum is made up of standardized elements. Its horizontal projection resembles a spiral. In theory his museum thus had the possibility of a cheap and easy extension by elongating the spiral. In practice nearly every wall had to be an exterior wall which would have made the design more costly. Moreover, there would have only been a one-way circuit along the spiral, a fact that made it inexpedient for exhibition design and uncomfortable for visitors. Considering these problems Le Corbusier reworked his sketch in 1939, adding openings into the walls and hence abandoning the standardization of the wall elements.[136]

After emigrating to the United States in 1937 the leader of the German *Bauhaus* movement Ludwig Mies van der Rohe plotted the plan for a *Museum für eine kleine Stadt* [museum for a small town], in which he criticized the connection of architecture and art to be numb.[137] His ideal museum was built up of one single room to allow for utmost flexibility for displaying art in an environment where nothing distracted the visitor from the exhibits. In this one big room Mies also located staff and administration. The blending of visitors, art works and staff can be still seen as a revolutionary program. Mies' aim of his museum for a small city was to dispose of all barriers between art and life. The museum should serve the community as a meeting place for the cultural life in the city. The environment around the museum was projected to be a sculpture garden without enclosure. City and museum coalesced.

Beside the museum drafts done by architects, and beginning with Gustave Courbet's *Pavillon du Réalisme* as a rival side event of the International Exhibition in 1855, there is a tradition of artists who are creating ideal museums. As in the case of Courbet, most of the initiators of such projects were discontent with the modus operandi of the art market or with existing museum buildings. Some of them also wanted to offer a different view on the conjunction of contemporary artistic production and museums. Sometimes these concepts served as an extension of their own opus, like Marcel Duchamp's *boîte-en-valise* (first edition in 1941), a suitcase with reproductions of some of his art works to be carried and displayed anywhere.[138] On the other hand there are concepts like Georg Baselitz' *Bilderbude*, a highly reduced architectural structure for selected artist friends of his, planned to be mounted on the sixth *documenta* in 1977.

One of the most famous ideal museums is that of the Irish artist Brian O'Doherty: the *white cube*, published in 1976. The *white cube* still acts like a magic word in the discussion of museum building design. With his ideal museum O'Doherty described a platonic vision: „The ideal gallery subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is 'art'. The work is isolated from everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself. […] Some of the sanctity of the church, the formality of the courtroom, the mystique of the experimental laboratory joins with chic design to produce a unique chamber of esthetics."[139] This vision serves as starting point for a critical analysis of the museum world. O'Doherty was well aware that the „white wall's apparent neutrality is an illusion".[140] With his ideal museum he tries to figure out ways of interaction between artist, art, and the museum, an interaction which in sum he says should be paradoxical and ironical. This conclusion derived from more or less zeroing one part of this interaction, the architecture of the museum.

A recent example of an ideal museum is „The Delirious Museum", outlined in the book of the same name by architect and museum consultant Calum Storrie in 2006. He describes his ideal museum as follows: „a place overlaid with levels of history, a multiplicity of situations, events and objects open to countless interpretations".[141] Like Mies he did not want to draw a line between the museum and the surrounding city. He rather superposed the city with the museum. Like many of the ideal museums in the 18th century the draft of the *Delirious Museum* shows a central rotunda, but unlike all other projects Storrie's draft is characterized by a succession of extremely distinct rooms, partly quadrate, partly polygonal, partly round. Each room is fitted with specific works of art that are intended to reflect the processes of negotiation between the objects on display and the museum. Storrie's goal is not to replace the existing museum as an institution, but rather to bring „a new level of 'messy vitality' and 'richness of meaning' to the museum". Consequently the *Delirious Museum* „cannot be made; […] it can only be brought into existence retroactively", which means in conclusion: „The architecture of this museum is neither here nor there."[142] In spite of his detailed descriptions of the ideal museum space, the place of this project is not fixed.

Virtual Museums: Ideal Gallery Spaces in the 21st Century

The 'placelessness' (*atopia*) of ideal museums is echoed in the rise of virtual museums in the late 1990s until today. Almost every real-life museum has its virtual representation on the internet. Some of them are making an extensive use of the new digital possibilities by creating an online access to their exhibits (also to those not on display) and curating digital-only exhibitions.[143]

Quite similar to the competitions of the *Académie Royale* the Italian architecture platform *newitalianblood* (www.newitalianblood.com) launched an international call for tenders in 2001. With a first prize worth 10,000 Euro, the assignment was to find new solutions for exhibiting museum content on the Web: „The competition calls for a re-conception of the traditional 'exhibition space' within our current sensibilities and technologies, and at the same time, calls for the design of new digital interfaces, online or offline, as effective alternatives to physical spaces."[144] The renowned jury consisted (amongst others) of Aaron Betsky, former

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[136] See www.fondationlecorbusier.fr. Le Corbusier already experimented with the spiral in 1929 for his design of the „Mundaneum", a museum of the history of humanity in Geneva. Traces of his ideal museum are to be found in his *National Museum of Western Art* in Tokyo, completed in 1959. The extension of this museum, accomplished by one of his former apprentices in 1979, is not an elongation of the original building, though.
[137] See Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1986 [1943]): Museum für eine kleine Stadt. In: Fritz Neumeyer: *Mies van der Rohe. Das kunstlose Wort – Gedanken zum Bauen*. Berlin, pp. 385-386.
[138] Victoria Newhouse values Duchamp's project as an alternative museum model since „the boîte, in fact, approximates all the museum's functions: validating objects that have been removed from their context and deprived of their intended role, preserving them and disseminating their abstracted meaning." (Victoria Newhouse (2006): *Towards a New Museum* (exp. ed.). New York: 105.) See also Dalia Judovitz (1995): *Unpacking Duchamp: Art in Transit*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London.

[139] Brian O'Doherty (1986 [1976]): *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: 14.
[140] Ibid.: 79.
[141] Calum Storrie (2006): *The Delirious Museum. A Journey from the Louvre to Las Vegas*. New York: 2.
[142] Ibid.: 3 and 64.
[143] For example, the *Louvre* enables a search of many of its art works on display and in storage (www.louvre.fr/moteur-de-recherche-oeuvres). In October 2010, the *New Museum of Contemporary Art* curated the exhibition „Free" that was shown exclusively on the website of the museum, with some additional events in real life (www.newmuseum.org/free).
[144] www.newitalianblood.com/competition/doc/brief-nib-kwArt.pdf.

director of the *Nederlands Architectuurinstituut*, Ben van Berkel, founder of the architecture office *UNStudio*, and Hani Rashid from *Asymptote Architects*, who, at the same time, was working on the *Guggenheim Virtual Museum*. The members of the jury as well as the number of entries (129 from 28 different countries) show the relevance of this kind of museological discourse, the more so as none of the entries was planned to actually go online.

With the history of Frank Lloyd Wrights *Guggenheim Museum* as one of the first iconic museum structures in mind, the *Guggenheim Virtual Museum* claimed to be „the most important virtual building of the twenty-first century“.[145] It should have been the overall virtual platform of all *Guggenheim* projects and branches, back then in SoHo, Las Vegas, Berlin, Bilbao, and Venice, with only the latter two locations still operating.[146] Planned to be put online in 2002, like many other (real-life) expansion projects of the *Guggenheim Foundation*, it was never implemented. The *Guggenheim* website remained in a classical form, giving general information about the collections, exhibitions and events of the different museums. Nevertheless, the *Asymptote* project received a broad critical reception and fed the discourse on future developments of the virtual museum.

Sometimes, virtual museums are a substitute for actual museums, like in the case of the *Museum of Architecture* (www.archmuseum.org) that presents Turkish architectural heritage in two sections: the thematic exhibitions in the 'galleries', and an all accessible storage. The founder, Turkish architect Doğan Hasol, sees the virtual museum as a predecessor of a real-life museum. In contrast, the *Adobe Museum of Digital Media* (AMDM) can only exist in the virtual world, since all its exhibits are digitally produced. It opened in October 2010 in a virtual building designed by Italian architect Filippo Innocenti. Innocenti describes the planning process as follows: „creating something virtual wasn't that easy in the end, so we had to go back and try to see the museum as something more credible, more physical“.[147] With this characterization he summarizes the basic contradiction of virtual museums: the necessity of space to show objects in a way that is comprehensible for visitors on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the virtual world where 'space' in a traditional sense does not exist. Moreover, this project shows that virtual museum space can be as complex to handle as actual museum space is.

The AMDM represents a company. In contrast to other company museums this multinational does not exhibit its history or other facts about the firm, but rather uses the virtual museum as an instrument to demonstrate one of its products while showing its affinity to the world of artistic and scientific production. It is yet to be seen to what extent this extraordinary elaborate model of a virtual museum has an impact on other approaches, since it would not be the first time for the advertising industry to have an influence on the museum world – and vice versa.[148] In any case, with their free access for all kinds of audiences (that possess an internet access) and their open storages virtual museums set an example for real-life museums which struggle to reach new audiences and to justify the bigger part of their collections being not on display but inaccessible in the storage.

Virtual museums challenge an institution that is defined by authenticity and by the aura of 'real' objects in 'actual' space.[149] In this perspective they constitute a continuation of the ideal museum. Moreover, virtual museums emphasize space as a principal constituent of any thinking about museums in general. The drafts done by architects like Boullée, Semper, and Le Corbusier certainly used constructed space to express their ideas about the museum. However, so did artists like Duchamp and Baselitz. Also Storrie's *Delirious Museum* is geared to a built environment. And, similarly, the more elaborate variants of virtual museums like the *Guggenheim Virtual* and the AMDM still appointed architects to create spatial structures in which museum content is provided.

The Museum as a Utopian Space

Even in the virtual museum, space – *topos* and *atopos* – remains a structural principle. One could even argue that the actual space of the museum and the imaginary space of the ideal and virtual projects are mutually dependent on each other. In the beginning, ideal museums pleaded for erecting public, purpose-built edifices for displaying objects that formerly were stored away in courtly dwellings. After the museum was established as an independent building type, the ideal projects turned against tendencies in the contemporary museum world in general and promoted to build museums which are more adequate to specific ideas or to specific exhibits. With the digital age, new forms of presenting objects arised and were tried to be implemented in the museum domain.

Except for some of the virtual projects, Duchamp's *boîte*, and Courbet's *Pavillon*, none of the ideal museums were realized. In fact, most of them weren't even intended to be realized. But almost all of the discussed projects have had and partly still have a great impact on the development of museum architecture. Traces of them can be found even in contemporary museum architecture: Boullées rotunda in the *Pinakothek der Moderne* in Munich or in Mario Botta's MART in Rovereto, Mies' coalescence of city and museum in the current discussion on accessibility, O'Doherty's *white cube* in the MoMA Taniguchi extension, in SANAA's *21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art* in Kanazawa, and many others. Ideal museums thus are here *and* there, are part of an imaginary as well as part of the 'real' world. They are in a state of permanent negotiation between both spheres, in other words: a utopia.

Each of the ideal museum concepts longs for something that is not there but – given the elaborate descriptions and drawings – without a question is worth striving for. Unbound, experimental, utopian thinking is not necessarily an intrinsic characteristic of the museum as an institution whose purpose (amongst others) is to preserve things and therefore to build up a more or less stable, formalized structure. Why then are those ideal, utopian concepts a constant companion of the museum in the different stages of its development?

What all ideal museums have in common is their independence to a specific location. The purely text-based ideal museums as well as the drawings do not show where they are meant to be erected. This is a fundamental component of a utopia as Michel Foucault defines it: „Utopias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces.“[150] The lack of placing enables an analysis and a critique of society or the museum respectively. It enables an external perspective.

[145] Written in the project description by *Asymptote Architects*: www.asymptote.net/art-objects-and-editions/guggenheim-virtual-museum.

[146] Even the *Deutsche Guggenheim* in Berlin is planned to be shut down in the course of 2012.

[147] Transliteration from the trailer „Making the Impossible“: http://adobemuseum.com/#/video/makingOf.

[148] See e.g. Michelle Henning (2006): *Museums, Media and Cultural Theory*. Maidenhead/New York, pp. 32-33.

[149] See e.g. Martin Hall, who refers to Walter Benjamin: Martin Hall (2006): The Reappearance of the Authentic. In: Ivan Karp et al. (ed.): *Museum Frictions. Public Cultures/Global Transformations*. Durham/London, pp. 70-101. See also Heiner Treinen (2007): Das Museumswesen: Fundus für den Zeitgeist. In: Ruairi O'Brien (ed.): *Das Museum im 21. Jahrhundert*. Dresden, pp. 27-40.

[150] Michel Foucault (1986): Of Other Spaces. In: *Diacritics*, Vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 22-27, here: 24.

Hence, the ideal conceptions unclose the museum for a more reflected standpoint. Through the lens of utopian ideas the established and static institution 'museum' becomes questionable and vulnerable. The museum is transformed into a suggestion that can be negotiated by anyone at anytime. The „unreal space" of utopian thinking can knead the museum into a real social space where people can congregate and discuss what they see rather than simply absorb what is on display. In the end, the ideal museum is a constant companion of the actual museum because it has proven to be an effective tool of its advancement.

The history of the ideal museum is far from finished as recent publications and conferences demonstrate.[151] It still is a form of criticizing and changing the museum. Nowadays, it is presumably not a comprehensive concept but a mere fragment of thought. Maybe being open to such fragments turns the museum to an accessible, public institution in the first place.

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Abstract

'Ideal museums' are projects, mainly generated by architects and artists, which are not intended to be realized. They are published as drafts, written descriptions, and thoughts that are the conclusion of a close, personal examination of museums and the functionality of their architecture. In the last three centuries, ideal museums are a constant companion to the evolution of the museum. They reflect crucial markers in the development of a public building type that nowadays seemingly overwhelms the institution it comprises. Analyzing these projects helps to draw a history of the museum and its architecture off the beaten track. In fact, ideal museums reveal the utopian potential of the inherently conservative museum.

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[151] E.g. the Museum Studies Conference at the University of Leicester in March 2012, and the upcoming collaborative publication *Museum Futures. A Speculative Investigation of Museum Past, Present & Future* (see http://museum-futures.tumblr.com/).