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Overtaking the Museum: Architectural Dissonance at the R.O.M.

(1672 words)

When the Royal Ontario Museum's aging, neo-classical façade was corrupted by the Michael Lee Chin Crystal, the results were mixed—and more than just in terms of casual opinion. Conceived as a pellucid ornament of daring angles and towering apexes, architect Daniel Libeskind's 2007 addition to the building gave jarring, fantastical form to an otherwise stoic institution. Designed with the lofty intention of granting icon status to the museum, the lack of harmony between the former historic architecture and its ahistoric new growth raised the question—of what, exactly, is the R.O.M. an icon? By their prerogative, museums ideally strive to espouse a rational truth, yet the crystal denies any rational interpretation. Its structure, devoid of any right angles and recognizable architectural elements, rejects the ordered nature of the museum. Instead, it renders the R.O.M. a heterotopia—a counter-site defined by irrationality and unfamiliarity. This disorients both the physical space of the museum as well as its ability to effectively communicate, leaving its audiences to ponder the nature of the museum and its import—if such a thing can even be determined.

Ideally, museums communicate transcendental knowledge about the world. They exist as the stewards of culture through curated collections that serve a greater purpose than their individual contents—namely, the preservation and dissemination of knowledge. Both the collections and the character of a museum are consolidated through the institution's mission directive as well as its structural whole. In terms of the former, a directive unifies both internal dynamics and educational prerogatives while manifesting as the taxonomical, chronological and otherwise intellectually digestible ordering of displays. In terms of the latter, the binding power of the museum's architecture provides a sense of unity through physical space. In *Civilizing Rituals: Inside the Public Art Museum*, Carol Duncan posits that the contemporary link between transcendental truth and architecture occurs via the museum. This is evidenced through the museum's frequent adoption of the architectural tropes of classical-era temples, rendering these institutions as the secular heirs to the religious structures of the ancient world. Certainly the older, neo-classical architecture of the R.O.M. elicits Duncan's notions by including renditions of the pediments, columns and stylobates of ancient Greece. However, the relationship between the two can be seen as more than a mere aesthetic similarity since both the temple and the museum can, according to Duncan, be viewed as ritual sites. While the former exists as the locus of religious revelry, the museum enshrines a "truth that is rational and verifiable . . . [an] 'objective' knowledge" (Duncan 8). The museum

also “[enables] individuals . . . to move beyond the psychic constraints of mundane existence, step out of time, and attain new, larger perspectives,” thus rendering it a site of meditation (Duncan 12). The museum is therefore a transcendental realm—one devoted to enlightening its visitors to the rational ideals that it espouses. It is an institution concerned with universal concepts as ameliorated through its cohesive architecture—at once a microcosm of the world, yet also an idealized conception of it.

While Duncan viewed the museum as a transcendental realm both unified and concretized through its architectural space, the disparate structural entities that currently comprise the R.O.M. refuse rational interpretation. By denying a cohesive style, the R.O.M. rejects its quest for unity and truth; instead, it exists as a fragmented entity. In “Des espaces autres,” Michel Foucault described the museum under a rubric he deemed the heterotopia—a type of heterogeneous site capable of juxtaposing in a ‘single real space’ several spaces that are themselves incompatible. He writes,

In every culture, in every civilization, real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality (Foucault 5).

Within the heterotopic museum, “time never stops building up and topping its own summit . . . [it has an] idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes” (Foucault 7). That is, museums are examples of heterotopias in that they are ‘real spaces’ capable of ameliorating as well as simultaneously representing all other times and spaces. This brings forth the dual nature of the heterotopia. On the one hand, the author states that such spaces consist of incommensurable worlds. However, because they nevertheless exist in a single space, an order is implicit through that singularity. Foucault states that “the [museum’s] idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place, this whole idea belongs to our modernity” (6). Despite the postmodern notion of the heterotopia, by the author’s own admission, the type of order that the museum attempts to impose upon its contents adheres to a Cartesian rationalism. However, what Foucault fails to anticipate is Carol Duncan’s subsequent contention that the link between modernity and the heterotopic museum can be traced to its architecture. That is, because these spaces are encapsulated within their architectural skins, their supposedly incommensurable contents are unified and imbued with a superficial order via their façade. Regarding the older structure of the R.O.M., the museum was invested with a classical skin that both shaped and strengthened the interpretation of its contents. As an heir to the religious deference shaped by the temples of antiquity, as well as a shrine to rational ideals, the former incarnation of the museum espoused Duncan’s postulations. However, the Michael Lee Chin Crystal, as an aesthetically divergent addition to the classical façade of the R.O.M., defied these

associations and, moreover, exacerbated the derangement of the heterotopia by disordering the museum's space and surface.

In applying the discordance of the heterotopia's contents to its façade, the R.O.M. eradicates its former identity and elicits the uncanny concept of the other. While the historic framework of the former R.O.M. characterized the archetypal museum, and thus the underlying character of such institutions, the application of the crystal disrupts these associations. The physical alteration of the museum necessarily changes its character since the skin encases, and thus conditions, the whole. In the case of the R.O.M., the revised character posited by Libeskind's addition defies logic. According to the architect, the supposed inspiration for the R.O.M. proposal derived from the crystals contained within the museum's geological collections (Browne 27). However, these geological specimens are by no means the defining element of the institution's collections or nature. By designing an architectural skin for the museum inspired by a false pretense, Libeskind has created an alienating condition for the institution. Through the crystal, the R.O.M. is transformed from the museum familiar into the museum strange. This transformation can be viewed as a type of otherness—an estrangement not only with the museum in an architectural sense, but also in terms of its shift in character and content.

In constituting the R.O.M. as other, Libeskind necessarily reflects otherness as conceived by both Emmanuel Levinas and subsequently Jacques Derrida. Levinas, who concerned himself primarily with modernism and ethics, posited otherness as that which resists knowledge as well as every attempt to either thematise or capture that alterity. However, this notion of absolute difference elucidates that the concept itself is unrecognizable. Derrida, Levinas' postmodern heir, proclaimed a more pragmatic solution to the concept of the other, leaning toward what his precursor would deem an "imperialism of the same" (Gennochio 37). That is, Derrida suggests that we frame what is considered to be other, or that which is outside of ourselves, through the tropes of familiarity, or what we already know. In this way we can construct a working knowledge of the world beyond our own physical binds (Gennochio 40). In the Levinasian conception, this would be impossible: we could only ever know ourselves. Yet, it can be demonstrated that, amongst other factors, a building's architecture provides a familiar context through which the museum can communicate and educate its visitors about unfamiliar content. Indeed, the former, familiar structure of the R.O.M. provided a rationalizing context for the heterogeneous contents within. However, this familiarity has been eroded through the application of the crystal to the museum. The addition of this structure has effaced the R.O.M.'s familiarity and rendered it closer to a Levinasian conception of otherness as well as a more apt embodiment of Foucault's dire vision of the heterotopia. Thus the R.O.M., in being remodeled, has diminished its ability to effectively communicate to its audiences in the way that it once had. While there is no ability for the museum to fully inhabit the impossibility of the Levinasian model, its discordant façade has exacerbated both its heterotopic qualities and its otherness.

Through the crystal, the R.O.M. has become alienated from itself, and so have we as its patrons. Its discordant addition has corroded the identity of the museum, obscuring its ability to communicate truth by splintering all aspects of time, space, character,

content and familiarity. If the crystal was designed to enhance the status of the museum as an architectural icon, it seems to signify nothing more than disorder and confusion. With its authority over knowledge undermined by its structural parasite, one must wonder—can the strength of its contents be reconciled with the novelty of its form? Although Libeskind's addition has clung to its foundation for the past six-years, it still raises questions as to what takes precedence: the crystal or the museum itself—collections, character and communicative authority included? As an entity devoted to a rational cause housed within an irrational, heterotopic building, one can only hope that this dichotomy will prove benign, lest the museum become as inert as the crystals by which it was inspired.

Works Cited

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