Architectural Definition of an Environment Suitable for Contemporary Art

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The best luck to David also. We had some really good time together as classmates and roommates.
ABSTRACT

Architectural Definition of an Environment Suitable to Contemporary Art

by Pierre Leclerc

Submitted to the Department of Architecture on January 19, 1990
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Architecture at The Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The title of this thesis implies a critical consideration of the subject, i.e. how do we create, show and consume the product of art today, which environment suits it the best and why. The term itself, contemporary art is actually too vague and encompasses such a long historical period that I will restate its period, for the purpose of this project, to the actual; and its actors: those who are affecting the art community now.

The environment that I am proposing here is neither a museum or a gallery space, neither a studio or a housing project. The main intent of this work is to create an environment which is a living one, not a monument to art or to a particular period. It is an environment which can facilitate the creative act: in its process as well as in its consumption. It is an environment which offers to both, curators and artists liberty and stimulation to redefine and confront their particular concerns, which is in my understanding the beauty of art, i.e. their needs to question and search one's own visions.

This thesis is the synthesis of my professional understanding. Working in art for many years and being involved in architecture through my studies here at MIT, I wanted to end by creating an environment which will be a representation of a living place where I, as well as other artists, would want to be involved; where the quality of its rooms and spaces (light, materials, sensual qualities...), the discovery through intellectual and physical movement, would offer conception, feelings and images of work to be realised, telling me that there is so much to do once I am out of here!!

Art and its process is a representation of our life. Its physical environment is also a possible interpretation of a physical environment which could be applied to many individuals...
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INTRODUCTION

The premisses:

Contemporary Art needs a certain context in which to be created and shown to the public. Museum and galleries have been generally the context in which such art has been exhibited, while the artist's studio has been considered a place for making art.

Since the 60's the art production shifted considerably and exploded beyond all its previous borders. The range of work produced was considerable; it challenged the notion of art, its process, its exhibition as well as its quality as a commercial artifact. New and different categories of art appeared such as happenings, performances, installations, conceptual art, earth works, environmental art, computer art. Such an important transition required a reconsideration of the art world in terms of politics and spaces.

In response to these needs, museums as well as contemporary galleries offer a type of sterilized environment, where the piece of art is supposed to express itself in all its grandeur, without interference with the architecture. The result is banality instead of discovery.

By exhibiting only the final work, museums do not offer to the viewer the possibility to understand artistic production as something which is built through trial and error like any other creative activity. If museums demonstrate the process as well as the final product in an environment which could accommodate both, the distance between art and life could be diminished.

While art works are shown in galleries and Museums, they are created in other places, generally the artist's studio.

In the studio we generally find finished work, work in progress, abandoned work, sketches - a collection of visible evidence viewed simultaneously that allows an understanding of process: this process which constitute the actual construction from which the final work is only a residue. What we observe is that through the transfer of the final work to its place of exhibition, all this essential information about its making dissipates: the reality of the work, its "truth", its relationship to its creator and place of creation, is inevitably lost in the transfer. It is this aspect of the work that is extinguished by the museum's desire to "install".

This sense that the main point of the work is lost somewhere between its place of production and its place of consumption forced me to reconsider the significance of the work place, and its relationship with the display of the art work.
Overhead View.

Spiral Jetty, Great Salt Lake, Utah, April 1970. Robert Smithson
Photography by Gianfranco Gorgoni/Contact.

Detail, No Title, Lewiston, New York, 1976.
140 feet across, eight feet deep, steel, concrete, crushed rock. Mary Miss

Body of Thought, 1987-88
Aluminum 110 x 333 1/2 in (280 x 846 x 419 cm.)
Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

Blind Deaf and Dumb, 1985
Laminated wood, 122 x 338 5/8 (310 x 860 x 98) cm.
Rijksmuseum Kroller-Muller, Otterlo.
1. Nam June Paik, Videoskulptur für die tv-Show
  Bei Bio "WDR", Köln 12. April 1984

Anselm Kiefer,
To The Unknown Painter,
Der unbekannten Maler, 1980
Watercolor on paper, 18 1/2 x 19 1/2
Collection of Antonio Homem, New York.
THE SITE

Montreal

Montreal was chosen to implement this project for many reasons. I lived in Montreal for 8 years before my studies and I had the chance to appreciate it. It is an extremely liveable city, one where people still live, and often enjoy life. I plan to return to practice in Montreal and so this project is an important source of information directly related to an environment that I will eventually confront and shape.

Montreal is a city on the verge of becoming an international city, and it has the potential and the infrastructure to offer a lot to the people coming to its center. Its cultural activities are numerous and of great quality. Its food is also excellent and varied. Many of its public places are open quite late at night, even all night. Its transportation system is remarkable. Its subway system smooth and rapid. But Montreal is isolated and needs to receive more input from the exterior to inform its people and to build its reputation.
Its location

The choice of the site was crucial to the project. The necessity to create an environment where the dynamism comes from the stimulation of working and showing works of art requires a site which offers a range of interaction from extremely public to extremely private. The project should not appear as an alien on the site, where an institution which brings together life, work and culture with the full range of privacy and publicness, can inscribe itself into the existing traditional network of its surrounding. The city center seemed to offer such a potential, especially along two of its main vehicular axes: St-Laurent and Sherbrooke.

Those two main axes cross the entire island and meet in the downtown area where the site is situated. They are also two cultural axes of the public institutions and the underground and ethnic cultures.

The east-west axis of St-Laurent is the shear between the French and the English communities. It is an ethnic street from Chinatown to the Portuguese neighborhood, to the Greek and Italian communities. Bars, shops, restaurants are also part of the picture. Even prostitution has its roots on sidewalks of St-Laurent between my site and Chinatown.

St-Laurent is also a major cultural street, where galleries, alternative theaters and dance groups perform and exhibit. Most artists have their studios and often live along this street.

Sherbrooke running north-south is the street of the public institutions: museums, commercial galleries, libraries, universities and public parks. It is also the topographical limit of the “plateau”. Sherbrooke acts as the retaining wall before the first major slope toward the river. The site is situated exactly at this point, on the east side of Sherbrooke on the slope on St-Laurent.
SITE ANALYSIS:

The site is situated on the corner of St-Laurent and Sherbrooke, two main axes which are crossing the centre-side of the island.

- St-Laurent on the east-west axis is the major axis between the French and the English communities. It is also the most diverse cultural environment of the city.
- Sherbrooke is on the north-south axis, it is the street of the public institutions (Museum of Fine Arts, Art Galleries, mcGill University, Olympic Stadium, Botanical Garden...).

SUBWAY

The site is situated at a walking distance of 4 stations distances varying from 900 to 3000 feet.
- It is also situated on the bus transportation network. St-Laurent (east-west axis) and Sherbrooke (south-north axis).
SITE ANALYSIS:

The site is situated on the corner of St. Laurent and Sherbrooke, two main axes which are crossing the entire island.

- St. Laurent on the east-west axis is the longer axis between the French and the English communities. It is also the most diverse cultural environment of the city.
- Sherbrooke is on the north-south axis, it is the street of the public institutions (Museum of Fine Arts, Art Galleries, l'UQAM University, Olympic Stadium, Botanical Garden...).

SUBWAY

The site is situated at a walking distance of 4 minutes, distances varying from 900 to 2000 feet.

It is also situated on the bus transportation network: St. Laurent (east-west axis) and Sherbrooke (south-north axis).
. The site is integrated into the fabric as an important link which reinforces the existing pedestrian network of the area.
INSTITUTIONS

Positions

- the site is situated at a strategic position in the public institutions network; it is on the main axis,
  Seldom: the link between museums, libraries, school...
INSTITUTIONS

The site is situated at a strategic position in the public institutions network; it is on the main axis.

Hardscrabble: the line between museums, libraries, schools...
The existing structures.

I was attracted to the site by two existing buildings which are located on both side of St-Laurent: a burned down church on the south side and an old abandoned brewery on the north side. These two buildings have an extremely interesting and strong character. They also have a living experience that a new building cannot offer which permits a confrontation of the artist with his (her) work in relation to the site. I decide to use them along with the adjacent empty lots and abandoned buildings.
An Old Brewery

A Burned down church
The existence of buildings through their work, or more precisely through their history marked by human activities is the representation of human presence. Buildings keep in their structures that atmosphere and that human presence.

By creating an environment for intensive activity of humans, here artists This quality of human presence in the old is renewed and reinforced in the new.
Kawamata: Destroyer church
March-September, 1987
Projet: participated to documenta 8 in Kassel

William Bennett.
View looking into Wedge (stone Boat).

William Bennett.
View from within Wedge (stone boat).

Perimeters Pavilions Decoys, Nassau country museum, Roslyn, New York.
Charlemagne Palestine, Drawing vs. book; Jim Lapine. "installation view".

Interior Design (phase 2-3)
Andree Putman.

First Gate Ritual Series Part II. 1978.
Wood, stone and phragmites, 100 x 156 x 180".
Collection of the artist.

"I Like America and America likes me."
Joseph Beuys
Action Galerie Renee Block, New York, May 1974

Georg Dietzler
The attitude toward the project:

My attitude toward this problem is one of synthesis where the facilities related to art in process and in consumption are blend together to create a total living environment. Artists come and work for a specific period of time varying from 3 months to a year. The artist are sponsored by specific programs of exhibition and/or education planned by an existing group of curators. The environment is conceived as a highly flexible in which access and spaces permit the curators as well as the artists to define entirely the evolution of their project as well as its spatial setting. It is conceived as a place of experimentation and production, where the work is done on site and/or in the city and/or somewhere else. In this place the artist is invited to work live and exhibit, work and live, or live only. This range of possibility could accommodate people from many medium, with a minimal reconfiguration of the space. The work produced could be built inside and brought outside by trucks or strictly exhibited in situ. The center can also exhibit existing works that are ship to the center.

My decision to address contemporary art as I explained it at the beginning of the abstract is more related to the fact that the art produced today is the one living today. Creating an environment for a living art implies people living and also performing. It cannot be done with dead people, even if their work is incredible. That is one of the roles of the museum, to conserve the work of the dead, it is not the role of the environment that I am proposing here.

There are already some examples of such living art environments, PS1 in New York, Villa Arson in Nice, the Magasin in Grenoble, or Plan K in Brusel. In addition there are many other small places, sometimes alternative galleries like in Montreal or in New-York (less and less), or specific events such as the Documenta in Kassel, or the sculpture project in Munster, both in Germany.

These exemplary places are less interested in the commercial aspect of the art market than in producing interesting exhibitions, showing the production that we could consider at the edge of the artistic thinking and experimentation. Architecturally they are in most cases situated in old factories renovated which have been renovated and adjusted to their needs. Their facilities varies from exhibition areas with, or without, residences and working areas.
THE PROJECT

The architectural project is thought of as a whole constituted of zones of activities. The two main activities are defined by the north and south sides of St-Laurent and by the two existing structures of the church and the brewery, that are kept architecturally intact.

The general organisation is based on maximum flexibility and an easy access with minimal control points. The importance is to offer buildings which are connected to the whole of the site, but which could also be isolated for specific periods while leaving public access through without stopping their internal activities.

My decision toward the access system is the following:
1. A main access through the entire site on the south side, which bring the public through the entire length of the building and finally into the building or to the street.
2. An internal street at the lowest level, which crosses the street underground and give complete access from below to the entire site on both side of St-Laurent. This street is pedestrian and vehicular.

On the south site, a major building is added to the church complex to house artists, major exhibition spaces and commercial/public areas such as theater, restaurant, and lobby. On the other side, a new building is attached to the brewery as a support to the brewery and to the whole site. This building houses the administration and the bookstore in the front part, and the workshops for heavy equipment, metal, wood, stone, etc., in its back part. The space between the two existing brewery buildings is covered with a glazed arch, and articulate the vertical access from the underground street. This major public space acts as a cafe, restaurant, and auditorium for the north site.
SITE ATTITUDE

Despite its fantastic location the site is in ruins. One of the reasons is its strong topographical change. In order to stabilise the topographical change on the south part of St-Laurent, the ground is lifted to the level of Sherbrooke to create the main entrance from Sherbrooke. The change in level of the site is such that it is possible to carve out a major building from that new ground, and create a strong ground and underground circulation link with the other side of the site.

The entrance level on Sherbrooke organises the south side. It is the reference level from which the other levels are linked by vertical circulation outside and inside the building. It is defined as a procession through a long bridge which takes you from the street, through the entire length of the site to its other end which is the official entrance to the complex that overlooks the roofs of Montreal 28 feet above ground. This public procession is an introduction which could bring you down again through the fabric of the city or inside the art center to its lobby.

One level below the bridge is the street link with the north side at the brewery level. This connection is done at the middle of the south side, in line with the brewery, between its two buildings. It connects also Clark street and St-Laurent street through its plaza.

28 feet below the bridge is the entrance to the lowest level. This is also the level of the underground plane which connects the site on both side of St-Laurent and through a building/tunnel. This level is essential to the understanding of the project as a whole. It is organised along an internal street on which trucks and mechanical lift can transport materials and/or works. It permits an easy access to all the facilities for the artists as well as for the public. It is also the ground floor for most of the individual studios as well as for the special exhibition/studios spaces. This level is like an underground city which connects with the outside at many points/levels through major vertical shafts which are strategically placed and easily recognizable.

This decision of burying such a large area is characteristic of the underground life of Montreal, which is a result of climatic necessities.
The Main Entrance
ROOF PLAN
PLAN / LEVEL 112
PLAN / LEVEL 100
SOUTH SITE DETAILS
NORTH SITE DETAILS
Residences:
The structure has been conceived as a flexible one. It offers the possibility to alterate the housing section.

As a scaffolding, not a megastructure
Plat form for hoist in twin nave with metal balustrade added by Valade and Pistre.

2. First phase of conversion included adding gantries, catwalk and lighting to naves.

Ted Victoria, Oil, movement in six parts, "Installation view."

Statues perch on metal beam hung from existing walls.
The exhibition space.

The floors of the space have been removed, leaving an open volume with a free structure. It offers a flexibility in plan and section. The movement through the space could be entirely redefined.
The exhibition space.

The floors of the space have been removed, leaving an open volume with a free structure. It offers a flexibility in plan and section. The movement through the space could be entirely redefined.
Forging of Berlin Block for Charli Chaplin in Henrichshutte, Hattigen. 1977.


Steven Woodward in his studio constructing Another Conundrum, and installing the on Walker Art Center roof terrace.

The bridge: an experience of the site

As you take the main entrance: the bridge, the ground goes down before the first wall (the slip) of the studio, revealing its foundation, and the church foundation. You pass through the slip: walls of lead, roofing coming down to your feet, evacuating the water along its side. On top skylights are bouncing the south light into the studio space down below. As you emerge from the slip, you overlook the plaza level, 13 feet below. You are now facing the main building, a mass separated into parts, inviting you to penetrate its membrane: its glass skin. The way is now open, the wind maybe, the snow and that membrane which is there to protect you, you cross and as you do you have a glimpse of the other side of St-Laurent, where another glass surface is coming down, covering the space between two old buildings, masses of gray stone. And then the wind reminds you of your stay and of your goal... The membrane. You cross... a flight of stairs goes down to the ground, using the surface of the membrane:, the arch as a support. You have the choice to go down to the plaza level or to penetrate into the membrane. You remark the water from the rain flowing along the arch sides being received in a long pool at the plaza level.

You decide to penetrate the membrane: the volume defined by the arch, the walls and the ground are entirely glazed as if the building wanted to show its interior, its inner life. You are in a vitrine, looking at vitrines; you are not sure if you are seen or if you see... You are still over, but the surface of the ground is now a drop, 28 feet below, screened by beams, and cranes under the glassed surface. It seems that in the bottom there is water, and a guy... working! working!!! You realise suddenly your situation of witness. The sky let the place to the glassed arch (membrane) suspended from above, hold from the sky?... no, another mass is on your left, zones of circulation, habitation and then again those beams but two stories over your head. Next to you is glass still, open spaces, columns, and panels on which art works are exhibited on one side: the gallery. On the other side it is work in progress, many people doing, scaffoldings up in a three stories high zone north lit by skylights.

You cross the entire zone discovering the buildings. Almost to its other end the bridge expand and becomes an island over the glass it receives you and re-directs you. Here again you can leave by a major vertical access system, which take you down 28 feet below to the ground at the street level on St-Laurent. Or, You can enter the exhibit area on its sides, the main entrance to either the gallery on the left, or the exhibition / studios on the right.
Giorgio Vasari: Portico of the UFFIZI, 1560, View toward the loggia on the ARNO.

House of the Silver Wedding, Pompeii, 2nd century BC. Atrium.

La fin du 20e siècle.

Jene Highstein, (Two Horizontals) untitled installation in progress:

Highstein (above) assisted by Robert Grosvenor.

Suzanne Harris, Richard Nonas
Cut away axonometric showing double nave surrounded by three-storey ranges originally used for storage.

Jannis Kounelis et Carlo Quartucci, les Templiers de Roccasvizz, Turin.

Gamlier, abattoir, La Mouche, Lyon, 1917.
The church

The church is used as an outdoor exhibition and work area. It is connected to a covered studio space by a double door where the artist can work protected from the elements. The church is the biggest outdoor space of the project and it is kept as intact as possible. The only transformation is the introduction of a circulation system to the south walls at the level of the top windows. It brings the visitors from the street level around the entire space where they can look down into the space through the windows or down at the street. The viewer can then access the ground level using the stairs situated in the back of the church. From the ground level, the visitors can either re-enter the exhibit area, facing now the main door and its tower, or they go out into the middle plaza. The ground of the church is of earth, its ceiling the sky, and the walls the ruins of the church. It is a cosmic space, where the artist has the freedom to shape, transform and respect the ruin.

The light defines the main entrance

In the early morning, the sun shines through the back opening (east side) of the church and lights the three front doors sequentially. First the left door of Christ, followed by the central door of God and then finally the right door of the Holy Spirit. In the adjacent studio building, a slip, six feet wide is carved straight through the building. This slip not only leads the way to a bridge which defines an axis from Sherbrooke street up to the other end of the site, but when the sun shines on the third door, the light defines the axis of the bridge, opening the site and indicates the main public entrance.
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