
Modular Architecture and Exhibition Space – Spatial Collage as a Strategy to Decode the Architectural Matrix of the Museum

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Abstract

Functional exhibition furnishings seem to fade into the background and present a wide variety of artworks and objects of all kinds in the best possible way. But one aspect escapes many visitors: Only a few pieces of exhibition furniture make a second appearance. Often cheaply made, due to low budgets, they succumb to wear and tear, take up too much space for storage, or are exclusively adapted to one specific exhibition, making future re-use impossible. This article examines the role of modular museum furniture in creating an adaptable exhibition space, which fosters a dialogue between the architectural DNA of the museum, the artworks on display, and exhibition design. Margula Architects devised adaptable design solutions for a number of museums, including museum furnishing, exhibition architecture, and modular systems for the presentation of artworks. These different solutions are connected by the idea of rendering museum furniture and exhibition space customizable and therefore reusable according to the needs of exhibition and museum narratives, exhibitors, and visitors. By creating a spatial language of adaptable forms that can be moved, combined, stacked, and merged, Margula Architects strive to provide a sustainable, yet creative and multifaceted interior design solution for museums that can be integrated seamlessly with the surrounding architecture as well as with the artworks on display. Applying their concept of spatial collage, Margula Architects view the spaces of the museum as an assemblage of multiple time-spaces mediated by exhibition architecture. They expand their approach to devise a multilayered spatial concept, which works with space as an active matter of presentation, spatial transformation, and interpersonal communication. The proposed article aims to detail Margula Architects' approach to exhibition architecture and their modular system of adaptable museum furnishing, while expanding on the concept of spatial collage as an approach for museum design. Finally, by revisiting the history of exhibiting art, this article attempts to provide a prospect on future solutions, challenging the view that a white cube, and by extension a white plinth, remain the best and only way to provide a stage for art.

Keywords

spatial collage; exhibition architecture; modular design; museum furniture; exhibition theory; sustainability

1. Introduction

Putting things, people and above all, knowledge into a mutual relation, creates contexts of meaning in the world. By connecting these contexts with each other, something new can be created. An exhibition may create such new meanings by placing exhibits in new contexts, new surroundings, and new relations. It is often forgotten that new relationships are not only created among the exhibited objects, but the works are also linked to the exhibition space and its furnishings. Thus, exhibition architecture can

become a structural and narrative element, emphasizing, or even creating relationships between different components of an exhibition.

Just as a museum cannot be detached from its urban context, its furniture cannot be separated from the spaces of the museum. At the same time, museum furniture also cannot be detached from the exhibition theme. It therefore intricately links museum architecture to exhibition themes, providing a spatial language that can be adapted to the



Figure 1-2. Jewish Museum Vienna - Museum Judenplatz. Holocaust Memorial by: Rachel Whiteread. Photo: Andrea Ceriani © Andrea Ceriani. Museum architecture and place design: Jarbonegg & Pálffy. (jarbonegg-palffy.at, 2000). Interior photo: Simon Veres © Margula Architects 2022

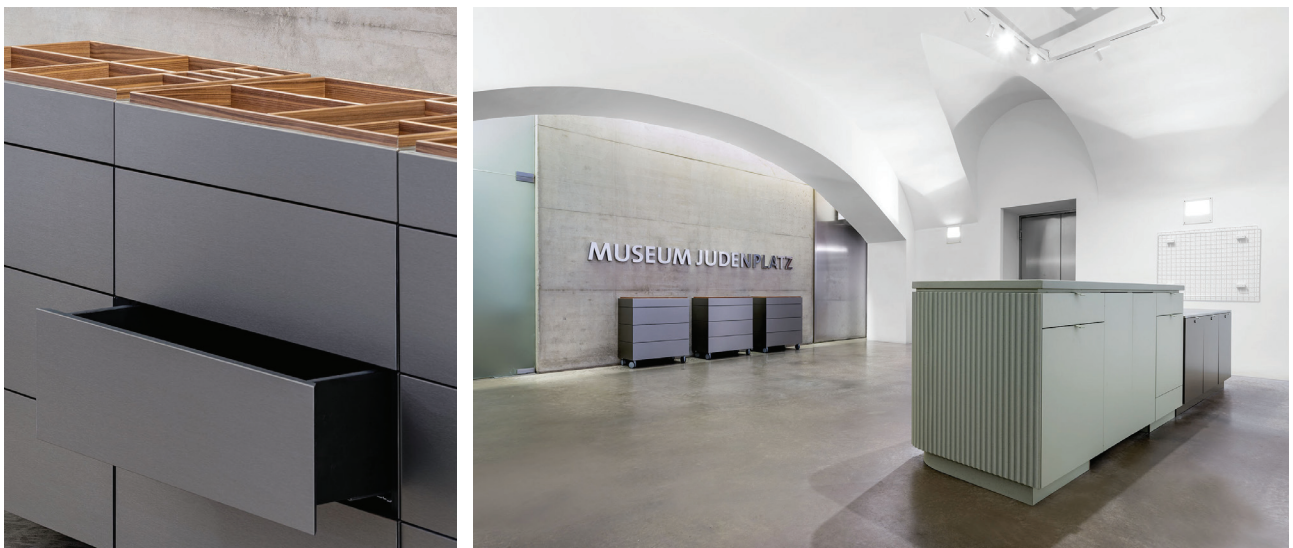


Figure 3-4. Interior by Margula Architects (reception, cash desk, mobile museum shop) photo: Simon Veres © Margula Architects 2022

various needs of curators, artists, and visitors. Consisting of elements of a modular spatial language, museum furniture decodes both the museum space and the contents of the collection, while translating them into spatial settings.

In this article, after an outline of the history of the museum as a public space and an ordering structure for knowledge, three concepts for museum furniture will be explained on

the basis of three projects realized by Margula Architects between 2021 to 2023. In their design approach for museum interiors, Margula Architects decode and reassemble spatial structures, creating sustainable museum furniture that can be used in multiple ways and adapted to different settings. (fig. 1-4)

2. A Brief Overview of the Museum as a Public Place and System of Order

In the following we give a brief overview of the history of the museum. We begin with its origins in antiquity, when the word museum, just as in the Baroque Period, described a context of meaning, rather than a specific location. With the 'Museum Age' (Baur, 2010, p. 27), in the late 19th and early 20th century, museums were transformed into the public spaces we know today. As public spaces for presenting systems of knowledge, they also mirrored existing power relations of their time, which are increasingly questioned today. The role of museum furniture and contemporary typologies of museum settings (e.g. coffee shops, museum shops, reception desks, educational furniture etc.) for creating spatial structures and providing an adaptable context for collections will be discussed in this chapter.

2.1 Museums as a Context of Meaning in Antiquity and the Baroque Era

The museum as a publicly accessible place of art presentation and general education has existed only since the 19th century, but the Greek 'museion' dates back to antiquity. Back then, this term referred to a place of the muses as well as to the specific location of the Library of Alexandria. Hence, it denoted an imaginary place of creativity and beauty, and at the same time represented a center of knowledge of antiquity (Baur, 2010). These two aspects - art and science - are still reflected in the educational mission of public museums today.

While the term and the associated concept of the accumulation of knowledge suffered from a loss of meaning in the Middle Ages, it was rediscovered during the Renaissance, when people looked back to antiquity for inspiration. Also, the



Figure 5. Handing over of the Pomeranian Art Cabinet to Duke Philip II of Pomerania. Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/61/Presentation_of_the_Pomeranian_Art_Cabinet.jpg. See also: (Mauriès, 2002, p. 56-57)

Latin term 'musaeum', did not necessarily describe a physical place, but an "epistemological structure that encompassed a variety of ideas, images, and institutions. [...] [It] was rather understood in a more comprehensive sense as a principle of accumulation, classification, and ordering of knowledge and was applied in this form to various topics and areas of knowledge." (Baur, 2010, p. 20, transl. by the authors).

Actual places referred to as 'musaeum' were either libraries (Baur, 2010, p. 24) or early cabinets of curiosities (fig. 5); in either case, however, they were private collections that evoked a different experience than the public institutions of today (Newhouse, 1998). "Objects of diverse origins and purposes - works of art, antiquities, books, naturalia, technical devices, as well as curiosities and exotica - were presented here together and were meant to represent the universal context of the world in the sense of a *theatrum mundi*." (Baur, 2010, p. 25, transl. by the authors) These cabinets of curiosities or chambers of wonders were meant to amaze and entertain, but any connections between the objects had to be imagined by the viewers themselves (Newhouse, 1998). The world was to be shown as a whole, the creation of connections between the exhibits, which stood for the big whole of the world itself, created meaningful connections within it.

At the end of the 15th century, a collection of antiquities previously located in the papal residence became the property of the Roman municipality and was exhibited in the Capitol. Pope Sixtus IV thus made the collection not only public property, but also opened it to public eyes. He is, hence, responsible for what was, in a present-day sense, the first publicly accessible museum. The collection was intended to bear witness to the greatness of Roman history and to be preserved for future generations (Baur, 2010). The first Public Collection was thus immediately accompanied by an idea of education as well as a state-building purpose:

"Consequently, the function of the collection and presentation of things changed. It no longer aimed, like the mirabilia of medieval treasure chambers, at the exchange between a world on this side and a world beyond, but at the connection of past, present, and future, thereby establishing its social relevance." (Baur, 2010, p. 24, transl. by the authors).

2.2. Museum Age and Power Dynamics

The so-called 'Museum Age' (Baur, 2010, p. 27), beginning in the 1870s, was accompanied by a professionalization of museums; scientific achievements were to be presented alongside colonial conquests, and thus the country's own national greatness was to be put on display. Like Rome's papal collection, these museums were intended to promote identification with the state.

Current power dynamics, however, are not only evident in the objects on display, but also in the architecture of the buildings that housed them. For example, the public museums of the 19th century in their formal architectural language resemble the palaces, where the exhibits originally came from (Newhouse, 1998). Hence, if current power relations and cultural trends were to be reflected in museum architecture, they may also serve as a tool to challenge power relations today. This increasingly requires multimedia contextualization of exhibits and also places new demands on exhibition architecture. Ethnologist Sharon McDonald (1996) describes museums as places that condense and map social hierarchies and structures. "The notion of the museum as a mirror and instrument of hegemonic rule is therefore supplemented and partially revised by its definition as an arena of conflictual negotiation of social values and bodies of knowledge as well as social and cultural affiliations." (Baur, 2010, p. 39, transl. by the authors)

2.3. Museum Furniture and Systems of Order

In his treatise "Inscriptiones vel Tituli Theatri Amplissimi", a "classification system of all earthly things" [transl. by the authors], published in 1565: "The state, or rather the physis of the state, resulted from the knowledge that was to be gained from the collected objects by means of order." (Segelken, 2010, p. 246, transl. by the authors) early museologist Samuel Quicchelberg (1529-1567) already recognized the benefit of these collections for the interests of the state. Quicchelberg understood the state as an ordering structure underlying the overall social system. The structure of knowledge and its presentation as well as the structure of a society were understood to be mutually dependent and thus influenced by each other (Segelken, 2010, p. 246).

Already for Quicchelberg, a collection of objects embodies an educational process that emerges from the relationship between the observer, the objects, and the pattern of order inherent to their presentation (Segelken, 2010, p. 243). This relationship between a research institution, the visitors, and the corresponding pattern of order of knowledge could in this sense be called the internal architecture of an exhibition. For a meaningful presentation, all these factors must be decoded as a referential context in order to reveal and visualize patterns of order for presenting and organizing knowledge. For Quicchelberg it is essential to ensure the mobility of objects in an exhibition, to be able to flexibly create new contexts within a collection.

“The elements of order, cabinet and box, described in museological writings and reflected in their importance for science, are established as imaging procedures.” (Segelken, 2010, p. 249, transl. by the authors) The furniture of the exhibition creates context and coherence and, hence, becomes the frame turning the exhibited pieces into artefacts.

2.4. The Context of Art

In the early 20th century, the practice of contextualization via a (formal aesthetic ordering system) lost importance and a trend towards open structures, white room dividers, and the greatest possible neutrality emerged. Critical voices, such as Frank Lloyd Wright, described a fully neutral spatial context as the “death sentence” for artworks, as they were torn from their original, social environments (Newhouse, 1998, p. 9).

“Architects echoed Wright’s view that white was the loudest color (he compared the use of white backgrounds for paintings to the use of a high C as an acoustic background for the sound of an orchestra), and they increasingly recognized that there is no such thing as neutrality. Each space has its own distinctive identity that influences its content; without a harmonious relationship between the two, all museum architecture fails.” (Newhouse, 1998, p. 11, transl. by the authors)

Art always establishes relations, and without context, the relationship to the world is lost. A historicist building or a

baroque palace does not become a white cube overnight, even if some museums try. If art is to become a living experience, it must be placed in context, and therefore an ordering structure is required. The carrier of this ordering structure, connecting art, viewers, and the museum space, is exhibition architecture. In order to establish this relationality, however, museum architecture must follow two basic principles: On the one hand, it should take up the aesthetic code of museum architecture and collection holdings. On the other hand, it should meet logistical demands regarding the processes and the mission of a museum.

Modular museum furniture can be understood as an adaptable system that decodes the architectural matrix of the museum, while allowing for different combinations, fulfilling multiple functions, and creating new relationships. Hence, modular museum furnishing can be re-used in various exhibition-specific settings and is thus a highly flexible and sustainable means for museums to create an ambience that does justice to the works of art.

3. Three Projects by Margula Architects

Creating a meaningful, modular system that interacts with the spaces of the museum thus requires addressing the spatial structure of the institution in question, while at the same time taking its collection and the institution’s educational mission into account. Therefore, it is necessary to define which exhibits are to be presented in a specific exhibition as well as to identify the requirements of the institution and the collection. Additionally, organizational-logistical processes, such as the procedures behind exhibition design and installation or the skills of the museum building team must be taken into account.

By creating an adaptable design solution that relates to the specific sociocultural context of the museum, sustainable museum furniture can be incorporated into the inventory of existing display systems that have been cumulated throughout its history. Based on three projects realized in different collections and architectural settings, we would like to illustrate examples of sustainable exhibition architecture and museum furniture, which organically adapt to the museum space as an ordering structure for an exhibition.

(1) In 2021, the baroque Belvedere Museum in Vienna hosted the exhibition “The Age of Dürer - Austria at the Gate of the Renaissance” curated by Björn Blauensteiner (Rollig and Blauensteiner, 2021), Margula Architects planned exhibition displays for the museum and created a wall design for the (con-)textual layer of the exhibition.

(2) The Heidi Horten Collection comprises artworks collected over many years as well as personal objects of the eponymous collector. Margula Architects designed modular, expandable museum furniture for the museum, to be used in different exhibition and event settings. First presented at the exhibition “Rendez-vous” curated by Agnes Husslein-Arco, Véronique Abpurg and Rolf H. Johannsen. (Husslein et. al., 2023)

(3) In 2024, the new National Library of Israel, planned by Herzog & de Meuron, will open in Jerusalem. For the exhibition “Encounters of Beauty – Hebrew Manuscripts from the Braginsky Collection and the National Library of Israel” curated by Emile Schrijver and Yigal Zalmona (Schrijver and Zalmona, 2023) Margula Architects designed education furniture in addition to the existing showcases. The designed furniture serves a dual function – as showcase and mediation furniture. The plans by Herzog & de Meuron included multiple applications for connecting ceilings and floors with removable poles. Margula Architects designed presentation frames that use the existing poles to create an adaptable museum setting and a modifiable space for learning and presentation, while incorporating the spatial language specified by the architects.

3.1. Belvedere Vienna: The Age of Dürer

The Belvedere Vienna is a baroque palace planned by Johann Lucas von Hildebrandt for Prince Eugene of Savoy from 1714-1723. During the prince’s lifetime, the Upper Belvedere (fig 6) served purely representative purposes; the picture gallery was opened to the public only after his death. Its aesthetics are primarily characterized by a baroque formal language, including frescoes and ornaments.

Instead of trying to create a neutral space for the planned exhibition of paintings and sculptures, Margula Architects

picked up on the characteristics of the museum’s architecture to design an adaptable system of museum furniture. The wood used for the newly-created exhibition furniture, matches the parquet flooring, and the height of the pedestals was adapted to the lamperie. Elements such as the center cross usually required in Baroque side tables to stabilize the spindly legs were revived for the design of the lamperie pedestals (fig. 7). The result was a contemporary, simple version of a piece of furniture that fits perfectly into the baroque surroundings. Consequently, all display cases became part of the museum’s inventory because of their unobtrusive design, which organically adapts to the spatial context of the museum.

For the exhibition “The Age of Dürer”, each room was designed with its own color coding (fig. 8) to match the colors in the paintings. Inspired by medieval flags used for decoration and as an expression of festivity, vertical stripes were painted on the walls of each room. The additional design element of the color dichotomy on the walls has been derived from medieval ‘mi patri’ clothing, which conveyed social status. While the symbolic ‘flags’ were painted, the accompanying text was displayed on real textile flags mounted on golden poles (fig. 9).

For three-dimensional exhibits that were to be interwoven with the narrative of the paintings hung on the walls, so-called lamperie pedestals (fig. 10-11) were created, placing the object in one line with the paintings. All free-standing objects were displayed on pedestals in the middle of the room. In addition, education furniture with braille inscriptions was created exclusively for the museum in cooperation with tactile studio (fig. 12). Since the windows in the Belvedere had to be closed and darkened to protect the paintings, the textile flags with texts were placed in the window niches. The display cases were created so they could be stored easily and used for further exhibitions.



Figure 6. Upper Belvedere. Photo: Lukas Schaller © Belvedere, Vienna



Figure 7. The Age of Dürer. Photo: Johannes Stoll © Belvedere, Vienna



Figure 8. The Age of Dürer. Photo: Margula Architects



Figure 9. The Age of Dürer. Photo: Johannes Stoll © Belvedere, Vienna



Figure 10. The Age of Dürer. Photo: Johannes Stoll © Belvedere, Vienna



Figure 11. The Age of Dürer. Photo: Margula Architects



Figure 12. The Age of Dürer. Relief: Studio Tactile (Studio Tactile, 2021). Photo: Margula Architects

3.2. Heidi Horten Collection: Rendez-vous

In the mid-19th century, the upper middle classes, aristocracy, and industrialists settled along the Ringstrasse. The Heidi Horten Collection is now housed in one of these former chancellery buildings built by Archduke Friedrich. For this purpose, the architects of The Next Enterprise completely stripped the building of its internal structure and connected two free-floating platforms with open staircases. All three exhibition levels are illuminated by a continuous light ceiling. Stainless steel is used throughout the entire interior (fig. 13-14).

The furnishing of the collection picks up the DNA of the house both in terms of materials and in its formal language. Margula Architects designed modular, expandable museum furniture, which is inspired by the modul-based playful

learning tools developed by pedagogue Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) and thus adapts to the museum's needs as they arise. In its materiality, it blends in seamlessly with the stainless-steel architecture of the museum conception designed by The Next Enterprise (fig. 15). The Heidi Horten Collection includes various works of art as well as a managed collection on the life of the namesake collector. The modular elements are therefore just as suitable for displaying furniture as they are for sculptures. They also meet another requirement: They can be arranged into a seating area, used as a bar, or even as a lectern. Since the individual modules can be moved on wheels, combined freely, and stored easily they are quickly and easily adapted for various events taking place in the building and are therefore also a more sustainable solution for Institution. (fig. 16)



Figure 13. OPEN 2022, Museum architecture: The Next Enterprise (tne.spce 2022). Photo: Lukas Schaller



Figure 14. OPEN 2022, Museum architecture: The Next Enterprise (tne.spce 2022). Photo: Lukas Schaller



Figure 15. Rendez-vous, Photo: Heidi Horten Collection, Ouriel Morgenstern



Figure 16. Modular museum furniture system. Rendering: Tetiana Khrapko © Margula Architects

3.3. National Library Israel: Encounters of Beauty

For the new building of the National Library of Israel, the architects of Herzog & de Meuron picked a cue from the pictorial architecture of Jerusalem, a city that is made almost entirely of natural stone. Herzog & de Meuron took the typical arches of the old city of Jerusalem as a reference in their interior design, while the openings of the facade are intended to decode typographic notions of Arabic and Hebrew. The entire interior is made of oak, as are the existing showcases designed by Deborah Pinto Fdeda (Pinto Fdeda, 2024).

In addition to the existing vitrines, Margula Architects designed educational tables and vertical showcases, which echo the wooden interior architecture by Herzog & de Meuron. The details of the educational tables and showcases, on the other hand, resemble the arches in the building as well as the graphic design (Frederik de Wal, 2024) of the exhibition catalogue by Frederik de Wal. This way, the architecture of the building, housing the exhibition, is decoded by the use of similar forms and materials, with individual elements incorporated into the design of furnishings. The designed furniture not only deciphers the aesthetic codes of the museum, but also takes the collection holdings and the museum's individual mission into account.

The National Library of Israel mainly displays books and ancient parchments. The tables, designed by Margula Architects, combine with the existing showcases designed by Oren Sagiv and Deborah Pinto Fdeda like a domino system. As the existing showcases are equipped with all required technical features (security, climate regulation, and lighting systems), it was decided to outsource all explanatory and educational functions to the mediation furniture by Margula Architects. This way, the existing showcases can be reserved for the exhibits while the curatorial layer is communicated by the educational tables designed by Margula Architects that can be used flexibly, according to different exhibition requirements. If necessary, they can also be used as display cases.

Additionally, free-standing showcases for parchments were installed via poles between ceiling and floor. These were initially intended to hold white walls for display. Instead, Margula Architects inserted wooden frames, to display pictures, objects, and documents visible on both sides, while keeping in line with the formal and material language of the showcases. By combining multiple devices on multiple levels along the vertical and horizontal axis and blending in with the architecture of the museum, an integral language for communicating knowledge is created that combines various media and contextual meanings in an encompassing approach to exhibition design.

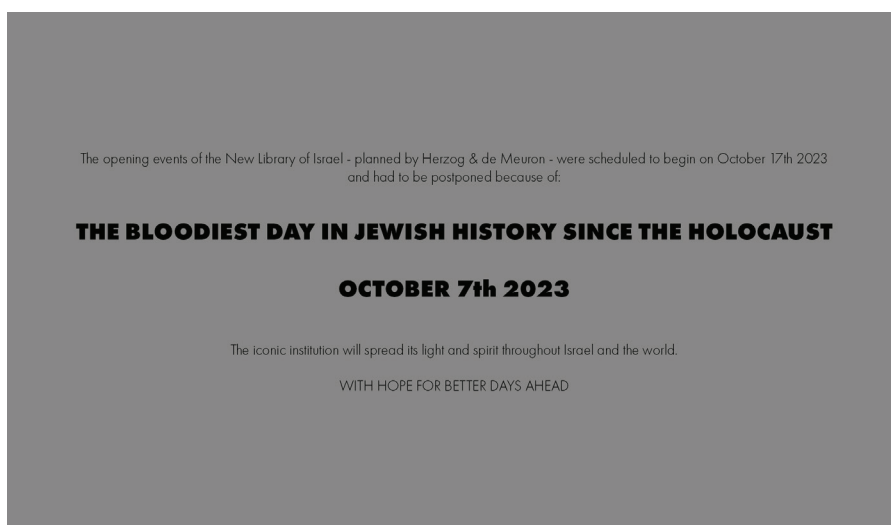


Figure 17. Encounters of Beauty. Museum architecture: Herzog & de Meuron. Exhibition Design: Margula Architects. Exhibition views will be added after the opening.

The opening events of the New Library of Israel - planned by Herzog & de Meuron - were scheduled to begin on October 17th 2023 and had to be postponed because of:

THE BLOODIEST DAY IN JEWISH HISTORY SINCE THE HOLOCAUST

OCTOBER 7th 2023

The iconic institution will spread its light and spirit throughout Israel and the world.

WITH HOPE FOR BETTER DAYS AHEAD

Figure 18. Encounters of Beauty. Museum architecture: Herzog & de Meuron. Exhibition Design: Margula Architects. Exhibition views will be added after the opening.

4. Discussion

Historically, a collection has been understood as an epistemological structure, a pattern of order that represents aspects of a larger world in miniature. The interrelationships within this *pars pro toto* (the latin “*pars pro toto*” literally translates as a part that stands for the whole) create meaningful connections in the world while translating them into a comprehensive exhibition narrative. By presenting objective relations between exhibits, museums not only reveal existing power relations, but have increasingly become sites of their controversial negotiation.

Successful exhibition architecture can support this endeavor by providing the collection – in itself a means to structure knowledge – with an ordering system of its own. Museum furniture allows to establish meaningful cross-connections between the exhibition narratives, the museum architecture, and the objects on display, while reflecting the outside world by combining multiple time-spaces in a spatial translation process mediated by architecture. It is through the exhibition architecture that an object becomes an artefact. Exhibition design and museum furniture mediate between the exhibition pieces, the spaces of the museum, and the implied spatial narrative juxtaposing socio-cultural realities. This way, exhibition furniture becomes an interactive and immersive process establishing contexts in the first place. If exhibition architecture consists of mobile structures, new cross-connections, and modular spatial exhibition settings can always be created anew, thus providing shapeable elements of an adaptable spatial language.

Another aspect that inevitably led Margula Architects to create modular systems is to be found in climate change. Taking the idea of the museum as a reference to the world outside one step further, also means to address issues that are pressing in today’s society. The global crises of climate change certainly is one of the major challenges of our time. Growing scarcity of resources and the resulting need to become more sustainable will not stop at the entrance to the museum. The Gallery Climate Coalition (GCC) for example states that “Many materials used in exhibition displays such as plinths, temporary wall cladding and timbers can easily be reused, and these reused materials should be preferred over newer materials (...)” (Gallery Climate Coalition. 2024)

Hence, the desire of ensuring comparatively little expenditure of materials, while at the same time providing museums with the greatest possible range of design freedom, calls for a durable and reusable solution. With modular systems the product life-cycle of furniture can be elongated, while restricting the flexibility of museums as little as possible. By blending the design with the interior of the museum, the furniture becomes a part of it and is thereby likely to be less affected by fashion changes. Furthermore, the use of durable high-quality materials and the multi-functionality of most exhibition furniture allow for a second life with different purposes (e.g. as seating, bar, etc.). So even if modular exhibition furniture will not stop climate change, it is in line with the GCC recommendation to “seek to reuse built items such as plinths, wall sections and carpets(...)” (Gallery Climate Coalition. 2024), and thereby counteracts current habits of a throw-away society and contributes towards a more thoughtful use of resources.

5. Conclusion

Over the centuries, the aesthetic and practical demands of artists and visitors have changed. The history of presentation systems is as old as the history of art - from the pedestal, individually designed for a single object, to most neutral white cuboids, which, analogous to the white cube, should enable the positioning of works in neutral space. Different needs call for different solutions and the changed role of the museum as an educational place for the public calls for yet more flexible means of presentation. Well designed exhibition furniture grants the greatest possible customization of exhibiting settings and can help translate complex systems of knowledge into integrated spatial experiences, while referring to the aesthetic codes of the collection and specific needs of the institution.

In view of the constant change in the art world, which reacts to and interacts with new political, cultural and not least technical developments in the world, museums must also be able to act with increasing technical flexibility in the presentation of art. While the digital transformation demands new presentation solutions, climate change makes the use of existing resources non-negotiable. This balancing act is increasingly becoming a challenge that can only be met with well-planned and visionary solutions.

Margula Architects meets this challenge by designing exhibition furniture that offers a high degree of freedom in the arrangement of artifacts, while being long-lasting and reusable at the same time. Furthermore, modular furnishings provide multiple options for exhibition design, which can include multimedia extensions, adaptable presentation techniques, and reusable elements, while taking the increasing importance of sustainability in the museum world into account. Resources, space, and costs can be saved in the long term. Consequently, in order to satisfy all requirements, modular systems seem to be the only way forward for a future-proof and sustainable exhibition design. Not least because modularity has the highest chance to be able to adapt to ideas or demands that are yet to come.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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