Urban Narratives
Museums as Iconic Symbols and Agents of Civic Experience

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Cities embrace and express cultural, social and ideological agendas that are central to urban experience. Cities are structured to orchestrate particular relationships between people and place, creating routines of movement, spectacle and memory. Throughout history, settlements have been formed around individual iconic buildings that codify meaning, which is either deliberately constructed or construed by the observer. The contemporary city has increasingly represented a paradox between two positions. On the one hand, urban environments are being reordered to support the social life of cities, and on the other, they are driven to engage with the global economy, corporatisation and international tourism. Brett Steel argues that this has led to a condition of ‘hypervisuality’, which has created a shift from ‘place making to promotion and place marketing.’

Museums have become a key part of this processes, with contemporary museum architecture frequently traded as a symbol of cultural capital in the global ‘iconomy’, an image economy in which symbolic exchanges between people, things, ideas, interest groups, and cultures take predominantly visual form. However, museums are also involved in the development of broader cultural narratives that convey and interpret meaning, and they also create spaces of social engagement. This paper considers how three leading international museums have provided alternative ways to understand the iconic role of museums as civic buildings. It examines how the British Museum, the Museum of Scotland and the Jewish Museum Berlin each question the role of iconic architecture in creating cultural meaning as part of the conceived, perceived and lived civic experience.

Keywords: Museums; Cities; Urban; Civic; Experience
Introduction

Cities provide the dominant backdrop for contemporary life, with more than half the population of the world now living in urban areas. Cities embrace and express cultural, social and ideological agendas, which influence the conception and perception of, and lived, urban experience. (Lefebvre 1991) The term ‘civic’ refers to the notion of belonging to the city, and this implies a sense of connectedness. Throughout history, civic aspirations have underpinned the architecture of the city in various ways, with buildings acting as icons or signifiers of shifting values and priorities. In the contemporary city, the civic and symbolic agenda of buildings oscillates between underpinning place-identity and harnessing place-marketing, where buildings become “places in the global assembly line...connected far more to timeless celebrity than to historical geography,” rather than to their immediate physical and cultural context. (Schwarzer 2005, 22-33) One of the central challenges of contemporary cities is to provide a sense of meaning that extends beyond the hyper-visuality of the global image economy that is fuelled by new iconic architecture, in order to highlight the importance of belonging to the city, which is central to the ideal of the civic. This paper examines these ideas through the exploration of three contemporary museum projects that offer ways of understanding the agency of architecture to establish physical, visual and conceptual connections to urban and cultural contexts.

Icons, urban ornaments and spaces of engagement

The contemporary city presents a paradox between the reciprocal relationships between buildings as icons, or ‘urban ornaments’, and as spatial elements in the urban network of the city, a condition that has characterised the design of settlements throughout history. Ancient Greek and Roman settlements are noted for their civic aspirations, particularly the relationship between the rituals and practices of everyday life, and the physical setting in which these activities were enacted. Settlements orchestrated particular relationships between people and place, establishing a routine of movement, spectacle and memory that was central to life.

As medieval settlements were formalized into more permanent ceremonial environments, ‘vistas, eye-catching foci and architectural ensembles’ created landmarks that aided orientation and formed symbolic markers that embodied meaning. (Hall 1997, 19) During the Renaissance, symmetry, scale and strong geometry were employed, with radial street systems allowing more effective control of the town and facilitating movement and communication across the settlements. (Bacon 1967, 203) Movement and visuality became increasingly important to the development of Baroque cities, like Pope Sixtus V’s Rome, where axial vistas and specifically positioned buildings aided spatial legibility and defined urban character.

By the nineteenth century symbolic meaning became central to cities; in fact Mark Crinson suggests that in Victorian Britain “to build was to create meaning.” (Crinson 1996, 9) Architecture became ‘phonetic’; codifying meaning through deliberately constructed associative references. However, rapid urban expansion began to dramatically alter the way cities were conceived and experienced. Functional requirements, particularly the need to provide housing, services, transport and technology, vied with imperial and nationalistic agendas to construct identity through urban form. By the mid twentieth century urban development became increasingly driven by functional demands.
of zoning, movement and transportation, which tended to subsume conceptual aspirations of the city as an armature for civic life.

Over the last 50 years, the contemporary city has represented a paradox between two positions. On the one hand cities are being reordered to provide positive urban environments that support the social life of cities, with an increasing interest in the design of cities as interconnected systems that support ideals of liveability, sustainability and productivity. On the other, cities are affected by the need to engage with the global economy, corporatisation and international tourism. Brett Steele contests this has led to a condition of ‘hypervisuality’, which creates two parallel conditions: ‘serial space’ and ‘brand space’. (2007, 108) ‘Serial space’ is produced by the homogenising effect of global franchises that dominate contemporary cities, and this contrasts with ‘brand space’ in which iconic buildings are conceived as ‘unique wonders in a world of ever-similar spatial backdrops’. (2007, 108) Steele suggests this represents the shift from ‘place making to promotion and place marketing’, which significantly impacts on the experience and meaning of cities. (2007, 106) Terry Smith observes that visual images have come to saturate the way we communicate, “not simply at the level of stereotypes but at the deepest levels of psyche and society.” (2006, 2-5) Image and style have become a form of currency: buildings are traded as symbols of cultural capital in the global ‘iconomy’, an image economy in which symbolic exchanges between people, things, ideas, interest groups, and cultures take predominantly visual form.

As twentieth century cities are being reconceptualised as ‘places for people’, foregrounding social interaction, connectivity and sustainability, Crinson’s observation of the nineteenth century’s architectural aspiration - to build is to create meaning – continues today. (Crinson 1996, 9) Buildings not only establish functional relationships between places, addressing practical concerns of movement, communication and accommodating residents, commerce and industry, but they also have the capacity to convey urban aspirations and civic values. However, in contrast to the agendas of 18th and 19th century cities that reinforced relationships between inhabitants and the church or ruling powers, the drivers of contemporary cities are more diverse. In the contemporary city, ‘place-making’ and ‘place marketing’ exert competing influences. (Steele 2007, 106) Terry Smith contests that place marketing focuses on creating connections to the ‘visual esperanto of international communication’, whereas place making calls for more specific localised expressions of site-specificity. (Smith 2006, 48) Creating connections to context, in a physical, visual and conceptual sense becomes key to developing a sense of civic connection.

Cliff Hague and Paul Jenkins suggest that ‘place-identity’ is central to place-making, and contest that the ‘creation and reproduction of identities’ is ‘socially rooted and culturally defined’. They suggest that “place identity is best understood as relational...identities are defined in relation to each other,” and that “the nature of place identity is inevitably reflected in engagement with place by those who have a stake in it.” (Hague and Jenkins 1996, 218-221) This highlights the importance of context, and the agency of architecture to create dynamic relationships between individual buildings and the physical and cultural landscape of the city, constructing narratives of experience and meaning that are central to urban life.

This paper proposes that prioritizing the visual, and focusing on the ‘imageability’, or the symbolic and iconic characteristics of architecture, erodes ones understanding of how buildings are encountered: what buildings look like becomes more important than how they operate, both
functionally and experientially. (Dovey 1999,45) That is not to say that the notion of spectacle is not important in both buildings and cities, but the relationship of building to the context - both physically and culturally - fundamentally affects its conception, perception and lived experience.

**Museums as iconic symbols and agents of civic experience**

Museums are ideal vehicles for the exploration of these ideas, as they are inherently linked to context - both physically and culturally. Museums are sites of active engagement that are influenced by overlapping, and sometimes competing sets of functional and symbolic agendas. Historically, museums were key elements in the development of the modern city; they provided symbols of cultural capital and spaces of socialization for the burgeoning modern metropolis. The museum was conceptualised as a ‘temple of culture’, and this symbolic association was reinforced by the formal and spatial order of the museum’s architecture. Externally the museum’s paradigmatic neo-classical architecture asserted the museum’s symbolic role as a signifier of cultural capital, drawing formal references to classical temples. Internally an enfilade of spaces created a routine of ‘organised walking’ that reinforced the formality of experience, underpinning authoritative museological narratives, and supporting a tacit agenda to ‘civilise the masses’ of the burgeoning city. (Bennett 1995)

Throughout the twentieth century, museums were under increasing pressure to counteract the perception of their status as elite institutions, and to engage with the economic, cultural and social life of the city. As a consequence, museums developed a more diverse agenda, both educationally and socially, accommodating new visitor facilities and new types and scales of exhibitions in an endeavour to compete with the other forms of metropolitan entertainment. The museum programme was expanded to encourage visitors’ active engagement, and institutions responded to this new, popularist role by providing more open and informal settings that integrated spatially and functionally with the city.

By the late twentieth century museums had become central to the urban renewal of many cities, providing catalytic sites of contemporary tourist pilgrimage, and creating new places for socialization and entertainment. Museum architecture was harnessed as part of an agenda of ‘civic branding’ frequently embracing iconic architectural forms. For example, museums like Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim in Bilbao and Santiago Calatrava’s Milwaukee Art Museum were specifically designed to create a visual spectacle, “to catch the eye, and to dwell in the mind as a fantastic form.” (Smith 2006, 39) Smith contests this promotes a form of ‘architourism’, an ‘architecture of destination’ as cities strive to compete in a world of global tourism, and museums become a commodity, an icon to be exchanged as a symbol in the “visual esperanto of international communication.” (Smith 2006, 48) Mitchell Schwarzer observes that this has resulted in many museums becoming “places in the global assembly line...connected far more to timeless celebrity than to historical geography.” (Schwarzer 2005, 25-33)

However, many new museums projects also endeavour to create connections to site, both the physical location in which a building is situated and also broader visual, cultural, conceptual and temporal contexts. Three recent museum projects, the British Museum in London, the Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh and the Jewish Museum Berlin, demonstrate how specific relationships between the museum and the city can be orchestrated to foster physical, visual and conceptual
experience. These projects all involve a major physical extension or reorganisation of an existing institution. They each respond to the programmatic shifts required by contemporary museums to not only fulfil the traditional roles of education and research, but also to provide places for entertainment and leisure, promoting the active engagement of the visitor with the institution. These projects demonstrate the shifting relationship between the museum and the city, particularly the agency of the new architectural interventions in the formation and communication of meaning through experience. Each questions the iconic role of the museum in the city, by engaging in the broader context of the city in various ways.

The British Museum, the Museum of Scotland and the Jewish Museum Berlin each present contrasting architectural approaches, but they all share a common agenda of constructing relationships between the building and its site – the museum and the city. All three projects create memorable iconic images that heighten the visuality of the museum in different ways, and contribute to both the ‘brand-space’ of the contemporary city and help to construct the ‘museum space’, the ‘psychological space’ that is encountered long before visitors actually arrive at the building. (Fleming 2005, 54-5) ...

The architecture of these museums engages with the broader cultural landscape of the museum, exploring the museological and urban history and drawing on this context to generate ideas for the new interventions. Each is located in European capital cities, and these settings provide contrasting contexts; physical built form and topography, as well as historical and socio-political contexts. As social history museums, these institutions each present a particular agenda to interpret specific objects and knowledge, but this discussion focuses on the architecture as an armature that orchestrates experience and conveys meaning, rather than engaging explicitly with the museum content. However, the architecture embraces the broader agenda of social history by engaging with both the physical and cultural context of the museums, creating connections with the city that prioritise active engagement – both physically and intellectually – and promoting movement, memory and meaning.

Case study 1: The British Museum, London

In the British Museum in London, Foster + Partners’ created a new urban space that extends the historical pattern of urban squares, parks and gardens that typified London’s early development, and continues London’s contemporary interest in reinvigorating the pedestrian experience of the city. The Great Court provides an iconic urban space within London that allows new paths of movement through the surrounding neighbourhood of Bloomsbury, and it also assists in reordering the museum sequence, re-establishing a sense of visual spectacle by physically and programmatically opening up the central gathering and circulation space. New visitor facilities, which can be used independently of the museum, assist in subverting the perception of the museum as an elite institution, allowing the Great Court to become an urban destination that can be experienced independently of the museum proper.
Image 1: British Museum Great Court, map showing context of London’s parks. (Norrie, 2014.)

The Great Court reinstates the courtyard proposed by the original architect, Robert Smirke, which was subsumed by the museum library. The new court restores a sense of order and formality that was central to Smirke’s original plan, promoting the idea of a central gathering space at the heart of the museum that is both practical and memorable. The architectural detailing of this space reinforces the monumental scale of the museum, reinstating a sense of grandeur that had been eroded by piecemeal alternations over the last two hundred years. The Great Court allows the interior of the museum and neighbouring galleries to be flooded with natural light, and it highlights the social agenda of museums, by creating an orientation space with cafes, bookshops and seating at
the heart of the museum. Opening up the centre of the building allows new circulation patterns through both the museum and the city, offering alternate modes of physical and conceptual interaction, intertwining traditional and contemporary agendas of spectacle and surveillance.

Foster + Partners’ interpretation of the museum as a site of movement extends traditional museological narratives, and it also engages with enduring urban aspirations of movement and spectacle that have been central to London’s development, from ideas of John Nash and William Lethaby to Richard Rogers and other contemporary projects. As one of London’s key millennium projects it is ‘future orientated’, combining historical references with Foster’s desire to create a “fresh means of experiencing the city.” (Foster, Sudjic, de Grey 2001, 11) The architecture engages with both the historical pattern of parks and squares, and Nash’s aspirations to clarify movement and amplify visual spectacle, which was progressively undermined as the city succumbed to pragmatic rather than civic demands. The Great Court celebrates the museum’s role as a new node in the pedestrian network of central London, connecting it other contemporary projects that reinforce urban patterns of street and square, while also retrieving and extending historical patterns. The project also engages with the contemporary interest in prioritising pedestrian movement and improving the quality of individual urban spaces to promote a more coherent understanding of the idea of civic connectedness, highlighting the ways that buildings belong to the city.

In conceptualising the Great Court as an extension of the historical urban pattern of civic spaces, the relationship between the museum and the city is inverted. The museum interior is conceptually and actually transformed into an urban space, formalising a place of gathering within city that heightens the sense of urban spectacle and prioritises the museum as a space of occupation, rather than merely an iconic symbol, or urban ornament. Establishing an urban plaza in the centre of the museum creates a new internal ‘forecourt’ at the centre of the museum, altering the movement sequence through both the museum and the city. The museum’s transformation from an urban ornament to a urban space, literally and metaphorically mirrors the transformation of the museum from a ‘temple’ to a ‘forum.’ (Melhuish 1997, 22-25)

Case study 2: The Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh

Benson + Forsyth’s architectural agenda for the Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh reiterates and reflects the visual ideologies that have recurred throughout the development of Edinburgh’s urban environment. Historically, the unique topography and geography of Edinburgh has been capitalized on in the development of the city, and the Museum of Scotland extends this preoccupation by providing an armature that orchestrates the physical and visual sequence within the building and the vistas beyond. This extends the picturesque traditions of Edinburgh and orchestrates connections between the museum interior and the spaces of the city.

Benson + Forsyth address the explicitly nationalist agenda that underpinned the museum’s brief, communicating ideas about Scotland by engaging with the cultural landscape of Edinburgh, particularly the city’s historical visual traditions. Arranging the museum around key exhibits and using two top-lit voids to create visual connections across the internal spaces highlights the nineteenth century museum tradition of a system of ‘organised walking’. (Bennett 1995, 6) However, rather than reinforcing linear progressivist narratives, the architecture highlights the dynamic potential of orchestrating the relationship between objects and movement that was central
to the modern museums. (Norrie 2002) Visual connections through and beyond the building also highlight the relationship between the museum interior and the surrounding landscape in a manner that recalls the ideals and experience of an earlier Edinburgh museum, Patrick Geddes’ Outlook Tower. The visitors’ gaze is drawn to locations beyond the museum, through orchestrated vistas that establish the association of the city as an object within the museum. This transforms the museum from a symbolic monument to an ‘instrument’ of active engagement. (Martin Pawley in Allan 1998, 128.)

Image 2: Museum of Scotland entrance, and plan showing sequence and views within and beyond the building on the entry level to the museum. (Norrie, 2014.)

The Museum of Scotland’s engagement with the visuality of the city acknowledges that Edinburgh’s development has been shaped by a series of visual agendas that range from pragmatic (outlook and surveillance) to ideological (picturesque associative and symbolic ideals). Within this highly visualised environment, Benson + Forsyth understand the importance of both visual connection (outlook) and visual association in creating meaning and memory, and this interest in visuality underpins the museum’s architecture. The building is orchestrated to reinforce movement and spectacle and highlight visual connections to particular elements within the city, which reinforces the urban tradition of the city as a terrain of landmarks. It also addresses twentieth century concerns of how to ‘build new’ in an historical context, by eliciting associative relationships. The role of the museum as a symbolic urban ornament is also implicit in the design of the building exterior, which draws on both vernacular and architectural building traditions to elicit associations with the historical context of Scotland, and architectural culture more generally.
In contrast to the examples of London and Edinburgh, the city offers an alternative condition for the Jewish Museum in Berlin. Although the city was successively shaped by a series of grand urban gestures, the structure of both the built and cultural environment was significantly altered by events that culminated in World War II and the post-war partitioning of the city. The grand boulevards of the 18th and 19th centuries that inscribed a strong geometrical form onto the relatively flat topography of the city were eroded by the effects of allied bombing in the final years of WWII,
leading to the perception of the city as a tabula rasa - an empty slate. However, Libeskind reconceptualises the city as a site of memory and meaning by foregrounding alternative narratives of rupture, absence and integration as a foundation for the form generation of the architecture.

Drawing on Post Modern techniques of form finding, Libeskind engages with the intangible physical context through a process of projective ‘site thinking’ that highlights conceptual relationships between the museum and the city. The conceptual narrative underpins the formal order and spatial structure, and through this process the architecture is liberated from conventional spatial practices. Libeskind creates a ‘trace’ of an ‘invisible and irrationally connected star’ which becomes the generator of the plan form, producing ‘anti-classical’ architecture that eschews reference to museological typologies or traditions. (Stead 1999, 321-8) Both the overall building form and the irregular diagonal incisions reference ‘something beyond the building’, as it ‘bends, dilates, diverges only under the singular authority of the zigzag line from which it is extruded.’ (LW 1995, 122) The ‘trace’ that underpins form generation is not utilised to reinscribe historical form, but to articulate a conceptual relationship of absence that implicitly integrates memory and meaning into the urban landscape.

Although the architecture is iconic, in so much as it is unique, connections between the museum and the city are neither triumphal nor visible. However, the architectural ideas are underpinned by a desire to seek legibility for the historical cultural condition of the city, particularly an aspiration that the history of the Jewish people should be understood as integral to the city. Although the project was not intended to be a Holocaust memorial, it embeds the memory of this event within the museum through the use of spaces that are deliberately spatially destabilising and also visually spectacular and memorable.

Image 4: Diagram of the ‘invisible and irrational star’ created by connecting the addresses of cultural leaders, Jews and Gentiles, from either site of the Berlin wall, which becomes the foundational diagram for the process of form find. (Norrie, 2014.)
The Jewish Museum Berlin has become a key cultural marker in the new terrain of ‘Jewish Berlin’ that has been overlaid on the contemporary city, as the first in a ‘trioka’ of projects that reinstate the visibility of Jewish culture in the city. Although the building does not primarily engage with the existing physical context, it acknowledges the existing urban condition, readjusting the awkward alignment created by the clash between the nineteenth and twentieth century planning traditions. (Heise and Holstein 1990, 162-3) Libeskind’s abstract conceptual ideas extract a new order, which assists in the ‘construction of mental and physical space’ that aims to imbue the museum with meaning, producing a unique and iconic building that is available to be deployed in the city’s various new ‘brand-spaces’. (Jojola et al 2000, 26)

Image 5: Exterior of the Jewish Museum Berlin; diagram of basement plan showing paths to 3 key void spaces; the Holocaust Tower, the Garden of Exile and the Memory Void. (Norrie, 2014)

Conclusion

All three projects construct particular relationships between the museum and the city, critiquing and reworking traditional narratives – museological, architectural and urban. Parallel themes of movement, spectacle and memory are highlighted, reinforcing the idea that museums and cities are not just about functional relationships, but are also sites of meaning and experience that create itineraries of movement, spectacle and memory.
In each of these projects there is an explicit questioning of the museum type, in other ways besides the deliberately ironic and polemical post-modern approaches. Rather than drawing on historical motifs of form, the architectural approach of the case study museums create buildings that are ‘future-oriented’ in their relationship to site and context. (Libeskind 2000, 29) These projects highlight the way spatial and cultural meanings are conceived, perceived and experienced. Each present constructed terrains of engagement that influence both museological and urban narratives. These ideas extend beyond the immediate curatorial, educational and commercial concerns to refocus attention of the museum’s civic role as a site of experience and meaning in the contemporary city.

The new architecture of the British Museum, the Museum of Scotland and the Jewish Museum Berlin evokes a site-specific response to the museological and architectural programme, and to the urban context. Each project was makes connections to the city’s history and contemporary condition, highlighting the physical, visual and conceptual relationship of the contemporary museum to its urban settings, both past and present. The architectural approaches employed in each project offer ways of questioning or problematizing institutional and urban narratives. (Isenstadt 2005, 178) They highlight the potential agency of architecture to create an ‘unfolding dialogue’ that allows ‘the city (to) flow through the project’, both physically and conceptually. (Allen 2001, 119) Although each project is iconic, in varying ways, the ‘imageability’ of the architecture is less important that the physical, visual and conceptual relationships to the urban and cultural context that are generated.

This discussion highlights ways of understanding how the physical structure of space and the visual associations that it creates, through movement, views and vistas and also through the use of conceptual associations embedded in building form, can highlight the idea of ‘belonging to the city’ that is key to civic engagement. It focuses on buildings as elements of the connected terrain of engagement of the city, rather than iconic objects that belong to the “visual esperanto of international communication.” (Smith 2006, 48) This approach does not erode the role of the icon, rather it presents a series of questions about the nature of meaning and experience, highlighting the cause and effect of underlying conceptual ideas that influence urban form and affect urban and architectural narratives.

Projects discussed offer ways of understanding the agency of architecture to make connections between individual buildings and their site, or context, particularly within urban environments. By interacting physically, visually and/or conceptually with their urban context, museums (and other urban institutions or entities) need not be at odds with, such places’ role in the iconomy, creating sites that engage with both global and local concerns of identity, to convey urban aspirations and civic values.

While the cultural expectation that museums will embody meaning makes these projects ideal exemplars for exploring this idea, the value of this discussion lies in the potential application of these ideas to other building types and sites. The case studies all exist within particular kinds of sites: dense European cities in which the core of the old city is physically compact and remains the enduring location of premier civic and cultural institutions. These cities are steeped in history, providing a rich palimpsest of past events that is layered into both the physical environment and the cultural landscape. However, the more expanded contemporary city provides a contrast to this condition. This opens the question of the applicability of these ideas in different spatial, temporal
and cultural conditions in which the key buildings and institutions are not well-funded museums and cultural centres, but more prosaic, yet essentially equally community based institutions like schools, and perhaps even shopping centres.

The application to these ideas to other building types offers ways to consider how the future development of the city, particularly its civic and institutional buildings, can promote civic engagement, and contribute to a directed urban narrative. Positioning the conception of the architecture of individual buildings within a broader understanding of cities highlights the conditions that foreground the contemporary urban condition. It shifts the focus beyond the individual building to highlight the importance of the enduring relationship between buildings and cities, both physically and culturally, which underpins civic ideals of belonging to the city.

References


