

Book Review



Gyorgy Peter (2013). Museum, The Learning House. Case Studies in Museum Theory. [Muzeum, a tanulo-haz. Muzeumelmeleti esettanulmanyok. Budapest: Fine Arts.

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We all know that museums are not just for free time activities but for learning and studying as well. This role has become quite important in the last decades: the so called “museum boom”, a huge museum transforming process has changed the original roles of cultural institutions. Museum pedagogy, lifelong learning became quite an important task that the museums had to complete. The visitors became curators: they are who determine museums nowadays. That is why museums needed changes concerning not only their programs and approaches but in their ways of designing exhibitions and in their architecture as well. So the countries started to establish new and extravagant museum buildings which were able to attract more and more visitors who wanted to learn in the museums.

This phenomenon is examined in Peter Gyorgy’s issue: Museum, The Learning House. Gyorgy is an acknowledged Hungarian aesthete, who is specialized in contemporary art and new media. He also examines the changes of museums, the changes of exhibitions and contemporary art as well as the architecture’s and designs’ role in the life of museums, the museum representation of the biggest catastrophes of mankind in the 20th Century (mostly: second world war, Nazism, Communism in Eastern Europe).

This book is a selection of the author’s writings concerning the subjects mentioned above: you can find seventeen publications examining the changes in museums. His aim is to point out the main similarities and differences between European country’s museums which represent the history of the 20th Century’s second half until nowadays. Germany plays the main role in this issue: you can read articles of Berlin’s, Dresden’s, Rugen’s, Schassenhausen’s, Linz’s, Koln’s museums and exhibitions which had somehow made something extraordinary or remarkable on the museum field. There are also case studies concerning museums of Sighetu Marmatiei (Romania), Athens, Vienna, Manchester,

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Madrid, Paris and Budapest and articles about two Jewish artists who suffered the Nazi suppression during the Second World War. All of these studies are about the new museum era, the changed architecture and the changed exhibition planning.

In the first chapter Gyorgy supports the theoretical background of these changes: museum spaces and artefacts are being reconsidered in the last few decades. The universal museums became more and more local museums with local themes where the collections look like their town and not like an ideology. The objects cannot be separated from their own history and they also cannot be separated from the space where they are situated (p. 30.). The book examines this battle between universalism and globalism in point of art theory of Alfred Gell: he says that art is a system of activities which aim is to change the world (p. 40.). He talks about the contemporary museum turn which change is mainly architectural. Gyorgy mentions Foucault who thought that museums are spaces for controlling and education and not the places for free esthetical roaming (p.47.). But these kinds of concepts became outworn in the last decades: new architectural views brought new possibilities for museums.

The book offers quite interesting examples and case studies for those who are interested in the ways of representing Europe's history between 1939 and 1990. Gyorgy confronts two famous cultural institutions in Berlin: the Altes Museum was built in the ordinary way as it was the open church of high culture where the process of learning did not only mean history and chronology but much more. The museum building was renovated like it was before, like nothing had changed. Neues Museum was built like Altes Museum as well but after its destruction they did not renovate like it was: in 2009, they left the marks of destruction on the walls, in the building, they did not cover the signs of the war but they created a new, an odd space. That is why the museum does not offer an illusion, does not cover the signs of history: it represents the historical memory in an unusual form (p. 88.).

The 21st Century's great question is how to represent the terror of the Second World War and the Cold War, the Nazi terror and the Soviet terror in Europe: how can one learn about these eras 70 years later? Gyorgy offers more ways, more examples as an answer for these questions in Chapter 4-8. In Chapter 4 called "Remembrance and Amnesia" you can read about two rather interesting museums in Eastern Berlin which are located in a former Stasi prison (Gedenkstätte) and in the former Ministry of State Security's offices (Stasi Museum). These museums are so-called "memorial museums" because they can be found in their original places, where history actually had happened (p. 124.). The author draws attention to a phenomenon in Europe (Eastern Europe) as the museums represent the Nazi terror but they rarely represent the Communist and Socialist terror of the Soviet Empire. Berliner museums are great examples to show that this abandoned theme can be demonstrated as a local theme in the exact place where history had actually happened (p. 133.). The same example can be read in Chapter 6: there is a strange and huge settlement of buildings in the Island of Rügen which was built as a holiday resort before the Second World War for Hitler's workers. Nowadays the buildings are abandoned except two museums which are quite different although they can be found in the same building. The

first museum represents only the monstrosities of the Nazis in a conventional way: it is widely accepted professionally but only a few visits it. The other museum demonstrates not just the Nazi era but the Socialist period as well in a modern way. This museum is not really accepted professionally but lots of people visit it (p. 164) which means that visitors can decide how and what they want to learn in a museum. The Author points out another interesting phenomenon concerning these buildings of Rugen: nowadays a lot of people go to the shore to bath and they park their cars next to these buildings although they don't care about the buildings' history or meaning. But they meet those buildings which mean they learn when they go through them: the author defines it as "involuntary remembrance" (p. 170.). Gyorgy also mentions the memorial museum of Sachsenhausen (GER) and the Museum of Sighetu Marmatiei (RO) which are quite similar to the Berliner ones: they also represent the terror of Nazism and Communism. The Romanian museum is like a "palace of remembrance" because the exhibition halls can be found in original prison cells: visitors can get the hang of prison, the space experience, one can be a part of this world so this is the transformation of mind and sense at the same time. (p. 144.)

Another important theme of the Author's issue is the question of restitution and reunification. Readers who are interested in this exciting topic can find examples and interesting explanations in Chapter 9-11. For example Gyorgy demonstrates the case of Acropolis Museum in Athens: the Greek artefacts of the Acropolis were transferred to British Museum in the last centuries. But from 1976, Greece wanted to get back those objects because they wanted to reunite them with the ones which remained in Athens. They had built a museum to achieve their goal but there are still huge arguments about the restitution and reunification of these Greek artefacts (p. 222.).

As it has been mentioned before, Gyorgy believes that architecture can define the mood and appeal of whole museums and exhibitions. For those who are interested in the power of architecture in museums we recommend Chapter 13-16 where the author gladden us with intriguing case studies of Paris, Madrid, Dresden and Manchester. We would like to highlight the case of the Imperial War Museum North in Manchester, Great-Britain as it seems to be the most interesting example of the architecture's and exhibition theme's cooperation. The museum's aim is to represent war acts from 1900 until nowadays but this institution does not have the traditional way. Instead of talking about armament, tactics and battles show us the human dramas of the heartlands. You can meet the fates of women and children who remained home: their destiny is in the centre of the exhibition so the visitors can be easily withdrawn, they can learn throughout stories (p. 312.). They read real stories in an interesting space where architecture helps them to understand, to experience and learn about those times.

The case studies do not end here: one can learn about more interesting examples, for instance the plans for reconstruction of Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest (p. 382.).

All in all, one can say that Peter Gyorgy's issue can help us to examine the new roles of the museums all over Europe concerning the shocking history of the 20th Century. The new

buildings', the new architecture's, the new exhibition designs' aim is to help the visitors with understanding the appalling decades of modern history. As we have demonstrated visitors can learn via new ways and new methods in these new museums and readers can understand more of the problems of modern museums in the 21st Century.