

AP

When we look at the field of museum planning within architectural practice and its developments over the last few years, we note that, on one hand, it is marked by a number of contributions that regard architecture as a specific work of art, as an auratic and significant object that always aims at conveying the history of a place while adding its own history at the same time. In other projects, on the other hand, the functional aspect is brought to a level of perfection that outshines any specific artistic statement, the result being that the functional background inevitably becomes the foreground.

How do you consider your architectonic practice between these poles?

FE

We don't believe that architecture—at least the architecture that we are interested in—can neatly be categorized by these two positions. We are, in fact, extremely interested in the overlaps and grey areas between these two attitudes. They are not, we believe, mutually exclusive, and we do not prioritize one over the other. Nor does this debate pertain solely to the field of museum planning (though it may be more clearly visible or manifest in museum architecture than in other public buildings that deal with more pedestrian needs): any architectural intervention (again, at least the work we are interested in) will have a considered relationship or response to its multiple respective contextual strata.

What we look for is how to respond to these possible contradictions and complexities, without making a complicated statement, but instead finding what we call the simplest formal manifestation of the complexity of a problem. It is possible, we believe, to express a complex thought in a simple phrase (rather than expressing a complex thought in a complicated phrase), and to make a statement of extreme complexity in an extremely simple phrase. It is the ensuing tension between these two extremes that interests us.

RG

We don't really think of these aspects as being polar or mutually exclusive. Being specific—that is, attaching a work to a particular situation (even in a series of mutations)—is important to us, but so is fulfilling the functional requirements of a project (in as invisible a means as possible). We do not, however, believe in giving form or physical presence to every detail of a work. A hierarchy exists and judgment must be made as to what is essential—demanding to be conveyed—and what is secondary—what Louis Kahn referred to as “served” and “servant” elements.

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Brian O'Doherty's groundbreaking series of essays *Inside the White Cube* introduced a discussion in 1976 that is still present today—one that does not merely deal with institutional critique of the museum thematically, but also examines the practice of creating neutral, anonymous spaces in which the contents and not the container is intended to be of central significance. This method of exhibiting is characterized by an intention to create a direct emotional effect in which space plays a secondary role, and the relationship between the object and the visitor, and thus perception, become the significant aspects.

What role does perception play in your work, and how is this represented?

FE

Space cannot truly be anonymous. We are, however, extremely interested in what we call “quiet space,” and we strive to make the architect’s hand—but not the architect’s thinking—invisible. In setting up the dialogue between the viewer and the viewed, architecture is a silent, but crucial, participant—an intermediary.

The relationship between art and the space around it is deeply meaningful to us. The great Renaissance or Baroque examples, for instance, where art heightens the perception of space and vice versa, have always been points of reference for us. Further, and more generally, our work often involves the act of framing—identifying what is there (but maybe not visible) and through our architectural intervention making this perceivable to others. But the act of framing by necessity is an act of excluding, eliminating, of removing, and requires careful editing. This, of course, is one of the aspects that intrigues us in Sharon Lockhart’s work. We have, in fact, often used her images to illustrate this process of framing when discussing our own work.

RG

Perception is very important to our work. However, space does not need to play a secondary role in order for the experience between viewer and object to be significant. This sort of perception can occur simultaneously at different levels—like focusing on an object while having peripheral awareness—holding a memory—of a larger context just experienced.

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This discussion ultimately leads to a dichotomy between the idea of architecture as an object itself versus the projection of neutral space in which art is supposed to represent something autonomous that, detached from the surrounding architecture, stands for itself. However, neither art nor architecture can exist and develop in an “either / or” situation. Understanding neutrality in a positive sense does not mean that objects cancel each other out, but rather that they create space for each other.

What would you consider your basic strategy for dealing with this matter?

FE

We see this division as problematic. Maybe we should start by defining the relationship, as we see it, between “architectural space” and “architectural object”: the architecture that interests us the most is one where the two are in a dialogue, no matter how tenuous or delicate. Architecture conceived of as an “object”—where “space” is an afterthought, later, sometimes awkwardly, inserted into the object (many recent museum buildings, sadly, have this shortcoming)—has little interest for us, as does architecture that is developed simply as an enclosure, or wrapping of “space.” It is the back and forth between these two, between “space” and “object”—how one shapes the other, the intersection of these two investigations—where we see architecture emerging.

This all happens before the next object, the art, is introduced into the architectural space and the dialogue between this new object and the space occurs. In most cases the space can or will not be altered, and the relationship between the space and the art can be somewhat accidental, and may or may not be successful. This is where we seek to find the transition from the object (art) into architectural space and, ideally, into the larger (architectural) object.

RG

Our work with Sharon Lockhart speaks to this very issue. In the best situations, art and architecture cannot be separated and still enhance the experience of the other.

In each installation we take into account both how Sharon Lockhart’s work should be seen (in a way that she envisions for the viewer) and how different venues will offer uniquely different spatial conditions. So the installations will vary from one location to another, but the relationship to the work must remain a constant.

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Current discussions on planning exhibition spaces also make clear that innovations that use architecture as their means are essentially restricted since, like all vocabularies, architecture’s vocabulary is soon exhausted, in addition to which it is not even particularly comprehensive. Yet architecture is not dependent for its success upon the continuous innovation of its own means.

What impact does this point of view have on your work?

FE

Whether we like this or not, every architect has his or her formal preferences. We do not believe that an architectural language is developed purely from abstract systems or data. The danger, then, is that “taste” rather than “thought” begins to dominate the process of developing architecture, a risk we continuously need to keep in mind.

RG

Pursuit of innovation for its own sake, whether by using architecture as a means or designating architecture as an end, does not necessarily yield good results—perhaps rather the opposite. Innovation must occur organically for it to be meaningful and have a lasting impact. We often find that a good characteristic of innovation is timelessness. We never strive for innovation in our work. The results are to be judged by others.

AP

It is interesting to me how in recent years contemporary art has increasingly been presented in historic spaces. This anachronism not only creates curiosity, it is also highly revealing.

How would you characterize this development?

FE

We see history no longer as a massive, suffocating burden from which we need to cut ourselves completely free. A critical distance allows us a more objective view of the past, and to even see conceptual (if not formal) similarities with the

present. Architecture and art—culture, really—is not a string of unrelated (disparate) events, but of one continuous line of events. We do not exist in a cultural vacuum and, whether we accept this or not, we are responding to what has come before us. Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his *The Way of Masks*, talks about the “fruitful illusion” of the artist who imagines himself to be “original”: “When he claims to be solitary, the artist lulls himself in a perhaps fruitful illusion, but the privilege he grants himself is not real. When he thinks he is expressing himself spontaneously, creating an original work, he is answering other past or present, actual or potential creators. Whether one knows it or not, one never walks alone along the path of creativity.”

This, the art-historical connection, is another aspect of Sharon Lockhart’s work that has always been of interest to us. In her film *Pine Flat*, there is a scene that reminds us of characters moving through Breughel’s wintry world; in a different scene, a girl, dressed in blue jeans and a red sweater, quietly reading, her hair framing a face of contemplation with a meadow and a forest enclosing this scene, reminds us of a virginal Renaissance figure within her hortus conclusus. Other protagonists or scenes remind us of Jean-François Millet or Édouard Manet, or of Kaspar David Friedrich. Her intense portraits of the children recall the long tradition of portrait representation.

Because of this, we have always used historical analogies in developing spaces to view Lockhart’s art: spaces for her *Pine Flat* portraits (page 80) were likened to the “Long Gallery” of English stately homes, where the proportions of the space force a close-up view and thus an immediacy of the portrait onto the viewer. But this also means that some contemporary work (Lockhart’s in particular) can easily enter into a rather interesting dialogue—a dialogue that may enrich space and art.

RG

This development is very revealing of our misconception about time and compatibility. We find these divisions by period to be superficial. Authenticity (or understanding the relationship between objects and events) matters more than when a work was created.

AP

The Secession, as a historically loaded space, does not offer easy conditions in favor of setting up contemporary exhibitions. Your work for Sharon Lockhart’s exhibition in the Secession can be regarded as one of the best architectural installations in this building in the past years.

What was your specific idea when confronted with the situation that the spaces in the Secession offer?

FE

The Vienna Secession—the building, the movement, and every artist and architect who was connected to it; the idea of linking every aesthetic aspect of life, architecture, art, design, and fashion; this “Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk”—is one of the seminal events in twentieth-century art. It is difficult, though, to think of the Secession building and not think of its axially, as well as of the main spatial sequence, and the movement along this axis.

To not align this axially with what we saw as a spatial and visual axis, around which the seemingly unconnected,

messy, random, but precisely observed (almost dissected) events, the doings and goings-on in Lockhart’s *Lunch Break*, occur, seemed almost inconceivable to us. For us, aligning these two axes, the building and her work, made Lockhart’s piece less an exhibit in the Secession but—for a short time—an integral part of the Secession. We further imagined the visual alignment of Lockhart’s precise observation of these quotidian scenes with the daily life in front of the building, and these two entering into an (imagined) visual dialogue.

The linear movement of the viewer from the vestibule and into the film space, leaving behind—slowly—the outside light of the exhibition space while moving—slowly—toward the moving image, the parallel in speed and movement and direction, seemed for us the only way to view the piece (pages 124–25). This “forced” (but not exaggerated) perspective, this procession, became almost a way to place Lockhart’s piece in a much larger context of art and architectural history—the carefully framed views and extended perspectival relations of art and space with architecture, the point where architecture ends and art begins.

The architectural object housing the film was pressed up to the main entrance of the space: we wanted the viewer to see the film as the final point of destination (almost a perspectival vanishing point), but we also wanted to render the size of the object’s volume imperceptible at the point of entry—not until one circles around this object would one would understand its dimensions.

The insertion of this almost banal object, though, blurs the symmetry of the exhibition space: the two halves (though mirror reflections of each other) are in themselves no longer symmetrical. The film then, through the volume that contains the film and its central location in the exhibition space, becomes the object around which the entire exhibition revolves.

RG

It was important for us that Lockhart’s work felt like it belonged there at the Secession. Synchronicity can exist between the most seemingly unrelated events or works. Finding or seeing that relationship sometimes requires an effort—a task that constantly intrigues us and informs our work. In this case, the result was very satisfying.



