

Conduct

By Natalie LeRoy



As any great symphony will have many different elements; location, acoustics, composer, timing, vocals, visuals, dancers, different instruments, lighting, and etc. All of these are for the conductor to control, the weight of their hand pulls the invisible strings of reaction and action creating a mood, perception and show for the audience. Of course, the conductor is not responsible for everything, but the audience is depending on him to translate all of the elements into a single bound work that is an experience and will ultimately control their enjoyment of the music.

Super star architecture in recent modernity has taken this role of a conductor, rather than that of one who plans space for functional occupation and purpose. An architect dances among the public, raising funds, creating an environment for the viewer, a perception of the city, pushing the limits of what is the need of architecture. The so called museums of the future, MAXXI of Rome, Quadracci Pavillion of Milwaukee, The Modern Wing of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Tate Modern, seem to showcase less and less work and take on grand meanings as definitions of art in a particular city, attractions, and are "authors" which have "taken on the task of reinvestigating Modernity," and "conquering new territories with every project "(Hadid 280). Architects reshape the way a city views itself, re-coordinates where traffic stops, and invigorates areas with fresh paint and cement. They conduct meanings and whispers of culture and promises of interests beyond life with their subtle curves in materials, elegant lights, and clean lines. Architects are super stars because they promise fantastical experiences through the manipulation of space and materials.

Like other public idols that we endorse, whether musical, academic, sports, cinema, or celebrities, there is often want of purpose when one area of expertise is pushed beyond realistic function into boundary exploratory 'arts'. Creation for creation's sake.

An exceptional example of this is Santiago Calatrava, and his largest piece in North America, the Quadracci Pavilion in Milwaukee. The interwoven interests of engineering, mechanical movement, bio-form mimicking structure, and plays of repetition and light

move the audience around the building in awe of the feats of concrete pouring, grandiose arches, and touches of elegance located around the perimeter. The colossal sculpture is a 120 million dollar dedication to the city of Milwaukee to ensure erasure of its industrial roots and maintain a position as a cultural player in the twenty-first century. Yet it is that, a sculpture. The function of the Calatrava, as it is fondly called, is hardly that of a building. Yes there are spaces for a museum to function, minimal service desks and cafe, hidden coat racks, bathrooms, and restaurant, white walls interrupted by expansive 'ribs' of concrete; but the actual gallery spaces and invitations for displays of art work are disrupted by all these open areas and curvature. It is a parallel of the problem presented by displaying artwork in the Guggenheim museum of New York City. How are works to hang on walls that are so clearly for the aesthetics of architecture only? How is the function to be shoved behind the gaspingly bright spaces? Art is working aside architecture, not within it. The Calatrava does not even seem fit for installation-type art. The art permeating the grand space would tear the architect's dream of infinite space apart. Nothing of object beauty will be allowed to penetrate the great entrance for decades.

Likewise, the decor surrounding the museum is of similar structure. The Dan Kiley lawn does not invite the viewer to play among his partitioned, methodical rows of trees, fountains, and bushes, instead guiding them to the building, forcing them out of a relationship with nature, insinuating that they belong with the man-made works. His tight outlines betray performative art gathering and playing among the sharp hedges and long, clefting fountains. The public sees gardens meant to be viewed and go untouched except by shears.

The Calatrava itself is beyond the function of a museum, and serves as the conductor of interest and art for the city. It promotes futurism, productivity, and creative depth. It hints at the treasures it holds by being a piece of sculpture caught between earth and ideal mechanism yet does not house the function for which it was created.

Architecture is beginning to fall into the category of grand sculptures, but its initial focus has always been function. As more and more cities fall to the ploys of grandiose curves and unthinkable angles, the function of an art museum is lost in the great white halls so many are using. The depth of architecture is losing its grip to the perplexities and far reaches of modern building.

Works cited:

Jencks, Charles, and Karl Kropf. "Zaha Hadid." *Theories and Manifestoes of Contemporary Architecture: 2nd Ed.* Chichester: Wiley-Academy, 2006. Print.