

Structure
Sean Weber

Structured Structure

structure, n.: the action, practice or process of building or construction.

structure, v.: to build or form into a structure; to organize the parts or elements of (something) in structural form. Also, to establish a hierarchy of relationships or a pattern in (something). Hence, to construct, form, or organize.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “structure” in many ways, but the two definitions above are potent enough for a brief investigation of thought.

The Milwaukee Art Museum’s 2001 addition of Santiago Calatrava’s Quadracci Pavilion is a structure. The visible physical structural elements to the building are the first things that one might point out when asked what is structured about the place. A suspension bridge connecting downtown Milwaukee to the Quadracci Pavilion is supported by thick metal cables spanning to the mast-like beam which hovers above and behind the backbone of the brise soleil. The building has moveable wings, spanning two hundred and seventeen feet, which are made up of seventy-two steel fins. Approaching the museum from the lake, one might notice all of the large white hinges supporting much of the poured concrete pylons, and if one wanders inside there are large white rib-like beams, which are visibly crucial to supporting the structure. One entering from the front lawn will come through a low-ceiling in-between the sets of glass doors, and out from that low ceiling one will be graced with extra room above their heads (implying more space to enter). Twenty paces further into the building, maybe by the ticket desks (part of the hierarchy), the space above you shoots upward into the museum’s giant wings and beyond into the sky. So, Calatrava’s architectural feat contains some obvious structure in the physical sense, but the building is structured in more ways than what meets the eye.

Structures rely on an interrelationship of the parts that might make up a more complex whole. A museum could be looked at as the structure, part of the ongoing architectural conversation. It could also be looked at as part of a bigger structure. Structured in the sense of Art History... By loosely dissecting the Oxford definition of structure, “... to establish a hierarchy of relationships ...” the organization of things becomes more apparent. The hierarchy has been built into the museum. When one enters or even plans on attending an art museum, they have probably already assumed that that which is displayed inside will have some significance to art. And lest you forget that the museum is not a small privately run gallery space that operates on a smaller scale; No, this is the Milwaukee Art Museum you are entering! This has its grandeur place in the hierarchy of the art world, and Calatrava said so in the conception and construction of this radical sculptural white building (even the white speaks to a structuring of ideas evident in Post-Modernism). The whole building’s purpose is to display the art within. Without the structure protecting the artwork, the structure loses its function. Does this not imply that the art, within the hierarchy, is of supreme importance?

The hierarchy is in place. The interrelationship of the parts creates the whole. The art precedes the building via this avenue of thought, but the Calatrava physically precedes this art as a way of structured space and structured tradition.