SUPERMODERNISM
A SOCIAL LOSS

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Introduction

Studying the Louvre and Natural History Museum makes us think about why these building, at first glimpse so completely different from another, are both successful. The history of each building is significant and yet, each still fulfils the needs of the contemporary citizen. Is it because of the extension of the Louvre? Why then, without a similar extension, is the Natural History Museum still functioning well? This made us think of the typology of these two buildings and their appearances. In which era do they belong? Is it not the building itself but the interpretation of the buildings by their users that makes them work? The theory about place and non-place is no longer relevant by concluding that they can just have the same qualities, the experience of public space the aura is far more important than that it is inherent in location and history. First, we will discuss how the buildings appear to us.

The Museums

When one arrives at the Louvre, one first sees the pyramid embraced by the huge bulk of the old palace. The long repetitive walls make you think of a big palace or as the French say, un grand chateau. Because it is quite big and stretched out, it suggests that it used to represents something important. The symmetric plan, the central entrance and the big and stretched out embracing arms supports that. Although you cannot
see it, you know that the walls are thick and massive, because the building just gives you this impression, knowing that buildings that were built in medieval time had to protect most of the time something important. It suggests that it was a place for the nobility and the knighthood and maybe even royalty. The building looks decorated. Windows are provided of bows and arches, and there is sculptural work above them. The entrance is marked by a queue leading us to the glass pyramid in the middle. It is rather strange to see all these people attracted to this not particularly large pyramid. The little pyramids and the glazed floor with a big hanging pyramid already tell us there is something going on underground. When one gets into this pyramid, the large hall shows us the crowd forced in all different directions, going with the flow. Then when you have entered, and walked around for several hours, bought a very expensive sandwich with an espresso and sat down, the flow of people - one slipping inside and another slipping out for a break - again becomes visible. The developers of the building even planned this break in. It is a part of the flow. This building looks like a completely directed scene.
The Natural History Museum is big, the complete façade is long and repetitive. In the middle, the entrance is easily recognizable by the stairs that lead to the big door. Two towers at both sides of the museum complete the symmetry of the complex. The whole complex looks like an old palace or government building, with terracotta colored bricks and a black roof. The repetition of the building makes a strong impression on its spectator. When you enter the big building, one will arrive in a large hall, with in the middle the skeleton of a dinosaur. Directly you are confronted with the exhibition. Actually, this was already starting at the outside of the building where all the little organic details in the building elements became visible. It looks like even the structure of the building is inspired by the content of the museum. This complete gothic building got an old sphere around it that makes one really in contact with the old treasures that are kept. The exposition is nicely displayed in all the different areas of the building. The repetition that was already shown outside continues in the plans of the building. In this way lots of different areas are created on this rigged scheme. All the little spaces are used for showing the exposition. Most of the daylight in the museum comes from the roof, also inner gardens supply some light in this building.
Supermodernism

'The production of contemporary world tends to improve performances by reducing means, unfolding a process that tends to the miracle. That is what interests us aesthetically: the miracle. To have a TV 30 millimetres thick, where I can see any place in the world, or my own image...What interests me is what does not have thickness, nor weight, what does not show the trick, only the image...We move towards a formal simplification of the object, towards a formal inexpressively in respect to function. This is the feature that makes an object part of our time and it is better to use these forces to our advantage rather than against us. To see that a piece of glass is transparent but can turn into opaque or translucent by touching a button is what makes the scenography of contemporary world. Some people maintain that this technological process will impoverish architecture, that it will reduce its visual complexity. But I think that the problem is precisely there: to find the emotional register that was once impossible but that now is available but not exploited. There is an emotional and aesthetical dimension in finding the most enigmatic, the less demonstrative solution, the aesthetical dimension of the miracle.'

Jean Nouvel

Supermodernism is a term that is been created during the publication Non-lieux; introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité (Paris, 1992) by anthropologist Marc Augé. Supermodernity is about a mass of space, individualization and signs. Because in our world everybody is bombarded with information. These three forms of multitude give a perspective of the super modern condition.

_Marc Auge, Non-places: introduction to an Anthropology of supermodernity, London/ New York, ‘95_
**Non-place and place**

Supermodernisation is the consequence of modern styles as functionalism. The neutral buildings that are part of this style exist out of minimalistic squares. Buildings have smooth surfaces and have a (semi-) transparent façade. In this current 24-hour economy, globalization plays a big role. This economy creates a new kind of identity for places and spaces.

In this epoch, space is the enlightenment-thinking, connected to emptiness, where space rational and functional can be classified. Therefore, this means that space is empty. Place is a reaction on this enlightenment-thinking. It is about history and matters. Place is history. The product place instead of space is also used in the marketing world. It is not only the space what is important, but also the experience of space is important when you combine a place in a city. This produced meaning is never ruling for the character of an area, but has for sure influence of how someone or another experiences a place.

Non-places are quasi-machined mobility-sluices, as gas stations, road restaurants, airports and shopping malls that are connected to the infrastructure. In contrast with places, this anthropologic has been seen as public spaces, as squares that do have
more a history. The Louvre is a place with history, the old part has lots of especially the old part, but the building ‘Louvre’ is not seen in that way, but in more in the quasi machined way. When you are on upper level, you will notice the old part and conclude that something has been going on for a long time, but when you enter the pyramid, you will forget this, by getting in this transferring mobility machine. This shows that non-places are too much focus on movement and function. In addition, these non-places are becoming more and more places in the city. For example, Schiphol-plaza, a non-space number one is a very lively and active space, a public domain. Office people, fly- en shopping people are here active very easily. However, the network-city could be the menace for the public domain. Because not nearness, but travel time is the biggest factor in the situation by choosing work, living and recreation, it gives people the opportunity to create there own city.

‘The city becomes a city a la carte’
Marc Auge, Non-places: introduction to an Anthropology of supermodernity, p. 45, London/ New York, ’95

The Louvre is just a piece of this puzzle, and an answer do the needs of the contemporary society nowadays want. It let the people connect just as a schiphol-plaza does. The non-places are nowadays also very often spaces that have the publicness in them. Bigger pieces of the daily urban life takes place in the private spaces, like shopping malls, not on the public street. Centers like this are very often isolated enclaves and are part of a bigger network. This threatening isolation and enclave forming is a big issue for the urbanism of a city. The identity of a city is important, and created out of the old city centre. The city nowadays is build out of different enclaves with gated communities, exclusive golf tracks, malls and business centers as most extreme examples.
City centers are in the urban field not just the central space. People think that the city is the carrier of the publicity, but the so-called network-society creates a new situation where publicity now does not necessary takes place on the street. Indeed the street has been moved underground or inside, there where one can fulfill his secondary needs. Enclaves distinguish themselves very often on basis of social economic style, image and lifestyle. This form of urbanism is known because of its programmatic and social aspects.
These mono functional enclaves are enclosed by transport zones. People travel from enclave to enclave by car, and spend as less as possible time at it. Because of this, the street in the old city who functioned as public domain, becomes more and more a function of the travel zone. When we go back to the Louvre, we see that this picture is projected on this building

On the Louvre and Natural History Museum

Ibelings calls airports building type number one. As explained before, the airport is a hot item if it comes to globalization. Essential themes as mobility, the accessibility, the infrastructure and the flight traffic has grown strongly, that are why the airport capacity extends so much.

Ibelings separated supermodernism in two groups. The first group contains buildings of high architectural worth that give, (although they are neutral and not symbolic and because of there excellence remarkable) a meaning to a place. This is clearly also the issue for the Natural History Museum. Although this building is not without symbolic meanings, the appearance contains a great religious value, although it is not, it gives a very special meaning at its place. The building is strangled with culture,
history and nation. Not only is the collection in the building about history, the building itself is too. At the time the Natural History Museum was build, England raised a lot of gothic buildings. A museum this big and representing for the country was destined to be gothic.

The second group contains structures that are so ordinary, despite their sporadic way to specificity by referring to historic or geographic aspect, that these kind of buildings could be anywhere. Good examples are the casinos or the big shopping malls in Las Vegas. This is exactly what the Louvre is about. The pyramid is only and just a mark for the underlying grave tomb and has further no relation what so ever with the surrounded old Louvre. M. Pei talks in his description about the design of the Louvre that he chose is a natural form, a basic sculpture, to not damage the sight of the old Louvre. Therefore, he chose a pyramid and made it as transparent as possible. That
is just the fact that shows that the new part of the Louvre is not related its
surroundings.
You can take the pyramid, place it in front of every old building you want, and still
create the same sight. People will have the same feeling when they visit that sight,
glass transparent ‘thing’ next to an old historical façade. The material mix of old and
new can look quite good. However, the pyramid is architectural quality in combination
with the old and gives no quality to the place.

Ibelings also concludes that the world is more marked by the so called non-spaces,
where the architecture does not show any identification, namely that they are not
place related, and that means they are neutral. Neutrality is a very important notion in
his argument. He refers to the smooth surfaces of the buildings, the shiny boxes, and
so on.
He talks about something that Mies van der Rohe already in time of modernity
explained: the neutral box. The term has been re-introduced by Ibelings, because he
thinks that we need every day more architectural aspects to make our buildings
interesting. The smooth surfaces do not answer the question of buildings being
recognized. That is why we intent to put text on buildings, because we can not
recognize them any more.\(^\text{(2)}\) Typologies are getting lost. If the old Louvre was not in
its place and there were everywhere pyramids rising, nobody could recognize which
‘shopping mall’ is under it. The old Louvre is actually the décor for the people behind
the pyramid what gives them the notification.

One of the aspect where this comes out most strongly is the relation to the context.
The surroundings for this kind of architecture is the legitimate nor the motive,
because they are being exposed to what have taken place in the building, to the
program. This autonomy is shown in many of the cases, because of the inaccessible
exterior, that already explains to the user what is going on inside.

\(^{(1)}\) Ibelings supermodernism, 2002, p. 80, NAI publishers
\(^{(2)}\), Ibelings supermodernism, 2002, p. 88, NAI publishers
You can seen buildings differently from a supermodern perspective. Buildings are containers of special experience instead of carriers of meanings. The moral and dogmatic are hidden and made place for realism. Because of that the things can be taken phenomenological as they are.⁵

What about the enormous space under the ground that reaches to every wing of the old Louvre? It is just storage and connection, a transferring zone to the old wings. The arms of this grave tomb are not designed by architectural reasons, but because they need to connect from point to point. Basically that form is already decided by the old part of the building. Again, this airport-like part can easily be placed under another building that needs underground storage. The arms will be in other directions, nobody will notice, because it's underground. When entering the Louvre, there is no quality of the exterior when transferring what so ever. People who are using this space to get from point A to B will not be stimulated of the exterior, because there is none.

(3) Ibelings supermodernism, 2002, NAI publishers p.91

POPULAR MUSEUMS

The crowd with the intention of going to a museum is changing for a long time. The diversity of the contemporary visitor is very remarkable. In the old days, the Louvre was a place for inspiration for the artists, now everybody can look at the art at the Louvre. Therefore, if one want to see the Mona Lisa one will enter a room complete full of people. More digital cameras will appear to one than the seconds that one sees a glimpse of the Mona Lisa. That is in a way what most of the visitors came for, been there done that.
seem to be the experience of the modern human being. Not surprising, if one reckons that not many people are educated art-lovers. The bigness of the whole complex leaves his visitor in a social emptiness.

The Louvre can be subscribed as a theme park, a well-planed route were one comes by the most famous artworks. Every five minutes there is a ‘picture-moment’, and the visitor who respects the museum rules can buy t-shirt, cards and hats with there most favourite artwork. World’s bestseller ‘The Da Vinci Code’ by Dan Brown is the last act for even more popularity of the museum. The whole world now knows the I.M. Pei pyramids, the old part of the museum gets no attention, the pyramids are the icons of the Louvre.

Also the Natural History Museum is a highly popular museum. The decorations are a spectacle for the visitor and create enthusiasm between the visitors. The museum uses this fact and organises tours by the terracotta decorations. It looks like the museum is timeless and definitely interesting for the contemporary visitor.

If we compare the two museums you have many differences, but one main similarity is that both of the museums are in origin a traditional public space. They are almost like a square, which everybody can enter. In a way, the extension of I.M. Pei makes the two museums more similar. Both now have a big hall where people will enter the building. It is the design of the hall, the modernity of it, what differs. For example if the Louvre had a big entrance hall in its original design, but than in the same style as the whole museum it would be completely comparable with the Natural History Museum. The extension is very symbolic with its pyramids and the underground spaces, even more symbolic than the churchlike appearance of the Natural History Museum.
MUSEUMS ON A HIGHER LEVEL

“The cosmopolitan was the perfect public man, not born to land, lease, house or office”

This cosmopolitan was already acting like most of the crowd in the museum. Go to a place to look at themselves and each other. We can say that these boulevards moved from the street to the museums and other cultural public building. Why are these cultural places, these contemporary public squares so popular by the cosmopolitan?

“…for when one has no fixed ‘place’ in a society... ...then one makes up a place for oneself by manipulating one’s appearance.”

In the chapter ‘Rousseau’s indictment of the city as theater’ Senneth explains the difference between the way men is acting in small and large cities. In a small city the social status of one is known by everybody. You can act different but people know what work one does, how many children they support. In bigger cities people got more social freedom, they have to search for each others reputation. Because everybody is acting the reputation they want. When one has no information about someone else, they can only ‘read’ the reputation by the way one looks and acts.

It appears that the museums are becoming more and more popular just as a hangout space, the new boulevards of the city. When we look at the Louvre and it ambivalence between place and non-place we can see a big similarity between the museum and its visitors. Like Senneth explains us the public man in a big city is no longer the man one really is, he is just acting the man one wants to be. One got no place in a society, but conquers it. The evolution Marc Augé subscribes for the city is also going on for public man, or perhaps better said, the city is following public life.

Can this change of public men that is going on for ages, come at a point that history of places and the aspects that make a place in Augé’s opinion a place or non-
place no longer count. Like men have an impression on one other by there appearance and then make up what kind of reputation they have, men judge a building also by its appearance.

History no longer counts, the way they impress got more value. How much a building is ‘worth’, the status, just depends on different aspects/themes. History should be one of them, but also techné, history or modern appearance, the excitement they encourage, architect, material, or elements like columns, windows etcetera and off course the contents are influencing what men thinks of it.

The Louvre does have a reputation. It is well known in our society, but the reputation that is created over the years is made up by this society, the same society that is acting in a theater. Louvre’s content is more a feeling than the real content. The feeling can be subscribed best as a grave tomb. The big underground space with the pyramid simulates the sphere that hangs around the real pyramids. In public life the opinion of men is noticed by the appearance, without real knowledge of the content. The Louvre is not just an airport-like space it is more. It is a non-place, but these places have much value in contemporary society.

Why attracted to a museum like the Natural History Museum? Even in its name the content of the museum is shown, the content is clear for its visitor. Natural History Museums are well known by the public. History is in the name and connected to every element of the museum. Still you can assume that the visiting public of both the museums are the same, namely the cosmopolitan. And as subscribed earlier the way they impress is more important then their history. The aura around the Natural History Museum is of another sort than the Louvre, it is far less vague. The museum and its content are like a dinosaur, literal by the exposition, but also the way the museum is build. Big, structural, gothic, it is not the history itself that impress but the aura around it. By the content en sphere around the museums a spectacle is created for the visitor. The network city creates the possibility to go there without thinking about distance because everything is close. It becomes a hotspot on the virtual world map of the cosmopolitan. We live in a world of spectacle; this is what counts for the cosmopolitan.
Sources


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