

PRAXIS

ISSUE 8

JOURNAL OF WRITING + BUILDING

RE: PROGRAMMING

8

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PRAXIS-Cambridge
PO Box 380225
Cambridge, MA 02238-0225

PRAXIS-Columbus
PO Box 3633
University Station
Columbus OH 43210-0633
p xxxxxxxx fxxxxxxx

www.praxisjournal.net
mail@praxisjournal.net

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ISSN 1526-2065
ISBN 0-CHECK ME
Printed in the United States
by Garrity Printing

SUSTAINING INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

Harvard University Graduate School of Design

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As a nonprofit journal PRAXIS relies upon private support for its editorial production. Individual sponsorships begin at \$200, corporate and institutional sponsorships begin at \$500, patron sponsorships begin at \$1000. All sponsors receive a one year subscription to PRAXIS. PRAXIS Inc. is a tax exempt organization under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Contributions to PRAXIS Inc. are tax deductible to the extent provided by law.

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SPECIAL THANKS TO

Tina Paul at fifibear.com, Gerri Davis, Tom Holzmann, Greg Wiethman, Guido Hartray, Andrew Berman Architect, TEN Arquitectos, Alan Altshuler, Toshiko Mori, Pat Roberts, Christian Larsen, Amy Ress, Libby Garrison, Claudia Backes, John McMorrhough, Meredith Collins, Hayley Eber, Mark Goulthorpe, Abbott Lawrence, and a warm welcome to Lucia Carola Verona Hartray.

SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION

PRAXIS subscriptions are for three issues:

Individual	\$52US	\$62 N. America	\$72 Foreign
Institutions	\$96US	\$106 N. America	\$116 Foreign
Student/Retired	\$40US	\$50 N. America	\$60 Foreign

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PRAXIS, PO Box 3633, Columbus, OH 43210-0633
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WHY PROGRAM?

AMANDA REESER LAWRENCE AND ASHLEY SCHAFER

On one of the many opening night galas for the newly completed MoMA, two security officers were overheard chatting as they stood near the entrance to the museum's sculpture garden. As crowds swarmed into the garden ersatz smoking lounge, one guard nervously cautioned the other, "make sure nobody sits on the art!" His admonition was surprisingly apt, given the architect's design intentions; in a statement made to the MoMA trustees, Yoshio Taniguchi had promised that, if given enough money, he would "make the architecture disappear." At \$785 million, the Japanese architect's "masterpiece" arguably did just that; at the opening event it became invisible to or at least camouflaged with the art. Not only did the design stylistically echo the "modern" of the art, but the art was mistaken for architecture. The guard's warning reveals the ambiguous relation between architecture and art that Taniguchi constructed. Night after night, it was apparent that many of the visitors were more interested in viewing the building than the collection it housed, and indeed the art seemed a fitting place from which to view the architecture. In this involuted modernist conflation what constitutes the art, what constitutes the museum? What is being exhibited?

Our initial inspiration for this issue emerged not only from questions regarding museum design and exhibition, but also from the more prosaic (yet significant) fact that since the completion of Frank Gehry's paradigm-shifting Bilbao Museum seven years ago, over a hundred museums have been commissioned or completed in the Americas alone. As we surveyed this vast array of projects, they seemed more impressive for their collective quantity and for their economic aspirations than for their innovative approaches. At first glance, most seemed to fall into one of two hackneyed genres: either a modernist version of the white box—a neutral, "flexible," Miesian "universal space" where the architecture ennobles the display of art—or a post-modern icon where the image of the museum is paramount and often indifferent to its contents. But as we researched more intensively, we discovered a new kind of museum that fell between, or even outside, these antipodal approaches—projects that defied reduction into a

conventional building type or stylistic classification. These alternative approaches, formally varied yet conceptually related, inspired us to avoid a traditional museum typology study—to move beyond a debate between the white box and Bilbao.

Recalling the complex history of typology in architectural discourse, we intentionally rejected the standardizing notion of type exemplified by Jean Nicolas Louis Durand's morphological studies which reduce formal complexity and variation to a set of generic plans. Durand's deterministic study of formal variation prescribes a limited palate of preconceived solutions. Instead, we embraced a generative notion of type more aligned with that proposed by Durand's contemporary Antoine Quatremere de Quincy, in which an origin (or multiple origins) suggests a starting point for infinite variation, acknowledging the myriad external factors that influence design. Seen through this lens, the museum as a programmatic "type" becomes much more than simply an architectural envelope. Instead it becomes a design operation or strategy, the construction of a means for accessing art, which is necessarily inflected and affected by social, economic, and urban considerations.

Type understood in this manner allows a comparative study of difference across a field of programmatically similar projects. As museums inextricably and universally address curation, we were intrigued specifically by projects that actively construct a relation between design and curation. Strictly defined, to curate is simply to look after and preserve works of art. However, we considered the term as it is conventionally used to signify the organization of art for purposes of exhibition and education, as well as putting forth our own definition that understands it more broadly as a means for orchestrating a relationship between architecture and exhibition. The term curation, as such, then suggests a feedback loop of information between how a museum accommodates art and how art accommodates a museum. How does museum design affect and negotiate alliances between city, institution, museum-goer, and art? How can design forge an integral relation between an architectural and a curatorial inten-

tion?

We realize that as editors, too, we act as curators, organizing and collecting a coherent body of work on a particular topic in an informative and critical frame. We therefore selected projects that integrated architectural and exhibition strategies. Towards that end, in this issue we organized projects and essays sequentially from those that foreground building/architectural strategies—i.e., those where the macro scale informs the micro scale—to those that foreground curatorial/exhibition strategies—i.e., ones where the micro scale of exhibiting the art object informs the larger structure of the project. The five years of P.S.1 entries together form a heterogenous set of studies as they fall in the middle of this range—at once architectural installations and art objects. The interventions in the empty courtyard are occupiable, architectural constructions, yet are also framed and presented within the space of the museum, and therefore (as mandated by contract) an art installation. Dia:Beacon also maintains an ambiguous interplay between art and architecture; it is foremost an architectural object, undeniably a building, but many of the large-scale design “moves” are dictated by the art within it—by the height of Richard Serra’s *Torqued Ellipses*, or the depth of Michael Heizer’s *North, East, South, West*. These projects exemplify an integral and imbricated relation between container and content. Resisting mere accommodation—where architecture accommodates art or vice versa—neither a “top-down” nor “bottom-up” approach prevails.

Shifting the editorial frame from a typological model to a comparative study of the relation of architecture and exhibition enabled us to consider what role these cultural institutions play in contemporary society and even to question the very definition of museum. While most of the hundred-plus post-Bilbao projects we studied maintained conventions of museum design, some challenged these tenets by proposing exhibition and curation as exogenous to the traditional space of the museum. Countering received presuppositions of the museum as a static determinant structure, Natalie Jeremijenko’s *Devices* and Atopia’s *XLA* propose instead a network for a distributed

engagement of art. By subverting the notion of museum as an immutable and enduring edifice, their work situates the museum more broadly as a multivalent and responsive social and cultural institution. In so doing, they also confront the curatorial convention of a singular, linear narrative by designing the museum as an entity that promotes multiple reconfigurations. Museum becomes an organizational and relational device, rather than simply a representational edifice.

Subverting another convention, the “framing” of the journal itself, we commissioned nine curatorial descriptions for the cover of PRAXIS 7. We invited a diverse group of professionals, academics, students, and architectural curators to define PRAXIS as they would an artifact in an exhibition. We printed each response on a separate card, creating nine different versions of the cover. These “art cards” or “wall texts” are spot-mounted onto the cover, each framing the journal with a different curatorial bias. The varied responses we received illustrate the complex nature of curation: collectively, these multiple interpretations of the journal critique the authority of the curator. If PRAXIS is defined by nine different authors, each in a different way, how do we understand curatorial “truth?”

This reframing of curation allows us to rethink museum architecture neither as an object-building nor as a vessel for art, but instead as a constructed or designed relationship between art and architecture. Understood as such, curation is no longer simply a strategy isolated within the confines of the museum, but rather connotes a way of working both in the museum, on the museum, or against the museum. The acts of curation featured herein provide the possibility of rethinking the museum “type” as something new—no longer a container of rarefied objects, but instead an institution integrated culturally and socially in the fabric of our cities, constantly questioning and redefining its own limits. To conceive a museum in these terms offers the designer the opportunity not simply to construct buildings for art but instead to create new means for engaging art.