

PRESERVATION AS PROVOCATION: RE-THINKING SAARINEN'S CRANBROOK ACADEMY of ART



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2007 COMPETITION ELECTIVE

“The works of the past always influence us, whether or not we care to admit it, or to structure an understanding of how that influence occurs. The past is not just that which we know, it is that which we use, in a variety of ways, in the making of new work.... The typology argument today asserts that despite the diversity of our

culture there are still roots of this kind which allow us to speak of the idea of a library, a museum, a city hall or a house. The continuity of these ideas of type, such as they are, and the esteemed examples which have established their identity and assured their continued cultural resonance, constitute an established line of inquiry in which new work may be effectively grounded.”

The Harvard Architectural Review. Volume 5. Precedent and Invention. Between History and Tradition: Notes Toward a Theory of Precedent. John E. Hancock.



Figure 1 - Cranbrook Academy Museum & Library, Michigan

In the case of this year's ACSA historical preservation competition, the problem statement is doubly relevant. While, as the problem statement asserts, all design is influenced by the past ideas, this competition required an addition to Eliel Saarinen's Cranbrook Academy Museum and Library that "would be unimaginable without the existing structures." (ACSA 01) In this way, the consideration of past precedents and typologies did not only affect our work on a

subconscious level, it immediately confronted us at the root of our design challenge – here, the past was literally to be built upon, shaped, and molded into a form representative of new ideas about the future of museum and library typology. This unique challenge required a sensitive response, and to fully understand our design intent, it is necessary to examine not only modern design precedents and the typological origins of a museum and library, but the challenges and qualities inherent in Saarinen's original building.

The typology of both the library and the museum essentially began with the grouping together of precious objects. The origins of both types can be traced back to antiquity - museums find their beginnings in the secretive storage of valuables within Egyptian tombs, ancient temples, medieval church crypts and royal treasuries (Newhouse 14), while the idea of a library has its foundation in the early establishment of private archives of government records and transactions. (Library) However, the types as we understand them today only evolved when the cultural and educational importance of these collections was recognized, and the priority shifted from private storage to public accessibility and preservation. (Newhouse 14) These historically private collections thus became primary public sources of knowledge and culture, establishing the new building types as essential elements of an educated community.

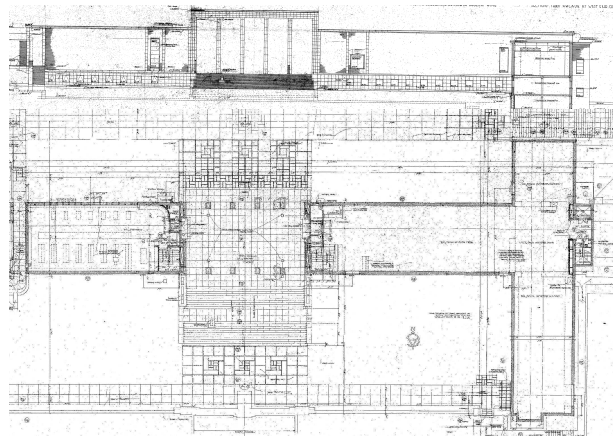


Figure 2 – Cranbrook Academy; Saarinen's original drawings

It is natural then, that when designing a campus for the new Cranbrook Academy of Art in 1942, architect Eliel Saarinen envisioned a monumental museum/library building to be the conceptual centre of the entire institution. (ACSA 07) Lying at the intersection of the two main axes that define the campus, the museum/library complex is a Modernist testament to the ambitious mission of the academy – to provide an "intense, interdisciplinary, highly creative community" in which artists could be trained in a studio-like setting, and where "art would be integrated with daily life to the benefit of all." (Cranbrook) For Saarinen, this interdisciplinary approach translated directly to the design of the library/museum. He not only recognized the two programmes as interrelated, but solidified their relationship and potential for collaboration by creating "one building with three distinct parts."(ACSA 03) The enclosed volumes of the library and museum are connected by an

open propylea, which serves as the structure's formal entrance (Figures 1&2). This allows for an architectural reading as one unified building, or as two separate, but related, entities. Designated a National Historic Landmark in 1989, the building has itself become an artifact, in need of preservation.

In designing the library/museum addition, the first thing that was important to understand was that to *preserve* in the typical sense of the word, that is, "to keep in perfect or unaltered condition; maintain unchanged" is incomplete in the architectural sense. Architectural

preservation places priority on the protection of a building's original intent, and focuses on the potential to "experience [artifacts] in new and meaningful ways," (ACSA 03) rather than on the building's historically perfect maintenance and restoration. To guide us in our understanding of this concept, we looked to Alar Kongats' 2006 addition to the Hespeler Public Library. (Figure 3) This project, praised as a "clear, elegant solution to the problem of expanding an existing historic building," (Awards) conceived of the new library as a



Figure 3 – Hespeler Public Library, Cambridge ON (Alar Kongats:2006)

“wrapper,” enveloping the existing library and allowing for old and new to co-exist in an exciting yet functional way. (Figure 5) This idea of “wrapping” the building artifact, and of a direct juxtaposition of old and new, was especially influential to our design. Our parti began with a series of translucent bands wrapping the existing building, working carefully to alternately conceal and reveal the existing

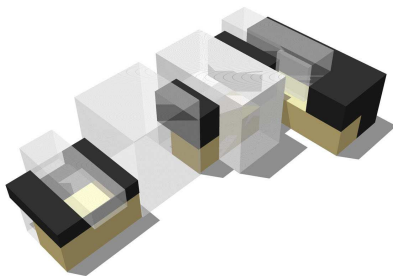


Figure 3 – Massing model shows translucent bands wrapping original building

structure. (Figure 4) These bands evolved into glass volumes that housed public gathering and major circulation spaces. The goal was for these volumes to directly interact with the existing structure, highlighting the significance of the exposed original building on the interior while allowing glimpses of



Figure 5 – Hespeler Public Library, Cambridge ON (Alar Kongats:2006)



Figure 6 – Proposed exterior; glass volumes indicate public gathering spaces

of Saarinen's building from the exterior. (Figure 6) In this way, visitors were to be

made constantly aware that the present academy was only made possible by literally building upon its history.

In contrast to Kongats' "ship-in-a-bottle" container, which completely envelops an untouched, unaltered historic structure, we wished to create potential for a more dynamic and direct interplay between old and new. In this endeavour, we were inspired by the dramatic effect of suspended volumes jutting into adjacent spaces as achieved by

Steven Holl in Amsterdam's Sarphatistraat offices, built in 2000. (Figure 7) Our design proposes the literal collision of old and new volumes, with new volumes protruding into existing spaces, creating new relationships and allowing for the old and new structures to be more completely integrated. Though this dramatic move would require minor alteration and demolition of the original building shell, the powerful new connections it would create can



Figure 7 – Sarphatistraat Offices, Amsterdam (Steven Holl:2000)



Figure 8 – Proposed section shows overlapping of volumes, juxtaposition of old and new

be seen in the way the volume containing the central library staircase slices through the new bookshop, punches through the existing library façade, and terminates inside Saarinen's library. More subtle connections develop in the way the curator offices protrude into the existing museum space, or how a new volume for performance art overhangs the new central hub atop the propylea. (Figure 8) This juxtaposition of volumes was also given precedent by Le Corbusier's National Museum of Western Art in Tokyo, where Corbusier was able to create a number of different ways to view the same artifact by designing balcony levels that overlooked ground-level display areas, and by introducing a ramp that allowed for changing views of both the space and the artifacts. (Newhouse 221)

Due to these influences, we began to address the issue of manipulating perspective, and thus, the issue of circulation. Taking subconscious cues from Frank Lloyd Wright's undeniably revolutionary Guggenheim museum in New York City (Figure 9), we recognized that by seriously considering the way people moved through a space, it was possible to make a statement about the relationship between artifact, architect, and visitor. While the circular ramp of the Guggenheim was meant to allow "viewers to observe



Figure 9 – Guggenheim Museum, New York City (Frank Lloyd Wright:1959)



Figure 10 – New York Times Tower, NYC (Renzo Piano: 2006)

each other as well as the exhibits from an unprecedented number of perspectives" (Newhouse 221) we had the additional challenge of wanting to create varying and new perspectives of the building itself.

Saarinen's original intent was that the propylea connecting the library and museum acted as the formal entry and main hub of circulation for the complex. In the spirit of preservation, we wished to maintain his original parti while reinterpreting the space in keeping with our desire for a new perspective. Our solution was in part inspired by the traditional idea of a grand staircase, but also in part by a recent movement towards visible, accessible circulation that more effectively

draws people into and purposefully guides them through new buildings. Renzo Piano's New York Times building (*Figure 10*), completed in 2006, makes a grand gesture of accessibility with its two translucent stair cores, flanking each side of the building in a continuous run and symbolically inviting people off the street and up its 52 stories. (Renzo) Shop architects' new academic building at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology, still in its design stages, features dense tunnels of circulation weaving through a transparent façade (*Figure 11*), while Saucier + Perrotte's proposal for the Canadian Museum of Human Rights in Winnipeg revolves around a dominant, sculptural core that forms the building's entry and vertical circulation. (*Figure 12*) In each of these projects, the circulation becomes a distinct object, clarifying the way in which one should experience the architecture and the artifacts within it, and giving significance to the areas which it passes

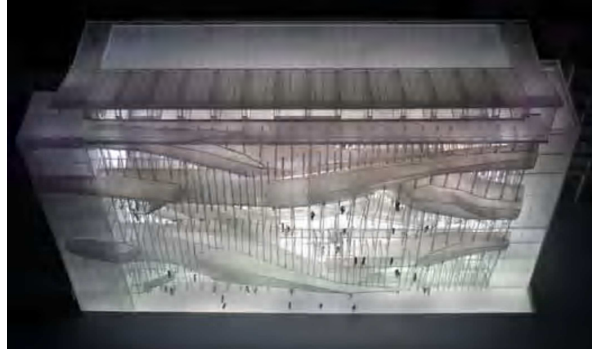


Figure 11 – Fashion Institute of Technology, NYC (Shop Architects PC : unbuilt)

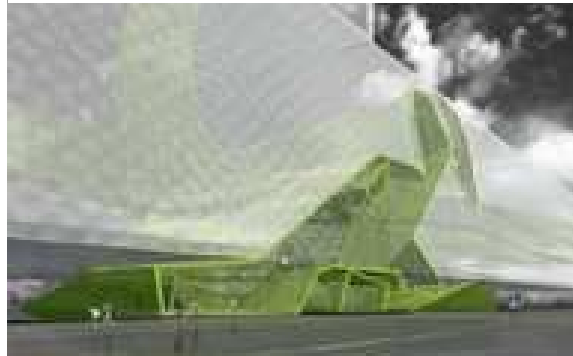


Figure 12 – Canadian Museum of Human Rights, Winnipeg MB (Saucier + Perrotte, unbuilt)

through. It was our desire to incorporate a “circulation object” such as this into our design, and it was natural that the propylea – the symbolic and literal connector between library and museum – become its vessel. Our proposal suggests a sculptural stair that winds through existing columns, becoming a canopy for digital information kiosks and shaping the entries to the bookstore and café, and ultimately leading visitors to the new central hub atop the propylea. (*Figure 13*) Though the essence of

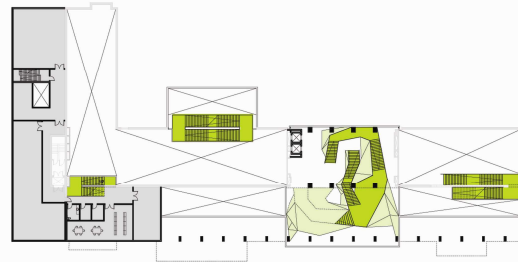


Figure 13 – Proposed sculptural stair under the propylea

the original design is maintained, the stair exposes the structure in a new way, and encourages tactile interaction between visitor and artifact. “By having to overcome obstacles... the viewer earns a privilege, something that is increasingly rare in new museums where escalators move people like packages and a combination of audioguides and labels tells them what they are supposed to be seeing.” (Newhouse 17)

The result of these efforts – the redefinition of circulation, the juxtaposition of old and new, and the conception of Saarinen's original building as an artifact – is a structure that is at once dynamic, subtle, and monumental. The proposal, by envisioning an architecture that gives new perspective to Saarinen's existing structure and plays an active part in the presentation of artifacts rather than merely storing them, is truly a progressive example of library and museum preservation design.

IMAGE CREDITS

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Figure 2: <https://www.acsa-arch.org/competitions/historicalpreservation.aspx>

Figure 3: <http://www.cambridgenow.ca/npps/story.cfm?ID=747>

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Figure 7: <http://www.stevenholl.com/>

Figure 9: http://www.jmg-galleries.com/blog_images/121506_guggenheim_II_520c.jpg

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