

The Future of Museum Architecture

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In the early 1900s, people were facing a disease that ravaged the world: tuberculosis. It was one that forever changed the way buildings were designed as architects learned to implement new techniques that, in a way, help to combat the disease.¹ One such designer, Hugo Alvar Henrik Aalto (better known as Alvar Aalto), established a sanatorium that included the characteristics of what would be known as modernist architecture: geometrically shaped, wider windows, and terraces that allowed for more sunlight.² This style would be utilized in other buildings by other modern-era architects like Le Corbusier.

Flash forward to the present day, and the entire human population is now facing yet another challenge in the form of COVID-19. The pandemic resulted in numerous industries being heavily affected, especially in places like museums where they saw a significant decrease in visitors. Like the modernist architects that were responsible for rethinking building architecture in the early twentieth century, designers of today have reevaluated how museums should be designed, which led them to consider incorporating elements of the outdoors to promote a more sanitary environment.

Real-Life Examples

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Some architects have proposed new buildings with more open or outdoor exhibits. According to Nancy Kenney of the Art Newspaper, these are meant to enhance “the connection between inside and outside in their designs, whether through transparent façades or the creation of open-air cafés”.³ Simply, they are investing in changes to the interior, allowing for more outdoor elements to enter. Certain locations like the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, or LACMA, are constructing a building with terraces and large windows that includes outdoor exhibits below.⁴ The project is expected to be finished by 2023 and will fulfill the

need for fresh air, which was a growing trend during the pandemic.⁵

Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum

On December 10, 2021, a new exhibit designed by MASS Design Group opened to the public. Presented by Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, the “Design and Healing: Creative Responses to Epidemics” exhibit details “the work of communities and individuals who came together to aid each other, push for change and create new spaces, objects and services.”⁶ There are three galleries that detail innovation through various professional fields including architecture, which is covered in the second gallery that revolves around designs that were created to combat diseases.⁷



Figure 1. Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum in New York, NY.

Source: Allison Meier, July 14, 2019, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/7527891@N04/48293978146>

Once everyone finishes the exhibit, they end up in a light-filled conservatory titled the Breathing Space. Designed with the intent of providing visitors a comfortable atmosphere, it contains cushions that have traditionally woven yarns courtesy of the textile industry.⁸

Long-Term Impacts?

While COVID-19 continues to be a threat to everyone, it will eventually wane over time like

tuberculosis did in the twentieth century. This, however, begs the question: will there be long-term effects on museum architecture? This can be influenced by a wide variety of factors including, but not limited to, current events and local community influences. The pandemic has caused museums to deal with financial aspects that influence expansions or renovations.⁹ This allows designers to find alternatives to provide visitors a safe experience without spending a lot of money. Communities have also influenced museum designs as architects have rethought the way physical spaces are designed. With the public still concerned about COVID-19, it gives designers an opportunity to redesign museums while emphasizing a more sanitary experience.

In conclusion, these ideas that can be seen as a response to the enduring pandemic reveal the important trait that humans can adapt to events that can be challenging. In these instances, they come up with possible solutions and implement them to improve the conditions around them. The COVID-19 pandemic is not the only event where this happened, nor would it be the last. However, designers can learn from this and make necessary changes that would benefit everyone.

Notes

1. Kyle Chayka. "How the Coronavirus will Reshape Architecture." The New Yorker. June 17, 2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/dept-of-design/how-the-coronavirus-will-reshape-architecture>.
2. "How the Coronavirus will Reshape Architecture."
3. Nancy Kenney. "Space Race: How the Pandemic is Pushing Museums to Rethink Design." The Art Newspaper. October 7, 2020. <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2020/10/07/space-race-how-the-pandemic-is-pushing-museums-to-rethink-design>.
4. Nancy Kenney. "Space Race: How the Pandemic is Pushing Museums to Rethink Design."
5. Nancy Kenney. "Space Race: How the Pandemic is Pushing Museums to Rethink Design."
6. "'Design and Healing: Creative Responses to Epidemics' Exhibition to Open in December at Cooper Hewitt." Smithsonian Institution. November 9, 2021. <https://www.si.edu/newsdesk/releases/design-and-healing-creative-responses-epidemics-exhibition-open-december-cooper>.
7. "'Design and Healing: Creative Responses to Epidemics' Exhibition to Open in December at Cooper Hewitt."
8. "'Design and Healing: Creative Responses to Epidemics' Exhibition to Open in December at Cooper Hewitt."
9. Bruce Davis and Ron Elad. "Will COVID-19 Change Museum Architecture?" American Alliance of Museums. August 28, 2020. <https://www.aam-us.org/2020/08/28/will-covid-19-change-museum-architecture/>.