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Museum architecture: a new biography (2nd ed.)

Altaf Engineer^a

^a The Illinois School of Architecture, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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BOOK REVIEW

Museum architecture: a new biography (2nd ed.), by Suzanne MacLeod, New York, NY, Routledge, 2013, xii + 237 pp., 82 black & white illus., US\$41.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-415-52905-1

What can the architectural history of the Walker Art Gallery tell us about some of the multiple ways in which museum architecture is produced and what does such an understanding reveal about the complex and active nature of the built forms of museums?

asks author MacLeod in *Museum architecture: A new biography*. This question captures the main theme of her book which emphasizes a need to move the focus away from the architects and physical envelope of the building and shift it toward the museum's inhabitants and their experiences, in order to study the built form as a social and cultural production.

Museum architecture is Suzanne MacLeod's latest installment in a series of publications on museum studies which include *Museum making* (MacLeod, Hanks, & Hale, 2012), *Museum revolutions* (Knell, MacLeod, & Watson, 2007), and *Reshaping museum space* (Ed., 2005). MacLeod illuminates the architectural history of a museum – the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool, England – and its various physical transformations due to shifts in the social, political and cultural scene. In *Museum revolutions*, MacLeod gave us a chapter containing a preview of how the configuration of the Walker Art Gallery responded to these shifts (2007, pp. 72–74), and in *Museum architecture*, she digs deeper and discusses in meticulous detail, the key historical events that occurred from the late nineteenth to the early twenty-first century in Liverpool – a city 'where the new was both welcome and necessary' in the 1920s and 1930s – and how they simultaneously influenced the architectural development and reshaping of the Walker Art Gallery.

MacLeod discusses some of the current issues and ongoing controversies in museum studies and architecture such as 'The battle between art and architecture: Architecture as function' in Chapter 1. She touches on the key ideas of prominent social and architecture theorists and historians such as Adrian Forty, Pierre Bourdieu, Hélène Lipstadt, and Tony Bennett, which highlight the significance of architecture as a social and cultural production, its continuous reshaping and transformation through use, and its role in the processes of identity formation. Chapters 2–5 document the chain of events that led to the architectural transformation of the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool. They contain a detailed description of the historical events surrounding the museum's initial conception in 1873 and inauguration in 1877, its expansion and renovation in 1931–1933, and other critical developments in the 1950s that continued well into the 1980s. Through these chronological accounts, the author reveals the social political, and professional forces that were responsible for changes in the agenda of the Walker Art Gallery that led to the changes in its spatial configuration over time.

Overall, the book gives us an intriguing account of the processes involved in museum making created by a complex framework of individuals and their personal agendas as well as the political controversies, arguments, and back-biting that preceded the building of an

Art Gallery in Liverpool in the late nineteenth century and continued thereafter. Chapter 2 – ‘Hobson’s choice: Art and grog in Liverpool’ describes the complex set of events surrounding the initial proposal of the museum in 1873 and its opening in September 1877 with an entertaining account of how the museum’s key donor, Andrew Barclay Walker, due to his stake in the brewery business, faced criticism with protests and satirical cartoons commissioned by members of political movements such as the ‘teetollalers’ who aimed to expose the negative impact of drink on the working classes of Liverpool. Chapter 3 informs us of the public debate and rows in the press over the functions of the Gallery calling to end the dominance of the ‘Alderman in Art’ (Alderman was the Chairman of Library, Museums and Arts and Committee) in 1931, followed by its extensive remodeling and extension from 1931 to 1933. Chapter 4 describes how the Gallery’s function changed in 1939; art gave way to more pressing social and administrative concerns, after it was taken over by hundreds of Liverpool women employed by the Ministry of Food for the duration of the World War and beyond. By 1949, along with the post-war ideals of democracy and nationalization, there were calls for the Gallery to fulfill its original objectives and it started undergoing rebuilding projects thereafter. Chapter 5 presents further architectural modifications that took place in the 1950s and continued into the 1980s, signifying a return to museum professional agendas such as modernization, collection care, and scholarship. Posters, satirical illustrations, and captions from newspaper archives punctuate the stories in every chapter and collectively go toward forming a narrative that is exhaustive, humorous and engaging at the same time.

There are 51 images in total, consisting of archival photos, city maps, architectural plans and drawings, posters, newspaper illustrations, and captions which capture key moments and turning points in the history of the Walker Art Gallery and its milieu, which in every instance are at the heart of the issues that are discussed in the text, serving only to strengthen it further. The floor plans of the museum in particular, showing the layout of the original building that opened in 1877 (Fig. 2.1), the extension in 1884 (Fig. 2.2) and internal modifications in the early 1950s (Figs. 5.1 & 5.2) and 1966 (Figs. 5.9 & 5.10) supplemented by exterior photographs are extremely helpful in understanding the architectural evolution of the building over time.

In her concluding notes in Chapter 6, the author draws from the findings and discussions in the previous chapters to make a call for the museum to be considered as an institution that is created by its users and activities, and not as the mere product of an architect. Architectural historians and theorists such as Henri Lefebvre and Jane Rendell have repeatedly emphasized the need to study a museum’s architecture as a function of social processes and their physical manifestations rather than of its surface and form, and we need return to these ideas and similar recent theories in order to get a better handle on the present and future occupation of museum space, says MacLeod.

MacLeod’s text serves as an important reference source in the fields of museum studies and architectural design, but its title initially, raises an expectation of discovering new in-depth, reference material on more than one museum, which one discovers, is not the case, after reading through the text. The author’s call for creating a ‘socially, as well as economically and environmentally, sustainable’ museum architecture fit for the twenty-first century could perhaps be reinforced by including some more museum case studies in the creation of a ‘new biography’ of museum architecture. The fascinating story of the Walker Art Gallery simply leaves us wanting more at the end of the book.

Museum architecture, however, has content that is well written, easy to read and academically rigorous at the same time, revealing the author’s thorough understanding of current discussions and controversies in the fields of museology, architectural theory and practice.

By taking us through the colorful history of the Walker Art Gallery and its architectural evolution, MacLeod promotes ‘the telling of new stories of museum making’. The story of the Walker gives us hope that museums will prevail as sites of meaning-making, cultural exchange, and personal transformation, even in times of political uncertainty, social upheaval, or war.

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Altaf Engineer

The Illinois School of Architecture, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
aenginee@illinois.edu

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