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## **The Transitional Museum as Urban Parasitism**

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In a recent talk at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston (see summary at <http://thetransitionalmuseum.blogspot.com/>), I presented to the public an initial approach to the concept of the Transitional Museum, one that I have developed over time in collaboration with Mauricio Rodriguez-Anza and Vivianne Falco. This concept grew out of our efforts at defining the main features and goals of the new Anza Falco Museum of Art and Design, and particularly out of our struggle with the word "alternative" as an all-embracing, defining category with the necessary components to project to the world a unique and interdisciplinary style both in its architectural form and its artistic and educational content.

Indeed, "alternative" has become a catchy and trendy word not only in architecture and art but also in academia and even in politics. So we hear that this is an alternative musician or artist or intellectual, but we never really hear a coherent explanation of why she, he or it is alternative. Alternative to what or to whom? The problem is that the word alternative -- like such other words as globalization, development and democracy -- have become empty signifiers, that is, words that can be filled with almost any content. So if we state that the Anza Falco Museum of Art and Design will be alternative, we should explain why.

Since our project is a work-in-progress, our definition is necessarily preliminary at the present time, based on a host of interrelated arguments. One argument relating to the alternative character of the museum is that it does not fit within the conventional definition of a museum of design for the reason that its focus goes beyond the simple presentation of international trends and designers. Instead the emphasis is on the exploration of the complex relationship between the emergence of design as an artistic, technological, economic and social force in the past one hundred years, and the international artistic trends and diverse ideologies that filled the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries and that had a constituting influence on its development and expansion.

In other words, alternative here means that the museum experience is not merely an aesthetic one, but that the visitor acquires a deeper understanding of the complexity of the human enterprise. Yes, you will find art and design, but the presentation is interdisciplinary, which implies putting together teams of experts in different fields so as to arrive at a presentation, a style, that projects not only the different elements found in a specific artistic or designing trend but also the socio-political and economic elements -- the ideology -- that allowed a particular trend to emerge in a particular time and space.

Alternative also means that a central objective is to develop a critical eye, a critical stance in the visitor to the museum by avoiding passive interaction with the exhibit and promoting engagement and active participation. This entails developing a unique orientation and exhibition style based on continuous experimentation so as to arrive at an original and successful --but



always changing—method that combines outreach, conservation and research functions to allow visitors to explore from a critical perspective the impact of particular movements, ideologies, groups and individual creators.

I have placed particular emphasis on explaining what alternative means for us regarding the development of a unique presentation style and interdisciplinary content because another central factor of our project is to arrive at the ideal balance between the actual content of our exhibitions and the architectural features of the museum. What I mean by this is that few imagined in the 1970s, when the future of museums was in question, that they would take the central place in human society that pyramids and cathedrals had for centuries, and that they would do based on architecture. Many believed that great architectural would be replaced by smaller museums, in contact with and catering to the needs of their respective communities.

However, museums not only adapted to the new circumstances but actually flourished. Since the early 1980s more museums were built worldwide than during the previous eighty years altogether, and many in a much grander scale. And today's museums are no longer merely a reflection of culture and society, but, as suggested above, they have become defining landmarks, places of pilgrimage, icons that characterize and differentiate cities, as well as main tourist attractions.

Throughout this process of rapid change and adaptation, architecture has been and continues to be a key element of the museum, simply because it is the one that defines it as a public monument and inserts it into the urban environment. Gradually, however, we saw the emergence of "designer museums," with the architectural features becoming dominant, the central and sometimes only masterpiece of the museum.

Our project avoids this architecture-over-content temptation by blending both elements, iconic architectural form and original exhibition spaces and content, in order to arrive at an ideal and unique product designed attract national and international visitors as well as artists, designers, scholars and curators interested in radical, innovating and experimental projects, from specific schools of avant-garde to the recent sprawl of plural and eclectic styles.

In addition, a central concern from the very beginning has been the type impact that our project would have on the surrounding urban environment, particularly on the neighboring communities. Since we understand that different types of architecture produce different types of societies, it was inescapable to experiment with different architectural and theoretical alternatives in order to arrive at an ideal formula, one that enhances but does not disrupt the surrounding socio-economic and architectural landscape.

Here I want to underline the word "experimental" as another key element that gives the Anza Falco Museum of Art and Design project its alternative quality. This process led us gradually to the development of the concept of the Transitional Museum, which is, above all, an experimental enterprise, but also the ideal format to further our project at the present moment.

So what is the Transitional Museum? First, its creation constitutes the initial stage of the overall project. Its iconic architectural form and exhibition spaces and content will suggest to both visitors and patrons the type of institution that will emerge in the second stage of the project. It will serve as headquarters for the development of promotional, community and public



relations events, as well as for the interaction of curatorial teams, designed to further its projection in the neighborhood, city and state, as well to facilitate the establishment of the permanent museum in the near future.

This takes us to a second point. In contrast to conventional museums, the temporary and movable character of the Transitional Museum will project to the public a key component of the Anza Falco Museum's philosophy, namely, the intention of taking exhibitions out of a permanent building into different landscapes and urban environments in the state of Texas and beyond in order to reach wider and more diverse audiences.

This objective clearly broadens the scope of what we understand as the tasks of a conventional museum, simply because we understand that social groups in most of the contemporary world can no longer be characterized as fixed in a place, as immobile and rooted but rather, as Robert Redeker points out, defined by their "trajectory." For Redeker, the question today is not related to a specific place, as in "where are you from?," but rather to movement, as in "what is your trajectory?" or "what is your route?" Thus, the challenge to architecture is "to render the trajectory habitable."<sup>1</sup> This is a key element behind the concept of the Transitional Museum.

Third, the Transitional Museum's innovative and experimental architectural design and exhibition content will have a combined social and aesthetic impact on downtown Houston, where as of today there is not one museum among a growing number of theatres, stadiums, restaurants, bars, and other commercial interests. Hence, the Transitional Museum, and of course the permanent museum once it is finished, will serve not only as a community center but also as an urgently-needed architectural magnet with the capacity of integrating the scattered artistic, public and commercial projects in that area into a coherent, original and contained urban destination for local, national, and international publics.

And fourth, the Transitional Museum's architectural-iconic, urban-integrating, and socio-economic-experimental characteristics, along with its focus on trajectories rather than places, and of course its low cost, not only will offer the public a new and critical lens to explore a diversity of creative options in the international field of art and design and a new way to understand the relationship between artistic institution and community, but also a new symbol for the city of Houston, where we have not seen the development of iconic architectural projects since the 1980s, and where the downtown area has been mostly overlooked by the city's urban planners.

On a more theoretical plane, we arrived at the conclusion that the Transitional Museum is an example of urban parasitism, hence the title of this paper. We were inspired by a collection of papers elaborated for the Olympic Games in Greece (2004) under the title of "Parasitism in Architecture" (**found in WEBSITE insert here**) developed by such architects as Andrew Benjamin and Maria Theodorou.

This theory is based on the fact that a prime trait of parasites is that they intrude and inhabit a host. Some parasites can be tolerated and housed without any ill effect on their host, while others, whether they live on the surface or within their host, will ultimately kill it. This

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<sup>1</sup> Redeker, Robert 2007. *The New Face of Humanity*. Bethesda MA: Academica Press, pp. 16-23



parasitic relationship problematizes the relationship between guest and host, simply because we can not put them in straight opposition against each other, it is a more complex, more nuanced relationship. On the other hand, there is a social dimension to the complex logic of parasitism, with the term raising a host of biological, ecological and anthropological issues. But the originality of this theory is how Benjamin, Theodorou and others adapt the biological positions of the parasite, the guest and the host to the field of architecture, to develop an architecture of the parasite.

Just like a parasite, the formal presence of a new building, "the architectural features, the services the new project offers to the community, would be such that its incorporation would allow it to remain formally distinct and yet programmatically interconnected with its host," that is with the new environment where it is inserted. While these projects could be envisaged as a permanent structure, a permanent institution like the Anza Falco Museum of Art and Design, it is also possible to understand parasitical architecture as impermanent and thus marked by a necessary temporality, as we have conceived the Transitional Museum.

In this latter instance, what is involved is a temporary structure which, rather than being a space to which "a specific program or content and infrastructure have to be brought," instead, due to its temporary character, it inserts itself, it ties in with pre-existing infrastructures and programs in its surrounding environment to open up new possibilities. In other words, the new structure and its content, despite being drawn as a temporary project, will intrude, as a parasite does into the human body, into the socio-economic and artistic fabric of the locality where it is implanted.

Thus, we consider that the theory of parasitism in architecture is a very useful concept in that it allows for a new mode of thinking about the configuration of an urban landscape. In general terms the parasite has to take up a position within the body, that is, it inserts itself into the spaces, the organs, that the host body provides. As such "the grid of the body, its natural contours, boundaries and edges will not be recognized by the parasite." The main objective of the parasite is survive within the host body and the condition of that survival would be the parasite's refusal to recognize lines that mark out pre-existing edges and boundaries in the host body, and "in refusing specific edge conditions the parasite constructs its own edge conditions, and thus creates new boundaries."

But it is important to underline that the refusal to acknowledge boundaries and edges, cannot be based on indifference or destruction. Any compromise undertaken by the parasite becomes a "structural transformation of the host's body," or if we want to put it in architectural terms, of the site, of the urban environment. Nevertheless, it is a transformation whose end is the maintenance of the parasitic relation.

What do I mean by that? If the parasite were to take over then the host body would be eliminated and as a result the relation of parasitism would be destroyed. In other words, if the host body is to survive the parasite "has to negotiate the space of its internal incorporation. It can only live off the host if the host is alive and able to maintain it within."

In short, what defines parasitism is the co-presence of *maintaining* and *transforming*. The possibilities of parasitism are therefore intimately linked to ways of intervening within an already existing site, which could be a body, when we talk about biological parasitism, or an



urban environment, when we refer to architectural parasitism. This mode of intervention has to be distinguished from simple occupation or recolonization of a body or a site, two options "that disregard the host-guest relationship and place emphasis on destroying and/or transforming [without maintaining]."

The key words, again, are *transform* and *maintain*. Without maintenance the host-guest relationship at the center of the logic of parasitism would disappear. At the same time transformation is essential not only because the parasite's presence transforms the site as such, but also because the conditions of edge and boundaries that establish the site, as explained above, "have to be transgressed and thus reformed by the presence of the parasite." What this means is that architectural parasitism has to be deliberate. It has to work with infrastructures present in the specific urban environment, using and adapting them to its own ends.

After this brief and I hope clear exploration of what parasitism means and how this concept can be usefully incorporated to theorize about architectural projects, let's return to our concept of the Transitional Museum and discuss why we consider it a prime example of architectural parasitism. The first reason is that its architectural design and exhibition content are being formulated, and re-formulated so as to insert itself and work with the existing infrastructure located in the area, the neighborhood, where it will be temporarily placed and at the same time allow for new openings and developments to occur in the area due to its presence.

In other words, we have a clear understanding that the project of the Transitional Museum will be operating from the outset within a particular urban landscape where there are various relations of dependence -- social, economic, artistic, political, as well as programmatic -- that have to be taken into consideration in order to maintain an ideal socio-economic balance and arrive at a successful insertion into the new urban environment.

Once we understand these relations of dependence it becomes easier to trace the consequences of the other element of parasitism, namely transformation based on further interventions into the urban body that will not block the socio-economic activity in the area, but instead enhance it. What emerges from this reflection on maintenance and transformation in architectural parasitism is a strategic understanding of the "systemic nature of the urban field in question."

And when we insert the Transitional Museum into this analytical format we can clearly see that it contains the capacity to transform itself into an agent of gradual change, one able to envision and experiment with new possibilities and different scenarios, and even consider the impact of inserting more parasites within the specific urban network. In more general terms what this means is that the Transitional Museum as an urban parasite will possess the qualities, the capacities, of being a leading agent in both analyzing and theorizing about the site or urban landscape in question on the one hand and the reworking or reconceptualization of the site on the other.