Rethinking the city through the museums of contemporary art -
the case of the MAXXI in Rome

Extended abstract

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Abstract

This dissertation focuses on the analysis of the case of the MAXXI, located in Flaminio, Rome, and it is integrated in the research area of Museum Architecture. As its name suggests, the Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo appears as a reference to the contemporary art museography, establishing a case study of wide potential, and that represents a great challenge for the art and for the city encompasses it. Founded in 2010 and designed by the architect Zaha Hadid, despite being a recent project is an important landmark.

In this sense, the thesis aims at the discussion and interpretation of the impact of museum and to explore its importance to Rome, discussing how the MAXXI may constitute an integrated model for this type of equipments.

Keywords: MAXXI, Rome, museum of contemporary art, urban revitalization, Zaha Hadid

Contemporary art museum architecture and the city

The true meaning of the modern museum was only established at the end of the 18th century, after the French Revolution in 1789, which encompassed the progressive view that the art was destined to the people. That is how begins, in the 19th century, the development of the architecture of museums, influenced by the ideas of Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand (1760-1834) and by the Altes Museum (1830) of Berlin.

The Museum "is born within the city, in the large monumental buildings of the past: the palace and the temple", assuming a "prominent location within the bourgeois town", linked to "areas of high political and social representation" (Lorente & Almazán, 2003: 110). However, this view seems to change throughout the 19th century and much of the 20th century, as the museums dedicated to the arts, despite maintaining its symbolism, are preferably established outside the historic nucleus, operating as "cathedrals of modernity" and exponents of the "dispersion of the urban fabric", as checked in the Galerie des Artistes Vivants (1818) and in the Tate Gallery (1897) (Lorente, 1999: 46). At the same time, in 1895, is inaugurated the Stedelijk Museum of Amsterdam, the first museum of contemporary art, which was included in the urban plan of the Museumplein.

Throughout the 20th century, with the decisive participation of the great masters of architecture that arise with the Modern Movement, is triggered a significant typological development, a reappraisal of the museum and its image, and a change in its relationship with the city, seeking to respond to the social, cultural and technical advances. Thus, the museum was gradually replacing its "monumental" condition and urban and symbolic connotation for a "functional" model (Lorente & Almazán, 2003: 114-115), as seen with the opening of the definitive headquarters of the MoMa (Museum of modern art in New York) in 1939.

In addition, it should be noted the impact of the Second World War, which triggered a rethink of the cultural and symbolic dimension of the city leading also to a greater proximity between the museum and urban planning (Layuno Rosas, 2007: 143).
this context that, with the emergence of new art forms, with the establishment of the leisure and industrial postmodern culture in society, and with the massive increase of the flow of visitors and the consequent expansion of services, that the museum of contemporary art becomes a theme widely developed (Montaner, 2003: 148).

In 1977 opened the Centre Pompidou in Paris, setting a new paradigm through its relationship with the city, the high technological level and the image that it represented. This cultural equipment assumed a large role, as a reference to the phenomenon of creation of new museums that started, particularly in more developed countries, where the museum was consolidated as a representative element of the progressively competitiveness of cities. In this way, the contemporary art museum has been acquiring an increasing power of attraction and economic identity, becoming increasingly a phenomenon of a large scale and directed to a very diverse public. The Guggenheim Museum (Frank Gehry, 1997) of Bilbao is one of the maximum exponents of this perspective, and also of the applicant spectacularization that many architects sought to their works.

Throughout the history of the museum of contemporary art, the relationship with the city has been a topic widely developed. In this sense, museums often sought the establishment of several formal and visual relations, and also the creation of public space, not just outside as inside.

Currently, there is a consolidated network of museums of contemporary art that have a strong bond with the city and are places for new ideas, for experimentation and that encourage the participation of the public. There are relevant references with a remarkable media impact, and some of these museums have suffered extensions in order to respond to their growth and to the large number of visitors, highlighting the cases of the MoMA (started in 1983 and still under development by the architects Diller Scofidio and Renfro), the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (by Jean Nouvel in 2005), the Stedelijk Museum (by Benthem Crouwel Architects team in 2012), the Tate Modern (by the same architects Herzog and de Meuron, in 2016), or until the construction of the Centre Pompidou-Metz (work of the architect Shigeru Ban, in 2010), equipment associated to the Centre Pompidou.

**Spaces for contemporary art in Italy**

The history of the museum of contemporary art in Italy was developed with the "intention of going beyond the traditional roles and ideals of conservation, acquisition and public display of art works of recognized artists", opening the museum to the promotion and enhancement of the latest fashions of artists (Baldi, 2006: 37). In this sense, It should be highlighted the emergence of the first *Biennale di Venezia* in 1895, dedicated to the exhibition of Italian and European art. This event has contracted a relevant role, not only for its increasing emphasis and internationalization, but also for its contribution to the affirmation of modern and contemporary art.
Even so, the creation of museums dedicated to the art of the present in the country turns out to be a "late" phenomenon, being most of these equipments originated from restoration interventions. In fact, is possible to affirm that contemporary art, despite being increasingly rooted in Italy, still has a great development ahead. In addition, it must be considered that the contemporary culture doesn’t expands uniformly across the country, being significantly more felt in the cities of Milan and Turin and across other cities where prominent equipment have been integrated.

Among the most relevant references, are the cases of the PAC (Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea, 1947) in Milan, the Museo d'Arte contemporanea del Castello di Rivoli (1984) in Turin, the MADRE (Museo d'Arte contemporanea Donna Regina, 2005) in Naples, the MAMBO (Museo d'Arte Modema di Bologna, 2007) in Bologna, the Centre of contemporary culture of the Palazzo Strozzi (2007) in Florence, and the MART (Museo di arte moderna e contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto, 2002) in Trento and Rovereto.

In the specific case of Rome, GNAM (Galleria Nazionale d'Arte moderna e contemporanea), a work of the architect Cesare Bazzani founded in 1883, stood out as the major equipment responsible for the awareness of the importance of the latest arts, as well as for the divulgation of new artists.

However, in the Italian capital, the contemporary art begins to highlight particularly before the Second World War. It was a time of profound political, social and cultural changes in the whole Europe and Benito Mussolini was in power since 1922. In this sense, it was also inaugurated in 1925 the Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna di Roma in the Convento delle Carmelitane Scalze, with the aim of bringing together a collection of works from the 19th century and early 20th century belonged to the Comune di Roma. In addition, in 1931 emerged the first Quadriennale di Roma, headquartered in the Palazzo delle Esposizioni, distinguished for marking a turning point and develop the study of the arts of the time. Throughout its history, the GNAM has always been seen as the biggest vehicle to the latest arts in the city, being target of a long process of interventions and enlargements, started after World War II.

At the same time, it should emphasized the presence of the Museo d'Arte Contemporanea (MACRO, 2010), established in the old establishments of the Società Birra Peroni. The museum is associated with the MACRO Testaccio, opened in 2003 in a former slaughterhouse, equipment with a smaller scale and impact.

**MAXXI, Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo**

MAXXI is a museum of contemporary art and architecture opened in 2010, in the Flaminio neighborhood, in Rome. Located on the north side of the city, Flaminio is a predominantly residential urban center, distinguished for its cultural weight and strong dynamization (especially at the beginning of the Via Flaminia), adjacent to the Villa Borghese and Piazza del Popolo. In addition, the neighborhood is distinguished by the presence of relevant instructive and sportive buildings, like the Stadio Olimpico (Enrico
Del Debbio, Luigi Moretti and Annibale Vitellozzi, 1927-1953), the Stadio Flaminio (1957-1959 Nervi, Pier), the Pallazzetto dello Sport (1958-1960 Nervi, Pier) and the Auditorium Parco della Musica (Renzo Piano, 1995-2002). Besides that, Flaminio shows, stands out for the presence of the river Tevere, and for the existence of several references of its industrial and later military end, throughout its buildings and its regular urban structure.

It was in the year 1998 that was born the idea of constructing the Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo, in order to assert itself in the international panorama and be the representative “image” of a new idea for Rome. Its irreverence and declared innovation are based on long process started with an international competition, launched by the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali, which had a great impact, as evidenced by the 273 projects (of which 100 Italians) who applied to the first stage, from which were selected 15 groups (6 Italians) to the next stage.
The objectives were clear: to seek the integration with the urban context of Flaminio with the systematization of open spaces and creating with new bodies “factory”, and also to control the possible damage and disruption to the surrounding residential buildings (Avagnina et al., 2010: 137). Among the proposals, in addition to Zaha Hadid, also highlighted other architects of wide international recognition as Souto de Moura, Rem Koolhaas and Steven Holl. However, it was the Iraqi-British architect, with the establishment of the new fabric of the buildings arranged according to the flow paths that cross the area, and with the creation of authentic urban campus dedicated to the contemporary arts, which managed to overcome the competition and see her idea be elected to assert itself as the new MAXXI (Vittorini, 2004: 19).

2. MAXXI, first floor plan (Author: Unidentified (n.d.) | Source: Fondazione MAXXI - www.fondazionemaxxi.it)

3. MAXXI, cross section (Author: Unidentified (n.d.) | Source: Gizmo - www.gizmoweb.org)
With a total surface area of almost 30000 m² and a permanent collection which covers about 350 works (Avagnina et al., 2010: 221), MAXXI has become a key work in Zaha Hadid's career. Nonetheless, the magnificence of the museum is only confirmed after passing through the tower of the Basilica di Santa Croce and through the industrial complexes along Via Guido Reni, in a process of discovery and progressive surprise that allows the arrival to the square and makes the sinuosity of the gestures perceivable.

MAXXI is marked by the diversity of equipments and services and for the way that is integrated into the urban fabric, in addition to a differentiated and innovative offer, factors that clearly highlight the project and converge to create an identity responsible for generating a strong attraction. Although the museum is an important reference, the adoption of a balanced scale and formal guidelines that depart from the urban fabric, demonstrate its determination to respect the place and to respond to the specificities of the surroundings. The square that configures is, in fact, one of the main strengths of the project, affirming a public space of ample protagonism for the neighborhood, that reflects the dynamism of the museum and has a considerable affluence, constituted not only by visitors of the museum.

The work corresponds to the functional requirements of a museum, creating a complex interior, where the structure, the light and the route are in permanent contact. Thus, is constituted a space with a great variety of technical solutions and expositive possibilities, in which the fluidity and the strong presence of the concrete stands out. This idea of space is allowed by the structure, which forms pure volumes in certain areas, and in others, it generates galleries of irregular shapes.

Today, we can say that was established a dialogue between the museum and the surrounding, with a great consideration for the relation "architectural object-city", where the MAXXI seeks to establish new relations of balance between the different elements of the neighborhood, in order to consolidate and recover the pre existence (Pergola, 2008: 19).
The impact of the museum

The museum has been characterized by an increasing impact. The number of visitors, six years after its inauguration, shows that the MAXXI, despite the decrease of visitors in the year 2012, is consolidating progressively its position in the city of Rome, assuming a progressive emphasis within the vast museological offer already present. However, its influence seems less impressive when compared with the largest institutions dedicated to the contemporary art, as can be seen in its considerably lower affluence in relation to the Tate Modern, Centre Pompidou and MoMA.

6. MAXXI: Number of visitors between 2011 and 2015.
   Author: Gaspar Crespi (2016)

Since its genesis, MAXXI has been subject of a big attention, being base for some criticism and controversy. Its outlined marketing strategy, coupled to its commitment in the communication (particularly in social networks and on advertising campaigns), and its approach to the local audience, have contributed to a relevant improvement of its public image. However, although the Museum took a strong media coverage in Italy and in Rome regarding other cultural equipments, its influence is clearly reduced when confronted with the international context.
At the same time, the role of MAXXI has been very important for the appreciation of the Italian cultural heritage through various exhibitions focused on the culture of the country, through the promotion of young Italian artists and through the identification of the public with the contemporary art.

On the other hand, the MAXXI's success also depends on its participation in the Flaminio neighbourhood revitalization, a process still under development, where the influence of the museum is, for now, somewhat limited. Nevertheless, it is possible to verify a significant contribution of the museum in certain areas of this process. In fact, the project of Zaha Hadid is distinguished for its urban nature, able to integrate and respect the environment, creating new urban dynamics and representing a clear improvement in terms of public space. In addition, it is pertinent to state that the museum has promoted the expansion of tourist activity to the North part of the neighborhood, as well as a distinctive offer, which resulted in a remarkable number of activities and events.

However, despite these contributions to the regeneration of the neighbourhood, the impact of the MAXXI in Flaminio is still reduced in other areas, especially in the accessibility, one of the main problems of the area, and in the process of renovation of the buildings, despite the high real estate value of the area and the strong urbanization.


9. Popularity Analysis of MAXXI, Tate Modern and Pompidou Centre, July 2016. Data obtained from the page of the platform Google Trends (www.google.pt/trends)
Conclusions

From the study of MAXXI and although its impact still has a large potential, it is possible to see the benefit that the museum could represent for the city, particularly for the urban, programmatic, touristic and cultural level, as well as for the protection and enhancement of the heritage.

On the other hand, it is possible to emphasize the importance of thinking and establishing a specific identity for the museum, extended from the building until its program and communication, which sought also a strong root and identification with the site. In this case study, the innovation has become a brand image of the museum, since its program until the final image, predominating a clear identity and a well-defined policy, across its lines of action, which also seeks to have a strong local and social impact. In this sense, is highlighted the importance of a strong marketing plan, and the appeal and encourage of the public participation. The popularity of a museum is one of the ways to generate revenue and to attract new audiences, but also a condition from which depends the success of the initiative. As proven in this case, this practice has contributed to the construction of the image of the museum and to the consolidation of its position in the city. In addition, it is pertinent to mention that the own brand of Rome, despite its strong international impact, is presenting some difficulty on the branding of its image. Thus, one of the greatest contributions of the MAXXI to the city is related to its ability to represent a necessary process of natural renewal of the city and of the brand of Rome, demonstrating that the concept of contemporary art museum is able to take a wide scale impact.

References


