

Book Review

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John Peponis (ed), *Museum Configurations: An Inquiry into the Design of Spatial Syntaxes*, London: Routledge, 2024, paperback £35.99, pp. xv+277

Designing, researching, or visiting museums and exhibitions involves more than just selecting and experiencing the items on display; it also requires a mental process of assembling visual and conceptual relationships. In this regard, the choice of 'syntaxes' for the subtitle of *Museum Configurations* accurately describes the multiple ways in which it is possible to think *of* and *with* (Hillier and Hanson 1997) the discursive and non-discursive nature of the syntactic relations put in tension with one another within the museum space.

The opening chapter makes it clear that the book is not intended to serve as a comprehensive overview of museum architecture. Instead, it focuses on interweaving a variety of themes and ideas between authors, discussing analytical conceptualization, synthetic criticism, and theoretical insights. Similarly, the concluding chapter not only revisits previous ideas but also offers significant perspectives on research and practice concerning museum architecture. In other words, the introduction clarifies the main purpose of the book, its 'emphasis on the conceptual and methodological premises of the analysis and design of (museum) spatial syntaxes' (23), whereas the conclusion expands the scope of the conversation by presenting new topics, such as the role of generative AI in creative work. In between the beginning and the end, readers with backgrounds in various fields of knowledge, including the visual arts, history, psychology, and museum studies, will find incisive analyses of museum architecture through a spatial approach. This approach examines how architectural morphology, particularly spatial configuration, interacts with cognition and communication within museums and exhibitions. Each chapter reinforces the book's interdisciplinary nature by exploring how spatial design influences the construction and transmission of curatorial messages. Chapters are discussed according to the dialogues established between the themes: history and criticism (chapters two, seven, and eight); movement, navigation, and visitor experience (chapters four, five, and six); and museum design (chapters three and nine).

The morphological inquiry of the book begins in chapter two, in which Wilfried Wang examines the purpose of the Enlightenment Museum. Representing Western European thought, institutions like the Altes Museum and the British Museum sought to assert intellectual superiority by classifying objects within an irrefutable taxonomy, thereby displaying the 'knowledge of the world' (32). The chapter provides a sharp critique, highlighting the limitations of these totalizing and supremacist museum practices, highlighting the limitations such as problematic collection acquisition methods and the ongoing debate over artifact repatriation. This critical and historical approach continues in chapter seven, as Yves Abrioux explores the semantic implications of collection spatialization, and in Chapter eight, in which Kenneth J. Knoespel examines the parallels between maps and museums as tools for navigating knowledge. Knoespel discusses visitor experience from an historical perspective, arguing that the presentation of knowledge involves an interactive model among the museum architect, curator, and visitors; by contrast, Abrioux offers a comprehensive exploration of space syntax formulations and their museum applications. Although Abrioux's 'museum yet to come' (60) is already present in certain less prominent contexts, his critique of the configurational policies in modern institutions – implicitly reflected in museum layouts – calls on museum staff to better understand the syntax of space as a way to improve narrative generation through spatial design.

Chapters four (Sean Hanna), five (Jakub Krukar), and six (Daniel Koch) explore how museum layouts affect movement and experience: Hanna uses space syntax framework through

which to analyse visitor movement; Koch examines it discursively; and Krukar investigates how vision, especially 'glancing away' (101), impacts engagement and movement. Hanna argues that predicting visitor behaviour in museums based upon space syntax is challenging due to the unique nature of museum visits, which take place as diffuse and unpredictable journeys through collections rather than through the sort of optimized navigation typical of urban environments. However, research shows that spatial configuration can strongly predict movement in museums. Despite syntactical prescriptions, museum layouts allow visitors the freedom to interpret the relationship between rooms and objects in their own way, providing a framework to pursue personal understanding. Visitor engagement is central to Krukar's discussion, particularly through the concept of 'glancing away', which he argues is a crucial part of any meaningful museum visit. This approach involves strategically allowing artworks of varying perceptual salience to be visible together, therefore enhancing visitor interaction with the exhibits. This helps visitors gain a sense of space, decide where to go next, and interpret artworks and their relationships. It also allows the spatial configuration to foster encounters and avoidances between visitors by offering them movement choices, an often overlooked but essential aspect of the museum experience. Koch's chapter examines how people navigate museum spaces, exploring the interplay between architecture, performativity, and perception. Utilizing concepts from choreography and dramaturgy, Koch illustrates how scenes unfold during a visit, and highlights 'the necessity of a language of movement that includes acknowledgement and notations of its relational syntax' (155). This language is expressed through various spatial configurations: the individual rooms that make encounters infrequent but more striking in the Asakura Museum of Sculpture; the continuous rooms that guide the visitor's path in the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art; and the contrasting patterns of attention elicited by the landscape-facing rooms of Artipelag versus the confined spaces of the Citizen's Halls. Viewing movement in exhibition spaces as a ballet of bodies can introduce a new theoretical framework for understanding the visitor experience.

In chapters three and nine, Tzortzi and Peponis explore the design of museum space and its relationship with visitor experiences. Tzortzi examines how museums organize accessibility and visibility, distinguishing between instrumental uses of space, associated with traditional museums, and expressive uses, linked to contemporary experiments. Supported by graphs, she explains that in traditional museums, 'navigation in space coincides with navigation in the classification of the contents' (67), whereas in contemporary museums 'the nature of the interrelationship, or even the tension between physical and visual movement constitutes the conceptual backbone of the designs' (76). This highlights the interplay between seeing and moving, thus revealing the 'experiential nature museum architecture' (77). Peponis asks his students to explore the interaction between space, design and museum visitor experience by proposing designs that reflect these dynamics. Using various space-syntax representations to evaluate these proposals, students examine the experiential nature of museums. This approach challenges conventional uses of space syntax, which is typically understood as a framework to analyse and describe existing designs. The reflections drawn from the five selected proposals highlight broader questions relevant to various building types. These include the relationship between their morphology and spatial configuration, and how we perceive and understand spaces.

Museum Configurations compiles a wealth of knowledge that was previously scattered across research outputs, including events such as the International Space Syntax Symposium, for example. This singular aspect represents a significant contribution to the fields of space syntax and museum studies. Peponis' edited volume may disappoint those expecting to learn specific concepts, units of measurement, and analytical procedures relating to space syntax, but it is precisely this theoretical and empirical approach that allows both specialized audiences and broader publics to engage with the rich discussions. Cross-referencing between the authors of the various chapters indicates that 'the gestation of the book in hand was not hurried' (29). Furthermore, the book includes recent developments and unexplored ideas, making it thought-provoking. Despite its broad disciplinary scope, the book is fundamentally a resource for scholars operating within the fields of space syntax, network analysis, and social studies, and represents a continuation of works such as *Architecture and Narrative: The*

Formation of Space and Cultural Meaning (Psarra 2009), *Museum Space: Where Architecture Meets Museology* (Tzortzi 2016), and *Architecture and Spatial Culture* (Peponis 2024). The balance between synthesizing existing knowledge and analysing current museological trends positions *Museum Configurations* as one of the most comprehensive publications on the socio-spatial study of museums buildings so far.

References

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