
As the author Eric M. Wolf points out, much literature exists on the design aesthetics of large contemporary art museum building projects, but little has been published on the connection between design, function, and institutional mission. This book formally analyzes these relationships in American art museums of the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries by examining the design of the Frick Collection, the Menil Collection, the Whitney Museum of Art, the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Art Institute of Chicago as individual case studies. The extensive documentation contained within provides insight into the factors leading to design decisions, such as their mission, the intent of the founders, and the scope of their collections. Wolf addresses the public and private functions of art museums, including exhibition, storage, conservation, research, administration, dining areas, and other multifunctional spaces for event rental, large-scale exhibitions, or lectures. The case studies follow each museum from its beginning to the present, together with proposed expansion programs, and unrealized building projects. As constantly evolving entities, an art museum’s changing goals and agendas are often reflected in the design of their additions and renovations. The appendix consists of comparative information and in-depth qualitative content on each of the aforementioned museums.

The introduction briefly explores the origins, history, and development of the art museum as a building type. Wolf looks at not only the structures that house art collections, but also the history of the museum as a cultural establishment from ancient times to the nineteenth century in Europe. The evolution of art museums in the United States from post-Civil War to the present is also discussed.

The last two chapters address design problems that arose when examining the development of the museums involved in the case studies. The size and scale of contemporary art is one of the main challenges taxing many institutions these days and the course of its future path is unknown. The other chapter discusses how the design of the museum affects the way a visitor moves through the space and interacts with the art. The author describes how several institutions have dealt with these issues in a variety of ways.

As a whole, the book is well-organized and provides a great deal of in-depth information and analysis on the development of art museums in the United States. It contains a sizable number of photographs and building plans in addition to a complete bibliography and index.

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