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MUSEUM ARCHITECTURE, COMPOSITIONAL THEMES

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A b s t r a c t

This essay wishes to offer a contribution to the architectural culture of the museum for potential projects, starting from a reflection on those spatial experiences which history has shown to be of an enduring nature. The museum as a complex building needs to include several typological elements, they are to be found in the very first buildings erected as museums, even if these were already places for collections. The space of the architect's imagination is that of memory and that of composition. A project thus becomes the organization of spatially defined elements which we might consider "typological elements."

Keywords: museum, composition, typology, imagination, memory

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Wychodząc od refleksji o tych doświadczeniach przestrzennych, które – jak pokazała historia – mają charakter nieprzemijający, autor niniejszego eseju pragnie wnieść wkład w kulturę architektoniczną muzeum pod kątem możliwych przyszłych realizacji. Muzeum, będące złożoną budowlą, musi zawierać kilka elementów typologicznych, które można odnaleźć już w pierwszych budynkach wznoszonych jako muzea, nawet jeśli były to jedynie miejsca gromadzenia zbiorów. Przestrzeń wyobraźni architekta to obszar pamięci i kompozycji. Projekt staje się więc układem przestrzennie wydzielonych elementów, które możemy postrzegać jako „elementy typologiczne".

Słowa kluczowe: muzeum, kompozycja, typologia, wyobraźnia, pamięć

Without any attempt to suggest definitions or historical-critical readings of the museum experience, this essay wishes to offer a contribution to the architectural culture of the museum (that of art, in particular) for potential projects, starting from a reflection on those spatial experiences which history has shown to be of an enduring nature.

It is taken as read that a museum exists where there is an accumulation of objects, a collection of works of art to be preserved and exhibited, however much time has passed from the "temple of art" museum, from that "sanctuary museum where the knowledge of man could be protected from time and revolutions."[1]

The museum is no longer a place destined for an exclusive, elite audience: changes in social life and educational school visits have turned the museum into an increasingly "open" and "public" space whose function as a museum is no longer prominent; inside, the way of

[1] H. Damisch, *Il dispositivo museo. Note sui cambiamenti istituzionali*, Lotus, 1982, no. 35, p. 4.

preserving the works may have remained unaltered but the idea of how to exhibit the works has certainly changed and, above all, so has the life lived inside a museum. In addition to places for the collections and storage, in a contemporary museum there are new kinds of spaces which can include libraries, conference rooms and teaching areas; while the other spaces – entrance halls, rooms for temporary exhibitions, points of sale, eateries, etc. – have grown in size. All of which presupposes a functional programme of great breadth and variety, where "public spaces" by far outnumber those intended for the collections. The places which welcome the museum audience of the twentieth century tend to become what the foyers and corridors of nineteenth-century opera houses once were: public places to meet, an extension of public squares to see and be seen, where the performance was often a mere pretext (for example, at the Opéra Garnier in Paris). These changes are not in themselves negative, and not all museums will inevitably need to transform themselves into supermarkets of culture; within a contemporary museum, the places for the collection can coexist – to give the objects an "aura" and, where still possible, to "concentrate" on the works – with spaces which respond to the new kinds of "social solicitations."

If in the nineteenth century the museum already featured its own urban identity as a public building and monument, the contemporary museum, in its functional complexity and objectives, growingly becomes a city part. It is for these reasons too that the museum becomes a privileged architectural theme when we attempt to restore the "identity" of particular urban areas.

In light of the new needs on the one hand, and the tradition of museums on the other, we should like to try and construct an architectural image of the museum building for potential projects. In its relatively short life, the museum has not found a typological form which sums up the shared character of its formal experiences. Ever newer and different institutional tasks and the continuous evolution of museological trends make attempts to define a typological form self-contradictory, unlike the situation of housing, religious buildings, and perhaps even theatres, all of which continually reproduce a liturgy that refers to their origin, according to a ritual which presupposes a precise typological form.

In my opinion, the design answer is not the museum intended as an indifferent container which, from time to time, interrogates its own spaces according to an idea of provenly impractical flexibility; the museum is not even a neutral, aseptic container, since a work transported to a museum ought to find a suitable place for its "second life", an atmosphere which evokes its history. For me, the museum as a complex building needs to include several typological elements, some of which are fixed in laying out a museum space: they are to be found in the very first buildings erected as museums, even if these were already, though fragmented, places for collections.

In a project, the elements of the collections find new life, transcending and reinventing the types and models which inspired them: the private study, the gallery, the rooms of the Renaissance palace, the chapels, the rotunda, the "Pantheon," the lapidary wall, and so on. This is the architectural tradition of the museum, the stuff of our work. By tradition I certainly do not mean the recouping of forms of the past which, once borrowed, represent a "solution"; I am thinking instead of certain fundamental principles which underlie our profession. Tradition is synonymous with certain experiences deemed successful; example and experience guide the project by bringing architecture back to an analytical operation and to the problem of "education in architecture". The project thus becomes a meditation on facts and a question of choice[2]

[2] Theoretical questions formulated by Aldo Rossi in *Architettura per i musei* [in:] A. Rossi, *Scritti scelti sull'architettura e la città: 1956–1972*, Milano 1975, p. 339.

within a sort of not-indifferent "collection": the problem of the choice of field is unavoidable. "Painters who obey their imagination seek in the dictionary the elements which suit their conception; yet, in adapting these elements with a certain art, they give them a completely new physiognomy. Those who lack imagination copy the dictionary,"[3] wrote Baudelaire in reference to the Parisian *Salons* of 1859.

The space of the architect's imagination is that of memory and that of composition. A project thus becomes the organization of spatially defined elements which we might consider "typological elements";[4] the goal is the realization of a work of architecture which features new construction and symbolic programmes, the means being the compositional procedure of "addition by parts" which will endow the architecture with meaning; and this meaning, as Aldo Rossi pointed out, lies in the operation, in the use, in the character. The procedure recalls certain principles which can be identified in the experiences of Enlightenment architects: the certainty of the typological elements used and research into social spaces which allowed them to be coordinated.[5] The composition is regulated by the routes for visitors; the route being the element of continuity of this narrative which tries to restore unity to a system of fragments. Among the typological elements we find those private studies which were designed first and foremost as places of learning, places of conservation, but above all of memory, recognizable in the iconographies portraying Petrarch in his study surrounded by objects of affection; these were *Wunderkammeren* with displays that were certainly neither scientific nor systematic but instead spectacular, based on the owner's aesthetic taste and a desire to amaze; finally, there were studies based on humanist principles, such as those of Isabella d'Este in Mantua: works of architecture designed to comprise a "precise iconographic programme."

Another important typological element is the gallery, built to allow us to walk indoors while maintaining contact with the outside through the large windows that were often arranged along both sides. Galleries would then go on to become the privileged place for private collections of art, curiosities, and archaeological finds, again based on humanist principles; in the palazzi of the sixteenth-century, the gallery already proposed its own formal statute. The gallery at Sabbioneta is certainly one of the best examples of these: it presents itself as an autonomous edifice and, by linking two important buildings of the city, defines its own urban space; since it is raised above ground level, it shows its function to be a passageway, or a bridge. Inside, a pictorial cycle forms a background to Vespasiano Gonzaga's antiques collection, the brick construction helping to tie it to his land. Singular and successful examples of galleries conceived as specialized places are also to be found at some French palaces and castles of the sixteenth century. In particular, at the Château de Fère-en-Tardenois, the gallery is a part of the entrance bridge. Large arches reminiscent of a Roman aqueduct support it, while the entrance to the castle is located underneath. The theme of the gallery is to be found in some eighteenth-century painters such as Panini, who rendered the idea of the picture gallery in some of his works, as did H. Robert (who would also become the first conservator of the Louvre), where the gallery is represented as a painter's studio illuminated

[3] C. Baudelaire, *Scritti sull'arte*, G. Einaudi, Torino 1981, p. 227.

[4] Resuming some reflections on the "typological elements" made by M. Narpozzi in his essay *Architettura, tipologia, invenzione* [in:] G.A. Caleffi, G. Malacarne (eds.), *Progetti veneziani*, Clup, Milano 1985.

[5] See E. Kaufmann's definition of "Pavillon system" as a composition by autonomous parts in *Da Ledoux a Le Corbusier. Origini e sviluppo dell'architettura autonoma*, G. Mazzotta, Milano 1973.

by diffused light from above and shows with extreme clarity what would become one of the main museum spaces; arguably, the Louvre is already all of this.

If we consider the first museums built as autonomous buildings, we note the persistence of these and other "typological nuclei"; however, we also find new elements which were to become more and more important in museum building programmes: large atria, monumental stairways, rotunda, social spaces and others for visitors to linger. J.N.L. Durand's *Project for a Museum* (1802–1805) is basically a collection of typological elements arranged along axes which allow them to be connected in precise hierarchies to form elementary figures, consistent with the compositional devices enunciated in his works.[6] Long vaulted galleries which link a central rotunda to small rooms (*studioli*), and spaces with a central plan in the intersections of the four courtyards that form the figure, are the elements that we find in many nineteenth-century museums for which this project served as a kind of "model." In Leo von Klenze's 1816 Glyptothek in Munich, where four vaulted wings enclose a courtyard, the galleries are a series of interconnecting rooms, each of which has its own formal characterization. One of the most eloquent examples of the conceptual centrality of composition in design is Schinkel's Altes Museum in Berlin; this is the result of a paratactic composition of three elements: the portico, the dome, and the gallery (arguably, a fourth element is represented by the staircases). The raised portico is an urban element which defines the space of the square in front of it and acts as a backdrop to the Berlin Palace; the portico leads to a narrow, dimly lit passageway which enters the central space defined by a dome, recalling the interior of the Pantheon in Rome, and identifying the "building's shrine" where the most precious treasures are kept. Finally, from the central space, we pass to the galleries arranged on two floors around the central space which, by enclosing it, bring unity to the composition. The routes for visitors are the "soul" of the composition of the elements, a continuous spatial and sensorial experience; the variations of light underline the character of the architecture: the passage from the narrow dark corridor to the large central space illuminated from above suggesting an idea of the "sublime," making us think of the effect that light produces on buildings (and of the architecture of Boullée). The light arriving from the outside restores the relationship with nature; the lights and shadows reveal the architecture.

We find the same elements in John Soane's Dulwich Picture Gallery (1811–1814): particular lighting systems in the galleries bring other meanings to the predictable spaces; in this historic house museum the rooms are illuminated by a "hidden" zenithal light which determines variations in the intensity of the sunlight: all of which represents a successful attempt to create a particular atmosphere reminiscent of the *Lumière Mystérieuse*[7] which became one of the hallmarks of Soane's architecture. In G. Semper's Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister in Dresden, the same elements of the galleries and domes return, arranged here in a different way in relation to the site and the architect's sensibility. In this case, the central space defined by the dome adjoins the entrance hall.

In the project for the Neues Museum in Berlin by A. Stuler, the museum becomes the central theme for the construction of a city part: that which was to become Museum Island.

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[6] J.N.L. Durand, *Précis des leçons d'architecture données à l'École Royale Polytechnique*, vol. 1, 1817 vol. 2, 1819, L'Ecole Royale Polytechnique, Paris.

[7] N. Le Camus de Mézieres, *Le Génie de l'architecture, on l'analogie de cet art avec nos sensations*, Chez l'auteur, Paris 1780.

The solution of which the museum building is a part, is a composition by pieces: pergolas, walls, lapidaries, and other buildings which house the collections and define this site as a whole.

The list of examples could go on and on; what is important, however, is to have identified which recurring elements and parts go to make up the architectural tradition of the museum. None of which means wishing to lay down a project method; if anything, to simply prompt reflection on the places of the museum, the architectural places, images, pieces, the fragments which are a part of its history and of public buildings in general, and which recur in a project due to spatial qualities that contribute to the reading and understanding of the works, in addition to those civic qualities which are indispensable for any public building. While architectural culture can refer to its own tradition when it comes to places for collections, for the rest, the room for invention is as open as possible to the influence of other typological elements with which to identify new construction programmes. While respecting the museological programme and specific characteristics of a site, the contemporary museum is also the museum of the designer, his or her own "collection" of places. In the context of what other theme is, is it possible to have so many kinds of architecture available to be combined in a single project, in a "city part" featuring streets, squares, and public buildings?

Starting from this "analytical" position which, in my opinion, inevitably governs the contemporary museum project, we can verify, through a significant example, the reflections made up until now on the museum space in a complex construction, which could be defined a "city-part/building," namely H.P. Berlage's Kunstmuseum Den Haag [in The Hague], conceivably one of the first museums where its functions were addressed according to modern criteria and therefore took into account several brand-new needs: from the collections to those activities which bring it closer to a "multipurpose cultural centre."[8]

Berlage drew up two projects for this area on the edge of the Zorgvliet park. The first project in 1919–20 envisaged an architectural complex destined to house, in addition to the decorative and modern art collections, a large auditorium for concerts, rooms for temporary exhibitions, workrooms, and multiple museum and exhibition spaces. Although the project was conceived as a composition of individual "volumes" which followed a precise construction programme, ranged around a courtyard, the architectural solution still referred to the spatial experiences of nineteenth-century museums, proposing a strongly unitary urban image, perhaps now lost. A courtyard opens up which respects the geometry of the lot, the twin façades which indicate the entrance to the courtyard and the central foyer have an autonomous architectural characterization which, while recalling the "usual" domed museum spaces, announce special uses. Inside the courtyard, a stretch of water surrounded by a portico helps to create a public place which ventures far beyond the mere function of a museum. As for the floor plans, the distribution of the museum is based on a succession of rooms of various sizes, along with light wells patterned on the internal connections (in an effective relationship between served spaces and serving spaces). The elements of the composition in their different volumes are brought back to unity in the design of the façade in an architectural mood full of Roman/oriental suggestions.

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[8] S. Polano, *Museo Municipale* [in:] S. Polano, *Hendrik Petrus Berlage, Opera completa*, Electa, Milano 1987, pp. 224–227, where we read, *inter alia*, that the essay by B.I. Gilman, *Museum ideals of purpose and method,* Boston 1918, was a basic reference for Berlage and Van Gelder, the museum designer.

The architectural elements which Berlage used in the composition of the first project found in the second (after the first was rejected for its excessive dimensions) a more coherent solution, which helped to bring a new meaning to the site. In the museum built from 1930 to 1935, the construction programmes were reduced, and with them the dimensions, while the functional programmes remained unchanged; the building was also required to present itself as a "flexible body" open to "future expansions of the exhibition space."

Today's museum, in transforming itself more and more into a public building, has a need to express new meanings, manifesting an ever-greater calling to participate in a city's cultural life. Berlage was well aware of this: "Therefore, do not think that it is intended as a church in which a dogmatic religious ritual is celebrated, but rather as a public building where society finds itself reflecting on the faith of a new time."[9] Faced with new urban and institutional themes and novel functional programmes, Berlage had no historical precedents of reference but only fragments which referred to the tradition of the museum. This may be what many other modern architects think in the face of new programmes: "The old masters certainly did not leave us models for office buildings and hotels, but they would certainly have been able to find a solution. Not in the sense of the so-called 'moderns' and not even in the sense of the upholsterers."[10]

"The art of building today can only be the art of building volumes,"[11] with this statement Berlage not only indicated an aesthetic programme but alluded to a precise theoretical programme. "Fragments of a safe reality," autonomous parts which, following the construction programme, following an idea of the city, build the museum. The result: a unitary, complex, public building which sums up certain urban themes. "The form of the public building," Rossi reminded us, "is composed like an imagined or analogous city made up of places and buildings which intersect each other in relation to the city itself."[12] The elements are taken from the tradition of the places in a museum that have been influenced by other places of architecture only apparently extraneous to it. The museum thus becomes a narrative through the spaces which are a part of the architect's "personal museum," of his or her collection of places which, when reassembled, point to new meanings. None of this can be resolved in the simple and consolatory search for an aesthetic goal since, as Berlage himself reminded us, "an architectural composition is only a means to a practical purpose and never an end in itself."[13] Berlage's culture and architectural sensibility allowed this rethinking of the forms of the museum and the public building in general, not to become, in a project, the development and application of a "method," but a measure of the real within the inventiveness of the design.

The museum is located in the centre of the lot and is surrounded by green spaces and two ponds. Lamppost towers indicate the entrance, a gallery, open on both sides, crosses the water – presenting itself as a sort of place of purification – and leads into the vestibule; then from the dimly-lit narrow vestibule, we pass into the larger space of the hall/gallery lit

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[9] H.P. Berlage, *Het Wezen der bouw kunst en haargeschiedenis*, quotation [in:] M. Fosso, *Melanconia e stile dimesso nella poetica del romanticismo berlaghiano*, Q.D., 1988, no.8, p. 36.

[10] From the writings of G. de Finetti, reported in C. Pellegrini, *La Milan di de Finetti*, Q.D., 1987, no. 6, p. 29.

[11] H.P. Berlage, *Ricordi di un viaggio in America* [in:] H. van Bergeijk (ed.), *Architettura urbanistica estetica*, Zanichelli, Bologna 1985, p. 139.

[12] A. Rossi, *Progetti* [in:] Caleffi G.A., Malacarne G. (eds.), *op. cit*., p. 182.

[13] H.P. Berlage, *L'essenza dell'architettura e la sua storia*, *(considerazioni estetiche)*, Q.D., 1988, no. 8, p. 14.

from above. The hall/gallery, in addition to being the architectural element which allows the museum spaces' distribution, is the real invention of the project; as a space it differs from the museums of the nineteenth century and refers to an urban passageway suspended between interior and exterior. This is the museum's public space, somewhere to linger, walk, and meet, just like the public spaces of the city. On the other hand, at the former Amsterdam commodity exchange, the large Licht Hof was never intended for particular functions but is merely an extension, inside the building, of the city's public spaces. The *Hal* (as Berlage called it), rotated 90° with respect to the vestibule, changes its formal status as the visit progresses: spaces of different heights, expansions, narrowings, zenithal lighting; while spaces in penumbra mark the rhythm of the "story" and identify the museum's places. The conference room is aligned with the vestibule; the office area is located along the sides of the hall. Where the hall closes, a space illuminated by zenithal light opens up and there the places for the collections begin, arranged around a courtyard. On the first floor, where the collections are located, there is an interesting and innovative arrangement of the rooms along the long sides of the courtyard. A corridor, punctuated by side windows illuminated from the outside (a window/display case equipped with special diffusers), distributes to the rooms which open onto it and is illuminated by large windows placed high up, not visible from the corridor; from the corridor the effect of the light is unexpected and reveals the character imprinted on the architectural forms by this "hidden light." From these small rooms we pass, crossing the building transversely, to a series of large rooms again lit from above and interspersed with light wells, and finally to another series of interconnecting rooms of moderate dimensions, arranged in enfilade along a route for visitors reminiscent of a gallery. The transverse distribution system, starting from the corridor on the courtyard then progressing from small to large rooms, precedes a contemporary museological concept: the museum offers two different possibilities for visits, a speedier one through the gallery, with the possibility of entering the first side rooms, and another more in-depth one where considered appropriate.

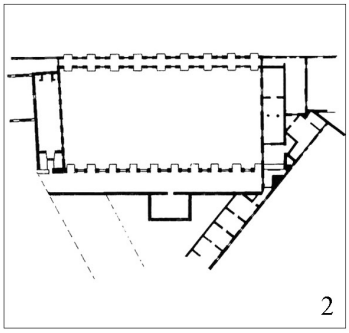
The architectural elements which Berlage inserted into his composition evoke known works of architecture and images, which unquestionably belong to the history of architecture and the tradition of the profession, but also to common, easily intelligible spatial experiences linked to the area where the building stands. In addition to the tradition of the museum space, Berlage drew on examples of collective buildings and particular echoes of a Dutch architectural culture which he himself helped to build: giving identity to Dutch architecture and looking for a style of our time were two cornerstones of his research. The arrangement of beams, pillars, and partitions which mark off the space of the hall and the timeline of the visit, adheres to a purist programme aimed at highlighting the structure, while also representing the construction of a language: the effect of light on these bodies produces a chiaroscuro effect that helps in determining the building's character. The whole museum is a continuous experience of places characterized by light:[14] in his preparatory drawings, Berlage studied the effects of direct light in the public parts and the effects of a diffused homogeneous light, both natural and artificial, in the exhibition spaces. The interior spaces are reflected on the outside in sequences of individual volumes: these are conceived as interpenetrating masonry

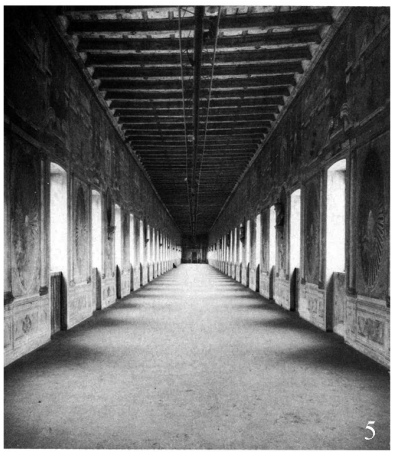
[14] A mural by W. van Konijnenburg which closes the axis of the entrance hall bears the inscription *Eerhet god'lijk licht in d'openberingen van de kunst* inviting us to be aware of the value that "the divine light has in the revelation of art". See T. van Velzen, *Het* Haags Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag 1982, and S. Polano, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

boxes covered by pointed glass skylights, in which the use of the facing brick helps to restore a unitary image. In addition, the brick cladding, by revealing its artifice, does not simulate a reinforced concrete construction, but follows a decorative scheme (making use of symbolic and memory devices) which expands the possibility of understanding the work. The entrance lamppost towers, the façade of the hall, the chimney towers and the "bow-shaped volumes" that close off the courtyard, as well as the telescopic form of the conference room reaffirmed on the outside, are counterpoint elements which, within the composition, have a clear symbolic value and broaden the associative reflections.

Each part of this project enjoys its own rational justification: the rooms, the routes for visitors, the lighting, all propose a "careful search for functionality that does not stop at the physical datum," because for Berlage architecture had to be "a medium between the visitor and the work of art." In this work, Berlage devoted himself, so to speak, to highlighting the beauty of the work of others.[15] This museum, its spaces, works of art, collections, internal and external decorations, works of art built into the museum, and "the experience of light" are a successful attempt to come closer to a work of total art, the pipe dream of every civilization.

[15] Here we borrow the considerations of G. Grassi in *Immagine di Berlage*, Casabella, 1961, no. 249, p. 43.

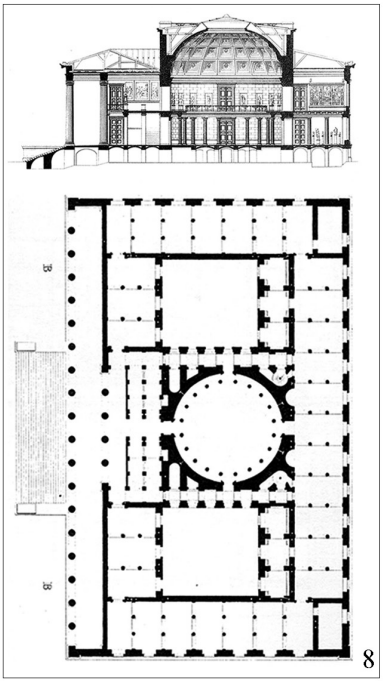




Ill. 1. Ferrante Imperato, *Dell'Historia Naturale*, Napoli 1599 (II edition, Venezia 1672). Source: Wolfram Prinz, Galleria, Modena 1988.

Ill. 2, 3. Mantova, Palazzo Ducale, Galleria della Mostra. Source: Wolfram Prinz, Galleria, Modena 1988.

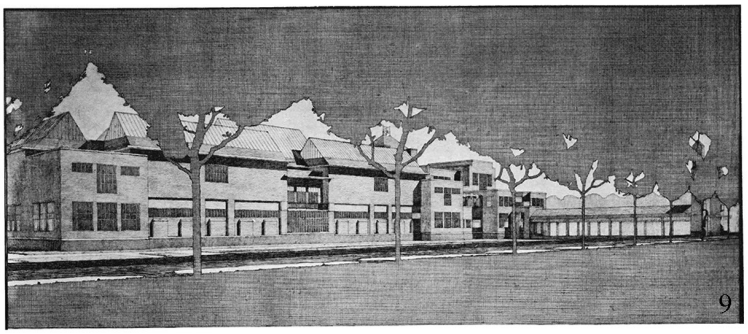
Ill. 4, 5. Sabbioneta, Galleria degli Antichi. Source: Wolfram Prinz, Galleria, Modena 1988.

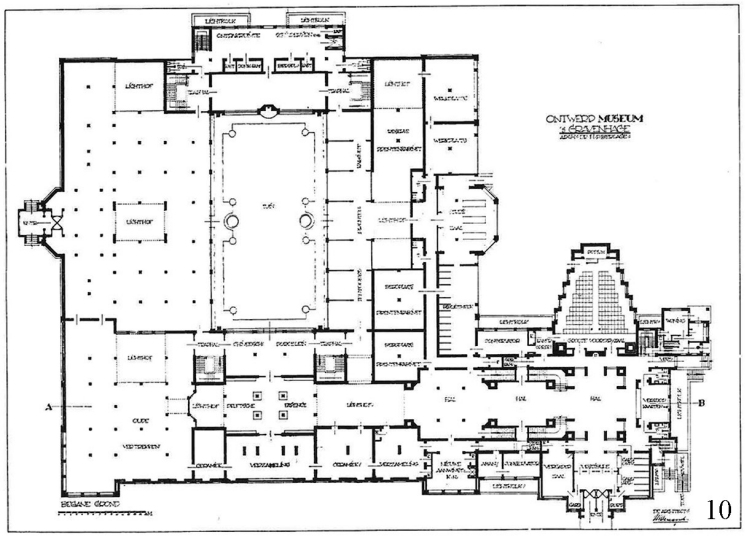


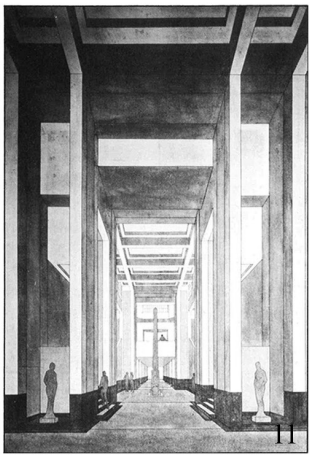
Ill. 6. H. Robert, Une galerie du Musèe, Louvre Museum of Paris. Public domain.

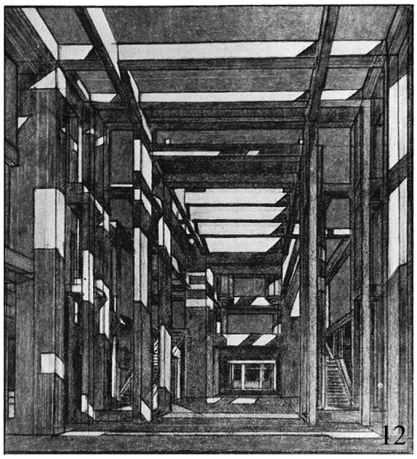
Ill. 7. Roma, Vaticano, Galleria delle Carte Geografiche. Source: Wolfram Prinz, Galleria, Modena 1988.

Ill. 8. K.F. Schinkel, Plan and section, Altes Museum Berlin. Den Haag Gemeentemuseum, H.P. Berlage. Source: F.K. Schinkel, Collected Architectural Designs, New York 1982.

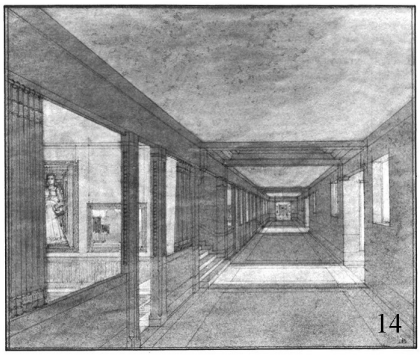


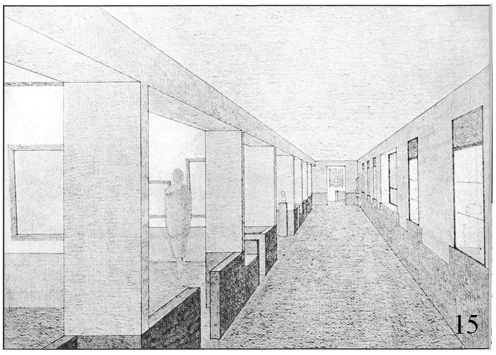






Ill. 9–12. Den Haag Gemeentemuseum, H.P. Berlage: 9. Perspective drawing of the Stadhouderslaan facade, definitive design; 10. Plan of the ground floor, definitive design; 11. Final design of the hall; 12. Drawing of the hall made during construction, 1932. Source: Het Haags Gemeentemuseum. Het museumgebouw van H.P. Berlage, Haags 1982.





Ill. 13–16. Den Haag Gemeentemuseum, H.P. Berlage: 13. Stadhouderslaan façade; 14. Corridor with picture-galleries, first design; 15. Corridor with picture-galleries, definitive design; 16. Hall, looking to the reception hall. Source: Het Haags Gemeentemuseum. Het museumgebouw van H.P. Berlage, Haags 1982.

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